



KINGS & VILLAINS

I'M IN DEBT TO A MONSTER.

# PRINCE OF HATE

JAGGER COLE

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A DARK MAFIA CAPTIVE ROMANCE

JAGGER COLE

Prince of Hate

Jagger Cole © 2023

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Cover and interior design by Plan 9 Book Design

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## PLAYLIST

The National Anthem - Radiohead

Meet Me in the Woods - Lord Huron

Drink You Sober - Bitter:Sweet

Black Hole Sun - Sofia Karlberg

Hey Man, Nice Shot - Filter

Piano Sonata No. 14 in C-Sharp Minor, Op. 27 No. 2 - Ludwig  
Van Beethoven

Stonecatcher - Marcus Mumford, Phoebe Bridgers

If I Had A Heart - Fever Ray

Stronger - SAULT

Gnossiennes: No. 1 - Erik Satie

The Tain, Pt. II - The Decemberists

Right Where It Belongs - Nine Inch Nails

The Funeral - Band of Horses

Comptine d'un autre été, l'après-midi - Yann Tiersen

That's Where I Am - Maggie Rogers

After Dark - Mr.Kitty

Here with Me - Susie Suh

Civilian - Wye Oak

On the Nature of Daylight - Max Richter

All I Need To Hear - The 1975

Listen to the playlist on [Spotify!](#)

## TRIGGER WARNING

This book contains darker themes and graphic depictions of past trauma, as well as mentions of SA and the off-screen loss of a (adult) child. While these scenes were written to create a more vivid, in-depth story, they may be triggering to some readers. Please read with that in mind.





AROUND ME, the house is an inferno. Engulfed in flames, strangled by smoke and ash.

Fire roars hungrily and hisses in my peripheral vision as I stumble choking through the blaze. My skin burns. My eyes water. The uncaring flames rip into and sear my heart, shredding it raw as the screams and pleas for help hit me like so many knives to the chest.

Again, and again.

*Help me. Help me, it burns.*

He's burning. I'm burning. The whole fucking world is burning. And I can't help him.

I surge forward into the raging hurricane of fire and smoke, seeing nothing, feeling everything. I keep moving. I keep fighting until the heat sends me to my knees. The ceiling begins to cave in, but I'm still crawling, clawing at the very fucking floorboards, oblivious to the way they crumble to ash beneath my fingers. Heedless of the way the smoke turns my lungs black.

*I'm coming. I'm coming.*

But I can't reach him.

The whine becomes a roar. The flames become Hell itself as the entire house begins to crumble and crash and burn.

And burn, and burn, and burn.

Everything burns. Everything crumbles to ash. Until the whole world is streaked with soot and blood.

Cinder and bone.

Gray and dead.

I close my eyes, reaching out one last time through the gaping maw of the fire demon roaring towards me. But as the ceiling crashes down, all I know is pain, fire and death.

This is how a golden god falls.

This is how a dynasty ends.

This is how the world goes dark.

And how a beast emerges.



*I CAN'T BREATHE.*

My nerves feel raw and shattered, like a live wire sparking as it snakes over the ground. My throat constricts as it tries to muscle down the lump caught in the middle of it.

But then, my mouth opens. And just as my hand clenches on the edge of the polished wood conference table, air fills my lungs.

Okay, I *can* breathe. I'm just being dramatic, as Sister Carmen would—and often *does*—say to me.

I swallow thickly again, feeling the lump in my throat finally sink into the black pit forming in my stomach. My teeth rake across my bottom lip, and I nervously glance down at the clothes I'm not used to wearing. Sitting in an environment I'm not used to being in. Preparing to talk about things I know nothing about.

*Where the hell are you, Dad?*

My hands run across the edge of the conference table in front of me. Apart, together, apart, then together again, my fingers beginning to claw and pick at each other's cuticles. Is it hot in

here? Maybe I'm sick. Maybe I've caught something. Maybe

—

A hand lands on top of mine: soft fingers, exquisitely manicured nails, a firm grip steadying my jangling nerves. I turned to smile weakly at the only other person currently in the conference room. The corners of Elsa's perfectly done, and yet tastefully professional lips curl up. She raises a brow, her sharp hazel eyes locking with mine. It calms me, at least momentarily.

"Take a breath, Rose."

I do, shaking a little as my lungs fill with air. My father's attorney smiles and pats my hand again before releasing it.

"Just let me do the talking, okay?"

I nod, telling myself I feel better now. But really, all I end up doing is moving my wringing, twisting hands to my lap under the table to hide them and my nervousness.

"Look, I know this is all new to you."

Elsa turns to give me another comforting smile.

"But it's not exactly old hat for me to be meeting with the upper echelons of the Greek Mafia either, for what *that's* worth."

She's good at maintaining power and poise, while also being a calming force. I suppose that's why, despite being barely five years older than me, Elsa Guin is one of the most hotshot lawyers in the country. Or at least, hotshot enough to be my dad's pick for a meeting of this importance.

"And my father really didn't say what this was all about?"

Elsa shakes her head.

“Not exactly, no. I know it involves some outstanding business contract, but Paul was quite vague about the particulars.”

Which makes him not being here right now send my anxiety spiking even higher. Elsa seems cool as a cucumber, though.

“Whatever the particulars are, though, we’ll tackle them head-on as they come.”

We? *She* will tackle them head-on. I’ll most likely sit here freaking out, wondering what the heck I’m even doing at a business meeting between my father and the Greek freaking Mafia.

I take another breath, smoothing my chestnut hair yet again. I am determined to stop shaking like a quivering leaf next to the poised, confident lawyer sitting next to me.

*I can do this.*

Because “tackling things head-on” has quickly become my personal mantra for the last two months, along with the slightly less uplifting “sink or swim”. Up until two months ago, when Dad found me, I’d spent the first twenty years of my life not knowing my father even existed. I mean, logically he *existed*. But I had no clue who he *was*, and only the barest idea of my mother.

My hand drifts to my chest, where I finger the little silver locket—the only thing I have of hers.

I know she was young when she had me. I know her family disapproved of her and my father—and unborn me, for that matter. I know everyone decided the best option for all concerned was to leave me with the nuns at Our Lady Hildegard Home for the Sisters of Mercy, a convent outside Birmingham.

Which is why all of this, from the clothes I'm wearing to just being in this conference room, is so shockingly new to me. I'd never even owned a smartphone until two months ago. My entire life, all I've known is the convent, the sisters who raised me, and of course, the piano in the conservatory that I've poured *thousands* of hours into.

Sister Carmen tells me I'm a natural. That my talent for playing and the way I'm so drawn to it is proof that I was destined to come to Our Lady Hildegard. Which is named after Saint Hildegard of Bingen, the patron saint of musicians and writers, herself an accomplished composer.

I don't know about that. But I do know that playing the piano is possibly my favorite thing to do in the world.

My world, consisting solely of Our Lady Hildegard, expanded two months ago, when my father came back into my life. It was a reunion straight out of one of the feel-good Hollywood romantic comedies the sisters loved to play on Friday nights in the main hall.

In this movie, a simple country girl—living in a *convent*, no less!—discovers she does in fact have a family. She has a father. Moreover, he's fabulously rich, terribly handsome, and most importantly, completely over the moon that he has finally found the daughter he was forced to say goodbye to twenty years ago.

Ever since that reunion two months ago, I've been thrust into the whirlwind that is high society London, and a pool of a million things that are so far over my head it feels as though I'm drowning sometimes.

But a business meeting this scary, with a father who's gone without answering his phone for two full days, is a whole new level.

I glance at Elsa again.

“Has he called?”

Her lips twist in an attempt to hide the shadow crossing her own face.

“Not yet.” The shadow fades, and she smiles that practiced, corporate, precise smile at me. “I’m sure he just got caught up with something. But honestly, Rose, there’s nothing to worry about. Paul has done this before, gone quiet when he’s gotten embroiled in business dealings that drag on for days. And I’m extremely good at what I do. Whatever Mr. Drakos intends for this meeting, trust me: I’m more than capable of handling it without your father being here.”

I nod mutely, glancing back down in my lap, at the twisting hands beneath the table. It’s comforting to hear her say that. But it’s still overshadowed by the enormous elephant in the room.

“You’re still curious about why you were asked to be here for this, aren’t you, Rose?”

I glance at her nervously, but she just smiles calmly.

“Your father does a lot of business with a lot of people. I’m somewhat familiar with the Drakos organization, and I know that family is important to them. I’m assuming they’ve either asked for you to be here as your father’s”...she uses her fingers to make air quotes... “*Heir*. Or else your father wanted you to be here to show Atlas Drakos a united family front as a strategic business move.”

I swallow, the knot of fear in my stomach burning a little hotter again.

Atlas Drakos, as in, the heir apparent to the most powerful Greek Mafia family in the country, possibly the world.

Or at least, that's what Mister Google said when I sat down to prepare for this meeting. Google also told me that the man coming to this meeting today has been at the center of an inordinate number of murder, assault, witness tampering, and evidence theft charges, none of which has ever stuck to him.

For the three -hundredth time, I wonder where in the *heck* my father is.

"You're thinking the worst. I get it."

I turn to see Elsa arching a brow at me.

"I remember the first time I sat down with a client and someone like Mr. Drakos." She shrugs. "I'm sure the internet has told you all sorts of campfire stories about him. But trust me, men like him operate exactly like any corporate CEO, most of whom have done far worse than self-proclaimed gangsters like Atlas Drakos. If you think he's going to come in here talking blood contracts or murder or anything like that, let me burst that bubble right now. He's most likely here to discuss some sort of real estate contract your father has with him."

She flashes me another confident smile as we hear footsteps approaching the door. Then in an instant the smile fades from her face, and I stare in awe at the way she transforms into the lethally cool, savvy legal expert that she is.

"Game time, Rose."

She stands. I do too, just as the door opens. But whatever confidence I'm leaching from her vanishes when the door slams open, and a large, husky, surly and cruel-looking man storms in. An insidious power seems to come with him, a power that sucks the light out of the room as he plants himself two feet inside the door.



Fists at his side, thick brows furrowed, the menacing, stocky man's eyes make a glowering sweep of the room, back and forth, moving right over me and even Elsa as if we weren't even standing there. His lip curls menacingly.

"*Coward,*" he hisses under his breath.

He turns to mutter something in what I think must be Greek to someone outside the room. Then he strides to the table, yanks out a chair across from Elsa and me, and drops down heavily into it like a barbarian chief back from battle.

Behind him, another man follows him into the room; this one a younger and far more darkly attractive but equally dangerous-looking version of the scowling man sitting across from me.

Elsa clears her throat.

"Mr. Drakos," she says cordially, addressing the man in his late thirties or maybe early forties sprawled in the chair across from us. I notice that she doesn't bother extending her hand because it's clear he won't be shaking it anyway.

"Elsa Guin. I'm Mr. Laurent's attorney. And this is—"

"Where the *fuck* is your client?" Atlas snaps.

Cold, naked fear rips and claws at my heart. Meanwhile Elsa looks like she's completely in her element.

"My apologies, Mr. Drakos. Something urgent came up at the last minute and Mr. Laurent was unable to pull himself away. He sends his most profound regrets."

"*Regrets* won't stop me from ripping his goddamn heart out of his chest and  *fucking*  the hole my fist leaves behind."

My face goes white. Then the younger man behind him drops a heavy, powerful hand on Atlas's hulking shoulder and glances at Elsa.

“You’ll have to forgive my big brother,” the man growls in a deep, darkly sensual tone. He smiles thinly at Elsa as he extends a thickly muscled arm bulging at the seams of his expensive-looking suit.

“Ares Drakos, Miss Guin,” he purrs, shaking her hand before his sharp gaze slides to me. “And you must be—”

“What I am *owed*.”

The older Drakos brother’s gravelly voice cuts through the room, silencing it.

Elsa clears her throat. “Why don’t we all sit down and we can dive right into whatever this is about?”

Atlas ignores her completely as his gaze cuts right into my soul. For the first time since he walked in, the mask of pure hatred and disdain seems to drop a little, as he flashes a cold, monstrous, hungry smile at me.

“I never thought to look for you—”

Elsa frowns beside me.

“Mr. Drakos, why don’t you tell us why we’re all here—”

“I am not interested in speaking to you, or to any other of Paul Laurent’s fucking underlings. Now *do not* interrupt me again.”

Elsa bristles, but swallows it back with the grace of a monk as Atlas drags his eyes back to me.

“Do you know who your mother was, Rose?”

I swallow thickly as I shake my head.

“Tell me what you do know about her.”

“That she—”

My voice cracks. He smiles cruelly as I clear my throat and begin again.

“I know she was from a wealthy Irish family, and that they didn’t approve of her and my father. I know she hid me from my father and sent me to be raised in a convent.” My mouth thins. “I know she abandoned me.”

The room is silent for a second before Atlas begins to laugh mirthlessly.

“What a beautiful little fairy tale, princess,” he rasps. “And how lucky that your benevolent father finally, *finally* found you after all these years. To pull you into his world and his warm embrace.”

His eyes narrow as the smile drops from his face.

“Your father is a fucking liar and a thief.”

I bristle. “My father is—”

“Let me tell you a different story about your mother, little princess. Her name was Saoirse.”

I choke when he says it, like I’ve been slapped. When my father first found me, I peppered him day and night with questions about my mother—until I saw the pain even asking him about her gave him. So, I stopped.

Now I know her name.

“Saoirse Kildare,” Atlas rasps, his eyes stabbing into me. “And oh yes, she is from a very wealthy Irish family. Very wealthy indeed. A wealthy Irish *Mafia* family.”

My eyes go wide and Elsa clears her throat.

“Mr. Drakos, I have to insist—”

His temper flares and his eyes turn to daggers as he whirls menacingly on the lawyer beside me.

“What did I tell you about interrupting me?” he snarls.

Elsa doesn't back down, even as I'm still numbly trying to process all of this.

“I don't work for you, Mr. Drakos. But I do work for someone who is paying me by the hour. So again, I have to ask: what we are doing here, and why did you call this meeting?”

“I called this meeting,” he snaps, yanking his gaze back to me, “because your mother was betrothed to me.”

The world grinds to a halt as the rug is yanked out from under me and I stare at the cold, ruthless man across the table from me.

“*No*,” I hear myself say. “No, she was supposed to marry my father—”

“And again I say, your father *is a fucking liar*. Just as he's a coward for not showing his face here today, sending you alone to pay his debts.”

My pulse thuds in my ears, my throat closing again.

“I—I don't understand—”

“Twenty-one years ago, I was betrothed to your mother. An olive branch between two warring factions. That is, until your fucking father stole her from me.”

For some reason, my heart swells with pride and possibly love. The idea that my poor mother was chained to this monster and that my father rode in like a white knight to save her feels unbelievably romantic.

Atlas laughs coldly, the laugh of a man who can see every word in my head written on my face.

“Keep thinking that, princess,” he sneers. “You keep reading your fairy tales. Trust me, I’ll enjoy watching them burn at your feet. I was supposed to wed your mother. That opportunity was stolen from me. But luckily, we are a family of traditions—traditions that have already solved this little problem for us. Which is why I am so very glad that Paul found you...”

I tremble as his cold, shark-like eyes glint wickedly.

“...so that our families may still be joined and I may still *claim* what is mine to claim,” he snaps.

A cold sensation crawls up my spine, accompanied by a queasy feeling in my stomach.

“I don’t understand—”

“*You.*”

Everything freezes.

*No...*

My face numbs in horror as the man across the table smiles at me like I’m fresh meat.

“To answer your question, *lawyer,*” he snarls, “we’re here today to settle a debt your fucking client has owed me for over twenty years.”

Atlas Drakos’ eyes snap to mine, gleaming monstrously.

“*You will be my bride.*”

The floor drops away. The room goes stone cold silent but for the thrumming of my pulse in my ears, like an engine revving

louder and louder before it drives the plane it's attached to into the side of a mountain.

I whirl to stare at Elsa, my face horrified and pale, praying that she'll say something, that she has got some sort of legal way to shield to me from this monster. But for once her professional demeanor has shattered and she looks as horrified as I do, stammering to find her words.

"Mr. Drakos, I—"

"*Find your client*, Miss Guin," Atlas snarls. "Find him right fucking—"

My phone suddenly rings loudly, shattering the frozen scene. Still numb, my heart still pounding a mile a minute, I fumble as I reach for my bag and yank out the phone. I silence it as I stare at the picture of my father's handsome, smiling face on the screen.

"*Answer it*," Elsa hisses quietly beside me.

I tremble, glancing at Atlas' sneering face before I stand and move to the far side of the conference room, by the windows overlooking London. I quickly answer and bring the phone to my ear.

"*Dad?*" I choke, my face burning as I feel every eye in the room drilling into the back of my head. "Dad, where are—?!"

"Rose!"

Something is wrong. My father is usually all easy smiles and dimples. All charm and poise.

The man choking my name on the other end of this phone, however, sounds like a shell of that man: strangled, terrified, and desperate.

"*Dad?! Where are you? I'm at the meeting and—*"

“Rose! Listen to me! I’m in trouble!”

I freeze.

“He’s got me, Rose. I’m his prisoner, and I need—” he wheezes, choking in fear and pain as my face goes white.

“*Dad—*”

“I’m his prisoner, and I need you to come help me.”

“Dad!! Who—?!”

“He’s a *beast—*”

The line goes dead.



I JOLT awake from the now-familiar nightmare of fire and ash with a roar. Whirling, my fist crashes into the wall behind my headboard: once, twice.

The third time, I wince as I crash back to reality. I come to a stop and slam my palm flat to the wall next to the two dents I've just punched into it.

*Fuck.*

The dreams are getting worse.

I'm soaked in sweat. My hair is damp, plastered limply across my forehead. My muscles heave and twitch as the last drops of adrenaline and rage flow through them. My lips curl into a snarl, and an anguished growl bubbles up like acid in my throat.

*"Breathe,"* I mutter to myself. *"And wake the fuck up."*

I inhale, filling my lungs with the hazy, stagnant air of the dim, dusty room before my eyes fully open. Grunting, I roll from my bed: naked and bristling with rage, hate, and the twin demons of fire and ash that choke me in my dreams. I pull on some briefs before I march over to the door to my bedchamber and yank it open.



Per routine, there's a full breakfast laid out for me on a tray sitting atop the cart outside my bedroom door. I ignore almost all of it, grabbing only the pot of tea, a mug, and a piece of buttered toast. Then I retreat back into the darkness of my room, slamming the door shut behind me.

It's amazing to me at times how routines change. But then, *everything* has changed.

Since the fire, and the scars upon my soul that no one can really see.

Since the very real, physical darkness sleeping inside my cursed DNA reached up with clawed hands and a hungry grin to say, "Come. I've been waiting for you."

There was a time when my morning routine looked far different than this one. Back when I was a different man. Or perhaps the version of me that I am today was always the real one, and the man everyone called the "Golden Boy" back then was the mask, the façade.

The gleaming armor I wore as I smiled, while the world bowed at my feet.

Back when I was untouchable. A god. Charming in all the ways one is supposed to be charming. Calculating and successful in business. I had the Midas touch. I breathed rarefied air back then, when I was "Oliver Prince: Billionaire investment banker and financial analyst."

Not "Oliver Prince: Monster. Fallen from grace. Scarred beast. Accessory to murder."

Before, in the olden days, my morning routine involved waking far earlier than this. I'd have slept in silk pajamas, of course. There wasn't a moment of my day, waking or sleeping, that I wasn't dressed in the finest attire money could buy.

Dripping in vanity.

I was young, phenomenally rich, and blessed with enviable genetics.

Goddamn right I was vain.

But when that veneer was scorched by fire and death and loss, the “Golden Boy” died. The gleaming armor cracked and fell apart, until it was no longer able to contain the monstrous beast who’d always been there: hiding, lurking, waiting to consume me.

My routine changed.

Lucile, my housekeeper and cook, no longer lays out ten-thousand-dollar three-piece suits for me in the morning. She knows I won’t wear them. Though, almost two years after my world went up in flames, she still hasn’t quite gotten the message about breakfast.

I grumble to myself as I stalk across the wreckage of my bedroom to the disarray of mostly-empty liquor bottles on what was once a desk.

At least I think it was.

Scowling, I lift the lid of the teapot and dump in a four-count of whiskey before I pour a cup and drink deeply.

I exhale slowly as the whiskey goes to work. It takes the edge off the harshness of living every morning. The visceral cruelty of the pain.

Some from the scars.

Some from the curse that’s destroying me from the inside out.

I pour a second cup of tea when the first is gone, draining it just as quickly. When that’s gone, I prowl back to my bedside

table and yank open the drawer.

Dulled and accustomed to this routine now, I use my teeth to rip open the individually-wrapped syringe. I stab it through the rubber membrane at the top of the little vial, drawing out twenty milliliters before my gaze drops to my forearm. I make a fist and wait for the veins to bulge to the surface before I stab one.

And just like that, I steal back another day. I fortify the cage around the blackness and the monster inside of me for one more day.

I drop to the floor, and the routine continues: push-ups until my arms want to snap. Crunches until my abs scream. Then it's shadow boxing with the practice bag hanging in the corner of the wreckage of my once tastefully-designed bedroom, until my heart wants to explode from my chest.

It's only when I'm drenched in sweat and every muscle in my body is crying out for release from the punishing workout that I finally relent.

I turn the shower on hot and then move to the vanity. I avoid my reflection in the cracked, smashed mirror above the sink when I reach for a toothbrush.

For a second, my hand hovers over the razor I used to use daily, back when "the Golden Boy" couldn't leave the house with even the faintest hint of a shadow on his face.

Now I *live* in the shadows.

I run my palm up my scruffed cheek. And then, despite my efforts, my eyes do manage to catch my reflection in the large, half-broken mirror.

My mouth twists.

The scars used to torment me. The pain of them, of course, when I first got them. But also the sight of them on a body I was once so vain about, a body now marred with burns and thin white lines.

Deep down, I'm aware I'm fortunate, relatively speaking. I know my money and reach have afforded me the best plastic surgeons in the world. The best medical care money can possibly buy.

But even after the best in the world have worked on me, there are marks on my body that will never go away. Shiny burns. White, angry scars down the left side of my ribs and part of my arm, along with my back and even on parts of my neck and jaw.

Scars that will never go away.

My eyes drag venomously over every single one. Over every part of my reflection through the smashed cracks in the mirror.

Yes, I've changed since the fire. Not just the scars and the burns. And not just the invisible marks beneath my skin. Physically, I'm different now.

I was soft before. Weak. I was always "in shape", but I was fit in that way men who sit at office desks say they are "fit" when they mean they spend a few hours a week lifting some weights.

Now I'm carved out of fucking stone.

My eyes run over the bulging lines of my broad, muscled shoulders. My heaving chest after the workout I've just endured. My abs, still clenching from the brutal crunches.

Slowly I exhale, ripping my gaze away from myself as I step into the scorching hot water of the shower.

Stolen as it may be, today is a good day.

Today, I have work to do.

I smile grimly as I rinse off, a malevolent glee glinting in my blackened heart as I step out and towel off.

Work that I've waited far, *far* too long to get to.

I throw on jeans, an old t-shirt, a hoodie, and slippers. It's a far cry from the designer silk pajamas, tuxedos, and three-piece suits I once wore in the before times. I don't give a fuck about any of that anymore.

I throw back one more cup of whiskey tea before I storm out of my chambers in the west wing of the sprawling estate. Gleefully, I prowl my way down the hall towards the main staircase.

Wentworth is waiting for me at the top of the steps.

"Good morning, Master Prince," my butler says in that stiff, posh way of his. *Master*. He's never gotten over calling me that from when I was still a child, and I've stopped bothering to correct him.

"Wentworth," I mutter back. I turn to glance down the hall towards another staircase that leads up into the north tower of the manor.

"How is our guest?"

In all the years I've known him, working first for my parents and now for me, Wentworth's jobs have included chauffeur, master of staff—back when I *had* a staff—and butler.

"Accessory to kidnapping, imprisonment, and other high crimes" is slightly outside his job description. And yet, Wentworth has been his usual capable self when it comes to

helping me keep our would-be-thief under lock and key for the last two days.

He clears his throat.

“Mr. Laurent seems to have been quiet last night, sir.”

Good.

Paul Laurent, a man I could gleefully watch slowly dissolve in acid, given the chance, spent his first thirty-odd hours under my roof screaming bloody murder for help.

None came. None *will* come.

The estate is in the middle of fucking nowhere, and I have no neighbors for miles. Not to mention the cell is a *literal* jail cell, built into the top of the north tower, a holdover from when this building was an eighteenth-century fort before it was turned into an opulent manor home. And it’s effectively soundproof.

No. Paul is not going *anywhere*, nor is anyone coming for him.

Breaking into my home was breathtakingly stupid on his part. I haven’t interrogated him yet, choosing instead to let him rot in my tower for a few nights. But I already have a guess as to why someone like Paul would be dumb enough to break into my home.

Paul Laurent and I come from the same world. We were both born rich and privileged, with silver spoons jammed up our asses. When you’re born into a life like that, you have the choice to look at the world in one of two different ways.

You can accept that life will be easy for you, that you will never have to strive or work for anything. Then you can sit back on your ass and let the world coddle your balls for the rest of your life.

*Or* you can take the immense privilege you've been given and use that privilege to forge a dynasty that will last a millennium.

Paul chose the former path. I chose the latter.

But unluckily for Paul, his trust fund well eventually ran dry. Which is why he's spent most of his adult life jumping from benefactor to benefactor, rich woman to rich woman, grifting his way through the privileged life that he is so, *so* very used to.

I've loosely tracked him for years. Things must be dire indeed if he'd risk breaking into *my* fucking house, knowing how much I'd like to rip his balls off and stuff them down his throat, given our history.

Yet, contrary to what I'm sure the tabloids would say if they got wind of this, my hatred for the man is *not* because my first wife left me and our son in order to run off with him.

I truly mean that.

Paul removing Vanessa and her toxicity from my life twenty-five years ago is something I'd have, under different circumstances, *paid him* to do.

It's not the woman he took I'm furious about.

No, it's what she took *with* her.

"Well," I mutter, glancing again down the hall towards the staircase. "I suppose it's time for me to have a chat with our guest."

"If you require assistance, sir, you may perhaps recall my training?"

I lift a brow, a dark smile teasing the corners of my mouth. The idea of my seventy-four-year-old butler busting out some

nineteen-sixties-style interrogation techniques from his time in the Royal Marines is certainly a tempting idea.

But when it comes to Paul, I would prefer the pain to come from my own hands.

“No,” I grunt. “Just me, and I do not wish to be disturbed.”

He nods curtly.

“Of course, sir.”

I climb the stairs of the north tower slowly, allowing the grin to spread wider over my face as I get closer. I let the old ring on my hand clank against the stone of the stairwell...louder and louder...until I hear a muffled faraway cry from Paul’s pathetic mouth.

*Yes, breathe it in, you little shit, I think to myself. That horrible sensation you’re feeling in your gut is fear. Terror. Your own impending mortality.*

I reach the top of the stairs and stride down the hall. Rage and a sick gleefulness spread through me like sweet poison until I finally come to a stop in front of the bars of his cell.

Paul looks bedraggled, exhausted, and like his sanity is hanging by a thread. He swallows and looks up at me.

“*Prince*,” he chokes, eyes wide. “Prince, there’s still time to fix this, please!” He babbles quickly. “Look, I know you’re not well. I—I know you’re dealing with a lot, what with Jacob—”

“Do *not* speak his name.”

“You know, when Vanessa and I were together, he was basically a son to me, too—”

Paul cries out as my fist flies between the bars of the cage and crushes his nose in a spray of blood. He chokes, crying out and



falling backwards.

“*Fuck!* Oliver! I didn’t mean anything by that! I’m just saying that I understand your pain when it comes to Jac—”

“*DO. NOT. SPEAK. HIS. NAME.*”

I feel the rage surge inside of me as my voice booms. As my vision clouds in blood-red mist. As my hands turn to claws at my sides.

My curse.

My beast.

My death sentence.

The last little Fuck You, passed down from my father to me.

It’s awake.

And suddenly, like the lights have been flicked off, all I know is darkness. And savagery. And *fury*.

I’m dimly aware of Paul’s cry of terror as I slam against the bars of his cell, roaring like a wounded animal as my hands scabble and reach for him. I hiss savagely, my blood turning to black venom as I smash against the bars over and over.

Until the mist clears.

Until I wrest control back from the beast.

Until I breathe.

When I do, I realize my face is still contorted with blind rage, pressed to the bars with my hands still outreached in front of me, my fingers twisted into claws, my teeth bared.

My heart racing like mad.

Paul is sheet white in terror, cowering from me in horror against the far wall of his cell.

With a grunt, I pull back from the bars, clearing my throat and staring calmly at him as if nothing's happened.

"Paul," I snarl quietly, rolling my shoulders and cracking my neck. "You have been chained in a cage in my home for the last two days. And now you decide the best course of action is to *remind me* of the fact that you and my blood-sucking bitch of an ex-wife once attempted to gain custody of my son after she abandoned him?" My voice becomes even quieter, a whisper. "That is...*unwise*, Paul."

His face pales as he swallows thickly.

"Look, Prince, this is all a misunderstanding—"

"I'm sure."

"Listen to me, Oliver—"

"Shut the fuck up," I snap. "This is how it's going to go. You're going to tell me what it is you came for. And if you don't, I will stop feeding you and giving you water, and we'll see how long you last. My money is on an *hour*."

Paul's face falls.

"Oliver, *please*..."

He approaches the bars again, arms spread in appeal, like we're going to hash this out calmly. I smile and wait until he gets closer.

Too close.

"Oliver, I—"

My fists slam through the bars again, crushing his bloody nose again and sending him reeling back against the wall behind him with a groan. His legs give out and he slumps to the ground.

Something clatters across the floor.

Paul freezes. My eyes narrow to slits as my gaze lands right on the fucking *flip phone* on the floor of his cell against the bars by my feet.

Mother. *Fucker*.

He goes whiter as my gaze slides lethally from the phone to his terrified eyes.

“*Prince...*” he chokes.

“Who the fuck did you call?”

The second I say it, I hear it; dimly, since we’re in the far recesses of my manor, but I hear it all the same—the low, insistent, dull thud of a fist pounding against my front door.

With a snarl, I stomp down hard on the phone, crushing it under my heel and making Paul wince. I whirl, ignoring his cries and pleas as I storm down the stairs two, then three at a time. I careen through the house like a bull, slamming past a side table and swearing as it crashes over and sends some old crystal vase shattering to the ground.

I storm into my office at the front of the house, grab a fistful of the heavy curtain, and yank it to the side so I can stab my gaze down on whoever the fuck is knocking on my front door—

The world goes still.

I was expecting a business associate of Paul’s. Maybe hired muscle or guns. Hell, he could have even been stupid or desperate enough to call the police.

What I’m not expecting is *this*.

The girl looks terrified to be standing on my front steps. But she *is* standing there.

Small and thin; waifish even, one hundred pounds at most, with long, chestnut hair falling halfway down her back, and wide, worried, innocent blue eyes.

She has to be half my age. And yet, even with that, even seeing the naked fear on her face and bulging her eyes, I can feel my pulse thud against the surface of my skin.

Whoever she is, and whatever the fuck she's doing here, she's beautiful.

Heart-stoppingly, temptingly, rattling-the-cage-of-the-beast-inside-of-me *beautiful*.

There's a lot I *was* ready to see pounding down my front door.

I wasn't ready for this.

She knocks again. The noise drives into my skull, breaking the spell locking my eyes to her. With a snarl, I pull back from the window, sinking back into the shadows and abyss of my world, just as I see her lift her face.

*No.*

The man in me—or, what's left of the man in me—feels the sort of things a man will always feel in the face of innocent beauty like that: lust, desire, the biological need to *have* and claim.

But I squash the feeling down. I bury it underneath my hatred, and my wrath, and my darkness.

She may look like a princess. But this is no fairy tale.

Fairy tales and happy endings aren't real. And this "Prince" doesn't save the day.

He dies at the end.

"Hello?!"

The girl outside calls out in a soft, delicate voice.

“I’m here for Paul Laurent?”

Blackness cloaks my face as my teeth grind and my eyes turn to slits.

Fairy tales don’t exist.

But monsters do.

With a cold snarl, I whirl back into the shadows, vengeance and malice swirling together in my black heart.

She should never have come here.

Because now she may never leave.



SHIVERING IN THE GRAY COLD, I stare up at the ivy-covered, twisted, rusted old gates of the manor estate. Behind me, the cab I took from the train station rumbles away.

*“Are they expecting you at the Prince estate, Miss?”*

The cab driver’s concerned look and nervous question when I gave him the address my father texted to me before going radio silent again lingers in my ears. I peer curiously through the wrought-iron gates at the vast, rambling estate beyond.

All I know is my father is being held here by a man he seems even more afraid of than Atlas Drakos.

Which is a terrifying thought.

The fear is palpable in the very air outside these gates, and it’s been building ever since I tremblingly did a search on my father’s captor during the manic train ride here.

Oliver Prince.

Forty-two years old. Worth *billions*. A one-time titan of the financial world, now a recluse for the last two years following the death of his adult son in a fire that he himself was wounded in as well.

On the surface, it seems a heart-wrenching, tragic tale. Until you read further. Until you dig deeper into the details and realize it's a horror show from start to finish.

Yes, Oliver Prince lost his son in a house fire. But that son turned out to be a confirmed sociopath who has now posthumously been proven to have murdered seven women, most of whom by burning them to death.

In fact, the fire where he lost his own life was a failed attempt to kill a woman named Ella Ransom, wife of the financial tycoon Noel Ransom, who was apparently once friends with Oliver.

They used to call Oliver Prince the Golden Boy. And in the pictures of him from those days, he suits the name perfectly. Every tabloid picture of him shows a devastatingly handsome man grinning and smiling away outside a fundraising gala, or at a film premiere. Always dressed in a tuxedo or the finest three-piece suit money could buy, flanked by a seemingly endless parade of gorgeous women.

His blonde hair perfectly coiffed, his blue eyes twinkling, his smile electrifying.

He was rich, beautiful, successful, and essentially a *god*...until it all turned to literal ash.

Since the fire, the first cracks in that Golden Boy veneer have been smashed wider. He's walked away from companies. Burned bridges, snubbed contracts and business dealings. There have been rumors of substance abuse, financial impropriety, and ties to criminal organizations. Worse, there are allegations now that he knew of his son's crimes, and actively shielded him from the law.

But of course, the biggest story is that nobody has seen him in two years. After the house fire that killed Jacob Prince and allegedly injured Oliver, he disappeared, taking up residence in his manor home here in Surrey, locking the gates and shutting out the world.

Now, he's apparently kidnapped my father.

And the only reason I'm not standing here with every police officer in the country is that my father begged me not to involve them, or he'd be hurt.

I take a shaky breath and glance about, looking for an intercom or camera of some kind. I can see where one used to be, perhaps, but the entire apparatus has been covered by thick ivy.

For a moment, I wonder if I got the wrong address. Does anyone actually *live* here? It seems abandoned. I peer through the gates again, a knot forming in my stomach as my eyes sweep over the rambling, overgrown lawn and hedges beyond. The crumbling statues flanking the gravel drive. The mansion beyond it.

It could very well be the lair of a monster from a horror movie. The home of a James Bond arch-villain.

I shiver as fear knots in my stomach, and every fight or flight cell in my body screams for me to *run*.

But I can't do that. I won't.

For twenty years, I thought I'd been abandoned entirely. Until two months ago, when my father came back into my life and proved me wrong.

He found me. Now it's my turn to do the same for him.



I exhale a white plume of breath as I look around again. But I don't see any cameras, or any sort of bell or keypad for the gate. I reach for the wrought iron, wrapping my fingers around the cold metal before I grit my teeth and push.

Shockingly, it opens—albeit on rusty, wrenching hinges, with a creak that makes me wince and turns my blood to ice. But it *does* open.

Steeling myself, I start walking up the long, winding, gray gravel driveway. I pass crumbling, weed-covered statues—angels and cherubs that have now turned to demons and nightmare creatures. I shiver. But I keep my eyes forward.

*They're just statues, you scaredy-cat.*

Besides, there are statues in just as poor condition as these at Our Lady Hildegard, and those never terrified me, I rationalize.

I walk past gnarled trees, a stone bench that's collapsed in the middle, and rows upon rows of weed-choked, neglected rose gardens.

When I at last get closer, and finally drag my gaze up to the house itself, my heart turns cold.

The place looks straight-up haunted. The enormous, rambling manor looks like it was built for a duke or a mad king easily two hundred years ago. It also looks like it could house ten families, rather than the single solitary man who allegedly lives here. Ivy wraps and coils in tendrils up the gray stone walls, half-covering some of the iron-framed windows.

As I get closer, my blood turns even colder and my eyes grow even wider as I stare up at the ancient stained glass windows, the cathedral-like archways and balustrades, the towers and the gargoyles.

*Gargoyles*, for God's sake.

There's even a fountain in the middle of the circular drive outside the front door. But it's long gone dry and is now also covered with vines and dead branches.

Shivering, I climb the massive stone steps leading up to the foreboding front door—a huge wooden thing, barred and banded with iron, making me feel like I'm standing outside a castle.

I glance to either side. But just like at the front gate, there's no doorbell, not even a knocker, just the door.

There's no “plan” here. All I know is, the only family I have is apparently being held prisoner here. And as dark and black a picture as the internet paints of Oliver Prince, I have to do this.

I don't how I'll manage it, but I *have* to get my father back.

Taking another shaky breath, I raise my fist, and I knock. The sound echoes through the house beyond the door as if there's nothing but a dark chasm behind it. I take another breath and pound again, and again, and then again before stepping back a bit and waiting.

Still nothing.

I breathe slowly in and out. For a brief second, I *swear* I see something out of the corner of my eye, high up the front facade of the house. I shiver, lifting my gaze to one of the windows half obscured by ivy.

There's nothing there. Just the blackness within, and yet I get the unnerving feeling that I'm being watched.

Seconds go by. Then a full minute.

“Hello?!” I pound on the door again. “I'm here for Paul Laurent!”

The house is still, and quiet.

I'm debating trying one more time or just cutting my losses and running to a police station, even though my father told me in no uncertain terms not to involve them, when suddenly I hear footsteps.

They're quiet at first, then grow louder. Closer. My heart turns to ice as I take a half step back from the huge door. A lock twists and wrenches with a grinding metallic sound in the chilly air. Then slowly, one half of the double front door creaks open, spilling an inky gloom out from the inside.

