

HOSTILE KINGDOM: SOUZA CARTEL



HOSTILE
VOWS

— ANDRÉ & SINÉAD DUET ONE —

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

autumn archer

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AUTUMN ARCHER

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AUTHOR NOTE



Hostile Kingdom is a Dark Romance world which includes the Jungle Oasis trilogy and the Souza cartel series.

Hostile Vows is a duet with a HEA in the second book. It's a dark cartel mafia romance that includes scenarios and references which may act as a trigger to some readers.

Within in the steamy dark pages of André & Sinéad's turbulent marriage you'll find murder, gore, human trafficking, drugs, alcohol abuse, plus physical assault.

Please read responsibly and know your own limits before diving in.

Welcome to Miami where André Souza rules.

ANDRÉ



Well, fuck—last night’s events took an unusual turn.

I prop myself up on my elbows and check out my surroundings. The jeans I’d struggled to remove a few hours ago are in a heap on the floor. An empty bottle of Jack Daniels and a full ashtray both suggest a heavy session.

Surprisingly, there aren’t any sexy panties lying about. Not even a pair of high heels, or any sign of a female guest, for that matter. I drag a hand over my scruff and recall the impulsive decision I’d made last night, letting it soak in. That’s the reason I’ve woken up alone, and it rocks the contentment of my typically chaotic world.

An insistent pounding in my skull has me reaching for a couple of painkillers from the bedside table. I grind them into a chalky paste with my back teeth and swallow. A glass of water would be helpful, but I’m feeling hard-core this morning.

I’d knocked back a shitload of booze last night—all because I randomly found the one person I’ve never forgotten.

There’s nothing unusual about this hazy, motherfucking hangover, except for the prickle of shock sparking my muscles—that’s a new thing. My over-the-top world rarely shakes.

I grab the remote control for the automatic blinds and squint at the sun-drenched balcony beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows when they move up. Usually, I love the epic ocean view from my penthouse master suite. However, this morning

it doesn't impress like it normally would. Something else of natural beauty haunts me.

Black hair.

Green eyes blended with blue.

Defiance.

The aquamarine seascape was worth the premium price tag. A few million dollars is loose pocket change for a Souza. This is my base, my main bachelor pad, and the princely throne where I run the entire Miami drug scene. Now my home will have to become something else.

The wide empty space next to me in my super-sized bed is a surprise given my new circumstances. A chuckle rumbles from inside my bare chest and dissipates into the cavernous creamy corners of the high ceiling. Papá had always said I was dangerously unpredictable, like a defective firework. Guess I'm always hunting the highs.

The irony in his criticism wasn't missed when the egotistical fucker had raised me to be just like him. Hungry for power and fully capable of taking it, but in my own way.

Where he had acted like an AWOL patient from a psych ward, I am more self-aware of my rebellious streak. Except, in the aftermath of last night's bombshell, perhaps I'd marginally agree with his assessment. This time, my spur-of-the-moment decision has a major kickback.

Something catches my attention when I flick back the Egyptian cotton sheet, and it's not my unsatisfied boner. It's a chunky black band, the width crammed with diamonds twinkling up at me from my wedding finger.

A straight flush. The winning hand in a game of poker. All the cards in the same suit—hearts.

Fuck. It's all coming back to me.

I bounce to my feet and half jog across the gunmetal-colored carpet, wearing nothing more than leather bracelets, a few rings, and a shitload of tattoos. Broken memories of my recent adventures crackle beneath a cruel headache. My

recollection is patchy apart from one very clear vision, and I'll never forget the mental picture for the rest of my life. It's a combination of complete power, hostility, and a surrender.

Quick strides take me out of my suite, along the hallway where a large-scale Jean-Michel Basquiat painting hangs and saunter past my best friend's bedroom door. The room he crashes in when our partying gets out of hand. Letterman had tried to talk me out of raising the stakes during my winning streak until he realized it wasn't that straightforward.

Flashes of the pending prize come hard and fast, confirming what I can't believe to be true. I run a hand through my disheveled black hair and take a deep breath. A buzz of wicked adrenaline tingles all over me.

At the top of the floating staircase that's sandwiched between a frameless glass balustrade, spontaneity burns inside me like fuel. The charge is more powerful than my usual daily dose of stamina. A never-ending energy source that races through my veins from the second I wake to the minute I crash.

But this immoral thrill of ownership is more addictive than any narcotic my family would sell. It's a lethal adrenaline hit.

My purposeful, light-footed descent carries me directly into the open sitting room doused in daylight. I squint as it temporarily blinds my hungover eyeballs, wishing I had a pair of sunglasses. And then I stop dead. Rock hard for the Irish woman who had given me the biggest fucking head rush a few hours ago—while I shot my load over her swollen lips. She had pretended it didn't get her panties wet, but we both knew she was lying to herself. I'd always thought I would strangle the bitch if I saw her again. However, that resentment had mutated into something far more infuriating. Filthy fucking lust.

Last night had kicked off with an invitation only, offshore poker game on a yacht belonging to a family acquaintance, Don Saporì, head of the Italian crime syndicate, Cosa Nostra. We cross paths every now and again.

Sapori's advisor had sat with us around the table too, but he didn't leave a lasting impression. Not like the showstopper of the evening. The dark-haired *belleza* who caught me off guard—Sapori's estranged daughter. Our families have been allies for years and never once did he mention *her*.

That very same woman is lying on my white leather couch, framed by an azure sky, the backdrop visible through a wall of windows stretching the entire breadth of my lounge. She's wearing a baggy t-shirt, all black except for a silvery skull and gold crown motif. I'd left it outside the bathroom door after she had locked herself in—leaving her to shower the blood out of her hair. A thin wooden door with a flimsy steel lock wouldn't have kept me out if I'd wanted in. With her, though, I'll take my sweet fucking time.

A bottle of Jack and a few blunts later, and she'd still refused to come out. Her brazen tenacity had me chuckling. There's nothing more satisfying than a tease finally meeting her master.

The thigh-high hem shows off the pale skin of her legs. Her stretched-out position gives the illusion they're long, except I know for a fact she's short—and makes up for it with a feisty-as-fuck spirit.

Arms the color of silky cream show splashes of fresh bruising. A pang of remembrance slams into me. It's not the first time I've seen her skin decorated in violence.

Silently, I swear an oath—no man will ever hurt her again. Unless that guy is me.

Unable to hear my approach with the music blasting from the Bluetooth headphones she's borrowed, she pretends to be oblivious to my arrival and continues to focus on the small screen. Tangles of damp raven hair tumble over the armrest as she lies on her back, legs crossed at the ankles, and dainty toenails varnished in emerald-green paint.

Unashamedly stark naked, I prowl closer, roll back my shoulders, fold my arms, and wait for her to notice me.

Her left foot jiggles, a telltale sign she's aware of my presence and doing her best to ignore me. Bitch. Right now, I have the upper hand in this dynamic and she'll learn to respect me.

Expending the short span of my patience, I skirt the golden equal-sided coffee table and bend over her plump tits, so my face is right up close to her makeup-free complexion. Close enough to count every tiny freckle on her high cheekbones and sense raw stubbornness. She smells just like me; the shampoo used to wash away gore still holds its scent.

My pulse thrums until long lashes drift up and she spears me with a mesmerizing greenish-blue gaze. Then the rhythm goes fucking nuts. The striking tint of her irises is so unique it deserves its own position on the color chart. The color's semi-translucent. More turquoise than cerulean, but one hundred percent spellbinding.

In one swipe, I drag the headphones off her ears and recognize Fifty Cent's, "In Da Club" playing. It's on my personal playlist too. We always did have the same taste in music.

Straightening, I chuck them onto the adjacent tan-colored daybed. "So you finally unlocked the bathroom door and made yourself at home... *Wifey*." I wink just to piss her off.

Exquisite shapely brows nip together, not from confusion since that ship had already sailed when she repeated her vows a few hours ago, but more out of sheer annoyance.

"You been waiting to call me that all mornin', Hotshot?" Her sexy Irish lilt entices my dick and offers it countless hours of satisfaction.

Our gazes clash like swords. A green halo circles wide; flaring pupils and long lashes blink while she takes a detectable deep breath. "Just because we're married doesn't mean I want to be anywhere near your dick again."

White teeth sink into her naturally red bottom lip, her eyes jumping from my boner to my abdomen, and ending with a notable gulp.

“You weren’t complaining when I was fucking your throat with it.”

Nonchalantly trying to hide her flushed reaction, she grabs a powder-blue cushion and wallops my thigh with it. When I catch the corner with my tattooed hand and let it hang by my side, she adds, “You tricked me. And if you want me to call you my husband, you can go to Hell.”

I stare at her for a silent beat and watch a flustered wash of regret creep up her neck. If she continues to disrespect me, I’ll choke the word from that pastel-pink-colored throat while my cum clings to her cheeks.

“Heaven and Hell are all around us,” I begin, my antsiness supercharged by her brazen attitude. “They’re just a clusterfuck of highs and lows. I can easily take you to Hell with me, right here, in your new marital home.” The cushion drops to the heated tiled floor. “Do you want that, Sin?”

“Don’t you dare call me that,” she growls with gutsiness, jackknives to sit, glances at my dick again, squeezes her eyes shut for a second, and then growls again with a sexy throatiness. “Did you seriously think marrying a woman against her will was a decent thing to do?”

“Who said I was trying to be decent?” I remain stoic in my posture, my jaw tightening when she flicks a ribbon of hair away from her perfectly symmetrical oval face and sighs with animation.

“Right... you get off on being immoral,” she mumbles under her breath, notably having more to say this morning than she did last night.

Even though she’s challenging me, I like it. However, the sassy grit woven into her spirit tests my threadbare restraint to stay levelheaded. I’m finding it exceptionally difficult when all I’m imagining are scattered, horny visions—biting, sucking, screaming. And how hot she’d look gagging on my dick again as I pump her husband’s cum down her throat in a lesson on manners.

When the tip of her tongue skates between plush red lips, my pulse skyrockets. I wasn't prepared for this. Not for *her*.

"My middle name is immoral," I deadpan. "I've never won a wife before, so this will be an interesting adventure. Saves us from all the bullshit of dinner dates and elaborate proposals—that's all hugely overrated. I'll enjoy telling my brothers about this unique arrangement of ours."

She rolls her ethereal eyes. Had it been anyone else, I would have strangled them for much less and with my bare hands, but her—her eyes have my balls in a clamp.

"I'm not okay with this, you know... With my life being controlled by a bunch of mobsters. You're just as narcissistic as that dickwad, Frankie."

"You mean your father?"

My pointed question has her bristling. "By DNA only. A sperm donor. Nothing else. Having met the prick for the first time a few weeks ago, I'm relieved he was never around." A small hand slides across her belly and stays there.

"Yeah... and that same guy sold you off to a New York suit. Show a little more gratitude, Sin. I saved your ass." I smirk. "Just like you asked me to."

"Saved me? Jesus, Dré..." she says on a gusty breath, simultaneously tucking a lock of hair behind an ear, her lashes flicking to the ceiling as she tries to find a safe place to focus on. "You played me. Instead of marrying one stranger, I was forced to marry another. You said you'd take me home."

"You're not married to Acer and when you walked in through that door..." I jab a finger in the direction of the entrance. "You came home. I stuck to my end of the deal. Which means I saved you."

Her narrowed gaze finds mine. Enchanting turquoise meeting curious black. "Winning me in a game of poker is not saving me. You literally dragged me back to your fuck pad and ruined my future. Miami is not my home."

The creases on her forehead suddenly soften. My new wife crosses her arms and stands, elevating onto her tiptoes to gain

more height—or courage. Even at that, she’s still petite next to my six-foot stature. “I should have taken my chances with Acer.”

Her audacity makes my hackles flare. Wrath seeps into my bones and colors them with darkness.

“You’re burning up my short fuse, Sin.” When she bites the edge of her lip, boldness flashes across her expression. “We have history,” I add.

“Seriously?” Her brows fly up and her dainty little hands shelve on her hip bones. “That was decades ago, Dré. We were children. I don’t know who you are now and after last night, I’d rather not be in the same room as you.”

“Well, that’s a pity, Wifey...” I rake my fingers through my hair, weirdly getting into this tug-of-war game between us. “Because we’re about to make some big fucking history together. You’ve got the rest of your married life to figure out what I like... and what I don’t. For starters, that motherfucker Acer won’t be sniffing around my wife, or I’ll cut off his hands and smack his own face with them,” I say matter-of-factly. “I’m sure he’s a boring fuck, anyway.”

“Are you...?” she drawls, hitching a brow.

“The man who married you.”

Her piercing gaze sharpens. “I was going to say delusional. Whatever hero status you’ve credited yourself with is a lie. I didn’t choose this. I didn’t choose *you*. This...” She waves her dainty hand back and forth from her chest to mine. “This is bullshit. All you want is an association to the Sapori name... something I’ve never used and refuse to accept. And stop calling me Sin. I’m not that little girl anymore. I’ve grown up.”

My friendly smile dies. “And I’m not that starry-eyed fucking kid, either. So listen up, Sinéad Sapori-*Souza*—you’re my *wife* now. Neither of us expected this commitment. But guess what? You said the vows and signed the papers. We both did. If you run, I’ll drag you back. If you try anything stupid, my men will inform me, and you’ll be dealt with accordingly.

The only way this ends is if I put a bullet in your heart. Till death do us part, Wifey.”

ANDRÉ



“*Wifey...*” she snorts. “Ever heard of a divorce? Or maybe I’ll become a widow, Dré...” The wicked bitch smirks. “How about that—huh, Hotshot?” Her voice thickens to a sexy rasp as she emphasizes the nickname she’s created for me.

I kinda like it. My cum will decorate her slapped tits when I shoot my load all over them. That would be one hell of an ace shot.

We stare at each other, both of us silent. I know her comment isn’t a threat; it’s self-defense. Only the same sassy survival attitude that had won me over once before.

But like my new wife had already pointed out, our best friend status was short-lived and too many years ago to mean anything these days. The tides of change have turned us into different people.

All I want is more control.

She quietly chews whatever insult she considers fitting and raises her chin in defiance. Although we’re both older, our dynamic still feels the same. Except this time, it blazes and crackles like a risky chemistry experiment.

Her left brow feigns coolness as it rises. “You’re not the only one who can fire a gun.”

My hand jumps to her elongated proud neck before my mind has time to think it over. The flutter of a quick pulse next to my palm adds to my addiction.

Christ.

“You belong to me in every way possible. Perhaps you actually think Acer would have been a good match. Next to me, his millions are like dimes. I have infinite funds, boundless power, and supreme authority that stretches across the world. I’m not just wealthy; my brothers and I reign over a global empire. The Souzas could crush Scott Acer’s family a thousand times over and no one would bat an eye. And now I have a beautiful wife from the Saporì bloodline. So, don’t fucking threaten me,” I warn, my insatiable impulses clawing for freedom just below the surface.

The intensity of the situation has my senses burning like Icarus’ wings too close to the sun. One stupid move and this woman could get the upper hand. I shake off the notion, instantly correcting every bone in my spine so I’m skyscraper tall and she’s involuntarily positioned to stare up at me.

“Or what?” she challenges, her breath coming fast.

“I guarantee you won’t cross me again... unless you enjoy pain as much as I enjoy unleashing it?”

She freezes, her throat the only thing working as she swallows. “You really are just like them now, aren’t you?” Her voice wobbles a fraction. “Greedy and corrupt.” Her nails scratch at my hand in the hope of a quick escape, but I’m too strong for her. “Get your damn hands off me.”

Back when we were kids, it was never about stolen kisses or secret touching—we were too young. Just close friends. The closest I’ve ever been with the opposite sex. Period.

That nine-year-old boy didn’t get a stiff dick when he hung out with her. And I sure as fuck never thought about stripping her clothes off and replacing them with ropes.

But right now, Jesus fuck, it’s all I can think about. And staring at the matured face of my childhood friend—I’m about to shoot my load all over her stomach.

Her scowl hardens as if the sight of me turns her to stone. “Don’t touch me, Dré.”

It makes my dick jerk when a flurry of goosebumps sail over her bare arms and her inky pupils expand, so there’s only

a thin crown of otherworldly turquoise.

I dip my face to the side of hers, my lips grazing the shell of her ear. “Oh, this isn’t touching.” A chuckle rolls from the back of my throat. “There are plenty of ways I could really touch you—plenty of tight little holes for your husband to fuck. However, there’s one thing you should know...”

Her nostrils flare, tense muscles vibrating like a caged rattlesnake. Rather than squeeze her windpipe, I keep my fingers loose, but their presence firm.

Brushing her dainty button nose with my own, I inhale her goddess fragrance. When she growls with bravado, I swear my hungry dick weeps.

“Go on then, enlighten me,” she hisses, cuffing my wrist in an attempt to drag my hand off.

With a featherlight stroke, my lips trace her cheekbone, merely skimming the silky skin. I relish the subtle shiver she expels, even though she’s trying hard to ignore it.

“I won’t hold back. Fucking your face was just the beginning. There’s so much more to come. One word of advice though—don’t get too attached. I get bored.”

In time, I would devour her. She’s my wife, after all, and I’m owed a wedding night fuck fest. But for now, I’d delay the inevitable. Once I well and truly use her, I’ll completely lose interest. I always do.

My twin brother, Giovanni, calls it my FOMO curse—*fear of missing out*. There’s always another willing female to obey me. And this one wouldn’t just be willing—she’ll dream about fucking me. Crawl on her hands and knees to reach my dick. She’ll beg the devil inside of me to grant her permission to come harder than her body has ever known.

And when I finally claim my wife, the buzz of this whirlwind marriage would wither and die. It’s always the same cycle with every woman I meet. Hit the highs. Escape the lows. Repeat.

“How the hell could you do this to me?” she hisses, unearthing the billion-dollar question.

I could explain how seeing my ex-best friend again had thrown me into a vortex. For some reason, my fingers had gone numb, my heart rate soared, and all I could see was the color red.

Or I could go deeper into the root cause—to the middle finger I'm sticking up at my dead father. Since this merger means I'm leaning more into my mafia birthright than I am the cartel kingdom he had established. It's a 'fuck you' to Papá for not believing in me.

He had labeled me the hyperactive ticking time bomb who would die young and rot in our family crypt long before my brothers. Out of all of his sons, including Giovanni, I was never deemed a viable successor for the Souza cartel. Apparently, I'm too reckless. And there's the irony, right there. He was the psychopath, yet considered me the liability.

"It was easy actually," I reply with a cavalier shrug to veil the truths haunting me. "I can do whatever the fuck I want. Plus, it gives us more control over international drug and firearms trafficking."

"You're disgusting." She strains her neck. "So let me guess—you get off on power and easy blondes with blue eyes?"

"Mostly," I reply honestly, given I've tried all sorts of women on my search for a rush that doesn't fade like the sunshine at twilight. But it always does.

"Thought as much." If her fascinating glare could unleash venomous darts, my face would be paralyzed. "Aside from the obvious differences, there's nothing easy about me, Dré." Her eyes glow like supernatural planets ready to obliterate my world. "And guess what?" When she traces a bitten fingernail across my pec, the muscle flinches, and my flesh bursts into flames. "Entitled gangsters aren't my type. And they never will be. I want a guy who wants *me*—for *me*. Luckily, this marriage is fake... so I can get it elsewhere, because I'll never let you anywhere near me."

Something dark slips over me. "There's nothing fake about it." I release her immediately and wave my hand in front of her pretty face so she sees the wedding band I'm wearing. "I'm

your *hotshot* fucking husband now. I own you. Which means screwing around with another guy is not an option. It's not even a thought."

Energy races through my hot veins, urging me to move. I snatch the iPhone she's held on to all this time and endure the mania pumping through my muscles. Christ, I need a smoke or another blow job, or both, at the same time. Perhaps resistance is futile. I should force her face down, stuff my cock in her from behind, and just be done with this.

I drag a hand over my face and turn away. Her cell phone is already unlocked, which makes it easier to add my digits, save them under the name *husband*, and hit dial to capture her number on my own. A shiver sprinkles my shoulders when I glance back to find her siren eyes wide and vivid.

"Here." I drop it onto her waiting palm, noting she's not wearing the matching wedding ring I had slid on her finger a few hours ago.

It shouldn't rile me as much as it does. She blinks slowly at the name I've used with my number. "I don't usually give my details out," I add.

She makes a face at me, feigning delight. "Wow... I'm so lucky." Then she tosses the cell phone onto the couch and stares right into my eyes. "So, you're basically just a fuckboy?"

"Less of a boy. More of a fully grown man with an unsatisfied, wayward appetite." A ghost of a smirk plays on my lips.

"Jeez..." A hand snakes across her belly. "I'll never be like those women who willingly submit to you. Sucking your dick will never happen again. You've become everything I loathe in a man—blinded by power and remorsefully cruel. Just like..." She takes a quick breath. "This is a marriage of convenience—for you. I want my life back and that involves getting as far away from Frankie, Miami, and you as possible."

My low growl makes her shift from foot to foot. "Never. Going. To. Fucking. Happen. Understood?" She blinks up at

me. “And you’re right—you’re nothing like them. I married *you*—which means you’ll put that wedding ring back on your finger or I’ll find another way to brand you. As for Frankie, I don’t give a fuck about his big plans. But you will kneel before me when I command it, like a good girl. As my obedient *wife*.”

SINÉAD



Eight Hours Earlier

It's been four weeks.

Almost thirty days since Frankie Saporì showed up in Donegal with his suited goons and introduced himself as my father with an articulated Sicilian accent.

All I knew about the spineless asshole was that Mammy had an affair. Then when he found out she was pregnant with a girl, he slithered off into the night.

For my entire life, I'd wondered what the man who abandoned me looked like. Until the silver-haired, leathery-skinned bastard strolled into my pub after being absent the last twenty-nine years.

Frankie had to duck under the low doorframe of The Rusty Shamrock, wearing a charcoal blazer, baby-blue pinstripe shirt, and pants the color of oatmeal. Every step he'd taken in those gleaming brown brogues of his expelled refined arrogance. If he wasn't the man who had walked out on Mammy, I might have been impressed by his lordly manner. Except, to me, the old guy just stuck out like shit on a bed of clovers.

He'd demanded a sit-down conversation with me, alone. So, I did what any jilted daughter would do. I pulled out my trusty rifle from under the bar and gave him to the count of three to find the exit.

Unfortunately, Frankie had a troop of armed henchmen surrounding my little slice of the world and a convoy of six

leased Range Rovers blocking the narrow road outside. Checkmate.

The so-called heart-to-heart he'd asked for was bullshit. After his men had cleared the bar of drunken patrons, he tried to feed me some crap about the mafia and my inheritance. Once he'd said his piece, I lunged at him with flying fists, only to be suppressed from behind by a guy built like a fucking brick house.

I was brutally extracted from my home and shoved ass first into a vehicle darker than the Irish sky on a stormy night. Frankie had left a message for Mammy, announcing it was time for us to have a father-daughter relationship. I was his mafia princess now and I would never return as Sinéad Quinn—if I'd ever return to Ireland at all. His closing statement was more of a warning. If anyone tried to come for me, they'd die.

He's not a kind man.

And I'll never be his dutiful daughter. Yet here we are. Him entertaining a bunch of wealthy losers on his monster-sized yacht anchored off the coast of Miami, and me stuck in a dead-end situation. He's promised me to a billionaire who wants a mafia bride. Frankie Saporì's only heir, to be precise. *Me.*

That's what all this kidnapping malarkey was about. Aside from daddy dearest, I'm the only other living Saporì. Which makes me both a pawn and a princess. Go figure.

Scott Acer is the reason I was ripped away from my homeland, my mother, and my livelihood. The rich guy just wants a wife from a Sicilian mafia bloodline. It's as crude and chauvinistic as that. My life plans are inconsequential to these men who rule the world beneath a debauched veil of secrecy.

When I'd spat in Frankie's face and told him I would rather die than marry a man I didn't know, he just laughed. It took me fifteen days of trying to escape my bodyguards and repeatedly refusing to cooperate to earn multiple welts and bruises all hidden under my clothes.

His final brittle threat to wilt my retaliation was the promise of death. Not mine, of course. I'm a Sapori commodity—my mother's murder. If I continued to disrespect him, then Mammy would get a bullet in each eye, and I'd still marry Acer.

Tonight, I've opted to keep my distance and stay below deck, taking sanctuary in the compact oak cabin that's basically a swanky prison cell. It's positioned in the middle of the yacht, which seems to help with the crippling sea sickness I had first experienced. Thankfully, I'm getting accustomed to the constant motion now that I've been on board for a while.

From the outside, this grotesquely expensive yacht, the chauffeur driven Bentleys and menus from a Michelin star chef, it would appear as though I'm living my best life. But I'm not.

Rather, I'm sprawled on top of a crisp white quilt with Sapori embroidered in gold lettering and praying Frankie doesn't demand my company for another evening of empty conversation. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought about burning the family crest. I have—after mentally soaking it in gasoline, throwing it over Frankie's corpse, and setting the thing alight.

At least he let me keep my cell phone, which would be helpful if Mammy had one too. She doesn't though. The woman hates the idea of satellites spying on her whereabouts, or ghosts from her past reappearing out of nowhere. She thinks people who find their way back into your life are just a reminder of why they're history in the first place. Clearly, she meant Frankie Sapori.

Bored and frustrated, I swipe open the social media app I've stayed away from since I left Ireland. I refuse to give up on my old life, except reminiscing only makes it feel too far away.

I hesitantly select The Rusty Shamrock's profile page—my pride and joy, inherited a few years ago after Mammy's brother was shot dead. My stomach aches as I stare at the timeline of random photographs, one by one. That ancient,

stone-floored pub was my everything. Right down to the peat-burning stove and upturned horseshoe nailed above the door. It's the one place where life got better for Mammy and me after it had hit rock bottom.

Damn it.

I growl out my annoyance, tapping on the search icon, my finger twitching over the tiny picture of the one man who I hate more than my estranged father.

A man I can't help harboring an unhealthy obsession for. I'm either sick in the head or a masochist, maybe both. The compulsion to scroll through André Souza's life has eaten me alive since I'd stumbled upon his Instagram profile. We were friends—a lifetime ago.

I've secretly spied on his extravagant ways for far too long, even when my on-and-off boyfriend was sleeping next to me in bed. Poor Liam had tried to win me over. He's a good lad, but I just wasn't sold on his version of a happy ever after, complete with kids—and commitment. It didn't feel right.

Sometimes I'd go weeks without virtually stalking André. Mostly because every time I did, I saw the long-lashed, attractive devil with a different glossy blue-eyed, young blond thing, in yet another lavish club. Despite his continual party lifestyle, I sought malicious comfort in seeing the bachelor with a string of different women—none of them were special enough to catch his full attention. Even as kids, I had to share him with his twin brother and gangster family.

In the end, he never came after me. Even when he said he'd always have my back.

Clearly, his affection for me had run out.

The truth pinches my pride, nipping the flimsy cord that stops me from unfollowing him. I blame the fact I'm in Miami, his territory, for the impulsive decision to creep on his profile.

My heartbeat goes wonky when I see the latest selfie he's posted. A moody black-and-white picture, so vivid it's almost 3D.

Thick eyebrows pull together in a thoughtful frown. Mysterious obsidian eyes expel all sorts of depravity within their thoughtful depths. A lock of disheveled hair, as black as a starless sky, so accidentally messy, hooks his brow. That effortless style gives the impression the blurred woman in the background had her fingers in the lengths only moments ago.

His large hand, covered in a shaded rose tattoo, is lifted to his unintentionally pouty lips, surrounded by the coarse midnight-black hairs of a short beard. Ringed fingers brush the lazy smile he wears—that signature rebellious smirk of his.

Regretfully, the sight of him always makes my pulse stutter, even now, despite a grudge burning so deeply inside of me. He hadn't always been so one-dimensional. I guess twenty-odd years, a shit ton of money, and living above the law could alter a person's soul. I know it's true, because I'm no longer the gullible kid who thought best friends forever meant—forever.

I sigh heavily, noting his sexy selfie was posted only an hour ago, across the city, in a club with booze and good times on his mind. I shiver, not from coldness, but the realization that once Frankie drops me into the shark tank, I'll have to either sink or swim in the darkest waters I've ever endured. Alone.

Taking a deep breath to steady rising panic, I reluctantly search up my soon-to-be husband. I'd put it off since Frankie announced their plan. The whole undercurrent of an arranged marriage is totally prehistoric. Ridiculous and one hundred percent happening to me.

I refuse to face up to it, constantly scouting for an escape. Despite my heroic fantasies, the Italian mafia has top-notch security. I can't outrun Frankie and getting the fucker on his own to stab each of his eyeballs with a fancy silver fork is impossible.

As for the Souza family, I fully understand who they are, who they've become within Colombia, and what they did to reach the heights they soar from. Also, how they turn addiction and fear into power.

They aren't just a global cartel organization; their veins run cold with Irish mafia blood too. They're sacrosanct hybrid criminals and I wasn't welcome in their close circle. Not that I'd want to be anywhere near those ruthless men with zero morals. They're evil—every last one of them.

Undesirable images of Scott Acer clutter the small screen. A shiver snakes under my skin as I study snapshots of his entitled life.

He's probably forty something, more than ten years my senior, with wishy-washy auburn hair, an expressionless clean-shaven face, and chestnut eyes. The man's rigid and dull—with an indescribable air of evil about him. I can't quite put my finger on it. Perhaps it's the half-moon smile that doesn't quite reach his cold stare.

It takes a monumental degree of self-restraint not to pelt the phone across the room. Instead, I scramble off the bed, my stomach churning with the injustice of it all.

After pacing the claustrophobic fancy cabin until my fury calms to a simmer, I grab the hairbrush from the walnut vanity and roughly drag the plastic teeth through my tangled lengths with a moderate temper. Once it's sitting pretty, I mess it up again with my fingers.

My complexion appears paler under the strip light surrounding the circumference of a gilded framed mirror. The hazy amber glow highlights my greenish-blue eyes that don't sparkle anymore.

While fixing my leather pants, I make a promise to never become a hapless victim. I'll claw my way out of this mess, even if it costs me my life. At least I'd die trying to save myself, because no one else would come to my rescue.

I would be my own hero.

My belly growls, having refused to eat with Frankie earlier. Our hate-hate relationship is exactly that. Frankie doesn't actually want to play the role of a father figure and couldn't give a shit what my opinion of him is.

My mafia roots mean nothing to me. Nor does the wafer-thin guard who slithers about in my shadow every chance he gets. The very same bald-headed asshole who turns to face me when I crack open the cabin door and step into the passageway. He might be built like a twig, but the guy is quick and strong. I'd learned the hard way.

Even Frankie's security team wears black-colored suits to match their felonious status. Just like this guy, who clasps his hands behind his ass and cocks an eyebrow in silent question, wondering what I'm up to.

During our time together, I've learned he would shoot me in the temple without a shred of regret. On the flip side, he's figured out I'm a handful from the few hits I managed to land.

"I'm hungry." I skirt his authoritative stance and flick my hair over my shoulder in the hope it would whip his bland face on the way past.

That little swish of boldness gives me a rebellious buzz. I might be under the mafia's watchful eye, but I can still fuck with them in my own way. It's the simple things I can do that will wear them down, eventually.

"Mr. Saponi is playing poker this evening." The way this guy breathes through his crooked nose makes me want to strangle him. "He doesn't want any childish disturbances. I'll ask one of the crew to deliver a meal to your cabin." His rough tone is harsher than a bunch of corroded nails scraping at my flesh.

I stop a few steps away, rotate, and glare up at him. "I can get my own food, using my own hands and legs. As for Mr. Saponi, I'll happily stay out of his way."

When I angle away, he instantly takes a step into my personal space. An angry flush spreads from my chest to my cheeks. I'm not used to being confined, contained, or controlled.

"You don't need to follow me around like a bored puppy. We're on a boat in the middle of the ocean." I cross my arms over my chest and scowl. "I have nowhere to go other than

jumping overboard, and your mates up there won't let that happen."

Tiny eyes like two black holes narrow, considering how best to deal with the newly crowned mafia princess who outranks him. "One stupid move and I'll cuff you to the bed overnight, so you'll have to sleep in your own piss."

"Oh... terrifying," I mock with a false gasp and raise my eyebrows. "You're quite the savage, aren't you?" Once my eyes roll, his hand twitches at the revolver snug to his hip.

He can't hurt me. At least not without an order from his boss. I'm untouchable—unless Frankie gives the word and his unimpressed gaze slides to the closest soldier as his fingers click together.

Then I'm a nobody for the moments their unaffected cruelty teaches me a lesson in alleged respect.

"Want me to throw you a juicy T-Bone on my way back, Pup?" I goad. "You're just Frankie's obedient pet hound, aren't you... or perhaps you're his wee snappy lapdog who enjoys being groomed?"

The second his lips pull back to form a snarl, I swish my hair again and motion my fingers in a semi-wave. "Don't sweat it, Pup. I'll make sure you have something to sink your nicotine-stained teeth into."

His grumble carries along the narrow corridor, and thankfully he doesn't come with it. I quickly cover the short distance of thick pearly carpet that smells as if it was freshly laid and reach a pencil-thin staircase with shiny handrails.

Barefooted steps carry me from the belly of the ship and into the airy saloon. Polished surfaces gleam in the radiance of recessed ceiling lights. A duo of creamy striped couches line the interior walls, mirroring each other in position. Between them, a royal-blue rug leads the eye to the starboard outdoor deck with its massive jacuzzi and wraparound seating. Next to it, a semicircular bar area is paired with deep seats for lazy midday naps in the sun.

Behind me, the chef and crew are hard at work in the open kitchen adjacent to a grand dining table. Security lingers on the periphery, keeping their intrusion to a minimum.

The only crew member who wears a fitted black shirt tucked into matching slacks spots me immediately. Floppy brown hair is swept back, and a friendly grin shows off his bright-white teeth. “Are you hungry, Miss? Or would you like a shot of limoncello?” he calls over.

I stroll toward them and pause at the Italian marble countertop. Gold-embellished china plates are lined up in a row, neatly presented with elegant portions of blood-red spaghetti and topped with miniature basil leaves. My stomach gurgles, my hunger being the one thing I’m able to control. Not even Frankie can tell me when to eat.

“I’ll grab something from the fridge if you guys are busy,” I suggest, my shoulders bouncing lightly.

The chef stills, his eyes cutting from the meal preparation to mine. “I’ll plate up an extra dish for you, Miss Sapori. Please take a seat at the dining table, unless you’d like to eat with Mr. Sapori on the top deck?”

There’s a raucous cheer from the heavens where Frankie’s game of cards is in full swing above us. “No, thanks,” I say like a strike of lightning. “I’ll sit out there.” I point to the bar area where nightfall and twinkly bulbs allude to a harmonious setting in the bowels of Hell.

“I’ll bring it right out.” The deckhand air salutes to me as I turn away.

“Okay. Thanks.” The right side of my mouth lifts to a halfhearted smile.

I ignore the suited guy on my way outside, noting his earpiece with a connecting wire. He doesn’t move when I flop onto a padded daybed and kick my feet up with little respect for the white custom furniture.

A welcoming sea breeze agitates the surface water in the jacuzzi, catching my attention as ripples glitter under eerie silvery moonlight. The hairs on my arms lift, my skin crawling

when a hideous thought of Frankie wearing a skimpy swim brief haunts me.

A round of clapping and rowdy masculine voices makes my blood boil. Bastards—every single one of them. I let my head tip back and I stare up at the night sky, praying my future with Acer wouldn't be filled with cruelty and torture, that he'd be an honorable man to have as a husband.

Except my gut instinct tells me he didn't get his billions from being nice. If he had to stand on a few guys to earn his wealth, undoubtedly, he would have crushed their skulls to dust on the way up. After all, what kind of man orders a mafia bride for a connection to the Cosa Nostra?

“Jesus fuck.” A gravelly baritone with a smoky foreign accent snares my attention. I lift my head and squint, adjusting my gaze to the bright indoors.

Next to the lead deckhand, a well-built man has his back to me as he speaks to the crew. I hadn't noticed him before—and I sure as hell wouldn't have missed his presence. The stranger wears leg-hugging slate-gray jeans and a fitted white t-shirt stretched around thick tattooed arms. It's clear he works out, not to gain the planes of flexing muscles on his wide shoulders, but simply to enhance his already broad back and mountainous height. Those carved biceps aren't too bulky; they're hardened for the purpose of exuding power and strength. Sheer masculinity.

“This shit is good, my friend.” As his left shoulder turns to acknowledge the chef, his too-familiar side profile becomes visible. “Letterman,” he calls, projecting his voice up the golden staircase winding to the heavens. “You have to try this food.”

I suck in a gulp of salty sea air and almost choke on my saliva. A gnarly knot hijacks my stomach and tightens until I'm light-headed from shock. The brutal squeeze of recognition forces me to tuck my thighs against my chest, as if shrinking in size could make me disappear.

The crazy off-beat rhythm of my pulse gallops, and I almost throw up. I'm adrift in ghostly shadows, helplessly

watching artificial light dance over pitch-black tousled strands and coarsely grown facial hair. Its warmth shines on every single breathtaking part of his swarthy features.

I should hurry back to my cabin or dive into the moonlit ocean and swim to the shore, except that would draw attention to the fact I'm *here*—on this yacht—and so is André Souza.

I'm spellbound, trapping a breath as he shakes hands with the chef, his authority capturing the crew's full attention. When a pretty brunette in a white shirt giggles at something he just said in that deep, husky voice of his, a rush of unwarranted bitterness zaps through me like volts from the electric fence I've mentally secured around myself.

My dented pride takes another beating and reinforces the distaste I have for the man. André's criminality represents the very thing I detest the most—men of power. More accurately, every underhanded, dishonorable man I've had to face since childhood.

Anyway, I'm the polar opposite of his typical type, which is why he lives in Miami, and I had stayed undiscovered in Donegal.

Despite my bruised ego, this senseless fascination I'm battling with is deadlier than delicate moth wings beating next to infernal flames. I'm aware of the change to my otherwise numb emotions, how I'm on high alert and feeding off the potency of his proximity. It fills the breadth of the ocean, so even Frankie pales in significance.

In a twist of fate, I've crashed into a hell where fireballs are coming at me in all directions. First, Frankie and his daddy revelation, and then his fist-happy goons. Next up, a marriage to a stranger. Now, André Hotshot Souza.

It's doubtful he would remember me anyway, and I won't step in his path to jog the memories.

The second he rakes those sturdy tattooed fingers through his hair, teasing lazy strands away from his forehead, my insides liquify. It's a shameful reaction. A ridiculous rush of lust.

And the way he laughs, that wicked sonorous rumble of fire and smoke, it provokes my shivery skin and steals the oxygen I'm trying to inhale.

But the second he swivels on his biker boots and advances, his swagger every bit a hunter's prowl, my roots lift, attuned to his presence and terrified he won't remember me, but secretly hoping he does.

ANDRÉ



“This tastes better than sex,” I chuckle, stuffing another forkful of spaghetti sauce into my mouth.

I was heading to the toilet when the lure of food had halted me. A cute brunette in a ship’s crew uniform flutters her lashes at me and fingers the epaulet on her right shoulder.

“Maybe a close second.” Her cheeks flush when I wink right at her.

This afternoon was all work and no play. Being trapped indoors for hours with my associates was intense. It had to be done with a clear head and laser focus. A skill I’m notoriously incapable of mastering.

However, this particular business meeting was personal. We’re still hunting the men responsible for gunning down my father in an alleyway. Shaking every fucking tree for miles around to see who falls out with intel. My eldest brother Tomás is leaning toward Carlos Blanco, Papá’s old friend turned enemy. I’m not convinced. Regardless, it won’t take long to the weed out the fuckers and unleash a living nightmare upon them.

After Papá was murdered, Tomás took over the family business. Albeit from the shadows where he’s recovering from a gunshot wound, and likely screwing the woman he was prepared to die for. I guess the Souza men are all intense motherfuckers.

During today’s meeting, I drank a gallon of coffee and didn’t bother eating. Now I’m buzzed and fucking starving.

“Bring that out to Miss Sapori.” The chef hands the skinny rake of a bosun a plate of tomatoey spaghetti.

My eyebrows snap together. I’d knocked back a few whiskey chasers during the card game, but my head isn’t fried just yet. I definitely heard the chef right. ‘Miss Sapori.’ I angle toward the outside deck, my gaze following the deckhand, who blocks the view.

“Does Sapori have a sister?” I glance back at the pretty girl with a scraped-back ponytail and fuck me eyes. “Like an old spinster relative?”

She smiles cautiously. “Mr. Sapori’s daughter is onboard this evening.”

“You’re kidding me. He has a *daughter*. Since when?”

Curiosity gets the better of me when her gaze cuts to the ornate staircase, secrets dancing behind her eyes. I could extract the answers from that silent mouth of hers, if I really wanted to. However, I’m confident I could charm those answers out of the mysterious woman herself.

The old guy had kept this information on the down-low. Which means there’s a reason for his secrecy. After dabbing the corners of my mouth with a linen napkin, I saunter through the tidy sitting area, disliking the lacquered oak furniture and elaborate brass fixtures. There’s nothing on this boat I’d want to replicate or own. It’s outdated, very much like its Sapori owner—not like my own custom mega yacht that’s finally finished and docked at a marina in the heart of Miami Beach.

I’m attuned to the security detail dotted around, having already pinpointed each of them when we boarded.

The bosun bends to set the plate of food on a low table by the jacuzzi and then nods. As he moves, his entire body throws shade on the figure in front of him. A fresh breeze moves through the tunnel-like space. I love the smell of the ocean and its freedom.

When he dances sideward to avoid my approach, I’m sucked into an hourglass with the flowing sands of time, every

single grain hurtling me back two decades. My gaze clashes with the stranger—black to hypnotic green-blue.

We stare at each other for a beat, the dark-haired female fixing her posture like she's about to attack me. Platinum moonlight fuses with her bare-skimmed arms, making her divinely angelic—familiar.

Rowdy, uncontrolled thoughts crash together to create a massive fucking question that I'm certain I know the answer to already.

Our instant connection slams into me with a sucker punch, my chest thumping from the chaos of a memory.

“What happened to you?” I stare at the unknown girl huddled under a solitary fairy tree in the middle of a grassy field. “Who hurt you?”

Tears track her pale cheeks. Milky-white skin is smudged with blood running from both nostrils.

She doesn't look at me. Instead, she pats her watery eyes with the sleeves of her hooded sweatshirt, darkening the olive material.

“No one,” she replies as a flock of migrating starlings roll through the peachy-blush sky over my grandfather's County Kildare estate.

“Tell me. I can protect you.” I set my dirty hand on her shoulder, my skin splattered in mud after I'd sped over the tracks on my off-road motocross motorcycle. She doesn't flinch, only hugs her knees in closer. “I'm André.”

Her spine straightens, yet she still doesn't look at me. “You talk too much, André.”

The flow of her speech is just like my mother's Irish side of the family. I love it.

I shrug, chuckling a little. “Yeah. They all say I do. What's your name?”

“Sinéad,” she replies quietly.

“Well, Sinéad, do you want to go for a ride on the back of my motorcycle? I’ve never had a passenger before. You should fit on it with me.”

When her head rotates, black hair skims across the hand still pressed to her shoulder and green-blue eyes, so freakishly amazing, pin me to the aged bark of the ancient tree. My insides feel all messed up and shaky as her haunting gaze eats up my grimy face.

“Okay.” She nods. “Will you go fast?”

“Not if you don’t want me to.”

“I want you to.”

“If you scream, I’ll slow down.”

“If I scream, you have to drive faster.” She holds out her hand. “Deal?”

“Sinéad?” Tingles run the length of my spine when her name leaves my tongue.

The Saponi woman jumps to her feet, the sound of it zapping her with a high voltage of shock. Defined cheekbones and juicy-red lips taunt me, yet she refuses to speak. Instead, she folds her arms and raises her heart-shaped chin high, then rips those insanely dreamlike eyes of hers away, breaking our mutual remembrance.

I can’t take my eyes off her.

Ignoring me, she starts to walk toward the edge of the deck, trying to put more distance between us, as if years weren’t enough.

“Sinéad... what the fuck are you doing here?” I lunge at her, my temper clawing its way out of my chest. “Talk to me. How the hell are *you* his daughter?”

She gasps when I snare her little wrist to halt her escape. My large hand easily wraps the fragile bones, the pressure I use purposefully careful for once. I bump her breasts into my

chest, secure her before me, and grasp her stubborn jaw. Our gazes war with unspoken words.

Being this close to my childhood best friend confuses me. Adrenaline spikes hot-blooded desire, feeding off the power of her resistance. Tonight, I feel uncontrolled... extraordinarily dangerous.

“Mr. Souza, please unhand the boss’ daughter.” A security guy appears at the wrong time.

“Fuck off,” I snarl out a reply, keeping my gaze locked with hers. “Sinéad.” The brittle tone cracking from my throat reveals all the hurt I’d once felt. “I know it’s you, for fuck’s sake. Speak to me.”

Despite her silence, obsidian pupils engulf the shade of celestial green, creating a magical ring to temporarily harness my temper. Short nails burrow into my forearms, digging for a getaway. There’s an awakening inside of me, an avalanche of emotions rolling through my chest. I can’t fathom the electricity she’s charged me with or understand how she’s back in my life after all these years.

The sharp sting of her fight doesn’t deter me, either. Right or wrong, I’m getting off on squeezing her soft skin so those pouty lips of hers pucker, fully aware she’s trembling. My heartbeat races at an insane tempo. It’s knocking me off-balance.

The flux is a hard-core thrill. Even more than the rush I had when she’d hug my waist and scream for me to drive faster through Grandfather’s sprawling forest. My girl was an adrenaline junky too. Her craziness had matched mine. And then her mother bit the hand that fed her and the two of them vanished into the Irish mist, never to be seen again. Until now.

“I know it’s you, Sin. Open that pretty mouth of yours or I’ll choke your words out. Why didn’t you tell me you were a Saporì?”

Her chest heaves, colliding against mine with every breath. Yet, she still doesn’t answer me.

“Mr. Souza.” A security guard coughs; he knows better than to pull a gun on a Souza in his kingdom. “Sir. Let go of Miss Saporì.”

Instantly, I release her and take a measured step back, shirking free from her sorcery to contain the savage wild storm whipping up within me. In that moment of separation, she dares to flip me the bird and proceeds to shunt her dainty shoulder into my arm on her way past.

That defiant act seals any doubt I might have had. Only Sinéad would have that level of recklessness. That brave tenacity needed to take on a Souza—to play with the monster inside of me.

When she hurriedly disappears inside and reaches the mouth of a metal staircase sinking below deck, I advance again, ready to annihilate the world just to reach her. She can’t outrun me on a yacht surrounded by water. Not this time.

The annoying henchman close to my heels turns my veins to ice and snow. If he doesn’t back off, I’ll shoot the motherfucker in the face for involving himself in my business.

“Sinéad!” I growl out her name, pinpointing her sexy, leather-clad ass at the end of the passageway. “You can’t hide from me on a tiny boat. If it’s a game you’re after, you should know I don’t play by the rules.”

She pauses to speak to a suited man and then slips behind him, opening the cabin door and escaping me. My boots eat up the carpet until the bald-headed guard stands in my way.

“No entry,” he says without changing his blank facial expression.

Fury scalds my flesh, so I’m almost blind from the smoldering black smoke swirling around me. “I need to have a quick word with Miss Saporì. It won’t take long,” I grit out with strained composure. “Stand down, soldier. You know who I am, right? That this boat you’re standing in is anchored in my territory.” When I reach into my back pocket, he cautiously slides his hand beneath his jacket, preparing for retaliation. “I didn’t come here for a war, my friend.” I flash a

chunky wad of one-hundred-dollar bills in his face. “Give me five minutes alone with the woman.”

The asshole laughs under his breath. “I’d happily give you alone time with the mouthy bitch; however, that’s not enough money to risk my life. Souza, if you want to speak to her, get permission from the boss, then you can do whatever you like to her. Until then, you need to walk away.” He taps his gun.

I memorize this guy’s face, every single detail. Not because he’s an ugly fucker, but because I’m going to kill him. Over his shoulder, Sinéad peers around the doorjamb, her eyes bright. A faded cluster of bruises peeks out from under glossy raven hair hanging around her neck.

Long blinking eyelashes take a snapshot of the situation and just as I consider my next move, she slams the door, cutting me out of her life all over again.

Bitch.

“No problem.” I throw on a fake smile and firmly pat the guy on his arm, forcing my low patience threshold to stretch just a little bit more so I don’t fuck this up. “I’ve got a better idea.”

ANDRÉ



By the time I'm back on the upper deck, Don Saporì is puffing the freshly lit Colombian cigar I'd given him, and Letterman is talking to Fat Johnny, a beast of a guy whose facial skin resembles dappled orange peel. My muscles are jittery as fuck, wound up to the point I could lose control at the slightest annoyance.

Since leaving her below deck, I've fisted my hands repeatedly to curb the impulsiveness twitching through my arms. The white noise in my brain becomes deafening. I'm struggling to collect all my crazed thoughts together in one place, fully aware they're even more scattered than usual.

Seeing her again has triggered a tornado within me. I hear the whispers in my head. Uncontainable psychotic tendencies that would easily start a feud in our empire and far beyond. However, I won't jump the gun just yet. Not until I get what I want.

I glance over at Reno, who's next to the railing, and throw him a look, a serious glare he's read a hundred times before. Immediately, he straightens and his hawkish eyes dart from me to the players around the table. Then I pull out my chair and casually sit, lifting the glass tumbler to my lips and knocking back the last of my waiting whiskey.

The slow burn doesn't settle my restless mood or stop my knee from jiggling. It's a common occurrence when my frustration levels are low. My guys are well used to my quirks.

Directly opposite me, Sapori's crested pinkie ring tinkles against his bourbon glass as he sips in silent contemplation.

"So, you have a daughter, Don Sapori?" I say respectfully while beckoning two fingers at the first mate who's in charge of the bar this evening. "Bring me the bottle." My throat is too dry. I comb my fingers through my hair to rally composure. "You kept that quiet all these years. Any reason why?"

His menacing chuckle gets my hackles up. "Si," he agrees with one word and then proceeds to draw in a mouthful of smoke and mouths out a few smoke rings. "I haven't had much..." He slowly rotates his hand in the air as if thinking of the appropriate word. "... involvement in her upbringing. I'd mostly forgotten about the girl," he says without remorse and a slight shrug of his shoulders. "She's not a pedigree Sapori, but she does have my blood in her veins which makes the girl..." His villainous eyes grow darker. "... useful."

My chest tightens, understanding the mafia world better than anyone. Even though nothing shocks me anymore, I have the distinct feeling this bastard is about to reveal something that'll piss me off.

"Oh yeah?" I probe, my intolerance veiled. "What did you have in mind for her?"

When a thin smile tugs at the corners of his mouth, all I can see is the smirk of a dark snake. "She's marrying into an old money family from Manhattan. An investment banker called Scott Acer. I've had it planned for months."

For some reason when I try to swallow, the saliva in my mouth dries, so I grab the opened whiskey bottle and fill my glass.

"Good move," I suck in through clenched teeth as the liquor travels into my stomach. My left brow drifts up in question. "What's in it for you?"

Sapori shrugs a shoulder. "His older brother is a senator. It's good for business. Acer has useful connections, and in return he wants an inlet to *La Cosa Nostra*."

I laugh, low and understated, guarding my displeasure. “Is he planning to distribute narcotics or weapons? You know his people are only permitted to sell our product in New York.”

That sly smile of his reaches the creases of his aged eyes. “He’s a smart guy—easily managed. I have big plans for him. He recognizes drug trafficking as the future and with his high-end contacts, he’ll help cut the red tape. That will benefit the Souzas, too.”

“You want a puppet?” I tap a cigarette from the Marlboro pack I’d left on the table, taking my time to light it and inhale the smoke into my lungs. “How do you know he’s not caught up with the Feds?”

“He’s not. I’ve been watching his movements for months. Even though my daughter will inherit everything I have, she’s a feral stray who doesn’t give a fuck about our traditions. To safeguard my legacy, I want something from her. Once she marries Acer, she’ll adopt both the Saporì and Acer surnames. And her firstborn will be given the Saporì name at birth.”

Motherfucker.

“How will that sound?” I push my spine into the backrest, flick ash into the breeze, and wait for it, my pulse seething.

“Sinéad Saporì-Acer. Has a good ring to it.”

Sinéad.

“She’s Irish?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

Frankie’s mouth curls up at the corners. “Half-Irish. My Italian blood is what really matters.”

He’s oblivious to the lava burning through my veins and the unhinged maniacal images running riot in my brain. Letterman eyes me, thoughtfully swilling his beer. He’s probably wondering what the fuck is happening when I drum the table with my fingertips.

“How does the girl feel about the wedding?”

“What woman wouldn’t want a wealthy husband with a house in the Hamptons. It’s her duty as my daughter to oblige. We have an understanding.”

My eldest brother, Tomás, is the silent strategist who recognizes the importance of self-restraint before allowing his bloodthirsty demons to escape. Unless he's triggered, then he's uncontrollable.

I've always looked up to him, but could never emulate his finesse. I'm too volatile. More like our dead father than I care to admit. However, tonight, I tap into Tomás' tactics, because there's something I'm after, and I'm not prepared to leave this ship without it.

"Let's get this game underway. And while we're at it, let's raise the stakes," I say with the butt of my cigarette clinging to my lips.

Letterman shakes his head slowly and smirks. He knows I'm an unpredictable fucker, except tonight he has no idea how far I'll go.

Fat Johnny nods in agreement. "Go big or go home, right, Souza?" A hacking cough follows a chesty wheeze.

"Oh yeah?" Saponi's brow drifts up. "You think you're on a winning streak?"

I nod. "Yeah. And if I win, I'll marry your daughter." Letterman lowers his cards while Reno moves from his position with the stealth of a wildcat to stand behind me.

"You're already mafia, boy. What could you possibly gain from it?"

I shrug, playing it cool. "It would unite our families once and for all. Mama wants her twins married now that we've hit thirty. Why not marry a Saponi?"

"And if you lose?" Saponi stares at me, his straight face masked by swirling cigar smoke. "What's in it for me?"

"I've built a substantial portfolio of hotels and casinos across the country. In fact, I own lucrative businesses all over the world. If you want a piece of me, come on board with the next hotel that's soon to be under construction."

He drums the table with manicured short nails. "I never thought you'd be a man to consider wedding vows."

Unfortunately, she's already promised to Acer."

"Who gives a fuck about Acer? He's no one. Or are you scared to lose our friendly game of poker?"

Sapori stares at me in silence, greed flashing behind his fixed gaze. "I want more than a hotel partnership in exchange for Sapori's bloodline."

I cock a brow at him. "Half-Sapori."

"When I win, you'll hand over this city."

As Sapori straightens like he's interested in hearing more, Letterman leans in and mutters under his breath, "A word, Dré. In private."

I meet his serious brown eyes, crush my cigarette, and push away from under the table. "Gentlemen." A smile pairs with the nod I offer Frankie before we casually stroll out of earshot.

"What the fuck?" We turn our backs to the men, both of us staring at the twinkling coastline. "Miami, Dré?"

"That's only if I lose." My hands throttle the curved metal handrail. "I bumped into a ghost from my past. His secret daughter. I know her from another life."

"Are you sure it's the same woman?"

"Oh, I'm fucking sure, alright, and she just happens to be Sapori's heir. What are the chances of that?" I shake my head lightly, disbelief tingling over me.

Letterman sparks up a cigarette and inhales while Reno joins us, his eyes never leaving the card table.

"You'd actually marry her?" Letterman says as the smoke from his lungs meets the evening air like fog. "Like vows and prenups and shit."

"Think of it as a strategy." I pinch his cigarette and take a drag before handing it back. "We know I'm not the wedding type. It would be a no-fuss, quick ceremony tonight, and then we're out of here. I don't trust Sapori to deliver her to me after we leave."

Reno side-eyes me, hitching a disapproving brow. “It’s not the ceremony that’s the issue. How about Dré Souza having a wife? You’re not the committing type, never mind a wedding. One night with the same woman is all you can offer. But a wife... she’d be all up in your face with relationship demands. Is she worth the risk of losing Miami?”

“It’s not just about the woman,” I reply thoughtfully, remembering how she’d gotten away from me once before. How it had spun my whole world in the wrong direction. “This is a tactical move, *parce*. She’s a mafia princess with a lot to inherit. I’m sure I’ll enjoy breaking her in initially, and in the long run, she’ll get used to our lifestyle. At least the Souzas would be firmly in Sicilian territory. We could increase our firearm and explosive shipments.” I shoot a glance over my shoulder where Saponi puffs his thick cigar, his eyes burning into us. “Not even Papá achieved that.” I look back at my friends’ troubled expressions and grin. “Have you seen the women over there?”

Letterman scrubs his face. “What if you lose?”

“I won’t. He’s a shit poker player. His left eye twitches when he’s losing.”

“You sure you know what you’re doing?” Reno slides his hands under opposite armpits and widens his stance, every bit the protector he had sworn to be.

I shrug. “You only live once. One way or another, the woman is coming home with me tonight. I’ll either carry her off this floating museum before I blow it to smithereens or Saponi will hand her over with a hefty inheritance as a wedding gift.”

“Dré... you’ll start a war.” Letterman breathes smoke around the statement. “You ready for that?”

“I was born ready.” I jab his flexed bicep, hitting half of a haunted skull tattoo peeking out from under his shirt’s short sleeve.

“You were born fucking reckless.” Letterman’s throaty chuckle rumbles between us, whereas Reno sigh-smirks.

“We’ve always got your back, parce. I just had to figure out what the hell was going on in that head of yours. You’d better not turn into a domesticated gimp and pretend to be a one-woman man.”

My laugh booms, spiking my energy with barbs of electricity. “Domesticated? Christ... I’m not cutting off my dick and offering it to her as a keepsake. You know I’ll never change. It’s impossible.”

SINÉAD



After all these years, he recognized me.

But instead of looking at me with fondness, something dark passed over his features as if his soul had derailed. Those coal-colored eyes weren't how I remembered them. They were liquid-black and intense.

André is no longer the boy who was a few inches taller than me. He's transformed into a mouthwatering monster of a man made from solid muscle, six-foot something in height, and has temptation written over his skin in ink. And to my utter horror and frustration, the reality of him rendered me speechless when my name had left his tongue.

Flutters swooped inside my stomach and erupted in my throat, collectively suppressing my voice. That foolish reaction to him, a toxic curse—a deadly mix of pheromones and desire for the man who had lied to me.

It's unheard of for a guy to have such wizardry over me. So in that moment, I aimed for silence rather than let him hear a treacherous tremor.

I'm a newly crowned Saporì, owning a powerful title that should give me a degree of stature or an armor of gold-plated fortitude to level the battlefield. However, it didn't.

Even though I wasn't raised in a mafia household, my backbone was still forged from incombustible steel. Life hadn't dealt me a winning hand, which meant I owned a rifle and would never back down from a bully. So, why did he make me feel so unbalanced?

Out of hotheaded anger, I slam my fists on top of the quilt and shove my face into the soft fabric to muffle an infuriated scream. How dare he rattle my entire skeleton and scorch the flesh covering it.

The next time I cross paths with my ex-best friend, I'll be better prepared without jumbled emotions getting in my way. We're incompatible people who live different lives. His crooked lifestyle isn't something to envy or admire. It's destructive.

Anyway, he had countless years as an adult to track me down, and never once did he stroll into The Rusty Shamrock to fulfill his promise of forever.

And that's the crux of the hostility hissing through my veins. His childhood oath wasn't worth shit.

I roll off the bed and pace in the darkness, muttering and sighing, furious at the dumbstruck reaction I had to him—to a man. I'm blaming my surge in hormones on the fact he took me by surprise. That seeing him in person was a shock.

