



OBSSESSED

THE UNDENIABLE - BOOK 3

LOLA MALONE

Copyright © 2023 by Lola Malone

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

 Created with Vellum

CONTENTS

[Untitled](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Lola Malone](#)

OBSESSED

THE UNDENIABLE

BOOK THREE

LOLA MALONE

*“First they ignore you, then
they laugh at you, then they
fight you, then you win.”*

ABOUT OBSESSED

Let me see you, mon lapin. Let me design you, define you, and consume you.

Gabriel:

They call me the *Initiator*, and *Les Frères Perdus* is where it all began. Gone are the days that they could strike me down. Now, I live with the family I created, in a golden cage that is my castle.

And I am King.

But when my brother comes home from New York, I see *him*. Hidden in the shadows, tall and strong, yet timid and kind. Mason represents an emotion I'd thought was trapped inside me, lost in nostalgia. The connection to my past, wrapped around me in silk rope, now tied around the neck of the man my brothers have brought home. Mason's inexperienced, and he lashes out with anger. He wants to fight me, though he can't deny what we both crave. My beautiful, strong *lapin*. Because I'll take it all, and more. I'll *devour* him.

Mason:

Looking after Pops, and making sure I keep my spot in the Inner Circle of the Business, are the top priorities in my life. For us to survive. And I never asked if there's anything more. Until they come after me, those we have branded as murderers, as our enemy. They chase me away from the second row and into the spotlight, where *he* awaits.

Gabriel is the most stunning man I've ever seen, and as wicked as he is gentle. As ruthless as he is compassionate. He becomes the enigma I want to unravel.

But when the doors to freedom open, I know I need to ask myself the most obvious question.

And accept the answer.

Obsessed is an abrasive enemies-to-lovers with a toxic angel and his furious captive. It opens the doors to cult life and combines a kidnapping scenario with plenty of action and

suspense. It's part of the interconnected series The Undeniable, and while our boys get their HEA, not everything is resolved. More will be revealed in the final instalment of this series.

This story contains dark themes, adult content, and potential triggers, though every effort was made to portray them thoughtfully and sensitively.

Specific triggers (potential spoilers): violence, hypnosis, kidnapping.

Dear reader,

The Undeniable series is going yet another shade darker with *Obsessed*, and once more, I fully recommend you read *Shameless* and *Fierce* first. We're about to enter another world—not only do we change setting, but we question the way people design their lives. Their devotion.

Obsessed was the hardest book for me to write. I felt like we needed answers to questions we raised in both *Shameless* and *Fierce*, and as I was searching for those answers, I explored another sphere. One that fascinated me, as I went along and created the characters—who are those people who give up everything to join a cult, join a whole different life?

As with the other books, I took my time in researching the topic. A topic that was often as gruesome as it was interesting—it sucked me in on multiple occasions and made me question even some of my own things I'd define as my cornerstones.

Writing fiction is creating magic. It's what I tell my children: in our fantasy, everything's possible. If you're looking for a most plausible world and plot, my books won't be for you. Still I hope that *Obsessed* will carry you away, and that you'll enjoy reading it as much as I did writing it.

Like with my other books, please be aware of the following trigger warnings: non-consensual sex acts, violence, hypnosis, depression/anxiety, and substance abuse of tranquilizers.

Lola Malone

PROLOGUE

The ship arrived in the early morning hours, when it was still cloaked in darkness, and rain fell out of the sky in thick, icy drops. It was here, in these dismal surroundings of the port, where other cargo ships reunited from all different directions after days of travels across the Atlantic. It was here, where secrets of the sea were exchanged.

A prolonged blast rang loudly through the frosty air, making his body shiver in anticipation. He shouldn't have been here in the first place. Yet here he was. And the only person he could blame for that, was himself. He'd been upset that despite rising tension on the streets, and their earlier decisions, his family was focusing on drugs again. And not just that. No, they were taking it up a notch. Because owning a solid drugs transport between NY and Brest in France, meant they needed a flawless organization on this side of the water. It meant that they'd constantly be in the line of fire, which was *not* how he wanted to live his life.

There had been words, and then there had been more words. And then he'd made this stupid promise to himself to go and oversee the transport with his own eyes. He understood that it was imperative to get out of this shit agreement they'd made with their newest rival. To understand the process and to meet their informant, before making any definite business decisions. But as the journey had progressed, so had his level of concern. What if any of these plans had been leaked? They had an agreement with All Saints, after all. A shitty one, but still—a deal was a deal and they were about to call it off behind their backs. Even without ratting them out, there were

too many rivals out there, too many risks of being screwed over. It was better to be the ones throwing the punches. But damn, they could do with a trustworthy ally. It wasn't easy to deal with all the stress, and he couldn't blame their brother Mason for needing some time on his own, to think.

Nearly there.

His insides twisted at the thought. This was the tricky part of the journey, if he didn't count the stormy weather on the way. And the lack of WiFi, for that matter. His love would be worried sick, not to mention his brother. But this was the reason why he'd come along. The so-called meet—and—greet with both their informant and the goods.

Seated at his desk, he stared outside, past the container block and right ahead in front of him. The view of the pitch black water the boat had been slicing through over the past few days had altered. It was now decorated with flickering lights coming from the nearing harbor. Action, a lot of it, despite the early hour. He tore his gaze away, and back to the cabin he had been occupying for the last few days. It hadn't been that bad, although the place was slightly outdated. Sparsely decorated, it only had a single bed, a desk, and a chest of drawers, but at least he'd had his own bathroom.

The ringing of the internal phone on his desk cut violently through his murmurs, making him jolt in surprise before picking up. This was his call, literally.

“Hello.” The old-fashioned receiver felt cold and heavy in his hand. There was the soft rustle of a dead line, and somehow it made his insides churn.

“Hello? *Petit?*”

Nothing.

The soft knock on his door startled him, and with the phone still against his ear, he whipped around in his seat, facing the closed exit. He'd locked it, right?

“*Petit?*” He repeated, into the receiver, his gaze fixed in front of him. When there still was no answer, he dropped the thing and strode toward the door, fiercely ignoring the sense of

growing dread that started to form a ball in the pit of his stomach. He took out his cell from the pocket of his jeans, but one glance confirmed what he'd suspected—still no WiFi. After one last look at his screen and the gorgeous face of his love, he swallowed, then opened the door with a swing, chasing away this unreliable sense of fear. Fear was never a good advisor.

There was no one out there, the narrow corridor empty. When the phone on his desk started ringing again, a chill skittered down his back all the same. Was someone playing him? And if so, why? What was it about him that made people always think that he was the weak one? Just because he was a *nice* guy, it didn't mean that he was to be underestimated. And it certainly didn't mean that they could scare him. Right.

“Hello?” The corridor did not respond, not even after he gave both ways a quick glance. There was nothing out there, only the doors that led to the crew's sleeping quarters. Ignoring the ringing phone, he stepped outside, taking the opposite direction from the one leading back to the deck. He hadn't been this way before, and when he got to the corner, he hesitated briefly once more. The flickering lights around him were not reassuring, and most certainly increased the beating of his heart, but it didn't stop him from walking on. Nor did the change of the humming vibration the boat made around them. But it was that door in the far corner, the one that stood ajar and that he now edged toward, that made goosebumps rise and his stomach churn. With another shudder of the boat, it creaked further open, sending shivers of fear down his spine. *Right*. From the inside, the place should have looked similar to his own cabin, with its single bed and chest of drawers. His heart leapt straight to his throat. Because it didn't.

A stranger sat at the desk, gaze already fixed on his. A mop of shiny, brown curls fell around his face and ears, making the hazelnut eyes nearly too large for the delicate features. On his face, a small smile, that looked both disturbing and fake. Over the past two days he'd frequently shared conversations with other cabin crew, and had even shared a few meals. Yet, he hadn't met this stranger before. He was sure of it.

“Did you—” He waved back toward the corridor, to where his own room was. “Did you just knock on my door?” The smile fell, and the stranger slowly nodded. “Okay? Well, it’s nice to...” His eyes caught sight of the wall, and his voice faltered. Dozens and dozens of images were pinned to its surface. “That’s *us*.” His worried gaze drank them all in. His family, his whereabouts, his *love*. “The fuck is this? Who the hell are you?”

“Sorry.” The stranger swallowed, then took in a deep breath of air as if finding the courage to reply. “I’m sorry, yeah.” Around them, the boat shook and moaned its vibrations, and it let out two more short blasts as it made its way into the dock.

“You’re sorry? For what?”

The stranger just blinked.

Crew members appeared further down the corridor, their cobalt-colored tunics and bright yellow caps glimmering as they left their rooms and moved toward deck, laughing and cursing. Shoulders were slapped and promises of drinks in nearby bars were made. Nobody noticed him in their excitement. Trepidation started to claw its way up his throat. “I don’t understand. Who are you?”

“*No One*.” The stranger stood, a slender frame, slightly smaller than he was, around his shoulders a worn coat that clung to his chest as he started to take the pictures off of the wall, shoving them into an equally ratty backpack. “I am sorry.”

“You already said that. But for what?” He sighed, impatience growing. They were running out of time. “Why are you here with all these photos? Do you know who I am?” Fuck, that had to be it. All Saints had somehow figured out that they’d gone behind their backs and had sent someone to spy on him. Although that barely made sense. His own family didn’t even know where he was.

Around them, the ship stopped moving, clearly having arrived at their destination, and suddenly he was desperate for fresh air, for space, to be away from this outdated, cheap hotel

environment. To be away from this new project that was about to go completely off the rails. Where the fuck was their informant *Petit*?

The stranger sniffed, shaking his head as he continued to pack his bag. He didn't reply.

"Who the hell do you work for?" He practically screamed. "Talk to me! Because when we leave this ship, my people are waiting for me, and they won't like the sight of you."

The stranger ignored the lie, wiping at his tears like he was annoyed with them. When he glanced back, he looked pissed. "I told you. I am No One, and I don't want to be involved."

"But you already are!"

Footsteps approached through the corridor, fast and furious. "Sir?"

He turned to watch them approach, then swirled his head back to the stranger. "What did you do?"

"I—"

"*Sir*. We are with the Port Security Center, and we need to bring you in for questioning regarding the transportation of drugs."

"You set me up," he hissed. The stranger nodded, a look of regret in his moist eyes, then swept his backpack over his shoulder and passed him as he left, leaving him humiliated and empty handed. Not even a name.

A war declared.

CHAPTER
ONE

MASON

One week earlier

Confusion. Fatigue. And that damn song—“End of the world” by Skeeter Davis. Those are the first things I remember before...

Before they took me.

I used to love that song, it being one of Pops’ favorites. Now, I’m not so sure. Still, my lips part into a cracked smile as memories bubble to the surface, but it rapidly turns into a painful grimace. They are paper dry, ready to crack from the lack of hydration. My tongue flicks out to coat my lower lip, and I try to flex my hands, needing to feel the blood circulate. Needing to feel strength, even though they got me battered down. Defeated.

I inhale greedily through my nose, *craving* oxygen, *craving* fresh air after having been enclosed in a damp space for too long. And with every deep breath I take, the erratic feeling of panic fades a little bit. For the blindfold helps to keep my memories vivid, soothing the brutal reality that’s lurking out there, waiting to make its presence known. Here, in the darkness, my tired mind is doing all it can to keep the images of home, of our small kitchen and that old-fashioned CD-Player, alive. The one my Pops still uses while he’s cooking.

“Don’t they know, it’s the end of the world, it ended when you said goodbye.”

The familiar smell of garlic and pepper when he makes his favorite meal—fried chicken with cranberry sauce and fries—is so vivid that my mouth waters. These bittersweet images are all I have to keep myself from reality. Because I know that everything will shatter to pieces the moment my eyes are freed from the blindfold. It makes my heart practically burst with homesickness. I’ve never been away from home. Where am I?

Slumped against a seat and by the sounds of it, I’m guessing I’m in a car, though there’s no noise apart from the hum of the running engine. Yet I sense the presence of other people around me, and it’s making my skin crawl with anticipation. A bump in the road confirms my suspicions of my whereabouts, and my lolling head hits the cool window, causing a dull ache to form at my temple and run down to my shoulder, awakening goosebumps.

Think. The blurriness in my head created by the bump against the window, threatens to erase my memories, though it cannot stop certain images from fluttering up and swirling like smoke, filling in the gaps with burning shame.

Because I got caught.

We were at the port, looking for Charlie, but did we even find him? My mind searches for the answer. We’d organized a party for both him and Samuel, to celebrate the opening of their martial center. *Did I go?* I imagine the relief of being able to scratch my nape with my fingers as my mind races.

I didn’t go.

Hushed voices make my body go rigid instantly, and fear clambers up my spine, tickling the pit of my stomach until a ball forms, solid and heavy. My eyes flutter behind the blindfold, but I can’t see shit, and my fingers flex and pry around the stiff rope that’s keeping my wrists together in an attempt to keep them ready. To strike. Because that’s what I will do as soon as the opportunity’s given.

They know I'm awake at the same time as I know that we've reached our destination, gravel beneath us being replaced by a softer ground, perhaps sand in combination with grass. Lips grasp the fine outline of my ear and a voice, husky and laced with amusement, muses, "Welcome to France, Mason. Are you going to behave?" It makes me shiver. But when his hand snakes around my neck, my startle melts into uncontrollable fear. And then he squeezes. It's not enough to hurt me, more a show to prove that he's in charge. I swallow, my Adam's apple bobbing against his grazing fingers, while flashes of my last training day pass by.

Practicing judo with Samuel and Big sure was fun, even though it meant finding my ass on the mat more times than I could count. Never did it occur in our minds that one of us could be in danger, could be captured. We're the Business, we're strong, we're *brothers*, no one can harm us.

Please don't forget me.

The car door opens, and both desperation and fear turn into a swirl of anger, the only emotion that's always on my side.

"Where the hell am I?" It comes out as a hoarse, broken rumble, and makes my dry throat splutter. They ignore me, instead start speaking in French, while pushing me into a walking position. I struggle to keep up, orientation entirely lost without sight.

"You've got the wrong guy." It's the only plausible explanation for all this, and hearing myself speak the words out loud, makes them true. They hoped to catch Logan Donnelly, and instead captured one of his bodyguards.

Of—fucking—course.

Logan... he doesn't like me as much as I'd wanted. No matter how hard I try, we just don't get along. Which is why he made me the bodyguard to Angélique, his wife. She's a sweetheart, their baby girl a doll. I love working for her, but whenever he's near, my mask of self-preservation slips back up. He's a moody man, demanding, used to always getting things his way. Perhaps he's even happy that I'm out of his reach. "Fuck, you've got the wrong guy."

Jerking on the ropes, I try my best to keep up with the forceful hands that guide me further along the ground. Definitely grass. “Listen, I haven’t seen your faces, we can still call this quits. You just drop me on the road, and I’ll never tell anyone what happened. But I need to go back, man, I can’t leave my—”

“Your grandfather, we know,” that same, raspy voice supplies.

“We don’t have the wrong guy.” Another voice, smooth and slightly higher-pitched. He sounds familiar, though I can’t place him. His words make something foreign tug inside my chest, and I swallow again, deeply this time, needing to dismiss the confusion it invites. Anger is easier. Always easier.

“Get this blindfold off of me,” I grumble, ignoring the protesting rattle in my throat. It might sting like a bitch, but I won’t just give in. I need to prove it to myself.

A few words are exchanged, and then I feel probing fingers at the back of my head. When the silk flows away from my face, it caresses my skin in a taunt, exposing my sensitive eyes to the sudden light. They squint, and I want to pull my hands up and shield them, only I can’t. Grunting under my breath, I duck my head, count inwardly until five, before looking up again. I need to know who is holding my life in their hands. I recognize the first person I see as one of my kidnappers. He’s smaller than I am, and with his slender frame and dark, wild, curls, he has a boyish appearance. It’s the eyes though, that give him away. They’re light, with a glimmer of madness in them.

“You,” I growl, to which he pouts his lips in faint mockery, then cackles out loud. It makes me feel fucking defenseless.

“Oh, you’ll be seeing a lot more of me. Remember him?”

I size up the raven-haired guy that holds the rope that’s bound around my wrists. He’s tall and well-built, and would be a tough one to fight. His hair is styled into a thick braid that reaches down between his shoulder blades, exposing an angular face with sharp, blue eyes. They remind me of Logan’s—clear as the sky, never missing a detail. It’s

unsettling, the way they're now trained on mine, sharp and unpredictable.

Pursing my lips, I swallow my growl and give him a clipped nod instead, then check the other guys around us. They are no competition, with their smaller build and slender limbs. All similarly dressed in a loose pair of silk pants and a light shirt, confirms that I have, in fact, been kidnapped by *les Frères Perdus*.

“I would ask you if you had a good journey, but I know that you slept most of the the way here, the car ride included,” Madman continues, then gestures to an enormous, dark-green door. “Shall we?” Fuck, I'd been so focused on my kidnappers, that I haven't checked my surroundings. Like this, disoriented and tied up in ropes, there's no fucking way I'll be able to escape. The thought makes me jittery.

Thump. Thump.

The raven-haired guy loops the rope that's tied around my wrists around my throat like a leash, and pulls. “Come on.”

“I'm not a fucking dog,” I growl, to which he turns over his shoulder, eyes narrowed and lips pressed into a thin line. Fuck, those eyes are unnerving. “*Quoi?*”

I want to spit in his face, fight him, make him bleed. “Nothing,” I mutter instead.

His long digits curl around my chin, making me grind my teeth. “Let me ask you again. Are you going to behave?” I send him a furious scowl, to which he replies by pulling the skin of my cheeks taut in a squeeze that has my eyes burning. My cheeks redden in humiliation and pain, but I can't do anything else but give him a clipped nod.

“Good boy. Now, let's get you to your owner.” He gives me another tug on the rope, and despite the baring of my teeth, my feet move and follow inside.

Motherfucker.



THE ENORMOUS RECEPTION hall is grand, with elegantly-shaped case windows—outside, the promise of miles and miles of nature. *Freedom*. It's so close that I can practically touch it. The room itself has high ceilings, large paintings kissing the walls, and rustic wooden flooring. It's spacious and luxurious, giving the impression that every single piece of furniture was placed with care. The wooden material has a warm tobacco-leaf scent, similar to rosewood. Gosh, Pops would love this, he's a history freak with European ancestors. The thought makes me grumble inwardly, and I shove it away immediately.

We saunter from the reception hall into an equally immense drawing room that is, to my surprise, bursting with activity. A few desks lean against the windows, with piles of fabric on them. Groups of guys are dotted around them while working with clay and leather, paper and glue. Their clattering and chatting infuses the sense of home. It's a startling conclusion, one I swallow all together with the blooming embarrassment in my chest.

This is *not* a home. It's a prison, *my* prison. Until they kill me.

When my eyes catch movement in the air, they first land on the ceiling, on which a painting of an angel is molded into the white roofing. And then I see a pair of fancy, golden balloons flying around. While I watch, they explode, coating the air with raining golden glitters.

“Hello, my dears, it's so good to have you back.” My head snaps back to a middle-aged woman who joins us, her voluptuous body wrapped in a shiny, purple tulle dress that squeezes her breasts tight like a corset. “You can untie him now.”

Hands fiddle with my wrists, and the next second I realize that they have been unbound. With an inward groan of pleasure I flex my fingers, needing the circulation to return quickly, before tucking them in the pocket of my dress pants. I'm still wearing my work attire of a black suit, black shirt, and tie. My phone's gone though.

Of course.

“Welcome, Mason, my name is Rita. I am—”

“You brought him *here*?” A shrill voice makes us all turn. A pair of gray eyes stare me down, as a guy approaches. He’s smaller than I am, his dark hair swept to one side, revealing a row of silver piercings in his ear. He swivels his gaze to the raven-haired guy, a venomous sneer on his lips. “I thought you just wanted to *check* on him. You never said that you’d actually go and *get* him!”

“Maxime,” Rita chimes. “You knew he wanted him. Don’t be upset, we’ll find you someone special too.”

“No.” His eyes are back on mine. “I wanted him first. I’ve *always* wanted him.”

The raven-haired guy barks out a laugh, then gestures to two guys to come our way. “It’s not about who you want, brother. It’s about who *he* wants.”

Maxime hisses at me, and if it wasn’t for the true hatred I catch in his gaze, I would have laughed him off, this angry kitten. Now, it leaves me feeling even more shaken-up. The rope that lingers around my neck doesn’t help either.

Silence falls over us, as multiple pairs of eyes catch on to this fit of whatever this is—a lovers tiff maybe? In a normal situation, I would have sent everyone an apologetic smile before gliding back into the shadows, though that doesn’t seem to be an option here. Their eyes are on me, while I watch this guy Maxime being escorted from the room like some rude customer. I cough awkwardly at the absurdness of the situation.

Rita turns back to me with a smile on her face. “Don’t mind him. Right, so my name is Rita. I head up our workshop. It’s so nice to meet you. You sure are gorgeous, Mason, and those *eyes*.” I flinch, but she ignores me as she claps her hands. “Thank you, boys.” Like a pack of docile wolves, they scatter quietly away as they take their leave—even Madman disappears out of my sight with a cackle—and once more I’m stuck with the raven-haired asshole, who’s still holding the rope like I’m some goddamn trophy. “Shall we?” Rita doesn’t wait for me, simply turns on her heels and starts walking.

“Fuck, you’ve got the wrong guy,” I grumble again under my breath. “Just do it, kill me. You have *nothing* that the Business wants.” Fuck, I hope this freak isn’t going to use this rope to hang me. The thought turns my blood to ice.

The raven-haired guy barks out a laugh. “Kill you? Already? Now where would be the fun in that?” He tugs on the leash, and I practically stumble when he starts walking. “Come on, let’s go.”

Rita’s already waiting for us at the end of the lounge, holding open a door. When we enter the long, narrow corridor, I grind my teeth as nerves rattle my core, and force myself not to think about the looming death, or torture, that’s awaiting me.

Because I got caught.

A door is opened, and on instinct my fists raise. And then they drop back to my sides. Because I am faced with a small, luxurious bathroom. It’s... Whirling back around, I make sure to catch, and *match*, the asshole’s glare, and snarl, “What the fuck is this?”

He sends me a glorious scowl. “A bathroom. You stink.”

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re playing at, but the answer is no.” Making sure to get right in his space, I bump his chest with mine, ready to strike if he does as much as *say* something else that pisses me off. I won’t go down without a fucking fight, even if my hands are a little sweaty with anticipation.

Sticks and stones won’t break my bones.

“Guys, please,” Rita begs, but neither of us breaks this death stare we’re in now. His chuckle makes my hackles rise, and I spit, “Fight me, you lunatic.”

He raises his hand, and mine mimics his movement, ready to deliver the first punch. Instead of going for my face, he lifts the rope from my head, his smirk a smug one.

“I already did. And I won. Now, shower.” With one firm push, I stumble across the threshold, left fuming. “You’ve got

five minutes.” And then the door slams shut, leaving me alone, panting, my mind a mess.

“What the actual fuck?” I look around me, not wanting to admit that the walk-in shower and that closet, filled with white, fluffy towels, does look tempting.

Asshole is right. I *do* stink. Dried sweat and wrinkled clothes make my skin itch, and the combination of having slept too long and not having rested enough, makes me feel dizzy. With anticipation, with dread. Because I know what is going to happen to me, I’ve seen the photos.

My stomach churns violently at the thought.

And yet... everything here is so clean. It’s so different from the tired, dated bathroom I share with Pops, with its leaking faucets and yellow spots. Sitting down on the closed toilet, I dig the heels of my hands into my eyes until little white sparks float behind my eyelids. Then I open them again. Nope, still fucking here. What an incredible mess. In the corner against the wall stands an incense holder with sticks, diffusing a gentle, though intoxicating, earthy smell. It helps calm my nerves, because this place has no windows. No way to get the fuck out.

The hot jets and spicy shower gel don’t disappoint, and I swallow down greedy gulps of water to soothe my hoarse throat. Relief and strength floods through my system like fresh waves. By the time I wrap a towel around my waist, I’m only half surprised to find the pile of fresh clothes waiting, my old ones gone. Though the sight of the cream-colored shirt and pair of silk pants, makes me growl inside. They await me with a taunt, begging to be put on and look like a damn cult member, snickering at my startle that there are no briefs. Of course there’s no fucking underwear. With the pants in my hand I let out a sigh, needing to fight the urge to throw them against the door and fight my way out like the goddamn bodyguard I am.

Not yet.

Only once I’m fully dressed, do I dare look at myself in the mirror. My green eyes are dull, the underlying visible red lines

a proof. My skin is naturally tanned, but due to the lack of daylight and oxygen, I look like a ghost. I run my fingers through my thick light-brown hair and easily slick the mess aside. With my eyes still on my own reflection, I inhale another waft of the earthy scent, that, in combination with fresh air, keeps my anger in check. I need to keep it together, if I want to find my way out.

There *will* be a way out.

Rita's already waiting for me when I open the door, her impressive chest heaving as she cracks a smile. "There you are, beautiful darling." Her compliment confuses my emotions, making my usual awkwardness peak through, replacing anger with alarming speed.

"Listen, I don't know why I am here," I grab her gingerly by the arm. "I can assure you that you have the wrong guy. I'm only a bodyguard. If they're expecting ransom for my return, I can already tell you that my employer won't take the bait." Her eyes narrow, but before she can say anything, I press, "I won't say anything, I promise. We can forget about this, and each get on with our own lives. You have my word."

The shiver of hope that my words provoke, is misguided. Because that's not how a kidnapping works. Of all people, I should know. We never sent the 'wrong guy' home, nah. Just like said 'wrong guy' never keeps their promise to *never* speak about it. No, they'll most likely dump me somewhere in the dirt, dead. "I have a grandfather who relies upon me." Which is not entirely true, since he has this new nurse he can't stop talking about. Perhaps it is I who rely upon him, the man who's the closest to anyone who'd actually miss me in their lives. As much as I love my brothers, they've both found their special person, and I have very much become the third wheel, no matter what they say. They have moved on without me.

"Oh honey," Rita just shakes her head and gives me a smile, that softens the painted features on her face. Then she offers me her arm, completely ignoring my argument. "Come with me."

"No, listen to me—"

“Is there a problem here? Do you need your leash?”

I swear under my breath when I see the raven-haired guy approaching through the corridor. His face is still set in that permanent scowl, his footsteps muffled, though the movements are calculated, knowing. When he comes closer he gifts me with another of those arrogant smirks, like he knows that I'd beg Rita to set me free, and that those pleas would be useless.

“Of course there's no problem here, Gaëtan. It's just around the corner, the first door to your right. Good luck, Mason.”

My mind is racing, though my feet keep walking. Fuck, this is it. We halt in front of the door, and the hand that pats my shoulder makes me flinch, but my eyes won't budge as they eye the wood in front of me. I try to swallow down the bile, but it's thick and heavy, and won't leave.

“This is part of the process, Mason, just let it happen. Here.” Rita's hand reaches for the knob and she opens the door. I walk inside to where a faint light brightens the room.

“Process? Uhm—” The door clicks behind me, making me spin back and try the door knob. It's locked. I turn back on a sigh, eying my surroundings. Unlike the other places, there's practically no furniture here, apart from a chair. And rope. More cream shirts and silk pants now, as two big guys appear, quickly approaching. Anger kicks in like a fire drill, erasing fear and my usual timid self. There's no time. Not now. *This* is about survival.

“The fuck you want?” I sneer.

Wrong question. Because they're coming right at me.

CHAPTER
TWO

MASON

Fury leaves a sizzle in the pit of my stomach, and I might be a socially awkward fucker, but I sure as hell can fight.

And I *will* fight. For my honor. For my Pops. For my brothers in the Business.

“You wanna take me out?” I growl. My body trembles with anticipation, and I crack my knuckles as I prepare for a first hit.

“We don’t want to fight you, Mason,” one of them says, still he does pick up the rope. “But we’ve heard that you are quite a wild one. I’d rather not have you injure my brothers, or myself.”

He takes another step forward, and I inhale sharply as I watch him approach. “You look pathetic in your cult clothes, fucking weirdos,” I sneer, then take a step sideways in an attempt to flip them off. Though that’s a delusion - I’m locked inside this hell with them.

The other one moves in on me with a crooked smile, and I don’t miss how his eyes roam my freshly, changed clothes. *Their* freshly changed clothes. Yeah, yeah.

“Damn you,” I rumble in a low voice, then make a fake attack with my fists. “I will make you bleed for this.”

He nods. “I know. And that’s exactly why we have this protocol. To protect our brothers from someone like you.”

“Yeah? You afraid that I’ll beat the living shit out of every single one of them? Because you know I fucking would. I’d leave them to bleed, all of you, you fucking psychos.”

Something shifts in the air, heavy and dark, matching the glimmer in their eyes. Then both men simultaneously close the gap between us, leaving me to calculate how and which one to attack first, and most importantly, how to defend myself from a possible blow. Movement in the corner of my eye catches me off guard, and a fist hits me right in the jaw, unexpectedly and embarrassingly painful, making me drop my attacking hands to cup my face. I back away, but can't escape the second punch that goes straight for my gut, and I bend double as I roar in pain.

"We will not let you harm our brothers," one of them growls.

"Fuck you." My hand flies down to my clenched stomach, while I let the other one blindly fist whatever it can hit. I dish out a few straight punches, judging from the grunts I hear around me. But then one of those fuckers tackles me, and I fall over and crash to the floor. Flipping myself onto my back like a snake, I use my legs as kicking guns. *Kick kick kick*, everything that comes close enough to be hit. I am on the automatic pilot and my legs are in command. And they are—until my body gets lifted from behind. I turn my head while my legs keep kicking, but it's difficult to keep on focusing on two things at the same time. My eyes don't really see anything and my legs don't really kick anymore.

And then I feel it.

Rope around my ankles. It gives me renewed energy, fueled with desperation, and my feet pick up the pace and start booting again, despite them being immobilized and not able to do any more damage. A punch to my face scatters sharp, hot agony, and I howl while lifting my hands to hit back whichever fucker got me there.

"We want you to be one of our brothers," one of them says from behind me, his voice gruff from exhaustion. "Stop fighting us."

I let out a growl. I can't stop fighting, can't give up. Because I feel it clawing up inside my throat. *Fear*.

The knots tighten around my ankles and the kicking stops completely, and I heave, throat dry and face in flames, as anger and confusion mingle into distress. When they grab my wrists together, I know that I've lost and somehow, just let it happen. I'm dragged to the chair on my knees, and allow them to pull me on it, draping my arms over the back so I'm pinned down by my own limbs, leaving me a grumbling, growling mess. Anything's better than fear.

"Have you finished fighting us?" One of them asks.

"Never." The word makes me cough, and the cough makes my face hurt even more.

"Gaëtan's right, you are quite a wild one."

"We protect our family," the other one supplies. "Before you can become a brother, you need to surrender your mind and soul to your new family, and trust that you will be protected, and loved."

I huff at that, since it's the only movement that doesn't cause the feeling of razor blades cutting through my skin.

"Surrender starts here, with us, because we will physically protect you from any harm. Yield."

My eyes fly up from my lap, and I force myself to give him my best taunting sneer. It hurts. "*Yield?* Where are we, in the Middle Ages? Fuck you. I don't want to be here, and you can most certainly *not* trust me."

Without a single hesitation, he slaps me in the face, making my head spin. "This is apparently the only language you speak." He crouches in front of me. "Yield."

I spit at his feet, my eyes ablaze. "Never."

He sighs, then stands and looks at his partner. And then, without any warning, he shifts on his feet and lets his fist fly against my face, causing my head to thud back painfully. I feel my lip split, and warm liquid dribbles down my chin. My tongue darts out to catch the metallic flavor, trying to minimize the damage. It stings like a bitch.

“I don’t want to be here,” I wheeze. “You’ve got the wrong guy. So what do we do now?” Droplets of blood land on the light shirt and I watch them fall, the rain of doom. “You wanna kill me? Is that what you want? Then do it, let’s get this over with. Because I sure as fuck ain’t gonna *yield*.”

For some reason, my own words create a trickle, in the back of my mind, like a leaking faucet.

“It’s not what *I* want.” My captor snorts, and I suddenly know the correct version of his phrase.

It’s what he wants. Didn’t they say that when they captured me in the NY port?

Why me? It has to be a catch. It’s never me.

“I’ll come back for you baby, I promise.” The memory wears heavy in my heart, and I pull at the restraints, allowing rope to attack my flesh, needing to carve the words out. “Yeah? And you know what *I* want?” My voice has turned into a low rasp, throat constricting with the need for water. “I want you to fight me. And when you think you’ve had enough, I want you to fight me even more.”

He clacks his tongue. “This what you need?” A punch lands on my face, and I wince at the pain.

“Again.” I cringe as ache spreads along my jaw, breathing heavily as my thoughts stutter. “They’ll come for me, they will.” Still I cry out when the blow burns my other cheek, pride long gone. “I’m part of the inner circle,” I wheeze to myself.

“You’re lost, that’s what you are.” Our eyes meet, his fist awaiting. “You need more?”

My breathing comes in rapid pants as my thoughts howl through my head like a fucking hurricane. “Fuck, yeah.” Because they will break me, and then they will hang me, I’m sure of it now. I bare my teeth at him, because it’s the only thing I’ve got left, but his eyes don’t glow with smugness, nor with triumph. They search mine, although I don’t know what it is they’re looking for.

I think of Pops, of my brothers back home. All will end here. My miserable, lonely life.

“F-Fuck y-y-you.” The words leave my mouth in a puff of air, and I grunt at the effort of it. The pain is making me feel dizzy and warm as blood still dribbles down my face, accompanied by the tears I somehow can’t seem to keep inside.

“Yield. Give in to this family, let us protect you.”

I close my eyes, forcing my tears to stop—*stop!*—falling. “Just kill me already.” The words come out as a slur, because I’m defeated. Fuck yeah, I’ll yield. But over my dead body, I’ll speak the words out loud. Instead, I stay still, letting the heaviness of my battered body embrace my overstimulated mind. More tears roll down my cheeks. Fuck, when’s the last time I actually cried? I can’t remember. Was it during Mom’s funeral? Was it when Tony Dimarco practically drowned me during swimming class, and the teacher had to pull me out of the water with one of those creepy swimming hooks? Or when he stole my stash and had someone from his block call the police on me? Pops had looked so defeated. Yeah, I cried that day.

I may have drifted off, because there’s nothing but darkness for a while. Then, sounds reemerge in the back of my mind, and I groan when my captor pulls my head up by my hair. My head lolls dangerously.

“Eyes up here now.”

Another man has entered, and my eyes squint at the light that somehow shines around him. A silk robe with a deep V is wrapped around delicate shoulders, showing off a chiseled chest under a layer of necklaces. His blond hair waves on one side of his face, exposing the short locks on the other side. It looks soft to the touch. But it’s his eyes, dark and wide with lashes that curl up to his eyebrows, that I can’t stop staring into as they come into my peripheral vision. He couldn’t be more out of place.

“Who the hell are you?” I snarl, trying my best grimace, despite the ache it brings to my bruised skin. The tears have

dried, thank fuck. But where on earth is anger when you need it the most?

He doesn't reply, but neither does he relent his slow, measured steps, light as a feather, as they come closer, making me scramble back involuntarily. Because he's handsome, and that's the last thing I want to think of right now. He sweeps his lazy gaze over me, all the way from head to toe, before returning to my eyes, sending me a scorching stare that burns a hole into mine.

He's close now. Close enough for me to see the shining piercings that adorn his nose and the tender dip below his plush, lower lip. I drag my gaze away, back to the other guys, who are barely visible in the corner where they have retrieved.

"If he is the executioner, tell him to make it fast," I slur. Suddenly I feel exhausted, and ache blooms, torturing my muscles.

One of my attackers pushes himself off the wall. "He won't yield, just like Gaëtan said."

"Of course I won't, you freaks," I growl like the trapped bull I am, giving him a bloody grimace. The blond guy just tucks away a strand of dark hair from my face as he lets out a hum. The sound of his voice trickles like a gentle waterfall, a rippling flow that floats right through my bloodstream, chasing its way south, sending tickles and confusion throughout my stomach. And then he steps closer. Panic sweeps through me, clinging to my nerves and grating my skin. When goosebumps rise, I'm not so sure what freaks me out more, and I need it to be chased away by shame, by anger, because I can't let any emotion distract me from this fight, that clearly hasn't finished.

"Good, Jérôme." His eyes never leave mine. "Because now the real fun begins."

CHAPTER
THREE

GABRIEL

*M*ine.

Mason opens his mouth, but apart from a throaty wheeze, nothing comes out. Then, the tiniest flush creeps over his cheeks. He feels it too. That realization, in combination with the sweet color that coats his skin from both his injuries and his discomfort, is thrilling. If only he knew how long I've been waiting for him.

"Get the fuck away from me," he finally rasps. His eyes speak a different truth though. The way he blinks them as if needing to regain composure, to understand what the hell is happening.

To *us*.

"Beautiful Mason," I sing-song. "Are you sure?"

