



# DEATH TRIUMPH

THEY SHOULD ALL BE AFRAID OF US

L.K. REID

# DELIRIUM

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SINS OF OPHELIA ASTER

BOOK FOUR

L.K. REID

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*For the bright stars, shining even during the darkest nights.*

## PLAYLIST

If you would like to listen to the songs I've been writing to,  
just head on to [Spotify](#),

**Breaking Me** – Topic, A7S

**Her Eyes** – Fame on Fire

**Villain** – MISSIO

**Let It Go (with Lo Spirit)** – Chandler Leighton, Lo Spirit

**I Want Out** – LOWBORN

**11 Minutes** – Sunsleep

**Enough's Enough** – Paris Shadows

**I Wanna Be Alone** – badXchannels

**Alone at Last** – L8ER

**Crawling (One More Night Live)** – Linkin Park

**Dial Tone** – Catch Your Breath

**Chokehold** – Sleep Token

**Meet Me on the Battlefield** – SVRCINA

**Pray for Me** – City State

**Walking Disaster** – SayWeCanFly

**Mind of Mine** – Lo Spirit

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**Dead Don't Die** – Shinedown



**Everything I Wanted** – Now or Never

**Deadman** – Smash Into Pieces

**Made by Design** - NOVELISTS

## FOREWORD

If you are here, then that means that you've read the previous three books in the series, and you know what you're getting yourself into. Now, if you haven't read the first three books, I'm urging you to stop right now because you won't understand a single thing in this book.

I actually hate labeling my books, because I don't think that they belong to one or another category or a trope, but they are dark. *Delirium* might not be as dark as *Ricochet* was, but it is still dealing with themes that are not suitable for all readers, and if mentions of suicide, child loss are something that trigger you, then I urge you to rethink reading this book. If vivid scenes of kidnapping and torture are also something isn't your cup of tea, again, please reconsider reading the book.

I also wanted to thank you for sticking with this series for as long as you did, and if you liked *Ophelia* and *Storm* and the conclusion to their story, I would be truly grateful if you got time to leave a small review on Amazon.

Happy reading!

x

Leila

## QUOTE

*“Souls don't meet by accident.”*

**Unknown Author**

## PROLOGUE

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Storm

*14 Years Old*

I'D' BEEN SITTING IN THIS GARDEN FOR AT LEAST THREE hours, staring at the red façade of my personal hell. This mansion in front of me looked like the dream of every family out there, but the horrors inside... I wouldn't wish those on anybody.

They were ripping our souls apart, our bodies, and I just wanted it to stop. I stopped begging them years ago, but it seemed that me being quiet didn't sit well. They first destroyed my innocence with their hands, then with the whips and chains, and lastly with poisonous words.

I wasn't the only one.

There were kids like me inside. Kids sold by their families. Kids who weren't kids anymore.

They used our bodies as if we weren't human beings. As if we were nothing.

*Get on your knees.*

*Open your mouth.*

*Do you like this, boy?*

*Does it hurt? Good. I'll make it hurt more.*

Their words were embedded deep in my mind, etched into my soul.

*You're a piece of shit. No wonder your parents didn't want you.*

My parents. My sick and depraved parents. They sold me to these snakes. They gave me away as if I wasn't their flesh and blood.

Neither one of them was there when Nikolai Aster took me away. I thought he was a good man, and he was—at least in the beginning. Little did I know that the whole time I'd been staying with him and his family, I was being groomed for this.

He taught me how to speak properly, how to read and count, and then he threw me to the wolves. I had no idea how much longer I would be able to be here.

It'd been almost seven years since he brought me here and told me to behave. The mask he'd been wearing around me slipped when we crossed the threshold of this mansion. The kind and patient man was gone, replaced with a monster that wanted nothing more than to shatter me.

I was the oldest one here. The other day, they brought a seven-year-old girl. I could hear her screams even on the fourth floor. She would learn soon enough that no matter how much you screamed, how much you begged and cried, they would never stop.

These people, these sick bastards, they didn't care about our pain. The only thing important to them was their sick satisfaction and the desire to molest children.

I've had them all—men, women, kind and vicious—they all wanted one thing.

My body.

Last night was one of the hardest ones. The man who loved to be called Master whipped me so badly, I couldn't even touch my back today. I was obedient, I listened, but he didn't want my obedience.

He wanted my pain. He never touched me like the others did, but he watched me touch myself. I felt sick every single time my dick would stand up and I couldn't stop it.

My body started changing three years ago, and my torture changed from me touching them to them touching me. They loved to see the torment in my eyes.

But this sadist from last night, I finally found out who he was. He was the same monster that brought me here. The same monster that took me away and stole everything from me.

*Nikolai Aster.*

“Why are you sad?” A soft voice jerked me back from my thoughts, and my eyes landed on a little blonde girl. Fuck, she was so tiny. When did they start bringing the younger ones?

But she didn't seem scared. No, she seemed curious, maybe even concerned. Her blonde brows furrowed as she looked at me. The brightest blue eyes I had ever seen stared at me, waiting for an answer.

No, this kid wasn't one of the slaves. She wasn't one of us.

Her clothes were too nice. She wasn't starved, not like me. Her cheeks weren't hollow. Her eyes still held the innocence I had lost long ago.

“Tell me.” She took two, then three steps toward me, the little pigtails tied on her head bouncing with each step. “Why are you sad?”

“I'm not sad.” My voice was gruff. It had also started changing from the high-pitched boyish voice to this.

“Yes you are.” She was a stubborn little thing.

“And how do you know?”

“Your eyes.” She was now right in front of me. “Your eyes are sad. Why are your eyes sad?”

*Jesus, kid, perceptive much?*

“What are you doing here, kid?” I wasn't about to start talking about my feelings with a kid.

“I’m just walking around the garden. My papa brought me here.”

Her father? My God, this was more fucked up than I initially thought.

“What’s your name?” She climbed onto the bench I was sitting on and took a hold of my hand, lifting it to her face. “I am Ophelia, and I am this old.” She lifted her left hand and showed five fingers. “My mom says I’m a big girl now and I can walk around alone.”

“Really?” Her sing-song voice almost made me smile. “And do you like being alone?”

She shrugged, inspecting my hand. “I guess.” Her tiny fingers traced the patterns over my palm and I let her.

It’d been so long since I last felt an innocent human touch on my skin. I hated when they touched me, when they groped me, but her touch... it was like a balm on burned skin.

“So, why are you here, Ophelia?” She had an interesting name, but most of all, she looked like a little angel.

“I already told you, silly.” She slapped me on my arm. “Papa brought me here. He said Kieran will be here.”

“And who is Kieran?” I didn’t know the names of any of the fuckers that were using us, but I knew that if she was sent here for the same reasons I was, I would find a way to set her free.

“He’s my friend. Well...” she started smiling again. “My friend’s brother, but he is my friend as well.”

“I see,” I mumbled. “And who is—”

“Ophelia!”

I swiveled my head to the right side, seeing a boy not much older than her with a scowl on his face. Midnight black hair and eyes of the same color, he definitely didn’t belong here. Just like this little girl, Ophelia, didn’t belong here.

“I’ve been looking for you,” he said. His eyes kept going from me to her, and his stiff posture told me that he didn’t like

what he was seeing.

“I was here, with my new friend.” She sounded angry, gripping my hand now.

“You shouldn’t be roaming around all alone.”

“But I wasn’t alone.” She plastered herself to me. “I was with my new friend.”

He was agitated, but I didn’t say a thing. I stood up and his eyes widened, his defensive stance increasing.

“We need to go now, birdy. Your father will be looking for us.”

“But I don’t wanna go.” She stood up as well, hiding behind me. I didn’t know what it was, but the sudden urge to protect her kept rising in me. Was this boy somebody she didn’t like?

I placed a hand on her head, the soft, silky hair tickling my palm.

“I wanna stay here. Why can’t I stay here?”

“Phee—”

“No! You and Theo always try to tell me what to do. I wanna stay here. I want to play with him.”

Theo? Why was that name familiar to me?

“Mr. Nikolai—”

“No, Kieran! I don’t wanna.”

Son of a bitch. Nikolai? He didn’t mean Nikolai Aster?

“Look, Ophelia,” he started. “Your papa told you that you can’t hang out with these kids. He warned you.”

“But he looks so sad.” She started pulling at my shirt. “Please. I want to stay with you.”

I looked down at this pleading kid, and I wanted her to stay. I didn’t want to be alone anymore, but I also knew that she couldn’t.



“Look, Ophelia.” I crouched down, our eyes on the same level. “You can always come back to play with me, but your friend is right. You can’t roam all alone. There are dangerous people out there that could want to hurt you. You have to be careful.”

“But—”

“No, little one. Go with your friend. I’ll still be here.”

Her eyes started watering, but she took a step back from me. She somberly walked toward the boy, who held his hand outstretched, waiting for her to go to him. My chest was painful, the light she brought leaving my side.

I didn’t want to watch them leave, so I kept my back to them. I guess I should’ve been thankful because she at least brought some semblance of peace. At least for a little while.

Before I could walk away, a weight slammed into me from the back, tiny arms circling around my waist.

I turned around and saw her in front of me. Without a word, she again jumped at me, hugging me.

“Please don’t be sad anymore. I don’t like your eyes when they’re sad. You need to smile. Like this.” She pulled back, looking at me, as the brightest smile took over her face. “Try it. Smile.”

Could I? Could I really smile?

I didn’t really have anything to smile for, but her innocence was bringing something light, something pure. I had no idea how or why, but my lips spread, the first smile after multiple frowns taking over my face.

“There. You look pretty.”

“I-I... Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. But you have to smile more. Your eyes don’t seem sad anymore.”

Without a word, she ran back to the scowling boy while I stood there trying to comprehend what had just happened.

*Who are you, Ophelia?*



## STORM

THE SILENCE WAS SUFFOCATING, SURROUNDING US WHILE WE waited for any news from the San Diego chapter. Atlas sat opposite of me, chewing on his thumbnail, his eyes firmly plastered on the phone in the middle of the table. Creed paced the room, spiking my nerves even higher, yet I stopped myself from commenting on it.

Hector was staring through the window, his back turned to us, but I could see the strain in his shoulders. We were all waiting for that final call. Any kind of news would have been better than this...

This terrible silence.

It was all my fault. I wasn't careful enough. I chose Ophelia. I went to her, ignoring the warning that was clearly given to me, and we came to this. Hector's brother, Esteban, was part of the San Diego chapter, and many of us had dear friends there.

Their president was like a brother to me, and even though we hadn't seen each other since the gathering, I considered him family. We spoke just yesterday, going over our plans, talking about the possible alliance with the Italians, even before Ophelia brought it up.

And now... Now he was probably dead.

Indigo was in Winworth, dealing with the shitshow there and talking to that kid. I was glad he wasn't sitting here with us now. I was glad he wasn't witnessing this, knowing that he

still carried the pain from losing his parents and the rest of his family in that attack so many years ago.

Atlas drummed his fingers on the table, the itch to get out of here and do something evident on his face, but there was nothing we could do.

Two hours ago, at twelve in the morning, I received a call from a police officer down in San Diego. Fire swallowed the entire chapter house, and the report was not looking good. Bodies littered the front yard—women, men, children. They were all slaughtered before the fire started, and I immediately knew.

“Why aren’t they calling?” Creed asked, looking at me as if I could give him an answer. “We should be there. We should get on our bikes and ride over there.”

“Creed,” Atlas warned, looking at him. “You know that there’s nothing we can do at this point.”

“It’s been two hours, for fuck’s sake,” Creed thundered. “Two hours and no news. Our friends are there, families...” he trailed off, looking at Hector. “I don’t know about you, but I’m going there.”

He started walking toward the door, and I stood up.

“Creed!” I bellowed, stopping him in his tracks. “Sit the fuck down,” I commanded.

“But—”

“Now!”

I had no time nor patience for insolence tonight, and if it was the person that sent me that first letter, then we were fucked. I had no idea if they were coming for us next.

I called the rest of the chapters as soon as the news about San Diego traveled to us, warning them, asking them to prepare for a possible attack.

We were on a lockdown—no one came in and no one went out. Every single family member was in the house tonight, and they would stay here until I was sure the threat was over.

The day was looking out to be perfect, and I was finally starting to work on a plan where I could keep Ophelia, my kids and my Club safe, but that wasn't happening any time soon.

In one night, I was going to lose it all, and I had no idea how to deal with this. How was I supposed to tell my men that this was all my fault? How was I supposed to tell them that I made a wrong choice, even if I didn't want to?

Other presidents knew about the threat, but we were too relaxed, too comfortable, and this was what happened when our personal needs came before the Club.

And Club always had to come first.

The door suddenly opened, slamming against the wall, and a scared-looking Damien stepped inside, startling us all. There was a box in his hands—a white box with dripping blood on the bottom.

“Prez—” he started, his eyes wide, his fear almost palpable. “We, uh,” he stammered. “We found this at the front gate. There’s a letter as well. It... There’s blood, Prez.”

Fuck, fuck, *fuck!*

I walked toward him and took the box from his hands, seeing the crimson covering his skin. The letter was stuck on top of the box, and I dreaded seeing what was inside.

Damien rushed out of the room, leaving us alone with the fucking box. As I dropped it on the table, the blood dripping from it suddenly spreading around. I tore the envelope from the front and pulled out the letter, my eyes widening as soon as I saw the header and the name.

Atlas took the box, opening it with the pocketknife he carried, but I was lost in the words written in the letter.

The person who threatened us, the person who attacked San Diego, was Belladonna. The same woman who was after Ophelia.

“Fuck!” I slammed the letter on top of the desk, turning toward the box. “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I continued cursing.

“Open it, Atlas,” I instructed, but I was too afraid of what the contents would be.

“Storm,” Atlas murmured. “I don’t think that I can. It... I just.”

I grabbed his shoulder, squeezing it softly, trying to give him strength that even I didn’t have. “It’s okay. I’ll do it.”

I pulled the lid open, a strangled cry escaping from my mouth as soon as my eyes connected with the lifeless eyes of my dear friend.

Benjamin Masterson, President of the San Diego chapter of Sons of Hades, was gone.

That fucking bitch delivered his head mere hours after the slaughter. She dared to do this, to attack us like this.

“What’s this?” Creed asked from behind me. As I turned toward him, I could see the letter in his hands. “What is this, Storm?” he asked again when I kept my mouth closed. “Storm!”

“That letter is from Belladonna,” I murmured, unable to look anyone in their eyes.

“The same Belladonna that’s after Ophelia?” Atlas asked. I nodded, looking at the box with my friend’s head, feeling a rage like no other.

“I got the first letter just before the gathering,” I started and sat down. “She told me to choose—it was either Ophelia or Club.”

“And you chose the Club,” Hector added, sitting opposite of me. “Storm—”

“I had no other choice,” I argued. “She somehow planted sleepers in all of our chapters, and there was no way to know who was an enemy and who was a friend.”

“Why did you keep this from us?” Atlas asked, walking away from me. “We could have helped. We could have done something.”

“There was nothing to be done, Atlas. The other presidents knew. I warned them. I told them I was going to choose the Club.”

“So that was what it was about.” Hector huffed. “I wanted to stab you myself for the way you spoke to her, Storm. You shouldn’t have done this shit, man. You let some bitch control your life, and for what?”

“I had to protect you all!” I roared, jumping up. “I couldn’t put her before you. I couldn’t do it.”

“But you did,” Creed said, a sad smile playing on his lips. “And I understand. But if we all knew about this, we could have acted differently. Hell, Storm, I don’t want to have Ophelia Aster on my ass, and you made it look as if she was our prisoner. As if she didn’t have a choice. And she’s pregnant now, for fuck’s sake!”

“I know,” I murmured.

“And this bitch, this Belladonna, is after her. She’s trying to isolate her, to make her hate you. Instead of us putting our everything into the search for this psychopath, you chose to let Ophelia go.”

“Except he didn’t let her go,” Atlas added. “He’s been torturing himself and her these last two months, keeping her here, unable to let her go, and for what, Storm? Huh? We’re not kids. None of us. We would have been able to help. Hell, Ophelia has Cillian and Tristan working on the Logan Nightingale issue. She has the Italians. She’s been doing something. Why didn’t *we* do something?”

“Because I didn’t want you to hate me,” I said, defeat laying heavy on my shoulders.

“So it was easier to make her hate you?” Hector asked. “It’s bullshit. You’ve hurt that girl, and she doesn’t deserve that. Hell, man, we went through so much together and you kept something like this from us.”

“I’m sorry.”

And I was sorry, but there was no other way. Every lead turned up blank. Every single time I was sure we were close to

finding Belladonna, we came up blank. She was so well hidden that I didn't even realize it was the same person Ophelia was talking about until tonight.

"What are you going to do?" Creed asked as I stood up and started walking toward the door.

"I'm going to lose the woman I love and my two kids forever." I sighed.

"Storm!"

"No!"

All of them started talking at once, arguing their points, telling me how stupid I was. Maybe I was stupid, but the only way to save them and to keep them alive was to cut ties with Ophelia. The only way I could find Belladonna was if I played by her rules.

"Where are you going?" Atlas asked, stepping right behind me. "If you go and break her heart again, Storm, she isn't coming back. She will never come back if you don't tell her what's going on."

"I know." But I had hope. I had hope that I would be able to explain it to her.

"Then, if you know, why are you doing this?" he cried out. "You'll have to let her go. Stop playing these games with her head. She's pregnant, you motherfucking idiot. She's one of the strongest people I know, but she's also fragile at the moment. Why, Storm?"

I didn't have an answer. I didn't have an answer to any of their questions, but sacrificing our relationship was a better option than sacrificing all the innocent people who depended on our Club.

I walked out the door without another word, their shouts following me through the hallway, still echoing in my ears as I went to her room, finding the room unlocked.

Today she told me we couldn't do this anymore, and she was right. I loved her enough to understand that she was right. Maybe once all of this was solved, we could find our way to



each other, but until then, I couldn't risk it. I couldn't risk all the children living in other chapters.

I pushed the door open, finding the light on her nightstand on, and her sitting on the bed, looking at the floor.

The blonde color she used on her hair was washing away, her natural brown hair growing out. Even though she hated it right now, she still looked breathtaking. She carried my kids, my heirs, and I would forever be in her debt for giving me that one slice of happiness, no matter how fucked up all the other things were.

We fought, pushed and pulled each other, constantly at each other's throats, because I didn't know how to tell her the truth. I couldn't let her fight my battles, and I couldn't let her know that the threat was so close to home.

Especially not now.

I needed her to be healthy and safe, and I wanted her to stay. And maybe she would stay. Maybe she would allow me to see my kids once they were born, but Atlas was right—I had to let her go.

“I was wondering when you would come,” she said, looking up at me.

Her cerulean blue eyes flashed with pain, but she quickly masked it, hiding it behind a smile.

“I know why you're here,” she murmured before I could even start talking. “I know why we're on lockdown.”

“Sunshine—”

She shook her head, her hands in her lap. “You're not here to choose me, are you?” she asked. “You're not going to choose your kids either.”

“Phee,” I murmured and closed the distance between us, taking her face in my hands. “I would choose you if I could.”

“No, you wouldn't.” She chuckled, but there was no happiness in it. “But it's okay,” she mumbled. “I never expected you to choose me.”

It wasn't okay. My heart wasn't okay. Her heart wasn't okay.

None of this was fucking okay, but I had duties that came before my own feelings, and she was collateral damage in all of it.

She moved back onto the bed and turned her back to me, pulling her knees up. I toed off my boots and removed my T-shirt, keeping my pants on.

I hated sleeping in them. There was nothing comfortable about sleeping in pants, but I just wanted to hold her tonight. One last time.

One last night where I could pretend that we were going to be okay, just how I pretended all those other nights.

Heartbreak smothered the clean air coming through the window of her room, making it harder to breathe even as I pulled her to me, her body shaking in my embrace.

"We can't do this anymore," she murmured, her voice barely audible. "I can't do this anymore. I know it might not mean a lot to you, but I need you to promise me, Storm. Promise me you will never again come to my room."

Fuck, I couldn't promise her that. I couldn't let go of the hope that this would all stop before the kids were born and that I would be able to hold her without consequences.

She looked at me over her shoulder, unshed tears glistening in her eyes. My heart slammed against my ribcage, rebelling against the words that needed to come out of my mouth.

"Please, Storm," she begged. "I never beg for anything, but I can't go on like this. If you can't be with me, if you can't choose me, that's fine. But I can choose myself. I can try to make this pain go away. That's all I'm asking." She took a deep breath, her hand wrapping around my arm. "I will stay. I will stay until they're born and then we'll be gone. I will be gone."

"No, Ophelia," I broke. "You can't."

“I can’t stay here.” She smiled through her tears. “But I can stay in Santa Monica, or somewhere close. You would be able to see them all the time, and you could come and visit.”

“But you would need help, and money, and—”

“I have Zoe, and I also have Cillian and Tristan.” I knew she wasn’t saying all of this to hurt me, but her words still pierced through my heart, leaving a bloody trail behind. “I have more money than you could imagine, Stormy.” She chuckled. “I can take care of myself.”

I knew she could. She’d been doing this for so long, and I knew she didn’t need me. As much as I wanted her to need me, now I could see that that was never going to happen. Maybe I didn’t want her to need me. I needed her to want me, to tell me that there was still hope.

But I couldn’t expect that from her. I couldn’t expect her to wait, thinking she would always be in second place.

“You know,” she started as she turned around, hiding her face from me. “I only wanted to be someone’s priority, Storm. Just once. I’m not saying I should be the only priority, but...” she chuckled. “But it would have been nice to have that. Just once to feel that someone chose me over everything and everyone else.”

“I’m sorry,” I murmured because there was nothing else I could say. I couldn’t choose her right now, and that was where we were at.

“Don’t be sorry. But, Storm...” she took a deep breath. “If these kids are anything but number one to you, you will never see them. That I can guarantee. You will never get to hold them, take them out, or cherish them.”

“You can’t—”

“Oh, yes, I can. The world is a huge place, Storm, and you better be ready to always have them as your priority. Because if they’re not, I’m not going to subject them to the same emotional damage I’ve gone through.”

I hated when she talked like this, detaching herself from me, but she had a point. I knew she would be a great mom.

She was already fiercely protective of them. She already threatened me and everyone else because she loved them, and that was all that mattered.

“I promise,” I murmured against her hair, inhaling her scent one last time. “They will always come first.”

With those words uttered in the darkness of the room, I held her one last time, until the dawn cracked through the windows, illuminating her sleeping form.

I didn't want to close my eyes. I didn't want to miss a moment because this was all we had. This was all I would ever get, and I would cherish this memory forever.

Pulling my phone out from my back pocket, I opened the camera, taking one last picture of her calm, sleeping face, and pulled myself away from her. My soul cried to stay, to hold her, to show her how much we loved her.

My entire body fought against me and what I needed to do, but I couldn't stay. I couldn't fucking stay with her.

She cried out in her sleep, frowning as soon as I stood up from the bed. No matter how much I wanted to go back, to just stay, just be, I couldn't fucking do it.

With the last atoms of strength, I picked up my T-shirt and my boots and walked out of the room, leaving her behind.



## OPHELIA

One month and a half later

ICE SETTLED DOWN IN MY BONES, KEEPING ME FROM GOING TO the room right next to mine, to just see him, maybe talk to him. It prevented me from running after him after I found the cold spot on my bed that morning after the lockdown. Even though it hurt like hell, I knew he made the right choice.

He was letting me go. He was letting all three of us go.

The first few days, it felt as if the pain took a permanent residence in my heart, stopping me from doing anything. Zoe and Atlas tried cheering me up. Indigo came back, pissed that I wanted to keep the pregnancy a secret, then even more pissed because I let Storm go, but he helped—in a way. Kaiser barely left my side as well, but all of them were, unfortunately, only distractions.

I loved them, every single one of them, but they weren't who I wanted, no, needed by my side, and it fucking sucked.

Avoidance was my best friend these days, and the newfound ninja skills I now had whenever I was moving through the house were movie worthy. Hell, Bruce Lee would have been proud of me. The other day I hid behind the tall cactus in the living room because I could hear Storm's voice coming my way.

He was with Atlas, discussing protection details. The look on Atlas's face was more than comical when he saw me there,

but Storm didn't, and that's what mattered. Those first couple of days, it felt as if my heart would fall out of my chest, but it didn't.

I glued it up, taped it with the love I had for these two kids. I had to be strong for them. If I wanted them to have a good life filled with good things, I had to glue myself together again. It was easier in the past, masking my pain and my misery with anger, heading straight into revenge, refusing to show other people how I truly felt.

But that could only take me so far, and I didn't want to live like that.

Was I angry, disappointed and whatnot because yet another person decided to throw me away? Absolutely.

Was I going to sneak into his room and cut his dick off? That remained to be seen.

I was still me, after all, and if he tried to pull the same shit with me, he might lose his precious family jewels.

But today wasn't about him, or me, or anything really. After having to reschedule my ultrasound appointment, I finally got to see them on the screen.

I never thought I would be this emotional over the fact that I now could hold the ultrasound picture of my babies. While neither one of them cooperated with us so we could see the gender initially, they finally relented, calming down enough for the doctor to see it. I was happy knowing they were fine, even if he didn't tell me that I was carrying a boy and a girl

One of them was slightly bigger than the other. If someone asked me right now what the doctor said after he told me their gender, I wouldn't know because half of his words just flew in one ear and out the other. My entire attention was plastered to the black-and-white screen where the two of them were visible.

I didn't give a fuck about anything else.

I was on cloud nine, walking through the house, going toward the dining room, where everyone usually gathered for

their meals. Lunchtime was almost over, but I was hoping I would get to see Zoe, or maybe even Atlas, there.

“What’s that smile for?” A voice suddenly boomed around me. As I looked up, moving my eyes away from the picture, I saw Creed standing in front of me. I haven’t talked to him properly since I came back, afraid that he would shun me for what my father did, but there was no maliciousness in his eyes, and I knew I was a fool for thinking otherwise.

“It’s the babies.” I beamed, turning the picture of the scan toward him. “They look so cute.”

“Well, shit.” He exhaled, his grin getting bigger and bigger. As his large hands took the picture away from me, a pang of regret flashed through me.

He could have had this, and as his eyes glossed over the picture, I could see the memories slamming into him.

“I’m sorry, Creed,” I murmured, taking the picture away from him. “I’m sorry you never got to meet your kid.”

He looked up at the ceiling and then at me, trying to contain the emotions rushing in, but there was no use. I knew him better than a lot of these people, or at least I knew him before he became a part of the Club.

I knew how much he wanted that kid, how happy both of them were, and I hated that they couldn’t have that happiness they wanted so much. I hated that I couldn’t help them to get out of this life.

“It’s okay.” He smiled. “I never thought I would see the day where you would be this happy about a kid, not to mention two of them.”

“Yeah, well...” I chuckled. “Me neither, but things change.”

“They definitely do,” he murmured. “Are you going to show this to Storm?” he asked carefully. The entire fucking Club knew that the two of us were barely talking.

The entire Club also knew I was pregnant, and the amount of men and women coming to congratulate me was insane. I



never thought I would be experiencing something like this, and it was obvious that they didn't mind me being here. It was obvious that what happened at the gathering was Storm's insane idea and not theirs.

"Yeah," I finally answered, hiding my face from him. "Have you seen him?"

"He's in the dining room," Creed answered. "But do me a favor." He grinned. "If you do decide to take him back eventually, make him work for it. He's an idiot for what he's doing, but—"

"I know," I said, cutting his sentence off. "But I don't think that I would ever take him back." I sidestepped him. "Thanks, Creed. We should actually talk more often."

"I know, right?" He laughed. "I'm awesome."

I walked toward the entrance to the dining room, my mood skyrocketing, excited to show Storm the picture of our kids. The two of us might barely be on speaking terms, but I was going to uphold my part of the promise. He was going to be a part of their lives and I would never keep these things away from him.

The dining room looked almost like a cafeteria, connected directly with the fully equipped kitchen. Sometimes I had a feeling that this place was more like a hotel than anything else, considering the size of it.

But the pretty chairs and the long table in the middle weren't what had my attention right now. Neither were Zoe's green eyes, scared of my reaction.

Storm sat in the middle of the table, opposite of the entrance, his laughter echoing around the big room, his eyes plastered to the woman next to him. The one woman I prayed he wouldn't spend time with while I was here.

The one woman I wanted to murder, no questions asked.

Nova held her phone to him, while his arm rested on the back of her chair, his body turned toward her. The way she looked at him was anything but friendly, but it was that

laughter, that happiness oozing off of him that made my blood run cold.

He begged me to wait for him, to be patient, to believe in him, to just hold on for a little bit longer while he dealt with the shitshow. He used my weaknesses for his gain, keeping me on the side over and over and over again. Dear motherfucking God, why did I allow this?

They were oblivious to the tempest brewing in me, the need to chop both of their heads off, while I held onto the picture of my kids. My fucking kids, not his. If this was what he wanted, then it was quite obvious to me that he would rather have his Club and the bitch that sold us out than me and my children.

“Storm,” Zoe gritted out, still sitting on the left side of him, her eyes firmly plastered on me. I couldn’t move from the spot. I didn’t want to move.

Nova’s hand ran down the length of his torso. The intimate way she looked at him pulling the nausea to the forefront of my mind. Here I was, unable to even look at another man because my heart still belonged to the motherfucker sitting here and playing with somebody else. He obviously didn’t have the same problem as I did.

I took a step backward, then another one, hitting the brick wall behind my back. I turned my head up, seeing Indigo there, and the scowl on his face when he saw Storm.

“Storm, for fuck’s sake!” Zoe bellowed, standing up. His attention snapped from Nova to Zoe. Then as if he could feel me, his eyes connected with mine, widening in shock.

“Take me away from here,” I told Indigo, his hands on my shoulders, keeping me in place. “Please, Indigo. I need to get away from here.”

“Gladly,” he grunted, taking my hand in his and pulling me toward the main entrance.

“Ophelia!” Storm yelled out behind us, and I could hear the chairs and table moving. I had no doubt he was trying to reach us, but I didn’t want to talk to him.

If I had any say in this, I wasn't going to talk to him ever again.

“Do you want to talk to him?” Indigo asked, holding me upright as we rushed through the house, out the door and toward his car.

“No.” I shook my head. “Please don't make me stay here. I'm begging you, Indigo, just don't let him get to me.”

“I won't. Don't worry.”

Indigo opened the passenger side door, letting me enter just as Storm barged outside, running toward us. I slammed the door closed, locking it from inside, while Indigo stood in front of it, pushing Storm away.

“Let me through, Indigo!” Storm thundered, trying to push his way toward me. “I just need to talk to her.”

“Do you want to talk to him?” Indigo asked from outside of the car, looking at me.

I shook my head and looked toward the front, ignoring the man arguing with his friend on my right side. I drowned out his voice, his pleas, his sorrow-filled eyes, the picture of him with that woman on a constant replay in my mind.

I didn't make a big fuss when he told me he was going to have to choose the Club. I didn't make a fuss when he failed to remember my appointments, leaving me alone. I didn't make a motherfucking fuss when my anxiety spiked and all I wanted was to talk to him about the things that were coming, but he never opened the door.

I was a perfect fucking citizen, an angel. I went against everything I knew, every single instinct and I trusted that maybe he would respect me enough not to parade his bitches in front of me.

But this... No. Nuh-uh. This was not acceptable in any way, shape, or form.

Indigo rounded the car, while Storm pressed his palms to my window, his lips moving, begging me to open the door, to let him explain.

God, that fucking sentence—*let me explain*. If I could, I would erase it from everyone’s vocabulary. I was only here because I was a human incubator right now—nothing more and nothing less. The sooner I got used to the idea, the better it was for all of us.

“Open the door, Ophelia!” Storm slammed his palm on the glass, finally getting my attention. Indigo entered the car, locking his door as well, and turned the engine just as I lifted my hand, showing Storm my middle finger.

*Fuck. Off*, I mouthed and turned my head to the front, just as Indigo started driving.

“Where do you want to go?” Indigo asked as my phone rang, the sound filling the car. I pulled it out from my front pocket, still holding onto the photo of my kids.

Kieran’s name flashed on the screen, and I frowned, not knowing what to do.

Did I want to talk to him today? Not really.

But I’ve been avoiding it long enough, and it was time for us to have a quick chat. He deserved to know.

“Hey, K,” I answered, pressing the phone to my ear.

“Birdy,” he drawled, his voice sad. “Cillian told me.”

Fucking shit fuck.

“I’m in Santa Monica, and you better get your ass here to meet me.”

“What if I don’t want to?”

“Then I’m going to come to the Club, Ophelia, and I’ll drag you outside myself. Unless you really want them to kill me.”

I didn’t want them to kill him. I didn’t want them to harm him, even though I did exactly the same not so long ago. But I liked to believe that we were all grown-ups now, much better at expressing our emotions and all the other baggage we carried.

But Kieran was a friend, and I needed those right now.

“Fine.” I huffed. “Where are we going to meet?”



THE SHEER IRONY IN THE NAME OF THIS PLACE WASN'T LOST on me, considering that it was where all the businessmen met with their flavors of the month. It also wasn't lost on me that Indigo wanted to turn around and go back home when I told him that I was meeting Kieran. He soon relented when I explained that he was either going to drive me, or I was going to walk.

I guess that sitting at the nearby table, waiting for me to finish the conversation with Kieran, was a better option than telling Storm that he let me go alone.

“Is he going to kill me or is that how his face looks usually?” Kieran asked, stealing glances at Indigo whose eyes never left our table.

He was far away not to be able to hear us, but close enough to be able to jump in should it be necessary. I still thought it was unnecessary, but I wasn't going to argue with him over this. You win some, you lose some, that was how it goes. If it made him feel better sitting over there, so be it.

“No, he always looks like that.” I chuckled.

“What?” Kieran looked at me. “Constipated?”

Laughter tore out of my chest, my head dropping down on the table with my forehead pressed against the wooden surface.

“Constipated,” I choked. “I can't.”

“Well, he kinda does, doesn't he?”

I straightened up, wiping the tears flowing down my face. “He definitely does,” I agreed.

The easygoing conversation we had suddenly died down, and I really looked at him. He used to be my friend, my fiancé, my everything, until he became a monster I wanted to

eliminate. Yet here we were, sitting here like two long-lost friends, laughing over things that didn't even matter.

I missed him.

I missed talking to him, laughing with both him and Cillian, and not in a romantic my-heart-still-beats-for-you way, but more because lately, I'd been feeling lonelier than before. The realization slammed into me out of nowhere, that if I died tomorrow, there would be only a handful of people who would mourn me.

That wasn't the worst part. It wasn't that I needed thousands and thousands of people to remember me, but I wanted to create my own little circle. I had Zoe, and I had Atlas, but I would never take them away from the Club. And while the Club might be the extended family of my kids, they weren't mine.

I had to get in touch with Lazar, because he also needed to know what was going on. If the Belladonna situation wasn't resolved by the time the kids came, I might need to think about other options.

"I called you to apologize, Birdy," Kieran said, sipping his drink. "My behavior wasn't exactly what you needed during those moments, and this chasm between us is killing me. I also came to apologize for everything else I ever did."

He really went there.

"I know it is too late, and this isn't me trying to win you back. We would never happen, and frankly, I think it's for the best."

"Well, fuck me," I murmured.

"I would rather not." He laughed. "Not because you're not hot, but because I would like my head to stay on my shoulders."

"I know." I laughed. "But you know that I've already forgiven you, K? I understand that the circumstances weren't the best, and what you did was most definitely not okay, but..." I trailed off. "I wasn't a saint either. I think we can

agree that both of us had our role to play in all of this, and if nothing else, I want us to be friends.”

“Friends.” He nodded, looking at his glass. “I mean, I was hoping I would somehow get the role of an uncle, but you know...” He shrugged, pouting at me.

“I think that one there,” I pointed at Indigo, “would fight you if you tried to be an uncle before him.”

“Both of us can be uncles,” he exclaimed. “Who says that we can’t?”

Ah, I missed this easygoing conversation.

“But on a more serious note,” he started, suddenly switching. “I found Maya, Birdy.”

My heart fucking stopped.

“Wh-What?” I stammered.

“I found Maya in Mexico, and I found the man who’s holding her.”

“Holy shit.” I huffed. “You’re sure it’s her?”

“One hundred percent sure, Birdy.” He grinned. “I’m going back tonight to extract her, but I needed to check with you,” he murmured and leaned over the table. “Where should I bring her?”

“I want to see her,” I murmured. “But now isn’t the best time to bring her to the Club.”

I hated it. I hated that I wouldn’t be able to see her as soon as she came back. I wouldn’t be able to hug her, to show her how much I missed her.

“I do have a house in Seattle,” he said. “I could go there with her.”

“You think it’s a good idea for you to go there alone with her?”

“I was kinda hoping you would come as well.”

I pulled back. “What?”

I couldn’t go with him. Could I? Should I go?

“You don’t seem happy, Phee,” Kieran murmured. “Your eyes are sad. Your cheeks are hollow, and you don’t look like a woman who’s happy. And you’re pregnant.”

“I can’t leave,” I whispered.

“There’s nothing you can’t do, Phee.” He grabbed my hand over the table. “If you want to leave, just say the word, and I’ll help you. I would do anything to wipe away that sadness from your face.”

He was right. I was sad, eaten by the sorrow and pain of what I was going through, but I didn’t want to think about it. I didn’t want to succumb to this void spreading through my body, yet it was getting harder and harder to resist.

Especially today when it was supposed to be one of the happiest days for me until I saw him sitting with her.

“I don’t know what I’m doing, Kieran.” I hiccupped, keeping the tears at bay. “This isn’t me. This weak, pathetic person who stays just because she keeps hoping that there’s something still there. I keep hoping and hoping and hoping, but he keeps shattering it every single day.”

“You don’t have to stay there, Ophelia,” he repeated, tightening his hold on me. “You have us. You have Cillian, Tristan, and me. We might not have been on the best of terms before, but I like to believe that we’re something akin to a family. We’re the oldest friends, and if Storm doesn’t understand what he has with you, if he isn’t choosing you over everything else, then he doesn’t deserve you.”

And there it was, the reason why we were in this situation. Storm couldn’t choose me, and I couldn’t let go, even though I knew that there was no hope.

“I’m not saying this to try and persuade you to run away or to never talk to him again. I’m saying this to show you that you have options, Birdy. You always have options, and you shouldn’t be someone’s prisoner. Not like this, darling.”

“I know.” I nodded. “I know I have options, but I also don’t want to separate us even further. He’s doing God knows what right now, and I know he cares, but he isn’t showing it. I



hate these stupid hormones, Kieran,” I cried out. “I’m not a crier. You know I’m not a crier, but I can’t stop fucking crying.”

The avalanche tore through me, the dam opening, letting everything I’d been keeping inside, sweeping away the walls I was trying to keep.

“I can’t keep doing this with him,” I whispered.

I couldn’t. I couldn’t stay there. I couldn’t stay in the Club when he would only keep hurting me. When simply seeing him tore my soul apart.

“The house.” I looked at Kieran. “It’s in Seattle?”

He nodded, his eyes flashing with concern. “We could go there today if you want to.”

“We might have to.” I smiled. “I have a feeling he won’t take all of this well.”

“Ophelia,” Indigo said as he approached us, extending his phone toward me. “I think you should take this.”

“Is it him?” I asked, dreading even hearing his voice. Indigo simply nodded, understanding and concern etched into every line of his face.

I took the phone from him and pressed it to my ear. “Hello?” I answered, as the almighty thunder roared from the other side.

“What the fuck are you doing with Kieran Nightingale?” Storm shouted, his voice ripping through the line. “I told you, Ophelia. I told you I could take anything, but not him. God, not him.” His voice lowered. “I need you to come home.”

This motherfucking son of a bitch. “I’m going to come to the Club when I want to, Storm,” I bit out. “That’s your home, not mine.”

“Don’t fucking test me, Ophelia! I’m about to go and drag you home myself. You’re allowing him to sit with you, when you damn well know how I feel about him. You’re mine and —”

“I am not yours, goddammit!” I bellowed, the patrons from other tables turning toward our table. “I was never supposed to be yours, Storm. I am never going to be, you fucking asshole!”

I moved the phone away from me and gave it back to Indigo.

“We’re going back to the Club,” I said, getting up. “K,” I looked at him, “I’ll give you a call tonight. He isn’t going to like me very much today.”

He wasn’t going to like what I was about to do at all, but there was no other option.

There was no other way.



## OPHELIA

LIFE AND DEATH OF THE UNIVERSE SWAM IN MY EYES, reflecting back in the mirror inside the car, fighting over each other, waging a war of worlds in my soul. Chains tightened around my ribs, closing in through the cracks, reaching my heart. The cold, unforgiving metal brushed against my lungs, my entire body shuddering when we stopped in front of the clubhouse.

I didn't want to move. I didn't want to say goodbye, but I had to.

This pathetic person sitting around, waiting for him to finally realize what could have been wasn't me. None of this was me. I could blame it on hormones and all the other things that have happened, but I chose this. I chose not to run. I chose to stay.

I decided that I wanted to show them all I wasn't the monster they made me out to be, but I had nothing to prove to them. They weren't the ones who mattered. Only these kids did, these innocent souls I carried underneath my dark heart. I just hoped the black tar swimming in my veins wouldn't poison their tiny, little brains.

What was I thinking? Families and happy endings were never in store for me. They could never be, because even though I couldn't see it now, I could still feel the crimson blood dripping down my hands. I could still hear the voices whispering in my ears, cackling like hyenas at what I allowed myself to be.

This death of the old me I tried to orchestrate didn't work, and the only thing I managed to do was become a sad, pathetic, little girl.

I allowed a man to shatter the walls I loved so much, but not anymore. This had to end.

“Ophelia,” Indigo started, his hands still wrapped around the wheel, his eyes staring straight forward. “I know we're not friends, and I know you would rather have Atlas here than me, but...” He took a deep breath. “If leaving is what you need to do, I'll help you.”

“You would betray him?” I scoffed. “I highly doubt that.”

“No.” He shook his head. “I would be doing you both a favor. This thing between the two of you... It isn't healthy. I know you've tried to stay. I know you've tried to fix it in your own, fucked-up way, but it isn't working, darling.”

The chains tightened with each new word he spoke, killing the last remnants of hope I had.

“I have no idea why he isn't talking to you. Why he doesn't tell you what's going on.”

“I know what's going on, Indigo. I know he's choosing the Club over me and these kids, and that's alright. I'm trying to make my peace with that, but the fact that he's walking around with that motherfucking bitch, laughing with her, eating with her, doing God knows what with her, that's what hurts. I told him I would stay for the sake of these children, so that they would be able to have the dad I never had, but he isn't trying. He isn't doing anything to at least try and make all of this better.”

“I know.”

“The only reason why he called earlier is because it was Kieran I was sitting with. My friend, Indigo. You saw us. You heard us. Do you really think I would go back to him?”

“No.”

“Storm's trying to cage me, Indigo,” I murmured. “He's trying to kill the pieces of me he doesn't like, and these last

two to three months, I thought I wanted that. But I don't. I fucking love who I am. I love the fact that there are grown-ass men who are afraid of me, because I don't give a fuck who or what you are. What I give a fuck about is how much you could scream, and how much you bleed.”

“He knows that as well,” Indigo said, looking at me. “I think he loves you. I think he just doesn't know how to deal with these things.”

“Well,” I grabbed the handle and opened the door, letting the fresh air envelop my senses, “it's going to be too late once he figures it out.”

There were no prospects in front of the house, but I could feel eyes on my back as I turned toward the car, waiting for Indigo to step outside. I could feel the animosity pulsating in these brick walls, and I knew he was watching.

Gravel scrunched underneath my boots, my feet carrying me straight toward the entrance, toward the double wooden door. Kaiser was with Zozo, or at least I hoped he was. He was the only being I wanted to take away from here.

It would have been Zoe as well, but she would never leave her brother behind, and he would never leave the Club. Atlas would never leave Indigo no matter how much he resented him right now, which left me all alone with my pup.

“Are you going to leave?” Indigo asked from behind me, following me inside. My heart wept for what could never be, but at least I would know that I'd tried.

I'd tried loving this new version of myself, but I couldn't. I couldn't erase the years that shaped who I really was for the sake of one man who could never accept me.

And we shouldn't change ourselves just for someone to love us. We shouldn't hide the dark parts of our souls just for one tiny crumb of love. Just because it hurt right now, it didn't mean that it would hurt forever. I'd been through worse things and survived. I forgot, I forgave, and I moved the fuck on.

“Ophelia?” Indigo asked again just as we stepped inside the house. The entire foyer was empty, but the bottles lying

around told me that they were all nearby. Did I really want to bring up my children here?

I grew up in a house of horrors, and I wanted them to have normalcy. I wanted them to feel safe, protected, loved, not observed like circus monkeys because of who their mother was. Genes were funny little things, and I had a feeling that these children would be more like me than Storm.

I hoped they would be.

I would make sure they were nothing like him.

“Thank you, Indigo.” I turned toward him before going upstairs. “Thank you for coming with me and for actually trying.”

I was making him feel uncomfortable, but I needed to say this.

“Look, talk to Atlas. Tell him how you feel.” His eyes flashed with anger, but he kept his mouth shut. “I don’t know what’s stopping you, but you should fight for him. Stop making the same mistakes the rest of us did and move on with him. Don’t hide it, okay?”

His lips parted, words on the tip of his tongue, and I could see that he wanted to argue with me, but he didn’t. He nodded, putting his hands in the front pockets of his pants. Defeat washed over me, the sinking realizations that this was it. This was the end.

“Would you be able to drive Kaiser and me to the city later on? I’m going to tell Kieran to wait for us there.”

“Sure,” he murmured. “I just... I hate to see you go, but I know why you have to.”

“At least somebody does.” I chuckled. “I’ll see you later?”

“Of course.” He smiled. “And, Ophelia,” he said just as I started walking upstairs, “If he tries to stop you, give him fucking hell.”

Oh, I planned to. Storm wasn’t stopping me this time. He wasn’t going to use my feelings against me.

I should have left a month ago. I should have left the moment that test result came back positive, but I stayed, stupidly hoping something would change. Stupidly hoping that I would be able to make up for the mistakes I had made.

I should have known that there was no use.

I should have known that a man like Storm never could forgive, always seeing only one side of the story—his side. He wanted me to be a villain? Very well, then, I would be one.



THE SILVER BLADE OF ONE OF MY FAVORITE KNIVES SHONE underneath the overhead light. The head of a dragon perched on the very end of the handle, rough beneath my fingers; cold and unforgiving, just like my family. Just as I was.

Its sharp teeth colored in crimson bit into my fingers, the pain resonating through my hand, but it never reached the receptors in my heart. Numbness settled in, this heavy void swallowing the emotions at bay, and all the feelings I thought I would have were nowhere to be felt.

They evaporated as soon as I stepped inside the room, my eyes roaming over the bed where Storm held me for so many nights. All the anger, all the pain, they grew and grew and grew, spreading through my veins until they became nothing.

I became nothing.

I didn't want to bring anything that they bought me. I didn't want to burden myself with the memories of this place, and if one day I returned with my kids, maybe I would be able to look at it with new eyes.

I tucked the knife into the waistband of my pants as I stood up and walked toward the wardrobe in the corner of my room. There was nothing here holding me back. There was nothing screaming my name. Looking at all of these things, I could see that he tried erasing the core of me.

A pink T-shirt fell out as soon as I opened the wardrobe, anger surging through my bones all the way to my fingertips



and as I bent down to pick it up. I pulled out the knife from my waistband and tore through it.

The fabric tore with the sharp slices of my blade, falling down around me, the pink mocking me. It wasn't about the fucking color. It wasn't about the fucking T-shirt. It was that I allowed myself to be this pathetic girl again.

Oh my God. What had I done to myself?

My phone started ringing from the bed, the sound bouncing against the walls, but I couldn't move from the last piece of fabric I held in my hand. I had no doubt that it was Kieran calling, to tell me where he would wait for me, but I couldn't move.

I didn't move even when the door slammed open, the rage of a man who didn't deserve me, moving through the room with heavy footsteps until he stood behind me, breathing like a bull. He had nothing to be angry about.

He wanted this.

He wanted me weak, defenseless, at his mercy, and he thought he was winning. I should probably be thanking him for showing me who he really was. For showing me that he could never handle me.

"Don't leave me," he whispered, the ghost of his touch lingering above my shoulder. "Don't you dare leave me, Ophelia."

"You left me first," I answered, still frozen in the same spot. "This isn't on me." I turned around and threw the last piece of fabric at him. "This is on you."

His legs closed the distance between us, his bare chest glistening with sweat. I knew he just came back from the gym, barreling in here as if he had a right. My eyes roamed over his wide shoulders, over the tattoos lining his torso, memorizing every curve, every dip, knowing I would never have it again.

I would never put my hands on him. I would never hold him tight while he told me stories of his life.

I would never get to place my lips on that strong jawline. As my eyes connected with his, I could see the torment swirling deep inside his irises, regret eating him alive, but there was nothing more in me to give.

I had nothing left to spare, and I wasn't going to give him the last piece of my heart reserved for my children.

"It wasn't meant to go this far," he grunted, lowering his head toward mine, his lips mere inches from mine. His breath washed over my face, the mint and leather scent sneaking inside my nostrils, pushing against the ugly demons demanding his head for what he did to us.

They didn't want to play with him anymore. They didn't want to love him anymore. They wanted to destroy his peace just how he destroyed ours.

"I swear I never meant to hurt you."

"Those are such pretty words, Stormy." I chuckled, pressing the tip of my blade to the column of his throat. "So many words, but no actions. I'm still swimming in the sea of your lies, trying to find the shore where I can finally rest, and it's nowhere in sight."

"Sunshine," he murmured.

"Don't," I bit out. "Don't call me that. You have no right, Storm. You have no right to be here."

"I know," he murmured, closing his eyes, pushing himself against the tip of my knife. His skin tore open, the crimson swimming down his chest, mixing with the sweat on his skin. "I know I have no right."

His hands stayed by his sides, but it didn't matter. His presence alone made me feel weak in my knees. I didn't have to have his hands on my body to feel again, to break through the numbness.

But it wasn't love that broke through. It was the anger he pulled from me. It was the months of pent-up rage that lived inside of me, waiting to be released.

I should have sharpened my claws better. I should have learned to bite every single person who wanted to disrupt my plans, but I allowed him to steer me off of my path. I allowed him to play with my heart, because I craved someone to love me for who I was.

I thought he was the one. My entire being was ready to give him my everything, but he didn't deserve one single ounce of my bleeding heart.

"Tell me, Stormy." I cackled, dragging my blade down his torso, all the way to the waistband of his shorts. "Did it make you laugh, seeing me broken like that, standing at the entrance while all my dreams crashed around my feet, breaking into a million tiny pieces?"

He shook his head, the remorse evident on his face, but I didn't need pretty words wrapped in a shiny package. I needed actions, and he failed to make them happen.

"Did you guys laugh at my expense, knowing how much it must have hurt me seeing you with her?"

"No," he grunted, shivering underneath the cold steel pressed against his stomach. "I didn't laugh."

"Could have fooled me. All you ever did was use me. All you ever did was make a fool out of me, but not anymore, Storm. You don't get to have me and your Club at the same time."

"You. Are. Not. Leaving," he breathed out. "You are not breaking us."

"There is no us!" I thundered. "There never will be an us, Storm. My God, how stupid can you be?"

"Phee—"

"What did you expect, Storm? Huh? I told you already. I told you a million times... I want someone to choose me for me," I snapped. "I want someone to love me with all my fucked-up, broken pieces, without trying to change the core of who I am. I stayed, Storm! I fucking stayed for you, thinking something would change, hoping you would be man enough to come back to me. I waited and waited and waited, but you

chose every other person over me. For fuck's sake, Storm, you're walking around with her, and you know what she did. You know who she is."

"I do."

"Then why?" I barked. "Tell me fucking why are you doing this? Why are you breaking my heart?"

"I never meant to do that," he answered dejectedly. "I never meant for things to turn out this way. I wanted to hurt you. I wanted you to feel the same pain I felt when I found you in that place with Kieran and Cillian—"

"Well, congratulations, darling." I laughed joylessly. "You've succeeded. Now, if you'll excuse me," I stepped away from him, "I need to get going."

I stepped around him and started walking to the other side of the room. He grabbed me from behind, pulling my back to his front, holding me with the strength of a man who didn't know when to let go.

"You're not leaving me," he growled into my ear, biting down on my shoulder with a punishing force. "You already have my heart."

"I don't want it anymore!" I blasted, needing to get out of here. "I don't want anything from you, Storm."

My strength was nothing compared to his. With my arms trapped beneath his, I couldn't move, couldn't really do anything to get out of his grip.

"No," he whispered, pressing his nose to my hair. "Please don't say that. Please—"

"You only give me pain, Storm," I bit back. "You only take and take and take, lying and cheating, trying to sell me to the highest bidder. Love isn't supposed to feel like this!"

"This is exactly what it's supposed to feel like between the two of us!" he bellowed. "Because we're not like other people. We weren't made for soft things, for the kind of love they make movies about. We were made for destruction, Ophelia."

And God, if I need to destroy myself and everything around me to have you, I will. I will burn down the world for you.”

“No, you won’t!” I thrashed in his hold. “You already showed what you will and what you won’t do.”

“Sunshine—”

“Don’t fucking call me that!”

“I thought you of all people would understand.”

“No, Storm. Communication is the key, and you never told me anything. You’re still treating me like the enemy. Then you have the audacity to come back here and tell me how I have your whole heart. Actions, Storm, not words. I need actions.”

“Actions, huh?” he asked, his tongue dragging down my neck. “If you wanted me to fuck you, darling, you should have just asked.”

“Why? Is Nova not satisfying your dick these days? Why would I ever want to touch you, huh? Why would I ever want you anywhere near me, Storm? It is so obvious that there’s something going on between the two of you.”

“There’s nothing going on between us,” he said earnestly, awakening the hope inside of me. “At least not anymore.”

And it crashed.

I stopped trying to get away from him. I stopped fighting him, my body going lax. Those four words echoed inside my mind, repeating over and over again...

*At least not anymore.*

*At least not anymore.*

*At least not anymore.*

“When?” was all I managed to utter, needing to know. “When did you sleep with her?”

“Ophelia—”

“When?” I roared. I was met by complete silence.

He buried his head in my neck, his arms getting tighter and tighter around me, as if he could hold me here after that bomb.

“In June,” he said under his breath. “While you were gone.”

I was on the run, hiding, trying to fix things, thinking about that last time I saw him. Worrying over the way we left things, hoping that one day we would find our way to each other. There were countless sleepless nights because I worried about him and this Club, seeking a better way to fix this mess I’d created.

And he... He fucked her while I cried myself to sleep, missing his touch, his words, the mischief in his eyes.

“So, now we’re even,” I whispered, realization hitting me in the center of my chest. “I slept with Kieran and Cillian because I thought you were using me all that time, because you failed to tell me the truth,” I murmured, feeling him stiffen behind me. “And you slept with her because I ran away, trying to fix things.”

“Ophelia—”

“Did you sleep with her before or after you thought I was dead?” I asked.

“No.” He shook his head. “Don’t. Please.”

“When, Storm? When did you sleep with her?”

Bitter bravery swam through me, but I knew I would shatter the minute he spoke.

“After.” He sighed. “Two weeks after they found you. But I knew it wasn’t you. I knew you weren’t dead.” He tried explaining, justifying what he did, but every single word fell on deaf ears, only causing more damage.

Flames licked over my skin, and every part of me pressed against him, hurt, burning with an unforgettable fire.

“Talk to me, please. Say something,” he begged, peppering kisses over my shoulder, over my neck, but I couldn’t speak.

I didn’t trust myself if I spoke right now. I didn’t trust that the words clawing at my throat wouldn’t erupt with the volcanic strength, destroying everything around them.

He thought he might not see me ever again, and he chose to go to her.

He...

“Let go of me, Storm,” I mumbled calmly. Calmer than I felt.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized, his words muffled by my hair. “I am so sorry, Ophelia.”

“I wish I’d never met you.” I smiled. “I wish I’d never crossed that street, Storm. I wish that you were nothing but a figment of my imagination, a silly dream I wanted to have. I wish I was stronger than my heart.”

“No, don’t say that,” he argued. “Please, don’t say that.”

“I wish our paths never crossed,” I continued, ignoring the pain in his voice. “I wish Kieran was a better man back then, capable of loving me.”

“No!” he roared. “I love you,” he whimpered. “I love you, Ophelia.”

“Your love hurts. Your love burns, Storm. Your love brought me down to my knees, and I was never on my knees before. I was never this weak, this pathetic, this powerless...” I trailed off. “You managed to destroy me, Storm.”

“I didn’t want to destroy you,” he murmured. “I wanted to hold you. To love you. To show you the world.”

“And I wanted you to understand me,” I said, turning my head from him, unable to bear his touch anymore. “I guess that you and Kieran have something in common after all.” I chuckled. “Neither one of you was capable of loving me in the way I deserved.”

As if I’d doused him with cold water, he suddenly stumbled backward, releasing me from his hold.

My chest ached, my arms shaking as my hand gripped the handle of my knife. I turned around slowly, pushing my hair away from my face, tucking it behind my ear. His wide eyes, filled with fear, were focused on my face, his mouth open agape as he stared at me.

“You have one other thing in common.” I chuckled brokenly, walking toward him, cornering him against the window.

“We are nothing alike,” he bit out. “That man destroyed you.”

“Nuh-uh.” I smiled. “He tried to destroy me.” I stopped in front of him. “You only finished the job.”

And I was going to return the favor.

“Ophelia, it’s not like—” But he never got to finish his sentence. He never got to lie to me again.

With the strength I didn’t know I still possessed, my arm lifted up and in a blink of an eye, the knife I was holding went through the soft tissue right underneath his shoulder, all the way to the hilt.

His howl of pain pierced through my ears, his body trying to fight against me, but I wouldn’t let it. I wouldn’t let him get away from this.

I turned the knife to the right, opening the wound wider, letting the blood spill over his body, over my hand. My left hand pressed against his chest, pushing him backward, and then wrapped around his throat, feeling his pulse beating erratically just under my thumb.

“Now you and Kieran can bond over the fact that I stabbed you both.”

“What the fuck have you done?” he grunted, barely fighting against me. “What have you done, Ophelia?”

“I did what I had to.” I smiled up at him. “I showed you what it feels like to lose the woman you loved.”

“Ophelia!” Creed yelled out from behind me, but I wasn’t done with Storm. I wasn’t done with the tempest living and breathing in my chest. “Get away from him, Ophelia.”

I looked over my shoulder, my grip on the handle of the knife increasing, while Storm yelped in pain.

“Make me.” I grinned, my vision turning red.



“Ophelia, don’t do this,” Storm grunted. “We can still salvage this.”

Turning toward him, I tilted my head, leaving the knife in. My fingers dragged over his chest, smearing the blood dripping from the wound. My crimson hand lifted up to his lip, covering them in the color of his betrayal, while the whimpering and shouting around me ceased to exist.

“Stop whimpering, for fuck’s sake,” I murmured, while his entire body shook. “At least you aren’t dead.”

“Call a doctor!” someone shouted from behind me.

“No!” Storm shook his head. “Don’t hurt her.”

“Awww,” I cooed. “Are you still trying to save me from big, bad boys?”

“You’re angry.” He swallowed thickly, his throat working against my palm. “But I refuse to play this game where we harm each other, going around in fucking circles.”

“Oh, God.” I smiled. “How generous of you. I was a side piece all this time, Storm. I don’t need your protection. I don’t need anything from you.”

My forefinger pressed against my lower lip, sneaking in, while the coppery scent of blood struck my senses.

“It tastes like lies, Stormy.” I laughed. “It tastes just how I imagined it would. Like a weak man.”

The vein on his temple throbbed, his sharp jaw moving, his teeth grinding against each other.

“Take her,” he commanded, looking over at me. “Take her down.”

“But we were only starting to have fun,” I whispered, just as they pulled my arms behind me, dragging me away from him.

Two prospects rushed inside, along with Creed who couldn’t even look at me, fussing over their precious president. Fussing over the man who could get us all killed with his idiotic choices.

I wasn't going to fight them, not right now, but I wasn't going to go that easily either.

"Stormy," I called out to him, waiting for those brilliant eyes to look up at me. "Tell your bitch that the next time I see her, her head will be mine."

"You won't touch her," he grunted as they pulled him back from the window, leading him toward the bed. "If you do—"

"This is a promise, Storm." I grinned. "The next time my eyes land on her filthy face, she won't survive. So better get that dick wet as much as you can, because you won't have her for much longer."

"Stop it, Ophelia," Indigo whisper-hissed next to me. "You're just making this worse."

"No, darling." I chuckled and looked to the left where he stood. "It can't get worse than this."

It couldn't get worse than stabbing the man you cared about, destroying the relationship you dreamed of.

"Take her away," Storm instructed, his eyes angrily looking over me. "I'll deal with her later."

"Stormy, if you come closer, next time, that knife will be lodged in your gut, and not your shoulder."

"Is that a threat?" he asked, narrowing his eyes on me.

"No." I shook my head. "It's a promise."

The men around us looked at each other, then at us, understanding washing over their faces.

My phone buzzed relentlessly, filling the silence spreading around us. As Creed took it from the bed, I knew by the look on his face who was calling.

"Who is it?" Storm asked, his eyes never leaving mine.

Creed looked at me, then at Storm, his face the perfect image of regret and misery. "It's Kieran. Kieran Nightingale."

"Oh, would you tell him I'll be slightly delayed?" I snickered. "Just tell him I have something to take care of."

Within seconds, Storm grabbed the phone from Creed with his healthy hand, crushing it right in front of my eyes, while my laughter rang around us.

“He’s going to be such a good father,” I said, looking straight at Storm. The roar that erupted from his chest would have scared a lesser person, but nothing he did scared me.

Not anymore.

I had nothing to lose.

He strolled toward me with the knife still buried deep inside his shoulder, grabbing my chin, and lifting it up to look into his eyes.

“He is never going to touch my children.”

“But they’re not yours,” I mumbled. “They’re my kids, Storm. You have no rights to them.”

His thumb buried itself in my cheek, pressing harder than necessary, his anger speaking louder than words.

“We’re done, Storm,” I said, shaking him off of me.

“We’re done when I say we’re done,” he argued. “And you and I,” he bent down, biting on my lower lip, “we are never going to be done, Sunshine. Stabbing me doesn’t change that.”

Maybe for him it didn’t. But knowing that he slept with our enemy just two weeks after I was presumed dead, even if he knew I was still alive, changed everything for me.

The love I felt, it turned into something ugly, something vicious. It turned into fury.



## STORM

I WANTED TO HURT HER. I WANTED HER TO PAY FOR WHAT SHE did to me, for what she did to us, but never once did I think that she would look at me with so much hatred, until it bled into the numbness settling in her soul.

I never thought she would look at me with so much coldness. Ice ran through my veins every time I remembered her eyes, the relentless pursuit to hurt me, to show me how much it hurt her.

And fuck, she had every right to be hurt. I thought she was pissed because I slept with someone else after she left me, but this wasn't it. This hurt, this bursting energy she was driven by, had nothing to do with that.

The cracks in her otherwise perfect armor didn't appear because I fell into bed with someone else, even if it was Nova. This was about the timing, about my own stupidity and the fact that I slept with someone so close to her alleged death.

She stabbed me.

But the throbbing pain coming from my left shoulder wasn't what bothered me as I sat here in front of her cell. Metal bars separated the two of us, her back turned toward me. Even though it seemed as if she slept, I knew her well enough to know that she was wide awake, waiting for me to leave.

But I wasn't leaving. Not this time.

I thought I could have it all—pretend for a little while that she didn't mean anything, save the Club, catch this Belladonna person, and get back in Ophelia's good graces.

I thought I could keep her around without compromising anything, but the moment I saw the expression on her face when she saw me with Nova, I understood how much I fucked up. I understood because if I saw her sitting like that with another man, especially someone who I didn't trust, who probably screwed me over, I would have killed him.

I wouldn't ask questions or wait for an explanation; he would be a dead man the moment he laid his hands on my girl. Yet I did the same. I fucked this entire thing up, and I couldn't sacrifice the two of us anymore for the sake of everyone else.

My boys were right—they could help, and they were helping. What happened in San Diego was a catastrophe, but none of them blamed me. If anything, it brought all of us even closer. None of the other leaders saw me as a fuckup for not being able to stop it.

The plan was born, and now we just needed to fully execute it.

The only downfall of this plan was that the lead we had would take us straight to Winworth. Straight into my biggest nightmare, and I would need to tell her everything.

She stirred on the bed Atlas arranged for her, but she didn't turn toward me.

I wanted to see her eyes, to tell her it would all be okay. To beg her for forgiveness.

I just didn't know how.

I would be lying if I said that her comparing me to Kieran didn't hurt, but what hurt even more was that she would rather go with the man who was incapable of doing anything right, instead of staying here. I understood why, but it didn't mean I had to like it.

This heaviness inside my heart choked me, and this chasm I'd created between us was too wide to overcome right now, but I could do it. I would get her to trust me again.

"I was born in Winworth, which you already knew." I started speaking, knowing she was listening, waiting to see what I would do. "I was born as the bastard son of a drug

addict who would sell her own child to the highest bidder, if it meant that she would be able to score more drugs.”

Ophelia’s back stiffened at the sound of my voice. My gut churned as I relived all those memories, but I still did it.

“I was four years old when Nikolai came to take me, buying me from them,” I murmured, hating the weakness wrapped around my shoulders. I hated that it made me feel filthy. No matter how much I tried to wash it away from my skin, the sins that lived deep inside of me still chuckled, laughing at the futile attempts to change the past.

“I knew your brother, Ophelia,” I continued, looking at the ceiling. “I thought he was my new brother, before Nikolai decided to take me to the Red Manor.”

*I thought this new family was going to be mine forever. I thought I was going to be safe finally, but the demon who took me was hungry and depraved, deciding I was better off as a toy than as a member of his family.*

“And I met you before that day on the street,” I revealed, waiting for her reaction.

She maybe hated me right now. I didn’t doubt that she would have killed me if it wasn’t for the feelings she had for me. If anything, her only harming me told me everything I needed to know—she still cared about me.

It was buried deep inside, underneath the anger and pain I caused, but it was still there.

She suddenly turned around, her wide, distrustful eyes narrowed on me. Questions were evident on her face, but she didn’t say a word.

“I never told you, because I didn’t know at first. Even as a kid, you were drawn to me, as much as I was drawn to you. It wasn’t the physical attraction back then, of course it wasn’t.” I chuckled. “You asked me why I was sad,” I whispered, reliving the one good memory I had from that place. “I hate that they took away your innocence, Ophelia.” I looked at her. “I hate that I couldn’t recognize your brilliant eyes when I met you again, but I guess that there’s a reason for everything.

Maybe it was wicked destiny, maybe some other fucked-up thing, but we kept finding our way to each other over the years, no matter what happened.”

She pulled herself up and sat on the bed, crossing her legs.

“You told me my eyes were sad, and I knew they were. You were such a tiny, young thing and I couldn’t understand how someone like you could see so clearly inside my soul.” I stood up and slowly walked toward the bars and lowered myself down on the floor, careful not to move my shoulder more than necessary.

“You were only five years old,” I murmured as I sat down. “I wanted to take you away from there and hide you from the vicious people who visited the Red Manor. They ate innocent little things like you for breakfast. Their main goal was to break us, to mold us into these robots that would do everything they asked of us. You have no idea how many of them died. You have no idea how many times we fell asleep, only to be awakened by one of the guards, taking us to the pit to satisfy their new customers.”

She blinked, her eyes softening, but it wasn’t enough.

“Kieran was there as well,” I mumbled.

“What?” she exclaimed, coming to the bars, and lowering herself down on the floor, opposite of me.

“He called you Birdy.” I chuckled. “And he hated me even then. Which, in reality, was understandable. You were a kid walking around unattended, in a place where all kinds of monstrous things happened, talking to this guy nine years older than you. If I were him at that time, I would have dragged you away from there screaming and kicking, but I would have saved you, Phee.”

She pressed her forehead against the bars, closing her eyes.

“You were the first person to show me kindness after years of torture.”

She kept quiet, her eyes on me, listening to every word I said.



“You hugged me, telling me to smile.” I smiled miserably. “And I made you suffer. I broke you.”

I pressed my forehead against the bars, on the opposite side of hers. “You told me your name, but I never connected the dots, baby girl. I never connected the dots because I wanted to forget about that time, and I should have. I didn’t know who you were when I met you on that street. I didn’t know who you were when Logan sent us to pick you up. He wanted to destroy his sons because he knew they were working against him. He was supposed to give Las Vegas back to us if we delivered you to him. I had no idea why he wanted you, I still don’t, but I couldn’t tell you that the only reason you were there with me was because he sent me for you.”

“You still should have told me,” she said, her eyes opening and zeroing in on mine. “You should have told me the truth,” she clipped.

“I know.” I nodded. “But words aren’t my strength, and I was too afraid of losing you. A part of me always knew we would meet again, but I didn’t know that the kind and sweet little girl would grow up to be the woman I loved.”

“Don’t use words you don’t know the real meaning of, Storm,” she mumbled, pulling away from me. “Don’t tell me you love me just to appease the beast in your chest, because you don’t. When you love someone, you burn the entire world to get to them. You show them what they mean to you. Words are easy to use, but it’s hard putting them into actions. And your actions showed me that this obsession you have over me is nothing more but the cloaked desire to exact revenge on my family.”

“No.” I shook my head. “That’s not true.”

“It might not be true in your head because you refuse to believe it, but it isn’t love, Storm. This... This isn’t healthy. Not for you, not for me, and it won’t be healthy for our children.”

“You’re not leaving, Ophelia.” I exhaled. “I fucked up, but I will fix it. I promise I will fix it.”

She shook her head. “You can’t.” Her hand covered mine on the floor. “You can’t fix it because I don’t want you to fix it.”

“No, you don’t mean that.”

“I do, Storm. I mean that with all my heart. You need to let go of this silly little idea, darling. You need to let me go and let me be happy somewhere else.”

Anger surged through me, the mere thought of her with another man narrowing my vision, surrounding it in red. Before she could react, I lifted my arm up, wrapping my hand around her neck and pulled her closer to me.

“You’re mine,” I bit out. “Mine to love. Mine to touch. Mine to care for. These kids, they’re mine and yours, and we’re going to raise them together, Ophelia. If you try to run, I will fucking chase you to the ends of the earth. You will hate me even more once I catch you, but you will be mine. Today, tomorrow, in a hundred years, this wicked heart of mine will always belong to you. It’s yours for taking, yours for destruction, but don’t ever think that I would be okay with you leaving. Especially not with Kieran.”

“You don’t own me, Storm,” she gritted through her teeth.

“But you own me!” I bellowed. “You fucking own me, body, mind, and soul. I am nothing without you. Nothing,” I breathed out. “I keep fucking this thing up because I don’t know how to let you in fully. I don’t know how to trust people, how to keep them by my side. Everyone I have ever loved has died on me. Everyone I trusted in my past has betrayed me somehow, and our track record isn’t exactly spotless.”

“Storm,” she murmured, her eyes on my lips. “I keep telling you to let me go, but you’re a stubborn fucker, aren’t you?”

“I’m not giving up, Sunshine. I could be pissed off at you. I might want to spank your tight, little ass for the shitshow you caused today, but I am never giving up. Get that inside your head.”

Her eyes brimmed with unshed tears, and I hated myself even more for how I made her feel.

“I can’t trust you, Storm. I don’t trust any of you right now. I can’t put myself on the line, when every single time I do that, you end up shattering the carefully glued pieces of my heart. I can’t do it. I won’t do it.”

“Then I will prove to you that you can trust me,” I argued, rubbing my thumb against the soft skin of her neck. “I will prove that all of this isn’t just a ruse or a lie. I want you to be happy and I need you here, Ophelia. I need you by my side. Now more than ever.”

“What do you mean?”

I didn’t want to tell her this. I didn’t want to even think about it, but we had no other choice. We needed to get to the bottom of this.

“Nikolai might be dead,” I started. “But his legacy lives on. The Red Manor is still active, and there are people in Winworth who are unfortunately in the middle of a major shitstorm. I want to help them as much as I can. No one could help me, but maybe we could help them. I need you with me.”

“You have Nova.”

This woman. If pettiness had a name, it would be called Ophelia. If anger had a visual, her picture would be right next to it.

“You know as much as I do that she means nothing to me.”

“Yet, you still slept with her only two weeks after they found my body.”

“It wasn’t even your body!” I thundered. “I knew it wasn’t you. I knew it couldn’t have been you.”

“How?” She stood up, moving away from me. “How could you know? That girl was almost the same size as me. Her—”

“Because I knew your face!” I belted out. “I could never forget the lines of your face, or your hands... Your entire body. Do you want me to tell you how everything shattered around me when they first called us? Do you want me to tell you that

my world ceased to exist when Atlas told me they found your body? I couldn't breathe, Ophelia. I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. I didn't exist because I thought you were gone." My voice broke in the end, and I stood up, facing her. "Do you want me to tell you that I wanted to die with you?" I whispered, wrapping my hand around the metal bar. "Because the world in which you don't exist, isn't the world that I want to live in. It simply isn't."

"And then what? Your pain brought you to sleep with her? What, you stumbled and your dick suddenly slipped into her pussy."

"No. I figured out it wasn't you and I got the picture of you from that wedding in Ventus City, laughing with Cole Mancini, while I died every single day, little by little, living without you."

She stumbled backward as soon as I said that.

"When I figured out where you were, I wasn't picking up pieces of my heart from the floor. I was angry, Sunshine. Devastated, because I thought you did it just to get away from me. I thought you never cared for me, and I lost it."

"But out of all those girls, all the people in this Club, did it have to be her?"

Ophelia stood in front of me, asking questions to which I didn't have an answer. She wanted me to tell her it never happened, but it did.

"I wasn't thinking, Sunshine," I murmured. "I didn't think about the person in front of me. I missed you, I hated you at that moment. I wanted you back, and I didn't know how to cope. I didn't sleep with Nova to deliberately hurt you. I didn't do it out of spite, but it did have its perks, because we all know Nova is working with Belladonna. Hell, you were the one who told us. We've been closely monitoring her, but we don't have any other leads for Belladonna. Keeping Nova close and under observation means that we still might find out who this person is."

“You could have told me all of this months ago, Storm. But the moment I want to leave, the moment I want to put you behind me, you come crawling back, telling me everything I deserved to know. I could have helped from day one, if only you didn’t let your feelings cloud your judgment. We could have caught this person already, but you chose to keep your lips sealed, treating me like an enemy.”

“You’re not my enemy. You’re—”

“Shut up, Storm. I don’t want to hear it anymore. We need to get Cillian here or wherever we’re going, and we need to make a proper plan that’s going to lead us to Belladonna.”

“So, just like that, you’re fine with everything?”

“I’m far from fine, Storm. I am doing this for our kids, not for you. I meant every single word I said before—there is no us, and there never will be. But Belladonna is a real threat, and I don’t want them living in a world where such a person exists.”

She said our kids. I smirked as she talked, knowing we were getting somewhere.

“So, you’re coming to Winworth with me?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“No,” I grinned, “you don’t. But I thought I would ask anyway.”

She sat down on the bed, huffing and puffing but she couldn’t help the small smile dancing on her lips.

“Get the fuck out of here, Storm. I’m supposed to be your prisoner.”

But she could never be my prisoner because I was always hers. She captivated me from the first time I met her, her soul calling to mine, and I was never going to let go.

Even if I wanted to, she was forever etched in my core, her name the only prayer on my lips. Now, I just needed to prove that every single word spoken from my lips was true.

Now, I just needed to show her, instead of only telling her.



## OPHELIA

I HATED COLD PLACES. I HATED WINTER, SNOW, TEN LAYERS OF clothes and the fact that I had to wear a hat and gloves if I wanted to keep my ears and my fingers intact. All those Christmas movies were lies, with their pretty, white snow, and everyone walking around as if it wasn't cold enough to cause hypothermia.

Atlas grinned as soon as we crossed the state lines, going further and further north, into the motherfucking cold. I wasn't a prisoner anymore, but it still didn't mean they trusted me. Instead of leaving me alone with my own car, I was seated as a petulant child between Storm and Indigo, both of them glancing at me every now and then. It wasn't as if I could just evaporate from here. Where would I go? Jump through the window?

I was good with knives, but even I wouldn't be able to carve a hole in the roof fast enough to escape from them. Storm hummed with the unmasked trepidation, and I knew he was still pissed about his shoulder, and wary about me.

I didn't say I could forgive him. I didn't say we could ever be together, but damn it felt good hearing all those words, even if I didn't want them.

*Sure you didn't.*

Indigo hated me again. Well, he hated what I did, but I was pretty sure that all those pretty words he graced me with would soon be a thing of the past. The animosity oozing off of him was anything but mild.

Atlas sat right in front of him, ignoring us, oohing and aahing over the snow visible on tops of the mountains we passed. I wouldn't have been surprised if he pulled out his phone to take some photos. I kind of wanted him to do it—at least we would all have something to laugh about.

My hand pressed against my stomach, my thumb rubbing in a circle, and I could feel eyes on me from my right side, where Indigo sat. Looking up at him, I could see the sneer and the disgust in those eyes.

Maybe I should have been worried, or at least self-conscious because it was obvious he hated me—again. But I didn't really give a fuck when he quite literally cornered me ten days ago, after Storm released me from my little prison, threatening me all over again, and in the moment of anger, mentioning my kids, when he very well knew that they were off-limits.

I wouldn't have minded him saying shit about me and trying to be all macho, but my kids...

Maybe this anger now came more from the fact that I knew his little secret now. I knew who he preferred fucking, hurting Atlas over and over again. I knew because I saw him as I passed next to his room, but I probably shouldn't have told Atlas about it.

"What are you looking at?" I sneered, my throat still sore from when he tried to choke me.

"I'm looking at—"

"Indigo," Storm warned from my left. "Stop that shit."

"She fucking started it," Indigo whined. "I didn't do *shit*."

