



VICIOUS CAPTOR

THE SEVEN DEADLY SINACORES - BOOK FOUR

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

AIDÉE JAIMES

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BOOK FOUR

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Vicious Captor
The Seven Deadly Sinacores, Book 4
by Aid e Jaimes
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TRIGGER WARNING: As with many dark romances, readers should expect explicit, dubious consent scenes, as well as gore and violence.

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PROLOGUE

LOUISA

Five Years Ago...

They say that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. What they don't tell you about is the pain you'll endure in the process. Or that the scars left behind might change you to such a degree that you'll wonder if you didn't actually die, and someone else was born in your place.

What doesn't kill you will still end your life one way or another is a more accurate saying. I know this because I'm actively dying. My heart is racing, burning white hot in my chest, making me wish for a dagger to carve it out and end my suffering.

The grandfather clock in the foyer of the small chapel chimes the midnight hour as I burst through the wooden doors and out into the dark and stormy night, my short life and everything that has led me here flashing before my eyes —the accident that flung me into the pool, Rowan hurdling himself into the water to save me. The first time our eyes met. The first time we made love.

Those memories are like death itself nipping at my heels, and I run faster. But it makes no difference. I can't escape them, and with every image conjured, I hurt a little more. Die a little more.

My foot catches on a rock in the gravel parking lot and I fall to my knees and land in a puddle. Mud soils my mother's

wedding dress, soaking into the ivory threads, tainting something that was once so loved and sacred.

“Lulu!” Mom’s voice pierces through the crack of lightning.

I want to get up and get away before she reaches me and witnesses my shame. But I’m too weak to go any farther.

“Your dress, Mom. Your dress.” Gathering some of the wet skirt, I lift it so that she can see what I’ve done to the gown she proudly gave to me.

What’s become of me? Sobs wrack my body as I blink against the rain, shouting the question in my head.

Not caring for herself, Mom sits beside me in the puddle. “Shh, my Lulu. That doesn’t matter right now. Come inside before you catch a cold.”

I swallow down through the tightness in my throat as I stare straight ahead toward the empty street. “He’s not coming.”

“I know.” Her gaze is soft and pitiful, but I can see the rage warring inside. Though I’m not sure who she’s angrier with. Me for falling for the wrong man, him for abandoning me, or herself for being a hardcore romantic who wanted to believe I’d found true love. Hell, she even let me wear the dress she wore the day she married Papá.

She was so swept away by my whirlwind romance that she even went against the wishes of my father, not to mention my three brothers, and convinced Father Ayala to marry Rowan and me in secret. In her mind, she’d envisioned the two rival crime families being brought together by our love. A real-life Romeo and Juliet.

To my detriment, I share that romantic gene. Until today, it was a benign emotion. It made me euphoric and giddy. But now it’s turned into a cancerous tumor I want to remove.

The rain comes down harder and Mom wraps her arms around me in an effort to shield me at least from that. “I’m so sorry, my Lulu. I’m so sorry.”

I drop my forehead onto her shoulder and cry, wishing that were enough to end the pain. But even long after the rain stops and my tears dry up, the agony of a shattered heart remains. His last words still blare into my skull as if he's just said them.

It only took me about one hundred desperate tries to get a hold of him, where I feared something had happened to him that prevented him from coming, before he finally answered his phone. I imagined him in a ditch, put there by his boss if he'd discovered he was about to marry the enemy.

"Louisa," he said, using my full name instead of his usual Lou. It sounded cold coming from him, and it sent a shiver of dread down my spine.

"Where are you? I'm at the church waiting."

"I'm not coming." His tone was dispassionate, matter-of-fact.

"What?"

"I'm not coming. It's over."

I shook my head in confusion. "What are you talking about? What's over?"

"Us."

Pausing for a moment, I let what he'd said sink in. "Did Bryan discover you?"

But instead of confirming my fear, Rowan laughed sarcastically. "Bryan is the one who set it all up. He wanted to see how far I'd go to prove my loyalty to the McKenzies. I would have done it too, if he'd made me. Lucky for me, he's letting me off the hook."

"It was all a setup?" All of my blood seemed to drain from my body at once, leaving me feeling faint. My ears suddenly pounded loudly with each stuttered beat of my heart. I swayed, catching myself against the wall. "But... You said you love me."

"I could barely stand to touch you. Much less love you." He paused, then added, "Consider yourself lucky. You've been spared the misery I would have put you through. Now stop

fucking calling me.” With that, he hung up and my world came crashing down.

I had to run. Had to get away from the pitiful stare from the priest and the judgmental one from the Jesus on the cross. *You disobeyed your father, this is what you get.*

My lungs tighten as I recall Rowan’s voice. It’s a crushing force, suffocating. Deadly.

Grimacing, I pull my shoulders in and fist the fabric at my chest as I continue to die this slow death.

I could barely stand to touch you. Much less love you.

If that was true, he played his role to perfection. I happily gave him everything I had—my soul, my heart, my body—because I thought he loved me. But he couldn’t even bear to touch me?

I could barely stand to touch you. Much less love you. The words echo in my mind again and again, louder and louder each time.

“Go inside, Mom. I need to be alone.”

“I’m not leaving you out here.”

“Please,” I plead, my voice breaking. “Leave me alone.”

She peers into my face for a moment before nodding. “If you need me.”

“I know.”

When the sound of her footsteps fades away, I turn back to stare at the road. For a long while, I remain there, crying. Hurting. Dying.

Then it’s over.

I take my last breath as the girl who loved Rowan and my first as someone stronger. What once felt like warmth and love is suddenly a lump of coal in the pit of my stomach.

There’s a thin line between love and hate. Another false saying. The line between them is so wide, once you’ve crossed it, you can’t see to the other side.

Love is blind. You don't perceive imperfections. But hate is also blind, filling your every thought with anger and a pressing need for revenge.

That's when it hits me. The one saying that *is* true. So very true. And as I think about Rowan now, a terrifying smile spreads over my lips.

Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.

LOUISA

Present Day...

“When I die, I want the last face I see to be yours.” I once said those foolish words. I was an innocent girl who’d just given herself, body and soul, to the man she loved.

“I’m not going to let you die before me,” his reply came as he drew lazy circles over my clavicle, luring me to sleep.

I cupped his face and stared into his eyes, at all the different hues of blue that make up his irises. Cerulean streaked with ice and steel.

“Then wait for me in Heaven,” I said.

His gaze darkened as he turned his face into my palm and kissed me there. “There’s only one spot reserved for a person like me. And that’s in Hell.”

“Wherever you go, I’ll follow. If the price of being with you is to burn for eternity, I’ll gladly pay it.”

“You may not always feel that way,” he said.

I smiled and shut my lids. “I will. No matter what, I’ll always be yours. I swear it. I’m yours forever.”

“Forever?”

“Forever.”

I peer at my palm. At the spot where, years ago, a piercing kiss was placed. It's strange that I can still feel it now—the tickle of his scruff, the warmth of his breath and softness of his lips.

As if the mere memory of it burns me, I flip my hand over and nervously dig my fingers into the fluffy ruffles of my bridal gown. The action gets my mother's attention. She turns to me from where she's sitting beside me in the back of the Rolls-Royce that's taking us to Saint Mary's Catholic Church. To the start of a new life.

But if it's a new life, why am I thinking of death? Why are those words said to a man five years ago playing over and over in my mind?

“Are you nervous?” Mom asks.

I gnaw on my lower lip, wanting to tell her about the dread in my gut that began the day I accepted Peter's proposal. How the face I wish to forget appears in my dreams every night, tormenting me, reminding me that even though my vow wasn't made in a church before God, it *was* made nonetheless, and not even God can refute it.

I want to tell my mother that that vow has been drumming through my mind, louder with each passing minute. *I'll always be yours. I swear it.*

A stupid, foolish girl. That's what I was to make such a promise to a monster. I would have kept it too. Would have followed him into the fiery pits of Hell if it meant being with him.

But I meant nothing to him, and neither did my vow. While I was willing to burn for him, he could barely stand to touch me, much less love me.

I fist my hands and dig my nails into my flesh until it hurts so much that it numbs some of the pain I can't fully divest myself of. It's been five years since Rowan left me waiting for him. Five years since he destroyed me. But like a limb that's

been amputated and is long gone, I still have the memory of the way it felt.

I don't tell Mom, because I don't want her to believe I'm having second thoughts about Peter. I want this marriage. I've worked hard to make this happen and I don't second-guess myself. Not anymore.

So instead, I say, "I'm afraid I'll trip going down the aisle."

It's never mattered what I'm doing or if she truly thinks I can do it. That smile has always made me believe I can.

Reaching over, she adjusts the Swarovski crystal-encrusted hair pin I've placed on the side of my low bun. "You look beautiful, Lulu. Everything will be perfect."

Her phone buzzes and she sighs when she glances at the screen. "It's your father again. I swear he's like a child. Hello?" she answers. I can vaguely make out the sound of his voice asking a question. She sighs again. "They're where I always put them. Did you check the box? Look again."

While she talks to him, I peek down at my hand and fight the urge to flip it over to see if it's possible that it's really burning, afraid that I'll find a scorch mark where that kiss was placed. Or maybe a scar.

"Yes, honey," Mom says. "We should be there in about ten..." She trails off and remains silent for a moment. "David, did we take a wrong turn?"

At her words, my head snaps up and I look out the window. "This isn't the way to Saint Mary's."

"No, Mrs. Duran. Just a shortcut," our driver says.

I frown as a sinking feeling settles in my belly. "Shortcut? There's no shortcut."

David glances at me through the rearview mirror, then farther back to the security detail following us. "Are your seatbelts buckled?"

"Yes, why?" Mom replies.

“It’s about to get bumpy.” Before he’s even finished his sentence, he accelerates.

“Oh my God!” I’m pinned to the seat by the sudden velocity.

Mom reaches for me, gripping my wrist tightly as she yells, “David, stop this car right now!”

But he ignores her, instead, swerving down a narrow road, barely missing a light pole.

I turn toward my mother at the same time as she glances at me. Worry and annoyance fill her expression. Then I turn farther, struggling to peer over the headrest, searching for the two black SUVs transporting our security, wondering why the hell David was able to pull this little stunt so easily. I quickly see why.

They’re flanked by three motorcycles and caught in some sort of shootout a few blocks behind.

“Fuck!” David speeds up even more, veering onto a winding road. Faster and faster he goes, coming dangerously close to the metal guardrail. He gazes at the rearview mirror again. “Fuck!”

Behind us, one of the motorcycles and another vehicle I hadn’t seen before are now in pursuit. At least, I think they are until the person on the bike spins in his seat and fires off a few rounds into the other car.

“Who are those people?” I demand.

David slams his palms against the steering wheel and whines, “This wasn’t part of the plan. Shit, this isn’t how it was supposed to go.”

“What plan?”

“Fuck the plan.” Mom takes the Glock 19 she always carries from her clutch and aims the barrel at David. “Pull the fuck over.”

He glances behind us, fear evident in his eyes. “You don’t understand. They’re not supposed to be here. I don’t know who that is.”

“I said pull the fuck over.” She cocks the hammer, the click his final warning.

But he doesn't heed it, too focused on the people following us. Up ahead, the road narrows as we approach a bridge over the river. There's a huge sign that reads *Caution. Uneven Surface Ahead*. We're going too fast, much too fast.

My mother sees it as well, and in what I know is a last-ditch effort to save us, she shoots. David slumps forward, but his foot remains on the accelerator and we hit that uneven surface at such a high speed, it sounds like the tires have popped.

Mom throws her arm over my chest in a pointless move to keep me safe as the car fishtails, then goes into an outright spin before bursting through the bridge's rail.

If I were better at physics, I could probably tell you why time slows down to a crawl as we go over that bridge. How I'm able to perceive every event that happens in every second as we fall —my mother's head thrown against the window, knocking her unconscious instantly, my scream, and the stiffening of every muscle as I brace for impact.

I might also be able to explain why hitting the surface of the lake is like crashing into a brick wall or why the car bobs for only a moment before the rear lifts up and flips end over end so that my world is turned upside down.

Seconds. I spend precious seconds gulping air, trying to gather my wits. I've heard of people trapped in sinking cars dying because they spend those precious few seconds it actually takes for a car to start going down panicking. I can see why. Hanging upside down, hearing the Rolls-Royce cracking as it bobs on the surface is fucking terrifying.

A scream lodges in my throat and all I want to do is cry out for help.

Get your shit together, Louisa. Think. Calm down. It will remain on the surface for a moment.

“Mom? Mom!” I grab one of her hands that are hanging above her head. She doesn't rouse.

Act quickly.

Placing one palm on the ceiling to minimize the impact of the fall, I unbuckle my seatbelt. I slip out of the seat and land in a mass of white and tulle. I throw the stuff out of my face, all the while regretting this dress more and more. Next, I work on releasing my mother, ignoring the fact that the light coming through the windows is dimming, a sign that we're starting to descend deeper into the water.

Placing myself under her, I release her belt and ease her out of the seat. Then I reach for the gun still in her hand and aim it toward the window. I wrap my arm around her waist and bring her against me tightly.

"God protect us," I whisper and shoot.

The shattering of glass is drowned out by the sound of the river rushing in. I lift my face to the pocket of air above me and suck in a breath, mentally preparing myself for my next move.

Then the pocket of air is gone, and I'm completely engulfed by the echoing hollow of the water.

It's harder than I anticipated for me to maneuver to my exit. And to my horror, it's impossible to push myself out.

The dress. I didn't consider the weight of my dress! It's so heavy, it might as well be made of cement. Not even the strongest man could swim out in this.

Desperately, I reach behind me, trying to get to the hundred tiny buttons the designer insisted would be the perfect touch. My lungs begin to burn as I strain to undo them, urging me to take a breath. Just one little breath.

Four buttons in, I start to tear at them. But it's even less effective.

Shit! Seconds are passing and with each one, our chances of survival diminish. I glance at my mom, at her face, so beautiful even in this watery grave. It might be my end, but I won't let it be hers.

With newfound strength, I position her at the window and shove with all my might, sending a prayer that she'll rise to the surface and someone will spot her.

She does. Slowly and as graceful as always. I watch her elegant form silhouetted by the light above, thankful that she wore that pantsuit and not a gown.

The car hits the bottom with a soft thud, stirring up silt and debris. I blink as her image begins to blur the farther up she goes, then completely disappears from my line of sight.

I attempt to push myself out just enough to make sure she made it to the surface. But I'm not strong enough to lift the weight of my skirt.

If I could, I'd snort at the irony of it. I'm going to die in this wedding gown I didn't even like but chose because it was so different from the one I wore five years ago. I considered that dress a death sentence, yet this is the one that's actually ending my life.

Selfishly, I wonder if I'll be buried in this gown and hate the idea that I'd be tied to Peter that way. Sure, I was going to marry him, but even he knows I don't love him.

Then as my world begins to dim, the edges of my vision go black and my will weakens until another thought flutters through my mind. The memory of those words I spoke so long ago.

When I die, I want the last face I see to be yours.

My oxygen-deprived brain conjures up the image of Rowan, appearing so much the way I remember, looking in through the car window. Even with the sunlight drowned out, I can make out his features—his masculine jaw and brows, the curve of his mouth, and intensity of his blue eyes—all framed by a halo of golden hair. If I didn't know better, I'd think he was an angel, come to take my soul.

But I do know better. I know he's nothing but a figment of my imagination when he reaches in and wraps an arm around my waist, bringing me to him as if I'm light as a feather. And I

know he's not really here, even though he feels solid and warm when I lay my cheek against his chest and shut my lids.

He's nothing more than my dying wish come true.

But there's a reason they say be careful what you wish for. I'm about to find out what that is.

2

LOUISA

I t's all over in a split second. At least, it feels that way to me. One moment, I'm underwater, my lungs on fire as I see the image of Rowan appear before me. The next, I'm on my back, sucking in shallow, painful breaths.

"We've got a pulse!" someone shouts near me. I'm turned onto my side as I begin to cough, and warm, thick fluid pours from my throat.

My body begins to tremble uncontrollably, until I'm wrapped in something warm and hard. A man. I'm pressed against a man.

A woman is crying nearby, her sobs heartbreaking. Mom?

I try to look toward her, but when I open my eyes, the light nearly blinds me. Everything is bright. Much too bright.

"Oh God, please tell me she'll be all right. Please!"

"Take her to the car," the man holding me says in a voice made of pure gravel.

The heat is suddenly turned up a hundred degrees as I recognize that tone because I've heard it so many times in my dreams. I force my lids open and stare up at the man holding me in his strong arms. Deep-blue eyes stare back at me, narrowed, intense, and worried. And beautiful. So fucking beautiful.

Rowan.

"Did I die?" My question comes out laced with extreme confusion because that's exactly what I am. Confused.

Why is he hovering over me with that worried expression as he takes me in the way he did the day he rescued me from that lake so long ago?

I wonder if this an out-of-body experience? Maybe a memory. My life flashing before my eyes.

That's when I notice the fine lines in his face, along with a few gray strands blended into his blond hair and the stubble on his cheeks. It's Rowan but an older version of him.

I reach up and touch him. "I don't understand."

"Your car went into the lake. I pulled you out."

All at once, the events of the day hit me like a sledgehammer—the drive to the church, David changing directions, the motorcycle chasing us, the crash into the water. Me pushing my mother out but unable to save myself because of that fucking dress.

"Let me go or you'll regret it. I want to see my daughter," Mom says a short distance away. Then her soft hand takes mine and she kneels by my side. She peers down at me, her cheeks tear streaked. "My Lulu?"

"Mom? What happened?" As the fog in my mind begins to clear, I notice the blood streaming from a gash on her temple and dripping down to her jaw. "You're hurt."

"It's fine. I'll be fine."

"Go to the car, Diana. I'll take you both to the clinic."

When I attempt to get up on my own, they both help me, which just makes it harder. When I finally do, I stare with my mouth agape at the scene before me. Around fifteen fully armed men are standing around their vehicles, none of which belong to my father. The bridge David tried to pass is up ahead, the guardrail crumpled, half of it hanging over the river.

"Where is the ca..." I trail off when I notice I'm standing on the side of the road with nothing on but my lacy corset and thong. Instinctively, I wrap my arms around myself. "My dress!"

Rowan one-handedly tugs off his black T-shirt and drapes it over me.

“Your car is in the river,” he tells me as I shove him away. “I had to cut the gown off to get you out.”

Heat infuses every inch of my skin as I glance around at the men, who, fortunately, are all purposefully looking away.

“Oh my God, this is happening. This is really happening.” I turn to Rowan, not a figment of my imagination, but the real thing. “And you’re actually here?”

“I saved you.”

“You saved me?” I repeat dumbly.

“From the river. You would have drowned.”

My fingers curl as a snarl escapes me. Then, because the rage he provokes has been simmering just below the surface for so long, I throw myself at him and begin to claw at any part of him I can. We fall back onto the ground with a hard thud, but even that isn’t enough to calm me. “You should have let me die!”

“Louisa!” Mom tries to grasp my arms, but I’m too angry.

I’m straddling Rowan, doing my best to take out those damn eyes I once loved so much, but he wraps his fingers around my wrists and stops me when my hands are just inches from them.

“Lou, I understand you’re mad,” he says in an infuriatingly calm tone. “But now isn’t the time. You’re naked, remember?”

“I don’t give a fuck.”

“Well I do!” With one quick shove, he throws me off. Before my ass hits the ground, he’s lifting me to him. He spins me and tugs the shirt over my head so fast, I can barely react.

By the time I turn back to him, I have a man on each side of me, holding my arms.

I grin evilly. “You need these big men to protect you from little ol’ me?”

Rowan grins back but winces as his mouth pulls. He wipes his thumb over his bloodied lower lip. “Apparently, I do.”

“What do you want with us?” I demand.

“Don’t I get a thank you for saving you?”

“For all I know, you caused this.”

“Did you?” Mom asks, touching her fingertips to her temple.

“Boss.” A thin older man approaches. “Duran’s men are on their way. Ten minutes tops. We should go.”

Rowan glances back at my mother. “We should really get that looked at. I have a doctor on standby. I’ll answer all your questions when I know you’re all right.”

“My husband will not take kindly to this,” she tells him. “It would be in your best interest to leave us here.”

“If that were the case, I wouldn’t have gone through the trouble of capturing you in the first place.”

Of course a man like Rowan would have a doctor come to his home. Criminals don’t set foot in hospitals unless they’re at death’s door, and even then, it’s likely against their will. Too many risks. Too many chances for the enemy to finish them off.

It’s what I would do if it were me who needed to keep my captives under my control.

After throwing me kicking and screaming into the back seat of a black Dodge Charger, one that was obviously an old police car, complete with cage and doors that don’t open from the inside, I’m taken to the McKenzie’s headquarters in Beacon Hill. I huffed when I saw how close it is to Boston Common, a mere stone’s throw from the border between our territories. Guess there’s no better way to ensure the enemy doesn’t trample on your grounds.

But there's no indicator that the place is anything more than a residential building, with the entrance to the underground garage well hidden in the back. However, once we go in and down a level, it's obvious this is no ordinary home.

At least a dozen more armed men stand at attention as the vehicle my mother is transported in stops in front of a set of elevator doors. Rowan exits the car and helps her out. She glances my way and says something to him. He shakes his head as he replies. With a nod, she seems to accept whatever he's said to her, and her features soften to show she's returned to her calm-and-collected self.

The elevator opens and they disappear from sight.

"Let me out." I shove my body against the car door and rattle its handle, but it doesn't budge.

The guy sitting in the front passenger seat twists his neck to peer at me through the grate. "Boss says to wait until your mom is all in," he says through a mouthful of peanuts. "Then you can go in."

I sneer at the New Yorker. "Let me the fuck out of this car."

"No can do. Want some?" He offers me some peanuts, but I simply stare at him. "Suit yourself." He shrugs, then, without a hint of remorse for keeping a woman against her will, he faces the front again.

For fifteen minutes, I imagine his demise. In my mind, he chokes on the peanuts since I have no way of getting my hands around his throat at the moment. Not that any of this is his fault. And I've never been one to make someone pay for another's sins. The only one guilty here is Rowan.

His cell phone rings and he answers it, "Boss." Then he nods and hangs up. "He's ready for her."

The driver pulls up to the elevator. "Your ride is here."

I look on in astonishment as five burly men come out of the elevator. One of them, a broad-shouldered bald man, dressed to kill in a black tailored suit, comes to my side of the

car and opens my door. “Miss Duran. My name is Declan. Please follow me.”

My breathing accelerates as I hesitate. Part of me wants to dig my heels in and force them to pull me out, just to give them a little hell. But the part of me that wants to see Mom wins. To make sure she’s all right. So I do as they say and get out all on my own.

The five men dwarf me as we step into the elevator. Even with odds being in their favor, I’d fight them to my death if it weren’t for my mother. The thought of her being harmed because of me is the only thing that keeps my temper in check.

The elevator chimes and makes a cushioned stop on the third floor. I’m escorted out into an open circular foyer that reminds me more of a hotel than a house, with thick Persian rugs covering hardwood floors, antique paintings, and occasional tables set at intervals with large vases of fresh flowers. Above us is what I assume is the jewel of the home. A large, domed stained-glass ceiling illuminates the space in a sea of color, all the way down to the black-and-white-checked floor of the main level.

I peer over the railing of the curved staircase that leads to other landings similar to this one. Staring up at me from them are more armed men.

“You McKenzies scared of something?” I ask sarcastically.

“This way,” says Declan, ignoring me.

I follow him down a long hall, past several doors and more guards. When we reach a door at the end, he stands aside to let me enter.

Where I expect to see some sort of office, or maybe a parlor wouldn’t be out of the question in a house like this, I walk into a large suite.

Frowning at the sight of the king-size sleigh bed sitting between two windows, I take a step back. “Where is my moth—” The door is slammed shut before I can finish my sentence. I whirl and run to it, turning the antique brass knob and rattling the damn thing. “Let me out of here!”

“I’m sorry, Miss Duran. You are to stay there until the boss is ready to see you.”

Slamming my palms against the wood, I growl, “Do you have any idea who you’re messing with?”

“Yes ma’am. You’re Louisa Duran. Daughter of Don Fernando Duran, head of the Boston Mex. Our enemy. Hence, the need for security.”

“Then you know what he’s capable of. When he finds out the McKenzies have us, your security won’t stop him. There will be war,” I hiss.

The threat is met with silence.

I drop to my knees and peek through the keyhole. The dick isn’t even there anymore. As if my name doesn’t even inspire an ounce of fear or respect, he’s just moved on. Or maybe it’s because the threat has no substance, not when my father wouldn’t suspect the McKenzies would dare take his wife and daughter. He’d be looking to his other enemies.

After all, the dispute over territory borders was put to rest years ago after a bloody battle over Roxbury that took out several members of both families. The losses were so high, a mutual decision was made by Bryan McKenzie and my father to cease.

They settled on a volatile truce, one that could have easily ended had my mother not kept what happened between Rowan and me a secret. She, in a sense, saved his life. Because if my father had discovered our midnight wedding plans, Rowan would now be lying six feet under. I have no doubt of that.

Even though I was ashamed of my own stupidity, there were several times I almost came clean about it. That’s how angry I was when it first happened. Unlike my mother’s mild nature, mine has always been hot and hard to manage. So I was not only cursed with her romantic sensibilities, but I was also gifted with Papa’s passionate temper. We love hard. But we also hate with the same abandon.

And I hated Rowan so much for what he did that I wanted him erased from my life in every way. Papá would have made

it happen, I knew he would. But every time I attempted to tell him, the words lodged in my throat as if held there by some unseen force.

So now this is what we get for keeping quiet, I think to myself as I attempt to open every window to no avail. Grabbing a small marble decoration from the nightstand, I toss it against the glass. It bounces back and I have to duck to avoid being hit by it.

“Fucker has impact glass,” I whisper to myself in disbelief.

It’s probably for the best. Even if I could break the thing, it’s a three-story drop. With my luck, I’d probably land on my head.

Sighing in defeat, I slump against the wall and slide to the floor.

They say patience is a virtue. Unfortunately for me, it’s not something I possess. Sitting here and waiting until the master of the house decides to grace me with his presence is going to be unbearable.

I glance at the marble piece and my sly smile returns. Idle hands are the devil’s workshop, and mine itch with the need to do something evil. And with time to plan, I can make sure Rowan’s day is as miserable as mine.

3

ROWAN

I wait at the bottom of the stairs for Declan to reappear after escorting Lou to the holding suite. Even from two stories below, I can hear the sounds of her raging against the door.

She's changed much in the last five years. Of course, I expected the sweet doe-eyed girl who gave me her heart so willingly to be different this time around. Not quite so easy to seduce. Maybe even a little pissed at me. That's why I had her placed in the room we reserve for special guests. The ones we don't want dead but need to keep under control.

However, I have to admit she's more aggressive than I thought she'd be.

Somewhere on the third floor, a door slams shut, and her screams of sheer rage echo throughout the house. "Let me out of here!"

"I'm sorry, Miss Duran," Declan says. "You are to stay there until the boss is ready to see you."

"Do you have any idea who you're messing with?" The door rattles so hard, I fear she may break through it.

"Yes ma'am. You're Louisa Duran. Daughter of Don Fernando Duran, head of the Boston Mex."

"Then you know what he's capable of. When he finds out the McKenzies have us, there will be war."

He doesn't reply to that because he's already walked away. My right-hand man peers over the railing at me as he says

something to Phil, one of the guards posted upstairs. Phil nods and moves to stand closer to Lou's suite.

Declan descends the stairs, unbuttoning the stuffy coat he insists on wearing. Stopping in front of me, he says, "I'd give her a few hours to cool down."

Glancing upward once more, I blow out a breath, my hands fisted at my sides. I've waited this long, but now that I have her this close, a few more hours seem like an eternity. But I agree with him.

"You and I need to talk. Now," I say.

"Yes sir."

We go into the study located at the back of the house. Declan shuts the door behind us as I round my desk and drop into my chair. "What the fuck happened out there? Those guys show up out of nowhere and execute the same plan we had. That's not a coincidence."

"It was a woman," Declan says. "The one leading them was female."

"Female?" Thinking about that carefully, I stroke my chin, narrowing my eyes at him. "Are you sure?"

He removes his coat and sets it on the back of the chair across the desk from me before sitting in it. "There was no mistaking that body as anything but feminine. A female assassin."

A chill crawls up my spine.

While there are women in our profession, and some notorious ones at that, I've encountered few. And never in a fight. Yet the very fact that one of the attackers who thwarted my plans could be a woman makes me wonder who the real target was.

"Say what you're thinking," I tell him.

Declan doesn't blink, his gaze sharp. "The Ferryman has heard you've assumed control of the McKenzies. He's come to collect your soul."

“If it’s him, why go after Louisa? I was there too. He could have just had that bitch kill me.”

“Maybe he doesn’t just want you dead. Maybe he wants to make you suffer. What better way to do that than by going after what you want most?”

I face the window, staring at the garish brown curtains. Then I glance around the room, noting the clashing design elements. Bryan and James McKenzie bought this house thirty years ago, after they broke away from a gang in Chicago and started their own here.

While they thankfully hired a professional interior designer for the rest of the house, the study was all them and it shows.

Hard as they were, I miss the men who practically raised me after my father died. The way Mam described it, she returned home with her tail between her legs, begging her two older brothers for shelter. They took one look at me, saw the McKenzie gene was strong in my blood, and immediately let us in.

I don’t resent them for their heavy-handed tactics. The world we live in requires I have a tough skin. They did what was needed to survive.

Growing up, my uncles were bigger than life. Superheroes. When they brought me into the fold and officially made me part of the McKenzies, I saw they truly were bold and brave.

But no amount of boldness would have saved them from their past.

A few months ago, Giuseppe Tadesco, the Don over Chicago, was taken out. The day we heard of his death, Uncle Bryan and Uncle James locked themselves in this study for an entire day.

Ignorantly, I assumed they were simply discussing a way to take advantage of the situation. But they were probably actually discussing the details of Tadesco’s death. Of how he was found in a dirty hotel room in Jersey, splayed out naked, his gut sliced from groin to sternum. And the most disturbing of all, the 2009 pennies placed over his eyes.

Perhaps if anyone else had been in the room with them, we could have formulated a plan to keep them safe. However, Bryan and James were proud men, and sharing a sin from their past, a sin they knew would one day come back to haunt them, wasn't how they operated.

Not long after that night, Uncle Bryan was found dead, just as Tadesco had been.

Uncle James took over the family then, appointing me his underboss. But he still didn't share with me what could have been a lifesaving secret. Whether it was a lack of trust or simple shame in the role he'd played, I have no idea. He remained quiet even when Tony Sinacore, then godfather of the ruling family in New York, made the first connection between the murders and a man named Stephen Black. That connection cost him his life too.

Our family was shaken to its core when Uncle James followed them to the grave in the same way. The shock and uncertainty was so great that we remained in a period of suspension, where no dared make a move to take over.

It wasn't until Joaquin Gianni from New Jersey was killed that I first heard from Luca Sinacore, Tony's younger brother. After he took over the *famiglia*, he called a meeting to warn those of us at risk about this new threat we were all aware of but couldn't see.

And I finally learned the secret my uncles kept from us for so long.

"Have you heard of the Ferryman?" he asked as we gathered around the dining room table in his home, Briar House. "He worked under Tadesco in Chicago for years, growing his power right under his nose. They called him the Ferryman because he was a smuggler. The mark he left on anyone he killed was—"

"Pennies," Noah Esposito, the new heir to the Gianni throne in New Jersey, finished for him.

Stephen eventually grew too powerful, infiltrating territories and incurring the wrath of the players he affected.

Francesco Gianni, Giuseppe Tadescio, Sergio Ramos, Sean Murphy, Clive Maxton, and Uncle Bryan. In 2009, those six ruthless men, all heads of criminal organizations, came together to take him out.

Six months ago, the killings began. The men involved in Stephen's murder became targets. All were found with 2009 pennies over their eyes, a clue as to why it was happening and who was responsible. Anyone who dared to replace them was killed in the same manner.