I shiver as an old, grayed hand wraps around the edge of the door, and the wizened, lined face of a man dressed like a butler pokes his head out. He arches his bushy grey brows in surprise at me, blinking.

"May I *help* you?" he mutters stiffly in a thick, uppercrust accent.

I swallow, trying to remember how to form words.

"Um, yes, hi, I'm sorry, I was looking for a bell or something at the front gate. I didn't mean to just—"

"May I *help* you?" The butler says again, no longer attempting to hide his mounting irritation.

"Yes. I'm here to see Paul Laurent?"

Well, that just spilled out.

The butler keeps his face neutral. But the way his pupils dilate gives him away, and I press.

"I've been told he's here?"

"By?"

My brow arches. "Excuse me?"

“By whom have you been told this information?”

My lips purse as I square my shoulders.

“By *him*,” I mutter icily. “And I don’t mind telling you that he told me he was here against his will. Now, please bring him to me, or I’ll be forced to involve the police.”

My show of strength is ruined when my voice cracks at the very last second. Still, I keep my shoulders back and my head held high, but I can see in the man’s eyes that he doesn’t believe my threat in the slightest.

He stares at me impassively for another few seconds, saying nothing. But then slowly he exhales and lifts a shoulder.

“I’m afraid you’re mistaken.”

“Excuse me?”

“You are mistaken, Miss. We have no guests here.”

“And who exactly is ‘we’?”

He scowls at me.

“The master has no guests at present.”

He starts to step back into the house, closing the door.

“Wait!” I jab my foot in the door, stopping him.

The butler scowls as he opens the door again.

“Maybe we got off on the wrong foot. Again, I’m really sorry for just walking in here, I’m just looking for—”

“I must ask you to leave, Miss.”

I stare at him, my pulse thudding.

“I’m not leaving. I *know* you have him here. I know he’s here because he called me and told me so himself. Now, let me in to see him or I swear to God, I’ll be back with the police.”

Once again, the man just eyes me impassively, giving nothing away.

“The police you could have arrived with in the first place?”

*Crap.*

“Look, if I can just *talk* to him, I’m sure we can clear up this whole misunder—”

“You should leave.”

He says it quietly. Yet, there’s an urgency in his eyes that chills me. No, not just an urgency, a *plea*.

“*Now,*” he whispers.

And before I know it, he’s melted back into the shadows and the door has closed with a solid clang. I blink, trying to process what just happened as I stare at the massive fortress door in front of me.

Then I get angry.

I raise my fists and pound on the door again, and again. And then a third time. But clearly, I need a new plan.

My heart sinks and the wheels in my head start to turn as I start to shuffle down the front steps. Suddenly, with a wrenching sound, the door opens again behind me. I gasp, whirling, as the stern, elderly man materializes out of the darkness again.

“Who *exactly* are you?” he says in a bored tone.

I swallow the lump in my throat.

“Rose,” I say quietly. “Rose Carson.”

His brows furrow.

“And who is Paul Laurent to you?”

Once again, I *swear* I see movement. But just like before, when I quickly glance up at the window high above, there's nothing there.

Nothing except the lingering feeling that I'm being watched.

Pursing my lips and swallowing back my fear, I turn to level my eyes at the butler.

"He's my father."

Despite his best attempts to hide it, I can see the way his eyes flare when I say it. Then he blinks, clearing his throat, and his eyes bore into me.

"Stay here."

He disappears once again, and the door shuts with another heavy, metallic clunk. The seconds tick by, then stretch to minutes. I turn, letting my gaze trace over the estate grounds from the higher vantage point at the top of the stairs.

Over the crumbling statues, to what looks like may have been a hedge maze. Over brackish-looking ponds and the dying rose gardens.

What *is* this place?

I'm about to turn and pound on the door again, when suddenly it opens. I shiver, expecting the butler to materialize out of the blackness again. But this time there is no man. Just an open door, like the gaping black maw of a monster.

"Please, Ms. Laurent," the butler's voice purrs unnervingly from somewhere inside.

"*Do* come in."



“HIS FUCKING *WHAT?!*”

Fury surges through me like a bomb about to detonate. Even Wentworth, with his decades of experience dealing with my moods, looks like he’s ready to take five giant steps back from me before the napalm explodes in his face.

Then, like the consummate professional that he is, he clears his throat delicately.

“According to the lady herself, sir,” he says slowly, “she says she’s Mr. Laurent’s daughter.”

Scowling deeply, I turn and stride across the huge foyer to the firmly shut front door. My blood burns hotly, knowing that just on the other side of it is the girl I was just lusting after. The one I was staring at from the window upstairs hungrily before storming down here to grill Wentworth about who the fuck she was.

*She’s Paul’s fucking daughter.*

And judging by how young she looks, she’s not his first daughter. Or his second.

In a supremely twisted and colossally fucked-up turn of events, Paul’s first two daughters, Naomi and Cora, lived with

me for a short time when they were small. After their mother Matilde *Laurent* and I got married.

Yes, I know. I married the wife of the man who ran off with mine.

But Matilde and I didn't marry for love. And it certainly wasn't for lust; we never once shared a bed. No, pure and simple, we married for *spite*. We married because of a shared hatred for Paul and Vanessa.

Once again, my fury directed at the piece of shit I currently have locked in a tower has never stemmed from a place of emotional pain or any ridiculous concept like a broken heart.

*Fuck no.*

I'd married Vanessa because I was young, because my father pushed for it, and because I thought it was what I was "supposed" to do. I was in business school, and about to start climbing through the ranks of the finance world. And so I married a woman I never loved, who never loved me, simply because she was from my own "station". We had our son, Jacob, and, if memory serves, creating him may very well have been the last time we touched each other.

It doesn't even matter to me that she's been dead for ten years. What I'll always hate Vanessa for is not that she left me.

It's that she left our *son*. And to this day, I have never shaken the nagging suspicion that Jacob's darkness was exacerbated from his mother abandoning him.

*That's* where my fury at Vanessa comes from.

I exhale viciously, directing my gaze at the door between me and the girl outside. I have no idea who the fuck this "Rose Carson" is. But it would appear her mother—or maybe her mother's bank balance—once caught Paul's fancy.



At any rate, now I know whom he called with that flip phone.

“Shall I call the police, sir?”

I slowly pull my gaze from the door in front of me to level it at Wentworth.

“You’re aware that I have a man locked in a cage upstairs?”

His brow furrows.

“Ah. Yes. Quite understood, sir. Best not to involve the authorities, then.”

“Yes, *best not to*, Wentworth,” I grunt through clenched teeth.

“Shall I send her away again, sir?”

I drag my nails over the scruff of my jaw. Without saying a word, I turn and storm back up the stairs to the vaulted hallway that runs along the front of the house, above the foyer.

“Sir?”

I still say nothing, ignoring Wentworth as he bustles up the stairs after me. I move to the window and use a hooked finger to draw back the drapes, just enough that my eyes can stab down upon the girl standing on the front steps again.

Christ, she is so out of place here. So bright, beautiful, and innocent in contrast with the crumbling old structure she’s standing in front of.

She doesn’t belong here. If she had any intelligence, she’d leave. Actually, if she had any intelligence, she’d have nothing to do with a thieving, grifting piece of shit like Paul fucking Laurent in the first place.

I’m curious why she came for her piece of shit father.

But I’m even more curious about *her*.

“Sir, shall—”

“Let her in.”

Slowly, I turn to level my gaze at Wentworth, standing on the top step of the staircase behind me.

“Master Prince, are you sure—”

“I *said*,” I snarl, “let her *in*, Wentworth. And escort her to where I’ve put her father.”

“But...” Then Wentworth sees the way my jaw clenches and simply nods. “Very good, sir.”

I watch him head back down the stairs. I wait in the shadows upstairs and listen to the sound of the door opening in the foyer.

“*Enter*,” Wentworth rumbles in an especially dramatic way.

I hide a smile despite myself and resist the urge to roll my eyes. The man does love his doom and gloom aesthetic.

I almost expect to hear her running away back down the driveway. But when instead I hear her footsteps cross the threshold of my home, I stiffen. My muscles clench, as if some sort of dark magic has wafted over me, the opposite of fresh air or sunshine.

I scowl, shaking the fanciful thought from my head as I prowl to the side of the hallway that looks down into the foyer. I slink into the shadows behind a pillar as the girl steps into my world.

Like a fool.

“So, he’s here?” she says quietly.

Her voice is soft and innocent, so out of place in these dark, dusty halls.

“This way, if you would, Miss Laurent.”

“It’s Carson, please.”

I peer around the side of the pillar, arching a brow as I hear Wentworth stop in his tracks.

“Beg pardon, Miss?”

“It’s Carson, not—”

She breaks off, and I watch curiously as her face hardens and her brow furrows.

“Sorry, it doesn’t matter. Which way is he?”

Wentworth inclines his head.

“This way, Miss.”

I stiffen again as my eyes lock on her, watching as she brings up a lithe, delicate wrist. Dainty and soft fingers push a strand of chestnut hair behind her ear. She glances around, and as a shiver visibly rips down her back...

Suddenly, her gaze lifts into the shadows of where I’m standing. I growl quietly as I slip behind the pillar again, my blood roaring in my ears.

Why am I hiding myself from her? Maybe it’s for the same reason I’ve hidden myself from the entire world for two years. When I glance back around the corner, it’s just in time to see her follow Wentworth deeper into the house.

Deeper into my net.

There’ll be no escape.



MY HEART WRENCHES when I see my father's stricken face behind bars.

“Dad!”

“Rose!”

He pales, lurching to his feet in the dingy, drafty jail cell and rushing to the bars.

“Rose! Sweetheart!”

My heart wrenches, tears pricking at my eyes as I hug him through the bars. I choke back a sob, clinging to him tightly against the metal before I pull away.

“What’s happening?”

“Rose...”

“Dad, why are you in here? Why are you locked in this horrible cage?!”

His face twists. “Sweetheart, I need you to listen—”

I whirl, fury clouding my vision as I glare at the old man who led me up here.

“Let him out!”

The man stands there, stone-faced and impassive, giving nothing away.

“I said let him out!”

The man sighs quietly and clears his throat.

“I’ll give you a moment.”

He turns as if to leave, and my face pales.

“*What!?* No! You will not give us *a moment*, you’ll give us the keys to *let him out!*”

It’s as if he doesn’t even hear me. Infuriatingly, he simply turns and begins to walk back down the hall toward the door to the staircase that leads back down.

“STOP!” I scream, panic wrapping its fingers tightly around my throat. “STOP! Please! Just let him—”

“Rose.”

Anguish shatters me, and I whirl with a sob to fling myself back against the bars. I hug my father through them again before he pulls back.

“Dad, what’s happening?! Why are you here?”

His brow furrows as he sighs heavily. He looks tired and utterly spent. His normally handsome face is sallow, lined, haggard.

“Rose, there’s a lot to explain, and we don’t have much time. I’m sure he’s listening to us right now.”

My face pales.

“Dad, why is Oliver Prince doing this to you!?”

He swallows, his eyes darting past me before his voice lowers.

“Because he hates me, honey. Look, I’m ashamed to even tell you this, but you need to hear it. Before I met your mother, there was...” His face falls as his gaze drops to the floor. “There was another woman whom I had a brief but intense relationship with.” He looks up, his lips thinning to a line. “Vanessa. She was Oliver’s wife.”

My face pales.

“*Dad—*”

“It was never meant to be. And of course, after I met your mother...” He smiles widely, his eyes shining. “When I met her, that was it for me, and I broke things off with Vanessa. Then when she passed suddenly a few months later, Oliver blamed me.”

Shock and anger thunder inside of me.

“So he *locked you up*?! Dad, that’s not legal! We can call the police—”

“*No,*” he blurts suddenly. “No, we can’t do that. Honey, I...” he shakes his head sadly. “I’m so ashamed to admit this to you...”

I choke, grabbing his hands in mine through the bars.

“Whatever it is, I love you, Dad.”

He smiles wryly.

“There are things I’ve done, Rose. Steps I’ve taken to secure deals, or to cement my business empire. Things lots of men in my exact shoes have done. They were victimless crimes, sweetheart, but still...crimes.”

I shake my head. “So what, Dad? Elsa is an incredible lawyer. And no matter what you did, Oliver Prince can’t just lock you in a freaking cage like this!”

His jaw tightens and again he can't look at me.

"The thing is, honey, I wasn't invited into this house. I broke in."

I stare at him with wide eyes.

"What?"

"Prince...he has something that belongs to me. To us. It belonged to your mother, and he wouldn't give it back, so I had to—"

"He had to steal from me."

I almost scream, my heart scurrying into my throat at the deep, dark, venomous voice behind me. And when I whirl to look, everything suddenly freezes, as if the whole world has turned to ice.

He's half shrouded in the shadows. But even still, I can see he's a *beast* of a man. He towers easily a foot or more over me, his bulging, broad shoulders blocking the light behind him. Even in the dimness and the shadows, I can see the flash of snarling teeth and the wicked glint of ice blue eyes stabbing into mine.

Turning me to stone.

A heated shiver inches up my spine as I swallow back the naked fear on my face.

"Who are you?"

The shadow's lips curl, flashing more vicious teeth.

"I'm the rightful owner of the property your fucking *thief* of a father tried to steal."

My throat closes.

*Oh my God.*

*This*—the towering shadow standing over me—is Oliver Prince? It’s not just the bad lightning and heavy shadows. It’s that even the silhouette of him looks *nothing* like the myriad “Golden Boy” images of Prince I have seen online.

This man seems...bigger. More powerful. *Stronger*...with bulging shoulders and arms straining against the thin hoodie he’s wearing. With a dark power emanating from him that is the polar opposite of “Golden Boy” energy.

“I’m the owner of this house that your idiot father decided to *burglarize*.”

I swallow, licking my lips.

“He was merely trying to take back what *you* took from *him* —”

An incredulous laugh. “Is that what he told you?”

“Rose,” my father blurts, his voice drowning in fear. “Rose, sweetheart—”

“Shut *up!*” Oliver roars monstrosly, shaking me to my core and ripping a gasp of fear from my father’s throat. But I stand firm, taking a hitched breath as I glare right back at the huge, hulking man standing before me.

“Don’t you talk to him like that!” I snap. “My father is not a thief. You have something that belongs to him, and he—”

“Not just a thief,” Oliver snaps coldly. “He’s a thief *and* a fucking liar.”

I gasp, flattening against the bars as he suddenly surges towards me, his eyes cold as he looms over me, still in the shadows.

Then suddenly, he takes another step closer to me...and into the weak light.



My cheeks flush.

To call the man “handsome” is not just an understatement. It’s not the correct word. Calling Oliver Prince is handsome is like saying the sun is warm, or that Michelangelo was a decent ceiling painter.

The man might not be golden anymore, but he still looks like a *god*. Even the flaws—the thin white scar that runs down the side of his face, the shiny burn scars on his neck, the haunted, savage glint in his formerly smiling eyes—all only add to his captivating look.

His once golden-blond hair is darker now, as if the fire that destroyed his life blackened the very follicles with soot and ash. His aristocratic, movie-star cheekbones and chin are now covered with a thick, dark scruff. And his once charming, Paul Newman-like baby blues have been replaced with glaciers.

It looks like the Devil tore apart the old Oliver Prince and glued him back together with muscle and hate.

“Tell me, *Paul*,” Oliver rasps in a rough, deep voice steeped in whiskey and smoke. “What is it that I took from you that you were so nobly breaking into my home to take back?”

When he’s silent, I glance at my father out of the corner of my eyes. His mouth is thin as he grips the cell bars.

“Documents,” he murmurs quietly before erupting in a deep, rattling cough.

Oliver laughs coldly, a sound like rocks scraping over gravel.

“*Documents*. How pathetically weak a lie.”

I glare at him. “He’s terrified. And probably coming down with something, given how freezing it is up here!”

“Neither of which concerns me in the slightest,” Oliver grunts, stabbing his icy gaze into me as I shiver.

His stare pins me to the bars at my back, and I slowly crumble under the weight of those eyes.

Then, slowly, coldly, his lips curl into a savage smile.

“*Paul*,” he growls quietly. “Let’s talk business.”

My father nods eagerly, forcing a nervous grin.

“Sure, Oliver. Of course we can—”

“Shut the fuck up and listen to me.”

I glare at the other man when he snaps at my father. But he doesn’t seem to notice or care.

“Twenty-three years ago, you took something from me.”

My jaw drops as I stare at him, stunned.

“*That’s* what this is about? You’re still mad that your wife and my father—”

“*Stop. Fucking. TALKING.*”

The words boom like thunder from his lips, punching into me and knocking the air from my lungs. I cower, trembling, as I press tightly to the bars behind me, withering under his stern glare.

“If there were any justice in this world,” he snarls, “that woman would still be alive, and still *with* him, so that she could make him as goddamn miserable as she made virtually everyone else on earth who was unlucky enough to cross her path.”

His eyes peer darkly at my father.

“I don’t give a *fuck* about Vanessa. But she came with benefits, didn’t she, Paul?”

My dad exhales with a slight tone of relief, smiling weakly.

“Oliver, if it’s money you want, I can get you—”

“I don’t want the money you don’t have, Paul,” Oliver snaps.

“Perhaps you missed the part where I made several hundred times what I had back then. I’m not talking about money, or Vanessa. I’m talking about the holding company that came *with* her.” His gaze shifts, narrowing lethally at my father. “And don’t for one single solitary second try and bullshit me that you don’t know what I’m talking about, you little fuck.”

I frown. “What are you—”

When I glance back at my dad, my words falter. Whatever it is Oliver is talking about, it’s clear from the stricken look on my father’s face that he knows exactly what it is.

“Prince—”

“Kensington Gardens Limited, Paul,” Oliver rasps darkly.

My father smiles weakly. “Right, that—”

“Specifically, the one-hundred-percent ownership it still has in Nanosplice Biotech Incorporated.”

“Look, Oliver—”

“*Where. Is. It.*”

My dad’s face pales a little more.

“Prince, I...I mean, I didn’t steal that from you. It—”

“Came with Vanessa, I know,” Oliver snaps. “And when she died, it fell into your hands.”

I gasp quietly as he takes another step closer to the bars, which also puts him a step closer to *me*.

“I’ll be blunt, Paul. If you ever want to stand on this side of these bars again, you’ll call your legal counsel and sign that holding company and the biotech lab with it back over to me, in full, in the next thirty minutes.”

Dad’s face goes white.

“*Yes or no, Paul,*” he snarls savagely.

“I...I just...”

“Think very carefully, Paul. Your very life depends on it.”

“Okay, yeah. Look, Oliver, it’s not...” Dad makes a nervous face. “It’s just that I don’t have it anymore.”

It’s as if the whole hallway has suddenly gotten colder, and darker.

“But I can get it back!” he blurts quickly. “I had to sell the holding company a few years ago, Prince. But I can get it back.”

Oliver’s lethal blue eyes turn even deadlier.

“You had better not be shitting me, Paul.”

“I’m not!”

The monstrous man smiles.

“Let me put it another way. You’d better not be shitting me, because you’re going to go *fetch it* for me. I don’t give a fuck how, but you’re going to. And while you go do that, *she...*”

I suck in a cold shock of air, trembling under his withering gaze as his fierce eyes and stabbing finger turn on me.

“While you get it back for me, *she’ll* take your place.”

*Take his place? Take his place where—*

My heart leaps into my throat as it all suddenly clicks. I whirl in horror, watching the color drain from my dad's face.

"You'll get me what I want, Paul. And until you do, she'll stay here," Oliver growls thickly, smiling savagely as he leans close. "As *collateral*."

"Prince—" my dad's voice chokes a little. "Come on, we're rational men. We can—"

Oliver starts to laugh coldly.

"Oh, Paul, no," he snarls. "We are *not*. Neither of us is a rational, good man. Believe me, I am the furthest thing from a rational good man that you can imagine. So answer me one last time: can you bring me what I want? Remember, she'll be here the whole time that you're out there getting it for me."

My face turns pure white, devoid of all heat as I turn frantically to my father.

"*Dad—*"

"Yeah."

The floor drops out from under me.

"Yeah, Prince, I can get it for you."

Before I can say a word, it's all happening. Oliver surges toward me, making me gasp sharply and cower against the bars. But he's not reaching for me, he's going for the keypad lock to the cell door. He unlocks it with a piercing, wrenching, metallic sound, and yanks the door open. My father shrieks as Oliver grabs him roughly, yanks him from the cell, and hurls him against the far wall of the hallway.

Oliver whirls back on me, and something terrifying but heated stabs at my core as he levels those icy eyes at me.

“*Get in.*”

My head shakes from side to side.

“I’m not getting in a cage.”

“Oh, princess, believe me, you are.”

“If you think I’m walking in there—!”

“You’re walking in there or I’m fucking *throwing* you in there,” he snaps ruthlessly, making me shiver. “Your choice.”

My eyes dart to my father.

“Don’t look at him,” Oliver chuckles darkly. “He won’t help you, unless your name is Paul Laurent. Now get the *fuck* in.”

My father smiles weakly.

“Rose, I swear, I’ll get it for him right away! You won’t be here long!”

Reality is shattering around me. My lungs are tightening as I turn to stare mutely at the beast of a man looming over me, and the cage he’s jabbing a finger into.

“*Now,*” he rasps.

Slowly, my feet moving as if controlled by someone else, I shuffle into the jail cell. The door slams shut behind me, a firm metallic clank making me wince. I take a shaky breath, turning to stare at my father with wide, terrified eyes.

Oliver glares at him.

“Follow the stairs at the end of the hall to the bottom. Wentworth will be waiting for you. You have three minutes starting *now* to get the fuck off my property.”

The way my father bolts for the door without a backward glance stings.

“And Paul?”

My dad tenses and pauses, his back to us.

“Yes, Oliver?”

“Get me what I fucking want, or she’ll stay here forever. Now *run*.”

And he does, bolting through the doorway and stumbling down the curved staircase beyond until he’s out of sight.

I’m all alone.

With a monster.

A cold sensation creeps over my skin. My hands wrap around my arms and I hug myself as I slowly shuffle back from the bars.

Oliver turns those icy blue eyes on me through the gloom, and I shiver as he wraps a huge hand around one of the bars.

“Unless you do something stupid,” he snarls. “You will not be harmed. But you *will* stay here.”

I nod, shivering, in a daze.

“Phone.”

I chew on my lip, raising my eyes to his.

“*Phone*. I will not repeat myself again.”

Swallowing, I reach into my coat pocket, pull out my phone, and hand it over. His huge, powerful hand brushes my tiny one as he takes it, sending a shiver down my spine.

“Do you care for him?”

It's not sneering. It's not meant to incite or be condescending. It's a genuine question growled through clenched teeth. I raise my eyes, my brow furrowing as I rake my teeth over my bottom lip.

"Yes, of course. He's my father, and—"

"Then you're a fucking idiot."

Hey punches in the code on the keypad lock on the door. I flinch at the way it grinds shut again with a deafening click.

Oliver turns away, but then pauses. His powerful shoulders bunch and flex as he glances back at me, his jaw grinding.

"You'd better hope Paul gives a single fuck about you and gets me what I want. Or else, you're going to be here for a very, *very* long time."





I STORMED up to this tower with a heart full of violence and vengeance.

On the way back down, it's bursting with *victory*.

A lethal, triumphant smile spreads across my face as I stomp down the steps and I don't mind admitting that I'm very pleased with myself. I'm nailing two birds with one very vicious, long overdue stone here.

For one, I'm making Paul *hurt*. At least, making him hurt if he has a single drop of human compassion for anyone besides himself left inside his pathetic body. If not, well, this is going to be a lost cause.

Because I've just set him free. And if he *doesn't* actually give a shit about Rose, and has any brains in that thick douchebag head of his, he'll be in a non-extradition country getting facial reconstruction surgery within the next twenty-four hours.

But.

For all his philandering, and bullshit, and narcissism, he's still a human being. Rose *is* still his daughter, and I did see the way he looked at her.

No, he'll be back. And if he tries to run, there'll be other ways that I make sure he gets what I want. Because that's the second bird I'm killing with this stone.

Years ago, when Vanessa and I divorced, I was angry. Not because of emotions or *love* or any bullshit like that. I was pissed because it was a loss. And I fucking *hate* losing.

I still hate it now and I fucking loathed it even more when I was a hotheaded twenty-one-year-old with my sights set on conquering the financial world. Any loss was a potential derailment as I clawed my way to the top. And when my own fucking wife left me for that douchebag, Paul, it wasn't that my pride was hurt, or my ego was stung, or my heart was broken, or any of that bullshit.

It was that the business plans I had were suddenly in jeopardy.

And so I said yes to everything she wanted in the split, just to get it over with as quickly as possible. I was fully prepared to fight her tooth and nail for Jacob anyway. Then, when she gave him up as if as if he was an old kitchen appliance she no longer wanted? Well, that was a bitter pill to swallow. But ultimately, I was glad to have him all to myself.

In my haste to be rid of her, though, I overlooked a few things. It wasn't that Vanessa pulled a fast one on me. It wasn't like part of her master plan was to take Kensington Gardens Limited or more specifically Nanosplice Biotech Incorporated. The problem is, I'd set the Kensington Gardens Limited holding company up in *her* name for various tax reasons.

And that holding company happens to be the sole owner of one Nanosplice Biotech Incorporated.

In the years since, that company has become important to me. Not their profits. I don't need those.

It's the technology they have sitting on a secure hard drive somewhere, collecting dust because they don't know what it is.

I do.

My curse is a genetic one—a silver bullet buried deep in my DNA that will one day, in the not very distant future, kill me.

The one shot in a million I have is a gene sequencing technology that Nanosplice Biotech has the exclusive patent to. It's not like I give a fuck about patent law where my life is concerned. I'd have had my team of scientists engineer it long ago, law be damned, if that was the case.

The problem is that the research to even *recreate* the technology is locked away at Nanosplice Biotech, too. Which has left me squarely up Shit Creek, *sans* paddle.

The option to simply buy the company or the technology back has always been there. But when I decided to swallow my pride and buy it back from Paul a few years ago—for the sake of, you know, *continuing to live*—my preliminary research revealed that he'd sold it or given it away to an unknown party.

I knew all that before I asked him just now to hand it over. I'd hoped for a moment he'd just rat out whoever the new owner of the biotech company is. When he didn't, but *did* fall over himself offering to get it back, I saw my opportunity.

Not merely to get my hands on the company.

To get them on *her*.

I *do* need Paul to get me that gene sequencing tech, or I'm dead. But while he's out there fucking around and doing whatever it is he has to do in order to get it for me, Rose will stay here.

With me.

My pretty little collateral.

I grin hungrily to myself as I round the corner at the base of the north tower. I have every intention of striding directly to my chambers and pouring myself a very large drink when suddenly, five feet and one inch of baking flour and English sass plants itself in front of me.

“What the bloody *hell* do you think you’re doing?!”

Never mind how long she’s worked for me, and how integral a part of my life she is, Lucile realizes she’s massively overstepped her boundaries the second the words leave her mouth. Even with that iron attitude of hers, I watch the fear explode behind her eyes for a second as I stare down into her face.

“I’d *re-phrase* that if I were you,” I snarl.

She purses her lips, clearing her throat. But she doesn’t quail. She doesn’t back away. She never does, infuriatingly, not once in the thirty-nine or so years I’ve known her, since she started working for my family when I was a small boy.

“What I *meant* to say,” she says stiffly, “is precisely what is going on with there being *captives* in the house, Oliver?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Lucile’s lips purse, her silvered brows furrowing deeply.

“Oliver, I’m not *deaf*.”

“Well, give it a few years. You’ll get there.”

I smile prickishly as I go to move past her. But maddeningly, she shifts, planting herself in front of me again.

“I can tell you’re in a mood, and I can tell you’ve been drinking, Oliver.”

She glares at me.

I sigh. “Wentworth, I assume?”

“You mean did he spill the beans on the bloody prison you’re running out of the north tower?”

My brow arches sharply.

“Well, as much as I’d love to throw him under the bus, no. What gave it away is the *prisoner* who just came rushing out of the north tower looking like the devil himself was chasing him down.”

I smile with satisfaction.

“Was he pissing himself? Tell me he was pissing himself.”

She rolls her eyes.

“Whatever this is, you have gone too far.”

“When I need scolding, Lucile,” I snap coldly, “I’ll know where to find you, in the kitchen, *where you belong.*”

Her lips pursed, she glowers at me.

Okay, that was over a line, even for me. I grumble, bringing a hand up to pinch the bridge of my nose.

“Let’s just say it’s nothing you need to worry about.”

Lucile plants her fists on her broad hips, eyes narrowing up at me in that defiant way only she can get away with.

“See, that’s where you’re wrong, Ollie.”

I scowl. “Excuse me?”

Lucile can get away with a lot with me, because she practically raised me, and she almost feels like the

grandmother I never knew or the mother I barely did. But she's *severely* pushing it right now speaking to me like this.

"If you want to play your little schoolyard games with your business friends, that's on you. Even though I won't ever understand why it is you men always play these ridiculous cock-measuring contests."

I make a sour face.

"Do me a favor and never say that word out loud to me again."

She sighs. "I don't care about the man who just ran out of here. Didn't like his look. Seemed like a sneaky prick—"

"You can expect a nice Christmas bonus for saying that."

She rolls her eyes.

"But I *do* care about the girl who's still up there."

My face darkens.

"I think we've already covered this. Not. Your. Concern."

Lucile laughs coldly.

"You truly think I don't need to concern myself with you keeping a *child* up there in that tower?!"

"She's clearly not a child."

"Oliver Prince!" Lucile scolds, jabbing a finger in my face.

"It's *complicated*," I grit through clenched teeth, my brow furrowing darkly. "And as nicely as I can put this, it is far above your pay grade."

"Human decency is not above my pay grade!"

"*Leave it.* I'm warning you."

"Or what?!" She fires back. "You'll fire me?!"

“Don’t tempt me,” I mutter.

“Do you even know how to use a toaster? A washing machine?”

I glare at her. “I’m confident I can figure it out.”

“Who is she?”

My temper flares.

“*Drop it, Lucile.*”

My housekeeper glares right back at me, planting her fists on her hips again as she purses her lips before changing her line of questioning.

“Will she be staying with us for a long time?”

“If the sniveling little shit you saw run out of here has any sense left in him, no. Not long.”

“But long enough that she’ll be spending the night?”

*Definitely.*

“Probably,” I grunt.

“Long enough that she’ll be spending a couple of nights?”

I sigh heavily. “I haven’t the slightest fucking idea.”

“Well, she’s not doing it in a bloody jail cell in a tower.”

“Oh, believe me,” I rasp, turning to march away. “She is.”

“Oliver, you take one more step and I promise you there’ll be no more breakfasts at your door.”

“I don’t even eat most of the breakfast, Lucile.”

“Well then, I’ll poison the bloody toast that you *do* eat.”

I turn and glare at her, eyes narrowing.

“Did you just admit to plotting my demise? You’re on very thin ice.”

She is, and she knows it, and I watch the way she pales a little.

It’s not like I relish scaring the only people who actually know me. But this needs to get shut down, now.

“As I said,” she mutters. “I don’t pretend to understand what it is you do with these games of yours.”

“Just what about any of this strikes you as a game, Lucile?”

“She’s *not* staying in a jail cell, Oliver,” Lucile snaps. She frowns, but then her expression softens as she steps closer to me and looks up into my eyes with sadness.

“I know you’re in there somewhere, Ollie,” she says softly.

My jaw grinds.

I don’t, nor have I ever needed, an “I feel what you’re feeling, I hurt how you’re hurting,” chat. Not from her, even though Lucile was essentially Jacob’s second parent. She may not be his blood, but she raised him as if she were.

However much I’m hurting, she’s hurting just as badly. But that still doesn’t mean I need to have this fucking conversation. *Ever*.

She sighs. “Look, I’m not going to insist you send her on her way. I understand that this is bigger than me. But I *am* insisting that she stay in a proper room with a proper bed, not on the floor of a jail cell.”

I scowl.

“Who was the man that ran out of here?”

My teeth grit, and I look away.

“Her father.”



“And you have a bone to pick with him?”

My teeth flash.

“That’s putting it mildly.”

“Has *she* ever wronged you herself?”

I glare at her. Lucile holds her ground.

“Let her out, Oliver. You of all people should know about the child being punished for the sins of the fa—”

That does it.

“Not. Another. *Word.*”

There’s a lethality in my tone and in the vicious way I glare at Lucile. But the monster isn’t there behind the scenes right now, pulling my strings.

I sigh heavily, grunting as I glance away.

“Fucking *fine*,” I mutter. “You can find a closet somewhere for her to sleep in.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see the smile crack across Lucile’s face.

“I can work with that.” She turns away. “I’ll prepare the guest suite in the east wing.”

My jaw clenches, and I snarl as I whip around.

“She’s my goddamn *prisoner*, Lucile!” I bark at her retreating back.

“Well then!” She spins to grin at me. “She’ll be the comfiest prisoner in England.”

I watch her disappear off into the east wing of the manor. Then, a curse spitting from my lips, I whirl around and storm up the stairs to the west wing. I crash my way down the

hallway, stopping once to swear and rip a framed painting of a field from the wall, kicking a hole in it just because I can before storming into my room and slamming the door shut.

What the *fuck*.

“Last I checked, *I* was the master of this house,” I hiss to the air.

I kick a pile of empty bottles out of my way as I march over to the bar cart in the corner. I splash whiskey into a dusty glass, knock it back, then grab the bottle before storming out to the balcony overlooking the rose gardens.

I drink deeply, my eyes narrowed, my heart black.

My every thought is on my tempting little prisoner locked away upstairs like a sweet caged bird.

My pretty little collateral.

Quickly, my anger turns to something darker. Something salacious, devious, depraved. I start to imagine what will happen if Paul fails to deliver. The things I’ll do...

Heat surges in my chest, followed by a throb of lust that pulses through my veins, heating my blood to napalm. My balls tingle, and I groan as my cock swells thick, hot and hungry between my legs, pulsing against my thigh.

I sit in the shadows, drinking.

Thinking of all the things I’ll do with Rose.



“RIGHT THIS WAY, MY DEAR!”

Surreal.

In the space of ten minutes, I’ve gone from being grabbed by a scarred, savage beast of a man and thrown into a locked jail cell...to being escorted by this smiling older woman named Lucile who smells like cookies into a lavish, gilded section of the house. A section that has sunlight and furniture and art on the walls.

And, most importantly, no metal bars or jail cells.

She stops in front of an ornately carved door and turns to smile at me.

“Just this way dearie, just this way.”

She turns the knob and pushes the double doors open.

And my jaw *drops*.

*Holy crap.*

Up until two months ago, I’d only ever seen most of the world through TV shows or movies. When my dad found me, I was introduced to a side of life I never dreamed I’d experience: a world of opulence and wealth. A world of gorgeous furniture,

and famous artwork, and stunning fashion. A world of fancy, expensive restaurants, and glamorous condos and townhouses in posh neighborhoods. With my father, I saw a lot of that in London these last two months.

*None* of it compares to the positively *regal* looking room that opens up before us.

I follow Lucile into the suite in shock, my eyes wide as saucers.

“*Woah*,” I say quietly under my breath.

She laughs a musical, grandmotherly laugh as she turns to roll her eyes at me conspiratorially.

“A bit over the top, isn’t it?”

“It’s...*stunning*,” I whisper. “It’s absolutely stunning.”

The cream walls are accented with minty, sea-foam green, with gold accents on the framing and the window sills. One whole wall is covered in what looks like silk wallpaper with a gorgeous floral design. Against it sits a golden—an actual *golden*—four-poster princess bed, complete with the drapes, tassels, everything.

The room looks like the last person who lived here was Marie Antoinette, and it is *beautiful*.

“What is this place?” I whisper apprehensively.

Lucile’s been friendly and smiling, and she even gave me a quick little hug when she first unlocked the cell upstairs. But she’s also not exactly leading me to the front door, and she clearly works here. For *him*.

I might be out of the frying pan. But it’s unclear whether or not I’m jumping into the fire right now, or something else.

“This?” She smiles at me. “This is where you’ll be staying, my dear.”

I stare at her.

“Excuse me?”

“These are your private quarters for the duration of your...”

She smiles at me, and arches her eyebrows, and I can tell that she’s had words with Mr. Prince and is keenly aware of what’s going on.

“Your *visit* with us,” she finishes.

“So it’s my new jail cell?” I throw back bitterly.

Lucile doesn’t say anything as she turns away.

“Through those doors over there is your private bath. And if you’ll give me your sizes” ...she whips a pencil and notepad out from her apron pocket... “we’ll see what we can do about your wardrobe, how does that sound?”

I stare at her, frowning slightly.

“Is this a trick?”

She laughs again.

“Mr. Prince is...a bit prickly at times.”

“He’s a monster.”

Her mouth draws to a line. “He’s prickly,” she repeats. “But I’m confident that your *brief*” —she underscores the word— “stay with us can still be a comfortable one. So, sizes?”

My lip twists between my teeth.

“Do you work for him?”

“I’ve worked for the Prince household for thirty-nine years.”

“Has he always lived here?”

She nods.

“So, he grew up in this house?”

“He did. Sizes—?”

“Did his son?”

“That’s *quite enough* of that,” she snaps suddenly, her tone changing dramatically and a cold shadow crossing her face before she catches herself and tucks the shadow away as quickly as it appeared.

“Why don’t we just stick to the sizes for now, dear?”

I nod, seeing the pain on her face lessen as I quickly rattle off what I can remember. I can guess waist, and I remember things like bra and shoe size. But when she gets to things like inseam, I’m at a loss.

“Not to worry, love,” she says, winking at me. “We can work with this for now, and the rest we can have tailored.” She grins at me. “Still think this is jail?”

I’m trying to frame my answer to that as she turns, bustles over to the windows, and yanks open the shades. Sunlight floods the gorgeous room as she marches over to the door.

“Are you hungry?”

My stomach rumbles eagerly.

“I’m fine,” I lie.

She smiles. “I’ll bring you something to eat. How do you take your tea?”

“I’m fine, really.”

“Rose,” she arches a brow. “Everyone has to eat. No point in going on a hunger strike.”

My lips go small as I suck on my teeth.

“I take my tea black, thank you,” I mumble quietly.

She grins. “Lovely. Well, get yourself comfortable and situated, and I’ll be back shortly.”

I nod, still numb as she steps out the door. She closes it behind her...and then locks it with a harsh, metallic click.