Despite the betrayal of overwhelming tingles I'd suffered, the facts would never change. He's a bad man and my future lies in New York with Acer.

My agitated strides eat up the moon-soaked carpet in my gilded cage, doing nothing to exhaust my nuclear temper. I'm pissed at my pathetic show of cowardice, how I'd scurried below deck like a cornered rat while grappling with those damn butterflies stuck in my chest. What a stupid move, because now I'm trapped and still hungry.

I pause a few steps away from the large portholes, peering out at the silvery ocean and Miami coastline glittering in the distance. A speedboat leaves the rear of the yacht in a trail of frothy white waves, heading for dry land.

A logical reaction would be relief. To take solace in the knowledge that Frankie's guests have finally left—which includes André. Except that's not the emotion pumping through my veins. Rather, I'm angry at how my foolish heart sinks to the seabed like a weathered anchor. The same way it

did when Mammy and I fled our little house on the Hennessy estate, when I knew I was leaving him behind.

I perch on the edge of the bed and nurse the unusual pain in my chest, exhaling in a slow gust. Content I'm not having a heart attack, I pull out my iPhone and swipe open his social media profile, stalking him all over again. Only this time there's no update. Nothing.

No doubt he'll upload a selfie later, when he's partying at another VIP venue. Before I swipe the screen to close the app, a direct message notification pops up.

Callahan_L: Where are you?

The sight of my ex-boyfriend's social media handle makes my stomach flip. I tap out a reply to Liam, and then delete the sentence, telling him I'm never coming home. It would be easier to simply vanish from his life. The safer option for everyone I've left behind, except that only leaves unanswered questions and room for dangerous decisions.

Callahan_L: I know you're online, Sinéad. Answer me. Who was that old guy and why won't Bronagh tell me what the fuck is going on???

Of course, Mammy won't tell him about Frankie or that I'm basically dead to them all now. I clutch the cell phone to my chest and take a deep breath. A few minutes later, he messages me again.

Callahan_L: Tell me where you are. If you're in trouble, I'll call the Garda... Interpol... Someone will step in. Let me help you.

I snarl with exasperation and toss the iPhone onto the bed while I think. After a few minutes, I decide it's better to tell him the truth—in part. There's nowhere to hide in this nightmare. The only way to kill a rose is to rip it from the flower bed where it flourishes, then smother the soil in poison, so it never blooms in the same place again. That's what Frankie will do if Liam figures out I was kidnapped. He'll torch The Rusty Shamrock with my family and friends trapped inside.

Rather than let the old bastard manipulate me any further, it's better to take control and cut all ties with my past.

Shamrock_Sinéad: I'm okay. My...

I debate calling Frankie my father, because he'll never have that role in my life. However, to help Liam understand this lawlessness, I decide to give the man his official title, as it's the easier option. *Father* is a more appropriate term, rather than the bastard who traded me out of greed.

Shamrock_Sinéad: I'm okay. My father showed up. We're getting to know each other. I'll be away for a while.

Callahan_L: Father... WTF did I miss?

Shamrock_Sinéad: We're making up for lost time. I won't be home anytime soon. Mammy will take over at the bar.

Callahan_L: Like a few weeks?

Shamrock_Sinéad: Weeks won't make up for the years he was absent. More like months.

Callahan_L: Fuck... that long?

He has an explanation, albeit a watered-down version. Now there's no misunderstanding. Liam can move on, and I'll drown under a wedding gown stitched with lead and lined with chains.

Blowing out a jet of air, I swipe the app closed and groan, feeling sick in the pit of my stomach.

There are mumbling voices from the passageway close to my room. As I start to stand, the door swings open and all the air rushes out. Radiance surrounds the circumference of a man who fills the entire entrance. It's not only his godly build the streaming light worships, but his intimidating presence too. His entirety commands my full attention.

The soles of my bare feet anchor in position, steadying myself as I sip oxygen to control the paralyzing rhythm of my heartbeat. I could swear there's a thunderous rainstorm battering the yacht until I realize it's the sound of fiery blood whooshing faster in my skull.

André Souza prowls inside without a fuss from Pup, angles back, and closes the door behind him. The glare of light cuts out, so I'm trapped alone with only him and shadows. Casually turning to face me again, he advances, shortening the gap between him and me, his gait confident.

Rather than move away, I hold my defenses ready for war, even though his sudden appearance leaves me breathless.

The atmosphere has changed. It crackles, the quality of it stricken with woody tones of vetiver cologne. All I can smell is this deific man. I stare up at him in a hushed standoff.

Taking one more step, he kills my personal space, his firm chest colliding with mine. The collision kick-starts a frustrating shiver and my nipples harden. Still, I don't move. Our gazes fuse, his dark and unreadable. I silently pray he

doesn't notice the throbbing vein in my neck. The giveaway sign that he's swept me into a disorienting maelstrom.

"I heard you're getting married." The smokiness to his baritone whispers a shiver right through me. "Glad I'll be around to celebrate your big day. I mean... you do remember me, right? You remember sitting under our tree while the shitty Irish drizzle clung to your pretty black eyelashes? And then you ran away—never to be seen again—until tonight."

I can't quite decipher his expression. There's a subtle quirk to his soft-looking lips, but his unsettling coal-colored eyes, they speak to me in a way I can't fathom. Wide pupils reflect miniscule pale-silver flecks captured from the moon pinned to the sky like a platinum button. Jet-black lashes lower as his gaze travels to my braless breasts covered by a flimsy layer of stretchy material.

"It's good to see you again, Sin. Now that we're older, we should party together." Pearly white teeth sink into the corner of his bottom lip, the result, a killer smile. "Just you and me. Like old times—without any rules."

My pulse skips, yet I clench my jaw shut, recalling all the wasted tears I had cried for him. I watch his plump lip pop free and hear a low hum that rumbles with the movement. It ignites microscopic fireworks all over me.

"You're trembling, Sinéad... and knowing you, it's not from fear. It's something far more fascinating than that, isn't it? It's been way too long." Tattooed knuckles trace the curve of my chin. "This silent treatment is getting me horny. You look better than ever. Did you miss me?"

I suck in a sharp breath, preparing to finally stand up to him.

"Miss you?" My tone rises a decibel higher than normal. "I didn't even know who you were until my bodyguard told me your name. To be honest, I'd forgotten all about the Souzas." I shrug, afraid the fibs don't sound convincing. "That guy out there manning my door has a big gun and a bad temper. I wouldn't piss him off if I were you."

A sexy grunt rolls from deep within his chest. “There she is... there’s that Irish fire.” Broad shoulders pull back, so his posture rises that bit higher, securing his position on the pedestal he’s used to sitting on. “Finally found your voice— huh? For a second there, I thought you’d chosen to stay quiet so your daddy wouldn’t hear us play.”

Bastard. He thinks my ill-fated situation is a joke. Something to use to his advantage without a single scrap of empathy.

I glance behind him and shelve my hands on my hips. “I’d like you to leave now. We’re done catching up.”

“Oh, Sin...” He pinches a lock of my hair and gently winds it around his forefinger, the act so unbearably tender it turns the carpet underfoot to quicksand. “We’re far from done.”

“I have nothing to say to you.”

The smile he wears flickers, ghostly in its appearance, hauntingly beautiful, but terrifying and marked with darkness. André doesn’t reply and on my next tattered breath, he unwinds the strands and slowly thumbs his mouth.

“I knew who you were from the second I saw those unforgettable eyes of yours, and now I know you’re Saporì’s *princess*.” His low chuckle creates a tsunami of goosebumps all over me. “Should we melt this frosty disposition of yours and find out how much heat you can handle before you get hitched?”

“Get the fuck out of my room.”

He secures my jaw in a lightning snap, the tips of his fingers hollowing my cheeks. “Your mouth is telling me fuck off, but those eyes of yours are saying something else. Say it again, but this time tell me to leave with your eyes. Bet you can’t...” His pupils flare.

I suck in sharply and straighten my spine that little bit more. My defensive stance earns a smooth smile. A roguish grin that tells me he’s not here for catching up. I narrow my eyes at his unshaven face with as much sincerity as I can

muster, cursing myself for tripping into the dark pools staring back at me.

“Leave. Me. Alone.” I punctuate each word, only to witness his cheek dent, a wicked dimple teasing me.

As he stands here, dominating the shadows, I remind myself that he’s a murderer who depletes decorum and hemorrhages arrogance. Regardless of those unpalatable qualities crisscrossed into his persona, it angers me how I still find him attractive.

“I’ll give you a four out of ten for effort.” He winks at me. “However, that telltale vein pulsating in your proud neck is like a wild horse without a stable. You haven’t changed one bit. Quietly hungry for adventure. Always aching for a charge of adrenaline to feed your soul. Indulge me. Tell me what fantasies you’ll play out for your new husband on your wedding night.” The gritty texture to his tone is provocative and rich in the purest form of seduction. “Will you think about me?”

I know he’s goading me for a reaction. However, my senses get all mixed up. From his deep carnal voice and cast-iron supremacy to his red-blooded intentions—all of him shakes the floor beneath me, weakening my morals. I’m alive next to him, just like I was every time he took me for a ride on his motorcycle. I haven’t felt that potent rush since. Not even in my rebellious teens, when I dated the older guy in school purely for the fact he owned a cool Honda.

Even then, his personality had failed to meet my needy expectations. I craved a deviant soul who would save me from the tedium of winter nights. Not unlike the young boy I once knew who’d created the perfect mold, yet refused to fit into it.

Although now that André’s dark vibrations sear my veins in this unusual way, I hate him for it. For assuming he has the right to abuse our innocent past like this. I refuse to let another man take from me, whether it’s my pride or my will. This underhanded deviant behavior is manipulation at the lowest level. He won’t succeed, because I respect myself too much to

give in. The devil's soul lives in a body primed for fucking and I'm perfectly capable of denying it.

When daring fingertips skate lower, he hooks them under the neckline of my top and drags the stretchy material toward my navel. I almost whimper when the pads of his fingers skim my already aroused nipples.

The second I squeeze my eyes closed to block the sight of him, memories of a younger, caring André flood my mind. Shutting him out doesn't make a difference, though. Every detail of his younger face is a hazy daydream, and his overwhelming presence is a reality.

"It's easier to see all of me when your eyes are open." His Colombian accent caresses my scalp, so the hairs rise in waves.

My heart hammers against the bone cage, protecting it, threatening a blip of sanity. Yet somehow, I manage to stay rigid like a sharp-edged sword ready to draw blood.

"Do you think your husband will bite and suck these tits while he fucks you?" My lashes flick up when he strokes the shivery flesh.

He teases my nipple with his thumb and forefinger, leaning into the movement, his physique so big it seems like he's taking up every corner of the cabin. Charges of electricity fire up my muscles, cruelly making my blood cells hotter than a sunbaked island where there's no shade.

"Stop it," I hiss, barely recognizing the desperation splintering my demand. "Back the fuck off, Dré. You can't barge into my room and grope me like we know each other. We don't. Not anymore."

He grabs my breast and squeezes again. It takes every last drop of stubbornness within me not to groan. His head moves from side to side, the motion controlled like a pendulum. "It's all in your eyes, Sin... I can see you aren't afraid of my monsters. You want an introduction to them?"

"No, I don't. But if you look hard enough, you'll find *my* monster. And it's pissed off." I grab his hand to shove it away,

but it doesn't budge. "I'm not here for your amusement. Now get the hell out of my room. Guard!" A yell scrapes out in a rasp. "Get this asshole out of here!"

In a flash of white wrapped muscle, large hands clamp my shoulders and I'm driven backward until my spine crashes into the wall. Only the door doesn't burst open, and Pup doesn't barge in to save me.

SINÉAD



I'm in the worst possible trouble.

His morals are ash-burned fragments left over from wrong decisions. Yet he's the one man challenging my restraint.

Liquored breath warms my cheek as he looms over me, his pelvis tight to my hip, pinning me in place.

"I'm enjoying our reunion, even if you're not. Tell me... what have you been up to all these years? Any serious boyfriends? Or maybe you should tell me how long you've been hanging around with Saporì?"

I arch a brow at him and opt to keep the details of my past where they belong. "I'd rather stick pins in my eyeballs than hang around with Frankie. He's an evil dickwad. I was enjoying freedom until he showed up out of the blue and kidnapped me. Just like that." I snap my fingers. "Now I'm engaged to an older guy whom I've never met in person, but know he has a face like a rat. So, turn around and continue walking. We have nothing more to talk about."

He smirks. "Oh, you're wrong. We have so much to discuss. And right now, I want details. I'm dying to know how you'll entertain your new husband." The firm grip burrowing into my cheeks moves to my mouth. "Will you kneel before him like a dutiful wife should and stretch these beautiful lips around his dick until he spurts his cum down your throat?" He manipulates my lips with his fingertips before forcing his middle and wedding finger into my mouth.

In the seconds he drives them inside, I take the opportunity to clench my teeth, only to meet a solid silver ring instead.

“Bite me and I’ll bite you back, Sin.” His stance widens to solidify him in place. “Or maybe you’d like that?”

His suggestion bumps into the dark thoughts of my mind. For some reason, it leads me to a place I never expected to visit, but feel drawn to the curiosity of it. I shake my head violently, not sure whether I’m trying to convince myself or him. I used to have a tendency to seek out danger just for the thrill of it, to feel something other than emptiness. That was before I settled into a life that made me numb.

He hums, rather than offer a response to my denial. “Will you gag on your husband’s dick while spittle clings to your chin and hot tears glide down these pretty pale cheeks of yours?” Tension sparks, the heat of his body wrongfully enticing.

“Suck,” he demands. I shiver, resisting the compulsion to obey. “Let me feel you suck.” I’m drowning in open water with the sensation teasing my tongue, still I won’t give in. If it’s possible, all the light evaporates from his eyes, so they become impossibly dark, signifying his change of mood. “I want to see your cheeks hollow for me.”

I’m attuned to the quick drop in his timbre, how it’s morphed from playful to animalistic. I should be freaking out by the sudden switch, except for some unknown reason it both intrigues and provokes me in equal measure.

Without thought of the consequences, my palm sails through the air and swats the coarseness of his strong jaw. Immediately, his fingers retreat and a ruthless hand grasps my throat. Not enough to fully strangle me, just enough to steal a single breath and secure my chin, so I can’t look anywhere else other than into his eyes.

“Fuck off, asshole.” I swallow against his palm as I try to sound in control of myself.

“You’re not playing nice,” he growls into the side of my face, slowly pulls back, and stares right at me. “Do that again

and I'll return the biting sting of pain tenfold. I know for a fact I'd get off on punishing your ass. It's these leather pants, Sin." His opposite hand sinks lower, the expanse of it cupping the leather hiding unforgivable dampness. "They do bad things to my dick."

"Why are you doing this? You've turned into a sick fuck, André Souza." I do my best to snarl at him, even though my unruly veins pulsate in places they shouldn't.

It's an irrational reaction to him, something we started as children and never had the chance to fully extinguish. He was the one person who gave me hope, and now he's the epitome of the very thing I despise.

"You're the one who hit me," he counters, brows raised. "I'm just trying to get reacquainted."

"It was inevitable you'd grow up to be just like your father," I say in a clipped tone.

André had told me monstrous stories about Elias Souza. They made my skin crawl. Mostly because I had sat under the weeping Hawthorn tree on the Hennessy estate and wished for a father who would protect me. Until I met a young boy who needed protection from his father's heartless lessons. Then I counted myself lucky.

Years later and the matured version of that sweet kid mirrors the grandiose attitude of his father and is very much artful in his sexual energy over women. He's clearly strived hard to live up to the Kingpin's expectations.

"I disagree." His forehead creases, a hint of anger digging out the shallow wrinkles. "I'm more easygoing than he ever was. The old man was a paranoid fucker, whereas I know you're happy to see me."

"The kid I knew wasn't like this. He wouldn't threaten to hurt me."

A shadow of something unrighteous moves across his expression. "As you can see, I'm no longer a kid. There's a difference between a spineless fucker who slaps women around and a man who offers next level sensations." The noise

he makes is like a laugh hacked with blades until it bleeds darkness. “All of a sudden, you’ve reappeared, Sin. I had to hear from Don Saporì that you’re his daughter, because you refused to talk to me. So, now I’m interested in learning how you’d entertain your husband once you finally belong to him.” His voice slips to tattered silk. “Call it curious intrigue.”

The pressure of his inflexible physique tight against mine confuses me to the point I’m dizzy. Unforgivable warmth blooms between my thighs, the heat of it raising my temperature.

“It’s none of your business. That’s personal,” I manage to grit out. “Wouldn’t you rather help me escape from a wedding I want no part of? I guess you really were lying when you promised to always be there for me.”

His muscles go rigid. “I can’t be there for someone who disappears in the middle of the night.”

“Understood. I’ll find my own way off this yacht—I’ll take my chances with the sharks instead of marrying Acer.”

Thinking about him makes my organs shrivel. It’s a sick revulsion that suffocates any light ahead of me. Once we’re officially married, I know he will subject me to whatever depraved acts he sees fitting for a new wife.

André’s lips twitch at the corners. “Are you asking me to save you?”

“I don’t need a man to save me. I was only asking for your help. Aren’t you the hotshot Colombian drug lord reigning over Miami? Surely you must have a little sway here?”

The pop of his thick brows tells me I’m close to touching a nerve. “You seem to know a lot about me. But I guess if you really knew what I was capable of, you’d choose better words. If I get you out of Acer’s orbit and remove you from this yacht, what would be in it for me?”

“A clear conscience, perhaps?” I frown up at him. “Knowing that you freed me from slavery. Isn’t that reward enough?”

He tilts his head to the side and laughs. “Nah, that’s not enough.” The hand around my neck tightens until I’m sure he’s about to kill me. “How about you choke on my dick?”

My nostrils flare as I try to suppress my panic. “No deal.”

“Fine.” His dark eyes stare right through me. “Do you think your new husband would inflict pain and then offer pleasure to intensify it?” André continues in a thick cadence, unaware of how it scares me.

A fear born from this unnatural craving I have for him. I squirm, conjuring my demons to help me from this nightmare, helplessly butting into the solid wall of tattooed muscle.

“Can’t you just do the right thing? Please?”

“Sure, I can.” The way he nudges my chin a bit higher gives him more authority. He’s so tall, the sheer height of him intimidating. “If you wrap your lips around my dick, then I’ll carry you off this boat and take you home myself.”

“Don’t do this.” I swallow hard, too aware of his red-hot touch like a blazing noose. “I won’t fall to my knees for you.”

“Fine. Don’t kneel then. It feels better this way.” He unhands my neck, only to shove his long fingers into my hair, so close to my skull that the roots burn.

Before I know it, he’s manhandling me onto the quilt and pushing me flat on my back, perpendicular to the edge. My head hangs off slightly, turning the room upside down.

When I catch his eyes, they fail to capture the pale glow from outside. They’re wholly black and rimmed with a gleam of ice white. A viciousness flashes in his obscure irises, the bottomless depths a hint of what’s to come and how fighting against it would be a losing battle.

No one rushes in to rescue me when I scream. Even Pup has put blinders on, having opted to ignore the beast unbuckling his belt and securing my wrists with it.

I kick, thrash, and plead with him to let me go, but he overpowers me at every turn.

“Think of this as fulfilling your debt to me for removing Acer from the picture.” He tightens the belt, making my clenched fists useless.

“How do I know you’re not just doing this for fun, that you won’t still leave me here afterward?”

“Oh, this is for fun.” The waspish sound of his zipper opening catches my full attention. “If you suck me off like the dirty girl you really are, I promise I’ll help you.”

“And what’s your promise worth to me?”

He cranes his neck to the side before lowering his jeans and boxer briefs to shackle his ankles. Strong muscular legs widen a fraction as he positions himself over the top of my face, the threat of him so close. I blink at the sight of his thick dick. It’s far bigger than Liam’s and appears rock hard as if it were chiseled from stone.

“Freeing you from Acer is me having your back, Sin. It’s done. Now pay up.”

It’s only now, when he lowers the soft, satiny tip to my lips, that I realize I’m about to make a shameful deal with the devil. I’m bargaining with one criminal to free me from another. Except this particular monster has the power to ruin me from within. Because he’s not the boy I once loved with my silly schoolgirl heart.

All this man craves is supremacy, and this evening I’m the victim he’s chosen to rule over.

My heart soars with the unrighteousness of his deviant request. This isn’t the path I would willingly choose, but it’s the only fork in the road that’s visible to me.

“Open up.” His spine bows and his hands are flattened at either side of my waist. The vertical magnitude of him suffocates any trace of light, and if I’m not mistaken, the deep tone of his husky voice is strained.

“Promise me...” I say in a mindless hurry as he takes the opportunity to thrust his hips with brute force and spear my mouth halfway.

“Fuck...” he hisses out the word. “I promise you won’t marry Acer.” And just as he spits out the declaration, he rises, slides his big hands under my head, and drives his dick the whole way into my throat.

It’s that basic act of brutally cradling my nape with such raw power that reaffirms who’s in charge. Yet somehow, beyond reasonable rationalization, I’m turned on. Which only gets worse after he snarls, “That’s it, Sin. Take it like a dirty fucking bitch.”

Unflattering choking noises follow the gag reflexes that make my head bob involuntarily. I’m completely at his mercy, jaw lax to allow the intrusion, liquid humiliation flowing from my eyes as he punishes my mouth for whatever reason he deems necessary. I inhale through my nose in staggered intervals at every chance, aware of the strings of saliva leaking from the corners of my stretched lips.

“Take every inch of it. I want to see my cum all over your beautiful pale skin.” He continues to fuck my face, his balls slamming into my eyes and nose as he picks up speed.

While he’s vulnerable, I could clamp my jaw shut and inflict the worst possible pain, but where would that get me? Strangled and dumped in the ocean, never to be seen again.

As if sensing the manic thoughts in my mind, he withdraws, roughly slots his hands under my armpits, drags me off the bed, and positions me before him. My knees dig into the plush carpet, my bound wrists fixed at my pelvis.

“Let me see those eyes.” He puts two fingers under my chin and gently tips my head back, the gesture almost tender. “Eyes up.”

In the darkness swallowing us both, he stares down at me with ferocious intensity, with the eyes of a man who shows no regret for this savage transaction.

When he fists the base of his dick, it makes it look longer, stiffer, and if at all possible, angrier. Brushing the tip across my lips, he paints them with my leftover saliva and the saltiness of his pre-cum.

“Look at you.” He stuffs his fingers into my hair. “So, fucking sexy on your knees, waiting for my cum.”

My skin tingles, his praise the kindling to a new fire in my core. It catches me off guard, the swollen sensation of my arousal a hateful deception.

“Open,” he orders, the word hoarse. “I want to see my whole dick rammed in your fuckable mouth.” When I hesitate, he wallops the length against my closed lips. “Would you rather we played a little rougher?”

I’ve no other option than to loosen my jaw or meet the wickedness tarnishing his dark aura. Something tells me it would amplify beyond control if I put up a fight.

This time, when he slides his heavy dick into my mouth, it feels more substantial—harder. His grip on my hair tightens as he thrusts in deep.

My stomach heaves at the force, the length and girth too much to withstand at this angle. I retch and gag, the motion of it hitting the back of my throat nothing less than dominating.

It was never like this with Liam. Then again, our sex life had fizzled out after a few months. Sex just wasn’t the same when we were sober the next morning. As for his dick, it lacked the sizable proportion of the one destroying me.

I’m so confused. My emotions have flipped inside out from the wrath of this hurricane. It shouldn’t spark my blood cells with wicked energy, nor should his sexy grunts of satisfaction make me feel alive. It’s all wrong.

I feel all of him, not just the dick destroying my throat, but the vibrations of his lust connecting with mine, creating a beast so carnal it might kill me.

André fixes his gaze on my entire face, studying my wide, teary eyes and spittle-soaked chin. The fierce grunt coming from the back of his throat only serves to heighten my senses, to reverberate through me like an electric shock. He’s enjoying this, maybe too much, as he pistons in and out, each time more violently than the last.

Over and over, he increases the intensity and then pulls out to let me gasp for air. Inhaling and exhaling so quickly makes me light-headed. Just when I think he'll take it easy, he secures my drool-covered chin with harsh fingers, tips my head, and shoves himself back inside.

“Fuck, yeah.”

I'm completely at his mercy. Tears track my flaming cheeks and the treacherous throbbing between my thighs is something I refuse to accept.

Nothing about this is how it should be. Whatever understanding we once had in another life is well and truly dead. But it's so terribly unfair how the thrill of his violence calls to me on a level I've never encountered. Not with Liam. Not with any man. Our bond always was intense. But this overshadows those innocent threads and creates something far more inexplicable.

It's electrifying to finally be next to him. Secretly, although I'll never admit it, forcing me to swallow his pre-cum stirs up my demons and invites them to dance with him.

Right when my own arousal heightens, saltiness bursts inside my mouth. He yanks his dick out and fists the length, ejecting warm cum all over my tongue. It splatters and spurts, hitting me in clumps. From my mouth to my chin, he marks me like it's his signature.

I blink up at him when he smears it over my lips like it's a creamy gloss, using the gentle crown of his otherwise violent dick. When he's done, he scoops up the residue and slips his coated fingers into my mouth. This time he's purposefully disciplined—gentle.

It's cruelly seductive how he hunkers to eye level and stares at the erotic mess he's made. His eyes, liquid pools crowned by bright white swirl with dark lust. I'm hyperaware of how unsettled I feel, like I want him to taste himself on me.

If he leans in any closer, he'll suck me into his black magic spell, and I'll lose myself. Luckily, after this evening, we'll never cross paths again.

That awareness has me sharpening the jagged edges I've cultivated within me.

“Happy now?” I bend my elbows to raise my wrists in the tight space between us. “Take the belt off so I can clean your cum off my face.”

“Lie back.”

“Why?”

“Do it,” he snaps the order under his breath. Ignoring his own command, he shoves me, showing a level of impatience that I don't wish to test.

Still bound, I helplessly topple and for the first time since he's arrived in my room, I'm alarmed by the daredevil expression darkening his features. My heart pounds, the erratic pulse slamming in my throat. He doesn't relish softness or clemency. Dexterous fingers pop open the button at my navel and yank the zipper lower.

“What the hell are you doing?”

He stops moving, his muscles rigid from restraint. Wild eyes drill into the opening he's created, his marginally contained disposition turning predatory. “Confirming you enjoyed it.”

Stuffing his hand inside my pants, he angles his wrist, pushes my panties to the side, and drags his fingers in the shameful, slick heat awaiting him.

“Hmm...” he grunts. “Just as I thought.” White teeth sink into his full lower lip as his fingers skate over my swollen clit, sending lightning bolts through me.

Rather than explore any further, his throat contracts as he swallows, and his hand slowly exits as if he's struggling to remove it. “Your new husband will be one lucky bastard. I knew that wasn't one-sided, Sin. After sampling what you have to offer, he'll lose his fucking mind over you.”

“Husband? You... lied to me...” My pulse races as he loosens the leather belt. “How dare you, André fucking Souza... You promised me I wouldn't have to marry Acer. You

promised!” I yell at him, his deceit crushing my heart while his cum dries on my face.

He exhales, stiffly governed as if practicing the art of self-mastery, a savage creature learning a new method of hunting. The smell of him, so earthy and smoky, mellows into a warm scent like the glowing embers of a peat-burning stove at last call.

“You’re no longer engaged to him... as promised.”

His lungs expand, the inhale deep, and the hot exhale hinting woody, sweet notes of whiskey.

“What are you not telling me?”

My skin involuntarily prickles, the sensation luring me into open water where I’ll surely drown.

“If the foreplay is as much fun as the fucking...” Teasing lips move next to my ear. “... I look forward to clashing control with you.”

“What have you done?” I hold my breath, aware of his movements, how his t-shirt worships every muscular curvature as he pulls up his boxers, followed by his jeans, and grabs the corner of the quilt.

Moonlight casts him in both darkness and liquid silver, giving him an out-of-this-world duplicity. A devil kissed with remarkable beauty.

“I’m the husband you’ll crawl to. The man who won your hand in a poker game before I fucked your greedy mouth.” He sweeps up the last dregs of cum on my face with the Saporì quilt. “You’re free from that motherfucker, Acer, and as a bonus, you’re marrying me instead. Once the speedboat returns with our rings and a wedding officiant, you’ll become *my* wife.”

My veins run cold. “You’re kidding me? You wouldn’t... This is patriarchal bullshit. I don’t want to marry anyone, especially not *you*.”

He was never interested in me before he found out I was Frankie’s sole heir. This is underhanded mafia tactics.

“It’s too late. I won.” He angles away and on my next strung-out breath, he adds, “Wash your face. I’ll wait upstairs while you pack your shit together.” Our eyes lock. “You might have escaped Acer, but there’s no way you’ll get away from me a second time.”

SINÉAD



“Asshole!” I scream after André, watching his muscular physique exit my airless cabin.

My lungs finally deflate, but my mind conjures all sorts of visual hate crimes intended for my so-called father, who’d tossed my life into the middle of a poker table. One minute I’m set to marry an old banker, the next I’m handed over to a notorious cartel leader.

Frankie has no honor or moral code, nor does the arrogant asshole who’d marched into my room as if he owned the world.

I’ve become an insignificant woman controlled by men. My restricted life boiled down to blood cells and whispers of power I’d never have. My erratic heart slams against every rib with so much force, one of them is bound to split in two.

I’m completely disarmed and wearing damp panties that were purchased by an unknown servant. The sense of my own deception leaves me lost in the aftermath of André’s cruel game.

It’s infuriating how he stirs an unworldly reaction from within me. For some crazy, illogical reason, I was turned on by the very man claiming me as his wife, as if tormenting me is a sick fantasy he’s suppressed all these years. Frustration heats the liquid fury gathering behind my eyes—tears that I’d never let fall.

Criminals like him choose to stay on their unholy thrones where the laws are invisible, and dominance is a way of life.

I'm nothing to André, other than an heir to an underworld I never want to step foot in.

I swivel on the spot, looking about the room for an escape I'll never find, almost laughing at my shadowy reflection in the mirror. My skin glows as if the moon has gifted me with its radiance, while my face rests in the darkness where my future lies.

There's not much to pack other than a toothbrush and the blister packs of birth control Frankie's doctor had prescribed. That's it. The clothes hung up in the wardrobe were bought for me by another stranger. I have nothing of my own here other than these leather pants and the top I've rewashed in the basin, rejecting the Saporì feminine standards. I'm a tomboy, not a Barbie doll.

"André tells me you're happy with the new arrangement." Frankie appears in the doorway, crosses over the threshold, and casually slides a hand into the pocket of his pewter-colored chinos. "He's better-looking than the American. I'll give him that, even if his thoughtless, psychotic traits are lethal." He expels a jet of air from his nose as if he's cracking a joke. "André emulates his late father, Elias. That man was a bloodthirsty son of a bitch with a temper like a stick of dynamite. Much like Elias, you never quite know where you stand with André. You're always walking on ice, waiting for it to crack, and just when you think you're about to sink into the coldest, darkest waters, he pushes you over a cliff edge instead." Frankie moves further into the room like a snake slithering through long grass. "I guess that's a bit of fatherly advice. He'll make you think you're special, *picciridda*, and then he'll wipe his hands clean. Where Acer would be molding clay in my hands—André is an activated grenade."

"You bastard!" Rage propels me forward like a reckless warrior navigating a battlefield. I draw back my shoulders and glare up at him, fully aware his obedient lapdog, Pup, has moved into position beside me.

"Spare your *fatherly* advice. You gave that title up the day you walked out on my mother. I'm a Quinn. My blood flames with Irish heritage, not spineless Saporì. I swear this to you,

Frankie... One of these days, the last thing you'll see will be my face as I'm hacking my way through your jugular."

As the threat spits out, Pup grabs a fistful of my hair, yanks my head toward the carpet, and rams his knee into my ribs. I stifle a yelp, managing not to cry, bending my quaking knees for balance.

"Oh, Sinéad," Frankie begins with a condescending voice. "I should be proud of your fiery temperament. It's odd though. I feel nothing." His shoulders move with gentle ambivalence. "Perhaps if I'd snatched you away from your mother at birth, then maybe I'd feel something other than... emptiness."

"The only emotion I have for you is loathing." My breath comes out hard and fast.

Salt-and-pepper eyebrows tug together in contemplation. "Your childish petulance is disappointing for a woman your age. I guess disappointment is something, right?" His left brow rises in question. "It's very unexpected for André to suggest an attachment—to a woman. He's the Souza wild card. I guess the promise of more authority would prompt a man to do uncharacteristic things."

I strain against the painful grip close to my burning scalp, unable to stand upright. From this angled position, I'm forced to witness Frankie's diabolical calmness and icy composure without any way to retaliate.

"Misbehave and I *will* put a bullet in that disrespectful mouth of yours. However, I would rather my plans unfold first. Which means you'll be the last one to die, after you've watched your loved ones suffer." He sighs as if he's lost interest in the conversation. "You'll marry André and if you choose to misbehave..."

He unpockets his hand, bringing a cell phone with it and taps the screen. After a beat, he rotates the device and lowers it to my line of vision. There before me, Mammy is serving a pint behind the bar in The Rusty Shamrock in real time. It's a live video, which means he has men in Donegal—watching over her.

“Bronagh has aged well. I’d fuck that ass again for old time’s sake. Wouldn’t it be a shame for her soft skin to melt right off her breakable bones? It would be easy. A quick instruction for the men watching her to obey my order. They’d trap her inside your quaint little establishment before it burns to rubble.”

My lungs shudder. “Tell your men to leave her alone and get the hell out of my home.”

“That’s not likely, picciridda.” Frankie’s menacing gaze catches the moon’s radiance, giving his sharp features a look of pure evil. “My men will stay in place until I give the order to either kill everyone you know or return to me. Do as you’re told or...” He angles the small screen away from me, stealing the sight of Mammy from me for what could be the last time, and turns it off. “...your actions will be the death of her. Conduct yourself with dignity like a true Saponi, recite your vows, and sail off into the sunrise with your new husband. And before you try to escape the Souzas, you should know they don’t show mercy to insurgents.” He glances at the back of his hand, flicks it around, and assesses his clean, short nails. “Don’t worry, we’ll meet each other again. I’ll be close by, waiting to see how everything works out.”

“If I marry him, will you leave her alone? Will you have your men walk away?”

“We shall see. One step at a time, picciridda. I can’t have you running off without fulfilling your important duties.” A sinister smirk twitches the corners of his mouth. “Your mother is safe for the time being. It’s best if you leave her out of the conversation once you’re married, though. If I catch wind of the Souzas sniffing around your mother, I’ll finish her without hesitation.” A long sigh depicts his growing boredom. “Now, let’s go upstairs. It’s been a long evening and I’d like to spend the rest of it in the jacuzzi. The sooner you get off my yacht, the better.”

Pup uncurls his fingers and shakes them viciously to free them from the tangled strands. When I straighten, he meets my hateful scowl with a blank expression. A splintering ache stabs

my ribs. Yet I hide the grimace, reluctant to let either of them see me suffer.

I snatch my purse from the bed, sling the strap over my shoulder, and start walking. Sensing them close behind, I don't stop until I've forced myself to nonchalantly climb the stairs.

A cool breeze prickles my bare arms, the smell of the ocean strong. Every stiff step mimics the quick tempo of my pulse, adrenaline controlling the rhythm. When I turn toward the outer deck, my gaze spears André. In that microscopic beat of a butterfly's wings, his eyes find mine.

The clashing connection spooks my soul and unsettles all the treasured echoes of our past. Those sacred months we'd shared together before he conformed to the hateful traits of his gangster father. I freeze, palming my swollen heart to steady the thrumming blood vessels.

"This way." Pup appears beside me, snares my wrist, and frog-marches me toward the stern, where a bunch of men have gathered like crooked crows.

Most of them blend into the night sky, except for André in his pristine white t-shirt that mimics the high moon, his majestic stature a head taller than the guy beside him. Both men appear to be similar in age, early thirties, with no intention of settling down anytime soon.

His friend looks every bit a gangster too with a faded crew cut and distinguished air of vanity. He stands next to André in a pair of bright-white Nike sneakers, the honorary best man. Creamy shorts show off lean tattooed legs, and an untucked shirt splashed with a peachy pattern has a few buttons purposefully left undone. Ink creeps upward from beneath the shirt, rising up his chest to his peppered jaw.

Although his biceps protrude with muscles and shaded art, his build is more athletic than sculpted from the god of war, like my old friend.

André pierces me with dusky-black eyes that don't stray, not even when the colorfully dressed guy leans in and mutters words for his ears only. My stomach swoops when the corner

of André's mouth curls ever so slightly. The secret smile vanishes quicker than my heartbeat stutters.

Pup manhandles me into the center of the small gathering, a lost lamb thrown to savage lions. Fuckers. My stomach falls, empty and defeated.

I fold my arms and inhale a cloud of tobacco, doing my best to look unaffected by the unjustness. Opposite me, André speaks to another man. My gaze drills into their side profiles, trying my best to lip-read, but unable to figure out what they're saying.

Frankie joins the onlookers and glances at his Rolex. "Are we ready?"

"Always." André saunters across the synthetic teak flooring made to look like wooden planks, his confident strides muted by the non-slip material under his biker boots.

He's closely followed by the second man whose complexion is darker, his countenance less relaxed. A long curb chain hangs from his neck, on display over a khaki-colored t-shirt. He fixes the collar on his denim jacket, simultaneously revealing the revolver fixed to the leather belt of stonewashed jeans.

André takes position in front of me and glares at Pup. "I'm marrying her. Not you. Back the fuck up," he growls, low and hoarse.

The heat of my chaperone's close proximity cools when he leaves me to stand unaided and joins Saponi at the railing beside us.

André moves into position, his men at either side of him, equally protecting as they are participating in this one-sided union. Unknown faces dot the deck, all of them bearing witness to the unconventional ceremony about to take place under the stars. My barely contained wrath hisses in the pit of my stomach until I feel faint from the force of it.

When my gaze locks with André's, I'm swept away in a fatal daydream, caught between a second and a lifetime. The rush of it ensnares me in a trap. Tousled hair falls in an

anarchic jumble over his forehead like it used to do when he pulled off his motorcycle helmet to talk to me.

“Will you ever tell me who hurts you like this?”

My best friend tugs off his white helmet. Another gift from the wealthy Mad Mick Hennessy—his mafia grandfather. Static causes jet-black strands to land on his brow with chaotic flare.

I can't ignore the warmth in my tummy when he brushes my cheek with the pads of his fingers, tracing the healing bruise on my sore cheekbone. “It's still swollen.”

I've never felt this close to a boy before—to anyone. Or maybe this feeling is because I hate being touched.

It's not that Mammy's boyfriend touches me inappropriately; he just enjoys throwing his fists about. Which is every random time he visits her. Ninety-nine percent of the time, he's messed up on a cocktail of drugs and alcohol. The last beating he gave me was after I'd caught him sniffing up rows of white powder on the coffee table.

Mammy has tried to stop him from barging over the threshold to torment us, except his temper is lethal and his bloodline the very same as her employer. We don't stand a chance.

There's nothing André can do to help me, especially when he looks up to the guy.

“It's nothing, Dré,” I lie. “You said you wouldn't talk about it.”

“I know.” He shrugs. “It's just... I'll cut up anyone who hurts you, Sin. I promise. I could sit outside your cottage and wait?”

“He doesn't come every day. Sometimes it's weeks.” I lie for my friend's benefit. The longest we've been spared humiliation and pain is days. “So, please, just forget about him. Mammy said she'll take care of it.”

“One day I’ll find out who it is, and when I do, he’ll deeply regret messing with my best friend.”

“You’re not a killer, Dré.”

His expression softens, and in a heartbeat, he flings his arms around my shoulders and squeezes. We stand there, hugging each other at our meeting spot under the big fairy tree as the golden sun disappears. “I’m a Souza and a Hennessy. It’s our way of life. Papá said killing is the only thing I’ll be good at.”

“That’s not true, Dré.”

He releases me, his fingers catching in the tangled lengths of my hair as it dances with the rainy wind. Messy damp strands stretch from him to me until there’s nothing keeping us together, only whispers of a promise. “You don’t have to be like them.”

“It’s in my blood. And when I’m old enough to have my own gun, I’ll shoot the coward who thinks it’s okay to hit you. That’s a promise.”

I blink a few times until the boyish face I recall so clearly morphs into an older version. Still every bit as handsome, except villainous intentions darken his features.

A gray-suited wedding officiant speaks eloquently, ignorant to the fact I’m not a willing participant. Not now. Not ever. The few failed relationships I’ve had turned out to be major disappointments. So, it’s not surprising that I’d end up coerced into tethering myself to a man with a monster living under his skin.

“I do.” André’s sonorous voice breaks the momentary silence and in the following hush, I realize it’s my turn. His declaration sweeps through me like wildfire, tightening my chest with flaming ropes, and I struggle to breathe.

Little by little, regretful tremors grow stronger and the two words I’m expected to repeat stick in my throat like razor blades. I glance up at him from under my lashes, resentment

clashing with intoxicating temptation. He stares right at me, his dark eyes and enigmatic expression my weakness and my downfall.

“Your turn, Sin,” he announces, swiping his thumb over his lower lip.

Adrenaline surges through me like a lethal shot of heroin. My stomach roils, causing me to sway. It’s either from starvation or the rebellious tingles showering my skin with goosebumps.

In a burst of energy, André circles my waist with large hands. Effortless strength secures me in place while he offers a subtle smile that throws me back in time again.

His cheek dimples behind a coarse short beard and moonlight cracks the bottomless depths of his eyes. It’s a look that dares me to believe he’s not like the rest of these assholes. And then I realize this is how villains are made. He’s luring me into the darkness with an anchor attached to my heart. So, when I fall in, I’ll never be able to reach the surface.

I continue to quietly gaze up at him, forcing myself not to break eye contact, not even when Frankie says my name with a sharp bite. “Sinéad.”

My heart beats faster and I swallow to suppress the insane flutters in my empty stomach. It’s unknown to me if they’re trying to escape the fire André has started within me or if it’s intense fury from living under Frankie’s threat. Either way, I pull myself together and recite the binding words in a rushed breath. “I do.”

When my agreement drifts out in the open, there’s a noticeable change in André’s face. His full lips twitch in a way that’s less inviting than it is provoking. The corners of his mouth curve upward to his eyes, his contagious grin almost impossible to resist. But I do. I bite my bottom lip and root my feet in place to show strength. There’s nothing to smile about.

The next thing I know tattooed fingers slide a ring onto my wedding finger, sealing my fate with obsidian diamond encrusted gold. Suddenly I’m aware of movement again, how

the tides tug at the yacht and gentle waves create a back and forth motion. André uncurls my fist and drops a matching wedding band into my palm.

“Nearly done.” He winks at me as a sea breeze agitates a lock of hair hooking his brow. This man would be the death of me. “Then we’ll go home.”

“My home is in Ireland.”

“Your home is with me.”

I shake my head. “My home is with my mammy.”

“I’m your family now.” His boots move when he stretches out his neck as if he’s governing a source of energy or managing the short fuse to his lethal temper. “Put the ring on my finger, so we can get off this fucking boat and celebrate.” The confidence he was born with flows from his tone with effortless seduction. Its coarse bass texture reaches my bones, so they quake. I don’t stand a chance.

The second I take his big hand in mine and force the ring along his sturdy finger, my knees weaken. This is it. I’m a married woman. My life will never be the same.

“You may kiss the bride.”

I release his hand like lightning and stagger backward. “No fucking way.” Being mauled in front of these mobsters is a step too far. “We’re married. That’s all you need. I won’t kiss you as if this is my happy ever after.”

André runs his tongue over his top teeth and takes a slow breath. “Come here, Sinéad.”

“Fuck off!”

It takes one more step for Pup’s unmerciful grasp to yank my loose hair and the sole of his boot to meet the back of my knees. Bracing doesn’t stop me from collapsing, though. When I hit the deck, an aggressive whimper scrapes the inside of my throat, clawing its way out.

“Get the fuck off me!” I howl behind a sob. “I’ll kill you all. Don’t think I won’t.”

When my head is forcefully angled to a star-laden sky, I witness my new husband's transformation from imperial god to fierce beast. My blood freezes. André's sharp features fuse with flickering shadows, his frightening expression so very different and utterly sadistic, as if death itself whispers in his ear. A terrifying temper ripples through his tense form, the richness of his striking eyes turning to a malignant shade of ire.

The slight ocean breeze becomes a polar squall in the moment of chaos, when he draws a matte black revolver and squeezes the trigger.

No hesitation.

No debate.

No question.

As the killer bullet rips through the salty sea air, his poignant words roll deeper than thunder. "No one touches my wife, but me."

The second a coppery casing drives into Pup's skull, crimson spatters embellish snow-white upholstery and warm droplets rain down on me from above. As his rotten soul escapes him, Pup nosedives to the deck beside me, his fingers still tangled in the lengths of my hair. I ignore the commotion and work quickly until I'm finally free of him. The carnage decorating my clothes has no effect on me. I just stare at the glossy puddle dappled with brain debris in silence.

Justice is served.

From the corner of my eye, a male figure lowers to his haunches. My scalp prickles. I slide my unaffected gaze away from the dead man to find André Souza holding a gun in one hand and the other, jutting out, ready for me to latch onto it. His waiting palm is big and robust, the substantial hand of a killer. "If a Souza falls, they always rise. Get up."

I should be sickened by his unremorseful actions, find an escape route, or even snatch the weapon so close to me. To save myself from this mess. Except, a surreptitious slice of my

soul is grateful to André—for defending me—even when I need that same protection from him.

My blood runs excruciatingly cold, making my teeth chatter and my limbs uncontrollably tremble. Frankie was right. André is unpredictable, lawless, and I'm in full sight of him—his wife for as long as he deems the position occupied.

“Congratulations.” His head rotates, dragging his glare to Frankie for a beat. In the same breath, a charming grin follows his returning gaze. “You’re officially a Souza.” His scruffy cheek dimples as he chuckles from deep within his chest. His ruggedly handsome smirk obliterates the warring emotions within me. It’s no wonder he gets away with murder. “Say goodbye to your old life, Sinéad. You’re mine now.”

SINÉAD



The Morning After

“We’ve got a lot of catching up to do.” He teases the scruff on his jaw as he inspects every inch of me.

“How about less catching and more releasing?” I scowl up at the sheer size of him, chiseled, inked, and stark naked.

“How about a tour of your new home?” André doesn’t give me a chance to reply. Instead, he seizes my waist, hauls me skyward, and throws me over an oxlike shoulder. I yelp from the shock of it and instantly regret the feeble sound when he laughs again. “First up, the best part of the house.”

“Christ, Dré, put me the hell down,” I growl into the curve of his spine, my line of vision unfairly drawn to golden ass cheeks—round and firm. “This isn’t my home and I’m not a dumb rag doll you can throw about. If you’re going to show me a freaky dungeon with chains and shit, you can fuck right off.”

I barely notice him swivel or feel the confident strides he takes to carry me over oyster-colored square tiles toward an open plan state-of-the-art kitchen. Being this close to his warm skin is disorientating.

Gravity follows the weightlessness of movement, and he slams my ass onto the silver-veined marble countertop of a colossal entertainment-sized peninsula.

The effortless way he manhandles me into position to suit his whimsy mood rattles me to the core. I thump his chest in a

pointless show of resilience. He snares my wrists quicker than a viper attacks and wedges himself between my knees.

“Tell me to fuck off one more time...” He secures my hands behind my back, which brings his solid torso closer. A faint haze of sandalwood cologne still clings to his skin. “... and I’ll bend you over this kitchen island, grease my dick with butter, and slide it into your tight little ass.” His voice slips to the darkest corners of the earth.

His carbon-colored eyes take on a life of their own, blending with enlarged pupils, so a haunting fluidity swirls like perpetual tornadoes.

“You’re disgusting.” The vertebrae in my spine lock, simultaneously brushing my traitorous nipples against the fabric of the enormous cotton t-shirt I’m wearing.

“And you’re wondering how good it would feel.” He uncuffs my wrists, a half smile denting his cheek in an erotic and utterly infuriating way.

“I am not,” I whisper-hiss, forcing conviction. “I’m actually wondering how far your ego stretches.”

On my last word, large hands lock on my bare skin, the expanse of his masculine fingers gripping my thighs like hooks. I flinch, swallow, and instantly look down at the designs coming alive as the veins on the tops of his hands protrude.

A blood-red signet ring hugs his pinky finger, looking out of place beside his diamond wedding band. The one ring that links me to him by vows.

I squirm in vain. It’s impossible to break away from a man of his influence. “Can you give me some space?” I growl, tilting backward. “You’re crowding me. It’s suffocating.”

But he has me trapped on the countertop, unable to snap my legs shut because his unmovable physique is glued in place before me. The naked, notorious criminal who runs organized crime circles has me cornered in his kitchen.

“You shouldn’t fight against me, Wifey.” The hoarse way he pronounces my pet name, with its singsong depth and gritty

rasp, is downright filthy.

His expression strains, a grimace tightening those pillowy lips of his. “I’m trying very hard to be on my best behavior for you. As I’ve grown older, my patience threshold has drastically reduced.” The bite of his statement erases every trace of friendliness. “Because of our past, I’ll go easy on you. But if you refuse to think of this place as your home, I’ll fuck you in every room, on every surface, and in front of every single window until it’s imprinted on you. And there are a lot of windows.”

“You shouldn’t have married me.” I struggle against him, not ready to give up the fight. “You could have helped me get me away from Frankie and then sent me back to Ireland. Only that’s what the old André would have done. He wasn’t conceited. But, oh no... this version of you had to flaunt your authority like an evil drug lord.”

The tips of his fingers dig deeper, hunting for a reaction from me. I mentally count to ten, hoping it would serve as a distraction to the double-crossing flutters in my belly. “I see myself as...” he states, pausing to hum in thought for a split second, “... as a dark knight. The hero in your story as it happens.”

“A knight?” I roll my eyes. “You’re the villain, Dré. The bad guy who would fuck his own ass if it was physically possible.”

He laughs—a dangerously dirty rumble from deep within his chest. “My dick belongs inside my wife. Women love villains. It gives them justification for a surrender.”

“I’m nothing like those pitiful, mindless women who want a dominating asshole and his moody temper. I just want to go back to Ireland—alone.”

“Are you trying to piss me off, so I’ll fuck the bitchiness out of you? Is that it?”

“Fu—” I stop myself short of telling him to fuck off, afraid of the consequences. If he forces himself on me, I’d never forgive him.

“Too late for regrets. It’s done,” he continues matter-of-factly. “We’re hitched. You’ll receive the same protection as any other Souza—unless we’re fucking, and then all bets are off.”

A chill whispers through my skeleton. The surface I’m sitting on suddenly feels unbalanced, and every wisp of oxygen I inhale turns glacial. Despite his quick-changing mood, when he flicks the tip of his tongue between his lips, the wintry atmosphere switches to solar-powered heat and my lungs hunt for a breath. My mouth dries, equal parts attraction to irritation. I’m not the type to wilt under a man, nor the kind of woman who’d let herself submit to him either.

I narrow my eyes, my glare flinty. “I’m not interested in fucking you. I’d rather not join the long line of... your ghosts of past fucks, and I certainly won’t become anyone’s whore.”

“Ghosts of past fucks.” His wicked laugh skitters down my spine, the sensation warm and tingly. “I’m not just anyone. I’m the baddest motherfucker you’ll ever get to know up close and personal. And the only man you’ll ever call your husband. Therefore, it’s only fair that you...” His chin lowers, bringing his whiskered mouth closer to mine. “... give me your submission when I command it.”

I’m painfully aware of the traitorous wetness blooming between my thighs, the arousal activated by this frustrating man.

My hands settle in place on the smooth skin of his imperial chest. “I’ll never be who you want me to be.”

“You already are.”

I raise an eyebrow at him, playing it cool even though I’m losing the battle to resist. “This isn’t real, Dré. We want different things. I’m not in love with you. I never will be. You’re just like the rest of the merciless gangsters out there. Being a Souza doesn’t change that.”

Thick brows pinch together and his pretty lashes dagger in the direction of my parted lips. “I’m more powerful than any of those fuckers. I give the orders—everyone else obeys.

That's the difference. As for love, that nonsense has nothing to do with it. This is simply an alliance, made easier by the fact we used to be friends. The sooner you accept your role, the easier your life will be."

I wrap my hands around his wrists and squeeze, hoping he'll let go. Instead, the pain of his viselike grip intensifies.

"Well, I have news for you, Hotshot." My words rush out on a heavy breath. "I've no plans to become a humored housewife. I'll live my life the way I want to. Don't bother insulting me with expensive gifts and money in exchange for a wife who's seen and not heard. I might be stuck with you for the foreseeable future, but I'll do things my way. I'll earn my own money in a job of my choosing and I'll have my own friends."

André tips his head back and roars with laughter, the sonorous rumble echoing from the high ceiling. "A job? Seriously. Doing what? Drug running doesn't seem like it would be your thing. Are you good with numbers?"

"I'll do bar work." I scowl at him. "Does that meet your approval? Or would you prefer me to sit quietly on the couch as your new pet?"

"I've already got a pet. I don't need another one. And believe me when I say this..." His eyes crease at the corners as if he's thinking about something carnal. "... I *want* to hear you. The sound of your screams will be music to my ears."

André releases me like the contact scalds him. The space he surrenders feels lonely. I'm colder. Confused. Spiraling into this nightmare without a compass.

He backs up, his majestic dick the color of anger, with a silky purplish hue and a bulging vein running the length of the shaft. As he moves, the tempting crown bobs against the etched landscape of his abdomen where a trail of shorn hairs are barely visible.

Breaking eye contact, he turns sideways, opens a white wall-mounted cupboard, and takes out a mirrored box.

Flipping the lid up, he plucks out a paper-rolled cigarette and a silver Zippo.

“Smoke?” His brows drift up as he gently bites the tip and sparks the lighter so the end catches fire. Instantly, the earthy aroma of marijuana permeates the air.

I shake my head and watch him shrug, drop the Zippo inside the box, and return it to the cupboard. “How about waffles?”

“Waffles?” I repeat indignantly. “Is that the street name for a drug that’ll knock me out for days?”

André chuckles from the back of his throat while propping his bare ass against a black inset oven so polished it appears unused. Watching me, he draws the hash into his lungs and traps the fumes for a few seconds.

“Why would I want you unconscious for days?” he says slowly around a plumed exhale. “You owe me a wedding night... and that involves active participation.”

I narrow my eyes at the sight of him, so confident in his lavish surroundings. “You’ll be waiting a while for my compliance, Hotshot. I’m not interested in consummating this marriage.”

Even though I project courage, my voice is small. Everything is small next to him.

“A while isn’t that long. I’ll wait,” he speaks slowly, eyeing my rigid position perched on his countertop like a new possession. “Letterman makes batches of waffles. There’s a shitload in the freezer for the days when he’s too fucked to bother. How about a fresh coffee—” His eyes dart left where a jangly noise catches his attention. “Speaking of pets.”

As he steps forward, I look to the open front door where a beautiful girl lets herself in. My intestines coil, forcing a shaky palm to my stomach as I crunch over a little. Rather than my pulse speeding up, it misses a few beats. Seconds linger in limbo, afraid to tick as a teenager strolls toward us carrying a large paper bag.

From sunshine-blond hair threaded with rich chestnut to her innocent, wide ocean eyes, she looks old enough to know better and young enough to still own her innocence. A natural café au lait complexion is blemish free, the advantage of youth giving her an edge.

“How’s my girl this morning?” André cocks his head, looking to the doorway where she just came from.

This beautiful girl is his pet?

“Dré... please!” The teen slams a hand over her eyes. “Here...” She tosses the bag so it skids across the tiles. “That’s your dry cleaning from last night. Daenis is coming now. She’s in the hallway with Reno. He’s talking to the security guy out there.”

André grabs the bag by the handle, pivots, and sets it beside me on the counter. A cloud of smoke screens his scrunched forehead as the blunt dangles from his lips while he rummages inside the bag and pulls out a pair of folded black jeans.

“India, this is my wife, Sinéad.” His eyes lock with mine. “Sin, this is Reno’s little sister. The guy who drove us home last night.” As soon as the introduction takes place, he stuffs his legs into the jeans and tucks his semi-solid dick away.

India blinks at me, her curious stare taking in every detail of my carefree appearance. “You’ve got black hair,” she points out, her dainty nose scrunched.

A box-pleated skirt skims above her knee, almost meeting gray socks pulled up the length of lean shins. Beneath a navy blazer, a starched white shirt is finished with a necktie, purposely loosened with a hint of rebellion.

“Sorry... I was expecting...” India shakes her head. “I don’t know what I was expecting... Anyway, congrats!” She holds out her hand and closes the gap between us, her long legs giving her height. “Reno told me last night while you were showering. It’s nice to meet you.”

I debate blurting out the truth or asking her if she knows I was forced into this temporary arrangement. Instead, I put my

anger aside, meet her big blue eyes, and return her sweet girlie smile with one of my own.

“It’s nice to meet you, too.”

“Oh, my God! Your Irish accent is so cool. I’ve never met anyone from Ireland before. Reno and I live a few floors down, although my brother spends more time up here with the boys. I’m not stupid. I know he’s smoking pot and screwing women.” She rolls her eyes dramatically. “To be honest, I’m grateful he spares me the sordid sound effects. I do not need to hear that shit.”

André chuckles. “What the fuck is Reno doing out there?”

My eyes cut to his side profile, where his features are exquisite and his torso utterly spellbinding. I quietly wonder who his real pet is.

“If you ever need a place to crash...” India lowers her voice and leans in, her friendliness catching me off guard. “You can stop in at my place anytime. It’s on the twentieth floor. These guys party nonstop.”

The scurry of tippy tap nails carries a Doberman pinscher puppy the color of soot in through the door. It wears a chunky polished curb chain with matching golden name tag. The two metals tinkle together as the leggy dog trots into the spacious room with its tail high and pinpointing André as its target.

He scoops the dog into his muscular arms and lets it lick his strong, hairy jaw. “Don’t worry, baby girl, you’re still my favorite pet.” Turning to face me, the smirk he offers shoots through me like electricity. Bastard. “Your clothes are in the bag, Sin. Have breakfast and get dressed. We’re going out.”

I slip off the counter, needing to ground my feet for whatever plan he has next. “Where to?”

“I have a meeting and you’re going job hunting.”

“Job hunting...” India giggles. “... as if she needs to work.”

I fold my arms across my chest. “I didn’t marry him for his money. To be honest, I’m still trying to figure out what the

benefits are for me.”

André’s gravelly voice carries across the room in a wicked roll of thunder. “You married me for my bad boy dominating antics and the dick I’ll use to fulfill your needs.”

“Right...” I mutter sarcastically and watch India bite her lip in amusement. “And you married me for a mafia title and the inheritance that goes with it. Kinda makes me a bad bitch, who you’ll *never* dominate.”

André stops stroking his dog and spears me in place with an odd look. A spine-chilling expression that makes me think I’ve summoned his darker side into the sunlight. “Challenge accepted,” he deadpans.

India blinks up at Reno when he joins his sister’s side. “I think we interrupted something,” she whispers.

Reno’s subtle observation of me is fleeting. He smells like eucalyptus or peppermint, fresh and clean. “They’re just getting reacquainted. You’ve got five minutes, Indie. Grab one of those gross waffles you like. I’m driving you to school today.” Mysterious eyes wander to mine. “My sis wanted to meet you in person.” His shrug finalizes the conversation, and then he saunters across the room toward André.

My silent assessment follows Reno’s stonewashed-clad strides and untucked t-shirt, swiftly cutting to my new husband’s bare-chested pose amid a phenomenal oceanic view. Except the azure sky and calm sea aren’t what holds my body captive. It’s the devilish way jet-black strands fall over his bronzed forehead, how a pinched blunt rests within full lips fringed by unshorn hairs, and a cute puppy gazes up at him like he’s the whole world and everything in between.