"Is that because you have a hard time finishing things?" I mocked him. "Or is it—"

"Ophelia," Storm called out. "I just want to get there without you two killing each other."

"Well, he did try to kill me." I snickered. "But he failed."

"It's because you're like a cockroach," Indigo exclaimed. "We need a special weapon to get rid of you."



“Indigo!” Storm thundered. “No one is getting rid of anyone. Fucking quit it and shut up.”

“But I’m hungry.” I pouted. “And we passed the sign for Winworth almost an hour ago.”

Storm took a hold of my hand, squeezing it between our legs. I knew this was hard on him. This entire trip was one major trigger. The closer we got to Winworth, the more withdrawn he was. I wished we were on better speaking terms, and I hated that I couldn’t help him.

I was too stubborn for my own good, but would he even want my help? Would he even accept it after everything? He was adamant that he wanted to get me back, but so far nothing had happened. He didn’t come to me this morning; Atlas picked me up. He didn’t even talk to me and I would like to lie and say that it didn’t suck.

Especially after seeing Nova from afar this morning, when Atlas had to hold me from going after her fucking ass.

But feeling his energy, knowing he was suffering from this trip alone, opened a dam in my heart I was keeping closed, and I poured everything I had in me to him. I entwined my fingers with his, tightening my grip. As I looked up at him, the emotions burning in his eyes knocked the breath out of my lungs.

“We’re not going to Winworth,” Atlas said, answering my previous question. “We’re going to Emercroft Lake.”

“Why?”

“Because Ash and his crew had to get the fuck out of Winworth,” Indigo piped in. “Because things went from bad to worse.”

“Did Lars finally answer?” Creed asked, his eyes firmly focused on the road as he drove. “The last time he spoke to us was back in August, and since then, nothing.”

“Who the fuck is Lars?” I asked and looked at Storm. Just another secret kept from me.

“He’s a man who knows more about the fucking cult operating in Winworth than anyone else,” Storm answered, looking out the window.

“And we’re sure he’s not actually the one orchestrating the entire thing? How do we know he’s not the one supporting Belladonna?” I asked, hating that it was yet another thing they kept me in the dark about.

I slowly started removing my hand from his, but he wasn’t having it. He tightened his hold on me, and pulled my hand into his lap, covering it with his other hand, his palm sweaty. He tried looking calm and collected, but I knew him well enough to know that he was anything but calm.

He hated being here. He hated being this close to Winworth. It didn’t matter we weren’t going to go into the city. He still hated this part of the country, reminding him of all those years when nobody helped him. When no one cared about the little boy with stars in his eyes, leaving him defenseless.

I wished I could go back in time, to help him, to stop it all from happening, but if the past hadn’t happened, we wouldn’t be here. We wouldn’t have been able to find our way to each other. Even though I wasn’t sure about us being together, deep inside of me, I knew I wouldn’t have changed a thing.

Telling him I wished that we never would have met was a low blow, but I couldn’t stop myself. I hated that lost look on his face when he realized I was telling the truth. In reality, I wished we never would have met because then he never would have gotten hurt and I would have been able to continue living my life, hiding in the shadows.

Loving other people would only lead to destruction, yet here I was, unable to stop my heart from beating for him.

“We know him,” Indigo said, looking straight ahead. “We know of him, but Lars isn’t his real name. I don’t know where he came from, or why he’s helping us, but there aren’t many people that know about Black Dahlia like he does. We weren’t going to waste this opportunity. Ash needed information, we needed information, so we got it.”

I understood that, but I still didn't like it. I didn't like having this unknown man in our business, but I had no choice. It wasn't like they had asked me for my opinion before doing stupid ass shit. It wasn't like they all trusted me.

I attacked their president a couple of days ago, and bikers could hold a mean grudge. I could too, and if I had another chance, I would stab him again.

But their prez fucked up as well, so it wasn't all my fault.

"Phee?" Storm pulled at my hand, bringing me back from the daydream.

"Uh, what?"

"I said, do you want us to stop somewhere to grab something to eat?" Indigo groaned from the other side of me, earning a slap on a thigh from me. "Can you two stop acting like two children?" Storm groaned.

"No," Indigo and I said in unison, glaring at each other.

"There's a gas station coming up," Creed said. "I need to take a piss and you all need to get the fuck out of this car before we start killing each other. Breathe some fresh air, eat something, do some yoga, I don't know. Whatever calms your titties down. Indigo," he turned toward us, "your car is going to be there. You're gonna have to go and meet Ash since he's already there."

"Gladly," he mumbled, glaring at me. "Some peace and quiet."

"Fuck off, Indigo."

"Will you just stop!" Atlas bellowed from the front seat, shutting both of us down. "Just stop talking to each other. I swear to God, it's like having two children in the car."

Silence ensued as soon as his outburst finished, and the rational part of me knew he was right. I had to stop goading Indigo unless I wanted him dead. Violence brewed in him, and if I wasn't careful, I would be the recipient.

I just wished I wasn't sandwiched between the two men who didn't really talk. The fact that we'd spent the last couple

of hours sitting like this wasn't helping. I was hungry, cranky, angry, and tired. Living without coffee and having to wake up at the crack of dawn wasn't my idea of fun, but I was here.

Traveling for five days was even worse when the people you were surrounded with looked at you as if you were the enemy. Going from city to city because they needed to check in on the other chapters. It wasn't as if Winworth was just in the next state. We had to travel to the far north to this God forsaken town, and I regretted agreeing to this.

I said I would be here, and I knew Storm would have dragged me with them even if I had said I didn't want to go.

Since I came out of my little prison, he'd been everywhere. He didn't talk to me, but he was always there, bringing me food, bringing me clothes, watching, observing, smiling and glaring. I had no idea how to behave.

Zoe stayed behind with Kairos because Indigo didn't want her involved in this. She kept pushing me toward Storm, trying to convince me to give him a second chance, but I couldn't. Not yet. He had to show me that he truly meant what he said, and that it wasn't just another lie.

But I had to let him in. I had to try as well if I truly meant what I said about my kids growing up with their father.

I got so many second chances with some people, it would only be fair that I did the same for Storm.

"Stormy," I whispered, putting my head on his shoulder. I looked up, willing him to look at me, to talk to me, to stop thinking about fucking Winworth. "Storm," I murmured again when he kept on ignoring me, staring out the window. "Look at me."

"What is it, Ophelia?" he asked, still avoiding my eyes.

"You need to look at me."

He took a deep breath, closing his eyes, before swiveling his head my way. Those brilliant green-and-yellow orbs focused on my face, anxiety sitting behind them, driving him mad. I knew what I had to do.

“Tell me a story, Storm.” I smiled softly. “Tell me a pretty little story.”

“I don’t know any stories.”

“Yeah, you do. And even if you don’t, you will need to learn some because I’m not going to be the only one putting these kids down to sleep. If those books Zoe bought me are correct, they’re going to need a lot of stories. It’s apparently good for their development, or some shit like that.”

Understanding flashed on his face, finally realizing what I’d been trying to say.

This was his second chance. I was trying to get over my own insecurities. I was trying to help him.

“So the two of us are going to be raising our kids, huh?” A brilliant smile spread over his face as he pressed his palm on top of my stomach.

“Yep.” I chuckled. “You’re going to be changing diapers. I’m not going anywhere near that.”

“But what if you need to.” He chuckled. “What if you need to change their poopy diaper?”

“Nuh-uh.” I grimaced. “You made them, you can do it. Your super sperm fucked up my birth control, and it slipped through the defenses.” Much how he slipped through my defenses, burrowing himself into my heart. “Now deal with it.”

“And what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to teach them that they can bite off someone’s dick if they bite down hard enough.”

Indigo choked on his water, Storm laughed, and everything was right in the world. At least for five minutes.

At least until we stopped at the gas station, until I saw who was standing there.

“Well, fuck me sideways,” I breathed out when my eyes connected with my father’s.

“What is Lazar Asterov doing here?” Indigo asked, looking at me.

“Uh,” I stammered. “He came to say hi?”

But I knew why he came. I would have done the same.

He came to take me home, to take me away from Storm. I knew this wouldn't go well. I just fucking knew it.



TRAVELING FOR ALMOST TWENTY HOURS WAS TERRIBLE. Having to sleep in some random place was even worse.

But having my father standing there with a scowl on his face, and his soldiers behind his back, was horrifying. I told him what happened with Storm. I told him everything. Judging by his stance and the way he waited for us to get out of the car, he wasn't here on a social call. He wasn't going to congratulate Storm, or chit chat with Creed, Atlas, and Indigo.

No, he was going to steal me away from Storm, and knowing Storm, he would start another war.

“Did you call him?” Storm asked, looking at my father with apprehension. “Did you?” He turned to look at me.

“No,” I exclaimed. “I haven't talked to him since... Oh, shit.”

“Oh, shit?” Indigo asked. “What do you mean, oh, shit? What did you do, Ophelia?”

“I didn't do anything.” I laughed. “You did.” I pointed at Storm.

“What do you mean?” Storm asked, his eyes narrowed at me. “I didn't call him.”

“No, but you smashed my phone, and I didn't manage to talk to him at all after that. And, well, Lazar isn't exactly the kind to wait and see.”

“So what,” Indigo started. “He's here to take you home?”

“Something like that,” I chuckled.

Storm wrapped his arm around me, pulling me into him, while I laughed at the nervousness dripping off of him. Atlas laughed from the front seat, and even Creed snickered. But Indigo and Storm—both of them paled, for completely different reasons.

“I hated Nikolai for what he did to me.” Storm gulped, looking at Lazar. “And now your actual father is going to hate me for what I did to you.”

I couldn’t keep my laughter at bay.

It tore out of my lungs, ringing inside the car, my entire body shaking from the strength of it. Storm was afraid; afraid that my real dad was going to despise him for the things he did. He was afraid it would lead me away from him.

“Stormy.” I chuckled, squeezing his shoulder. “It’ll be okay. He probably just wants to talk.”

“I highly doubt that,” he murmured. “Look at him.” His frantic eyes connected with mine. “He looks like a Rottweiler ready to attack.”

“Hey.” I swatted at his arm. “Kaiser is a Rottweiler.”

“Yeah,” Indigo piped in. “And he tried to attack me the first time he saw me.”

“Because he knew you were a little bitch.” I looked back at Storm. “Can we go out now? I need to say hi, I need to pee, and I’m fucking hungry. They’re not just going to magically disappear if we keep sitting here.”

I had never seen Storm scared, not like this. Even when Nikolai held that blade to his skin, Storm didn’t flinch, didn’t blink, didn’t show fear, but this... This was golden, and I had a feeling Lazar would laugh as well once I told him it went like this.

“Come on.” I nudged him. “Open the door, Storm.”

“He’s not going to take you away from me,” he announced. “I’m not going to allow that.”

“Buddy,” I groaned. “I’m not an item. You guys can’t volley me back and forth. If I want to leave, I will. But I don’t want to, so open the goddamn door and stop being a pussy.”

Pure shock flashed on his face. “Did you just call me a pussy?”

“Well, if the shoe fits.” I shrugged. “Open the door, Storm, or I’m going to crawl over you and open it myself. Sitting in the middle isn’t exactly comfortable, and you guys are huge.”

He grinned, leaning down toward me. “You know what else is huge?”

“My knife?”

His grin quickly fell off his face, his brows furrowing, while his eyes burrowed into me.

“What?” I asked, laughing at him. “It kinda is huge.”

“You just ruined a moment.” He huffed and looked outside the window. “I still want to know who told him we were going to be here. This can’t be a coincidence.”

“It isn’t,” Atlas piped in, looking straight at us. “I called him.”

“You did what?” I exclaimed, turning fully toward him. “Are you insane?”

“No.” Atlas shook his head, opening the door. “But you need to talk to him,” he said. “And you,” Atlas looked at Storm, “need to meet him.”

“You crossed the fucking line, Atlas,” Storm growled, fisting his hands. “You crossed a motherfucking line.”

“I didn’t. I did you all a favor. You need to stop tiptoeing around the fact that you’re going to be parents and start acting like you really want this. You also need to put aside these things that happened in the past. Do you want your kids to grow up like we did?” Atlas asked, not an ounce of remorse in his voice.

He was right. I didn’t want these kids to grow up how I did. I didn’t want them to have a mother and a father who



would fight over everything. I didn't want them to think it was their fault because we couldn't get along.

Love turned to resentment if it wasn't cherished. It turned into a vicious beast, destroying everything in its path, and two people like Storm and I wouldn't know how to stop the destruction, because we would be its masters.

I didn't want our children to feel unwanted, or to be blamed for our own mess.

I just wished I knew how to get over things. How to start trusting him again or how to stop feeling as if the entire world was against me.

"You shouldn't have done this," I said instead. I wasn't angry at him, but people butting in my business wasn't something I appreciated. No matter how much I loved Atlas, and how much I understood what he tried to do, this wasn't the time or place.

Both Storm and I needed time to get over the things that had happened in this past year, and pushing my real father into this situation was the wrong thing to do.

"Let's just go out," I said, looking at Storm. His eyes were a blazing inferno of rage, directed at Atlas, who was completely oblivious to the mess he made.

Storm and I were finally making progress, no matter how small it was. For the first time in a very long time, I didn't feel that the toxicity was the only path for us, and those small displays of affection warmed my heart more than those sleepless nights when he would come to fuck me and hold me afterward.

But we were teetering on the edge, and one tiny push could shatter the fragile peace we established between the two of us.

Lazar was much like me, and he wouldn't appreciate the way Storm behaved. I knew it, Storm knew it, and Atlas should have known it as well.

I wanted to have more time before I had this conversation with my father. He offered to come and get me when I spoke

with him last time, and I said no, confident that I could handle all of this.

He was thrilled about the twins, but he wasn't thrilled about the way Storm behaved, constantly repeating that it reminded him of his brother, Nikolai, and the way he behaved toward my mother. But Storm wasn't Nikolai, and I knew he wasn't doing any of this to spite some other man who wanted me.

He wasn't keeping me with him to piss Kieran off. He was keeping me here because he knew no other way. Or at least that's what I kept telling myself.

"Storm." I placed a hand on his chest, feeling his rapid heartbeat slamming against my palm. "We should really go out. Let me do the talking."

"Lazar isn't taking you from me," Storm bit out, his eyes moving to me. Pain, love, anger and in the end, fear, all swam in those depths. "I'm not letting you go, Sunshine."

"I'm not going," I murmured. "Lazar isn't Nikolai and he wouldn't force me."

"But he knows," Storm stated. "He knows how I've treated you."

So much regret washed over the sharp features of his face, and I wished I could give him a better answer. I wished I could calm him down and tell him that Lazar didn't know, but he did. He knew what Storm did.

He knew about Nova, about all the secrets, and all the lies.

But he also knew I wasn't a saint, and he was the one pushing me to go with Storm. So if he came all the way here to try and tell me that I needed to go back to Russia with him, he had another thing coming.

"Yes, he knows." I rubbed his chest, feeling his deep breaths beneath my palm. Atlas gave us one last look and exited the car as if he didn't just cause a fucking shitstorm with his actions. Indigo followed a second after, scowling the entire time at Atlas.

“But I’m not the girl from a couple of months ago, Storm.” I smiled. “I’m not running away. You know I could have been on the other side of the planet by now if I wanted to, but I didn’t run. I’m here. I’m still here.”

His hand wrapped around mine, squeezing, holding on, as if he couldn’t believe I was still here.

The door slammed as Creed exited, but I paid him no attention.

“We need to stop this darkness taking over our lives,” Storm said, his eyes closed. “I want you to forgive me for sleeping with her.” He exhaled.

I froze at his words, trying to remove my hand, but he wasn’t having it.

“I know you didn’t cheat on me,” I mumbled. “Because we weren’t together, not at that moment.”

“Ophelia.” He placed his hand beneath my chin, lifting my head to look at him. “My heart belonged to you ever since you crossed that road and walked straight toward me. My heart knew no other person. Even when I hated the things you did, the way you acted, it still wanted you. God, I wanted to rip it out of my chest, because it never wanted to betray you.”

“But you did,” I mumbled. “You betrayed me.” I smiled hollowly. “I know you’re afraid I’ll run again, but I’m right here. I want to be here for my kids—our kids. I just don’t know if I can forgive you right now. Not when she’s still there, and when she’s still clinging to you like a fucking koala to a tree.”

“What do you want me to do!”

“I want her gone,” I gritted out. “But you’re not going to do that, I know. She’s too important right now. But I can’t help the way I feel, Storm. I can’t stop from wanting to murder her, to carve out that smug smile from her face. I can’t help it!”

We stared at each other, both of us breathing heavily.

How was it possible that at one minute we were okay, talking and laughing, and in the next one we were at each

other's throats? How was it possible that I could love someone this much, and also hate them for the things they were doing?

I looked toward Lazar who was staring at the two of us even while he spoke with Atlas. His guards were ready to attack if needed, but I didn't want bloodshed today. I promised Storm I wouldn't run, and I planned to fulfill that promise.

That didn't mean that I had to do it with a smile on my face.

I detached myself from him, scooted to Indigo's side of the car and opened the door, letting the cold, fresh air filter through the car. It slowly drowned out the emotions choking us inside. As I stepped out, I finally felt I could breathe.

"Ophelia," Storm called out after me, but I drowned out his voice by slamming the door closed. I turned toward my father whose eyes drank me in from head to toe, and I knew what he was doing.

He was checking to see if I was hurt.

Lazar Asterov wasn't a man I wanted to have in my life, at least not before, but I knew I needed him. He's been trying to stay aside, letting me deal with this in my own way, but it was getting harder and harder pretending that I didn't want to have a proper relationship with him. That I didn't want a dad.

One look at him, one tiny smile on his face, was all I needed to run toward him, surpassing Atlas, Creed, and Indigo who stood on the side, looking at me as if I'd lost my goddamn mind.

I launched myself into Lazar's open arms, clinging to him, burrowing my face in his neck, needing someone to hold me because they really loved me. Maybe I'd lost precious years with him, maybe I'd been a target for Nikolai's rage, but I had a second chance now.

I had a chance to change my future.

"*Ya skuchal po tebe, Katya,*" he murmured against my hair, his arms tightening around my middle. He was saying he missed me, and God, I missed him too.

“Are you okay?” he asked. I knew he wasn’t just asking about my physical health. His body was rigid, ready for an attack, and I had to defuse the situation if I didn’t want another war.

I nodded, slowly stepping back. “I am.” I smiled. “I’m okay. I’m much better now, knowing that you’re here.”

“Well, if you told me to come and get you, you know you wouldn’t have to wait for this day to be with me.”

“I know that, but...” I looked over my shoulder, seeing Storm as he approached us. “I’m stubborn.” I looked back at Lazar. “It must be the genes.”

“The genes?” he exclaimed. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Asterovs are not stubborn. We are mild, easygoing people.”

“Riiight,” I drawled, chuckling. “And I’m a fairy godmother.”

“Uh, what?”

“It’s a saying, Dad.” I laughed, squeezing his hand.

Time froze, Lazar’s eyes widening at my choice of words, and it took me a second to realize what I’d just blurted out.

“I’m sorry.” I placed a hand over my mouth. “I didn’t... I’ll understand if you don’t want to—”

“Katya—”

“No, no.” I shook my head, stepping further away from him. “It just came out. I’m sorry—”

“Ophelia!” Lazar barked, taking a step toward me. I was avoiding his eyes, avoiding the rejection that was no doubt going to come.

Just because he was nice toward me, just because he’d been trying to help me, didn’t mean that he wanted me to call him dad.

Fuck, what was I thinking?

“Ophelia Ekaterina Asterova,” he mumbled, taking my hand, and pulling me closer to him. “Look at me, dorogoy,” he urged, but I couldn’t do it. “Katya, look at me.”

I shook my head. “I can’t.”

“Yeah, you can. Come on. You’re my little dragon, my fierce warrior, you can do it.”

Nikolai called me his dragon, but never with affection. Those words sounded more like a curse coming from his mouth, than a gift. I’d lived my life believing I was cursed because of my heritage, because of the blood coursing through my veins, but Lazar... Lazar said those words as a prayer, as something he often thought about.

Slowly, carefully, I lifted my head and looked at Lazar. His eyes shone with unshed tears, the stoic man he usually was disappearing right in front of my eyes. From everything he did and everything he said, it was obvious that he wanted a relationship with me, but I often wondered what kind.

He asked me to lead the Syndicate, and my distrustful mind immediately thought the worst, making me believe that he only approached me because they needed a monkey they could control. Even a blind person could see I wanted to have a family.

A proper family.

Proper holidays.

Hell, I wanted to have someone who loved me. I thought he played on that card, pretending to care just to get me to agree.

“You’re my daughter, Ophelia,” he murmured, moving the hair behind my ear. “You are my blood, my flesh, and I have waited twenty-five years to hear that word come out of your mouth. I don’t want to wait anymore.”

“You don’t have to lie to me, you know? I would be okay even if you don’t want to have that kind of a relationship with me.”

“God, you’re stubborn,” Lazar groaned. “Do you really think I would be here if I didn’t want you in my life, Ophelia? Do you really think I would have stayed in the States after I finished all the things that needed to be wrapped up, if I didn’t want to have a relationship with you?”

“I just thought—”

“You thought wrong,” he whispered. “Look around you,” he said, looking over my shoulder. “You have people who love you. Even though I would like to slap that boy of yours for giving you these sad eyes, it’s obvious he loves you. Hell,” Lazar chuckled, looking at Storm, “he’s like a lost puppy, darling. If you gave him a command to attack me, he would, even though he knows he wouldn’t be able to survive all my soldiers.”

“No.” I shook my head. “He might care about me and he says he loves me, but that’s not...” I trailed off as I looked behind me, to where Storm stood.

His hands were fisted at his sides, his entire body strained, but his eyes never left me. He never once looked anywhere else. Just as Lazar said, it was as if he waited for a command.

“Storm,” I called out to him. “Come here.” I wiggled my fingers, beckoning him to me.

He didn’t hesitate, as if it was all he was waiting for. Without a minute to spare, his hand wrapped around mine, pulling me closer to him and away from Lazar.

I would have laughed at his comical expression and the way he narrowed his eyes at Lazar, but I didn’t want to ruin the moment. Both of them were exuding alpha energy, trying to one-up each other.

“Storm,” I said, breaking their staring contest. “This is Lazar Asterov.” I looked at Lazar. “My father. Well...” I chuckled. “My real father.”

Without missing a beat, Storm took a step toward Lazar, extending his hand for a handshake. Lazar took his, all the while smiling at a broody Storm.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, sir,” Storm grunted, and I lost it.

Laughter bubbled up through my chest, erupting from me, echoing around the parking lot. Ten sets of eyes zeroed in on me as if I’d lost my mind, and maybe I had. But hearing Storm call Lazar sir had me howling all over again.

“Did your mom drop you on your head when you were a baby?” Lazar asked, dead serious. “Because I swear, there’s no other explanation as to why you would be this weird.”

“I agree,” Storm added. “Why the fuck are you laughing now?”

“Y-You... I can’t,” I choked out. “You called him sir.”

Both of them looked at me, then at each other, shaking their heads.

“Good luck with this one,” Lazar said to Storm, ignoring me. “It’s obvious she needs some, uh, help.”

I mean, he definitely wasn’t lying.





## STORM

IT TOOK ME A WHILE TO REALIZE THAT LAZAR ASTEROV WAS nothing like his brother, Nikolai. It took me even longer to relax while we sat in a small coffee shop adjacent to the gas station, while Ophelia literally inhaled a chicken burger, oblivious to the tension between her father and me.

Lazar and Ophelia had the same eyes—the same color and same shape of the eyes. The more I stared at him, the more I realized that she never really looked like Nikolai. Maybe that was why I could look at her without resentment.

Maybe I always knew that she couldn't have been the real daughter of such a monster, but knowing that his blood would never flow through my children's veins made it easier to sleep at night. The nightmares I'd had where my son or a daughter would look like him haunted me even during the daytime. No matter how much I wanted to erase those images from my head, I couldn't.

Nikolai Aster mocked me even in his death, sending his brother to ignite the hatred toward the patriarchs of the Aster family all over again.

"I need to go to the toilet," Ophelia announced, dropping the empty paper wrap on the table. Both Lazar and I stared at her, waiting for her to start a conversation, but I knew that twinkle in her eye.

This was my punishment, sitting here with her father, unable to form the words. It wasn't only that I feared he would take her away from me. Deep inside, I knew that there was not

one single person who could tell her what to do. Even if he tried, I knew she would fight him.

No, this suffocating silence came because I couldn't stop comparing Lazar and Nikolai. The maneuvers, the way he looked at Ophelia and then at me, the way he held his fork, I compared all of it to the man who was now dead and would never be able to hurt us again.

Ophelia dashed toward the bathroom, going between the empty tables, while Lazar's guardians followed her every move.

"You don't like me." Lazar was the first to speak, using the opportunity because she wasn't here.

"That's not true," I answered, still looking toward the door where Ophelia disappeared. "I don't trust you. I don't trust any of you." I looked at him. "I know her, and I know what she's capable of, but she's the only person from your fucked-up family I can trust."

"I don't blame you." He shrugged, placing his elbows on top of the table. "I am sorry for what my brother did to you."

"Yeah, well," I scowled, "it isn't your fault."

"No, I know it's not, but I still feel responsible because I did nothing to stop him."

"But your daughter stopped him. She made sure he would never hurt another child in his life."

Ophelia thought I didn't remember it. She thought my brain stopped me from remembering one of the worst days of my life, but I remembered every single moment. I remembered that knife slicing through my skin, burrowing deep inside.

I remember her screaming, her tear-stained eyes, and her begging me not to leave her.

I remember thinking I would die, thankful that her face would be the last one I would see.

I remembered everything, and I wished I didn't. It would have been so much easier hating her than loving her, but I

gave up on fighting against my heart. I gave up on wishing things were different because they never would be.

Ophelia was my destiny, my beginning, and my ending. I'd be damned if I allowed anyone to take her away from me.

"You're not taking her from me," I said, looking at him. "She's mine."

"She's not yours." Lazar chuckled. "Ophelia belongs to no man. She doesn't belong to you, or me. She's never belonged to anyone because she doesn't need us. I'm not saying this to rival you, Storm, or to get you angry." Well, he was failing at that. "Ophelia is a woman who's very much capable of taking care of herself. She doesn't need us to make things right. Hell, she doesn't even need us to help her with this Belladonna person, or with Albanians and the Outfit. She's allowing us to help her. She let us enter her life, and she's keeping us there because she wants us." He looked down at the table, playing with the napkin in front of him. "It is more important to be wanted, than to be needed. When you're needed, you don't know if that person would ever be with you if they had a different choice. But when you're wanted," he looked up at me, "that means she chose you. She chose you, Storm. Out of all those other men, she chose to be with you. She chose to stay."

It was as if he sucker punched me.

"I offered her to go to Russia with me. I offered her the Syndicate, the world for fuck's sake, and she didn't want it. She stayed with you because she wants you. She stayed because being with you is more important to her than running away. And let's be honest, she's been running her entire life. Why can't you see this?"

Because I was too afraid to let her back in. I didn't have a problem saying all those things, but deep inside, I wasn't ready to let her have all of me.

I wasn't ready to let her in, because letting her in meant she would be able to see every single part of me. It meant that I would need to share my world with somebody else.

She wasn't just a cut chaser, wanting to become an Old Lady. She was my equal. She always was, and I was allowing my fear to consume me, falling into old habits.

"But, Storm," Lazar started speaking again. "If you ever hurt her again. If I ever get another call where she's fighting her tears, I promise you," he grinned, "what my brother did to you would be a child's play compared to what I'm capable of doing. Don't fuck with her feelings if you're not planning on returning them back. Let her go if you're not one hundred percent in."

He was right. This motherfucker, who I had never met before, was right, and I didn't know what to say. I just stared at him, processing everything he said, trying to get over my stupid fear of letting her in.

"Good, you two didn't kill each other," Ophelia said as soon as she came back. I had completely missed seeing her walk back to us. "Is everything okay?" she asked, looking at the two of us when neither Lazar nor I responded.

"Everything is perfect," I mumbled, unable to look at her.

Here we were, right in front of her father, and I couldn't look at her. She knew me better than anyone and she would be able to see right through me.

She asked me to choose her, to show her that I really wanted her. Like the coward I was, I chose my Club, knowing that I actually could have both only if I stopped overthinking everything.

I played right into Belladonna's hands, putting Ophelia aside, parading Nova in front of her, trying to hurt her just how she hurt me.

I never should have done that. If I didn't want to truly be with her, to open myself up, I shouldn't have brought her back. But I couldn't let her go. I couldn't imagine my life without her, but maybe it was for the best, letting her go.

Yet, I couldn't do that. The mere thought cut through me like a sharp knife, and I knew I couldn't let her go.

Ophelia sat down, her eyes trained on me, and I could feel the questions bubbling in her mind. The smile she wore earlier was nowhere to be seen now, and like in a dream, I could see Lazar's lips moving, I could hear their voices from faraway, but I couldn't understand what they were talking about.

"We should go." I suddenly stood up, halting the conversation they were having. "It's getting extremely late, and we still have another hour or so to reach Emercroft Lake."

Ophelia's eyes narrowed, understanding slowly passing over her features. But she had it wrong. She had it all wrong, and I hoped she would understand what I had to say.

"Well, don't let me keep you." Lazar grinned, standing up along with Ophelia. "Think about what I said, Storm." Lazar looked me straight in the eye, a somber expression on his face. "And it was nice meeting you."

"Likewise," I grumbled.

I would have been able to feel Ophelia everywhere. In a room full of people, my eyes would always search for hers, needing that assurance that she belonged to us, but right now, I couldn't look at her. Right now, I wondered if bringing her with us was a good idea at all.

I'd tried doing things for her ever since she came out of captivity, showing her that things could be different, but it was my guilt talking.

I started walking toward the exit. She followed me, wordlessly, too fucking quiet for the thunderstorm brewing inside of me. Indigo, Atlas, and Creed followed after us, and I couldn't wait to step outside into the fresh air, to think, to plan, to fucking put a stop to this madness.

"I figured you two would need to talk," Atlas mumbled from behind us. "So Creed and I will drive in a car with Indigo and you two can take the car we came with."

My head swiveled toward him. I couldn't blame him for trying to fix our shit. He thought he was doing us a favor, bringing us back together, thinking that if I met her father, if

we both put our past behind us, we would be able to move forward.

But this opened my eyes, and that conversation with Lazar showed me how much I was hurting her. I was keeping her back, and Ophelia was meant for a lot more than this.

She needed someone who could always put her first, who didn't have a truck full of baggage from his past. She needed someone who didn't need to think twice about all these things.

The guys quickly crossed the parking lot toward the car left for Indigo to use, leaving Ophelia and me alone, while a thousand emotions played over both of our faces.

“What did he tell you?” Ophelia asked, looking toward the car we had to use.

“The truth,” I said matter-of-factly. “He finally opened my eyes.”

I didn't wait for her before I started walking toward the car, expecting her to follow me, which she did. She followed me across this parking lot, just how she followed me across the country, going along with everything I put on her.

The sound of the door opening and closing as we got inside the car felt louder than it really was, but the silence enveloping the two of us into its embrace was stronger than the emotions coursing through us.

I could see it on her face when I looked at her as I turned on the ignition—she was bracing herself for an impact.

The heating system quickly kicked in, and as I exited the gas station, driving toward the highway, she turned to look at me, waiting for me to talk.

“We need to talk,” I mumbled, keeping my eyes on the road.

“So, talk, Storm,” she said with zero emotion in her voice, making me wince involuntarily. “I'm waiting.”

This Ophelia reminded me of the girl ready to take on the world. This version of her reminded me of that day in the

Clubhouse when her father attacked us, after I told her I wanted her gone.

The pine trees became thicker the further we were going up into the mountain, and the sign for Winworth and Emercroft Lake indicating the distance between us and those places made my blood run cold. But I needed to focus on her, on us, and what I needed to say.

“I never meant to hurt you,” I blurted out first. “Well, no. I meant to hurt you, but not in the way it happened.”

She kept quiet, looking at me with ice in her eyes.

“I want you to know that I’ve meant every single word I said to you. My heart will always be yours. My soul will always want to be with yours.” It would, but I needed her to know that she always had a choice. I wouldn’t keep her back if she didn’t want to stay.

The hitch in her breathing was the only indication that she was really listening.

“You told me earlier that I should let you go, that I shouldn’t keep you with me because it was hurting us both, and maybe you were right. I was just too stubborn to see it back then.”

“What changed?” she asked flatly, never once moving her gaze away from me.

“Lazar,” I answered. “He told me some things, and I finally realized that I did it all wrong. I finally realized that I shouldn’t be holding you back.”

“So,” she chuckled angrily, “you’re going to make that choice for me. You’re going to be the one to tell me who I should and shouldn’t be with, or who is enough for me?”

Fuck, I was screwing this all up.

“Phee, don’t make this harder than it is,” I groaned. “I’m giving you options. I don’t want to be hot and cold anymore. I didn’t know how to let you in and—”

“You’re not giving me options,” she argued. “You’re giving yourself an option. You’re being a coward.”



“Ophelia—”

“Save it,” she cut me off and turned her head toward the road. “I should have known, but that’s on me.”

“You should have known what?” I asked, hating the coldness in her words.

“I should have known that you would never be able to keep your word. I should have known that I was never the villain in this fucked-up love story of ours.” She looked at me. “You were. You and your weak fucking mind.”

“Come on,” I groaned. “I never thought you were the villain.”

“I don’t care,” she answered.

“Sunshine, come on. That isn’t what I meant. I love you. You know I love you.”

She turned toward me one more time, her eyes blazing with an anger I had never seen before. Not when she fought against Nikolai, and not when she bickered with Indigo.

“You can take your declarations of love and give it to someone who wants them, Storm,” she bit back, breaking my heart. “Because I don’t. I don’t want to hear it. Hell, I don’t want you to talk to me anymore. You said it yourself—you’re giving me an out, as if I ever needed your permission. As if you were ever strong enough to hold me back. I know who I am, what I am, and what I’m worth, but it’s you that doesn’t. It’s you who could never love me in the way that I want to be loved, and I was too stupid to realize it before now. So, thank you.” She smiled bitterly. “Thank you for opening my eyes.”

“Ophelia—”

“Shut your fucking mouth, Storm,” she grunted. “Once this is done, we’re going back to Santa Monica and I’m getting the fuck out of your life. I hope you’re going to be man enough to let me go.”

I didn’t want to let her go. I wanted to keep her forever. To have her next to me, but if that’s what she wanted, then I would need to follow.

“But you’re going to be in Santa Monica, right?” I asked, but the answer never came. “Right?” I looked at her.

“None of your fucking business,” she answered, turning up the volume of the radio.

“Hurt You” by Living in Fiction blasted through the car, cutting through my bleeding heart.

“You’re not going back to Kieran,” I blasted, unable to keep my thoughts to myself. “Over my dead body, Ophelia.”

“That can be arranged,” she answered, looking at me. “One thing I’m really good at is apparently killing people. You no longer have a say in what I can and can’t do. Hell, I never should have allowed you to have any say at all, but I tried to play along. I tried to respect your wishes and your need to cage me. I wanted to give you my heart. I wanted to give you everything I had. I wanted to show you that I could change, that you could trust me, that I could earn my place in your Club.”

She huffed, turning her head toward the window. “Now I can see that it was a mistake trying to do all those things, because you never wanted me for me. I have no idea what you expected to get when you first met me, but it’s obvious that you weren’t prepared for me. And that’s okay. But now you don’t get to play the hurt party when you’re the one asking me to leave. Again!”

“I’m not asking you to leave, dammit!” I thundered, slamming my hand against the steering wheel. “I’m giving you an out. I’m telling you that you can leave if you want to.”

“And I am telling you that it was never your decision to make. I could have left ten times by now. Do you really think your guards are a match for me? Don’t you think that if I wanted to get the fuck out of that house, I wouldn’t have done so by now? I might be pregnant, Storm, but I’m not crippled. My fighting skills aren’t dead just because I’m carrying two children. If anything, they’re better because I’m not protecting only myself, but them too. They’re the ones who matter, and it’s obvious that you would never be able to be the father they would need.”

“You’re way overline, Ophelia,” I grunted.

“Am I?” she asked. “If the Club was burning and if they needed help, who would you go to?”

And that was the problem. I was quiet for far too long, too late to tell her that I would always run to them. That I would choose them.

“That’s what I thought,” she mumbled. “But you should know, Storm... If someone asked me what I would do in a situation like that, I would always choose them. I would always run to them because they have my loyalty. Only them.”

I fucked this all up. I wanted her to know that she had a choice, that she could choose to go somewhere else if she wanted to, but I didn’t word it properly. I didn’t explain it properly, and I fucked everything up.

The momentary peace we were in was short lived, and I knew she was serious.

Ophelia was going to leave me.



## OPHELIA

I WAS NUMB.

Deprived of any feeling, I walked toward the cabin we drove to, following Storm, trying to ignore the hollow hole in the center of my chest where my heart used to be.

Storm wrapped his fingers around the pumping organ and tore it right out of my body, throwing it somewhere on the side of the highway we sped over as he said that he was giving me an out. Stupid fucking man.

If I wanted an out, I would have taken it. If I wanted to leave, I would've been long gone by now, and he wouldn't have been able to do anything about it. But I stayed. I fucking stayed like an obedient little girl, believing the devil on my shoulder that this was where I was supposed to be.

Storm kept glancing back at me as if I would run away right this moment, but those last-minute dot-com decisions weren't who I was anymore, and this version of me thought things through before acting on them.

Irrational decisions fucked me up more than anything else, and while trying to prove to all of them that I wasn't the monster, I realized that I needed to start thinking about my actions and my reactions.

I wasn't going to run, but I also wasn't going to stay with a man who obviously wasn't what I wanted.

A coward. That's what Storm Knoxx was. A motherfucking coward, trying to play it off as him giving me an out, his pathetic blessing for me to do whatever I wanted.

As if he could stop me if I wanted to go and fuck somebody else.

As if he could stop me if I wanted to take his kids away from him.

He didn't deserve me and he didn't deserve them. He wasn't even trying to be deserving of these two souls I was carrying in my stomach. They weren't going to be collateral damage because their father didn't pull his head out of his ass. If I had to, I would protect them from everybody else—even from myself.

My parents didn't do that. They didn't try to protect me, to show me how bright the world could be, but these kids were not going to have the same destiny as I did. Storm didn't know what I planned to do, not yet, but he would find out.

The audacity to ask me if I were going to stay in Santa Monica. The audacity to expect anything from me. The fucking audacity to look heartbroken when he was the one breaking both of our hearts.

I swallowed my promise for this man. I never should have gone against my word after he humiliated me publicly in front of his entire Club. I relented because I wanted to be a bigger person. I didn't want my life to be just one big sequence filled with revenge and blood.

I wanted it to mean something, to have some light in it. I wanted to fight for what I believed in, for my people, for my kids, because I refused to believe that people couldn't change.

Vengeance was always fueled by anger, eating at your insides, staining the brightness in our souls. I knew it because I lived through it. I allowed anger to turn me into a vicious beast, hungry for revenge, for the blood of those who wronged me. I didn't want to listen. I didn't want to stop to think for even one second, and I wouldn't have minded burning the entire world to get to my end goal.

But plans changed, people did too. For a second, I thought that maybe, just fucking maybe, I could put it all behind me

and live in this new world where everything wasn't just about anger and killing people who fucked me over.

I wanted to fight for the man who was now entering the cabin, passing right next to Atlas who refused to look at Storm and only stared at me.

I didn't want to talk to him either because I had nothing to say. Whatever it was that my father told Storm couldn't have been the reason why he decided it would be better to push me away than to open up to me.

I was getting tired of this game we were playing, and I just wanted it to stop.

Atlas opened his mouth to say something, but I shook my head, too strung out to hear anything he had to say. He'd done enough already and I would deal with that when I wasn't feeling as if everything was falling apart.

In all the darkness surrounding me, I believed that Storm would be one bright spot to keep me up. I believed he would understand my mind, he would understand that I didn't want to live like this anymore.

I needed an escape, something new to hold me upright, and it was obvious he wasn't it.

Atlas simply nodded and entered the cabin before me, leaving me alone with my thoughts. Well, today, we were going to start anew. Today, I was going to mourn for something that never could have been and tomorrow I would forget he ever existed.

I would forget the taste of his lips and the feeling of his skin beneath my palm as he hugged me to his chest. I would forget the sound of his voice and what he could do to me.

I would forget that my heart ever cried for him, because only people who truly wanted me deserved to be remembered, and men who didn't know how to handle their feelings for me weren't invited into that circle.

Warmth enveloped me as soon as I entered inside the cabin, walking straight toward Storm who was looking at the

small group of people gathered around Indigo and Atlas. Atlas laughed at something Indigo said.

“You mean he didn’t tell you how fucking amazing I am?” Atlas asked the guy standing in front of him, pointing at Indigo.

“Atlas,” Indigo warned.

“What? The kid has the right to know what a motherfucker you are from time to time.”

I paid no attention to two of them. The girl and two guys standing on each side of her were what tickled my attention. Her blond hair flew down her shoulders, swallowing her petite frame. Her striking blue eyes were trained on Indigo, moving slowly to Atlas, while the blond guy standing next to her kept his entire body turned toward her, as if he could protect her from us.

I knew the look on his face. I could recognize yearning and pain as if it were my own. I saw it enough times staring back at me in the mirror whenever I thought about Storm. I was sure it was permanently etched on my face, and I could recognize it in other people even when they tried to hide it.

The dark-haired guy standing on her other side must have been Ash Crowell who the guys spoke of. Those eyes of his had seen more than a young person ever should. The tragedy was written all over his face, the remnants of darkness lingering on him like an extension of his soul. I have never met another person whose eyes held the pain of a thousand other souls because they went through hell and crawled back out.

“Atlas!” Storm roared, shutting them all up. The anger brewed beneath his skin, and even though I felt his eyes on me earlier, I didn’t want to look. He didn’t deserve it anymore.

I could feel his eyes on me now, and I knew if I turned back, I would see the same expression as the blond guy carried. But I wasn’t the one pushing him away this time around. I was ready for the future, for better things. He was the



one stalling now. He was the one stopping us from ever happening.

I glanced up, hating how weak I was where he was involved, hating the need reflecting back at me from his eyes. I quickly glanced back, scanning the three kids watching us with wide eyes.

“Storm Knoxx,” Storm introduced himself, without shaking Ash’s hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Ash Crowell. We have quite a lot to discuss.”

“Nice to meet you,” the kid muttered, just as the girl snickered.

I couldn’t stand this anymore. This dick competition, where they were all sizing each other up, where the kid, Ash, obviously was starstruck by Storm. I pushed through Indigo and Atlas and stepped right in front of Storm, ignoring all three of them.

“Ophelia,” Indigo warned, but I paid him no attention. Storm’s presence behind me almost stopped me, but I kept scanning the kid in front of me from head to toe, before I turned toward the girl standing next to him. “Ophelia!”

“Shut up, Indigo,” I growled, focusing on the girl in front of me.

Ash moved to the side, trying to step in front of the girl, boiling my blood more than necessary. His protective stance was almost laughable, considering that I would have been able to put him down in less than one minute. But I had to give it to him—he thought he could take me on.

“I’ll say this once, and only once, darling,” I started and then leaned closer to his ear. “You don’t want to be in my way. You should ask Stormy.” I turned around to look at Storm. “He can tell you all about me and what a terrible person I am.”

Storm’s hands were fisted on his sides, the vein on his temple throbbing and a tick appeared on his cheek.

“Who are you?” Ash asked, the bravado from before nowhere to be seen, his eyes assessing me and everything I did.

“Ophelia, darling.” I turned and looked at him. “Ophelia Aster.” I grinned, while all of them stood frozen, fear coursing through their bodies. “It is so nice to meet you all.” I chuckled.

Storm wasn’t the only one who could play this game, and it was obvious that people still knew who I was.

It was now important that I remembered as well.



IT WAS WEIRD SITTING IN A ROOM FULL OF PEOPLE YET FEELING inherently alone because none of them wanted to talk to you. Other members of Sons of Hades started coming in, and it was obvious that Storm was slowly setting up shop here, in order to help Ash.

I was still kept in the dark about a lot of things, and considering that Storm didn’t stop glaring at me, I knew it was his doing. Even Atlas stayed away from me, talking to everybody else but me.

I missed Cillian now. I missed talking to him and having him in my corner. He was busy with Tristan and Chiara, trying to find out more about Belladonna, while also working with the FBI to bring his father in.

It was harder than we expected and Logan Nightingale was a hard man to find. They checked all of his hiding places, every single safe house he had, but he was nowhere to be found. And if that didn’t piss me off, I didn’t know what would.

The kid, Ash, kept glancing at me from the other side of the room. It was obvious Indigo was warning him against me. Hell, Indigo didn’t want me anywhere near his precious little Club, and he would be happy when he finds out that after this shit, I would be nowhere to be found.

Just like Logan.

The wooden bar in front of me was a perfect canvas to distract me from everything that was going on around me. My hand tightened around the handle when Ash started walking

toward me, looking over his shoulder to make sure that no one would stop him.

It was almost laughable that these people thought I could be contained if I decided to cause a mess, but I would allow them to think they had any sort of control. Storm kept standing at the exit. If he continued glaring as he was, he was about to burst a blood vessel.

Ash reached me within seconds, pulling out one of the bar chairs and sitting down, his eyes firmly planted on me.

My eyes narrowed at him, but I didn't say a word as he fidgeted on the chair. Slamming the tip of the knife straight into the wooden bar, I turned to him and smiled.

"You're a brave one, aren't you?" I asked, chuckling.

"I would rather say reckless. Being brave has nothing to do with it," Ash answered, curiosity written on his young face.

"You have the same last name as Nikolai," Ash murmured, avoiding my eyes.

"I do." I smirked, not even bothering to correct his thoughts. Everyone still thought Nikolai was my father, and it was better if they still believed that. "It would seem that I am my father's daughter." He didn't need to know the actual truth.

"F-Father?" He stammered.

"Don't look so surprised, Ash. Just because somebody gave them the power to be parents, didn't mean that they were good ones. Yes, we share the same last name, but that's the only thing we shared. Although, if you ask Storm and his buddies, I'm pretty sure that they will tell you what a terrible person I am and to stay away from me."

It was obvious that his mind was working overtime, trying to connect the dots, to understand what I just said. But my focus was soon pulled from him when movement behind him caught my attention. Storm stood next to Indigo, talking with him, while both of them glared at us—Indigo with disdain and Storm with eyes full of pain.

Ash quickly realized I wasn't looking at him. He turned around to see what I was looking at.

"What are you to him?" Ash asked out of the blue and looked at me.

I didn't want to answer that question, because it hurt more than I wanted to admit, knowing that the one person you wanted to give your all was supposedly giving you an out, just because he was too much of a coward to tell you to get the fuck out of his life.

"Nothing," I murmured, unable to look at either of them one second longer.

"Okay." Ash nodded, seemingly choosing his next words carefully. "And what is he to you?"

"Everything," I blurted out without thinking, hiding my eyes from this kid who had hell living in his eyes.

"I'm—"

"I understand that you have a death wish, Ophelia." Indigo's deep voice boomed around us, an underlying current of hate intertwined with every word. I turned and looked at him. He seemed furious, his eyes focused on me. "But the kid shouldn't be the one to pay for your fucked-up behavior."

"Go fuck yourself, Indigo," I bit back. "It's not like I wanted to be here. He made me come, so you can go back to your boss like a good little lapdog and tell him to either look somewhere else or to talk to me like a grown man."

"Indigo—" Ash started, but there was no reasoning with Indigo once he set his mind on something.

"You are such a bitch, Ophelia. Motherfucking bitch."

"Takes one to know one, darling." I chuckled bitterly. "At least I know what I am and what I want. I don't shy away from the shit I did, and I don't mind saying I'm sorry. Tell me, Indigo, is Atlas talking to you again?"

I knew it was the wrong thing to say. I knew it would hit a nerve, but I didn't care anymore. I was walking on eggshells

around all of them, always careful not to say the wrong thing, not to offend any of them, but I'd had enough.

Enough of them making a fool out of me.

Enough of them thinking I was weak.

I'd had enough of playing by their rules, and if they wanted a motherfucking war with all their comments, then they were going to have it.

Faster than I could react or move away, Indigo had his hand wrapped around my throat, lifting me up from the chair as if I weighed nothing. But I wasn't afraid of another man-child who couldn't handle his life and live in his truth.

"And whose fault is that, bitch?" he asked, seething with anger.

"I fucked up shit, Indigo," I choked out. "But that one is all on you."

From the corner of my eye, I could see Ash getting off of his chair, looking around as if someone would help him if Indigo really tried to kill me. They were all counting on it, and it was obvious that Storm wouldn't do shit even if Indigo tried to really hurt me.

"Indigo, you should let her go." Ash spoke slowly, almost too carefully. "You'll kill her."

"I would be doing us all a favor if she stopped breathing. Trust me." Indigo was relentless, his eyes holding anger that I hadn't seen before. Atlas was a sore spot for him, a topic he never wanted to discuss, but I didn't give a fuck about Indigo's heart anymore.

I didn't give a fuck about his feelings. It was obvious he wasn't my friend and he never would be.

"For real, man." Ash placed a hand on Indigo's upper arm. "This is not okay."

"Ash—"

"What the fuck are you doing, Indigo?" Atlas bellowed somewhere from the side, but I couldn't move my head to look

at him.

“I think it’s pretty obvious, Atlas.”

“Let go of her. I thought I warned you what would happen the next time you decided to act like a little bitch.”

“Fuck you, Atlas.”

“You already did that, baby.” Atlas grinned, while my eyes widened even more at the exchange between these two.

They did what? When? Why didn’t Atlas talk about that?

“Now get your hands away from her neck and walk away. Storm might be an idiot right now, but he won’t like it if you kill her, no matter how much he thinks that he hates her.”

It felt as if an eternity passed before Indigo released me, letting me fall against the bar, coughing and wheezing. He got closer to Atlas.

“We need to talk.”

“No, we don’t.” Atlas smiled and took a step toward me. My hand was wrapped around my neck, trying to rub away the soreness coming up. “You already said everything I needed to hear. There’s nothing left for you to say.”

“Atlas—”

“No, Indigo. Save it,” Atlas answered, completely ignoring Indigo.

Atlas’s arms wrapped around my middle, holding me upright, and as we passed next to Storm and straight outside, I finally understood.

Sometimes trying to hold onto something or someone was a sure way to descend into hell. And Storm and this push and pull between the two of us—it was my version of hell.



## STORM

I WAS GOING TO MURDER HER.

No, I was going to murder her, revive her and murder her again. And again. And fucking again until she learned her lesson.

“What the fuck did you do, Ophelia!” I roared, looking straight at her where she sat on the couch, looking up at me as if she didn’t just fuck up the entire operation.

“That girl could have died because of you!”

“But she didn’t,” Ophelia answered calmly. “She survived, and that’s all that matters.” She shrugged. “And don’t raise your fucking voice at me, Storm.”

I looked at her, trying to understand where this ice queen sitting in front of me was coming from. This wasn’t the Ophelia I knew. This wasn’t the woman I would have given my life for.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I asked, trying to break through her icy shell. “You knew the danger. You knew the plan. You—”

“Actually, I didn’t.” She glared at me. “I knew nothing because none of you bothered to fill me in, Storm. None of you told me what the plan was because you don’t trust me. And that’s absolutely fine. But don’t bring me here, under this whole false pretense that you needed me and that you wanted to include me in your plans, when it’s obvious that isn’t the case.”



“Indigo was supposed to—” I was about to say, cursing myself for not seeing it before.

I’d tasked Indigo with Ophelia, telling him that he needed to get off of his high horse and work with her, but it was clear that my decision was not a good one.

“Yeah, exactly,” she murmured and stood up. “I did what I wanted to do, Storm, just like I always do. That girl doesn’t need to be coddled. She doesn’t need to be protected and kept in the dark.”

“She isn’t you!” I thundered, trying to wrap my head around the fact that she put that poor kid in danger. “She doesn’t know how to fight, Ophelia. She isn’t trained for this kind of situation, and what happened is exactly what we wanted to avoid. A psychopath tried to kill her, and he almost succeeded.”

Her eyes kept blinking, her anger a living, breathing thing, existing between us, fueled only more by my own.

“Is that what you tried to accomplish, huh? You tried to kill her?”

“No.” She shook her head. “I tried to give her back her power. You men all preach about equal rights, the fact that we are on the same level as you are, but you don’t allow us to take care of ourselves. That girl was drowning, you fucking idiot!”

“And you almost killed her with your actions!”

“Fine, Storm,” she relented. “Fine. I tried to kill her. Does that make you feel better? Me admitting to your ridiculous accusations? Here, darling.” She pulled her sleeve up and extended her arm toward me. “You wanna carve ‘murderer’ in my flesh? Go ahead, do it. I’m your favorite villain, so why not make it official?”

“You’re being ridiculous.” I huffed.

“I’m being ridiculous?” she exclaimed, her eyes widening. “I’m not the one standing here and accusing you of something utterly insane. That’s all you, buddy.”

“You have no idea what you’ve done,” I murmured. “Dylan and Ash are missing, and Skylar isn’t in the hospital.”

“Then it’s a good thing that I asked Tristan to hack into the GPS system of the car Skylar took from her friend, and Cillian is on his way to her,” she said and sat down on the couch, as if what she did wasn’t the biggest fuckup of her life.

“What?” I asked.

“Cillian is on his way to Skylar, and he’s most probably already with her. He picked up her friend as well. What’s his name?” she pondered. “Kane, I think.”

“That doesn’t erase the fact that there are two guys who are most probably dead, and a shaken young girl who’s doing God knows what.”

“No, it doesn’t,” she agreed. “But unlike you, Storm, I’m not sitting around, blaming other people for my mess. I own it. I know I should have sent her with more people. I know Atlas should have stayed with her, but he didn’t, and that’s on us.”

“You shouldn’t have sent her out there at all!” I yelled out. “Don’t you see? She was safe here.”

“She was trapped here,” she argued. “Just as I am, and she couldn’t see the way out. She didn’t go there because she wanted to run, Storm. She went because she wanted to get back the control they took from her. But you don’t get it, and you never will.”

Ophelia stood up from the couch and started walking toward the door.

“Where are you going?” I asked, taking a step closer toward her.

“Lazar will be sending a car for me,” she replied, looking at me. “I’m not staying here with you for another second.”

“You can’t leave,” I blurted out, earning another one of her glares. “You can’t leave now.”

“And why is that, Stormy?” she asked and walked toward me. “For the first time in your life, please do try to tell me the truth instead of some fucked-up lie.”

“I-I,” I stammered, because the only reason why I didn’t want her to go out there was because I didn’t want her out of my sight.

What happened with Skylar shook me to my core, and I knew that if it was Ophelia, I would have reacted even worse than Dylan and Ash. They didn’t stop to listen to any of us before they took off after her. They didn’t stop to think about the possible consequences and what could happen if they went alone, but they didn’t care.

They didn’t wait for Indigo and Creed, and now they were gone.

Indigo called to tell me about the accident, but their bodies were nowhere to be found, which meant only one thing—Judah and Logan had them, and I knew where they were taking them.

But how could I focus on Ash and Dylan and this entire mess when the woman I loved was slipping through my fingers, and there was no one else to blame but me? If only I had communicated properly. If only I had tried to do things better, to talk to her about my fears and the fact that I couldn’t let her in yet. At least not fully.

Maybe then we wouldn’t have been in this situation where my heart was tearing apart, bleeding on this cold fucking floor as Ophelia got ready to leave me.

“I’m coming with you,” I said, closing the distance between us. She looked up at me, the disgust and anger obvious on her face, but I didn’t give a fuck how she felt about me right now.

All that mattered was for her to be safe and secure. For our kids to be safe, and that meant I was going with her.

“Now look who’s being ridiculous,” she said, moving away from me as if she couldn’t stand to be anywhere near me.

It was funny because I couldn’t stand to be away from her.

“I’m going with you. I’ll take you to Santa Monica and if you still wish to leave, then you can leave, but I’m going.”

“You have to stay here, Storm. You need to help them.”

“Indigo and Atlas are on it, and I will instruct them to coordinate with Cillian. Don’t look at me like that,” I groaned.

“Like what?” she asked.

“Like you hate me? Like you don’t want to spend another moment with me.”

“Because I don’t, Storm,” she answered flatly. “I especially don’t want to spend the next two to three days driving in the same car with you. Driving up here from Santa Monica was enough to drive me crazy, and having to do that a second time is definitely not my idea of fun.”

“Please, Sunshine,” I begged. “We can leave right now, but I can’t let you go without me. You’re pregnant—”

“Stop saying that as if I’m sick!”

“I’m not,” I murmured. “But you’re carrying precious cargo, and I don’t want you out there without me. I know you don’t really care about what I want or how I feel right now, but I would feel much better knowing you’re okay.”

She stopped to think about it, looking at me, at the ceiling, the floor, anywhere, before she looked up at me again, resignation clear in her eyes.

“Fine.” She huffed. “But my father’s men are going to follow us and once we’re in Santa Monica, I’m taking my things and getting the fuck out of there.”

I winced at her words, but I still had two days to maybe change her mind. I had two days to try and fix this mess.

The only question was—would she let me?



SPENDING ALMOST TWENTY HOURS IN A CAR WITH A PERSON who didn’t want to talk to you was a new level of hell I didn’t expect. Spending it with the woman you loved and wanted in

your life was even worse, but I had no idea what to say to fix this shitshow I had caused.

It would have been much faster if we had taken one of the bikes, but I didn't want to risk her or the babies, and the weather right now wasn't exactly made for pregnant ladies. She could fight me as much as she wanted to, but there was nothing I wouldn't do to protect her and our kids, even if it meant driving in this metal cage for hours on end, with the silence as my only companion.

We made our first stop in Reno because I didn't want to drive all day and night. I could see that she was getting more and more uncomfortable, even if she didn't want to voice it. But ever since we left this morning, she'd been quiet.

She wouldn't even look at me, choosing to stare out the window instead. Ophelia was slowly erasing me from her mind. Even though the physical distance between us was almost non-existent, her mind wasn't here.

She wasn't with me anymore, as if she expunged me from her mind and I was nothing more than a designated driver taking her to her next destination.

True to her word, her father's guards were close to us, following, always on our tail, and it was obvious that she didn't want to talk. Hell, I didn't want to talk about this, but we had to. We had to clear the air. If she didn't want to stay after that, then I would try to respect her wishes.

We had destroyed each other in more ways than imaginable, hitting where it hurt the most, letting the anger and pain dictate how we were going to live our lives. I took the broken girl, thinking I could fix her, thinking I could change who she was and how she reacted, but I hadn't realized that there was nothing to be fixed.

Ophelia Aster didn't need fixing—she was perfect as she was, and I was too blind to see it before.

I took the perfect woman for me, but I failed to realize that I was the one unable to let her in. It wasn't her fault that my heart was locked in a vault, and no matter how many times I

told myself that I loved her, that I wanted her with me, the harsh reality was that I didn't know how to give her all the parts of myself without thinking of it as a weakness.

She'd been trying to fix this mess. Maybe it was in her own, weird way, but she tried. Now with a clearer mind and without the anger clouding my judgment, I could see who the real fuckup was, and it wasn't her.

We missed the most important step in the relationship, well, I missed it. Communication was the key to everything. Instead of talking about my fears and the things that bugged me, I took it out on her, pushing, taking, never listening.

I replaced words with kisses because I didn't know how to tell her about the things that laid heavy on my chest. I replaced explanations with sex, masking my deeply rooted fears with passion, hoping she would never see how weak I was.

And I was a weak man. Fear was one of the greatest weaknesses and I was afraid that once she saw it, she would leave. She wouldn't want me anymore.

But as Lazar already said, no one could make Ophelia do anything, and trying to predict how and what she would do was the greatest mistake any of us could make. Instead of giving her the benefit of the doubt, treating her as my equal, I put her in a golden cage, cutting her off from reality because I was too afraid to show her all the fucked-up parts of me.

I wasn't afraid of her seeing the viciousness coursing through my veins because I knew she was capable of the same things. I wasn't afraid of her seeing my anger, because hers mirrored mine.

But I was afraid of her seeing the broken, little boy who often wondered why his parents didn't love him. I was afraid she would see the fear of being abandoned, of being forgotten, of being loved only for that love to be ripped from my hands.

I was terrified of having her and then losing her once my heart and my soul became too attached. But I was already too attached. There was no going back for me. There would never be another woman who could make my blood hum like

Ophelia could. There was no other woman who could make me both angry and happy as she could.

She was it for me, and I failed to show that to her. I did everything in my power to push her away, instead of fighting to keep her with me. And now... now she was going to leave me.

“The first time I saw you, I thought you were an angel of death, coming to take my soul,” I said as we passed the sign for Bakersfield, only two hours away from Santa Monica.

“Your power almost knocked me off of my bike that time, and I knew you were a force to be reckoned with.” I turned my head to the right, looking at her profile. Her slightly arched eyebrows cast a shadow over her eyes, her pouty lips set into a thin line, but she didn’t look at me.

I knew she was listening, but she didn’t want to show it.

“You were such a tiny thing back then, with fury living beneath your skin, humming to the song playing in my heart. I knew I had to have you, no matter the cost, but it wasn’t until we sat down on top of that hill that I saw how much pain you carried in your brilliant eyes. Anger was what fueled you, but this deep-rooted sadness was what ate at you, keeping you in the cage.”

Taking a deep breath, my mind swam through the memories safely tucked in the back of my psyche. Back then, I had no idea how much she would mean to me. But the moment we touched, the moment she showed me the woman underneath the armor of a warrior, I knew she had to come with me.

“It broke my heart when you didn’t show up, and deep inside, I knew you were in trouble. But I couldn’t find you. I didn’t know enough, and I didn’t think that you were the daughter of a man that brought me so much pain.”

Her left eye twitched, the only proof that her mind was attuned to what I was talking about, that she was listening. So I continued.

“I’ve spent years trying to find out more about you, but no one knew who you were or where you went. Even the girl who was with you was nowhere to be found, and I’ve tried, Sunshine.” Her breath hitched as soon as my nickname for her rolled off of my tongue.

“You already know this, but when Logan sent us to get the infamous Ophelia Aster in exchange for Las Vegas, I had no idea it was you. Seeing you in that place, standing there with Kieran and the rest of them, I wanted to burn them all for mistreating you. I thought I was saving you, Sunshine, but you saved me. You woke me up from the deep slumber I was in. I didn’t exist before you, and I’m not going to exist after you.”

“Why are you telling me all of this?” she suddenly asked, her eyes firmly placed on my profile. “It’s too late, Storm. I can’t go on like this anymore. I can’t play these games. One moment you want me, then the next one you don’t. When you realize you’re losing me, you suddenly wake up and decide that you’re going to butter me up with sweet words that mean nothing.”

“I know.” I exhaled.

“Then why?” she exclaimed. “Don’t torture me like this, Storm. Please don’t torture me. If you ever cared about me, stop holding my heart hostage and let me be. Let me go if you’re not going to give this your all.”

“I’m trying to explain myself, Phee,” I murmured. “I’m trying to explain why I’m the way I am and why I did all these things.”

She kept looking at me, but she didn’t say a word after that. She was letting me talk, listening to every single word I said.

“My parents didn’t want me, Phee. They never wanted to have a child. I was just an accident, another burden they had to take care of. I found them after I joined Sons of Hades. My father was a shell of a man, dependent on his drugs, hollow, ready to die. My mom... My mom was already dead by then, overdosed a couple of years back.” I gripped the steering wheel of the car, remembering the face of my father, his frail



body on the floor, his eyes hollow of emotion, but the recognition was there.

He recognized me as soon as I walked through that door. His eyes, the same color as mine, filled with tears, but I had no empathy for a man that sold me so easily.

“He begged me for money, Ophelia. He hated what he did to me, but he didn’t care enough at that point to stop himself from begging me for his next shot. The house I was born in was in ruins. No electricity, no food, bare walls, and a hollow soul living inside. I had no emotions toward the man who had destroyed my life. I told myself that I would never be like him. I told myself I would never hurt those I loved, but I did just that.” I glanced at her. “I hurt you.”

I hurt the one person I wanted to cherish, because I didn’t know how to let go of my past. I told myself over and over again that I was doing the right thing, that I was nothing like them, but my actions were the opposite of what I promised myself, and I would regret it for the rest of my life.

“I pushed you away because I don’t know how to show you my fear, Sunshine,” I whispered. “I was afraid you would see the weak man and you would never want me. I was afraid you would take one look at me and realize that I wasn’t what you wanted. My fear controlled me and I tried masking it with this anger that I still don’t know how to let go of.”

“You could’ve told me all of this before, Storm,” she mumbled. “Don’t you think I was afraid as well? I’d just stabbed the man I was supposed to marry a long time ago, thrown into your world, and all I wanted was for someone to see me, to truly love me, to show me that I wasn’t the monster they all made me out to be. That’s all I wanted.” She took a deep breath and turned toward the road again. “We all have our demons, Storm. Some are louder than the others, but we all have them. We all have fear. We all live with anger. We all carry pain deep inside our souls, and we all make mistakes. It’s up to us how we control those things. It is up to us how we decide to go forward.”

“I know,” I murmured.

“I don’t think you do,” she added. “I don’t think you truly understand what you did to me, to us.” She turned her face toward me. “I gave you so many chances, Storm. I stayed when I should have gone. I loved you with all my heart, hoping that you would wake up from this slumber, and that you would finally see me. I don’t need money, Storm. I have enough of that on my own. I don’t need someone to protect me because I can do that myself. I just wanted someone to hold me, to tell me things would be okay. That’s what I wanted, and I chose you. I would always choose you, Storm. But now there are two other little people who need me more than you do, and I can’t keep putting our needs above theirs.”

“I understand,” I rasped.

“Do you really?” she asked. “Because what you’re doing right now is trying to lure me back into your web of lies. You’re trying to be nice, but you’re only being nice when there are no other people around us. Indigo was choking me back in that cabin, and you just stood there, doing nothing. Why? Because your ego was hurt? Because you didn’t want to seem weak since I told you I was leaving?”

“No.” I shook my head. “That’s not why.”

“It doesn’t really matter anymore, does it?” She smiled hollowly. “Once we get back to the Club, I’ll be leaving. I don’t want to live like this,” she whispered. “I’ve had enough heartache and pain to last me a lifetime. The last thing I would want to have is a future where my happiness was something that depended on your mood. I will always be Ophelia Aster, and you will always be Storm Knoxx. Our worlds, they don’t play well with each other. My family did too much damage to yours, and people would always know. They would remember. I don’t want these kids to be looked at as enemies. I want them to be loved, cherished, and protected. I don’t want to live in the Club my entire life.”

“I get it,” I grunted. “You want more.”

“Yes, I want more. I’ve spent so many years running, hiding, fighting, killing... I’ve spilled so much blood, Storm, nothing could ever wash it off of my hands. But I want to have

some peace, or at least something akin to peace. And you can't give me that. You can't promise me that you would never resent me for the things Nikolai did, because you would. Every time I do something that doesn't align with your own beliefs, you look at me in the same way you looked at him. You might not want to believe it, but you still think I'm a monster. You still think I'm incapable of love, of trust, and it shows. It's obvious that your members think the same."

The air surrounding us was thick with emotion, suffocating both of us. She wanted a partner, an equal, and I failed to provide her with that. I thought I was going to be better at this than she was, but it was obvious that two people like us could never find common ground because of everything that had happened.

"I don't want you to leave," I murmured, the words leaving a bitter taste in my mouth. Just thinking about life without her squeezed my chest, the monstrous talons ripping through my skin, right through my heart. "I don't want our kids to grow up with parents who are separated."

"You gave me no choice, Storm. You told me that you're giving me an out without even asking if that's what I wanted."

"I didn't want to give you an out or to push you to do something you didn't want to do. I'm terrible at this, Sunshine." I looked at her. "Words don't come easily to me, and I didn't explain myself properly." I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "I wanted to tell you that if you wanted to leave, I wouldn't stop you. I wanted to tell you that I didn't want you to leave, but if that would make you happy, I would respect your wishes. I would respect anything you decide to do, but I want you with me. I want to grow old with you, to laugh and cry with you. I want to raise our kids together. That's what I wanted to say, but instead, I pushed you away. My poor choice of words created a chasm between us, and I will regret it for the rest of my life."

Silence ensued, holding us in its tight grip, and I had no idea what she was going to say. Did I lose her forever? Was she ever going to be able to get over the things I did in the last couple of months?

“I don’t know what to say, Storm,” she mumbled, pushing her hands between her legs. “The way you made me feel...” she trailed off. “It was too much. This constant push and pull between us, I just... I don’t know what to think.”

“Just... stay,” I pleaded. “Stay with me, Phee. We could figure this out. We could make it work.”

She shook her head, avoiding my eyes. “I can’t. My heart is telling me to stay, but my mind... My mind is telling me to go, to get away from you, at least for a little while. We need time, Storm. Time to figure out what we really want.”

“You’re trying to run away from me,” I grunted.

“No.” She shook her head. “This is me doing the right thing for both of us, Storm. This is me trying to think things through before acting on them. Trust me, I really did think about all of this. If I stay now, we might never be able to think about all those things that were holding us back. And if once everything is said and done, we still want to be with each other, then we will be.”

“Please,” I broke down. “Please, don’t leave me.”

“I need time,” she whimpered. “Time to set my head straight. Time to be healthy for these kids. Time to figure out who was behind all of this.”

“I can protect you. I can give you all those things,” I argued, pleading with her. “Just please don’t leave, darling. I don’t want you to go.”

“I have to,” she sobbed, tears cascading down her face. It broke me seeing her like this. It hurt knowing that I was the reason for her tears, and I was the reason for both of our heartaches. “I have to get away from you and you have to get away from me for a little while. It isn’t healthy what we had, Storm. All these lies, all those times when we didn’t communicate, none of it is healthy.”

“But—”

“No, Storm,” she said and squeezed my bicep. “We need to do this. We need to figure things out on our own. I’m still

going to be near. I'm not going to disappear from your life, but I need time alone."

I didn't want her to be alone. I didn't want to be alone. What was the point of everything we went through if in the end we wouldn't be together?

"You know," I started. "When I found you in that warehouse, I thought I hated you," I mumbled. "But I didn't. Not really." I took a deep breath and looked at her. "I'm going to give you time, Ophelia. I'll give you time until the twins are born, but then I'm coming for you. I'm coming and there's nothing you could do to stop me. I lost you twice already, and I'm not going to lose you a third time."

"Storm—"

"No." I shook my head. "You want time, fine. I'll give you time. I agree that we need to figure things out, but just because I'm giving you time, it doesn't mean I'm giving up on us. I will never give up, Sunshine. Never."

"I know." She smiled through her tears. "I know you won't."

What she didn't know was that I wouldn't let her go through this pregnancy alone. She might choose to leave the compound, but I would make sure that she could never forget about me. I would be a constant reminder of what was waiting for us at the end of the road, no matter what it took.

Days, nights, hell, I would even abandon my position in the Club if it meant having her.

I meant what I said—I wasn't going to lose her again. This time... This time she was going to be mine forever.



## OPHELIA

THE HOUSE WAS QUIET, HALF-EMPTY ONCE WE FINALLY reached our destination, and all I wanted was to lie down in my bed and cry for weeks. Something broke inside of me, but I knew I was making the right decision.

We needed time separately to figure things out. We had to work on ourselves if we wanted to make this work. Both of us carried too much anger, resentment and pain, and we had to learn how to quiet those demons of ours if we wanted to move on.

I didn't want to build a life with him if we didn't know how to communicate. I didn't want to build a life with him if we were going to be at each other's throats for the smallest things. I wanted us to live in harmony, not to fight every step of the way. I was determined to break this generational trauma where family life was a catastrophe with parents constantly fighting.

If Storm and I wanted to make this work, we had to work through our own trauma first, before the kids came. I didn't want them to have the same life as I had. I didn't want them to be woken up at six in the morning by their parents shouting at each other.

I didn't want them to flinch every time a door slammed, or to feel as if they weren't enough. Resentment often followed people who grew up like that, and I didn't want that for them.

Storm walked with me through the doors, greeting the guards stationed at the entrance. The majority of the Club was

in Emercroft Lake now, figuring out the Judah and Logan situation, Cillian and the guys helping with the same.

Skylar was nowhere near Winworth right now, but Storm was right in a way—I could have gotten her killed. I shouldn't have let her go out like that, alone and unprotected, but I wanted to help her. I wanted to show her that she could have control over her life, that these guys of hers weren't the ones who needed to protect her.

If she didn't know how to protect herself, then nothing else mattered. Dylan and Ash weren't made of stone, and sooner rather than later, she would have found out that even the strongest ones broke if too much burden was put on them.

But I miscalculated the situation, and I put them all in danger. It didn't matter that I was trying to help, I still messed up. Maybe it wasn't only my mess-up, but I should have known better.

“Are you going to pack now, or...?” Storm asked as soon as we walked through the doors, stopping at the bottom of the staircase leading to the first floor where our rooms were.

“I'm too tired for that,” I answered. “I'm going to leave packing for tomorrow and I'll talk to Zoe about staying at her place.”

His face lit up like a Christmas tree, and I could almost see the wheels turning in his head.

“No, Storm,” I warned. “Don't get any ideas.” I chuckled. “I'm thinking of living with her because it will be easier. The hospital is just around the corner from her apartment, and you wouldn't be too far away in case I need you.”

“I didn't say anything,” he answered, but I recognized that mischievous look in his eyes.

“No, you didn't say anything, but your thoughts are pretty loud. I'm not staying with her because I want to be close to you.” *Liar*. “It's just more convenient.” Lies, lies, lies, all of those were lies.

I wanted to be close to him, because even though I could protect myself, I felt safer knowing he was around. But my



stubborn ass didn't want to admit that out loud and rather than saying it, I tried playing it cool.

It was obvious I was failing.

“Right, right.” He grinned. “I believe you.”

“I'm telling the truth.” I huffed.

“I know, Sunshine.” He smiled and took a step closer to me, taking my hand in his. “You're going to stay with Zoe because it's more convenient.”

“Yes, that's correct,” I said.

“And because you want to be close to me.”

“Yes, that's... No.” I shook my head. “Storm, stop twisting my words.”

“I'm not doing anything.” He had the audacity to laugh at me. “I'm just repeating what you said.”

“Liar.” I smiled.

His fingers trailed over my arm, all the way to my shoulder, slowly sneaking into my hair at the back of my neck, massaging my scalp. A moan escaped from my lips, my nipples immediately standing up, begging for his attention. My body was the biggest traitor, and ever since I got pregnant, it seemed that all I could think about was him.

I stopped counting how many times I woke up horny and needy, itching for a release, but he wasn't with me.

“Go to bed, Sunshine,” Storm rasped, his pupils dilated, his entire body humming with need just like mine. “You need to rest.”

“I know,” I whispered, closing my eyes, and pressing my body to his. “Will you come to tuck me into bed?” I asked as I looked up at him.

My nipples rubbed against his chest, the clothing between us creating a friction that shot straight to my core. My teeth bit down on my lower lip, stopping the moan threatening to erupt from me.

His cock strained against his pants, pressing into my hip, and fuck it all, I wanted this man. Even if it was the last time, I fucking wanted him.

“Come to bed with me,” I purred, pushing my fingers through his hair. “I need you, Storm.”

“Fuck,” he cursed, pressing his forehead against mine. “You don’t know what you do to me, Ophelia. You have no fucking idea.”

“Then come and show me,” I murmured, pressing my lips to the skin at his throat, my teeth nipping at the sensitive flesh just behind his ear.

“I’m trying to be good, Sunshine,” he groaned. “I’m trying to give you space.”

“But I don’t want space now,” I said. “I want you. Tomorrow, we can have space and anything else we might need. Tonight, I want you to break me and put me back together.”

“Jesus fucking fuck,” he muttered, pushing his hips against me. His hand snuck into my pants, straight into my underwear, where my heat throbbed with insane need.

“You’re soaked,” he growled as his fingers dragged through my folds, softly touching my clit. “Is this for me, Sunshine?” he asked.

“Y-Yes,” I moaned. “I can’t use the vibrator anymore, Storm. It isn’t working.” I cried out as he pushed one finger through my opening.

“Fuck. Fuck. Are you thinking of me when you play with this pussy? Do you call out my name while you’re playing with my pussy?”

“Your pussy?” I asked, chuckling.

“Yes,” he growled. “This is my pussy, Ophelia. Today, tomorrow, seventy years from now, this will always be my pussy.”

Fuck me sideways and six ways to Sunday. I loved possessive Storm, and I missed these moments with him. Our

love language was a physical touch, and I knew that even if we worked through our issues separately and learned to communicate better, this would always be the best way for the two of us to connect.

“I’m going to go up to my room,” I whispered and bit down on his earlobe, earning a soft growl from him. His chest vibrated, his hand tightening in my hair, and I hummed with excitement, my entire body ready for his taking. “And you’re going to come and show me just how much you want me. Your pussy misses you,” I whimpered.

“Fuck. Me.”

“That’s what I’m planning to do.” I chuckled and before I could change my mind, I stepped away from him, immediately missing his touch.

“You have five minutes, Stormy.” I grinned. The animalistic way with which he observed me, as if I were a prey and he was a predator, sent a new wave of heat through my body. “If you’re not there, I’ll start without you.”

“Don’t you dare,” he growled. “Only I can touch you.”

“We’ll see.” I winked at him and ran upstairs, going straight for my room.

My hands trembled, my muscles strained. The clothes I wore were suddenly too tight, too suffocating and I wanted them off. I pushed the door open with a smile on my face, thinking of all the ways I could position myself in. I saw her standing right next to my nightstand, going through the papers I got from my doctor.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

Nova jumped and turned around, frazzled by my presence. Her eyes went wide, fear screaming from their depths, and she stood frozen in the spot, waiting for me to move.

“I’m not going to ask you again, Nova,” I said, taking a step forward. Her muscles locked, paralyzing her, while her hands shook, rustling the papers she held in her hands. “What were you looking for? Why are you in my room?”