My heart sinks.

“Why yes, Lucile, I *do* still think this is jail, now that you mention it,” I mutter to the princess bed.

Sighing, I slowly make a tour of the room, still marveling at the sheer opulence of the gorgeous furnishings. I drink in the tasteful decor, the shelves of books, the vanity desk that is already stocked with unopened, high-end makeup.

The walk-in closet is empty. When I stick my neck into the bathroom, I almost shriek with joy.

At the convent, I shared a bathroom with three women in their seventies, and it consisted of a single shower stall, a single sink with about two inches of counter space, one toilet, and one of those step-in tubs that someone had generously donated for any of the sisters who might have bad hips.

The ensuite bathroom in my gorgeous jail cell is larger than the dorm I lived in at the convent. It’s *enormous*. There are three sinks—*three* of them.

A door leads to a whole separate toilet room. There’s a glass-walled shower big enough for eight people, a steam room, a sauna, a *beautiful* gold and porcelain claw-foot tub, and another door that leads—to my mounting disbelief—to a

separate room with its own sunken hot tub set in the intricately tiled floor.

Where the *heck* am I?

Back in the bedroom, still in a daze, I sit on the edge of the bed and out of habit reach for my phone.

*Crap.*

Right. The tyrant who rules this palace took it from me earlier. I scowl, deciding that the next time I see him, I'm going to give him a piece of my—

I gasp sharply, bolting up from the bed as the door of the room swiftly unlocks and is thrown open so hard I'm surprised it doesn't crack the wall as it crashes into it. I shudder, paling and backing away as the beast himself storms in, glaring malice at me.

“Who are you?” he snarls, his voice simultaneously velvet and poison. Silk wrapped around a razor-sharp blade.

For the nine hundredth time, I find myself staring up into his face, caught between the warring feelings of terror and attraction.

Which is very unfair.

Monsters are supposed to be abjectly terrifying. They're supposed to frighten you, to send you screaming away.

They're not supposed to look like sex on a stick, sinfully handsome models from magazine covers.

Even with the scar running down the side of his face, and the burns on the side of his neck, Oliver Prince is a *lethally* attractive person.

*Too bad he's a giant jerk and a cruel, uncaring monster.*



“*Who. Are. You,*” he rasps again.

I tremble in fear, hugging myself as I chew on my lip.

“I’m Rose.”

His eyes narrow.

“And Paul is your actual father?”

“Yes.”

“By whom?”

My brow knits. “Excuse me?”

“Who birthed you?” he snaps coldly.

“My mother?”

His jaw ticks as his eyes narrow dangerously.

“Don’t get cute. *Who is she?*”

For a second, my memory flashes to the boardroom table and Atlas Drakos telling me the truth about my mother. And for one crazy second, I imagine telling this ill-tempered bully who my mom really was. That she was a princess in the Irish Mafia. Maybe *that* will scare him off.

But the second I have that thought, and the second I look back up to him, I realize how hilariously bad an idea that is.

Yeah, *sure*. As if anything would scare this monster. He won’t care anyway. I mean he’s literally kidnapping and imprisoning me. So instead, I lift a shoulder.

“I don’t know,” I lie. “Some fling of his.”

Oliver grunts, his brow furrowing deeply.

“She abandoned me right after I was born. Her parents didn’t approve of my father.” At least that part is true.

“Well, then there’s a chance you have some smarts in that head after all, genetically speaking.”

I glare at him.

“Why are you so mad at me?”

Oliver’s lips twist into a dangerous, cruel smile.

“You think *this* is me being mad at you?”

“Okay, why are you acting like a jerk?!”

His mouth curls dangerously at the corners as he leans close, turning my heart to ice.

“*A jerk* might be the nicest thing anyone’s called me in years.”

I shiver.

“Do you know your father well?”

“I...”

*Not at all*, I think to myself. I mean he’s my father, but I’ve only known him for two months.

“We’re still...getting to know each other,” I continue hesitantly. “We’ve only recently reconnected.”

Oliver’s brows arch.

“I grew up in a convent. That’s where he found me just a few months ago.”

“A *convent*?”

I nod hesitantly. He smiles scornfully.

“Like a convent to be a nun?”

“Yes.”

“Are you?”

My brow wrinkles. “Am I what?”

“A nun.”

I shake my head. “No.”

Not really. A few months ago, I asked Sister Carmen to start considering me for postulancy, the first step to entering the novitiate on the road to taking vows. But I’m relatively sure her oft-repeated “We’ll talk about it soon” was her nice way of saying no.

I glance up, and immediately shiver at the way Oliver’s icy-blue gaze bores into me, as if trying to rip the truth out of my very head. His jaw grinds. Muscled arms cross his powerful chest.

It’s so bizarre: in every picture of him on the internet—literally *every single one*—the man always looked like he had just gotten the best haircut anyone’s ever gotten in their life, had *just* shaved, and was dressed immaculately in the most expensive clothes imaginable. He looked like an Armani model. Always.

The man standing barely a few feet away from me looks like that Armani model’s dangerous, rough-and-tumble twin brother who doesn’t give a fuck.

Scarred. Shaggy-haired. Scruffy, stubbled jaw. He’s wearing dark jeans, a white T-shirt and an unzipped hoodie with holes in it. I can see tattoo ink peeking out from the neck of his T-shirt and the wrists of the hoodie.

Did he have those before? Were they always just covered by the tuxedos and suits?

I shiver as he cracks his neck, stepping towards me.

“Do you believe in God?”

I swallow nervously. “Yes?”

Oliver smiles coldly and grunts.

“How many times have you repeated that lie?”

I simmer, my face turning red as I drop my gaze to the floor. I do believe in God. I mean, I *think* I do. But not the way I should if I was on my way to becoming a nun. And Sister Carmen and the rest of the sisters at Our Lady Hildegard knew it.

Honestly, it’s not like I’d been dying to become a nun. It just felt like, if I was going to live there forever anyways...might as well, right?

“So, you weren’t really a nun.”

I swallow, looking away.

“I was in training to be a nun.”

“*Why?*” he barks.

I’m not really even sure how to answer that question, but Oliver already seems to have lost interest.

“Well, my little captive,” he rasps, looming over me and making my heart pound and my toes curl. “You won’t find God here.”

He whirls, stalking away from me as his hand comes up to shove his fingers through his messy hair.

“Here’s how this will work. You will be my guest under *certain conditions.*”

He turns to glare at me.

“Understand?”

I nod quickly. “Yes. What are the condit—”

“You will do as I say, for a start,” he grunts.

“And if I refuse?”

Oliver stops pacing, and I shiver at the way his eyes snap viciously to me.

“I would suggest you not do that. To be clear, you will do *anything* I ask of you, or tell you to do.”

His eyes drop from mine, sliding darkly and sensually but not lecherously over me. I feel as if he’s slicing my clothes away with his eyes, leaving me quivering and my skin prickling with heat.

Horrible, terrible, sinful heat.

And suddenly, my jaw drops as his sultry gaze tells me everything he’s not saying out loud.

*You will do anything I ask of you.*

“I won’t...” My face blooms with heat as I drop my gaze to my twisting hands.

Oliver smiles coldly.

“You won’t *what?*”

“I won’t...” I blush. “*You know,*” I whisper quietly.

“But I don’t,” he purrs with dark amusement. “Please, enlighten me.”

I stammer, my cheeks throbbing as I drag my eyes back to his.

“I won’t do *those* things—”

I gasp as he suddenly moves toward me, stumbling away from him until my back hits the wall. Oliver looms over me with one fist on the wall next to my head.

His savagely beautiful, haunting blue eyes cut into my very soul.

“Ah, but you most certainly *will*, my little Rose,” he hisses, simultaneously terrifying me and filling me a forbidden, needy heat.

We stay like that, inches apart. The beast looming over me, pinning me to the wall. Like he’s about to devour me. Or rip my clothes off. *Defile* me.

I tremble, and I’m not even sure anymore if it’s from terror or excitement. The two are battling for my mortal soul in this.

Suddenly, Oliver’s jaw grinds, and without another word, he turns on his heel and storms for the door.

“You will bathe, dress, and be at the dinner table in the grand dining room in two hours.”

He yanks the door open and starts to go.

“And if I’m not?”

Oliver tenses in the doorway. A chill creeps down my spine at the way he glances back at me over his shoulder, like he’s turning me to a pile of ash with the sheer heat of his gaze.

“There’s no *if*, Rose,” he mutters. “You can either do all that on your own, or I can come up here and do it all for you. Your choice.”

He turns, and before I know what’s happening, he’s striding back across the room and pinning me back to the wall. I jolt, explosions and alarm bells jangling through my head, gasping. His hand jerks out, reaching for me.

My face goes crimson, reality blurring at the edges as he hooks a finger through the top button of my blouse as if to pull me against him. He pulls tight, and when I don’t fall into his chest, he suddenly smiles thinly.

With a quick jerk of his arm, he yanks hard. I make a squeaking sound, gasping as his finger rips the top button off my blouse, letting it fall open to reveal my cleavage.

Heat explodes through my very core. My hand flies up to clutch at the neck of my blouse. Oliver smiles coldly.

“A word of warning, Rose,” he growls. “My way is likely not as gentle as you’re used to. Be downstairs in two hours or face consequences I am confident you are not ready to address.”

And just like that, he turns and strides from the room, slamming and then locking the door shut behind him.

I’m still standing there, shocked, scandalized, and throbbing with something sinful and wrong long after he’s gone.

*I have to get out of here.*

Before he devours me whole. Before he does whatever he wants with me.

Before I get sucked into the swirling dark vortex of this man so deeply that I *allow him to*.

My eyes fly to the bedsheets, and then to the big windows overlooking the grounds.

I’m getting the *heck* out of here.



*Thirty-two years ago:*

“AGAIN.”

I blink. My lips are cracked and my throat parched as my heart sinks into my stomach. I look across the room to where my father is sitting impassively behind his desk.

“What?”

I wince as soon as the words fly from my mouth, seeing the shadow cross his face.

“*What* is not an appropriate way for a son to address his father, Oliver.”

I know this. It’s been drilled into my head along with every other rule, since I was old enough to understand words.

I swallow uncomfortably, nodding at him.

“I meant to say, ‘I beg your pardon, Father’.”

He snorts.

“You know damn well what I just said.”

His fingers drum across the desk as his eyes stab into me.

“*Again*, Oliver.”



I wither inside.

“Which part, Father?”

I’ve just finished reciting—from memory, without notes—my hour-and-a-half-long presentation to him on Alexander the Great’s campaign in Issus.

*An hour and a half.* No water, and no breaks.

I’m ten years old.

“Which *part?*” His smile thins. “From the top, Oliver.”

My entire heart collapses.

“But...I just...”

“Yes, son, I’m aware that you’ve just finished the entire presentation. It’s not that it wasn’t good.”

There it is. The sprinkling of benevolence to barely soften the sharp edges. This is how Reginald Prince shows his “warm and fuzzy” side.

“It was quite an in-depth presentation, Oliver.”

“Then why?”

His brow lifts, and my mouth snaps shut.

“I’m telling you to repeat yourself because while the information was good and the presentation well put together, the delivery was...” His fingers drum on his desk again as he searches for the right word. “Suboptimal.”

*Suboptimal.*

“How should I have improved it, Father?” I say through clenched teeth.

Wrong response.

Even though I've added only the tiniest note of sarcasm to satiate my own anger, he hears it. I watch the coldness and the displeasure shadow across his face.

"Well, for starters, you can drop the snot-nosed tone," Reginald snaps back. "It's not merely regurgitating information, Oliver. I'm fully cognizant of Alexander the Great's campaign in Persia. I did not ask you to present this to me so that I might learn anything new. I wish to hear the information in a *better* way."

I nod as he sighs and sits back in his chair.

"It's not enough to be *good*, Oliver. You must be the *best*. Your blood and your lineage demand it."

*He* demands it. Because he's a tyrant.

My mother wouldn't have stood for the way he's leaned so hard into tyranny. But it's a little hard to protest when you're dead.

"So. From the top. You're not teaching me anything new, Oliver. You're shining a light on knowledge in a new way. Again."

I swallowed thickly, my throat raspy and dry. My brain hurts. My legs are numb.

"I..."

"Is there a problem?"

"There's no problem, I just..." I frown. "Could I take a quick break first?"

His brows pull together. His mouth thins dangerously.

"Do you understand what happens if I *take a quick break* from my work? If I *take a quick break*, I lose my edge. My

decisions, Oliver, which put a roof over your head and shoes on your feet, happen in the blink of an eye. If I'm pissing away my time and kicking my feet up, someone else will get that edge, and I'll lose mine. And that is not acceptable. It's not acceptable for any man in any business, and it is *certainly* unacceptable for a Prince!"

He stands abruptly, and I see it happen in real time: the way his mannerisms change from merely overbearing father to cruel tyrant. This isn't about discipline. This isn't about molding me. This is about exerting control.

I don't realize I'm glaring at him until it's too late.

"I see defiance in your eyes, Oliver."

The room grows colder as he steps out from around his desk and moves towards me. My heart tenses, my body clenching. But I refuse to back away or turn and run.

"You think this is about control, son?"

"It *is* about—"

I cry out as the back of his hand cuffs my ear, spinning my head around and knocking me off balance onto the ground. If I was prepared for it, or if I hadn't just been standing and talking for an hour and a half, I might have caught myself in time.

As it is, I tumble to the ground.

My face stings, and my blood turns to fire as I instinctively whirl on him and snarl.

My father smiles coldly.

"There it is. *Good*. There's your fire. There's the royal Prince blood in your veins, son."

I glare at him.

“You can’t—”

“I can’t *what*? Discipline my own son?” He smiles again as he leans close, making me flinch. “*Watch me.*”

He extends a hand to me. When I eye it warily, he chuckles darkly.

“Were I to hit you again, I would have done so already. Take alliances when you have them, Oliver. You’d do well to remember this.”

Yes. I’d do well to remember all of the fatherly lessons and advice he’s given me, all essentially ripped from the pages of Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*. But I take his hand, wincing as he yanks me to my feet.

My father dusts off my shoulders, readjusting my shirt and straightening my tie before he pushes my hair out of my face.

“There you are. Stand tall. Good, like that.”

His brow arches sharply.

“And *lose* the defiance. It’s not going to help you with your presentation.”

I swallow as I nod.

“I know how you look at me, son,” he says quietly. “And I know that I’m hard on you. But life, even with the Prince name, even with all the privilege, money, and power that comes attached to it, is hard. You can choose to use that money and power as a shield, or as a cushion to lie back on. *Or* you can use it as the weapon it is to take what is yours from the world.”

He steps back, squaring his shoulders as he eyes me.

“It’s not enough to be good, Oliver. You must be the *best*.”

He pats my shoulders, smiling magnanimously before he strides back to his chair behind the desk. His fingers tap at the desk again.

“Now. Once more from the top. Illuminate me, Oliver. And remember: control, always.”

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*Present:*

TWO HOURS after leaving Rose in her chambers, I sit alone in the grand dining hall.

I glower into the whiskey glass. My gaze raises from the liquid inside and looks over the rim to the array of food laid out before me on the table. And beyond that, a place setting that Lucile *insisted* on setting out for Rose.

But the chair in front of that place setting is empty.

Five minutes later, my mood has darkened even more. Five minutes after *that*, it turns black.

She isn’t just late. This isn’t tardiness.

This is defiance.

This is her refusing to understand the gravity of her situation, or of my rules.

I swirl the whiskey in my glass. Of course she doesn’t understand. She’s the daughter of Paul fucking Laurent—the sort of “soft rich” that my father spent my childhood conditioning out of me.

I don’t care that she’s been in a fucking convent for the last twenty years, away from her pathetic shit-stain of a father. I

don't give a damn if she's given all her worldly possessions to the disenfranchised orphans of India. Nor do I care what this Carson last name is all about.

She's a fucking *Laurent*, and that makes her weak. It makes her privileged, blithely unaware of and unencumbered by rules and law.

My jaw sets as I toss back the last of my drink and slam the glass back on the table, jostling the silverware and making the candles flicker. With a growl, I shove my chair back, rise to my feet, and storm from the dining hall towards the staircase.

In a perfect world, Paul would retrieve what I need in the next twenty-four hours and bring it to me. At which point, this obnoxiously attractive distraction lurking in my halls and wrecking my solitude could go back to wherever the fuck she came from.

Of course, Paul won't—a possibility I'm sure he's at least considered, but may yet look beyond, given that his daughter is currently my prisoner.

When he *does* return with what I want...whenever the fuck that is...he's going directly back into that tower until I figure out exactly how to destroy him.

But until that moment when Paul goes back into his cell and she leaves, she *will* obey me.

She's not a guest. She's not my dinner date. She's not even my eye candy.

She's my goddamn *prisoner*. My collateral. And when I say "jump" she'd damn well better ask me how high.

I raise a fist and slam it menacingly against her door—so hard that I hear the shocked gasp on the other side. It makes me smile.

“What do you want?!”

My eyes narrow to slits as my lips curl into a snarl.

*What do I want? Things that would make you scream, little one.*

“Two hours was fifteen fucking minutes ago!” I snap through the door. “So get the fuck downstairs.”

“I’m not hungry!” she yells back.

I roll my eyes.

“I’m not playing games with you.”

“And I’m not hungry! So go away!”

My temper explodes like gasoline touched by a lit match. My eyes stab into the door as my blood runs hot.

“Perhaps you forget whose house this is, and who the prisoner is here?”

“So I *am* a prisoner!”

*Goddammit, this fucking girl.*

“Perhaps I wasn’t clear earlier. You are *whatever the fuck* I say you are! You will do whatever I tell you to do, when I tell you to do it. Is that *fucking clear enough* for you?” I roar through the door at her.

“I’m not your servant!”

“No, you’re my fucking *PRISONER!*” I bellow.

“No wonder you live alone in a creepy old haunted house!” she screams back at me.

“I live alone in this house because I choose to.”

“Is that what you tell yourself? I assumed it was because you’re a giant *asshole!*”

I almost smile at the way she hurls the word. Her handling of “asshole” as if it’s the coldest, most brutal insult in the history of insults tells me everything I need to know about this girl. Calling me an asshole has probably just revealed a darkness in her she never even knew existed.

“If you choose to be angry at me because your father is a lying, backstabbing thief, by all means, go ahead.”

“Screw you!” she hurls back. “My father is none of those things!”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

“*Me?!?*” she snaps. “What about *you?!?* How the heck do *you* sleep at night, imprisoning people, keeping them—”

“I sleep like a fucking baby!” I bellow furiously. “And this is your last chance! Dinner is right now. You can come down and eat, or you can fucking starve in this room. But let me be clear, my rules in this house are *law*. This time, should you choose to continue disobeying them, the punishment is not eating dinner. Next time, it will be something far more severe.”

“What you going to do, wash my mouth out with soap?!”

“I just fucking might!” I snap. “But I was thinking more along the lines of putting you across my lap and spanking the brat right out of you.”

I hear the sharp intake of her breath.

“*Don’t you dare touch me,*” she chokes.

“Play by the rules for the duration of your stay, and I won’t have to.”

“If you try to lay one single finger on—”

“Dinner or *not*, princess,” I hiss.



“Go to Hell!”

It comes without warning. The fury erupts from me like a wild animal, and for a moment, the rage inside overtakes me completely. Neuron receptors not connecting. Synapses not sending their messages. A blackness explodes out of me like a hydrogen bomb and I roar, pounding my fists against the door again and again as my monster emerges, screaming.

In a flash, though, it's over.

I grit my teeth, shaking and squeezing my eyes shut. My palms and my forehead go flat against the door.

Inside, I can hear her stifled whimpers and a mewling, frightened sound. Christ, she's probably locked herself in the bathroom.

I close my eyes, sucking down air as I physically shove the beast back in his cage and lock him up tight, deep down inside me.

I was angry. But that...that was something else. That was “the other”.

My curse that will eventually consume me.

But not fucking tonight.

I grit my teeth, exerting my control and shoving the rest of the blackness back into its cage. I clear my throat and open my mouth to say one more thing. But what's the point? What's the use?

Why bother fighting or trying to hide the inevitable?

Without a word, I storm off, all the way back to my quarters in the west wing. I don't realize I've been clenching my hands into fists, as if that motion alone holds back the tide, until I get

back to my room. At which point, my arm jerks out with a snap, my fist slamming a hole in the wall.

What does any of this matter anyway?

My time is running out.

I close my eyes, taking a breath before I go over to the bedside table. I'm supposed to stick to my prescribed daily dosage but fuck that.

Twenty milliliters later, I let my eyes close as I pull the needle from my vein. I swallow back the hatred, and the violence, and the lack of control, and I feel the roaring inside go quiet.

At my bar cart, I skip the glass, taking just the bottle out with me to the balcony. I slump down into the chair I dragged out here months ago and bring the whiskey to my lips.

Objectively, none of this matters.

I'll be gone soon anyway.

But then again, it does, because I don't know how not to care, or how to let go. For whatever time I have left, I *will* have control.

Over myself. Over everything around me.

Over Rose.

And she had better get on board with that.



MY HANDS ARE SHAKING. But I still manage to knot the top sheet from my bed tightly to the scrunchy corner of the fitted sheet. I stretch them both across the floor, eyeing the length.

How high up is this room?

I glance out the window, trying to gauge the drop to the ground below. Both sheets together look like they're giving me, what, twelve or fifteen feet? If I add the pillowcases, that's another two or three feet. But still. There might be a drop at the end.

For a second, I try to remember how high a fall it takes to sprain or break a leg. Then I start to wonder how far I could get in the darkness with an injury like that.

I could make it.

Right?

I glance out the window, shivering as I hear the cold wind howl against the glass. I bite my top lip as I turn to look at the duvet crumpled at the foot of the bed.

Maybe it's got one of those covers on it, and if I take *that* off, it'll give me at least another ten feet...

There's a quiet knock on the door. My heart lurches into my throat and I gasp as I whirl and back away from it.

"If you try hurt or touch—!"

"It's just me, dear!" A matronly voice calls through the door. I shudder, exhaling quietly as relief floods my system. It's Lucile.

"May I come in?"

"Uh..."

My eyes dart to the knotted sheets and the messed-up duvet.

"One second!"

I grab the sheets, shove them onto the bed, and cover it all up as best I can with the duvet before I turn to the door.

"You can come in."

The lock clicks, and the door swings open. Lucile steps in pushing a little wheeled tray covered with a metal dome.

"Thought you might like something to eat, dear."

I pale as I glance past her.

"Don't you worry, he's sulking in his room."

I smile weakly with relief, and she winks back.

"Where I come from, you don't send guests to bed without a bite."

"So, I'm a guest now?"

She ignores the sarcasm.

"Mind you, this is just a snack. Do you like scallops?"

My stomach gurgles loudly, and I nod eagerly.

“Lovely!” she beams. “This is one of my favorite recipes to make, and the sulker *hates* them.”

She grins at me.

She’s genuinely kind. But it’s not a treacly sweetness. It’s more conditioned, hardened kindness. There’s a brassiness to her, and I wonder how much of that was always there and how much of it comes from having lived and worked in this house with that monster for so many years.

Lucile pushes the cart to a little table by the window. She lifts the lid, revealing a plate of crostini topped with lightly seared scallops and thick cut maple bacon, drizzled with herbed butter.

I groan, my mouth instantly salivating.

“Have a seat and tuck in,” Lucile chuckles quietly.

I sit down and reach for one of the crostini. My eyes glance nervously again at the door, then I feel her pat my arm.

“Like I said, dear, don’t you worry about him.”

“Thank you,” I murmur quietly as I begin to devour the plate of appetizers. “This is delicious.”

“You’re quite welcome.”

Lucile pulls out the chair across from me and sits.

“Would you like some?”

“Oh no, dear, I’ve already eaten.” She smiles quietly at me.

“Look, a bit of advice, since we don’t know how long you’ll be with us—”

“As a guest.”

“Yes, as a guest.”

“With a locked door.”

She inclines her head eloquently.

“All the same, let me give you some advice. Sometimes it’s easier to just...” she spreads her hands. “Do as he says.”

I glance up at her.

“Are you a prisoner here too?”

“Me? Oh, no. I’m free to come and go as I please.”

“Then why do you stay?” I balk.

She smiles. “Because I choose to.”

“But, I mean, how do you work for him?” I blurt. “He’s...he’s a...” I stammer, pursing my lips. “A jerk!”

“Oh, let’s not pull any punches, dear. He’s a bloody asshole, is what he is. You can say it.”

I grin, blushing at her words.

“I stay because I was here long ago, *before* he was a bloody asshole. I stay because I made a promise to someone that I would look after him.”

“Who, the *Devil*?”

She chuckles quietly, waving a finger at me.

“Sharp. I like you. No, not the Devil.”

But she doesn’t say who.

“Rose, I’m not about to tell you to have pity on a privileged billionaire with definite anger management issues. But I will say he’s lived a harder life than people realize.”

It’s not until I’ve swallowed the last bite of the very last sinfully amazing scallop crostini that I realize that I’ve inhaled

the whole plate in roughly ninety seconds. Sheepishly, I glance up at Lucile, my cheeks reddening.

“Sorry. That was really good.”

She grins. “Thank you. Now, this isn’t me acting on his behalf or anything like that. But, as I said, sometimes it’s just easier to play by the rules and figure out” ...she shrugs, winking at me again... “*other* ways to assert yourself aside from trying to move an immovable object. Or, in this case, an immovable asshole.”

I frown, looking down at my empty plate.

“It’s just dinner, dear. Why don’t we get you cleaned up and dressed, and you can give it a test run. I can promise at least that the food will be good. I can also promise that he’s not actually as bad as you probably think he is.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

She smirks. “Well, then, have dinner with the man, and then you can throw how right you were in my face. Deal?”

I sigh, my shoulders slumping.

“Okay,” I finally mumble. “Deal.”

“Lovely.”

She stands, walks over to the food cart, and bends to lift something out from a shelf underneath. I raise a brow when she straightens up with a garment bag in her arms, and watch curiously as she waltzes over to hang it on the door to the empty closet.

“The rest of your clothes should be arriving in the morning.”

My brows arch.

“The rest of my clothes?”

“Yes, I’ve gone ahead and ordered at a few things for you. But in the meantime, this belonged to Cora. I’m sure it’s a few years out of date. And she was much younger, but she and her sister were both tall for their age—

“I’m sorry, who’s Cora?”

Lucile looks surprised and a little uncomfortable.

“Oh my. I thought you knew... Well, why don’t you try this on.”

She unzips the bag, revealing a *stunning* sleeveless, sequined blue gown that makes my jaw drop.

But then my mind drags me back to four seconds ago.

“So, who’s Cora?”

Lucile glances at me over her shoulder.

“Not my place, dear.”

*What?*

I try to force myself to remember the brief snippets of Oliver’s personal life that I read on the internet. Was Cora his ex-wife? The mother of his murderous, dead son?

I shiver, but then shrug it off.

Whatever. I don’t need to know a single detail about the monster’s personal life.

“Well, what do we think of the dress?” Lucile says quickly, changing the subject.

“I think I’ve never even *seen* a dress that beautiful.”

She smiles at me.

“It’s going to look even prettier on you, I just know it.”



I blush as she strips the garment bag away and fluffs up the gauze at the hem.

“Now then, dear. You go have a quick bath and get dressed, and I’ll go convince his royal asshole to meet you downstairs for dinner in about half an hour. Does that sound good?”

I nod, smiling quietly. Lucile grins back as she turns and heads out the door.

“Lucile?”

She pauses in the doorway, turning back to me.

“Thank you.”

She smiles warmly.

“Any time, dear. Any time.”



THIRTY MINUTES LATER, I take a deep breath as I look at myself in the mirror.

*Wow.*

I mean, freaking *WOW*.

I've spent my entire life living with women four times my age who owned three pieces of clothing each. I wasn't walking around in a nun's habit myself or anything, but up until two months ago, I owned about four outfits, tops.

And yes, I've had lots of fancy things to wear in the two months since my father found me. But the gown that once belonged to the mysterious Cora person is by far and away the most gorgeous thing I've ever had on.

There's a soft knock on the door—soft enough to let me know it's Lucile, not *him*.

“Come in!”

The door unlocks, and when it opens, sure enough, it's Lucile who pokes her head around it. Her face lights up.

“My *goodness!*” She gasps, stepping inside. “You look absolutely stunning, my dear!”

I blush deeply.

“It’s just the dress.”

She chuckles. “I wasn’t talking about the dress. But would you like some help with your hair?”

She’s very good at talking to people and putting them at ease. With my hair, the obvious answer to her question is “Yes, of course I do”. Because I have no idea how to do anything with my hair except pull it back into a simple ponytail. Just like I have no idea how to apply makeup.

I never had to do any of that at Our Lady Hildegard.

“Have a seat, dear.”

She gets behind me and there’s a flurry of bobby pins and braids. Then suddenly, she spins me around to look in the vanity mirror, and my jaw about hits the floor yet again.

*Holy crap.*

“I’m afraid it’s a bit of a rush job, but I think it’ll do.”

Yeah, it’ll “do”, alright. I look like a freaking princess, and I can’t stop just *staring* at myself like some vain weirdo.

“Now, a bit of this...”

She opens the drawer to the vanity and comes between me and the mirror again. Blush dusts my cheeks. A pen glides across my eyelids. Lipstick glistens on my lips. Finally, she pulls away and smiles.

“There we go. Perfect.”

She moves aside, and I stare at my reflection in disbelief. It’s me...but *not* me. Does that make sense? It’s a version of me I’ve never seen before.

“Well then, why don’t you join us when you’re ready? He’s already downstairs.”

I nod, and as she turns, for one moment, my eyes flick to the bed and the lumps of my makeshift escape rope beneath the duvet.

“If you were wondering, dear...”

I jump, glancing sharply to see Lucile arching a brow at me with a look of slight amusement on her face.

“The window ledge to the ground below is forty-five feet.”

I blush viciously.

“Oh, I wasn’t...”

Her eyes dart to the to the bed.

“Now, I don’t think I have the numbers exactly right. But I believe corner to corner, a queen size sheet like yours would give you about eight feet, minus the knots, which probably makes it more like six and a half feet. Double that, add the pillowcases....” She shrugs. “Well, I think that’s about sixteen feet. Maybe another ten if you add the duvet cover, but it would still be nineteen feet to the ground. Which is concrete, by the way.”

My face burns hotly as she sighs dramatically.

“And it *is* quite cold out tonight.”

She flashes me a warm smile as I stand there writhing in embarrassment.

“Now, shall we?”

---

“WELL, look who finally decided to show up,” Oliver grunts, bringing a glass of something to his lips.

His back is to me as he sits at the head of a huge table laden with enough food to feed thirty people.

I clear my throat nervously.

“Perhaps you would consider this an olive branch.”

He chuckles a dark, rough and gravelly laugh as he takes another sip.

“You still seem to be under the mistaken impression that you will be negotiating *anything* with me,” he mutters, turning towards me. “Now, have a seat and—”

Quite suddenly, the room feels hot. His eyes turn to blue fire as they stab into me hungrily.

Dangerously.

Lethally.

Drinking me in, swallowing me up, and spitting me back out. Turning my core molten in a way that brings an even worse flush to my neck and face. The way he’s looking at me is pure sin. I simmer, unable to look away as my face burns fiercely.

Then he stands. And before I know it, I’m doing the exact same thing to him that he’s been doing to me.

Staring. Shamefully. *Hungrily*.

Because gone are the jeans, t-shirt, and ripped hoodie. The man standing in front of me now is the version of Oliver Prince the internet showed me from before. The one dressed impeccably in a dark custom tailored suit, crisp white dress shirt, and a silk tie.

His hair is still shaggy and haphazardly pushed back from his face, and he still has the scruff covering his strong jaw. There's still that feral, angry, broken look in his haunted eyes, and the white line of a scar tracing down the side of his face.

But...*yikes*.

In a flash, I understand why this man was once called the Golden Boy by high society and the world of finance. Because even with that feral look in his eye, even with the dangerous scar, and the haunting brokenness behind his eyes, all of it—there's no denying it: even though I hate him for what he's doing to me and my father, Oliver Prince is a *dangerously* attractive man.

His piercing eyes narrow as they slide over my gown appraisingly.

“I suppose Lucile found that dress for you?”

I nod. “She did.”

His eyes slide over me again, as if he's memorizing every single detail.

“It suits you.”

I flush, biting my lip. It's as if that very motion breaks the spell, because instantly he's scowling again, grunting as he turns away.

“Sit,” he commands, gesturing at the table as he drops into his chair. “Eat.”

I do my best to ignore the heat from my face and take my place at the other end of the long table from him. My stomach, teased before by the crostini, gurgles eagerly as I stare at the feast in front of me.

Slowly, I start to dig into my dinner. Oliver does the same, and when I glance up, I stiffen as I notice his gaze is focused on his plate. My eyes flick to my place setting...and to the steak knife next to my plate.

I peek at Oliver again quickly before I nonchalantly take a spoonful of the soup in front of me. I chance one more furtive look before I quickly snatch the knife and slip it into the napkin on my lap.

“Why don’t we dispense with the amateur theatrics.”

I stiffen, my gaze yanking up sharply to see Oliver staring right at me. My face pales and my throat closes.

“What?”

His hands are steepled, his elbows on the table, and he’s staring right at me.

“You’re not going to stab me, Rose.”

Whatever color I have left in my face drains away in a second.

“I—”

“And this isn’t Shawshank fucking Redemption. You’re not going to carve your way through a wall with that knife, either. So do us both a favor: leave it on the goddamn table and dispense, as I said, with the amateur theatrics.”

I swallow thickly, my brow furrowing as I glare at him.

“*Now*, Rose.”

I’m simmering, my lips pursed in a mix of anger and embarrassment that he caught me. But I pull the knife out from under the table and place it back on the table.

“Good girl.”

*Oh, God.*

Something electric sizzles through me the instant he says it. Something darkly sensual and sinfully wrong, yet so right at the same time. My cheeks burn hotly as I quickly swallow the feeling back, dropping my gaze to my plate.

“Have you heard anything from my father?”

Oliver snorts, chuckling darkly and quietly across the table from me as he sips his drink. Anger—anger that outweighs the embarrassment from a second ago as well as the electrifying feeling I got when he said “good girl”—flashes through me.

“I’m sorry, is that *amusing*?”

He smiles thinly.

“It is, actually.”

“Which part?”

“All of it. I’m amused both by your blissful ignorance of who your father is, and also your blind adoration of him.”

“He’s my *father*,” I snap.

“Whom you met two whole months ago.”

“What does that have to do with—”

“I’ve known your father *far* longer than you,” Oliver hisses quietly. “Long enough to know that the odds of him coming back for you versus fleeing to a non-extradition country and surgically altering his face to escape me and my wrath are fifty-fifty *at best*.”

I stare at him, my face paling.

“That’s not true.”

“Oh, it’s very true. And I’m being very generous with my odds.”



“I don’t know what your opinion of fathers are—”

“Poor, as a general concept.”

I swallow. “Well, he’s *my* father—”

“Being a father does not ipso facto make you a good man. And trust me, your father is not.”

“If you’re the one judging character, I’ll take that as a glowing endorsement!”

I shiver as Oliver’s jaw clenches, his eyes on me again.

“That’s a very pretty dress.”

Something cold prickles down my spine. That wasn’t a compliment.

It was a setup.

“Thank you,” I mutter stiffly.

“Do you know who it once belonged to?”

My heart quickens as I glare at him.

“Cora.”

Oliver smiles again.

“And do you know who *Cora* is?”

I smirk coldly. “Some other girl you locked in a tower, I presume?”

“Your half-sister.”

My heart skips for a second. For a moment, it feels like the room is spinning, and I find myself having to grip the edge of the table to steady myself.

I stare at him.

“I don’t have a half-sister.”

“Correct. In fact, you have *two* of them.”

I blink, feeling cold and numb.

“That’s not tr—”

“It is. Cora and Naomi,” he says with a smug, cruel look on his face. “*Laurent.*”

The floor drops away, and my heart plummets into my gut. My head begins to shake back and forth as I try and form words.

Oliver smiles with a hint of triumph.

“Ahh, now I’m guessing Daddy Dearest neglected to mention his *other* family by way of Matilde, before he left her for someone new.”

“You’re a *liar*—”

“Come now, Rose, do you cherish some childish fantasy that your dear mother was your father’s one and only?” He chuckles. “More like one of hundreds. Your father’s made a successful career grifting rich women out of their—”

“STOP LYING!”

It happens before I can stop myself. I watch it almost in slow motion: my hand reaching for the glass of water in front of me. My arm stretching back, and then flinging forward. The glass of water sailing across the table.

Oliver yanks his head out of the line of fire just as the glass shatters against the back of his chair.

The dining room goes silent. I come crashing back to reality, and gasp in horror at what I’ve just done.

He stands, deftly flicking bits of shattered glass from his suit before he glares at me coldly.

“This was a mistake.”

“Dinner with someone you are keeping here against their will? You *think*?”

His eyes pierce into me as he drops his napkin to the table.

“No, letting you out of your room and allowing you to dine with me.”

He reaches for his drink, finishing it in one swallow and then slamming the glass down on the table.

“This dinner is over. Wentworth!”

The older man who answered the door when I first arrived is by his side instantly, as if he’s been lurking in the shadows.

“Escort Miss Laurent back to her room.”

“It’s *Carson*.”

“Yes, you said. I don’t give a fuck. Since you’re since you’re so hell bent on playing daughter to to an idiotic piece of shit like Paul Laurent, I will associate you with him accordingly. Wentworth?”

The man approaches me, and I quickly stuff another three bites into my mouth before I’m helped to my feet.

“This is the last time I’ll ask you: leave the goddamn *cutlery* at the table.”

My face burns hotly. With a mouthful of food, I glare daggers at him before finally dropping the steak knife back to the table.

Wentworth and I are at the door when Oliver speaks again.

“You don’t know your father, Rose.”

I stop, pulling away from my escort to turn and glare at Oliver. But there’s no malice in his voice. Just a dark, cold, statement of fact.

“If you did, you never would have come for him. Believe me, it’s going to turn out to be the biggest mistake of your life.”

I keep myself poised, head held high, the entire walk back to my room. But the second Wentworth closes the door and locks it behind me, I shatter, all but ripping the exquisite dress from my body and then throwing myself across the bed.

And using the pillows to silence the sobs and the tears that are streaming down my face.



