

POSSESS ME

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A DARK MAFIA ROMANCE

MASTERS OF CORSICA

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SYNOPSIS

Lyam Gerard is my mortal enemy....

And the father of my unborn baby.

I should have known he was a monster when I betrayed him.

I should have realized that in the ruthless world of the mafia, my actions would be met with punishment.

But I fell for the wounded bad boy who knew just what I craved.

Now, I am his possession, and he's determined to make me pay for my sins...

On my knees.

Bent over his desk.

Tied to his bed.

I shouldn't want this—shouldn't want him—yet part of me yearns to submit to his dark, depraved demands.

But in Lyam's world, loyalty is everything. And when he uncovers the truth I've been hiding all along, I know that will be the end of us...

Because it will be the end of me...

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ONE

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Liam

BOOM.

A thrill goes through me when I pull the trigger. *Always.*

If I believed in superpowers, I'd know what mine is: I hit with the first shot.

Fuck flying or seeing through walls. Give me a cold, hard weapon, ammunition, and a target.

Sometimes I feel like my body's connected to my gun, as if it's a part of my actual being. An extension of my person. When I feel the weight of a gun in my hand, my body and mind fuse. Laser-focused.

You don't know how heavy a body is until you watch it collapse. You don't know how red blood is until you see it spill. You don't know the power you wield until you look into the eyes of another person whose life you're about to end.

Boom.

There's something almost divine about watching your bullet hit the target. There's nothing methodical or rote about it. Pulling the trigger and hitting a target makes me feel godlike. I have the power, right in the palm of my hand, to end life.

I've got a variety of places I like to go for target practice but today, I wanted to shatter glass. So I came to one of my favorite spots in Paris: a private, remote field on the edge of the city my family's bought for this purpose. When it's cold or snowing, I practice inside, but this, *this* is my favorite—a brick wall where I line up glass bottles. My friends who know my favorite hobby save empty bottles and give them to me by the bucket.

I love watching the glass explode. I love the *boom* of gunshots. The sharp crack of shattering glass, followed by a rainstorm of tiny, brilliant, sparkling shards.

I pull the trigger again and the cobalt blue bottle on the far right disintegrates.

“Jesus.”

My bodyguard, Philippe, shakes his head. “How far away is that target?”

I squint at it and shrug. “A hundred meters.”

“*Mon Dieu.*”

Some shooters routinely shoot fifty yards, but hunters and sharpshooters can easily hit targets at further distances, depending on the weapon. I like to practice long range. I don't always have my target bound, on their knees in front of me, served up on a silver platter.

I aim for the next blue bottle and smile at the memory of Thayer handing me a case of empties after his honeymoon, when my phone rings.

God, I fucking hate technology. Obtrusive and obnoxious, a man can't even take a piss in private without some kind of goddamn interference.

Speak of the devil. It's Thayer.

“Yeah?”

“She's ready for you.”

A different kind of thrill runs through me.

There was a time when I would have moved heaven and earth to be alone with Cosette, but she ruined that. What we had is gone, and in its place, I have another laser-focused target.

She's earned the ultimate penalty for betraying my family: execution.

But Cosette is too beautiful for death. Her betrayal too deep to end things so quickly.

My brothers agreed to allow her to live, but she'll suffer the consequences. Namely, she'll answer to me.

My job is to keep her in my custody. Punish her for betraying my family.

I stand and slide my gun, the metal still hot to the touch, into a holster at my waist. I don't go anywhere without a weapon,

which has made for some strategic planning.

I roll my neck and stretch my shoulders.

My plane is ready for me. Cosette's been kept prisoner at Le Luxe, the private sex club owned by my brother Thayer. But I've already made my decision.

I won't keep her there. What kind of a punishment would it be for her to be in a place familiar to her, where she has friends and acquaintances and the potential to escape?

I'll bring her back to Paris.

Here, I can make sure that she'll never betray us again. Here, I can keep a closer eye on her.

And here, I'm closest to the people I need to ultimately destroy.

"Hey, man." Philippe grins at me and shows me a bag of tiny glass bottles. He mouths, "You want a drink on the plane?"

I grin back and move my mouth away from the mouthpiece. "You fucking know it."

Thayer doesn't need to know. My older brother's the most serious asshole I know, and he'd kick Philippe's ass for drinking on the job. He'd roll his eyes at me and talk about the loss of control, the need for precision and focus, but I don't fucking care. Sometimes, it takes the edge off.

I grab one and slide it into my pocket. I'll drink it on the plane.

"For one goddamn time I wish you'd take a ride," Thayer says. "Do you have any idea how much easier that would be for us?"

I clench my jaw. "No."

I drive my own cars and I like it that way.

"For Christ's sake, Lyam. You should really consider trusting the people we hire. You know we vet the fuck out of them."

"No."

Why does he have to harp on this?

He blows out an angry breath on the other end of the line.

“Lyam, you should reconsider.”

“Why?” I ask, as I slide into the driver’s seat and start the engine. “You know I like to be the one behind the fucking wheel.”

He curses. “Because people know you’re someone important. They respect you. Because if anything happened, you could shoot instead of having to navigate a fucking car.”

I shake my head. “I don’t need a driver to get respect.” Being a trained assassin who hits on the first shot will do that just fine. And if that fails to work, I have other methods. “And I can handle myself.”

I transfer the call to the car speakers.

He drops the subject. “Fine, suit yourself.”

“I will. After I park, one of my men will take the car back.” I take a left turn as Thayer pauses. “What?”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

Thayer sounds apologetic, my first warning sign. It’s out of character for him. “I was going to tell you about that—”

My voice is low and controlled when I respond. “Tell me about *what?*”

Up ahead I see a flash of black. I narrow my eyes at the signature uniform of the *gendarmérie* and slow down to get a better look.

Two of them, unfamiliar to me. One, a man who has a tattoo on his lower right arm, forbidden until recently. The other, a woman with short black hair.

I draw in a breath and let it go.

I don’t know them. They’re not my targets.

They weren’t there.

In my mind’s eye I see a flash of rope, hear the clink of chains and the insidious laughter of uniformed men. It takes me a minute to realize that Thayer is still talking.

“...and I thought it better that she be brought here instead.”

“Who brought her?”

He pauses before he snaps, “Did you hear a fucking word I said?”

“Of course I did,” I lie, as I turn down the main road that takes me to my family home in Paris, the same road that leads to the airport.

“I said, I had Claude bring her back.”

“How?” I snap.

“How? What the fuck are you talking about?”

Beside me, Philippe stiffens. My voice is low and unamused when I ask, “Did he touch her?”

“Of course he didn’t touch her. He knows better than to take advantage of her. Lyam, who do you think we hired?”

“No,” I say, my jaw clenched. “I meant did he put a hand on her in any way, shape, or form? Did he hold her arm? Grab her if she stumbled?” My hand begins to ache, and I realize I’m holding the phone too tight. “She’s mine, Thayer. We agreed. I don’t want anyone else to even look at her.”

I can hear Thayer swallowing on the other end of the line. “Fuck. I don’t know the answer to that. I’m sorry, Lyam. I should’ve sent you.”

Philippe squirms on his seat. I ignore him.

Thayer continues, “Fabien said that you wanted her in Paris, so he had her sent to Paris. He thought it would be the most expedient.”

“Expedient my ass.” I grit my teeth. “I’m the one that makes sure she never betrays our family again. I’m the one that makes sure she understands the severity of what she did. Me. No one else. Fucking *me*.”

“I got you, brother. I get it. Why do you think we let her go? If it were anyone else...”

I know. Woman or no, she'd have died a slow and painful death.

I draw in a breath and let it out slowly.

"I'm almost there."

"Lyam, don't kill him," Thayer says. "Send him back here and I'll make sure you never see him again. He's good people."

I nod. "I'll find out how the trip went, and I won't do anything without talking to you first."

Thayer curses. "Alright. Okay, I got it. Listen, Savannah and I will be back soon, but I have a few things to tie up here at the club first. Keep an eye on Maman?"

"Of course." I have my own residence in Paris, but my mother's only about thirty minutes away. "When do they land?"

"Fabien arranged for a car to bring her to you."

I grit my teeth and take a deep breath so I can fabricate patience.

It doesn't work.

"When. Do. They. Land?"

"Ten minutes."

I hang up the phone before I curse him out.

It's unlike my brothers to keep me in the dark like this. I know the only reason they did was because they had to choose a more expedient route, but I don't like not knowing when the playing field changes.

Philippe clears his throat. "Sir, I know Claude. He wouldn't touch her. He would know better."

Maybe so but I don't like the idea. I am still here only because I'm waiting for one of our private jets to return, or I'd already be in Corsica.

When I don't respond, Philippe looks out a window. "There's talk about us publicly today. Did you hear it?"

"Excuse me?"

“Did you hear Montague’s recent declaration? Party line? Fabien and Thayer said they’re not afraid of him, but...”

“We’re not afraid of anybody,” I correct, but it’s only so he doesn’t hear the real concern in my voice. “When did he speak?”

“Last night,” he explains. “It was on the news. I saw a clip online.”

“Pull it up.”

François Montague looms on the screen, larger than life.

Red-hot hatred pulses through my veins. I turn away, grip the steering wheel, and focus in front of me when something scratches at my memory.

I know that location...

“Where is he?”

“I’m not sure.”

It’s familiar....

“Louvre and Tuileries?”

The Louvre and Tuileries district of Paris brushes the Seine in the south, with the neighborhoods known as Bourse and Grands Boulevards to the north. Ah. He’s in front of the green trees that border the Tuileries Garden.

My home’s only a few blocks away.

Even in my peripheral vision I can see his jowls sag as he talks. I despise the pompous bastard. He’s arrogant and incompetent, but what I despise most of all is how he pretends to care about the citizens when all he cares about is his own pocket.

At least I don’t pretend to be anyone but who I am.

He continues in his despicable, oily voice. “As the citizens of Paris have shown great concern regarding the infiltration of organized crime into our historic and precious city, the focus of my campaign for reelection focuses primarily on bringing them down. My promise to you, the people of Paris, is to take

them into custody and eradicate their influence and presence. We will bring safety and honesty back to our historic landmark of a city.”

“Oh for the love of God,” I say with disdain. “Of all the fucking platforms to run on. What a fucking asshole.”

Philippe snorts. “The irony of it is that the political parties are more corrupt than you are.”

“You’ve got that fucking right.”

The camera pans to the left as I cruise to a stop at a traffic light. The sun has begun its descent, the sky darkening.

I blink and stare at the man on the screen. He’s personally familiar to me. Have I met him before? Why can’t I place him? I know in my gut I haven’t just seen him on the screen but in person. Where? Why does my skin crawl? Something about him makes me check my gun to make sure it’s loaded.

Other people check to see if they shut off the stove or locked the door.

I check to make sure I have enough ammo.

Normally, I wouldn’t give two shits about a politician running his mouth about organized crime. The only ones they ever catch are the ones that are too dumb to hide their actions or too arrogant to try. The new ones. The more established groups like us don’t fear the police force because we’re smart enough to have half of their goddamn force on our payroll.

This time, though... this time, something doesn’t feel quite right.

The light turns green, and I drive toward the airport.

“They’re waiting, sir.”

I exit the car, thankful dusk has fallen so I can stand in the shadows and observe them. I stroke my gun lovingly and wish Princess was with me.

I like my toys and my pets.

The door to the plane opens.

And then I see her.

Cosette.

Tall and slender and as delicate as a porcelain doll.

I thought I loved her once.

I know now that I was dumb and foolish and there's no such thing as romantic love, and definitely not with someone like Cosette.

Seems she has a similar memory, because when she sees me, she narrows her eyes and juts her chin out as if to defy me before I even command her.

Claude, on the other hand, does *not* see me.

I watch as he doesn't just touch her but fucking *manhandles* her off the plane.

"Let go," she seethes. "Don't touch me like that."

She fights and resists him, then for a few seconds I don't see anything but a haze of red.

"Oh, fuck," Philippe curses beside me as I step into the light.

Claude sees me.

I walk faster. I'm only paces away now.

In seconds, his eyes go wide in terror, and he does the only thing worse than touching my woman—he pushes her away from him.

With her wrists restrained, she can't brace her fall. I lunge forward and catch her, just in time.

I don't bother to ask if she's alright. I don't bother to check on her. I plunk her down on the tarmac and cock my gun because Claude just fucking ran.

When I shoot to kill, I don't miss.

I'm not trying to kill him.

Yet.

I made my brother a promise.

I shoot and hit the back of his kneecap with the first shot. He falls, screaming, and grabs at his knee. Brilliant red blood stains the ground around him. I shoot his second knee just to fucking hurt him.

When I reach him, I grab him off the ground and lift him to his feet. He screams like an animal caught in a trap.

“Lyam,” Cosette shouts. “He didn’t hurt me, Lyam. I promise he didn’t.”

She’s a sensitive soul who can’t stand the sight of violence or blood. Of course she’s trying to save his ass.

I click my teeth together and breathe through my nose before I respond.

“I didn’t ask if he hurt you. He’s smart enough to know that if he hurt you, he’d wish for death before I killed him.”

“Sir, I was only doing what your brother said. I was only—”

“Laying your disgusting hands on *my* hostage? And then after you fucking wet your pants when you saw me, let her go so she nearly fell? Do you have any goddamn sense in your head?”

I don’t know why her pleas sway me. I won’t kill him, not in front of her.

I lift my gun and snap the butt against his temple. He cries out in pain as I strike him again. “You touched her. You put your hands on her.” I hit him again. I want him to hurt. “Then when you saw me, you only wanted to save your ass. She could’ve broken her arms or cracked her head.” I hit him again. “No one gets close to her but me. If you so much as breathe the same air she breathes again, there will be consequences.”

I hit him again and again until he’s bloodied and cowering, begging for mercy. “You know who I am. You know I won’t tell you again. If you ever come near her again, I won’t be so nice.”

I lift him and throw him toward Philippe. “Take him back to Corsica.”

Philippe blanches. “He might need a medic—”

“He can wait on the plane. Back to Corsica, *now*.”

I turn my back to them and reach for Cosette.

“And you”— I take her hand and yank her to her feet— “will come with me.”



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TWO

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Cosette

“THERE’S BLOOD ON YOUR SHIRT.”

He glances down before looking back at the road in front of him. “Why, so there is. Must be Claude’s.”

He doesn’t care at all that he’s splattered in another man’s blood.

Figures.

I shudder and turn away to look out the window, rubbing my wrists now that he’s taken off my restraints. I stare outside the window.

When I boarded the plane, I didn’t know where they were taking me or who they were pairing me with. I felt my heart sink when I saw the familiar city skyline of Paris.

I wish I could love Paris like others do. But it’s a city for lovers, something I’ll never be. It’s also a place that haunts me, one I’d like to forget.

But I forgot my dislike for Paris when I saw who they stationed as my captor.

Lyam.

Why Lyam?

There was a time when he turned my head with those fiery, hazel eyes and that stern, utterly masculine face that stops women’s hearts. The black ink that marks his body with the memories of what he’s survived, who he is, what has meaning in his life. They say French men make the most passionate lovers, and I think a part of me wondered if I’d find love here.

I know better now.

I watch him surreptitiously as he drives the car with the command and authority of an expert. His large, muscled body, honed from hours upon hours of hard work at the gym, moves with fluid grace as he navigates the busy streets, teeming with curious tourists. I watch as he thoughtfully brushes a thumb

along his lower lip, his eyes narrowed on the road in front of us.

Someone with an untrained eye might think he's a fitness model, a personal trainer, or even a professional athlete on holiday. Dressed casually in expensive but simple clothing, he's the very picture of health and vitality. Sculpted and rugged, it still makes my heart turn over in my chest when he moves, his muscles rippling with grace.

Perfection.

And why is it so beautiful here? Paris at dusk, silhouetted in velvety blue, is stunning.

I sit in the passenger seat of the car he drives—a gorgeous, armored Ferrari he had custom designed, no doubt with help from their friends the Rossis in America. Everyone in Europe knows about Mario Rossi's affinity for stunning, insanely expensive cars.

I remember when he talked with Mario. I remember when he told me all about the car, in vivid detail, his eyes shining and proud, almost boyish. Unlike how he is these days.

He used to be a lot more carefree. But that was back when we liked each other. Maybe even loved each other.

I miss that Lyam.

I shut my eyes because hot tears blind my vision and I'd rather die than let him see me cry and know he won. I take in a deep breath and get my shit together, then let it out slowly as I gaze out at elegant buildings and glowing streetlamps.

“Funny how life works,” he says, almost thoughtfully. “I always wanted to show you my place in Paris. And now here we are.”

I exhale a shaky breath. If he only knew the half of it.

“Here we are.”

I expect him to go on about rules and expectations and how he hates me. I expect him to tell me I'm his prisoner, under his command, and blah blah blah. Maybe smack his chest like the

animal he is and growl his ownership of me, or whatever it is he's told himself he deserves because of what I did.

If only he knew...

A part of me hopes he *does* punish me.

I never meant to betray the Gerard family. They're the only family I have. I hate the guilt that weighs me down, the knowledge that I hurt people who cared for me. I hate the pain of their rejection.

I swipe discreetly at my tears that *will* fall as I continue to stare out at the night through watery eyes, trying to ignore him. I'm not so much interested in what's out the window so much as I'm trying to make sure I don't look at *him*.

If I do, I might love him again.

I can *feel* him, though. Beside me. And there's nothing he could ever do that would make me forget.

The nights of passion. The late-night hookups. Our rendezvous at Le Luxe. The hours we spent confiding in one another, sharing our hopes and dreams and regrets. The midnight sex and passion a girl could only ever dream of.

It's how I got into this predicament to begin with.

Someone knew, though. Someone saw. And someone used my love for him against us.

I flinch when he speaks, his voice as harsh as a slap. "Why did you do it?"

I look at him in surprise at first, wondering if he's asking why I fell in love with him.

But no. Of course that isn't it. He may be many things, but he isn't a mind reader.

He wants to know why I chose to betray him and his family.

I snort, trying to feign disdain. "Maybe they paid me. Maybe I needed the money."

I've always been a terrible liar.

He snorts. "Liar."

And he's always been able to suss me out.

That's honestly what I'm afraid of.

I look back out the window and try to put up a wall between us. I can't, though. I can feel the tension between us, and I know it isn't just the knowledge of what I did. It runs so much deeper than that.

I gasp out loud when I feel his hand on my knee.

"Skittish."

I don't reply.

He continues, "We have a lot to address."

Oh yes, we do.

"And we're going to start with honesty, Cosette."

I wonder if it's only hopeful thinking that his voice is a little softer this time. To anyone looking in from the outside, Lyam's the life of the party, full of jokes and laughter and humor. He could tell you the best restaurant to go to in any major city, the best nightclub, the most luxurious hotel. Women fawn over him at Le Luxe like he's an ancient deity incarnate, a god descended from Mount Olympus who's graced us mere mortals with his presence.

No one knows the way he broods when he's alone.

Even his brothers don't know about the scars on his back or why he never sleeps.

But I do.

"What do you want me to tell you?" I ask, my voice husky with emotion because I know before he answers that I can't tell him the truth. None of it. Not why I made the decision to betray them. Not how I really feel.

And most definitely not who I really am.

"You heard me. Why did you do it?"

"I told you that night," I say, grateful he's focused on the road because I don't want to look in his eyes. "They threatened to hurt you."

The fingers on my knee tighten.

“And we both know that was a lie. My brothers buy it, but I don’t.”

Is that why he’s the one who spared my life?

How can he see through me like that? *How?* My God, sometimes I wonder if the man is superhuman.

His phone rings. Cursing, he glances at the screen and stabs it with his finger. Thayer’s voice comes over the car speakers.

“You got her.”

“Yeah.”

There’s a pause, before Thayer clears his throat.

“And Claude?”

Lyam’s jaw tightens before he responds. “Is on his way back to Corsica.”

“Alive?”

“Yeah, fucking alive. He’ll need a medic, but I told you I wouldn’t kill him on a whim.”

Now who’s the one lying? Lyam would absolutely kill someone on a whim if he thought he had to.

I’m under no delusion that his brutal attack had anything to do with caring about me. No, definitely not. I know for a fact that it was only because Claude touched Lyam’s property. *I* have nothing to do with it.

“Something else you need?” Lyam asks his brother while he makes a turn. I’d bet good money we are heading toward the Louvre.

I learned the layout of Paris years ago and have it committed to memory. I walk the streets in my dreams sometimes.

“Just wanted to tell you I’ll be in Paris next week. Savannah’s decided she wants her prenatal care here instead of Corsica. She said —”

He keeps talking but I don’t hear a word because of the pounding of blood rushing in my ears. My cheeks feel hot and

my chest, heavy. My skin prickles with awareness and fear.

My mind completely short-circuited at *prenatal care*.

Savannah's pregnant? Oh my God.

Savannah's pregnant and I betrayed her.

She could have died because of me.

I was the one that handed her over. I was the one that let their enemies in. If she'd died, her blood would've been on *my hands*.

Pregnant.

It doesn't matter that I had no choice. It doesn't matter that I did what I thought I had to.

"What the hell is going on with you?" Lyam asks me. I swipe at my cheeks, angry that I've always cried easily. I try not to, but it seems the harder I try, the harder I cry.

I didn't even realize they'd disconnected the call.

I shake my head. I don't want to talk.

"Did he fucking hurt you?" Lyam snaps, as he yanks the steering wheel, pulls over to the side of the road, and slams on the brake. "If that fucking asshole hurt you, you'll fucking tell me."

I shake my head. I know he's talking about Claude, and I know that if I told him Claude hurt me, he'd destroy him.

"He didn't hurt me. It's nothing. I'm cold and tired." I put ice into my voice to cover up the trembling and turn to face him. He doesn't deserve my honesty and vulnerability. He had that once, and that was enough. "That's all. Now take me back to wherever you're taking me and do whatever you're going to do to me already."

Lyam grabs my chin, his eyes blazing into mine. Even when he's furious with me, my body can't forget what it's like when he touches me. My skin feels warm and tingly, and my heart beats too fast.

“You think you’ll get away with stonewalling me? You think I won’t find out?”

I stare at him, unblinking. I refuse to cave. I refuse to let him have any control over me.

I know he’ll find out. I know he’ll find out everything eventually. I just need this to be on my terms, not his, and I have my reasons.

“Do you have any idea where we’re going?” he asks, his lips curving in a sardonic smile.

I know we’re not in Corsica anymore, obviously, so my fear that I’d be kept in one of the cages at Le Luxe was unfounded.

Not that he doesn’t have whatever else he needs at his disposal, wherever the hell he is.

I shake my head, glaring at him.

I can’t believe I ever thought I loved this asshole.

“Oh, I have no idea. I suppose you’re taking me deep into your lair, where no one else will ever find us.” I pretend to shiver. “A top-secret underground bunker? Oooh, maybe an abandoned warehouse with cement floors and scary rope suspension systems. No, no, I know! *A hidden cave behind a waterfall!*”

“You know what they say about sarcasm, darling?” he asks with his own brand of sarcasm. The coldness in his eyes makes my teeth chatter.

“What’s that?” I ask, pretending he doesn’t terrify me.

“It’s a form of contempt. A method of hiding one’s true feelings. A form of great disrespect. And you know how I feel about disrespect, Cosette.”

My eyes grow misty again. I hope he doesn’t notice.

It’s so much more difficult to harden my heart when he calls me by name.

I remember what it was like, being pinned beneath him, helpless under his harnessed weight, overpowered by him but safe in every way. I remember the way he’d give me a look—

just a *look* to let me know I'd crossed a line and delicious punishment would follow. A fixed stare, a tight, cold expression. A raised eyebrow or a subtle shake of his head. The slightest hint of disapproval set my heart to pounding.

But he isn't flirting with me this time.

Punishment at his hands now wouldn't electrify my senses and end with my back arching in climax as he wrenched orgasm after orgasm from my body.

No. This time, any discipline he inflicts will be to teach me a lesson.

To remind me that my life is disposable.

No longer mine.

He doesn't know the truth.

"I do know how you feel," I say in what I hope is a nonchalant voice. "I know very clearly how you feel about disrespect. I know how you feel about loyalty and trust, too. And I know why I'm here, Lyam. So let's not waste each other's time."

When I turn my face away, he reaches for my chin again. His fingers trace my skin, as if committing it to memory. If he doesn't feel this electric charge between us, he may not be the animal I just thought of him as, but rather a vampire or zombie, completely devoid of any human feeling at all.

How could someone so cruel burn with such fire?

How could someone who wants to hurt me look like he wants to hold me?

For one fraction of a second—less than one beat of my heart—he looks as if he's going to kiss me.

He always did love it when I gave him chase.

"Good. I'm glad we're on the same page."

I'm holding my breath. Trembling in anticipation, scared of what he'll do next. Scared of what he won't.

And then he's driving. I'm back in my seat, shivering with cold because he moved away.

As he pulls away, I'm left reeling. Pulse racing.

I shouldn't want this—I shouldn't want *him*—but I can't deny the way he pulls me in.

Eventually the ache of his rejection will stop, I tell myself. It has to.

I look out the window and wonder.

How long before he unburies my secrets?

And when he does...

How will I survive?

Fuck the Gerards for ever making me feel wanted and loved.

Fuck their friends, who made me feel like I had a home.

And fuck their enemies who built an insurmountable wall between me and the only people I ever loved.

I know where my loyalty lies now. I know what I need to do.

And as Lyam looks at me with a mix of desire and something deeper, something dangerous and forbidden, he triggers every survival instinct in my body.

Run.

If only I could.

He turns away and places a call.

"Yes, sir?"

"I want the final touches we discussed in place for my guest room."

"Yes, sir. Straight away."

I clench my jaw and look ahead of us, where construction workers in bright yellow navigate trucks, and one man is in the middle of the road directing traffic.

Lyam curses under his breath and rolls down his window.

"What?" Under the solar glare of the construction lights, the man directing traffic doesn't see who's driving.

“Hey,” Lyam says, his voice friendly and warm. I know that look so well.

I fell for it, too.

He beckons, and the man stomps over to us. It only takes him a few seconds to recognize Lyam. It may be the enormous tattoo of a python on his forearm he notices first.

“My residence is only about five hundred meters from here. I need to get by this construction.” He takes out his wallet and removes a thick stack of euros.

Of fucking *course* he does.

“I’m so sorry, sir. Just a moment, Mr. Gerard. And no, no, sir, that’s unnecessary.”

“Please, take it,” he says. “I insist.”

I see the flash of fear in the man’s eyes. One does not say no when a Gerard *insists*.

I roll my eyes and turn away so he doesn’t see me. *Just a moment, Mr. Gerard*, I mock in my mind. *Right away, Mr. Gerard*.

God, it’s disgusting how people fall all over themselves giving him what he wants. No wonder he thinks he’s a *king*.

It’s like an act of Parliament for them to move the barriers, but after a few hushed words with his crew, they all snap into action. They practically *salute* him.

Gag. Me.

A minute later, we’re driving down the road, I suppose to wherever he’s going to keep me.

“You should do a better job at hiding your contempt,” he snaps.

I didn’t know it was that obvious.

“Oh,” I say with a tight smile. “I’m doing an *excellent* job.”

To my surprise, he actually smiles. “Enjoy yourself while I’m occupied with my hands on the steering wheel. It’ll be the only time, you know.”

A prickle of fear skates down my spine.

Some people scare others with rage and fury, throwing things, shouting, and causing an uproar.

But I know Lyam. I know Lyam well.

I fear him most when he's quiet.

His thoughts imprison him. When he stares ahead, I know he's entrenched in a world of darkness, as if he's trapped in a nightmare.

We drive the rest of the way to his home in silence.

The atmosphere in the car is suffocating. The only sounds are the purr of the engine and the rapid beating of my heart. I'm alone with a man who thought nothing of beating the shit out of a man who crossed him. I'm alone with a man who despises me. Whose command is always obeyed. A man who's above the law.

A man who *always* kills with the first shot.

What have I done?



THREE

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Lyam

EVEN THOUGH NIGHT has now fully fallen, when we near my house, I can still see the silhouette of the gardens. Tourists and couples, pedestrians and visitors roam the streets we've been driving through. Most of them likely oblivious to echoes of the claims made by the pompous asshole while he stood right here on this pavement and read canned words someone else wrote for him.

He doesn't care about the city of Paris. Even I know that. They buy it, though. They want to believe that what he says is the truth, because people like to have someone to look up to. Someone they can trust.

I'm struck with the irony of that when I pull the car up to the house.

I made sure my home was located in the heart of the city but somewhat away from the main tourist attractions. Still, it's heavily secured with gates and the most efficient security cameras money can buy. I don't take any risks. Fabien and Thayer think I've gone overboard, but I know better.

I live here because Paris is the heart of France and I like to keep my finger on her pulse.

I get out of the driver's seat and stretch. While I don't let anyone drive for me, I want to take Cosette inside immediately, so tonight I'll allow one of my men to park it. Six of them stand beside the car, waiting for instructions.

"Mr. Gerard, you had a visitor earlier."

"Who was it?" It's unusual for me to get visitors. I don't exactly roll out the welcome mat.

"They didn't leave a name, but we suspect it was one of Paris's detectives."

Of course it was. I look to Jacques, my main assistant. Sworn into our family recently, he's loyal and adept and notices everything.

I don't fear them. Everything I've done is neatly accounted for, and I've got alibis and justifications if anyone raises accusations against me, not to mention a team of lawyers and, worst case scenario, dirty cops on our payroll. But detectives are like pesky little flies that won't go away, no matter how many times you swat them.

"Was he in a uniform?"

I hate anyone in a uniform.

"She, and yes, sir."

She. I know who it was, then, and she should've been smarter than to come here in uniform.

"Thank you. Park my car. I have a guest I'm bringing inside."

The slightest lift of his brow is the only indication that he's surprised before he nods. I rarely let anyone touch my car, but I trust Jacques. "Yes, sir, right away."

I open the passenger door. Cosette looks up at me, her lips pursed in disdain, but I don't miss the way she's quickly taking in every detail. I told her about my home in Paris, but she's never been here before. I wonder what she thinks.

I shake my head and reach for her. I shouldn't care what she thinks. It doesn't matter. I should want her to hate being here. She's my prisoner, and the more she dislikes it, the better.

I reach for her restrained hands but think better of it and grip her elbow instead.

God, her skin's so soft and warm. I remember what it felt like to brush my body against hers, both of us stripped and vulnerable. I remember the way she felt, the way she tasted. I remember the way she yielded to me. I remember the sound of her cries when she came.

"Very nice," she says, her nose in the air. "It's very *you*. I suppose you have a room for all your pets?"

Fuck, she makes me hard when she spars with me. "Some have rooms, yeah. And some," I say in her ear as I move her from the car, "have cages."

Yeah, that struck a nerve. Cosette's well acquainted with the room of cages at Le Luxe.

Of course those are consensual.

"Very cute," she quips, but she can't hide the flush of her cheeks or the way her voice trembles a little. I wonder why. Curiosity? Anger?

Arousal?

If I can still wield that power over her, my job will be so much easier to do.

My men flank our sides, weapons drawn. They walk in sync like I've trained them.

"Isn't that cute," Cosette says, rolling her eyes.

I give her hair a good pull, making her gasp in surprise.

"Watch it."

She only smiles.

"Ah, I see what you're playing at." We step up the stone stairs that lead to my main door. My staff opens it. A dim light in the entryway welcomes me home, and I know if I call, more staff will come within minutes. It's late, though, and I don't need more of them than are already here. I'm never alone here unless I demand it.

"I'm not playing at anything," she insists.

Like hell she isn't.

"You forget, Cosette. I know what you like. I know what you crave."

Her flushed cheeks deepen in color as we enter my house. "I won't be baited into punishing you. Not the way you like."

That woman craves an over-the-knee spanking like some women crave wine or sex. She falls apart over my lap and comes so easily I hardly have to work for it.

Though... now that I think about it... that actually *could* be used to my advantage...

“I’m not baiting you,” she protests, and this time there’s none of the disdain and hardness. She falters a bit.

“So you aren’t trying to get a spanking because you like it,” I say nice and loud for everyone to hear.

Drawing in a breath, she releases it slowly before she responds. “You said you were going to punish me. And I won’t even pretend I haven’t earned it. But don’t forget, Lyam. I know what *you* like, too.”

And just like that, I’m hard as fuck.

She fucking does.

I need to get her alone, and now.

“That doesn’t fucking matter,” I say to her, but we both know it’s a lie. Jesus, making love to Cosette was the pinnacle of damn near everything I’ve ever done. Even though she’s being terse with me now, I know. That’s not her personality. I’ve never met a woman so eager to please in all my life. Her anger and contempt only mask her fear.

I grind my teeth together, because I can’t think about our time together... the passion... everything we did...

Contrary to popular opinion, I’ve only been with a few women. But everyone, literally everyone, pales in comparison to Cosette.

God, Cosette. Why did you have to betray us? I can’t ever love a woman I can’t trust.

“Ow,” she protests. I didn’t even realize I was holding her as tightly as I am.

I loosen my grip.

Some members of my staff stand in the shadows, watching. They know I expect them to be unobtrusive but ready to do whatever I ask at a moment’s notice.

“The room’s ready?”

“Of course, sir. I assumed you meant the one near yours? And I assumed you meant one for someone kept under guard. Thayer filled me in.”

I nod as we walk down the hallway toward the bedrooms. I watch her out of the corner of my eye. She's pretending she isn't observing every single damn thing along the way.

"Well," she says almost begrudgingly. "I shouldn't be surprised you live in the lap of luxury."

There was a time that I imagined bringing her here, only in my imagination, the circumstances were very, very different.

"I like to work hard and play hard."

"Right. And you need a place large enough to accommodate your monstrous physique?"

I press my lips together. I won't be taunted. "Remember what I said about sarcasm."

Still, I can't help but smirk at her comment. She isn't wrong. When I work, I'm laser-focused. When I come home, I like my surroundings luxurious and spacious. I spend good money on shit that will last.

"Surely you didn't pick this all out yourself?" she asks, gesturing toward the furnished rooms. "Either you hired someone, or you've got a hidden talent for interior decorating."

"I don't give a shit about whatever decorating. I told someone what I wanted, paid them good money to do it, and they delivered."

I've got the most up-to-date electronics and comfortable, well-made furniture that will last, but most importantly, the large bay windows look out over the Louvre. At night, the city twinkles, as if it were a movie set.

My bedroom's decorated in simple, muted tones to help me relax, with leather and wood accents, and a king-sized bed I'm told is designed for the best night's sleep.

Not that I ever sleep.

But we aren't going to my bedroom.

Occasionally, my brothers or mother come to visit, so I made sure this home had a guest room. I know how I am. I know if

Cosette's anywhere near me, I'll soften. Before I know it, she'll be in my bed.

And that's not why we're here.

"Ground rules," I tell her. "You know why you're here. You'll stay in the guest room unless I give you permission to leave."

"Mhm," she says, her lips pursed.

Still trying to pretend she isn't afraid.

"I was thinking I was tired and could put off your interrogation until the morning, but now I'm thinking it might be smart to start this off on the right foot."

She grits her teeth but doesn't fully hide the fear in her eyes. She swallows.

"Right."

My pulse begins to quicken. I love dominating anyone, but dominating Cosette's a particular delicacy.

She's your prisoner.

I can't let myself forget even for a second why she's here.

Why I am.

It won't be like punishing a man.

No.

The beauty of knowing her so intimately is that I know exactly how to push her buttons.

"Lyam," she begins. "I'm very tired, and so are you."

It isn't like her to try to talk her way out of something. She's way too brave for that. So it surprises me she's trying this angle.

"There will be plenty of time for sleeping later."

She purses her lips and walks beside me with her head held high, but her lower lip trembles.

It would be a lie to say I don't look forward to part of this. I'm not dead.

She's gorgeous and brilliant, even if she is our enemy now.

I know what she looks like when she comes. I know that when she softens her heart and gentles her spirit, she's irresistible.

"Sir?" someone calls from down the hall.

I turn with her still in my grip.

"Your mother's here."

My mother? "What? Is she alright?"

"Yes, sir. She said she's here to talk to you and won't keep you long."

My mother never shows up unannounced. I glance over to see the look of triumph on Cosette's face.

"Did you call her?"

"With what?" she asks innocently. "Smoke signals?"

Someone called her. For crying out loud.

I grumble under my breath and open the door to the guest room.

"You're going to stay here. I need to see why she's here and then I'll be back." I flick on the lights.

Cosette gasps.

Before she arrived, I had my men do some work. The final call was only to make sure they were putting the final touches into place.

The room, previously well-furnished for guests, has been transformed into little more than a cell.

A bed sits in the middle of the floor, with clean linens and pillows. There's a small wooden desk and chair.

And nothing else.

The heavy door's bolted from the hallway side, the locked windows fitted with reinforced steel bars.

Motion detectors and an alarm system with a spotlight are installed outside the room, a search light outside as well in clear sight.