“I-I,” she stammered. “Ophelia, *pozhaluysta*,” she begged. “Please don’t hurt me.”

“Too late for that,” I answered, the anger replacing the passion Storm ignited earlier, pushing me toward her. “Why are you going through my things?”

“*Pozhaluysta*,” she whimpered, taking a step back from the bed, going toward the windows. “I didn’t want to do this.” She faked innocence so well, but I could see the snake slithering underneath her skin.

“Cut the crap, Nova. Others might believe you and they might fall for this act of innocence, but I’m not buying it.”

I couldn’t understand how I didn’t see it before. Her fake politeness toward me and Zoe, her always being around, sitting with us, pretending to be our friend. Maybe that’s why once I found out she was the mole, it didn’t surprise me as much as it should have.

She was an Aster after all. A fucking, filthy Aster, and I should have seen the signs.

“You know.” She chuckled, her face suddenly changing from the fake innocence to the real monster living beneath. “I almost had it all. Storm was supposed to be mine. This entire empire was supposed to be mine, but then you showed up, destroying everything.”

Poison dripped from her lips, her disdain for me obvious from the way she looked at me.

“Why are you doing this? Why are you here, Nova?”

“Because I wanted to have it all!” she thundered, crossing the small distance between the bed and the windows, coming closer to me. “Because I was promised everything, only if I were patient enough. But you’re like a motherfucking cockroach, Ophelia. Nothing can kill you.”

“You’re right, but you’re still not answering my question. Who sent you, Nova?”

Sickening laughter bubbled up from her chest, echoing around us, bouncing off the walls. She always seemed familiar

to me, but I could never put my finger on it. I could never figure out why. I was sure I have never met her, but—

“My father said you would be a hard one to destroy, but I didn’t believe him.”

“Your father?” I asked, narrowing my eyes to her. “I have no idea who you’re talking about.”

“My father, Ekaterina.” She spat my name out. “*Our* father.” She grinned viciously.

No. It couldn’t be.

“What are you talking about?”

“You think you’re the only one he trained? You think you’re the only one he pushed to the edge?”

“Who’s your father, Nova?” I asked, anger taking over my body.

“He wanted me, you know.” She smiled softly, lost in her memories. “But they wouldn’t let him hold me. They wouldn’t let him keep me, so he had to pretend to love you, when all he wanted was me.”

*Fuck my life.*

I should have seen this coming. I should have known.

“Nikolai Aster is your father,” I stated matter-of-factly. There was no question in it. There was no doubt. The same insanity shone in her eyes just like it did in his, but I didn’t see it before. She was such a good actor, wearing a perfect mask, and I failed to recognize the monster hiding among us.

“He promised he would take me with him once we got rid of you. He hated you, Ophelia, but he couldn’t kill you without bringing the wrath of Russia on his shoulders, so we had to be careful. We had to plan.”

“Nova,” I started. “Your father was a sick man.” I grinned. “And I’m glad he’s not here today to see all his plans destroyed.”

“Liar!” she bellowed. “Our father was an amazing man. He loved me, he wanted me, he wanted to give me the world.”

“Then why didn’t he?” I asked, slowly moving toward the nightstand on this side of the bed, where my knife laid. “Why didn’t he give you everything?”

“Because of you!” she cried out. “You took everything from me, so I took everything from you as well.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, slowly bending down to take the knife.

She was lost in her thoughts, her attention on everything and nothing. She was breaking in front of me, and I wasn’t going to stop it. This was what I wanted. This was what I needed.

“I took Ava from you.” She grinned. “She cried and cried and cried, but I couldn’t allow that kid to survive. I couldn’t allow it to happen.”

I froze, the white noise filtering through my ears.

“You killed Ava?” I asked just as my hand wrapped around the handle of the knife. “You killed my best friend?”

“Well.” She shrugged. “*Killed* is such a harsh word. I set her free. I saved her from you.”

“You had no right,” I bit out. “No right!”

She started talking to herself, looking down at the test results my doctor gave me. The last picture from the ultrasound shook in her hands, her anger directed at my kids.

I slowly went around the bed, inching closer to her, using the opportunity to approach her.

“They will never be yours,” Nova mumbled, looking at the picture. “You will never know happiness.”

She was wrong. I would have it all, and all those who wronged me would find out what happened to the people who dared to cross me.

“She’s going to take them.” Nova laughed maniacally, paying no attention to me. “She’s going to take everything from you, and I will get Storm. Yes, yes, yes, I will have him. I will have it all.”

And people called me insane.

This here was the real insanity. The delusions she had, the game she played, this was a manipulator par excellence, and I had to stop her. Fuck what Storm said. This woman didn't deserve to live.

I snuck behind her and pushed her onto the bed, the papers and the picture falling down on the floor as she lost her footing, surprised by me. She wasn't paying attention and now she was going to die.

I sat on her back, holding her down as she thrashed on the bed, trying to break free.

"Let go of me!" she screeched. "I will call Storm. Storm!" she screamed. "Help me!"

"Oh, darling." I chuckled, moving the hair from her face. I pressed the tip of my blade to her cheek and leaned down toward her ear. "Storm isn't coming. No one is coming to save you. But you are going to tell me everything you know." I grinned. "Every filthy secret, everything you did."

"I'm not telling you anything." She laughed. "They're coming for you," she sang. "All the demons are coming for you."

"They're not coming, Nova," I said, pulling back. "They're already here."

Her hips were trapped by my body sitting on top of her. The derangement shining from her eyes reminded me of Nikolai, of the way he used to look in those last moments, completely lost to the insanity taking over.

This girl, this woman, thought that she could swoop in and take everything away from me. And judging by the papers she was going through, she was reporting to Belladonna about my pregnancy, which also meant that my children weren't safe anymore.

And it was all thanks to her.

"So, this is how we're gonna do this, darling." I grinned, lifting myself up and turning her around. Her eyes blazed with

anger, but I paid her no attention. I pressed the blade to her shirt, right above her heart.

“You’re stupid, Ophelia.” She laughed. “They all believe me. They all love me. Not you! You’re not the favorite anymore.”

“Oh, boy.” I smiled. “You really are completely and utterly crazy.”

“I’m not crazy!” she bellowed. “I’m better than you. Better than all of you.” She nodded to herself. “Better. I’m better. Daddy told me I’m better.”

Jesus fucking Christ.

Nikolai really did a number on her. Or maybe it was more than that. Maybe the insanity lived in his blood, destroying everyone slowly over the years. Maybe genetics had more to do with this than the environment the person lived in.

And for the first time in my life, I was glad we didn’t share the same blood. I was glad my children would never be touched by anything related to Nikolai.

Before Lazar came back into my life, I believed I was just like Nikolai. I believed I was a psychopath who didn’t care about other people, because he made me think so. But not anymore.

Seeing Nova like this, her mask completely off, brought some clarity to me. I would fight anyone who tried to take these children away from me, or to harm them. I thought I had nothing left to fight for, but the mere thought of Belladonna getting her hands on them made my blood boil.

“Who is Belladonna, Nova?” I asked her, my blade ripping open the T-shirt she wore, revealing the lacy black bra underneath. “Who is the bitch that’s trying to take what’s mine?”

“I will never tell you.” Nova laughed. “She will kill you. She will take everything from you. Your life, your kids, your pathetic existence will stop.”



I lowered my upper body toward her, dragging the blade of my knife between her breasts, to her collarbone, and all the way to her ear. “Oh, really?” I chuckled. “She will do all that?”

“Yes, yes!” Nova yelled out. “She will take it all.”

“And how’s she gonna do that, huh? How’s she going to destroy me, Nova?”

“Easy,” this fucking idiot answered, completely unaware of the game I was playing. “She has it all planned. All of it is planned.”

“What is planned, Nova?” I whispered, keeping the tip of my knife to her throat. “How am I going to die?”

“Painfully,” she panted, closing her eyes. “And all will be well in the world.”

“But how? Am I going to bleed out? Is she going to kill me herself?”

“She will separate you from everybody. She will get you when you’re at your loneliest, because you won’t have Storm, you won’t have your friends. She already told him. Yes, yes, yes, she told him.”

“What did she tell him, Nova?”

“She told him.” She laughed maniacally. “She told him to choose. He had to choose. And he did, he did, he chose. He didn’t choose you. He will never choose you. He loves you. He wants you, but he will never choose you.” That we could both agree on. “He let you go. He let you go. And she knows. She knows.”

For fuck’s sake.

“She knows you wouldn’t wait. She knows you wouldn’t understand.”

“What won’t I understand?”

“Why he didn’t choose you. Why he chose the Club.”

A-ha! Now we were getting somewhere.

“So she told him to choose?”

“She did. She did. And he didn’t choose you.”

“Okay,” I said carefully, aware that this episode of hers could stop if I said something wrong. She was babbling everything I needed to know.

I knew Storm chose the Club, but I had one more question that needed to be answered.

“Did she tell him to choose you instead?”

“Yes!” she moaned. “But he doesn’t want me. While you’re breathing, he will never take me fully. He won’t touch me again. I need him to touch me, to show me how much he loves me. I need him, I need him...”

“I see,” I mumbled.

Was that why he was walking around the Clubhouse with her? Was that why he didn’t kill her, why he paraded her in front of me? Because Belladonna told him? Because some faceless monster kept him in her claws?

The fury in my veins came back to life, whispering to take her life, to end her right here and right now, but not yet. Not until I got all the information I needed.

“Do you know who Belladonna is?” I asked, keeping my wrath at bay, my hand trembling around the knife.

“I do, I do, I do,” she practically sang, closing her eyes. “She’s the best. The most powerful. All thanks to me. All thanks to Logan.”

*Logan?* “What does Logan have to do with it all?”

“He created her. He made her. He helped her see her full potential.”

“Do I know her?” I asked. “Do I know Belladonna?”

Nova’s eyes flew open, the glassy veil lifted, and she was back to pretending she was a damsel in distress.

“Storm!” she bellowed, calling the name of my man. My fucking man.

“He can’t help you, Nova.”

“Storm! Please. She’s trying to kill me!”

She thrashed underneath me, trying to get away. With each movement, the tip of the blade kept cutting against her skin, the droplets of blood rolling down her neck.

“He can’t help you, traitor.” I chuckled, moving the knife to her ear. “No one can help you.”

“Why are you doing this?” she whimpered, lying through her fucking teeth. “It’s not my fault he loves me more than he loves you.” She grinned momentarily, almost as quickly replacing it with a fearful expression.

I couldn’t take it anymore. I couldn’t stop the need to destroy her.

The heel of my left hand pressed against her forehead, keeping her head down to the bed. My knife cut through her ear, the crunching sound mixing with her screams, with the stench of her blood filling my nostrils.

“You’re insane!” she wailed, trying to push me off her, but I was stronger. I was better at this than she ever would be.

Nikolai might have trained her, he might have told her to destroy me, but she would never be me. She could never be me.

I sliced the knife upward, cutting through her ear, letting it hang on a thread. Blood pooled around her, the destroyed blood vessels crying out a river of blood.

“This is what you get for crossing me, Nova.” I smiled. “And this,” I said, pressing the tip of the blade to her throat. “This is what you get for trying to take what’s mine.”

“He will never forgive you!” she cried, tears streaming down her cheeks. “You’re killing someone he loves.”

“Oh, Nova.” I chuckled. “He knows who you are. They all do. They know your real name. They know who you’re working with, and he’s been only using you to get closer to Belladonna.”

Pure devastation shone in those eyes.

“No,” she whispered. “You’re lying. He loves me. He wants me as his queen.”

“Storm will never want you, darling, and you know why?” I leaned down, my lips pressed against her temple. “Because he already has me, and I will always be better than any of you. I am the one who survived Nikolai’s insanity. I am the one he shaped, molded into the perfect assassin. I am the only one who’s strong enough to conquer nations, to bring the strongest of men to their knees. Not you.” I pulled back, pitying this poor girl. “It will never be you.”

“No!”

“Oh, and, Nova.” I smiled at her. “Nikolai isn’t my father. Not my biological father.”

“You’re lying,” she seethed.

“My name is Ophelia Ekaterina Asterova,” I said proudly. “I am a daughter of a true dragon. Not the pathetic Nikolai Aster.”

“Noooo—”

She started screaming just as I pushed my blade through her throat, right through her larynx, choking her on her own blood. Her blue eyes widened, shocked, as I kept pushing through, until the hilt of my blade was the only thing protruding from her neck.

Her body convulsed, shaking underneath my body, yet I sat there, right on top of her, the crimson color of her blood staining my hands.

For the first time, I didn’t regret killing someone. I didn’t regret killing the traitor.

I didn’t see him standing there. I didn’t hear him entering the room, not until he spoke.

“Is she dead?” Storm asked. As I looked up, his eyes shone with relief.

“Well, she has a knife protruding from her neck. You tell me.” I shrugged and got off her, wiping my hands on my leggings.

Storm’s eyes were on me, not on her. I expected him to yell, to say something. I never expected him to cross the distance between us and to get right to my face, lifting me up in his arms.

My legs automatically wrapped themselves around his waist, my hands wrapping around his neck. As he pulled my head closer to him, crashing his lips to mine, I knew that there was not an ounce of regret in him over what I did.

That insecure part of me, the part that wanted to believe the worst, had heard Nova’s words as she said that he loved her, that he wanted her. That part wanted to believe the worst. It wanted to push him as far away as possible because it feared that we wouldn’t survive another rejection.

I wouldn’t be able to survive it.

“You’re driving me crazy, Sunshine,” he groaned between the kisses, his length rubbing between my legs, driving me insane. “One of these days, you’re going to kill me, and I’ll be a happy man, dying because of you.”

“I would much rather have you alive,” I murmured, my teeth dragging over his stubble. “It wouldn’t be fun torturing you in your grave.”

I dragged my nails over his scalp, earning another groan, another animalistic growl, as my teeth clamped on the pulse point on his neck.

“I need you to take me, Storm,” I murmured, licking the place I just bit. “I need you to show me who you belong to.”

Like a man possessed, he threw me onto the bed and pushed Nova’s lifeless body to the side, her blood pooling all around me. My hands lifted to my face, coloring my skin in her blood, in the blood of a traitor.

“Come on, Stormy,” I cooed, looking up at him. “Come and take me.”



## STORM

OPHELIA'S HAIR WAS GETTING STAINED BY NOVA'S BLOOD, HER cheeks red from the crimson surrounding us, and she had never looked so beautiful.

My Ophelia.

My dark angel, ready to kill everyone who stood in her way.

God, I told her I would let her go, but how could I when my body had never felt this alive? I was a hollow man without her by my side, and I knew I had to show her. I had to show her that I would never belong to another.

There was no one else out there for me.

She was it.

My beginning.

My ending.

My fucking forever.

For a moment there, I saw fear flashing through those brilliant eyes of hers. Fear of rejection, of my anger, as if I actually gave a fuck about Nova. I kept her around because I was told to do so. I kept her around because she was a means to an end. But this woman in front of me, Ophelia, was who my heart would always beat for.

It had been beating only for her since the first moment my eyes landed on her. Since I felt her anger, her pain, and her fury, as if they were my own.

The best decision I had ever made was keeping her with me. Even when she hated me. Even when she fought me, it was the best damn thing I ever did, and I would do it all over again if it meant having her here with me.

She pushed her leggings down, her pale skin coming out, my eyes feasting on her long legs. My cock hardened at the sight of those scars I gave her, when I carved my name into her thigh. Her leggings fell to the floor, kicked off by her, leaving her only in red panties, waiting for my teeth to remove them.

I bent down, going on my knees, wrapping my hands around her calves, pulling her entire body until her bottom rested on the edge of the bed.

Her shirt rode up, revealing her stomach. Our kids slept there, protected by their mother. She still wasn't showing as much as I would want her to, but I could see the soft rounding of her belly. As if they had a mind of their own, my hands traveled over the length of her legs, over her hips, to her belly, needing to touch the two miracles she carried inside.

"Mine," I growled, looking up at her. "All three of you are mine, Ophelia."

Her pupils dilated, her chest rising and falling with harsh breaths as she kept herself up on her elbows.

"I told you I would give you time, and I will keep my promise. But don't ever think that you don't belong to me. You and these kids are all I need, Ophelia. Don't you ever forget that."

"Storm," she whimpered. "You don't me—"

"I mean it, baby girl. I mean it with my whole heart. I fucked up. I fucked up massively, but I will spend the rest of my life proving that I was the right choice. That I was the only choice for you."

I didn't let her answer that. I knew she had doubts. It was obvious in the way she was looking at me, fighting through the haze of lust, but I needed her to understand that I wasn't letting go.



Bending my head down, I pressed my nose to her mound, inhaling her spicy scent. Her smooth skin under the palms of my hands felt like silk, and even the scars I knew she hated were what I loved. They were a part of her. A part of the woman I loved.

My teeth clamped down on the band of her panties, pulling them down, revealing her glistening pussy. My hand pushed her panties down her legs, letting them fall next to her leggings.

Her heady scent made me dizzy; dizzy with lust, with need rivaling her own.

“Storm!” she screeched as my tongue lapped at her soaked pussy, drinking in the juices spilling from her

“Shhh,” I murmured against her center, keeping her still with my hand at her hip. “I need to clean you up, baby. Stay still.”

“I-I can’t,” she moaned. “It’s too much. I need—”

“I know what you need,” I replied. My tongue circled around her clit, my teeth softly biting down on the enlarged nub. “I know exactly what you need,” I said as I pushed two fingers through her tight opening, stretching her wide.

“Oh, God!”

“That’s it, darling,” I mumbled, licking her clean. My fingers scissored inside of her, rubbing against her walls, against that spot I knew drove her crazy.

“Fuck!” she yelled out, falling down on the bed.

Her hips moved in the rhythm of my fingers, seeking the sweet release only I could give her. My third finger joined the other two, my muscles cramping from the force I was pushing in and out, while my tongue lapped at her.

She was the only meal I needed.

The only salve I needed to soothe my wounds.

“I-I...” she trailed off, her chest rising into the air. “I’m going to—”

Her walls fluttered around my fingers, but before I could push her over the edge, I pulled out, completely detaching myself from her.

Her eyes flew open, anger and confusion filling the lines of her face.

“What the fuck, Storm?” she yelled, breathing heavily. “What are you doing?”

“Shhh,” I murmured, lowering myself down, pressing my lips to hers. “I need to feel you around me, Sunshine. Remember, you only get to come when I say so.”

“Storm,” she moaned, trembling as my hands explored her entire body. I pushed her shirt above her chest, her heavy breasts inviting me in.

“These are bigger now,” I mumbled as my mouth closed around her nipple. My fingers pinched the other one, earning another moan from her. “I bet I could get you to come just by doing this.” I grinned.

“T-they’re sensitive,” she hissed, looking down at me. “It’s the pregnancy.”

“Hmmm,” I murmured. “I might need to keep you pregnant all the time if this is the response I’d be getting.”

“Storm!” she yelled out as I bit down on her nipple, my tongue licking around as my teeth retracted.

“You have no idea what it does to me, knowing that you’re carrying our children here,” I said, placing my hands over her stomach again. “I can’t wait to see you with a large belly, walking around, knowing that I have permanently marked you as mine.”

I pulled my shirt over my head, throwing it to the side, followed by my pants and my boxers. My cock sprung free, weeping, wanting in.

“I wanna keep you like this, Ophelia,” I murmured, kissing my way over her belly, toward her collarbone. “I want to keep you barefoot and pregnant, and in my fucking kitchen. I have no idea why. I want to see you with ten children, running

around our house, all of them looking like you, with your eyes, and these pouty lips.” I pressed my thumb to her lower lip. “I want it all, and I want it with you.”

“Storm,” she growled, wrapping her arms around my neck. “If you don’t fuck me right now, you won’t have a dick to make all those kids.”

I started laughing, my chest expanding from the love, the need for her, the utter possessive need to own her and for her to own me.

“Your wish,” I murmured, pressing a soft kiss to her lips, “is my command.”

I held her hips in my hands, lifting her only enough for my dick to run through her folds, teasing her further.

“Storm!”

I chuckled, but I believed her when she said she would cut off my dick. I lined up my dick with her opening, and without waiting another second, I slammed in, finally going home.

“Fuck!” I cursed at the same time as her moans echoed around us. “Jesus fucking fuck, Ophelia.”

“More,” she groaned. Her body was marred with Nova’s blood, and unable to help myself, my hands started dragging over her chest, spreading the crimson as if her body was a canvas for me to paint on.

She did the same, dragging her hands over my chest, her tiny nails biting into my skin, not hard enough to break the skin, but enough to spur me, to push my hips to start working on their own.

My mind blanked as I lifted her up, holding her chest pressed to mine, slamming inside her as if I would never get to do this again.

But I would prove to her that she could trust me, that I was made for her. I never fucking believed in soulmates until I met her that day, until my heart fluttered in my chest, coming alive at the sight of this spitfire who didn’t give a fuck how dangerous it was approaching Sons of Hades like that.

My hips pistoned, the sound of our bodies slamming against each other music to my ears. Ophelia's lips sought out mine, her eyes firmly plastered to mine, giving me everything I ever needed.

Love.

Hate.

Pain.

She showed me everything in these moments, everything she had felt over the last couple of months, and I hated that I was the one who put it all there.

"I love you, Sunshine," I breathed out, my fingers rubbing against her clit. "You might hate me now, but I will always love you."

"Storm," she moaned, looking into my eyes. "Please. Please... I can't."

"Do you want to come?" I asked, knowing what the answer would be already. Her body was trembling, ready to release the pent-up energy she kept inside. Beads of sweat ran down my temples, mixing with hers as she pressed the side of her face to mine.

The tremors shook my body, my balls strung up tight, and I needed her to come. I wanted us to come together.

"Come for me, Sunshine," I growled, biting down on her neck. "I want to feel you shatter."

As if a switch was turned on, her walls clamped down on my cock, fluttering at the same time, milking me.

I lost it.

With an inhumane roar, my orgasm rushed through my body, pulling from the very core of my being, going all the way to my balls, through my cock, emptying inside of her.

"Storm!" she screamed out, shaking in my arms, holding onto me like a lifeline. I had no idea where she began and where I ended. Black dots danced in the periphery of my

vision. I held on even after the tremors subsided, even after my body stopped shaking from the force of our orgasm.

I pulled slightly back, looking down at her and her sleepy eyes. The satisfied look on her face warmed my heart, my hand dragging over her hair, all the way to the matted ends, covered in Nova's blood.

Both of us looked like a mess—her covered in the blood of an enemy, me full of scratches and the blood Ophelia painted me with.

“We need a shower.” I chuckled, pressing my lips against her temple.

“Too tired,” she yawned, pressing her head to my chest. “Sleep.”

“I know, but you'll hate waking up covered in her blood.” I slowly detached myself from her, hissing at the loss of contact. My cum spilled down her thighs and over the bloody bed sheets.

The sight of her like this, ruined by me, satisfied and sleepy, calmed the monster living inside of my chest. Mindlessly, I started spreading the cum that spilled down, over her body, over her belly—

“What are you doing?” she asked, chuckling at my attempts to cover her in me as much as possible.

“Marking you,” I mumbled, looking at my masterpiece. “Besides,” I looked up at her, “it's full of protein. I heard it's good for the skin.”

The gleam in her eyes put a smile back on my face.

“You're such a goof.” She smiled back at me.

“I know.” I nodded. Wrapping my arms around her back and underneath her legs, I lifted her up bridal style and started walking toward the door.

“What are you doing?” she asked, wrapping her arm around my neck.

“Shower, talk, food and then sleep,” I said. “Hold on tight,” I instructed, feeling her other arm wrapping around me as I shifted her in my arms and opened the door.

I crossed the short distance between our rooms, thankful that no one was there on the floor. I didn't want to share this moment with anyone else. This was only for us, and hopefully this would be the new beginning we needed.

I needed to tell her about the pact I made with Nico, and I just hoped she wouldn't hit me with the shower head once I did.



## STORM

AS SOON AS WE STEPPED INSIDE THE BATHROOM, I PLACED Ophelia on top of the counter, right next to the sink. I fumbled with the water tap at the bathtub, wanting to make this good for her. We would need to wash off the blood first, before using the bathtub, but I wanted to make her feel good.

Cherished.

Loved.

I had been doing a poor job over the last couple of months, and I hated myself for leaving her all alone when she needed me. She was one of the strongest people I knew, but I also knew other pregnant ladies, and it was obvious that they needed the support.

Yes, she had Zoe and Atlas, but she needed me even if she didn't want to voice it.

And I left her all alone.

I was too busy thinking about everyone and everything else, forgetting that only one person mattered in this entire game. If it was necessary, I would step down as the president. Hearing Nova say all those things made me realize how wrong I really was.

I played right into Belladonna's hands, almost losing Ophelia, because I was too weak to realize that nothing else mattered but my family. The Club was my family for so long, that I failed to see what I was doing to the woman who loved me.



I failed to see that I was losing her and our children, while trying to protect everybody else.

“You know, I can take a shower myself,” she said from behind me, amusement obvious in her voice.

“I know.” I turned around and walked toward her. “But where’s the fun in that?”

I lifted her from the counter, my dick awakening as her bare pussy came into contact with my skin, but now wasn’t the time for sex. This was about her, about making her feel good. This was about putting her before everything else, even my own needs.

I walked us toward the shower, avoiding her eyes. I could almost hear the questions in her mind, especially because she told me she was leaving just a couple of hours ago.

I wanted to let her go. I wanted to let her breathe, but I couldn’t shake this feeling that something bad would happen if I didn’t keep her in my sight. I just hoped she would understand why I wanted to keep her here.

Why I needed to keep her here.

She slid down my body and pressed her back to the wall of the shower, while I opened the tap, letting the lukewarm water start from the showerhead above.

“Fancy.” She grinned, letting me pull her with me right underneath the stream.

The water around us turned red, washing off the blood we were soaked in. I missed these moments, these simple fucking moments that I didn’t cherish the first time around.

I missed just holding her hand, touching her without fear of losing her.

The red started disappearing from the remaining blond strands on her hair, leaving behind just a soft red hue. I turned the water off and took a bottle of shampoo from the shelf, putting a good amount onto my hand.

Her eyes followed my every move, her mouth closed, not a word said between us. Words weren’t needed for the emotions

living between the two of us. Words couldn't describe what I felt for her, and to say that I loved her would be the understatement of the year.

I needed her like air to breathe.

My heart turned erratic every time my eyes couldn't see her, and having her here, like this, calmed me down in ways I didn't know were possible.

I lathered my hands with the shampoo, and started dragging them through her wet hair, untangling the stubborn strands of hair that clung to each other. I massaged her scalp, her forehead falling to my chest, soft whimpers escaping from her mouth.

I then moved to her shoulders, slowly turning her around so that her back faced my front. I pushed her hair to the front, my thumbs digging into the knots lining her back.

“Oh, God,” she moaned. “That feels so good.”

My dick stood up, pressing against her backside, but I didn't move. I didn't want her to think I was doing this just for sex.

“I know,” I rasped. “There's too much tension here,” I murmured, pressing my lips to the back of her neck, eliciting shivers all over her body.

I dragged my hands over her back, then to her front, lathering her chest, playing with her nipples, before moving downward, toward her center.

I squeezed more shampoo into my hand, paying extra attention to her stomach where our kids hid, safe with their mother.

“S-Storm,” she whimpered as my hands dragged over her hips, to her mound, rubbing between her lower lips.

“Shhh,” I crooned, going down on my knees and slowly turning her around. As I looked up, I could see the desire reflecting back in her eyes, and it took all my willpower to restrain myself from getting up and pressing her against the tiles, showing her how much I loved her.

My hands glided over her legs, all the way to her ankles and up, going over the back of her thighs, over her soft ass, until I stood up, looking down at her.

“You’re so beautiful, Sunshine,” I murmured. My hands landed on her shoulders, my thumbs rubbing in small circles over her collarbone. “My heart will always be yours, Ophelia,” I whispered, unable to contain the emotion from my voice. “I know you don’t want to hear it right now, but it’s the truth. No matter what, I will always belong to you.”

Her eyes glistened, her teeth clamped down on her lower lip, while her hands rose to my face, rubbing over my stubble.

“I know, Storm,” she murmured. “And I want to thank you for giving me a choice. For actually talking to me instead of only issuing commands.”

If only she had any idea.

The irrational part of me wanted to lock her inside the room and throw away the key until this situation with Belladonna was resolved, but Ophelia wasn’t a girl who needed to be coddled. She didn’t want me to protect her.

She wanted me to see her as my equal.

“I know how hard it must be for you, letting go of your possessive tendencies.”

I grunted, unable to answer.

If I allowed myself to speak, she would probably slap me or hit me with the shampoo bottle.

“Let’s get this washed off,” I murmured, stepping toward the wall to open the water, when her hand wrapped around my arm, pulling me back.

“No.” She shook her head. “It’s my turn to clean you up.”

The mischievous grin on her face should’ve scared me, but the trepidation coursing through my veins had me frozen in place, waiting to see where this would lead.

She took the same shampoo bottle from the shelf, and poured a hefty amount into her hand, looking up at me

expectantly.

I bent down, letting her hands roam over my head, over my scalp, massaging me in the same way as I had her. Those tiny hands of hers ran over my torso, my shoulders, and my arms, awakening the desire I was trying to suppress.

When her hands wrapped around my aching dick, the groan I was trying to keep at bay tore out of my chest. My body was an instrument and only she knew how to play it.

She pushed me toward the wall, my back slamming against the cold tiles. Before I could stop her, she went down on her knees, her eyes firmly plastered on mine.

“What are you doing?” I asked, panting as she dragged her hand up and down my dick. Her eyelashes fluttered, the fake innocence cloaking the vixen living in her skin, pushing to the forefront, and I lost it.

My hips started moving along with her hand, seeking friction, needing more than this.

She squeezed her hand around my dick and instinctively, my hands wrapped in her wet hair, pulling her head closer to my dick.

“Open those pretty lips, love,” I grunted, urging her to take me in. She was letting me have control. She wanted this as much as I did.

But just as I thought she would bring me to oblivion, she stood up, walking toward the showerhead controls, and turned the water on.

“I love the taste of you, Stormy.” She chuckled. “But I don’t like the taste of shampoo.”

The water washed over her, and without question, I walked toward her, entering underneath the stream of water. The red hue that was still on her hair washed away with the shampoo, our hands roaming over each other, unable to keep ourselves at bay.

I dove, claiming her lips in a bruising kiss, biting and hissing as she wrapped her hand around my aching cock,

removing the shampoo she lathered me with earlier.

Before I could do anything else, she pushed me against the tiles, and dropped to her knees as the water from the overhead shower washed over her back. Her mouth wrapped around the head of my cock, my entire body locking up from the sight of her on her knees.

One of her hands roamed over my body, while the second one dragged up and down over my cock, covering the areas she couldn't reach with her mouth. Her tongue pressed against the vein running under my cock, tracing a pattern all the way to my head.

Precum leaked into her mouth, her moans echoing around us. As my hand wrapped around her hair, holding her in place as I fucked her tight mouth, the hand that roamed over my body disappeared between her legs, her hips moving on their own, fucking herself on her fingers.

"That's it, baby," I groaned, looking at her face as my cock disappeared into her mouth. "Take it all in," I instructed.

Her fingers dragged over my balls, the featherlike touch driving me wild. As she took me into her hand, playing with my balls, I fucking lost it.

I pushed and pushed and pushed, forcing her to take me in, while her eyes glistened, her irises dilated, her moans louder than the sound of the water falling around us.

"Baby, I'm going to... Fuck!" I couldn't take it anymore.

Building and building and building, my orgasm was rushing through my body like a volcano threatening to erupt from my body.

"I'm going to come, Sunshine. You need to step away."

But all she did was clamp her hand tighter around my dick, chasing her own orgasm, lost in the moment to the insanity of our lust.

It snuck up on me, the blast, the roar that echoed as I erupted into her mouth, my cum spilling down her chin as she swallowed the rest. Her whimpers, her moans, her ecstasy, a

living, breathing thing, forever etched in these walls as her own orgasm rushed in.

I scooped her up from the floor, wrapping her around me, claiming those lips that tasted like salt, like me. I pulled her hand to my mouth, licking the proof of her own desire, of her own orgasm, the heady scent around us enough to make me dizzy.

“Look at you.” I chuckled. “You’re dirty again.”

“It’s your fault,” she answered with a yawn. “You made me dirty.”

She nestled into the crook of my neck, her arms firmly wrapped around my neck, holding on as I walked through the stream of water to the other side of the shower, turning it off.

“Then let’s get relaxed, yeah?”

“Mm-hm,” she mumbled, nodding against me.

We walked outside, her wrapped around me like a spider monkey, and toward the bathtub that was now completely filled, covered in bubbles.

“You’ll need to step down, Sunshine.”

“No,” she mumbled. “Comfortable.”

I smiled at her, my lips pressing against her wet hair. Seeing that I wouldn’t be able to lower her down, I stepped inside the bathtub with her, turning off the stream of water, and lowered us down.

This bathtub was made for people much smaller than me, and as the water splashed outside, covering the floor of the bathroom, she suddenly turned up, awakening from her mini slumber.

“Are you trying to flood the Clubhouse?”

“No,” I rumbled. “I’m trying to get you comfortable. Zoe told me lavender is supposed to be soothing or whatever the fuck.”

“Lavender?” she asked, looking at me. “Uh—”

“It’s in the water. No, don’t look at me like that.”

“You bought lavender for me?”

“Phee,” I murmured, pushing her hair away from her face. “I would do anything for you. I’m sorry I was such a shit showing it before. But I’ll do better. I promise.”

“Mm-hm,” she mumbled, settling down again.

Her knees fell on the sides of my hips, both of us barely fitting inside the bathtub, but it would have to work.

I played with the bubbles on the surface, pushing them over her skin, lathering her back with the water, afraid that she would get cold. Her body relaxed against mine, the stress of the day slowly dissipating from her body.

Her arms stayed wrapped around my neck, her slow breaths tickling the skin on my shoulder. This was my happy place.

Being here, with her, far away from all the bullshit living outside of these walls.

I would show her how good everything could be for her.

That was a promise.





## OPHELIA

MY MUSCLES ACHED AS MY EYES OPENED TO THE DARKNESS OF the room, but the ache wasn't the kind I was used to after a fight or a long, rough day. No, this kind of ache came from the slumber I was in. Slowly, like a kaleidoscope of memories, the pictures of Storm on his knees, rubbing at my skin, my muscles, came to me, reminding me why I felt so well.

I was rested for the first time in forever, and as I slowly looked around, I realized I wasn't in my room.

This was Storm's room, or well, at least the room I saw a couple of times from the doorway.

I looked down, seeing a long white T-shirt I was wrapped in. By the scent, I knew it was his. I wanted to roll in his sheets, to inhale the spicy scent only he had, but the growling of my stomach reminded me that I hadn't eaten anything since we left Reno, and I had no idea what time it was.

I rolled over to the other side of the bed, only to see him sitting in the chair by the window, his eyes closed, but his entire body strung high, as if even in his sleep he couldn't relax.

The moonlight shone from the outside, illuminating his naked torso and the gray sweatpants he wore, my mouth watering at the mere sight of him. What we did earlier in the shower maybe shouldn't have happened, but God, I was tired of trying to run away from him.

I was tired of trying to forget how he made me feel.

Earlier, I remembered what it was like letting myself belong to him. I remembered how safe I felt in his arms, but I still couldn't forget what he did and how he made me feel, no matter what the reason behind his actions was.

But I couldn't leave.

Nova's words rang inside my mind, reminding me that Belladonna wasn't just after me. She was after my kids. While it only made sense that they weren't safe while they were cocooned inside my womb, it didn't register before that they were in as much danger as I was.

I hated admitting that I needed Storm for protection.

If it was only me in danger right now, I would get out of this bed and walk out of here, creating some much-needed space between the two of us. But it wasn't about me. It wasn't even about Storm, and I needed him as much as he needed me to get through all of this.

His words from earlier reminded me that I was his as much as he was mine. Maybe we had a long road ahead of us, but all our differences would need to wait until this mess was cleared up. I wasn't going to just forgive and forget, but I had to swallow my pride and stay.

Now with Nova gone, I doubted that we would be facing the same things again, but we still needed to talk without shouting, without other people there, just the two of us and our truths.

"Storm." I called out to him, getting up into a seated position.

Sheets wrapped around me, covering my bare legs, but he didn't move. Didn't even stir.

I wanted to laugh, because I was sure he stayed in the room to protect me, but he was in a deeper slumber than I was.

"Storm!" I called out louder. His eyes shot open, and he almost jumped out of the chair.

"Wha-what!" He stood up, grabbing the gun that lay on the side table.

The laughter tore from my lungs, my entire body shaking at the comical expression on his face. Sleep still lingered around his eyes, the exhaustion heavy on his shoulders, but he still jumped up, protecting me as if there was anything to protect me from.

“You should see the look on your face.” I chuckled.

“Not funny,” he grunted, lowering the gun as he realized that there was nothing to be afraid of. “I had such a good dream.”

“Weren’t you supposed to protect me?”

“I fell asleep, okay? You tired me out.” He looked at me, and walked toward the bed, lowering himself down right next to me. “Are you okay?”

Nodding, I answered, “Yeah. Just hungry I guess.”

He removed the covers from me and pulled my legs into his lap.

“What are you doing?” I asked, looking at him warily.

His thumbs dug into the sole of my foot, almost immediately finding the little knots aching under the pressure.

“If you keep doing this, I might never leave,” I blurted out, succumbing to the pleasure ricocheting through my body.

“That’s the plan,” he grumbled. “I don’t want you to leave.”

“Storm—”

“No, no, hear me out,” he said, looking straight at me. “I know what we discussed. I hear you and I know you need space from me, but...” he trailed off. “What Nova said about Belladonna being after our kids, it fucking scares me, Sunshine. I know you can take care of yourself, and I know you don’t need me for protection, but I’m begging you to stay here until all of this is over.”

The sincerity shining from his eyes brought me to my knees—both figuratively and literally.

I pulled my foot from him and climbed on my knees closer to him.

“I will understand if you really don’t want to,” he said, looking down at his hands in his lap. “I’ll have guards with you at all times. And again, I know you don’t need them, but humor me.” He looked up. “Please. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if anything happened to the three of you.”

“Storm—”

“I’m not trying to go against your wishes, you know. I hear you. I understand that I fucked up, but I just—”

“Storm!” I thundered, stopping his little babble. The fear staring back at me was too much to bear. The fear of rejection, of losing me, losing our kids, I didn’t want him to be miserable. I wanted him to focus on the person who needed to pay for all the things she did. “Before you give yourself a stroke, breathe,” I murmured, rubbing circles over his back.

He exhaled sharply, as if he’d been holding a breath for longer than necessary.

“Good. Now,” I shuffled closer to him and took his hand in mine, “every nerve ending in my body is telling me to get out of here.” He stiffened at my words. “But those nerve endings are used to how things were, not how things should be. They’re used to me running away, hiding from feelings, and avoiding confrontation with people I care about. And right now, the right thing for me is to stay here where I could be protected.”

His eyes widened. “Really?” Storm asked. “You’ll stay?”

“Yes.” I nodded. “I’ll stay, but that doesn’t mean the two of us are back together.”

The hope shining in his eyes quickly deflated at my words, but before I could even continue talking, it disappeared, replaced by a cool-and-collected mask he was used to wearing.

“I understand.”

“I need time, Storm. Time to come to terms with everything and time to understand my place in your life.”

“Ophelia—”

“No, look,” I cut him off. “I know you want me with you. You said as much yourself, but the two of us have a history of saying one thing and doing something completely different. So, I’ll stay but under two conditions,” I said.

“Anything.”

No questions asked, anything I wanted, he would do it. I knew that, which was why it was even harder staying away from him.

“The two of us need to stay away from each other for the time being.”

His brows furrowed, and I could see the denial lingering on the tips of his lips, but he said nothing.

“What is the second one?”

“I want to be involved, Storm. I want to know what’s happening and I wanna help. I want to include Cillian as well.”

He took a deep breath and squeezed my hand. “Okay.”

Okay? No arguments, no you-need-to-stay-safe bullshit?

“Really?” I exclaimed, my eyes widening.

“Yeah.” He smiled. “Really.”

Maybe now wasn’t the best time to mention Maya and Kieran. He seemed happy, content even, and I didn’t want us to get into another argument.

“There’s one more thing though,” I blurted out, avoiding his eyes.

“What is it?”

How should I put it in words? *Oh, hey, Stormy. My long-lost sister is possibly coming home soon, and guess what? She’s going to be with Kieran, who you hate and want to kill, but I still want to go and see her.*

Yeah, I could already see how that would go over.

“Kieran found Maya,” I said, pulling my hand out of his hold, waiting for the volcanic eruption to sweep me off of my

feet. Or well, my knees if we were going to be technical. “And I want to go see her once she’s back.”

Silence ensued, our breathing filling the space between us, but at least he didn’t shout. Right?

I lifted my head, looking straight into the thunderstorm brewing behind his eyes.

“Storm?”

“Shhh,” he shushed me, closing his eyes. “I’m trying to be reasonable here.” I wanted to laugh, because it was obvious he was trying, but he looked constipated. “I’m trying to appease this ugly, green monster inside my chest, and I’m trying to explain to it that you wouldn’t be going to see Kieran, but Maya.”

“Hey.” I placed my hand on his shoulder, pulling his attention to me. “I didn’t choose Kieran, Storm,” I mumbled. “I made a mistake because I wanted to hurt you, but Kieran isn’t the one I—” I stopped myself.

We already told each other how much we cared for one another, how much we loved each other, but something stopped me from uttering those words now.

“I know,” he said, pulling me out of my misery. “I just... I don’t like the guy, okay? I don’t like the fact that he saw you naked, that he had you before me. I don’t like any of it.”

If the roles were reversed, I wouldn’t like it either. Hell, I killed Nova, for more reasons than only sleeping with him that one time, but still... I understood.

“You could come with me.” I shrugged. “I mean, you would need to come with me either way.”

“Sunshine.” He chuckled. “I’m not sure I’d be able to look at him and not punch him, or worse.”

“You can punch him.” I smiled. “I’m pretty sure he deserves it, but don’t kill him. He’s my friend, you know? He’s Cillian’s brother, and they both lost too much already. I wouldn’t want them to lose each other.”

He kept looking at me, mulling over the words, fighting with his natural instinct to stop me from going there.

“Fine,” he bit out and stood up, pulling me with him. “But I’m not promising I’ll be on my best behavior.”

“Okay.” I giggled, pressing against him. As if doused by a bucket of cold water, I remembered what I asked of him—to stay away from each other, to keep the distance.

Yet here I was, my body naturally going to him.

“Right,” I said, clearing my throat as I took a step back. “I’m going to need a functional phone as well.”

“Done.”

“And Cillian might come visit.” I grinned.

“Phee,” he growled, pulling me to him. “Are you testing my patience?”

“No?” I chuckled. “I might be testing your limits though. You’re very forthcoming right now. I don’t know what to think.”

“You’re a vixen,” he murmured, pinching my bare butt, earning a scowl from me as I swatted his arm. “Come on,” he said, walking toward the door. “I need to feed you and then we need to talk about some other things.”

“Other things?” I frowned. “What other things?”

“Things that need to be discussed when you’re wearing something more than just my T-shirt and when knives and guns are far out of your reach.”

“Storm,” I growled, walking after him into the hallway. “What did you do?”

“Just remember I didn’t do it to hurt you or anyone. I did it because I didn’t have any other choice.”

“Storm!” I yelled out after him as he walked in front of me, heading toward the stairs. “Get back here!”

I ran after him, but his stride was longer than mine. Even running, I didn’t catch him until we reached the stairs, him

being already halfway down.

“You can’t just say something like that and walk away!”

“Come on.” He smiled up at me. “I suppose you’ll be more agreeable if I fill your belly with something more than my cum.”

“Storm!” I exclaimed, looking at the prospect standing at the bottom of the stairs, his ears turning red.

“What?” Storm looked at the young guy avoiding our eyes. “He’s heard worse than this. And I make really good pasta.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, huffing and puffing, but I followed him, my stomach rebelling against the need to turn around and walk back to my room. No, his room.

“You’re not being fair,” I said as I caught up with him just before we entered the kitchen. I looked at the spot where I found him with Nova, and deep inside, I knew I needed to ask him about that as well.

“Was it true?” I asked, looking at him. “Did Belladonna tell you to be with Nova?”

His head shot up from the cupboard, holding a packet of pasta ravioli in his hand.

“Yes.” He simply nodded. “And I was an idiot to play into it.”

“Did you sleep with her?”

“Phee—”

“Did you? I mean after.” I needed to know. I already knew he slept with her months ago, but I needed to know if he was with her after I came back. “Please, I really need to know.”

He crossed the distance between the two of us, stopping only a few inches away from me.

“No, not after that first time. And even that first time, I kicked her out the moment I sobered up, hating myself for what I did to you.”

“We weren’t together at the time,” I mumbled.



“It didn’t matter. There I was, angry at you for what you did, and then I went and did the same thing. Even worse because I knew she was a traitor. You told us she was the traitor, and I played right into her web of lies, because I was lonely. I was tired. I was scared for you. I wanted you back. I wanted to punish you and then to hold you. I wanted to spank your tight little ass until you couldn’t walk anymore, and I wanted to show you how much I loved you. I didn’t know what to do, Phee, because you were again running away from me.”

“I didn’t run away from you,” I mumbled.

“I know. I know that now. But back then, just waking up from the coma, just coming to the new home, I wanted you by my side. Hell, I forgave you long ago, but I couldn’t forgive you running away, making me feel as if I didn’t mean anything to you.”

I hated myself for making him feel that way.

“And then this push and pull between us. This toxic connection we started feeding, it wasn’t healthy. I was stuck between you and the Club. I thought that the only way to have you in the end is to first save them. I thought you would understand, and I knew you would have, if only I’d explained it properly.”

“Yeah, well,” I squeezed his upper arm, “it would seem that both of us suck at communication.”

“It would seem so.”

He passed next to me, toward the kitchen on the other side of the dining room, pulling out pots and pans from the cupboards lining the wall, getting ready to cook.

“What did you mean when you said you had something else to tell me?”

His back stiffened, his entire stance defensive.

“Storm?”

“Just remember that I didn’t do it to hurt you,” he said, slowly turning around.

“What did you do, Storm?”

Seconds ticked by as he lowered the pot on top of the counter, his eyes plastered to the floor.

“After I woke up from the coma, I realized that the Club wasn’t in the best shape. I know you don’t know enough about the Club and the businesses we do, but we rely on our mechanic shops around the country, the restaurants and nightclubs we’ve opened over the years, and the hangars where we’re keeping the guns that are being sold to other clubs.”

It would seem that I didn’t know shit.

“After I woke up, many of those places were attacked, taken over... Our men couldn’t hold on anymore, and the money we needed was slowly bleeding dry.”

“Okay.” I understood that. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“I was still too weak to go to those places, to deal with deserters and the attacks myself, so I made a deal.”

“Storm,” I groaned, rolling my eyes. “Who did you make a deal with?”

Nervous energy emanated from him, my feet moving me closer to him, waiting with bated breath to hear who he had made the deal with.

“Storm?”

“I hope we’re gonna have two boys,” he mumbled, walking toward the windows overlooking the garden. “Maybe then what I agreed to won’t come to fruition.”

“Storm!”

“I made a deal with Nico Romano,” he said and turned around to look at me.

“Nico?” *My Nico?* “Nico is a good man, Storm. What are you so scared of?”

“Because the deal we made wasn’t only for him to help me. He didn’t want money. He didn’t want power. He wanted

something else.”

I was blank at that point. What else could Nico want, unless—

“No,” I whispered. “No, you didn’t.”

“Nico wanted to connect his family with the MC’s, and what better way to do it than to marry his son—”

“To your daughter,” I finished for him, the little pieces of the puzzle slowly falling together. The way Nico looked at me when he saw me. The way his eyes kept following my every move.

It wasn’t because he was afraid of me hurting Alessia. It was because he thought I knew already.

“You motherfucking bastard!” I screeched, my hand connecting with the handle of a pan.

I had no idea when I threw it, but as it crashed against the window, right next to Storm’s head, I didn’t even care.

“You sold our daughter!”

“You weren’t pregnant back then.”

“How could you?” I stormed toward him. “Storm, you better make this right.”

“I don’t know how,” he answered, stepping away from me.

“Stop running away from me, for fuck’s sake!” I marched toward him, following him around the table. “You know the kind of life the two of us had, volleyed back and forth for more power, for control. I’m not going to do the same thing to her!”

“You might be carrying boys.”

“It’s a boy and a girl, you stupid fuck!”

He stopped moving suddenly, his entire face turning pale. “You already know the gender?”

“Of course, I know. I wanted to tell you as soon as I found out, but you were too busy flirting with that bitch!”

“They’re a boy and a girl?” he asked, completely ignoring my outburst.

“Yes, Storm,” I answered, my molars grinding. “And you sold her.”

“I didn’t know,” he murmured. “I didn’t want to. I just... I just didn’t see another way.”

“Storm,” I said, calming my racing heart. “I’m not going to raise our daughter just to be a breeding mare for the Italian Mafia!”

“I thought you liked them!”

“I do!” I yelled. “But I don’t like the way they treat most of their females.”

I didn’t want her to be just another puppet in this fucked-up game of life. I didn’t want her to end up like me or Maya, or any of the other girls I’d met over the years.

I wanted her to meet a guy, fall in love, and be happy. Happier than any of us had ever been. Arranged marriages almost always ended in disaster, and I wanted her to have a better life than I did. I wanted both of them to have a better life than us.

I didn’t want them to be shackled by invisible chains, waiting for their life to happen just because their parents made mistakes. He had to fix it.

We had to fix it.

“Fix it, Storm,” I said and turned around, walking toward the exit.

“I can’t. Where are you going?”

“To sleep.”

“You need to eat!” he called out after me.

“I’m not hungry anymore!” I yelled back.

I was hungry for something else, and I had a knife with Nico’s name written on it. That motherfucker failed to tell me about his little deal with Storm.

And he's going to hear from me.



## OPHELIA

“NICO ALESSANDRO ROMANO!” I BLASTED OVER THE PHONE as soon as he picked up. I paced from one side of the room to the other one, my heart threatening to burst in my chest, filled with the anger over the news Storm threw at me.

My daughter. My beautiful, unborn daughter was to marry Nico’s son in the future, thanks to the deal he and Storm had made, and I wasn’t having it.

My entire life I’d been a pawn, a simple puppet in somebody else’s game, following the rules blindly because I didn’t know better. Because someone should have told me that there was better. I wasn’t going to destroy her life before it had even started, just because her father was an idiot who should have known better than to bargain with his unborn kid to gain something.

“Shit,” he exhaled. “You know.”

It wasn’t a question, but a statement, and both of us knew that I wouldn’t accept it no matter what. Even if it started another war, I wasn’t going to accept it. If she ended up being anything like me, she wouldn’t accept it either.

“What the fuck were you thinking? That I’d be okay with it? That I would be okay with two overgrown boys bargaining their kids as if they were something to trade?”

“Ophelia—”

“Don’t,” I cut him off. “Whatever you’re about to say, think carefully before it actually comes out of your mouth, Nico.” My breathing accelerated, my chest paining from the

betrayal I was once again experiencing. “I thought we were friends.”

“We are,” he quickly said. “We are friends, Ophelia. Come on, this doesn’t change anything.”

“This changes everything,” I growled. “Does Alessia know?”

“Phee,” he moaned.

“Does she?”

“No,” Nico answered, defeat lacing his tone.

I sat down on the bed, toeing off the sneakers I wore, and grabbed the knife I left on the nightstand.

“Did you know who I was to Storm when you saw me at your wedding?”

Silence. Fucking silence.

“I think I deserve an answer, Nico. After everything we have done for each other, that’s the least that you could do. Give me the fucking truth!”

“I knew,” he whispered. “But I knew you weren’t together in that moment, so—”

“So you stood there, pretending to be my friend, all the while knowing that you made a deal with the man I love. A deal I would never be okay with. You know better than anybody else what it’s like being controlled by your family, having to do what they tell you to do, not once being able to be yourself. You know, and yet you still made this deal!”

“Ophelia, please,” he pleaded. “It isn’t like that. I didn’t make a deal to hurt his future daughter. I didn’t make it to hurt you. I made it to protect my—”

“You made it to protect your family!” I bellowed. “And what about my family, huh? What about the little girl whose life will already be planned? What about your son? What if they fall in love with somebody else? What if they hate each other?”

“Phee—”



“What about the fact that I’m tempted to drive to fucking Ventus City just to stab you myself? Once Alessia finds out about what you did, I’m sure she will help me.”

His silence was louder than any of the words he could have spoken, and I knew I hit the nail on the head when I mentioned her. But no matter what, I knew that there was no way out of this. There was no way out for my little girl, and I hated feeling powerless in this situation.

“We signed a contract, Ophelia,” Nico said, and I could hear the shuffling of papers in the background. “We signed it in blood.”

“Nico.” I huffed. “If you don’t tear that fucking contract apart, I’m going to be wiping your blood with that same paper. I swear to all that’s holy, I’m going to skin you alive.”

“It isn’t wise to threaten the head of the Italian Mafia, Phee. Even for you.”

“Oh, yeah?” I scoffed. “It isn’t wise crossing Ophelia Aster, yet both of you already did that. What is it with you men that you think you can control us? Why are you always thinking of selling your children, never once asking the mothers what we think about it?”

“Mothers?” he asked. “Wait. You’re not—”

“I’m pregnant, you fucking dimwit, just like Alessia is. And I’m tempted to stab you in the eye the next time I see you.”

“Shit,” Nico cursed, his voice muffled as he spoke with someone in the background. “Ophelia, I’m gonna have to call you back.”

“Don’t you hang up on me, Nico!” I growled. “You made this mess and you will fix it. I don’t care how, I don’t wanna know. But you will fix it, along with Storm. And Nico,” I said as I stood up, walking toward the bathroom. “You better tell Alessia. If you don’t, I will. And trust me, better she hears it from you than from me.”

“Ophe—”

He started speaking just as I hung up, throwing my phone on the ground before entering the bathroom, slamming the door behind me.

Stupid, motherfucking dimwits. Why? Why wouldn't they tell us?

Even if I wasn't pregnant, I would still feel the same. I didn't want my kids to be trapped, to feel that they needed to prove something. I didn't want them to have mine or Storm's life. I wanted them to have a choice.

I wanted them to be able to think for themselves, to make mistakes, to fix them, to learn from all of it. I didn't want them to have to run from their family, from their friends, from everything they held dear, because they couldn't deal with the pressure their parents were putting on them.

I pressed my hands against my stomach, already getting rounder as the days passed, and I vowed I would always protect them, even if it meant going against Storm and every other human being that wanted to harm them.

"I won't let them touch you," I whispered, dragging my finger around my belly button, going upward then and down, imagining that it was the two of them I was caressing, showering them with the love I didn't think I was capable of.

When Ava got pregnant, happier than she ever was, I couldn't fathom the idea of me being pregnant one day. Kids, happiness, love, all those were foreign concepts I couldn't even imagine, because I knew they weren't planned for me.

I pushed the idea of them so far to the back of my mind because I didn't think I deserved them. I didn't deserve the happiness shining from Ava's eyes, or the love that she had for her little family. But now that I was here, faced with reality, I knew I deserved it.

I deserved these two kids, and they deserved a better life than I had.

If Storm decided that he didn't want to fix this mess, then he would never get to see them. Parents were supposed to protect their kids, not sell them to the highest bidder.

Nikolai didn't sell me, but he sold Maya. He fucking sold his biological daughter because she couldn't agree with the shit he was doing, and she didn't want to be a part of it. If Storm thought that I would ever be okay with this, he had another thing coming.

A soft knock came through the door, his raspy voice breaking through the fog in my head. "Phee," he whispered, his energy pulsing all around me.

The funny thing with this connection between Storm and me was that no matter what, I could always feel him. He was buried deep beneath my skin, his heart beating in the rhythm of my own, and these two kids holding pieces of both of us only tethered me closer to him.

"I know you hate me right now," he croaked. "But I need you to know, I'm sorry. I didn't think it through when I spoke with Nico, and things between us didn't look good."

"So you decided to sell your unborn daughter for your own gains?" I clipped back. I knew he was sorry. It was evident on his face when he told me about the deal, but that didn't change the fact that we had no way out of this.

"No," he answered. "I don't know, Sunshine. I don't know what I was thinking, but I didn't see a way out. And the Italians, well... They used to be our enemies, until we made a pact with them years ago to help each other when needed. I never even expected to have a daughter."

"Storm." I exhaled. "All these pretty words don't change the fact that we're in this mess. Nothing that you say will change the fact that you sold her. You should have told me the moment we found out I was pregnant. You should have—"

"I couldn't," he said. "I thought you hated me, Sunshine, and with reason I might add. And then there were all these other things, and I just—"

"You just hid the truth from me," I cut in. "Again. Maybe you didn't lie, but you still hid the truth from me, and that fucking hurts, Storm. It hurts knowing that I can't trust you."

Not with my heart, not with our kids... How do we move on from this? Huh? How can I trust you?"

My legs shook, my entire body feeling weak, exhausted. I slid down to the door, hugging my knees to my chest, wanting to feel anything but this anger, this pain over the lies that were becoming common for our relationship, or whatever the fuck we had.

"I don't know, Sunshine," Storm answered, his tone laced with the same pain living inside my chest. "I'll try to fix it. I promise."

I nodded, keeping my mouth shut, because I feared what would happen if I actually spoke again. No matter what, I didn't want us to be enemies. I didn't want us to regard each other with hostility. I had no idea if it was the hormones or just the exhaustion settling in, but I wanted to cry, and sleep and be held by someone I trusted.

I wanted somebody to tell me that everything would be okay. That my kids would be okay, that the world wouldn't try to kill me or destroy me for at least one day. I wanted someone to reassure me that I had nothing to worry about.

With a heavy heart, I stood up, ready to go to bed. Opening the door, the first thing I saw was Storm, sitting on the floor, with his back pressed against the wall, his eyes closed, his face turned toward the ceiling. His eyes flashed open the moment he heard me stepping out, jumping to his feet, immediately towering over me, but keeping his distance.

"Are you okay?" he asked, observing me with bloodshot eyes.

"I will be," I said, walking toward the bed, ready to put on my shoes and go somewhere quiet to sleep. I agreed to stay, but with my room quite literally being a crime scene now, I had to find some other place where I could sleep.

Maybe I could take Atlas's room, or Zoe's?

"What are you doing?" Storm asked as I started putting my shoes back on, bending down to tie the laces.

"I'm going to sleep."

“In your shoes?”

I looked up at him, irritated by the concern in his words. I didn't have time for this. Not tonight.

I was tired of fighting, explaining myself, having to look over my shoulder every single day. I just wanted to put my head down on a pillow and close my eyes, leaving this world behind. My emotions choked me, wrapped around my throat, and I wanted to let them out without witnesses watching me fall apart.

“I need to find a place to sleep in, Storm. I can't go back to my old room, and—”

“You could stay here.” He shrugged, looking down at the floor.

“Storm.”

“No, look,” he said, stepping closer to me. “I'll find another place. Hell, I can sleep on the couch, that's not a problem. But you need to rest. You need stability,” he rambled. “It isn't something that you had so far, and I want to make sure you're comfortable.”

“Storm—”

“I fucked up, okay?” He looked up at me. “I fucked up again, and there's nothing that I can do or say right now to fix this, but let me do this. Let me give you my room at least.”

My lips were set in a thin line, a headache brewing behind my eyes. When I said nothing but just kept staring at him, Storm decided that it wasn't enough. It never was with this man.

He closed the distance between us. Before I could react, he dropped down to his knees, hugging my thighs to him, pressing his forehead to my stomach.

“Please, Sunshine,” he said. “Just stay in here. I'll know you're safe. Maybe that doesn't mean anything to you right now, but I need to know you're safe. I won't be able to sleep if you're in somebody else's room.”

“Storm,” I murmured, my hands instinctively landing on his head, my fingers playing with his hair.

“It won’t mean anything, but me looking after you. Please, let me do this.” He looked up, his glassy eyes filled with remorse threatening to knock me off my feet. “Just stay in my room.”

I could have said no. I could have been petty, letting the anger rule my actions, but that was the old Ophelia who never thought things through.

Besides, I didn’t want to traipse through the Clubhouse in the middle of the evening, looking for a place to crash, when so many people wanted me dead. Maybe they didn’t live inside the Clubhouse, but if Nova could infiltrate this place, anybody else could have.

Even though I would never admit it, sleeping in his bed, surrounded by his scent, calmed me more than I wanted it to.

“Okay,” I mumbled, removing my hands from his head. “I’ll stay here. But, Storm—”

“I know,” he said. “It doesn’t mean anything. I know, Sunshine.”

He detached himself from me, and I hated my body for already crying out for the loss of heat from him. The man was like a furnace, his body burning, feeding me with warmth.

“Do you like your new phone?” he asked as he stood up, looking at the device lying on top of the nightstand now. He must have picked it up after I threw it on the floor.

“I guess.” I shrugged. “It’s a phone.”

My eyes connected with his, and I knew he wanted to say more. I could feel the tension seeping into the room, emanating from each and every pore of his body, but I didn’t move. I didn’t say a thing as he stepped backward, going toward the door.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then,” he said instead, keeping his thoughts to himself, and I suddenly regretted not talking this through.

I didn't want to go to sleep feeling this angry.

"Storm," I said, taking a step toward him.

"We'll talk tomorrow," he murmured instead. Without a second glance, he disappeared through the door, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

And it bugged me more than I wanted to admit.



I COULDN'T FUCKING SLEEP.

I turned this and that way, went on my stomach, then on my back... I even tried counting sheep, but nothing worked. As the moonlight seeped into the room, illuminating the empty space around me, I wondered if I should just give up altogether, or keep lying here, pretending I was asleep.

The shadows danced on the wall opposite the bed, my mind seeing things that weren't there. Images of destruction, of the past I wanted to forget, swirling ominously, cackling viciously because they knew, they always knew that I wouldn't be able to run from them.

The hold I had on the blankets tightened, wrapping myself like a fucking burrito, turning to the other side, facing the door, wishing for him to be here with me. But I knew Storm wouldn't come in unless I asked him to, and it would be too selfish of me to ask him to just hold me, when I still couldn't forgive everything he'd done.

His keeping secrets from me hurt more than anything else. It wasn't even about the fact that he agreed to marry our daughter to Nico's son. Now, after a couple of hours of tossing and turning, I could understand that deep inside I wasn't even hurt over that as much as I was hurt over the fact that he didn't tell me.

He kept it from me. Even though their pact was made before I got pregnant, he should have told me. He shouldn't have fucking kept me in the dark.

And now I couldn't sleep without him. I couldn't sleep, knowing that we weren't on the best of terms, with this chasm between us. That fucking idiot.

He made me feel like this. Pregnant, alone, needy, hormonal... This was all his fault.

I couldn't sleep without him by my side anymore. I couldn't imagine my life without him, and it fucking sucked because I wasn't ready to forgive him.

But if I wanted to sleep tonight, to rest as the doctor ordered when I last visited him, Storm would have to come here and do something about it. I didn't care what it was as long as I could close my eyes.

I took the phone from the nightstand, wincing at the blinding light that came on the moment I unlocked it, frowning when I saw the time flashing brightly at me.

"Three in the morning." I frowned. "Beautiful."

Huffing and puffing like a wild animal, I placed the phone back on the nightstand, and untangled myself from my makeshift burrito blanket, lowering my feet on the ground, almost jumping back onto the bed from how cold it got overnight.

Santa Monica wasn't New York, but it didn't mean that this period of the year didn't get chilly during the night.

Wiggling my toes, trying to get used to the chill seeping through the floor, I cursed him for the hundredth time for putting me in this situation. I just had to find him and then I'd be able to curse him in person.

Then he would help me to go back to sleep. I had a solid plan, now I just needed to survive this fucking cold.

Tiptoeing toward the door, I kept the light turned off. As soon as I opened the door, the light from the hallway almost blinded me, a complete contrast to the darkness inside.

But the light wasn't what had me stopping dead in my tracks. It also wasn't what had my heart racing in my chest, pounding rapidly, slamming against my ribcage.



“Storm?” I whisper-hissed, seeing him on the floor right in front of the door, with his arms across his chest, a frown etched on his face even in his sleep.

His eyes opened, his entire body on a high alert when he saw me standing there, jumping almost immediately.

“What... What’s wrong? Are you okay? Are the kids okay?” he blabbered, lines of exhaustion prominent around his eyes.

He hadn’t left. He stayed in front of the door, keeping me safe, when he could have gone to any other room to sleep. And even though it looked as if he was sleeping, I could recognize tired eyes even if he tried to hide it.

His hands landed on my upper arms, then on my shoulders, my neck, dragging over my sides, his eyes searching for injuries, distress, or anything wrong.

“Why are you here? I thought you were sleeping. Are you hungry? Thirsty? I can bring you something up if you want to, it’s not—”

“Storm,” I cut him off, stopping his rambling. “I’m okay,” I said, squeezing his hand. “Kids are okay, I just... I couldn’t sleep.”

He took a step backward, holding my hand, looking me over as if I had grown two heads.

“You couldn’t sleep?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “And it’s all your fault, you know?” I bristled, dropping his hand.

“Is it now?” he asked, suppressing a smile that was threatening to erupt on his face. His legs spread apart, and he crossed his arms over his chest again, silently laughing at me.

“Yeah, it is,” I murmured. “I’m pregnant, and hormonal, and happy and sad, and I worry, okay? I worry about these kids. I even worry about you!”

“You worry about me?” he asked smugly. “Why? I thought you wanted to kick my ass.”

“I do!” I bellowed. “God, I want to hit you, to slap you, to show you how furious I am with you. But I can’t. I can’t do that because I told myself I would be an adult now. I can’t just stab people because they piss me off.”

“Yet, you stabbed me.”

“I’m about to stab you again if you don’t come inside.”

He looked inside the room, seeing the unmade bed. “Why?” he asked, looking back at me. “There’s no danger in there, right? You asked for space, and I’m giving it to you.”

“Storm,” I growled.

His eyes flashed dangerously, the smug smile he wore slipping off of his face, replaced with a somber look in his eyes. He crossed the distance between us, putting him right in front of me. His finger danced over my cheek, dragging down to the column of my throat, pressing softly, before his entire hand wrapped around my throat, pulling me closer to him, pushing me to get on my tiptoes.

Warm breath washed over my lips, his nose rubbing against mine, both of our eyes closed, as if we could erase the time, the past and everything that bothered us just by standing here like this.

“Why do you need me to come inside, Sunshine?”

“I-I...” I stammered, my fucking ego blocking the words that wanted to tumble out.

Because I needed him to hold me. Because he was the person I wanted to have with me. Because I wanted him to tell me everything was going to be okay.

But I also wasn’t ready to forgive him. I wasn’t ready to let him in that easily, not after everything. I had to guard my heart better this time. If we were going to end up together, then it would be forever.

I thought I loved Kieran, but he was just a person I thought I could trust in that world. He was just the person who knew what it was like being thrown into something you hated.

But Storm... Storm was my always and forever. He was the soulmate I never wanted to find, yet I dreamed of him, hoping that I would find him one day. He was my beginning and my ending. My dawn and my twilight, and nothing made sense if I couldn't have him with me.

But I wanted him to show me that he was in this with me. I needed him to prove to me that I wasn't just something that he wanted to own.

"Sunshine," he murmured, teasing me with his lips as his thumb rubbed in circles over my pulse point. "You gotta tell me what you need. I don't want to assume."

"You mean, you don't want to get your ass kicked. Again."

His chuckle vibrated through his chest. "That, too. Tell me, Phee. Tell me what you need."

"I need you," I blurted out, too tired to stand here and fight the yearning coursing through my veins. "I need you to tell me a little story, Stormy."

My eyes opened, clashing with his, my need reflected in those green orbs perfectly. I hadn't noticed it before, but the specs of yellow hid around his irises, creating a kaleidoscope of colors in his eyes.

"A little story, huh?"

"Yes," I whispered. "I need you to hold my hand, to put me back to sleep, because I can't do it alone. I can't sleep alone. Not anymore."

"What about all those other nights when I wasn't with you?" he dared to ask. "Did you sleep then?"

I could lie to him. I could tell him that it only started tonight, this stupid need in the center of my being, that only he could calm. But I didn't. If we were going to move forward, both of us had to start telling the truth.

"I didn't sleep, Storm. The only time I truly slept was when you were with me. I don't know why, and I don't want to know, but whatever it is that ties the two of us together, isn't happy when you aren't with me."

He shuddered, his eyes closing after my admission, and I feared that the only thing staring back at me once he opened his eyes would be another rejection, because he was as stubborn as I was.

“Please, Storm.” I wasn’t above begging at this point. “I just... I just want to be able to sleep.”

His strong fingers wrapped around my neck, pulling my face to the crook of his neck, his other arm wrapped around my middle, holding me tightly.

“Then let’s go,” he grunted. “Let’s go to sleep, Sunshine.”

Leading me inside the room, he let me crawl inside the bed first, wordlessly removing his belt, then his boots. He pulled the sofa chair that sat in the corner of the room and placed it right next to the bed.

“What are you doing?” I asked, already burrowing myself underneath the blankets, seeking heat.

“Getting comfortable.” He chuckled and sat down on the sofa chair, putting his legs on top of the bed. He took a hold of my hand, lacing our fingers together, before he looked down at me from his position, while love shone in his eyes.

“I thought you were going to help me sleep?” I pouted, scooting closer to him. “But you’re there, and I’m here.”

“I know, darling, but you still don’t trust me, and I don’t want us to base our relationship only on these small moments that might evaporate with the first sun. You asked for space, and I’ll give it to you as much as I can. I’m not going to lie, my entire body wants to get inside that bed, to hold you, to feel you wrapped around me, but I’m not going to do that. Not yet. Not until you ask me.”

“I did ask you.”

“No.” He shook his head. “You asked me to help you sleep, and that’s what I’m doing. Now, keep quiet. I need to tell you a story.”

A smile broke on my face as he started dragging his finger over my naked forearm, petting me, lulling me to sleep.

“I’m going to tell you a story about a fourteen-year-old boy who met his soulmate when he thought that life wasn’t worth living. I’ll tell you the story of a little girl, with pigtails, capturing his heart even then, showing him what kindness was. And I’ll tell you how he loved her once they grew up.”

I knew what he was talking about. I knew who this story was about, but I let him tell me.

“Do they end up together?” I asked in the middle of the story, captivated by his voice, by the emotions slipping from him, filling in the hollow space in my chest.

He looked down at me, smiling softly at my question. “I think they do. I think they were always meant to be together. It took them some time to figure out how to navigate life, but they end up together, Sunshine. Because when you love someone, you do everything you can to make them happy.”



## OPHELIA

MY NECK ACHED AS I OPENED MY EYES, ALREADY BRACING myself for the disappointment I would feel once I found myself alone in this big room, without Storm in it. But as my mind fought against the fog of sleep, my eyes slowly opening, blinking against the light seeping inside the room, I found out I wasn't alone at all.

Storm still sat in that same sofa chair, his face turned toward me, and those brilliant, green eyes twinkling with happiness, looking over me as if it was the only thing he ever wanted to do.

“Morning, Sunshine,” he crooned, squeezing my hand as if to tell me that he was still here. His brilliant smile was brighter than the sun coming through the windows.

“Morning,” I murmured, yawning, coming closer to him.

His legs were on the floor now, his boots back on, but he hadn't left. For the first time in months, he didn't leave me alone, and something akin to hope blossomed inside my chest, making me feel... alive? Hopeful? Happy even.

“I gotta tell you,” he smiled, “this sofa chair is the best thing I have ever bought, but it definitely wasn't made for sleeping.”

Pulling myself up onto my elbows, I let the blankets fall down around my lap, feeling more rested than I had in months. “We need to get you another bed maybe,” I said, looking at him. “Is your neck in pain?”

“Sunshine, I’m an old man.” He chuckled. “What do you think?”

“I think,” I murmured, coming closer to him and taking his hand again in mine. “That you deserve a massage.”

Storm’s eyes widened at my suggestion, his lips parting. Without a fight, he let me pull him onto the bed, until he sat on it, with his back turned to me.

I positioned myself behind him, sitting down on my knees, dragging my hands over his back, all the way to his shoulders. I reveled in the quiet grunts escaping from him as my fingers dug into the tight muscles, breaking through the knots that must have been bothering him for a lot longer than today.

I ran my hands over his trapezius muscles, all the way to his lats, chuckling as he started wiggling in front of me.

“Are you ticklish?” I asked, continuing my little exploration.

“No,” he answered fast, trying to keep still and failing. “Okay, okay,” he relented when I continued pressing my fingers to the same area. “I am. Fine. You win.”

“My Storm is ticklish.” I laughed, unaware of what I just said, as his entire back stiffened, his head slowly turning toward me. It took me a moment to realize what just came out of my mouth, but I didn’t want to take it back.

He didn’t deserve for me to take it back.

I knew it was only one day since we said we would take it slow, but he deserved to know what he meant to me. He deserved to know that he wasn’t alone. That he had me now, these babies. He had one more family that would love him no matter what.

“Storm—”

“Say it again,” he breathed out, completely turning toward me, climbing on top of the bed. “Please,” he said. “Say it again.”

“My Storm,” I whispered, smiling while his shocked eyes devoured every inch of my face, as if he was trying to etch me



into his memory. “My brave Storm,” I continued. “Even when I want to stab you, you’re still mine, aren’t you?”

I pressed my palm to his cheek, his eyes closing immediately, leaning into my touch. His stubble tickled my skin, but he didn’t make another move. We sat there as the minutes ticked by, protected in our little bubble, allowing ourselves this small moment where nothing else mattered.

“I’m going to fix the mess I made, Sunshine,” he murmured, pressing his hand over mine. “I’m going to fix it all, and I’m going to show you that you can trust me. I promise you.”

“Storm—”

“No.” He opened his eyes, the determination bright in them. “I don’t want you to ever doubt me. I want us to have a future together, Phee. I want you to trust me like you did before. And I’m going to prove that you can.”

He turned his head toward my palm, his soft lips pressing against my skin, branding me with his touch, before he stood up and started walking toward the door.

“I wish I could stay with you,” he said, taking his gun from the floor. “But I need to go and meet somebody.”

I frowned at that. “Who?”

“I’m afraid if I tell you, you’ll demand to come, and I don’t want you to stab him in the eye.” He smiled.

“Nico?” I exclaimed and stood up after him. “He’s in Santa Monica?”

“He flew in this morning. Turns out that his wife isn’t exactly thrilled with the way we handled things either, so we will fix it.”

“You will?”

“I will.” He nodded, coming closer to me. “Trust me, Sunshine. There’s nothing more important than you and these two kids,” Storm said, splaying his fingers over my stomach. “I will do everything I can to fix this shit. I promise.”

He leaned down, pressing his lips to my forehead, leaving me not a second after, as if he couldn't trust himself if he stayed a minute longer. I knew, I could see it in the way he held himself back.

I knew because I wanted nothing more but to throw myself at him.

But he was right last night. I asked him for space, and it was exactly what he was doing, giving me space, making sure we were both one hundred percent in this. I would just keep blaming it all on hormones and the insane urges to have him with me at all times.

I had no idea if it was what happened with Nova, or maybe the fact that he took the time to wash me, showing me how gentle things could be, or maybe the fact that being pregnant was starting to be a lot more real, but I wanted him next to me at all times.

It wasn't healthy, especially because I was still pissed at him over his deal with Nico, the way he dealt with things, the constant hot-and-cold game we were playing, that little monologue he granted me after he spoke with Lazar, but goddammit, I loved this man.

I loved his faults, his darkness, his good and bad sides. I wanted to have everything with him, and I hated that I couldn't make up my mind and just let things go. I hated that I still wanted to hurt him as much as he hurt me, just to show him that I wasn't a weak person.

But we both knew I wasn't weak. We both knew what I was capable of, but it was hard letting go of old habits when the constant need to prove that you were still you while everything else was changing, was always there.

Letting go of old habits was harder than I could have ever imagined. Letting go of parts of you that weren't serving you anymore was even harder, because it felt as if you were betraying yourself, changing to fit other people's agendas. In reality, you were changing because you were growing up. Because you were healing. Because you were becoming a better version of yourself.

Five years ago, I would've fought tooth and nail to get away from Storm, because he scared me. He didn't scare me because I thought he would hurt me. He scared me because he made me feel all these things I vowed I would never feel again.

He scared me because I knew he was my forever, and if I wanted it to last, I had to change the way I did things. I had to change the way I thought about things, and it was happening. Right now, it was happening.

But just because things were changing, it didn't mean that we were betraying our true selves. Just because we were growing, getting away from toxic behaviors, it didn't mean that it wasn't good. I didn't change to appease Storm or to get any of them to love me.

I changed because I wanted to love myself. I changed because I wanted a better life. I changed because the violent things I did weren't serving me anymore, and that was okay.

It was okay to let go, no matter how afraid you were of new beginnings. It was okay to forgive, to let yourself heal.

I was looking forward to the future for the first time in my life, because I could see it. I could see it filled with holidays, happiness, love, friends and family, and I wasn't afraid to embrace it. I wasn't afraid because I knew I deserved it.

Love and happiness weren't the things reserved for some and forbidden to others. We all deserved to feel them. We all deserved to be happy, and I was finally embracing it all.

There were pieces of the puzzle that needed to fall into place for everything to be perfect, or well, as perfect as it could get, and for that to happen, I needed my sister back. I needed Maya.

Turning around toward the nightstand, I leaned down toward it and took the phone in my hand, opening the contact list to see who I had there. Storm's name was the first one on the list, along with Cillian and... Holy moly, Kieran. I thought I would need to call Kill to get his number, since Cillian's

number was the only one I knew by heart, but Storm installed it for me already.

He... He was trying.

My thumb hovered over Kieran's name, remembering the last time we spoke. He wasn't happy that I wasn't leaving, and I wasn't happy because he couldn't understand. But I needed to talk to him now.

