

THE RITES OF PASSAGE SERIES 2

DUST

TO

DUST

A.G. HARRIS

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DUST TO DUST
The Rites of Passage Series
Book 2
A.G. HARRIS

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Acknowledgments

It takes a lot to write a book and even more to publish it. I wanted to thank author Ashley Harris, who helped motivate me to put my story ideas onto paper. Also, I wanted to thank TL Swan, one of my favorite authors. Swan's group, SS Cygnets, has been a wonderful group to learn and ask questions in.

I could not have done this without the encouragement from my husband and family, who never stopped pushing me to pursue my dreams.

Thank you to my fans, who there would be no reason to continue writing without you. This is the start of my journey as an author, and I hope you enjoy all the stories coming your way.

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Author's Note

Dust To Dust is a dark romance novel, and some events may be upsetting to some readers: mature language, scenes, characters, bullying, and violence some readers might find offensive. Not every character is a hero, and some are purely evil villains. So if this doesn't make you hesitate, go ahead and enjoy the ride. This is NOT a standalone book. Ashes To Ashes, Book 1, needs to be read first.

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Chapter 1



Four months earlier...

I've done a lot of deeds in my short life that would grant me a one-way ticket to the highway to hell. Heck, maybe this was purgatory, and *she* was my punishment.

Nova Baladan.

The apparition.

Little quirks of Nova reminded me of Elsa, like how she bit down on the left side of her bottom lip. Elsa used to do the same thing before I'd kiss her. It drove me wild for the need to taste her. Elsa didn't bite down on the middle or roll her lip; she always bit down on the left side of her lip. Was it a coincidence, or were they the same person? Had guilt finally made me lose my mind?

Elsa was dead.

Right?

The cool air did nothing to stop my palms from sweating as I gripped the steering wheel. I had been sitting in the driver's seat for the past twenty minutes. I ran my hand through my thick blonde hair, pulling it at the roots until my scalp was tender to the touch. Maybe all my dark deeds made

me genuinely lose my mind. How many girls nibble on their lips? A shit ton. Apparently, I'm so desperate that I'm trying to grasp at ends. I needed evidence. Speculations were what got you in trouble.

Grabbing the door handle, I used my foot to kick open the car door. There's just something about Nova, a fine, tiny detail I can't let go of. That's what brought me back here, to Elsa's grave. I stepped out of my Audi Q8, and my boots kicked dust from the dry dirt and crumbling fallen leaves. I haven't been back here since I destroyed it, but it seemed to be my destiny in life to be haunted by the things I had destroyed. Closing my car door, I paused and inhaled the start of spring soon to come.

I walked up what used to be the driveway of the Stepanovs. The old crumbling mansion was never rebuilt, but why would it have been? Who wants to build their home over ashes? It's a bad omen.

The Stepanovs were dead, murdered here on this pile of rubble. The official report was a gas leak from an old faulty pipe. The truth was that I, Titan Jules King was the Stepanov's killer. I was the bullet, my father the trigger man. Was the weapon to blame or the man that yielded the weapon? In this case, I blame both.

That was what I was. My sole purpose was to be a weapon. My childhood was stripped of pleasantries and freedom, replaced with structure and lessons to conquer. I wasn't alone; there were others like me. That should bring me comfort but my comfort meant the world was much more dangerous. Men like myself brought on the spark that could start Armageddon. At least in these end of times, I had my cousins to march beside me, and now more brothers, our brotherhood had been formed.

Not all of my brothers were so lucky to have a father that wanted to shape them into monsters. Sure Lucas King, my father, never showed me love, but I knew if I needed him, he would answer in his own sick and twisted way. Anders Elden, my Norwegian brother, wasn't as fortunate as me. Anders suffered years of torture before he found us. If only back then, during my childhood, I was the man I was today. Finally brave

enough to overthrow my father. If that had been the case, Elsa would still be alive.

As I walked around the rumble of the old mansion, I ran my hand through my golden blonde hair again, my soothing habit. Damian had his knives, Dash had Mila, and I had my self-inflicted pain. Sometimes the only thing my brain could feel or register was pain. What was happiness anymore?

I noted the old bricks from the destroyed mansion. They had begun to weather and break down from numerous winters and summers. I purchased the land years ago because it was my burden to bear. There was no point in lingering here at the house because it wasn't *our* special place, so I continued to walk with purpose to her grave. Five feet from the start of the forest, the natural scent of pine filled my nose. It was so damn peaceful out here that it killed me, and a part of me wanted to disrupt the peace. I want to set it all ablaze and wipe its divine beauty from this earth.

If I had to suffer, then it was only fair for everyone to suffer alongside me, right?

As I walked deeper into the woods, closer to Elsa's grave, the beauty of the trees started to fade. No birds were singing, no sunlight sneaking through the canopy. It was deserted and grey. Lifeless like Elsa. In the distance, I spotted the old decaying stump of the tree that once supported the treehouse. The treehouse was no longer here; I burned it a long time ago. I halted my steps and stood where I once laid on the forest floor as ashes from the burning fire rained down on me like snow. Ashes cleansed me as they baptized me. Death's snow welcomed me into my new life of corruption. I thought it was cathartic then, but I was wrong. In anger, I purged all my memories of Elsa from my life. Looking back, I wish I had kept something. If I was destined to suffer her memory, I might as well have something tangible to cling to.

My blue eyes scanned the floor, a few barren slabs of wood from the treehouse walls survived and lay scattered on the floor. Most of the treehouse had vanished, turning from fire to ash and now to dust. My sight clouded over with the dust of my wrongdoings, my judgement now so off-kilter that

my evil deeds seemed normal. Good even. You do one wrong deed, and it eats at you; it usually leads to another, then another. They start to haunt you until one day the haunting stops, and guess what happens when it stops? Your dirty deeds don't feel so wrong and dirty anymore.

Being evil is the new normal, and you lose your soul when that happens. Then, you are up shits creek, and no one wants to wade through shit without a paddle. So you find yourself sitting back in your rocky boat drifting down a river of shit stuck at its mercy.

Villains are not born.

We are made.

I was twisted by emotional distress and deeds forced upon us. The best villains are the patient ones, which is what I must be because *she* has been. If Nova is the girl I killed, or maybe I'm losing touch with reality, and Nova isn't Elsa.

I don't know everything. The smartest of men are not afraid to admit that. I take every hit, punch, win, and failure and learn from it. So what am I to learn from this ghost from my past? Bending down, I picked up a pile of ashen dust from atop a pile of a burnt logs. What do I take away from the girl that faked her death?

* * *

“What are you doing out here?”

My shoulders tensed, but once I registered his voice, they returned to their relaxed state. Keeping my back to Damian, I threw my hand forward and threw the pile of dust back to its grave.

“I caught you off guard,” Damian noted as he approached. His voice leaked his shock. Like me, Damian and I were trained to be predators, and predators don't ever stop hunting. We're always hungry for blood. As Damian came closer, the sounds of decaying leaves crunched under his steps. “What the hell is up, man? I could have killed you right now.” Damian hit my back, and my feet staggered forward, almost stumbling into the pile of ash and dust.

Where I belonged.

My mind isn't one hundred percent here. Then again, has it ever been? Every night I dreamed of Elsa, and every morning I woke from the nightmare of my sins covered in sweat. Years ago, my night terrors were so troubling that Dash and Damian could not wake me from them. It wasn't until I bonded with my new brothers from Initiation 101 that my mind started to accept my sins. Because I wasn't the lone sinner or killer anymore. I was with a pack of them, which made everything more acceptable.

"Nova," I voiced as I rolled her name around on my tongue.

Is Nova, Elsa? Elsa had light blonde hair and sun-kissed skin like an angel. She glowed pure, untouched humanity. Everything about Elsa was good. Nova, on the other hand, looked different. With jet black hair, pale skin, and a sinful essence that just screamed the bad girl. Sure, Elsa was only a teenager when she was killed, so comparing her body to Nova's wasn't straightforward. Nova had a similar face shape and lips with that cute cupid's bow. Elsa's kiss was from cupid, and she stole my heart. I'd suspect Nova's kiss would be a bite from the devil's snake. The one feature that haunted my core was Nova's eyes. The grey was darker than Elsa's; lifeless. One look told me Nova had seen some serious shit. Setting aside the changed features from child to adult, I was left with a tiny feature only in Nova's left eye.

Once again, I think I'm losing my mind.

A freckle.

Elsa had a speck of a blue freckle in her left eye, and Nova had the same. If Elsa was pretending to be this new girl called Nova, who went to such lengths, why not change her eyes? Did she think I wouldn't remember every detail about her? The little details are often plotted out, but it's the fine details people forget to inspect. Is it possible Nova forgot about the smallest and most delicate of details? I didn't think so. I had a feeling that whatever game Nova was playing was a

cry for help, but I had to get to the bottom of the conundrum to be sure.

“What about the new girl?” Damian asked. He stepped shoulder to shoulder with me, and his eyes roamed the brunt-down tree house. Damian didn’t know Elsa, but I told him and Dash all about her. They had to put up with my self-destructive behavior after Elsa was killed. Damian had a savior complex when it came to women. We were cousins by blood but brothers by experiences, and as my brother, Damian, suffered when I did.

I opened my lips to confess my irrational thought, “I don’t think *she* is Nova. I think Nova is someone else.”

Damian tilted his head, “You think she is a spy?” He suggested. It wasn’t a wrong suggestion. Men like us, men in high power, face numerous threats. That was why our fathers trained us so hard as kids. That training saved us multiple times and made us want to kill our fathers. We’re not the only ones either. The brotherhood, our secret group, will soon need to enact our first plan. We were taking power into our hands, claiming our freedom. When you overthrow a king, the first rule is to make sure you kill him. One who comes back for vengeance isn’t to be trifled with. A scorned king can raise an army from the dead. Therefore we had no choice but to end our makers. Men like us, like our fathers, didn’t accept defeat. They continued to plot and fight to the last breath.

“I don’t know,” I admitted.

Damian crossed his arms and widened his stance, “You’re here for a reason.”

I nodded. Damian didn’t miss a thing. Dash was too busy losing his mind and control of Mila, and although Damian was obsessed with his Plain Jane, his mind could multitask like no other. Part of Damian was with Plain Jane, and the other part was always with Dash and me.

I turned to Damian and dropped all my defenses, “I think Nova is Elsa.”

Damian tipped his head back and chuckled. When I didn't respond, he stopped, "You're serious?" He raised a brow.

"I'm not sure." Licking my lips, I tried to explain myself, "She has a freckle. The same as Elsa."

Damian flashed me a look of concern, "Dude, you're not serious?"

"Yes."

He uncrossed his arms and stepped closer, "I thought Elsa was like an angel, blonde hair, good heart, etc."

"She was."

"Titan," Damian emphasized my name with concern as he opened his arms, "Nova is a hellfire. She eats men up and spits them out. People have a lot of features that our minds can try to link to old memories. Your dad mentioned you have to get married soon, and I think your mind is playing tricks on you. You're grasping because of your guilt over Elsa."

Placing my palms over my eyes, I pushed my hands painfully into my eye sockets, "It's not the same." I began to explain the freckle in Nova's eye. Damian didn't interrupt; he listened and calculated. That was precisely why I needed him. It was very rare to keep secrets from one another, but Dash currently had too much on his plate. Plus, there was no point in telling him my speculations until they were confirmed.

"Why would she show up now?" Damian questioned.

Looking at my cousin, I confessed, "That's what I need you to help me find out." If Nova was Elsa, and Elsa had been hiding from me for years only to come back and play some twisted game, she had another thing coming. When you poke the devil, you unleash the hell hounds. *You better get ready, babygirl, because I'm out for blood.*

Chapter 2



Three months ago...

“Your intuition was correct.” Damian said. His jaw was tense, his body on guard and ready for a fight. Damian’s right hand was slipped inside his pocket, no doubt gripping his pocket knife. Damian and I agreed to meet at the burnt-down treehouse once he compiled the facts I needed to face or not face the past. Dash would find out if we met anywhere else besides here, and I couldn’t tell him yet. Dash was dealing with Mr. Michelson, who was trying to stall the marriage contract between Mila, his daughter, and Dash. Ironically, the man who built a business on not breaking contracts was trying to break his own. Michelson was a fool to try to test a King. I would enjoy watching Dash tear Mila’s father apart and claim his prize.

I liked Mila a lot, and she was suitable for Dash. Mila centered and calmed the beast that roared inside of Dash as much as she rifled it. They had a lot of shit they needed to work out, but once they did, once Mila learned how to put Dash in his place, well, they would be an unstoppable couple. That was precisely what Dash and Mila needed to be to take over their branch of King Corporations. Unlike our fathers, who had to watch their backs, my cousins and I bonded with our new brothers. If we learned anything from our fathers, it

was better to have more than one set of eyes looking out for your back. I'd have just that when our brotherhood came into power.

My boots dug deeper into the muddied soil when I turned to face Damian. He stood with a giant pine tree against his back, a tactical move. This way, he only had to watch his side. Dressed in all black, he would soon disappear into the coming night's darkness. Lately, Damian had gained more muscle weight. His usual clothing looked too tight and pulled around his arms and thighs. He was preparing for the battle that loomed on the horizon. The war our brotherhood was waging would soon spark to life. For Damian, his biggest fight would be against himself. He struggled with the fear that he would turn into his father. Dash and I would never allow that to happen, though.

"What did you find?" I questioned. My ribs felt so tight that when I inhaled, it pained my lungs as I waited for Damian's findings. I stood tall, feeling like a tidal wave was about to press down upon me. Damian was good at the vanishing act. Most of the time, he vanished to see his Plain Jane, but I had him disappear the past few weeks to spy on Nova. During those weeks, he gathered the facts I needed, and now it was time to come clean.

Had I lost my mind?

Nova was the first girl I craved since Elsa was killed. Maybe trying to link Elsa and Nova together was just a trickery of the mind?

Damian whistled and shook his head, "You either have a first-class stalker, or it's her. Most likely both."

Tension laced my neck as I clung to his every word. "We already know Nova followed you to the bar, but besides that, well shit, man," Damian exhaled, "she's good." He raised his hand and pointed his index finger, "But she's cocky. She wasn't trained as extensively as us, so it was easy for me to blend into the background and watch her." He whistled, "She's got a hard-on for you. Watches you all the time. I know her type."

“Because you are her type,” I murmured, but Damian heard. It was a dig at Damian’s obsession with his normal girl. Damian hunted in the shadows and had eyes and ears around Plain Jane 24/7. Dash and I named her Plain Jane because she wasn’t from a family like ours.

“You asked me to help you. I didn’t ask for your help.” Damian poked. “Nova is up to something that much, I know. I had Helen dig,” Damian admitted.

Helen was one of the top hackers working for King Corporations. You’d never guess it by looking at her. Helen was in her fifties and looked like the all-American soccer mom; blonde hair, pink collared shirt, and khaki pants. Little did her friends know she had successfully hacked into the more notorious governments worldwide. Helen had pocketed millions using hold-up tactics, taking over sectors of governments that would cripple their power until they paid her back in cryptocurrency. Helen then took her resume and applied to King Corporations. It wasn’t that she needed the money or job but rather our protection from her past deeds.

“Whoever did Nova’s credentials was good. You dig deep it comes back clean until you see a facial recognition scan of her past. Once again, the tiny details start to crumble.” That was Nova’s problem. Not covering every single detail of her past.

Nothing got past the Kings when we put our full force to it. Damian paused as he pulled out his phone. “Seven years ago, a blonde hair girl was registered into the Russian juvenile prison system. The mug shot is one hundred percent, Elsa. Elsa never died, Titan.” He extended the phone to me. On the screen was a photo registration of Elsa.

I don’t know how long Damian and I stood in silence as I studied the picture. I examined every detail of the girl who escaped death. Elsa’s eyes were bloodshot and puffy from crying, and her skin was so pale that it was as if she had been dragged through hell and locked up. She was hidden away from the sun she loved so much. The devil had ripped her angelic wings off. The eyes looking back at me in the photo were not the eyes of the girl I fell in love with in that

treehouse. It was a haunting image I could never erase from my mind now.

“How the hell did a girl from Connecticut end up in a Russian prison a few weeks after her parents were killed?” I murmured, knowing that Damian had all the answers.

A tremendous amount of guilt sunk into my stomach. I felt like I was going to be sick. I did this to her. I did as my father asked and spied on her, got close to her so I could plant a virus on her parents’ computer. My mistake was falling for Elsa. Karma paid me back by making me suffer, thinking she was killed only to have survived and been dragged into hell.

“Titan,” Damian tried to soften his words, but he knew exactly what I was thinking. “Even if you knew, you would not have been able to help her. Your dad—”

I cut him off, “My father has always been the problem!” I roared.

Damian grabbed me by the back of my neck, forcing me to breathe, calm down and look at him, “A few more weeks, a month or two tops, and we will be free. I know it’s hard, brother, but maybe it was better this way. Better Elsa was hidden from you. It was what probably kept her alive.”

I didn’t want to register his words. I pulled out from his grasp and looked back at the phone. I knew that Damian was right. I was a fourteen-year-old boy when Elsa died. A puppet that was controlled by my father. If my father knew Elsa was a distraction, he would have killed her. But none of that knowledge made anything right.

I grabbed the back of my neck, my fingertips digging into the muscles to kneed out some of the tension. “I’m going to continue,” Damian warned me. “When you start to connect the dots, you land on her uncle first. Ever heard of the Stepanov Bratva?”

“Shit...” I muttered. How did I not know this? I knew Elsa’s parents were Russian, but she never claimed to have lived in Russia. I always assumed Elsa grew up in France

because that's all she mentioned. I just accepted what she confessed to me as a child. A mistake I'd never make now.

Damian continued. "Her uncle is Pakhan. He had something to do with her move to Russia."

"But why and how?" I probed. My father wanted her father's business which had nothing to do with the Bratva.

"I don't know, the digital trail ended there. You have to get the rest from the horse's mouth. How did her uncle save her, and why bother to bring her to Russia only to allow her to be put in prison?"

"Her uncle could have used her as leverage. Elsa's father's company was worth a shit ton. His tech is the foundation of some of our top tech. Rightfully the company would have been passed down to Elsa. Why not come forth with her and claim the power?" I voiced aloud.

"That's what has been racking my mind."

Nothing made sense because there were too many holes.

"What are you going to do now?" Damian asked.

My father.

Everything linked back to him. It was my father that wanted her father's business. There was more than dad was telling me. I could turn to him, but that would make me weak. Dad would never tell me the truth. He would dangle it over my head and relish his added power over me.

"I'm going to make Nova trust me; then I'll break her," I confessed. When Nova did crack, I'd find the missing parts that had been tucked away from me.

Chapter 3



One month ago...

The walls inside my father's office made my skin itch. Nightmares echoed in my mind about being called into this room as a child. I never knew if my meetings with him would be a lesson, an order to kill, or worst. *Yeah, there were things worst than killing.*

I stood to attention with my arms clasped behind my back. The perfect soldier that my father crafted and sculpted. Lucas King sat in his chair; his desk separated us. A fire crackled behind me. My father always had the wood-burning fireplace on. Through winter and summer, the fire burned. Maybe it was my father's way of getting used to the constant flames. He'd be living eternity in hell, that is.

"I've found you a wife." He flatly stated. His words hit me like a punch to the gut. I knew my father would arrange my marriage. My cousin Dash suffered the same fate. However, Dash and Mila loved each other. My heart could never be given. I gave it away to Elsa when we were kids, and now Nova.

"No thoughts?" My father taunted.

I shrugged, knowing that this marriage he planned would never work. Not because my father's plans failed but because the brotherhood would soon take over. My father would be wiped from this earth along with his plans. I clenched my jaw to hide my eager excitement. Soon the prince was going to kill the king.

My father exhaled and lost some of his fierce presence. I looked him in the eye finally. In front of me, I saw a man holding the world's ruling power. However, my father was no longer the ruthless lion he once was. He looked exhausted. A heavyweight bore down on his shoulders, and my gut told me it wasn't merely the fact that someone had just killed his brother in front of him.

"Do you remember when I told you and your cousins that myself and your uncles had made many sacrifices for you boys?"

"Yes, father." I spat. His statement was a joke. My father never sacrificed anything for me. He used me, his flesh and blood, as a pawn to gain more power and control.

"I know you abhor me, son, but trust me; you know nothing of hate. Like you, I detested my father." He rubbed his jaw, "I don't want history to continue to repeat. I did something long ago to protect you. I saved someone for you."

My right hand gripped my left wrist, which was still tucked behind my back. I needed to let my father continue to speak. As hard as it was to listen to his lies, there were hints of the truth laced between his words.

"Your new wife is going to be Elsa Stepanov."

I cocked my head, "What did you just say?" I knew Elsa was alive, but my father should not know that!

"Elsa. That girl you attached yourself to long ago. She is alive and attending your school." He pushed back in his chair, "But you knew that, didn't you, son?"

It took every ounce of my training to remain frozen. I was like an iceberg floating in the hot waters. My father wanted a reaction, a physical one. It was almost as if my father wanted

me to kill him at this very moment. It was that fact that made me refrain.

My father ran his tongue over his teeth. "I'll explain."

"I have a feeling we are long past explaining, father." I hissed. I felt the weight of every concealed weapon on me. Which one would I choose right now to end him...

"I knew you cared for the girl." My father rolled his eyes, "Once I knew she was alive, I watched out for her."

"You. Watched. Out. For. Her?" I questioned. "Did you know she was in prison?"

"Yes." He answered right away. "I had a man watching her. I didn't tell you because you didn't deserve her then, and neither did she deserve you. You both needed to pass your trials. Be happy." My father waved his hand. "I called you here because I am not the only one that knows. I'm helping you." He offered.

"You never offer help."

"Time changes."

I eyed him, wondering what he was up to. My mind raced to connect this new information with the knowledge I had. "Why didn't Elsa's uncle reach out to you after her parents were killed? The company belonged to her." I questioned.

"You've found a lot." My father raised a brow. "Her uncle, Igor Stepanov, is a very greedy man. Thus the reason I called you here today."

I shook my head, unclasped my hands, and placed my palms on the desk. "You didn't answer my questions." I was a fuse that had been lit. The fire was racing toward my core, begging for me to explode.

"Patience, son. We don't always get all the answers at once. You have more pressing matters at the moment. Like the bidding to buy your wife's hand in marriage."

"Stay away from her." I warned as I leaned forward.

“Her uncle is trying to sell her off. He sent me an invitation to buy her hand. I’m not the only buyer he has reached out to.”

A beast clawed inside of me, breaking my skin as it tore forth. It wanted blood. The blood of Igor Stepanov. The man who took the fallen angel whose wings had been cut off. He broke Elsa. He took my angel and caged her, keeping her hidden in hell. Now he was selling her off! I would hunt him down and make him suffer. I’d take Anders with me. Yes, Anders would be perfect. My brother had a desire for torturing people with an ax.

My father stood, “I will not apologize for how I have raised you, son. You’ll be happy to know I have secured her hand. Her uncle believed we would make a partnership with him. You can handle him as you see fit. Consider this my parting gift.” Dad rounded his desk and exited his office. I was left to wonder how big the game board that Lucas King controlled was.

Chapter 4



The past...

When you see the boy of your dreams, you tend to overthink everything. Does my breath smell? Heck, do I smell? Will he think my hair looks frizzy? Are my boobs big enough? What does he like about me? Why me? Why does Titan Jules King, like me, not only the hottest but the wealthiest guy in school?

I'd forever remember Titan no matter how this ended, and it had to end, right? I mean, a guy tells you things you want to hear to get you to loosen up. I know this, but when Titan spoke to me, I couldn't ignore his words. His promises were so engrained in my mind that I would give him my soul if he wanted to strip it from my body.

Every night I looked forward to seeing him like an addict to their vice. Now, I was happy my parents were too busy with work. Their work had been insane, and even though I knew something pressing was going on with mom and dad, I didn't ask or acknowledge it. I was being a bit selfish in my teenage life. I wanted to enjoy seeing the boy of my dreams and not be worried about my parents' business troubles.

* * *

Have you ever felt a sixth sense? Well, I have, I think. All week Titan had been acting odd. We had no classes together, so I rarely saw him at school. When he came to my treehouse, he seemed distant, and his behavior went from extra cold to hot. At times Titan could barely look at me, but then each night, he pressed his lips against mine with unspoken promises of a caring nature. His hug felt like he never wanted to let me go. Maybe my young teen mind was overthinking everything, but I knew Titan would break up with me any day.

He wasn't at school today, so I didn't even see him in the hallways or at lunch, but he texted me, ordering, not asking, to go to the treehouse right after school. His text felt like an ominous cloud above my head. The day dragged, I got a B minus on my math test, and I had a paper to finish writing that was due tomorrow.

Unlike most kids at my school, who had a private driver, I took the bus. But, the school bus at our private school was anything but average. With plush black leather seats and small TVs overhead, it was more like a first-class seat than a yellow bus. The bus stop was two blocks from my street, which wasn't a bad walk most days. As I stood to exit, I felt drained of energy, knowing impending doom was hanging over my head. I decided to stop by my parents first and not listen to Titan about meeting him at the treehouse, at least not yet.

It took me twenty minutes to reach my house because I was so tired and my feet dragged. Mentally, I hoped if I stalled that, Titan might change his mind about breaking up with me. When I reached our long driveway's start, tears blurred my vision. I tried to brush them away because today, my parents were home from work very early. They had texted that they decided to come home and have a family dinner, which was out of the ordinary lately. If I came home crying, it would only lead to more probing that I didn't need right now.

I stepped one sneaker on the cobblestone-lined path that led to my house when a black car came to a rolling stop behind me. Turning my head, the sedan's windows were so tinted I couldn't see in, but I knew one thing, it wasn't my parents' car, plus they were inside. Their silver Escalate was

parked our front in the distance. My hands clenched the straps of my backpack tighter as fear embedded into my stomach.

The car door opened, and a large man stepped out. Shiny black leather shoes echoed off the cobblestone driveway. My eyes skirted up his black dress pants, and his white shirt rolled up to his elbows. Muscular forearms were patterned with tattoos that caused me to gulp. My father's men used to have tattoos, so I always associated the markings with the Bratva, the family business my father left behind. When my eyes reached the man's face, I noted his handsome appearance. Thick brown hair, green eyes, and more tattoos slipped out from under his shirt collar.

"Elsa," He said my name as he moved closer. He smiled, but I could tell it wasn't something he usually did. It looked like the smile a lion flashed when trying to lure a defenseless deer into its jaws.

*The subconscious part of my brain screamed danger as it forced my feet to step back. The man did not miss the slight change of distance. I had a feeling the stranger didn't miss anything. He opened the palms of his hands as if to signal he wasn't dangerous. **Yeah, buddy, I'm not buying that!***

"My name is Anton. Your uncle Igor sent me."

My forehead scrunched up, "My uncle?" I hadn't seen uncle Igor since we moved from France. Uncle and father had a rocky relationship.

"Where is my uncle?" I quickly asked. Glancing over my shoulder to our house, I willed my mind to settle because dad should be inside. Was this why my parents wanted a family dinner. Did my uncle make a surprise visit to town?

"I just need you to come with me, Elsa," Anton stepped closer.

Red flashed in my mind, warning me of danger. I turned on my heels and ran from the man. At fourteen, I was five foot seven. My legs were longer than most, which gave me an advantage because I could run faster. As I sprinted away from Anton and towards my house, I heard him yell and then take

off in a run himself. The stomping of his dress shoes sounded like hammers chasing me. My foot faltered, and nearly stumbled, but I corrected myself in time to stop my fall. My eyes pleaded for my house to close the distance between us, but I knew that my fate was sealed. I was fast, but Anton was catching up.

*Ten feet from my house, I was so close. “Dad!” I screamed. I was almost safe when my eyes caught a bright white light from inside. The light expanded, and my body was pulled back instead of running forward. **Did Anton grab me?***

A buzzing sound, like that of bees filled my head, pounding all of a sudden. My brain felt fuzzy and disoriented. My back burned with pain as I struggled to open my eyes. My body laid on the hard stones of our driveway. Parts of my skin felt raw, like the feeling of road rash. I expected to see the sky above, but all I saw was smoke billowing into the once blue sky. The smoke was so thick, with tones of black as it tried to choke the surrounding air. There was a second sound that rocketed through the air. The explosion was so loud that it halted the buzzing for a moment before the bees returned even stronger. My body moved, and a heavy weight pressed down my back. My lungs suddenly felt on fire; I desperately inhaled and tried to clear them, making the burning worse. Hands grabbed my cheeks, then Anton’s face filled my vision. His once handsome face was covered with stripes of blackening soot. There was a small cut on his forehead, which caused a tear of blood to cry down his face. His mouth was yelling at me, but I couldn’t hear a damn thing except the ringing in my ears.

I don’t understand what happened!

Anton crouched lower, wrapping his hands around my body. He picked me up and threw me over his shoulder as he took off running with what felt like superhero strength. My body hung limp in his hold like I was a fresh kill. It took all my energy to tilt my head up, and when I did, I screamed.

My brain started to connect the dots.

My house was on fire. Wait, not fire; it wasn't there anymore. Bright orange flames licked up where the walls used to be. Anton placed me in the back of his car, slammed the door shut, and then got in the driver's seat. The jolt of the vehicle pushed my sore body into the leather seats as he sped off. My brain fought to stay awake, but I knew one thing, if my parents were inside, there was no way they would have survived the explosion. That fact made me stop fighting; I surrendered to the darkness trying to swallow me.

Chapter 5



Seven years ago...

“Kukla, wake up.” my body shook, “Come on, Elsa.”

A deeply accented voice continued to call my name, urging the fog in my mind to clear. One of the few words I remembered when my father spoke Russian to me as a child was the word for a doll, Kukla. Why was my father calling for me?

The voice became more demanding. It took me three times to finally be able to lift my lids. When I opened my eyes, it wasn't my father hovering over me. I knew that face. I had seen it just moments ago. I looked into green eyes that were as vast as a forest that held a trove of secrets. Anton showed relief that I woke up. Looking past him, I saw the distinct white paneling of an airplane. I planted my palms on the leather seat and pushed myself to a sitting position. Since I had been lying on a leather couch lined by one of the walls, I knew we were in a private jet.

“Slowly, your medicine is still trying to wear off,” Anton said. His hands gripped my forearms in a caring gesture.

“Where am I?” I asked. Then my brain remembered the explosion. I gasped, and tears fell from my eyes. Anton didn't

say anything, which only confirmed my nightmares. I lifted my gray eyes to his face, "They are dead." I stated.

Anton nodded, which felt so wrong. How could it be so simple? A mere nod confirmed my parents' death? I never felt anger like I did at that moment. I didn't think my mind was capable of creating such hate.

"It's time to be strong, Kukla," Anton said.

I shook my head frantically as I cried. Anton, the stranger, hugged me until I settled myself. It was an act. I wasn't settled, nor had I come to terms with the knowledge. I checked out and accepted the numbness. The only way I could continue with life was to tell myself that this was all a nightmare and that I would wake up soon.

"Why did you call me Kukla?"

Anton's green eyes flashed with pity, "Because that is what you are. You are about to become a doll in a new role where you need to be very strong to survive. I can't save you, Elsa, but I can help you as best as I can." Anton nodded, reassuring himself of his promise to me.

"Where are you taking me? What happened to my parents..." Question after question poured like flood waters from my mouth.

"Shh. Hush now and calm yourself."

"Calm down!" I screamed, but no one came to my rescue since we were on a private plane. "I just watched my parents get blown up."

"Yes!" Anton snapped harshly as he flipped from caring to coldness. "You haven't begun to see the amount of death that will plague your mind, Kukla. So take the olive branch I am giving you and hold on tight because when I hand you over to your uncle, there will be no sympathy or hugs. Your Pakhan is not a pleasant man."

Pakhan? What the hell did that mean. I imagined little pac-man trying to beat each other, but I was sure Anton did not mean the game.

Pushing away from him, I stood, but I was trapped in the private jet, with nowhere to run and no one to help me.

Titan.

He will help me. If I play along and get to a phone, all I have to do is call Titan and pray I was misreading his distance. He was stressed because of something his father made him do, not because he wanted to break up with me. Yes! I continued to tell myself false lies. Little did I know the hell I was about to enter.

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I don't understand, uncle," I confessed as I questioned my uncle Igor. It didn't make sense why he had Anton watching my parents and me. Why didn't he warn my father if Igor knew something terrible would happen? "Your father doesn't listen to others very well, Elsa. I warned him if he gave up his position in the Bratva, he'd be unprotected. I tried to offer my help," Igor shrugged his broad shoulders, "but he didn't want to take me up on that offer. I sent Anton to watch out solely because of you and your mother. And good thing I did." Uncle made himself out to be a savior. Maybe he was, perhaps he wasn't? I didn't know anymore, and in the end, did it matter? My parents were not coming back from the dead.

"Your father got involved with the Kings. They are not to be tricked or messed with. You want someone to blame," Igor eyed me long. I didn't particularly appreciate how he kept pointing fingers at others. Uncle relished in the knowledge that he knew more than me. "Blame the man who just took control of your father's company." There it was, the twist of the hand that showed me uncle's cards. He knew much more than he was willing to tell. He'd drop crumbs only to torture me.

"What do you mean?" I questioned.

"Lucas King just signed over all control and rights of Stepcon Tech to King Corporations. He stole everything from you, Elsa." Uncle sat back behind his vast desk and lit a cigar. His house was refined and ornate. Gold gilded the crown moldings, and thick wallpaper lined the walls that shouted a

royal lived under the roof. Unlike the fairy tales, my uncle was no kind king. He was a thug hiding behind the size of his wallet.

I shook my head. That wasn't possible? Wait, was that why Titan entered himself into my life? Was it all a ploy? Had Titan been playing me like his father played my parents?

Everything started to make sense, why Titan King would approach me as a friend, why he wanted to get close. Was that why Titan had acted so strange those last days? He knew, didn't he? Titan knew his father would stop at nothing to get my father's company. Titan played me. He wasn't the knight that would save me. Titan was the villain who just killed my kingdom.

Chapter 6



Seven years ago...

If you knew you were dying, would you lay down and accept your fate, or would you continue to fight the losing battle? I had been in prison in northern Russia for three months. It was a feat I had survived this long. Uncle Igor thought this place would strip me bare, snatch away my soul and spit out a stronger, better Elsa.

He was wrong. I wasn't getting stronger. I was dying.

Every day I fought to stay focused and have the willpower to continue, but I awoke to new threats, and a new part of me was stripped away. Sanity was no longer tangible.

Some nights I told myself this was still a nightmare I would wake from. Other nights I told myself I must be in a coma, and soon I'll wake up to see my parents' faces. Ninety days later, I was still stuck in whatever reality this place was, and I didn't want to live it anymore. I held the shiv in my hand, gripping it tight between my fingers. Two deep cuts, one in each wrist, and I'd fade into the abyss. It will all be over soon. I raised the shiv I made from my toothbrush. I pressed the sharp edge to my inner wrist slowly, too slow to cut my flesh. As the rough plastic touched my inner wrist, I saw Titan's face in my mind.

Titan King.

The boy I loved.

The boy was responsible for killing my parents and putting me in this hell.

Defeat sagged in my shoulders as I lowered the blade and slipped it back into the pocket of my grey sweatsuit. I still could not grasp what my uncle had told me. The Kings wanted my parents' business, and my parents refused to sell it to them, so Lucas King killed my father to take everything. As uncle had described, dad made a deal with the devil, and the devil always came to collect. A virus was planted in our house, and it spread, hacking into my parents' encryption and taking over their hard drive. The Kings knew all our secrets. They tracked our every move, and when my parents went behind Lucas King's back, he went behind my mother and father's.

During my days of rotting away here, I started connecting the dots. Lucas was the reason Titan inserted himself into my life. Titan's love and promises were all lies to get closer to my parents. Titan was the only one who had access to my laptop. I rarely brought it to the treehouse, but he must have distracted me one of those nights I was in teenage bliss, lusting over the idea that the cute guy wanted me for me.

What a joke!

It was from my laptop the virus was planted. Therefore it was because of me and my weakness that my parents were murdered.

Renewed strength flickered in my mind as I pulled the shiv back and pressed it against my wrist. I cut but not deep enough to kill. It wasn't the first time I had cut myself, not because I was fucked up in the head, or maybe I was at this point, I needed to cut to wake up. Haven't you heard that old saying, if you are in a nightmare, just pinched yourself to wake up? Well, whoever said that was a fool because there is no waking when you are in a nightmare. When I cut or pinched myself, I only woke up back in my cell every day—time after time.

A faint line of blood appeared against my skin. I heard a guard's boots echo down the hallway. Drop, drop, stomp, stomp. The blood and boots repeated in a synthesized fashion.

Scurrying with haste, I rushed to my bed and slipped the blade into a hole I made in my mattress. The guard stopped at the bars of my cell. I walked to the front with my head tipped down, not looking into his eyes. The guard extended his hand and slipped between the bars a black envelope. I reached out and accepted it then he walked away. I never knew what the guards would give me. Sometimes it was a beating, and other times it was an extra amount of food from Anton. Nothing from my uncle usually came.

"Gifts, gifts, she gets gifts. Pretty little angel now in hell gets gifts," Marla sang on repeat like a parrot. Marla was in the cell across from mine. Leave it to fate to place the girl who spoke the most English across from me. It's not what you think. Marla was one hundred percent off the rails. Dasha, two cells down, told me Marla was in here for murder, and I didn't doubt it.

Marla continued singing about me as I walked to my bed and sat down. Peeling back the paper, I opened the envelope. Shaking it, I spilled its contents over my bed. It was filled with photos, and not just any pictures but photos of Titan King. I staggered back, falling off my bed with shock and horror. Knowing it was Titan who killed my parents was one thing. Seeing his face well I was suffering in hell was another form of torture.

My palms dug into the cold concrete floor as I pushed myself up and sat back on the bed. Hesitantly, my trembling hand reached out and grabbed a photo. The paper felt like it burned to the touch. Seeing Titan in the photos killed what little life I was clinging to. Titan looked just as beautiful as my mind remembered. He was stunning, smiling and looked unaffected in every single photo.

The fucker!

I looked at photo after photo of Titan; each one angered me more just as it drove a long knife into my chest. After

inspecting all the images, I knew my uncle was telling the truth because in that picture was not the boy Titan pretended to be. In those images was a cold-hearted, unaffected killer.

I realize my mistake.

If I killed myself, Titan would win. He'd continue to live his privileged life with pleasure. Fuck that! Why should he get to live well I was slowly rotting away and dying in here?

I stood and started to pace my cell. I used to feel like a trapped rat in here but not now.

"Not now!" I screamed as I pulled my hair at the roots. Marla started to laugh like a hyena, the crazy bitch.

My eyes narrowed as something dark took hold of me. It started in my mind and then slithered down as it wrapped around my heart. The darkness constricted, tighter and tighter until what was left of my heart crumbled. Dust scattered in my chest as the evil root spread its ashes. It mixed with my blood.

Killing.

Killing every part of me that was foolish.

Killing Elsa.

"Not. Now." I declared!

I was no longer a rat; I was a trapped lion. Instead of pacing the cell, I walked back and forth as I sharpened my newly found claws on the concrete floor. This was no longer my jail. It was my training ground, and what better place to train than with killers.

Titan, Lucas, and my uncle Igor were about to learn a hard lesson. You can cage a wild animal, but you can never tame it. I will devour them whole when they think I am tamed enough to be let out. But in order to do that, I can't remain myself. Rushing to the bars, I pressed my face between them. The cold metal could be felt through my cheeks, down to my teeth, but that didn't matter anymore. My feelings didn't matter.

I eyed Marla, who jumped and skipped around her tiny cell. Marla wasn't born this way. None of us were. We're

shaped, broken, and molded into something twisted. The only way to survive was to the cope; some cope with a pint of ice cream; some deal with life by just shutting down.

Elsa was too weak to sense Titan's lies. I had to become someone new, more assertive, and most of all, a person that felt nothing. Feelings got me into this mess. I'll stop feeling and patiently wait because, like a lion in the wild, I'll be stalking and lurking, ready to pounce when my prey least suspects it.

I could hear an evil laugh echoing in my head. The voice was new. It sounded confident, but the voice was mostly cold, dead, and heartless.

It sounded glorious.

** * **

The cold chains locked around my wrist caused an ache in my bones. The metal felt even colder than the icy room I was placed in. Then again, my time here wasn't meant to be spent in comfort. The jungle was a harsh and cruel world, and that's where I was now. Little did my guardian know that I would become the predator they wanted, but I wouldn't be the one they expected.

"Long time no see," I cocked a grin as I looked at Anton. I had been in prison for seven months now. The last time I saw Anton was when he drove me here. My uncle and I sat in the back of the car as my uncle explained my new fate. Anton was a liar too. He said he'd protect me from my uncle. Well, he can't save Elsa anymore because she was dead.

Anton's green eyes looked more haunted as he scanned me up and down. More wrinkles were starting to form on his handsome face. Unlike most men who aged to become bald and fat, I was willing to bet Anton would be the rare 1% who was the opposite. His body still lacked body fat, and his head was still thick. All he needed to worry about was those stress lines, but many women favored that look.

I crossed my ankles under the table as I eyed Anton, who whispered to the guard at the door. The guards escorted me

into a private room with a metal table and two chairs. My wrists were chained to the table like a criminal. The guard nodded and took an envelope, which Anton handed him, then the thick metal door shut, and I was us alone with Anton.

“I’ve been hearing something,” Anton said in English. Unlike my uncle, Anton didn’t mind speaking to me in English. But seven months in prison greatly improved my Russian. Anton approached the table; as he did, he rolled up the sleeves of his crisp white dress shirt. Veins in his forearms were noticeable and thick.

I slipped on my new mask. In time I wouldn’t need to slip it on. I would let my new persona become my every thought. “Terrible things, I hope,” I responded in Russian to prove my lesson had been learned.

Using his foot, he kicked out the chair and slowly sat in it. His posture suggested he thought the chair was dirty and beneath his title. He licked his lips as he studied me. His right hand rested on the metal table as he drummed his fingers in a musical pattern. I started to get unnerved as Anton examined me under his microscope, “You did it, Kukla.”

“I’ve done a lot of things now.”

Anton nodded, “So I’ve heard. Weekly fights so much so that your uncle has had to pay off the warden who wanted to keep you longer as punishment.”

“Am I supposed to be thankful?” I cocked my head. Did my uncle know about the guard who used hot water as a punishment? The shower water would boil with a simple twist of the old piping. My back now was marked with quarter-sized scars that were the burnt blisters from that punishment.

“No,” Anton responded without haste, “you are supposed to be what you are now.”

Narrowing my eyes, I asked in Russian, “And what am I now?” Leaning forward, I pressed my forearms on the cold surface of the table. “What kind of Kukla will I be today?”

I thought Anton might look proud that I could speak Russian, but instead, he looked sullen, “You’ve done what he

wanted.”

“Uncle gets what he wants,” I sneered.

Anton leaned forward, “Not always.” The tip of his lip tugged up slightly. Anton always had something else at play. So, who else would gain from my time here?

“You didn’t kill yourself that day. You became a fighter.”

The muscles in my neck stiffen, “You’ve been watching me. That’s crossing the line, Anton. I mean, putting me in juvie is one thing but filming me?” I joked. I figured the cameras were standard prison protocol, but it seems I was wrong. Anton was always watching.