THREE NIGHTS AGO, at our disastrous dinner, I told Rose that the biggest mistake of her life was coming here.

The biggest mistake of *mine* is keeping her here.

Because this is not going as anticipated. I blame that first night. I blame my weakness, masquerading as my need for power and control. I blame the fact that ten minutes after I had Wentworth take her back to her room, I pulled up the app on my phone connected to the hundreds of cameras throughout my house.

Including the ones in her suite of rooms.

That's where it all started to go to shit.

Because when I checked the cameras, expecting to find Rose either trying to escape out the window or sobbing in the corner, I saw something I wasn't expecting. Yes, she was crying. But she wasn't in the corner. She was on her bed...

Minus the dress she'd been wearing.

When I saw her face down in just a pair of panties on that bed, my rage, annoyance, and disdain for her turned to something else very quickly.

And I've been paying for that ever since.

I've gone years without the comforting touch of a woman. By choice, even long before the events that marred me and stripped away the golden veneer I used to cover myself in. I was always too tied up with business, and my petty rivalries, and my battles of narcissism with friends and foes alike. Back then, I told myself I didn't have time, that I was "above" chasing women.

In a weird way, lust and sex have always been something I've compartmentalized, like all parts of my life. It's the same way that I know now at the age of forty-two that even though I've been married twice, I've never loved. I don't mean that in a glib way. I mean I've literally never been in love.

My first marriage was a joke. My second was a sham. In the years between the two marriages, and in the years after, yes, there were women. But they were exclusively the type who were paid both for their time and, equally importantly, to *leave* when that time was up.

It's easier that way. Simpler.

After all, sex is *always* a transaction. Even the mushy romantic types can't be naive enough not to see that. Sex is never free, and there are *always* strings attached. It's just that when you pay for it with cash, everyone understands what's going on without trying to cloak it in sentimentality or power games.

But it's been years since I've even had those sort of encounters. Before, because I didn't have the time. Now, since the fire, because I haven't had the inclination .

It's not vanity. I don't give a fuck if some woman I'm paying to ride my cock is turned off by my scar tissue. But when you've lost in the way *I've* lost—had things taken from you—sometimes, there's parts of yourself you turn off.

For me, the part of me that I turned off was lust. For years.

Until three fucking nights ago.

When I opened my phone expecting tears or a ludicrous escape attempt and instead saw an absolutely *perfect*, tight, petite little peach of an ass split down the middle by a lacy black fucking thong.

When I saw smooth, lithe legs and thighs. The splash of chestnut hair across her bare back. The slight swell of her breasts to the side as they pressed against the mattress.

She was temptation *incarnate*, and my dick has been hard ever since.

I hate it. I hate how easily her mere presence in this house rattles my cage. How she seems to taunt both man and beast in me with her benign innocence. The carefree way she seems unaware of what a little temptation she is. Her purity annoys me. Yet at the same time, it beguiles me.

And that's a fucking problem.

It's been three fucking days and I've become a horny teenager who's found a peephole into the girl's locker room. More times than I can count, I find myself using the cameras to watch her in her room. To watch her pace. To smirk at the way she untied her makeshift rope of bedsheets and tucked them back across her bed, which was a smart move.

To watch the way she emerges from the bathroom wrapped haphazardly in a towel. The way she doesn't seem to sleep more than two hours at a time, waking to pace the room, read a book, or, frequently, to take yet another random shower.

Apparently, Rose is a clean freak.

I scowl, forcing the images I've concocted of Rose soaping her body under the spray of a shower head from my mind. Then I reach for my phone and tap Paul's name.

He answers quickly. Smart, for once.

"Oliver," he says with forced, fake cheerfulness in his tone. "How are you?"

"Fucking peachy, Paul."

He laughs nervously.

"Well, I assume you're looking for a progress—"

"Do you have what I want or not, Paul?"

He clears his throat.

"I'm close."

I scowl as he proceeds to blather on, giving me what sounds like complete bullshit about people he knows, even about a professional hacker he thinks he can hire to help him get the information I want without having to get back the company at all.

I don't care if he has to assassinate a fucking world leader.

I want my fucking cure.

I *need* it.

My hand clenches into a fist over and over. Merely talking to this douchebag has the rage and the monster in me boiling like black oil over a roaring fire, threatening to bubble and spit and explode into someone's face at any second.

"Anyway, as I'm saying, this guy Sherman thinks he knows a man who can—"

"Paul," I hiss, cutting him off. "*Stop. Fucking. Talking.*"



He clears his throat, then swallows.

“What’s the timeframe, Paul?”

“Days,” he blurts quickly. “Days, Oliver. A week at the very —”

“Call me when it’s done.”

I’m about to hang up when I pause.

“And Paul, yes, your daughter is fine, in case you were even remotely curious.”

He laughs nervously.

“Well, of course. I knew she’d be in good hands with you, Prince.”

“Then you’re an even bigger fucking idiot than I thought.”

I end the call and drop the phone to the desk. I’m pinching the bridge of my nose a minute or two later, when there’s a knock at the door.

“Enter,” I grunt.

It’s late. Lucile would have gone to bed at least an hour ago. And Rose is asleep. I know because I’ve I watched her, via the app, walk topless into the bathroom, where she apparently showered and then emerged half an hour later wrapped in a towel with another one wrapped around her hair.

Then I watched in annoyance as she disappeared into the walk-in closet, which is now filled with clothing fit for a queen, exactly her size thanks to Lucile, and emerged dressed in pajamas a minute or so later.

During that same minute or so, I made a mental note to install ten more cameras in the fucking closet.

But she's asleep now. I know that because I just looked barely five minutes before I called her idiot father.

The door to my office opens, and Wentworth pokes his head in.

"Sir, she's arrived."

I scowl. And for some infuriating reason, my dick reacts in the opposite way than it should when it's being told it's about to be served pussy on a platter.

"Send her in. And then that will be all tonight."

"Of course, sir."

He bows out. A minute later, I look up from my phone to the click of high heels across the wooden floor and the door shutting behind her. I immediately frown.

Mother. *Fucker.*

Carrie smiles coyly at me.

"What's it been, Oliver? Five years?"

*Goddammit.*

Objectively, Carrie, the professional whom I've seen on occasion, is gorgeous. Of course she is. The women I pay for these sorts of encounters aren't down on their luck street hustlers. The type of escorts that men like me engage are the complete package.

They're not just model beautiful. They're also sophisticated, intelligent. Carrie has two master's degrees that I had a heavy hand in paying for. She speaks fluent French, Italian, and Mandarin.

I know for a fact that when she hits thirty, she'll cash out and retire, probably living a fabulous existence somewhere tropical

for the rest of her life.

There's just one problem.

In my attempt to put an end to my horny teenager antics of spying on Rose changing or showering and jerking off like a compulsive loser for the last three days, I've reached out to a professional.

If I had a broken arm, I'd reach out to a doctor. If one of my cars started acting up, I'd call a mechanic.

When there's an issue with my cock not knowing when to fucking quit, I call a different sort of professional.

Sue me.

And the reason I called Carrie specifically, and not one of the other women just like her that I've hired in the past, is because Carrie is *nothing* like the little temptation on my phone screen.

Carrie is blonde. Carrie has short hair, clipped to her jawline. She has the sort of chest that sells skimpy swimsuit editions of sports magazines to men.

Or I should say, Carrie *had* all those things.

My brow furrows as I look this new version of her up and down.

*Fuck. Me.*

She's not wrong. It's been at least five years since the last time I saw her. And since then...she's made some changes.

For one, she's grown her hair long—halfway down her back long. And it's no longer blonde.

It's fucking *chestnut brown*.

Not only that, of all the goddamn dresses in the world she could have worn to go get fucked in tonight, she's picked a

sleeveless, shimmering blue gown that may as well be a replica of the one a certain temptress was wearing at dinner the other evening.

My gaze drops from her face to her body, and my jaw tightens.

“Oh my goodness!” Carrie chirps. “Wow, it really has been a long time. I completely forgot to tell you!”

She grins, reaching up to cup her *substantially* smaller chest.

“They were just...” She shrugs. “They’d become a pain in the ass. And yeah, I know, a lot of guys like big tits. But I was just *so* over it, so I had a reduction about three years ago. What do you think?”

She flashes a killer smile and turns side to side.

I think it’s too fucking similar.

I think there’s no way this is happening.

The entire point of calling Carrie, besides the fact that I know her, and trust her, and can rely on her professionalism and discretion, was that she was *nothing* like the girl I have no business lusting over.

Blonde. Busty. Short hair.

Instead, she’s shown up looking *exactly* like Rose.

You would think that getting rid of my urges on a doppelgänger would be the best possible solution. But that’s not true. The point was to get my release out on someone who would remind me *nothing* of the girl locked in the bedroom on the far side of the house.

This is a real problem.

“Well?”

Carrie grins at me, shrugging her jacket off and giving me a flash of bare shoulder.

“Want to open some wine?”

I scowl as she approaches my desk. I wasn't really interested in this before. But now that she's standing in front of me, I'm *less* than interested.

We're done here.

But Carrie takes my silence for approval.

“See, I knew you'd like my new look.”

She slinks up against the side of my desk, giving me bedroom eyes.

“You know what? I don't think I've ever been to this house.”

She hasn't. Because none of the women I used to pay to see ever came here. I saw them in hotel suites. My penthouse in Knightsbridge. My townhouse in Kensington.

Never here. Never my home.

“So, why don't you show me where the bedroom is—”

“I'll tell you what we're going to do instead.”

She grins.

“*Ooo*, tell me, Daddy.”

My jaw clenches, anger and a blackness flickering inside of me dangerously.

She needs to get away from me. Right now.

“Or, should I say, I'll tell you what *I'm* going to do.” I stand, and her eyes drop to my crotch.

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to pay you double for your time.”

Carrie glances up at me, arching a brow curiously.

“Oliver, there’s no need to—”

“And then I’m going to show you the door and you’re going to leave. And that’ll be it. Understand?”

Her brows wrinkle.

“Is this a game?”

“I know you’re smart enough to realize that it’s not.”

Carrie’s frown deepens.

“All right, I’m just trying to understand why you brought me here for, well, obvious reasons, and now you say you’re going to pay me double to leave without doing any of that.”

“Are you upset by the fact that you’re getting paid to not have to do your job?”

She laughs. “No. I mean, I can’t say I’m not at least a *little* disappointed at not...*you know*...” Her eyes drop to the front of my slacks again, and she blushes.

“Oliver, I have clients I see because of money. And I have clients I see and don’t *mind* the money afterwards, if you get my meaning.”

She eyes me.

“You were always the latter, if that wasn’t clear.”

I shake my head, my jaw tight.

“Not going to happen.”

Carrie frowns.

“Is it...physical? I mean, after the fire...”

“No,” I growl quietly. “Everything works fine. I’m just not interested.”

She winces.

“Is it my reduction surgery?”

I sigh. “Carrie, you’re not actually insecure enough to think it would have anything to do with that, are you?”

She blushes. “Well then, what is it? The hair? You only like blondes?”

“Carrie—”

“Oliver, whatever it is, I just want to know. Call it professional development—”

“You look too fucking similar to someone else,” I snap harshly.

She sucks on her teeth, eyeing me.

“Someone you can’t have?”

“Someone I *shouldn’t* have.”

“I might just be the cure for that—”

“Believe me, you’re not,” I mutter.

She smiles curiously.

“My, my, my.”

“What?”

“I sense some walls crumbling, Oliver. Well done.”

I roll my eyes, reach in my pocket, and pull out a wad of cash.

“For your time.”

Carrie nods, smiling quietly as she slips the money into her bag.

“Do you need a lift back to London?”

She shakes her head. “My driver is waiting by the gate.”

“Call him. I need you gone five minutes ago. No offense.”

Carrie laughs, shaking her head again as she turns and slips her jacket back on. She turns again to eye me coolly.

“Whoever this girl is, I hope it works out for you.”

“It’s not like that.”

She smiles, nodding quietly. She starts to turn away again, then pauses.

“Oliver...” her brow furrows. “I’m...I was so sorry to hear about—”

“Get. Out.”

There’s a cold finality to my tone, and I know she hears it. I have no regrets with Carrie. But this is the last time we’ll ever be in the same room together, much less speak. And I think we both understand that.

“It was good to see you again, Oliver,” she says gently. “Take care.”

I watch from the window as Carrie walks down the front steps of my manor to the waiting black Rolls. When she leaves, I turn to grab a drink at the bar cart. I’ve barely taken a sip when headlights illuminate the room once again.

My face shadows with annoyance. If this is Carrie suddenly deciding she’s feeling sentimental, fuck that. Wentworth can deal with whatever it is and kick her out if need be.

I settle onto the couch with a heavy pour of whiskey. But then suddenly, there’s a knock at my door.

“Master Prince?”



*Goddammit, Wentworth.*

“Whatever the fuck she needs,” I snarl through the door.  
“*Handle it.* I’m in no fucking mood.”

The door opens anyway, and I glare death at my butler as he sticks his head into the room.

“Begging your pardon, sir, but it’s not your recently departed guest.”

My brow furrows deeper as I glance towards the window where the Rolls’ headlights were just flashing.

“You have another visitor, sir.”

It’s only then that I realize how shaken and worried Wentworth looks.

And now I’m *very* curious to know who the fuck is paying me a visit at midnight that has my one-time Royal Marine of a butler so shaken.

“*Who?*”

Wentworth’s face pales as he clears his throat.

“Cillian Kildare is here to see you, sir.”

*Shit.*

The sociopathic king of the Irish mafia.

*That’s who.*

The question is, what the *fuck* does he want?



LONG BEFORE THE veneer began to crack and crumble—before the whole thing turned to shit—there were those who understood that the “Golden Boy” image was really only skin deep.

For all the charity galas I reigned as king over, and for all the charming smiles I flashed for the cameras, there was always a darkness underneath.

My genetic curse, of course, waiting to break free. But also, my greed. My viciousness. My unblinking, unshaken compulsion to be the best, always.

The world saw a golden boy who invested in smart, safe, *legal* companies.

Only a few saw what else that false idol got up to.

My old friend Adrian Cross was one of those few. Adrian and I, along with six others along the full spectrum of “bad” and “good”, became friends back in business school. Our friend Thomas, who started our little group, used to say that “in all of us, there is both king and villain”.

Inside Thomas, unfortunately, there also ended up being brain cancer, which took him far too young. But before, when we

were all young, headstrong, and ready to conquer the world—or at least our own slice of it—that’s exactly what we called ourselves: the Kings and Villains.

Adrian, being the head of the Cross crime family, was obviously squarely on the “villains” side of things. But I didn’t actually see villainy in him, and other men like him.

I saw opportunity.

And I saw *money*.

Adrian and I did plenty of illegal business together back then, and even more over the years, through various shell companies I formed to protect my “golden” reputation. I think for the longest time Adrian thought he was the only “man of ill repute” I worked with, and I only did it because of our friendship through the Kings and Villains.

But he wasn’t the only one. Not even close.

I’ve done business with the most dangerous criminal elements on the planet: the Kashenko, Volkov, and Reznikov Bratva families. Another of the Kings and Villains crew, Kristoff Zima’s former oligarch boss, Boris Tsavakov. The Scaliame Syndicate out of Chicago. The Carvelli family. The Bolinaro Cartel.

I’ve also done business with Cillian Kildare, the reigning king of the Irish Mafia.

Lethally dangerous, viciously powerful, and sadistically minded, with the added bonus of being a certifiable *psychopath*. We haven’t even spoken in almost ten years.

Suffice to say, I have *several* questions about him showing up at my fucking front door at midnight.

“Sir?”

I frown, swirling the whiskey in my glass. Part of me wants to sit here and analyze this chess board that Cillian's thrown down at my front door and figure out what the fuck he's doing here.

Or should I say what he *wants*. Because I know this isn't a social call. Our history does not make us friends.

I grunt, slamming back the glass of whiskey and setting it down before I stand.

"I'll see him downstairs—"

Suddenly, there's a commotion behind Wentworth. My butler whirls back to the hallway, falling out of sight.

"Sir! You were asked to wait until—"

There's the metallic click of the gun hammer being pulled back, accompanied by a wheezing choke that sounds a whole lot like Wentworth. A second later, my suspicions are confirmed as my butler comes staggering backwards into my office with his hands raised and a gun jammed into the underside of his jaw.

The man holding the gun has tattoo ink across the back of his hands. He's wearing a black shirt and tie. And he has a cold, slightly off-putting, psychotic smile on his chiseled face.

"Cillian," I growl, guarding myself, yet trying to appear as open as I can.

Cillian's venomous green eyes gleam, and that shark-like smile of his curls wickedly.

"Did you nick yourself shaving?"

He grins coldly, nodding at the white line of my scar on my face.

“It appears you’ve wandered into stand-up comedy over the last ten years, Cillian.”

His unhinged smile widens dangerously, the darkness behind his eyes glinting.

Yeah, this is not a social call.

“Cillian.”

“*Oliver.*”

“Maybe we could start whatever-this-is off on the right foot by you taking the gun away from my butler’s throat.”

He glances back at the gun, as if just realizing he’s a sneeze away from painting my office with a man’s brains. His lips curl as he leans close to Wentworth.

“Let me say this as nicely as I can,” he growls. “Order me around again, and I’ll cut you from balls to throat.”

He doesn’t wait for a response. But he slowly releases the hammer and then pulls the gun away. Wentworth glances at me, and I nod before he makes a hasty exit from my office, closing the door behind him.

Then we’re alone, the fallen Golden Boy and the psychopathic king.

“Well?” I mutter, glaring at him. “Are you going to keep me in suspense or are you going to tell me to what I owe the pleasure of this midnight visit?”

It’s not lost on me that he hasn’t holstered his gun. But I know men like Cillian well enough to understand that showing fear to them is like cutting your wrist in front of a shark.

And so I casually turn to the bar cart.

“I was just going to bed, Cillian. So whatever the fuck the point of this visit is, kindly arrive at it.”

“You want to know why I’m here, Prince?”

“More than anything,” I answer sarcastically, pouring a single drink for myself and none for him.

“You have something that belongs to me, Prince.”

I stiffen at the lethal edge in his voice.

“*That’s* why I’m here.”

“Our business concluded ten years ago, Cillian—”

“I’m not quite sure I appreciate your fucking tone.”

His hand lands on my arm, gripping me as if to spin me around.

That’s a fucking mistake.

Cillian knew the old me—the “golden” me that flirted occasionally with darkness but still lived in the sunlight. The man who kept in shape and who boxed on Fridays with his friends from business school, but who was a keyboard warrior more than anything else.

He doesn’t know the new me.

The second his hand touches my arm, the black-cloud monster in me thunders to life. The beast roars awake, smashing through his cage. In one second, I’ve whirled with a snarl on my lips, shocking Cillian by my speed and strength as I grab him by the collar and drive him back across the room where I slam him against a bookshelf by the window.

*Hard.*

“And *you* should appreciate how much you fucking underestimate me,” I rasp in a demonic voice forged in the pits

of Hell.

Blood roars in my ears, the thunder of it almost overwhelming my senses before I suck in air through my clenched teeth.

Breathe.

Control yourself.

Cillian eyes me—not with fear, but certainly with keen curiosity.

“Our *business*,” I mutter thickly, “is complete—”

“Our fucking *business*?” he roars suddenly, knocking my hands from his collar as his face turns livid with rage. Before I can blink, his gun is back out, hammer cocked, and pointed right between my eyes.

“Our business is that you have my *niece* locked in a fucking tower.”

Everything freezes.

---

“I ONLY MET HER ONCE, on the day she was born.”

My pulse thuds in my neck. I greedily suck down the whiskey in my glass as I watch Cillian pace the room, swirling the drink I finally poured him. The magnitude of the information he’s just dropped at my feet sucks the very air from the room.

She’s not Rose “Carson”. She’s not even Rose fucking *Laurent*.

She’s Rose *Kildare*.

“My sister...”

Cillian turns, green eyes narrowing. “Bet you didn’t even know I had a sister, did you?”

He’s right, I didn’t. But it’s not exactly like my financial dealings with a sociopathic Irish crime boss ever gave me any inclination to give a fuck about his family.

“Her name was Saoirse. She was headstrong as fuck, but also flighty, and prone to throwing herself at any shiny thing that caught her eye.”

Cillian’s jaw grits as he takes a deep sip of his whiskey.

“Our father pampered her. He gave her the world and made her a true princess with one hand, while honing me into a weapon with the other. He needed me to be that blade for him.”

He stops at the window, drumming his fingers on the sill and glares into the night.

“Back then there was blood in the water between my family and the Drakos family. Still is, but it was bad back in those days. Finally, Aeneas Drakos and my father, Brendan, brokered a peace that would end the war. Aeneas’s oldest son, Atlas, would marry my sister, Saoirse. A marriage to connect the two families, end the war, and make all the rich criminals just a little bit richer,” he mutters with an edge of bitterness before glancing at me.

“Are you familiar with the Drakos family?”

“Not personally.”

But I certainly know their reputation. I know the family is dangerous and extremely powerful. I know Aeneas is known as a strong man of sorts, and I know he has five sons and a daughter that he, bewilderingly, named after various Greek



gods—including Atlas, his oldest, who will one day soon take his place on the Drakos throne.

“I’m aware of them, of course. Though we’ve never done business.”

Killian snorts. “No, I don’t imagine the Golden Boy would ever do business with Aeneas Drakos.”

“I did business with you, didn’t I?”

“Yes, but I’m charming,” he growls.

When I say nothing and simply throw him a look, he shrugs.

“Compared to the fucking Greeks, trust me, I’m a *gentleman*.”

“What the fuck does any of this have to do with Rose?”

Cillian stiffens a little at the possessive note in my voice.

“Precisely *whose* room is she staying in, Prince?” he hisses with the sharpness of a naked blade.

I glare at him. “Her own. Which she’s locked into, because she’s my collateral. Not my fucking *date*,” I grunt.

His eyes narrow.

“While the idea of her being your captive is enough to make me want to cut your fucking head off, Prince,” he growls dangerously, “believe me, things will get far worse if I get the impression that you’re thinking of her as anything *more* than that.”

We’re both still, glaring at each other like two predators sizing each other up across the silence of the room.

“Threaten me again in my own home, and you’ll find out exactly how much I’ve changed since the last time we knew each other, Cillian.”

Green fire swirls in his eyes as they stab into me, the tattoo ink on his neck rippling as he grinds his jaw.

“It concerns Rose because of the terms of the marriage arrangement between the Drakos and Kildare families. Saoirse was betrothed to Atlas. But then she was...” His eyes darken. “*Distracted*,” he mutters. “By something sparkly and shiny.”

My jaw grits.

“Paul Laurent.”

Cillian nods.

“The little prick swooped in, swept her off her feet, and carried away her away to fuck-knows-where. The next thing we knew, it was five months later, Aeneas was ready to go to fucking war over the whole thing, and Saoirse was back on our doorstep *very* pregnant and very much abandoned by that piece of shit Paul.”

*Fuck.*

My mind flashes back to when I asked Rose about her mother, when she painted more of a tragic Romeo and Juliet situation, with parents who didn’t approve of their daughter being with her father.

Which was apparently *bullshit*.

My brow creases.

“Is she aware of her background?”

Cillian looks away out the window again.

“She is now. She had a sit-down meeting with Atlas himself not a week ago, where he informed her of the terms of the arrangement.”

I grit my teeth.

“Which are?”

“Which are that since my dear, idiot sister decided to get herself knocked up by Paul Limp-Dick, and Aeneas cancelled the engagement...”

His eyes narrow to slits.

“And seeing as there is now *another* female Kildare...”

I almost snap. The way my beast slams against the bars inside rattles me to my core and has my throat closing tightly before I force in a breath of air.

“You’re fucking joking.”

“Unkind speculations concerning my career in stand-up comedy aside,” Cillian hisses, “*no*, Prince, I am not fucking joking. That’s what the meeting with Atlas was about: him informing my dear niece that it would now be *her* that he would be marrying to cement the truce between our families.”

The beast roars inside. Blackness swirls in my very soul, and razor-sharp talons sink into my heart as my vision goes blood-red at the edges.

“Prince.”

Dimly, I realize it’s the fourth or fifth time he’s said my name. With a superhuman effort, I drag myself out of the abyss inside my head. I blink, suck in a breath, and down the rest of my whiskey before I slam the glass down with finality.

“If you’re here to carry her off to some fucking arranged wedding somewhere...” I hiss dangerously, trying to hide the strange, possessive feeling in my chest from Cillian.

And from myself.

“It’s not fucking happening. I have business with Paul. And until such business concludes, she’ll remain right—”

A snarl falls from my twisted lips as Cillian surges across the room toward me. He crashes into me, catching me off-guard and sending me smashing into the wall behind me.

But then, the monster takes over.

With a roar, the beast leaps from its cage, turning me from angry to lethal. From guarded and grim to savage and vengeful. Cillian’s eyes flicker with something as close to nervousness as they ever get as I whirl, twisting his weight against him and sending him sprawling to the floor.

He’s up fast, though he doesn’t come at me again. This time, we circle each other, teeth bared, fists clenched, the two predators no longer sizing each other up but preparing to tear each other apart.

“My niece is not collateral, Prince,” he hisses dangerously.

“That is *exactly* what she is, until Paul fucking delivers.”

“Get my blood out of your fucking jail cell—”

“She’s not in a *jail cell*. She’s in a lavish suite, being taken care of in a manner befitting a guest of honor in my home.”

*More or less.*

He stares at me. I stare right back, unblinking. Finally, after a full half-minute of this, Cillian grunts and turns away. Slowly, he shakes his head.

“This new you?” he mutters. “This dangerous version? The walk on the wild side Prince?”

He turns to bore his eyes into mine.

“You’re walking in fucking quicksand, my friend. You’re playing with fi—”

*Fire.*

He bites it back just in time, his mouth slamming shut. Mine curls dangerously at the corners.

“You were saying?”

He takes a breath.

“I don’t give a shit about the Greeks, Prince. And I’d be happy to have Rose spend her life *away* from this world of mine, which is precisely why I let her stay in that fucking convent for the last twenty years. To keep her away from danger, and from having targets painted on her back. But they know about her now, and Atlas *will not* be stopped. If I know you have her here, it’s only a matter of days or perhaps hours before he does, too.”

My voice is a menacing whisper.

“How *did* you know she was here?”

Cillian prowls to the bar cart and pours himself a fresh glass, downing it before he turns to glare viciously at me.

“Because strangers though we may be, she’s still family. She’s my blood, Prince. And while I was fine letting her live her life without the world knowing her connection to the Kildare name and the subsequent target on her back, I still checked in on her at the convent from time to time. When I did so a few weeks ago, and my source there mentioned she’d run off with her father...”

His face darkens.

“After that, I’ll just say my people rapidly connected the dots concerning your imprisonment of Paul, his release, and her

subsequent disappearance.”

I rake my nails down my jaw as I try and read between the lines.

“If you’re working with Paul in *any* capacity, Cillian,” I growl quietly, “now would be a good time to mention it.”

He chuckles mirthlessly.

“Paul’s stupid, but not stupid enough to cross my path.”

“Are you hunting him?”

“*Not* if doing so puts my niece in jeopardy,” he says icily.

“She’s not in any jeopardy. But I need Paul alive. At least until he does what I need him to do. After that...”

“After that, if you get in my way, I won’t blink to shoot him through you, Prince.”

“Noted.”

“There’ll be a war for her, Oliver. And as much as I can tell you’ve been hitting the gym,” he grumbles sarcastically. “And as dark and dangerous as this new Oliver Prince is...”

He shakes his head.

“You do *not* want to go toe to toe with Atlas Drakos. On anything, but least of all a second bride that was promised to him after the first one was stolen.”

Maybe I should worry that even Cillian fucking Kildare seems apprehensive about getting into a fight with Atlas Drakos.

But it doesn’t faze me. And, I realize with a nasty start, it doesn’t change anything in regard to the temptation locked up down the hall.

“Was there anything else?” I grunt.

Cillian makes a scoffing sound as he slowly shakes his head at me.

“What the fuck happened to you, Prince?”

“Time to go, Cillian.”

“Look, what happened...Jacob...” He shakes his head. “I can’t imagine your grief—”

“You’re right,” I snap brutally. “You cannot.”

“Maybe not,” he spits back. “But you’re acting as if the world is ending. I’ve been monitoring your business, Prince. I’ve seen your stock sell-offs, seen the way you’re rampaging through your portfolio, shuttering businesses, closing accounts, consolidating.”

Cillian continues to stare at me, unblinking.

“You may think that because your personal world came crashing down, the rest of the world is ending, too,” I continue. “But I promise you, it’ll keep spinning, Prince, whether you want it to or not.”

For a second, that psychotic glint flickers in his green eyes as he shrugs.

“You can always take the easy route and just off yourself.”

He smiles and I smile right back. I can tell my lack of even a flicker of reaction unnerves him.

“It’s always an option.”

His brow furrows as his smile drops.

“Okay, I was convinced this was an act. I’m convinced it’s not, now.”

I laugh coldly, turning to splash more whiskey into my glass.

“You’re no comedian, Cillian. And I’m sure as shit no fucking actor.”

“I was always curious how dark it was behind all that gold.”

“*And now?*” I hiss quietly through clenched teeth, whirling on him.

His mouth turns down at the corners.

“For what it’s worth, I am truly sorry about what happened to you.”

I laugh coldly as I swallow back my drink.

“Everyone’s fucking *sorry*,” I snap.

“This is more than grief, Prince. Granted, I might not know *your* grief. But grief and I are fairly well acquainted, and this is...bigger.” He peers at me. “What *really* happened to you?”

He tenses as I spin to him savagely, smiling demonically as the black poison swirls in my very soul.

“I took the fucking mask off. Now, Cillian...”

My voice turns to ice.

“Because we were once business associates, I’m telling you one last time, as nicely as I can, to get the *fuck* out of my house. Before you learn *precisely* how dark it is behind the gold.”





THE WORST PART is the insomnia.

Well, no. The worst part is being held captive. The part where I'm, you know, locked up in a room in a sprawling haunted mansion, lorded over by a terrifying beast of a man.

A terrifying beast of a man who is a hundred times more attractive than he has any right to be.

The not being able to sleep thing is new for me. At Our Lady Hildegard, as far as I remember, I slept like a baby. But here, out of my element and thrust into the clutches of the monster, a thousand thoughts wake me every other hour throughout the night. Not surprising, really.

And then, when the insomnia keeps me awake, and I'm lying in the bed in the dark, more often than not my thoughts return to my captor himself.

I know that's wrong. I know I *should* be thinking of my father, who's probably out there worried sick about me, hunting frantically for whatever it is he's supposed to find for the man keeping me hostage. He's probably beside himself that he can't get even get in touch with me or hear my voice to know that, relatively speaking, I'm okay.

And yet, that's not what I keep thinking about when I can't sleep at night.

Instead, I think of *him*.

My captor.

My monster.

Because as terrifying as he is, and as much of a surging, physical manifestation of fury and hate that he embodies, the façade that keeps the monster barely contained is, as I said, *alarmingly* attractive.

My mind flickers back to the pages and pages of images that the google search showed me of the old Oliver Prince, The Golden Boy, the toast of the tabloids: the smug, cocky, charming grin. The blonde hair swept back from his face. The sparkling blue eyes and dimples on his cheeks.

The man was usually flanked by at least two different famous actresses, or models, or socialites, champagne flute in hand, toasting the room.

I compare those images to the man who prowls these halls like an avenging spirit. The demon with the heavy footsteps, and the bulging shoulders and biceps. The swarthy scruff on his jaw, and disheveled hair.

The once-charming twinkle in his eye that's turned to a look of stony malice.

And yet, even with all of that, it's made him somehow even more attractive. Dangerously so. I could no more look away from a wolf with blood dripping from its fangs, or the seductive glint of a blade.

Sometimes those lingering, forbidden thoughts concerning my captor grow more intense. When I'm caught in that state just

before waking, and consciousness drags me from my dreams.

Dark, depraved, sinful dreams. Dreams in which the beastly king of this castle smashes down my door and forces himself on me.

Dreams where he uses the bedding to tie my hands to the bedpost, uses his powerful hands to tear my clothes away, and does to me what he pleases.

These are dreams that I *should* be calling nightmares. I should wake screaming and terrified. Not panting, pulse roaring, thighs slick.

When I find myself awake and shaking at two o'clock in the morning with the lingering tendrils of these forbidden dreams teasing across my skin and a wet heat between my legs, I end up bolting to the shower. Where I shamefully scrub the sin from my skin and from my thoughts.

But cleansing my body also seems to electrify it. In my attempts to wash away the sinful thoughts, my soapy fingers end up running over nerve endings already revved up from the depraved dreams that have woken me in the first place.

Each night, I'm going to bed telling myself to fear the monster that prowls these halls.

To hate him.

To loathe him.

To see him for the devil he is, and to not dream those forbidden dreams again.

But then, three nights later, those same dreams are exactly what wake me again. I shudder, slick with sweat and something else as I sit up in bed gripping the sheets.

I swallow, acutely aware of the charged feeling dancing over my skin—the pulse of something sinful between my thighs, and the way my nipples rub against the silk tank top I’ve been sleeping in.

That tank top is just the beginning, by the way. Less than twenty-four hours after my arrival here, the walk-in closet went from empty to completely full of clothes. Gorgeous, beautiful, expensive clothes, all exactly my size.

Not a closet full of skimpy lingerie and bikinis, or anything else overtly sexual. They’re all beautiful and tasteful clothes. And yet, all of them have a little...something.

An added hint of sexiness.

Like a perfectly normal sun dress, but about two inches shorter than it should be. Or a beautiful full length gown with three-quarter sleeves...

And a neckline that plunges between my breasts almost all the way down to my belly button.

Even the pajamas that I found folded away in my closet one morning were perfectly “normal”—but they’re silk, which rubs against every part of me when I twist in bed, like a sinful lover’s touch.

Like they did tonight.

Shuddering, I fling back the covers and abruptly get out of bed. But even that movement has the silk dragging across the hard, electrified buds of my nipples, instantly sending a zing of something heated and dangerous between my thighs.

And so the routine continues.

Wake. Shame. Shower. Sleep.

I turn to head towards the bathroom when suddenly, the metallic sound of the bolt on the door of my chambers being roughly drawn back sends a shiver up my spine and yanks my heart up into my throat.

I whirl, wide-eyed in the darkness as the door slams open. My throat closes, and a tingling feeling somewhere between scared and erotically desperate teases over my skin as I drink in the sight of the hulking shadow looming in the doorway.

I tremble as the moonlight from outside illuminates the unearthly blue in his eyes as they pierce through the darkness. He says nothing, and before I can blink or say anything myself, he's surging towards me, and every horrible, forbidden, electric fantasy I've had of this exact scenario comes back, pouring through my veins like molten fire.

Every dream I've had of him doing *exactly* this roars through my head. Oliver kicking in my door and storming towards me, ready to put me on the floor, or against the wall, and then take me any way he pleases like his own personal plaything.

Bent over the nearest object like his possession to dominate.

*None* of these scenarios should excite me so, even now as he storms towards me.

But they do.

I shiver, backing away from him, my eyes wide as my pulse thunders in my ears. But he doesn't slow down or stop. And for one horrible, edge-of-the-cliff second as I back against the post of my bed, heart racing, skin tingling, I have no idea if Oliver is about to throttle me or kiss me.

Or fuck me.

Or kill me.

Or all four of those things in an unknown order.

The looming shadow of him surges across the room, and I gasp, choking with adrenaline when he all but slams into me and wraps his powerful hand around my throat.

*“Wait! Please!”*

The fantasy shatters. This is the end. Something’s gone wrong. Whatever my father was supposed to do for him has fallen through. What was I thinking? He’s not going to kiss me.

He really is going to kill me.

I’ve never once taken a self-defense class, but on instinct, I thrash out, kicking his shin as hard as I can and making him roar and back away.

“Please!” I scream at him. “Whatever it is, just give him more time!”

Oliver snarls, wincing as he raises his leg to rub it with his hand, glaring at me.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Aren’t you...?”

I shiver violently.

“Aren’t you here to kill me?”

Oliver’s brows knit together.

“I fucking *should*, after that stunt,” he mutters, rubbing his shin again. But then he stands tall, rolling his shoulders and cracking his neck as he moves towards me once again.

This time, whatever fight or flight response I had in me before is gone.

I whimper, cowering against the bedpost as he looms over me.

“Please...don’t—”

“You lied to me.”

I tremble as I look up into his smoldering blue eyes.

“No—”

“Tell me again about your mother.”

*Crap.*

My face pales as I see the truth written all over his face.

“You’re a fucking *Kildare*,” he seethes.

“I—I don’t even know what that—”

“That’s Irish fucking mafia *royalty*,” he snaps.

“Congratulations, you’re the Kate goddamn Middleton of Gaelic organized crime.”

His hauntingly, darkly beautiful eyes glint viciously.

“You’re also a *liar*.”

What?

“I didn’t lie to you.”

“You knowingly told me another story, which was the opposite of the truth,” Oliver snaps. “In common parlance, we call that *lying*.”

“I didn’t...”

I shiver, dragging my teeth over my bottom lip. I’m aware that I’m staring into his eyes, which feels like something dangerous I shouldn’t be doing. But I’m helpless to pull them away.

“I didn’t know if it was true. I just found out before I arrived here.”

He glares at me.

“Well, it’s fucking true. Do you know anything about the Kildare family?”

*No.*

“I—”

“You know what, don’t even answer that. I can’t trust a single fucking thing that comes out of your mouth anyway.”

I stare at him, anger rising within me as he starts to turn away.

“What do you *want* from me?” I snap.

I gasp as he whirls back on me.

“*Obedience*,” he snarls. “And I want the truth. *And* I want you to stop this ridiculous idea of hiding steak knives at dinner or knotting your bedsheets together in some comically hare-brained plan to escape, which would most likely kill or at least maim you.”

My face falls.

“Yes. I know all, and I *see* all, in this house,” he rasps.

His eyes drop to my chest. Horribly, my nipples pucker instantly; hardening against the silky top as my core suddenly floods with something warm and forbidden. And exciting.

Dangerously exciting.

Oliver’s hand raises towards me. For a second, visions flood my brain of myself as the heroine on the cover of one of the paperback romances that Sister Teresa used to hide in the alcove behind the toilets. The naughty books with the images of rough men with wild hair, chiseled muscle, and open shirts, ripping the bodices off fainting women.



And that's exactly how I picture myself: about to faint as this wild-eyed beast of a man shreds my clothes away.