"If Stephen Black is dead, who's killing Dons?" Esposito asked then.

"His son," Gunn Sinclair, Luca's right-hand man, replied. "Gideon Black."

Uncle James was taken out when he replaced Uncle Bryan. Joaquin Gianni was murdered for replacing Francesco. Then Renzo for taking over after Joaquin's death.

Attacks were mounted against Noah Esposito when he first took over the Giannis after Renzo died. But by then, he'd become part of the Sinacore Alliance.

The same happened with Arran Maxton, the underworld king of Philadelphia. He took over Clive's businesses, going against the Ferryman's explicit warnings not to.

But just like in 2009, Luca Sinacore called for the heads of the criminal organizations involved to come together and fight. With our support, Noah and Arran were able to keep their positions and power.

Now it's my turn. Which means Declan could be right. The Ferryman has heard I've assumed control of the McKenzies and he's come to collect my soul. And what better way to do that than through Lou?

I lift my gaze to Declan. Though he's staring right back, I can tell he's somewhere else, the wheels in his head turning.

"The question I'm asking myself," —he frowns— "is if the timing was all a coincidence or if Gideon Black went after Louisa because he knew of your plan to take her on the way to the wedding."

“That would mean we have a snitch.”

His dark eyes focus on me again. “Exactly.”

There’s a knock on the door. Without looking away from Declan, I say, “Come in.”

Axle enters, followed by Dr. Graham. Axle shuts the door and stands beside it, waiting as usual for anything I might request of him.

“How’s our patient?” I ask the doctor, turning to him.

“She’s alert and well. There is a bit of swelling, and the bruising extends down into her cheekbone, but the wound is clean and stitched. I don’t believe she’s concussed, even though she did lose consciousness.”

“Good.” I nod.

“But I strongly advise a cat scan at the hospital, just to rule anything out.”

My lips pull into a thin line. “I’m not sure that’s a risk I can take.”

“She’d be in good hands. I can have it done discretely and have her brought back to you within the hour. No one will know she’s there.”

I sigh and pinch the bridge of my nose. Sending Lou’s mother to the hospital would give her the chance to escape. Or if she’s seen by anyone in Duran’s employ, my hand will be revealed and everything I want will slip through my fingers.

But if I don’t and Diana has some head injury we can’t see, I’ll lose it all anyway.

“Axle,” I call out and he stands at attention. “Please make sure to get Dr. Graham and Diana an escort. You go along and report to me every ten minutes. And make sure to let Mrs. Duran know what will happen to her daughter should she try anything while she’s at the hospital,” I add before they’re out of the room.

Axle pauses, then nods. “Yes sir.”

“You wouldn’t hurt Louisa after all your efforts to get her here,” Declan says.

“Diana doesn’t know that.”

When I continue to stare at the door the men just left through, Declan says, “Now it’s my turn to ask what you’re thinking.”

“I think you’re right. It’s my time to deal with the Ferryman.”

4

ROWAN

“How is she doing?” I ask Phil.

He glances wearily down the hall, toward the suite Lou is being held in. “She’s been quiet for a while.”

I go to stand outside her room, staring at the door so hard, it seems to take on a life of its own. It bulges toward me as it breathes, intense and maybe a little terrifying. Like the woman on the other side.

Louisa.

Although I always knew she’d come back to me, this isn’t where I imagined her.

A grin tugs at my lips as I recall the vision she made beneath me in that small apartment I rented in the North End. Her sweet smile, the way her black hair fanned over my pillow, and the desire in her gaze remain emblazoned in my mind.

That’s what I hoped for when she returned to me. However, I prepared for the worst after what I did to her.

Perhaps if she hadn’t vowed to be mine, even after I warned her she might not always feel that way, I would have left her alone. But she did.

“I will. No matter what, I’ll always be yours,” she said. “I swear it. I’m yours forever.”

I place my palm on the door, wondering what she’s doing inside. It’s quiet in there, not a single sound to indicate where she might be.

Is she peering out the window? Or is she lying in bed, her hair fanned out on the pillow the way it is in my memory?

The knob catches my attention. It's one of those old-fashioned types with the skeleton key. When my mother first brought me to live here and I was too young for grownup conversations, I'd peek through the hole. See things I shouldn't have. But it wasn't until Uncle Bryan caught me and dragged me inside to watch Charlie Baker's torture and execution that I learned that the saying "Curiosity killed the cat" was true.

When it was over, Uncle Bryan took me out for chocolate ice cream. I stared at it until it started to melt, my stomach in knots, my small hands shaking.

He gazed at me long and hard, the way he had Charlie Baker before he slashed his cheeks with a dagger. "Charlie saw what he shouldn't have. The next time I catch *you* snooping, I will beat you to within an inch of your life. Is that clear?"

I shrank into my seat. "Yes sir."

"Eat your ice cream," he said.

"I'm not hungry."

"Did I ask if you were? Eat it, boy," he demanded. "I don't like to waste money."

I did. The chocolate went down as easily as tar would have, sticky and gross, and I heaved the entire time. But I ate it because I knew that this treat was as much a punishment as anything else could have been. A lesson in what my uncles were capable of doing when someone disobeyed.

That was the last time I ever ate ice cream. It was also the last time I was tempted to peek through a keyhole.

Until now.

Dropping to a knee, I bend down farther, leveling my sight with the hole. As I focus, I realize I'm looking straight into another eye.

There's a slap against the door and I immediately draw back, as if she could hurt me through the wood.

"I see you, Rowan Kane!" Lou hollers angrily. "I'd know that eye anywhere. Let me the fuck out of here."

"When you're ready to talk, I'll let you out."

Another slam against the door. "You want to talk? Talk?! I will never be ready to talk to you. Ever! Do you hear me, you son of a bitch? I never want to talk to you."

"Then you'll never be let out. Simple as that," I say flatly.

Suddenly, she goes quiet as a mouse. As quiet as it was when I got here.

"Boss," Phil interrupts. "I've just been informed dinner is ready and your guest is waiting."

"Thank you, Phil." I glance at the door once again and shake my head. She's not going to make it easy. Luckily, if there's one thing life with my uncles has prepared me for, it's that nothing ever is.

I head down to the dining room. When I enter, Lou's mother lifts her gaze from her dinner plate.

"Diana," I greet and sit beside her, at the head of the table, where my meal already awaits.

"Mr. Kane. It's so nice of you to finally come. You are aware it's bad manners to keep a lady waiting?"

I drop my napkin onto my lap and look at her. She's wearing one of my mother's dresses. Just as I thought, it fits her perfectly. "I want to apologize for your involvement in this. It didn't occur to me that you'd be in the vehicle when—"

"When you kidnapped my daughter?" She grabs her knife and fork and begins to gingerly cut into her filet. "Of course the mother of the bride would be in the car with her."

"I don't attend many weddings."

"It's my understanding that you don't attend any at all. Not even your own." Elegantly, she places the cut of meat in her mouth.

I clear my throat. “Axle said your scans were normal. And that you were very cooperative with them.”

“Didn’t try to run away a single time.” She brings the glass of red wine to her nose and inhales. She shuts her lids as if in doing so, she can better take in the aroma of the expensive stuff. Then she tastes it. “Heavenly.”

“I’m glad you approve. While you are my guest, you will be treated like royalty. Only the best, I assure you. Please make use of the house, enjoy the gardens. Axle will assist you in ordering clothes, shoes, whatever you’d like.”

“Mmm. Do you treat all your prisoners this well?”

“Only the ones destined to become my mother-in-law.” I take a bite of my steak while she assesses me.

“I see. So that’s what this is all about. You want to marry Louisa.”

I swallow, then say, “Exactly.”

Blinking at me, she asks, “Why?”

“I’d like to achieve what my uncles couldn’t. I want access to your territory.”

“So it’s a marriage of convenience?” Her brow furrows and she takes another bite.

“Not exactly. Though it will be convenient.”

“If you wanted an arranged marriage, you should have spoken with my husband.”

My lips pull. “I don’t believe he would have been receptive to a meeting.”

She daintily taps her mouth with her napkin, trying to discreetly hide her smile. “Well, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, Rowan, but Louisa may not be either. She inherited her father’s stubbornness.”

“I’m sure I can persuade her.”

Turning away from me for a moment, she seems to mull it over as she eats. Then she sets down her silverware and asks

the question I can see churning in her mind, “I don’t understand. Why put her through this again?”

“Because she’s mine, Diana,” I answer honestly. “She made the vow herself.”

She shakes her head. “She won’t accept you. Not this time.”

“Yes, she will. And if she doesn’t, you’re going to help me convince her.”

“Why would I do that? What do you have to bring to the table that would make this marriage in any way appealing to the Durans?”

“It would prevent a war, for one. I’m sure you’re not aware of this, but your husband has been busy stealing from me.”

“Is that so?” She arches a brow.

“He’s been intercepting some of my shipments, and wouldn’t you know, he suddenly has an increase in supply.”

Diana taps her finger against her wineglass thoughtfully. “Pure coincidence.”

“That’s what I told my men. They have their eyes on someone else. For now.”

Her lips pull up into a smile. “And if I don’t help you with my daughter, you’ll start a war?”

“If she doesn’t accept, I’ll start a war. Which is why you might want to help me. The McKenzies have more men.”

“Quantity doesn’t matter. All that matters is will. And I assure you, the Durans have that in spades.”

“I don’t disagree. Perhaps we are still equally matched, and there’s no way to predict who would win a battle between us. But the one thing I can predict is that there would be bloodshed. Lives will be lost. Your own sons might be among them.”

Her jaw tenses and I see I’ve gotten her attention. But her smile doesn’t falter. “And if she accepts you? What do *we* get out of that marriage?”

“A contract between our territories. I want to be the sole provider of coke with a twenty-five percent cut for you. That’s it. Everything else is yours. It’s a win-win.”

Sitting back, she narrows her stare on me. “A win-win,” she repeats.

“One less product for you to move, and you still make money. I’d say it is.”

“My husband makes those decisions,” she throws at me. “I have no say.”

“Everyone knows the power you wield over Fernando. Whatever you tell him, he’ll do.”

Tilting her head as if to see me from a different angle, she smiles a sad sort of smile. “Believe it or not, I tried to help you once. I was the one who drove Louisa to the church that night. I rooted for you, put a lot on the line for you, and you disappointed me. How do I know you won’t disappoint me again?”

“Things have changed. So which is it to be, Diana? War or peace?”

She sighs as she pushes her chair back and rises. “All right. I won’t stand in your way. But I will not help you either. Convincing Louisa to marry you will be all on you. If she accepts, I’ll allow it. But if she denies you, there will be war.”

I nod. “I’m sure she will see reason quickly enough. I plan on speaking with her first thing tomorrow.”

A bout of laughter bursts from her. “It’s been a long day. I’m going to bed.” She laughs again as she makes her way out.

“What’s so funny?”

Shaking her head, she says, “Nothing. Just...” She looks over her shoulder at me. “You have yourself a good rest, Rowan. I think you’re going to need it.”

5

LOUISA

Falling asleep wasn't part of my plan, but my boredom finally got the better of me. After finding the heavy marble cross on the nightstand I'd use to mount my attack the first chance I got, I was left to wait for hours on end with nothing to do but let my mind wander.

Rowan's appearance was the one and only break in the silent monotony. I heard the creaking of the floorboards just outside, deep whispered words between men, and I couldn't resist the urge to peek.

There was no mistaking the unique color of his iris, cerulean struck through steel and ice. It was like spying through the keyhole straight into the depths of a rare jewel, one I committed to memory years ago, and I can't seem to rid myself of the image.

But like a coward, he fled. It's like he sensed I had a plan for him and it was going to hurt like hell.

Left alone once more, I sat by the door and waited. And waited. I made devious plans, went over them again and again, perfecting them. I'd attack the moment that door opened. I'd disarm whoever it was, and if it was Rowan, even better. Then I'd run through the house screaming for Mom like a crazy woman, because if I had to bet, there are nothing but male guards. And male guards are scared of only one thing. A woman gone batshit crazy.

I hate going with stereotypes, but sometimes there's no choice.

It didn't occur to me that I'd find the scheming soothing. Like counting sheep. Even turned it into a little rhyme.

One, two, three... He's going to pay for what he did to me. Four, five, six... I'll hit him with the crucifix.

My body betrayed me in the worst way and I fell asleep, wedged into the corner between the dresser and wall.

When I wake, I'm in that state where the dream world still has its grip on me, and it takes me a few moments to realize that what I'm seeing is real. Rowan crouched in front of me, his long blond hair framing his handsome face as he stares at me.

He seems almost mesmerized as he tilts his head and rakes me with that intense gaze, up my bare legs and over the black shirt he took off his back for me yesterday. Then his eyes lock on mine for an instant, and they touch something raw inside me. A tender spot that still smarts from the last time I let him in and paid the price.

The ache from it is enough to fully rouse me and remind me where I am and why I'm here.

Mistaking my stillness for compliance, Rowan smiles. "I see you're in a more amicable mood today."

Behind him, I notice the door has been left slightly ajar. I return his smile coyly.

"That's the problem with men," I say sweetly, my hand wrapping around the hard object behind my back. "You're blinded by a half-naked girl."

"I did always love the way you looked in my shirts after we fucked."

"We didn't fuck last night," I retort.

Reaching for me, he tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. "You cut your hair. It suits you."

The electric contact of his skin against my cheek as he moves away is enough to push me into action. I swing my arm and hit him with the cross. To my misfortune, he's able to

react in time to protect his head, but the assault still throws him off balance and he falls back.

I push myself up and go for the firearm tucked in his belt holster but have barely touched it when he's already righting himself.

No time. Get the fuck out! Run!

With those words blaring in my mind, I toss the cross at him, forcing him to duck. Taking advantage, I rush out of the room like a bat out of hell.

"Mom!" I scream, running straight for the first guard I see.

Seeming confused, he just moves out of my way and allows me to pass him. I head toward the winding staircase I saw yesterday and down past another guard, who also acts puzzled and plasters himself against the wall before I trample him.

"Mom!"

"Lou!" Rowan's long legs already have him out of the room and then closing in on me in a matter of seconds. "Louisa, stop!"

I don't stop, not even when I can practically feel his breath on my neck. "Mom! !here are you?!"

I'm two steps away from the first-floor landing when Rowan throws his huge body on me. My much smaller frame easily succumbs under his weight, and I smash onto the tile floor.

"Let me...go!" I desperately fight him, kicking, screaming. I manage to drag myself out from under him but don't get far.

His big hand wraps around my ankle, holding me in place. "Not until we talk," he says easily, while I'm breathless and panting.

"I have nothing to say—" My denial dies on my lips when my mother appears in a large archway holding a cracker topped with thinly sliced salmon.

Beside her, the guy named Declan, impeccably dressed in his tailored suit, is pressing the barrel of his gun against her temple. “I suggest you oblige the boss.”

My eyes go from him to my mother. I stop moving, stop fighting, my body completely limp. “Mom?”

Before she can utter a word, I’m unceremoniously flipped onto my back then dragged up Rowan’s chest as he rises to his full height.

I despise the way every one of my female senses comes to life. Memories of that hard body extended over me spark like fireworks in my mind, flashes of images and touches that made me want. Made me ache.

Futilely, I push against him, refusing to remember. Hating the helpless whimper that escapes me. Out of the thousands of times I pictured running into Rowan again, this is not how it played out.

But he shows as much pity for me now as he did the day he left me shattered. Not caring one bit that his proximity is killing me all over again, he snakes an arm around my waist and fists my hair to keep me from looking away.

“Do I have your attention now?” he asks, his tone low and menacing.

As if he’s ever lost it.

After being given an hour to shower and dress in a pair of gray slacks and a pink cashmere sweater, I’m escorted to the study on the first floor.

Per Rowan’s promise—really the only thing that kept me from lashing out at my captors—my mother is already there, peering out a tall window. She’s standing beside the very man who held a gun to her head earlier, speaking to him in low tones.

“Mom?” I run into her open arms when she turns to me. Inhaling her warm scent, I tuck my face into her neck and squeeze tighter. “You’re all right. I was so worried.”

“Lulu, of course I’m okay.”

Pulling away, I inspect her for any sign of injury. But other than the bandage on her forehead, she seems to be in good health. “That beast hasn’t hurt you?”

She laughs, her brown eyes crinkling at the corners. “Quite the contrary. I’ve been treated very well. So far, they’ve all been gracious hosts.”

“Gracious?” I glare at Declan. “Mom, we’re hostages. This man held a gun to your head!”

“But he wasn’t actually going to shoot. It would have completely ruined our plans if he had.”

My brows pinch. “What plans?”

“Our wedding plans.”

I spin to see Rowan entering with a skinny older man close at his heels. Like prey that’s just spotted danger, I watch him carefully as he moves around the room. Every one of my muscles tenses when his scent reaches my nostrils, and I want nothing more than to flee.

Dropping into the chair behind the large mahogany desk, he indicates the two seats across from him. “I’m glad the clothes Axle brought you fit.”

When I don’t move, Mom takes my hand and escorts me to my chair, then takes the one next to me.

Both the skinny man, who I assume is Axle, and Declan stand flanking Rowan, a display of their position within the McKenzie family. It’s one I’m accustomed to seeing, with my father as the head and my three brothers surrounding him whenever they’re about to make deals.

And that’s exactly what this is, so I get right to the point.

I cross my right leg over my left and relax my hands on the armrests, willing them to stop shaking. Steeling myself against

the effect of Rowan's glittering gaze, I stare into it, hard and unrelenting. "What do you want?"

"Nothing more than what is rightfully mine."

"You want access to Duran territory." Smirking at his arrogance, I disengage from our locked stares and pick at a thread on my pants. "Of course you'd assume it's yours."

"What I want is access to *you*," he says in an intoxicatingly deep voice that has me snapping my eyes back to his. "And I assume you're mine, because you are. Or have you forgotten what you said to me the night before our wedding?"

My mouth goes dry as heat rises over the skin of my neck and into my cheeks. "You can't be serious."

Mom clears her throat and I turn to her mechanically, my mind struggling to make sense of this conversation.

"Mr. Kane has made an offer. Your hand in marriage, along with selling rights in Duran territory, in exchange for peace."

"Peace?" I ask dumbly.

She smiles wearily. "If you don't accept, he will start a war."

"If I do, Papá will."

"I believe he'll come around," Rowan adds. "Once your mother has a chat with him."

"Then *I'll* start the damn war!" I snap, slamming my palm against the desk.

"Lulu," Mom says calmly, placing her hand on my shoulder.

"Please tell me you're not actually considering this?" I implore her. "Don't you remember what he did to me?"

Sighing, she nods. "I'm not considering anything. The choice is all yours. I simply ask that *you* consider the offer and the ramifications of your decision."

I stare at her in confusion. Why isn't she screaming in outrage at such an offer. A threat, really. She believed in the

love Rowan once claimed to feel for me, but surely she doesn't think he actually wants me?

Then I see it in her expression, the choice she'd like me to make. If there's war, her three boys would fight. Yeah, they're grown-ass men with deadly skills that have more than earned them their place by my father's side, but to her, they're still her boys.

It's a discussion that has been debated many times at the family table. Whether or not the Durans and the McKenzies are still as equally matched. Would another war finally end the debate, or would it be the same bloody massacre on the streets of Boston that nearly took us both out. Would my brothers and father end up dead this time around?

Rowan must sense my inner thoughts. "Leave us," he orders everyone.

Mom squeezes my hand and gives me a pitiful glance before following the men out. I stand and go to the window, peering out at the small enclosed garden behind the house. Unlike this garishly decorated study, it's lovely. A little piece of paradise in a busy city.

A few moments later, Mom appears out there and sits on a bench to enjoy a cup of something—tea, perhaps. She takes a deep breath, then exhales it, seeming to appreciate the quiet.

She likes it here. It's in her body language. I hate that.

"So what's it going to be?" He stands so near me that I have to move over so as not to feel his heat.

Crossing my arms over my chest to keep my breasts from grazing his shirt, I ask, "What's your endgame, Rowan? If I accept, what do you get out of this deal? A little side hustle selling drugs on our area of Boston isn't worth your time."

"I. Get. You." He punctuates his words as if he wants to make sure I understand him. "Because I don't want you on paper alone. I want everything that comes with marriage."

I huff. "An arranged marriage with benefits."

“With *all* the benefits. And I mean *everything*, Lou. I want it all, and I want it done with a smile.”

I snicker. “You’re not seriously implying you’d be willing to go to war and take out half of Boston in the process just to get into my pants.”

He somehow manages to get closer, seeming larger. Against my will, I take one step back and another when he follows. Then my back is against the wall and he’s crowding me, looming over me as he braces a hand by my head.

Leaning in, he takes a piece of my hair and twirls it around his index finger. His gaze darkens to deep cobalt as he inhales, then my name rumbles over his lips like butter and sin. “Louisa Duran.”

To my shame, I begin to tremble like a fucking rabbit in the face of a wolf. And fuck me, but I’m not sure if I want to cower or offer myself up as his dinner.

And just like a wolf, he gives me a toothy grin before he moves his face closer, his lips grazing my cheek as he growls into my ear, “Just to get into your pants, I’d burn the down the city. I don’t just want to get into your pants. I want to get into your head, into your fucking soul. So imagine what I’d do for that.”

6

LOUISA

I'm sitting on the edge of the bed, staring dead ahead, doing my best to ignore the elephant in the room. But it would be easier to ignore a huge stinky beast than the large pink box beside me.

I side-eye it, glaring at the frilly white stuff visible through the window of its lid. I'm not sure what's worse, the doom it would mean for me if I were to wear it or my curiosity to find out what sort of wedding gown Rowan would choose. Not that he has bad taste in what he wears. Quite the opposite, the way he dresses emphasizes all of his best attributes. But clothing himself and purchasing a gown for me are two very different things.

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" I huff and stand.

Throwing the lid open, I tug out the dress. Just as I expected, it's hideous, not at all what I'd ever pick for myself. With huge pointy shoulders and a ruffled high neck, it's like something out of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. How befitting. I'll basically be the living dead if I marry him.

Clutching the ugly thing to my chest, I drop back onto the mattress. If I go through with it, this will be the third wedding dress I've worn, and I'm barely twenty-three years old.

An image of me in it, gliding down some aisle toward the very monster who already destroyed me once flitters through my mind. Like Lucy moving in an eerie trance toward Count Dracula and, ultimately, her final death. That will be me. Only,

I'm not in a trance, but very much aware of the disaster that's about to befall me.

Rowan gave me a choice, though in reality, it's not a choice at all. Of course I'd choose my family. I'd protect them at all costs, even if the price is my freedom.

I believe him when he says he'd burn down Boston. That he'd end both our families to have me. The question is why?

Because you gave yourself to me. The answer comes unheeded. I vowed to be his, and he's holding me to it, even though he doesn't love me. Again, why? Is it a pride thing? Did my upcoming marriage to Peter threaten his masculinity somehow? Or is it truly about access to the Duran territory his predecessors weren't able to get?

Papá will want nothing more than to hang Rowan. But by the time he finds out where Mom and I are, who's had us this entire time, it will be too late. And that answers the question as to why Rowan would want this to be a real marriage and not just on paper. If I were to get pregnant, my father would definitely hesitate because, above all else, he values family.

I could ask him to kill him anyway. Hell, I could kill him myself, couldn't I? He certainly deserves it. But if I did, we'd be back at square one. Back at the possible high price that could cost me. My family. In that, I'm just like Papá. Family is the most important thing to me.

Helplessness fills me and I want to scream from the rage that accompanies it. Helpless rage. Useless rage.

Damn Rowan for doing this to me. In all the scenarios I played through my mind of running into him again, it never went like this. I always had the upper hand. It was me who gave him a painful choice to make. He'd lose a part of himself and he'd regret the day he left me waiting for him.

No, more than that. He'd regret the night he saved me from the pool.

I regret that night too. Regret the spark of defiance I felt when Papá allowed my three brothers to go out even before they got their first chest hair but refused to let me out of his

sight, and I was already eighteen. I regret that I chose that night to sneak out the window and follow them to the party a few blocks away. And I regret that I hadn't learned how to swim yet and fell into the pool as I tip-toed through someone's back yard in my efforts to crash the party next door.

Above all, I regret that it was Rowan who pulled me out of the water, mesmerizing me, stealing my breath. He looked like a guardian angel. The moment our gazes met, I handed him my heart and soul.

I never questioned what he was doing there. It wouldn't have mattered if I had. He would've lied and I would have believed him.

He should have let me drown. It would have been more merciful than this.

Peering down at the dress, I swallow the knot that's begun to form in my throat. This is happening. He's not going to leave me waiting this time. I'm going to put this gown on and marry Rowan. Then he's going to take it off and make me his wife in every way.

I want to rip the dress apart with my bare hands and throw the shreds at his feet to let him know what I think of his proposal. No, not proposal. Blackmail from a black-hearted man.

I'd like to rip him apart too. Take out all of my anger and pain on his beautiful face. Scratch those blue eyes out. Though I doubt that would help. They'd haunt me as they have for five years.

A rogue tear rolls down my cheek and I wipe at it with extreme frustration. I've agonized over this decision that's not really a decision so long that my chest aches. I grimace, pressing the dress tight into the pit of my stomach.

If my overbearing father and brothers only knew the sacrifice and the pride I'm swallowing just to save their asses. Their faces come to mind. All tan-skinned, dark-haired brutes who still believe it's a man's job to rescue the damsel in

distress. Yet here we are, the damsel protecting them, and they have no clue what's going on.

But if they did know, they'd be here. They'd put their lives on the line for me. That's why I'm doing this. For the boys who have looked out for me since I was a child.

There's a quiet knock. "Lulu?"

I go to the door and turn the knob, smirking at the fact that it's unlocked now. Of course it is. Rowan no longer fears I'll run. He's got something stronger than locks to keep me his prisoner.

"Can I come in?" Mom asks, her eyes roving the room as if she expects Rowan to be in here with me, then landing on the dress in my arms.

"If you're here to try to convince me to marry Rowan, don't." My words come out clipped and tinged with the annoyance that hit me earlier when she remained silent in the study and that only grew when I realized she likes it here.

Her lovely features soften. "I'm not here to do that, Lulu. I told him the choice was yours and yours alone."

"What if I decide not to and we go to war with the McKenzies? Will you support my choice?"

"Absolutely," she says firmly, her brown eyes intense.

I believe her. She'd rather have peace, but she'll fight for me if I so choose.

I'm overcome by something I can't define, perhaps because it's not just one thing. It's a myriad of emotions, as if I'm already at war. Only, this battle is inside me.

Sighing, I slump into her arms. "Why is Rowan doing this to me? Is our territory that important to him? Or is this some sort of revenge? No, don't answer that. I already know what you're going to say."

She kisses the top of my head and guides me back to the bed. "What am I going to say?"

Pulling away, I stare at her, studying the way her full lips curve slightly upward. “You think he still loves me.”

“It is possible.”

“Ugh! You’re too much of a romantic. He doesn’t love me, Mom. He never has.” I toss the gown onto her lap and stand, then go to the window.

“And what about you?” she asks. “Do *you* love him?”

I whirl to her. “You were there that night. How could I possibly love him after that?”

Shrugging, she shakes her head and that same pity I saw in her eyes five years ago as I sat in the mud returns. “Hearts have a funny way of betraying us. That’s how I ended up with your father. You know that story. Yet I love him beyond sanity.”

Even though she didn’t mean to do it, what she says leaves me feeling more hopeless than ever.

Yes, I know that story well. Of how he kidnapped her while she was on a trip to Mexico and happened to tour a town that his cartel ran. One look at her and he had to have her. She fought him, using what few Spanish words she’d learned to curse him. He found it amusing and smiled. That smile stole her heart.

Every time she tells the story, it’s with a breathless voice, her eyes twinkling.

“But there is one stark difference between us,” I say. “I loved Rowan from the start.”

“And now?”

“I hate him,” I hiss with so much anger, my tears stream freely. “I hate him so much that I’m willing to marry him till death do us part. And I plan on being the cause of his.”

7

ROWAN

I can sense my uncles' anger, their restless spirits roaming the halls in a rage as I prepare to marry the enemy.

Ghosts have no business among the living. At least, that's what Uncle Bryan said to my mother whenever she brought up their parents and how disappointed they'd be to see their two eldest sons had turned to a life of crime.

He also said it to me after she'd died, when I was sixteen and hesitated on my first official assignment—take out Johnny Roscoe for stealing ten thousand dollars from a night's collection.

Johnny was one of our guys. Maybe even one of our better guys. That's why he was trusted to collect fees from those under McKenzie protection.

"It was one time!" he screamed moments before I was given the order to end his life.

My mother had been gone for years and yet her voice sounded clearly in my mind. "Everyone deserves a second chance."

I couldn't pull the trigger.

After Johnny's body was dragged from the study, Uncle Bryan wiped the blood from his blade on my arm. He stared at me knowingly as he did it. "Do not listen to the dead, Rowan. The only place their words will guide you is to the grave. Got me?"

Now it's he who haunts this place, his disapproval I sense as if he's breathing down my neck. He and Uncle James.

You're a traitor. A disappointment.

A smile paints across my lips. I paid my dues and the McKenzies are mine now. Bryan and James no longer dictate what I do. They are no longer a threat.

Shrugging into the tuxedo coat, I flex the muscles in my shoulders to get it to settle into place. I hate formal clothes. My broad back and my height have always made it difficult to find suits that fit without having them tailored. And even then, I feel like a stuffed sausage. But for *her*, I'll gladly wear this shit.

My second-in-command is waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs when I descend.

"Are we ready to go?" I ask.

Declan nods. "The church has been cleared. Father Ayala is impatiently waiting."

"You were able to convince him to perform the ceremony?"

He gives me a look. "I'm a very persuasive man."

Axle scurries into the foyer just then, looking nervous as always. "Sir, we have company."

Before I can ask who it is, the doorbell rings, followed by familiar voices coming from the guarded foyer. A moment later, Luca and Noah enter, both formally dressed.

I frown at the head of the Sinacore Alliance, who seems as comfortable in a tux as I am. "Where are you going?"

"To your wedding, apparently," he replies.

"How did you know about that?"

"I have people." His eyes move almost imperceptibly to Axle.

I raise a brow at the little weasel and he shrinks. "You invited them? I mean..." I turn back to Luca and Gunn. "No

offense, guys, but this is a private thing.”

“No offense taken,” Gunn says. “I was in the middle of something private myself when this asshole showed up and dragged me here.” He points at Luca.

Ignoring him, Luca heads toward the study. “Let’s chat.”

I sigh and follow him. He shuts the door before Gunn or any of my men can come in.

“You’re getting married to Fernando Duran’s daughter and didn’t think to inform the alliance?”

Moving to sit at my desk, something I do more out of a need to establish dominance, I extend my arm to indicate he take the seat across from me. “My marriage to Louisa has nothing to do with the alliance.”

“It does when it puts your safety at risk. We cannot afford to lose you.”

“I’m very well aware the alliance needs me. Better yet, you need what I have. Access to Boston. Manpower. But don’t worry, I’m not putting myself in any unnecessary danger.”

“Aren’t you?” he argues. “Marrying the daughter of your enemy, a man equal in strength to you, behind his back. Word on the street is he’s raking the city searching for them. How long do you think you have before he figures out you’re behind the abduction? When he confirms it, he’ll likely declare war, and that puts you in a vulnerable position. Do you really believe you could fight Duran *and* guard against Gideon Black?”

The thought had occurred to me that Gideon would learn of my marriage and use it to his advantage, but I figured the possibility was slim. That is, until Luca showed up.

“I’ve got it,” I say.

“Rowan, you don’t even know who’s stealing your product. Is it Duran? Gideon? Another enemy waiting for you to let down your guard?”

“Once the marriage is official, Duran will have no choice but to align with me. He will be an asset against Gideon. As

for who is stealing from my trucks, it has to be Duran. Even if it's not, that's an entirely different matter altogether. They are after product, not my life."

Luca laughs. "You've got this all thought out." Then his laughter dies instantly. "But what happens when Duran decides to kill you instead?"

"He won't," I say with certainty.