“Did my uncle send the pictures?” Referring to the photos, I kept receiving of Titan King. The images kept me awake while pondering who the sender could’ve been. My uncle was twisted, but was he so filled with hate that he would hunt me with images of the boy responsible for killing my family?

“No,” Anton responded fast.

“You?”

“No.”

I licked my lips and then cleared my dry throat. This was a game of Russian roulette to Anton, but I would be the bullet that shot free. “It doesn’t matter anyway.”

“No, it doesn’t. What matters is that you can be controlled once you are released. Igor has made a monster, but to survive Elsa, you must know who the ringmaster is. Is that something you can do?”

A change in Anton’s face hinted at his dirty little secret. Igor didn’t have the strength he made me believe he had. Anton, however, had more power than he let others know. It was the ones who hid their power that you needed to consider. Igor was a balloon that could be popped; Anton was something entirely different. “Controlled like you, Anton?” I questioned his loyalty with one sentence.

Anton's green eyes gleamed as he stood, "I think you have no idea of the power inside of you, Kukla, and neither does your uncle." Turning his back, he walked to the door and knocked three times. He looked over his shoulder and said, "You're critical to some very influential people. The end is the beginning, Elsa. Don't forget that."

Chapter 7



The present...

Well, this was...unexpected.

A fitting shoe for my pretty little feet because it was my goal to be unexpected. Then boom, I get a taste of my own medicine. It's a hard pill to swallow.

Defeat? Ghost asked.

Fuck no, Ghost. We have not been defeated.

The cold metal of my gun started to warm in my hand, so much so that my palm had begun to sweat. Titan, Lucas, Damian, and my fucking uncle Igor look down the barrel. For once in their lives, they were all unsure. The King men kept a mask over their features, but my uncle had furrowed brows. *Your lion was about to kill its captor uncle.* They knew I was unpredictable, and I'd act without repercussions. Yes, I, Nova Baladan, dared to aim a gun at these powerful men.

I had plotted my plan for revenge, but I failed to see the tiny details. I didn't care about those details. The bigger picture blinded me. I pushed through years of abuse, all to cut my leash and take control. I was now Nova Baladan, and I had successfully killed Elsa, the girl I was born as but never meant to be. Elsa was weak and fell for the lies Titan fed her. Lies

Titan force fed so he and his father could steal my parents' company.

My plans were simple. Get Titan to hate me, turn that hate into lust, lust into love, and then kill the King. But it was all unfolded because Titan was a fucking freak that remembered a tiny freckle that even I didn't notice in my left eye. Color me surprised. I thought Titan didn't remember Elsa at all. But to remember, an insignificant detail meant that Titan did care.

During my months of making Titan fall for me, I started to blur the line and fall for him. Once again, I was a fool because men don't change. Titan played me yet again. Today, the anniversary of my mother and father's death, I showed up to kill Lucas King, Titan's father. Instead, I was illegally married to Titan King, handed over in some back-ended deal by my uncle Igor who always viewed me as a bargaining chip.

Fucking hell, each man in front of me deserved the bullet in my gun. Well, except for Damian. He had yet to do me wrong, but he stood by Titan's side, and Damian's last name was King, so it was only a matter of time before his evil showed.

Who will you pick? Ghost wondered.

That's a tough decision, I admitted to her.

Tell me about it. I'm sorry, Nova.

Are you sorry?

Yes, Ghost replied, *maybe your way was correct. We all go down in fire.*

I laughed in my head. *Ghost, we are not going down yet. We lost this battle, but I'm still going to wage war, and you know what that means Ghost? That means there are more battles to come.*

Mila's father ducked out from behind the desk. I had forgotten Greg Michelson was even here. The famous lawyer for all the underworld. Michelson Law worked with the worst of the worst, and once you signed a contract, there was no backing out. That is what made his law firm so powerful. Even

evil had to have order, and Greg Michelson enforced the wort of them. Since Mr. Michelson was the one who wrote up the marriage contract, it all but etched my fate in stone. I would be married to Titan King until one of us died. I should kill Michelson, but my first bullet wasn't meant for him. Plus, if I killed Mr. Michelson, that would fail to teach Mila the lesson she needed to learn. No one is going to fight your battles for you. You have to train, find motivation and fight them yourself.

With my gun aimed high, my eyes moved past Mr. Michelson as I took in the stillness of the office before I unleashed my fury. This used to be my father's office. I hoped he was watching from heaven. I might not regain control of his company, but I would claim blood as the punishment for killing my father and mother.

So now the hard decision, which King do I kill first? There was Titan, but killing him wouldn't satisfy my hunger for his pain.

Are you sure? Ghost asked.

Damn sure, Ghost, case in point, he betrayed us again, and I'm not shocked.

Wouldn't betraying us mean he killed us? He married you, Nova.

Marriage to a King is the kiss of death, Ghost. It's all the same in the end. Whether you die from a bullet or a kiss, death is death.

My grey eyes moved to Lucas King, the mastermind behind King Corporations and the man that set in motion the murder of my parents. Make no mistake, Lucas's death was coming, and it would be by my hands. However, his time still has a few ticks of life left. It's an unexpected decision I just made. I had one bullet to fire before the shit hit the fan.

Damian King lurked side by side with Titan. He stood on the edge, ready to tackle me from the side. When our eyes met, he knew he was safe. In truth, I didn't mind, Damian. He was still a mystery to me and had primarily remained

hidden. *Ghost, I guess you have rubbed off on me; I'll spare Damian too. For now.*

That leaves one more man in the room. The man that was my maker. The Kings' might have killed Elsa, but they let her rest in peace. It was my uncle Igor who didn't let the dead slumber. Uncle exorcised a ghost from beyond. For years he trained me, thinking I was his pet that could be summoned and controlled. I remembered that day in juvie when I killed the little mouse and became the caged lion.

Now the lion was free.

In one second, I aim my gun at my uncle; right before I pull the trigger, I let my decision register in his eyes which flared wide as his mouth opened to plead. Words forever left unsaid once he realized his time had come.

Bang!

Igor's wide eyes spread even wider. Like butter being scraped over dry toast, they look just as painful as the sound of the knife raking back and forth over the hard bread. His head snapped back with a wicked jerk. Blood and brains went flying. It was beautiful as they landed on Mr. Michelson, who screamed. Seriously, the man screamed like a little girl. Mr. Michelson could dish out the pain but couldn't take it. I couldn't wait to see how he would react when he saw how I corrupted his little girl.

The room didn't erupt in chaos, but rather after the sound of the gun, it remained silent besides Mr. Michelson. Aftershock settled; Titan moved first and took a step toward me.

"Son," Lucas snapped, grabbing his son from behind. One would almost believe Lucas cared if his son died. If that were so, he'd never have sent Titan to Initiation 101. The camp that broke humans took their souls and turned them into ruthless killers.

I aimed my gun at Titan, "Still on daddy's leash, Ti," I shook my head in disgust, "I'd rather have a husband that had some balls." I goaded.

Titan grinned and stepped forward. My finger pressed the trigger with more pressure, but his eyes revealed the knowledge he and I both knew.

“You won’t shoot me, babygirl,” He beamed.

He was right. I had planned for this moment my entire new life as Nova Baladan, but here, with my prize in front of me, I couldn’t pull the trigger. *What do you think about that Ghost?*

No answer. Why doesn’t she answer when I need her to?

Titan began to take another step, so I did the unexpected thing.

Tada!

I aimed the gun at myself. The barrel was hot against the temple of my head from when I shot my uncle. Everyone in the room inhaled—even the cold-hearted Lucas King looked concerned, which didn’t make sense. I eyed the signed papers on the desk, now stained with my uncle’s brain; everything was signed, and even if I tried to protest it now, a contract made by Michelson law was set in stone.

“Why do you need me?” I asked Lucas, who stepped up to his son’s shoulder. Don’t fool yourself; Lucas would not take my bullet to save his son. Right?

“Put the gun down, Elsa,” Lucas ordered.

“Nova!” I snapped. Pressing the barrel harder into the skull. “You’re a brilliant and conniving man Lucas. Can’t you remember a name? You killed Elsa! I want to introduce to you Nova, Nova Baladan.” I opened and extended my left hand as if to make an emphasized introduction. Dramatic gestures were cherries on top. Speaking of cherry, I licked my lips and tasted the cherry-flavored lip gloss that coated them.

Lucas nodded. It bothered me that Lucas looked at ease after all the lies, deception, and killing today.

Chaos is our environment Nova, but it is his world. Lucas still controls the little people, and we are still little, Ghost added.

Look at you, Ghost. Sounding all wise. Betrayal will do that to you. It removed those rose-colored glasses and replaced them with shades of red and black: chaos and destruction.

“Ok, Nova.” Lucas stressed my name, “Now put the gun down.” Lucas twisted and looked to Mr. Michelson, who had composed himself. My uncle’s blood stained parts of his suit jacket. “Michelson, we’re done for now. You can go.” Lucas ordered. The fact that no one came running into the office after a gunshot and screaming told me these walls had seen a lot of shit since the Kings took over control.

Mr. Michelson looked towards me for added permission to move. I did have the gun after all, “Scurry along.” I grinned. He stood and walked to the door with haste.

“Answer my question,” I insisted now that it was just the four of us in the room.

Then, Titan glanced away from my eyes and looked toward his father. Did I ruffle some feathers? Yes, I think I did. Titan realized that Lucas had something else in the works that neither of us knew. What it could be, I had no idea. Lucas successfully stole my parents’ company. He agreed to let his son marry me, so what else was Lucas hiding that would be affected if I died?

Chapter 8



Many things were certain. One thing was uncertain, what would Nova do? Reckless had become her middle name. Nova Reckless Baladan. Actually that wasn't right. Legally she was my wife now. Nova Reckless King. Just the sound of it sent my blood flowing south. Not the best time for a hard-on, but when it came to Nova, I wasn't always able to control my body.

The sexy woman with the golden blonde wig on, wearing skin-tight clothing that outlined her lean curves, was my wife. Shit! I finally had her, and I wasn't going to lose her.

Nova moved the gun away from her and aimed it at my father. I was torn between answers that my father was concealing and the girl I loved who had lost her damn mind. No, *really, she had*. No one pointed a gun at my father. Trust me, I considered doing it myself, and I knew the time was coming that I would have to go against my nature. A son to kill his father. A man to kill his maker. I didn't care that Elsa, Nova—whoever she wanted to be or whatever name she wanted to be called—was broken and lost. Nova returning in my life boiled down to one simple fact. This new persona, Nova, was a cry for help. Nova didn't honestly want to kill me. She wanted me to save her.

I had been trained to hunt and dominate, which was what I would do with my wife. I'd trudge through the depths of hell to find her soul and bring her back to the living. I made a promise years ago, and now I got a second chance to keep that promise. Nova would be mine in every way possible. She was my wife, but I needed to find her soul and repair the girl I broke so many years ago.

Now that my father had signed the papers and I signed the marriage contract, why did dad need Nova alive? He had her parents' company, he got everything he wanted like he always did. My father didn't need Nova alive. I didn't believe he wanted Nova alive to make me happy. The conversation he and I had about him giving Nova to me was utter bullshit. Lucas King never did anything from the kindness of his heart. Every move he made had a motive. My father needed Nova for something.

Something bigger at play.

Dad finally tore his eyes off of Nova and looked at me. All I saw in his blue eyes were secrets and lies. A darkness that concealed the inner workings of the devil. The man loved me in his sick way, but love didn't matter sometimes. Other times love just killed, and I knew I'd have to kill my father sooner rather than later because now my father was threatening my wife again, and I wasn't the naive boy who listened to Lucas King anymore.

Chapter 9



The weight of the gun started to weigh heavy in my extended hand. Lucas, the ass, had yet to utter one syllable. So, it was time to up the stacks; I aimed the gun back at Titan and pulled the trigger. Don't worry. I didn't harm his pretty face; I aimed between him and Lucas to the right. Damian lunged for me then, but I shifted my position, lowered the gun, and pulled the trigger, almost shooting his toe off. This entire dramatic act was meant to show them my skills. Yes, I was a woman and not as trained as them, but that didn't mean I was any less deadly. My reflexes were fast, and my aim was true.

I didn't consider who snuck up behind me as I fired the second shot, a cold, sharp knife wrapped around my neck from behind. With my eyes aimed ahead, I noted how Lucas relaxed, which told me he knew who was behind me. Titan and Damian, on the other hand, stiffened. I could see their brains working like a computer, running through scenarios and how they could get control of the room. Titan's blue eyes shifted to my attacker. Pure joy radiated through my body like a nuclear blast when I saw how Titan promised the attacker a painful death for attempting to harm me. Titan was just as twisted as me. We loved to hate each other, and a part of us hated to love one another. It was unclear because no matter what emotions we shared, we were toxic, haunted by the

radiation of our past that was causing deadly conflicts for our future.

Titan locked eyes with me in an unbreakable hold; he nodded with his eyes as he tried to reassure me that he wouldn't let anything happen to my pretty little neck. A laugh slipped from my lips as it filled the room. Titan still thought I needed him. The man's audacity to think I still couldn't handle tough situations myself.

I felt my attacker lower his lips closer to my right ear. Titan's forearms bulged as Damian stepped in front of him to hold him back. There was a knife still pressed to my neck after all. "Hello, Kukla," Anton purred. *Well, shoot me dead. I did not expect to have Anton show up.* Anton stayed back in Russia when my uncle was away to act in Igor's absence. So, who was behind the wheel at the Stepanov Bratva if Anton was here?

Anton and I had a strange relationship. Nothing between us was sexual, but he did show tenderness towards me. During my years under my uncle's control, Anton showed me what little mercy he could. He taught me how to use a sniper rifle and disable a man and kill him. Anton was with me when I was first forced to kill, and Anton killed Jakob when he beat me and then tried to assault me further. I suppose I'd say, in his sick way, Anton cared for me, and I for him.

"You've been naughty again," He said.

I relaxed in his hold, but he did not release any pressure from the knife. I knew Anton couldn't afford to show me greater affection. He had to maintain control of the room, and I was his bait. Still, it didn't make sense why Lucas would care about my life, but I'd find the answers to that question later.

"Are you proud?" I asked. I could feel his head shift and look at the body of his dead Pakhan.

Anton grunted with disgust at Igor. I knew all along that Anton had been planning to kill my uncle one day; It just so happened that I beat him to it. "I'd be prouder if you kept your guard up."

I rolled my eyes, “You’re not going to kill me.”

Anton shook his head, “Your cocky attitude will be your downfall.” He lowered his voice so only I could hear, “Sometimes you need friends, Kukla.”

Was he suggesting himself or the Kings? Then again, something else was at play here. Lucas knew who Anton was, and they almost seemed friendly, whereas Lucas merely put up with Igor but didn’t relax in my uncle’s presence. “I could kill you now. Killing your Pakhan signed your own death,” Anton voiced.

I shrugged my shoulders, still locked in his hold. “I’ve been dead a long time. If someone can finally kill *all* of me, then more power to them.”

“You still talk to your little friend Kulka?” Anton knew from the moment he visited me in prison that day that something fractured within me. A few days following his visit, he sent a psychologist to profile me. What good did it do? I didn’t know, nor did I care? The journey to becoming what they wanted me to be didn’t matter. Only the end result did. I was stronger, didn’t feel, and was willing to get my hands dirty to survive and, most importantly, get revenge.

“Lower your knife.” I heard Titan order, but when I looked up, Titan and Damian each had a gun aimed at Anton. They used the time we had our private conversation to take some control back. Lucas, however, leaned back against the desk without a care in the world. One would have thought he had a crystal ball and knowledge of the future.

Why does he want me alive? The questions hammered away in my mind.

“Lucas,” Anton said in a friendly greeting.

“Son,” Lucas exhaled, “lower your weapon. And Anton enough with the dramatics.”

What the hell was going on now? Lucas confirmed he didn’t only know Anton, but they addressed each other casually as if they were friends.

“I said. Lower. Your. Weapon.” Lucas hissed to Titan, who held his gun high and aimed on Anton. There was the man we all knew and hated. Lucas pushed off the desk and stood tall, like a king taking the lead. Lucas, like Titan, was overly confident. There was a difference between confidence and cockiness. Confident people knew what they had. Cocky people were still trying to convince themselves of their ego. Anton was right, per usual. My cockiness was a flaw in my design. It was the reason Ghost still echoed in my mind. I still doubted, no matter how strong I told myself to be. If I were confident in my new life, Ghost would disappear.

But what fun would that be? Ghost grinned.

You’re becoming more like me now, Ghost, I laughed. There was a fresh tone of darkness in her voice. Usually, Ghost played the role of the angel on my shoulder.

Two peas in a pod, Nova. Ghost laughed.

Anton shifted the knife as he pressed it harder into my skin. This time it caused my skin to break as a sting rippled over my neck. I felt a trickle of blood drip down my skin. Titan shifted his weight onto his right foot. His index finger applied more pressure to the trigger. Hopefully, Titan was a good enough shot to hit Anton and not nick my pretty face.

Anton chuckled, relishing in the fact that he was able to anger the great Titan King. I looked at Titan and shook my head. I don’t know why I cared for Anton, but I wasn’t ready to watch him die. Consider it payment for all the times Anton showed me mercy. It must have been the downfall from such a high adrenaline rush because I started to feel slightly dizzy. Anton wrapped his hand around my torso. After a few more seconds, my legs began to give. “This end is the beginning, and the beginning is the end, Kulka,” Anton said as he released me. My eyes found Lucas, who shifted in his seat. His eyes looked off, lost in a faraway place. Lucas’s once confident demeanor was now replaced with worry. What would make Lucas King worry, and how was Anton connected?

I didn't have time to ask as Anton pushed my failing body forward. My legs failed to support my weight as my body shifted, but like a faithful husband, Titan outreached his arms to catch me. Where was he years ago when I was falling?

Titan's touch was gentle yet as strong as bulletproof armor. Firm palms gripped my waist as he turned us, shielding me from Anton. Damian was faster than a ninja as he stepped in front of Titan and took on Anton.

"Don't kill him. I need him alive." Lucas snapped at Damian.

Titan moved my body behind the desk, where he laid me on the carpeted floor, keeping my uncle's body away from my view. "Hey, babygirl." His deep voice was emotional and filled with worry. Blue eyes narrowed on mine with concern. It all came back to our eyes. My colorless, grey eyes betrayed me and revealed my real face. Titan's were the door that led me into his fucked up soul. Swimming in his deep ocean blue eyes was still the boy from my treehouse. As dark and twisted as he was, Titan still cared for me in his own sick way.

And you still care for him, Ghost declared.

"So pretty." My mind felt fuzzy. His face, every inch of skin wrapped around his body, was perfection. He wasn't a man but a god who chose to live amongst us. We should be worshiping his every step. Maybe the fact that we didn't bow down to him was why Titan held such a grudge.

"Nova," Titan gently shook me, trying to rouse me awake and alert again. As my vision blurred, his head snapped up. He looked like a Greek god that landed on earth, ready to destroy it. His index finger glided over the small cut on my neck. "What did you give her!" Titan roared. Titan was the superhero trying to save the villain. Didn't he know once you sell your soul to the darkness, there is no coming back? I couldn't be saved.

But Titan could join us, Ghost suggested.

I like your thinking.

“My knife was coated in a sedative. She will be fine. I’d never harm her.” I heard Anton, but he sounded so very far away. The last thing I saw was Titan, but he wasn’t here. We were back in the treehouse. It was surrounded by fire licking up the walls as it started to burn everything. We both were lying on my favorite pink and orange plaid blanket. We seemed at peace as we held each other as the world burned around us.

Chapter 10



The beginning is the end?

It wasn't the first time I heard whispers of the exact words. What did that mean, and why did those words startle my father...or was it fear?

"It's about time you showed up," my father addressed Anton, then looked at Igor's dead body. "You could have chosen a better time." Dad exhaled, then focused on me, "Son, take your wife back to your home. I will call you later."

Was he fucking serious?

Even though the man in front of me was my father, my maker, we shared no fatherly-son bond. I was nothing to him but a mere possession; and a way to further the King's name and empire. Not any more. The day was coming when my father would be put down. I just needed answers to questions that pertained to Nova. I would not risk Nova again. Anton was one of those hidden secrets. I needed to know what Anton and my father had in motion and how Nova was involved before I killed the two of them.

"Now is not the time." My father stressed.

Damian stepped up to my shoulder; we presented a united front together. Nova's body shifted in my hold, causing my

eyes to check her. Her breathing slowed even further. My father was right, now wasn't the time. I needed to get Nova to a doctor. I didn't know what Anton had cut her with.

During the weeks I found out Nova was Elsa, I wondered if Nova genuinely wanted me to find out who she was pretending to be? Sure her body had changed, her soul, heart, and mind too. Her hair was now black, and her smooth skin now had scars and tattoos. Those eyes were eyes you'd never forget. Nova went to such lengths but didn't think to wear contacts? She wanted me to figure out who she was so she couldn't kill me. She came to me as a cry for help. Nova needed me to save her from the pits of hell she had been suffering in. Without a second thought, I'd cast myself into the fires to save her. I needed to get her out of the firing line and into safety.

"I need to speak with Anton. I'll call a meeting with you later." Dad said as he sat back in the desk chair.

Damian tried to speak but my father would not allow it. My father snapped and slammed his fist down. But I wasn't the young boy who was scared of my father anymore. "I said not now!" My father seethed. "I gave you the women you wanted; don't make me regret it. Leave." He warned.

Just then, the elevator down the hall dinged, footsteps sounded, and uncle Elijah joined the show. Damian and I were outnumbered now. It was only Damian and me against my father, uncle Elijah, and Anton.

"Fine," I hissed. Damian held his knife in his hand down by his thigh. Although Damian was vastly different from his father, they shared similar abilities. Like the skill to disappear and reappear like a superhero. Last I knew, uncle Elijah was in Europe. So how the hell did he manage to show up here?

As Elijah's cold eyes scanned the room as he entered. I held Nova closer to my chest as Damian took the lead, acting as my cover as we exited the room. The door to the office closed, and the answers I needed were again sealed off to me.

* * *

Two months ago...

There she is.

My lost love, the girl I killed, and the woman who now has some vendetta against me.

Not that I could blame her. A tornado of questions spun around as they barreled toward me. The winds scooped me up and shook me to my core.

The stalked had become the stalker.

Thirty yards away from the coffee shop Nova was sitting in, I was perfectly hidden behind a tree, pretending to be on my phone, but I used the camera and zoomed in to watch Nova. I had all my bases covered now. Sitting inside the coffee shop was Ben, one of my men. Ben was seated with his laptop at a table across from Nova and her date. Oh, babygirl, I can't wait to get my hands on you now.

With the aid of Ben, I had full audio and could hear everything single line Nova was telling the soon-to-be dead man she flirted with. If the guy could shut the hell up and stop talking about himself, he'd noticed how uninterested Nova truly was. She nodded and agreed, pretending to be into the conversation, but her eyes scanned the area and continued to watch the door.

What did you go through, babygirl? How did you become so lethal?

Nova continuously scanned her surroundings, making mental notes of all the exits. She kept her back to the wall and had a full view of who came and went. Once in a while, Nova pretended to itch her ankle, but that was a nervous tick. What she was doing was touching the knife she kept tucked into her boots. None of her dominant traits had been inherited; they were learned, which was more worrisome. I knew the horrors of my past, nightmares embedded into my mind that allowed me to become the lethal man I was today. That meant that Nova had been through similar training. She must have been broken down, abused, and manipulated into a monster.

No longer able to watch her talk to another man I stalked forward. The lion has spotted its prey. Nova could run, and she could hide; but now that I knew Elsa was alive and somewhere buried deep within Nova, I'd stop at nothing to have her. Nova might be a monster, but she was crafted from the same foundation Elsa was made of, which meant the girl I loved was still there, buried between the cracks. I'd continue to let Nova play her little game, but along the game, I would break Nova, and when she crumbled, I would dive into the depths and extract the girl that first captured my soul.

I'm coming for you, Elsa.

Chapter 11



There was a chill in the air and staleness in the room, which told me the room was not used often. I had woken up alone, but I knew where I was. Back at Titan's campus mansion. My cage. The cream colored walls that held me in were the exact shade of cream that would make a person go insane after a few hours of staring at them.

We're already off our rocker Nova, so those cream walls don't affect us. Ghost joked.

I laughed out loud because who the fuck cared if I talked to the dead girl inside of my head? My plans had been figured out, and dissolved. Was this what I wanted after all? Did I always want Titan to figure it out? No, Nova had a plan. I had a plan. Or was Ghost in control from the very beginning, was this game her idea of showing me that in the end, I always needed Titan in my life?

We will never know, Ghost responded. Her voice held an upturned note at the end. She knew all the answers; at least, she thought she did.

I continued to rock back and forth on the bed to soothe myself. Without my flavored lipgloss or combat boots to organize, rocking was the only thing I could think of. Elsa

used to rock herself to sleep back in prison, so if it worked for her, then it should work for me, right?

After another hour passed, I released my arms from around my knees. The inside of my arms was wrinkled and red from my firm grip. A tingled sensation of rushing blood danced down my limbs as I unfolded them straight. When my palms pressed into the bedding, I noted how smooth and delicate the fabric was.

It's much softer here, so unlike the bed in jail. I whispered to Ghost. My hand pushed deeper into the memory foam mattress. A part of me hoped it would swallow me whole so I didn't have to face any truths.

We are locked in a palace, not a jail cell. Ghost corrected me with a sass to her tone.

Do you still think Titan is the prince coming to save us? Why else would she call the Kings' campus mansion a palace?

Shadows moved under the door signaling a change of shift. One guard replaced another as time continued to fade away in my cage. No matter how much I screamed or banged on the door, the guard didn't open it. I knew there must have been a camera inside my room but still hadn't spotted it. Then again, cameras can be hidden in any microscopic nook and cranny. I gave up my search and laid back on the bed. Deep inhales and slow exhales allowed me to regroup.

This isn't the end. I confessed to Ghost.

Repeating Anton's words, I voiced, "The end is the beginning." Did Anton mean *my* end here would be my new beginning? Everything after that became too fogged for me to remember. I recapped the events since I had woken up but could not plot what I needed to do next. A bump in my road shouldn't affect me. I just needed a little superglue to put me back together before I could get myself back on track.

Back to killing a king.

Rolling onto my belly, I pushed myself up but passed when I spotted the new tattoo on my wedding finger. *Did I*

forget to mention that detail? My head tipped to the side as my eyes stayed glued to it, maybe I thought it was a dream, but it couldn't be. The tattoo was still there. I opened my fingers wide on the soft white bedding, the skin around the tattoo felt slightly tender. In flesh-colored ink, scrolled writing now read Titan King. The bastard marked me. I would have preferred a large rock on my finger instead of the permanent reminder of a man who lied, killed, and tricked me. Biting down hard on my bottom lip, I started to dream of how I could mark Titan.

Karma baby.

Footsteps, too light to be a man, sounded down the hallway. I narrowed my steel gray eyes like a bullet in the barrel of a gun at the door. My senses were focused like a sniper hidden in the wild as I eyed my target. If only I had a real weapon, but then again, the best weapon was our mind, and I was about to destroy whoever walked through that door.

A hushed conversation began, and then I heard the heavy boots of the guard shuffle as the door unlocked. Little Mila stood on the other side, holding a tray of food. She nodded at the guard, and he nodded as she entered. Mila flashed me a small friendly smile as she came forward. The smell of chocolate chip pancakes and bacon wafted through the air, causing my stomach to stir.

“Hi Nova,” Mila hesitantly voiced. “I’m guessing you’re hungry? It took a lot to convince Dash to allow me to bring you food. But they thought you could use a friendly face.”

I tilted my head, “And you think you’re a friendly face, Mila?”

Mila came closer and set the food tray on my bed; then, she stood tall and tried to fake confidence. It made me laugh out loud, but it didn't deter Mila.

“I’m not sure what to think anymore, Nova, or should I call you Elsa?”

“Aww, so the cat is out of the bag? I wasn't sure if Titan would keep this little secret all to himself. But now I can see that his lips have become too loose.” I would stitch his lips

closed again if I had a needle and thread. Pushing my weight forward, I grabbed the end of the tray and set it on my lap; I eyed the silverware, “A real fork and knife?” Was Mila that foolish?

“There’s cameras.” Mila added, then she scooted closer and lowered her voice, “You don’t have to act around me, Nova. I know that whatever plan you tried failed, but I also know that your confidence and ego aren’t bruised easily. I’m sure you’re already plotting a new way to take the Kings down inside your evil head. I’ve been watching you a lot closer than you think.” She edged as close as she could without causing suspicion, “There’s a reason that you were my roommate, and there’s a reason why you have been trying to manipulate me.”

The chocolate from the pancake melted on my tongue. I swallowed a bite as I looked proudly up at Mila, “You’re finally learning how to read the wild. Maybe you’ll survive a little bit longer.” I stabbed another pancake piece and brought it to my mouth. The way the chocolate melted as soon as it touched my tongue told me whoever the chef was, they didn’t use cheap chocolate. Then I remembered how Titan snuck Elsa the expensive bar of chocolate so many years ago. Who was the real Titan King? Did he have any genuine feelings for Elsa? Why did he legally tie himself to me in marriage?

“I want to survive on my own,” Mila stressed. She was being a bit selfish, I thought. Here I was, the prisoner. Mila’s marriage was arranged, but she craved Dash’s touch, so this castle was her playground, not prison.

And you don’t crave Titan? Ghost probed.

Ok, seriously, Ghost, what the hell? You were with me when I was going to take them all down, and now you’re back to being a moral compass?

I think there is more at play here. We lost the previous battles, Nova. If we are going to survive and win the war, we need allies. Titan might be that. Lucas King is our number one enemy. An enemy of our enemy is our friend. Titan can be that friend.

So maybe Ghost had a point. But I couldn't just let Titan think I'd submit to him. I cut another bite of a pancake and slowly chewed it. Mila waited patiently for my response. I was surprised at how much she had learned since I had taken her under my tutelage. She impressed me with her fast pace ability to be corrupted and to want to hurt others. Specifically Dash. "Do you still want to run, Mila?" I set my fork down but continued holding the knife, "Run as fast as you can. You can't outrun the gingerbread man," I finished singing the classic children's song. At that moment, I reminded myself of Marla, the crazy girl who lived across from my prison cell. Marla used to sing to herself throughout the day. "Don't you find it odd that so many children's songs and fables are about death and pain, stalking and chaos? Seriously what the hell were adults trying to teach their children? A gingerbread man chases them; a witch eats them in a candy-themed house. Ashes to ashes, the plague takes them all down. No wonder any child ever grows up sane." I shrugged, "Then again, maybe the adults are doing the kids a favor. The world is harsh, and if we teach kids that sooner, they are more likely to survive."

Mila sighed, "Are you still able to help me?" Once again, she was being selfish. Good for her. Mila needed to think about herself. I didn't respond until I had licked the whole plate clean.

"What's in it for me?"

Mila chewed her inner cheek before she thought of a response, "I could help you escape from here."

That made me laugh. "I don't want to escape Mila. I've got Titan right where I want him locked in a personal hell with me. Titan still holds the keys to my cage but make no mistake, Mila, I'm still the mother fucking devil, and I will sit on the throne of power before I die." I raised the knife, which was sticky with syrup, running my tongue across it; I licked it clean. "If I die, I will take Titan with me. Along with Lucas and probably the rest of the Kings. So you might as well sit tight, hold on and enjoy Dash King while you still have him." I sneered.

Mila looked more defeated than I ever had seen her. No rebuttal came as she started to accept my promise.

Oh my, it seems we're stuck with her Ghost.

My last speech was another test; Mila failed it. I sprang forward and punched Mila's right shoulder. She staggered back on the mattress, "What did you just do, Mila?" It took a moment for her to realize what I was referencing, but then she smiled, and it made me so proud because her smile was one of pure darkness. "I rolled with the punches."

I beamed, "And what are you going to do about that now?"

"I'm going to start throwing them."

"Bravo, bravo, Mila." I clapped my hands, "You have finally stepped out of the light and come into the darkness. Welcome, welcome, it's a much better place to be."

"What do we do now?" Mila leaned forward; she looked like a little mouse trying to nibble on the cheese.

Rubbing my finger over my empty plate, I collected all the remnants of the chocolate from the pancake. Popping my finger into my mouth, I sucked it clean, "There is one thing I have become a master at Mila." Leaning forward, I whisper in her ear, "I'm good at killing, even when it means killing myself. So I'll teach you how to kill yourself and become a ghost. First, we're going to play the role of the broken little dolls the King men want us to be. Well the men are basking in the glory, boasting about their conquest; we're going to be gluing ourselves back together. I pulled back to look into her hazel eyes, "Then, when they least expect it, we will strike again. We will keep striking until we hit them dead."

Chapter 12



I have an idea. Ghost suggested as I lay on the bed and looked at the ceiling. The cream color was starting to piss me off.

What are you pondering, Ghost? I'd engaged her to get my mind off being trapped in a cream shell.

Since we don't have a plan yet—

Who said I don't have a plan? I snapped

Well, you haven't shared it with me yet.

I stretched long on the bed like a cat waking from a great slumber. *Maybe I want to keep you in suspense, lock you in your cage again to suffer.*

You're lying. Ghost hissed confidently. *You need me. I'm the only thing keeping you sane enough to function.* She laughed to herself. The gleeful sound echoed in my head. *I am the only anchor keeping you grounded and crazy enough to stay docked at the idea of revenge against the Kings. I feed a part of you you need to survive.*

My forehead wrinkled, *Look at you being all confident.* And correct, but I would not admit that to her.

Ghost agreed. *Didn't you say we needed to be confident instead of cocky? Maybe you should be taking a page from my book?*

I hummed. Both my students were starting to get wiser. Dare I suggest wiser than me? *Of course not.* I was the master, but I'd let them keep believing that.

It had been hours since Mila left when the door to my room finally began to open again. Titan walked in looking like the smug prince who slew the dragon. But this fairytale was reversed because instead of freeing the princess from the castle, he trapped her in one.

His blonde hair was perfectly tussled, his five o'clock shadow was trimmed to precision, making his jaw look so masculine it could melt the panties off you. Wearing sweat pants and a tight grey shirt, Titan looked all too comfortable entering the lion's den. Just because I had a pussy didn't mean I didn't have claws.

Just like Mila, Titan carried a tray of food. I assumed it was dinner, "Am I an invalid who needs to brought food?" Crossing my legs and arms as I sat against the padded headboard of the bed, "You gonna spoon feed me too, baby?" I goaded.

The door closed. Titan set the food tray on the bedside table, "I'll spoon feed you something else, wifey."

My eyes narrowed as Titan sat on the bed like the cat that got the cream. Then again, he did call me his wife and I was a prize. I held up my hand, "Is it official?" I wiggled my ringer finger with the tattoo on it.

Titan looked proud, but he seemed genuinely happy under his intense demeanor. He beamed joyfully, like the boy he used to be when he met me in my treehouse. "We still need to consummate it." He added with a flare of hope. Men always thought sex fixed everything. As evil as Titan was, he never pushed himself upon me or forced me. Although I claimed to be acting and told myself I had to sleep with him for my plan, it was all lies. I slept with Titan because I needed to. Not because I had to. I craved his body and the way it made me

surrender control. Though, I'd never admit that to anyone. Not even to Ghost.

I faked annoyance, "You got all I'll ever give you on that island."

"You don't even believe that lie, babygirl." Titan leaned forward and tucked a loose piece of my black hair behind my ear. His eyes seemed to linger on the color of my hair. I wondered what he preferred, the blonde or the black. "Since I know you like tattoos, I thought I'd give us a matching set." He slipped his hand away and motioned to the tattoo on his ringer finger, a mark he got years ago when he thought Elsa was dead.

I flipped my hand, pretending to admire and examine the tattoo on my finger. "I'll just remove it."

Titan didn't like that. His happiness faltered, "I'll tattoo it back again," He growled.

"I'll cut off my finger then." I quipped.

"You've got a lot of other places I can mark, babygirl," He leaned forward, his blonde hair shining like a golden sword, "Try. Me." He dared, his nostrils flared.

Part of me, maybe it was Ghost, or perhaps it was just Nova, wanted to try him. I wanted to push him, test him and see how hard he would try to break me. Crush me into smaller pieces so small that not even all the glue in the world could glue me back together.

Who would we become then? Ghost asked, Would Nova be in a cage with me? Would you make yourself new again?

I'm not sure, Ghost. I'll have to get back to you on that. It depends if we survive in the end. After all, a little piece of Elsa survived. Can you imagine what a tiny part of Nova would be like if she survived, and three people would be in our mind? Actually, that's quite an exciting idea. Could you imagine the mischief we could get into?

The world wouldn't know what to do with us. Ghost replied.

They never know what to do when gifted an actual genius Ghost.

“You do that a lot; slip deep inside your head somewhere. Where are you running to?” Titan asked as he lifted his hand and cupped my face. I wanted to lean into his warmth. It had been so long since anyone cared for me. The problem was this was an act. Wasn’t it?

Instead, I jerked back. Offended, he thought I’d take the cowards’ way and run, “What makes you think I’m running? Maybe I’m plotting my next move.”

His touch turned hard as he gripped my jaw. “We’re done with the games Nova, Elsa, whatever name you want. There are no more moves to be plotted or made. There is no more board to play the game on.” He grabbed me by my chin and brought his face closer to mine. “The games are done. You are mine, and I’m yours. Eventually, everything will go back to how it should have been.” There was that spark of hope in his deep baby blue eyes again—a hidden message in his words. Titan knew something; just like his father, he was full of secrets and lies.

Do you want to go back to how things used to be? Ghost inquired. Deep down, I knew she would be content. Ghost would always find some silver lining and forgive Titan.

Oh Ghost, do I want to return to my weak, pathetic self? To the blonde hair angel who fell from heaven and barely survived the fall? NO! Things would never be how they should have been. My parents were never coming back, and neither was Elsa.

“If you’re expecting to find Elsa, you won’t,” I told Titan. Our lips were so close that mine brushed against his when I spoke. I could feel the heat from his body radiating off him and seeping into my core, feeding my wanted desires. Titan was nuclear, and his radiation had affected me. It sickened Elsa and eventually turned her into a new kind of beast.

“And you won’t find the boy you knew either.” His words were tinged with pain. Titan slammed his lips onto mine. I kissed him back with all the hate in my blackened heart. I bit

and sucked and tried to show him the pain I felt. Titan and I were two mega-energy forces about to collide and create something new.

The sound of ripping fabric and moans filled the once stale air. I sunk my teeth into his plump bottom lip, drawing blood this time. Titan responded by pushing his hardness between my legs grinding it against my sensitive core.

Hold on, Ghost, because I'm not giving you control this time. By the time I made my move, I was already straddled on Titan's lap. I shoved both palms onto his chest, forcing him to lay back on the bed. He looked at me and grinned, "I'm the King," he flipped me, switching positions before he attacked my mouth with his lips again. We were so hot and heavy with hate that there was no need for foreplay. I didn't even remember Titan slipping my pants off, but he did. My legs wrapped around him, flesh to flesh, hate to passion with a bruising strength when he thrust in.

I screamed in pain and pleasure, more pleasure from the delicious feeling of his fullness. There was no *before* Titan, and there would never be an after. He erased any others from the past and present. No one could, or would, compare to how Titan King felt. He swiveled his hips, hitting me intensely before he pulled out, only to push back. His attacks were brutal, but so were mine. I sunk my nails into the flesh of his back, feeling and clawing over all the ridges of his muscles. He hissed but somehow grew harder inside of me. This was hell, and the devil was torturing me with his pleasure.

"Were the same babygirl," He declared through his searing kisses. I could feel the dampness of his blood on his back from my clawing spreading under my fingertips.

"I'm a creature of hate made by you." I declared. I forced my hips up so he could hit the spot that drove me over the cliff.

Titan shook his head and repeated his words, "We're the same."

In and out, out and in, he kept a delicious pressure and speed until I unraveled. I clenched around him as I came, but

he kept going. Time slowed into tortured waves of pleasure until I came again, and then, once he knew I was almost unconscious from the satisfaction, he allowed himself to join me. He collapsed on me. The weight of his sweaty body was like a heated blanket I wanted to snuggle into. The sound of heavy breathing filled the room. "My hate is different than yours," I whispered. My lips brushed against his shoulder as I longed to taste him again. Swiping my tongue out I licked his hot skin. He tasted of a deadly combination. Salty and sweet. Good enough to kill and bad enough that the guilt would eat you alive.

"Hate is hate. It's the fuel behind the hate that differs." He rolled over, dragging me on top of him. Locking me in his hold, I was too tired from our sex to fight, so I laid limp on him. "You're tired now," he whispered against my lips, "I'm going to exhaust you in so many ways. I'm going to deplete the fuel that feeds your hate for me. When that is empty, I will make you dependent on me to live and breathe."

Chapter 13



Descending the stairs to the basement in our mansion on campus, which held many secrets, I heard Dash and Damian, but I also heard a voice that made me walk faster. Skipping the last two steps, I saw my cousins laughing and smiling as they talked with their guests. I paused for a moment. Dash looked carefree as he spoke. He hadn't looked like that since he kidnapped Mila, took her to his island, and married her. Damian looked like stress had been lifted off his shoulders. Their guest had the power to do that.

"Cillian," I announced as I came forward, and we hugged. I wasn't a shrinking violet, but Cillian could make me look small. Cillian was part of the brotherhood. At six-four, he was a mountain. We joked with him about it all the time, calling him princess because he needed things custom fitted to his broad frame. Cillian was as Irish as they came. Auburn hair, green eyes, a splash of freckles, and fair skin, but most importantly, he loved to box. Not just the small underground fighting my cousins and I fooled around with either. I'd be hesitant to get into a ring with Cillian. Usually, the bigger the man, the slower he moved, but Cillian was like a lightning strike. He moved so fast he could blur.

Like most of my brothers, Cillian had a specific skill set that would make many of the world's more brutal men

tremble. Unlike Anders, who showed his crazy, Cillian was a master at hiding it. From the outside, he was a good old catholic boy who ate his vegetables. He was down to earth and didn't live like a billionaire. He seemed like a typical man until you looked at his knuckles and the blood that always coated them.

“What are you doing here, brother?” I asked.

He slapped my back, “I didn't want to miss the wedding.” He balled his enormous fist and punched Dash in the shoulder. Dash staggered back, “This shit head didn't have the manners to invite us to his. I wasn't going to miss another brother's wedding.”

Damian laughed, “Titan's bride would sooner make the wedding red than live happily ever after.”

“There's no formal wedding,” I announced. Not yet, but one day, when Nova accepted her fate, there would be. “We have a lot to talk about.”

Cillian's big green eyes narrowed, “I figured.”

We all pulled up a chair as we connected to our other brothers worldwide. It was time to confess who my bride was and what other game my father was playing.

“So the girl you thought you killed is now your wife?” Leo questioned, “How is it that we have such fucked up lives?” He joked.

“It makes it all the more fun,” Anders added. He sat on his couch as he sharpened his favorite ax.

“More importantly, we need to discuss how this web of lies will come back to us,” Leos added.