Not just because he was trying to save Maya, but because no matter what, Kieran was my friend. He would always be my friend. If I really wanted to move on with my life, I had to understand that both of us were young and stupid when some things happened. Holding onto grudges did nothing but poison your mind, and I'd been holding onto mine for far too long.

Without waiting any longer, I pressed the dial button and pressed the phone to my ear, hearing it ring. Kieran's deep voice came on, muffled by the noise from the background, and gunshots.

What the fuck?

"Kieran?" I asked, sitting my ass down, hoping that he wasn't in trouble. "What's going on?"

"Slightly busy now, Birdy." He huffed, and I assumed that he was running by the way he was breathing. "Are you okay? Is everything alright?"

"Uh, yeah..." I trailed off. "Are you okay?"

"Just a little busy, trying—"

"Trying not to fucking die!" somebody yelled out from the background.

I knew that voice. I knew it as much as I knew mine, and over the years it hadn't changed a bit.

I was too young to understand that everything Maya did was to protect me from Nikolai. I was too young to understand that her standoffish behavior wasn't there because she hated me, but because she didn't want to give him a reason to hurt me. Because she knew what a controlling motherfucker he was.

Hearing her voice, after all these years, made my entire body weak.

“Is that Maya?” I asked, trembling from head to toe. If I hadn’t been already sitting, I would have probably collapsed from the shock.

“Uh, yeah,” Kieran answered, when another gunshot rang through the line. “Look, Birdy. I’m going to call you back. We’re in a bit of a situation right now.”

“Situation you put us into. I told you I was handling it.”

“Not now, Maya!” Kieran barked at her.

“Don’t you fucking yell at me, Kieran Nightingale. I have a gun and I’m not afraid to use it.”

Oh. Oh wow.

“Where are you?” I asked. “I can send help. I can—”

“No, Ophelia!” He silenced me. “We’re in Mexico, but you’re not going to do anything about it. I’ll handle this.”

“Like you handled—”

Maya started speaking in the background, when the line cut off, leaving me in the dark.

Maya was alive and with Kieran. Maya who always seemed like someone who didn’t want to fight. Maya who now had a gun she knew how to use.

I always dreamed of getting her back, but I never thought about our relationship or how the two of us would function if she did come back. I had pushed all those thoughts to the back of my mind because it wasn’t really important.

But now it was, and I had to help them, no matter what Kieran had said.

I had to talk to Storm, to tell him what was going on. I had to ask him for help.

I stood up from the bed, pocketing my phone and started going toward the door. It opened from the outside, revealing Zoe with Kaiser, who immediately barged toward me.

“Kaiser!” I squealed as he jumped on top of me, trying to reach my face with his lolling tongue.

It’d been a couple of days since I last saw him, almost a week, and I hated that I couldn’t bring him with us when we went to Emercroft Lake.

“I’ve missed you, buddy,” I cooed, dragging my fingers through his fur, while his tail wagged, hitting against the sofa chair where Storm slept last night.

“And did you miss me?” Zoe asked, entering the room, with a bright smile on her face. “I’m starting to get offended that you first hugged him. I’m going to get jealous.” She chuckled.

“Come here.” I smiled, trying to get away from Kaiser. As soon as I stepped in front of her, I enveloped her in a big hug, while Kaiser tried to get between the two of us, pushing at our legs with his snout.

“He’s such a drama queen.” Zoe laughed, looking down at him. “You would think that he was starved for attention with how he acted with you.”

“It’s because he missed his mama,” I murmured, dropping down on my knees, letting him rain kisses all over my face. “That’s right.” I scratched behind his ears. “He missed me.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Zoe murmured, walking toward the bed. “I must say, I was surprised when Storm told me you were sleeping here.” She looked at me pointedly. “I mean, my mind might be playing tricks on me, but if I recall correctly, you kinda stabbed him a couple of days ago.”

“Shut up.” I chuckled.

“So, spill.” She grinned. “What’s going on with the two of you?”

“Nothing,” I murmured, avoiding her eyes.

“Ophelia.”

“We’re taking it slowly. I asked him for space, but with that Belladonna bitch alive, and Nova dead, I don’t want to risk the kids. So I’m staying in the Clubhouse.”

“So, you couldn’t have found another room to stay in? It had to be his?”

“Zozo.” I frowned. “It isn’t like that.”

“Well, then explain it to me. It looks to me as if you’ve forgiven him for sleeping with that ho, for lying to you, and for withholding the truth.”

“I didn’t forgive him,” I murmured, getting up from the floor and walking toward the sofa chair. Goddamn, I had no idea how he could sleep on this thing. “But he asked me to stay in his room and I agreed.”

“But, why?”

“Because I want to try to forgive him, Zoe.” I huffed. “I want to move on from things that are hurting my heart. I want to give him a chance to prove himself, to show me he can be trusted. We’re not together, not yet, but I want us to be. No matter what, I want us to be.” I looked up at her. “And because my previous room looks like a crime scene right now.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, oh. But he’s not out of the doghouse, and he definitely isn’t sleeping in the same bed.” Unfortunately. “He made a mess, but he’s fixing it. He’s trying at least, and I can’t fault him for that. It’s not like I’m a saint.”

“I never said you were, but you were trying as well, and look what he did.”

“I know, Zoe.” I looked at her. “I know very well what he did. You don’t have to remind me every single time we have a conversation about these things. But I also know that the two of us are very complicated people, and I know that if he could change things, he would, but we can’t. I can’t erase the fact that I cheated on him or that I killed so many innocent people. I also can’t erase the fact that he got hurt because of me.”

“Phee—”

“Nope, hear me out.” I took a deep breath before speaking again. “We both made mistakes, but if we hold on to the things we did, we will never move on. I want us to move on. I want

these kids to have parents who can communicate better than mine did. I don't want them to grow up, surrounded by bitter, old people, constantly fighting with each other. That's not the way to live, not for them and not for me."

"I know, but I just want to smack him on his thick head for what he did to you."

"Then you should be smacking me as well, because I did things no one should be proud of."

"But you've changed."

"And so has he," I countered. "Zoe, I love you, you know that. I love that you're so loyal to me, but Storm isn't the villain of this story and neither am I. We've made mistakes. We realized that we never should have made them. We apologized and we're trying to move on. I'm trying to learn to trust him again, and he's trying to be better at letting me do things by myself."

Her eyes widened more and more with every word that came out of my mouth. "Wow." She blinked. "I never thought I would see the day."

"Uh, I don't get it."

"You're growing up." She smiled softly, squeezing my knee. "Both of you knuckleheads are finally growing up, and it's beautiful to see. But, Phee." She looked pointedly at me. "If he screws up one more time, I'm going to stab him myself. Understood?"

I couldn't stop the laughter bubbling out of my chest. "Absolutely. But he might want to strangle me when I tell him the news."

"What is it?"

"Kieran found Maya," I said without a minute to spare. "And by the sound of the things, they're in danger. I don't know what to do."

"Phee." The warning in her voice was as clear as day.

"I'm not going to do something reckless or stupid. That's why I need to talk to him, to see if we could help in any way."



Don't look at me like that, Zoe. I'm not about to go to Mexico myself."

"I know you." She really did though. "I know how your brain works. I'm pretty sure that you would have been on your way by now if you knew exactly where they were."

She did have a point there.

"But I'm still here, and I'm trying to be better at this whole communication shit. But I can't talk to him until tonight, so you'll have to entertain me."

"Why can't you talk to him?" She frowned. "He did do something, didn't he?"

"No." I laughed. "He didn't do anything. But he's doing something very important today, and I don't want to distract him."

"Okay."

"But that means you'll have to distract me from doing something crazy," I said. Like going straight to Mexico to help them.

"Or," she said, getting up from the bed. "You could just call Storm. I'm pretty sure he will get his ass here if you ask him to."

I knew he would, but I didn't want to distract him. I wanted him to fix this shit with Nico, but I also needed to tell him about Kieran.

Jesus fuck, this communication thing sucked.



"YOU'RE GOING TO CREATE A HOLE IN THE FLOOR IF YOU continue pacing like that," Zoe said, looking at her sandwich, while I walked back and forth in the dining room, waiting for Storm to call me back.

"I can't stop," I replied. "I texted him an hour ago, and he read the message, but he still hasn't call me back. What if

something has happened and he's hurt, or worse?"

"Phee." She looked up at me. "Babe, I fucking love you, but you're going to drive yourself crazy. Hell, you're driving me crazy."

"How are you so calm?" I asked, sitting down on the chair on the opposite side of the table from where Zoe was. "How can you eat?"

"Because I'm hungry?"

"It's almost three in the afternoon, Zozo. His meeting was supposed to be finished two hours ago. What if Nico attacked him?"

"I truly hope he didn't," Zoe answered, biting into her sandwich. "Because if he did, I don't think that he would like you very much."

"Why are you saying that?"

"Because you have a crazy look in your eyes right now."

"I don't have a crazy look."

She looked up again, chewing slowly. "Yeah," she nodded, "you definitely do."

"I don't have a..." I trailed off, taking the phone out from my pocket and opening the front camera. "Well, shit." I definitely had a crazy look.

My pupils were dilated, the lines around my lips strained, and I truly did look like I wanted to murder someone.

"But he isn't fucking answering. What am I supposed to do?"

"Eat?" she answered nonchalantly. "That breakfast of yours was bullshit and we both know that."

"I wasn't hungry." I pouted. "And cereal is healthy."

"Since when do you care about healthy food?" She laughed. "Your breakfast usually consists of three cups of coffee, one or two cigarettes and some water just in case."

“Well,” I shrugged, “I can’t drink coffee right now.” Even though I would kill for just one cup. “I can’t smoke either.” This would have been helpful in this situation. “And I can’t not eat. I’m a human incubator right now.”

“Then call him again.”

I wanted to, but I had a feeling it would go into his voicemail—again.

Just as I was about to get up and start pacing again, my phone started ringing, startling me. But it wasn’t the name I wanted to see on the screen. As a matter of fact, it wasn’t a name at all. Unknown number was calling me and I had no idea if I really wanted to pick up.

Eh, what the hell. I survived Storm being in the hospital once, I could do it again.

“Hello,” I answered carefully.

“Oh, thank fucking God,” a female voice screeched through the line. “I thought I would have to send the cavalry to Santa Monica.”

“Alessia?” I exclaimed, surprised to hear her. “Oh no, if you’re calling me—”

“No, nope. They’re okay. My husband is a stupid motherfucker, but I still love him. Kinda. I do. I just want to strangle him right now.”

“So, you know?” I asked carefully.

“Oh, I definitely do. And it wasn’t pretty when he finally told me, that motherfucker. Late last night he comes into our room and starts babbling how much he loves me, how much he loves our boy, and how he will always do everything to protect us. Now, mind you,” she continued. “I knew who I was marrying, but I thought we were past this bullshit where he needs to tell me how much I truly mean to him. So obviously, I knew something was wrong. Then he tells me about the little pact, and I swear to God, Ophelia, he’s lucky that I didn’t have any sharp objects next to me.”

“Uh,” I murmured, looking at Zoe. “I’m going to put you on a speaker now. I’m sitting here with Zoe. She’s one of the Club members. She’s like a sister to me.”

I pressed the button for speaker and placed the phone on the table, waiting for Alessia to talk.

“Hi, Zoe,” she greeted her. “Look, girls, we gotta get together one of these days. These men are killing me. The level of testosterone in my house is insane. The fact that I’m carrying a male child is not helping. But, back to the point.” I laughed at her blabbering. “Then he packs his bag and tells me he’ll fix it. He goes straight to Santa Monica, and what does he do today?” Please don’t tell me that he and Storm stabbed each other. “He got drunk. He went there to fix this shit and now he’s drunk, texting me, calling me, and I can’t help him. He doesn’t want to go with Storm. By the way, woman,” she exclaimed. “That is one hot piece of ass.”

I started laughing along with Zoe.

“But the reason why I’m calling is because both of their phones have died, and I need to tell my idiotic husband that I still love him and that he should come back home.”

“Oh,” I murmured. “So, you want me to go to them?”

“Yep. Find them and bring them home. I figured you would be the person to do this, since he’s threatening Storm right now and I don’t want Storm to kick his ass. You get it, no?”

I did get it. “Where are they, do you know?”

“Some bar called Luminosity,” she said. “I’ve no idea.”

“I know where that is,” Zoe said. “I can take you there.”

“Perfect,” Alessia said. “And, Ophelia,” she continued. “I wouldn’t mind us being sisters-in-law, or whatever the fuck is the name, in-laws? I don’t know. But I want our kids to have a choice.”

“Me too.”

“And if they do end up being together, well, better for us. I don’t think that Nico planned to have you as an in-law

though.” She laughed. “Serves him right for making that stupid pact.”

She had a point there.

“I’ll call you once I get there,” I said, already getting up from the chair. Zoe followed suit, leaving behind the sandwich she was eating.

“Thank you, Phee,” Alessia said. “I owe you one.”

“Nah, don’t even mention it. I’ll talk to you later.”

I pressed the red button on the phone and took it from the desk, ready to leave.

“Are you sure you know where it is?” I asked Zoe as we started walking toward the entrance.

“Oh, yeah.” She chuckled. “Storm took him to one of our bars. I’m not surprised to be honest. That place is full of bikers. If our Italian boy is there, and alive, that only means that they’re okay with each other. Trust me, Storm is safe. Italian stallion—he won’t be if he tries to do something.”

That’s exactly what I was afraid of.



## STORM

I COULDN'T REMEMBER THE LAST TIME I GOT EXTREMELY drunk, and looking at Nico and listening to his blabbering reminded me why. It wasn't pretty, and it definitely didn't feel very well the next day, when my body rebelled against the alcohol still living in my bloodstream.

“And then,” he murmured, thankfully still sitting on the stool at the bar. “Then I told her I should let her go, you know,” he said, looking at the empty whiskey glass in his hand. “But she didn't let me. She basically told me to stop being a pussy, and here we are. I'm her pussy now. Pussy whipped.”

It sounded as if he said *pushy whipped*, but that was beside the point.

Ophelia texted me earlier, and just as I was reading the message, my phone decided to die and the bar didn't have a charger. Nico's wife called him earlier, but between him slurring, telling her he loved her and that he was sorry, his phone died as well.

So here we were, me babysitting a grown-ass man who couldn't handle his alcohol, apologizing for the pact we'd made, as if he was the only one in that equation. At least we found a way to avoid the wrath waiting for both of us at home. We found a solution just before he got smashed.

“Nico,” I murmured. “As much as I love listening to your love story, I think we should get going. I need to get back to Ophelia.”

“Ah, Ophelia.” He smiled. “That woman is amazing. Don’t tell her,” he looked at me, his eyes half-lidded, “but I’m fucking scared of her, eh. When she told me she would skin me alive, I actually believed her.” I would believe her too. “Once, I saw a grown-ass man cry because they told him he had to deal with her. Imagine!” He laughed. “He was crying because he was afraid of her. And now I want to cry because she would definitely stab me the next time she sees me.”

That I couldn’t argue with.

She’d been mad at me, but she already stabbed me once, so what was the point? But Nico, he definitely wasn’t safe.

“She’s not going to stab you.” I hoped. “She’s pissed off, but we found a solution, didn’t we? And we both want the same thing—for our kids to be happy. It’ll have to be their choice. They might need to go on a few dates, but they won’t be forced.”

“No, no,” he said. “They won’t be forced. I wouldn’t force your daughter to do anything she didn’t want to do. Ophelia Aster is her mother, I’m not even sure if my son would be able to survive the mix of you and Ophelia.”

I wasn’t sure either.

I drank the water the waiter placed on the bar for me and looked toward the exit, praying that I would be able to get him out of here soon. My guys were around us, laughing at the state he was in, but they still had no idea who he was, so there was that.

Thankfully, he ditched his usual outfit of whatever branded suit he wore, and came casually dressed. Members of the Club listened to me, but it was well known that the Italians and us didn’t really play along. Apart from my close circuit of friends, the rest of them had no idea that we were working with the Italians now.

Not yet at least.

“Nico,” I tried again. “We really, really have to go.”

“She doesn’t love me anymore!” he bellowed, slamming the glass down on the bar. “And it’s all my fault.”



“I’m pretty sure she still loves you. If she didn’t love you, she would have left by now. But she’s at home, waiting for you. We just need to get you sobered up.” And we needed to get him the hell out of here. I just didn’t want to ask for help unless I really needed to. “Here.” I pushed my water toward him. “Drink this.”

“What’s this?”

“Vodka,” I blurted out.

“Vodka?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “Vodka. Drink up.”

He took the bottle from me, eyeing it, but I knew he couldn’t really read the label. Not after one bottle of whiskey that he finished in a record time. He pressed the lid to his lips, chugging it down, but movement from the entrance pulled my attention, and I didn’t notice him falling off of the stool until it was too late.

“Fuck!” I cursed, jumping down, and picking him off the floor.

“Oh, look.” He chuckled, barely standing up. “It’s Ophelia.” And it really was Ophelia, looking at the two of us with wide eyes, while Zoe stood next to her, laughing along with the other men surrounding them.

“Oh, shit,” Nico said, stumbling backward. “Ophelia, I didn’t mean it. I swear. Don’t kill me.”

She cocked her head, her eyes shining, amused, even though her face kept the same blank expression.

“What the fuck did he drink?”

“A distillery, apparently,” Zoe said, taking a seat at the bar.

“Hey, it isn’t my fault,” I said, keeping Nico upright. “He kept saying that Alessia hated him, that it was all his fault, but,” I grinned, “we made an agreement.”

“You did?” my Sunshine asked, coming closer to us.

“No, nope. Please, Ophelia,” Nico begged. “I still want to live.”

“I’m not going to kill you, you moron.” She chuckled. “I’m here to help you.”

She pulled out her phone and dialed a number I couldn’t see, pressing the phone to her ear.

“Babe,” she started. “He’s in a terrible state.” Her eyes were plastered to Nico, and damn, I fucking wanted to go home and to tell her what we discussed. I wanted her to look at me. “Yeah, I’m giving him the phone.”

She stepped in front of Nico, taking his hand and placing the phone in it.

“Talk to her,” she murmured. “It’s Alessia.”

“Tesoro,” Nico murmured, his voice wavering as she spoke. “I’m so sorry, Tesoro. I’m sorry.”

I had a feeling he would be in a lot of trouble once he got home, but it was interesting watching him like this, afraid of his own wife. Nico kept mumbling into the phone, apologizing, telling her he loved her. Instead of holding him up, I led him toward a table right next to the bar, and pulled the chair out, putting him down.

It was easier than holding him up, making sure he didn’t fall.

A hand on my shoulder made me turn around. Ophelia was standing right behind me, her eyes smiling at the drunk man sitting just in front of us.

“He’s really drunk,” she murmured, going on her tiptoes. Her breath washed over my neck, sending shivers all over my body. My eyes closed of their own volition, my body fighting against the urge to take her back to the Clubhouse and lock her inside the room where I knew she would be safe.

Every atom in my body screamed at me, wanting to protect her, to take her as far away from here as possible, because I knew she wasn’t safe, even though we were in the middle of my territory. If she only knew half of how I felt about everything, she would’ve smacked me days ago.

But I meant what I said to her—she didn't need my protection. She didn't need me to lock her in a golden tower, while I dealt with the dangers surrounding us. I wanted to show her that I could let go, that I could trust her with her own choices.

“You didn't answer your phone,” Ophelia whispered, her eyes firmly plastered on drunk Nico. “I was worried about you.”

She was?

I wasn't questioning the feelings she had for me, but I also knew how much I fucked up—how much both of us fucked up—and we both needed time to heal the wounds we'd inflicted on each other. As much as it pained me to say, she was the more rational one in this relationship, not me. Because all I wanted since our trip to Emercroft Lake was to hold her and never let her go.

That whole fiasco where I tried telling her that I was letting her go was the stupidest thing I ever did, and I knew she would remember it for the rest of her life. I guess I just had to show her that I didn't mean it.

Her happiness always came first, and I meant it when I said that if she was going to be happier without me, I would let her go. But words never came easily to me, and instead of explaining it properly, I made a bigger mess than before.

“You were worried?” I smiled, lacing my fingers with hers just as she placed her head on my shoulder, nodding after my question.

“I mean, I had no idea if the two of you would kill each other or simply talk like grownups.” She lifted her head, looking up at me. “I know you can take care of yourself, but still.” Ophelia shrugged as if it pained her to admit that she worried for my safety. “I don't trust many people, and knowing you were out here with Nico, while the real threat still existed... It just didn't sit well with me.”

“Sunshine.” I lowered my voice, taking a step back from Nico, along with Ophelia. “You don't have to worry about me.

I'm not the target this time around.”

“Yeah, I know. But still...” she trailed off. “I worry. I don't know how to explain it, but I have a feeling that things are just starting to get messy, and I don't like it.”

“Sunshine,” I murmured. “We have people that can help. People who are capable of protecting you and themselves.”

“It's not that. It's the fact that I now have these two kids to protect. It was easy just thinking about myself because I know I can fight. I can defend myself. I can run, but they can't. What if something happens to them, Storm?” she asked, her eyes filled with worry. “What if I ruin their lives how my parents ruined mine? What if they hate me?”

“They're not going to hate you, Sunshine,” I said. “Where is this coming from? You never told me any of these concerns before.”

“Because it didn't feel real before. I don't think that I truly realized how vicious our world is before today. Well, before I found Nova snooping through my things. What if they can't defend themselves, Storm?”

“Then we'll teach them,” I said. “We'll teach them how to be both vicious and kind. We'll teach them to love wholeheartedly, but to also keep themselves protected. We'll teach them that not everyone is a friend and that family always comes first. We will love them, Phee. I already love them.” I smiled, splaying my fingers over her stomach. “I love them more than anything, and I know you love them too.”

“I do.”

“It's normal to be afraid. Hell, I wish our parents were thinking about all these things when they were having us. I wish they worried about our safety and how we would survive in this vicious world.”

“I don't want them to end up like me,” she whispered, looking at the floor. “I want them to love the simple things in life, not to be filled with regrets over the things they did and over the things they didn't do, you know?”

Squeezing her fingers, I hoped she would be able to take the strength from me. I hoped she could see what an amazing mother she would be.

She was already better than my mother, better than hers as well. Since she became pregnant, she's been putting the needs of our kids above her own, and I knew she would always protect them from the evil this world was infected with. She would protect them even from herself if that was needed, but she would never harm them.

"Phee," I murmured, pulling her closer to me until her chest pressed against mine, and she had no other choice but to look up at me. "How about we get out of here? I saw your message and I know there's something you want to tell me."

"But what about Nico?"

"Zoe can take him to the Clubhouse to sleep this off. I think you need to get out of the house for a bit."

"God," she groaned. "I really do. I feel like I'm going crazy in there."

"Come on, then." I grinned, pulling her with me as I walked toward Zoe. "Zozo," I said as we stepped closer to where she sat at the bar. "I need a favor."

She turned toward us, her eyes narrowed at me, and I knew I fucked up with her as well. She was pissed off at me, and had every right to be, but I needed her on my side if I wanted this thing with Ophelia to work. It was obvious that she loved Ophelia, and even though Zoe wasn't a fighter, she would've fought me for this girl.

"Did you fuck something up—again?"

"No." I smiled, shaking my head. "I wanna take Ophelia out for lunch, but this situation here," I pointed toward Nico, "has to be taken care of. Can you take him back to the Clubhouse? I'll tell them to call Felix to come and help you, but—"

"And you're okay going with him?" she asked Ophelia, completely ignoring what I had just said.

“Yeah.” My Sunshine smiled, beaming at me. “I think I want to eat something. Kids are hungry,” she murmured, rubbing her belly. “Are you okay with doing this, though?”

“Hmmm.” Zoe seemed to contemplate whether or not she wanted to do this, but before I could plead with her, a bright smile spread over her face, her eyes going from Ophelia to me. “You better not fuck this up,” she said, pointing at me. “And you,” she looked at Ophelia, “don’t run, eh?”

“I’m not going to run.” Ophelia chuckled. “But, thank you, Zoe.” Ophelia detached herself from me and went to Zoe, enveloping her in a bear hug. They murmured something to each other. Zoe smiled, while Nico kept on repeating from the background how much he loved Alessia.

“And bring me back my phone, okay?” Ophelia said as she stepped backward, her eyes flickering between Zoe and Nico who was still talking to Alessia. “I need it.”

“Come on,” I said, taking Ophelia’s hand in mine. “My stomach is about to eat itself if I don’t get some food in my system.”

“What the hell were you two doing before? Only drinking?” Ophelia asked as we walked toward the exit.

“Nico was drinking, but I didn’t think it would take this long.” I huffed. “I wanted to come back home and have lunch with you, not sit around, waiting for him to stop drinking.”

“Why didn’t you bring him back?”

“I’m on my bike,” I said as we exited outside. “It isn’t exactly safe driving on a motorcycle with a drunk person. And then my phone died, so I couldn’t exactly call anyone for backup.”

“But you said Felix would come?”

“Diego, the bartender, has called him already,” I murmured, taking the helmet from my bike and turning toward her. “They’ll help Zoe. Don’t worry about that.”

The cold breeze pushed through the street, sending chills over my body.

“Are you going to be cold, riding on the bike with me?” I asked her, as I stepped closer, placing the helmet on her head. The straps laid loosely around her face, her bright, blue eyes looking up at me.

“Nah, I’ll be okay. I’m just hungry.”

“Oh, yeah?” I chuckled, attaching the straps underneath her chin, my fingers brushing over her soft skin in the process.

*Patience, Storm. You gotta be patient with her,* I told myself.

Being this close to her, my mind only wanted one thing—her lips on mine. Her hands on me.

“Sunshine,” I rasped, lowering my head.

“Yeah?” She breathed out, her eyes flickering between my lips and my eyes.

“Can I kiss you?”

“Are you asking?”

“I am,” I mumbled, lowering my head toward hers. “I’m asking for permission. Can I?” I asked, playing with the loose strand of her hair. “Please?”

My thumb ran over her cheek as her hands landed on my shoulders. Her chest pressed against mine, her breathing quickening as my lips lowered down, closer to hers.

“Please, Sunshine.”

“Okay,” she whispered. “Kiss me, Storm.”

And I did.

I pressed my lips against hers, slowly at first, gently, savoring her, drinking in the little moans and whimpers escaping from her. My fingers snuck to the back of her head, holding her neck, keeping her in place, while my lips bruised hers, taking and taking and taking, until the soft and gentle kiss turned into the savage need to own her, to have her, to feel her against me.

My cock hardened in my pants, pushing against the zipper, wanting to be free, but it wasn't about him right now. Her barely there stomach pressed against my lower abs, and the pride over her, over these two miracles she was carrying, washed over me, making it harder to breathe.

Our tongues danced, fought and caressed, until I pulled back with force, breathing heavily, my body rebelling against the idea to stop.

“Fuck,” I murmured, dazed, and filled with a need only she could quench.

“Wow,” she mumbled, pressing her fingers to her lips, as if she was replaying the kiss in her head. “That was... Wow,” she whispered, looking up at me. Wide irises and eyes filled with need rivaling mine stared back at me, and I knew we had to get the fuck out of here and go eat.

“We should get going,” I said, fighting against the urge to take her to the closest alley, and fuck her against the wall. “We really should get going.”

“Yeah,” she stammered, drunk with lust. “We really should.”

“Come.” I extended my hand to her. As soon as she placed her much smaller hand in mine, I moved us toward the bike, straddling it first, before she sat behind me, wrapping her arms around my middle.

“Hold tight,” I said, revving the engine up, and shooting down the street, determined to take her to eat and not to fuck her.

We needed time. She asked for space.

I repeated those two sentences over and over in my head as we drove, but it didn't help. Nothing helped because I knew... My mind, my soul, my body, they all knew—she was always meant to be mine, and I'd do everything to get through this period of distrust and separation.





SANTA MONICA WAS ALWAYS BEAUTIFUL, BUT THERE WAS something special about it during these colder months, when all the tourists went to their homes, leaving our beaches mostly empty and peaceful. I knew Ophelia loved the ocean, she always had.

That first time I saw her with Ava, she took me to the cliffside, where we sealed our fates, binding ourselves forever. We didn't need to say the words back then. We didn't need to hold hands, kiss, or fuck, we just knew.

We always knew that this was it.

Or at least I did. I knew this woman was made for me and only me. I knew that I would do anything to kill the sadness shining in her eyes, and that I would do anything to make the lives of those who wronged her as miserable as possible.

I didn't have a cliffside right now, but we had a beautiful beach. In all this time that she was in Santa Monica, we only came here once, to the Pier, after I had just brought her to the Clubhouse for the first time.

She was the first one to get off of the bike as we stopped at the parking lot close to Venice Beach, and I followed a second after her. Ophelia removed her helmet, turning toward me with a smile.

"It's beautiful here," she said, beaming. The sun shone brightly today, white, puffy clouds covering the sky, playing hide and seek with the sunrays.

"It really is," I said, walking toward her and taking the helmet from her. "Let's go. There's an amazing stand a minute from here with the world's best burgers."

"The best?" she asked, following after me, taking my hand in hers. "Are you sure about that?"

"The best," I repeated. "My old president brought me here when I first came to the Club. I was a skinny kid, angry, and I was constantly getting into fights with the other members. I just... I don't know, I just didn't know what to do with this anger living in me, you know?"

“I kinda do,” Ophelia said, looking at me. “It’s like, you want to scream and scream and scream, because you’re angry. You’re fucking devastated. You see all these other people living their lives, having a peaceful life, and you’re drowning. You think it’s unfair that this happened to you. Why you, right? Why not somebody else? And then you start thinking that you must have done something in one of your past lives and this one is the punishment for the previous crimes. I know, Storm. I know what it feels like being angry at the entire world.”

“I know you do,” I murmured. “I know you understand better than anyone else what it feels like being trapped in a life you don’t want to have. No matter what, there’s no way out. There’s nothing you can do but push forward.”

“Yeah. And then all that pain, all that anger morphs into violence, because why should other people live their lives freely when they did this to you. The only problem is that more often than not, you don’t know when to stop. You feel comfortable in your misery. You feel as if this is the only thing that feels like home, because you know nothing else.”

“Until that same misery starts destroying the good things happening in your life,” I said, looking down at her. “But sometimes there’s light, you know? Sometimes you meet a girl who changes your life, who makes you feel as if everything you ever did, everything that happened to you has happened for a reason, and that reason is to bring you to her. To put the two of you together.”

“Even when she’s an asshole who doesn’t know how to trust?” she asked, smiling softly.

“Even then. Especially then because you understand why. Even when you’re angry and you think you want to strangle her, you understand why she did certain things. Because if the roles were reversed, you would’ve done the same.”

“Oh,” she murmured, her eyes widening at my statement. “Really?”

“Yeah, really.” I chuckled. “You know, that day when he brought me here, man... I’m still not sure how he didn’t kill

me in those first couple of years. That younger version of me was a real asshole.”

“So, what you’re saying is that we should expect our kids to be real assholes as well, because the two of us were?” she asked, laughing the entire time. “We’re gonna have our hands full with them, won’t we?”

“With the two of us as parents, I’m going to be surprised if one of them doesn’t come out holding a knife. Look.” I pointed toward the black-and-red stand in front of us. “That’s the place, and they still have the same owner. Well, it’s the son now, but they still have the same burgers, I swear. My previous president put them under our protection. Back then, many gangs were running around Santa Monica, trying to take over, but we put an end to that.”

We walked closer to the stand, where a kid who couldn’t be older than twenty stood behind the counter, looking at us with a bright smile.

“Welcome to Manny’s.” He grinned. “What can I get you guys?” His eyes widened when he saw me, smiling from ear to ear. “Mr. Knoxx—”

I was about to greet him back, when Ophelia blurted out her order, without waiting for me.

“The cheesiest cheeseburger,” she said. “Please. And pickles. Lots and lots of pickles.”

I started laughing, looking at her as she stared at the pictures of burgers behind the kid.

“You really are hungry, huh?”

“I’m starving,” she said.

“Would you like to have some french fries with that?” the kid asked, typing everything into his system. “Something to drink?”

“Yes to the french fries.” She was basically salivating at the thought. “And an orange juice, please.”

“Coming right up,” the kid said. “Mr. Knoxx.” He smiled. “It’s been a long time since you last came. Is it going to be the

same as usual?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “Life got a little bit crazy. But I’ll have a Star Burger combo, with Pepsi.”

“Perfect.” He typed everything up, while Ophelia practically danced next to me, giddy about the food. “Here.” He gave us a small, round device over the counter. “It’ll start beeping once your order is ready, but in the meantime, you can have a seat behind the trailer.”

Paying for our order after he told us the amount, I took the device before Ophelia could. After thanking the kid, I pulled her with me toward the area where the tables were arranged, just behind the truck, overlooking the sea.

“I hope it won’t take too long,” she murmured as we sat down. “I’m really, really starving.”

“I should go and tell him to hurry up. I don’t want you to eat me. I still need all of my limbs.” I laughed as she punched my shoulder.

“Jackass. You don’t get to complain. I’m an incubator right now.”

“Uh, what?” I asked.

“An incubator, for the babies. I’m eating for three.”

“Is that the excuse you want to go with? Phee, I hate to break it to you, but even before the babies were there, you were eating like a grown-ass man.”

“I needed my energy,” she exclaimed. “All that running and fighting required a lot of energy.”

“I know.” I laughed. “But on a more serious note, what did you want to tell me? Your message kinda frightened me and if it wasn’t for a drunk Nico, I would’ve gotten home in a second.”

“I think,” she started saying, playing with the napkin on the table. “I think you should probably tell me first what you discussed with Nico. I don’t want to be angry at you and frankly I don’t want to fight over this. If you’ve agreed on

anything less than destroying that agreement, we're going to have a problem."

"Well," I took her hand in mine, lacing our fingers and placing them on top of the table, "we didn't destroy the agreement—"

"Storm!" she whisper-hissed, trying to remove her hand from mine, but I wasn't having it.

"Just hear me out before you try to feed me to the sharks." I took a deep breath and turned toward her. "We didn't destroy the agreement, but we did amend it. Neither one of us wants our kids to have their choices taken from them, and we want them to be able to choose on their own. Just like we did."

"Get to the point, Stormy."

"The agreement stands, and they're still going to help us, however, the kids won't be forced into marriage unless they want it."

"What does that mean?" she asked, distrust obvious in her eyes.

"It means that we will introduce them to each other, have them grow up together, and if it turns into something more than friendship, then we wouldn't be opposed to them marrying each other. But if they decide to just stay friends, then that's all they'll ever be."

"So, we're going to be seeing Nico and Alessia a lot more?" she asked. "And with that, the kids are supposed to bond and become friends?"

"Yep," I said. "We want them to know each other, regardless of everything else. And again, if they fall in love, then so be it. If they don't, we won't force them."

"Storm," she whispered, looking straight at me. "I... I don't know what to say. You're giving them a choice?"

"Yeah, we're giving them a choice."

Before I could even blink, she was out of her chair and coming straight at me, lowering herself down onto my lap.

“I was so worried,” she said, hugging me, her hands roaming over my head. “I didn’t want to have to stab you, but I would have if you forced this on her.”

“Oh I know, and I would much rather not get stabbed if possible,” I murmured, wrapping my arms around her. “But now they’ll have a choice. They’ll be able to choose who they want to spend the rest of their lives with, if they want to spend the rest of their lives with someone.”

Her relief was almost palpable, and for the first time since yesterday, I felt as if I could breathe, knowing that I could fix this. That she could trust me again.

“Uh, sorry to interrupt.” The kid who took our order cleared his throat. As I turned around, I saw him carrying a tray. “I brought it over for you guys. And Mr. Knoxx,” he said as he lowered the tray with our order on the table. “My dad said to say hi. He mentioned that you guys used to hang out here a lot when you were younger.”

“That we definitely did.” I smiled as Ophelia took the fries from the table, devouring them as I talked to the kid. “It is nice to meet you, Riccardo. Tell him I said hi, will you? I haven’t seen him in ages.”

“I will, I will.” He smiled. “Enjoy your food and let me know if you need anything else please.”

He didn’t have to tell us twice. At least he didn’t have to tell Ophelia twice.

She was already up and back in her own chair, with her fries in front of her, biting into her cheeseburger.

At least no one could worry that she had a lack of appetite.

Picking up my burger and removing the wrap, I slowly bit into the juicy goodness, observing her every move.

“So,” she started with her mouth half full. “I spoke with Kieran.”

And just like that, my appetite disappeared, just hearing his name. It was insane, this green monster of mine, awakening every time she spoke of him, but I couldn’t help it. I could try

to tame it, but I couldn't completely ignore the fact that he saw her naked before me.

It was irrational, feeling like this, especially since neither one of us were saints, but I still didn't like him. I still hated him for what he did to her, for how he hurt her, how he wanted to destroy her, and I couldn't understand why she forgave him.

Maybe I never would, but I also knew that I couldn't act as irrationally as I wanted to every time she spoke of him.

"Oh," was all I said as I chewed my burger, avoiding her eyes. That little stunt he pulled where he told her that she could go with him... Yeah, I still couldn't forget that.

Okay, I respected him for wanting to give her an out, considering that I was behaving like an asshole, engaging with Nova and all the other shit, but no matter what the rational explanation was, I didn't like it.

"I called him," she said, and it was as if a sledgehammer slammed into my chest, knocking the breath out of me. I shouldn't be feeling this way, since I was the one who added his number to her phone. I didn't want any secrets between us, and it was obvious he was a big part of her life, no matter what I wanted.

I would rather show her that I could keep my temper in check, than have her keep secrets from me because she didn't want to hurt our relationship.

"You don't have to look like that, Stormy." She chuckled.

"Like what?"

"Constipated?" she said, laughing at me. "I know you don't like him." That's putting it mildly. "But Kieran is a friend. He's one of my oldest friends and he knows that we would never be together. Never again. But he's helping Maya. He's trying, and I have to give it to him—he didn't pull any moves on me, and is really trying to fix his mess."

"He asked you to come with him," I grunted, unable to look at her. "I know it's not for romantic reasons, and I know you had every right to leave that day when you saw me with Nova, but I still don't like it. This irrational part of me is

telling me to find him and to beat him to a pulp, because he wanted to steal what's mine."

"Stormy—"

"I know, I know," I mumbled. "You're not an object to be owned, I know that. But my heart doesn't. My soul doesn't. I can't even try to explain how all of this works to them, and that's why I can't move on from the fact that he pisses me off with his attitude."

"He just offered to help, you know," she said, placing her hand over my fisted one. "I know you don't like him, I get it, but he really isn't trying to get into my pants."

"Phee," I growled and looked at her. "If you want that man to live, don't ever put his name and your pants in the same sentence."

She bit into her cheeseburger, her eyes crinkling at the corners, laughing at me.

"Stop looking at me like that," I said.

"Like what?"

"Like you're amused because I'm jealous of him."

"Because I am." She laughed. "It's good to know."

"Ophelia," I warned. "Don't. Please, don't."

"Okay, okay." She grinned. "I'm not trying to make you jealous. I'm trying to tell you that I called him and..." she trailed off, closing her eyes.

"Sunshine?"

"He's with Maya, Storm," she said, opening her bright, cerulean eyes, filled with so much emotion. "He found my sister."

"Holy shit."

"And by the sound of the things, they're in danger. When I spoke to him, it was obvious that they're in trouble, but I can't just go to Mexico to help them. Not right now."

"You're not going anywhere," I growled.



“No, I’m not.” She shook her head. “That’s why I need your help. I don’t know if you guys have any chapters in Mexico or if you know anyone who can help, but I want her back and I want her safe. Hell, I want both of them to be safe and home. But I don’t know what to do.”

I could see that this was bothering her more than she was letting on. She was a master at keeping her pretty mask on her face, but the cracks were showing, and her worry for her sister was at the forefront of her mind.

“I don’t want her to be harmed. Can you do something? Anything,” she whispered, pleading with her eyes. “I know you don’t like him, but he doesn’t deserve to die. Not like this, not while he’s doing me a favor.”

“Sunshine,” I murmured, pulling her chair closer to mine. “I’ll do whatever I can to find them and to help them if they need help. I’ll talk with my contacts in Mexico. I’m sure they can help.”

“Thank you,” she whispered. “I came to you, because... Because I trust that you’re the only person who can help me right now. I don’t want to involve Lazar because I have a feeling that would only make things worse. Kieran said not to send anyone, that they could handle it, but they were in the middle of something when the phone call cut off. I can’t shake this feeling that something horrible is about to happen.”

“Phee, hey,” I crooned. “Nothing is going to happen. We’ll help them and they’ll come home. We’ll also find this bitch who wants to harm you. Trust me, okay?”

“I do trust you,” she said. “Maybe I shouldn’t, considering everything we’ve gone through, but I do trust you. I’m just worried that even you, that even I, won’t be able to stop Belladonna and that she’ll get to our kids once they’re born, unless we find her before.”

“We will. We will find her. We will find Kieran and Maya, and we will have an amazing life. All of us together.”

She looked up, her eyes filled with unshed tears. “Promise?” she asked. “Promise that once all of this is over,

we will have a better life than before?”

“I promise, Sunshine,” I answered. “I promise I will do everything I can to protect you guys. I swear to you, you are my priority. You are my family, no matter what. We might be on a break right now. I might give you the space you asked for, but I promise—you’re the only thing that matters. You and these kids,” I said, placing my hand on her stomach. “I will burn down the world to keep you safe.”

And I meant it.

I would destroy every single person who stood in our way or who wanted to harm my family.

That was a motherfucking promise.



## OPHELIA

IT'S BEEN FIFTEEN DAYS SINCE I LAST SPOKE WITH KIERAN. Fifteen miserable days, and every single time my phone rang, my heart got stuck in my throat, thinking it would be someone with bad news.

Fifteen days of constant waiting, constant worry, stress, overeating and sweating bullets, but there wasn't a peep. Even Storm's contacts in Mexico couldn't trace them, and to make matters worse, I had no fucking idea which part of Mexico they were in.

There are at least one hundred cities in Mexico, and I wasn't even counting the smaller towns where Kieran and Maya could be. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack—practically impossible.

Storm practically had to order me to go to sleep the other night, but every time I closed my eyes, I could hear Maya's screams. I could see the day Nikolai dragged her from the house, selling her to the highest bidder. So I couldn't sleep—again, and this time, it had nothing to do with Storm or the mess of our relationship.

He still slept in that uncomfortable sofa chair, and no matter how much I urged him to come to the bed, he refused, standing his ground. He was there for me, I couldn't say he wasn't, but this entire plan to keep my distance and to give us time was working against me. It was obvious that he wasn't as bad as I made him out to be, and he'd been trying.

But was it enough?

It had to be, because I had no idea how long I would be able to stay away from him. To make matters worse, my hormones were working against me, and every single thing made me cry.

I saw a commercial with little ducklings the other day and started bawling like an insane person because they were following their mom everywhere, quacking and doing whatever the fuck ducklings were doing. Even Kaiser looked at me funnily.

My stomach was getting rounder, and I knew it was only a matter of time before it would be quite obvious that I was pregnant. The majority of the guys inside the Clubhouse knew about it, but I didn't want people from the outside to know as well.

I had no idea who Belladonna worked with. It was obvious that it bugged Storm more than he led on, if him following me around like a lost puppy was any indication. Between Belladonna and Kieran and Maya, I was going to go insane.

“Sunshine.” Storm’s voice piped through my train of thoughts, and as I turned toward him, moving my entire body in the big sofa chair they placed in the backyard, I could see the same worry etched on his face. “There’s someone here to see you,” he murmured, stepping aside, as the man I hadn’t seen in almost a month, stepped forward, beaming as his eyes landed on me.

“Dad!” I yelled out, jumping up off of the chair and running straight toward him.

My arms wrapped around his middle, clinging to him like a monkey, forgetting momentarily about everything bad that was going on.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, looking up at him.

He wrapped his arms around me, stopping me from moving away, and that smile, that genuine fucking smile, only pushed my own smile to spread wider. He was in the middle of enemy territory, coming here to see me, and I had a feeling Storm had something to do with this.

“Did you call him?” I asked Storm, looking at him over Lazar’s shoulder.

“Maybe.” He shrugged. “Maybe not.”

“You have a good man there, Katya,” Lazar murmured, only for me to hear. “But don’t tell him I said that. I like it that he’s still slightly afraid of me.” He chuckled.

“He’s not afraid,” I said, looking between a fidgeting Storm and my father. “I think he wants to earn your respect, and you’re not making it any easier.”

“Well, he practically broke your heart. I have no idea what’s going on now, he didn’t tell me all the details, but I don’t like seeing you sad. *Chto proizoshlo?*”

Taking a step back, I put my hands into the front pockets of my hoodie, staring at the floor.

“I’m worried about Kieran and Maya,” I murmured. “I spoke to him two weeks ago, and he found her, Papa.” I smiled softly. “He found Maya, but they’re in trouble. Or at least they were. Storm is trying to find out where they are, but so far, we have no information, and Kieran’s phone is still switched off.”

“I can look into it,” Lazar said. “Give me just a second.”

He turned around and walked inside the house, leaving me alone with Storm.

“You didn’t have to do this,” I said first, coming closer to him. “I’m okay.”

“You’re not,” he countered. “You’re far from okay, and I hate seeing you sad when there’s nothing I can do to fix it. So, I thought that maybe he could help.”

“Stormy,” I murmured, slowly tracing a path with my hand from his throat to his stomach. “Thank you.” I slid my arms over his chest, wrapping them around his middle and pressing my head to his chest. “You didn’t have to do it.”

“I did. I told you already,” he murmured, pressing his lips to my hair. “I will do anything to make you happy, even if it means bringing your father here, even though he scares me a bit.”

“Okay,” Lazar’s voice boomed around us as he stepped through the sliding door, coming outside. “I know your guys are on this,” he told Storm. “But the more the merrier, right? I’ve contacted some of my guys in Mexico and they’re going to help locate Maya and Kieran. There’s a possibility that they’ve already crossed the border, but you know, better safe than sorry.”

“Thank you,” I murmured, still wrapped around Storm. “But how do you know that they’re in Mexico?”

The smirk that overtook his face should’ve been scary, if I didn’t know better. “I have my ways,” he shrugged. “You don’t have to thank me for this, *dorogoy*.” He smiled. “Maya is family. She’s your sister, and I will do anything I can to help you guys. But,” he looked at Storm, “this is not the only reason why I’m here.”

“It’s not?” Storm asked, frowning. “Then—”

“Have you heard from Cillian, Ophelia?” Lazar asked, that dangerous gleam in his eye.

Cillian? The last I heard was that he was still with Skylar, helping her with the situation in Winworth.

“No,” I said. “Why?”

“Where’s your living room, Storm?” Lazar asked. “There’s something you might want to see.”

Storm and I looked at each other, confusion obvious in both of our gazes and followed after Lazar. He entered the house, as if he knew where he was going. Storm took over, leading us toward the living room, where most of the members tended to gather at the end of the day. The large television screen was attached to the wall opposite of the couches.

Zoe sat in the corner already, with Felix next to her, smiling at something he said. But when she looked at us, her eyes widened, and I knew what she was seeing. She hadn’t met Lazar so far, and I knew he looked more like Nikolai than he wanted to admit.

“Zozo,” I said as we stepped in. “This is Lazar.” I looked at him. “My father.”

“Holy shit,” she breathed out, getting up from the couch, leaving Felix behind. “He looks just like—”

“That one actor, right?” Lazar said, smiling at her. “I get that a lot.”

“Uh, yeah?” she stammered. “I guess. But...” She plastered a smile on her face. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Likewise. Now,” Lazar turned toward us, “we need to turn the TV on to Channel 4. You’re gonna want to see this.”

“See what?” Storm asked as he walked toward the small coffee table where the television remote stood. He turned the television on, searching for the said channel.

“You’ll see.” Lazar grinned and sat down on the couch, getting comfy while the rest of us stared at him, confused. “Come on,” he urged us. “Sit down. You don’t want to miss it. Turn the volume up.”

I moved my attention to the television. As soon as Storm located it, the voice of a reporter boomed around us, while the video of a man being dragged to a police car started playing.

I knew the man. I knew him very well. Along with Nikolai, he was responsible for so much misery, so much pain, and I knew he was involved with the Red Manor.

*“Logan Nightingale has been charged with the allegations of human trafficking, racketeering, drug trafficking and more,”* the reporter said. *“The FBI has been working diligently to bring this man to justice. Now that they have arrested him, it looks like he will be facing a sentence of up to eighty years.”*

“Holy shit,” I said, sitting down on the couch. “They did it. They finally did it.”

Storm came behind me, placing his hands on my shoulders, holding me to him.

“It’s over,” I murmured, looking at Lazar. “He’s been caught.”

“Oh no, *dorogoy*.” Lazar grinned. “It’s only starting, at least for him. He has no idea what’s waiting for him once he



gets to prison. He has no idea what pain really is, but he will find out.”

And I believed him. I knew Lazar wouldn't let this go that easily. Logan might not be free anymore, and the men and women who fell victims to him would be able to breathe, but that didn't mean that jail was the only punishment he would get.

“I need to call Cillian,” I murmured, looking up at Storm. “I need to check if he's okay. He didn't tell me about this. He didn't tell me they were taking him today.”

“Do you want me to go with you?”

“Nah,” I answered, placing my hand over his. “I need to talk to him alone. I need to tell him about Kieran as well.” I frowned. “Not sure how he's going to take that.”

I wasn't sure if losing another family member would shake him or if it would finally liberate him. No one hated Logan Nightingale more than Cillian, but if something happened to Kieran... I didn't want to think what that would do to Cillian.

I truly didn't want to.

Standing up from the couch, I looked down at Lazar. “I'll be back. You're still going to be around?”

“Oh yeah.” He smiled. “I'm not going anywhere. You need to tell me all about my grandchild.”

*Shit.*

I only then realized that my hoodie had climbed up, revealing my round belly.

“You'll explain everything later,” Lazar said, narrowing his eyes at Storm. “We will have a little chat while you talk to your friend, won't we, son?”

Storm paled, his entire complexion going three shades lighter, while his eyes widened, fear evident in them. He looked at me, then back at Lazar, but there was no getting out of this.

We should have told him before. We should have told him I was pregnant, but it just never seemed like the right time.

“Fine.” I huffed. “But, Dad,” I looked at him pointedly, “if there’s even a hair missing from his head, you know what will happen.”

“I do.” He chuckled. “But you didn’t mention anything about his limbs.”

Fucker.

I started laughing, but it was obvious that Storm didn’t find it as funny as I did.

“He’s going to murder me,” he whispered as I took him with me toward the hallway. “He’s going to feed me to the pigs.”

“We don’t have pigs here.”

“It doesn’t matter.” He exhaled. “He’s going to find them and he’ll feed them with the chopped off pieces of my body.”

“Storm,” I said, my palms landing on his cheeks. “You’re going to be okay. Just don’t piss him off even more.”

We didn’t have time for him to fall apart or to be afraid of my father, but it was funny. A little bit. Okay, it was quite funny, but I wasn’t going to laugh in his face.

“Now go back,” I instructed. “Talk to him. He’s not as bad as people make him out to be.”

“Sunshine, I love you, but you’re the only one he’s being nice to. Trust me, that man right there is a murderer and he wouldn’t mind chopping off my dick if I harm his little girl.”

He had a point, but still.

“Go, Storm.” I laughed, pushing him back toward the living room. “And remember, don’t piss him off.”

“He’s already pissed off,” he mumbled, walking back toward the living room, while I started walking toward our room, needing to call Cillian.

I just hoped he was okay. He had to be okay.



IT FELT AS IF AN ETERNITY PASSED AS I SAT ON THE BED, keeping the phone firmly pressed to my ear, while the line rang and rang and rang. Cillian's voice finally boomed from the other side, tiredness lacing those five letters.

"Hello?" he all but grunted, annoyed, tired. All I wanted was to hug him and ask him what was going on.

"Kill?" I breathed out, my heart hammering in my chest, knowing that the topics we would be discussing weren't the ones he necessarily liked.

Cillian hated his father, but he never once told me why. He didn't want to discuss the details, and I never dared to ask what brought on such hatred. Logan wasn't a good person, that much was obvious to all of us, but he had done something.

He must have done something to have one of his sons hate him so much. Kieran didn't like him, but the hatred didn't shine in his eyes as it did in Cillian's. Tristan was always an enigma, and I never knew what exactly he was thinking.

"Birdy?" he asked, his voice changing from the tired one into one of pure elation, happiness. But that tiredness was still an undercurrent and I listened to his slow breathing. I couldn't even imagine how he must have been feeling this past month.

He'd stayed with Skylar, but I had no idea what was going on. Were they okay? Was she alive? But more than that, was she okay? There was a difference between truly living and being alive. I knew... I knew the best what the difference was.

"Hey, Kill." I smiled softly, hoping that it translated into my words as well. The last thing I wanted was to bother him with this, but I had to check in on him, and I had to tell him about Kieran. He would kill me if I hide this from him. "How are you?"

Silence greeted me instead, and I could almost hear him thinking. I could almost see those wheels turning in his head,

because he wouldn't want to worry me. He wouldn't want to tell me how bad things really were.

“Do you want the truth or do you want me to tell you something that will make both of us feel better?” he asked, chuckling. I couldn't stop the grin that appeared on my face. He was trying to make me feel better, but withholding the truth would only hurt him so much more.

“The truth, Kill,” I answered. “Always the truth.”

“Things suck,” he breathed out. “It's bad, Phee. It's fucking bad and I don't know how to help them.”

Shit.

I assumed that things were bad when he didn't come home, but I didn't think it was that bad.

“Wanna talk about it?” I asked, hoping he would share some of it with me. For so many years, I'd failed to realize how good it was just talking about the things that bothered you. How good it felt sharing your burden with somebody else.

Maybe they didn't have the answer to all your problems, but they were there to listen, to offer support in any way possible. I isolated myself from people when I first ran away from home, but that isolation only fed the demons in my mind, telling me I would never be good enough for other people.

I didn't know how to ask for help. I still didn't, but I was getting better at letting things go. I was getting better at letting people in, and I had a feeling that Cillian needed it as well. I worried that this entire ordeal would reopen old wounds for him. I was worried he would spiral, that his sanity would suffer.

“I don't even know where to start, Birdy,” he murmured. “They're... They remind me of us in a way, but not quite. We were raised in this world. We knew. All of us know how to handle things, but they don't. They're kids, Phee. They're just kids for fuck's sake, and I have no idea what to do to alleviate this pain that all of them are feeling.”

“Kill—”

“I know it’s stupid, you know. It’s so fucking stupid, but man,” he groaned. “The look on Skylar’s face is tearing me apart. The hollowness in her eyes, the lack of responsiveness, it’s terrible, Birdy. I don’t know what to do with Ash who’s so full of rage. I’m worried he’s going to do something stupid.”

“And Dylan?” I asked. I didn’t get a chance to talk to Dylan back in Emercroft Lake, but that guy reminded me of, well, me. Me from a couple of years ago.

Lost, abandoned, angry... I was so fucking angry, and I let it guide me. I let it control my emotions, every single thing I did, and I let it destroy everything and everyone around me.

The tight skin could only hold you for so long before you snapped, shattering everything around you. Sanity could only hold for so long, before it shattered, pummeling you into the ring of fire, your own personal hell, until you were completely lost to what was truly wrong and what was right.

“Dylan... I don’t know where to start with Dylan,” Cillian mumbled. “He’s just... He’s here, you know? His body is here, but his mind is somewhere else. I can’t remember the last time that he said more than two words. He’s eating, he’s breathing, but he isn’t really existing. His mind is thousands of miles away from here, and Skylar can see it. Ash can see it, and I don’t know how to help them. I don’t.”

“Oh, Cillian.” I sniffed. “It’s all my fault,” I whispered. “If I hadn’t—”

“No,” he barked. “This isn’t your fault. You tried to help her. You tried to do the right thing.”

“Did I?” I asked. “I did it because I was angry at Storm and I wanted to show her that she didn’t need them to protect her. But she did. I failed to realize that Skylar isn’t me. She isn’t any of us. I should’ve seen that she was already tethering on the edge, and I pushed her. I fucking pushed her, Kill.”

“You didn’t push her,” he argued. “You didn’t do anything wrong, Ophelia. Skylar has been asking about you, saying you showed her the way. She isn’t angry at you.”

But he wasn’t saying everything.

“But the other ones are,” I stated. There was no question in it, no doubt—Ash and Dylan blamed me.

“Ash is...” Cillian trailed off. “Ash is angry at everything. He’s angry at himself, at you, at me, at Judah Blackwood. Everything he ever knew just tumbled around him, falling apart like a house of cards. I can’t blame him. His uncle fed him lies, and the things they went through in that house... It wasn’t pretty, Phee.”

I could only imagine what they went through and how they felt. But—

“Where were they held?” I asked. I had to know. I needed to know if it was the same house.

“You’re not going to like it,” he answered, and I could hear shuffling in the background. “You’re not going to like it at all, but at least I can say that we destroyed it.”

“You destroyed what?”

“We destroyed the Red Manor, Phee. We burned it to the fucking ground. They will never be able to hurt another child there.”

Holy shit.

If I wasn’t already sitting, I would’ve tumbled down. The place that held so many bad memories for Storm. The place where we first met.

I couldn’t remember it. I couldn’t remember ever visiting, but from the stories Storm told me, I knew Nikolai brought me there once. Maybe it was his sick way of showing my mother what he could do if she dared to cross him, but he still brought a child into that house. He still pushed me into that world, way before that fateful day when I saw him and my mother in the basement.

“It’s gone?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. “Truly gone.”

“Yeah, it’s gone. Your buddy, Nico, helped.”

“Nico?”

“I called him,” Cillian answered. “I asked for his help. He, uh, he sent Chiara.”

Well, holy moly.

I saw the way he looked at her at Nico’s wedding. I saw the way his eyes followed her every move, and I knew there was more there than he wanted to say. There was so much more attached to the two of them, and I was going to find out what.

I loved Chiara. She was more similar to me than any other women I had met in this business. But she was also ruthless, vicious, and I knew Chiara carried her pain buried deep in her heart, guarding that little organ with all her might. The last thing I wanted was to see Cillian hurt, even if it was her.

“Kill—”

“Nope, I don’t want to hear it.”

“Do you like her?” I pushed, disregarding his words. If he truly liked her, then he needed to show her. They could be good together, but only if they communicated. Only if they allowed themselves to feel.

I knew Cillian loved me, his brothers, even some of his friends, but he’d been guarding his heart for so long. I didn’t want him to go through life like that. I also didn’t want him to get hurt because she didn’t know how to let go. How to show him what she truly felt.

“It’s complicated,” he grunted. “I don’t want to talk about it. Why did you call me ?” he asked, immediately changing the subject.

I would let him, this time, but we had to talk about this. We had to figure out what was happening between them.

“Is this your way of saying that you don’t really want to talk to me?” I chuckled, rubbing my stomach.

“Birdy,” he groaned. “You’re my favorite person. I will always want to talk to you, but if you keep pestering me about my love life—”

“A-ha! There it is. So there is a love life.”

“Or a lack of it,” he murmured, continuing as if I hadn’t interrupted him. “I might need to befriend Storm and forget about you.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Try me.” He laughed. “But seriously. What’s going on? Are you okay? Are the babies okay?”

“Yeah,” I murmured. “We’re all okay.” I swallowed thickly, hating that I had to bring this up to him. “Have you watched the news today?”

“Can’t say that I have,” he said. “Why? Am I supposed to?”

He most probably shouldn’t watch it, but if he wanted to... “They arrested Logan, Kill,” I blurted out. Sugarcoating it would get us nowhere, and Cillian was strong enough to hear the truth. “Just today. Lazar came here and turned the TV on, showing us the arrest.”

“He didn’t tell me,” Cillian breathed out.

“Who?”

“Tristan,” Kill answered, and that same annoyance flared in his words. “He isn’t answering his phone, he isn’t reachable, and he didn’t tell me about this. He should’ve told me,” he said. “He should’ve fucking told me that they found him!”

“Kill,” I started, trying to calm him down. As a crash came through the line, I knew he wasn’t okay. He was as far from okay as he could get, and it had everything to do with Tristan this time. “Calm down, Kill.”

“He should’ve fucking told me, Phee. I’m going to strangle him when I see him.”

“I thought you guys were keeping in touch about these things. I thought you knew.”

“I didn’t know!” he bellowed, breathing heavily. “I didn’t fucking know, and I should’ve.”

“Is there something going on that I should know about?”



But the answer never came. Only his heavy breathing filled the line connecting us, his anger almost a palpable thing, a living and breathing organism.

“Tristan has been acting weird lately,” Kill murmured, piercing me through the heart with his own pain. “I have no idea what’s going on. I tried talking to him. I tried meeting him, but ever since I came to Winworth and left with Skylar, Tristan started avoiding me.”

“Maybe he’s just working on these things,” I tried reasoning, but even to me, it was too weird that he would be ignoring his brother. Cillian and Tristan always had a good bond, and this was obviously destroying Cillian.

“Maybe,” Kill breathed out. “I just can’t wait for Kieran to come back.”

“About that.” I winced as soon as the words came out of my mouth. “Kieran found Maya, Kill. He found her.”

“Holy shit,” he exclaimed. “That’s amazing, Phee. That’s fucking dope.”

“I know,” I murmured. “But they’re missing, Kill. I spoke to him the other day, but there were gunshots around them, and the line just cut off. That was the last time I heard anything from him.”

“They’re missing?” Cillian asked, the panic traveling from him to me.

“Yes,” I murmured, reining my emotions in. “They’re missing.”

I hoped we would be able to find them.



## STORM

OPHELIA WASN'T OKAY.

None of us were, not really. Stress was eating at everyone, and it was obvious that we were all worried about the threats living outside of these walls, but my Sunshine... she was struggling more than the rest of us.

I thought that bringing Lazar would help, or that talking with Cillian would, but after Lazar left, and everyone returned to their rooms and their homes, she shattered. A cloud of darkness seemed to descend on her, and no matter what we did, no matter how much Zoe tried to pull her out of her funk, nothing was working.

Even Kaiser's presence and goofiness didn't help, and the worry gnawing at me kept growing with each passing day.

We still had no leads on Kieran and Maya. Judah Blackwood was on the run and no one knew where his hiding spot was, and Belladonna stayed quiet. Too fucking quiet, and I didn't like it.

My mind was being pulled in ten different directions—the need to find Belladonna, to stop this madness. The need to find Kieran and Maya to calm Ophelia down, which ended up with me being on the phone with my guys in Mexico almost constantly.

And most of all, the need to hold her close even though she didn't want me to.

She didn't ask for one single thing this last week, and I hated seeing her pulling back from me. I thought we were

making progress. I thought we were heading in the right direction, but now there was a chasm between the two of us, getting wider with each passing day.

The gravel groaned underneath my boots as I walked in front of the house to my bike. Fiery red hair caught my attention, strolling toward me with Kaiser in tow.

“Zozo—”

“You gotta do something, Storm,” she said, before I could even say anything. “She’s not sleeping properly. She’s not eating properly. Hell, she doesn’t even want to come out to walk Kaiser.”

He yapped as if he knew what we were talking about.

“She’s either getting depressed or she’s trying to find a way to get her ass to Mexico, and that is no *bueno*.”

“No *bueno*? Seriously?” I smiled.

“It’s not funny, Storm. You need to do something.”

“She doesn’t want me to do anything,” I replied. “She doesn’t even talk to me properly anymore.”

“Because she’s scared, dum-dum. Such a typical male,” she groaned. “Listen, Ophelia isn’t exactly known for her gift of communication. She doesn’t know how to ask for help, and it’s obvious that she’s drowning. Maybe non-pregnant Ophelia could handle things better, but those hormones, dude... Those hormones are telling her all the ugly things that could happen. You saw how she freaked out when she was at the doctor’s that first time. Do you really think that any of this is easy on her?”

“I know it isn’t,” I grumbled.

“Then do something!”

“I don’t know what!” I thundered. “I’m out of ideas. I’m afraid that if I push, she’s just going to get up and leave. I’m afraid if I show her how much I need her to come back to me, she’ll just run again.”

Zoe's eyes flared, a blazing inferno burning in those irises, and without preamble, she came closer to me and smacked me on the back of my head.

“What the fuck was that for?”

“For being stupid,” she stated, taking a step back. “If Ophelia wanted to run, she would've been in China by now. She would be anywhere but here, but she isn't. She's upstairs, in your room, I might add, waiting for you to show her the path. We all know she's strong, but sometimes even the strong ones need help. Sometimes the strength isn't in isolating yourself, but in accepting the help, and she needs it right now. She needs you to hold her, to tell her shit is going to be okay.”

“Did she tell you this?” I asked, latching onto Zoe's words like a man starved. I wanted to hear those words from Ophelia. I wanted to know what she thought, what she wanted to do.

I wanted her to come to me of her own volition. I'd made so many mistakes with her, and the last thing I would want to do was make another mistake, because I misjudged the situation.

“She didn't have to,” Zoe answered. “She keeps telling me that she needs time and time and time, but she lets you sleep in the same room. She can't fall asleep without you there, without your touch. She isn't eating if it isn't with you because you bring her peace. No matter what happens, you bring her peace, Storm, and I think that's what she needs.”

Fuck.

“And instead of being there with her, you're hiding out here, pretending everything is okay.”

“I'm not pretending,” I grunted. “I just don't know what to do.”

And that was the truth. I had no idea how to help her. I worried so much that the knot in the center of my chest couldn't loosen even if I wanted it to. I've tried just being there, waiting for her to call me, to ask me to hold her, but so far, she'd simply ignored me. She was only barely communicating at night, when her eyes held all the pain of this

world, and when her lips pressed against my hand as she curled into a fetal position, just before falling asleep.

She communicated with her body, with her eyes, with simple touches, but words were what I needed. I was a simple man, and I needed to know how to do things right.

I needed her to guide me.

“So, what do you suggest then?” I asked. “What should I do?”

“For starters,” Zoe eyed me, her nose wrinkling, “you should take a shower and shave that bird’s nest from your face.”

My hand instinctively went to my beard, the prickly strands digging into my palm.

“I thought it looked cool.”

“It looks as if something died in there,” she replied, making me laugh. “Seriously, do something about this.” She pointed at my entire body. “She might be a simple girl, but that doesn’t mean that she would want to spend time with your smelly ass.”

“I’m not smelly,” I bit back. “I took a shower this morning.”

“And the morning was at least five hours ago, Storm. Take a shower, shave that shit off of your face, and then go to her and pull her out of her bed. If I go to her room one more time, only to find her curled on top of that big-ass bed, I’m going to start screaming. And then take her out,” she grumbled. “Ophelia kept talking about that day when you guys went for burgers, so maybe do something like that. Show her how much she means to you. How much all of them mean to you. Don’t leave her alone just because she isn’t capable of voicing what she needs.”

And it dawned on me—I was doing just that, leaving her alone. I thought it was what she wanted, but just because we wanted something, that didn’t mean that it was what we needed. She needed me. She needed all of us.

She needed to know that she wasn't alone.

"I have an idea." I grinned. "But I'm going to need your help."



THE FLOOR CREAKED AS I ENTERED THE DARK ROOM, SEEING the pulled curtains over the windows and the curled body on top of the bed, covered with the blanket. Her chest rose and fell with each breath she took, but she didn't move. She didn't even look at me as I approached the bed, my legs eating up the distance between the two of us.

Her hand was stretched toward the sofa chair where I usually slept, her eyes plastered on the wall opposite the bed, but she didn't move. She didn't do anything how she usually would.

"Sunshine," I croaked, going down on my knees as I stopped next to the bed. "I need you to come back to me, Sunshine," I murmured, taking her hand in mine, placing my lips on top of it, trying to pull her back from this state she was in.

"I don't want to move," she replied, her lifeless voice echoing around us, piercing me straight through my heart. "It's too hard, Stormy," she whispered. "I'm tired. Tired of moving. Tired of running. Tired of fighting."

"Phee," I mumbled, biting down on the emotions threatening to spill over my lips. "I'm sorry. I know it's hard. I know it hurts right now, but I need you. We all need you."

"There's no point, Storm," she breathed out, closing her eyes. "No matter what I do, no matter how hard I try, there's always someone that gets hurt because of me. There's always a person I could lose, and I don't want to see it anymore. I don't want to live through it anymore."

Sometimes it was easy to forget everything she went through, everything she fought through. It was easy to forget because she never once showed how much it affected her. I

witnessed her nightmares, but I also witnessed her shutting down right after her eyes opened, as if she was ashamed that something like that could make her weak.

She was raised to never feel, to never show what was truly on her mind. They told her it was a sign of a weak person, loving someone, caring for someone, showing your true self. It ate at her, all these things they tried to instill in her.

“Sunshine,” I grunted, moving up on the bed. “I’m going to hold you now, and you’re going to let me.”

She still didn’t look at me, didn’t even move to let me know she heard me, but as my body weight fell on the bed, I pulled her into my arms, placing her head on my chest.

“I know you’ve been strong for so long,” I started, pressing my lips to the crown of her hair. “I know you’ve suffered, but I need you to let me take care of things now, okay? I need you to rely on my strength as well because we’re in this together. We’re in all of this together, Sunshine.”

“I don’t know how,” she whispered. “I don’t know how to be strong anymore.”

“Yeah, you do,” I murmured. “You’re the strongest person I know, Phee. And you’re going to be such a good mom, an amazing one. You’re going to be better than all the other moms in the world.”

A shuddering breath pushed through her, and before I could even look down at her, her arms circled around my waist, holding on tight. Her entire body shook, the sound of her sobbing cutting through my skin with razor-sharp blades, but I held her, rocking her in my arms, trying to soothe the invisible wounds.

But just because a person didn’t bleed, it didn’t mean that they weren’t hurting. Just because the pain of the mind wasn’t a physical one, it didn’t mean it didn’t exist.

“I’m here, Sunshine,” I whispered as she climbed onto my lap, her entire body curling in on itself, holding onto me for dear life. “I’m never letting go.”



“It hurts,” she cried out. “And I don’t know where it hurts. I don’t know how to stop it. I know I’m being pathetic, and I know you’re worried about me, but I don’t know how to get up. All these thoughts...” she shuddered. “All these vicious thoughts keep repeating in my mind, and I’m afraid, Storm. I’m terrified that I’m going to destroy our kids. I’m afraid that I will never get to see my sister, that I will never get to tell her how sorry I am. I’m afraid that I will never have to stop running, that I will never have a home.”

“You have a home, Ophelia,” I said, placing my fingers under her chin, pushing her to look at me. “You will always have a home with me. You know why?” She shook her head, those tear-stained cheeks trembling from the force of her sobs. “Because you are my home. Today, tomorrow, in I don’t even know how many years, you will always be my home. I know that we have a long road to travel if we want to get to peace, but I am not giving up on you. I’m sorry I wasn’t here.”

Her face scrunched, an avalanche of emotions tearing through her body, flowing with her tears.

“I’m sorry I pushed you away,” she hiccupped. “I didn’t mean it, it’s just—”

“It was easier than letting any of us in.”

She nodded, pressing the side of her face to my chest again, pulling her knees up. “I just have this horrible feeling inside my chest that everything will fall apart. I have a feeling that this fake calmness is just temporary, that it’ll all go up in flames, and I will never get to experience true happiness.”

“You will,” I pushed. “You will be happy, Phee. You will have everything, trust me.”

“I don’t know how to trust you. Not because it’s you that’s saying those words, but because everything inside of me is telling me that I don’t deserve to be happy. That I don’t deserve to be loved. There’s this weight sitting on top of my chest, telling me that I will always destroy everything good around me. It’s telling me I don’t deserve you, these kids, my friends... I don’t know how to stop listening to it. I don’t know how to stop.”

She was killing me. Her shaking body, her palpable pain, it was all killing me, and I did the only thing I knew how to.

I kissed her.

My body acted before I could think about it, my hands palming her face as I pulled her upright. My lips pressed against her much softer ones, the taste of her tears mingling with the taste of her. There was no carnal desire in what I did. There was no need to tell her anything else as she kissed me back, her tiny hands fisting my shirt.

Words weren't needed to express what both of us felt in this moment, and the relief from her kissing me back washed over me, reigniting the hope that died that day when we came back from Emercroft Lake. But I also knew that I wouldn't be enough to help her.

Ophelia needed professional help to deal with everything that had happened, and I would find it for her, no matter what it took. In our line of work, we couldn't just walk into the office of a psychologist and start spouting everything we ever did.

If we did that, we would end up locked up somewhere in a psych facility or in jail.

"Are you feeling any better?" I asked as we both pulled back, catching our breaths. Her cheeks were flushed red, her irises dilated, while her hands still clung to my shirt, as if she too didn't want to let go.

"I'm... I'm okay." She smiled brightly. "I... Thank you, Storm." She beamed. "Thank you for coming for me."

"I will always come for you," I murmured, pushing back the loose strands of her hair. "I will always be here, one way or another." I smiled. "We might push and pull each other, but I need you to know how much I care about you. How much I need you."

*How much I love you*, I wanted to say, but I knew she wasn't ready to hear it. We'd said it before, mentioned it in passing, but never once did we say those three words directly to each other.

I never understood why those three words, with eight letters, held so much weight, when they weren't the ones that mattered—our deeds did. But now, sitting here with her, holding her, breathing her in, I understood.

They were just words until you truly felt them, until you truly realized that you couldn't imagine your life without that person. And me, I knew my life would be meaningless without Ophelia in it.

Her much darker hair was overtaking the blond she colored it with many months ago, and I loved seeing it, bringing me back the girl I fell for. She looked amazing even with her blond hair, but it wasn't her. It simply wasn't my Ophelia.

“You need a haircut.” I smiled, dragging my fingers through the strands of her hair.

“Storm Knoxx.” She scoffed. “Are you saying I don't look good?”

“No,” I murmured, dragging my nose over her cheek. “You always look beautiful to me, but your hair is getting really long.”

It was now cascading all the way to the middle of her back, falling down in soft waves. I wanted to bury my face in her scent and live there forever, but we couldn't stay here. I had plans for us, and I wanted to show her the forest surrounding the house.

Kaiser was already ready and waiting downstairs with Zoe. I just needed to push Ophelia out of the room.

“Say,” I started, playing with her hair. “How do you feel about going out for a bit?” I looked at her then, gauging her reaction. Her eyes closed, but the determination that settled there as soon as she opened them almost knocked the breath out of me.

“I think that would be amazing.” She smiled softly, pressing her forehead to mine. “I know you won't let me down.”

“Never, baby,” I whispered, battling the emotions choking me. “But,” I pulled back, “I need you to get your ass showered

and ready to go. I'll wait here, but you need to get going."

I pinched her butt, earning a shriek and a soft slap to my chest, but she listened. She jumped off of the bed, her T-shirt riding up, exposing her growing belly, and something akin to pride bubbled inside of me, with the knowledge that our kids slept there, protected by their mother, bringing tears to my eyes.

"What's wrong?" she asked, immediately coming closer to me, but I just shook my head, forcing a wobbly smile on my face.

"I just can't wait to meet them," I murmured, splaying my fingers over her belly, right underneath the shirt. "I can't wait to show them the world, to love them. I want to give them everything, Sunshine," I looked up at her. "Everything we didn't have."

"And you will," she murmured, battling her own tears. "You're going to be an amazing dad." Her lower lip trembled as she spoke, while her fingers disappeared through my hair, keeping us close together.

I pulled her to me then, placing her between my legs as I sat on the bed, with my feet on the ground, pressing my face to her stomach.

*I love you both and your mother,* I said inside. *I love you so much.*

My arms stayed wrapped around her for a few seconds, and I loved her even more for giving this to me, for letting me hold her like this. I loved every single thing about her—her strength, the fierce need to protect those she loved, her love, her heart, the fact that she could stand her ground, unwavering. I loved that the Ophelia I met years ago was now stronger than she ever was because she allowed herself to feel.

"I'll go for a quick shower," she said, pushing my head away from her with a smile on her face. "If we stay like this, we're never going anywhere, and I'm itching to get outside."

"Fine." I pouted. "But you have ten minutes," I called after her as she all but ran toward the bathroom.

“I only need five,” she called back, turning the shower on.

I looked around the room, frowning at the small space.

We couldn’t bring our kids here. We were still a couple of months away from the birth date, but still. I couldn’t start building a family in the Clubhouse, and I wanted her to have everything. I meant what I said—she deserved the world and so did our kids.

I pulled my phone out of my back pocket and found the number of the one person who could help me to realize this little dream of mine.

I glanced toward the bathroom, hearing the running water and the soft humming as Ophelia sang, and I smiled, loving the happiness that started coming back to her after our little talk. We had a long way to go, but it was all worth it. All this pain was worth it. As the familiar voice answered from the other end of the phone, I knew I was doing the right thing.

“Storm? Is everything okay with the house?”

“Hey, Monica,” I greeted, getting up from the bed and walking toward the window in the room. “I need a favor. Well, I need you to work your magic and I need it fast.”

Her chuckle echoed through the line, followed by the question, “What do you need?”

“A house,” I blurted out. “A house close to this one. Four to five bedrooms. Large enough to raise a family,” I murmured. “And a big-ass dog.” We couldn’t forget about Kaiser.

“Consider it done,” she replied. “I’ll come back to you shortly with a couple of ideas.”

“Thank you,” I said just as Ophelia emerged from the bathroom, the little towel she had wrapped around herself, leaving little to the imagination. Her hair was pulled in a messy bun atop her head, questions lingering in her eyes as she saw me talking on the phone. “We’ll keep in touch,” I murmured, dropping the phone call just as Ophelia walked toward the closet, keeping her eyes on me.

My hands itched to touch her smooth skin, to run my tongue over all the tattoos lining her body. Her boobs had grown in the last couple of months and her entire body was changing right in front of my eyes, preparing for our kids, and she had never looked more beautiful to me.

“Who was that?” she asked, pulling out one of my T-shirts and putting it on. “That sounded serious.”

“Seattle chapter,” I lied. I wanted this to be a surprise. I wanted to see how she would react. “I was just checking in on them.”