The windows of the bathroom are locked and too small for anyone, even someone as slender as Cosette, to escape.

On the desk chair sits my black bag with tools.

“Wow,” Cosette says, almost amused. “I’m honored you think I’m that dangerous.”

I don’t respond but push her over to the bed.

“Stay there.”

“Glad you cleared that up. I was contemplating bending those metal bars with my hands, squeezing myself through a window the size of my nose, and maybe going for a little stroll.”

I spin her around and smack her ass, hard. She gasps and clamps her mouth shut, her cheeks flaming. I wrap my hand around her neck and hold her gaze.

“If you were anyone else, we’d have killed you already.”

She stares at me unblinking, her lips pressed together, and doesn’t respond.

I sit her on the bed, her fragile neck still in my grip. “I’m going to get to the bottom of this if you have to spend all night long over my knee. And this time, Cosette, there won’t be any climax.” I stare into her eyes, those green, vibrant eyes of hers framed with long, fetching lashes. I hate that she dashed away the hope of anything romantic between us.

“You can’t do that, Lyam,” she whispers, shaking her head. And for one minute, one little flash in time, the real Cosette’s talking to me. “I can’t tell you. Please, don’t make me. I promise, it was the right thing to do.”

“Right thing to do?”

She flinches at the sound of my tone.

I stand and take a pace back before I do something I’ll regret.

“There is no excuse for betrayal in my family. It’s never the right thing to do. Any one of us, from our guards to our assistants and even my mother, would rather die than betray us. It’s the ultimate sin against us, and you know it.” My hand

shakes when I point a finger at her. “So you keep your ass right there. You think about how you want this conversation to go. And when I come back, we’ll talk.”

I turn and leave before she can respond. The door shuts behind me with a loud *bang*, right before the security system I put into place clicks ominously. I take my phone out of my pocket and tap the screen. The camera I had installed pans straight to her, as clear as if I were standing right in front of her. I watch as she narrows her eyes at the camera and flashes her middle finger.

Fine, then. We can play that game. I’ll remember that when I punish her.

My hand’s shaking with rage as I slide my phone into my pocket and take a deep breath.

I have to steady my nerves before I talk to my mother.

No one gets under my skin better than Cosette, *dammit*.

I pull my phone back out and look at the screen. This time her back’s to me, but the camera on the other side of the room can still capture her. I pan out and zoom in with the second camera. Cosette sits, her shoulders bowed. She stares at her hands in her lap. Then she does something strange. She places her hand on her belly, closes her eyes, and whispers. Her lips move, but I can’t hear her.

Is she hungry?

I make a call.

“Bring her dinner.”

“Yes, sir.”

I can almost hear Thayer chiding me for giving in so quickly. I wouldn’t rush to feed another prisoner. Why is she any different?

Jesus. I’ve never had a fucking *prisoner*. They call me to pull the trigger, not to babysit.

I walk to the sitting room. In this part of Paris, even the largest residences are on the smaller side, so I know exactly where my

mother will be waiting. I draw in a deep breath and look back at the screen. Cosette's shoes are off, and she's lying, almost in a fetal position, on the bed. She looks almost childlike.

I have to stop looking.

"Lyam." My mother's warm voice captures my attention.

I shut the door behind me. She sits on the leather couch, her hands folded in her lap. Maman was a young bride and had Fabien, the eldest of my siblings, when she was only twenty. People sometimes think she's our sister, because we share the same bright eyes, strong chin, and olive skin, though her features are softened and feminine.

I give her a smile. Even when I'm angry, my mother's soothing voice and demeanor calm me. I gentle my voice. "Maman. You never come here unannounced."

"I... oh, I just happened to be in the neighborhood."

She's as bad at lying as Cosette. I don't buy it.

"Right. Something bothering you?"

"Well, yes, I... I thought it best to talk to you in person."

That's strange. She never does this.

"Do you want a drink?"

She shakes her head. "No, thank you. I don't want to take up much of your time. Listen, Lyam, I was... I didn't know..." She draws in a breath and lets it out sharply. "Nicolette called me to talk about Savannah's baby. Apparently, it's customary in America to have a party of some sort. Something about a shower and presents, and she hoped we could do something like that here. But that isn't the point of my visit."

Nicolette, my brother Fabien's wife, is Savannah's sister.

Maman opens her mouth, then closes it before she opens it again. "You know I don't interfere, Lyam, but I—well. I need to... talk to you."

"So you *do* want to interfere."

I'm losing my patience.

“Lyam, Nicolette told me what Cosette did to Savannah. And I... know you’re bringing her here if you haven’t already.”

I don’t respond at first. She doesn’t need to know she’s here.

When I don’t respond, she goes on. “Listen, Lyam. I just want to remind you. Your father may have done some things that others would have criticized him for, but you know he never raised a hand to me. Not once, Lyam.”

“You were his wife,” I say shortly. “Not someone who betrayed your family.” And my father was the exception to the rule.

She winces. “I’m just saying that you’re better than that. You’re not the type to raise a hand to a woman, Lyam.”

There’s a world of difference between striking a woman and taking her across my knee, but I’d rather not get into details with my mother.

She pleads with me. “Lyam. If you hurt Cosette, you’ll never be the same.”

I shake my head. “She betrayed us. She set Savannah up to be killed. If we hadn’t rescued Savannah, she’d be dead, Maman. Savannah’s my sister-in-law. Thayer’s *wife*. Now I don’t know why Cosette did what she did, but I do know this. If she were a man, she’d already be dead.”

I swear, the older Maman gets the less she can handle. But I’m not making excuses for who we are or what we do.

Her face pales when she whispers, “Oh, Lyam.”

I’ve had enough.

“Don’t ‘*Oh, Lyam,*’ me. You came here because you want to interfere. You don’t like to know details, because you don’t want to know. And yet here you are. So I’ll give it to you straight. She’s my prisoner. She made a huge mistake. I’m not sure why yet, but I’ll do whatever it takes to find that out, because I have to know what motivated her.”

And saying it aloud makes me realize... *why* she betrayed us matters more than anything. There’s nothing more telling or insightful than her why.

I can't move forward until I know the truth.

Maman looks at me sadly. "If you hurt a woman, you hurt who *you* are. You don't come back from that because you'll never be the same, Lyam. Did you ever bother to ask how your father and I came to be married?"

I'm getting impatient to see my prisoner. "You met in London. It was instant attraction. I know this story."

But the reproach in her gaze tells me I only know part of it.

I don't have time for this. I've had a long fucking day and it isn't anywhere near over yet. I tap my foot impatiently.

"My father owed him money. A large, significant sum of money. My father was not a good man, so he promised my youngest sister instead."

I feel my eyes widen. I had no idea. Her father's long since dead. How did I not know this?

"I offered myself in her stead. I couldn't let her go to a man she didn't know, Lyam. I didn't know what he was capable of. He could have assaulted me. He could've beaten me. I went into marriage to him knowing this."

I stare at her. My father lived by a moral code all his own, and he taught us to do the same.

"But he didn't, Lyam. And you all remember him as a good man because of that." She shakes her head. "Only the weak need to hurt the vulnerable." She rises and steps over to me. Reaches for my hand and gives it a squeeze.

When I embrace her, I feel how small she is, how delicate and dainty. Dwarfed in my embrace, she has to stand on the tips of her toes.

"I remember when I could hold you with one hand," she says, laughing. "And now look at you. I'd bet you eat bricks for breakfast." She pulls away, smiling sadly. "I'll leave you now and I'm sorry to come unannounced."

"Take a guard with you home." I beckon for one of my men to come. "Drive her home."

I'd drive her myself if I didn't have Cosette in the other room.

On her way out, she looks over her shoulder at me, her gaze thoughtful. "Lyam, did you see what Montague said on the news?"

I grumble and shove my hands in my pockets. "I did."

She stands in the doorway, tugging on her gloves one at a time. "Should I be concerned?"

I shake my head. "Of course not." I repeat what Philippe said earlier. "We all know the politicians are more corrupt than we are."

"Still, I worry," she says thoughtfully.

"Don't. You have nothing to worry about. Go, buy some clothes for the new baby. I'm sure Savannah's already started the nursery."

Maman rolls her eyes at me. "As if I haven't started shopping yet. Good night, Lyam."

I wait until my mother's gone.

She has a tender heart. That means in front of her, I'm cognizant of who she is and how she feels. But when she's gone, all bets are off.

She doesn't know what I do, and she doesn't have to.

I'm here for a reason. I have a code to follow. And Maman goes home safe tonight because of that.

Jacques looks at me. Waiting for me to dismiss him for the night.

"You can go," I tell him. "Philippe won't be back tonight."

"Is there anything else you'll need this evening, sir?"

I shake my head. "Nothing I can't get myself, thanks."

When he leaves, I remember the nip Philippe gave me. I pull it out of my pocket and twist the top off. I polish it off in two gulps, welcoming the warmth and burn of the whiskey. It's smoother than I expect. I look at the label. Bastille. Good stuff.

I sit until the whole house is quiet.

I remember Montague's promise to rid the city of the scum and shake my head. The irony is rich.

I pull out my phone and look at the screen. I half expect Cosette to be asleep, but when I see her, she's standing at the window, peering out. She looks so small, so innocent and frail.

Her tray of food sits on the desk. Untouched.

I wonder why she hasn't eaten.

Only the weak need to hurt those who are vulnerable.

The reason the vulnerable are safe to begin with is because *someone* is willing to hurt those that threaten their safety.

I stand and whip the mini bottle into the waste bin. It hits the side and shatters.

I shake my head.

Pacifism is the privilege of the protected.

Countries go to war because they have military.

Citizens are safe because we have the police.

And my family is safe because of me.



FOUR

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Cosette

I STARE out the barred window in the cell-like room. I've dimmed the lights so I can see out better and it's harder to see me.

Not that he doesn't have cameras trained on every possible exit.

If I move close enough to it and peer out, maybe squint my eyes a little, I don't notice the bars.

Not that I care. He could put me alone in a prison in Siberia right now, and I'd welcome the solitude.

I don't want to be anywhere near him.

I hate that guarded, fierce look in his eyes.

I hate that I'm in this predicament.

And he may not know this? But God, I hate Paris.

When I was younger, I didn't really understand why I hated Paris so much.

When I was about six years old, I finally understood. I can still see my mother, sitting at our worn kitchen table, flipping through junk mail. A pamphlet of the Eiffel Tower bragged about discount flights abroad. She tore it into pieces and tossed it in the trash bin.

I hate Paris because *she* did.

"Why do you hate it so much?" I asked her.

She sucked on her cigarette, opening her mouth and releasing a ring of smoke before answering me. I imagined her words were embedded in the smoke.

"You're old enough to know. Your father came from Paris."

My father? I don't know what I'd assumed up until then, but as a child with fanciful thoughts and a vivid imagination, I probably imagined she'd plucked me from a garden or something.

“My father?” I asked.

“Your father,” she said, her voice laced with contempt. “This is the first and last time we’ll ever talk of him.”

And that was that.

For her, anyway. For me, it was only the beginning.

The motion-activated lights blink on outside the window. Avril Gerard, her head held high, surrounded by lithe, lanky bodyguards on either side, walks down the long pathway that leads to her parked car.

My heart aches.

I’ve only met Avril once, when she came to Corsica to visit her sons. They never take her to Le Luxe and she likes to pretend it doesn’t exist, but she sometimes comes on holiday. Even though I worked for Thayer, I was friends with his sister-in-law Nicolette first and I’ve known Nicolette’s husband Fabien for years.

Avril was at once kind and welcoming. Once, Avril, Nicolette, and I went for a visit to one of Corsica’s many natural springs. She asked about college, our plans, and listened with rapt attention to everything we said. She brought a wicker basket of little sandwiches wrapped in wax paper, ripe fruit, and chilled wine. It was a simple meal, but with her welcoming presence and ready smile, it felt like a feast meant for royalty.

I wonder what it’s like for her being alone. If I survive this—and I have no reason to believe I will—I wonder if I’ll be as graceful being alone as she is. Is it lonely? Or does she like having full autonomy over her life?

I wish I could talk to Avril now.

Nicolette spoke highly of her before I met her, and when I did, I wished I could spend more time with her.

My mother battled demons her whole life. She was coarse and abrasive and rarely showed kindness. But she was the only family I ever had, and she loved me in her own way.

I still miss her.

I blink in surprise when Avril turns to face Lyam's house before she gets into her car. She's strength and grace personified.

I watch as she kisses her fingertips and waves her hand toward the house.

Or is it... toward me?

Does she know, then?

Was that on purpose?

I pretend to catch the kiss in the air and place it onto my damp cheek.

I hate that I'm crying.

I hate the position I'm in.

I hate that I felt as if I had no choice.

The only warning I get is a series of clicks and sliding bolts that tell me he's coming in. Ice pulses through my veins.

I stand with my back to him, still gazing down at the pathway. Pretending that my whole body doesn't go rigid and my heart begin to pound when I feel him enter the room. I still don't turn to look at him.

"Tears won't sway me, you know."

I close my eyes and steel myself to face him. To face whatever it is that comes next.

I wasn't trying to gain his sympathy. I wasn't even thinking about him.

But do I ever really stop thinking about Lyam?

"Look at me."

I flinch at the sound of his voice. So cold. So harsh.

This isn't a hill to die on. We'll get there.

So I draw a deep breath and turn to face him.

Lyam stands in the doorway, leaning against it with his arms crossed over his chest. The dim lighting makes it harder to see his eyes, but I know every crease and contour of his face. The

harsh slash of his brow drawn over brooding eyes. The aristocratic turn of his nose, and his sensual mouth. He's beautiful and cruel, like an angry god. He's the epitome of tall, dark, handsome, and fucking pissed off.

Behind him, I hear the vague chatter of staff, footsteps, and the barely audible, faint sound of glasses clinking. I doubt he's invited anyone to the house, so it makes me wonder how many members of staff he has here.

"Nicolette thought it smart to tell my mother you were here."

Oh, did she? I'm surprised by this. My betrayal of their family put Nicolette's sister in danger.

"Why?"

"I have no idea. Misplaced sympathy? Mercy?"

I don't reply. I don't know what to say to something like that anyway. If he thinks he needs to emphasize how little sympathy he has for me, he's woefully mistaken.

"Nothing to say?"

"Did you ask me a question?"

I watch as he strokes his chin thoughtfully, as if contemplating how he wants to begin to torture me.

"I did. I asked you lots of questions on the way here and you didn't want to answer them." Shrugging, he begins to push up his sleeves. He wears a long-sleeved navy tee that fits him well, molded to his muscular body. Back at Le Luxe, I'd have gotten excited to see him roll up his sleeves. It was almost foreplay. Now, it's a different story.

When both sleeves are rolled up, he anchors his hands on his hips. I swallow hard. God, why does he have to be the absolute picture of masculine perfection? "Let's see if you want to tell me the truth now."

My pulse quickens when he steps into the room and slams the door behind him. The series of locks click. Ominous silence fills the room.

I know what Lyam is capable of. He's told me as much, and I've heard stories. Way back when I was first hired to work for the Gerard family, before we'd even moved to Le Luxe, a few of us—Nicolette, Gwen, and I—worked at La Maison, essentially a high-end brothel. Gwen told me the first day I met Fabien Gerard, head of this family and owner of La Maison, that I should tread carefully.

I can still see her sitting on the edge of her desk, sharp eyes piercing mine. “You think Fabien is scary, and you should. He rules this region of Corsica with an iron fist. But you haven't met Thayer, his much scarier brother. They call him The Savage and say he doesn't have a conscience. But Lyam? The youngest?” She'd blown out a breath and shaken her head. “He's the scariest of all.”

It wasn't until later that I realized why, but it was in that moment I felt the pull toward Lyam. I couldn't explain why. I still can't. But as soon as she told me about him, something pulled at my heartstrings.

That was obviously a mistake.

It's quiet in here. So quiet, I can't hear a single sound outside the door. It feels as if I've just switched on a pair of noise-cancelling headphones. The effect is strange, and a bit unnerving, as if my inner thoughts have been magnified.

I realize with a start that he's made this room soundproof. What else has he done in here?

“So this is where you take your victims?” I say, trying to sound all brave and sarcastic, but I'm finding it harder to pull that off.

He laughs humorlessly as he walks to the small desk and reaches for the black bag. “Victims? No, Cosette. A victim implies the person I hurt doesn't deserve it.”

I think about my reasons for what I did. My mind races because of what's at stake.

I don't care if he hurts me. I don't fear pain. But I'm not the only one on the line here.

I think about what he can do and what he can't, not without causing harm. He's already implied he won't lean heavily on any kind of *impact* play, as we'd call it at the club.

There's no playing here, though.

He could spank me or whip me, and I'm sure he'll use that at some point, but he already knows what I can take. Being punished when it isn't a form of sensual play is very different, however.

I saw him give Claude a merciless beating, and it wasn't the first time. I can't imagine even angry, Lyam would do that to me, though.

Or would he?

I turn away from him when a lump forms in my throat. How could I have ever thought he was anything but a monster? Why was I so attracted to the wounded bad boy?

I watch as Lyam extracts a thin, flexible leather strap, coiled like a snake. He lays it beside the bag and reaches back in. Next, a set of clamps, followed by a bottle of liquid I can't identify. Something silky and black joins the rest, along with a ball gag and a portable kit for melting hot wax.

My stomach begins to churn acid.

"You really gave this some thought," I say nonchalantly, aware of the bitter edge to my tone. "Or is this just your little bag of tricks you keep packed for date night?"

No response. He only continues to unpack the bag as if looking for something and he won't let my chatter distract him.

I watch him remove a velvet bag the length and size of a vibrator, something else that looks like a small violet wand, and a pair of metal handcuffs.

"I think the deluxe package of the Fifty Shades date kit has a feather and a mask..."

Still no response.

He doesn't need any of these tools, though. Lyam is strong and devious. He could do plenty just with his mouth and hands alone.

God.

I have to steel myself against this.

You've overcome worse than this, I tell myself.

This won't last forever.

If he was going to kill you, he'd have done it already.

Would he, though? I remember him telling me that those who commit the worst crimes deserve to be punished before they die.

My heart beats so fast I feel nauseous. Is that why I'm here, then? So he can kill me?

If you were anyone else, we'd have killed you already.

I thought he meant they'd spared me because they knew me. Or maybe even because I'm a woman. Now, however, I'm rethinking this. Maybe he meant they needed to punish and torture me *before* they killed me?

He could kill me and dispose of me, and no one would even try to stop him.

I look at him in a new light.

I look at those strong, powerful hands that have been over every inch of my body. Masterful, sexy, manly hands that know exactly what I like.

Hands that have pulled triggers to kill, beaten human flesh, wielded knives to cut through skin and sinew.

Another wave of nausea roils through me.

"Now," he says, turning to face me with a length of rope.

"Let's pick up the conversation. Where were we?"

"I have to use the bathroom," I blurt out.

He rolls his eyes and a corner of his lips quirks sardonically.

"Nice try."

“No! I’m going to be sick,” I say, covering my mouth before I vomit all over his shoes.

“Jesus,” he mutters, before he jerks his head. “Go!”

I barely make it to the bathroom before I vomit the entire contents of my stomach. My cheeks flame in humiliation. I hate that I’ve done this. When I’m finally exhausted and done, I wipe the back of my hand across my mouth and hope he doesn’t get suspicious.

I rinse my mouth over and over until he yells, “Get out here. You’re done now.”

I glance at myself in the mirror and wince. My eyes are watery and bloodshot. My cheeks look hollow. My skin is pallid and pale and a little clammy, like moist dough. *Ugh.*

I wonder idly if they have paper bags under the sink. I’d like one to put over my head, please.

I turn around and startle at the sight of him standing in the doorway.

“You done?”

“For now,” I snap. God, I hate him.

“Good. Strip. If you’re not completely naked and those clothes in that basket behind the door by the time this timer goes off, I’ll whip you as a prelude. Clear?”

My heart skips a beat. Will he be able to tell? Is it too soon? God, I hope I get nauseous again and this time *don’t* make it to the bathroom.

I bare my teeth at the bastard as I yank my top off. “Crystal.”

I hold his gaze while I rip my clothes off in angry, rapid movements. If he’s trying to humiliate me, this is the wrong tactic. I’ve been a hired prostitute at a brothel and a slave at a sex club. I’ve long since lost any shame in being naked.

He stares while I strip, but if the sight of me naked arouses him, he doesn’t let on at all, he only watches, like he’s making sure I obey. When I’m standing before him naked and a little cold, he nods.

In two steps, he enters the tiny bathroom and grabs my wrist. I trot to keep up as he drags me into the bedroom, snaps his wrist, and releases a length of long rope.

I grit my teeth.

“Now then. Hands in front of you.”

I obey. With every second that passes, my apprehension grows. If he crosses a certain line, I may have to tell him everything.

I can't.

I won't.

“Good. Now, let's see what we can get from you.”

When he arranges me on the bed like I'm an article of clothing, I close my eyes and try to put on a brave face. It's not like he hasn't done this exact thing before. I've always loved being at his mercy.

But that was when I trusted him.

That was when *he* trusted *me*.

And that makes all the difference.

The bed pressing up against my naked belly, that coiled leather at the ready, I expect him to spank me, but he doesn't. Instead, he spreads my legs and reaches between them. I gasp when he fingers my sex and spreads me wide open. He's got some kind of gel on his fingers he spreads liberally all over me like he's lubricating me, but soon, I know that's not what this is. A warming, tingling sensation spreads throughout my sex until my entire lower body feels like he's been torturing me with foreplay for hours.

“Oh, how nice,” I snap. “You know how to get me all aroused with literally no effort on your part. If that's not the most masculine thing I've ever—”

A sharp *thwack* hits my ass.

“No more of your back talk. Open your mouth again, and I'll gag you with my cock until you shut up.”

I press my lips together and rant in my head instead, because I am very well aware of the fact that he's fully prepared to make good on his promise.

His hands are on my hips. I close my eyes as a rush of unexpected emotion chokes me. The warmth of his hand, the power of his touch. All I'd need is his mouth at my ear whispering sweet nothings and I'd be right back at Le Luxe, having the most amazing sex of my entire life.

If he likes the way I feel at his mercy, he hides it well. He's a man on a mission and nothing's going to sway him.

Nothing.

I gasp when he strokes my pussy, hard and fast. No warning, no foreplay, but it doesn't matter. That gel did its job, and I'm so aroused my hips jerk with the first spasm of orgasm.

"Good to know this shit works," he mutters, which would be cute if he wasn't an asshole.

And then he's gone. His warmth. His body. Those fingers that I need between my legs before I pass out.

My body pulses with need and want, stronger than anything I've ever felt before. My clit throbs. Even the walls of my sex ache as if I need to be filled by him. I whimper when I feel something hard and cold where his fingers once were. It begins to vibrate, and I come apart. I climax so hard I scream, though no one can hear me. I'm wrecked from spasms of heat and pleasure, my back arching so long and tightly it hurts.

And then there's no more pleasure, only a sensitive clit and the continuous vibration.

"Lyam," I gasp. "Please. Make it stop."

He sits on the edge of the bed. How is he doing that? He isn't holding the vibrator any longer. The jerkface has some kind of contraption set up so it stays in place. Lovely.

My hips jerk and I need the sensation to stop. "Lyam—"

"Tell me."

"No."

The vibration increases in intensity. Another climax builds on the first. I shake and tremble as sensation begins to rise again. I press my lips together so he doesn't hear me cry. I'm so sensitive I don't know what to do with myself.

So this is how Lyam Gerard punishes a woman.

And he's only warming up.

Goddamn him.

I climax again, and again, until I'm crying freely onto the bed. I can't get away from this or move.

"I can keep this up all night, Cosette," he says with a yawn which is probably fabricated. I barely hear him. I feel like I'm in a tunnel of blissful pain.

I'm hoarse from screaming and my sex is on fire as the vibrations go on, and on.

I can't tell him. I won't.

I scream out loud when something bites at my nipples. I open my eyes. I didn't even realize they were shut or that he'd turned me over. Lyam has the remote in one hand and a violet wand in the other, grazing it against my nipples.

I squirm and plead. I don't even know what I'm saying as the words fall out of my mouth. "I can't tell you," I sob. "I won't, Lyam. You can—do whatever you want to me. I won't cave."

The violet wand kicks up.

"Fine, then," he says. He pushes to his feet and reaches for the strap. I can see him out of the corner of my eye.

That's when true panic sets in.

He can't do this. This might be the one line he can't cross. If he whips me—

He reaches for the silken hood.

"I'm getting the answer out of you tonight, one way or another," he says grimly, as he slips the silky fabric over my head.

I can't breathe. I start to panic. I gasp for air but something's wrong. I'm not getting any air.

I try to scream but my words are muffled. I'm trying to gasp for air when it hits me.

I have to breathe.

If I can't breathe, I'll suffocate, and if I suffocate—

“Will you tell me now?” His words are dim and far away. I want to shake my head. I want to tell him to fuck off, but it isn't just about me.

I have no choice.

I have to tell him.

Something inside me breaks when I know he's won.

I nod my head, only to get him to take the hood off.

When he does, I gasp for air.

“I couldn't breathe with that on,” I cry. “I couldn't breathe.”

“Of course you could.” But his voice falters.

“Why-would-I-lie,” I stammer. My teeth chatter as I climax again on a scream because of that godawful contraption. I wish I could shut my body off. “I-couldn't.”

“Motherfucker,” he grates, looking at the hood. “This isn't what I asked for. Thank fuck I took that off. *Jesus.*”

He shoves it in the bag, rolls me back over onto my stomach, and lifts the strap again.

“Let's see how far we get with this.”

I have one brief moment of panic, before I scream, “No! No, Lyam. You can't!”

“Can't?” he says, lifting his arm with a look that tells me *he absolutely can.*

I squirm and try to get away, but he pins me down.

“So you'll tell me?”

I clamp my lips together. No, I can't tell him. If I do, it'll change everything.

He shakes his head, a look of conviction on his face telling me he is absolutely willing and able to hurt me if he thinks he needs to.

No.

He lifts his arm.

On a sob, I break.

“I'll tell you!” I scream.

Silence in the room.

I'm panting. He's panting. He shuts off his toys and lays the strap down, then roughly flips me over so I'm on my back.

I had to do it.

I swallow hard when he grips my chin and makes me look at him.

“Look into my eyes and tell me the truth, Cosette.” His voice cracks a little. *“Please.”*

Tears flow freely down my cheeks. “Lyam, I'm pregnant.”



FIVE

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Lyam

I STARE AT HER, uncomprehending.

I don't trust her.

But I can't ignore what she's telling me if she absolutely *is* telling the truth.

Pregnant?

My mother was just here talking about Savannah's baby and—did she get the brilliant idea that lying to me would get her out of punishment? That I'd be more lenient on her if she told me this?

Cosette has a high, high pain tolerance.

I would know.

I fully expected her to grit her teeth and bear it, but I knew a spanking alone wouldn't be enough. So I ramped it up. Broke down her walls and defenses by making her climax. Showed her how much control I truly can wield over her.

Tears flow down her cheeks. She looks scared.

Every instinct in me wants to hold her. To assure her that everything's okay. To tell her that she's safe with me.

But I can't do that.

Before I do another damn thing, I need to make sure that she's telling me the truth.

"Pregnant?" I repeat, narrowing my eyes at her. I cage her throat with my hand and hold her gaze. I don't restrict her airway or hurt her, but I keep her in a grip so that if she moves, she'll hurt herself.

"Yes," she whispers. Her wrists are still tied in front of her, but she lifts them so she can put her hand on mine. "Please. I'll tell you everything you need to know."

I take in a deep breath, my mind riddled with questions.

Is she lying?

If she is lying, what do I do with her next?

How far along is she?

“We need to verify this.”

She chokes back another sob and nods. “Yeah.”

“If you’re telling me the truth, who’s the father?”

“Lyam,” she sobs. She shakes her head from side to side. “I haven’t been with anyone else.”

Ice pulses through my veins.

I want to believe this is true, all of it.

I want to believe she’s lying.

I don’t know what I want to believe.

I lift her up. She’s fragile and soft in my arms, and her body shakes with wracking sobs.

I pull the covers down then lay her back on the bed and stare at her while I take out my phone. If I call Thayer, he’ll ask questions. Fabien’s the same.

My mother won’t and she’ll know someone I can trust to take care of Cosette.

My mother answers on the first ring. “Lyam?”

“I need a doctor.”

She’s quiet for a minute. “For whom?”

“Cosette.”

“What kind of a doctor? Is she okay?”

I clench my teeth. I don’t want her to know anything. I don’t want anyone to know, if this is confirmed to be true.

“She isn’t hurt. I just need a doctor.”

She pauses before she goes on, and doesn’t ask any more questions. “Of course, yes. I know someone. Doctor Martin.”

I text the doctor and tell him what I need. He’s on his way.

I pace outside Cosette's room while I wait for him to arrive.

If she is pregnant—have I done anything that would hurt her? My mind races with a quick scan of how we've spent the last few hours.

No... no, nothing I've done would hurt her.

But now I definitely don't regret beating the shit out of Claude.

God.

Pregnant?

I make myself another drink to stop the inner turmoil, but it doesn't help. My mind races with possibilities.

I've already dismissed my staff for the night, so I answer the door when Dr. Martin arrives.

A petite, stunning woman with short black hair and bright blue eyes, dressed impeccably in a conservative black dress, stands on the steps.

What the hell?

I yank the door open, likely glaring. I don't welcome visitors.

"Mr. Gerard?" she asks brusquely.

Wait. What?

"You're the doctor?"

She gives me a tight smile. "I get that a lot. My surname is Martin."

Right.

"Come in."

I shut and lock the door behind her. If my mother suggested she come, then she knows who we are and what we expect. My mother wouldn't send someone who doesn't play by the rules.

"Tell me everything I need to know, please. Your mother and I know each other well. You can expect full confidentiality."

She's matter-of-fact and direct, as if she came straight from the French Armed Forces.

I draw in a breath and let it out before I reply. Thayer and Fabien would want to know all about her and get a full background report before I tell her another thing.

"Her name's Cosette. She claims she's pregnant, and she claims I'm the father. I need to know if both of those things are true."

"I see." She asks no more questions. "I can tell you within a few minutes the veracity of her claim to be pregnant. However, paternity tests take a few days to determine."

Son of a bitch. "That's too long. I need to know tonight."

The doctor gives me a patient smile. "Not the first time I've heard that either," she says firmly. "But unfortunately, I can't tell you that for a few more days. We have to send the tests to a lab, and as it is, the shortest turnaround is two days, and that's only through expedited means."

Two days? What the fuck is that all about?

"Fine."

We reach Cosette's room.

"Now, sir, if you'll stay here, I'll—"

"Absolutely not."

"I prefer to work in private."

"And I prefer to be present. Since this is my house and I'm paying your fee, this is where I draw the line."

"I see."

She goes quiet when I open the door and reluctantly enters with me.

Before the doctor came, I freed Cosette's wrists and had her get dressed in her nightclothes. She lays in the bed staring at me then the doctor.

"I'm Dr. Martin," the doctor says. "I asked Mr. Gerard to leave the room but he refused."

Cosette sighs. "I'm not surprised."

"I'm told we need a pregnancy test?"

"So he says," Cosette responds.

I turn on her. "Are you kidding me? You had me call this doctor all the way out in the middle of the night and you don't even know—"

"Mr. Gerard." The doctor's sharp voice could freeze fire. "Cosette is my client. And while I promised confidentiality, I cannot allow you to abuse my patient in my presence."

I can tell by Cosette's wide-eyed stare that we both hear the caveat "in my presence" loud and clear.

No one talks to me that way.

Who the hell did my mother send here?

Cosette clears her throat. "Anyway, you were jumping to conclusions, Lyam. I am not lying. I only reason I chose the words 'so he says,' was because *you're* the one that says we need a test. I don't need one, because I'm very well aware of the fact that I'm pregnant." She lifts her beautiful chin defiantly and stares at me. "So there's no need for you to go all caveman on me. Not now, anyway." If rolling your eyes was a tone of voice, she just used it.

The doctor looks from me to her then back again and rubs her hands together. "Well, then. Let's get on with this, shall we?"

Cosette blanches.

"Do you need to do a blood test?"

I stand next to her and cross my arms over my chest. It goes against every grain in my body not to give her comfort and consolation right now. The entire paradigm of why she's here is beginning to shift, and I'm not happy about that.

"No, at least not for a pregnancy test. Urine tests are less expensive and more accurate and will provide a faster result."

"Do it," I snap.

Both the doctor and Cosette side-eye me.

“Mr. Gerard, I’d really like you to consider leaving the room, please. You’re making my job more difficult.”

“Give. Her. The. Test.”

Cosette, however, is unperturbed. “He can stay. It’s his baby, after all, whether he needs a test to prove it to himself or not.”

“Ah. Yes, but if we get a negative, we will have to move on to a blood test. A paternity test will also involve a sample of blood from you, Cosette, and swab from you, Lyam.”

Cosette nods. “That’s fine.”

How long has she known? Did she betray us before or after she found out?

“Do you need to accompany her into the bathroom so she doesn’t escape? Make sure she doesn’t cheat on the test?” Dr. Martin asks wryly.

Cosette opens the bathroom door and gestures to the barred windows. “No fear of that here. *Is* there a way to cheat on the test?”

She smiles wryly. “No.”

This is the last fucking time this doctor’s setting foot in this house.

A minute later, Cosette opens the door and the doctor and I enter.

We all stand in various forms of awkward silence as she dips a stick into the cup. Cosette yawns as if bored, but I know she’s probably exhausted, too. I check my phone and pretend I’m busy doing something, but I’m actually searching *how to cheat on a pregnancy test*.

Turns out the doctor’s right.

I send my mother a text. If I know her, she’s probably still up, wondering what’s going on.

Me:

Where the hell did you find this woman? At a walk for women’s rights?

Maman:

Haha. She's good at what she does. Trustworthy. Doesn't put up with any nonsense. She's Louisa Myles's daughter. You remember her?

Me:

Ahh.

Our family medic for years before my father passed away and she retired.

“Well, folks,” the doctor says pleasantly, holding up the test. “That’s a pretty clear positive.”

Cosette smiles victoriously.

I blink.

“Are we keeping the baby?” the doctor asks.

“Yes,” we say in unison.

I glare at Cosette. She glares back. We’re not supposed to be on the same team.

Keep the baby.

Keep the baby?

As if that’s even a question.

Wait. I haven’t even gotten the paternity test back yet and I’m already jumping to the assumption the baby’s mine.

Whose else would it be?

I’d have to find him and kill him.

“Congratulations, Mr. Gerard. Your mother will be thrilled.” She beams, holding up the test.

She goes on about things like prenatal care and vitamins and checkup visits, but I hardly hear it.

“Liam?” Cosette asks. I ignore the smug look on her face.

For now.

I look at Cosette. “Did you hear what she said? She asked if you want her to take care of my prenatal care here or elsewhere?”

“Here but I want an option for an office visit if necessary. This changes nothing.”

Cosette flinches but quickly recovers and turns back to the doctor. They talk about nausea and hydration and a bunch of other things I barely listen to. My mind races with questions and possibilities.

“That’s it then for now,” the doctor says, rising as she gives me a smile. “Again, I tell no one else any more details. Good night, Mr. Gerard. I’ll see myself out.”

She’ll do no such thing.

“I’ll see you out, but first I need to know, how far along is she?” I ask.

“Based on the date of her last period, she’s eight weeks along.”

Either she’s lying, or this baby’s mine.

Mine.

Mine?

What the fuck is in the water at Le Luxe?

She said she was on birth control. I trusted that.

“You said you were on birth control.”

Cosette’s smug look broadens. “Thought you didn’t believe the baby was yours?”

“Whether it is or not impacts our future, mine and yours, so I have to know for sure. And you know why I don’t take you at your word.” I don’t care that she winces. I push on. “Unless you’re lying about that date, or cheated on me when we were together, then the baby *is* mine.”

“Oh, it’s yours alright,” she snaps. “I can tell by the way it’s making me sick already.”

Dr. Martin’s eyebrows rise before she responds. “We’ll know soon enough. For now, follow the instructions on this sheet

here, and I'll be in touch with the results of the paternity test shortly." She packs her bag and heads for the door while Cosette peruses the paper she gave her. I can't read the smaller print but can read *FIRST TRIMESTER OF PREGNANCY* across the top wide and clear.

This feels surreal.

"I'd like to see you in another month."

"A month?" Cosette and I say in unison.

There we go again.

"Why that long?" I ask her. "Don't you have to take care of her and the baby? What if something goes wrong during that time?"

"There's nothing to do now but make sure she's nice and hydrated, eats well, and gets plenty of rest. Of course, if there are any concerns, or you have any symptoms on that sheet, you can call me directly at any time." She hands us both a little business card with her name emblazoned on the front. "Normally I'd have you call the front desk, but when I work for the Gerard family, I have a direct line."