“I agree.” I didn't want to talk about Nova any longer. I trusted the brotherhood with my life, but I wanted to keep Nova to myself. I needed to protect Nova, even if it meant from my brothers. They cared deeply about me, and the fact that my new wife stalked me and wanted to kill me didn't settle with them. Dante continued to eye me, and I ignored his stare. I could not wait till the day came when the great Dante De Luca found love. Only then would Dante know what it felt

like to forgive any matter. When Dante glanced at Cillian, Cillian shook his head.

“You sent him.” I started with Dante. It all made sense now. Cillian lived the closest to us, so it was easiest for him to come instead of Dante. “I was concerned.” Dante confessed. “Your father has been acting strange and even more reckless since the assassination of your uncle. These odd confessions to Lucas has been telling you....” Dante shrugged. “Better safe than sorry.”

“I have Dash and Damian.” I snorted. “No offense, brother,” I looked at Cillian. He was always welcomed, but I didn’t need someone watching me, waiting for me to make a misstep.

“A new set of eyes is always smart. Maybe he will see things Dash and Damian overlook.”

“Fuck you,” Damian seethed.

“I’m only here to check in,” Cillian stated. He held up his huge hands in surrender, “I’ll leave in a day or two.”

“Can we get on to the more import topic at hand,” Anders interrupted, “The time is on the horizon, brothers.” Anders hinted at the brotherhood finally taking over power. “Tell us again what your fathers and Anton said.”

I went over the encounter. My father’s strange words hinted that something more significant was already in the works. I was on the game board, the play in motion, but I didn’t know the rules or the object I was trying to win against my father.

After I had Nova safe at my house with a doctor, I trusted I called my father. All he told me was that he would confess everything soon. He needed to get his affairs in order. Then the line went silent. “*Just trust me, son.*” *He asked.* The words my father spoke and how he spoke them only made me worry more because Lucas King didn’t ask. He demanded. There was a change in his voice, a break that made him sound weak as if he was kneeling to me and not the other way around.

What the hell did any of it mean? Most likely, he was covering his lies up and killing off loose ends. I had added two teams to watch my father and uncle Elijah, but they both laid low for the past four days, not even leaving the King compound.

“The end is the beginning?” Dante repeated. He raised his right hand and began to rub his temple. Dante always did that when he was lost in his head.

“I’ve never heard it either,” Anders mentioned; his eyes looked to the screen on his left where Dante was.

Dante opened his mouth, “I’ve *seen* it.”

“Seen it?” I questioned as I leaned forward in my chair, “Where?”

“Written on the old ruins in my castle. I’ve thought nothing of it before. I’ll take a closer look now.” Dante lived in an honest-to-god castle. It had belonged to his family for centuries, but his late father had the grand idea to revive the forgotten relic. Dante made it his side passion to continue to restore the castle now that his father had passed.

Cillian shifted in his chair. His large frame made it look like he was sitting in a chair designed for a child. “I’m more concerned with the idea he is getting his affairs in order. That means he’s planning on dying soon. Men who know death is coming have no lines drawn or rules, Titan.” He leaned forward, resting his elbow on his massive thigh, “You need to be careful.”

I nodded, “I will be.”

“Your father said nothing about this message?” Leo asked me.

I shook my head, “Nothing, but he was worried when Anton said those words. There was a deeper meaning to them.”

“Then we need to be worried. Who is bigger than the Kings on your side of the world?” Leo added.

“You’re going to let this fucker, Anton, live?” Anders questioned. The statement made my blood boil. “For now.” I seethed. I wanted to kill Anton, but there was one thing making me pause. Anton was protecting Nova from the repercussion of killing her uncle. Anton was now in control of Igors Bratva, a branch of the Russian mob. As their new leader, Anton promised to settle the bloodlust and, most importantly, protect Nova. The public story was that Igor died of a sudden heart attack, and Nova, his niece, wanted to cremate him so she could spread his ashes with his brother, Nova’s father. We had no choice but to cremate Igor after Nova blew his head off. It was the only way to cover up what Nova did.

That didn’t mean Anton was free to walk. I asked Leo Molotov from the brotherhood to keep a close eye on Anton and find out more about the man that had a connection to both my wife and my father. Anton might be a Bratva boss now, but in Russia, Leo was God, and God heard everything.

Leo picked up his vodka and slowly sipped it as if he was savoring the burning feeling running down his throat. “I’ll look into Anton. I’ve heard about him, things you won’t want to know, Titan. He likes to rescue people, men, women; he draws no line for his soldiers.”

Fury started to pump through my veins, “Elaborate?”

Leo ran his hand through his short brown hair, “My little birds have sung to me. Anton has an underground operation. He helped Igor train Torpedos, assassins for the Bratva, but he kept some of his prized students for himself. I need to find out what he did and where he sent them for you.”

Was Nova one of his students? She sure had training and was skilled in killing and spying. I pushed this knowledge to the back of my mind for now.

“What about that bullet that killed Marcus?” Anders asked. “Anything come back, or can you still not trace the bullet?”

Damian shook his head, “That is what our fathers’ claimed.” He said, “I went to the lab where my father had the

bullet taken for analysis. I wanted to follow up personally. It's not there anymore."

Anders shook his head as he grabbed the old leather sleeve that covered his ax's blade. He slipped the cover on and then stood. Dante narrowed his eyes to mine. Even through the screen, I could feel the power of his dark eyes. I knew Dante's unspoken message. He told me I had a lot of cracks in my ship, and those leaks could affect our brotherhood. That was why he sent Cillian here to check-in. I had a lot of loose ends to tie up, but Nova had taken priority.

Anders leaned forward and adjusted the camera, so his face filled the screen. "I'm done, brothers. I'm done waiting around like a little bitch. I want the brotherhood to come out from the shadows, and my father wiped off the face of this earth." He hissed.

"I agree," Damian added.

"I second that," Cillian shifted in his chair, "I can ignore some of the details I was trying to tie up. If we all agree, I'm ready to act now."

I knew this was coming. I almost got rid of my father when he confessed that he always knew Elsa was alive. I didn't pull the trigger then because I thought I was being loyal to my brothers, but something more psychological was bothering me. I envisioned one day sitting down with my son and confessing to him that I killed my father. What would my future son think? He'd see me as a monster with no boundaries or morals—the shoe fit. However, I didn't want to be the kind of father mine was to me. I wanted to raise my future children with love, but I also needed them to be strong. Could a man succeed at both?

"Do you agree, Titan?" Dante asked. I could tell by his expression that he wanted more than the simple answer I was about to give him. Dante was incredibly perceptive. We all had our strengths, and Dante's was not just reading people but getting them to open up in his presence. If they refused him, not having fallen for his renaissance good looks, Dante would turn to his other tools; those were much more deadly.

I nodded, not wanting to reveal my genuine emotions. Unable to utter the words that I would agree to kill my father. My brothers would not understand the battle that was in my mind. A son would need to kill the man who made him. I'd mourn the man my father never was. Damian eyed me from the corner. Unlike me, Damian didn't struggle with this idea at all.

"The answer isn't always death Titan." Dante interjected, "There are other options and ways Lucas's power can be handed over."

Dante wasn't going to kill his mother. The difference was that Dante had slowly taken power away from his mother for years. He was testing her strength and lack thereof. At this stage, it was easy for him to set her aside, letting her live with one of her rotating lovers. Dante's mother was a cold-hearted woman who took her hate and insecurities out on her sons. Unlike my father, Dante's mother valued her reputation and would hand over power instead of tarnishing her name. "There is no other way for me, brother," I confessed with haste making sure no one questioned my decision again. Dante nodded, but I appreciated that he had let me know he would support me either way. Anders, on the other hand, would only accept blood, the crazy fuck.

Anders beamed like a demon that scented blood was coming his way, "Then it is settled," he clapped. Anders had been biting at the bit for the first phase of our plans. The brotherhood was formed by men who were battered and hardened. Raised to be predators, we found harmony and forged a family with each other. Something neither of us had. We all sought one thing.

Freedom.

To have independence from our makers who trapped us with their money and power. Each of us had a journey to walk to claim power, a ritual. Mine was killing my father. It wasn't the same for all of us. Anders had a bitter bone to bite on since he was a bastard and was always treated like one. But being the only son, Anders father had no option but to acknowledge him. Men like Anders father didn't hand down their

companies to their daughters. If only they had daughters like Nova, they might reconsider.

“How long?” Cillian questioned, “We should all act on the same day. The others will get suspicious if rumors of one or two falling.”

“Is April 1st good for everyone?” Dash asked with a sly grin.

I raised a brow, “April fool’s?”

“Hey,” Dash shrugged, “I think it’s perfect. These men and women raised us to be ruthless and take over the helm; little did they know, we’d do so by destroying them. You have to see the comedic satire in that Ti.”

Anders laughed, “I like how you think, brother.”

Dante met my eyes; ever the observer, I nodded in agreement. “It’s settled then. There is no point in delaying. Whatever goes astray, we will handle as a united front.”

“It’s settled.” We all agreed in unison. “The brotherhood has begun.”

A band of brothers was about to take over some of the most influential companies in the world. As a united front, those who opposed our rule would have to fight off not one but all seven of us. The brotherhood was about to become the most ruthless and powerful organization in the world.

Chapter 14



Two hours after Titan thought I had fallen asleep, he snuck out of the room. Before he did so, he gave me a precious little kiss on the temple of my head, which woke me up—his mistake. I needed to find out where he was. After all, aren't husband and wife meant to be one? *What is mine is yours, baby!* Titan was going to find out what kind of wife I would be.

My feet touched the warm wooden floor. It squeaked beneath my feet, making my snooping a bit more challenging. That was always the issue with old, original wood flooring. As I crept from the room, I was surprised to note the absence of any guards. Did Titan think I'd stay without trying to escape after a few orgasms?

Isn't escaping the coward's way? Ghost asked as I walked down the long corridor passing two doors on my way. Every ten feet or so hung a canvas painting of Mila's artwork. The long hallway was like a gallery exhibition of her work. What must it feel like to have others support you? I had that once before Lucas King killed my parents.

I didn't say I would run when I escaped Ghost. I hissed at her releasing some of my anger at my previous thought. Ghost was always my punching bag.

I passed one more door in the dark before I reached the stairs. I knew this was Dash's room. No doubt, Mila was tucked inside. I bit my lips as I pondered my odds. Dash would most likely be with Titan, so I took my chances. Turning the doorknob slowly, it opened without a struggle. The room was a mirror image of Titan's room which I was now lucky enough to be able to sleep in. I guess after a forced marriage and sex, I was trusted enough to be able to sleep in his room.

The room was dark, causing my eyes to strain as I scanned it. The king-sized bed was empty except for a small lump buried under a mountain of covers. Walking over, I spotted Mila's head peaking out from the navy sheets. I slapped my hand over her mouth. Even in the dark, I could see her eyes fly wide open. She screamed from under my hand, but the sound was suppressed. When Mila noted it was me, she calmed. I jumped into the bed, which caused Mila's small frame to bounce mid-air. Mila rubbed the sleep from her eyes, "Nova?" Her voice was filled with a longing for more sleep.

"I've thought of something," I beamed as I bounced on the bed.

"O-ok," She responded. Back to the stuttering and lack of confidence.

"Well," I patted the navy comforter. It was so soft it felt like silk under my fingers. "I can't help you."

Her eyes expanded, making her look like an owl. She was too adorable. "What do you mean?" Mila was suddenly very awake.

"What I said," I hated repeating myself. "But, I know someone who can."

"I've heard you say that before," She murmured in detest. Mila was referring to the man I turned to who sold me out. That night, my uncle's man found me and beat me to a pulp.

"This is different. You'll be doing this alone." I grinned.

Mila licked her lips, reminding me that I needed my supply of flavored lipgloss. My glosses helped take the edge

off and trust me, everyone under this roof would be much happier if I was less edgy. “We attend Empire university. The home of the rich and powerful.” Not famous, because fame was too ordinary and none of our fellow students were ordinary people. What was better than fame? Being anonymous. It was something you simply couldn’t buy in today’s world. Society tricked us into wanting to be famous and having our faces splashed everywhere. It made it harder to hide. Social media was a genius idea. It created a digital catalog of you forever traced. The people posted all their information for the world to see. That is why being anonymous was so rare and expensive. The truly powerful didn’t want fame. They wanted puppets to control well they stayed hidden.

“I know our fellow student body Nova.” Mila quipped.

“I’m not the only person who can get good fake credentials.” I snorted. For most of our piers, buying a new identity would be as simple as walking into a department store and picking a new handbag off the rack. The problem was that Mila never ventured to that side of town; now that she had King as her last name, people would be very hesitant to help her. Dash was a shadow that loomed over her. No one would give her an escape knowing that Dash would be hunting them. Mila needed a puppet, and I knew the perfect boy whose strings she could pull, “I happen to know a sexy Irishman who has a liking for you, Mila.”

Her head tilted, “You...no, no way, Nova. I can’t do that to Dash.”

Crossing my arms, I shook my head, “You want to run. To hurt him,” I stressed, “to make him feel how you felt, but you don’t want to what?” I threw my hands up in the air, “Make him think you looked to another guy for help?”

“You don’t understand, Nova. I’ve done things, but I was with *you*, things I said I would never do again.” She lifted a trembling hand to her chest, “You breathed life into me. I don’t want Blaze to think I’m leading him on. Heck, Blaze already kissed me; if I asked him for help, he’d want something in return. They always do...” she whispered hurt words.

Narrowing my grey eyes, I cursed the lack of lighting, which would have revealed more of her expression to me. It was easy to confess in the dark; the shadows swallowed up all your sins. The light showed everything.

I wanted to dig for more of the truth. As naive as Mila was, like all humans, she held secrets too. Dash's anger was aimed at something Mila had done in her past. "You haven't done anything that would make you lose your soul Mila." Hell, I wasn't suggesting she sleep with Blaze, merely use the feelings he had for her gain. Was that so terrible?

It's morally wrong, Ghost added.

We don't live in a world with morals, Ghost. I eyed the tattoo on my finger—the prime example. My uncle sold me to the Kings, the family that murdered his brother. Then I was forced to marry Titan. There was no moral compass in my world.

Mila started to chew her lip, but eventually, she confessed like she always did, "I promised myself..." she hesitated and struggled to speak, "I'd never go to a club again."

Wasn't dancing the night away and getting drunk a rite of passage for college students? "That's your big wrongdoing Mila? Did you promise yourself or Dash?" The latter was more likely because Dash was insanely jealous like all the King men. Us modern-day women wanted freedom from men, but we also craved being wanted by them. We loved how territorial men could be; anyone who claimed otherwise was full of shit. The biggest turn-on was having someone willing to fight for you and die for you.

"I don't want to talk about it," Mila whispered. I knew then that there was much more to her little story. It didn't take a genius to guess that something terrible happened to Mila in a club. As much as I wanted to push her, I needed to know where Titan went. My time was running out. "You want to escape; you know where to turn to now. Blaze's family runs weapons all along the northern coast of Canada and Europe. If anyone can make you disappear, it's him. If you are too worried it will bruise Dash, then don't run because, trust me,

Dash is going to be livid. Dash will be out for blood until he finds you again.” *And it will be beautiful.*

“I want him to hurt,” She said in haste.

“Where is Dash?” I asked. I didn’t have the time or energy to be her cheerleader in corruption tonight. I planted my seeds, and now I had to be patient and watch them thrive.

Mila’s eyes flicked to the door, “He’s in some meeting again.”

I raised a brow, “What kind of meeting?”

She adjusted the sheets and started to look sleepy again, “I’m not sure. He and the guys’ meet in the basement a few times a month.”

I uncrossed my legs and kicked them straight. “You don’t ask,” I questioned in disbelief.

“No, Nova, I don’t ask, and I honestly don’t care.” She sneered. *Someone needs her beauty sleep!*

I stood from Dash’s bed, pulled the covers up, and tucked her in, “Sleep tight.” I joked as I exited the room.

It took me over fifteen minutes to find the entrance to the basement. Whoever was last to enter didn’t close the door all the way, which was a blessing. The door was iron clad and had an iris scanner on the outside. If it had been correctly shut, I never would have gotten in. Lady luck was on my side tonight.

With light steps, I heard Damian, Titan, and Dash, along with other men, as I made my way down the stairs. Each step I took had to be made with precision and balance. I had to shift my weight to ensure the wooden steps didn’t creek and alert them to my presence. Like a lion stalking its prey, I was slow and crouched, waiting to strike. Just a few steps from the landing, I sat down on the step and watched. The basement was small, only about the size of a primary bedroom. The Kings’ first mistake was having all the computer screens on the far wall. They were forced to have their backs to the entry in the current position. *You always had to guard your back. What fools!* I sat back and crossed my legs as they conducted some type of meeting with other men.

There was another man with the three Kings. I almost didn't see the chair he was sitting in because he was so damn huge. Not fat, but massive! An enormous back blocked out a section of the screens. Thank god he wasn't a guard in the house. I didn't want to go toe to toe with him.

Looking past the giant, I studied the wall of the screens to see if I recognized anyone else. The first screen to the left was a seriously sexy man with long blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail. I never thought a man wearing a ponytail could be hot, but I was wrong. He held an ax, like a real ax. The hilt was short enough that it could be strapped to a belt without hindering your steps. Too small to chop a tree down, but the sharp blade's shine was primed for killing. Very odd indeed.

The middle screen showed a man that was stunning in a regal way. With thick black hair that curled at the ends, he had olive skin that looked like the crust of a pie you wanted to nibble on. *Who doesn't love apple pie?* The man kept his middle finger under his chin as his index finger stroked his temple in thought. He presented a calm and orderly presence, but I doubted he was anything but. That was a mask, and under the guise lurked monsters. Trust me. I was a master of slipping on a cover to conceal who I truly was.

"Do you agree, Titan?" The man who looked like a royal spoke, drawing my attention back to his thick, black curls. He had a slight Italian accent that sounded smooth like milk chocolate. Hell, I was hungry for apple pie, chocolate and... Titan. As hot as these men on the screens were, no one compared to the boy that killed me.

Titan nodded, running his hand through his tussled blonde halo. I could tell by how he clenched his jaw that he wasn't happy. What did he agree to?

"Then it is settled." The man with the ax clapped with joy. Whatever plans they made, this sick fuck was satisfied. I continued to eavesdrop without one single eye looking my way. All the men were too into the conversation to notice me sitting here.

“It’s settled. The brotherhood has begun.” They all agreed in unison. It was freaky how in sync they were. Like they were in a cult or freaky shit like that. The screens shut off. Damian, Dash, Titan, and the mountain man remained silent for a moment. The decision that was made was a heavy one. You could taste it in the air. War was coming, but where was the battle going to take place?

Damian shifted in his chair and then spotted me. I wasn’t trying to hide. I wanted to make Titan’s life a living hell. Titan wanted me; well, he had me. I’d pop up like a nasty rash until I infected everyone. Damian acted fast; reaching behind his back, he pulled a knife and threw it towards me. I shifted forward, anticipating his move. I dove off the stair, and my right shoulder hit the wall with a thud, but I’d rather have a bruise than a stab wound. I pushed off the wall and brushed my tender shoulder, “Gosh, Damian,” I turned towards four angry faces, “is that how you welcome me into the family?”

“How the fuck, did you get in here?” Dash roared.

The mountain man looked at Titan and then grinned as he looked back at me. His green eyes looked me up and down. Thick auburn hair framed his fair skin. His jaw was square, but his face was beautiful in a rigid sort of way. His nose had been broken, but the odd angle made him look sexy. Like the kind of man that grabbed you, pressed you up against a wall, and claimed you. However, as good-looking as this stranger was, no one compared to Titan. His power pulled my eyes off the giant man.

“Someone forgot to shut the door.” I grinned. Damian glanced at Dash, whose face reddened. It was too easy to ruffle Dash’s feathers, like taking candy from a chubby baby.

Titan stepped in front of Dash to shield me from Dash’s next outburst. I skipped to him with a pep in my step, causing them all to narrow their eyes in suspicion. Currently, I was too sweet and unlike my angsty, naughty self. I placed my arms on Titan’s shoulders. I was enjoying how his eyes darkened to a sapphire shade of blue. I pushed up on my toes to kiss him. I was missing my combat boots greatly and had to push my toes to their limit to reach Titan’s lips. I was tall, but Titan was tall

enough to climb even next to the massive stranger behind him. *And I enjoyed climbing him and scaling his walls.* Titan didn't deepen the kiss but he didn't push me away either.

"What are you boys up to?" I giggled. It sounded more evil than innocent. Dash looked like he wanted to skin me, and Damian looked relaxed, but I knew he was calculating and studying my change in attitude. I couldn't get things past Damian as effortlessly; he knew I was always up to something. *Smart man.*

"Whose your friend?" I playfully questioned as I peeked over his shoulder.

"You're supposed to be sleeping." Titan lowered his lips to my ear and nipped at my lobe, "You're in trouble." He whispered. My core surged with heat. No matter what mask I slipped on, Titan could seep behind it.

I shrugged, "It's my nature. You can cage the animal. Marriage doesn't change it genetically." Just because my last name was King didn't mean I'd follow his commands. I curled into his body, acting like a house cat. The opposite reaction of my spoken words.

"Plus, my bed was lonely." I slipped my hand to his back, running my fingers over the claw marks I marked him with. His face grimaced with a mixture of pain and lust.

"This is not who you are genetically."

His words hurt. When I tried to pull away, his arms locked tighter. "Who's fault is that." I hissed.

"Mine." He responded fast, "And I'm going to fix it."

I snorted.

"I'm Cillian," A thick accented boomed and interrupted our lover's quarrel,

"Hi, Cillian," I twisted in Titan's hold. "If I knew you boys had a slumber party, I would have brought cookies. Whose nails can I paint?"

"I wouldn't trust you to paint your own nails," Dash murmured.

“Careful, Dashy, don’t want to get on my bad side again.”

“What did you hear?” Dash demanded.

“You look like someone just shoved a stick up your ass. Why so serious?” I smiled my best Joker grin.

Cillian laughed, and it caused me to jerk. It was deep and booming like Santa.

Dash’s face reddened, “What did you hear?” He asked again.

I narrowed my eyes and pretended to look infuriated, “What did you hear?” I mimicked.

“I swear to god if you copy my words again....”

“Nova,” Titan voiced my name, breaking my fun.

“Oh nothing,” I twisted a lock of my hair around my finger, “April fools, some big decision, lots of daddy issues. Are you all in a cult or something?” I pried. I smiled my best girl scout smile, trying to convince someone to buy cookies they didn’t want, “Are you welcoming new members, or is this a boys-only club?”

“Fuck.” Dash cursed. “Let’s kill her.”

Titan growled and pulled me closer to his side.

“I’m joking,” Dash responded, but his eyes didn’t look upturned and relaxed.

I laughed as Titan turned me and pinched my chin between his fingers, “You’re not going to repeat a thing, babygirl. Even if you do, it won’t matter.”

“I’m not going to repeat a thing.” I voiced in a robotic voice, and then I laughed.

“You need to keep her locked up until then,” Dash added. “add a muzzle too.”

I crossed my wrists and formed an x shape, “You wanna tie me to your bed, hubby? Then again, Dash’s sheets are softer, so I’d rather be tied to his.” I goaded. I relished watching how Titan’s face twisted with jealousy.

“How the fuck do you know what my bedroom is like?”
Dash growled.

Titan pulled me into his body, and my breasts squeezed almost painfully against his torso. I twisted my head to eye Dash, “You shouldn’t leave a sleeping angel alone. The Devil’s play things come out to manipulate things so sweet. Bees flocking to honey and Mila is just so freaking sweet.”

Dash stormed from the room. “We’ll talk later,” Damian added as he followed Dash.

“It was nice to meet you,” Cillian said. His steps were loud like thunder as he exited with Damian.

“Why are you doing this,” Titan questioned once we were alone.

That was the billion-dollar question and part of my new plan.

Oh, did I forget to mention that I plotted out my next steps? My idea struck when I was trapped in my room looking at the shitty-colored cream walls.

Genius works like that; zero to sixty.

Insert the evil laugh here because the bitch is back.

Chapter 15



Nova looked and sounded like the woman I loved. But looks were deceiving. Elsa was my better part, a part that never existed before I had met her so many years ago. When Elsa died, the fragment of good she planted in my soul died with her.

When Nova came into my life, a new part of me started to come forth, a piece that was hard to describe. Everlasting love, pain-filled anger for her lies and deceit. Most of all hope; it bloomed in my chest. I would get a taste of what I had with Elsa again. As my time with Nova continued and our relationship developed, I realized I was starting a relationship with two *very* different people. When Nova fully acted as this new person she created, I could not see Elsa in her eyes. Nova's walls were too strong for Elsa to escape. The rare time I did see Elsa was after we made love. I caught a glimpse of Elsa when she slipped through Nova's hardened walls, and when I did, I grabbed her and held on.

At times I grew frustrated that Nova refused to let this hard edge slip, but I had to remember what she lost and what she went through. Elsa had changed and evolved to survive. I couldn't separate the two of them. I had to love them both or let them both go. The latter would never happen. Honestly, I

needed Nova's strength; Elsa needed it to survive in my world.

"Doing what?" Nova furrowed her forehead. Her lips were still swollen from when we had sex. I could never get my fill of her. As soon as it ended, I wanted more. I was a drug addict, and Nova was my addiction. Now I had her in every way. I could overdose on her night after night and day after day.

"I know it's going to take time for you to realize I meant what I said." I failed once. Now I was stronger and no longer a child. I could protect her from my father, and soon none of us would have to worry about my father and his games. I'd right my wrongs and pave a new road over my sins.

The brotherhood had begun.

Her face, which had been cocky, flipped as she slipped on a mask I came to love. No longer Nova Baladan but now Nova King. Hardcore badass. The girl, I would make my mission not to tame but to ensure she felt loved and welcomed in my world. I'd give her full reign one day.

I didn't want to cage her.

I wanted to free her.

Grey eyes cast over like thunder clouds darkening to a shadowy black. Her new black hair looked like the Devil coming out to kill an angel. But I wasn't an angel and could go toe to toe with her all day. "Sometimes it takes one simple word to get someone to forgive, and you've never even uttered one of its' syllables." Nova snorted.

Did she want an apology? If I had thought that was all it would take to tame Nova and let Elsa slip out from time to time, I would apologize every second of every day. But how could one apologize for destroying a life?

You couldn't.

Sorry felt more like an insult, so I never voiced it. "You want me to apologize?"

Nova rolled her eyes; behind her tough facade was a hurt little girl. “It doesn’t matter, and it’s too late now. My pain runs too deep; my scars still feel too fresh. A simple apology can’t take back murder.”

Oh no, you’re not running from me now. I pushed her, “I thought you didn’t feel, babygirl? It sounds to me like those are some deep feelings.” My words were like a hammer beating down her walls of lies and insecurities.

She opened her mouth to lay me low, but I interrupted her, “I never apologized because there are no words that I could say to correct the wrong I did to you and your family.” I hit my chest with my closed fist, “Guilt ate me alive when I thought you were dead, and now that you’re alive, I see the effects of my wrongs. My sins beat my mind daily. Like lashes of a whip tearing my flesh open and breaking my bones. I love you, and I’ll confess that to my dying days. I will correct my wrongs starting with my father.” My chest labored. I tried my best to soften my voice, but resentment slipped through, “You never met me at the treehouse after school as I ordered you to. Why didn’t you meet me? Why didn’t you let me try to save you?” It wasn’t her fault, but I could only survive those years of guilt by trying to convince myself that it was Elsa’s fault. I could have saved her if she had met me and not went home first. We were beyond an apology. I needed to do more, and I would. I could take steps to repair my wrong deeds. Efforts, I was going to start tonight.

* * *

I had had enough talking; words could only break a person so much. It was time to show her. Bending down, I scooped her up and tossed her over my shoulder. When I threw her over my shoulder, her black hair looked like silky oil as it flew in front of my blue eyes. As I walked up the stairs from our basement, I slapped her ass, and she relaxed in my hold. She thought I was going to punish her with orgasms. It didn’t matter if Nova overheard the brotherhood’s meeting. I’d take care of my father and any threat to Nova and our future. Nova’s need for vengeance would be finished in just a few

days. Then, it would be how it was always meant to be. Nova and I together at the helm.

As I walked to my room, I remembered how my mind would drift to her in Initiation 101—years of hell that changed me from a broken boy to a ruthless man. During my training there, I always imagined an older version of Elsa. I'd dream of Elsa by my side, as my wife, the mother to my children. Yet the dream always turned into a nightmare. After each mission my brothers and I were sent on, it always ended the same for me. I'd see Elsa's face after I committed more sins. My mind told me it was Elsa's blood that covered my hands again.

The reality was that I was nothing more than a weapon used by my father to destroy. I killed Elsa and would continue to be weaponized to destroy others my father deemed unfit. It haunted me and threatened to drive me insane. If it weren't for my cousins and the brotherhood, I'd be a monster without morals. In a way, the brotherhood was a cage for all of us. The brotherhood was a group of broken and twisted boys who survived and grew into fractured men. We were stripped of our souls and remade to be killers. Our brotherhood bonded us, but it also tamed and protected us.

When we got to my bedroom, I tossed her on the sheets but remained standing as I looked over her like a predator eyeing its prey. Elsa was my first kiss, but Nova would be the first girl I made love to. It wasn't just sex. It was something more serious. When we made love, I tried to express to her all the things I could not find the words to. I tried to hide my dark side. That part of me was furious Nova had continued to remain hidden, playing her game. She had become too stubborn to ask me for help. Yet, no matter how hard I tried, sometimes my anger slipped out. I'd hold her too tight because I feared she would vanish before my eyes again. If I could, I'd chain her to me.

Grey eyes that haunted my mind, day and night, looked back at me as they drank me in slowly. Nova couldn't hide the fact that my body turned her on. Her heart-shaped face beamed as her pouty lips tugged up into a hidden smile, ready for a taste of what was coming. Nova was so sensitive to my touch;

with a few gentle strokes, whether from my fingers or tongue, she fell over the edge. Lust washed over her eyes like a storm over a dark ocean. Her iris's shifted from the natural grey to a shade of molten steel. Nova's dark hair fell loose around her shoulders as it fanned over my bed. I took my time engraving her image into my memory. Blonde or raven, she was stunning. Nova took my breath away regardless of how she changed her appearance.

I grabbed my shirt, pulled it over my head, and tossed it to the floor. "I want to know," I demanded as I looked down at my prey. The girl who captured my heart. Those secret nights in her treehouse, she cut me open, grabbed my heart, and bonded our souls. There was no turning back and no future without her. Her grey eyes narrowed slightly as her sly smile dropped, "I want to know what happened that day you never came to meet me and the years after?" That question pissed her off but not enough to try and flee my room. No matter how much Nova wanted to convince herself she hated me, Elsa was still buried deep inside her; Elsa would never run from me.

Nova crawled deeper into bed and slipped under the sheets, "I'm tired and need my beauty sleep." She turned to cover herself, but she couldn't cover up the sliver of hurt that rumbled in her voice. I watched as she tried to pretend she didn't want me, but her body did the opposite when she curled up into a ball and rested her head on my pillow. My blue eyes watched as her nostrils flared when they inhaled my scent.

There it was.

Nova felt safe again.

I was her safe space even when she couldn't admit it out loud or to herself.

My feet almost didn't want to move as I watched her. Just a few months ago, I never would have dreamed the girl I loved, who I thought was dead, would one day be in my bed. Watching her from afar was what I had been doing. I needed more now and craved to feel her. I walked to the opposite side, peeled my clothes off, and crawled in. She lay limp, like a doll that was broken. She didn't aid me when I pulled her closer to

my chest. We were silent until I felt her muscles melt into the state of borderline slumber. Just where I needed her, exhausted and easy to peel apart.

“Do you want me to start?” *Come on, babygirl, give a little and take the little I’m offering.*

Nova’s lungs released a long sigh then she shrugged in my hold, “I’m going to sleep, so do whatever you want.”

I knew damn well she wasn’t going to sleep. I’d take the first step in healing us, “My father asked me to get close to you,” I confessed. When I finished the confession of my original sin, her body stiffened, “But, as soon as I talked to you, I knew you were different; and I made a lifelong promise.” I nuzzled my nose in her hair, “I’d keep you for myself.”

Nova snorted, “That’s your problem, Ti. You think everything is a possession.”

“It is.” I corrected her, “Everything in this world can be taken. In one way or another, we are all objects in the game of man versus man.” That silenced her, so I continued, “I was a fourteen-year-old kid Nova. I didn’t know how to protect you from my father. I knew if I ever let my feelings for you slip, he’d take you from me to teach me a lesson.” I ran my fingers through her hair; the darkness was a stain from my sins. I stripped away her heavenly glow.

“I kept you hidden and separate from the task he ordered, but I still had to do my job. My father wanted that company. I snuck into your house and installed the virus on your laptop that ripped apart your parents’ lives. I didn’t think it would come to hurt you. Everyone yields to Lucas King. Then everything went to shit. Your parents took a loan from someone else, thinking if they paid my father back, it would free them from his hold. Dad wasn’t going to lose your parents’ company or risk it going to a competitor.

“I sat on the floor next to the fireplace in his office that evening. Dash was with me; he kept watching me. Dash was worried I’d do something stupid and get myself killed. I looked into the fire, knowing that my father was about to burn

down what your parents worked for, not just their company. My father would not stop because if he let this happen, others would think they could take from King Corporations. I don't know who your parents turned to for help, but I do know that it threatened my father." Giving her time to let my words settle, I bent down and kissed her head, remembering when I could kiss Elsa's blonde hair in the treehouse. "That day I asked you to meet me right after school was the day I was going to turn my back on my family and give my full heart to you. I knew that the repercussions of my actions would most likely lead to my death, but none of that mattered as long as I died knowing you were safe."

Chapter 16



“I knew that the repercussions of my actions would most likely lead to my death, but none of that mattered as long as I died knowing you were safe.” It’s funny how a bunch of letters joined together can change your life.

He was going to die for us, Ghost murmured. She finally felt at peace knowing that Titan was going to try and warn her. But how did that make me, Nova, feel? I wasn’t sure. Forgiveness wasn’t a word I knew. How could I chew it down and swallow it? It tasted like an overcooked piece of steak. No matter how much I chewed, it wouldn’t break down.

Then just swallow it whole, Nova, Ghost suggested. Or was she pleading?

Maybe Ghost was right; I’d have to swallow it whole and hope it stayed down. *Puking was never pretty.* What else was there to do besides kill Titan now? Which I know I can’t do. I had to move on. The path I chose at the start of my course for vengeance was crumbling. I was running, sprinting to reach some safety as the road under my Prada boots crumbled. Here I was; I had run out of time. I was trapped in the chains Titan wrapped me in. Worst of all...I didn’t want to escape. That’s why I convinced myself I’d stay and make him miserable.

Are you going to leave me now that you know the truth? I asked Ghost. It seemed like eventually, everyone would leave me. That's life, people live, and people die. Wasn't it common knowledge that ghosts could finally be set free when they found peace?

Why would I leave, Nova?

You just said you were at peace, I repeated. I tried to swallow, but it wasn't easy. The tingling feeling of emotions had broken free. *Usually, when a spirit finds peace, it can finally be at rest.*

I'm not going to leave Nova because I never died, now did I? She corrected with slight amusement in her tone. In truth, she didn't die. A part of Ghost, Elsa, always lived inside my mind. Our conversations kept me sane.

Ghost laughed. *The conversations in your head, to your old self, whom you refer to as Ghost, kept you sane? Nova, we are a perfect pie for a therapist to devour.*

I don't want to have some idiot in a suit try to change me. I quipped.

You don't have to change Nova. Titan wants you, and he is fighting for you.

Time ticked away, and Titan gave me the quiet space to think about his words. I felt his chest sink into an even rhythm and I knew he was asleep. It amazed me; he felt comfortable enough to sleep next to the woman who had wanted to kill him. That told me one thing. Titan was telling me the truth. The guilt of his actions caged him like a prison.

So now what? I asked.

I said I didn't die, Nova. You possessed me. My body and future were stolen from me. Ghost hissed.

I furrowed my perfectly groomed eyebrows. *I wasn't the one who did the stealing. That was Lucas King. It was my possession that kept us alive. Elsa died in that prison.*

No, Ghost said, *It was that possession that kept me trapped and birth you, Nova Baladan.*

I laughed. *Birtherd me? I don't remember the contractions or labor.* I joked. *Plus, I'm not a bad friend to have Ghost. You better watch it.* Where was she going with this?

Actually, my friend, you better watch out! I'm tired of this cat and mouse game. I'm taking more control. I could mentally envision her flipping her once buttery blonde hair over her shoulder, standing tall, and getting ready to draw her sword for battle. An angel versus the devil. Blonde versus my raven hair. *Do you know what the Bible says?* Ghost asked, but she didn't let me answer. *God allowed the devil to have control of the earth, but one day, God will come back to claim the world as his domain again. When God takes it back, he will cast the devil back into hell and make the earth a part of heaven. I'm coming back for my body, and when I do, I'll break you down, Nova. But, unlike God, I'll forgive you, my fallen angel. I'll let you live in paradise with Ti and me.*

Ghost did it.

She silenced me.

We're stronger together, and I'm not afraid to admit that, Ghost added.

I was. Nova was too stubborn to admit she needed others.

So that's it, mom and dad died for nothing? Will you forgive and forget to get some action in bed?

NO! Ghost yelled inside my head. My body shook so much that Titan's arms pulled me tighter against him. Titan didn't wake up. Even in a deep sleep he fought to protect me.

Your anger has been in the wrong direction. Who pulled the trigger, Nova?

Maybe Ghost was right? Don't tell her that. She had already become too confident. Titan made grave errors, but he was a boy manipulated by his father. He claimed he tried to fix it. He was too late, and I didn't listen. Although I couldn't forgive him just yet, maybe I could try to exist with him. As Titan said, we forged some unbreakable bond as kids. Years later, neither one of us could break through hate and pain.

Now you're on track, Ghost beamed. Do you remember what the brotherhood was discussing earlier? Ghost questioned.

Yes. I answered.

Something big was going down with Titan's little secret group.

Titan hinted we'd be safe from our problem and our biggest problem was the man who ordered our family's death. Ghost purred.

Lucas King.

Exactly! Ghost murmured.

Lucas was the beginning and end of it all. He was the sun that controlled everyone's rotation. I understood what Ghost was trying to tell me.

I'm coming for you, Lucas King.

I'm striking you down and claiming your crown, but I'm not stopping there. I'm going to take your entire legacy. I'm taking Titan's heart and allowing him to rule by my side.

How does that sound, Lucas?

Your heir is going to be ruling with the woman who bested you!

Energy surged through my veins, reviving my dead heart with purpose. I could feel the cushion under me as I envisioned sitting my fine ass on Lucas's throne. I'd get comfortable as I sat back and watched everything he built crumble. I'd smile and live on with the knowledge that Lucas's heir was willing to turn his back and align with the enemy.

Titan King was about to become a spoil of war. *I think Titan King would make an attractive war prize in my trophy room, don't you Ghost?*

Absolutely, Ghost beamed.

Once again, insert an evil laugh here.

Chapter 17



Flour dusted every single surface of the kitchen as well as me. It scattered and danced in the air like falling ashes. I didn't understand why people turned to baking to calm themselves or eating. A cupcake and sugar high was nothing compared to the high from taking down those who deserved it. Sugar was short-lived, like a bad one-night stand. You think at the moment it is good, but the next day you wake up having had no orgasms piled on with a weight of self-pity.

Now revenge, that is vastly different. The high lasted for life, like marriage to a sex god.

So what would you choose if given a choice, a sugar high or a lifetime of orgasms? I bet that cupcake isn't looking so sweet now, is it?

"I hope you're not planning on feeding us any of... whatever that is," Dash grunted.

More footsteps sounded behind him. I turned and caught Damian entering the kitchen, Mila by Dash's side like the well-behaved puppy Dash thought she was. When they arrived, the kitchen and breakfast were a proper mess. "Happy wife, happy life," I cheered as I turned back to attend to the burning patties that were supposed to be pancakes. A breakfast of lipgloss with a side of black coffee was so much easier, but

this was an added step in making them all miserable. Titan was my war prize, but that didn't mean he'd get to relish in every second with me. I still had to play naughty, which meant making everyone's lives a bit more tortured. Thus, the burnt smell and floured mess that rifled their noses caused them to wake. I scurried around the kitchen as if I owned it. I had to play the role of content wife until I could make my move, slip away and take care of Lucas tomorrow morning.

Everything was happening too fast to play catch up. Tomorrow was April 1st. I had only today to plot how I'd reach the great Lucas King. Mila, the lucky bitch, got to continue to attend school. I was on house arrest at King Manor. Well, Titan was fast asleep. I snuck out of bed and scooped the house. The men were on high alert; I spotted a dozen guards around the perimeter of the house. But I knew more were lurking in the trees that surrounded it. My mind looked for holes in their security well I pretended to play the typical housewife role and be a proper hostess. I'd make them all a breakfast...filled with my hate.

I picked up the spatula, but since the pancake was stuck to the pan, I tried to scrape it off so I could flip it. When that didn't work, I improvised and changed them from pancakes to pan scramble. I chopped the patty and scrambled it in the pan using the spatula.

I heard Damian approaching closer as he dared to glance at what I was concocting. What I didn't hear was him pulling his knife out. He had it pressed to my neck before I could react. Since I was only wearing a red lace bra with a pair of Titan's boxers, I could feel Damian's hard body and the heat rolling off it. "If you want to share Damian, you'll have to ask Titan first," I joked. "I'm a loyal wife." Nothing about my tone suggested I was being honest. However, I'd use my burning hot pan to teach Damian a lesson if he thought I would let him touch me. I didn't reveal my hand yet. I remained relaxed with the blade pressed against my flesh until Damian showed me what he was up to.

His unflinching body told me he wasn't playing around, nor did he think my joke or suggestion was funny. "If you hurt

my cousin,” he whispered a hateful hiss, “I will kill you very slowly.” He slid the blade down my neck to the swell of my left breast, just above my heart.

“Hmm, that’s an intriguing offer, Damian. If I ever get tired of this life, I might take you up on that.” I looked down at the knife that hovered over my heart. Unlike the matte black knife I had always seen Damian playing with, this blade looked like it was made of gold. *That’s odd.* The hilt had jewels incrusting within like some old relic from the past that a king would have been gifted. I didn’t take Damian for the kind of man who liked the privileged things in life. He was simple. All the King men were, minus the enormous houses and expensive cars, but that was for show. Deep down, Titan, Dash, and Damian would have been content to suffer in a tent if need be. So that meant this embellished knife meant something very special to Damian.

“I understand your need, Nova. So does Titan. If you continue to slip, it won’t only kill you, but it will trap you in a purgatory of hell.” Damian turned me around, not removing his knife but letting it gently glide over my skin as he turned me. His movements were so precise not even a paper-cut sliver appeared on my skin. My eyes gazed upon him. Compared to Titan and Dash’s blonde hair Damian was darker. It made me wonder what his mother must have looked like. Thick short black hair, eyes so dark blue they looked black most of the time. Damian was consumed by the shadows, whereas Titan and Dash fought to be in the light; they twisted their deeds into false lies, thinking it was for their family’s good. Damian didn’t need to bend any of the facts. He knew the Kings were demons and accepted it.