He pulls his wrists violently in an attempt to free himself from his restraints, growling as he does so. The rawness of the sound makes Jérôme rocket forward, putting his body between ours without a single hesitation in his wish to protect me, but it doesn't prevent our eyes from colliding. An electric shock shoots through my veins, and Mason rolls his lips as he averts his gaze down to his lap.

Watching him fight my brothers was... hot. I could watch them all day, punching and kicking each other, before they tie Mason up to a chair, a table, a *bed*. It still feels a bit surreal to be in the same room as him, to be so close. It's - addictive. Part of me feels victorious for finally having him at home, where he belongs. But he's bigger than I thought. Stronger...

No. The past is gone, the people dealt with.

I let a hand run through my hair, brushing the thought and its connected memories away, and the movement causes him to look back up. Good, because I want his full attention—to own his pain, his fear and his *lust*. His eyes are green, like shiny emeralds, embellished with golden flecks. He shudders, revealing how all the fight has escaped from his strong, battered body. Yet when he does, there's something else. Something that makes my own eyes squint in confusion as I search his face. Interesting. *This*, Théo didn't mention. *This* makes me very happy.

“You like what you see, Mason?”

“Fuck you,” he snarls, nostrils flared as he glares at me. His jaw ticks and his breathing comes in short gasps, but his lips are pursed, slick defiance carved into his features.

Beautiful.

With one last step our knees are touching, and I tower over him, necklaces dancing in a shiny twirl, and I lower my face so I can see his injuries up close. He hisses as one of my fingers touches his burning cheek, and he squirms in his seat, while Jérôme holds him still from behind. My fingertips gently trace the red marks on his other cheek, before I let them move toward his straight, long nose. When they trail off to his mouth, he snaps out of it, and shakes himself free. “Back off.”

This guy, who, had he not been tied up, could easily take me, *crush* me, pin me to the floor and kill me. Though not here. And I won't back off.

Because this is my castle.

“Damn, that was a good fight,” I mutter.

“You've got the wrong guy.”

“You need to yield,” Jérôme glowers, his voice shaped with its usual sternness. I give him a nod, then tap Mason softly on the nose.

“*Mon lapin,*” I whisper in French as I crouch in front of him, and the words, although he doesn't understand them,

make him squint. I lick my teeth, then grab my favorite necklace, a pendulum, that carries my favorite scent, matching the one we have in our dispensers. Sweet, like this man here, who will submit to me. Because I have chosen him.

“Jérôme here is my loyal guard. Every single member of our family vows loyalty to him and his brothers, requests their protection and accepts their power in doing so. You can liken them to bodyguards. *Your* bodyguard.”

His eyes dart between me and Jérôme, and he blinks as they land back on mine. “I don’t need a bodyguard, and I won’t vow to any of you.”

I clack my tongue. “I think you might be wrong.”

“I’m—” He shakes his head on a cough, but when Jérôme takes a step closer, he flinches, and tenses up.

“You don’t have to be scared. We’ve all done this before, when we became part of our family.” Except for myself, since I introduced this rule.

He puffs up his chest, and purses his lips. “I’m not scared.”

“Liar.” Ignoring the way he growls at that, I continue, “You lay your trust with your brothers, rely on them to protect you. No one in this family is left out, Mason, no one. You’ll never be alone again. Especially not you, sweetheart, because your bed will be warmed by me every night, your body and mind treasured.” That shuts him up. “Would you like that?” I croon. I sure as fuck would, and the mere thought has me flicking my tongue against the diamonds on my incisors, enjoying the sensation of the hard stones, that feel both slippery and powerful.

He doesn’t reply.

“You’re shy, I like it. But don’t worry, when you’re in bed with me, I’ll lick away all that innocence from your strong, willing body. Bend you exactly the way I want you. Sexy, sweet, and so ready for me.”

His green stare dips and stutters when it finds my lips, to where my tongue still caresses the diamonds. Then he clears

his throat and looks away. “I just wanna go home, man. I don’t want anything to do with you.”

“You lie, again. But don’t worry, you are home now, sweetheart, and I’m going to take good care of you.”

His tongue darts out, catching some of the dribbling blood, making me realize once more how badly he has been battered. “Are you the one who—” He clears his throat and flushes, visibly wincing at his own words, and I wrap myself in his perfume of fear. It smells sweet and innocent, and it’s got me purring. “Never mind,” he breathes.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

I tilt my head in curiosity. I have met many, *many* men in my life, and those like Mason, tall and fit, dominant and hunting, used to choose me as their perfect prey. But I don’t think I’ve ever met someone who’s as shy as Mason is. It’s quite...*interesting*. “Yes. I chose you,” I supply.

His eyes jump from the piercing in my nose to the one right below my bottom lip, back to my dark eyes. “That’s sick. I don’t, you can’t just, *choose* me.”

“It’s easy.” And then I bend my face toward his and lap away the blood dribbling down his neck. He lets out a shocked hiss and shivers visibly, but when I look up with a victorious smirk, he gives me a furious look.

“Well, I wanna go home.”

“You already are.” My splayed fingers toy briefly with the buttons of his shirt, the first droplets of blood decorating the delicate cream material, before I use both my hands to shred the material in one smooth movement. His eyes bulge, muscles rippling in shock when his silky skin is exposed to me. Inches and inches of creamy flesh, making my mouth water just at the mere sight. My rapacious hands linger over his body, floating over the vales of muscle, hard and ready to strike, were he not tied up.

“Beautiful,” I mutter, opening the now two loose parts of his shirt with my fingers, and I dip my head, looking up to see

him watching me like a hawk, eyes wide and full of wonder. I lower the pendulum and smear some of the strawberry-flavored potion over his belly, only to trace it with my fingers - heaving muscles underneath taut skin. He squirms in his seat, and for the briefest of seconds I wonder if he doesn't want my touch, but then I sense his true feelings poking against my thigh. His *desire*. It's hard, and hot, and needs to be taken care of. Lightning shoots through my blood. I want to devour him. I don't though, not yet. Because there are rules in our family. Rules I created, and being the *Initiator* of my family, I must set an example. Always an example.

"My brothers need your respect, your surrender, so that they can shield you." My finger dips into the sweet homemade potion on his stomach, before I suckle the drugs right into my mouth. As I do, I make sure to hollow my cheeks, eyes hooded and gaze straight on his.

"Fuck you," he spits shakily, but his breath catches when I brush my fingers lightly against his clothed arousal. "No, no, no—" he sings in a low voice, needing to convince himself that he won't give in. His eyes flash, in anger or confusion, but he keeps on shaking his head.

"Don't you want me?" I breathe against his ear. He blushes, then shakes his head even more furiously. "Liar. You know, I thought fists could break you." I let my hands run over his smooth stomach then back to his groin, where they caress the outline of his rigid length. Mason hisses when I pull on his waistband, rolling down the material, over his impressive bulge, that bounces happily into the open the moment the bare skin feels its freedom. His eyes go wide as he looks at his own cock, then back to me. "Wh-what—"

"But it's something else you need, isn't it?" This, what's about to come, has adrenaline pumping through my veins like fucking heroine. This need for him to breach me, to own my body, while I own his soul. I untie the silk cord of my robe, exposing my own dick, that's hard and leaking—a result of finally seeing him after weeks of anticipation.

"You're—you're not wearing any underwear," he mutters as he looks up through thick lashes, his voice quivering ever

so slightly, making him so fucking delectable. The moment Théo told me that they'd captured Mason, I started preparing for his cock. First I played my hole with my own, slicked fingers, before using my plug toys to make the muscle nice and soft. Ready for Mason to come and claim his new territory. But he doesn't seem so eager. He seems... *inexperienced*.

"I'll make you yield one way or the other, Mason." I straddle his waist, and we sit there for a moment, our eyes locked. Pupils have taken over the color of his eyes, but it's the emotion that radiates through them that really has my entire body trembling with need. He is an absolute wet dream—tall, muscular, with his golden mane casually slicked back, and those pouty, bloody lips.

I look down to where our naked bodies touch. His abs are even more impressive from my view, with my cock snugly nestled against his lower abdomen, hard and smearing pre-cum all over his skin as I wiggle my ass. He hisses at the sensation, making me look up on a grin and rocking onto him once more. He clenches his jaw and tries to give me an eye roll, tries to play it cool, but when I rock our hips together again, he runs out of character. His mouth opens and he lets out a stifled grunt.

"Yield," I whisper, and through gritted teeth he furiously shakes his head.

"No."

I grind my hips against his again, and fresh drops of my leaking length smear against his stomach. He eyes it, swallows, then repeats on a hiss, "No."

"What you gonna do about it?" My ass is clenching in anticipation. I stand, take his cock in hand, lining it up perfectly against my eager hole, before repositioning myself onto his lap.

"No," he pants again, but his thighs come up to meet the hand that is now gently wrapped around his girth.

"Are you still a virgin, Mason?"

His eyes practically bulge out of their sockets when the tip of his length breaches the first tight ring of muscles. He clears his throat, but it sounds more like a groan, because my ass is giving his fat crown more entrance to come into my snug heat, and then he slides in further, inch by inch, until his balls touch my ass. We both gasp at the sensation.

This time his groan escapes loud and clear, while his eyes squeeze closed, and he licks his lips before pressing them together in an attempt to keep himself under control.

“Bring the mirror,” I order Jérôme, and then bend forward to whisper in Mason’s ear, “open your eyes.”

They flutter open, those gorgeous green gems, and they flicker from my face to behind me, where the sight of our reflection is showing in his bewildered gaze. I don’t hesitate, but twist the moment until all luck’s on my side, as I start riding his cock painfully slowly. It’s excruciating. My hands brush over his bare chest, teasing his nipples, making them hard and sensitive and loving the way Mason stifles in my hold. He tries to protest, I can see it by the way he clenches and unclenches his jaw, but when his lips finally part, the only noise that leaves his mouth is a guttural grunt.

“That’s right. Feels good, hm?” I purr, and then I brush my mouth onto his, lapping at his pouty, bloody treats until they give in, parting for me, and he moans right into my mouth. It’s enough encouragement to ride him deeper, faster, and he squirms onto his seat, groaning, while his tongue tries to keep up with my invasion of his mouth. We’re fighting, a wet, tight, fucking erotic battle that my strong bodyguard has no chance of winning. I don’t pull back, until my chest is heaving with the lack of oxygen. “Yield.” It comes out breathy, and perhaps I expect him to resist once more, but he dips his head back instead, showing me the lines of his long neck. I dive in without hesitation, tracing the line of his jugular with my tongue up to his trembling mouth.

“Oh, *fuck*—” He wails, and I feel his cock become heavy and thicker in my ass as he lets out another unhinged grunt. My hand reaches for my own dick, bouncing and desperate for some love, and it practically jolts in my hand when I put my

fist around it. I start stroking, needing to come with Mason, needing to show him that from now on, we'll always come together. "There you go. Now you're mine." His breath comes out on a gasp, and I bend forward, nibble on his split lip and moan into his mouth. I taste his blood, his fear and his desire. "Show me sweetheart, show me how you come."

His jaw goes slack on a silent cry, and his whole body shudders with pleasure as he climaxes. I should have lifted my hips, made him pull out right before, but I didn't. I can't. He's already spilling inside me while I pump my hips, loathing to leave the electric invasion of this cock I've spent endless hours fantasizing about. Mason's breathing heavily, his eyes still shut, but under their lids they're moving rapidly, desperate to regain control. I drop a kiss onto his forehead, then on his nose, on his battered cheeks, then down to his mouth. I lick away the blood, then nudge his lips open and take him in for a bloody, deep kiss. He obeys, and his defeat and delectable, unique scent make me groan in ecstasy. I did it. I found him. My chosen one.

Wrapping my body around him like a vine, I press his head into the crook of my neck, cupping his nape with both my hands. He really must have been exhausted, because it doesn't even take thirty seconds for his breathing to even out, and his body to go slack, and heavy, against mine. Carefully, I lift my hips, while keeping his nose pressed against my collarbone. His soft cock slides out of me, leaving the proof of his orgasm dripping out from between my cheeks. Once I have him tucked back into his pants, I nudge Jérôme.

"Please take Mason to the bedroom we reserved for him. Since Ezra wants to become a nurse, he might as well start now."

CHAPTER
FOUR

MASON

The moment my eyes drift open, my gaze freely wanders around in a frantic attempt to see, to *understand*, where the hell I am this time. My entire body feels as if someone has hit me with a fucking truck. I'm in a bed, that much is clear. A fluffy, comfortable bed with silk sheets that caress my bruised skin and make my eyes droop with a fresh wave of fatigue. I clear my throat, which feels paper dry, burning in its desperation for some water. The memory of the hot jets pouring from the shower they allowed me to have, and the desperate gulps of water I'd drank down, feel bittersweet. Now, a sore ache first heats the inside of my mouth, before I burst out a torrid cough that makes my body spasm. My hands try to reach for my mouth, but...

"The hell?" I croak, followed by another dry, guttural rumble.

My fingers wrap around the ropes that are firmly entangled around my wrists, fighting with them, while my feet kick of their own volition, desperate to free themselves from their restraints. They don't get further than a few inches. "You fucking bastards," I grumble, the words bringing out another dry, and painful cough.

Tied up, they have me fucking tied up. Again. The sense of helplessness makes fear creep up from my toes to my eyes, letting tingling goosebumps appear on my skin.

He defeated me. That, that...*guy*. I've never been with another dude. I mean, I haven't been with a lot of girls either. One, I've had one girlfriend. But this was my first time of

fucking someone in the, in the... My cheeks flood with heat at the thought of the famished desire I felt when I'd penetrated his ass. How was it possible that he'd been the one in control? Because *he* fucked *me*, I realize. And I loved it, *so* much.

It's wrong. Every single thing about it. So I wrestle with the rope again, my jaw clenched, eyes adjusting quickly to the twilight which this room is bathed in. My head hits the pillow, surprisingly soft and fluffy for a prison cushion, and I let my eyes take in the elegantly decorated ceiling. In the dim light I'm not sure what I'm looking at, but it appears to be a painting of some sort. It's pretty nevertheless. At the breathy sound of the diffuser I instantly open my mouth and take greedy gulps of that earthy scent. It relaxes my aching limbs.

A velvety chuckle resonates through the room, and my head instantly flies back up, eyes darting around frantically. My body jumps toward an instant panic mode and there ain't a damn thing I can do to stop it. It has recognized menace before my reeling mind has, and it instinctively prepares, bruised up or not, for another fight.

"Who would have thought that the big, bad wolf of the Business is really such an innocent cub?" Out of the shadows I see Madman appear. Fear rattles me, and I scramble back toward the headboard. Licking my dry mouth, I sweep off small pieces of blood crumbs that leave a metallic taste. My face hurts, the bruises ache, its skin feeling tender.

"What's that? You're speechless after all?"

My lips part, but the only thing that stumbles out, is a dry gasp. I swallow, then try again. "Stay the fuck away from me." It comes out on a pathetic wheeze, which causes me enough annoyance to pull at the ropes again, though I practically cry out in pain when the raw material burns the sensitive skin.

A playful smile tugs onto the edges of his mouth. "I'm Théo, by the way. It's nice to finally meet you. I mean, we've met before, as you know, but it's the first time that we're actually talking to each other." He lets out a cackle, his curls bouncing happily. "Welcome home, brother, to *les Frères Perdus*."

“*Home?*” I gurgle. *Théo?* This man is the killer who took out innocent members of the Business and the Void in an attempt to infiltrate our organizations. The very same one who scared and taunted Charlie and his friend, Ezra. His rustling body makes my heart slam against my ribs, but instead of coming closer, he moves to flick on a green desk lamp that lights the room in more dancing shapes. My eyes sweep across my surroundings. A table and chairs, an antique chest of drawers with a large vase with flowers on top of it. There’s a window, hidden behind thick, velvet curtains.

An escape.

“Are you thirsty?” Théo grabs a glass and holds it under the faucet. A rumbling sound escapes my mouth at the sound of running water, making me inwardly squirm. Lesson one, *never* show your weakness. But this throat is torture, this fatigue, this fucking *confusion*. My scattered thoughts are all over the place.

“I take that as a yes. *Brother.*” He smirks gloriously, then saunters back to the bed, leisurely taking a seat onto the nearest chair, holding the glass out of reach.

“I’m not your brother, for many reasons,” I fire back, forcing the cough to stay down. “And I did *not* yield.”

Théo chuckles under his breath. “Yes, you did. My brother had his way with you.”

My face flushes crimson at his words, involuntarily taking me back to before. To *him*. Rolling my lips, I try my defense in a different way. “I’ve said this before, and I’ll say it again. They won’t bargain for me. I’m just a bodyguard.”

He tilts his head. “Poor boy, just a bodyguard. So what are you suggesting? That we should just kill you and dump your body in the ocean?” He pats my arm while he chuckles. “Just kidding. Besides, you heard my brother, you’re his.”

“I’m no one’s property,” I bristle. “Come on, free me. Fight me. They will rescue me, and when they do, I’ll come for you.” The slur of words leave my mouth on a painful rasp, and once I’m finished, I practically pant while taking another

breath. We both hear the husky wheeze coming out of my throat. I'm dying for some water.

"I went out on a quest and came back fully loaded. I found Ezra, and I found you," Théo muses, tilting his head while watching me with that maddening twinkle. "He's obsessed with you, you know that, right?"

"I—" My eyes dart to the glass that's dangling in between us. That's *impossible*.

"Do you want me to tell you where we are?"

I don't. Not really. But I need it, need to know, if I want to escape. Not waiting for my reply, he gets up, taking the damn glass with him, and strides toward the window. He opens one side of the dark, ceiling to floor, curtain. "You're in the far west of France, in Brittany. See that?" Miles and miles of green slopes stare me right in the eye as I peer through the glass. It flows like a valley, all the way down to—

"Is that the coast?"

"The Atlantic Ocean. You'll soon see the view from the other side of the house. The cliffs are breathtaking." I stretch my head, eyes already drooping, but determined to fucking know where I am. So I can get the hell outta here.

"I thought you guys were based in Paris?" Photos of strangled corpses flash through my mind. Was it only five months ago that Connor went to France to chase those madmen that were killing our people?

Théo tilts his face and watches me, a sly smile appearing on his lips. Just as I think he won't answer my question, he nods. "You're well informed." He takes a swig of his water, making me lick my cracked lips. I can practically feel the wetness gliding down my throat.

"Got to know your enemy," I counter, but a dry cough punishes me immediately.

"Oh, we're not your enemy, Mason."

I shake my head while my throat keeps on convulsing. When I can breathe a bit more, I rasp, "That's exactly what

you are.”

Théo ignores my pathetic counter and lets his gaze fall back outside. “You’re his chosen one.” The glass appears back in my vision, but his amused gaze has me on edge. “You want some?” I won’t nod, won’t fucking ask for it, but... I want it so badly. Still I keep my head straight, my stare blank.

“Let’s play a game,” he quips, and the glass disappears out of sight again. When he draws the curtain closed, I blink my eyes in an attempt to see in the sudden twilight. “I love games.”

The bed dips when his smaller frame practically snuggles up against me, and my heart rattles in my chest as I force myself to stay put. But the sudden cold touch of the glass against my clammy skin, makes me practically jump. Goosebumps break out on my neck and arms, and I growl at him, annoyed for catching me off guard.

“Don’t worry, wolf,” Théo mumbles, amusement replaced by a dangerous glint in his eyes. “You’re not mine to tame. Now let’s play. We’ll do a truth or truth, I don’t like the dare. Do you like the dare?” When I don’t reply, he continues, “Why did you join the Business?”

I give him an eye roll, then swallow, but it feels raw and painful since there’s practically no saliva left.

“I’ll let you drink if you answer.” Théo rolls the glass toward my mouth, and I open my lips without thought, desperate for the water. “Not yet.” He laughs at himself, a crazed, exasperated sort of sound that has my teeth grinding.

“I—” Because of Tony Dimarco, that treacherous piece of shit who stole my stash. I clear my throat and stifle another rumble. “I needed the cash.” We’d ended up in one of the bloodiest fights I’d ever been into, my revenge nasty and heated. Tony had made my life hell at school, and when I discovered he’d broken into our home and stolen our money, it had been the end of it. “So I went and took it.” Back. I’d taken it back. And then someone in his block had called the cops and they’d arrested me. The cops had taken one look at my ratty self, and had brought me, and my fucking money, in. My chest

clenches at the memory, at Pops' face when I'd finally gotten back home. He'd been disappointed, and that had hurt me the most. "Then some guy offered me a job working for the Business. Got me outta incarceration." I shrug. "And that's it."

"Hm." Théo pats my head with an approving hum, and then holds out the glass in front of my mouth. I dive into the sweet, delicious liquid that tumbles past my open lips, practically purring at the sensation. Oh sweet Jesus, it's been so long. It takes all my strength not to groan into the glass, but I want to drown in it, surround my entire body in its wetness, drink, swallow, forget, *leave*, go home to Pops. I take a big gulp, and another one, and then I practically choke it all out.

"Easy there." He withdraws the glass, but I want more. Heaps and heaps of it. Like answers to my questions. Resting my head back against the pillow, I take a moment to stabilize my breath. When I do, it comes with a question. "Who is he?"

Théo nods, as if he expected me to ask the most obvious thing, the tips of his mouth curling into the tiniest of twitches. "He's my brother by blood, and our *Initiator*. His name is Gabriel." He gives me a small smile, but I don't miss the way his eyes radiate a certain tenderness. Then it's gone. "Did you feel our presence over the last weeks, Mason? Like someone was lurking over your shoulder, looking in on your every movement?"

"I—" Fuck. I did. I remember all those moments I felt like someone was following me, though despite what should have been my inner defense mode, I hadn't felt threatened. I had wanted to talk about it with Samuel, but thought better of it every time. We had other things on our minds. Maybe I should have. Maybe I should have told him what was bothering me, so that they could have had my back. Instead I hadn't said a word, because I never fucking do, and allowed these freaks to kidnap me and drag me all the way across the world to some guy who supposedly chose me. "It was you."

Théo hums. "It was."

"But, *why*?"

His eyes narrow, and his light eyes darken a shade, a transformation that makes him a ruthlessly beautiful angel.

This is what his victims must have seen before he killed them.

“You’re not very clever, are you?” It doesn’t sound evil, though definitely patronizing. The smile is back on his face, and fuck me it doesn’t make him creepier. Gorgeous, and evil. He puts a hand through his dark curls, then adds, “He’s always wanted someone for himself.”

My chest tightens, and I don’t like it one single bit. I don’t want his words to make me feel, what—*special*? I snarl at my own thoughts, ignoring the way Théo eyes me attentively, thirsty, as if he wants to drink up my thoughts. Only, there’s nothing here of interest really. Because I’m *not* special.

“I’ll come back for you baby, I promise.”

But you didn’t. Instead, you left me alone. I’ve taught myself to be useful, so I won’t be forgotten—I’m driven and have great discipline. I do my daily work-out, eat healthy, make sure that all tasks are executed, while keeping far away from the spotlight. I’m the dude you can absolutely not remember the morning after the party.

Mason? Were you there as well? Bro! I didn’t know!

“He’s got to have the wrong guy. I mean, he doesn’t even know me.”

Théo clacks his tongue at that, but doesn’t disagree. I don’t know why that disappoints me. “Tell me Mason, did you enjoy fucking my brother?”

My eyes practically pop out of their sockets at the question, and he pushes the glass against my mouth, trapping it against my skin forcefully, preventing me from simply drinking. I growl in frustration, though I can’t help myself from chasing it as he cackles and pulls it back away, bit by bit. “Your denial says it all. I’m happy that you enjoyed it. You were chosen, after all.”

“You’re fucking crazy,” I grit out. “My brothers will come for me.”

He wiggles his brows and sends me a lopsided grin. “Aren’t we all a little? Yeah, I think you’ll like it here.”

“I think you’re wrong,” I hiss. “I think that I’ll get outta here, and the next time you see me you’ll be the one tied up, you, you—”

There’s no time to finish that phrase, because the door opens, and even without the light from the corridor reflecting on his shadow, I know it’s Gabriel. I know it, because my heart rate speeds up, and his mere presence is making me roll my lips in trepidation while my muscles tighten. And then he comes my way, slowly, his craze and beauty gingerly embracing me like the most delicate glove, covering me until there’s no escape. The thought makes me feel like I have ice water in my veins. *Never* an escape.

CHAPTER
FIVE

GABRIEL

They've put him in my favorite bedroom on this side of the house, because of its spectacular view of the valley.

Ezra, Théo's *other* boyfriend, follows me inside—our newest family member, and good-hearted nurse. I'm happy he's here now. Because my brother looks unhinged, the way he looms over Mason, his features scrunched in sarcasm, his curls wild. Ezra will be able to calm him. He has surprised me, this quiet, American guy who arrived unexpectedly in our home after my brother's journey. But over the last few days, he has proven himself to be stable, and peaceful, and that in combination with his genuine adoration for my brother, is what Théo needs.

One look at the scene in front of us, is enough to have me looking back over my shoulder. Ezra nods in understanding.

"*What?*" My brother taunts, eyes on Mason, before he sends me a wink. "Come on, spit it out, don't be shy. What am I?"

"Théo, stop." Ezra strides further into the room, to where Mason is tied up against the bed. His large frame looks fragile, wrapped in one of my sheets, showing only his naked hands and feet that are so deliciously tied in rope—*always in rope*—his skin dipped in the slightest of redness where he fought in vain to escape them. I want to circle the carved flesh with my tongue, feel the proof of each protest against my measurements while his resistance crumbles. "He needs to rest." Ezra bristles.

Théo raises his hands in defeat, and hops off of the bed. “I see why you’re so obsessed with him, *Gabi*.” He glances back at Mason, then shoots forward. “Booh.”

“*Théo! Out, now.*” Ezra shushes him away. Ignoring my brother’s pout, he gives Mason a soft smile, though he accepts Théo’s arms as they wrap around his shoulders, and even briefly leans back against his chest. “I mean it. You need to leave, and Mason needs to rest.”

“If you need me, you know where to find me, *chaton*.” And with a fleeting kiss on Ezra’s cheek, Théo hops to the door. “See you soon, wolf.”

“You’re a sick fuck!” Mason calls out after him. My brother turns at that, the doorknob in his hand, his dark curls swirling around in perfect reflection of that untamed character that is his, and that I love so much, despite his mental state. Then he gives me a boyish grin. “I know you’ll tame him, *Gabi*.”

I can’t help but return his smile, as I pull him in for a hug and press a kiss to his cheek. “Can’t wait. Go, and tell the others that he’s arrived. And take your meds!” I call after him as I watch him leave, then finally close the door and turn back to the bed, where Ezra has now taken out his medical supplies.

“Did you sleep all right?” He asks softly. Mason’s eyes dart from Ezra to mine, back to Ezra, before he rolls his lips and nods. Strolling through the room, I inspect if he’s got everything he needs. The flowers are fresh, our home incense nicely activated, and he has enough fluffy blankets.

“Please untie me, Ezra. Please.” Mason’s whisper sounds desperate, swallowed by the rustling of sheets.

“Don’t rile yourself up, Mason. I need to look at those wounds first.”

“Come on man, just—” He’s silent for a beat. My fingers pry through the discarded fabric we apparently stored here, in this cupboard. Its moss-green tint is perfect for the fairytale *soirée* we have planned in a few weeks. “Charlie’s my *brother*,

and you're his friend. Get me outta here, man." The words are followed by another coughing fit.

"Please just give yourself time to settle, before you judge," Ezra shushes, while my fingers trace the dark velvet material that hangs in front of the window, where I'm now standing. I need to bite my cheek to stop myself from turning around to see what's happening. "I'll have to take a look at your injuries, and then I'll let you sleep some more."

"Ezra—"

"Stop, Mason," Ezra chimes. I open one of the heavy curtains, distracting myself with the sight of so much green beauty outside. "I let you sleep for two days, and now I need to look at those wounds. Then you're going to eat something, and then I will clean you, before you'll sleep some more. Your body needs to heal."

"Two days?" Mason's breath leaves on a gasp.

Ezra shrugs. "I mean, I woke you a few times to take you to the restroom, but I don't think you can remember that. You walked around like the walking dead."

Ignoring Ezra's joke and chuckle, Mason repeats, "Two days? I don't want to—"

"First, you'll eat, then I'll clean your wounds, and *then*, we'll talk," Ezra finishes in a clipped tone.

Mason sighs in defeat, and when I finally turn around and saunter back to the bed, he catches my gaze, his green glower filled with anticipation. And something else. When I send him a wink, he narrows his eyes on a killer scowl, but as soon as he notices Ezra taking out the stethoscope from his medical kit, he wrinkles his nose.

"This all sounds good." Ezra's fingers linger over the bruises on Mason's face and chest, then he looks up with a stern look, "But this needs time to heal. And you still look exhausted." They eye each other for a brief moment, and I can feel Mason's defenses going up again, as disapproval radiates all over his face. When I approach the bed and drop down on the chair, Mason's hesitant expression turns to one of

trepidation, a transformation I eagerly drink in. He flinches when I place a hand on the bed, but immediately tilts his chin in defiance. All these emotions, and I haven't uttered a word yet.

"All right, let's get you something to eat." Ezra wiggles a banana in front of Mason's snarling face. "If you weren't so tired, I'd get you something decent, but that will have to wait. Before you know it, you'll be finishing big plates of pasta again." Mason's face flushes when he sees me leaning forward, licking my lips teasingly.

"Come on," Ezra orders. "You need to eat."

After another of his stubborn pauses, Mason takes a first bite, cheeks pink, eyes straight ahead. He ends up eating two bananas, and Ezra does a great job of dissolving some of the tension as he chats about the magnificent view this mansion has, and how he can't wait for Mason to see it. To meet his new *family*. Granted, Ezra has only been with us for a few days himself, but if there is a thing called fate, I'd say he was meant to be here.

"I don't want to sleep." Mason stifles a yawn, replying to a non-existent question as he glares at Ezra, who's still washing parts of his battered body, applying ointment and Band-Aids. I take notice of how he ignores my presence, and that sends me a thrill of excitement. Still shy, despite his anger. I fucking *love* it.

When Ezra takes out the syringe kit, I stop him. "Can you make sure that the dose is not too strong? I want to talk with him first." My words have the desired effect, because Mason swings his head my way for the first time, eyes large and filled with fury. And fear. Hmm.

"*Talk* with me?" He grits out, his rage now solely focused on me. Though I catch him nibble at his lower lip as his eyes take in my black nail polish. "Yeah."

"All right, the rest is all healing nicely," Ezra concludes with a small smile, tucking the wash cloth back into the bowl before lifting the blankets over Mason's impressive chest, ignoring the increasing tension. "I'd like to give you an IV

drip, but something tells me that you won't want that. However, we'll need to get more liquids into your system." He grabs the cup on the nightstand and stalks over to the faucet in the corner, and Mason follows his every move, clearly determined not to look my way again. When Ezra comes back, he licks his lips, then opens his luscious mouth to be given the water. Making my cock perk up behind my silk pants. Ezra snakes out a hand behind Mason's nape, while he lets him drink, and, yeah, Théo's definitely missing out. By the time he has finished his second cup, Ezra gives him a satisfied hum. And my cock is rock hard.

"All right, if you don't need to use the restroom, lay down and relax. You need to rest." Ezra starts preparing the syringe, tapping the barrel a few times to remove the air bubble at the top.

"Don't leave me here with him," Mason begs. His gaze locks on the syringe as the needle connects to his flesh, penetrating his vein, injecting him with the tranquilizer.

"There you go." Ezra gives him a gentle squeeze on the shoulder when he's finished, ignoring his pleas. "Rest now. Heal, and you'll feel better." He sends me a clipped nod, then moves to arranging his equipment back into his medical kit. "I'll leave you to it then."

Mason's eyes flutter, but he still traces my every movement as I stand from my chair and move closer toward the bed. He winces when I sit down next to him onto the plush sheets, but his scowl has turned glossy.

"How are you feeling?" My digits brush over one of his cheeks, careful not to touch the bruised parts.

"Don't touch me," he snarls.

"I won't." My fingers take their time discovering every inch of unscathed skin, its texture smooth and soft. "It's just, they are so happy to meet you. All of them." When he raises his brows, I flick my digits on a crooked smile, then move them to the thick, golden strands of his hair, and let them trace all the way down to the crown of his head. When I start rubbing his scalp, his eyes flutter. "They approve of you,

Mason. So big and strong,” he blinks when my free hand darts out to trace the skin where Ezra’s syringe penetrated him, making him shiver. “Yet so fragile.” He wants to protest, but the only sound that leaves his wet, pouty lips is barely a harsh squeak. My fingers trace his upper arm all the way up to his collarbone, and I whisper, “You know what they do to fragile guys? They call you names, chase you down, corner you, beat you up.” I scratch the skin right below his ear and Mason leans into my touch, eyes now closed. “Always making sure that they’re stronger, faster, harsher.”

“You lived like this?” His question comes out as a breathy slur, rough with fatigue. But I don’t miss the pity. Always the fucking pity. Placing my flat palm onto his nose, I let my fingers crawl around, enjoying how he can’t control his mouth as he chases them.

“A long, *long*, time ago,” I purr, while my fingers continue scratching, caressing, and petting his skin.

“Is that why you became *this*?” He finally mumbles. Tracing the curve of his mouth with my fingertip, I enjoy how his full lips quiver as he speaks, the low hum rumbling through my digits all the way down to my cock, that doesn’t need much stimulation to be hard again.

“*This* is a result of many, many situations, Mason, not just mine. *This* is what you get when you create a home for people who have lived a meaningless life. *This* is what you get when you allow them to be part of something bigger. A family, a place where they belong.” My eyes look up toward the exposed window, following the slopes of the valley, revealing countless miles of nature. I used to go there. Not anymore. Nowadays I stay behind the fences in our own territory. Safe—always safe.

“But you’re a killer,” Mason mutters.

“Tell me something, Mason. Have you ever killed a man?” A flock of geese comes into view, honking loudly, and flying high. I don’t know why I notice, but I do.

A storm is coming.

“Never.”

“Let me rephrase.” I tear my gaze away from the magnificent view, eyes back on Mason. His face has accepted the invasion of my fingers, but his limbs still try to break loose from the ropes. Fatigue makes his movements sloppy. “Have you ever chased a man to his death?”

He stops his fidgeting to look up at me between the spaces of my digits, eyes hazy with sleep. Finally he shakes his head, then coughs up dry phlegm.

“Let me get you some water.”

“We go debt collecting,” he finally garbles, while I make my way to the faucet. It looks like he wants to say something more, but instead he lets out a long sigh as his head falls back onto the pillow.

“And what happens when someone can’t pay? What do you do then?” Closing off the faucet, I walk back toward the bed, telling my cock not to be too happy about the idea of helping him drink. “Do you take your knife and carve your name into their chest? Do you use your fists, break every single bone your striking force comes across?” Climbing into the bed between the headboard and his head, I pull him in between my spread legs and press the back of his head against the bare skin exposed through the sides of my robe. His body goes rigid, and he struggles once more against the rope, but he accepts the water when I set it at his lips. The sound of his swallows is a proof of his helplessness, of his need for my presence, and it’s intoxicating. When he’s finally finished, I set the cup back on the cupboard. Then my hands move to caressing his skin as they make their way down. “Leave them to die with the promise of coming back to collect your dues, or finish the job you’ve started?” They crawl under the plush sheets towards the center of the snug warmth his body has created, and his breath catches when they find what they’re looking for. “Well?” I prompt. “What’s expected of you?” My fingers tighten around his rigid length and start pumping, slowly, and thoroughly. He’s afraid. I can feel it in the rigidity of his limbs, in the way it showcases in short, rapid bursts of

air as if he's panicking. And he's aroused, the way his body turns into a pliant, uncontrollable mess at my slightest touch.

"This is wrong," he chokes, his voice sounding breathy. "You're a monster."

"Maybe. But I'm not wrong, am I? We all live by the rules of our community, whichever one we've decided to join." I nudge the side of his face with my nose, and Mason swallows, before tilting his head to the sight, giving me access to his neck. I lap up his flavor, humming as I do so, loving the way the back of his head presses firmer against my collarbone as he whispers an exasperated "*fuck*" at my hands, that still slowly work his dick. "You won't be a prisoner here, Mason. You are my chosen one and you will live here, in my castle, with me. You're free to walk around, explore your new home. But you're not allowed to leave. Rest for now, and when you're feeling better, I'll introduce you to your new brothers. They have been waiting for you as much as I have." My thumb swirls over his crown, swiping the pre-cum, coating my fingers with it as I keep on stroking him, from tip to base, picking up the pace ever so slightly. His cock is exactly how I'd hoped, and despite his rigid flesh being hidden from me now, I liked what I saw the other night. Damn, I loved how he'd made me feel, how his thickness had me filled up. Mason lets out another groan and I feel him jolt in my hand.

"You're evil," he pants. "Fuck, you're evil. A—fuck—a *monster*." And then his cock pulses and he shoots his load right into my eager hand, moaning all the way through as his limbs writhe against the restraints, crazed by ecstasy while his body trembles.