“And?” She turned around just after she put on her panties, forgoing a bra altogether. I knew that this would be a long, long day.

She grabbed a pair of pants from the closet, closing the doors then. “Everything seems quiet,” I answered, following her every movement. The tight pants left nothing to the imagination, and I groaned internally, battling against my own desires.

All I wanted was to stroll to her, take her in my arms and show her the burning desire living in my veins. But that would have to wait.

“I don’t like the quiet,” she said, pulling on her boots next. “It makes me nervous. It makes me think about what the other party is doing.”

“I’m the same,” I answered, taking her hand in mine as she walked toward me. “It’s been way too quiet, and even her letters have stopped.”

“You don’t think that somebody else got to her before us?”

“No.” I shook my head as we walked outside the room, heading downstairs. “We would have known, trust me. Someone would’ve talked by now. It bothers me that no one really knows who this person is.”

“I know,” she murmured, descending the stairs in front of me. “I hate that all of this is happening. Sometimes I still feel like a prisoner of my father, knowing that there’s someone out there, who doesn’t only want to hurt me, but our kids too.”

“We won’t let them,” I grunted, squeezing her hand as we came to the ground floor. “They won’t destroy this for us, trust me.”

“You can’t promise that, Stormy.” She smiled, looking over her shoulder at me. “You can’t promise that nothing will happen, when both of us know that things happen all the time, and sometimes we can’t stop them.”

“I know,” I agreed. “But I gotta try. I have to believe that we will be able to catch them before they do any real damage.”

I didn’t want us to talk about this, to bring up Belladonna today, but it was obvious that she needed reassurance, that she needed to talk about it.

“And if we don’t?” she asked just as we walked through the hallway. She was leading me toward the exit door without me having to tell her where to go.

“I don’t want to think like that,” I said. “I really don’t.”

Her eyes connected with mine, so many questions lingering in them, but she didn’t say another word. I knew she wanted to. I could see she wanted to argue, to think about the worst possible outcome, but I had to believe that things would work out in the end.

If I didn’t, I would succumb to the dark thoughts that were plaguing her as well, and where would that get us? One of us had to be strong right now, and if that had to be me, I would gladly take the brunt and push through. I worried as much as she did.

Maybe I couldn’t understand the motherly part of her worries, but I was terrified that things would go wrong. That we wouldn’t be able to get back from all of this and that all our efforts would be in vain, but we had to try.

“Kaiser!” Ophelia screeched as the little beast ran toward her, almost knocking her down as she crouched, opening her arms for him. She scratched behind his ears, on top of his head, over his body, while his tail wagged, his entire body wiggling as she showered him with love. “I’ve missed you so much.”

He barked playfully, as if to say that he missed her too.

She was cooped up in our room, avoiding everything and everyone, including him. While I knew that she didn't want to do it, he couldn't understand why it happened.

I stepped next to them, crouching down, my hand going to his soft fur. He shifted his attention from Ophelia to me. Before I could move back, he jumped up, pressing his paws to my shoulders and pushing me down to the ground.

“Oh, fuck!” I yelped as the little beast descended on me, showering me with his kisses, licking my face clean. “Kaiser!” I screeched, laughing as he stepped on top of my chest, his weight pressing down on me.

Ophelia's melodic laughter echoed around us, joined by Zoe who kept snickering at me while the dog mauled me.

And with their laughter, with this big dog on top of me, I held onto that hope that we would all be okay in the end.

We had to be.





## OPHELIA

BIRDS SANG ABOVE US, HIDING IN THE TREES, THEIR MELODY following us as we walked toward the green field settled in the middle of the forest.

The clear skies above us seemed to have given me some clarity as well, and for the first time in a week, I felt like I could breathe. The invisible chains that were tightening around my neck had dissipated, leaving me free, and those little flickers of happiness I thought I would never feel, started coming back.

And it was all thanks to him, this quiet man walking next to me, carrying a backpack filled with whatever he and Zoe came up with together. My curiosity was getting the better of me, because I wanted to see what was inside.

Storm's hand never left mine, and as we descended deeper into the forest, I have never felt freer, ready to get over these things that were hounding us, so that we could live freely, happy. I couldn't wait to stop with this silly "time" thing I put on us.

It was only hurting us both. Back when he kissed me, I wanted him to keep going, to show me how much he missed me, because I missed him. But I loved him for stopping, for only giving me a glimpse of his need for me, of his love. He didn't have to say the words. He didn't need to say anything. I saw it as clear as day—Storm truly loved me, cared for me, and he would do anything to help me.

“I think this is a good spot,” he said as we walked onto a clearing, surrounded by woods from all sides. Kaiser went ahead, sniffing around, rolling in the grass. “He likes it.” Storm chuckled, taking off the backpack he’d been carrying.

He pulled out a red blanket from the backpack and laid it down on the ground, placing the backpack right on top of it. He sat down, looking at me expectantly when I didn’t follow along.

“You coming or what?” he asked, holding his arm up in the air, waiting for me to grasp it and sit down next to him.

I didn’t wait another second and I sat next to him, cuddling into his side, breathing in the fresh air around us.

“It’s beautiful here,” I said, looking around us, paying attention to where Kaiser was. His happy face as he ran toward us, pushing through the grass, was everything I needed today.

“It really is,” Storm added, pulling out the first container from the backpack. My hands itched to see what was inside. I tried to grab it, when Storm swatted my hand, moving me away from the container. “Nuh-uh, not yet,” he warned, laughing at my pouting face.

“But I want to see,” I said. “I’m hungry.”

“Patience, darling.” He continued getting the things out of the backpack, keeping me on the side, far away from the items he kept placing on top of the blanket.

Kaiser sniffed the air, and in a blink of an eye, he ran toward us, stopping next to Storm, trying to push his hand away, sniffing whatever was in the bag.

“If there was ever a question who his owner is, there isn’t anymore,” he grumbled, battling with my little beast. I used the opportunity to snatch the container he placed down first. I didn’t wait for him to see me holding it. As I opened it, seeing all the fruits the doctor recommended for me to eat during the pregnancy, I burst into tears, going for the second container, seeing the small sandwiches he packed.

“Oh, shit,” Storm cursed when he saw my tears, pulling me into him. “What’s wrong? You don’t like it? It’s okay. We can

throw it away. We can even go back home if you'd like."

"I-it's not t-that," I hiccupped while tears cascaded down my face. "I love it."

"You love it?"

"I do," I sobbed, cradling the container with strawberries close to my chest.

"Wanna tell me why you're crying then?" he asked, murmuring against my hair. "I'm not sure I can follow."

"Because it's so pretty!" I bellowed, unable to contain myself. "And so thoughtful. And there are sliced oranges and bananas, and I just... I just can't believe you made this."

"Zoe helped." He smiled. "I wanted to do something nice for you."

I looked up at him and without a second thought, I placed the container on the blanket and threw myself at him, my arms wrapping around his neck, holding him tightly.

"I have no words," I mumbled, pressing my face to his neck. "This is the second time today you're seeing me cry," I grumbled. "It isn't fair."

"Sunshine," he purred in my ear. "I would do anything for you. I told you already."

"I know, but still. You didn't have to."

"I know I didn't have to," he breathed out. "I wanted to. I hated seeing you sad, and I hated seeing you so afraid. I wanted to give you something. Something pure, relaxed, something where you won't need to worry about anything."

"Thank you," I whispered, pressing my lips to his cheek. "But can we eat now?" I asked, pulling back to look at him. "I'm really, really hungry."

"Yeah." He chuckled, taking one of the strawberries from the container and pressing it to my lips. "We can," he rasped as I opened my mouth, biting down on the delicious strawberry, looking him straight in the eye.

The heat emanating from him enveloped me, keeping me captive. As his face lowered, his lips a breath away from mine, I knew what I wanted.

Him, always.

Nothing else mattered.

“Kiss me, Storm,” I mumbled, afraid to talk too loud, afraid I’d scare him. “I really need you to kiss me.”

His palms landed on my cheeks, holding me still as I pushed my chest against his, needing this connection with him.

“I’ve been waiting my entire life for this,” he purred, looking down at me, his eyes filled with emotions I couldn’t quite understand. “I’ve been waiting for you without even knowing, Sunshine.” He smiled softly. “I’m so glad I found you. I’m so glad that this fucked-up life of ours brought us together, and trust me, I would do it all over again if it ended with the two of us together.”

I would too. I would go through all that pain, all that heartache if the path would lead me to him. I would kill, destroy, maim, and hurt those who deserved it all over again, because I’d know that Storm would be the one waiting for me at the end of the road.

“Your beauty sometimes hurts, Sunshine,” he said as I frowned at his words. “Not in the way that you think, but in the way that I don’t know what to do with all this love I have for you. My heart isn’t big enough to contain it all, to keep it all inside, and I need to tell you.”

“Storm,” I whispered, my eyes widening.

“I told you before, I know I did. I said it a million times. But each and every time felt as if we were saying it out of anger or obligation. I didn’t understand why these three words were so important until today, until you let me hold you as you fell apart. My heart almost jumped out of my chest, because I hate seeing you in pain, Sunshine.” He swallowed audibly. “I hate being unable to take away that pain.”

“Storm, you did take away the pain. You showed me a different path.”

“But I also hurt you.” He shook as if the mere thought of hurting me pained him. “I caused you pain, and I hope that one day you’ll be able to forgive me.”

“Stormy.” I smiled, placing my palm on his face. “We both hurt each other, and it isn’t as if I’m some kind of saint. We both know I’m not. I forgave you, Storm. I forgave you weeks ago. I forgave you the moment my knife went through your skin. Trust me.”

“But then I pissed you off again.”

“You did.” I laughed. “You pissed me off so badly that I wanted to stab you again, but I understand what you meant when you said that you were letting me go. I can’t blame you for wanting to give me a choice.”

“I’m not good enough for you.”

“Storm.” I pressed my lips to the corner of his. “You’re the best damn thing that has ever happened to me, and I love you,” I said in one breath. His eyes widened. “I love you, Storm,” I chuckled, those damn tears pushing forward again. “I think I loved you from the first moment I saw you. I loved you even when I wanted to kick your ass, even when loving you made it impossible to breathe.”

“Sunshine,” he breathed out, his thumbs rubbing over my cheeks.

“I will always love you, Stormy. *Ya tebya lyublyu.*” I spoke softly, hoping that everything I ever felt for him could fit into those three words. But I knew that there was no language, there were no words sufficient to describe how I felt for him.

“I love you, too, Sunshine.” His voice quivered, his hands shaking. “I’ve loved you forever, and I will love you for longer than that.”

“You promise?” I asked, his image in front of me blurring as my eyes filled with tears.

“I promise,” he answered, pressing his lips to mine, inhaling me, devouring me, taking everything I wanted to give him. “Forever, Sunshine.” He smiled.

“Forever,” I confirmed.

I wrapped my hand around his neck, holding on to him, when the sound of an approaching vehicle pulled me back from the little dream we were living in.

Kaiser jumped away from the sandwich he was eating, growling in the opposite direction, where the trees were cut down only enough to let the vehicle pass.

“Did you hear that?” I asked Storm, looking in the same direction. “It sounds like—”

“Get down!” Storm yelled out just as the first gunshot sounded in the air, aimed for us. He pushed me down, covering my body with his. I landed on the ground with a huff, my hands instinctively going around my stomach, protecting the kids.

Kaiser started barking, his thunderous voice echoing around us, but he too stayed down on the ground, his entire body trembling.

Storm cursed from above me as the bullets rained around us. I was just thankful for the higher grass that barely covered us from the eyes of the attackers.

“What’s happening?” I asked, breathing through my nose. “Who the fuck are they?”

“I have no idea,” Storm answered, fumbling with his phone. “But they’re going to wish they were never born.”

The tone of him calling someone was deafening, and as he put the phone on the speakerphone, I could hear clearly when Creed answered the phone.

“We’re under attack,” Storm barked, ignoring the pleasantries, and going straight to the point. “We’re at that clearing, not too far from the house.”

“How many?” Creed simply asked, and I could hear the murmur of voices behind him as he spoke to Storm.

“Three, maybe four four-wheelers. We’re sitting ducks here, Creed. I need you guys to hurry.”

“We’re already on our way,” Creed answered as the sound of motorcycles roared through the line, seconds before he cut it off.

“Are you okay?” Storm asked, looking down at me.

No, I wasn’t okay. I was angry. So fucking angry at these people. I didn’t do anything to them. I understood when people wanted me dead because I hurt them or because I did something, but not right now. I didn’t fucking deserve this.

All I wanted was to have a peaceful day, with the man I loved, ignoring the rest of the world. Just one fucking day.

“Do you have a gun with you?” I asked instead of answering.

“Of course I do.”

“Then we need to shoot back,” I said at the same time as Kaiser’s growl cracked through the air, as if he agreed with what I said.

“There are too many of them,” Storm argued. “I don’t want them to hurt you.”

“Stormy,” I started. “It’ll take the guys at least ten minutes to get here. As much as I love you for your concern, we both know how to fight. Trust me.”

I pushed him to the side, turning along with him, turning my front to the blanket. I wasn’t going to risk the kids, but I also wasn’t going to keep lying there like a helpless damsel.

A bullet whizzed right next to me, finding the target in a tree somewhere behind us, followed by an array of curses spilling over Storm’s lips.

“I’m going to kill them.”

“You’re gonna have to get in line,” I grunted. “Me first. Give me the gun,” I instructed, trying to locate the shooters. “There are at least three of them. I can’t see the fourth one.”

“Me neither,” Storm answered, handing over his gun, and taking the other one from the backpack.

“You brought two?” I asked.



“You can never be safe enough.” He grinned. “We need to get to those trees,” he said, pointing at the trees behind us. “We need to take cover.”

“I know,” I agreed. “Together?”

“Together.” He nodded.

We both fell to the ground, crawling over the debris and the grass, heading in the direction of the trees with the thick enough trunks to hide us.

“Kaiser!” I yelled out, calling for him. A couple of seconds later, I turned around to see him following us, keeping low on the ground.

“Did you teach him to do that?” Storm asked, panting as we came closer to our goal.

“No.” I shook my head, looking ahead toward the trees. “But I don’t think you need to have training for your dog for them to understand that there’s a massive danger.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t run after them,” Storm said, ducking down as another shot sounded from behind us.

They were getting less frequent, but I knew that our attackers were just waiting to see if we would get up. They weren’t tired, not even close. Maybe they were reloading, or just waiting for the perfect opportunity, but I wasn’t going to get up and check.

“He’s protecting us,” I said. “I think we don’t give them enough credit. These animals tend to be smarter than us, trusting their instincts. Humans, we don’t do that. We think too much and sometimes that costs us a lot.”

I could feel Storm’s eyes on me. I could feel the heat from Kaiser emanating from behind as we crawled toward the trees. Before we knew it, we were there, closer to safety.

“On three,” Storm said as he went to the right side and I went to the left, followed by Kaiser. “One,” he counted. “Two...” His eyes connected with mine. “And three!”

We both jumped up and ran behind the trees, pressing our backs to the trunks, our chests rising and falling as if we had

just ran a marathon.

The sound of an engine turning on cut through the air and the bullets started raining around us. It was obvious that they saw us. I looked down at the gun in my hand, removed the safety, and held it up, nodding at Storm.

Adrenaline coursed through both of us. It was what would help us to get through this.

I could hear footsteps over the clearing, the shuffling of feet. Without waiting for Storm, I stepped aside, moving away from my shelter and aimed at them.

Three of them were on the ground, coming closer to where we sat earlier, while one sat on top of the four-wheeler, further away, observing the area. I didn't think, didn't wait. I aimed my gun at the first one out of the three of them, and shot.

The bullet flew through the air, pummeling toward them. As it embedded into the upper thigh of the first guy in the line, the rest of them raised their guns at us. I wanted to see him fall, to see the pain on his face, but I couldn't risk it.

Within seconds, I was behind the trunk again as the bullets rained on us. The scowl on Storm's face was worth it though, and I would've done it again if it meant having one of them bleed out in this clearing.

The rumble from the direction where we came from tore through the forest, bringing back the relief I desperately needed. As the first car came through, followed by at least five bikers, I knew we were going to be okay.

Creed hung from the window of the car, holding a rifle in his hands, aiming straight at our attackers.

"We need them alive!" I yelled as they came closer. The nod from Creed was the only indication he heard me.

They jumped from the car and off of the bikes, their tactical uniforms protecting them from the perpetrators, and ran toward the clearing.

Gunshots echoed around us as I slid down the trunk of the tree, my butt hitting the ground. If it wasn't for the strong pair

of hands landing on my shoulders, I would've let the anger take over. I would've run into that clearing myself.

“Hey, hey,” Storm crooned. “You're okay. We're okay.”

“I know we are,” I answered with a clear voice.

“Then why—”

“I want them dead, Storm.” I looked up at him. I knew he could see the anger swirling in my eyes. “I want at least one of them saved for me.”

“What are you going to do with him?” he asked, smirking as Creed yelled out that it was clear. I stood up, holding on to Storm and looked toward the group of our guys, holding the man I shot earlier between them.

The fourth one was missing, no doubt running away, but the other two that came close to our blanket were on the ground, their eyes open, staring at the darkening sky.

“I'm going to play a little game.” I grinned. “And he's going to love it.”

Kaiser pushed his snout on my hand, panting as I scratched his head.

“Then let's go,” Storm murmured, taking my hand, and pulling me toward one of the bikes. “We gotta get home.”

“What about Kaiser?” I asked. “I'm not leaving him here.”

“Oh don't worry.” Storm grinned. “Kaiser will ride with Creed and the man. I'm sure he'll love it.”

Kaiser growled as Creed pushed the limping man toward the car, his blood trailing over the grass as Kaiser followed after them.

I didn't want to stay around and wait, because if I did, I would kill the motherfucker here and now. But I couldn't.

He had to have some kind of information, something that could help us.

Something that could put a stop to this insanity around us. I was getting tired of being a sitting duck. I was getting tired

of waiting for things to get fixed. This had to end here and now.



## STORM

THE MAN WHIMPERED AS WE DEPOSITED HIM ONTO THE CHAIR, tying his hands behind and his legs to the chair, but he didn't say a word. His fear-filled eyes fed the monster threatening to jump out and play, but I subdued it, because this wasn't our show.

It was Ophelia's. She waited just outside this room, choosing her toys specifically for this fucker who dared to come into our territory.

"What are you going to do to me?" he finally asked as Creed exited the room, his entire body trembling from fear.

We'd tightened a cloth just above his thigh wound, but it wouldn't hold for much longer. I had no idea if Ophelia nicked the artery, but if I was being honest, I didn't give a fuck. I would've killed him back there if I didn't need him for questioning.

They fucked up the perfectly planned day for Ophelia and me, and this guy was going to pay for it. I had no doubt that the fourth one was already reporting back to his boss, telling him or her what had happened.

What bothered me even more was the fact that I had no idea if it was Belladonna who had sent them or someone else.

The doors pushed open, revealing Ophelia in her black pants, tight black shirt, revealing her small, round belly, strolling in like she owned the place. Hell, she might as well, because she owned me.

“I’m sorry,” the guy blabbered. “I didn’t mean to. They told me I had to—”

Her palm connected with his cheek, the slap on the skin echoing around us, bouncing off of the walls. As she lowered herself down to him, putting her face closer to his, her grin filled with insanity at full display, he paled even more, waiting for her to talk.

“Stop talking,” Ophelia clipped, pressing on the wound on his thigh.

His yelp was music to my ears.

“I will give you permission when you get to talk. Until then, just shut up,” she said coldly. My dick hardened at the sight of her, completely in her element. This was the Ophelia they all feared. This was the Baba Yaga they all talked about, and I felt proud, knowing she was mine and I was hers.

“Now,” she murmured, looking over the knives we kept next to the chair. “We can do this in two different ways.” She looked at him, picking up a small knife from the stand. “You can tell me everything I want to know and your death will be swift.”

The smile that spread over her face chilled me to the bone, but I kept myself in the same spot, unable to move my eyes away from her.

“Or you can do this the hard way, and the torture, darling... The torture is going to be delicious for me, but painful for you.”

“Please,” the guy whimpered. “I didn’t mean to. They’re going to kill me if I tell you anything.”

“I am going to kill you either way,” she said. “It’s up to you how you want to die.”

“I can’t.” He shook his head. “I can’t tell you.”

She shrugged, coming closer to him. “So the hard way it is, then.”

The stench of fear in the air suffocated me, and the view of the trembling man in that chair awoke something vicious in

me. It wanted to play with Ophelia, to help her, to show her that she wasn't alone in this, that whoever came after her, after my family, would suffer. The excruciating pain I'd felt as we crawled over the grass, trying to hide from them, flashed through my muscles again, the memory now living in the back of my mind forever.

As Ophelia walked around the basement, building up the tension, looking at the man in question, I relaxed even more because I knew that look in her eyes—determination.

People called her crazy, unhinged even, insane enough to bring grown-ass men to their knees, but they were all wrong. Insanity wasn't what fueled her, it wasn't what pushed her to do these things.

It was the life that taught her you needed to be vicious if you wanted to survive. The people surrounding her taught her to hide who she truly was, to wear a mask, to cover her true feelings because they couldn't understand. But when the rage was the only thing you knew, you learned how to use it for your own gain, and Ophelia was the best at it.

She wielded it like a weapon, like the knife she was holding now as she slowly approached the whimpering man. She used the rage they caused, the darkness they threw her into, and she turned it into something that all of them feared.

The tip of her blade glided over the man's cheek, her eyes following every movement, in tune with the sharp object. His eyes widened, his chest shaking from her proximity.

“What's your name?” Ophelia asked, purring, her voice like honey, hiding the anger brewing underneath her skin.

“W-why?”

“Because.” She chuckled, moving the blade away from him and looking down straight into his eyes. “I want to know whose name I'm supposed to write when I send your severed arm to your leader.”

“Please!” he cried out, his eyes seeking me in the corner where I stood. “Please don't kill me.”



But I was the wrong person to ask for help. I was the wrong straw he wanted to pull. With leisurely steps, I walked toward them, placing my hand on Ophelia's shoulder.

Her eyes flashed at me as soon as I made the first contact, as if I pulled her from the trance she needed to do this, but I wasn't going to stop her.

"I'm new." He lied straight to our faces. "Completely new. I don't know anything."

"Oh dear." Ophelia chuckled, straightening up and standing right next to me. "He's new, Stormy," she said, looking at me. "That means we can't kill him, right?"

I loved the twinkle in her eye, the game she was playing... Hell, I loved every single thing about her.

"He's an innocent bystander," I added. "We surely can't kill him now. Look at him," I murmured, both of us turning toward the man. "He's just a poor little man."

"Yes, yes." He nodded. "I didn't do anything. I don't know anything. You can let me go and I won't tell a soul."

"Are you sure?" Ophelia asked, crouching down. "You won't tell them that the big, bad Ophelia Aster had you in her chokehold?"

His eyes widened as she trailed her finger over his abdomen, to his thigh where the gunshot wound still bled, slowly draining him of life.

"You won't tell them I wanted to kill you, sever all your limbs and feed them to my dog?"

"N-no." He shook his head. "I won't tell them. I won't tell them anything."

"Really?" she exclaimed, turning to me. "Did you hear that, Stormy? He won't tell a soul."

"I know," I added, looking at the man. "He will never tell."

"That's right. I will never tell. I'll disappear. I'll... What the fuck?" he screamed just as Ophelia's knife lodged itself in his other thigh, the handle sticking out from his leg. "Why?"

he screamed, his voice reverberating through the room, mixed with Ophelia's laughter and my soft chuckles.

"Why did you do that?" he asked, his bloodshot eyes traveling from her to me, trying to understand what just happened.

"That," Ophelia said, turning the knife to this side then the other. "That was for not telling me your name." She grinned. "And this," she added as she wrapped her hand around his neck, squeezing, her thumb pressing against his pulse point. "This is for lying to me, you stupid fuckface."

"I-I do-n't... I... H-elp," he choked, his eyelashes fluttering against his cheeks, his body convulsing, trying to catch his breath.

Ophelia leaned down, pressing her entire weight on him, choking him until he came close to passing out, and then let go, stepping back.

"You thought you could fuck with us and live to see another day?" she asked, venom dripping from her lips, the pure anger she kept locked inside, escaping from her body. "You thought," she slammed down on the knife in his leg, "that I would let you go!"

"Please—"

"Tell me your fucking name!" Ophelia roared, shaking the fucking ground of the house. The dark red color of his blood dripped down his leg onto the floor, creating a puddle around him.

"Simon," he breathed out. "My name is Simon."

"Simon," Ophelia murmured, tasting his name on her lips, damning him for an eternity. "Who sent you Simon?"

"I don't—"

"Who?" She took another knife and pressed it to his chest, tearing through his shirt. "Fucking." The blade cut through the shirt. "Sent." It pressed down on his pale skin. "You!" The first droplets of blood ran down his abdomen, mixed with the dark hair leading into his pants.

The chair shook along with him, his panic almost a palpable thing, enveloping us in its embrace.

“I don’t know her name,” he finally said. “I don’t know who she is.”

“But it is a her?” Ophelia asked, calmer than before, dragging the blade over his chest, leaving angry red marks and broken skin. “Tell me!” she screamed when he kept quiet. “Tell me, Simon, or I swear to God—”

“Yes!” he yelled out. “I don’t know her name, I’ve never met her before, but she came with an older man to our compound.”

“Which is where?” I asked before Ophelia could beat me to it. “Where is your compound?”

“Portland,” he murmured. “We’re stationed in Portland.” He took a second as if he was mulling something over. “She is too.”

“She’s stationed in Portland?” Ophelia asked. “Where?”

“God,” he groaned. “Can you get the knife away from me?”

“No,” Ophelia grunted, pressing the blade into his skin. “I make the rules here, pretty boy, not you. Now tell me, where is she stationed?”

His dark eyes dragged over Ophelia and then over me, the realization that he wouldn’t get out of here alive finally setting in.

“You’re going to kill me, aren’t you?”

“I thought I’d made myself clear on that matter already.” Ophelia scoffed. “Or do I need to repeat myself?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I just... I just wished that things didn’t end up like this. I wish that I never took this job.”

“Why did you?” I asked. “If you knew where you would be going, you shouldn’t have taken it.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It never is,” Ophelia piped in. “But sometimes you have to think for yourself instead of letting other people think for you.”

“I wish I had.” He smiled. “I’ll tell you everything, just... just don’t go after my family, please,” he whispered. “I didn’t know who you were when I took the job,” he told Ophelia. “I had no idea we would be going after the infamous Ophelia Aster.”

“Didn’t you ask?” Ophelia asked. “How can you take a job to assassinate someone without knowing who you would need to kill?”

“We weren’t supposed to kill you,” he answered, looking at me now. “We were supposed to kill him and take you with us. She wants you, but I don’t know why.”

And then it dawned on me.

“How did you know where we were?” I asked, leaning closer to him. “How did you guys find us?”

He fidgeted in his seat, avoiding my eyes, but he would tell me, one way or another.

“Simon!” I barked. “How did you know?”

“They’re watching you,” he answered, avoiding our eyes. “They have people surrounding the area, watching your every move. I have no idea who it is, but I know that they’re around, watching and waiting. We’ve been camping in the forest for the last ten days, waiting for an opportunity.”

“An opportunity to kidnap me,” Ophelia said.

“And to kill me,” I added. “Simon,” I murmured. “Are you sure you don’t know who these people are? The ones who are watching us?”

He kept quiet until Ophelia pressed the tip of her blade to his cheek. “Tell me,” she bit out. “You know something.”

“I only know one name, but I’ve never met the man,” he murmured. “Ivan,” Simon added. “His name is Ivan.”

“Is he blond, with a scar over his cheek?” Ophelia asked, my eyes flashing toward her. “Is he?”

Simon nodded. “Yes. He’s a scary motherfucker. He’s the one leading the men who are here. He’s the one that told us you were out in the forest.”

“Sunshine?” I asked as she stepped away from Simon, walking to the other side of the room. I followed after her, needing to hear what she thought. Did she know him? “Phee —”

“I know who that is,” she murmured, fire blazing in her eyes. “I know him.”

“Who is he?”

“He was one of Nikolai’s generals. He always hated me, thought I didn’t earn my position in the Syndicate.”

“Does Lazar know?”

“Lazar killed almost every single member of the Syndicate who stayed loyal to Nikolai. The rest ran away, scattering around the globe, because they knew what was coming for them. And now they’re working with her, with Belladonna.”

“Fuck,” I cursed.

“Why can’t they leave us alone?” she asked through gritted teeth, her eye twitching. “Why can’t they let us be?”

“Because they feed off of other people’s pain, and that’s what they want. They want revenge.”

“But revenge for what?” she whisper-yelled. “I’ve been trying to figure out who this person could be, who could hate me so much, and every single time, I come up blank. I don’t understand any of this. Why would she want to kidnap me? Why go after our kids? Does she want to kill me or does she just want me to suffer?”

“Maybe both,” I said. “I hate it as much as you do, but we need to do something about it. We need to go there.”

“I’m going with you,” she added, looking up at me. “If you’re going to Portland, I’m coming. Don’t even try to stop

me.”

“I wouldn’t.” I chuckled. “But we will need to have a lot more people with us, and I don’t want you unprotected.”

“Uh, I’m happy you guys are talking about whatever it is, but I’m kinda bleeding here,” Simon called out, earning an eye roll from Ophelia.

She didn’t waste another moment. Within seconds, she strolled toward him, stepping right in front of him. “You’re gonna tell me where their compound is. Right. Now.”

He seemed to consider his next words, but all three of us knew that he wasn’t going to get out of here alive, and it was futile trying to postpone the inevitable.

“I need you to promise me that you won’t go after my family,” he said. “Swear on the lives of your children.”

“How do you know there’s more than one?” I asked.

“Because she told us,” Simon answered. “She told us you’re carrying twins and that you’ll need to be handled with care.”

She knew. Belladonna knew Ophelia carried twins. She knew more than I was comfortable with, and I had a feeling that knowledge came from Nova.

She was getting desperate now if she wanted to kidnap Ophelia. Why not before? Why now?

Why hire mercenaries for this? None of this made any sense.

“You have my promise,” Ophelia suddenly said. “I won’t touch your family. They will never see me, never hear from me, and they’ll be protected from Belladonna.”

Tears pushed to the forefront, his eyes filling with regret and pain. As much as I hated what we were about to do, I knew it was necessary.

“Thank you,” he breathed out. “Thank you for that.”

Ophelia simply nodded, giving him time. As he took his next breath, he told us everything he knew. The location where

Belladonna stayed, her house, the number of men he managed to see when they went there for the first time to get their payment, and the insanity surrounding her.

He described the man working with her, and it was obvious that it was Judah Blackwood, hiding with that bitch.

“Thank you, Simon,” Ophelia murmured. “Thank you for letting me know.”

Without preamble, without warning, she pushed the knife through the side of his neck, cutting off the artery. In the blink of an eye, his blood started pouring out, covering the entire floor. Simon twitched and moaned, crying out the entire time, while his eyes kept looking at us. Within minutes, he was gone.

The smell of the blood in the air sent a shudder through my body. No matter how many times we did this, it was never easy watching life disappear from another person’s eyes.

“He’s gone,” I mumbled, wrapping my arm around Ophelia’s shoulders. “Are you okay?” I asked, worried about the trembling in her body. “You’re shaking.”

“I’m pissed off,” she bit out, still holding on to the knife. “I’m pissed that we still have no idea who this person is or what they want. More importantly, I’m pissed off that the killing didn’t stop the moment I stepped away from that world.”

“This isn’t your fault.”

“I know it isn’t, but it’s like a domino effect, isn’t it?” She looked up at me. “Maybe I did something in the past that caused all of this. Maybe I was the trigger, and now good men and women are dying because of me. Your chapter in San Diego, even this man, they’re all dead because some psychopath out there is trying to get to me.”

“We can’t know that for sure,” I argued. “I know we all did things we aren’t exactly proud of, but everything that happens afterward is not on us.”

“I wish I could believe that, Storm. I really do. But I’m worried that one day my actions are going to hurt those I love

the most, and what will I do then? I can't run away from my past. I can't change it—”

“No, but we can face it. Together, Sunshine,” I murmured. “We can do anything as long as we're together, so don't even think about running.”

“I'm not.” She chuckled. “For the first time, I don't want to run.”

The knife fell out of her hand, clattering down onto the floor, slowly getting covered with Simon's blood that kept on spreading around the chair. Her arms opened and wrapped around my middle, her head pressed against my chest. As I hugged her, holding her tight, I held on to that hope that came back to me, that maybe, just maybe, we would be okay.

“I don't want to run from you, from us, from our little family, Storm,” Ophelia mumbled against my shirt. “I'm tired of running, hiding, constantly being on the lookout. I want this to be over so that we can live our lives in peace. I don't want my past to be hanging above our heads, which is why I want us to end this insanity before the twins are born.”

“I know,” I said. “Me too, Sunshine. I'll have to assemble the crew, call them all to come back from their posts. I don't want us to go there unprepared, guns blazing, when we have no idea what's waiting for us.”

She pulled back slightly, smiling up at me. “Simon did say that there are at least fifty men in that house, as well as Belladonna. I'm pretty sure we can take them on.”

“Atlas and Indigo are back today,” I added. “They'll help as well.”

“Really?” she asked, surprised. “I thought they were still with Skylar and the crew.”

“They were, but Atlas said that they need to let them be for a bit. I have no idea what happened there and I'm gonna ask them for a full report. I don't like the fact that all of this is interconnected. I want to make sure we're all safe while doing these things.”



“I’m worried about Skylar,” Ophelia murmured. “Cillian said she isn’t doing well. None of them are.”

“They’re going to be fine.” Or at least I wanted to believe that they would be fine. What those kids went through isn’t something I would wish on my worst enemy. “Maybe I should bring them here, let them stay with us,” I said out loud. “I’ve been thinking about it for a long time, but I don’t know.”

“I think that could be a good idea. Maybe they need some normalcy after everything that has happened. They’re all so young.”

“You’re not much older than them.” I laughed.

“Yeah, age-wise, but sometimes I feel as if I’m forty years old after everything that’s happened. It’s been too much of a mess in these twenty-five years of my life.”

I couldn’t agree more, which was why I wanted to show her that the terrible things that have happened were not the end.

“You know—” I started speaking when her phone rang, the annoying ringtone bouncing around us.

She quickly detached herself from me, pulling out her phone from her back pocket. As her eyes zeroed in on the name on the screen, filling with tears, I had a feeling who it could be.

“Kieran?” she breathed out as soon as she accepted the call, fear digging its claws into her body. “Are you okay?”

I fucking hated that man, hated him for what he did to her, for everything he put her through, and most of all, I hated him because he was the first one she ever loved. It was irrational, it was insane, but I couldn’t help it.

“You’re good? Both of you?” Ophelia nodded at something Kieran said, and it ate at me that I couldn’t hear what he was saying. If Maya, Ophelia’s sister, wasn’t with him, it would kill Phee.

“Maya is okay?” Ophelia asked again, attentively listening to whatever he’d been saying. “Tonight? Alright. We’ll be

there.” She looked up at me, her eyes full of tears. “Thank you, K. Thank you.”

She dropped the call within seconds, staring down at the phone in her hands.

“Sunshine?” I asked, slowly approaching her. “Is everything okay?”

“They’re okay,” she whispered, her voice wavering, and as her eyes clashed with mine, I could see the relief there. “They’re both okay and they’re here.”

“Where?”

“They’re in Las Vegas,” Ophelia murmured. “We’re going there tonight to meet them,” she stated, and I knew I couldn’t deny her.

Even if I didn’t want to see him, even if I felt as if I would kill him on the spot, I could push all these feelings down the deep, dark hole and face it with her. Because she needed me and I wanted to show her that she could count on me.

“Let me organize it all,” I murmured, pulling her to me. “You got your sister back, Sunshine,” I smiled. “She’s alive.”

But instead of happiness and elation, I could feel the wariness settling deep in her bones. I could feel the uncertainty and fear, and I had no idea where it was coming from.

“I’m scared she’ll hate me,” Ophelia mumbled. “I’m scared she won’t want to see me.”

“She will,” I reassured her. “She’s your sister. She loves you.”

“Ah, Storm. My own brother hated me and wanted me dead. Family ties aren’t exactly strong in that household.” She chuckled. “But I need to see her, no matter what. I need to tell her how sorry I am.”

“And you will. Do you have an address?” I asked. I hated going back to Las Vegas. It held too many bad memories, too much blood spilled, but we would go no matter what.

“Yeah. I can write it down.”



## OPHELIA

MY EYES KEPT TRAVELING TO STORM AS WE DROVE DOWN THE narrow road, leading to Kieran's house in Las Vegas. I'd been here only once and the memories I had connected with this place weren't pretty, but I knew it was even harder for Storm, coming back to the city that held so much pain. Not to mention the rest of the guys who followed us here.

Atlas and Indigo were in the car behind us, with Creed and Hector in the other one. We weren't taking any chances, especially knowing that there were members of Belladonna's organization monitoring the house.

The two of us could fight, but there was only so much the two of us could do if we got outnumbered. I wasn't taking any chances.

I pressed my hand over my belly, hoping for their sake that things would start turning around. We still had to plan our trip to Portland, but it would have to wait until at least tomorrow. Until we spoke to Kieran and Maya.

Trepidation took hold of my body, and with each passing minute, with each new mile crossed, I wondered what she would be like. The Maya I used to know wasn't very affectionate. We weren't at each other's throats like Theo and I were, but she never really cared about me, and I didn't really care about her or anything she did.

We used to be close when I was younger, but something had changed when she turned sixteen, and I knew it had everything to do with Nikolai. Maya always kept a part of

herself closed off, hidden from the rest of us. I just hoped that didn't turn her into just another monster in my life.

“Are you going to be okay seeing Kieran?” I asked, looking at Storm's profile. His hands clenched around the steering wheel, his knuckles turning white, but it was the only indication that he wasn't exactly happy to see the man I cheated on him with, and the man I used to love. “Stormy?” I asked again, trying to lighten the situation.

We didn't have time to talk about how this would affect him, and without question, he had assembled the team, taking us all into Las Vegas. The four-hour drive was mainly filled with silence as both of us processed what had happened and everything we found out, but I wanted to comfort him.

I wanted to assure him that he had nothing to worry about.

“You know I love you, right?” I said, trying to bring him back to me. And it worked, as a smile spread over his face and his hand shot to my side, seeking my hand. His fingers laced with mine, holding on tight, and I knew we would be okay. “You also know I will kick your ass if you kill Kieran, right?”

The laughter that bubbled up from him, escaping through his lips, pulled a smile from my face. “Only you would try to protect the man that brought you so much pain.” He laughed. “But to answer your question,” he looked at me from the corner of his eye, “I won't kill him.”

“Thank God,” I exhaled.

“But I might punch him.”

“Storm!” I cried out. “No violence, please.”

“I can't promise that, Sunshine,” he murmured. “But I'll do my best. For you, I'll do my best. If it was for anyone else, I would've probably planned a full coup at his house, but I won't do it. And the guys won't do it either. They'll wait for us at the gate and they won't even approach him. Creed still wants to kick his ass, and I don't think he's exactly happy that he won't be able to attack him.”

“Creed used to love Kieran.” I smiled. “I'm sure that it's only because Creed thinks Kieran had something to do with

the beating he got.”

“Are you sure he didn’t?”

“I’m sure,” I answered.

Kieran was many things, but he wouldn’t have gone after Creed. He wouldn’t have hurt the man his sister loved, no matter what. Neither one of them would. I had a feeling that Nikolai and Logan had something to do with it.

Nikolai liked to pretend that he didn’t know about Ava’s passing, that he wanted to help me, but it was all a lie. I had a feeling that both Nikolai and Logan had their fingers in that whole mess, wanting to control us.

Dividing people was the best way to control them. Just look at the politicians in most of the countries. The easiest way to brainwash people was to tell them that others were after them, that they wanted to take their space, that they wanted to attack them... That’s how wars were waged.

Small-minded men controlled the masses, dividing them, putting a seed of doubt in their minds, giving them weapons, letting them destroy each other, while they sit in their ivory towers, watching as the entire country burned, just so that they could gain something from that.

People never understood why I was so much against the war, when I did what I did, but I knew. Wars weren’t made by the ordinary men and women in the country—they were created by the politicians and heads of states who would do anything to get more money, more power. They poisoned the minds of young people, of those who weren’t strong enough to think for themselves, who believed in every single word they said. They pushed them into the dark pit from where they could never return.

“Phee?” Storm’s voice pulled me back from the wayward thoughts taking over my mind, and as my eyes focused on our surroundings, I could see that we were parked in front of the wrought-iron gate, with the Nightingale emblem right in the middle. “Are you okay?” Storm asked, and I could feel his

eyes on my face. I didn't want him to see the anger that still clung to my mind.

"Yeah," I answered, trying to shake off the emotions washing over me. "I was just thinking about the past and the things that have happened to all of us."

"That's a dangerous road to take, Sunshine. You know that there's nothing any of us could do to change it."

"I know." I smiled and looked at him, squeezing his hand. "I know there's nothing we could have done, but it still makes me angry that we let them brainwash us, that we let them destroy our lives, when none of them really cared about us."

"Holding on to the anger could eat us alive, Sunshine. You know it as much as I do. Both of us held on to it because we knew no other way."

He was right.

We held on to our anger because it was the only thing keeping us upright, allowing us to continue living. There were so many times in my past where I wanted to let go, where I wanted to stop, but my anger kept pushing me forward. It helped, but it also isolated me from the people who could've helped, because I didn't know how to ask for help. I didn't know how to let go of the insanity, of the need to destroy those who wronged me.

I had no idea how to live. I was alive, I was breathing, living, going through the motions, but that wasn't living. Breathing wasn't the same as living.

"Is he going to let us through or are we going to sit here the entire night, waiting?" Storm asked seriously, but I could hear the undertone of amusement in his voice.

I'd informed Kieran he would be coming, and I couldn't miss the slight hitch in his breath or the way his voice squeaked when I mentioned Storm's name.

"He knows you're coming with me, right?" Storm asked.

"He knows," I confirmed. "Look." I pointed at the light turning on at the gate. "He probably saw us on the cameras."

“Yeah.” Storm huffed. “Took him awhile.”

“Hey.” I laughed. “Be nice. I know you guys have your differences, but I think it would be healthy for all of us to let go of the old grudges and to push forward.”

“What would be healthy is for me to get out of this car and stretch my legs,” he grunted. “Driving for more than four hours is not my idea of fun. These bones aren’t that young anymore.”

I burst out laughing just as the gates started opening, and the lights on the sides of the road lit up, leading us toward the house that stood in the distance, lit up from the ground.

“Are you saying you’re old, Stormy?” I asked as he kept on driving. I looked in the side mirror, and I could see the other two cars following.

“Hey, I’m not old.”

“You just said your bones are not as young anymore.”

“They’re not, but I’m still not old,” he growled. “What the hell is this place?” he asked while his eyes scanned the surroundings. “It’s like a mini mansion.”

“It is.” I chuckled. “He bought it himself, completely separate from his father. He wanted a place he could call his own, with no ties to the Outfit.”

“I hate to say it,” Storm grumbled. “But it’s kinda inspiring. I always took him for a spoiled little brat who always sought out his daddy’s approval.”

“He did want his approval in the very beginning. I know you had a hard start in your life, but for us...” I trailed off. “Even before we were born, they already knew what they wanted us to be. My whole life was planned for me. It didn’t help that they were never happy with anything we did.”

It was hard talking about the past, especially the period when we were just kids, trying to push through life.

“I remember coming back home after my competitions in gymnastics, and Nikolai scowling, saying that it wasn’t good enough, even though I got gold. I remember Logan lashing out



at Cillian and Kieran for every single thing. I remember Cillian's first high, because he couldn't deal anymore. I remember Kieran pulling back from all of us, because his mind told him he would never be good enough. I remember thinking that I shouldn't even exist because it was obvious that no one truly cared if I lived or died."

"Phee—"

But I continued even after hearing the pain in his voice. "And all of that, Storm, all of that was before any of us knew what our families truly did."

"I'm so sorry," he mumbled, pulling my hand up to his mouth, pressing his lips to my knuckles. "I am sorry you had to go through that."

"Thank you." I smiled softly. "It's ridiculous, you know. I've always felt that I complained for nothing, because I actually had everything I ever wanted to have. Expensive clothes, summers in France, brand new cars, but none of it mattered. I thought I was ungrateful, but Nikolai and my mom didn't know how to show us love. They had no idea what it meant because they were both so lost in their own little worlds. True, Nikolai hated me, but my mom... My mom found salvation in her pills, in the drugs he provided her with, and there was nothing any of us could do. On the days when he wasn't home, if it wasn't for our housekeeper, we wouldn't have been eating at all. My mom just didn't care."

"Because she didn't know how to pull out."

"I know she didn't know how to pull out from that world," I answered too harshly, hating myself for lashing out at him. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to yell at you, but it just angers me. She was supposed to protect us, you know? She was supposed to find a way to take us away from him. Maybe if she had, Theo wouldn't have become such an asshole, Maya wouldn't have been sold God knows where, and I wouldn't have ended up drowning in misery, in darkness, killing people because the Syndicate told me to do so."

"Phee, you can't blame her for not being strong enough. She isn't you."

“I know.” And I did know. I understood very well, and I knew I couldn’t blame her for being weak, for trusting the wrong people. But some days, it felt as if this little chest I’d buried all those emotions directed at her in would burst, and I wouldn’t have an outlet to release them.

“I hate this anger directed at her,” I murmured as we came to the front of the house. “I hate that I can’t let it go,” I whispered, my eyes zeroing in on the lone figure standing at the front porch with his hands in his pockets, waiting for us.

“I really hate what it did to all of us,” I mumbled, looking at Storm. “I hate it, because it makes me feel as if I’m not deserving of love. Because if my own mother didn’t love me, how could anyone else.”

“Babe,” Storm said. “Your mother loved you in the way that she knew how to. I’m sure she suffered enough. It took me a long time to realize that my mom loved me, in her own fucked-up way. My father, not so much. My father never wanted me, but sometimes I would remember these little things she did when he wasn’t home. She used to sing while preparing sandwiches for the two of us. She used to tell me stories. She used to hide me in the closet when the other men came to visit her, teaching me to stay quiet. And look, I hated that closet. I hated many things about my childhood, but I understand that she did the best she could, and I can’t blame her for other things. I know she tried to fight my father, and now I know she wasn’t the one who sold me to Nikolai—it was him, my father. Look.” He took a deep breath. “We can talk about this more later, but I really, really, really need to stretch my legs.” He then looked at Kieran who came down the stairs, waiting for us to emerge from the car. “And I need to punch lover boy over there.”

“Storm!” I burst out laughing. “You’re really going to punch him?”

“You better be around.” He smirked, opening the door. “You might need to help him get up.”

Storm pushed the door open, exiting with a grunt, and as he said, stretching his legs and his arms as soon as he came out

of the car. I followed suit, not trusting him to only end it with a punch to Kieran's face, because the last thing we all needed was yet another war.

Fresh evening air slammed into me as soon as I stepped out of the car, the change in pressure between the car and the outside slamming into me with force, and the fatigue I thought was just a wayward thought, came back in full force, punishing me for pushing my body too much.

With each new month, the pregnancy was taking a toll on me—not in a bad way, but in a way where I just wanted to sleep and do nothing, when there were many things I wanted to do.

“Birdy,” Kieran called out, slowly coming to me, ignoring Storm on the other side of the car. “You look good.” He smiled, opening his arms for me to step in.

Maybe I shouldn't have done it with Storm so close by, but he would need to get used to the fact that these guys were still my family. The only people who truly understood everything we went through. I wasn't going to forsake them just because Storm felt jealous over our interactions.

My arms wrapped around Kieran's middle, my nose slowly filling with the familiar scent of lavender and clean soap, reminding me of my childhood and a time when things were a lot simpler.

“I missed you, Birdy,” he murmured, stepping back mere seconds after the hug. I knew he was doing it out of respect for Storm.

“I'm so happy you're alive,” I murmured. “But you look like you went through hell.”

His dark hair was a lot longer than usual. The dark circles and the bloodshot eyes told me he didn't sleep nearly enough, and the fact that he had lost weight since the last time I saw him, told me that whatever they went through wasn't pretty at all.

“What happened in Mexico?” I asked. “I've been so worried.”

“Yeah.” he shuddered. “Mexico wasn’t the best time for us if I’m being very honest, but we made it through.”

“I tried finding you. Storm,” I glanced at my silent, broody companion, who kept his eyes on Kieran’s back, “tried finding you guys. Even my father did.”

“Your father?” Kieran frowned. “What do you mean?”

Shit. “You don’t know?” I smiled. “Oh man, there’s so much we need to talk about. Come on.” I pushed him toward Storm. “You guys need to get this over with.”

Storm’s nostrils flared, that familiar tic in his cheek reappeared, and I looked at him pointedly, hoping he would understand that he couldn’t—

And he did.

Storm’s arm flew up just as Kieran approached him, extending his arm for a handshake, connecting with Kieran’s cheek. The deafening sound of his fist slamming into his face, the bone crunching, and the surprised yelp from Kieran, all echoed around us.

As Kieran fell to the ground, keeping a hand on his cheek, glaring at Storm, my heart raced, waiting for Kieran to retaliate.

But he never did.

My eyes traveled from Storm to Kieran, feeling the testosterone in the air, but I never expected the laughter that erupted from Kieran to be the first thing to appear.

“Oh, man.” He kept on laughing as he stood up. “I definitely deserved that.”

I was flabbergasted, shocked, because in any other situation, Kieran would’ve retaliated. He wouldn’t have let Storm get away with it, even though he deserved it.

“I know we’ve met before, man, but...” Kieran came closer to Storm, scrunching his face in pain as his cheek moved. “But I would like us to start fresh.”

Storm looked at me, then at Kieran, his eyes narrowing at the man in question. I knew this was hard for Storm, especially after all the things we went through together, but we all needed to move forward. We had to try.

With careful movements, Storm came closer to Kieran, taking his hand for a handshake, his eyes never leaving Kieran's face.

"Storm," he grunted, squeezing Kieran's hand more than necessary. "Storm Knoxx."

"Kieran Nightingale," K grinned, satisfied with the outcome, and the lead weight on my chest suddenly disappeared.

"You're not related to Logan Nightingale by any chance, are you?" Storm asked, mischief shining in those green eyes.

And he had to go there.

Kieran looked at me, then at Storm and started laughing again. "I unfortunately am, but I can assure you, the blood is the only thing that connects us."

"Hmm," Storm grunted. "We will see."

"I was hoping you would have kicked his ass by now, Storm. This wasn't what I expected."

A voice I knew all too well rang around us, pulling all of our attention to the front door, where the girl I haven't seen in years stood, her dark hair pulled into a high ponytail, and those piercing blue eyes looking straight at me.

It was still Maya, still the sister I wanted to find, but instead of the fear she so often wore whenever we were back home, there was something else in her eyes. Something vicious, dangerous even, and I knew that whatever she went through changed who she was back then.

"Maya," I breathed out, unconsciously taking a step toward her. Storm's hand wrapped around my upper arm, stopping me in my tracks.

"Hello, Mouse." She smiled brightly, looking at me, using the old nickname she had for me.

I couldn't move, could barely breathe as she descended the stairs, coming straight for me. Storm stepped in front of me, blocking her path. She cut him with her eyes, glowering at the overprotective man in front of me.

"Storm Knoxx, right?" she said. "I've heard a lot about you."

"Can't say the same," Storm replied. "Except for some things Ophelia told me."

"Well, let me introduce myself then." She smirked. "My name is Maya Aster, and if you don't move out the way so that I can hug my sister, you're not going to be able to use that dick of yours ever again."

And that did it.

Storm smiled at her, nodding as he stepped aside, leaving me open to her.

Back in the day, she always towered over me, being two years older, but now we were the same height, and the same colored eyes that stared back at me whenever I looked in the mirror, stared back at me now.

"I've missed you so much," I breathed out, still unable to move. "So fucking much."

My voice wavered, the emotions clogging my throat, my mind. Without a second to spare, Maya hugged me, holding on tightly. My arms wrapped around her, holding on for dear life, and I never wanted to let go.

I finally had her back.

My sister was finally back.



I'D IMAGINED THIS MOMENT SO MANY TIMES, PLAYED WITH THE scenarios, the words, the things I would tell her, but as the two of us sat in the kitchen, drinking tea of all things, I had no fucking idea what to say.

She was still the same Maya, the same mischievous glint shone in her eye, but it also wasn't the girl who pushed everyone away and ran that night when Nikolai threatened to take me away to Russia. We should've known that he never would've done that, but she thought she was protecting me by getting away.

She thought she was redirecting his attention to her, sparing me, but we were both so wrong.

"It's a stupid question, but..." I cleared my throat. "How are you?"

She kept looking down at the ceramic mug in her hands, and I couldn't help but notice the scars over her hands, over her arms. I wondered how many scars she had that weren't visible to the eye, but lived deep inside her soul, eating her alive. I wondered how many wounds never really healed, only getting patched by the sheer force of will, because she knew she had to survive.

"I thought I would never see you again," she mumbled. "I thought he killed you, you know?"

A shuddering breath escaped me, hearing the pain in her voice.

"I thought..." she trailed off. "That night, when they, uh... When they sent me to Kieran's place..." I winced as she mentioned the night that Kieran—

"I thought you were already dead," she whispered.

"Maya—"

"It wasn't your fault, you know." She smiled softly. "What happened between Kieran and me, it wasn't your fault."

"Wasn't it?" I asked. "Sometimes it feels as if everything was my fault. Your disappearance, Nikolai holding you captive, Kieran—"

"You can say it, Phee." She smiled, placing her hand over mine. "Kieran raped me because he thought I was you."

No matter how many times I heard it, no matter how many times I told myself that Kieran wasn't in his right mind, the

same kind of anger washed over me at his actions, knowing that it wouldn't have happened if I'd just done what Nikolai asked me to do back then.

"Yes." I nodded, swallowing the emotions bubbling inside of me. "Kieran raped you because he thought you were me."

"But I forgave him," she said. "I forgave him because I saw the state he was in. I saw how much pain he was in. I forgave him because I understood wanting to disappear, wanting to forget everything." She took a deep breath before sipping her tea and putting the mug back on top of the table. "Did he ever tell you that he tried to kill himself?"

Shock and disbelief pushed to the forefront of my mind, and I had no idea what to say.

"That night, when they brought me to him, I saw it, darling. I saw his blood, saw the shattered glass, and the lost look in his eyes. I saw how much he hated himself, and I don't know. I understood in a way."

"And I tried to kill him," I breathed out, trembling from head to toe. "I tried to kill him because—"

"Because he raped me. I know." She chuckled. "I've heard all about it. I saw the scar."

"You saw the scar?" I frowned before it dawned on me. "Wait—"

"No, nope." She smiled. "Don't even go there. I can see those wheels of yours turning in that head, and no, I didn't see him naked because I wanted to. We've spent almost a month together, running away from the people who wanted to keep me there."

"I'm so sorry, Maya," I said. "I know you forgave him and I understand that you might not blame me for what happened, but I'm still sorry, for everything. I wasn't a good sister. I wasn't there when you needed me."

"Darling." She squeezed my hand. "We were both terrible because we had to be. Remember what they told us? Loving another person was a weakness. Emotions weren't allowed in our lives back then. I'm sorry I didn't fight harder against



Nikolai to save you, to take us away from that place. I'm sorry you had to go through it all alone. I'm sorry I didn't see what they were doing to you."

"They were doing the worst things to you," I murmured. "You have nothing to apologize for."

"Then it's set." She grinned. "We gotta stop apologizing." She leaned back against the chair, looking at me. "When Kieran told me you sent him, I almost burst out laughing, because I didn't believe him. I was so sure that you were dead, darling. I was sure they destroyed you, killed your light, but they didn't. I can see it now. I can see it in the way you look at that man of yours."

"Storm?"

"Yeah, Storm. I know you've been through hell, but I gotta tell you, I never imagined coming back and seeing you pregnant."

My cheeks burned, my hand immediately going to my belly, but I wasn't going to be ashamed of this pregnancy.

"Truth to be told, it's been a rocky path," I said. "But we survived and that's all that matters. I didn't expect to get pregnant, but I'm not going to lie—I can't wait to meet them."

A faraway look entered her eyes, and I could see that she wasn't here with me anymore. She was present but her mind was miles away.

"Maya," I called out to her. "Are you okay?"

"I need to tell you something, but you can't tell Kieran. Not yet."

My heart skipped a beat as she continued looking at my belly, but as her eyes traveled toward mine, I could recognize the pain there. Only another mother could understand it, and while my kids were safe and far away from the danger, I could only imagine how I would feel if something ever happened to them.

"Maya?"

“After Nikolai shipped me off to Mexico, I was a wreck. I didn’t eat, couldn’t sleep, and I thought that the vomiting and the sickness was due to the fact that he dared to do that to me. He sold me to the worst kind of a man, and I let him, because I thought I had nothing left to live for. I didn’t fight him, Phee. I didn’t fight him,” she whimpered. “But then a miracle happened.” She smiled softly, pressing her hand to her stomach. “A teeny, tiny miracle I never knew I wanted, but it kept me sane, and it kept me far away from the monsters who wanted to ravage my body. After all, no one wanted to fuck a pregnant lady.”

“Oh, Maya,” I cried out. “Is it—”

“It was Kieran’s son,” she murmured. “His and mine. I hated it at first, you know? I hated it so much that I spent every waking hour thinking of ways to get rid of it. The baby reminded me of the lost look in Kieran’s eyes, of you, of everything we went through, but they wouldn’t let me. They didn’t want to let me abort, and it went on.” She took a deep breath as if she was collecting her thoughts. “He was so tiny when he was born, with long, black hair and the bluest eyes, Ophelia.” The first tear rolled down her cheek. “And I loved him. I fucking loved him so much. I didn’t think I could love another human being so much.”

“I’m so sorry,” I cried. I cried for her, for that baby, for the unfair life she had to go through—all of us in fact. “Did he—”

“He’s alive.” Fire blazed in her eyes. “But they took him from me. They fucking took him when I didn’t want to play by their rules.”

“Oh, Maya.”

“I could’ve escaped earlier, you know? I could’ve run away, but they still had him, and I couldn’t leave him there.”

“But now you have to,” I said, understanding washing over me. “That’s why you gave hell to Kieran.”

“That, and, well,” she smiled, “I didn’t want him to know about him. Not yet. I can see that he’s a changed man, Phee, I

know that. But I'm not ready to share him, not yet. I'm not ready to look at Kieran and tell him that he has a son."

"I understand, and I'm not going to say a word. I promise."

"I know you won't, but I'm telling you this so that you can understand—I won't be able to stay too long. I won't be able to stay here when he's there, all alone."

"I get it." I did. I would do anything for my kids. "What do you need from me?"

"Nothing yet," she murmured. "But when the time comes, I'm going to need help. I'm going to need to tell Kieran."

Pain ricocheted from her to me, understanding what she must be feeling eating me alive, but I would help her. It was the least I could do.

"I'm here for you," I said, getting up from my chair and getting closer to her. I crouched down, looking up at her. "Whatever you need, I'm here."

"I know." Her smile was wobbly, but it was there. "I know you are, and I'm sorry I won't be able to be here all the time."

"You will be once we get your son back." I looked toward the door, lowering my voice. "What's his name?"

"Damien." She beamed. "And he's so perfect, Ophelia. So, so perfect. They let me see him every now and then, but he doesn't know me all too well. He has no idea I'm his mother, and it's eating me alive that I couldn't protect him from them."

"But now you can."

"Now I definitely can. I'm not the same girl I was back then, and I'm not afraid to kill for those I love. That I can promise."

I knew she wasn't the same, and the same fire blazing through my blood, lived inside hers as well. It didn't matter who our fathers were. All that mattered was that we had a bond no one could deny.

I would help her in any way possible. That was my promise to her.



## OPHELIA

MAYA'S WORDS RANG IN MY HEAD EVEN TWO DAYS AFTER WE spoke, but nothing could stop me from thinking about her little boy and the hand of destiny that was dealt to him. Was he okay? Was he hungry? Were they taking good care of him?

All these questions and no answers ate at my insides, and to make matters worse, I couldn't tell Storm anything about it. I knew him, knew how he felt about people holding kids hostage, and I couldn't ruin this for Maya.

So many choices were taken away from her. If she wanted to do this her way, then so be it. I would just need to calm myself down and make sure that I didn't spill.

"You're awfully quiet today," Storm said as we entered Portland, heading toward the warehouse where Belladonna ran her operations. "Is everything okay?"

Nothing was really okay, but this was something I couldn't share with him no matter how much I wanted to. I wanted him to hug me, to tell me that he would always go to our kids if anything ever happened to me, but I couldn't worry him with that. He was already stressed out about me coming on this trip and putting additional stress on him would only end in disaster.

"It's nothing." I shrugged, keeping my voice even. "I'm just hoping we'll be able to catch her today."

"Me too, Sunshine. Me too. I'm getting tired of this game of cat and mouse, where we have no fucking idea who she is."

It was the unknown that screwed with our heads, the fact that we didn't know who the enemy really was. It was different when the Albanians or the Outfit were after us, but this... this was different.

Speaking of. "You never told me what you and Kieran spoke about," I said, trying to steer the conversation in a different direction. "You seemed friendlier when we found you two."

"I would say that." Storm grinned. "But I think we understand each other a lot better now if that's any consolation. You know that he's in love with Maya, right?"

My head swiveled toward him so fast, I thought I would get vertigo from the movement. "He's what?" I exclaimed. "Repeat that."

"He's in love with Maya." Storm chuckled.

"Did he say that?"

"Nope," he answered. "But it's quite obvious. He couldn't keep his eyes off her."

"Maybe he's just sorry for what happened between them years ago."

"Oh, he's sorry, but I think he's sorrier that he didn't do things differently. Trust me, he's in love with her."

"You can't know that."

"Sunshine." He looked at me, "He's like a puppy around her. Hell, he doesn't even look at you or me or anyone else for that matter. You could literally take out all the furniture in that house of his, and he would still just keep his eyes on Maya. He loves her, he just doesn't know it yet."

"Aren't you the perceptive one?" I chuckled.

I had no idea how to feel about that revelation. Not because I loved Kieran, but because I knew the secrets Maya hid from him. For whatever it was worth, I didn't want either one of them to get hurt in the process. Once he found out about Damien, Kieran was going to be pissed. There was no doubt about that.

Seeing Maya and her need to be independent now... Yeah, that wouldn't go over too well. Especially now because Kieran took over the Outfit, and he'd been trying to change it already.

"There's something else he wanted to talk to me about," Storm added, bringing my attention back to him. "He wants to give us back Las Vegas."

Holy shit.

Years ago, the Outfit destroyed the chapter house of Sons of Hades that was based in Las Vegas and took over the territory, igniting the war between the Club and the Outfit.

"That's... That's good, right?"

"It is good," Storm grunted. "But I don't know if we really want to take it."

"Seriously? You wanted this for so long."

"We did, but we don't have time right now for another chapter house. We're still recovering from the destruction of the San Diego chapter, and with Belladonna and all these changes, I don't know if I have time to work on it properly. It isn't that easy, just opening another chapter house."

"Then send someone else. Hell, send Indigo or Atlas, Storm. You can trust them. You know they could do it. Send them instead of you."

He seemed to think about what I had just said, that bright smile I loved so much spreading slowly over his face.

"That's not a bad idea."

"Sometimes I have great ideas." I chuckled. "But seriously, send them. You can go there from time to time, but you don't have to stay there." I didn't want him to stay there. As selfish as it sounded, I wanted him with me in Santa Monica.

I spoke with my doctor yesterday and the next appointment was in three days, to check if everything was okay and to set up the final date for the C-section. Zoe kept laughing whenever she saw me in the house, carrying all this weight. It was as if they grew overnight. While at the beginning of

November I only had a small bump, it was now getting harder to hide the pregnancy from other people.

My clothes wouldn't fit, my bras were too small, and the emotional overhaul I was constantly in was tiring.

I wanted Storm around me. I couldn't explain it. I didn't want to explain it, but having him around calmed me down a bit.

I thought I'd be showing a lot sooner, especially with twins, but they loved playing hide and seek with us. Only now, at the end of the fifth month, they were making their presence known.

"Do you think we will find her there?" I asked, looking at the buildings we passed as we entered the industrial area.

"I don't know. The scouts reported movement inside the warehouse, but we have no idea whether they're still there or not. If they're not there, we will keep looking, Sunshine. I'm not going to stop until we find this person."

"I just want it to be over before twins are born, you know? I want them to have a peaceful start in their life."

"And they'll get it, trust me. I'm going to do everything that's in my power to give them the best life possible. Better than what any of us had."

I wanted to believe him, I wanted it so badly, I could feel it within reach, but my conversation with Maya shook me to my core. The knowledge that someone out there would try to take my kids away from me didn't sit well.

"We're almost there," Storm announced, slowing the car at the curb. I could see the warehouse in the distance, the lights shining brightly.

Sinister, sitting alone in the middle of nowhere, far away from the other warehouses, it sent a creepy feeling through my body, chills skating down my spine. I tightened my grip on the handle of the gun I kept in my lap as Storm exited the car, telling me to stay inside, letting the chilly winter wind enter inside.



We left Santa Monica yesterday, sleeping in a shitty motel we found not too far from Portland, since everybody needed to rest. The look on the receptionist's face was almost comical when she saw more than fifteen bikers pulling in, with a couple of us in our cars. An entire entourage followed us, and I admired Storm for managing to pull it off on such short notice.

We didn't have time to spare. If one of those guys ran away, then it was glaringly obvious that he would have informed them that we took one of their own with us. If Belladonna was as smart as she wanted to be, she probably wasn't here anymore.

But maybe there was a clue as to who she was and what she wanted. I mean, it was obvious she wanted me gone, but the questions still stayed—why?

A knock came on the window on my side, and as I turned, I saw a grinning Atlas standing there, with a cap covering his head. The gloves he wore were hilarious—pink and fluffy, but it was the only thing he could find at the gas station.

“What are you doing?” I asked, opening the window, laughing as he kept jumping from one foot to the other, trying to warm himself.

“I'm freezing my balls off, obviously. Come on, get out of the car. I have a sandwich with your name on it.”

“A man after my own heart.” I chuckled, opening the door, and stepping outside.

I thought Croyford Bay was freezing, with the wind blowing from the Atlantic, but this... This was a whole new level of cold.

My nose was freezing, my cheeks turning into ice, and I could see my breath in the air, small puffs of smoke coming out of our mouths.

“I'm telling you,” Atlas started leading me toward their car. “I'm never moving north. I don't care what they want me to do, I'm not doing it. I thought the place where Skylar and

the guys were staying was cold, but nope. It definitely isn't. This, right here, this I never want to experience again."

"That makes the two of us," I murmured, shivering as he opened the door of his car, taking out a sandwich from the bag on the front seat.

"Here." He handed me the sandwich. "It's that chicken Caesar wrap thing you like. Storm instructed me to buy a bunch of those, but they only had one."

My stomach grumbled as soon as he mentioned the sandwich. As my fingers wrapped around the foil, I remembered how hungry I truly was. Tearing through the foil and the paper wrapping the sandwich, I all but drooled as the smell of the Caesar dressing snuck through my nostrils.

"I know it isn't much, but right now this smells divine." I practically moaned, biting down on the wrap. My taste buds were overwhelmed with the sensations, the soft tortilla bread melting in my mouth, mixed with the pieces of roasted chicken, salad, and the Caesar dressing.

I was in food heaven.

"Is that what you look like when you come?" Atlas suddenly asked, breaking through the haze of food heaven, chuckling at my facial expression.

"Fuck off, Atlas," I grumbled. "This, right here, is a foodgasm."

"Foodgasm?" He chortled. "Seriously? Don't talk about food and orgasms in the same way."

"This is better," I moaned.

"What's better?" Storm asked, coming behind me and wrapping his arms around my middle, his hands landing on my belly. "Hmmm, you got your food."

"And we all know how much she likes to eat," Atlas added, earning a glare from me, while Storm laughed along with him.

"Neither one of you has the right to say anything. You're not a human incubator, carrying two human beings inside your

body. I'm eating for three!"

"I hate to break it to you, Phee," Atlas started, barely containing his laughter. "But even before this pregnancy, you ate for three people."

I was going to kill him. Cut through his carotid artery and leave him somewhere on the side of the road to bleed out, choking on his own blood. And then I'd send pigs to get rid of his body.

"You're such a comedian, aren't you?" I asked, sarcasm dripping from every word. "I have no idea what any of us would do if it wasn't for you and your words of wisdom."

"I know, right?" He smiled. "You would all die from boredom. I'm telling you, none of the other guys are as amusing as I am."

"Har-har," I grumbled.

"Be careful, Atlas," Storm said. "Her trigger finger has been quite unpredictable lately."

"You should listen to the man," I mumbled, looking down at my wrap. "Accidents happen every day." I beamed. "We wouldn't want you to lose the family jewels." I smirked, looking at him.

His hands immediately went to his crotch, covering the said family jewels, while Storm laughed behind me, practically shaking.

Having him wrapped around me felt good. Too good, if I was being honest, and I never wanted to step away. This fucking cold seeping into my bones was too much to bear, and even looking like a motherfucking panda with ten layers of clothes on me, didn't help to keep the cold at bay.

But having Storm as my personal blanket worked.

I looked toward the warehouse, ignoring the quiet conversation Atlas and Storm had started, talking about the guys who were still about to arrive. I hated the chill rushing through me when my eyes zeroed in on one lone light turned on just at the entrance.

The suspense in the air, all the cars coming in, had the trepidation awakening in my bloodstream. But no matter how much I wanted for everything to be finished tonight, I had a feeling we wouldn't find the answers we were looking for. And that worried me—a lot.

It was fucked up, this constant worry gnawing at me, but life was too good to be true. I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop and destroy this temporary peace we had created. Maya was back, Storm and Kieran were communicating like grownups, my pregnancy was going well, yet I couldn't shake off the impending doom.

Something was coming, for all of us, and I just hoped we would be strong enough to withstand the avalanche rushing toward us.

“Sunshine,” Storm purred, bringing me back to them. I turned my head to the side, my cheek pressing against his. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “Just cold I guess.” That wasn't a lie. Even with him wrapped around me, my feet were turning into popsicles, and it wasn't fun, not even in the slightest.

Why anyone would want to live in a cold place, I had no idea. But they did.

The heavy smell in the air, the cold pressing from all sides, the pressure pushing against my head... I had no idea how they did it.

“We've been discussing how things are going to roll out. Freddie and his crew are just down the street, and they'll be here in about a minute. You're going to stay behind with Atlas.” I wanted to argue, to tell him that I could go in as well, but he couldn't be the only one compromising.

I knew very well that he wanted me to stay behind, protected, far away from this place, but he agreed for me to come without a fuss. I could see the worry lining his face, the stress this was causing him, and I wasn't going to add more to that.

“I would like you to stay in the car with him,” Storm mumbled. “I know it’s not the way you’d want to have, but if shit hits the fan, I want him to be able to take you away from here. I don’t want you to be my hero tonight. I don’t want you to jump out and fight. I want you to run.”

“Storm—”

“No, listen,” he cut me off, moving to my front, letting the cold envelop me again. “I would never survive it if anything happened to you or them,” he mumbled. “So, I’ll need you to run. Run as far away as you can and don’t look back. I’ll find you. I will always find you.”

“I know you will,” I said. “But I hate it. I hate not being able to fight in this.”

I was pouting, I knew that, and I knew how important it was for me to keep the kids safe, but it didn’t mean I had to like it.

“I’ll stay in the car,” I murmured. “But I want us to have a direct line to you guys. I wanna know what’s happening.”

“And you will,” he said. “Atlas will have a radio, listening to everything that’s happening around us, and you’ll be able to talk to me.”

I could do that. I could sit in the fucking car and wait, no matter how much I hated waiting. No matter how much I itched to be out there with them, getting into that warehouse, seeing with my own two eyes what was happening.

But he was right. I hated it when he was right.

I had to sit this one out. Hell, I would have to sit a couple of them out in the next few months. But I’d said it once and I was going to say it again—these kids came first, and if that meant me sitting my pretty little ass down, then so be it.

“I just need you to be careful,” I murmured, sliding my hand in his, lacing our fingers together. “No heroics, Storm,” I warned. “I don’t care who is dying, you are not to die yourself. Okay?”

“Okay.” He chuckled, just as the sound of an incoming car pulled at my attention, making me turn in the direction from where it was coming.

A black Range Rover pulled right next to Storm and me. Four guys I hadn’t seen before exited, heading straight to us. Storm smiled at the first man, heading toward him, and engulfing him in a manly hug.

“Freddie man.” Storm laughed. “It’s been too long.”

The other man laughed, hugging Storm as well. His sandy blond hair reminded me of Atlas, but where Atlas was all tall and lean, this man could probably carry me around with no problem at all. He was almost the same height as Storm, but where Storm didn’t seem as huge as he actually was, this guy looked as if he could move a fucking truck.

His blue eyes zeroed in on me, and stepping away from Storm, he slowly moved toward me, grinning the entire time.

“And who do we have here?” And the man had a dimple. Of course, he had to have a fucking dimple.

“This,” Storm piped in, stepping between him and me. “Is my Sunshine,” he answered proudly, and damn him. My Sunshine, seriously?

“Sunshine, huh?” The man, Freddie, smirked, his eyes volleying between Storm and me. “And does Sunshine have another name or am I supposed to call her Sunshine as well?”

“No,” Storm all but barked, wrapping his arm around my shoulders possessively. “Only I get to call her Sunshine. This is—”

“Ophelia Aster,” I interrupted. “It is so nice to meet you, Freddie.” I smiled, extending my hand toward him.

“The pleasure is all mine, darling,” he murmured, the twang of the southern accent slipping through as he took my hand in his, bringing it to his lips. Tension brewed in Storm, as palpable as this fucking cold air around us, and just before Freddie tried pulling me closer to him, Storm pulled me back, glaring at the man.

“I never thought I’d see the day.” Freddie laughed, irking Storm even more. “Storm Knoxx... in love.”

“Watch it,” the bear next to me grunted. “I have a gun I’m not afraid to use.”

“I bet you do,” Freddie answered, still grinning from ear to ear. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ophelia, truly. But please remember,” he leaned down, earning another soft growl from Storm. “If this one screws up, I’m just in San Antonio. My door will always be open for you.”

Oh man, I liked him. I liked him even more because it was obvious that Storm hated the attention I was getting.

“Okay, alright,” Storm rumbled. “That’s enough. Step away, Freddie. We got a job to do.”

Within seconds, Freddie’s face changed from the playful and silly one to the serious one, ready to take on everything. I was glad I had these guys on my side, no matter what. I wouldn’t want to be the one on the receiving end of their wrath.

“Plan is already set?” Freddie asked, his attention on Storm.

“With Indigo,” Storm answered. “Just give me a second. I’ll be there shortly.”

Freddie simply nodded at him then me, and disappeared without a word, going all the way ‘til the end of our little convoy where I knew Indigo stood with the rest of the guys, going over the plan. My eyes followed him until I couldn’t see him anymore from the fog slowly settling around us.

“Sunshine,” Storm whispered. “Look at me.”

But I didn’t want to. I didn’t want to see the worry on his face, and I didn’t want him to see how worried I was.

“Phee.” He pulled me to him, burying his face in my hair. “Look at me.”

“I can’t,” I whimpered. “I know you’ve done this a hundred times as have I, but it still doesn’t make it any easier.”

“It’s different when it’s someone you love heading straight into the fire.”

“It is,” I agreed, clutching his hand in mine. “It’s irrational, this fear of mine, but I can’t help it.” I pushed myself to look at him. As my eyes connected with his, seeing all the love there, I relaxed a bit. “I’m scared I won’t see you again after you go in, and a part of me wants to tell you to just stay here. To just run away with me. But that’s not who we are.”

“No, it’s not. And running is never the answer. It’s a temporary solution for the problem, but it isn’t a permanent one. Whatever we’re running away from has a tendency to find us, no matter how much we try to hide from it.”

“I know,” I mumbled. “I’ll be okay,” I said, placing my hand on his cheek. “I don’t want you to worry about me. I’ll be here, safe and sound with Atlas. I promise I won’t do anything reckless.”

“I know you won’t.” He chuckled. “But remember what I said. Run if it’s necessary. Call Lazar immediately, get to Russia, do whatever you need to do to keep them safe,” he grumbled, placing his hand on my stomach. “Keep our kids safe. No matter what happens here today, just remember...” he trailed off, pressing his chest to mine. “I love you, Ophelia Aster.” He smiled softly. “I love you today, I’ll love you tomorrow... Forever, Sunshine.”

“Forever,” I mumbled as his lips pressed against mine, as he poured all his love through that one simple kiss, that shouldn’t have ignited the fire inside me as it did.

“Are you ready?” Atlas asked from behind us, making me step away from Storm.

“Yeah.” I nodded, still looking at Storm. “Remember,” I warned. “No heroics, Storm. I need you with me.”

“I know.” He grinned. “I heard you the first time.”

“Just checking.”

He kissed my cheek just before running toward the others, while Atlas led me toward the same car Storm and I came in, opening the door for me. I would be lying if I said that the fear



wasn't the only constant emotion coursing through my veins right now, but I bit down on my trembling lip, refusing to let it control me.

Fear had controlled me for so many years, and I'd be damned if it made me do something stupid right now, when so many people depended on me to stay calm. Storm wouldn't be able to do his job if I risked my life.

The warmth of the car eased the cold that was slowly latching itself to my bones, but it didn't ease the trembling in my body. That didn't come from the cold. That came from the unknown surrounding us, from the fact that the man I loved was about to enter the devil's nest, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

Atlas entered the car shortly after, locking the doors as he entered, warming his hands as both of us looked at the group of our guys, all clad in black, slowly ascending the hill, where the warehouse was located. It seemed so far away from here, hidden between the trees and the fog in the air, but it was there.

"It's showtime," Atlas mumbled.

It was, and I hoped we would all get out of this alive.