"Either way," Luca adds. "From now on, I want to stay informed of these decisions. You will have the protection of the alliance only as long as we can count on you. And you need it if you want to keep your position as the McKenzie boss."

"Fine," I throw up my hands. "If you want to provide extra security, I won't fight you on it."

"Good. I already have. I've set up men along the route to the church."

A thought occurs to me about the alliance. "Have you heard from Gavin?"

He shakes his head slowly, concern forming lines between his brows. "Arran and Noah are in Vegas now, conducting their own search. But he's been missing too many days."

During Arran's encounter with Gideon, we discovered Gavin's absence when he didn't answer the call for assistance. It's unlike the ruler of the Vegas underworld to ignore us, especially when he was one of the first to join the alliance.

"Have you found anything linking Gideon to his disappearance?"

Luca seems to think on it for a moment. "If it were him, Gavin would already have shown up with pennies over his eyes."

"What about Sofia? Gideon took her and she's still alive."

There's a tic in Luca's jaw. His sister is a sore subject. Gideon has had her for months now, completely hidden. Anytime we've gotten close enough to Gideon, he's slipped away, and with him, any chance of finding Sofia.

Actually, her being alive is just a theory. We don't know for sure. We only know that she hasn't been used against Luca yet. That's the only thing that gives him hope.

Luca leans forward, hanging his clasped hands between his legs as he narrows his gaze. "When the time comes to fight for my sister, can I count on you?"

"Yes," I say without hesitation.

"Then I need you alive."

I give him a nod. "I'll do my best to stay that way."

There's a knock on the door a moment before Declan enters. "It's time."



We arrive at Her Lady of Faith, the small church in West Roxbury where I left Lou waiting five years ago.

The first time I chose this church, it was because of the carving on one of the old gray stones that form part of the outer wall. *Finnegan Kane and Shannon McKenzie*, it reads.

I pause before entering, tracing my parents' names with my fingertip. This was their last stop before running to Texas, afraid of my uncles' wrath. Their little sister had married one of the men entrusted to guard her, after all. At four months pregnant, she was starting to show and they knew the clock was ticking.

This time, I chose this church because Lou and I have unfinished business here.

Dropping my hand a few inches, I touch the blank stone beneath it. The one that would have had our names carved into it long ago had I followed my uncle's orders.

Tonight, I finish what was started then.

One of the men opens the double doors and we proceed past the foyer and into the sanctuary. Father Ayala is standing at the platform under the large wooden cross from which Jesus

Christ watches. I'm not sure if there's judgment in His gaze. He knows the truth, and He may forgive me or curse me. Either way, I'm going to marry Louisa. I will bind her to me before Him, and then not even He can tear us apart.

"Father, thank you for being here," I say to the priest.

He frowns as he adjusts his round spectacles, his hand trembling over the pages of the Bible as he searches for his text. "Let's get on with it, shall we?"

Declan inclines his head and stands on the other side of Father Ayala. I stare at him, wondering exactly what tactic he used to convince the reverend.

"Is this all of us?" Gunn asks as he and Luca stand to my left. "You need more friends."

"He has us," Luca tells him. "That's the important thing."

"I told you it was meant to be a private event."

Axle comes into the hall, gesturing that Lou and her mother are in the foyer and ready to enter.

Then she rounds the corner, one arm hooked on her mother's and a bouquet of daisies from the garden in her free hand. Her dark eyes rove around the room before they lock onto mine, and the moment is frozen in time. There are no violinists, but I wouldn't have heard them beyond the loud rushing of my blood in my ears. There are no photographers and yet the image of her in white, her dark hair curled wildly around her lovely face, will be etched into my memory forever.

I have a second of regret that I didn't get to see her before, in the dress her mother lent her. She had long hair, slightly fuller cheeks, and she shone beautifully as she does now. Had I seen her then, I wouldn't have been able to leave. And the consequences would have been horrific for the two of us.

They might still be.

But I've seen her dressed just for me, and I can no longer back out.

Slowly, they make their way up the aisle, my heart rate increasing with each step they take, until they stop right in front of me.

Diana disengages herself from Lou and, holding her by the arms, leans in to kiss each of her cheeks. After taking the bouquet, Diana whispers something to her, and Lou nods, her gaze remaining on mine the entire time.

When her mother goes to stand beside Declan, I move in front of Lou and take both her hands. She's trembling almost uncontrollably, and I do my best to steady her.

Father Ayala clears his throat. "I'd like to begin this ceremony with a prayer. May it vanish some of the demons you brought in with you."

I ignore the man's comment. Everyone around us inclines their head as he begins to pray. Everyone but Lou and me. We remain like that, staring at each other.

Lou was always easy to read. She wore every emotion on her sleeve. Her love was evident in the way she smiled, the way her eyes shone when she looked at me. Need and passion and fire blazed in them.

That passion and fire are definitely still there. They burn brighter than before. Hotter. Even when all I see is a threat in her gaze. I'll kill you the first chance I get, it says. Damn, it turns me on to imagine that fierce energy taken out on me. It makes me smile.

Her brows pinch tightly together as she narrows her eyes on my lips.

The priest finishes his prayer. "Under normal circumstances, I'd ask who here gives this woman away. But I'm actually afraid to." He looks over his glasses at everyone.

Diana takes a small step forward. "I do. I give her."

Father Ayala blinks at her, then glances back at his Bible and sighs. "I cannot stress enough that one should not enter into the bonds of holy matrimony lightly. What you vow before God, it cannot be taken back."

“We are aware, Father,” I tell him. “Which is why we’re here in the first place.”

He looks at Lou, who refuses to lift her gaze to him. “Child, if you are doing this against your will, speak now.”

She does turn to him this time. Flicking her eyes upward toward the Christ, she says, “I leave this to him now. He can save me or condemn me for a promise I made to the devil.”

“Louisa—”

“Just, please... Get it over with.” Her voice cracks, and as she peers down, a tear falls onto my right hand.

It’s like a knife to the gut seeing her cry. But it will not change my mind.

The priest’s mouth thins. “Repeat after me. I, Louisa, take thee, Rowan, to be my wedded husband...”

She lifts her reddened gaze to mine and repeats after him, “...to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part, according to God’s holy ordinance; and thereto I pledge thee my faith.”

I do the same, and when I’m given the simple round platinum band, I place it on her slim finger and say, “I give you this ring as a symbol of my love.”

She smirks and tugs her hand out of mine before shoving the matching ring onto my finger. “I give you this ring.”

Again, Father Ayala looks on with disapproval. “In the sight of God and these witnesses, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may now kiss.”

Lou’s cheeks turn beet red and her breathing accelerates as I snake my arm around her waist. Her palms press against my chest, as if that act alone will keep this from happening. But even if I stop, her body language tells me she won’t.

Her body molds itself to mine the way it always did, her face turning slightly as she melts into me. I bring my hand up her back, until I can feel the furious beating of her heart inside her chest.

Then our lips meet, and I taste her tongue again after years of wanting, and that furious beat becomes a thunderous drum that my own heart matches.

The world around us melts away as I'm thrown back in time with this woman in my arms. It's as if we were never apart. Everything about her is exactly as I've replayed in my mind again and again. Her scent. Her warmth. Her taste.

Lost in her and in her instant response to my kiss, I dig my fingers through her hair and pull her in harder. I devour her desperately, a starved man on the brink of death, and she's my only salvation.

I hear a voice in the distance. And another.

But it's not until someone taps my shoulder that I'm brought back to the present and become aware that we're not alone.

"Daaamn," Gunn says. "Maybe he *should* have done this in private. Feel like a fucking Peeping Tom and I've never looked away from a porno."

It takes much of my will power to tear myself from Lou. When I do, she comes with me, her lips attached to mine for a second longer before finally parting.

Her stare glassy, hair mussed and lips swollen and pink from my kiss, she sways slightly. Then a moment later, her eyes widen in realization of what she's just given away.

I lean in and whisper in her ear, "The things I want to do to you. And I'll get to do them all now, wife."

8

LOUISA

To my surprise, Rowan didn't plan a reception. But we remain at the church for a while. He introduces me to Luca Sinacore, the Don of New York, and his right-hand man, Gunn Sinclair.

I greet them in the stupor I've been in since Father Ayala declared us husband and wife and Rowan kissed me.

It was a moment I dreaded. I didn't want to feel his lips on mine or have his taste slide across my tongue, because I feared what it would do to me. That it would addle my brain and stoke the embers in my belly. Hate him or not, I'd be a fool to deny the dangerous effect he has on me.

Rowan was my first, and I wish with all my might he hadn't been. I've compared every other man to him, and sexually, none have come close. Not even Peter with his huge dick was able to satisfy me the way Rowan did.

I'm not sure if it's that Rowan was better than everyone else or if I wasn't as attracted to them. Whatever the reason, it can only mean one thing for me. Doom.

Sleeping with Rowan again is going to be torture. And if he still has the same stamina, it's going to last all night.

Memories of the nights spent in his shitty apartment, our bodies slick with sweat, fill my mind. They're so vivid, I can feel the stubble of his chin on my neck, my breasts, and my thighs. I can feel his hot breath between my legs as he licked and sucked.

My mouth goes dry as the temperature in the room seems to skyrocket.

And we never stuck to that mattress that had been thrown on the floor. Any surface would do. *Did* do. I especially loved it when he fucked me against the wall, my legs wrapped around his waist as he thrust. He kept me in place so effortlessly as he filled me and brought me to cataclysmic orgasms.

Sweet Jesus.

As I think that, I glance over at the Christ and cringe at my dirty thoughts in his presence. But it's his fault too. He could have stopped the wedding. Struck me down as I said my vows.

In a short while, Rowan will take me home and do to me all those things I've envisioned. And because I have no choice, I'll let him. It will seem like Heaven, but the truth is it will be nothing but Hell. And I'll hate him so much more for the pleasure he forces upon me.

I try to tug out of his arm, which only makes him hold me tighter against him. Sweat begins to trickle over my temples and down my back, and I pull on the high neckline of my gown.

"Rowan," I whisper into his ear.

He turns from the conversation he's having with Gunn to me and his brow furrows. "What's wrong?"

Everything! Everything is wrong and you're too close.

"I have to use the restroom."

His gaze trails over me as if he doesn't believe me. "Diana," he says. "Would you mind going with her to the bathroom?"

She gives him a smile that says it's a stupid question. "Come on, Lulu. I'll help you."

I sway into her as she wraps an arm around my shoulders. "I think I'm going to be sick."

The second we enter the ladies', I go to the sink and splash water on my cheeks and forehead.

Mom rubs my back. "It's going to be all right," she repeats what she said after she walked me down the aisle.

"It doesn't feel like everything is going to be all right." I press my palms on the sink and drop my head, taking deep breaths.

"I know it doesn't now. But one day you'll look back on this, and you'll realize I was right."

I lift my head and look at her through the mirror. Her eyes are so hopeful that I want to believe her, if only for her benefit.

"So what you're saying is that this too shall pass?"

"Exactly."

Straightening, I inhale deeply and let it out slowly. "I wish it would pass much faster."

Mom places her hands on my shoulders. "Regardless, you are Louisa Duran. You can do anything."

"You're right. A little marriage to the man I hate is just a bump in the road."

She grins. "That's what I said."

Frowning, I ask, "You said that about Papá? But you've been married for thirty years."

"I know."

I groan. "You give the worst a pep talks, Mom."

"But I'm here for you anyway."

When we exit the restroom, Declan is standing just outside, waiting. "Mrs. Kane, your car is waiting. Rowan is ready to leave."

"Thank you." I attempt to move past him with my mother, but he thrusts out a hand. "What are you doing?"

"Mrs. Duran will be riding back to the house with us."

“Where am I going?” I ask, digging my heels in when he tries to escort me away from Mom.

“I’m not certain. Rowan did not say and it’s not my place to ask.”

Frowning, I look at the large, strong man. “Aren’t you his second-in-command? That means it’s literally your job to ask questions.”

“Not when it pertains to you, apparently.” The last is said with a sort of sneer, and for just a moment, his façade of control slips.

He hates me. It’s not dislike or annoyance I see in his glare. But sheer unadulterated hatred.

I turn to Mom, who’s watching him just as carefully as I am. “It will be okay, Lulu. Declan has promised me a game of chess. He says he’s the best.”

Declan glances at her. “I am.”

“And I will bet that lovely Beretta in your holster that I’m the better man.” She points a dainty finger to his waist. “When you set me free, you hand it over.”

He smirks. “When I win and your husband comes for you, you will take the pistol he carries and hand it over.”

Her eyes widen in feigned shock. “You don’t even know what he carries.”

“But I know I’ll enjoy the look on his face when you do it.”

Mom’s lips thin and she narrows her eyes to near slits. “You’re on.”

Declan shifts his attention to me once again. “Shall we?” He sweeps his hand to indicate I should proceed to the entrance.

I turn toward the doors to the foyer and force my legs to propel me forward.

God, why is this so fucking hard. I’m stronger than this. At least, that’s what I’ve told myself for years now. What I’ve

told my father every time he's excluded me from the family business.

"Just because I'm a woman doesn't mean violence scares me," I swore to him when I demanded to be included.

He rolled his gaze heavenward as if he was praying for patience. "This world is not for everyone, princess. All I want for you is to enjoy life."

It infuriated me that he didn't believe me capable of the tough decisions that have to be made. My brothers are physically stronger, but that doesn't make them better at ruling a family. What *does* make them better is that they were raised to do so. Taught from the moment they could walk and talk.

The blame doesn't fully lie with them. Before Rowan, I didn't want anything to do with the dirty side. I rather pretended that The Duran Construction Company was not just a front, but a legitimate business. And that everything we owned was because of that.

After Rowan, however, everything changed. My heart hardened and I wanted nothing more than to exploit that violent side of me that was born that night.

I craved revenge and the power necessary to get it.

I am the daughter of Fernando Duran. Don of the Boston Mex, the successful Mexican mafia he created after fleeing the cartel. He has done what's had to be done, no matter the circumstances. Hard things. Things that brought him pain in order to succeed.

This is what *I* have to do. Arranged marriages are common among crime families. As are kidnappings and murders. All part of our twisted world. And if I'm going to live in it long enough to see the rewards, I must play the game.

By the time I reach the foyer, I've managed to steel myself. My spine is ramrod straight and my confidence has returned.

But it all goes out the window when the wooden doors are opened and the first thing I spot is Rowan.

Damn. I hate that I find him so fucking sexy. Too sexy. My attraction to him is a liability. In a nanosecond, all that bullshit talk about being the daughter of Fernando Duran and playing the game goes out the window.

I walk to him, my legs unsteady once again. He gives me one of those wolfish grins that used to melt me, but now I'd love nothing more than to slap it off his face.

He steps close, bending his head slightly to meet my gaze. "You look so lovely."

"Really? Because this atrocious garment you chose for me would drown out anyone's beauty."

Chuckling, he grazes my cheek with the back of his index finger. "Not you, Lou. Nothing could make you less desirable."

I roll my eyes. "You're unbelievable. And I mean that literally. I don't believe a word you say."

"I'll earn your trust again." Then he does something that scares the living daylights out of me. He produces a blade from somewhere in his pants and lifts it high.

A scream bursts from me as he swings the blade downward, and thrusts it into the stone behind me, missing my ear by inches.

"You jackass!" I shove him and try to move past him to his black Mustang.

Before I can advance two feet, he snatches my wrist and tugs me back. "I can't do this alone."

"Do what?" I demand.

He drags me closer, placing me in front of him. His warm breath fans my hair as he leans down to my ear and I shiver. "Everything I ever swore to you... I'm making it happen."

"A little too late, don't you think?" I hiss, trying to shrug out of his hold.

"Better late than never." He places the hilt of his knife in my palm, then wraps his big hand around mine and begins to

scratch at the stone he stabbed a moment ago.

When we're done, he releases me, but I don't move. I can't even look away.

"My parents' names are etched into a rock at the church. Ours will be too," he told me once. "And when they are, it will mean that we will be together forever. It will mean nothing can ever take you from me."

"You promise?" I asked and snuggled into his chest.

"I promise."

It took five years to fulfill that promise, but here it is.

I touch the stone, trailing my fingers over the fresh carving.

Rowan Kane and Louisa Duran.

9

LOUISA

Rowan refuses to tell me where we're headed, so I stare out the window in silence. Even when he grabs my hand and places it beneath his on the gear shift, I don't look. Instead, I pretend the contact of his skin doesn't burn me so thoroughly, I might as well be touching a hot iron.

God damn Rowan. I'm so completely aware of not only his hand on mine, but of everything about him. His scent, his breathing, the sound his clothes make when he shifts in his seat. It's all I can do not to tear myself from his hold, open the car door, and jump. The only thing that stops me is the idea of ending up a pancake.

"Wait, where are we?" I sit up as I suddenly recognize an old Victorian house on a corner, its unusual roofline resulting from illegal additions bringing back memories.

"The North End."

I turn to him, my heart pounding in my chest. "We're going to your old studio?"

"Seems fitting, don't you think?" He glances my way. "It's where you gave yourself to me the first time. Where you promised to be mine forever."

He pulls into a spot in front of the brown building that looks exactly the same as I remember. Same green-and-white-striped awning over the narrow entrance door tucked between a Greek restaurant and an Italian market.

Rowan scans the street carefully before exiting the car. He then looks behind us and makes a gesture.

I spin in my seat, expecting to see the caravan of guards I'm accustomed to trailing us, but there's nothing.

"You have someone out there, don't you?" I ask.

"Always." He comes around to my side of the vehicle and opens the door.

I take the hand he extends to me, mostly because it's difficult to move in this dress, let alone get out of a small space, and I really don't want to put on a show.

The moment I'm out, I too scan the area. Nothing seems out of the ordinary, just people milling around, hanging out on the stoops to their buildings. A few do stare my way, some smiling and waving. Someone even yells, "Congratulations!"

However, there are no men lurking in corners or spying on us from windows or rooftops. Shame. I'd hoped there would be. Hoped even more they would be my father's men out searching for me.

But Rowan has been one step ahead the entire time. While I'm positive my father is still out raking the city, he would have expanded beyond the perimeter of his territory by now. He'd have had no reason to suspect we'd be in that tiny church so close to him, or that Rowan has a place in this building. He'd have no way of knowing it's even on to Rowan at all.

Shaking my head in disgust over my situation, I follow Rowan through the entrance and up a wooden staircase so narrow, his shoulders graze the walls. Or maybe he's just that broad.

His apartment is located at the end of a long hall that always made me feel like I was going to a hidden room in an attic. Some place where secrets can be kept locked away. It was exciting when I wanted to keep him a secret, not so much when I need to be found.

Unlocking the door, he pushes it wide and waits for me to enter.

It takes me a moment as the familiar scent of old varnished wood, polish, and other fresh cleaning products wafts out. My eyes adjust to the darkened interior, a consequence of there being only two small windows, and something thick and painful lodges in my throat.

I take one step inside and then another as I glance around the tiny room. It's all here, exactly as I remember and, somehow, that makes all of this so much worse.

There's the kitchenette with the small white fridge he used to stock with diet soda just for me and the bit of counter beside the sink, where I sat to watch him cook on the slim two-burner stove.

Pushed against the wall, there's the table we never ate at because there were no chairs. But we did use it for other things. Fun things. Dirty things. Things that make me look away from it now.

Beside that is the pocket door to the bathroom, with its tiny pedestal sink and standup shower. I peek at Rowan, trying to imagine how a man his size ever fit in that. Then again, he wasn't always this big.

When I met Rowan, he was twenty-two. His body hadn't shed that youthful lankiness. Now he's... Well, he's definitely a fully grown male.

Clearing my throat, I say, "I can't believe you still live here."

He shuts the door and locks it. "I don't. Actually, I never really did. Just got the place for us."

I roll my eyes. "Hard to believe that's true."

Coming to stand close to me, too close, he says, "I couldn't very well take you to my uncle's house, now could I?"

"Perhaps you shouldn't have taken me anywhere at all," I retort.

"That's also true," he whispers as he lifts his fingers to graze the shell of my ear. "But I did."

“So here we are.”

“Yes.”

Unable to take his nearness, I go to the kitchen and run my palm over the laminate counter. “It’s pretty clean for being un-lived in.”

“I had someone come in yesterday to scrub down everything and replace the linens. As much as it pained me to get rid of anything with your scent, they were musty. What do you think?”

I pick at a peeling spot and stare hard at it. “About getting rid of them?”

“About the new bed covers.”

Slowly, I lift my gaze to the side of the studio I’d been avoiding. The one where the full-size bed is set against the wall.

It’s hard to see the fluffy white comforter and plush pillows when the raw images of Rowan and me entwined on that bed fill my head. The sheets were thin and cheap, as was the reversible coverlet. But none of that mattered, because they often ended up on the floor anyway when we made love.

“It’s nice,” I say, my mouth gone dry. “Did you pick it out yourself?”

“Yes.”

“What about my dress.” I shift my eyes to him and pluck at the shoulder pad. “You pick this thing out too?”

“Yes.”

“So you have good taste, just chose not to exercise it when it came to your bride.”

He chuckles, his blue eyes lightening for the briefest moment as they trail over me. Then, almost instantly, it all changes. The amused smile remains, but the light in his gaze vanishes, leaving behind something dark and primitive.

“You really dislike that dress so much?” He tilts his head, watching me, adding a sense of trickery to the question.

“I do.”

“Then I believe it’s time to take it off. Come.”

My breathing quickens at his order. *Come*. Like I’m some damned dog. Worse, his belonging. A slave to command.

But I do it because that’s exactly what I’ve turned myself into. I was left with no other choice.

I stand in front of him, doing my best to mentally prepare for the assault I know is coming. Our gazes lock and I’m sure he’s going to kiss me. Going to use his ability to daze me to ensure I remain compliant.

But he doesn’t.

“Turn around,” he says instead.

“What?”

He lifts a finger and motions for me to turn. When I do and am facing the bed, he reaches for my hand and places it on the zipper pull at the base of my neck. It’s a large tab that my fingers can easily hold.

“This is the reason I chose the gown,” he says.

“So that you can undress me faster?” I ask sarcastically.

He chuckles, his gravelly voice doing that thing it does to me, low in the pit of my belly. “Tug the zipper down.”

I blink and swallow hard. With fingers that are suddenly slippery, I pull down on the zipper. But even with my trembling, I’m able to easily open the back of my dress.

Rowan moves closer, the fabric of his pants grazing my legs. “I did it so that you could undress *yourself* faster should something out of my control have happened. The dress is ugly, Lou. But you...” He places his large warm palm on the bare skin of my back and I suddenly can’t breathe. “You are such a beautiful thing.”

He keeps his hand on me, roving it over my flesh so slowly, as if he’s savoring every second. All the while, I’m staring at the bed, shaking like a fucking leaf, more terrified than the day he took my virginity. Maybe it’s because he’s

about to take something much more valuable to me now. My dignity.

Leaning in, he murmurs against my neck, “And so soft.”

Then, with both hands, he pushes the sleeves of the dress down, exposing my shoulders. I grab the bodice before it falls, holding it against my chest protectively.

“I like your hair short, Lou. Better access to your neck.” He bites me there, hard, restraining me from moving, the way he knows I loved.

To my detriment, it still works on me. I shut my eyes and bite my lower lip in a sad attempt to stop the moan that escapes me. It just comes out more heated. More needy.

If that wasn't enough to reveal what he does to me, I grind my ass into his hardness, an automatic reaction to the domineering move.

He snakes one arm around my waist and pushes the fabric of the dress down farther, exposing more of me. Giving him more terrain on which to do battle with my senses. To destroy them.

“Stop calling me Lou,” I say breathlessly, dropping my head to the side as he makes his way to my shoulder, nipping, kissing, licking. “It makes me sound like a middle-aged man. Like your Uncle Lou.”

Again, he laughs. “I never had an Uncle Lou. If I had, I certainly would never have touched him like this.”

Turning me to face him, he takes in the sight of my fists holding the dress up. Excitement and desire mingle in his expression as he gathers some of the material himself and tugs it downward until I'm forced to release it.

Then I'm standing in front of him in only my white bra and lacy thong, the dress a puddle on the floor. Easy prey to his hungry eyes.

Rowan drops to his knees in front of me. Then, almost reverently, he drags my bra straps to my elbows, bringing the whole thing down to my waist.

“Are your nipples as sensitive as they used to be?” He gives me a mischievous look as he leans in and takes one of them into his mouth.

I nearly fall back at the feel of it, but he catches me. His large hands keep me in place as he toys with me, flicking the hardened peak, biting it.

He moves to my left and takes that nipple into his mouth too. I can't help the moans that escape me. Nor do I have control of my fingers as they thrust into his hair to hold him to me or the need building in my core.

Abruptly, he pulls away, leaving me swaying toward him, confused and cold.

Standing, he shrugs out of his coat and tie. “Sit,” he orders, pointing a finger at the bed.

Fighting the urge to stubbornly cross my arms, I do as he says. I watch as he undoes the buttons of his crisp white shirt, revealing the hard expanse of his muscled chest and the leather and silver chain he wore back then too.

My breath hitches in my throat when he kicks the dress out of the way and kneels in front of me. Oh so slowly, he runs his fingertips down my leg and takes my right foot. With delicate precision, he undoes the buckle of my shoe and removes it. I'm barely breathing as he moves to my other one and does the same, taking his sweet time, his blue gaze steady on mine.

The shoe is tossed aside, but he keeps my foot captive. Lifting it, he kisses my ankle with slightly parted lips, but he might as well have kissed my clit, because it has nearly the same effect.

Another kiss, and my sex begins to throb. One more, and I'm sure that if he glanced between my legs, he'd see a wet spot on my panties.

I never imagined the soft skin there could be a direct conduit to more intimate places. Sweet Jesus, no one has ever kissed my ankles, not even him! And he does this to me now? I have to grit my teeth to keep from sighing with every light touch of his lips on me.

“What are you thinking about?” he asks curiously.

“I’m thinking of how much I’d love to shove my foot down your throat.”

He chuckles, that deep, throaty rumble sort of chuckle that flows through me like warm whiskey, his lips still on my ankle. “The only part of you I want sliding down my throat is your taste when I swallow.”

“You shouldn’t say those things.”

“Why? Because you don’t like to hear them? Or because they turn you on?” His mouth quirks up on one side as he slides two of his fingers up the inside of my thigh, stopping mere inches from my panties. “I’m going to ask you something, and I want you to be honest, because I’m going to verify it for myself anyway.”

“What?” I breathe out.

“When I move this scrap of fabric to the side, will I find you wet?” His gaze becomes a hot blue laser into my soul. “Is your pussy wet for me, Lou?”

“No.” I slam my knees shut and he laughs. “Dry as a desert,” I add.

With one hand, he pushes my legs open once more. My heart slams into my chest as he runs his warm palm over my skin, heating me up more the closer he gets to my sex.

Then, with his index and middle fingers, he tugs the material aside and exposes me to him. His smile vanishes as a renewed hunger turns his eyes almost feral.

All I can do is watch as he rubs the pad of his thumb over my clit and down to my entrance. He presses inside, eliciting a moan from me at the same time as he groans.

“Sweet wet pussy. And I’m so fucking thirsty.” Before I can protest, he loops his arms around my legs and hauls my ass to the edge of the bed.

When he has me where he wants me, he locks me in place, keeping my butt glued to the mattress, my legs firmly open.

Then his mouth is on me and whatever argument I was about to make about why I'm dripping wet dies on my lips. He sucks on my juices, drinking me as if he really is thirsty and I'm the only thing that can quench him.

I watch him move between my thighs with complete and utter abandon, my arousal increasing with each pass of his tongue across my nub, the lacy thong still shoved to the side.

He inhales deeply as he feasts and exhales heat that bleeds into every cell of my body. My pelvis jerks, but he holds me securely in place.

Giving me a break, he gently licks and nips my labia, and the sight of my soft lips between his teeth nearly undoes me. So I drop my head onto the mattress in an effort to slow my rapidly increasing desire.

It's too much. Too soon for such an intimate kiss.

"You have no idea how long I've been waiting to taste you again," he says in that roughhewn voice a second before returning to suck on my swollen clit.

I'm aroused beyond reason, the sensations almost too much to handle. But it's the knowledge that it's Rowan sucking me that pushes me to my limits.

Losing control of my actions, I thrust my fingers into his thick hair. I'm at the point of no return, pushed there by him.

"I hate you," I grind out through my teeth as my climax shoots through me like a lightning bolt.

The waves of pleasure have just begun when he's stretched out over me, his full weight on me. His mouth crashes onto mine at the same time that he thrusts inside.

I cry out from the shock of his intrusion, but he doesn't break the kiss. Instead, he deepens it just as he pushes his cock deeper, spreading and stretching.

My pussy aches and pulses, still orgasming even as it tries to accommodate the size of him.

"Shit," he growls. "You're just as tight, Lou. So fucking tight around me."

He must have already been on the edge, because he begins to pound into me quicker, harder, as if he's also losing control, and fast.

His kiss becomes painful, and I welcome it, hoping it will detract from the growing need to come again. But it doesn't. If anything, it makes me ache more. Want more.

As a second orgasm overtakes me, I wrap my arms tightly around his waist and dig my nails into his ass.

Rowan tenses as he succumbs to his release, his cock swelling inside me as he fills me.

When my trembling ebbs and he's relaxed, he pushes himself up. Then, his eyes glittering, he takes in my disheveled state.

"You are so beautiful," he murmurs. "Especially when I'm inside you like this." He reaches between us and slides his thumb across my overly sensitized sex and I shiver. "Such a sweet little cunt. I'm happy to see how much you still want me."

"Don't confuse things, Rowan. Physical attraction doesn't change the fact that I despise you."

"No, you don't." He pulls out of me, and warm liquid spills from my entrance. His expression grows further pleased as watches himself flow from me. "So fucking beautiful."

God help me, the way he looks at me there turns me the fuck on. And that gives me yet another reason to hate him.

ROWAN

I've been lying awake for hours, unwilling to drift off when, after years of waiting, Lou is finally back in my bed where she fucking belongs.

Moonlight spills through the blinds, illuminating the room enough for me to make out the shapes of everything—the old leather chair in the corner, the lamp on my nightstand, and the figure of the woman tucked in close to me.

Lou is what I call a heat seeker. The instant she falls asleep, her feet begin to move like little antennae, searching for warmth. When they find it, the rest of her follows. It used to make for many sweaty, uncomfortable nights.

I smile in spite of it. Maybe even because of it.

I've missed the feel of her naked body wetly clinging to mine. In sex and in sleep.

This is why I fight to remain conscious at three in the morning. I don't want to miss a thing. Every tiny movement, every breath, I commit to memory, afraid I might lose it again someday.

Fuck no. I won't let that happen ever again. Every fiber of my being rages at the mere thought.

As if she can sense my sudden mood shift, her breathing accelerates, then, just as suddenly, slows. She's awake.

I remain still, inhaling and exhaling evenly, not wanting to alert her.

It takes her a bit to move, as if she's trying to determine if I'm sleeping. When she seems satisfied, she gently sits up. Another few seconds and she's scooting off the bed.

Risking a glance, I crack my lids slightly and watch her as she glides through the studio. First, she goes to the window and peers out into the darkness. I can tell she's mulling something over, her arms crossed over her chest, her nails digging into her shoulders.

Her head turns my way and I close my eyes and roll onto my stomach, clutching the pillow beneath me and sighing. I hear her footsteps as she moves away.

She walks to the kitchenette and opens the drawer in the single cabinet. There's a clinking sound as she searches and takes an item from it.

As quietly as she went, she returns to the bed. It dips again as she climbs into it and slowly straddles me, pausing every once in a while.

Now I'm sure she's up to no good, but something inside me wants to find out how this ends. I want to know exactly how far she'll take it.

Her soft curves mold to my body as she straddles me, and the feel of her pubic hair on my ass has me nearly giving myself away. Instantly, I'm painfully hard as the inviting heat of her core tempts me to roll over and thrust into her. No matter that we've had sex four times in the course of a few hours. I need more.

But I stay immobile, torturing myself just to see what she's up to.