"That's it, *mon lapin*, that's it." I leisurely continue to milk his spurting dick until he's got no more to give, enjoying his heavy weight against my chest. When I'm sure that he's fully spent, I crawl out of the bed from behind, and walk toward the cupboard to retrieve a towel. I wet it with warm water and use it to clean up his spent body. Mason mumbles something unintelligible, and his head wavers a few times before he's finally still. Asleep.

I take a moment to admire his tight muscles and smooth skin. Unlike me, he has no piercings, just inches and inches of sunkissed skin, adorned by light freckles and dark hair. I want to caress every single part of it with my tongue, taste his flavor, savor it like the gift it is.

A true gift, one I gave myself.

My fingers trace the shape of his soft cock, hanging lazily between his balls, relaxed like its owner, before tucking it back underneath the silk pants.

There's a soft knock on the door, then Ezra peaks around the corner. "Is he asleep?"

"Yeah. We'll take off his restraints now, I want him to sleep peacefully."

Ezra gives me a clipped nod, an approving look in his blue eyes, before he gets to it.

"Where's Théo?" I ask after a moment of silence. His face flushes ever so slightly, and he looks up on a blink before turning his attention back to the rope at Mason's ankle. "He's still with Gaëtan." When I don't reply immediately, he continues, "They're in a meeting to prepare for the upcoming events in Paris."

"Sure." I collect all the loose ends and fold them around my wrist, before tugging them into one, final knot. "Now, let's celebrate *Vindication*."

CHAPTER
SIX

MASON

“You don’t belong here.”

My eyes flutter open, blinking heavily as they scan the bedroom. I’m rolled up to my side, knees hitting my stomach as I’m facing the door, while that foreign, cold tone... I grimace when I force my body to roll over to the other side, but I don’t get further than my back, before letting out a tired sigh. Sure, I’ve had my fair share of fights since I joined the Business, but damn... it’s been a while since they were this serious. Because someone actually managed to throw *me* a good few punches for a change, and that hasn’t happened since high school.

I turn my face to the side. He sits on the chair by the bed, legs crossed, his gray eyes cold and unyielding as they probably watch me grinding my teeth, since that’s exactly what I’m doing. Yeah, motherfucker hit me real good.

“It’s guys like you he hates. Who we *all* hate.” Maxime uncrosses his limbs, and leans his elbows on his knees as he bends forward, making me flick my eyes back to the ceiling.

“Oh yeah? That’s why I’m here?”

He lets out a snort. “Gabriel’s confused, that’s all.”

I nod at that, massaging my wrists one by one, wincing at the red stains, but fucking relieved that I’m no longer restrained. “That he is.” Though he left me with a mind-blowing orgasm, and a strange tug at the chest. I scramble toward the headboard, relieved when I can actually sit, instead of the constant laying down, body strapped. The lingering

sensation doesn't evaporate though, so I focus on my surroundings instead. The entire space swims in the soft dimming light of the notary lamp, making the wooden furniture light up in a glimmer, the soft, thick carpet looking more inviting. Making it impossible to determine whether it's morning or night. "How long have I been here?"

"Too long." Maxime gets out of his chair, and strides for the door. "So I suggest that you go. Get ready, you've got five minutes."

I huff out a confused laugh. "Are you for real?"

"Don't play stupid. Hurry up, and check your phone, *petit con*," he mutters under his breath, and with one last pointed look over his shoulder, he leaves.

For a good thirty seconds, I just lay there, rubbing a hand over my face, as I try to collect my thoughts. Then a frustrated grumble leaves my mouth. It's not my body that's keeping me from jumping out of bed, it's my mind. Because Gabriel claims to have chosen me, and it does something strange to my insides. No one has ever chosen me. And for some reason, his declaration feels like the ground has been swiped away from under me, forcing me to scatter like a broken puzzle and analyze the pieces I call life.

My foundations. My convictions. What will I find if I do though? Will I recognize *myself*?

I run a hand over my face. This is not the kind of shit I should be thinking of now. I'm given a way out, so let's just fucking go. I roll my lips and stare up at the ceiling, my lazy ass still planted in bed. Gabriel's batshit crazy. A cult leader, a murderer. But he's so, so... a flash of thick, blond hair, large, dark eyes with long, thick lashes appear in my mind. My mind is in overdrive, my body in heat as I remember those piercings on his face, the diamond gems on his teeth, glittery and obscene like the man himself. Those full, pouty lips, mouthing brave words. How would they feel around my leaking cock?

"Cut it the fuck out," I grunt, but it doesn't stop my dick from twitching in reply, tenting the silk pants. Making me feel embarrassed, even though I'm the only one in this damn room.

I inhale the earthy perfume greedily at the next soothing puff of the room diffuser, and it successfully manages to relax my mind. And then Maxime's words come back in full force. "Check my phone?" I mumble with narrowed eyes, gaze searching around me, half expecting to be taken for a fool. But there, on my bedside table—my heart takes on a frantic beating—is my fucking phone.

It's got to be some kind of trap. Still my hand slowly reaches out, and I tug at my lower lip in anticipation, before I dive in. Grabbing the device, I clutch it to my chest, under the sheets. I'm panting hard, heart rate going crazy in there, as I'm half expecting someone to come barging in and breaking my face.

No one comes.

My hands tremble when I pick it up and scroll to find any messages. Not to my surprise, everything is deleted—videos, music, books, messages, and photos. Except for one. I click on it, to enlarge the image. Pops sitting in his bed, sending me a smile and a thumbs-up.

"What the—" I zoom the picture further in. He's wearing a shirt with the Eiffel Tower on it, that he most certainly didn't have before. He looks... happy? Healthier than I've ever seen him?

I look up, staring hard at the drawn curtains while the realization feels like a thud to the chest. Of course he's not happy, *I*'m not there. He should be out there, missing me, asking everyone to go and search for me. Instead, he's sending me this ridiculous photo, showing how well he's doing without me.

Unless I "told" him that I was doing all right.

"You fucking twisted, sick assholes!" I throw the phone against the wall, where it lands with a loud clatter. I've spent years worrying about Pops. First about his grief, then later about his well-being, and now about his health. And here he is, looking freaking *happy*, while I'm not with him. That version of him died a long time ago, buried deep in the ground along with his daughter. Mom.

Swinging my legs out of the bed, they feel wobbly and weak as they find the ground and go after the phone. I pick it up and look at the image again, and while my finger traces the lines of his face, I feel my chest tighten. Pops never had another love after Grandma died. Still, that was ages ago, and he could have been with someone, if he hadn't ... hadn't had *me*.

I nibble at my bottom lip while my eyes keep staring at him. I'd been a burden. My ratty fifteen-year old ass, an orphan and a fucking *burden*. I'd never thought of it before, but it makes sense. Still, my eyes sting at the thought, and it lingers while I wait for anger to come in and take over, the loyal ally it is.

I walk my way toward the window where I gingerly open the other side of the curtains. I peer outside, half expecting the view to have changed into some mind altering fuckery. It hasn't. Miles and miles of peaceful green are all around me, the valley with its slopes, floating all the way down to the coastal village and the shimmering water. The Ocean. Clouds are fighting for dominance in the gray sky, leaving practically no space for bright sunlight. A reflection of my mood.

A knock on the door makes me jolt, and I fist my knuckles in reply, nostrils flared. "Yeah, I'm coming, asshole."

"It's me, honey, Rita," a muffled voice. "I brought you some lunch. Can I come in?" She adds, when I don't reply immediately. I look outside once more, then at my clothes. My cult-clothes. The thought makes me grimace. Where the fuck is Maxime? On a whim I hide the phone under the pillow. "I —" Fuck it. "Yeah."

The door opens, and in she comes carrying a tray in both hands and a warm smile on her face. Her chestnut curls sit high on her head, the purple-colored lace matching the blouse she's wearing. Nicely tucked into a black skirt, she walks barefoot.

"Hello sweetie. Gosh, you must be starving, you slept so much." Placing the tray on the desk, she gives me once-over. "How are you feeling?" Not sure how to answer that, and

certainly doubting that she's in Maxime's camp, I decide to go for a strategic answer. "Better."

Her face splits into a big smile. "I'm happy to hear that. Now, dig in. I've got fresh croissants, bacon and eggs, and even some chocolate cake." Turning my back to the window, I join her on the two chairs she's put out. "Go on, dig in, they won't bite you."

All kinds of potential dangers flash through my mind, but they all fade away with that one single thought at Pops' happy face. He's happy. Without me.

The food *is* good, not poisoned, and I *was* hungry. While I devour the pastry, we don't speak. Rita doesn't eat, just casually sips from her tea, her eyes on the green slopes outside my window. But finally she does. "You know, this family was built out of sorrow and despair." Her prying silver eyes find mine. "I suppose that's how most communities are created. Out of mutual values, perhaps of poverty, a lack of guidance, a need to fit in, to belong. Don't you agree?"

I give her a meager nod.

"For *les Frères Perdus*, it was the same," she continues. "They were two brothers with broken souls, who moved into this house and opened their gates to those who recognized themselves in their fragmented lives. Who were willing to forgive, and forge a new home. Together."

Washing down my last bit of egg with a sip of tea, I ask, "And kidnapping is part of that?"

The tips of her lips curl up in a secretive kind of smile. "Ask me that question again in a few days, Mason." I don't understand, but decide to let it go. Besides, I won't be here in a few days. "And what about those guys who beat me up? How does that have anything to do with family and forgiveness? You sent me in there, knowing what would happen to me."

"Trust me when I say that that was the first physical fight they've ever had with a brother."

“I’m not a brother!” I sneer, then immediately hold up my hands in an apology. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to go off like that.” *Not to you*, I guess. “What about you? Are you a member of this family?”

Rita smiles and puts her cup back onto the tray. “I can’t answer all your questions without showing you around.” She stands up. “Why don’t you take a shower, get freshened up? Then I’ll pick you up in half an hour and will give you a tour of the house. I’m sure you’ll love it here.”

“I don’t—” Even want to *consider* that option.

“I know,” Rita sends me an understanding smile. “All your brothers were once like you.” She pats my hand, then picks up the tray and heads for the door. “See you in half an hour?”

I nod like the spineless fuck I am, left undecided. She’s barely left, when my phone vibrates with a text. I hurry back to the bed, and grab it from under my pillow, chest constricted.

Now that she’s gone, it’s your turn.

Thank fuck, Maxime, for making this easier for me. I don’t hesitate, but type back.

Me: Tell me how

The three dots move, only to stop, before they pick up again. It feels like forever, before I stare at their reply.

Leave your room, then turn right.

The clear sense of urgency makes me pick up my brain and put it back into my skull, and I spin around and march toward the cupboard. Can’t leave barefoot and dressed in only the loose-fitting pants.

Have you left yet?

“I can’t fucking fly,” I grit between my teeth, then I rip the drawer open and take the first shirt I can find, not giving two fucks that it’s a lemonade pink see-through top that is at least

two sizes smaller than I am. It fits me like a fucking glove, making my nipples sensitive to the soft material. All right, it will have to do. There are no shoes here, so barefoot it is.

Me: Yes

I grimace inwardly when I try the doorknob, half expecting Rita to have locked it after she left. She didn't.

The corridor is quiet and empty, the phone held tightly in my sweating palm, and I give it a tight squeeze, terrified that I'll lose it if I don't. And then I take a right and run, like the devil's at my heels. The corridor is so narrow that it feels like the walls are coming right at me, like deforming, taunting shapes, creating a maze that I don't know how to escape.

Have I already told you that we hate guys like you?

The text on my phone reads.

Yes, you did, fucker. And guess what? The feeling's mutual.

The cream-colored carpet feels soft under my heels and most importantly, muffles my steps when I practically fly around the corner, breathless, heart leaping in my throat, my body in pain from the beating a few night's ago, but teeth firmly gritted together to get the hell away.

And then I stop. And stare back at a bunch of guys who're working in a workshop. There's a clunking sound of sewing machines, and rolls of textile are casually piled up on the various tables, accompanied by needles in all kinds of shapes and threads in different colors. Rita greets me with a smile, a measuring tape around her shoulder. "You're fast, honey. Were you curious after all?" Her eyes seem larger because of the pair of fashionable glasses she has tucked onto her nose. "The others are still celebrating *Vindication*, but this here is my favorite part of the house. Welcome to my workshop!" She spreads her hands and swirls on her feet. "This is where we make our beautiful outfits and masks. You want to see?"

The phone buzzes in my hand.

Take the corridor across the room and go straight on. You'll get to a large hall, the exit's there. A dark-green door. Be quick.

My heart leaps in my chest. "I—" I search around until I find the other corridor across from me, and don't hesitate. "I'm sorry, but I need to go," I mumble, squeezing the phone tighter as I take off again, ignoring both Rita's surprised splutters, and the sudden silence in the workshop. The sewing machines have stopped working, and I can feel them. Tens and tens of pairs of eyes, following my every movement as I dive for the other side, for the corridor, for the fucking *exit*. They're coming after me, I can feel it, and my belly is in all sorts of knots as I shiver with panic. Though my feet keep leaping forward, faster and faster, I command my brain to ignore the eyes, ignore *everyone*, and dive for safety. This house is fucking huge. But the corridor does lead to a large reception hall, and from my direction, I'm staring right at an enormous, dark-green, wooden door. I prepare to bolt. I'm nearly there, and for a moment my heart jolts in euphoria, before I get this nasty sour taste in my mouth that something's *off*. Like that one time I did that school run and I was about to come in first, only to be tackled by Tony Dimarco, as part of his usual routine. I remember seeing the finish line from the filthy mud, where he left me as he ran to victory. The air is thick with anticipation, and it rustles around in thick ropes of smoke. Of fear. *My* fear.

"You don't have to be afraid." A gentle voice startles me, and I stop dead in my tracks and turn in surprise, allowing myself to face my enemies. They're all there, the people from the workshop, eying me in surprise, looking ridiculous in those cream shirts and silk pants. I snarl at them. My gaze finds Rita's, who's holding her glasses in one hand, the measuring tape back onto her shoulder.

"You don't have to be afraid," another voice formulates, and when I find its owner, a slender guy with dark hair and light eyes, he gives me a soft smile. "We were all once like you. But this is home now, and we'd like it to be yours too." There's more commotion around me, and then the crowd parts like the sea as a group floats through.

“Mason?” Gabriel’s dressed in that ridiculous, silk robe, chest decorated with the many necklaces that seem to be part of his daily outfit. His hand, covered in bracelets, brushes his blond hair, and his face flashes with jewelry and a sad smile. “Don’t go where I can’t follow you, *mon lapin*.”

“You can’t fucking choose me.” The words come out on a spit, and I eye the group once more, my gaze faltering only briefly when I catch Maxime’s cold, gray stare. I shrug, but can’t stop the unexpected sob to escape my mouth. “I’m no one’s choice.” My voice falters, and I need to turn away, because they can’t see. “Stay away from me. From *us*.”

My phone buzzes in my hand, and my eyes quickly dart to the message.

Why did you have to ruin this moment? I hate you

The moment my brain realizes that something’s *really* off, I’m too late. And the unexpected, electric shock that cracks through my hand makes me cry out in both horror and pain. The phone crashes to the floor, but my hand can’t seem to withdraw from the doorknob. Only when my knees buckle and my weight goes crashing down, do I let go. A throaty cry fills the heavy silence, and only when I collapse to the ground do I realize it’s mine. Finally free of more shockwaves, teeth clattering so violently that the sound vibrates through my ears, until everything fades away.



MUSIC. I hear it, its melody drifting in the back of my mind, and it brings the faintest of smiles to my lips. “Put your head on my shoulder”, by Paul Anka, takes me to our kitchen back home, back to Pops. But the image scratches with flashes of *him*. And as the music distorts, he smiles at me, making my heart stutter.

You’re so beautiful. Evil, yet fascinating.

“*Mason, can you hear me?*”

Why do you do the things you do?

Gabriel takes my hand and straddles my lap, and I don't hesitate as I wrap my hands around his waist, pulling him closer. He smells of lavender and mystery, delicate and precious, and it's making me feel big and strong. He brushes his hands through my hair, tugging gently before pulling me in for a kiss. His lips are full and warm, and so wet. Wet for me. Oh baby, touch me, that's right. Touch me.

“Mason?”

Gabriel. His shape starts to fade, like melting chocolate, scattering shards that heat my blood, and I grab around me, desperate, craving, but he's gone.

“Mason.”

My eyes fly open, my entire body feeling clammy; I shiver, feeling both hot and cold. I'm tied up again, rope slicing through my skin, and that realization helps me to leave my foggy thoughts. My gaze zooms in on Ezra's light eyes and friendly stare, as he looms over me, the stethoscope dangling around his neck like a chain. “How are you feeling?” His tone is gentle, caring. “I'm so sorry to wake you, but I need to check your wound.” He doesn't wait for an answer, but starts unwrapping the bandage with agile fingers. They brush against my hot skin, cold and deft, making me let out a shuddering sigh. I don't think I've had anyone care for me in like, forever. It's always been me and Pops. Well, not always.

It feels nice to have Ezra's gentle hands caress my contused skin. “Théo says he's sorry. Maxime was jealous, and wanted to hurt you. We should have seen it coming.”

“*Jealous?*” I mutter with closed eyes. “Of who? I hoped —”

I hoped Maxime would have let me go.

Ezra sighs. “You've been on a long and lonely journey, Mason, but you can rest now. You've reached your destination.”

“Why did he not just let me go?”

“He wanted to. But he didn’t count on everyone being around.” He gingerly puts some cream on my battered skin, and the smoothness of the texture makes the prickling sting on my hand numb.

“So he would have left me, hurt, outside this house.”

Why did you have to ruin this moment? I hate you

I hiss at the burn in my hand, and Ezra clacks his tongue. “Come on, give your body a chance to heal, and your mind the rest it needs. Maxime will be punished.”

“Punished?”

Ezra sighs. “For not respecting the rules of our family. I believe they’re pretty clear.”

I watch him, Ezra, as he puts his equipment back into his medical kit. The guy who burned all his bridges. “Why did you do it?”

He looks up. “Do what?”

“Cross the entire world to come here.”

“Because I was chosen, by Théo and Gaëtan.” His light eyes find mine, and he stares, pushing right through my defenses until I look away. “Have you met Luca yet? He’s the *Captain* in this family, looks after the guys, and is a hypnotist.” I don’t answer, and he continues, “I wonder what you’ll find when you go there.”

“Go where?”

His thumb brushes my forehead and I flinch. “There. You know, my guys chose me, saved me when I needed it most.” He tilts his head to the ceiling and lets out a surprised laugh, as if he still can’t believe it. “They have given me a purpose in life, a degree I can turn into a profession, and a family to love.”

I don’t know how to reply to that.

“Gabriel desires you,” he barely whispers.

His words create chaos and ache, despite the creams and medications.

It's easier to be alone.

Pulling my wrists against the ropes, I groan in pain. *More.* I chase the burn, need the hurt. Want it to slice through me, scorching and fucking painful, and cut out the shame that's feasting on my mind. On my body. Because the way Gabriel used my body for his own pleasure, the way he rocked on me and got off on my cock, has made me feel more alive than I've felt for a very long time. I do it again, and again, needing this hurt, needing it to calm my brain, that's switching to panic mode now the syringe comes back in view.

"Have you finished fighting it?" Ezra holds the syringe up in the air, prepping. "You claim that the Donnellys are your family, yet they hurt their own people. Look at what they put Charlie through. Gabriel would never do that. Here we live in peace. We provide for our own needs."

"I don't desire him," I lie between chattering teeth.

"Are you cold?" Ezra asks, and then the needle penetrates my flesh, muscles trembling with the effort to get away.

No. I'm afraid. But I'll be damned if I tell him. Because with the medicine slowly alleviating the pain, my anger fades away, baring what little's left underneath the remainders.

"Sleep now, Mason."

I don't want to sleep, don't want to be alone in my head, and I tug against the ropes, needing to feel that I'm still *here*. That I'm still in control of something.

And then he's gone, taking the remaining soft noises with him, leaving me, and that goddamn music.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

GABRIEL

“**M**es frères, we are grateful.”

Standing on the stage in the *Dome*, the room we use for *Vindication*, I take the time to eye each and every family member. Above me, under the immense glass domed ceiling, restless clouds slowly pass by. It fills my stomach with prickling anticipation. *A storm is coming.*

My brothers return my gaze. Dressed in our usual attire, already lightly swaying on the balls of their bare feet as they get ready for our mind session.

“We are grateful for this family that we have created with each other.” The perfume dispenser in the corner of the stage takes that moment to exhale a woosh of earthy air and I inhale deeply, letting its incense stream through my body. “We are grateful to live a life that’s filled with love. Love for each other, for this space, this peaceful place in the world that we can call our own.”

Some of my brothers let out a relieved sigh and their surrender makes my heart rate speed up. I know what it’s like to live in agony. To be afraid of going to school, of getting beaten-up, and spit upon. I know what it’s like not to feel accepted for who you are, what you are, where you want to go on this journey called life. Bullying is a disgrace, a recipe for trauma. “I’m happy that you came here when you needed it most. That we found each other, that we look after each other, according to the rules of this community.”

According to *my* rules.

“Which is why I am so upset now. You were all there.” My voice has softened, the recoiling in my stomach increasing. “You all saw what happened to my chosen one. How he was lured into a trap by his own *brother!*” Shivers around me, but nothing comes close to the goosebumps that scatter freely on my skin at the memory of the agony I’d seen on Mason’s face. “Is that any way to treat family?” They shake their heads, too afraid to answer. “Is that a way to treat my chosen one?” The room lights up with soft murmurs, and it takes all of me to subdue the rising of my fury, it’s desire to break everyone around me. Instead I take in a deep breath through my nose, as my eyes search through the crowd. “There will be punishment, brothers. But not now, not while my chosen one is still recovering. But soon.” I nod at Simon, our pianist, who starts playing gentle, soft notes, the perfect prelude. “I want to start by thanking those who participated at the last *soirée*. Our clients were extremely satisfied, and have indulged us with a handsome payment. Special thanks to Gaspard.”

A slender guy with dark hair and light eyes returns my gaze with a thankful smile, looking sweet and flustered, a light shade of pink coating his cheeks. He didn’t look that innocent during the party. I saw the videos from my bed, saw how my beautiful, masked brother was on his knees while being fucked from behind, his sweet mouth used by multiple guests. That sweet mouth made us thousands of euros.

“They might want to use your services again,” I whisper. “I’m so very proud of you, *mon trésor*.”

“I am too.” Luca joins me on stage, and Gaspard’s cheeks color a darker shade before he lowers his gaze. Simon switches his play to legato sounds in a minor key, slow and calm-inducing. “Close your eyes, brothers.” Luca’s tone is soothing, gentle, a baritone sound with a hint of a rasp.

The first drops of rain land on the glass dome, adding to the sounds of the piano, and I close my eyes too, ready to be brought inside my mind by our *Captain*, our hypnotist. And when he begins, I feel like I’ve opened a secret staircase to my past, free falling through the darkness, surrounded by fluttering images of a life lived.

I once found this book in my father's study. We still lived in Paris, and he was still unpredictable in his permanent state of depression, fuelled by infinite funds. I was reckless, kicking and screaming at every single bully who pushed my boundaries. And they did, crushing me altogether, as they took what they wanted and left me to rot. They really should have killed me, the members of *Les Milieu*, the most renowned gang in my estate. Instead, the ignorant alphas provided me with my own weapons. And I went from being their punch bag, to being their slut. Realizing too late, that really it gave me power. Over *them*. The day I gained control, was the day their gang crumbled. For they all wanted me, and couldn't share.

Another waft of that earthy scent invades my mind, and I hear my brother speak, asking me to dig deeper, and deeper, into the secret holes of my past.

When all fighting was done, the only thing that was left, was fucking. And did we do plenty of that. They let me own them, yielding at my feet, still believing that it was *they* who pulled the strings.

They're long gone now, broken in humiliation, and by the law.

We kept Gaëtan—because Théo wanted him. Tall, strong, superior, regal Gaëtan, with his dark hair and light eyes, and his multi-million euro inheritance. He's crazy about my little brother, so I let him stay. As long as he behaves.

I wanted mini-Gaëtans. The equally beautiful ones, but smaller in size, easier to cuddle. No longer afraid that they'd beat me up and spit in my face. I wanted *brothers*.

The book I found in my father's study was written by Hippolyte Bernheim, a French physician, and it was about suggestibility in hypnosis. I wondered what my own father, of all people, would need with such a jewel of science, but then I saw the little note right above the title, in the beginning of the book.

Olivier Corbin.

Our grandfather.

Olivier Corbin.

Our parents had told us that there was no one else. That we had no family. I never told my father about what I'd found out, and less than a month later, Théo and I inherited this house. My grandfather had passed away, and had left us this house in Bretagne.

Change had come.

And so we stepped out of the shadows, out of misery, and set up this community, this family, for those who wish to participate. For those who can live by the rules.

The rules that *I* create.

A tap on my shoulder and my eyes flutter open. Luca nods at me as he continues to speak to the others, ensuring that I have left my past and stand here, with him, in the present. I watch my brothers waver on their feet, their eyes closed, lost in trance, as they listen to that delicate voice, rich with gratitude and compassion.

After we moved to this house, I went on a hunt for hidden memories, that were scattered so freely around, by a person whom I'd never met before. As it turned out, my grandfather had been a psychiatrist, and well respected in his field of expertise, hypnosis. When I found out at first, I'd been startled by the coincidence of me finding that book, that of course hadn't been that much of a coincidence. We'd found many more in the house after that, books about the mind, and how it can fool us and can be fooled. A fascinating concept, such as suggestibility in hypnosis, which not everyone has. Some of my brothers from the workshop stay with Rita while we celebrate *Vindication*, but not the likes of Gaspard, the ones who celebrate during our *soirées*. No, those brothers help to manage our household, and entertain the local communities with social activities.

I give Luca the smallest of nods, then slip off the stage. The rain is now pattering loudly against the glass ceiling, echoing through my restless mind. Silently making my way

through the narrow corridor, enjoying the way the thick, plush carpet kisses my bare feet. I might never leave this perfectly decorated, golden cage anymore, but most of my brothers do. Frequently even, because business is doing extremely well. Gaëtan signed deals for two more private *soirées* and they will both take place in our Paris residence. One of them wants to have a fairytale theme, and although our brothers will wear their Venetian masks, I have worked out a few designs for their clothes.

It's not until I halt in front of Mason's door, that I realize I am not in my own rooms. Yet my fingers are already curled around the door knob, impatient to get in. To see, to feel, to touch.

To claim.

The door opens on a soft crackle, but the sleeping man laying on the bed doesn't as much as stir. I approach quietly, again met with contradiction in my stomach.

"Why did you run?" I mumble. Mason's nose is long and straight, making his cheekbones stand out ever so slightly, and his arched eyebrows are full and dark, matching his golden-colored hair, that's a little muss after so much time spent in bed. He puffs out small breaths of air in reply, a silent answer, that makes his kissable lips vibrate gently.

"I'll protect you." My finger darts out, needing to catch those wet delights I so desperately want to taste against my own lips. I don't, leaving them ghosting in front of him, not touching, not wanting to wake him up. And then my eyes find his bandaged hand and I feel a shudder of regret fluttering through my chest.

"I'll keep you." The shudder is quickly replaced by a whirl of anger that turns into hatred. *They'll come for him.* "But I won't let them take you."

Spinning on my heels, I head for the door, needing to leave, needing to breathe. I *loathe* them. Hate that they dare to have the *guts* to come near my safe haven, my castle. Because *I'm* the fucking king.



AS THE HOURS PASS, hatred has left my body like poison from a snake. Regular wafts of earthy incense have made my limbs more relaxed as I once more hunch over my sewing machine. Despite it only being early evening, it's pitch black outside already, the remainder of my discarded dinner left to be picked up. I didn't join them tonight, because I wanted to finish this, wanted to get the design my mind had created into the open.

If the client wants fairytales, they'll get fairytales.

I sew another round of seams on the edge of the moss green crepe, and then I pull out the garment to inspect the result, while humming to the melody of "End of the World", by Skeeter Davis. It was one of the many records my grandfather left for us in this house, ready to be scooped up and loved, altogether with the record players. We both have one, Théo and I. And this, being my workshop, is the ideal space for music. It's in the far corner of the house, overlooking the sharp cliffs that connect directly to the ocean. The weather's getting wilder out there, but for now, the craze has left my mind. I'm satisfied with my first design.

A knock on my door has me looking up, and I watch Gaëtan as he makes his way inside. Tall, strong, his raven-colored hair braided like Théo loves it, his blue eyes cautious as they eye me. Not being one for small talk, I drop the cape onto the work table and gesture to one of my velvet couches, before placing myself opposite of him. His gaze wanders around, taking in the darkness outside, before they swirl back to the record player, the sewing machine, and then back to me.

"Our new *Captain* has been accepted by Jérôme." He makes his way toward the antique liquor cabinet, and I catch his gaze through its mirrored back. "He will lead the two *soirées* we have organized over the weekend in Paris." He looks over his shoulder, the decanter in his hand, and I nod. Turning back to pour us a drink, he continues, "Each night has a value of roughly half a million, that includes our clients in

Asia who will be joining via webcam. You'll receive a full overview of the numbers for you to sign off."

I thank him as he hands me the drink, and take a sip while I wait for him to sit down. He does so, stretching out his silken-clad strong legs.

"Théo's been missing you," he finally says.

Gritting my teeth, I nod. "I know. Hopefully having Ezra around, makes him happier."

"Hm." Gaëtan takes another sip, then stares down at the glass rolling in his large palm. "He believes that keeping Mason will help us reach our final destination—America." His light eyes flick up and look into mine, most probably trying to unravel my mood, checking in before knowing how to continue. "Luca's contacts confirmed that the streets surrounding the Business, are restless. Change is around the corner."

I roll my lips, not surprised by the news, but annoyed nevertheless. "We don't need any informants over there anymore. Now that we have who we want, we can go and settle somewhere else. It's a big country."

A soft knock cuts off Gaëtan's reply, followed by a rustle of clothes, then Ezra. He gingerly closes the door behind him, then turns to stand against the wall. Gaëtan doesn't acknowledge him, instead continues our conversation. "We can go anywhere we want, Gabriel. But just because we close our eyes and ears, doesn't mean they won't be coming for him."

"I know that," I growl, my mood souring as earlier thoughts flutter back in.

"Théo wants to show his worth by bringing you Mason, wants to make you proud. Your brother needs that recognition for his own sanity."

Pressing my lips firmly together, all I do is nod. Théo used to be so frail, so easy to break. And maybe they succeeded, maybe they broke him, my little brother. But when we came here, we glued his soul back together, and fit it right into his

core, complete with all the cracks. “And he does. He lives with his loves, and now I get to live with mine. He’s made me very happy. He knows just like me, that the past is gone, the people dealt with.” The words taste treacherous in my mouth, and even the rich flavor of my drink can’t wash it away.

I did that. For him.

“Has he taken his medication?”

Gaëtan hums, but doesn’t answer.

“Charlie’s been calling me,” Ezra blurts from the corner of the room.

“Calling you?” I flinch at the words.

“So they suspect, despite Luca’s messages.” Gaëtan hangs back on a sigh and closes his eyes. When he opens them again, they are finally focused on Ezra, and he crooks his finger. “Come here, please.”

My brother’s new boyfriend slowly approaches, his gaze diverted from both of us, only to gracefully slide down onto his knees in between Gaëtan’s spread legs.

“What messages?” I ask.

“Luca’s been using Mason’s phone to keep his friends updated, assuring them he’s fine and just needs some space.” Gaëtan takes another sip from his whiskey, and lets his free hand cup the back of Ezra’s head before he gently pushes him further down, toward his crotch. He lowers the front of his silk pants to give Ezra access, then tilts his chin up right. “Have you spoken to Charlie?”

“No.” The answer comes softly, and is added by another mumble that makes Gaëtan’s lips twitch. “Good. Don’t answer for now, I promise you’ll soon be able to speak with your friend.” Ezra nods, and with one final push his mouth gets to work. Gaëtan’s eyes return to mine, but he doesn’t say anything. Instead, we listen to the rain, while I focus on my breathing. On my *fury*.

“Remember what they said during that video call, when they captured Théo?” I don’t wait for Gaëtan to answer, the

memory still fresh. “*We could use a guy like him. We could tie him up, trap him in a cage, put him on display and at the disposal of the highest bidders.*” I snort at the recollection of Austin Carrington’s words. “So yeah, I’m fucking *keeping* Mason, and there’s not a damn thing in the world they can do about it.”

Gaëtan takes his time to answer, his hand wrapped around Ezra’s braid, his gaze relaxed. “Perhaps Théo’s right, and we can use this situation to our own advantage.”

Les Frères Perdus. The Lost Brothers. Oh, we’re no longer lost.

“What are you suggesting?”

“First, let’s make sure that our brothers leave on time for Paris, and that we have everything ready for this weekend’s events. I’ve asked Rita to join our new *Captain* as extra support, this being his first *soirée*, even though our brothers are waiting for them in Paris. The clients are regulars, and I’ve informed them that I won’t be joining this time. We’ve even organized a party at our usual bar, *Touché*, to have them celebrate all being together again.” Gaëtan’s eyes flutter and he lets out a sigh as his hand runs down Ezra’s cheek.

“Is my brother aware of this?” I vaguely wave my hand at Ezra, who’s gone to bobbing his head, his mouth filled all the way up to his throat.

Gaëtan’s lips twitch. “He needs it.”

I nod at that, not understanding. I could never share Mason, not with anyone. But I respect their lifestyle, so we sit some more while I finish my drink with slow, more relaxing gulps, enjoying the way the drink calms my nerves.

When Gaëtan speaks again, his eyes are on his phone, then he gently pulls Ezra off his cock. His voice is a thoughtful murmur when he says, “A storm is coming, *mon frère*.” He nods outside, to where it’s still drizzling. “There’s a cop outside.”

CHAPTER
EIGHT

GABRIEL

“Has anyone opened the door yet?” My robe flutters wildly around the sides of my waist as I hurry to catch up with my brothers from security. They’re already waiting for me in the large reception hall, from where the massive, green, door awaits us, like some gateway to doom. Because it’s the same door that caused Mason to be electrocuted only a few days ago.

The look on his face.

“No, Jérôme’s waiting for you.” One of my brothers points to where he stands, my loyal guard, his usual rope casually slung around his waist, hair tied in a loose bun that floats around his nape. When he hears me nearing, he turns and nods. Behind me, Gaëtan is softly talking to the others, before he nudges me on the shoulder. “Let’s get you safe.” He pushes open the door in the wall, immaculately hidden beneath the wallpaper of wild roses, and leads me into the secret room. It’s only a small space, but still has an armchair and a coffee table, installed to my liking. I sit down on the chair and get comfortable. “You okay like this?” I give Gaëtan a thumbs-up, and he closes the door behind me. And then, I wait. The painting at the other side gets moved ever so slightly, exposing the small hole through which I can see the entrance.

Gaëtan opens the door, with Jérôme flanking him, and I hear him let out a short greeting, before he lets our unwanted guest come over the threshold. A man of average size wearing dress pants and a raincoat, steps inside our home. In one hand he holds a briefcase, in the other a badge that he shows both

my brothers. “Good evening, gentlemen, my name is Philippe Laforêt.”

Gaëtan takes his time to analyze the image, then hands it back. “And how may I help you, Detective Laforêt, of the Paris Metropolitan Police? You’re a long way from home.”

“I am sorry to disturb you at this hour.” The cop lowers his hood, then runs a hand through his auburn hair, wet strands that are glued to his head, and clears his throat. “I received a phone call saying that someone’s being held here against their will. A man, someone who’s lost.”

“Against their will?” Gaëtan drawls, then makes a show of turning around as if he’s searching for something. Or someone. “Are you lost?” He asks Jérôme, who lets out a bark of a laugh as he shakes his head. Gaëtan turns his gaze back to Laforêt. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know who you are referring to.”

“Hm.” I watch as the cop peers inside, to the paintings across the wall, and the corridor that leads to the maze that is called our home. “Do you mind if I take a look inside?”

“That depends,” Gaëtan muses. “Do you have a warrant?”

Laforêt lets out a sigh. “I don’t.”

“Then I have no idea why I should let you take a look inside.” I don’t miss the note of amusement in Gaëtan’s voice, while Jérôme snorts from behind his shoulder.

“All right.” Laforêt straightens his coat, and lets his eyes dance around one last time. “I will make sure to come back with one.”

“You do that. Now, please leave our premises. The gate will close in thirty seconds, so I would be quick if I were you.” And with those words, he closes the door on a bang.

My brothers share a few words, while I digest what just happened, before the door to the secret room finally opens.

“How the hell does he know we have Mason?” Jérôme mutters, while I get up from the chair and close the door behind me.

“That quick, you mean?” Gaëtan lets out a puff of air, nudging the painting back into place. “I have no idea. But I do know that we’ll need to check out this cop’s details.”

“He doesn’t have a warrant, and I doubt that he’ll get one based on an alleged phone call.”

Gaëtan turns over his shoulder and bites, “We need to be careful. I told you that they’d come for him. *Merde*, I wanted to focus on getting our brothers to Paris first. But now—Jérôme, bring Luca and my guys to Gabriel’s room.”