BY THE END OF THE NIGHT, I WOULDN'T HAVE NAILS anymore. Hell, I think I started chewing on the skin around my nails, focusing on the radio Atlas placed on the dashboard, listening to what was happening up there.

Storm led the group straight to the front, while Indigo took the other one to the back, where we knew the second entrance was hidden, but nothing was happening so far. We could hear their muffled voices, the commands issued by Storm, but nothing that would alert us.

"*Hold,*" Storm commanded over the radio, my heart jumping to my throat. "*Creed to the left,*" he said. "*Hector, right.*"

“*Noted,*” both Creed and Hector said, while I chewed on my thumb, every nerve ending in my body telling me to get out and go up there to help.

“He’s going to be okay,” Atlas murmured, taking my hand in his, stopping me from chewing on my nail. “He knows what he’s doing.”

“I know he does,” I whispered. “But it doesn’t make it any easier.”

“*I see movement at the entrance,*” Creed’s voice came over the radio, and I straightened up, waiting for it to happen.

“*Creed—Fuck!*” Storm cursed. “*Get down!*”

Gunshots rained through the line, my eyes widening, looking toward the warehouse where they all were now.

“It’s a trap,” I murmured, realization dawning on me. “Oh my God, Atlas.” I looked at him. “It’s a fucking trap.”

“No, no, Ophelia,” he stated in a calm voice, but I could see how nervous he truly was. “It might not be.”

“They know we’re coming. They must know.”

“No, Phee. Breathe.”

“I can’t!” I bellowed, removing the hat from my head. “They’re going to die up there.”

“*Fuck!*” Storm cursed again, and I couldn’t bear it anymore.

“You have to go up there,” I said. “You gotta help them.”

“*There’s too many of them,*” Indigo’s voice came over the line, and it took all my willpower to stay seated instead of rushing up there. “*Storm, there are at least fifteen of them waiting at the back entrance. I can’t locate the sniper shooter.*”

Jesus fucking fuck.

“*Around twenty here,*” Storm said, breathing heavily. “*Is everyone okay?*”

Murmurs came over the line, muffled by the sound of the gunshots in the background.

“We have to do something, Atlas,” I said. “We have to help them.”

“We can’t,” he croaked. “God, I wish we could, Phee, but we can’t.”

I looked frantically at the warehouse, the lights from the gunshots illuminating the night. Before I could think about it, I unlocked the door and started pushing it open. Atlas pulled me in, stopping me from going there.

“No, Atlas! They’re going to die!”

“And so will you if you go up there like this. Calm down.”

But I couldn’t calm down. The shouts and grunts over the line were getting louder, filling the small space of the car, and I couldn’t do a thing to stop it.

Storm’s voice still kept issuing commands, but they were powerless against these people if they knew we were coming. They were sitting ducks in there. I opened the window, trying to hear better, letting the cold seep into the car, but the only thing I could hear were the gunshots and the shouts of the men on that hill.

“They’re going to die,” I cried out. “They’re all going to die.”

“No!” Atlas barked. “They’re not going to die.”

I wanted to believe him, I really did, but it was getting harder and harder with each passing moment.

“*Felix was shot,*” Indigo said over the line. “*We gotta take him away from here, Storm. It’s bad.*”

“*I know, dammit. I know.*”

“*What do you want us to do?*” It was Freddie who asked this time, and a small bout of relief washed over me, knowing he was still there with Storm. “*We can’t keep hiding behind these barrels.*”

Silence ensued for a second, and I waited with bated breath to hear what Storm was going to say. Hell, I wanted him to retreat, to come back here. Fuck it all. I just wanted him to be okay.

“*Cover me,*” Storm instructed, shattering the temporary illusion of mine that they were going to retreat. “*Freddie, at my six. Creed, take out the man on the roof.*”

“No,” I breathed out. “He can’t.”

He would be out in the open, vulnerable. “He can’t do this.”

“Shhh,” Atlas instructed.

“*Now!*” Storm shouted and all hell broke loose.

Gunshots, shouts and the deafening silence followed shortly after, while my heart kept jumping in my chest, trying to get out. Trying to get to him.

“I can’t listen to this,” I murmured, leaning against the seat and closing my eyes. “It’s too quiet.”

“Wait, just wait, Phee.”

“No,” I shook my head, feeling the first tear roll down my cheek. “It’s too quiet,” I sobbed. “Too fucking quiet.”

“Ophelia, listen.”

The line kept breaking, followed by someone’s heavy breathing.

“*I’m in,*” Storm suddenly said, and my eyes flew open, my hands immediately going for the radio, clutching it to me.

“I told you.” Atlas smirked. “We’ve done this many times.”

“Shut up, Atlas,” I mumbled, waiting for Storm to say something else. I didn’t want to bother him right now, I didn’t want to burden him with my worry, but just hearing his voice gave me more hope than anything else.

“He’s okay.”

“He’s okay,” I agreed. “He didn’t get shot.”

“No, he didn’t,” Atlas added, but it wasn’t enough.

I needed to see him, to make sure he was okay, and I couldn’t do that right now. I couldn’t just march up there and demand to see him, to make sure with my own two eyes that there was no harm done.

“Are you okay?” Atlas asked while I kept squeezing the radio, keeping it to my chest. “Phee?”

“I need air,” I grunted. “I need air.”

Fuck, I had to get out of the car. I couldn’t just sit and do nothing.

“Shit,” was all I heard from Atlas before I opened the door, threw the radio back inside, and got out into the cold. My hat was inside and so were my gloves, but I couldn’t feel the cold. I couldn’t feel anything but the gnawing worry that wouldn’t let go.

I looked toward the warehouse, trying to hear anything, but we were too far away from them to hear what was going on. The gunshots had subsided, and as the wind picked up, I couldn’t hear the footsteps coming closer to me, until an unfamiliar pair of boots stepped right in front of my line of sight.

I slowly pulled up, ready for whatever the other person had planned for me, but as I straightened, my eyes landing on the young face of a man I met not too long ago, the fight-or-flight instinct slowly died out, followed by surprise.

“Ash?”

Blue, hollow eyes stared back at me, following my every move. I had no idea a person could change this much in the matter of a month. His black hair was longer now, curling around his ears, but the way he held himself, with caution and distance, killed me.

I did this. It was my fault.

“Hey, Ophelia,” he murmured, a small smile dancing on his lips, but there was no trace of the boy I met. There was no trace of the softness he had back in Emercroft Lake. This

harsh armor he wore was no doubt a consequence of whatever they went through with Judah and Logan.

“H-how are you?” I asked, not knowing what else to say. What was I supposed to do? Apologize? I was pretty sure he didn’t want to hear my apologies, and if he was here—

“What are you doing here?” I asked then, looking around, trying to see if anyone else was with him.

“I’ve had better days,” he grunted. “But I’m alive, I guess.”

*I guess.* That simple statement shook me to my core.

“Ash—”

“Ophelia!” Atlas roared, stopping right next to me. “Ash? Buddy.” He smiled, going straight for him, engulfing him in a bear hug. “What are you doing here?”

“I guess the same thing you guys are doing.” Ash shrugged, stepping away from Atlas. I didn’t miss the flinching as Atlas hugged him, or the way his eyes got that faraway look as if he was remembering something. “We found out that Judah was hiding here, with Belladonna.”

“Who is we?” Atlas asked, just as another voice called out to me.

“Birdy!” Cillian yelled out. As I took a step to the side, I saw him running toward us, with a big smile plastered on his face.

“Kill!” I screeched, rushing toward him, careful not to slip and fall on the frozen ground. “Holy shit!” I harrumphed as I all but jumped into his arms, holding him tighter than necessary. “What are you doing here?”

“Judah is here,” he explained. “Or at least he was.”

“Yeah, Belladonna is here as well.”

“I know.” He nodded. “At least we think she is. We can’t be sure, but this is the last place Judah was spotted. We left this morning and came here.”

“Only Ash and you?”

“And me,” a man added, approaching us from the other side of the road. The long black coat he wore covered most of his body, but I didn’t miss the way Cillian shuffled from one foot to the other, shielding me with his body, as the stranger came closer to us.

His blond hair was slicked back, his pale blue eyes drinking me in, making the situation so much more uncomfortable.

“And you are?” I asked. I had no time for niceties and small conversations.

“Casimir Lacroix,” he answered, grinning from ear to ear as he stopped in front of us. “It is nice to meet you, Ophelia.”

“I would say the pleasure is all mine, but I don’t think it will be.” I stepped next to Atlas and looked at him. “Who is he?”

“This is the man you guys know as Lars,” Atlas grumbled. “He’s Skylar’s—”

“Brother,” Casimir added. “I think you will be pleased with me when I give you a little gift of mine.”

“Which is?” I glared at him. I didn’t like him. I didn’t like his energy, or the fact that he seemed so full of himself.

It was in the way he held himself, the way he spoke, the way he observed us as if we were nothing more than pawns in his little game. Nikolai behaved in the same way, and I fucking hated it from the bottom of my soul.

“Reinforcements,” he added, just as an entire squadron of men dressed as a SWAT team ran toward us, heading straight for the hill. “You didn’t think you were the only ones going to this place?”

“No.” I shook my head. “But since I have no idea what your intentions are, I will hold on to the gratitude and elation. You must understand that.”

“Cut it, Cas,” Ash murmured as he came to stand next to me, glaring at the other man. “We already talked about this, man.”

“What?” Casimir grinned. “It’s funny seeing her assert herself like this. I like you, Ophelia,” he murmured. “I think we will be great friends.”

“I highly doubt so,” I responded, my eyes following the tactical team as they went up the hill. “I already have friends,” I told him, my gaze moving to him. “And to be one, you gotta deserve it first.”

“I think I’ll deserve it tonight after I save your lover boy from demise. You have no idea what you walked into.”

“Let me guess, you do?”

“I know more,” he said, proud of himself. “I know that Belladonna isn’t there right now, and neither is Judah. I also know that they knew you were coming, thanks to the little informant who keeps lingering around your house back in Santa Monica. But don’t worry,” he purred. “I took care of that as well.”

“Ivan?” I asked. “How did you—”

“I told you already,” he murmured, taking a step closer to me. “I know everything, darling. I also know your father would cut out my liver and feed it to me if I ever dared to do anything to you, so don’t worry,” he rumbled. “You’re safe.”

“Jeez, thanks?”

“Phee,” Atlas started. “Storm is calling for you.” I swiveled around as he mentioned Storm’s name. Completely ignoring the rest of the people, I took the radio from Atlas, turning on the button on the side to speak to Storm.

“Stormy,” I breathed out. “Are you okay?”

“Sunshine.” He chuckled. “I didn’t know we were getting reinforcements. Kinda late if you ask me, but helpful.”

“What happened?” I asked, leaning against the car. Fatigue was slowly taking over, but I’d be damned if I let it keel me over.

“I’ll tell you once I get down there, but, Sunshine,” he grumbled. “They aren’t here. Other things are... some of their plans, but they expected us to come. The guards were placed



around the warehouse and they knew we were going to be here.”

“I figured as much,” I murmured. “I’m just glad you’re safe.”

“Me too.” He chuckled. “I’ll see you shortly. Stay there until I come to you. Don’t come here yet.”

“Okay,” I whispered, and let go of the button, staring down at the radio.

“Are they okay?” Cillian asked, coming closer to me. I looked over his shoulder at Casimir who wouldn’t stop looking at me.

“I don’t like that guy,” I mumbled, looking straight at Casimir. “There’s something off about him.”

“You’re going to like him even less when I tell you who he really is,” Cillian added, leaning on the car right next to me.

“Do tell,” I said. “Because I have a feeling that it isn’t anything pretty, even for my standards.”

“No, it’s not,” Cillian breathed out. “Casimir was the first son Skylar’s father had, but his family forced him to put the baby up for an adoption. Unfortunately for all of them, the real Order found Casimir.”

“The real Order?” God, I had no idea what was happening in Winworth.

“Yeah, it’s complicated. But the Order that was led by Judah isn’t the real Order. Or well, they’re sort of a branch of the Order that went slightly wayward. Judah was excommunicated years ago for not following the rules, but it turns out that the real Order of Black Dahlia is even more fucked up.”

“Fucked up how?” I asked carefully. I didn’t want us to get entangled with someone who was worse than Nikolai, Logan, and Judah. None of us were saints, but lines had to be drawn somewhere, and getting entangled with people who did things in a way that wasn’t acceptable for us, wasn’t something I wanted to have.

“The Order of Black Dahlia is everywhere, Birdy,” Cillian said. “They have their claws in the government, elections, health care, and they are more powerful than our parents. They don’t care who gets hurt as long as they get what they want. They don’t believe in God. They don’t do things like other organizations, and while I don’t know all the details, I do know that they worship Satan.”

“Oh, just *the* Satan?” I scowled.

“Yeah, just *the* Satan.” Cillian laughed. “Casimir is their leader.”

“But he’s so young.”

“It doesn’t matter. He climbed up the ranks over the last couple of years and he got what he wanted. What he wants the most right now is to kill Judah Blackwood for what he did to his sister.”

“So, Skylar is really his sister?”

“Yeah,” Cillian murmured. “Ash isn’t exactly happy he’s here, especially because of how the Order functions.”

“Which is?” I asked again. I needed a manual at this point to figure out all the organizations, orders and all the other shit surrounding us.

“They marry siblings,” he murmured. “They groom the girls and boys from a very young age, keeping it in the family, so to speak.”

“Holy shit.”

Revolt started in my body, disgust—

“They sacrifice people during their rituals. The people they believe are bad.”

“Jesus,” I breathed out.

“Ash thinks Casimir is here to steal Skylar, but I don’t think so. I don’t trust him, but I think he just wants what’s best for her.”

I just hoped he wasn’t here to destroy us. The problem with people in power was that they wanted to control

everything and everyone, and Casimir could destroy us all, trying to conquer the world.



## STORM

THE STENCH OF BLOOD LINGERED ON MY SKIN EVEN AS I changed the shirt I wore, but it was still there, drowning me, clutching to my skin. But that wasn't what annoyed me or what had me rushing down the hill.

It was the fact that a completely unfamiliar man came tonight, along with Ash and Cillian, claiming to be Lars—the man who contacted us about Winworth and what they were doing there. I knew of Casimir Lacroix, I just never thought he would be Lars.

As soon as I came down, seeing Ophelia glaring at him, I knew something was wrong. I knew she didn't like him. I knew we made a mistake trusting Lars before, but what could we do now? Nothing at all.

He helped Skylar, Ash, and Dylan when they needed him, and I couldn't fault him for that. But I would gouge his eyes out if he kept staring at Ophelia as he sat opposite of us in the diner, drinking his tea.

Belladonna and Judah weren't there when we finally entered the warehouse, leaving only their goons to fight against us, thinking they could win. Felix was on the way to the hospital now. Hector broke his arm trying to push through the door, but no one else got hurt.

At least, none of us got hurt. I couldn't say the same about the other guys.

“So,” Cillian murmured, breaking through the silence enveloping us. “Is anyone going to say something or—”

“There’s a reason you’re here, Casimir,” I said, glaring at the man. God, I really wanted to strangle him. He was making Ophelia uncomfortable, and I hated that he affected her this much. “And for fuck’s sake, can you stop looking at her?” I blasted, unable to contain my fury.

Her hand landed on top of my thigh, reassuring me, but it did nothing to appease the beast living inside of me. I just wanted to hold her, to get out of here, to tell her about the plans and letters we found in the warehouse, but I had to sit here, cooped up in this tiny booth, because Casimir Lacroix wanted to talk to us.

And if I didn’t want another war on my hands, I would listen to what he has to say. I wasn’t an idiot, and I knew what he was capable of—what all of them were capable of, but that didn’t mean I had to kiss his butt and pretend I was happy with having him here.

“You’re very possessive of her,” Casimir stated, placing his cup on top of the table. “I like it.”

“Stop fucking talking about her,” I gritted out.

“Cas,” Ash warned from the other side of the booth, looking at the menu. “I’m not going to repeat myself again. Stop it.”

“It’s just curiosity, that’s all.” Casimir smirked. “I have never seen a couple so much in love as the two of you. It’s interesting, fascinating even.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” Ophelia bellowed, turning everyone’s attention to her. She grabbed the knife from the table that the waitress placed earlier and pointed it at him. “Listen to me very carefully, *Cas*.” She mocked his nickname. “I’m tired, sleepy, pregnant, and I am one pissed-off lady. I had to go to the toilet three times in under an hour. Three fucking times! So cut the crap and tell us why we’re here so that I can go and cuddle my man without you hovering around.”

“Fire.” Casimir grinned. “I like it. See, Ash,” he leaned over the table to look at Ash, who was sitting next to Atlas, “I

told you I would like her.”

“Yeah, you did,” Ash grumbled, while Atlas’s eyes kept growing wider and wider, sitting between the two of them. “Now you can stop trying to provoke her. She won’t hesitate to stab you.”

I probably wouldn’t.

“You’re really not very interesting today, are you?” Casimir pouted like a little kid and leaned back into his seat, looking at us. “Fine.” He huffed. “I’m going to stop, but I’m not going to apologize for goading you. Ophelia.” He looked at me, while Storm growled under his breath. “I knew Nikolai, and what a piece of shit that man was.”

Seriously?

“And because I knew him and knew what he was capable of, I wanted to meet you as well, to see if the stories are true.”

“What stories?”

“That you aren’t his daughter, and I don’t mean only by blood. That fire in you...” he chuckled. “That’s Lazar. That fury living inside your veins, that’s your real dad, and I like it. I like it a lot.”

“Why?” I asked. “You have nothing to gain from knowing me.”

“But I do,” he answered somberly. “I understand that you all now know who I am and what it is that I do.” He looked at all of us, his eyes flicking from one person to another. “Then you also know that we need allies, now more than ever.”

“No,” I simply said, pressing my shoulder against Ophelia. “We’re not doing this, Cas.”

“You don’t even know what I’m about to say.”

“Whatever it is would mean us getting entangled with your organization, and I don’t like it.”

“No, Storm, I wouldn’t want us to do that, but...” he trailed off. “I want us to make an alliance. The MC’s, the

Syndicate,” he looked at Ophelia, “The Outfit.” His eyes bore into Cillian. “And the Italians.”

“We’re not interested,” I gritted out.

“Just think about it,” Casimir pushed. “You don’t have to give me an answer now but think about it. It could be good for all of us.”

“Why?” Ophelia asked. “You have nothing to gain from this. Why would you want to create an alliance between the families?”

“Have you ever heard of Entente Powers and Central Powers from World War I?” Casimir asked her.

“Of course I have,” Ophelia said. “Two opposing sides, with a lot more countries joining Entente or Allied Powers, versus the Central Powers.”

“And who won?” Casimir smirked.

“Entente Powers,” Ophelia grumbled. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“The Russian Bratva, several families in the Mexican Cartel, and the Colombians, are creating an alliance. Hell, I think they already have created it, and the Albanians are joining them.”

Fuck, that wasn’t good.

“I don’t have to tell you how bad it would be for all of us if they decide to attack. You think this whole situation with Belladonna is bad?” Casimir grumbled. “Well, think again. If we have the entire South America against us, what are you going to do? Run? Where?”

“But they might not be targeting us,” Ophelia countered. “It could be only for their business—”

“Ophelia, you’re smarter than that. You know that they’re not going to stop until they take everything. Every single territory, and I’m not about to lose everything The Order has gained just because some mongrels think they could do it better. I’m not gonna stand for that.”



“And neither would we,” I said. “But the alliance with you would mean going against everything we believe in.”

“You don’t have to like me, Storm.” Casimir chuckled. “You don’t have to agree with what we do, but you gotta admit—we’re pretty good at what we do. Hell, we’re the fucking best, and you know it.”

“You mean at making people disappear?” I said. “That, you’re really good at.”

“We are,” Casimir agreed. “But we’re good at other things too. If we all get into an alliance together, I can promise you that none of you would ever have to worry about anything. Especially your kids.” He smirked, the undertone of a threat lingering in the air.

That was the last straw.

“Cas, Casimir, whatever the fuck your name is,” Ophelia growled, slowly standing up. The knife was in her hand again as she leaned over the table, coming closer to Casimir. “I don’t give a rat’s ass who you are or what you can do. I don’t care how many men and women have disappeared because of you, or how many organizations are under your thumb. Hell, I don’t even give a flying fuck that you could kill me with a flick of your wrist because you have other idiots working for you who might make it happen. What I do care about is you mentioning my kids. My fucking kids!” she roared. “Do you understand me?”

Casimir nodded, all traces of humor gone from his face. That cocky little smirk he wore suddenly disappeared, replaced by the fear only Ophelia could instill in men.

“You thought you could come tonight, wave around your army of men, and we would fall down on our knees, kissing your feet? Think again, *blyat*. And trust me, Cas, if you ever, and I mean ever, mention my kids, even thinking of threatening them, I will find you,” she warned, snickering at the same time. “And not even Satan will help you to save you from my rage.”

“I get it,” he murmured.

“I don’t think that you do,” she added. “But you will. I’ve killed men more powerful than you, and I would kill you as well if I felt that you’re fucking around with my family,” she threatened, lowering the knife on top of the table. “You want to create an alliance with us? Great. That’s an awesome idea. But if you for even one second think that we would bend our backs to appease your sick desires, you should think again, because we won’t. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever!” she yelled out.

The tension at the table increased with every new word she said, and even Ash who wasn’t paying attention to the first half of the dinner was now looking at her, smiling at everything she said. It was obvious the kid didn’t like Casimir, and I could only wonder why.

“I didn’t come here to threaten you,” Casimir stated, straightening up in his seat.

“Could’ve fooled me,” Ophelia said as she sat down, pressing against me. “That little cocky attitude of yours might fly with government officials and dickless little fucks who think that the sun is shining from your ass...” Cillian choked on the water he was drinking. “But that shit won’t fly with us. I get it, you’re scared.”

“I’m not—” he tried denying.

“You’re fucking scared,” Ophelia repeated. “I would be too if someone tried taking my home away from me, but this isn’t the way to make friends, Casimir. You gotta understand, buddy, you’re an outsider here. Just look around you,” she said, letting it linger in the air. “I’ve known Cillian and Kieran Nightingale since we were kids. Hell, I was supposed to get married to Kieran. Do you really think that we would need you to create an alliance? Look at the Club.” She smirked. “They have more than twenty chapters around the country, with more than one thousand men and women ready to fight for their president. We don’t need you, Casimir. You,” she pointed at him, “need us, and that’s the fact.”

Silence ensued as soon as she rattled it all out, everyone looking around the table, figuring out what just happened.

“Damn,” Casimir breathed out.

“Yeah, damn,” Ophelia grunted. “You came to us, not the other way around. So if I were you, I would show a little bit of gratitude for letting you sit at this table with us. I have no doubt that you earned your position, but you gotta earn our trust if you want us to work together. You can’t just waltz in here, demanding things, mocking us, laughing at us, trying to make Storm jealous. If that’s the way you guys do things, then I feel sorry for you, because it reminds me of Nikolai Aster and the spineless little fucks who followed him all those years, until we killed them all.”

“I agree with her,” Ash said, looking at Ophelia. “Trust needs to be earned.” He glared at Casimir. “People expect that just showing up will make us trust them, but it won’t. Trust is such a fickle thing, and one simple mistake could take it away forever.”

“I know that,” Casimir grumbled.

“Then start acting like it,” Ophelia said, calmer now than five minutes ago. “Start from the beginning and start with the facts, without trying to laugh or smile or threaten any of us. I have long legs, and your crotch is not too far away.”

I lost it.

The laughter bubbled up from my chest, escaping through my lips as she so blatantly threatened one of the most powerful men in the country. Only her, only Ophelia.

I wasn’t the only one laughing. The rest of the guys were trying to keep it in, and as Casimir truly heard what she said, he started chuckling as well, his eyes glinting.

“I said it before, and I’m going to say it again.” Casimir grinned. “I think we’re going to be great friends, Ophelia.”

*Over my dead body*, I thought to myself, but he didn’t need to know that.



CASIMIR KEPT ON TALKING ABOUT THE PLAN AND WHAT HE HAD in mind, connecting all our organizations together, explaining the logistics behind everything, but I'd stopped listening at least half an hour ago, too tired to give a shit.

My back was killing me, my eyes were closing down of their own volition, and all I wanted to have was a hot shower and bed, with Ophelia by my side. I turned to look at her as she played with the napkin on the table, the empty plate in front of her. I had a feeling she was ready to leave as well. But, true to his word, Casimir changed the way he spoke to all of us, showing a lot more respect than he initially had.

I still didn't like the man, but he did have a point—we had to work together, one way or another.

“Cas,” Ash interrupted him. “I think that we should continue this some other time. Everyone looks just about ready to fall asleep at the table.”

“Shit.” Casimir smiled. “You're right. I'm sorry, everyone,” he apologized, which surprised me. “I got carried away. I know you've been through hell and back tonight. Storm,” he looked at me, giving me his business card, “contact me when you want to talk more and we'll arrange a meeting. Ophelia,” he looked at the sleeping beauty next to me, who was glowering at him, “it was a pleasure, truly. Sorry about before.”

She simply nodded, leaning into me, turning her face toward mine. “If he didn't stop talking, I would've stabbed him tonight.”

“Tired?” I chuckled, imagining it already.

“Dead tired,” she grumbled. “You might have to carry me away from here, because I definitely can't walk properly.” Her melodic laughter swept over me, and I remembered the moment from earlier where I thought I would never get to see her again.

When that soldier came at me, running with the knife. If it wasn't for Freddie and his fast reflexes, we probably wouldn't be sitting here.

“I’ll take care of the bill,” Ash said as he stood up from the table, going to the waitress who was glaring at us, wanting us gone. I couldn’t really blame her. It was past eleven already, and I knew she needed to close up and go.

“I need to talk to him,” Ophelia mumbled, following Ash’s every move. “I feel bad for what happened. Those kids didn’t deserve it.”

“No, they didn’t, but it isn’t your fault.”

“I know.” She huffed. “But I just wish that there was something we could do.”

Ash pulled out his wallet and took out several notes, giving it to the waitress without waiting for the change. His entire posture was rigid, the turmoil evident in his eyes, but he still smiled at us as he approached the table. “All done,” he said, plastering that fake smile all over again. “I’ll wait outside,” he told Casimir. Ophelia jumped up from her spot, pushing Cillian out of the booth.

“Ash,” she called after him. “Wait. I need to talk to you,” she told him, and I braced myself for the possible mess this could end up being.

Ash frowned, contemplating her words, but with a small nod, he let her follow him outside, right where I could see them.

“He’s not okay, is he?” I asked, looking at Casimir and Cillian, both of them frowning at Ophelia and Ash as they spoke in front of the diner.

“No,” Casimir said. “He’s not. None of them are and I have no idea what to do.”

“Neither do I,” Cillian added. “What happened to them... I wouldn’t wish for it to happen to anyone, truly.”

“Where are Dylan and Skylar?” I asked. Casimir winced, telling me everything I needed to know.

“I’ve seen bad things in my life, you know?” Casimir said. “I’ve seen broken people and I’ve seen them heal, but Dylan...” he trailed off. “I don’t know if there’s enough life

left in that boy, to be very honest with you. I'm worried that when he decides he doesn't want to stick around anymore, it will destroy both Skylar and Ash."

Not *if* but *when* he decided to get out. When he decided to

---

"Are you saying he's suicidal?" I asked.

"I'm saying he doesn't want to live anymore," Casimir answered. "I'm saying that Judah damaged that boy so much, even Skylar isn't able to bring him back."

"Fuck," I cursed.

"Exactly my thoughts," Cillian added. "We've tried everything, Storm. Every single thing, but the kind of trauma he went through, it's hard."

"What did they do to him?" I asked. Both of them fell silent, avoiding my eyes.

"They, uh..." Casimir cleared his throat. "I don't have all the details, and I don't even want to have them all, but they raped Dylan, Storm. They raped him right in front of Ash."

"Jesus," I breathed out.

"I spoke with Dylan after they had just come back, when he still wanted to talk to us," Cillian added. "He, you know, finished. He blames himself. Thinks there's something utterly wrong with him."

"He couldn't control his body."

"Yeah, try telling that to the person who went through such trauma. We'll try to get him some help, but so far, he doesn't want it. He doesn't want us to touch him. He doesn't want us to talk to him. He doesn't want anything."

"And Skylar is dying along with him," Casimir added.

"With Ash following after them. That one though, that one is blaming himself for not being able to stop it. Skylar is blaming herself for going there that night. They're all blaming themselves for things that were out of their control, and they're not talking to each other as they should."

Silence could be your best friend and your enemy. If you allowed it to take over your life, if it distanced you from people who loved you, it could destroy your mind. Because in those dark moments, everything bad you ever did, every single mistake, seemed to be bigger than it actually was.

“Let us know if we can help,” I said, looking at Casimir. “I mean it. They have our support.”

“I just want us to catch that bastard,” Casimir gritted out. “I’ll kill him myself. I just want to bring him to us. Prison isn’t enough for men like him.”

I understood him because it was what I felt for Nikolai for so many years. It was what kept me alive, this anger that one day I’d be able to destroy him, just how he destroyed the others. I turned around, looking at Ophelia and Ash, seeing them hugging each other.

“She blames herself for that night,” I murmured.

“She shouldn’t,” Casimir added. “Skylar talked about Ophelia, of how strong she is, how she gave her back her strength. It wasn’t Ophelia’s fault.”

“I know, but I think she needs time to realize that, to fully comprehend it. She thought that what she was doing was right.”

“We all did,” Atlas added, suddenly joining the conversation. He’d been quiet this whole time, listening to us talk. “I shouldn’t have left her alone that night, but I forgot that Skylar isn’t Ophelia, and she isn’t us. She didn’t know how to fight back, how to push that motherfucker into the river.”

“She’ll learn,” Casimir grunted. “She will have to if she wants to survive in this world.”

And the saddest thing was, every single one of us had to learn to fight if we wanted to survive. One way or another, we had to fight to push through life, because nothing ever came easily. Not one single thing.





## OPHELIA

A HEAVY ARM WAS DRAPED OVER MY MIDDLE AS I STIRRED awake, my eyes focusing on the window opposite of the bed, seeing the morning sunshine slowly filtering in. My feet were frozen, the blanket no doubt on the floor already. Knowing Storm, he pushed it off of me not too long after he settled behind.

After the events in Portland, things became... quiet. Too fucking quiet, and I couldn't help but wonder if we were maybe, by some miracle, finally free from Belladonna or if she was only quiet because we found her compound. The plans Storm retrieved from the warehouse, the pictures of all of us lingering around, the psychotic letters she had prepared for all of us, they chilled me to the bone, and there were not many things that could do that.

I had no idea why someone would go to such lengths to kill me. I would've understood if she went only after me, but it was obvious that she was after Cillian and Kieran, as well as Tristan. She had information on Zoe, Maya, Atlas, Indigo—every single person who meant anything to me. She knew Lazar was my real father, not Nikolai, and she was hellbent on destroying them all, alienating me from the people I loved.

Sometimes it felt as if the truth was just there, at the edge of my mind, pointing me to the person who was behind this all, but I never managed to reach it. So I stayed in the dark, unable to figure out who this monster was. And it killed me that I had no idea.

It killed me that Storm had to bring in more people for protection.

I hated that Zoe couldn't go back to her apartment, or that Cillian felt as if he was trapped when he decided to come to Las Vegas to stay with Kieran.

I hated the fact that I had to warn Maya, *again*, knowing full well that she didn't need this shit right now. It killed the pieces of my sanity that we had a ghost trying to kill us, while none of us were anywhere closer to the truth.

My hopes that the insanity would stop with Nikolai's death were slowly getting extinguished, and even the reassuring words from Lazar and all my friends that nothing would happen to them, weren't helping.

At least Tristan called back, explaining that he was tracing Belladonna's movements, which managed to ease some of our worries. What was funny though, was the fact that Kieran and Storm slowly but surely started becoming friends.

If I voiced it out loud, I knew that Storm would grumble and mention something about killing Kieran, but I knew he liked him. Hell, he liked him enough to go for a drink with him, getting away from all of us. It warmed my heart knowing that all my people were finally getting along, that there was no more bad blood between all of us.

When I looked at the past, at all the things that had happened to all of us, it was hard to imagine that something like this would happen, but it had.

Storm grumbled in his sleep, pressing his dick against my ass, rubbing, making me chuckle as he kept on whispering in his sleep.

"Stormy," I murmured, pressing my hand over his, trying to wake him up. "I think we need to wake up."

"No," he grunted. "It's too early."

"I don't know about that." I chuckled. "It's almost eight in the morning."

“No.” He burrowed his head in my hair. “I want to stay in bed today.”

“We can’t.” I laughed, turning around to face him. His eyes were half open, sleep still lingering on the edges. My stomach was becoming a small barrier between us, and I could no longer press my entire body to him. “We’re having that dinner tonight, remember?”

“Whose silly idea was that?” he grumbled.

“Yours.” I chuckled. “You wanted to have Christmas Eve dinner here, not me. I would’ve been happy with just a Christmas tree and takeout.”

“God, and we need to decorate the Christmas tree as well,” he groaned, dragging a hand over his face. “Please stop me from ever again doing something like this.”

“It’s going to be fun.” I smiled, pressing my lips to his. “All our people in one spot.”

“Me freezing my balls off, trying to arrange that cinema shit in the backyard,” he moaned. “I’m telling you, Sunshine, I shouldn’t have done this.”

“No.” I laughed. “You shouldn’t have, but you did, and now we need to get our pretty little asses up and go downstairs to help Zoe with cooking. You know she’s already up and running, and most probably cursing because the Christmas tree isn’t up.”

“I know. She’s going to kill me. I can already tell.”

She probably would. When Storm told Zoe we would be having a ginormous Christmas dinner for everyone right here at the Clubhouse, I thought she would burst a blood vessel. The dirty looks she kept sending his way every time she saw him were amusing at best, and the fact that Storm actually feared for his life was what kept me laughing every time I saw the two of them in the same room.

But somewhere in between us running the Clubhouse together, trying to find out more about Belladonna, worrying about our friends, I started wishing for a real Christmas, only him and our kids as a family, far away from everyone else. But

it was wishful thinking, the one that could only send me on the dark road where I wanted more than I already had. But it wasn't wrong of me, wanting to have a house where we could raise our kids, a little piece of heaven we could call our own.

All these dreams always kept crashing down, because I had no idea what Storm and I were. Yeah, we slept in the same bed now because I couldn't sleep without him and keeping him on that sofa chair was cruel. We kissed, we told each other "I love you", but I had no idea if we were together or not.

He hadn't touched me since we came back from Emercroft Lake, and to say that taking care of your needs was not as good as it would be if he was doing it, would be an understatement of the year. My fingers and the toys I bought weren't a substitute for him and the things he could do to my body. Waking up next to him, with wetness between my legs, was not my idea of fun, when he wouldn't touch me.

I had no idea why. I tried not to think about it, because every single time, my mind would tell me it was because he didn't find me attractive anymore, which couldn't be true. Right? He still couldn't keep his hands off me. He kept touching me, kissing me, holding my hand every single time we were out, so why wouldn't he fuck me, dammit?

"What are you thinking about?" Storm asked, his forest green eyes slowly dragging over my face, drinking me in. "You start frowning every time you're thinking hard." He smiled, pressing his thumb between my furrowed brows. "What's bothering you?"

"I'm horny," I blurted out, staring at him. "I feel like my vagina is going to combust if it doesn't get some action soon. I have no idea if it's the pregnancy, or the fact that you're here, or—"

I never got to finish the sentence.

Storm all but attacked me, pressing his mouth to mine, devouring me, drinking me in, as his dick, covered only with his sweatpants, kept sliding over my pussy, driving me wild.

“Shit,” he grunted, drinking in every single moan escaping from me.

“I swear to all that’s holy, Storm.” I glowered at him. “If you don’t fuck me, I’ll go and find someone who will.”

“You aren’t going anywhere, Sunshine.,” He grinned viciously. “This pussy,” he cupped me over my underwear, “it fucking belongs to me. I was trying to give you space, to let you come to me. Hell, my hand is going to fall off from the amount of jerking off I’ve been doing. I’ve been walking around half-hard, and it hasn’t been fun and games.”

“You were?” I asked as he pinned my hands above my head. “I thought you didn’t want me anymore,” I mumbled, ashamed that these thoughts even existed in my mind. “I thought that maybe you found me repulsive.”

“Repulsive?” He reared back as if I’d slapped him. “Why the hell would I think that?”

“Well...” I pulled myself upright, leaning on my elbows. “If you haven’t noticed, our kids have become big enough to pass for two soccer balls,” I murmured. “And my entire body has changed.”

“Ophelia—”

“I don’t know, okay? I just thought you didn’t find me attractive anymore.” I pouted. “Maybe it was wrong, but still.”

“Phee,” he called to me, lifting my head while holding his fingers under my chin. “You’re beautiful.” He smiled, crooning as soon as my eyes met his. “You have always been beautiful to me, but now,” he pressed a kiss to my belly, moving slowly to my boobs, “you’re carrying our kids, baby. You’re protecting them, and these...” He motioned for my boobs. “These have become so much bigger than before, and God, I’ve been itching to play with them,” he grumbled, his voice husky.

Not even a second later, he pushed the T-shirt I wore over my head, leaving me only in my panties, completely naked from the waist up.

“Beautiful,” he purred as his hands cupped my boobs, pressing them together. “So fucking beautiful.”

With hazy eyes, he looked at my face, slowly lowering himself until his lips were just a breath away from mine.

“I’ve wanted you so much, Sunshine. So fucking much. Nothing else compares to you. I wanted to come in here and fuck you raw so many times, but I stayed back, wanting to give you time.”

“I don’t want time anymore,” I moaned as his fingers disappeared into my underwear, thrumming over my sensitive skin, going toward my clit. “Fuck.”

“You’re drenched, Phee,” he growled. “Are you always this wet for me?”

“Always.” I bit down on my lip, stopping myself from moaning out. “Please, Storm. Please. I need—”

“You need me to fill you, baby?” he asked, lowering his head down to my boobs. “I bet I could get you to come just like this.”

Fuck, my boobs were getting more and more sensitive, and I knew that only one small puff, one small touch, could set me off.

“What if I do this,” he said, licking around my nipple, while pinching the other one. I could already feel it, the avalanche rushing through my body, heading toward its final destination.

“Or if I do this.” He bit down on the sensitive skin just above my areola, making me arch from the bed. He pressed his finger against my clit, dragging it lazily around the nub of nerves, driving me insane.

“I need to come, Storm,” I moaned, pushing my chest in his face. “Please!”

“Like this?” He grinned, entering me with two fingers, sliding in easily. His thick fingers pressed against my walls, scissoring, avoiding that spot he knew so well.

“Storm!” I screeched. “Stop playing around.”

“Who? Me?” The bastard smirked, removing his fingers all the way, bringing them to his lips. “Fuck,” he groaned, closing his eyes. “I’ve missed the way you taste, Sunshine. Imagining it is not enough anymore.”

And that did it.

He dove toward my panties, ripping them off of my body, before he pulled me closer to him, wrapping my legs around his shoulders, as he went down on me, feasting as if it was the only thing he would need.

I was weightless, floating in the air as he licked and sucked, his tongue creating friction around my clit. My orgasm rushed through me, almost at its peak when Storm pulled back, grinning at me.

“I will fucking kill you,” I panted, almost crying from the frustration. “Please. I’m begging you!”

“I know,” he said, removing his underwear. “I love it when you beg. Makes my cock even harder.”

Fuck me.

It’d been too long since I last saw him like this, in all his glory, standing in front of me proudly, while his cock pointed at my entrance as if he already knew where he belonged.

Storm dragged his hand over his shaft, his eyes fluttering as he looked down at me, desire floating between the two of us in waves, bringing us back together. I wanted him to slam into me, to show me who I belonged to.

I wanted him to make me scream, to make it hard to walk afterward.

He kneeled on the bed, slowly coming closer to me, situating himself between my legs. He slammed into me without waiting for me to adjust to his size.

“God,” he groaned, the veins on his neck straining as he held himself inside, breathing slowly, calming himself down.

“Storm,” I moaned, moving my hips, needing that friction, but he held me down, keeping me in place as his fingers dug into the bones at my hips, stopping my ministrations.

“If you keep doing that, this will be over way too soon.” He smiled, but I could see how much he tried to keep himself still. Sweat beaded on his forehead, his eyes concentrating. My pussy clenched around him, and it was all I needed to do to push him over the edge.

Like a man possessed, starved, he pulled almost all the way out before slamming back in, rattling the entire bed as he pistoned his hips, pushing and pushing and pushing, slamming with the force of a man starved.

His dilated irises darkened his eyes, and as he held my head up, wrapping his fingers around the back of my neck, he pulled up my left leg, throwing it over his shoulder, stretching me.

“Oh, God, oh God, oh God,” I chanted when he hit the spot inside, the orgasm he stopped earlier coming back with a vengeance, relentlessly rushing through me. My entire body trembled, arching off of the bed. Black dots danced in the periphery of my vision, and I was gone, reaching the stars as the orgasm tore through me, coating him with my juices, pulling a scream out of my throat.

White noise filled my head, detaching me from reality for a second, letting me float in the ether—weightless, satisfied... happy. Storm’s grunt slowly registered in my head, his calloused fingers wrapping around my throat, bringing me back to the moment. My eyes flashed open, zeroing in on his furrowed brows, the strands of hair sticking to his forehead as his entire body strained to keep himself from coming, from letting go.

His thumb pressed against my pulse point, and before I could react, he lifted me, bringing my face to his, taunting me with his full lips that I wanted to bite.

“You’re a fucking Goddess, Sunshine,” he murmured, his tongue swiping over my bottom lip before his teeth bit down, pulling yet another moan from me. “I’m never letting you go, Ophelia. If you ever think of running away from me, I’ll chase you to the ends of the earth.”



“I won’t run,” I breathed out, cupping his face in my hands. “I love you, Storm.” I smiled softly, hoping he would be able to see everything I felt. I made so many mistakes and seeing the shadows in his eyes while talking about me running made my heart clench. He slowed down his pace, leisurely pushing in and out of me, savoring the moment. “I’m yours,” I said, convincing him that this was it. He was it.

My everything.

As the brightest smile took over his face, his eyes twinkling as he dragged his thumb over my bottom lip, the disbelief evident in every line on his features, he pressed his lips to mine, inhaling me, sealing our fates together, as they were meant to be.

“I love you, Sunshine,” he grunted, slamming into me once again. “I’ve loved you from the first moment I saw you,” he whispered over my lips, and I knew what those words meant. He wasn’t professing his undying love or forever... This was so much more than that.

This was two soulmates finally finding their way back to each other. This was me letting go of past insecurities and grudges that never should have meant anything—at least not in the long run.

His hands knotted in my hair, keeping me close to him as he slammed and fucking slammed, awakening my body in ways no one else ever could.

“You’re mine,” he gritted out, biting, owning, and I let him. A weight lifted off of my chest as I surrendered myself to him, letting him love me, letting myself love him. I felt lighter, happier, and as he kept slamming in, beckoning another rush of lust, of need and yearning through my body, I let it all go.

All my doubts evaporated with the screams erupting from my lungs. All my worries suffocated from the force of his kisses, from the way he held me—safe and secure, but free to do whatever I wanted to.

As he roared, his neck straining, his hips pistoning inside of me, pushing me over the edge of insanity, I joined—our

voices echoing around the small room.

He dropped on top of me, careful not to press over my stomach, and within seconds, he rolled us over with me draped over him, his half-hard dick still inside me. I looked up, pushing away the hair that fell over my face, and let myself hope for a better tomorrow as I smiled at the man I loved with my whole heart.

The emotions glaring back at me as he observed me were almost too much to bear, but I kept on looking, drinking him in, tracing the lines over his tattoos, leading all the way to the column at his throat and then to his face. The tempest swirled through his irises, beckoning me, pulling me closer to him.

I rested my chin on his chest, soaking in the silence that enveloped us.

“Penny for your thoughts,” I said first, breaking the tranquility, getting comfortable on top of him. “You seem worried.”

The frown he always carried slowly disappeared, his arms wrapping around my body, keeping me as close as possible to him.

“I don’t know what this feeling is,” he murmured. “I don’t... I’ve never felt this way.”

I knew exactly what he was talking about—the fluttering in your stomach, the weightlessness, this feeling as if we were floating in the air.

“It’s called happiness, Stormy.” I chuckled, recognizing it for what it was.

“Then why,” he started, clearing his throat. “Why do I feel like something bad is going to happen to you? Why do I have this need to lock you up, and never let you go anywhere without me?”

I chuckled, because he was seriously perplexed by the powerful emotions coursing through both of us. I let my finger trail over his lower lip, over his cheek, landing on his temple, slowly tapping.

“Because you’re afraid,” I said. “I am too. I’m afraid that something is going to happen to you while I’m not looking. While I know that terrible things happen every day, regardless of what you’re doing in life, I can’t shake it off. But that’s okay,” I murmured, lying down on him, pressing my cheek to his chest, listening to the strong thumping of his heart. “We’re afraid because we care, Storm. Because we love each other.”

And this was it, wasn’t it? The moment I stopped running, trying to change things I couldn’t change. This was the beginning—the true beginning. Letting go was one of the hardest things for me, but with him by my side, with our kids, I knew I could do it all.

“I have a question, though,” I blurted out, keeping my head down as he dragged his fingers through my hair in slow motion. “Are we, you know...” I stumbled over my words. “Are we together?” I asked, closing my eyes immediately.

His fingers stilled, his breathing evened out, and I hated the insecurities rearing their ugly head at me as seconds passed without him saying a word.

“Sunshine,” he croaked. “I don’t know how to show it to you anymore. I don’t know what else to do.” He chuckled softly, lifting my chin to look at him. “Baby girl.” His eyes shone as he looked down at me, filled with love and everything I didn’t know I needed. “You’re my girl, Sunshine. Only mine.” My breath hitched at his words, every nerve ending in my body attuned to the words so softly spoken by him.

“It took us a while, getting here, but you were always mine. Do you feel this?” he asked, putting my hand over his heart. “This belongs to you, darling. Always did and always will. I never had a girlfriend. I was never in a serious relationship, so I don’t really know what the labels are, but you’re mine, Ophelia. Mine to hold, mine to love, mine to cherish, mine to have for the rest of our lives. And one day, when we’re old, cranky and gray, I want to sit on the front porch of our house, holding your hand, as we watch the sunset, ignoring the rest of the world.”

His features blurred in front of me as tears pushed forward, filling my eyes, but there was no doubt in my mind that I wanted the same thing. With a wobbly voice, I pushed out, “I want that, too.” I smiled, relaxed, mirroring his emotions.

“Forever, Sunshine.” He grinned.

“And always,” I added, pressing my lips to his.



THE SMELL OF CINNAMON AND GINGER WAFTED AROUND THE kitchen, but the cookies sitting on top of the table weren't what had my attention right now. It was the man skillfully moving around the kitchen, obviously knowing what he was doing.

Storm replaced his usual attire of leather jackets and black trousers for a white T-shirt that clung to his every muscle and washed-out jeans that hugged his ass in a way that had me salivating as I sat on one of the chairs, following his every move. I had no idea where he'd found the dark red apron, but the images in my head made me want to stand up, walk over there and tear it off him.

And yes, I still blamed pregnancy hormones for this hornier-than-ever version of me.

Leaning back against the chair, I placed my hands on my protruding belly, humming as the man I loved more than anything else cooked dinner for all of us, making me fall for him even more. Needless to say, I was terrible in the kitchen. Hell, I couldn't even make popcorn in a microwave without burning it completely, yet here he was, moving around, knowing what to do.

“I had no idea you could cook,” I said, smiling at his back. His head swiveled over his shoulder, smirking at me, as if he knew what seeing him like this did to me.

I never thought I would see the day where I would actually love all this domestic bullshit—kitchens, sitting around, having friends coming over... It was hard imagining it when

your life was filled with constant fighting, constant running. But now at the age of twenty-five, all I wanted was a moment of peace, a place to call my own. Somewhere between running and fighting, I think I finally found it in the most unlikely place.

“Are there any other skills I should know of?” I chuckled. “You’re obviously very good with your fingers.” I wiggled my eyebrows, trying not to laugh, while his shoulders shook slowly. “Your tongue has a master’s degree as well,” I said, standing up from the chair and walking over to him. My hand dragged over his back, feeling him shiver under my touch. “You’re extremely good with guns and knives,” I purred, pressing my lips to the center of his back, snaking my arms around him, pressing my palms to his stomach, right underneath the apron. “If I didn’t know better, I would think that you were trying to make me fall in love with you Mr. Knoxx.”

“Is it working?” he rasped, lowering the knife he was holding, along with the potato he was starting to cut.

“I don’t know,” I breathed out, dragging my hands over his torso. “I think it might.”

My hands traveled all the way to the hem of his T-shirt, lifting it slowly and pressing my palms to his skin, tracing each hard muscle with my fingers.

He pressed into my touch, groaning as I popped open the button on his pants, playing with the soft skin at his pelvis.

“Sunshine,” he growled, turning around, and taking me up in his arms. He placed me atop the counter, spreading my legs around his hips and holding his hands on my waist. His teeth clamped on my shoulder, pulling a moan deep from my chest as I squeezed my legs around him.

“Behave,” he breathed out, licking the spot he just bit. “Our guests are coming soon.”

“But I don’t want to behave,” I murmured, lacing my fingers at his neck, playing with the short strands of hair there. “I really, really want to be bad.”

A raging inferno stared back at me. As he pressed his hips to me, I could feel just how much he wanted me. His hardened dick rubbed against my pussy, and the thin material of the yoga pants I wore did nothing to decrease the pleasure.

“Later, baby.” He grinned against my cheek, pressing his lips there. Faster than I could blink, he detached himself from me, his hands disappearing underneath the apron to button up his pants. The apron concealed his hard-on, but the planes of his face told me that he wanted me right now as much as I wanted him. “The food is not going to cook itself.”

“I liked it more when you just kept me in your bed.” I pouted, pressing my hands on the counter. All I got from him was a self-satisfied chuckle, before he walked toward me, lifting me and lowering me down to the floor.

His lips descended on mine, the small peck doing nothing to appease the horny bitch living inside of me right now.

“Oh God,” the voice from the entrance to the kitchen grumbled. As I moved back to look over Storm’s shoulder, I saw a frowning Zoe standing there. “Is this going to be a thing now? You two mauling each other in every corner of the house?”

“Fuck off, Zoe.” Storm laughed, moving aside to look at her. “If I want to kiss my girl, I will.”

His girl, God.

I liked to think I was an independent, strong woman, but every time he called me his girl, my panties disintegrated, and the feminist inside of me decided to take a vacation.

“Fine.” Zoe rolled her eyes. “But can you not do it while the rest of us are around?”

“I don’t know.” Storm grinned, wrapping his arm around my waist, and pulling me into him. “Can we, Sunshine?”

“And they have cute nicknames,” Zoe groaned. “Seriously?”

“Are you jealous, Zozo?” I asked, trying not to laugh. “Because if you are, I think I saw Felix in the living room sit

—”

“No,” she interrupted. “Don’t even go there.”

“Why, Zoe?” I asked. “He looked quite deli—”

“Ophelia!” she exclaimed, feigning anger, but I could see that she wanted to laugh. “We’re not going to talk about Felix.”

As if he knew, the man in question waltzed right behind her, his eyes drinking her in. “You’re not going to talk about what?”

Zoe jumped and turned around, her shoulders quickly rising and falling as she took in the man standing in front of her. Felix chuckled softly, looking at her as if she hung the moon, but for whatever reason, she didn’t want to see it. I kept watching the two of them, dancing around each other, tiptoeing around the obvious attraction.

It was there when I first came to the Club and it was there right now as well, but I had a feeling that she was the one pushing him away, and not the other way around.

The gunshot wound thankfully missed all the vital organs, but I didn’t think that any of us would forget that day when they went to the warehouse where Belladonna hid any time soon. Especially not Zoe.

“Were you talking about me, Kitten?” he asked, his eyes dragging over her body.

“N-no,” she stammered. “I was talking about the dog I want to adopt,” she blurted out and I lost it.

“Speaking of dogs,” Storm said, cutting through the tension. “Where’s Kaiser?”

“Indigo took him out,” Zoe said, taking a step back from Felix, ignoring the poor man, while his eyes never wavered from her. She looked at Storm and me and if the looks could kill, both of us would drop dead right now. But she couldn’t hide from this for much longer, and if I had anything to do with it, she wouldn’t.

I had to talk to her, see what the issue was, because it was quite obvious to all of us that Felix wanted her badly.

“They’re here!” Atlas yelled from somewhere in the house, and I knew who they were.

Storm invited Maya and Kieran to our Christmas dinner without my knowledge. I only found out yesterday when Maya called me and told me that Kieran behaved as if he was going to visit the Queen of England and not the MC. I bawled like a baby when she told me, and Storm found me with a blotchy face and tears streaming down my cheeks. If this wasn’t the testament of his love for me, I had no idea what was.

Cillian stayed with Kieran and Maya after the whole shitshow in Portland, and I felt bad for not taking more time to see him, talk to him, see what was happening. Something was bothering him, but neither one of us were known for our ability to talk about things that were eating us alive.

I hoped Kieran would be able to reach him, to let him open up, but Cillian kept his feelings close to his heart, never once divulging anything to his brother. To say that both of us were worried would be an understatement of the year.

But they were here now, and that’s all that mattered at this moment. I had all my people in one place. As the sound of the door opening and closing filtered through the house, Atlas’s voice ringing loudly as he greeted them and then Maya mumbling about the size of this place, I knew that things would be okay.

Even if we were nowhere near finding Belladonna or Judah Blackwood, we were together. I never thought I would see the day where all of us could be in the same house without trying to kill each other, but it was here.

Years ago, all I had was the darkness to keep me warm at night, and now I had a group of people who I trusted with my life. Not only that, I knew they would do everything possible to keep my kids safe as well, and that’s what mattered.

“You want to go and greet them?” Storm asked, leaning down to me, and whispering in my ear. My answering nod was



all he needed to start walking toward the hallway leading to the rest of the house. As we crossed into the small foyer area where Maya, Kieran, Cillian, and Atlas stood, my heart filled with the unfamiliar feeling, something akin to happiness, fullness, something I hadn't felt before.

"Phee!" Maya squealed, running toward me. Before I could detach myself from Storm, she had me enveloped in a big hug, squeezing me. "I've missed you so much," she murmured against my hair.

"You saw me two weeks ago." I laughed, pulling my hand from Storm, and hugging her back.

"Well." She shrugged, taking a step back. "Two weeks is a long time. Just be lucky that I haven't killed Kieran in those two weeks."

"I heard that," he said, coming closer to us.

"You were supposed to." She glared at him, but Storm was right. I had to admit he was right, because the way Kieran looked at her wasn't filled with indifference or anger—it was filled with emotions so similar to the ones that passed over Storm's face every time he looked at me.

"Hey, man." Kieran greeted Storm first, shaking his hand. Storm tried remaining stoic, but somewhere between that first meeting where he punched Kieran in his face and now, the two created some sort of friendship.

It was different from what Storm had with Indigo and Atlas, even the rest of the guys in the Club, but it was a friendship nevertheless, even though he didn't want to admit it. He grumbled the entire time I cheered and cried at the same time that he invited them, but I knew that deep down, he liked Kieran.

The fact that Kieran stopped sniffing around me, trying to take me away from Storm, definitely helped.

"We should talk, K," Storm grumbled, shaking Kieran's hand, and my eyes widened at the small nickname he gave him.

“K?” I asked, looking between Storm and Kieran. “You call him K?”

“Shush, Sunshine,” he grunted. “His name is a mouthful.”

“You know what else is mouthful?” I grinned, looking up at him. His hand snuck behind my back, pinching my ass. My yelp reverberated around the small foyer, everyone’s eyes turning toward us.

“What was that for?” I pouted, rubbing the spot he pinched.

“You know what,” Storm answered, looking down at me, and I knew that look. I knew that fire and wanted it every single day. That look meant he wanted to put me over his knee and spank me for talking like this in front of everyone else. I always knew he was possessive, but I didn’t figure out just how much until I came back to the Club.

“Birdy,” Cillian called out from behind Kieran, pushing between Maya and his brother to reach me. “You look like a whale.”

Out of nowhere, Storm slapped him on the back of his head—the same thing he did to Atlas when he called me an elephant the other day. It didn’t really bother me because I knew I looked like a whale.

The first couple of months of the pregnancy, my stomach was barely there. But it was as if once I entered the fifth-month mark, the twins decided to make themselves known to the world, and I looked like I swallowed another person with how big my stomach was starting to be.

“What was that for?” Cillian exclaimed, while Atlas chuckled from behind.

“That was for calling my girl a whale,” Storm grunted, not a trace of humor on his face.

“I mean, I kinda do look like a whale.” I laughed, stepping closer to Cillian. My eyes landed on the dark circles around his eyes, the hollowed-out cheeks and the weight he lost in the time since I last saw him, and I wanted to cry for the man I loved.

He was the brother I never had. Theo was just someone I shared blood with, but he never treated me the same way as Cillian did. He never made me feel safe in his presence, but Cillian did. To see him looking like this, struggling... it wasn't right. I didn't want him to kill himself while trying to fight his demons.

"Kill," I mumbled, wrapping my arms around his middle, believing I could wash away the terrors living inside his head with that simple touch. His hands landed on my shoulders, slowly sinking toward my back, fisting my shirt as he hugged me back, pressing his cheek on top of my head.

Words weren't needed where he was concerned. He didn't need to tell me about the pain he felt. It was as palpable as thick, humid air, and I hated that there was nothing I could do to make it better. I was a fixer, someone who always tried to find a way to fix other people's problems even when I didn't know how to fix my own. The fact that I couldn't fix Cillian ate me alive.

But one thing I'd learned over the past year was that you couldn't help a person if they didn't want to get better. For such a long time, I loved living in my misery, surrounded by sorrow and pain, and I liked it. God, I liked it so much that I never wanted it to end.

Rationally, I knew it wasn't right. I knew it wasn't okay and that it could kill me one day, but I still continued, refusing help from the people who cared about me. Until I realized that I couldn't live like that anymore, that I couldn't keep pushing away those I loved because I thought I would hurt them by simply being a part of their lives.

"How are you?" I asked, still holding my arms tightly around his middle, wishing I could transfer all the love, all the happiness I was feeling into his body.

"I'm good," he lied. We were masters at deceiving people who loved us, but I didn't want to get into another fight with him, not tonight.

Taking a step backward, I looked up at him, frowning as his eyes flashed with dark emotions threatening to swallow

him whole. His hands twitched at his sides, a telltale sign that he was still using, still killing himself, and I couldn't do a thing to stop him.

“Okay,” I murmured, coming closer to Storm who placed his hands on top of my shoulders, giving me strength just by being here. A dark cloud of desperation fell down on us, and it was obvious to everyone around that Cillian was as far away from okay as possible, but no one said a thing.

I looked at Atlas, who kept frowning, looking at Cillian's back. My eyes connected with Maya, who slowly shook her head, because she could see it too. She could see his struggle, his need to disappear, and I wouldn't let him.

I couldn't let someone I considered family disappear in front of my eyes.

“Do I not get a hug?” Kieran asked, grinning at me from the side, breaking through the silence enveloping us. But as I looked at him, at those dark eyes and the handsome face, I recognized the worry there, the need to talk about it, to fix it. I sometimes thought that was what attracted me to Kieran in the first place.

Both of us were fixers, always feeling responsible for those around us. Even when we fucked up, we tried to fix shit. I wondered if he felt the turmoil coursing through Cillian, and I had a feeling he could.

“One hug,” Storm grumbled, squeezing my shoulders, his fingers softly digging into my flesh. “Don't make me chop off your fingers, Kieran.”

“I wouldn't dare.” Kieran laughed, closing the distance between us just as Storm took a step back, and engulfed me in a bear hug. “You look happy, Birdy,” he murmured.

“I am happy.” I smiled, patting his back. “Really, really happy.”

“I'm glad,” he mumbled.

“Are you?” I asked, as he released me from his hug. “Happy, I mean.”

His eyes lifted, seeking my sister who was still looking at Cillian, as if she could fix whatever was wrong with that one stare.

“No, not yet,” he murmured. “But I will be.”

“I’m counting on it,” I whispered, squeezing his bicep.

“Okay everyone!” Zoe barged in, followed by angry looking Felix. “Chef Storm needs to help me in the kitchen, and the rest of you,” her eyes traveled over all of us, “please go to the living room while we get the food ready. Booze is at the bar.” She looked at me. “Ophelia will show you. Don’t get too drunk without me.” She turned around and started walking back to the kitchen. “God knows I’ll need alcohol to survive tonight.”

Maya chuckled and stepped closer to me. “Is she always this dramatic?”

“Oh no.” I shook my head. “This is a mild version.”

“I think I like her,” she mumbled, looking at the spot that Zoe vacated. “I’m glad you had someone in your corner, a friend.”

“Oh, Maya,” I whispered, taking her hand in mine. “I had a lot of friends. I was just an idiot that couldn’t see it at first.”

“Well, you were always a stubborn little motherfucker.” She laughed. “Come on,” she said. “I really need alcohol tonight.”

“Trouble in paradise?” I grinned, leading her toward the living room, where Atlas already went with Cillian and Kieran.

“Don’t even start, Phee. Trust me, I’m better with knives now than I was before.”

My resonating laughter followed us all the way to the living room, where the guys already took their seats on the couch, still uncomfortable with each other. Felix kept eyeing Kieran and Cillian as if they would suddenly jump and start shooting at the rest of us, while Atlas scrolled through his phone, completely ignoring the others.

The front door opened behind us and the sound of paws hitting the marble floor had me turning around, just as Kaiser barreled toward me, his tongue lolling out, and what I liked to think was a smile, wide on his face. He slowed down as he came closer to me. I'd noticed that ever since I became pregnant, he was less rough with me, even when we were playing, as if he truly knew what was happening.

"Is that your dog?" Maya asked just as I crouched down, sitting on my knees, scratching behind his ears as he closed his eyes, oblivious to all the other people around him.

"He is." I smiled. "This is Kaiser, Maya," I said as I looked at her. "Come," I beckoned. "He's friendly."

"Yeah, he only tried to chew me when he first met me," Indigo smarted, looking at Maya with confusion on his face. "I'm Indigo." He extended his hand. "And you are?"

"Maya." She smirked, taking his hand. "Maya Aster."

"Oh fuck." Indigo paled, looking at me. "There are two of you? Fuck," he murmured. I couldn't contain my laughter anymore, and his fear-stricken face made it impossible to stay serious. "Stop laughing at me," he protested. "It was enough having to deal with you and your murderous tendencies." He looked at Maya then. "Now there are two of you."

"I promise you, Indigo," Maya said, laughing along with me. "No one will die tonight."

"Tonight!" he all but squealed. Kaiser walked to him, pushing at his knees with his head. "Atlas!" Indigo bellowed. "Did you know there were two of them?"

"I sure did," Atlas replied, still looking down at his phone. "The more the merrier."

"Of course you would say that." Indigo rolled his eyes, scratching Kaiser's head. "Are there any more of you I should know of?"

"No." I shook my head and stood up from the floor. "I killed the third one, and the fourth one." I smiled. "You're stuck with only the two of us."

“Fourth one?” Maya asked, looking at me. “Who was the fourth one?”

I wrapped my arm around her shoulders and led her toward the still empty couch, opposite of where Kieran and Cillian sat, watching us like hawks. “I’ll tell you all about it, but I need to sit. My back is killing me.”

As we sat down, as my eyes traveled over my people, even over Indigo who sat close to Atlas who kept ignoring him, I released a content sigh, knowing everyone was safe and at the same place for the first time in my life.

All was going to be well.

It had to.





## STORM

I COULDN'T KEEP MY EYES OFF OF HER. OPHELIA KEPT SMILING throughout dinner, talking with Maya, joking with Kieran, even with Indigo, and for the first time in forever, I felt myself relaxing, truly enjoying the evening.

The food was long gone, with everyone lounging around with their bellies full and content smiles on their faces. Kieran kept looking at Maya whenever she wasn't watching, and I would've laughed at the expression on his face if I didn't wear the same one every time I looked at Ophelia.

We all moved from the dining room to the living room as soon as the dinner finished, and it didn't take us long to enter into a familiar conversation of the Alliance that Casimir mentioned. Ophelia's head was on my shoulder as she talked pros and cons with Kieran. I loved seeing her in her element.

She changed, that much was obvious, but deep down she was still a fierce warrior, an assassin who knew more of this world than most of the people we encountered.

"Can we trust him?" Kieran asked what all of us thought, his eyes moving from Ophelia to Cillian, who kept quiet throughout the night, silently observing all of us. I hated seeing him like that. Not because I had some long-lost respect for the Nightingale brothers, but because Ophelia loved him. I had to admit—the two of them weren't all that bad when you removed all the shit their father made them do.

Felix and Zoe spoke in hushed voices, with her constantly shaking her head and glaring at him. It was obvious that she

wasn't buying whatever he was trying to sell. My hand splayed over Ophelia's belly, that feeling of happiness expanding in my chest with each passing moment. I never thought I would be able to sit like this, in the same room with the two men I considered enemies not so long ago, with the woman I loved and our kids safely tucked inside her belly.

"I don't know," Cillian replied as Kieran kept glaring at him. "Casimir has connections we don't, that's for sure."

"Yeah, but can we trust him?" Atlas asked. "I didn't really like him when he first came. I don't want us to get entangled with someone who's lying to us."

"I don't think that any of us would want that," Ophelia added. "But he does have a point. If the cartel and Albanians get together, with some of the smaller gangs around the country, they'll be unstoppable. We have a lot of people working for us, and I know that Lazar would support all of us, but we are stronger united."

"Birdy, there's too much bad blood between all our families. Hell, we're Nightingales, and even with our father behind bars, there are still people who will come for us to exact revenge for what he did to them. Frankly, I don't want to bring that to your doorstep."

"I know you don't," Ophelia murmured. "But I also don't want anything to happen to you guys. If getting into this Alliance with Casimir is a good thing, and if we all agree to certain terms and conditions, I think it could work. The Outfit still holds the majority of East Coast, Kieran, and we hold the West Coast. With the Romano family in the north, we could be unstoppable and they wouldn't be able to break us if we work together."

"If we rally together, we could eradicate them completely," I added, looking at Kieran. "Albanians are holding the South Central part of the country, and they're already on the border with Mexico, which gives them and the cartel an advantage. They're at the very entrance to the country, and they control the route that's leading into South America."

“So you’re saying that we should create an alliance with Casimir?” Maya asked, sitting next to Cillian. Kieran’s head swiveled her way, but she paid him no attention, her eyes firmly fixed on me.

“Yes.” I nodded. “That’s exactly what I’m saying. Look guys,” I started, my eyes traveling over Kieran, Cillian, and Maya, then Felix and Zoe and finally Indigo and Atlas. “There’s no doubt that we’re strong individually. We have resources and manpower. We hold certain territories, but would we be able to hold on if they decide to attack us?”

Silence ensued as I asked the most obvious question. I knew we were all very well aware of the dangers lurking behind the closed doors. Hell, this entire situation with Belladonna had taught us that enemies tend to lie hidden from us until they decide to attack.

“The Cartel is ruthless,” Maya started, looking at the floor. “They take no prisoners. They don’t care if you’re a woman or a child. Their leader, the man they call El Chupacabra, is a dangerous motherfucker. Trust me, I’ve seen him in person. I’ve spoken to him. I know how he works, and he won’t stop until he takes a hold of the entire US.”

Kieran frowned at her words, his hands twitching in his lap, but he didn’t move. There was so much pain, so much anger with which Maya spoke and I couldn’t even imagine the monstrosities she survived throughout the years before Kieran found her.

“I think we should definitely consider creating that Alliance,” she murmured, looking up at Ophelia and me. “But we need to set the rules. Rules that Casimir won’t be able to break.”

“I think he cares about Skylar too much to break those rules,” Atlas added. “She’s his sister, his real sister. He might not be the best person to keep around because of his shady cult, but he won’t stop until she’s safe. Trust me, I almost feel bad for Judah Blackwood, because Casimir will rip that man apart.”

“He will need to get in line,” Cillian grunted. “Look, guys, is this the best solution? Probably not. We’ve all always worked on our own, independently, hell, even fighting between each other. But is it a smart decision to make? Most probably yes.”

“Phee,” I murmured, looking at her. “What do you think?”

She kept her eyes on the group in front of us before slowly looking up at me, placing her hand over mine right on top of her belly.

“I think we need to arrange a meeting between all of us and Casimir. We need to talk it through.”

“I can call Nico,” I offered. “They’ll need to be here as well.”

“Maybe after the New Year?” Ophelia added. “Alessia is supposed to give birth any day now, and I don’t think that Nico would want to be away from Ventus City right now.”

“Then in January,” I murmured, pressing my lips to her hair. “We’ll meet in January to discuss it all.”

“We’re okay with that,” Kieran said.

“I’ll contact Lazar,” Ophelia murmured, pulling herself upright. “But now, I really need to pee.” She chuckled, slowly getting up from the couch and almost wobbling through the room, all the way to the hallway.

I could feel eyes on me as I stared at the hallway, almost counting the minutes until she came back.

“Man, you’re pussy whipped.” Atlas chuckled.

“I am.” I grinned. “And I don’t mind. Not even a little bit.”

I thought I would mind. I thought I would be one of those men who didn’t want to show his feelings to the rest of the world, but having Ophelia, even with all our fucked-up problems, made me appreciate what we shared so much more. After everything we’d been through and everything we did to each other, I knew I wouldn’t waste a day without showing her how much she meant to me, how much I loved her.

Life was too short to spend it hiding our emotions. If I could, I would shout from the top of the mountain how much I loved her, how much she changed my life.

Even during those moments where hatred seemed to be the only emotion between us, I knew she was it. She was my beginning, my ending, my sun, moon, and stars, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

The situation with Belladonna made me want to keep her next to me twenty-four hours, seven days a week, but I knew that she would probably stab me if I even attempted something like that. I was learning what the balance was, letting the one you loved have a life separate from you, but that didn't mean that she didn't need you.

It just meant that your love was strong enough to withstand anything, and that chains were just the tools to end a good thing and not to start it.

“Did you tell her?” Zoe whispered, looking toward the hallway where Ophelia disappeared.

“No.” I shook my head, smiling, trying not to let the nerves wreak havoc on my body. “Tonight. I'll take her there tonight.”

“Is everything ready?” she asked. “I left the things—”

“God, that feels so much better,” Ophelia all but moaned, the sound shooting straight to my groin. For the hundredth time tonight, I wished we were alone, in our room. I wanted to worship her, to show her every day what I felt, rather than telling her.

That would start tonight.

“Sunshine,” I murmured, standing up from the couch and walking toward her. “Say your goodbyes to your friends,” I whispered into her ear.

“W-what?” she exclaimed, looking at me. “What are you talking about? We were just talking and the conversation isn't over.” Yeah, we were all talking, but I couldn't wait anymore.

I wanted to see the look on her face when she saw my Christmas gift for her. I wanted to feel the same as this morning, when we lay in our room, happy and content, far away from everyone else.

“I know, but this can’t wait.”

“Storm,” she grunted. “You know I hate surprises.”

“You’re gonna like this one.” I grinned. “Come on.” I took her hand and pressed my lips to her cheek. “I’ll wait for you outside until you say your goodbyes. And, Sunshine.” I lowered my voice only for her to hear. “Don’t keep me waiting.”

I didn’t wait for her response. With one simple nod at the group staying behind, I exited the room, taking the keys to my car from the bowl we kept in the tiny foyer of the house, and stepped outside into the cold night.

Goosebumps traveled over my body as I ran toward the black Range Rover sitting right in front. I knew I should’ve taken a jacket with me, but it wasn’t as if we were going to be outside. As soon as I stepped inside the car, I turned up the heat, shivering as the temperature in the car slowly rose. Not long after, I could see the front door opening and Ophelia stepping outside with a frown on her face, her eyes narrowed at the car.

She walked down the path and straight toward the car, opening the door and sliding in without the word.

“Are you pouting?” I asked, chuckling as she cut me with her brilliant blue eyes, keeping her mouth closed. “I promise you, Sunshine.” I took her hand. “You’re going to like this.”

Or at least I hoped she would. I’d been working on this for almost a month, getting everything ready, and I just hoped she would love it as much as I already did.

Holding her hand between the seats, I maneuvered the car away from the driveway and into the night, driving down the familiar road, not too far from the Club, while my heart raced in my chest with each passing second.

The Will Rogers State Historical Ranch wasn't too far away from the place I was going to, and I planned to take her there as well one day, after the twins were born. I had a feeling she would love the horses and the landscape. Kaiser loved to be in nature, and where we were going, he would have so much space to run around and play with Ophelia and the kids.

This was the first step to life together. Even with all the nerves and fear that she wouldn't like it, I had a feeling that it was just what the two of us needed. A place to call our own, our home.

The place was ten minutes away from the Clubhouse, and as I started turning toward the narrow road leading up to the ranch, she stiffened, looking between me and the road ahead of us.

"What is this?" she asked. "Storm?"

"You'll see."

"I really, really don't like you very much right now."

"Keep on lying to yourself, Sunshine." I smiled. "We both know you wouldn't be able to live without me."

Just as I wouldn't be able to live without her.



THE COLD NIGHT AIR WRAPPED ITS HANDS AROUND US AS I exited the car and both of us came to a stop in front of the ranch house.

"What is this, Storm?" Ophelia asked, her voice wobbling as she kept looking between me and the white building in front of us. "Storm?"

"It's home," I murmured, looking at her. "Or at least I hope it will be a home. For us, for our kids."

"Storm," she whispered. "You got this for us?"

"I did." I beamed. "The Club will always be there, and so will our room, but it isn't a place where I want our kids to be

born, to grow up. It isn't a place where I want to stay forever. Before you, before all of this, I never really thought about getting a place of my own, because I was happy there. Or, well, I was okay there, but not really happy. I always knew there was something missing, something crucial, and that something was you, Sunshine."

"Oh you fucker." She sniffed. "You're going to make me cry."

I laughed as she tried to keep the tears at bay, but I wouldn't lie—I liked seeing the emotions so freely flowing off her.

When I first met her, she was a closed book, careful not to show any of her emotions to anyone, least of all me. And now... now we were able to communicate, to tell each other things, to show our emotions without the fear that the other person would use them against the other.

"Phee," I murmured, pulling her closer to me. "I want you to be happy, to have a place you can call your own."

"Ours," she cried quietly. "Our place, Storm. I don't want it if it doesn't come with you."

"Oh, trust me. Where you go, I'll follow, darling. There's nowhere I would rather be than right here, with you in my arms."

"Stop making me cry," she wailed, burrowing her head in my chest. "I don't like it, all these emotions."

"But they're good, Sunshine." I smiled, feeling myself tear up as well. "It means you're allowing yourself to feel, and that's more important than hiding yourself from the rest of the world."

"I know," she whimpered. "But I still hate it."

"I get it, I really do, but do you mind if we maybe go inside the house so that I can show you around? My balls are about to fall off from this cold."

The laughter that erupted from her was music to my ears. As she stepped back, taking a hold of my hand as I led her



inside the house, everything felt right. Everything was as it was always supposed to be.

I pulled out a key from my back pocket and unlocked the door, letting her enter first with me following shortly after. I turned on the master light, illuminating the entire place. She slowly walked to the center of the living room, which was the first room as soon as we entered the place, looking around, taking it all in.

“This is so spacious,” she whispered. “And it’s so bright.”

The white couches were arranged neatly in the center of the room, facing the opposite wall where the seventy-inch television was placed. There were still no items that could show this house really belonged to us, but I planned to fill it with love, photographs—all the little things that made our family.

I came behind her, wrapping my arms around her belly, placing my chin on top of her shoulder. “Do you like it?”

“Yes,” she breathed out. “This is... I have no words.”

“On the right,” I pointed toward the right side, where the entrance to the other three bedrooms were, “are the other bedrooms.”

“Bedrooms?” she asked. “How many kids are you planning to have, mister?”

“A small basketball team?” I grinned, earning a soft swat of her hand over mine.

“If you’re going to carry them, then we can definitely do it.”

“Come.” I laughed, taking her to the left, where the dining room was located. A long mahogany table with ten chairs surrounding it stood in the middle of the room. Soft brown and beige tones decorated the room, and I could feel her excitement as we walked through it.

“This is a big table.”

“We have a lot of friends, don’t we?” I said. “But this is the best part,” I murmured, taking her away from the dining

room and into the kitchen.

“The kitchen is the best part?” She huffed. “Seriously?”

“No, silly. This is.” I pushed open the door leading to the covered back porch, overlooking the forest and the pool centered right behind the house.

“Holy moly,” she murmured, taking it in.

“It looks amazing during the day. All this greenery, the pool, and that small jacuzzi over there.” I pointed toward the elevated structure, right next to the pool.

“This is amazing.” She oohed and aahed over it all, walking away from me toward the currently empty pool. “This is...” she trailed off, turning toward me. Her eyes were full of tears, the happiness shining through them. “This is everything, Storm.”

Walking toward her, I had a hard time keeping my own emotions at bay. Having her here, standing in the backyard of our house—*our home*—illuminated by the fairy lights hanging above us, she looked like an angel looking at me as if I hung the moon.

The tips of our shoes touched the moment I came to her, while her belly pressed into my stomach, while her eyes shone with the unshed tears, mirroring my own.

“I love you, Sunshine. I would do anything to make you happy.”

“You already do, you sappy fucker.” She smiled. “I didn’t need all this.”

“But I did,” I murmured, tucking her hair around her ear. “Don’t ever color your hair again.”

“Are you trying to tell me what to do, Stormy?” she asked, smiling up at me as her hands dragged over my torso, all the way to the back of my neck. “You know what happens when you try to tell me what to do.”

“I do.” I grinned. “But I think you’re going to like doing what I tell you to do when I show you the next part of the house.”

I didn't ask, didn't wait for her to protest as I lifted her up in my arms, taking her back inside the house, and all the way to the master bedroom that would be our bedroom.