Under this light, his skin held a touch more olive tone than Titan’s golden boy tan, making it look more Greek or European. Yet behind his ethereal beauty was a demon like my own. After all, the devil was once an angel, and so much beauty could mask great darkness.

We were troubled souls, stuck together under this roof now. We could spot another one from a mile away. I didn’t know Damian’s past, but I knew his present, and it was full of

pain and rage barely contained. Unlike Dash, who lashed out, Damian held it all in. Like a trapped geyser below the earth's crust, the pressure slowly grew until the foundations cracked, and he would blow like a volcano.

"You're slipping," Damian eyed me, but he wasn't looking at me. He was digging too deep. Damian could see a part of me buried and hidden, even from myself. It was a dirty part even Ghost didn't acknowledge. I cast my eyes away from his as worry sickened my stomach. *How the hell did he do that?*

You're playing in the big leagues now, Nova. Ghost chimed. *Your walls are being tested to see if they even still stand.* She laughed.

The cocky bitch was too strong now.

Avoiding Damian until I could compose myself, I spotted Mila, who looked tense as she didn't look at me, but the knife Damian held against my heart. Dash sat next to her, looking gleeful and at ease, but it was who was behind Dash that surprised me. My heart beat faster as a bead of sweat broke on my forehead. Titan lurked in the entrance as he watched the scene that was unfolding. I wasn't sure how long he had been standing there, but he trusted Damian enough not to interrupt or worry about the knife he pressed against me.

Titan leaned with ease against the door frame as he watched his cousin try to rip me open. His jaw was tense, but curiosity in his eyes allowed Damian to continue. "I see you duck and hide inside your mind," Damian whispered. "I see you plotting and scheming. It's the only thing that keeps you going, but the fuel is running out, and soon you'll need another source." He stated confidently as if he was a God who knew my every thought.

Keeping my eyes on Titan, I responded to both men, "And you think you're that source?"

"I think my cousin is. I think he is the only person you care about, and let me tell you this," Damian took a step back, removing his knife, "I don't know what you went through, but

I know what my cousin went through. His love for you never died; it only grew, and that love will save you one day.”

“So why are you so worried for Titan if he’s going to save me?”

Damian’s forehead creased and something dark flashed in his eyes that made my blood run cold. At that moment, I saw the killer that lurked so deep within him it claimed his soul. “Because some of us don’t want to be saved. Some of us just wanted everyone to go down with us.” He tipped my chin up, forcing me to look into his eyes. “So don’t you dare fucking fight Titan when he breathes life back into you because there’s an army behind us that you can’t fight nor destroy. You failed. This is your punishment. You will accept it like a good girl.”

“And if I don’t?” I provoked.

Damian smiled a feral grin that even sent chills down my hardened spine. He dipped his lips closer to my ear, “There are worst things than death, worst than torture. You hurt him, and I’ll show you pain like you have never felt before.”

I held his stare as I studied the top predator in the room. His short black hair was pushed back, giving me a clear view of his sculpted face. Cheekbones peeked so high they looked like an arctic wind had sculptured them. Damian would burn to the touch like dry ice. How could a man so full of demons speak such words? A poet, buried amongst dust and ashes of sin.

Our stand-off ceased as Damian turned to exit. Titan reached his arm and stopped him. “Do you want me to help you?” Titan murmured in a low voice to Damian.

Concern and a flash of worry replaced Titan’s confidence; Dash glanced over his shoulder to give his unspoken support. Damian looked at Titan and Dash before he shook his head and gripped the golden knife. All the men eyed the blade as if it were a ghost in the room. You could taste the shift in the air. The knife was a bad omen, and the tides of war were about to batter the men that forced me into their freakshow of a family.

My grey eyes narrow like the scope of a sniper rifle. Today was March 31st, and whatever the brotherhood was planning, it was going down tomorrow. Damian wasn't waiting, though. He was going to make his move early. *Fuck! I'll be too late.* I failed with Titan. That was a hard pill I was willing to swallow. But I accepted it, knowing I'd at least get to live in hell with the man who put me there. Titan and I would suffer the sins of our past together. There was no way in heaven or hell I would let Lucas King walk away without punishment.

Turning my back to the men, I glared at pan scramble, which now was burnt.

Stay calm, Nova, Ghost urged. *We'll find a way to get to Lucas.*

Squeezing my eyes shut, I pinched the bridge of my nose. *Shut up!* I hissed. Was it too much to ask for a moment of silence?

You can't accept the fact that you need help! Ghost sneered.

Under the heavy scent of burning pan scramble, I caught a new fragrance. A smell I came to accept could never be bottled. Titan approached and pressed his chest against my back.

Breathing deeply, I could feel the stove's heat close to my bare stomach. I continued to shove around my pan scramble, but Ghost kept thinking about Damian's words not giving me what I asked for. With Ghost in my mind and Titan against my back, it felt like my walls were caving.

I am calm. I lied as I scrapped a large chunk of burnt crust off the pan.

Really, Nova? Because Damian is correct, this living on edge feels like purgatory. Ghost cried. *Once you kill Lucas, I want our future to be different. I want to try to be happy.*

“Shut up! Shut! Up!” I screamed. *What the fuck do you want me to do? What more can I try to do to appease you Ghost? I gave you peace, yet you refuse to go away. You're*

driving me insane, always lingering and taunting me, probing and probing. You are the spoiler of the peace you are trying to seek!

Arms grabbed me, pulling my exposed skin away from the burning stove as they hugged me in a heated grip. I could feel his muscles tense like a suit of armor protecting me from the most dangerous creature on this planet.

Myself.

“I’ve got you, babygirl,” Titan whispered as he kissed the side of my head. His lips were too chastised and caring. Ghost purred in my head. I hated and loved that his voice calmed my inner demons. Titan was my doubled edge sword. The reason I had such darkness inside and the only guiding light that could contain it.

“Damian spoke of his own accord,” Titan said. “He cares for you.”

I laughed as I struggled and fought his embrace, but Titan didn’t loosen his arms. He held on tighter like a straight jacket. “I’m here. Every single time you fall. I. Am. Here.” He declared. New emotions churned within me as tears washed over my eyes. I was happy my face was buried

in his chest because I was too stubborn to show him I was human enough to cry. “But you’re not always there to catch me,” I whispered.

The sound of his next inhale was filled with pain. “If I knew you were alive, I would have moved heaven and hell to find you. You’re my wife now. No one threatens what is mine. I’ll banish every demon that lurks too close.” He tipped my head and kissed my lips, “I love you.”

When I was silent, he voiced it again, “I love you.”

That’s when I saw it, my chance to escape and drink my revenge. Titan was going to give me everything I ever wanted.

I twisted in his arms and looked up into his blue eyes. He waited with bated breath for my response. It wasn’t going to be what he expected because where is the fun in that?

“Then prove it.” I dropped my walls and let him see my want and pain. A new hope lingered in my eye. “Let me kill your father.”

Chapter 18



Titan just stared at me. I had dropped my walls, but he erected his own in response. Finally, he spoke as his hands rested more gently on my hips, “I can’t let you do that.” His voice softened as his eyes roamed my face.

Was he worried about my conscience? “I’ve killed before.”

Titan didn’t like that, but sometimes the truth hurt. His jaw tensed, as did his fingertips on my waist. I pushed more, hoping to break some of his defenses. “I’m not Elsa. I’ve seen blood, and I’m owed blood. Tell me the truth, Titan. What is your secret club planning? What are you planning?”

His tongue swiped over his lips as he fought his mind for a rational response. “My brothers and I have suffered, Nova. We have been treated like hunting dogs, trained to kill and lead. Our lives have been pawns in someone else’s game. No more.” He glanced over his shoulder. I hadn’t noticed that Dash and Mila slipped out. I was so consumed with Titan that I forgot to check my surroundings. “We’re breaking the chains that hold us down. Taking power into our own hands and with that power, we will build a better future.”

“A better future for whom?” I questioned.

Titan grinned. He pulled my hips closer to his, “For the brotherhood. Through them my family will be protected.” His right hand slipped from my waist. Grabbing my left hand, his index finger ran over my new tattoo, acting as my wedding ring.

He was refusing me! “Then you’re no better than Lucas, the man who controlled you.”

Titan shook his head, “That’s where you’re wrong. I can’t confess lies to you and promise you my new oath will be free of blood and sins.”

“Yet again, you’re putting someone before me. First was your father and now your brotherhood. You haven’t learned from your past mistakes.”

“The brotherhood is an armor that will protect us!” He snapped. “We all want the same thing. We want to be free, but we want our future and our families to be protected. Our wives and children won’t be pawns, Nova.” Titan sounded so severe it’s laughable.

“Sounds sexist.” I quipped.

“Enough!”

I grinned with the secret knowledge that I would not back down.

“Don’t,” Titan demand. He knew exactly what I was planning. Instead of snapping at me, his walls lowered slightly. He bent down and kissed my neck, sucking hard. I could feel it right between my legs as a new throbbing started. He was pleading with me but also marking me. “What if I asked you to join?” He whispered over my lips, “What if you didn’t have a choice? Becoming my wife made us one; what I am a part of, you are now a part of.”

Was that supposed to make me feel better? “A little band of thieves?” I joked. I couldn’t resist his taste as I swiped my lips over his. I’d consider replacing my obsession with flavored lip glosses for the taste of Titan King. Ghost repeated his words in my mind. As I listened to her, I realized that what turned me on even more, was that Titan continued to view me

as his equal. He offered me a partnership in the brotherhood. He claimed to own me but that I also possessed him. Titan didn't give me full reign now, but I would be unrestrained at some point.

Free, not to run away, but to run beside him.

That was the definition of a power couple. To cage each other up, giving only each other the key. Relationships were a twisted game of love and hate, after all.

"The brotherhood isn't about a one-world power," Titan confessed. Contrary to what many believe, most of the world wasn't free. There was always someone else who was bigger and better. The free man didn't vote. He was manipulated into thinking he had a choice. Every decision had been plotted out and made far ahead of time. I knew that first hand. Men like Lucas King were the gods that played with the world. I didn't see every aspect of what King Corporations controlled, but I knew from experience that it far exceeded what my wildest dreams could have imagined.

So maybe it's better to have Titan and the brotherhood on our side, Nova. Ghost suggested.

She had a point, A vigilante fights alone but dies alone. They were a mere blip on the radar of good. Then again, I wasn't a vigilante fighting for the common good. I was fighting for selfish reasons.

Titan tipped my head up so he could look in my eyes. He knew I had just slipped off in my head again. As he dragged my chains back, Titan acted as my anchor so I didn't drift astray. "We're stronger together. As a united front, we will face fewer enemies. Blood will still be split on our path but hopefully less. Yes, we are greedy, but we want a better world. I want my son to live in a world where he doesn't need to be born to kill to continue the family name. He'll kill to protect it, not prove he is worth it."

His son.

There it was again. A hint of the boy I once knew. A boy who spoke of a promised future. "I'm not mother

material.” *Seriously! What the hell was he thinking?* I was beyond messed up. Heck, I had a dead girl who was the moral sound inside of my head.

Titan laughed. *Did he think I was joking?* “If you are as protective over our children as you were when it came to surviving, then I have no doubt you will be a fierce mother. The kind of mother, my children will need to survive our brutal world and bear our last name.”

I pushed out of his grasp. This was all too much; Titan had successfully scared the shit out of me. “Let’s backtrack here. I went from wanting to kill you to being captured by you, forced to marry you, then forced to having children one day?”

Maybe Titan was more insane than me?

“Forced?” Titan raised a brow, “If that’s what you have to tell yourself to sleep soundly next to me after I’ve made you scream my name till your voice is raw, then go ahead and call it forced babygirl. My wife,” he bent lower, “you know deep down you crave me as much as the darkness inside of me craves your fucked up plots.” He hissed. Then his hands grabbed my thighs as he hoisted me up and poured his fury into my mouth with his tongue. My fingers raked through his golden hair, clawing down his neck and leaving red marks.

This wasn’t forced.

It was pure, raw passion that could not be contained.

When we got to his room, I was so ready for him that my body hummed and purred with excitement. My hands yanked at his pants, but he held my wrist in a firm grasp that felt like handcuffs. His eyes roamed over my red lace bra, “This is mine, babygirl,” He pushed his hard body against mine, his stiff muscles rubbing my nipples even harder, “next time you leave my room, I don’t want my cousins to see you in only a bra.” He spun us around, sat on his bed, leaned forward, and started to suck on my breast through the lace. It created a roughness that made my knees tremble. Titan’s effect on me was like gravity. He forced me to be grounded and remain on the earth where he played God and ruled the world. Maybe that’s how it was meant to be all along.

Titan never forced me. I accepted everything he offered willingly. I needed it. Because in the end, it was always Titan King who made me stronger. I killed Elsa because of him. My need for vengeance was because of him. All the years I suffered, I used Titan as my strength. Titan made Nova stronger; now, he continued to make her and Ghost grow. As our lips danced in a heated passion, I claimed my war prize, and I'd protect Titan as he did me.

But you know me, Ghost, I'm not going to give my King complete control. A great Queen knows how to twist the neck, tilt the ears and swing a sword. I wasn't going to play by all the rules because where is the fun in that? Part of my allure was my rebellious behavior, "You should know better than to tell me what to do or what to wear." I placed both palms on his shoulders and pushed him back. He fell back onto his bed with a beaming grin, a smile I think Satan would have dawned when he was free to roam the earth. I climbed onto him and straddled his hips. To tempt him, I started to grind my hips down on his hardness. I could feel the friction of his jeans against my flesh. No matter the material, I could feel just how hard and aroused he was for me. I tipped my head back as I claimed the first orgasm. A fire ignited without our skin even having touched. He flipped us, and with a few kicks, he freed himself of any material. In one swift movement, he ripped my pants clean off me. And then he was inside of me. A taste of heaven on earth. A sweet Ambrosia that would forever make me immortal.

"I'm not going to let you go." He pushed back in with a force that made my toes curl. "If you drown or hit rock bottom, I'll swim down and breathe life back into you." Thrust.

"I don't want to feel right now." I hissed as I claimed his lips, trying to shut him up so I could enjoy the ride. He ripped his lips from mine and stilled on top of me. Titan's hooded eyes darkened then the bastard upped his control and started moving in and out slowly. I went from heavenly pleasure to torture. Right on the cusp of my next taste of heaven but too far to reach it.

Titan looked upon me as my eyes stayed glued to his blue ones. I realized then Titan had won yet again because as he moved his hips, he began to make love to me, and I felt everything with each thrust. I felt compassion and need, but most of all, I felt protected. His body covered me, shielding me from any outside threats. I came without breaking eye contact with him. His golden blonde hair, ravaged by my fingers, hung like a broken angelic halo. He was the angel who never gave up his mission. He'd drag my soul back from the depths of hell.

A tear slid down my eye. Titan leaned down and licked it away, "I'll take your pain away, babygirl. I love you," He pushed in harder, and I felt myself building again, "Do you hear me, Nova? Does Elsa hear me?" I came again and clawed his back, or maybe it was Ghost who clawed back to answer him. "I love you," Titan said as he came with me.

The air in the room was scented with the aftermath of our desire. I stopped fighting and curled into his body as Titan held me, and we cuddled like kittens orphaned on the cold streets huddling in a box. We rested in silence until our breathing relaxed to our regular rhythm.

Titan had side-tracked me from answering the question I demanded of him in the best way possible.

My hand danced over the muscles on his stomach, which rippled with abs and hints of scars. I had no idea how many marks came to scar him. His most biggest scar was a four-inch raised red mark on his left bicep. I always felt it under my fingertips when I clung to him. "You never answered my question," I pushed up on my elbow so I could steal a hold of those sapphire eyes, "If you want a future, then I have to bury my past."

Chapter 19



Come on, let me out, Ghost pleaded as Titan looked away from me and up to the cream-colored ceiling. When everything settled, I was going to take a tube of Mila's paint and abstract the shit out of the walls. Titan was too mighty of a man to have cream-colored walls.

You need to push him for the answers you seek. I'm better at pushing. Ghost purred.

That's comical. I chimed back.

Please don't act like you're upset, Nova. Ghost rolled her eyes. *You attract Titan, but I draw him in closer. Titan isn't going to agree to this with a simple yes. I know how to bend his will.*

You want everything, don't you, greedy little Ghost? I questioned. Titan's forgiveness, control over me...what was the bitch up to?

Why can't I have it all? Ghost asked.

You want your cake and to eat it all, well, remaining sexy as fuck. Too much sugar kills. It didn't work so well for Marie-Antoinette. Learn from history, Ghost. I quipped. I eyed Titan, who was lost in heavy darkness. He continued to run his tongue over his teeth. Was my question the most challenging

thing he'd ever encountered? I wanted a kill that he was ordered to take by the brotherhood. If I was adopted into this brotherhood by marriage, I should be able to kill Lucas King just as much as Titan.

True, Ghost agreed, But unlike Marie, we have a much stronger king by our side. He's making you stronger.

When Elsa first met Titan, she dreamed about being married to her prince one day. The dream was simple because she didn't envision what the prince would have to do to claim his crown. Elsa was much more innocent when she thought the world was safe.

Fine Ghost, take over. I submitted.

It's about damn time.

Chapter 20



I licked my lips and tasted the remnants of Titan. I could feel his tender touch on my swollen lips. Nova had to understand that we had to answer some of Titan's questions first. We have to give trust to receive it. "I convinced myself you were going to break up with me. That week before my parents died, you acted strangely. I knew you were too good to be true. The hottest guy in school doesn't suddenly fall for the new girl with the funny accent." Back then, I hadn't perfected my American accent. My voice was a mix of French, English, and Russian. A foreign sound that some kids liked to poke fun at in the prestigious school.

"I did fall for you," Titan shifted to lean on his elbow as he mirrored my position.

Fuck, you were right. He's eating this shit up, Nova barked. Deep down, she wished she could pull her mask off and show Titan what she felt. In time, she would. I knew we would eventually merge into yet another new person. Nova and I would become a lethal unit instead of caging me.

Titan's hand reached out and started to play with my hair. I watched in fixation as his eyes followed the movement of my hair as it wrapped and slipped through his fingers. He's not here. He's fallen back to the boy that I knew. Titan used to do

the same thing in my treehouse. I'd sit and study for school, but Titan would study me.

"I fell for you as soon as I saw your goodness shine through my thunder clouds. I had never seen anyone so pure. I was scared that I would ruin you. And I did," Sadness seeped through his confession.

"What about now? There's no goodness left. I came to kill you, and now we are married." I snorted. "Did you legally bond us to torture me, punish me? Or was there something deeper? I'm struggling, Titan...." I tapped the side of my head, "Inside me are two very different people. One wants to trust you. She's the moral ground. The other isn't sure if she should kill you or stay married and make your life a living hell. I can't take more lies. If they continue, I'll become a creature so dark even Satan will try to cast me away."

His hand stilled in my hair. Everything in him shifted as his muscles flinched at my final words. He opened his mouth only to close it as he considered his following words to me. He licked his lips. "That's where you're wrong. Elsa was burnt into ashes, forced to crumble to dust. But from that, dust remained a small ember. I see it flicker now and then, and when it does, I blow on it and coax it back to life." A tear escaped my eye as he continued, "I know what you're doing with Mila, and she will need to be stronger to survive Dash and for him to survive her. *That* is you caring in your own twisted way." His hands moved and searched for my hand. Interlocking our fingers, he brought them to his lips and lightly touched the tattoo that was now my wedding band. "I don't want a sheep, Nova. Neither does Dash. We need wolves to bring into our pack. You're my wolf, and Mila is his." He reached around me with his other hand and stroked the tattoo covering my spine—a *wolf in sheets clothing*. The hidden letters tucked into the pattern revealed my truth, what he wanted all along. "You became part of my pack years ago, and although time separated us, once you're part of my pack, there is no leaving."

I understood Nova's need for revenge. There was no forgiving what happened to our childhood and parents. Titan

pushed my shoulder back as he guided me to lay on the bed. His head hovered above mine like a golden light baptizing me into a new religion, “My father will pay for his deeds, Nova. Tomorrow it will all be over.”

Ask him more! Nova screamed.

“How will he pay because the only payment in my book is blood. A life for a life.”

Titan was silent. His blue eyes shifted, and he finally surrendered as his jaw softened. He nodded, and I knew in that moment I had won. Nova could celebrate.

“You will get your blood, babygirl.”

The blue shade of his irises was like the shade of ocean waters with a storm on the horizon. Deep, endless blues with swirls of blackening depths. Nova was going to get what she wanted, but I needed to ensure I got what I wanted.

Titan.

“If you only allow me to kill Lucas for my vengeance, then you’ll end up hating me as much as Nova hates you. They’re two of us in here, Titan,” I tapped my temple, “We ebb and flow like a rocky tidal wave crashing onto the shore. I know you have come to accept us both, but can you accept and live with a wife that killed your father?” Nova didn’t understand why Titan hesitated and struggled with the idea of a son killing his father. Was it because, deep down, he loved his father?

Titan caged me between his legs and then cupped my cheeks. His eyes dipped to my bare breasts. We both were completely exposed to each other in more ways than one. Like Adam and Eve, we both sat naked in our garden of pleasure. Like Eve, I was tempting Titan into sin by killing his father. Eve’s actions ended terribly for the world therefore, I needed Titan to make this decision for himself.

“The actions that will be taken tomorrow are for myself *and* you. We’re one now,” he looked down at the tattoo that spelled Elsa on his ring finger. I glanced at my wedding band tattoo.

Titan King.

He was forever inked on my flesh.

“I protect what is mine, and I consider every action. You think you are the only family my father destroyed?” Titan snorted, “My father’s past is a graveyard of sin. The sins of a father pass to their son. I’ve inherited my father’s sins, but that doesn’t mean I am saddled with them. I’m going to correct his wrongs, and when I do that, I’ll be doing my own wrongs.” He leaned forward and claimed my lips. When my tongue pressed against his, he pulled away. I wanted more.

“I need to know you are by my side when my wrongs come back to haunt me.” He held my steel grey eyes, seeking an answer.

What do you say, Nova? Are we keeping Titan as a war prize?

There was no other option for us now. Nova smiled.

I worry about him and the repercussions ahead when we kill Lucas. I admitted to Nova.

We won’t have to worry about that Ghost. Like I always promised you, I am going to kill the King. I will shield Titan from that task, and if the brotherhood has any issue with that, they can be next on my list. I’m not only taking the crown, Ghost. I was going to take the whole fucking kingdom. Marriage means 50/50. Everything Lucas King did and worked to claim is now half mine, along with his most precious possession. Titan.

Chapter 22



DAMIAN

I had become slightly obsessed.

Ok, not a little. I was a complete stalker, but it wasn't like I was some crazed killer hunting my prey. I was protecting my target, making everything I did honorable and good.

I sat at my usual table in the coffee shop across the street as I watched her, Isabella. Isabella was a mistake, like a whisper on the wind that my eyes and ears caught. When I saw her, when that whisper from God spoke to me, I never looked back. Isabella was everything I ever imagined I would want. She was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen, with strawberry blonde hair that flowed like calm ocean waves down her back. That is what Isabella was, a calming force to my tempered rage.

My mind imagined her hair spread out on my bed. In the past few weeks, I rarely ventured close enough to uncover the fine details of her heart-shaped face. But our past has been forever etched into my mind.

My Isabella thought she could run. She was wrong. I worked forever in the shadows to keep her where I needed her until the timing was safe. I knew my father always had men watching my movements, so to keep Isabella safe, I kept as much distance as I could, but God could only tempt the devil

so much. Sometimes I slipped and gave in. I couldn't resist, and neither could she. But my disappearing act only enraged her.

Isabella worked in the small local book store across the street. Six days a week, she was here. Isabella was earning an honest living, something far different than how I was raised to be. She took night classes at the community college when she wasn't running the store. She lived in a run-down part of town that kept me up at night. Her apartment building was a shit hole, so I took the liberty of buying it and upgrading the security for all the tenants free of charge. All for her.

The bell above the coffee shop door chimed as a young couple walked in. Hand in hand, they walked to the counter and ordered their drinks. An act so simple yet unattainable for me. I tore my eyes off the couple and grabbed my coffee cup. The sharp, bitter notes filled my mouth. My mind turned towards my cousins, who each had women they loved, women they could touch and hold like the young couple in the shop.

Dash did everything he could to twist his mind into not forgiving Mila. It was destroying their once pure love, but Dash would not realize that until it was too late. It might already be too late. Dash won't forgive Mila for something that was not her fault or her control. Instead of comforting her when she needed it most, Dash poured salt into her wounds. It sickened me that my cousin could torture Mila mentally just as my father had done to my mother. Unlike my father, Dash was not a lost cause, he would break eventually, and then he'd be the one graveling for Mila to forgive him.

Then you had Titan and Nova, or Elsa. Bat-shit crazy wrapped up tight in a hot sexy as sin package. I set my coffee down and exhaled. Just the thought of handling a girl like Nova exhausted my mind. Nova was a bundle of fucked up memories, twisted with rage and gift-wrapped with a need for blood. Titan would be her undoing and the one thing to save her.

I remember that day when I first saw Nova in class. Titan was deadly silent. I knew he was hiding something. From the first day I met Nova, I knew that Titan owned her heart. That's

why I followed Titan when he drove back out to his old childhood home. Titan never visited his father in that house. He avoided it like the plague.

It wasn't only Titan who gave away something that day. The way Nova looked at my cousin when we walked up those stairs to her row told me that not only did she know him, but there was a burning fire inside of her that was set free when Titan cornered her against the wall. If I were Titan, I'd sleep with one eye open but then again, Nova had plenty of chances to kill Titan, and she hadn't done so yet. I'd be willing to bet she never would.

Speaking of killing, my time stalking Isabella would soon end. I'll be free to love without pain. Standing from my table, I grabbed my paper cup, thanked the barista, and tossed the cup in the trash bin. I exited the coffee shop and pretend to look at my phone, but in reality, I took a picture of Isabella. Her hair was pulled back into a low ponytail that I'd love to wrap around my fist. She's smiling wide as she talks about a book to a customer.

I bought an apartment in Aspen, where King Corporations had its second largest office facility. Hidden in the mountains, King Corporations was working on the next generation weapons manufacturing. That was where I'd be relocating as soon as I graduated in just a few days. I've never been apart from my cousins for long, but this next phase in our lives will change us all. Each of us had roles to fill and kingdoms to run to aid the brotherhood.

I snapped a series of photos and slipped my phone into my pocket. I made sure to have a whole library installed in the apartment I bought in Colorado. Isabella wore a lot of yellow and not just any shade but marigold. So, I told the designer to design the library in navy blue and marigold shades. All I had to do was make sure my plan worked. In my pocket, my fingers brushed against the small antique pocket knife that I never left home without. Rubies and emeralds were embedded in the solid gold hilt. It was worth a very pretty penny; then add in its history and the price skyrockets. The blade was still

sharp after all these centuries. I kept the knife on me like a lucky rabbit's foot.

It is my most prized possession, beside Isabella. I remember, as a boy seeing the knife on a stand high up in my father's office. It looked cool as a kid, like a weapon used by a king from past eras. The knife haunted me, but the best way to outrun your demons was to confront them, which I will be doing tonight. As a matter of fact, that is where I'm headed now. Titan and Dash wanted to go with me, but I insisted I must do this alone. Whether I make it out alive or not is another story, but my cousins gave me their word that no matter what happened, they would protect Isabella for the rest of her life.

I slipped into my car and closed the door. The engine revved to life and caused a surge of adrenaline to course through my veins. From my rearview mirror, I eyed the bookstore one last time before I peeled out of my parking spot. The knife in my pocket burned with fire now like the heat from the pits of hell. It spread and ignited my soul. The warmth from the flames called out to me like the devil himself. The knife ordered me to give the devil another soul, not just any soul, but the soul of my maker.

I floored the gas and rocked forward towards my next mission. You see, my mother gave this knife to my father as a wedding gift. It was this knife she used to kill herself. I would kill my father with this same knife.

Chapter 23



It always amazed me how comfortable people were in their own homes. Once tucked inside those walls, they let their guards down. People made the misfortunate of thinking they were safe and protected behind a thin layer of brick and drywall. *Insert that evil laugh here, baby, because Nova is back in the driver's seat, and let's be honest with ourselves, life is much more thrilling when Nova is driving.*

Now you're talking in the third person, Nova? Ghost asked with concern.

No back seat driving, Ghost. I hissed.

Now back to the naive fools who slumbered in their homes when I lurked within their walls. I mean, seriously, haven't they ever read a history book? Villages were raided all the time; empires rose and fell, and spies were always lurking in the darkness.

Can you guess who the spy is in this history lesson?

I spent my teenage years training with a Torpedo, a Russian hitman in the Bratva. I could fade into the background and vice versa. I became just as good about standing out *when* I wanted to. Like when I snuck into the basement to spy a few days ago. I didn't try to hide. I sat on the stairs and

let Titan, Dash, and Damian know they wouldn't be safe in their own house. I was going to be there to disrupt everything if I wanted to.

We are not walking alone now, are we? Ghost asked.

I glanced at Titan, who had his left hand on the steering wheel. The flesh-colored ink that lined his ring finger with my old name.

You mean my name. Ghost corrected.

She was greedy and made it clear that Titan was devoted to her. I'd be changing that. Titan was committed to us, Ghost and myself. Therefore he needed to add on to that tattoo when the dust settled.

His right hand rested on my thigh. His thumb tapped in a rhythmic pattern as he tried to prepare himself for what was coming. As soon as he touched me, I was his calming presence. They say opposites attract, and when Titan touched me, I calmed him. Yet when I touched him, his presence revved me up.

The car turned and slowed as we pulled into the guarded gates. The guard flagged us in, not knowing Titan was driving the Trojan horse through Lucas King's walls. The driveway to Titan's childhood house seemed endless. Straight and narrow with perfectly groomed trees that were framed by shaped hedges. "You ok?" Titan asked.

I hadn't realized the tightness in my chest that affected my breathing. "Just eager," I murmured, but that was a mask. My chest hurt because I had never been this close to my parents' house. Our community was just a street away. However, Titan's home was vastly different than my childhood house. Yet no matter the differences, the forest was too familiar. I never wanted to return here again. After today I wanted to bury this town in my past. Better yet, burn it out of my mind. Some ghosts were better left dead.

And some aren't, Ghost quipped.

I grinned.

Looking over at Titan, I remembered the boy who first stole my heart, then killed me. That death only resurrected me and forced me to be stronger. Titan and I were both pawns in someone else's game. It seemed like the purpose of the brotherhood was to take control of the game board; the pawns and pieces would become the game makers. Titan and I stayed up late as he talked about the brotherhood. Titan confessed some of the journeys the men had experienced. Some made my childhood look like nothing. I decided I would give the brotherhood a chance. Plus, they needed a confident pair of ovaries in their group if they wanted to be accepted nowadays. I'd be their poster child of female empowerment. They better clear the path because the head bitch is coming, and when I arrived, I was going to shake things up.

Glancing down at my Piaget watch, I noted the date. Today would shake up the underworld and shift the controlling powers.

April 1st.

All around the world, the men from the brotherhood were drawing blood. The caged animals were turning against their masters.

The palms of my hands grew clammy as the mansion came into sight. I rubbed them against my leather leggings. Once again, I had to dress the part of the villain. In case you didn't know, villains loved leather, thus my Saint Laurent leather leggings. A matching black jacket concealed my weapons. Instead of dawning all black, I chose to wear a golden shirt that shimmered when the light hit it. After all, kings preferred gold, didn't they? You had to dress the part you sought to assume. Naturally, I had to stick to my guns and wear my Prada combat boots, blood red, raspberry-flavored lip gloss, and a smoky grey eye. My mask was complete.

Titan grabbed my hand. I hadn't realized that I kept rubbing my palms up and down my legs until he stilled them. "You don't have to do this." He stated with such affection Ghost wanted me to consider it.

Titan was trying to protect me, but at the same time, I was guarding him. *Isn't that what a real marriage is about, Ghost? Making sacrifices to defend your significant other?*

Ghost didn't respond. She usually didn't when she agreed with me. She didn't dare to admit I was right. I wasn't the only victim here to claim my revenge. Titan was just as much a victim as I was. A boy was used and abused by the man who was supposed to be his role model. I knew back then Lucas King wasn't a good father. I could see it in the eyes of the broken boy, who, at the age of fourteen, should have had no worries in the world. Instead, he carried the weight of his family name on his young shoulders.

I was so clouded by pain, shock, and trauma that I wanted anyone close to me to suffer.

So I did make them suffer.

Now that I'm older, wiser, and have Ghost as my moral compass, I see my faults, like not wearing a pair of contacts when I tried to trick Titan.

Ghost coughed. *Are you sure about that, Nova? Or, are you lying to yourself again?*

Ok, so maybe it was a cry for help. Perhaps I longed for the boy who I once loved. I wanted the prince to save me from my tower, but I had to climb and fall from the tower and then save the prince—none of my mistakes now mattered. The only thing that did matter was both Titan and I were going to cut ourselves free from our chains. Titan would be safe, as would I.

I pressed my fingers into his hands tighter. His hands were larger and swallowed mine like a suit of armor. The heat penetrated my core. I looked at Titan and finally gave him what he wanted. "I love you," I confessed.

Titan eyed me with shock.

"I love you, Titan King, because let's face it, hubby, I will take what I want, when I want it. I love you because you are right. You make me stronger. I was drowning in my old world. I always needed you, but I never could voice it out loud. So I

sought you out and changed my looks. I hoped that you would recognize me. I needed to know that you never forgot about me.”

Titan leaned forward and rested his forehead against mine. His lips hovered over mine,

“Not one second has gone by without me longing for you. I’ll right this all. I just need to know you’re always going to fight on my side.” His tongue parted my lips before I could answer. As we kissed, I never wanted it to end. I wanted to create a bubble where we could live happily ever after. But darkness lingered on the horizon of my mind. I pulled away and looked into the blue eyes that haunted my mind.

“You said as my husband you will protect me, but as your wife, I will protect you too.” Turning away from him, I looked at the mansion. Titan guided my face back to his and pressed a kiss on my lips. He smiled, knowing that our new lives would start before the sunset today. His grin pierced my heart. It was the smile I had not seen since I met him at my treehouse. Genuine and pure, there was still light within his dark soul. He brought our joined hands to his mouth and kissed my fingers. As he drove closer to our fate, he kissed every finger until he pressed a lingering kiss on my ring finger tattoo.

The car stopped. I offered him one more chance to allow me bear the burden of today. “This decision is eating at you. It’s my kill.”

I knew what Titan struggled with, which was why he would be a good leader. If all the men in the brotherhood had this moral compass, then the power that ruled the world would be in better hands. “A son kills his father,” I murmured the words that haunted Titan.

Titan was silent. Four guards stood at the entrance of the house. More men patrolled the grounds in groups that passed every three minutes. I was so worried about who killed Lucas that I never considered not making it out alive. The dream of being Titan’s wife might die as it once did with Elsa.

“I know why my father raised me the way he did. I will have to raise our children to be lethal, but there are two sides

to the coin. You can teach a man to be a ruler and show him compassion. I never saw that side of my father. He never confessed to me things a boy mourned to know. Who was my mother, for example?"

I could see the pain laced on his face. I wanted to protect him from this pain, but I didn't know how. You could protect a person physically, but mentally...that was a solo job only the person themselves could fight.

Look at Ghost and me, for example.

"We can look after this is done."

Titan laughed, but it was pained, "No. It doesn't matter now; that's not my point. I meant that he was cruel. He could have given me an ounce of tenderness here and there but he didn't. That's why I claimed you. I saw Elsa and how good she was. You were everything I ever sought. I gave you my heart, and you forever have it now." He leaned over and kissed me. As he pulled away, something still ate at him, "How will I explain to my children that I killed my father?"

Why was it so sexy that Titan cared about his future family? Not that I had ever considered kids. I might not ever want them but knowing that Titan cared about how he would be viewed as a parent planted a seed in my head. "You'll explain it as you just did to me. Sometimes blood isn't thicker than water. Blood is just blood. Evil is evil."

Chapter 24



Titan and I exited the car. Then as a united front, hand in hand, we approached his childhood home. Massive white cement walls held back the pure evil of Lucas King. We were surrounded by guards and a pine forest that once upon a time connected to my parents' house. In the middle was my treehouse—a place long forgotten, like a fairy tale.

We stepped on the final stair step, and the front doors opened, so we didn't have to stop and knock on the door like an average person. An older woman dressed in a traditional maid's uniforms stood to the door's right side. "Mr. and Mrs. King," she bowed her head, but her voice was cold and distant. I wished she smiled at Titan, showing him the love a mother should have. Did Titan truly have no loving parent figure growing up?

I glanced up at my husband, who was stoned face. A vein in his neck was bulging, and he seemed like a hungry lion that was being held back in a cage. He was tense, knowing the cage door was about to open. He wore his black cargo pants and a tight black shirt. His guns were on display, one strapped to the right side of his thigh, one tucked behind his back, and a knife in his boots. It would seem normal for the heir to be armed. On the other hand, I acted the role of the perfect wife, minus the leather and boots, which didn't fit the Stepford wife

role a King woman should be depicted as. I had to hide my weapons and conceal my true nature for only a few more minutes.

Then I was going to be free.

Utterly free of the monster from my past.

An uneasiness spilled in my stomach as if I were on a turbulent flight, unsure if we would have to make an emergency landing in a place unknown. I clenched my abs tighter like a corset as I willed away nausea.

“Mr. King is in his office. I’ll bring you to him.” The maid informed us. As if Titan needed to be escorted around his house. Heck, juvie in Russian felt more welcoming than Titan’s childhood mansion.

Walking down the long wide hallways, I realized how cold the house was. There was not one spot of color. Everything was either white or grey. *At least it wasn’t that awful shade of cream back at their campus house.* No pictures of Titan and his father hung on the walls. A few priceless pieces of art, and that was it. The windows were tinted, and I was sure they were bulletproof due to the extra thick frames. The dark tint of the windows cast an eerie shadow into all the rooms, which looked more like a museum than an actual space people would relax and live.

At the end of yet another hallway was a glossy black set of lacquered stairs. The maid ascended, as did we. At the end of the landing was a matching lacquered black door that the maid stopped at. The black shiny door and stairs were so dramatic that I half expected the walls to erupt in flames and the actual devil to open the door. Leave it to the insanely wealthy to have eccentric interiors that matched their empty souls. “Mr. King is waiting,” She hissed as if the arrival of his son and daughter-in-law was a nuisance for everyone.

Titan eyed her with disdain as she opened the office door. Anxiety blossomed in my gut like caterpillars breaking from their cocoons and turning into butterflies. We didn’t exactly discuss our plan step by step. We agreed we’d act normal so

we could get Lucas alone, and then well...shit was going to hit the fan. Lucky for Titan and me, we packed our raincoats.

Titan grabbed the shiny silver door knob, and the beating of my heart and the butterflies in my stomach threatened to break free of my body.

Tick, tock, Tick, tock. The sleek door opened, and the countdown to the apocalypse had begun.

* * *

Lucas King.

The king that held the crown that controlled all the kings. Lucas sat in a leather armchair next to a roaring fire looking the part he played so well. After all, Kings were born to rule.

Granted, the temperature outside didn't call for a fire at all. Lucas looked up but didn't look surprised to see Titan or me. No doubt Lucas was informed about our arrival as soon as our car approached his castle. I felt the weight of the gun that was tucked behind my back. When Lucas looked at Titan than me and smiled, I had a moment of fear that caused a bead of sweat to form along my brow bone.

What if Titan had betrayed me again?

"Lucas," Titan greeted his father with a distant hostility.

He's with us, Nova, Ghost assured me.

Titan shut the door to the office and locked it. I watched as Lucas raised a brow but remained calm. Then retaking my hand, Titan walked forward and towards the empty seats across from Lucas. Nerves made my feet stumble, but I quickly corrected my balance. Titan squeezed my hand with added reassurance.

I sat on the buttery leather armchair but didn't relax my posture. I remained perched forward like a cheetah, ready to pounce. Titan positioned the heavy chair in front of mine. The simple movement assured Titan's loyalty to me. Lucas might have thought it was a romantic move to make me look submissive to Titan. But I knew what Titan was doing. He was my shield.

I eyed the gun strapped to Titan's thigh, the strap was off, and it would only take Titan a moment to grab it. The safety on all our weapons had been clicked off also. I licked my lips tasting my raspberry gloss.

"My son and daughter-in-law," Lucas grinned as he opened his hands. "Please join me." He joked since we had already taken the liberty to sit down. Impatience took over my body as I twisted my hand around and grabbed my gun. Titan didn't move or react. He leaned forward on his thighs. Using his left hand, he rested his chin under it. He kept his right hand close to his gun.

Lucas kept his mask on and eyed my gun without fear. He still had confidence covering his shoulders like a fur-lined king's cloak. His blue eyes that looked like twins of Titan's, only older, finally looked towards Titan and then back to mine.

"I thought you'd choose something more painful. A bullet is hardly fitting for a man like me, don't you think?" Lucas shifted his hand, which alerted me. I aimed my gun at his head. Titan reacted and stood with supernatural speed, grabbed his gun, and aimed it at his father.

Lucas laughed, "I'm not going to kill you, Nova." He reached for a thick crystal glass that looked like scotch or whiskey. "Son, after all I have done to ensure you got the woman you loved. Do you think I'm so heartless that I'd kill her in front of you?" I couldn't tell by his tone if he was joking or not. I glanced at Titan. What did Lucas mean, after all, he had done?

Lucas didn't take a sip of his amber liquid but swung back the entire glass. He adjusted the sleeves of his pitch-black tailored suit that fit him like a glove. He had one ankle crossed over his knee in a comfortable stance.

Lucas pointed to the chair again, ordering Titan like a dog to sit. My thumb rubbed the texture on my gun. "You'll need to sit for this, son. We need to talk before I die today." His choice of words stuck out to me. Lucas wasn't shocked we were here. As a matter of fact, he had accepted everything.

That had every sense my body could muster on alert because Lucas wasn't a man that quickly gave up or dug his own grave.

"Yet again, you surprise me, Lucas," I admitted.

His blue eyes shifted to gaze into the fire, "You're both going to keep quiet and let me speak," he glanced at the watch on his wrist, "I don't have much time."

"As of this moment," Titan began, his voice was deep and rumbled like thunder, "my men have overtaken yours. Whatever you have planned isn't going to work, father. It ends here."

Lucas nodded, "Yes, my boy, it does." His voice was sullen but proud. "You think I killed your parents, Nova? I allowed you to believe that because it gave you fuel in that jail. You were too young to know the real truth back then. My son was too. I had to make sure you both would be strong and wise before you were welcomed into power. You each had to earn it. We learned from our past what happened to the heirs who were given power without a trial," Lucas snorted, "It didn't end well."

My brows furrowed in confusion, "You killed my parents." My mind shouted at me to pull the trigger. To finally shut him up. Stomp on the spider, so it can't spin more webs of lies.

"You are a smart girl. I kept you alive and tailor-made you for my son." Lucas looked away from the fire and at me. Titan shifted in his seat. He nudged his right foot forward, ready to pounce. "Ask yourself this, Nova, why would I leave you alive if I truly killed your parents? I don't leave bread crumbs." He let his question sink in as he grabbed the weighted crystal glass filled with amber alcohol and poured himself another glass. Lucas sipped his drink and sat back in his chair, "I'd do anything to protect my child Nova, as I'm sure you will do one day."