My core aches for some sort of gratification, and my skin flames from the thrumming veins pumping feverish blood through me. The way my pulse races should conjure the sourest of moods. It should have me cursing him rather than craving those big tattooed hands on my shivery flesh.

Why the hell am I experiencing such an excruciating, begrudged *hunger* for him after he double-crossed me?

I'm married to André Souza.

The man who is so hot it burns just to look at him.

He rotates into the Miami sunshine, illuminating his carved torso as it twists. From brawny arms to broad shoulders and all the way down to a narrow waist, the expanse of his skin is a sturdy canvas. Crossed pistols sit at the base of his spine. A stag's head with its jagged antlers fills the space above it. Detailed intricate floral designs entwine fiendish skulls at the sides while marijuana leaves blend light and dark into an extensive, full back masterpiece.

And then my heart suspends within a shocked gasp and my composure falters. My mind rushes straight to the past when my eyes settle on the one thing I'd never expected to see on him.

Centrally sketched at the base of his neck, positioned between his shoulder blades, is a skeletal portrayal of life and *death* that clearly depicts a finality.

Overreaching sinister branches.

Spindly twisted roots.

A nightmare to shred apart my daydreams, connecting to our history.

SINÉAD



“I’m starving.” India announces as she prances over to the fridge freezer, disappears behind the door, and grabs a clear pouch of frozen waffles. “When did you arrive in Miami?” she asks.

While she plunges a couple of waffles into a fancy toaster, I quietly inhale and exhale to collect myself, my eyes never leaving André and Reno. My pulse is all over the place and my mind is running riot. Well, if he wanted to kill me, he would have done it already.

“Are you okay?” India’s soft voice wrenches my head around. “I asked when you arrived in Miami—but you zoned out.”

“Sorry. Long night. I got here a few weeks ago,” I mutter, meeting her soul-searching blue stare with a mild smile before looking back at André and his friend.

Their hushed conversation is inaudible. Chills scurry over my scalp in tandem with the panic knotting in my stomach. I need to know what his next move will be. I made it very clear that I wanted a job and, strangely, he appears agreeable to the stipulation. Perhaps Frankie was right, and he’s lulling me into a false sense of security. Next thing I know, he’ll shove a condom filled with cocaine up my ass and make me cross the border.

Watching them interact makes me both curious and furious at their businesslike attitude. No one gives a shit about my forced circumstances or star-crossed outlook. I mean, how

much bad luck could one woman have in the space of a few weeks? At least André's people don't kick the shit out of me for being a disobedient prisoner—well, not yet anyway. I haven't purposefully pissed them off so far.

“Canned cream?” India's next question punctures my waspish thoughts like a shiny pin bursting a helium balloon.

I move around the island to where she's standing and focus on the pretty teenager who's perfectly comfortable in a killer's kitchen, as if it's her own.

“What do Irish people eat with their waffles?” she asks, looking back at the fridge. “Chocolate spread... honey... or maple syrup?”

“I don't usually eat breakfast.” I rake a hand through my damp hair and tug out a tangled knot. “I'm usually more of a coffee drinker first thing. The bigger the mug, the better.”

Despite my normal morning routine, my concave belly feels neglected. If I don't eat something, I'll likely faint, and that's the last thing I want to do in front of André. Then he really would think of me as a weak little woman.

She closes the fridge door and wanders the length of the walled cabinets. “When I was younger, we'd go days without food sometimes. Reno would steal cookies or bags of potato chips from the local store to make sure I had something to take to school. In my opinion, you should eat breakfast, because you never know when your next meal will be.” Her eyes sparkle, confidence straightening her posture. “Here, try this.” She pinches the corner of a hot waffle and drops it onto a waiting plate, blowing on her scalded fingertips. “I'll drizzle maple syrup over it. Although, now that you're Dré's wife, I bet he'll make sure your favorite Irish food is always at hand... so you don't get homesick.” If little hearts could spring from her eyes, they'd be battering my unimpressed expression right now.

I walk up behind her and start to open random cupboards, needing a hit of caffeine. “How about I make the coffee?”

“The cups are in that one.” She nods to a slim door above a shiny silver barista espresso machine. “Dré likes his coffee black. Use the Americano setting.”

This girl has no clue what he’s doing to me. “I’m sure he can fetch his own when he’s ready.”

“Okay.” Her lips twitch into a faint smile.

I swipe two mugs, set one on the grilled drip tray, and tap the touch screen display to customize my morning beverage. It’s quite the high-end machine and, of course, uses only the best Colombian coffee pods.

“How long have you known him?” I ask quietly, trying to figure out what all the random options are for.

From the corner of my eye, she picks at the waffle with pink-polished fingernails like a bird pecking for scraps. “A long time.” She shrugs. “Since Reno started working for him. He’s crazy... in an over-the-top, overprotective, big brother sort of way. I love him for it.”

The rich smell of steamy coffee reminds me of misty drizzle, cold slab floors, and the first punch of caffeine before the doors to The Rusty Shamrock open. Although the recollection is homely, it also stirs up the bone-deep remoteness that comes with it. Dull mornings spent checking stock levels and lonely nights sitting by the fire, wishing there was more to life—more adventures, fun, excitement—*more*.

“Coffee?” I ask, setting a fresh mug in the machine for her and reviewing the catalog of options on the display.

Her nose scrunches. “None for me. Reno won’t let me drink it, says I’m hyper enough without caffeine. He won’t let me smoke weed either or have alcohol. My big brother tries his best to protect me and, in return, I’m the best-behaved sister he could ever ask for. I owe him that.” She offers a cheeky grin. “Have you got any brothers or sisters?”

I rip a corner off the waffle India had prepared for me and chew it slowly, not liking how sickly sweet it is. “No. It’s just me and Mammy.” As soon as I think about her, my stomach

aches from sadness, quickly turning queasy after I take a sip of strong coffee. “She’s back home in the northwest of Ireland.”

“Does she know about the wedding? I mean, it was kind of last minute. Especially when André had a blonde here the other night...”

I stare at her in disbelief, watching her gaze drop and her mouth snap shut. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. I mean... he told me you met each other a long time ago... so...” Her shoulders bounce lightly as if she’s given up trying to defend him. “I guess we’ll be seeing a lot of each other now. Maybe we could go shopping together sometime?”

I sigh, doing my best to work through my frustration without snapping at the poor girl. “Sure,” I reply, even though I’m mentally planning a way out of this that wouldn’t put Mammy in danger.

It’s damn well impossible when the Italian mafia are stalking her every move. However, I’m clearly not his type and André’s a typical male born without the desire for commitment. I’m betting this sham of a marriage won’t last longer than a week. Guaranteed. “How long has he had the tree tattoo on his back?”

“Since I’ve known him.” Indie’s curious gaze meets mine. “Why?”

“No reason. It caught my eye earlier, that’s all.” I take another mouthful of coffee and feel the heat of it warm my belly.

It was our meeting place.

The lonely old Hawthorn tree that had sheltered us from the rain and heard all our secrets.

Except this particular version represents something far more expressive than the memories I cherish. Finely stenciled branches are abundant with foliage on one half of the image and eerily skeletal on the other. A micro flock of birds swarm the partial barrenness and soar toward a powdery pale moon. Below, where the roots reach deep into the shaded earth, a solitary skull sits proud, hauntingly isolated.

The more I think about it, the harder my heart slams into my achy ribs.

“I should get dressed.” I push the unwanted waffle across the counter and grab the bag of dry cleaning. “Thanks for breakfast.”

“I’ll see you later,” she shouts after me, but I don’t reply. I’m doing my best to focus on the steps, their formation blurred as a result of my anxiety.

Last night André’s possessive hand had pressed to my lower back, his confident strides pushing me in the direction of the bathroom I’m searching for now. Neither of us had spoken. Though I couldn’t shake the feeling, he was equally shocked about the commitment we’d made as I was.

Before I had the chance to slam the door shut on his handsome face, he barked out an order to strip, his hungry, dark eyes trailing my nakedness once all the blood-stained clothes were in his hands. In a gleaming gray-veined marble bathroom where the shower is a glass room itself, the air crackled and hissed, an awareness of his growing lust feeding my senses until I couldn’t breathe properly. Without touching, he’d choked me under slow, sweeping appreciation and silently struck a match to ignite trillions of tiny fireworks in an explosive shiver.

I remember it all.

Especially how the right corner of his mouth had hitched as he offered me a sly, sexual grin—a curse to ruin me. It didn’t matter that I looked away from him as quickly as the pupils of his eyes expanded, because he saw my nipples pebble and my chest rise. We both knew I was turned on, even when I shoved him with both hands and saved myself by locking the door.

Now I’m back in the same bathroom, trembling and confused all over again. I can’t explain why his larger-than-life presence has such an acute effect on me. It’s infuriating and demoralizing. I’m exposed, out in the open, drowning in the danger of him. *Wanting* him inside of me. Craving a deeper connection.

A typical response would be to find the nearest exit and run. I should get as far away from his evil beauty as possible, but he makes my heart beat faster and Frankie has Mammy under surveillance. I'm trapped by two power-hungry fuckers.

Attracted to my captor who only thinks of me as a new plaything.

And forced to withstand him.

I shake off the transient notion of my new husband caring about anything other than sex and power. Despite his callous threats and wifely expectations, here I am, leaning against a modern vanity in his million-dollar penthouse, recalling the heart-pounding moments he'd rammed his dick into my throat—nothing more. Yes, it was brutal and nothing short of erotic; however, he didn't push for more.

And what's worse is I couldn't get enough of him. That pitiful awareness is the one thing that infuriates me like an incurable, toxic disease.

Ironically, I'd been the life-weary woman sitting at home, night after night, wishing for *more*. For a one-way ticket to the wild side. And there I was on my knees, hunting for a dirty release with a man who could've easily strangled me and thrown the evidence overboard.

A crest of exhaustion pushes its way through me. For an hour or maybe two after he'd left me to shower, I'd stared at the array of dappled bruises on my torso, washed the gore from my hair, and slept on the heated tile floor beneath super soft towels. It wasn't exactly the best night's rest, but I knew I'd need my strength to face him again. And I was right.

Splashing freezing water over my face, I blink in the awakening coldness it offers and study my sorry reflection. Glistening beads of water cling to my lashes and straggly damp hair hangs limply at either side of my pale face. The bone-tired woman cocking her head to scrutinize herself has dark crescents under her eyes and beyond the weariness lies the courage of a hard-hearted fighter.

On first impressions, people would think I'm a pushover. A fragile little woman, lacking guts and ability. Most of the men I've encountered have considered me weak and beneath them. Even when I'd taken over ownership of The Rusty Shamrock, they all thought they could do better. The onslaught of unsolicited advice and degrading passes continued until one rainy November night I bought my first gun. Owning a revolver eventually gave me credence among the locals. I guess having the barrel of a gun rammed into your temple would have a profound effect on a man's ego.

I can survive this—survive André.

I take my time to dress and squirt a pea-sized blob of minty paste onto the toothbrush I'd taken from Frankie's yacht. It felt weird slipping into the laundered leather pants and jersey top I've worn for so many weeks.

"Time to go." André thumps the bathroom door, making me jump. "Are you ready?"

Drawing back my shoulders and reconfiguring my posture, I open the door and hide the deceitful tremor in my hands when I see him. He's wearing aviator sunglasses indoors, a supple biker jacket, and ass-fitting jeans. In a brief silent standoff, he combs his fingers through his hair and licks his lips.

Fuck, this man knows how to raise the temperature.

"I'm ready." I project my voice at him, hearing it echo through my tight chest. The numb barrier I'd slipped behind during my internal pep talk starts to tingle. "Stop staring at me."

A ghost of a smirk dances on his lips. "No can do. I can stare at you all day if I want to..." He terminates the safe distance between us and grabs my hand, weaving his fingers with mine. "... because you're all mine, Wifey. Get used to it." I shake my head and expel a gruff growl. "I'm going to show you something that'll get you off just by looking at it." His fingers tighten. "You might think you've changed since we were friends, but I disagree. You're going to fucking love this, Sin."

ANDRÉ



I stub out a third blunt. Despite the marijuana, my hot-blooded tendencies are rife, and my swollen dick still throbs. For her. How could it not? She's fucking exquisite.

When we move through the card-activated entrance and into the blackness of my private underground garage, I drag my sunglasses down the bridge of my nose, pinning her leather-hugged ass with hawkish vigilance as the lights flick into action. Long, loose hair resembles sweeping strokes from the devil's iniquitous inkwell. Those silky strands would feel good on my balls.

"You can leave us alone." I nod to the security guard who had followed us down here in the elevator. "Have the men on standby. We're leaving in a few minutes."

The guy obeys without question, swipes the electronic pad, and disappears behind the bulletproof door.

Cautiously glancing over at me, those flaring pupils of hers dilate to form a remarkable ring of turquoise that makes me believe she's capable of necromancy. The second her pouty, soft lip slips between her teeth, an indescribable sensation fizzles through me, confirming my suspicions.

Christ. I want this woman.

She tugs her hand free from mine and crosses her arms over her tits, the drop in temperature playing havoc with her nipples. I haven't missed the fact she isn't wearing a bra. Either she didn't have time to fully dress before Saporì snatched her away, or else she enjoys the freedom. I make a

mental note to buy her leather lingerie with straps, lace, zippers, and suspenders.

Fuck!

I reposition the painful boner straining behind my jeans and head for the row of motorcycles lined up along the far concrete wall.

“This one is my favorite. It’s a custom MTT Turbine Streetfighter,” I tell her.

She eyes it, pretending to be nonplussed by the sleek black curves. “Nice,” she replies, her fingertips skating across the prickled skin of her porcelain forearms. “Are all of these yours?”

I chuckle, watching her gaze eat up the fleet of Midnight Range Rovers, a deep-purple Mustang, a quicksilver-colored Maserati, and a selection of high-priced motorcycles.

“Yeah. These are a few from my collection.”

“Of course, you have more.” Her eyes roll and I find myself chasing the ethereal circles, suddenly aware of the annoying way she hooks me in. “You have everything you could ever wish for.”

I’m before her in two hungry strides, grabbing her delicate wrists and yanking her into my chest.

“What the hell are you doing?” she growls after a brisk sip of oxygen.

“You’re right, Wifey.” The hoarseness of my voice gives away how horny I am right now. “I have everything I want...” My fingertips dance over her quivering belly, and I add, “Including a beautiful wife with a sassy mouth that fits like a glove around my dick.”

She pushes backward, except I’m too fast for her getaway attempt, my merciless grip still cuffing her wrist.

“It’s all about sex for you, isn’t it?” she huffs. “A power kick for the criminal who takes whatever he wants. Well, guess what, Husband? You don’t *have* me. Not fully,” she spits out. “And you *never* will.”

The bitter undertone of her rant weirdly unsettles me. “I seem to remember those two little words you repeated—‘I do’—how they whispered out of your raw, fucked throat.”

Her lips contort into a venomous snarl. “They’re just words, Hotshot. We both know that. I doubt the high-and-mighty André would honestly pledge his devout allegiance to one woman. I’m not stupid... and I’m *not* yours.”

She wrenches her arm, trying to get away, then flicks a leg out to unbalance me. Her fight stimulates unparalleled urges for a deeper connection. Overpowering her is easy when she’s smaller and so full of lies. Pointless lies that struggle to veil her thorny lust.

I sense the change in her movements, how she loves it when our bodies collide, and I refuse to let go. I’m roughly thwarting her amateur self-defense moves while she pretends my strength isn’t what she craves.

When I secure her waist and grind my knee into her pussy, she groans and growls, panting hard in a weak bid to show restraint.

Despite her game of resistance, she’s a worthy opponent. Her twisting torso and quick-thinking jabs pelt my leather jacket, clawing and fisting the t-shirt beneath to both push me away and pull me closer. She’s not scrapping for autonomy. No, she’s wrestling, the sparks flying from her skin to mine.

The fierce woman packs a superior punch. I’m proud of her gutsiness and aching to demolish it at the same time. Only this battle of ours has my pulse racing and my libido soaring. I’m on fire.

A female should know how to defend herself properly, especially a Souza wife. Unfortunately, I’m not the man who’ll tolerate this particular *señora’s* abstinence.

In an effortless tackle, I pin both of her arms by her sides. The back of her head crashes into my shoulder as her chest rises and falls in fast breaths. She still squirms for freedom, but her courageous efforts are overthrown.

“Get the fuck off me, Dré!”

Aroused beyond comprehension, I lean into the side of her face, taking a second to inhale her natural fragrance that blends into my musky cologne.

“I hate to burst your bubble, Sinéad *Souza*.” I intentionally drop her double-barreled title because she’s all mine. “There’s nowhere to hide from this.” My left arm snakes around the front of her, circling her entire torso. Locked in place, my opposite hand skates over the soft skin around her belly button, moving to the waistband of her pants.

“Dré...” My name bursts out in a strangled sigh. “Don’t...”

“Don’t what... stop?” I unfasten the flimsy button, hastily lower the zipper, and push my hand inside to find the wetness she wants to hide from me. “You don’t really want your husband to stop touching you; surely, you don’t?” My hunt for the truth is rewarded when I rub her swollen clit and she instantly moans. “It feels good... doesn’t it?”

The tone of my voice rasps from the back of my throat, thick and hungry. “Your flushed skin burns for *me*. This wet cunt wants me to claim it, to own it, and to fucking destroy your lies. I know you want me, Sin.” Her pelvis moves to seek out more friction, and her spine bows a fraction. “Admit it.”

“No...” Her head falls forward. “... surrender.”

I chuckle darkly, the unhinged rumble filling the dark corners of the fresh-aired garage. “I think your denial is what gets you off. You want the fight—the indecent rush of your new husband forcing you to do something naughty. Go on, admit it. Confess your dirty, dark secret, and I’ll give you what you crave in return.”

She gasps when I hook a finger and slip it inside her slick, warm pussy. “Oh, shit,” she pants.

I’m on the verge of insanity too. My balls are cramping, and my heart rate is through the fucking roof. “Stubbornness won’t satisfy your dark side, Wifey.” The knuckle-deep finger withdraws and lies flat against her folds, unmoving.

Sinéad squirms, not to seek a way out of my relentless hold, but to urge me on. My paper-thin restraint starts to crack, crushing my decency like shards of misshapen glass. “Say it—say you want your husband to finger-fuck you,” I snarl.

She shivers and shakes her head. “You bastard.”

“It doesn’t have to be this way.”

“I have more respect for myself than this.”

“Yet here you are, grinding against my hand, aching for my fingers—for my dick.” I drag my flattened hand across the landscape of her pubic hairs, rubbing the heel of my palm against her clit, teasing her with pressure. “You are mine, which means I’m the only man who’ll grant you the orgasms you deserve. No one else is permitted to touch my wife.”

I graze the shell of her ear and gently bite the fleshy lobe when she mutters in a ragged breath, “I’ll do it myself. You can’t stop me from touching myself in the bathroom or in the moments you’re not around. You’ll never know when I’m getting myself off, because it’s none of your goddamn business. I don’t need a man to satisfy me. I’ve taken care of my own needs for long enough. I don’t need you, Dré. And I sure as hell don’t belong to you.”

The outrage scorching my veins is alien to me. I’m jealous of her own hand. I’ve never felt that way before—ever.

“And you think your solo hand is good enough?” I push a finger between her folds and let it sit there, feeling the muscles in her core flutter with neediness. “If that’s the case, then I forbid you to come. I fucking prohibit it. The only way you’ll feel the intensity of a release is by my hand, my tongue, or my dick. I’ll make you come harder than you’ve ever done before. Guaranteed.”

My stationary finger skates over the top of her engorged nub. “A hand is a hand—” she groans, her knees weakening. “Yours... mine... it’s irrelevant.”

“Let’s test that theory, shall we?” I plunge a finger inside of her, hard and probing. “This cunt is dripping. So warm and ready for me... and that’s a dirty fact you can’t hide.”

“Fuck you...” Her shoulders jerk forward when her inner walls milk my finger.

I struggle to catch a breath when the sensation sends shock waves right through me. “Is that a request?”

“No!” she hisses, almost crying from the maddening greed she’s fighting to ignore.

“But you want it?” I add a second finger and almost come myself when she rocks into them and cries out, her voice torn with hunger. Her refusal to beg lingers on a thin film of patience and if she’s not careful, it would irrevocably shatter. “Beg me to finish this,” I grunt, supporting her body weight when her head falls back.

Her pelvis tilts into my hand, and a breathy sigh carries a forced laugh. The deranged sexual noise that tells me she’s close to letting go, but her pride won’t allow it. “You don’t own me... Dré...” Desire rolls off her tongue, her Irish accent thick with it. “No... I’ll... finish... it...”

I continue to finger-fuck her until I sense the brewing clench of a release, and then, mustering every mangled scrap of control I have left, I withdraw. My head swims, unable to banish the electrified impulses charging through me. I unravel my arms and watch her stagger forward, trembling and flushed with sexual hunger.

When her head rotates to face me, her hair whips dark lengths across her foreign complexion and incandescent eyes. The fanning fingers covering her heart fail to calm her heaving chest or extinguish the hunger bubbling in her veins.

Our gazes clash like blades on an explosive battlefield. Hers white-hot and mine hiding an agonizing desire of my own.

As she watches me, urgent fingers move to the opening in her pants as if she’s in pain and needs a quick remedy. They curl around the leather and tug at the zipper.

“All you had to do was admit it.”

Her legs snap together, and she sways. “Why? So you can laugh at the poor Irish girl and add her to your extensive list of

conquests?” I lunge at her and snare the disobedient hand moving between her thighs. “I won’t give you that victory.”

“Laugh...” I squeeze her fragile bones and blurt out, “Why the fuck would I laugh at you?”

“Because I don’t stand a chance against you, Dré. You’re too strong. Too toxic. Too fucking good-looking. And I hate you for it. I hate you so much it hurts.”

I swallow her confession and drag her hand free of her leather pants. “What hurts is denying yourself this...” I touch her pussy again, sinking my fingers into the heat I’m craving more than liquor, narcotics, or speed. Her forehead tips to my shoulder, and then she rears back, her will to resist still strong.

“Let’s get one thing straight, Sin. Nothing about this is a laughing matter.” She groans when my thumb swipes her clit. “I can either give you this... or you can spend the rest of the day unsatisfied.” Her uncontrollable shiver is like a domino effect, causing my own skin to break out in goosebumps.

Touching her is heaven—a curse inside my mind. My heart pounds as she starts to rise from the penetration of my fingers. Even though she hasn’t spoken her consent, her fingers dig into my jacket, her hips rock, and her sexy little groans spur me on.

“It’s not my victory...” I breathe the words into silky soft hair when her right knee lifts a fraction to give me deeper access. “It’s yours. You’re the only woman who has my full attention. The only one who belongs to me. This isn’t about my control; it’s about a husband allowing his wife to explore her feminine desires.”

Her grabbing hands are slapping me one minute and roaming the next, her composure disintegrating into the concrete beneath our feet. I can’t get enough of her angry submission. Or how her legs widen, and her eyes latch onto mine when her body starts to tremble, wild and violent. I curl the fingers of my other hand around the back of her neck. Our foreheads collide, and our breathing mingles while my fingers pump into her, the heel of my palm banging her clit.

My own urges are on high alert, my dick weeping into the fabric of my boxer briefs. But the second I steal a slippery, tongue-sucking kiss, she moans deep into my mouth—and detonates.

“Holy shit...” she pants, rocking into my fixed wrist. “Fuuuuuck!”

Her body goes lax and her knees buckle. I secure her waist, hug her close to my chest, and remove my hand, cleaning the fingers I’d used with saliva. She tips her head back to watch me lap up her essence, her exquisite eyes flashing hatred and appreciation.

Her head twists to the side as if she’s ashamed, her pretty lashes lowering to block out the sight of me. Oddly, my heart oscillates as if she’s bumped into it and asked for directions to a happy ending. Except, I can’t promise that my attention won’t stray.

All I know, whether I can understand it or not, is that she’s mine.

Mine today.

Mine forever.

Even when the high fades, she’ll still be my wife.

She punches me away and fixes her leather pants, then stuffs a hand into her hair to rake the messy lengths. “A hand is a hand,” she mutters, folding her arms across her chest as if she didn’t just come all over my fingers.

I snap, latching onto her throat, my temper struggling on a tight leash. “Tell the fucking truth.”

“What do you want me to say? That your fingers felt better than when I do it myself... or when I think about other men and rub my clit until it swells? Is that what you want to hear?”

My mind flickers with violence and the bloodthirsty tendencies of intolerance. I’m falling into an abyss, tumbling into a world where my father had branded me under par. Not quite good enough.

“I just licked your cum from the fingers your wet little pussy ached for. *My fucking fingers.* Isn't that right... Wifey?”

She frowns, the vein in her regal neck thrumming. There's a moment of silence, a heartbeat where she gazes right into my soul and witnesses the vulnerable tattered ribbons of my past. Every single one of them unattached and withering in the darkest corners of my mind.

It's in that truce when she offers me the slightest of smiles and whispers, “I won't admit it.” She swallows hard against my palm and dishes out a mocking smirk. “Because there's nothing salvageable about craving the asshole who's single-handedly trying to destroy me.”

“Well, I guess that's a start.” I draw back my shoulders and take a step away, uncertain how to address her sardonic admission. The way she makes me feel has me doubting who's the one capable of destroying. “When was the last time you were on a motorcycle?” I casually change the subject to hide how she affects me.

“Last month,” she answers with a shrug.

My brows drift up. “Back in Ireland?”

“You're not the only one who has a motorcycle, Hotshot.”

Fuck, she's perfect.

“What is it?”

“A Honda CBR500R.” The corners of her mouth dance to a negligible grin. “I bought it secondhand after I'd saved up enough money to buy a decent one.”

“You'll feel at home on this Honda, then?” I stroll further away from her toward the motorcycle that has space for two riders. “Here.” I toss a helmet at her, and call out, “I'll take you back to the wild side, Sin.” When I wink at her, she breaks eye contact and chews her lip. “Let's go. We have a stop to make before my meeting.” Then I shirk out of my jacket, move behind her, and place it over her shoulders. “It's safer if you wear a jacket.”

She stares at the gun holstered to my hip and then glances at the draping black leather nestled next to her skin. I shove on the spare helmet, turn away, and mount the motorcycle, beckoning for her to jump on the back, which she does once her arms are stuffed into the too-long sleeves. Having her squished up behind me feels like old times. Her arms snake my waist as her chest presses tight to my spine. A shiver tingles over my scalp. If she so much as breathes near my dick right now, I'll come hard and fucking fast.

“Ready?” I ask her through the Bluetooth intercom system fitted inside both helmets.

“Yeah—”

“If you scream—” I begin.

“I won't,” she cuts me off. “Nothing makes me scream anymore.”

“We'll see about that, Wifey.” I laugh, accelerating out of the parking spot and up the ramp to the automatic gates.

ANDRÉ



When we burst into the sunshine, I weave into traffic and choke the throttle. The hold she has around my middle tightens a little when we dip sideways to turn. However, she doesn't squeal, not like she used to. Part of me misses the thrill of knowing she's into it. Only, now that I'm aware my ex-best friend owns a motorcycle in Ireland, I'm confident our past means more to her than she's letting on.

It can't be a coincidence that she bought a secondhand Honda in memory of those hair-raising adventures we'd gone on together.

Pulling up outside the doors of an independent fashion boutique, I switch off the engine. "You need more clothes. We'll try this store. I think you'll like the style."

"Okay." She dismounts before me and removes her helmet. "Can't guarantee I'll like anything." Her eyes narrow on the big glass windows. "I'm not a girly girl."

I remove my helmet and run a hand through my hair to fix it in place. "I know exactly who my wife is. If you can't find an outfit in there, we'll try somewhere else. Although I'm confident you will."

Her shoulders bounce as she sighs softly. "If I buy something, I'll repay you from the first paycheck I earn."

"This one is on me." I get off the bike and slip the key into my pocket. "You didn't wear a pretty wedding dress last night. So, let me buy you something to wear on this momentous day, Mrs. Souza."

Eventually, she'd have her own credit card to use as she pleases, whenever she accepts our arrangement is permanent.

She scowls at me and shirks out of my jacket, folding it over her arm. "Fine."

I shrug with indifference, place my hand to her lower back, and usher her indoors. My security team would be all over this store in a matter of seconds. While she was changing in the bathroom earlier, one of my guys had arranged for its temporary closure to prevent shoppers from getting in her way.

Sinéad's subtle intake of air isn't missed when she fingers the clothes hung on racks around the outer walls. There's not much in here that wouldn't suit her. She'd look good in anything, but mostly, she'd be regally supreme naked and covered in my cum.

I give her time to browse, type a quick message to Letterman, and prowl up behind her, leaning in close. "See anything you like?"

"Eh, maybe—yeah—there might be a few things." she lies, her eyes wide and sparkly. She wants them all.

"Dré?" a female voice purrs from the opposite end of the shop floor.

I angle around to find a cute blonde squeezed into bubblegum-pink leggings, her ample tits pushed up like two ripe melons and razor-sharp talons twirling the tips of her hair. She's holding an iPad as if she works here.

"It's good to see you again."

Again?

Christ—did I fuck her?

"Yeah." I nod and swivel back to Sinéad, whose pale eyes are swirling with venom, directed right at my face.

"Do you bring all your whores here?" she hisses under her breath.

Rage boils my blood. "I've never stepped foot in this store until today."

“Really? So, this isn’t you trying to mold me into your type? Next, you’ll have me wearing a bleach-blond wig and wearing a push-up bra.”

I cock my head, swallow my temper, and refrain from manipulating one of her braless tits. “There’s nothing about you that I’d change,” I mutter while her furious gaze cuts to the woman behind us. “Anyway, I found this place online. Look around, Sin. There are leather pants, jeans, t-shirts, and fucking handkerchiefs disguised as dresses.” I shake a hanger with a pair of skinny jeans. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but aren’t these similar to what you’re wearing right now?” Her eyes glitter with something unreadable. “I’ve never taken a woman shopping before or even thought about doing it. So please, pick something and let’s get out of here. How about this—” I snatch the closest tiny black item folded on a shelf, throw it over my shoulder, and yank the hem of her top. “Take it off. Now.” I bark out the order.

She scowls. “No!”

My impulsive brain waves spike. I reach for the small knife in my jeans pocket and flick out the blade. “Remove the top or I’ll hack it to pieces while you’re still wearing it.”

“You’re fucking crazy.”

“That’s because you drive me fucking crazy.”

“At least let me go into a changing room.”

I scan the back wall and catch sight of the illuminated dressing room sign. Grabbing her arm, I manhandle her into a tight cubicle. Pulling across a heavy mustard curtain, I pivot around to face the both of us—her flustered expression and my frustrated reflection brandishing a knife, ready to slash her shirt to shreds.

In the second it takes me to crowd her, she spares me the fun of actually doing it. She hauls the white top up and over her head, those lush bare tits of hers in full view. My spine straightens and my elbow goes lax to lower the blade—the only part of me that isn’t hard for her.

I cock a brow at her, trying my best to ignore the way my heart is pounding. “Finally doing what you’re told?”

She snatches the top hung over my shoulder and dresses, regrettably, hiding her juicy brown nipples. “There. Happy now, Hotshot?”

Folding the blade away, I take a moment to appreciate the stretchy material hugging her narrow waist. “I like it when you’re a good girl. Yet I’m enjoying your defiant streak too. What do you think, should we add it to your basket?”

“Was your ex out there a good girl for you too?”

“Are you jealous, Wifey?” I lean in and rest my palm on the shiny surface beside her head. “The word ex would imply she was something to me. She was not. That *señorita* out there doesn’t live in my memories.”

“But she was an ex-fuck, right?”

“Probably,” I admit with a cavalier shrug.

Her brows snap together, and her fingertips fly to her lips, pressing over the lush landscape of them. “When was the last time you were tested for an STD or HIV?”

“I’m not careless, Sin. Condoms are a priority. I get tested regularly.” I push off the mirror and fold my arms over my chest, aware of how much she’s become a distraction. “What about you?”

She laughs with a bitter, scornful bite. “Unlike you, I don’t sleep with everyone who breathes near me.”

My eyes jerk to hers. “But you let them fuck your throat?”

The tight material covering her tits moves as her chest rises and falls. “No one has ever treated me like that before,” she growls. “I only hook up with respectful gentlemen.”

Now it’s my turn to laugh. “Gentlemen? Christ, Sin. Your hungry little pussy doesn’t drip for a considerate gentleman. It gets all swollen and greedy for the dirty things I want to do to you.”

Her eyes turn cold, almost as if she's trying to deny it. "Oh yeah? You're so full of yourself. You're right though; you're far from being a gentleman—you're an egotistical monster."

"Excuse me." The curtain moves, but doesn't open. "Can I help with anything, Mr. Souza?" the annoying blonde calls to us from the other side.

Keeping eye contact with my wife, I growl, "Didn't my guys offer you enough money to close the store so we'd have privacy? However, now that you've interrupted... we'll buy everything you have in her size."

"Everything?" the owner gasps.

"Yeah, and grab a pair of jeans for her to wear now. I want one of every single item that's in stock. Gather it up as quickly as possible and I'll send a guy to collect it."

Sinéad glares at me. "Seriously?"

"Deadly." I smirk, studying how her cute nose scrunches and her tempting lips pout. "I'm a monster who buys his beautiful wife whatever she needs."

My wink makes her eyes narrow and that proud neck of hers elongates. Sweltering heat blazes from her skin. "Money can't buy everything, you know," she murmurs, fixing her hair behind her ears.

"I think it just did," I counter, shortening the distance between us so we're toe to toe, chest to chest.

She licks her lips, inadvertently signaling to my dick that they're wet. I wait for her to exhale and use my fingertips to tilt her head back so our gazes snare.

We fall silent.

Except for our hearts beating.

"What are you waiting for?" I ask on a low rumble.

Her forehead creases. "For you to back off," she replies breathlessly.

"Right... you know what I think you're waiting for?"

“Enlighten me, Hotshot.”

“You’re waiting for me to kiss you.” My mouth lingers before hers. “Aren’t you?”

She shivers when I inhale deeply and lightly brush our lips together. It’s not enough to taste her; just a feathery touch that catapults tingles over my scalp. Lust swells within me. Thunderbolts and lightning strikes exhilarate my muscles as delicate pants flutter across my cheeks.

Our chests meet as we quietly breathe together, the intensity of this deadlock simmering beneath the surface of my unshakable countenance. On the inside, I’m anything but calm. Plentiful ebony lashes flutter and lower to fan high cheekbones, her eyes shutting in momentary anticipation. This time she doesn’t push me away or tell me to move; however, I won’t give in. Strangely, I want to get to know the matured version of my childhood friend, as much as I want to devour her.

No matter how well trained I am in the art of seduction, my wife takes it to the next level. She’s a turbulent temptation. If she wants to play the tease, I’ll up the ante.

With sudden swiftness, I rear back and tug at the curtain, sliding it sideways to break free from her spell. She stumbles forward, flushed and a little off-balance, her blinky lashes taking in the presence of a discreetly armed guard standing in the corner.

“Let’s go, Wifey.” I feign indifference even though I’m light-headed, because my dick has drained all the blood from my body, including my brain. “We’ve got somewhere to be.”

SINÉAD



The Honda slows beneath a colossal protruding shelter—the overhang of a gigantic hotel. André pulls over, parks the motorcycle by the curb, plants his feet on the ground, and kills the engine.

My hands automatically fall away from his waist. The second we lose contact, I oddly panic, scared it'll be the last time we ride together. It's an irrational thought given we're stuck with each other for the foreseeable future, and I haven't forgiven him for it.

He drags his helmet off and glances over his shoulder. His hair tumbles over, almost brushing his thick brows. Raking the lengths away with long fingers, he says in his low, sensual accent, "I have a business meeting. Let's go inside."

I use the footrests to elevate and throw my right leg over the back, something I've done a thousand times over, except this dismount feels painfully familiar. "Go ahead without me," I mutter hopefully, the soles of my boots hitting the sidewalk.

A black Range Rover pulls up behind us, quickly followed by a second. Doors slam and suited men wearing earpieces move toward the hotel lobby. André acknowledges the arrival of his professional security detail, who followed us through the streets from the clothes store. He drops his key fob in the smartly dressed valet's hand and then stuffs a few dollar bills into his smart blazer pocket.

"Thank you, sir." The young guy almost bows in reverence. "I'll take good care of her."

“You do that, kid.” His gaze sticks to mine. “After you.” He nods at the entrance.

“I’ll go for a walk.” I need space. Time to think. Independence. “I’m sure there’s a bar manager in the area who needs staff.”

André’s smoky chuckle distracts me from the large hand he slides beneath the jacket he’s made me wear again. He imprints his fingertips on the base of my spine. The heat of his touch is undeniably good. Being this close to a man like him, a predatory villain, shouldn’t fuel my blood with lust. Yet it forces my hate to tip lower than the unnatural craving I have for him, like a set of unbalanced scales.

“You’re not just someone. You’re a Souza,” he reminds me. “And we don’t walk the streets hunting for employment. We create jobs and fund the economy. Anyway, I have it on good authority that this hotel is recruiting more staff for its rooftop bar. We’ll check with the general manager while you’re here.” Glancing at his expensive-looking wristwatch, he sighs a little. “I have a thirty-minute window.”

I fix a scowl on my face and gaze past him. My jaw clenches as he ushers me toward waxy evergreens in massive cylindrical pots housed around twin concrete pillars where a few of his men watch us from the shade.

Once inside the grand foyer of the Sky Hotel, a charcoal slab floor gleams under hundreds of twinkling recessed lights and vast stone walls reach high to meet wooden slatted ceilings. We move to the steel doors of an elevator that part the second we arrive. Thankfully, I’m not left alone with him when two armed guards join us.

“You didn’t eat this morning. If you want to stay ahead of the game, you need to take better care of yourself. Order from the menu when we’re seated.”

I scowl up at him, careful not to stare into his eyes for too long. Somehow, the cramped conditions have made him appear bigger, stronger—extra in every possible way.

“I’ve managed to look after myself for twenty-nine years. Save your unsolicited advice for someone who cares about your opinion.” I arch a sardonic eyebrow at him. “Weirdly, waking up as a married woman killed my appetite. Maybe it’s all the cum you forced me to swallow.”

“You didn’t swallow all of it. There’s a shit ton more where that came from.”

The right corner of his mouth hitches at the exact moment the elevator rises and my stomach flips. It’s solely due to the gravitational pull and nothing to do with his infectious smirk. He watches me, the woodiness of his cologne intensifying the atmosphere. My chest rises as I breathe him into my lungs and quickly regret how it gives me tingles.

“I’ll eat later,” I mutter, stubbornness being one of my best qualities.

A barely audible growl comes from his lips when I turn my head away faster than a strike of lightning.

His hand pressed to my lower back shoots out from under the leather and settles at my nape. Harsh fingers weave into the roots close to my scalp, allowing him to control the angle of my face.

Our chests bump and every breath blends. For the first time this morning, light glitters in his intense dark eyes. They’re no longer starless and more cosmic than baneful. He cages me against a mirrored wall, his overwhelming physique commanding my full attention.

“It wasn’t a suggestion. It was an order.” Coarse-tipped whiskers surrounding his red lips graze my cheek the closer he slants into me.

My hands fly to the tight material covering his biceps. The instant they settle on the planes of muscle, I regret the rash impulse. “How gallant of you.”

There’s no room in the elevator to move, let alone escape the man who’s threatening to kiss me. Except, he doesn’t. A little bell dings, announcing our arrival on the fortieth floor, and he pulls away instead.

“Welcome to Luna. It isn’t open to the public until lunchtime, which gives us plenty of privacy.”

The guards exit first and disappear. He releases my hair, grabs the lapels of the leather jacket I’m drowning in, and frees a lock of hair caught beneath.

“This is one of my favorite places in the city. You’ll love it.”

“Will I?” I huff. “So, now you’re going to tell me what venues I should like too?”

Before I can step foot out of the elevator, he halts me with his whole body. “If you don’t like it, I’ll fuck you on top of the bar until you change your mind. I can be very persuasive.”

And then he effortlessly grabs me by the wrist and drags me into the open foyer of a decked rooftop. The one-hundred-and-eighty-degree view fringed by glass and thriving foliage takes my breath away. It’s stunning. Nothing like my aged, rustic pub with a leaky toilet and the cloying stench of stale beer.

An elaborately carved wooden bar sits off to one side, fully stocked and immaculately presented. I follow behind him, stepping down a level onto a natural stone floor where groups of cushioned sofas and low tables are separated by screening planters. He chooses a discreetly hidden semicircular booth and gestures for me to sit first.

A male server appears immediately, notably keeping a measure of respectful distance. “Sir. It’s a pleasure to see you this morning. How can I be of assistance?”

“The lady will try everything on the hotel breakfast menu and bring a magnum of the best champagne.”

“Right away, sir.”

I lean over the table and catch the server’s eye, offering a saccharine sweet smile. “Hey... just a mug of coffee for me, please. Forget about the food. I’ve lost my appetite.”

The guy nods at me, his stare lingering for longer than André appears to be comfortable with, because he clears his

throat and jiggles his knee under the table. He cracks his knuckles, immediately snaring the server's gaze. "Bring the *whole* breakfast menu and the champagne. We're celebrating."

"Yes, sir."

"And let Janel know I'm here. I'd like a word with her before my meeting in the boardroom."

"Of course."

When he leaves, André roughly seizes the sleeve of the jacket I'm about to remove and hauls me tight against his hip. Our shoulders crash together. He pauses, his face before mine. Sunlight and shade dance across his features as a leafy plant sways in the distance.

"Don't defy me, Sin. Not while we're with company, and definitely not when we're alone. If I order the entire fucking menu for my wife, you'll sit there and graciously accept it."

The hand he's captured me with travels to his jacket pocket, where he plucks out a pack of Marlboro cigarettes. I feel trapped—suffocated by his close proximity. Rather than let him know it, I straighten my spine and eyeball him right back.

Regardless of our standoff, he was right. This bar stretching into the bold blue sky, flooded with natural sunshine, is paradisiacal, even next to this infuriating man. The bone-warming climate is a world away from the wet and windy, teeth-chattering weather of the Irish west coast. I'm so out of my element. Yet strangely, sitting beside him makes the sunrays feel brighter and these exotic surroundings inviting.

I shake my head and sigh. "Whatever makes you feel like a man, Hotshot," I quip.

Dragging his intense gaze away, he turns his head. Fire engulfs the end of his cigarette, and then he slowly raises both arms outward to rest one behind my head and the other on the booth.

With smoke twirling like a ribbon and the tip draping his lower lip, he speaks to me in a low, confident tone. "I don't need to feel like a man when I'm a god."

His eyes drill into my face. They remind me of the farthest stark fields at nightfall, where there's no light to guide the way.

“Nothing happens in this city without my approval. Take a look...” He nods to the stunning panoramic view of high-rise towers, the farthest having a gargantuan construction sign draped over extensive scaffolding. The bold font used depicts power and strength, the company name—Souza. “Everything looks better from up here. Down there, the rats kill dogs for sport. You'd be wise not to make an enemy of me, Wifey. Runaway again, or disrespect me, and I'll ruin the earth beneath your feet like an earthquake.”

I continue to stare at him, studying every single inch of his rugged face. “You're threatening me?”

He shrugs one sinewy shoulder and takes a long drag of his cigarette. “I'm simply telling you how it is.”

I watch his nostrils expel more smoke while ebony lashes bat slowly so he can take in every inch of me. And he does. André sits there, trailing his gaze from my eyes to my mouth, and all the way down to the fingers I've placed on top of the table. His avid assessment spills over me like the first blush of dawn, pinking my skin to a shade of corruption.

“This morning we're celebrating.”

“Celebrating what, exactly? My bleak future?”

“The start of an epic love story,” he muses.

My cheeks burn under his intense stare. “Love story... pleeeeeease!” I scoff.

“Yeah—my dick is going to love fucking your cunt,” he says straight-faced, momentarily narrowing his eyes on my ringless wedding finger. “I take it the ring wasn't to your liking.” His frosty tone challenges the heat of the bold sun.

“None of it was to my liking.”

“Is that right? Given the way you're admiring me, I would say you're secretly happy about it. As for the way you sucked my dick, that was sheer fucking hunger,” he says, his voice

thickening like a rope to choke the lies from my throat. “In the best possible way.”

It infuriates me how he brings it up again, as if his deception was something to be proud of. “I’ve sucked my fair share of dicks in the past. So last night was just me going through the motions.”

My biting statement triggers something in him. Instantly, his expression shutters and a menacing frown knots between his dark brows. He goes from laid-back to wolfish in zero to sixty seconds, leaning in so his mastery burns through me.

Placing a large hand on my thigh under the table, he digs his fingertips into my flesh. “Anything you did before me is gravely insignificant. Do not speak of those incidents again. Whereas everything we do together moving forward is exactly what you deserve—what you’ll crave. It won’t be you going through the motions when you’re begging me.”

I let his words sink in and wonder why he’s so irritated by the mention of my disappointing past encounters. It’s not like he cares about me. Then I recall his intriguing tattoo and our meeting place. The one spot on the Hennessy estate that brought me happiness—him.

“Why do you have our tree tattooed on your back?” I do my best to ignore the immobilizing grip on my leg.

He stares back at me, unmoving for a moment, the hand burning my skin becoming heavier—relentless. I watch as the darkness in his eyes lightens to gunmetal, as if he’s recalling every memory we ever shared under that warped Hawthorn tree.

“I think you’ll find it was my tree long before I found you sitting under its branches,” he finally answers.

I suck in a sharp breath when his fingers uncurl, quickly making their way to my throat. My pulse hammers beneath his expansive palm, more so out of confusion from the acrimony brewing behind his fierce gaze.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were leaving that night? One day you were there, the next you were gone.”

My heart stops beating. “We were told to leave immediately.”

“By whom?”

“It doesn’t matter now. Besides, I left a note on our kitchen table with your name on it. Mammy wouldn’t let me go anywhere near Hennessy House. She said it was too risky. Your family would have killed us.”

His frown tightens and his fingertips lock in place. “It matters to me, Sinéad! I’m guessing the fucker who ordered you to leave was the same man who abused you. I waited hours for you under that tree. After I realized you weren’t coming to meet me, I raced to the cottage. It was empty when I arrived. Like you’d never existed. At one stage, I actually thought I’d made you up. You just disappeared. Who the fuck does that?”

He didn’t get my note.

“So, all this time you really didn’t know where I was?” I grit out, slapping my hand over his to loosen his grip, only to find my pitiful reflection in his molten black eyes.

“No one knew where you’d gone,” he snarls. “But you knew where I was, right? Yet you didn’t bother to reach out to me.”

“Why would I have done that, Dré? I left my uncle’s address, and you didn’t show up. Anyway, I knew you were flying home, eventually. It’s not like I could’ve hopped on a flight to Colombia. Do you really think a girl like me could track down a notorious organized crime family and survive? Or that I’d want to fall for a man who has evil blood running through his veins?”

The air around us smolders with something devastatingly carnal, and dare I think it—hurt. Before I have time to read between the lines, he lets go and sits back, glacial and barely composed.

“You’ll tell me who ordered you to leave eventually, and when you do, I’ll kill the cunt with my bare fucking hands,” he mutters in a low growl.

That's doubtful.

One minute his skin was scorching mine, the next we're like two isolated islands—separate and alone in our thoughts. In that moment, I'm transported back to the night I've tried to forget.

The unbearable weight of cold steel heavy on my tongue and the eyes of a devil, cracked with amber fire. His haunting laughter still catches up with me in the shadows.

The harrowing nightmare of hot tears creeping out from behind the swollen flesh closing over my left eye. How they burned like acid. Mammy's screams of forgiveness and that shade of pure horror whitening her lips. She'd had enough of his torment. We both had. Except I was the only one foolish enough to try to put an end to it.

You're either the hunted or the hunter.

Those words had inspired me. I'm certain that petrified little girl would have put a bullet in her tormentor's skull had the Hennessy sibling with an inbred evil streak not woken up. I eyeballed the fist-happy bastard from the foot of Mammy's bed, the barrel of his own gun aimed right at his snarling face.

He always wore a clandestine aura of greed, lies, and carnage. But that night, under the sheets, he was buck naked and vulnerable. Until he seized Mammy's neck and threatened to snap it.

As I shuffled from foot to foot, out-of-control nerves knotted in my belly. A splintering pain left over from his attack earlier had almost made me black out. In the drawn-out seconds of my hesitation, he witnessed my soul tremble from within and my unharmed eye, salty and bloodshot, blink wildly.

I had wanted him to stop beating me. To quit telling me I was a worthless piece of shit only good for breeding when I'd come of age. But most of all, I wanted him dead.

Except crippling fear took over and I couldn't pull the trigger.

“If you had known where we were traveling to, would you have come after me?” I finally ask, snapping my mind back to the present and pinning him with earnest eyes.

He stubs out his cigarette, studying the dull ash in silence. Then he looks up at me under his villainous black lashes and smiles. “I would have done anything for you, Sinéad. But I guess we’ll never know what lengths I would have gone to. No doubt I would have flown back to Ireland as a teenager, and we would have fucked a few times before going our separate ways. Not that it matters anymore, because we’re legally tied now. And eventually you’ll be the mother of my kids.”

My heart stops beating. “M-mother of your *kids*?” I repeat, utterly dumbstruck by his comment. “You’re joking, right?”

He pinches the cigarette with his fingers and slowly exhales a gray fog. “That’s why your old man was fixated on marriage. Frankie wants legitimate grandkids. He’s growing the Savori family tree so his life’s work can be passed down through the generations.”

I force myself to lock eyes with him even when I’m screaming inside. Slapping him would appease my temper, but the fallout wouldn’t be worth it.

“No way,” I hiss under my breath, scooting to the other side of the booth. “I don’t want kids. That’s a hard fucking no.”

A slight smirk tilts his lips. “Unfortunately, it’s not up for debate. It was a stipulation he added before he put your life on the table.”

“Mr. Souza.” A woman dressed in a cobalt power suit stops at our table, her timing inconvenient. “Is something wrong?” Shoulder-length hair the color of flax swishes as she cocks her head in silent assessment of us.

André’s revelation washes over me in a sickly wave. As if an arranged marriage wasn’t bad enough, now he plans to impregnate me, and I have no say in the matter.

He casually sits back as if he hasn’t just blown up my world. “Janel, are you still on the lookout for more bar staff?”

My wife would like to work here for a while. She's new to Miami, so this would help her settle in. Can you make it happen?"

I fling myself back against the seat, quietly containing the waspish temper bubbling under my skin. He's started to speak for me now, too.

The woman's bold red smile fades and her brow creases. "You're... married?" she stammers slightly and swallows, her shocked gaze hunting mine.

His mouth stretches wide at the corners, the grin lethal. "Sure am. This is my wife, Sinéad." A slow sweep of his pillowy bottom lip has Janel entranced. "Janel is the general manager of Sky Hotel, Sin. She's a real taskmaster." The way he looks over at her twists my insides under the cool facade I'm displaying.

My bones involuntarily oscillate; the emotions I'm fighting are fatally messed up. Janel folds her arms, hitches her chin a notch higher, and clears her throat in a dignified cough. "Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Souza. That's wonderful news." Her unreadable gaze slides back to André. "We're always on the hunt for experienced staff. Can she start straightaway for orientation?"

"Absolutely. She'll be free after breakfast." He scrubs the coarse hair on his chin in contemplation. "Best to keep her identity between us. No one needs to know who she is to me. Not yet."

Janel offers a tight smile to portray a businesslike demeanor, yet her French-tipped fingernails play across her breastbone. I can't quite decide if her heart is breaking, or she has indigestion.

"Understood. I'll update the bar manager. It's good timing; we have another person starting today too." She glances at her glitzy Cartier watch. "If you don't mind, I have somewhere to be. I'll catch up with you later, Mr. Souza." Her lashes flutter. "Once you're ready, Mrs. Souza, please make your way to the inside bar. David will be expecting you."

Mrs. Souza.

That's who I am now.

Nodding respectfully, the woman pivots in her high heels and struts back the way she came.

“Dré?” I pin him with a serious glare. “Neither of us would be fitting parents. You're eyeballs deep in criminal activity and I'm not the slightest bit maternal. I've no intention of dragging a baby into this pantomime.”

After a tense pause, he says, “The majority of my businesses are legitimate. I'm an upstanding member of the community.”

My blood boils when the server skirts the table, sets down two flutes, uncorks the champagne magnum, and pours, then backs away from the table. Ice crunches when he twists the bottle into a silver bucket. “Your food is on the way. Do you need anything else, sir?”

André eyes me over the glass of bubbles at his lips. “We're good.” His gaze stays on me, his voice calm.

The second the server disappears behind a potted palm, André takes a long drink and finally says, “I'm not in a rush to fulfill Frankie's request.” His dark eyes haven't left mine, except when he blinks in that measured, assessing way of his. “Being a father is not on my agenda at the minute, not when I'm growing an empire and hunting the men who assassinated Papá. But you should know that when the time comes, and it will, I'll put a baby in your belly, because you're the only woman who's worthy of my superior cum.”

I glare at his messy dark hair, bulging muscles filling the plain black t-shirt, and try to gauge the unusual expression he offers. It's not cruel or vindictive, not even cocky. Rather, it's sincere and utterly terrifying.

ANDRÉ



Twenty-One Years Ago

“Come on, Dré. Go faster!”

I love how the tires rip up the dirt when I twist the throttle, but what gives me an even bigger rush is my daredevil best friend screaming for me to accelerate.

This evening, she’s pinned to my spine with her arms around my waist like a koala bear. That free, girly squeal of hers seeping into my bones so they feel supercharged with strength.

The motocross dirt bike was a gift from my grandfather, who figured out I thrived on adrenaline and needed an outlet. Two days after I was diagnosed with an attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, Mama’s brother, Sean, disappeared, only to return with a trailer full of dirt bikes. Of course, Tommy and Gio begged for one too, but they didn’t spend hours raking around the grounds like I did.

When Mother rang Papá to tell him what the test results were, he just sighed and repeated the same phrase he always used. “I told you the kid wasn’t right in the fucking head.” I couldn’t hate him for it, because that would mean hating myself. I’m his son, after all, the only Souza who mirrors his idiosyncrasies, whether he wants to admit it or not.

A blood-red sky cushions the sinking sun behind the imposing presence of my grandfather’s mansion, set back on the horizon. Sinéad and I had spent the evening skirting wild

fallow deer and whipping up the mossy undergrowth of a dense forest, and now the fuel tank is close to empty.

I pull the motorcycle over in front of colossal gothic-styled electric gates. The intricate ironmongery with lethal spikes stretching skyward has a collection of disfigured gargoyles slaughtering chubby-faced cherubs in a war of love and hate.

When I first arrived at Hennessy House, they appeared creepy and evil—now they're simply the main entrance to my mother's family home.

I flick up the visor. "You ready to go home, Sin? I'm nearly out of fuel."

She flicks up her visor too, disorderly black strands falling every which way like crazy serpents over her shoulders. "Next time we'll hide a jerry can in the woods so we can refuel."

Her lashes lower and I can tell instantly she's dreading the ride home to her cottage. "Do you want me to sneak you into my bedroom? I have a massive bed. You'll be safe there. We could watch a scary movie."

She blinks at me, debating my suggestion with an intensity that glistens over liquid-sheened eyes. I could stare at those pretty irises all day long. They seem to catch my attention and trap my focus unlike anything I've ever encountered.

"I can't leave Mammy. She'd go out of her mind with worry if I didn't go home."

"Okay." I shrug. "Hold on tight." My wink makes the corner of her mouth twitch into a sweet smile.

"What's that creepy noise?" she asks, glancing over her shoulder.

I hear it too. The sound of bone-rattling pain or a creature unearthed from a tomb, ready to zombify every living being.

"Fuck if I know. Sounds like it's coming from over there, near the track to your place. You up for slaying some flesh-eating zombies?" I waggle my eyebrows at her. "I have a pocket knife with me, so we'll be okay."

Her wide grin tells me she's ready for another adventure. "If you turn into a zombie first, make sure you bite me, so we can be zombies together." She laughs.

Back in position, her arms wrapping me from behind. Tiny stones pelt the six-foot boundary wall when the back wheel spins. Together, we race along the gravel driveway leading to Hennessy House and swerve left where a sheltered dirt track runs parallel to the perimeter. The faster we go, the tighter she holds on.

In the distance, sprawled amid dense vegetation, lies a mass of gingery-brown fur with dappled white spots and a magnificent set of antlers poking out from leafy ferns.

Squeezing the brakes, the motorcycle skids to a slippery halt. I slam my boots into the soft mud to steady us. Pitiful moans reach right inside me, a deeply distressed melody, so emotive and disturbing that I can't help the threads of empathy stitching my ribs together. Sinéad dismounts and unfastens her helmet. "Dré... is it dying? Can we save it?"

I jump off too and let the motorcycle lower to its side, then drag off my helmet. I'm kneeling by its teeth-torn guts in a matter of seconds, my veins pumping and my mind flooded with ways to save the distressed creature.

"It's in so much pain," she whimpers, placing her hand on its rump. "There's no way we can carry it to the stable yard."

Even if we dragged the stag into the open, the patrolling rottweilers would rip it to pieces. The harder I try to think, the louder the sorrow-stricken groans affect me. Its helpless plea consumes me, the horrendous rattle of imminent death howling through the shadowy forest. I'm crawling in my skin, praying the noise will stop, and losing awareness of my surroundings as it takes over.

A gentle weight settles on my shoulder, the touch of my best friend sucking me back into the damp undergrowth. I angle around to meet Sinéad's pale cheeks, her wide eyes the very things that ground me. They're even more astounding when tears twinkle over the corneas. The dazzling brilliance morphs to mystical, so I'd swear she was a supernatural

creature in her own right. And in that moment, oddly entranced by the misery in her eyes, I equally need to abolish it.

The thin switchblade feels featherlight against the adrenaline coursing through my muscles. I swallow hard and clamber over exposed roots to reach the stag's fleshy, proud neck, so soft and warm under my shaky palm. Sucking in a ragged breath, I choke on my fear and mentally count back from ten. The instant I mouth the number three, my rash impulses kick in. Unable to wait, I stab first, then hack my way along its gullet in a barbaric act of mercy.

Dark-red blood spills over my fingers, so gloriously rich and warm with the last wisp of life. A vast amount of it pours onto the earth, turning cold as it settles in a puddle at my knees. Salty tears burn my flushed cheeks in the shocked hush that follows.

Leaves rustle.

Twigs snap.

“André.” Grandfather's sharp voice punctures the bubble surrounding my best friend and me. He glances at Sinéad and offers a mild smile before his imperious gaze cuts to mine. “Come here, son.”

I rise, soaked in the scarlet stain of a fresh kill, to lock eyes with the most powerful man in Ireland. He stands stoic, a peaked cap sheltering him from drizzle and his usual tweed hunting jacket buttoned to the neck. Burnt-orange leaves swirl and flutter around his dominating form while the wind agitates complaining branches. A rifle is tucked under his armpit, the barrel draping his forearm, pointing toward the dirt beneath his field boots.

“You did good, son.” His eyes narrow on my filthy hands. “We'll celebrate your first kill, albeit an animal. It takes courage to follow through. In this world, you're either the hunter or the hunted. And this evening you became the hunter. Sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind, and sometimes you have to be kind to maintain order. Both lessons require strength.” He reaches out, grabs my wrist, steers my fingertips

toward my face, and smears the blood along my cheekbones in streaks. “I’m proud of you, André. Wear the stag’s blood with honor.”