A California king-sized bed was placed in the middle, right between the two nightstands, and on top of it what I was more nervous about than this house itself.

“What is that?” Ophelia asked as her eyes zeroed in on the leather jacket splayed over the bed. “Did you leave your jacket here?”

“Not really,” I answered, lowering her down and walking toward the bed, my hand dragging over the embroidered letters on the back of the jacket.

“Stormy, then what—” A gasp escaped her as she came closer to me and saw the letters on the back of the jacket. “Is that... is that what I think it is?”

“In motorcycle clubs, weddings, engagements and all that bullshit mean nothing. I mean, a piece of paper is just that—a piece of paper, but this...” I lifted the jacket and turned toward her. “This means forever, Sunshine. This means more than you know.”

“Storm.” She smiled shakily.

“I'm not really good with words, Sunshine. I mean, some come easily, others not so much, but I know that I love you. And I know that I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I also know that there will be times in our future where you'll want to stab me, and there will definitely be times where I'll want to lock you up and prevent you from doing something crazy.” She started laughing, her eyes never wavering from mine. “But I know I'm yours, as much as you are mine. I know there will never be another for me. I don't need to spend months or years proving it or waiting for something to happen, because I know. Right here.” I pressed a hand to my heart. “I know you're my forever.”

I stepped closer to her, taking her hand in my free one, while holding the jacket in my other hand. “Ophelia Ekaterina Aster, my favorite pain in the ass.” She laughed again. “My

beginning and my ending, would you like to be my Old Lady?”

I trembled from head to toe, waiting for her to answer. This meant more than engagement rings, a wedding and wedding bands. In our culture, being someone’s Old Lady surpassed the silly papers signed in front of witnesses. It surpassed the “I dos” and white wedding dresses.

This meant forever, and she was the only person I would want to grow old with.

“Yes.” She smiled brightly, crying, her face getting redder with every second. “There’s nothing I would want more.”

I couldn’t wait another second.

Throwing the jacket on the bed, I pushed my fingers through her hair, claiming her lips with mine, taking, owning, giving, showing her how much I loved her.

Our teeth clashed, our tongues fought for dominance, playing my favorite game, and before long, her hands grabbed the hem of my T-shirt, pulling it up, dragging it over my torso. I stepped back, pushing it over my head and dropping it on the floor. My pants followed shortly after, along with the sweater she wore, and the yoga pants I wanted to tear off of her body.

She stood in front of me only in a bra and black, lace panties, her round stomach the first place my hands landed on.

“You’re mine, Sunshine,” I growled. “Forever, mine.”

“Yours,” she purred, dragging her tiny nails over my abs, all the way to my underwear. She bit down on her lower lip, looking between us, at my aching cock. Her hand disappeared under the cotton material, fisting my cock at the base, earning a grunt from me. “I was always yours, Storm,” she moaned as I pushed the cups of her bra down, letting her boobs spill over the material.

I loved her body before, every single thing about her, but since she became pregnant... God, watching her body change, adjusting to our kids, it was the best aphrodisiac. I dove, taking one puckered nipple into my mouth, drawing out the

moans from her, while she writhed in my arms, dragging her hands over my dick.

She pushed my underwear down as I unclasped her bra, letting it fall on the floor as I took a step away from her, pushing my boxers all the way to the floor.

The fire in her eyes fed my own, licking over my skin, drinking me in from head to toe, ending at my dick. In a haze of lust, I lifted her in my arms and deposited her on the bed, right next to her jacket. She moved backward until her back hit the headboard, those skimpy little panties still blocking my view.

“These will have to go,” I grunted, dragging my hands over her legs. Peppering kisses over her calves, to her knees while she writhed, moaning and urging me to go on, I dragged the hem of her panties down, exposing her to me. “There’s my girl,” I murmured, reaching her center with my mouth, blowing slowly over her clit.

“Stooooorm,” she moaned, dripping for me. Her thighs were soaked in her juices, already ready for me and what I had planned.

With two hands, I tore off the panties from her body, while she laughed at me and my impatience, but as I looked up at her, I could see the darkness of her dilated irises, the need flashing brightly at me.

I dove, hungry for her taste, for the cries that erupted from her every time I ate her pussy, and licked through her folds slowly, torturously slow, and she didn’t mind telling me as much.

“Storm! Stop fucking around.” But I was just getting started.

I pulled away from the bed. “What are you doing?”

“Shhh,” I murmured, walking toward the nightstand on her right, and opening the first drawer. I’d been planning this for so long, waiting for the day when she would be here, spread for me, waiting for what’s about to come.

I wanted us to play, to christen every single spot in this house. As I pulled out a small vibrator from the drawer, her eyes widened, moving from the object in my hand to my face.

“What are you going to do with that?” she panted.

“You’ll see.” I grinned wolfishly and climbed on top of the bed. “On your knees and arms, Sunshine.”

“Fuck,” she groaned, obeying the command. She turned around, slowly lifting herself on all fours, looking at me over her shoulder.

“You have no idea how beautiful you look like this,” I praised, dragging my hand over her ass cheek. “Ready for me, eager—”

“Storm,” she moaned. Without waiting for another second, I lifted my hand, bringing it down on her ass cheek, my palm connecting with her soft flesh. “Fuck!” She groaned, wiggling in front of me.

I spanked her again, and again, and again, until she couldn’t contain her moans, begging me to take her over the edge.

“Spread your legs, baby,” I instructed, taking one of the pillows from the bed and placing it under her belly. “That’s it,” I purred as she spread her knees further, opening herself to me. “Such a good girl.”

“Oh, God,” she whimpered.

Pressing the small button on the vibrator, the device started buzzing, filling in the space between her moans and whimpers. As I pressed it through her folds, she almost jumped off of the bed. My hand pressed to her hip, keeping her in place as I dragged the vibrator from her clit to her opening and all the way back, to her ass.

“I want you to enjoy this, to remember this as a new beginning,” I murmured, removing the vibrator and pushing two fingers through her tight heat, feeling her clench around me.

“Oh my fucking God!”

“God isn’t here tonight, baby girl.” I smirked. “But I am.”

“Please.” She wiggled, pulling my fingers in. “I need... God,” she whimpered, pressing her cheek down on the bed. “Please.”

“Be patient,” I murmured, dragging the juices from her pussy to her ass, preparing her as I pressed my forefinger to her opening, and back, repeating the same over and over again.

“Storm, I can’t,” she moaned, panting. “I need to... I need to come, dammit!”

Her entire body trembled, coiled from the need to erupt around me, but not yet. Not fucking yet.

I lifted the vibrator and leaned over her, spreading her ass cheeks as I spat on her puckered hole, lubing her up with her own juices. Without warning, I pressed one finger inside of her, as she bucked around me, her eyes rolling into the back of her head. I plunged in and out, pushing the juices inside of her ass, preparing her for the vibrator.

“My God,” she groaned. “I can’t take it anymore.”

“Yeah, you can.” I grinned, feeling the sweat running down my back.

“Now be a good girl, Sunshine, and relax for me,” I purred, kissing her lower back, and slowly pushing the vibrator inside her, then pulling it out and then back in, while she moaned, bucked, and writhed under me. “Such a good girl, baby,” I hummed. “Taking it so well.”

“Storm!” she bellowed. “I need you. I need...”

“What do you need, Sunshine?”

“I need your fucking cock, you ass.”

I laughed at her outburst, but within a second, I lined up at her opening, coating my cock in her juices, dragging the head through her folds, and pressing against her clit.

“Fuck!” she moaned. “Stop playing around... Please.”

And what my girl wanted, she always got.

I held my cock at the base, lining it with her opening, while keeping the vibrator inside her ass. I pushed through, groaning as her tight, slick heat enveloped me, holding me in a vice grip.

“Fuck, baby,” I groaned, feeling the vibrations through her pussy. “This is fucking heaven.”

“Fuck me, Storm,” she mewled, pushing back at me. “Please, please, please...”

I pulled back and slammed inside her with relentless fury, holding her hips in my hands as she pushed back, meeting me thrust for thrust, needing more and more and more. Finding my pace, I slammed inside like a man possessed, wanting to hear her come undone, needing to see her get lost in lust. As I worked the vibrator in and out of her ass, my cock working through her heat, I felt the familiar flutter of her walls closing around me.

“Are you going to come for me, baby?” I asked, dragging my hand over her back.

She looked at me over her shoulder, having a hard time keeping her eyes open. Her mouth formed an O, her cheeks flushed, a soft red spreading over her neck, and I was sure over her chest, while she clawed at the sheets under her, lost to the here and now.

“Y-yeessss,” she droned, shaking under my arms.

I bent down, wrapping my hand around her hair, lifting her up, pushing her chest up, while my hips slammed against her ass, and that familiar sensation dragged over my back, racing toward my balls.

“Are you going to be a good girl and come for me, baby?” I asked, pulling her higher until her back became flushed with mine, and the vibrator got trapped between her ass cheeks. I wrapped my other hand around her throat, softly applying pressure as her pussy milked my cock, seeking a release. “Play with your pussy, Sunshine. Come on,” I urged her. Before long, her hand slid over her chest, over her stomach and between her legs.



“Oh, oh,” she moaned. “I’m going to... I’m... Fuck, fuck, fuck! Storm!” she yelled out just as her pussy shattered around my cock, her body shaking in my hands. She turned her face toward me, and I watched her eyes flutter closed. “Oh God,” she purred, coming down from her high, but I wasn’t done with her.

I moved backward, hissing as my cock slipped from her pussy, and lowered her down on the bed, removing the vibrator from her ass. I turned off the device and threw it on the bed, before turning her around and wrapping her legs around my waist, lowering my lips down on hers.

A dreamy smile graced her face, and I smiled back, unable to contain the emotions shining from me and seeping into her.

My cock slid through her heat, and inside her pussy once again, sheathed in her slick heat.

“Hi,” I murmured, peppering kisses over her cheeks and her nose, then pressing my lips to hers. I slowly pushed in and out, my balls tightening up, needing the release, but I didn’t want to rush it.

“Hi.” She smiled back, her mouth opening as I pushed through her heat, still overly sensitive from her orgasm. “Oh, Storm,” she moaned, wrapping her arms around my shoulders. “Yes,” a hiss escaped through her lips. “More, please.”

I swiveled my hips, pushing in and out, keeping the same pace.

“Faster,” she pleaded. “Go faster.”

I grinned down at her, increasing the pace, chasing the delirium only she could bring.

“Squeeze my cock, baby,” I urged her, feeling her doing it as soon as the words tumbled over my lips, drawing out a groan from deep inside my chest, as my instincts took over, pushing away rational thought.

“You.” Thrust. “Belong.” Thrust. “To.” Thrust. “Me,” I growled, slamming into her like a man possessed, my abs dragging over her protruding stomach. A sense of belonging

washed over me just as my orgasm snuck upon me, pushing me over the edge.

“Oh fuck!” I growled. “Give me one more, baby,” I grunted. “Come on.”

“Storm!” she bellowed just as she squeezed my cock, emptying me, elevating both of us into the universe. Black dots danced on the periphery of my vision, my breath rushing in and out of me as I held myself over her, emptying myself inside her slick heat.

Both of us trembled, holding on to each other. Her hair stuck to her face, and as I pushed it back, looking down at her, I thanked the universe for bringing her back to me.

“I love you, Sunshine.” I hummed, taking her lips in mine. “Forever.”

“Forever, Stormy.” She smiled.

I pulled out of her, hissing at the loss of contact just as she moaned, and lay down on the bed, pulling her back to my front.

“Sleep,” I murmured. “We can see the rest of the house in the morning.” I grinned.

“I’m too tired to do anything else right now,” she answered, yawning as her ass pressed against my half-hard cock, teasing me with her body.

“Phee,” I warned. “Stop it.”

“I’m not doing anything.” She laughed, wiggling again. I pinched her butt, earning a yelp from her again.

“Go to sleep, baby. This is going to be a long night.”

And it was, the longest night of all. I woke up in the middle of it with her between my legs, sucking me dry, looking at me with eyes filled with lust and need, and I couldn’t deny her.

I never could, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.



## BELLADONNA

FOOLS.

Stupid, fucking fools.

They thought they could outsmart me. They thought they could live their perfect little lives, leaving me behind? Celebrating Christmas together, having the best time, completely ignoring the fact that I was still out here, waiting, watching, learning their moves.

They were getting too relaxed, too happy, too in love. And Ophelia and Storm... I thought I'd be able to separate them, to isolate her from everyone she loved, but it only backfired. But no more. We weren't doing that anymore.

I would let them enjoy it for a little while, let them live in their bubble. Those kids she carried, my kids, they still needed time to grow, to get stronger, and then they would be coming to their real mother. To me.

They were my children, she just didn't know it. She didn't know anything. No, no, no, she had no idea.

"Madam." The man I hired to decorate this house came out of the nursery, his eyes plastered on the floor as he stepped in front of me. "Would you like to see the room?"

"Oh," I exclaimed, smiling at him. "Is it ready?"

"Yes, madam." He nodded. "I hope you'll like it."

I pushed past him and into the room for my children. The blue and pink painted on opposite sides of the room, with the

white, fluffy clouds on top of the ceiling, had my heart softening a little bit. They would love this, my little babies.

They would have everything they ever wanted, and this nursery was just a start.

Their cribs were arriving tomorrow and I couldn't wait to see them living here, sleeping here. My hands pressed to my sternum, my heart beating steadily, ready for what they once stole from me.

Ophelia Aster took away my entire family from me, stole everyone I ever loved, including my children. But I guess, with this, she would redeem herself. She would give me back my children and as a thank you, I would take away everything she ever loved.

Who knew, maybe even Storm would come crawling to me once she was gone. She was poisoning him, poisoning them all, turning them into idiots, because she knew she could control them that way. None of them knew what a vicious predator she was.

None of them knew how dark her soul really was, but I did. I always knew. I did, I did, I did.

And once I cut through her heart with my knife, I'd show them all the black tar coursing through her veins.



# OPHELIA

March

Three months later

I FELT LIKE A FUCKING PENGUIN, WOBBLING AROUND, carrying myself and my big-ass belly. Whoever said that the pregnancy was the best experience ever, had obviously never been pregnant with twins.

Because this sucked.

I loved my kids. Loved them with my whole fucking heart, but the fact that I had to pee every fifteen minutes, my swollen ankles, mood swings—let's not talk about mood swings—made me want to march into the doctor's office, demanding to induce a premature labor. Did that make me a bad mother? Maybe, possibly, but as I waggled from this shopping mall with a laughing Zoe at my back after I had to pee—again—I was just done.

The sun shone brightly today, a beautiful March day, yet my mood was sourer than Haribo Sour Goldbears, and I was just done.

“Stop laughing, Zoe,” I growled, looking at both sides of the street before passing toward the parking lot where she parked. I couldn't even drive anymore, because reaching the steering wheel was proving to be extremely difficult for me right now. Hell, I couldn't even see my vagina anymore. I

never thought I'd be feeling sad over that fact, yet here I was, about to cry because I couldn't see parts of my body.

"I-it's just," she choked, cackling as we crossed the street. "The look on your face when they offered you the weight loss pills..." she lost it. Her body bent like a pretzel, laughing at me and the fiasco that just happened in the mall.

We came here to buy some baby clothes, because as much as I loved doing things at the very last minute, I couldn't wait until the twins were born and for them to have some actual clothes. Storm's solution was to order them online, but I needed to get out of the house to see other people. I loved the man, but once I entered into the last trimester, it was as if the switch was flipped on in his head and he held me as close as possible to him at all times.

I knew it wasn't only the pregnancy.

The fact that we still hadn't managed to catch Belladonna, the fact that we had no idea who she was or what she'd been doing, was worrying all of us, not only him. But he didn't want to take any chances, so wherever I went, he had at least two guys following me.

But not today. Oh no.

I had to get away from all of them, and Zoe offered to accompany me on my obviously failed shopping spree. The only thing I managed to buy were some baby onesies and that was it. Just looking at all those clothes made me want to cry.

And then that fucker offered me weight loss pills as if I wasn't eight months pregnant. Who the fuck employed those people, honestly?

"Slow down, Phee," Zoe called out, trying to catch up with me.

"If I go any slower, I'll be crawling, Zoe," I bit back, too pissed off to look at her. When the guy offered me the pills, she burst into laughter. I had never wanted to slap her so much. I loved her, okay, but... Not today.

I woke up cranky, hungry, with the twins sitting right on top of my bladder, playing soccer or something, because there



was no way that they were just chilling there with the way they were kicking me. To say that I was uncomfortable would be an understatement of the year, and Storm wasn't helping. The man couldn't keep his hands off me, while I felt like a bubble filled with water, ready to burst.

"If you continue running like that, you're going to give birth today and not in two weeks!" she yelled out just as I came to the area where she parked her car.

"Good!" I blasted, turning to look at her. "Then maybe I'll be able to sleep through the night without having to get up every hour to pee. Or hell, maybe I'll be able to have sex with Storm without crying in the end, because everything was so beautiful, and emotional, and... I don't know, okay!"

"Phee." She chuckled. "I hate to break it to you, but once the twins are born, you won't be sleeping at all."

"I know," I groaned. "I know all of that, but I'm trying not to think about diapers, vomit, sleepless nights, the two of them crying and whatnot. I just want to feel like my old self." I pouted.

I took all those things for granted, and while I was thankful and excited for these kids, I just wanted to feel like my old self. I wanted to be able to climb up the stairs without having to rest in the middle of the stairs.

I wanted to be able to run, and drive a bike, and get into a ring to fight with someone, and if that made me selfish, so be it. I was aware that my life would change once the kids were here, and while I loved being pregnant for the majority of it, these last two months were insufferable. No one ever told you that your back would hurt this much, or that no matter how fit you were, you wouldn't be able to walk for a long period of time because you would get tired. And we were not going to talk about Braxton Hicks.

Two weeks ago, we rushed to the ER because I thought I was in labor. The expression on Storm's face was priceless as he rushed around the house, collecting the things he thought I might need in the hospital. But I had to admit—it was kinda cute as well.

“Phee,” Zoe murmured, placing a hand on my shoulder. “You’re going to be back to your old self in no time, trust me. I know it’s frustrating. Well, I don’t know, but you get what I’m saying. These two are going to be here in no time, and you guys are going to have a great time. You’ll see.”

“I know,” I answered with a sigh. “I just... It’s hard sometimes. I worry about them and the fact that they’re being brought into this fucked-up world. I worry I’m going to do a terrible job or that I’m going to fuck them up somehow.”

“Babe.” She smiled. “You’re already doing a better job than a lot of the parents out there. You love them, you want the best for them, and that’s what matters.”

“I know, I just—”

The sound of screeching tires stopped me mid-sentence. I looked to my left and noticed a large black van barreling toward us, with the speed that was nowhere near acceptable for the parking lot.

“Watch out!” Zoe yelled, pulling me back into her as the van stopped right in front of us. “What the—”

Four masked men jumped from the side of the van as the doors opened, balaclavas over their heads, and headed straight toward us.

“Run, Ophelia!” Zoe bellowed, pushing me to the side, and stepping right in front of the men. But she wasn’t a match for them, and I couldn’t leave her.

“No, Zoe.”

“Run!” she thundered, her eyes filling with worry and fear. “Call Storm. Call him!”

I started retreating, turning to run, as a guy I hadn’t seen with the other four, stepped in front of me, his eyes filled with menace and anger. Violence oozed from his body, rendering me speechless, and I knew we were fucked.

“No.” I shook my head as he walked toward me, tilting his head to the side, as the sounds of Zoe fighting with the other four echoed through my ears. “Please, don’t.”

I wasn't above begging. I wasn't a fool. I knew this was coming, one way or another, but I hoped the kids would be safe, that they wouldn't be attached to me anymore.

"Ophelia!" Zoe cried out, followed by a loud thump. I turned around, seeing her lifeless body on the ground.

"No, no, no," I cried, tears streaming down my face. "Zoe." I rushed toward her, but I didn't get far as a strong pair of hands wrapped around my arms, holding me still.

I thrashed and tried hitting him with the back of my head, but there was no use. He was stronger than me, more agile at the moment.

*I'm so sorry, Storm,* I told myself, hoping he would be okay. I knew this was the end. The end of me, of us, of our kids. She, fucking Belladonna, had fucking won.

"We finally have you." The man in front of me chuckled darkly, approaching me with a syringe in his hand. My eyes lowered down, looking at the object, while the fear coursed through my bloodstream, rendering me speechless.

But I wasn't going down without a fight. I wasn't about to let them take me and my kids without at least trying.

The man came closer, his brown eyes filled with venom. Just as he came within reach of me, I kicked out with my right leg, hitting his crotch, earning a pain-filled grunt from him.

He crouched down, holding his fucking balls with one hand while the other one still clung to that syringe.

*Think, Ophelia. Think. What can you do right now? What can you do?*

But I didn't have time to think, because the man who was standing behind the van stepped forward, taking the syringe from the motherfucker who had approached me first, and without preamble, came to the side of me, laughing darkly at my face.

"This is going to hurt, bitch," he said gleefully, pushing my head to the side, exposing my neck. Within seconds, he

stabbed me with the needle, pushing into me whatever the fuck it was.

“No,” I moaned, trying to get free. “Please. My kids.”

“They’re not yours.” The one holding me chuckled. “Not anymore.”

I opened my mouth to deny it, to say something, to scream, to yell, to call out for help, but my tongue was weighed down, my teeth tingling and my eyelids heavy.

“W-hat ha-ve yo-u d-done?” I slurred, but I never heard their answer.

The darkness slowly beckoned me into its embrace, and before I could even think about fighting it, I was falling, my mind shutting down.

*Storm*, I thought to myself before getting lost in the hollow void of darkness.



## Storm

SOMETHING WAS WRONG.

Something was terribly wrong, and as I kept pacing from one side of the living room to the other, the gnawing worry in my gut just kept increasing, telling me to go to the mall, to find her myself. Ophelia wasn’t answering her phone, and neither was Zoe. I knew I should have listened to my gut when she demanded to go alone with Zoe.

I shouldn’t have let her. Fuck. I should have gone with her.

“Calm down, Storm,” Atlas said from the other side of the room, trying to call Zoe’s phone. I knew what the result would be—a big, fat nothing.

They weren’t reachable and the mere idea that something had happened to Ophelia felt like a gut punch, as if a sledgehammer hit in the middle of my chest.

“I can’t,” I grunted, dialing Ophelia’s number again. “I can’t fucking calm down.”

It kept ringing, and ringing, and ringing until her voice came through the line, indicating that the call was going to the voicemail.

“Something’s wrong, Atlas,” I said, looking down at my phone, as if I could make her call me. “Something is terribly wrong. I just know it.”

“Storm.” He came closer to me, clasp my shoulder with his hand. “Maybe they’re in the tunnel, or something.”

“How many tunnels do we have around here, Atlas?” I growled, irritated beyond measure. I knew he was trying to reason with me, to calm me down, but it wasn’t helping. If anything, it was just making things worse. “It’s impossible that both of them aren’t answering. Absolutely impossible. It’s been three hours since we last spoke, and I am telling you again... Something. Is. Wrong.”

“Okay, okay,” he relented. “We’ll go to the mall then. Get your keys, and we’ll drive there. But I’m sure they’re just having too much fun.”

They could be, but Ophelia wasn’t someone who wouldn’t answer her phone, no matter what. She knew how paranoid all of us were. She knew how worried I was, and she wouldn’t have done that, not right now. Maybe if we were talking about Ophelia from one year ago, yeah—maybe. But not today. She wouldn’t do this.

God, what if something happened to them? To her, the kids, Zoe?

“Storm, stop trying to murder the couch with your stare,” Atlas said. “Get moving. We need to get there and see what’s happening.”

“Right, right,” I murmured, moving around on autopilot. She had to be okay. They had to be okay.

I didn’t know what I would do if anything happened to them, to my Sunshine, our kids. I had no... I had no reason to go on if they weren’t here.

“Storm!” Atlas bellowed from the front door, his eyes filled with worry, his face pulled taut. I knew he had thoughts similar to mine, he just didn’t want to voice them. “Come on, man, now’s not the time to fall apart.”

“Right, I’m coming,” I murmured, taking the keys for my bike from the bowl on the coffee table. I couldn’t help but see her in every single part of this house. She started hanging our pictures on the walls, the little things she loved, her books... She was living again, truly living, not just existing, and to even think about someone taking it all away from us made my blood boil.

I rushed out of the house, meeting Atlas next to his bike, where mine was parked as well. Just as I was about to sit on the bike, my phone started ringing.

“Shit,” I mumbled, fumbling with my keys and my helmet, trying to take my phone from the front pocket of my jacket.

But the name on the screen wasn’t the one I wanted to see, and the hope I had of her calling me was squashed as fast as it came.

“Cillian,” I barked as I picked up the phone. “Now’s not the—”

“Where’s Ophelia?” he blasted through the line, his voice wavering, breaking, filled with emotions I couldn’t quite place. “Storm, it’s fucking important. Is she with you?”

“N-no,” I stammered. “She isn’t answering. She went with Zoe to the mall, but they’re not—”

“Fuck!” he yelled out. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.” Something crashed in the background. “We need to find her. Now, Storm!”

“I’m going there, but—”

“I hacked into Tristan’s computer, Storm, and it’s bad. It’s so fucking bad,” he cried out. “I didn’t know. I swear to you I didn’t know.”

“Kill, calm down,” I murmured, but my words held no power. His distress was seeping into me. “What are you

talking about? What about Tristan?”

“Tristan was working with her, with Belladonna,” Cillian said, freezing the blood in my veins. “Maybe not at first, but later... Those days he was gone, when he wasn’t answering, he was with her, sharing everything we did, every single plan, locations, everything I trusted him with.”

“Cillian, are you telling me that Tristan was the mole all this time?”

“Not all this time,” he stated. “Not until he found out who she was. Fuck, this is all fucked up.”

I breathed through my nose, trying to keep my emotions at bay. It was obvious he hated this, that his own brother betrayed us in such a way. He didn’t need me to tell him it was bad. But the fury coiling in my gut was too hard to ignore. Tristan Nightingale was a dead man. I didn’t care if it caused another war with Cillian and Kieran, he was dead.

I’d fucking kill him myself.

“I’m so sorry, Storm,” Cillian apologized, obviously crying. “I didn’t know. Kieran didn’t know either. Maya is here with us and she’s desperately trying to reach Ophelia.”

“Kill, calm down, man. I need you to tell me everything. Who is Belladonna? Why would Tristan work with her?”

“Because...” he started. “Because Belladonna is our sister, Storm. Belladonna is Ava.”

*Ava?* “As in Ava who you wanted to kill Ophelia over? Ava who died?”

“That Ava,” Cillian murmured.

“I’m going to murder her myself,” Maya shouted from the background.

“Maya,” Kieran scolded. “That’s my sister.”

“Fuck off, Kieran,” she belted. “I don’t care if she’s the Virgin Mary. That bitch is going to die.”

“Maya,” Kieran growled.

“I’m sorry, Storm. You’re on speakerphone,” Cillian murmured, while Maya and Kieran fought in the background. “I’ll come to Santa Monica today. We need to get this—”

“Oh, no no no,” Maya interrupted. “We’re all coming to Santa Monica, and you better pray that bitch is still there. I always hated her guts.”

“That’s my sister you’re talking about!” Kieran thundered.

“And she’s trying to hurt my sister!” Maya replied. “Don’t fucking stand there with that look in your eyes, Kieran. She’s trying to hurt my family, my blood, and she’s going to pay.”

This was bad. This was so fucking bad, and no matter what she did, I knew that Cillian and Kieran wouldn’t be able to stay objective. This was their baby sister—the sister they thought was dead. I wasn’t sure it was such a good idea to have them involved in this.

“Kill,” I murmured. “Are you sure it’s a good idea for you guys to be involved? I mean, I’m going to go and find Ophelia and we will make a plan, but—”

“I’m sure, Storm. Ophelia is like a sister to me. Ava... I have no idea what happened or why she’s doing all of this, but it isn’t right. None of this is right, and Tristan...” his voice broke as he mentioned his brother’s name.

“We’re coming,” Maya announced. “Find her, Storm. Find Ophelia,” she practically ordered before dropping the line.

I sat on top of my bike, staring at my phone, trying to understand what had just happened. Ava was Belladonna. Ava, the girl Ophelia mourned and tried to help before that. Ava, the girl the Nightingales wanted to go to war for.

My God.

“What’s happening?” Atlas asked, sitting on his bike beside mine, his helmet on his head, ready to leave.

“We know who Belladonna is,” I whispered, almost in a trance. “We don’t know why she’s doing this, but we know her identity.”

“Who?”



“Ava.” I looked at him, putting my phone in my pocket. “Ava Nightingale, the dead girl.”

“Wait.” His eyes widened. “What? I thought—”

“That she was dead? Yeah, so did the rest of us. But there’s more, Atlas.”

“What more could there be, man? The dead girl is not so dead, and she’s trying to hurt Ophelia. I think that’s enough.”

“Tristan is working with her.”

“Tristan? Cillian and Kieran’s brother, Tristan?”

“Yeah, that one. He’s been feeding her information, telling her everything about us. I’m pretty sure he’s the reason why it seemed as if Belladonna was three steps ahead of us at all times.”

“Fuck,” he mumbled. “So what—”

My phone suddenly started ringing again, and I pulled it out, relieved seeing Zoe’s name.

“Zozo, where the fuck are y—”

“Storm,” she cut me off, her voice wobbling, barely a whisper. “They got her,” she cried. “They got Ophelia.”

The sledgehammer came back in the full force, hitting me from all sides, rendering me speechless. They got her, she said. They took my Sunshine. They took her.

The phone slipped from my hand as I climbed off of the bike, looking at the ground as the war waged inside my chest, anger I had never felt before brewing, threatening to spill into reality.

Like in a haze, I saw Atlas picking up my phone, talking to Zoe, his lips moving, but I couldn’t hear the words that came out. I couldn’t listen, couldn’t comprehend how this could be happening.

She was gone. Gone from me. They took her.

Atlas came to me, standing in front of my body, but I still couldn’t hear a word he said. The buzzing noise in my ears

silenced everything else around me. All I could hear, all I could even see, was Ophelia's laughter, her brilliant blue eyes, the happiness we felt for the last three months.

I saw her in our bed, her sandy brown hair splayed over the pillow, calling me to come back, to cuddle with her. I saw her on that street, crossing to get to me, her defiant eyes and mischievous smirk playing on her face.

I saw the five-year-old girl who wanted me to smile, who wanted me to be happy, while those pigtails bounced around her head, so full of life, full of love.

I saw our kids on that monitor, growing inside her, and Ophelia's tear-filled eyes when she looked at me, full of hope and promises of tomorrow.

"Oh, God," I grunted, falling to the ground, my knees taking the brunt of the fall.

"Storm," Atlas said, his voice sounding so far away.

Like a kaleidoscope of memories, every single scene replayed in my head—every single time I held her, I loved her, I had her. Even during the times when she ran, when anger consumed my entire body, I still loved her.

Yesterday, today, tomorrow, that one feeling would always stay with me.

"She's gone," I murmured flatly, as if the thought itself still didn't settle in my bones. "She's... Atlas," I cried, feeling the first tears roll down my cheeks. "Atlas, she's gone."

"Hey, hey," he whispered, crouching down in front of me.

"They're all gone," I said, letting the words sink in. "What am I supposed to do, Atlas?"

"Storm, hey." He shook me, holding my shoulders. "Now's not the time to fall apart. We don't fall apart. We fight. Remember. We always fight."

"I can't." I shook my head. "I can't... I can't move, Atlas."

"It's okay. It's okay, Storm." He hummed, hugging me, wrapping his arms around me. "It's gonna be okay. We will

find them.”

“They’re gone,” I wailed, clutching the back of his jacket in my fists. “They’re fucking gone!”

“We will get them back,” Atlas argued.

But how would we get them back? How?

“I need to send someone to take Zoe to the hospital. Can you stand up?”

“Oh God, and Zoe is hurt,” I finally realized. “I’m a terrible person. Is she okay?” I looked up at him.

“A little banged up, but she shouldn’t be driving. I’ll send Indigo to her, but we need to go to the Club, Storm. Everyone will be there and they will help. Maya is coming, Storm. I need to call her and tell her what happened, but I need you to hold it together, okay? They can’t see you like this. You need to be strong for Ophelia, for your kids.”

I had to be. I needed to be, but getting up from the ground almost felt impossible. But I would do it. I would fucking do it, and I would find them.

And Ava and Tristan Nightingale would pay, one way or another.



## OPHELIA

THE MUSTY AND STALE SCENT WAS THE FIRST THING I NOTICED as my eyes started fluttering, slowly opening and closing, too sensitive against the glaring light directed at me. Something brushed over my left arm, and taking a deep breath, I slowly pushed myself through the foggy haze that still surrounded my mind and forced my eyes open. I blinked as the light flickered above me, too bright to look at.

I lowered my head, trying to shield my eyes, but as I tried to lift my arm, I realized I was trapped, tied up.

Confusion lingered in the back of my mind, then it hit me all at once—the mall, the parking lot, Zoe on the ground, the men surrounding me and injecting me with something.

“Oh, shit,” I murmured, turning my head to my left. I noticed a figure standing on the far end, just outside of the light. My lips were parched, my throat dry, but I forced the words out, no matter how much they kept scratching my throat. “Who are you?” I rasped. “Where am I?”

The figure never answered, just moved toward my legs, seemingly inspecting something there. I looked down at my body, realizing I was on some sort of a table, with my arms spread to the side of me, tied to the said table, as well as my legs.

“What’s going on?” I asked again, clearing my throat. “Answer me, goddammit!”

I didn’t want to panic, didn’t want to send myself into a frenzy, but this was either a very bad prank, or it was my end.

This had Belladonna written all over it.

“Who are you?” I asked again as the figure moved to my right, circling me like a predator. “Please, tell me.”

“I’m so sorry, Birdy,” he answered, and I froze on the spot, looking at the outline of his shadow as he stood on the side, feeling his eyes on my body.

“Tristan?” I breathed out, disbelief fighting against my rational thought. “Tristan, is that you?”

Maybe he was here to save me? Maybe they managed to find me already?

“I never wanted this to happen.” His voice wavered, and as he stepped out of the shadows and into the light, I saw the torment written all over his face, his eyes avoiding mine as he kept staring at my belly.

My naked belly.

“Tristan, what’s going on? Untie me, please.”

But he never moved a muscle, just kept staring at the spot where my twins were hidden.

“I didn’t want to do it, but I couldn’t deny her. I could never deny her. She’s my family. My favorite person. She always was.”

“Tristan, what the fuck are you talking about?” I growled, trying to push against the restraints keeping me here. The drugs were still in my system, my movements sluggish, but I could get out of here. I knew I could. “Release me. This isn’t funny.”

“I can’t!” he bellowed, finally looking at me. “This is making her happy.” He smiled, nodding frantically. “I need to make her happy. I need her to forgive me for not keeping her safe.”

“Who, Tristan?” He wasn’t making any sense. “Talk to me. Who is she? Is it Belladonna?”

“You don’t understand,” he gritted out. “She needs me. She needs all of us, but my brothers are too enamored by you

to see it. But she sees me. She understands me. She can see I want to help her. You'll see. She deserves this."

"Tristan, you aren't making any sense. These are my kids, my life. She doesn't deserve them."

"She does!" he bellowed, slamming his hand down on the table, right next to my belly. "These are going to be her kids. The kids she never got because you got to her."

"Who, for fuck's sake?" I hated people talking around and around, never getting to the point. "Tell me who?"

"Me," a new voice piped in. The voice I knew, remembered, loved, cried over never hearing it again. I cried a river of tears for her, for the unfair life she had to endure. For the viciousness with which they killed her.

"Hello, Ophelia," she said, chuckling at me as she stepped into the light, right next to Tristan. She still looked the same—the same eyes, same hair color, same way that she held herself, but it was the expression on her face, the coldness seeping from her that had me palling as she wrapped her hand around Tristan's arm, scowling at me. "Miss me?"

"Ava," I breathed out. "W-what... How?"

"You mean how I survived after you tried to kill me?"  
*What?*

"I never tried to kill you. I tried to save you."

"Liar!" she belted out, narrowing her eyes at me. "You tried to kill me. You took my kids from me, my ability to ever have them!"

"Ava, I didn't—"

"Stop fucking talking, you filthy bitch!" she screeched, getting in my face. What in the fuck was going on? "You're going to look so pretty with blood all over you." She cackled, pushing the gun I didn't see before to my cheek. "So pretty, so fucked up. It's almost poetic what I'm going to do to you. And no one is coming to save you. Nobody cares, Ophelia."

"Ava, please," I begged. "Don't do this. I didn't do anything to you. I didn't—"

“Stop lying, Ophelia. You always said you were the honest one, so be honest for once and admit that you stabbed me, letting me bleed out there.”

I looked at Tristan standing behind her, but he wasn't looking at me. He knew this wasn't true, they all knew. I had already proven it, and there was no need for me to lie.

“Ava, I found you there, inside the house, bleeding out on the floor. Tell her Tristan.” I looked at him. “Tell her it wasn't me.”

“Nuh-uh.” She tsked, grabbing my jaw with her hand, pulling my attention back to her. “We all know it was you. My daddy saved me and told me it was you.”

“He brainwashed you!” I thundered. “You remember that night, don't you?”

“Every single moment,” she answered proudly.

“Then how can you stand here, accusing me of something I didn't do. You know I wasn't the one who stabbed you. Do you remember me stabbing you, Ava? Huh? Do you?”

Her eyes glassed over, and I could see she was searching through her memories, but she couldn't have found me there. She couldn't have seen me because I wasn't the one who tried to kill her.

Her face scrunched because we both knew she couldn't remember that.

“Liar,” she hissed out, pressing the barrel of the gun into my cheek. “You're trying to lie to me again, but it isn't working. It'll never work because I know who you are. I know what a filthy fucking bitch you are, Ophelia Aster.”

“Ava, don't do this,” I breathed out, trying to move away from the barrel, but there was no use.

“You brought this on yourself, darling.” She chuckled. “And now I'm going to have my kids. Finally, I will get what you took from me. My babies, my darlings.”

“No.” I shook my head, my eyes filling with tears at the mere thought that this psychopath could take my kids. “You



can't have them. They're mine, not yours."

"Shut. Up!" she thundered, pulling my head backward, ripping at my hair. "They're not yours. They're mine. Only mine. Mine to love and hold and cherish. You wouldn't know what love is even if it hit you in your head."

But I did. Maybe I didn't know back then, but I knew now. I knew I would die for these kids, for Storm, for people I cared about, people I loved.

"You and your sister." She chuckled. "I thought I got rid of her and that filthy little bastard she carried, but apparently not."

"Maya?" I looked at her. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, darling." She smiled wide. "You didn't think that the cartel figured it all out on their own? I was the one who told them about the baby, that it was the son of Kieran Nightingale. My brother deserved better than a filthy Aster bitch, regardless which one of you it was."

"You kept Maya locked away all these years?" I asked, shocked at the new revelation.

"Kept, tortured, all by my instructions." She laughed. "She begged and begged and begged to see her bastard son, but El Chupacabra knew he had to keep them separated if he wanted to get into my good graces."

"You're fucking insane," I bit out. "Why would you do that?"

"Leverage." She shrugged. "Maya would never leave that place if her son was there, and having her think that you were dead only sealed the deal."

"That's your nephew, you stupid cow, and you left him with monsters!"

"That's not my nephew," she sneered. "He's a bastard, a kid who never should have existed. But my brother was an idiot who didn't know how to keep it in his pants. I saved him. He should be thanking me."

"He will never thank you."

“Oh he will,” she hummed, dragging the barrel of the gun over my cheek, to my neck and between my breasts, sliding down toward my stomach and stopping right at my belly button. “They’ll all thank me because I killed you. They will be free of you, of your darkness.”

“I’m not the dark one right now.” I smiled smugly. “You are, and they’ll see. They’ll see the depravity in you. And my kids, even if you take them, Ava, they will always have my blood in them. My daughter and my son will always have me with them, always guiding them to be exactly like me.”

“Shut up!”

“No.” It was my turn to laugh. “You can take them from me, take them from Storm, but they will always be my kids, my legacy. Every time you look at them, every time you see their eyes, you will see mine, haunting you from my grave. I will be the spirit you will never be able to shake off. The spirit that will send you to an early grave.”

“Shut up, shut up, shut up,” she kept repeating, covering her ear with her free hand. “These are my kids. My blood. Mine, mine, mine, only mine.”

“Never,” I sneered, my lip curling as I looked at the girl I mourned, loved, and wanted to help. “I wish you a life filled with insanity and fear, Ava,” I grunted. “I wish you a life where you’ll always be waiting for Storm to come and take you to the underworld, because he will come. Trust me, he will come. It doesn’t matter if I die today. I, unlike you, have people who would go to hell and back for me. And you...” I looked at Tristan, disgust rolling over me as my eyes traveled over the pathetic man. “You betrayed your brothers, you idiot. That is your legacy. Your fucking legacy of blood and wrong choices because they will never forgive you for this. You know they won’t, no matter what. I might not be the one who will end your pathetic life, but I’ll be watching, Tristan. And I’ll be laughing, in the darkness, as you take your last breath.”

“Shut the fuck up!” Ava screeched, firing two bullets through the ceiling, thinking that would shut me up.

“I don’t flinch at that, Ava. You know I don’t. You’re as pathetic as he is, holding onto grudges from the past. Grudges that have no ground, when you know I wasn’t the one who destroyed your life. Your father did, but both of you,” I looked at Tristan, “needed somebody else to blame. You needed someone else to put the target on, and that someone was me. Shame on you. Shame on you both.”

“You tried to kill me!” she belted out, making me laugh.

“I didn’t, but now I wish I did. Trust me, Ava.” I lifted my head, looking her right in the eyes. “When I try to kill someone, I don’t only try—I succeed.”

“I’m done listening to your bullshit,” she said, moving away from me. “It’s time to get this over with.”

Fuck, I needed to stall, to get them talking. I had no doubt in my mind that Storm and the gang were already looking for me, but they definitely needed time. I had no idea how long I’d been out, and I had no idea where we were.

“Where are we?” I asked, looking at Tristan. “If you’re going to kill me, I at least deserve to know where we and where my last resting place will be.”

“Hangars,” he answered almost immediately, guilt lacing his features. “But they’re not coming, Ophelia. They think we’re outside of Santa Monica.”

*Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

“It’s been hours since we picked you up. They’re not coming,” he answered sadly.

“Stop talking to her,” Ava barked, dragging with her a man in a white coat like doctors wore. “We’re getting my kids out of her. They’ve been there long enough.”

“No, ma’am.” The doctor pulled away from her. “I can’t do this. Please.”

“It’s this or your family, Doc,” Ava sneered. “It’s your choice.”

I knew she had him where she wanted him. There was no way this man would choose me over his family. If I were in

the same spot, I would do the same.

“I can’t,” he wailed. “We don’t have proper instruments, nothing to do this with.”

“Yes, we do,” Ava said, pointing at something on the other side of the room that I couldn’t see. “There are your instruments. We took them from your office. Now you can do it.”

The doctor looked at me, his eyes seeking forgiveness I couldn’t give. No matter how much I understood that he needed to do this, I couldn’t forgive. They wanted to take my kids away from me, and I couldn’t condone that.

“How far along are you?” he asked, slowly stepping closer to me, his eyes flickering between my face and my stomach.

“Eight months,” I murmured, refusing to look at him. “My due date is in two weeks,” I added, keeping my voice even. I refused to give them the satisfaction of me breaking apart, even though every single nerve in my body screamed at me, rebelling against the thought of losing our kids.

They weren’t ready. I wasn’t ready, and both the doctor and I knew this.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. I turned to the side, finally looking at him. He was sorry, I could see that. He was scared for himself, for me, probably for his family as well.

“Don’t hurt them,” I said. “Please don’t hurt them. I don’t care about me but tell me that you know what you’re doing.”

“I do.” He nodded. “But I have to... They have—”

“I know,” I interrupted. “I understand. Just, don’t hurt them.”

“Chop-chop,” Ava pushed on. “We don’t have the whole night.”

With one last look at me, the doctor walked toward the other side of the room, where I assumed his instruments were laid out. I couldn’t watch, didn’t want to count the minutes until he would do it. He said, “There’s no anesthesia.”

“I know.” Ava cackled, looking at him. “Oops.” She grinned at me. “We forgot to bring it.”

Motherfucking bitch.

“I can’t do it,” the doctor said. “I can’t. No, I cannot.”

“Then your kids are going to die.” She shrugged. “You either do it or you don’t. If you don’t, I’ll just cut through her and pull those kids out myself.”

“You could kill them,” he grunted.

“Then you do it.” She chuckled, as if all of this was just a game for her. “Either way, she’s dying today. I don’t give a fuck how.”

“You... I can’t... I... Fuck...” And there it was, the doctor relenting. “God will never forgive you for this.”

“I don’t care,” she answered. “I will at least have everything I ever wanted.” She looked at me. “Ophelia Aster dead, and my kids with me.”

“They’re not your kids.” I laughed. “No matter what you tell yourself.”

“Do it, Doctor. Do it!” she blasted, staring at me with enough venom to kill a person. But I was made of sturdier stuff than most, and her hateful little looks weren’t doing what she intended them to do.

“You were always a pathetic little thing, Ava,” I goaded her. “Always wanting what I had. Always running after the guys I dated, the things I wore.” I laughed. “It’s no wonder that you want to take my kids. You never knew how to play with only your toys.”

“Shut up!”

“You never knew how to stand on your own two feet. I mean, if you were such a brave person, why didn’t you ever try to find me yourself, to fight me, huh? Oh, I know why... because you’re too weak, and no matter what, you will always be weaker than me.”

“Shut your mouth,” she growled, pressing the barrel of the gun to my chest.

“You were always—” I started saying, when the cold metal of a scalpel pressed against my belly, cutting off the air from my lungs, cutting through my skin.

“Oh my God!” I yelled out, my back automatically arching from the table. The burning pain spread over my abdomen, cutting through the rest of my body, as the scalpel went from one side of my stomach to the other.

“Hold her down!” the doctor instructed. Hands I used to trust pressed against my shoulders, keeping me down.

My eyes fluttered closed, the pain ricocheting throughout my body, but he kept cutting. The metallic scent of blood filled the air, my screams echoing around us, while Tristan kept holding me down, murmuring soft words, apologizing over and over again, but I didn’t want to hear him.

Giddy laughter reached my ears as Ava crooned over the doctor, pushing him to go further. I knew I wouldn’t survive this. I ignored Tristan, biting down on my lower lip, tasting blood as the doctor pushed my cut skin open wide.

“Fuuuck!” I cursed, trying to push Tristan off of me.

“Hold her still!” the doctor bellowed. “I need to cut through this layer to get to the babies.”

“Get off of me, Tristan!”

“No,” he cried. “I’m sorry, Ophelia. I’m so fucking sorry.”

“Fuck you!” I looked at him, hoping that my eyes would convey everything I couldn’t say right now. “I hope you will remember my screams every time you close your eyes,” I panted, wishing him a life worse than death. “I hope you’ll lose everything you ever held dear, Tristan. I truly, truly wish that for you.”

“I’m sorry,” he sobbed, hiding his face in the crook of my neck. The sensation of something being pulled from my belly rocked through my body, making me yell out all over again.

“Oh, look at that,” Ava crooned. I looked down my body, where the blood covered my stomach and where the doctor stood, elbows deep in my belly, and Ava stood above him, holding a small blanket in her arms.

My heart raced, threatening to jump out of my chest. As I closed my eyes, a loud cry echoed around the room. The very first cry of one of my babies. The first and the last one I would ever hear.

“We have a girl,” the doctor announced, looking up at me, but his face was getting blurry in front of me.

“Give her to me,” Ava ordered. Like an obedient puppy, the doctor placed her carefully into Ava’s waiting arms, while the little girl—my little girl—wailed, her tiny arms in the air, thrashing in Ava’s arms. “You’re so pretty, darling.”

The doctor carefully cut the umbilical cord, tying it into a makeshift knot, and I felt that loss deep in my bones. She wasn’t connected to me anymore. She wasn’t with me anymore.

“Please,” I begged. “I want to see her,” I panted. “Please.”

Ava ignored me, just as the doctor went back to my stomach, pushing his hands into my body, slicing me from the inside out with the movements.

Ava’s voice sounded so far away, as did the cries of my daughter. “Please.” I begged and begged and begged, but none of them brought her to me. “I just want to see her,” I sobbed. “Please.”

“I’m sorry,” Tristan kept repeating, but I didn’t have any more strength in my body to tell him to fuck off, to leave me be, to give me my baby. My chest seized, my lungs hurting, trying to get as much air as possible in my system, but it wasn’t working.

When the second cry echoed around the room, quieter than the first one, I opened my eyes again, seeing the doctor holding another baby in his arms, the dark hair matted with blood.

“We have a boy,” he murmured, looking down at my son. My son, my little boy.

“Please!” I yelled out, pulling strength from deep within my body. “Don’t do this. Please.”

The doctor’s eyes filled with tears as he cut the umbilical cord from him and carried him to the other side of the room where Ava stood above my daughter, cooing and talking to her as if she belonged to her.

“I hate you,” I told Tristan. “I hate you with all my soul, Tristan,” I gritted out, grinding my teeth. “I hope this was worth it,” I whispered, turning my head to him. “I hope this was all worth it, Tristan.”

His eyes connected with mine, the torment in them as obvious as day, but I couldn’t give a fuck for his torment. He did this. He allowed this to happen.

“You were my friend,” I breathed out, feeling the icy cold seeping into my bones. “You were the person I trusted, the person I loved, and you betrayed me. I hope it was worth it, Tristan.”

“Tris,” Ava called for him. “Come and help me.”

“I need to stitch her up,” the doctor said. “She’s losing too much blood.”

My head lolled to the side, looking at their backs, covering my babies. As much as I wanted to yell and demand to see them, I could feel my life slowly seeping away from me. I could feel myself disappearing.

“Oh no, Doc.” Ava chuckled, looking at him. “She stays like this.”

“What?” he exclaimed. “No. She’s going to die. I need to get her to the hospital. I need to help her.”

Oh you fool, kind man, I wanted to say. Neither one of us would get out of here alive. Not him and not me.

“Then let her die.” Ava cackled like a hyena, her eyes momentarily connecting with mine. “Let her—”



Alarms started blaring around us, the sound too loud for the small room we were in. Ava's eyes connected with Tristan's, glaring at him.

"What the fuck is that?"

"I don't know," he mumbled, pulling his phone out of his back pocket. "Fuck," he cursed. "They're here."

"What do you mean?"

"Storm, our brothers..." he trailed off, looking at the screen. "They're all here. We need to go, Ava."

"You said they'd be going to the other place, Tristan!" she screeched. "You promised!"

"Well, they found a way, Ava! Come on. Pick her up. I'll take him."

During their banter, the doctor moved to the other side, taking the needle into his hand and leaning over my body.

"I'll help you," he whispered. "Just stay with me, okay? Stay awake."

"My babies," I mumbled. "Don't let them take them."

"What the fuck are you doing?" Ava yelled out, her eyes firmly plastered on the doctor. "I told you, she dies today."

"No, I need to help her."

Ava looked at me, then at him, holding my baby girl close to her chest. "Since you're so keen on helping her, let me do you a favor. You'll die with her, together."

Without flinching, without a second to think about it, she aimed the gun at him and released the bullet that burrowed right into his skull. The doctor fell to the floor with a thud, and all the while she laughed, her eyes twinkling with venom.

"Thank you for my kids, Ophelia," she murmured, stepping backward.

"No," I mumbled, trying to pull myself up, ignoring the sharp pain cutting through me like a knife.

My body was mangled, bloodied, destroyed, but they couldn't take my kids. I wouldn't let them. I wouldn't fucking let them!

Tristan took one last look at me, holding my son in his arms, but for all his sorries, he didn't try to stop her. He didn't try to stop this insanity. He was as vicious as she was, even though he didn't want to admit it.

The sound of doors opening and closing echoed around me, feeding into the misery I was feeling. I tried pulling my right hand out of the restraints holding me down, but there was no use. The alarm kept blaring, the sound of the gunshots from the outside keeping me awake, keeping the hope close to my chest.

I had to see Storm. I had to see him one last time. One last time to tell him how much I loved him, to push him to our kids.

All those times I ran, all those times I tried telling myself that he wasn't the right person for me, I wished I could take it all back. I wished I wasn't as fucked up as I was when we first met. I wished we had more time—more time to live together, to create a family. It was all now slipping through my fingers, slowly becoming a faraway dream I would never get to see.

But I wanted to see him. He needed to know how much I loved him, how strong he was, how much he changed my life for the better.

My tongue darted out, licking my lips, but I could feel it, the pull, the inevitable darkness surrounding me. My vision was getting blurry, and just as I thought I wouldn't be able to wait, to keep holding on, the doors burst open. There he was, my avenging angel, the man I would do it all for all over again.

“Sunshine,” he breathed out, stepping inside the room, coming closer to the light. His eyes were filled with worry, with pain, anger, as he took in my body, the blood dripping down on the floor. “No.” He rushed to me, untying my hand. “No, no, no,” he chanted, working on the ties, his entire body trembling.

“S-Storm,” I rasped, trying to follow his movements, but my head was too heavy, my limbs plastered to the table.

“No, Sunshine. No.” He rushed to the other side, untying my other leg and my hand, scooping me up in his arms. As I looked up, I could see the tears running down his cheeks. “Stay with me,” he murmured, pressing his lips to my forehead. “Just stay with me. Help is on the way.”

“Storm, she got them. S-She has our kids,” I whispered.

“I know, I know.” He dragged his hand over my hair, moving the loose strands away from my face. “Fuck, no!” he barked as my eyes started closing. “Stay with me, Sunshine. Just stay with me. Keep those eyes open. Please,” he wailed. “Please stay with me.”

“I I-love you, Stormy.” I chuckled brokenly. “I will always love you.”

“No!” he thundered. “Ophelia, don’t you dare. You’re not dying on me. You’re not fucking dying!” he yelled, as if he could will Death to stay away from me. But he couldn’t. Neither one of us could. “You’re not leaving me,” he whispered on a broken sob, his voice wavering, his tears falling down on my face.

“Find our kids, Stormy.” I coughed, feeling colder by the second. “Find them.”

“I will. I’ll find them, but you’ll see them. You’ll meet them as well, Sunshine. Please, don’t leave me,” he wailed. “Don’t fucking leave me!”

“Remember me, Storm. Tell them about me,” I spoke, hoping he would truly listen to me. “Tell them I wasn’t the monster they made me out to be. Tell them there was good in me.” I coughed. “I wasn’t just darkness.”

“You’re not darkness, Ophelia,” he broke. “You’re my sunshine. You’re my everything.” His voice trembled and his hands on my cheeks shook. “I can’t live without you. Please. I love you. I love you so much, Sunshine.”

“T-Tell them. Please.”

“I’ll tell them. I’ll tell them you were the best goddamn person I have ever met. And you’ll tell them yourself. You’ll tell them.”

“I didn’t get to hold them, Storm,” I murmured, feeling the one wayward tear rolling down my cheek. “I never got to hold them.”

“You will,” he argued. “You’ll hold them. Trust me. You’ll teach them everything.”

But I wouldn’t. We both knew this was it. This was the end for me. This was the end for us.

“I’m sorry for the pain I caused, Storm. I’m really sorry.”

“Don’t say that. Don’t apologize,” he sobbed with me. “It wasn’t your fault. None of it was your fault.”

“It doesn’t hurt anymore.” I smiled, looking up at him. “It’s okay now, Storm.” I lifted my hand and pressed it against his cheek. “I’m going to be okay. And I’ll meet you again.” I smiled softly. “I’ll meet you in another life, Stormy. Don’t forget about me.”

“No, Ophelia, hold on.” He shook me, lifting me up in his arms. “You need to hold on, baby.” He crossed the room with me in his arms and started walking down the dark hallway. “Help!” he yelled out. “Atlas!”

But it was too late. We were too late.

Our happily ever after would never come. Our dreams would never be a reality, but at least I had him for a small period of time. At least I knew what love was, what happiness felt like.

“I’ll love you forever, Storm,” I whispered, pressing my cheek against his chest, closing my eyes. “Always and forever.”

“No! Open your eyes, baby. Open your fucking eyes.”

“I’m tired,” I murmured. “Find them. Find Malia and Malakai.” I blurted out the names we had been discussing. The names I liked the most. “Find them, Storm.”

“What the fuck?” Atlas belted out. I could hear the footsteps, the sound of the sirens, but I couldn’t stay anymore. I told him... I told him what I needed to say.

“Ophelia!” Storm roared. It was the last thing I heard before everything turned black, forever separating me from him.



## CILLIAN

THE LIGHTS FROM THE PARAMEDICS' VAN FLASHED BRIGHTLY IN the night, illuminating the building in front of us, where Storm and the rest of the guys ran almost half an hour ago. The sirens from inside the building blasted shortly after, but I couldn't move.

The knowledge that we could lose Ophelia today froze me to my core. I couldn't eat, couldn't drink, could barely think, and I fucking hated the fact that my family was once again involved in something this vicious.

No, this went beyond being vicious. This was downright insane—kidnapping a pregnant woman and trying to steal her kids from her. Who fucking did something like that?

Gunshots slowly quieted down. The illuminated windows inside the large hangar where Tristan and Ava took Ophelia looked ominous, like the fire itself burned from within, even though it was only the lights that were turned on. This was pure hell, waiting, looking on as everyone else helped, while I was too powerless to do anything.

Storm rushed in first without waiting for the rest of the guys to catch up, taking down the guards by himself, trying to save the woman he loved. The woman he couldn't live without.

The moment I stepped inside the Club, the moment I saw him, I recognized the lost look in his eyes, because I felt the same. I couldn't lose Ophelia. I wouldn't survive without Ophelia, no matter what. All the fucked-up things we did, all

the good deeds that were supposed to wash away the sins from our souls, they would all be for nothing if Ophelia wasn't a part of my life.

She would never know how much I loved her, how much I bled every day, knowing she would never belong to me. And she shouldn't belong to me. She shouldn't have a person as fucked up as I was in her life.

She was happy with Storm, finally content with her life, and now my family was destroying it all over again.

Kieran had Maya. Even if they were at each other's throats more often than not, he had her. Me? I had no one. If we lost Ophelia... there would be nothing left to live for.

I scratched at the wound on my arm, the one I kept a secret, pushing in the poison through my body, using it as an escape mechanism. But even the poison wouldn't help to forget the sound of Ophelia's voice or her eyes.

This was all my fault, not seeing what Tristan was up to. I was too caught up in my own shit to see that he was playing two sides, fucking fooling us all. And Ava... I couldn't comprehend how she could do something like this.

It made no sense. She was alive. All these years, all that heartache all of us felt over her death, and she was alive, playing with us like puppets, feeding us wrong information, pushing us over the edge. I fucking held her hand when the doctors pushed us out of her room.

I fucking watched her as she took her last breath when they brought in the crash cart.

They told us she would make it, until she started crashing, and none of us ever questioned it. We trusted our father who swooped in, sharing the news with us. We never got to say goodbye, and now our sister was the monster, lurking in shadows, hurting those close to us.

"Did they find her?" Maya asked as she stepped close to me, looking at the entrance to the building. I was surprised the police hadn't gotten involved yet, but I knew that it was only a matter of time.



“No,” I answered, scratching at my arm furiously, the hit I used before we came here doing nothing to calm me down. “They’re still inside.”

“Kill, hey.” She laced her fingers with mine, pulling my attention to her. “Ophelia will be okay. She’s a fighter. She’s got this.”

“I know,” I murmured, but my words held no weight, because I didn’t know. Right now, I didn’t know anything.

I just wanted to see her, to make sure she was alright. To make sure that I didn’t fuck this up, that I didn’t kill the woman I loved, my best friend, the only person who ever understood me.

She was never mine, but I was always hers, and always would be, for better or for worse. Seeing her struggle, go through life with her head held high, made me proud of her. And all those times I hated her, believing in lies that Ava fed us while pretending to be Belladonna, I would never forgive myself.

I would never forgive myself for not seeing the woman behind the mask that Ophelia wore, because she was always the best fucking person I ever knew. And now she could be dead, completely alone, somewhere inside that building.

“I need to get out of here,” I said, shaking my head. “I can’t stand here and just do nothing.”

“We can’t go in,” Maya added. “But we can go for a walk. Come on.” She pulled me as she started walking toward the side of the building, avoiding the paramedics standing around, waiting for Storm. I had no idea how he pulled this off, but I was glad Ophelia had someone like him with her.

Someone strong enough to withstand this, to fight for her even when every single atom in his body screamed at him to surrender. He was stronger than me, because while he went in, guns blazing, determined to get her back, I walked around the building because I couldn’t bear the thought of her dying.

“What the fuck?” Maya hissed, pushing me to the side, right at the corner of the building, looking at something around

the corner.

“What’s going on?”

“Shhhh,” she murmured. “Look.” She pointed at something behind the building, something she was looking at. As I stepped aside, trying to gauge what she saw, my blood turned to ice when my eyes landed on two figures, moving away from the building.

“Is that—”

“That’s the bitch who’s about to die tonight,” Maya sneered, pulling out the gun she’s been carrying tucked in the back of her pants, and looked at me. “Can you handle this? Because they’re carrying something and I bet I know what it is. If you can’t handle me shooting at your brother and sister, then you should step back and let me handle this. Call Atlas.”

“No.” I shook my head, as if I was waking up from a deep slumber. “I can do this.”

They were my brother and sister, but blood didn’t make a family. Both of them betrayed me and they didn’t deserve my mercy.

“Lead the way,” I whispered, my eyes following every movement of those two. They weren’t running, so sure they wouldn’t get caught. I had no idea how they could be this stupid.

Without another word, Maya started walking toward them, increasing her pace the closer we got. Just as the two of them were about to cross the street toward the parking lot situated behind the hangar, Maya whistled, startling them both.

“Yo, bitches!” she yelled out, pointing her gun straight at Tristan. “Going somewhere?”

Tristan and Ava froze in their steps, slowly turning around to look at us. And then I saw them, the two bundles in their arms, each carrying one. The low crying sounds told me everything I needed to know, and the anger I was keeping at bay roared back to life, taking over my body.

Pulling my gun out, I aimed it at Ava, while Maya kept hers aimed at Tristan.

Ava's eyes widened, looking from Tristan to Maya and lastly landing on me, shock and disbelief written all over her face.

Ava was always the favorite in the family—the youngest child, the spoiled princess—and it was our fault. All of us spoiled her, handling her with kid gloves even when she was old enough to make decisions on her own. Ophelia could never see it, but Ava wasn't the sweet little girl who always followed Ophelia around.

No, I saw the sides of her that Ophelia and my brothers never did. While I had mourned the death of the little sister I had, I never liked the way she behaved with people, with staff, thinking she was better than everyone else, thinking she was owed something just because she was a Nightingale.

“Cillian.” She said my name, barely above a whisper, staying in the same spot. “It's so good—”

“Cut the fucking crap, Princess,” Maya cut her off. “That little innocent face you're trying to plaster on your face is not going to work on me.”

“Maya? It's been so long. I almost—”

“Cut the crap!” Maya bellowed, walking closer to them.

Tristan's eyes were filled with torment, the lines around them pulled taut, but I held no sympathy for my brother. He made his fucking bed, and now he was going to sleep in it.

“That little act of innocence you always used to fool everyone else? Yeah, that never worked on me, bitch,” Maya spouted, venom dripping from her tongue with each word she said.

So I wasn't the only one that always saw through Ava's facade?

“Maya, it isn't—” Tristan started, pulling Maya's attention to him, but she wasn't having it.

“You too. It’s better for you if you don’t talk, Tristan. Trust me, I know how to use a gun, and there are at least three bullets inside that have your name written on them. I wouldn’t mind using it on you, Nightingale or not.”

“Cillian.” He looked at me. “Please. Don’t do this.”

“Don’t do what?” Maya sneered at him. “Those are my niece and nephew you two are trying to steal away. Don’t do what? The right thing. You’re as insane as she is, aren’t you?”

“She’s my sister.” Tristan’s lower lip wobbled. “Our sister,” he reiterated, looking at me. “She deserves to be happy.”

“What she deserves is to be dead, and to fucking stay dead,” Maya bit out, uncaring about Tristan’s emotions, or his obvious distress. I had to agree with her because I couldn’t give a fuck either.

Both of them were sick for doing this. Sick in their heads, and I had no sympathy for whatever they were going through.

“Give us the babies, Tristan.”

“No!” Ava belted out, closing the distance between her and Tristan. “These are my children. Mine!”

“If you know what’s good for you, you’ll hand them over,” Maya seethed. “I don’t give a flying fuck about the consequences, assholes, but you are not going anywhere with those kids.”

As Maya kept on talking, I saw movement from behind Ava, a dark figure moving between the parked cars.

“You don’t know anything, Maya.” Ava chuckled. “What would you know about being a mother, when you left your only son behind?”

She what?

My eyes instinctively moved to Ava, seeing the pure fury playing over her face, and I knew. I fucking knew.

“You mean your nephew?” Maya grinned. “The nephew you knew about. The son of your brother who he doesn’t know

about, because you took him away from me?”

The figure came closer to Ava and Tristan, close enough to hear what Maya was saying. It took me a moment to recognize Kieran and his wide eyes as Maya revealed something that none of us could have predicted.

“Yeah, I know the truth, Ava. I know that Belladonna instructed El Chupacabra to take him from me. I always knew, and I didn’t leave him. Trust me. You have no idea who you’re fucking with. I’m not the Maya Aster you remember, Princess.”

We... I had a nephew? Kieran’s son. Kieran had a son?

I wanted to ask her about him, ask about the things she went through, but we didn’t have time. Not right now.

In the blink of an eye, Maya crossed the distance between her and Tristan, and before any of us could react, she aimed her gun at Tristan’s leg and pressed the trigger. The sound of a gunshot cut through the night. As Tristan started tumbling down, Maya took a hold of Ophelia’s son, keeping him close to her chest, while my brother fell to the ground, grunting and crying out.

“You fucking bitch!” Ava screeched, aiming her gun at Maya. Within seconds, Kieran had his hands wrapped around Ava’s neck, squeezing tightly.

“You hid my son away from me?” he growled, his eyes filled with pure fury as he looked down at our sister. “You knew.”

He kicked the gun from Ava’s hand, letting it fall to the ground, while I stood there, dumbfounded, and shocked with the newfound information.

“You fucking knew!” he roared, and I could see his fingers pressing against her larynx, her eyes fluttering, her mouth opening and closing, trying to pull in air.

“Y-you’re cho-king me,” Ava sputtered as Maya laughed, tucking the gun into the back of her pants again.

“Good,” Kieran sneered. “Kill.” He looked up at me. “Take the baby.”

“No!” Ava wailed. “She’s mine. They’re both mine.”

“Cillian!” he blasted. Without a second thought, I moved toward them, carefully pulling the baby away from Ava.

“No,” Ava cried, trying to get away from Kieran, holding the baby close to her chest. “You can’t take her. She’s mine. Mine!”

“She was never yours,” I sneered at her, finally getting the baby from her, and pressing the baby to my chest. “Neither one of them were ever yours, and they never will be. You’re sick, Ava.”

“Nooooo!” she cried as I stepped away. I looked down at the little girl in my arms, feeling as if someone sucker punched me as my eyes connected with her blue ones. She was a little replica of Ophelia, from her eyes to the pouty lips, and the way she glared at me, still covered in blood.

“We need to get them to the hospital,” Maya said, pulling me back from my reverie. “Take him as well.” She came closer, handing over the little boy in her arms. They were tiny, too fucking tiny, and I worried that the mess Tristan and Ava made would harm these little kids.

“You need to go, Kill,” Maya said, putting her hand on my shoulder. “Find Atlas and get him to drive. Just go.”

“What are you going to do with them?” I asked, looking at a crying Ava, and Tristan on the ground with blood pooling out from his thigh.

“We will handle it,” was all she said, before she started pushing me away from them and toward the front entrance of the hangar. “Find out if they got Ophelia.”

I simply nodded, and without looking back, I started walking toward the front, where I hoped the paramedics would still be. But as I rounded the corner, I realized it was too dark, and the ambulance was nowhere to be seen.

“Fuck,” I cursed, looking through the crowd of bikers gathered around until I saw the blond hair of a man I knew could help. “Atlas!” I bellowed, rushing toward him, careful not to run. The last thing I wanted was to drop these two. “Atlas!” I yelled out again, finally catching his attention.

He frowned at first, seeing me walking toward him, but when his eyes traveled down my body, landing on the two blanket-covered bundles in my arms, he jumped into action, sprinting toward me, leaving the man he was talking with behind.

“Are those—”

“Yes. But we need to go, now. They need a doctor.”

“Come on,” he said, slowly guiding me toward the Mercedes parked on the curb. “I’ll drive.”

“Ophelia?” I asked as he opened the door, but I caught the look on his face, and I knew it was bad. “How bad is it?”

“Really bad,” he choked, avoiding my eyes. “I don’t... I don’t know if she’s going to survive. They were reviving her here. Storm... he’s not gonna survive this, man.”

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“We need to get to the hospital. If he sees the kids, he will at least have something to hold on to. He will. Come on,” I urged him as I sat inside, keeping the kids as close to my chest as possible. “We need to get there as soon as possible. I don’t know shit about babies, but I don’t think they should be this pale.”

As if my words spurred him on, Atlas slammed the door behind me and rushed to the other side, sliding in with catlike grace, turning the ignition on as he slammed his door as well. We pulled onto the road, and just as I instructed, he slammed on the gas, propelling us toward the main road, taking us to the hospital.

I just needed Ophelia to be okay. I looked down at the little girl who kept her eyes on me, while her brother slept, feeling relieved that we at least got to them before Ava could take them away. We at least got them.

I hoped it was enough. It had to be enough.



I FUCKING HATED HOSPITALS. THE SMELL OF THEM, THE feeling of despair, lack of hope, the antiseptic clinging to the air—I fucking hated it all. But for the first time in my life, I fucking loved them.

I loved them because as soon as we rushed through the doors, the doctors surrounded us, understanding we were with Ophelia who was brought in not too long ago, and started working on the kids. I had no idea what was happening, what they were talking about. The only thing I understood was when they said NICU.

They were taking them to the NICU.

“Are you the father?” one of the nurses asked, holding a chart in front of her.

“No.” I shook my head. “I’m not. He came in with their mother not too long ago. The girl with the open stomach,” I tried explaining, and understanding dawned in her eyes.

“Okay. She’s in surgery right now, but I need you to come with me. We’ll get the father later, but I’ll show you where we’re taking the kids.”

Atlas was on the phone, talking fast. While I couldn’t quite catch everything he’d been saying, I knew they were taking Tristan and Ava to the Club. Maya and Kieran were with them. I just hoped they would come to the hospital before Ophelia woke up. Because she had to wake up. She fucking had to. And I needed to see my brother, to make sure we were okay.

“Come on, darling,” the nurse urged me on as she started walking through the hallway, leading to the set of elevators. I had no idea what she was talking about, my mind halfway here and halfway with Ophelia.

Was she okay? Was she alive? Fuck, I needed to find Storm.



The nurse urged me to go into the elevator, just as Atlas raced toward us, telling her he would follow. I didn't care which one of us was going to go, but I knew that Storm needed to know the kids were okay.

"Indigo is with Storm," Atlas whispered to me as the elevator started going up, while the nurse kept her back to us. "He said that he's never seen him like this."

"I can imagine. But his kids will need him, especially now. They're scared, alone, and they'll need at least one of their parents with them."

"We will get him there," Atlas agreed, placing his hand on my shoulder. "You did the right thing."

"I know." I had no doubt in my mind that we did the right thing, even if it meant that Tristan and Ava wouldn't be among the living for much longer.

I had a feeling that Maya wouldn't allow that to happen, no matter how much Kieran insisted. I knew he was pissed at Ava right now, but he always had a soft spot for her, and she was always able to get him to her side. I just hoped he wouldn't forget what a monster she was now, once the initial rage subsided.

"We're here," the nurse announced as the doors of the elevator slid open, and she stepped outside, leading us toward the large waiting room. "Wait here, guys."

She left us standing in the middle of the room as she disappeared through the set of sliding doors. We could hear the kids wailing, the machines beeping, and it was all becoming too much to bear. I dropped down on one of the chairs, unable to stand anymore.

"What a fucking night," Atlas said, sitting down next to me. My heart raced, thundering against my ribs. "I never thought this would happen."

"Me neither," I agreed. "I'm really sorry, Atlas." I looked at him. "I had no idea that it was them. I really had no idea."

"Hey." He turned his head to look at me. "I know. We all know and we aren't blaming you. We know how much you

love Ophelia, and we know you would never do something like this.” If they only knew how much I loved Ophelia, Storm would never be okay with me sticking around. “This isn’t your fault, Cillian.”

“Somehow it feels as if it is,” I murmured, just as the nurse came out, smiling at us.

Both of us jumped up, waiting for her to talk.

“The babies are fine. Slightly underweight, but that’s normal with preemies,” she said as if any of it made any sense to us.

“Will they survive?” I blurted out, unable to contain my words.

“Of course they will.” She chuckled. “We’re placing them in incubators, but we don’t think they will need to be inside them for more than two days. They’re already extremely strong, and that little girl has a strong set of lungs on her.” She grinned. “That one will be a troublemaker, for sure.”

“Oh thank God,” I murmured, dragging my hand over my face. “We need to tell Storm,” I told Atlas. “He needs to be here.”

“That’s the father, right?” the nurse asked. “I can take you to him, and the doctor will meet him here to take him to see them.”

“Please,” I murmured. “You’re gonna stay here, right?” I asked Atlas. Rationally, I knew that the danger was gone, that both Ava and Tristan were locked up, but having Atlas with them here, even if he was only in the waiting room, made me feel better.

“Of course, dude,” Atlas answered. “I’ll be right here. Go and get Storm.”

I nodded mindlessly, looking at the nurse, waiting for her to lead the way. With a soft smile on her face and more understanding than most people I knew had, she led the way back to the elevators, to the floor where Ophelia was fighting for her life.

As we exited the hallway leading to the waiting room where Storm was, I almost collapsed at the sight of him.

Storm, the man who always looked so strong, seemed so small, sitting on the floor, with his head between his knees. His shoulders shook, and I had no doubt that he was crying quietly, while Indigo kept looking at him with a worried expression.

“Is that him?” the nurse asked, whispering to me.

“Yeah,” I choked. Seeing him like this was not something I ever thought I would see. Storm was a force to be reckoned with and seeing his pain like this was a hard pill to swallow.

I slowly walked toward him, ignoring the glare Indigo sent my way, and crouched down on the floor next to him, placing my hand on his shoulder.

“Storm,” I murmured. His head snapped up, hitting the wall in the process, the tears he’d been trying to hide obvious on his face.

Crimson streaks of Ophelia’s blood were all over his clothes, his hands, his face, and something told me he didn’t want to wash it away.

“Not right now, Kill,” he breathed out, keeping his pain coiled tightly, trying to hide it from me, but there was no use. He loved her—loved her more than any of us, and I knew he needed her more than air to breathe.

I didn’t beat around the bush. I knew he needed to hear this. I knew he needed to know his kids were okay.

“The twins are here, Storm,” I murmured, waiting to see his reaction, and he didn’t disappoint. His eyes snapped open, immediately connecting with mine. “They’re okay. Alive. They’re up in the NICU.”

“They’re here?” he breathed out, barely whispering as if he too couldn’t believe they were okay.

“Yes.” I smiled, hoping it would ease the tension. “We caught Tristan and Ava before they could run away with them, Storm. We fucking caught them.”

“I want to see them,” he said, looking behind me at the nurse, finally realizing what was happening. “Can I see them?”

“Absolutely.” She chuckled as he jumped up with renewed energy. “Come on. I’ll take you to them,” the nurse said, slowly walking toward the hallway where we came from.

“Storm,” I called out to him as he followed her. “The girl,” I choked. “She looks exactly like Ophelia.”

His face scrunched, his eyes filling with new tears, and he simply nodded, before coming back to me and taking me into a bear hug.

“Thank you, Kill,” he murmured, clinging to me. “Thank you for bringing them back.”

“Always, man,” I murmured, controlling my own emotions. “Ophelia is family, and she’s going to be okay.”

“She died on me, Cillian,” he sobbed, his voice breaking, his body shaking, and I wrapped my arms tighter around him. “She fucking died two times on the way to the hospital.”

“She will be okay,” I repeated, willing it, fucking manifesting it. “She’s strong.”

“I know,” he murmured, taking a step back. “I’ll be back,” he said, looking between me and Indigo. “Tell me if anything changes.”

With those parting words, he ran after the nurse who waited for him at the elevators, leaving me with Indigo, who suddenly collapsed into a chair. Only then did I see how tired he looked. I crossed the waiting room and sat down next to him, looking at the doors that had signage that only authorized personnel could go through, and waited.

“Thank you, Cillian,” Indigo grunted. “I was worried about him, so...” He looked at me. “Thank you.”

“I would do anything for her, Indigo.”

“I know you would, and she’s lucky to have you in her life. She’s really, really lucky.”

No. I was the lucky one.

I was lucky to have her friendship, to have her with me. We were all lucky to have Ophelia in our lives. I knew without a doubt in my mind that if she didn't survive this, none of us would ever be the same.



## STORM

WAS IT POSSIBLE TO HAVE YOUR HEART SPLIT INTO TWO, BOTH parts beating equally strong, as you watched the two most perfect human beings in front of you, sleeping peacefully, safe, and far away from the danger that brought them into life?

My heart cracked wide open as the nurse brought me into the room where my kids, *our* kids, were recovering from tonight's ordeal, stealing the breath from my lungs. My hand trembled as I placed it on the plexiglass separating my little baby girl from me, my eyes misting. The tears I thought had dried up on the way here suddenly made themselves known, rushing down my cheeks as I stared at the two of them.