"You won't be alive to see those children." Titan hissed.

Lucas grinned, “I know, but I’ll die knowing you and Titan will be strong enough to protect our family name and the cause.” Lucas seemed to be lost in a daze. What *cause* was he referring to? King Corporations?

Lucas shifted in his seat, finally giving Titan his attention, “That is what a father’s mission in life is meant to be. Unfortunately, my father, your grandfather, didn’t realize that. He tried to damn us all. Not me, not my son.” Lucas shook his head, “I was your protector Titan. I ensured you would be strong enough to continue our family name and take your seat in life.” His chest inhaled deeply, “Let me try to confess to you as much as I can. I knew you fell for Elsa or Nova,” He glanced at me as if he wanted a thank you for addressing me by my chosen name. “My son gave his soul to you, just as my brother, Marcus, gave his soul to his wife Kate. I realized too late that when a man can love, he is much stronger but also more susceptible. Love can save and destroy. It did both for my family. I needed to make sure it didn’t destroy my son.” His eyes darken with what seemed to be regret. “I thought I’d first use Elsa like bait to keep control of Titan. But then I watched Titan grow. I changed my mind. I wanted Titan to have a strong woman by his side. Elsa Stepanov wasn’t that girl, but my son didn’t seem to notice. So I recruited Anton and used him as my puppet. Anton had to make Elsa stronger, so he convinced your uncle to send you to that prison. You’re first test, Nova.” He beamed as his eyes locked with mine.

Before I could speak, Titan punched Lucas square in the jaw. Bloody hell, the punch was so hard, I thought it would break his jaw, and I’d be unable to get answers. “Titan!” I roared as I jumped forward and pulled him off of his father.

“I’ll kill you! I’ll fucking kill you again and again! You told me you found her once she was in Russia. You planned this all!” Titan roared so loud even the thick bulletproof windows rattled.

“Let me hear this,” I begged Titan. For the first time, I sensed Lucas was telling the truth. The confession of a dying man.

Lucas held up his hand as he rubbed his jaw. Lucky for me, he was able to continue. He hunched back in his chair and drank another shot of alcohol before he continued. I grabbed Titan's hand and urged him to let me take control of this situation.

"So you knew all along I was alive." It was a statement that Lucas nodded to.

"And my uncle?"

"Was merely a pawn my enemy tried to get a hold of." Lucas waved his hand.

"And Anton?" I asked again, needing clarity. It made sense now why Anton was always there to save me from the brink of death. It was all Lucas's doing.

Lucas rubbed his jaw. Pain laced his brow. He reached into his mouth, and with a grunt, he pulled out a tooth. Lucas held his tooth between his fingers and then grinned. He was proud of Titan's hit. He set the tooth down as if he was setting down an unwanted object. "Anton is a whole different kind of pawn, Nova. One not solely of my controlling either." He warned.

"But you just said he worked for you." I snapped.

"You have to let me finish the story, daughter-in-law. If I skip ahead, you'll jump to conclusions."

"This. Is. Not. A. Game." Titan growled.

But it was a game. Everything in Lucas's life was a game he controlled. At least, that is what Lucas had made Titan, and I believe. Now, however, we got a glimpse of the truth. Lucas wasn't the game maker. He was also a player. The question was, who was more powerful than Lucas King?

"Who's the other player? Who else does Anton work for?"

Lucas waved his hand, "Let me give you a little crumpet to nibble on because all will be revealed in," He looked at his watch again, "well, now, just in a few hours." Lucas smiled. He relished holding the truth over our heads. "Anton is like a

little mouse who gets to claim the whole cheese now. With each mission, you receive a reward, but with each reward, your debt grows.” Lucas raised his hand and started to draw a symbol in the air repeatedly.

Ok, I think he has lost it. Ghost worriedly admitted.

Don't worry, Ghost. I can interpret crazy.

I watched the movement of his fingers and realized he was drawing an infinity symbol. “It all ends where it all starts. The deeper you get, the higher you become. The bigger the reward, the bigger the debt. Are you starting to understand it now?” He looked long and hard at Titan.

“The end is the beginning,” Titan repeated Anton’s words.

Lucas beamed with a proud smile. “A father gives life only to have that life take his.” His words implied Lucas knew Titan’s plan, the brotherhood’s plan.

I lowered my gun to rest on my right knee. I still had it aimed at Lucas. I wasn’t a fool. I rested my left hand on Titan’s leg, urging him to be patient. As Titan promised, he let me take the lead still.

When someone loses their mind, it is best to sit back and watch. Don’t try to interpret every word; that will only make you the crazy one in the end. As they spew nonsense, you pick out the parts that make sense. Like a needle in a haystack, Lucas was leaving a trail of needles.

“Did you like the pictures I sent you?” Lucas taunted, and my blood ran cold. I knew exactly what he was referring to. I always assumed it was my uncle sending me the pictures of Titan. Provoking me and ensuring my anger and hate for the Kings continued growing. It was Lucas all along. He wanted me to hate Titan. Titan was correct, and more unanswered questions started to fill my mind.

“It was you?”

Lucas glanced at Titan, “You didn’t tell her?”

“I was planning on it. After I let her kill you, that is.” Titan hissed. He turned to me as a pleading look covered his eyes. Lucas was trying to tear us apart again. “My father revealed he found out you were alive when you were in prison. I knew nothing before. I knew he was planning something but hadn’t put it together. I wanted to get those answers today before I confronted you. I didn’t want to leave you with more unanswered questions.” He grasped my hand, “I should have been honest about every detail I knew.”

I nodded with my eyes only so Titan knew I still had his back. Titan turned to his father with a look that made me pause. It was a look of utter nothingness. Hate that would make Satan pause for a moment, “If you try to twist my words and actions into lies, I will not let Nova use a bullet,” Titan reached down to the side of his boot and pulled out a knife. He didn’t need to finish his statement. Titan would make his father’s death slow and painful.

Lucas nodded. His face suddenly looked older. His hair was more grey than blonde. His skin looked tired and more drawn. “I am not twisting anything. I stated a fact. You didn’t tell her what you coaxed out of me in the office that day.” He shrugged, faking comfort, but his eyes watched the knife in his son’s hand.

Lucas shifted his attention to me again. “As you broke over the years, I had Anton watching over you, making sure the pieces of Elsa fell where I needed them. I needed you to be a stronger version of yourself for my son. Everything I have ever done is for my son.” He opened the palms of his hands in a welcoming gesture, “And look at the woman you have become.” He said proudly of himself.

“You destroyed a family,” I hissed. Raising my gun so the bullet would shoot him directly between his eyes.

Hear him out, Ghost protested. He’s still willing to talk.

My hand held a slight tremor, and my body could not keep in the fury my brain was consumed with.

“I have destroyed many things, but I wasn’t responsible for killing your family, Nova. I needed your parents’ business

for a reason. Stepcon Tech was in the middle of a game of tug-a-war. The end is the beginning, Nova.” Lucas again drew the infinity symbol: “You’re father knew that before he betrayed me, turned his back on **us**. He still thought he could outsmart them.” Lucas shook his head as he sounded like a madman.

I tried to connect some of the dots. Whatever reason Lucas kept me alive and broke me for his son had nothing to do with my parents’ company or King Corporations. Instead, the riddle he kept repeating ran over my tongue. “*It all ends where it all starts. The deeper you get, the higher you become, the bigger the reward, the bigger the debt.*” It all had a juxtaposing effect. The end isn’t the end, but the beginning and the beginning would eventually come to an end.

A repetition.

Infinity.

“What does that mean?” Titan growled.

Chapter 25



What Nova didn't know wouldn't hurt her. Yet my father twisted my knowledge into making Nova think I had betrayed her again. As much as Nova wanted this kill, I salivated for it.

"Start talking." I clutched the knife in my hand. It begged me to coat its blade with the warm blood of my father's. Not that death would scare my father. Dad seemed to come to terms he wasn't leaving this office alive. Dad cracked his neck and then looked back into the fire.

I eyed Nova, who was looking at me. Nova was beautiful even in this state of confusion, and she tried her best to portray a bulletproof shield of confidence. Her lips were slightly parted and still swollen from when I ravished her. Nothing and no one would come between us.

Ever again.

"It is all a part of something bigger, son. Smaller skirmishes make up the game; battles create the war." Dad pinched the bridge of his nose as if a headache or some other type of pain was beginning to set in, "The history of humanity can be wrapped up in two words son, power, and order. Man always wants power, but you need order and control to have power. We sought control over the lands and animals. Then we wanted power over the neighboring tribe. As tribes grew, we

created kingdoms and then fought, kingdom to kingdom; so one winner could call themselves the High King. We have evolved in many ways but are still flawed with the need for more. At our core, we are starving for one thing that continues to grow our appetite. Power changes in forms, but the root is the same—the ability to hold all the cards. You know as well as I do, son. I'm not merely talking about money because when you are at the level we have amassed, money isn't even a factor when it comes to power. The Rites of Passage is how they started, son, and how we all will end."

"The Rites of Passage?" Nova questioned.

Father nodded, "They are *the* group. The Rites of Passage. Their power is infinite, ever-growing, and everlasting. Infinity. A series of tests, because that is what life is about. From early man, The Rites of Passage has been in power. They were born at the dawn of man and will continue long after most of us do ourselves in. They are the power behind us all, son. The Rites of Passage birthed smaller factions like the Knights Templars, the Freemasonry." Dad waved his hand in the air. I'd never seen this side of my father. He seemed defeated but content in that defeat. That wasn't the man that raised me.

"King Corporations belongs to The Rites of Passage. **We** belong to The Rites of Passage. The son pays for his father's sins, and soon Titan, my boy, I will pay in full. Then you will be free from the past transgressions and be ready to take your rightful place." Stress lifted off my father's shoulders. "My son shall be saved with the payment of my death." Dad looked away from the fire and stood. He walked over to my chair and knelt on his knees. Nova's gun followed his every step, and when father knelt, Nova stood just a foot behind him, ready to shoot if he harmed me. It made my heart swell with a pride I'd never felt before because I knew I had her forever at that moment. She'd kill if someone hurt me, and I'd do the same for her.

I shifted my gaze back to my father, who knelt below me as if I were the king. Lucas King bent a knee to no one. In making this gesture, he put himself below my level. Every

muscle in my body was on alert. A king never kneels to another. I was forced to sit on the floor like his dog as a boy. I wasn't granted a chair until I proved myself after I made my first kill. Things a boy should never have learned how to do.

"You think you were sent to Initiation 101 with boys like Dante De Luca, Anders Elden, Cillian Collins and Leo Molotov." Dad rested his hand on my knee as if he wanted his bizarre words to soak in deeper. A mere touch that tried to convey some sense of caring; My father never cared for me like a father should. "Everything in your life has been plotted out, my son. They have been watching you grow into power, but most importantly, they also have been judging how you boys have used that power. Your little club, The brotherhood, was exactly what The Rites of Passage wanted you boys to do. They wanted you to have each other's back."

I jerked back at his words, "We formed the brotherhood. Not you or The Rites of Passage!"

"No, son, you think you formed it. We laid the breadcrumbs that you boys ate up. We needed you all to unite, to be friends. Together you are unstoppable. And Titan," Father paused, his blue eyes, which were mirrors of mine, stressed and darkened, "You can't go against them because you are them, son. All of you boys are."

"As fun as this was, you have skirted around what you did to my parents," Nova demanded. I was thankful for her quick interjection. I needed a moment to think. There was no way my father could take credit for the brotherhood...

Or was there a link to my father? Did our families torture us knowing it would cause such hate that we'd all form the brotherhood? I pinched the bridge of my nose. My reality was spinning. Fact and fiction were merging. When a soldier loses his senses, it marks his end.

The beginning is the end.

I had to remain grounded, or my father would be walking out of this office today, and I'd be the one six feet under.

“I told you,” My father exhaled; frustration grew on his brow as he glared at Nova, “I didn’t kill your parents. Those responsible for their death are part of Titan’s final task. I admit guilt when I’m guilty. I knew my son loved you. I knew you were alive but kept you hidden. I don’t have much more time, so please don’t interrupt me as I make my final confession. The Rites of Passage wanted Stepcon Tech, your parents’ company. What we want, we take, but so does our enemy. Your father thought he could pick no side, but in picking no side, he chose no alliance. The enemy couldn’t risk keeping him alive, letting his tech get into our hands or someone else. So it was simple,” Lucas clasped his hands, “They killed your parents.”

“No, I have proof from my hacker.”

Lucas laughed, “You think if I wanted your parents dead, I’d resort to blackmailing and paying off a city worker to do the job?” Lucas raised a brow, “Sometimes we try to connect dots that are not there. My enemies covered up their tracks by blaming us, The Rites of Passage. When the dust settled, and anger grew, all fingers pointed at us. I have personal teams of assassins,” My father looked over at me. I knew all too well about those teams. Fuck, my father had armies devoted to him.

Were they loyal to him or The Rites of Passage?

“If I need a job done, I take care of every detail. I wouldn’t be so quick to believe a faceless person behind a computer, Nova.” Lucas cleared his throat, “As I was saying. My son didn’t fare too well after your supposed death, but we must all struggle before claiming our prize. I let Titan believe you were dead and let you become a stronger woman. Ultimately, I knew your need for revenge would lead you back to my son. Everything would be full circle again.” Lucas began to cough, “The beginning is the end. The end is the beginning. A series of trials one must pass to continue to gain power. The Rites of Passage at its core values.”

“Why? Why would you play us both?” Nova asked. She still didn’t get it. Nova grew up with parents that loved her. She devoted her new life to avenging them. She couldn’t relate to having a father like mine.

My father looked at me, and I noticed a speck of blood on his lip. It wasn't from when I punched him in the jaw. That bleeding has stopped. This blood was fresh. Dad smiled at me. It was a look of manic pride. A smile a madman would gesture when the world crumbled and turned to dust around him. "Because I need Titan to be strong. I needed Elsa to be his match."

Before I could speak, dad's hand flew up and grabbed at his chest. He coughed again, more blood spewed out from his lips. His blue eyes found me. At first, I saw fear in his eyes. He knew at that moment he was facing death.

I knew it also.

As quickly as the fear came, it vanished into acceptance and pride as he looked over my face and grinned. His eyes rolled back, and he fell on the rug he used to make me sit on as a child.

No, this wasn't how this was supposed to happen! We came here to kill him and get closure. Not for him to leave us with more unanswered questions.

"Dad!" I yelled as I flew from my chair. I was begging for him not to die. I needed him alive a little bit longer before death took him.

My fingers curled around his shirt but his skin was already losing the warmth of life. His body was lifeless. I noticed the color drain from his face. The new color that replaced his complexion was a color I had come familiar with.

Death.

There was no rise and fall of his chest, no pulse in his neck. I beat on his chest.

Thump!

Thump!

Thump!

The exact opposite of what I thought I'd be doing today. I was trying to breathe life back into my father when I came to kill him.

“You’re not dying, you fucker! I want answers!” I slammed my closed fist into his sternum, hearing the bone break from my force of compressions.

“I. NEED. ANSWERS!” Slam!

My muscles started to burn from the numerous compressions I beat down on his chest. I don’t know how much time slipped away from me. Eventually, Nova perched on her knees beside me. Her hand rested on my back, “Titan.” Her voice was soft and lacked the anger it should have been filled with. Her vengeance was taken from her, as was mine. Just because I had battled with the knowledge that I, Lucas King’s son, was going to kill him, didn’t mean I didn’t have the courage to pull the trigger.

“He’s dead,” Nova confessed in a hushed whisper, “Your father is dead, Titan.”

Chapter 26



Death was so final.

Was it now? Ghost joked.

I didn't think you'd be the one joking when Lucas King died, Ghost. I raised a brow; maybe my corruption was sinking into her too deep. Ghost was the voice in my head that grounded me. At least she tried to. She was the good angel, and the rest of me was just...bad.

How do you feel? Ghost asked.

I was merely a pawn Lucas King moved and molded for his son. Is this how a man feels when he meets his maker on judgment day?

My parents' death was a game for The Rites of Passage. I caught a boy's heart, and like the loving father Lucas never acted to be, he made sure his son got what he wanted.

Me.

Would I have died with my parents if Titan didn't love me?

I watched Titan cling to his father's shirt, and then he started to do CPR. I knew no matter what Titan did, Lucas

would not take another breath tonight. Not because I was standing here with a gun and a bullet meant for Lucas King.

Nope.

You see, Lucas was too headstrong and stubborn. He knew he was dying today, he decided it, and so he did. I wasn't naive enough to think God was on my side and struck down Lucas. Lucas did something to spur this on. Once again, it was all planned just as he confessed to having plotted to break and mold me into the perfect doll for Titan.

A doll.

Kulka. What Anton always called me and told me I had to be. Hell, If I start to dissect everything Anton said to me in the past, it would all make sense now.

There were a lot of holes in our ship. So much so that we might need to jump ship and find a new mode of transportation.

Isn't that the coward's way? Ghost whispered.

Fuck, she was right. A captain doesn't abandon the ship. I'd fight with Titan to get to the bottom of this.

Titan started to scream as he pounded on his father's chest, but what made me love him even more, was that he wasn't demanding his father come back to life; Titan wanted answers, not his father.

As I watched Titan's useless attempts to bring his father back to life, I thought back to Ghost's question. How did I feel now that Lucas King was finally dead and not by my hands?

I felt...

Turbulence? Ghost responded.

If you already know how I feel, then why ask? I hissed. Yes, I felt shocked and deprived that I didn't get to see Lucas suffer; pissed off that he only left Titan and me more confused. I felt stuck on a plane without knowing where I was going and if we will land or not. All I could do was grab hold of the oxygen mask and breathe.

I heard the crack of a bone. Titan's golden face was red as he beat down his father's chest. I watched Titan in his restless pursuit until the scene before me sunk in. Pain speared my chest, another hint that my love for Titan ran so deep within my body that I had no control of it.

Titan was suffering.

My brows furrowed as my lips frowned. I didn't mind if Titan suffered by my hands, but to see him in pain by someone else's hands...that got me upset.

You do bad things when you're upset, Ghost added.

Damn, right, I do. I still struggled with the onslaught of emotions all of a sudden. I went from forcing myself not to feel anything to an all-you-can-eat buffet of emotions. Hmm... so much for being a psychopath. It seemed this broken girl could feel after all.

I felt the need to protect. To guard the boy I once wanted to destroy. Titan was my war prize, and I wouldn't let my spoil of war be tarnished.

"Titan," I perched down next to him, but I didn't let my guard slip. In this state, Titan wasn't here right now, and there was no telling what he would do. It is dangerous when your mind has trapped you in the red haze. Like firing up a nuke, all the alarms were blasting.

When my hand touched his back, he stilled. His shoulders deflated, and he drifted out of his fog. My touch had a calming effect. "He's dead," I whispered, "Lucas King is dead, Titan." The words on my tongue seemed dry and untrue. I examined Lucas on the ground.

The King had fallen.

He was dead. The man who haunted my dreams, lied, murdered, and corrupted, taunted me for years with photos, and now, the man responsible for breaking me and making me stronger was no longer alive.

Titan remained frozen, his hands on his father's chest. Then in a sudden flurry, he stood, pushing himself far away from his father; he stumbled back in a drunken stagger. As if

Lucas's death was a plague he wanted far from. I pushed to my feet and watched Titan as he pulled out his phone to call someone. "Fucking answer!" He yelled as he started to dial again. Three more times and relief hit his face, "Don't kill him, Damian. I need uncle Elijah alive!" Titan pleaded. Then I watched his face shift. He ground his teeth with such a force I worried he might crack one of his pearly whites.

Titan turned his back to me, unwilling to show me his failure or defeat. "Did you call Dash?" He asked. His voice was utterly empty. Titan nodded then his hand slowly lowered down to his side. We stood there silently for a few moments until Titan finally spoke, "I'm sorry." He confessed but kept his face hidden from me. That wasn't fair. He kept fighting and pushing for me to feel and share my feelings with him. So I was going to force him to do the same.

I walked to his side and turned him to face me. Under my fingertips, his skin felt cool and damp to my touch. Titan allowed me to pivot him towards me, but he didn't look me in the eye.

Fuck that.

I tilted his face to mine, "Look at me." I ordered. With the King dead, the crown was resting on my head now, and this new King would obey his queen.

Titan licked his lips, "I failed you. Again." His teeth sunk into his bottom lip. The skin became blanched and pinched under pressure. His teeth wanted the blood he was denied. I was the only one who was allowed to hurt him. I raised my thumb and freed his lip from the pain.

"You didn't pull the trigger, Titan. Lucas did. You didn't fail me." When Titan still refused to look at me, I did the only thing I could think of. I set my gun on the desk next to him and wrapped my arms around him. He felt like my armor, but that didn't mean I couldn't be his. The scent of his cologne calmed me, like taking a walk on a beach at sunset, minus the dead body in the room.

"My love for you killed you," Titan whispered.

“I forgive you.” I voiced. How could a boy know that his love would kill a family? He didn’t. Kids jumped without thinking about the fall. That was what was so magical about childhood. None of this was Titan’s fault. I finally came to terms with that now. Finally, Titan’s hands wrapped around me. My confession didn’t just refer to today but everything. Titan knew that. There was a part of us that was synced. Darkness collided with darkness. We knew what each other was thinking. No other words or explanations need to be spoken.

Titan shook his head, “My father knew he was going to die when we entered this room. He was...settled. Lucas King wasn’t God. He didn’t know he would have a heart attack or whatever it looked like he had. He knew the moment it hit him. He was waiting for it. He timed it out. I could see it in his eyes.” Titan took my hands, holding them tight. It felt like we were about to run into an unknown battle. I could hear the war drums beating in the distance. I just didn’t know who the enemy was this time.

“Someone killed my father, Nova. Someone took what belonged to you. When I find out who,” he pulled me closer, so our chests were pressed together. Our hearts were beating in sync as he vowed his promise. “I’ll hand them to you on a silver fucking platter.”

Chapter 27



The world beneath my feet crumbled, causing me to jump and keep moving quickly until I reached solid ground. My father was dead. His body was cold and growing hard as my security removed him. I didn't trust one soul in the house that worked for him, and my mind knew the cause was likely poison that killed my father. But dad knew he was poisoned and was...content with it?

Dash had arrived with Mila. He wasn't going to let her leave his side. I didn't blame him. Something bigger was at play here, something neither of my cousins knew. Dash placed Mila in the room just outside the office with a dozen men, six inside, and the other six stood guard outside the door. I tried to put Nova with them, but she wasn't so easily persuaded. It didn't matter now. Nova had heard too much. She was deep in my world, and I was chaining her to my side, arming her and allowing her to fight side by side with me in battle. The fact that Nova could handle herself was a significant benefit that turned me on.

Damian, on the other hand, was...breaking. The monster within shook, trying to break free. Unevaluated anger took hold of my cousin, and I didn't know what demon would be unleashed. Damian had suffered trials and tribulations I had witnessed. Uncle Elijah made my father look like a saint.

Damian didn't get the gift of a parting word or a dying man's confession. All he got was a simple letter. I worried about how Damian would not only react but what he would turn into now that his father was taken from him, not by his own hands.

Blacken silk flashed in front of my eyes. Nova's raven hair shined like a dark cloud, backlit by a full moon. Surprisingly, Nova was handling the news well. Relief rounded her shoulders. She was now married to a free man. I was forgiven of my past sins and free of the binds that tried to tear us apart. Yet as the waters settled around us, I knew it was only temporary. Maybe a few minutes or mere hours before the seas rose and tried to consume us again. Many things were still uncertain.

I didn't have time to ponder a world without Lucas King. He left too much of a wake after his death. I needed to uncover who The Rites of Passage were. We all stood around the office that my father once ruled. I retold the events to my cousins, and then Dash slipped out his phone to call the brotherhood. Like myself, many of us were left with more questions than vengeful glee today. Only half of us had plans that went accordingly. The other half were left with the mystery of who The Rites of Passage were. Whoever they were, they plotted with my father and other powerful men before they killed them.

"We're going to head out." Adam, my head of security, informed me. My father's body was loaded in a car, ready to go to one of our labs to find his actual cause of death.

"I'll go with you," Damian voiced as he pushed himself out of the dark corner. I hadn't asked Damian what he did with his father's body. He didn't tell us, and now wasn't the time to probe. What was important was guarding my father's body so we could hopefully get untampered answers. I nodded thanks as Damian left the room.

The list of people I trusted was growing smaller, and Damian would make sure nothing got fucked up with the autopsy. My eyes searched for Nova, seated in the chair that once belonged to my father. Her eyes were in a comatose daze as they looked into the flames in the fireplace. Her strong

vener, which pretended to be okay with my father's death, had begun to crack.

Dash cleared his throat, causing my eyes to shift, "We should talk alone."

I shook my head, "Nova can hear. She has heard enough. Nova has a bigger role in this game. We need to find Anton."

Dash's eyes looked to the chair Nova sat in, "Don't you think it's odd that she turned up in our lives and everything goes to shit at the same time?" He crossed his arms and raised a brow, pleading with me to see reason.

"Dash—"

"Oh, Dashy, ever the stick up your ass." Nova uncrossed her long legs and planted her combat boots firmly on the wood floor. She stood, like the queen she was. Her glossy lips pulled up in a cheshire grin that I knew all too well, "You're right. I came here to tear apart the Kings. But poison isn't my style. If I wanted you dead, there would be a bullet," She cocked the gun in her hand. A weapon I allowed her to keep hold of because I trusted her. She kissed the gun barrel as she slipped into the role she needed to be at the moment.

Nova was back to being Nova, but the girl who sat in my father's chair that gazed into the flames of the fireplace was Elsa. Elsa looked into the past, but Nova looked at their future. I'd never be able to separate them. I married a woman who slipped into roles to survive.

Dash stepped forward, "What did you just say?"

"Dasher, do you have a problem translating bitch?" She spun the gun in her hand, "I said there's a bullet with your name on it if you continue to piss me off." Nova grinned a soulless smile.

Dash rushed forward to grab her, but I intercepted. His eyes flicked to mine, "It was her! She killed my father!" Dash growled. His body shook, and I struggled to hold him back from Nova. It didn't help that she continued to taunt him, "Please, Dashy, you didn't like your daddy anyway." She chuckled.

Dash had a point. Nova's words were too connected to the actual bullet that had my father's name etched in it. A shot that hit my uncle Marcus, Dash's father, instead of my own. Could it have been Nova? Our security team found where the sniper was perched. In his dying breath, the restaurant owner confessed that he was paid extra to sit us at that specific table—a table with a perfect view and shot for the sniper to take. We never found who paid him off, and it didn't matter now. If you get stuck chasing dead ends, all you'll get is death. If one end stops, you take another angle until you find your mole.

Nova was trained by Anton, who Leo, part of the brotherhood, heard liked to train assassins. Dolls, as Anton wanted to refer to them. Was that another role Nova played?

Fuck!

I released Dash and turned my back to him, shielding Nova from him and him from Nova. I thought I was getting through to her. I wasn't a fool to drop my guard, but I had to give a little to get along with her. My hand reached out and grabbed her by the neck. Her skin was smooth under my heated touch. A small scar that was now pink in color marked where Anton had cut her with his knife coated in poison. Poison seemed to be Anton's style. Dots were starting to connect. But why would Nova allow Anton to kill my father when she fought to claim that particular kill herself?

“Did you kill my uncle?” My voice was cold and emotionless. Nova sensed it, and I saw apprehension in her eyes for a second.

She masked it quickly, “Which one?” She grinned, but it lacked the cockiness it usually held.

“Don't play games, babygirl.”

“And what if I did?” She asked me, “Would that be the straw that broke the camel's back? Seriously, Titan, you need to pick a side. You promised to kill for me, to protect me, but then one word from Dashy here, and you're flapping around like a fish out of water.” She was hurt. Her words masked the pain she felt inside. When was she going to understand that no matter what she had done in the past, I wouldn't let her go?

Punish her? Yes.

Freedom from me? Never.

Thankfully Dash remained quiet behind my back. Nova's attitude towards Dash wasn't out of hate. Nova was jealous, and Dash had just figured that out. My babygirl didn't like sharing, and she didn't like that I cared so much for my cousins. Nova would have to learn to accept them. We stood solid as a family, or we all crumbled to dust and ash.

My hand slipped from her neck and up to her jawline, where I tugged on her bottom lip. Her lipgloss was slightly sticky, but I loved how it made her lips look ripe and pouty. I looked her in the eyes, but my words were for Dash. "She didn't do it."

Dash swallowed the pill he didn't want to, as he trusted my words and nodded. Long ago, we made a promise to trust one another entirely. Dash stepped from around my body to face Nova. Dash was my height at around six foot three, Nova was tall, but we still cast a shadow over her sleek frame. My wife didn't shrink in the dark; she grew in the darkness, and it was fucking beautiful.

"I don't like you. And it will take hell freezing over for me to trust you," Dash admitted.

Nova grinned, "Sometimes the cold can be so bitter that it burns. I've been to hell, Dash King; trust me, nothing you can say or do would make the burn hurt more than hell's frozen flames."

My fist balled as a pang in my chest struck. Nova had started to let slip some of her pain. After the dust here settled and we were safe from this new threat, I would scour the earth for anyone left alive who hurt her. I couldn't erase the past, but I could write the future. Nova's future would be free from the demons that haunted her mind.

"Let's be real for once, Dashy. Did I want to destroy your family? Yes, Titan in particular, but if the fallout spread to you, then I didn't care. Did I kill your father? No. I wish I did. He seemed like just as big as a prick as Lucas." Nova slipped

the gun in her hands behind her back and then crossed her arms. In doing so, she waved her invisible white flag to Dash.

He nodded, "If you hurt my cousin, I will take great pleasure in killing you." He grinned.

"Well, you will have to fight for that honor because Damian already stated that same warning," Nova said. "Now," She turned to me and stepped into my side. "I don't know about you boys, but I've got a load of questions I want to be answered, but first, I'm going to need some lipgloss."

Chapter 28



Did you know the devil was good at negotiating peace?

Don't believe me? Well, she is. Satan can make peace treaties just as good as God can. Some would argue even better than God. You see, the devil has better incentives. That's why so many people sell their souls to her. The problem was keeping the devil from provoking that peace. War doesn't tempt the devil because there are fewer opportunities. The devil already took what she wanted. Peace and love were the devil's playground because they allowed her more souls to swindle with her lies.

The minute I laid eyes on Mila, I knew she had changed. She had sold her soul, but it wasn't to my devil, but another. The problem was that I just settled my issues with Dash; If Mila were about to take my advice, Dash and I's peace would soon be the next world war.

Ghost held up her hands; *We're in trouble.*

I know, I agreed. I didn't accept Mila's soul as payment, but I did give her advice.

Dash will blame you, no matter what. Ghost goaded.

Hey, you can't stop a bee from pollinating. I quipped. Did that make me guilty by association?

Your guilt can fill a textbook. Ghost said.

She had a point. I eyed Mila as we all walked down the line of waiting for armored SUVs. There was a guilty look in her eyes. Dash read that emotion as her submission to him. Her fight was finally over. At least, he thought it was.

Dash couldn't see that Mila's guilt wasn't due to a past event but the future creeping closer. His love blinded him. As Dash helped her into the car, I knew it was a matter of days before his little artistic songbird flew the coupe. If the angel on my shoulder had a say, I would warn Dash or confess to Titan.

There's never been an angel on your shoulder. Ghost said.

I know.

I climbed into the car, sliding into the third-row seat. My eyes stayed on Dash as he held onto Mila's hand. When you looked close, it seemed like an honest gesture from two people in love. Yet, when you looked closer at the details, you could see that Mila wasn't holding onto him. Dash's hold was too strong to have picked up on that.

Titan slid next to me, and I curled into him, seeking his armor. The fallout was coming, and I'd need him for shelter. I wasn't about to drop any bread crumbs or hints. I had enough battles to fight. Mila needed to find the badass bitch inside her and wage her war. And I hoped Mila would be strong enough to make Dash surrender and fall on his knees.

* * *

Once you stop fighting and surrender, no matter how short the slumber will be, it's much harder to climb back up on the horse and ride into battle again. I had stopped my plan of vengeance against Titan. Heck, I accepted him as mine. Now, I had no bone of contentment with Lucas. That bone was stolen from me. I had to rest and regroup. But as I curled into Titan, I found myself growing tired and...content.

Even if I didn't get the kill, I just wanted some relief—no more lies and darkness. I wanted to escape, slip away to the treehouse, and just be with Titan. As badly as he longed to know my story, I wanted to know his. Where did he get his

scars? What made him so strong that he formed a club and was willing to kill his father?

I almost drifted off to sleep on the car ride back to the mansion on campus. My mind didn't let my body fade completely into slumber because, then again, I didn't sleep deeply or for long. Would I ever be rid of these demons? I hung like a dead body swaying in the wind, caught in the fog of awareness and sleep. Sleep deprivation was another form of torture I became all too familiar with when I was in prison.

"What's the matter?" Titan whispered as he hugged me tighter into his side.

"Nothing." Just the memories of being tied to a chair. Every time I closed my eyes, loud music blasted. Water was thrown onto me to ensure I could not sleep. The chills in my body kept me awake as I shivered against the metal chair.

Titan bent down, "That's a lie, but I'll let it go this time. Sleep, babygirl. We'll discuss this later and your punishment for lying to me."

I licked my lips, wondering what sort of punishment Titan would dream up. As long as it involved his bed, I'd go willingly. Titan couldn't take away my demons, but he gave them chase. I kept my eyes closed, but sleep never came. The cars rolled to a stop, but no one exited. I could feel Titan's body grow rigid. His muscles flexed like a warrior grabbing his shield, ready to run into battle.

Something was wrong.

Titan spoke to me but didn't look my way. His eyes focused on his house. "I want you to stay in the car with Mila."

Yeah, like that was going to happen.

I narrowed my eyes and then looked in the direction that held him captive. Sitting on the third step of the campus mansion was no other than Anton. He was dressed casually, which was peculiar. Anton preferred his suits. He leaned back against one of the columns that gave the estate a government-like effect. A house of power, which it was. A cigarette hung

between his lips; a gun sat on his knee, clad in dark-washed jeans. A tight navy shirt wrapped around his hard body.

“If you want this,” I touched the tattoo on my ring finger, “to be lasting and real, then all the secrets stop now.”

Ghost didn't like that I threaten our war prize. She slipped out and took control. *Nova, I'm done. I am fucking tired. I want to see peace on the horizon. We get Titan, and we figure out who took Lucas from you.* Ghost ordered.

Look at Ghost wearing her big girl panties. I beamed, *I can agree with that. I want the same thing, Ghost. I want Titan King as much as I try to convince my mind to think the opposite.* Thinking and believing were two very different things. You believe in something you can't see or grasp but feel in your heart and mind. Thinking is just an assumption on the winds in your mind; Shifting and changing. When put to the test, belief always outlasts thoughts.

I believed Titan loved me, and he would burn down the world for me, and most of all, I believed nothing would come between my love for him. Hate took a lot of love to continue to grow. I hated Titan King as much as I loved him.

Titan interlaced our fingers, then lowered his lips to mine as he kissed me. It was different from other kisses. It was a kiss that bonded us fully, intertwined our lost souls, and damn us both to the hell fire's that our love and hate for one another fueled.

“Stay by my side,” Titan ordered.

Dash waited with Mila in the car as he slipped out his phone to call Damian. Titan and I exited, but Titan shielded me from Anton who stood from his seat on the steps. I walked side by side with Titan. He would have to learn the hard way that, as my hubby, he could not control me nor solely be the protector. If we were going to work, we had to be equal.

“Kukla,” Anton voiced through the cigarette hanging in his mouth.

My Prada boots came to a halt on the first step. Reaching into my front pocket I grabbed my cherry-flavored lipgloss

and swiped some on as Titan aimed his gun at Anton. “I thought you quit.” I eyed the cigarette as Anton snubbed it out under his black boots.

Anton shrugged, tucking the gun that had been on his knees behind his back. He wasn’t a fool and knew besides Titan’s gun aimed at him, at least a dozen more did the same. “Old habits die hard, Kukla.” Anton smiled then shifted his eyes to Titan. “My condolences new King.” Anton lowered his head. A gesture he never did for my uncle, his Pakhan, and his leader.

“I know, Anton,” I stepped closer, “you played me all along.”

Anton laughed. I balled my fist and punched him. He allowed it and didn’t move. The impact of his jaw hitting my knuckles didn’t satisfy me enough. “We are all being played, Kukla.” He twisted his head back towards me. Blood lined his upper lip where a small cut now marred his skin, “After all, we are all dolls,” he grinned, “and it is a doll’s purpose to play the role given to them.”

Titan stepped up and grabbed Anton by the collar. He pressed the barrel of his gun to Anton’s lips. Not the cleanest shot, and Titan knew it. If he chose to fire, there was a slight chance Anton would live—without his jaw. “How did you know my father died?”

Anton lifted his emerald eyes. His lips tugged up as much as they could with the gun pressed against them, “Because I’m the one who gave him the poison.”

Chapter 29



I knew Titan could move fast, even for his size, but even I was shocked at his speed. Within a blink of an eye Titan had flipped Anton, wrapped his elbow around Anton's neck, and wedged his knee into Anton's spine which caused his back to arch painfully back at a contoured angle. Maybe Titan did have superpowers?

If he did, did that make Titan the superhero or villain? Ghost asked.

The villain of course. The superhero catches your eye, but the villains hold it Ghost. They trap you and steal you and never let you go. Titan was just as much of a villain as I was. I confessed.

"Don't kill him," I calmly said. Anton's face reddened with a lack of oxygen, but I gave my old friend props. He didn't fight Titan's hold even though you could see the pain rippled down his arched spine. Anton accepted it. Like Lucas.

How peculiar...

Or, did he know Titan would not kill him because we need answers? Ghost thought, *Anton is more brilliant than we ever gave him credit for. The man values his life. He would not have shown his face if he knew Titan would kill him.*

Titan lessened his hold, and I fell for him even more.

What was better than killing Titan or being married to him?

Controlling him.

Like I just did.

Steps behind me alerted me to Dash joining the party, “Where’s Mila?” I questioned already knowing the answer. Dash and I might have made peace, but that didn’t mean he was always willing to throw me a bone. He didn’t answer but instead opened the door to their campus mansion. Before I followed I glanced at the car Mila was waiting, or trapped in, however you want to view it. Not only were the SUVs we drove in armored, but the car was surrounded by a dozen guards with more scattered around the property. The highly trained men popped up like moles. Just how many men did Titan lead?

Titan nudged his head for me to follow Dash inside. He wasn’t willing to let me out of his sight. Dash started to lead us down to the secret room in the basement. The room they held the brotherhood’s meetings in. With a palm placed on a scanner and his face close to the wall where a biometric scanner was located, Dash opened the door. I noticed an additional hinge on the inside of the door that caught my attention. “The door will automatically seal shut now,” Dash followed my eyes.

I patted his back, “Look at you, Dashy. You can learn from your mistakes.” *I hope you’re just as fast as a learner regarding Mila.*

“Can you learn from yours?” Dash goaded.

“Time shall tell,” I smiled. “You don’t want to start on my bad side when I rite my wrongs, though.”

“I agree,” Anton said from behind us, “My Kukla is a force to be reckoned with. I’m not even done molding her yet.” He joked with a husky laugh which was soon cut off when a grunt of pain followed. Titan had slammed the butt of

his gun on top of Anton's head but not hard enough to knock him out.

"She's not yours!" Titan roared. Those butterflies in my stomach started to flutter again. Seeing how possessive Titan was of me made the pulse between my legs beat to a new rhythm. His golden skin reddened as he hissed in Anton's ear, "Keep Nova's name out of your mouth. Keep thoughts about her out of your head." Anton's skin rippled under the pressure of the gun Titan was jamming into his temple. "You have no idea the monster, I, was *molded* to be."

Dash started to descend the stairs, and I followed, but I slowed a step behind until I was shoulder to shoulder with Titan, "I don't need you to defend me. I can defend myself." I didn't sneer it in anger but rather a gentle warning. Just because I agreed to play his game of hubby and wifey didn't mean I would turn into a damsel in distress.

Titan leaned closer to my ear so his whispered words would remain between us, "I know you can babygirl, but what you're failing to understand is that you don't have to defend yourself anymore." He kissed my cheek, "Let me be your shield, and I'll let you be my gun."

That was the most romantic thing anyone had ever said to me. Titan trusted me to have his back, and I would protect that fine ass. If anyone were going to stab him in his back it would be me.

Would be? Ghost repeated. She liked to continue to rub in the fact that I cared and no longer lusted to kill Titan. Ghost could be a snarky bitch when she wanted to.

I followed the men into the bowels of the mansion. Deeper into the hidden room. The basement was bare and lacked anything to warm up the atmosphere to make it cozy. An area rug and a few lamps would have done the room wonders. But this wasn't a standard room. It was a war room, and right now, we are about to use it to interrogate the enemy.

I glanced at the now black screens that worked as a giant Livestream when Titan met with his brotherhood. A long metal shelf in front of the screens acted as a desk where the

keyboards were neatly placed. Three sleek black chrome chairs were tucked under the desk. Titan would need to add a fourth chair now. A new head bitch was about to break up this band of brothers.

Along the opposite wall was a thick glass case filled with weapons. My feet started to lead me to it, like women attracted to a sparkly diamond. It was stocked with enough ammo to defend the house for weeks. Besides the guns were beautiful hand-crafted knives. My eyes caught onto a stunning Japanese tanto in black metal. I placed my hands against the glass and eyed it like a kid in a candy shop. Knives weren't my style, but I might change my tune with a weapon like that.

“Start talking,” Titan ordered.

I'll be back for you later, baby. I promised the tanto blade.

One of the three chairs now had Anton strapped down to it. His wrist and ankles were secured with a zip tie on each limb. Anton's shoulders were rolled back at a painful angle. The right side of his face already showed signs of bruising, and a small lump was forming just above his temple.

“Remind you of anything, Kukla?” Anton taunted, but then he addressed Titan, “Has she broke? Confessed what they did to her in that prison?”

Anton looked at me, “It wasn't my doing. I break my dolls differently, but—” Titan punched him in the jaw. One, two, three times. He swung back for a fourth hit, but Dash grabbed his arm,

“He wants you to kill him, so he doesn't have to talk.” Dash hissed as he shoved Titan back, “Get it the fuck together.” He ordered his cousin. Titan's shoulders heaved with heavy exhales of anguish and fury.

“You're going to be so wonderful, Kukla, now that you have found your match.” Anton continued. Dash stepped between Anton and me. For the first time, Dash was not only blocking me but trying to protect me.

I was good at pushing my emotions away. I had dug a trench so deep in my mind that I shoved them all into it and slipped on my mask.

We can talk about it later, Ghost added with sympathy.

I don't want to talk about it. I sneered.

I didn't want to relive my past. I needed to forge forward with my future.

Anton cursed and spat a mouth full of blood onto the concrete floor. "Your father would be proud to know you mourn him." Anton laughed as he twisted his head to look at Titan. "He thought you'd be happy, but I can see he was wrong."