That's when I feel the steel against the side of my neck. She bends over me, her nipples grazing my back as she brings her lips to my ear.

"Where the fuck are all the knives?" she hisses, pressing the prongs of the fork deeper into my skin.

I roll my head toward her and chuckle. "If I tell you, you'll just kill me with one of them."

“All right. Guess I’ll just have to make do with this.” She drags the prongs over the side of my neck, and I jerk from the pain.

“Thanks, princess. I had an itch there,” I say, touching the spot that stings like hell and finding that it’s bleeding.

She leans closer, molding herself to me more completely—her pussy on my ass, her tummy curved into my lower back, and her breasts crushed between us—and whispers, “Where else do you have an itch?”

“Everywhere,” I groan, pushing my butt against her bare cunt.

It has the desired effect as she sucks in a breath and presses back, rocking her hips against me.

I do it again, and, again, she inhales and responds, this time dropping her forehead to my shoulder.

“You’re getting wet, Lou. I can feel it.”

She shakes her head. “No. I don’t want to.” But even as she says that, she continues to rub herself over me, her intake of air increasing.

Beneath me, my dick is throbbing as each thrust of her hips presses me into the mattress, creating friction.

I’m faced with two options. Let her bring herself to orgasm like this, and probably make me come on the mattress. Or I can take control, make her come and put *my* cum where it belongs. Inside her.

I like option two better.

Before she can protest, I rotate under her and grab hold of her wrists. I tug her toward me and wrap my arms around her waist to keep her locked in place.

She tries to wriggle free, but stops the moment she feels my dick at her entrance and realizes that the more she moves, the more we come together.

But I don’t push inside. It’s merely an invitation. A proposition to let me do what we both want.

“Kiss me,” I say.

“No.” The tip of her nose touches mine, and her breath fans my lips.

“I want to taste your mouth.”

She shifts in my arms, causing my shaft to slide over her wetness. We both moan at the contact. Then I purposefully do it, rubbing the tip of my dick back and forth, straining not to thrust, though I’m desperate to.

Lou cries out, her fingers digging into the sides of my head as she brings her lips closer to mine. My dick twitches and my balls tighten almost painfully, so ready for her.

“Rowan, you’re killing me.” Her voice comes out distressed and laced with something like a plea.

It makes me pause, unsure of exactly what she’s begging for. That’s the thing with seduction. It draws a fine line between coaxing and forcing and I have to be very careful. She wants me, I know she does. But if I take before she’s given me a sign that she’s receptive, I could lose her.

“What do you want, Lou?” I ask, keeping my hold on her firm.

“I hate you.”

“That’s not what I asked. What do you want? Do you want me to fuck you?” I slide my cock across her slit once more.

“No,” she groans and I stop.

“Do you want me to let you go?”

Dropping her face into my chest, she shakes her head. “No.”

She rubs herself on my dick and bites the skin of my clavicle. And that’s the signal I’m waiting for.

I drive into her powerfully, penetrating her, pushing myself in to the hilt. She gasps, holding her breath until I begin to move. Keeping her hips in position, I pound into her fast and hard from the start. She’s teased me too long.

Lou moans and trails the edge of her teeth up my neck, to the spot she hurt earlier. I hiss and fuck her harder.

“Shit, don’t stop,” she cries out. “Don’t stop.”

She nips my neck, my jaw, then my lower lip before she kisses me. Our breaths mingle and become one as we both reach that desperate place where oxygen doesn’t matter as much as the exhale of the other person.

My cock swells more and more with each slap of my pelvis against her ass. Then my entire body tenses as I find my release, everything I am pulsing into her tight cunt.

In my haze, I barely register her pulling from my grasp and sitting up. Her fingers wrap around my neck, tightening enough to get my attention. Her brown eyes are locked on mine as she rides me, rocking on me, fucking me. The faster she moves, the more she squeezes.

And I let her because she’s a fucking avenging goddess over me. Sexy as hell. If strangling me turns her the fuck on, I’ll buy some rope.

Her lips part and she throws her head back on a cry of pleasure, releasing my neck in the process.

When her climax is done, she begins to fall limply to the side, but I guide her onto me instead, wanting to feel her a little longer.

She lays her head on my chest and throws her leg over mine as she draws lazy circles on my skin. It’s nice lying here like this, with her curves pressed against me, the sweet scent of her hair filling my lungs and lulling me.

I close my lids and let out a breath. Knowing that she might try to kill me again isn’t enough to keep me from drifting off.

But before I can get too far into dreamland, Lou lifts her head. “Why now?”

Dragging my eyes open, I tilt my face down. “Why now what?”

Reaching over me, she tugs on the chain of the lamp on the nightstand and turns on the light.

“Must we have that on?” I ask, squinting at her.

“I’ve been doing a lot of thinking and can’t exactly figure out why you’re doing all of this now. Taking me, I mean. Is it because you found out I was marrying Peter?” Her brows knit tightly together as she waits for my answer.

“Seeing the announcement in the paper simply hastened plans that were already in place. It would have been...” I pause, trying to think of a word that doesn’t involve killing Peter if he’d married her. I come up with, “Complicated. If you’d legally wed him, it would have been complicated.”

“You would’ve still taken me if I had?”

I push up on my elbow, forcing her back onto the pillow, and look down at her with what I hope leaves no question about the truth in my reply. “Nothing would have stopped me from getting you back.”

Lou stares at me for a long while, then she turns and peers out the darkening window. “I also wondered if what you did had anything to do with the Ferryman.”

“You’ve heard of him,” I say it as a statement because it doesn’t surprise me, and yet I’m not sure how much she knows.

“He’s been taking out Dons. Of course we’d know about him.”

“It makes sense your father would want to be informed, but I wasn’t aware you had an interest in the family business. You didn’t want anything to do with it before.”

Her attention shifts back to me. “A lot has changed. I’m not the same girl anymore.”

I let my gaze travel over her beautiful face, then reach for a lock of her hair, twirling it around my finger. “There’s still some of her left in there.”

She slaps my hand away. “She’s gone, Rowan. She died the night you abandoned her at the church.”

“So now you’re a hardened woman.”

“Not hardened. Just wiser. I’ve learned that in this world, love is an illusion. Only power matters.” Her jaw clenches as she seems to work to slow her growing agitation. “Did you do this because you want resources to use against the Ferryman?”

That question *does* surprise me. I want to bite back a response, tell her that I don’t need Fernando Duran for shit. That is, until I notice the expectation on her face, as if she believes I’ll wound her more than I already have and she’s braced for it.

“His name is Gideon Black. And I won’t deny that having your father on my side would be an advantage. But there’s no guarantee that he’ll back me. In fact, he may decide to back Gideon. I still won’t fucking let you go. You’re mine, princess. In Heaven or Hell. Remember?”

The tension in her expression eases. “Papá will definitely want to kill you.”

“Do you think he’ll come after me with a fork?” I tug the steel utensil from under the pillow.

She takes it from me and eyes it. With a quirk to her tone that could be mistaken for amusement, she says, “He just might. Especially after the contract with Peter’s dad you caused him. He’ll want to make it really slow.”

“What contract?”

“Peter’s father owns a couple of buildings Papá has been wanting to acquire for a while. He was going to give them to us as a wedding gift.”

“And what about Peter?” I ask, curious to know how she views the man. There’s no doubt in my mind she respected him, or she wouldn’t have accepted the proposal. But not once has she expressed a desire to return to him. To see him again. Which makes sense since their impending marriage was strictly an arrangement.

Lou sighs. “Peter... He isn’t a violent man. I mean, he likes to pretend he can hang with the big boys, but the truth is, he’s just a businessman.”

I huff. “Businessman? He was handed a made-up position in his father’s firm.”

“It wasn’t made up. Peter is smart. And—” She lifts a finger to stop my contradiction. “He wasn’t violent and threatening like some men I know.”

“Am I violent and threatening?”

She arches a brow. “Let’s just say he didn’t leave me bruised after sex. Shit, I’m going to be black and blue...” Whatever the hell else she’s going on about fades as what she’s said sinks in.

I sit up abruptly. “You had sex with Peter?”

“What?”

“I asked if you had sex with Peter.”

Sitting up too, she brings the sheet to cover her chest, a move that makes me growl with annoyance. “Of course we had sex. Peter was my fiancé. I was going to spend the rest of my life with him. The last thing I’d want to is to be locked into forever having to fake it.”

“Most women do!” I throw my legs off the bed and am up, stomping around the room with my fist to my forehead, willing myself to see anything but red.

She laughs, giving me a look that says she’s genuinely confused. Of course she would be. She only has half the story.

“You can’t seriously be angry about this. It’s been five years since we were together. I’ve had sex with another man just like you had with...” The words trail off as I turn an angry glare at her. “You did have sex with other women. Rowan,” she prompts. “You also slept with other women, right?”

“Why the fuck would I do that when *you* are the one I wanted.” I point a finger at her. “I swore to be faithful—”

“Days before you left me. Rowan, this is ridiculous. I won’t apologize for— Wait, what are you doing?” she asks when I begin to dress, shoving my jeans and black combat boots on.

“I have business to attend to,” I hiss.

“It’s three in the morning! What kind of business would you have to attend to at this hour?”

“The kind that can’t fucking wait.” I furiously tug a T-shirt over my head.

When she begins to wrap the sheet around her body, I know it’s time to go.

“Rowan!” she screams, chasing after me out the door. But my long strides allow me to easily leave her behind.

By the time she reaches the stairwell, I’m already on the first floor heading toward the door.

“Rowan!”

“Car keys,” I order when I burst through the front door.

Phil peels himself from the shadows from which he’s been guarding the building and tosses them to me. “Here you go, sir.”

I get into the Jag parked out front and skid out onto the street before Lou appears.

Peter Deacon had one job. To keep his dick in his pants. He didn’t, and now he’s going to pay the ultimate price for touching what belongs to me.

ROWAN

“Get out,” I snarl at the half-naked woman in the bed, who’s just woken to me towering over her.

Her mouth drops open on a silent scream, but my glare forces her to obey. Quickly, she scoots away from the man at her side, bringing with her the sheet to wrap around herself.

“Babe, what’s going...” Peter Deacon’s eyes grow as big as saucers as he turns and focuses on me. “R-Rowan, what are you doing here?” He grabs for the covers to hide his naked ass.

The level of fear he displays would be expected of any man who’s been woken in the middle of the night by the criminal he made a deal with. But there’s something more with him. Almost like he’s in shock, with a vacant look that tells me he’s in the process of checking out even before I do anything to him.

Somewhere in the distance, a door slams, indicating the woman has left, the sound making him jump. “W-what’s up, man?”

“Let’s have a chat, shall we?” I grab hold of his shirt, the only thing he’s fucking wearing, and drag him onto a nearby chair.

Standing before him, where he trembles spastically, I drop down onto my haunches. “You touched her.”

“Wha... Kelly?” He peers out the door in the direction the brunette went.

“Why would I give a fuck about Kelly?” I grind out.
“What were your orders about Louisa?”

The large Adam’s apple in his skinny neck bobs up and down as he swallows hard. “Louisa?”

“Do you have any idea where she is?”

He shakes his head. “Her father’s been searching the city like a madman.”

“Her father. Not you. The man she was going to marry is here fucking another woman only days after the wedding was to take place.”

Again, he shakes his head. “I looked for her. But Fernando stopped me. He said the man who took her was too dangerous for me to be involved.”

That makes me frown. If he was referring to me, he would have already made a move. Which means Fernando suspects someone else. The question is, who?

“I’m the man who took her, you idiot!” I hiss.

“So she’s safe? Is that why you’re here?”

I take a deep breath and release it, grasping at any ounce of patience I might have left. “I’m here because you disobeyed orders.”

“No, I did exactly what you said.”

“Did you? What exactly did I say for you to do?”

A small, strangled sound escapes him. “Keep her close.”

“And?” I motion my hand, telling him to get to the point.

“Um... Don’t touch her.”

“But you did,” I say on a growl. “You touched her. Not only did you touch her, but you had the balls to ask her to marry you.”

He blinks. “I didn’t mean to. It just happened.”

“It just happened,” I repeat a second before backhanding him.

He tumbles over, chair and all, and whirls to me, holding his bleeding lip.

“Sorry,” I say. “It just happened.”

“Rowan, man. I got caught up in the moment. Then when I didn’t hear from you...”

I crack my neck, doing my best not to attack him. Yet. “You stopped answering my calls, mother fucker. Then I find out you’re marrying her. And you touched her!”

“It was her!” He points to the door. “Louisa started it.”

Grabbing him by the shirt, I drag his ass up. I’m not sure if I’m that strong, that angry, or he’s just that scrawny, but I’m able to throw him clear across his bed, where he lands in a heap on the other side.

He sits up and his arms come up protectively when I stalk to him. “Security will come if I scream.”

That makes me pause, more because it strikes me as funny than scaring me as he intends. “Do you think I would have been able to come in so easily if they weren’t on my payroll? Did I teach you nothing? Always get the guards on your side, Petey Boy!”

Again, he gets that confused expression that shows that as much as he wanted to be a gangster, the most he ever dared to do was gamble in underground casinos.

That’s where I found him, wasting away his trust fund money, pretending he was a baller, when he had no experience with the big boys. Rich yet stupid.

He was perfect for the job I needed done. Court her. Flash his father’s money and business power. Peter’s family has enough wealth that I knew Fernando wouldn’t object much to his daughter dating him. But his weak constitution disqualified him as husband material.

All he had to do was smile, look pretty, and keep his dick in his pants.

In turn, I’d show him a few ropes. Introduce him to some people that would make him feel dangerous.

It was meant to be a temporary plan while I gained more power myself, something not easy to do under my uncles' rule. Then Gideon Black showed up and threw a wrench in it all. It distracted me, made me afraid to make any move that might put his attention on Lou.

I took my eye off the situation momentarily, and Peter got too big for his britches.

From my ankle holster, I produce a blade and glance at it. It's not very long, two and a half inches. But it's sharp, and that's all I need.

Peter plasters himself against the wall. "Rowan, I-I don't know what's going on here. I'm sure there's been some misunderstanding."

"Do you remember what I told you the penalty would be if you *did* touch her?" I ask, flicking my narrowed gaze from the knife to him.

"Hey-hey, man." He frantically shakes his hands in front of him as he pushes himself farther up the wall. "I didn't want to do it. I told you. Fuck, I didn't even like it."

"You didn't like it?" I take step closer. "You mean to tell me you fucked my girl, knowing full well I'd kill you for it, and you didn't even like it?"

"Please!" If he could melt into the wall, I believe he'd try. "Give me another chance. I'll do anything you want. I can talk to her father, put in a good word for you. He trusts me. Just one more chance. Everyone deserves a second chance."

I soften my gaze and tilt my head as I flip the blade in my hand, end over end, catching it by the hilt each time. "Someone said those exact words to me a long time ago. Everyone deserves a second chance. His name was Johnny Roscoe."

Peter takes a small step to the left, eyeing the door as if getting to it would mean his salvation. "What happened to him?"

"I thought he was right. Everyone deserves a second chance," I say, and he visibly relaxes. "But my uncle didn't

agree and stabbed him in the neck. Forced me to watch as Johnny bled to death all over the rug.”

“Wh-what do you believe now?” He seems so hopeful, I almost feel bad for him.

“I still believe everyone deserves a second chance. That is, anyone who hasn’t fucked Lou.” Quicker than he can react, I throw my weapon in his direction, the blade hitting its mark with a thud.

Surprise etched in his blue eyes, Peter pulls the knife from his throat and stares at it. Then it drops from his hand, landing on the floor at the same time as he does.

I watch Peter die the way I did with Johnny. Watch his blood flow onto the expensive rug. Only, this time, I’m not sorry. Peter won’t haunt my dreams or torment me when I’m on my own deathbed and have to account for all the lives I’ve taken. I’m not sure if it’s because he deserved it, or because I’ve done this so many times, the faces of the men I’ve killed are nothing but a blur.

Just like with sex, you remember your first and your last. Everything in between is just a number.

Or maybe I *will* remember him. Out of all the men Lou dated, all the men I had to threaten, he was the only one stupid enough to have slept with her.

LOUISA

I peer out one of the two small windows that face the rear. Somewhere beyond the building behind us, morning is coming, but the studio remains cast in shadows. It will stay like that until just after noon, where, for about an hour, the sun will be at the right angle in the sky for it to shine directly inside.

It's an event I witnessed only a handful of times in the past. Something about the rays streaming through the old glass and onto the even older hardwood floor and the specks of dust floating in the air like tiny fairies made it seem magical to me. Could have also been that I was so madly, stupidly in love.

When I told Rowan about it, he made a suncatcher for me. It was the first time he'd ever soldered, and the glass burned in some parts, but to me, the misshapen butterfly was perfect.

That was the thing about him, what made him so easily able to seduce me. He was a good listener, like the time he filled the studio with red tulips because I casually mentioned they made me happy. Or the time I screwed up a common American saying because English was my second language and when I was growing up, we mostly spoke Spanish at home, so he gave me a little book on English idioms.

Damn Rowan for being so thoughtfully smart.

Lifting my fingers, I touch the spot where the suncatcher once hung. It pisses me off that though the studio is mostly the same, it makes me sad that this one thing is different. Did it break during the time Rowan and I were apart? Did he take it

down because it didn't matter to him the way it did to me? Or maybe it just got lost along with the book.

And he's not even here for me to ask.

It's been over two hours since he left in a rage when he discovered I'd slept with the man I was going to marry. It still makes no sense to me, other than it hurt his male ego. Threatened his masculinity somehow to learn that I didn't fall apart when he left me—well, not completely, anyway—and swear to wait for him to change his mind.

But it's not him I should be concerned with. It's Peter. This doesn't bode well for him. As angry as Rowan seemed, I'm afraid he'll give him the beating of a lifetime.

And poor Peter... He can't fight for shit. At least I never thought of him as a fighter. It's part of what I liked about him, how nonthreatening he was. Fortunately for him, he lives in the penthouse of a well-secured building.

Damn Rowan. Damn him, damn him, damn him!

What the hell is he doing that's taking so long? Why hasn't he come back?

After I chased him down the block wrapped in nothing but a bed sheet, I was forced to concede that I'm not a fast runner and return to the apartment. Phil, the very same guy who guarded my room at the house, tried to hide his grin as I walked past him to the front door.

"Is this funny to you? Do I look funny to you running down the street in a fucking sheet like a crazy person?"

He shook his head furiously. "No, ma'am."

"Is there another car I can use?"

"We were left strict instructions that you were to remain here."

I arched a brow and scanned the area but was unable to see the other men. Doesn't mean they weren't there. "You didn't go after me just now."

Looking sheepish, he said, “I didn’t believe you’d get far in that.”

Spinning on my heel, I went back to the studio and practically tore the place apart searching for something to wear. There were a pair of jeans and couple of shirts in the closet for him, but all I could find for me were a few negligees in the top drawer of the nightstand. New ones that I bet Rowan thought I’d be willing to wear for him.

Well, I’m wearing the white slip nightgown, not because he wants me in it, but because it’s the least revealing. Besides, when I tried on his jeans, they slipped right off and I had nothing to secure them with.

I considered trying to sneak out. But the likelihood of my being successful is minimal at best.

So, instead, I take a seat on the bed. And I wait. Again.

A few hours later, I’m lying down when I hear heavy footsteps coming from the hall. I sit up just as the door opens.

Rowan steps in, his expression just as feral as it was when he left, maybe even more so.

He glances at me, his eyes cold as slate. Without saying a word, he begins to undress, taking off his crimson-stained T-shirt and dropping it on the floor as he makes his way to the bathroom.

“Where have you been?” I spy the discarded article of clothing warily.

The glass shower door squeaks when he opens it, and the pipes rattle and hiss as he turns the water on. Then he slams the door shut.

I follow him in there, stepping over his pants and boots and that suspicious shirt, and stop dead in my tracks when I see him.

With one hand braced on the tile wall, his head bent low under the jets and the muscles of his back and shoulders rippling, almost vibrating with restrained power, he's magnificent and terrifying at the same time. I allow my gaze to trail the water as it pours over his skin, forming thick ropes down his spine and to his ass.

But it's when I go farther still down his legs and feet to the white shower basin and see the pool of pinkish red that I move closer again.

I pull the door open and stick my head inside. "Is that blood?"

Rowan turns to me. "He fucking touched you."

He. Peter.

"It's Peter's blood. How badly did you hurt him?" When he doesn't reply, I reach inside and shove my palm into his chest. "How badly, Rowan?"

"It doesn't matter."

"It matters!" I shove at him again, this time harder. "What did you do to him?"

Something in him snaps, and in a move too fast for me to evade, he snatches my wrist and hauls me into the shower with him. "He touched you. The memory of your body was etched in his mind and there was only one way to erase it."

My skin curls as he presses me to the cold glass enclosure, and I jerk away from it, only to find myself pressed against his heat. A rock and a hard place.

I try to keep my gaze stern and unyielding even as he places his hand just above my head and looms over me like the beast that he is.

"You killed him." A statement, not a question.

"Peter knew the consequences. He did it anyway."

At this, I frown. "What the fuck does that mean?"

"Do you honestly believe I would've allowed anyone else to have what belongs to me? You did nothing without me

knowing, Lou. Except for him putting his hands on you. That scrawny rich twit was the only one with the balls to go against my orders.”

My lips part on a reply, but I pause as what he’s just admitted to sinks in. “Are you saying you ordered anyone I dated not to sleep with me? That you would have killed them if they did?”

His brow furrows as he hones that slit gaze on me. His agitated breathing increases and it makes the shower seem even smaller. “Did anyone else fuck you?”

I stare at him with my mouth agape as, for the first time since he took me, I see *him*.

He’s completely unrecognizable to me. This Rowan isn’t the same person I met, the one who didn’t want to kill under his uncle’s command, because he believed people deserved second chances.

The man in front of me took a life without hesitation, and there’s not an ounce of remorse present.

Just because I didn’t see him for the last five years doesn’t mean time stood still for him. Life has hardened him as it has me. Maybe more so. His uncles would have demanded it.

How many more men was he ordered to kill under their command? Do or die. Don’t blink. Don’t think. Don’t hesitate.

Rowan didn’t have to tell me about the ways of the men in our world. I knew those words. They were recited by my own family all my life. It was how Papá taught my brothers to be brutal with the enemy. But I was especially horrified to know that his own family was so cruel toward *him*. Vicious dogs doing their best to raise a vicious man. One who didn’t think twice about killing poor, helpless Peter out of jealousy.

He might not think twice about killing me either. Why would he? He’s the McKenzie boss now. Born and bred to rule a ruthless and dangerous criminal organization.

I chastise myself for the stupid mistake. For being blind to what he could become. For not anticipating it. Or maybe he’s always been the same and I was too in love to see it.

The thought sends a chill up my spine. Rowan might want me now, but what happens when this obsessive whim to have me passes? What happens when he loses patience at my resistance?

I know the answer to those questions. I end up six feet under.

“Lou, did anyone else—”

“No,” I reply before he can finish. “Peter was the only one.”

He searches my eyes for the truth, and I avert my gaze, unsure that I can keep it from him. I don't want more blood on my hands.

Poor Peter, who died because of loveless sex. He was good at it, but it was nothing more than fucking. No one deserves to die for a fuck.

If I'm not careful, I'll end up like him. For a fuck. Because, at the end of the day, I'm not so sure that's all Rowan wants from me.

Shit. I've been too reactive, too reckless. I'm surprised he hasn't already slit my throat.

“Lou, look at me,” Rowan says.

Understanding of what I must do dawns on me. Lifting my eyes to his, I inflect as much submission and vulnerability as I can muster. “It was only him, Rowan.”

“Did you love him?”

“No,” I answer easily, because it's the truth. “It was a mutually beneficial arrangement. But he was a nice man.”

He huffs. “Peter was a leech. Nothing more.”

“Either way, he didn't deserve it.” I place my palm on his bare chest.

His gaze locks onto the place where I'm touching him, then roves over my arm to the negligee that's now soaked.

I can tell the moment that whatever conversation we were just having gets sent to some distant place in his mind as the primal part of his brain takes over. His nostrils flare and his jaw works furiously, the muscles in his arms bulging as he takes in the sight of my nipples poking through the satiny material.

This is what's keeping me alive, I'm sure of it. His attraction to me. His need to possess me.

With shaking hands, I tug down on both straps of the nightgown, exposing my breasts to him.

His already heated stare goes white-hot as it snaps back to mine. "You belong to me, Lou. Is that clear?"

He doesn't wait for me to respond, his lips crashing against my mouth in a bruising kiss. Instantly, and to my shame, I forget everything else but him. His tongue slides across mine, silky smooth and tasting of him and sin, taking over my senses.

I wrap my arms around his neck as he deepens the kiss. His hands are on my breasts, kneading them, pinching the peaks. Then they snake behind me, grasping my ass roughly before moving upward.

Fisting my hair, he forces my head back so that he can access my throat. The sting of his teeth on my sensitive skin only serves to arouse me more. I cry out, pressing myself tighter against him, molding my body to his.

But he only lets me remain this way for a second before he spins me, grips my wrists tightly in only one of his hands, and lifts my arms above my head.

Using his free one, he tugs down on the skimpy panties and pushes his hand between my legs to cup my sex from behind. I drop my forehead onto the glass and moan as he runs his fingers over my slit, then cry out when he presses one in.

"Rowan," I groan and lift my butt. "Fuck me."

"Where do you want me to fuck you, princess. Here?" He touches my wet entrance, gathering some of the moisture

before going farther back and touching my tight hole. “Or here?”

I stop breathing. Fuck my ass? The mere thought has me panting. That’s when I think about how large he is, not just in inches, but in girth.

My mouth dry and my heart rate picking up, I say, “You’re too big.”

He puts his mouth against my ear and groans as he pets me between the cheeks as if he’s trying to coax the hole to open for him. “But you’ll take me anyway, won’t you, princess?”

Releasing my arms, he toys with my nipples at the same time as he teases me below. The combination makes for an erotic overload that leaves me unable to speak. Unable to deny what he’s saying as he touches me like that. All I can do is accept whatever he’s going to do to me, pushing myself harder against his finger, forcing him deeper.

“Fuck yes,” he murmurs, then wraps his arms around me and lifts me.

The shower door bursts open as he shoves through, carrying me to the bed and throwing me onto it. I land on my belly, immediately twisting to look at him.

Like a sleek panther, he crawls onto the mattress and shoves my legs apart. His eyes are trained on my ass as he approaches. Then his big hands are grasping it, pulling the cheeks apart so that he can view what he’s really hungry for.

Bringing his face near, he bites each buttock almost desperately as he works his way to the center. Like he can’t get enough of my flesh into his mouth.

When he reaches what he’s after, he circles it with his tongue, moaning as he does. He teases me relentlessly, licking me from clit to asshole and back.

I’m dripping wet, there’s no doubt about it. And with each pass he makes, he pulls that wetness back, lubricating me.

By the time he moves away, I’m ready. I need him inside me in any way. In *every* way.

“Before I fuck you there, I want you to feel it with your fingers. Feel how open you are even before you’ve taken an inch.”

I reach back and do as he says, but it’s not necessary to find out it’s true. A fingertip slips in easily, then another.

Rowan moves my hand out of the way and replaces my fingers with his own. He stretches me so deliciously that I can’t wait for the rest of him.

But when he withdraws his fingers and places the blunt head of his cock there instead, I freeze. No matter how many digits he had inside me, this is much different. The pressure is greater, the sting more intense as he gives me one inch, then another.

“Oh God,” I cry out when he thrusts, and he pauses.

He pushes down on my lower back. “Relax.”

Inhaling and exhaling, I will myself to loosen and let him in. The moment I give a little, he thrusts. I cry out from the instant burn and claw at the sheet beneath me.

“Shh,” he soothes. “I’m all the way in. You took all of me, princess, just like I told you to.”

It takes me a moment to catch my breath, and when I do, he starts to move, slowly at first. The pain ebbs and morphs into something closer to pleasure, then into outright ecstasy.

I begin to mewl and moan, slamming back against him, wanting him to drive into me harder.

I’ve never felt anything like this, so stretched and filled. I’m not sure if it’s the act itself or the idea of it, of him in my ass, that turns me on so much.

Rowan slaps my butt, adding to the pleasure/pain. I drop my head onto the mattress, completely overtaken by all the sensations.

That’s when he swells even more inside me as he stiffens and roars. I can literally feel his shaft pulsing as he comes, pumping his brand into me.

When he falls to the mattress, he rolls over and brings me with him. We lie on our sides for a few minutes, both of us breathless and sweaty.

“Fuck. That was insane.” He sighs and pulls out, leaving me aching deliciously.

“Yeah.” It was. Even though I didn’t come, it was... amazing.

At least, that’s what I’m thinking until he speaks again. “I’m the only one who gets to fuck you everywhere, Lou. Remember that. You belong to me alone.”

Biting my tongue, I roll onto my belly and bring the pillow beneath my head. As if I can forget I belong to Rowan. For now, anyway

Because nothing lasts forever.

LOUISA

Over the next three days of our “honeymoon,” we fuck like rabbits, eat, and sleep. Rinse and repeat.

We do everything, joining in every way a man and a woman can, connecting our bodies to the fullest, yet the barrier between us remains. I can’t get over the past; he doesn’t want to talk about the present.

Not that I can bring myself to ask him why he discarded me so easily, apparently threatened any man who came near me not to have sex with me, and somehow feels entitled to my future.

And Rowan can’t seem to bring himself to apologize. Or maybe he doesn’t think he has to.

There are people out there who have a hard time with an “I’m sorry.” My youngest brother, Daniel, has that God-awful trait. Just starts talking to you after a particularly nasty fight that he started as if nothing happened. I’ve had to swallow my pride on many occasions because of him.

It wouldn’t matter if Rowan asked for forgiveness anyway. I could never give it. That’s the real reason I don’t bring it up. It’s pointless.

On our last day in the studio, someone delivers a bag with a suit for him and actual clothes for me is delivered— a pair black slacks, a gray silk blouse and black.

“We’re leaving?” I ask.

Rowan nods. “We have a business meeting at the house in three hours.”

Frowning at how insanely sexy he looks in business attire, I look at the clothes I’d laid on the bed. “We?”

He finishes tying his boots and stands beside me. “Your father and brothers are coming to discuss our new contract.”

My brows fly upward in complete shock. “He knows where I am?”

“Your mother called him last night. I thought it would be best if he heard it straight from her that you’re both alive and well.”

“So just like that, we’re one big happy family.” I cross my arms over my chest and shiver.

“Not exactly,” he says. “He threatened to eliminate every last McKenzie from the planet. But he agreed to the meeting when your mother told him how in love we are and that you orchestrated the whole thing.”

I narrow my eyes on him, my fury exploding out of control in less than a nanosecond. “You asshole!”

“Me? *He’s* the one who didn’t question it. Which tells me you must often come up with nefarious plans.”

“Ugh!” I slam my palms against his chest and shove him. “I hate you.”

Laughing, he grabs hold of me and brings me tightly against him. “There you are. I thought something had happened to you when you went all submissive and sweet on me. Not that I minded having a little of the old Lou back.”

“You’re a beast, Rowan. If I pretend to like you in the least, it’s just to keep me alive until I can get the fuck out.”

His smile fades in a flash and his irises go almost black as he bends his head so that his lips brush mine. “Then I suggest you like me real fucking hard if you want to survive today.”

I didn't realize just how much security Rowan had set up around the studio until we leave and five black Ford Explorers follow.

"You must have a lot of enemies if you feel the need to have so many guards." I twist in my seat to face forward and stare out at the road.

"Only one who really worries me," he confesses.

I frown and turn to him. "That Ferryman guy?"

He nods. "The moment I took over the McKenzies, I became a target. He's already raided a few of my trucks and stolen product. The motorcycles that attacked your Rolls-Royce when you were on the way to the church?" His eyes flick to me momentarily. "That was him."

Motorcycles? Yes, I do remember them. I didn't realize they hadn't all been a part of Rowan's men.

"Why would they attack my car?" I ask, confused.