Good.

That's something, anyway.

After she's gone, Cosette and I stand alone in the room, staring at each other. She stifles a yawn, her eyes watering.

"I told you," she says quietly. She blinks and turns to the bed, sinking onto it.

I pull out the chair at the desk and sit.

We don't talk again for long minutes. What should be happy news feels like weighted bricks in my stomach.

"I didn't want you to... hurt the baby," she whispers before she averts her eyes. "That's the *only* reason I told you."

I blow out an angry breath. "If what you're telling me is true, then I deserve to know the truth."

“Do you?” She tips her head to the side. “And why would I tell someone who doesn’t believe a word I say? Why would I trust someone who doesn’t actually give a shit about *my* well-being? I half expect you to chain me to the bed, force-feed me prenatal vitamins, demand I get a C-section when I’m full term, and then take the baby for yourself.”

I stroke my chin. “Those are actually some good ideas.”

“Lyam!” She grimaces and turns away. “Please. Leave me. I’m so tired.”

I get to my feet.

“We’ll talk about this more tomorrow. Don’t think for a minute that you’re no longer my prisoner. This changes nothing.”

Fuck, it changes everything.

“Right,” she says on a yawn, lying back on the bed, her eyes closing.

“Don’t think I’ve forgotten what happened.”

When she doesn’t respond, I look more closely at her just before she lightly snores. I stare at her. She fell asleep just like that? Well, she *is* pregnant, which likely means she’s probably exhausted.

I don’t know what the fuck I’m going to do with her, but keeping her prisoner until she gives birth might be my only choice.

I look around the room and don’t see what I’m looking for. She’s asleep on top of the blanket, and I don’t want to wake her. She might be my prisoner, but she’s a pregnant prisoner, and those two things don’t seem to go hand in hand very well.

Jesus.

I find a spare blanket in the closet and open it up, laying it over her. No need for her to get cold, not when she’s carrying a baby that could be mine.

I check the windows.

I check the locks.

Then I leave, and head to my room.

I wish I could call my brothers. I can imagine how a call to Thayer would go.

“How’s our prisoner?”

“She’s fine,” I begin. “She’s pregnant, too.”

“What? Motherfucker. Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. I did the first thing you’d have done, and called a doctor.”

“Any idea who the daddy is?”

“Waiting on a paternity test, but if I’m honest about what I think? You’re talking to him.”

I can’t do that, not yet. Not until I know.

My room’s five times the size of hers, the biggest room in the house, and for good reason. This is my bachelor pad. If I bring anyone here, it’s a woman, and I want a nice, comfortable place to go.

Not that I’ve brought anyone here since Cosette.

I hate that Cosette’s betrayed us and she’s down the hall from me. I hate that I’ve signed up for this, but I hate even more the thought of anyone else putting their hands on her. I’d have to kill them.

Why does this change her betrayal?

She said she had to tell me, because she was afraid if I hurt her, I’d hurt the baby.

But is there another reason she had to tell me?

Why didn’t she want to tell me?

I’ve got more questions than answers as I pace the room, but I’m exhausted.

I strip out of my clothes and when I’m heading to the bathroom to wash up, I pull out my phone and check my

messages.

Three from Thayer and three from Fabien.

I purse my lips together and shake my head. If they found out already, then Dr. Martin isn't trustworthy at all—

Fabien:

Are you alright?

Fabien:

Lyam, tell me you're alright. I can't get in touch with anyone at your home. Are you okay?

Why does he want to know if I'm alright?

Thayer:

None of us can reach you. Maman is safe. Are you alright?

Now I'm wide awake. Why do they want to know if I'm alright? I call Thayer and Fabien on a three-way call.

"What the hell happened?"

"God, it's good to hear you," Thayer says, obvious concern in his voice. "There was a shooting at the Louvre. My sources say it was an unidentified assailant who killed himself. Our security said Maman was nearby recently and is home safe now, and asleep. Our guards will brief her in the morning."

God. This is one of the safest neighborhoods in France. I can't imagine why this happened.

I scrub a hand across my brow. Fabien speaks up next. "The shooting was half a mile from where you are and it's clear it's unrelated to anything having to do with us. We know that. Still..."

"It can't hurt to be safe. We're fine, I'll let you know if there are any changes."

I didn't hear it because her room is soundproof.

I pull up the app to check Cosette.

Still fast asleep.

Either I'm going to check the app every ten seconds all night long to make sure she's safe, or I'm going to march my ass back to that room and watch over her myself.

I'm in boxers and a tee as I open the door to my room and head down to Cosette's. Sometimes a shooting's a diversion, sometimes it's a warning.

I would know.

My security personnel have all gone to bed, but our security measures are all in place. Nothing's been triggered. If anyone stepped foot on our property, I'd know in seconds.

I open the door and find Cosette's still fast asleep. She doesn't even move when I check in on her.

I check the windows.

Fine.

The bed's barely big enough for me, never mind the two of us, but I don't care right now. I climb into bed beside her and pull the covers up over both of us.

It feels right.

I don't sleep all night like most people, but usually nap. My mind never allows me to rest long enough to sleep.

But now that I'm next to her... I remember.

I remember what it was like to hold her, to have her by my side like this. The soothing, whiffling sounds of her heavy breathing tell me she's calm and at rest. Soon, my breathing begins to match hers.

I developed insomnia recently. Even lying in bed, my mind races and I'm wide awake.

I stifle a yawn.

It's been a long day, though. I'm exhausted.

I'm only going to stay here to make sure she's safe.

I close my eyes. It's warm in here. God, Cosette's a damn furnace. Do pregnant women run hot?

Pregnant.

I imagine a baby inside her.

My baby.

Why was there a shooting nearby? Does it have anything to do with us?

Is this my baby?

I yawn, my eyes still closed.

How can I punish her without harming the baby?

I don't care who I've killed or what I've done, I don't love the idea of keeping a pregnant woman prisoner, and if she's pregnant with my baby...

What will I do with her?



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Cosette

WHERE AM I? I don't recognize the cream-colored walls of my room at Le Luxe. I still when I feel the warm, obviously male body behind me.

Lyam. I'm at Lyam's.

God, I sleep hard, being pregnant.

Why is he in this bed? He left me last night, and I was so heavily asleep I never heard him return. When did he come in? Why?

And more surprisingly—is he actually asleep? I've never had him in bed with me like this because Lyam doesn't really sleep. Plagued with insomnia, he would lie in bed with me while *I* slept and occasionally catch a few hours. But right now, I can feel the slow, steady, rhythmic breathing that indicates he is indeed asleep.

I'm struck with the sudden, disconcerting realization that even if things were good between me and Lyam, pregnancy itself is not going to be all fun and games. My body is telling me loud and clear I have to use the bathroom before my bladder explodes. But I'm confident that if I move, I'm going to vomit.

Oh, this is gonna be fun.

I'm at war within myself, trying to figure out which is more important right now: staying completely still so I don't vomit again, or going to the bathroom so I don't explode. And if I do move, I'm afraid I'll wake Lyam up. I don't want to.

I like it when he actually sleeps. And I don't want to fight with him anymore.

I remind myself I should hate him.

The need to use the bathroom wins. I move as slowly as I can, but soon realize moving means I need to extricate myself from his arm around my waist.

Oops.

I lift his arm.

His very big, very heavy, tattooed, and muscular arm.

How can I be thinking of sex at a time like this?

But of course the second I manage to get out of bed, I wake him.

“Going somewhere?”

Shit.

“Ladies’ room. Were you actually sleeping?”

“I took a nap, yeah.”

I wonder how long he’s been here.

We don’t speak again, yet I’m trembling when I reach the bathroom door. I open it, shut the door wishing there was a lock, and do my business. I stay in here a little longer than necessary because I don’t want to face him, not like this.

I splash water on my face and brush my teeth, but the taste of the toothpaste does me in. Nausea roils through me like bubbling lava. I fight it, but the nausea wins.

Soon, I’m on my knees, emptying my stomach.

Great.

But this time, I’m not alone. I can feel him behind me.

“No, Lyam,” I say, shaking my head. “I don’t want you to see me like this.”

“Too late.”

I feel his hands at my neck, lifting my hair, when the nausea hits me again.

If I wasn’t horrified by the idea of what he’s seeing or embarrassed to be found like this, I’d think it was almost romantic.

But we’re not there.

When I’m finally done, I rest my head in my hands. Exhausted. I make it to the sink with his help and rinse my mouth. I splash cold water on my face and my clammy neck,

then lean against the sink for support. When I turn to go back to bed, I face the wall of his chest.

Wordlessly, he lifts me.

I tense in his arms and open my mouth to protest, but he shakes his head.

“If what you’re telling me is the truth, I’ve got a duty to honor that. If you’re carrying my baby, I’ll have to be gentler on you. I won’t let you go, but while you’re pregnant and in my possession, I’ll have to take care of you.”

In my possession.

I’m... in his possession?

I don’t want to be. I want to be free. I want to be alone.

I don’t trust him any more than he trusts me.

Though given how this started, I won’t complain if he’s trying to be gentle. “How long does this last?” he asks, when I’m sliding back into bed.

I look at him in surprise. “Nine months.” He doesn’t know this basic fact?

“No, God,” he says, and I swear I almost see him smile. “I’m not that much of an idiot. The nauseous part. How long are you nauseous?”

I shake my head. “I have no idea. I’ve never been pregnant before. I guess a few weeks or something? But it varies based on the woman.”

“Right.”

Tired and weak, I blink at him while he paces in front of me. He’s wearing nothing but boxers and a tee that’s molded to his perfect physique.

I forgot how gorgeous he was.

He’s stunning when he’s dressed in a suit with a crisp white dress shirt, but the casual look highlights every casually masculine detail that makes my heart beat faster.

When there's a knock at the door, he turns to answer it, murmurs under his breath, then comes back with a cup of something steamy that smells like mint. "My staff found this for you." I take a sip, pleased my belly's beginning to settle a little bit.

"You're still my prisoner," he says, as if to remind me that he's not going to go *too* easy on me.

I sigh wearily and lean my head back against the pillow. "We've established that."

"And soon we'll find out if I'm the father."

I smile wanly. "No. *You* will. Unless I was abducted by aliens and impregnated in my sleep, I already know the answer to that question."

How will he react when he knows the truth? He's possessive but furious.

A knock sounds at the door.

"That will be breakfast. Get under those fucking covers so they don't see you." I smirk to myself when I look down and see I'm wearing a tank and shorts.

"Sure thing." I slide back under the covers and pull them up to my chin. When he opens the door, my mouth waters at the smell of freshly baked bread.

The room's so small, I can hear every word he says. "Did you hear anything about what happened last night?"

What happened last night?

"Not much, sir, but I'll see what I can find. There's a rumor your family's been mentioned on the news."

His family? What's going on?

"Son of a bitch." He shakes his head. "I'm going to get her settled before I look, but thanks."

Shutting the door, he walks over to me with a wooden tray. He grunts and points like a caveman. "I had them make you things you like. Try a little bite. It might help."

I stare at the tray and my throat gets all tight. While breakfast in France is a simple affair, he's arranged to have it served the way I like it—the sliced bread toasted and spread with butter and marmalade. The tea scalding hot with a splash of milk. Orange juice with no pulp, and a small basket of flaky croissants served with a side of softened butter.

I could handle being a prisoner. I could handle being held against my will. But how am I supposed to handle being with someone who knows me so intimately he knows exactly what I like? It's the worst kind of vulnerability because there's no place to hide.

My belly aches for food, but I fear another bite of something will make me sick again.

I turn my head away.

“One bite, Cosette.”

I shake my head and press my lips together.

“Cosette,” he says warningly.

I take another sip of the mint tea and stare at him. “So now that you know I'm pregnant, you're going to punish me by making me do things I don't want to, like eat?”

He pulls out the desk chair and sits heavily. Leaning forward with his forearms on his knees, he looks straight into my eyes and doesn't answer my question but asks a question of his own, in typical Lyam style.

“Am I going to make you do what you should? Yes.”

“My belly's all queasy.”

“Then take a nibble. They said the tea would help and that you need some food to make the nausea better. Eat what sounds good.”

Okay, so those croissants are calling my name, and I *am* concerned that I need some food.

I take the tiniest bite of a croissant.

“Good girl.”

I can handle his anger, but I'm not sure I can handle his approval. I take a quick sip of tea to quell my nerves.

"Now that I know you're pregnant, I want to know. Did you know you were pregnant before you were approached at Le Luxe? And if so, did that have anything to do with why you betrayed us?"

I don't want to give him all the answers. I can't. He's already made wild assumptions about my thoughts and motives, and if he truly knew everything, I'm afraid he'd jump to conclusions that assume the worst about me.

I draw in a breath and take another sip of tea before I answer. I have to reluctantly admit, it's helping.

"Yes."

I place the mug down on the tray and sit up a little more in bed. It's hard to remain dignified when the person you're with just saw you praying to the porcelain gods and you're completely at their mercy, but I do my best.

"I didn't want to tell you I was pregnant, because I know that the baby is yours. I was afraid that if I told you, you'd think I was trying to manipulate you. You were right. I was on birth control. But we're both smart enough to know that birth control isn't completely effective, and it appears the Gerard family has excellent reproductive genes."

Is that a hint of a smile at the corners of his mouth?

I draw in a breath and release it slowly.

"And somehow, they also knew."

The Chabert family, rival mafia, were after Thayer's Savannah because of what she'd seen. Hidden deep within the walls of Le Luxe, Savannah was safe with Thayer, but thanks to me, not for long.

I look away. I don't want to tell him this part.

He's already on his feet, pacing, his phone in a death-like grip as if he's going to order a nuclear bomb attack if anything I tell him now gives him reason.

Oh, Lyam. Don't you know not everything can be solved with a well-placed bullet or three?

"I told you that I was loyal to your family. You know that. And you all believed I betrayed you, because obviously, I did. I hate what I did. I don't know how I'll ever look Savannah in the eyes again knowing I lied to her." My throat tightens and I can't continue for a moment.

Still glaring, he pauses his pacing. "Are you ready to tell me why, then?"

I nod. There's no point in hiding this from him now and if I'm honest, I want this part at least off my chest. My voice trembles when I tell him the nauseating, horrifying truth I wish I could forget. "They knew I was pregnant. Mindy and I shared a locker at Le Luxe. You know we worked together on the same shift."

Mindy, submissive to her master at Le Luxe, was friendly to me. None of us knew her master was on the Chabert family payroll, or that he'd infiltrated the privacy and security of Le Luxe.

Lyam nods. And he knows it was Mindy who worked with her master to manipulate me, that the only way to get to Savannah would have to be an inside job. They knew that.

"She must've seen the pregnancy test. She definitely saw me vomiting and crying, and even though she asked questions, women sometimes know. They were planning on using me and looking for a threat that would make me cave, and that positive pregnancy test was the ticket."

He stares in front of me, a look I'm all too familiar with in his eyes. Almost inhuman in intensity, that dangerous, foreboding look warns me he's on the cusp of going to the dark recesses of his mind that knows no fear. This is the part of him I'm irrevocably drawn to and simultaneously fear.

In a low, deadly voice, he asks, "Did they threaten you and the baby?"

The knowledge that there's a baby growing inside me as we speak, cells reproducing at enormously fast rates, creating an

actual human who will eventually be fully dependent on *me*, stirs something primal and protective deep within me. I swallow and nod.

I feel nauseous again at the memory of the terrible threat against me. Horrific, vivid, and something one doesn't get over very easily.

"They told me that if I didn't cooperate, they would end my pregnancy. And they told me in vivid detail how they would do it."

Lyam stares at me, unblinking. "So they didn't threaten to hurt me. I knew that was a lie."

I nod.

"They threatened to harm you in another way entirely. To completely violate you. But if they'd threatened harm only to you, you wouldn't have caved. Instead, they threatened the baby, knowing full well you could never allow that to happen."

I nod. It feels both relieving and awful to tell him the truth now.

I hate that it's come to this.

"You have some terrible enemies," I whisper.

"They're lucky they're dead," he replies.

Dead. They're dead. Mindy and her master, and anyone else who was involved. Lyam saw to that, and his brothers helped.

"The Chaberts disowned the ones who attacked us. They attacked without permission from inside their family. And every one of them is gone now. I saw to that. If I'd known what they actually did to you..."

He doesn't have to complete the thought. I already know. They would have suffered a painful, slow, and torturous death. I know that. So does he.

"And you didn't tell me any of this. You allowed us to believe you betrayed us for your own gain." His brow tightens in anger. "Why?"

Isn't it obvious?

“Because I'd have to tell you I was pregnant. Your family is dangerous and wealthy, and I didn't want you to think I was trying to manipulate you. I didn't know what you'd do, and I didn't want to make excuses for what *I* did. But that doesn't matter.” My throat tightens. “I hate myself for what I did. We weren't exactly a happy couple, Lyam. We weren't even a *couple*.”

Were we ever? We weren't in a committed relationship.

I made sure of that.

I look away.

And how can I tell him I didn't know if I wanted to raise a baby with a man like him? Fiercely protective but dangerous.

So damn dangerous.

“Of all the things I'll never understand,” he mutters, almost to himself. “I most definitely will never understand women.”

When his phone vibrates, he glares at it as if it's his mortal enemy. Shaking his head, he turns away from me. “I have to take this call. Try to eat some more.”

Swiping his finger on the phone as if he wants to obliterate it from Planet Earth, he takes the call.

The tea's soothed my belly. My mouth waters from looking at the buttered bread and golden croissants, the fragrant tea laced with milk, still steaming. I take a tentative bite of bread. When my belly agrees this is a good idea, I take another bite and chase it with a sip of hot tea. I close my eyes briefly. Finally, some relief.

I'm not the only concern he has. Obviously, something's troubling him. The Gerard brothers are always restless, always on guard for the next attack. Is this the life I want for my child?

The door flings open. “Up,” he orders. “Get dressed. We have to move.”

I blink. “What?”

“We can’t stay here.”

“Why?”

Instead of answering he makes a phone call. “Everyone’s dismissed. You know where to go. I’ll be in touch.”

I push out of bed, thankful the nausea’s somewhat abated.

“Where are we going?”

“No more questions. Get ready.”

He gets ready in his own way, which in this case means strapping a holster around his waist and sliding guns and ammunition into the fitted sections as if he’s going to war.

I get dressed, freshen up, and in a few short minutes, we’re on our way out. His car sits, purring, waiting for us, when suddenly he curses.

“Motherfucker. They’re almost here.” He shakes his head. “I won’t do it. I fucking won’t let them take us. Buckle your belt, *now*.”

“Who? What’s going on?”

“Buckle,” he snaps, my only warning before he starts the car and floors it.

Like everything he does, Lyam is an incredibly competent driver, even when he’s driving so fast it feels like we’re flying. Eyes on the road, his hands on the wheel, his reactions are instantaneous and on point. I should be scared, but in his capable hands... I’m not. I feel like a magician could wave a wand and turn this car into a spaceship, and he’d maneuver that control panel with expertise and ease.

I gasp when I see flashing lights behind us. I expected criminals or his enemies, not... the police?

He drives with staggering speed down a long, narrow street, takes a sharp left, then a right. Paris is a maze of intersections and streets full of landmarks, tourists, and shops, with the Seine at the heart of the city. It’s easy to get lost in a place like this.

My pulse hammers in my chest, my belly in knots. “Are you going to tell me what’s going on? I can probably do better if I know what’s going on.”

“You’ll do better if you do what I tell you.”

Of course he says that.

“Fuck.”

A roadblock sits at the center of the intersection.

I gasp as he takes a corner so quickly, I feel we’re airborne for a second. Without missing a beat, he yanks the wheel so we’re on a sidewalk. Pedestrians scream and jump out of the way. Street dogs bark at us, and a few people snap pictures with their cell phones.

I can see them in the rearview mirror. This car is narrow, though, and I realize then that’s why he took it. At the next turn, he yanks the wheel again. I scream as we drive straight into oncoming traffic. “Up the down staircase,” he mutters. “Always an option B. Don’t worry, they don’t want to die either.”

Is he banking on that?

I open one eye to watch as the cars in front of us part as if by magic.

I squeeze my eyes shut again when we careen forward with impossible speed. A loud, grating noise makes me open them again. I stifle a scream.

We’re in an alley so narrow, I feel claustrophobic. The side mirrors of the car scrape off along the walls, the remaining wires sparking when they contact the concrete.

I scream and cover my face.

“This can’t be good for the baby. Oh my God!”

“Don’t worry, Cosette.” I feel his hand on top of mine. My heartbeat thunders. “I won’t let you get hurt.”

We come out of the alleyway on the other side. For a moment, I think we made it, until I see another flash of lights.

“Trust me,” he says, pushing his foot down hard on the pedal. The streets and people whip past us so fast I feel like we’re on a movie set. A pedestrian bridge over water looms in front of us.

That bridge is not built for cars but foot traffic.

“Lyam...”

“You have to trust me.”

“This isn’t made to drive on. It’s pedestrians only! It won’t support the weight of the car, Lyam!”

Ignoring me, he goes even faster.

“Close your eyes.”

“What?”

“Close your eyes!”

I scream and squeeze my eyes shut. For added measure, I cover my closed eyes with my hands.

Is he going to jump the bridge? *Oh my God.*

We’re airborne. *Airborne.* I don’t know how he does it, but I can feel us flying through the air like a paper airplane. I grip my belly on instinct and brace for the impact. We land on the other side with a soft *thunk*, the impact gentle, then we’re driving again. The impact wasn’t anything like I expected. How did he do that?

We’re on the other side.

We made it.

He jumped the bridge.

Without pausing for even a second of triumph, he takes a sharp left, then a right. We’re zigzagging back and forth until finally, *finally*, we make it to a city road flanked by cars. We merge with the flow of traffic and blend right in.

No one follows us.

He slows and turns to face me. “You alright?”

I check. "I'm f-fine." Other than a little jostling, I'm okay. "How did you manage to land like that?"

"It's the car. I had it customized." He goes on and on about something like suspension and shocks and stability. I know it isn't just the car, though. He's grossly underestimating his abilities. If I didn't know any better, I'd think he was a superhero, able to fly through the air and navigate human limitations with ease.

I do know better, though. I know who he really is.

"You sure you're okay?"

I know what he's asking. He wants to know if the baby's fine.

"Yes."

The sudden realization hits me.

Liam doesn't need a paternity test either. He knows as well as I do that this baby is his.

But I don't get a minute to revel in this knowledge before he's barking out commands again.

"Look in that glove compartment," he snaps. I do.

Three handguns neatly nestled in leather harnesses.

"We're going to speak to an informant eventually and need to stay safe in the meantime. We need to be prepared. I wanted to make sure we were. Shut it."

Okayyyy. Yeah.

"How are you feeling?"

"That drink you gave me must be miraculous, because under normal conditions, being tossed around like I'm a load of laundry in a dryer would make me sick as hell, but I'm okay." I let out a breath I didn't know I held. "But maybe let's not plan that again."

He gives me a wry smile. "I'll try."

My heart turns in my chest.

No matter how hard I try to put a wall up between the two of us, no matter how hard I try to convince myself he's dangerous

and deadly and we shouldn't be together... when he looks at me like that, I'm right back at Le Luxe, losing my heart to him.

He drives over to the side of the road, parks the car, and exits so he can take out our bags. "We'll need another set of wheels. Obviously, this one's on their radar."

He discards cars as if they're disposable plates.

"Right."

"Last night, there was a shooting. Some local powers that be thought it smart to blame 'organized crime.' We, obviously, had nothing to do with it but we're an easy scapegoat. And since I'm the one here, they're pinning the blame on me."

Powers that be.

Could it be?

No... no, there's no way.

"So we're going to hide for now."

"Hide? Where?"

Another sultry smirk makes my heartbeat quicken. "You'll see."

I like this side of Lyam so much better than the brooding captor. I still don't trust him, though.

"But you were home last night!"

"It doesn't matter, Cosette. They're not looking for evidence or alibis. They want to look like the good guys by putting us away."

They. They who?

What a complicated life he leads.

"Right," I say with a sigh.

"So until we get to the bottom of this, we hide."

"And what does 'getting to the bottom of this' entail?" I ask.

He smiles at the guns like a boy with his toys.

Lovely.

“You’ll leave that part to me. For now, let’s get you settled.”
He glances at his phone. “Looks like I got a call from Dr. Martin.”



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SEVEN

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Lyam

FUCKING MONTAGUE'S got it in for us.

I had hardly any warning at all before I knew—he'd pinned last night's activities on mobsters in his precious city and struck while the iron was hot. How fortunate for him he could attack my family and try to use us as the whipping boys for his run for office.

No fucking way.

We have informants. We've got people on the inside. And as soon as he blew the whistle and sent the *gendarmerie* to arrest me, I got the word.

I'll pay my informant well.

But first... Cosette.

I don't like to run, and I'm not one to hide. But my obligation is to Cosette.

I know where we'll hide until we get our footing. Hidden behind a thick forest of trees, Le Marquise will suit our needs, at least until I can conference with my brothers and come up with a plan of attack.

Adrenaline still pumping from that godawful high-speed chase, I make sure Cosette's safe. God, if I'd done anything that would've caused harm to her or the baby—but no, she's totally fine, thank fuck.

The car, on the other hand, will need some love.

I call Dr. Martin back.

"I was able to pull some strings, Mr. Gerard. I had the lab open early so they could process the results."

"Thank you." That wad of cash I handed her on the way out didn't hurt then. Most things that take time can be expedited if you know the right price.

"And?"

I know the answer before she says it.

“She was right. You are the father. I’ll have these results printed and sent to your home as well as email.”

“*No.*”

“The results are very clear, Mr. Gerard. You can’t deny scientific data —”

“No. I believe you. But I don’t want them sent to my home. This information dies here, understood? We never had this conversation.”

“Yes, Mr. Gerard. Understood.”

I hang up the phone and stare at the road in front of us. It feels as if we’ve driven straight out of the heart of the city and into a place all our own.

Cosette gives me a curious look.

“And?” she says, though she knows full well what I’m going to say.

If I’m honest, I knew the minute she told me she was pregnant, but I needed evidence. I needed to confirm it.

A baby. She’s pregnant with my baby.

She only betrayed my family because she was trying to protect our baby.

Our baby.

It feels as if a weight’s been lifted. Like I’ve been viewing things through mist and clouds that have been cleared away. I didn’t know how anyone who could behave the way she did would ever betray people she’d come to view as family. Cosette lives to serve, and longs to be needed. I knew this about her after our first night together. But I doubted myself.

I doubted her.

I thought I hated her. I thought I’d never forgive her for what she did, but now that I know her reasons—

I turn to her. “She told me you’re carrying my baby.”

Cosette's eyes widen. She isn't surprised by the news. She told me the news herself.

Is it my reaction, then, that surprises her? Or the knowledge that she's finally told me everything?

I reach for her. This time, she doesn't flinch. I cup her face in my hands and look into those beautiful green eyes.

"You're having my baby," I whisper, shaking my head. "I never thought I'd be a father."

"I know," she whispers back. "I never thought I'd be a mother either. I promise you, Lyam. I swear, if I thought there was any other way, I never would've done what I did. I hate that I did. I don't know how I'll ever look at Thayer or Savannah again. I —"

I tilt my head toward hers. She stops talking. I press her body closer to mine. I can't get close enough.

I want her.

And I do something so foreign to me, it stuns me.

I forgive her.

Will she forgive me?

And then, I do the most natural thing in the world.

I believe every word she says. A surge of emotion renders me speechless and the only right thing to do is kiss her.

My heart beats faster.

Her lips part like an invitation, and when my lips meet hers, she yields to me. I hold her face with one hand and her back with the other. I've touched her since I've taken her into my custody, but nothing like this. My touch is tender and gentle, but urgent. I want her.

Cosette carries my baby.

My child.

Cosette is mine.

Her eyes close as if she wants to savor this moment. This reunion.

My lips move softly against hers, a silent apology for everything I've subjected her to. I feel like an asshole for what I've done.

Too soon, she pulls away. She frames my face with her hands and our foreheads touch.

"I'm so sorry I betrayed your family. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner."

I swallow, my voice husky when I tell her, "I understand if you don't forgive me, but I want you to know how sorry I am. I truly thought you betrayed us. I'm sorry I couldn't see the truth."

"It's my fault," she says, then finally laughs. "Listen to us, trying to outdo each other with apologies. We should have been honest with each other from the beginning. You should have given me a chance to explain, and I should've trusted you with the truth."

There's more at stake here. We were a couple once, but she put an end to that.

"We have shit to go over, Cosette."

"Yeah." She looks down at her hands. "I know. And I'm sorry, too."

"Did you end it because you were pregnant?"

When she doesn't answer at first, I know. She fears being with me. She was the one who pulled away, not me, and she knows it.

"Yeah," she finally says. "I was scared. I was afraid you'd accuse me of trying to get pregnant on purpose, so I could take advantage of you."

Is she kidding right now?

"What the hell is that about?"

When she looks back up at me, she sighs. "It's complicated. It wasn't personal, I just... struggle with getting close to people."

Sometimes, people in club settings feel they know someone better than they do. There's an immediate vulnerability that leads to a level of trust. And then you realize... you never really knew them at all.

I want to get to know her.

I want to put all this behind us.

She's the mother of my child.

Cosette sighs. "When I tell you I'm sorry, I mean for everything. If I had it to do over again... I'd choose differently. Listen Lyam, we're stronger together. Let me make it up to you. If there's a threat against you, I might be able to help."

How the hell would she help me bring down Montague? I don't have the slightest idea. Still, it's the thought. The principle behind her actions. The desire for repentance.

I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to her. I'd never forgive myself if I'd done anything to jeopardize the baby's health.

"I'll tell you everything I can," I say. "But we have to get to safety. We won't stay here long, just long enough for me to get in touch with our informant. After I do, I'll know more about what's going on."

"What about your family?" she asks, true concern in her voice.

Cosette never wanted to betray us, I believe this now. And damn if that doesn't change the whole landscape of who we are.

"They're good. Maman's safe and was never one of their leads or targets anyway. Thayer and Savannah are traveling but unscathed and Fabien and Nicolette are in Corsica. I'm the one they framed."

"Someone framed you?" She frowns. "Who would do that?"

"God, anyone."

My mind goes back to the dark recesses of the dungeon. The clinking of metal cuffs in the musky room. The cold at my

back. But worst of all, the helpless feeling of being out of control and fully at the mercy of another.

“Lyam?” She traces the outline of my face with her fingertip. “You alright?”

“Yeah.” My voice is husky. “Fine.”

“You’re not alright. You got so angry with me for lying, yet you do it to me so casually,” she muses.

She cuts right through the bullshit. I always loved that about her.

“Not now,” I tell her.

She looks out the window. “Where *are* we anyway?”

“A place where no one will find us. You’ll see in a minute, but it’s a little tricky to get there.”

“Right.” She takes in our surroundings. “I’ve never been here before.”

“One of the hidden gems north of Paris.”

“Oh, wow.”

We have small locations all throughout Europe we can go to when we need to. A secret underground bunker near the Metro in downtown Paris, private hotel rooms accessed through back entrances, an abandoned church north of the Louvre, a warehouse south of the city.

We share our private locations with our friends the Rossis in America, and in return they give us access to their home in Tuscany, like an underground network. Sometimes, being in a place that’s secluded and solitary works for hiding. Sometimes, it’s best to hide in plain sight.

I take her bags and check my guns as she exits the vehicle. No one’s tracked us here. We lost them back at the bridge.

I lead her down a flight of stone stairs that smell musty from disuse into a paved area.

“Oh wow. Is there a chamber with a princess? A dragon hoarding its gold? This is like... an outside dungeon.”

Chains. Damp air. Stale cigarette smoke. The squealing of rodents hunting for crumbs.

“Yeah.” My voice is husky. “Like an outside dungeon.”

I turn my memories toward a dungeon involving Cosette and pull them away from the memories that keep me up at night.

At the foot of the stairs, a paved road leads to several places only locals know about. You won’t find these locales in any travel guides.

“Charming,” Cosette says with a curious look. I wonder if she’s being sarcastic. The rustic, world-weary location is meant to throw people off. We’ve installed top-notch security measures. I’ll know if there’s so much as a mouse searching for a scrap of food.

She’ll like it here, though. I’ll enjoy seeing her reaction.

I open the series of locks and push open the heavy door.

Cosette gasps. “I suppose we’ll make do, won’t we?”

A gleaming marble floor stretches out before us, and six members of staff stand ready for my command. We have Le Marquise all to ourselves.

“I feel like I’ve stepped through a portal into another realm,” she says, blinking in the bright light that’s in such stark contrast to the dim lighting outside. “I half expect a witch or a magician to emerge to take us to our rooms. Old-world history meets modern-day luxury?” she asks in a low voice.

“You could say that.”

My family bought Le Marquise, tucked deep in the fifth arrondissement of Paris, after my father’s passing. It’s charming and comfortable but built like a fortress.

She’ll join me in a private suite.

It’s clean in here and ready for guests, though Cosette and I will be the only ones. We keep it stocked with emergency food supplies, fresh water, and toiletries.

“We’ll be in the penthouse,” I say to staff.

“Yes, sir.” They take our bags and I take her hand. The elevator will take us to the top floor, built for a solid view of the Louvre.

I issue commands as we walk to the elevator, delegating. “Call Philippe. I want a conference call in an hour. Make sure he knows where I am and that all security personnel have us locked down.” After Le Luxe was infiltrated, we put in security measures unlike anything we’d ever done before. We spent millions of dollars vetting our staff and putting into place a secret network of people and places that would provide safety.

It isn’t just me, Thayer, and Fabien anymore. We could handle ourselves and always have. Between our informants and security, and our own talents when it comes to wielding a weapon—the most important being the lack of a conscience that gives us the added luxury of being able to pull the trigger—we’re almost fucking untouchable. When you don’t fear death, you’re untouchable.

But we have our mother who’d no sooner pull the trigger of a gun than live in an underground submarine. And now... children. Babies. *Dependents*.

Our safety matters.

“Cars,” Victor, one of my staff, mutters. “What kind of fucking cars do we need?”

I give him a list.

Perrine joins him, her hair tucked into a neat bun at the nape of her neck, her eyes glowing with excitement. She loves weapons the way some women love shoes. “Weapons, sir?”

Cosette stares and blinks as if I’ve just transported her into a magical kingdom where fairies and wizards live.

“Where are we?” she whispers.

“It’s called Le Marquise.”

“Whoa. I thought Le Luxe was something else. I mean, it’s the height of luxury, but seriously, Lyam. This is... this is

stunning. And it's so hidden. Like, you'd need to be in an airplane or helicopter just to see it." She pauses. "Wait—"

I nod. "We've thought about that, too."

Fabien was the one that chose militaristic security measures to guard against anyone ever seeing us.

"It's like we're hidden in a world between worlds," she replies.

I check my phone and grunt in reply. She always was a romantic at heart and sees the charm in every little thing.

"Can I get you anything to eat, Mr. Gerard?"

I look to Cosette. "Are you hungry?"

"Famished," she says, her hand on her belly. "I swear I ate a good breakfast and now—"

"You're pregnant." I turn to Victor. "She's pregnant. Make sure everything prepared for her is suitable for a pregnant woman. We're going upstairs to regroup, and I'll be down in an hour for the meeting. We'll be here for a while, so I want to make sure we're ready." I scratch my jaw. Cosette stares. "We've got the doctor visits arranged. I want to be sure she has all the food she needs, proper hydration, her vitamins, and the remedies she needs for nausea. Finally, I want my brothers to know I'm here, but no one else." I harden my voice. "Is that clear? *No one*."

"Clear. Consider it done."

We walk to the elevator as my staff hustles to make sure everything around us is done the way I asked. They know who I am and what I expect. I reward those who obey and punish those who don't. Every member of my staff is loyal, dependable, and bulletproof.

I push the elevator button. It dings, ready for us.

"They just *obey* you," she whispers, shaking her head. "Why? How? Even at Le Luxe, things were more like... peers. There was a different vibe. Here, though..."

“We only come here if we need top-notch security,” I explain.
“We only come here if we’re in danger. So yeah, they do what I say.”

“Ahhhh. All of them?”

I give her a warning look. “Yeah, baby. All of them. There’s only one person who doesn’t. You know who that is?”

“Um,” she says with a sheepish little grin. “Me?”

“Very good. You get a gold star.”

I don’t tell her that it’s her refusal to obey me that initially intrigued me. I’d never met anyone who defied me so fearlessly as Cosette.

It really got to me. I had a hard time reconciling her willingness to serve in bed with her refusal to obey me outside of it.

I knew she’d pose a challenge, and I loved that.

I take her elbow to steady her as we step onto the elevator. She doesn’t need me to, but I can’t help but do it automatically.

She’s carrying my baby. This isn’t just us anymore. Her safety’s never been more important.