Dash interjected now. He pulled out a knife I didn't notice was hidden under the belt of his cargo pants and stabbed Anton in the right leg.

"You see," Dash laughed, then he nudged the knife to the right, keeping the blade buried inside Anton's thigh, "Two inches to the right, and I'd cut your artery. It would be over far too fast." Dash dragged the knife painfully down, cutting deep. Anton couldn't hide the pain then as he thrashed and yelled.

"I'm on your fucking side!" Anton growled when Dash stopped his cutting.

I stepped closer till the tip of my Prada boots nudged his shoe, which was now coated in blood. I watched as the dark red blood started to cover his right leg, and then well...I slipped into an old nightmare.

"Is it warm or cold?" I asked as I fought too hard to wrangle the demons I casted down in the trenches of my mind. I ran my finger along his fresh cut. The blood ran hot under my fingers. "It was always so cold there." I pushed my finger into his wound. "Until it wasn't." Until the water boiled and blistered my skin for the guard's amusement.

"I didn't know about that, Kukla," Anton whispered. Knowing where my demons tried to take me.

“But you didn’t stop it.” I dug my finger deeper into his stab wound.

“Nova,” Titan said, his voice gentle. It was clear I was not here. A demon fought to possess me. This is what Titan wanted, wasn’t it? To see behind my mask. Would it be too dark even for him? “A lot of the guards in prison had particular desires they acted out.”

“No one was meant to touch you unless I approved it,” Anton confessed.

I tipped my head back and laughed. “Not everything was under your control.”

“What is she talking about?” Titan asked. His voice is full of concern.

“I took care of him myself,” Anton grunted as I pulled my finger out from his stab wound.

I cocked my head to the side, “Where’s the fun in that for me?”

“You’re stronger because of it.”

That wasn’t true. I still don’t take hot showers to this day. Unlike the other girls, who this guard could touch, I was off limits but not in every way. He found a different way to torture me.

Fight it, Nova, Ghost urged.

I closed my eyes and sunk my teeth into my lip. *There, there. Now isn’t the time.* Ghost applauded me.

I punched his stab wound, causing Anton to cry, “Start talking.” I crouched lower at his eye level, “Let’s start at the very beginning.”

Anton looked at me. His eyes softened to convey a silent apology I would not accept. The man was as twisted as me. He protected me and destroyed me all because Lucas King ordered it.

“The beginning?” Anton shook his head. “Let’s start where it matters, Kukla. I believe Lucas already filled you in

on how old The Rites of Passage is, am I correct?” Anton said through graded teeth. “The Rites of Passage are Gods amongst men; in the old days, they were the kings; in the current days, they are gods. Unlike kings who can only be in one place at a time, now they are everywhere. Technology has connected them. They have seeped into every aspect of everyday life. Nothing is hidden from them; nothing is untouchable.”

I rolled my eyes, “Yeah, they are some secret club, blah, blah, blah. How does some organization affect Titan and me?” Seriously did men have a hard-on for underground clubs? First, I stumble upon the brotherhood, and now this? How big did these men’s egos need to be inflated? Women didn’t have time for this bullshit; if we wanted something, we took it—no need to cloak and dagger our way through life.

“How do they affect you?” Anton beamed and cocked his head, “They affect Titan because they are Titan, and as his wife, you are now a part of them. You might want to pull a chair up, Nova, because what I was sent here to tell you isn’t the short version of this tale, my Kukla.”

Chapter 30



I didn't like how Anton looked at Nova and how he continued to look at her even after my threats. His eyes watched Nova's every inhale of breath, from how her eyes moved to the rise and fall of her chest. Anton looked up at her from his chained seat with pride, and if I didn't need him alive, I'd kill him ever so slowly. I'd call up Anders and ask for some pointers when it came to prolonged torture. Maybe I'd even follow in Anders footsteps and grab a battle ax to start with. I could feel the weight of my second gun burning a hole in my back.

Use me, come on, you know you want to. It tempted me. It took all my years of conditioning and control not to grab it and shoot Anton.

My breath became labored with rage. So much so that Dash nudged me with the heel of his shoe. His eyes sent me a warning. I didn't respond to Dash because I wasn't sure what I would do.

My wife was guarded and didn't get into details about her time in prison. But the way her eyes washed over now told me more than I needed to know. It looked like her soul had departed from her body. At that moment, I saw Elsa, a girl that was broken down into dust and then spat on.

I watched Anton's reaction. His anger mirrored mine. I couldn't figure Anton out; maybe I didn't need to before I killed him. He cared for Nova. I could see the regret on his face when she mentioned the guard now. I could see his delight when he confessed he killed the man. But at the same time, Anton was nothing but a pawn for my father. He was hired to break Nova. When did his teachings turn into affection, and just how far did that affection extend?

I turned and grabbed a chair and placed it in front of Anton about ten feet back. Far enough away that if Anton escaped, which he couldn't, but I didn't take chances, he could not lunge for Nova before I killed him. Gently, I touched Nova's lower back. Without looking at me, she came closer to my side. I guided her to the chair and sat her down. Then I stood guard next to my queen. Dash stood guard behind Anton with a gun pressed to his head. I took half a step forward. I was partially blocking her from Anton's view. The bastard was going to look *me* in the eye, not my wife.

"We can not choose the families we are born into Kukla. It is interesting both you and Titan have the blood of traitors running through you." Anton stated. Then his eyes shifted to me. He lowered his head, almost making me believe he was bowing before me. "Your father was a king in more ways than one. Lucas was a member of The Rites of Passage." Anton paused for a dramatic effect, "Your family has roots seeded in great power. Your father, Lucas, his father, and so on. Generation after generation, one ruling seat is passed to blood only. Seven ruling seats are passed to the firstborn no matter the sex." Anton stressed with a severe face.

"How progressive of you," Nova snorted, "And what about my father?" Nova's hands were curled into a fist, her knuckles blanching white. Leaning back in my chair, I reached out and took hold of her hand, forcing my fingers into her palm to protect her from breaking her skin.

"You wanted the beginning, so I can't skip ahead to your parents just yet. Patience Kukla." Anton cleared his throat and began, "Jules King." Anton stated with his green eyes trained on me. There was a mix of disdain and rage within him.

“My grandfather,” I asked. Anton nodded. I looked behind Anton to Dash, who shrugged as lost as I was.

Dash, Damian, and I knew very little about our grandfather. Besides the fact that I was gifted with his name as my middle name, my father never spoke much of his father, and the few times I asked my dad or my uncles they became enraged. I had never so much seen a picture of the man. Then again, my home never had family pictures on the walls or my father’s desk. It was like living in a cold hotel or cage. Father only confessed to me that an enemy killed my grandfather. He had it coming. Dad didn’t seem sad about the death, but I had sought to kill my father, so I figured the apple didn’t fall far from the thorny tree.

“Let’s start with the great United States,” Anton began, “You think every four to eight years the ruling power of the presidency is handed over? That a new ruler can control the vast wealth and power America holds?” Anton laughed, “Behind every major country is us, The Rites of Passage. We are the real power that rules. We *never* hand over power. When a new president comes into play, they learn of us. They accept that they are merely *our* puppet and either follow or are replaced.” Anton shrugged. I didn’t have to ask what a man like Anton meant when he referred to someone being replaced. You either followed, or you were dead. King Corporations lead with the same iron fist.

“Dictators, Queens, Kings, governments, parliaments. Everything is a puppet show to appease the little man who thinks he votes in power and has a voice. We, The Rites of Passage, are everything that makes the world go round and continue to evolve. Jules King and two other members ruled over north and south America.” Anton’s voice shifted to a less relaxed state as he continued, “One day Jules thought, to hell with the rest of the order, he didn’t want to be bound by his European mother, so he tried to kill her. If we learned anything from history, it’s the beginning of the end when you break up and separate a superpower. Each new ruler becomes engrossed in believing they can control their faction without help from the mother. A child without a mother can’t be nourished. They wilt and die. As you can imagine, the kings and queens of The

Rites of Passage could not allow this to happen. So we went to war. Jules controlled the Americans for five years until his son fell in love.” Anton sighed, “It’s always love that sparks war. Whether it is the love between a woman’s legs or the love of power and greed.”

“Who did Lucas fall in love with?” Nova asked.

Anton shook his head, “It wasn’t Lucas that fell in love. It was Marcus King.”

Chapter 31



Marcus.

Was my uncle the tipping point in this crazy story?

I looked to Dash, who was on the verge of pulling the trigger. Gone was his composed demeanor. Dash, Damian, and I hated our fathers, but our aunt Kate, Dash's mother, was the only pure light in our darkness. *Until Nova came back into my life, that is.* Kate was the one person who could tame us all and make us sit at a table together. My mind raced back to our last family dinner, the dinner where Kate confessed she had weeks to live. They kept her cancer a secret even to Dash. Secrets and lies built our empire. But she didn't have weeks after she stopped her cancer treatment. She wanted to spend her last days with the lot of us—a group of demons. Dash didn't speak for a long time after that. Instead, he found a new angel to try to save him.

Mila.

After Kate's passing, we never had a family dinner again. Now, all our fathers were dead. Dash, Damian, and I were the last of the King family name. *Until I have a child, that is.*

The idea of having a child with my wife, my determined, hellfire wife. It warmed my cold heart and added to my short

list of reasons to live. When all the dust and ash settled, I'd make that my number one goal.

"Kate's family was part of The Rites of Passage but they were on the wrong side," Anton cocked his head, "well Kate's family was technically on the right side, my side, the loyal side, but in Jules's eyes, Kate and her family were the enemies and your grandfather was dead set on killing every single member that opposed his rule. Your uncle Marcus loved Kate and convinced his brothers to turn on your grandfather. A knife in the back," Anton smiled, "Jules never saw it coming. Your heir kills you. The one you gave life takes life. It is the root of The Rites of Passage. The hardest trial to pass. Jules's end was the beginning of his family's freedom."

"Infinity," Nova whispered.

Anton nodded, "Our core symbol. Everything has a repercussion. History repeats. The end comes back to start a new beginning, a new set of trials, and rites, to be passed, and a new beginning marks a new end.

"So my father and uncles killed my grandfather, then what?" Dash asked from behind Anton.

"Then order and balance had to be brought to The Rites of Passage again. Your fathers were stripped of their ruling power as punishment for their father's betrayal. They were still allowed to maintain a voice on the council. They agreed to the consequences only if The Rites of Passage allowed their heirs to have their original seats of the ruling power." Anton grinned through bloody teeth, "So a new rite began, one all your fathers passed, except Marcus, who was taken out before he could commit to his trial. The sins of the father were not bestowed unto their sons as long as the fathers made the ultimate sacrifice. If power had not corrupted them as it did their father, then your fathers would have no problem giving up their power to their sons. Thus, the poison."

I tipped my head back and laughed, the sound echoed off the metal walls. When I stopped, I looked to Dash, who continued to watch Anton in a daze. Did he believe any of this shit? "You want me to believe *my* father, Lucas King?"

What..." I threw my hands up, "took poison so I could have his ruling seat?"

Anton leveled me a stare, "Facts are facts, boy."

"And lies are lies." I hissed. "I don't believe a word you are saying." I cocked my gun and stepped toward Anton. Nova's hand stretched out and grabbed mine. I looked at her. She widened her eyes and parted her lips in a plea to continue to listen to Anton's lies.

I turned to Dash. "You do not believe this!"

Dash licked his lips. It was a gesture to tell me he was concerned and worried, "My father left me a letter. I found it in his desk when I went through his belongings after his murder."

I staggered back. I felt like I was the one who had been stabbed. He kept this from Damian and me and chose to reveal it now! We looked weak and not united in front of Anton and his new group, The Rites of Passage.

Dash looked down, ashamed. He should be. "I thought it was all lies, a bunch of madness from a mad man."

I stepped forward till I was chest to chest with him, "You endangered us all." I growled in his ear.

"I was going to tell you. I just needed to get my facts straight."

"It's too late. You fucked up." I pulled at the collar of my shirt. What else was going to come our way? I felt like a barbarian that wanted to scream a battle cry and hit my chest. *Come at me! I can take it.*

Dash tipped his head up and eyed me. "And you didn't? Tell me, brother, when did you find out about Nova? Why trust Damian and not me?"

"Don't tell me your feelings are hurt?" I goaded, but I was ashamed of myself for having lied to him. I ran my tongue over my teeth. We could not fall apart now. Secrets caused cracks in our walls, but they didn't reach our foundation. "You were handling Mila. I was waiting—"

“Till you gathered intel? Yeah,” He hit my chest, “we are the same.” No truer words had been spoken today. Dash, Damian, and I suffered together and trained together. We were molded from boys to beasts. We all had the same thought process.

I nodded, and that was that. Too bad getting Nova to end an argument wasn't as easy. “You want to believe him?” I whispered so only Dash could hear.

“We don't have an option. Too many things are checking out.”

Dash was right. I couldn't shoot the messenger before he delivered us everything we needed to hear.

“Anton is a lot of things, Titan, but I believe what he is saying is true,” Nova confessed.

Facing Anton again, I watched as a small puddle of blood started to form around his leg. Walking to the medical cabinet, I grabbed a piece of gauze, and then, with no tender touch, I tied it over the stab wound. He grunted. “Continue,” I ordered. Standing, I walked back to Nova, who sat back in the chair and eyed Anton. What was she thinking? I wished I knew at the moment. Did she feel betrayed by the man who claimed to watch her back?

“You and your cousins endured extended trials and tribulations to appease the other kings and queens in power. They had to make sure you would be loyal.”

“That doesn't answer any questions, Anton.” I sneered, “If my father and uncles were welcomed back, then who killed my uncle Marcus? Why did you give my father poison? Why did he give up his power now? How does Nova get folded into this story?”

“Just because we won the war didn't mean we killed all the snakes in a fell swoop. That is why I am here. The Rites of Passage has a very lush garden that draws predators to our watering hole. We must always be vigilant.” There was a spark of glitter in Anton's eyes. He relished in knowing more than we did. “You all will have to stand and fight as a front. At this

very moment, other soldiers like myself are with your brothers. They will be given a choice like you. Accept or die. Let's see by the end of the day if all your brothers will stand. My bet is against Anders." Anton laughed.

Dash moved first as he locked his arm around Anton's neck, cutting off his air, "You mention my brothers again, and I will skin you alive." He seethed.

Anton tried to laugh through his choke hold, "I-If we wanted..." he struggled to say. Dash loosed his grip to let the snake talk. Anton coughed and gasped for air, "I-If we wanted you dead, you would be." Anton spat, "That is not your fate in life. Nothing in your life has been by coincidence. Every heir is put through tests, a series of rites, trials, to bond them." Anton smiled then, it was piss full of knowledge and I didn't like it. "And didn't you boys bond?" Anton raised a brow as his arrogance grew.

"The brotherhood," Anton stated, "I think you need a better name. You can be more creative than that. A brotherhood set on taking over control. Power is in your DNA. You're lucky the rulers didn't see your ideology as treacherous like Jules King. They believed your little band of brothers would only strengthen you."

Dash looked at me as I stood back and straightened. I nodded as Dash pulled out his phone to alert our brothers.

"Anton," Nova leaned forward, resting her elbows on her thighs, "I've been very patient. I've listened to a madman once today, and now, you're asking me to listen to you. We are not friends. You helped me as much as you broke me. There is no olive branch that grows between us. There is a beautiful blade behind you that I've been admiring," she nudged her head to the weapons cabinet and licked her lips, "you know knives are not my style, but I mind as well stick to them since Dash already stabbed you. You know what I'm capable of. You've got one minute to get to the point before that blade starts to cut your flesh."

Her long black hair fell to her left side. She was a vision, a dark angel that fell from heaven and now was let loose to

roam. Elsa would never have survived my world, but Nova could conquer it.

That was why my father did what he did. It sickened me as much as I came to understand his reasoning. I disagreed with it and if I could bring him back only to kill him again I would. At this moment, I knew that whatever came our way, Nova would be strong enough to stand by my side. We'd fight a bloody battle and stand victorious.

My queen.

My wife.

“Franco Fontaine.” Anton paused, waiting for a reaction. He got one. Why he was throwing a name like Franco Fontaine into this ridiculous story was beyond me, but with a reputation as ruthless as Franco's, it made me pause and wonder. I took the bait, and Anton continued.

“Aww, so you have heard of Franco or his family name at least.”

“Of course, I've heard of the Fontaine's,” I spat.

Nova glanced at me for answers, but Anton continued, “Franco Fontaine is God of Canada and Alaska. Isn't that right, Titan? Your father never could unseat the Fontaines. Didn't you ever wonder why a man like Lucas King never even tried?”

“We have enough power,” I stated.

“Power feeds on power. It is a taste that can never be quenched or filled.”

“What does Franco have to do with this?” Dash probed.

“Franco is the leader of the biggest organized crime family in the world; his great grandmother was one of the rulers, a Queen, who followed Jules King. She was killed, but her son remained alive and escaped to the untamed land of Alaska, where their company controlled the oil field, netting them billions. Franco Fontaine is the reason why your father gladly swallowed the poison. Franco is your final test.”

Chapter 32



In front of me was a page with about a thousand dots staining it. I was racing, trying to make sense and connect the dots. Anton wasn't telling a story, he was telling the big bang of life as Titan, and I knew it. I had no choice but to grab hold and listen. I always knew Anton had something up his sleeve. I thought it was simply him seeking power and control over the Stepanov Bratva, but now, I saw his secrets lead to something much deeper. I'd sort the shit out later, but amid battle, I had to remain focused, something Dash and Titan were struggling to do. They needed to learn to push everything down and slip a mask on. Maybe they needed to try on a pair of Prada boots. Their little squabbles showed a weakness in their bond. It made the brotherhood look weak. I shouldn't care, but if I was going to be a part of this brotherhood, then I needed to make damn sure my hubby and his men looked strong and unstoppable. Never show your enemy your weakness. It's where they will aim. Anton now knew they kept secrets from one another. No Bueno. I'd sort that shit out as soon as we were alone.

Jealousy filled my mind when Titan reacted with such rage when his brotherhood was threatened. Did Titan love his club more than me? When I finally met the rest of these men,

would I become as brainwashed as Titan and swallow down the kool-aid?

Probably not.

But having a more powerful ally was always good. I was committed to Titan now and I had to protect him. I had to understand the man he was today, not the boy I once knew. Titan was mind, body, and soul devoted to his brothers, so I had to be.

Anton continued, forcing me to stop thinking and just listen. “Franco was raised with one mission. Hunt down and kill the members of The Rites of Passage. He is well fortified and protected with technologies you can only dream of. Franco is elusive, and we’ve had no opportunities to take him out. He was the one who sent a sniper to take out Marcus. Franco Fontaine is the reason your fathers took the poison. Their time was up. This is a young king’s battle now. The start of a new era. Before each King or Queen turns sixty, they must hand over power. It is the law, and we do not break our commandments. Your final test is to prove loyalty. Everything your fathers have trained you for will be tested.”

“And what if we don’t want to join your organization?” Dash threatened. His biceps flexed in his tight shirt. Dash looked seriously attractive with his icy hair and darker shadow on his jawline. I could see why Mila fumbled her words around him. Where Titan was my golden God, Dash was a nordic devil with icy blonde hair, a darker beard, a clash of heaven and hell, beauty and poison, all wrapped into a body of muscle trained to hunt and kill.

Anton bellowed a chuckle, “Firstly, Titan will be the ruler of your family since he is the eldest; secondly, you have no choice, son. Your fathers made the hardest sacrifice a father and ruler can make. Give up their life for their sons, and step down without a fight. Lucas gladly took the poison so you, his only son and heir, could enter your final trial. Titan King, as the eldest son of Lucas King, who was the eldest son of Jules King, it is you who is handed the ruling seat of power. Your cousins, Dash and Damian, will be your advisors. Titan, you will be the leader of your family once,” Anton paused long as

he stressed, “you, along with the other rising young princes, have completed your final tasks. Your task Titan King is to kill Franco Fontaine.”

“You want me to kill Franco.” Titan growled, “There’s a reason why my father and uncles left the land to the north alone.”

“Yes,” Anton hissed, “because it is *your* final test. Do you want to be handed more power? Then you must prove your worth. Your life has been planned. Your brotherhood has been planned. You all have been groomed like stallions. You will kill Franco or kneel to him as he kills the ones you love.” Anton fought to lean forward in his chair, straining against his bonds, “Are you willing to let Franco kill my Kukla?” Titan lost it. His fist pounded into Anton. Dash and I watched for a moment as the beating continued. Anton had asked for it too many times. I wasn’t his.

I was Titans.

I looked to Dash, “He’ll kill him.”

Dash nodded. What a turn of events, Dash and I agreed, Lucas was dead and not by my hands, and now some birthright Titan had to fulfill.

Not even close to how I thought April 1st would end.

When the chair Anton was tied to tipped over. Titan swung his leg back to continue, but Dash grabbed Titan by his shoulders. With expert movement, Dash applied pressure to a pressure point which caused Titan to flinch and halt his aggression.

“You don’t ever mention her name again!” Titan roared. I wasn’t sure Anton could hear him as he struggled to remain conscious. “Do you understand!”

Anton coughed, “W-what about y-you boy,” blood poured from Anton’s mouth as he spoke to Dash now. His nose was broken and angled to the left side of his face. “Mila Michelson,” Anton uttered.

I shook my head, knowing I was going to have to intervene and get my Prada boots dirty. What was Anton up

to? Did Anton want to die a painful death? First Titan and now Dash. Then it hit me.

A test.

Anton's continuous goading of Titan and Dash was a test from The Rites of Passage.

I pushed off my chair and stepped between Anton and Dash. Dash, at that moment, let his demon out. The hungry devil that was going to rip flesh from bone, then extract his victim's soul and take it to the deepest part of hell. I wasn't scared but cautious as I angled in front of him.

In Dash's eyes was a potent darkness. I felt it tug at the tips of my toes, begging my feet to walk closer to it.

I'd seen evil men, had been raised by them and even killed terrible men—those men I could handle. I thought I could handle Dash, but I was mistaken. I had come across men like Dash in my travels. Those types of men you didn't want to have glance your way. You didn't want them to hunt you because they would never stop. Men like Dash were predators that let the prey think they got away. The prey relaxed in the artificial freedom only to be killed slowly; their eyes gapped open at the paradise they would never get to taste.

"I need him alive." But did I? I already knew my truth. I was nothing but a doll for Lucas King to gift to his son. My father picked the wrong side. "I want to know if Anton knows who killed my parents. Lucas said he wasn't responsible for their murder. I deserve to know who was."

I could see the blood lust in Dash's eyes. His black pupils dilated as he honed in on Anton. Dash wasn't about to let this go. He was going to kill Anton, so I had to betray Mila at this very moment. I needed to know what part my father played in this. I'd worry about our friendship later.

I was selfish.

With psychopathic tendencies. You will betray others to benefit yourself. Ghost added.

That just makes me unique. It's the unicorns of this world that people long for Ghost.

“Mila is going to run if you don’t change.” I threw my curve ball.

The demon in Dash scented fresh blood as he pivoted his head towards me. Dash inched a step closer to me. My mind screamed danger, but I held my ground.

“I know.” He confessed. The left side of his mouth tipped up.

My glossy lips parted. I realized Dash wanted her to run. Dash wanted to show Mila there was no escaping him. Last I checked, Blaze was still alive. Which was shocking and odd. Dash was overly possessive of Mila. Poor Blaze was going to have a painful end in sight. Did Dash want to catch Blaze helping Mila? Maybe he planned on killing Blaze in front of her to teach her a lesson.

Turning, I crouched down and eyed the man who watched my back as best as he claimed he could. Gone were his handsome features, now covered in blood. “Tell me about my father. Who’s side did he pick? Who killed him?” I pleaded.

“Your father was loyal to his last breath.” Anton’s voice was weak and sounded distant. My time for answers was about to end before he gave into his darkness.

“Loyal to who?”

“Loyal to himself. His blood. At first, he tried to play both sides, but the coin must land Nova. He had to pick a side in the end. He just picked the wrong side. Blood isn’t always the safer choice. By the time I was recruited, you were already in Igor’s claws.”

“Igor. My uncle betrayed my father?”

Anton’s eyes started to fade. I pulled the knife from my boot and cut Anton’s bonds. His body slumped to the floor. “I was given orders. I’m sorry, my Kukla, sorry I allowed you to be fed lies and to allow them to fuel you. I tried to protect you the best I could, but in order to protect you, I had to break you. I had to force you to evolve into something stronger. Lucas saw you as the perfect object to mold for his son, and mold you, I did.” His voice was merely a whisper now. His eyes

fought to stay open. I couldn't see the whites of his eyes anymore. Bending on my knees, I lowered my face closer to his bloody lips to hear him, but I was too late. Anton was alive and breathing, but he had taken too many hits and lost too much blood to remain to talking tonight.

I lost again...

Patience wasn't a virtue. Patience was a form of torture.

I balled my fist, sinking my nails into the palm of my hand. Pressing my lips together, I closed my eyes and remained calm. How was it that I kept getting the short end of the stick? I didn't get to kill Lucas, and I didn't get to find out who killed my parents!

"Babygirl." Titan's voice lost its usual deepness.

"Don't." I continued to be robbed.

"We'll get your answers," Titan added.

"When! Because you and Dash got many answers, I got nothing."

Nothing. It was how I felt.

"I've got a doctor on the way," Dash added with a gentle voice I didn't know he could possess.

I bit the inside of my cheek. I needed pain. I needed to let it consume me, to make me numb.

Unclenching my fist, I splayed my palms out on the floor covered in Anton's blood. Warm red covered my hands.

Red was all I saw.

I'd never escape it.

"Nova," Titan cautioned. Was he warning me or the monster inside of me?

"The Rites of Passage." I spread the blood with my palm as I painted the floor. I drew a giant question mark with the blood using my index finger. Who was the enemy I should focus my anger at?

Anton said my father chose his blood. His blood betrayed him.

Igor.

My uncle had something to do with my father's death. But Igor's dead now.

Franco Fontaine killed Lucas, Ghost answered. And he wants to kill Titan too.

I giggled. "You're always so wise, aren't you, Ghost? Always fucking chirping in my ear." I smacked my fingers together like the beak of a bird, "Chirp, chirp, chirp."

"Nova," I felt Titan's hands on my back, "come back to me."

I did the opposite.

As he pulled me up, I snapped. My fist swung, hitting its target. My legs kicked, landing where I aimed. I was pulled back by foreign hands. An arm wrapped around my neck, choking off some of my air and trying to stop my fight.

Titan came forward as Dash held me. I bucked my head back, trying to hit Dash. When that didn't work, I lifted both my legs to throw off his balance but Dash was too strong to be affected.

"She doesn't stop chirping about you. She never cared about them, only for you. She wants me to let her win. She wants you. But what about what I want? I want justice for my parents and to keep you safe."

"I am safe, Nova. Come back to me, babygirl." Titan pleaded.

He grabbed my face. The look of pain in his eyes was unbearable. It poured water on my rage and broke the damn that held back all my emotions. Ghost and I were free. Our waters spilled as they mixed.

"Who am I, Titan?" I cried. "Who am I fighting now?"

I trusted the boy that killed me.

I forgave him and accepted marriage to him. I didn't fight the bond our souls shared. I became a King. The name I sought to destroy.

I became the enemy I considered evil.

“My life was a joke; I was a joke. I was a doll passed around and played with. I talked to a dead girl in my head. I was a pawn that was played with, made to be broken and twisted, so I'd be the perfect wife for you. I want to be with the man that I thought killed my parents but he didn't. The man I married is just as fucked as me. I don't know who the enemy is because his face keeps changing.”

“Come back to me,” Titan pressed. His warm palms cradled my face.

I continued, “The Rites of Passage wants the man I loved. Franco Fontaine wants the man I love dead.”

“I'm right here, babygirl.” Titan continued to try and ground me. “You're my wife,” Titan growled with a force that stalled my crazy conviction.

I slacked in Dash's hold. Dash's arms slipped free only to be replaced by Titan, who grabbed me and pressed me into his chest. I could hear the thunder of his beating heart. He held me so tight it felt like a straight jacket. It was what I needed; after all, I was losing it.

“I'll figure everything out, babygirl. I promise you.”

“When are you going to give up on me?” I murmured against his shirt, which was cool from sweat.

There was only so much crazy a man could take, only so much I could take. Titan tipped my chin up and smiled. It calmed the storm inside of me. Titan was my lighthouse and I now saw the path I needed to take to escape the storm. I saw safety ahead of the choppy waters.

“Never,” he beamed. “If someone is after you, they are after me. If you hurt, I hurt. I love you. My love is everlasting. I love every version of you I see. No matter how far you fall, I'll dive after you head first and save you.”

His blue eyes shifted to a lighter tone as they searched mine. “I love you too, Titan King.”

And I did. I might be lost at times, but one thing was for sure. The connection that boy and girl formed in that treehouse stood the test of time. Our love was never dying. It was tested. But we’d always find a way to love each other again.

They better watch out if anything threatened the peace Titan and I had.

As Titan guided my ship back to safe waters, I looked at my new horizon with certainty. I knew exactly what needed to be done.

Hello, there.

We haven’t met before.

I’m Nova, Nova King. If you thought Nova Baladan was scary, you haven’t seen anything yet. Nova King is all your childhood nightmares merged into one sexy body, with glossy red lips and a closet filled with combat boots. Nova King is ready to lurk in the night. I’ll hide under your bed, and just when you think you are safe to sleep, I’ll come out to play.

Who is my first target to play with? Well, that’s easy—the man that took from me, the man that has threaten my new family.

Franco Fontaine.

You better watch out, baby, because I’m coming, and I’ve got two other girls in my head who have more than enough crazy and pent-up vengeance that needs to be unleashed.

Chapter 33



“Is she ok?” Damian asked with genuine concern. After returning, we filled him in and scheduled an emergency meeting with the brotherhood. A discussion Nova was not going to attend. There was only so much she could handle, and I knew she was cracking when she smeared around Anton’s blood.

“She’s totally fucked in the head.” Dash tried to make light of the situation. His eyes met mine, “But it’s nothing Titan can’t handle. We’re here for you, brother.”

“I know,” I wearily admitted.

Nova was anything but alright. I couldn’t blame her break, either. She had one mission in life, and she failed. All the broken girl wanted was answers, but she continued to be denied even the simplest of needs. As my wife, I wanted to give her the world and mark my words; I would. I’d do whatever I needed to give her closure. If that meant playing the game, The Rites of Passage wanted me to play, I’d played for her.

I tucked Nova into our bed. As I closed the door, worried eroded my stomach when Nova didn’t object. Dash, Damian, and I went back down to the basement, which had been clean of Anton’s blood. We sat and talked with our brothers who,

like Anton promised, also had been met with a messenger from The Rites of Passage.

Some of these messengers were lucky. Like Anton, they were allowed to continue to breathe. Others, like the man sent to Anders and Leo, weren't so fortunate.

"So that's it." Cillian stated, "They have contacted every one of us. They gave us a task and expected us to comply with it. Aye, I say fuck them all." Cillian said more to himself than the rest of us. The fighter in him was ready to go to battle.

Leo eyed Dante before he answered, "They knew all our plans. They reached us all without us knowing they were coming. I don't know anyone who could accomplish that. If we don't comply, they will start to attack. They will start with our weaknesses. I'm not going to sacrifice my sister. I suggest we play along until we get to the bottom of this."

"Where is your sister now?" Anders questioned. A vein in his neck pulsed. I had long suspected that Anders and Leo's sister had some past.

Leo eyed Anders with a dark hooded glare. It was a silent challenge to question him further. Those two were constantly at odds. A constant dick-measuring contest we never had the time for, "My sister is none of your concern." Leo grinned, knowing he had control over something Anders showed interest in. Leo's sister had been MIA for the past three years. Only Leo knew where her location was.

Anders laughed, but he didn't think Leo's response was funny. I knew as soon as we left our meeting, Anders would use his resources to get his answer.

Each of us had been given a task to complete to ascend to our ruling throne. Tempting if we wanted power. But they offered something we already had. My father was dead, and now my cousins and I had complete control over King Corporations. Did we need The Rites of Passage?

"I'm with Cillian," Anders said as he raised his small ax. No longer shiny and clean, it was covered in dried blood.

I ran my fingers through my hair and right on cue, “Bloody hell, you can’t even clean the thing.” Cillian hissed. Cillian was a big man, even compared to me. He spent all his free time in the boxing ring at a gym he owned. You’d never know he was a billionaire by the looks of him. But the burly giant was a clean freak. You walked into that gym and could not escape the smell of bleach. His penthouse was the same. So clean you could perform surgery on any surface. In Initiation 101, Cillian took the role of a maid. Anders and Leo loved to dig under his skin. In a fight, they’d aim their shots so the spray of blood would rain down on Cillian. I laughed at the memory if it.

Dante showed a rare smile and shook his head. “Anders,” he said. Dante and Anders were like blood brothers. Dante was the sounding voice that could corral the madness that consumed Anders. Anders beamed, then he kissed the blade, pressing the dried blood to his lips. Cillian cursed and stood as he started to pace in and out of the screen. We all laughed as he rubbed his hands on his jeans. Itching to take a shower after seeing how unafraid of germs Anders was.

It was times like this that I cherished my brothers. Even in the middle of the shit storm, we could find a way to laugh.

“What if we play their game instead?” Dante suggested.

“If we play the game, that means they control us. Wasn’t the purpose of the brotherhood so that we all stood together so no one could control us?” Cillian rebutted.

I knew what Dante was suggesting; like my brothers and me, we’d never roll over and die, nor would we shake in our boots because some stranger confessed a story that we were born into positions of power, “We play along to find out more.” I stated as I looked up to the screen Dante was on.

“Exactly.” Dante grinned.

“I’ve been playing others games my whole life. Now you want me to be a puppet for someone else?” Anders spewed. Anders was always the hardest to reign in. I didn’t blame him, we all had hellish childhoods, but at least my father boasted about me, his son and heir, in public. Anders’s father was a

different story, and he publicly referred to Anders as his bastard.

I went through hell, no doubt, but Anders went through years of purgatory that involved torture. Under all his tattoos were the scars his father marked him with. If you got close enough to look beyond the ink, you'd see a mess of pain that made my hardened heart feel. Nothing had been off the table, from burning to cutting to even a gunshot here and there. Anders had endured it all.

Dante leaned forward, closer to the camera, "We need to play smart, Anders."

Anders raised a brow. His blonde hair was so long he had it tied back into a bun. Only he could pull off such a look. The feminine hair juxtaposed all his muscles and tattoos, "Or we go in guns a blazing."

"We're up against a power we don't know," Damian voiced, "What we do know is they seem to know a shit ton about us. I agree with Dante. We play their game and see where the game board leads us." Damian agreed.

"Let's put it to a vote," Dante suggested. "All in favor of playing the game?"

"Fuck it, Aye," Cillian said.

Leo was next, "I agree."

Anders scoffed. "Fine, I'll play, but I'm making my own rules."

Dante grinned, "I agree."

All eyes looked to me and my cousins, Dash and Damian, nodded. I looked into the camera lens, "Let's play, brothers."

Chapter 34



By the time I entered my room, it was the following morning. I expected Nova to be in bed. Instead, I found her in the bathroom, sitting on my counter. Legs crossed in a meditative stance as her eyes looked lifelessly into her reflection. Her long black hair was hanging loose around her face. Under her grey eyes were dark circles, and the whites of her eyes were stained red. “Were you crying?” I stalked forward with concern. Nova didn’t answer but remained unconscious, looking in the mirror. Hesitantly, I outreached my hand and touched her hip, “babygirl?”

“I don’t cry.” She sneered as she lied. She had an emotional breakdown in the basement. She wanted to cause pain, even if that meant hurting herself. When Dash held her, I grabbed her soul and dragged her back to me.

“It’s ok to feel, babygirl. The emotions are motivation, and they can give us strength and make us stronger.”

She fought an inner battle. She often did. It was like she was having a private conversation inside her mind, one she never wanted to share with the outside world.

“I feel like a pawn in a game of God versus God,” she spoke. Her voice was merely a whisper. “Everything I thought I knew was a lie. I was being played and didn’t even know I

was on the game board, Titan.” Her eyes remained locked on her own reflection in the mirror. I stepped closer, hugging her from behind. She finally moved and reached up to grab a lock of her raven hair, “What is real Ti? I had a purpose,” She looked back to her black hair. I knew she was referring to her goal to kill me. “This,” she twisted the black hair around her fingers until it fell loose, “was who I was now. Nova, not Elsa. Not the weak girl who died with her parents. I had a mission, and then you altered my trajectory. You stole my heart when I meant to kill yours.” Finally, her eyes left as she looked into mine through the mirror, “You’re all I have now.” Her grey eyes darkened, and I didn’t like what I saw. It was dangerous and reckless, “I’m not going to let anyone take you from me.”

Those words shouldn’t be coming from her mouth; they should be pouring out from mine. I grabbed her by the neck and forced her to look at our reflection. “You’re mine to protect.” I was losing her again. “We are husband and wife.” I lowered my head and kissed her neck. Fuck this! I scooped her up from the counter and carried her to my bed. Gently, I sat her on the edge as I undressed her. I started with her boots which she loved. Then her pants and shirt until I unclasped her lace bra. I kissed each nipple until they grew hard under my tongue. I wanted Nova to feel but could not bear to see her hurt. I would take away all the confusion, lies, and pain.

I kissed her neck, feeling her body heat under my touch. I scooted her back till she rested in the middle of the bed. She was perfection, laying on my bed naked and waiting for me. As I crawled over her, she attacked. Nova surrendered at that moment. I knew any sliver of anger she held against me had been dismantled. I won, but so did she; she would be my queen, and I’d be her shield.

I cupped her face as she wrapped her legs painfully around me. Her heat pressed into my hardness. She shifted up and down, side to side, until I started to push in. “No matter what stands in our way, babygirl, we’re all a team now. We fight side by side, and we cover each other’s backs. I will bow only to you, Nova King.” I loved the sound of her new name, King. She was mine.

Nova kissed me as she raised her hips, allowing me to sink fully inside her. “Fuck,” I hissed. She was so perfect, like a drug. I could never get enough of being inside of her. As tender as I tried to be, it could not last. A primal beast within me took over, thrusting into her deep until she fell apart, clawing, marking, and crying out my name.

I pushed into her one more time before we both came together. She took everything from me. My body wanted to collapse. I rolled over, pulling her onto me, so I didn’t crush her under my weight. My hands slipped down her naked back, which was now covered with the dusting of sweat. “I love you,” I’d repeat this a hundred times a day until she believed me. Until she stopped running and hiding in the dark corners of her mind.

I never wanted to see her hands painted in blood. That lifeless look that had stained her eyes would haunt me. My wife needed stability and safety; she needed a place to drop her walls and recover. I was determined to be her safe place. I was going to make her addicted to my touch.

Nova King, my wife, and love. I’d protect her with everything in my arsenal. If that meant playing the game, The Rites of Passage wanted me to play, I would. If I had to burn down the world, I’d find a spark big enough to ignite it. And, if I needed to join The Rites of Passage to keep her safe by my side, then so be it. There was no limit on what I’d do to protect my wife.

Chapter 35



The grand finale or the beginning to the end, or is it the end to the beginning? The Rites of Passage should be proud I remembered their tagline. There was only one thing left to do, for me, that is. I had to put on my big girl panties and protect what was mine.

Don't do anything stupid, Ghost urged me.

Is saving the one you love stupid, Ghost? She didn't answer. Deep down, there was only one option, and Ghost knew it.

The smell of burning pan scramble filled the kitchen. Once again, I tried making pancakes, only to get impatient and frustrated. I took the spatula and scrambled them into one giant mess of pancakes. Then I started to experiment, so I cracked a dozen eggs into the massive frying pan and continued to mix it all.

I walked to the fridge and pondered over what else to add. I grabbed a bag of sliced cheddar cheese and eyed the cream cheese.

"I think you should leave the condiments to us," Damian suggested as he entered the room. He was right. Keeping hold of both, I kicked the fridge door closed and placed them on the

large round kitchen table. Damian walked over to the coffee pot and poured a glass. The freshly ground coffee from the local shop smelt divine. Speaking of divine creatures, was it my lot in life to be surrounded by men so stunning?

No one compares to Titan, Ghost purred.

Naturally, I agreed, but I would be lying if I said the King men had made a deal with the devil when it came to the genetic lottery.

Damian was wearing only sweatpants that hung very loosely. A small dark line of hair also made my eyes trail lower. When lust filled my mind, I longed for Titan. Titan was too beautiful to die or be tarnished by this Franco Fontaine. I, on the other hand, wasn't. I was already marked with scars and fucked in the head, so why not risk a few more?

Damian rounded the table, his chest full of tattoos. Like him, the ink wasn't colorful. It was black and clean with no flare of embellishments. Damian was stunning with the perfect bone structure, thick black hair, and a body like Titan's. Whoever caught his eye would be lucky or unlucky. Damian was a double edge sword, beauty, and the beast. He kept his beast controlled and hidden, but a monster can only be caged for so long before it wants to sneak out and play.

"I think it's burning," Damian said as he cocked a brow.

Chatter and more footsteps rounded the corner as I dumped it pan scramble and eggs into the largest mixing bowl I could find. I placed a mountain of the concoction in the middle of the table. "Bon a petite." I grinned, feeling impressed that I didn't burn the entire dish like last time.

Little did they know, this was the last supper. I looked around the table, and for the first time since my parents died, I felt like I had found my place again. I had a family, and I was going to protect them. Dash pulled Mila's chair close as he dropped his arms over her shoulders. Her cheeks were flushed, and her lips swollen. They had sex this morning.

Titan pulled out my chair, and I sank into it. He was freshly showered, and his scent overtook the brunt pan

scramble. My mouth watered for him. Forget the food. Titan King could be all the nourishment I needed. “What cologne are you wearing?” I asked him as I forked some of the food onto my plate.

“I’m not wearing cologne,”

I leaned closer to him, “Liar,” I beamed as I smelt ocean musk and citrus notes.

“I use a body wash; that’s it, babygirl.”

Body wash.

That’s where I went wrong. All this time and hundreds of dollars later, I was buying the incorrect item.

“I can change it if—”

“No,” I eyed him. My eyes dared him to finish the sentence. Titan ran his tongue over his teeth and gave me a come fuck me look. I didn’t think he was an exhibitionist as we sat around the table with his family. The idea was tempting.

Stay on task Nova King. I told myself.

I had him last night, and that might be the last time. If I let myself be lured by him again, I’d never leave his bed. I was a powerful, badass woman, but I struggled to separate myself from Titan. No wonder Mila failed so often when it came to her and Dash. She never stood a chance and was easy prey for his deadly looks.

I looked to Mila, who was shoving pieces of my breakfast around her plate.

I feel bad for betraying her, Ghost confessed.

I do too, but my hands are bound. Damned if I do, killed if I don’t.

We all sat around the table like one big bizarre family. Titan picked around the pancake and targeted the eggs, as did Dash. Mila, well, she didn’t eat much because whatever she was planning was twisting her stomach. I, on the other hand, ate two plates. If you added enough syrup, anything tasted

good. By the time I was finished, my plate had become a soup of maple syrup.