“Of course.” We watch Jérôme leave on a jog, before I turn Gaëtan around by his shoulder. “Don’t overstep yourself, please.” He blinks, searches something in my eyes, then nods.

“Sorry.”

“*My* rules.”

He looks away. “I just want to protect you.”

Taking his chin between two fingers, I turn him, recapturing his stare. “You know he’ll always choose me, right?” It’s nothing more than a purr, but watching his shudder, the words have the desired effect. It tickles through my stomach, and I crave more, so I murmur, “He’d even let me play with his newest toy, if I wanted to.”

Gaëtan’s light eyes freeze into mine, reflecting hatred and confusion. There’s a bit of fear there too, that I lap up, slowly and deliberately. I can’t wait to taste Mason again.

I let his chin go, then nudge him to start walking. “But you have a good point. Let’s go to my room and sort out this, whatever this is. For starters, who tipped off the cop, if anyone did?”

In my room, I go straight for my record collection, in search of something that can wrap its melody around my flickering mood. When I put on some Simon and Garfunkel, I turn, finding Gaëtan staring outside the window toward the ocean. It’s still raining.

We have about ten seconds of peace and quiet, before the door gets practically ripped off its hinges, and my brother

barges in. “The cops were here?” His face is flushed, his eyes crazed, curls bouncing freely in his face as he makes his way toward me. “*Already?*” He takes my hands and I need to squeeze them, need to keep him *here*, in the present. And then he throws his head back and starts cackling. Gaëtan walks toward us, forehead scrunched in worry, at the same time as Ezra crosses the threshold, followed by Luca. “That cop, already here,” Théo splutters between his laughs. “Did he take the batmobile, or what?”

My heart plummets at the words. “Théo, what did you do?” Théo’s lips twitch, but his eyes turn to slits, a sign that his crazy-self is kicking in. “You know what I did, *Gabi*. I took Mason’s phone, and texted them to let them know that he’s come home.” His hands keep fidgeting in mine, and I squeeze them, needing the *other* side of my brother back, while I glare at Gaëtan.

“I am in France, where I belong.” He chortles, then mimics a horrible American accent, before looking back at me. “With my new *love*,” he thunders, all earlier laughter replaced by darkness.

“No,” I squeeze his hands a little tighter. “Why did you do that? Why did you tell them where he is?”

“This is good, *Gabi*. You wanted him to come home, so I brought him to you.” The whining is back.

“He sent them a message with Mason’s phone this morning,” Luca confirms, the phone in his hand. I wince, panic hitting my nerves. “Why, brother, why?”

“Because I fucking *felt* like it!” Théo roars in my face, his eyes lit up by the lightning outside that cracks through the air and across the baby-blue of his irises. And then, as sudden as it showed up, it disappears, and the normal mischief returns to his gaze as he simultaneously grins at my surprised face. “Because I fucking love riling those assholes up. Let’s play a game.”

“No, *amour*. We’re not playing any games now.” Gaëtan booms. Théo’s eyes turn wet, and then a first sob makes its

way over his perfectly handsome face. “I wanted to make you proud, *Gabi*.”

“I know, my brother. And you do. You make me proud every day.” I take him in for a hug, swallowing to press the heaviness away from my chest.

“You wanted to go to America to honor her,” Théo pouts. “This is our opportunity. We *have* him. Did I tell you that there are so many lonely people out there, so many hearts to fill? They’ll need your love, need it. *I* need your love, *Gabi*.”

Gone is the twenty-two year old man my brother has become. Now, in my arms I’m carrying my baby brother, like I did so many times when we were young. Beaten, spit upon, hurt. He starts weeping, and my heart breaks for him. Again.

“*Je t’aime, mon frère,*” I mumble to his broken mind.

“Théo,” Gaëtan orders from the couch, where he sits with Ezra tucked into his side, a possessive arm draped around his shoulder. My brother eyes him, shudders, then shakes his head. “No, I—”

Gaëtan crooks his finger, and I watch as Théo stomps with his feet like an angry child. Tears are rolling down his face, and his head falls to his chest in defeat, making those beautiful curls dance around his tormented mind as he does as he’s told. Gaëtan hoists him up to his lap, and squeezes him tight while my brother’s face falls into the crook of his neck, close to where Ezra is seated. I hear him surrender as he empties his crumbling heart, and Gaëtan’s hand continues to rub his back, while mumbling soothing words into his ear. It makes me wonder if there will ever be enough medication to make my brother better, if we’ll ever be able to give him enough love to survive his horrifying past. Finally, I turn to Luca, who’s all business, laptop on the coffee table, a whiskey in his hand. “Théo sent a message to Connor Donnelly.”

“That animal tied me up to that chair!” Théo hisses from the couch, then falls back into sobbing.

“He lives in Paris, but I highly doubt that the Police want to work with him,” Luca replies.

“How was he able to find our location so quickly?”

“That’s easy.” Luca turns the phone for me to see. “Théo didn’t switch it off, so they could track down the phone location by its ID.”

“But—” I let a hand run down my hair, down my face. Fuck. “How did you know his password?”

When Théo doesn’t answer, Luca shrugs. “Either because there was no password to begin with. These guys often have burner phones that they keep a few days max.” I don’t like the way he refers to Mason as “these guys”, but I let it slip. “Or perhaps he made a good guess? People tend to use the same passwords. Dates of birth, consecutive numbers, that sort of thing.”

“*Merde.*” My thoughts stutter, and I’m losing my grip on my vigor. “What do we do now?” Eyeing the door to my bedroom, the internal fog shrinks as it’s chased away by darkness. By anger. “I won’t give him up,” I hiss.

“Well, technically, we knew that they’d come for him,” Luca states matter of factly. “We just didn’t assume it would be in the shape of a cop. Philippe Laforêt is a detective at the Paris Metropolitan Police, and despite the unlikeliness, it’s safe to say that he’s a contact of the Business.”

“We can ask Mason what the link is between the two of them?” Gaëtan asks, but Luca shakes his head. “I would keep him out of this. If he knows that they’ve found him—” his eyes flash to mine, and I look away as I bite my lip. My heart makes a funny stutter. He’s only been here for a few days, and we haven’t even started. I won’t let them take him.

Luca starts tapping on his computer. “Here’s what we do know. The Business is in trouble. They have made more enemies than allies over the last months with this drugs transport. All Saints have forced them into a crappy deal that seriously pissed off those they ganged up with. They could use an ally. Give that bit of information some thought. I’ll see if I can find out what the connection is between this cop and the Business.” He gets up, taking his computer with him. “Now, if

you'll excuse me, I'll go and feed your chosen one, then bring him here."

"They lost their informants," Ezra adds softly when Luca closes the door behind him. "Which is why they need to work with All Saints in these shitty conditions."

Gaëtan nods. "Luca's right. They need an ally. If they want to own the drugs line between NY and Western-Europe, we can give them Brest. I can contact my uncle, who's the Director of the Security Port Authorities, and always looking for a way to stash some free cash."

It's at moments like these I dislike Gaëtan the most—when he flashes his good looks and name-drops his wealthy relatives. The fact that he still gets on well with his rich family doesn't help. Despite that family being well-respected clients. "I can make some inquiries, but we can offer the Business our allegiance on this side of the ocean, and that will give them the armor they need to escape from All Saints' deadly grip, and make do with their previous allies."

"That simple, huh?" I ask.

Gaëtan shakes his head. "It never is. But it's a good starting point. Gabriel," His light eyes have a dark gaze that matches mine and he stares at me intently, "We can't just keep him. Let's finish what Théo has started. Tell them to come."

My skin itches at his words, causing my body to erupt in a shiver. He must feel my reluctance, because Gaëtan quickly adds, "Not inside. Behind the fence. But we can't sit here, waiting for them. We have three cars with brothers leaving for Paris tomorrow, we can't just sit here and cave. We need to lead, and prompt them in the direction we need this to go. An alliance for their drugs, in exchange for your man. Tell Mason to call them," Gaëtan adds.

I roll my lips, contemplating my options. A small, hidden part of me knows he's right, I'm not that crazy. I've just become reckless. Even *I* know that I shouldn't just take someone and keep him in a fluffy, golden box.

Or should I?

The air turns thick with anticipation and I feel his stare on me, feel him waiting for my answer. He needs me, needs me to approve, needs me to take the lead, while giving him the illusion that he's so smart. That he's so big and strong. Don't they all?

It makes my cock tickle with need. It makes me want to see Mason.

I look up. "No. They're not welcome here."

CHAPTER
NINE

MASON

“Hey, wanna grab some dinner? My name is Luca.”
The blond guy in the doorway is roughly my size, his hair tied out of his face in a messy bun, revealing almond-shaped, dark eyes that somehow pierce right through me. His smile seems genuine enough, and though I’d love to tell him to go and fuck himself, I don’t. I’m famished.

Until he holds out a rope, and I take a step back. “Are you kidding me?”

“Depends, are you gonna put up another show?”

I bristle at that, then shoulder him purposefully as I leave the room. He catches up with me on a jog and a chuckle that I ignore, and the walk that follows is a silent one, although not awkward. Until he ushers me through the door inside the kitchen. I pause, once more painfully aware of the elegance and grandeur that shoves my entire being in the darkest of shadows I’ve ever seen. I don’t belong here, in this immaculate environment. I belong in the cramped, outdated spaces I have always called home. The mere illusion that, according to Gabriel, this could be my new home, turns my stomach in knots, and lets nerves flutter freely.

Sure the Donnellys have millions, and I’ve spent a fair amount of time in their offices, and even their penthouse, but somehow the cool, modern look feels inferior to the rich architecture of history. Colorful tiles combined with massive windows that showcase the cliffs and the ocean beyond. Apart from the extensive kitchen, complete with all imaginable appliances, there’s a large counter made out of a tree trunk that

seems to operate as a kitchen island and bar, whilst on the other side an equally large table and at least fifteen chairs.

“You must be starving. Here, we saved you some dinner,” Luca cuts through my murmurs, his face searching inside the gigantic fridge. Another guy trots in, and makes his way toward the sink, taking his time in filling up his water bottle and washing his hands, but when he turns around and sees us, his eyes widen. Without hesitating, he grabs the plate out of Luca’s hands and I listen to their rapid conversation without understanding a single word. When he smiles at me, I recognize the word *Captain*. Watching him take the food and put it into the microwave, my mind scrambles to remember Connor’s description of the way this cult, or *family*, is organized. Before, it all just sounded creepy, and none of us was interested in getting the details. Wetting my bottom lip, I think of Ezra mentioning this guy. Luca’s about my size, looks fit and strong. In a normal situation, I could probably take him down, but after the last couple of days, the horrible journey in the container, being beaten to a pulp and having been put down like *Sleeping fucking Beauty*, I have lost some of my muscle. My forehead wrinkles at the thought. “So, you’re a *Captain*?”

There’s something troubling about his dark eyes and the way they stare at me, as if he can see through me. Then he nods. “I am.” Luca gestures toward the hot plate placed right in front of me. “Here, eat something.”

Lunch with Rita feels like a century ago, and though my hand throbs under its bandage, it doesn’t stop me from using a fork and devouring the creamy pasta with shrimps and salad.

“It’s my intention to make sure that every family member is free,” Luca ticks his finger against his temple, “in their minds.”

“Hypnosis.” I scrunch my nose, to which he lets out a laugh.

“Exactly. I take it you’ve never been under hypnosis?”

“Hell, no, *freak*.” I take another bite, keeping my eyes on his. If this guy wants a fight, he can have one. With my

injuries throbbing and my mind only just cluttered together, it won't need much to set me off. He doesn't. Apart from a smile and a shake of his head, he drops the subject. "I'm also the designer of our *soirées*. Have you heard of those?"

"I have," I mumble with my mouth full, then swallow. "Your murder scenes."

He barks out another laugh, sits back and chats with the other guy, who sits behind a computer at the long table. His eyes flash with devilish intent as he snickers. Luca turns back to me. "You're a funny one, but not that well informed, Mason."

Sudden embarrassment rushes back to the surface, and I growl while my good fist hits the table. "Are you fucking kidding me? I know what you are."

"Hey, chill out." Luca holds out both hands in surrender, but I don't miss how the other guy flinches. "Perhaps if you were willing, we could show you how we live, explain our values."

"Are you for real? You've kidnapped me, dude."

He doesn't reply to that, and I keep on eating, loathing myself for enjoying the food as much as I am. Only when I finish my glass of water, and wipe my mouth clean with my hand, do I look up again. Luca's eyes flash briefly, and I recognize the tiniest glimpse of understanding as he nods.

"Let him show you first, before you judge," the other guy whisper-mumbles, but when I look up at him, his eyes are still fixated on his computer. I really should be bargaining for my freedom right now, Luca seems like a sensible guy. He'd understand, right? But me, on the other side... The sheer thought of Gabriel has my body vibrating. It clearly doesn't get the message that this guy is not on our side, as it hums with anticipation, making my chest tighten.

Outside the rain clatters against the windows, and the ocean collides with the cliffs in violent waves that we hear through the silence. "So how are we going to do this?" I finally ask Luca. "How does a *chosen one* live? Will I be tied

to a bed for the rest of my life?” The thought makes my cock tickle behind silk, and I grind my teeth with annoyance. “Or is there some way we can get to an understanding?”

Luca crosses his arms in front of his chest, a challenging glint in his eyes. “Would you like to be tied to his bed for the rest of your life?”

“Fuck you, this is wrong, and you *know* it.” I snarl at him, and our eyes lock, but his become deep, as if he sees through me, and I look away, annoyed with myself. Annoyed with everyone. Shaking my head, I mumble, “You fucking lunatics.”

Luca doesn't seem taken aback, not the slightest. Instead he leans forward ever so slightly, and I feel his burning gaze on mine. “Tell me something Mason, have you ever been chosen before?”

He backs off when two other guys walk into the kitchen, chatting casually as they fill bottles of water from the tap. It makes me exhale in relief. The way they are sauntering through the place with swaying hips and playful grins, they seem... happy. The thought is more discerning than I'd realized. It's easier to fight it. There's something else too, something that has me jumping out of my stool, because I want none of it, and yet I do, and it's killing me. My legs walk me toward the window, and I take in deep gulps of air. Fuck, I'm losing it.

Watching the others through the reflection of the glass as they chat with each other, cleaning as they do so, it's clear they belong. It makes me feel even more the outsider, a distinction I have wrapped around me permanently, like a mismatched label. But then, aren't we all outsiders, somehow? I sigh when I catch my own reflection through the glass. Perhaps life was easier when my sole focus was finding enough food for me and Pops to eat, and enough money for his medication to survive. And yeah, I have done some dubious things to put cash in my pockets. Does that make me a monster?

“Your grandfather says thank you for all the gifts.”

I spin on my heel, to where Luca's now also standing, hands in his pockets, that strange, invasive gaze on mine. He's measuring me up, and I notice how the clattering of pans behind him has dimmed. They're all waiting for me to react, probably like last time. My hand starts throbbing, as if to remind me how that ended.

"Have you talked to him?" I rasp, and I swallow in an attempt to chase away the lump that sits on my larynx. It does, sliding all the way down to my heart.

"You sent him a few text messages." Luca narrows his gaze. "You need some time alone, and sent him a box with plenty of gifts. I believe you already saw a picture of him wearing a shirt with the Eiffel Tower on it. You were not meant to see that picture so soon, but Maxime..."

"And what, you want me to *thank* you for sending him those gifts?" Fear comes to the forefront of my emotions, but it feels cold out there, because his words hit me straight in the chest. I miss Pops. When's the last time I gave him an actual gift?

Luca squints his eyes. "Just thought that you would want to know that he's doing all right." He grabs his computer from the table, then tilts his chin toward the corridor. "Come on, let's go and see your man."

I shiver, and inwardly groan at the strong, physical reaction to those words. I have never looked at any guy like that, never lived in a world where claiming someone as *mine*, could even be an option. Luca holds the door open and patiently waits for me to give in. Part of me wants to piss him off, hoping that I'll be successful enough for him to pick a fight with me, but that other part of me is tired. Tired of fighting, tired of thinking. So I follow him through the kitchen, ignoring the curious stares around me. I expect him to look smug as fuck, or give me another one of his smart ass comments, but he doesn't. In fact, he hardly speaks at all as we make our way through the narrow corridor. There are fewer doors in this part of the house, though everything's designed in exactly the same way.

“So, is this, like, your home?”

He shifts his head to face me. “It is.”

“It’s uhm—” I let out a forced whistle, that makes me cringe immediately. “Big. Yeah.”

“It is.” He catches my eyes and lets out a chuckle.

“And it’s also where you organize these evenings?” Connor and Austin attended one before, and did they have many stories to share, each one weirder than the last.

“No. We also have a house in Paris. Most of our clients are based in the capital anyway. This is—”

“Your home.”

“Right.” He grins back at me, and I turn away, feeling caught. “What about you?”

I clack my teeth at the question. “You know about me.”

“Please, enlighten me.”

I let out a sigh while shaking my head. “I don’t think I will.”

“Not much going on then, apart from life with your grandfather and the Business?”

I bite my lip, then add, “Nah.” It’s the truth, but he already knows that. I don’t know what’s worse. Without anger to help me, I’m back to my usual socially awkward self. Not sure if I’m required to say anything else, I stay silent. And then the moment’s gone anyway, because we halt in front of a door.

“We’re here.”

I grimace, and as annoying flutters flit around my chest, my hand starts throbbing again. When Luca opens the door, the first thing I feel is recognition. It somehow reminds me of the container back in NY, the one they used on me as bait. I blink away the thought, but it leaves my mind spinning. The room is large, with one side entirely walled in glass, the outside darkness bringing the reflection from the living room directly back to me. On our side of the room is a spacious sitting area. Big bookcases up to the ceiling showcase

hundreds of books, and in the far corner across from me stands a desk with a sewing machine on it. Next to it a chest of drawers, some of which are open, filled with colorful fabric and thread. Close by I hear the puff of the incense, and I take it in on a greedy whim, needing my limbs to relax.

“*Bonsoir, mon lapin.*” One, husky phrase is enough for my muscles to do anything but that. My hackles rise as discomfort grows, and when I find Gabriel hanging back on a velvet couch, his hand wrapped around a glass of whiskey, his predatory smile upon me, I practically bare my teeth at him. Yet I don’t know what to say. He’s once again dressed in that silk robe, his necklaces clinging to him like a shiny, second skin. Both his fingernails and toenails are painted black, and I realize now that his toes are equally adorned with rings.

When he wiggles his brows, I realize I am gaping at him, and this time I let out a growl while my face heats. “Whose idea was it to send Pops those text messages?”

Gabriel turns his gaze to Luca, who’s leaning against the door. “Has he eaten?” As if I’m not in the fucking room.

Luca’s neutral stare takes me in, before he gives Gabriel a clipped nod. “Yes.”

“Stop treating me like I’m an idiot,” I mumble. Joke’s on me though, because when Gabriel shifts in his seat, the material of his robe rustles, making my cock instantly jerk in reply. All those smooth inches of skin hidden under that garment. Is he wearing underwear today?

I swallow, and place a hand over my groin. Never has my body reacted so strongly to anyone, and he fucking knows it. Gabriel’s once-over is slow and thorough, his lips curled into a satisfied smirk. I huff and look away. So much for casual hiding.

“And you managed to get him here without any rope around his neck?” Gaëtan quips, the insult loud and heavy from where he’s sitting across from Gabriel on an identical velvet couch. No one reacts, though he doesn’t seem to mind, being too busy with Ezra and Théo, who gets up from his lap with a wicked grin. The two others equally rise, and Gaëtan

drapes both his thick arms around each pair of slender shoulders. “Come on, *amour*, it’s time for us to go anyway. Gabriel, tomorrow, once the guys have left for Paris, we’ll talk again.”

I watch them all leave, but as soon as the door shuts behind the two of us, I turn back to Gabriel on a scowl. “Was it your idea to send my Pops gifts from France? Pretending that I’m on some sort of a trip in search of space?” My cock finally understands the message, softening once more in my pants, only to perk up in confusion when Gabriel rakes a jeweled hand through his mussed, blond hair. I bite my lip, needing to rile myself up, because it’s easier, it’s so much easier than discovering what’s underneath.

“This is fucking insane.” That’s not what I’d wanted to say, but as usual, words come short when I see red. “He even looked *happy*. With that stupid shirt on and his thumbs up, and his smile.” Somehow, my own words take out the sting, and suddenly I’m no longer looking for a fight. Suddenly I’m just feeling sad. “He... he always wanted to travel, and France was on top of his list. We never—” We never had the money. And now I’m here, in fucking France, against my will, and he thinks I’m on vacation or something. The thought brushes against my heart. “I need to talk to him, please let me talk to him. Please.” Desperation claws at my pathetic insides. “I will play your game, won’t tell him the truth, but I’ve never been away from home, never left him alone, and I just—”

“*D’accord*. You can call your grandfather.” He twitches his lips.

I take in a deep, shuddering breath. “Thank you.” Fuck, do I hate myself right now.

“Now, come and sit, Mason.” Gabriel pats the empty spot next to him. His mood has shifted, and my body has picked up on it even before my mind has. “I’m sure you have questions.” His patting turns into rubbing, long fingers caressing velvet. “Please.”

I loathe the way that I love how my name falls off his tongue in this breathy seduction, how his slight accent makes

it sound so much more exotic. Like I'm not just a loser from Brooklyn who still lives with his Pops. "Don't be shy, sweetheart, for you are the mystery my mind enjoys solving. And now I finally have the time to do so." He smiles his glittering teeth bare, making my cock jolt behind my hand. I bite my lip, willing it down. But when I catch him staring, embarrassment floods my cheeks, so I send him a snarl, because no words come out.

"You're black, or white. Sweet, or sour. Angry, or..." Gabriel tilts his head. "I haven't quite decided. Were you still a virgin before I let you fuck me?"

"What?"

His eyes flash. "You were."

"I *so* wasn't." I've had a girlfriend. One.

"Wanna know why I chose you?"

No.

I stay silent, while I force my tongue to just form that exact word, but it gets distracted when he lets out a soft, throaty chuckle.

"No," I manage to rasp, but it only makes his chuckle become more husky, more confident.

"You're a bad liar." Our eyes meet, and he looks so fucking smug, the way he sits there in his silken garment, teeth flashing with diamonds, on his proverbial thrown. His neck is long and slender, pale skin inviting me to admire the jewelry around it, to lap at that pendulum like he did, his delicate shoulders barely wrapped in any garment. I want to discover the scent of his skin, the flavor of his flesh, the sounds he makes when I pull him into my larger body.

"Come on, wolf, come sit with me, and I'll give you answers. Or we can do something else instead. Whatever it is you need."

My hand stays firmly against my groin, while I bite my cheek. I'm so hard for him and I fucking *hate* it.

CHAPTER
TEN

MASON

Walking toward the couch, I try to cup my hard length as best as I can, fully aware of the fact that I'm not wearing any underwear, and silk does absolutely nothing to prevent that tickly, soft sensation. I warily eye the hand that he doesn't remove when I get there. Instead those long digits seduce me, curling and rubbing, tauntingly slowly, as if they're waiting for me to make up my mind. When I take too long, he crooks a finger. "Sit."

I do, landing onto his pressing fingers, that deftly find their way between my barely clothed ass cheeks. A jolt of pleasure zaps through my balls, and I can barely stifle the groan in my throat.

"Better?"

"Barely," I glower at him with clenched teeth. "You could take your hand away."

"Your wish is my command, sweetheart." He pulls free, his robe fluttering around his sculpted limbs when he gets up and walks toward a vintage record player stand.

"You know we have modern sound systems for that nowadays, right?" I sneer cheaply, blaming it on my treacherous body that's somehow already missing his warmth. *Pathetic.*

He whips around, a record in his hands. "Ah. But where's the beauty in that?"

I narrow my eyes. "I'm sorry?"

“Don’t you just love the moment the needle chatters right before it starts playing your favorite song?”

“I—” Had never thought of that.

“Did you like the songs I chose for you? I’m personally a big fan of Skeeter Davis, and I love Paul Anka.”

Those artists... their songs were playing when they took me, then later when they put me into that bed, half-battered to death. “Did you *choose* those songs?”

He gives me a toothy grin and nods. “For you. You like them?”

“I don’t know, man. It’s—” My heart rate picks up. “Sick.”

“Told you, you’re a bad liar.” He lets out a chuckle, then turns back to the record player. “I love style, love to design it, create it, cherish it. Beautiful, complicated things. Beautiful, complicated *people*.”

The first seconds of Elvis Presley’s “Can’t help falling in love with you” play when he walks back. “Look around you. This place is timeless. It already existed before you and I were born, and it will continue to do so after we’re gone. It was created with beauty, its architecture based around curves and lines, *Art Nouveau*.”

“Your point?” I bristle, not willing to admit that he’s touched a sensitive spot. He tilts his head to the side while he darts his tongue over the gems on his teeth.

“Nothing, it’s just that I’ve seen you looking at the architectural style. At the furnishings. This house has plenty of historical wealth.” When I don’t react, he adds with a secretive murmur, “I might know more about your desires than you think.”

Pursing my lips, I push away the shatters of broken dreams. “I have questions, and I need answers.”

“And you are willing to listen?”

“I—Why did you come to NY in the first place? What were you looking for?”

Gabriel hums, then replies in a soft voice, “America has always called to me from afar, Mason, whispered to me from across the ocean. It was my grandmother’s country. Like a bird, she flew into this place, painted it bright, lit the house on fire.” He stops speaking, and our eyes meet.

“Go on.”

He nods. “When I moved here, I discovered her life, described through the stories she wrote in her diary. She shared her thoughts, her passion, and I indulged myself in it, needed it to wrap around me, so I could forget about my own past. Her memories, and the stuff she and my grandfather left behind, the furniture, the records, the *view*, has become the make-up that I permanently wear. It has become my life.” He moves forward, seeking something, seeking *me*, as he places himself onto my lap. And despite my internal grumbling and growling and the knowledge that I *shouldn’t* want this, I instinctively put my arms around him and pull him in tight. His chin lands on my chest, its shape a perfect size for the crook of my neck, and I carefully take in a deep breath of Gabriel. I don’t want him to stop talking, suddenly yearning to unravel this enigma that he is. The realization is as seductive as it is wrong.

“Théo was so sad, so little, when we came here, despite my attempts to protect him.”

“From what?” I snap my mouth shut, praying that my curiosity didn’t just kill the mood. Gabriel halts, only to continue, and I let out the relieved breath that I’d been holding in. “He still wants to thank me for those years, wants to make me proud. It calms his restless mind. He’s been trying for us to move to America, so I no longer have to chase my dreams.” His lips brush my collarbone, and he continues to gingerly nuzzle my neck. Feeling his silky, blond hair against my mouth, I squeeze my eyes shut, desperately trying to keep the fire out of my veins.

“What he doesn’t realize is that my dreams are an illusion, based on a person who’s no longer alive. Based on something she represented, from a time long gone.” He looks up, and our eyes meet. “In his attempt to get us settled there, Théo targeted

a few French companies with strong family roots, hoping that he could somehow infiltrate them, and convince the owners to give in and give way to us, but that didn't go quite as planned." He huffs. "Apparently they were more eager to die than to stay alive."

"You have so much money, Théo could have simply bought the company, rather than kill the owners?"

Gabriel taps my lips on a grin, before his face lands back in the slopes above my chest, while he mumbles in my neck, "That's not my brother's style, *mon lapin*. Sometimes he enjoys having a little fun." His fingers reach for my injured hand. "And sometimes people just need that little push to remind themselves of what *they* truly want. Even if it's death. You know what I mean." He starts caressing the bandage, and I can't help the sigh as it escapes from my lips. "Anyway, we developed our own life here, and time moved on. Our family became bigger, and our business grew with that." He stops talking, and I give him a short break before I fire my next question. I have so many, I don't even know which one to pick. "So this business. You sell sex, right?"

His breath feathers over my skin as he chuckles, and goosebumps erupt. "Has anyone ever told you that you only hear what you wish to hear? It's style, *mon lapin*, that we offer. We create beauty, and our customers enjoy consuming it." His fingertips are still circling my hand, and the heat of the wound flares up, reminding me that it's *him* who did that to me. That it's *him* who can hurt me, because he's captured me.

"What kind of beauty?"

"A fantasy. An erotic, interactive play that they can design whichever way they wish."

"Is that what you recruit these guys for? F—for sex?" I shouldn't be appalled, the Donnellys aren't any better. But his angelic appearance doesn't seem to match the nature of this business. He should be a fashion designer, or an artist, not a cult leader.

Gabriel pulls back to look up at me once more, this time looking genuinely surprised. "Are you talking about my

beautiful brothers, who provide for their family by sharing their bodies so sweetly with our clients?”

I give him a jerky nod.

“We call them *Trésors*, Mason. The word’s very similar to the English word “treasure”, and that’s exactly what they are, each and every one of them. They are a reflection of the guys we used to be, Théo and I, before we moved here. When we inherited all this wealth, we opened our arms and hearts to guys who are in the same situation as we were. We give shelter to the injured, to the wounded, give them love and strength.”

“And in exchange for that, they are raped?”

Gabriel shakes his head, a hint of amusement flickering through his eyes. “Our *Trésors* are the ones in charge, Mason. Open your eyes. They hold the power. Our clients give them everything, cherish their bodies, admire them. The moment these guys step inside this family, they define *power*. It’s always about power.” He licks the gems on his teeth. “Tell me something, wolf. Between you and I, who do you think is in charge? Is it you?” We both look at his caressing fingers on my bandage, before he rakes his hand up to cup my chin, tilting my gaze back to his. “Hm?”

“I—” My eyes dart around his face, taking in the large eyes and the glimmering piercings, and my cock throbs inside my pants. I swallow, unsure of what to say. A sly smile crosses his lips, and his gaze drops to where his fingers are still curled around my chin, as they give it a little squeeze. “That’s right. We both know who’s in charge, and it’s not you, sweetheart. Now, kiss me.”

My mind goes blank as desire spikes, and I let him pull me closer before crushing my lips onto his. They are soft and plump, and I groan against their seam, requesting that they open to let me in. He fists my hair in a tight knot, and pulls my head back with force. It stings, and my growl allows for his tongue to dive in and lick inside my mouth. He yanks harder, and my eyes burn, ache flicking through my veins, and flooding south toward my groin. My cock is on fire, hard and straining against the silk of my pants, while Gabriel molds me

as he pleases, his moans swallowed by our kiss. Our tongues connect, chase each other, but every time I try to lead the kiss, he tugs my head further back. I let out another desperate groan, and he chuckles ever so slightly as he drags his lips over mine, his tongue solidly ruling my mouth, locked in position as it devours my wet heat.

“Fuck,” I pant when he pulls back to catch his breath. His cocky smile is back on his handsome face, but his large eyes are pupil-blown, his cheeks flushed. We’re both breathing hard, and when his hand lets go of my hair, he brushes the brown strands gingerly.

“We enjoy playing the big guys,” he mumbles, and he licks his lips, hooded eyes staring at me. “We make them bend, then take what we want. *I* make you bend, *mon lapin*. Because you are mine.”

He lets go of me completely, and shifts on my lap as he pulls his robe straight. “Now, what other questions do you have?”

“What about Rita?” I fire back immediately, chest still heaving, but not wanting to let him win.

“What about her?”

“Is she a member?” I cringe at my choice of words.

Gabriel’s lips twitch. “She’s the head of our workshop, and yes, she’s a family member. We work together a lot. After Luca defines the fantasy with the client, we sit together, and design the clothes and masks our brothers will be wearing.”

“What about...” I look around, away from him, questions evaporating with every second. The way he explains it, it kind of makes sense. Still, it’s all wrong. It’s got to be. “Luca told me, he puts people under hypnosis, Connor told me about the drugs—” Fuck. I didn’t mean to blurt out his name. Gabriel tilts his head to the side, his eyes on mine.

“What about hypnosis freaks you out so much? Do you know that it can be used to treat depression, anxiety and eating disorders?”

“I mean—” Why does everything he says need to make so much sense? I’ve seen them, the images. I *know* that they kill people, hang them in churches and abandoned alleys, despite his excuses.

“Let me show you something else.” My heart rate picks up when he leans closer. Is he going to let me kiss him again? He holds out the pendulum. “Lick this.” His gems flash. Then he brings the jewel up and taps against my mouth. “Open.”

My lips part without thought, but I don’t miss the hunger in his gaze. The material feels smooth against my tongue, and then my taste buds react confused. “It tastes like strawberry?”

“It does.” He grins. “Well, not usually, but I have it specially strawberry flavored.”

“What is it?”

“I’ll show you tomorrow. It’s derived from poppy seeds, and it relaxes our minds and brings us closer to our inner core.”

Fuck. Opium.

“It’s very good for fucking.” He’s back to playing with the silk rope.

I swallow, willing my erection to go down. My dick doesn’t listen, entirely fixated on Gabriel’s whispers. “Clients enjoy the scent as well, and enjoy watching our brothers get off on one another during our *soirées*.”

“That is—” I swallow. A vivid image is now implanted in my brain, and I need to remind myself that this guy is my kidnapper. “You’re evil.” It comes out on a breathy exhale, and misses any form of punch. I hate myself for it.

“I can feel your mind spinning from here, Mason. You want to know, right? Why I chose you?” He doesn’t wait for my pathetic excuse, instead continues, “After previous attempts to infiltrate a French family business, Théo tried NY. Tried to find different kinds of organizations, if you catch my drift. Still family-run, but more experienced in the type of business we could use to add to our own. He didn’t find one, but two, and even better...” He grins at me. “They hated each

other. The Business and the Void. It was entertaining to see how you guys ran around each other in circles, avoiding contact, egos bigger than your cocks, and all the while you let these people die.”

“Innocent people,” I grumble.

“Hm. Were they? Who’s innocent in this world?” He drawls, eyes twinkling with mischief. “A newborn baby, yes. Most children, yes. But come adulthood, most of us are already smeared with hatred and vengeance.”

“He killed those people, Gabriel. Your brother killed them.”

“Yes.” He whispers. “He did. And you know why? Because they got in his way.” He continues on a whisper, “It’s not common for us to kill our brothers. But Théo has certain *needs*. So sometimes, we let him. For his own health. But then Connor and Austin had to fall in love. We weren’t counting on that.”

“And he was taken prisoner.” I remember them talking about it, about having two prisoners, of which one was executed to save the other’s life. Freedom was granted to the crazy one.

Gabriel nods. “I saved my brother’s life. When he came home, he showed us all the video footage he recorded over there. He was angry for the way your bosses had disgraced him, and I was fuming for the words they’d used on him. But then everything changed. Because my eye caught something on camera it wanted.” He snaps his fingers. “Boom, just like that. You know what I saw on camera, right? What made me ask my brother to go back out there and get it for me, to bring it home to where it belongs?”

“No?” The word comes out forced, high-pitched, and he must hear it, though he doesn’t comment. Because I do. I fucking do. But at this moment, some pathetic part of me needs to hear him say it, again and again. At this moment, I don’t care that he’s a wealthy cult leader and I’m a ratty mobster lackey. I just want him to say that he chose me, need

him to upgrade my spot in the shadows to one in the spotlight.
In *his* spotlight.

“You.”

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

MASON

Despite this need, I can't let him know. It's wrong. So I spit, "That's ridiculous," and let anger rise, my loyal savior. Gabriel chuckles under his breath as he shakes his head. "By now you should know that Théo would have kidnapped you for less, if he'd felt like it. But yes, I did. I ordered you. And my brother brought Gaëtan with him, for muscle and commercial purposes, since he is the business mind of our family. He always finds a way to gain opportunity, and this trip certainly was one of them." He stops, then watches as I purse my lips in forced distaste. "Oh, that's not the answer you want to hear? Then what is it exactly, *mon lapin*, what you *want* to hear? You want me to tell you that they came over to get you, because I wanted you? But when I tell you just that, you don't want to hear it."

Frustration gets the better of me, and I push him off of me, then jump out of my seat, crossing the room, with no specific destination in mind, feeling his eyes on my back. I don't know what I want to hear anymore.

"You truly are a mystery, and I wonder why you are so upset right now."

I swirl around and snarl, "Maybe because you have kidnapped me and claimed me as *yours*? Maybe because I don't *want* to be here?"

He stands too, silk caressing smooth skin, and I bite my lip as I look away.

“But that would be a lie, wouldn’t it? Funny, you don’t strike me as a guy who would lie to your brothers in the inner circle. Why do you lie so much to yourself?”

“You don’t understand,” I grit out, and he clacks his tongue in reply.

“It’s you who doesn’t understand, sweetheart. Every time I’d catch you on camera, you’d either be with these two other guys, or your asshole boss. Always one step behind, in the shadows, like some rusty pot of gold that had yet to be discovered. And I did it. We brought you here to be brushed up, to be put on display.”

“Oh yeah? So your clients can book me for their sex fantasies?” I spit, knowing full well that this is completely irrational.