I know now why she did what she did. I know now that even though her actions were heinous and dangerous, she had good reason for doing what she did. I know now that my gut instinct about her when I first met her wasn’t off.

“Oh, wow. The elevator doesn’t make a sound. It just whirrs while you magically travel.”

I grunt in reply while I answer a text from Fabien and take Thayer’s voicemail.

Everyone’s safe.

Thayer wants to know what’s the status of our prisoner.

Thayer:

Have you found anything out?

Me:

Some, and I also understand her motives now

Thayer:

Don't let that pretty face and her magical pussy sway you from what you have to do

Me:

Touché, brother. You underestimate me

Have I found anything out? You could say that.

When we enter the penthouse, Cosette goes from room to room, examining every little detail.

“Little rosebuds on the towel that were embroidered by hand. Wow. And matching soaps! Look, how adorable!”

“Did you say rose soaps?”

I put my phone down mid-reply to Fabien when she stands in the doorway holding something.

“Yes. Look how cute!” Small, rose-shaped soaps sit in the palm of her hand.

“Jesus,” I mutter. “Where did those come from? Someone who was outfitting this place must’ve taken them from home.” I shake my head.

“What do you mean?”

“I carved these. I learned how to carve things by hand by practicing on soap. My mother thought it was clever, so I guess she kept them or something.” I shrug. “I made these when I was a kid.”

She quirks a brow. “Why does it not surprise me you had access to knives when you were a kid?”

I snort and pick up a piece. I still remember sitting by the fireplace in our family home. My father was still alive.

Funny how a little bit of soap can trigger such vivid memories.

I shake myself out of my reverie. We’re short on time, and Cosette’s pregnant. Who knows what she’ll need from me.

“I have a few things to do. Settle in and we’ll get something to eat.”

When I finally look up from my phone an hour later, all I know is that Montague’s press conference made him out to be some sort of a hometown hero, and his ratings are up. The head of one of our rival families has been taken into custody, so we aren’t the only ones under scrutiny. Fabien seems to think that means he won’t come after us, but I have a sneaking suspicion that’s only wishful thinking.

He won’t find us here. But he’s after us. I wouldn’t be surprised if the attack at Le Luxe was somehow tied back to Montague as well. We’re safe here while we hide, but I only hide to regroup.

Once I find out who’s behind the threats against us—once I know who threatened Cosette and now threatens the well-being of my entire family—we’ll leave the security of this fortress.

It will be time to attack.

We take a quick ride in the elevator so I can give her a brief tour. She grins when she sees the swimming pool, the state-of-the-art exercise equipment in the fitness room, and private movie theater. Most luxury hotels have concierge services and room service, fine dining and well-stocked bars, butlers and valets. Not every luxury hotel has private elevators, bulletproof windows and reinforced doors, private security, advanced air filtration, or a helipad on the roof next to the garden terrace.

“Wow, seriously, this is amazing.”

“Mmm.”

“You’re distracted, Lyam,” she says quietly as she threads her fingers through mine tentatively. It’s going to take time for us to get back to where we were before all this happened, but we’re getting there.

I breathe a little easier with her palm against mine.

“Fucking politics,” I mutter. I slide the phone into my pocket. Fucking Montague doesn’t even care about us or what we

stand for but wants the ratings and votes.

Cosette blinks. “Politicians?”

I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t want to dwell. I’ll do what I have to and so will Thayer and Fabien, but for now, I want to revel in her. Relax right here, by her side. Make sure she’s alright. We’ve been through hell and we need some time to reconnect.

I step off the elevator and into the hallway.

She doesn’t follow.

I reach for Cosette’s hand and give her a little tug, only to notice she’s gone white as a sheet.

“Are you feeling sick again?” I ask curiously. “You okay?” I’ve got half a mind to scoop her up and carry her off the elevator. Her skin’s gone pale and clammy like she’s contracted something.

“Cosette. Are you alright? What’s going on?”

“I’m... I don’t feel so good,” she whispers. “I think I need that food after all.”



EIGHT

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Cosette

I TRULY FEEL NAUSEOUS, and I'm not sure the pregnancy is helping at all, so when he leads me to the room under the assumption that I'm nauseous from pregnancy, I don't correct him.

There's no way... *no*.

I hate Paris because of my father.

He hates Paris because of politicians.

The man who got my mother pregnant—by all definitions, my *father*—lives in Paris.

François Montague will never admit that I'm his daughter. It looks good to the press that he has a wife he's been married to for thirty years, two picture-perfect children at university, and a modest home in the suburbs. Montague would never recover from the admission that he cheated on his wife and had a child with her. Better for him to pretend it never happened.

Some politicians would've paid my mother off to keep her silent, but that was too good a choice for Montague. Maybe he feared she'd better herself or make a spectacle of him. So instead, he threatened to ruin her, to have her put in jail on trumped-up charges and have me taken away. Instead of providing for either of us, he chose to pretend it never happened. That we never existed. To Montague, we don't exist.

For years, my mother wouldn't tell me who he was. She said we were better off without him.

I've spent the past few years of my life trying to figure out who he was.

The irony of Lyam asking for a paternity test...

If Montague ever asked for one, it would be loud and clear.

I don't want to know who it is that Lyam's after.

I don't want to know anything.

I can't deal with that now. Not when I have a baby to bring to term. Not when I have my own life to worry about. Not when Lyam's lack of trust runs so deep in his veins, it takes everything I've got to rebuild what we had.

And I know the chances are so slim—

I'm always looking for excuses to run. This time, I won't. I can't. If I spend the rest of my life running every time I draw close to anyone, where will I end up?

My thoughts come to a screeching halt when the elevator door opens, bringing us back to the most high-end penthouse I've ever seen. It's more than a hotel room, more than anything I even saw at Le Luxe.

I have a question, though. "Lyam, how is this place possibly secure? How do you *hide* it?"

He shrugs. "Camouflage, to begin with. That forest of thick trees? The outside of the building was intentionally designed to disappear into the surroundings. Remember how we didn't even see it when we first drove here?"

I nod, wordless. This is amazing.

"So the structure blends into the forest, making it harder to see from a distance. That only keeps the most basic viewers from finding it, though. We planted natural barriers, some extra vegetation and a rooftop garden which makes it a lot harder to see from above."

Brilliant. Anyone flying over would see the spread of green and colors of vegetation. From a distance, it would look like the ground below.

"The entrances are secret and hidden, but the most high-tech methods involve blocking radar and jamming systems with electronic countermeasures. We don't want aircraft finding us."

"And this is all legal?" I blurt out. "Like... there are military planes and—"

He only smirks.

Yeah. I forgot who I was talking to there for a minute.

“We’ve got surveillance cameras, motion detectors, alarms, and security teams around the clock. Biometric access panels keep out unwanted guests.”

“Right. *Wow.*”

“Windows are reinforced, the walls are bulletproof. We even have a fire suppression system and emergency generators. The windows and doors are reinforced with shatterproof glass and heavy-duty locks.”

“So not only are you guarding against attacks, not only are you making sure you have a place to hide where literally no one can find you, but you’re also prepared in the event of like... a nuclear attack.”

“Yes.”

Holy shit.

“Well, then,” I mutter to myself. “Guess I somehow stumbled on the exact right type of father I’d want for my baby. Someone to make sure they are as safe as can possibly be. Maybe we should pick out where we’ll put the nursery.”

Another smirk.

The elevator opens.

“This place is *lavish*,” I tell him.

He shrugs. “You know I like to work hard and play hard. And we had to have it designed so that it was comfortable enough for a long-term stay.”

Long-term stay.

“How long do you think we’ll be here?”

“I don’t know,” he says honestly. “We may be leaving the premises for your prenatal visits. We don’t bring people here unless it’s necessary.”

That’s a full month away.

“You’ll like it here, though,” he says, as he stretches his shoulders and neck. His voice drops to a lower, deeper register that holds promise. “I’ll make sure of it.”

My pulse begins to pound. My mouth goes dry, and a warm sensation fills my belly.

He'll make sure I like it here, will he?

I'm glad we moved out of his house. I'd have a hard time forgetting the memory of the prison-like room he kept me in, even if it wasn't for long. I want to start fresh with him. Maybe this is my chance.

I look around the room. It's elegant but functional, with modern and stylish decor—marble flooring, stainless steel appliances in the kitchen, and in the living area, comfortable seating with panoramic views of the skyline. There's an office, a kitchen, and two sitting areas, one with an open dining room table near the kitchen. I don't feel right about getting these floors dirty, so I kick off my shoes. I luxuriate in the soft feel of carpet underfoot.

When I walk to the kitchen, though, I brace myself for the cold of the floor beneath my feet.

I pause on the very edge of the room and look to Lyam with wide eyes.

"It's warm," I whisper.

"They're heated floors," he whispers back.

"Are you *kidding me? Why?*"

I like the way his eyes crinkle at the edges, almost boyish. He's never carefree, but this is close. He shoves his hands in his pockets and shrugs.

"Because no one likes cold feet. They're in the bathroom, too."

This is the Lyam I've missed.

My heart aches, knowing that this is the Lyam I crave.

No. No, that isn't true.

I crave every facet of Lyam. Without his hard exterior, his tenderness isn't the same. Without his struggles, he isn't the man he is today, the man he strives to be.

Without his past, there is no present.

Is the same true about me?

I'm not sure how to feel about any of this. I'm not sure what he wants from me. Is he only trying to butter me up?

Or can I actually accept the fact that he's forgiven me? That he knows I'm carrying his child, and that my protection matters to him?

Why is it that being with Lyam makes me question everything? I ask as many questions as I get answers.

I walk silently to the bedroom. There's only one, and of course it's outfitted with a king-sized bed, decorated in shades of cream. Everything in the bathroom's equipped with high-end luxuries—a large soaking tub, a walk-in shower with luxurious toiletries, and those heated floors like in the kitchen.

“Well,” I say thoughtfully as I look around the room. “This is the sexiest prison I've ever seen.”

A shadow passes over his features before he nods. “It is, isn't it?” A muscle twitches in his jaw. Something I said, then?

I look at him in silence.

His eyes smolder with intensity. I turn to face him. He mirrors me, turning to face me, too. I touch my hair and smooth it down.

A girl doesn't forget what a man like Lyam's capable of. I watch as he draws his thumb across his lower lip.

And I remember.

The feel of those lips across my body, heated and passionate like a brush with fire. The electric intensity of our connection.

“Come here,” he orders.

I said your disobedience intrigued me. I never said I'd allow it.

“Maybe you should come here,” I say boldly, looking at him from beneath lowered lashes. “I'm pregnant, you know. It might be a little... hard to walk.”

“Cosette,” he says with steel in his voice. “Come here, before I demonstrate exactly how one can safely but thoroughly punish a pregnant woman.”

Shi-it.

I walk to him.

I stand in front of him expectantly, when he reaches for me. He spreads his warm hands along my lower back, and it feels so good to be touched by him. His finger under my chin, he lifts my face to his. At first, the kiss is exploratory and tender, soft and gentle. But when he deepens the kiss, my lips part, allowing his tongue to explore mine.

My mind and body fuse in a whirlwind of desire and love, lust and need. I lose myself in the moment, this quiet, knowing passion laced with forgiveness and trust. My heart races and I can't breathe. My senses spring to life as he runs his hand along my back gently, drawing me closer.

When he pulls back, I'm confident my eyes are wide and surprised.

I let myself forget how much I loved it when he kissed me.

I let myself forget *everything*.

Lyam is nothing like anything I've ever experienced before, and it makes me wild for him. Tortured and badass and dangerous as hell, he softens when I'm with him.

God, I want him so damn bad.

He holds me. I lean my head against his chest and allow myself the luxury of feeling safe and protected for a little while.

“How are you feeling?” he asks. “I'll have this kitchen stocked with things you can eat.”

“I am *starving*. I don't know what they're talking about with the whole ‘you don't eat for two until the second trimester’ thing, but I feel like I could eat like an entire turkey leg right now.”

“That's oddly specific.”

“Or maybe a burger. Some chicken? Fish? Protein. I want protein. I think.”

“Protein,” he repeats. “That’s easy. I’ll order food.”

Of course it is. He lifts iron like it’s saving his ass, and the man eats my body weight in protein every day.

“Wait, no. Soup. Can you get me soup?”

“Of course.”

I yawn. “You’re tired?” he asks.

“Always.”

“Let’s get you to the bedroom.”

“How cliché.”

A spark flares in his eyes that makes my own heart beat faster.

“Cosette—”

I swallow and gather my nerves. “Yes?”

I can see him warring with himself. I’m not sure what it is he battles, but there’s a part of me that longs to know. Lyam and I may look like we’re night and day, opposites even. Entirely different from one another, but I know—deep down inside, we’re not all that different at all.

And maybe that’s what drew me to him to begin with.

The problem with knowing someone intimately is that there’s no place to hide. They see your deepest wounds, your deepest flaws, and the longings of your heart. It’s both a blessing and a curse.

“Food,” he says finally. “Then bed. You’re exhausted.”

And this is what he does. I know it. Lyam takes charge so he can protect. Because it’s the only way he knows to love.

I don’t argue or protest because my body begs me for both food and rest.

Lyam takes a cold bottle of water from the fridge and opens it, handing it to me. “Drink, Cosette. You’re coming down from an adrenaline rush. You need fuel and water and rest.”

Funny, those things sound actually amazing right now.

I look over at the couch. I just need to make it to that gorgeous, luxurious, amazing couch that's as big as Canada and lay my weary self down. The bed seems far away.

"That couch looks beautiful."

An oversized, L-shaped sectional wrapped in caramel-colored, buttery leather beckons to me. Accented with gorgeous throw pillows wrapped in silky fabric, it's both functional and elegant.

With a swipe of his fingers, he makes a call while I head to the couch and stretch my weary body out on it.

"This is beautiful," I say, my words slurred from exhaustion. Lyam's by my side. My eyes feel so heavy. He lifts the top of a matching oversized ottoman.

"Oooh. It's a storage thing?" I say on a yawn.

"Mhm."

I watch him unfold a thick, luxuriously soft blanket and drape it over me.

"I had to become pregnant to see this side of you?" I ask in a low voice that sounds a lot more seductive than I planned. Lyam's gaze shifts to mine. Wordlessly, he bends and kisses my forehead. Tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. Smooths the blanket over me.

My belly warms and my protests melt.

Danger, my mind warns me. Danger.

I know what happens when I get close to Lyam. I know how I've reacted.

There's a knock at the door. When he turns to answer it, I try to get my shit together.

I swallow and clear my throat. I take deep breaths. I lean back against the pillows, my body deliciously cushioned in comfort, and watch him.

He walks with fluid grace, strong and confident. Dominant, yes, but so much more. In charge, because that's how he likes it. Caring, because he wants to protect me. So agile and poised I'm content just to sit and stare.

How did they get here so fast? Maybe he had them on standby. He's prepared, as always.

"Here," he says, approaching me with a large tray of food. "We'll eat later at an actual table, but for now just eat this, then get some rest."

It's so damn nice to have someone actually looking out for me for once. Someone who has my best interests at heart.

I've missed that, more than I let myself believe.

A generous bowl of steaming soup, a crusty baguette, softened butter. A silver pot of tea.

"Aren't you eating too?"

"I'll eat when you sleep." He lifts the broad soup spoon and extends it toward me. "Now eat, Cosette. Maman said that homemade chicken broth is the elixir for nausea. The salt and protein or something. She said to get you some."

I love his Maman. "And what else did she say?" I ask curiously.

"To buy you whatever the hell you wanted."

"So she knows I'm pregnant," I say, a little unsure about how that makes me feel.

"Probably."

"Wait, does she or not?"

Frowning, he strokes his chin. "I asked her in a hypothetical scenario, but she's smart enough to figure things out. Officially does she know? No. Will she assume it's you?" He grimaces. "Probably."

For some reason, this strikes me as outrageously funny. I snort with laughter and cover my mouth with my hand.

"What?"

“Why didn’t you just tell her?”

He grunts. I’m starting to realize he grunts for a lot of reasons, and this time, it could be because he doesn’t really know how to respond.

“If she tells my brothers...”

“I mean, I can’t hide it forever.”

“True. And I don’t want to *hide* anything so much as I need a minute to get my own head straight about everything.”

Well, that I can appreciate.

When my belly’s comfortably full, I yawn and stretch and lean back on the extraordinarily comfortable sofa. “In any event,” I say on yet another yawn, “if you hypothetically speak to her again, will you do me the honor of thanking her?”

Another grunt. “Just because you’re pregnant doesn’t mean I’m going to take it easy on you,” he says, tucking the blanket around me in a way that contradicts what he was just saying. The way he leans over and strokes my cheek makes my heart turn over in my chest. I ache to be closer to him.

When he was angry with me for what I’d done, I almost forgot how I felt about him. I had to protect myself. A part of me is terrified that if I come undone, I won’t recover from it. That I don’t have what it takes to survive that blow.

But I do. I know I do.

Still, I fear laying down my defenses and allowing myself to be vulnerable... again.

With food in my belly, a comfortable sofa beneath me, and the warmth of the blanket around me, the adrenaline crash hits me like a freight train. I yawn so widely my eyes water.

“Rest,” he says, sitting beside me. “You’re safe here.”

I close my eyes so he doesn’t see the tears shining in them.

I lean into the comfort of him. Into the comfort of us.

I sigh when he rests his hand on the blanket at the small of my back.

“I don’t know why I’m so tired,” I say on yet another yawn.

“You’re growing a human.”

I wonder if I’ve imagined the note of pride in his voice as I close my heavy eyes.

I will myself to silence the voice inside my head that tells me this isn’t real. But I’m so tired.

I do my best to quiet the fluttering thoughts and fears in my head.

I lean my head against his chest and listen to the steady beat of his heart. My body sinks into sleep.



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NINE

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Lyam

COSETTE SLEEPS FOR *HOURS*.

She's so beautiful when she sleeps.

I sit beside her and ghost the outline of her brows with the tip of my finger. Down the contours of her cheeks and the full pout of her lips. I rest my hand on her back, steadied by the gentle cadence of her breathing.

I've never loved any woman. It's a foreign concept to me and strange to think that Lyam Gerard, player extraordinaire and Gerard family black sheep, has fallen for a woman.

But how could I not?

She's sunshine and daisies and all things good and wholesome, and I'm... not. She yearns to serve, and I yearn to command.

Now that I know what happened, I know she had good reason. I can't fault her. Not now.

So when my phone rings and I see it's Thayer on the line, I pick it up.

I'll fight him if I have to.

I'll win.

"Where the fuck are you?"

"You know where I am."

"Is this phone safe?" Fabien's voice. Three-way call.

Jesus. "It's fucking safe. *I* was the one who programmed it. You two pussies can't make a fucking phone call without the other on the line?" I roll my eyes heavenward. I guess it'll make things easier for me in the long run.

"Alright, Lyam. What the hell happened?"

I tell them how we got into a chase and that I suspect we've been set up.

“I’ve checked all calls and records, prompted by Philippe,” Thayer says. “There’s no record that the police had anything at all to do with this. Every member of their force is accounted for at the time of the chase.”

I clench my jaw. “Motherfucker.”

So someone posed as the police to scare us. It was a setup.

I’ll remember that.

“You’re safe to leave, Lyam. They aren’t after you.”

“Yet,” Fabien responds. “I’ve never seen the citizens so restless. Montague’s got it so that every fucking thing is blamed on organized crime.

“Abduction in Marseille? Mafia. Racketeering in Nice? Mafia. Murder in Roubaix? Mafia. Bad weather coming? Fucking mafia.”

“I’m honored,” I mutter, rolling my eyes.

What an asshole.

While it’s good to know we’re safe, I don’t want to take Cosette out of here, not again. I know she was joking, but she mentioned building a nursery here. I saw the way her eyes lit up when I gave her the tour.

If we go back to my home, my family and friends will know I’m there.

I want privacy for a little while.

I want some time alone with her.

And hell, I like knowing how safe we are here.

I want to reconnect with Cosette. Does she want to be with me? After all we’ve been through, for the love of God, we need some time to just be with each other.

“Lyam?”

“Yeah?”

“You thinking what I am?” Fabien asks.

“That I need to pay Rousseau a visit? Yeah.”

There's a pregnant pause as I wait for one of them to ask the question we're all thinking. Finally, Thayer's the one who does the honors.

"You gonna tell us or do we have to drag it out of you?"

"What?" I ask, as if I don't know for a fact they want an update on Cosette.

Fabien, as the oldest, heads this gig but he takes input from all of us and in the end, it's all of us that run this.

"We want an update on your prisoner."

"Remember?" Thayer snaps. "The one who tried to kill my wife?"

"She didn't try to *kill* her. Jesus."

Thayer's growl travels really well through the phone.

"But yeah, I've got an update." I stand and straighten my shoulders. I don't know if it will be easy for them to accept her at her word. "Cosette's pregnant."

The slew of curses makes me pull the phone away from my ear for a minute.

"I'm guessing you verified this," Fabien groans.

"Yeah. I did. I confirmed that she's pregnant, and I confirmed that I'm the father."

"No *shit*?" he asks.

"Excuse me if I'm not popping champagne celebrating that that woman's gonna have one of my nieces or nephews," Thayer snaps.

"Listen, I know where you're coming from," I tell Thayer. "I do. If I were in your position, I'd feel the same."

"But what?" he snaps.

"I know her reasons now."

"Well light me a cigar and call me uncle," Thayer mutters.

"You care to share?"

“I do,” I tell him with a sigh. “The Chaberts knew about the baby. They fucking threatened to terminate the pregnancy.”

There’s another pause as this news settles in.

“Are you kidding me?” Fabien growls. “Are you *fucking* kidding me?”

“Yeah. I told Cosette that it’s a good thing they’re dead.”

“Better to be dead than to be your enemy,” Fabien supplies.

He’s not wrong.

“Well. Maybe it’s good you didn’t kill her then,” Thayer finally reluctantly admits.

Maybe?

Jesus.

“She’s apologetic, brother. I know this is hard to hear, but I mean it. She didn’t want to hurt Savannah. You know how quickly she came to us.”

“*After* the Chaberts were gone and she knew she was in deep shit,” Thayer provides.

“When she knew the threat against the baby didn’t exist anymore. Yeah.” I feel my temper rising, which is not a good thing with my brothers. I could fill a mansion with every piece of furniture or window we’ve broken when in this exact position...

“So what now? She just goes free? That’s it?” Thayer asks, obviously not willing to let this go.

“I think we have her and Savannah talk things out. My research tells me that what she says is right. I believe her. We’re heading in to get a prenatal checkup next month. And in the meantime...”

“She’ll continue to be your prisoner.”

“Right.”

“Though not under lock and key like we thought,” Fabien says.

“Yes.”

Thayer continues. “You’d think I wouldn’t want to hear this, but I do. I couldn’t fathom why someone I considered a friend would ever betray us. The fact that she did this under duress means everything.”

“I trust you, Lyam,” Fabien says. “You do what you have to. I know you’d never want to hurt a pregnant woman, especially one who came clean.”

“Yeah,” Thayer admits. “I mean, I’m the first one to say *no mercy*.” They don’t call Thayer *Le Sauvage* for nothing. “You know that. But everyone has a motive. If she’s willing to do what it takes to make things right again, then I say we forgive her.”

Forgive. Almost a foreign concept to my family, but one that holds significant weight.

Forgive.

I can forgive her.

I did forgive her.

We all can.

“Alright, so when life gives you lemons,” Fabien begins.

“You get out the goddamn vodka,” I supply. Maman’s expression. Triple sec, vodka, lemon juice and a simple syrup make the lemon drop, her drink of choice.

“So we move on, and we know exactly what to do. Talk to our informants. Prepare for an attack from whoever the fuck Montague’s paid, and act accordingly.”

“Exactly.”

Rousseau, one of our top-paid informants on the police force, knows exactly who’s doing what and hasn’t led us astray yet.

“I’ll contact her in the morning. Thayer, probably best you get in touch with one of our lawyers.”

We need a lawyer ready should Montague want to do more than blow smoke up the asses of the Parisian citizens. It can’t hurt.

I hear stirring in the other room, and when I look up, Cosette stands in the doorway, a blanket draped around her slim figure. “Liam?”

I hold up a finger to her. “I gotta go. I’ll fill you in tomorrow.”

I hang up the phone before my brothers can distract me again.

I’ve known plenty of beautiful women in my time, but Cosette stands in a class all her own. She’s a one-of-a-kind masterpiece, slender and graceful. I can lift her with one arm and hold her, and it takes no effort at all to physically dominate her.

Dominating her mind is a whole other story. You don’t *take* submission from a woman like Cosette. You earn it. It’s part of her nature to serve. It’s who she is.

I toss the phone on the desk and look at her. We stare at each other in silence. I’m tired and weary, but a new kind of energy wakes me up when I look at her.

Twilight has fallen outside the window, pastel blue light kissing her shoulders. Her blonde hair’s messy but beautiful, the soft curls framing her pale face like a halo.

“You’re beautiful,” I say, my voice husky.

“Thanks,” she whispers, looking down as if she’s embarrassed. “Who was that?”

“My brothers.”

Worry creases her brow. “And what did they say?”

I shrug. “Thayer has understandable concerns. I told him I think you need to talk to Savannah.”

She bites her lips but nods. “Yeah. It won’t be fun, but it has to happen.” She shakes her head, worry creasing her brow. “I feel so terrible about what I did.”

“Shhh.” I cross the room to her. “You know I wouldn’t let this go if I wanted you to still pay for this.”

I watch the worry in her eyes fade but not disappear.

“It was the shittiest thing to do,” she says, shaking her head.

“And what choice did you have? It was our fault our enemies had anything to do with this. They shouldn’t have come anywhere near you.”

“I didn’t know mercy was in your vocabulary, Lyam,” she says with a wan smile.

I reach over and tuck her hair behind her ears. I frame her face in my hands and kiss her forehead. “Mercy and justice go hand in hand. In my family, we focus on justice first. Loyalty. And mercy’s rare but sometimes necessary.” I sigh and kiss her again.

In my world, it’s kill or be killed.

When I was taken against my will and held captive, it was clear as fuck why, and who I was. I knew what they wanted. In this life that I’ve chosen, there are no gray areas, no exceptions.

But now Cosette’s making me question everything.

I change the subject.

“No more about this, Cosette. Not another word.” I tip my finger under her chin so her eyes meet mine. I put steel in my voice. “Did I explain that well enough?”

She closes her eyes and nods. I can tell it takes a lot for her to admit this. When she opens her eyes, the green depths look troubled but hopeful.

“Lyam, I—you know, a part of me *hoped* you’d punish me.”

I’m not surprised. I nod. “I get that.”

“Do you really?” she asks curiously.

“I do.” I sit on a chair and bring her onto my lap. It feels so good to have her here, nestled in between my arms, her weight on my lap. I drape my arms around her. “You want to pay your penance. You feel guilty.”

I can see the pain written across her face when she squeezes her eyes shut and nods. “Yes. God, *so* guilty.”

“I’ve spent a lot of time at Le Luxe. And I’ve noticed that some women like to be fully independent and know their man

is their equal. Some like to be taken care of. And then there are some women, like you.” I feel the corners of my lips quirk up. “Strong and fully independent. They like letting their hair down. They like knowing they can put their trust in someone else. They’ll run shit all day long but like knowing that every once in a while, they don’t have to.”

“Yes,” she says eagerly, her wide eyes excited and hopeful. “That’s exactly it. I don’t want to be steamrolled. But it’s nice not having to always be plagued with the thought of *what next?*”

I hold her against my chest. I savor the warmth of her body and gentle scent of her innocence and purity. How she managed to keep that innocence despite everything she’s been through, I may never know.

“It especially makes sense for someone like you.”

“Like me?”

“Someone who’s wired for service. Sometimes I think you’d run yourself into the ground if I let you.”

“You’re not wrong.”

“I know.”

I run my hand up and down her back. I’ve missed this so much. I wanted her back and never thought I could have her.

And if *I’m* the one being honest now? A part of me wanted to punish her not just for betraying my family but for leaving *me*.

“Okay, so as much as I love sitting on your lap and talking to you, and most especially knowing that I can make amends for all this? My body has a mind of its own. I’m feeling nauseous again and think I need a bit of a snack.”

“Gonna be a full-time job keeping you fed?”

I love that little smile. The way her eyes light up and her cheeks turn pink. “You know it.”

I hold her to me. A part of me wishes I could freeze this moment in time. Keep her right here where she’s safe. Keep her right here with me so she doesn’t run.

I wanted Cosette before.

Now, knowing she's carrying my baby? The power of heaven and hell couldn't drag her away from me. Cosette is *mine* in a way she's never been mine before.

There are so many things I want to do. So many things I want to say. But right now, we need food.

"Something in particular you want? You said protein earlier. I could—"

"No! Oh, God, no," she says, covering her mouth with her hands. "Stop! Please. Don't say another word."

Her pink cheeks have gone suddenly pale and clammy.

"Okay, alright. So. Anything sound good?"

"Carbs. I want carbs. Buttery, flaky, delicious carbs." She blinks. "The baby wants carbs. Namely... a palmier."

A flaky, crispy pastry made with layers of butter and sugar and fashioned into the shape of a palm leaf, palmiers are easy enough to come by.

I look out the window at the twinkling lights of the Louvre set against a twilight backdrop. "We could go for a walk."

"What do you mean?" She sits up. "I thought we had to hide."

I fill her in and watch the little divot between her brows deepen. "Well of all the low-down, scumbag things—"

"Tell me about it. We'll move on this, and soon, but I want to stay here for now. Maybe even until you have the baby. It's safe, and we have privacy. After everything we've been through, I think we need that privacy."

I love the way her eyes grow heated.

I love the way she moves impossibly closer to me so that we share the same air, the same breath, and my heart slows to meet the beat of hers.

"I think privacy sounds like a fantastic idea," she says softly. "*After* the walk. Give me two minutes to freshen up?"

I trace her jaw with my index finger, relishing the way she shivers and looks into my eyes.

“Yeah,” I say softly. “C’mere.” I lace my fingers at the back of her neck and draw her closer to me. I brush my lips against hers. Our foreheads meet briefly as I tighten my grip on her.

“I like that,” she whispers when we pull apart. “I like that a lot.”

“What?”

“Your—the way you touch me. There’s nothing tentative or questioning about it. You just—hold me like you want to. Like I belong to you.” She sighs. “God, Lyam, how I’ve missed that.”

“I missed it too, baby,” I tell her with another kiss. “Now go get ready while I make a call.”

I hang up the phone as she comes out to me.

I whistle, staring at her as I shake my head.

“Oh, *staahhhp*,” she says with an adorable laugh. “You’re acting like I just changed into a ballgown. All I did was put on some lipstick.”

“Just makes me want to kiss you even more.”

We kiss right there, in the doorway as I lean on my forearm and hold her against me. We move to get our shoes on and I pause by the couch. I lean on the edge of it, hold her to me, and kiss her again.

We kiss by the dining table, in the entryway, and against the doorframe.

We kiss on the elevator, and when we get to the first floor, I tuck her into a doorway and we kiss again there. It’s killing me not to push her up against this wall and fuck her right here, right now. To make her remember who she belongs to.

“I want you so bad,” I whisper in her ear. “You’d better eat that palmier quick.”

“I shall inhale them if it pleases your majesty.” Fuck, I love when she gets all highbrow on me.

“It pleases me very much,” I say with a sigh as I push open the door and head toward *La Pâtisserie Belle Époque*.

“What if they’re not open?” she asks with a look that tells me she might cry.

“Oh they’re open.”

“At almost midnight?” she asks incredulously. “None of them are ever open this late.”

“Who do you think I called when you got ready?”

Her brows furrow adorably. “Wait. What?”

“You’ll see.”

“It’s gorgeous here at night. It’s practically built for romantic strolls.”

The Louvre at night is a sight to behold. The famous glass pyramid entrance is lit from within, bright against the dark backdrop of the night sky. Regardless of the time of day, tourists mill around outside taking photographs and posing, but no matter how crowded, nothing detracts from the peaceful calm of the imposing landmark.

“It’s spectacular,” she whispers, shaking her head. Nearby, bright lights flicker in the back of the pastry shop as we walk hand in hand to the back entrance of the store.

“It isn’t open?” she says curiously.

“No, they closed four hours ago.”

When the back door opens, we’re greeted with a warm gust of air that smells divine. “If I could bathe in that air, I’d die a happy woman.”

“Monsieur Gerard!” A rosy-cheeked baker greets us with wide-open arms. “And mademoiselle, are these for you?” Reaching behind him, he pulls out a box of still-warm palmiers.

Cosette groans and reaches with two hands pinching at the air. “If my grabby hands are any indication, I think you have your answer. *Thank youuuuuu.*”

I discreetly tuck a wad of bills into his hand. “Thank *you*.”

“Monsieur,” he says in a low voice. “This is too much. I can’t ___”

“I am confident I’ll be calling you again,” I mutter as Cosette tears into a palmier, flakes of pastry littering the ground. She moans in a way that sounds so sexual I need to get her the fuck out of here.

We amble down the street, bathed in moonlight, the twinkling lights of the Louvre our backdrop. It’s stunning and majestic and a little cold, I realize, when she shivers and rubs her free hand on her arm.

“These are even more delicious than I imagined,” she moans.

I shrug out of my jacket and drape it over her shoulders. “Glad you like them and the baby’s happy now. Should’ve gotten you a sweater, too.”

“I was hot at the time,” she says, pulling the jacket around her more tightly. As she looks out over the Louvre, she whispers her thanks. “Thank you, Lyam.”

I don’t ask her for what.

“Oh, look,” she says with that earnest wistfulness I almost forget about. It’s one of the things I like best about Cosette, how excited she gets over the simplest things.

I look to where she points but don’t see anything. “What are we looking at?”

“The moon over the water. Look, it casts a shadow that looks *exactly* like a dragon.”

We pause by the Seine and I squint my eyes, trying to see what she does. “Are you just giving me shit?”

I love the sound of her giggle. “No. Not this time, anyway.”

I give her a playful smack on her ass.

“You can’t do that, Lyam,” she says in a heated whisper.

“Do what?”

“Smack my butt.”

The hell I can't. "Why not?"

"I'm *pregnant*."

I burst out laughing. God, it feels good to laugh. I haven't laughed like this in so long, I can't seem to stop.

"You think because you're pregnant we can't do anything kinky?"

"Lyam!" Her cheeks flush pink this time as she covers her mouth and looks around us.

I shake my head. Thayer has given me full details about what exactly I can and cannot do with a pregnant woman, and smacking her ass doesn't even come close.

"I've done my research," I say with a smile.

"Oh, really?" She pops the rest of the pastry in her mouth. "Maybe I need...a demonstration."

I pick her up and carry her the rest of the way back.



TEN

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Cosette

I SQUEAL when Lyam swings me up in the air but soon, with me in his arms, we're walking back much faster than I'd be able to walk on my own.

"This is crazyyyy," I protest.

"Your objections? Oh, yeah." That smug look on his face is so adorable I want to kiss it off.

We pass a few women dressed in tight-fitting skirts and blouses so small they look like bras, but even in their heels they don't come anywhere near his height. They stare, mouths open, at the sight of Lyam stalking down the street carrying me, determination written across his face. I know what they see: a hot as fuck, dominant man in a T-shirt that does nothing to hide his abs, biceps or pecs, tattoos sneaking out and lacing his arms and neck. My arms strewn around his neck and my shoes hanging on by a thread as my feet helplessly dangle. Plus, I'm pregnant. They might not know that, but it secretly pleases me to keep that detail in mind.

They don't know the Lyam that I know. They don't know that he's marching down this street because he has plans for me that may or may not involve me on my knees, in his bed, or across his lap.

They don't know that beneath that stern exterior and coarse mouth lies a man with passionate interests, blood that runs loyal, and a need to conquer unlike any I've ever seen.

They don't know him like I do.

I hear one of them sigh, another whisper, "*Il est beau comme un dieu.*"

He's as handsome as a god.

I don't even think he sees them. He walks right past them without a second glance and slips down a narrow alleyway that takes us to a back door. Since we drove here before, I hadn't seen the way the doors here were camouflaged.

Down one flight of stairs, then up another. When we get to the front steps, he takes them in two massive strides. I hear clicks and locks and whirring and watch as he quickly and effectively bypasses every security measure in place.

“They should have a place like this for the President,” I mutter. He quirks a brow at me and doesn’t answer.

“They *do*?”

“Of course they do. You think they just allow him to walk around in broad daylight like a free-roaming pet?”

“Hey.” I stop him as we head to the elevator. “Speaking of pets...”

His eyes gleam and my heart turns over in my chest. My belly clenches.

Pets.

Lyam has a thing for all sorts of kinks.

“Now that isn’t the kind of pet I’m talking about, Lyam,” I say warningly.

The elevator door slides open.

“What? You want a puppy?”

“Uh, no.” My mind whirrs. “Actually, that would be—no, no.” Stay focused. “I was wondering where your pets are?”