I thought I couldn't love another person more than I loved Ophelia, but these two angels... I didn't know how to describe this feeling. There was nothing I had ever felt that could come close to this vice grip on my lungs, on my throat, my heart shattering and being put together with each passing second. I knew without a doubt in my mind that I would destroy anything and anyone to keep them safe, to keep them happy, far away from the dangers this world brought with itself.

"They look so tiny." I broke down, my knees buckling from the force of love and fear I felt for them. "So freaking tiny."

"They are," the nurse who brought me here whispered. "But they're strong. Their vitals are rather good for preemies, and they'll be out of here in no time." She had a soft smile on her face when I turned around to look at her, my eyes searching for the traces of lies, but there were none.

They were really okay. They were really here.

She pushed the chair toward me, indicating with her head for me to sit, and she didn't have to tell me twice. I suddenly felt exhausted, powerless to do anything except to wait while their mom battled for her life a few floors down. She didn't even know they were here, far away from the monster that wanted to take them away from us.

My head swiveled right just as my boy opened his tiny mouth, yawning, flailing his tiny arms around, but he kept his eyes closed.

"She's looking at you," the nurse murmured, and when I turned my attention back to my baby girl, I saw her mom there instead—Ophelia's eyes and the tiny nose, that pouty lower lip and the weight in that little gaze. I didn't know much about babies. Hell, I didn't know much about anything, but the purity emanating from her tiny body left me shaking in my seat, while every single atom in my body screamed of love, of fear, because I knew they would need to be protected.

They would need to be cherished.

"Can I hold her?" I asked, keeping my hands on the incubator, hating the separation between us. I wanted to touch them to make sure they were truly okay. I didn't believe the machines beeping around us, or the vitals I didn't know how to read. I didn't believe doctors or any of the nurses, even though deep down, I knew they were telling the truth.

But I wanted to make sure for myself.

"No," the nurse murmured. "But you can touch them. Here." I heard her footsteps behind me and from the corner of my eye, I saw her coming closer to the incubator. She pulled it closer to me and stood on the side. "Do you see these openings." She indicated the two holes on the side of the incubator. "Keep your gloves on. They're stable but we don't want them to catch bacteria we tend to carry on us."

"But I washed my hands."

"Still." She smiled. "Their immune system is practically non-existent at the moment, which is why we need to keep



them in a sterile environment, at least for a day.”

I hated it, but I didn't have a choice, and she was right. Their health came first. It didn't matter if I touched them with my gloves on or without. What mattered was that they knew I was here. My own parents didn't care whether I would live or die, and I never wanted to have these kids feeling as if they were alone or abandoned.

I wanted to give them the world and everything else I didn't have as a kid. I wanted them to have a better life than Ophelia and me.

Nerves racked through me as I lifted both my arms, reaching through the openings toward her. Wires sprung from her body, kept on her tiny stomach with stickers. No matter how much I hated seeing them, I knew they were for her own good.

I dragged my finger over her tiny leg, her pale skin almost the same color as the white gloves I wore, and a shudder ran through me, knowing that I could've lost them all. I couldn't stop the tears from running down my cheeks and I didn't want to.

My palm slowly closed over the top of her head, while she still kept on looking at me, observing me, as if she didn't know if she could trust me or not. A small furrow appeared between her tiny eyebrows, barely visible, and I smiled at her, trying to convey all my love for her in that one tiny movement.

“Hi, Malia,” I crooned as the pain laced through me, Ophelia's words on repeat in my mind. God, I needed her to survive, to come back to us. I needed her to see them, to see our kids, to hold them and show them how much she loved them.

All three of us needed her.

“I'm your dad, baby girl,” I sobbed, dragging my thumb over her forehead, hoping that she knew—that they both knew—how much we loved them. “I'm your daddy, darling.” A watery smile appeared on my face, and I could see in the

reflection on the plastic of the incubator how messy I looked, but I didn't care.

All I cared about were these kids and Ophelia. Nothing else mattered.

"I love you so much, darling." My voice broke while she blinked, her tiny eyelashes pressing down on her cheeks before she opened her eyes again, the cerulean blue staring back at me with so much patience, and I hoped I wouldn't screw this up. "And your mommy loves you as well," I hummed. "So freaking much."

"She is definitely the louder one." The nurse laughed, pulling my attention to her. "When they brought them in, I thought she would scream the hospital down."

I couldn't help but chuckle at that.

"She's like her mom then," I added, unable to keep my eyes away from her. "Extremely loud."

"Oh that's an understatement." The nurse laughed with me. "He kept quiet," she said, looking at the incubator where my son slept. "Observing everything, looking at us. When he realized that he wasn't in any danger, he just fell asleep."

Yeah, that sounded like me.

"How long are they going to be here?" I asked, looking at her. I held onto hope, no matter how small it was, that Ophelia would be okay, that all four of us would be able to get out of here together.

"Their vitals are relatively good, but the doctor wants to keep them here for at least a few weeks, for observation and to make sure they're all good before we move them to a regular ward. I reckon they should be okay. There was no jaundice, nothing to indicate any possible infections. I'm sure they'll be out in no time."

In no time, she said, and that hope I held onto just beamed brighter, expanding in my chest at the mere thought that we would be okay. We would be fine, all of us.

I slowly moved backward, pulling my hands out of Malia's incubator, but she didn't like it. Not even a little bit.

The moment I started turning away from her, to go to her brother, a wail louder than should be possible from such a tiny body, rocked through the room, her tiny eyes squeezed shut as she cried, complaining.

"Oh-oh," the nurse murmured. "Someone isn't happy she isn't getting all the attention."

"Is she okay?" I asked, going closer to her again, my heart beating frantically in my chest. "Is she in pain?"

"No." The nurse shook her head. "She just probably liked having you with her and now she wants it back." The nurse chuckled. "Look." She moved both incubators closer to me. "Now you can be with both of them."

I looked toward my boy's incubator, seeing him wide awake now, listening to Malia's cries. As I pushed my left hand through his incubator and my right through Malia's, cupping her head and holding his tiny leg, she quieted down, content once again.

"Malakai," I murmured, looking at him. "I love you, son," I whispered, tracing patterns over his leg, then to his arm, until he grabbed my finger with his tiny hand, holding me tighter than I knew could be possible.

I looked back at Malia, my vision blurring from the tears, and saw her looking at me, no doubt trying to understand who I was.

"I love you both," I whispered. "And your mom does too."

I sat there until my eyes started closing, until the nurse nudged me before I could fall off of the chair. As I looked at the two of them, both of them sleeping, I knew I had to go back down to my Sunshine.

"What time is it?"

"You nodded off for maybe fifteen minutes," the nurse whispered. "But they told me that the surgery is almost over if you'd like to go back down. The doctor will be out soon."

I wanted to. God, I needed to go down, to hear what he had to say, but I didn't want to leave Malia and Malakai alone. I didn't want them to think that we were abandoning them.

Whatever she saw on my face, the nurse understood. With slow steps, she came to me, placing her hand on my shoulder, bringing my attention back to her.

"They're going to be okay for an hour or so," she said. "I'll be here to keep an eye on them and you can come back later on. Okay?"

"Okay." I nodded. "You promise to keep an eye on them?"

"I do." She smiled. "Now go back down. Do you know the way?"

"Yeah," I murmured. "Thank you." I smiled at her. "I... I don't know how to repay this."

"Nah, just doing my job. Now go." She ushered me out of the room. "There's another person here that needs you."

She didn't have to tell me twice. I removed the gown they gave me before I entered NICU, removed the gloves I had on my hands, and all but sprinted toward the elevators, and down to the floor where Cillian and Indigo still sat, waiting for the news. Just as I came to the waiting room and the doors leading to the operating rooms, the doctor came out with a grim look on his face.

"No," I murmured, closing the distance between him and me. His gown was covered in blood—Ophelia's blood—and I fucking hated the defeated look on his face. "Please, no," I murmured, feeling my voice waver with each passing second. "She isn't—" my voice broke, unable to even utter the words.

Seconds felt like eternity as he looked at me, his tired eyes taking in the state I was in, but I didn't have time for his pity or for him to choose his words. I needed to know. I fucking had to know. I could feel the color draining from my face as I waited for him to say it, to shatter my world, to take away one good thing that had happened to me.

"No, no," the doctor finally spoke. "Ophelia is stable for now, but she's lost a lot of blood."

The whoosh of air pushing out of me almost knocked me off my feet. A strong pair of hands landed on my shoulders from behind, and I tilted my head, seeing Indigo there. He had a grim look on his face while he stared at the doctor, but it did nothing to suppress my nerves.

“She coded two times on the table,” the doctor said flatly as if he was talking about a fucking sheep somewhere in the field and not my Sunshine.

“But she’s okay?” I asked, hoping to hear it from him as well. “She’s going to be okay?”

The flat set of his lips was starting to piss me off, but I had to keep my cool. I could feel my anger brewing under my skin, waiting to be released, but for all his robotic movements, I knew the doctor was only doing his job.

“We’re taking her to the ICU,” the doctor said. “But the first twenty-four hours are critical. We will keep monitoring her throughout the night, and someone will always be—”

“Is she going to live?” I thundered. I was done with listening to the nonsense. He wasn’t giving me a straight answer.

“Calm down, Storm,” Indigo murmured behind me, squeezing my shoulders. “He has to explain it all.”

“I don’t know, Mr. Knoxx,” the doctor murmured, looking me straight in the eye. “I don’t want to give you false hopes because it wasn’t good. Whoever did it, knew what they were doing, so they didn’t cause any unnecessary damage. But the amount of blood she’s lost and the number of times she coded are what worries us. Her blood pressure is low, and we don’t know if there is any permanent damage to her brain from the lack of oxygen she went through.”

Every word felt like a knife slicing through my body, but I stood strong, listening to what he had to say, even though I wanted to sit down on the floor and fucking wail for her. But I couldn’t. Our kids needed me, she needed me, and I’d be damned if I left them alone to fight through this.

“She’s strong,” The doctor finally smiled. “And I think she wants to live.” She better. “But we need to monitor her, and we won’t know for sure what the verdict is until tomorrow.”

“Can I see her?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

He seemed to contemplate his answer, but whatever it was that he saw on my face broke through his resolve and he slowly nodded.

“One of the nurses will take you to her, but Mr. Knoxx, you need to know...” he trailed off. “She will look extremely fragile, and I don’t want you to get frightened. There will be monitors attached to her, and she won’t look like she usually does.”

I fucking knew that, and I knew it wouldn’t be easy seeing her like that, but the need to see with my own eyes that she was still breathing, that she was still with us, was stronger than the fear of seeing her so fragile, so broken.

“I don’t care,” I gritted out. “I need to see her.”

I needed it more than air to breathe. Without further ado, the doctor explained how the night would look and left us to stand there until the nurse came to take me to her, to take me to my Sunshine.



THE FIRST TIME I SAW OPHELIA ON THAT STREET, MARCHING toward me with that cocky smile and the sway in her hips, it was like looking at the sun and not being able to look away. I was mesmerized, taken, and in that moment, I knew I had to have her no matter what the consequences would be. I had to have this larger-than-life woman, who oozed confidence and something akin to danger, as she dragged her hand over my bike, making it feel as if she was dragging it over my own skin.

The way her eyes sparkled, the way she held onto me as we went away from that place, I knew I had found my soulmate.

Which was why the sight of her in the hospital bed, attached to the machines, with wires spreading from her body, made me want to keel over. The doctor warned me, the nurse did as well, but I didn't comprehend it quite fully until I saw her now.

Was this what she felt when I laid in the hospital bed, unconscious, fighting for my life? This fucking terror rushing through my veins, the mere thought of never hearing her voice, never seeing her eyes, made it harder to breathe.

"Sunshine," I croaked as I walked toward her, every step weighed down with a lead weight. My shoulders sagged as I stopped next to her bed, pulling the chair closer to me, and sitting down, unable to take my eyes away from her.

"I need you to come back to me, Sunshine," I murmured, taking her hand in mine, careful not to screw up any of the wires attached to her. "I really, really need you to come back," I sobbed.

Her skin had lost its color, the pale, ashen complexion right in front of my eyes, and I wanted to turn back the time, to keep her with me at home, to tell her to stay. Hell, I should've been there with her. I should've been the one protecting her, but we had become too relaxed, too comfortable, and this happened.

"I can't go through this life without you, Phee," I murmured, pressing my lips to her hand. "I don't want our kids to grow up without their mom. I don't want us to only have memories." I spoke softly, praying that she could hear me.

"They look perfect, darling." I smiled through the tears rushing down my face. "So fucking perfect, and I love them more than anything else. Malia, our daughter..." I cleared my throat. "She looks exactly like you. Loud, proud, and so observant." I smiled. "And Malakai." I laughed. "I'm pretty sure he's like me. Quiet, but will probably end up being a bigger troublemaker than she is."

My thumb rubbed circles over the top of her hand, the sound of the beeping machines around me breaking through

the otherwise silent room.

The fatigue clung to my skin, the need to close my eyes and drift into oblivion too strong to ignore, but I shook my head, staying awake for her, for our kids.

“I need you, baby,” I murmured, putting my cheek on top of the bed, right next to her hip, looking at her face. “I need you with me. Life makes no sense if you’re not here. Nothing makes sense if you aren’t with me. You gave me the most perfect gift, Ophelia, and I need you to wake up so that I can show you how thankful I am. How much I love you. The plans I have for us. I want it all, you know, and I want it with you.

“And if you’d like, I would even want more kids. One more who looks like you and one more who looks like me. Our little clones.” I chuckled. “I have a feeling that Malia is going to be a hellraiser, just like her mommy, but we need you to come back to us. If you see the light, don’t you dare fucking go into it. I know it looks pretty, but you aren’t allowed to go there.”

My body felt too small for the feelings coursing through my veins. My heart was too fragile to even think of her leaving us, because I wasn’t lying... I couldn’t imagine my life without her. Years ago, I could have, because she was nothing more but a figment of my need, the girl I thought I had dreamed of.

I wasn’t ready for her, for her spark to illuminate my life, for her demons to so perfectly fit with mine. I wasn’t ready for Ophelia Aster then, but I was more than ready now. I was ready for us to live life without the impending danger from those that wanted to hurt her.

I was ready for sleepless nights, football games, recitals of our kids and lazy Sunday mornings where both of us would just lie in the bed for hours on end.

I was fucking ready, and I needed her to come back, to be ready as well, to truly start living, with me.

“Just come back,” I whispered, feeling my eyelids closing. “Come back to me.”



I would do everything in my power to show her how beautiful life could be. Even after everything we went through, it could be so perfect if you had the right person by your side. And I knew—we were perfect for each other.

As my eyes closed, lulling me into sleep, I prayed for the first time in years. I prayed for her to be okay, to come out of this, to look at me, annoyed that she had to stay in the hospital.

Slowly succumbing to the darkness, I felt the onslaught of memories, both good and bad, rushing to the forefront of my mind. I embraced them, replaying every single thing we did together, everything that made us who we were, and I let myself fall asleep, hoping that by tomorrow, she would be looking at me, bitching because she had to be here.



## MAYA

I WASN'T A STRANGER TO PAIN, TO SORROW AND ANGER, BUT I had never felt like I did tonight. The moment I saw that spineless little bitch running out back, with my sister's kids in tow, I fucking lost it. I would've killed them both on the spot if they weren't holding the twins, and I wouldn't even blink an eye.

If there was one thing I learned during my time in Mexico was that forgiveness was a powerful tool, but it didn't mean you had to use it. Just because someone repented, because they apologized, it didn't mean you had to accept it. Not accepting it didn't make you a bad person, it made you fucking human, and that's what all of us were striving for.

To feel human.

To feel alive in the midst of the terror our lives had become.

To push through when everything else was against you.

And for me, the thing that would make me feel alive tonight would be the head of that motherfucking piece of shit on a platter.

But as I stepped through the main door of the house, Creed stepped in front of me, torment I had never seen before evident in his eyes, and I remembered that he knew Ava. That before our parents screwed us over, the two of them were together, expecting a baby, until it was all taken away.

"I know what you're going to do," he murmured without any strength, and I knew he wasn't here to stop me.

“Are you going to stop me?”

“No.” He shook his head. “That girl down there...” he shuddered. “That’s not the Ava I used to know.”

“Or maybe you never really knew her,” I added, seeing the realization dawning on his face. “I think that you all were fooled with her sweet persona and the mask she was wearing. But Creed,” I placed a hand on his shoulder, “I saw through her long before any of you did, and that was why she always hated me so much. Why she always bitched to Ophelia about me. And I’m sorry this is all hurting you, but you gotta know—none of it is your fault.”

“I just...” he shuddered. “I can’t believe she would do something like this.”

“The sooner you realize that the girl we’re holding down in the basement isn’t the girl you used to love, the better it will be. I know she has always been jealous of Ophelia and everything she had, but this... this is more than that.”

“I know,” he admitted. “But there’s no excuse for the monstrosities she’s committed, and I can’t fault you for doing this.”

I knew he wouldn’t be the problem. There was another person in this house right now who would try to stop me. I didn’t have to be clairvoyant to know that he would do anything to save his fucking sister, and that left as on opposite sides, because I wouldn’t let this go.

Not just because she tried to kill Ophelia and take her kids away, but because she took my kid from me. She took my son away, making me believe that I was all alone in this world, that there was nobody coming to save us.

So I learned how to fight. I learned how to survive, how to plan and how to gather people around me who could help me with my plan.

She took away the person I loved the most, breaking my heart over and over again, and if he thought I would let it go, he had another thing coming.

“You know where to go?” Creed asked, taking a step backward.

“Show me,” I murmured, letting him lead the way through the foyer where we first gathered when we came over for Christmas. We passed next to the living room, going to the far end of the house, where the tall, metal door stood, leading to the basement, and the nerves I had tried to squash earlier reappeared.

Not because I was about to kill the bitch, but because I knew Kieran would be down there, like a fucking guard dog.

“Maya,” Creed murmured as he opened the door. “He’s down there, and he isn’t allowing anyone anywhere near her. He knows what’s coming for her, but I don’t know if he’s going to take it well that you’re the one coming.”

“I don’t give a fuck if he takes it well or not, Creed,” I grunted, looking at the illuminated staircase that would lead me to my target. “She made her bed and now she’s going to fucking sleep in it—forever. She took everything away from me, and now I’m going to put her out of her misery.”

“I’m just saying. He’s been a mess since he dropped her off. He wouldn’t talk to any of us, wouldn’t move away, barking at all of us to leave them alone. I have never seen that man looking so distraught.”

Cry me a fucking river. He knew she was about to die. He had to have known, but he was smart enough to at least bring her here.

“Where’s Tristan?” Creed asked as I took the first step toward the staircase.

“In the front.” I grinned. “Chained to the post.”

The quiet chuckle that bubbled over his lips surprised me, and I joined him, softly laughing along with him.

“I’ll take care of him.”

“Thank you,” I mumbled. Before he could utter another word, I pushed my legs down the stairs, slowly descending, as shadows played on the wall. Within mere seconds, I had my

eyes plastered on Kieran's back as he stared at his sister, chained inside the cell.

"I said to leave us alone," he barked, still looking at her. Her eyes widened when she saw me, quickly replaced by a scowl, but she didn't say a word.

"I don't give a fuck what you did or didn't do, Kieran," I bit back, reaching the ground, and slowly walking toward him.

His head swiveled toward me, his bloodshot eyes taking me in from head to toe, landing on the knife strapped to my thigh. We both knew why I was here—it was inevitable.

"Maya," he breathed out. All the emotions contained in those four letters as he uttered my name wouldn't sway me. Not by him, not by the emotions he wasn't even trying to hide anymore.

The first time I saw him down in Mexico, I thought he was sent to kill me, but I was wrong. I hated the way his eyes perused me, seeing more than I wanted him to see.

I hated that my blood boiled, humming at his nearness, because I didn't have time for this, I didn't fucking want this, especially not with him. I told myself it was the fact that I hadn't been with anyone in a very long time, but deep down I knew, I was lying to myself.

I cared for this motherfucker. Unbeknownst to me, I cared for him, and I hated myself for caring, because he was already one of many who broke me before. But no matter how much I tried, no matter how much I wanted to hate him, I couldn't, because every time I closed my eyes, every time I tried to erase him from my memories, I remembered the lost look on his face as he moved above me, begging me to forgive him, calling me by my sister's name.

I still could see the shattered glass on the floor in that living room, and the defeat on his face. I still tasted the terror dripping from his lips, the heartbreak happening right in front of my eyes, and I used him as much as he used me.

I pretended I was someone he needed me to be because I knew he would never look at me the same way he looked at

Ophelia. I knew that the love I felt for the boy I grew up with, the boy who would never be mine, would always have to be my little secret.

I forgot what it felt like, loving him in secret, while he conquered the world with my sister by his side. The moment he took me back here, it all came rushing back, like an avalanche of fucking emotions and I wasn't able to stop it. I wasn't able to do anything because he was still my Kieran.

He was still the boy who spoke to me of stars, the boy whose eyes made me feel dizzy.

But right now, he was the man standing between me and the woman who needed to die, and I couldn't care less if she was his sister.

"Move, Kieran," I said flatly, stepping closer to him. "You already know why I'm here."

"No." He stubbornly shook his head. "I can't let you do this, Maya."

"I'm not fucking asking you."

"And I'm not fucking letting you!" he thundered, the hair at the nape of my neck rising at the pure anguish taking over his face. "She's my sister."

"And she tried to kill my sister," I bit out. "She tried to take her kids away from her."

"Maya, please—"

"I wouldn't mind stabbing you as well, K," I grunted, coming closer and closer. "An eye for an eye, darling."

"She's not well," he murmured. "Please don't do this."

"I don't give a flying fuck, Kieran. Forgiveness is something I don't have left in my soul."

"No, please. You forgave me," He stepped closer to me, taking a hold of my left hand, lacing our fingers together. "Please don't do this. Please."

"There was nothing to forgive, Kieran. You used me and I used you," I murmured. "That's where the story ends. I know

that Ophelia thinks otherwise, but I have nothing to forgive you for.”

I hated the feel of his fingers between mine, the lost dreams I wanted to shake off coming back in full force. The dreams where he loved me, where we were happy, far away from this fucked-up world. But dreams were a slippery slope into the field of sorrow, and I’d had enough of pain and sorrow to last me a lifetime.

I pulled my hand back from him, shaking off the feelings coursing through me, and glared as he stepped between me and the entrance to the cell.

“We still need to talk, Maya,” he murmured.

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“I beg to differ,” he stated, glaring at me now. “Why didn’t you tell me? Why—”

“Because it was none of your business!” I blasted, done with this entire conversation. “It was your family that took him away from me!” I bellowed, remembering my screams, my wails, the pleading with the woman who took him away. I remembered myself on my knees, begging to see my son, to just hold him one time. “She,” I pointed at Ava with the knife, “orchestrated it all. She took my baby boy from me, and she’s going to pay for it.”

“Maya—”

“Move, Kieran!” I closed the distance between us, pushing the knife under his throat. “Move or I’ll kill you as well. I don’t fucking mind.”

“Do it,” he breathed out, his lips close to mine. “Come one, do it.” He pressed into the knife, the tip cutting through his skin. As his blood rushed down his throat, disappearing into the black T-shirt he wore, my resolve started shaking, because we both knew I wouldn’t be able to hurt him. “If you want to hurt her, you’re going to have to hurt me too, and we both know you won’t do it.”

Did we now?



Kieran Nightingale thought I was still the same girl he dragged around, hiding me in shadows, only visiting when it suited him. He thought I was still a naive girl following him around, living off of the breadcrumbs he decided to throw my way, because I didn't know better.

I didn't want better. But I deserved so much more than that.

"Kieran," I purred, pressing my chest to his. "You have no idea who you're fucking with." I smiled. "But you're about to find out."

In the moment of weakness, while he was too preoccupied with my lips right in front of his, I grabbed the back of his hair and lifted my leg, hitting him behind the knees with my heel, pushing him right behind me, opening up the pass toward the cell door. I already knew it was unlocked, otherwise they wouldn't have kept her inside the cell like this, chained to the wall.

"Maya!" he bellowed as I slipped inside, shutting the door behind me and turning the lock from the inside, putting the key in my pocket. "Don't!" He slammed against the bars, trying to stop me from doing what was inevitable, while Ava followed my every move, every step, until I was in front of her.

There were no witty remarks this time, no sarcasm dripping from her poisonous lips, only Kieran's wails and pleading to stop, to go back to him. But it was too late now. There was stopping me from what needed to be done.

It was too late for pleading, for fake professions of love, too late for anything, because I had a target, and she was right in front of me.

"You came," she finally said, eyeing the knife in my hand. "I didn't think you had it in you."

"You don't know anything about me, Ava."

"No?" She smirked. "I know a lot more than you'd like me to, Black Mamba."

I stumbled backward at the name she used—the name I hadn't used since I came back with Kieran. The name none of them knew, and I wanted to keep it that way.

“You look shocked, Maya.” She snickered. “I know everything.”

“Really?” I grinned, coming closer to her. “Then you must know that today is the day you die.”

“He will never forgive you if you kill me,” she answered, so sure of herself.

“I know,” I murmured. “But I can live with that, Ava. I can live, knowing that you will never hurt another human being. I can live with that because I'll know that I got the revenge I always wanted to have.”

“It won't bring you your son back,” she sneered, finally realizing that having Kieran here wouldn't stop me. “You will never see him.”

“I'm going to let you in on a little secret, Ava.” I smiled, leaning down toward her ear. “I already know where my son is, and I know how to get him back.”

“You're lying,” she seethed. “You're fucking lying.”

“I don't see why I would be lying to you.” I beamed at her. “I have nothing to lose and nothing to gain by lying to you. But I am happy that I won't need to protect him from you and your filthiness. He will never have to live in fear again.”

“Fuck you,” she bit out, trying to lift her leg to kick me, but I was faster, and she was fully chained to the wall, unable to move.

I stepped back, looking at her one last time. Without preamble, I sliced over her stomach, in the same way she sliced my sister open, leaving her in that warehouse to die.

“Maya, no!” Kieran roared, rattling the bars, but I didn't turn to him. I didn't want to see his anguish, his pain... I didn't want to stop.

Ava's blood started spilling over her beige shirt, soaking the fabric, and going over her legs, slowly dripping down on

the floor.

Her moans and cries fell on deaf ears, my blood pumping through my veins with the violent rush. Before she could recover, I slammed the knife right into her throat, her wide eyes filled with shock, staring at me, while her brother cried and yelled behind me, cursing me out.

“I’ll see you in hell, Ava.” I grinned, finally stepping away, while she choked on her own blood, slowly dying in front of my eyes.

“What have you done?” Kieran asked, breathing heavily. As I turned around to look at him, his eyes weren’t on Ava, but on me. It wasn’t hatred shining through them—it was the heartbreak I didn’t expect to see.

“What I needed to,” I answered as I slid down the wall, the exhaustion finally catching up with me.

He dropped down to his knees, his hands firmly gripping the bars in front of him. “I will never forgive you for this, Maya,” he breathed out, his voice barely above a whisper, hitting me in the center of my chest. “Never,” he growled, looking at me now, battling with his own emotions.

“It’s a good thing then that I didn’t ask for your forgiveness.”

I just wished I wasn’t lying through my teeth when I said that, because no matter how right what I did was, I knew I had just lost him and there was nothing I could do to get him back.

And as Ava stopped making sounds, choking on her blood, Kieran stood up, leaving the basement without a second glance at me, leaving me behind just like he always did.

I shouldn’t have expected anything else from him.



## OPHELIA

“COME ON, BABY,” SOMEBODY MURMURED TO ME, HIS VOICE sounding a thousand miles away. “Open your eyes for me. Come back to us.”

I knew his voice, knew him better than anything else, but I couldn't open my eyes. I wanted to. God, I was tired of sleeping, of this darkness, but my eyelids felt heavy, pressing down on my eyes, as if somebody kept them closed.

“I need you here, Sunshine,” the voice murmured again, and I knew him. I would know him in every single life.

Storm, I wanted to say. I wanted to shout, to scream his name, but my mouth wasn't cooperating.

“Did you see that?” somebody else said. “Was that—”

“Her finger moved.”

“Come on, Sunshine. You can do it. You can do anything you set your mind to.”

God, my head was killing me. My stomach felt—

Millions of pictures rushed through my head—the memories of Ava and Tristan, my babies crying, getting taken away from me. Oh no.

No, no, no, no.

“Her heart rate is getting elevated,” the third voice said. “She's in distress.”

“No, come on, Phee. Come on, love.” Storm kept encouraging me. But if he was here, and I was here, where

were... Where were our kids? They took them from us. They fucking took them from us.

With a strength I didn't know I possessed, I pushed through the fog surrounding my mind, and opened my eyes, blinking at the blinding light surrounding me.

"T-too br-ight," I croaked, squinting through the sharp pain rushing through my stomach.

"Oh God," Storm cried. I opened my eyes again and his face came into focus, the tear-stained cheeks and the anguish living inside those green eyes I loved so much. "Sunshine." He pressed his lips to my forehead, and I could almost feel all the pain he must have felt while I was out through that simple touch. His body trembled, his hand shaking as he held mine, and I fucking hated seeing him like this.

"W-water," I rasped, trying to pull myself up, but the sharp pain cutting over my abdomen stopped me from moving. I winced as I looked down at my deflated stomach. The panic rushed through me at the sight where my babies used to be, from where they took them, and I frantically searched Storm's eyes, looking for a sign, anything.

"St-orm," I cried out.

"Wait, wait, here." He took a cup filled with water from somewhere on my right, and brought it to my lips with the little straw inside. "Baby sips, Sunshine. Go slowly."

My dried lips wrapped around the tip of the straw, my parched mouth filling with the water slowly, almost painfully, as it slid down my throat, quenching my thirst.

"Oh that feels much better," I murmured, before turning toward Storm. "Hi," I rasped, my lower lip wobbling as I took him in.

The dark angry circles around his eyes had my heart in a vice grip, making it harder to breathe, and I hated the worry lining around his eyes.

"Hi," he breathed out, his eyes drinking me in as if he couldn't believe I was here.

“I’m sorry,” I cried out. “I’m so sorry, Storm. I didn’t...” I hiccupped. “I didn’t mean for this to happen, and now I’ve lost our kids, and—”

“Hey, hey, hey,” he butted in, sitting down on the bed and holding my hand in his. “You didn’t do anything wrong, Sunshine. This wasn’t your fault.”

“But I should’ve listened. I should’ve taken one of the guys with us, and now—”

“And now everything is okay. You’re okay, we’re okay. You’re alive, Phee. You’re here with me.”

“But the twins,” I cried again, unable to stop the tears. “Oh God,” I wailed, inconsolable. My heart was ripping apart, shattering from the pain. They were gone. My babies were gone and I would probably never see them again. “I should have protected them. I should have been stronger.” I hiccupped, letting the tears fall. “It was my fault.”

“Sunshine, hey. Baby, look at me.” I shook my head, keeping my eyes closed.

I couldn’t look at him. I couldn’t see the pain there because I was the one who essentially caused it. It was all my fucking fault.

“Sunshine, please.” His voice broke in the end, begging me to look at him.

“I’m sorry, Storm,” I mumbled. “I’m so so sorry.”

“Okay, that’s it.” The bed dipped, and within seconds, he was in the bed with me, scooping me in his arms, holding me, lying on his side while his thumbs rubbed against my cheeks, his lips peppering kisses all over my face.

“Phee, baby, look at me,” he crooned, but I couldn’t do it. “Baby.” I could hear the smile in his voice, in the way he held me. “The twins are here.”

“What?” I asked, my eyes flashing open immediately. “What are you talking about?”

“The twins.” He grinned, his eyes shining with unshed tears. “They’re here, Sunshine. They’re okay.”

“Oh my God,” I breathed out. “I want to see them. I need to see them, I—”

I started moving, trying to get out of the bed, but the stitches over my stomach stopped me as did the pain rushing through my body. “Fuck,” I groaned.

“You have to stay still,” Storm murmured, holding me down. “You’re still recovering and you won’t be able to walk around anytime soon.”

“But I want to see them, Storm,” I cried out. “I... I didn’t get to hold them. I need to hold them. I want to feel them next to me.”

“They’re in NICU right now,” Storm murmured against my hair. “But they’re okay. Malakai had a small problem with breathing yesterday, but he’s okay. They’re both going to be okay.”

“They’re okay?” I couldn’t believe it until I saw them.

“Yes, they’re okay.” He hummed, his arms not once moving away from me. “I’ll take you to see them, but the doctor needs to give an okay first.”

“But, Storm.” I pouted. “It’s not fair.”

“I know,” he answered with a somber look on his face. “None of this is fair, and I’m sorry, Sunshine,” he whispered. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you.”

“No,” I stopped him. “I’m sorry for not being more careful, for being so reckless, so relaxed. I’m sorry you had to go through this.”

“It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Phee.” His hands enveloped my face, pulling my head up to look at him. “The most important thing is that you’re alive and okay. That’s all I care about, nothing else. I couldn’t care less how we got here as long as you and the twins are alive.”

“Did you see them?” I asked, realizing I’d been out for longer than just one night. “How long was I out?”



“Two days,” he said. “Two excruciating days, Sunshine, and I’m gonna spank you next time if you decide not to wake up for two days.” He laughed. “I think I died at least three times.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, no,” he murmured. “It’s okay. I’m glad you’re alive, that’s all. I’m glad I can hold you like this.”

“I didn’t know we got one more patient,” somebody said from the other side of the room. I turned toward the source, my eyes zeroed in on a man wearing a white coat, kindly smiling at us. But it was the man behind him whose eyes spoke of torment that I wanted to see.

“Kill!” I exclaimed, trying to keep still, but his eyes didn’t answer with the same light I was feeling at seeing him. “Oh, Cillian.”

He shook his head, lowering his head, but I could see the shaking of his shoulders, the anguish emanating from his body.

Storm slowly got up, moving as the doctor came to my side to check my pulse and my vitals, but my eyes were firmly plastered to the man still standing at the door.

“Cillian,” I rumbled, needing him to look at me. “Come here.”

“I can’t,” he mumbled, still looking at the floor.

“Kill, come on. Come here. Please.”

It felt as if an eternity passed before he looked up at me, his eyes filled with tears I hadn’t seen so often on his face, and misery written all over his features.

“I’m sorry, Birdy,” he murmured, slowly stepping inside. “I didn’t know. I—”

“Kill,” I stopped him from rambling more. I could see that he blamed himself, that he wanted to apologize. “This wasn’t your fault.”

“But Tristan and Ava—”

“Are two grown-ass adults who did this because they wanted to, not because you made them.”

The doctor harrumphed from my left, and I could see the small smile playing on his face.

“She’s right, you know,” he added, looking at Cillian. “No one can make another person do something, so it’s futile feeling bad over it.”

“He’s right,” Storm agreed, walking toward Cillian. “We know this wasn’t your fault. We know this wasn’t you, Kill. Come on, now. Go to her. Let her hug you.”

It was as if Storm’s words penetrated through his thick, stubborn skull, and within seconds, he was hovering over me, hugging my upper body, avoiding my stomach.

“I could never be angry at you over this,” I murmured. “This wasn’t your fault.”

“I’ll try to remember that.”

“You better.”

“Well,” the doctor exclaimed just as Cillian moved backward, standing next to me on one side, while Storm stood on the other one. “Who’s ready to meet the kids?”

Regardless of all the heartache, all the pain we went through over the last couple of days, happiness slowly appeared in the center of my body, spreading through every vein, every artery and organ, filling me with light once again.

Storm grabbed a hold of my hand as the doctor brought in a wheelchair, and with their help, I managed to get off of the bed, slowly lowering myself down into the cushioned seat. The uncomfortable tug in my stomach made me wince, and I bit down on my lower lip, stopping the whimpers from erupting from my lungs. Storm would never let me get out of here if he knew how much it hurt just trying to move, but I had to go. I had to see them. I was more than ready to meet my kids, to see them, to tell them how much I loved them.



STERILE WHITE WALLS, MACHINES BEEPING ALL OVER THE place as Storm wheeled me toward the NICU ward, and I was immediately transformed to a different time when he was in the hospital, when I begged and pleaded for him to wake up, to come back to me. The roles were reversed now, and I was thankful we didn't have to run out of the hospital because there was someone trying to kill us.

Storm refused to talk about Ava and Tristan and I had a feeling that at least one of them wasn't among the living anymore, and I had no idea how that made me feel. I loved Ava with all my heart, but what she did... I wouldn't have done this to my worst enemy. The fact that she blamed me for everything bad that has ever happened to her spoke volumes. I didn't know that person who took my kids away from me.

I didn't know the person who tried to kill me, and I couldn't mourn someone I didn't know, someone I didn't care about. I cared about the Ava from years ago, when everything was simpler and less bloody, when we still had silly little dreams and idiotic problems that in reality weren't problems at all.

We were two girls who had no idea what life would bring to them, but we were young and innocent enough to hope for a better tomorrow, for happiness and even love. I think that deep down, even through all those years when I allowed myself to succumb to the darkness and viciousness that my life turned into, I still hoped for love and this exact feeling I had right now as Storm held my hand to the sink, washing them for me, sterilizing them before we went in to see our kids.

"Storm," I murmured, pulling his attention to me. "I love you," I blurted out because I needed to say it. I needed to say it again, because I didn't want him to live with those last words I uttered before I collapsed in his arms. I didn't want it to haunt him, to break him.

His entire body stiffened before he fully turned to me, dropping down on his knees and burrowing his face onto my legs. He trembled as I placed my hands on his back, rubbing in circles as he released an anguished cry, gripping my legs, fisting the gown I was wearing.

“Hey, hey,” I whispered, trying to keep my own emotions in place. “I’m okay. I’m here and I’m not going anywhere.”

“I thought I lost you,” he wept, keeping his face pressed to my legs. “You died in my arms, Sunshine. I... I don’t ever want to feel like that, ever again.”

“Oh, Storm.”

“I’m sorry.” He sniffed. “I just...” he looked up at me. “I want you to know how important you are to me, how much I love you, and my God, Ophelia, I thought my heart would give out that night. I thought...”

“Hey.” I cupped his cheek, bringing him up to my level. “I’m okay.” He didn’t waste a second before pressing his lips to mine. He tasted like tears and despair, and I wanted to erase every trace of pain from his body. “I’ll always be with you, no matter what,” I murmured between the soft kisses. “I promised you always and forever.”

“I know.” His watery smile brought out my own. “I just didn’t know I would have to yell so much at you when you were unconscious.” He laughed. “Come on.” He stood up, taking my hands again into his, washing them all over again. “We need to be clean before we see them. Did you know there are millions of bacteria around us, and all of them could harm the twins.”

I tried to hide my smile, but as he turned toward me, a serious expression on his face, I couldn’t stop the laughter bubbling from deep inside my body. “Are you laughing at me?”

“You’re just so cute, knowing all these things about bacteria.”

“It’s for our kids.” He shrugged. “They need to be safe.”

“I know.” I smiled at him. “I’m just joking with you. You’re all domesticated and soft. I can barely recognize you.”

He slowly turned toward me, while the water dried, toweling my hands with sensual movements, the glint in his eye saying everything I needed to know. There was nothing domestic in this man and as soon as he could, I had a feeling he would devour me fully.

And I couldn’t fucking wait.

“Let’s go and see our kids. I’m pretty sure that the crying we can hear is coming from Malia.” He laughed, but the husky note in his voice had me shivering in my wheelchair.

He pushed us through the door where we came from and rounded the corner. A nurse waited for us, ready to lead us inside. The gowns both of us wore felt like armor as we went through the long hallway and into the area that had signage all over the place that it needed to be sterile.

My heart climbed in my fucking throat, the thought of the two of them actually not being okay wreaking havoc on my nerves. I swallowed it down, keeping still as we came to a stop.

“Look.” Storm pointed toward the two incubators, not too far away from us, and I fucking froze.

I couldn’t see them clearly, not from this distance, but one of them was flailing around with its legs, the sound of a baby crying hitting me straight into the center of my heart.

“Is that—”

“That’s Malia.” Storm chuckled, pushing me in further, following the nurse who pulled away the chair that was placed in front of the incubators, letting us pass through.

And there they were—the two most perfect beings, and they were all mine. Malia’s mouth was wide open, crying and flailing around, her angry little voice almost comical, but the worry gnawed at me, and I turned toward the nurse. “Is she okay? Why’s she crying?”

“Babies cry sometimes, but she’s alright. We fed them not too long ago, and she just woke up from her nap. She keeps doing this lately until he joins her.” She pointed toward Malakai. “Then when he starts crying, she stops, falling asleep as if that was exactly what she wanted to get.”

“Reminds me of someone I know.” Storm chuckled, keeping his hands on my shoulders.

“Can I hold them?” I asked, hopeful beyond measure.

“No, darling, not yet,” Storm answered instead. “They’re still too fragile to be held, but you can touch them. Here.” He pushed my wheelchair closer to their incubators. “Put your hands through those openings.”

I looked at both of them, mesmerized, my eyes volleying between Malia and Malakai, and slowly, with trembling arms, I pushed one hand through the opening of Malia’s incubator, running my finger over her tiny cheek, all the way to her arm, and the other one through Malakai’s, tickling his tiny feet.

“They’re perfect,” I whispered, tears streaming down my face. Emotions I had never felt before rushed through my body, filling my heart with so much love, I could never imagine something like this could happen.

My chest expanded as if it was making additional space for the two little souls who were now very much real and very much here. As I looked at Malia, I noticed her looking at me, her little whimpers quieter, observing what I did.

“Hey, Lia,” I blubbered. “Mommy is here.”

The knowledge that I almost lost them, that they could’ve been taken away from me was still at the forefront of my mind, but I pushed it back, focusing on the now, on the two angels I had.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here from the beginning,” I cried, my heart breaking all over again. “But I’m here now.”

The sound of sniffing came from behind me, and I turned around to see Storm trying to hold his tears at bay, but there was no use. Within seconds, he was crying along with me, pulling the chair closer to us and pushing one hand through

Malakai's incubator, cupping his head, while his other hand stayed firmly on my back, giving me strength.

"They're perfect, Storm."

"They definitely are." His watery smile couldn't be hidden, and I loved this, no matter how we came here.

Our little family.

Our little piece of heaven.

"I love you, Storm," I told him.

"I love you, too." He pressed his lips to my shoulder, looking between the three of us. "I never thought I would have this, or that I would feel this happy, but I do. I am truly happy, Sunshine, and it's all because of you. Thank you," he murmured, looking at me. "Thank you for giving me this."

"No." I smiled at him. "Thank you for never letting go. For fighting for us even when I wanted to give up."

"You mean even when I was a massive..." he stopped himself, looking at the kids and then added in a whisper, "Asshole?"

"Even then." I laughed.

There was always a reason why some things happened and I firmly believed it now. Every single heartache, every time I felt like I couldn't go on, had brought me here, to this perfect moment, and no matter what, I wouldn't change anything.

My life wasn't perfect, and I knew that the things I had done were not things I should be proud of, but I would do it all over again if it meant having this moment with Storm and our kids. Nothing had ever felt this good, this right.

"Always and forever, Stormy," I mumbled, pressing my lips to his.

"And beyond that," he added, cupping the back of my head as we both looked at our kids, at the two miracles we never expected.

And I promised for a millionth time—I would try to give them a life better than what I had.

## EPILOGUE

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### Storm

#### *Five Months Later*

THE HOUSE WAS QUIET. TOO FUCKING QUIET WHEN I KNEW that our little hellions never went to bed on time, keeping both Ophelia and me up until late, with both of us falling asleep before them.

Malia was a crier in the hospital, but Malakai—dear God, that kid didn't know when to shut up. I blamed my little princess for that because she taught him how to cry and how to get whatever he wanted. Whenever I tried to lower him down, it was as if he had an internal alarm, and his wailing would start, angrily kicking at me until he figured that I wouldn't lower him down.

Which was why the quietness of the house as I stepped inside unnerved me, and the fear I hadn't felt in months now reared its ugly head. Before I could stop to think, I barged through the living room and toward the room where the twins were. As I opened the door, seeing the two of them peacefully sleeping in their cribs, the panic that started tearing through me slowly subsided, and I felt like I could breathe again.

Kaiser lifted his head lazily, and if dogs could frown, I was pretty sure he would be frowning at me. I was afraid that he wouldn't take too well to twins, but the moment he saw them,



it was as if no one else existed. He was always with them, protecting our kids, making sure that no harm ever came to them.

The nightlight was on, and not a sound came from either one of them. But where was Ophelia? I turned around, slowly closing the door behind me, and walked toward our bedroom, dropping my keys in the bowl in the kitchen. The doors were closed, but I could hear the soft sounds of music coming from inside.

She was okay. All three of them were okay. There was nothing to worry about.

My hand wrapped around the handle, pushing the door open, and I almost fell on my knees at the sight in front of me.

“Took you awhile.” Ophelia grinned, taking me in, that mischievous twinkle in her eye telling me she was up to no good. And the way she looked—my God.

She was on her knees, right in the middle of the bed, wearing nothing more than the cut I gave her and that fucking smile I loved so much. My chest rose and fell with each new breath, and I stood there frozen, taking her in, my eyes drinking in her curves, the slope of her breasts. As she dropped down on her hands, giving me a clear view of her boobs, I fucking lost it.

I tore through the room, dropping to my knees right in front of her, my hands immediately going up to cup her under the cut, earning a low moan from her.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” she purred into my ear as my thumbs played with her nipples, rubbing little circles around them. She writhed on the bed, her hips moving already, yearning for more than this.

“Are you wet for me, Sunshine?” I asked, barely recognizing my own voice as the need coursed through me.

“Y-Yes,” she whimpered. “I started without you,” she admitted, looking straight at me. On a low growl, I picked her up and turned her around, seeing the small butt plug I bought for her, glaring back at me.

“Did you now?” I smirked, dragging my hand over her lower back and down over her round ass until my fingers reached the plug. “You started playing without me,” I said, pulling the plug out and slamming it back in. She whimpered and moaned, pushing against me.

“I was getting ready.” She gasped as I increased the pace, fucking her with the toy, leaving her pussy hungry and dripping for me. My eyes feasted on the wetness spreading down her thighs. “Oh, God!” she moaned loudly, dropping her head down on the bed.

“Do you need to come, Sunshine?” I asked, slowly unbuttoning my pants, and pushing them down, freeing my aching cock, eager to get inside her. But not yet. We were going to play a little game first.

“Yesss,” she hissed, pushing against me with fervor, chasing an orgasm she so desperately needed, but just as I felt her reaching the peak, just before she could come, I pulled the plug out, leaving her hanging.

“Storm!” she thundered, looking at me over her shoulder. “What the fuck?”

“Shhhh,” I crooned, wrapping my hand around her hair, pulling her up. “Do you trust me?” I asked, biting down softly on her neck, nipping at the spot until she started whimpering, pushing her ass against my hard cock.

“With my life,” was all I needed to hear, before I dragged my cock through her folds, coating myself in her juices, heady with desire, with a need to be inside her. “I want you to play with yourself,” I hummed, my tongue darting out, licking her neck, while my fist tightened around her hair, pulling her back flush with my front.

Her hand snuck down her body, disappearing between her legs, and the long moan that drawled out of her as she pressed against her clit, hit right into my groin, my balls pulling up, throbbing, and I knew I wouldn't be able to hold off for too long.

“Storm,” she moaned, her head falling to my shoulder, shuddering in my arms.

“I know,” I grunted, slowly pulling back, and slamming into her in one swift thrust. “Fuck!”

“Storm!”

“I love you, Sunshine.” I breathed against her neck, slamming into her relentlessly, chasing the high I always felt with her.

“I’m going to—” She whimpered as I wrapped my hand around her throat holding her to me, biting her cheek in the process. “Please,” she moaned, and spurred by her words, but the feeling in my chest, I released her, pushing her down into the mattress, my eyes zeroing on *Property of Storm* written on her jacket, the animal in me striving, feeding off of the words, because I knew how true that was.

She was mine. Now, forever, in another life, we would always find each other.

“Come on, Sunshine,” I grunted, my hands gripping her hips in a punishing grip, chasing the high, slamming inside and feeling her walls closing around me, until she erupted, almost jumping away from me from the force of her orgasm.

“Oh my God!” she screamed, shaking as I pushed in, the familiar tingling rushing over my shoulders, toward my lower back and into my balls, until I couldn’t hold on anymore. With one lust thrust, I emptied myself inside of her, my entire body shaking from the force of my own orgasm.

I collapsed on top of her, trying to keep my weight off of her, but there was no way that I could move.

“Storm.” She laughed underneath me, her shoulders shaking. “Are you alive?”

“Give me a second,” I grunted, smiling softly while my body relaxed, and I wrapped an arm around her middle, pulling her back into me, changing our position. My cock nestled between her ass cheeks, and I knew—this was fucking heaven.

She slowly turned around, facing me with a smile on her face, dragging her finger over my cheek, to my forehead, and over my nose, landing on my lower lip. I playfully bit down on her finger, earning another chuckle from her, smiling along with her.

“Hi, Stormy,” she purred, pressing her cheek to my heart. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too,” I said, placing a kiss on the top of her head. “That was some welcome.” I laughed, wrapping my arms around her.

“I know, right?” She smirked, looking up at me. “I know we’ve both been busy with the twins and you with the Club, but you know,” she shrugged, “I missed your cock.”

I groaned hearing her say cock, her plump lips rounding on the word. “Sunshine, when you say things like that,” I grunted, burrowing my face into her hair. “I need a minute or two to recover.”

The little minx started laughing, splaying her fingers over my chest.

“Is it because you’re getting old?” She smirked, and I pinched her butt, earning a quiet yelp from her.

“If I am, so are you.” I chuckled, pulling her closer. “What did you do today?”

“Well,” she pulled back to look at me. “Malia puked on me—twice.” I really tried not to laugh, but by the expression on her face, I was failing. “Don’t you dare, mister,” she warned. “Kai peed on me.” I lost it.

But so did she. She tried keeping that frown on her face, but there was no way she wouldn’t be laughing at that.

“He...” I choked. “He peed on you.”

“Yes.” She laughed. “If that isn’t proof that he’s your son, I don’t know what is.”

“Hey.” I feigned hurt. “I never peed on you.”

“Well, maybe not literally, but don’t think that I don’t see those death stares you kept directing at Casimir during the meeting. Or wait, should I mention the way you practically carried me out of the room while that buddy of yours from Seattle spoke with me?”

“He was practically undressing you with his eyes.” I scoffed.

“Storm.” she chuckled. “He has a wife and a kid. I doubt that he wanted to have anything with me.”

“Doesn’t matter, Sunshine. They can’t have you.” I hugged her. “You’re mine.”

“I am,” she answered, wrapping her hand around me. “And I’m not going anywhere. Now, tell me more about the whole Alliance thing. Where are we at?”

I looked down at her, still unable to comprehend the fact that we were here. After everything, after all the things we went through together, she was here, in my arms, smiling and happier than ever. I thanked whatever force was there for bringing her back into my life, for giving me this, for gifting me with happiness and love, and the house filled with amazing memories, enough to replace all the bad ones I had in my life.

And I would never let go, no matter what.

This was my family, our new beginning, and we would do things differently than our parents. That I could promise.

**THE END**

## WHAT'S NEXT?

Ophelia's story might be over, but the story of their children is just starting.

Keep reading for a small sneak peak of **The King of Nothing** —the first book in the **Post Mortem** series, set to release at the end of 2023.

## THE KING OF NOTHING

### MALIA

The smell of jasmine and something else, something sweet that I couldn't quite put my finger on, was suffocating in the small room I was confined to. The hairdresser fussed over me, putting the veil on this and that side, oohing and aahing over looks, pretending that this was the perfect wedding and I was the perfect bride.

The modest dress was beautiful, covered with lace on the upper part, covering my arms, creating a soft V-shape on my chest, without visibly showing my breasts. It covered the corset and disappeared into the fluffy skirt billowing around me, that felt as if it weighed tons when in reality, it couldn't have been more than a couple of pounds.

But it wasn't the physical weight that kept pushing me down to the ground, letting the gravity pull me into its embrace. It was what I was set out to do, the commitment I was about to make, breaking the promise I made to myself that I would never stand here, looking in the mirror as I wore the white dress, waiting to be wedded to the man of my dreams.

Because the man of my dreams didn't exist, not anymore at least. I refused to let another person have so much hold over me that I would do something stupid, like fly to Sicily, trying to save him, only to have him reject me in the middle of the city square while everyone around us looked and snickered at the foolish little girl whose dreams shattered in that second.

The blushing bride I was not, but I had to admit—the stylist they brought in did a phenomenal job. As my fingers pressed against my crimson lips, the clear contrast to my cerulean eyes rounded with soft brown eyeshadow and long lashes, I wondered if I would really be able to go through with this.

For the past two days, Mirsad left me alone in the room they assigned to me. He would smirk as he passed the offhanded comments of his son taking what belonged to him now, and being kind enough to let me sleep here, close to him, while the wedding preparations were underway.

He failed to mention that his son liked torturing girls during sex, cutting them up, making them scream from pain, as he pounded in them until he took away their humanity and what made them happy. He failed to mention that he raised two sadists, letting them do whatever the fuck they wanted, uncaring about other people.

We were all born saints until life fucked us over, but it was up to us to decide how we wanted to go through life. It was up to us to decide what mark we wanted to leave behind. While my parents weren't saints in any sense of that word, I knew they did their best to exclude the innocent ones who ended up in the crossfire. But Mirsad and his two sons were the type of people that thought everything belonged to them, even when they didn't work for it, and that was what bothered me the most.

They took and took and took, uncaring about the consequences, destroying innocent lives left, right and center.

“Beautiful.” The girl who was arranging my veil finally stepped down from the chair she was standing on for the last ten minutes. “Just stunning,” she gushed over me as she looked at the mirror, looking at my expression.

But while her eyes twinkled from the uncontained excitement, her hands landing on my shoulders, mine were blank, void of any emotion. My phone kept ringing and ringing throughout the morning, and I knew it was either Malakai or Vasilisa trying to reach me. Maybe it was my mom



and dad as well. I would be surprised if they didn't hear about this hot mess I was in. I knew they would try to reason with me, to ask me why this was happening and I wouldn't be able to keep my emotions in check if I heard my brother's voice.

He knew me better than anyone else, and he knew I would never have willingly married a man like Hamza. Not in this lifetime and probably not in the next one.

The news of this marriage rippled through the underworld, and people I never really spoke to started reaching out to me, asking if it was true, if I was going through with it or if it was just another hoax.

But it was the truth, and as the hairdresser handed over the bouquet of flowers I was supposed to carry as I walked toward the officiant and Hamza, my heart squeezed, rebelling against the thought of having to share my life with such a man. But there was no other choice, and I couldn't back out now. Not when Vasilisa's faith laid firmly in my hands, and not after Mirsad showed me the footage incriminating my brother.

The door behind us opened with a thud and one of the goons who I hadn't met before, stood there, glaring at me as if I was the one who wanted all of this. His green eyes dragged over my dress, his scowl growing with every second, until they landed on my face, his thick eyebrows furrowing at the sight of my lifeless eyes.

"Are you ready?" he asked, buttoning up his suit, hiding the gun that I already knew was tucked into the backside of his slacks. His dark hair was slicked backward, completely different as to what I was used to seeing from these guards, and I wondered if he was maybe part of the higher circle that Mirsad kept around himself.

He wasn't a usual guard, that much was obvious, and the way he kept looking around the room as if he expected someone to jump out from the wardrobe, also told me that he was well trained, which was probably why Mirsad sent him instead of one of the other guys to take me down to the hall. I hadn't seen him this morning when we arrived at the venue, but it might be due to the fact that I was ushered to this room

without a second to think, with Alisa trailing behind me, her desolate eyes looking anywhere but at me.

I wondered if she knew what her family was capable of. I wondered if she truly wanted to be here or if she had gotten so used to the idea that leaving was out of the question for her.

But this guy, I hadn't seen him before, and it bothered me for reasons unknown to me. I hated standing here like this, on display for all these people to judge and dissect. I hated it even more because I didn't want to care. I knew why I was doing this, why everything was happening, but the judgemental way this guard looked at me irked me for more reasons than one.

"Who are you?" I asked, unmoving from the mirror, still holding the roses in my hands. Something sharp jabbed itself into my thumb and as I looked down at the pooling blood. I removed my hand and realized it was a thorn I managed to jab myself with. "Fuck," I muttered, keeping the offending finger further away from the dress. The last thing I wanted to have was my blood on this wedding dress.

I had no idea why, but the idea of me being pure and wearing this white dress was as laughable as Mirsad thinking that I would give him heirs. So as I stood there, watching the blood slowly drip down my finger, trailing down toward my wrist, I let it all out. The fear, the pain, the insecurities all bubbled up in the laughter that tore from my lungs, climbing fast through my throat and escaping through my lips before I could stop them.

The girl who arranged my hair fussed over me, wrapping my thumb in a tissue, stopping the bleeding, but I couldn't stop laughing. Tears gathered in my eyes as I let my body shake with my uncontrollable laughter. As I looked up at the guard, I could see that he was frowning, even more than before, looking at me as if I had truly lost my mind.

And maybe I did lose it, considering I was about to tie myself to the Ajazovic family, but there was no going back for me. There was nothing to be done except to go through with this. As the bleeding stopped, the red on the tissues that fell

around me mocked me, alluding to the terrible fate I was about to face.

I walked toward the guard, keeping my eyes plastered on him, still holding that flower bouquet as if it wasn't filled with thorns meant to hurt me, no doubt a silent message sent by Mirsad.

"You didn't answer my question," I said, dabbing at the corners of my eyes with the tissue I snagged from the girl. "I haven't seen you before. Who are you?"

"Adin," he murmured, keeping himself utterly still as I observed every move he made, every rise of his shoulders, as he breathed in and out.

"Adin," I said, nodding slowly, tasting his name on my lips. There was something familiar about him, as if I had seen him before, but I couldn't have. I had never met him in all the time I was working with Ajnur, and I would've remembered him if I had. "Well, Adin." I chuckled. "Wanna take me to my sentencing?" I grinned, trying to gauge his reaction, but he never let anything out.

"Gladly," he bit out, taking my hand and pushing it through his. He led us out of the room, through the long hallway and all the way to the stairs. My nerves started wreaking havoc on me, my palms sweating and my heart racing as if it could jump out of my chest at any moment.

"I didn't peg you for the type of girl who would marry someone like Hamza." I didn't miss the disdain dripping from his tongue as he said his name, but I tried not to read too much into it. I would be surprised if there was a person alive who liked the guy, but I couldn't forget that this guy, Adin, was not my friend, no matter how tightly he held me upright, leading me toward the staircase.

"What kind of a girl did you peg me for?" I asked bravely, looking straight ahead as I worked to get my racing heart under control, shaking off the chills rushing down my bare back.

“Someone who would fight,” he said. “I pegged you as someone who knows what’s right and what’s wrong.”

“Oh, really?” I breathed out, looking at his profile as we descended the stairs, getting engulfed in the murmurs of people gathered down there, waiting for us. “I didn’t know that guards were allowed to think.” I smiled saccharinely, venom dripping from each word. “Could’ve fooled me.”

The grip he had on my hand tightened, but he didn’t say a word as we reached the ground floor, met by more gushing from the people gathered around. People I didn’t know and didn’t care to meet.

I plastered the brightest smile on my face, keeping my head high, before turning to him and saying, “You don’t know me, darling. It’s easy to judge me when you have no idea why I’m doing this. I don’t need to explain myself to you or anyone else. You’re the enemy here,” I murmured, leaning closer to him. “Don’t you forget that.”

With those parting words, I moved away from him and stood in front of the door leading to the main hall, waiting for the rest of the guests to go inside, to sit down, so that I could get this farce of a wedding over. My thumb throbbed, and as if on instinct, I pressed it against the stem of the flowers, keeping my smile strong and fierce. If my mom could see me now, she would be proud of me standing here like this, repeating the words she said again and again.

*You’re my strong girl, Malia*, she said a million times. I lost count after so many years. As the music started, announcing my entrance, I pushed my feet to move, to carry me inside.

Several rows of chairs were arranged in the hall, filled with people whose faces I didn’t know, smiling and smirking at me as if they were in on a secret I wasn’t privy to, and I didn’t want to be. I just wanted this to be over.

White roses adorned the stands at the beginning of each row. I lifted my eyes and saw Hamza standing in front of the man dressed in a beige suite, sweating as if there wasn’t air conditioning blasting at full speed. I wouldn’t be surprised if

they forced the poor man here, but it wasn't my problem right now. As long as he could do his job without fainting on us, I didn't care if they forced him or not.

Maybe it was cruel. Maybe I was more similar to Mirsad and his family than I wanted to admit, but I didn't want to have to drag this out. The sickeningly sweet scent of jasmine that followed me from the bridal suite to this hall made me sick to my stomach. I swallowed down the contents of my breakfast that were threatening to erupt, and I strolled over the red carpet, breathing through my nose, smiling until my cheeks started hurting. Even then, I pushed through the pain, because I knew I would crumble if I started thinking about the consequences of this wedding.

The golden hue of the afternoon sun flickered through the long line of windows adorning the entire line of the wall on my left side, illuminating the entire hall more than was necessary. I wished for it to rain, to wash away this sickening feeling in my chest, but it seemed that even the weather was working against me.

With a deep breath, I continued my slow stroll toward Hamza, who kept smirking at me, his eyes flashing dangerously as he drank me in. The whooshing in my ears elevated to a new level, the echo of my heartbeat loud in my ears, but I kept going, putting one foot in front of the other, holding on to the flowers like a lifeline.

The officiant smiled softly at me, wiping at his forehead with the white napkin, his eyes nervously flickering from me to Hamza. He opened his mouth then closed it again, as if he didn't know what to say.

Hamza grunted something unintelligible that I couldn't hear or maybe I just didn't want to, glaring at the officiant as the music died down, leaving us enveloped in silence. Hamza took my hand, lacing our fingers together, pulling me closer to him. Standing this close to him had me almost dry heaving.

The man was disgusting, in more ways than one, and I would have to live for who knew how long with him.

“Dearly beloved,” the officiant started, his voice shaking as he looked over the crowd behind us. “We have gathered here to—” But he never got to finish the sentence. A loud blast sounded through the hall, coming from the outside.

“What the fuck was that?” Hamza asked no one in particular, his eyes going toward the entrance to the hall where the doors still stood closed. The guards they had placed in front, slowly stepped away as loud gunshots echoed around us.

Suspended in time for a second, it felt as if everything came to a halt. The doors burst open, revealing several men with black balaclavas over their faces, their rifles held high, pointed at the guards who were supposed to keep us safe.

The women in the crowd started screaming as bullets rained over the four guards stationed at the door, dropping them to the ground like flies. Men fell down to the ground, hiding under the chairs, as several more guards on Mirsad’s payroll came running in from the doors in the back, rushing toward the group proudly standing at the front.

Hamza crashed into me as the bullets rained over us, aimed at him, covering me with his body. But it wasn’t long until he crawled around the long desk that stood in front of us, hiding from the onslaught happening in the hall.

*Was this how I was going to die? At the altar or whatever the fuck this was called?* I asked myself, before the clarity rushed through my head and I remembered who I truly was.

All those grueling hours of training and learning what to do in these situations wasn’t for nothing. Before I could stop myself, I lifted my long chiffon skirt and pulled the knife I’d strapped to my thigh, cutting through the material.

My veil fell over my face, and I ripped it out, wincing as it pulled at strands of my hair. I looked up to see the soldiers coming closer to me, and I cut faster, ripping off the material as I went, freeing myself of the long skirt.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I cursed as one of the soldiers reached where I lay, his eyes firmly plastered to me, but he failed to realize that I wasn’t going down without a fight.

My heel connected with his face as he leaned down, looking at me, and I pushed him far away with a grunt. I kicked off my shoes, and jumped up, keeping my knife in my right hand and my eyes firmly focused on the group who was filtering in, more and more of them coming with each passing second. I knew that Mirsad's soldiers wouldn't be able to hold out for much longer.

People cried in the crowd, screaming and begging for mercy, but none of the soldiers went to them. Hell, they passed right next to Mirsad and came straight at me, running as I started moving backward, stepping down from the small pedestal they arranged for the wedding, and slowly inching closer to the doors leading to the back area.

"Don't!" one of them yelled out as I turned around, sprinting toward the doors where the rest of Mirsad's soldiers were hiding, but I didn't get too far away. Before I could reach for the handle, a heavy weight crashed into me, sending me tumbling to the ground.

I thrashed and turned, trying to fight off the man holding me down, but he didn't budge. His snickering was loud in my ear as he turned me around, making me look up at him. Familiar green eyes flashed with mischief, my own eyebrows furrowing as I realized that it was the guard who escorted me here, Adin.

"You son of a bitch!" I yelled out, trying to push him off of me while he sat on top of my stomach, holding me down only with his thighs to keep my body from moving. "Let me go!"

"Ah, princess." He laughed at my antics. "See, I told him you would fight this, that you wouldn't go willingly."

"Who?" I asked, moving this and that way, but the man wasn't budging.

He pulled something from his pocket, leaning down toward me, that fucking mask making him seem all the more intimidating. "You'll see," he murmured, before pressing the cloth to my mouth and nose, the putrid smell immediately entering through my body, making me dizzy.

The last thing I saw were his twinkling green eyes, before the world turned black.



I was being carried.

That much I knew as my mind started clearing up, waking me, telling me we were in danger. Strong hands wrapped under my knees and around my shoulders kept me upright as we moved around, but I didn't dare open my eyes. I still had no idea who those people were, or what they wanted, but it was better pretending that I was still asleep than giving them more ammunition against me.

I had to think, come up with a plan.

"I know you're awake," the man said, chuckling, and I could feel his eyes on my face. There was no point in denying it now. As I slowly opened my eyes, I was met with bright green ones, the same ones I saw last before he drugged me and dragged me away to whatever this place was.

I refused to answer as I glared up at him, which only amused him further.

"You can keep your mouth shut for now, but I have a feeling we will be great friends down the line."

"I highly doubt it," I murmured, trying to gauge where we were, but nothing about the dark walls and dimmed hallway was familiar to me. "Where are we?" I asked instead. There was a fat chance that he would answer, but I still had to try.

"You'll see," he answered cryptically, making my anger grow even more. "He's waiting for you."

"Who?" I asked. "Santa Claus?" I smirked. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I don't really believe in him."

"You really are a smartass, aren't you?" The man, Adin, laughed. As we reached the heavy set of mahogany doors, he lowered me down, holding me upright as my knees wobbled when my bare feet landed on the cold ground.



A sharp pain cut through the sole of my right foot. I lifted my leg, inspecting the damage, and saw the dried up blood and the angry, red cut going straight to the middle.

“You stepped on the glass,” Adin explained unapologetically, earning yet another glare from me.

“I wouldn’t have stepped on the glass if you and your fucking goons didn’t come in, guns blazing, chasing me around.” I bent down, inspecting the cut, but I could already see that it wasn’t deep enough to cause any permanent damage. But it would hurt like a bitch as it healed, and I could already see myself wobbling around like a fucking penguin until it fully healed.

“Not gonna apologize for that,” he said with a shake of his head. “Come on.” He pulled me toward the doors, opening them with one hand. “I don’t want him to get even more impatient.”

“Who the fuck is he?” I asked just as he opened the doors, revealing the dark study inside. There was not one single speck of color in there. Whoever designed this should get an award for the most depressing office I had ever seen. I limped after Adin as the doors closed behind us. Before I could admire the artwork on the walls, he pushed me down on my knees.

I turned around, ready to fucking bite his head off, when a thunderous voice echoed around the room, burrowing itself deep inside my heart.

“That’s enough, Adin,” he bellowed, no trace of snarkiness, but only pure anger directed at us.

I slowly turned around, feeling my eyes widening, as they landed at the only man I had ever loved. He emerged from the room adjacent to the study, walking casually toward the large desk placed right in the middle of the room. The black shirt he wore was molded to his body, the sleeves rolled at the elbows as he commanded the room, making me feel so much smaller than I actually was.

Those whiskey eyes landed on me, filled with disgust and so much resentment as they dragged over my destroyed dress. I probably looked like a hot mess in my ripped dress, destroyed hair and no doubt, makeup running down my face. But I refused to bow down in front of him. I refused to look elsewhere when his gaze finally reached my eyes, holding me captive, darkening an already fucked-up day.

“What am I doing here?” I asked, uncaring how bitter I sounded. He was so much taller now, bigger than life itself. I still felt the bite of betrayal as he turned around and left me standing in that city square, as if he didn’t just tear my heart out of my chest, stomping on it.

My fingers curled in on themselves, the urge to jump up and punch him in that handsome, square jaw becoming harder and harder to ignore. But he didn’t say a word as he walked around the desk, to the front, leisurely leaning against the dark wooden desk and looking down at me.

Adin moved backward until he stood all the way at the door. For whatever reason, I missed having him at my back. He was the devil I sort of knew. This one in front of me—this one was a ghost from my past, the man who deserved my anger more than anything else.

“So you’re back,” I said, more as a statement than a question, because it was obvious this place had been used for longer than one day. It was obvious he was running the show around here. The danger dripping from him slowly curled itself around me, holding me in its tight grip, pushing me to succumb to the power he emanated, but I refused.

His eyes perused me, drinking me in as if he had any right to do so, awakening the childish part of me that wanted to flip him off and run away from here, but I couldn’t. I had to be an adult over this.

“For how long?” I asked, because I needed to know. I had to know.

“Five years,” he answered flatly, knocking the wind out of me. He’s been back for five years and not once had he tried to seek me out, to tell me he was alright?

I hated the fucking burn in the pit of my stomach, the need to yell at him, to tell me he was lying, because I refused to believe that someone who professed his undying love to me when we were barely sixteen years old would become someone who could toss me aside as if I had never meant anything. But I had to accept it, because the man standing in front of me wasn't the man I used to know.

Schooling my features, hiding the betrayal I felt at his words was a hard feat, but I did it, and as I looked at him indifferently, I asked the only thing I needed to know. He wasn't here to take me back, to show me how sorry he was for the way things ended.

It was obvious that he'd moved on, without me, without caring how it all affected me. I was a heartbroken eighteen-year-old who finally found out where they were keeping him, hopeful that I would be able to take him back home.

I dragged my brother Malakai with me, hoping that maybe saving him would alleviate the heavy ache in my heart because we had just recently lost Phoenix as well. But Enzo took one look at me that next day and told me to go back home, to where I belonged, because it wasn't with him.

I begged, like a pathetic little girl, telling him I loved him, I missed him, but he hadn't budged. Not even when he crushed my heart did he stop hurling the hurtful words at me, so I knew that this wasn't a social visit.

He didn't bring me here to save me, to tell me he missed me. I knew that look in his eyes, even if everything else about him seemed unfamiliar.

“What do you want from me, Vincenzo?”

He kneeled, the tick in his jaw getting more prominent as his eyes landed on my bare knees and the dried-up blood on my foot. His finger trailed over my bare skin, going all the way to the ripped hem of the skirt and then back down to where the throbbing in my foot only intensified with each soft stroke.

“Everything,” he rasped, his amber eyes lifting, drinking me in, as if he was seeing me for the first time in his life. And maybe he was. He didn’t know this version of me.

The Malia he left behind would have smiled at him by now, trying to joke about the situation, but not me. My glare only intensified. He wrapped his hand around my ankle and pulled me closer to him until his lips were mere inches from my cheek. My breath caught in my chest at the proximity of our bodies. He crowded me, leaning over me as if he had any business doing so. As the sound of the doors opening and closing echoed around us, I dared to look at him. Really, really look at him.

Under all the anger, something else pulsed—something powerful enough to send fire licking over my skin. His shoulders rose and fell with each inhale and exhale from his body, as if he was trying to calm himself enough.

“Why are you in a wedding dress, Malia?” he asked through gritted teeth, pressing his forehead to my temple. “Why were you there with *them*?” I didn’t miss the way he said them, as if it bothered him even thinking about Mirsad and his family.

“I think it’s quite obvious why I was there, Vincenzo,” I gritted out, proud of myself and the strength in my voice. “I was the bride, and you stole me away.”

His hand flexed around my ankle, his forehead pressing harder against my temple, as his other hand snuck around to the back of my neck, holding me in place. “I couldn’t steal something that didn’t belong to them,” he bit back, opening his eyes and putting some distance between our faces. “Why were you really there?”

It bothered him that I was there, that much was obvious, but I wasn’t going to entertain his childish antics or answer the man who so easily discarded me when he didn’t want me anymore.

“None of your goddamn business,” I grunted, but not before seeing the pure fury living inside those amber eyes, drinking me in as if there was nothing he wanted more.

“That’s where you’re wrong, Principessa,” he growled, pulling me up to him, holding my neck in a punishing grip. “Everything you do is my business.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” I breathed out, refusing to show him how much he affected me, how much my entire body trembled as he held me. “Didn’t stop you the first time, so why stop now.” I was angry, tired and hurt, and the last thing I wanted today was to have him anywhere close to me. “Why are you really here, Vincenzo?” I asked, using his full name again, knowing how much he hated it. He hated me calling him by his full name, and the flare in his eyes told me that hadn’t changed.

“I came back to claim what rightfully belongs to me,” he muttered, holding me hostage in his stare. “And you, Principessa.” He chuckled darkly. “You were always mine.”

His lips hovered over mine, the broken promises lingering between us, leaving a bad taste in my mouth. Before I could push at him, detach myself from this situation, he rose, leaving me on the floor as he turned his back at me, walking toward the desk.

“Adin will show you to your room.”

“I don’t want to go to my room,” I bit out, and stood up, keeping my weight off of my hurt foot. “I’m not a child, Vincenzo. I’m—”

“Stop fucking calling me Vincenzo!” he roared as he turned around, the full force of his power slamming into me, almost knocking me backward. But I refused to budge, to show him how much it bothered me being here, talking to him.

“Well.” I shrugged. “That’s your name. I wouldn’t want someone to think that we have history.”

“Malia,” he warned, growling like a fucking rabid dog. I’d had enough of men growling, yelling and all around trying to assert dominance.

“Growl one more time at me and I will stab you with a hairpin,” I warned, pointing one finger at him. “I’m gonna say

it once, and you better listen. I have no idea why you brought me here, or whatever the fuck is going on, but you better let me be and let me go on with my life and my wedding.”

“Over my dead body,” he said.

I answered, “That can be arranged.” Which earned another scowl from him.

“You weren’t this difficult before,” he observed, crossing his arms over his chest, glaring at me.

“And you weren’t this obtuse, either,” I responded. “I guess that both of us have changed, which also means that I have nothing to do here. Let me go and I’ll forget this little exchange ever happened.” *Just how he forgot that I ever existed.*

“Not a chance, Principessa.” He smirked. “You’re staying here.” He slowly walked toward me, closing the small distance that gave me some breathing space, but as soon as his chest came flush with mine, his hands playing with the loose strands of my hair, that same sensation I always had where he was concerned came back in full force. My breathing hollowed out, the anticipation eating me alive, but I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of seeing how much he still affected me.

“As I was saying,” he rasped. “Adin will take you to your room.” His hand wrapped around my throat, putting a lot more meaning into that one simple touch. “And you will stay there,” he whispered in my ear. “Until I come to you. Understood?”

But two could play this game, and I wasn’t a bright-eyed girl who followed him everywhere he went anymore. I wasn’t someone he could fuck with.

I lifted my head, pressing my lips closer to his ear, seeing the shivers erupting all over his skin as my breath washed over, tickling his ear.

“I’m not a dog, Vincenzo.” He stiffened at my words. “I will do whatever the fuck I want to, and neither you nor any other man will be able to tell me what to do.”

His grip on my throat intensified, the smell of oak and chocolate slowly pushing through my nose, making it harder

to keep upright when he still smelled the same as all those years ago. A part of me wondered if he still tasted the same.

Before I could move away or put some distance between us, his face disappeared to my neck, his teeth clamping down on the sensitive skin at my throat, right where my pulse point raged, my heart threatening to jump out of my chest.

A moan spilled over my lips, my body betraying me in more ways than one as my neck extended, letting him have better access. His tongue followed after his teeth, soothing the spot he just marked, never once letting me away from him. I wished I could say I hated it, or this new, possessive side of him, but I'd be lying, and I was maxed out on all the lies I could tell for one day.

“You’re mine, Malia,” he snarled, keeping his face hidden in the crook of my neck. “And if I tell you to go to your fucking room until I deal with the fucking mess you made by agreeing to that wedding, then you will do so.”

“And what if I don’t?” I asked, stupidly or maybe bravely enough, but the way his eyes narrowed at me, the way his hand slid over my bare back, all the way to my ass before his hand grabbed a handful, pressing me against him and the hard length crammed between us, made me feel drunk, my mind hazy from lust I hadn’t felt with any other man.

“You better, Principessa,” he rasped, pressing his lips to my cheek. “Unless you want to be responsible for the death of men who dare to even look at you.”

With those parting words, he detached himself from me and walked to the adjacent room he came from earlier, slamming the door a lot harder than necessary. He left me standing in the middle of his study, with only one thought in my head.

*What the fuck just happened?*

Did you like that small excerpt?

Don’t forget to [PREORDER NOW](#), because Malia and Enzo are coming very, very soon.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Oh boy, oh boy... I don't even know where to start.

It took me two years to finish this series. Well, more than two years if we're going to be technical. I'd be lying if I said that it wasn't bittersweet being here now. I also know that I will most probably forget every single person who helped me in one way or another to write this book as well as the previous three books, but I'm going to do my best.

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The ending of this book feels like an end of an era for me, and I cannot wait to see what's next in store for me.

Thank you for reading, and if you have time, I would be so grateful if you manage to leave even a tiniest review on Amazon.

It would truly mean a lot to me.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

L.K. Reid is a dark romance author who hates slow walkers and people being mean for no reason. She lives with her two cats, Freya and Athena, and she's still figuring out the whole "adult" thingy.

In her opinion, Halloween should be a public holiday, and she also has a small obsession with all things historical—especially Greek mythology. During high school, she wanted to be an archaeologist, and ended up studying law, but obviously neither one of those professions worked out.

If she isn't writing, she's most probably watching horror movies, listening to music, reading, or plotting upcoming books.

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