His jaw tenses as his grip on the steering wheel tightens, his knuckles going white. "Because Gideon is aware of you now."

That makes my skin crawl. The Ferryman is aware of me now. Meaning Rowan's stunt put me on the radar of a notorious murderer.

I shake my head at him. "If he kills me, my blood is on your hands."

"He'd have to get through me first. And once I'm dead, he won't want you."

"So your death guarantees me immunity from that man," I say thoughtfully, tapping my index finger against my chin. "Good to know."

Rowan gives me a look that says he'd like to see me try and I smile.

We pull up to the back of the house, where the inconspicuous door to the underground garage opens, and we park near the elevator.

When I step out, I study the open space. “How did you guys set this place up?” Most houses in this area of Boston are too old and too close together to have garages.

“My uncles had it done.”

“Is it legal?”

“Everything we do is legal.” He engulfs my hand with his huge one and tugs me toward the elevator, greeting his men as he goes.

“So if the basement is a garage now, where do you put your enemies?”

“The ones we’re willing to negotiate with go to our special suite on the third floor. I believe you’re familiar with it.”

“You’re horrible.” I try to pull out of his vise-like grip.

He laughs and pushes the button for the first floor, and the doors slide to shut. But just before they do, he points to a door at the far end of the large space. “That room is for the ones we aren’t willing to negotiate with.”

I wrinkle my nose, hoping I’ll never know what the inside of that place looks like.

Mom is waiting for us when we ascend to the first level. This time, when I pull away from Rowan to run into her open arms, he lets me go without hesitation.

“I missed you, Mom.” I sigh, so relieved to see her again.

“I’ve missed you, Lulu.” She smiles and cups my face. “I take it the honeymoon wasn’t too awful?”

There’s no mistaking the mischief in her gaze, something that says she hopes what Rowan and I shared in the past is still there. Although I’m not sure if it’s to assuage her own guilt at pushing me toward this marriage I didn’t want, or if she genuinely believes there’s true love between us.

Either way, there's no point in dashing her hopes by saying, "No, Mom. The honeymoon was horrible. Rowan killed Peter. And even knowing this, I let him fuck me raw. Let him tie me to the bed and fuck my ass and fuck me on the counter and on the table, in the shower, against the window, and once in the hallway outside the door when I threatened to leave after one of our many fights. It was torture and I hate him. And, still, I begged him for more. Begged him to make me come."

Oh God, I want to scream.

I glance at Rowan. He's standing near the study, speaking quietly with Declan. As if he senses my stare, he lifts his gaze to me.

My skin heats as his eyes move over me, touching me everywhere his hands have been. Against my will, liquid warmth pools between my legs and I have to glance away or risk everyone in the foyer knowing what he's made me into.

Turning back to my mother, I remove her hands from my flushed cheeks. "It was fine."

Her smile widens, obviously taking my reaction as something good, when the truth is, it's too terrible to tell.

"Fernando is on the way with my sons. He should be here in half an hour," Mom says to Rowan.

He nods. "Declan just informed me. Did you have a chance to pack?"

"Pack?" I ask, looking between the two. "But we just got back."

Mom squeezes my arm and smiles. "It's time for me to go home. While I've enjoyed a little time away from the boys, I miss them."

I blink at her. She makes it seem as if she had a choice in the matter.

A knot forms in my throat. "What about me?"

"You don't need me the way they do. I can't even imagine the state the house is in. Besides, you have your own place to

run now.”

“It’s not mine!”

“Isn’t it?” She cocks her head to the side.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I say, “You know my brothers are grown-ass men.”

“And you’re a grown-ass woman,” she retorts. Then she leans in and whispers conspiratorially, “Don’t forget I know exactly what you’re capable of” before pulling away and winking.

“You’re just as bad as Rowan. Did you know that too?”

She laughs. “Oh no, my Lulu. I’m far worse.”

Right on schedule, Papá’s entourage arrives. The red Ferrari California GT, or as Mom calls it, his midlife crisis, stops right in front of the house, and two white Escalades park behind him.

Papá steps out of his car with all the confidence of a man in power, dressed to the nines in light gray Versace, gold chains hanging from his neck and wrists. The moment he’s out of the car, he searches for Mom and me, glimpsing over the many guards and Axle, Declan, and Rowan.

His eyes finally make contact with Mom’s, then mine. And when they do, his full lips pull into a line so thin, they practically disappear.

He’s disappointed.

My brothers exit one of the SUVs, each with the same upset expression as my father. As if they’ve never done anything stupid.

I narrow my stare on them, silently communicating a threat. Those who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones. Oh, the tales I could tell of all the shit they’ve done.

Not that I did anything. Nope. This is all one man’s fault.

“Fuck!” Rowan releases my hand, which he’d been holding in hopes of showing a united front, when I dig my nails into it.

“That’s what you get for putting this shit on me,” I grumble and stiffen my spine as Papá makes his way toward us.

“Louisa, let’s keep this peaceful,” Mom orders out of the side of her mouth. “Your father’s already on edge.”

“Diana.” Papá extends his hand to her and she takes it. He tugs her to her side, effectively reclaiming his wife. He doesn’t turn to her, but by the way he’s holding her so protectively, molding her to him, his arm over her shoulders, I can tell he’s been desperate for her.

“Don Fernando, welcome,” Rowan greets.

Papá gives him a scrutinizing once-over, then glances between us. “Kane. I hope you don’t mind...” He sweeps his hand behind him as ten of his men leave the other two Cadillacs and position themselves around the McKenzie guys.

Rowan’s lips pull up. “I wouldn’t have expected anything less. Of course you’re all welcome.”

“Papá,” I start, my throat inexplicably tight. “I—”

He shoots me a glare that speaks volumes without saying a word. *Don’t even try me right now.* I’m left with my mouth open as he pushes past all of us and through the front door like the Don that he is.

“You really fucked up this time.” Daniel chuckles as he walks past me.

“Shut up.” I try to slap his back, but he’s too quick.

Renzo arches a brow as he follows him in but says nothing.

Arturo, on the other hand, does have the guts to stop and face me directly when he talks shit. I stiffen my spine and glare up at my oldest brother, fighting the need to back up when he towers over me.

He's always scared me a little. Not because he's so damned big, as tall and almost as broad as Rowan. But because he's got that extra bit of meanness to him that comes with being next in line. Except he's also a *momma's boy*. Which is a deadly combination, in my opinion. Powerful and immature.

"You really fucked up this time, Louisa," he says, giving Rowan a sneer. "This better go our way or else."

"Or else what?" Rowan asks, blocking the doorway with his body when Arturo makes to go inside.

Every man outside tenses visibly, their hands moving close to their holstered weapons.

Though his stare remains hard and unwavering, Arturo doesn't attempt to push through. Even *he* knows that this situation is prickly at best. Anything could set anyone off, and then there'd be war. And he'd be one of the first to go.

"If I were you, I'd move out of the fucking way," Arturo grits through his teeth.

"And if I were you, I'd remember who's the fucking boss here. Ask for permission," Rowan grits back.

My brother cracks his neck and flexes his arms before he forcibly asks, "May I come in?"

Rowan grins. "I don't know. Ask my wife."

ROWAN

Lou turns to me with a shocked expression. Though I'm not sure why. This house is hers, and if she doesn't want her asshole of a brother to be in it, he won't.

"Go in," she tells him.

Giving me a smirk, he says to her, "You better hope he always has your back."

"I wish *you* did, Art. Or did you forget that's what a big brother is supposed to do?"

"My job is to keep you in line."

She rolls her eyes. "Just go inside, or I'll change my mind."

He glares at her for a moment before entering, followed closely by Axle, who scurries around him to show him the way.

Declan stops in front of me, his heavy brows knitted. "Who would have ever imagined all of the Durans in this house. Your uncles must be rolling in their graves."

"We're about to accomplish something they never could." Even though I reply to *him*, I'm watching Lou over his bald head. She's paying close attention to every word said.

"You're not going to control their territory," Declan notes. "A contract with them doesn't mean more power."

"That's exactly what it will mean," I say, my eyes still on Lou. "We each have something the other wants."

Declan turns to her and the corner of his mouth quirks. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“For the first time in my life, I do.”

He blows out a breath and smooths down the front of his black coat. “Then let’s do this.”

When he’s inside and out of earshot, Lou steps closer. There’s something in her gaze I can’t read. That wasn’t always the case. In the past, I could discern every emotion that flitted across her face. Now, that damned wall she’s put up hides more than it reveals. It’s disconcerting at times.

I believe she’s hurt by her father’s obvious anger. But putting all of this on her was necessary. He’d have killed me on sight, while she gets nothing more than a scathing glance.

It was Diana’s idea anyway. I really like her.

But there’s more going on in Lou’s head than Fernando’s behavior. Fortunately, she doesn’t leave me guessing long.

She lets out a little laugh, but it’s laced with venom. “Power. That’s all you men want.”

“What?”

“You defend me to my brother, but it’s just for show. I’m nothing more than a pawn in a power play. So why not set up whatever the hell it is you want and let me go home with them?” She points through the door to her family.

Grabbing her arm and hauling her close, I lower my tone and stare straight into her eyes, making sure she’s paying attention. “There is no power play, Lou. Our marriage offers this opportunity, like it will many other things. Children. Trips. A home. But even without those things, and even if I’m fucking powerless to do anything else, this marriage stays in every sense of the word. It will never dissolve. I won’t allow it.”

She’s breathing hard, her jaw clenched. Then she moves to turn from me, but before she does, I see the redness that colors her eyes. “Like Declan said, let’s do this.”

Loathe as I am to, I release my hold on her. There's no point in getting her all worked up before an important meeting like the one we're about to have. And it seems I have a knack for working her up quickly.

I follow her into the house and to the study, pausing only briefly when I see Fernando sitting in my chair behind my desk, his wife and three sons standing behind him.

He narrows his gaze expectantly, as if he's daring me to say something.

"You don't mind, do ya?" Arturo questions tauntingly.

"Of course not. I may be equal in position, but he's my elder and my father-in-law. As such, it's my honor to allow him my seat."

Fernando smiles, catching the word "allow," but he seems pleased nonetheless.

Declan clears his throat as he gets up from his chair and offers it to me. Just like Fernando, I sit in it with Declan, Axle, and Lou standing behind me.

Lou's father loses his smile when he sees his own daughter on my side of the desk, supporting the family that he once considered the enemy.

"Shall we get down to business?" I ask, hoping to keep emotions low.

"First, I'd like to say something to my daughter," he starts in his heavily accented voice. "I am deeply disappointed in your actions."

"Papá!" Lou cries out behind me. "It's not what you think."

"So you didn't promise to marry Peter and then left all of us hanging, wondering where you were and if you and your mother were being tortured or, worse, dead?" He pauses, his breathing loud for a moment before he's able to regain control. "And all the while, you were shackled up with Kane?"

"Fernando, why don't we talk about this when—" her mother tries to interject, but he's too angry.

“If you didn’t want to marry Peter, you should have said something. Instead, you worry and humiliate us all!”

“Would you have allowed her to marry me instead?” I watch the three brothers’ reactions, smirks and disgust, then look at their father.

Shifting his attention from his daughter back to me, he replies simply, “No.”

“There is your answer as to why things happened the way they did.” I take Lou’s hand and hold it. “We’re married and could have a baby on the way.”

She tries to dig her nails into the flesh of my palm, but I’m ready for her this time. I twist her hand so that mine covers hers. *Put away those claws kitty cat.*

Her father sits back and regards the two of us, his gaze dropping to her belly a few times. “Married to the fucking McKenzies. Grandchildren with them. How the fuck does this even happen?”

“They met at a party,” her mom tries to explain.

“It was a rhetorical question, Diana. I don’t give two fucks about how they met.”

“You’re right. That doesn’t matter anymore,” I agree. “What does is where we go from here.”

He rubs his chin with his thumb and forefinger. “All right. Let’s begin with what you’ve cost me. Besides years off my life when I thought my wife and child were gone.”

I motion for Axle to hand him the documents he prepared earlier. He sets them on the desk in front of Fernando, who begins to flip through them.

“Louisa told me about the contract with Peter’s father,” I say. “In exchange, I’d like to offer you my warehouse on Old Harbor. It has its own marina and boat yard. It would open up a new route and bring in more business.”

He glances up from what he’s reading. “This is in McKenzie territory.”

“We’re family now, Don Fernando. No one would question a gift to my own father-in-law.”

He considers it, the wheels in his head turning. “What about access to the harbor? Will my men be stopped every time we go into South Boston?”

I grin. “*Mi casa es su casa.*” *My home is your home.* “It was Lou’s idea.”

“And what do you want in return? Diana told me you want to be the sole provider of coke with a twenty-five percent cut. That’s a high price for someone we consider a—”

I lift my hand to cut him off. “I’ve changed my mind. All I want is your blessing on this marriage. Nothing more.”

Declan chokes on some grumbled words I can’t make out, nor do I care to.

Fernando peers at me suspiciously. “No favors?”

“Only what you’d do for family.”

His brows lift as understanding dawns on him. What you’d do for family is much more than a twenty-five percent cut on anything. It’s a willingness to lay down your life.

“And you’d do the same for us?” he asks.

“For Lou, yes.”

“Hmm.” He turns to her, looking much more pleased than when he first came in. “Well, it’s a start.”

Diana smiles and squeezes her husband’s shoulder. “See, I told you we’d figure things out.”

Nodding, he turns his scrutinizing attention back to me. The way he studies me reminds me so much of the way my uncles used to, searching for a flaw, a weak point to exploit. Even when you’re giving them exactly what they want, they search for more.

He taps his fingertips against his chin thoughtfully. “Tell me something, Kane. Peter Deacon? Was that you?”

Beside me, Lou stiffens. “Peter?”

“Jou must have heard about his death by now. He was found jesterday in his penthouse, stabbed to death. The video cameras have all been erased and the guards saw nothing.”

I risk a glimpse at Lou and see murder in her eyes. *If you say I asked you to kill Peter, I'll strangle you with your own hair while you sleep!*

“It was me,” I admit, turning back to Fernando. “Peter and I had a deal. He broke it.”

He nods in approval, because it's what he would have done. “Very well, Kane. If this is what Louisa wants, then who am I to deny my little girl the chance at true love.”

Standing, he calls for his family to follow him. I also get out of my seat and wait for him to stop in front of me.

“I never believed we would have a peaceful contract between us,” he says. “Frankly, I'm hesitant to trust jou. If it weren't for a...” He looks at Louisa, his eyes roving downward once again to her belly. “We will see where this goes. But I'm not letting my guard down, Kane. Not yet. Jou understand.”

“My uncles were great men,” I tell him honestly. “But even great men can be short-sighted. They couldn't see a way to unite our strengths. Can you imagine the powerful front we'd present if everyone knew we were allies? We will make this work.”

“If it doesn't, you will have a lot to answer for, Louisa.” He reaches for her shoulder as if he's going to give her a hug but then appears to change his mind and pats her instead.

I'm sure she wants to scream at him that none of this was her doing, but, deep down, he knows. It's the Don in him that makes him willing to believe otherwise. He loves her, but he loves power too.

“I think we should go,” her mother tells him. “I've intruded in their lives long enough. They need time to acclimate to married life alone.”

“Declan will reach out to you in a few days with all the details. Once all of our men have received instruction to allow

you access, you will get the deed.”

“And my son will grant you access through our streets.” Papá motions to Arturo. “Your *familia* is also welcome.” He makes to leave but stops before exiting the study. “Just one more thing. The most important thing. I want to know it’s true what Diana said. Do you love her?”

My eyes snap to Lou’s. She watching me carefully, as if, once again, she’ll hang on every word I say.

Without averting my gaze, I give her just one. “Yes.”

LOUISA

“How did it go?” Rowan asks when I return to the study after having walked my family out.

“They handed over three suitcases of my things. Declan has his men searching them for explosives now.” As if my family would blow up Rowan with me around. Or who knows? There are times I’m not so sure they wouldn’t.

“Good.”

I blow out a breath, but it does nothing to relieve the ache in my chest. “Papá couldn’t even make eye contact when he said goodbye. So there’s that too.”

“He’ll get over it.”

I’m about give him a nasty reply, when Axle, or Rowan’s “secretary,” as I’ve come to think of him, hands him something to sign. My curiosity has me shutting up before a word comes out.

This is Rowan in administrative mode. He’s even pulled his hair back into a low ponytail and rolled up the sleeves of his button-up shirt.

Axle takes the signed paper, then places a tablet in front of him. “And I need your authorization to transfer the funds to Falcon.”

Falcon? The name sounds familiar. Better yet, important. So I step closer, intent on their conversation.

Rowan scans the electronic document. “We agreed to two million up front. The rest when the shipment arrives safely.”

“His new terms...” Axle shuts his eyes for a moment before continuing, and I realize he’s working through a stutter. “New terms after he heard about Gideon’s heists.”

“How does he know we suspect Gideon?” Rowan slams his palm onto the desk.

“Who’s Falcon and what does he have to do with Gideon?” I move around the desk and try to peek at the contract. “And what are you buying?”

Rowan gives Axle the tablet back before I can see anything. “It’s McKenzie business.”

“According to you, I’m a McKenzie now. So it’s *my* business.”

Sitting back in his chair, he regards me as if he’s not sure how much to share.

I move closer, until my knees graze his, and lean on his desk. Tilting my head, I run my fingers over the edge of my décolletage, the way I’ve seen Mom do many times when she wants something out of Papá. It’s always disgusted me how easily he caves.

But I learned.

Rowan’s pupils dilate as his gaze trails down to my cleavage, his nostrils immediately flaring.

And he starts to talk. “Falcon is a new partner of mine from Mexico.”

“What are you getting from him?” I continue nonchalant. “Marijuana? Fentanyl?”

His lips pull up. “Coke.”

“You mean he’s a distributor?”

Rowan reaches for me, tugging me down until I straddle his lap. “I know what you’re doing, Lou.”

“What am I doing?”

“You’re trying to confuse me with your body. Sorry to tell you, princess.” His warm palms slide under my shirt and up

my back, heating me instantly. “It will take a lot more than a little knee rub for me to talk.”

“Excuse me. I’ll bring this back later.” Axle collects his things and disappears, closing the door behind him.

Pressing myself onto Rowan’s hard bulge, I wrap my arms around his neck and bring my mouth close to his. “I’d like to help you with the business.”

“Is that so?” He runs the tip of his tongue over my lower lip.

“It will keep me from getting bored.”

“I know something else that can keep you busy if that’s what you’re looking for.” He crushes me to him in a kiss that ignites me instantly.

Flames erupt between us and quickly build to a wildfire, eradicating all thoughts of anything but him.

Without breaking the kiss, he seeks the hem of my blouse and lifts it over my chest. Only then does he drop his head, kissing his way down my chin and throat.

Then his mouth and his teeth are on the swells of my breasts and he breathes in the scent of my skin. I shamelessly heave them into his face, wanting him to take more of me. Wanting him to consume me. I hook my index finger into the band of his ponytail and release his hair just so I can get fistfuls of it.

When he tugs down the bra and takes hold of my nipples, I cry out in bliss.

“Yes!” I bend my head over his and shut my lids. Now it’s my turn to breathe in the smell of his hair as I hold him to me. “I need you inside me, Rowan.”

In the blink of an eye, he has me lying on the desk. The impact of it takes my breath away, but not nearly as much as the sight of him towering over me in that button-up shirt with his messy hair, looking very much like the ruthless boss he is.

“Tell me again, Lou,” he orders. “Tell me what you need.”

“What?” I reach for him, annoyed that he wants me to talk when what I want is something else entirely.

“Say it. If you want it, ask for it.”

“I want you to fuck me, Rowan.”

“Show me where you want it.”

Peeved that he’s making me spell it out, I try to stand up, but he pins me down with his palm on my chest. “Show me where you want me to fuck you, Lou. Or I’ll fuck you wherever *I* want.”

Damn him. He makes me wet just looking at him, which is ironic because I hate domineering men. And yet I can’t help but to push his buttons, to egg him on. To dare him to dominate me.

A sly grin paints across my features. “What I’d like now is for you to go fuck yourself.”

He bends over me, running one of his hands from my waist to my throat. Gripping it tight enough that I’m immobilized, but not so much that I can’t breathe, he groans, “I’ve always fantasized about fucking you on this desk.”

“Even when it belonged to your uncles? You’re a sick fuck,” I retort.

“Even then. And yes, I can be a sick fuck.” He slides his free hand down my pants and cups me between my legs, eliciting a moan from me. “I’ve imagined you with your legs wide, your sweet pussy spread for me.”

Using the heel of his palm, he creates the right amount of pressure over my clit, and the feeling makes me squirm. When he tries to remove his hand, I grab his wrist to keep it there.

But he slips out anyway, sinking his fingertips into my slit as he does, bringing wetness with them. Then he licks that wetness off, my eyes following the motion of his tongue across his fingers.

My heart thuds faster and my temperature rises as he undoes the zipper and button of my pants, then, in one motion,

tugs them and my panties off. I hold my knees together, keeping them bent in a way I imagine hides me the most.

“Open your legs, Lou. I want to see you.”

I do it, not because he’s asking, but because I’m so hot and bothered, I need him to see me too. Need him to make me do things.

Rowan looks at me and his irises darken as his pupils dilate, and I wonder if this is what he pictured in those fantasies.

I’m staring intensely into his gaze, locked in it, when I hear his zipper. Then his cock is at my entrance and he’s pushing inside. He’s so hard as he begins to thrust that there’s no doubt in my mind. This is what he imagined.

He moves in long, slow strokes that touch every inch of me, making me ache deliciously. Then he’s climbing onto the desk with me, his mouth on mine in a demanding kiss that takes more than it gives. He’s hammering into me so violently, stuff is thrown off the desk, but neither one of us cares.

I hold on to him just as tightly, partly afraid I’ll end up on the floor like everything else, but mostly because I can’t control my need for him.

Biting his shoulder to keep from screaming his name, I moan every time he hits that spot deep inside me. I don’t want him to know how he affects me. Don’t want him to know how close I am to coming.

But it happens anyway.

A cry of pure pleasure erupts from me as a toe-curling climax hits me full force. I gasp and cry out again as another wave rolls through me.

My nails dig into his back so hard, I’m sure he’s bleeding through his shirt, but if he notices, he doesn’t seem to care.

Rowan growls my name in my ear and the sound of it alone makes me tighten my legs around him, bringing him farther into me as he comes.

God, he feels so good. Smells so good. Fucks so good. Why? It's like some kind of punishment wanting the man I hate this much.

I want to hate God too, for creating me for Rowan. Because there's no denying I was made for him. But it's not His fault we turned out like this. I mean, He made Adam and Eve and they were as bad for each other as Rowan and I are.

And like them, in the end, I'm going to cost Rowan his life.

Asshole. I fucking despise you, I think as he brings his mouth to mine for a lingering kiss that makes me sigh.

He pulls away almost as if he can hear my thoughts and peers into my eyes. Then he grows thoughtful, his brows pinched tightly together. "I want a baby, Lou."

It takes me so completely by surprise to hear what he's just said, I'm left speechless for a few seconds. But when I do speak, it's in outrage.

"I'm not going to have a baby. Are you crazy?!" I try to shove him off, but he weighs as much as an ox.

Brushing the hair from my temples with his thumbs, he says sweetly, "We can name him Finnegan, after my dad."

"Jesus, get off me." The moment he rolls off, I'm standing, shoving my legs into my pants. "I'm on birth control."

"We've been together for several days. I know you're not on the pill." He tugs his zipper up and grins.

I shake my head in disbelief at his ignorance. "For someone so damn smart, you don't know a lot about women. For one, we don't like to be kidnapped."

"I'm sure it depends on the kidnapper."

Again, something else he's said that stuns me for a few seconds before I reply, "And two, there are many types of birth control. I have a vaginal ring."

He arches his brows as he thinks about something. "It could have been dislodged. I'm big, princess. I get deep."

I blink at him as I process his statement, because, yes, he's large and anything but a gentle lover. I actually have no idea if the thing can be dislodged.

My stomach sinks at the very idea of being pregnant. "I can't, Rowan. Don't force me to have your child. I'll just hate you more."

His smile vanishes and his jaw clenches, but he doesn't say anything else. Instead, he begins to pick up the items that fell.

I gnaw on my lower lip, feeling oddly guilty and I don't even know why.

"Rowan, I—" I pause as my gaze lands on several pictures scattered across the floor. "What the hell?" Taking a step closer, I'm horrified by the gory crime scenes. "What..."

Rowan quickly gathers the photographs and documents and shoves them back into the manila folder. "I'm sorry. I was going over them last night."

"Over death photos?" I question.

"They're my uncles."

Frowning, I ask, "What made you want to look at them?"

"I didn't want to look at them." He sighs and sits back down. "I needed to."

"Why?"

He runs his palm over his face. "I don't know. Morbid curiosity. I couldn't sleep last night and decided to get some work done. When I opened the drawer to search for a pen, the folder was lying there. So I looked."

"The Ferryman did it?"

Nodding, he blows out another breath and pinches the bridge of his nose. "They were the first and most brutal of the Ferryman murders."

"How can you be sure it was him, though?"

"The pennies." Giving me a weary glance, he reaches for the folder and tugs one of the photographs from it. "The

Ferryman's calling card is the 2009 pennies. He leaves them wherever he's been."

I stare at the picture of the dead man, his torso sliced so severely, his guts are spilling onto the mattress.

The coins would be a payment from the Ferryman for the life he took.

Averting my gaze, I cup my palm over my mouth to keep from heaving. "That's awful."

Rowan puts it all back into the drawer he must have taken it from last night. "You've never seen a body, have you?"

"Only in pictures."

"Let's hope you never have to in person."

Then it occurs to me that he might have been there, at the crime scenes where his uncles were slain. I wonder if he felt anything when he saw them, the people who raised him, dead that way.

As if he can read my thoughts, he answers me, "I've seen many people die in all sorts of ways. I've killed many myself." He glances at me. "It doesn't bother me."

"Even though you loved them?"

He smirks. "There is nothing more horrific than the sight of someone you love lying dead. Even if they go fast. Even if you're told it was peaceful. Even years later. It's unbearable to see."

I look from the desk to him. He was able to view his uncles with a sort of dispassion.

"Who died that you couldn't bear to look at, Rowan?"

He reaches for the leather thong around his neck. "My mother."

LOUISA

Rowan's mother passed a few years after his arrival at his uncles' house. She'd been diagnosed with colon cancer too late to do anything about it. He watched her wither away, turning into a corpse way before she actually died.

He told me all that once, but until now, I didn't realize just how horrific it would have been for him to see his mother dead. I can't even imagine what it would do to me to lose Mom, and I'm an adult. Rowan was a child.

"I'm sorry you went through that," I say, surprising myself because I mean it.

His lips part as if he's going to reply, but just then, Declan peeks in the door. He takes in the sight of the desk and all the things still scattered about and gives us a disapproving glare. It makes me wish he would've come in sooner and caught us in full action.

As if he can read my mind, he focuses that disapproval on me. "The luggage is clear."

"Thanks," Rowan tells him.

Declan inclines his head, his eyes still on me. After swinging the door fully open, he leaves.

"Guess he wants to make sure we don't fuck in the study," I note.

"I will fuck you anywhere I want." Rowan stares out into the foyer. "An open door isn't going to stop me." From one of

his desk drawers, he produces a box. “I have something for you.”

I take it from him. “A phone?”

“To replace the one you lost in the river.”

Attempting to hand it back to him, I say, “You don’t seriously believe I’d use this. It’s probably bugged.”

Rowan ignores the box. “It is. But I’ll feel better if you have it on you. My and your parents’ phone numbers are already programmed in.”

Rolling my eyes, I take the new cell out and do a quick examination, turning it on and scrolling through the contacts. Sure enough, there are three phone numbers in there. I slide it into my pocket. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Um, I’m going to freshen up.” Hopefully whoever packed my things was thoughtful enough to put some underwear in there.

If it was Art, he probably made sure to get my granny panties I wear during my period. If it was Daniel, he wouldn’t have gone near those drawers at all. Renzo... He’s the wildcard. Could have gone either way.

“I’ll come with you,” he offers.

“I can go to my room all on my own, thanks.”

“That’s the thing. You’re in our room now. I need to show you where it is.”

Frowning, I ask, “*Our* room?”

“You’re my wife, Lou. You didn’t think I’d allow you to sleep anywhere but my bed, did you?”

I’m about to let out a sarcastic laugh when I recall the way he responded to me earlier. All it took was a little knee graze and he was putty in my hands, telling me more than he would have otherwise. I’m sure of it.

You’re the one who ended up on your back, Louisa.

That's true. Unfortunately for me, I'm also easily seduced by him, which makes me vulnerable. However, it's a worthwhile risk if it gets him to talk.

Plastering a smile on my face, I say, "Of course. *Our* room. It makes sense. Okay, lead the way."

I follow him to the second floor and to the left, to the room right below the "guest suite" I was kept in. If I'd known, I would have stomped around to drive him crazy.

"This is it," he says, moving aside to let me enter.

"It's nice," I remark, taking it all in. "Is this the master?"

"No." He walks in behind me and shuts the door. "Uncle Bryan had that room. This has been mine since I moved here."

The room itself isn't large, about half the size of the one above it. Oak paneling covers the wall with the window, the other walls painted a pale blue. A dark wood sleigh bed is centered on one side, and on the other, a rustic chest of drawers sits between two doors.

"That's the closet." He points to the one on the right. "And that's the bathroom."

I peer into it, admiring the classic black and white tile floor and claw-foot tub. It's not a huge space but is better suited for him than the one in the studio apartment.

He stands behind me, and through the mirror above the sink, I see something like doubt cross his features. "We could move into the master if you prefer that."

"No. I don't mind—" I pause midsentence when I spot a few lines carved into the door casing. Beside them, dates have been inscribed, a single large digit next to each one—5, 6, 7. Then they stop.

It doesn't take me long to figure out that the lines recorded his height at those ages. I know this because there are similar lines in my house. We each have our own markings, my brothers and I. A register lovingly made by Mom, and even a few by Papá, so that we could always see how far we'd come.

Rowan's end at seven. The year his mother died. There was no one left who truly cared after that.

My throat suddenly tightens and I glance away, not wishing to feel anything but resentment toward him. But damn me, I can't help it.

"I like this room," I tell him, going to rummage through my luggage, needing something to distract me from the unwanted emotion.

"I made space in the closet for your stuff."

Flicking my gaze in that direction, I give him an apprehensive smile. "Once I figure out what's staying, I'll put my things away."

The first bag I check has a few pairs of threadbare sweat pants, old college sweatshirts, and some socks that don't even belong to me. Ugh, Daniel.

Disgusted, I push aside the other two bags. I go to the bed and throw myself back onto it and sigh.

"What's the matter?" He knocks my knees apart and climbs between them. Burying his face into the crook of my neck, he takes a deep breath, inhaling my scent. "You smell like me. It fucking turns me on."

Almost on instinct, as if his hard cock against my center is a button, I lock my legs around his waist. "You're seriously ready to go again? I haven't even showered yet. I'm literally still wet from the last time."

He thrusts his hips forward, and I moan. "That only makes me want to fuck you again."

Pushing with all my might, I roll us until I'm on top, straddling him. Just like he did to me, I hold his wrists by his head. "I'm a little tired of you manhandling me."

"Then by all means, teach me a lesson." He thrusts upward. "I'll take it like a man. Promise."

Angry, and not to mention extremely aroused, I throw my pants off. Then I start to undo his buttons. "You're insufferable."

His cock springs free and I wrap my hand around it. He groans when I squeeze, causing a tiny bead of precum to form on the head of his dick.

Taste him, the tiny voice in my head whispers. *Remember how good it is.*

I stare down at it. For as much sex as we've had the last few days, I haven't had him in my mouth. Yet he's had his tongue in every part of my body. Torturing me.

Hardly seems fair.

He hasn't showered either. My juices and scent are still all over him.

"That only makes me want to fuck you again," Rowan said earlier.

It makes me want to fuck him again too.