Sticky goop decorates my boyish face—a warrior claiming victory. The devilish cranberry sunset has since darkened, awakening the moon as a night-light for the southern sky. Everything has changed. My chest explodes with the sincerity of my grandfather’s pride, to the point I’m buzzing from within. The sensation is unlike any wired rush I’ve ever sought behind the handlebars of my motorcycle.

When he pivots and strolls away, Sinéad trots to my side, slots her hand into mine, and says, “You did the right thing, but that doesn’t make you a killer. You’re good inside, Dré. You know that, right?”

A crazy hodgepodge of emotions feud within me, the extent of them mentally taking me to a place I’ve never visited. I’m high on my grandfather’s respect, yet shaken by the horrible deed I did without regret. All of it rushes through my veins while the adrenaline of power electrifies my muscles.

And when Sinéad wraps her arms around my neck, a surge of oxytocin fuels every single cell in my body until I’m indescribably exhilarated.

“Friends forever,” she whispers in my ear.

My dopamine rises above the treetops where I fear it’ll never reach again.

ANDRÉ



Present Day

As a teenager, I learned that my deviant tendencies were a byproduct of the need for a high more consuming than the last. I'm a nonconformist. The notion of a normal life creates anarchy within me. Drugs, sex, alcohol, speed, and control—all sources I lean into for satisfaction, each one helping me to block out the adrenaline junky compulsion.

Yet somehow, I've fallen into a societal rabbit hole where the expectations of marriage have been well and truly fulfilled. I had recited vows and made a pact to produce an heir. This was not the plan.

Those things weren't aspirations I've ever aimed for. However, now that they've presented themselves to me, I'm considering them as opportunities. Like investing in my future with solid stocks and shares.

Wearing this wedding band on my finger should strangle my rebellious nature, completely shoving me right out of my chaotic comfort zone. Only it doesn't. Probably because I haven't stepped off the roller coaster since I bumped into Sinéad on Saporì's yacht. I'm still buzzed, and that's without grams of coke or a long line of shots. This high is unnaturally natural.

"I'm on birth control, Dré." She makes a small movement with her head, a shake that signifies growing frustration. "That's never going to change. Not now. Not ever. So don't sit there and demand something like that from me."

“Are you saying you would have preferred to marry Acer, then fuck the asshole and have a kid to him instead?” I say crossly, my patience thinning. “Because that was your future before I came along.”

Her shoulders fall as she exhales, the truth not sitting comfortably with her. Defeat contorts her expression, her features becoming soft as if sadness killed her appetite for anger.

Avoiding eye contact, she mutters under her breath, “I’m a human being, Dré. Not an insignificant pawn in your mafia wars and games of domination.”

I take a moment to quietly knock back the rest of my drink and mull over the sinking feeling in my gut caused by the lost look on her face. It doesn’t please me.

“Souzas aren’t pawns, Sin. We’re kings in our own right. Which makes my wife a queen. Accept it. I agreed to Frankie’s terms, and that includes a Sapori-Souza heir. The deal is done and so is this conversation.”

She lowers her head and rubs her temples. “Since when do you take orders from him?”

My veins seethe with anger, my temper on the shortest of leashes. It wasn’t an order; it was my own doing. I had orchestrated the whole fucking thing. The mention of a kid was a last-minute caveat that I brushed off without giving it a second thought. For some unknown reason, the idea of knocking her up makes me incredibly horny.

“Face up to it, Sin. We’re together. For better or for worse,” I bite out, my tone harsh. “Here’s to married life.” I raise my glass to the heavens. “And our first serious disagreement—which I won, by the way.” The smirk I unleash is met with an overemphasized scowl, her eyes less than tranquil and every bit intense.

I reach over the table, swipe the champagne bottle, and refill my empty glass. “To us. We’re family now. How your life is shaped from now on is up to you.” She folds her arms and continues to glare at me.

“Up to me?” She almost squeaks when her tone elevates. “If it were up to me, I’d be on the first flight home. Or maybe I’d have you castrated.”

Her huffed sigh is followed by a cute pout.

“This is why you need to eat. Hangry is not a good look on my beautiful wife,” I say with a half laugh. “Apparently testicles are a delicacy in Montana. I’m sure you’d enjoy having a good suck on mine the next time you’re on your knees.”

“I think you’ll find that’s bull’s testicles, not overly confident gangster’s. And if hangry covers a hatred for all things Souza, then yes, Husband, I’m hangry.”

I throw my head back and laugh from deep within my belly. “Didn’t take long for you to say it.”

Her forehead creases. “Say what?”

“Husband,” I say simply, watching flustered realization creep over her cheeks and settle. “Now that you’ve accepted your position, let’s toast to new beginnings. To friends forever.”

“Friends?” she scoffs, cocking her left brow. “The prospect of friendship is a bit premature, don’t you think? We’d actually have to like each other first.”

Her wry smile sizzles through me, reminding me of the countless smiles we’d once shared. When it warms my chest, antsiness explodes, and the happy feeling subsides. “Raise your fucking glass,” I repeat, my gravelly tone harsher than before.

“Say please,” she counters.

Her eyes focus solely on my mouth until I’m convinced she wants me to eat her alive.

“Raise your glass... please.”

Our gazes connect and our glasses clink. Then she takes a sip while I drain every last drop. A handful of servers file in, their trays overloaded with dishes. Once they’ve unloaded everything and left us in peace, I grab a soft, syrupy pancake

and sink my teeth in, making a deep groan of appreciation. While she pretends not to hear me, my phone rings.

“Letterman,” I answer. “You here?”

“Ready and waiting, parce.”

“Coming now.” I end the call, unfazed by the meeting with investors for a new business venture.

“Eat. Drink. And enjoy your orientation morning. You’ve got my number if you need me, Sin.” I slide out of the booth and crook two fingers at the closest security guy, beckoning him over. “All eyes on my wife. Don’t make it obvious. I’d rather not draw unwanted attention to her.”

I glance down at her feast, inwardly convincing myself this killer attraction is temporary. But when she picks up a bright-red strawberry and pops it into her lush mouth, I’m oddly overcome and jealous of a stupid piece of fruit. It’s unsettling and completely absurd.

“I’ll take you home later. Don’t leave the hotel without me.” I unpocket my aviators, the champagne not helping my hangover as much as a line of coke would, and cover my eyes.

“Yes, sir,” she mocks, drilling crystalline eyes into my dark lenses. “I’ll stay up here in this ivory tower.”

“Are we all in agreement?” I steeple my fingers and eyeball the suited businessmen around the table, each one ruthless in their own right—just not at the very top like me. “Fuck with me on this, and it’s the last skyscraper the collective will ever build in my city.”

Augustine, the French billionaire with little construction knowledge, asks a question at the exact moment my attention flits. It’s drawn to the glass partition separating the boardroom and an informal seating area. I’m instantly sucked into a

wormhole, muscles braced, fists clenched, and jaw locked so tightly my teeth almost crack.

There she is, my wife. Loitering in the corridor, her long ebony hair cascading over dainty shoulders, its sheen glossier than a still pond under moonlight. A vixen-like smile apples her cheeks and her hands move as she explains something.

She hasn't noticed me yet. Instead, she's holding a conversation with a walking broomstick who has a mass of wiry chestnut hair scraped into a topknot and an ugly bird tattoo on his throat. It's probably meant to be a bird of prey like my own; however, from where I'm sitting, his resembles a basic pigeon.

Beyond them I recognize the bar manager, David, who's talking on his cell phone while my wife and a stranger get to know each other.

Through the surge of adrenaline powering through my body, I hear Letterman answer Augustine's question, batting it away from me. He's aware my fingers are twitching over the cold, hard steel of my revolver. In a lapse of sanity, I fish my phone out of my pocket and type a text instead of officially losing my shit.

Husband: STOP FLIRTING.

The second it arrives, she scoops her device out of her back pocket and quietly reads. Her alarmed gaze roams every doorway until she locates the boardroom at the far end of the corridor and settles on the scowl, freezing my expression like black ice.

She visibly takes a deep breath and tucks a lock of hair behind her ear, pausing in the aftermath of my demand. After a tense moment, when I'm certain she has understood, a reply lands.

Wife: I'm only talking. You can't control everything I do.

She turns her back to me and continues to engage the lanky cunt, who laughs at something funny. My heart rate soars higher than it would from a nose full of premium cut coke, causing palpitations that make me jittery. It takes every grain of self-discipline to keep my gun holstered and my ass in the boardroom. Doing my best to hide my temper from my associates, I send another message.

Husband: STOP FUCKING FLIRTING, WIFEY.

My mouth dries when she flicks the screen around. I admire the perfect composition of her side profile as she studies the capital letters and reminder of her status. Glancing sideways, she spears me to the seat with her bold eyes, takes a beat to consider her next move, and then replies.

Wife: That wasn't flirting. But this...

The corner of her mouth hitches to a cheeky grin before her gaze flits and she angles away. Accidentally on purpose, she drops her phone at the feet of the guy who's got thirty seconds left to live.

Ever so slowly, she lowers to her haunches, her face fronting his zipper as she calmly looks up at him and lingers in that position while they chat. He caresses his clean-shaven chin, almost drooling at the sight of my wife in a submissive pose before him.

I'm lost in a mental vision of me burning his sleazy eyeballs with a Zippo flame. I can easily guess what thoughts are brewing in his dirty mind, imagining how good it would be to have my girl's mouth around his mediocre dick.

Even knowing he's thinking about it drives me insane. My stomach clenches and my chest is uncomfortably tight. This

wasn't the plan. Being distracted by my new wife is not a good idea. It would only prove Papá right—that all I'm good for is fucking around.

However, for some unknown reason, I can't function properly, let alone concentrate on anything else but her.

After too many heart palpitations and a whisper from Letterman, who thinks I've mentally checked out, she rises and fiddles with the tips of her hair like a sexy fucking siren luring in prey, until my next message lands.

Husband: HE'S DEAD.

My phone clatters onto the table and I push out of my chair, unable to stay seated for a second longer. I lean over the table and lock eyes with my guests one by one, projecting as much decorum as I can physically muster. "We need to wrap this up. I have someone to take care of. Letterman will answer any further questions you might have. It's a pleasure doing business with you all."

The iPhone screen glows when she replies. Except I'm too far gone in my temper to read it. She had poked my fucking monster and now it's pissed.

Nothing shocks me anymore. Not anything. I'm the master of a professional world and the capo of an organized underworld. Everything runs like clockwork until some fucker betrays me. And then they're history. Which makes this reaction nothing short of cataclysmic. And what's worse, it's knocked me off-balance and interfered with business. There's a price to pay for that.

Wife: He didn't do anything.

Wife: He has a girlfriend.

Wife: You wouldn't.

Wife: Dré??? WTF.

SINÉAD



I can't breathe.

My lungs won't accept oxygen. The unread messages on my phone become blurry under a wave of panic. He wouldn't kill him—would he?

I've only just met Lennon, and what I've learned so far is that he's planning an elaborately romantic proposal for his girlfriend—in the rooftop bar, Luna. I don't fancy him in the slightest, and he doesn't think that way about me either. He's the first person outside of André's gang who has spoken to me. Talking to him made the chaos dissipate temporarily.

I knew I was goading André in a playful way. He needs to know I'm not a docile little wife who'll bow down to his every demand. I can talk to whoever I want and secure a job without his help. However, pushing my boundaries hasn't worked in my favor. Now I'm afraid he'll go apeshit like his psycho father would.

André immediately straightens from sitting to standing, no longer watching me from his position at the head of a full table. His expression is dark, blank, and completely void of emotion.

“Right, guys, the conference suites are the last part of the tour.” David checks his phone as he speaks to us. Together, we walk away from the meeting room filled with power players and my capricious husband. “You'll only be on this level if bar service is required. Follow me. We'll grab a drink upstairs while you fill out paperwork.”

My nerves are all over the place. A loud slam makes me jump when we move along the corridor. “What’s with you?” Lennon chuckles. “It was only the fire doors closing.”

I pretend to laugh with him. “I’m from Ireland, where there are zillions of sheep, rolling fields, and never-ending hills. The loudest noise I would hear is the rain on the roof.”

As a trio, we leave the boardrooms behind where André holds court and pretends I’m invisible. His text makes me uneasy—more so nauseous. There’s a side to him I’ve never met. A split in his persona that lives in savage territory where he’d set fire to the rain to watch it scald anyone who challenges him. And that’s the side of him I never want to meet.

Lennon’s long strides purposefully match David’s on a quest to talk over his romantic proposal plans. I let them walk ahead to act as a buffer should André appear.

Earlier, after introductions were out of the way, Lennon had asked if I was in a relationship, to which I’d answered, ‘Yeah, it’s complicated.’ However, the guy has no clue that the complication is a six-foot gangster with a short fuse, who’s threatened to kill him because I played a game of ‘I’ll Show You What I Can Do.’

I’m a good few steps behind them, glancing over my shoulder every now and again to check for an incoming, hot-tempered gunman. Thinking he’s occupied for the time being, I pull out my phone again to send another text message.

One minute I’m looking at the screen and in the next a huge hand covers my mouth as a possessive arm snakes around my midriff. I’m trapped against a hard mass of muscle, my arms thrashing as I struggle against my captor, who effortlessly walks me backward, away from the two men.

A door whooshes open, kicked by a boot to keep it from closing on us. Once we’re both inside, whiskered lips drop to the shell of my ear. “Scream and I’ll kill them both. Understood?”

Under his hand, I smell alcohol, leather, and vetiver. Confidence epitomized in my husband's aroma. The heavy door automatically shuts us inside a huge windowless room, where a massive screen hangs on an oak-clad wall with rows of tables and chairs set out for a conference. It smells brand new, from a fawn patterned carpet underfoot to glitzy chandeliers that ping to life as motion sensors detect our movements.

"You're a psycho, André," I snarl when he removes his hand to release my waist, allowing me time to whirl around on the spot to face him. "You can't kill them."

He paces before me, his inked muscles rigid, each step reminding me of a caged lion in a zoo. "I can and I will. You should have thought about the consequences before you tested me."

"The consequences of talking to someone? You have no reason to kill either of them. Lennon is a decent guy," I hiss. "He's in a normal relationship with his soon-to-be fiancée. Unlike us, he's happy and wants to marry the love of his life."

"Happy?" He sneers, his hair messily falling over his brow. "You want to feel happiness, Sin? We all know that fades. Wouldn't you rather I offered pleasure and agreed to let you come harder than you've ever done before?"

"That's a bit presumptuous," I counter.

His eyes flash and I instantly regret saying it. I'm not given the chance to take it back when he prowls closer, clamps my shoulders, and backs me into the wall.

"Luckily for him, he didn't lay a finger on you. Otherwise, I would have thrown the asshole out the window. He wouldn't be so happy then, would he?" His chest visibly rises. "Have I made myself clear?"

I refuse to answer, doing my best to push him off me. He won't budge.

"You. Are. Mine," he grits out through clenched teeth. "Mine to touch. Mine to admire. Mine to take home. Mine forever. Even when the lights go out on this attraction, you'll

still belong to me. If any man dares to think you could be his, then all bets are off. I'll cut him up and bury his remains in the foundations of the next Souza tower. Do you understand?"

"You're a maniac."

"Maybe I am." He tips in closer. "But those are my rules. If you don't want a trail of dead bodies behind you, then you'll pay attention or face the consequences."

"And what should *I* do when a woman like Janel makes a move on my husband? Take a knife to her throat? Things could get messy around here if I start slicing up all your whores while you're hacking up innocent guys."

He stares at me, his expression darkening, not from violence but delight. "You're jealous of her too?"

"No..." I say breathlessly, inwardly batting away the lie. "I just think it's hypocritical how you can act like a caveman when I'm only trying to make friends. I'm here because of you. In a city where the only person I know is my good-looking husband who gets bored quickly. Do you expect me to shrivel into the background and watch while you disrespect *me*?"

Both of his eyebrows drift up. "That's the second time you've called me husband and referred to me as good-looking. I'm starting to think you have a crush on me, Wifey."

His killer mood starts to unravel, the levels unwinding until it's less fury-stricken and more wicked. A subtle dimple dents his cheek. Under his anger, there's a glint of humanity.

"You know you could have any woman on the planet, yet you forced a stranger to marry you. I just don't get it."

"You know what I saw when I looked into your eyes on that yacht?" I shake my head. "... The same miserable girl who needed an escape. Who wished for a way out. Who craved an adventure. You're not a stranger to me, Sin. Which is why you're my wife." He takes a sharp breath as if he's said too much. "If it's not your new friend who should be taught an important lesson, then it must be you?"

“In case you haven’t noticed, there aren’t any windows in this room to push me out of.” My voice wobbles, unsure why the floor beneath my feet feels like jelly.

“How about I make you a promise?”

“I’m listening.”

“I’ll never kill you. No matter what happens in the future. As long as you never betray me.”

“And despite my loyalty, you’ll continue to control who I speak to and what I do.”

“Correct.”

I groan out my dissatisfaction. “You’re impossible.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. Everything I’m capable of is very possible.” Brawny shoulders pull back as he straightens, his hands still pinning me to the wall. “Are you prepared to take responsibility for your actions and accept the punishment? Or will I arrange for Reno to pick up your *new friend* later and take him on a one-way trip?”

“Go on then, Dré. Do your worst, because I’m not the type of woman who appreciates being ordered around. I’m used to doing things my own way, on my terms.”

Shadows darken his glare, the liquid ink pools becoming a shade of evil to sketch out the daredevil whims of my new husband.

“You’re not the one for me,” I point out.

“Really?” He pinches my jaw, the touch startling like a static shock. “Is that why your pupils are dilated and your skin is flushed?”

I pointlessly struggle to free myself from the truth. “I’m an independent woman and you’re a controlling asshole. Do you get off on scaring people?”

“You’re not scared of me, Sin; you’re just afraid of how much you want me.”

“Fuck you!”

He presses himself into me, his massive form flush against my body. His intoxicating woody cologne regretfully ambushes me. I'm on fire next to him and I can't help it.

“Why would you tease me if you didn't want a reaction? Are you curious to feel my dick inside one of your hot holes?”

My cheeks blaze. “I—I wasn't teasing. I was showing you that you're not the boss of me. There's a difference.”

“I disagree.”

“Of course, you do.”

His forehead butts into mine, the magnitude of his authority closing in on me so we're closer than ever. “Pick a word.”

“Why?”

“It will stop me from going too far,” he growls into my face.

“Are you talking about a safe word?” I retort.

“Precisely.” The way he answers me with that sonorous voice of his chills me to the bone.

My mind scrambles. I can't form a coherent sentence now, let alone think of a suitable word. For some reason, I'm thrown back in time, to the dying stag we'd found far from its herd. I recall the harrowing groans of wretchedness and how André had ended its life with a shiny blade.

Some might think it was a monstrous thing to do. However, I saw the tremors in his boyish hands, the liquid fear glossing his wide eyes, and felt the sorrow crushing his warm heart.

Afterward, I witnessed his transformation, too—his rebirth. The adrenaline junkie who found a new vice that was more powerful than reckless speed. All because Mad Mick, his mafia grandfather, made him a victorious princely hunter.

I look him square in the eye. “Stag.”

The corners of his mouth twitch as the charged word electrifies us both. I can feel the heat of his body turn hotter,

his pulse radiating through me like galloping hooves. “Very good, Sin.”

I blink up at him. “You showed that lost stag mercy. So you can do the same for me. Right?”

“Your heart is pounding, Wifey.” His rumbled whisper elevates my heart rate. “I think you’re ready.”

“Wait...”

He raises his eyebrows. “I’ve waited long enough.”

The words are barely out of his mouth when he whirls me around to face wooden panels. A whimper escapes me when he yanks my hair so my head falls back against his chest.

“Unbutton your pants.”

“If you think raping me will earn my respect, then you’re beyond help.”

His teeth graze the shell of my ear, dissolving my fight with a crescendo of shivers. “Just so we’re clear, I’m not fucking you today. I’m punishing you. Now lower your pants.”

SINÉAD



I flinch at the harsh bite of his command and almost cry when I realize I'm disappointed. What the hell is wrong with me?

Doing as he asks, I pop open the top button and lower the zipper. He doesn't wait, grabbing the waistband and roughly tugging until my ass is exposed and my knees are shackled with leather.

"Hands to the wall." He runs a dominant hand over my bare flesh, so it prickles without my consent.

I try to look back at him, needing to meet his eyes and find out if they're black with cruel intentions or swirling with desire. However, it's too late. Ruthless fingers land on the back of my skull and I'm forced forward, saving myself from face-planting into the wood by slamming my palms to the wall.

He moves directly behind me. "Good girl." His controlling touch glides over my buttocks again, strong fingers manipulating the flesh. "My dirty, dick-hungry wife has a sexy-as-fuck-shaped ass." The thick, approving grunt he offers attacks me with temptation. "So smooth, round, and ivory, perfect for marks of discipline." The warmth of his torso lines my spine, his hoarse whisper reaching my ear. "Who do you belong to, Sin?"

"Dré... not here..." My pleading voice escapes in a pathetic mewl.

Ruthless fingers wrap around the hair at my nape and tug. "Answer me," he demands.

“You,” I blurt out, aware of every wild tingle within me.

“And who am I to you?”

“My husband,” I croak, hungrier than ever for a man I should hate, but can’t stop myself from craving.

He wields the sharp edge to cut me deep, to slash up my world and leave me gasping for more. It was never like this with Liam. Or any of the other losers I’d hooked up with in the past. Those men weren’t even in the same stratosphere as André. I’ve never experienced domination at the hands of such power, and right now, it’s getting me off.

“That’s right. And I’ll never let you forget it. From this day forward, I’m the only man who’ll ever fuck you. For better or for worse, you’ll take all of me. For richer or for poorer, you belong to me. In sickness and health, you will lie beside me. There’s no getting away from me this time.”

He pushes off me, the sudden movement vanquishing the heat his body had created and leaving me with chills. While I foolishly mourn the loss of his closeness, a loud smack connects with my bare ass.

The echo of punishment slices the atmosphere and shreds the hush with my tattered gasp. A burning hot pain spreads across flesh, bringing a sting of humiliation with it. He doesn’t give me a moment of self-preservation when a second slap lands on the same flaming spot, this time more agonizing than the last.

“They represent the bullets I should have fired into that guy you were flirting with.” His voice slips into darkness, the tone raspy and unfamiliar as if he’s wrangling with the presiding monster within his soul. “And these...” A third slap collides like a whip, firm and sadistic. “These are what you’ll think about the next time you decide to defy me.”

I blink away the tears misting my eyes and clench my jaw to brace for the pending assault. He continues to spank me without hesitation, the crack of every slap rising to the high ceilings. Confusing whimper-like groans escape me as I grow wetter when he grunts out his carnal satisfaction.

He's in control and I'm willingly giving him that power. Perhaps his depravity is what I've been craving without fully understanding what I needed. Why Liam could never impress me, or anyone else for that matter.

To date, I've never felt satisfied. As if I was faulty and there was no one equipped to repair me. I've fought for myself in a man's world, but had never taken the time to figure out what they could offer to set my soul alight. To me, men have always been a means to an end. Not a necessity. Creatures who steal and lie. Assholes who use their fists to make a point.

I'd fuck on autopilot and fail to fully soar, always assuming it was my fault. But maybe this is what my tough shell truly yearns for, an attack so sexually awakening it could crack open all my barriers and excite my unhappy soul. This isn't brutality like an evil punch to the belly or a hateful dig in the face. No, it's something intriguing. An erotic lever I never knew existed, but have allowed André to press.

My shaky forearms take the weight of my exhausted body bearing down on them. Sweat trickles along my spine and my pulse thrums with life. It's a sickness, a secret animalistic desire that only a fool would give in to. I've lost count of the slaps he's dished out. Somewhere along the line, I think he has too. Until he hisses, "Eight."

"Enough!" I beg, if only for it to stop in time to comprehend why it's becoming so stimulating.

"It's not nearly enough yet," he replies with chilling calmness.

The safe word we agreed upon sits on the tip of my tongue, its lightweight presence a comfort. I could scream it over and over, but from a dark corner of my mind, I decide to lock it away for another day.

As I mentally banish it, he unleashes a smack on one cheek and another on the opposite, causing me to yelp from the rapid shock of it.

"Ten. Now that's enough."

I'm a mess. My pulse is hysterical and the wetness between my thighs is shameful and illicit. He snakes a domineering hand around my waist and yanks me into his solid chest. My fast breaths chase every rise and fall of his. But when he drops his mouth to my neck and bites, I almost buckle. The sharpness of his teeth is quickly pacified by suction. I try to shake my head, except he's latched on hard, inevitably bruising my flesh with a hickey.

Once he's confident he's left an ugly stain, his whiskered jaw brushes the side of my face.

"I'll let you decide what happens next." There's a gravelly tone to his bass voice that elevates the hairs on my scalp. He sounds like a completely different person.

"What are my options?" I whisper, my own voice unsure.

"We can walk out of here together right now, or you can beg me to give you pleasure. To let you come."

Holy shit. He really is a cruel bastard. The indignity of begging only adds to the throbbing in my core that I'm struggling to resist.

"I can sense how much you crave a release. Beg me to sink my fingers into your wet cunt. I know you, Sinéad. You don't want fairy tales and romantic proposals; you crave the rush and excitement of rough foreplay. And whether you'll admit it or not, you want *me*. Don't even try to deny it."

The welts on my ass chafe against his erection when I wriggle in a bid to break free. His dominating hold doesn't give me an inch to play with. I'm trapped in his powerful arms, intoxicated by his control and unable to think of anything else other than what he can offer me in this moment.

There's no rational reason to explain how I'm shaking with lust at the hands of a killer. It's illogical. But that's exactly what's happening. His monster doesn't want to capture mine; it wants to coax it free.

"Fine," I say the word like the lashing of a whip, ashamed that my urges have run away with me.

In a beat, he spins me around, steadies me before him, a beast of a man feeding his own perversion. Dark eyes drill into my face, the depths of his pupils rich in sadism and mastery.

“I said beg.” His jaw clenches when I stumble backward into the wall. “Beg your husband to give you exactly what you need.”

He crowds me, shoves his middle finger into my mouth, removes it, and slips it past his teeth. The intensity of my arousal worsens after he sucks his whole finger and returns it to my lips, where he traces my Cupid’s bow. Unintentionally, my lips part. A whimper sighs from the back of my throat—hungrier, needier—despicable.

My hips rock into him, hunting his leg for some sort of satisfaction. “Please... let me come... André...”

His voice drops, darkness comfortably living in his expression. “Husband.”

The urge to fuck him siphons through my veins like poison, my emotions and senses so tightly wound that I swear I could come from just a kiss from this man.

“Please... Husband...” I hiss the two words, furious at my surrender and secretly relieved that I did.

Suddenly his fingers hollow my cheeks, and he stares at me, his jawbone moving as he looks straight into my eyes and rips out my curious soul. “Good girl. You’re a fast learner.”

His free hand swoops lower, hunting the slick heat at the apex of my thighs and shoving two of his fingers in deep. I’m locked in place before him, his fingerprints digging into my cheeks while our gazes war in an unspoken battle. The mounting pressure captures my breath. Stimulation only serves to excite me beyond anything I’ve ever experienced. From the tyrannical red hand marks on my ass to the skillful thumb working my clit, it’s all a mishmash of sensations, so intense that I start to shake.

With our eyes locked, a fierce pleasure surges through me, its force violent. I can’t stop the raw moans scraping my throat on their way out, because all I’m equipped to do right now is

surrender. And I do. I fall apart on his fingers and witness the shadows caressing his features yield temporarily as he watches me implode.

I've never felt dirtier than I do right now, and even though the circumstances of why I'm in this conference room are all wrong, I've never felt something so goddamn right.

And that's the worst realization of all. Like he said himself, he's not capable of sticking with the same woman for long or offering a happily ever after. Perhaps this is the hardest lesson I'll ever learn—a man like André Souza can never be tamed. I might belong to him, but he'll never truly be mine.

A sensual, low growl follows the removal of his fingers once I'm well and truly spent. He moves slowly as if it pains him to take a step back and then, while he watches me recover, he cleans his essence-soaked fingers with his tongue.

“You taste so fucking good. Next time I sample your flavor, it will be ours combined.”

My knees wobble, almost failing me. I hurriedly hoist my pants up and anchor my spine to the wall for support, painfully aware of how my ass cheeks burn under the heavy material. Then something occurs to me.

“Are there video cameras in here?” I scan the ceiling, looking to all four corners of the room. “Who will see this?”

“Don't worry about it. I'll make sure the footage is wiped.” He removes his cell phone from his back pocket and types a quick message. “Reno is all over it. Trust me. The same rules apply to anyone who watches my wife or flirts with her.”

He slots a hand into his jeans pocket and looks at me, his pretty black lashes batting slowly. “You enjoyed that, didn't you? And don't even think about lying to me.”

I shrug, unable to hide the flush coloring me scarlet. “I don't enjoy you threatening to kill people who speak to me. It's suffocating and unfair.”

He cocks his head to the side. “Then behave yourself,” he says matter-of-factly, like it's that easy to accept his rules. “I

need a smoke. Time to go home.”

What the hell is wrong with me? I’m a freak. A traitor to my principles. I’ve turned into a sadistic-loving nympho who’s finding it tricky to formulate another sentence in the aftermath of his *punishment*. At first, yeah, it was horrifying, and then I got turned on like a bulb from the brightest lighthouse.

Motherfucker.

His dominance oozes corruption, the sexy jerk.

I should be disgusted by the throbbing sting on my ass and the leftover dampness now seeping into the crotch of my pants. It’s embarrassing. But I can’t stop the dirty flashbacks that make my pulse go wonky. Or put a halt to thoughts of a release that blew up my old world and spat me out in his.

Now my head is all over the place.

I don’t want to be his wife, and I definitely don’t want to have kids with him. Those are solid, concrete facts. Despite those beliefs, I’m still tingling in places I shouldn’t be, and when I watch André prowl toward the exit, all manly and muscular, an unbearable desire to fuck him charges through me.

I take a deep breath and collect my wits. Nothing good would come of parting my legs and giving in to his filthy, hot demands. I swallow hard and begin my walk of shame behind him, not sure whether I want to stuff my fingers in his thick, tousled hair or dry hump his leg.

If I’m going to figure out a way to get Mammy off Frankie’s radar and survive the Souza show, then maybe I should play along with his game.

ANDRÉ



“What the fuck happened to you?” Letterman and Reno bounce into my home office and take a seat on the couch.

“Next time you disappear, send a text, Dré. With *sicario* still breathing down our necks, we need to stay close,” Reno warns.

Next to Giovanni, Reno is one hell of a sharpshooter. Controlled, vigilant, and meticulous. Clearly, dragging my wife from Sky Hotel and riding my motorcycle back to the condo without an entourage has angered him. I wasn’t thinking clearly because all my focus was zeroed in on Sinéad and that hot-as-fuck encounter in the conference.

“Right, yeah. It was a dick move. I was preoccupied.”

“Where is the distraction?” Letterman asks as he lights a reefer and stands, crossing the room to be next to me. “Here. Looks like you need it.”

I’m standing behind my disorderly desk, a hand in my jeans pocket and the other tinkling an ice cube in my now empty glass. Miami stretches out before me for miles beyond the window.

I’ve stood in this same spot since arriving home a few hours ago. She didn’t say much after I’d punished her smooth ivory ass to the shade of corruption. Which tells me she got the message loud and clear.

Fuck, it had felt good. Every time I made those silky-smooth buttocks subtly tremor and when my handprint blazed

across her flesh, my dick stiffened to titanium. Like metal fucking strong.

By the time I was done, I had nearly torn off the rest of her clothes to finally fuck my wife and enjoy the adrenaline that I crave in my bloodstream. Except she's adamant it'll never happen. I say it will—very soon.

I may enjoy spells of violence to keep order on the streets, but I draw the line at rape. There's no joy to be had in a one-sided party. I get my thrills from hearing women beg and watching them fall apart under my control. Just like she did earlier, and it was the highest I've soared in a long time. Which makes me believe fucking the woman could quite possibly be the ultimate rush to date.

"She's upstairs trying on new clothes." I set my glass down and take the reefer he's offering me. "I need you to run a full background check on the new guy working in Luna. Janel will give you his details."

"No worries." Letterman unscrews the cap of my favorite whiskey and pours a healthy measure into the glass. "You don't seem yourself, Dré. I think you need to fuck the woman and be done with it."

"Not yet," I say coolly, irritated that my dick is still aching and unsatisfied. "Her time will come." I push off the glass, snatch the imported Irish whiskey from his hand, put the mouth to my lips, and take a long swig straight from the bottle. "I'm enjoying the game." My playful wink earns a chuckle from him. "Waiting is new territory for me, which adds to the appeal. I'm not used to resistance."

Letterman chuckles. "Resistance or marriage?"

"Both. But holding out for sex, that's killing me," I confirm. "My fucking balls are swollen, and my concentration is shot. Worse than usual," I point out.

"Why haven't you charmed her yet?" Reno asks with a smirk on his clean-shaven face. "It's not like you."

"She's not like the women we usually encounter," I offer. "Never has been."

“You mean she has better taste in men?” Letterman takes the bottle off me and drinks.

I give him the middle finger. “Nah, *cabron*, she’s into me. I know it and she fucking knows it.”

“And that’s why you’re down here with us and she’s upstairs, probably naked...”

I run a hand through my hair and growl, the recollection of her ass, all red and fiery, claims pole position in my thoughts.

“I bet she’s got a killer body under those tight leather pants.” Letterman whistles.

My hackles rise. “You know she’s my wife, right? How about a little less looking and lot more fucking respect?”

He throws me a cocky grin. “I’m simply showing a platonic appreciation of her fine female form. I’d expect nothing less from the wife of my best friend.”

“And your boss...” I growl. “Eyeing her up is not permitted. She’s off-limits.”

“Wow.” He smirks. “Possessive much?”

We’ve never fallen out. Not once. Especially not over a woman. So, this wired reaction to his friendly teasing is completely out of character for me.

“She’s gotten to you.” Letterman slides me a knowing smile, almost bordering on sympathetic. “I’m guessing there’s more to this than the no sex thing?”

“Of course, there is,” Reno chimes in. “Didn’t the yacht give it away?”

“That’s a coincidence,” I say flatly.

Letterman’s forehead scrunches. “Fuck... yeah. Christ. Now it makes sense—you’re more than into her.”

It’s weird to hear him say it when I’ve hated the woman for years. Fleeing the Hennessy estate without saying goodbye or leaving a forwarding address was the ultimate betrayal. By the time our private jet had touched down in Colombia months

later, the chances of bumping into her again became impossible. I forgot all about her—more or less.

“We had a watertight bond a couple of decades ago. It was stupid kid stuff. Nothing that means anything now. This is simply the Souzas getting cozy with the Sicilians. It’s tactics.”

“Right—tactics.” Letterman widens his eyes sarcastically.

“Once I’m done with her, she’ll end up in a billionaire’s bunker on a nearby gated island with a team of guards watching over her day and night. That way, she’ll be safe, and we can continue doing what we do best.”

Letterman nods. “Sounds plausible. How do you think she’ll react to that?”

I half laugh. “I’m sure she’ll kick and scream for a while until she realizes it won’t make a difference. It’s the best plan. Just like my parents’ dysfunctional agreement.”

“Have you told your family yet?”

My gaze settles on the city beyond us. “I’ll call them tomorrow. It’s bad timing with Tommy’s situation. And to be honest, I’ve put off listening to the disappointment in Mama’s voice. She was cheated out of a wedding day for her favorite son.”

When Reno joins us at the window, I pass him the reefer next. He looks worn out. Then again, we all do. It’s been an intense few weeks and Tomás is still off-grid, the inconsiderate fucker. His second-in-command, our cousin Shane, assured Mama that he’s recovering from the gunshot wound that almost killed him a few weeks ago. However, I’m still pissed he’s gone dark and won’t return my calls.

First and foremost, I need to know he’s okay and happily balls deep in Carina. Then we have important business to discuss, like who assassinated our father. Initially, we had suspected Carlos Blanco, Papá’s old friend turned enemy, but something doesn’t add up. Whispers from North Colombia tell us it wasn’t him. So, if not him, then who the fuck was it? At this point, I don’t trust anyone anymore.

The lesser cartels' goal is to eliminate the principal organization in Colombia—my family. In this world, the best way to deal with competition is to eliminate it. Guess we're on their hit list for that reason alone. And now, everyone is a suspect.

I exhale a long sigh, enjoying the wisp of relaxation the marijuana brings to my tense muscles. "Have we got any new intel?"

"Feels like we're running in circles." Reno props his ass on the edge of the desk. "Nothing solid yet. A few of our guys were talking to rival coke handlers. They're low enough to the ground to pick up rumors. We'll see what they have to say."

The three of us fall silent. I seize the bottle back into my possession and take a much-needed glug. "I need to get fucked up."

Letterman hooks his hand around my nape and butts our foreheads together. "There he is. I thought I'd lost you, parce. We'll hit downtown Miami." He grins.

Reno propels off the desk. "You don't need to ask me twice."

These guys know what makes me tick. An all-nighter will sort my head right out. I need to lose myself tonight and if that means fucking a hot señorita, then so be it.

"Give me half an hour. I'll shower first," I say over my shoulder, nearly out of the door, the bottle still in my hand.

It's late afternoon. The sky is a deep salmon pink as the sun begins to set, its blushed rays streaming into my living room as I stroll through it. Climbing the steps two at a time, I stop halfway up the staircase and swallow another mouthful of whiskey, followed by a few more in quick succession.

For some reason, the liquor doesn't soothe the turbulence in my chest. Uneasiness rests on my shoulders, heavy and tense. From experience, this edginess brings danger.

Rather than head to the shower straight away, I go to the west-facing guest bedroom, expecting to find Sinéad in the walk-in closet where the maid had unpacked and organized all

of her new outfits. My own closet is packed full, so affording her space elsewhere saves a compromise.

I secretly hope to find her stripped and bent over, except when I enter, all the clothes are neatly hung on racks and she's nowhere to be seen. The hairs on my nape prickle. There's no way she could have escaped. Not with all the guards patrolling the condo. And if she has, I'll likely lose my fucking shit with her until she gets the message.

Despite my sudden tide of anger, I'm quietly troubled by the uneven rhythm of my heartbeat. My lungs sip for oxygen as if I'm worried, even when I have no reason to be. If she tries to disappear a second time, I'll drag her back, strap her to a chair with duct tape, and force my dick in her throat again.

For fuck's sake. I can't think of anything else these days.

To appease the unsteady thrum, I gulp more liquor and storm out of the guest room, making a beeline for the master suite.

When I get there, my heart does a weird jittery thing when I find her curled up on top of my duvet, dressed in the skull t-shirt I'd given her, bare legs tucked to her chest. Sable hairs map the fresh cotton pillowcase as she lies motionless, oblivious to my approach.

From the foot of the bed, I observe her every breath and how her lashes flutter as she dreams. I continue to drink from the bottle, my boots rooted to the rug with demons sitting on my shoulder. What would it take for my wife to fully surrender?

We hadn't discussed sleeping arrangements. However, I'm quietly pleased to see she's accepted my comments and placed herself in my suite. That's exactly where she belongs.

Curious to see if her buttocks are still raw, I skirt the mattress and lightly trace the curve of her thigh, pinching the t-shirt so it creeps up to expose that fuckable ass of hers.

The temperature rises when a deeply erotic murmur leaves her throat, every bit the tease even in her sleep. When I take another swig of whiskey, I realize my heart is pounding.

I drag a hand down my face, carry the bottle with me to the adjoining bathroom, and set it on the vanity. Flicking on the shower, I strip and get under the powerful jets. Water sluices over my shoulders and soaks my hair. I think about jerking off, but stop short when a filthy fleeting fantasy involving her catches me off guard.

Jesus fuck.

By the time I'm done lathering up and rinsing, the desire to go out has left me, replaced by a much darker urge.

I turn off the water and throw on my black and gold Versace robe, letting it hang open. My iPhone vibrates from my jeans strewn on the floor. It's a message from Reno downstairs telling me the car is waiting. I grab my smokes from the adjacent pocket, tap out a cigarette, and light it, all the while considering my next move.

Back in the bedroom, I navigate the control panel on the wall to lower the smart blinds. As soon as they block out the sunset, the bedside lamps automatically turn on. She's still asleep, blissfully unaware of this monster lurking in the shadows. My blood sizzles and my dick turns angry. I've never watched a woman sleep before, or even been interested in taking the time to notice. Somehow, the vulnerability it gives her has my veins scorching.

I drag a low-slung armchair close to the edge of the bed, checking the position offers the best view of my sleeping beauty, then sink down and kick my feet up so they settle on the mattress. My dick is at full attention before me like a radar searching for its next target. It's been unsettled for long enough. Something has to give.

Taking my time to enjoy the nicotine, I let my mind run away with itself, unable to ignore the onslaught of flitting thoughts in my head. The faster they swarm, the more disturbed they become. Something has activated in my chest, making me feel more psycho than I'm comfortable with.

This ends now.

I take another drink, dying of thirst but finding the alcohol inadequate, and send a message to Letterman and Reno in our group chat.

Dré: You'll have to go out without me tonight.

Letterman: Are you serious?

Reno: Of course he is. His balls are too heavy to drag around town.

Letterman: You promised things wouldn't change.

Dré: Nothing has changed. I have business to take care of.

Reno: What business?

Dré: Personal business.

Before either of them could follow up, I close the app and drop the phone onto my lap, feeling guilty for being a dick about it. Regardless, I don't answer to anyone. Not even those two. They'll still have a wild night without me, and I'll make it up to them once this complication is dealt with. Besides, I'm getting drunk and feeling extremely horny.

A winning combo.

SINÉAD



A yanking sensation wakes me. When my eyelids flick open, I'm blind. My wild blinking catches on fabric. I go to move my arms, but they've been hoisted over my head and my wrists are bound.

"Dré?" I call out in a panic. "Is that you?"

I'm thrashing and kicking when a hand settles on my belly, possessive in its placement and weight. "You're happy to deny sex, Wifey, so we're going to play a little game. Let's find out how long it will take for those quivering thighs to willingly part."

"Please... take the blindfold off..." This time I'm actually scared. "I'll scream, Dré."

"Good. That's what I want. Scream and I'll go harder."

The overwhelming sensation of being trapped without sight strips away my sense of control and sends barbs of fear through me. Before, when he'd assaulted me in Sky Hotel, I couldn't tell if his eyes darkened from desire or cruel intentions, but at least I could see what was happening. Which makes this setup unfair.

Unable to see, my other senses are enhanced. The scent of tobacco and booze is heavy in the air, matching the natural masculine scent of him. A muskiness of freshly washed hair is detectable as he looms nearby; however, there's another aroma, an unfamiliar fragrance surrounding us—maybe vanilla.

The bed dips, and then he's on me. Teeth latch onto my sensitive nipples, biting and sucking. It shouldn't send volts through me, but it does. My hips buck to throw him off. But he doesn't shift; the pressure bearing down on my legs is dominant and strong.

"Get the fuck off me!" I hiss, my head rolling from side to side, doing my best to try to unfasten whatever is covering my eyes.

Fingertips dig into my breasts. "You have gorgeous fucking tits." He smooshes them together, cruelly forcing me to imagine how they must look to him in this position. "You're a dirty little tease for wearing my t-shirt without a bra. These hard nipples are so easily accessible."

It's only then I feel the soft cotton swathing my throat and guess that he's simply hitched the t-shirt higher while I had slept. The whole ordeal earlier had depleted my energy levels to the point I was bone-tired. Falling asleep on his bed was my choice, and now my biggest mistake.

"You said you wouldn't rape me..." My voice verges on hysterical.

I can't fathom the level of intensity I'm drowning under or the unbearable urges swelling inside of me from this man's forceful control. His fingers continue to manipulate my breasts in tandem, then flicking my nipples for his amusement. A flurry of goosebumps rocket over my bare skin.

Puffs of his liquored breath feathers the lower half of my face, giving away his eagerness. "Who said anything about sex? This is all about pushing your limits."

"You married me to gain Frankie's inheritance, didn't you? So why the hell are you torturing me like this?"

He bites my nipple and I yelp. "As your *hotshot* husband, I have the right to stake my claim on your sexy body. I'm not doing anything that doesn't make you come alive or doesn't turn you on. You were born with a stubborn streak, and I was born with impatience."

"Impatience doesn't need to lead to cruelty," I pant.

Wetness smears the bitten nipple; the gentle suckling turns pleasurable. The sort of forbidden gratification that stimulates my core and electrifies the soft downy hairs on my body. When he hums, the vibrations rumble through me in waves of unforgivable shivers.

The nipple pops free of his mouth. “Was that cruel?” he asks sarcastically.

“Very cruel...”

“And this?”

There’s an echoey crack, like a lid popping open. Liquid splashes all over my chest, tiny beads rolling every which way. I flinch at the sensation. Not quite cold, yet not warm either. Large hands settle on my abdomen and begin to confidently massage.

They slip and slide over the curves of my breasts, the slick oily layer helping his firm strokes become more possessive and hungrier. Confused and enraged by the game I’m powerless to witness, my breath hitches. Yet, behind the frustration, I feel worshiped.

“Fuck, these tits feel good,” he says, the tone of his accent thick and seductive. “They’d look good hugging my aching dick too.” His weight shifts when he scoots up the mattress.

The only awareness I have of him are his knees close to my rib cage and the sensation of his bare ass meeting my pelvis, bringing his proud dick to lie heavily on my sternum. It rests there like a column of rock-hard granite.

“We have a score to settle, you and I.”

“What do you mean?”

“I haven’t punished you for leaving.”

“Leaving?” A merciless grip seizes my throat.

I gasp at the brutality of it, pointlessly writhing beneath the dominating force of his contained anger. Terror has me straining to see in the darkness and flailing like a dying animal. The mental comparison triggers my memory.

“Sta...” I begin to choke out the safe word, except his hand jumps to my mouth and traps the final syllable.

“Don’t say it. Not yet, Sin. The only words you will repeat to me are...” I sense the harshness of his expression by the rasp in his voice. “... I promise.”

Slowly, his fingers lift from my mouth ever so slightly until they’re no longer controlling my speech.

“What am I promising you?” I murmur.

“Obedience and trust. Promise me that you won’t disappear a second time. Even when we’re done playing these games, I will always have knowledge of your whereabouts.”

His possessiveness is a whole new level of crazy. “I’ll make that promise, if you promise not to hurt me. Why am I tied up and why can’t I see what you’re doing?”

“The blindfold adds an element of suspense. You’re tied up because you want me... but you’re holding back. Your pride is in the way of my dick. When I spanked your ass earlier, it brought out a side of you that craves pain. It spoke to the suffocated part of you, the thrill-seeking dirty girl who hides in the shadows. I promise I won’t hurt you beyond what’s bearable. Your turn.”

André is the worst devil I’ve ever encountered because he has the ability to see right into my soul and shine a light on every dark corner, leaving me raw and exposed. He was my savior once before in a hellish world and now he is that hell. Despite that fact, I still find myself helplessly drawn to him.

My head moves left, then right, chasing sounds. “What happens when you’re bored of this?”

“You own the Souza title, Wifey. For that reason alone, you’re untouchable. Even if it makes your heart turn black, you’ll remain in our close circle until you die. When this fizzles out, you’ll still have a duty to perform. This isn’t a temporary arrangement. It’s for life. Now promise me, or I’ll force the words out of your filthy fucking mouth.”

My slow exhale signifies the surrender. “I promise.”

Somehow, the muttered oath becomes liberating. The faint line drawn in the sand meets an uncomfortable silence as it starts to dissolve. We're no longer on opposite sides, brought together by a flimsy assurance.

"Good girl." His fingers squeeze my cheeks as he praises me, slowly dragging them down along the curve of my neck to rest on my oily nipple.

His other hand roughly snares the opposite breast, and in a heartbeat, they're crushed together again. I feel his hips move and his dick slide into the tight gap he's created. With a snarl, he starts to thrust, sliding in and out as if he's screwing me.

"Fuck," he grunts. "I could shoot my cum all over your pretty face from here. You have perfect slippery little fuck holes, Sin. So fucking perfect. Lift your head. Chin down."

I obey him, my neck straining, anticipating the crown of his dick on my lips. But when salty pre-cum seeps onto my tongue, I taste his virility. Whether it's because my sight was stolen, or because I'm venturing into the twisted depravity of him, wetness pools between my thighs.

"You like that—huh?" he growls.

The second I nod my head, he withdraws and climbs off me, robbing me of his body heat and challenging this obscene craving I have for him.

I'm so frustrated that I still can't see. My hearing pricks to hyperaware. I'm exposed to him in a way I'd never allow with any man, and that both terrifies me to the core and excites me. Still, I sense his presence close by.

"Dré?" I soften my voice, my obvious uncertainty earning a dark chuckle.

A tinkle is followed by a shivery iciness gliding across my belly, all the way up to my nipples, one at a time. The sensation creates a flurry of goosebumps all over me. It's an ice cube. It has to be. He circles the frozen object clockwise, his reward my aching nipples turning painfully erect. The addition of his mouth switches the sensation to off the charts. I

bite my bottom lip and groan, arching my back into his touch. The need for him undeniable.

“My dirty little wife is so responsive. Do you want more?” His voice drips with seduction and hints at something far darker to come.

I lick my lips and swallow, aware of my pounding pulse points—especially the one thumping between my legs. I nod my head, the anticipation of his primitive whims reaching an all-time high.

He slaps my left breast, quickly followed by the right. I whimper from the sharp strike like energetic thunderbolts. “Tell me with words. I want to hear the desperation and hunger.”

“I want more,” I groan.

“More... who?”

My toes curl from his command and for what I’m about to admit. “I want more, Husband.”

“Hmm. It sounds so fucking sexy with your naughty Irish accent, Wifey. So fucking smutty that it makes my balls ache for you. I have a new fetish now. Your husky, filthy voice calling me husband. I’m going to fill that fuckable mouth of yours. But first, let’s see how you respond to this...”

ANDRÉ



She's stretched out on my bedsheets, wrists bound and secured to the headboard, her eyes shielded by the baroque belt I used after shedding the bathrobe. Once I knew the guys had left, I went downstairs and gathered a few supplies to play with.

I had sat in the armchair for an hour tops, smoked a couple of Marlboros, watched her sleep, and then proceeded to jerk off to see if that would eradicate this lust spell. It didn't. The fiery urges still blazed through me.

But now—now she's my captive, trembling and defenseless. I can smell the scent of her arousal. So fucking hot and needy.

Jesus fuck, my blood is pumping faster than my brain can cope with. Sinéad is oblivious to the torture she's subjected me to—the continual unsatisfied boner I've had to endure—the unorthodox desire I'm suffering from. This affliction is far from strategic. It's an insufferable torment—a lust so primitive that it has its own source of pain.

In the semidarkness, I reach for the specialty candle which smells as sweet as candy. She squirms when I linger over her, impatiently waiting for what comes next. However, when I tip the candle and let melted massage wax drip over her juicy tits, she shrieks.

“What the fuck is that?”

“You have such a dirty mouth, Wifey. I'm going to stuff it full of my cum tonight and make you say the word cum while it dribbles from your lips.”

Embarrassment creeps over her cheeks. As the wax settles on her porcelain skin, it trickles and spreads. I'd applied the oil beneath, so it's easily removed when I'm finished. I continue to drizzle the molten liquid over her tits and let it leak all over her belly, the look of it similar to spurts of creamy cum.

"Jesus—Dré—it's hot," she whimpers. "What is it?"

Her head moves from side to side. A second later, she thrusts her hips wildly to try to get free. I smirk to myself, knowing the skin beneath the landing spots will turn red. That's the plan. Contentment in the knowledge I've branded her ass, tits, and even left a hickey on her neck. And once I've claimed every tight horny hole, I'll be satisfied that I've stamped my mark on her.

Straightening, I set the candle on the nightstand and scoop up another ice cube from a fresh whiskey tumbler. Her cheeks are perfectly pink, her legs wiggle with eagerness, and her breathing is quick and erratic. I follow the map of spilled wax, running it over the top to swap out the temperature. A low mewl gives away her confused delight.

"Dré..." she breathes my name, thick with need.

I love how goosebumps rain over her bare flesh and those sexy moans she makes test my threadbare restraint. I've known myself to rashly lose interest in foreplay midway through and move straight to the fucking. Most of the time, sex is a quick fix for an oxytocin hit. After having so many beautiful women, I've learned to fuck without emotion or attachment, resulting in a less than full throttle desire. I do it for instant gratification. Nothing else.

However, from the second Sinéad walked back into my life, I knew she'd sunk her motherfucking nails into me again and I wondered if I'd really been free of her. These days this woman turns me on without even trying. My unyielding boner has become a major hassle, more or less fueling my hotheadedness. I could slap her tits until the wax breaks, or I could straddle her face and dangle my swollen balls over her lips, commanding her to inhale them.

Rather, I climb onto the bed, leaving the ice cube sitting in her belly button, and throw her legs over each of my shoulders. It doesn't take long for her to gasp when I part her wet folds and drop my mouth, ravaging her pretty pussy. My lapping tongue feasts on her arousal.

"H-holy fu-fuck..." The words claw from her throat in tatters.

The taste of her mellow essence covering my face is exquisite. Unique in flavor, it's the very thing that gives me electric chills. I plunge two fingers where my dick begs to visit. Her tight inner walls clamp around the intrusion as if she never wants them to leave.

I lift my head and stare at her wax-splattered tits as they rise and fall. Those engorged nipples dare to provoke me. Her lips are parted, and her eyes are still covered. It instantly annoys me how she can't watch me eating her cunt. That behind the barrier she could be imagining another guy. Motherfucker.

The realization springs to life with an incurable possessiveness. Pushing into her thighs, her knees lower outward while I tug at the soft belt. Blinking lashes help her adjust to the dimly lit master suite.

"Eyes on me," I order and reposition myself at her weeping entrance.

She moans when my mouth returns to her drenched pussy, grinding into my face to signal desperation. "Do you want to cum, Wifey?"

"Yes," she breathes the plea. "Please..."

Please—a beg rife with hunger and need.

Sinéad jerks the instant I latch my mouth around her clit and finger-fuck her as if it were my dick. I continue to devour, anticipating the body shudders when she falls off the edge.

"Fuck!" she screams, as if she doesn't know how to deal with the waves of pleasure jolting through her. "André..." A ragged exhale carries my name in that motherfucking erotic accent, and then I'm a goner.

Certain her climax has subsided, I lift my head and fist my painful boner, furiously stroking it from root to tip. Normally, I'd fuck and fuck until she's raw. Except the heart pounding arousal I have right now is on a short timer; the fuse close to detonation.

So I jerk myself off while her gaze flits all over me and find pleasure in the waxy artwork that decorates her abdomen. My own release comes hard and fast, cum spurting over her pelvic bone and beyond.

My chest rises in bursts like I'm a maniac who's committing murder. Adrenaline sprints through my veins, forcing out a savage growl that startles her.

Fully emptied, I let her legs fall away. Collecting the cum smothered ice cube from her belly button, I arch over and push it past her lips. "Suck it," I order.

She does and makes a point of licking her lips too. My vision distorts. I crash my mouth onto hers, stuffing my tongue inside to rally the thawing ice back and forth while we mix her juices with mine. Our teeth bite. Our lips war. I taste coppery blood and *us*.

It's both hot and cold. Slippery and aggressive. A savage kiss, unlike any other. Sure, I've licked, sucked, and bitten pretty bitches before, but this sensation is blowing my fucking mind.

I'm hard all over again. Painfully ready to demolish her cunt and she's wrapping her legs around my waist on a dangerous quest for something far more gratifying. However, this lesson of authority has a sharp-edged dagger to slice her hunger into tatters. I call the shots. Me. And I want her dripping and aching for it. When the time comes, it'll be on my terms. Not hers.

Earlier, I figured it was time to destroy that smug pride of hers before it became a real problem. The point of this particular foreplay taught her how pointless it is to resist me, because she surrenders every time.

I always get what I want and if Sinéad finally relents, she'll have to do more than just kiss me back. Which she is. The woman is injecting her venom into me with tongue fuckery and exotic tasting juices. It's a toxic blend that overrides my taste buds—another drug that's bad for me. At this rate, I'll have to go cold turkey to stamp out the constant state of horniness she's cursed me with.

I win the thin tiny lump of ice from her tongue, rip my mouth off hers, and crunch it between my back teeth. She blinks up at me, her bold glare suffocated by lust. In silence, I reach over her head, unhook her wrists from the headboard, and free the knot. She instantly pats the hardened splotches of wax on her tits, her roaming fingertips meeting my cum the further she explores.

“Take a shower,” I say, leaning forward and stabbing one finger under her chin to bring her eyes in line with mine. A lightning shiver breaks out across her shoulders. “I'm going out.”

Frustration pinches her pretty features. “Where?”

“The guys and I are hitting downtown Miami.” I do myself a favor by moving off her, taking a few steps away from the scene. “Don't wait up.”

She sits up and slips elegant long legs off the edge of the bed. Her shiny black hair is all ruffled at the back of her head, and those vivid turquoise eyes flit from my resurrected boner to the flickering flame on the nightstand.

The t-shirt automatically gravitates toward the floor, robbing the view of my creation. I take my time to look her up and down, eyeing the change in her demeanor from feisty to troubled. Her tongue tentatively peeks out of her mouth, her chest rising as if she's nursing a dark secret.

She's fucking with me.

There's no saving her from this attraction or me. Except I'm adamant that I'll remain in control of the situation, even though my stomach has a weird ache and my libido revs like a Ferrari at a starting line.

Turning my back on her, my fists clench and my feet move quickly. If I don't leave this room, she'll condemn me to Hell while I fuck her with everything I have—except her consent.

I don't get far when I sense her movements behind me.

“Wait...” Her sexy voice sounds breathless.

I do a one-eighty to find rosy cheeks and the skull t-shirt coming off in a blur of arms and whipping hair. She shivers, moving forward as the shade of her eyes turns a frenzied green. Her graceful naked figure pauses a few feet away.

Holy fuck.

Now she has my full attention. I don't move, waiting for her to figure out what happens next.

“Forgotten something?” I comb my fingers through my hair, aware of my thinning self-discipline.

She sways a little, her pupils dilating as she studies my hard-earned physique. Straightening her spine, she raises her chin and advances. Forceful dainty hands slam onto my pectoral muscles, their purpose to push me against the wall.

I should stand my ground and not concede, but I'm interested to see where this leads. The feral glint in her thirsty eyes thickens my dick to the point of excruciation.

She drives me backward until my ass hits smooth plaster. The heat radiating between us scorches to a thousand degrees. I could easily flip her around and fill her, yet she's hoping to seize control in this dynamic and I'm happy to play along for now.

In reality, it's never going to happen. No harm in letting her think she can take charge for a few minutes.

“Well?” I cock an inquisitive brow.

“This is what you want, isn't it?”

Her lips settle on my feverish skin, her tongue gliding over my muscles and teeth grazing the flesh. Christ, it feels good. The tingling sensation assaults my skin in trillions of fiery

explosions. Searching fingers dive into my hair, curling tightly to yank my face down to hers.

Fuck, I want to destroy this woman.

A slutty little tongue skates across my lips, so tentative and uncertain. I stay stoic and pretend I'm unaffected. When really, I'm about to fuck her, brutally and unrepentant until I've imprinted the crown of my dick on her cervix.

Next, she pulls my bottom lip into her mouth, then bites, sucks, and releases.

That's it.

That's all it takes for my patience to disintegrate.

SINÉAD



The grunt ripping out of his throat sounds certifiably crazy—fucking hot as hell.

He had tied me up, tortured my senses, and buried his face between my thighs. Still, he drew a respectful line and walked away. That says more about him than it does about me. Because all I can think of right now is provoking the barely contained beast inside of him.