His hand moves towards me, and I gasp as it flies to my chest. But Oliver doesn't rip the pajama top away. Instead, his fingers curl around the little locket on the delicate chain around my neck.

*"Wait!"*

My eyes flare as he yanks and the chain snaps, sending a horrible feeling down my spine.

"Don't you dare!" I scream, instantly lunging for the locket as he pulls it away. Then I gasp as his other hand juts out, his powerful fingers wrapping around my throat and pinning me to the bedpost behind me.

I glare death at him, gritting my teeth.

"Give that to me!" I blurt.

He says nothing, keeping me pinned as he thumbs it open and reads aloud.

"To my wandering star. Love, Mom'. Well, isn't that *touching*," he sneers coldly.

"That's from my mother!" I hiss at him. "And it's the only thing I have from her!"

"That's not true at all, though. You have her last fucking name, too."

I hold my gaze firm.

*"Give that back to me."*

"No." He smiles cruelly. "This is the price of lying to me."

I scream—or try to, but it's hard with his hand wrapped around my neck like that. I fight and writhe, kicking at him,

hitting nothing.

“You’re a monster!”

“So I’ve been told.”

“Do you have any idea what it means to lose your own family like that—”

*Oh God.*

The second it flies from my mouth, I wish I could turn back time. Images from the news of a blackened shell of a London townhouse flash through my head. Headlines involving Oliver. Others involving his son, Jacob.

My face goes white as his turns scarlet with fury. But he says nothing. His jaw grinds as he stares icy blue daggers all the way through me.

“I’m...” I swallow through the hand around my throat. “I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

His hand drops. His eyes cut into me once more. And then, without another word, he whirls and storms away, slamming and locking the door behind him.



AS IT TURNS OUT, Cillian was right when he mentioned Atlas Drakos coming for Rose. Less than six hours after the visit from the angry Irish warlord, the Greek one came knocking.

Only it was less knocking and more charging at the gates of my house like he's ready for fucking war.

I'm shaken from sleep by a frantic pounding at my bedroom door. It comes again and again, until I finally snarl and drag myself from under the covers. I glare at the clock, and my mood darkens even more when I realize it's barely six in the fucking morning.

"What is it?!" I roar.

"Sir?"

Wentworth. Probably the only person I know who could rouse me from sleep this early, in this way, and live to tell about it.

"Sir, you have... visitors."

*Now fucking what.*

"Who?" I grunt.

Wentworth clears his throat politely.

"I believe it's Atlas Drakos, sir."

*Motherfucker.*

For two years, I've lived in silence here at my house. No drama. No bullshit. No visitors—at least, not aside from my old friends, when they tried stopping by to see how I was right after the fire.

And were promptly turned away at the fucking gate.

But somehow, in the span of roughly a week, I've been burglarized, put an old foe in a jail cell, and then swapped him out for his daughter, who I've imprisoned as my own personal peep show in the east wing. I've also had a gun pulled on my butler and been threatened by the Irish mafia.

Now, apparently, I've the goddamn *Greek* mafia about to about to shove a Trojan horse up my ass.

I pinch the bridge of my nose.

“Please tell me you don't have him waiting on the front steps.”

“I haven't even answered the door, sir.”

Considering the last time he opened the door to the head of a crime family he got a gun shoved into his throat, I can't really blame him.

“Alright, I'm coming.”

I lurch from the bed, yanking on some clothes before I storm over to the door and half rip it off its hinges. I nod gruffly at Wentworth before I start to move past him out into the hall.

“Sir, you're not going down there, are you?”

“Well, he's sure as fuck not coming up to my goddamn bedroom, Wentworth.”

“Sir,” he says worriedly. “Sir, I have to interject my—”

“Noted,” I grunt, pushing past him out the door of my study.

“*Sir*, perhaps this would be a good time to call in a special security force of some kind.”

“Yes, and we’ll just let Atlas Drakos hang around on my front stoop until they arrive. Because he’s *so* well known for his patience and civility,” I mutter as I storm towards the staircase down into the main foyer.

I’m not even downstairs before I can hear the thundering of pounding fists and the roaring of my name from outside.

Yeah, Cillian wasn’t wrong. If he found out that Rose was here through his network of informants and whisperers, it was only a matter of time before Atlas figured out I had his “betrothed” locked in my—

I stop halfway down the staircase, blind rage surging inside of me.

*His betrothed.*

“*Fuck that,*” I snarl.

“Sir?”

I glance back at Wentworth, paused on the stairs behind me. My brow furrows, and I shake my head, clearing it from the violently possessive feeling that just clawed its way up from the blackness in my chest.

“No, Wentworth. I’ll do this alone.”

“Sir, I can’t allow—”

“Consider it an order,” I growl quietly.

Wentworth and I might have a stoic relationship that has never once veered remotely close to warm and fuzzy, but I’ve still known the man for most of my life. And veteran status notwithstanding, the man is in his seventies.

If this turns bad, one, it's not like Wentworth is going to exactly turn the tide for me in a fight with Atlas Drakos. And two, it'll most likely get him killed. I don't want that.

“Sir—”

“You will go upstairs and stay upstairs and that is final.”

Marching the rest of the way down to the grand foyer, I stop in front of the looming front door and the pounding on the other side of it. I take a breath, square my shoulders, twist open the lock, and step back as it instantly flies open.

*Fuck. Me.*

Atlas didn't come alone. In the half a second it takes for the door to slam inward, I count Atlas himself together with four other thugs.

And half a second is all I get, because after that, he hits me like a freight train.

I grunt as his bulky frame slams into me, knocking me off my feet and toppling me to the marble floor with him landing on top of me.

Coming in hot like that was his first mistake.

I was prepared to be civil. Or at least happy not to immediately resort to physical violence. But when he hits me he shakes the beast inside of me awake. And the second that happens, it's like ripping the door of the cage wide open and letting the inky black darkness come pouring out to play.

Then I'm on him like the Devil himself.

Atlas has a prodigious reputation for being a bloodthirsty sadistic thug who revels in violence and inflicting pain, but even he looks shocked when I bodily throw him from me,

clamber to my feet, and crash into him like a fucking wrecking ball.

There's a roaring sound in my ears that may or may not be my own voice as my fist crushes into his face. Blindly, I shove him back, scattering the men behind him before I slam him to the wall next to the open door he's just kicked in.

I snarl, pure black toxic fury pulling my face into a death mask as I rear back to send my fist into the wall by way of his face, when suddenly, his men are on me.

All four of them grab me, tearing me from their boss as he hurls epithets in both Greek and English at me. In one motion, Atlas yanks a gun from a holster under his jacket, cocks the hammer, and levels it at my face.

And suddenly a gunshot thunders through the foyer.

I blink, completely sure that I'm about to look down and see my life bleeding out of me. But when I see Atlas' head jerk to the side and his eyes go wide, I turn as well.

Lucile is standing in the doorway to the to the coat room brandishing a smoking double-barreled hunting shotgun, with bits of plaster drifting like snow down from the ceiling above her head.

"That's *quite* enough of that!" she barks swiftly.

Atlas snarls and moves to bring the pistol up. But my housekeeper is faster, swiveling in the blink of an eye to level her weapon at his chest.

"I said, that's *quite* enough of that."

I clear my throat, glancing and nodding at Lucile before I yank my arms free of the stunned thugs behind me and clear my throat.

“Why don’t we all simmer the fuck down?”

Atlas turns to glare at me.

“Simmer down?” he growls. “You take my bride-to-be hostage and lock her in your fucking haunted house, and you want me to *simmer down*?”

“I believe it’s customary to *propose* to the lady before calling her your bride-to-be. Put the fucking gun away.”

He grits his teeth as his men move in from behind me to flank him. I glance left and right, realizing for the first time that only three of them are common thugs. The fourth is much more recognizable a face: Ares, Atlas’ younger brother.

Wonderful. A sociopath *and* the god of war, both ready to cut my throat in the middle of my foyer.

“Why don’t we sit and discuss these hostilities?” I hiss through clenched teeth.

Atlas shakes his head.

“This is not a discussion and there will be no fucking negotiations,” he spits heatedly. “You have Rose Kildare locked in a fucking *dungeon*.”

“I prefer to view it as, I have a *guest* staying at my house.”

Anger darkens his face.

“You have what is *mine*, locked away, pretending she is your own.”

At first I think it’s just his tone that rankles me. And for a moment, I want to say it’s the insolent, obnoxious way he’s talking down to me in my own fucking house that has the beast and the blackness ready to surge from inside, ready to go ballistic again.



But that's not it. Not at all.

"She's *mine*, Prince! Mine to wed, mine to bed, and *mine* to fuck like a good little who—"

I don't realize I'm moving until he's slammed flat against the wall again, my hands wrapped around his throat.

I hear nothing except a roaring sound like fire in my ears. I feel nothing except a burning sensation ripping through my veins. And I see nothing except true fear spreading across Atlas' typically stoic, scowling face.

And then the black and red mist completely sucks me under.

"Sir! SIR!"

I blink the bloodlust away and suddenly realize there are something like six sets of hands attempting to drag me off Atlas.

I'm also aware of the cold metal of a gun against my temple.

The fury breaks apart like a wall crumbling down. My eyes dart to the side where I see a terrified-looking Wentworth along with Lucile screaming my name.

I blink. My hands release Atlas' throat, even allowing him to shove me back as he wheezes.

"*Enough*," Lucile says tersely.

I blink again, realizing she's speaking to Ares, who seems to be the one holding his gun to my head.

"Mr. Drakos," Lucile says again, her voice tight. "I said, that's enough now."

The gun slowly pulls back from my temple. In front of me, Atlas chokes and coughs, swearing violently before he drags his bloodshot eyes up to me.

“So it’s true, then?” he rasps, glaring death at me.

“Is *what* true?”

“That you’ve gone full on savage? That you’ve turned into a fucking monster?”

My jaw tightens as my eye ticks.

Atlas sneers at me.

“Yeah... When the Golden Boy falls from grace, word gets around.”

I glower at him, still saying nothing.

“How does it feel, Prince?” he rasps darkly. “Being reduced to *our* level. You know, I hear they may even bring charges against you.”

*Stay in your cage.*

My face is blank, my body betraying nothing. But inside, it’s taking every single ounce of my willpower not to let the monster out again. To contain him.

The whining in my ears is growing louder. The temperature is rising, and my vision is starting to blur.

Atlas is playing chicken with a fucking nuclear warhead, and he needs to *stop*.

“Now, mind you, I’d have done the same—covering it all up, that is—if it were *my* son who turned out to be a pyromaniac little psychopa—”

“ENOUGH!”

Atlas finally stops when Lucile jams the barrel of her shotgun against his chest.

“*That’s enough,*” she chokes again, her eyes brimming with tears before she somehow manages to collect herself.

She pulls the gun away from Atlas.

“I stopped playing with the gloves on, if that’s what you mean,” I growl quietly, pulling his attention back to me.

It wasn’t his tone just now that set me off. It wasn’t the fact that this is my house that he’s decided to wage a battle in.

It’s that he called her *his*. And the image of him laying his hands on Rose—touching her. Having her.

Fucking her—

The whirlwind inside surges back up like a tsunami before I manage to swallow it down again. Even replaying Atlas’ words in my head has something green and vicious welling up like venom inside of my heart, to the point where I have to bite it back.

I need him gone.

Now.

I need him gone before I can’t contain this anymore.

“She belongs to—”

“I believe she would have a different opinion of that,” I snarl at Atlas. “But even besides that, I don’t give a fuck.”

His eyes narrow.

“Her mother was *mine* and was taken from me. I will have what is owed me.”

“You’ll have your teeth and your own balls choking your throat if you don’t leave in the next thirty seconds,” I snap coldly, eliciting a look of rage on Atlas’s face and a raised eyebrow on his brother’s.

“Rose is here under my control, for my own reasons.”

The last thing I need to do right now is mention Paul or that he’s technically working for me to a man who may very well hate him even more than I do. Because I don’t need Atlas Drakos out there hunting Paul down like a dog.

At least, not until I get what I need from him.

Atlas is about as used to hearing the word *no* as you’d imagine. I see the rage roar in his eyes, and his hand twitches as if about ready to go for his gun again. Before he can say or do anything stupid, I stick my hand into my jacket pocket, and when it comes out, Rose’s locket is dangling from my fingers.

“You want her?”

Atlas peers at the little locket, and his eyes widen in recognition. Yeah, he recognizes it as hers.

“Let me clarify. Do you want her in *one piece*?”

If slowly becoming a monster the last few years has taught me anything, it’s how to talk to fucking monsters.

Atlas’s mouth thins.

“Careful, Prince.”

I shake my head, my eyes locked onto his.

“Stay away from my home and any business that concerns me,” I hiss quietly.

“And what business is that, Golden Boy?” he leers. “The business of her father running errands for you?”

*Shit.*

I keep my face utterly neutral. But I can see the glint in Atlas’ eyes.

“Do you think I’m stupid, Prince?”

I’m not sure which is greater: the willpower it takes not to answer that question, or the willpower it took not to yank Rose against me last night and crush my lips to hers.

“I’m perfectly aware that Laurent is out there doing something for you. So let me put this plainly. Give me the girl, and I won’t hunt him down like the dog he—”

“No, let *me* put *this* plainly,” I snap coldly, lurching at him suddenly enough that he flinches.

“Paul is working for me. If you hurt him, if you go *near* him, if you keep him from that business, you’ll get your prize back. But she’ll come in small, neatly cut, individually-wrapped pieces. *Do I make myself clear?*”

The foyer goes eerily silent. Atlas glances at Ares, and then turns back to me with his brow arched.

“So, when did the Golden Boy go full psycho?”

“When I decided it was much more fun to play without the mask on,” I reply without blinking. “Now, Mr. Drakos, I’m giving you to the count of three to get the fuck out of my house.”

I can tell he still wants to fight. But then Ares turns and whispers something in Greek to his brother.

Ares Drakos is as famously unhinged and violent as his brother. All of the Drakos offspring are. But Ares clearly got most of the brains in the family. Atlas hisses something back and then shoots me a venomous glare. His younger brother grips his arm again, growling in Greek before the older Drakos finally mutters something and nods.

“I’m leaving, Prince.”

“No need to announce, just get the fuck out.”

He smiles darkly at me.

“Not because I feel threatened. Not because I’m scared of you. But because I think I might actually enjoy watching the Golden Boy fully descend into this madness. And when you do, and when you finally rip apart at the seams...”

He smiles at me.

“I’ll be back. To piss on the pieces of you and *take* what is mine.”

“Tick-tock, Atlas. Three, two...”

Atlas nods at his brother and his men. And without another word, they turn and leave the way they came.



FOR THE LAST FOUR DAYS, my morning routine has been the same: Lucile knocks on my door, usually within half an hour of me waking, in order to wheel in a tray with a delicious breakfast and black tea.

On the fifth day, however, the routine changes.

For one, I wake up *way* earlier than usual. At first, I'm unclear why. Then I hear shouting and what sounds like an actual monster roaring from somewhere in the house. I shiver, sinking deeper under the covers as my pulse quickens. A few minutes later, I hear the sound of a car roaring out of the driveway, and the house is silent again.

An hour or so later, I'm still wide awake when Lucile's knock lands on the door.

"Morning, dear!" she says cheerily, making me wonder for a second if I dreamed the whole thing.

The door unlocks, per routine. But when she opens it, my brows knit.

It's just her in the doorway. No wheelie tray. No delicious smells of bacon and oatmeal and black tea. I smile at her just

the same, though, doing my very best to hide my disappointment.

But Lucile smirks when she sees the careful way I'm smiling at her.

"Hungry, are we?"

Guilt slams into me.

"Oh, it's totally not a problem. I'm sure you have other things to besides—"

"Come on, then."

I blink.

*What?*

For the last four days, the only times I've left this room is in the evenings, dressed in an extravagant gown, to have dinner while sitting across from the surly, sulking, savage master of this castle, usually almost in silence. Other than that, the door to my suite hasn't been unlocked.

But even as I think that, Lucile shrugs and steps away from my door, leaving it wide open.

"Well, if you are hungry, I trust you can find the kitchen?"

I blink again as she disappears, the door still wide open.

Is this a trick? It is Oliver screwing with me, waiting for me to run so he can chase me like the psychopath he is?

I could see him doing that.

I swallow as I pull back the covers and step out of the bed. I pad quietly to the door and peek out and around the corner, just in time to see Lucile about to disappear down the stairs at the end of the hall. She turns, winking at me.



“Go ahead and get dressed, and then meet me in the kitchen. I’ll have tea ready.”

“Where—”

“Just follow your nose, dear.”

Then she’s gone.

What the *heck*?

Back in the room, I frown and look around cautiously, as if waiting for Oliver to jump out and say “Boo!” But it doesn’t happen. So instead, I quickly change into leggings, socks, and a hooded sweatshirt.

Cautiously, still expecting the “gotcha” moment, I step into the hallway. Shivering, I look around at the vaulted, gilded ceilings, the suit of armor down the hall, the huge stained glass window near the staircase.

Then, creeping forward, I do exactly as Lucile told me to.

I follow my nose.

---

“THERE WE GO!”

Lucile smiles brightly as she settles a tray of tea, toast, bacon, and fruit salad on the kitchen island in front of me. There is, of course, a question I’m *dying* to ask. But it feels as if asking it will shatter this dream, or break this spell, or whatever this is.

Quietly, I sip my tea, warmed and comforted by Lucile’s motherly movement around the kitchen. Aside from the state-of-the-art chrome and white marble everywhere, it almost feels like I’m back in the kitchens at Our Lady Hildegard.

“Go ahead and ask. I know you’re bursting to.”

I feel my cheeks redden as I sheepishly look up at her.

“It’s not a trick, dear,” Lucile chuckles with a fond smile.

“So...does this mean I’m allowed to leave my—”

The sound of thundering footsteps approaching has my chest seizing and my pulse quickening. The warm, sunny atmosphere of the kitchen instantly evaporates as the storm cloud named Oliver Prince rolls in, filling the room with his inky black energy.

At dinner, the “old” Oliver Prince emerges, at least in terms of his clothing. When we sit at his huge table together, I’m always in by far the most expensive, gorgeous gown I’ve ever even dreamed of wearing, a new one each time, while he sits across from me in a suit that is clearly custom tailored to the last stitch.

But when we’re not sitting in near silence at our strangely formal dinners, he’s dressed as he is now, in dark jeans and a black v-neck t-shirt.

A t-shirt that hugs his bulging biceps, broad shoulders, and powerful chest *way* too closely. One that teases me with glimpses of swirling tattoo ink on his arms and chest, the complete opposite of the “Golden Boy” of the finance world.

In every picture of Oliver from the Before Times, he looks so clean cut and... *good*. The tattoos give me a hidden glimpse of a darkness no one and no camera ever saw before.

Which makes seeing them now feel strangely intimate, almost illicit.

He barges into the room and stops right in front of me, towering over me like a stern teacher about to mete out punishment. I tense, frozen, terrified that I’ve been “caught”,

even though Lucile just told me this wasn't a trick. But when Oliver looks at me, he just arches an eyebrow.

And his eyes burn right into my very soul.

Instantly, I remember the way his hand slid over my skin last night. The way he loomed over me, either ready to kiss me or devour me whole.

I shiver under his gaze, swallowing thickly.

“You have free run of the house.”

I blink rapidly, confused, because there's no way my ears just got that correctly.

“What?”

“I'm quite certain you heard me.”

My brows knit. “You're serious? I mean I can really go wherever—”

“The *house*,” he growls. “Not the grounds, unless you are accompanied. My office is strictly off limits, as is the entirety of the west wing.”

“What's in the west wing?”

“It doesn't matter. You won't be going there. Is that clear?”

I nod quickly.

“Crystal clear.”

He grunts, turning and grabbing a mug before pouring himself a cup of coffee. I watch him slug it back almost like a duty, an item on his to-do list he needs to cross off, not something to enjoy at the start of the day.

When he sets the mug down, I clear my throat.

“May I please have my locket back?”

He turns to glare at me. And suddenly, for the first time since he walked in, I notice the bruising on the side of his face. Not the scar that's always there, or the strip of shiny skin along his neck. These are fresh, purplish bruises.

“What happened?”

“It doesn't concern you.”

Lucile clears her throat from across the kitchen.

“I should take a look at—”

“It's *fine*, Lucile,” he grunts. Then he frowns, almost to himself, as he clears his throat. “But thank you.”

Lucile makes a clucking sound as she turns and makes her way out of the kitchen through another door. Oliver's brows stay deeply furrowed as he turns to level that vicious ice-blue gaze at me again.

“What did you want?”

“The locket?”

He frowns.

“The one you *stole* from me last night.”

Oliver's face darkens even more, and a flicker of something sinful and dangerous flares in his eyes. His hand comes up, and I tense, expecting it to wrap around my throat again. Instead, he shoves his fingers through his hair.

“Fine.”

He jams his hand into the pocket of his jeans and pulls out the locket, then slides it across the marble counter towards me. I almost can't believe it.

“Just remember. There are *consequences* to actions,” he growls quietly, his voice like woodsmoke and whiskey.

“Actions like breaking the rules, for instance. Keep that in mind.”

I nod quickly, giddy as I eye the locket.

“I will.”

My eyes raise to his, and instantly, as I meet his powerful gaze, it’s like something wraps around my heart and squeezes.

Then, without another word, he turns and storms out of the room.

Instantly, it’s like the sun comes back out. The air clears, and I exhale quietly, turning to see Lucile shaking her head as she comes back into the kitchen and starts stirring something she’s got simmering on the stove.

“I don’t get it,” I whisper quietly.

She glances back at me absently.

“Get what, dear?”

“How do you work with him? You’re not a prisoner here.”

“No, I’m not.”

“So, you could leave whenever you want.”

“I could.”

I stare at her. “So why do you stay? How do you put up with that? I mean I know you said you’ve known him and worked here forever, but still. Does he pay you millions a week or something?”

She laughs.

“He’s a grump, I’ll grant you that. And a bit of a bully at times.”

“*A bit*, yeah.”

She smirks, lifting a shoulder.

“But he really is a very good employer. And he does pay extremely well.”

“So, it’s the money, then?”

I mean why else would anyone put up with his moods and his glowering looks, and his sulky, Mad King persona?

Lucile laughs ruefully as she shakes her head.

“Money is not why I stay with the Prince household. I’ve known that man” ...she jabs a finger to the doorway he’s just left... “since he was three years old, when I came to work for his father, and his mother briefly, before she passed.”

“His mother died young?”

Lucile nods. “Very tragic. Even more so because, oh goodness, you think *he’s* a bully?” She shakes her head. “His father dwarfed him there. Reginald Prince was a hard, hard man. Saw the world through a single lens and it was his way or no way at all. Get on board or get out.”

“So, that’s why Oliver’s a jerk.”

“He’s had a rough go of it. And he truly wasn’t always like this. He was...” she shrugs. “There’s a goodness in him. It’s just hidden these days.”

“Since the fire.”

She nods, and a sad look comes over her face. I shake my head apologetically.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought that up.”

“No, it’s all right, dear. It’s good to talk about it sometimes.” She smiles wryly, sadly. “After Vanessa—that’s his first wife—left him for—”

My mind flashes to the articles I've read about him online, remembering the two marriages mentioned—the first ending in divorce, the second when his second wife died.

*By his own son's hand.*

I shiver, and then realize just how abruptly Lucile's ended that sentence. When I glance up at her, I see a thin smile and an awkward nervousness on her face.

"Left him for...?"

She looks away.

"How's the tea, dear?"

"Who did she leave him for, Lucile?"

She swallows as she glances back at me with an embarrassed look on her face.

"For your father, dear."

My stomach drops like a stone, through my body, the floor, the earth itself.

*Oh God.*

And suddenly, I remember through the haze of that first day here, my father telling me about it. That he had a fling with this woman, Vanessa, after she'd left Oliver.

Except now I'm realizing that my father may have been *the reason* she left in the first place. And suddenly, all the hate and rage and viciousness directed at my father by Oliver makes sense.

Horribly so.

My face falls, turning white as I stare aghast at Lucile.

"No..."

“I’m sorry, dear, I don’t mean to stir up—”

“Is that really what happened?” I choke quietly.

She nods. “Left him, and Jacob too, when the boy was about three years old.”

My stomach knots.

“She left her own son to run off with my dad?”

Lucile nods. “She did. But Oliver was a good father, raising Jacob by himself. He did the best he could, and I think he struggled all the time to make sure he wasn’t his own father to Jacob. He had my help, of course. But I don’t want to give the impression that I was the nanny, though. Oliver was still a hands-on parent, even with business school, work, and his budding career. Still, I was close with Jacob.”

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly.

She smiles sadly. “That’s what really did it, you know. Deep down...” She shakes her head, turning back to the stove. “Deep down, we all knew there was a darkness in Jacob that was something more than the famous Prince ‘drive’. There were suspicions...when Matilde passed—”

She glances at me sharply.

“Matilde Laurent?” I croak.

Her mouth twists as she nods.

“That’s right.”

I look down.

“Is that also true?”

She’s silent.



“The dress I wore the other night, the one you said belonged to Cora.”

When I look up, Lucile is turned away from me, suddenly very interested in what’s bubbling on the stove top.

“Oliver told me she and her sister Naomi are my half-sisters.”

Lucile stiffens.

“*Please*,” I whisper. “Is that true or not?”

I watch her shoulders drop. And her head is already nodding before she fully turns around, a deep sadness in her eyes.

“It is, dear.”

I feel like I’ve been punched.

My dad really did have another family. Other daughters.

My lips purse tightly as my eyes drop to the mug in my hands.

“So that’s why he hates my father so much.”

“He’s known your father for a very long time, dear. And I’m afraid not a single chapter in their history has been good.”

I think, trying to piece the timeline together in my head.

“So, Oliver had a son with Vanessa, then Vanessa left him for my father...”

Lucile nods.

“And then Oliver remarried *Matilde*? My father’s first wife? Cora and Naomi’s mother?”

For some reason, my mood suddenly sours. I don’t know *why* the idea of Oliver being married before—twice!—makes me feel like claws are sinking into my chest. But it does.

I feel...*anger*.

Lucile sighs. “Yes, but Oliver and Matilde’s wasn’t a real marriage. Not really. They didn’t marry for love or anything like that. It was *spite*, pure and simple. They didn’t even share a bedroom, much less anything else, if you get my meaning.”

It’s amazing how quickly the angry, jealous feeling I had a second ago disappears when she says that.

“So, it was just to get revenge on Vanessa and my father?”

She shrugs, suddenly sighing loudly and then clapping her hands.

“Let’s change the subject, shall we?” She forces a smile to her face. “All this doom and gloom talk about the past...” she flaps her hands as if drying them out.

“So. Wentworth tells me you were in training to be a nun?”

I laugh, shaking my head.

“Not exactly.” I frown. “I mean, I grew up surrounded by all of that. And I think I was considering it for a second, just because it’s all I ever knew. But...” I smirk at her. “I don’t think the sisters had much faith in me actually going through with it.”

She chuckles, pouring some more tea into my cup.

“Do you miss it? Living there, I mean.”

“I don’t know. Kind of?” I shrug. “When my dad found me a few months ago, suddenly I was in this world I had *no* idea about. It was like *poof*, I had all these fancy clothes, and going to these expensive restaurants, and meeting fancy people, and going to parties and the opera and...” I laugh.

Lucile grins.

“Sounds like a dream.”

“Don’t get me wrong, it *was*. I just...” I shrug. “It was maybe a little too much, too soon. I kind of loved the life I had at Our Lady Hildegard. Simple, you know?”

Lucile’s brows arch.

“Patron saint of musicians, if I’m not mistaken?”

I grin. “That’s the one.”

“Do you play anything?”

I blush.

“Piano. A little.”

She gives me a coy look.

“Something tells me it’s a bit more than a little, dear. Yes?”

My face reddens.

“You’re good, aren’t you?” she presses.

Finally I grin and nod, blushing fiercely. Her face lights up.

“Well, since it appears you’re allowed to roam the house...”

Lucile wags her brows and takes off her apron.

“Come with me.”

Without even thinking, I quickly scramble from my chair and follow her out of the kitchen. For a woman her age, she’s surprisingly fast as we wind our way through the sprawling manor: up one flight of stairs, down another, through another hallway and around the corner until we come to a closed door.

Lucile reaches for the knob, then pauses before turning back to me.

“Now, this is what you might call a gray area.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Well, Mr. Prince *did* say you could go anywhere in the house aside from his office and the west wing. He didn’t mention this room being off limits. It’s just...it could be.”

“Why?”

She smiles to herself.

“No reason. It might just be best not to mention that we’ve been in this room, let’s just say that.”

She winks at me conspiratorially, and I grin back.

“Duly noted.”

Lucile turns back to the door, twists the knob, and pushes it open. We step inside a dim, dark room, and I squint, trying to make out where we are.

“A bit dark in here. Let’s fix that.”

Lucile moves quickly across the room to some blackout curtains across the floor to ceiling ballroom-style windows. She she grabs a fistful of them, and with a flourish, she yanks them back.

My jaw hits the floor.

*Holy crap.*

The room is absolutely *stunning*: a double-height ballroom, every wall and every corner covered in exquisitely crafted white oak paneling, giving the room the feel of a small concert hall.

Probably because *it is*.

There, at the very center of it, gleaming in the sun as if in a spotlight, is quite possibly the most beautiful piano I’ve ever seen in my entire life.

“Now, I can’t speak for the last time it’s been tuned,” Lucile makes a tsk tsk sound with her teeth. “But as I said, he *did* give you permission to go just about anywhere, and I interpret that to mean this is fair game.”

I walk in slow, almost reverent steps towards the piano, unable to stop the grin from spreading over my face. Pure joy floods through my heart for what feels like the first time in well over a week.

My gaze falls to the lettering over the closed lid of the keyboard and my eyes bulge.

“*Oh my God...*”

I whirl to Lucile.

“*A Stradivari?!*”

She nods. “Indeed.”

Stradivari as in Stradivarius, the world-renowned violin maker from the seventeen hundreds. Who *also* made about a dozen gorgeous, *extremely* rare and wildly expensive pianos from the same hardwood from which he made his famous violins.

I stare at her in shock.

“This is a *real* Stradivari.”

“Of course, dear. Only the best for the Prince family. Go ahead! Try it out!”

I turn, suddenly in fresh awe of the very room I’m in, as if I’m standing in the Vatican, or a royal palace, or some other hallowed ground.

Slowly, shakily, my hands extend, hovering over the keyboard cover before I quickly yank them back.

“No. I can’t play this.”

“Of course you can.”

“*No*. This has to be worth millions of dollars.”

“Well, it’s not worth anything sitting collecting dust in this old stuffy room,” she shrugs. “You don’t have to play it now, but you know where to find it. And as far as I’m concerned, it’s all yours for as long as you’ll be here.”



RAIN POUNDS RHYTHMICALLY against the windows. Outside, the inky blackness of night is periodically broken by flashes of lightning far in the distance, followed by the low rumble of thunder.

But I don't think it's the storm that's woken me up. In fact, I know it's not.

I shiver, hugging myself as I sit up in the bed. I swallow as I glance at the rain, pattering against the glass.

No, the storm that woke me is the one inside inside my head. The whirling of dark thoughts and darker desires that come with just being in this house.

Near *him*.

It's been three days since since I've been granted my "freedom" to walk freely through the house. But that freedom hasn't done much to stop me from feeling like the prisoner I still am. In fact, I think it's *scarier* to have that much freedom.

Because when I'm in my room, I can at least feel barricaded and safe.

From *him*.

In here, it's just me. And even if he were to open the door at his whim, I'd at least know it's coming. When I'm wandering the house, I have no idea which corner I might come around to find him suddenly looming over me.

That's happened on a dozen occasions in the last three days. And each time I enter a room to find him already in it, or walk around a corner only to almost bump into his chest, my heart climbs into my throat, and the sultry, electric shiver teases over my skin.

And the dreams? They've only gotten darker and more intense.

I spent twenty years almost exclusively in the company of women. Over the past two months, going to fancy restaurants and lavish parties and social events with my father, there have been men present, of course. Charming and handsome men, even.

But that was different. Even then, everyone we met was firmly aware that I was with my father. And to be honest, mostly everyone we met looked at me like a freak. They all smiled at me in that way that said I didn't really belong there.

I was a sideshow. A quaint little country bumpkin who didn't quite know how to pull off the fancy outfits she'd been given. Who didn't quite know how to walk in the heels. Who hadn't been told it was childish to pick a Disney song for the ringtone of her phone that she forgot to silence at dinner.

Then I came here. And suddenly, there was another new dynamic I'd never felt before.

It's not *just* that I'm in the company of a darkly attractive man. I'm not that shallow. Merely being in the presence of



attractiveness doesn't suddenly turn me into some sort of ridiculous mess of a schoolgirl, unable to control herself.

It's more than that. I just don't know what that *more* is that makes me tingle—even through the fear he brings out in me—whenever I'm around him. The feeling that makes my pulse pound harder, and my thighs clench tightly.

Alarming, I've been beginning to wonder if it's the power dynamic. The fact that it isn't just that he's a lethally handsome man, it's the fact that he's a lethally handsome man who has me literally locked in his house.

Every time I enter a room to find myself suddenly alone with him, or come around a corner to find him looming over me in a dark hallway, there's an edged feeling.

One that...*does things*...to me.

A feeling that excites me, horribly, but also makes me wonder. Is there something wrong with me? Is this Stockholm syndrome?

*Enough.*

I exhale in a rush, bringing my hands up to shove my hair back from my face.

It might be storming outside, but inside the house feels warmer than usual, as if someone's cranked the heat up. I slip out from under the covers, the heavy sweatpants and t-shirt I wore to bed clinging to me from the heat of the room. I strip them off in the changing room and slip on a pair of loose, lacy sleep shorts and matching tank top that I find in one of the drawers.

I don't know for sure that it was Lucile who picked out this entire wardrobe of clothes for me. But if she did, for a woman who wears the same black and white housekeeper's uniform every day, she's got *great* taste.

Cooler now, I pace the room, trying to quiet the dark, swirling, lingering dreams in my head. Suddenly, I frown.

If I truly have free range of an entire mansion, there's someplace I'd *much* rather be right now rather than pacing this room.

Tentatively, I go to the door and twist the knob to poke my head out. It still feels like even the idea of stepping out of this room is taboo.

I grab a silk robe from the closet and slip it on before I step out into the hallway. Like always, I almost expect him to be there, snarling at me, his eyes burning into me from the darkness of the hall to scare me back inside.

But of course, he's not. It's one o'clock in the morning. He's almost certainly in bed, right?

Just the same, as I prowl the halls of the house, I make a small side-track down the hall toward his office door which is almost always closed and locked. I swallow, raking my teeth over my lips. But as I pass it and glance down, I can see there's no light coming from the crack underneath the door.

Somehow, that settles my nerves a little.

When I step into the gorgeous, minimalist music room and lay eyes on the piano standing in the middle of it, I feel a throb of something aching and yearning in my chest.

I've been here twice since Lucile showed it to me the other day.

I still haven't played the piano.

Three days ago, I sat at the piano bench and smiled at Lucile as she left after telling me it was mine to play. But I couldn't bring myself to do it. I mean how the heck am I supposed to

even think about *touching* a piano that's probably worth four-freaking-million dollars?

I *want* to—I mean, I'm *aching* to play again. Because I haven't in months. Even though I told my father all about my love for it, and even though he promised that he would buy me one as soon as we were settled in the new house he's been looking at outside London.

The only time I've actually touched a piano since the convent was at a cocktail party he brought me to at someone's townhouse. I found myself alone in the living room, and began to play before the host quickly rushed over and told me with a withering look it was an antique and closed the lid.

I'm *starving* to set free whatever it is inside me that comes out when I allow my fingers to dance across the ivory and ebony keys. And for the last two nights, I've been coming to this room with every intention of doing so.

I chickened out both times.

But tonight, as I stand just inside the door to the silent, still room, and gaze at the instrument sitting in the middle of it, I purse my lips.

I need this.

This room was never once mentioned to me as a place I couldn't go. And on top of that, it's on the opposite end of the house to the west wing where Oliver's quarters are. And Lucile *did* mention that the room is virtually soundproof.

Would he even know?

Slowly, I start to grin as temptation begins to get the better of me. A giddiness creeps through me as I cross the room, until I'm standing in front of the piano. Through the storm and the rain outside, there's a bit of moonlight glinting through the

huge windows, bathing the room in ethereal white and the occasional flash of muted lightning.

My skin tingles as I run my fingers over the keyboard lid. *God*, it's gorgeous. Exquisite craftsmanship, with gorgeous inlays across the perfectly polished wood.

There's a weird, almost sensual feeling from being this close to something so beautiful that electrifies my skin and tightens my core. The taboo feeling that comes with being here—it being a “gray area”, as Lucile said—heightens the sensation even more and sends a buzz of something forbidden through me.

I shrug off the long-sleeved robe and take the little handles of the keyboard lid in my fingertips. I lift it, revealing the eighty-eight black and white keys beneath. I take a shaky breath and bring one finger down to middle C, hitting it lightly.

My eyes close as I exhale slowly and shiver. Again, an almost sensual feeling grips me, making my core throb and my nipples tighten beneath my lacy top as the note rings out clear and true.

My *God*, that's beautiful.

Has it really been “years” since this thing was tuned? Perhaps. Rooms that have been professionally soundproofed like this one has have a way of keeping their climate, too. Especially if the door's been shut and no one's been in here for years, as Lucile mentioned.

I shiver as I raise my pinky up a fifth from middle C, lightly touching the G above it. Again, the sound is pure honey. I play the two notes together, and the tone is crisp, clean and *perfectly* in tune.

My pulse thuds in my ear as I bring both hands to the keys. And before I know it, the sound begins to pour from my fingertips.

It's like breathing for the first time in months.

For the first time in months, I play, and it feels like I'm living again. I don't even consciously choose what I end up playing, it just starts to flow from my fingertips—Beethoven's "Piano Sonata Fourteen in C-Sharp Minor". But it feels so incredibly perfect in this moment.

For the pedigree of the piano I'm playing. For the crumbling but beautiful old house I'm trapped in. For the broken, angry and beautiful man who haunts my dreams at night and stalks my shadow by day.

The piece melts from my heart and streams out through my limbs and my fingertips to flow across the keyboard. My eyes close tightly, and I feel myself moving to the music—swaying, dancing, drowning in it. Giving myself over entirely to the sound, until the last teasing notes fall from my fingertips and the room goes silent.