“I only have two snakes now,” he says, a little chagrined. “And they’re both with Thayer at Le Luxe.”

“Why?”

The elevator soars upward. He’s still holding me.

I don’t protest.

“I had to travel, and they don’t travel well. They were with me in Corsica because I was there for months at a time.”

“Right.”

“Why? Do you miss them?” he asks as we arrive at our floor.

“Miss your pet python or your other pets that you treated better than your own mother? Uh, no,” I reply.

I kind of like Princess, his very large but very tame ball python.

“Sure,” he says, shaking his head. “You expect me to believe that?”

I give him a sly smile.

And before I know it, we’re back in the penthouse.

And I’m naked.

Wordlessly he turns from me and heads to the bathroom.

I push myself up on my elbows and look around the room.

The sound of running water. The scent of roses...

And then he’s back in the room, fully clothed, and staring at me with a fire kindling in his eyes that stokes my own.

Oooh, boy.

The pounding flow of water behind me piques my curiosity. What... *is* that?

“Touch yourself,” he says as he grasps the hem of his shirt and gives it a tug. The tee comes off in one pull and he tosses it on the bed.

He knows this makes me squirm which is exactly why he’s doing it.

I hesitate. Spread my legs. Stare at him.

“What happens if you disobey, baby?” he asks in a deep, low voice laced with warning.

“I don’t know,” I tease, my words faltering, heart pounding. “Why don’t you show me?”

Standing in front of me, his eyes never leaving mine, he shakes his head from side to side as he slowly removes his belt.

“You know I won’t be baited, Cosette.”

Sure he will. He fucking loves this.

“Mmm. I *see*.”

In two steps he's by my side and I'm on my knees, hands splayed in front of me. With his sharp tap to my inner thighs, I spread my legs.

The first swish warns me to brace just as the smack of his belt lands on my thighs.

“I've done my homework,” he says. “I know you can take it.” Another hard *thwack* of the belt has me squirming. “And I further know that you like it. You're a good girl, taking my belt.” I squirm to get away from the bite of leather when his warm, rough hand caresses the area he just whipped. My belly warms to molten honey, his praise dripping down over every inch of my exposed body.

“Just like that, baby. Mmm,” he says when I spread my legs wider as if to beg him for more. “That's exactly what I want from you. You know it's actually good for a pregnant woman to be overpowered like this.”

“And spanked?”

Another *thwack* of the belt has me hissing in a breath while he continues. “That endorphin rush is good for you and the baby.”

“Is that right?”

“Yeah, baby.” That *voice*, all sexy and stern and commanding, the husky tones making my skin crawl and my pussy ache. “Now, touch yourself. And if you stop, I'll get the cane.”

Gah. That cane's no joke.

I finger myself, not too surprised to find I'm sopping wet and eager for more. My hips jerk, my need for him rising with every second that passes. Another lash of the belt falls, but I hardly feel it as my body grows hotter and I'm sinking deep into the calming well of submission, craving more.

And then he's on me, his body fully over mine. His hands cover mine, pinning me down, his torso brushes mine, his mouth at my ear. “*Je veux sentir ton corps et me perdre en toi.*”

I want to feel your body and get lost in you.

He kisses my shoulder, and I shiver when his rough whiskers graze my sensitive skin. I yelp when his teeth nip my skin, then warmth floods through my core when he licks and nips and bites again. I whimper and moan and arch my back into the strength of him.

When he pushes me flat onto the bed and laces his fingers around my throat, my pulse spikes.

“Breath play,” he whispers. “No breath play. No drawing blood.”

Eeek. Drawing blood?

“If I spank you, I’ll be careful. I know how far I can take you and I know what you need.”

I close my eyes as a sudden rush of emotions threatens to choke me.

He does. He knows what I need, unlike anyone else I’ve ever met or ever dreamed of before. I’ve missed this. I’ve missed *him* so badly I can’t help the rising feelings that are overcoming me.

“Can I blame the pregnancy hormones?” I say on a sob.

His body stills over mine. I’m tucked under a Lyam blanket.

“For crying?” he asks. When I turn my face to look at him, he kisses my damp cheek. “You can blame whatever you want on the hormones. I like your tears.”

He brushes my cheek and captures a tear before he slides it along his lips.

“You like my tears?”

“Your tears don’t show weakness, Cosette. They show that you trust me.”

Gently, slowly, he pushes himself up and guides me to my back. We fit together like this as if we were carved into creation coupled together, his larger, heavier body above mine, my softer, curvier body beneath his.

I trace my finger along his bicep, outlining the tattoos there. Pushing myself up I kiss each tat, one after the other, tasting

them, tracing my tongue over every curve and line. When he moans, I glide my thumb across his chest and over his nipple and kiss another tat.

“Fuuuucckk,” he groans, his head thrown back. The length of his hard cock presses into me.

It surprises me when he pushes out of bed, only to bend and lift me again.

Oh, right.

The scent of roses.

When we reach the bathroom, I see what his plan is. The huge jacuzzi tub is filled with splashes of pink petals.

“You didn’t,” I say, giving him a curious glance.

“Fill a tub for us? Why not?”

“Because it’s *romantic*.”

“You think I’m not romantic?” he says with a frown as he lowers me into the tub. I moan in pleasure, enveloped in the warm, fragrant water.

“I might fall asleep,” I whisper. “Don’t let me drown.”

The sound of his dark chuckle makes my pulse skitter dangerously. “Oh, I’ll make sure you don’t fall asleep. I can assure you *that* isn’t happening.” I lean on the edge of the tub, watching him undress. I want to touch myself all over again just eying his chiseled abs and toned legs, and that *ass*—

“Are you objectifying me?” he asks with a quirk of his eyebrow.

I smile and dive into the water. I could practically swim *laps* in this thing. I’ve felt so heavy and lethargic, like my limbs were made of lead. Between the nausea and hormones and sensitivity to damn near everything, being here in this tub feels *incredible*.

His large, rough hand wraps around my ankle and drags me to him with ease. I splutter water and laugh when he enters the big tub with a splash, sits on the seat submerged in water, and tugs me over to him. I easily wrap my legs around him. A rose

petal clings to one of my breasts like a lily pad. We both stare. Wordlessly, he bends his mouth to the petal and brushes it aside. I sigh when he laves my hardened nipple.

“Fucking beautiful breasts. Jesus, Cossie.”

Cossie.

He’s the only one that’s ever called me that. I close my eyes when I’m hit with a rush of emotion. There go those damn tears again.

His words come out sharp and commanding, and I crave more. “Show me.”

I look at him questioningly. “Your breasts. I want to see those nipples. They’re so perfect. Your whole fucking body’s a work of art.”

“Will you still think that when my belly’s bigger?” I ask teasingly, but there’s a thread of real concern underlying the question. My body will change, I know it will. I’ll be carrying a whole *human* inside me. And even though I think pregnant women are beautiful, I fear change. If I’m honest, I fear a lot more than that.

“Cosette,” he says, shaking his head, his brows drawn together almost as if he’s angry. “Are you serious right now?”

“Of course I am. I’m going to change. My body will.”

The thought of him not being attracted to me—the thought of being rejected—

When he laces his fingers around the back of my head and dips his forehead to mine, I know he’s serious.

“What?” I whisper.

“You’re carrying my baby inside you. *Mine*. We made a *child*. How could I not see you as the most beautiful woman in the world?”

My cheeks feel hot, and not because of the warmth of this bath. It’s hard to imagine he really thinks that, after all we’ve been through.

“Pregnant women show us new life. They glow with that knowledge and yeah, sometimes they may get curvier. But you already love our baby, and that makes you beautiful to me. Now give me those breasts.” I lean back so my torso’s above the water, giving him a full presentation of my perky, full breasts. My nipples are larger with the pregnancy hormones, deep pink in sharp contrast to my pale, ivory skin. With one lap of his tongue, he sends a spasm of pleasure through my whole body.

I lay my head in the water, floating, as he braces his hands against my back and kisses my breasts. He tongues the undersides and groans. I reach for him and thread my fingers through his thick hair, bringing him closer to me. The air is warm and my heart is light, but my body’s on *fire*.

I want him in me. All of him. I ache to feel his thick cock deep within me. I want to be closer to him, in the only way I know how. I want him to take me.

He holds my hips and drags me closer to him. My legs wrap around his powerful, muscled back. I hold my breath as he glides his cock to my core.

I’ve never had sex fully submerged in a bath like this and *It Is. Divine*.

Divine.

He glides into me with effortless ease. We’re weightless and warm.

“Guess we don’t have to worry about birth control, eh?” I ask him, earning me a devilish grin that’s all Lyam.

“Not this time,” he says with a groan as he enters me again. I easily lift up and bring myself down on him. Lying beneath the surface, our bodies intertwine.

I relish the groans that he makes.

I crave the feel of his cock.

Somehow, the knowledge that I’m carrying his baby makes me crave a nearness so deep that our very cells are knit together.

Like this.

His mouth meets mine with a masculine groan that makes a warmth of pleasure flood my senses. I want him. Fuck, I want him so damn bad.

I lick his tongue and he licks mine. I sink into the power of this moment, forgiveness and understanding wrapped into every touch, every kiss, every moan. We explore each other's bodies, hands and mouths sliding over skin that's slick and hot. We indulge in lingering, sensual kisses, our bodies joined in the blissful stillness of the water.

He thrusts his powerful hips and liquid pleasure trickles down my spine and between my legs. A moan echoes in the bathroom and it takes me a moment to realize it's mine.

Every protest I have—he's too dangerous, I'm too broken, he's *mafia* and I'm not—and the deeper secrets I hold still, that I can't share with anyone, become muted and inconsequential in the perfection of this moment.

I wanted him back. And here we are.

"You're fucking perfect," he says as he lifts me and thrusts, lifts and thrusts. Rose petals cling to our skin like swaths of satin, fragrant and erotic. The pattern of his breathing accelerates with mine. I cling to his shoulders and he holds me to his chest as he lifts and thrusts.

We ride the blissful perfection of this moment as we climax together. I moan when a spasm of pleasure rocks me. He groans in my ear as his own orgasm claims him.

My limbs are boneless when we're done. I'm slumped against him, still submerged in the water, his cock still in me. I breathe heavily and nestle my head against his damp, warm chest. I close my eyes.

I want to hold onto this moment. I want to let myself believe that what I want—dare I say what we both want? —is possible.

I've told myself that Lyam is unfeeling and cruel, and at times... I may not be too far from the truth.

But he's loyal to the people he loves. Dedicated and fierce, and I want that kind of love.

What if I gave in to the temptation to... actually... let him in?

My heart races at the thought. I look away, but not for long, because he takes my chin and turns me back to him.

“What are you thinking?”

I’ve got nothing to lose. *I’m bearing his child.*

“I...” I draw in a breath and let it out again. “I don’t like to get close to people,” I admit. I think it might be the first time I’ve said it out loud.

He doesn’t look away or dismiss me but holds my gaze earnestly. “Good. I’m glad you’ve admitted that. Now tell me why.”

I look down at the water. “The water’s getting cold,” I say, even though it’s not, but my attempt at diversion doesn’t work.

“Right. I’ve got it set to stay at the right temperature, which matters when you’re pregnant, so it won’t be getting too hot or too cold.”

Of *course* his billion-dollar tub can do that.

I bite my lip.

Tender fingers on my cheek. Piercing eyes with a furrowed brow that split me wide open. “There’s nowhere to hide, baby,” he whispers. “*Tu peux me faire confiance.*”

You can trust me.

Still, I find it hard to speak. I don’t have the words.

He stares into my eyes. “When I was twelve years old, I killed my first traitor.”

I blink and stare back. For cultured men like the Gerards, I sometimes forget that they’re as brutally violent as they are when they have to be. The stories I’ve heard...

“Why?” I whisper.

“Why did I do it or why did they have to die?”

Oh, God.

I swallow but don’t look away. “Both.”

Still staring at me, he gives me the bald truth. “I did it because he was my first hired hit. To this day, I have no idea what he did. My family was just beginning to get into organized crime. I was really, *really* good at shooting. We needed the money, and I’d found a way to get it, a *lot* of it, quickly.”

Wow.

Shit.

I lick my lips and swallow, trying to get up the courage again. “How many?” I whisper.

“I’ve lost count.”

I stare at him.

I’ve forgotten we’re still joined together. He’s still in me.

It feels strangely right.

He was a hired assassin. He killed for money because his family needed it.

“I never miss,” he says quietly. “Ever. If I shoot to kill, my target dies.”

He’s given me a glimpse into the deepest, darkest part of his soul no one but me ever sees.

“Now do you want to run?” he asks me.

I don’t want to give him anything but honesty. “A part of me? Yes. But a bigger part of me wants to stay.”

His brow softens with the hint of a smile. “You think you can fix me?”

I give him a smile back. “I don’t think I need to.”

He continues his story.

“We wanted control. People put their faith in bullshit lies and promises, but in the end, we know the people they trust are untrustworthy. Politicians line their own pockets. My family at least owns who we are.”

I nod. “Right,” I whisper. “I get it. I understand.”

Maybe he never needs to know who I truly am. Maybe he'll understand that my affiliation with the man who's rejected me my entire life has nothing to do with who I am today.

"Let's get to bed," he says, looking over his shoulder. "The sun is beginning to rise."

"Are you actually going to sleep this time?" I tease. I stand and rinse myself off, then take the plush towel he hands me. I let him help me out of the tub so I don't slip, then slide into a fluffy white robe waiting for me on a hook. "Oh my God, I'd pay you a million dollars to wear one of your own."

He snorts. "I'm gonna *try* to sleep, and if one of those damn things actually fits me, I'll pay *you* a million dollars."

"Deal."

He literally rips the seam on the first arm of the robe he tries to put on and sighs. I sometimes forget he isn't the size of an average human.

"I guess I owe you a million dollars," I say with a grimace.

With a shrug, he makes me an offer. "We can settle this debt with a kiss."

I tie my robe and smile at him. "Whoa. I'm impressed. A kiss from me is worth *a million dollars?*"

"No, baby," he says with that fire in his eyes I've come to crave. "No one can put a price on a kiss from you."

I think I melt a little then.

I sidle up to him and lay my hand against his cheek.

We kiss in the small pool of moonlight next to the tub, as the sun and moon gradually take each other's places, beckoning the light of day.

We kiss in the doorway, with him wrapped up in a towel knotted around his waist and me completely engulfed in the fluffy white robe.

We kiss in bed as we pull up the covers, the robe and towel discarded on the floor, next to the bed. And as the sun begins to rise, my mind begins to drift.

Maybe Lyam could protect me and maybe I'll be the one that makes him see the goodness in people again.

Maybe... I don't run this time. Maybe I don't look for a reason to leave and force myself to raise this child as a single mom, when the father of my child is sitting right here in front of me, ready to take care of both of us, in his own fierce and unique way.

Maybe...



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ELEVEN

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Lyam

I ROLL over and feel something warm and bright hit my face.

I open one eye.

Sun. It's *sunlight* hitting my face.

It's been so damn long since I actually slept—in a bed, like a normal human instead of catnapping on a couch or in my car or on a pull-out sofa in one of the offices—that I forgot what it felt like to wake to sun on my pillow.

It isn't that I hate sleep. I hate what happens when I close my eyes.

But I won't think of that now.

Right now, I've got a warm, gorgeous, absolutely perfect angel curled up beside me. Her golden hair, strewn over the pillow, frames her face like a halo. She's curled up facing me, her soft breaths like the gentle patter of rain on a rooftop.

It's soothing.

I watch the gentle rise and fall of her chest. The way she's perfectly at peace in her sleep, her hand beside her gently curled. I take in every detail while she sleeps. The half-moons of her fingers and soft slope of her hands. Her bare skin is smooth and unblemished, with a few freckles here and there because she's so fair. And I imagine I can already see the gentle swell of her belly.

A baby.

The enormity of the responsibility—of taking care of, protecting, and raising another human—astounds me. Excites me. I wonder if it'll be a boy or girl. Or twins? Do they know that stuff yet or is it too early? If it's a boy, will he be like me—fiery and passionate, headstrong and impulsive? I'm not afraid of a boy like that. I know exactly how he'd think and feel, and I'd be a good father to him.

Or is it a girl? God, a girl who looks like her mama with soft blonde curls and those green eyes that would only have to plead with me once to get me to do damn near anything she wanted. And I don't need to see her with children to know Cosette will be an amazing mother. Already, she's pushed aside her own needs to make sure our baby's safe and healthy.

I've known Cosette long enough to understand part of her comes alive when she has someone to take care of and serve.

I ought to know.

At Le Luxe, they jokingly called her the team mother, because she was the one that would take care of everyone's needs, whether it was emotional support or practical advice. She's empathetic and compassionate, and I love that about her.

God, it must've *killed* her to be forced to betray the people she cares about. The only thing worse would've been forcing her to hurt her own child.

Bastards.

But why does she run when she gets close to someone?

What is it that she fears?

"Good morning, handsome."

I won't ever get over waking to those earnest green eyes and that gentle voice. I don't deserve a woman like her but now that I've got her, I'll do anything, literally *anything*, to keep her safe.

"Morning."

"Mmm," she says softly. "I love that groggy voice of yours. Wait. Lyam, did you actually sleep?"

I've laid with her in bed. I've had little naps here and there, but I've never actually spent the entire night—or early morning, as it is—sleeping beside her.

"I did. Did you enchant me?" I tug a soft strand of blonde hair.

She reaches for my face and gently strokes my cheek. "Of course I did," she says in that soft voice that makes my heart

turn over. “I waved my magic wand and took away all the thoughts that keep you awake at night.”

If only.

Wordlessly, she snuggles up to me so her head is on my chest. I drape my arms around her and hold her there. I love the comfortable weight of her on me and sigh contentedly. Her hands are as small as a child’s, gently resting on my bare chest.

“Lyam.”

“Mmm?”

“Why don’t you sleep?”

I comb my fingers through her soft blonde hair. “Gorgeous,” I say softly. “You’re so beautiful, Cosette.”

“Are you changing the subject?”

“No, I just don’t want to take this for granted.”

“What?”

“Me. You. *Us*. But I’ll answer your question.”

She looks up at me and waits patiently.

“What do you remember about when Fabien and Nicolette were first together?” She’s known Nicolette longer than I have, from when they worked together back at our former establishment, La Maison.

“I knew that he bought her for the weekend,” she says. “I know that she was attacked by someone and Fabien killed him. I know that after the weekend, the two of them were a couple and they haven’t been separated since.”

“Right. But do you know anything about what they did or where I was at the time?”

A little line between her brows deepens. “No.”

Nicolette hasn’t told her then.

“Fabien hired Nicolette. I was held hostage and he had to retrieve something to set me free.”

“You’ve never told me this.”

I never wanted to.

I take a deep breath to quell the anger that rises when I remember this.

“I’ve never told anyone the details. I didn’t want my brothers to fuck things up and lose their minds, so I told them I was okay. And they rescued me. They killed the people who held me captive, but I knew then and I know now that whoever did it were only pawns in a bigger game.”

She stares at me with wide eyes and does that thing she does, stroking my chin as if she cherishes me. It soothes me.

“Who was it?”

“I don’t know,” I tell her honestly. “But I haven’t forgotten it.”

“My God, how could you?”

I shake my head and give her a squeeze. She knows. She gets it. She understands me.

“When I close my eyes and fall asleep, I’m there again. I was chained in a dark room. I knew that some of the men who came and went wore uniforms—they were part of the police force.”

She draws in a sharp breath but doesn’t say anything else, not yet.

“They hurt me, but that wasn’t the worst of it. I’m a big guy. You’ve seen the scars. They knew that if I ever got out of those chains, I’d kill them. So they used mental tactics, too.” I clench my jaw. “They kept me isolated and gave me no food or water until I thought I’d die. They told me my mother was endangered, threatened to torture my brothers, and kept me awake for days on end. I can’t sleep now because that’s how they tortured me best. They showed me pictures of children and entire cities they’d destroy if I didn’t tell them everything.”

“Oh my God,” she says. “Lyam. God, I had no idea.”

How would she? I haven’t told her.

“I don’t like to talk about it.”

“I can see why.”

Her hand comes to rest gently on my chest again.

“When I close my eyes, I go back there. It takes different forms, but I’m helpless. Chained. Tortured. Only this time, the person they have is you.”

Her voice is choked. “Lyam—”

“But not when I’m with you. When I’m with you, I close my eyes and I *sleep*.”

She pushes herself up and slides herself on top of me. I hold her to me when she dips her mouth to mine and kisses me. We stay like that for a while, kissing and exploring, holding each other, until I can’t stand it anymore. I roll her over and spread her legs, and while we kiss each other, I slide into her and we make love. We say with our bodies the words we can’t say any other way.

I hold her in the quiet aftermath. Then she says literally the last thing I expect.

“I think you should make plans to get Princess back.”

“What?” I look at her in surprise, a little amused. “I thought you hated Princess.”

“Well,” she says thoughtfully. “No, I don’t *hate* snakes. I actually really like Princess. She’s the nicest snake I’ve ever met.”

She nearly jumps off my chest from the bark of laughter that bursts out of me. “No, I’m serious,” she says. “I’ve never seen a snake that was *trained* so well. She’s very docile, actually. But that’s not my point.”

Sobering, she holds my face in her hand. “She soothes you. I think a part of you likes that you’ve tamed this wild, dangerous animal and that she practically purrs in your hand. She’s... kind of like your dog. Some people pet their dogs, you pet your snakes. Knowing what I know about you, that’s not terribly surprising.” Her eyes grow a little heated. “You like submissives, don’t you?”

I run my fingers through her hair. “You know I do. And yeah, baby. Thanks for that. I like having Princess with me. I like having you with me, too. How are you feeling today?”

“Oh, Lyam.” I blink in surprise when her eyes water. “You care? You’re asking me how I’m feeling? *No one* asks me how I’m feeling!” And then she starts crying, right then and there, actual fat tears streaming down her cheeks. I wipe away a tear with my thumb and stare at her.

“You’re crying because I asked you how you’re feeling?” I shake my head and hold her to me while her shoulders heave and she cries harder. “Sweet Cossie. Pretty girl. God, I had no idea.”

“Well. I mean, keep in mind these pregnancy hormones are gonna fuck me up.”

I smile into her mass of golden hair that’s all over me.

“I cry over *everything*. I was imagining our baby growing up and going away to college and I just *sobbed*. Like, would they ever even come home again?”

“Okay, so our baby isn’t even here yet. Maybe we can... table that fear for now?”

Jesus.

She nods and swipes at her eyes. “Good point. Okay, so I’m not feeling great. I need to pee, I want a shower, and I could eat a family dinner for four right about now.”

I give her ass a playful swat. “What do you want for breakfast?”

Ten minutes later she’s singing away in the shower and I’m waiting on a tray of croissants, fried eggs, and sliced apples. I sit in the quiet and listen to her. She doesn’t exactly have a stage voice, but that doesn’t stop her and I love that it doesn’t.

I place a call to the bakery again just in case. The baker assures me that he can get whatever she wants whenever she wants it and has specially prepared a new shipment of palmier. I smile to myself when I hear her hit a high note that’s way out of her range.

Fucking adorable.

I stretch and hit the floor. I haven't been to the gym in a few days and I'm feeling it, but I don't need a gym to stay in shape. On my hundredth push-up, my phone rings.

I grab the phone and lay on my back and start doing crunches. Thayer.

“Yeah?”

“Lyam, we're in town. Can you and Cosette come to Maman's later today?” Our family home, which is also our group headquarters, isn't far from here. This will work out well. Maman will be absolutely thrilled when I tell her the news, and it will do Cosette good to hear it.

“When? I need to talk to Rousseau first.”

We make a plan to meet for lunch so I can have a chat with Rousseau after.

“Perfect.”

Cosette comes out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel just as a knock comes at the door.

“That'll be our breakfast.” I frown at her. “Get back in that bathroom and shut the door.”

“What?” She looks down at herself in the towel.

“Cosette,” I say warningly.

“Alright, alright.” The bathroom door shuts with a bang and I go to get our food. Like hell I'm letting anyone else see her half-dressed.

I lay everything out on a little table by the balcony. They brought everything I wanted, even a small vase with pink carnations.

“You can come out now.”

The door opens and she stands there again in the fluffy bathrobe. I stare at her.

“How did you get even more beautiful overnight?” I ask in a low rumble.

She gives me a soft smile that lights her whole face up and tightens her robe. “Pregnancy glow?”

“Maybe. Lose the robe, baby.”

“Here we go,” she says on a laugh. “Explain to me why you don’t want someone on your staff seeing me in a robe but any skydiver out that balcony can see me naked?”

“Because no one will see you naked. That glass is one way.”

“Wow. That’s incredible.”

I shrug. “Sit. Eat. We’ve got a lot to do today.”

“Yes, *Sir*.”

I grumble. “Don’t look at me that way.”

“What way?”

“With that *come hither* face that makes me want to fuck you all over again. We don’t have time.”

She sips a steaming hot cup of coffee and grins at me over the top.

I can almost see her.

Waking up every day beside her.

Cosette, with our baby tucked up against her shoulder. Sitting in moonlight in a rocking chair. Singing her little songs in that voice of hers full of bravado and hope and so much joy.

Christmas with just the three of us, snow falling outside our window.

Morning coffee and evening walks.

A warm place to come home to and a soft place to land.

Us.

“So what are we doing today?” she asks, tucking her long legs under her and lifting the vase so she can inhale the scent of her flowers before she continues to eat.

“I have an informant I need to talk to later. But before then, we’re heading to see my family.”

She pauses with a piece of toast lifted to her mouth. “Your family?”

I brush a crumb off her lip and slide it into my own mouth. “My family. Thayer and Savannah are in town. They want to see you and I want to tell Maman about the baby.”

Cosette’s hands drop to her lap, the food forgotten. “Lyam. Oh my God, I can’t face Savannah.”

I know it’ll hurt her to do this, but I know she has to.

“Listen, baby, Savannah’s good people. You can trust her. All you have to do is tell her what you told me, and she’ll understand.”

She pinches the bridge of her nose. “I don’t know if I can.”

“You absolutely can, sweetheart. I promise. I’ll be there with you. Thayer knows and he understands, too, and after you’ve put all this behind you, you’ll feel so much better about things. Think about how excited Maman will be about the baby.” I sit down beside her and reach for her hand, giving her a gentle squeeze. “Listen. I know this is hard for you. I want you to know I’m sympathetic to that. But I also know that facing this will make things so much better for both of us in the long run.”

She squares her shoulders and looks at me. “I can do it,” she says with a confident nod. “I don’t want to, but I’m not going to run anymore, Lyam. I’ve got a baby to think about now. And I need to do what’s in that baby’s best interest. Our baby needs family and cousins and aunts and uncles and a grandmother who will spoil them to death.”

I smile at her. “Absolutely. And I’m proud of you, baby. Now put those hands in your lap and let me feed you.”

I lift the last piece of toast and put it in her mouth. Chewing and swallowing, then sipping some coffee, she sighs. “I’ve missed this.”

“What?”

“The way you are with me.”

“And what way’s that?”

“Insanely protective, dominant as fuck, and so...” she sighs contentedly. “*Focused.*”

“Focused?”

“Yes. Like when I’m with you, there’s no one else in the room. I mean, you don’t miss anything that could hurt either one of us, but you also don’t let anything distract you. If I’m talking to you, there’s no scrolling on your phone or cruising the web or ignoring me. You’re *hyper-focused* on *me*, like I matter. I *love* that.” She shrugs. “Makes me feel special.”

Special? God, of course she’s special.

“That’s because you are,” I say matter-of-factly. “You should know that.”

She grows quiet as she picks at a piece of crust on her plate. “I dunno. You have your shit and I have mine, you know?”

I do know. The question is, is she willing to talk to me about hers?

“You want to tell me anything?”

“No,” she says with a sad smile. “I mean, I do. When do we have to leave?”

“Thirty minutes.”

“Thirty minutes!” She leaps from her chair and runs back to the bathroom. “Oh my God, I need to get ready!”

I guess that means we’ll talk later.

“Just throw something on,” I mutter, tugging on a pair of jeans and a tee myself.

“I can’t just *throw something on*, Lyam. I’m going to see *your family.*”

Which will be *her family*, I realize with a sudden rush of emotion that almost chokes me.

My wife.

She’s going to be my wife. My family may break the law and make rules that are all their own, but we have some traditional

values. And there's one thing she has to know—if she's having my baby, she'll wear my ring.

I just have to find the right way to ask her.



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Cosette

I'M a bundle of raw nerves and energy when we get to the car.

Not long ago, I was afraid someone would attack us. Now that's the furthest thing from my mind.

My belly churns with nausea, and this time, it has nothing to do with the fact that I'm pregnant.

Savannah. I have to face Savannah.

Savannah's a ray of sunshine to everyone and anyone she meets, not as serious as her older sister Nicolette. But this family is loyal and protective and God if I didn't fuck her over so hard.

I want to weep and vomit and run.

Lyam takes my hand.

I draw in a deep breath.

He leans me against the door and frames me in, my back to the car and his hand on my cheek. "Listen to me. Are you listening to me?"

I nod and swallow and feel my breath come a bit easier. "Yes."

"They are going to love you. Do you hear me? *Love* you."

I nod. I hear the words, but I don't feel them. It's like I'm thirsty and he's pouring the water right over my head, drowning me but not satisfying my thirst at all.

"You don't look like you believe me," he says with a twinkle in his eye. "Do you?"

"I betrayed her so badly," I say on a hoarse whisper. "I can't... I can't make that go away."

"Change the past? No, baby, you can't. None of us can. I can get you palmier in the middle of the night or the biggest diamond ring you've ever seen, and fly you in a private jet to Hawaii, but even I can't change the past."

Did he just say diamond ring?

Wait, no, I have to stay focused here. “Right.”

“But you can change tomorrow,” he reminds me wisely. “You’re gonna go in there with me. You’re gonna talk to Savannah. I’ll make sure my brother isn’t an asshole, and then after that hard part’s over, we’ll tell Maman the news. Okay?”

I swallow and nod. “Okay. When did you get so smart?”

“Goddamn, it took a lot of hard knocks,” he says with that sheepish expression he gets sometimes that makes him look like a boy. I get up on my tiptoes and kiss his cheek.

“Thank you. And Lyam?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“Can we really do that Hawaii thing sometime?” I’ve always wanted to go since I was a kid and read an article about the crystal-clear water, white beaches, and fruit ripe for the picking.

He gives me a peck on the cheek before I slide into the passenger seat. “You’ve got it.”

I don’t mention the diamond ring.

But I don’t forget it either.

We’re quiet the rest of the way there. He’s obviously deep in thought, and I’m not sure about what, but I know he’s like this. He gets all broody and serious sometimes, but it’s all good. I don’t mind it. I know it’s his process.

As for me, I like just watching him drive. There’s something incredibly sexy about the way he’s so damn *efficient* and *skilled*. He navigates the windy roads, traffic downtown, a detour down a side street. It’s kind of amazing to see how fast we can drive while still being totally safe.

I wonder if when he drives me to the hospital because I’m in the throes of labor he’ll drive like this, or will he let something finally ruffle him a little? The idea amuses me. I smile and look out the window and have completely forgotten my nerves

about meeting up with Savannah and Thayer until I see the familiar gate that borders the Gerard family home ahead of us.

I've always loved this home. It's beautiful and majestic without being pompous. I also feel welcome when I come here which has everything to do with his mother, who's currently standing on the front step waving excitedly at us when we pull up.

"How much have you told her?"

"About what?" he asks as he waves off a uniformed man who looks like he wants to take his keys. As soon as he sees the driver's Lyam, he backs off with profuse apologies. I stifle a giggle. They all know Lyam likes to drive his own cars.

"About... me."

I remember how she was back at his house. I remember how she blew me a kiss and found me a doctor. How badly I wanted to talk to her.

"She knows our circumstances have changed. Maman doesn't like knowing too many details and we honor that."

Understandable.

"Oh, Cosette, you look lovely!" Avril practically claps her hands. For someone who's old enough to be my mother, too, I swear she could pass for my sister.

A little bit of my fear dissipates at the honest, warm welcome from her.

I imagine what it would be like coming here with a little baby on my shoulder. A ring on my finger. The Gerard family name?

A part of me wants to run.

Danger, danger! My instincts to run war with my need to be loved and my craving for approval. I want to hide from the authenticity of it all.

I fear that getting close to them will make me too vulnerable. I know this, and yet it doesn't make it any easier to take that step once again.

A part of me wanted to hide so that I'd have this baby alone. But even then, the thought of that kind of isolation makes me sick to my stomach.

Lyam's talking to the driver when I reach Avril. She extends her arms for a hug, and I eagerly hug her back.

Tears spring to my eyes when she holds me tightly. I feel her warmth and her acceptance, and I yearn to have the love of a mother like her. My mother did her best, but I was never good enough for her. And my father...

"I'm so glad you two are in a better place," she whispers. "My sons can be so harsh sometimes, and I can't talk *sense* into them." She shakes her head. "I know it comes from being loyal, but still." Rolling her eyes, she lets me go and squeezes my hand. "You know."

Boy, do I know.

"Ohhh, yes," I agree, just as a second car pulls up.

I want to tell Avril that I deserved being taken prisoner. I'm still riddled with guilt for what I did, but I'm ashamed to admit it out loud. I don't know what to say or do but I know that I have to face the next hard thing with courage.

The car that pulled up has a driver, but I suspect it's Thayer and Savannah.

I'm not wrong.

Avril takes one look at me as Lyam climbs the step beside me.

"Are you alright?" she asks.

"Inside." His voice holds a note of unquestionable authority, leaving no room for debate. "We'll see them in a minute."

I let him lead me inside. Avril hurries back to the door to greet the other two.

Lyam and I stand in the foyer, my belly roiling with nerves and fear.

His forehead touches mine. Our palms meet, our fingers lace together.

“It’s gonna be okay.”

My nose tingles and my vision goes blurry. I try to clear my throat to counteract the tightness, but I can’t. My heart is racing and my body feels strangely tense and on edge.

“Cosette.” I snap to attention at the sharp tone of his voice and pull away, staring into his eyes.

“You listen to me.”

My heart beats even faster, my body trained to obey him on command. I nod, swallowing, when his index finger lifts my chin.

“You had a choice between two terrible things. You made the better of the two choices. So you stop right this minute beating yourself up for what you did. There isn’t a person in this family who hasn’t been in that exact position. That’s life, baby. Sometimes you’re faced with a hard choice and a harder choice. Sometimes those choices you’re forced to make will put your heart in a vise and squeeze it. Sometimes, it’ll kick you down and you’ll have to claw your way back up to the top. But you listen to me. The key isn’t avoiding the fall. That’s inevitable. The key is *getting back up*.”

I hear the truth in his words. I feel them. And I know then that no one will ever understand me the way this harsh, broken man does. Because I’ve had to claw my way back up and he *gets that*.

And damn if it doesn’t make me love him.

“Thank you,” I whisper, as the front door opens and Thayer and Savannah walk in.

I gather up every bit of my strength and turn around to face them.

Thayer, stern and commanding and known to be ruthless, doesn’t look at me but straight to Lyam. The two of them have a silent battle only they understand, but it isn’t lost on any of us. Avril wrings her hands and mutters something about checking in with her kitchen staff. Savannah straightens.

“Okay, then, so while you two do whatever the hell it is you have to do, Cosette and I are going to have a private talk.” She looks to me, not smiling but still welcoming. “Come with me, Cosette, will you?”

“I’ll join you,” Thayer says, but Savannah puts her hand up on his chest.

“Honey, not this time. Please give us a little space, okay? We’ll be right out that door and you can see us, but I want to speak privately to her.”

Thayer growls and takes a step toward us, but Lyam grabs his arm.

“Stay.”

Thayer swings around to him but Savannah goes between them and kisses his cheek. She whispers something in his ear that makes his face soften, and he finally nods.

She’ll have to teach me that one.

I still feel sick. When we’re outside alone, my nerves get the better of me.

“THAYER SAID you wanted to talk to me. I know you were taken into custody, and I know that Lyam says you’re trustworthy, but I don’t know much else. Anything you want to tell me?”

I look her in the eyes and nod. “Two things. First, I’m sorry. So sorry. Second.” I draw in a breath. “I’m pregnant.”

And then it all comes out in a rush. While she stares at me with wide eyes, her mouth gently parted, I tell her everything. She listens, and when I’m done, she stands, walks over to me, and like Avril... hugs me.

“Me too,” she says softly. “I’m pregnant, too. Aw, it’s gonna be so cool that we don’t have to do this alone. Will you come back to Le Luxe? I know you might not want to right now but we’re staying there for a while.”

“I honestly don’t know where we’re going but I think we may stay in Paris for a bit.”

She nods. “Of course, I understand. We’re here all the time anyway. And I like to stay close to Avril.”

“I can understand that totally.”

“I can’t believe they threatened you like that. Even then, when you betrayed us, you told me you were sorry. I knew you were under duress, but I had no idea why.”