For some reckless reason, I crave its dominance.

I *seek* it.

One moment I'd been shivering from an earthshaking orgasm and the next he was strolling out of the room, telling me not to wait up. His flippant statement pulled me into a riptide. The crushing claws of jealousy tore this new life of mine apart. A world where I'd become a wife to a man who I secretly adored from afar, from the ages of history to the passing years of social media photographs.

And now he's mine. *Mine*. Whether I believe he really wants me or not. That admission conjures a fresh possibility. Maybe I should place my trust in the hidden part of him I once met under our tree.

He might desire power more than fulfilling our vows; however, he'd said it himself: I'm a Souza now. Protected by a notoriously ruthless family. Maybe I could tap into the faint bond we had shared—perhaps my vicious husband would help me save Mammy from Frankie's threat. The only problem

would be if he doesn't think it's a worthy risk. To fuck with Frankie now could ruin whatever plan André hopes to fulfill.

Raw authority vibrates through his muscular form when I suck his lip into my mouth and sink my teeth into the plump flesh. A surge more dangerous than an erupting volcano sweeps me up in a blur. Strong hands seize my waist, and he effortlessly flings me over his shoulder, forcibly tossing me onto the bed. The surge of his power knocks the breath from my lungs.

I'm flat on my back, and for the first time, the expression he wears is bestial, a cold-blooded animal preparing to tear me apart. The most terrifying part is that it has my pulse thrumming and my blood red hot. This whole time he was preying on me, biding his time until I gave him the green light to unleash the starved creature inside of him.

Despite the ferocious way he's manhandling me, his eyes swim with lust. They're not exactly black and far from normal, almost otherworldly, a fraction lighter than his wide pupils.

André's upper lip skews, hitching into a snarl before he pins me down. "Hurting will never feel so good."

My chest tightens; the panic of his declaration instantaneously sets off alarm bells within me. There's no other way to describe his movements other than predatory and animalistically intense.

I wriggle and squirm, my wrists pressed deep into the mattress beneath possessive hands, locking me in place. He arches over me where soft flickering light casts shadows on his inked chest, the drawings coming alive, each of them a witness to my destruction.

"Fight against me all you want, Sin," he growls into my face. "You called me back because you want me to get high on you. It's time to fuck, don't you agree?"

I swallow hard, fully accepting the unorthodox ache I need to satisfy. "Yes..."

His fingers tighten while he positions himself between my knees. His head shakes. "Not good enough, Wifey."

“Yes... Husband.”

“Still not good enough.” One hand jumps to my throat. “Need me to choke the begging words out of your dirty mouth?”

As he gently squeezes, his breathing deepens and he swears in a muttered groan, “Fuck!”

My free hand claws at his viselike grip. The lack of oxygen becoming a frantic concern. “Do it... fuck me... please... don’t stop...” Every word is strained, my uncomfortable swallows nudging his palm and twitching his lips into a satisfied smirk.

It’s the kind of killer smile that dents his cheek and strips the madness from his eyes, as if he’s offering me a safe place to hide. In that silent second, his grip lessens, and I inhale.

“I won’t stop, Wifey, not even when you scream.” He half laughs in a low menacing rumble that’s not playful—it’s deadly serious.

My stomach quivers when he lowers his mouth to mine and drags his tongue over my lips.

“I’m going to bury my dick inside of you and fill your cunt with so much of my cum it will ooze out of you. And you’re going to enjoy it. You know why?” His other hand roughly grabs my breast, making the wax crack. “It’s simple. I wouldn’t have married just any dirty little whore... No, I chose to marry the one whose veins run darker than mine. A woman who could handle all of me. This tiresome game of yours has run its course. I’m done with foreplay, and your pretty cunt is mine.”

And it is, embarrassingly so. When a strangled whimper escapes me, he lets go of my neck to focus on the chaotic mess he had left earlier. A heady wave of pleasure starts beneath the hand slapping my breast, intensified by crumbling fragments of wax. Tingles shoot straight to my core, heightening my arousal. He pinches a nipple and then moves to the other.

“I’ve never done it like this before,” I admit on a breath, as if I’m hoping my confession will please him or maybe give

way to a little clemency. Instead, his thick brows snap together, his intensity looming over me heavier than an Irish rain cloud.

“Don’t even go there, Sin. Are you telling me you’re lying here thinking about other men?” Ruthless fingers dig into my cheeks, his breath hot on my face. “Are you flat on your back for me and counting men like sheep?”

I shake my head. “No! I just meant...”

“The thought of my wife being fucked by other men is enough to make me find each one of those motherfuckers to a put a bullet in their skulls. I don’t want to imagine their ordinary dicks in *my* wife’s pussy or their lips on these perfect fucking tits.” The fierce possessiveness of how he snarls at me only serves to set me on fire.

I’m panting. Not just for air—for him. For this.

And equally, his impatience is visible from his clenched jaw, how he urgently settles himself between my legs and aligns the tip of his dick to my throbbing entrance.

“Look at me,” he demands, pressing the heel of his palm over my clit and applying pressure. “Do not take your eyes off me.”

The instant his command is free, he slams inside me deeply—brutally. I suck in a tattered gasp, my body turning rigid from the solid girth of him. How it both hurts and feels amazing at the same time.

I’m not a virgin, far from it, but this intrusion is unlike anything I’ve experienced in my life. He stuffs his hands under my knees and pushes them forward to give him more leverage for thrust power. His energy soars. It’s not gentle or romantic—it’s his way of fucking me—to drill in his dominance and control.

All I can hear are his sexy grunts, the furious slapping noises of flesh colliding and my own groans. My body shunts across the mattress every time he reenters me.

Aside from pooling pleasure, I suffer a wave of emotions. Feelings that have no place within me—relief, adoration,

bone-crushing desire. They're all swimming around in my chest, each of them creating a monster of my own making.

He angles his pelvis and easily hits the sweet spot Liam could never find. It temporarily paralyzes me and in those seconds I'm no longer myself, nor am I ashamed of it.

In the past, we were too young to know about these reckless highs, and somewhere in the depths of my psyche, that little girl is wondering if we were always meant to find each other again. I shake my head to banish the nonsense. To romanticize this is worse than exalting the devil.

I bite my lower lip to contain a scream, only to draw blood. Copper blends with my saliva. The primitive way he's slamming into me has my heart thumping. I can't hold in the ragged moans scraping from my throat; the exquisite pain and gluttony are my undoing.

"This tight cunt of yours has never been fucked so good," he spits out, half asking, half claiming it as so.

Moving from kneeling upright, he drops my legs, leans over, and slams his hands down at either side of my arms, caging me beneath his body in a plank position.

I ache to touch him and reach out for his hair, delving my fingers into the messy, thick mass on the top of his head. Unwittingly, I fist the strands and tug. His face drops to my breasts and his teeth bite. I buck my hips into the movement, then wrap my thighs around him and lock my ankles.

This is the closest we've ever been. Our skin rubbing and slapping, our bodily fluids mingling, and now our gazes are fiercely connected.

Stilling for a beat, he balances on one arm and seizes my throat. When I gasp, he takes the opportunity to dribble his spittle into my mouth.

"Swallow," he instructs. His eyes flash when I obey him. "Good girl."

Next, he sends his tongue in my mouth to joust with mine, capturing it and sucking hard.

He's a monster I can't escape. I belong to him—and he belongs to me. As much as that fact is alien to me, I don't want to share him with other women, and I fear this moment will destroy his curiosity forever.

My whole body responds to him, drenched in an overwhelming arousal. I'm light-headed and fully submitting. I've never let myself go like this, never conceded to a man, and never relished sex in this way. Yet I'd rolled the dice as a willing player in a dangerous game.

Forceful lips cover mine at the very second he releases my neck and picks up the hammering rhythm again. He crushes his mouth to mine with a savage open-mouthed kiss of ownership, messy and hungry.

My body starts to shake from the inside, close to detonation. "Hmm... can you feel that? You're so close," his voice is gritty and low, reverberating into my throat and chest, making my heart rate accelerate. "You'd better scream, Sin, or I'll stop. Don't hold back when it feels this fucking good."

The gravelly texture to his command is enough to trigger a muscle-charging release. My screams come easily when he angles himself in deeper and sinks his teeth into my shoulder. "That's it, Wifey, come for your husband."

Black eyes drill into mine as they roll and blur.

In the final dregs of a violent quake, he flips me over onto all fours. He's behind me with an arm hooked under my pelvis and a fist in my hair. I'm speared on his dick as he continues, taking the full brunt of his vicious thrusts. The hand in my hair switches from yanking strands to slapping my ass. When he's done spanking me, he bites, fucks, and slaps as if he's using me for an outlet. My self-control runs wild.

"This body belongs to me, Sin. I'll reach the parts of you no one can find."

I'm attuned to the fluidity of his relentless pace and how it suddenly becomes stiffer to match the tenseness of his muscles. He hisses when his own release spurts inside of me. "Fuckin' hell," he pants, his body turning lax.

I face-plant the duvet, completely satiated, but the instant I settle, he rolls me over, spreads my legs, and slips his fingers inside me again. The touch of his hand down there makes my pulse react, especially when he widens the opening in a scissor-like motion and avidly stares at the cum trickling out. He scoops some of it up with two fingers and brings it before his face. “I could fuck you every day, so my cum is always inside of you.”

Then he licks the creamy substance, grabs my wrist, and unceremoniously yanks me to sitting. Dazed and spent, he claims my mouth again; however, this time we’re not at war. Tenderness lures me into a trap for a heart-stopping moment. And just like Frankie had warned me, he skates his lips across my cheek and inhales my sweaty fragrance.

It happens in a blink, right before he rears back, climbs off the bed, and stands. Stretching his neck from side to side, he silently strolls out of the room.

I freeze at the abruptness, unsure why it rips my bucking heart out. A shaky hand settles on my sticky belly as I glance at the messy sheets around me. Anger mangles my pride and frustration catches me off guard.

I gave in.

I escaped with him to a place beyond rational comprehension, and it was the best fucking thrill of my life.

Hurrying off the bed, I stagger into the adjoining bathroom and stare at the full massacre of smashed wax and blazing marks reflecting back at me. Somewhere in the dark, fucked-up crevices of my mind, I feel as if I’m home again—like my home is in him.

The marks he left are his way of proving to me that I am his. However, that doesn’t mean anything more than a token of ownership. It’s just a man who has everything claiming one more thing.

Between my thighs there’s a burning ache, a sweet sting that curses my name for wanting more. My hands tremble when I turn on the hot water and step under the showerhead. I

slam my palms to the tiles to steady myself, letting the water jets crash on top of me. I desperately want to forget the emotions gripping me in a choke hold.

I'm exhausted and starving, so I drag myself out of the shower and wrap the softest towel around me before returning to the bedroom. I don't know what I expected to find, but my belly knots when I'm still alone.

Resigning myself to the fact he used me, I shake out the duvet and perch on the edge of the bed, my hair dripping and my chest heavy. It happens without my permission, the liquid resentment that burns the back of my eyes.

"I'm sure you're hungry." His sonorous Spanish accent comes from the doorway where André stalks toward me, eyes dark, his features shaded by shadows.

My breath catches at the sight of him, oblivious to the plate of food he's carrying. He's not dressed, confidence oozing from every step in the natural habitat of this confusing man.

"Here." My brows pinch together when I look at the sandwich he offers me. "Bread, butter, banana, and a sprinkle of sugar. Just how you like it."

I'm speechless. Quickly blinking, I swipe a finger under my lash line and dab, struggling to hide my confused vulnerability. He observes me in silence, sets the plate on the nightstand beside the glowing candle, lowers to his haunches, and stares right at me.

His head cocks to the side as he watches me build my defenses brick by brick. Then, out of the blue, he says, "Your eyes are so fucking pretty when they're filled with tears."

He reaches out and thumbs a solitary tear trying its best to escape from the corner of my eye. I shiver at the tender contact and swallow hard. As soon as the salty liquid coats his skin, he withdraws and stands tall before me. "Eat."

And then he pivots and saunters away again, leaving me alone with my all-time favorite sandwich.

ANDRÉ



“I’m starving.”

Sinéad takes a small backpack off her shoulders and unzips it. “Here you go.” She drops a silver-foiled package onto my lap. “Mammy made extra.”

I peel it open, finding triangular-cut sandwiches neatly stacked. “Extra?”

“Yeah, for you.”

A smile tugs at the corners of my mouth, and then I sink my teeth into the strangest combination I’ve ever tasted. It’s sweet, savory, and fruity, all at the same time. And to my surprise, the mushy mouthful tastes amazing, which says a lot since the Souzas and Hennessys have personal chefs.

“Banana sandwiches?”

“Aye. And a spoonful of sugar.”

“I’ve never tried anything like these before.”

She grins at me. “They’re my favorite.”

A glass of whiskey lands on the coaster in front of me, dragging my mind to the present and the quiet restaurant I’m sitting in, discreetly hidden at the rear of the secured establishment.

“There you go, sir. Can I get you anything else while you wait?” the suited server asks.

“Not at the minute. My guest won’t be long.” I glance at my iPhone on the table and consider sending my wife a message. It’s been a few days since we fucked like animals. I still have claw marks on my shoulders.

My heart pounds and the energy flowing through my veins turns electric. I’m on edge since I sank my dick into her perfect little cunt.

When she had stared up at me with those glittering turquoise eyes, the glossy tears put a bullet in my heart. She’d looked torn—miserable and irresistible in the afterglow of a filthy fuck. The irony is, I swore to her once before that I’d kill anyone who made her cry. I guess that guy is me, which probably explains why I’m so restless.

However, I don’t regret a single second of what we did together. She had wanted all of me and that’s exactly what she got. Sinéad held on tighter, and I revved the throttle.

The annoying thing about it all is that once should have been enough—it wasn’t.

Twice would be unusual—but it’s something I can’t stop imagining.

And a third time would be a huge concern—a complete anomaly.

I unlock the phone and scroll through my photographs, select one, add a caption, and upload it to my social media profile. It’s a fitting choice under the circumstances. Once it’s live, I smile to myself, then run a hand through my hair, feeling buzzed.

There’s a fuss at the entrance. A familiar beast of a man wearing an earpiece scans the room and then steps back outside. I wait for a few seconds, acknowledging him as my mother’s bodyguard, and stand when she finally enters the building.

She glides toward me, the lapels of a loose-fitting ivory blazer lifted at the nape beneath jet-black hair and matching wide-leg trousers swishing with every elegant step she takes. Moving indoors, she removes her large framed sunglasses to

see me better. A warm smile reaches the corners of her vigilant green eyes. They don't emulate the same profound translucency as Sinéad's, rather, they're deeper in pigmentation, more earthy and shrewd.

"I was so happy to get your invitation, son."

I immediately put my arms around her delicate shoulders and pull her in for a big hug. Her signature floral fragrance smells like home. I would take a bullet for my mother.

A part of me still mourns the loss of a father who raised me with his paranoid ideals, but only for the presence he claimed in my life. However, this woman is my universe. If something bad ever happened to her, I'd burn the whole world to ashes.

"You look well, Mama." I kiss her on both cheeks.

For a brief tender moment, her palm settles on my cheek before she asks, "Are you okay?"

"I'm good." My tight smile makes her eyes narrow. "I just wanted to tell you my important news face-to-face."

She stills when the waiter closes in. "Can I get you a drink?" he asks.

Her attention doesn't waver. A serious frown projected right at me. "Is there something wrong, André? Have you heard from Tommy?" she says under her breath, every bit as impatient as me.

"Sit, Mama." I beckon to the chair opposite mine and nod at the smartly dressed waiter. "A bottle of your finest champagne."

"Champagne?" she repeats, sitting gracefully, her thick ebony lashes framing a silently assessing gaze. "Are we celebrating or drowning our sorrows, son?"

My knee jiggles under the table, my muscles jumpy. Hours spent in my gym doing cardio and weights didn't help to diminish the high-voltage currency flowing through me. It's been in a constant state of flux since I filled my wife full of cum.

“We’re definitely celebrating.” I smirk.

“Have you secured the new construction site?”

“Of course I have, but that’s not the reason why we’re celebrating.” I hold up my left hand with the wedding band. “I got married, Mama.”

Her refined brows snap together. “My son is *married*?”

I lift my whiskey glass and sip the cool liquor, savoring the burn at the back of my throat. “Married.” I confirm.

“When... to who?” Shock fans diamond encrusted fingers over her chest. “Are you teasing me?”

“I married Frankie Sapori’s daughter.”

Mama sits back in her chair and lets the server present a bottle of Armand de Brignac. She waves her hand in approval, then waits for the cork to pop and the bubbles to fill her glass before she pins me with an odd look.

“Sapori doesn’t have any children, André.”

“That’s what I thought until he introduced me to his forgotten daughter. He recently dragged her to America to marry some asshole in New York.” I watch her forehead crease and her posture stiffen. “However, I decided it would be good for the family business if I married her instead.”

“So, you just married her? On a whim?”

“I won her in a friendly game of poker.”

“Christ, son. I-I—” She takes a long drink. “... I had hoped you’d find a strong woman who could match your energy. That’s all I’ve ever wanted for you. What I’ve wanted for all my boys... but this... married to a stranger who has no idea what our world is like—”

“She’s a mafia princess, Mama. She’ll inherit Sapori’s empire. It’s a lucrative alliance to benefit our family.”

“At what cost, André? That sly bastard always has a hidden agenda.”

“He wants a Sapori-Souza heir.” Her jaw goes lax, and for the first time in my life, my mother is speechless.

I signal to the waiter, who efficiently tops up her glass while the news sinks in. “And...” My lips involuntarily curl into a helpless grin. “She’s not a stranger. Do you remember Sinéad, my friend from Hennessy House, when we stayed with grandfather?”

“The little Irish girl?”

“The very one.”

“She’s a Sapori?” My mother cocks a skeptical brow. “Did you know who her father was back then?”

I shake my head. “Not until she turned up on his yacht after twenty-odd years.”

“So, where is this wife of yours? Why isn’t she having lunch with us?”

“It’s complicated, Mama.”

“You mean she wasn’t happy about it?”

I shrug. “She’s getting used to married life. I gave her a job in the bar at Sky Hotel. She’s not the sit at home type, nor a gold digger itching to get her hands on our wealth.”

“A Souza wife working in a bar, André?” Mother’s expression darkens. “Why don’t you put a beacon on her forehead and tell the world how to reach us? Didn’t your Papá teach you anything? We don’t work with the general population, because they’d do anything to stab holes in our family.”

“Mama...” I sigh. “I haven’t announced it yet. There’s a team of undercover men all over the hotel. She has no idea they’re watching her. Allowing my wife to work was a temporary solution to help her settle into Miami. It won’t last long.”

“Was Giovanni in attendance at this wedding I wasn’t invited to?”

I laugh. “Letterman and Reno were there.”

“You didn’t even invite your twin brother to stand beside you.” She palms her brow. “You’re breaking my heart.”

“It was last minute, Mama.”

She pouts at me. “It was unplanned and rash, son. Just because you were friends once before doesn’t mean she’ll be loyal to us. You were children, and children grow into adults with selfish goals. What if Frankie planned this all along, to infiltrate our family for his own reasons?”

“The fucker didn’t raise her, Mama, and he sure as fuck doesn’t care about her. Frankie has his own personal agenda and Sinéad is an innocent. Papá was a bastard, but we all knew he would have severed the head of anyone who wronged us.”

At the mere mention of my father, Mama shifts in her seat, fixing her regal posture. “You didn’t marry that woman for business, André.”

I frown at her. “Sure, I did.”

“Don’t forget, I was there. I saw what it did to you when she disappeared. You were so young, and she had captured your sole focus for months. It’s not business; it’s revenge for leaving. You saw an opportunity and you took it... except something tells me this will blow up in your face.”

My low chuckle earns a wry smile from her.

“You like the girl,” she adds over the rim of her champagne coupe glass. “More than you’re letting on.”

“She’s good-looking,” I admit, drumming my fingers on the table, unable to smoke. “And a worthy addition to our family given her bloodline. She’s both Irish and Sicilian. It saves you from playing matchmaker. Now you can focus on Gio.”

“Gio doesn’t have any room in his heart for a woman. It scares me how closed off he is.”

“That’s because Papá ripped my brother’s beating heart out and ate it.” We both fall silent, lost in harrowing memories. “I was never good enough in Papá’s eyes. It gives me great fucking pleasure to know I’ve single-handedly expanded our

international reach. At least Tommy will be pleased whenever he comes back to us.”

“He will. You’re *my* son, André, and *I’m* proud of you. It’s about time you settled down. You’ve had a roaming eye all your life. Women are your weakness. One word of advice though—don’t make an enemy of this one, not when she shares your bed or falls pregnant with your child. Don’t underestimate the Saporis. Frankie is a cunning old bastard and now he thinks he’s in our circle. Keep a close eye on him, but watch your wife even closer.”

SINÉAD



“Take a break.” David continues to tap the screen on his work iPad. “Lennon will pour you a drink.”

I nod, grateful for a few minutes to sit down. It’s been a long afternoon, made longer by the constant thoughts running wild in my mind. For the past three mornings, I’ve woken up alone to the stench of stale cigarette smoke and empty bottles of liquor sitting next to the armchair across the room.

After I’ve had my morning coffee, I’m escorted out of the building by a suited guard who accompanies me in the back of a chauffeur-driven car. He delivers me to Sky Hotel for my shift and then disappears. I haven’t seen André since our violently hot encounter—not even a glimpse.

An ambient saxophone melody gives the rooftop bar a chill vibe while guests dine and enjoy fancy cocktails. It’s bustling with life, and dare I think it, a place where I could happily sit for hours. Sunshine dapples the jungle like foliage, making it calm and serene.

I take a seat in the corner under the shade of a cream parasol and pull out my phone. All day I’ve wondered if I should risk a phone call to The Rusty Shamrock’s landline in the hope of speaking to Mammy. However, she doesn’t know Frankie’s men are watching her, so she’d likely give me away.

With a long, defeated sigh, I decide it’s better not to set fire to the hornet’s nest. When I look at the screen, there are five missed calls and one message from an unknown number.

Unknown: Answer your phone the next time, daughter.

Frankie. The asshole. I swipe away the notifications and pretend his attempts to contact me aren't irritating, but they are. If he thinks I'll engage with him, he's sorely mistaken.

To add venom to my already waspish mood, I open the social media app to see if André has spent the past few nights partying while I've been sleeping in his bed. I'm guessing he forgets about the wife at home, rolls in through the door to find me under the sheets, and dumps his empties on the way back out.

I freeze, my wide eyes fixed on the latest picture he's uploaded and its cryptic caption. The angle is skewed, so it's not entirely obvious to anyone else but me—and I see it.

There in black and white is the skull motif of the t-shirt I wore the last night we were together, except the material is slightly rippled, so the hollow eyes look even more demonic. At the edge of the photograph there's unblemished bare skin. My stomach. My skin before he'd dripped molten wax all over it. Below it, the caption reads: *My Favorite*.

"Everything okay?" Lennon lands beside me with a glass of icy juice. "You look confused."

I am confused. "It's nothing." The smile I offer him doesn't reach my eyes. "Have you gotten the date sorted for your engagement party?"

"David is clearing it with the general manager. Some woman called Janel. I haven't met her yet. Apparently, the owner has private parties up here all the time, but it costs a fortune for us mere mortals to rent the space. He's going to ask if we can work out a staff rate. You're invited, by the way. If you're not already working." He chuckles.

"I'd love to go." I grin, thankful for a normal invitation to a normal party.

"Bring your guy. It'll be a crazy night."

I'm not exactly sure how that would work. It's not as if my over-the-top gangster husband would rub shoulders with his staff. Or behave himself.

“What did you say he does for a living?”

I shrug to make light of the question I'd rather not answer. “Construction.”

David strolls over to our table and sets a bowl of salted cashew nuts on the table. “Apparently, the owner is on his way up. Make yourselves busy.”

Lennon opens his mouth to speak, the first few words rushing out. “I could ask him about—”

David cuts him off, visibly tensing. “Forget it. You wouldn't get past his security and if you somehow managed to, he'd likely shoot you in the face. Do not be a dick, Lennon. The guy is untouchable. He could easily fire any of us for standing around looking idle. Your break is over.”

Lennon smirks. “Shoot me in the face... in broad daylight. Who are we working for—the cartel?”

A shiver runs the length of my spine just as my phone vibrates, the screen glowing as an incoming call pops up from the same number Frankie had used.

“Do not answer that if you want to keep working here,” David warns, glancing over his shoulder.

“It's no one special, anyway.” I stand, ignore the call, and shove the phone into my pocket. “Just an asshole with a superiority complex.”

“Problems in paradise?” Lennon walks with me back to the bar.

“Daddy issues.” I roll my eyes. “The loser was never around, and now he thinks I'll drop everything when he calls me.”

From out of nowhere, a hand seizes my wrist. “I'll be your daddy.” A dark-haired guy wearing a red polo shirt perches on a bar stool next to his preppy friend, the two of them knocking back shots.

“Hardly.” I shirk out of his grip. “You’re a kid.”

“I’m twenty-five and old enough to be your big bad daddy.”

“I’d happily murder mine, so you should think twice... and back the fuck off.”

“Kinky.” He waggles his brows. “I’d let you choke me while you ride me like a Harley, baby.”

“Fucking creep,” I mutter.

In a beat, the asshole’s off the stool, his arm snaking my waist, the heat of his intoxicated breath close to my ear as he leans in. “I’ll let you call me ‘Daddy’ all night long.”

“What the hell is it with assholes today?” I growl, automatically turning into him and fist punching his throat. “Keep your hands to yourself, dickwad.”

I’m too busy watching the guy struggle for air to notice the commotion unfold around me. From behind the bar, David swears like I’ve just killed someone. I would have done a lot worse if we were back home in The Rusty Shamrock. The drunk friend bounces to his feet, bravely waving his fists at me.

“What the fuck, you freaky bitchhh!” he slurs.

An eclipse steals the heat of the sun when a dark tornado obliterates everything in sight. I’m suddenly surrounded by plainclothes guards, all of them pointing weapons at the two drunk guys. However, that’s not what sucks the air from my lungs.

It’s my husband and the storm that comes with him.

His nostrils flare, the onslaught of a seething temper revealing a beguiling beast unlike anything I’ve ever seen. He’s too far gone in his rage to meet my wide eyes. His own are laser-focused on the man who’s gasping for oxygen in the wake of my quick jab to his Adam’s apple.

André lunges between us. He wrestles with him until he wins possession of the man’s left hand and stabs it dead center with a steak knife, securing his palm to the wooden counter

beneath. A bloodcurdling scream of pain silences the entire bar, so only music can be heard. Without hesitation and chaotically methodical, André moves to the guy's opposite hand, pulling a switchblade from his pocket and driving it through the man's tendons.

“What the fuck?” his victim howls.

André hunches over him, his face right up close and ruthless fingers tugging his head back. “Who the fuck do you think you are, cabron? You think you can drink in *my* hotel and put your dirty fucking hands on *my* wife, too?”

His hotel.

I'm so stupid, so terribly stupid.

A glass smashes to my left, but my gaze never leaves André. His harsh expression is nothing short of diabolical. “Apologize to my wife for being disrespectful.”

Frantic eyes hunt mine. I'd rather not look at the guy pinned in place like a rat caught in a trap, but I dread the fallout if I don't.

“You... can't... get away... with this,” he spits out.

In a flash, André uncovers a matte black revolver from inside his biker jacket and jams the barrel under the guy's chin. The men circling the scene move closer to hide their boss' lethal actions.

“I'm a Souza, you piece of shit, and that beautiful woman you thought you could touch is a Souza too. She's a fucking goddess and you're the ugly fucking scum she stepped in. And you know what that means, don't you, cabron?” André's voice is void of emotion—stone cold.

“I'm s... s... orry.”

No one else speaks. Obedient soldiers don't challenge my husband's judgment; instead, they tighten up their ranks to guard him.

“Sorry—*Mrs. Souza.*” André exaggerates my new surname. “Address my wife properly.”

“André,” I say his name loud and clear, not sure if he’ll listen. “I had it under control. Stop this—”

He angles his head in my direction, keeping the threat of his gun firmly in place. There’s a second where the world stops and the music vanishes. His temper momentarily fades. In the reprieve, I find the untamed gaze of my devoted friend. Amid mayhem, an indecipherable emotion flashes behind his carbon-black eyes, a haunted regard that I dare not read into.

Without dropping eye contact, he runs his tongue over his upper teeth and narrows his eyes, bordering whatever violent act his irrational nature considers fitting.

Slowly, on the edge of reason, André unclasps his fingers, rolls back his shoulders, and straightens as if his volatile mood has found an anchor. He stands before me, thick hair tumbling over his brow in that messy way he wears so well. Every inch of his towering form is taut and rigid, his rationality barely in check.

Our gazes linger. He inhales slowly, his wicked ebony lashes blinking at me. To date, I’ve known André to be a merciless god of power and a hot-blooded devil, but the harrowing expression on his handsome face confuses me. Those dark eyes of his are no longer roguish; they’re moonless pits where lost souls never return. I stare back at him, fully aware of the debilitating lure of his supremacy and how he’s the sexiest man I’ve ever been this close to in my whole life.

His jaw works as his teeth grind. “Come here, Sinéad.”

He holds out his hand, his inked throat corded with muscle and his command completely unyielding. My knees weaken, authority emanating from him in the form of an intoxicating aura, erotic and powerful. Our tense standoff doesn’t last long, not even a heartbeat of hesitancy when he grabs my arm and yanks me into his solid chest.

“I don’t need a maniac following me around and threatening to kill everyone. I’ve dealt with drunken assholes countless times in the past,” I whisper.

“His hands were on *my* wife. On *you*. There’s no room for negotiation in those circumstances.” He would kill me too, if he was bored of our arrangement already. “As for the maniac following you around, I’m *your* fucking maniac, Sin. Get used to it.”

The way in which he gradually glides his free hand to my throat and the other, still gripping his revolver, moves to the base of my spine is chilling. He doesn’t speak again, breathing with intentional control, the hard wisp of each exhale settling on my face to create unbearable anticipation.

Without a care for the avid spectators around us, he covers my lips with his, hard and furious. He glues me to his torso using his strength and bends in to deepen the forceful attack. The kiss isn’t tender or loving; it’s carnal and ferocious. An overprotective man staking his claim at the same time as he announces my role to everyone in attendance. They all know who I am now. There’s no questioning it.

The boss’ wife.

The cartel.

His.

André’s lips are so smooth and yet harsh in their pursuit of ownership. He bites my lip. Our tongues joust in a war that gets more potent with each passing moment. As much as I’m drowning in this controlling battle of ours, I’m furious. He didn’t tell me Sky Hotel belonged to him or that there were undercover bodyguards watching me like a flightless bird. I’d foolishly trusted this farce of a job as a compromise, thinking he was giving me something of my own. A degree of freedom within a life sentence.

Sensing my growing displeasure, he grips my throat tighter to drive his point home, then rips his mouth away and presses a chaste, reverent kiss to my forehead. His lungs expand and contract while I dab my swollen lips, wondering what fate holds for us.

“Get those fuckers out of here,” he growls, his eyes never leaving mine, not even when his men move to act on the sharp

command.

My gaze flits behind him where the two men are hauled toward the exit. As they're dragged out of the bar, the armed men fall back to create a protective horseshoe shape around us. No one can see us now—except for David and Lennon, who stand behind the bar, dumbstruck. A weight sinks in my stomach and embarrassment fuels my temper.

“Why didn't you tell me this was your hotel? How the hell am I supposed to work here now?” I hiss, low enough not to cause a scene.

“You wanted bar work, didn't you?” There's a noticeable change in the way he speaks; the calculating demon inside of him has seemingly chilled. “What does it matter if it's a Souza-owned hotel or a shack on the beach? I gave you what you wanted, Sin. Just because you own it doesn't mean you can't enjoy pulling pints or mixing cocktails.”

“I *don't* own this hotel, Dré—you do!”

“Baby, you own it all.” He winks at me. “This is your life now. Wealth and bodyguards included.”

I shake my head and sigh. He just doesn't get it. Or maybe I'll never accept losing myself in this marriage. The metallic taste in my mouth needs to be rinsed out and my frustration time to cool.

“I need to use the washroom.”

“Take your time. I'll smooth things over here.” His head angles sideways where he expects to find his friend and locates him. “Reno, walk with Sin and wait for her. We're going home after I spin some shit for the media.”

“We're going home together?” I chide. “Don't let me get in your way. I'm sure you have plenty of things to do that don't involve me. Isn't there another all-night party for you to attend or another woman to fuck and ignore afterward?”

“You've missed me.” He thumbs his lower lip and stares at me under his lashes. “The jealousy in your pretty eyes is getting me hard, Wifey. I guess absence really does make the heart grow fonder.”

“My heart has nothing to do with it.”

“Oh, so it’s your wet little cunt that misses me?”

“I hate you, Dré.”

“When I get you home, you can hate fuck me until you pass out. I’ll teach you how to squeeze my dick with all that pent-up sexual tension that’s drenching your panties,” he whispers close to my ear. “You can fuck *me* until it hurts this time.”

“Mr. Souza. What happened here?” Janel appears at the periphery of the soldiers. “Is anyone hurt?” Her brow scrunches when she catches sight of bloodied knives.

André chuckles darkly. “A few minor injuries. Nothing life-threatening.”

I glance over at David, who’s dragging a clump of paper towels through a pool of blood, his gaze purposefully lowered. Lennon briefly catches my eye and offers a slight smile, as if he knows this will be the last time I see him. Then he looks away to make sure he’s not caught staring at the mad boss’ wife.

“Lennon,” I call, watching his cautious gaze float to mine. “Now that the cat is out of the bag, you can have your engagement party up here. Free of charge. My husband will cover the drinks tab for the entire night. I hope you have a wonderful evening celebrating with the woman who makes you happy.” Although my pointed statement was aimed at pissing off André, it stings me.

Lennon’s eyes bug and the wide grin he offers stretches his cheeks. “Thank you.”

I don’t wait to hear what André has to say about it; instead, I flick my hair over my shoulder and take a sideways step to avoid him.

The instant I move, André grabs my elbow and dips into the side of my face. “He can have his little party in Luna, but you owe me. And I want to be paid, in full, when we get home. You’ll strip to your panties and kneel by the bed until I decide to join you.” His gravelly voice catches me off guard,

causing a full-body shiver. “Then you’ll crawl to me, Wifey. You’ll crawl to my dick and fill your dirty little mouth until...” He pinches my jaw and aligns my eyes with his while keeping his tone calm and lethal. “... these feisty green eyes of yours sparkle with tears.”

And then he unhands me, rakes his fingers through his hair, and moves out of my way. My pulse accelerates and the unnatural swell of desire in my core sweeps across my skin in a heated flush. I lock my spine tall and continue walking, the pace picking up speed with Reno in hot pursuit behind me.

We move indoors to the lobby near the elevators. I don’t pause or glance over my shoulder at André’s best friend, because I’m too incensed by the events to care about anything other than my pride. When the door closes behind me, I stuff my hands into my hair and clamp my skull, growling like a trapped animal.

Oval wall-hung mirrors reflect the spotlights directly above, gleaming over porcelain basins and shiny taps. Thankfully, the toilet cubicles are all empty, giving me space to breathe. And that’s what I do. I drop my hands to the vanity and stare at my reflection, inhaling and exhaling at the vision of a woman who has to figure out what her role in this situation has become.

In the peacefulness of each controlled breath, an earsplitting fire alarm siren goes off and Reno bursts in behind me.

“Time to go. Something isn’t right.”

SINÉAD



We push out into a crowd of bodies all rushing toward the fire escape doors. Reno latches onto my bicep and brings his mouth to my ear so I can hear him over the ruckus. “Stay close, Sinéad,” he shouts. “This isn’t a fire drill. Whatever happens, stay beside me.”

“Where’s André?” My heart rate skyrockets, unable to see a thing beyond all the people pushing into us.

“Focus on getting out of here. Then we’ll find him.”

I crane my neck, twisting around to catch a glimpse of him. The hairs on my neck lift like a storm creeping up from the sea. As soon as we enter the stairwell, the air cools and the noises change from muffled footsteps to clattering echoes.

Pinned to Reno’s hip, he charges forward without a care for the people he’s knocking out of the way. While they fall and trip, I’m searching for André, my gaze frantically spilling over the railing. And that’s when I see two out-of-place figures dressed in black, their faces hidden behind gas masks and a smoke grenade sailing through the air.

“Reno!” I yank my elbow, jarring his body against mine. “Are they Souza soldiers?”

“Fuck. No...” He tugs my arm and together we battle through a line of people, leaving the concrete stairs. We hurry into an abandoned elevator lobby and along a corridor.

Beneath the repetitive siren, he pulls out his phone and taps the screen at the same time as a spinning grenade lands at our feet, spewing a mass of smoke into the atmosphere.

“Cover your eyes!” Reno yells as he kicks the grenade away and crashes on top of me, both of us getting close to the ground.

It’s too late. My eyes sting like they’re glossed with acid, temporarily blinding me. I suck in thick air and choke when it burns my lungs. Gunfire reverberates, but I can’t see a damn thing. Reno’s body weight no longer presses down on me. In the chaos, I hear curses, coughing, and heavy footfalls.

Hands lock on to my flailing arms, and then I’m ruthlessly dragged backward. Light streams into my blurry eyes as I’m forced into an unoccupied suite.

My ass hits the floor with a thud. I blink, sputter, and wheeze, struggling onto all fours. When I finally focus, there are two sets of military-style boots close to my hands, and when I look up, I see double. Almost identical men dressed all in black and wearing tactical face coverings wait for my next move. The only difference is the height between them.

“Where’s Reno?” I choke out.

A hand shoots out. Gloved fingers capture the hair at my nape and force me to take a crooked standing position. The captor, who breathes like Darth Vader, doesn’t speak as he shoves me onto an unmade bed and moves in front of the window, blocking out the daylight. He removes a phone from a leg pocket of his combat trousers and holds it in my direct line of vision.

“What happens when the fire alarm sounds, Sinéad?” Frankie’s familiar accent chills me, his aged face appearing on the small screen in real time. “Everyone vacates the building.” He rubs his chin and smiles with amusement. “Which means you’re trapped on whatever floor my men found you on, and everyone else is outside. I’m never too far away and I can always reach you—even when your husband tries to keep me at arm’s length. This is a lesson in manners and respect. When I call, you answer.” When his head moves, I note the Miami coastline in the background. He’s on the yacht. “That was quite the show your new husband put on. Almost makes me believe he might actually like having a Saporì wife.”

His face disappears, replaced by video footage of André sitting at a table in Luna. Reno and Letterman are on either side of him as they talk. My heart swells at the sight of his roguish smile and disheveled hair. I inwardly curse myself for being so foolish.

“Keep watching. It gets very entertaining from here,” Frankie muses.

I hold my breath when André’s expression morphs from playful to homicidal. He tosses a lit cigarette, climbs on top of the table like a wildcat, thoughtlessly knocking over beer bottles, and drops off the other side. Confident strides carry his rigid form to the opposite side of the bar where he tackles the guy from earlier. Chills scurry down my spine like a bucket of sobering ice had tipped over my head.

“You’re watching us?”

“Of course I am.” His brow creases, as if he can’t believe I hadn’t thought about it before. “André signed a legally binding contract to produce an heir, or he has to forfeit his reign over Miami. It would be a huge embarrassment for the Souzas to lose a solid foothold in the states. He wouldn’t only lose respect, but their entire organization would take a fucking beating too. He thinks he’s got elements of his father in him, but he’s a tiny shrew compared to Elias. The boy is playing with the real gods and I’m the one holding all the cards. If it turns out his dick has more brains than his head does, and he allows a woman to get in the way of business, I’ll become the biggest threat the Souzas have ever known—until then, we’re family.”

My hands tremble, rage siphoning through them when I scrub my stinging eyes. “Your interpretation of family is pretty fucking distorted. Haven’t you got the hint yet—your so-called family doesn’t want anything to do with you.”

He shakes his head. “You have no self-preservation. I’ve asked myself, would it really matter if you died after your child was born? Do you really think André would be a stay-at-home father and raise a baby if you were dead? He’d hire a hot little nanny, fuck her, and hire another. Or better still, he’d

hand it over to me. Your role has a limited shelf life. If I were you, I'd be a little more cooperative.”

“I'm not you. And you're awfully certain I would let André anywhere near me,” I said, letting my voice frost over, my anger freezing in a thin film of icy fear.

“Given his reputation, I've no doubt he's fucked you already, which troubles me somewhat as he habitually moves on to the next good-looking woman. It was, however, assuring to witness that public display of devotion for his new plaything. Make sure André Souza doesn't lose interest in you. Fuck the man as often as it takes to get pregnant. I'm sure it won't be a hardship for you, picciridda. Surely, you'd rather screw your husband than have your mother's corpse turn up in a peat bog.” His face reappears on the screen.

“I'm on birth control.” I shoot a phony smile at him.

“Oh, yeah.” He nods. “The fake drug in the blister packet? You assumed the little pills were contraception?”

My heart stutters. “Fake...”

“Not so confident now, picciridda.” Frankie laughs darkly. “I knew a headstrong woman like you wouldn't willingly allow a stranger to impregnate her. Doctors can prescribe anything for the right sum of money. Those innocent pills you've been taking are called norethisterone. All they do is delay your period—like a contraceptive pill would—but they don't protect you against pregnancy. Genius, right?” He chuckles. “That way, I eliminated any possibility of you taking the real thing. Women are sneaky bitches, but men are smarter.” He shrugs. “My biggest regret is never having a son. A true heir. These days I'm firing blanks, which makes it impossible to father another Sapori child. I guess you weren't that big of a mistake after all, not when you can serve a purpose. The next time I call your phone—answer. Or life will get very difficult for both of you.”

He leans in closer to the lens. “By the way, has it sunk in how easy it was for me to track your movements—and locate your husband's whereabouts too? Look at how simple it was to separate you from him and inside his own hotel.” Frankie

cocks a smug brow. “There’s still time for me to change my mind...”

I frown. “About a baby?”

“No, you silly little girl,” he chastises. “However, I might decide that André isn’t the best choice for you anymore. Scott Acer still wants his mafia bride. So, if your husband were to have an unfortunate accident... you’d be free to marry your original suitor.”

My heart stills, frozen by his suggestion. “You wouldn’t dare kill a Souza. His whole family would come after you.”

Frankie laughs low and menacing. “I have many enemies, picciridda. The Souzas don’t scare me, they’re insignificant. Don’t you think I’m being rather generous, under the circumstances? You can stick with the devil you’re married to for now and have his baby... or I’ll have him assassinated and hand you over to Acer.”

He sits back and runs a hand over his silver hair. “Give my daughter a taste of what’s to come if she fucks with her daddy. But... don’t kick her in the stomach in case she’s pregnant already.”

Frankie waves two fingers at the screen, signaling my captors. “And Sinéad, if I get a whiff of a Souza counterattack after today or hear any rumors of an uprising against me, I’ll give the order to have your mother’s head hacked off at the neck with a blunt machete. That way it takes longer to sever the spinal cord... a few attempts at most, and she’d likely feel every chop unless she has a heart attack first. One phone call is all it would take.”

A thunderous wallop cracks the side of my skull, followed by a jarring punch to the chin, knocking me off-balance. I helplessly topple off the bed, my face smashing into the carpet, my gaze drawn to the only exit out of reach.

I’m dazed, momentarily paralyzed by the overwhelming ache at my temple and a surge of crippling emotions. All I can think of is Mammy—and the new threat my so-called father has projected at André.

My bruised jaw cries in agony as I try to open my mouth to speak. I'd endured pulsating panic before and faced it with courage and strength. Yet, nothing could have prepared me for the concentrated crash of fear Frankie's words had conjured.

I don't want either of them to die. Not my poor mother, and not André. He isn't simply a rebellious mobster anymore. I've slowly started to accept him as *my husband*. So now, in the light of day, if I was given the choice to pick between Scott or André—I'd pick my old friend without hesitation, even if our bond won't last forever.

Frankie was able to reach me even though André's armed guards swarm us twenty-four seven. It doesn't matter that it's my body or that it's a female prerogative whether I get pregnant, because he's taken the decision out of my hands. He's more powerful, cruelly evil—and horribly vainglorious.

Originally, I thought André might help me protect Mammy. Only, now I've learned he has too much to lose—his kingdom being the most important. On the ship, when he'd planned our wedding, he knew what Frankie wanted from us all along. It was an acceptable trade-off for a man conducting business.

But he also knew I was on birth control and didn't push me to come off it. Now he's in danger too, just like Mammy.

Exhaustion and confusion crushes my shoulders. I'm furious, scared, and filled with dread.

Tapping noises from outside the room have the men checking their weapons. The phone flies through air and lands on the crumpled duvet at the very moment Frankie barks out a question.

One gunman aims at the doorway, while the other inches closer, his ass flush to the wall. He pushes down the handle and cautiously opens the door, his mask still covering his eyes and mouth. The tireless fire alarm shrills in my pounding skull, somehow growing louder when his bulky body moves into the corridor, plunging into a dying smoke haze.

There's a loud crack, then a second. I squeeze my eyes shut briefly to appease the acidic sting and when they open; the henchman is slumped against the doorjamb, his motionless body sliding downward. I take a deep breath and force my streaming gaze upward to the next guy who's pointing his weapon at the exit.

He wasn't sent here to murder me. Frankie had only planned an elaborate scare tactic for his noncompliant daughter. This isn't about inheritances and bloodlines—it's all a show of authority. A greedy old man stamping his authority on the Souzas, in the wake of their father's murder. He saw an opening and took an opportunity.

Frankie Saporì thinks he's a god, but he's just a weak mortal who sends those with strength to do dirty work for him. Sick of feeling powerless, I launch myself at the last man standing in the room with me. I slam my fists into his chest, pummeling solid muscle and ammunition-lined pockets. It's pointless trying to wrestle him to the ground when he easily swats me away like a fly. My head wallops against the wall and I sink like a stone.

He shoots into the corridor, angles around to where I'm slumped, seizes my throat in his large hand, and hauls me to my feet. Holding me at arm's length, I'm forced out of the room with a gun to my belly, so I'm the first to reverse out over the threshold—the first to get a bullet if anyone fires.

I scrape and claw at his gloved hand, not even scratching his skin. Out of the corner of my eye, flat to the wall, Reno is bare-chested with his white t-shirt tied over his mouth and nose. He constantly blinks to see me, his own eyes burning, and lifts his forefinger to where his lips are covered.

I'm out in the open, in a choke hold, whereas my captor is using my body as a shield as he hesitates in the doorway. The fucking coward.

Content there's no more bullets flying, he takes a steady step into the corridor and pulls my body into his own. The barrel of his gun jumps to my throbbing head as he pivots.

Reno immediately pushes off the wall, his firearm pointed at the henchman's skull. The two men in a standoff.

"Let her go, motherfucker," Reno growls. "One more step and I'll blow a hole in your head."

I wriggle and squirm, gasping for polluted air. A cruel headache grows more debilitating and my stomach flips in warning. Nausea is washing over me in waves. My knees wobble and I realize I'm only upright because this guy is holding me up by the neck.

"I'm not here to hurt her. Put your weapon down."

"Fuck you!" Reno laughs. "The second you touched his wife, you signed your death certificate."

As his laughter echoes along the corridor, there's another earsplitting crack, only this bullet flies up from behind. I jerk when my captor lurches, a bite of lead penetrating his bulky body. His muscles vibrate in the seconds it takes for a surprise bullet to burrow into his flesh. When the ruthless hand clutching my throat weakens, my legs buckle. A disorienting mind muddle loops my limbs and pulls me down.

A second shot is fired, then another, and another. I manage to push up onto hands and shaky knees, peering through the lengths of my disheveled hair where André empties his clip into a motionless corpse, his mouth contorted as he repeatedly snaps the trigger.

"Motherfucker!" he yells, his face utterly demonic in his deliverance.

I scramble on all fours, scurrying into the bedroom to bargain with Frankie and tell him I'll do whatever it takes to protect my mother—and my wild husband.

"Frankie..." I gather up the device and slump at the foot of the bed, unbalanced with my head swimming. "I'll do it... I'll do it." It's too late though, he's hung up already.

"You'll do what?" André's voice booms over the alarm.

"Behave..." I mutter, rubbing my temple. "He called me a few times. I didn't pick up. He wants—" A brain fracturing

throb spreads through my skull, making the fleeting thoughts foggy and distant. My vision goes blurry, triggering unbearable dizziness.

He kneels before me, his big, warm hands cupping my face, his searching gaze feral. “Sinéad... fuck... you’re bleeding, baby... keep talking...”

“I-I... I’m going to be sick.”

ANDRÉ



“She’s awake!”

India presses a gentle hand to my wife’s brow as her eyelids flick open and she focuses on our master suite.

“The doctor checked you over and said you have a concussion. Don’t move too quickly, you’ll be woozy.”

The journey home from Sky Hotel was a living nightmare. My phone had buzzed a million times in my pocket from fuck knows who. I wasn’t in the mood to talk to anyone, so I ignored it.

Letterman was with Reno in a separate chauffeur-driven Range Rover, and I was in the back of another with Sinéad curled up on my lap as she struggled to fight the desire to sleep. Her blood had dried on my hands after I’d pressed my t-shirt to the gash on her scalp.

I didn’t like what was happening inside of me. The fury that tumbled in my veins like fiery coals had transformed into rankling worry. I’d never seen her that fragile before, and it startled the demons inside of me.

Whispered voices of vengeance and death had slithered over every inch of my skin until the bastard who was strangling her was dead. That alone should have appeased the thorny knots twisting around my heart, but it didn’t. Not when a trail of blood trickled the length of her ghostly pale complexion. Her blood. Her vulnerability.

A few days ago, I’d fucked her brains out and then threw up a flimsy barrier between us to prove to myself she was like

all the others. I had pretended I needed space, even when distance was virtually impossible.

The truth is, there's no comparison. She's perfectly unique and a feisty handful, which is why I'd found myself in an armchair at the foot of our bed night after night, drowning my urges. I'm not that guy—the committed fool. Or the player who pretends he's in it for the long haul. Women know where they stand with me. I don't promise anything more than what I can offer.

But now I want to offer more—and claim the same in return.

Turns out my wife is an orbiting star tethered to Earth and I need to figure out what's really keeping her in my stratosphere. That bastard Saporì went to great lengths to prove a point and give her an instruction. I'll get to the bottom of it, and when I do, I'll launch a missile at his yacht and blow him out of the fucking Atlantic Ocean.

Time's ticking, motherfucker.

Studying her in my bed, I inwardly admit that my wife is gorgeous, but so were the other women I'd enjoyed over the years. However, none of them had raven-colored hair or evoked any worthwhile feelings inside of me. None at all. Nor did they make my dick eternally throb or my impulses go to shit.

They didn't capture my attention long enough to warrant a second chance. But this woman... Christ... she has my dick on a leash.

"Indie, let's go out for one of those cool lime refresher drinks you like," Reno calls to his sister.

Sinéad swallows and slowly turns her head to the sound of his voice, locating him in the doorway wearing a pair of gold-framed aviators. He had marginally escaped with bloodshot eyes and a split lip.

"You okay?" she asks him, the croakiness of her voice a freaky fucking turn-on.

“Sure... we all got out alive to enjoy another day.” He shrugs, keeping the whole ordeal low-key for his little sister’s benefit. “Take it easy, Sinéad.”

Truth is, he’s lucky he didn’t suffocate from smoke inhalation. His message barely reached me in time. Once I realized the men escorting us to the fire escape weren’t on my payroll, I signaled to Letterman and we flipped the game, luring the dumb fucks to the boardrooms where Letterman lived up to his nickname.

He takes pride in choking a random letter of the alphabet from his victim’s throat and then shoots a body part starting with the same letter. The first guy picked the letter *K* and received a bullet to the kidneys and one in each of his knees; the other, well, he thought he was being a cunning fucker after watching his sidekick’s fate. He picked the letter *X*. However, Letterman just laughed while I pinned the traitor to the floor and cut two deep slashes over his heart with my blade to create the corresponding letter. That guy won a bullseye bullet straight through the middle as Letterman had snarled, “*X* marks the spot, motherfucker.”

He’s a fucking legend.

In the space of five painstakingly long minutes, we had found out Saporì was pissed, because I’d declined his request to speak to my wife. The old bastard doesn’t understand that she’s mine now. Apparently, he had tried to contact her a few times and she ignored him.

Good girl.

Trapping her in Sky Hotel was his way of teaching us both a lesson. Reno’s warning text message landed moments after we’d already figured it out.

India glances at me on her way past. I nod at her briefly and return my focus to Sinéad. She no longer looks like the thrill-seeking minx who gets off on taunting her husband.

The glint in her turquoise eyes has faded and her already pale skin is whiter than snow. Her dry, chapped lips are

slightly parted, her forehead cleaned of blood, and feathery eyelashes flutter against her eyelids as she remembers.

An ordinary man would let her rest. He'd leave her to recover while he put business first. I am not that man. Not tonight.

"This was your father's handiwork." I stalk closer to the bed.

"Stop calling him that," she mumbles. "He's nothing to me other than a mild irritant or an itchy rash."

"So you won't cry when I kill him?"

She dents her lower lip as she thinks on my words. "I haven't cried properly in years, and he certainly won't be the catalyst. Though he's a dangerous man..." Her eyes glaze over, stuck to an empty space in the room.

"You okay, Sin?"

She takes a deep breath and exhales slowly, her forehead furrowed in thought. "I'm fine."

I'm close enough to see her wince when she tries to push herself further up the mattress. She tries to hide it and coughs to disguise her pained groan. My chest thumps for vengeance. The shift happening inside of me follows a much more fulfilling path than hunting power. I want to make her happy.

"What did Frankie say to you?"

She tugs at the sheet covering her. "I-I don't remember."

"The doctor didn't mention amnesia."

Bringing a hand to her face, she pinches the bridge of her nose. "I'm trying... it's all so hazy."

I cross my arms over my bare chest and quirk a brow at her. "What's my name?"

"André," she says on a breathy sigh.

"And my surname?"

"Souza."

“So you know that name sends fear throughout the masses, right? Saponi made an enemy of me when his men attacked my territory and roughed up my wife. If you’re hiding something, now’s the time to tell me.”

I’d go to war with the whole world if it meant I’d never have to see her this fragile again, and one of these days, I might tell her that.

She looks confused. “As soon as I remember... we’ll talk... okay?”

I study the bruising on her neck and then level her with an accusing look. “His men beat the fuck out of you. You rushed back into that hotel room to tell Saponi you’d do something. Surely you remember what it was?”

Her adorable scowl pinches my heart. “He’s a bastard. What else do you want me to say? I told you already, I don’t remember...”

Something stirs within me. The desire to simply be in the same room as her is potent. I could walk away, cruise along Ocean Drive on my motorcycle, or get wasted with my friends in a club. Yet none of my past vices appeal to me.

Life, up to this point, has been a never-ending party. The same disorganized journey with no destination in sight. I thought it was fulfilling until she reappeared, and now, everything feels steady, like she’s become my grounding foundation.

“Well, it looks like we’re in for an interesting evening.” I pull my sweats down, watching her eyes roam all over my heavy dick.

“What are you doing?”

“Making myself comfortable.” Buck naked, I round the bed, pull back the sheets, and settle in bed beside her. It’s going to be a long night, made even harder by the fact I know she’s braless underneath that skull t-shirt. The brand-new top she’d worn had blood all over it, and I wasn’t going to let her rest in skinny jeans. Sounds like a lame excuse to get her

naked, but at the time, my concentration prioritized her well-being.

“You’re sleeping here?”

“It’s our bed, in our suite, Sin.”

I stuff a pillow behind my head and reach for the TV remote. Even though there’s a good measure of space between us, I can feel the heat of her skin like a roaring fire. This growing desire hasn’t left me, not once, and being so close to her body is playing havoc with my senses.

“You haven’t slept beside me since I moved in.”

I shrug. “I might not have joined you in bed, but I’ve sat in this room every night.” She sighs and I can’t tell if it’s in defeat, bewilderment, or exhaustion. “Do you need stronger meds for the headache?”

“What have you got?”

I laugh. “I can literally get you any drug you want. No joke. You’re in bed with a Souza, don’t forget.”

“*You’re* in bed with a Souza too,” she says quietly. Her eyes turn cloudy as she looks at me. “Hypothetically speaking, if Frankie were dead, would you let me go? I mean... would you file for a divorce?”

I scratch my jaw, not needing time to think. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Because—” I say immediately.

“Because isn’t an answer.”

“Well... it’s *my* answer,” I counter. “Have you remembered something he said to you?”

She shuffles down the bed, simultaneously brushing her bare foot against mine. The unintentional contact is far from sexual. However, it ignites a blazing inferno under the bedsheets. Sparks fly all over me and raging flames almost melt my good intentions to let her recover in peace.

“I’m tired.” Her voice is soft yet thick, unexpectedly seductive.

The mattress moves beneath me when I move closer, snake my arm under her delicate neck, and rotate her torso so her hips roll into me. She’s neatly pressed against my ribs, her shocked expression next to my face on the pillow.

Her eyes are shining now, the shade of green so deep it reminds me of the abundant green pastures on my grandfather’s Irish estate and the shimmering freshwater lake hedged by evergreen forest.

“Go to sleep, Wifey. I’ll be right here waiting for you to remember the other reason why I’m going to get rid of Saporì,” I say on a rumble, battling my way through the torture of being this close to her, my self-control a fractured layer of wafer-thin ice.

Her soft curves notably stiffen. “He’s dangerous, Dré. I know that without having a concussion.”

“And so am I,” I counter. “I’ll see him coming the next time and he won’t get within a one-mile radius of you.”

Without warning, she carefully shifts, and her juicy tits squish into my chest when she plasters herself over the top of me. A little groan escapes her, the effort of moving a struggle with her head injury. “And what about you? He’ll come for you if you make a move.”

“This isn’t just about them touching my wife—he was strangling you—that bastard nearly killed you, Sin.” The sickly heaviness of losing her stamps out the light she graces me with. “They bulldozed over a thin line of respect, and I won’t sit back and do nothing. It’s un-fucking-acceptable. If it’s a war he wants, I’ll give it to him.”

The weight of her is warm and intoxicating, a combination that’s giving my dick a whole new dose of stamina. She moves her bare legs to sit at either side of mine, her knees digging into the mattress so she has leverage to cautiously haul the t-shirt upward. I help her at the final stage, gently slipping it over her head and tossing it away.

Every naked piece of her battered flesh covers me. My palms find their way to her round ass cheeks. But when she gingerly hitches forward and slowly rests her forehead on mine, my mind goes to shit. My hands keep moving, gently squeezing one of her tits. I relish the hot sigh she exhales.

It's her turn next. Her small hand explores my shivery hot skin and finds my excruciatingly hard dick. Taking control of the shaft, she drags the head of it through the slick heat of her pussy.

“Let me fuck you...” She traces the tip of her tongue across the seam of my lips. “Husband.”

The dark tangled lengths of her hair act like a curtain to dim the bedside light, fencing us in a private space of heavy breaths and featherlight lips. I resist the urge to wrap my hand around her war-dappled throat and rein in the impulse to destroy her tight little holes.

My muscles visibly argue with the decision to go easy on my injured wife. Her lips kiss a path to my ear, where she nips the lobe with her teeth and tugs. I growl under my breath and savor her natural scent hitting me like a sugary-sweet drug.

She gently rocks her hips, lowering onto my weeping dick, and spears herself in place. Delicious heat and snug inner walls almost finish me. Her upper body hovers; those lush, proud nipples sway in my eyeline. The view of her grinding my boner injects my bloodstream with all sorts of depraved desires. However, she's not ready for rough and hard. Not tonight.