“Well, Damian seemed to like my pan scramble. How about you, Mila?” I joked, knowing Mila was still too sweet to hurt my feelings. Her eyes blinked as she glanced at Dash, who suppressed a smile. “It’s interesting.” She eyed a large amount of syrup on my plate. She would have preferred I ate organic syrup.

“Interesting?” I started with a cold tone. Deep down, I wasn’t upset about her answer. It was just my nature to cause a fuss and upset the peaceful balance. What I was burdened over was having to leave my new family.

Mila tried to swallow another fork bite. “It’s um...” she struggled to say something nice about the breakfast.

Dash intercepted, “It tastes like shit. But since you made it,” He looked at Titan and held his hand up in a pleading, “and we’re all a family now,” Dash stressed, “we will suffer together to eat whatever the fuck this is.”

Maybe you should make cooking a new obsession, Ghost joked.

That’s not a bad idea. I like your thinking, Ghost.

Titan cleared his throat with a growl. His blue eyes pierced Dash as they shared an unspoken message. Dash rolled his eyes, picked up the fork, swallowed a bit down, then looked at me and plastered on a, fuck you smile.

I upped my dramatics. My hand went to my heart as I fanned shock and excitement, “That might be the sweetest thing you’ve ever said to me, Dashy.” I looked to Damian, who had cleared his plate free of my *shit*, “Are you suggesting Damian likes to eat shit?” I joked.

Dash snorted, and then the whole table broke out into laughter. I paused and watched them all. At this moment, we were normal young adults without a care about the future. But moments don’t last long. Soon the somber air would come rolling in like a thundercloud.

Titan slipped his hand under the table and grabbed my thigh. I looked over; he was entirely at ease. He picked up his cup of coffee and sipped it slowly as his thumb drew small circles over my jean-covered legs. Last night, Titan made love to me more times than I remembered. I lost track after the fifth time. We barely slept. We both kept stirring to ensure we were in each other's arms. It amazed me how the mind could make excuses and turn them into fuel. I had gone from trying to convince myself that I hated Titan to seeking out his touch and agreeing to be his wife. Now, I was determined to protect him no matter what the cost.

After we finished, Dash ordered Mila to wait in the car for him. I could see the disdain on her face as two guards escorted her to the armored vehicle.

“She can handle more than you give her credit for,” I said to Dash as my eyes followed Mila.

He leveled his eyes to mine, and his blonde hair fell loose on his forehead, hiding some of its furrowed anger, “I, of all people, know Mila can handle a lot. It's not a question of what she can handle, Nova.”

“Then what is the question? Mila is a flower, rare and beautiful. You've placed her inside without any sun, Dash. If you keep at it, she will wilt and weather.”

Damian leaned against the wall, crossed his arms, and observed Dash. So Damian agreed with me. Titan slipped his hand on my lower back, “Not all of us can cope with the darkness in this world. Dash knows what Mila can handle.” Titan intervened, bending down as he kissed the top of my head. There was that hint of something that happened to Mila again. I could see the anger and frustration in her abstract paintings. As much as Mila had opened up to me, she still left her past with Dash a big secret.

Dash pushed his chair in and ran a hand through his blonde hair, pushing it back off his forehead, “You want Nova to be a part of our brotherhood now,” He glanced at Titan, who nodded. “Being a part of us means we don't tear each other down. We watch all our backs, Nova.” Dash stressed.

I stepped forward and out of Titan's touch, "I am watching your back. I'm warning you, not threatening." I placed my palms on the table as I leaned forward, "Mila can handle shit. All the secrets you hide from her push her away and turn her into a new person you might not like."

Titan grabbed me from behind, "That's enough, you too. You're worst than Anders and Leo."

"God help us all," Damian snorted.

"Who are they?"

"Anders is a fucking lunatic that carries around an ax. He stabbed Titan with it once. Leo is like a bear coming out of hibernation and always grumpy and hungry."

I eyed Titan, "Anders stabbed you?" Why did that knowledge make me want to grab an ax and teach this Anders a lesson?

Titan shrugged as if it was nothing. He touched his shoulder where the thicker raised scar I came to know was placed. "It was a bet gone wrong."

I licked my lips, wishing I had some of my flavored lipgloss on. I'd hold onto that knowledge for later. Facing Dash again, I gave the best apology I could muster, "I'm not trying to pick a fight. I mean what I said, Dash." I stressed his name, hoping he'd realize that I was trying to be serious by not using his nickname.

Dash looked long at me as if trying to break into my inner thoughts. He finally gave up and exited the house. Titan turned me to him, "Do you know something?"

Well, that's sticky ground now, Nova, Ghost goaded.

Technically I don't know what Mila is planning. Did I give her a push and shove? Yes, Ghost, I did. But the baby bird flew out of the nest, and where she lands or turns for help is out of my hands. Plus, I told Dash straight up that she was going to run.

"I already told Dash she was going to run." I wasn't going to reveal more. Maybe Dash didn't know everything he

was pretending to know.

“What else?”

I shrugged, but I felt a need to confess to Titan. I didn't like that feeling. “I encouraged Mila,” I admitted. “Plus,” I raised a brow in question, “If Dash knows she is running, why are you asking me this? Unless Dashy doesn't know it all?”

Titan narrowed his baby blues, “Encouraged her to do what?”

I bit my lip, wishing we were alone. From the corner of my eye, I could still see Damian leaning on the wall, fully listening to us. Ignoring Damian I focus on Titan. His eyes danced with mine as I shamelessly undressed him with my mind. He looked delectable, his biceps barely restrained in his tight navy shirt. The material looked offensive and was begging to be ripped off. His golden hair fell like fields of untouched wheat shining in the sun. Titan was a creature poets would have written about; he was the model and mold that renaissance artists glorified.

And he is ours. Ghost beamed.

Titan lowered his head, “Keep looking at me like that, babygirl, and I'll take you right here.” Titan ran his nose along my jaw and pressed his full lips to mine. I leaned forward to kiss him, but he pulled away. “I can protect you from many people,” he stressed. His eyes searched mine, “I don't *want* to have to protect you from my brother.”

“What exactly does Dash know?” I probed.

“I'm not falling for that, Nova. You know better than to think I'll reveal his hand.”

I dropped my guard, “I don't know Mila's plan. I know she is going to run. We all know that. Look at her. She'd been fed up, defeated. Dash's love has smothered her when it should have made her stronger.”

“He's trying to protect her,” Titan stated.

“From who?”

Titan clenched his jaw, “You don’t know what she’s been through. Dash wants to make sure she is never in that situation again.”

There was a motion near the kitchen door as the doctor keeping Anton alive entered the room, “He’ll be awake soon.” An older man with black-rimmed glasses, grey hair, and green scrubs informed Titan.

The three of us headed to the room Anton was being held in. As Titan spoke with the doctor, Damian inched closer to me. “I know what you are doing?”

“You seem to think that a lot.”

“You don’t want Mila to suffer like you.” Damian crossed his arms and watched me.

“No one can be like me,” I sneered, “I broke the mold.”

“There’s a little psycho in you. You’re a narcissist. Sometimes you lack empathy, you have a few OCDs I’ve seen, but I’m sure there’s a lot more tucked into that crazy head of yours. You are impulsive to the point of stupid. Amazingly, you have managed to stay alive.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“You feel too much to give into your darkness. It’s why you made little mistakes that tipped Titan off. Deep down, you never wanted to kill him. You were begging for him to save you.” Damian grinned as he continued, “You might just be the strongest woman I have ever met, Nova. The brotherhood is lucky to have you. But we can’t change people, and not everyone is reborn stronger. Some of us aren’t reborn. We just die. We turn into ash and those ashes spread like dust in the wind. The dust scatters until all traces of who we once were have disappeared.”

I could see the pain etched in his eyes. I wondered about his story and how he became the man standing before me.

“I’ve tried too many times to tell Dash that he would slowly kill Mila. His love is deadly. I never tried your approach because Mila is like a sister to Titan and I. Like Dash, we want to protect her. You, on the other hand, are

willing to sacrifice her to get her to grow. It's a smart approach. The last one to take."

Mila wasn't the only one I was willing to sacrifice. Damian didn't know I was planning on sacrificing myself. "I'm a very wise woman." I grinned. But it was another mask covering what I truly felt.

If I died. No more Ghost or Nova.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, dead as a doornail.

I'd miss them all. I'd miss my banter with Dash, my deep conversations with Damian. My friendship and tutelage with Mila and, most of all, Titan. The only man who could silence all the voices in my head.

Chapter 36



I wasn't sure what to expect when I turned the doorknob and entered Anton's room. I closed the book on who I was and why I was used as a pawn. It would take time for me to come to terms with that. I had to make sure my King was going to be safe now. I was going to protect Titan with everything I had.

The door opened with a slight creak, a haunting prelude to what Anton might confess. I wore my Louis Vuitton boots because I needed the boost of optimism for today. Once again, Prada was for kicking ass, Fendi for deceiving, Versace...I glanced at Titan and licked a taste of my lemon lipgloss. Versace was for when I wanted to get laid.

It's not the time for that now; Ghost said as she splashed a mental bucket of cold water on my head.

When I stepped into the room, the bed was empty. I looked over my shoulder at Titan. He narrowed his eyes and grabbed the gun from behind his back. In a swift movement, he reached his arm out and tucked me behind him. As Titan covered my front, Damian covered the rear. The doctor noted Anton was gone, and a look of fear paled over his older face.

Chaos broke out as Titan and Damian started shouting orders. I sidestepped Titan and walked to the empty bed. On

top of the wrinkled bedsheet was a plain piece of paper. I picked it up and felt the thick cardstock between my fingers.

Kulka,

In case you all were second-guessing The Rites of Passage's power, allow me to let my escape be a fine example. As I said, we are everywhere. We protect those who work for us. Therefore we could not allow you to kill the messenger.

Fret not.

I won't allow you to suffer any longer. You don't need to be broken anymore. You have become a queen, but a queen must have a good rule, or she will be struck down. Only after Titan completes his task will he be able to protect you. We will come for you next if he fails to commit to his final rite. We will take any link that the brotherhood loves. All the men have been warned.

The clock is ticking.

Consider this my parting gift. Lucas King did not kill your parents. As I said, your father chose blood. Igor betrayed his brother out of jealousy. He reached out to our enemy, who gave the final order to kill your father. If you want justice, then help your husband because Franco Fontaine set your parents up, but Igor knew their death was coming and gave no warning. Igor was a man always desperate for more power, no matter what side he was on.

Before your father stepped down as Pakhan, he was beloved and respected by his men. Igor was not. But having you, the actual boss's daughter, by his side silenced the men. You can hate Lucas but remember, Lucas paid to have you protected all these years. He wanted his son to have what he never had—a strong woman by his side.

The book of your past life is now closed, Kukla. If you keep going back to reread it, it will swallow you whole. You'll no longer be a queen but a puppet. Take my advice. Close the book, burn the book and move on. Help Titan with his final mission. Forget the past and write your future.

Until we meet again, my doll...

-Anton

Chapter 37



“Every single one of them?” Dash asked.

“Yes, every messenger that remained alive has vanished,” I repeated.

The Rites of Passage’s messengers managed to escape from our elite security teams. All video feeds were remotely wiped, which meant The Rites of Passage could hack into *all* of our systems. We found five of our soldiers drugged, not killed. The rest of the men never saw a thing. Whoever extracted Anton from our armored walls was beyond skilled.

“The Rites of Passage,” I paused as I hated to admit what I was about to, “we need them. If they have this kind of power.” I shook my head.

Our security system used encryption that the public didn’t even know existed. If The Rites of Passage could hack into our encrypted walls and take over some of our systems, then their power was on a different magnitude I couldn’t begin to fathom yet. A good ruler knew when to break bread with a powerful ally.

“What about Anders?” Dash questioned, “He killed his messenger.”

Damian nodded, “His note was a warning. They are going to take something he cares about.”

Dash rubbed his jaw. “Tomorrow is Mila’s graduation. I want it to be normal for her. After that, we go to war. We take out Fontaine and then...” Dash looked to me.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I wasn’t the leader. We all ruled together regardless of what The Rites of Passage believed.

Dash grunted and shook his head, “Because you are our leader whether you want it or not. The weight of being firstborn to the King empire. The Rites of Passage said you had a ruling seat.”

“We’re just your bitches,” Damian grinned.

“You both have talked about this?” I eyed them both.

“Yeah. Damian will be the bottom sandwich, and I’ll be on top in our little triangle.” Dash joked.

“Fuck you,” Damian punched him hard in the shoulder.

“I’m not making decisions alone. You’re my blood, my brothers in more ways than one. The Rites of Passage will have to realize that. We walk together; we rule together. If they can’t agree, then,” I paused.

“Then what?” Damian probed.

“Then we go to war.”

It was a war I didn’t want to fight. I didn’t see The Rites of Passage weapons vault, but I got a glimpse. I couldn’t risk my cousins, brothers, or my wife. I needed to break bread with The Rites of Passage. Play along.

We all agreed that Mila deserved a typical college experience after what happened to her. Part of that was tomorrow. Technically it was all our graduation, but only Mila would be walking. After that, I would begin my hunt.

Franco Fontaine was a dead man.

Chapter 38



It's a sea of blood.

A red sea flowed in the wind from the intense air conditioner overhead. Red drifts with every motion of the crowd. The color of the caps and gowns was a joke or a prelude to what most students will be—a path of blood to their thrones of power. The school must know this, thus the color. It isn't a deep wine red or maroon. It is arterial blood red. The type of shade that spews out when you hit an artery and only have minutes to live.

Titan squeezed my hand, "You ok?" He whispered next to me.

I nodded, but it was a lie.

Even though we all were graduating from Empire University, Mila was the only one walking, which was fine because I didn't want to be trapped in the color of my sins. Plus, that shapeless gown was something, not even a top model could pull off. I didn't want to hide my curves, thus my skin-tight navy blue dress. It matched Titan's blue suit.

Not long after Titan, Dash, Damian, and I took our seats, Titan ditched the suit jacket and rolled up his sleeves just

above his elbow. His golden muscles had my mouth salivating. Why did we have to sit through this parade?

I looked over at Dash, who was looking towards the front aisle where Mila was seated. The blood-red gown swallowed her whole. You could only see a hint of her honey-brown hair sticking out from behind. Dash looked at Mila with so much pride. Would Titan ever look at me like that?

I felt another set of eyes on me as Damian peered down at me. I was boxed in between Titan and him. I rolled my eyes. I had to be cautious around Damian. He could sniff my treachery like a dog on the trail of blood. Did he know about the conversation I had with Mila when we arrived? I doubted it.

I pretended to apply flavored lipgloss on Mila well the men talked fifteen feet away from us.

“Dash knows you were planning on running,” I let it slip. In the end, we bitches had to have each other’s back. Yeah, so I was incredibly impulsive. I made a decision only to change my mind a second later.

I stayed awake during the night thinking about my plan and how I betrayed Mila. That didn’t mean I was going to cross Dash, either. I was merely going to drop a breadcrumb and help both sides.

“I know,” Mila said with a sly grin.

I finished applying the gloss on her doll-like pouty lips. “What are you up to?”

“I took a page from your handbook. I left little clues and saved emails with booked plane tickets. Didn’t delete my browser history.”

“You’re playing the player.” I dipped the wand into the gloss and then applied the caramel apple flavor to my lips.

Mila nodded and swallowed a heavy gulp. She glanced at Dash with a longing in her eyes. She was struggling, but determination in her stance told me she was going through with it all.

“Mila,” I began as I placed the gloss back in my clutch. “There is a lot of shit about to go down. Don’t trust anyone. Whatever plans Blaze helped you with,” I glanced over at the men who were still talking to the guards, “betray him. Don’t trust anyone but yourself.”

Mila chewed her inner cheek, “I’ll be safe.”

“You know I’m here for you if you need me.” I didn’t tell her that I might not be around forever. My time was coming to an end.

“Thank you for everything, Nova. I didn’t think I had the strength until I met you.”

I narrowed my eyes. This was her goodbye. Mila was planning on running today. Using the chaos of the graduation wasn’t a bad idea.

“There’s a lot of security,” I stated.

“I know what I’m doing.” She looked to her right, “Thanks for the gloss,” She changed the subject as the men started to walk our way.

“You seem uneasy,” Damian questioned.

“Do a round,” he said as he looked me in the eye. But he wasn’t ordering me, rather the almost invisible grain of rice in his ear that connected him to his security.

I licked my lips, “I am. There’s a lot of security here. That and,” I exhaled, seeing only the red again, “I like red but not this shade.”

“I didn’t think you’d be one who fainted at the sight of blood,” Damian probed.

“I’m not,” I hissed. “Unlike you, sick fuck,” I grinned, “I don’t prefer knives. Too messy. Guns are a one-and-done. In and out.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself.” Titan bent down and kissed my cheek. It was such a small gesture packed with tenderness. “Thank you, hubby,” I narrowed my eyes on Damian, who held my stare.

The ceremony dragged on. We were an hour in and had yet to reach the M's for Mila Michelson. "This is purgatory," I murmured. I pulled out my gloss and licked the wand. "I'm starving."

Titan grabbed the gloss from me, "That shit is full of chemicals."

"Not you, too," I groaned.

"Mila told me about this bad habit. We're going to work on it later."

I suppressed a smile, "And how are we going to fix it?"

Titan kissed my neck, taking time to suck hard on the spot that made the pulse between my legs tremble, "I'll get you addicted to a different taste." His eyes glimmered with mischief.

"Can you, too, shut the hell up," Damian grunted. He pulled out his phone. I straightened myself and tried to calm the beast inside. I peered over Damian's shoulder and noticed he was looking at a photo of a girl. It was too far for me to make out her features, but she was surrounded by what appeared to be bookshelves. He caught me looking and tucked his phone away without saying anything. I pitied the woman who captured Damian's heart. He may be a poet at times, but his darkness outweighed everything.

"Mila Michelson," The man on stage called. Like a united front, we all stood and started to clap. As Mila walked across the stage, I smiled wide at Titan. He did view Mila as his sister. Damian had the same look. Another man four aisles over stood as well.

Greg Michelson. Lawyer to the underworld. I hoped he come. I needed to have a word with him in private. Greg stood and clapped with affection. His love was all a lie. The man bartered his daughter so his reputation could grow.

Looking at Dash, my clapping halted at the smile on his face. It was a look that was rare and hauntingly stunning. Damn all the angels to hell; Dash loved Mila with all his soul. It showed in every ounce of light that was being cast off him at

this moment. Dash shouted Mila's name, and my heart began to beat with new pain. If Mila was able to pull this off, it was going to shock Dash to his core. He underestimated Mila's strength. My little troubled artist just might pull off her biggest show yet. All the stars were aligning because what the boys didn't know was I was planning my escape now as well. Mila's disappearance would provide me with the perfect amount of distractions to be able to slip away from Titan and save him.

Chapter 39



The world was burning. The only question was, would the flames reach us? Would the fire blister our flesh and turn us into dust? I wasn't sure I'd ever find out.

In grand fashion, Mila had mysteriously slipped away. Lost in the crowd as the caps were tossed in the air. A room was filled with guards employed not just by the Kings but by other powerful families as well. They were all made fools of that day.

To make matters worst, Mila wasn't the only one who vanished. Over two dozen women from the most influential wealthy families somehow slipped away. Not one guard noticed. This wasn't just Mila's doing. Whoever helped her had vast resources.

Rumor had it, half of the girls had arranged marriages—something familiar in our world—right after they graduated. Their escape was an extraordinary revolt against the pigs who raised them and thought they could trade them for money or things more dangerous.

When I mentioned the world was burning, I meant it. Fights erupted all around the graduation when the girls could not be located. Families started to accuse other families. Guns

were raised, and threats were made. It was a fantastic sight to see. And for once, I had no hand in the chaos.

By the time I arrived at the mansion, Dash had vanished, and frankly, I didn't want to see him. I'd be the first person he pointed the finger at. Our alliance was still weak and yet to be tested through thick and thin. Titan didn't want to let me out of his sight as we all convened in the war room. Titan and Damian were on the computer, hacking into the security feed.

It was the perfect time to make my move. I slowly backed away and tipped my toes up the stairs. The addition to the door that would seal it shut was about to work in my favor. I pressed the open button, and the door slid open. The new hinge was a hydraulic system, and the door would automatically close shut with one well placed bullet. Titan and Damian would be locked inside until a team could open the solid, bulletproof door. It would take hours.

I gave one more glance over my shoulder. Titan stood but was hunched over a keyboard as he checked screen after screen of Empire University. The satellite images gave him a view others rarely could see. His white dress shirt was wrinkled as it strained over his broad shoulders. His blonde hair raked messy from his hand. It was a nervous tick that relaxed him.

"I love you, baby," I whispered as I pulled out a piece of paper. I placed it on the top stair and then took out my gun.

* * *

Two weeks later...

When I had planned to kill Titan, I knew I had to get close to him. I studied the man he was and what type of woman would attract him. I picked him apart. I knew where he liked to frequent and the path's he took to his classes. I knew it was exactly 3 miles from his house to my dorm. A short twenty-minute drive from his campus mansion leads to one of the King's private airfields. I knew Damian had his pilot's license, so they could make a faster getaway if he were with Titan. I had gathered as much intel as possible even if, in the end, I wanted to be caught by him.

Yeah, I admit it. I skipped over the small details because I wanted Titan to remember me. If Titan didn't forget me, then I never really died.

Franco Fontaine was a different beast. My intel gathering didn't need to involve an extraction plan because I didn't have enough time to plan one, and deep down, I didn't think I'd be walking out alive. I only cared about keeping Titan safe. Franco was a true sociopath. I had studied him for two weeks now. During that time, I witnessed him kill three of his guards in broad daylight in the middle of the town!

Everyone in the small town just outside of Montreal looked the other way. *Seriously, they turned their heads and kept walking!* His public killing wasn't shocking to them. I already knew Franco had a hunger for power and to dominate The Rites of Passage. He was a ruthless killer in the pursuit of his goals. One could argue he was gaining ground. He did, after all, kill Dash's father. He tipped the scales and pressured Lucas to take the poison now and not in another two years when Lucas would have turned sixty and was forced to hand power over to Titan. Franco was going to be even more confident since he had managed to kill two of the King men.

During my second week of stalking, I noted how precise Franco was. He was like a poster model for perfection. He had a superficial charm that bent women and men to his will. He'd walk into a restaurant, and the crowds would part in both fear and excitement. He wore the finest suits that melted and wrapped around his sleek frame like butter. He was skinner than any of the King men. His movements were graceful, like a ballerina performing on stage. He cared about what others thought about him and how they perceived him.

Yet like all over confident men, there was an Achilles heel. I spotted it within the first two days. Franco put himself in harm's way by venturing into the small town. The surrounding buildings were too short for a sniper to perch on. Which meant the kill had to be point blank. A tricky shot with all his security, but still, you'd think The Rites of Passage would have tried. Unless they wanted Titan to make the ultimate sacrifice...

Did they want my husband to kill Franco by sacrificing himself? It was the only option I could see now.

The only way to kill Franco would have been in the town. Twenty miles north was his compound; once you were back behind his walls, you'd never breach them. The twenty acres of land were surrounded by drone surveillance 24/7. That didn't include the eye in the sky. The company known as SSC, Space Satellite Corporation, was owned by Franco. Three years ago, he spent 20 billion dollars building his satellite and putting it into orbit. That was next-level shit. Did King Corporations have a personal satellite? They certainly had the money to do so. Like all men who loved to show off their toys, I'd make sure Titan bought me a giant eye in the sky to play with if I made it out of this.

Taking down Franco meant only one thing...

I don't know, Nova, Ghost whispered. Fear trembled through her lips.

Well, I do, I sneered. *And since you have no say in the matter, you've got no choice but to come along for the ride, Ghost.*

It just might very well be our last hoo-raw.

Chapter 40



DAMIAN

Dante eyed me, and I shook my head. Our brothers all flew in to assist us, which meant they pressed pause on the rites they were ordered to pass. Technically we were never given a time limit from The Rites of Passage. Whether that was a good bad detail was still in question.

After Nova jarred the door, it took our men four hours to remove the massive door and free us. It was an error we would fix. Within your walls, you feel safe, and sometimes you think you are so safe you let small details slip. Once all the storms passed, we agreed to have our brothers walkthrough of our homes. Fresh eyes would help solve slip-ups like this.

Titan had not slept more than an hour at a time, nor did he let anyone read the letter Nova left him. He was glued to the computer as he scanned through screen after screen. He had sectioned off three entire divisions at King Corporations, now devoted to our needs. One worked on finding Nova; the other searched for Mila and the last was trying to locate Dash. These were not small teams either. The men and women working in each division headed our black site programs. They were the top when it came to covert operations. We recruited people from governments all over the world. We offered the same high they got from government work, but with much better benefits and protection. However, our teams were struggling,

no thanks to The Rites of Passage, who created roadblocks in our search. Some of our intel was wiped well other sources had vanished.

The latest we knew about Nova was that she took her bike and stopped along the way a few times for gas, paying with cash, but we could track her movement through satellite images. That is until she reached a secluded patch of wood in Pennsylvania. The trees acted as a perfect cover our satellites couldn't penetrate. We covered all the road exits, but she never appeared. Forty miles west was a strange clearing surrounded by trees. When we zoomed in closer, we discovered it was a small airfield. Only a small Cessna could land on its short runway. Currently, our team was combing through flight records, but when we came up empty, I knew whoever piloted the plane was working under the radar. The aircraft and runway were most likely used to smuggle drugs—another dead end. In time we would find Nova. It was just going to take time. Time I didn't think Titan would be able to digest.

Not only did I fear for Titan, but Dash was MIA, and unlike Nova, Dash had the training and resources to vanish if he ultimately wanted to. I didn't know what was happening between The Rites of Passage and the mysterious vanishings from Empire University.

At least Titan had the sense to allow me to stay with him so I could help. He'd bark out orders, grunt and snap. He even slugged me in the jaw twice already. I'd rather him take his anger out on me than someone else. I could handle his rage. The rest of the world couldn't.

“And Dash?” Dante whispered.

A consistent raking of metal against stone hummed in the background. Anders sat in the corner meditatively as he polished the blade of his ax with a smooth stone he always carried in his pocket. When he first did this during our time at Initiation 101, it pissed me off. Like nails on a chalkboard. Eventually, the scraping sound became rhythmic, like a lullaby that calmed me, just as it settled him.

“I have no fucking idea.” I grunted, “Dash has the resources to vanish. Nova doesn’t.”

Or did she?

“Maybe they are working together?” Dante suggested.

It wasn’t a terrible suggestion, but I knew that wasn’t the case. “No.”

“Do you think The Rites of Passage is working with Nova?”

“Don’t ask Titan that.” I hissed. I already did, and he just about broke my jaw. “I think Nova had safeguards in place when she first came here. Safe-houses and connections. I believe she tapped into them when shit hit the fan.”

Cillian had joined our conversation. “Why now? Why not turn to Titan for help.”

What would I do in this situation?

Like me, Nova had a hard time admitting she cared for people, but she’d protect those who did capture her heart just as I protected my brothers and Isabella.

“She’s trying to protect Titan, all of us,” I could see it in her eyes during the terrible breakfast she continued to cook for us. As she watched us, I studied her. There was a somber look in her eyes when she smiled. She looked at the table as a whole as if she was taking a picture of it in her mind. A memory she wanted to capture before she committed herself to a kamikaze mission.

“Protect us from The Rites of Passage?” Cillian asked.

“No.” My phone started to ring, “Maybe. I’m not sure yet.” I shrugged as I pulled my phone out. I stepped away from my brothers and climbed the stairs. An unknown number flashed on the screen for a FaceTime call. Once I was free from all the commotion downstairs, I answered. The screen opened to a beautiful woman with sleek platinum blonde hair framing her face.

“What the fuck!” I hissed as I looked at Nova through the screen. “Where are you? Do you have any idea what you are

doing to Titan!” I raised my finger, “I told you if you hurt him, I would kill you.” I growled. I pulled back my anger, so I didn’t crush the phone in my hands.

She rolled her big grey eyes. That’s it. I was going to strangle the woman. I’d bend space and time, reach through this phone and deal with her. “Will you calm down? Gosh, so dramatic.”

“I’m dramatic!” I turned and started to head towards the basement.

“Stop!” Her eyes looked around the room. She knew where I was going. “You should have called Titan.” Why was she calling me, and what was up with the change of hair again? This woman was too much even for me.

“I need a favor. Go someplace we can talk in private.”

I must have lost my damn mind. I turned my back on my brothers and slipped into the butler’s pantry down the hall towards the kitchen. “You better tell me you were kidnapped and held for ransom.”

Nova laughed, “As if someone could kidnap me.”

“This isn’t a joke. Do you know what monster Titan has become since you ran from him?” Pain flashed in her steel eyes. Finally, her mask slipped.

“I’m doing this for him,” she licked her full lips, which were coated in a pink gloss, “for all of us. So shut the fuck up and listen. I don’t have much time.”

I looked behind her. She was walking down a street and then fumbled for keys as she got into a car. It was dark out, which eliminated a few places around the world. In the far corner of the screen was a parking sign in French.

Nova was in France.

I should have known. Nova was fluent in French and spent some of her childhood there. But no...that couldn’t be right. It would be late afternoon there now.

I pocketed this knowledge for later.

“I love him, Damian.” She started the car. The engine sounded spotty. “Love makes you do crazy things.” She laughed. Her lip tugged up as she got lost in thought, “Trust me. I know,” she tapped the side of her head, “she knows too.” I heard Nova refer to herself in the third person, and a voice inside her head she called by a different name. I had voices in my head too, but unlike Nova, I controlled them. I shut them up and killed them when I needed to.

The screen shook as she placed her phone into a cup holder and started driving. “There’s too much going on, Damian. Too many guns aimed at us. I’m part of the family now, right?” She asked, but she didn’t let me answer, “That means I have to make sacrifices too; I have to pull my weight.”

I shook my head, “You’re going to do something *foolish*. Do you think Titan is bad now? I know you do because you didn’t even bother to ask me how he was doing. Imagine how much worse he will be if you get killed.” I pinched the bridge of my nose, “Tell. Me. Where. You. Are.” I demanded.

Nova smiled to herself. The grin wasn’t happy or bitchy; it was a smile one gave when they were at peace. “I’m about to take two guns off our radar.” She shrugged and straightened her shoulders, “Well, hopefully.” She looked down at the Piaget watch she always wore. I told Titan to bug it. I told him to track her movements! He should have listened to me. I had bugs placed all over Isabella just in case she tried to move without my knowledge again.

“I’m going to confront Franco, and thus—”

“Nova!” I shouted, “You have no idea—”

“You have no idea what you’re doing.” Nova mimicked me in a deep male voice. Something a child would do. “I know what I’m doing. I will hand myself over to Franco, and when the timing is right, I will kill him. Two birds, one stone, a fabulous pair of Prada boots, and a well-done job. Franco will die, and The Rites of Passage won’t threaten Titan anymore. I don’t see the problem here.”

Holy fuck, she was delusional, “Then why are you calling me and not Titan?”

She bit her lip and exhaled. Then I watched her push away any emotions before my eyes and slip on the mask I knew. It was a scary ability. To see someone who could feel, simply turn it off. Even the highest trained soldiers struggled with that ability.

“You’re annoying me.” Her words turned cold, “Anyway, I’ve got to get going. I called because I need,” she struggled to gulp as she paused, “I just need you to look after Titan. If all doesn’t end well.” She waved her hand. She spoke fast, trying to push her struggles away.

A creak of wood sounded outside the door right before it opened. I expected to see Titan ready to flay me alive. Instead, Dante slipped in. Nova had no idea another joined her goodbye call. Dante put his index finger to his lip, telling me he would remain quiet.

I tried a different approach, “Nova King. Your last name is *King*. That means we all fight together. Right now, you’re turning your back on the family you’re about to die to protect. Just give me a few hours to get to you. This isn’t the right way —”

“It’s the only way, Damian. Deep down, you understand that. Dash is too busy with Mila missing. If I don’t make it out, I just need to know Titan is cared for. And I expect you to be a good little nurse. I’ll be watching even when I’m gone. There’s plenty of ghosts in my head, and they will haunt your ass if you betray me.”

She shouldn’t worry about Titan but rather anyone in his way because my cousin would lose his mind. He almost did when he thought he was responsible for killing her. I resisted the urge to look at Dante. He had to physically hold Titan back from one too many attempts to go solo on a mission that would have killed him. I promised myself that I’d never fall in love with anyone. If madness was the result, no woman in the world was worth it. Now I have my Isabella, and I’m eating crow.

“I’ve got to go. I’ll take your silence as a yes.”

“Nova, please,”

She looked at the screen and grinned, then she raddled off and addressed so fast I almost missed it. Thankfully Dante pulled out his phone, and if I knew my brother, he was assembling a team as she spoke. “I’ll try to get back to my little hideaway if I can. But if I can’t, then just,” she looked away, “Tell Titan I love him, and I have no regrets.” The call went dead before I could respond.

“Why did she call you?” Dante questioned.

“Because,” I exhaled and looked at the phone that burned in my hand, “I was able to pry behind her deepest mask. She’s going to try and kill Franco to save Titan.”

Like Nova, I’d gladly turn my life over if it meant I’d save my family. We were too much alike. That’s why she called me. Titan would fight to his dying breath to save us all. He would fire away without thinking. On the other hand, Nova and I would lay down our arms, cease fire, and hand ourselves over if it meant our family would be saved.

Chapter 41



The phone burned in my hand, so I had to discard it. I tossed it out the window. I had a short drive out of town towards Franco's compound.

Aren't we going to talk about this? Ghost pleaded.

Nope. I was done talking. Talks did nothing. Actions did.

I flicked back my long blond hair, which was back to its natural color. I styled it to hang in loose waves down my back. Dying my hair to its natural color should have taken a month if I wanted to play it safe. But I didn't have time to be safe. Hell, I didn't even have an exit plan. I was just going to wing it.

Wing it? Ghost provoked.

Yep. Big girl panties are on, and I will get out alive.

I didn't believe that, but I had to fake it till I made it.

As I drove through the small town, my hands grew clammy on the old steering wheel. The leather was cracked and peeling, but then again, the shitty car only cost me a thousand bucks. I didn't need it to be reliable. I just needed to get close enough to that compound.

Inhaling to calm my nerves, I was thankful for my extra strength deodorant. When facing death, I didn't want to smell.

I had never been so nervous in my life. My palms were clammy; my pits were sweating—even a drop of sweat beaded on my brow.

Just as I was about to exit the small town and start up the winding roads through thick woods to Franco's compound, a shadow leaped out in the middle of the road. I slammed on the brakes, not sure they could handle stopping so suddenly. They screeched to a halt, but the shadow wasn't there. Shit, did I hit someone before I even started my kill mission? With my guard up, I exited the car and saw a large body lying down in front of the vehicle.

"You've got to be shitting me!" I hissed.

Laying on the road, smiling like a cheshire cat, was none other than Anton. He laughed out loud, then pushed himself up and stood with a smile at his little game. He brushed his coat off and then lifted his still bruised face to look into my eyes, "Hello, Kukla."

* * *

Anton was like a fucking tick that clung to me and sucked my blood when he needed to. The only way to remove a tick was to burn it off or pull it from its head.

Ok, Nova, even I have to admit, The Rites of Passage is like an all-knowing God. Ghost murmured with uneasiness.

I shove at his chest, "What the hell, Anton!"

I looked around, but it was just him. I half expected men to appear out of thin air.

"Surprised," Anton joked.

"Don't Kukla me," I raised a finger. I breathed in and out to calm my shock, "How did you know I was here?"

"We have our ways."

"Cryptic bullshit."

Anton was dressed in a black turtle neck and a matching jacket. He faded into the night with ease. I adjusted my black

sweater that was fitted loose to my body, unlike the femme fatal clothes I usually wore.

Using the back of my hand, I wipe the sweat off my forehead, “I’m busy and don’t have time for your shady lies.” I turned.

Anton reached for me before I could round the hood of the car. Balling my fist, I swung, but he didn’t let me land my punches. Anton moved fast; as he dodged my punch, he grabbed my wrist and twisted it behind my back as he spun me. *I didn’t have time for this!* I raised my foot and brought it down on his. When his head leaned forward with a hiss, I snapped my head back, aiming for his nose. He tilted his head to the right, blocking my attempt.

“Stop it!” He ordered in Russian. “I know why you’re here.”

With labored breath, I responded, “Don’t try to stop me.”

“I’m not.” Anton released me. He looked me up and down, “We all have rites to pass.”

That caused me to pause, “Are you suggesting this cloak and dagger club knew I’d come here?” I shook my head, “That’s impossible.” I took great care in making Titan think I was heading south. The plane I charted was a well-known man who ran drugs for the Italian mafia on the east coast. Men like my pilot knew better to talk. Unlike commercial flights, the aircraft flew under the radar and worked with various connected black sites to fly undercover.

“Not impossible.” Anton adjusted his suit. “Highly probable. You love Titan. You’re reckless at your best—incredibly greedy when you are cornered. You’re not going to stand by and watch Titan fight without jumping into battle. I knew you’d do something rash.” Anton squared his shoulders, “Franco was Titan’s trial.”

“I don’t give a fuck.” Wishing I had a weapon on me so I could kill Anton. I didn’t pack anything on my body. I knew I’d be searched—if I made it that far before they killed me—

and that wasn't the approach I was going for when it came to Franco.

Anton laughed, "I know. We acknowledge the marriage, Nova. What labors Titan must endure are shared with you since you are his wife. It never mattered who killed Franco." Anton confessed, "We needed to test *all* the Kings' loyalty to one another. You're willing to die for the lot of them. That's loyalty at its finest." Anton backed away, giving me space, "You kill Franco," he leveled his green eyes onto my grey ones, "The Kings all pass." He turned to walk away but stopped, "Don't underestimate him, Kukla. When you see an opportunity go for it. Don't let the voices inside your head cloud your judgment."

"Wait," If I made it out alive, I might need this knowledge for Dash. An olive branch to show him I could be trusted if I wanted to be. "Do you know where Mila is? Was it you?"

Anton turned and shrugged his shoulders.

"So that's a no?"

I barely caught sight of the grin that tugged on his lips. He turned and started to vanish into the night, "That's undisclosed for now."

A textbook political response if I ever heard one.

Chapter 42



My mind struggled to break through the fog. I could hear the gentle clattering of what sounded like dishes. Soft murmurs filled the room where I was. All I remembered was driving towards the compound, and then...shit went sideways. My tires were blown, and my car spun. The door was ripped open before I could assess myself, and then darkness.

“Don’t waste my time Nova,” A voice said. The tone sounded refined and cultured. Like they had spent their childhood traveling to exotic places.

Finally, I was able to pry my eyelids open. Blinking away the blur, I tried to move, but my body was jolted by an electric shock that caused my jaw to lock.

“I’d suggest not to struggle.” The voice purred.

Looking down, I was strapped to a chair. Thick iron cuffs captured each of my wrists. I lifted my arms again, only to feel the painful shock to my teeth.

The voice laughed, “They always do that.”

I looked up. I was in a dining room. Red Damascus wallpaper lined the walls. A sparkling chandelier radiated rainbows of light off the dimly lit room. Candles lined the long dark wooden table. The wax had dripped so long that it

started covering the stands' silver bases. I was seated at one head, and across from me, down the long expanse that could easily sit twenty people, was no other than the man I came to kill.

Franco Fontaine.

Franco continued to eat as I sat chained to the chair, so I took a moment to study him. He held his fork and knife like an orchestra conductor waving a wand. His movements, from moving his arms to swallowing a bite of food, were like a choreographed production.

Franco flipped his eyes up. They were a deep chocolate brown that looked like melting chocolate as the candlelight bounced off them. The shade matched his shortly-trimmed hair. A clean-shaven square jaw and perfectly shaped eyebrows would make a makeup artist proud. He was a metrosexual at his finest. Clean and meticulous.

His suit was made of wool in a navy color, a matching blue dress shirt that had tiny yellow pinstripes. The fabric was free of a wrinkle. His tie was a deep maroon that matched a cute little silk pocket square folded into three triangular peaks that stuck out. It was an eccentric style none usually worn by a man his age. I much preferred Titan's cargo pants and tight t-shirts to this prissy excuse for a man.

Franco set his fork down, and on cue, a waiter dressed in a traditional black tie uniform entered the room. He cleared the plate and started to walk back to the door. In a swift movement, like a figure skater performing a skilled jump, Franco pulled out a gun and shot the server in the head. Blood splattered, and dishes broke as the dead man fell. I jerked, which Franco noted.

"Scared?" He purred as he set the gun down.

"Death doesn't scare me."

"That's what they all say."

"That's what they all say." I mimicked.

He narrowed his eyes, so I copied him again. He licked his lips, and then I did the same.

“You don’t like your reflection, do you.” I joked.

“I like it very much.” He sneered.

I looked over his face, “Not that reflection.” I corrected him, which he didn’t like either. “The little boy on the inside.” I provoked.

He studied me for a moment before he picked up a polished silver bell and rang it. A second server came into the room. Without looking at his dead companion, he side-stepped the body, avoiding the pooling blood, and served Franco his main course. A steak with asparagus drizzled and a thick gravy sauce.

“That sauce is going to go straight to your hips,” I said. Breaking the silence.

Franco paused his fork and knife, then resumed slowly cutting into the steak as if he was performing an autopsy. He made uniform one-inch cuts,

“It’s rude not to offer your guest food or beverage.” I provoked. I eyed the cuffs. They were too tight to slip my hands out, and I didn’t want to risk being shocked again.

“But are you,” Franco paused, “a guest?”

I cocked my head to the side, “I don’t know, am I?”

He changed subjects. He wanted to prove he was in control, so I went with the punches this time. “You’re hair is different.” He knew who I was. This was good.

“Which do you prefer?” I cocked my head. I needed to show Franco I wasn’t weak even if I was trapped. This angel had claws.

Franco looked long at me as if I was a fine piece of art.

I was.

“The blonde. It’s much more fun killing an angel.” His voice was cold and lacked any traits of humanity.

“Hmm, Interesting. Angels are easy kills. Demons are much more rewarding. A challenge always is.” Franco didn’t respond, but I noted the twitch in his jaw.

“I know you want to kill my husband.”

“And how, pray tell, do you know that?”

“Let’s not play around, Franco. You’ve got a hard-on for my husband.” A vein in his neck pulsed. “Inside my car was a bag. I’m sure your men told you what was inside. You know Greg Michelson drew up that contract. You know who he is, and you also know I didn’t have a choice in my marriage.” I voiced a fake disdain. I needed Franco to believe I hated Titan. That’s right; I was going to make Franco think I wanted to kill the King.

Chapter 43



Franco lowered his eyes as he waited for me to reveal my cards. “I hate the Kings. They killed my parents and stole my father’s company.” I stated with angst.

Franco would believe that false truths were still guiding him. He didn’t know that I knew about The Rites of Passage or that he was the one who killed my parents.

It’s a gamble, Ghost said.

I know. But it’s all I had.

“Take me as your wife. Piss Titan off. Enrage him. He hasn’t publicly announced our marriage, and I’m sure a man of your status can get any legal accounts of the marriage to be erased.”

“You’re asking me to cross Michelson?” He speared a cubed-sized bite of steak and slowly chewed it.

I looked him up and down, then looked around the grand room, “Are you scared of a lawyer behind a desk?” I provoked.