I feel so much lighter. I feel so much more at ease.

“Cosette. You have to know they don’t forgive easily. If Lyam and Thayer know the truth, they know exactly what happened. And if the people who forced you into that weren’t already dead, they’d see to that.”

I laugh and feel lighter than I have in ages. “He said that.”

She snorts. “Lyam? Of course he did.”

The door opens and Avril stands on the other side, waving to us with a huge charcuterie board.

“Oh my God, I’m starving,” she says. “And she knows *all* my favorite foods. You have any cravings?”

And just like that, we’re talking about food cravings and due dates and babies. Like sisters.

Sisters.

“Does she know yet?” she whispers.

“Not yet,” I whisper back. “But we’re telling her today.”

Savannah grins. “Oh, I can’t wait to see her reaction. She is going to be so damn excited!”

We step through the door and Avril gives us a group hug. “Oh, girls, I can’t *tell* you how nice it is to have some *women* around here. I love those boys, but they are uncontrollable sometimes, you know?”

“Oh, do we know,” Savannah says with a laugh.

“And to think,” Avril says, “we’re having a *baby*.”

“Pretty sure *the girls* are the ones having the babies,” Lyam says drily.

“You know what I mean,” Avril says while we all wait for her to figure it out. “Wait. Did you say *girls*? As in... plural?”

Lyam’s eyes twinkle. Savannah grabs the tray of food just in time as Avril throws her hands up in the air and *squeals* with excitement. “Ahhhhhh! *Mère de Dieu!* Another baby?”

And then I’m in her arms again and Lyam’s laughing, Savannah and Thayer in the background but even Thayer’s smiling. And I relish this moment. This feeling that maybe everything’s coming together.

“We have a few more guests, Maman.”

Avril’s eyes light up as if she just won the lottery.

“Mario’s in town with one of his cousins.”

“Tell them to come!” she says, nearly clapping her hands together with glee. “Please!”

I’m thankful I’ve had the conversation I needed to with Savannah. I feel happier than I have in ages, energized and excited and... *hopeful*.

“Already did. They’ll be here any minute.”

“Speak of the devil,” Lyam says as the doorbell rings. He doesn’t let me go but holds me against him as Avril opens the door and the hottest, most Italian-looking men I’ve ever seen enter. The taller, thinner man holds a toddler in his arms and a second by the hand. One boy, one girl.

Lyam grins and my heart turns over in my chest. “*Mon Dieu,*” he whispers in my ear. “If those aren’t the cutest damn kids I’ve ever seen?”

It dawns on me then that we’ve never been around kids together. I met him at Le Luxe, an adults-only club, and no one ever brings their kids anywhere near it. I haven’t seen him that much with his family, and the few times I have, there weren’t any kids. His brothers’ wives only just started having babies.

And the kids are drawn straight to him. I wonder why. Could it be those twinkling eyes or the fact that he's smiling at them? Has the concept of having a baby all our own softened him?

Thayer does introductions. Mario and Sergio both hail from Boston.

"Ooh, I love Boston," Savannah says gleefully.

They talk about businesses the Rossi family owns in the North End, and Savannah's been to several as she went to school in Boston.

"I had no idea they were owned by *you* guys."

Mario, jovial and friendly, quirks a brow. "Did that affect the taste of the cannoli? Hmm?"

"Definitely not," Savannah says with a groan. "Oh my God, what I would give for one of those cannoli right now." She pats her pregnant belly.

"Sergio," Lyam says, extending his hand. "What brings you here, brother?"

"Came to talk to Thayer." He glances at Avril. "I'm opening up a business outside of Boston similar to Thayer's, and I wanted to ask his advice."

"You came all the way to Paris to chat?" Lyam asks.

"We came to Paris on business and thought we'd stop in while you were here."

I don't know much about their business dealings, but I know that the Rossis, and by default the Montavios, their close cousins, work with the Gerard brothers. When you're as powerful and as wealthy as they are, it helps to have someone who's got your back.

"And who are the darling children?" Avril asks. "Yours, Sergio?"

"God, no," he says with a smile that looks a little haunted. "My little cousins. We're taking a family vacation in Paris and these two have kept my cousin up at night. We said we'd wear them out good in the city today."

The little boy, about three years old, toddles over to us and points to Lyam's arm. "You draw?" he says. "Bad."

"I told him it was bad," Avril says, shaking her head.

Sergio half-smiles. He looks like the kind of guy that doesn't smile often, and when he does, he has to remember how to.

"Someone got in big trouble for drawing on the wall. He thinks you drew on yourself with a marker."

"What it is?" the little boy asks.

Lyam bends to one knee. "It's a snake," he says in a low voice, which only excites him further. "Do you like snakes?"

The little boy's eyes widen. He only nods.

"Oh lovely," Avril says on a groan. "Another snake lover."

I watch Lyam with the little ones. I watch the way he gently but firmly guides them away from the elegant vase in Avril's entryway and instructs them to sit politely at the table when a member of staff brings cookies. I watch him carry them on his shoulders so they can reach way up high to see out the stained glass windows. With every gesture he makes, my heart melts a little more.

I watch him with the children and know: Lyam's gonna make the perfect daddy.



THIRTEEN

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Lyam

I THINK Cosette would stay all night long if she could, but we have an informant to confer with. Still, I'm glad she talked to Savannah. Thayer was a harder sell, but there's no one more dedicated to family than he is.

"You gonna propose?" he asks discreetly when Maman says something about giving them goody bags of baked goods to take home and the girls go with her to the kitchen.

"Of course I am. You know it. She's having my kid, brother."

"Mmm. It's soon, though. She's got a ways to go yet. Take it slow, Lyam. I know you aren't always the one to do that."

I know he's right, but I don't want to wait. "I know I love her. She's having my baby. It's the right thing to do."

He nods and shrugs. "Maybe, but it's important to find out everything you can. Do you even know her history?"

He's right, I know he is, but I also know there's nothing that's gonna hold me back from marrying Cosette.

Before I can respond, they come back into the room, both Savannah and Cosette carrying massive containers filled with baked goods.

I stand. "We have to go."

"So soon?" Maman asks, her face falling.

"I promise we'll come back soon but we've got a few important things to do."

Savannah and Cosette hug, and before we leave Savannah reaches for me, too. I give her a hug and she whispers in my ear, "Be good to her, Lyam. She's had a hard life."

What does she know about Cosette's life?

Does she know more than I do? I know she was raised by a single mom north of Paris, that her mother hated the city, and her father left them. I know that her mother died when Cosette

was in college, and she and Nicolette became friends when they worked at La Maison. I know that while she studied cosmetology she was more called to work in nursing, but after she found her place at Le Luxe, she never went back to school.

And I know that I love her.

“I will.”

As we head out, Cosette looks over her shoulder. “Thayer, did he ask you about Princess?”

Thayer snorts. “Yeah. I’ll have her sent up.” He shakes his head. “No goddamn way *I’m* bringing her back. Snakes don’t travel so well.”

I kiss her at the bottom step, then again outside our car, holding her to me.

I kiss her when I buckle her seat belt, and before I shut the door.

We kiss at a red light, until finally she giggles and says, “Lyam, we can pick this up later. You have an informant to talk to.”

I do. Fucking duty.

“Shouldn’t be too long though.”

“Where are we going?”

“Remember I mentioned several safe places we have? The warehouse is south of the city. We’ve got a stack of secure locations, and that’s one of them.”

“Gotcha.”

I turn and look at her. “Why do you stare at me when I drive?”

She reaches a hand out to stroke my biceps. “Because you’re sexy as fuck and I love watching how competently you drive. It’s a turn-on.”

I groan. “Cosette.”

“No, for real. All that alpha male commanding authority.” She fans herself. “My God. It’s sexy as hell. And you’re just so

good at everything you do.” She sighs. “I want to see you shoot again.”

I shake my head. “You’re strange, woman. And you might get your wish sooner than later, we’ll see.”

Her eyes widen comically. “You think we’re gonna have a shoot-out?”

“Not *now*, or I wouldn’t be bringing you here.”

“Okay, you don’t have to *growl*.”

“I didn’t growl.”

“See, growling is such a natural part of what you do that you didn’t even *realize it*. But you were one hundred percent growling. There you go again!”

“Okay, alright, I was growling. So sue me if I hate the idea of bringing you to a potentially dangerous situation.”

“You’re so romantic in your own way,” she says on a sigh.

I love her quirky ways.

“So tell me about your conversation with Savannah.”

She tells me everything and finishes just as I pull down the long, windy drive that brings us to the warehouse. “And you were right,” she says happily, her pink cheeks nearly glowing. “You were *so* right.”

I’m glad she’s put this to rest. I squeeze her hand. “I’m proud of you.”

She looks at me in surprise. “I don’t know if anyone’s ever said that to me before. Thank you.”

God, I can’t imagine no one ever saying that to her.

“Okay, listen. This is an informant, and I want you safe, so I want you to stay as quiet as you can. Don’t talk to her. At *all*. Got it?”

She nods. “Got it. Wait, *her*?”

I give her a stern look. “Yeah. And I mean it, Cosette. I swear to God, if you talk to her, you’re in *big* trouble. I will literally

bring you right back here and put you over my knee and then *no more palmier.*”

“Lyam,” she says, abashed. “You wouldn’t!”

“Oh, I would.”

I check my gun and slide it into a holster, fill a second and check that as well.

“Also hot,” she says on a moan.

“What?”

“All those guns. Please promise me you’ll take me shooting again soon.”

I shake my head. “Done. Hawaii, guns. Got it.”

Cosette may be perfect for me.

Camille Rousseau sits at a table in a darkened corner of the room. She joined the police force at thirty years old, a late bloomer. Her father knew ours, and the rest is history. She’s been working for us ever since, and we pay her well.

“Mr. Gerard,” Camille greets. I’m glad she’s in civilian clothing. I hate what the sight of a uniform does to me. “And to whom do I owe this pleasure?”

“No names,” I snap. Camille smiles. She’s a professional liar so I don’t trust her.

“Alright, then. How do I know I can trust her?”

“Because you trust *me*, and where she goes, I go,” I tell her. I take out a wad of cash and put it on the table, careful not to bother hiding the metal I’ve got packed.

She takes the cash eagerly and shoves it in a black duffel bag.

“I have no more details on who was behind your abduction. I wish I did. All I can tell you is that the chase earlier did not involve any actual police. They were impersonators with a mission, and I suspect they were hired by a politician. I’ll get you more information as soon as possible. I’m sorry,” she says with a grimace. “They’ve hidden their tracks so well.”

Which makes them actually fucking impossible to track.

“But I do know that someone in Montague’s office was behind it. For all I know it was Montague himself but I can’t say for sure. Whoever it was wanted you to think it was the police, but I can assure you, it wasn’t.”

“Right. So you know for a fact Montague or one of his cronies is behind this?”

“Yes.”

“I figured as much.”

She gives some more pertinent information. Cosette looks pale and wan.

“You okay?” I ask her.

She shakes her head and clutches her belly. “I feel sick.”

I stand. “We’ve got to get her home. I need to know all the details you can find. What you’ve told me is a good start, but not enough. Get me more, and I’ll double what you just got.” Her eyes gleam like full moons.

“Tomorrow morning. Come tomorrow morning and I’ll have more answers for you.”

I nod and take Cosette’s hand.

I reach for my gun and check outside before we leave.

“What was that all about?” she asks.

I blow out a breath. I tell no one anything, but I’m going to ask this woman to marry me. It’s about time I tell her more of what makes me who I am.

“You know I was taken prisoner. Abducted.”

She nods as I open her door and let her in. I reach in and on instinct buckle her belt.

“And you know why.”

“Right.”

I go to my side of the car and give one more look around. The back of my neck prickles like we’re being watched, but I see no signs at all that anyone else is here. Just to be safe, I pull out my gun and take a stance.

Leaves stir in a bush behind us, but no one's there.

The warehouse is eerily silent. A part of me wants to check on Camille, but she can handle herself. I look down to where the ground is muddy from last night's rain and see no telling footprints but ours, and we're secluded enough that no one would've made it here without a car or some mode of transportation.

Then why do my instincts scream at me to go?

Why do I want to toss my body over Cosette's and protect her from whatever or whoever would threaten her safety and the safety of our unborn baby?

I trust her. I know I do.

What is it that I don't trust?

No one's here. Still, I slide into the driver's seat and turn the key in the ignition quickly. I want to get the hell out of here.

"I was telling you about my abduction," I continue, once our doors are shut and locked.

"Everything okay?" Cosette asks.

"I think so." I still can't shake that feeling. "Why?"

"You look guarded. I saw you draw your weapon."

"It feels like someone's watching us."

She's quiet as I peel down the road, dust kicking up behind us. A part of me wants to take her to America, to a place that's safe and away from all of this until it all blows over. The other part of me wants to arm myself to the teeth and start picking off would-be enemies one by one until there's no one left to threaten us.

Neither is an option.

"Do you feel like that often?" Cosette asks. "Like someone's watching you?"

I sigh. "I do."

Anyone who's looked down the barrel of a sniper's rifle with the intent to kill as many times as I have develops that skill.

Once you've been the predator enough times, you begin to imagine there's a larger predator with even bigger teeth threatening your survival.

"What are you thinking?" I ask Cosette. She seems pensive and troubled.

"I liked that your mother was so excited. She'll be an awesome grandmother."

"Yes."

"I'm happy I was able to make peace with Savannah. I like her a lot."

"I agree."

"And Mario seems pleasant enough, but Sergio... I don't know about him."

"He's dangerous as fuck. I don't want you near him unless you're with me."

She nods. I know Sergio Montavio and I know I don't want her anywhere near him.

"Those kids were adorable."

"Mmm."

My responses are getting shorter because I feel like she's leading up to something and I want her to get to it. She looks out the window at the passing hills and trees studded with vibrant green leaves. I think about what I'll do with her when we're alone later. How beautiful she was when we made love this morning, and how gorgeous she will be as her body accommodates our growing child.

I reach for her hand. She doesn't take it at first, and I wonder why.

"I don't know," she says softly. "You guys are all so... charming and suave. You turn the heads of every woman you pass."

"Eh," I say with a shrug. "They know we're filthy rich."

I love the sound of her soft laugh. “It isn’t just that. Not every woman is into money.”

I shrug. “Maybe not *all*.”

“I just... well, men like you are known for taking mistresses. Of not being faithful. They consider infidelity an acceptable part of their code.”

“Men like me?” I ask, my voice harsh.

“Yeah, Lyam. *Mobsters*. Men in the mafia. Made men. Do your friends the Rossis cheat on their wives?”

“No.”

“What about the Montavios? I know for a fact that some of them do, the girls talked about it.”

“I don’t know about Sergio or Timeo, and those are the only ones I know.”

“So with all those gorgeous women ready to do whatever you tell them, how do you plan on staying exclusive? When it gets hard. When the baby wakes up at night wanting to be fed or when someone says something to one of our children, or one of our staff disrespects me.”

“You know exactly what I’ll do,” I respond through gritted teeth. “If we need help, I’ll hire them. I’ll buy you what you need.”

“But our *child*, Lyam.”

“Right. Our child is going to be perfectly fine.”

“Why?”

“Because unconventional as we might be, we love each other. No matter what happens, we’re loyal and faithful. And that child will be so, so loved.”

She swipes at her eyes and nods her head.

“Thank you.”

She doesn’t seem convinced, though, and I don’t know why. I spoke the truth to her. I told her what’s on my mind and in my

heart and how I feel. And in turn, she seems more distant. Cold, even.

Why?

Is she battling a struggle all her own she hasn't shared with me?

I imagine she's battling *lots* of things she hasn't shared with me.

I watch Cosette's shoulders rise while she takes in a breath. We're almost back.

"Lyam." Cosette's voice trembles when she looks at me. I don't know if she's afraid or concerned or what, but I want to get her back to safety and privacy.

I reach my hand out and place it on her knee. She calms when I touch her, and I want her to know she's okay. "Yeah?"

We're in the heart of the city now. Traffic thickens and the city sounds around us tell us we're not alone.

"I want to talk to you," she says, resting her hand on top of mine. "There are some things —"

I slam on my brakes when a car in front of us comes to a sudden halt. "Of all the fucking—"

Cosette suddenly gasps and holds her belly, both hands spanning her slender waist. When she gives a cry of pain, my heart leaps into my chest. We're fully stopped behind a line of traffic.

"What is it?"

"I—oh God, Lyam." Her face blanches and her eyes are so wide she's scaring me. "I—there's some pain." When she looks down, she panics. "I feel like... I think I'm bleeding. Oh my God, get me to a restroom. Please!"

We're only a block away from the pastry shop. I lean on the horn to make the cars in front of me move, but they won't. We're jammed in between a truck and a motorcycle, and I can't get them to move.

“Get out of my way!” I bellow at anyone and everyone. “It’s an emergency!”

A few cars inch away, but most just stand stock-still.

I slam the car into Park. Whip off my jacket, revealing my ink, and stalk toward the car blocking us.

“Liam!” Cosette’s crying now.

I turn to face her. “I’ve got this, baby. Breathe, Cosette.”

I reach the car in front of me.

“Listen, buddy,” the driver says as he turns to face me, cracking his window a fraction. He’s bald and about fifty, and looks like he wants to punch me. I fucking dare him. “We all wanna fucking move. If you think you’re special, fucking think again.”

“Roll down your window.”

He stares at me and snorts. “I don’t think so.”

I lean in and brace my forearms on the doorframe at the base of the window, the tat of my snake clearly visible. His eyes widen when they come to rest on it. I have a reputation in these parts and I’m not afraid to use it.

“Roll down your window,” I repeat in a voice just above a whisper as I take out my favorite gun, “or I’ll shoot it open. It gets messy, then, doesn’t it? I might accidentally hit *you*, or your buddy, then you’ve got a fucking broken window.”

Staring at the snake, he pushes a button. The window slides down.

As soon as it’s down I reach in and grab him by the neck. His eyes nearly bug out of his head. “This is an emergency. I’ve gotta move. Get out of my fucking way *now*.”

His friend slams the dashboard. “Do it. Jesus, do it.”

I release him and toss a few bills on his seat. “Here’s a tip.”

I go back to Cosette and notice blood on the seat of the car. She openly weeps and turns away when I get back in the driver’s seat. I reach for her knee. “Breathe, baby,” I say again,

as the car in front of us peels away. I hit the dash with my left hand and call the doctor. I tell her what's happening.

“Meet me at the hospital, Mr. Gerard.”

We drive through the city streets as fast as I can while keeping her safe and glide into the hospital entrance within two minutes. Seconds later, I'm running in with her. She's sobbing quietly against my shirt. I bark out orders to the hospital staff, trying to think of anything at all that might make this better.

Goddammit. I feel helpless and useless.

There are some things that even physical intimidation, millions of dollars, and brute force can't control.



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FOURTEEN

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Cosette

“WE’RE GOING TO THE HOSPITAL,” Lyam says. “Hang in there, baby.”

I hold onto my belly as if somehow, I can keep this baby here with me. Even though I’m not that far along, I’ve already imagined having a sweet baby of my own... of our own. I’ve already imagined how it would feel seeing Lyam hold our baby, and how I would be the one to hold and rock and soothe our little one.

Lyam drives fast on a good day. Right now, it feels as if the car has sprouted wings and begun to fly. But I don’t care. I want to get there as fast as he does. He’d teleport us if he could but since he can’t, he’s doing the best he can to get me there as fast as humanly possible. God help any officer who tries to stop him right now.

When I see traffic and brake lights ahead of us at the final turn to get to the hospital, I stifle a sob. I need to get there. The urgency of the moment tells me I need to get there *now*.

“They have to move,” I cry. “How do we get them to move?”

“I’ve got this.” His hand rests on my thigh. “Trust me.”

I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding.

With a quick turn of his wrist, determination written in the angles of his face, he cuts the wheel and hops the curb. I close my eyes. I feel his hand leave my thigh as he continues to drive as if this sidewalk is his own personal lane. I tune out the sounds of horns blaring and people screaming as he tears down the sidewalk and nearly flips the car over as he makes the turn to get to the hospital.

Several ambulances, lights flashing, sit in the bays at the back of the hospital. Lyam throws the car in Park and runs to my side. Yanks open my door and lifts me out. I’ve never seen him look so wild and afraid. It terrifies me.

A young man in a security uniform steps in front of him. “Sir, this entrance is only for—”

“Stand back.” Lyam’s eyes narrow. He hasn’t bothered to hide his weapons and they all look down immediately. “We’re meeting Dr. Martin. We’ll go in this entrance.”

They mutter to each other as they part to let us in.

“You can’t threaten security guards, Lyam,” I whisper. “You’ll get arrested.”

“I’m getting you in there.”

“You are no good to me if you’re in jail!” I protest.

He grunts in reply.

Two nurses in scrubs see us and usher us down a hall. “This way, Mr. Gerard. Dr. Martin is ready for you.”

I bury my head on his chest as he carries me down the hallway. We’re brought to a room with a hospital bed and monitors.

He lays me down with surprising gentleness.

I watch the nurses eye him like he’s a bomb about to detonate.



LYAM HOLDS my hand when we look at the little wriggling bean on the screen in front of us.

Our baby.

“Some women bleed during pregnancy,” Doctor Martin says reassuringly. “But everything is fine. You see?” she says, pointing to the screen with her index finger. “That’s the heartbeat. You’re perfectly healthy. Your body is shedding excess blood which can be alarming, but in this case doesn’t indicate that anything is wrong.”

“But I thought she stopped bleeding when she was pregnant,” Lyam says, his voice sounding not unlike a growl.

“Most women do, yes,” Doctor Martin says calmly. “That’s how it normally goes. But some women bleed periodically. This is how some women end up in labor without knowing they were even pregnant. They assume the bleeding is their cycle, when in fact it isn’t at all.”

“So the baby’s okay?” I ask. “That’s what’s most important.”

Dr. Martin smiles. “The baby’s perfect.”

“And Cosette will be okay?” Lyam asks in a tone that dares her to tell him otherwise.

“Of course,” she says. “Though I do recommend bed rest for the next day or two just to ensure she recovers from the trauma. I’ve given her something that will help her sleep for now. Make sure she rests.”

Lyam’s jaw clenches. “Oh, I am fully prepared to do that.”

I sigh. Of course he is. He’d chain me to the bed and stand guard over me until I have this baby if that’s what he had to do.

She clears her throat. “Mr. Gerard. We need to talk. Typically, we frown upon people coming into the hospital with weapons. You cannot come in here and threaten the staff again.”

“I may not?” he challenges, getting to his feet.

“Lyam.” I reach for him, but he shrugs me off.

“My future wife is carrying our child. I needed to make sure she was safe.”

“I understand,” she says. “But I’ll repeat. You cannot come in here and threaten people. They are far less likely to do what you ask if you’re using threats to get what you want, and how much of a help will you be to your wife and child if you’re arrested?”

My thoughts exactly.

They go on arguing while I mull things over.

Wait.

He said wife.

Did he say wife? Of course he did. I'm pregnant with his child, so it stands to reason the next thing he wants to do is put a ring on my finger and make this official.

He could've *told* me that.

Before this happened, I was on the verge of telling him that Montague is my father. I wanted him to know. But right now, I think we need to clear a few things up.

I yawn, exhausted. All I care about is this baby, and sleep.

And maybe getting a proposal? *Gah*.

I'd never seen Lyam panicked until he saw me bleed.

It unnerves me.

But I rest secure in the knowledge that our baby is safe, tucked away in my womb.

I close my eyes.

The doctor leaves. I don't even know what they agreed upon, but I know Lyam doesn't back down, so that was probably an interesting compromise.

"I'm bringing you home," Lyam finally says. "You'll rest better there."

They ask if he wants a wheelchair, but he declines. He'd rather carry me. I close my heavy eyes and hear him mutter an apology to the nurses for scaring them. It isn't enough, but it's something.

Ah. So Dr. Martin *did* get through, at least a little.

He nestles me back in the passenger seat of his car, and this time, the ride home is less frantic. He doesn't want to jostle me. I close my eyes, half in and half out of sleep, until we get back to Le Marquise and he leads me upstairs.

I fall asleep within seconds of my head hitting the pillow.

When I wake, sunlight streams through the windows and Lyam's on his phone, his back to me.

"I know," he says in a hushed whisper. "Motherfucker. We'll do what we have to."

I see his shoulders slump, and then he pinches the bridge of his nose. Nausea rolls through my belly. I need food.

When he turns to me, my heart squeezes. He looks haggard and tired, his eyes bloodshot and unfocused.

“Come here,” I say softly. “Lie down.”

He turns his back to me and speaks in a low voice into the phone.

“I gotta go. Cosette’s up.”

He hangs up the phone, tosses it aside, then walks over to me.

“You didn’t sleep last night?” I ask. I reach my hand to him and gently touch his face.

When he reaches over to cradle my head, I close my eyes. Inhale. Exhale.

We’ve been through a lot.

“How are you feeling?” His voice is raspy from lack of sleep.

“Nauseous,” I whisper. “Shaken, but better. You?”

“Yeah. I got you food.”

He helps me sit up and arranges a tray with breakfast on it.

“Don’t you want to lay down? You look so tired. I only want a little to hold me over.” I nibble a croissant, then lay back down on the bed, exhausted.

Wordlessly, he climbs into bed next to me. Takes the croissant from my hand. Feeds me little bits.

“So. You said something about me being your *wife* last night? Would you care to elaborate on that, Mr. Gerard?”

He looks at me as if I just sprouted a second head. “Of course you’ll marry me,” he says sternly. “You’re having my baby and I love you. Why wouldn’t you marry me?”

He loves me.

“I love you, too,” I say, my voice trembling. “But you didn’t *ask* me.”

“I need to ask?”

I throw my hands up in the air. “Yes!”

When he shoots me that boyish smirk, my heart turns in my chest. “Cosette. I love you. The best way I know to protect you and care for you and our baby is to marry you. Will you marry me, or do I have to steal you away to Vegas and find an Elvis?”

I smile back. “Yes,” I say tremulously. “No need to pull out the Vegas threat.”

We eat in comfortable silence for a little while until I ask him, “Who was on the phone?” Could be anyone after everything we’ve been through the past few days.

“Thayer.”

“Ah. Did you tell him what happened?”

“Yeah. I did. He and Savannah are still in Paris. She’ll be by to see you soon.”

He’s still distracted. He isn’t really here. Something’s troubling him.

Silence reigns for a minute while he works his jaw. “But that’s not why he called.”

I sip the juice he hands me.

“Why did he call?”

I watch him draw in a deep breath.

Something is wrong. I stare at him.

“Rousseau is dead.”

Rousseau... his informant... is dead.

Yesterday she was alive and breathing and now...

“Dead?” I repeat in a shocked whisper. “How?”

“Suicide, allegedly. Only there was no note, she had plans to go out to dinner with her fiancé that night, and also had plans to meet up again with me. There was a gun placed in her right hand, but she always used her left.”

“My God,” I whisper. The lives they lead, the people they know—they’re dangerous and deadly and walk a razor’s edge between death and life.

And when Lyam knows the truth... when he knows my father is the very politician after his family with the intent to bring them down... what will stop him from leaving me, just like my father did?

He has access to money and people and places I can only dream of.

But he loves me.

Does he, though? Or does he love the idea of a wife and baby?

Do I love him?

I close my eyes as a wave of grief washes over me.

I have to tell him about my father. He has to know. I have to tell him everything and pick up the pieces of where that leaves us.

I told him about my mother. How she did her best but was detached and overwhelmed much of the time. How I’ve never even celebrated my own birthday. How we bought my clothes secondhand and the kids at school made fun of me. The memories I have of visits to the food pantry and the church ladies bringing us Christmas dinner.

I told him about the betrayal and why I made the choices I made. But the thought of telling him I’m actually related to the one man who’s trying to destroy everything...

“Lyam.” My voice sounds hollow and empty. “We have to talk.” My heart clenches in my chest and I feel sick to my stomach. I bite back bile as it stings the back of my throat. It burns and leaves me no choice but to stop speaking.

“You okay?”

I cover my mouth with my hand and shake my head.

He leaps to his feet. “Pain?”

I shake my head again.

“Nausea?”

I nod. He reaches for a small bottle with a prescription the doctor gave me, but it’s too late. I fly out of the bed and into the bathroom and make it just in time.

When I’m done, I’m spent and exhausted. Weakened, I lay my head in my hands. Again, he’s with me and again, I don’t know what I’m going to do or how I’m going to handle this as he gathers my hair up and places a cool washcloth on my neck.

“You’re so strong,” he says gently.

Is a man like him capable of real, self-giving love?

“I’m so proud of you for putting up with this for the sake of our baby. You’re a good girl, Cosette.”

My heart warms, even as I war with my thoughts and fears.

People who love me leave.

If I leave first, I won’t have to go through that again.

What if I have this baby with him, only to find out later that he’s going to leave? And after getting my hopes up and depending on him? It isn’t just me I have to worry about now, but our child.

He isn’t safe!

But he protected me and will protect our child. Is safety overrated?

He brought weapons into a hospital!

Does he know any other way?

He threatened people. When they get in the way, he hurts them. How can I raise a baby with a man like him?

Then I remember how he was with the children, the way his eyes danced, and how I knew right then, deep down in my soul, that he’ll make a good daddy. He may have battle scars, but I know he’s actively working through them.

That doesn’t solve my biggest dilemma though.

If he finds out who my father is, he’ll think I betrayed them again.

How will he ever really love me when he knows?

I brush my teeth and hair and freshen up, but I'm still shaky.

Of course I'm not in cahoots with Montague. But will he jump to the worst conclusions?

"Back to bed with you," he says in that authoritative way that makes my heart squeeze. I don't want to lose this, his protection and fierce loyalty. Having someone I can *depend* on. Someone strong enough to lean on.

I want to believe this is real.

I want to believe that he really loves me.

What *is* love, anyway?

"I have to investigate a few things today. The fact that Rousseau is dead isn't good. I'm an asshole for taking you with me yesterday." He shakes his head and squeezes his eyes tight a moment before he opens them again. "I should've made sure you were safe and never should've taken you to talk to her."

"I'm fine," I reassure him, giving his hand a squeeze. "Remember? Dr. Martin said I'm fine."

"But fuck, Cosette, if they'd attacked while we were at the warehouse—"

"Did they?" I ask pointedly.

"No."

"You have secure locations, and that's one of them. You brought me with you there because you knew it to be safe. She wasn't killed there because it *was* safe, and we both know that if you'd been anywhere else, you would have feared that someone would've hurt me. You know that you'd have done literally anything in your power to protect me."

"Of course."

Lyam needs to make peace with the fact that he can't wrap me in foam wrap and ensure that no one, ever, hurts me or our child.

“Then stop beating yourself up already.” I shake my head.

Turning to me, he gives me a hint of a smile before he shakes his own head and lifts the covers. “You’re the only one who gets away with talking to me like that.”

“Good. Then things are as they should be.” I smile, but it feels forced. I haven’t put to rest my fears, or my deep-seated need to flee when things get good, because getting closer to him and having my hopes dashed will destroy me. I can’t let them. I can’t let *him*.

Lyam is distracted.

“Lyam?”

My heart begins to beat faster with nerves. This time, I’m not sure the rolling nausea is related to hormones. “Lyam, talk to me. What is it?”

“Here,” he says, still a million miles away. He hands me a mug of steaming tea that smells minty. “It’s that tea that helps.”

I sip it gratefully, my heart warming.

He knows what I need. He meets my needs.

I reach for his hand and give it a squeeze. He kisses my fingertips. Even when he’s troubled and hurt, he softens when he’s with me.

I want to do that for him. I want to *be* that for him.

He doesn’t answer me at first, only sits beside me and lifts my hand to his mouth. He kisses my fingers, one by one.

“How are you feeling?” he asks softly.

Something feels off. I can’t put my finger on it. Something is unsettling and discouraging.

But when he kisses me again, my heart melts and my protests thaw like snow under rain. When his tongue licks mine, I moan and sink further into the bed, my arms encircling his neck as he continues to ravage me.

Soon, my body is heated and flushed with the need for more.

“Come here,” he says with a sad but wicked smile.

I tell myself he's troubled by what happened. I tell myself he doesn't like this any more than I do. He fights his demons and I fight mine.

We stop talking. He undresses me and pays particular attention to kissing my shoulders, the undersides of my breasts. He licks my nipples and strokes them while nudging my knees apart.

"Please," I beg, my arms around his neck, begging for the only thing that will give me comfort and consolation—being closer to him.

He holds my gaze as he glides into me. I sigh at the feeling of being completely full, completely connected to him.

"I love you, Cosette," he says softly. A rush of emotion chokes me. I swallow the lump in my throat.

"And I love you," I respond in a trembling voice as my body starts to tense, the first beginning spasm of pleasure kissing my nerves. I moan as he tenses and shudders into his own release on the heels of mine. I give in to this fully, to the utter and perfect bliss, until he finally slumps against me. Our breathing unites, and he nestles his head on my chest.

I love Lyam Gerard. He's not only the father of my child, he also owns my heart. But if the two of us are going to make this work, he needs nothing but the truth.

The *whole* truth.

I need to tell him. I need him to know the truth, so we can face this together.

I open my mouth to tell him everything.

I'm the bastard child of François Montague.

Will he believe the worst? Does he trust me?

My heart pounding, I'm about to tell him everything when he speaks first.

Still, I can't help but feel that something's wrong.

Something's terribly wrong.

We just made love and he told me he loved me, but it feels like... goodbye.

Why does it feel like goodbye?

He doesn't look in my eyes when he pulls out. He doesn't look at me when he cleans me up and tucks a blanket around me.

He doesn't look at me when he deals the final blow that feels like a fist to my heart.

"I want you to understand that it's because I love you that I need you to go."

I sit up. My body's still heated, my pulse still racing from making love.

Did I mishear him? I feel as if someone splashed cold water on me. A prickle of fear and apprehension washes down my spine. I start to tremble.

"What?" I whisper.

"If you're anywhere near me, you're in danger. Don't you see? They want to get to *me*. They killed Rousseau because they know that we met. They know that the two of us were together, and the fact that you weren't harmed makes me feel like you escaped by the skin of your goddamn teeth." He shakes his head. "You can't stay here anymore, not with me. I can't keep you *safe* if you're with me."

"Of course you can," I protest. He can do anything.

But I know before I speak that it's fruitless. If he's made up his mind, then he won't be talked out of it. He can do anything if he wants to, I know he can. My voice sounds pathetic even to my own ears as I plead with him. "Lyam..."

"I'll give you everything you need," he says, his voice harsh but choked, and it gives me some consolation to know that he's struggling with this, too. "I'll make sure you have money and protection, and I'll even have a decoy with me so that it looks like you're still here."

A decoy? I feel my eyes go wide.

A decoy would be a woman just like me.

My rational brain tells me to simmer down, to not get carried away, but I can't help it.

He's going to have a... woman... with him? So that no one suspects he's hidden me? The hot flames of jealousy lick at my skin.

No.

No.

I stand and shake my head, nausea forgotten. I can't let him push me away. I can't let him give in to his fears about not being able to protect me. I won't give up on us.

"No, Lyam," I say. He stands with me, facing me, towering over me. I know that look he gets when he's made up his mind about something, and I should really take heed of that look, but I'm pushing forward.

Your refusal to obey me intrigues me.

Does it, still?

"I won't let you do this," I say, shaking my head. Our baby is worth me fighting for this, but even as I protest, I feel the gnawing suspicion I had from the beginning clawing at me. If I force him to stay with me, is he really staying at all?

His phone rings. A muscle twitches in his jaw, and his eyes narrow on me. It rings again, the blaring sound like the clang of a doomsday gong. It could be important, each of us knows that, but we both stare at the phone as if it's a viper ready to bite.

"I fucking hate technology," he growls. "Fucking *hate* it."

When he lifts the phone, I fear he's going to throw it through a window, but there's too much going on right now for him to have the luxury of going dark.

"Take it," I whisper. "You have to."

We stare at each other.

"It's Thayer's ringer."

“Fucking Thayer,” I mutter. “Does he wipe his ass without telling you?”

A corner of his lips quirks up and my heart thumps with a flicker of hope.

“What?” he snaps into the phone, his eyes on me.

I watch the flare of surprise.

His parted mouth.

The heartbreaking shutter of his gaze on mine.

I watch as, one by one, the dominoes fall.

He shakes his head. “Montague?”

Noooo.

No, not now. Not this way—

He places the phone on the table and hits speaker.

“Say it again, Thayer. Tell me what you just said, loud and clear for both of us to hear.”

The tone of Lyam’s voice tells me everything I need to know before Thayer speaks another word.

“Cosette, are you there?” Thayer’s harsh voice makes me flinch.

I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. I will myself to push through this, to tell them, to explain everything.

I manage a shaky, “Yes, I’m here.”

“Tell him, why don’t you?”