He tsks at that, simply brushing the comment to the side. “You know, whenever I saw you hanging back in the twilight, I wondered what a guy like you could possibly be doing in a crime organization like the Business. So timid, so beautiful, the star player in my dreams.”

His words hit me straight in the chest, and I swallow, needing the lump to leave my throat.

“I wondered who you were, what your name was, what kind of person you were.”

“Stop.”

“Now I wonder how bright all the other colors look, once we’ve found them between the prominent black, and white. How many emotions you have between anger and fear.”

“Shut up.”

“Ah, black has joined the party. Tell me, Mason, why are you angry now?”

“You know why.” His voice comes closer, and I start walking again, toward the windowed wall and the ticking rain.

“Because you’re confused.”

I turn around, my hand in the air. “That is *not* true. You know nothing about me.”

“I know that you’re a big, needy guy. You’re strong, and sweet, and want me to take control.” Gabriel doesn’t look at me, simply fiddles through the records when he searches for another one, leaving me boiling with fury on the other side of the room.

“Don’t worry though.” He looks over his shoulder and his blond hair falls over his forehead. He blows it away, then grins. “Consider that the cherry on the cake, and I intend to devour it in one swallow. I love taking control.”

Soft music starts to play through the speakers, and he slowly comes walking my way, one hand curled up in the silk rope. Licking my lips, I feel the erratic beating of my heart as I take a step back. “Don’t underestimate me, Gabriel. I might not have the biggest of mouths and enjoy standing in the shadows, but I am not some pussy you can bend your way.”

“I don’t underestimate you, Mason.” He halts, then tilts his head to the side. “Is that the impression I gave you?”

“Yeah, I mean,” Fuck, I don’t know anymore. “You seem to be so sure of yourself.” I stare ahead, into his smoldering eyes. “But you’ve never asked me what *I* want.”

“Those are two big statements.”

We’ve both now entered the other side of the room, which seems to be made purely of glass, apart from the colorful tiles on the floor and the constant rainfall outside. “Being sure of yourself is subjective. Like beauty, I define, then design, then consume.”

I lick my lips. “And which phase are we in?”

“That depends, which phase do you *want* to be in?” His eyes sparkle with devilish intent as he takes another step, effectively trapping me. I shiver, but my throbbing cock doesn’t realize that it shouldn’t get turned on by this man. Words don’t come, they’re somehow lost in my mind, and he moves in slowly, his onyx stare burning as it crashes into mine. He takes another step closer, not giving two fucks about

personal space since he steps right into it. My breath leaves me on a gasp, mind blanking out when I get a much needed waft of his scent. Lavender, mixed with mystery. It's soft, powdery, with smokey notes. I close my eyes when his breath feathers my neck, and he mumbles, "I'd say I'm still designing your beauty. There's so much of it."

The back of my head hits the cool glass, but it doesn't do anything to quench the fire that burns my insides. The anticipation is killing me, his words absorbing.

"We have time to be molded, Mason. To find a rhythm that is ours." He quirks his lips ever so slightly, making my gaze land on the diamond below his mouth. It's shining, just like Gabriel.

And then he dashes forward and gives my neck an unexpected, firm lap, from my collarbone up to my ear. He groans when he gets there. "Hm, you taste so good. So sweet." My cock jolts at the touch, and I slam my mouth shut in an attempt to keep control.

"Big, strong, and innocent. *Merde*, the perfect combination." He gives my rigid flesh a gentle squeeze, and my entire body trembles. Flames ignite, and I can't help the moan from spilling.

"I'll let you have my body, all of it." Another brush against my throbbing length, and I stifle a groan. "Turn around. What do you want to see?" I do as he says, facing the darkness and the storm outside. There's a lighthouse in the far distance, its beacon shining a bright white light. When I stare longer, I see the reflection. My own frame, and the room behind me. Two arms snake around my waist, the wrists shining with bracelets, the long, slender digits decorated with black paint on their nails. I swallow when they creep toward my waistband, my cock leaking in apprehension.

"Nothing." The lie comes out on a rasp, and his fingers halt.

"Nothing?"

“I mean,” his fingers continue their excruciating journey, and my hips jerk involuntarily. “It’s dark outside.”

“Come on, I know what you want to see.” I can feel his smile against my shoulder blades.

“Fuck, what do you want me to say?” I groan when his fingers dive under the silk, and my legs wobble. “That I see America from here?” My forced chuckle turns into a breathy moan when they crawl onto my cock, swiping away the wetness on my slit. “Oh, fuck.” My hips buck and I let my arm rest against the glass to find my balance.

“They won’t come for you, Mason.” His words trickle inside my mind, but the featherlight touch around my arousal makes me sluggish. I bite my lip, need to feel the sting, the blood, the *pain*.

“We have powerful clients, and a lot of money,” he mumbles. He swirls his thumb around the tip, and I grunt through my closed jaw. “No one gets in my way, sweetheart.”

“So you’re just gonna keep me?” I mumble through gritted teeth, ignoring the way my biceps are straining. “Until you have had enough of me? And then what, you’re going to hang me?”

He doesn’t answer, but this time, when I look into the outside darkness, I do see. “You’re wrong. They *will* come.” Grabbing his prying hand out of my pants, I whip around. His gaze lowers where our fingers are connected for the very first time, his size matching mine perfectly.

“You’re warm,” he counters. “Your skin. Soft and warm.”

I drop his hand immediately and bare my teeth when I push him away. “*Are* you? Keeping me?”

“*Will* they? Come for you?” He fires back immediately, eyes darting between mine as if this is just one, fucking game.

“They know *who* you are, know *what* you are. And they’ll soon know *where* you are. And when they break me out of here, I’ll be coming for you.”

“Yeah? Then what? What are you going to do to me?” He comes closer again, and his sharp angles cut into my mind like knives. It’s lethal, *he is*, but this time I’m prepared.

“Don’t you come any fucking closer,” I snarl. “Because I will fight you.”

He takes another step, our heaving chests now touching. “Then fight me, *mon lapin*. Show me how strong you are.” He tilts his head up, leaning in. His tongue laps over the seam of my lips before nipping at the skin hard enough to draw blood. I flinch, but when he sucks from the injury, desire shoots through my body. “Your blood tastes so good. So sweet, like it wants to be mine.”

He licks my lips, and they open as I slowly taste his words, their true significance absorbed by my tastebuds. His tongue sweeps inside, drowning all erratic thoughts into the ocean beyond the window, making me taste my own blood, my own defeat. He hums in satisfaction when I take the line he throws me, frantically curling my tongue around his, picking up the pieces of my pride. A gasp escapes my mouth, all pent-up frustration and arousal coming to life, but I try to pull back, need for reality to kick in.

“Ssh, tell your mind to stop worrying.” Gabriel presses a finger against my mouth, and his fingers dive right in my pants, chasing my frustrated cock, that weeps when they reconnect.

“No,” I rumble to myself. I *won’t* give in. “G—get—” off, I want to say, but they get stuck, the words being replaced by a filthy moan, because Gabriel has started stroking my rigid shaft, and hot desire is pouring through my veins.

“*Fuuuck.*”

“You are so hard for me,” he croons. “Here’s where you belong. With me. No longer alone, no longer in the shadows.. But keep on fighting me, sweetheart, I love it when you do.” His whisper has become husky, seductive, and I lap it up, my hips taking on a mind of their own as they rock into his hand.

“Here you’re safe. With me.”

“*Safe?*” I bite on a moan, because his fist continues to work my cock, leaving only a narrow tunnel for me to grind into, which I do, because he’s got me so horny, so hot for him. I tilt my head in defeat, baring my neck and arrowing my back, because I’ve given up. I’m defeated.

“With me.” His free hand cups my balls, rolling them in his palm with the perfect combination of gentleness and firmness.

“Oh, god,” I grunt, not able to stop myself.

“I want to keep you.” His confession is so damn hot, so overwhelming, so confusing. “And now I want to taste you.”

My eyes jump when he slides down in front of me in one elegant move, his blond hair an intoxicating contrast to my darker tint. He looks up to face me, smoldering eyes large and hungry, and I watch as his mouth opens ever so slowly. He flicks his tongue over his diamond gems, before making a show of slowly taking my crown gingerly between his lips, and I -

“F-fuck,” I pant. “It’s too much, you’re so—”

He pops off my cock and looks up, eyebrows quirked. I grunt in frustration, my body aching with need for more. “Please.”

His tongue plays with the tip of my cock, flickering and playful, spit combined with pre-cum, and it’s making my cock sticky before we’ve even started. “Please what?”

My back’s pressed against the window, and I let out another whine as my hips buck, as my mind goes completely blank.

“Do you *want* me to taste you, *mon lapin?*”

“I—” I let a hand in front of my eyes, trying to focus again. But the only thing I can feel is his tongue, back on my slit, lapping up the liquids that come from my arousal. It’s making my ears buzz. “Please, yes.”

I don’t know what I was expecting. I was hoping for him to take me back into his warm mouth, to meet me halfway. But

instead, he chuckles, and gives my cock one last, firm lick, before he tucks me back in. My mouth falls open, and shame bursts through the haze, ready to bring me back in my defensive position. Ready to regain control.

Gabriel stands up, his face not reaching further than my eyes. And then he takes my hand.

“Come.”

CHAPTER
TWELVE

GABRIEL

C ontrol.

It's what I crave. No one will ever, *ever* take that away from me again. Not even this tall, strong man with his golden hair and green eyes. Eyes that invite me to peek inside his very soul, and dig up his treasures. He's got so many of them, things he enjoys doing and that could turn into a passion. If he lets me, I'll help him dig inside and search for his true devotions. As long as he stays here, with me. Mason doesn't speak, just keeps my hand firmly in his when we leave my workshop and enter my bedroom via the connecting door. We're all the way in the corner of the house, closest to the cliffs. High above the sea, under the heavens' rain. Because it's still pouring out there, filling our ears with a rhythmic, light, tapping sound.

Closing the door behind us, I lead him toward my bed. It's a huge oak wood frame with four massive pillars. I painted it white, and together with the satin, indigo-colored sheets and the pile of colored, plush pillows, it's one of my favorite places in our home. Especially at this very moment. Plopping down on the edge of the bed, I pull Mason between my spread legs. He might tower over me, but he looks like he's about to run and hide—his forehead slightly creased and his lips pressed together. But his eyes... they give him away.

“Now, give it to me, *mon lapin*.” I place my hands on his strong upper legs and slide them up to where they can cup his balls. His eyes stare down at me, aflame, and he rolls his lips. While I wait for him to find the courage and ask me whatever

has popped into that mind of his, I get to it. His pants come down and his cock bounces happily up, thick and slick, not sharing the same doubts its owner apparently has. My finger swipes at the pre-cum that's once more beaded at the tip, and I lap it up, knowing he's watching. When his breath hitches, I look up, offering him a wicked smile.

“Feed me your cock, sweetheart.” Licking the gems on my teeth, I open my mouth wide a few inches from him, while my stare locks with his.

He clears his throat, and rolls his lips again. “I shouldn't be doing this,” he mumbles, to which I chuckle. His dick jumps at the sound, and he curses, before curling long, slim fingers around his hard length and slowly pushing forward. The moment his salt-flavored crown hits my tastebuds, I let out a groan, and I eagerly press my mouth onto his slit, sucking the rest of his cock gently inside.

“Oh, fuck—” he grunts, and a vein pops out on his chiseled jaw. Bracing one hand on the bed, I wrap the other around the base as I begin to work my mouth over him, letting the sounds Mason makes be my guide. His thickness feels perfect inside my mouth, and I love the way it stretches my lips, making me feel helpless, as if I am a slave to him. And perhaps I am about to be. Perhaps the flavor of this man, with his hard body and gentle character, is going to be the end of me. But if it is, then I will take him down with me. The moment his cock hits the back of my throat, Mason lets out a shuddering sigh. And then... he starts babbling.

“No one has ever done this to me,” he mumbles, his eyes closed, a hand grabbing the nearest pole he can find. This is his first blowjob? He has bent his head ever so slightly, and seems focused, judging by the way his jaw works. To test my theory, I moan around his cock, and he hisses while his free hand rubs his face. “You're crazy, I can't let you do this to me. But it feels so damn good, oh—” I start bobbing my head, and he flinches, opening his eyes to watch me. His face flushes and his lips part, and he lets out another moan. “You, you feel so good. This, I don't know what—yes, oh God, just like that, just—” Another moan escapes from his mouth, and when his

hips start gyrating, making his cock take control of my throat, my mouth, and tongue, I know that he's nearly there. And then he tilts his head back with a loud cry, and shoots his load. I swallow it greedily, then take my time licking him clean, knowing full well that he's still looking. The rigidness has left his body, and what is left is a quivering mess, as he practically collapses over me.

I won't let him fall though, so I get up and wrap my smaller hands around his neck, pulling him in for a kiss. I feel his fatigue, feel how he surrenders to me, lets me lick inside his mouth, explore him, tease him. Swallowing his sighs, I gingerly place him onto the bed, and pull him backwards with me, so that we both end up lying on our backs.

“Here, let me draw the sheets back.”

He lets me guide him under the indigo color, onto the soft comforter, his head safely tucked onto one of the many pillows. His hair's sticking up, missing its usual casual-yet-neat slickness. I like him like this, rumpled up, exhausted, because of *me*. Once I'm sure he's comfortable, I climb out of the bed and make my way toward the liquor cabinet, enjoying the way the silk flutters around my heated body. “This is the finest whiskey. You want?” I don't wait, just pour him a glass and place it onto his bedside table, before sauntering back to the other side of the bed.

“Gabriel, you—” Mason halts, emerald eyes turning wide. It's the first time he speaks my name out loud, that he refers to me other than ‘monster’ or ‘evil’. It's the first time that he acknowledges *me*, and judging by his reaction, he realizes it too. “We really shouldn't be doing this. I mean—” He visibly flinches. “I mean, fuck, I don't even know what I mean.” He looks away, and I don't know how this conversation has taken such a sharp turn, but I find it's somehow calming my mind.

We've passed the first phase.

“You come barging into my life, taking me from everything I've ever known, into this *family*,” he spits the word out. “You are my enemy, and here I am.” Still, his eyes burn onto the flesh that I'm slowly exposing to him.

“You are.” My wolf, who’s really just a cub. The thought leaves a rush of thrill through my veins. Shimmying the smooth material off my slender shoulders, I’m left practically naked, apart from my satin underwear that leaves very little to the imagination, since my cock is hard and wet after what my mouth was gifted with.

“Do you like it? Being with a guy?” I purr, as I crawl my way onto the bed. He swallows, and I sway my hips sensually as I pull the sheets down and make my way back under them. “Because this is all for you.” His hungry gaze is right where I want it, right on my body, his eyes drinking in every crevice and slope of my toned chest, down to the light hairs that indicate the path to my thickness. There, they linger for a moment, until he clears his throat and looks away, cheeks pink.

“No matter what you say, you clearly like the view. That pleases me. Let’s see if you like the taste of it as well.” I straddle his chest, and his green eyes shine like emeralds in the twilight as they look at me—large and completely oblivious. My hand crawls down my chest, going down to my groin, cupping my hard cock through the softest restraints, before taking it out. It’s so hard that it bounces against my belly, and I stifle a guttural groan, filled with lust and anticipation. Snatching the glass of whiskey from his bedside table, I bring it down to his mouth, inches from my hard flesh.

“Open your mouth, sweetheart.” Mason blinks, and in that very moment, he looks so damn innocent. He doesn’t open his mouth though, and so I tap two fingers against his lips. “*Allez*, open up. I’m not going to hurt you.”

He swallows, then, ever so slowly, part them, and if that isn’t a freaking turn-on. Him, obeying, for me. I pour a bit of whiskey into his mouth. “Keep it inside, and I’ll give you more.” I lower the tip of my cock and he lets me slide in, while he wraps his lips around my hard flesh. His eyes are on mine like jade stones, bright and shiny as he hangs on to my gaze.

“So good,” I purr. “Can you take a little more?” He makes a humming sound, then moans as I go deeper. “This whiskey is

produced in the area, you like it?” I take a sip, while slowly rocking my hips back and forth. His eyes flutter, and I feel him swallow, drinking down the combined flavors. “Fuck, sweetheart, you’re so good for me. You’re taking me so well. Look at you,” my fingertips trace the outlines of his stretched mouth. “So beautiful, the way you let me ride your face.” Rocking my hips ever so gently, my cock hits the back of his throat, and while I let out a moan, my back arches, further and further, until my face can look up to the ceiling, to where a large, golden-framed mirror is placed. His eyes go wild when he catches his own stare in his reflection, and embarrassment glows through the tiniest of green rings that is left in his pupil-blown eyes. “Gorgeous,” I croon, and our eyes connect through the glass. “On your back, with me on top of you, fucking your mouth nice and easy. You’re gonna make me come, aren’t you, *mon lapin*?”

He flutters his eyes closed and his cheeks are flushed when he allows me to grind into his mouth, back and forth, take what I want from him, exactly the way I want it. Testing my own limits, I tease both of us by taking my time, reveling in those beautiful, plush lips, enveloped around my girth. He’s new to this, I can tell by the way his movements are careful, as if he’s afraid that he’ll hurt me. “Yes. You were made for this, made to be mine.”

He tries to talk, the sound muffled by my thickness, owning his mouth. Definitely new to this. The thought makes me smile as the speed of my rocking increases, and another decadent moan spills past my lips. “*T’es parfait*,” I pant. So, so perfect. The thought has my balls drawing up with that tingling sensation that promises crackled pleasure, as it builds up further, then rises, like the outside ocean, until it tips over. And when it does, I let out a cry, and waves of bliss swarm through my body. When the blizzard has passed, I carefully remove myself from him and plop onto my back.

We lay like this for a while, as we sip from the golden liquor, lost in our own thoughts, rain still ticking against the roof. When the record plays the last song, I wonder whether he’s fallen asleep, but one peek at the glass against the ceiling tells me that he’s tense. He’s back in his head.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

He snorts, but to my surprise, he finally turns to face me, even lets me roam his face in search of his thoughts. When no words come, I try, “How did you like me using you the way I did?”

His face flushes instantly, but his eyes stay on mine. “I -” Shaking his head, he presses his lips tight.

“How did you like me blowing you?”

“I—” He bites his lip, but still no coherent phrases come out.

“Soon I’ll ride your cock again, *mon lapin*.”

His lips finally twitch, and I laugh in reply. “Come on, it’s not so hard. You can use your words. You can even tell me that you enjoyed it. I won’t tell anyone.”

“It’s not that. It’s just that I’d never been with a guy before.”

I nod at that. Judging by his inexperience, I’d gathered that much. “And your first blow-job?”

He bites the insides of his cheek, then nods. “Yeah. There wasn’t really any time before to—”

“I’m glad, sweetheart,” I rush to say, not wanting this conversation to turn tense or awkward again. “I want to be the first one. And the last one.” I smile.

“You’re so fucking persistent.” He shoves me away playfully. “But I *will* have my phone call.”

“Tomorrow,” I promise, when he yawns. “Let’s sleep now.” I grab both our glasses and put them onto my bedside table. He doesn’t fight me for once, the word sleep apparently being the magic one. His face is a little pale, and he looks exhausted, both physically and mentally. After I’ve switched off the light, we curl around each other in need of the right position. Finally he lets out an exasperated sigh, then pulls me close to his chest, where my cheek finds a firm, smooth pectoral muscle.

“You know that I could kill you in your sleep, right?” He mumbles, the sound of his voice pleasantly vibrating through my skin.

“Hm.”

“I could beat the living crap out of you, then leave this house of madness, and take a plane back home. I could just—” His voice falters when he lets out another deep yawn.

“Or you could just go to sleep.”

“Tomorrow.”

“*Bonne nuit, mon lapin.*”

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

MASON

I am woken by a cool breeze that tickles my skin, causing goosebumps to spread along my arms. I grunt, then pull the warm blankets closer to my naked body as I snuggle in once more. But... I open my eyes and blink a few times, catching my own reflection in the mirror above me.

“Fuck.” Gabriel’s not lying in bed with me anymore. Perhaps it’s a good thing, because I can’t believe I did that. Can’t believe I let him touch me, that *I* touched *him*.

Again.

The more I get embroiled into this, the more it feels like just a dream. I need to be back home, to the life that’s based on the Business and on Pops. Nothing else. Thoughts confuse me, make me *want* something I shouldn’t want in the first place.

Providing. That’s what I should focus on. Providing for Pops and me, so we can survive.

What do you do when you’ve been kidnapped by the most handsome man you’ve ever met?

Who touches you, makes your body tremble in ways it has never trembled before?

“Fuck,” I groan again. Gabriel is mind-consuming, gorgeous in a sexy, obnoxious way. He’s over the top, with his silk underwear and his robes, his piercings and jewelry. And those painted nails... And he claims to be mine.

“I’ll come back for you baby, I promise.”

I press a hand against my forehead, willing the memory to stop haunting me, because—*You didn't come back for me.*

The door to Gabriel's workshop has been left ajar, and through it I notice that the enormous, glass door toward the ocean has been opened, the cause of these breezy chills.

I climb out of bed and stalk through his room, fingers brushing against the heavy oak chest of drawers on which the silk pants and light shirt are patiently waiting for me in a neat pile. I don't hesitate to put them on, then look around me. Gabriel's bedroom embodies his character—extravagant, colorful, with antique furniture that embraces shapes and forms. In the corner, next to his wardrobe, stands a mirror with a similar golden frame to that devilishly sexy version against the ceiling above his bed. The one that invites us to do naughty stuff.

I remember when they took me, back in the port. The music they played. *He chose those songs for me.* Because I was deliberately taken. Is this grandmother, he spoke of the reason for his obsession with the 1960s?

I wonder if he'd talk about it if I asked him.

I wonder why I even want to know.

That thought confuses me more than I like, and with a huff I retrieve my probing finger and tuck my hand inside the pocket of my pants as I make my way outside. There's a small, private patio here, leading to a grass lane that follows the exterior walls of the house, which from this side, almost teeters at the top of the cliff. Looking down, the view gives me a mixture of nausea and admiration. Unlike last night's heavy rainfall, it's dry today, the slightest rays of sunlight peeking through dark clouds. It won't last. Despite that, seagulls squawk loudly as they fly over the water below, careless and free. A bit further down the grass, practically hidden from the thick shrubs full of pink armeria, I find a set of rustic stone steps leading down.

"Gabriel?" Straight ahead of me flickers the lighthouse tower, proof that there's more out there than just me and him. I look ahead, toward the thousands of miles of water. It makes

my stomach churn with realization that today I'm standing at the *other* side of the ocean.

“*Ici.*” Gabriel’s smooth voice interrupts my thoughts. Carefully pushing the flowers aside, I start to make my way down. After only a few steps I get to a stone platform, surrounded by flowers and plants, and from here—I inhale deeply and slowly through my nose—the view is absolutely spectacular. Miles and miles of water are stretched out ahead of me, and I can *breathe*. I’ve always lived in a cramped apartment, even before I moved in with Pops. The block I grew up on with Mom was unsafe, though not as bad as the places she spent most of her days. I remember too well the journeys from the subway back home that I’d do on a jog, because the bordering hood was even sketchier.

“This is where my grandfather would wait for my grandmother every day, hoping that she’d come back to him. She never did.” I turn to see Gabriel hunched on his knees, the sides of his satin robe fluttering along his body in the flow of the breeze, his hands filled with the fuzzy stems of more pink flowers. He gazes straight ahead, toward the water, and I follow his gaze, zooming in on eternity.

“Where did she go?” I finally manage, my voice thick.

He turns to face me, licking the gems on his teeth as he does so, before smoothly standing back onto his two feet. “She went back to America. And when she did, she took all the joy and love my family once had, with her.”

“Did he live here? Your grandfather?”

“He did. He inherited the house from his parents, my great-grandparents, who had it built in 1890.”

He takes a careful step forward, until we’re now facing each other, our eyes curious, our bodies wrapped in silk. Our minds -

“Why didn’t your parents inherit the house from your grandparents?”

“Because they hated each other.” His reply is firm and his eyes flash, and something happens to him. He looks away and

rolls his lips, and when he looks back at me, whatever just took him, is gone. But it leaves me with goosebumps and a knot in my stomach. “That’s why they left it to Théo and me. My father...” He sighs, then rubs a hand over his face. He looks *vulnerable*.

“Tell me.” The words leave my mouth way too fast, but instead of giving me a snarky retort, Gabriel only offers a soft smile. And it breaks right through my defenses.

“My grandfather was a famous psychiatrist, a specialist in hypnosis as a cure to trauma. My grandmother—” he takes one quick, longing look back to the ocean, before his smoldering eyes find mine again, “was an American actress. They started dating when she came to Paris for a movie and fell in love. My grandfather was head over heels, and when he inherited this house, asked her to move in with him.”

“And did she? Move in with him?”

“She did. After all, she was already pregnant by that time, with my father. It must have been the ideal hiding place for her, I don’t know. Or maybe she did really love my grandfather, because according to the diaries, they lived here together for a few years. Until one morning, she was gone. Left my grandfather, her son, and a note that she needed to go back to America, that she wasn’t meant for this kind of life.”

He stops talking, and I don’t know what to say to that. And so for quite a while, we just stay there. It’s cold, and I see him shivering beneath his silk, the wind rattling through as it clutches against his beautiful skin. Now that he’s given me this much, I want more. I want to open the door and look inside his mind, discover this tragic past and understand what that meant for him. Understand what has made him become this *Initiator*.

“What happened next?” I finally ask.

“*Rien*.” He lets out a huff. *Nothing*. “My grandfather was heart-broken and sent my father off to his house in Paris, where he was raised by his nanny and other staff, until he became the official owner at the age of eighteen. He went to college, got a degree, never needed a job, met my mom and had me and Théo.”

“Are they still alive?”

He shrugs. “Nah. They’re all gone. Théo and I inherited both houses, and buried the past all together with their corpses.”

I hum at the ocean while I taste his words on my tongue. They are bitter. “Surely you were happy? Growing up?”

He turns to face me, his onyx eyes searching through mine, scooping up my shattered thoughts and bringing them back in order. “You want to know what it was like growing up a rich kid in Paris?”

My face flushes, and I don’t know why.

“Because you come from a poor family,” he supplies. There’s no mockery in his tone, but it doesn’t stop me from biting the inside of my cheek and looking away. “You want to know what someone like me, someone with money, would want with someone like you.” His words hit me straight in my chest and anger comes in, ready to strike.

“Why the fuck would you say something like that?” I lash out. Gabriel doesn’t reply, instead shifts his entire body toward me, his eyes lingering on mine. Something dances in them as he slowly approaches, making my breath hitch and my insides swirl. He’s dangerous, reckless, and coming for me. When he puts his smaller hand in mine, cold and soft, I shiver. He fits perfectly.

“No, I wasn’t happy, so I got rid of them. Yes, I have a lot of money, and I intend to make a lot more. And you, Mason, are a mystery my mind’s wrapped around. I told you. So why don’t you show me your true colors, rainbow boy?” My brows reach my hairline, and he chuckles as he holds out the strange-looking bouquet of flowers like some peace offering. “Now, take me back to bed. I want you to fuck me good, *mon lapin*, and then I’ll let you have your phone call.” My cock grins at the promise, despite my own protests. “Come on.” He squeezes my hand and guides me back upstairs, toward the house that I haven’t taken a proper look at ever since I first came here. It truly is a beautiful place, painted in white and full of asymmetrical shapes and spiral forms. Directly under

the roof plant-like embellishments are carved out, and the amount of glass that is used is breathtaking. Gabriel turns and catches me staring at the building in awe, a soft smile spreading over his plump lips. “You like it?”

“Yeah.”

He places the bouquet into a stone vase and steps back inside his workshop, where he lets the bathrobe slide off his luscious body without as much as a warning. When he gives me a coy smile over his shoulder, I blink at the sight of the twinkling diamonds in his mouth, my own lips dry and my stomach filled with flutters. My cock suddenly aches to fill him up again, and the realization is staggering. Inside his bedroom, he grabs a bottle of lube from the drawer of his bedside table, before crawling onto the bed. He lays down, his back caressing the indigo-colored sheets, a wicked smile on his lips, and then he spreads his legs. “Get down here.”

I hesitate, though my eyes are glued to his hands as they skim over his tender collarbone, down to his chest and further down, to his cock. He too is hard, for me, or for knowing what he does to me. It’s the same at this point - he’s gotten to me and he knows it. Gabriel beckons with a small jerk of his head and uses a hand to play with his balls, making me lick my lips. I really should put a stop to this nonsense, should insist on making my phone call. Just the thought of how the guys will react when they learn that I—

“*Allez, mon lapin.* Come over here. Let me guide you.”

And I do, my legs moving while my mind’s still all over the place. “I want you so bad.’ The confession leaves my mouth on a rasp. He uses his long digits to spread his ass cheeks further apart for me, and his breath hitches when I crawl in between his legs, lips lowering to feel my prize. To taste it. He is perfect. Every part of him is soft and smooth, except for his cock, which is hard, straining and pink at the tip.

“Taste me. Bury your face between my cheeks, and use your tongue. Make it nice and slick. Can you do that for me?” Fuck, I do. And after the first shock of realization that I actually have my tongue in another guy’s ass, the reward of his

sweet scent and the texture of his taint is fucking intoxicating. I growl while my tongue digs in further, wanting more of that, more of that touch, of his soft moans that encourage me to keep going. And then his hands are in my hair, caressing my scalp, rubbing my face closer.

“*Oui, comme ça*, just like that. You’re making me so horny, sweetheart, with that delicious mouth of yours. Keep on eating me, don’t stop.” I don’t, obeying bravely as I lick and nibble, suck and kiss, while my cock practically burns its way out of my pants. I let out a groan, and one hand reaches down, the need to take care of myself becoming overwhelming.

“Give me a finger, prepare me, *lapin*.”

My hand halts, his words making me stop, and shy and uncomfortable all the same. I hate being like this, always being the one who freaks out. But it’s like he picks up on it, feels my discomfort. He opens the cap of the bottle, then spurts some on my hesitant hand, before he guides it back down, between his thighs. “We’re going to take our time. Start with one finger, make me feel good.” Arousal floods through my veins, the feeling fascinating and powerful, and it triggers another emotion in my mind, another *color*. My finger sinks in between the crease of his ass cheeks, slowly and easily as if it was meant to live there, and Gabriel lets out a gasp that makes my throbbing cock jolt.

“Fuck, look at you,” I whisper, as my digit discovers the sweetness of his hot channel. His wide eyes find mine, lips parted and his cheeks flushed. “You’re so beautiful.” He groans at my words, and in reply I add a second finger and press further, until they hit a spot that makes Gabriel’s back arch. I do it again, and his eyes flutter closed while the sexiest moans escape from his mouth. “You’re a dream come true,” I babble, captivated by him, in all his presence. “Fucking perfection. I’ve never - and then you came along, and you’re so delicate, so precious.”

“Then take me.” Gabriel licks the diamonds on his teeth, the matching labret one shimmering in the twilight. Then he gazes up toward the mirror. “Show me how you wreck me. I want you to.”

Carefully, I withdraw my fingers, and before I know what I'm doing, I've put them in my mouth, licking and sucking every single inch of Gabriel's scent on a groan. When our eyes crash, his charcoal stare is practically black with the way his pupils are blown. "You're mine now," he pants. "I've been tested, we don't need protection, you can fuck me anytime you like."

"Fuccckkk—" I leap forward and slam my elbows on both sides of his head, drinking in his face with every bit of lust that's currently floating through my body. He's deadly, a threat to everything dear in my life, but at this very moment, I'm addicted to this danger. His hand helps me to hold my cock still when I line it up against his entrance, and then I press forward. Slowly, so very slowly, I breach his tight ring muscle, engulfing myself in the slick heat of Gabriel's body, and holding my breath as I do so, too afraid to hurt him. Pressing one hand on his left ass cheek, I push it outward so I have a good visual, and with the other I grab his right hip. "I'm not sure I know what I'm doing." I slowly push my cock forward, to where his tight hole eagerly opens around the tip.

"You're doing great. Just keep going. Fill me up, sweetheart." I do, his softened muscles sliding down my length like a dense stroke as I penetrate deeper, until I finally reach the hilt. "That's it," he whispers hoarsely, when our balls are pressed together, his ass glued to my lower abdomen. Then he looks up to the ceiling, to the glass reflection, while he lets his fingers dig into both of my ass cheeks, black nails sharp and possessive. "Your ass is a dream come true, *mon lapin*. Your large, muscled body, trapping me. It should frighten me, but with you, it empowers me, like you were meant to be mine. Show me how you fuck who's yours, *mon ange*."

I exhale my held-in breath on a shudder as my hips start to rock, and the sensation of his tight heat in combination with my movements ignites sparkles inside my body. My mouth falls open and I howl like a fucking animal, losing it entirely as I start pumping and pumping, harder and harder, sped up by Gabriel's mewls while his hand rubs my ass cheeks in encouragement. "Oh God," I grunt, my face feeling hot just like the rest of my body. And the temperature is rising, just

like my need to come. I feel it in my balls, feel it in my thickening cock.

“That’s it, you’re so good for me, aren’t you?” Gabriel’s voice is smooth, and still manages to taunt me, tease me, tickle me. I let out another groan in reply, coming undone as he unravels me, pushes me, throws me off those cliffs. And then I feel him pumping himself, his squinted gaze on mine, while he keeps on expressing his praise. “Look at you fucking me, yeah—that’s how I like it. That’s it, *mon ange*, a little more. I’m nearly there.” I do as I’m told, working myself against him harder, faster, until sparks are flashing behind my eyelids and Gabriel’s nails aren’t just digging, but dragging along my skin, the pain only driving me closer to orgasm.

“Yes. Yes. Yes—” I wail, punctuating each word with a thrust, needing him to come first. And he does, crying out, making me feel his hot release against my stomach, while I fill him with mine, my heart thudding and my brain turning to mush as pleasure takes over. It seems to wash through my insides and create more waves of glorious orgasmic pulses, and my hands wrap around Gabriel’s shoulders and I squeeze, needing his skin against mine, needing the rapid rhythm of his heart to match mine. And then we jump. It’s a free fall, and we hold on tightly onto one another as we dive, straight for the ocean of our dreams, our bodies entangled and our minds connected. I’ve never felt so alive.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

GABRIEL

It's too quiet in my head. For a moment, we lay in complete peace, wrapped up in one another, Mason's big hand around my waist as if he wants me close. But I can feel him drift off, his mind somewhere else, giving way to silence. Giving way to my past. Crawling as carefully as possible from his hold, I climb out of bed and walk toward the record player in my work space. Mason's release drips out of my body, leaving me satisfied and proud of being owned by such a beautiful, strong guy.

Flicking through my collection, I go for Ella Fitzgerald, and while the first notes of "Every time we say goodbye" resound through the room, I give the view outside a last glance, pull on my silk robe, and close the terrace doors.

A storm is coming.

Flipping off my own thought, I send a few pictures of the green cape I made to Rita, and ask her to pick up on the design. We won't need to work out this fairytale theme until next week's *soirée*, but we'll still need to be prepared. I take a seat on the velvet couch and let my mind fill with song and my eyes with Mason. His golden hair is flopped over his forehead as he's sprawled out onto his belly, one arm still draped over my side of the bed. He's naked, the indigo sheet covering his delectable ass, but showing the view of his impressive back. Today he can call his grandfather, I promised him that, although we'll have to monitor the call.

I can't lose him, not after what we just shared. This mind-blowing connection I just *knew* we would have. I take in a

deep, nasal breath as memories of before rattle through my brain, scaring away the silence. It's true that discovering who our grandparents were, digging up the pieces of their lives and glueing them together to reveal the bigger picture that was their tragedy, has fascinated me ever since we moved here. It replaced the silence, replaced this gnawing hurt with its sharp edges, and gave me a purpose in life.

After making sure Mason's still sleeping and that the diffuser is working properly, I shut the door quietly behind me and make my way to the kitchen for a proper breakfast for two. On my way, brothers smile at me, greet me, show me their admiration, as they provide for our family in various ways. A group of *Trésors* is getting ready for their trip to Paris, while others are strolling around with brooms and buckets.

Taking the detour, I make sure to walk past the workshop where Rita and her team have started early today, laying the finishing touches to masks and costumes that will leave later. When she sees me, she sends me a flying kiss, and I pretend to catch it and place it on my cheek. She flips me off with a cackle, and I walk into the kitchen where I find Luca watching outside the large, glass window.

“Ça va, mon frère?”

He turns, his dark eyes scrutinizing me and our surroundings.

“Yeah.” He runs a hand over his blond hair that's wrapped in a loose bun today. “It's just—” He turns his head back to the window and lets out a long exhale that turns into a dry chuckle. “I'm just worrying too much.”

The words turn my heart into ice. “What is it?”

“They're here.” He waits for me to join him in front of the window, and together we stare outside, toward the green slopes of the valley this side of the house looks onto. “Somewhere out there, lurking in the trees. I can feel their eyes on us.” His words are unsettling, but it's their true meaning that brings out the goosebumps.

“That cop?” I turn to face him. “They can’t take him from me.”