She groans into my mouth, owning it with silky soft leisurely lips and a slippery tongue that teases and explores. I've never known such a masterful, erotic kiss. She's blowing my mind.

“That's it, fill yourself up with my dick, Wifey.” I wrench my mouth away. “Your little cunt is just right for me.”

Sinéad plants her hands on my shoulders and grinds her pelvis, while my fingertips burrow into her hip bones.

“And your dick is just right for me.” She bites her bottom lip.

My hands are everywhere and my dick tunnels deeper, not seeking cruelty in the moment. Only giving into something sensual—a sensuous, purposeful pace mostly controlled by her. We move together, clashing unspoken emotions, staring into each other’s eyes.

“Tell me your name,” I say thickly from the back of my throat, crazily permitting myself to enjoy the softness of her, of this unheard of submissive moment.

A warm fluttery buzz infects my chest in a way I’ve never experienced. I’m addicted to her.

“Sinéad Souza,” she mumbles, every syllable electrifying my arousal, so I hit the highest of highs.

My skin blazes beneath her. My fingers manipulate her tits, stroke her delicate neck, and find their way into silky strands of hair. “And who do you belong to?”

“You, André—you.”

Her raw admission pins me to the mattress, paralyzed by the truth of our unusual adventure. Decades have passed and in those desolate years, I’ve never met a woman like her.

And that’s not simply a compliment—it’s the truth. We were only kids when I found her beaten, but not defeated, under the old Hawthorn tree. Seemingly, the threads of our childhood bond have never broken. I still feel connected to her in the strangest way.

I close my eyes for a moment to rein in the weird-as-fuck ache in my chest. I can’t decide if it’s a twinge of pain or something far more incomprehensible.

“I wish you’d found me sooner,” she whispers, her statement pulling open my eyes.

Her bold, lusty gaze burns my willpower to ashes. I clench my back teeth and drive my pelvis upward slowly, using her narrow waist to force her down on my boner. Together, we work as a team to get each other off. Neither of us takes the

lead, both of us hunting for a deeper connection. She kisses my shoulder and swivels her hips, her long hair caressing my sweat-laden skin. I haven't been this focused, this entranced in forever.

“I wish you'd never left me.” I hold her up and then slowly let her sink back down. Palming her ass, I resist the desire to swat it and pull her close instead. “You feel so good, Sin... so fucking good.”

She captures my mouth, her hungry little groan my next inhale. Our pace turns sloppy and hungry, both of us kissing and panting. My flaming skin rubs against hers as we rise to the pinnacle of madness without a care for where we land in the aftermath.

The swelling in my dick is sweet agony, especially when I know I'll cum inside of her. “I'm going to explode—that's how much you turn me on,” I pant into her mouth, carefully weaving my fingers into the hair at her nape.

“I'm nearly—” she cries out when I thrust upward with more violence than we both expected. “Fuck! That's it—oh my God—right there—right fucking there.”

My heart pounds, the surging release coming hard and fast when her pussy vibrates around me in a powerful climax of her own. I'm dumbstruck and temporarily transfixed from the shock of an all-time extraordinary orgasm. She moans and shakes, her forehead tipping to the pillow beside my face and her mouth muffled against my shoulder.

“Holy shit, Dré—” Sharp teeth sink into my prickled flesh, sending electric shocks right through me. Her body convulses, wrangling waves of pleasure. “It's still—going,” she breathes. “So damn goood.”

I wrap my arms around her, angling my hips to nudge in deeper while she's trembling. When her muscles finally relax and her breathing settles, I stroke her hair and hold her against my heaving chest, tight and possessive. I've never let a woman screw me like that. Although, something tells me it's not the way we fucked, but the woman who's just ruined me for sex with any other.

“Thank you, Dré.” She sighs, still stuck to my sweaty chest.

“What for?”

“For saving me like you promised all those years ago.”

I haven't saved her yet. The bastard who abused her still walks the earth unpunished and her father, well, he's a dead man too. Rather than reply, I kiss her head and pull the sheet over the top of us. My busy mind is at peace and my body is fully satiated for once. With that bizarre awareness, I fall asleep to the sound of her hypnotic breathing.

It feels like my eyes have only closed when they reopen to the brightness of my phone glowing on the nightstand beside me. She's no longer on top of me, her naked body flush to my side and her arm draping my hip bone.

I lean across and grab the phone, noticing the time. It's 2:30 in the morning.

Answering it, I slide out from under her arm, sit up, and throw my legs over the edge of the mattress. “Letterman? What's up?”

I'm walking away from the bed when he speaks. “We have intel. Except this shit isn't about Elias or Saporì. The chopper is fueled and waiting on the roof, ready for takeoff. Reno and I are happy to deal with this, but I think you need to see it for yourself, parce.”

I rake a hand through my hair. “What are we talking about here?”

“Our guys visited a local stash house and found something... Look, Dré, this issue needs a Souza presence. It's...” Letterman's voice goes ice cold. “We're waiting for you downstairs.”

Fuck.

I hang up and pull on my boxers, glancing over my shoulder where she's still peacefully sleeping. The compulsion to kiss her fizzles through me, so I prowl to her side of the bed, reach forward, and tuck a wave of hair behind her ear.

Staring at the battered marks, so dark and ugly on her beautifully structured face, I curse the fucker who put them there.

Sapori.

His henchmen dished out the punishment, but her father had given the order. I drop my lips to her temple, inhaling the scent of her. The seductive notes of sex and Sin.

I pull back and take a steadying breath, wondering how the fuck she could get under my skin this much. As I leave her in my bed, a weirdness unsettles me.

My muscles become twitchy and a buzzed source of energy pistons through my limbs, making me jog, rather than walk. I'm pumped, indestructible, and ready to rule my kingdom with an iron fist, no matter what I'm about to face.

SINÉAD



He thought I was asleep.

But the gentle kiss he placed beside my eyebrow settled the warmest sensation on my skin. I couldn't open my eyes for fear of my husband seeing straight into my soul. If he did, he would've found a racing heart that was shackled in the dark for too long, and now I'm terrified that he's set it free.

Whether the old ties of our friendship never frayed, or it's the new relationship we've kindled, I've become emotionally attached to him—and now anxiety is eating me alive like a super-spreading virus all because of Frankie's egocentric demands. It's not just Mammy I have to protect; it's André too.

I fully understand who my husband is and the power his family holds, except it appears that no one can circumvent the evil streak of a Sicilian mafia don with high expectations and tunnel vision. He's not only spying on me, but he's watching André too and making my husband's entire inner circle vulnerable.

Upon waking in his suite, I found my beautiful husband pacing. His distraught obsidian eyes shielded the vengeful storm within him, his muscular flexed arms folded over his inked chest in quiet observation of me. It was at that moment I'd recognized his true nature from a different angle. I witnessed my best friend's creased brow, his pouty regard, and caught every deep exhalation.

It wasn't a monster staring at me—it was my villainous hero, my husband. I have no right to hate him for the years we

spent apart. We were too young to know any better, just two kids who hunted an escape together. Me, from my brutal reality, and him, from his father's constant displeasure.

After years of resenting him, I finally discovered he never found the scribbled note I'd left for him. He had no idea we traveled to Donegal to stay with my uncle. Instincts tell me our cottage on his family's estate was raided after we fled, and all traces of our existence removed. That's what happens when you challenge a Hennessy.

Maybe it was better that we had parted ways. Fate had its own plans and today, as grown-ups, our bond has crystallized into something heartfelt—my heart feels it. And I'm starting to think his does too.

In normal circumstances, I would have naturally seduced André after I'd met his harrowing expression in the hotel room. The murderous countenance he wore switched in a heartbeat as he hauled me into his strong arms. Wide inky pupils had engulfed midnight irises the instant his fingertips located my seeping head injury.

He was horrified.

As we lay in bed together, closer than ever, and André spoke of a ruthless war that could finish him, I made a burdensome decision. Even though I truly wanted my husband, I had to do it. I followed through on Frankie's order to fuck my husband, unprotected from pregnancy, and yet absolutely certain it was the only way to save the people in my life who mean the world to me. For my own survival and theirs, to save myself from heartache and a doomed future with Acer.

Besides, André planned for us to have a baby together eventually—though I'll never admit it that over the past few days, my heart had secretly warmed to the idea of us creating our own little family one day.

Now I'm lying here alone, wide awake in a massive bed fit for a king, the sheets puddled around my waist and my sleepy eyes gritty. Since he'd walked out of the room, I've heard a collection of muffled voices, all of them fierce and serious.

My pulse races, scared of the gathering and what it might mean. Retaliation. War. A risk that could put Mammy in the firing line of a prowling sniper or an undercover assassin. Or a bloodthirsty battle to wipe out André and his loyal friends.

Throwing my legs off the bed, I force myself to stand and notice a bittersweet ache between my thighs and the soul-crushing thump of a headache. I sway a little, taking a moment to stretch out my jaw as I steady myself and then make my way to his huge walk-in closet on the other side of the room. Once inside, I pick out one of his hung t-shirts and get dressed. It's brand new, regretfully not carrying any trace of his virile scent.

When I reach the top of the staircase, mumbled conversations grow louder, as does the clatter of ammunition and weapons. I tread carefully, every step stiff and cautious. Reno stands beside André by the windows, both of them in head to toe black combat gear, their chests strapped into slim bulletproof vests. Letterman holds court near the kitchen, discussing tactics with a bunch of armed men, all similarly dressed.

Perched on the final step, what little energy I have left quickly withers. I look over at the team of soldiers, my eyes still burning, with a lump forming in my throat. The seriousness on André's face sends waves of fear through me, made worse when his eyes lock onto mine. He frowns, and the staircase moves beneath me.

Before I hit the tiled floor, he's there, his solid physique next to me, his heartbeat thrumming against the side of my face when I'm effortlessly hoisted into his arms. I breathe him into my lungs, relaxing immediately.

"Why are you out of bed, Sin?" he murmurs on an exhale, almost chastising me.

It feels good in his arms. Safe. When he carefully places me on the couch, I sit upright even though I'm light-headed.

"Where are you going?" I ask, wringing my hands.

“You don’t need to concern yourself with it. I’ll be back by sunrise.”

“Please, Dré, listen to me,” I plead, feeling a trickle of debilitating sweat roll down the length of my spine. “Frankie will kill you. He’ll kill everyone we care about.”

He hunkers down to eye level and stares at me. “*We* care about?”

“Yes... he...”

Something dark passes over his rugged features. “What did he say to you in the hotel? You remember, don’t you?”

I swallow, feeling sick to the pit of my stomach. “Your reputation precedes you, Dré. Frankie knows the honeymoon period has an expiration date. You admitted it yourself.” My breathing is all over the place, erratic. “You knew he wanted an heir. He told me to hurry up before...”

“Before I move on to the next woman?” he grits out, his mouth contorting into a grimace.

I nod slowly. “He’ll start a war with the Souzas if we don’t follow through on the agreement. But if you go after him or I don’t get pregnant soon... he’ll kill you and... he’ll kill my mother, Dré. He has men watching her in Ireland, waiting for the order to do it. Whatever you’re about to do—please don’t.”

He stands, smooths a hand over his hair, and before I can say another word, he lashes out and cuffs my wrist in his large hand. This time, his touch isn’t gentle or thoughtful; it’s unkind—impetuous.

“Letterman, get everyone out of here. I’ll be on the roof in five,” he commands, his eyes turning pure black.

With his team behind us in the living room, he roughly manhandles me into his office and spins me around to face him. The rapid movement makes my headache pound that much harder, causing me to sway.

Moonlight shadows half of his face as he shakes out his shoulders a few times and watches me in silence. He’s magnificent, if not terrifyingly tainted with danger.

Except, the way he's glaring at me has my pulse jumping, as if he's preparing to put a bullet in my heart. I inhale a shaky breath, straighten my posture before him, and pull myself together.

"Let me get this straight, Sinéad..." His gritty tone is wrapped in a thousand shades of black. "Upstairs, when you fucked me like that—like a wife who needed her husband to be gentle..." The hands by his hips fist as he snaps, "... that was you obeying Saporì? You rode my dick to save your mother?" Beneath a hardened layer of anger, I sense fine cracks bleeding hurt. "You seduced me because that bastard told you to get pregnant, right? Did you stop taking your birth control too?"

"He planted false birth control in my bag. I haven't been protected this whole time." My heart beats faster when he swallows hard. "But what happened upstairs... I let my guard down because I think this can really work... me and you. It was my decision, not his order."

In a flash, his face is too close, his fingers burrow into my cheeks. "Bullshit. You never wanted this in the first place. I thought..." His peppered jaw ticks as he stops himself short. "I should have left you in the past."

My temper snarls from under the fragility of the headache. "News flash, Hotshot... you knew I didn't want to marry anyone, yet you made me yours, anyway. So, you understood the assignment—scratch that, you *agreed* to get me pregnant whether *I* wanted a baby or not. You're a damn hypocrite, Dré. He has a bullet for you... and one with Mammy's name on it and he's waiting in her shadow to use it. You knew he wanted an heir, so why the hell are you angry with me, huh?"

When he growls, pristine white teeth clench behind his lips, the deep rumble freezing me to the floor. His chest rises as he breathes and his hand sails to the material covering my braless breasts rather than my bruised throat.

Forceful fingers brush against my nipples, sending volts of electricity through my limbs. But when he speaks, there isn't a trace of decorum left in his gravelly, glacial tone. "Had your

hot little cunt not been drenched after I fucked your face on the yacht, or you hadn't stared up at me with those hungry green-blue eyes of yours, I wouldn't have followed through on our vows. You were into it." His lashes blink slowly as he glares at me. "I consented to a baby when the time was right for *us*—not him. The old fucker thought he could control me—control my wife. I guess you never could trust me with your secrets." He unclasps his fingers and takes a notable step back. "I'd never trick you into getting pregnant. This shit stops now."

"Dré... I wasn't tricking you." When I inch closer, he grabs a fistful of the material covering my belly and yanks me into him.

"Like fuck you weren't."

A lump forms in my throat. "No! When I woke up in our bed to find you there, looking anxious, I finally accepted our marriage for what it is. *Till death do us part*. You saved me and I committed myself to you. Don't you see that? At that moment, I wanted to be your wife," I whisper, my voice shaking. "I—I. Wanted. My. Husband." My confession tingles all over me. "So there, Hotshot. Now you know my deepest, darkest secret."

The whites of his eyes glow, the only color on his otherwise eclipsed features. He chuckles coldly. "Such a shame, Sin, because you're one of many. You know that, right? Just another pussy to get high on before the rush fades." His breath hitches as if he's struggling to breathe—or he's lying. "And the adrenaline hit from fucking my childhood friend has run out. Whatever you thought you saw in me was just a player playing a game. Whatever I had hoped to find in you obviously didn't exist."

"I don't believe you!" I claw his merciless hand, praying he'll stop looking at me with so much distaste. "You felt it as much as I did."

His mouth presses into a firm line and he unravels his ringed fingers, yet even the tangled strands of my hair refuse to let go of his hand easily.

“I felt the thrill of a cunt milking my dick. It was a basic oxytocin hit. There’s nothing between us, Sin... only bad blood.”

I scowl, furiously seething from his blatant lies. “Well, thanks for that. I’m glad I know where I stand now.”

Whenever we’re in each other’s company, our eyes never wander. I can’t stop blinking up at him, regardless of his harshness. However, it appears as though it’s not just me who can’t look away. His gaze burns into mine, molten mercury and deadly carbon.

“Don’t wait up. I have a house full of fuckers to slaughter.”

And there it is. The split in his character where he’s a borderline psychopath—an intriguing mix of danger and desirability. He does a one-eighty and turns on his heel.

Panic squeezes my chest. I grab his elbow to stop him from leaving. “Are you going after Frankie? You need to tell me. I have to...”

He shirks me off and growls, low and foreboding, “The only thing you need to do is go back to bed. I’m done with your shit tonight.” As I bite my bottom lip to maintain a degree of composure, my emotions swell. The sight of him prowling through the doorway dressed for war rockets panic into my already tight chest.

“Our latest mission has nothing to do with Saponi,” he adds without looking back. “Not tonight. As for you, Wifey, I’ll deal with you tomorrow.”

Something unbearably oppressive creeps over me. A warm, sickly wave of dread crests in my gut and rolls down my spine.

“Whatever you’re doing tonight, Dré, please be careful.”

My concern for him earns a half laugh—not a playful chuckle, but rather more of a sinister grunt. He glances over his shoulder to meet my troubled gaze.

“It’s not me you need to worry about, Sin. It’s yourself. I went easy on you before—I even tended to your skull when it

was pissing blood, changed your dirty clothes, watched over you after the doc left, and gave you permission to fuck me hot and slow. Yeah... I let *you* take a little bit of control, but that's the one and only time." He jabs a finger at me, almost shaking from anger. "From now on, you'll do what I say, when I say it, and exactly the way I like it. And when I punish you, it'll fucking hurt."

ANDRÉ



Filthy bastards. Every single one of them.

As I stand in the stash house of a run-down Miami neighborhood, I barely quell my nuclear mood. My men have already detained six guys and I'm staring into the petrified eyes of their detained ringleader. I'm known for using harsh methods to ensure respect; however, given these harrowing circumstances, this guy faces immediate termination.

The punishment I deliver tonight will have to satisfy my unquenchable need for violence. After Sinéad's heartless admission, I'm on the edge of stability. My veins run cold, but my heart—it fucking aches behind the pathetic bone cage that had failed to guard it.

The slow *meaningful* seduction of my wife was betrayal.

She didn't offer herself to me because she craved *me*—she did it to obey Saporì.

Something has shifted inside of me. I knew it was happening from the moment I slid the ring on her finger. Every time I closed my eyes, her scent burst through the darkness and lured my senses to the wild side. Rather than sleep to dream of her, I observed the living, breathing fantasy in the dead of night.

But when her soft flesh sprawled on top of me, I'd relinquished a sliver of control—I succumbed to the mindless idea of my wife becoming my one and only. Yet as life would have it, she's still a closed-off stranger. The lust darkening her

eyes was a hoax. Our connection forced. And those tantalizing kisses that had my blood scorching were filthy lies.

Tonight, I have zero tolerance and a painful fracture is working its way through my soul. How was I supposed to know I would need her so much? Marrying the woman wasn't enough to make her mine, not even filling her cunt full of my cum could bring us closer together. Not when she has a singular mission to protect her mother.

I spit on the naked fucker tied to his cast-iron bedframe. "Have you forgotten who runs this city? I control everything and this..." Whimpers and cries from the next room plague my volatile mood. "I have no time for sick fucks like you."

His eyes dart from the lethal weapon in my hands to my unforgiving expression. A furrowed frown contorts his swarthy, tearstained face. "It's *Project H*... you know about this particular stock and all the transportation schedules."

I freeze. "What the fuck is Project H?"

"The fuck, Souza? What... you can't stomach it now you're here? I work for you."

"I didn't authorize the trafficking of young girls, motherfucker." I prowl around the bed.

"Sure, you did, and those pretty little girls out there are funding your family businesses."

This is it—the impetuous surge—the apocalypse.

I'm gone.

Hearing the pitiful bleating of broken souls, a radioactive hatred surfaces from deep within my bones. I let the rage take over without objection. My temper becomes the trigger of an automatic assault rifle; my unsatisfied wrath projects through penetrating lead. The victim's muscles violently jerk from every energetic slug, making the bed rattle beneath him. Blood spills, its rich hue soaking into the mattress, and hundreds of spatters decorate bland plastered walls.

No one will miss this bastard. He'll simply vanish like every other guy who's crossed me before him.

I glance over at Reno when he appears in the doorway, his flared nostrils and menacing scowl equally as anarchic as my own. My friend might be a man of few words, but his actions speak louder than any strung together sentence.

Neither of us is fazed by the carnage I've discharged. Not when my men had to round up hapless female prisoners, stripped of the clothes they were stolen in, suppressed by flesh cutting chains, and left in a dank cellar to await a life worse than death.

If that alone hadn't tipped me over the edge, the two dark-haired girls covered in fresh cuts and brutal bruises were the final catalyst. I'd found them naked and in bed next to the asshole whose torn-up guts are everywhere. They've witnessed my unsparing outrage, endured the sound of every flying bullet, and observed the knee-jerk justice I deemed fitting.

No fucking regrets.

The sobbing teens cower in the far corner of the room, covered in the floral duvet I'd thrown over them. If my wife wants to meet a real monster, she can eyeball this worthless fucking corpse.

"We'll take care of the rest of them," Reno mutters, his rough voice capped with frost.

"No." I pivot to fully face him, my uncontrollable rampage wholly justified and urgent.

I finally breathe and continue to reload the rifle. He eyes me quietly, probably wondering if I'll ever return from the darkness I'm lost in. Whether I want to or not depends on my decision to free myself from the numbness it offers.

"Call in a utility chopper and get all the girls out of here. The rest of these fuckers are all mine."



“After I check in on India, I’ll crash for a few hours, okay?” Reno talks to me through a headset.

The helicopter vertically descends onto the roof helipad of our condo and the pilot kills the engine. Silence doesn’t appease the conveyor belt of thoughts moving at top speed through my brain.

“No worries.” I unclip my seat belt and rip off the headphones. “We’ll increase security. Organize plainclothes soldiers to surround her wherever she goes.”

Neither of them questions my plans. She’s family, and after the past few hours, I’d happily pay a million dollars to guarantee her safety. That’s priceless.

When all three of us exit the aircraft, we prowl under the slow rotation of the blades, blood dried into our combat gear, and dark-crimson splashes cover our faces. I take a second to enjoy the hazy blush of dawn before moving indoors. Pretty pastel shades don’t help to soothe the confusion twisting inside of me.

I need answers.

And I think I’ve—done the unthinkable—fallen for my wife.

Entering the building, Reno punches the button for the elevator and disappears inside while we make our way to the penthouse entrance.

Letterman follows me in and goes straight to the liquor cabinet. Our mutual silence is broken by my lighter sparking up the tip of a blunt. He twists the cap off a full bottle of Jack Daniels and offers it to me first. I nod and accept, taking my time to drink as much as I can in one sitting. Once I’m done, I hand it back and inhale hash deep into my lungs.

“I need a shower.” My voice rumbles in the early morning hush that’s better than wretched pleading and explosive gunfire.

“What the fuck was that?” Letterman glances over at me, dark crescents under his eyes and a charcoal smudge on his cheekbone. “The oldest was at least fifteen.”

The memory slithers over me like a dying serpent. Once all the men involved were sufficiently pumped full of lead, Letterman and Reno drenched the residence in gasoline. The girls were escorted onto a passenger helicopter for transport to a safe house. I need headspace to figure out what the fuck we should do with them. Meanwhile, the shithole went up in flames.

Buenos noches, motherfuckers.

“I have no idea. They all called it Project H,” I say in a smoky breath. “I need to speak to Tommy—or Mama. This must be some crazy shit that Papá was neck-deep in.”

Letterman drags a hand over his weary features and wanders to the couch where he throws himself down. Neither of us has any words left to say, so I climb the stairs two at a time and purposefully go to the guest suite rather than disturb Sinéad. My patience is in tatters. If I see that pretty little ass of hers, I’ll likely bury myself in balls deep just to be close to her.

Inside the bathroom, I flick on the shower and continue to smoke the blunt until the water temperature is red hot. Under the jabbing water jets, harrowing faces haunt me when my eyes squeeze shut.

I curl my hands into fists, allowing the brewing outrage to find a viable outlet. Every high-powered punch into the smooth marble tiles mashes up my knuckles. I continue to batter, bruise, and bleed, unable to stop, or simply opt not to.

Each strike hurts more than the first. Blood drips and rolls, watered down by haphazard water droplets. My snarls compete against a racing pulse, the speed of it whooshing in my skull.

Eventually, my temper cools and a tornado of bright red swirls around the drain. I can’t determine if the brutal explosion was a byproduct of my murderous whims or the grim realization that Sinéad never wanted this—she didn’t *choose* me.

I stare down at the wedding band on my left hand and then study the ugly family ring beside it. A moody red stone

hugged by gaudy gold. My father's attempt to bond with his sons. Or a burning reminder of the deaths we were responsible for.

After each of us had killed for him, we were presented with a symbolic ring. I was only seventeen when he shoved a semiautomatic into my shaking hands and commanded unwavering obedience.

We all earned a unique Souza ring, except for my kid brother Matheus. The slick kid who's better suited to law books than weapons. It's only a matter of time before he's dragged into the dark side.

No matter how many times I look at the ring, I always feel my father's undiluted disappointment. I despise the colored jewel, dark and somber like every challenging day we had to spend at his secluded plantation as teens. It holds no hint of light, similar to my father's calculating and judgmental eyes.

Aching and stiff from being so tense, I wash my hair and revel in the sting the shampoo offers the bleeding grazes. It doesn't take long to rinse myself off, and then I'm wrapped in a towel, leaving my strewn clothes on the floor and returning to the sitting room downstairs.

"I'll be in my office if you need me," I say to Letterman on my way past.

"No worries, parce." He takes a long drag of a blunt and lets his head fall back on the couch. "Drugs and guns are what we do, but that shitshow..."

Letterman and Reno have stood beside me for years. We've raised hell together, and never once have they failed me. We diversify and cause chaos as much as any other illegal organization, but stolen virginal teens—that's where we draw the line.

"If there's more of those trafficking dens in Miami, we have to shut them down." Letterman visibly deflates, his mood ruined like mine.

"Agreed. Once I find out who's involved, I'll make it my personal crusade."

“*Our* crusade, Dré,” he confirms. “Imagine if that was India. Christ. At least you took those fuckers out in style. If a spewing machine gun didn’t send a message, blowing the place up sure did.”

“They don’t deserve to live in my city.”

“Here’s to that.” He raises the bottle, nods in my direction, and takes a much-needed gulp. “The whole of Miami will feel the Souza presence when it hits the streets in the morning.”

“Good.” Justice doesn’t do anything to suppress the seething anger under my flesh. I could run for miles and still not deplete the constant hiss of Sinéad’s betrayal. “We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“Hey...” Letterman calls to me while I walk away. “What happened before we left? Did you and the girl have an argument?”

I sigh, feeling unbalanced by the truth. “I was just telling my wife that the honeymoon period is over.”

Letterman doesn’t respond. There’s nothing to elaborate on. Both he and Reno understand how boredom gets the better of me. I’m not about to expose the frustration buried in my bones or discuss how I’m not finished with this particular woman. The common tediousness of the same pouty lips, juicy ripe nipples, and long, flowing sable hair hasn’t set in yet. Thinking about her consistently awakens my dick, turning it rock hard despite my wishes.

I head toward my office, my mind all over the place, knowing there’s more liquor and an abundance of cocaine waiting for me. Although it’s difficult to ignore the frustrating boner I have, I resist the urge to creep upstairs, peel back the covers while she sleeps, sink into the armchair next to the bed, and jerk off to the sight of her bare-assed position.

Nothing good would come of those actions now, because giving in to the lure of her only weakens my position in this dynamic. I’m in control and she’s at my mercy. Not the other way around.

Regardless of her deceit, she belongs to me, and I won't let Don Sapori throw his ego about in my territory. He knew the risk he was taking when his men invaded my hotel to wreak havoc.

I reach for a bottle of liquor and sit deep into the comfy chair behind my desk. Sliding open the top drawer, I grimace when the fresh scabs on my knuckles crack. The sting doesn't fade, nor do the urges to fuck my wife, not even when I extract a small obsidian treasure chest filled with Souza cocaine. The vitamin-fortified, strawberry-flavored blend sits in a mound, waiting for me to Hoover it up line after line.

A few snorts of this shit will get me through the day ahead, because I sure as fuck don't have the patience to sleep.

As time passes, loneliness gets the better of me. The cramping in my balls and the intolerant hardness of my dick haven't subsided. My brain is telling me to stay in my office, but my spiked libido demands satisfaction—and not by my hand. It wants her.

Fucking idiot.

I fumble with my iPhone and hit speed dial, drumming my fingers next to the Eurasian Diamond credit card I'd used to make thin, powdery tracks on the glassy desktop.

“Fuck... Dré... brother... I love you, man, but this is—” my younger brother Matheus grunts. “—bad—” Grunt. “—fucking—” Grunt. “—timing.”

A female moan sails through the airwaves, tingles over my scalp, and races to my aching boner. “You answered the phone while you're fucking?” I laugh quietly, not surprised. He learned from the master—me. “Call me back sometime, cabron. I miss your ugly face.”

I leave him to it and hang up, tapping on my twin brother's contact details. After ten long fucking rings, he finally answers me.

“What the fuck, Dré?” Giovanni mumbles, his voice croaky from sleep. “Another all-nighter?”

“You could say that.” I swivel the chair to take in the view of the city I call home. “Does Project H mean anything to you?”

Giovanni breathes into the phone, and I swear the fucker has gone back to sleep until he mutters, “Don’t tell me... it’s an exclusive sex club for the vile and horny. Did you seriously wake me up for this bullshit?”

I sigh. “We took out one of the Miami stash houses earlier. They were trading virgin teens.” The line goes deathly silent. “I had no idea it was happening under my own nose. The creeps hiding the girls thought I was in on it, too. They referred to it as *Project H*.”

“It’s news to me. Although it wouldn’t surprise me if Papá was behind it. The sick fuck had his fingers in every shady deal out there. Tommy won’t be out of action for much longer. He knows what’s at stake. We’ll plan a family meeting as soon as he’s back in Colombia.”

“Yeah...” I agree, still pissed off at my dick’s need for satisfaction. “When are you coming to visit me, brother? You spend so much time in that weird castle on the cliff. I’m starting to think you’re a vampire.”

Giovanni chuckles, the rumble a little deranged. “Isn’t that what we are, Dré? Papá raised us to become monsters to protect his kingdom.”

“It’s not his kingdom anymore,” I say, reaching sideways to fetch my liquor-filled tumbler. “Tommy needs to get his dick out of Carina, so we can figure out this mess Papá has left for us.”

“Speaking of dicks...” Giovanni’s deep tone switches to roguish. “Mama broke the news earlier. I tried to call you, but I guess you were *busy*.” He emphasizes the last word so I can tell he’s smirking. “A wife, Dré? We shared a womb together and I had to hear about your wedding vows from our mother.”

“I got sidetracked.”

“I know what you got, brother. And it’s the last thing any of us expected. Only my twin could win a woman in a game of

poker and marry her the same night. Will you introduce us, or is divorce in the cards? Pardon the pun.” The fucker laughs.

No chance.

She’s all mine.

I’ll never let her go.

“Till death do us part and all that bullshit.” I force a flippant laugh, hiding the antsiness in my tense muscles.

“Mama told me it’s the little Irish girl from the Hennessy estate. What are the chances of that?”

“What are the chances of her father being Don Saporì?”

“Remember that trip we took to Ireland after we’d turned eighteen?” I hum a knowing response as he continues. “You said you wanted to fuck an Irish girl for a change. And then you saw that dark-haired girl who had emerald eyes and a cute smile. You thought it was her.”

I sip from my tumbler and feel the burn of liquor. “The club was dark. Mistaken identity,” I mutter.

“Or wishful thinking,” Giovanni suggests. “Didn’t stop you from railing her in an alleyway in Temple Bar, though.”

The impromptu Dublin trip was a blur of booze and cocaine—I was more or less wasted when the private jet had landed on the runway. The woman who I swore was Sinéad became the hardest downer I’d ever had to endure.

In the streetlights, she looked nothing like my old friend. Her eyes didn’t sparkle, and her personality was bland. She was a sore reminder of how good things never last.

“That was the last time you mentioned her, and the last dark-haired woman you screwed with.”

“And your point is?” I counter.

The line goes quiet for a moment. “I’m just saying, Dré. Maybe it’s fate. Was she with Saporì all these years?” He seamlessly flips the topic.

“Sapori had nothing to do with her until recently. She might be a mafia princess, but she has no concept of the Cosa Nostra. But Frankie—he’s testing my patience. Sinéad is in bed recovering from a concussion after his men paid her a visit. I don’t care who Sapori is or how long he’s known our grandfather for. The fucker thinks he can stroll into Miami wearing his handstitched shoes and do whatever he wants. He can’t—and won’t—get away with it.”

“What do you need from me?”

“Get one of your contacts to track him down. I only need eyes on him for now. His yacht was anchored off Biscayne Bay and now he’s sailed on elsewhere. I won’t do anything until I figure out the extent of his threat.”

“No worries. I know just the guy.”

“I love you, Gio. Stay safe. With Papá’s killer still out there, the threat on our family is bigger than ever.”

“Maybe I’ll swing into the city one of these days and meet the woman who’s changed my brother.” His low chuckle makes me grin.

“Unfortunately, she hasn’t achieved that mission.” I feign a smirk for my own benefit. “I’ll be gray and fucking old by the time you drop by, cabron. Stop talking about it and do it already.”

I end the call and toss my phone, knocking over the framed photograph of me and my brothers taken a few years ago. It’s one of the rare occasions when we were all together. Fixing it, I focus on our youthful faces, each of us harboring our own demons behind the smiles of four powerful men.

Unfortunately, the phone call to Gio wasn’t enough of a distraction. It failed to help me forget the persistent sexual desire or the feeling of my hard dick against the towel.

Despite my self-disgust, I can’t get rid of the horny buzz, probably made worse by my cocaine consumption. The potency of it spikes my temperature and riles my mood. This is not what I’m used to, and it’s driving me wild.

My arms work on autopilot, bringing the glass to my lips to sip more numbing liquor. Brick by brick, I rebuild my walls until there's a forty-foot fortress encircling me.

From this moment on, I'm unattainable. My wife is simply a recreational habit that I'll use on my terms, and eventually leave the idea of monogamy behind.

SINÉAD



Once I'd heard him arrive home, I quickly climbed back under the sheets and patiently waited for the mattress to dip and his body to settle next to me.

It didn't.

That was an hour ago. Sitting in the middle of his huge bed with the rich sheets swamping me from the waist down, I tease my fingers through my hair and flinch when they brush over a crusty scab. My limbs ache and queasiness rolls over me in hot, sickly waves. I'm not sure if it's the aftermath of the attack or the fact we'd had a huge argument.

I stare blankly at the bedroom door. Finally, I pluck up the courage and energy to leave the suite and descend the stairs. Hazy tangerine rays of dawn spread over the living space. Letterman lounges on the couch, watching a video on his phone while sipping amber liquid straight from a bottle.

Padding over to him, I gasp when his torso suddenly rotates, bringing the threat of his gun to my chest.

"Christ..." He visibly relaxes when I hold my hands outward. "Why the fuck are you creeping up on me?"

"I'm not creeping. I heard you guys arrive home, but André didn't come to bed."

He sits back and mutters, "He's in his office. I'd give the guy some space."

I glance across the living room where his office door is closed. "I need to talk to him."

“At this time of the morning?” He angles his head and wrinkles his forehead at me like I’m nuts. “No one needs to have a conversation at this ungodly hour, especially not Dré, and not after the shitshow we just dealt with. It can wait.”

Letterman lights a hand-rolled cigarette, nips the butt with his lips, unties his laces, and kicks off his filthy boots. “A friendly word of advice, Sin...” He breathes out my name with a haze of smoke. “...go back to that comfy, warm bed upstairs and sleep off whatever shit you want to talk to him about. He’ll speak to you when he’s ready.”

He reverts back to watching YouTube on the small screen. I study him for a beat, noting an ashy streak across his cheek.

“What happened?”

His gaze doesn’t falter. “You don’t need to know.”

My gut twists beneath the palm settling over my belly button. “It’s something serious, isn’t it? Please tell me you didn’t kill Frankie.”

“Look...” Letterman exhales heavily. “Frankie will get what’s coming to him, eventually. Tonight was about something—unexpected. So, do yourself a favor and turn around. He needs alone time to process whatever shit is spinning through his head.”

“What was so unexpected?”

“Souza business.”

In a beat, I’m standing tall before him, my shoulders drawn back and my hands shelved on my hips. “Haven’t you heard? There’s a new Souza in town and that’s me, Letterman. I’m his wife. I deserve to know what he’s involved in—tell me what happened.”

“I don’t have to tell you shit, sweetheart.” He exhales like a dragon, slow and smoky. “That guy who you call your husband is my best friend. What we do together out there in those streets stays out there. I know Dré better than he knows himself. And don’t think I haven’t noticed the weird way he gets with you. He’s changed since you resurfaced. Reno and I

have both noticed how he's given you something no other woman could ever achieve."

"Oh yeah, and what's that?"

"His full attention. All of it." Hazel eyes stare up at me from his laid-back position. "Don't ask me how long it will last, because I've never known him to have an extended interest, never mind tying the knot."

I lower and perch on the edge of the coffee table, taking a quick mouthful of honeyed liquor from the bottle.

"I hate Frankie Saporì more than anyone." The burn feels good as it makes its way down my throat. It reminds me of closing time in The Rusty Shamrock, icy winds, and a nightcap before the door is locked.

"I'd put a bullet in his cold heart this very second if he was here. He's threatened the people I care about. I'm not afraid of violence. I've grown up around it. It wasn't easy taking ownership of my uncle's pub and facing the onslaught of male assholes who thought they could do better or considered me as entertainment once alcohol hit their veins. I dealt with it. Dré and I had an argument and I want to put him straight on a few things. It's important. Please... tell me what happened, so I know how to approach him."

Letterman regards me through a haze, pinches the cigarette, leans toward the artsy stone ashtray beside my thigh, and taps off ash. "One of our stash houses was packed with teens. They were locked under the floorboards, awaiting sale. It was..." He scratches his peppered jaw. "... haunting. Dré was already on edge after speaking with you before he left, so when he set eyes on a couple of young girls with hair the color of coal and bruises the shade of soot, he lost his shit. Your husband personally assassinated every son of a bitch responsible for abusing those girls. Every fucker was interrogated and then gunned down. *That* is the real Dré. So, if you don't want to meet the brutal side of him, do yourself a favor and go back up those stairs."

The atmosphere is colder than usual, even with the burning ball of flames peeking out from the horizon. Goosebumps

scatter my bare arms. I should listen to Letterman's warning, flee from sight, and backtrack in ignorance.

Nothing good would come from antagonizing André, not while fresh blood creeps over his conscience. We quarreled. He'd implied our connection was gone, and then he left. And I'm too restless to let it fester any longer.

I nod my head, mentally justifying the brutal murders. Many a man would turn his head and pretend he didn't see anything. Or worse, he'd take part for money. But not Dré.

"And the girls?" I ask, taking another drink for courage.

"Don't worry about them. We'll sort something out."

"Okay." I rise and let my gaze fall to the farthest side of the living room.

"That's who married you, Sinéad. He's either the punisher or the best friend," Letterman adds.

"I know him as both of those things," I say, setting the bottle down and leaving him to finish his cigarette.

"Good luck," he calls after me.

I knock once and meet silence, so I fist the door a second time and enter. He's standing by the window, the inked Hawthorn tree a reminder of our past ties. He turns slowly and points his crystal cut tumbler at me, those enigmatic black eyes of his spearing me like lethal darts.

My belly flips over as he regards me without saying a word. A vein pulses in his thick neck and his teeth grind. The way he just stares at me makes me both uncomfortable and flaming hot. His ebony hair is just how I like it, disheveled and hanging over his brow as if he's only just woken. Peachy light illuminates his tattoos and those shadowed muscles that flex in his abdomen make my insides clench.

I know what this man is capable of, yet I don't stand before him in fear. I'm sucked into all things André Souza and completely in awe of this lethal, handsome antihero. My eyes go fuzzy from staring at him so intently, black dots dancing across my vision as if I had stared directly at the sun.

He sniffs, raises his glass, but doesn't drink until he's wiped his nostrils with the back of his hand.

"Leave," he commands, harsher than a slap in the face.

"No." I dig my toes into the thick plush rug underfoot. "Not until we talk. I have things to say, and I want you to listen."

I see a subtle smirk linger on his lips, and then he quickly reins it back in. His slow-moving gaze drops to freshly cut lines of cocaine on the desk, an empty bottle of booze, and his revolver. "As you can see, I'm otherwise occupied. This isn't the time for your groveling to commence."

"Groveling?" I repeat.

I drink in every inch of his naked torso, my pulse soaring when he moves beyond the chair blocking his lower half. His dick hangs heavily between his thighs, slowly stiffening. The length of it triples with its satiny bulbous crown rigid and ready to ruin. He looks wild, as if he's ridden to Hell and returned as a warrior. Ringed fingers rub his coarse jaw as he considers whether my entrance is acceptable to him.

"You're familiar with the term groveling, aren't you?" He cocks an inky brow at me.

My heart rate quickens. Every inch of my skin tingles under his sweeping assessment. I swallow my obvious intrigue of him and move further into the room, pausing by the couch where a bath towel sits in a heap.

"Do you really think I should grovel?" My words come out softly while I push my nerves aside.

He snarls when I lick my lips. "I do. And you'll do it on your hands and fucking knees."

"If you're not going to listen to me, then you may as well let me go." I fold my arms across my chest. "Rather than blaming me for this situation."

"Let you go?" His voice scratches my skin as it blasts into the atmosphere. "Why the fuck would I let you leave when you're mine?"

“Yours? Yet you want me to grovel as if I’m worthless. Why are you treating me like this, André?”

He slams the tumbler onto the desk, the sound of it echoing in the modern office. He glowers at me, his entire face contorted with raw anger.

“Because no other woman has stood where you are now—as my wife. They’ve never experienced all of me. Nor have they been this close to the real me or even latched onto my intrigue. In fact, let it be known that I’ve never allowed a woman to fuck me the way you did. Not with those sexy fucking kisses or such a slow, vanilla pace. That scenario only occurred because I allowed it to... and now that I know the truth behind it, you will never experience it again. The groveling is simply a requirement that will ensure your role as my wife is maintained. As for getting pregnant—I haven’t decided if your cunt deserves my cum again. So yeah, Wifey—groveling is an expectation.”

ANDRÉ



“André... please.”

She rushes forward, snatches my hand, threads her fingers with mine, and looks up at me with mesmerizing turquoise eyes. Instantly, my chest implodes. Chills race over my scalp and my pulse goes haywire.

The simple touch of my wife helps to soothe the devil’s chatter inside my head. To subdue the bloodlust of my past actions and the violence I’ve yet to unleash.

My unruly dick twitches against my bare abdomen and my balls throb when the scent of her flurries up my nose. She smells like sex and antiseptic. Not a combination that would usually turn me on, but on this woman, it’s intoxicating. It’s clean and dirty—astringent and musky. A mash of disturbing purity and eroticism.

Where her palm nestles against mine, chills catapult from the burning heat of it, all the way along my arm to my shoulder. If I’m not careful, my veins will explode.

I want to fuck this woman.

On repeat.

I’ve endured a grueling few hours, assassinated a bunch of rapists, demolished a bottle of booze, and snorted a few lines of cocaine. Here she is, gazing up at me like I’m a fucking god. Or the only man who can save her mother.

The crippling realization of that being the most obvious scenario almost has me reaching for my gun. I could kill her—

if I wanted this to end and for my life to go back to my version of normal. But it wouldn't matter. She'd always be right there in the forefront of my mind. Getting rid of her is not an option.

Despite the fleeting thought of pulling the trigger, the rush I'd hunted since the day I slaughtered the pitiful stag hits me tenfold. It's a sucker punch right to my stomach. I can't breathe beneath its weight. I grit my teeth, having never found an adrenaline hit to replicate that feeling—until this very instant.

And it's not the act of reaping lives or the alcohol in my system or even the narcotics in my bloodstream—it's the sensation of her tiny hand in mine. Of the visible desire prickling her skin in shivers and the way she gazes up at me.

The longer her hand stays in place, the more my urges take over. Our connected skin grows hotter and my need becomes feral.

I hate her for it.

I despise how she didn't trust me to help her mother. How she fucked me under the direct order from a man who doesn't value her life like I do, and most of all, because I'll never know if her sexy groans of pleasure were real... if any of it could be real now.

In reality, what woman wants marriage forced upon her? She didn't. Despite that fact, the dark twist woven through our vows was the hot sex—the undeniable attraction between us from the get-go. Not to mention the mind-blowing way in which she had surrendered and shook. And now I've found out she was compliant for other reasons. None of it was genuine.

While my heart made room for her again, she was only faking it.

The morning light is dusky through the large windows, its radiance dappled with wispy clouds in an expansive rose-gold sky. It kisses her pale complexion, transforming my wife into a goddess of surreal beauty.

The fresh bruising on her jaw turns my thoughts dark. Its circumference spreads to her heart-shaped chin where a cute

little freckle peeks out at me from the edge of the purplish-blue mass.

She's playing me.

I whip my hand away and stuff it into my hair, combing from root to tip.

“André.” Her Irish lilt is thick and enticing.

My dick thickens to excruciating heights of stiffness. All the blood in my veins scalds like lava, heating me with this intolerable ache to fuck.

“Go back to bed, Sin.”

I push past her, moving to the liquor cabinet for another bottle. Unscrewing the cap, I take a long drink and prowl toward the couch, sinking into it. I've already drunk too much and followed too many trails of snow to count. Yet none of that had injected me with this insatiable buzz.

I drag a hand over my face and blow out my growing frustration. When the same hand meets my rough-edged jaw, I realize I'm shaking.

“Didn't you hear me? Get the fuck out of here before I kick you out myself.”

“Letterman told me about those young girls—and what you did to the men holding them captive,” she says softly, turning her back on the sunrise. “You did the right thing, André.”

My wife falls silent immediately after speaking, cautiously lingering by the desk. I glance over at the loose strands pouring over narrow shoulders like a multi-tailed whip and visualize fisting the lengths of it into a ponytail to help me drive my furious dick deep into her throat. My mouth waters. How dare she tease me like this, even now, when my mind is chaotic.

“I know I did the right thing. I don't need your approval. My city. My rules, remember?” Her lashes beat rapidly at the harshness I project on her. “So, run along.”

“André... I want to talk about earlier.”

My muscles tighten, coiled for punishment. “In case you haven’t sensed the vibe, I’m not exactly in the mood to communicate. Chatting—definitely not. Punishment—perhaps.”

She pushes back her shoulders and takes a noticeably deep breath. “You’re not being fair. I didn’t tell you about my mother to begin with, because I thought you were only interested in my bloodline and what it could do for you. Women like me are collateral damage in your world. But something unbelievable happened, Dré. I—I have feelings for you and couldn’t figure out if they were the old ties from our past or something new, something real. I know it might be hard for you to believe, because even I find it unthinkable when you’ve basically stolen my life.”

Her graceful feet move and before I know it, she’s standing in front of me with the hem of an oversized t-shirt grazing her milky thighs. I study the fascinating color of her skin, how it appears untouched by the sun’s rays. Unlike her proud neck and the tinge of frustration sweeping upward to her cheeks.

It’s maddening to crave something that’s flawless on the outside and treacherous on the inside. Either way, it feels so good to know she’s mine. That she’ll never escape from me, no matter what happens.

“Walk to the other side of the room and turn to face me,” I command. She sucks in her bottom lip and snakes a hand to her belly. “Do not make me ask twice.”

When she swiftly lifts to the balls of her feet and tentatively obeys, my senses fire up to hyper-aware and my dick switches to high alert. My mind runs away with itself. The rampant thoughts are largely about punishing her, but amid the revolving rumination, I think about loving her. How I want this more than she does.

Whether it’s because I’m wasted or painfully aware of her reasons for being compliant—I’m becoming a paranoid fucking mess, crippled with doubt.

I’m turning into the man I swore I’d never become.

My father.

Once she's in place, directly opposite me with the sunlight in her eyes and my restraint at its breaking point, I take a drink before barking out another order. "Remove the shirt."

Her throat works as she swallows, and when her tongue peeks out from between her lips, a short-tempered snarl scrapes out of my throat. The reaction I have to such a simple thing evokes raw, painful hunger. But I'll contain my impulses and make her work for my aching dick. Because that's how this shit will work from now on.

The t-shirt lands by her feet, leaving her completely naked. Tits on display and pussy available. I clutch the bottle, digging my fingers into the glass with so much pressure that I'm surprised it doesn't shatter.

"This is how things will be between us now." The hoarseness to my voice is born from a sleepless night and the urges of a man so close to letting go that every part of him hurts. "I will command. You will obey. Now turn around and let me see all of you."

"André," she whispers.

The hand gripping the bottle stabs the air. "Address me as your husband."

Her eyes narrow, arresting turquoise dazzling in the blinding sunlight. She lifts her hand to shield her gaze.

"Husband," she begins. "You can build barriers and keep me at arm's length. You can even send me back to our room, but it won't undo what's already been done." An unhealthy blackness attaches itself to my temper, knowing exactly what she means. "I wanted you and you wanted me. Deny it, but I saw the devil in your eyes burn to ashes. I wasn't fulfilling an order, rather consummating *us*. It was more than just sex—and you know it."

My hands ball at the audacity of her claim. How she dares to think she understands me or can figure out the conundrum that's breeding under my fiery flesh.

“From now on, you don’t have permission to speak,” I bite out, watching her flinch. “Turn the fuck around and let me see the ass I’m going to claim when I decide the time is right.”

I watch her chest rise and fall as her breathing accelerates. She obediently does a gradual three-sixty turn on the spot. A deep yearning to feel those silky strands tickle my pounding balls crashes over me in tidal waves.

“Slower,” I say with false restraint, given I’m anything but calm.

The intensity of my gaze slides to her breasts, so fucking perky and plump, taunting me to bite them in quick succession. She notices my scalding stare, lifts her hand to the left nipple, and squeezes.

Fuck.

“Your instruction was to turn at a slower pace, not to touch yourself for undeserving gratification. Do I have to come over there and tie your wrists together? However, that would make it exceptionally difficult for you to crawl to me.”

Her eyes trail over my own nakedness and her core clenches. The subtle spasm of her tummy muscles doesn’t escape me. Keeping her head up and her arms by her sides, she rotates with the attitude of a red-hot flame. Her movements are brazen, yet disciplined, lit up from the rising sun, so she appears all powerful.

“Good girl.” I breathe the words. “Again. Only this time, bend over and spread your ass, so I can see the tightest hole of all.”

A sexy little scowl darkens her features, adding to the thrill of my control. “What if I don’t?” she says bravely.

Being held under her inquisitive stare makes the air around me sultry and dangerous.

“Do you want to feel the burn of my hand across that round ass of yours? I bet your soaking pussy would want more and more until your skin catches fire. If you want to feel it now, all you have to do is sink down onto all fours, crawl to me, and kneel at my feet.”

Our dynamic is set in stone. I'm in control and she has to forget all about her plans to use me.

“How about I do both, Husband?” she taunts, just before her little feet lift one after the other.

She pivots, spreads her legs, and bends over. Bringing a hand to each of her pearly smooth cheeks, she pulls them apart and reveals her glistening folds. My heart rate spikes in the silence between us, the atmosphere throbbing with her need and mine.

I sit forward on the couch cushion and set the bottle by my heel. At the same time, she straightens and angles back to face me. Her eyes latch onto mine, darkened with lust. I've never been so poised for a physical attack before. Not to brutalize, but to fuck myself off the cliff she's dangling me from.

Without another word, she lowers to her knees and slowly sets her hands on the rug. The way she watches my reaction has my dick planning all sorts of violent deeds. She skates her tongue over her bottom lip and the state of my dick turns painful.

I want to fucking ravage her.

And I will.

Without mercy.

Without tenderness.

Without giving her my cum.

Bracing myself, my gaze follows her every movement. Seductive hips purposefully sway to lure me under her spell, and sumptuous tits jiggle. Her spine curves with kittenish dexterity. I'm not above enticement from a beautiful woman. However, the wild desire in her avid stare matches my own on a level I can't explain. Nor do I want to consider it.

This is punishment. Simple. Carnal. Except, for some reason, it feels like my own sentence instead of hers.

When she reaches my bare feet and sits back on her heels, my self-control shreds. Breathing hard, I lunge at her, cupping her cheeks to stare right into her big eyes.

Our noses graze. Tiny puffs whisper over my face as she gazes back at me, the intensity between us thick with need.

“Open.” Fingertips skate to her mouth, careful not to disturb the bruising beneath it. As her lips part, I shove my forefinger and middle finger inside and explore the toxic warmth. “No cum for you tonight, Wifey.”

This little minx knows what she’s doing, especially when she closes her lips around my digits and hums. My nostrils flare as I inhale; the way she teases me is criminal.

My intoxicated veins are working a thousand times harder to portray this extraordinary level of self-discipline. The effort makes my head thump and my mind run away with itself.

I remove my fingers and settle back into the couch. My knees are wide apart, and my dick is lying heavy against my stomach. She squeezes her eyes shut briefly, and when they reopen, all I see is desire.

Is it real?

Memories of my teenage self engulf me in my alcohol-laced trance. I was never good enough in my father’s eyes, always one step below Tommy, his one true heir. Not quite reaching the heights of worthwhile praise.

Eventually, I stopped trying to please him. As time passed, I didn’t care for anyone else’s opinion. Even Reno and Letterman understand that if I don’t agree with their advice, then I do things my way.

Which is why I married Sinéad and why I agreed to get her pregnant when the time was right for *me—for us*.

It was my choice. Little did I know it’s not simply about owning a wife; it’s about deserving her. Being enough for her. And just when I thought I’d found the perfect wind to train my tornado, she moved direction and left me feeling cheated.

Soft hands smooth their way up my thighs, the gentleness luring my thoughts back to the room. My pulse thrums and my heart thuds against the steely bone structure of my ribs. Her awareness strikes a flash of possessiveness through me.

I sink my fingers into her hair and roughly lock her green-blue gaze with mine. My muscles tense as I brawl with my self-control. It would be so easy to ram my dick in her mouth and fuck her throat until tears mingle with cum. To fuck her rough with the sunlight on her skin. But I refuse to get hooked on her. Not today.

“This occasion isn’t for tenderness.” I grab her hand and press it to my dick. “Grip it hard.”

Our gazes tangle. She licks her lips and takes hold of my dick, wrapping her fingers around it firmly.

“Harder,” I bite out.

She studies me silently and then tightens her fingers before moving a choking fist up and down. Inhaling in a rumbled groan, I rub a hand over my heart where it hammers in situ. The erratic palpitations are due to a combination of drugs, liquor, and hard-core adrenaline.

Goosebumps hurl their prickly formation all over me.

“Harder,” I snarl. The compulsion to feel something other than pleasure takes over.

Her juicy tits brush against the pricked hairs on my thighs as she tugs and yanks. My balls are on fire, growing insanely hot. I thrust into her tight palm faster. She doesn’t back off, matching my furious pace with her own wildness.

She has an intolerable power over me.

My raging heartbeat bucks wildly while my balls draw up. A crest of blazing heat rushes through me when she lets out a moan, throttling my dick with a degree of sexual anger. My core clenches and my drunken veins run hotter than the fires of Hell.

This woman has changed me, and I’m not convinced it’s for the better, because I’m dangerously aroused by every little thing she does. I’m not certain it’s wise to crave a woman who was forced to marry me, especially when my body reacts to her like it’s the one thing I’ve been missing.

I didn't expect to feel for her as much as I do or endure the unbearable chains of possessiveness for one woman. The chemistry sparking between us is off the charts.

It heightens the fact she belongs to me. No matter what Saponi thinks, or what her motives are for messing with my head.

Fuck!

She uses her nails to scratch from root to crown, her punishing strokes growing faster, sharper, fiercer. The rush catches up with me at the exact moment I find her wedding finger bare. The woman still refuses to wear the diamond encrusted band that depicts her role in my life. Her defiance strikes me hard.

Despite a snarling temper, my muscles stiffen and cum erupts everywhere. Threads of creaminess decorate her fist and my twitching abdomen. But when she leans over the top of it and licks the oozing slit, the blackest storm builds.

I didn't give her permission to feast on my cum. On my last ragged exhale, she peeks up at me under ebony lashes, those turquoise eyes of hers assessing how I've easily become undone. The evidence of what she does to me sits in a pearl at the corner of her lips, thoughtlessly swept away by the tip of her tongue.

I'm lost in a few manic moments. The high from cocaine is nothing compared to the soaring sensation from my wife's touch. Alcohol fails to desensitize the dark lust whispering through my soul. This is love and war. And she's moving into position to slay me.

I wish I had known better than to open my heart to her.

The rush of her scalding touch confuses me. She's both a dangerous distraction and an untrustworthy Saponi.

I shove her away and push out of the couch, too messed up to think clearly. My heart pounds and my lungs heave for air as if I'm drowning in open water, aware of a shark moving in for the kill.

“André?” she pants, her sexy accent tangling with my paranoia.

I fist my hair and pace, my dick dripping a final spurt of cum. Yet it’s still firm beyond acceptable.

“Don’t speak!” I growl, unable to pin down rationality.

Sinéad freezes at the sight of my fraying mental stability. Frustration and head fuckery have me stalking to my desk and reaching for the lethal hard steel of my favorite revolver, not sure what the fuck I’m doing.

She shrinks backward, her feet slipping and sliding as her disarming eyes pop wide. “André? What are you—”

In the fallout of a deliciously tortured release, my chemically warped brain malfunctions. Unbalanced emotions war within me—mistrust, deception, love. Sweat trickles the length of my spine.

And I pull the trigger.

SINÉAD



“Stag!” I scream at him, my chest exploding and the backs of my eyes burning.

“What the fuck?” Letterman barges into the office. His gun points inside the office, frantic eyes scouting for danger. “Dré?”

I scramble to my feet and press my spine flat to the wall. My startled gaze is directed at twirling white feathers and two bullet holes in a cushion.

With disheveled wild hair, carved inky muscles, and eyes like bottomless black holes, André appears distressed and utterly predatory. Raw rage sharpens his features, the chaos running riot inside of him searching for an anchor.

And suddenly, when I fear those inner demons will rip the flesh from his bones, his forehead furrows and he squeezes his eyes shut for the briefest moment to shutter visible anguish.

The wildness controlling him lessens as he takes a steady, fortifying breath. Once his gaze reappears, he snarls at Letterman, “Don’t look at her.”

Letterman briefly studies me in silence, trying to figure out what had happened. André stands next to the desk, his gun aimed at the floor, his other hand scrubbing the coarse hair of his jawline.

“Leave us,” André mutters after running his tongue under his upper lip. “We have unfinished business to discuss.”

Letterman glances at him, his brow scrunched and his lips parted like he wants to speak. Instead, he nods and backs out, slowly closing the door on us.

No fucking way.

“Wait...” I dart toward the exit and grab the handle. “I’m coming with you. Let me out of here.”

“You’re not going anywhere.” The revolver clatters on the desk as it lands, his barefooted steps slapping the floor as he stalks toward me.

“Stag! How many times do I have to say it? Don’t come any closer!” I stick a hand up to halt him, my breathing out of control. “Stay the hell away from me. You’ve lost your mind, André.”

“Sinéad.” The calm way he says my name in that raspy Colombian cadence regrettably makes my skin sizzle. “It’s okay.”

Hatred combines with an unjustified desire. My eyes snap from him to the abandoned revolver and back again.

“Fuck you, Dré,” I hiss. “You were going to shoot me.”

His jaw ticks. “I shot the cushions. Not you.”

“Yeah, but you thought about it, didn’t you?”

“No. What I thought about was my wife obeying Sapori’s order,” he confesses, as a flicker of sadness moves across his features.

“Are you joking? I must have missed something because I didn’t hear Frankie’s order for me to crawl naked or beat you off. That was all you, Dré. I followed through on *your* commands. But after you scared the shit out of me, I wish I hadn’t. I don’t want you anywhere near me. Not now. Not ever.”

For an eon, we stand toe to toe just staring at each other. The longer he stares, the more confused I become. Whatever rolls through him gives off a ferocious vibration. A killer capable of evil deeds, and I could have been his target for a

split second. A tick of time where the scales had thankfully dipped in my favor, and he shot up the cushion instead.