“I was going to,” I say in a whisper, but even I feel my words lack authenticity now. They took me into custody for betrayal, and now I know I’ve only confirmed their suspicions.

“François Montague is my father.”



FIFTEEN

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Lyam

I THOUGHT I couldn't protect her.

I thought that being with me meant that she wasn't safe anymore.

I never dreamed she would betray us. Again.

I hang up the phone and shake my head, staring at her.

Disbelieving.

"You plotted against us," I say, disbelieving the words as they come out of my mouth. "You actually did betray us."

I think back on the day I took her into custody, the way I buckled her in the car and brought her back here with the intent to punish her for what she'd done.

I wanted to believe she was innocent, but deep down I knew she wasn't.

When she told me her reasoning, I believed her. I let myself believe that we could make this work, that she'd have my baby and we'd marry each other and Cosette would be mine forever.

And now I know, she was never mine to begin with.

Who even is she?

"Lyam," she says tearfully. "You have to believe me. He doesn't even know who I am. We have no relationship. I hate Paris because of him. He had me with my mother when he was already married and in the public eye, so he never made it known to anyone."

She goes on and on, but why wouldn't she? I can't even process the words she's saying. Cosette knows who I am. She knows who my family is. She knows we would have killed her once for betraying us and now she's left us no other choice.

But she's pregnant with my child.

"If you're innocent," I say, interrupting her pleas. She reaches for me, and I push her away. If she were anyone else—I shake

my head and draw in a breath, making myself stay calm despite the anger that rises in me like a tide.

Only the weak need to hurt the vulnerable.

“If you didn’t know him and have no affiliation with him whatsoever, then why didn’t you tell me? You knew there were politicians threatening us. You even knew *Montague* was involved. You had a hundred chances to tell me and yet you didn’t. So why should I believe you now?”

“Because you know I love you,” she says tearfully. “Because I *wouldn’t* betray you. I was going to tell you so many times but every time, I was afraid.”

“Afraid of what?”

It looks as if the very words she speaks pain her to say them. “Afraid that if I told you, you’d leave. That you wouldn’t want me. That you wouldn’t believe the truth.”

“I changed my mind,” I say. She flinches at the harsh sound of my tone, but I’m doing everything I can not to hurt her. She betrayed me. Betrayed all of us. My only choice now is to give her a safe space so she can have our baby safely before she faces the ultimate punishment.

Everything in me screams against this, but I clench my hands.

“You knew. You knew who he was and why he’s after us. Were you a plant by him?”

I stand and stalk over to her. I hate the way she flinches and backs away.

“No! No, we don’t talk at all. I didn’t even know he knew I existed.”

“And why should I believe you?”

“Because you trust me,” she says emotionally. “Because I love you. I would never betray any of—”

She snaps her mouth closed as she hears her own words. She did betray us once and even though we know why, what’s to prevent her from doing it again?

When she reaches for me, I turn away. “I don’t know what you want from me,” I say to her. “You’ve put me in a position of choosing between you and my family.”

“I just want you to believe me,” she says on a sob. “Please!”

I shake my head. “Montague has put half the city’s resources into hunting us down. He’s intentionally set every single news organization against us and is hell-bent on making sure that we take the blame for every single fucking crime in this city.”

I blow out a breath.

“Don’t you see how this complicates things?” I snap, so angry at her I want to shake her. “If Montague knows that one of his whipping boys knocked up his *daughter*, we’ve just given him the very best ammo.”

Her face crumples. “But he doesn’t see me as his daughter, Lyam.”

“Won’t he, if it fits his narrative?”

She shakes her head, as if confused and not sure how to proceed.

“You’re carrying my baby, so I’ll keep you safe, but only then. And it won’t be a pleasant stay.” I shake my head. “I need to get out of here.”

I watch as her eyes shutter and close. She shuts down completely.

“You know what? *Don’t* believe me. Maybe I don’t believe you, either. Maybe you only wanted me because I’m carrying your child.” Her voice breaks at the end. Angrily, she swipes at the tears that fall down her cheeks.

“Atta girl,” I mutter.

The look of betrayal she gives me almost makes me cave. But I won’t be taken in, and I won’t let her sway me now. I have to pull away from her. There are no other choices.

My phone rings. The last time this fucking phone rang, I got the worst news imaginable. Now, to think—

“What?” I snap.

It's Philippe. "The woman you had me call is here, sir."

I hold Cosette's gaze. "Send her up."

I hang up the phone and we stare at each other for long minutes in silence. "You don't have to believe me," she says. "And I'm glad you're being honest with me. Because you've told me everything I need to know."

"Oh, have I?" I want to shake her. I want to put her over my knee and spank her until she begs for mercy. I want to kiss her and fuck her hard and demandingly, to punish her for what she's done.

To think, I almost trusted her—

There's a knock at the door.

"What?" I snap. She winces.

"Philippe, sir. Is she ready?"

I stare at her.

"Get in the bathroom and put some fucking clothes on. I'm out of here. I'll have Philippe bring you to your new apartment. I'll see you tonight and we'll talk about the new rules we have."

She slams the door to the bathroom.

I slam the bedroom door behind me.

I don't miss the note of finality.



I'm deep in my head when I hit the streets of Paris.

Normally, I'd check my weapons and scan the exits and make sure Cosette is fucking safe before I step foot out of this place.

But this time... I can't.

Because Cosette actually did betray us.

All this time, she knew who her father was. She knew we were being hunted by local politicians and she didn't say a thing.

I close my eyes and shake my head.

And I fell for it.

I fell for it, like a goddamn sycophant. She told me she was carrying my baby, and I lost all sense of reason.

I'm not paying attention, my feet just plodding on, one after the other. I know I should be paying attention, but I'm a million miles away.

It takes a lot of effort not to follow her. It kills me, because even now, I want to keep her safe.

Rousseau is dead. Yesterday, she was alive and breathing and today, she's gone.

And I'm to blame for that.

I sent Cosette away because I knew being around me meant she's as much of a target as I am.

Just like our informant was.

Whatever it was that Rousseau unearthed led to her execution.

There was a reason we paid her well, of course. She knew from the beginning the risks associated with socializing with us.

That doesn't make me feel any less shitty.

I sent a military-level team with Cosette to take her to a new place, secure and apart from me.

And it kills me.

I brought her here to punish her for her betrayal and the sense of relief I had when I knew she didn't betray us... but now...

"Monster Gerard!" I look up in surprise. No one ever recognizes me here. As soon as I look up, I see three university students with backpacks carrying bags ahead of me.

Wait. Did they say Monster?

"Is that him?"

More people look my way.

“It’s him, the one on the news!” one shouts.

“The bastard responsible for hurting all those poor orphans?” another asks, loudly.

Too loudly.

Orphans? What now?

What the fuck is going on?

“*Gerard*,” one repeats.

“Gerard?”

They’re repeating my name with horror and hatred, and I can almost feel the swell of the mob mentality.

I’m not one to run away, but I wouldn’t even know who to target right now. My gun is safely secured in the harness, but if they’re ridiculing me for being violent and bringing violence to Paris, drawing a weapon will only throw fuel on the fire.

My family doesn’t target civilians.

I turn to face them, finding a wall of people behind me. That quickly, they’ve gone from ambivalence to hatred, swarming and screaming. Some are throwing things and others are taking pictures with their phones. Someone pushes me and I shove back, which elicits a scream. “Don’t let him hurt us! Get him!”

What?

“Hey, I’m not hurting anyone.” I don’t want to draw attention to myself. That’s not how I work.

A big, burly guy puts his hand on me, and I lose it. I’m no fucking pacifist. I hit him so hard I break his jaw. He falls to the ground screaming, holding his jaw in his hands. The crowd presses in on me. I can’t breathe. I’m smothered by their hands on me. I’ve never seen these people before.

I can’t call my brothers or even fight my way out. The crowd begins to pull me down. I’m on my knees when someone leans down and breathes in my ear.

“Don’t fight it, Lyam, if you know what’s good for you.”

I shove my way up, looking for the person who spoke to me.

“Who the fuck was that?” I manage to extricate myself from two men when three more who look vaguely familiar grab me from behind.

“He’s trying to hurt us!” one yells.

“Call the police!” another yells.

Cameras flash again. I’m shoving and pushing but getting nowhere. A prick hits my neck. I flail as realization dawns on me.

It was a setup, all of it. These aren’t tourists or students. This was a setup.

I punch the guy in front of me as the world gets hazy.

“We’ve got him.”

Cosette.

Our baby.

I sink into a world of darkness.



SIXTEEN

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Cosette

I'M TORN between disbelief that he can be so heartless and refuse to listen to me, and anger at myself for not telling him sooner.

When would there have been a better time? When we were in his family home in Paris and Savannah and Thayer were there? Oh, maybe when we were in the hospital making sure I wasn't losing our baby. Could've been perfect timing if I'd told him back when we were in his home, and I shared with him I was pregnant. Get it all over with at once?

I pinch the bridge of my nose and exhale.

I know the truth and there's no point in lying to myself.

There is no such thing as perfect timing.

A part of me feels I've been betrayed too. I wish I'd earned enough trust from them that they'd give me the benefit of the doubt. But no. His brother tells him Montague is my father, and immediately he sees me as a traitor.

I am, though. I know I am.

I wouldn't knowingly hurt any of them. I hope he knows that now. But I may have put them at risk.

I groan and sink to my knees when the familiar pang of nausea hits me. Good God, when will this end? I fight it but can't help it and in the end I succumb.

When I'm finally spent, every crumb of my breakfast gone, I lay my head on my arms and weep.

I *know* I shouldn't have kept anything from him. I know. And while I felt that first pang of rejection when he told me I couldn't be with him anymore, this feels so much more final.

"Mademoiselle?" I stand weakly and go to the door. I open it to find Philippe with luggage. "I'm ready to take you."

"I have to pack."

“Mr. Gerard already did that for you.”

“That quickly?”

“No, ma’am,” Philippe says almost shyly. “He packed your bags last night when you were sleeping.”

I follow him in a stupor. I look around for Lyam but he’s gone. We just made love. We just argued and... did we break up? I don’t even know where this leaves me now. And all this time, he knew. He knew he was sending me away. That all my worldly possessions were here. So without a word to me, he decided to send me away and packed my things.

“He said he’d come see you tonight, but you were to get situated in your apartment,” Philippe says.

This feels so wrong. So distant. As if something that never should have happened has descended on us, and I barely know how to crawl out of this hole I’ve dug myself into.

I hate the sickening dread I feel leaving here without him. It seems almost illogical that he feels I’ll be safer without him when he’s the only one who’s ever made me feel safe.

It comes as no surprise that when we get to the main floor a team of *six* bodyguards flanks me like I’m a goddamn celebrity.

“Oh, for crying out loud,” I say with a grimace. “Really, guys?”

They don’t even look at me or make eye contact but anticipate every move.

Someone opens the door.

Another takes my jacket.

They move with fluid grace as one, and when I get outside into the bright light of morning, one is holding the door open. I know their names. I know who they are. But as I’m escorted into the waiting car, I forget everything. My mind goes to a weird, blank space, devoid of feeling or emotion. A place of self-protection.

In a trance, I let them drive through the city. A small part of me wonders if someone will come after me. I mean, if that wasn't Lyam's fear then why have an entire army of bodyguards on me?

I wish I could believe he's doing this because he cares about me, but I know the truth. It's the baby he cares about, not me. I'm only a vessel.

We drive past the Louvre, bright under the beaming sun and bordered by tourists. They're screaming and yelling, but I can't make it out. What are they going on about?

I'm empty and hollow inside. I don't pay attention as we're driving. I'm trying to remember how to breathe.

It's just me now. Just me and this child I need to bring to term. I need to do anything and everything I can to make sure that happens.

Bed rest.

Good food.

Water.

Vitamins.

I list them all from rote memory, trying to will myself back to a place where I can feel confident and productive and centered.

But I can't do it.

I think I sleep a little on the ride.

I had prepared myself for life without Lyam. I had convinced myself I could be a single mother and be resilient and capable and strong. And I still know I can. But the loss of him after what we've been through *burns*. It hurts so badly.

I wish I could believe there was hope for us, but everything feels so hopeless.

Yes, I should have told him the truth before it was too late. Now he's done the very thing I feared from the beginning.

Somehow, some way, I end up at the apartment he's planned for me.

The apartment they bring me to is clean and simple and functional, but lacks any interior decoration. The clean lines seem vacant, and even though the bed is made up with luxury sheets and a gorgeous comforter, it feels empty in here.

There's no Lyam.

He secured this place before he rejected me, back when he thought he loved me, but sending me here now was a quick decision he likely made on the fly. Still, he's taken care to make sure I have what I need here.

I open the fridge and note it's stocked with my favorite things, even though I have no appetite. I find my prenatal vitamins, my favorite sparkling water, even light-blocking window shades and a state-of-the-art sound system. It's beautiful and luxurious but feels barren.

I lay down on the sofa and glance at the clock. My only hope is that after Lyam's burned off some energy, he comes back more centered and focused and ready to listen to the truth.

But as time ticks by, I begin to wonder.

Did he tell me a lie?

Did he only placate me?

After three hours pass with no Lyam, I begin to get angry.

Doesn't he know that sometimes you have to do things you don't want to do? Doesn't he know that affiliation with someone doesn't necessarily mean actually being in cahoots with them?

Does he really love me, or does he only love the *idea* of me?

I have my answer when Lyam doesn't come at all.



SEVENTEEN

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Lyam

I OPEN my eyes and for a minute think I'm dreaming again.

Because this is where I come in my sleep. Dark walls. The smell of must and urine and the squeals of rats. The prison of my dreams.

Only this time, I'm not dreaming.

When I get out of these chains—and I *will*—I will kill them.

I draw in a breath and try to remember what happened.

I was outside Le Marquise, near the Louvre.

It was a setup. It was a fucking setup. He had those tourists planted so they could cause a mob scene and take me in.

Clever bastard.

I blink, looking around the dimly lit room and see a pair of polished black shoes. "Welcome, Mr. Gerard."

I look up into the jowly face of none other than François Montague himself.

Cosette's father.

The man that would be my father-in-law.

I shudder at my enemy and observe him up close.

On the surface, they look nothing alike.

Now that I know, I can see the slightest hint of resemblance. The subtle turn of the nose and color of his eyes.

Just like hers.

But that's where the similarities end.

There's a pronounced hunch in his shoulders, and a greedy, calculating smile embedded in his fleshy face. She is sunshine and daisies, and he's the charred remains of a forest fire.

Whereas Cosette's eyes are bright and vivid, his are heavy and cruel. She's slender and lithe, as graceful as a willow tree. His

potbelly sags below his waistline, pinched into pants that are too tight. Her smile is bright and vivid and could challenge the stars in the heavens, and his is a slimy smirk. Cosette's skin is soft and clear like a porcelain doll's while his is pitted and leathery.

“What the fuck do you want?”

He sighs and places his fingertips together.

“It's very clear, Mr. Gerard. I want to be reelected. Why else would I work so hard at ridding Paris of its scum?”

I know he's baiting me, and I refuse to rise to the bait. The irony of calling us scum...

Though I'm familiar with where I am now, I can see that we're in a different area. Before, deep in the dark recesses of this basement hovel, there was no light, no noise from the outside. I can still see where they held me, the chair and chains still visible in my mind. But now I can hear the rattle and squeak of something overhead and even see a small window that sheds light on the passing feet of passersby. It takes me a minute to identify the bright blue lights and stone monuments outside the window.

We're in the basement of the Capitol.

Clever, Montague. Very clever. And damning. If I ever got word to the press about what he does in the basement of this place of government business, he'd never survive it.

The nerve that Montague took me here.

“You had to ask questions, didn't you?” he says with a shake of his head. “You could have just left. When we began the witch hunt, you could've packed your bags and gone off with your friends in Tuscany or America, but no. You had to go after my *daughter*.”

Go after his daughter?

“It was easy enough, Mr. Gerard. Let me have my way. The citizens of Paris aren't interested in riffraff like you being in their historic city. All you had to do was give me my way and let me drive you out of the city.”

No. It's a lie. He was never going to just drive us out of the city. He wanted us annihilated. He may still.

"But you went and had to perpetuate your rubbish by impregnating my daughter."

"Your daughter," I repeat through gritted teeth, "hasn't seen you since she was too young to remember. You don't even pretend that she exists. And you have the nerve to claim ownership of her in this way? She wasn't good enough for you before, you rejected her and pretended she never even existed, but now she's your precious daughter?"

"Silence!" he thunders, as shooting pain cascades through my nerves. I clench my jaw to stifle a scream when pain tears through me. He's got me connected to chains that emit electric currents.

Motherfucker.

I grit my teeth and glare at him as he continues. I'm panting from the exertion when the pain stops.

"She disgusts me. A prostitute for hire when she worked at La Maison? An employee for your revolting club?" He shakes his head. "I wanted to punish you for having the gall to disrupt the calm of my city. I had one of the officers on our payroll infiltrate one of your businesses, pretending to be a client. He had the nerve to go too far, and Fabien decided to kill him, didn't he?"

It takes me a minute to realize what he's talking about. Fabien killed a man who attacked Nicolette. Montague's hire?

"My daughter will pay for her shameful behavior. Wretched creature. I hoped that *you* would kill her when you discovered she betrayed you, and things looked like they were going our way. But you didn't, did you? Foolish man." He shakes his head. Spittle flies from his mouth as he fumes. "You thwarted my plans. You had no idea she was working for me all along, did you?"

I tear at the chains that have me bound to the floor.

He's lying. He can't hate her and consider her despicable and also hire her to work for him.

Can he?

Would she?

“Let me go,” I seethe. “Then we can talk man to man.”

He likely knows that our “talk” would involve my hands around his throat. He only shakes his head.

“If it were that easy, why would I chain you to begin with?”

A door opens and I hear approaching footsteps. I look up to see one of Montague’s henchmen. I recognize the crooked nose, thin lips, and narrowed, beady eyes. I see him in my nightmares.

My torturer.

“Welcome back,” he says with a ruthless smile.

I bare my teeth at him. “Easy to say that when I’m bound in chains, isn’t it?”

He’ll go down first, and painfully.

“What is it?” Montague asks. “You know I don’t abide interruptions unless necessary.”

“So sorry for the interruption, but I have pertinent news.”

“Oh?” Montague gives him a curious look. “What’s that?”

He looks straight to me when he curls his lip. “We found her, sir.”

No.

I rattle the chains. “If you touch a fucking hair on her head —”

“Like you care?” Montague asks, his head tipped to the side. “You just found out she was working with me, didn’t you? You sent her away. You don’t want her.”

Something doesn’t sit right. Something’s wrong with this scenario. I know they drugged me, but I also know that they’re lying. I push through the fog and insist on what I know is true. “She isn’t working with you.”

“Do you say that because you believe it to be true or because you hope it is?” he asks, shaking his head from side to side. “Of course she is. Why do you think she lured Savannah out?”

It doesn't make sense. She couldn't have fabricated any of what we had.

The way she touched me. The way she told me in her gentle way how much she loves me. How devoted she already is to our baby.

Montague is a traitorous liar. So who would I believe?

I push through again. “Because you threatened to end her pregnancy.”

He laughs. “I didn't even know she was pregnant when we asked her to betray you.”

My head swims with the lies, and I'm unsure of where even to begin to sort them out. Cosette didn't betray us, I know that for a fact.

I wonder why he hasn't killed me yet. I doubt it's just to punish me for whatever crime he thinks I've committed.

No. He wants me for something.

Then why does he have me here?

What's his endgame?

My heart beats faster at the knowledge that they know where Cosette is, when I realize if he's lying about everything else, he's lying about that too. It's a bluff. I was careful about moving her, careful who I hired. I made sure they were untraceable and completely off the grid. There's no way they actually know where she is. I wouldn't have moved her from Le Marquise otherwise.

I imagine her, resilient as hell and strong, but compromised, focused on carrying our baby to term. I have to get to her. “You killed Rousseau.”

His eyes go hard. “Of course I did. She betrayed us. She was a danger to every citizen of Paris.”

The bastard. The fucking *bastard*.

I clench my jaw.

“What do you want from me?”

“It’s very simple, Mr. Gerard. I want to be reelected. I’ve promised to rid the city of the likes of you. All you need to do is move out. Re-root somewhere else.” A small smile makes him look almost reptilian.

No. That isn’t it.

“I want to let you go, you see. But I can’t unless I have some assurances. In short, Mr. Gerard, I want you to make a choice. Cosette or your family.” He begins tapping the little table beside him with broad, blunt fingers, but his eyes remain on me. “You’re an assassin, so this will be an easy one for you. Kill Cosette, and life goes back to the way it was before. I’ll come up with a story for the press and drop all charges and investigations involving your family. However, know that if you choose her, and your family remains in the city, I *will* kill all of you.” He scowls. “Starting with my sorry excuse for a daughter.”

Hot, visceral hatred bubbles inside me like lava.

He wants me to choose between Cosette and my family?

“It’s a very simple choice.”

“Very easy,” I say to him. “Because the answer is no.”

The electrical current sears through my skull, rattles my nerves, and brings pain the likes of which I’ve never known. I scream until my voice is hoarse, and when it finally stops, I’m dripping in sweat and my vision is hazy.

“Not an option, Mr. Gerard. You’ll do what I say, or I’ll fry you until you can’t remember your own name. And then, if you still refuse to do what I’ve asked of you, I’ll be sure you watch as I kill her, before I take your life.”

I won’t hurt her. I can’t. The only reason I rejected her and sent her away was for her own safety. I love Cosette. There’s no goddamn way I’ll allow anyone to hurt her, or our unborn baby.

But I need to find out more information. I need to bide my time and find a way out of here.

“So, wait,” I say, even though speaking makes me want to vomit. “One of your men went to Le Luxe. He was the one who Fabien killed. You set it up so I’d be kidnapped and held for ransom so you could get what you wanted.”

The slow, wicked smile that spreads across his face makes me sick.

“Then you sent men to Le Luxe so you could destroy us from within. You found Cosette. Used her to get to us. You were working with the Chaberts all along.”

His eyelid twitches as he scowls at me, and he doesn’t respond. But his silence tells me everything I need to know. He’s been pitting every rival mafia group in Paris against one another for his own gain. And it’s worked.

Until now.

He lifts the small remote control that makes me writhe in pain when he pushes the button. My body tenses, remembering what happened, how I’ve been here before. I don’t fear physical pain. I fear helplessness. I don’t fear what they’ll do to me. I fear what they’ll do to the people I love.

“Then what will it be, Mr. Gerard?”

“You can shove your offer up your fucking ass. I’ll never betray my family. I’ll never hurt Cosette. And if you think for a minute that I’ll do anything to harm our baby—”

The pain hits so hard, I can’t talk. I fall to my knees and writhe. He rends screams out of me as spasms of pain erupt in my body, fire pulsing through my veins.

I’m on the floor, panting. My ears ring with pain. Worse than the agony is the inability to think when I’m in its grip. I draw in a breath to try to clear the mental haze.

He waits until I look at him again. “If you don’t, Mr. Gerard, I will.”



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EIGHTEEN

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Cosette

WHEN ONE DAY passes with no sign of Lyam, I start to come up with another plan.

I know I need to leave. I'm not going to stay here on his dime after he's rejected me, knowing that he put every detail in here back when he still liked me. I don't know what he thinks about me, but I know it isn't what I need. And when another day passes, I'm confident that he isn't coming back. I manage to convince myself that not only does he not care about me, but if he truly thinks I've plotted against them, my life could be in danger. I can't let that happen. Not for me, and most definitely not for my baby.

I decide it's time to pack a few things. I take stock of the money that I've saved, tucked away in a high yield savings account. I think about where I could go. Where could I go where he wouldn't find me? Except I know he'll find me wherever I go. Does that mean I can't try? Otherwise I'm doomed to be kept prisoner here for the next eight months until I give birth. Of course there's no luggage here. Why would there be? But I have to find something that will work.

When I cross the room and pass the window, I see him.

He's here. It's Lyam. What's he carrying? I look wildly about the apartment and wonder if he'll be able to tell I'm packing. Clothes piled on the bed, my toiletries arranged in the closet, but thankfully I have so few things it might just look like normal...

A knock sounds at the door. I'm completely consumed with fear and worry and concern and I don't know what he's going to say when he sees me. Has he come here to hurt me? To make amends? Has he come here to punish me? Or, worst of all... Is he going to be detached and cold?

I'm not sure what would be worse.

There's a low hum of voices outside the door. Lyam is talking to my guards. Finally, the door opens. I draw in a breath, my

heartbeat racing.

Just one of my guards.

“Mr. Gerard is here to see you.”

I square my shoulders. I can't talk. I can only nod.

The door stands open. I hold my breath.

Thayer steps in. I blink in surprise.

“Thayer,” I say in a hoarse voice.

“Hey. Lyam told me you were here.” He goes on and says something about the snakes and Savannah and Avril, but I don't hear a word he says because... he isn't Lyam.

I told myself I could leave him. I told myself I could run away and hide and save myself, but for that one brief moment when I thought Lyam was coming, I can't deny that I was hopeful. I wanted to see him. Even if he was angry and cruel and distant, I wanted to see him.

My heart sinks.

The Gerard brothers look so much alike that from a distance, I thought it was him.

I look down and realize that the thing Thayer's carrying is actually a pet carrier. Princess, Lyam's ball python, is curled up fast asleep.

I open the cage and stroke the large, gentle creature. I never liked snakes before Lyam, but Princess is tame. And right now, there's something about her that makes me feel closer to him. Most people can't train snakes, but Lyam has taught this one literally to eat out of the palm of his hand.

“She ate an enormous breakfast and is set for the next week,” Thayer mutters. “She's tired. Now, I don't know when Lyam's coming, so I figured he was here with you. Where is he? I need to talk to him.”

I blink in surprise and stare at him. They never lose touch with each other, not ever.

“What do you mean you haven’t talked to him? Thayer, he isn’t here.”

Thayer stares at me for a minute, uncomprehending. “What do you mean?”

“How else do I say *he’s not here?*”

Thayer’s face goes dark as he processes what I’m telling him. “When was the last time you saw him?”

“It was two days ago. My God, Thayer, this isn’t good. I haven’t seen him and you haven’t seen him—”

Thayer turns to me, as stern as I’ve ever seen him. “Tell me the truth, Cosette,” he snaps.

“What?”

“Did you two have a fight?”

“Yeah. Somehow, he thinks I’ve betrayed you guys. Imagine that. You told him Montague was my father, and he thinks I betrayed you.”

“Jesus.” Thayer scrubs a hand across his face. He looks older, as if he hasn’t slept in days. “This is not good. Okay, so you saw him two days ago.”

“Yep. Right before I was escorted here. He said he’d come back that night, but he never did.”

Thayer throws his hands up in the air. “And you didn’t think to tell me that?”

I throw *my* hands up in the air. “Why would I think to tell you that? We left on bad terms. He was pissed at me. I needed to figure my shit out. He got it in his head that I was somehow in league with Montague which, I’ll have you know, is patently false. I figured he didn’t come to me because he was angry with me.”

Thayer’s eyes narrow. “Is it like Lyam to go back on his word?”

I shake my head, panic rising. “Absolutely not.” Angry or not, furious with me, whatever he is, he isn’t one to ever not do what he says he will. He hates the concept of being unreliable

and means what he says. It's one of the scariest things about him. "So where the hell is he, then?"

Thayer takes a menacing step toward me. "If you had anything to do with this... I'm telling you right now, Cosette, if you worked with your father—"

Something inside me snaps. I could slap him silly right now. "Oh fuck *off!* No! I've never talked to my father, and now all of a sudden, just because he decides he wants to get on your ass, I'm suspected to be in cahoots with him? No. Fuck *all* the way off, Thayer. My man is missing, and after what he went through when he was taken hostage before, I am *not* letting you start putting false blame on anyone and wasting any more goddamn time. Now are you going to find Lyam, or do I have to call in favors myself?" I'm shaking, my hands on my hips as I glare at him, daring him to take me on.

He stares at me for a moment before responding. I don't know what to expect. "I'm on it. I have to make some phone calls. *Christ.* You call him, too."

I take my cell phone and call Lyam, but not surprisingly it goes to voicemail.

Thayer's talking on the phone, his voice hushed but vehement. "No, I have no idea where he is. Jesus. The *one* time I don't get on his ass about not staying in touch."

Minutes later, he's got Philippe in the room and Fabien on the phone. Men and women I've never seen before or heard of pile into the apartment one at a time. Some are officers in uniform, still others look like beefy bodyguards. Thayer fills them all in simply.

"Lyam is missing, and we need to find him."

"Is it possible, sir, that this had anything to do with the mob scene near the Louvre the other day?" someone asks.

"The what?" Thayer's eyes are thunderclouds. "Someone tell me what the fuck he's talking about."

I pull out my phone and start searching.

"Oh my God," I whisper, shaking my head. "Thayer—"

I scan the article and look for a picture, but all I can find is a fuzzy picture of the back of his head. It doesn't matter, though. I'd know Lyam anywhere, anytime. It's him.

I hand Thayer the phone. "Motherfucker," he mutters under his breath. "We need to find out everything we can."

I scan the details and look on social media until I piece things together. "This was right after our fight," I say in a little voice. "We were—he left, angry, and it looks like shortly after that there was a mob attack. But there's no telling where he is or if he was taken, he just... vanishes."

My throat is tight. I've heard Lyam's cries in the middle of the night. I've seen his scars. I've seen him thrashing in the sheets as if trying to escape. If they took him again... if he's held at the mercy of someone else... God help his captors. He'll slaughter them. That is, if *I* don't get to them first.

"Cosette." Thayer's sharp tone cuts through my mental haranguing.

"What?" I snap.

"Sit down."

I stare at him as if he has an eye in the middle of his forehead. "What?"

"Sit down." He points to a chair. "*Now.*"

I don't have the energy to argue, so I sit but I glare at him just the same.

"Have you eaten today?"

"Are you even serious right now? Lyam is missing and you want to know if I've eaten?"

"Of course he does," Philippe says, shaking his head at me. "What would Lyam say?"

I know exactly what Lyam would say. I grumble but I take the piece of bread with butter Thayer hands me and eat it. I chase it with hot tea, hoping it melts the lump in my throat, but no luck.

"Sit, Cosette."

I didn't realize I'd stood back up.

"Stop pacing and *sit*."

I flounce into a chair and look away from Thayer. Aggravating, bossy brothers.

I look around the apartment. It looks like the middle of a crime scene investigation. Computers open, notebooks at the ready, twelve of the most high-tech mobiles I've ever seen. People are concentrating, speaking in hushed voices. There are phone calls and notes, someone's brewed a pot of coffee. One thing is clear for sure: they've lost one of their leaders, and it's more than a little unnerving.

I want to bury my head in my arms and cry, but I can't. I have to stay strong.

I stand and stretch. Drink a bottle of water. Pace the room. Look down at my phone and back up again.

God, I wish we hadn't argued.

I wish we'd had a nicer conversation before he left.

I wish I knew he was safe.

I wish—

"Got it!" Manny, one of the youngest Gerard family interns, sits in front of a massive computer screen. "Got it!"

We all pause. Silence reigns in the room while we all look at him.

"The drone! I found the security drone from that location."

Thayer's gone stone silent, stiff as a board.

"Let's see it," he says. He shakes his head. "This is usually Lyam's field of expertise."

Manny pans out on his screen. The date's clearly written across the top of the screen. It's the same day he left.

The screen blossoms into bright light and it takes me a minute to realize we're functioning as eyes for the overhead drone. From this bird's eye view, we can see the density of the buildings, the general layout of our urban area. The traffic

looks like little play cars, and the Louvre from this distance looks tiny. Vibrant green spaces mark the parks, the tinge of blue the River Seine. But as we draw nearer, I can see crowds of people.

“Look,” Manny says. “This guy here gives a signal. Then after he signals, they turn on him.”

I shake my head from side to side. “It was a setup. A total setup, wasn’t it? You can tell just by looking at that... It wasn’t like someone just saw him and got upset. Between the footage from the drone and this clip I found online, this isn’t the way things go. All of a sudden, out of nowhere, there are like fifty people attacking him? They were planted.”

“Agreed,” Thayer says. “It would be the easiest method in the world, right? Get people afraid of us, then blow the whistle. Have them think that they’re in danger because the bad guys are here. Make the actual bad guys innocuous enough that the others there don’t send a guard after him. Then, attack. Yeah, it makes sense.”

My heart races. I want Lyam safe. The first time they had him, he was a bargaining chip, but now... “Zoom in,” I tell Manny.

I stand and cover my mouth when I see two men bring Lyam to the ground. One sticks something in his neck. A second puts a bag over his head, and a third helps carry him away. I blink, staring, waiting for them to emerge from the crowd so we can see where they went.

They don’t.

“They didn’t leave,” I tell Thayer. “How come they didn’t leave?”

He scratches his chin and shakes his head. He’s got Fabien on the line. “What the fuck does that mean, they didn’t leave?”

Thayer frowns.

“Maybe we should check out that area at another time? Let’s go to two days ago, six a.m., same spot.”

Thayer eyes me curiously.

“Good thinking,” Thayer says approvingly. “Very good job.”

His praise sounds hollow compared to Lyam’s, but I give him a wan smile.

Manny’s fingers fly over the keys as he zooms in further, a few days earlier.

“Aha! There, look!” Right in that location is a manhole cover. “Let’s find out what that leads to.”

Minutes later we have an underground map of the tunnels.

I reach out and stroke Princess. She makes me feel closer to Lyam.

Thayer’s eyes go dark. He shakes his head. “Well, look at that. The tunnels lead straight to the Capitol.”



NINETEEN

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Lyam

I KEEP track of the days by looking outside the sliver of a window and watching the sun set and rise. And on the second day, I decide. I'm going to get away from Montague if it's the last thing I do.

If I haven't cooperated, where will he go next? Will he hurt my brothers? My mother?

Cosette and the baby?

I know now that my first thought that Cosette betrayed us couldn't have been further from the truth.

Jesus, I've been a douchebag.

I will make it up to her, goddamn it, and when I do, I will crawl on my belly to beg forgiveness. Cosette loves with the tenderest heart and yet she would still rather die than ever even serve this man coffee, never mind lie to us and betray us and work with him behind our backs. I let my fear convince me she betrayed us.

Never again.

I have to get away.

He has me chained to the floor with electric shocks on my ankles, neck, and wrists.

Twice someone's come in with food, but they've given me hardly any water. He's trying to give me just enough to keep me alive. I know what he's playing at.

Montague himself has only come to check on me once. He has other people coming in to make sure I'm still alive, but that's about it.

I have a lot of time alone. During that time, I think about how I'll get away. And I put the pieces of the puzzle together.

His bid for reelection means he needs to win the majority vote. It was his plan from the beginning to use our family as a scapegoat for his troubles. He's been working against us now

for months, and likely has aimed for rival mafia to be pitted against one another when it comes to a place of power.

And now he's after us again. The entire time, he's been working with dirty cops and rival mafia. From the very beginning, he wanted to dominate this city. Framing my family as the ones responsible for crime in the city. He's wanted nothing but political gain. And now, he's going to use me.

He'll have to kill me before I'd agree to hurt either Cosette or my family, but he's threatened to do it himself if I don't.

Jesus.

Dusk has fallen outside the window. Last night and the night before, it was when the Capitol closed for the day that Montague decided to pay me a visit.

I've been here long enough. If something doesn't shift, I'm going to have to pretend to cooperate with him so I can get out of here and make sure he doesn't hurt Cosette.

I have to protect her.

I can't believe I thought she was the one who worked with him. I can't believe I ever thought she'd have my baby and act like a friend, only to go behind our backs. Once, *one time*, she betrayed us while under duress, but I know that isn't who she is or the way she typically functions. I know better now. So much better.

The elevator bell dings. I hear Montague's oily voice before I see him.

"Evening, Mr. Gerard." I despise how he insists on talking to me as if we're business partners, and he isn't the lowest scumbag in Europe.

Why did it take me being abducted into this asshole's custody to see the truth?

All this time, I've told myself Cosette is the one who runs when she gets close to people. Who was the one who booked a fucking apartment and exiled her? Me, that's who fucking did.

"Have we come to a decision, Mr. Gerard?" Montague asks. "It's safe to say at this point, no one is coming to save you."

Your precious family, who haven't even bothered to come looking for you—"

The blare of an intercom interrupts. "Mr. Montague. You need to evacuate the premises immediately. I repeat, you need to evacuate, sir."

Montague stares at me with wide eyes, terror written on his face. The fucking coward.

I knew they'd come. My brothers are here, I know it.

"You were saying?" I ask him.

Montague's face goes beet red. They've used a taser, a shock collar, and a fucking electric chair, but have tied my wrists so he can use his torture device of choice –

a goddamn electric prod. He grabs the electric prod off a table and hits the button.

I grit my teeth.

He will hurt for this.

Only the weak hurt the vulnerable.