Time stops. I let the dying notes hang in space. My eyes stay tightly shut, as if opening them will shatter this perfect moment. My chest rises and falls, my nipples tight and tingling against the material of my top. A sensual heat pools in my core, radiating through me as I tremble in almost a physical ecstasy.

*Perfection.* It's perfe—

I stiffen and the hairs on the back of my neck go up.

I'm not alone.

I whirl, and scream. Or at least I try. But the sound lodges in my throat—caught, trapped by my heart trying to escape out

the same way.

I spring to my feet, choking on my own breath as my eyes lock onto the hulking, savage-eyed silhouette looming behind me, sucking the very soul out of the room.

Oliver steps into a beam of moonlight just as lightning flashes across his hardened, chiseled face and the thin scar running down the side of it, and I turn to jelly.

“I—I—!”

He crosses the space between us in a second. I make a feeble attempt at running away, but I’m pinned between the piano and the bench.

Oliver stops right in front of me, turning me to ash with the fierce, fiery glint in his eyes as they sweep dangerously over me. I shiver as his chiseled jaw grinds. As his eyes slide sensually and shamelessly over every single part of me.

His eyes turn black.

“I—I’m so sorry,” I blurt, my voice shaking. “I’ll leave—”

“*Wait.*”

I jolt, my heart leaping into my throat again. My skin prickling.

My pulse racing.

“I—”

Before I can turn, or run, or do anything at all, his arm shoots out and a powerfully strong, veined hand wraps around my arm—not hard enough to hurt, but hard enough that it’s clear there’s no running away now.

Slowly, I turn to him, my eyes wide and my skin thrumming with electricity as his gaze scorches me to my very soul.

“You’re not going anywhere.”



AT FIRST, I think I must be dreaming.

I wake to blackness and the low rumble of thunder in the distance as the rain pours against the windows of my bedroom.

But then I stiffen, my brow furrowing and my ears straining to hear—what? And then I hear it, and I know what’s just woken me.

This is no dream.

My jaw clenches. She shouldn’t be there.

I lurch from the bed, yanking on sweatpants and a shirt before I wrench the door open and race out into the blackness of the hallway. Out here it’s even louder. Not *loud*; in fact, I can barely hear the piano being played way off on the far side of the house.

But it *is* being played, and the sound is piercing my soul.

Fury erupts inside my chest. She has no right. In fact, nobody has the right. That room hasn’t even been entered in years.

No one should be playing Jacob’s piano.

And I will not—I *will not*—have my my fucking collateral strolling in there in the middle of the night to hammer out



fucking Chopsticks or wherever the fuck it is.

As I rage through the house, I can feel the cage walls collapsing—the savage inside me ripping and shredding his way to the surface as angrily as the storm raging outside.

I stalk the halls like a monster, the blackness in my heart getting darker and more vicious with every step I take. Until by the time I'm standing outside the barely-closed door to the piano room, I'm ready to tear it off its fucking hinges and send her tumbling into the abyss with my voice alone.

Until suddenly, I stop and actually listen to what I'm hearing.

*Holy fuck.*

It's like cool water being poured onto flames until they extinguish and float away in a cleansing steam. Instantly, the raging beast stills.

The roaring quiets in my ears.

The hatred and rage choking my heart and soul melts.

I blink, stunned by the sounds coming from the room—to the point that I'm sure this must be a recording. Then I quietly push the door open and step into the darkness of the music room.

And I just *stare*.

Thirty feet away from me, an angel sits bathed in moonlight, playing pure *heaven* across the keys. Her back is to me, and the ethereal gleam of the moon and the flashes of lightning glow off her pale skin.

She puts me in a trance.

She's playing Beethoven's "Piano Sonata Fourteen in C-Sharp Minor"—not an easy piece to begin with. And she's not just

playing it, she's breathing a life into it that I've never heard before.

I've gone to hundreds of performances by the world's finest pianists, playing on the world's greatest stages.

I've never once heard anything like this.

I watch as she moves with the music, her body filled with it, her head thrown back, eyes closed. And before I know what I'm doing, as if in a dream, I'm moving closer. And closer.

And closer.

Until I'm barely six feet behind her, just watching her play. I'm powerless to look away—unable to do anything but stare at this gorgeous creature playing this stunningly beautiful music right in front of me.

For the first time in what feels like a hundred fucking years, this house feels like a home. Not a tomb. Not a mausoleum to my past, to my parents, to my son.

When I suck in a slow, quiet breath of air, for the first time in what seems like forever, I feel like I'm actually breathing.

And then suddenly, she stops. The song is over, and the last notes hang in the air for what could be seconds or hours. Then suddenly the spell is broken and Rose stiffens.

She whirls, and when her eyes lock on mine, her face goes white as she scrambles to her feet.

“I—I—!”

I want to tell her that what I've just heard her play is the most beautiful thing I've ever heard in my life. I want to tell her to keep playing—to *never* stop playing.

But all I can do is stare.

At her. At the soft lines of her jaw, and the plumpness of her lips. The way the moonlight glowing through the windows turns her tank top and shorts translucent, revealing every curve, every swell, every valley. The dusky pink of her nipples. The shadow between her thighs.

My teeth grind, and Rose trembles, mistaking my lust for fury. For a moment, I want to set the record straight. I want to shed this skin I'm in—the scars, the rage, the hatred that won't release me from its claws. I want to let it all drop.

For a moment, I want nothing more than to just to be the golden boy I once was.

Then a shadow slips over my face, and my heart darkens.

I can't. Not with a girl like this. Not with something so good, so innocent, so pure—so untainted by fury and hate and loss, like I have been.

So instead, the inky blackness around me only thickens. I force myself to frown, to be the angry beast she sees me as.

I can't be anything else.

"I—I'm so sorry," she blurts in a hushed, scared tone. "I'll leave—"

*"Wait."*

She trembles as the word rasps from my lips. She starts to turn, as if she's going to run away, but the beast in me *roars* hungrily as my hand closes around the warm, smooth skin of her forearm, gripping her tightly.

"You're not going anywhere," I growl thickly, shaking my head as my eyes stab into hers. "Sit."

"Mr. Prince—"

“It’s Oliver,” I mutter quietly. “And I would like you to sit, and to play.”

She swallows, her eyes blinking quickly. Her teeth drag over her bottom lip in a way that makes me want to sink my own teeth into that soft flesh and bite until I leave my mark on her.

Rose reaches for the silk robe draped across the piano bench, but I get to it before she does, grabbing it and tossing it behind me.

Her eyes widen, her arms cross over her chest protectively and heat creeps over her cheeks as she stares at me, jaw agape.

“I—I shouldn’t be here.”

“No one said you couldn’t be in here.”

“It feels like I shouldn’t.”

“Why?”

She looks down, her chest rising and falling quickly.

“I’ll ask you again, Rose. Why don’t you think you should be in here?”

“From the way you’re looking at me,” she whispers, still looking at the floor.

It’s taking everything I have not to grab her jaw and lift those innocent baby-blues to mine.

“How exactly am I looking at you?”

I watch her face bloom with heat. She draws in a long breath, and slowly, she’s raising her head to look at me.

“Like no one else ever has.”

“Then the rest of the world are fucking idiots.”

She blushes deeply. And once again, her lower lip slide between her teeth.

She really needs to stop fucking doing that, before I snap.

“*Sit,*” I mutter thickly. “Play.”

My brow furrows, and I clear my throat.

“I mean, *please,* sit and play,” I grunt.

Rose swallows, her cheeks heated as my eyes hold hers. Then she slowly nods, turning to sit at the keys again. I bite back a groan as I realize that sitting this way the moonlight glinting into the room turns the white of her pajama shorts translucent again.

She might as well be wearing nothing but mist.

I grit my teeth, drinking in the smoothness of her back, the flare of her hips, the lacy white thong between the tight globes of her ass as she sits on the bench in front of me.

“What should I play?”

I let the question hang in the air for a moment.

“Surprise me.”

Rose nods slowly, and I can imagine the gears turning inside her head. Her brow furrows in this sinfully adorable way, lips pursed before slowly, she exhales.

Her hands extend, thin wrists at position, practiced fingers poised at attention.

And then, she starts to play.

The first notes tinkle like broken glass from her fingers—like ice shattering on a frozen pond. It takes me a second, but I soon recognize the haunting, broken sound of Erik Satie’s

“Genossiennes: No. 1”. Also an incredibly hard piece to play well.

And Rose is playing it *far* better than “well”.

I blink, staring in awe as she dances her fingers over the keys. I swear to God, this girl could play Jingle fucking Bells and I’d still be mesmerized.

And that’s exactly what I am: fucking mesmerized. It’s this weird combination of an appreciation of mastery swirled together with raw, unbridled *lust*. It’s not just the way she’s dressed. It’s not just the way that I’m ogling her perfect body. It’s all of that plus her talent.

*Plus* the fact that even if she’s scared of me, and even if I have her locked in this bizarre situation, cornered in this room where I’ve literally ordered her to play for me like I’m some sort of mad king, she’s still feeling the music.

She’s completely possessed by it, consumed by it. Her body still sways, and her eyes still close as her fingers gracefully dance across the piano.

I’m so lost in the moment that I’m still staring right through her when she finishes. When she stops and turns to look at me, I blink awake again, like one emerging from a dream.

And then?

Then I move before I even know what I’m doing. Because there’s no stopping this.

Rose gasps quietly, but this time, it’s not with fear. Or at least, not the same sort of fear that’s been in her eyes when she’s looked at me before. She rises from the bench, but she doesn’t run.

She shivers. Her nipples pucker hard against the lace of her top. Her eyes go wide, her cheeks flushing deeply as she backs against the piano as I move in toward her.

She trembles, gasping quietly as my palm slides along her cheek, cupping her jaw. I push my fingers back, sliding them into her hair and grabbing it suddenly in a fist.

Her eyes bulge.

Her mouth opens hungrily, eagerly.

She *whimpers*.

We're locked in a moment, staring at each other as if through glass. In the next fraction of a second, my mouth slams to hers.

It's the single most vicious, brutal, unrelenting and savage kiss of my life.

I kiss her like I might stop breathing if I don't. I kiss her like she's the cure for the curse destroying me from the inside out, the curse that will drag me into the darkness and destroy me.

I kiss her like I know that before I die I have to taste good in this world one last time.

And when she whimpers quietly, and when her mouth opens for my tongue, it's as if for one brief moment the period at the end of the sentence that is my life vanishes like smoke in the wind.

For one moment, there's hope. There's a chance I *do* have a future that doesn't end in darkness and hatred. And I hold onto that moment with everything I have, kissing her fiercely as time and the rest of the world melts away.

But then, of course, reality comes crashing back.

Because it's a motherfucker like that.

A thunderclap booms outside, and it's enough to startle her and make her gasp as she pulls back from my mouth. And just like that, whatever spell had fallen over this room shatters.

This can't happen. This isn't real. And it's no fucking fairy tale. Or if it is, it's the bad kind, the kind where everyone fucking dies at the end.

The kind without hope.

Instantly, the blackness that I know all too well floods back into my soul. My hand drops from the nape of her neck, and I back away slowly, my eyes hardening and my jaw tightening as I let out a low growl.

"Get back to your room," I rasp thickly.

Rose blinks, as if startled from a dream by the harshness of my tone. She stares at me with wide eyes, her lips swollen from my kiss. Her face blooms with heat, and then shadows with confusion, perhaps even a little anger.

"Am I not allowed in here?"

My jaw grinds.

"Get to your room."

"I don't understand—"

"*Get* to your room," I snap, hating every second that the darkness steals from me. Every lingering flicker of goodness in me that it snuffs out. "Get to your room before I never let you leave it again."

She stares at me. I stare right back, drowning in my self hatred.

"You're a *monster*."



It's hardly the first time someone's called me that, or something like it. But this time, for some bizarre reason, I actually feel it, stinging like a slap across the face.

Then I'm just left watching, lips curling into a snarl, hating myself, as she runs from the room, leaving me alone with the ghosts of my past and a hole in my soul I know I'll never fill.



*DID THAT JUST HAPPEN?*

My hand flies to my mouth as I sink against the bedroom door at my back. Every nerve in my body jangles, every inch of my skin tingles, every every muscle twitches.

I tremble as my hand moves to my face, my fingers tracing over my lips, puffy and swollen from that kiss.

*His* kiss.

My first ever.

The second I remember it, something molten and hot erupts inside me. Something sinks its sensual fingers into every part of me, twisting until my legs squeeze together and heat floods my core.

I run my fingers over my lips once again, closing my eyes and letting myself revel in the dark depravity of what just happened. The way he stormed over. The way he grabbed me like I belonged to him, and crushed his mouth to mine.

My very first kiss, and it's at the hands of my *captor*.

Not just any captor, either. But the one who invades almost all my waking thoughts and definitely every sleeping one. The

monster of a man who entices me and ignites something inside me in a way he has no business to do.

And that I have no business to *feel*.

Not for him, not given the circumstances. Not with his hateful attitude, piercing eyes, and dark power that seem to be poisoning my very thoughts just by staying in this house with him.

And yet, the longer my fingers trace my lips, the more I keep thinking about the way he devoured me, and pinned me to the piano, and turned my body to liquid fire against him. The way every part of me screamed for more. The way his hand landed on my hip and tightened in my hair and, oh God—the way his tongue tasted mine.

Before I know it, I'm shuddering as my other hand slowly teases into the front of my sleep top. Just like before, my nipples tighten, aching deliciously against the lace. And before I can stop myself, my thumb and finger pinch and twist.

I start to cry out, then I clamp my mouth shut with the same fingers that were a moment ago tracing my lips. I bite down on the tender flesh of my hand, my eyes closing tightly. The fingers at my breast pinch down hard on a nipple, making me gasp and writhe against the door before I slide my hand to the other side to do the same.

My hand moves back and forth, teasing first one nipple and then the other before the fire between my thighs threatens to engulf me, and then there's no stopping it.

Shuddering, my hand lowers, pushing down my stomach to the waist of the sleep shorts. I whimper as my fingers tease across the lace before they slip under, pushing deep. I choke on moan

as my fingers delve deep to roll across my throbbing, aching clit.

I push deeper, sinking a finger into the wetness of my folds, stroking myself in the ways I mastered shamefully in the shadows, behind the locked bathroom door at night while the other sisters were asleep.

I might be a twenty-year-old virgin who just had her first kiss. But I do know how to do *this*.

As I slump against the door, leg spread with two fingers stroking in and out of my wetness, I pretend I'm back in the music room, my back against the piano.

Back with the monster of this house holding my hair like he'd never let go. Like he'd keep it locked in his fist as he did whatever he wanted to me.

My fingers curl deep into my slit, and I grind my palm against my clit, pretending it's him.

Usually, I have a light touch with myself. But this time, I push *harder*. And I imagine it's Oliver's rough touch dragging the pleasure from my body. That it's him touching me, his fingers plunging deeper inside me than ever before. His thumb pressing without mercy on my throbbing clit.

My other hand drops from my mouth, cupping my breasts and pinching my nipples as my legs shake and my head drops back against the door. My eyes close, imagining Oliver grabbing me and shoving me across the piano before doing everything he wants to me.

No matter if I tell him to stop.

No matter if it hurts.

Simply *taking* me like the beast he is, over and over. Until all I know is him claiming me as I desperately, shamelessly, beg for more.

With a cry, I turn and bite down hard on my shoulder as my body wrenches with the force of my orgasm. More slickness than I've ever felt before floods my fingers, dripping down my thighs and soaking my shorts as I grind my hips against my hand over and over and *over*.

I keep grinding until I come a second time. This time, I slump to the floor; gasping and shaking, I curl into myself and clench my own hand between my thighs.

It's not until several minutes later that I manage to drag myself off the floor. For a moment, I'm appalled at myself and even more appalled at my fantasies. I quickly yank off my top and soaked shorts and all but run to the bathroom, turning the water on hot and jumping into the shower.

I gasp at the brief shock of cold before wincing when it turns to fiery heat. I grab the soap, determined to scrub the sin from my flesh. But the second my fingers touch my body again, I'm right back in that room. Right back against the piano.

Right back to tasting his mouth.

And before I know it, it's happening again, and I'm making myself come a third time, pretending that it's Oliver having his way with me.

Claiming me without mercy.

Later, I finally crawl back into bed. But sleep still doesn't come.

I was scared before, as his captive. But somehow, this is even more terrifying. Not because I'm worried about him coming back for more.

But because I'm actually *excited* for the possibility that he might.

That *I* might want more, too.

I'm not scared of him.

I'm scared of me.

I'm scared that I might be attracted to a monster.

And I'm scared that I might not ever get enough.



WITH A GROAN, I drop heavily onto my back, muscles twitching, chest glistening with perspiration, my entire body screaming from the workout it's just endured.

I've always been in relatively good shape. But I think as the darkness inside of me grew, so did the drive to hone my body. To rebuild it, brick by brick.

Maybe it's some vain attempt at imprisoning the monster inside of me. As if every shadow-boxed punch or lifted weight strengthens the cage. As if building my muscles will turn them to banded iron that can keep the blackness and the darkness at bay.

Even if I know that's a hopeless cause.

One day soon, I won't be able to hold back the darkness any longer. One day soon, when I snap, and the black and red mist clouds my eyes and my soul, I won't ever be coming back from it.

The thought settles and sours in the pit of my stomach, blackening my mood. I sit up and gaze out my bedroom windows to the rambling, overgrown roses beyond.

Scowling, I climb to my feet, rolling my neck as I grab my phone from a side table. I tap on Paul's number.

"Oliver! Good morning!"

I grit my teeth as I yank open the drawer in my bedside table. *Fuck* this man's fake, plastic, shiny personality. Even now, with everything going on? Really? Bullshit.

"Where the fuck are we with your with your assignment, Paul?"

He clears his throat.

"Doing well, Oliver. I'm close."

"I don't give a shit how *close* you are. Do you have what's mine or not?"

There's a long pause. Too long of a pause.

"That's a no, then?" I hiss dangerously.

He laughs nervously.

"No, no, that's an *almost*. I'm meeting with the hacker I reached out to today. And I'm quite sure he can—"

"*Stop*," I growl, using my teeth to tear open the packaging on a clean needle before jamming the spike through the rubber membrane at the top of the vial. I draw out twenty milliliters and use my finger to tap out the air bubbles.

"Get it *done*, Paul."

"Of course, Oliver. Of course."

There's a pause, and I wait for him to ask about Rose.

*Just give me something*, I think to myself. *Give me one fucking drop of a fatherly instinct.*

But there's nothing.



“Was there anything else, Oliver?”

I look away, shaking my head. Unbelievable.

“No.”

I hang up, tossing the phone to my bed before I flex my arm and bring the needle to a vein.

This isn't saving my life, it's just delaying the inevitable. Time marches on, and it waits for no man, least of all me.

I shower quickly, doing my damndest to ignore the throbbing, thick erection between my legs that's been there for the last ten hours, ever since I feasted on her lips.

I towel off quickly and dress in jeans and a t-shirt and I'm about to head downstairs for something to eat when I stop and glance back at my phone.

It's not the first time I've considered calling him. But as my eyes land on the empty vials and used syringes on the bedside table, my lips purse.

I'm truly running out of time. I can't waste any more of it dancing with Paul.

Snatching the phone back up, I go out to my balcony that looks over the ruined rose gardens and tap on the number. It rings twice before Oren answers.

“Oliver Prince,” he murmurs in that cold, calculating way of his. “It's been some time.”

That's it. No “I'm sorry for your loss”. No condolences, or sentiments, or any of that bullshit. Even though there's zero chance he doesn't know about the events of the last few years, including the fire and Jacob's death.

But that's exactly why I like working with Oren Frey. Because he's a laser-focused *bloodhound* when it comes to what he does.

I first employed him years ago. A master of surveillance and an even more skilled hacker, Oren was one of my secret weapons on more than a few business conquests. He's gone a bit more legit these days—less dark web hacker and more Washington, D.C. political insider and investigator.

I smirk to myself. As if digging up political dirt and carrying out character and career assassinations for the highest bidder is more “legitimate” work than hacking into rival companies’ servers for me.

But politics has a way of putting a sheen of righteousness over the illicit.

“It has,” I grunt. “How’s...”

My brows knit. Fuck, I’ve forgotten his wife’s name.

“Kenzie,” he finishes for me. “She’s good. We’re expecting, actually. But I think I know you well enough, Oliver, to know you don’t really give a fuck about the small talk. So, what can I do for you?”

My lips curl slightly at the corners. There’s a reason Oren and I work well together.

“I need a tail on someone. Full spectrum.”

“Hmm,” Oren grunts.

I can hear the intrigue in his voice. He *lives* for chases like this.

“Physical, full electronics?”

“Yes.”

“On your side of the pond, I assume?”

“Indeed.”

“And how soon do you need me on this?”

“Yesterday,” I growl thickly. “Feel free to charge me double your current rates.”

“I should mention that my current rates are nearing criminal levels.”

“Oren. I’m scarred, not broke.”

He chuckles darkly. “Let me move some things around in my schedule. I can be on a plane by tonight. Text me the details when we’ve hung up.”

Brutal efficiency at its finest.

“Perfect.”

“Good hearing from you, Prince. And...”

My lips curl into a snarl, bracing for the condolences I don’t want. For the sympathy I hate.

“I’ll speak to you soon.”

He hangs up, and I exhale.

*Smart man.*

I text him the details—Paul and his pursuit of whoever is in possession of Nanosplice Biotech and their research. I even throw in an offer to go after the Nanosplice research *himself* if he’s interested in a substantial bonus.

Then I toss the phone back on the bed and stride from my chambers.

Business concluded, my thoughts instantly return to Rose.

To her mouth.

To the way she whimpered into mine and opened her lips for me.

I frown as I prowl the empty hallways of my home aimlessly. I need to shrug this off. What happened last night was a momentary lapse of judgment. Weakness. A flash of humanness. I'm a man in his sexual prime, and I've been denying myself release and the company of a woman for far, far too long. That's all it was.

This changes nothing. She's still my prisoner.

My unplanned guest.

My collateral.

But as I stalk the halls, my brain keeps replaying the events of last night. The taste of her lips on mine, and the feel of her body writhing against mine. And then, the fantasies that teased me all night come rushing back.

Scenarios in which the kiss doesn't end. Scenarios involving me tearing those lacy shorts and tank top from her body and feasting greedily on her flesh. Digging my fingers into her luscious ass as I suck and bite and devour every inch of her until she's screaming for more.

Until her legs are wrapped around my hips. Until she's squealing in pleasure as I ram my hard, fat cock balls-deep into her sweet little cunt.

I tense, stopping mid-stride in the hallway as a shadow crosses my face.

Enough.

She's just a means to an end. A means that will be out of my house and out of my life soon, as quickly as her idiot father can get me what I need.

My jaw clenches.

Last night means nothing, and it will *certainly* not be happening again. Even if I have to confine her to her fucking room again.

I steel my resolve as I roll my neck and shoulders and stride around the corner of the hall—

*Directly* into something small and soft that squeals and jumps back when I almost crash right into her.

I blink, suddenly face-to-face with the siren who's been tempting my dreams all fucking night. Instantly, whatever grand plans I had of locking her back in her room, or keeping her at a distance, or shaking the memory of her mouth on mine, shatter like glass at my feet.

She's not even prancing around the halls naked or in sexy lingerie. She's in leggings and a goddamn *hoodie*, for fuck's sake.

But the second she's near, the second I can even vaguely smell the scent of her hair wafting through the air between us, my resolve breaks.

And something strange and unexpected happens.

The rattling sensation building inside my chest is different than the one I normally feel when the darkness begins to surge through me. Yes, the beast inside is grinding his teeth and smashing at the walls of his cage. But it's not fear, fury, or hate that explodes through me as the mist begins to rise.

That's not what clamps down on me, making me feel like I need to scream in order to break free of it.

It's not anger at all.

It's *hunger*.

A raw, unstoppable, lustful hunger as my eyes shamelessly drink her in. Rose blushes fiercely, her throat making a heavy swallowing motion before her mouth and eyes open wide.

“I—I was just taking a walk...”

I don't say anything. When I take another step towards her, she shivers, backing away until she's pressed against the wall behind her.

A thudding sound fills my ears and a burning sensation spreads through my chest until I'm barely hanging on by a thread as I stare at her. She shivers, her back flattened to the wall, as I stop a foot away from her, and our eyes lock.

“Are you scared of me?” I growl quietly.

Rose purses her lips and shakes her head.

“No.”

My eyebrow cocks.

“*No*,” she repeats, with zero strength behind the word. “I'm not scared of you.”

“Think very carefully before you answer again, because I'm not convinced,” I hiss quietly as I move even closer, until we're merely inches apart. Until I can hear the soft intake and exhale of her breath and smell the citrusy sweetness of her hair. Until I can feel the heat of her skin.

“*Are you scared of me?*”

She meets my hard gaze without blinking, lifting her chin defiantly.

“No. I'm not.”

“Then I can only assume you're backing against the wall in my presence so that you have something to hold the fuck onto

when I claim your mouth again.”

I shatter the distance between us in a nanosecond, and she’s whimpering eagerly even before the fingers of one hand thread into her hair and the other grips her hip and yanks her to me.

Even before I crush my lips to hers.

Rose shudders, uttering a soft, fractured moan as her fingers drag over my chest and grip handfuls of my shirt.

Eagerly. Wantonly. Whimpering, spreading her legs as I slide my thigh between them.

My pulse roars. So does the monster inside of me. But not with rage, or hate, or the blind fury of pain and regret.

It’s with a savage, primal *need*. A hunger for her that shakes me to my core.

I grip her hair even tighter, so tight that I know it must be causing her pain. But I can’t stop. Just like I can’t stop kissing her. Like I can’t stop tasting her lips, or biting them, or sucking them, or wrapping my tongue around hers.

She moans again, melting into me as I pin her fiercely to the wall. My hand tightens on her hip, my thumb pushing up under her hoodie to run along the waistband of her leggings, over her bare skin.

Rose shivers, then moans even more desperately as my thumb drags across the silky soft porcelain of her skin. She tenses for a moment as my fingers slide into her leggings, and when they center and slide deeper, I feel her hips rock against me.

*Such an eager little thing.*

My fingertips brush lace before sliding under, boldly pushing past the last barrier between my touch and her silky heat. Her

breath catches, but she doesn't pull away. She doesn't freeze, or try to stop me, or shove me away.

She fucking *spreads her legs*.

And her undoing is complete.

Heat and raw need flood my nervous system like a drug. Red mist clouds my vision, and I growl savagely into her mouth, devouring her as my hand plunges between her legs. And when I find her pussy fucking *soaked* for me, whatever last shreds of resolve, whatever lies I've told myself go up in flames.

"*You're mine,*" I rasp into her lips, making her gasp as I bite down on the soft, plump flesh of the bottom one.

I pull away, hungrily drinking in the dizzying look of desire and lust on her face before dropping to my knees and yanking her leggings and panties down to her mid thighs in one motion.

Rose stares at me, wide-eyed, her face bright red, mouth opening and closing like she's trying to say words but can't find them. She chokes and shudders as I grip her thighs, spread her legs as wide as I can, and look up into her flushed face.

"Now would be a good time to hold on to that wall, princess."

My mouth presses between her legs. And when my tongue drags wetly up her seam, the wild sound that tumbles from her mouth drives me over the edge.

Christ, I could come in my fucking *pants* just from hearing the way she moans like that.

All it does is spur me on even more hungrily. I plunge my tongue into her sweet, sticky folds, lapping at the slick, silken petals of her pretty little pussy. My hands grab her tight ass,



pulling her savagely against my mouth and digging my fingers into her skin hard enough to bruise.

My mouth hums over her clit as I suck it between my lips. Rose spasms like she's been electrocuted. She cries out, choking and clawing at the wall with one hand. The other falls to my hair, gripping it tightly as she moans breathlessly and pushes her hips against my face.

*"Dirty, greedy girl,"* I growl into her cunt as I tongue her clit harder and faster.

My blood turns to liquid fire in my veins as she starts to whimper even louder. Groaning, I shove one of my hands up her front, clamping it over her mouth and silencing her as I continue to devour her pussy. She tenses up, as if the act of me covering her mouth sends her into orbit. Then her pussy floods my face, her legs quivering, and when I swirl my tongue around her clit one last time, suddenly she's exploding for me.

Her cum floods my tongue, and I hear her sob—literally *sob*—in pleasure into my palm covering her mouth. Her legs buckle and sag, and it's as if it's only my mouth on her pussy that keeps her from collapsing to the floor as I mercilessly tongue her from one orgasm to another.

"Oliver?"

I tense and Rose spasms so hard against me she almost breaks my nose at the sound of Lucile's voice coming from somewhere down the hall.

I don't pull away. In fact, my hands on her mouth and her hip only tighten their grip, pinning her to the wall as I look up at her, grinning savagely.

Her eyes flash with fear and lust as I lean in again, keeping my gaze locked on hers as I drag the tip of my tongue all the way

up through her drenched lips to flick over her clit. Rose's eyes roll back, and she moans through my hand.

"Oliver, is that you?"

She tries to push me away. But that's not happening. Not when I'm twice her weight and a foot and a half taller.

Nothing in this world could pull my mouth from her sweet little pussy right now.

I do it again, teasing her lips all the way to her clit again. I groan into her sweetness, sucking on her clit before I finally pull my mouth away from her eagerly rocking hips.

"Lucile, is that you?"

"Oh! Oliver, hang on, I'll be right there."

I smirk as I look up at the sheer terror on Rose's face. I flick her clit one last time with my tongue before I slowly stand. She scrambles, yanking her panties and her leggings up and whirling away as if to bolt.

Not happening.

My arm juts out, stopping her in her tracks.

"Over here, Lucile."

"*Oh my God are you joking!?*" Rose chokes, half turning away to hide the mortification on her face as my housekeeper comes around the corner.

She stops abruptly, eyeing the two of us.

"Beg your pardon, sir. I didn't realize you were both here."

I give nothing away.

"Yes? What is it?"

Her brow furrows as she clears her throat.

“You have a guest.”

What the *fuck* is it these days with me suddenly having all these goddamn visitors?

“Whoever the hell it is, tell them to kindly go and get fucked.”

Lucile rolls her eyes.

“I’m not rather sure I feel like telling the head of the Cross family criminal organization that, Oliver.”

I tense, scowling deeply.

*What the fuck is Adrian Cross doing at my house?*

I’m still trying to figure that one out when Lucile cranes her neck to look past me.

“Are you all right, dear?” She says it to Rose, but it’s directed at me.

“She’s fine.”

“I was asking her, *sir*,” Lucile says politely yet firmly, eyeing me suspiciously like she’s just caught me forcing myself on Rose.

“I’m...fine,” Rose mumbles sheepishly, half turning. Her face is still bright red, and her eyes have a wild, dreamy look to them.

“Are you sure?”

She nods quickly. “Y-yes. Just a little surprised. I was walking in the hallway, and we just...” her eyes flick to mine before she blushes deeper and yanks her gaze away. “We just bumped into each other.”

Lucile’s brow furrows.

“Should I get you some tea?”

“She’s fine, Lucile.”

I turn, twisting my body between the two of them and blocking Lucile’s view of Rose.

“Completely fine, aren’t you?”

She looks up at me, her face bright red, her eyes hooded with lust as she chews on her lip and nods.

“Totally fine,” she breathes shakily. “I—I think I’ll get back to my room now.”

She whirls, and without another glance, she rushes off, dragging the moment away with her. But she could never run away fast enough to pull the sweet taste of her pussy from my lips.

And now, I want *more*.



WE'VE BARELY MADE it twenty feet down the hall before my sixty-three-year-old, five-foot-one housekeeper turns on me and jabs a finger harshly against my chest.

“Don’t you *dare*,” she hisses.

Fury surges inside of me. Fucking *no one* speaks to me that way, not even Lucile. Because when they do, it’s like a hot button that instantly triggers the mismatched chemicals in my brain.

Like it does now.

I snarl, lips curling dangerously.

“*What* did you say?” I seethe as the black mist crawls into my vision.

She doesn’t back down. Instead she just purses her lips and jabs her finger into my chest again.

“You bloody well heard me!” she says tersely. “I’ve put up with your brutishness, and your bullying tactics and your generally terrible, *terrible* behavior these last few years—”

“*Watch your fucking tone—*”

“Don’t interrupt!” she snaps, blinking as she dabs at her eyes with the hem of her apron. “Oliver, you’re the closest thing to a son I’ve ever known,” she continues, her voice thick with emotion. “But you can be *damn well* sure I’m not going to let you bully and intimidate and scare that poor girl.”

My brow furrows and I do my best to plaster an innocent look onto my face.

“What?”

“Don’t you *what* me! I could see how perfectly terrified she was when I saw her just now. Out of breath, cheeks all flushed, tongue tied.” She glares daggers at me. “What’d you do, threaten to push her off the bloody *roof*?!”

I bite back a smile and resist the urge to tell my housekeeper the reason Rose was so out of breath and flushed was that that she had just come all over my fucking tongue.

Twice.

“I wasn’t bullying—”

“I won’t have it, Oliver!”

“What exactly does that mean?”

“It means I’ve put up with a lot, because I love you,” she says tersely. “But don’t you *dare* hurt her, or that may be my breaking point.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning it might be time to see how well you cook your own damn breakfasts.”

“Is this a cry for help, or a genuine threat?”

“Oh, *piss off*.”

She whirls and starts to march away.

“Lucile.”

She stops, tensing as she turns to glare at me over her shoulder.

“I promise not to hurt her.”

My housekeeper eyes me closely.

“I swear, Lucile. I won’t hurt her.”

She nods stiffly, clearing her throat.

“Well. Good. And Mr. Cross is waiting for you in the library downstairs.”

---

THERE WAS a time in my life when I saw the men who made up the Kings and Villains more frequently than almost anyone else.

Then life happened. The years ticked by. We got busy. Some of us got families.

Some of us became rivals.

That’s just how things work. You get older, and you have to find time twice a year—if you’re lucky—to see the people you once saw almost daily.

With me, it’s more than that. After the fire that took Jacob and a piece of my heart, the darkness that had always lurked hidden inside me grew. The anger and the hatred spread like a cancer, to the point that even hearing a whisper of sympathy or compassion, even from old friends, actually pained me.

In the beginning, right after it all happened, most of them came often. Christ, even Noel, after we’d butted heads and

tried to destroy each other's lives so many fucking different ways.

Even he came almost daily for a month.

He never got past the gates.

I shut them all out. In two years, I've seen almost no one from my old life. And now, for the first time since my former life imploded, I'm seeing one of my oldest friends in the flesh.

Adrian looks up as I step into the library and shut the door behind me. Then he stands, and we stay like that across the room from each other, drinking in the moment.

"It's been too long, Oliver," he finally says quietly.

We've all gotten older, but fuck, Adrian still looks exactly the same. The same dark, roguish look on his face. The same dark hair and piercing blue eyes.

I only nod.

Twenty years ago, when the eight of us found each other back at Lord's College of Business and banded together as the Kings and Villains, we were different versions of ourselves. Young, power hungry, *money* hungry, vain, cocky beyond measure, and ready to take on the world and bring it beneath our heels.

We all did, each in our own way, and gone on to claim our own slice of the world. Adrian, sitting at the head of the Cross family table. Kristoff, who's moved on to become second in command of the Tsavakov Bratva Empire. Noel, who, despite his far humbler beginnings, became one of the most fearsome and viciously cut-throat forces to be reckoned with in the financial world. Braddock, Lars, Maddox...they all found their empires to lord over. Their pieces of the world to conquer.



And then there's *me*: the Golden Boy who fell from grace and into the shadows. The one that used to be so proud of his upright life and his "on the right side of the law" and "clean" successes.

In the end, it was all bullshit. But damn, I was so good at *hiding* the darkness from everyone. When you're a Golden Boy, you get very skilled at putting on that shiny paint every morning.

Some of them had inklings of what was hiding beneath the golden veneer. Adrian, of course, knew that I was doing business with, well, *him*. Kristoff and I shared a few moments where I think we both got a good look at each other's demons. But none of them have ever really known full scope of the behind-the-scenes work I did with several different criminal organizations. And none of them ever, *ever* knew of the dark poison lurking inside of me, the poison that will one day soon utterly destroy me.

They still don't.

Those old friends see me as broken. Emotionally shattered. Reeling from and still mourning the loss of my son. They see me as a man who's locked himself away in his house in an effort to shut out the world.

And they're not wrong. But none of them knows that part of the reason for shutting myself away is that it's my quiet exit. My last bow before the beast takes over, and I fully succumb to the darkness.

"What can I do for you, Adrian?"

I can see the wheels turning behind his eyes as he peers at me, frowning slightly.

"I'm worried about you, Oliver."

I laugh coldly, temper flashing.

“I believe I was quite clear on my position when it comes to pandering sympathy and—”

“I’m not here to hand you a hanky and give you a fucking hug, Oliver,” he mutters. “So you can drop the emotional stonewalling.”

My lip curls.

“You don’t need to worry about me, Cross. I’m quite fine here.”

“You haven’t been out in public in two years, my friend.”

“And?”

“And that worries me.”

I glare at him.

“Christ, Prince, no one can truly understand the loss you’ve experienced—”

“*Correct*,” I hiss dangerously. “That includes you.”

“I’m going to give you some advice, though.”

My fury boils to the surface as I start to make for the door.

“Save yourself the effort. I’m not interested in—”

“Oliver, *stop it*,” Adrian snaps. “You think I don’t understand pain? You think I don’t understand what it means to lose people you care about?”

I whirl back to him.

“You can’t *possibly* understand what this feels like.”

“*No*,” he growls. “I can’t. But as a father myself, I can damn well guess. And in your anger and in your fury, you’re letting the world grind you under its heel.”

“I’m *fine*, Adrian,” I growl. “And I don’t need this after school fucking special.”

“You’re not fine.” He stares at me, shaking his head. “Have you watched the news lately?”

“No.”

“Surely your own lawyers—”

“I fired them five months ago.”

He shakes his head.

“Oliver, I understand what you did for your son—”

“Careful, *old friend*,” I rasp in a voice not quite my own.

I don’t watch the news, and I *have* fired my idiotic lawyers. But I’m also not unaware that the world has now decided they’re bored with the tale of the son of the Golden Boy who quietly devolved into a sociopath and burned at least seven women to death.

Bored enough that they’ve moved on to me instead.