Sliding between his legs without letting go of his shaft, I bend over him. My gaze locks with his as I flick my tongue over the slit and do what the voice in my mind commanded.

I taste him and inhale the scent of our sex earlier. The intoxicating combination invades my senses and I have to close my eyes.

Then I part my lips and let him slip between them, only a bit before pulling out. I lick him from tip to base and back, and bring him into my mouth again.

"Fuck," Rowan moans and digs his fingers into my hair. "Suck me, princess."

I pull him in and back out. Again and again until he's groaning, his fingers twitching. When I think he's close, I stop, waiting until he simmers down before beginning the torture all over again.

"Do you want to come?" I ask him.

"Yes," he growls.

"Say please." I grin and go back at it.

It's a heady feeling knowing I can make him squirm like this, the way he's done to me. I like having the power over a big man like him.

Except I don't. Not really. Something I find out when I try to get off him, but he holds me there. Then he pushes his entire length all the way to the back of my throat, his cock pulsing in my mouth.

When he releases me, I take a breath and snap at him, "I'm in control, not you."

Before I can react, he's grabbed me by the arms and is dragging me up his body. We're nose to nose, chest to chest, and dick to pussy.

"If I hold you like this," he murmurs. "Pressing myself against your wet cunt, waiting for your command to slip inside, who's in control? Me, who wants nothing more than to fuck you but won't unless you tell me to? Or you, who wants it desperately but would rather deny yourself just to say you can?"

Adding as much sarcasm to my tone as possible, I laugh. "What makes you think I want it desperately?"

"You're dripping all over my cock, princess. You want it."

"Then fuck me, Rowan. Just fuck me and put us both out of this misery."

I don't have to tell him twice.

He drops his hands to my hips to keep them in place as he drives into me. And because he's right—I'm dripping wet—he slides right in.

"Oh God!" I cry out, instantly breathless. Pushing myself up, my hands on his chest, I bounce on him.

The sound of his hips slapping against my ass and our groans of pleasure fill the room. Hell, they might even drift all the way down the hall to wherever Declan is, disappointing him further. But I don't give a fuck.

In this moment, with Rowan hard beneath me, his hair fanned wildly around his handsome face, everything else

disappears. The house, the people, and even our past.

In this moment, when he's deep inside me, his blue eyes boring into mine, our souls connected, I don't hate him. It's hard to hate a part of you.

But the moment doesn't last, as nothing else does. His climax throws me into one of my own, and I remember it all. The betrayal. The pain. The hate.

I roll off him, needing distance. But he doesn't allow it. Instead, he envelops me with his arm and tucks me tightly against his side. And I let him, telling myself there's no point in fighting it yet unable to deny that his warmth and strength stir something inside me.

Completely unaware of my inner turmoil, he kisses the top of my head. "I'm hungry. Your sexual demands are draining me."

"My demands!" I cry out in mock outrage. "You don't even let me go two hours without mauling me."

He laughs. "Keep whining and I'll give you even less of a break."

"Should we go somewhere? We've been trapped long enough."

Grazing the skin of my hip with his fingertips, he says, "I'll make us something. What would you like?"

I'm about to tell him anything is fine, when an idea hits me. If it works out, it could present me with the opportunity to strike sooner than I thought possible.

When he makes to stand, I stop him with my hand on his shoulder. And because honey attracts more flies than vinegar, I sweeten my disposition even more by skimming his chest with my palm.

"Actually," I say, lowering my lashes and licking my bottom lip. "I thought maybe we could go out tonight. I've been craving something. It's not a fancy place or anything. You'll really love it."

His eyes glaze over and he relaxes into the pillow.
“What?”

“Enrique’s.”

“I haven’t heard of it.”

“You wouldn’t have. It’s just a hole-in-the-wall in Brighton. They have the best ceviche.”

He stares at the ceiling for a long time. “That’s in Duran territory.”

“Don’t tell me you came and went as you pleased for years, and, suddenly, now that you have full permission, you’re scared?”

Giving me a side glance, he says, “Your family didn’t know I was there before. Coming out in the open seems... risky.”

I sit up and peer down at him. “My father gave his word that you’d be welcome. He never goes back on that.

“Never?”

“Ugh!” I shove at him. “Fine. I’ll go look for something in the frid— Ah!”

Rowan drags me back onto the mattress and pins my wrists to it. “I’ll take you to that hole-in-the-wall if it’s what you really want. I’ll risk getting shot for you. Just be aware that using sex to get things might not always go your way.”

“What?” I ask innocently.

Lowering his head, he bites my left nipple through my blouse. “I’m not stupid. You’re trying to use your body to get information out of me or make me do something for you. Where did you learn that trick?”

I heave, trying to throw him off. My cheeks flush in embarrassment that he’s figured me out. “Nowhere.”

He takes in my other nipple and bites it, making me hiss. “If it’s something I want to tell you, or give you, I will. It won’t matter if we fuck or not. Don’t think for one second your pussy controls me.”

I smirk. “Are you so sure about that?”

“Yes.”

LOUISA

“Did we have to bring them?” I look out the back window of Rowan’s Jaguar to the two SUVs following close behind.

“Be happy I only brought them.” He throws a thumb over his shoulder.

“Ugh. They’re going to fill the place. It’s so small!”

He chuckles. “Why don’t we take the food to go, then?”

“I’m not going to wait till we get home to eat.”

“Eat in the car.”

I blink at him in disbelief. Neither my father nor my brothers ever let me eat in their sports cars. “You’d let me eat in here?”

“If it makes you happy.” He shrugs as if it’s no big deal and continues driving.

If it makes you happy. That’s something he’s been saying a lot lately. Actually, I recall he said that a lot before too. Always willing to do whatever I want. Except when it comes to letting me go. Anything but that.

I pull out my brand-new phone and search the restaurant’s website for a menu. “The owner, Ricky, is from around the same place Papá is from. Michoacán. That’s probably why I like his food so much.”

Rowan stays quiet for a while before asking, “Is he on his payroll too?”

I look up from the screen. “Ricky pays his dues like everyone else. We keep his business safe.”

“But not thriving. You just said it’s tiny.”

“You know how this business goes, Rowan. Don’t come at me with some self-righteous bullshit. Ricky makes more than enough to leave if he wanted to. He doesn’t for a reason.”

“I’m not being self-righteous.” He grabs my hand and brings it to his lips. “I just want to know to what degree he’s involved with your father.”

“He’s not going to kill you. I promise.”

“Good,” he says as he pulls into a parking space across the street from the restaurant. “I’d really like not to die today.”

He steps out of the car and goes to talk to the other men. I start to walk to the restaurant, but he catches up to me before I can open the door.

“Lou!” He snatches my wrist and hauls me to him. “What the fuck? You stay close to me. Is that understood?”

I take a quick glance at our surroundings, embarrassed to be talked to like a child. “I’m a fucking grown-ass woman on my own fucking streets.”

He leans in real close. “You’re *my* woman now, Lou. A McKenzie. These aren’t your streets anymore. Which means you tread carefully.”

“It wasn’t my choice to switch sides, remember?” I yank my arm free. “So I suggest *you* tread carefully if you still want that pussy that supposedly doesn’t control you.”

His lips pull tight and his left eye twitches. “I just want you safe.”

Taking a deep breath, I calm my rising temper. This is not the time to lose my shit.

I grab his hand. “I know you want to protect me. I’m just hungry.”

“Let’s get you food, then.” He opens the door, a bell ringing above, and scans the small eatery before pushing me

forward.

“Welcome to Enrique’s.” Elisa, the young hostess glimpses my way for the tiniest moment. She knows me, has for a long time. Which means she also knows to remain discreet. Grabbing two menus from the stand at the entrance, she says, “Just the two of you today?”

“We’re taking it to go,” Rowan tells her.

“But we can sit and have a drink while we wait, can’t we?” I ask him.

“Of course.” Then to her he says, “Can we have a table?”

“This way.” Elisa leads us to a table near the front window and farthest from the kitchen. Good girl. She hands us the menus as we sit. “What can I get for you?”

“A margarita for me,” I tell her, scrolling through the offered items.

“Gin and tonic.”

“I’ll be back in a few minutes.” She smiles and goes to the bar located on one side of the crowded place.

“Busy,” Rowan notes.

“It usually is.” I take advantage of the opportunity to scan the room, pausing slightly when I spot the pass through into the kitchen. Through the opening, I can see Ricky peering in our direction.

Rowan studies his menu. “What should I get?”

I turn back to him, my heart pounding because I can’t screw this up. “Um... How about you get the steak tacos and I’ll get the ceviche. We can share. The boys would like the tortas. But will you order for me? I have to use the restroom.”

He looks toward the hallway in the back, probably registering the face of every individual on the way. There’s an edge to him here, where he’s completely on guard, anticipating a fight, I suppose. “Don’t take too long.”

Standing, I sigh. “I’ll be okay. You can come with me if it makes you feel better.”

“Go. I’ll order.”

Before he can change his mind and actually come with me, I go. When I reach the hall, I glance over my shoulder. He’s watching me carefully. I wave and smile, then enter the restroom.

A few minutes later, Elisa comes in. “Miss Duran?”

“I was hoping you’d show up!” I say, stepping out of the stall.

“Ricky sent me in to ask if he could speak with you.”

“That’s why I’m here, Elisa. But my husband is keeping a close eye.”

“I’ll distract your husband. Wait two minutes.” She slips out.

Tugging my cell from my back pocket, I time her. Two minutes in, I step into the hall, glancing toward the front of the restaurant. As she said, she’s at our table chatting with Rowan, who’s keeping his attention on her.

As quickly as possible, I rush down the little hall to the door that leads into the kitchen. I’m greeted with a simple nod by the staff, who’s accustomed to seeing me here.

Ricky is waiting inside the pantry, nervously wiping his hands on his stained white apron. “I have been calling you. The Sinaloa deal fell through. They don’t want to do business with Don Fernando’s daughter without speaking to him first.”

“That doesn’t matter right now.” Though it irks me that the single biggest contract I could have gotten to show my father I’m as capable as Art isn’t going to happen, it’s not as important as the other job I have for the chef. I point out the door. “Do you know who that man is out there?”

“Rowan Kane. I heard you married him. You’re crazy as fuck to bring him here. Or you have big balls. Maybe both.”

“Neither. Both. I’m not sure anymore.”

Ricky peers around the corner as if he’s expecting someone to sneak up. “Why did you do that if you hate him?”

“I do fucking hate him.” Grabbing hold of his arm, I get his attention back to me. “Listen, Ricky, I don’t have a lot of time. Rowan is doing business with a man from Mexico named Falcon. He’s just signed a contract with him for cocaine. I need you to find out exactly who that is and how those shipments will come in.”

His brows knit together. “Falcon? I believe he’s referring to Esteban Falcon.”

“Is he a part of Los Diablos del Sur?” I ask, wondering if he’s associated with the cartel that controls much of the southern border.

“Not that I’m aware of,” Ricky says. “If he’s not, he might have to travel through Monterrey.”

“Or by plane,” I suggest. “I need you to look into it.”

He nods in agreement. “Where can I reach you?”

“You can’t. The only phone I have is bugged.” I show him my new cell.

“Then you want me to wait for you to return?”

“I highly doubt Rowan will believe I’m having daily cravings for your food. No offense.”

“None taken,” he says, then adds thoughtfully, “The next time you come, I’ll have a phone for you.”

“In the meantime, if you learn where the shipment is coming through, make a plan. I want it stopped before it reaches its destination. When you intersect, leave two pennies.”

“Pennies?” He frowns. “We haven’t done that with the others.”

“He still doesn’t suspect I’m involved in those heists. This will throw him off the trail more.” I don’t elaborate further, and he doesn’t ask. “I should get back to the table. I’ll figure out a way to get back in touch soon.”

Ricky goes into the kitchen and peers out the narrow window. When the coast is clear, he calls me out. “He’s

distracted. Go!”

“Thanks, Ricky.” I move quickly to the hall.

I’m not two steps in when I hear, “Miss Duran.”

The voice so close to me has me nearly jumping out of my own skin. “You startled me, Declan. I thought you were in the car.”

“I came in to help carry the food and Rowan sent me to check on you. It was taking you a while.”

Frowning, I say, “I wasn’t aware there was a time limit on powering my nose. Next time, I’ll know.”

He glances over my head toward the kitchen, then back to me. “I think it’s time you and I have a little chat.”

My heart pounds furiously in my chest. “About what?”

“You want Rowan out of your life.” He gives me a grin and I’m not sure if it’s that his face wasn’t made for it or because he never smiles, but seeing it sends a chill up my spine. “I have a proposal that might finally give you what you want.”

ROWAN

Axle and Declan sit across the desk from me, going over daily business tasks—account balances, deliveries, and other shit that could have been done without me.

“Reaper is delivering a kilo to Sean William’s place today. That will bring in an extra eighty.”

“He paid eighty?” Axle asks him.

“It’s the good stuff,” I say absentmindedly. “Not that diluted shit my uncles sold.”

Without looking up from the documents he’s going over, Declan asks, “If it’s so good, why don’t *you* do it?”

I don’t bother answering him. It’s the same reason he doesn’t touch cocaine or heroin. Not even weed. We can’t afford the vulnerability that comes with being under their influence.

“Sean Williams will pay today?” Axle types something on his laptop.

“If he doesn’t, you have your orders.”

“Yes, sir.”

Declan adjusts his little glasses and moves on to the next order of business, and I let my mind wander back to the place it’s been since I came into the study. The place I wish I could be in physically, and not just in spirit—naked, tangled up in warm sheets and an even warmer woman.

It was hard to drag myself from her side this morning, especially when she was snuggled close, pressing her ass into my crotch. When I wrapped my arm around her and cupped her breast, she moaned.

Louisa has always been receptive to my touch, but something has changed in the last few days. I see more and more glimpses of the girl she was before—sweet glances, smiles, and even laughter.

Though she's yet to ask me the question that I know has been on her mind since the day she arrived here, it's coming. With these changes in her, I know she'll finally be ready to hear and believe what I tell her.

“What about Michael Hunt's extension?” Axle asks.

Declan flips through some pages in front of him, his readers perched on the end of his nose. “We gave him an extra week. Either he pays, or the church will have to find a new priest.”

That gets my attention. “Michael Hunt. You mean Reverend Hunt?”

“Yes,” he replies, matter-of-fact.

“Why the fuck are we collecting fees from the church?”

My right-hand man removes his glasses and sits back. “James set the new rule into motion before he died.”

“But it's a church!” I exclaim, shocked that this has been going on for months without my knowledge.

“Even the church needs more than God's protection sometimes. Hugo's men were harassing them, taking much more than *we* asked for,” he tells me, referring to one of the few gangs we allow on our streets.

“The solution was to order Hugo to desist, not charge the church. Fuck me, we're all going to Hell.” I wipe my palm down my face in frustration.

“You didn't seem bothered by it before,” Declan remarks.

“I didn't know before.”

“It was discussed last week. We were sitting right here, you were there, just like now.”

Frowning, I try to recall the last time they dragged me into one of these meetings. It was the day before Lou was set to marry Peter and my mind was on other things.

Declan pins me with a disappointed stare. “Perhaps if you didn’t have so many distractions, you’d be aware of what is happening right under your nose.”

I don’t glance away, giving him a harsh glare of my own. “What distractions are you talking about, exactly?”

“You know who I’m talking about, *exactly*.” He sneers the last word, giving it extra emphasis. “She was bad for you then, and she’s worse for you now. Ever since you brought her back into your life, you’ve been absent. She’s dangerous, distracting you from the things that really matter. The family comes first.”

“She *is* my family.”

“No.” He tosses the documents onto the desk and buttons his coat as he stands. “That woman is your enemy. *Our* enemy. And your reluctance to accept that is going to cost you.”

“That sounds like a fucking threat.”

He looks away, his square jaw working overtime. “I swore my loyalty to the McKenzies. I’ve stood by your side since the day James died. You were next in line, and I bowed my head to you. I’d never make a threat against one of our men. You know that. All I want is to ensure our success.”

Axle, who’s been quietly watching, shuts his laptop and collects his things. “We’ve gone ovah everything.”

Raising my hand, I stop him. “Michael Hunt will not pay. And tell Hugo that if I so much as hear a rumor that’s he’s been near that church, even if it’s to pray for fucking forgiveness, I’ll kill him.”

His eyes flick to Declan momentarily before he nods and hurries out with his things.

Declan turns to me. “Go back to her. Get your fucking fill. When you’re done and ready to pay attention, I’ll be here.”

The door slams shut in his wake, leaving me fuming for several minutes. Declan has always been a hard man. Doesn't mince words. Stays in his lane and keeps you in yours. But today was the first time I've felt there was something more to read between the lines. A warning that leaves me feeling unsettled.

I start toward the door he just exited through, intent on following him. But by the time I enter the foyer, he's gone.

"Has Mrs. Kane come down?" I ask the man standing guard.

"No, boss."

Glancing up the stairs, I say, "Let me know when Declan has returned."

"Yes, sir."

With that, I head up to my room. It's not that I can't call Declan and have it out with him. Remind him of his place. It's that I have a sudden need to see Lou. To make sure she's safely tucked in my bed.

Taking the stairs two at a time, I reach the second floor and motion to Phil to vacate the hall. My personal guard does as he's told, moving to another spot farther away from my suite.

Louisa is sleeping soundly when I enter the room. I take my clothes off and slip under the covers with her. She rouses slightly, her eyes still shut as she snuggles into me.

"Rowan," she says with a sigh.

I slide my palm over her feminine curves, the warmth of her skin heating me instantly. "Did you miss me?"

"Mmm." She reaches for my hip and pulls me to her. My cock rubs against the crack of her ass and slips between her legs.

Everything but the woman in my arms fades away. Even the sense of dread that had come over me quickly vanishes. All that's left of what just happened is the affirmation that, yes, I do want to get my fill of her. I have to.

When I bite her neck and knead her breast, she moans. As she begins to squirm, I slip my fingers between her folds to confirm she's wet. She always is for me.

“Get on your knees, Lou,” I order.

She does as she's told, getting on all fours. I shove the blankets off her naked loveliness and move behind her.

There's nothing more beautiful to me than the sight of her ass in the air, her sweet pussy glistening and ready. I touch her, grazing the line of her slit to her tight puckered hole. She sucks in a breath in anticipation of my fingers inside her, and I smile. That's not what's going in right now.

I position myself, placing my cock at her entrance. Her breathing stops altogether.

“Look at me,” I tell her.

She twists so that she can peer at me over her shoulder. When our eyes meet, I ram my dick home. Deep inside her, where it belongs.

Fuck, she fits me like a glove. So fucking tight and perfect. Made for me.

Each thrust that brings me closer to my climax also brings me closer to the realization that she's a distraction with a high price.

After I come, filling her with every last drop, I reach for her little clit. I'm still inside her, wanting to feel her pulsing around me when she orgasms. And when she does and her pussy clenches around me, I find even more satisfaction than in my own pleasure.

For this, I'd pay any price.

Lou drops onto the mattress, stretching out to grab the glass of water from her nightstand. “You are insatiable,” she says.

I lie on my back and slap her ass. “It's you. You do something to me. Declan told me you're a dangerous distraction.”

She rolls onto her side, facing me, the glass in her hand. “Is that what he said?”

“Among other things.” I take the water she offers me and drink.

“He’s right, you know. I am dangerous.”

Chuckling, I hand her the glass back. That’s when I see the serious expression on her face. But that’s not what has me trying to bolt upright. It’s the strange sensation that comes over my mouth and the blurring of my vision.

My speech comes out slurred as everything around me begins to swirl. “Wha did you do thu me?”

“What I swore I’d do,” she says, and it all goes dark.

The hammer of a gun is locked into place, the distinct click something I could spot among many other sounds.

I lift my heavy lids and stare right into the eyes of a stranger.

“Don’t fuckin’ move,” he warns, raising the barrel of his firearm so that it’s aimed right between my brows. Behind him, five others do the same.

“Where is Louisa?” I demand. “If you fucking hurt her—”

The man snickers. “She’s the one who let us in.”

Suddenly, I recall what happened after we had sex—her words, the glass of water, the look in her eyes as I began to drift into a drugged sleep.

She did this to me. She fucking drugged me.

“Get the fuck up.” The goon throws my discarded clothes onto my chest. “And get dressed.”

With them watching every move I make carefully, I slip into my jeans and T-shirt. “Who hired you?”

He motions with his gun for me to walk. “I already told you. The lady.”

I exit the room, surrounded by those men. Louisa might have drugged me, but there’s no way she worked alone.

The question of *who* is quickly answered, however, when I peer over the railing to the first floor and see Lou standing with Declan and a man I’ve never met before. Plastered against a wall is Axle, watching nervously.

Every muscle in my body tenses as we reach the first floor, preparing me for a fight even as I force myself to remain calm.

I’m fully aware of Lou’s presence, but I avoid looking at her, afraid to find the confirmation of her part in this betrayal.

Instead, I turn to Declan and the other man. Though he seems vaguely familiar, I can’t place where I’ve seen him before.

I also scan the faces of the guards standing around us, all armed and ready. I don’t recognize most of them. Even Phil isn’t standing among them.

“Where are my men?” I demand.

Declan laughs. “If you’re referring to the McKenzie’s men, they’re it.”

Once more, I look, not recognizing a single one of them. “Did you kill them?”

He laughs again, the sound like nails on a chalkboard. “Anyone with questionable loyalties has been replaced. Simple as that.”

“What about you? *You* swore your loyalty to me,” I remind him. “I’m starting to question that.”

“I swore my loyalty to the family,” he retorts. “But you never understood what it is to be a McKenzie. To rule. To be respected and feared. Instead, you marry the enemy. And for what? You couldn’t even bargain a fair treaty.”

“You’re a traitor,” I say. “And you’ll die like one.”

He huffs in disbelief. “I warned you that your distraction would cost you. I did what had to be done right under your nose, and you were too busy fucking her to notice.”

“And this dickwad helped you?” I lift my chin to the dark-haired guy who’s dressed like he’s about to go to a fashion shoot. “Is he your new minion?”

The man grins and chuckles in a way that tells me that, unlike Declan, he’s often amused. “You hear that, Scar? I’m a minion now.”

From behind me, a woman says, “If you’re a minion, what does that make me?”

I turn to the blonde walking toward us, dressed in a tight black catsuit. Although she’s petite and feminine, an aura of deadliness surrounds her. Her sparkling green eyes lock with mine, her red lips pulling up as she approaches him and, instantly, I’m aware of who I’m dealing with.

“Gideon Black,” I hiss.

“That’s my name, don’t wear it out,” the man says.

He takes a step toward me, and as he does, I attempt to strike. But the two goons flanking me roughly take hold of my arms. This makes him smile wider.

I struggle until a third man joins the fold and I’m pushed down to my knees.

“You’ve got my attention.” I sneer at Gideon.

“Is that all I have?” He extends his hand to Lou. “Thanks to her, I think I have a lot more than that. I have *you* now. And you’re the one I’ve been dying to get my hands on most of all.”

Now I *do* look at her, my chest tightening at the sight of the anger in her expression. “*You’re* the one turning me over to Gideon? I would expect this from Declan, not you. Why?”

“Because I hate you, Rowan,” she spits out as she comes to stand in front of me. Her eyes begin to water and a tear rolls down her cheek. Furiously wiping at it, she grits between her teeth, “I hate you with every fiber of my being.”

“You. Hate Me,” I repeat as I peer at her and into her soul, and it finally sinks in like a dagger to the heart. “You. Hate. Me.”

“What did you expect after you crushed me? *You* did this.” She points at me, digging her finger into my chest. “You made me into this monster. Now you’re reaping what you sowed.”

Yes, she’s told me so many times, and yet I stupidly believed she would forgive me. That she’d remember she once loved me and hold on to that. That she’d ask me for the truth, and I’d give it to her.

But I’m the one who needed to understand the truth. Louisa hates me. She’ll never ask me what happened and she’ll never forgive me.

Something inside me breaks, and the world around me disappears. I barely register as I’m tugged away from her.

Behind me, distantly, Gideon says, “Boston is yours. Congratulations.”

Just like that, the throne slips between my fingers. And so does Lou.

LOUISA

Revenge is a dish best served cold. Because by then, the person who hurt you has their guard down. There are the people who forget what they've done in the first place, like my brother. They move on, never apologizing, because they simply don't remember the pain they've caused.

Then there are the ones who do a wrong and remember what they did but assume if enough time passes without repercussion, all is forgiven. That time has forgiven the wound they've inflicted.

I'm not sure which category Rowan falls into, and with each step I take toward the second floor, the less certain I become.

It was the confusion in his eyes when he asked, "Why?" The pain as he repeated what I told him. "*You. Hate. Me.*"

It was as if he'd never heard me say it before. As if all those times I hissed the words at him, they went in one ear and out the other. Or he refused to believe them.

Either way, he finally heard them this time. His eyes widened in shock, as if I'd jammed a dagger straight into his heart. My moment had finally come, that karma I'd been dying to slap him with, but instead of relief, I felt something stir in my chest besides hate. I felt confusion, doubt, regret. I felt his pain.

I squashed that feeling, shoved it deep down and reminded myself that he had this coming. He made his bed and now he must lie in it. No one's fault but his own.

Except...

Why does it hurt *me*?

His eyes. It was his eyes. The blue so dark, it was like an abyss in the ocean, cold and desolate.

Lies! Even with his gaze, he lies. Because of him, I died inside. Now because of me, Gideon Black is going to kill him.

I stop, my foot suspended in midair, my hand grasping tightly onto the stair rail. *Gideon will take Rowan's life.*

My heart slams into my chest and my stomach clenches. Gideon will kill him, but at the end of the day, Rowan's blood will be on *my* hands.

Three days have passed since our lunch at Enrique's, where Declan overheard my conversation. After we drove home, he caught me again in the kitchen for our little talk.

He told me of his recent meeting with the Ferryman and his offer to allow Declan to rule the McKenzies without going after him. All he wanted in return was Rowan.

As for me, I'd have to keep Rowan distracted long enough for him to replace any would-be mutineers with men loyal to him. All I had to do was keep him in bed. Manipulate him into believing I was finally accepting him. And for my final act of revenge, I'd be the one to serve him up and hand him over to Gideon on a silver platter.

"You can have your revenge, Louisa," Declan had said. "He deserves it."

Yes, Rowan does deserve it.

Does he?

He would have done the same to me. Would have killed me the moment he was done.

Would he have?

He hurt me. Tore my heart apart. He never said he was sorry.

You never asked him to.

He never loved me.

Are you so sure about that?

Pressing my palm to my chest, I take a deep breath, then release it. Why am I questioning everything now that it's done? For years, I've known exactly what I wanted. Revenge.

Take it back. Do something. Bring him back to me, that little voice in my head says. It's the one I've been hearing for years and has gotten louder since the plan to take Rowan out went into action. But it isn't until now that it hits me who it is. It's that same eighteen-year-old girl who died inside me, who's found a new life, who's crying out for him.

"Shut up!" I tell her. "Shut up and remember what he did to you!"

But she doesn't. *I love him. I love him. I love him.*

It's the days and nights spent pretending. Fake it till you make it took a wrong turn here, making me believe that my actions were real. That's all it is. I don't love him. I don't want him.

Yes, you do.

With determination, I climb the remaining steps and go into Rowan's room. *Our* room. We only shared the space for a few nights, the luggage my father brought me still in a corner unpacked. Yet it seems as if it's already bursting with memories, not just the ones we made here, on that bed and in the shower. But the ones we brought with us.

That's what happens when you carry me inside you. I'll never let you forget him.

Thrusting my fingers through my hair, I pull and scream, "I said, shut up!"

Fuck this. I really have to go. I grab hold of my bags and stack them.

Before I can haul them out, something in my peripheral catches my attention. Through the crack of the open closet door, I can see tiny dust motes float like fairies in a colorful

ray of sunshine. I stare at them for a moment and at the rainbow pattern they create on the rug below.

My breath hitches in my throat even before I release the luggage and follow that ray to its source, walking to it slowly

I push the door open. At the far end of Rowan's walk-in closet is a porthole window. And hanging at its very center is the stained-glass butterfly he made for me years ago.

Overwhelmed by a myriad of thoughts, I pluck it from its hook and hold the frail thing in my palm. He kept it? Why is it here, on this window?

The window faces east, the same way the one at the studio does. Which means it would capture the sunlight at about the same time every day.

Is that why he did it? Did it mean something to him?

Before I have a chance to dwell on it more, I hear footsteps. Shoving the butterfly into the pocket of my slacks, I leave the closet to find Declan accompanied by several of the McKenzie men, including Axle, all standing behind him.

An alarm blares in my mind and every red flag goes up.

"What's going on?" I ask but don't need him to tell me to know that whatever this is, it's not good. "I was just on my way down. Is the car ready?"

Declan smiles. "Come on, Louisa. You didn't actually believe I'd let you go home, did you?"

"That was the agreement." I frown.

"No. The agreement was that Rowan would get what he deserved, thus giving you the revenge you so desperately wanted."

I mentally go over everything Declan said. To my horror, he's right. He never promised to let me go. In my desperate desire to get back at Rowan, I heard what I wanted to. All he promised was revenge, and in my hate-filled state, that's all I asked for.

“You piece of shit,” I spit. “You’re not going to get away with this.”

“Are you sure about that? You’ve sentenced the only one who could save you to death.” He cracks that awful smile as he motions two of his men forward. “Take her to the cell.”

“Let me go!” I shout and struggle, but they’re far too strong. That doesn’t mean I have to make it easy for them.

Dropping like dead weight, they have to literally drag me out. But to my surprise, we don’t go up to the third-floor suite like I thought.

“Where are you taking me?” I demand when we begin to descend the stairs.

However, before he replies, I already know. The room in the garage for the ones they aren’t willing to negotiate with.

My blood runs cold as I see the door to that room at the far end of the garage and recall imagining what goes on in there. Horrible things done to horrible people. Good people too if they were unfortunate enough to cross the wrong path.

I don’t have to imagine for long. Soon enough, I’m being tossed into the dark, windowless space, thrown in like a heap of garbage into a dumpster. I’m pushed in with so much force that I slide a few feet over the smooth concrete.

“No!” I cry out when the metal door is slammed shut, taking with it any sliver of light. I’m left scrambling up and blindly search for the exit. When I find it, I pound against it until my fists ache. “Let me out!”

It takes a long while for me to give up, even though what Declan said is true. Rowan was the only one who could have saved me, and I sent him to Hell. By the time my father suspects anything, I’ll be there too.

Wherever you go, I’ll follow. If the price of being with you is to burn for eternity, I’ll gladly pay it. The voice inside repeats the words I said to Rowan all those years ago.

I dig into my back pocket where I put the butterfly and pull it out in pieces. The impact of my crash onto the floor must

have broken it.

Clutching the shattered suncatcher to my chest, I drop to my knees. And I sob, unable to contain the grief I feel for this thing in my hand, this thing that meant so much to me and that Rowan kept.

What have I done?

LOUISA

Nothing makes you long for a past shitty situation like being stuck in an even shittier one. That's not a saying I've ever heard of. This one I came up with all on my own.

I curl up on the cold floor, wishing for the holding suite Rowan put me in when I first arrived. There was a warm bed, windows, a bathroom.

There was no one beating me just because they can.

A tear slips from my eye, rolling sideways across the bridge of my nose and over my other cheek.

"Fucking Mexican rat!" I hear for the millionth time in the span of only a few hours.

Knowing it's coming, because this isn't my first round with him, I wrap my arms around my head before the goon's foot makes contact. He gets me on the back of the hand this time, the sole of his shoe tearing off some skin. Before I can even think about the pain, he's kicking me again, this time in the abdomen.

That one takes me by surprise, knocking the wind out of me. I gasp for air, struggling to get my lungs to expand.

"Enough!" Declan says. He comes to crouch in front of my face. Leaning in close, he examines me. "This should be enough. We don't want her to die before it's time."

"Just kill me now," I manage to grunt out. "What the fuck are you waiting for?"

His dark eyes lock on mine. “Death would be a mercy you haven’t earned, dearie. Besides, there are others who would like a turn with Don Fernando’s spawn. Manny Valdez has already made a special request to be next in line.”