Tortured recklessness had crept over his demeanor and the darkness in him spilled into the room. Equally, I'd watched him fight an inner battle, and in a heartbeat, he chose to blow a couple of holes into the cushion instead of my heart.

He towers above me, so lethal and dangerous. It stupidly makes my stomach flip. I loathe this uncontrollable red-hot attraction.

I scowl up at him. "Letterman told me to leave you alone. I shouldn't have disturbed you."

"Too late. You did." He folds his arms. "Everything about you disturbs my world."

"Charming." My lungs cramp at the cruel admission. "I'm going back to bed. You do you."

For a moment, we're locked in an impasse of heat and bewilderment. "I will. Which means I'll take you upstairs myself."

My vision goes blurry. I press a hand to my belly, unsure if I'm going to faint. Whether it's adrenaline or the concussion, I'm hatefully vulnerable. Suddenly a large arm hooks my waist, his bullish power sweeping me into the air until I'm cradled in his arms. The energetic shock of it makes me squeal.

"What the hell, Dré?" I thump his firm chest. "Put me down!"

He ignores me. My stomach clenches when his hips work to carry us through the sunlit living space, storming past the muted cleaning staff who've just arrived, and all the way upstairs.

"I'm perfectly capable of walking, you know. I'll never know where I stand with a man like you."

Silence settles between us, his heavy, determined footfalls a powerful rhythm of dominance. With my hair swaying and

his hands pressed to my skin, his predatory strides eat up the corridor.

Entering the master suite, he offloads me onto the bed. I land flat on my back, bouncing a little on the mattress, and look over his naked form. I resent the sight of his godlike masculinity, how I can still taste his enticing cum, and I hate the faint acrid scent of nitroglycerin following the shots fired.

He could have killed me.

But he didn't.

Familiar cramping starts off negligible, then teams with prickles of nausea. I scoot off the bed, uncomfortably aware of an ache in my uterus. My muscles are tense from an ill-fated shock. Terrified by the muddled line between a psychotic criminal and my husband. He's evil, yet so beautiful—and ironically the only one who makes me feel alive.

“Don't walk away,” he warns, stuffing all of his fingers into the thick mass of messy hair on top of his head.

All I want to do is bolt from the unstable way he makes me feel. The sharp pains catapulting through my legs have other plans. I lurch in the direction of the bathroom, dizzy to the point I could faint, a palm clutched to my midriff. Only he's behind me before I can shut the door.

“Leave me alone, Dré.” My voice comes across weak and breathy.

A strong hand latches onto my elbow. He halts me in the entrance of his massive bathroom and gently holds me captive, lowering his head to meet my worn-out gaze. Thick eyebrows pinch together. “I'm wasted, Sinéad... my head is fucked... it was bad timing.”

I narrow my eyes at him, shivery sickness rising in my throat. “Get off me.” I try to shirk him off, but his grip on me contracts. “Leave me alone.”

His expression bleeds torment. “I asked you to leave me alone in my office. You didn't. What makes you think I'll afford you the courtesy of space?”

“I didn’t sleep well... and then I confessed my secret... how I really feel about you... and in return you pulled a fucking gun on me, Dré. Don’t you get it? I had sex with you—for you—for us. To save you from Frankie’s threat of assassination, of war. I don’t want anything bad to happen to my mother... *or* my husband. Now I’m stressed out and I don’t feel well because of it.”

He stiffens, the fingers on my arm still strong, but not harmful in any way. “I’m André fucking Souza, Sinéad. This is the world I grew up in. There are a ton of fuckers out there who want me dead, and look, I’ve survived thirty years. Saponi can come for me if he has a death wish. I can defend myself... and I’ll protect you too... with my own life if I have to. All I ask for is your trust. And for the record, I didn’t point my gun at you. I’d never do that.”

“Frankie’s men were in the Sky Hotel before the alarm even went off,” I protest. “They watched you stab that guy in the hands and had a video to prove it. Face it, Dré, we’re not safe, and now I have to add a husband with a split personality to the chaos. So, why should I believe you?”

Dizziness casts floaty blobs over my vision and a notable exorcism of blood dampens my inner thighs.

I’m not pregnant.

“Just leave me the hell alone!” I choke on a muted sob, refusing to show weakness. “It’s a basic human right to use the bathroom unaccompanied. Give me some damn privacy, won’t you?”

His avid gaze trails my bare breasts, skims over my slightly hunched posture, and skates the length of my legs. The slow sweep welcomes a cruel rampage of chills over my scalp. When he sees exactly what is happening to me, he frowns. “You’re bleeding?”

I sway against the doorframe. “I said go!”

His bare chest strains as he inhales, studying the drips of dark red on the warm tiles underfoot. In a flash, he lowers to his haunches and runs two fingers through the blood stain.

“Your period?” He removes the sullied fingertips and stares at them as if he’s seeing double. “What do you need?”

Exhausted, I shuffle backward, palm my belly, and do a one-eighty, desperate to clean myself up. My shins ache as I take deliberate small steps, the discomfort I’m in heightened by the apprehension of his volatility.

“Yeah... you don’t need to worry about becoming a father anytime soon. I need you to leave me the fuck alone. Please. Just get the hell away from me.”

I hear his sharp intake of air when I put a cavernous distance between us, wait for the fancy toilet lid to automatically lift, and plonk myself onto the heated seat, mentally and physically drained. Perched in his opulent bathroom, our distant gazes knot. He pins me in place, staring deep into my eyes.

His dick hangs between his legs, all signs of arousal diminished. In contrast, those well-earned muscles of his are tight and hard. He doesn’t say a word, only nods once and then his deific tattooed body rotates.

I blink away liquid frustration when he gradually pivots and heads into the bedroom, doing my best to defy the flutters in my chest. My elbows drop to my thighs and my forehead rests in my palms.

I’m alone, just like I’d asked of him. He granted me privacy even after I had pushed him to speak to me in his office. Letterman had warned me, yet I thought I knew better. If the consumption of alcohol and drugs in his body wasn’t a red flag, the discord in his eyes should have been.

Alone time is instant respite, if not to recover from André’s outburst, but to seek a degree of modesty in a male dominant zone. For some reason, the swell of loneliness doesn’t please me as much as I thought it would.

Since throwing away the fake contraceptives, my menstrual cycle has kicked off—which is both a bittersweet relief and a setback. He doesn’t love me and in hindsight; we don’t have a stable relationship. Yet it still means Mammy and

André are in danger—and Acer is still lingering on the sidelines of my marriage, waiting for Frankie's patience to snap.

Queasiness gives me cause to groan. Sitting in the quiet, a strange sadness works its way over me like heavy rainfall after glorious sunshine. Emptiness creeps through me. I had opened myself up to him—to the idea of commitment—and the possibility of becoming a mother.

All the silly notions that my husband was kind, generous, and devoted were just that—whimsical wishes. I blow out a long puff of air and scrub my tired eyes.

I relive the moment he'd shot the cushion after I'd viciously jerked him off, as per his command. He's not equipped to nurture, let alone offer security. It was wishful thinking to assume we could salvage happiness from this unusual tragedy. That somehow, we could make our marriage work and have our own family one day.

But now—now I feel like an island where the sun never rises, and the tide drags boats away from its shore. I'm lonely and isolated.

Frankie was right. André's mercurial disposition can never be tamed and I'm simply his next victim.

After I blot up clotted blood, I move to the vanity to wash between my thighs. I let the water flow until it's tepid, all the while aware of how my hands are trembling and my teeth chattering. I've never been in this position before—disjointed in my emotions and off-balance by weakness.

My limbs are stiff and sore, whereas my stomach has run on empty for too many hours, and to add to the mix, an ache spears my skull in the aftermath of a concussion and I'm bone-tired from a brutal menstruation.

Soothing liquid combined with zesty soap is a godsend. Droplets roll down the inside of my legs and puddle at my feet as I wash. Afterward, I take a few moments to rinse my hands and cleanse my flushed cheeks, staring at the ugly bruising on my jawline before burying my face in a soft hand towel.

I'm too tired to consider how long I've sought solace. So, when he reappears, my skin prickles, and I lean into the countertop for support. I sense my husband before he joins me.

Our eyes lock, our exhausted reflections silently greeting one another as he strides into the bathroom. I notice his soaking wet hair first, then tiny beads of water clinging to his broad shoulders as if he's showered again to sober up. He wears a pair of fitted boxer briefs and carries a paper bag.

His gaze wanders from my face, skating over my nipples, bloated stomach, and clamped thighs. He saunters to my hip and places the crinkled bag next to the basin. His expression is soft and thoughtful.

"I got these from India." He catches my eye again. "She'll buy more later today, after school, unless they don't suit you?"

His tongue wets his bottom lip as he stands there, his damp skin scented from soap.

I peer inside the bag to find a collection of tampons. "They're fine," I reply with a nonchalant shrug.

"Good." He reaches out and picks one, extracting a plastic wrapped tampon, and rips it open with his teeth.

He studies it as if he's never seen one before or cared to acknowledge their existence. Beneath his assessment, I witness something far more perplexing. Flashes of whatever it is appear and linger there as he fiddles with the plastic.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Helping you."

I frown at his inspection of the blue casing and white string. "I don't need any help. You can go."

His lashes flick up to immobilize me with carbon-black eyes, sincere and bold. "It's not up for debate. I'm going to help you."

"I've used those things since I was twelve. I can take it from here."

Something odd passes over his expression. Keeping eye contact, he sinks to his knees before me and wedges them between the insides of my ankles. He doesn't bark orders or dig rough fingertips into my flesh. Instead, he rests there and intimately strokes a tattooed hand across my belly, his compassionate inspection catapulting a hedonistic shiver all over me. When he witnesses the goosebumps, a slow smile tugs at the corners of his mouth.

"This pussy belongs to me, Wifey, and I intend to look after it. Don't fight with me on this. You won't win."

"Dré..." I protest. "Some things are best left a mystery. I'd rather sort it out myself." I swallow hard when his pupils flare. It would have been undetectable had I not studied the exact hue of his eyes since the first day we met. "What makes you think this is appropriate after what you did?"

He leans in and kisses my hip bone, looking up at me as if I'm the ruler of his lawless kingdom. My core clenches despite myself. He's a man who holds so much power. Yet he's the one kneeling before me, extending the plastic applicator and carefully inserting it inside of me.

"My pussy. My rules," he mutters.

I should argue and fight against his authority. But the tenderness he oozes is a white flag. A truce within a perplexing war of ironclad wills and domineering control. I resist the impulse to lovingly weave my fingers through his hair, entranced by the utmost care and attention he uses.

He isn't fixing a problem or simply presenting a helping hand; he's practically worshiping me without a sexual act or unwanted violation. His sole focus is intense and undivided. His touch is extraordinarily gentle—unlike anything I've ever known from him.

In this moment, between husband and wife, he isn't playing a game of seduction or wearing a killer's crown; he's being himself. The thoughtful man behind the violence and illegal activity. He's just André—the charming side of him that I could easily adore. And I do. With all of my foolish heart.

What's even more unsettling is how it makes me feel—as if I could really be his—the only woman, his wife to have and to hold, in sickness and in health.

“Is it in properly?” he asks the neat mound at his eye level. I nod, biting my lower lip as I hum my approval. He rises tall before me, so I have to lift my chin to meet his gaze. “I’m sorry, Sin. I didn’t mean to scare you. My head was fucked.”

“Well, you did. Which makes it difficult to trust you.”

He doesn’t speak. Instead, he puts an arm around my shoulder and tugs me neatly to his side. “We both need sleep. Let’s go to bed for a few hours.”

André ushers me into the dimly lit bedroom, his pace slow and steady to balance me. My phone sits on the nightstand glowing 8:30 a.m. when we reach the bed. He shakes out two anti-inflammatory pills from an orange tube and offers them to me with a glass of fresh water. I don’t argue when he lifts the duvet and gestures for me to climb in, or when he rounds the bed and slips in beside me. Nor do I object when he hauls me onto his bare chest and holds me there. I can’t explain how contentment eases my anger or the heat of skin soothes my aches and pains. Lying there, on top of him, skin to skin, is the very spot where I belong.

My cheek rests on his shoulder, the quick pace of his heart rate thudding loudly in my ear.

He runs his fingers along my arm. “Wear your wedding ring from now on.”

I’d forgotten about it. “Is that why you flipped out?”

André sighs heavily. “I’ve learned that I don’t need drugs and alcohol when you’re kneeling before me as my slutty little wife. Keep putting that mouth of yours to good use and I won’t have the need to snort cocaine or get wasted on booze. Your perfect body offers more of a high than they ever would.”

Plastered across him, the sonorous sound combined with the honesty of his dirty talk has a tingling effect on my pussy. I sigh, giving in to the gravitational pull of his muscular build.

“The ring is ugly,” I tell him.

“What would you prefer—more diamonds?”

I lightly shake my head, shifting a little to become even more settled. “Do I look like I’m a bling queen to you?”

“You can be whoever you want now that you’re a Souza.”

“Really? That didn’t work when I was employed at Sky Hotel.”

He laughs. Unlike his usual seductive chuckle, this one is amused and lighthearted. “In hindsight, I should have told you it’s my most recent completed project.”

“Yeah, you should have. And now I’ll miss Lennon’s engagement party, because I’m too embarrassed to show up. No doubt they think I duped them—like an undercover boss.”

“They’re assholes if they think that. Go to the party if you really want to. I’ll go with you.”

I peer up at him, meeting his gaze. “Really? You’d slum it with the mortals for a night?”

“For you, I’d go anywhere.”

“Hmm.”

“Don’t believe me?”

“It’s not that.”

“Then what is it?”

“What will happen to me when you grow tired of this?”

“I think we’ve both figured out that *this* isn’t a normal thing for me. So, wear your ring for me like a good wife.”

“Only if you promise to never pull that gun of yours out like that again.”

André’s lips settle on my forehead, the kiss warm, but his tone frostier than a wintry blizzard. “The next time I point my gun, it’ll be at Saponi’s head.” He senses my muscles tense. “He can’t hurt my wife and not expect retaliation. I’ll figure out a way to protect your mother first, and then I’ll finish the fucker once and for all.”

“But if I get pregnant, wouldn’t that keep everyone safe? You wouldn’t have to worry about him coming for us... or taking Miami.”

Every muscle in his body goes rigid beneath me. “He can come for Miami if he thinks he’s capable, but what he won’t come for is our kid. He’s not our *familia*. Saporì has burned his bridges with the Souzas. And when I put a baby in your belly, it’ll be our decision, not his. I don’t take orders from anyone or bow down to threats. War is on the horizon, Sinéad.”

SINÉAD



Dawn transitioned into late afternoon.

I'd slept soundly for the first time since leaving Ireland. Upon waking, I wasn't entirely sure if his strong arms had offered the sense of protection through those peaceful hours, or if it was sheer exhaustion that took over.

When I blinked awake, he was right there with his thick ebony eyelashes, swarthy soft skin, coarse, unshaved hairs on a strong jaw. His features were relaxed while he lay there. His dark eyes drilled into mine when my head tilted to study him. Perhaps it was the deep rest, or the sight of him, that made me feel more like myself again; nevertheless, I'd woken with a freshness of mind and only a dull, lingering headache.

After he had announced his plans for the day, which was making important calls in his office, one of which would be arranging for the doctor to check me over again, he disappeared, only to return with breakfast in bed. The rare smile he gifted me with is playful—but mostly erotic. I swear he's thinking of all sorts of sordid and delicious ways to torture me.

Sitting on the big bed together, we eat messily divided banana sandwiches. Once I've finished eating, he gently places his hands around my skull, caging it with his long fingers and kisses me, hard. He pours all his dark desires into it, nibbling, sucking, and fucking my mouth with his wicked tongue.

The realization that I'm enjoying it, that I've never been a slave to a person's lips before, unsettles me. I crave André's control, even if I never quite know how long the ground beneath my feet will remain balanced for.

When I let a hungry groan slip, I push my hands against his chest to hide the shameful desperation and show him that I can't be manipulated at every turn. The man who kisses me like he wants to crawl inside of me and stamp his mark of ownership on every cell in my body revealed his lethal demon to me not so long ago. And that side of my husband troubles me.

He stills, considering whether to obey his urges or acknowledge my need to break away. His fingers capture the sheet covering my legs and just as I think he's going to yank it off me, he lets go. I suck in a breath of disappointment, secretly wishing the hot-blooded impulses vibrating from his inked skin would cover me in ways I've yet to experience.

Tension mounts between us when he moves back and stands upright, his girthy arousal so very angry in its full glory. Sinewy legs stiffen where he waits, coiled with dominance as if he's a heartbeat away from giving in to filthy whims. The sexy expression he wears darkens despite the sunlight kissing every dip of his muscular abdomen. He's not angry that I pushed him away—he's turned on.

Electricity prickles my skin. The entirety of his restraint fills the room with an unbearable heat. He's holding back to prove the monster I'd met in his office can wear a leash.

While he masters his needs, to put mine over his, my core clenches and every inch of me aches for his rough touch. Wetness blooms between my thighs, verifying my own horniness. I crave the twisted shadows in his stare more than the power of his self-discipline.

His danger is my weakness, the chink in my morality, and the indestructible link from the chains we somehow assembled together in the pages of history.

I scoot across the bed and sit before him, my eyes in line with the throbbing vein winding its way up his shaft like a

tireless lightning bolt.

“Your wife wants to taste your cum.” His nostrils flare and his throat works as he swallows. “And for the record...” My fingers skim the silky soft skin of his dick. “I don’t need your permission because this... this belongs to me.”

His eyes flash with violence and lust. Impure notions and dominance. I don’t get the chance to speak another word when his fingers delve into my hair, and he syncs our gazes—locked and starved.

He dips into my face, his spine arched and his timbre hoarse with maddening desire.

“You’re right. My dick is yours to spit on, choke on, and sit on as your queenly fucking throne.” Locks of messy hair tease his forehead and his voice becomes one with the brewing torment inside of us both. “Touch it. Suck it. Bite it. Fucking own it, Wifey.”

When he straightens, I cup his balls and squeeze hard, the tight skin so hot in my hand. He grits out a horny growl and a trickle of pre-cum escapes the smooth tip. Knowing exactly what makes my husband tick, my daring fingers ramble over the hairy sacks and wrap the base of his smooth shaft, each one of them forming a ruthless fist to twist and pump in our version of savage foreplay.

“What about your head... still sore?” he bites out. “I don’t want to fuck this pretty little mouth if you can’t handle it today.” A thumb sweeps my bottom lip, his searching eyes thoughtful.

“I’m a Souza, right? I rise after I fall. I can handle you, Husband.”

Predatory need tightens his features, and an unspoken emotion passes between us while I torture him. It’s an appreciation of something inexplicable and authentic. An undeniable awareness of this unique armistice we’ve somehow fallen into. Our acceptance of the fire that burns so deeply in me, meeting the flames that exist within him. Together, the

blazing inferno births a lustful beast that neither of us can escape.

I continue to wring his dick, stroking him viciously, binding our gazes from under my lashes. He rakes five fingers through his damp hair and then seizes my wrist. “Suck it. Fucking suck it, Sin,” he rasps, on the cusp of impatience.

His hips thrust forward to bring the swollen head closer to my wet lips. The length of it forcefully injects past my teeth and drives deep into my throat. My nails claw at his hips when my stomach heaves and saliva leaks in stringy ribbons from around the edges.

His hold imprisons me in place, the snarl of his satisfaction charging through me. Tilting his head to observe me, he stops thrusting for a second and withdraws. I gasp for air.

We share a moment of heaving chests and contemplation. Beneath the complex lust living in his eyes, something else lurks—a hint of real emotion, implicit truths, and sentimental memories. Innocent echoes of this passionate duo before the world had ripped us apart.

After a heartbeat, he thrusts back inside my throat, deep and possessive.

I retch.

My eyes stream.

My sopping wet pussy aches to be filled by him.

And then my phone vibrates from the nightstand.

His back tenses. His hips freeze and he slowly withdraws so his saliva-coated dick wallops his stomach. The fingers in my hair unravel the tortured strands and he lunges for the device.

“Who the fuck is Liam, and why is he calling you?” I don’t move. Panic scurries over me like an infestation of ants. “Look at me, Sin. Who is this joker?”

Our gazes fuse while the screen glows in his hand. André swallows, his throat moving with sinew and strength.

“I know him from back home.”

“Know him?”

“Yeah... we used to—”

“Fuck?” André inhales sharply after he interrupts me. “He fucked my wife and now he’s calling you out of the blue?”

I blink up at him. “It was last year. I wasn’t that into him. We’re friends now. That’s all.”

He shoves it into my hand, his nostrils flaring. “Answer the call, Sin. On speaker.”

My insides quiver at his command. The oddest look contorts his beautiful features until they’re stricken with evil.

“Liam?” I say coolly, wishing he’d hung up. “Why are you calling me?”

“Nice,” he chuckles in response. “It’s great to hear from you too.”

While Liam speaks, André presses two fingers to my solar plexus and pushes me onto the mattress. I’m flat on my ass, watching him straddle my pelvis.

“I thought I’d find out how the daddy bonding was working out for you?”

André’s spine stiffens and his brow creases. His jaw twitches as his hand moves to the base of his dick, where it stands at attention like a vicious warrior. Our gazes never part. My core quivers as he quietly punishes the length with a tight fist.

“It’s... fine. All good. Look... I’m in the middle of something right now. Umm... like I said before... I won’t be home anytime soon...”

“Tell me about him? I mean... we practically lived together for a year, and you never mentioned him.”

I suck in a ragged breath when André growls from deep within his chest.

“What the fuck was that?” Liam asks.

“I have to go.”

“Wait... please... I miss you...”

André sits back on his heels, confidence rippling through his movements as he continues to strangle his erection before me. “My wife can’t speak to you right now; she’s busy.” His gravelly timbre sends shock waves through me, building illicit lust in my core.

For a split second, Liam is silent; all I hear is the chafing of my husband’s hand and his heavy breathing.

“Wife... what the fuck, Sinéad?” Liam sounds utterly bamboozled. “You’re *married*?”

Wicked perversion curls the corners of André’s mouth and white teeth trap his bottom lip. As disturbed as it is, my skin is hotter than it has ever been, and the fast rhythm of his tattooed hand matches the rapid tempo of my beating heart. My core is drenched and craving a release.

“Yeah, she’s taken. One hundred percent claimed. Off-limits. Mine.” The instant André discloses our union, he shoots his cum, hard and fast, all over my breasts.

“What the fuck... Sinéad... Are you okay?”

Liam’s concern pinches at my heart, but I’m too far down the rabbit hole to answer. Lost in my husband’s never-ending gaze and the carnal hunger we can’t seem to hide from. His spurts go on and on, splattering my bare breasts, covering my nipples, and decorating my skin like an animal marking its territory.

Perhaps I should have told Liam the truth when I replied to his messages or begged him to smuggle Mammy out of Donegal. But where would she go? We don’t have spare cash to fund a one-way trip south. She’d need a home to live in, a job, and a new identity. I couldn’t provide any of those things without selling The Rusty Shamrock first.

But lying beneath my savage husband, as his wife, gives me a measure of authority and access to money. Maybe he really could be my villainous hero—maybe he could really be all mine.

“I have to go,” I pant, hungry with desire and beyond turned on. “Bye, Liam.”

André’s hips rock, sending a blood-scorching tidal wave of lust right through me. A thick, satisfied groan escapes his throat. He arches over the top of me, collects the phone and chucks it across the room. The thud of it hitting the wall is followed by a few muffled tumbles.

My heart bucks when he places his big hands at either side of my head and slides his knees away until he’s in a lowered plank position. His mouth grazes mine, slow and remorseless.

“If you won’t wear your wedding ring, I’ll find other ways to brand you.” Sticky cum spreads in a thin layer between his chest and mine. “And if that guy calls you again, I’ll kill him too.”

ANDRÉ



“Well, brother, what have you been up to while I was recovering?” Tomás muses, his sonorous rumble vaguely reminiscent of Papá as it crosses the airwaves.

“Recovering?” I repeat snarkily and set my helmet on top of the leather seat of my black Ducati Streetfighter motorcycle. “Is that what you’d call it? I’m sure Carina was the perfect nurse.”

“Delete whatever filthy vision you have of her from that perverted mind of yours,” he snaps back. “Save that for the pretty Irish, señora who thinks she’ll be your one and only.”

“Maybe she will.” I hum the thought. “Anyway, while you were on sabbatical from the family business, I encountered a few *issues*.”

A metal door slams behind us, and Reno draws his gun as a precaution. When my brother rang, we were about to knock on the side door of an intimate club where we usually hang out to keep a close eye on the local dealers.

“Wait... is the mafia princess too much for you to handle? Could it be true? Have you finally met a woman who’s crazier than you, cabron?”

She’s a wildcat, alright. My smile reaches the corners of my eyes when I think about her. “I take it you’ve spoken to Mama?”

“Not yet. I heard from a reliable source that my crazy-ass brother became the first Souza to tie the knot. I wanted to congratulate you on an excellent tactical move. The news was

unexpected—given your allergic reaction to female commitment.” He pauses. “But I’m proud of you, Dré. You’ve thrown open the international trade routes.”

I stare along the alleyway where we’ve parked our motorcycles, my mind hurtling back to a time I’d rather forget.

“Are you kidding me, André?” Papá’s eyes blink once as he glares at me, the sedate movement like a reptile assessing its prey. “It’s a basic report. How the hell can you not understand what it means?”

He’d thrown a wad of papers at me with a deadline of thirty minutes to read, digest, and decide if the content was beneficial to business. I tried to focus while my knee bounced since my energy levels resented containment. All I wanted was a helmet and a few hours tearing around the plantation trails.

Instead, I stared at the never-ending, uninteresting paragraphs, pissed at how the words blurred. I rubbed my temples, then drew a detailed sketch of a motorcycle wheel on the top corner of the page. Suddenly, I remembered I had an unfinished homework assignment that was overdue. Fantasized about the hot mathematics teacher who weirdly had black hair even though the girl I’d fingered the other night had platinum-blond curls.

Then I saw a sweet little bird perched on the waving branches outside Papá’s office and wondered if it knew freedom or if its days were filled with mundane tasks like eating worms or building nests. Regardless, it got to stretch its wings and soar above the clouds—and everyone else. Like a god of the sky with a bird’s-eye view of the world.

“I need more time to review it, Papá.”

“Forget it. You’re fucking useless, André.” He looks at me like I’m an idiot. “Thank fuck for Tomás. At least he can read. All you’re good at is truancy, fucking girls, and riding that motorcycle.”

He turns away and marches across the room. I take a quick breath when he unlocks the twin doors to his gun safe, selects

a machine gun, slings the strap over his shoulder, and moves to the window. My spine stiffens, unsure of what neurotic lesson he'd teach me today.

The last time I pissed him off, for whatever diabolical reason, he had tied me to a chair in the cellar for the night. That's what he thought, anyway. Papá had no idea that both Tomás and Giovanni took turns visiting me with food and video games. But what I won't forget are the words my big brother told me seconds before he left me alone in the dark to await our father's return.

"Eventually Papá will die on his throne and end up in that god-awful tomb he's planning to build. When that day comes and his crown sits on my head, I'll need you, Dré."

However, on this occasion, dread sinks to the pit of my stomach. Papá's about to do something neither of my brothers can help me with.

I watch him shunt the window open, position the machine gun in the gap, and take aim.

Fury explodes inside my chest when bullets annihilate my parked motorcycle out in front of this torturous prison.

My impulses act first. I dart to the cabinet and grab a pistol.

"What are you going to do with an empty gun, boy?" My father's demonic laugh crushes me under his cruelty. "You really are an idiot. Take the chopper back to school and find a girl to fuck your anger into. At least you'll please someone today... if you can do it right."

My hand trembles and the gun drops to my feet.

"One word of advice, son. The next time you think about shooting me, I'll beat you to it. Don't make an enemy of the most powerful man you'll ever know."

"Sapori tried to teach me a lesson," I hiss into the phone and ignore the flutter of my brother's praise. "When I threw the offer of marrying his daughter on the table, he said he'd only

agree to it if we produced an heir. The old fucker wants to pass his legacy on to a new generation of Saporì. An heir was the deal. There was no timeline put in place. But now, to ensure she follows through on his stipulation, he'll slaughter her mother if she doesn't get pregnant soon. And he thinks he has the resources and nerve to take Miami from me. But what infuriates me the most is that he ordered his men to beat the fuck out of my wife while she was in our hotel."

"He did what?" Tomás snarls. "He had the audacity to make a move like that in a Souza hotel. In Miami. Actually, fuck that, Dré—he came after your wife. Even if she means nothing to you, she has the Souza name. He's a fucking dead man."

She does mean something to me.

"I know," I grate, so angry that my blood boils and my heart thumps. "He hurt my wife, and I'm going to slice and dice his wrinkly fucking face while he's still conscious."

"Not yet. We need a plan. Where's her mother now?" Tomás becomes deathly calm, utilizing his ability to strategize rather than go in guns blazing like a reckless son of a bitch—like me.

"She's in Ireland."

"Okay. I'll phone Grandfather and get support from the Hennessys. Ireland is their kingdom. He'll step in when we need him."

Clearly growing bored, Reno pulls out his phone and types a message to India. I know it's to her since he's never done checking in. Plus, I can see the contact photograph she's saved under. Glowing under the dim light of dusk is her pretty face, all smudged with chocolate ice cream.

"There's one other thing, Tommy." I catch Letterman's eyes and hold up my hand, mouthing the words for two minutes. "Have you heard of Project H?"

"No? What is it?" Tomás replies, uncertainty lacing his tone.

I stroll toward the steel door and rub the brass plaque of Club Vice. “I have a feeling it’s got something to do with Papá. If it does, he wasn’t acting alone. Selling teenage girls isn’t my thing, Tommy.”

Shocked silence creeps in like a mist. “Are you serious? Who told you about it? Are you sure this isn’t a trap set up by Carlos Blanco or Saporì?”

My gaze cuts to Reno as I say his name. “Reno heard about unusual activity from a few coke handlers. He checked it out and found a basement full of young girls.”

“Were they hurt?”

I squeeze my eyes shut and instead of seeing multiple petrified faces, I see my wife covered in bruises.

“Yeah, they were roughed up pretty bad. We need to figure out who’s behind it so I can take care of the fuckers myself. Miami is my responsibility. I know we’re all about diversification and rolling with the tides of change, but that shit doesn’t sit well with me. Not kids.”

“Where are the girls now?”

I still. “They’re somewhere safe for the time being. A couple of them saw my face when I was interrogating the house leader, which means I’m linked to this, whether I’m part of it or not. They could quickly figure out who I am and run to the Feds.”

“It’s okay,” Tommy reassures me, the same way he did when we were trapped teenagers. “I know someone who can help us get them out of Miami. They’ll be taken care of.”

“Wait. You’re going to terminate them?”

“No... don’t worry. I know a ghost who can make them disappear. Leave it to me.” Before he hangs up, he adds, “And Dré, you haven’t told me much about this wife of yours. Is she worth going head-to-head with the Italian mafia?”

I wave two fingers at Reno to let him know we’re about to leave the flamingo pink sunset and enter the darkness of our

favorite den. Usually, I'm pumped and buzzing for the night to begin; however, tonight all I can think about is Sinéad.

"You found your queen, Tommy, didn't you?"

"I did, and now I'm going to marry her."

"Well, I guess you could say I realized she was my queen after I married her."

Tomás chuckles. "There's nothing straightforward about you, brother."

"I'm glad you're back in the land of the living, Tommy. You scared the shit out of us. Please plan a fancy wedding, so Mama can get off my back about the lack of invitations to mine."

"You broke her heart."

"Christ," I groan. "It wasn't planned."

"I'm going to ask Shane to be my best man."

"Fucking charming."

"At least you'll get an invitation to mine, and a plus one."

"Sinéad is more than a plus one, cabron."

"Good." His playfulness turns serious. "I hope you make it work."

"Say hi to my favorite sister-in-law. We had a good time together in Mexico."

"Fuck you."

"Fuck you too."

I hang up and pocket the phone in my leather jacket. Letterman fists the door for entry.

"Everything okay at home?" I glance over my shoulder to find Reno.

"Yeah, India and Sinéad are watching a movie together."

It's been a few days since she'd bled in my bathroom. The significance of that deep-red blood went beyond words. After fucking me for the purpose of impregnation, it failed. I can't

say I was happy about it. In fact, I'd go as far as saying I was miffed. A weird-as-fuck sensation for a live wire like me. A betting man would have set the odds in favor of my bachelor ways until my last breath. I guess Sinéad makes me want to be a better man for her.

One thing is certain; I'd give my children a better life than Papá ever gave my brothers and me. I'd be a real father.

Now my wife and I have a clean slate. A chance to figure out this thing called love taking over me.

The fact my head hasn't been turned by another female isn't just a freak exception—it's an anomaly.

A chunky doorman, stuffed into a slim fit waistcoat and shirt, respectfully nods before he ushers us inside. Dance beats bounce off the low ceilings and a sultry heat clings to my skin. The sweaty crowd parts to give us clear passage to the cordoned-off VIP section, where a soft blue rope separates us from them.

Two guards move like opening doors, allowing us access to the seated area where the decibels decrease to a comfortable volume. A young waitress closes in, her false lashes too long for her doll-like face. But her tits, fuck, they're perky and bouncy, as if she's not wearing a bra. I respect them from afar, oddly deciding they aren't the right size for me, nor is she in the same league as the woman I've left at home.

“What can I get you to drink, sir?” She smiles timidly.

I light up a cigarette and stare out at the women gathering around the entrance like vultures.

“Beluga Vodka and whatever my friends are having.” I wave my hand in Letterman's direction and feel an overwhelming desire to see Sinéad's face.

For the past couple of nights, I worked in my home office while she sat on the couch eating salty popcorn and reading one of India's fiction books. She had curled up with the hot water bottle I bought for her tummy cramps, looking over at me every now and again, catching me spying on her. I even

agreed to narrate a chapter of the book while we lay in bed later in the night.

It was all new to me.

How she'd taken ownership of the empty half of my bed and changed the scent of my pillows to the aroma of Sin. Or when I brush my teeth and notice her toothbrush hangs in the allocated spot next to mine, and the brush she uses to untangle her hair takes up space next to my comb.

"I have a guy on standby to drive us home." Letterman sinks down beside me on the semicircular velvet bench seat. "We can swing by tomorrow and pick up the bikes." He narrows his eyes at me. "Is everything okay with Tommy?"

I nod. "He's happy for the first time in forever. I can hear it in his voice." The cold gold of my wedding band skims my nose when I drag a hand over my face. "I just hope nothing fucks it up for him."

The dark undertone of my comment doesn't require a response. In this life, nothing is guaranteed.

Letterman winks at the waitress when she returns with two frosty bottles of Beluga and a tray of glasses. Her cheeks blaze, the wanton blush obvious even under the low lighting.

"Back in a second." He grins at me, pushes to a stand, and follows her to the bar. Left alone, I fish out my phone and type a message.

Husband: Are you behaving?

Wife: Can we clarify the terms of behaving?

Husband: Naked, alone, and waiting for your husband's dick.

Wife: Really? I thought Daenis was your pet, not me.

Husband: Which out of the three is a problem?

Wife: The first two.

Husband: So, you want my dick?

Wife: I do.

Husband: How much?

Wife: That's for me to know and you to find out.

Husband: Dirty little teases get their asses fucked for misbehaving.

Wife: You'll have to catch me first.

Husband: I'll hunt you. Catch you. And fuck every hole you have, Wifey.

*Wife: It's a date. *wink**

Husband: Be naked when I get home.

Wife: Undress me yourself.

I'm painfully hard. Lust fires up my blood cells and blazes under my skin. I need to fuck away this madness. Instead, I sit on my ass, kick up my boots, and knock back a shot of vodka.

In a loud, music-filled nightclub where shady corners hide horny couples and cokeheads consuming my product, I grow restless. Reno is chatting up a cute girl and Letterman has disappeared with the waitress. Usually, I would have finished the bottle of booze by now and I'd be flirting with a hot blonde. Oddly enough, none of them have impressed me tonight.

I don't crave the women squeezed into figure-hugging dresses. Nor do I feel the need to Hoover up cocaine. Not when thoughts of my wife tempt me to go home, luring me back to the bed we share.

Extinguishing my cigarette in a glass of vodka, I decide to call it quits. I want to go home. But when I stand, every good intention I had dissipates like poisonous vapor.

My heart stutters and my muscles seize from the strain of keeping myself in check when my attention is snagged from outside of our exclusive seating area.

The repetitive melody fades around me like I've left this world and moved on to the next. I rake my fingers through my hair to ground me, completely and utterly in reverence of the sun-bleached blonde who dares to stroll toward the guarded VIP entrance and then, without a care for my marital status, pauses to brazenly look right at me.

Why do I feel like I know her—like her DNA is imprinted on my skin?

And why can't my damn heart function properly?

Our gazes snag, black to ocean blue. My eyes skate over her skintight black jeans, ripped at the knees and the clingy material nestled close to her breasts that stop shy of a tanned, toned belly. She's fucking gorgeous in a familiar way. A way that speaks to me from my gut and twists every dark edge inside of me so her sharp corners collide with mine.

I unstick my boots and stalk forward, unable to tear my gaze from the striking woman who's the complete opposite to my equally as stunning wife.

The way she stands there, blatantly staring at me. It's as if she's summoning me to her crystal waters where sirens hale, and I'm drunk on her power.

Her slow, secretive smile punches the air from my lungs and turns it to blistering heat. I try to breathe calmly and steadily, all the while studying the blonde, wavy loose hair, oceanic eyes, and pebbled nipples poking out at me from under a simple white top. Except there's nothing simple about this electricity sparking from her intentions to mine.

I want to snatch her away, shove her into a toilet cubicle, and punish her for making me feel this way. But I can't move. Entranced by the cataclysmic asteroid wedged in the middle of my vision, a beautiful fantasy that's about to blow up my entire world. And truth be told, I'd stand back and let her do it, because I've never experienced this gravitational wrench before.

"Who the fuck is that?" Reno appears by my side, his voice thick with desire. "If I didn't know better, I'd say that's..."

I'm too infuriated to listen. The fact he fancies this particular woman almost cracks my sanity. Deep within my psyche, I recognize the goddess, whose very presence shakes the earth beneath my boots.

I shoot toward the rope, blinking away awestruck stars, and push past my security detail. But when she turns her perfect round little ass to me and strides into the midst of the heaving crowd, my fists curl and I lose my ever-loving mind.

SINÉAD



I'm fed up—and frustrated.

Having my period and recovering from all the drama at the hotel had drained me for the first couple of days. Staying indoors with André was fun. It gave us time to settle into the weird groove we had to carve out once we'd quietly accepted our marriage was real.

But then he left our bubble and ventured out into the world, leaving me to enjoy a lunch date with India yesterday and watch a chick flick this evening.

It's not that I don't enjoy spending time with her. I do. On the surface I'm content, but underneath, I'm plagued by a kinetic energy. A tireless dissatisfaction that zips through my body and begs me to seek a life outside of the luxurious prison cell I'm trapped in.

I no longer work at Luna, and I don't have any friends here, except for a mature seventeen-year-old who's hiding a distant universe in her lost eyes.

Guards secure the main entrance of our condominium, and one lurks outside the penthouse door as an extra precaution. When we actually left the building together yesterday to take a stroll in the blissful sunshine, India's bodyguard walked five steps behind us. That was the one we could see; apparently, there were a handful of others blending into the background.

I'm not a stay-at-home housewife.

That's not who I am—or who I aspire to be.

André had told me I could be anyone I wanted to be now that I'm a Souza. So, when I study my reflection in the walk-in closet, I see my mother's dark hair, the dying bruises of a lifelong survivor, and Irish green eyes tinged with Italian blue.

My overall appearance resembles Sinéad Quinn, the lonely soul who'd pulled pints for a living and ignored humdrum paperwork. But on the inside, that's where the invisible divergence has taken place.

All of my organs were electrocuted by his power. My veins burned from his ferocious heat. Every muscle surrendered to his dominant proximity. And my disbelieving heart expanded to make room for his presence in my life.

Beneath the feverish flesh and twitching muscles of what makes me who I am, I've somehow become a slave to my husband's desires. This wasn't supposed to happen, not when our togetherness was forced upon me. Yet, he's managed to kick-start my underwhelmed heart and shine his light into every dull aspect of my unsatisfied existence. I ache for his danger and yearn for his savage touch.

Who the hell does that make me now?

A fool?

A wife with no freedom?

A bargaining chip between mafia families?

Or a woman who once thrived on adventure until there was only routine to fill her days. Someone who demands more from her life now.

The tinkle of a dog tag alerts me to the cute Doberman puppy. Its shiny black coat glistening under cabinet lighting and its rusty-colored face scented from a lavish beef dinner. Although Daenis belongs to André, the spirited whirlwind spends the majority of its time with India.

For the duration of the movie, I'd cuddled the sleepy dog and stroked its soft little head. She offered me comfort in his absence. Afterward, when India took the pup outside to pee, her quick-to-respond bodyguard was in hot pursuit.

“Hey, little one!” I sink to the carpet and capture Daenis in my arms. She licks my chin and pants while pushing against my shoulders with spritely paws. “We should go for a long walk together. Get some fresh air. Smell the ocean.”

India joins us, sitting cross-legged beside me on the floor. “They’re going to Vice tonight.” Her hair is twisted on top of her head in a messy knot and her clear skin is free of makeup. “Why don’t you go too?”

As she speaks, my torso angles to face the mirror again and a glint of bone-shaped metal catches my eye. The dog tag gleams, the etched name reflecting back at me, creating a whole new word. My breath catches in my throat, and I mouth the flipped letters that spell out *S I N E A D*. He had subconsciously named his dog after me?

I try to hold my cool and stare at the back-to-front name; however, my wide eyes surely reveal my shock. “Who named Daenis?”

“André, why? Are you okay?”

I release the squirming puppy and tuck my hair behind my ears. “Where did you say they are?”

India’s voice slips over my shoulder. “Club Vice in Miami Beach. It’s one of their regular haunts.”

Then it hits me. My husband is a multifaceted creature. A man like him needs a partner in crime, a worthy accomplice. His mastery requires a mistress. His dominance deserves sexual surrender. He craves danger and soaring highs. Demands ownership and obedience. All the while seeking those qualities in a wife he can nurture.

And what do I want?

My mother’s safety.

To understand the side of me that likes the pain—the thrill—the submission.

Mostly, I want all of him.

I turn to face her, adrenaline pumping through my veins. “Will you help me get out of here? I have a plan.”

India rubs her hands together briskly, a cute smile curling the corners of her pink lips. “Tell me what you need.”

“I need a few supplies and a way to distract the guards.”



Deep bass reverberations run through my skeleton. My heart pounds. Bodies move to the heavy rhythm, all tightly packed around me as I navigate the dance floor in Club Vice.

Sweat trickles down my spine, the heat turning sticky, but not like the blaze of his stare moments ago. How it tore right through me, eviscerating skin and bone, leaving me raw and exposed.

A solid mass of muscle and power tackles me from behind. I freeze and turn, hitting my captor’s groin and his distinct tented arousal. In a heartbeat, he manhandles me on the spot, controlling my movements until our chests collide. The seductive smell of leather and vetiver rushes up my nose when his hand lightly swathes my throat, nudging my gaze upward, his sole focus pinned to the bright-blue eyes staring back at him.

Without words, I sense his disbelief and feel his attraction spike like a rabid animal. Even I was shocked at how different I’d looked before I slipped out of India’s apartment with a couple of her girlfriends.

Our awareness of each other bumps from him to me, highlighted by a neon strobe light. His creased forehead peeks out from under disheveled dark hair and those thick brows of his are drawn together. He’s not scowling at the metamorphosis I’ve undergone; it looks like he’s searching for a way to understand it.

I try to push him away, playing a game of power, except his hold on my neck bites the skin. Beneath his rough touch, sparks charged electricity, the same way it always does when I know he’s taking full control.

However, I won't make it easy for him. That's not what this is about. I lift to my tiptoes and brush my lips across his, then draw his pouty lower lip between my teeth, biting gently. Once it's free, I watch his inky pupils dilate, becoming one with his infinitely dark irises.

His chest rises, filling his lungs with sweltering heat, and then his fingers release my throat.

The deep bass thrums inside my chest. A featherlight finger traces the curve of my marred jaw, where India applied a thin layer of false tan followed by disguising concealer. Curious fingers comb the blond lengths of a wig that has transformed his sable-haired wife into an alternative persona.

They slowly travel to my temples, where he places his large palms and angles my head to scrutinize the uncomfortable contact lenses stuck to my corneas.

We stare at each other for too many heartbeats. Both of us lost in this unfathomable intoxicating lust. And then I take the opportunity to rear back and slip out of reach, hurriedly weaving off the dance floor to find an escape.

A further bolt of power seizes my bicep, its insurgence almost knocking me off my feet. I'm dragged toward a door, hauled into the corridor beyond, and shoved into the male restroom where men linger by the sinks.

André pulls his gun out from under his leather jacket and jabs the air with it. He marches the length of the room and checks the stalls are free with me forcefully stuck to his hip like glue. "Everyone out. Now."

One man holds up his hands as he sweeps around us, another ducks low and runs for the door, and the last guy practically bows on his way past.

A prickle of fear injects my veins with the deadliest rush. This barely contained beast is mine—and I don't want to face the day when he casts me aside for another woman.

Once we're alone, he uses his brawn and height to back me into the wall and then stuffs his gun into the waistband of his jeans.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I gnash my teeth at him. “Don’t you know who I am?” His chuckle borders on demonic. “I’m a Souza, and you’ll show me some respect.”

He teases the coarse hairs on his unshaven chin as he considers me. “You might be a Souza, but first and foremost, you are my wife.” His eyes blaze. “So, how about you explain what the fuck you’re doing here—without armed guards to watch out for you or a weapon to protect yourself with?”

I trail my fingertips along planes of muscle, regretfully hidden beneath a fitted t-shirt.

“You like blondes, don’t you, André?” He moves closer, sandwiching me against the wall. “Admit it. When you saw me out there, you were tempted... tempted to fuck me seconds before you figured out my real identity.”

His throat works as he swallows. “Dressed like this, you’re the hottest bitch in this place. But my naturally beautiful wife, she’s the one I want.”

“Liar.” I laugh softly, rubbing my hand over his strained zipper. “Your dick says otherwise.”

His hands fly to my face, securing me in place. Quick breaths caress my cheeks, our eyes lock, and a cosmic shift cracks open the vows I’d made under duress.

“Every husband wishes for a mistress,” I whisper, gripping his bulge hard. “Let me be your fantasy, too.”

This blistering, heart-pounding attraction isn’t simply lust, it’s fate. Our fate. His and mine.

Harsh lips descend, punishing in their force as they smash onto mine. Our frantic kiss tastes of peppermint and liquor. His entire deific physique pins me to the mosaic tiles. This monster of a man hunts sanity in control. He bites and sucks, groans into my open mouth, and gropes each breast like I’m the first woman he’s ever touched. It’s pent-up fire, manic and salacious. The air is hot and heavy, so full of sexual stimuli that I could scream.

“Fuck, I need you, Sin.” His foreign timbre is drenched in lust.

I grab the lapels of his jacket and drag it from his broad shoulders, panting as he rears back to free his tattooed arms from the sleeves. Then his hands are on me again. His mouth claims my lips and his slick tongue dives past my teeth. We kiss harder, deeper, and dirtier. Both of us needing to smother ourselves in the other's cum, saliva, sweat, and illicit shadows.

Our heart-stopping fight mimics caged animals, him yanking at my top to bite my engorged nipples, and me unzipping his jeans for access to his dick. We claw and scrape at each other on a mission to fuck or destroy—both options viable.

My vicious grip circles the hot thickness of his shaft. I writhe against his thigh, rubbing myself on the strength of his taut quad muscles.

It's anarchy in lust.

Fiery agony entwined with bliss.

With twisting, strangling strokes, I make him pant and growl. Shivers tingle all over me. My fingers slip over the damp tip to moisten the friction.

When he rolls a nipple between his fingers, I moan, my thick hungry noises flaming the craziness in my veins. But the instant he bites them, one after the other, mania threatens a blackout, and my recklessness takes over.

Together we're combustible. This is the rush I crave. The high he'll never forget. The lesson he's going to learn.

"Do you want to fuck your horny little mistress in the toilets, Dré?" My words are breathless.

With as much power and painful restraint as I can muster, I shunt him backward. He stumbles, his velvety dick assaulting his abdomen, and his chest bursting with every rushed breath.

In the brief moment of his stunned confusion, I swoop down and grab his biker jacket from the worn tiles and lurch for the door. "If you want me—work for it."

And then I run.

ANDRÉ



I'm an island.

And my soul is a relentless, briny ocean where foaming waves shipwreck every woman and their intentions to contain me.

Impenetrable seaworthy emotions cut through the dark sea waters without attachment. Diving beneath a haphazard surface as a sharp-toothed predator, denying conformity, laughing at fidelity, and hunting for fun.

That was before my wife.

Before she entered the shadowy depths to dredge up a past I'd let the tides tug me away from. The woman has harpooned my focus and attention, speared my sea dog heart, and dragged me deeper into the unknown.

Her proximity is a widespread net, sprawling near and far. As a pair, we don't create life rafts or buoyancy aids to rescue each other. No, we spike chaos, turning the water into a boiling, red-hot mess.

And this time, she's sailed straight for the rocks and I'm going to fucking eat her alive.

By the time I've zipped up my jeans, stumbled out of the bathroom, and knocked every fucker out of my path, I'm beyond hungry—starved—malnourished. Off the charts horny.

“Was that Sinéad?” Letterman is beside me in seconds, his voice next to my crazed, searching gaze. “Why was she wearing a wig?”

My body becomes an incendiary device, ready to detonate if I can't find her in five, four, three... I swallow hard and breathe. "Where the fuck did she go?"

"She went out the side door. Does she have a bodyguard with her?"

I shake from within as violence competes with painful desire. She's unprotected and roaming a shark-infested city alone. Baiting me until I'm well and truly hooked. I've spent more time next to her than any other woman. Period. I haven't just tolerated her presence; I've sought it out.

My heart rate explodes when I stalk past the doorman guarding the exit and burst into the evening air. An engine growls and my heart rate spikes.

In the alleyway, my unpredictable wife straddles my favorite motorcycle. Her new blond lengths are hidden beneath the biker jacket she'd pinched from me and zipped up to her delicate throat.

Fuck, she's the sexiest woman alive.

Our eyes lock briefly before she flips the visor in place, puts the Streetfighter in first gear, and applies the throttle. A snarl scrapes up my throat as I helplessly watch her drive off—at speed.

But when she pulls out onto the main road, a blacked-out SUV swerves into the traffic behind her.

Shots are fired.

Wheels spin.

"Sinéad!" The madness in me crawls out of my mouth in a yell, each syllable ripping at my throat like razor blades. "Motherfuckers!" I howl.

If there was ever a time to confess insanity, it would be this very moment. I can't breathe as my boots cover dry asphalt, and I instinctively reach for the cold steel handle of my gun. I look left where the taillights of the vehicle chasing my wife dance in the dusky night air. In five marching strides, I'd

stopped traffic and rooted myself in the middle of the road with my feet apart and my firearm raised.

Letterman rushes up beside me, dodging a honking car, his face alarmed when I repeatedly shoot at a far-off moving target until I'm almost out of bullets.

“What the fuck, Dré?”

“Get a chopper in the sky immediately,” I seethe, quaking with anger. “Get a whole fucking fleet fueled and on standby. Sinéad took the Streetfighter.” My lungs ache, unable to accept oxygen, because my heart is pounding so hard it's crushing into the damn things. “She's wearing my helmet and my jacket.”

“They think it's you...” Reno growls as he skids to a stop beside me.

My fingers curl around the handle of my weapon until I can't feel them anymore. “Someone give me a fucking key,” I snarl, palming my throat, feeling the airway tighten and the veins thrum.

“Did you get the plates or see who was driving?” Letterman pulls out his iPhone and taps the screen.

“No—give me your fucking keys!” I yell, impatience almost choking me.

Reno hands over the keys to his motorcycle and grabs my elbow. His features are as sharp as his serious glare.

“We'll catch the motherfuckers, Dré. I'll call the police department. You have the captain in your pocket. He'll help us trace the vehicle.”

I barely make out what he's saying under the noise of blood rushing around my skull. All I see is red. My impulses itch for vengeance. A violent surge of endorphins crushes and cracks me. My wrath doesn't just swell and seethe; it annihilates my composure, so I visibly vibrate.

I should have protected her. Taken full control and forced her to fuck me in the bathroom. Disciplined her for daring to alter her appearance in a way that resembles every

insignificant woman I've ever bedded—even though she's a trillion times more appealing than they ever were.

She's a curse on my rogue ways.

The only woman who drives me wild.

My new addiction—without an antidote.

In a hurry, I mount Reno's motorcycle, shove on the helmet, and rev the powerful engine. Letterman is already doing the same next to me, his own engine fired up, making a noise like demons roaring from Hell. Taking the lead, we speed into the oncoming traffic to hunt the woman I can't say goodbye to.



She isn't just missing—she was stolen from me.

I came across the jet-black motorcycle a few blocks from Club Vice, overturned and riddled with lead bullets. The SUV that chased her had vanished into the night without a fucking trace. It didn't matter that I drove through the Miami streets until the fuel light blinked—my wife was nowhere to be found and her iPhone went straight to voicemail.

“Here.” Reno offers me a tumbler of straight Irish whiskey.

The slashes in my heart pour out in anguish. I scrub my eyes and knock back the neat liquor. Since reluctantly returning to the penthouse, I've hated how different it feels without her here.

Letterman and Reno continue to bark orders into their phones. Two helicopters cover miles from north to south Miami. While teams of men walk the streets and make the Souza presence felt in every establishment and undisclosed den in my city.

India sits on the couch with her knees tucked to her chest. Daenis is curled up next to her, both of them silent. And I'm one heartbeat away from torching the city to smoke out the fuckers who took her.

I've lost count of the cigarettes I've inhaled. Having a drink in one hand and a Marlboro in the other ensures my fingers are occupied instead of randomly pulling the trigger at anyone who crosses me.

"Yo, Dré... I've got Saponi on the line. He wants a word." I drag my gaze away from the cityscape when Letterman jogs across the room to join me at the window. This is the first time I've despised this view. The tiny lights are shifty eyes hiding secrets and the darkness is a sadistic beast that swallowed my wife. "He claims it's nothing to do with him."

Giovanni's guy has had eyes on Saponi's movements for days now. He even managed to bug the bastard's out-of-date yacht; however, he wasn't able to tap his personal phone. Not yet anyway. I grab Letterman's cell phone and press it to my ear. "Saponi."

"You have enemies. Just like your Papá."

"We all have enemies."

"Apparently, some more than others," he replies, too condescending for my liking.

My teeth grind impatiently. "What do you want?"

Saponi sighs on the other end of the phone. "This doesn't please me, André. We have plans, you and I. If this is an elaborate ruse, I'll find out."

This guy is pissing me the fuck off. She's missing, and he's making it all about him.

"Or maybe you planned the whole thing yourself?" I spit, ready to sentence this motherfucker to the death penalty. "Perhaps if you removed her from the picture, it would justify a bloodthirsty war? I won't let you take Miami, and if I find out you've hurt Sinéad, I'll introduce you to my father's pet tigers."

Christ, I sound just like Papá—except all I feel is desperation, not callous satisfaction in the art of brutal torture.

He's silent for a few minutes and then grunts a borderline laugh. An evil noise that doesn't quite elevate to the next level. I'm going to take great pleasure in killing this fucker one of these days.

"My need for an heir is still strong at this point in time. That remains my goal. Kidnapping Sinéad before she's pregnant wouldn't be a wise move, given the lengths I've already gone to. I suggest you find her." The way he speaks, patronizing me, chips at my temper the same way Papá's callous orders had grated on my nerves. "It might take a while, given the Souzas have hitmen darkening their own shadows."

If he didn't take her, then who the fuck did?

"Oh, Sapori... I forgot to tell you..." I hang up without finishing my sentence just to aggravate the cunt and leave him wondering, then toss the phone back to Letterman.

His conversation was infuriatingly repetitive and I'm too restless to listen to his shit. I slam a fist into the triple-glazed glass, my control disintegrating, then take a long gulp of liquor—completely stressed as fuck.

My palms have half-moons burrowed into the flesh from my nails. It kills me to think she's out there, in the streets I rule over. Yet I have no clue where she might be. That I've failed to safeguard someone in my circle—my familia—in my heart.

I rake a hand through my hair and stub out the cigarette before pacing again. Text messages and missed call notifications from people who aren't her ping as I scroll through my contacts. Not even my brothers can help me with this fuckup.

"Do you think this is the same crowd that assassinated your father?"

"Fuck knows." I'm about to take another drink when I realize I would become too intoxicated to head up the search party. I need my wits about me, and greening the bottom of a whiskey bottle wouldn't help. Not tonight. "Did you see the CCTV footage from the front of the club?"

“The captain’s team has it. They’ll run the plates and as soon as they find something, they’ll call.”

“I should be out there,” I growl, my frosty tone deflecting the worry knotting inside of me.

“We have enough manpower to tear up the city. As soon as we get intel, we’ll be all over it.”

Ignoring the unsettled rhythm of my pulse, I return my gaze to the indigo night sky where high-rise towers look like gemstone-encrusted columns, each of them competing for impact in an unclean world. Hidden behind millions of glittering pinprick windows, city dwellers carry on living, the multitude of homes and offices a harsh reminder of places I’m powerless to search.

That’s if she is even in Miami.

And is still alive.

“Should we call off the search and regroup?” Letterman’s voice creeps into my manic mind.

I squint with a malevolent outlook, a miserable fool hoping to sense her dynamic presence, to hear her divine Irish accent cloaked in desire and to know the touch of her skin all over again. My stomach twists and refuses to stop churning.

“No. We won’t stop looking until she’s back where she belongs. My wife is a fighter,” I grit out, knowing she’s unlike any other woman I’ve encountered. “Every second counts.”

I have to believe my feisty wife could escape danger. She owns determination and is a fucking Souza by nature. Always was. The whisper of something less than a successful rescue mission isn’t worth thinking about. I’ll set the city alight and watch it burn if she’s not by my side by sunrise.

“Dré!” Reno’s boots batter the tiled floor as he runs to me. “I think they’ve found her. I just took a call.”

I toss the tumbler aside, uncaring for the mess of broken glass and unfinished amber liquid. Checking for the reloaded gun holstered snug to my hip, I rebuild my posture and brace for her coordinates.

“Where is she?” The words grind between my teeth.

“A blond-haired girl carrying a biker helmet was downstairs in the lobby, claiming to be Sinéad. The guy at reception asked if he should let her in. I confirmed she was wearing a wig tonight. Security is bringing her up.”

My pulse turns erratic and my body pivots to face the door at the same time as it opens. And there she is, escorted by two armed guards who pause a few steps behind.

She’s a warrior returning home from battle.

My breathtaking wife.

Blue-eyed and brave. Tangles of platinum-blond hair spill over narrow bronzed shoulders and long, lean legs, one of them moving stiffly until she stops a few yards away. Smudged mascara thickens her lash line and the old bruising I knew to be on her once alabaster jaw has resurfaced. She blinks at me—part trepidation, part repose. Clutched to her bare stomach is my glossy black helmet, reflecting her bedraggled appearance.

Our connection crackles through my muscles like electricity, her power over me stronger than gravity. My eyes are all over her, checking for signs of injury—or blood.

Goosebumps scatter my spine when she licks her parted lips in preparation to speak. “I’m so sorry, Dré...” She draws her lower lip between her teeth for a second and then continues to whisper, “They shot up your favorite motorcycle.”

I unstick my boots and march in her direction. “Are you hurt?”