I look out the window and there isn't a single disturbance to be seen there. They're being discreet. Pride swells in my chest. My brothers have come, and they will take him down right here, and no one will be the wiser.

We stare at each other as pain vibrates through my body, my nerves on fire. I grit my teeth and ride it.

When the spasms subside, I hold his gaze.

"Way to treat your future son-in-law," I say in a low voice.

I watch with delight as his face goes from red to purple.

"You know she's having my baby. That's your grandchild. It will be such a shame when the press realizes that your daughter married one of the very people you told everyone you were getting *rid* of, won't it? Go ahead, Montague. Hit the fucking remote. Only a coward would hurt someone incapable of defending themselves. You're despicable, you know that? We know who you really serve. Pretending to have the interest

of the people of France in mind, are you? I'm a goddamn criminal and yet even I am more loyal to my people than you are."

"Protect him!" someone shouts from the hallway. I hear the telltale sound of a body dropping. I'd bet every penny I own Thayer's arrived with his silencer. I smile at Montague.

Another heavy *thump*. It's the quietest of revolutions as one by one they're taken down, alerting absolutely no one else of the attack. As his men fall, Montague's face pales. He looks around the room and signals to his guards. "Do something!" One of them runs to the door just as it opens. Thayer marches in with Princess around his neck.

Montague screams and cowers as Thayer strides over to me.

"There you are," he says in a chiding tone. "No wonder you didn't answer when I called you. Here, brother." He bends, and Princess slides down and affectionately rubs her lengthy body against mine.

Snakes, like cats, aren't usually tamable creatures. But some enjoy the challenge of commands. My girl is one of them.

"Easy, Princess," I say in a low voice. "Don't hurt him. Not yet."

Montague whimpers.

Thayer doesn't shoot or attack but pulls out a tablet and pushes a few buttons. Cosette comes on the screen.

"Where is she?" I growl to Thayer.

He doesn't answer. If she gets hurt...

Her beautiful voice fills the room.

"My name is Cosette Fildeuroux. François Montague is my father. Twenty-four years ago, he had an affair with my mother."

"What is this?" Montague fumes as Cosette goes on.

"He was married with children when he impregnated my mother. He refused to send child support or anything to help, and thus my mother raised me in poverty. He denied my very

existence. I spent years of my life tracking down the man who was my father and was shocked when I found he was a man of wealth, prestige, and privilege. My mother died when I was a teenager, and I've long suspected that her death was no accident. François Montague never wanted anyone to know who she was because it would ruin his career."

"What is this?" Montague repeats in fury.

"It hasn't aired yet. You see," Thayer says, clearly distracting him as Princess wraps herself around me. A silver glint catches my attention. He's attached a sheathed knife for me on Princess's underbelly. I slide my fingers over and carefully extract it as Thayer goes on. "We wanted to handle this peaceably." He holds up a hand. "To be fair, *Cosette* wanted to. Be peaceful, that is. Me, well, that's another story. But I allowed my team to defer to her."

I slide the knife out of its sheath and carefully begin to cut the ropes at my wrists.

"Princess," I say in a low voice. I jerk my chin at Montague. "*Attack.*"

I've just given her the signal to go to him, but she won't hurt him.

He doesn't need to know that.

He cowers and screams as Princess slithers over to him. "Stand back," I pretend to command the snake. "Don't strike yet."

My wrists swing free as Cosette enters the room.

I'm going to kill Montague, then I'm going to kill my fucking brother.

She stares at me, and I hold her gaze. My heart swells at the sight of how beautiful and courageous she is, but goddamn, I don't want her here.

"You!" Montague holds up a fist, but when Princess gets closer, he whimpers and stands back. "Do something!" he yells at his useless bodyguards. They flounder helplessly, unwilling to get any closer to a ball python.

“I’d say it’s nice to meet you,” Cosette says calmly. “But I don’t like to lie.”

“You,” Montague rages. “You’re as despicable as your mother.”

“Me?” Cosette says, her eyes the picture of innocence. “I’ve done nothing to hurt you. I’m not quite sure why you hate me so.”

He pulls himself to his full height and points an irate finger at her. “You should never have happened. I have no daughter!”

“Oh,” she says with a nod, “but you *do*. Just because I don’t fit in with your plan doesn’t mean I don’t exist. But I don’t need your acceptance. I don’t need your money. I have become who I am without your aid, and I’m proud of that.” She shakes her head sadly. “Parents should never reject their children. I spent many years mourning what could have been.” She smiles proudly and lifts her chin. “But no more. You left me, and that was your loss, not mine.”

My own chest swells with pride. Montague, however, shakes with fury.

“Get them!” he spits out to one of his guards, but he’s shit out of luck, because his guard takes one look at Princess and whimpers.

I look at Princess and issue a loud command. “*Kill.*”

Montague’s bodyguard screams and runs from the snake who’s as harmless as a kitten.

Cosette looks across the room to me. “Lyam!”

In a flash, she whips her hand and throws me a gun. I catch it mid-air.

I point the gun. “My family deserves this retribution. Hell, *I* do.” I draw in a breath. Cosette is innocent. She deserves to know that she means more to me than anything.

After everything he’s put us through, I want him to suffer. I want him to feel the physical torture I have and the emotional torture she has, but sometimes, justice takes another form.

“Promise us you’ll never come after us again. You’ll make a public statement that my family has done no harm to the citizens of Paris, withdraw your candidacy, and tender your resignation from your current role. Then we will never, ever see you again.”

Thayer shakes his head. “Lyam, are you out of your mind? Think of what this man has done to you. You’re just going to let him go like that, scot-free? Jesus, brother...”

Acid stings the back of my throat, raw nerves and adrenaline fueling me. I shake my head. “He’s her father.” I swallow. “And I love her.”

Her eyes meet mine, and in that gaze is forgiveness and understanding. We’ll bury a world of hurt and build a new life together.

Montague fumes, his eyes nearly bulging out of his head and instead of responding to my offer, he pounces. He grabs Cosette by the arm.

Motherfucker.

I would have let him go. Against every fiber of my *being*, I was going to let the motherfucker go.

But he just put his fucking hands on her.

“Let her fucking go,” I say, my gun pointed at him.

He brandishes her like a shield. I can’t get a good shot in.

He won’t hurt her. I won’t let him.

“You’re scum! All of you are scum!” Montague fumes.

“Let her go, or I’ll shoot.”

His hands are on her neck. He’s going to hurt her. Her face is beet red and she’s gasping for air. She beats at his hands but it’s useless.

No.

Cosette twists to the side, giving me the sliver of a window.

It’s all I need.

I pull the trigger.

I never miss.



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TWENTY

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Cosette

I BARELY REMEMBER what happens next. I don't know how we get to his apartment. All I remember is Lyam crossing the room to me, Montague forgotten. Mumbled words from Thayer about "cleaning up" and Lyam saying he's taking me home.

I remember Lyam bending and lifting me, cradling me against him as if marching away from a bloody battle.

It's time to go home.

Home.

We make it to Le Marquise. He carries me upstairs; it seems he can't bear the little bit of distance we'd have between us if he were to let me walk.

He doesn't have to ask me twice. I nuzzle my head against his neck and loop my arms around him.

"Lyam," I say in a whisper. "I'm so sorry. I should have told you sooner. I wanted to. So many times, I—"

"And I should have given you the benefit of the doubt," he interrupts in a low, husky tone. "No more, Cosette. *No. More.*"

"No more what?" I ask, as he carries me past his staff who scurry like ants with one sharp look from him. Anyone that even glances our way gets the message loud and clear: Stay. Away.

"No more regrets. No more 'should haves.' No more apologies. We leave the past behind us right here, right now. All we have is this, right here, right now. *Us.*" And I know deep in my heart that he doesn't mean just me and him, but our unborn child too.

Our family.

Lyam nearly kicks the damn door down.

We're a mess. My hair's all tangled and straggly, my clothes are torn and bloodied, and he looks like he's just come back

from hand-to-hand combat.

He stalks into the bathroom with me and slides my ass onto the vanity next to the sink. I know how rough he can be, so when he silently, gently removes my clothes, I get a little choked up.

“Pregnancy hormones,” I say, swiping at my cheeks.

“Then what’s my excuse?” he asks, his own eyes shining.

I brush my thumb across his cheek. “Perfection.”

When I’m naked and quivering, my breathing ragged and my need to be with him making my hands tremble, he stands still in front of me and lets me undress *him*.

“You’re hurt,” I whisper, reaching to kiss the bruises on his neck. I lift his shirt and stifle a moan at the utterly masculine breadth of his shoulders and chest, his inked pecs and biceps, the raised veins along his muscular arms, his washboard abs. I’ve never understood how simply beautiful he was until now. I’ve thought of him as hot, sexy, and masculine, but seeing him in his naked glory, he looks like a survivor. And God if that’s not sexy as fuck.

My man.

I moan and kiss, lick and stroke until he gathers my hair in his fists.

I still.

“Shower, baby. I want to wash off the memories of everything that happened and I want to make sure you’re okay before we make love.”

Make love.

He lifts me off the vanity and slides me to the floor. Reaches toward the shower and turns it on. When hot steam fills the bathroom, I step in first and he joins me.

I moan at the feel of the cleansing water on my back and lift my head to welcome a deluge of hot water. He lifts a pearly white bottle of shampoo and pours some into the palm of his hand. Without a word, he massages it into my hair and scalp,

his strong fingers lathering my hair then finger-combing it, rinsing out the soap.

He kisses my temple. I take his hand and kiss his palm.

We take our time, kissing and embracing in between lather and bubbles, washing our battle-worn bodies and reconnecting.

I stand with my head on his chest as steam rises from our battered bodies. I cleanse the dirt and sweat off him, stifling a choking sound as I wash away the blood from his wounds, all thankfully shallow.

“Does it hurt?” I ask, wincing as I cup warm water in my hands and pour it over an angry-looking cut on his wrist.

“The only thing that hurt was being apart from you.”

I reach for his face and frame it in my hands. His beautiful eyes look down on me with such tenderness, I sigh. He kisses me.

Shuts off the shower.

Wraps us in towels and lifts me in his arms again.

“Is this our new thing?”

“Hush,” he says, laying me on the bed. Our towels fall to the floor, discarded. “I need you soft and gentle, baby,” he murmurs. “I’ll take you hard later, but I want you soft and gentle right now.”

“Lyam,” I whisper on a broken sob. “Oh, God, Lyam.”

His fingers in my hair, his mouth on mine, I part my lips and welcome him in. Our tongues touch, and a surge of need and want and longing nearly chokes me. I want him in me so badly I can’t think beyond the need to be filled by him.

“Not yet,” he says in a low growl, before lowering his mouth to my nipple and licking the hardened, tender bud. I arch my back and cry out as he licks first one, then the other, then back again until I’m panting and so wet, my arousal coats my inner thighs.

“That’s my girl,” he whispers. “That’s my sweet, beautiful girl.”

I part my legs, a silent beckoning for him to fill me, and nearly groan from pleasure when I feel the silky head of his cock at my entrance. He looks into my eyes, and I stare into his, saying more with a mere look than spoken words could ever convey.

“You’re mine, Cosette. I won’t ever let you go.”

I wrap my arms around him and hold him to me, cherishing this moment that I’ll keep with me for the rest of my life. We look into each other’s eyes before he runs his fingers through my hair and kisses me. I close my eyes and lose myself to the kiss.

The hot length of his cock presses closer.

“I love you,” he whispers in my ear. “God, I love you so much.”

His large, warm, rough hand caresses my hip with a sense of ownership that makes my heart pound harder, as he puts his mouth to my ear.

“Give me that pussy, Cosette. You belong to me. All of you.”

“All of me,” I agree, as he glides the head of his cock inside me. I groan at the perfect feel of his hardened length stretching me, filling me, completing me. My voice is choked with tears. “All of me. I’m so sorry, Lyam.”

He growls, and it does deliciously wonderful things to my body. My pussy clenches around him and my heart beats faster. “Somebody’s gonna earn herself a spanking.”

God how I love when he goes all alpha dom on me.

I give him a pout.

“I’ll be good,” I say demurely.

His grin nearly stops my heart. “That’s my girl.”

My heart beats faster with every perfect thrust, with the way he builds a rhythm and makes me feel. Nuzzling my temple, his voice is choked as he says, “I love you, Cosette. When I saw him hurting you...” He can’t talk for a minute, then he

takes a shuddering breath. “Before that, I was going to let him live, for you.”

“And I love you for that,” I whisper into his ear. “I know you wanted revenge. I know you wanted him to be punished for what he’s done to your family. For what he planned to do. But you were willing to let him go... *for me.*”

We don’t talk for long moments. I wrap my ankles around his muscled, inked body. His tats are irresistible, and I can’t help tracing them with my fingers while he weaves his fingers through my hair, keeping the steady tempo of perfect ecstasy going. We roll so I’m on top and he’s below me, never losing the perfect rhythm of our lovemaking.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispers. “And I love you. I won’t ever doubt you again, I promise.”

I give him my own brand of a growl. “Now who needs a spanking?” I tease.

And that’s when the sweet part of our lovemaking ends.

He rolls and pins me beneath him, under his full weight. My wrists are captured in his hands, my body pressed to the bed as he lifts his hips and thrusts so deeply I gasp for air. Pulling his cock out nearly completely, he returns with a perfect thrust.

“Okay, okay, I get the point,” I groan, breathless.

He slows our rhythm. We make love slowly and tenderly, savoring every moment.

It feels so perfect, it’s like the first time.

“I love you,” he whispers as my body arches and the first spasm of pleasure spirals through me.

“I love you,” I echo, as he groans in ecstasy, on the cusp of climaxing.

“Come with me,” he whispers in my ear. “I want us to remember this. I don’t want to forget.”

I close my eyes and nod.

He holds me against him.

My eyes fly open when another thrust nearly threatens to split me apart. Another makes me moan for him, and his final thrust pushes me right off the edge of oblivion as he whispers words of love and devotion. His body shudders with pleasure, and with a groan of ecstasy, he empties himself inside me.

We collapse in each other's arms, exhausted and content. I think we doze a little. Opening my eyes, I find him half on me, half sprawled on the bed, his perfect body like a carved statue of a god.

It already looks like his wounds are healing.

"Are you Superman?" I ask.

"If I am," he says with a wry smile, "you're my kryptonite."

"I'm honored, kind sir."

He chuckles. "There she goes again. Are you hungry, baby?"

"Only for you."

We make love again, joined in our mutual apology.

And then we sleep. Actually *sleep*. It's long and blissful and restful.

We wake up the next morning ready to talk.

I thread my fingers through his.

"So what exactly does groveling look like?" I ask in a sweet voice, tapping my chin thoughtfully. "You've already killed the corrupt politician who wanted to kill me, so it can't be that..."

News stations all over the country are up in arms over the story of Montague's "suicide." I'm not sure what kind of strings Thayer pulled for that one, but it's poetic justice after what Montague did to Rousseau.

I had no relationship with François Montague. He might as well have been a sperm donor for all I cared. The pain of his rejection is something I may deal with for the rest of my life, but I'll make peace with it.

Still, I appreciated Lyam's deferring to me just as I appreciated him saving my life in the end.

We have his confession and have made it public, and now it's clear to the citizens that Montague couldn't handle the public shame of his illicit affair and illegitimate daughter.

They'll talk about it for weeks.

Lyam and I, on the other hand, are done talking about it.

Done.

As far as I'm concerned, we need never talk about it again.

"Late night palmiers for the remainder of your pregnancy?" he offers. We're lying in the deluxe bed at Le Marquise. He knows I love it here, and Lyam loves knowing how safe it is.

"That's a good start," I say teasingly. "Though these days, my cravings are more along the line of... *éclairs*? Mmm." Those long, thin pastries filled with custard and topped with chocolate are my favorite. "No, no, I've got it!" I sigh. "Macarons, Lyam. I want *macarons*."

Light, airy, delicately sweet. My mouth waters.

"Those are easy. Consider it done. But you have to ask for more than that. I wasn't just an asshole; I was a *fucking* asshole." He grimaces.

"You're awfully cute when you grovel," I say thoughtfully. I run my fingers through his dark, tousled hair.

"Cute?" he says with distaste. "I was hoping to go for debonair or handsome."

"That, too," I say, leaning in to kiss his forehead. "But cute is a refreshing change."

"Oh! I've got it!" he says, pointing with his index finger as if he's been struck with a brilliant idea, and still looking incredibly *cute*. "I can make it up to you with multiple orgasms that rock your world, morning, noon, and night?"

I guffaw. "I thought *that* was a given."

He rolls over onto his elbows and looks me in the eyes. My heart turns over in my chest.

“Of course it is,” he says in a soft voice. “And I *do* know how to grovel.” He swallows. “It begins with an apology. I was insensitive and jumped to conclusions. Instead of assuming you betrayed us when I found out he was your father, I should have known it only put you in more danger. I should’ve known you would never do anything like that. I let my fears get the best of me, and I was wrong. I should have chosen to treat you with respect and given you the benefit of the doubt.”

“Lyam Gerard,” I say in a soft voice. “You really *do* know how to grovel, don’t you?”

“Not saying I do it often, but yeah. Of course I do.” He swallows. “Because you’re my Queen. And I love you.”

“And I love you,” I say as he moves closer to me so he can hold me.

“Cosette, we’ve had nothing but craziness for weeks on end. I want quiet. I want to enjoy time with you. I want to take long walks and eat good food and make love. I want to *date* you. Paris is the City of Love, and French men know how to be romantic. So tell me, love. What is it you want to do? Let’s resurrect this city. Let’s show the Parisians what two lovers do.”

My heart leaps with happiness. Lyam really does want to make it better. We will eradicate the bitter memories and renew the city that’s tainted and make it our home.

“So many things,” I say. “I want to take a romantic stroll down the Seine and buy books from the vendors at sunset when the city’s alight. I want to have a picnic lunch by the Champ de Mars Park, explore the Luxembourg Garden’s fountains, and maybe rent a sailboat. I want to visit the Opera House and see a ballet and explore some of those adorable little cafés in the Montmartre district. I want to taste macarons and drink hot tea and have dinner with Maman at your family home and pore over your baby pictures.” I sigh and repeat, “*So many things.*”

“God, I love your romantic heart,” he says, stroking his fingers through my hair. “Let’s make a pact, Cosette. Right here, right now.”

I look into his eyes. “Yes?”

“Our world is full of challenges and obstacles and people that would tear us apart. We have to promise each other that we won’t let them.”

I nod. “Yes, Lyam. I completely agree. Absolutely.”

“We have to talk it out. When things come up, we have to give each other the benefit of the doubt. We have to promise that no matter what happens, we will work through it, together. Because we’re building a family now, and peace in our family *matters*. Keeping our family together matters.”

My throat’s all tingly when he says this because he’s just stated what I want so badly. I’ve longed for the comfort and consolation of family. Sure, his is not perfect, and they have their flaws like anyone does. But no matter what, they have each other. Thayer went hunting for his brother and was ready to keep him safe, no matter the cost. He’s utterly devoted to Savannah. Fabien would crawl over hot coals for his wife and family.

This, this is what I’ve longed for. I’ve wanted a family to call my own.

“You’re the mother of our family,” Lyam says. “By some grace and miracle, here we are. Despite *everything*. You’re growing a healthy baby, and this baby is *ours*. I’ll be the best father I know how to be. And I already know you’ll be the best mother.”

Bending his mouth to my bare belly, he places a gentle kiss at the center before he looks back up to me. “Now tell me, Cosette.”

“Mmm?” I blink at him and swallow the lump in my throat.

“Will you marry me?”



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EPILOGUE

THIS VISIT to the Gerard family home is much different than the last, when I was fraught with nerves, afraid of what would happen with Thayer and Savannah. But this time? This time is different.

Lyam and I stroll up the beautiful pathway bordered by Avril's stunning flowers, hand in hand. I'm reminded of when he picked me up at the airport. How very different our walk together looked then. And now... now we've made peace with our pasts and look together toward our future.

We haven't told anyone our plans yet. We wanted some time to savor the knowledge that he proposed to me and that I said yes. During one of our romantic dates, he took me to a jewelry store in the city and we picked out my *bague de fiançailles*. My engagement ring.

Our plan is to set things right again, to make a family of our own. I know what he does and who he is... and he knows me.

I considered getting an unorthodox ring, something to signify our unique union together. But when the time came, I fell for a stunning diamond set in rose gold, an elongated, pointed oval shape.

"A marquise cut," the jeweler said. "A classic choice. A popular cut of diamond, mademoiselle, but it can sometimes chip because of the fragile edges. One must choose a high-quality diamond to prevent such a tragedy."

Lyam and I shared a smile, before he forked over more money than I've ever seen in my life. For a *ring*. When I gave him

shit about it, he only shook his head.

“I spend my money on what I want to spend my money on. If that’s on Paris’s most expensive macarons or a late-night flight to visit our friends in Tuscany, or a *marquise*-cut diamond the size of my hand, I’ll do it. Got it?”

I smile and melt a little. “Fine, then, spend your money on me and spoil me a little, as long as you promise not to spoil our child. Spoiled children are entitled, Lyam.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” he says soberly. “No spoiling the baby.”

I’ll believe *that* when I see it.

Avril meets us by the front steps, grinning from ear to ear. “Oh my *God*, look how gorgeous you are! Look at that little baby bump! Please, can I touch your belly for good luck?”

I laugh out loud. “Of course.”

She gently pats my belly and her eyes mist over. “I miss being pregnant, though I’ll tell you, those sons of mine were all kickers.” We start up the front steps while she regales us with tales of her sons’ Herculean efforts and supernatural strength in utero. Of course, I’m not surprised.

We enter the house and I stare, uncomprehending, for a few moments.

I expected the others would be here, and the front entryway might have its traditional oversized vases filled with fragrant blooms.

But...no.

Lyam comes up behind me, a warm wall of protection at my back. His hand goes around my ample belly and he tucks my head under his chin.

He whispers in my ear. “Happy birthday, Cossette.”

Savannah and Thayer, Nicolette and Fabien, all their friends and family and acquaintances, stand smiling with flutes of bubbly. Golden letters glitter beneath overhead lighting heralding a message:

Happy Birthday.

They're... looking at me.

Me.

I stare at them all before I swivel my gaze back to Lyam. "Lyam," I say in a choked voice. "Did you... did you have anything to do with this?"

"With what?" he says, as he grabs two flutes of champagne from a tray as staff mulls around plying everyone with champagne. "I'll take hers, too."

Avril grins. "Of course he did!" She leans in and whispers in my ear, "He told me you've never had a birthday party, love. And it's our pleasure to give you your first."

I'm at a loss for words. Whereas others see this family as dangerous and threatening, I know better.

I know they're loyal and they love fiercely and I *need fierce*. Here, I belong.

They are my family and I am theirs.

Savannah grins. "Did you forget it was your birthday? You look *stunned*."

"Um, maybe?"

I have barely even looked at a calendar, between prenatal appointments, our romantic dates, and the new work Lyam's taken over in Paris. Plus, our trips all over Europe now that my nausea's abated. Not to mention preparing for our wedding.

I never paid attention to my birthday because no one ever made it special for me.

Everyone laughs. Savannah grins at me, and my heart swells at the knowledge that she's not only forgiven me, but she's my friend now. Lyam holds my hand as we walk together, flanked by friends and family.

"Oooh," I breathe when we look at the room overflowing with good food and an actual quartet playing string instruments.

A table laden with the best pastries France has to offer showcases all my favorites, the largest tray in the center piled with whimsical, pastel-colored, round macarons. The dining

room's been transformed into a party room with round tables decked in white cloths, each centerpiece overflowing with beautiful flowers from Avril's garden. Every place is set with careful attention to detail—delicate, butter-colored napkins to match bouquets of flowers in yellow and white, elegant plates waiting to be filled.

My mouth waters as staff brings out large family platters of all the foods I've craved the most, piled high in silver catering trays—savory mini quiches, coq au vin, fresh-baked baguettes with softened butter.

I sit with Lyam at the head table, as if we're foreshadowing our wedding in the days ahead. Next to us sits a small table with a matching white tablecloth, piled high with wrapped packages.

"For me?" I ask him. I've never seen so many presents in my life.

"Of course they're for you," he says, holding my hand. "I'd give you the world if I could, Cosette."

"I don't need the world," I say, looking out in gratitude at the cluster of people around us. "I'll settle for just a little corner of it. Just like this."



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PREVIEW

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DEVOTION

***Book 1 of “The Montavio Brotherhood” (A Deviant Doms
Rossi Family Saga Spin-off)***

CHAPTER 1

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Eden

“I’ll come back for you.”

My words feel like a strangled plea, as if somehow I’m begging Starla to believe me. I need to give her the hope I can barely hold onto myself. My hands in hers, I squeeze, trying to convey with a touch what words can’t say.

I’ll move heaven and earth to come back for her, even if it kills me.

And it might.

When she squeezes back, I can feel her own desperation coming off her in waves, but she manages to put on a brave face.

For me.

Starla whispers back. “I know you will.”

I have to pretend I don’t hear the pain in her voice. The worst of it all is having to leave her in misery to set her free.

I stare into my sister’s hopeful blue-gray eyes and see the courage that I need. *They* see her as less than, as weak and damaged. Imperfect. Cursed, even.

I think she’s the most beautiful person I’ve ever seen.

In her plaintive voice, barely above a whisper, she begs me. “*Go*, Eden. You have to. We’ll be back together again, I know it.”

Somehow, the confirmation that she knows I’ll be back is all that I need to give me the little boost of courage to move. To face the wide open world that’s a black hole of uncertainty. To leap over the cliff and into the wild.

A twig snaps in the underbrush of the woods beyond the fence.

We both freeze. My heart pounds so fast I’m dizzy. Long minutes pass while we wait for another sound. Finally, I hear a

low growl.

I exhale in relief. A wolf or coyote, maybe.

They're not who I fear.

Starla squeezes my hand again. "Go, Eden. Go!"

We've been planning this for months, for me to escape and get what I need to buy us both freedom — a home, money, and whatever else I can earn as quickly as possible. If I don't go now, I may not get another chance for a year or more... or ever.

But when the time comes — when I have to actually leave my sister alone, knowing the punishment she'll face if anyone ever suspects she helped me escape — I can't move.

"Eden," she says in an impassioned plea. "*Please*. You have to." She gives me a quick embrace, holding me to her. I can feel the bones in her back, her rib cage pushed up against mine. So thin and frail, she feels as small and fragile as a child even though she's almost eighteen.

I kiss her cheek. My lips are damp with her tears.

I love you, I think, but I don't say it out loud, because speaking those words to her could send her into a tailspin. We're not allowed to love anyone but God. It's heretical, a damnable offense to tell her I love her. And I've already given her enough reasons to face the worst penalty.

But I hope she feels it.

I hope she *knows* it.

One day, I'll tell her.

But for now, I have to show her.

It's a scary place to be, when you're afraid of what lies ahead of you but terrified of what's behind you. But I love my sister.

So I run.



The bus station looms ahead of me with the bright lights of a promise of things to come. I feel a lightness in my chest I haven't felt in so long, it's foreign to me, though it's still tainted with the fear of being found. Cloaked in darkness, I walked through the forest like a woman on a mission.

"This is it," I whisper to myself, hoping that the sound of my own voice gives me more courage.

It doesn't work. I tremble as if angelic messengers from heaven itself will come down and block my way.

But no one — or nothing — does.

I'd mapped out the way. I'd taken notes and planned my route, and one day, when we got a shipment of goods, on a day when Seth was actually out of sight for a minute, I asked the delivery boy casually where the nearest bus station was.

"Oh, not far," he said nonchalantly, waving in the general direction of the woods. "It's only a few miles from here."

My mind began to swim with possibilities.

"Oh?" I asked, while I stacked the bags of flour and beans, sugar and oats on a shelf in our stock room. "How much would a ticket cost then?" I wondered, not making eye contact with him, as if somehow that would prevent him from understanding my motives. I liked to pretend I was invisible, sometimes.

If only I could be invisible to Seth.

"Oh, a hundred dollars or so," he said, when heavy footsteps warned us that Seth was approaching.

Our conversation came to an abrupt halt, but I had all the information I needed.

So I made my plans.

I forged my way.

I traded a few of my handmade items Seth didn't know about, and socked away every penny I could. I made everyone pay me in dollar bills, and when Seth wasn't home, and when I was feeling *very* brave, I would count the bills, one at a time.

When I had one hundred, I knew it was time.

A car horn blares in my ear. I jump, my heart pounding. “Watch where you’re going!”

I look down at my feet and back at the car as it screeches away. I’m standing on the side of the road, next to a solid curb.

I don’t care that they yelled at me or that they beeped their horn. My heart pounds against my rib cage in a frantic staccato because I don’t want to be seen and now everyone is staring at me.

“Hey! How about you watch where you’re fuckin’ going!” I jump and blink, my cheeks hot, at the irate voice of a woman next to me when she flips her middle finger at the retreating car.

We couldn’t look more different. Her hair is strangely short around the base as if she shaved it for the military or something, her eyelids painted a vibrant blue, and her lips as red as cherries. She’s chewing gum, snapping it like it did something to personally offend her. “Jesus,” she mutters. “People should watch what they’re going.” Turning to me, she gives me a sympathetic look. “You come here to sell somethin’ from the Amish store? Didn’t know we were that close to Pennsylvania but I’m shit at geography.”

“We-we’re not,” I stutter. I don’t usually stutter, but my teeth are chattering and a chill runs straight through me. When I left, I brought nothing but the clothes on my back and the small bag I’d packed but left everything else, including a sweater, behind. The chill breeze of a North Carolina sunrise did nothing to warm the air around me.

“So you came all the way up here to sell your Amish stuff?”

I blink. “Uh, no, I don’t have anything to sell.”

She blinks back. Grins. Then throws her head back and laughs as if I just told her the funniest thing she’s ever heard.

“Oh, honey, God am I such a bitch. You look beautiful, don’t listen to a word I said, though it’s too bad you *weren’t* selling Amish things, their bread’s the best I’ve ever head.”

I still wish I could somehow become invisible, but when she beckons me to come into the bus station with me, my heartbeat begins to slow.

I've left behind everything that I knew. I left behind a world of misery and fear, and now that I'm on my own, I have to face reality: There are many things I have no knowledge about, and I'm probably not going to be able to hide it.

"Where you heading?" she asks as we head into the station.

I want to change the subject. I don't want to talk about *me* any more than I want anyone looking at me.

"North," I say vaguely, because *as far away from here as my money will take me* sounds a bit dramatic. "You?"

She grins. "Same. Out of this hell hole, that's for sure. I'm Quinn. You?"

"Eden."

"Eden. Well, that's a new one."

I watch as a line of people forms in front of me and I realize I have no idea how to buy a ticket. I have a wad of dollar bills and there's a sign on the wall that has the names of cities I've never heard before. I'm assuming the higher the price of the ticket, the further it goes.

As the people begin, one by one, to purchase tickets, panic rises in my chest.

No one has money with them.

Everyone uses a credit card or their phone, but I have neither. Seth always said that mobile phones were the device of the devil and I was never allowed to have one. All credit cards, of course, are in his name. All I have is this wad of bills. It says *legal tender*, though. That counts for something, I'm guessing?

"Girl," Quinn whispers, snorting under her breath. "Stack of bills like that, I'd think you got tips pole dancing at a strip club, but for some reason, you don't strike me as the type."

I'm starting to warm up to her. I feel my lips tip up again. "What gave that away? Was it the glasses or the full-length skirt?"

Quinn blinks, before she throws her head back and laughs out loud.

"Girl, am I dying to know your story, but I don't pry."

"You don't pry," I repeat, "Why do I have a hard time believing that?"

We're only two people away from the ticket counter now.

"Ooh, so she not only doesn't sell me Amish butter and scones, she likes to critique me, eh?" Quinn winks at me. "I don't pry *much*, but I am wondering what a girl like you is doing in a place like this and how you got that money. You flash your ankles to a bunch of hard-up church boys?"

I wink at her. "Close."

She hoots with laughter, and for some reason it makes me feel like I'm ten feet tall.

I blow out a breath and clear my throat. "And you don't have to think too hard about it. I'm here for the same reason as you."

The person in front of me steps aside. It's just me and the uniformed ticket seller.

"Can I help you?"

My hands tremble as I place the cash on the silver counter in front of me. "I'd like a ticket as far as this money will take me."

The attendant grows quiet. Eyes me suspiciously. Picks up the stack of cash and counts it once, then twice, then glances at the schedule on the wall.

"One way or round trip?"

My heart beats faster.

It's happening.

I breathe out my answer with so much relief it's all I can do not to sob right here in front of him. "One way, please."

For a moment, he doesn't respond, just glances at the wall then back at me and the money there.

"Boston," he says with a nod. "This will take you to Boston."

I'm not sure why he reaches into his own pocket and takes out a slender black leather wallet and places a bill on top of my stack before handing me the ticket. "This one includes your lunch, as it's a thirteen hour bus ride."

I nod, excitedly. Food is a bonus.

"Safe travels," he says, giving me a look that says he doesn't think I'm capable of it.

I am, though.

I'm capable of lots of things.

I take the ticket and turn around, almost bumping into Quinn.

"I think he was hitting on you," she hisses at me.

"He didn't hit me!" I respond, appalled at the very idea.

"Oh my God, you're adorable and maddening at the same time," she says, shaking her head. "I didn't say *hit* you. I said *hitting on* you. It means he thinks you're hot."

I look down at my faded skirt and shake my head.

Me?

I look back at the elderly attendant, clearly a senior citizen with graying hair and glasses on the tip of his nose.

"Are you crazy?" I ask her.

"Oh my God you need to learn how to take a joke. Grandpa probably has a wife and ten kids."

I'm glad for her sake she thinks that means he wouldn't use me.

We take seats together near the middle. A riot of raucous men come on the bus behind her, laughing and jeering and reeking of alcohol. They look a bit older than I am, dressed in college

jerseys and sweats. I stare. They're big and brawny, and nothing like the men I grew up with. I squirm when one of them looks my way.

"Look, Brad, you thought the ride home would be boring," one guy says. "But we get to sit right near the pretty girls."

I blink in surprise when I realize they're talking about Quinn and *me*.

Pretty girl.

I wish the window next to me reflected more than my wide eyes and pale face. Pretty? Am I pretty?

No one has ever in my life called me a pretty girl. Humility is one of the basic tenets of my upbringing, and I have never thought of myself as *pretty*.

It's a bit unnerving, but I'm strangely flattered. It doesn't matter that these men are obviously inebriated and probably haven't even gone to *bed* the night before.

"Hands off, frat boy, this chick's mine," Quinn says staunchly. She crosses her arms on her chest.

"Oh, so we're gonna play it that way," one of the guys says, shaking his head. "Let's go to the back, boys."

They manage to tumble their way to the back of the bus. Quinn smiles and looks at me. "Do you trust everyone you see?" she asks with narrow eyes. "You look so sweet and innocent, and I need to know just exactly how much I'm gonna have to tuck you under my wing."

I look out the window and swallow the lump in my throat before I answer.

"Actually, no," I say softly, as the door to the bus shuts. "I trust no one."

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I swore I'd stop at nothing to put him behind bars.

But then our plane back to the States crashes.

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And the monster will make me wish I'd died along with the rest of them.

The Bratva's Heir

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Prison is a dark, bleak place.

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My sweet little bird will be my ticket to freedom.

The first time I saw her, I had to have her.

From her big, dark eyes, to the curves she can't conceal...

The way she can only hold my gaze so long.

The way she shivers every time I move inside these chains.

And most of all, the way she'll bend the rules when I order her to...

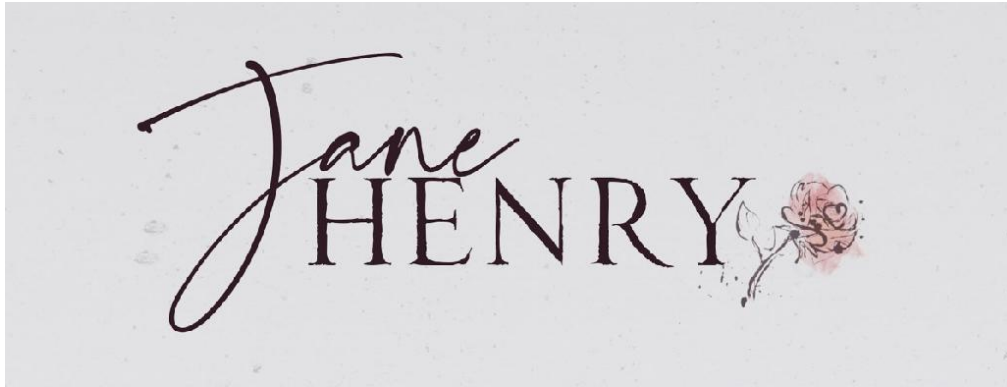
I know a natural submissive when I see one.

Her degrees and titles don't change who she is: a woman who will bend to my will.

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