My blood runs cold at the mention of the drug lord my father fucked over before escaping to the States. Of course any of Papá’s enemies would do their research into his past. They’d want to find his worst fear. Manny Valdez would make anything Declan has done to me seem like a day at the spa. If he gets a hold of me...

I cough as I struggle to push myself into a sitting position. When I finally manage to, I glare at Declan through the one eye that hasn’t swelled shut. “This won’t get my father to bow down to you.”

“Dear, I’m not doing this to get his loyalties. I’m doing it because *you* had it coming. Or did you already forget I know it was *you* who raided our trucks?” He cocks his head. “It was *you* who fucked up. Not your father.”

If I wasn’t in so much pain, I’d laugh. The irony is too much. For years, I’ve tried to prove myself as an essential part of the Duran business and it’s Declan’s radar I end up on. Now I’m going to be handed over to one of my family’s greatest enemies, just like I did to Rowan.

Giving him my deadliest of smiles, I say, “Make your plans, asshole. I’ll make mine.”

Declan regards me intensely. Without taking his eyes off me, he says, “Axle, call Mr. Valdez. Tell him I’ve just moved up the date to today.”

“Valdez doesn’t like plan changes.” Axle, who’s been lurking in the shadows as usual, watching silently, takes a step closer. His gaze goes from me to Declan and back. “He specifically said he needed at least a twenty-four-hour notice for any changes.”

“Make the call. I’m sure that for this, he’ll make an exception.”

“Yes, sir.” He scurries out, giving me one last glance before he disappears from sight.

All the other men go too, leaving only Declan behind. “Don’t be too disappointed. Valdez might find you pretty, and he doesn’t beat the women he fucks.” Chuckling, he exits and shuts the door behind him.

I’m once again left in the darkness, left to cradle my wounds and hope there’s not some serious injury. Left with the idea that I’ll be sold to one of the most dangerous men in Mexico.

I need to find a way to alert my father. I need to make those plans I warned Declan about. But all I do once the door shuts out the light again is hold my knees to my chest and wait.

I’m not sure how much time has passed when I hear someone at the door. I stiffen, aware that this is it. Whoever is out there is taking me to Valdez and certain death.

After allowing myself to wallow in self-pity and a good dose of regret, I remembered who I am. And Louisa Duran doesn’t go down without a fight.

Adrenaline fills my veins, preparing me for that fight-or-flight mode. But either one would be a stupid move. Even if I managed to slip past the person about to enter, there are at least ten or fifteen armed men in the garage at all times.

The smart thing would be to assess my situation and wait for the perfect opportunity. Escaping without being killed might be tough, but it isn’t impossible.

But it seems my body has a completely different opinion of what the smart thing to do is, because the moment light spills in through the opening door, I bolt.

I don’t get far, of course. There are two men blocking my path and I’m quickly detained and shoved back in. The much larger one wraps his huge arm around my chest and pins me

back against him, his meaty hand covering my mouth to prevent me from screaming.

Axle is the other one, standing with a frail-looking finger to his lips. “Shh.”

I kick at him, but the beast holding me pulls me away before my feet can make contact.

“Stop fighting,” he says. “We’re here to help you.”

“But we must hurry,” Axle adds. “We don’t have much time.”

Regaining physical control, I allow myself to relax. As soon as I’m released, I whip around to see who had me. It’s Phil, Rowan’s personal guard.

“You’re here?” I say, shocked. “Alive.”

“Declan doesn’t have as many allies as he believes.” He nods toward Axle.

“You saved him?” I ask the reedy man. “But I thought—”

“I have my loyalties,” Axle cuts me off.

“But—”

“There’s no time. We have to go.” He turns and starts for the door.

Phil pushes me, forcing me to follow whether I believe they’re here to save me or not. There’s no time to consider if my fate will be better or worse when I run behind Axle, past the dead guards that secured this place. I don’t even search Axle or Phil for blood to determine which of the two was responsible for so many bodies.

Instead, I allow myself to move on instinct, slipping quickly between cars, making our way to Rowan’s Jag. That’s when the sound of the elevator descending alerts us to someone’s arrival.

I’m instantly pressed down near the closest vehicle. Across from Phil and me, only a few feet away, Axle crouches down low and almost melts into the side of a van.

The elevator dings and the doors slide open. Axle makes a gesture and Phil nods. He takes my hand and squeezes as he adjusts his position slightly. It lets me know he's preparing to take off, and when he does, he's taking me with him.

My heart rate increases, pounding furiously as I also prepare to be tugged in a rush.

Footsteps sound nearby, then stop. "What the— Shit!"

We explode into action at the same time that Axle does. Only, he's running toward the two men while Phil and I get to the Jag.

"Get in the back!" Phil orders as he slides into the driver's seat.

I crawl over to the passenger side and am barely in when he steps on the gas pedal. Tires squeal over the painted concrete and it's all I can do to hold on.

Through the windshield, I see Axle moving in a way I've never imagined he could. That frail twig of a man is fighting one of the goons with nothing but a knife and his fists. The other one is already lying on the floor, his hand on his bleeding throat.

The car screeches to a halt just as Axle twists away from the man's attack, and before the other can recover, he twists back, jamming the knife into his temple. The guard falls onto his now-dead comrade, a blank stare on his face.

Without bothering to remove the blade, Axle hops into the vehicle and we skid away. We burst through the half-open garage door just as several armed men appear. Shots ring in the distance as they chase after us.

"Get down!" Phil turns the wheel hard and the Jag fishtails, but he regains control almost instantly.

I stay down long after the shots stop, my limbs too shaky from the high of almost being killed. When I do finally sit up, I scan our surroundings constantly, afraid we're being followed.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

“A safe house,” Axle responds.

From the glove compartment, he grabs a pistol and checks the magazine. Suddenly, he doesn't look so frail and skinny. Suddenly, I see why he was selected to be by Rowan's side.

Frowning at my own error of judging a book by its cover, I watch with fascination as he reins in whatever demon he had to unleash. There's a slight tremor in his jaw and a twitch in his eye. His hands, bony though they may be, are strong and precise. I know that now.

“You killed all those men in the garage,” I state.

He pauses, the magazine he's just checked for bullets halfway in. “I don't kill. I don't do that anymore.”

“You didn't kill, buddy,” Phil tells him. “You're a protector. You protected us.”

“I should have protected Rowan. But I didn't know what they were planning. Declan didn't tell me!” He spins my way, the gun pointed at me.

I plaster myself to the seat, my hands up. “What are you doing?!”

“I should have protected him from *you!*” he shouts. “But I had orders.”

“What orders?”

“To keep you safe, no matter what. Even if it cost him his life.” Axle's face scrunches up and he pounds the gun to his forehead. “I didn't want to let them drag him away. Now he's dead. I failed.”

“I don't understand.” I shake my head, trying to wrap my mind around what he's telling me.

Phil peers at me through the rearview mirror. “The day you arrived, Rowan made us swear. If anyone ever attacked, your life came first.”

Rowan told them my life came first? “But he doesn't love me. He left me.”

“You stupid woman.” Axle glares at me, his eyes narrowed and full of resentment. “Are you so blind?”

“He left me!” I retort. “What was I supposed to do? Turn the other cheek?”

“You were supposed to see him! See *him*. I told him you wouldn’t. You’re all the same, self-centered brats. I told him you’d be too concerned with your own feelings to bother asking him why. But he insisted on waiting until you were ready, or you wouldn’t believe that he didn’t leave you. That Bryan discovered his plans and demanded your head or his own. Rowan refused to give the location where you were marrying, refused to hand you over. And he was beaten to within an inch of his life for it. The only thing that kept him alive was his McKenzie blood.

“After that, he was made to swear his allegiance, or they’d come find you. *You* kept him a prisoner here for five years. And you just handed him over when he would have happily given himself up if it meant your happiness. If you can’t see that, *you* are the one who never loved *him*.”

Done with his long-winded rant and seemingly much calmer, he turns back to peer out at the road ahead.

However, I’m far from done. His words replay in my mind, over and over, slicing into my very soul. They’re death by a thousand cuts, each one an accusation that’s true. I never asked Rowan why he did what he did, because his side didn’t matter to me. It’s also true I wouldn’t have believed him. My anger was too intense, my reality too distorted. And I *did* eagerly hand him over.

What’s not true is that I didn’t love him. It’s that I loved him with the passion of an eighteen-year-old girl who couldn’t get over the loss. I still love him.

Wherever you go, I’ll follow, the voice repeats my words. Get him back for me. For us.

I take the fractured butterfly pieces from my pocket and hold them tightly in my palm. The sharp edges pierce my skin, but I bear the much-deserved pain.

Tears fill my eyes and roll down my face when I blink. Through the tightness in my throat, I say, “Phil, are there any more of Rowan’s men alive?”

“I’m the only one. Axle got to me before Declan could. He was sly.”

“I need you to take me to my father,” I say.

“He’ll kill us the second he learns about what happened. If he hasn’t already.”

“Then drop me off somewhere and I’ll get a ride.” I wipe my tears and inhale deeply. “If there’s a chance Rowan is still alive, I have to take it. And no offense, but to get to Gideon Black, I’ll need someone in power.”

“You know how to get in touch with him?”

I nod. “Declan didn’t think I’d be talking much, so he told me things. Including where he met Mr. Black.”

Phil flicks his gaze to me again through the mirror. “In that case, I’ll take you to your father. But if they shoot me, I’ll haunt you. You comin’, Axe?”

Axle sighs. “I swore to protect her. I have no choice.”

Bringing the bloodied colored glass to my lips, I kiss it. “I’ll make this right again. I promise.”

You better.

LOUISA

The ticking of the clock above the fireplace is the only sound in the study. I'm standing by the window, holding an ice pack to my brow. Mom is by my side, while Art remains silent, throwing daggers my way across the room.

My father sits behind his desk, his narrowed eyes darkening more and more as he processes what I've told him.

Mom squeezes my hand, the one that's not been bandaged, passing some of her strength on to me.

"Say something," I tell him, anxious and also aware that every second that passes is critical.

Papá steeple his fingers beneath his chin and his eyes go to mere slits. "What would you like me to say, Louisa? That I'm all right with the fact that you tried to get married behind my back? Or that I'm proud that you are doing business on your own, also behind my back? How about the fact that no one bothered to tell me this marriage was a sham the entire time? I don't suffer fools gladly, and yet my own daughter has made one out of me."

"You're disappointed."

"Of course he is!" Art chimes in. "You've fucked up one too many times and you expect us to come running to your boyfriend's rescue now."

"He's my husband." I hiss, literally making the sound when he comes close to where I'm standing. "And I'm aware I fucked up. I don't need your affirmation on that matter."

“Kids, this isn’t the time to fight.” Mom leaves my side to sit across from my father. “Fernando—” she starts but is cut off by his glare.

“And you knew about this all along.” He pounds a fist against the desk and looks away from her as if he can’t stand the sight. “You kept this from me.”

“Because I knew you’d react this way. You wouldn’t have allowed it.”

“He’s the enemy!”

“It was love! You remember that, don’t you? Love? It makes you do crazy things like running away with Manny’s fiancé. You risked it all for me.” She sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose. “I wanted that for her.”

Papá glances up. “He took her against her will. I did not do *that*.”

“Fine. You didn’t force me to marry you. Whatever. The point is this—you will help our daughter save the man she loves, or the only way I’ll *stay* married to you *is* by force.”

They stare at each other, an intense battle of wills. My father tries his best, but in the end, he averts his gaze.

Before he can say anything, I’m by his side on my knees. “Papá, please forgive me. I never meant to make you feel like a fool. All I wanted was to impress you. Your approval means more to me than you can imagine. That is why I branched out on my own, so that you could see what I can do.”

His jaw clenches. “You didn’t have to impress me, Louisa. I know what you are capable of.”

I take hold of his forearm, imploring him to look at me. When he does, I cry. “Not capable enough, Papá. I can’t do this on my own. Please help me get Rowan back.”

He studies my face, his brows knit tightly together. “You love him that much?”

“Yes,” I whisper.

Papá takes in a deep breath and lets it go slowly as he nods. “All right.” He pats my hand. “Arturo, I want more soldiers on the street. With Declan in control, any deals we made are out the window.”

“Yes, sir,” my brother says.

“Gather your brothers and assemble a team to go with us to search for this Gideon Black.”

“What about Axle and Phil?” I ask. They were taken to the kitchen the moment we arrived, kept there under heavy guard. At least they weren’t killed.

“They will come with us as well,” he says to me, then to Art, he says, “Return their firearms.”

“But, Papá!” Art whines.

“Why must my children question every order. Do as I say, *muchacho!*”

Art glowers my way. “Yes, sir,” he grinds out and leaves.

I throw myself on my father, hugging him in the way I used to when I was a child. “Thank you, Papá.”

“If we rescue your man, I want his oath of loyalty to me. Or I’ll take him out myself.”

“You’ll have it as you have mine,” I say.

Finding Gideon was easy. Too easy. It’s almost as if he was expecting me.

Just as Declan mentioned, G.L.B. Enterprises belongs to Gideon. All Papá had to do was call the number listed on their website and ask to speak with the Ferryman. The line went silent for only a moment before the operator asked my father for his information.

A few minutes later, a call from an unknown number rang on his cell phone. But I knew who it was.

It was strange listening to Papá speak in such a detached manner as he requested a meeting. I'd heard him on many occasions before, but this was the first time it'd felt like my life depended on it. In a way, it did. Because without Rowan... if I lose him again, this time by my own doing... I don't think I'll survive it.

My heart pumped hard, my blood rushing through me, making me lightheaded and clammy as I listened. But Papá's stoic expression gave me little hope.

When he hung up, he turned to me. "He's willing to meet."

I almost passed out from the relief. "Thank y—"

He lifted a finger. "Don't thank me yet. Gideon is after his own revenge. Rowan is a part of something big. If he is still alive, you must bring something he wants more than revenge to the table. And before you ask, no, I will not give up Duran territory. I've fought too hard for that."

Shaking my head, I flipped through my mental files of all my possessions. "What do *I* have that he'd want?"

"That is for you to figure out. But do it quick. We meet in an hour."

It's dark outside by the time we arrive at the address we were given, a lofty hotel located downtown.

"He lives here?" Daniel asks from the back seat of the Escalade.

"No, douchebag." Renzo smacks him upside the head. "He's not going to actually invite us to his house. He probably doesn't even live in Boston."

"Do you think those men are Gideon's?" I ask, peering ahead toward the grand entrance at three guys dressed all in black, looking far too stiff even for this place.

"They could be secret service," Daniel offers. "Look at those earpieces."

Papá shakes his head. “They’re his. Are you ready with your offer?”

I swallow down my nerves. “Yes. Ready enough.”

“Then let’s hope it’s good enough.” He exits the car and hands the keys the valet while another gentleman lets my brothers and me out. The other vehicle, the one carrying six of our guys, including Axle and Phil, remains parked a few blocks away.

Arturo, Renzo, and Daniel stop ahead of the entrance. Papá pauses in front of them. “Remember, *muchachos*. Only if our lives are in danger. Otherwise, you will get us killed.”

“Yes, sir,” Art says in his most serious tone.

My brothers will stay here, listening in on the conversation through a mic on Papá’s phone. If anything goes wrong, it’s their job to get us out.

Gideon’s right hand, a woman named Scarlet, is waiting for us in the foyer, dressed in a tight pencil skirt and turtleneck. Anyone who sees her would assume she’s a sexy secretary or assistant.

She’s definitely an assistant, the kind that assists people to the other side.

Even if Declan hadn’t told me she’s an assassin, one of the deadliest he’s heard of, I would have pegged her as one. There’s just something about her that screams stealth and deviousness. A huntress that always hits the target.

Standing beside her is an impeccably dressed Asian man, tall and as handsome as she is beautiful. I’m sure just as dangerous too.

“Don Fernando, welcome. I’m Scarlet, and this is Itsuki.” She inclines her head toward him, but her red-lipped smile is all for me as she focuses on my bruised eye. “Miss Kane, nice to see you again. This way, please.”

We follow her inside, through the grand lobby full of rich guests. But I don’t spend much time admiring the gleaming marble or crystal chandeliers. Instead, I watch her ass as it

sways almost hypnotically, not because I'm interested in it, but because I need something to focus on while I think.

Over the last hour, I've exhausted myself mentally trying to come up with anything that a man like Gideon would consider an even exchange for Rowan's life. I have money of my own, funds I've acquired through my "side hustle." It would be chump change to Gideon, though. My father would let me borrow whatever I needed. But even he doesn't have enough.

Besides, I don't believe any amount of money would entice the Ferryman.

It's the moniker that finally gives me the answer. The Ferryman doesn't mean death to everyone. The insanely handsome man is quite charming, in fact. He wanted nothing to do with Declan or me, only Rowan. And he wanted him because he's a part of the Sinacore Alliance.

I step into the elevator behind the deadly duo, Papá by my side. Itsuki slides a key card over the scanner and presses the *P* button.

The elevator ascends along with my heart rate. It's been a long time since I've prayed. Not since that night at the church where I waited for Rowan, afraid something had happened to him, have I lifted my gaze to Heaven and asked for anything. That day, I begged God to keep Rowan safe.

Back then, I believed he'd been okay but didn't love me. Now I know he'd almost lost his life for me. I stopped praying after that day because I thought God had forsaken me, when he'd actually abandoned Rowan. There's a part of me that wants to be angry at that.

However, another part of me can't help but want to cry out to him and plead, *Don't leave us, dear God. Save him. I'll give anything. Don't leave him alone. Punish me, not him. Let him live or I will die.*

My throat tightens as I repeat those words in my mind, praying out of desperation.

"Louisa," Papá whispers.

I give him a side-glance and stiffen my spine. There's no room for weakness here, not with these people who can smell it a mile away.

Even as I think that, Scarlet arches a brow at me. "Everything all right?"

"Yes, of course." I smooth my blouse and lift my chin. "So we're going to the penthouse?"

"Mr. Black wouldn't have it any other way," she replies.

The elevator doors open to reveal a huge modern loft, the kind I'd imagine any billionaire playboy would stay in. To the right, a leather sectional sits in front of a concrete fireplace. To the left, a long dining room table is covered with dishes that are piled high with all sorts of foods—meats, cheeses, breads, and fruit.

Straight ahead, framed by a floor-to-ceiling window that spans the entire wall, is Mr. Black himself.

Gideon turns to us, his grin firmly in place, ice-blue eyes twinkling. He walks our way looking like a GQ model on a runway, dressed in a tailored gray suit, his chiseled features and dark, wavy hair flawless. He extends his hand to my father. "Don Fernando. Finally, I get to meet the man behind the legend."

"Legend?" Papá asks as he shakes his hand.

"You managed to escape with Manny Valdez's fiancé. Anyone else would have been killed before they reached the border. But not you. You made it all the way to Boston and built your own empire."

Instantly, my father's ego has him smiling. "It wasn't easy. But I knew this is what was meant for me."

"Fate." Gideon then focuses his insanely gorgeous gaze on me. He takes my hand and brings it to his lips, kissing the back. The entire time, he keeps his eyes on mine, and there's something about him that suddenly seems so familiar to me. "It's lovely to see you again, Lou."

My stomach twists and knots when he says Rowan's nickname for me. "It's Louisa."

"Ah, forgive me." He releases me and motions for us to move into the dining room. "I hope you don't mind. I took the liberty of serving food." As he makes his way there, Scarlet and Itsuki remain close to him. Sitting at the head of the table, he does a sweeping gesture to his right. "Please, have a seat. Enjoy."

Appearing cool and confident as always, Papá takes the seat closest to him. He gives me a quick glance and nods to the chair beside him.

A woman dressed in black trousers and a white chef coat steps through a swinging door that I assume leads into the kitchen. With her, she has a bottle of red wine and proceeds to fill the glasses set before us.

"Thank you, Anita," Gideon says to the woman. "Everything smells delightful."

"Enjoy," she tells us before disappearing.

"She's absolutely the best, I highly recommend her," he says, grabbing some of the steak and placing it on his plate.

Papá also helps himself to dinner, but I can't bring myself to eat at a time like this. I feel sick and desperate to get this over with. Desperate to get Rowan back and beg his forgiveness.

"Mr. Black," I begin.

"Call me Gideon. Formalities are for strangers. And we're not strangers at all, are we?" His lips pull up, his eyes crinkling at the edges, and, again, I get that sense of familiarity.

It's something I felt when Declan introduced him to me yesterday. Like I'd met him before somewhere, but I couldn't quite place him. For a moment, I'd wondered if he'd done business with my father in the past, but I quickly rejected the idea. He would've told me.

Maybe he just had one of those faces. Then again, not many people have a face like that.

Papá taps his fingers on the table twice, something I take to mean “be quiet.” He’d told me that in this meeting, he needed to do the talking. But I’m so anxious, I can barely contain myself.

“We’re actually here on a matter of extreme urgency,” he says and sips his wine.

Without taking his stare off me, Gideon asks, “This wouldn’t have anything to do with Rowan Kane, would it?”

“In fact, it does.” Papá lets out a breath. “We would like him returned. Of course, we realize that it would require compensation.”

Gideon sits back, still observing me so intensely, it’s unsettling. “But just yesterday, you readily gave him up.”

“We’ve received new information since,” Papá states. “I understand he is your enemy. He is mine as well.”

“So you want him to kill himself?” Gideon asks me.

“No!” The word bursts from me before I can stop it.

Papá glares at me. “Louisa!”

“I’m sorry, but this is taking too long, Papá.” To the blue-eyed devil, I say, “Giving him up was a mistake.”

“How so?” He spears a small bite-sized piece of steak and brings it to his mouth. “From what I understand, he captured you and forced you to marry him. That seems like reason enough to want him dead.”

“I... I was tricked. I didn’t know the truth. I believed he did something he didn’t.” A tear slips down my cheek, but I leave it there. I deserve the shame.

He finishes chewing and takes a drink of his cabernet. “What would you give in exchange for him?”

I want to scream that I’d give anything—my life, my soul, anything. But I’m not worth much to Gideon. There’s only one thing I have to offer.

Peering at my father, knowing he won't approve, because it's traitorous, I say, "A way in. I'll give you a way in."

"In to what?" Gideon asks, though I have a feeling he already suspects what I'm referring to.

"You let Rowan go, I'll spy for you. Any move the Sinacore Alliance makes, you'll be the first to know."

"Keeping the wineglass in his hand, he swirls it around as he considers me. "If Rowan ever trusted you again, you'd be risking your own life. Luca Sinacore takes as well to betrayal as I do."

The images of Bryan and James McKenzie's bodies fill my mind instantly. I glimpse at Scarlet and Itsuki and wonder if either of them did those horrible things.

Would they do the same to me? Would Luca?

Would Rowan?

It doesn't matter. For him, I'll do whatever it takes, even if I have to sell my soul to the Devil.

"I'm aware of the risk," I say. "Just return him to me."

Gideon sighs, his gaze taking on a regretful expression. "I must admit, out of anything anyone could have offered, that is the most tempting of all. And I might have taken it. Except..." From his coat pocket, he produces a leather necklace and sets it on the table in front of him. Then, one at a time, he places two pennies heads up beside it. "I'm sorry. His sentence has already been carried out."

I reach across my father for the necklace, immediately recognizing it. It's the one given to Rowan by his mother. The one that's been hanging around his neck since he was a child.

"No!" I cry out.

My world shifts and I nearly vomit. His sentence has already been carried out?

Against my will, I imagine it happening. Picturing him being killed a thousand different ways makes something inside me snap.

“I’m sorry. If you’d come to me an hour sooner, perhaps —”

“Murderer!” I lunge from my seat and crawl over the plates of food, wanting to kill Gideon. But before my fingertips make contact with his throat, Scarlet gets a hold of my hair and drags me off the table.

“I thought they’d be more professional than this,” she says to Gideon.

I scream and dig my nails into her wrists, but she doesn’t release me. It’s not until my father manages to get control of the situation that I’m let go.

“Easy,” he says to her, his palms up in a placating manner. Slowly, he steps toward us and takes me from her.

“Keep her on a leash if you don’t want her to end up like her boyfriend.”

“He’s my husband!” I scream like a banshee, doing my best to tear myself out of my father’s tight hold, but he’s too strong.

“Tut, tut, Lou,” Gideon scolds, shaking his finger at me as he stands. “These are the consequences of your actions. Perhaps next time, you’ll give yourself time to think about that before pulling the trigger.”

“Settle down, Louisa,” Papá growls in my ear. “This isn’t going to help fix anything.”

Fix? How can anything be fixed now?

Where there’s life, there’s hope. There is no fixing anything. My hope is gone.

Rowan is dead. And I killed him.

ROWAN

O *ne Hour Earlier...*

I stare at the wall across from the wooden chair I've been tied to. There's a painting of a man leaning against a desk hanging over the fireplace mantel. When I was first placed in this library, I assumed it was Gideon. He seems full enough of himself that he'd have such a gaudy thing. But after staring at it for at least an hour, I began to wonder.

To my misfortune, I had a perfect view of him from the backseat of the Rolls-Royce that drove us through Boston. If he'd captured me at any other time, I might have fought harder when they secured my wrists behind my back. But all I could do was stare at his profile.

In all the times I met with the Alliance, not once did we see a photograph of Gideon. Arran gave a description. Said he was tall with dark hair and blue eyes and wore a suit. That could have been anyone.

So I stared at him as he chatted animatedly with the blonde woman, wracking my brain for any clues as to where I've met him before.

I fixated on that because it was better to busy myself with a pointless exercise than to think of the woman who'd betrayed me. And when we arrived at the sprawling mansion in Brookline, and the two men I'd sat between dragged me out

and placed me in one of the suites, I went over his face in my mind.

Now, as I sit at a reading table in this two-story library facing the painting, I do the same. Or I try to, at least.

The man depicted above the fireplace has the same air of confidence that Gideon has. But while he has similar features, they're different enough that you can tell one from the other. So what makes them seem so alike?

I stare harder, studying the face, and discover the similarity. It's the eyes. They have the same eyes. Steel blue and intense despite the slight upward pull of his lips.

"That's Father." Gideon enters, holding a glass filled halfway with an amber liquid, and walks past me to peer up at the portrait. "Stephen Black. Handsome, wouldn't you say?"

"He's not ugly," I reply with a shrug.

"He *wasn't* ugly," he corrects. "Or have you forgotten your uncles were involved in his murder?"

"And *you* were involved in theirs. You're even now?"

Gideon turns to me, a sly grin plastered on his face. "Is that your way of pleading for your life?"

"I'd never beg you for anything."

I hate you, Rowan. [...] You made me into this monster.

Suddenly, no matter how hard I try to ignore them, Lou's words blare in my mind. She's right to hate me, but not to believe herself a monster simply for reacting to the pain I inflicted.

I'm the real monster. I deserve whatever is coming.

Scanning the stately room, I ask, "Is this where you're going to do it?"

"Do what?" His brows pinch together in genuine confusion, and, once again, the strange sensation of having met him before fills me.

"Take me out," I say. "Is this where you kill me?"

With a horrified expression on his face, he makes a big show of looking around at the expensive furnishings. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to get blood stains out of marble flooring? Impossible.”

The horror vanishes as quickly as it appeared, replaced by that fucking grin that’s starting to grate on my nerves. I frown at him. If I turned Lou into a monster for what I did to her, then this guy has been turned into a complete psychopath by what was done to his father.

That’s when it hits me. The portrait, the house, the fact that he won’t kill me in it when he didn’t care about stains before. This is *his* house.

For months, the Alliance has searched for this place. Anyone who’s met with him has always been sent to different locations—empty buildings, hotels, restaurants. But we’ve never been able to determine where he actually lives.

If I’m right, Sofia, Luca’s sister, could be here as well. Whatever the reason Gideon has for keeping me alive, I need to use the advantage to search for her.

I look around. The woman who’s always attached to him is nowhere in sight. In fact, no one has come in here at all.

Scrutinizing him, I ask, “Why have you brought me here if not to kill me?”

He stands closer and, to my utter surprise, pulls out the seat beside me, spins it so that it’s facing my way, and sits.

Gideon sips from his glass and sets it carefully on the table. “I don’t intend to kill you at all.”

“Do I know you?” I finally ask, observing him carefully. “We’ve met before.”

Nodding, he leans forward, staring hard into my eyes as if he’s willing me to remember him. “Think, Rowan. Where do you know me from?”

“You’re awfully close to me, man. My sight’s not that bad.”

He chuckles as he sits back. “I didn’t know you were funny.”

“I’m not. Now fucking tell me what I’m doing here, or let me go.”

“You won’t believe me if I tell you,” he says.

“Try me.”

Tapping the glass with his fingernail, he bites his lower lip in thought. “First, I want to know how much your uncles told you about my father.”

I shrug. “Nothing. Everything I know about Stephen has been through the Sinacores. He was a traitor and died like one.”

For the first time since I got here, Gideon’s grin vanishes. “It sounds like you need some reeducation.”

“I don’t need anything from you, except to turn you over to Luca so you can pay for your sins.”

In the blink of an eye, Gideon is out of his chair and standing behind me. He fists my hair and pulls my head against the high seatback and presses the edge of a sharp blade I wasn’t aware he had on him against my throat. I can feel it slicing through the skin there, but only deep enough to sting.

“What are you waiting for, Ferryman. Kill me.”

Gideon shoves me away from him. He peers at the large knife, turning it back and forth, as if he’s looking at his reflection in it.

“I’m not going to kill you, Rowan.” He lifts his steel gaze to me, and I’m suddenly struck with the realization of why, since the moment we met, he’s seemed so familiar. The same reason he seems so much like the painting of his father. It’s the eyes. I see them every single time I view myself in the mirror.

“What is this?” I ask, my mind reeling as it desperately tries to fit the puzzle pieces together. But I can’t. There’s not enough information. “Who are you?”

“Me?” Gideon smiles and tilts his head. “Why, I’m just your big brother.”

Seeing is believing.

I’ve never been one for idioms, but Lou always was. Made me laugh every time she said one of her Spanish ones, because the meaning was often lost in translation. Sounded funny as fuck.

They were sayings her father taught her. Though her mother had had an American education, she’d lived most of her life in Mexico, so she didn’t teach Lou anything different either.

I bought her a little book of idioms I found at the bookstore. Not that she hadn’t heard them before—she was raised in Boston, after all. But she hadn’t been exposed to them in her day-to-day life, always around her Spanish-speaking friends and family.

She studied that book and inserted a saying any chance she got. It was a challenge for her, and every time she did, a huge smile painted across her beautiful face.

God, I loved to see her smile. That was my favorite part. It’s why she so easily distracted me while Declan worked against me. It was thinking she was finally happy by my side that controlled me, not her pussy. Though I have to admit that played a part too.

I don’t do drugs, because they’re a dangerous addiction that creates dangerous vulnerabilities. Instead, I did something far worse. Louisa Duran.

Seeing is believing.

Axle begged me to tell Lou the truth. That if I’d shown up at the church that night, my uncles would have killed her and sent her head to her father. That they’d used her to keep me bound to them, and it was only through some miracle that they

didn't see my real feelings when I told them I didn't love her anymore.

But I was sure Lou wouldn't believe any of it until she saw for herself that we still belonged together.

Just like her, Gideon wants me to see for myself, to remember who he is. Who *I* am.

He undoes the rope from around my wrists and throws it on the table. For a long while, however, I remain in that position, staring stupidly ahead, reeling from his revelation.

It can't be true, and yet when he sits once again beside me, his face as serious as mine, I can't help but see myself in it. There's simply no denying it.

"How?" I ask the only question I'm capable of.

"You're the son of Stephen Black and Shannon McKenzie," he replies.

Subconsciously, I'm already denying it all. "Impossible."

"Finnegan Kane was not your biological father," he continues. "He wasn't even in the picture."

"Of course he was."

He shakes his head. "Tell me what you remember of him."

"He worked at a brewery when he and my mother left Boston. Then he—"

Gideon raises a hand to stop me. "Not what you were told. What do you actually remember about your father? Think hard."