She shakes her head. My blood pumps faster. A concoction of fury-entangled relief makes every heavy footfall akin to a savage thunderstorm. She’s standing here, virtually holding me by the balls with her tomboy style and striking looks, yet she’s the one apologizing. There’s no mention of the gunmen who’d put her life in danger or the obvious crash she was involved in, not even recognition of the godforsaken hours I’d endured in her absence.

For the first time in my lawless life, a woman has capsized my very existence until I was nothing more than blood and bone, pain and fear.

I'm utterly lost where this bombshell is concerned.

Her nostrils flare the closer I get, a telltale sign of faltering bravado. From every step I take in my expensive boots to each purposeful stride clad in designer dark wash jeans, I feel raw and exposed, as if she's stripped the clothes from my back.

The crystal-blue eyes staring up at me, although as brilliant as the ocean, don't hold the allure of those turquoise-colored irises that usually haunt me. The wig disguising her Irish gypsy bloodline doesn't deserve to wear the invisible crown she's earned during a death-defying escapade.

I fight the savage urge to rip the blond strands off her pretty little head, flush out the lenses, and scrub her bronzed skin until she returns to the uniqueness that I'm obsessed with.

A low snarl slips past my dry lips, all my saliva drained and my mouth dry. The guards quietly exit, moving outside of the penthouse to man the entrance.

Her gaze doesn't break. She ignores the soldiers who'd taken over the kitchen island with maps and iPads, nor does she hunt out Reno, who's calling off the search party. We just stare at each other amid the bustle of voices. For the longest moment, I'm painfully aware of what she means to me and how our relationship has become so much more. Our bond never diminished, and our connection would forever be felt.

Rather than lashing out for harm or control, I snatch the helmet and chuck it out of sight.

"I'll have a replacement motorcycle delivered in a few days."

But I'd never be able to replace her.

In a beat, I wrap my arms around her dainty shoulders to pin her biceps by her sides. I hold her fragile body next to mine as the most precious possession I've ever owned.

"You okay, baby?"

“I am now,” she whispers into my chest.

I hug, squeeze, and silently signal to her that I’m sorry. The faint blend of my cologne and salty sea air clings to her fearless form. I’ve known the tug of destruction since I was a young teen, when my father shoved a rifle in my hands and ordered me to kill or be killed.

It’s a rush of shadows and a hit of oxytocin. But embracing this woman, having her delicate bones and exquisite skin right next to me, surpasses *everything*.

I want to hold on to her until she suffocates from this curse I’m stricken with and no longer poses a threat to my wayward lifestyle. To break her into tiny pieces and pocket them so I never have to be without her again.

I’m a fucking mess.

“What happened?” I ask, forcing myself to snap out of this uncharacteristic mindfuck and release her. “Did you see their faces?”

“No—” She winces when I put a few inches of space between us. “The Streetfighter’s nippy and fast.” A ghost of a smile plays on her lips as if she had enjoyed the ride. “I weaved in and out of the traffic, but the back tire blew out. They must have clipped it with a bullet. I came off in a crowded street, got to the sidewalk, and mingled in a group of people.” She shrugs like it’s an everyday occurrence to escape armed bad guys. “I took off your jacket and moved from bar to bar every few hours to make sure I’d lost them.”

A wash of fury chills my tone when I growl at her, “And you didn’t think to call me? To let me know where you were—or that you were alive?”

Her forehead creases, a flash of rebellion sharpening her expression. “There’s no need to be so pissed, Dré. I landed on the stupid thing when I came off the bike. The screen is smashed up. It wouldn’t work.”

“I’m fully within my rights to worry about my wife’s well-being.”

Her chin elevates, surprise and disbelief written all over her pretty face. “Even if I had my phone, I still wouldn’t have rang you.”

“Oh, yeah?” My head cocks to the side. I keep my voice low and controlled while she tucks pale strands behind her ear, showing yet again a bare wedding ring finger. “And why is that? Do tell me.”

She swallows hard, her arms prickling in a visceral response to the flaming track of wildfire shooting from her body to mine. “It occurred to me while I sat in a bar with no money, friends, or even an address for this place, that I’d been riding *your* motorcycle. Wearing *your* jacket. Leaving the club *you* frequent. Those assholes weren’t after me. They were after you, Hotshot. If I had told you where I was, it would have put you in danger. So I hung out in a few random bars and then walked the city on foot to find your fucking condo.”

“*Our* condo.” I offer a predatory smile to indicate I’m less than amused.

She blinks up at me, slaying me on the spot. I respect her reckless decision. Fucking admire her for it, even. Despite that, my heart still aches from the possibility of losing her. The truth of how I reacted on the inside has scarred me in ways no one will ever see. Which is why I have to follow through on the wild idea I just thought of.

“I will always come to your rescue, Sinéad. No matter where you are,” I say honestly. “Rule number two—you will never hesitate to contact me when your life is in danger.”

I want her so badly.

But not until I’ve settled this once and for all.

“What’s rule number one?” She licks her lips as my gaze settles on her perfect lips. That tempting little tongue of hers is so fucking wet and begging to be sucked.

“You’ll find out later. Rule number three—you will *never* walk about the city alone again. When I’m not with you, you’ll have armed bodyguards.”

Power runs through my veins and a surge of adrenaline spikes my muscles when a whisper of defiance leaves her mouth. “It was my decision... my call.”

So fucking feisty and courageous.

I dip into her, my height threatening her shorter stature. “Is that so? Maybe you thought it was a good idea. It wasn’t. You took an unnecessary risk.” My nose almost strokes hers, her quick breaths puffing over my face. “I’ve told you before, Souzas don’t scurry like hunted vermin. We take a blowtorch to our enemies and dump their ashes in the streets for everyone to see.” My hands ball by my sides as I spin on my heel, locating Reno and Letterman on the couch with India. “Organize a convoy and notify the crew that we’re boarding tonight. We have to stop off before hitting the marina.”

Letterman’s gaze catches mine and he nods. I’ve always been unpredictable, except this particular notion is fully justified whether she agrees to the severity of it or not. I type out a quick message on my phone and hit send.

The typical thing for me to do would be to take her upstairs and show her who the real boss is. To finish what she started in the bathroom at the club and pump my cum so deep inside of her that she’d feel it fertilizing her eggs. However, this plan will cement her role in my life. Now and forever.

Her eyebrows knit together, confusion glistening in her eyes. “Where are we going?”

I clench my teeth, letting my temper simmer under the weight of us. “I’ve warned you before about disobeying me. This trip will save me the hassle of reminding you again.” She shifts, as if troubled by my statement. “And when we get there, you won’t look like an imposter who’s trying to be my beautiful wife. You’ll wear your black hair loose and wild. Your green-blue eyes will watch everything that happens, and when it’s all over, you’ll fully understand what the fourth rule is.”

SINÉAD



Vibrations rolled over my bone.

It wasn't exactly painful and not quite pleasant either.

I could have fought and wrestled the sweet guy whose indigo-dyed eyebrows knitted together as he worked. Though part of me wanted to experience the pain, even if the end result would be everlasting.

The whole time, André sat opposite me, patiently waiting for the masterpiece to be finalized, having undergone the same treatment himself.

Even though it's the early hours of the morning, the owner opened his tattoo parlor for a three-thousand-dollar handshake. However, after observing how meticulous and friendly he is, I get the impression he would have thrown open the doors for my husband without a financial sweetener. No matter where we go, people are in awe of André. And lurking deep within the hostile corners of my personality, I feel it too.

He's beautiful and dangerous.

Mine.

And this seals it.

I stare at my red, raw wedding finger and blink repeatedly. Every time my lashes shutter and reopen, the black detailing is still there.

"Now there's no questioning who you are to me." André crooks two fingers, beckoning me to his side. He grabs my wrist, yanks me closer to the padded chair he's sitting in, and

inspects the tiny tattoo under artificial lamplight. “Rule number four—always wear your wedding ring,” he muses. “It’s perfect, don’t you think?”

My brows fly up in response. “It’s certainly a statement...”

He carefully sets my hand on his lap, loosely interlocks his fingers over the top of mine, and takes a photograph using his phone. On my wedding finger, a delicately etched letter *Q* is inked where a wedding band should sit, and a cute black heart sits neatly beneath it to mimic the queen of hearts from a pack of cards. On his matching ring finger, the letter *K* is tattooed above the same miniature heart.

I won’t openly admit it, but the concept gives me tingles. I hadn’t failed to notice how he’d worn his wedding ring every day; however, the twinkly band blended in with the other rings on his fingers. Now the distinct sentiment behind this particular symbol could never be taken away.

I frown at him as he taps the small screen. “Is that going on your Instagram profile?”

“Not yet. I always delay posting.” He shakes his head. “Otherwise, my enemies could pinpoint my location in seconds. It keeps them on the back foot.”

“So, you’re happy to announce to the world that you won me in a game of cards?” I steal my hand back to study the permanent design closer. “That’s what the whole card theme is, right?”

André pinches the bridge of his nose as if he’s exhausted and clears his throat. “Not only does it symbolize your role as my wife, but it signifies who you are to me and the lengths I’ll go to for you.”

My heart oscillates and my stomach goes all gooey. I’d started out resenting him for forcing wedding vows from my throat and now I’m experiencing all sorts of emotions. The tattoo artist joins us, his black gloved hand reaching for mine again.

“I’ll do it.” André snatches the damp gauze from him and proceeds to dab my finger, possessiveness flashing in his

focused gaze.

“You going to wrap it up too?” the guy asks, immediately backing off.

André shrugs a shoulder at him. “Your work here is done, *mi amigo*.”

The bell over the door chimes when Letterman and Reno enter, leaving a few men outside to keep watch.

“Ready to go?” Reno asks. Together they close the distance, expensive track shoes squeaking on the linoleum flooring. “Let me see.”

André doesn't let go of me; he simply angles my hand around and brings his own in line with it. “*La eternidad*,” he murmurs.

La eternidad?

“Sure is, *parce*.” Letterman stuffs a hand into his pocket and nods his head slowly. “I never thought this would happen,” he mutters, his dark brows pulling together.

I watch André's forehead crease ever so slightly as he considers the statement. “You two are my brothers, blood or not. That will never change. I've just added Sinéad to the adventure.” He lowers our united hands and rises.

Broad shoulders pulled back, his height dominates over all of us. “I expect you guys to watch over Sinéad the same way you do for India. She's familia.”

A shiver runs the length of my spine. Letterman's gaze cuts to mine where a roguish glint lives in his hazel eyes.

“Welcome to the boys' club, sweetheart,” he announces in a low voice that sends echoes of acceptance through my whole body.

“She'll need a gun,” Reno adds, his practical advice noteworthy. “And a bodyguard,” he concludes, glancing over his shoulder to the doorway. “We've been here long enough, Dré. Time to move out.”

André nods stiffly, his chest expanding as he inhales deeply. “We all look out for each other. She’s one of us. Got it?”

I hold my breath, my blood roaring in my skull. My eyes dance between the three men, each of them owning killer instincts and capable of justifying murder for the greater good of the Souza family business. Visually, they’re an attractive trio, dressed in designer clothes and harboring concealed weapons upon their fit bodies. They ooze power and chaos, yet the bond humming between them is natural and heartwarming. It’s a respite of light within twisted darkness. As I watch them together, I don’t hate the evil shadowing them with death. Somehow, I feel connected to it—to them.

Reno offers me his hand and cute dimples dent both of his cheeks. It’s a rare smile and one I don’t think I’ll see often. I latch on and return his handshake. Neither of us speaks, yet a mutual pact buzzes from him to me. A fire burns in my belly, fierce and energetic.

Letterman checks his phone. “Reno is right. There’s a threat out there and we’re sitting ducks. The crew is loading the yacht as we speak. It will be stocked for a week and ready to cruise by sunset. We need to get clearance from the U.S. Coast Guard for marine transit through the security zone. I’m pulling a few strings to get it sorted quickly.” His wicked grin tells a thousand tales of persuasion. “That will give us plenty of time to kill some fuckers and find out who’s targeting you.”

Every hair on my body lifts to attention when André snakes his arm around my waist and tugs me neatly to his hip. “We’re finally getting a honeymoon, Wifey. And you know what that means?” He dips into the side of my face, his warm lips skimming the shell of my ear, his sharp teeth grazing my earlobe. “I’m going to tie you up with knots so you fully understand rule number one.”

SINÉAD



Our entourage of black Range Rover Sentinels slow for entry to the marina.

André sits quietly beside me, his gaze focused outside of the vehicle. He's deep in thought, lost in the zillions of scintillating lights covering his city beyond the bulletproof exterior that's transporting us. After he'd sent a flurry of text messages and spoke in Spanish on the phone with his eldest brother Tomás, he ended the call, glanced at me, and then sat back without saying a word.

Tonight, he appears restless and edgy. He's cracked his knuckles a few times and now he's rotating his family ring as his right knee repeatedly bounces.

"Are Reno and Letterman coming with us?" I ask when we're cleared by the marina's security.

Our gazes meet, then his eyes drop to my wedding finger, where they blaze hot with possession.

"No, they're staying on dry land," he finally answers. "It will be you, me, and the ship's crew. Unfortunately, it takes a whole team to run a yacht of this size. Don't worry, they'll stay out of our way. They won't hear your secret."

In this moment, his somber mood is difficult to read, and his comment is cryptic.

"Secret?" I say softly.

"Yeah..." He looks right at me. "How you're secretly happy to be married to a man like me."

“Not a man *like* you. But *you*—all of André Souza.”

The whites of his eyes sparkle in the shadows of our moving vehicle. “In my opinion, you’re the only woman who can handle all of me. We’ll see if you agree with that belief after tonight.”

A shiver teases my scalp and I swallow hard. Perhaps I’ve only scratched the surface and haven’t truly seen what lies beneath the flesh of this handsome devil.

“Have you figured out who chased me on the Streetfighter?” I quickly change the subject.

His lips press into a firm line. “It could have been the same crowd who gunned down my father. While Tommy was off-grid, they probably planned a hit on the next Souza.” He turns his gaze back to the tinted window. “Or I’ve made a few more enemies of my own.”

“Your father died recently, didn’t he? And hitmen are targeting you. That can’t be easy.”

“Easy...” He pins me with an odd expression and falls silent for a moment. “I’d thought about killing the fucker myself—too many times to count. Disappointment is all I ever felt from Papá. When Tommy broke the news of his murder, that swell of disappointment hit me like a gunshot. I was pissed at myself, because I could never pull the trigger... Someone else beat me to it.”

My left shoulder lifts to my ear. “Then maybe the person who killed him did you all a favor.”

He shakes his head slowly as if my words were thick fog. “Whoever they are, they put you in danger. For that reason alone, I won’t hesitate to pull the pin on a grenade or my trigger. I’ll finish any fucker who hurts you, Sin. No matter who they are. No matter the consequences.”

My stomach turns queasy, knowing he’d struggle to kill the asshole who had tortured me with his fists when I was younger.

Eventually coming to a stop, the door opens and the cool sea air rushes in. André steps out first and then pivots, holding

his ringed fingers out for me to latch onto. The instant our skin unites, shock waves rocket up my arm and his grip on me tightens.

Skyscrapers dominate the majestic backdrop and a navy-blue sea shimmers with splashes of bold light, spreading out from a row of massive yachts. Each one looks unbelievable, like something from a James Bond movie.

However, when he guides me along a decked boardwalk and stops at the gangway of a sleek charcoal yacht three times the size of the others, I nearly choke on my saliva.

“This is my new yacht,” he announces. “I haven’t ventured out in her yet. This will be her maiden voyage.”

I blink in the sheer size, unable to compute the cost of such an elegant sea vessel. It epitomizes my husband with its commanding presence. Larger than life.

“It’s even bigger than the penthouse,” I mutter as we walk hand in hand along the gangway, over the top of calm water.

The closer we get to the dark exterior, the easier it is to read the name engraved in gold capital letters on the hull.

Sin Pretty.

“You named it *Sin Pretty*?”

“Yeah... like Sin City, except it’s hot, sleek, sexy, and fucking pretty.” He gives me a look. His expression burrows into my being and confirms the true origin of the name—me.

Once on board, I don’t seem to notice the same sea swell that had made me ill on Frankie’s yacht. Probably because this particular sea vessel is three times the size of his. If not bigger.

We’re formally greeted by the captain and first mate, both in full uniform. Together, they run through safety and security procedures. I listen while André talks confidently and discusses our plans, feeling totally out of place in this floating hotel owned by a ruthless cartel billionaire. Apparently, we’ll cruise for a few days and then anchor off the coast, so we’re close to the city for business.

I have no objection to our spontaneous surprise honeymoon, not when the raw skin on my wedding finger reminds me of the permanence of our vows. But what I can't wrap my head around is the wealth and danger this new life of mine comes with—or that I'm a mafia princess in my own right.

The weight of my future hadn't truly sunk in until we stepped onto this extraordinary mega yacht. If André protects Mammy and assassinates Frankie like he's promised to do, then I'll become the Sicilian successor, whether I want to be or not. His fortune would likely be handed to my firstborn child when the time comes.

Regardless of my birthright, I'd take a wild guess that Frankie has plenty of criminals on his payroll who would happily get rid of me on their way to claim his throne.

"You okay?" André's husky voice slips over my shoulder, finding me rooted to the hardwood flooring of a comfortably furnished cigar lounge.

"It's a lot to take in."

He cocks a bushy brow at me and places his hand to my lower back, ushering me to a glass ceiling atrium that invites the silvery moon into the freshly crafted space. "The yacht or the tattoo?"

I shrug. "All of it, I guess."

We climb a narrow, polished staircase, him leading the way and me following closely behind. There's another lounge area and private office space, both fitted with black framed furniture, a well-stocked bar area, and snow-white walls.

A set of double doors open into a spacious master bedroom, its soft gray carpet pulling my gaze to the central bed and beyond it where a partition of glass reveals a sundeck, plunge pool, and matching oversized daybeds.

"This is the emperor suite. Do you like it?" André prowls the breadth of the master suite and strips off his t-shirt.

My hungry gaze eats up every tattoo on him and my heart flutters due to the burn where my very first tattoo is healing.

He moves to an unassuming cabinet, taps in a code on the keypad, and yanks open the door. At a quick count, there have to be at least six rifles, two machine guns, and a collection of handguns. Removing his usual revolver from the holster at his hip, he stores it with the rest.

“It’ll do.” I shrug, noticing how the air is fresher and the couch has never been used before. In fact, everything is brand new and untouched. At first, I’d thought Frankie’s yacht was lavish inside; however, in retrospect, it’s like a basic dingy compared to the *Sin Pretty*.

André’s boots are next to come off, then he unzips his jeans, tugs them past his hips, and kicks his feet out of them.

“I think it’s time we christened our boat and at the same time, you’ll learn exactly what my number one rule is.” As he smirks, I see the devil in his eyes.

I fold my arms across my chest to hide the violent heartbeat slamming into my chest cavity. “Let me guess... don’t swim with sharks? Don’t eat warm oysters? Don’t run on a moving boat?”

His head shakes from side to side and he spears me in place with a sexy-as-fuck smirk. “Oh, it’s far more critical than any of those.” He strolls to a custom-fitted set of drawers, stares inside the top one for a beat, and removes a neatly looped scarlet jute rope. “Ever heard of *Shibari*?”

My brows snap together. “No—”

André unravels the rope and folds it in half, the sound of it whispering through his fingers. “Come here,” he commands.

I freeze. “Wait... what are you going to do with that?”

The corners of his mouth curl. “This is about your permission as much as your surrender. We’ve already established a safe word. I swear to you, when we’re together like this, it’s your safe place to relax.”

“I don’t know... ropes... you’re not putting it anywhere near my neck, are you?” I reach for my throat, uncertain and confused why I’m tingling all over.

In one stride, he's by the foot of the bed. "Shibari is the Japanese art of binding with knots. It's intricate designs, nothing more. I'm looking forward to tying up your tits, feeling your hot little cunt milk my dick, and hearing those sexy sounds your ass cheeks make when I slap them."

"You want to tie me up so you have all the control. No way!"

His deep, rich voice carries in the silence, crackling from his serious gaze to mine. "I'm asking you to trust me. Can you do that?"

"I... I'm not sure about this, Dré..."

"Do you trust me, Sinéad?" he persists.

I swallow the crazy flutters stuck in my throat. "Yes."

My lashes blink wildly as he stalks toward me, rope in hand, eyes focused. Dark hair grazes his brow, and his boxer briefs are tented.

"Good girl." A rogue smile plays on his kissable lips. "Guess what, Wifey..." He stops a breath away, his bare toes almost touching my boots. "Rule number one is to never run away from me. After your performance at Club Vice, you owe me. Now strip."

I take a steadying breath and pull my top over my head. His eyes follow my hand to my zipper, and he growls under his breath when I kick off my boots and shimmy out of my jeans. He cups one of my breasts and gently massages it. I can't believe he's still into me after everything we've been through.

Keeping body contact, he shakes out the skinny rope, threads it under my arms, and circles my diaphragm with it, leisurely working behind my back. He's methodical in his concentration. His breath is hot against the side of my face as he rolls me into him and winds the length over the top of my breasts.

With a sharp jolt, he tightens the knots he's made at my spine, not too tight, yet firmly secured to make escape difficult. Again, he rotates me into his pelvis and trails the

rope over my shoulder, fitting it snugly between my bare breasts. He works there too, twisting and weaving the soft cord before it snakes upward in a V-shape to my opposite shoulder. As he confidently creates an ornate zigzag, I gaze down at the pentagon he's created. Butterflies crash and burn in the wake of his touch and the blazing heat he radiates.

Towering above me from behind, he drops his lips to my neck and drags his teeth to my shoulder. I shudder from the proximity and suck in sharply when he assertively cinches the rope in its labyrinthine pattern.

"You're stunning, Sinéad." The way he says my name, all husky from too many cigarettes and important conversations, has my skin prickling.

"And you've done this before..." I gasp when a helter-skelter of shivers cover my skin. "With other women."

"Many times." He hums low and seductive while hoisting my arms behind my back and folding them so my palms meet opposite elbows.

Jealousy scorches my veins. "Which makes this an ordinary, everyday thing for you?"

André works quietly for a few moments, focusing on the task of binding my forearms multiple times by expertly knotting and attaching them to the woven creation at my spine.

For a second, I think he's going to ignore my comment until he spins me around and cups my cheeks, his chest rising and falling with every quick inhalation.

"There's nothing ordinary about the way you make me feel." The gravelly texture to his tone slips to darkness, his lusty gaze dawdling over the elaborate design that showcases my breasts.

Both of his hands burrow into my hair, one of them cupping the back of my head to hold it in place. He stares at me for a heartbeat, impatience seeping through his fingers as they cinch the lengths to tip my head backward. "You're mine," he confirms, his expression genuine. "Understood?"

"Yes," I say breathlessly.

Imprisoned before my husband, my pulse thrums when his mouth crashes over the top of mine. André doesn't just kiss me; he owns the very air in my lungs, claims every racing thought in my mind, and completely devours my soul. His plunder hunts all of me, leaving my old life upturned. It's a messy clash of teeth and bruising lips. A master demanding submission or a possessive husband professing devotion to his wife.

Breaking away, he plants both hands on my shoulders. "Kneel for me."

If I had wanted to escape, I'd be powerless to do so. My legs may well be unbound, but they tremble with adrenaline and a deep-seated weakness for this man's authority. As I obediently sink to my knees, he hunkers to my eye level and nudges my chin upward, using the tips of his fingers. His stonelike erection dominates the gap between us, springing up next to his carved abdomen, thick and primed for a brutal explosion.

"You have all the power even when you're tied up like this." He swallows. "Don't ever run away from me again, do you hear me?" His gaze burns red-hot when I nod. "Good girl. Now let's see how wet my dirty little wife is for me."

A blistering bolt of pleasure starts where his touch skates from my jaw to my pebbled nipples and lower. "I've imagined your sexy pale curves wrapped and bound with red knots since the first time I plunged my dick into your throat." His hand moves between my legs. "Looking at you now with my ropes next to your soft skin makes you the hottest woman I've ever seen, Wifey. But if you think running from me is the answer, I won't be so forgiving the next time. I'll become a savage tiger who'll hunt and break the fragile prey that you are and believe me... I *will* fucking demolish you."

He twists my nipple, hard. One, and then the other. I yelp when he slaps each of my breasts in turn. Skin to skin. Sharp stings and firm pinches, his rough touch commanding.

"André..." I breathe his name. "I don't want to be a trapped housewife with no life outside of us. I need adventure."

Thrills. Interaction with other people who won't get shot in the face by my husband."

"What are you saying?" His tone cracks like I've shattered the thin veil of his decorum.

SINÉAD



“Tell me what you need from me.”

I’m light-headed when he yanks my hair harder and breathes into my ear.

“I want to be your equal and not thought of as a weak woman stuck at home in a fucking gilded cage.”

He stills for a rapid heartbeat, releases my hair, and hooks his hands under my armpits to haul me up to stand. Except he has other ideas as he urges me backward, his hard dick prodding my pelvis, his inked chest bumping into mine, and his starless eyes drilling into me. The backs of my legs hit the mattress and I topple onto bound arms. He arches over the top of me, his muscular form eclipsing the ceiling lights. I search the depths of his eyes for a wisp of friendliness, but all I see is dark, twisted desire and my own lust reflecting back at me.

André stays in place for a bit, his lips pouting as he considers his next move or what order he deems fitting for his prisoner. The rhythm of his heart catches up with mine, our breathing syncs, and the silence crackles.

“I am the ruler of your fine body whenever we’re together—like this. But outside of that...” His powerful physique goes rigid. His eyes burn hotter and his skin catches fire where it meets mine. “I’ll give you whatever you want, Wifey. A motorcycle of your own. A new home. A hotel to run... to create... to build. A family. Together, we’ll create the life you’ve always dreamed of, because you’re the only woman I want to own... the wife I’ve chosen and the mistress who

tortures me without even knowing it. You belong to me, and I'll do whatever it takes to ensure you never have a reason to doubt it."

The instant he finishes, he spreads my legs wide, grabs his dick at the base, and maneuvers it to my opening. There's no pause for permission or gentle kisses as a prelude; he rams deep inside and awakens all sorts of sparked emotions within my core.

The strangled sound scraping free of my throat couples with the raw hiss exploding from his. His hands are on my breasts as he drives in harder, his fingertips digging into my flesh as if he's punishing me for something. For crushing the surface of his authority so fragments of light pour into the fine cracks where our twisted darkness reigns.

We stare at each other, a silent passing of remembrance. Beneath his brutal movements, there's a gentleness hiding in the wilderness of his untamed mind, a man who secretly seeks refuge in the woman he's furiously fucking.

I'm desperate to touch him, mark his broad shoulders with my nails, sink my fingers into his thick hair, but I'm bound in rope, both literally and figuratively. Twisted scarlet strands tie me up on the outside, and on the inside, the valves of my heart are knotted and tangled.

The manifestation of desire he generates within me could never be replicated. I crave him with so much hunger that I'd let him fuck me in whatever way he chooses. And he does. Again and again, he thrusts his thick dick in a savage rhythm and briefly withdraws as if he can't stand the sensation of our separation.

He fucks me.

Owens me.

Slaps my flesh.

Bites my nipples.

And just when I think I'm about to detonate, he pulls out, flips me over onto my stomach, hoists my hips into the air, and parts my buttocks. I gasp at the quick, silent demands of his

hunger. My spine bows toward the mattress when he spits on the puckered hole that has never been touched before.

“Are you ready to be stretched, Wifey?” I don’t recognize his voice, the rasp to his accent so thick with lust it borders on unholy.

I angle my head to catch sight of him. “I’ve never...”

His gaze latches onto mine, dark and triumphant. “Even better...” he says in a sexy rumble. “None of those motherfuckers in your past were man enough to experience all of my beautiful wife. They were scared of your power... whereas I feed off it... off you. Take it like a good girl.”

He spits again and runs a finger over the uncorrupted entrance, welcoming a wicked shiver of the forbidden through the tense muscles. The next thing I know, he’s breaching the tight muscles using a single digit and his dick drives so far inside my pussy that it nudges my cervix.

“This tight little ass is *mine*. Your hungry little cunt is *mine*. Your whole fucking existence belongs to me, Mrs. Souza.” His ownership of using my full title isn’t missed.

I’ve never been so consumed and coveted—utterly worshiped and divinely violated. My inner walls pulse around the intense intrusion; his steely dick shows no mercy as it conquers, whereas his thumb stays still, unmoving in its place.

There’s no reprieve from the force he uses. A harsh spanking smack echoes in the electrified air, his opposite hand connecting with my ass cheek. My flesh absorbs the thrilling punishment and each one following the first, ejecting a tattered scream from my hoarse throat.

Where his hand strikes, the torrid burn has surely left a mark, his primal punishment a trigger for the dark and sadistic fantasies I never knew I craved. He seizes my hair and drags my head back like he’s riding bareback and I’m the creature he’s dominating.

I quake as his hips slam into me, his dick burying itself deeper with every maddening thrust he subjects me to. With my flushed cheek chafing on cotton rich bed sheets and my

torso restricted by ropes, brutalized by my husband's fingers, hands, and dick, I lose more of my innocence to the monster who forced me into his chaotic kingdom. I find peace in this new bond we've constructed from memories, attraction, and trust.

In a beat, all contact is stolen from me. Chills shower me in tingles. I glance over my shoulder, where he runs a ringed hand through his tousled hair before pouncing on me again. Only this time, he heaves me off the mattress by fixed knots and manhandles me in front of a full-length mirror.

Standing tall behind me, his heart thrumming against my spine, he slides a possessive hand around my belly and his mouth drops to my neck, where he licks the curve of it. "Look at yourself, Sinéad. This is the woman you are to me. Fully charged like high octane." His lips brush against the shell of my ear. "My ravishing wife." A sultry nip of my lobe liquifies my muscles.

I dig my feet into the carpet for purchase, staring at his unruly reflection. His tattooed, corded throat, unshorn facial hair, and fiendish carbon eyes—sexually intoxicating. It's a rush just being next to him. A starlike pattern of red weaves across my upper half and traps my engorged breasts for his perversion. My hair is an unkempt nest of lust and roughness, but my eyes, they flourish under the weight of my realization.

He caresses my stomach as we both stare at the arousing vision of us entwined. "You're the sweetest thing I've ever tasted. I crave the thrill of *you*. Promise me you'll always trust me."

"I promise."

My heart races, ready for the freefall. This is who I am now.

His.

"I'm going to fuck you from all angles, Wifey." He presses down on my shoulders. "And watch you take all of me."

I blink at his thick shaft on my way down to the floor, inwardly praising its essence-coated sheen and the frenzied

vein throbbing under the duress of what looks like an exceedingly painful erection. Settling on my knees, he lowers too, sweeps my hair over one shoulder, places a hand between my shoulder blades, and forces me to collapse forward again. My cheek nestles into the plush silver-gray carpet and my secured forearms tingle as wild pins and needles circulate.

“Hmmm,” he hums while his hands explore my bare skin. “I’m going to enjoy our honeymoon.”

His dick needs no guidance, nor does it wait for permission. My teeth clench when it fills me, my inner walls spasming in a powerfully greedy way. He draws back and slams forward, his fingers weaving around the knots he tied to give him something else to hold on to. The strength of him winches my shoulders upward, all the while being taken from behind.

Half of me dangles, the other half is supported by a strong arm, and impaled on his dick. I catch his feral eyes in the mirror. How he’s admiring my vulnerability as he continues to pound into me. Returning my lustful gaze, he smiles at me. Not a happy grin or a pleased smirk—it’s sadistic, carnal, and full of adulation.

Rearing back, he sucks in air and growls, “This is it, Wifey. Me filling your cunt, so full of my cum it will pour out of you for days.”

He hauls my bound arms into his chest and roars, instantly palming my throat and squeezing. His opposite arm hooks my pelvis to drive his thrusts in harder. Sweat mists on my skin as I get light-headed and gasp for oxygen. His fingers relax a fraction, permitting me to suck in a gust of air.

Pleasure cripples me, lost in the force of his fucking. He fucks me harder than ever—faster, deeper, aggressively. Each time he withdraws, he spears me again as if desperation is controlling his urges to ram back inside of me.

The way this man makes me feel is criminal. I could lose my mind if I’m not careful—lose all sense of direction and control. Blood surges in my ears, an energetic melody to his grunts and my pleading gibberish. The toxic vision of us

ignites a powerful, leg-quaking orgasm. A release that electrifies my core and won't stop. The deeper he pounds and the harder he tunnels inside, the easier it is for the crown of his punishing dick to hit the exact spot of my detonation. Every. Single. Time.

“André... Don't stop...” Tears stream from the corners of my eyes, the sensation sweeping through me and kissing my soul. I'm out of my body and inside of it, at the same time. Screaming and moaning in a strangled sob unlike any sound I've ever made before. “Fuck... shiiiiiiiiit... Dré...”

His pace switches from manic to controlled as the waves subside. I know he's exploding when he sinks his teeth into my shoulder, curls his chest around me, and growls. A comforting hand clutches my stomach as he pumps every last drop of cum into me. I pant and shake, refocusing on our united reflection. He breathes heavily into the crook of my neck, creating ripples of vibrations from my flesh to his. We stay locked together for a flurry of erratic heartbeats, me fully captured by him and André fighting his way through his unhallowed impulses.

He slowly pulls out on a quiet hiss. I slump away from him, my ass in the air and body worn out. I'm mentally and physically exhausted. Well and truly claimed in every way. Lying on my side before the mirror, I observe him through slitted eyes. How he tactically loosens the knots holding my arms in place and rolls me to lie flat on my stinging ass.

My numb fingers automatically open and close to get the blood flowing again. Once he's content I'm comfortable, he moves between my legs and parts them at the knees.

His eyes darken to a shade more terrifying than dominance—its unadulterated possession woven with obsession. André carefully spreads my thighs wide and stares, his brow creasing to a frown. Our gazes lock and he reaches out for me, hooks his ringed fingers around the rope hugging my breasts, and heaves me to sit. “We didn't use protection.”

I swallow hard. “I know,” I whisper.

“So, you know what that means?”

“Do you?”

He kisses me for a lingering second. “Yeah.” His fingers move to my swollen folds. “I fully understand what it means, Sin. It solidifies our feelings for each other, and I’ll never let that bastard anywhere near my family.” I watch his brow crease as his gentle fingers stuff leaking cum back inside of my entrance. “This belongs to you. It’s all yours.” He offers me a cheeky grin, a rare smile.

A blazing fire of ownership sparks within me. No matter what I tell myself, he’s the man I was secretly waiting for—he’s the one I had wanted to save me since I was a little girl.

Except life has never been straightforward.

Unfortunately, I’m all too aware of how complicated villains can be.

A shiver of apprehension tells me we’re caught in the headlights of an impending catastrophe.

SINÉAD



I've witnessed six sunsets and missed every sunrise.

Our time spent on the colossal boat was free from interruptions—until this very second, when his phone rings from the edge of the tropical plunge pool. André curses under his breath, his large, inked hand reaching for the device.

I shove myself upright, switching from lounging under an ice-white parasol to sitting on the edge of a padded daybed. Although the ship's crew packed swimwear and sundresses for me before we embarked, my husband likes to observe me from every angle, naked and exposed. On the occasions I had dressed for moonlight dinners, the seams of each flowing mesh garment never lasted long.

He pushes out of the water, his broad shoulders tense, the skin glittering under a baking sun. Reckless beads dive off his skin as he rakes his fingers through his damp strands and prowls to the railing, out of earshot. I suck in a flabbergasted breath, still shocked at the fact I'm married to him. My greedy gaze devours his firm golden buttocks, magnificent dick, and his shorn testicles that hang right between his taut thighs.

The past few days have been one hell of an awakening. One where we easily slipped into a lazy pace of life—where I forgave him for forcing his world upon me and he made an oath under the stars to protect me at all costs. I haven't forgotten about my old life, and definitely not Mammy. André has assured me he has a plan to sweep her out from under Frankie's nose and has asked for my patience.

For a heart-stopping moment, he twists his torso to catch sight of me and then returns his troubled frown to the horizon. Something unknown crawls over my skin. A chill of uncertainty—or maybe it’s simply the dread of knowing we’ll return to shore eventually, and our honeymoon will come to an end.

Gazing over at him, I don’t just see a ruthless killer or the most powerful man in Miami; I see *him* without boundaries or expectations—the realness of him—my husband. He captures my senses and injects them with boundless adrenaline, as if he’s waking me up from the spell I fell under after we had parted ways decades ago. No matter what unhallowed deeds blemish his soul, I still find myself falling in love with him.

My arms ache to hold him and my core clenches. After a few minutes, he pivots on the spot and casually stalks in my direction. There’s nothing basic about his strides. Each step is confident, his bronzed muscles flexing as his sinewy physique draws closer. My pulse goes crazy when he crowds me, driving me backward until I’m flat on my back, vulnerable to his every sadistic whim.

“I have business in the city.” He kisses me with mind-melting authority. “And the good thing is, I’ll be back in time for dessert. Unless you’re ready to return to the penthouse?”

A thick ebony brow hitches playfully, and his rogue smile leaves me questioning my ability to form sentences.

I’ve fallen so hard.

Fuck...

I shrug nonchalantly. “I’m enjoying life at sea. A few more days wouldn’t hurt, I guess.”

He thumbs my lower lip, dragging it open to give him access to the tip of my tongue. “Yeah... life at sea... it looks good on you, Wifey.”

Delightful chills scurry from the roots in my scalp to my toenails. I’m on fire. Crawling off me, he narrows his gaze, his carbon-black eyes settling on my exposed breasts.

“You look good on me.” I laugh, cuffing his wrist before he’s out of reach, unable to take my eyes off him.

Raw attraction ignites on contact. My heart beats faster. Familiarity and white-hot threads of a limitless affinity curl around the pair of us and I momentarily forget to breathe. He swallows hard and lifts my knuckles to his lips, kissing the now healed tattoo. André doesn’t need to speak a word. I can see the shift in his eyes like tunnel vision, how it surpasses our fiery mania and burns further in his soul.

Sun dapples his chiseled form when he dips out from under the parasol, preparing to leave me alone. My stomach flips when he winks at me from over his shoulder.

“I’ll be a phone call away. If you ring me—I’ll answer, no matter what fucker thinks they have my attention. You’re my number one, Wifey.”

Something inside of me squeezes, a surge of glacial fear prickling my hot veins. I do my best to quash it and inwardly tell myself I’m turning into a love-struck fool.

“And why would I need to call you? Unless...” I throw my legs over the edge of the daybed to stand. “Unless I get bored and decide to FaceTime you for a visual.” I slide my hand between my legs and watch the possessiveness in him snap.

He stiffens as I taunt him, my fingertips skimming the sensitive folds he’s devoured night after night, and day after day. In a stuttered heartbeat, he’s before me, his untamed control maneuvering my hand out of the way. “This is mine.” His head shakes slowly as he brings my wet fingers to his mouth and sucks them one by one. “Wait for me, Wifey. That’s an order. I’ll make it worth your while.”

“Oh, yeah?” I laugh from the back of my throat, surprised at the hunger thickening it. “Then you’d better hurry back to me, Hotshot.”

He’s a blur of muscle and speed, almost giving me whiplash when he moves, his expression so tortured it could summon the devil. Eager dominance drives me backward onto the daybed, my shoulders pressing into the spongy pad

beneath them. I notice the flare of his pupils, the quick intake of salty sea air, and the moisture rolling from his vivid tattoos.

He crawls on top of me, brawn and strength, securing my position. I groan when he clamps my thighs and hurriedly spreads my legs, hungrily impaling me with his swollen, furious dick.

“Fuck, you feel so good,” he hisses on entry. “No matter how many times we do this, it never gets old.”

He’s a stunning man, etched with danger and designed by a cruel cartel kingpin. But at this moment, he’s not taking me aggressively. It’s something else—an energy I have no name for because I’ve never known it.

I struggle to breathe, wondering if I’m drowning in this undefined emotion alone. Until my rugged husband digs his fingers into my cheeks to control my gaze and our eyes fuse. His features soften and his mouth crashes over the top of mine.

I’m fluid like the salty sea and hotter than the bold sun. His teeth graze mine and his tongue penetrates my mouth like he’s fucking it too. When he resurfaces from his plunder, he stares right at me and nudges his forehead into mine.

“Do you know why rule number one is so important?” He grinds his hips, angling in deeper, all of him moving inside of me. Regardless of the warmth his breath offers, chilling tingles flourish over my feverish skin. My fingers curl in the damp hair at his nape, spurring him on as I’m lost in the embrace of my husband’s custody. “Because I’ve always been fascinated by you, Sin. That’s why I made you marry me. Not because of mafia titles or cartel power, but because you belong to me. And I won’t let you slip through my arms again. I spent years searching for my best friend and came up with nothing.” His eyes are the purest form of liquid sincerity, fierce and hot. “And yeah, baby, this boat is named after you—my damn dog too. So, when I tell you that I’m the only man who would kill for you, I fucking mean it. I’d bleed and go to war for you. Do you understand what I’m telling you?”

“Yes.” I exhale the word on an adrenaline-fueled sigh.

“Tell me then—tell me who you belong to.”

Flat on my back, held beneath the weight of him and his admission, I fall apart. He drives in harder, his control shattered, his movements wild like a ferocious storm battering at my defenses until I’m broken and rebuilt.

He fucks me, forcing every inch of himself inside of me. And I match his insanity with clawing nails and locked legs, wrapping his hips to welcome the fast-paced intrusion.

“I belong to you, André,” I groan as the surge of an almighty orgasm crests and my love for him detonates within every nucleus of my every cell, the explosion a blast my heart will never survive.

“And you’re the...” He bites my earlobe and thrusts, his eyes the wildest I’ve ever seen them and rasps, “... only one who owns all of me. La eternidad.”

“Dré... Fuck... Dré...” I’m lost in him. Gratified by the sound of his uncivilized grunts and imprisoned behind the invisible cage he’s locked me in. “I... Love... You...” I whisper on the cusp of euphoria, exhaling my declaration into his mouth.

“Then don’t run from me... unless your life depends on it.”



I said it first.

André, more or less, had implied it; however, the four-letter word had slipped past my lips, not his. It’s not important, not when he’d revealed the depth of our perplexing relationship in more than words.

A few hours ago, he showered, dressed, and kissed my lips with a gentleness I’ve only glimpsed upon, then he sauntered to the helipad positioned on the bow of the ship without looking back. My heart lurched the second he climbed into the waiting chopper and rose into the sky like the god he is.

Since then, I've had a restless catnap indoors, showered, picked at the fresh fruit platter he'd ordered for me before he left, slipped into a strapless sundress, and yet I still have a wired uneasiness in my gut.

I'm baking under the coastal midday sun, gazing out at the Miami cityscape where the Souza presence is felt in the form of concrete giants erupting from the earth. Sky Hotel catches my eye, its brass logo shimmering amid competing buildings that don't quite hit the same height. It reminds me of Lennon and his soon-to-be fiancée—and the engagement party I was invited to as Sinéad Quinn and had accepted as Sinéad Souza. Hopefully, it'll be any day now, and my first official outing as Mrs. Souza. As surreal and messed up as it may be, I'm secretly proud to stand beside André.

I return to the master suite and move to the nightstand where the new iPhone André organized for me sits. I sit on the bed and hold the screen to my face to unlock it. While we were together, I didn't have the same compulsion to stalk him on social media. I had a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view of the glorious man, so why would I look at him in 2D? Yet now that I'm by myself again, aside from the armed guards on every level and the ship's crew busying themselves with chores, I feel lonelier than ever.

Tapping on his social media handle, a smile reaches my eyes, aching my cheeks. He'd posted the picture of our matching tattoos and added the brief caption, *la eternidad*.

Quickly searching for its meaning on the internet, my fingers fan my chest at the sentiment.

Forever.

I squeeze my eyes shut for a fluttery heartbeat and let the meaning fizz through me.

“How did I fall head over heels for André Souza?” I whisper and then giggle like a silly schoolgirl who has a mega crush on a bad boy, fully aware my obsession with him has never faded.

Fate invited us to meet under the Hawthorn tree in Ireland all those years ago. Evil circumstances had torn us apart and luck threw us back together under the stars in Miami.

I save the picture as my lock screen image, then search up Luna. Selecting the stories feature, I tap through the short videos from last night that show multicolored cocktails, well-dressed guests enjoying the music, and an epic sunset view. The most recent video, filmed a few minutes ago, is a panoramic sweep of the rooftop area which captured Lennon working in the background and Reno stalking past the bar, his dark aviators hiding his usual businesslike features. As soon as the fifteen-second clip ends, I tap on it again to rewatch. It's a neurotic thing to do, because I would have pinpointed my husband the first time I'd watched it. He's not exactly easy to miss.

My head whips up to the sound of a distant clang and muffled thuds. A metallic echo haunts the stillness, and then I hear hushed voices. The hairs on the back of my neck rise, sensing something isn't quite right.

One minute I'm cross-legged on the monster-sized bed and the next I'm hurrying across the room to open the gun cabinet where André locked away his revolver the night we arrived and removed seconds before he boarded the chopper.

As I punch in the first few digits of the combination code he'd made me memorize, unusual noises carry on the breeze. I spin on the balls of my feet, startled by multiple bangs similar to muted gunfire. My pulses goes haywire when the digital display on the keypad blinks at me and I have to start over again.

"Hands up!" a male voice booms before I can finish the task, signaling I'm not alone anymore.

Reluctantly rotating away from the cabinet, I face four camo-clad figures. The lower half of their faces are hidden under masks, and machine guns outfitted with sound suppressors are locked and loaded, pointed directly at me. The only difference the clones have is a hodgepodge of varying heights. "Time to go."

“Wait... what do you want from me?” I take a step toward the bed where my phone is nestled in the unmade sheets. “My husband isn’t here. You should leave. Once his security team finds out you’ve boarded the ship without permission, they’ll contact the Coast Guard. My husband gave the order to shoot to kill.”

One of the men laughs darkly. “As you’ve pointed out, your husband left you here. As for the security guys...” He growls and jabs his gun in the air. “All dead, princess. Every single armed soldier and crew member met a fatal bullet. Fuck, even the captain will go down with this fancy-ass ship.”

“Put up a fight and you’ll get hurt,” another warns. “He wants you alive. Behave and come along with us, so you can live another day in another paradise.”

He wants you alive... who?

“Who wants me alive?”

“Don’t worry, you’ll find out.”

Dread wilts the high I’d soared on this past week. I should have known it wouldn’t last. Where contentment breeds, misfortune strives to shred it to miserable scraps. Just like the times when André and I would spend hours together on the Hennessy estate, both of us buzzing from crazy, adrenaline-induced adventures. But when I went home, I’d face barbaric punches and degrading taunts that knocked me straight out of Heaven and into the dark bowels of Hell.

The bittersweet evolution of us hadn’t changed. It never will. My merciless husband thrives in his ruptured world where dangerous, nefarious deeds are a daily normality.

For the longest second, I stare at the four men and silently weigh my options. Their formation blocks the opening where the glass doors leading to the plunge pool are folded shut.

“Can I pack a few things first?” I take a cautious step sideways to the disguised gun cabinet.

“Don’t move!” The closest man to me advances. He snares my wrist and yanks hard. I stumble, hitting against his

bulletproof vest. “Say goodbye to this life. Nothing will be the same for you after today.”

A whirlwind temper unravels within me. Nausea squeezes my stomach until I feel like vomiting, but without a gun, I’m at their mercy. A hexed, half-dressed prisoner in the middle of the ocean. These are the stereotypical thugs whom I despise the most. Selfish goons who only act upon orders rather than think for themselves.

I summon all the venom from my past misfortunes and violently shirk my arm to wrangle free, but his viselike grip chokes my fragile bones, ready to snap them into irreparable pieces.

“Get the fuck off me,” I say, my tone freezing with indignation.

In a bid to catch him off guard, I bob low and when I rise a second later, my opposite hand sails through the air and smacks his steely jaw. Without a thought, he slaps me back in retaliation. His mocking timbre hides in the darkness of my whirling mind and when he forces me to break André’s number one rule, I’m triggered.

Panic lifts my lungs with every quick inhalation, the shortness of my breath making me light-headed and desperate. The vicious demon in my soul spurs on every frantic thrash and riotous strike. My nails scrape and claw at his eyes, the frenzied attack on him dragging his mask lower to cut flesh.

The spine-chilling sound of a lethal snarl hacks through my physical assault on him. He victoriously manhandles me to the carpet. While I’m flat on my belly and writhing like a shark caught in a net, he stomps his boot on the small of my back.

“Stay the fuck down,” he bites out, hauling my arms behind my back and cuffing them.

“Motherfucker!” I hiss and pant, craning my neck to find my attacker. The metallic taste of my own blood blends into my saliva. “My husband will come for you. He’ll blow your entire fucking family to pieces and make you watch.”

The stone-cold eyes visible to me appear to sparkle as if he's amused. "He won't do shit when he's the one who'll go up in smoke, princess."

I freeze. "You won't get anywhere near him."

"Yet here we are. Face-to-face with his widow."

I give him a thin smile. "I will find out who you are and mark my words—I will personally kill you. He didn't marry a trophy wife; he married a woman who's a little bit fucking psycho—who won't hesitate to cut your throat at any opportunity."

Bang.

SINÉAD



One minute I'm spitting vengeance, and the next my face is splattered in warm blood and chunky gore.

I'm heaving and confused, anchoring the soles of my feet to the carpet after I push to a stand amid a gratifying massacre. The four soldiers were all precisely shot in the skull, every single one of them sprawled out before me, their fresh blood seeping into the carpet fibers.

At the far end of the deck, a man wearing an unbranded baseball cap and matching face mask stops for a second in the distance to reload his gun. The stranger is head to toe in jet-black pants, a chest-hugging top with long sleeves, and wears a discreet backpack over his robust shoulders. He doesn't wear a protective vest, nor does he lower his weapon.

Our gazes meet, my green-blue to his supernatural jade. I'm trembling in the uncertain standoff, except there's something familiar about his confident, determined gait.

"There were four, right?" he asks in a refined Spanish accent, his raspy voice igniting odd sparks all over me. I nod and swallow, tasting alien coppery goop at the edge of my lips. "Good. That's all of them. Are you okay, Sinéad?"

He steps over a corpse and drags the material to his chin, revealing his mouth—a mouth identical in shape to my husband's, except this guy doesn't use it to offer a reassuring smile. In contrast to André, he appears a little smoother around the edges and slither in build. Similar, but not a carbon copy.

“Giovanni?” I whisper. “How did you know I was in danger? Where’s Dré?”

My husband’s twin brother continues to walk the perimeter of the master suite, looking out of the portholes and then at the analogue timepiece peeking out from under his sleeve. “I’ve been watching the yacht since Dré rang me.”

“So who the hell are those guys?”

His ghostly eyes narrow on my gory appearance as he thinks quietly. “I don’t know who tried to kidnap you. But it’s not safe out here anymore. I hitched a ride on a speedboat which took off the second I climbed on board. Dré has a jet ski stowed in a drive-in garage on the lower deck.”

Of course, there’s a garage.

“What’s going on? Do you know where André is? They said I was his widow—please tell me he’s safe?”

“Focus on getting off this yacht first. Understood?” he commands, his poker-faced expression unmoving.

“Did he know they would come for me?” I swallow a whimper, uncertainty clawing up my throat.

He shakes his head. “No. Which means they were watching the penthouse and followed the convoy to the docks. The fuckers came in on the tender boat. They waited for the yacht to anchor close to shore and knew it would need fresh supplies.”

“I need to warn André. He’s in dang—”

Whirling rotary blades cut up the cloudless sky, a mechanical engine roaring from outside.

“Christ... I should have known.” Giovanni darts to the outer deck and covers his eyes with a pair of sunglasses. “They have backup.” He weaves around the dead bodies, stopping when my startled gaze reflects in his shaded lenses. “There’s no time to fuck about, Sinéad. We have to get to dry land.”

“Wait... my phone... I need to tell André.”

“He’s my twin brother. I have the guy on speed dial.”

He takes my hand, then pulls me out of the master suite and into a private office. The cylindrical silencer attachment on his gun aims low as we descend a flight of stairs and hurry over transparent sections of an atrium floor. We don’t stop until we’re on the bottom deck, staring at a seven-meter-long saltwater pool where a custom-crafted tender, doubling as a jet ski, is secured for direct sea access. Its ebony fiberglass construction mimics the high-spec design of the *Sin Pretty* and would comfortably allow four passengers.

“Climb on board,” Giovanni orders, his sharp authority not unlike my husband. “I need you to drive the tender as fast as you can, okay?” He unhooks a key fob attached to a coiled wire lanyard and tosses it to me when I’m in position, straddling the leather stitched seat. “Don’t start the engine yet. I’ll tell you when.”

Thunderous rotors chop up the beautiful sunlight into flickering shapes when a substantial helicopter silhouette darkens the freshwater pool overhead, its position shrouding our whereabouts.

Giovanni unclips the bungee cord anchoring us to the mothership and steps onto the watercraft. “Are you familiar with jet skis?”

I squeeze the handlebars, my gaze fixed on the rippling ocean, nauseatingly aware of an unsettled seesaw motion. “It’s not a jet ski. It’s a mini speed boat.”

“Yeah... my brother is a flashy fuck. Can you handle it?”

“Of course I can.”

“When the platform is fully submerged under water, I’ll tap your shoulder to signal acceleration. Head straight for the shoreline. Don’t look back, no matter what happens. Keep fucking going. Here—you’ll need these.” He drops his sunglasses over my shoulder, rotates, and flicks his leg over the tanned seat, doing a one-eighty. An ammunition-filled backpack digs into my spine, his rigid posture now pressed against me like a stone pillar, so he’s facing the wrong way.

The creeping shadows above us move with the chopper's flight path as it leaves the stern, no doubt preparing to land on the helipad. Flecks of blazing white sunshine sprinkle the tropical pool water surrounding us like treasured gemstones, the intensity dulled when I shield my eyes with Gio's aviators. Slowly, the pool base sinks into the depths, inviting eddy waves to carry us away from the garage, the tide granting permission to go ashore.

The marine air and far-off horizon identify with freedom. Though the midnight-blue hue we're at the mercy of resembles a bottomless abyss that could easily imprison anyone who enters its dark depths.

"Turn on the engine," Giovanni instructs. "Get ready..."

"Okay—" I twist the key and brace for the next order. My heart is racing, and my eyes blink wildly at the coastline, on Sky Hotel to be precise.

A flirty breeze plays with the loose lengths of my air-dried hair, carrying a few ticklish strands across my nose. Giovanni remains quietly stoic, patient in his timing. I'm bobbing about in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean with André's twin. That alone should offer me peace of mind. But it doesn't. Anxious knots tighten around my lungs, the unforgiving hold of anxiety threatening a panic attack.

His widow.

After a few painstaking minutes, when he's certain the chopper has landed on the ship, Giovanni taps the top of my shoulder. "Now!"

In a frenzy of nerves and adrenaline, I apply the throttle, hard. The ski lifts at the front as the acceleration increases and we zoom forward, cutting through the waves on a quest to reach land. The temperature dips and chills prickle my bare legs. My hair whips all over the place and a roaring wind rushes past my ears.

Giovanni shifts. I dare a quick glance over my shoulder and curse out loud. Our enemy has spotted our heroic getaway attempt. The chopper ascends into the cyan-blue sky at the

exact moment a thunderous, apocalyptic explosion suppresses the sound of its mechanical whir and overrules sea bird chatter.

My wild gaze returns to the Miami coast. The sky is stricken, the expanse of it contaminated by an evil cloud of black smoke. Shock steals my breath. I witness spewing flames that devastate the upper floors of a high-rise tower.

“Giovanni!” I yell. “Where’s Dré?” My heart rate soars, the crazed vibrations pulsating in my throat. “Miami is under attack!”

Lethal bullets whizz past and plunge into the choppy sea, narrowly missing us. Undeterred and focused on the immediate threat, I hear Giovanni fire off a few rounds. I keep my hand on the throttle and chant inwardly, begging for my husband to be at the shore when we get there. A vertical trail of turbid smoke creeps skyward, shrouding the buildings in the distance.

I scan the other towers, all of them untouched and smug in their new domination of the city. A fear so incomprehensible and sickening terrorizes me right to the core of my being. Realization hits me. My beating heart malfunctions, going deathly still as it levitates in my aching chest. A hard mass is trapped in my throat, even when I swallow. I’m painfully aware of my chaotic pulse pounding in my throat and shake my head to try to comprehend the graveness ahead of me. There’s nowhere else to look, other than a blazing rooftop—crumbling upper floors—Sky Hotel.

André!

Please—no!

I scream into the wind, tears glossing my wide frantic eyes, only to feel Giovanni jerk violently, his upper body thrown into mine.

“Gio...” I look over my shoulder for a split second. “Are you okay?” I yell at him, my voice breathless and raspy, my gaze returning to the burning building.

He doesn’t answer, but I sense his movements. I can feel him straighten and recognize the riotous crack of every bullet

he unleashes. The jet ski isn't fast enough to outrun a helicopter. We're under attack and exposed, an easy target on the open ocean. But I won't give up. I'll fucking swim to the beach and take my chances with the sharks if it's the only way I'd reach André.

The ski continues to skim over the top of waves, rising high and slamming down hard, until the engine cuts out. When I turn the key, nothing happens. A slick film of gasoline bleeds across the uneven swell. The gunmen had punctured the fuel tank and now we're stranded.

"We need to swim..." I rip off the sunglasses in preparation.

Mechanical thwapping blades shred up the polluted sky as the chopper circles our aimless bobbing. I twist around, feeling Giovanni move. He plants his boots at either side of the long seat to balance himself, raises his weapon heavenward, and takes a moment to concentrate. After a heartbeat, he shoots. His bullseye aim penetrates the pilot's temple inside the cockpit. An almost immediate second shot takes out his accomplice in the rear compartment.

Within a few wretched heartbeats, the helicopter spins out of control and the dark shell smacks the water, its blunt force playful like an orca whale. The sea turns rough on impact, spreading turbulent waves in every direction.

Giovanni manages to scramble around so we're face-to-face; his beautiful cheekbones smeared in a bright-red wash of salty water and blood where a deep cut slices the flesh. He takes off his cap and runs a hand through his choppy dark hair, sweeping it away from his damp forehead. Luminous pale-green eyes, cold and secretive, pinpoint the carnage in the middle of his brother's city.

My ribs tighten and a strangled sob bubbles from my throat. "Where... was... André... going?" I hiccup, one hand clutching the pain in my chest, the other hugging my queasy stomach. "Sky Hotel? I saw... Reno... he was there..." My voice breaks.

Like an earthquake, tremors erupt all over me. I start to shake from the inside and quickly assess how close we are to the shore.

Giovanni doesn't speak. He methodically pats the left pocket in his utility pants and removes his phone. A subzero chill jars my bones like a relentless Irish winter, even though the Miami sun is torrid. He taps the screen, presses it to his ear, and waits.

I hold my breath to focus on the monotonous dialing tone. Far-off helicopters gather around the burning tower. Distant sirens carry in the eerie hush. I swallow hard, witnessing a majestic halo of supernatural green engulf the circumference of Giovanni's dark pupils. They become barely visible pinpricks, the only visible sign of panic on his otherwise remote expression.

Once it switches to voicemail, he hangs up and redials. My heart flounders, the erratic pulse jumping in my throat. And then our gazes connect, and he says, low and sharp, "He's not answering."

To be continued...

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USA Today Bestseller Autumn Archer spends her days romancing the darkness to create delicious, tortured men who deserve to be loved. Not only does she bleed Dark Romance, she dabbles in the lighter side of love with Romantic Comedies written as A. Archer. With all of her books, you can expect high heat, passionate emotions and happy endings.

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“When there is darkness, the light will always find a crack to shine through.”