I’m fine with that.

I know who and what my son was. Or, to be more precise, I know goddamn well who he *used to be*, and then what he became. Just as I know the media is out there stoking the flames of this idea that I was aware of Jacob’s crimes and secretly using my money and influence to cover them up.

It’s only a half lie.

I never knew exactly what he was doing. But I knew the darkness he had flowing insidiously in his veins.

Knew it intimately.

Because it's the same darkness that flows in mine. The same darkness that slowly twisted my father. That darkness is the reason I bought Nanosplice Biotech in the first place and quietly poured something close to three billion dollars into their gene therapy research.

For a cure. For *hope*.

Did I ever cover for my son when he did bad things? *Goddamn right* I did. I would have killed for him. But I had no idea of the extent of the horrors he was committing.

The offenses I swept under the rug or paid people to walk away from were petty, "trust fund kid" problems. Like when he was seventeen and drove his Porsche into a parked police car when he was drunk. The police station got a new *fleet* of cars and a raft of season tickets to Arsenal games.

When he was nineteen and still dating women, he managed to get a girl from a family with royal connections pregnant. She ended up miscarrying, but the family, obviously, was irate.

That is, until her father won that seat in Parliament he was after. Until her mother "lucked" into that coveted membership at the exclusive London Royal Society. Until the girl herself wound up with a Bugatti and a condo in New York.

Because *yes*, I pulled strings. And maybe that makes me a shitty parent. Maybe it's best if your children suffer the consequences of their actions.

But I was determined *never* to be like my father to my son. But who knows. Maybe that does make me complicit in the horrors he ended up committing.

"You think I wouldn't have done the same?" Adrian growls quietly.

"I said *careful*—"

“You think I wouldn’t move heaven and earth to keep Ronan or Simone out of trouble if they—”

“If they ever *what!?*” I roar, making him flinch. “If they ever committed murder?! If they ever became confirmed sociopaths with pyromania, delusions of superiority, and a malignant narcissism complex?”

“Oliver—”

“If they ever *burned women alive in their fucking beds?!?*”

His face twists, but he doesn’t flinch or look away.

“What would you do for your children, *old friend*, if that were the—”

“*Anything*,” he hisses thickly. “I would do *anything*. But I don’t believe what they’re saying about you.”

“And why the fuck is that?”

“Because I know you, Oliver,” he growls. “Maybe I haven’t seen you lately. But I know who and what you are. I know you couldn’t ever have known that he was—”

He stops himself, taking a slow breath.

“You don’t have to fall on a sword here, is all I’m saying.”

“I’m quite fine, Adrian.”

“Are you?” he snaps. “Because they’re about to open a legitimate criminal investigation into your involvement with his crimes, in case you haven’t heard.”

I grind my jaw, saying nothing as I stride over to the bar cart.

“It’s ten-thirty in the morning, Prince.”

“And?” I snap.

“And perhaps it’s a little early for a drink.”

“You don’t have to have one.”

Adrian’s watches unhappily as I pour a glass.

“Don’t do this, Oliver.”

“Don’t do what?”

“Burn your entire life and legacy to the ground in your pain and your rage.”

“Adrian, this has been a positively *lovely* visit,” I rasp, turning to him. “But I do believe it’s time you got the fuck out of my house.”

My old friend exhales slowly, shoving his fingers through his dark hair.

“Look, I didn’t come here to tell you how to run or ruin your life.”

“Well, you know what they say about the best laid plans, don’t you, Adrian?”

He looks away, shaking his head.

“I’m here because of the girl, Oliver.”

I tense, my eyes narrowing as he turns back to me.

“*Excuse me?*”

He stabs his gaze into me.

“You understand that all of this is *my* world, right? The shadow world that you used to play in from time to time, but that I *live* in. I know everything that happens in my world, Oliver.”

Adrian’s steely eyes narrow.

“I’m well aware who you have locked up in this house.”

My jaw tightens.

“Just as I’m well aware who her mother was.”

Adrian shakes his head slowly as he glares at me.

“I mean, Christ, Oliver. You’re putting yourself in the middle of a war zone between Cillian Kildare and Atlas fucking Drakos with this. Do you have any idea how stupendously fucking stupid that is?”

I down my drink and set the empty glass down hard on the bar cart.

“Didn’t ask for your opinion.”

“I don’t think you’re fully grasping the gravity of what’s happening here, Oliver. Atlas Drakos isn’t just some violent thug trying to live up to his dad’s standards. He’s trying to take over his throne—a goal you’re giving him all the ammunition he needs to achieve. Because every day that goes by that Aeneas Drakos tells Atlas to not drive a tank through your front door, he looks weaker and weaker to those loyal to his eldest son.”

Adrian’s face darkens.

“You are fostering a *coup* in the Greek Mafia ranks, Prince. And I haven’t even touched on Cillian yet.”

“I thought you two were old pals,” I mutter, pouring another splash into my glass.

He laughs coldly.

“I’m as friendly with Cillian as I need to be to stay on his good side. And that’s not fear talking,” he growls. “That’s intelligence. Cillian is a madman, Oliver. He’s psychotic, and I don’t say that lightly. He’s the kind of man who would set the world on fire because he enjoys the smell of the smoke.”

Adrian sighs, turning to rake his fingers over his jaw.

“You’re putting yourself in the crosshairs between two utter sociopaths who have been playing Cold War with each other for years with this stunt, and *you* are about to become the proxy battlefield.”

We’re silent for a moment, eye-to-eye, before I knock back the last of the whiskey and then set the glass back down.

“Was there anything else, Adrian?”

He exhales, shaking his head sadly and looking away.

“You know, back in the Kings and Villains—”

“The Kings and Villains are dead and gone,” I spit. “It was a joke fraternity a bunch of cocky twenty-year-old finance assholes started so that we could go for pints and box on Fridays. That’s it.”

He looks back at me steadily.

“We both know that’s barely scratching the surface, Oliver. Just as you know that bond is there for life, through whatever —”

“I think it’s time you left, Cross.”

Adrian says nothing, but I see the way his eyes dim as he nods and walks to the door. He pauses in the doorway, glancing back at me.

“You still have friends, Oliver.”

“*Goodbye*, Adrian.”

The door clicks shut, and my eyes close tightly.





MY LEGS ARE STILL SHAKING as I *run* back to my chambers.

It may be a prison cell. But somehow, it's also become my refuge here. And I have every intention of slamming the door shut and then pushing as many pieces of furniture as I can in front of it to lock myself in.

And to keep him *out*.

It's not that I feel used, or taken advantage of, or pushed past my comfort zone. The reason I need to lock myself in my room isn't to keep Oliver out at all.

It's to keep *me* from *him*.

Because I have officially tumbled over the deep end into madness. This is full-blown Stockholm Syndrome.

Fantasies were bad enough, and a sure enough sign of my own spiraling depravity. The kiss in the piano room, mind-blowing as it was, pushed me deeper into the abyss.

But what just happened now...

I shiver heatedly as I bolt down a hallway and up one of the sprawling staircases that leads up to my wing of the manor. With every step, my mind replays the scene, the possessive way he pinned me to the wall.

*Are you scared of me?*

I should be. Fear would be a much saner reaction to this man than desire.

Than lust.

Eager, wanton, desperate lust.

My body remembers the way he touched me, as if every inch of skin his fingers played over was already *his*, not mine. His to touch. To claim, and bite, and suck, and stroke.

I shiver.

*God, I'm still wet.*

My core floods with heat as the image of Oliver dropping to his knees, yanking my panties down, and roughly pushing my thighs apart to bury his tongue in my most intimate place plays on a repeating loop. Again and again, I see his eyes stabbing possessively into mine as his mouth pressed hungrily to my pussy, giving me sensations I've never even dreamed of.

Making me ride a wave of pleasure I've never come close to with my own fingers. A wave that's still crashing over me to the point that I can barely breathe.

Imprisoning me wasn't enough. Filling my dreams with dark, depraved fantasies wasn't enough, either.

His next trick is to unravel me completely.

I get to the top of the staircase, pausing on the landing where the staircase branches into opposite directions. To the right, my own quarters in the east wing. To the left, the forbidden west wing.

I start to head east. Suddenly, I freeze. Then I shudder, slowly turning and dragging my gaze up the staircase into the

shadows of the west wing. Curiosity sinks its claws into me. A shiver teases down my spine.

If Oliver's dead set on unraveling me, I can damn well unravel some of him.

The man is a swirling dark mist of secrets, anger, tragedy, and a life I know almost nothing about. And maybe—just maybe—if I uncover at least some of those secrets, I'll begin to understand this poisonously dark attraction I have to the monster holding me hostage.

My eyes drag up the stairs again. Slowly, my feet begin to follow one after the other, until I reach the top landing. I tremble, hugging myself, my eyes widening as I strain to see down the dim, dark hall in front of me.

It's noticeably darker in this part of the house. Are the bulbs in the hallway light sconces a dimmer wattage? It's chillier here, too. My skin prickling, I start to tiptoe down the hall, glancing back as if any second he's going to come lunging from the shadows.

I move deeper into the forbidden, until suddenly, I'm standing in front of a massive wooden door.

My heart tenses.

A massive wooden door with honest-to-God *dents* across it, that match the ones in the walls on either side of it. Dents that look the same size as a fist.

*Where the heck am I?*

I reach for the knob, fully expecting it to be locked. And yet, it twists as I turn it, and the door cracks open. Taking a deep, shaky breath, I open the door and step into the gloom beyond.

I blink, dread filling my heart as I stiffen. My eyes take in the wreckage of what was once a glamorous master suite. As my eyes adjust to the near-darkness, my face drains of color.

*Holy crap.*

It looks as if I've truly stumbled into the place where an inhuman monster sleeps. It's not just the darkness, or the gloom hanging over the room like a fog. It's the sheer chaos of it all, the *carnage*, like a scene from a haunted house in a horror movie.

Empty liquor bottles are scattered over every surface, a clear indication that this area seems to be off limits even to Lucile. Dust and grime cover the windows, and my stomach knots as my gaze sweeps across what looks a whole lot like holes punched—literally *punched*—into the walls here and there.

Shamefully, something forbidden pulses in me as my eyes land on the massive bed where the monster sleeps.

I tremble, turning my gaze to a smashed chair in the corner and a framed poster now lying amid shattered glass on the floor. I move quietly across the room, watching my step carefully as I tiptoe over to what might have been a desk at some point.

Newspapers, financial statements, contracts, even dirty plates and silverware cover the surface. For some reason, my attention is drawn to a framed picture lying face down amongst the rubble. Shivering and raking my teeth nervously over my lip, I lift it face up and peer into the cracks in the glass.

It's a photo of a young blonde boy, smiling regally from ear to ear, his bright blue eyes piercing from the shattered glass into my own.

*Oh my God.*

My heart wrenches as my hand flies to my mouth.

For a moment, I thought it was a childhood picture of Oliver. But it's too new a photograph. And with a mix of horror and sadness, I realize who I'm really looking at.

Jacob.

I'm mesmerized by the unassuming, charming grin on the boy's face. A boy who would grow up to be a sociopathic killer who targeted women and almost always burned them to death.

Like Matilde Laurent. Mother of my half-sisters. One-time wife of my father.

One-time wife of *Oliver*, too.

For a second, I'm sickened by the green jealous feeling that instantly poisons my blood, legitimately disgusted by it. Because in what world is that an okay feeling to have, when faced with all of this?

But then, Lucile's words filter back into my head.

*It wasn't a real marriage. They didn't marry for love or anything like that. It was spite, pure and simple. They didn't even share a bedroom, much less anything else.*

And once again, I'm a little disturbed when I notice how quickly thinking of Oliver and Matilde's marriage as something fake, with no emotional or even physical attachment, lifts my spirits.

Then my eyes drop again to the smiling face of the boy who would grow up to murder women connected to—or that he *perceived* as connected to—his father.

My stomach knots, and I can't help but wonder if Jacob were still alive, and if he found out about what just happened between his father and I...

If I'd be *next*.

I shiver quickly, turning the photo face down again on the tabletop.

*I shouldn't be here.*

I back away and turn with every intention of leaving. But then my gaze filters through the gloom and lands on the wreckage on one of Oliver's bedside tables, and I peer curiously at what I'm seeing.

*Walk away. You shouldn't be here.*

But I can't walk away. Not when I realize what I'm looking at. The color drains from my face, and I shake as my feet move me closer. It's not the signs of possible alcohol addiction or ghosts from his past that catch my attention this time.

It's the vast quantity of used hypodermic needles scattered across the surface of the bedside table.

The empty vials. The bits of bandage wrappers. The tissue with a spot of blood on it.

My face pales.

What the *hell* am I looking at? Heroin? Fentanyl? Horror and fear stab me like two cold knives.

I didn't mean to unravel this much.

I start to back away as the fear claws at my chest. *This* is why he didn't want me here.

*You need to run.*

But my legs won't work. I can't tear my eyes away as I stumble and shuffle backwards, away from the needles and the bottles.

Until suddenly, I hear a creak on the floor behind me.

*"What. The. FUCK. Are you doing here?!"*

Oliver.

I'd scream, except my throat closes off. And instead, all I can do is whirl, ashen and pale, my eyes wide in horror as I look up into Oliver's furious face.

But this time, it's a different fury. It's not the glowering, sulky anger I've seen in him before, or the savagery when I've seen him snap. This is something more; something bigger.

Something deeper, and darker, and one hundred times scarier.

The look on his face is pure unmitigated rage. As I stare at him in terror, his eyes darken even more. His face wrenches into a demonic visage, as something twists him from the inside out. Until he's grinding his teeth, his eyes becoming lethal slits.

*"You were told never to come here!"*

Horror digs its claws into my heart. It doesn't even sound like him. It sounds like a hellish, possessed version of him. Less than an hour ago, this man had me clawing at the wall and seeing double, growling filthy, sinful things to me as he made me come on his tongue.

Now, I'm looking at his Mr. Hyde, a version of him who very much looks like he actually is about to kill me.

*"Oliver, I—"*

I shudder, turning white.

*"I'm sorry—"*

“You’re *sorry*?!” he roars, making me whimper as I shrink away from him.

“I didn’t mean to—!”

“Yes, you did,” he rasps thickly.

His eyes stab past me to the bedside table, and I watch as livid fury explodes across his face.

“What did you touch!?”

“I didn’t touch any—”

I shriek as he whirls on me again, his face a savage, dark mask of fury.

“Do you realize what would have happened if you’d spilled any of that?! If you’d dropped one?! If you destroyed what I *need*?!”

His voice booms like a cannon through the room, breaking me into little pieces as I shrink away from his wrath.

“I’m so sorry! I *swear*, I won’t tell anyone about the drugs!”

“*Get out.*”

“I promise!!” I scream, shaking in fear as I back away from him. “I’ll forget I saw any—”

“GET OUT!”

I whirl, and I *run*.

I hear glass breaking and wood splintering behind me, and the unmistakable, sickening sound of a fist slamming through a plaster wall.

But I’m already halfway down the hall, running faster than I’ve ever run in my entire life. Naked fear nips at my heels, turning me cold, shredding and destroying the sinful heat and



heady excitement from earlier until all I can taste is bitterness  
as I flee all the way back to my room.

Away from the beast.

I have to get out of here.



THE PAIN IS UNREAL.

It's a thousand knives sliding under my skin to twist and flay, until there's nothing left to shred.

The blackness is all-consuming, drowning out the world around me and utterly taking over. It's as if I'm watching the whole thing through glass, a hundred feet away, as the version of me I hate screams full in the face of the innocent girl I can't stop thinking about.

I watch as that worst version of me destroys yet another part of my life: roaring, bellowing, sending her fleeing from the room before suddenly I get pulled under.

The inky blackness fills my lungs, choking and drowning me as I whirl in a daze. I'm dimly aware of pain exploding through my fist as it crashes into something. My other hand tightens on the back of a chair and sends it hurtling across the room.

And then I'm falling and spiraling out of control until I crash headfirst to the floor.

I see flashes of light, taste blood on my tongue. And my entire heart and soul feel as if they're being charred to ash.

blackness before my eyes.

I fight for air, choking and gasping. I claw at the floor as I drag myself blindly across it. I feel the shards of glass and splintered wood slice into my palms and drag across my thighs as I pull myself through the wreckage.

My vision swims as my eyes desperately search the rapidly-darkening room, until I lock on on to my only cure.

My temporary cure, at least. The only thing that'll pull me from the abyss I'm about to fall into headlong.

The side table crashes to the floor as I cling to it, sending everything scattering. Desperately, I snatch up a fresh needle and a vial I can only hope hasn't cracked. My vision swims, the beast in me roaring and snarling and desperate, hell bent on destroying me.

I force myself to breathe. I force myself to concentrate on the liquid filling the syringe. I'm starting to fade as I fumble, find my arm, pray to God I hit a vein, and stab. The needle rips the skin. My thumb shoves the plunger down.

*Please fucking work.*

I collapse backwards onto the floor, my eyes rolling back as I slip out of consciousness.

Suddenly—seconds, minutes, who even knows how much later—air fills my lungs. The blood-red mist covering my vision begins to dwindle to spots, and then streaks, and then just a haze. I blink again and the mist clears completely.

*That was too close.*

I suck in a ragged breath of air, choking on the sweetness of the oxygen before sitting up against the side of my bed, my head resting heavily against the mattress.

Fucking hell.

It requires a huge effort to move. It's as if the rage has drained every ounce of strength from my body, leaving a broken and shattered shell of myself. I close my eyes tightly, gritting my teeth.

This is getting worse.

Way worse.

I've been on borrowed time for at least five or six years now. But I thought I'd have longer. I *need* longer.

For what, I have no idea.

And yet, as much as hatred has poisoned my veins these last few years, and as much as I've burned my world to ashes at my feet, and as many times as I've thought about ending it all with a gun in the back of the throat...

I never have.

I shudder, taking a shaky breath as the beast slowly begins to quiet and unclench from around my heart and lungs. As the monster inside me slowly gets smaller and smaller, retreating back into its cage.

I exhale slowly.

I've always given myself various reasons for *not* putting myself out of my misery. That shooting myself is the coward's way out. That staying alive at least will prolong the memory of my son before he sank into his darkness.

Or that the legacy I would leave behind if I took that way out would be one that looked like guilt. That the fucking talking heads on the news would be proven right that I'd known about the murders all along and shielded Jacob from the law, and ended my life because I couldn't stomach what I'd done.

Or maybe, the reason I've never swallowed the business end of a gun is that ultimately, it'd feel like losing.

And even now, with the wreckage of the Golden Boy in smithereens at my feet, I fucking *hate* the idea of losing.

Slowly, the attack fades.

My brow furrows deeply as the blurry image of Rose running in terror from me comes swimming to the surface.

*Fuck.*

I've gotten very good at not feeling one lick of guilt or shame when I lash out uncontrollably. Lucile gives me a far bigger pass than she should. And Wentworth? He's very good at letting things roll off his back.

But Rose...

I grit my teeth.

She shouldn't have had to see that. I mean, yes, she should *not* have come in here. And had she accidentally spilled any of my medicine before the next shipment comes...well, things could have ended very, very badly.

Things like my life.

But even still, I wince when I flash back to that other version of me sending her sobbing from the room.

She's probably scared to death of me now, and I wouldn't blame her. But the curious part is why I *give a shit* when I've been perfectly content to let the entire world fear me the last couple of years.

Exhaling, I finally find the strength to stand, clutching the edge of my bed. I glance down, scowling at the needle still

stuck in my arm like some fucking junkie. I pull it out and go to toss it on the table. When I look around, I frown.

Holy shit. This place is a fucking *disaster*.

It's a disaster I've lived in for two years, but it's one that I've lived in *alone*. No one comes in here. Not Wentworth. Not Lucile. No one.

Until Rose, five minutes ago.

Suddenly, it's as if the presence of another human in here has me looking at it with fresh eyes.

And it disgusts me.

My face shadows as I grab a wastebasket from the bathroom and use a rolled-up old newspaper to sweep the fucking chaos of used needles, bandages, and trash on the bedside table into it.

I sort out the unused medical supplies, along with the precious medicine that keeps the darkness at bay, and carefully put it all away in the table drawer.

In the bathroom, I glance menacingly at my reflection in the cracked mirror, shoving my fingers through my hair.

Then I stride from the room.

Two minutes later, feeling much more myself, I'm standing outside Rose's closed door in the east wing. I breathe slowly and lean my forehead against the doorframe.

"Rose."

She doesn't answer.

That's fair.

"There's..."

I shake my head.

*Don't do this. She doesn't need to know. It doesn't matter.*

“There are things you need to know about me.”

Fuck me, why am I telling her this? Why am I opening up like this, through a closed fucking *door*, no less?

“There’s a darkness in me that is...hard to describe. But I didn’t mean for it to come out like that. The problem is, it’s getting harder—a lot harder—to keep it bottled up.”

She’s still silent on the other side of the door, and I exhale again.

“The rage isn’t me.”

I close my eyes, trying to imagine where she is. Locked in the bathroom, probably. Or hiding under the bed or the covers. Or, knowing her even as little as I do, probably brandishing a weapon of some kind in case I decide to come smashing in.

Self-loathing burns through me, making me wince as my lips curl and my head shakes.

“It wasn’t me that you just saw in there. That was...” my jaw tightens. “That was a me that I try very hard to keep buried. I have a darkness in me. An illness, of sorts. And it’s getting worse. What you saw in there is medicine that keeps that darkness at bay, at least a little, for a short time. It’s just that sometimes it...”

I shake my head.

“Rose, I really don’t want to tell you all of this through a closed door. So I’m going to open it. You don’t need to scream. I’m *not* going to hurt you.”

My hand twists the knob, and I step inside. I'm half expecting something heavy to be flung at my head, or a chair to come out of nowhere. But there's no attack.

There's also no Rose.

My brow wrinkles as I scan the room.

“Rose?”

The bed is a mess, but she's clearly not in it. And when I stride over and glance underneath it, she's not there, either. Nor is she in the walk-in closet, nor the bathroom.

Brow furrowing, I prowl back into the main bedroom.

*Where the fuck is—*

Then my eyes land on the window, and my face hardens.

“You have got to be fucking *kidding* me.”

The window is jammed open, a book holding the heavy pane up. Instantly, I put two and two together as to why the bed is a mess, and the window is wide open.

It's a mess because there's no fucking *sheets* on it, and because the duvet doesn't even have its cover on it anymore.

Those sheets and the duvet cover are now knotted together, tied to the heavy radiator beside the window, and then hanging *out* of that window like a rope.

*Fuck me.*

I slam the window all the way open, sticking my upper body out and glaring at the ground below.

*Clever fucking girl.*

She's used a bunch of the gowns and other clothes from her closet to extend the reach of the sheets. My eyes land on the



end of the makeshift rope dangling maybe five feet from the ground.

*Mother. Fucker.*

I tear through the house like a maniac, seething as the mist begins to cloud my vision again. But I don't need to put on much of a detective hat. When I bolt out the side kitchen door, I realize the door to one of the five bays of my garage is open.

And the vintage '68 Porsche inside is missing.

Rose is gone.



THIS CAN'T BE RIGHT.

My hands grip the steering wheel of the Porsche tightly, my eyes darting from side to side fearfully. I swallow, peering at the boarded-up shop windows, broken streetlights, trash-strewn, dirty sidewalks of the rundown, dangerous-looking neighborhood.

No. There's no way this is right.

An hour and a half ago, I was hoping to God I wouldn't break an ankle jumping from the end of my makeshift rope. When I miraculously survived that, I ran from the gardens beneath my bedroom window around the side of the house to the massive five-bay garage filled with luxury cars.

The cars that, in a lovely twist of fate, had their keys hanging on neatly labeled little hooks next to the garage door.

Luckily, when Sister Carmen taught me to to drive, it was in the convent's beater of an old manual van. I've barely driven since, but mercifully, I retained enough that I could maneuver the stunning, vintage black Porsche out of the garage and head as fast as I dared back towards London.

Tucked into a pocket of my jacket, as it has been since I arrived on Oliver's front steps, is Elsa Guin's business card.

I might not have a phone. But the vintage Porsche *does* have a modern navigation screen retrofitted into it. One that I programmed the address of Elsa's office in central London into and headed directly for.

I shiver again as I glance around at the super sketchy neighborhood I've ended up in. It's nowhere close to central London. It's filled with empty storefronts with smashed-out windows. There's a blackened trash barrel up the street that looks as if someone has been using it as a stove.

There's categorically no way this is anywhere remotely close to the law offices of one of the country's top lawyers.

I snatch up her business card from the seat next to me. Elsa's office address is listed as number five Highgate Lane, London. My eyes dart to the "you've arrived at your destination" location on the modern screen built into the vintage 60's dashboard, and—

My stomach drops.

*Crap.*

I programmed in number five Highgate *Street*. Not Lane.

Barely at a crawl, I pull the car to the curb and put it in park. Shaking, I tap back on the navigation screen and type in the correct address. Relief washes over me. I'm barely a thirty-minute drive from where I *should* be going. Thank God.

I take a breath for the first time in what seems like hours. I even close my eyes for a second and allow myself to uncoil just a little.

*You're almost there.*

I still haven't quite decided what I'm going to tell and not tell Elsa when I get to her. Obviously, a huge part of me wants to go directly to the police. On the other hand, there's a part of me that understands that whatever my father is doing for Oliver, it's not exactly "on the level".

Calling the police on Oliver might get my father into trouble, too. And I might be furious with him, and still trying to wrap my head around everything I've learned about his past—including the other family I didn't even know about after living with him for two months—but I don't want him to get pulled in deeper than he already is.

I start to wonder about things like attorney-client privilege. Elsa's my father's lawyer. But I'm pretty sure I can pay her even a small amount of money to revoke that privilege. Or at least, that's what they do in the movies—

I scream, my eyes flying open at the sudden loud knock on the window beside me. I gasp, whirling and then tensing when I see the face of a young man in a track suit leering at me through the glass.

His hair is slicked back, his eyes glint, and his grin has a dark edge to it as he raps his knuckles against the window again.

"Little lost, sweetheart?"

My face goes white as his hand goes to the door handle. But somehow, I break my trance and slam my hand down on the lock on my side of the door.

The guy grins wider.

"My, but you're a jumpy little thing," he snickers, drumming his knuckles against the glass again. "I ain't gonna bite you, love. Why don't you come on out? Maybe I can help you get wherever you need to go."

I smile warily. I might have grown up in a convent, but I'm not an idiot.

"I'm fine, thank you," I say as politely as I can.

The young man's smile drops.

"I think I can help you be a bit more than just fine, love."

"Fuck *me*, look at this fuckin' ride!"

I gasp, whipping my head the other way and lurching across the passenger seat to lock that door too. Outside of it, two guys leer at me with similar glints in their eyes.

"Open up, sweetheart," the first guy growls, banging on the window again with his knuckles.

I'm shaking, and it feels like my throat is starting to close. Nerves fraying, I quickly drop my hand to the stick shift. But before I can start moving, one of the two guys from the passenger side heaves a newspaper box over right in front of the car.

My pulse goes through the roof.

There's a crashing sound behind me. And when I whip my head around to glance back, I see one of the other guys shoving over a trash barrel.

*Oh God. Oh God.*

My breathing becomes ragged and too fast, and my eyes dart wildly around the leering faces surrounding the car. A fourth guy, bigger than the rest, wearing a leather jacket and holding a baseball bat, strolls up in front of the Porsche and lightly taps the hood with it.

"Pretty set of wheels," he murmurs before his eyes drift up and over the hood and stab through the windshield into me.

His grin darkens.

“Pretty girl, too.”

I go cold.

“Why don’t you come on out, love?”

“I’m all right where I am, thank you.”

It’s just a newspaper dispenser. I can ram it.

*Right?*

Panic bubbling up my throat like acid, my hand drops to the shifter again when suddenly I’m flinching in terror as a palm slams against the side window.

“Don’t *touch* that,” one of them snarls.

I can feel the color draining from my face, my whole body shaking as I glance back at the man leering at me from right outside the driver’s side window.

“I—I have to get going.”

“Not from around here, are you, love?” he leers. “Posh girl like you in a fancy car like this?”

“I—”

“Does Daddy know you borrowed his car?” one of them sneers coldly.

My heart races as I reach for the stick shift again.

“I have to—”

I scream as the window explodes next to my face, shrieking and cowering away as the baseball bat comes smashing through it. My foot hits the gas, even though I’m still in park, and then hands jab through the smashed window and grapple with my seat belt.

*Oh GOD.*

I scream, flailing and slapping and hitting and clawing. But there's more of them, and they're much stronger. Before I know what's happening, my seat belt is off. Strong hands wrap around my wrists, my throat, and my hair, and I scream in absolute terror as I'm yanked roughly out of the car through the smashed window and onto the street.

Another scream rips from my throat as they slam me to the ground. Pure abject terror explodes through my entire body as I try and scramble away from them.

But they're too fast and too strong. And there's too many of them.

A sob wrenches from my throat as one of them grabs my hair and the back of my shirt, dragging me from the street. I claw at the ground, crying out as my fingers scrape over shattered glass and broken gravel.

It doesn't even slow them.

Horror blinds me as I'm dragged into a shadowy alley between two abandoned shops and slammed hard against a wall. My face is the color of ash as I look up in terror to see the four of them grinning at me—eying me up and down like I'm *meat* as they circle around me.

“You came to the wrong neighborhood, sweetheart,” one of them growls.

I fold in on myself, terror shutting me down and dulling my ability to think.

“*Please*,” I croak, flinching as the guy with the bat taps it thoughtfully against the bricks next to my head. “*Please!* I won't say anything! I won't go to the police—”

“Nah, love, you’re right, you’re not going anywhere. What’s a pretty, posh girl like you doing here, anyway?”

The snickers of four bloodthirsty animals fill my ears.

“Looking to have a little dirty fun on the wrong side of town?”

It feels like I’m going to throw up.

“*No*...please—PLEASE!!”

I scream as two of them grab me by the arms, ignoring my thrashes as they start to drag me deeper into the shadows. I start to sob, but when a greasy palm slams across my mouth, my survival instinct kicks in.

And I bite down.

*Hard.*

The man howls, yanking his arm back and slapping me across the face with the back of his other hand.

“You fucking bitch!”

Blinding pain explodes across the side of my head. The world spins and then I realize I’m on my hands and knees on the ground, the coppery taste of blood trickling from my lips.

I look up at the leering faces, my blood turning to ice as I see the glint of a blade in one guy’s hand.

The one with the baseball bat tucked under his arm starts to unzip his jeans.

“You use those teeth again, cunt, and I’ll fuck your ass with this bat.”

I’m drowning in horror. Fear. Panic. My face feels numb. I have the strange sensation that I’m watching all of this from outside my body.



“Please...” I croak. “Please... God—”

“God ain’t here, little girl.”

“No, but I am.”

The voice is like the sound of breaking bones. The sound of metal being dragged across gravel.

It’s the voice of darkness.

The voice of hate.

The voice of a monster I know all too well.

My heart seizes, and when I drag my gaze up, I see the huge, hulking figure silhouetted by the streetlights at the mouth of the alley.

He steps forward, and the gleam from another streetlight glints starkly across his chiseled, aristocratic face.

The face with a thin white scar running down the left side of it.

The face with icy blue eyes, haunted by pure darkness.

I want to scream at Oliver to run. That there’s four of them, and they have a knife, and a bat, and God know what else.

But before I can say or do anything, he’s on them.

All of them. All at once.

And very quickly, I realize I’m not looking at Oliver Prince.

I’m looking at a *beast*. An apex predator, completely in his element.

My hand flies to my mouth, and I cower shivering against the wall of the alley as he smashes into them like a tidal wave. I watch with eyes wide open, unable to look away even if I wanted to.

I see him grab one of my attackers by the ear and smash the man's face against the brick wall until his teeth shatter and his face turns bloody and raw.

The one with the knife is on Oliver, and I scream as I swear I see him stab him. But all Oliver does is grunt, whirling and driving his fist into the man's face again and again, until the man drops to his knees, choking and gurgling and spraying red from a shattered mouth.

Oliver kicks the blade away before turning with a roar to the last two as they go pale and try to run.

They don't make it out of the alley.

He grabs them both by the hoods of their sweatshirts, yanking them back and smashing them into the side of a dumpster. One of them swings a fist into Oliver's jaw, making him grunt. But in a second, Oliver has the offender by the throat and is slamming him hard against the wall.

Again, and again, until his face goes ashen and his eyes roll back.

I scream as the ringleader comes at Oliver with a roar. But suddenly, he's shrieking and holding a wrist bent at a horrifying, unnatural angle, and the bat is in Oliver's hand.

The end of it drives three times—*hard*—into the man's balls, turning his face green as he drops to his knees. The bat splinters as it crashes over his head, and I watch the light in his eyes go out before he drops face-first to the ground, whether dead or merely unconscious I don't know.

The entire thing is over in forty-five seconds.

Suddenly, the entire alley is completely silent. I raise my eyes to Oliver, my mouth working but no words coming out.

“I—I—”

I can't breathe. The world is spinning, and the adrenaline that's been keeping me alive since the window in the car smashed has vanished.

The night starts to blur. The alley starts to spin.

“Rose!”

Everything fades away as he rushes to me, like a black cloud swirling around me. Arms carved from stone catch me before I can hit the ground, cradling me against his broad, hard chest.

“Rose!”

He's screaming my name, but it sounds like it's coming from the other end of the longest, darkest tunnel in the world.

“ROSE! Stay with me!”

And then everything goes black.



I **LOSE** track of how long we're in the car: Oliver behind the wheel, me huddled into as small a ball as possible in the passenger seat next to him.

Cold. Numb. Shaking, and staring wordlessly out the window.

Eventually I turn, shifting my gaze from the window to the driver's seat. The glow from the dash of the Range Rover illuminates the hauntingly beautiful, perpetually shadowed and grim face of the man who just rescued me.

*After* I ran from him.

His jaw tightens and his gaze flicks to me for a second, making me both shiver and flood with something warm before he glares back at the road.

"*I'm sorry,*" I whisper hoarsely.

Oliver says nothing.

"*I—your Porsche—*"

"It's just a car," he grunts. "It's fine."

He blinks, frowning at the road. His jaw tightens again, and it hits me.

He's not angry. He's in *pain*.

We drive under a street light, and quite suddenly, the reality of what's just happened, and everything I've just witnessed hits me.

And I feel fear.

Not because I'm suddenly scared of *him*, even though I just watched him possibly kill all four of those men and witnessed his full savagery that I've only seen hints of before.

No, I'm not scared *of* him.

I'm scared *for* him.

Big difference.

My mind replays the fight—in particular the part where I swore I saw the guy with the knife stab it into Oliver's back before Oliver practically broke him in half.

“Are you...?”

His eyes droop shut and then instantly fly open again.

“*I'm fine*,” he rasps.

The car veers to the side, and I gasp, gripping the handle on the door.

“Oliver—”

“*I'm fine*, Rose,” he grunts, his face growing paler.

He's not fine at all. I can see it written in the struggle in his face, the sheer willpower it's taking him to keep his eyes open. And when we pass under another streetlight, my face pales.

*Jesus.*

Earlier, I thought it was his tattoos that I could see peeking out from the collar of his shirt. But when we pass under the light, I realize it's not ink.

It's blood.

My mouth falls open, my eyes bulging as my gaze runs all the way down his side.

Holy hell, he's really bleeding.

“Oliver!”

“We're almost...” his mouth droops. “We're—we're almost... home....”

His eyes roll back, and I choke back a gasp as he loses his grip on the wheel and slumps with a thud against the window next to him.

“OLIVER!”

I scream as the car careens off the road before I grab the emergency brake and yank it up hard. Tires squeal and pure terror explodes through my body as the car skids and spins and I grip the dashboard with white knuckles, Oliver still slumped against the door.

Suddenly, we come to a stop in a cloud of black dust at the side of the road.

My heart is beating a million miles a minute as I finally suck in a breath of air. I rip off my seatbelt and turn to the man slumped next to me.

“Oliver!”

He doesn't even blink.

“OLIVER!”

There's a flicker of movement in his jaw and behind his eyes, and I can hear a quiet groan somewhere in his chest. He's alive.

But his eyes don't open, and his face is ashen. I flick on the overhead lights, and my eyes go wide with horror.

*Oh God.*

There's a giant gash down the back of his shirt, and the whole of his shoulder is soaked in rusty, drying blood.

I swallow, feeling my pulse humming in my ears.

He needs a doctor. *Badly.*

His phone is still clipped into the mount on the dash in front of us, the GPS open to directions back to his house.

My eyes drop to his seat belt. The door next to him, with the dark, empty road all around us. The SUV has a full tank of gas, according to the indicator, and a GPS that will take me anywhere...

I go completely still.

It would be so easy.

And for one horrible second I play out how it could happen. I envision myself undoing the seat belt, reaching across and unlocking the drivers's side door, and letting the dangerous, possibly psychotic man who's jailed me in his house for two weeks, and kissed me, and put his mouth between my thighs to make me scream in pleasure, who's invaded my every *thought*, just slip out the door and fall into the shadows.

I picture myself slipping behind the wheel, quietly driving off, finding my father, and disappearing, far away from all this.

It would be *so easy*.

But when my eyes shut tightly, and I think again of doing all of that, all I feel is horror and self-loathing.

I open my door and slide out, rushing around to the driver's side. Oliver groans as I reach over him and unclip his seat belt.

*"What...Rose..."*

I grit my teeth, using all of my strength to push his massive frame across the divider into the passenger seat. He slumps almost lifelessly, still a worrying, ashen gray, and my pulse quickens.

He's lost a lot of blood.

I have to be fast.

I leave my plans of escape on the side of the road as I get behind the wheel, start the map directions again, drop the emergency brake, and *floor it*.





I DREAM OF DEATH.

Of pain.

Of the suffering of the world, and the misery of loss. I dream of demons, of everyone from my past that I've left behind, or fucked over, or beaten.

Every enemy. Every friend whose face and name I've now forgotten, who have definitely forgotten me. Until I'm pulled under, drowning in the toxic darkness of my regrets.

I rage at the darkness, cursing life, fate, the genes my father and his father before him passed down to me. But no matter how loud I roar into the abyss, the only thing I hear echoing back is mocking laughter.

Fate, or maybe death, smiling at me, waiting for me, welcoming me with open arms.

*"Soon, Oliver. Soon."*

The abyss grows wider and wider, until it swallows me whole.