"I was too young when he died to remember him."

"You weren't too young, Rowan," he spits out with frustration. "You're afraid of what you'll see if you try."

"All right then. You tell me what I'm supposed to know."

Observing me for a moment as he decides whether or not to fill me in on what supposedly happened, he taps his fingers against the glass again. A nervous habit.

“*Our* father was working on expanding his shipping business, offering his services to a more...distinct kind of customer.”

“You mean criminals,” I correct.

He grins and takes a sip of his drink. “It’s where the money was. And Father followed the money. This was before he knew the way of criminals, however. He didn’t realize that a contract could only be held with one family at a time.”

“So this was before he got stuck working with Tadesco in Chicago.” I’m following the story but taking it all with a grain of salt. I don’t trust this piece of shit as far as I can throw him.

“It was. He came to Boston in an effort to make a deal with the McKenzies. Obviously, he was turned down. They had no reason to trust him. But he got something out of that trip anyway. Your mother.”

“Liar!” I slam my palm against the table. I’m shaking, my face so tense I can practically feel the veins at my temples bulge. “Finnegan Kane was my father.”

“Finnegan Kane was part of the McKenzie’s security detail. When Shannon called Father to tell him about the baby, he sent for her. But she was smart and knew what Bryan and James would do to him when they found out. So she paid Finnegan for his name. Once they were married and he delivered her safely, he fled to Costa Rica with a lot of money.”

“Lies.”

As if he doesn’t hear me, he continues, “I was five years old, Rowan, and I remember most of it.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I was there! I fucking carried you in my arms where you were born, Rowan. I was there when you got your first tooth, your first steps. You lived with us until *you* were five and your mother wanted to leave, so *you* must remember something.”

We stare at each other for several moments, him wanting me into believing his story, me refusing to.

But against my will, I do remember something. Not an event that ever happened, but a recurring dream I had as a child when we first moved into the McKenzie house.

I was in the backseat of car at night, holding a blanket tightly. My mother glanced at me through the rearview mirror with terror, and it made me so afraid, even though I had no idea of what.

Then I remember something else, something that happened before that. A fall from a tree in the back yard, and a boy older than me rushing to pick me up. A dark-haired boy with blue eyes.

One after the other, memories of that young man assault me, of him playing cards with me in front of a fireplace, him reading to me, him teaching me to ride a bike. Him desperately holding on to me as we were torn apart.

Only, the boy's name wasn't Gideon. In my memories, I called him Dionne. Because I couldn't say his full name.

"I remember." I gasp.

"Father?"

"You." I lift my gaze to his, knowing without a doubt that the man sitting in front of me is my older brother. "I remember you."

He sighs, letting out a breath that it seems he's held for a long time. "I was afraid they'd brainwashed you too well."

Yes, they brainwashed me. I remember that too. Anytime I tried to mention my other family, specifically my brother, the boy I worshiped, I was beaten by my uncles.

Mother begged me to stop asking for him, to stop saying his name.

For her, because she cried so much for me, I listened. I stopped saying his name and finally managed to forget it too.

My chest tight, I regard him. I'm completely unsure of what to feel or what to do. He's my only living relative and yet he's been my enemy for months. Has been taunting me, ruining my business, killing my allies.

“Why did you raid my trucks?” I ask. The question comes out without any of the initial anger I experienced when it happened.

Gideon frowns. “I never raided your trucks. That was all on your lovely wife.”

“Lou?”

He looks to the side as if in thought. “Lou,” he repeats. “I’d call her a traitorous bitch.”

I shove out of my chair and grab him by the throat. “Watch what you say about my wife.”

Laughter erupts from him as he lifts his hands in surrender. “I’ll call her whatever you want, little brother. As long as I don’t have to like her.”

Growling, I move away from him. “Are you certain she was behind the raids?”

“The bit—” he starts but catches himself. “Lou has a contact in Brighton. He owns a Latin eatery. You might have heard of it. Enrique’s.”

Peering out a back window, I watch the landscapers working on the garden behind a large pool. But all the while, I’m thinking of Lou and that restaurant she made me take her to. Of how afraid I was she’d be hurt for being my wife, when the entire time, she was plotting against me.

“My wife,” I whisper, my chest tight at the thought of her betrayal. Then I think of something else. “Why did you try to take her on her wedding day? That was you, wasn’t it?”

“I didn’t want her to marry someone else,” he admits. “I didn’t know you’d be there too. Wish I’d taken her after all. Would have been better for you.”

I turn in time to see Gideon’s smug face. “Don’t act all high and mighty. You’re just as dirty as she is, Dionne.”

He grins when I accidentally use the nickname. “All I did was save you, Rowan. Declan would have killed you with that woman’s blessing. I extracted you from a deadly situation.” He

comes to stand in front of me. “I’d fucking do it all over again.”

His phone buzzes and he reads a text that’s just come in. “Hang on, I need to make a call.” Moving to the door, he dials a number.

While he talks, I glimpse at Stephen Black’s portrait, still unable to see his face in my mind. Still unable to remember him as my father. But I remember Gideon as a boy. My big brother.

“Of course, for a man like yourself, I’m always available,” Gideon says to the person on the phone. “Meet me at the Varleigh Hotel in an hour.” He hangs up and returns to my side.

“What do you want from me?” I cross my arms over my chest. “You saved me because I’m your brother. But there’s more.”

He nods. “All of your men are dead. Your wife has betrayed you. You’ve lost it all. Except for me. I’ll always be here for you. No matter what. With my help, you will get it back. The question is, will you be there for me, little brother?”

Everything he’s said sinks in, the truth of it crushing my soul. “What do you need?”

“Stand by my side where you belong and help me defeat the Sinacore Alliance.”

LOUISA

Where do I go from here?

Mom is rubbing my back as I lie in bed, staring ahead at nothing. Even though I've cried for hours, tears still stream down my cheeks, a never-ending river of pain.

The guilt that eats at me prevents me from moving; the sadness, from breathing. I'm a living corpse, wishing for the bliss of a death that never comes.

"Have some of your soup, Lulu," Mom whispers. "Please."

I sniffle, the only response I can give, because the moment I open my mouth, sobs escape.

Mom sighs. "I'll talk to your father again. Perhaps there's something that—"

"No!" I grab hold of her arm when she tries to get up. "He won't risk bringing Gideon's wrath onto the Durans. Not again."

"Then *I* will do something!" She pulls away, looking more determined than I've ever seen her. "I played a part in all of this too, and I will not stand by and do nothing while my daughter withers away. I will go after Gideon. He will pay."

I'm unable to help it when sobs begin to wrack my body. "I'm the one responsible. If anyone has to do something, it's me. I just don't know what to do!"

"If only we had allies that would be willing to—"

Abruptly, I sit up. "Oh my God, that's it. Oh my God!"

I jump out of bed and dig for my phone. While Axle couldn't even look my way, Phil was much nicer. He took my cell phone and entered his number.

"Just in case" was all he said.

"What's happening?" Mom asks, standing behind me and peering over my shoulder as I dial Phil.

"The Alliance, Mom. They were the answer; it was just the wrong question."

"What?"

I'm about to explain it to her when I hear Phil's voice. "Hello?"

"Phil, it's Lou."

"Is everything okay?"

"No," I reply honestly. "Nothing will ever be okay again, because I took the life of the man I loved. But I can at least atone for my mistake."

The line is silent for a moment. Then, "How can I help?"

"I need you get me in touch Luca Sinacore."

A few hours later I arrive at the home of New York's kingpin, accompanied by my father and a huge security detail.

"Thank you, Papá," I say to him.

I didn't expect his help. He'd told me he wouldn't get involved. Didn't want to risk war with Declan if things didn't work out. However, when he saw my determination to meet with the head of the Sinacore Alliance, Papá refused to let me come alone.

But, this time, he's allowing me take charge. "Remember you're a Duran and a McKenzie. Don't let him intimidate you. I'll be here if you need me."

I hug him, then step out of his sports car and catch up with Axle and Phil, who are already beneath the portico of the Victorian mansion.

“You came,” I say to Axle.

He inclines his head. “I’m still in Rowan’s debt.”

One day, I’ll ask him what exactly Rowan did to earn so much loyalty. Whatever it is, I’m sure Rowan deserves it.

Luca and his sidekick, Gunn, are standing at the doorway. In front of them is a petite woman who reminds me of myself, with dark hair and light skin and a fierce gleam in her eyes.

“You must be Louisa,” she says. “My name is Carina. I’m Luca’s wife.”

“Nice to meet you. These guys behind me are Axle and Phil. And those three standing by the truck”—I toss my thumb over my shoulder—“are my three older brothers.”

“They’re not coming in?” Luca asks.

“I’m not here on Duran business.”

He nods in understanding. “In that case, welcome.”

Luca and Gunn part, allowing Carina and me to walk in. She remains close to me as she leads me into the dining room, where a huge spread has been set out on a buffet.

“We’ve had company so often, Nan sets out food every day now,” she tells me. “Help yourself.”

Thankful my brothers didn’t join me, because they’d be acting like animals if they saw all this, I shake my head. “Maybe later. I’d kind of like to get down to business if that’s all right?”

“I was sorry to hear about Rowan, may he rest in peace.” She squeezes my shoulder and I believe she’s genuinely sad.

“He was a good man,” Luca says, taking a seat.

Gunn, who’s piling fruit onto a piece of cake, chimes in, “Fucking Gideon keeps on taking us out, man.”

Carina sits beside her husband and I take my seat across from them, with Phil and Axle flanking me. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t share this with anyone. No one is aware. I’m not even sure if Declan knows yet.”

“We will keep quiet,” Carina says. “Won’t we, boys?”

Neither of them reply, and I realize it’s time to address the elephant in the room. “You know that I played a part in what happened to Rowan. I was clear about that before I came.”

“How do you feel about it?” Luca asks Axle. “He was your boss.”

Axle seems to think about it for a minute before he replies, “She acted upon the information she had at the time.”

“It’s hard to trust a traitor,” Gunn outright accuses, then pops a strawberry into his mouth.

“I’m not a traitor. Like Axle said, I didn’t have all of the information. It doesn’t make me any less at fault. I take full responsibility. While there’s nothing I can do to bring him back, I can make sure that Declan doesn’t keep his throne. For that, I need your help.”

“Wait a minute, are you asking us what I think you are?” Gunn asks.

“He was a part of the Alliance,” I insist.

Gunn arches a brow. “But you’re not.”

“Here he is out,” Carina interrupts before he can utter another word.

“Look,” I start. “I know I’m not a part of you guys. But Rowan was. And that’s why I’m here. I’d like to make you an offer.”

“We’re listening,” Luca says.

I swallow down any nerves trying to make their way to the surface. I’m a Duran and a McKenzie. I have as much right to this audience as anyone else. The worst that can happen is that they don’t accept.

When I went to Gideon, I didn't really have anything of value to him. But I do have something the Sinacores would want.

"Help me take out Declan. I might not be able to bring Rowan to life again, but I can make sure Declan doesn't keep a position he didn't earn. In return, you can have full access to McKenzie territory."

"The fuck!" Gunn chokes on a grape, and Carina slaps him on the back.

Luca sits forward, his fingers steepled beneath his chin. "You're offering us Rowan's territory?"

"I'm his wife. Was," I correct. "Once Declan is removed, I intend to take it over. You'd also have the Durans as an ally."

He clucks his tongue as he mulls it over. I'm basically offering a golden ticket to all of Boston. While Rowan was a part of their group, he would never have granted something like this without a fee.

Carina glances between us but says nothing, deferring the entire decision to her husband.

"I'll tell you what," he says and I stiffen as he prepares to counteroffer. "We'll help you take out Declan. In return, you grant me full access to Boston. But I won't conduct business there without your approval."

I look at Axle, then Phil. They both nod in agreement.

"We accept," I say.

"Gunn," Luca addresses his right-hand man. "Get a team ready."

"My father will provide men as well," I tell him.

"Good. We'll need all the help we can get." He stands and motions to one of the guys standing guard at the door. "Hansen, please call in Don Fernando and his sons. We need to coordinate an attack as soon as possible."

"When he's not expecting it," I say.

“Not only that. We need to hit him at home. He won’t see that coming at all. Not in the middle of the city. But it must be done quickly. In and out before police arrive.”

“I can make sure it takes them longer to get there,” Phil says. “The chief is on the payroll.”

“Excellent.”

“Axle can give you all you need to know about the house.” I turn to him. “Right?”

He nods. “I’ll do better than that. I have a floorplan.”

“We leave at dusk,” Luca says. “Before the morning is over, Declan will be dead.”

And I’ll be the new McKenzie queen.

LOUISA

Luca's plan was to set up a perimeter of security several blocks wide around the house. Because they were his men and unrecognizable to anyone working for Declan, each of them could more easily blend in as a transient tourist.

Papá reinforced the border between both territories, preparing for that dreaded war Mom wanted to avoid. Hoping that if a battle does breach the doors of the McKenzie house, it won't reach the Durans. Better safe than sorry.

Mom fought tooth and nail to keep me with her. I can still hear her cries as I got into the car. She tried to reach for me but was held back by Arturo, his arms clasped tightly around her.

Those cries only got louder when Daniel decided to jump in the back seat. "What? I'm going to miss all the fun if I stay here. Besides, I'm just a spare, remember?"

"Spare? What the heck is that?" my father asks from the driver's seat.

"Nothing. Just go, Papá."

The old silver Honda we use when we need to remain incognito pulls out and my mother's screams fade away. For her sake more than my own, I hope nothing happens to us.

We arrive at the designated place three blocks from the house and parallel park in front of a residential building. In the distance, I can see the McKenzie house being silently surrounded by Luca's men. However, if anyone inside were to

scan the area, they'd only see pedestrians. Normal- looking and completely innocuous.

“Is that Gunn?” Daniel points to a jogger across the street. He's wearing tight blue shorts that are a size too small and a black hoodie. He pauses at the corner to do stretches, using the light post for leverage before moving on.

“Wow, he's taking this role so seriously,” I remark.

My cell phone buzzes. It's Luca. “The men are in place. We have two minutes.”

“We're ready,” I tell him.

“Remember the plan, Lou. You're to stay in the vehicle until I give you the signal. If you want to take over the McKenzies, you must stay alive until the house is secured.”

“Understood.”

“Axle is in,” he informs me. “We have one minute.”

“Good luck, Luca. And thank you.”

The three of us watch as at the minute mark hits and the front door opens. Several of those innocuous-looking men slip inside. For a moment, all is quiet. The only sound that can be heard is the slight breeze rustling through the trees and birds chirping nearby.

Then it begins. First, it's one shot cracking through the air. Then another and another.

It's not long before actual pedestrians begin to gather at intervals, staring in the direction of the gunshots. Fools. If that were me, I'd be gone. I'm just here because I have to be.

I'm about to glance at my cell phone for the “all's well” signal when four black SUVs screech to a halt by the front door. At least twelve armed men, all dressed in black, pour out of the doors. They march into the house, rifles in hand and ready to shoot.

I snatch the binoculars Daniel has been holding. “Who the fuck is that?!”

“Another enemy?” Papá suggests. “Shit. We need to go.”

He tries to put the car in gear, but I stop him. “We’re not going anywhere. They need us!”

“We don’t know what we’re up against now.”

“If we leave, that will be seen as a betrayal.” I get out of the car before he can utter another word and run toward the house.

“Louisa!” he screams, but I just pick up the pace.

I peer over my shoulder, and just as I thought, they’re following. When I face the house once again, I’m momentarily stunned by the vision in front of me.

A man who looks a lot like Rowan appears behind one of the SUVs. He’s crouched low, a gun in his hand.

“Louisa,” Papá takes my hand and forces me to stop. “I forbid you from going in there until we’re certain it’s secure. Return to the car and wait. Daniel and I will go in.”

They leave me there, blinking. I just saw Rowan’s ghost. Only, he seemed so real with his hair blowing in the slight wind, his face stern and muscles rippling beneath a white button-up shirt.

Of their own accord, my feet begin to move in that direction, my heart pounding in my ears. I’m panting by the time I reach the front door and step over a body. Shouts and grunts alert me to the areas where fights are still taking place, and I move toward them quietly.

“Rowan?” I whisper, scanning every room I pass.

The once-gleaming home is now covered in shattered glass and blood. There is chaos everywhere, men engaged in battle, some wielding knives or guns—others, fists.

It’s impossible to tell which men belong to Luca and which to Declan. So I stick to the shadows, making myself as small as possible as I move, avoiding them all.

I’ve just made my way to the second floor when a bullet hits the wall in front of me. Ducking into the nearest bedroom, I escape two more.

Shit! Shit, shit, shit!

That's when I finally remember the gun in my waist holster. Taking it out, I move backward in a crouch and plaster myself to the other side of the bed.

I peer over the mattress just as the vision from outside appears at the doorway, his gun pointed low, his eyes searching. When it's aimed at me, he pauses, shock evident in his expression.

"You're alive?" I shake my head, blinking furiously in disbelief at what I'm seeing.

I toss the firearm down and run to him, wrapping my arms around his waist. Holding him tight, I gaze up into his beautiful face. "You're alive."

Though Rowan's response to me isn't as warm as I'd hoped for, it's not a surprise. Still, it stings.

He detaches me from him and pushes me away. "What are you doing here?"

"We came to take the house back from Declan."

"Who's we?"

"The Sinacore Alliance and me. Phil and Axle are also here."

His brows raised, he asks, "They're alive?"

"Axle saved us. Rowan, he told me everything." I slap his chest, and, against my will, I begin to cry. "You idiot. If you'd told me the truth from the beginning, I would never have..." I stop, unable to continue without hating myself more. "But you're here now and you're alive. How are you alive?"

"Gideon didn't intend on killing me."

Frowning, I look up at him. "But he told me he'd executed you."

"When did he say that?"

"I went to see him. I begged him to return you to me. He gave me your necklace and two pennies."

“Gideon didn’t say anything.” He reaches for the necklace, only to find it’s no longer there. “It must have fallen off,” he says absentmindedly. Then his intense gaze meets mine “You’re doing this for me?”

“Yes. I regretted everything the moment I did it. Then Axle told me the truth and I died a thousand times inside. I love you, Rowan. Please forgive me.”

“We’re both to blame, Lou. Fuck, what a mess.” Finally, his arms come around me and I sink into him and breathe.

“You came with Gideon,” I state. “Are you working with him now?”

“He’s my brother.”

I snap my face up to his. “What?”

Shots ring out nearby and he turns to the door. “Another time. I need to get you out of here.”

Grabbing tight hold of my hand, he begins to move us toward the door. Although some of the fighting has died down, there are still men going head-to-head.

I peek over the railing to spot Phil taking on a guy with his fists. Beyond him, Daniel is finishing off another.

Just as I’m wondering where Papá could be, he steps out of one of the rooms, bloodied and limping but alive.

“Don Fernando!” Rowan calls out as we race down the staircase.

Papá’s expression is as surprised as I’m sure mine was when I first saw him.

“Díós mío, jour here?” he says.

Rowan tries to hand me over to my him. “Get her out of here.”

“The fuck I’m going!” I tug myself free. “Where you go, I’ll follow, remember?”

“This isn’t one of those situations, Lou.”

“I’m staying,” I grit through my teeth.

The choice is taken from any of us when Declan's stiff laughter has us all turning to him. He's at the study doorway, a gun pointed our way. "I should have known better than to trust Gideon."

Rowan pushes me behind him. "And I should have known better than to trust *you*."

From our left, Luca and Gunn appear, their weapons ready. And to our right, Gideon and Scarlet.

"Well, will you look at this? The whole family's gathered," Gideon says and seems almost happy about it with that wide grin.

"Gunn." Scarlet says it in a way that sounds like more than just his name.

"If I'd know you were here, I would have loved to fuck you up a little." He blows her a kiss.

She laughs. "The day you're actually able to fuck me up, I'll let you fuck me too."

"Enough!" Declan screams. He lifts his gun toward Rowan's head, and all the other men, including Gideon, lift theirs to him.

Rowan laughs. "You better say your prayers before you fire that shot, Declan. Cause you'll be only seconds behind me."

"Better dead than—*gurg!*"

It takes me a moment to figure out what's happening. One instant, he's standing, the other, he's holding his throat and gurgling, then falling. That's when I see Axle with his bloodied blade still in position from stabbing Declan in the back of the neck.

Shit. I didn't even see him go there.

"I didn't kill him," Axle explains. "I was protecting you."

"Yes, you were, buddy. You protected us," I tell him.

With Declan gone, the other men switch their attentions on each other, and we're the monkeys in the middle.

“You’re done, Gideon,” Luca says.

“Are you sure about that?” Gideon replies. “From my point of view, you’re the one about to meet your maker.”

Papá gets a hold of me and drags me from the center, leaving Rowan all alone. “We’re dead too if we stay there!” he growls when I try to fight him.

“He’s my husband.” I’m kicking and screaming, but even injured, my father is strong.

“And you’re my child!”

Rowan looks over his shoulder, then at the two sides he’s stuck between.

“Rowan, it’s time,” Gideon says.

“Why the fuck would he go with you?” Luca asks.

“Because he’s my brother,” Gideon replies smugly.

Everyone glances at each other. Luca’s men tense even more.

Rowan peers at me as if in question. *What should I do?*

“I will follow you anywhere you go,” I mouth.

Then he turns to Gideon. Something unspoken crosses between the brothers. A tug of war of the minds, where Gideon tries to pull Rowan closer, but he refuses.

“If you stay with them, little brother,” Gideon says, “You will die. And I don’t want to fight you. Not today.”

“Then don’t.”

Gideon looks between all of us, then returns his gaze to Rowan. His lips pull tight and his jaw clenches. And though his breathing seems almost labored, as if he’s forcing it into a slow rhythm, I can tell he’s come to a decision.

He nods, then turns to Scarlet and says something to her before spinning on his heel and leaving. She narrows her green eyes on me as she slowly begins to back away.

One by one, Gideon’s men retreat. No, retreat isn’t the right word. A man like him doesn’t do that. They choose not

to fight today because of Rowan.

“Are you all right?” I ask him.

It takes him a moment to peer down at me. When he does, I can see the weariness and exhaustion in his face. But more than that, I see relief.

I wrap my arms around his waist and press my ear against his chest, listening to the powerful beating of his heart.

He kisses the top of my head. “I’ll be okay as long as we’re together.”

“We will be. Forever.”

ROWAN

I t's a fucking interrogation. Being on the receiving end is worse than being the one giving them.

I'm sitting in a chair in Don Fernando's kitchen with far too many eyes on me for comfort. The only thing that keeps me from losing my shit is the feel of Lou's hand in mine.

And even that might be pushing me to the edge, because all I want to do is take her in my arms and bury myself inside her.

She fought Declan for me. Risked her life for me.

"Is it true? Gideon is your brother?" Luca finally asks.

"Yes," I tell him.

The room goes quiet, and everyone looks at each other for confirmation that they heard that right.

"Fuck," Daniel chimes in. "A McKenzie and a Black. You know how to choose them, Lulu."

"Shh." Art surprises me by keeping him in check. He's finally stepping up to his role.

Carina tilts her head. "How is he your brother?"

"Apparently, my uncles had other motives for wanting to kill Stephen Black other than him taking their business. He also took my mother."

"Shit." Gunn gives me a wide grin. "That motherfucker is *really* your brother?!"

“He seemed so familiar to me when I met him,” Carina says thoughtfully, brows knitted. “It was because I’d already met you.”

“It’s the shifty eyes,” Gunn tosses in.

Luca sits back, obviously bothered by this revelation. “This is going to be a problem.”

“I know,” I agree.

“He could have kept it a secret,” Lou interjects. “But he chose to be honest with you.”

They all look at each other again.

“The question is,” Carina says. “Where do your loyalties lie?”

“It doesn’t matter what he says. I’m not sure we can trust him.” Luca taps his pen against the table. “He will not go against his brother. We all saw his indecision when it came to choosing a side.”

“But he *did* choose,” Carina replies.

Luca regards me. “Why *did* you choose the Alliance in the end?”

“Gideon is my brother,” I tell them. “But I don’t share his desire to avenge Stephen. I don’t even remember him.”

“That’s not enough of a reason,” Luca states. “You could have simply not chosen a side at all.”

“Sofia.”

Luca’s gaze snaps to mine. “You saw my sister?”

I shake my head. “The house I was in is Gideon’s. It’s where he lives. If she’s still alive, she’s there.”

“He let you see where it was?”

“I don’t think he expected I’d leave,” I say honestly, part of me wishing I could return and ask him the million questions I have.

“If that’s the case, he’s long gone by now,” Gunn says.

“But he may have left clues behind as to where he went,” Luca tells him. “Will you take us there?”

Nodding, I say, “The house is in Brookline.”

“He’s been in Boston this entire time,” Carina mutters to herself. Though she’s facing us, her focus is somewhere else altogether. “Near his sibling. Do you know what that means?”

“What?” Luca asks.

“Gideon has a vulnerability.” She lifts her eyes to mine.

“If you hurt him,” Lou hisses. “I will fucking murder you all.”

Carina turns to her. “I’m not talking about Rowan. I’m taking about Scarlet. If he was willing to stand down for his brother, imagine what he’d do for his little sister.”

“But she’s not—” I start.

“Not blood. She’s something more. He chose her to be his family. We all know this. Which means, she’s our new target.”

“How do we get her? She’s just as elusive as he is,” Luca remarks.

She zeroes in on Gunn and her lips curve into a sly smile. “We offer her something she’s dying to sink her claws into.”

“Me?” Gunn asks innocently.

“She was kind of fucking you with her eyes,” I mention.

“Yeah, I’m irresistible like that. Okay, I’m in.”

Luca stands and helps his wife up. “Lou made a deal with us. I expect you’ll uphold it.”

I glance at her. “Whatever she promised.”

“Good.” Luca comes to stand in front of me. “As far as the Alliance, we’ll need to take a vote when Noah and Arran return from Vegas. I’ll be in touch.”

After they all leave, Lou and I remain in the Duran house. When the police arrived at my home, conveniently once we'd left, they taped it all up and set it as a crime scene. It will be days, maybe even weeks before we can return.

"We have to keep up appearances," Chief Jenkins told me when he called earlier. "You understand."

"I'm sorry," Lou says when she guides me to the room we will share. "I've cost you so much."

"A price I'd pay any day." I bring her close, and feeling her cling to me just as desperately as I do to her makes everything worthwhile.

"The Alliance will vote to keep you. I know it."

Sighing, I say, "They don't trust me. I get it. If the shoe was on the other foot, I might feel the same."

She stands on her tiptoes and gives me a kiss. "I'm going to shower. Will you join me?"

I peer at the door. Something about knowing her father will be downstairs while I defile his daughter has me ready to jump her now.

Lou must sense my thoughts, because she giggles and shoves me onto the bed. "Give me five minutes to clean myself off a little. I want to be lickable all over."

I'm about to argue that she's always edible, when my phone buzzes. So I let her go.

I tug my cell from my pants and find it's a message from Dionne, as I've named him in my contacts.

Him: How are you?

Me: Good. You?

Him: Disappointed. I need a brother.

Me: I do too.

Him: Then come back.

Me: Someday.

Him: The Alliance will kill me.

It takes me a long time to reply. And when I do, I know without a shadow of a doubt that Luca is right about questioning my loyalties.

Me: The Alliance will never hurt you. I won't let them.

LOUISA

“Can we stay like this forever?” I’m draped over Rowan’s chest, sweat still clinging to my skin from our last round of lovemaking.

He chuckles, the sound of it rumbling through me. “If that makes you happy.”

I sigh, luxuriating in his warmth, enjoying it so much more now that I’m free from the shackles of my hate. Free to love him as we both deserve.

“Rowan?”

“Hmm.”

I look up at him. “Will you marry me?”

He tilts his face toward me. “We’re already married.”

“I want one that counts. I want to vow my love for you before God willingly.”

Something strange crosses over his expression and his beautiful blues darken. “Louisa.”

I frown at his use of my full name. “What?”

“I am sorry about that.”

Smiling at him, I say, “And I’m sorry I almost got you killed.”

“Technically, you didn’t. Dionne...” He pauses. “I mean Gideon. He would never hurt me.”

“Still... I love you, Rowan. I’ll never doubt us again. No matter what.”

“In that case...” He moves from under me, causing me to whimper with disappointment at the loss of his heat. Taking something from the nightstand, he gives it to me. “I accept your proposal, Mrs. Kane. I will marry you.”

“What?” I sit up, peering at the necklace in my palm. A silver chain with a pendant made of several pieces of glass I recognize. “The butterfly?”

“Axle found some of the pieces in the garage.”

Quickly, I put it on. “I’ll never remove it.”

“All I care about is that *I’m* always in your heart.”

“I swear it, Rowan. No matter what, I’ll always be yours. I swear it. I’m yours forever.”



Thunder rolls through the little church just as the antique grandfather clock chimes the midnight hour.

My chest tightens and I clutch the bouquet made up of white bleeding hearts. I fight back the tears stinging in my eyes and swallow down the lump in my throat.

“Are you sure about this?” Papá asks. “Jou don’t look happy.”

A tear slips down my cheek and I turn to face him. “I’m sure.”

From his pocket, he produces a handkerchief and carefully wipes the moisture from my skin. “Then why are jou crying?”

I swallow again and blow out a breath, trying desperately to control myself. My lips part, but nothing comes out. I shake my head and shrug, saying simply, “I love him.”

How to explain the myriad of emotions filling me at this moment. There are no words that can describe the all-consuming, intense, insane emotions Rowan provokes in me.

There's no saying in any language that can quantify what I feel for him.

I'm head over heels, madly in love with Rowan.

It's agonizing and wonderful. It's willingly dying for him, carving out my own heart and handing it to him to do as he wishes, because that's the only way I can live.

Mom comes to stand at my other side, hooking her arm through mine. "She's crying because this is true love. All I ever wanted for her."

"You always knew," I say to her.

"A mother always does." She taps my chin. "You look beautiful, my Lulu."

I peer at the simple knee-length dress that was made from the salvaged pieces of the one my mother gave me the first time I came to this church. It was beautiful then, but now it's even better. Proof that when you love something, even the most irreparable of circumstances can be overcome.

My dress. My butterfly. My Rowan.

Art and Renzo, dressed in their tailored tuxedos, open the double doors that lead into the chapel, and from here, I can see Rowan standing at the altar with Axle and Phil by his side.

I'm trembling, nervous as if this is the first time. In a way, it is.

The eighteen-year-old girl inside me has been quiet for a while. I search for her, telling her we're here. Rowan is ours again. Our entire family is here this time. Everything is better than we could have hoped for.

We have our happily ever after.

But she remains silent and I know why. Because *I'm* that girl. I never died. I never went anywhere. I love Rowan with the same passion as I did then.

As we walk down the aisle and I see my feelings mirrored in his gaze, I vow before God that I'll never allow anything to come between us again.

For as long as we both shall live.

Dear reader, I hope you enjoyed Rowan and Lou's story! But the saga isn't over. Up next, find out where the hell Gavin has been hiding and who he's been with, in [Wicked Empire](#)! Pre-order now!

I always knew there'd be a cost to pay for being a thief, but when I cross Gavin Alexander, the wicked price he demands might be more than I can afford.

After living on the streets for years, I managed to get my life together for my son. I have a job as a housekeeper. A car that runs. A tiny apartment.

But when things suddenly become dire, I'm left with no choice but to steal again. I make myself believe it's chump change for my boss, the billionaire would never notice the few hundred dollars from his dirty laundry.

My mistake isn't that it's pennies to a wealthy man. It's that he's not just any wealthy man. He's the king of the Vegas underworld, a dangerous criminal with dangerous enemies.

When he catches me red handed and his eyes trail over me, a flicker of desire forms in them and he makes me a deal. Report me to the police and lose my son, or enter his dangerous world and submit to his wicked desires.

Aid e Jaimes is a Mexican American, USA Today Bestselling author of dangerously addictive dark and contemporary romance. For more information on her novels and future releases, go to www.aideejaim.es.com, or her Facebook hang with her in her Facebook group, [Aid e's Criminals](#).

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