“I have sent a few brothers out into town to go shopping, socialize, make sure that everything is normal, just in case. We’ll keep our gates closed and our eyes open.” He turns and his smoldering stare finds mine. “I retreat into myself until *Vindication*, ask my mind and soul for guidance. If you need me, ask Gaspard.” He curls his lips into a small smile. “Don’t worry for now. Go back to your chosen one and let love flourish. We’ll wait for those who are leaving today to be ready, then get together before.”

“Where’s Maxime?” I ask.

Luca grimaces. “In his room, awaiting his verdict.” He turns from the glass and toward the coffee machine, where he starts preparing our drinks, and doesn’t speak until I have my tray filled with fresh *croissants*, fruit and coffee. “Here, Mason’s phone. So he can make his call.”

Mason is awake when I stroll back into the room, his head resting against the headboard and the blanket wrapped around his chest.

“Have you ever had a *croissant* before?” I place the tray between us as I sit down onto the bed.

“Of course,” he huffs, his guards up immediately. “We have bakeries too.”

“Well, I’m sure they’re not as good as these ones. They’re freshly made by one of our brothers.” He opens his mouth as if he wants to dish out a smart retort, then just shakes his head and lets out a laugh.

Silence creeps up between us as we eat and sip our coffee, but it’s not unpleasant. Him being here, sitting in my bed, his bright green eyes on mine, his jerky movements reserved for my presence, somehow keeps my mind from going back in time. Or outside. Rather, it settles with deep satisfaction for his presence. One I intend to keep. Only, I never do.

“I’d like to make my phone call,” he says after he’s finished his pastry.

I nod at him from above my coffee cup, annoyance and indignation threatening to ruin our moment, then toss him the phone from the pocket of my robe. He catches it, then eyes it as if he's forgotten what his phone looks like.

“Can I—”

“Take a shower first.” I gesture toward the en-suite at the other side of the room. “Bathroom is all yours.” Flickers of fury whirl through my spine, and I have to fight the urge to take out my rope and tie him to the bed posts. Surely sensing my mood change, he climbs out of bed without a word. “There are fresh clothes in the wardrobe. The right hand side is yours.” His back stiffens, but he doesn't turn. Instead, he opens the door and inspects the pants and shirts Rita's team has made for him over the past weeks.

“What's with these weird clothes anyway?” He grumbles, but it sounds unconvincing, and he knows it. Without waiting for my answer, he closes the bathroom door behind him, leaving me to listen to the sound of falling water.

I sip from my cooled coffee, then stroll around the bedroom, feeling restless. If I could, I'd toss that fucking phone right outside, down the cliffs and into the ocean.

A storm is coming.

I think of Gaëtan's prediction, of Luca's premonition, and it's enough for me to drop my cup on the nearest table and barge my way inside the bathroom. Mason's standing under the shower, his face toward the wall as thousands and thousands of droplets fall down his broad shoulders, toward his trim waist onto the curve of his full, slick ass. I swallow as the bitterness of jealousy and rage form bile in my throat, that I need to swallow away, because I need to think clearly.

“I want to keep you.”

His back tenses at the words, and I want him to turn around, want him to look at me and tell me that he won't leave, but he won't. “But it's not what you want.”

Finally he turns, and when he does, his jade-colored eyes are bright as they shine their light right through my darkened

soul. I swallow. “Come here.” It’s nothing more than a rasp, but it has me practically floating toward him, shifting out of my robe as I do so. He pulls me under the shower and into his arms, and my face dips to the curve between his collarbone and neck, the perfect cleft for my front. His hands tighten around my shoulders and I breathe him in, smell the scent of my lavender gel on his skin like it was meant to be there, on his body, that has become mine.

“I’ve never really asked myself what I want, Gabriel.” He pauses, and drops from his face land onto my cheek. “My mom died when I was young, and Pops took me in. He was already sick at the time, so I guess I just—” His arm squeezes me tighter. “There was no space for asking ourselves. There was only survival. For food, for medication, for safety.”

“Is that why you asked if I was happy?”

“Perhaps. I guess that I wondered if life would be easier if you had a lot of money. I work with money, collect it, give it to my boss who’s absolutely loaded. I’ve seen a lot of people suffer from it. But most of those people didn’t grow up with money, and don’t own two huge houses just because they happen to have inherited them.”

I look up, and our eyes collide. Droplets are sitting on the corners of his thick lashes, and when he blinks, they fall down like hot tears. “I like wood.” He gives me a sheepish smile and his tongue darts out, licking away some of the droplets that are immediately replaced by new ones.

“Wood?”

“Yeah. I like the smell, and the texture of it. I like where it comes from and what that represents to me.”

“As in, the forest?”

He smiles. “As in, nature. Freedom.”

“As in, choices,” I complete his murmuring. He nods again. “I will give you all the wood you want. You could make our new wardrobe.”

His smile falters, and he shakes his head.

“No wardrobe,” I decide hastily. “You can make whatever you want.”

He stiffens, and his hands fall from my shoulders, causing me to shiver, despite the hot droplets. “I want to make my phone call.” He walks past me and grabs a towel as he steps out of the shower. Desperation claws at my insides, and the sudden feeling of desolation makes me choke on a sob.

“It’s people like you who turned me into what I am today,” I snarl. “It’s people like you, who come in and take, *take* what they want, *want* every-fucking-thing, and then leave. I won’t let you leave!” He doesn’t look back, but closes the bathroom door behind him, sending chilly waves onto my spine. My chest trembles and aches, and my eyes blur as the sudden wave of sorrow burns my eyes. My sobs sound loud and flat inside my mind, and I wipe my tears away, annoyed, angry, *fuming*, as I grab my towel and leave the shower.

“I won’t let you fucking leave.”



MASON SITS on the side of the bed, fully-clothed, phone in his hand, when I get out of the bathroom. His hair is still damp, and falls untamed over his face, emphasizing his full, plush lips. “Can I make my phone call now?” He doesn’t look at me, indignation radiating from his body language, but the fact that he’s waiting for my approval, tickles my insides. I don’t reply, instead revel in letting my demon side take over as I walk toward him and crouch in between his spread thighs. His leg starts bouncing, and finally his gaze finds mine.

“What? You want me to beg for it?” He lets out a huff at his own words, but his leg doesn’t stop bouncing as he rolls his lips.

“Would you like that?” I croon.

“Shut up,” he snorts, but he doesn’t move, apart from his leg. He yelps when I push him full force onto his back, onto the bed, the phone squeezed into his hands. He stares down on me, watching how I lower the material until I can get ahold of

his cock, still limp and soft when I roll it inside my palm. His breath catches, and he blinks, surely to keep it from happening, to keep *everything* away from happening—

“You can’t hide from me, Mason. Not now, not *ever*. Now, make your fucking phone call, while I make you come. Time’s up as soon as you’ve filled my mouth.”

His cock throbs inside my hand, and I lower my head to lap at his balls, silky soft as they caress my tongue.

“What? Like *this*?” His face is flushed, mouth slightly open, and his eyes... Large and green, and despite his physical strength, my wolf is absolutely a cub. I reply by lowering my head between his thighs, then suckle in his balls on a hum. His body jerks, and I hear him mumbling in reply as he understands the message. “I—I’ll make my phone call then.” I bob my head in agreement. While continuing, my fingers tighten around his growing cock, that jolts into the ring I’ve created for him. “P—Pops?” He stammers into the phone. “Oh, really? It’s Mason. C—can you see if you can wake him up? I think he’ll want to know it’s m—me.” He gasps when I empty my mouth, only to use my tongue to tease his shaft, that feels thick around the tightness of my hand. “O—okay,” he utters. “I’m fine, yeah. H—how is he doing?” My fingers disappear from his weeping cock and I let my mouth replace them, swallowing him down in one go while my hand sneaks down to his taint. Mason shudders, and bucks his hips involuntarily while grabbing the phone as if it’s his last resort, his knuckles white. He shoves a fist in his mouth to stifle his sound when his cock hits the back of my throat, but the muffled cry is loudly received in my buzzing ears. It’s fucking thrilling. Then he comes crashing into my throat, my big, strong, guy, all because of me.

“N—never mind, I—I’ll call soon.” He grunts, loudly, violently, while his cock spurts inside my mouth, where I greedily drink him down, milking him until he’s given me his last drop. And then I tuck him back in, and sit up on my knees as I stretch out my hand. Mason’s beautiful like this—his mouth agape, his face pink with arousal, his eyes large. And

when he hands me the phone without one single complaint, my cock jumps beneath my satin underwear.

“He was sleeping,” he mutters, and sits up.

“Good.” I stand up in front of him, his perfect mouth at the perfect height. He eyes my hardness hesitantly, his lips, plump and wet, rich with that pout that I love so much. “Mason?”

His eyes dart back to me. “Yeah?”

I curl a golden lock between my fingers, admiring the color, before I slowly push his head toward my groin. His eyes never leave mine, but his mouth parts, waiting for me to smooth the silk down, before he takes the crown between his lips. “You’re so sexy like this.” I shiver, a natural reaction to his reluctance, that somehow grips me, just like his strength does. I don’t know if he’s aware of the colors he’s been radiating since we’ve started spending more time together, but this one, his arousal, is a deep purple that’s shining bright. “Are you going to make me come, *mon ange*?”

He nods, working my cock like the guy he is—carefully, sensually, firmly. And then he spreads his palms onto my upper legs in a silent plea for me to take charge, to take what I want. I do, grabbing a fist full of his golden strands, then roll my hips further between his firm lips, my pouty treats, until I empty myself in that tightness with a cry, fire turned into ashes. He swallows, then tentatively licks me clean and tucks me back behind satin. When he gets up, our hands reach for each other and we bend our faces until our mouths crush, lick and suck, nibble at each others’ lips and twirl our tongues. Finally he pulls back, takes in a deep breath and licks his swollen lips.

“He was sleeping,” he repeats, and his entire body language closes off from me once more. “That’s what she said. But what if that’s not true? What if there’s something wrong with him?”

“Mason, sweetheart, there’s nothing wrong with him. It’s still early in New York.”

“Is it?” He blinks. “I have lost track of everything, I—he
—”

“Breathe.”

“Breathe?” He growls. “How can you say that? You. Have. *Taken*. Me.” He brushes a hand over his forehead, and I have the impression that he’s no longer speaking of his journey across the ocean.

“That’s right. And I want all of you, Mason.”

He halts, understanding the surge of energy between us like sparks of electricity.

“I want your strength, and your fears. Your past, and your future.”

“You can’t say that. You can’t choose me,” he stammers, anger obviously having left his system.

I tilt my head. “Open your eyes Mason. Open your mind, and see me other than the person you want me to be. Think in colors, not just black and white, rainbow boy. Search for them. Now come, let’s get dressed for *Vindication*. Our brothers are dying to meet you.” Feeling his eyes on me as I get dressed, I add, “I can teach you how to find inner peace, if you want.”

“What do you mean?” His shirt halts in the air and our eyes collide.

“You know what I mean.”

“Hypnosis?” He stumbles over the word, then presses his lips into a sneer. “I don’t want anything to do with that.”

“That’s too bad, because today we have a special occasion.”

“Which is?” Mason licks his lips, exposing the nerve ticking in his jaw. I grab his bandaged hand and hold it up.

“Punishment.”

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

GABRIEL

“**M**es frères, welcome to *Vindication*.”

Numerous eyes stare at me through masks of different colors and shapes. Some of them are designed in the shape of an animal, others have feathers. They are glorious, just like the brothers wearing them, as they proudly stand in a semi-circle around me at today’s gathering. In the corner, Simon sits at the piano, the face of our pianist masked with plain white and a hint of gold as his empty gaze is on mine, waiting. When I send him a clipped nod, he starts playing softly on the instrument, making sure not to rescind my voice, when I continue, “You look absolutely stunning, each and every one of you, dressed up for today’s celebration. This was your choice, to come here today, wearing your mask. You wanted to get dressed up, wanted to show off a little, perhaps. Get in the mood, maybe.” My voice drops, and I feel Mason’s gaze on me from the wall to the side, where he’s standing together with Gaëtan. A little further, Jérôme and his guys loom over Maxime. The main reason we’re all here.

“I’ll be introducing my chosen one shortly. He wasn’t too happy about coming here today, and I think it’s because he’s a little shy.” Soft chuckles echo through the large dome, and I choose that moment to turn to face Mason, reveling in his scowl. I’m not disappointed.

He didn’t want to wear a mask at today’s gathering, but when I continue talking, I feel movement, knowing that Ezra will be helping him out with one of my creations. I hope he’s

chosen the navy-blue one—I bet he'll look handsome in that color.

“Some of you are leaving for Paris this afternoon. I want you to know that your brothers are waiting for you, and you're all invited to the party they've thrown for you.” I wait for the soft cheers to pass, before I continue, “I'm so very proud of you. Of all of you.” I smooth my voice, and make sure it glides into the waiting space around my brothers, inside their minds, curling around every single nerve, seducing them with silk and lace. The last whispers disappear, and heavy silence falls around us once more. “Because I know where you come from, every one of you. We've all suffered, felt left out, felt like we were not important enough, not worthy enough, of being loved. Of belonging.” My eyes flicker back to Mason. “Felt like we were never important enough to be chosen.” He looks away, but not before I see him bite his lip nervously. I was right, he looks absolutely delectable in navy blue. “Instead you came to me, to join our family. To start again, your life, the way *you* were meant to live it. Filled with love, with devotion, with brothers.” Heads are turning, hands are being held, and I allow myself to remember fluttering memories. Of strong hands holding me down, hurting me, every time, again and again. Of a time before I became the *Initiator of les Frères Perdus*. When I was still a victim to the gang that ruled our neighborhood, and most certainly, ruled *me*.

“But what do we do, brothers, when we are hurt?”

Gaspard swings a metal censer, which is suspended by chains as it spreads the fragrant smoke of our home incense around. There is a noticeable chill, and I enjoy the shivers, causing the vibe around us to slowly change, to slowly make all of us a little more relaxed. The piano picks up, its sounds flying through the air like an invisible dragon, tail wide and heavy as it corners us. I take in a deep breath, then nudge for two of our *Trésors* to come forward. They carry ceremonial torches to light the large, golden candles that stand proudly in huge, metal holders in a whispering silhouette of angels.

“What do we do to those who don't appreciate our love and devotion, our *family*?” I ask on a hiss, and some guys snarl

in reply and clack their tongues disapprovingly. “Those who can’t provide for our family, those who don’t honor the rules of this family, those who *cannot stay* in our family. They become intruders,” I let that phrase linger, before soothing, “But you have nothing to fear.” I look at each and every one of them. Even behind their masks, I know them, know each story, each tear shed before they joined our family. “For only one of you crossed a very important line this week.” There’s the slightest shudder through the room, and rain chooses exactly this moment to make its appearance once more, trickling gently against the glass dome above me. This is perhaps my favorite part of *Vindication*, the part that brings out the true villain in me, the broken teenager that was left for dead in the street many years ago.

That teenager is gone.

I slowly climb down from the stage, and enter the semi-circle they’ve created for me. From up close, my *Trésors* are even more beautiful. Slender, dark-haired, light-eyed beauties, with troubled pasts and tortured minds. They worship me, just like I worship them, because they are me, and I am them. Candlelight now breaks into the light, giving the dripping wet dome an eerie look, and creating flickering shadows against the walls. They crawl around us like ghosts, a sight so beautiful I just can’t get enough. “Where are you,” I singsong, and then my eyes lock onto the pair of light ones that I have been wishing to hunt down.

“Here.” Maxime’s voice comes out high-pitched with unhidden fear, and he lets Jérôme pull off his mask, before pushing him closer toward his brothers. I crook my finger, and when he doesn’t immediately come forward, Jérôme takes two steps toward the group. He squirms away, his skittishness nearly getting the better of him, before he corrects himself and trudges my way.

“Say your name, angel.” I ask him for the performance, my eyes on Mason.

“Maxime.”

“Maxime,” I drawl. “Do you know why I have come for you?” His shoulders tense while he lets his head hang. “Yes,” he barely whispers. “I’m sorry, Gabriel, I was jealous. I—” He looks up, his wet eyes finding mine. “I’ve wanted you for so long.”

The confession hangs heavily in the air, surprising me. Though I had suspected that his taunting behavior toward Mason was due to jealousy, I hadn’t thought of this outcome, of him wanting *me*. “You and I are the same,” I counter, voice breathy with something hefty as it settles in my chest. “We are brothers who are part of the same family. We respect our rules, and don’t break them. Yet you did. You decided to deceive my chosen one, to taunt him. And as a consequence, you *hurt* him.”

Maxime lets out a sob, and hidden tears fall down onto his full, trembling lips. “I didn’t mean to,” he whispers, then clears his throat, and rasps, “He doesn’t love you like I do, Gabriel. I would do anything for you. *Anything*.”

“Hm.” My eyes go from the crowd, back to my lost brother, and I lay a finger under his chin and tilt his head up. “You grew up in an orphanage. You, of all people, should know what it’s like to live by rules.”

His gaze falls, but still he manages to give me a shaky nod.

“What happened in the orphanage when you didn’t obey?”

“W—we were punished.”

I let those words echo into the dome, and its sound mingles with the piano and the clattering rain on glass. “Punished.”

“Y—yes.”

“Mason.” I don’t look away from Maxime, but feel my chosen one approach with every step he takes, until he stands next to me and clears his throat. “What would Connor Donnelly do if you hurt one of your brothers in the inner circle?” Mason swallows audibly, and when I turn, I catch his green eyes darting between me and Maxime. “I’m sure that this was a misunderstanding, Gabriel. Maxime didn’t know that the back door was electrified.”

“Ah, but didn’t he?” I swirl my head back to Maxime, who’s eyes have gone wide.

“I didn’t! *Je te jure.*”

I raise a brow. “You promise? Gaëtan. Bring the rope.”

Mason stutters. “Gabriel, please—”

“You didn’t answer my question, *mon ange*. What would Connor Donnelly do?”

“He would probably talk to me—”

“Lies,” I snort. “Try again.”

Mason takes in a deep breath. “All right, he would eliminate me,” he then answers carefully.

I turn to fake my surprise. “You mean kill you?”

“No, he—” Mason stares right back at me, looking visibly uncomfortable. “He’d most likely give me the choice.”

“Because a brother who doesn’t respect the rules of the family cannot be trusted. Right?”

He squints his eyes at me, then licks his bottom lip. “That’s right.”

Gaëtan takes that moment to hand me over the rope, and as Simon stops playing, the increasing drumming of the rain sweeps over our heads, the wind howling as it crashes against the thick, brick walls.

“Your hands, Maxime.”

“Please,” he sobs. “I didn’t mean to hurt him, Gabriel, I did it out of love for you. You have to believe me.”

“I do *believe* you, Maxime.” My hand reaches for his glistening lips as I wipe some of the tears away. “Please understand me when I say that I have an example to uphold. We live by the rules I created, because I am your *Initiator*. I have the power. Don’t I?” Maxime dips his head ever so slightly, and my voice goes soft again. “Our life here is based on love and support. Jealousy is not our friend, not here. Jealousy is *not* our friend,” I repeat, and I take slow steps,

eying my *Trésors*, hands clasped behind my back. ‘Those who cannot respect our rules, are punished. Those who don’t provide for this family, are punished. They suffer.’ I walk back to Maxime, who’s sobbing intensely while his shoulders shake. Tilting his chin up, I look him in the eye, and whisper, “We suffer.”

He looks at the rope in his hands, and nods.

“You will travel to Paris with the others and attend the party tonight, *mon frère*. Our newest brother and *Captain*, will accompany you to a destination of your choice.” I nod at Jérôme, who comes closer and gingerly grabs one of Maxime’s spluttering arms. He’s crying now, and my chest aches for him, because I *will* miss him, my brother, who has been with us for two years and was part of my life.

“You can—” I cut off Mason before he finishes his words, knowing full well what he wants to say.

“*Non.*” His eyes flash with the same fury as the one that will be raging in the approaching storm outside, but now is not the time to explain. Not in front of all my brothers. We watch in silence as Maxime leaves *Vindication*, our ears buzzing with sobs and pleas, our hearts filled with sorrow. It’s not until the door closes and Simon picks up his piano play, that I speak. “This breaks my heart. Trust me when I say that I don’t want to do this. I don’t want to invite death to come crawling its way inside these walls. But the only way that we can uphold our brotherhood, is by respecting the rules. And I, as your *Initiator*, have to set the example.” When no one replies, I wait for a new wave of incense to fill my nostrils then continue, “All right, Luca, I think we’ve all deserved some reflection. Please take us inside our minds.”

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

MASON

This place represents all extremes at the same time. As I stand there, I can't help but feel captivated by the way that these *brothers* respect beauty, kindness, cruelty, sexuality, *care*. They care for one another, that much is clear. They live here, share their world together, their dreams, their future. And most of them share a common past as well.

They are looking at me. I can feel their prying eyes from behind their masks, their unasked questions. It should freak me out, but it doesn't. Perhaps because I'm tired of fighting, perhaps because part of me is feeling thrilled. And as the outside rainfall slowly increases to becoming a full-blown tempest, I find myself returning their gazes.

What do they see when they look at me?

"Luca, please lead your brothers." A smaller hand tugs against mine, and I curl my fingers around his soothing skin as Gabriel leads me away from the crowd. Perhaps it's icy liquid dread I should expect to tumble over me, but it doesn't. It's something completely different that captures my inner core—smooth like melted chocolate as it floats through my veins and chases away my doubts, replacing it with hundreds and hundreds of tiny flutters. His eyes, they're on mine, dark and wide, innocent yet unscrupulous. Now's not the time, I tell myself, but my body's already imprisoned by this enigma, this *Initiator*, this man who claims to have claimed me.

I could get used to his undivided attention.

Passing the guy with the metal censor, I squeeze my eyes shut and take in a deep breath, and then the floor beneath me becomes straight again, and I can see clearly. We move toward a corner of the Dome, close to where one of the large, golden candles flickers as if to greet us, leaving the rest of the spot lingering in soft, golden shadows.

“Here, take a seat. The first time can be overwhelming, if you are suggestible.” Gabriel must take my hesitation for discomfort, because he adds, “You might not recognize them, but Théo and Ezra are here too. You are safe, *mon ange*.”

More smoke is spread into the room, and I inhale its earthy scent selfishly. Its soothing effect calms me, wraps around me like a blanket, and when I cautiously look around, I notice that it has the same effect on these so-called brothers. Luca stands right under the stormy dome. Rain is tapping against the glass, feral and rapid. A hint of air, and the candles flicker, causing the hair on the back of my neck to rise. His blond hair is swept out of his eyes and bound into a high bun, exposing the shaved sides of his head. Unlike all the others, he’s not wearing a mask, instead focusing his dark, almond-shaped eyes on us, like a cat watching his prey. When Luca starts speaking, his voice is low and smooth, the words drawn out. And my back presses against the chair, further and deeper, my slack muscles moulding into it.

“We come together, mind and soul. What happened earlier, is done. It’s gone. Look at me.” My eyes fly up to him, and shiver. It makes me fucking *shiver*.

“It’s cold here,” I mumble.

“That’s because you’re scared,” Gabriel croons from his seat next to mine, and his hand finds mine once more as he squeezes. “You don’t have to be scared.”

“There’s so much desperation today.” Luca continues. “So many questions. I can hear yours buzzing around, filling the air like colorful hummingbirds. Because that’s what you are, *mes frères*, all of you. You all shine your true colors, and they are unique. Because *you* are unique. Don’t let fear get in the

way of your hopes and dreams. Don't let the past scar you anymore."

He walks down the stairs, taking his time when he does so, his long limbs curling and stretching before he comes face to face with us, who are all watching him, curiously. I am. What will happen next?

Luca touches each and every one of us lightly on the shoulder. When he finally reaches me, he mumbles, "Welcome home, Mason. Let's see if you are suggestible." Then to the crowd, "Close your eyes, please. All of you."

I shouldn't. But with Gabriel sitting next to me, his smaller, warm hand wrapped around mine, I find my eyes fluttering closed.

"No more fear," Luca murmurs. "We don't live on fear, we live on love. We are a family. We look after each other."

"Sometimes, we forget. Those are the moments we want to hide back in our past, hide behind anger, and loneliness. But here, we don't have to. Come out of the shadows, please."

I swear I feel that last phrase like a hot breath in my ear, but my eyes feel more tired now, so I keep them shut.

"What is right? What is wrong? Who decides that for us?"

I don't know. I try to think, but my mind feels like cotton, emptiness consuming me. And still, his words, spoken smooth as honey, keep on invading my senses.

"You are your own judge. You are your own master. Is it wrong to be wanted by someone else? By someone who accepts you for who you were, desires you for who you are, and wants you for all you can be? It's a genuine promise. It's love. Before you came here, how often did someone make you a promise, then didn't keep it?"

"I'll come back for you baby, I promise."

You were so pretty, Mom. But in those last years, you didn't smile so much anymore. Was it because of me? "Maybe I wasn't good enough." The slur echos through my mind, and it shatters something in my chest. Sorrow. Heroin consumed

Mom's sparkle, replaced it with dullness, with greed. Gradually at first, but once she started spending her days outside our home and in a trap house around our neighborhood, there had been a free fall, and no safety net. There had only been licking flames, consuming her flesh, her mind and soul. I breathe in a waft of earthy scent as my eyes flutter. I can't remember her face. No matter how hard I try, I can't grasp it. No face.

But I can hear her.

"I'll come back for you baby, I promise."

"I don't want to hear you."

"Welcome to *Vindication*, sweetheart. Have you been a good boy?" Charcoal eyes stare at me through the darkness.

"Are you real?" I ask, and my mind trembles.

This is my free fall. The question is, where will I end up? So many shards are thrown my way. Shards of the past, moments I'd long forgotten. A fit of laughter with Tony Dimarco, ages before he became the son of a bitch who stole my stash. The bedroom I had when I still lived with Mom, a thousand years ago. And Pops, standing in our kitchen, cooking, listening to his favorite songs.

The end of the world by Skeeter Davis.

The NY port. My eyes flutter.

Gabriel and his large, innocent eyes. Those impossibly long lashes. His piercings, shiny and obnoxious like the man himself. His mouth on mine. My lips part and I need to breathe, need to regain control. But my dick is hard and my heart is beating erratically.

I've ended up right here.

"This is where you belong." The voice booms right inside my mind, leaving only in a slow echo. The sound ripples through me, followed by the clicking of fingers. My eyes quiver behind their lids, but when I hear the clicking again, it somehow breaks through crumbs of the past, pulling me back.

They click again, and I slowly open my eyes, whimpering softly at the sudden headache.

Luca's crouched in front of me, a worried look on his face. "Mason. Are you with me?"

"I—" Placing a hand over my face, I take a bit longer to rub my eyes. "My head feels like it might explode."

A reserved smile appears onto his face. "It's a lot to take in the first time."

I nod absentmindedly, then look around, expecting the empty stares from the other guys, but to my astonishment, they're all gone. The seat next to me is empty. The place feels cold, and a trickle of dread flutters through my spine.

"How are you feeling? You've been on quite the trip."

I exhale shakily as I look around, still feeling a little disoriented. Lightning crashes against the dome, illuminating the glass ceiling like a crystal flash. "Where is everyone?"

"I need you to go back to Gabriel's room now. Here." Gaëtan offers me a glass of water, which I gladly accept, knocking the liquid back into my mouth practically in one gulp.

"Gaspard," Luca turns over his shoulder and a smaller guy approaches rapidly out of the darkness, his mask discarded, showing the face of an angel. "Please accompany Mason back to Gabriel's room."

I stand, but my legs feel like jelly, and I nearly collapse on the spot. Luca grabs me by the shoulder. He doesn't say anything, and frankly, I don't need his words. Instead, I let Gaspard grab my other shoulder gingerly as we make our way toward the door. With each step my strength comes back, and by the time we make it to the corner of the corridor, Gaspard lets go of my shoulder. We walk in silence, the ache in my head still thumping loudly, but when we reach the reception hall and walk toward the corridor leading to the furthest wing of the house, I can feel it.

"Where is everybody?"

Gaspard shrugs. “Some of us have left for Paris, others are in their rooms.”

“They’re not working?” The pounding in my head becomes worse as new thoughts trickle inside, confusing the hell out of me. When we halt in front of Gabriel’s room, I glance at Gaspard. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” The lie falls off his tongue easily, but it lacks conviction. He opens the door for me. “Gabriel will be with you shortly. I’m sorry.”

Jérôme and his partner appear in the corridor, suddenly on our tails with invisible words as they follow us inside the room, caging me in, turning my fear into anger.

I fist my hands. “What the fuck do you want?”

They don’t give me time, nor space. Before I realize what’s happening, I’m on my back onto the bed, their ropes already tied around me. Still I splutter and sneer. “What the hell is wrong with you? You god damned punks!”

My kicking and snarling doesn’t get me anywhere though, and my eyes catch Gaspard’s terrified stare.

“He’ll be right back,” the small *Trésor* then says.

I balk at those words. “Hey! You can’t leave me here, man. Come on.” My feet kick wildly, making the rope tighten even further. It stings like a mother fucker, and I stifle a groan. “What the fuck is going on?”

But they don’t reply, instead leave through the door. A few seconds later, it locks with a key.

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

GABRIEL

Someone's banging on the door to my castle, disturbing *me*, its king. Because seeing Mason like that, taken back into his own mind, his eyes closed, in mumbling conversation to whoever was waiting for him, was satisfying. And it confirms what I thought—he belongs here.

His cock got hard beneath the silk.

I saw my brothers look, impressed by its size, though they kept their distance. But then, with Mason still hypnotized, I was called away, because someone's at our gates.

Again.

That, in itself, is strange enough. Sure, people know who we are. We are by no means strangers to the local community, with my grandfather having lived here a good part of his life, and with the care that we take in spending time to participate in local festivities. Some keep their thoughts to themselves, some are a little more vocal in expressing their opinions. But, that doesn't mean that someone would show up here uninvited.

Outside, the wind howls through the trees, and the knocking resumes, making the hairs rise at the back of my neck.

“That cop?” I mouth, and Gaëtan shrugs.

“Unless he has a warrant, which I highly doubt he'd obtained because of an alleged phone call.” Another clap of thunder booms across the sky. “Besides, he could have picked a more favorable day.”

Another knock at the door, and I take in a deep breath. “Open it.”

“Do you want us to take you to the secret room?”

“No. I want to see who’s disturbing me.” Still, I take my stance behind the door, sure to be protected by the wooden shield should I need to be. Gaëtan nods, then goes to unlock the door. He swings it open, then hesitates, making me scrunch my eyebrows.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t know where to go,” a trembling voice. “I’m, I was—”

“Come in.” Gaëtan opens the door further, and in comes a guy who looks like a drowned puppy. His ratty coat clings to his slender frame, and his dark hair sticks to his face like a wet cloth. He’s visibly trembling, though his eyes radiate curiosity when they take in the large reception hall.

Gaëtan closes the door behind him, and when the stranger turns around, a similar obsidian stare lands on mine. He blinks, and I catch his fear. Then it’s gone.

“I’m sorry. I climbed through the plants to get here, I didn’t know what else to do. Sorry for just barging in like this, I—”

“Calm down. Who are you?”

“My name is Adrien. He’s after me. He—” He swallows. “My boyfriend. I left him down in the village. I ran away from him, through the fields, behind the cliffs. Then I saw this house. I don’t know what to do.” His chest is heaving from the effort, water dripping down his face like crystal tears.

“You’re safe here.” I gesture to Gaëtan. “Can you take him to get freshened up?”

“Thank you,” Adrien whispers, his eyes lowered as his cheeks flush slightly.

I take my time watching them leave, and only then do I turn to look back at the window. At the door, to ensure it’s locked once more.

“Are you all right?” Jérôme asks, as he moves to stand next to me.

“Is he?”

“Kicking and screaming as per usual, but yes.” He opens the curtain, and we’re both met with trees in the darkness, wavering like drunkards in the shadows of doom. And rain. So much of it. Seconds pass while we just stand there. “Can you have one of the guys check out the gate and the surrounding vegetation when the rain has eased up? We don’t want any jealous boyfriends entering our territory.”

If there are any.

“I’m on it,” he finally decides, then stamps away.

I follow him, more slowly, in need of my own space. We don’t like strangers in our house.

The entire walk back to my room my skin itches, the sweet strawberry flavor of the pendulum on my tongue a meager consolation. It’s not until I feel the door of my workshop pressed against my back, firmly closed, that I can breathe in. *And out.* My face whips to the connecting door that leads to my bedroom. He’s there, waiting for me. Feeling rage flutter through the pit of my stomach, I march over to my record player, and take out the first record my fingers can find. They are shaking when the needle drops, missing the exact beginning of the song, and suddenly I need to fight the urge to rip the entire thing apart. “*Merde.*”

The tall glass window to the outside view doesn’t console me, nor does my textile corner with its sewing machine. Nor does my liquor cabinet, despite the glass I pour myself, or my couch, or all the thousand fucking books my grandfather left me in the antique, oak bookcase. Taking a sip from the whiskey, I squint my eyes at my own emotions, recognizing them all too well from my past.

I’m scared.

I used to be scared. Every fucking day. Tomorrow I’ll make sure to talk with this intruder, who may, or may not, be telling the truth. I take in a deep, nasal breath and let the

oxygen settle in my chest for a few seconds. They're gone. I've dealt with them. But despite this, despite knowing that they can only continue to haunt me like ghosts, the feelings linger. "*Merde.*" I say again, as my feet move me to the connecting door, and I throw it open, eyes frantically searching for Mason. And when I find him, tied up with rope, his green stare already on mine, I can finally let out my shuddering breath.

"Are you all right?" He asks, and his lips curl into a smile as he copies my own, our eyes finding each other with relief.

"I am now." Moving to the bed, I sit down next to his sprawled out frame, and caress the silk rope that's looped around his wrists. The color matches my black nail polish. "I missed you."

He swallows, eyes on my digits as they play with the ropes, the bonds, nodding when he realizes that I'm in no hurry to free him. "My Pops is a fan of Nat King Cole," he mumbles, referring to the music that's playing in the room next door.

"Is he?" My fingers have reached the bandaged palm of his hand, where they trace lazy circles on their way up toward his arm.

"Yeah. He usually plays those old tracks when he's cooking." His breath leaves on a shudder when they crawl further up toward his neck, which he exposes as he tips his head back. I lean in, pursing my lips as they prepare for the connection, prepare for his smooth skin, warm and soft, as it waits to be treasured.

"How are you feeling?" My mouth grazes his tender flesh, dropping featherlight kisses as it makes its way toward the shell of his ear.

"Better. Today was intense, but I had some water, then some sleep." He hisses when my tongue flicks out to suck on his earlobe, making me hum as I do, while my fingers reach out for the rope and start untying the strands.

“You know why we use rope?” Mason doesn’t answer. “Because both captivity and freedom are an illusion.” I take his wrists in my hand and rub the skin, willing the blood to circulate a little faster. “It’s all in your mind.” Placing his hands back onto the sheets, I press my fingers against his lips. He opens for me and a sigh escapes, its breathy sound music to my ears. “You are in my mind.” And then I press two digits slowly past his parted lips, and take my time to claim his mouth, watching as my fingers disappear into tight heat. “Suck.”

He blinks, then traps them in tight suction, making me groan in satisfaction as I watch him carefully, the way his cheeks flush and his pupils dilate.

“When you can liberate yourself from fear, from your past, from what’s expected of you, your mind is free. *You* are free.” I curl my finger around his tongue, toying with it, and his eyes flutter closed as he lets out a whimper. “You let me do this, yet you are free to refuse.” It comes out as a whisper, but it’s enough for his eyes to fly open and raise his hands. He wraps them around my neck and shakes his head, ejecting my fingers, making me bark out in laughter. Took him long enough. “With rope, the captive man fights. He fights, and he fights, and the more he fights, the more he believes that he wants to get out of there. And when he believes he feels movement, he convinces himself that that is the way to get out. The way to freedom. But will he ever get there, Mason? And more importantly, does he *really* want to get out? Or is he simply caught in a vicious circle, a so-called ring of repetition, where he can only repeat himself, again and again, because he has forgotten why he started in the first place?”

A nerve ticks in his jaw, and he presses his lips firmly without relenting the pressure on my neck. It’s not meant to hurt, though I love how his long fingers gripe my neck like a collar, claiming me. I recognize the suppressed anger when he growls at me, marking his confusion even further.

“Do *you* still remember why you’re fighting me, *mon ange*?”

“You’re evil,” he whispers, the words gritted through his teeth. His breathing comes in fast and shallow rasps, as his internal struggle ripples to the surface.

“I dare you, angel, to open your mind and accept this path. To see in multicolor, and not just the black and white that is cast into your system.”

His green eyes reflect storms and restlessness, and I surge forward, slanting my lips over his unyielding mouth, not deepening the kiss but not pulling away either. He shoves me back, but before I can react, he’s grabbed me by the nape and drags me back, smashing our lips together in a kiss that lingers. Ripping the silk from his chest with brutal force, my hands find the smooth valleys of his pecs, the chiseled shapes that lead to his abdomen, greedy in their need to reach for every inch of skin they can feel.