“I could always send your body back to Titan.” He popped another bit into his mouth.

“Where would the fun in that be?” I dared him, “Torment is much more painful than torture. Sure, you could kill me,” I pulled at the cuffs and felt the zap. I wasn’t scared of pain and needed Franco to know this. “But torment...” I grinned my best evil smile. “That’s a much sweeter dessert. Titan would have to suffer knowing you had me in *every* way. By your side, in your bed. Titan will come here. It will be like taking candy from a baby.”

Franco sipped his wine, “I could just do what I want with you. No need for the antics.”

Franco was lying. He liked dramatics, and he was starting to like the idea I had proposed to him.

“You could, but you don’t see the bigger picture. You didn’t just take a man’s wife. You took his wife, and she willingly accepted you. It makes the burn so much deeper.” I shrugged, “It’s up to you, Franco. You either can kill Titan when he comes here to get me.” I level my eyes at him from across the long table, “Trust me; Titan will come. I’m the toy he has always wanted but can’t have. Use me; allow me to watch him suffer before you kill him. Paint a broad and wide picture that you’re in love, but most of all, I love you. Splash it across media, then and only then, when Titan is seething and blinded by jealousy, kill him.”

“I don’t trust you.” There was a gleam in his eyes that jarred me. He liked my idea, but like most narcissists, he needed it to be his idea. And since he didn’t think of the grand plan, he wouldn’t use it.

I lost.

So I pushed, hoping he’d kill me fast.

“And I don’t trust a man who cuts up his food like a baby.” I eyed the steak, which was half eaten. “Tell me, was it mummy issues.” I goaded, “It’s the mothers that usually baby us.”

Franco pushed back his chair slowly. Once he stood, he gripped the steak knife and slowly walked to me.

Now you’ve done it. Ghost hissed.

“I’d think twice, Franco. A man like you likes pretty things.” I looked at the knife, “That’s going to scar. You want a scarred toy?” Franco stopped before me, but his eyes remained behind me,

“I’m going to play with you, and you will let me. If you make one move against me, I’ll let my guard break a bone of his choice.” His eyes looked behind me to the presumed guard he was referring to.

Two against one very stubborn woman. Ok, Franco, let’s play!

Franco pulled my chair back. It made an awful screech across the wooden floor. He crouched in front of me. My legs were not chained. They were free and bare; my shoes had been taken off. “Don’t tell me you are a foot guy.” I tried to joke, “I just don’t get that kink.”

“Shut up before I make you.” He purred. His voice was restrained, but barely. There was a bite to it. Had Franco ever been pushed as much as I had taunted him this evening?

He tucked the steak knife under the hem of my jean and slowly started to cut up. He was gentle and practiced, but I didn’t remain unharmed. One extended cut from my ankle to hip now sliced my skin. It wasn’t deep. It felt like a paper cut and stung like a bitch!

Franco knew what he was doing. I wanted to hide my pain from him. I’d wager he liked to see others in pain. It fed his control and excitement. Franco’s type didn’t get scared because they didn’t feel fear, only excitement.

I bit down so hard on my tongue that it bled, but I remained frozen in my seat. I would not scream or beg. Once he finished with my right leg, he did the same on my left.

Then...well, everything changed. The ball was in my court because, like most men, Franco underestimated the woman in front of him.

Chapter 44



Franco was a lot of things. A sociopath. A troubled boy who was now a very sick man. He was powerful and, no doubt, highly educated. But Franco was a naive fool. Like so many men in power. They thought they could wave their weapons in the air and have the world shake in their boots.

This bitch didn't quiver. I didn't shake in fear in my combat boots; I conquered in them, and I'd only beg one man!

Franco placed his finger on a small sensor on my right cuff. A blinking green light flashed, and they opened. The guard was a good twenty feet behind me, giving me a few seconds to make a move before he reached me. Therefore my move had to be good.

Was he so stupid to uncage the lioness?

He was. Ghost beamed.

I still needed to wait. My prey wasn't ripe for the picking yet. If I lunged too early, he'd get away. I need to buy some time. He was the one with the weapon.

"Stand up," he ordered.

As I stood, I felt the burn as my skin stretched over the cuts. Little trickles of blood ran down my legs. My jeans fell

and pooled on the floor. I looked into his chocolate brown eyes. Franco, who tried to act nonchalant, was teetering on the edge. His eyes were feral, like a wild stallion trying to resist being broken in.

He liked to play with his victims. How predictable...

At least we have time to think before he starts to cut us up. Ghost murmured.

He's not going to cube us up into perfect bites like his steak...not just yet anyway. If there is one thing men in control like to see, it's watching someone fight a battle they can't win. He has the upper hand here, Ghost. I've played right into it. I just need to find the escape button.

And the kill button, Ghost added.

Franco eyed my sweater and started to cut it off, this time not cutting any skin. He looked at my body, now just covered in my panties and a bra. "You think I'd ever entertain a whore like you." He scowled. His upper lip twitched in disgust as his forehead wrinkled.

"You need more botox. Your forehead is wrinkling. Not very pretty, Frank." I chimed Purposely, not calling him by his name.

Yeah, It's not looking good, Ghost. It was worth a try. I'd play this game again and again if it meant I could have saved them all. Unfortunately, in these games of life, there is no reset button. I confessed to my best friend, who always remained by my side. I wasn't going to cower. I'd give Franco my complete bitch.

His hand mindless touched his forehead as if lost in an old memory. "Aww." I continued, "So it isn't a mommy issue. More like daddy cheated on mommy with one too many whores. Are they your main targets Franco." I probed. "That's so typical. The sociopath that kills hookers."

Franco's skin flushed. I hit the nail on the head. He lunged fast, and a searing pain stabbed me deep in the gut.

Ding, dong, the bitch is dead.

Chapter 45



I paced the aisle of the private jet, knowing we would never make it in time. *She called him over me.* It fucked with my head. I understand why she called Damian, but I couldn't accept it; that and the small letter she left behind.

Hubby,

You know as well as I do that love drives people insane, and, well, insane people do insane things. I promised myself that if anyone were going to kill you, it would be me. So I've got no other options.

Love your wifey, and all the voices inside of my head

-Elsa & Nova.

I pulled at my hair again. If she managed to get close to Franco after her phone call with Damian, he would have two hours with her until we arrived. I knew what people could do in two hours.

“You're going to be bald if you keep fucking with your hair like that,” Anders shouted. He took a seat next to the cockpit door. His ax was in his right hand as it rested on his lap. He tried to pretend he was at ease, but he wasn't. He was eager to shed blood.

I didn't respond but rested my palms at my side as I kept walking up and down. "She's not going to like you with no hair. Trust me. The ladies love hair. Sit down and save some energy." He added. His long blonde hair was pulled back in a low ponytail.

"How long till we land?" I asked Dante, who was calmly sitting with his laptop on the table. Dante always wore a mask of calm.

He didn't look up from the screen, "Five minutes shorter than last time you asked." He stated.

Damian was in the cockpit with one of our pilots as we took the trip from Vermont to Montreal. For me, the trip wasn't short enough. It seemed endless as I imagined what Franco was doing to my wife.

I don't know what she was thinking. If I ever see her again, I'll fucking kill her myself. It was beyond reckless and stupid. It made no sense.

My phone rang, and I scrambled to grab it. I didn't bother seeing the screen. I answer. "Hello!" I shouted in a raised voice. Anders grunted in the corner and fought a smile. Let's see how he handled the love of his life in the hands of a monster.

"Titan," I knew that accent. It was refined, arrogant and Russian.

"Anton," I stated in disbelief. Dante stood, and Anders grabbed his ax. I put him on speaker. My mind was such a cluster fuck. That's where my brothers would come in handy. Dante and Anders come to my side like pillars to ground me.

"You passed."

"What?"

"You passed your rite." Anton said with pride that didn't make sense to me, "Nova passed for you." I heard his words, but they didn't make sense to me. All I heard was Anton mention Nova's name. She passed, so that meant she killed Franco, right? Why hasn't Anton mentioned her...unless she's dead too?

I saw red, so much so that Dante grabbed the phone from me before I crushed it in my palm. I watched his lips move, but I couldn't hear anything but the buzzing in my ears. Dante was talking, and then Anders grabbed me, but I snapped.

We fought, beast to beast. The plane felt like it shook from our quarrel. A sharp turn of the plane jolted me; it wasn't just our fight, but the plane had changed course. Anders used that to his advantage as he gained the upper hand and pinned me to the floor.

Anders pressed his forearm on my throat, and my vision blurred. His green eyes were a shade of light jade. They pierced into me, "Don't fight me, brother. It's ok." He said as my oxygen was slowly cut off. Darkness tunneled my vision before he let me inhale a full breath again. But it was too late. I passed out and found her in my mind's darkness. The only woman I ever loved.

Chapter 46



I had been stabbed before, back in prison, that is. It was a small two-inch shiv. Nothing compared to the six-inch steak knife that sliced through me like butter. I had never been shot, but I imagine this hurt more because the blade had to come back out, unlike a bullet.

Franco's face lit up with glee as he twisted the knife clockwise in my stomach. The monster had stepped out from behind the tailored mask.

The Kings' were beasts; darkness lined their souls. Franco was a different kind of demon. The Kings and all their brothers struggle daily to not tip over Franco's line. My new family still had some humanity. Even a tiny seed of hope could save a soul. Franco had nothing. He's the shell of a man that a demon had possessed.

I was weaponless, blood poured out from my deep wound, and at this rate, Franco was one hundred percent going to kill me. I rolled the dice and got close to winning but lost. The house always wins, and currently, I'm in Franco's house.

I've got nothing else to lose. Dignity be damn. When you cage a lion, expect its claws to come out. My fingers curled in on themselves, bunching up fabric. I didn't even realize I had grasped Franco's suit jacket after he stabbed me.

That's good, Nova, focus, Ghost chanted like a cheerleader shaking her pom poms. *We are close to your target.*

I nodded. Franco slowly began to pull the knife out, so I reacted. I could see from the gleam in his eyes he thought I was about to beg. He was wrong. I made my move as I cupped the sides of his face. He dug the knife lower, making sure to cut further as he removed his weapon. Then using my thumbs, I sank them into his eyes.

He didn't expect that.

Like the others he had killed, he thought I was down for the count after one blow. That I would grovel for his mercy!

“Guard!” He bellowed.

I glanced over my shoulder as I locked my thumbs into his sockets. I thought I'd see the huge guard running towards me like a linebacker. Instead, he remained standing at the door, just watching.

Watching and waiting.

Holy fuck! He's not with Franco. This guard was with The Rites of Passage—an audience to my passing or failing.

It gave me hope because that meant it was just Franco and me.

Don't forget about me. It's you and me versus Franco! Ghost beamed.

I could never forget about you, Ghost. You never shut up.

Under the pads of my thumbs, it feels wet and slippery. Franco roared as I pushed in with all my strength. I lunged forward, putting my entire body into my thumbs as they pressed his chocolate brown eyes deep into his sockets.

Lady luck finally appeared on my side. The gambler just won.

“Don't underestimate him, Kukla. When you see an opportunity go for it. Don't let the voices inside your head cloud your judgment.”

My brain repeated Anton's order, and I did just that. After all, I was nothing but a pawn, a doll that was trained to kill. As Franco fell back onto the dining table, he clasped his eyes, leaving the knife buried in my stomach at my disposal. Gnashing my teeth to the point of cracking, I pulled it out with one fast withdrawal.

He staggered back and blinked repeatedly. His right hand reached back for his gun.

"Fuck!" I wrapped my shaking fingers around the knife and pulled. It hurt worst than you could imagine. For the first time in years, I prayed.

I swung back my arm, the knife in my hand, and stabbed it forward right as he grabbed his gun. It landed in his chest but not to the hilt. It only sunk two inches in. Not deep enough to kill.

Shock marred his face, "Guards!" He screamed. His cries were fruitless, and he knew it.

That's when I saw the real panic in his eyes. "Is that the same look of panic you gave your daddy when he hurt your and mommy? You never stood up for her, and now you treat women like your daddy did. You're pathetic and weak. You'll never rule the world, Frank." I poured and poured more salt into his insecure wounds.

I started to feel my world tilt as the blood loss from my stab wound started to affect me. The warmth from the bleeding blood coated my bare legs. There was no way out now. I was bleeding too much. Franco must have hit something vital. I wouldn't die until I saw this fucker wiped from the earth.

I raised my left hand and curled it around my right hand, still clenched around the knife. With both hands, I pushed the blade deeper. I could feel the sides of the serrated edge grind against bone. It moved along his ribs until it reached my final target.

His dirty little heart.

Franco wrapped his arms around my throat and squeezed. Mesmerized, I watched the moment flicker in his eyes when

the knife tip pierced his beating heart. With luck, the next beat would further sink the knife deeper.

“It’s always more entertaining,” I gasped through his grip on my throat, “to kill the devil. Even God has struggled to do that.”

His face started to pale. Using his dying breath, he pushed hard on my throat. My knees give out. My body crumpled down on his body which was leaning over the dining room table. We grabbed for each other, and both fell to the floor. His hands fell from my throat in harmony with my hands as they dropped from the knife.

We each lay on our sides. I gasped for air, as did Franco. In the distance, I heard gunshots. But I knew it wasn’t Titan or Damian. They were too far away to save me now. As air filled my lungs, life faded from Franco. I watched as his eyes dimmed and the final bit of the monster seeped away.

I look into the dead eyes of the man who threatened my family as I lay on the floor beside him. I finally had my answers about what Julius Caesar felt when bleeding out. It’s oddly satisfying. The warmth of the blood pouring from my wound heated my burning stomach. Everything started to tingle as the blood from my other appendages rushed to repair what it couldn’t. My fingers felt numb, but I couldn’t tell whether they were cold or hot.

Gunshots sounded again. The double doors to the dining room opened. Boots ran against the floor, and then a shadow fell over me.

“Jesus, she’s losing too much.” A man said in Russian. I didn’t know his voice and his dialect sounded strange.

“Stay with me, Kukla.”

I rolled on my back, and I felt again. As the stab wound was stretched and pulled, I moaned, but that was nothing compared to the pressure now applied.

“Fuck you,” I murmured to Anton. He snorted a laugh as he worked with another man to stop my bleeding.

“You’re going to make it,” Anton told me. I didn’t believe him, his voice was strong, but his eyes held a fear I wasn’t used to seeing.

I don’t want to make it either.

I couldn’t face Titan, knowing I betrayed him by coming here, but Anton didn’t give me a choice. I was lifted with great care as Anton held me to his chest and ran through the mansion. Bodies and blood lined the halls. I must have blacked out because I was in a helicopter when I opened my eyes again. Oxygen and needles were stuck in my body.

“You lied,” I confessed, my voice a mere whisper.

“If we knew all the answers, it would not be a test, Kukla.” Anton gently grabbed my hand, avoiding the needles. He bent down to my ear, “You passed. Your rites are finished.”

Chapter 47



She's alive.

The girl who escaped death had escaped it yet again.

She lost half a spleen and some of her small intestines, but she was going to fully recover. Physically that is. Mentally, it's still a pan scramble mess in her beautiful head. "She's awake," Damian informed me as he exited her room. "You should go see her."

Instead, I turned my back to him and her as I exited the private hospital. We landed at a small airport in Canada, where The Rites of Passage escorted us to the hospital where Nova was at. I stood inside the surgery room, accompanied her to the recovery room, and then to her private room. But as soon as she started to stir, I left.

My steps hastened as I rounded the corridors that smelled like disinfectant. The pale blue walls started to tunnel in on me. When I pushed open the double doors and felt the Canadian air fill my lungs, I was about to have a full-blown panic attack. I bent over and rested my palms on my knees as I inhaled to calm myself. This had never happened to me. Usually, when I snapped, I killed, but this time I felt like falling down a dark hole. My hands reached out to find purchase but nothing was in sight. I just kept falling.

Once I felt like I could control my heart again, I grabbed the back of my neck, massaging it to try and release some of the tension.

“Who are you punishing? Her or yourself?” Anton asked as he joined me outside.

I’ve never wanted to kill a man so much in my life—even more than my father, which spoke volumes. Killing Anton might just piss off The Rites of Passage, the secret club I was now a member of, because my wife risked her life to pass a trial that was supposed to be mine.

“You were able to get to Franco all along.” It wasn’t a question; it was a fact. The Rites of Passage played game after game. You had to look between the words to figure out what they wanted.

Anton confessed everything to me as Damian and Dante held me back from killing him. Anton knew Nova went into Franco’s compound. He spoke to her and allowed her to walk into death. Then after she completed the mission, he swooped in like the white knight he pretended to be.

“Yes, we could have killed Franco at any time.”

“I’ll never join.” I seethed.

Anton laughed, then pulled out a cigarette box and lit one. “You will.” He stated with confidence. “Like Nova, you’ll do anything to protect those you love. You will love The Rites of Passage. You will be devoted to us because we are the biggest arsenal you can have against your enemies. We’re the body armor, the first layer you have when protecting Nova and your brothers.” He blew out a cloud of smoke, tossed the cigarette on the ground, and crushed it under his shoe. “This was a test of loyalty. How far you could be pushed. Like Lucas, who was willing to die for the cause, so was Nova.” Anton reached into his pocket and pulled out a cell phone, “You can reach me anytime. I’m at your disposal. In one month, we will come to collect you, and then you’ll be the one bossing my ass around.”

I didn’t take the phone.

Anton shrugged, “Have it your way. We’re always watching.” He turned and started to walk away, “I’ll see you in a month.” On cue, right as he reached the parking lot, a black sedan pulled up, and he slipped inside.

Footsteps sounded behind me. They were not running shoes or boots but rather formal dress shoes.

Dante.

“What are you going to do?” He asked.

“I want nothing to do with them,” I looked towards Dante. The fucker always looked so put together. Where he found a suit that fit him like a glove was beyond me. Even with his dark hair messy and needing a shower, he still looked like the powerful Italian he was born to be.

“We need a man on the inside, Titan. Until we all pass, you can be our eyes and ears. I know I’m asking a lot.”

He wasn’t. I would do anything for my brothers, just as they had dropped everything to come and aid me when my wife went off the deep end. “You’re not,” I grunted. “The Rites of Passage knows too much. We can’t afford to have them as an enemy.”

Dante crossed his arms. “They said we all have seats of power. Power can persuade.”

I raised a bow, and Dante beamed, “I’m not going to take orders, brother.” He shook his head. “I’m going to give them. We formed our brotherhood to shake up the world. We agreed to play The Rites of Passage’s games to see inside. You’re in. You passed. I say we all pass, drink the knowledge, and then if we don’t like the rules....” He grinned.

I nodded, knowing what he was thinking, “Fuck’ them. We burn it all down.”

We stood in silence. The wind whistled through the nearby trees, creating a sense of calm that felt too eerie. “And what if we like them?” I pondered out loud. What if The Rites of Passage were really good, as good as ruling power could be?

Dante slapped my back. “If you can’t beat them, then join them.”

Chapter 48



Three weeks later...

I grabbed the small pile of shirts and tossed them in my small duffle bag on the bed. Looking over my shoulder, I noted Titan had blocked the door. “I’m leaving.” It’s useless to stay in a home where my husband won’t speak to me, where it pains him to look at me. I expected a nice congratulatory dinner, makeup sex, and hate sex. I knew Titan would be angry, but I didn’t think he’d be disgusted with me. His disgust was something I couldn’t bare. It’s worst than when I thought he killed me.

I was able to move on my own now. It still pained me to stand completely straight, and I wasn’t given the clear to resume my daily exercise until my stab wound healed completely. It wasn’t the physical wounds that pained and taxed me. It was the mental ones. Like how my husband couldn’t look at me. Titan didn’t stay by my side as I healed. Damian acted more like a husband than Titan did.

“The fuck you are.” Titan growled.

I turned and planted my hands on my hips, “Then stop me!” I dared him.

Titan had denied me his touch as my punishment. It was a new form of torture. I'd dream at night of his fingers caressing me. His invisible touch helped mend me and make me whole again. Yet my dreams could only satiate me for so long. I needed his actual touch to survive. Titan had successfully made me addicted to him.

Damian had become my only friend here in the secluded mountain house we came to for my recovery. He visited me throughout the day and tried to talk to me. His approach seemed genuine, and I knew deep down Damian wanted me to recover so Titan could. I just needed Titan to forgive me.

"Look at me! Talk to me!" I demanded when I noted Titan's eyes were downcast.

"And say what!" He snapped in a pain filled, haunted tone.

"Fuck you. I hate you. How could you!" I suggested, "Take your pick."

Silence lingered. I could see the vultures circling overhead, waiting to pick us apart once our love for each other died.

I shook my head, "You're a pussy." I threw my hands up in defeat and anger. *Fight for me, you fucker!* "You can't stand the fact that a woman got your kill? So much for promising me revenge." That's what it had to be, right? He felt emasculated that I was able to kill the great Franco Fontaine.

Blue eyes so cold locked onto me, "You're not even close."

I rolled my eyes, "Then what is it?" Of course, he didn't answer. I turned and zipped up my bag, and marched to the door. He moved then, grabbed my bag, and tossed it against the wall, where it made a loud thud and tumbled to the floor.

I opened my palm and smacked his pretty face. I wanted the beast to come out. I walked past him; hands grabbed my hips as they pulled me back into the room. He walked us to the bed, where he tossed me onto it. A look of panic washed over

his face as his eyes flashed down to my stomach. Worried, he broke open my healing wound.

“It would take a lot more than that to hurt me.” I pushed up on my elbows and watched as he struggled to speak.

“I can’t ever trust you.” He voiced. He ran his hand through his golden hair as he fought the voices in his head. It was like he was trying to knock off the crown on his head.

Deep down, my husband felt unworthy. That was my doing, but I couldn’t apologize for what I did. I’d do it again a million times over.

“When it comes to your safety,” I edged closer to him but kept some space, “I’ll always jump in front of the bullet.”

His teeth sank into his lip as he shook his head, “That’s not how this marriage is supposed to be.”

“You said we are equals. What gives you the right to risk it all for me?”

His pain was mine. My heart, which already was in pieces, crumbled again as pain marked his beautiful features. “I just want to make the pain stop. I want this to stop so we can try to be those two people again. The boy and girl that loved so easily.” I stripped down my mask and let the tears fall. That’s what he wanted, feelings. So I gave them willingly. Nova King wasn’t a mask of an emotionless void, and she wasn’t ashamed to show her husband her inner self.

Titan turned, I thought he was going to walk away, but he sat on the bed next to me. “We can’t go back, babygirl. We are not those two kids.”

I knew he was right, but a girl can dream. Or was I left to suffer my nightmares?

We sat in silence for what felt like hours. I didn’t dare speak or move because this was the closest we had been for a month. Titan shifted and squared his shoulders at me. He reached out and slowly pushed me back to lie on the bed. His fingers traced my curves over my clothing. He lifted my shirt, and then traced over my new scar. The lines were angry and jagged, bright red against my pale skin. I saw the deep hurt in

his blue eyes, like a ship sinking to the bottom of a dark, terror-filled ocean.

“I love you,” I declared as his fingers traced the mark back and forth as if he were trying to erase it. “Let’s erase it.” I pleaded.

“Erase what?” He took his fingers off my skin, and the absence of his touch chilled my body.

“Our sins. A clean slate.” I was begging him as best as I knew how to.

“It doesn’t work like that, babygirl.”

“Why not? Lucas took poison to give his life to you, to erase his father’s sins so you’d be free.” I stood and then turned my body to straddle him. He didn’t grab my hips as I wished he would have.

Leaning forward, I pressed my breasts against the rugged plains of his chest as I cupped his face. My nipples hardened over the friction, and I hoped he could feel what his presence did to me. “If I could forgive you for everything, why can’t you forgive me?”

Chapter 49



Her blonde hair hung loosely around her pale face. She was the perfect mix of Elsa and Nova. Nova King wasn't afraid to show me she cared. Fuck, she was willing to die for me. I finally had her where I wanted her, vulnerable enough to show me what soul laid behind her rigid walls but not weak enough to be crushed. Yet, I couldn't find it in me to forgive her.

We didn't return to the campus house. Instead, we flew to my home in Aspen, surrounded by the mountains and summer air. It's remote and safe, the land untouched—the opposite of us. I had a doctor and nurse stationed at the house to care for my wife. They gave me hourly reports through the night.

Nova fought so hard to break me, to grab my mask and strip it off. The roles had changed, for better or for worst. Her legs framed mine as she straddled me. Trapping me. The warmth of her petite body pushed onto mine like a blanket covering me from the harsh cold reality of my crimes. My index fingers touched her thighs, but I longed to feel so much more. I want to grab her, roll her over and pour my love and hate into her. So I did the opposite as I pushed my palms into the bed sheets. It was a cheap trick, the sheets gave me no relief, but her skin would...

She cupped my face, her hands feeling so tiny. “If I could forgive you for everything, why can’t you forgive me?”

Pale grey eyes begged me to surrender, but that wasn’t so easy to do. After all, I was a King, and King men did not bend a knee so easily. I should be able to forgive her. After all, she was right. She forgave me. I was weaker than the woman who was begging me. *Just try*. My body begged my mind. It longed for her touch, to be inside of her because she *was* home.

“I told you, I can’t live without you,” My fury slipped. “We should have faced the rite together.”

“And if we did, one of us would be dead.” She hissed. She ground her body down on mine, “I’m here in your arms because of my choice. The decision to protect you.”

“I didn’t need your protection!” I bellowed. My hands grabbed her hips with force, and I snapped. The tips of my fingers would leave bruises on her flesh. “I. Needed. You.”

My lips pressed against Nova’s mouth as I poured my beast inside her. I didn’t give her a chance to respond. I flipped her on the bed and gave in to my desires. Between my brutal attack, I tore the clothes from her. Her lips fought to stay on any part of my body they could taste. Then in one push, I was home, buried deep inside her heat that was always ready for me.

“You have all of me,” she moaned, arching her neck back so I could taste it. I did. I licked the sweet, salted honey that always covered her skin. Her hands clawed down my back, but it wasn’t enough. I needed to be closer to her. I’d never to let her go.

I needed to chain her to my side.

I slipped my hands under her back and arched her hips up so I could sink deeper inside her. Her back bridged more as it tried to melt into my body and become one. We both came so fast that I didn’t even know how I spiraled into this situation.

Where had my strength gone?

My resistance vanished as soon as I tasted her.

That was Nova's power. Nova brought me to my knees and fucked with my head. The more I resisted her, the more I became addicted to her. I pulled out of her, pushed off the bed, and stood with my back to her. Reaching for my pants, I pulled them back up.

"Don't you dare fucking leave!" She fumed, but her hate was gone and replaced with hurt when I started to make for the door.

Good, I wanted her to feel hurt and betrayed.

Used.

That's how I felt when she went on a suicide mission. She betrayed our marriage, my trust, and most of all, my love.

* * *

I lay in bed, unable to sleep. This happened most nights. I'd wake frantically searching the bed for my wife, who wasn't there. Footsteps sounded down the hall. The closest guest room was just a few feet from my room. I had moved Nova in there. I didn't need her in my space.

I didn't need her. *Keep telling yourself that.*

We had sex just hours ago. I hoped it would sate my need, but it only poured oil into the fire. I once thought it would be hell to live without her, but now it was hell either way. Seeing her every day, knowing I failed to protect her. New scars marked her skin, marks I vowed never to allow happen.

The handle of my door twisted then the door opened. Even in the dark, I knew it was her. The dark silhouette was long and lean. It flared slightly at the hips. I loved to grab her hips. Each step she took was light, like a dancer gliding across the stage.

"You're awake," She murmured as she approached my bed.

I rolled to my left side and away from her. The covers were ripped back, and then she slipped into my bed. She crawled close. I could smell her scent which was my body wash. Her arms wrapped around my body as she pulled the

covers back up. She was spooning me, but she was the bigger spoon. Once again, she took on the role of our protector.

“What are you doing?”

“Sleeping.” She snuggled closer, “Now shush!”

Maybe it was the room’s darkness or the fact that I was inside of her mere hours ago. I turned and switched our roles. She allowed my change without a fight. “This means nothing,” I grunted as I wrapped my arms and legs around her. I caged her too tightly, but she didn’t object.

“Hmm,” was all she said.

Soon her breathing evened out, but I still laid awake. I didn’t want to wake up from this.

My wife and my nightmare.

My everything.



“I need you to come with me,” Damian said as he entered the room. I could tell from his tone it had to do with Nova. Damian and Nova had become friends during my absence. I trusted my brother to do what I could not; Care for Nova in person. Well, I cared for her distantly.

“What now?” I just received a report from the doctors. They had to apply surgical glue to her wound, which tore slightly when we had sex again this morning. Guilt already ate at me. I hurt her yet again...

“Hurry up, will you.” Damian rasped. I knew he had better things to do. After all, he wanted to get his Plain Jane.

I threw jeans and a t-shirt and tucked a gun behind my back. I laced up my boots and tucked a knife inside my right boot. Just because we had passed our rite and were tucked away on top of a mountain we owned didn’t mean shit. I didn’t trust The Rites of Passage yet, and Anton’s warning kept my senses alert twenty-four seven.

The Rites of Passage was coming for me in just a few days.

I passed my rite. Nova passed for us; my brothers hadn't, and their lives were starting to be shaken. New trials had started, and I monitored them from afar.

Damian walked me to the outside patio. The sun had almost set and reflected over the pool. Massive beams created a lattice awning to cover you from the sun's heat in the summers. Twinkling lights now wrapped around the beams as they flickered like stars over the dusky sky. "What is this?" I asked Damian. It looked like a party was going to take place. Baby's breath was placed in small vases as well as flickering candles.

"Go to the outlook and find out." He smirked, then he turned and left.

The outlook was a rounded edge that extended off the patio and near the side of the mountain. It looked out, giving the viewer an almost 360-degree view of the land we owned. Whether it was summer or winter, the view from the outlook was heavenly and surreal.

My boots hit the ground with hesitation, but they stopped as the outlook came into view. An angel stood in the middle of it. Her wings had long fallen, and now she was a vulnerable creature, stranded on earth where demons lurked.

Chapter 50



I was twiddling my thumbs.

I never thought you'd admit to that, Ghost chimed.

Me neither, I sneered. I was, dressed like a vision and nervous like a pubescent teen about to have their first kiss. The dress I ordered two days ago was custom-made and flown from Italy. Money could buy you anything, and with Damian's help, we pulled everything together without any added stress. The only weight on my shoulders was my own doing.

The white spaghetti strap silk dress had a deep plunging neckline that bordered on indecent for a bride, but that's what I was. Indecent and bold. It was my day, and I'd wear what I wanted to. A thick belt pinched in my narrow waist. The skirt flared out in a ballroom poof, not typical of me, until it was cut off just above my fingertips. A short as sin wedding dress, accessorized with what else...my black combat boots. There weren't Prada, I know, shocking. The current pair was a limited edition Versace with silver buttons and crystal-embellished straps. I had to have a little bling on my wedding day.

That's right. Wedding bells were ringing. That or the voices in my head were having a party.

It's going to be ok. Ghost tried to settle me.

So I did what any ordinary girl would do. I patted down my hair, making sure it was in place. I pinned it half up, half down. Flat ironed it to perfection. I even added a short veil that would make a pop princess proud. An elegant nude smoky eye and a pale red lip stain with a layer of lipgloss in a strawberry sorbet flavor.

Ghost was girlie and virginal.

Nova Baladan was femme fatal and leather.

Nova King was eccentrically feminine and bold. Leather, lace, puffy skirts but always a boot.

I squeezed the handle of my bouquet like a stress ball. I heard footsteps, and with each echo, my heart thumped more aggressively.

Then, he appeared.

My vengeful knight in shining armor.

The setting sun bounced off his golden blonde hair like the flames of a flickering candle. He stopped, and his eyes looked me up and down.

Don't turn... My mind begged. If Titan abandoned me here, that was it. Titan must have sensed it because he marched forward with purpose.

I hope he takes us as his war prize! Ghost begged like a puppy.

Shhh! I need to concentrate. I quipped back.

“What is this?” His words were cold.

I hoisted up my bouquet of white Lillies, “It’s our wedding.”

“We’re Married.” His tone was cruel, like a beast that captured the beauty in his castle.

“We’re starting over. I deserve the white dress and fairy tale wedding.” I watched the struggle etch onto his face. “You have to give Titan. Our past is a bunch of faults we each are

guilty of. We lied and betrayed each other. Today, right here, right now, that changes.” I exhaled a shaky breath.

We stood at the base that overlooked the world, like a king and queen who either would conquer or kill each other.

Titan cracked his neck then his eyes drank me from the bottom up. From my Versace boots to my long legs and my short white dress. He tried to suppress a smile, but it slipped as his lip tugged up. “You look beautiful, babygirl.”

I beamed. *We won Ghost.*

“I know,” I replied because shit, I did look fine as fuck. I knew what I could pull off, and a shotgun wedding in a custom Italian dress was something I could rock any time of the day. There was nothing wrong with being confident, as long as I wasn’t too arrogant.

“If you wanted a real wedding, you should have told me.”

I shrugged and took his left hand, “You got the first wedding. I get the last.” I winked at my husband. “Let’s begin,”

Titan laughed, “That’s how it’s going to be? You hold the reigns.” He tried to joke, but it was a test because my man didn’t want control. He needed it.

“In public, we’re a team,” I stated.

His brow rose, “And in private?”

I swiped a lick of my strawberry gloss, “I’m yours.”

Darkness swept over his blue eyes. Lust tempted his monster. “Now, as I was saying. Titan Jules King, you are the only man who was able to fuel me. It was solely because of you that I’m here today. Through the hell fires and heavenly light, I’m yours. I’m a little messed up, but you have been the only man who can calm all the voices in my head. You see past my stunning exterior to the real me. I can’t live without you,” I laughed, “I can’t kill you, trust me, I’ve tried.” His fingers gripped mine.

“I’m going to fuck up again, but I need you, hubby. I need you to catch me when I fall on my fine ass. I need you to

keep my OCDs in check and my closet well-stocked with combat boots. But most of all,” I dropped his hand and fumbled in the bouquet. Taking his left hand, I grabbed his wedding finger, which had the tattoo with Elsa’s name on it. I placed the ring at the tip of his finger. “I need you to commit to me, the good, bad, and fabulously outrageous. You married Elsa, but I’m not her anymore. I’m not Nova Baladan, either. I’m Nova King.” Licking my lips, I held the ring and waited for his reply. Time ticked painfully slow with no response.

Fuck it, I push the ring down onto his finger, “Screw that,” I smiled, “I’m taking what I want. You’re stuck with me, hubby.” I eyed him—my confidence a mask covering an insecure girl deep inside.

Slowly a wolfish grin appeared. He eyed the ring and then finally looked at me. He stepped forward and placed both hands on my lower back, “I promised you I’d make you addicted to me. I’d be the vice you begged for. I was never going to let you go, babygirl. You messed up, but I needed to make sure you realized that.”

I cocked my head. Maybe Anton was right, and Titan was made for The Rites of Passage. These last few weeks of him not being by my side were a test.

One I passed.

His right hand slipped up to the back of my neck. “I knew what you had planned today,” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a red box. Flipping open the lid, he grabbed a ring. It was a marquise-shaped ruby framed by two pear shaped diamonds on the sides in a gold band. It was unique and one of a kind, like me.

“I forgive you. We walk side by side into the fire, babygirl. No more secrets, no more lies.” He took my hand and pushed on the ring. It was a perfect fit, like him.

He tipped my chin up and kissed me slowly. Like stroking a fire, he worked his tongue till I began to pant.

My knees bent, and I jumped and wrapped my legs around his waist. Titan caught me and hoisted me high up. He

would always catch me no matter how far I fell.

“I love you,” I murmured over his lips.

“I loved you from the very first moment I saw you. I claimed you then. Time wasn’t favorable to us, but we proved that our love can never die. It will continue to grow. We will conquer anything put in front of us. You never made me weaker, only stronger, babygirl.” His heated lips brushed over mine and lingered there as we inhaled each other.

This is what peace felt like.

Heaven on earth.

The ghosts from my past had finally been freed.

Well not all of them, Ghost winked.

Epilogue



For the first time in four days, I'm dressed. There was a throbbing between the apex of my legs that wouldn't fade. Titan hadn't given me a break. Day and night, we worshipped each other in ways I never imagined.

"He's here," Damian announced as he entered the room. Guns and knives were strapped to his body like a soldier off to war.

Titan nodded as he twisted his wedding ring. We knew Anton was coming. It had been one month since I passed our rite. Sure enough, a sleek black helicopter landed in our front yard. The make and model of the aircraft were in question but it looked stealthy as fuck. As the helicopter began to land, our alarms sounded. The aircraft's technology just took out all our electronic systems. Our top systems were rendered useless against The Rites of Passage's systems.

Damn impressive.

Titan and I remained seated in the living room like a true king and queen. The front doors opened, and Anton eventually approached. He bowed his head with a smile, "Kukla." Titan grabbed my fingers tighter.

"Anton," I sighed.

“It’s time.” He raised his head and eyed Titan.

Titan and I had to play the part. That and I was genuinely curious. Each time Anton visited us, more and more slipped out of the mysterious group. Now, we were finally going to get a look behind the curtain.

Damian, Titan, and I rode in silence in the helicopter. The entire ride, Titan kept looking at Damian as if they had a sixth sense and could communicate with each other telepathically. I know they felt vulnerable without Dash. His absence even affected me. I missed the brotherly banter we had and I missed watching him suffer as he tried to eat my pan scramble.

Last I heard, Titan and Damian had communicated with Dash, but they didn’t let slip any juicy details. I worried about Mila but I knew she wasn’t alone. The Rites of Passage were always watching.

Maybe Mila was Dash’s rite?

Anton said Titan held the seat of power for the King family, which meant that Damian and Dash didn’t have to perform a final trial to assume control. However, if The Rites of Passage taught me anything, it was that they continued to test. There were little things here and there to ensure a person had not been corrupted or lost faith. Maybe, after today, I’d figure out just where Mila slipped off too.

Like something out of a sci-fi movie, the ground below us, which looked like dusty, rocky dirt, began to open. The large door lowered and slid open from the center as the helicopter landed under the surface. We were led through security passages that could survive nuclear fallout. Titan, Damian, and I took roles in memorizing every aspect of the trek here.

“We have headquarters like such scattered all over the world,” Anton informed us. We passed room after room. Finally, Anton stopped at the door. “We will get you both set up with security today. I’ll be showing you around. You’ll get settled in.”

“When will we meet the council?” Titan asked.

Anton glanced over his shoulder, “You won’t. Rulers don’t sit on the council. Even gods have to play by the rules. You are the first to pass Titan; you will now hold the realm until your brothers join you. Six seats are left to be filled.”

“Titan holds the seat,” Anton stressed as he looked at Damian and me.

“My wife rules by my side.” Titan squared his shoulders.

Anton nodded as he faced us, “That choice is yours. Your advisors are important. They turn your neck, but you have the final say. If Nova is your mouthpiece,” Anton held up his hands, “I mean it respectfully. Then that is your choice. The council will judge your rule, Titan.”

“Who is on this council?” Damian asked.

Anton shook his head, “In order to keep the council pure, they remained hidden. Therefore they can not be persuaded or corrupted. They are always watching and enforcing the rules. Don’t forget that. You know what happens when one King thinks he can betray us. We eventually hunt them down.” Anton warned as he hinted at what happened to Jules King, Titan’s grandfather.

We entered the vast room, and then, well, everything I knew changed.

The room was filled with numerous round tables. Uniform rows showed a force of order. In the middle was a large rounded table about twenty feet wide. Next to the center table were another two rows of ten tables. Tables were not the best word to describe what there were. They stood like planted smooth river stones, polished and round. There were no buttons on them, and the material used to craft them was a mystery. It must have been a poured material because there were no seams, joints, or texture. On every surface of the table, a built in light circled the perimeter. When we approached the table, the lights activated and started to draw an image.

“Are they holograms?” Damian asked with curiosity.

“They are a step up from what you know as a hologram. More detailed and refined.” Anton answered.

At every table stood a guard dressed in a navy and grey camouflage uniform. Each guard held a tablet that seemed to be connected to the table and hologram. I felt like I was on a spaceship, but I kept that reaction to myself. I didn't want to seem like a giddy child. I needed to play it cool. Anton showed us the toy box The Rites of Passage had in their sandbox. He was seducing us.

Anton lead us through the room at a slow pace, giving us time to let everything sink in. One hologram projected a factory of sorts. Large cylinders were in the background. Men in white lab coats walked around, assisted by military men holding guns. “That is a nuclear factory in Iran,” Anton informed us.

The Rites of Passage had eyes everywhere! “How did you get inside?” I questioned.

“Many ways,” Anton vaguely answered. “Sometimes we infiltrate the air systems. We designed small particles with cameras that work on radio frequency. The vibrations paint a visual image for us here. They have no clue the specks of dust are communicating and relaying information to us.”

There it was. The facts behind why The Rites of Passage was an excellent ally. They controlled the dust that danced in the wind. I doubted King Corporation had that technology at their disposal yet.

“Where is this?” Damian pointed to the right, where a new hologram image was being drawn. The line moved in slow motions as it traced the air and drew finer details of the room The Rites of Passage was spying on.

“That's a black site where the Chinese general of the armed forces meets with his staff.”

I continued to walk and roam with Titan. The guards dipped their heads when we approached the tables and stepped back. I stopped at a hologram that showed an ornate room in pristine condition. It looked like a museum of sorts where

royalty used to live. Old paintings lined gilded walls; crystal chandeliers hung high with sparkling crystals dangling. “Where is this?”

Anton chuckled, “Buckingham palace.” He shrugged, “They hold no power, but it’s still fun to watch them.” Anton stopped, “We can take you practically anywhere.” He leaned against an empty desk, “So,” he raised a brow and grinned, “Where do you want to go?”

* * *

Titan and I had spent the last week learning the ins and outs. Our minds spun, and it was hard to remain grounded with the newly acquired knowledge we had.

“What do you think?” I asked. I pushed up on my toes and kissed him. His hands held my lower back, keeping me in place. Calm blue eyes looked into my grey eyes.

Titan shook his head, “I know that this world is dangerous. I know that I love you. I’d do anything to protect you and those I love. I made a pack with my brothers to be free and to make a future for my family that was vastly different than how I was raised. I can make all that possible if I accept The Rites of Passage. They can offer my family protection that others can’t fathom. I’d be a fool not to take it. But I will only do that if you are with me.” His lips brushed against mine. A chill went down my body as the pulse between my legs began to throb with need. “Are you with me, Nova King?”

“I never left you, hubby,” I beamed as I started to strip him bare.

We were a team, a ruling king and queen to the liking that The Rites of Passage had never seen before. Titan and I would write our futures together, hand in hand, because our love never died. The ashes turned to dust, that dust fell to the ground, and over time it seeped beneath the soil, nourishing it back to health. From that darkened soil came new life, entwining flowers that would be deadly to the touch if anyone dared pluck one from another. Titan and I were rooted together, never able to be separated again.

The End...for now.

Insert evil laugh here!

* * *

The start of The Rites of Passage has just begun! Will each member be able to pass their rite, and what happens if they fail? Follow me on Facebook and Instagram, and sign up for my newsletter for the latest updates and book releases.