“Let me in.” I groan against his mouth, wrapping my limbs around him like a vine, only to start rocking once he wraps his hands around my shoulders. I lick inside his mouth, making my own blood boil with desire. I want more, so much more, I want it fucking all. “Only me.” My hips rotate over his groin, enjoying how the smooth silk stimulates our hard cocks as we grind together.

“Oh, Gabriel.” It comes out on a moan, and makes me rock hard, and desperate for release. My hand releases my leaking cock from my satin underwear, and when I tip the silk waistband down, his cock bounces out, flush and pink at the top, and wet with precum. I slick our cocks with our own saltiness before stroking them in rhythm with the torturous rolls of my hips.

“Fuck, that feels so good,” Mason chokes, making my balls draw up, begging to spill release. “I’m so hot for you. You—”

“Ssh, if you keep on talking, I will come right away. Oh, *fuck—*”

It’s too late. He lets out a guttural grunt, and I know he’s there too, because his release spills over my palm, making me cry out as my balls explode, and my own release coats my

hand and lower belly. We're both left panting, staring at each other, until I shiver, body gone cold. We huff out a laugh.

“Come on.” I hop off of him, rubbing off the cum from my belly as I do so. “Shower, and then I have another surprise.”

He doesn't protest, instead gets up to unwrap his ankles from the black rope, before he follows me into the bathroom.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

MASON

“**T**rust me.”

“To perform your hypnosis on me? What if it takes me back again?”

“Well, that’s sort of the point.”

I flip him off. “After everything my mind has already been through today? I shouldn’t be doing this.” Fuck, I *really* shouldn’t be doing this.

“Yet you are.” He looks over his shoulder, a faint curl onto his lips as he puts on another record. Freshly washed, I’m sitting on the velvet couch in Gabriel’s workplace, sipping from my whiskey, a sense of trepidation growing in my stomach.

“So, how does this work?” Putting my glass back onto the coffee table, I rub my thighs, willing my knee to stop bouncing.

“First, tell me how it felt.” Gabriel trudges back to me, silk pants hugging his slender frame and firm ass. His cream-colored shirt hangs unbuttoned, and when he crouches in between my legs, his necklaces glimmer in the open space between us. “When Luca took you inside your mind.”

“It was... I don’t even know.” *Scary*. “It made me go back in time. Remember things I’d considered forgotten. I—” Without looking away from me, Gabriel grabs my glass behind him, and tucks it between my hands. Giving him an absent smile, I take a quick swig. “It made me consider things. Before, I mean before I came here, I didn’t question my life.

Things just happened, and I had no time to choose any specific direction.” I let out a huff, but it sounds more like a sob. “I mean, look at you. You live with ghosts from the past, family you’ve never even met, yet they’ve put their mark on you from the day you walked into this house, branding you in a way, or perhaps simply offering you the perfect excuse to become who you are today. But guess what?” I look up, allowing our eyes to collide, sweeping up his charcoal gaze as it penetrates mine. “Perhaps I’m the same. Those sixties songs we love, they remind us of the people we cherished, those who loved us.”

Gabriel pushes himself up, only to slide onto my lap as his hands snake around my neck. And then we’re kissing, our mouths pressed together, their softness matching at the tender touch.

“Tell me more about your life,” Gabriel mumbles against my lips. “Please, I want to understand.”

“There isn’t much else to say other than what you already know.” He brushes his mouth back onto mine, making the pounding of my heart increase. Gabriel is soft everywhere, elegant. His hair a blond mop, mingled with my darker strands as he presses his forehead against mine. And his hands, warm and firm around my neck, make me feel something I should entirely not be feeling. *Home*. Perhaps that’s the reason I answer his question, or perhaps it’s because I’m tired of being led by life, of being led by ever-ticking time, and the unspoken questions. “Me and Mom, we used to get along. I have fond memories of her, you know?” He doesn’t answer, but rubs the muscles between my neck and shoulder blades, making my muscles relax. “She, unlike me I guess, *did* ask herself many questions. And whatever the answers were, she must have realized at some stage that she was fed up with me. She was always searching for a man, for love. At first it wasn’t too obvious. I’d be in school, come home and we’d eat together. We lived our lives. But when I was around twelve, things changed. She’d be away more often, sometimes wouldn’t even come home at night. I was afraid.” I clear my throat, but the embarrassment that floods through my body gets chased away under Gabriel’s firm massage. “I was afraid.” The words resonate through my mind as I repeat them. “I don’t think I’ve

ever said that out aloud. I'd run to school in the morning, and back home in the afternoon. Our hood wasn't the safest, and there was—" There was Tony Dimarco. "Anyway. My mum got into heroin in that period, and she started spending most of her time in trap houses."

"I'll come back for you baby, I promise."

"There was this kid, and he and I didn't get along. He made my life hell, and one day he told me that he'd be waiting for me after school, you know. I asked my mom to come and pick me up, and she promised she would." My voice breaks at the end, as an unexpected shiver of sorrow runs through my spine. "But the trap house caught fire. They couldn't get her out."

Gabriel doesn't say anything to that, but he doesn't have to. Somehow the words are enough to trap me in my own memory. "I was thirteen, and moved in with my grandparents. In the beginning, my grandmother was still alive, but she died when I was fifteen, leaving the two of us together." My head drops forward, only to land against the deep hollows above Gabriel's collar bone, and I inhale the scent of lavender. "That's it, really. I joined the Business when I was eighteen. It was either that or go to prison. Then worked myself up to where I am now, a bodyguard and a member of the Inner Circle."

Am I still? Neither of us speak the words out loud. Instead I allow myself to bask in this moment, his skin flush against mine, his flavor in my nostrils, his arms wrapped tightly around me.

I surrender.

"Will you accept my challenge?" Gabriel asks softly, his hot breath fanning my ear.

"Yes."

He pulls back and stares at me, then writhes himself out of our embrace, leaving me colder than I care to admit.

"Then sit back onto the couch and relax."

I do as he says, though my stomach swoops dangerously. His palms rub my legs in a soothing way. “We’ll be thinking about good things, *mon ange*. Trust me, please, and close your eyes.”

“I—”

“Sshh, Mason. Close your eyes and let your head fall forward, just a little. Like that. That’s good. Can you feel the muscle in your neck?”

I can.

“Now feel the flow, all the way to the tips of your ears. To the crown of your skull. Feel it become heavier and let go. Let it all go.” His soothing voice penetrates my mind like hot caramel, sweet and gentle as I feel myself floating. “Let’s go back to when you were thirteen years old, Mason. Can you do that for me?”

I mumble something unintelligible, the memory of myself in our lousy apartment becoming visible in my mind.

“You were feeling so lost, my love. So lonely.”

I let out a hum, the sound resonating through my mind as it lingers like a low rumble, while I walk through the place I used to call home. I remember the smell, the chaos. Its small size, barely enough space for both me and her. I float through it, opening doors and seeing inside. The old-fashioned kitchen with its brown tiles and round, formica table. The radio on the window sill, blasting some song. I float along, back through the corridor, knowing the way. And then I’m inside my bedroom, and a sob ripples through my chest at the sight of all those memories.

“Can you taste your sorrow?”

I can, and it’s acidic and heart-breaking. The bed with the racing car sheets, Rangers posters on the wall. My desk, with a large pile of all shapes of off-cuts of wood on it. A drawing placed next to it, the papers warm on my finger when I flick through them, realizing that they are designs. I wanted to become a carpenter.

“Your mother passed away, Mason. Leaving you with your grandparents. Your life was ripped away from you. But under those blankets of sadness, lies your heart. What is it your heart desires?”

My own studio. My taste buds flicker the words around on my tongue, experimenting with its long-gone flavor. *Design.*

“Deep inside, you know what your heart desires,” the voice smooths on. “You know what it is you want.” I grab the wooden miniature chair from the desk, and head back to the corridor. My nose has captured another scent, one that doesn’t have any right to be here. Smoke. I turn toward the living room, but head back immediately. There’s no place for me. When I get to the bathroom, smoke has made its way inside the apartment. I try to call for my mom, but no sound leaves my mouth. Something brushes over me, and my breath leaves on a gasp. What -

“Tell me what you want.” The voice echoes through my head.

You.

“I’ll give you anything you want.” Another brush through my core, and I let out a breathy moan.

The leaking of the bathroom faucet—drip, drop, plop—and another brush.

Fuck, I’m so horny.

A touch on my shoulder travels down to my chest, so softly, so sweet. I sigh and let my mind transport me further along the timeline that is my life.

“No more hiding, Mason. No more sorrow. The past is gone, *mon ange*, and has taken those you loved with it.” Fingers trace my crotch and my hardened cock twitches while I spread my legs, while my head lands back onto the couch like a bomb. So heavy, everything’s so heavy. I need release, want to grab ahold of those fingers and push them around the crown of my cock. But they dance around me like butterflies, while my mind brings me further back in time, right from my home, to the place I live with Pops.

“Tell me where you are.”

“Home,” I slur. “With Pops.” He’s making cranberry sauce and smiles at me, but the memory slips through my mind like rays of sunshine, because of that song, making my eyes flutter shut.

End of the World by Skeeter Davis.

When I open them again, my mind has brought me to France, to Gabriel.

“No,” I whisper into the emptiness, into the space I’m caught in. “I shouldn’t want this.”

My memories drop me in his bed, but when I look at my hand, I’m still carrying the miniature wooden chair.

The fingers massage me harder and I groan at the touch.

“Feels so damn good,” I mumble into the darkness. So very good. A mouth engulfs my hard cock and I gasp at the sensation. It teases the tip, slick with arousal, then invites it inside, swallowing my shaft in the process until I’m all the way in. It’s hot, wet and I swallow hard, then let out a dirty moan. “F—fuck,” I slur. “What is this?” Where am I? Still in that black hole? That’s not possible.

“Tell me where you are,” the voice asks around my hot flesh, and then it suckles it back inside its mouth. I grunt, mouth wide open, my body heavy and relaxed at the same time.

“*Here.*” The word echoes through my mind.

“Mason, I’m going to bring you back now.” The voice is soft, sounding like a song, gentle and soothing. “Can you hear me?”

“Yesss,” I garble, followed by another groan. Fuck, this feels good.

“Good boy. Come back to me. That’s it. There you are. Open your eyes, Mason. Open them for me.”

I open my eyes, blinking rapidly, feeling light and heavy and *confused*. And so horny. I’m breathing heavily as I

practically lie against the backrest of the velvet couch, my hard cock out, in front of Gabriel's mouth, who's crouched between my spread thighs. I'm no longer carrying the miniature wooden chair. His eyes are all pupil, and he licks his lips in anticipation.

"Welcome back, *mon ange*. Now I'll take care of you."

My cock is painfully hard, despite our earlier orgasm, and my insides are practically shaking with need. And then, without a warning, his mouth is back, swallowing me whole, and I arch into the touch, desperate in my chase. I let out a whine, and another one, because there's a tingle in my heavy balls, drawing them together, and then I come like crazy, shooting deep inside Gabriel's throat. I'm in heaven.

He looks up with a crazy glow in his eyes and lifts his head up to drop me a trail of sweet kisses from my softened cock, to my stomach, my abdomen, my chest, and then to my lips.

"My own studio," I mumble when I stare at him sleepily.

"Your own studio," he repeats on a drawl. He drops me one last kiss, then slowly stands from the couch and trudges toward the windows across the room.

"I told you I liked woodwork. But going back in time, I saw the designs, the wish to build my own carpentry studio, my own definition of freedom. A peaceful place where I can work as a carpenter." A laugh bubbles toward the surface. So I did ask myself questions after all. "That was the answer." I turn to watch him stare at the view outside. Without turning around, he says, "Then we'll get you enough wood to build your own studio."

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

GABRIEL

“Tell me something.” It’s late at night, and though we’ll soon be leaving the brunt of winter, our breath clings to the air around us, as we sit outside, wrapped under a large blanket, candles burning around us, our eyes toward the glistening water. The bottle of lube sits heavy in the pocket of my silk pants, and when his fingers brush against my side, it lights me up. At his words, I turn to face Mason. He hesitates, then continues, “I get the part of being a bully victim and wanting to flee from that life. The loneliness. The need for survival. But when did you decide to become the leader of a cult?”

A chuckle escapes from my lips, together with a shake of the head. “We’re not a cult. I’m not the main focus of interest in our family. We *all* are.” Mason nods, his eyes still on the ocean, while he bites his lip. “But they need to follow the rules. If not, they’re punished, right?”

“It’s not quite like that.” I let out a sigh. “You make it sound like it’s a bad thing. Yes, we are a family, and yes, I founded this family, and created the rules. But-”

“What are those rules?” He interrupts as he turns to face me, his eyes glimmering with suspicion. “I mean, if I were to —” He clears his throat.

“Respect. Love and understanding. Being able to provide for your family.”

“And what if you can’t? What do you do then? Punish them?”

Annoyance grows. “Why don’t you tell me? You look like you already know what you want to hear anyway. Am I right?” Mason’s eyes dart toward the gems on my teeth as I give him a smile. “Go on.”

He looks away. “I’ve seen the corpses,” he mutters. “I’ve seen the pictures with hanging bodies, don’t lie to me. You can’t be—I can’t be...”

“Brothers who don’t provide are punished, yes. They are hanged, is that what you want to hear me say?”

“Fuck, I don’t know, man. Maybe not?” When he looks up again, it’s shimmering hope I recognize.

“It’s similar to your debt collecting. People know what they sign up for when they borrow money from the Donnellys, right?” He gives me a hesitant nod. “Our brothers know what they step into when they decide to join our family.”

“I need to know what happens if they can’t provide.”

“It doesn’t often happen, and when it does, it depends, *mon ange*. Maxime was punished for violating our rules of showing respect and mercy toward his brothers. He didn’t want to hurt you, I think, but he did.”

Mason’s throat works as he swallows. “And what’s going to happen to him?”

“He’s left for Paris, and won’t come back.” A candle flickers, and we both turn our focus on the fulgurating light. “Once he’s reached the place of his choice, his *Captain* will put the rope around his neck, bring Maxime in hypnosis, and from there, he will stay at that place, his mind in peace as it says farewell to his body.”

“Fuck.”

“It’s different from your usual MO, I agree.”

“I don’t usually get involved with violence,” Mason breathes. “Logan, or Big will do the actual killing. I am more of a promoted driver, and because of my build, I work as a bodyguard.”

“So no fighting for you?”

He snorts at that. “That’s not real violence. Yeah, I take part in the fights, just not in the actual execution, that’s not really my thing.”

I hum. “Well, I love watching you fight my brothers. I think it’s sexy.” Mason huffs out a laugh, and it breaks the tension a little. “I don’t do the hanging either,” I admit. “Over the years, my anger has been extinguished little by little, and I’m quite content living here and making sure that our workplaces are in order. I’d like to do more in fashion.” I breathe out. “I don’t leave the gates.” My chest tightens at the admission. “Not anymore.” I expect him to ask something, but instead he gives me the slightest of nods, silently inviting me to go on, to trust him. It is euphoric. “Here, I feel powerful, at home. This place has everything I want, everything I need, now that you’re here.” I feel him tense next to me, but he still doesn’t speak. “It’s where I belong, the only place where my past is erased, and the present and the future blend together, making it timeless.”

“Everything the *Frères Perdus* stand for is defined here. Our values and our home. Everything we stand for is designed here. Our *soirées*, the clothes, the beautiful masks. We even produce our own incense here. You haven’t seen it yet, but we have two hectares of poppy fields we use for the production of opium. There is nothing out there, *mon ange*, that I miss. And if you miss him, we can bring him here, your grandfather. This can be his home too.”

“Gabriel—”

Something in the way he says my name, makes my throat close up with a monumental fear of what he’ll say next. “I want you to be mine, Mason, and I want to be yours.” I tap his temple, ignoring the way his eyes widen. “In here.” I tap his heart. “And in here.” I run my hand over his hardening cock. “All of you.”

His hand covers mine, as he shakes his head. “Gabriel.” But no other words come, and my misplaced fear that he will actually turn me down, becomes a truth with every second that he keeps his silence. Until he speaks. “I’ve wanted someone special for a long time, a hidden desire that felt like it had no

business to be there in my heart in the first place. And now I've met you, in the most unconventional of ways, and I can list hundreds of reasons for having lost my fucking mind, yet here we are. I've become scared of losing you. Of missing you. Of wanting you more than you want me." He lets out a snort, and shakes his head in disbelief. "Of being pushed away by you, sent back home to my life in Brooklyn. Of realizing how empty that life is, after the things that we've been through here together. Like the speed of light, if you counted the hours. Like an erupted volcano, if you counted the impact. Yet, at the same time, I'm afraid of letting Pops down and my brothers back home. Of not fitting into this family you've created. What if I ..." he nibbles his lip. "What if you get tired of me? Will you ask me to hang myself?"

My heart trembles at those words, and relief and hesitation battle for dominance. Indignation that he fears me, us, our family. Even his own, if he thinks that those who claim they love him, won't want the best for him. Concern that he doesn't believe in my respect for him, nor my true feelings. Apprehension that he can even think that I could ever get enough of him, or ask that of him.

My hand snakes around his neck, and I squeeze, pulling him closer until our lips meet, and whisper, "You're brave for telling me all that." Our mouths meet in a seductive brush that quickly turns more demanding. "For admitting your feelings."

The firm grip of his hands on mine are intoxicating, possessive as he pulls me closer with one hand. He lifts the blanket and lets out a rumble, then hooks my legs behind his and hoists me onto his lap, my back pressed against his chest. "For showing me how much you want me," I praise further, noticing how his body vibrates with need at the sound of the words. "Because you know, you'll always have me, every single piece of me." His teeth nip at my neck, sucking and claiming as they trace a path toward the dip between my ear and collarbone. "Bite me, *mon ange*. Claim me."

He howls at the words, and I close my eyes as tears cut through the tender flesh, where his eager tongue laps up the droplets of blood that ooze out of the tiny wound. My fingers

flick open the bottle of lube, and without opening my eyes, I snatch one of his hands and spurt a generous amount onto his digits. “I love your teeth sucking at my skin. Love the pain. Give me some more, let me ride you. Let’s celebrate our love.” Without breaking away from my neck, his lubed finger breaches me as it reaches between my ass cheeks to loosen me up, making my ass clench. “Fuck yeah, so good,” I hiss at the sting. “More.”

“Give me time, Gabriel. Give me one night alone, to think.”

“Anything for you, *mon ange*, as long as you come back to me.”

“Fuck,” he whispers at my words, or at the sounds I make when he adds a second finger. My arms are wrapped around his back, the black painted nails digging into the skin between his shoulder blades as I mewl his name. “Mason, give me more. I need more, *mon ange*. I need you. Come inside me. I can take it.”

He lets out a string of curses as he slowly removes his fingers. Then he lifts me, and the feeling of his straining muscles against my sides, is fucking thrilling. “So strong,” I murmur. “And all mine.” I feel his lined up cock penetrate my slick entrance, a gasp escaping both our lips as he slowly but steady eases himself into me.

“Fuckkk,” he mumbles on a groan when he’s fully sheathed. With our gazes both toward the ocean, I lean with my back against his chest, rocking down onto his hips as he holds my waist firmly, guiding me into the right rhythm. His breath fans against my neck and behind my ear, leaving goosebumps behind on my sensitive skin.

“You feel so perfect around me. So tight, so hot.” He increases the pace, using me like a puppet as he moves to fucking me the way he wants, and I take it, all of it, as I let him have his way. “This place is so beautiful.” His breath comes in short rasps now as he continues to pound into me. When he snakes a hand around my rigid length, I let out a hungry moan, practically exploding on the spot. Using my pre-

cum to slick my cock, he starts working it, in sync with the rhythm of our rocking hips. “The ocean, so peaceful. This house...” I swear, he’s just saying this all to drive me crazy, to undo me. I turn around, and catch his flushed cheeks and dark eyes, hungry as they stare at the gems on my teeth. He lunges forward and crushes our lips together, and the angle on which we are now sitting, is perfect for his fucking to hit me right in the sweetest spot. I cry out when he rocks against it with every thrust, my body jerking and hardening as it prepares for the grand finale.

“Show me how you can take it,” he teases, and he squeezes me around my crown, making my movements become more sloppy, and my noises louder. “So good, you feel so good Gabriel. Show me how you come.”

“*Mon Dieu...*” Ropes of cum spurt out when my balls explode, leaving my chest heaving as I practically drown on the heavy panting of my breath. And then I feel him, groaning when his entire body spasms, filling my ass up with his release. His forehead collapses against the back of my shoulder and he pants, leaving soft kisses on the silk of my shirt. When my eyes open, they stare right ahead at the dancing, dark clouds, and the lighthouse with its haunting light, that reflects a new wave of fresh, misty drops of rain. The wind has picked up, and it sends a shiver through my spine.

“We should go inside,” Mason says, carefully lifting me to withdraw his softened cock. “A storm is coming.” Draping the blanket around my shoulder, he presses his arm around me, and nudges me toward the glass door of my workplace.

“Are you sure you want to sleep alone tonight?” My eyes dart to the darkness behind us, before making my way inside. He closes the door, then draws the curtains, before pulling me against his chest. “No, but I will. I need to think, alone. This has been quite the ride. I need to think of Pops, of my brothers back home, of everything. I can’t just disappear.” He smiles softly and pushes a blond strand out of my face. “The Business is no ally of yours. We’ll need to think of that as well.”

“We’re far away here.”

He drops a kiss onto my nose, then drops his hands. “Maybe, and maybe not. If they want to, they’ll come for you anyway, that’s my experience. Can’t hide forever.” With those words, he turns to leave.

“Who? Who will come for me?” I hate how small I sound, and I hate how terrified I suddenly am of him leaving. Mason turns and with two, big steps he takes me back into his arms. “I don’t know, baby. But what I do know is that hiding is not the solution. It never is.” He drops a kiss onto my crown, then leads me toward my bedroom. “I need time to think this through. How will we move forward, and what will we need to do for that to happen, all right? Come on, let me tuck you in.”

I hold onto his strength as I let him guide me toward the bed, indigo sheets greeting me when he lays me down. Silk caresses my cooled body, but it won’t be enough to warm me. Not tonight, with the increased rainfall clattering against the windows, and the turbulent wind reflecting my own thoughts, my own sense of trepidation. “I can’t sleep,” I pout. “*Pas sans toi.*” Not without you. Never again without you. “Please don’t go yet.” Because there’s something in the air. Something I can’t put my finger on, though I won’t tell him that. Mason lets out a breathy smile, then climbs onto the bed above the sheets, and lays down next to me. I roll onto my side and against his broad chest, melting into his sculpted shape as if my cheek was meant to be there. And then we’re left staring at each other through the glass of the mirror above us. “Luca gave me your phone back. It’s in my bottom drawer. Please take it with you, call your grandfather, do as you wish.”

“Thank you.” He doesn’t look away. “Will you ever tell me why you decided to place a mirror there?”

Snuggling my cheek against his firm chest, I place my hand under his laced shirt, feeling the warmth of his skin connecting with mine, his green stare somehow making me feel safe. I let out a yawn, and my eyes flutter closed.

“Maybe some day.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY

MASON

I stayed longer than necessary, somehow unable to untangle myself from Gabriel's sleeping form. It was pure determination to follow through on my wish to be alone, that made me uncurl his soft features from mine, nestle his blond head back onto one of his fluffy pillows, and get back to this bedroom that I can practically call mine now.

I called Pops straight away. I don't know what I was thinking. Perhaps that hearing his voice would remind me of my old life, of where I should be—taking care of him, providing for him. For *us*. I should have at least told him what really happened. But the truth is, that once he started talking, his voice so much stronger than I've heard in such a long time, joking and chatting joyfully as he filled me in on the pizza night and football game that I've missed, I couldn't. Because right then, when I opened my mouth, Pops told me that he was *proud* of me. For leaving and taking the time to think about what I want to do in life.

And my mouth fell shut.

Should I be happy about this invisible acceptance coming from his part?

I've fallen in love with my kidnapper, in less than a week's time, and it's the weirdest, most unlikely thing that could ever have happened to me. Because he's my enemy—this intriguing, sexy man, who's locked me up, and left me to be slowly burned by the sensual flame that is Gabriel. Do I want it? Christ, my feelings are scattered everywhere, all over the

fucking place. And now, they've created a heavy ball in the pit of my stomach, and I don't really know why.

Yeah, I do. But my emotions are so tender, as they play in my mind on repeat, and prevent me from sleeping right now. They cause me to lay awake the entire night, listening to the howling wind and the spiking rain, my brain a whirlwind of a whole different category.

I've passed the phase of accusing Gabriel of being a monster. I've passed the phase of believing that I'm solely here as a captive, and yet I'm so tempted to blink it all away. To tell myself that it's all a trick, part of some masterplan to wipe out the Donnellys. Because it can't be me.

I've fallen in love with my kidnapper. Everything from his extravagance, his defined style, his love for the past and those objects that are part of that, to the way he smells. Lavender mixed with roses and a touch of that bitter flavor called opium, which relaxes our minds and has connected us on every single possible level.

I toss and turn, wrapping the blanket tightly around me as I do so. Facing the dark curtains, I listen to the storm outside. This place is where it all started, barely a week ago. Being kidnapped and transported to France, then brought into this mansion, where I tried to fight myself out of captivity. Meeting Gabriel when they had me tied up to that chair, when he didn't hesitate to leisurely impale himself on me. My heartbeat picks up. Innocence combined with madness, the first essence he let me taste. God, I wanted to fight him, to fuck him, and to fight him again. When did this hostility turn into something more?

A door bangs shut in the corridor, and it's followed by an outside thunder, making me jolt. It really is ruthless out there tonight. Gabriel felt tense earlier, and I suddenly wonder if he's afraid of the storm. I should have asked. I love our conversations. To have someone asking you, challenging you, agreeing with you. At home we don't have the same kind of talks. Or maybe we do, and I just haven't been as invested. Because Gabriel and I share a common past. A mutual feeling of being neglected, of not belonging. And though I thought it

to be weird, this whole definition of creating a family of injured souls, a home based on values such as love and respect, doesn't sound too bad.

I wonder how he'd punish me if I was a bad boy.

My cock jumps in reply, and I hiss when the smooth, silk material grazes my balls. During my entire twenty-four years, I have never once asked anything for myself. Muttering a prayer, my religion so deeply ingrained in me from being practically raised by Pops, I don't believe it, but I still find myself going through the motions. *Perhaps Gabriel won't be taken away from me.*



I WAKE by an undefined hush of trepidation. Keeping my body still and my eyes trained on the curtain, I try to decipher what it is. Outside the storm is still raging, and by the looks of it, it's still dark. Nighttime.

Something shifts closeby, making the hair on the back of my neck stand. Someone's here, inside this room. Someone's here, waiting for me to make a move. My eyes flicker around the twilight and I force a squint as they accept that sleeping time has finished. One sweep across my closest surroundings confirms that there's nothing here that I can use as a possible weapon. Another shift behind me makes my heart leap into my throat. When the moment comes, I'll have to use my bare fists, and make it quick. Only, that moment never comes.

"Mason?" A hurried whisper. My eyes widen at the sound of a stranger. I turn my head around and can barely see him at first. When I do, my brows pinch, as I stare at a huge mop of curls and large eyes carved in a small face.

"Who the fuck are you and what do you want?" I growl.

He doesn't as much as flinch, instead pressing his lips firmly together. "Come on, let's get you out of here."

"And have my hand electrocuted again? No way, man."

His eyes dart to my bandaged palm, but he doesn't reply. Instead he nudges his chin toward the door and holds up a phone. "Are you ready to go home?"

"Are you a *Trésor*?"

He gives me a scowl in return. "Do I look like one?"

"You kinda do."

He huffs, then walks back to the door. "You can call me No One, because I'm only here to get you out."

"Did my brothers send you?"

He doesn't reply, but he doesn't have to anyway. *They've come*. I can feel it in my bones. "I've just had Pops on the phone, who told me that I can take all the time I need to make up my mind. Dude, I can't imagine the look on his face when he—"

"Can you please stop talking?" No One looks over his shoulder. "Let's get you outta here first. This place is a fucking maze. Ready?" I am. My legs are moving on their own accord, still a bit wobbly but determined to unlock the door to freedom. Anger is back on the front line. No One eases the door open and gestures to me to follow him through the narrow corridor, toward the large reception hall. I remember it being used as a lounge area for the brothers. At this time of night, the place is deserted—empty couches and coffee tables staring back at us, with the lighthouse radiating through the wall of windows. There are two corridors from here, and after a week I know where they lead to. The one on the right is the one I took when Maxime tricked me into leaving this place, and it will lead us to the exit. The other corridor leads toward Gabriel's wing, the center of my presence for the last few days of our tender love making, our heated discussions. Anger falters, as this new emotion, this new *color*, challenges the first row.

"Come on," No One then hisses, and the moment's gone. Getting a grip on myself, I follow him, only to realize halfway that we've taken the wrong turn."Hey man, this is not—" I get

cut off by voices further down the corridor, and we both freeze.

“Fuck.” No One opens the first door to our left, and I follow, right on his tail. We stand there, left in the musty darkness, our chests heaving, squinting at each other as we wait for whoever it is to pass. Hushed voices approach, speaking in rapid French as they linger in the corridor, making me clench my jaw. I recognize the booming voice of Jérôme, which does not reassure me in the slightest. As if they sense our presence, they halt right in front of the door, their voices now hushed, their tone filled with an urgency that makes my stomach churn. The doorknob squeaks as it turns, and No One takes a panicked step back as we both eye the rotating handle. There’s more talking in the corridor, then one of the guys lets out a muffled chuckle, and their voices start fading.

“They’re moving,” I mouth, and No One nods, eyes darting between me and the door. When we’re finally left with the sound of silence, he carefully opens it, checks our surroundings before sending me a tilt of the chin. We leave the cramped space, but as he moves forward, I grab his arm and hiss, “We’re going the wrong way. The exit’s to the other side.”

No One holds up his phone, and mutters, “We found something suspicious around the front door. I can’t risk us leaving that way. We believe that the entire wall facing the ocean is made of glass. From that side, it’s also the shortest run to make it back to the fence, about seven hundred feet. We’ll have to run barefoot, but Austin’s waiting for us at the other side. Once we’re back, the Business will negotiate. Are you happy now? Can we please get the fuck outta here without you having ten thousand questions?”

“Negotiate about what?”

He lets out a desperate sigh. “About the drugs transport, of course.”

“Drugs transport?” My eyes narrow in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

No One shrugs. “Listen, let’s just go. I only know that the Business has problems. They have allegedly signed a shit deal with All Saints, a deal the Donnellys now try to get rid off by setting up this drugs transport behind their backs.” He shrugs. “Desperate times call for desperate measures.”

“Desperate measures?”

Desperate enough to trade me for an alliance?

A nerve ticks in my jaw, and I inhale through my nose to prevent my throat from tightening around some dirty form of panic. This can’t be happening.

“I don’t know. I don’t meddle in *Business* stuff.”

“Then what *do* you do?”

He stops, his smaller frame lithe and proud as he eyes me, his large, dark eyes reminding me of another pair of dark eyes. I look away, unable to see any more. Is he still asleep, my baby?

“Right now, getting you out of here.”

“Who are you?”

“I said that—”

“I say you’re full of shit.” But I’m too far in now. Fury mingled with betrayal. I start walking, and I can feel him hot on my tail, this *No One*, who’s certainly not an enemy. But is he a friend?

“How did you get in anyway?”

He snorts. “Pretended to be a victim.”

Gabriel’s smoldering gaze appears in my mind, the curl of his lips when he speaks about his past, his sorrow, his dreams to create a shelter in this house that’s haunted by a lost family. And this No One, this traitor...

“Hey, don’t snarl at me,” No One scowls but flinches nevertheless. “Jeez. They told me you were the silent type. Turns out you’re nothing but trouble.” When we get to the door of Gabriel’s workplace, I’m positive that this guy cannot be trusted.

“How do you know this house so well?” No One holds up his phone. “No,” I hiss. “That’s not an answer.”

“It is, you idiot,” he whisper-snarls. “The police have special equipment. Now, let’s get the *fuck* outta here.” He turns his face back toward the door, hand already on the door knob. When he turns it, he lets out a muffled, triumphant cry. “Fuck me, that’s an unexpected surprise. It’s unlocked.”

Because of me.

My stomach churns. I left Gabriel there, in bed, *asleep*, and didn’t lock the door.

A loud thunder makes the house shudder, and the room is set alight. It’s only a few seconds, but it’s enough for me to see that the door toward the bedroom is open.

So close, yet so far away.

“Here.” I guide us to the wall of glass and swiftly turn the handle to slide the door open. Strong wind gusts welcome us at the speed of light, making a lamp fall, the wooden flooring only barely dampening the shattering of the glass. The cold cuts straight through my clothes and causes my skin to shiver. It’s raining full on now, thunder rumbling through the air once more, chasing the eerily moving clouds above us into a frenzy.

No One’s breathing comes in short rasps, giving him away. He’s scared, yet he flips me off at my unasked question, indignation shining frantically in his dark eyes. He reminds me of Gabriel. “Are you ready to make a run for it? It will be pitch dark out there, until we get to the fence.”

I nod. “Yes. You go first, I’ll come right after you.”

“Okay.” And then he takes off, his bare feet crunching softly into the soggy grass. I watch him go, knowing full well that I shouldn’t wait, that I should go right after him, to shadow him, to make this decision easier. Because this is so fucking hard. I shouldn’t turn and look over my shoulder at Gabriel’s workshop, yet I do, hating the way my eyes burn.

“Fuck.” The velvet couch on which we sat, drinking whiskey and talking about our pasts. Gabriel’s record collection, his sewing machine, a space surrounded by antique

wood that smells reassuring, safe, like home. Was it all an illusion?

Biting my lip, I decide that I don't want to know.

"Come on!" I growl, fisting the window, despising myself for not being able to let go. "Go, go, *go!*" My feet won't fucking move, and my heart feels heavy with regret. And so I stand there, on the threshold, skin shivering with wind and doubt, emotions identical to the crazed waves that hit the cliffs below me.

"Mason?"

I can't turn around, instead keeping my eyes trained on the water, allowing an ache to spread across my chest. "What's going on?" His voice is soft, but I hear the nuance, the worry that makes his French drawl come out just a little more. I probably woke him up with that stupid lamp that broke, and I secretly hope that it wasn't some masterpiece that his grandfather left him.

Leaning my hand against the window, my face right in the howling wind, I mumble, "It's time for me to go." I'm not sure if he's heard me, but my body senses his approach before my mind does, and it's aching to reach out for him. It wants to feel every inch of his smooth skin against mine, wants to protect him from the rest of the world.

"I believed we shared something last night," he mumbles against my shoulder blades, hot breath leaving my skin even colder. Despite the storm, I hear him crystal clear. "Something real. I believed that you felt it too."

A tentative hand brushes over my tense muscles, and I freeze. I turn over my shoulder and capture his gaze. "You *kidnapped* me," I snarl. "You kept me here while I should have been looking after my Pops, while I should have been working for my employer. And for what?"

Was I just part of a transaction? The thought has me lashing out. I swirl him around, and his back hits the window with a thud. His eyes widen in surprise and dart between mine, but I can't read his expression. They are darker than usual, yet

they're empty. "No one's ever chosen me," he whispers. "But I chose you to come home with me. I wanted to give you all this. Anything that would make you happy, *mon ange*. Anything."

Each word makes my heart crumble a little more, until there's nothing left but a painful, black void. Fisting his silk robe, I clench my jaw. "They've come for me, so I'm going now." Pressing my lips, I swallow the bile in my throat. "You can drop the act." And then my lips crash against his, desperate for a last taste of him. He's soft, and sweet, and evil. Yet he feels so good in my arms, like he was meant to be here, his smaller frame perfectly liquifying into the dips and cuts of my body. I plant my hands at both sides of his face against the glass but it's too cold, too far away from the intoxicating source of heat that is Gabriel. Cupping both his cheeks, I press him closer until our noses bump into one another, making sure that my teeth bite and nibble, suck and kiss every single part of his lips. He opens his mouth for me, and I dive in, desperate as I lick my way in, caressing every bit of heat I can find. I don't want to stop. I don't want it to be a lie. But when Gabriel sobs into my mouth, I can't take any more. I need to pull myself out of this spell and turn away, away from him.

"Mason—"

"Don't. I need to go." And I do, suddenly running like the devil's on my heels, but in reality, it's the ghosts of the house, chasing me, preventing me from leaving. My feet fly over the wet grass, its spongy texture of plants combined with rain and mud, making my feet wet and dirty. When I turn around the corner, I'm met with a shrieking sound of the security alarm, loud, and obscene, making my heart leap into my chest. Lights are being switched on, showing misty rain that's falling all around me. Someone yells loudly, and then I see them. Brothers, leaving the house. They're wearing their usual clothes, some even their masks, reflecting a shimmer in this darkness that gives them a creepy vibe. I keep on running, my breathing high in my chest as I pant to keep the fear out and my condition up, ignoring the first signs of the stinging pain in my feet when they occasionally hit stones and spines. This is the longest seven hundred feet I've ever had to run in my life.

“Mason!” Someone calls me from behind, and when I dare to look over my shoulder, I see it’s Jérôme. He’s right on my tail, the scowl back on his face. Worse, he is not panting as hard as I am. “No!” He calls, but I tune him out, turning back and focusing on the last part of my escape. My foot hits a large rock, and I groan in pain when I tumble over, crashing onto my knees in the grass. A flashlight shines into my face, and I raise my hand in protection, ready to be dragged back to the house. Or worse, have those fucking ropes around my limbs again.

Another thunder bursts through the sky, and for the briefest of seconds I feel that I may have misheard. But then I hear the sound again—the click of the safety catch being taken off.

Everything stops around us. Headlights from multiple cars are being switched on, right in my fucking face, and when I finally look up, my face dripping with rain, eyes hooded against the brightness that curses the darkness away, I see that I actually managed to make it in front of the fence. I’m now staring right at the barrel of a gun, which nudges me to come closer.

“Mason.” It’s the voice of Austin Carrington. “On your left, there’s an opening in the bushes for you to climb through. My cousins are waiting there. We’ve got ya man, we’re getting you out.”

The storm has arrived. Yet I wonder which battle I’m really about to fight. The one on the front line, or the one in my heart.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

GABRIEL

“**G**abriel! *Qu’est-ce qui se passe?*” Gaëtan shouts, as he pushes inside my workplace, followed closely by Théo and Ezra. The shrieking sound of the alarm penetrates through the open doors. It’s the first time it has ever been used.

I can’t move. “H—he—”

Théo pulls his arms around me, and I don’t want to break down with his boyfriends around him, with Mason still on our property, but this heartbreak is all consuming and kicking me to the ground. I breathe my brother’s curls in as my forehead hits his collarbone.

“Stay with him. I’m on it. Come on, Ezra.” Gaëtan rushes outside, already on his phone. “Luca?” I hear him bark, and then he’s gone, and I’m left with my brother who still has his arms firmly wrapped around me. I sob, hot tears escaping the corners of my eyes while my body trembles. It’s such a foreign sensation, crying again after all these years. It’s devastating at the same time, because crying equals sadness, and sadness equals hurt. Hurt from my past. Only this hurt is from my present, and I’d promised myself I’d never cry again. I promised myself I’d stand up to it and never be small again.

Swirling myself out of Théo’s embrace, I cup his wet cheeks and drop a kiss on his forehead. “I need to go back for him.”

“I’ll go with you.”

And then we're outside, our silk bodies shivering in the wind, our minds determined to capture what we cherish. What is ours. But when we march around the corner of the house, my jaw drops, and fury creeps its way inside my mind.

"*Mon Dieu,*" Théo mutters next to me.

"Is this what you wanted?" I hiss. Fresh tears mingle with hundreds of raindrops. "When you invited that cop to our home? Is *this* what you wanted?"

"*Gabi,*" my baby brother faces me, his light eyes ablaze with sorrow. I shake my head in despair, flipping him off. Everywhere around us, brothers are jogging up to the fence, which is lit up by headlights of two cars. From the *other* side. Some of them carry their masks, protecting their beauty, their identity, as they stand tall, ready to fight and protect what's ours. Still, the sight has my breath locked in my throat, and it makes my legs wobble and my heart beat rapidly in my ribcage.

"Gabriel." Luca comes jogging toward me, his blond hair brushed away into a tight ponytail that whips across his cheeks. Almond eyes bore into mine. "Let's get you somewhere safe and dry."

"No." I drift closer to the fence. "Mason?"

"It's not safe for you out here."

"Where are you?" My gaze squinches at the brightness of the lights, and I place a hand above my eyes in an attempt to recognize the person that is the black, rigid shape, standing in front of the fence.

"Gun!" Someone screams, and brothers scatter away in all directions. All of them, apart from my loyal henchman Jérôme, the gun pointed directly to his face.

"Gabriel," Luca grabs me by the shoulder, but I shake myself free.

"No! I can't let him die for me." Conflict tears me apart from the inside, but these words represent everything I stand for, making me wobble further. I won't let him die. A

whirlwind passes me in a rush as it makes its way to the fence, and when he turns, Théo sends me a crazed grin.

“*This* is what I wanted, Gabi. Now go, *go!* Find him. Cross the fence through the bushes, and bring him back home.”

Chaos erupts at the next thunder, flashing lighting through the garden and igniting the scene. My hands don't hesitate as they search hectically for the shrubs, and when they find what they're looking for, I let out a relieved exhale. I worm myself through the green hole, heart beating erratically and probably half expecting to be caught even before my feet hit the ground. I'm not. Instead, this side of the fence seems eerily quiet. Sideways, I see Austin standing in front of the gate, the gun still on my brother's chest as they speak too softly for me to make out the words. The dark-haired guy next to me snorts at something, then turns his gaze. I'm sure it was just a casual movement, but his eyes land on me as I sit here, crouched in front of the bushes, being caught by chaos. It is what I'm searching for, what's consuming me, in this scorching panic. This guy, who seems to be a combination of Mason and Théo, crazy combined with anger, keeps my gaze. But it's his strength that makes me instantly aware of our size difference, and makes me suddenly and cruelly, remember my past. I watch in slow motion as he pulls out a gun from his inside pocket, my mouth opening slowly, too slowly, the word a slur. “*Non.*”

And then my feet take off. I run, as fast as I can, into the darkness, hating our scarce attire and the lack of shoes for the very first time.

Is he following me?

I don't dare look over my shoulder, and with the rain that has me in an iron hold, I keep going. I don't know where, panic slowly but steadily consuming my trembling limbs as it crawls up my spine, all the way to the crown of my skull. It tugs at me, and I increase my speed, while my hands search for any leverage I can find. A tree, that I hold onto for dear life, my ears eagerly trying to pick up on any sounds. There's nothing.

“Mason? Where are you, *mon ange*?”

It takes me a good five minutes to finally let go of the tree. When I do, I take a deep breath and force myself to digest the darkness and see, *see* where I need to go. There’s a path here, and with a searching hand I grab onto nothing as I follow its trail.

“Is this really the first time that you’ve left this house?”

I stop dead in my tracks and push my head up, but I am surrounded by nothingness. The voice is soft, inquisitive, and sounding genuinely curious. “Who are you?” I squint at my own reply.

‘No One.’

His voice comes from behind, so I turn on a whim, only to be met with more darkness.

“I can’t blame you, you know.”

“You sound like you have experienced your own version of pain,” I try, my eyes frantically darting around as I do.

“I have.”

“Tell me, was there ever an abusive boyfriend?”

He chuckles softly, and it’s the breathy sound that gives him away. He’s hiding behind the tree to my left. “Abusive father, does that count?”

“That depends. Is he here in France? Or did you leave him in NY?”

“You’re a clever one. So what is it?”

“Yes. It’s the first time in a very long while.”

“And what’s it like?”

I let out a tired sigh. “Horrible. Being out here takes away all the years, plunges me right back into the fear I left right before I decided to stay on our land.” It’s true. And that realization makes me feel afraid. “But I can’t find him.” And it fucking breaks me.

No One doesn't reply, in fact he doesn't speak for a while, and I suspect that he has left me on my own. But right when I continue walking with my searching hands, he gets out from behind the tree. He's a little smaller than I am, and from this close he appears fragile and feisty at the same time. Like the first time I met him, his dark curls are stuck to his face, showing large eyes and high cheekbones. He grabs my hand and we start walking. It takes me a few steps to realize that my body decided to trust this traitor, even before my mind did.

"The Business believes you are responsible for their failing drugs transport," he says.

"Well, we're not."

No One chortles. "I know you aren't, because I know who is. But what's important is that they think it's you."

"And why would they think that?"

He tilts his head, his dark stare matching mine as they collide. "Really? You coldly kidnapped one of their guys."

"I brought him home, is what you mean."

His eyes twinkle with something I can't pinpoint, then he shrugs. "Whatever you want to call it. They believe it's part of a master plan. That you're back sabotaging their shit."

"But—"

"I know you aren't." He lets go of my hand, and I realize we've come to where the path splits into two directions. "You see those lights? You're nearly there. Go straight on, and you'll be home."

"Where's Mason?"

"Watch out for Kai, Austin's cousin."

"Have you seen Mason?"

No One shakes his head. "But he's here somewhere. He made it across the fence."

Sadness blooms in my chest. "Where are you going?"

He nudges his chin toward the other path. “That way. Any moment now they’ll realize what I had to do.”

“And what is that?”

No One sighs and shakes his head. “Have you ever had to sacrifice your own values for a greater cause?”

My mind swifts to Maxime, to his lifeless body bouncing from a cord around his neck. “*Oui*. What did you do?”

“I got into trouble.” No One lets out a sarcastic huff. “That’s what you get for being nosy, I suppose.”

A cry, so feral that I believe it to come from an animal, howls through the forest. It’s heartbreaking, and I squeeze his hand.

“Fuck.” No One tries to pull back, but I keep my hand firmly gripped onto his, needing to understand. Something in the air shifts, like tension that’s breaking free, and despite it mingling with the heavy rain, it’s suffocating as it creeps up to us and squeezes my throat tight. There’s someone running along the path across from us, and they’re heading our way, fast.

“I need to go,” he begs. “Tell Austin I’m sorry. I never meant for this to happen.”

“Then why do it?” No One withers in my grasp.

“Hold him!” They shout. “Don’t let him get away!”

“Because it had to be done to stay alive!” No One sobs. “Please, I beg you, Gabriel.”

“Oh yeah?” I recognize the black-haired guy when he approaches us like a madman, his face in a glorious scowl, his eyes dark as the night. “Wait until I get my hands on you.”

Fear, engraved so deeply inside my system, bubbles back to the surface, and I let go of No One’s hand, needing for him to take cover against a guy who can easily overpower him.

Never again.

No One scoots away into the black night, leaving me alone with an enemy whose gaze is now on mine as he bares his

teeth. I swallow, but can't stop my feet from walking backwards, step by step, until they hit dirt and I crash to the ground.

“You!” Kai grunts at me. “Of course it's you who's letting him get away. That fucker got Connor arrested. Or was it you really?” He looms over me, and I swallow thickly as my mind gets stuck, though I try everything I can to reject those thoughts, to forget they ever happened. “Ever since you got your crazy asses to NY, you've been after us, you sick fucks. And look at you now.” The sole of his boot ghosts right above my chest. “Nothing but the tiniest of insects, ready to be crushed.”

There's a cracking sound of a branch, and it makes him look up. Without a second thought, I crawl my way out, my silk garment twisted around my frozen limbs, my mind exhausted, both from being on the outside, and from my leaking heart that cries salty tears. I have hardly taken three steps, when he catches up with me.

“You crazy son a bitch—” I don't wait for the rest of that phrase, instead bolt away into the darkness. The rough edges of the road carve into the soles of my feet, and I grind my teeth together and breathe through my nose as I try to ignore the sting. “Get back here!” A firm push into my back, and I hit the pavement with a slap and roll into a ball, my legs pulled against my stomach and my arms crossed in front of my chest, heaving. “You still haven't had enough of us? A few corpses here and there, a guy kidnapped, and still you want more? Austin is my cousin, and we are part of the same family. I won't let you sabotage our trade. Won't let you steal what's ours and befriend our enemies.” Kai lunges forward, and I squint my eyes closed, but the blow never comes. Instead I hear him grunt, followed by a string of swear words that makes me open my eyes. My attacker is no longer looming over me but tied in an armlock, his dark stare squinted in rage and anger.

“Focus on the guy who got away and never touch what's mine again, Kai.” It's the only growled warning I'm given,

before he pushes the other guy back and scoops me off the ground and into his firm chest.

“Mason,” I sob, while I breathe him in.

“Did he hurt you? I’ll fucking kill him if he hurt you.”

“No.” I shake my head. “You saved me.” His scent has me crying once more. Thick, wet drops dribble down my cheeks and make my nose run. I need to hide my face in the crook of his neck, because the dam of my leaking heart has broken, and I can’t help from spilling the words while he walks us back. “I was so scared. I haven’t been out here for so long, but I was searching for you. And then you came back and saved me.”

“Gabriel,” he pulls my wet face back and our eyes meet. “I choose you too, baby.” His confession is softly spoken, but I hear it crystal clear, those beautiful words that sound like music to my ears, and like honey to my taste buds. It comes out as the softest of hums, making my embrace around his shoulders tighten, just like the glove around my heart does. I fear that I might explode with happiness. He pushes me back against his neck and keeps on walking for what feels like forever.

“We’re here,” he finally announces. To my surprise, Mason takes us back inside the house, where everyone else has gathered.

“Where’s the gun?” I breathe.

“It’s gone.” Mason mumbles against my neck, then puts my feet back onto the ground. “But we need to talk.”

The reception hall is packed with brothers, wet silk stuck to their tender limbs, though their masks keep their beauty fiery as they stand on our side of the invisible wall. We all look exhausted, and that includes the *others*.

“Brothers, please, go to your rooms. Take a shower, get warmed up. You are safe,” Luca booms as he walks past all of them, gently touching their shoulders as he does so.

“And once they are where they should be, let’s talk,” Gaëtan adds. “Outside in the rain, growling at each other, is not quite our style. Nor are guns.”

“No, you prefer ropes and mind games, don’t you?” Someone bites, only to be cut off with a, “Shut up”.

I still look across from us, to the intruders. Most of them, I don’t recognize, though I don’t miss the way their eyes linger on our connected hands. Mason holds mine firmly, its warmth slowly spreading through my limbs.

The sound of a sniff startles me. Even more so, when I see that it comes from Austin. A ginger-haired woman has her arms put around him, and he sobs freely, a sound so devastatingly sad that it nearly has me reconsider my opinion of him. Our eyes meet only briefly, but it’s enough to see the hurt and defeat that lie in his.

“Look at my brother. *Look* at him,” a man hisses, his eyes on Mason. “And look at *you*. What the fuck happened between you needing some *space* and ending up with the cult that we have been fighting against the last months? I didn’t take you for a traitor, man.”

Mason takes a step forward, taking me with him in the process. “I am no traitor, Aaron.”

“Then what are you...” He nudges my way. “And he is—”

“I am the *Initiator* of *les Frères Perdus*.” I tilt my nose higher in the air. “This is my castle, and you’re not welcome here. I am—” Furious, confused, sad.

“He’s my chosen one,” Mason finishes, then moves my body in front of his and wraps both his arms around my waist. He tugs me closer and his face towers over my head. I can breathe again. “And believe me when I say that I hadn’t exactly planned for this to happen.” He drops a kiss onto my skull.

Aaron narrows his eyes in disbelief. “You don’t understand what these guys have done.” He purses his lips angrily as he shakes his head. “You’ve known Connor since you were eighteen.”

“Where is Connor anyway?” Mason asks.

“Maybe you should ask your little *boyfriend*,” Austin hisses, his red-rimmed eyes flashing with hatred. “Tell me,

what did you do to my lover?” He clenches his fists, but the ginger-haired woman pushes him back into the corner, where he lets out another sob. But he isn’t finished, voice low when he continues, “Connor is on that ship. He was against our newest drugs transport, but we needed a way to get rid of All Saints and that shitty agreement. So he goes and arranges himself a cabin on this cargo ship.” He looks right at me. “He didn’t tell me, my sweetling, my clever guy. I’d never have let him do such a thing. I—”

“Are you suggesting that we turned him in like a bunch of traitors?” Théo spits.

“Our informant just called and told us that the police are talking to Connor. That they’ve received a tip.”

“We are no traitors,” Théo repeats on a hiss.

“I have nothing to do with this, bro.” Mason presses his hands more firmly against my chest to express his anger or to protect me, I don’t know. “I was out there in the NY port with my boys, looking for Charlie, when I was taken -”

“Brought home,” I interrupt weakly, only to press my back tight against Mason at the sight of Aaron’s angry gaze.

“Yes, baby, you brought me home. But that was not how this started off, remember?”

A flash of memory in which I sit on Mason’s hip while riding his cock, teases my mind.

“Cut to the fucking chase, Mason. What are you saying?” Aaron snarls.

“That I was taken hostage, dude, because Logan became desperate for this drugs transport that has visibly gone wrong, and he needed something to negotiate with.”

The meaning of his words cut me right through the gut. “What?” I swirl around, just as Aaron repeats the same question.

“We wouldn’t trade you, man.”

“You know why I wanted you, *mon ange*. Don’t twist the words now. Is that because of that guy, No One?” His green

gaze finds me, and he looks lost when he nibbles on his lower lip, obviously contemplating. And then he shrugs—a simple, yet innocent movement that makes me realize once more why I have fallen so hard for him. *All these colors left to discover, but a simple black and white is precious at times.*

“The fucker that got away,” Kai bristles, as he closes the large door behind him, showering us one last time with stormy raindrops. He’s breathing heavily. “Because of you.”

“Couz, don’t,” Aaron chimes, his eyes still on mine, his forehead scrunched. “I’m surprised though. This guy, who you call No One, was hired by Mia to protect her brother, Charlie. He was hired by the Business.” He turns to face Kai. “What changed? Did All Saints offer him a bigger paycheck?”

Kai shrugs. “Who knows?” Yet there’s something else there, mingled with his scowl. Something that shows me that all his earlier fury and bravado was something more than just revenge. It was personal.

“So if your claim that you have nothing to do with Connor being arrested is truthful, then surely you can help us get him released?”

“Why would we do that?” Luca asks. “You have your own cop on location.”

“I have no jurisdiction here. I told you that when I came at your door. I was here for personal reasons,” Philippe counters.

“But back in Paris, where you have jurisdiction, you are building a case against us?”

Philippe holds up his hands in defeat, but Luca prompts, “Are you, or are you not?”

“In our defense, we have images of hanged corpses. Brothers from *les Frères Perdus*. It’s my job to seek justice for innocent people who are murdered.”

Gaëtan hums. “And you have proof that they have been murdered?”

“Well, it’s not like they pull that rope around their neck by themselves, is it?” Philippe lets out a nervous laugh, that’s

followed by an unpleasant silence.

“So you have no proof.”

“Well—”

“You have no proof,” Aaron clips. Then his eyes find mine. “Get Connor out of this mess, and you may have yourself a deal.”

“Very well.” I lick the gems on my incisors as I scan Philippe, enjoying catching the moment the thoughts click into his mind. He narrows his eyes. “Are you telling me that these people hang themselves?”

Most of the time. I eye Gaëtan, and he nods. My brother will always be protected. “Yes. Listen, we can make a better deal, propose a partnership, but I get to keep Mason.”

My chosen one lets out a dignified huff behind me that I ignore. When it comes to him, I want to be triple sure that no one will ever come back here to take the man I have claimed.

“We can be a solid partner for your drugs transport and kick out the informant All Saints has, making sure that you can take over their position.”

Aaron’s eyes dance from me upwards to Mason. Then he gives him the slightest of nods. “Very well. We could use an ally on this side of the ocean. Prove you are trustworthy by coming with us to the harbor and getting our brother out of this mess.”

“We can do that.”

“Where are we going, *Gabi*?” Theo approaches us on a playful skip, his hand laced through Ezra’s, his light eyes shining with his usual madness. The wet silk doesn’t leave much to the imagination as it clings to his long limbs, and Gaëtan snarls in French, as he commands both of them to go to their room.

“I will tell you later,” I promise when he pouts in disappointment. And I will tell him later, because right now he is back to being my baby brother again.

“Give me five minutes.” Gaëtan gives his boyfriend one last, firm look. “I’ll call my uncle to make sure they keep Connor on location and wait for us to arrive. Get a car ready.”

Austin takes that moment to come walking our way. His eyes are still red, though he has regained some of his arrogance. He listens to Aaron as he talks to him in a hushed tone, and the smile on the girl with the ginger curls is wide by the time he finishes.

“Mason,” she claps her hands cheerfully, “I’m so happy for you. Big misses you, but I bet he can’t wait to hear what happened to you.” She doesn’t falter, but takes a few steps closer and takes us both into a very awkward bearhug. Then, before I can think of anything to say, she spins around and hooks her arm into Kai’s. “Come on, brother, let’s go and find some trouble. By the way, they have gorgeous houses here. I was thinking, perhaps we should invest in properties here?”

“You are hopeless,” he grumbles.

“That runs in the family, bro. I bet you can’t wait to get someone’s ass busted.”

“Vic!” Austin thunders, to which the girl cackles.

“Come on, you” Mason whispers in my ear, causing my body to shiver even further. “Let’s get you somewhere warm”.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

MASON

“My feet sting,” Gabriel mutters, making me smile against his wet hair, and I press him closer to my chest as I make my way through the corridor. It’s still dark outside, the early time of the year causing the sun to not rise until later in the early morning. Walking through the corridors, I take us toward the far end of the house, closest to the cliff, to where the world seems to end, and the journey takes us straight through to Gabriel’s rooms. To Gabriel’s heart. To our hearts.

We make our way inside, and with him still tucked against my chest, I cross the workshop through the connected doors and to his bedroom.

“Let’s get you warmed up first.”

He shivers at the thought, but watches as I turn on the shower, then willingly lets me take off the sticky, silk clothes.

“This feels good,” he sighs, when the first hot jets reach his flushed skin. Not wanting to be away from him other than the bare minimum, I wiggle myself out of my own clothes, then climb into the shower and let him wrap his smaller body against mine.

“I missed you,” he purrs against my chest.

“I’m sorry.” The confession makes my stomach tighten, its significance another step in this chase of love we are apparently both in. “I am so very sorry. He came to the room, offered me a way out. And I—old habits die hard, I guess.” The excuse feels cheap, dishonest.

“No One? He came to your room?”

“Yeah.”

“But he doesn’t work for the Business. He’s the one who got Connor arrested. Why the hell did he want to chase you away from here?”

He wanted to set me free, I think, but don’t speak the words out loud. Besides, he’s got a point. “He felt guilty,” Gabriel continues. “For doing that to Connor. It’s what he told me, right before he fled. He helped me out there, when I was searching for you. He held my hand and guided me back -” He lets out the softest of sobs, and they tug heavily at my heart. “I hadn’t left that fence for years.” He whisper-mumbles. “It was horrible. Chaos, fear, it made me feel all kinds of things I never wanted to feel. But now—” Gabriel looks up to me, droplets hanging in those thick eyelashes, his brown eyes a deep chocolate. “With you, I guess that I’d like to try again. Together. If you want to.”

My fingers cup his cheeks, eyes drink in his charcoal stare. “You’re breathtaking. I still can’t believe that you want me.”

His lips curl into the tiniest of smiles. “I will gladly remind you of that every single moment of the day. I want you to build your carpentry here, to design your way through life. I want to show you my fashion creations, share the brotherhood with you. I want to be an ally to the Business, if that’s what you want. Bring your grandfather over, if that’s what you need.” Our mouths meet halfway, brushing against each other in a tentative kiss, wetted by the hot jets, making them slick as I nibble at his plush bottom lip while sucking on it at the same time. His tongue darts out, teasing me as I do so, and I let out a growl when I squeeze him closer.

“You’ve bewitched me.” When I slide down onto my knees, I hear Gabriel’s breath as it catches. His smoldering eyes are on mine, and I make sure to look right back as I suck him, enjoying how his back thumps against the tiles. His eyes roll, and his mouth is open as he pants.

“I’m already so close, oh....” Snatching the bottle of lube that’s standing next to the shower gel, I open the cap and spurt

a generous amount onto my fingers. And then I slide between Gabriel's legs, and snake two fingers between his cheeks to press them inside him. One by one, taking my time, and he stutters at the intrusion, followed by a filthy moan. "Fuck..."

Humming around him, I double my efforts until he bucks his hips, forcing himself deeper with each motion, too far gone to worry whether I struggle or not. I'm not, reveling in this fully uncensored version of Gabriel as he lets himself go. "That's it, I'm gonna—" Gabriel lets out a moan as he explodes, and I drink him in, swallowing around him until he pushes me off.

"I need to be inside you." That's the only warning I give, before lifting him up against the tiles. Turning the shower head mostly into his direction, I make sure that he's kept warm and wet while he feels my weeping cock that's begging to come in and play. Gabriel licks his lips in anticipation, eyes wide and pupil-blown. "Do you want me to make love to you, baby?" He gives me a shaky nod, then slides a hand into my hair, tugging at the wet, longish tips.

"Tell me how much you want it."

"Need it, *mon ange*. Need you."

Not wanting to keep both of us in desperation any longer, I align my cock in perfect harmony to the crease between his cheeks, then press forward, ever so slightly, reveling in the feeling of him opening up for me. We both pant from the rippling sensation, and I can't help the breathy chuckle that escapes my throat, once I'm fully inside him. It just feels so damn good.

"This is everything," Gabriel whispers, describing my thoughts perfectly in just three words. And then he reaches his hand below me, cupping my balls. "They're so heavy, so tense. Are you going to explode for me?" I can't help the guttural moan that escapes from my throat at the sound of his smooth voice. His taunt. It sounds like fucking music to my ears, and I continue thrusting, becoming sloppy as I do, as my balls draw up tighter by the seconds. "I think you are." He lets out a low chuckle, while his long fingers with those perfectly

black polished nails keep on toying with my balls, as if it's not me who's fucking him, but him who's in charge. But then again, he has been from the very start, hasn't he?

“Fuck, baby, I love it when you're bossy.” I rasp hoarsely, and then I let out another string of thrusts. “Keep on telling me how you want it, love, come on.”

His touch is gentle, yet firm, and so persistent that I let out a desperate howl. The warm droplets of the shower are practically burning my skin, and my muscles are straining from the effort. And then a slender digit teases my taint, as it rubs around it in slow circles, not quite breeching the muscle, but teasing nevertheless. “Show me, *mon ange*, show me how hot you are for me. Show me.”

And I do. My balls empty on a loud growl, muscles tensing, and I swear that I see fucking stars when my orgasm rides through me, wild and uncontrolled. The sensation is fueled by Gabriel's giggle, sensual like lace, smooth like chocolate, and my heart opens to this man, this damaged man, who's created this golden cage around him, then opened the door to let me in. To let me live in it together with him. We hold each other tight, breathing each other in, while our bodies and minds connect, swirl around each other like vines from the root, until they're solidly wrapped around each other.

Like silk.

We dry off, then get dressed in our usual clothing, while the first rays of sunshine break through the glass. Once we're fully clothed, I nudge toward the door. “Let's get down to the harbor. I need to see my brothers.”

“Mason, I can't—“

“But what if you can?” Gabriel opens then closes his mouth, while his eyes dart frantically around.

“It's too soon.”

“What if I tell you that you won't have to leave the car? That I will keep you protected at all times? I need to go and see my brothers, but I don't want to leave you alone. I need you by my side, even if you stay inside.”

Gabriel stays silent for a few seconds, the only audible sound is him suckling on the strawberry-flavored pendulum, seeking comfort. It's cracks like these that make my heart weep for him, for they show me the frightened and fragile teenager he was. Still is, in a way, for we all carry our past with us. Mostly safely hidden, until it seeps through and exposes ourselves to who we once were.

"Can I take my blanket with me?" He finally asks, followed by a sheepish smile. "I'm still kind of tired."

"Sure you can."



GASPARD IS glad to "be of service", though his motivations are more than morally gray as I watch him swing his imaginary tail at the sight of Luca, when we get to the harbor. He parks the car next to a black Audi, in which I recognize Aaron's driver, D. as he sits behind the wheel, patiently waiting to leave once more. He looks up when I tap against his window, and he drops it down at the sight of my face. "Hey man, how's it all going?"

D. tilts his head to the side. "They're still in there. Have been for the past half an hour."

"Let me go and check." I walk back to the car, where Gabriel's curled up onto one of the seats, a fluffy blanket around him, his eyes closed. His blond hair is whipped to the side, casually sleeked over his ear, exposing his chiseled jaw and the fine jewelry. His full lips leave small, regular puffs of air, and I'm relieved that he has fallen asleep. I scribble a note for him, in which I say that I'll be right back, then gesture to Gaspard. "Make sure that the doors are locked from the outside, and that the heater is left on. Check on him every five minutes."

Connor Donnelly is sitting at a desk with his computer in front of him, and a mug of steaming coffee in his hand that makes his glasses fog up. He doesn't seem to mind that much, since his gaze is far away, looking somewhere across from him

against the opposite wall. When I walk into the cramped office, he turns to me, a crooked smile sliding onto his lips. “Mason.” He stands, but gets told off immediately by Austin, who sits next to him, a furious scowl on his handsome face. “Sweetling, don’t. He’s become one of those who hurt you.”

Connor swats the hand away from his thigh. “It’s nothing that I can’t handle, and you know it.” Austin grinds his jaw, eyes flashing but doesn’t reply. Instead he snarls at me, which I purposefully ignore, as I grab my boss by the shoulder and take him in for a quick hug.

“How are you doing?”

“I could ask you the same.” Connor smiles, and his hazelnut eyes dance with amusement. “We genuinely thought that you’d gone on some yoga retreat. I must say that I was more than suspicious when I got your text saying that you were off to see your French friends -” he air quotes, his grin blooming into something wicked, “Then Austin tells me about your kidnapping. Or should I say, kidnapper?”

“Batshit crazy,” Austin mumbles from behind.

“That, they are,” Connor agrees, his eyes still on mine. “Murderers too, for that matter. A snake pit. That’s what Philippe called it.” He’s about to say something else, but then the door opens, and Gaëtan, Luca, Aaron, Kai and Vic walk in.

“You’re free to go, Connor,” Gaëtan announces. “The misunderstanding has been clarified. A man named Petit picked up your container, and the truck will be heading to a distribution park about an hour’s drive inland from here. I suggest you take your car and follow him. From there, you can take the contents with you.”

“Thank you very much.” Connor stands, and both men shake hands. While Vic takes her phone to inform the guys back home, Austin wraps a firm arm around Connor and pulls him closer.

“What’s your price?”

“We already told you,” Luca replies, his eyes on mine. “We want him.”

“Mason.” Aaron takes a step forward. “Are you sure?”

“Do you believe them, when they say that they want to be our ally?” Connor asks, his framed eyes search mine thoroughly. I nod. His voice turns softer. “Does he make you happy?”

I roll my lips at the sincere question. Connor has always been the good guy, and I regretted on multiple occasions that it was him who left for Paris and not his brother, Logan. The big boss and an even bigger ass. “He does. But I mean, you need me, Pops needs me, I can’t just go.” Right?

“It’s your life Mason. You have the right to decide. You follow your heart. As for us, we could use a guy on this side of the Ocean. A guy we can trust. You.” His words make me exhale on a relief that comes all the way from the tip of my toes, and lifts the heavy weight my chest had to carry for the past few days.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m taking you home, sweetling,” Austin urges, “You need your rest.”

“What about the rat that got away?” Kai grumbles. “Are we just gonna let him run and report back to that filthy scum?”

“He’s the key to All Saints,” I agree, to which he lets out, “Fuck, yeah.”

“If we wipe out All Saints, get them to leave our turf at the airport, we’ll own the drugs transport between NY and Brest, and you get to keep the good network you have going on with the other gangs. It will solidify our alliance and restore the reputation of the Lost Brothers. If you trust me, you will also trust that they earn that reputation.”

Connor finds my gaze and gives me a nod. “Logan will be more than pleased to regain his firm grip on this transport, and from here we’ll be able to set up a distribution network. I don’t want to work on this full-time, since we have plans to open a gallery as well.” He eyes Austin. “Right?”

“Right, sweetling,” Austin’s dark eyes are on mine. “Then let’s take what’s ours. Together.”

“Excuse me, Mason?” Gaspard clears his throat timidly. When everyone looks at him, he gives a little wave of his hand. “It’s just that Gabriel woke up.”

“I’m coming.” My eyes find Connor’s. “Together.”

Our goodbye is short and will be temporary. I then jog back to the car, frantic to be there before Gabriel can be afraid. I am. Because Gabriel’s just waking up, his eyes blinking in confusion when they catch my stare. And then he smiles.

“I thought you had gone away.” His voice is soft, laced with fatigue, and *that* accent.

“I was. And then I came back to you.” I take the blanket and pull it over us both. “We’re on a mission that might even involve a trip to the other side of the ocean.”

“Oh yeah?” He blinks his large, dark eyes.

“Oh, yeah. And I think you’re gonna love it.”

“Why’s that?” Gabriel’s lips curl into a dirty smirk.

“Because it will involve a healthy dose of treachery, violence, and an unhealthy dose of sexy stuff.”

His smaller hands wrap around my waist as his side melts into mine. “Hm, sexy stuff? Us?”

“Always. But some others will also get their fill. We’re generous people, aren’t we?” My lips kiss their way from his cheek toward his lips that await me, warm and inviting.

“We’re very, very generous people. Let me show you just how much.”

EPILOGUE

“Tell me again why we’re doing this?” Gabriel stamps behind me, his feet hidden in cream-colored slippers, his silk robe exchanged for our usual pants and shirt. His large, brown eyes scowl at me, but once they catch sight of the huge hot air-balloon behind me, they grow wary. “I thought you were joking,” he adds on a mumble.

“We’re doing this because we’re going on a trip to NY baby, and I need you to be ready to leave your golden cage.”

He snorts, but after a few long seconds, he takes my outstretched hand. I help him inside the wicker basket. “Were you going there in this thing?”

“Well, I was counting on taking a plane, but even so I can’t hide you in a rental car forever can I? There will come a time where you’ll need to come out and face the world.” We both look up to where the two gas jets fueled cylinders are already sending hot air into the balloon. Five brothers have helped me to set up this little surprise for Gabriel since today we are officially celebrating our eight week anniversary, if that is an official thing. Eight weeks from the moment I woke up in a car, tied up and terrified. He still occasionally ties me up, but it no longer terrifies me.

Pops has decided to stay in NY, claims that he’s too old to move. I can’t blame him, though I can’t wait to see him.

“So when is this wedding?” Gabriel asks while gazing carefully over the edge as he sucks in his lower lip. He wobbles lightly on his feet as he looks up.

“In two weeks. But Austin and Connor have asked us to come a little earlier, since they’ve been working on All Saints.”

“So fireworks, hey?”

“I should hope so. If not, Theo will never join us on a trip again.” I turn my face to the side and catch his sly grin. “We’ll show them who’s the king, and it ain’t them.” Taking his chin between my fingers, our eyes collide. “My beautiful baby.” The words set my soul ablaze, and he must feel it too, because he blinks, his dark eyes shining with something that’s somewhere between adoration and craze. And I fucking love him for that.

“Can you feel that?” He asks, his voice going up in the end. It makes me let out a chuckle.

“I can.”

“We’re flying.”

“Soon you’ll see my world,” I whisper. “All the pretty, and all the ugly.” He looks down to where our garden is now stretching below us, the flowers waving in the early sunrays of spring. His fingers wrap around mine, squeezing.

“I haven’t seen the world out there for so long. I forgot what it’s like.” His voice catches, and then we both stare at the ocean, its quiet waves rippling beneath the morning light. “It’s so beautiful.”

“The world is a beautiful place.” I turn to face him. “And you can decide who you share it with. That’s freedom.”

“Will you share it with me?” He wraps his arms around me, pressing tightly into my chest.

“Always.” I drop a kiss onto the crown of his head, and he looks up, his smoldering gaze naked with reverence. It makes me feel humble that this man, this amazingly handsome, elegant, artistic man, shares my feelings. “Are you ready to come with me to NY? To finish off All Saints and celebrate Connor and Austin’s wedding?”

He smiles. “As long as you’re coming home with me.”

“Hm,” I pout my lips on a question. “Is home the place where I can have my carpentry studio and redesign our wardrobes?”

His mouth twitches. “Yes.”

“And is home the place where I will always have my bed warmed by this unraveled enigma that is you?”

He smiles now, flashing his diamonds. “Yes.”

“Then in that case, yes, I’ll always come home with you.”



THE END. For now...

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you

Louise Maguire, I would not know what to do without you. You somehow seem to bear with me and my stress, and the ever-returning details that need to be changed. Thank you for all your time, for our chats, our cups of coffee and glasses of wine. Thanks for all the laughter, and all the tears. Thanks for always being there for me.

Flora Conroy, thank you for believing me in moments I seriously doubt myself.

Thank you to all these amazing authors and bloggers I have met over the past few months. You cheer me on when the path is invisible, and fill my days with laughter and inspiration: Jen Samson, Anja Elena, Garry Michael, Matthew Dante, Riley, Ashley James, T.Ashleigh.

Thank you to my amazing street team and ARC readers: for loving my books and promoting my stuff.

And thank you J., mon amour, for your patience.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nothing with Lola Malone is what it seems. Although it's true that she loves writing romantic suspense and good wine, when you read her books, don't be fooled... her men are naughty and hot, shy and determined, and her plots twist and turn. But just when you think you've seen it all? You haven't. Lola creates stories in a unique world that's filled with culture, art, fashion and gorgeous men.

Below are my socials. I love to connect with readers! Join my FB readers group, my IG, or just drop me a message.



ALSO BY LOLA MALONE

Shameless (The Undeniable, book 1)

Fierce (The Undeniable, book 2)