---

PAIN STABS into me and I'm suddenly ripped from sleep, wincing and my eyes flying open as the burning sensation in my back hits me.

I'm vaguely aware that I've been home for some time. There are flashes of blurry memories that play in my head on a loop. Being dragged from a car—frail, thin arms under my own and tight across my chest.

An urgency in a soft but bold voice screaming for help. The feel of my ankles bashing up the stone steps of my home. My head throbbing when she raised a small fist to pound on the front door over and over.

Dim flashbacks of Wentworth carrying me inside, and of Lucile screaming that she was going to call an ambulance.

Of my own head shaking side to side, mumbling the word “no” over and over.

There's another foggy memory of writhing in agony on the bed. I'm face down, listening to Wentworth mutter something about the gash being deeper than he thought and about the amount of blood I've lost.

The flood of what I know is morphine hitting my veins like a balm. The pinch of a needle putting me back together. And then, the feel of a soft hand entwining with mine before the blackness swallows me whole—

The stabbing sensation hits me again, yanking me back into the present. I'm wide awake. Someone is prodding the wound on my back.

And it fucking *hurts*.

“*Goddammit!*” I roar, half turning to take a swipe at whoever is fucking touching me. But even just that motion makes me choke, my head swimming with the pain.

“Can’t you just leave me fucking *be!*” I snarl.

“I *can’t* let you be. If I don’t clean this, you’re going to get a freaking infection.”

I stiffen. This time, I swallow down the cold, burning, stabbing pain as I turn my head, my brow furrowing as my eyes lock with Rose’s.

The room goes still; her perfect, soft lips pursed tightly, her brow arching impishly at me as I glare up at her. My gaze moves from her, and I suddenly realize I’m in my own bed, in my own room.

I stiffen.

“What the fuck are you doing in here?”

Rose’s brow furrows before she rolls her eyes.

“Putting Humpty Dumpty back together again,” she mutters testily. “Now roll back onto your side before you rip your stitches.”

“I asked you a fucking question,” I hiss. “What in the *hell* are you doing here in my—”

I choke, seeing fucking triple as I attempt to sit up. The pain is almost overwhelming, sending me groaning and falling back across the bed.

My pulse begins to thud. The blackness in me begins to throb and grow, and the red mist begins to seep into my vision.

“Sit *still*.”

The beast begins to smash against the bars.

She needs to get out of here. *Now*.

“*Get out—*”

“Oh my God, are you actually serious right now?”

“*Get—*”

“Could you please try to swallow back your *incessant* need to be a grumpy jerk for like seven seconds, unless that’s an impossible—”

“*Medicine,*” I choke through clenched teeth, switching tactics as the rage in me threatens to torch everything in its path.

“No, you’ve already hit the upper limit of how much morphine you can have in a twenty-four-hour period. Wentworth was *very* clear about—”

“*Not...morphine...*” I gurgle, fighting the darkness in me with every ounce of my willpower. I choke, clenching my teeth and every muscle in my body, trying to stave off the inevitable.

She can’t be here for this.

She can’t be sitting on my fucking bed when the monster takes over.

“*Twenty milliliters,*” I blurt as the world dims to darkness.

“*Bedside...table...*”

I fade out as I hear her suddenly gasp, followed by the scrambling rummaging sound of her yanking the drawer open.

Then she goes quiet.

I groan, writhing as the claws sink into me, forcing my eyes open.

Rose is still, staring at the contents of the drawer. And I see the war on her face.

“What is this?”

“*My med—medicine!*”

“Is it drugs?”

“It’s fucking *medicine!*” I roar in a voice that is no longer my own before I clench my eyes shut tightly. My hands curl to clawed fists as pure hate and blinding rage begin to burn my very soul.

“*Medicine,*” I—or rather, my raging beast—rasp before I use the very last drop of my strength to shove it back down.

“*Please...*”

I hear the sound of packaging ripping. I feel soft, shaking hands on my arm; fingers trembling as they search for a vein.

“I—I’ve never done this!”

“*Rose—*”

“How do I—?!”

“*Rosssee...*”

“Don’t move.”

There’s a sudden edge in her voice, and her grip on my arm tightens. I hear her sharp intake of breath, and suddenly, the pinch of a needle piercing my skin.

I’m on the bleeding edge of losing all control when that twenty milliliters hits my brain like a brick. And then, like clouds parting after a hurricane, or water dousing a roaring fire, I feel it.

*Relief.*

The medicine floods my system, extinguishing the pain and shoving the monster roaring and thrashing back into his box. I can see the mist leaving my vision, and the lethal rush of adrenaline subsiding as air whooshes into my lungs.

The room goes utterly silent, until the only sound is my slow, deep breathing as I grip the bedsheets with white-knuckle fists.

“What did I just give you?” Roes says quietly, her voice trembling a little.

I shake my head.

“Nothing.”

“Oliver—”

“It was...” I grit my teeth, scowling. “I take it for seizures.”

She doesn’t respond to my weak lie for a moment. Then—

“What is it?”

“It’s just med—”

“Yeah, *which* seizure medication? Sister Patricia at Our Lady Hildegard got seizures. But the stuff she took didn’t look anything like this.”

I don’t answer.

“Oliver, this doesn’t even have a label on it.”

Probably because I get it from a doctor on my payroll in Malaysia. Who, while a genius, doesn’t exactly have his medical license anymore.

“I took it off.”

Rose goes quiet again. When I raise my eyes to her, she’s frowning as she peers at me.

“That didn’t look anything like Sister Patricia’s seizures.”

“Well, good for Sister fucking Patricia,” I mutter. “I’ll ask you again, *what* are you doing in this room?”

Her brow knits, lips pursing thinly.

“I told you: I’m cleaning your wound.”

“Where the fuck is Wentworth?”

“I have no idea,” she shrugs. “But—”

“But *what*. He’s the one with the military field-dressing experience.”

“Well, good thing I’m the one with *seizure* experience,” she snaps curtly, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “And besides, I don’t think you need to be a veteran to know how to sterilize a stitched-up wound. So *stay still*, or you’ll rip these stitches.”

I scowl at her. She scowls right back.

Finally, with a wordless grunt, I roll back over onto my side. And for the first time, I notice something.

My room is no longer the toxic waste dump it’s been for the last two years.

It’s...*tidy*. Clean. Devoid of old liquor bottles, plates, garbage, syringe wrappers, and whatever other mess my darkness has accumulated in my manic brooding these last few years.

“Lucile,” Rose says quietly behind me.

My brow furrows deeply into a scowl.

“Lucile is *not* allowed in—”

“Yeah, well, we *were* here, and I think the mess was going to give her a panic attack. Plus, you weren’t conscious to yell at her. Or anyone else, for that matter. That was a really nice change of pace, actually.”

My jaw sets as I scowl at the pristine bedroom.

“How long was I out?”

“About a day.”

I feel her touch something wet and cool to the wound on my back again, dabbing at it. It hurts like a motherfucker, but I can ignore that.

What I *can't* ignore is that she's still here.

I have a vague memory of wanting to drive us home as fast as possible, even as I felt the life ebb out of me. I remember knowing the window of opportunity to get back and get help was closing further by the second. There's a hazy recollection of deciding to rest my eyes just for a moment behind the wheel.

And the next thing I know, I'm being pulled out of the passenger side of the Range Rover, back at home. I'm being half-carried, half-dragged upstairs. I'm hearing frantic voices shouting my name as I fade out again.

And suddenly, it hits me.

I should have been furious that she escaped out the window, stole one of my fucking cars, and then, for reasons I *will* get to the bottom of, drove to one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in North London. She drove into that place looking, well, like she always does: like a lost, innocent lamb.

An innocent lamb driving a two-hundred-thousand-dollar vintage sports car, no less.

If I hadn't have driven like a madman, tailing the tracking system that was built into the Porsche—if I hadn't gotten there in time...

The rage explodes in me again. But it's not *him*. It's not my monster. This rage is all me. And that's a terrifying concept.

I should be, *want* to be, angry that she deceived me. That she escaped and tried to run from me, breaking our deal. But I'm not angry, I'm just...



My brow knits.

Scared.

I didn't chase after Rose because I was angry at her. I did it because I was terrified at the thought of not having her anymore. And when I arrived at the scene playing out in that disgusting alley?

I was *vengeful*.

I was an angel of death, ready to pass judgement.

I'm not quite ready to even think about what would have happened to her at the hands of those four pieces of shit if I hadn't gotten there when I did. For a second, I try and replay my actions through the red mist clouding the memory. I try and put the pieces back together to get a glimpse of what I did to them—to try to recall if they're alive or dead.

But then I realize, I simply don't care. If they're dead, *good*.

They were jackals, preying on the weak. More importantly, they tried to prey on *her*. They tried to hurt what's mine.

They laid hands on Rose. And for that, they fucking deserve worse than death.

I close my eyes, pushing from my mind the nightmare possibility of walking into that alley and finding her dead, or assaulted by the four of them.

And then suddenly, I realize: I've been out a full day. Maybe more. And she's still here.

Rose could have left at any point after we got home, or even earlier, when I blacked out behind the wheel. I'm having trouble understanding why she didn't, to be perfectly honest.

“Connecting the dots?” she says dryly.

I frown, glancing back at her over my shoulder.

“Excuse me?”

“I said *connecting the dots*. You’ve been out for a day and...”

Rose lifts a graceful shoulder. “I’m still here.”

“I suppose you want me to thank you for not leaving me to die on the side of the road?”

She says nothing, but gives me a sharp look.

“It would be a *start*, yeah,” she mutters. “Oh, and you’re welcome for the blood, by the way.”

My brow furrows. “The what?”

“The blood. Turns out, you and I are the same type, and you’d lost a lot of it. So...” She shrugs, making a face as she twists her arm around to show a bandage over the crook of her elbow.

I eye it for a second before my gaze lifts to hers.

“Thanks.”

“You are *so* very welcome, I’m sure,” she says sarcastically.

“Of course, I wouldn’t have to thank you for any of this if you hadn’t run off like that.”

“You wouldn’t have to thank me for *saving your life* at all if you weren’t an *asshole* who locked me in your house!”

I don’t even try to stop the smirk that spreads over my face. It’s adorable to hear Rose try to curse like that.

She whirls away in a huff, looking like she’s got every intention of storming out the door. And even though barely two minutes ago, I was barking at her to leave, now, the idea of her walking out of here has me...*scowling*.

“Ah, yes, the *prisoner* theme again.”

Rose whips around to level her eyes at me.

“Oh, I’m sorry, what is your exact definition of someone being kept somewhere without their consent?!”

“Right, because you’ve been so obviously hating every second of being here.”

“Are you *insane*—”

“As demonstrated by the way you fucking moan like a greedy little girl every time I touch you.”

Her jaw drops as her face goes positively livid.

“You son of a *bitch*.”

I smirk again. Which, predictably, infuriates her.

“You know what?!” Rose snaps as she turns for the door again.

“Clean your own damn wound. I *hope* it gets infected—”

“Come here.”

I grunt as I move into a sitting position, swinging my legs out of bed to sit on the edge of it. The pain is brutal, and my vision swims again.

But I swallow it back and lock it away. I let my eyes stab right into her back as she stutters to a stop by the door. Slowly, Rose glances back at me over her shoulder, and the anger instantly evaporates from her face.

“What are you doing?!” She whirls back, her face lined with worry. “Lie back down, you’re going to—”

“Come. Here.”

I don’t know if it’s the tone of my voice or the way I crook two fingers at her, beckoning. It could be a combination of

both. Whatever the reason, Rose's face burns hotly as her teeth sink into her bottom lip.

“Lie—”

“*Come. Here.*”

She shivers, but her feet move, inching her closer and closer to me. She eyes me warily, like she's trying to determine if I've got the strength to pounce on her.

But there's something else in that look. She's not just trying to figure out if I'm going to pounce.

She's trying not to be so fucking *excited* about it.

When I was an untouchable golden god, I could read people like words written in neon paint across a wall. Some people are obvious with their thoughts, others are coy with their emotions.

I could always read every single one of them.

Here in my bedroom, two feet from Rose, it's no different. I can see it *all* on her face.

The anger at me is real. But it's not as heated as she wants me to think. And it's not just animosity turning her cheeks pink and sparking a storm behind those innocent blue eyes.

It's need.

It's a hunger that both tantalizes and frightens her. It's desire smoldering deep inside that she's trying so hard to hold back. But just like the beast in me...

She can't.

First, she was a bargaining chip. A pawn. Collateral with angel eyes and sinful lips. Then, she was a fucking thorn in my side. But also temptation. Forbidden fruit, locked in her room across

the house from me, invading my thoughts and freeing a part of me that I walled up years ago.

And now, lines have been crossed. Not just the physical ones —of me claiming her mouth, and pinning her to the hallway wall with my hand clamped over her mouth and my tongue buried in her cunt.

I'm talking about the one deep inside me that was crossed the minute chasing after her the other night became infinitely more than "recapturing my collateral."

I didn't chase Rose down that night because she was my escaped prisoner.

I chased her down because she's *mine*.

Rose comes to a stop two feet from where I'm sitting on the edge of the bed. Her face throbs with a pink heat. Her teeth drag over her plump bottom lip in a way that's making it almost impossible for me not to jump up, grab her in my arms, and fuck her senseless against the wall, pain or no pain.

My eyes raise to hers, and when my fingers crook again, she shivers heatedly.

*"Come here."*

There's a second of hesitation. Like she worries if she moves one inch closer to me, she'll never get away.

She's not wrong.

I watch her swallow thickly. I watch her pulse throb under the skin of her neck, and feel my cock thicken to steel as her teeth rake over her lip again.

And then, she takes one more step towards me.

*Now she'll never get away.*

My hands take hers, and her breath catches as I pull her commandingly into my lap. She falls against me, gasping quietly as her thighs spread over either side of mine. As my hands slide over her hips, holding her small body against me as her nipples threaten to poke holes in the cotton of her t-shirt.

“Are *you* hurt?” I growl quietly.

She shakes her head.

“Did those fucking animals touch you, or—”

“*No*,” she whispers breathlessly, eyes locked on mine.

“Why didn’t you leave me to bleed out on the side of the road?”

“I—” she swallows, her face reddening as her eyes lock with mine. “I—I just couldn’t.”

“Yes, you could. And you could’ve taken the car and gone anywhere. You could have gotten away.”

“I know,” she breathes.

“But you didn’t.”

“No.”

“That’s a shame,” I growl thickly.

Rose shivers on my lap, the movement pressing her thighs even tighter to me as I feel heat pulse between them.

“Why is that a—”

“Because now, I’ll never let you go.”

My mouth crashes to hers. She stiffens for a millisecond before her whole body comes alive. Before she melts into me.

Before her hands cup my face, and she moans a hungry, anguished, breathless cry of pleasure into my lips as she kisses me back.

It's the last straw.

She's never leaving.



FIREWORKS EXPLODE. At the same time, warning bells ring, and every voice in my head screams to pull away and run while I can. While I still have a drop of sanity left in my soul.

Every voice, that is, but one. And the problem is, it's that one solitary voice that screams "stay" that screams the loudest. The louder it roars, the more the rest of my defenses crumble. Not because he's smashed through them.

Because I've torn them down myself.

Whenever he kisses me, my world turns to fire. When his powerful hands grip my hip and my jaw possessively, and he growls—actually *growls* into my mouth like an animal—it does something to me. It flips a switch in me, and releases a part of me I've had locked away in a place I didn't even know existed.

It came out before, when he kissed me in the piano room. And it came out again when he pinned me to the wall, dropped to his knees, and muzzled me with a firm hand over my mouth while his own made me explode.

While his tongue did things to me that might honestly be the closest thing to religion I've ever felt.



*Me*, who was raised by *nuns* in a freaking convent.

But this time, when Oliver yanks me into his lap and slams his mouth to mine like he has every right in the world to do so, it's even more explosive than before.

It doesn't just feel like him taking what he wants.

It feels like an inevitability.

It's a kiss that feels as undeniable as time. As the Earth's rotation. As gravity.

And when I realize the sounds I'm hearing in my thudding ears are *my own moans*, it turns me to liquid fire. I whimper as I push my hips against his body and eagerly open my lips for him. Tentatively, I dance my tongue with his, and when the man beneath me—surrounding me—growls savagely and grips me even tighter, I come undone.

My hands fall to his bare chest, and I shiver when I feel the muscles rippling under his hot skin. I've always known Oliver was strong. I've seen the way his muscles bulge at the sleeves of his t-shirts, or strain the fabric of his hoodies at his chest.

But touching him so intimately like this, my bare skin on his, has me realizing just how strong he truly is. Oliver's, what, forty-two? And yet, his body rivals that of a professional cage fighter half his age.

Powerful pectorals flex against my fingers as I rake down his chest. Coiled abs ripple against my stomach as he yanks me close. Biceps and shoulders flex and surge as his powerful arms engulf me.

My nipples tighten to points under my t-shirt, pebbling through the cotton to drag electrically across his chest. A sinfully needy, aching heat pools between my thighs and my

hips move like they're possessed—writhing against him shamelessly as I moan into his mouth.

This isn't captivity.

This is release.

Suddenly, he pulls his mouth from mine. I whine from the loss of his lips. But then I'm gasping sharply as he flips me over like I weigh nothing at all, pins me down on the bed, and growls thickly as his mouth slides to my neck.

I cry out, moaning as his teeth and lips drag across my delicate skin—biting, sucking, nipping and licking as my hips buck off the bed. He moves lower, and I tremble as he shoves my t-shirt up to my neck.

“*No bra?*” he rumbles.

I blush fiercely.

Earlier, I took a shower and then just threw some clothes on before coming back to Oliver's room to check his wound. I didn't put on a bra because I was in a hurry, and honestly, out of habit. I rarely wore one at Our Lady Hildegard because I'm pretty small and never needed to.

“I—”

I cry out as his lips wrap around one throbbing pink nipple, sucking hard as his tongue swirls over the bud. He nips it with his teeth, making me jolt. It's electric.

“I showered,” I moan as his big hands skim up and down my ribs, his mouth sliding to my other breast. “And then...I just pulled a shirt on—”

“You're not to wear one at all, anymore.”

I whimper, flushing with heat at the commanding tone of his voice.

“I—”

“There’s no need to turn it into an argument, princess. Consider it law. When I see you in this house, and when I look at you, I want to see *these*...”

I cry out sharply as he nips at a nipple again with his teeth, sucking it between his lips immediately after to let his tongue assuage the pain of the bite.

“Without a fucking bra hiding them away.”

I flush deeply.

“What about the other two people who live in this—”

“They’ll start wearing fucking *blindfolds*, for all I care.”

I gasp as he moves back to the other nipple and flicks it with his tongue.

“Why stop with just bras, then?” I groan, my breath catching as I feel his powerful hand sliding lower and lower to tease at the waist of my pajama pants. “If there are blindfolds involved, why should I wear clothes at—”

“*Careful*,” he rasps into the crook of my neck, his teeth raking the skin.

“Of?”

“Of putting ideas in my head that I’ll turn into fucking *law*.”

He drops down, his mouth teasing between my breasts, over my ribs, then down my stomach as my flesh melts beneath his lips. He moves lower, and I gasp as his fingers slip into the waist of my pajamas and my panties.

In one motion, they're down at my knees. In one more motion, my eyes go wide and my mouth goes slack as Oliver drops to the floor and lewdly shoves my knees up to my chest, utterly exposing my most intimate parts to his hungry eyes.

I can feel his hot breath against the backs of my thighs. When it teases tantalizingly across my bare lips, I tremble.

*“Oliver—OH GOD...”*

His tongue drags up my seam, making my eyes roll back as an inhuman, guttural sound I'm not sure I've ever heard before rips from my throat. He groans into my pussy, pushing his tongue deep between my lips as his thumb rolls my clit. He swirls his tongue over me, moving higher to suck my aching bud between his lips, dancing his tongue across my button as I cry out.

I thrash on the bed, spasming and writhing under his tongue. He keeps his mouth on me as his powerful hands tear my pajamas and panties the rest of the way off, yanking them over my feet and tossing them aside before he moves back to my clit.

He shoves my legs over his bare, muscled shoulders. His fingers tease over my lips, centering and then slowly curling into me. My mouth goes slack as I feel his fingertips brush against a certain spot just inside. My vision blurs as his lips wrap around my clit.

And when he starts to move his tongue and his fingers at the same time, I'm coming before I even realize it.

My whole body spasms, my hips bucking wildly as the wave crashes over me. But there's no shaking him off. There's no getting away at all. Because the more I come against his mouth, the harder he pins me to the bed, and the more he

keeps devouring me. I'm not getting out of this with just *one* orgasm.

His muscles bulge as he shoves my legs wide apart, lewdly pinning me open as his tongue drags from my clit all the way down my lips.

And then lower.

*"Oh my God..."*

I scramble to break his hold on me, blushing fiercely as his tongue wanders dangerously lower.

*"Wait, Oliver, not—"*

"Did you just try and tell me what I can and can't do in my own house? In my own *bed*?"

I shiver as he pulls his mouth from between my legs, his eyes stabbing into mine. My face flushes deeply.

*"How about what you can do with my body—"*

*"Which belongs to me."*

My mouth falls open as I stare at him heatedly. Part of it is shock at his perfect, unbridled arrogance.

A bigger part of it is a dark, sinful lust at how unbelievably *hot* it is to hear him say that, even if I know how messed up and wrong it is.

*"I beg your—"*

"You heard me," he rasps, bringing a whimper to my lips as he moves up over me.

He keeps my legs wide and pinned back, and I shiver as I feel the thick, *huge* bulge in his sweatpants press electrically against my pussy. He hovers over me, eyes pinning me to the bed as one hand slips down between us.

“*This...*”

I whimper when he pinches one of my nipples.

“Belongs to me.”

“That isn’t—*oh JESUS!*”

I moan wantonly as he twists hard, which, shamefully, floods my system with an achy need. A desire for *more*.

“I believe I rest my case.”

I groan, panting as his hand shoves deeper between us. His palm grinds against my throbbing clit, and I choke on a moan as my eyes roll back.

“And do I even need to make an argument about *this* being mine as well?”

“You’re an arrogant egomaniac.”

“And you’re a soaking wet mess for me. Shall we keep going?”

I cry out, moaning as he sinks two fingers deep into me. My hips writhe, pushing against him as if to take even more of his fingers into my pussy.

Oliver growls deeply.

“See how fucking wet you are for me? See how much your greedy little pussy wants to pinch my fingers right off—how you come the fuck apart for me? And *this...*?”

My eyes fly open together with my mouth as he pushes a third finger down to tease around my asshole in a sinfully electric swirling motion. My mouth goes slack and my brow caves as a *horribly* erotic sensation ignites deep inside of me.

“*This is mine, too, my little princess.*”

He crushes his mouth to mine, pinning my knees against my chest, forcing the air from my lungs. Then he's pulling away again and dropping down between my legs, his fingers never leaving my pussy.

I stare at him with blurry, lust-hooded eyes as he twists his hand to curl his fingers into me and uses his thumb to roll my clit. His teeth and lips drag up my inner thigh, making me breathe heavier and heavier until suddenly I can feel his hot breath against my ass.

His tongue drags slowly and demandingly around my tight little ring, and my world *melts*.

Oh. My. *God*.

Instantly, like a strong wind turning a single lit match into a forest fire, *all* of me erupts in flames. I melt into the bed, my mind going white as pure sinful pleasure tears through me. He rubs my clit hard with his thumb as he curls his fingers against my g-spot. All the while, his tongue is swirling around my ass over and over.

“*Oliver...I—!*”

“Now be a good girl and fucking *come* for me.”

His tongue sinks into me, and I *explode*.

It's like being hit by lightning—my entire world going white-hot as I spasm on the bed. I fling an arm over my mouth, screaming into it as I buck my hips shamefully and shamelessly against him.

He keeps me there, floating in the freaking stratosphere, for I don't even know how long. Because time has stopped working, just like the rest of me.

At a certain point, I'm vaguely aware of floating back to reality. I collapse into the bed, shaking and trembling as his hands leave me. Then his tongue drags up slowly over me, pulling a shivering whimper from my lips as he kisses my pussy gently.

I'm still shaking when he finally pulls away. Trembling, still trying to catch my breath, I slowly open my eyes.

Instantly, I blush when I see him standing over me, staring down at me sprawled naked, legs spread wide. I flush deeply and go to close my legs. But instantly, his hands grab my knees. His eyes lock with mine as he shakes his head, easily spreading them apart again.

God, why is that so sinfully hot?

My eyes stay on his, deliriously drinking in the stern, commanding look on his face. The way his jaw clenches, as if even intimacy is a battle to him. As if making me come like that is an actual real-life conquest, not just a bedroom one.

My gaze slowly drifts to the scar on the side of his face—the thin white line that made him look even more terrifying when I first arrived here. Now, it gives him character. It's actually handsome in a dark, dangerous way.

I pull my eyes lower, over the swirling tattoo ink and the powerful, chiseled muscles of his chest and shoulders. Down over the scars on his side and his ribs.

And then lower.

When my gaze lands on the *enormous* bulge tenting the front of his sweatpants, my whole body ignites again and heat pools between my spread legs.

The kiss in the piano room was a first. The time in the hallway before was another one. So was what happened just now on



his bed.

I simmer, lust and desire smoldering inside of me, making me bold.

Making me dripping wet again.

I'm ready for another first.

Slowly, blushing, I sit up. My gaze lifts to his, and I shiver at the commanding, possessive way his eyes stab into mine. Wordlessly in the silence, I move to sit on the edge of the bed.

Then I reach for him.

Oliver hisses, growling as my fingertips brush his bulge. My core tightens and flutters, my nipples hardening as my pulse skips.

*Holy. Hell.*

He feels enormous—massive, even. And so, *so* thick. I shiver as I use two fingertips to explore, running them over the bulging shaft beneath his pants as my heart hammers in my chest.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, little one,” he growls thickly.

My eyes drag up to his. My tongue wets my lips as desire pools between my legs.

“I want to make you feel as good as you just made me feel.”

His jaw clenches.

“*Rose...*”

“*Let me make you feel good,*” I whisper, my heart racing as my hand slides to where his grooved hips disappear dangerously into his sweatpants. Where the line of dark hair from his navel seems to point down, like an arrow.

“Rose—”

I blush as I glance back up at him.

“I mean, since you’ve got me trapped here anyway—”

Instantly, the spell is broken and the whole mood changes. The savage lust in his eyes snuffs out, turning into something hard-edged and angry. His brow furrows into a deep scowl. And before I know what’s happening, he’s pushing my hand away and stepping back.

I frown.

“Wait, what did I—”

“You should go.”

I blink, flinching as if he’s just smacked me.

“I—sorry, *what?*”

Oliver takes another step back, his muscles bunching.

“*Get. Out.*”

I stare at him, feeling like I’ve just been punched in the solar plexus. Or like a fire that’s just had ice water dumped all over it.

“Are you serious?”

“As serious as me counting to five before you’d better be well on your way to your own room.”

His eyes narrow.

“One.”

Shocked, confused, and mortified, I scramble to my feet and off the bed. I turn away from him, blushing deeply as I tug my shirt back down and reach for the panties and pajama pants he tossed away.

“Not those.”

I gasp as I feel him right behind me, one hand on my hip as he reaches around me to snatch the panties away. When he steps back, I whirl to him, covering myself with the pajama pants.

“Give me those.”

Oliver’s mouth thins to a line.

“No bras. No panties. Remember?”

I stare at him, pulsing with both anger and desire. Confusion and lust.

“I—”

“Two.”

“You are *such* an asshole.”

I turn away, throbbing with shame as I yank on the pajama pants. Then I whirl, shoving past him and to the door.

“Three—”

“You know what?!” I suddenly throw at him, whirling back to stab my gaze into his. “*Fuck you!*”

He lifts a brow, one corner of his gorgeous mouth lifting in an infuriating smirk.

“Where the *hell* do you get off dictating things like that to me while simultaneously kicking me out of your—”

“I’m not kicking you out, I’m asking you to leave. There’s a big difference.”

I glare at him as he lifts his eyebrows, his eyes locked on me.

“And I get to do that, Rose,” he growls quietly. “Because you’re *mine*.”

I shiver with heat when he says it, hating myself for it.

“I—”

“*You’re mine,*” he growls again as his eyes lock with mine.

“But it doesn’t go the other way.”

I flinch, feeling the heavenly high from earlier turning to ashes at my feet.

“Now, do I need to keep counting?”

My eyes close.

“*Fuck you.*”

I whirl, yank the door open, and then bolt through it.



MY TEETH GRIND, muscles screaming. My fist jabs hard and smashes into the bag, jarring my arm and sending fireworks exploding in the gash on my back. I snarl in pain and dance away, only to come back immediately with a left hook.

I duck and weave, making imaginary counter-attacks, dodging left and right before I go on the offensive again. I get in a volley of body shots, and just when my invisible opponent is trying to catch a breath, I smash his face in with a power right.

Lungs heaving, dripping with sweat, I finally dance back from the bag and collapse into a chair.

Mother *fucker*, that hurt.

My entire left side, where the knife plunged into me, is on fire. The wound itself feels like a red-hot poker is being slowly pushed into my skin. But I wall the pain up and force it down, gritting my teeth as I will myself to breathe.

Annoyingly, the boxing practice bag was taken from my room along with the rest of the general mess the other day. I can thank Lucile for carting it off while I was fucking unconscious. But then Wentworth, bless him, set up a random unused guest room down the hall from my quarters as a makeshift workout room.

Free-weights, a power rack, a bench, some mats for crunches and sit-ups, and of course, the practice bag.

My eyes sweep over the setup in front of me. Okay, it's actually pretty decent. And it's hard to stay mad at Lucile, anyway.

It turns out, living in a room that *isn't* a shithole is having a positive effect on my general mood and well-being.

Go figure.

But in the three days since I sent Rose from the room, no one's been in it to marvel at its new cleanliness except me.

The breakfast cart still waits for me firmly *outside* the room. I go *elsewhere* to have the stitches in my back checked.

No Lucile. No Wentworth.

And *certainly* no Rose.

I glower at nothing, dark clouds swirling in my brain as her face flickers in my mind's eye.

I haven't seen her at all since that night. I've put our formal dinners on hold. Nor have I been prowling much around the house, where I might bump into her. I've basically spent the last three days in my bedroom or my office.

Grunting, I stand, stretching as I peel off my sweaty shirt and trudge from the room. Down the hall, I stalk back into my own room, before heading for the bathroom and cranking the shower on hot.

I glare at the tiled wall as the scorching water pours over me.

*"Since you've got me trapped here anyway..."*

On the one hand, the memory of a very naked Rose with her shirt pushed up over her perky little tits and her pussy dripping

glistening wetness down her thighs as she reaches for my cock is enough to get me rock fucking hard.

Even right now, replaying the scene has my dick rising to *very* full attention, curving up under the spray of the shower as lust explodes inside of me.

I want to say that kicking her out was purely me being an asshole. That it was nothing she said or did. But that's not true.

It's *entirely* because of what she said. Or rather, how she said it.

I know she was just being sarcastic, or coy, that it was her innocent, unpracticed version of being flirtatious. But it flicked something inside of me that shut the whole thing down.

I've spent the last three days lying to myself about trying to figure out what that "something" is. But I don't need to figure it out. I knew damn well what it was the second she said it.

I want her. I want to consume and lay claim to every single fucking inch of her. I want my name on her lips as she rides my cock to kingdom fucking come. I want my cum running down her thighs, and her mouth begging for more with her tight little ass high in the air for me.

And I want her to *want me too*. Not placate me because she's my prisoner.

If I simply wanted a warm mouth or a tight pussy as no more than a cum repository, I'd call someone like Carrie. But apparently, my libido and my dick *don't* want that. Apparently, my cock *only* wants Rose.

And he wants her begging.

I don't want her mouth wrapped around my dick out of a sense of obligation. Fuck that.

I want it because she can't fucking get enough of it. I want her mouth and her pussy literally drooling for me. But something tells me that's never going to be the case.

That's probably a good thing anyway.

What's the point, when I'm cursed?

I crank off the water and step out, toweling off quickly until I hear my phone pinging in the bedroom. When I pick it up off the bed, my eyes narrow before I finally answer.

What the fuck does Atlas Drakos want *now*?

---

THIS BEING one of my chauffeured cars, the windows are darkened to near-black, and the soundproof divider is up between us and Wentworth.

Not that we need the divider anyway, given that Rose is *silent* in seat next to me as the SUV roars toward London.

I glance at her, rolling my eyes at the way she makes a big show of deliberately turning even harder away from me to look out the window. What is she, twelve?

Fine. Let her sulk.

I turn away myself, staring through the tinted window on my side. I need to focus. I need to get my mind off the girl next to me, and onto the meeting ahead of us.

With Atlas Drakos.

Sitting down with that psychopath is, objectively, a terrible idea. But he's agreed to meet on safe ground—a conference room at the law offices of Henley and Marsden, in London.



He's also agreed to the meeting being *only* between he and I, Rose, and one other person from his organization—probably another of his brothers also named after a Greek god by their mythology-obsessed whack job of a father.

I don't know what this whole thing is about. Atlas didn't say. But I'm guessing he's getting antsy and wants an update from the last time we spoke, when he barged into my house with a fucking gun.

Trying to take *her*.

I grit my teeth, turning, letting my eyes burn into the back of her head. Rose, her hair up elegantly, is dressed in a stunning cream-colored Valentino dress and matching sky-high heels.

The hem of said dress is *considerably* shorter than I'd like to see on her in any way, shape or form in *any* public situation. Especially not when sitting down with Atlas Drakos. But I could tell from the barely-contained smirk on her face when she finally walked down the staircase on wobbly ankles that she did it on purpose.

She *wants* me to react. To blow up. She wants to meet with Atlas—who demanded her presence, because of course he did—about as much as I do. But she also knows meeting with him has me on edge, so she's dressed to rattle me.

And it's fucking working. I'm just not going to let her see that it is.

And the other problem is, the dress isn't just rattling me.

It's *igniting* me.

Every seven seconds, I'm glancing back at her. Letting my eyes drag hungrily over the way it clings to her slim form. The way the bust hugs her handful-sized breasts. The way the hem rides dangerously high on her smooth, creamy thighs.

My dick has been hard as steel since she walked down the stairs into the foyer looking like sin. And the longer I sit in the back of this car with her dressed like *that*, that steel is getting so hard, it may very well have formed a new element.

Dickluminum.

Cocknesium.

Need-to-be-balls-deep-in-her-tight-little-pussy-right-the-fuck-nowsium.

“Is my dress okay?”

I blink, frowning as my gaze drags from her wildly distracting hemline to her eyes, which are smug as smug can be as she smirks at me.

Someone’s learned how to be a tease.

“You know my thoughts on that dress.”

Her face burns hotly. “I think it’s gorgeous. Lucile has great taste in—”

“No one is doubting that it’s a very pretty dress,” I growl, my eyes burning into hers.”

“So, what’s the problem?”

“The *problem*,” I hiss dangerously. “Isn’t the dress. It’s who you’re wearing it for.”

She flinches, her brow furrowing in confusion before she stares at me.

“You think I’m...” she shakes her head, her mouth thinning before it curls up deviously at the corners.

“And what if I *am* wearing it for him?”

I. See. *Red*.

Blood. Death. Violence. Carnage.

“*Careful*,” I hiss quietly.

“Careful of what?” She shrugs, either foolishly ignoring the look on my face or, more dangerously, not seeing it at all. “After all, he *is* going to be my husband—”

“*The fuck he is.*”

In one motion, I’ve undone my seatbelt, slid over the backseat towards her, and ripped *her* seatbelt off. She gasps, whimpering as I grab the hair at the back of her head in a fist and yank her quickly across my lap.

“*Oh God...*” she whimpers the second she feels my rock-hard dick throbbing against her stomach.

“I let it slide when you decided you were going to dress like *this* for a meeting with Atlas,” I growl into her ear, still gripping her hair in a fist as my other hand holds her ass through her dress.

“You arrogant fucking—”

“But if you think for *one fucking second*,” I snap dangerously, “that I’m going to let you provoke me like this, it’s time for a hard lesson in—”

I yank the back of her dress up, and freeze. I’d had every intention of spanking her ass with my palm—maybe even seeing how many slaps it would take to dampen her panties between her legs. Except when I *do* pull the dress up, there’s a problem.

...Rose isn’t *wearing* any panties.

For a moment, I’m so livid I’m shaking. And even though I just took a dose and a half of my medicine before we left the

house, just in case, the beast is already slamming at the bars of its cage.

That is, until she opens her mouth.

“I remembered your rule,” she whispers, shivering against my lap. “The other day, you told me...”

I blink away the red mist, lowering my eyes to see hers looking up at me as she twists her head to the side.

Her cheeks are bright red, and she’s doing that thing where she bites her lips in a way that makes me want to see that mouth stretched wide around my cock.

*Fuck.*

That’s why she’s not wearing panties. It’s not for fucking Atlas.

It’s for *me*.

I stiffen, blinking as my gaze drags down her back and over her hips to stare at her glistening pink pussy nestled tightly between her creamy thighs.

*Fuck control.*

I grab her hips, pull her up, and then drop my mouth to hers hungrily. She cries out as my tongue drags over her pussy, teasing her as I use my thumbs to spread her ass open from behind, bent over my lap like this. My tongue snakes around her clit before the angle gets too difficult.

Then, instead, my eyes center on her puckered back hole.

I groan as I drop my mouth to her ass, tonguing her little hole as she squeals and writhes on my lap. My thumb sinks into her pussy, fucking her as two of my fingers rub her clit in circles. I’m so fuck hard it hurts, and finally, I can’t take it anymore.

In a second, I've unzipped my suit pants and pulled my swollen dick free. She moans, shuddering as she feels the thick heat of it slip between her thighs. They clamp around my shaft and my eyes roll back from the feeling of her soft skin encasing me. When she starts to rub her thighs together around my cock, I hiss in pleasure.

*"Eager little fucking tease."*

I growl as my tongue dances over her asshole again, licking it as I rub her clit and her g-spot. My hips push up rhythmically, like I'm fucking her thighs. I pull away now and then to allow the swollen head to push over her slick pink lips and to rub against her clit.

And the sounds she makes when I do that are almost enough to make me come.

No. Not yet.

Yanking her hips high, I devour her pussy with my mouth, tonguing every inch of her and bringing a palm down to spank her ass again and again. Rose gasps, moaning and bucking against me as her whole body tightens and coils.

"When we walk in there, princess," I groan into her cunt. "You're going to be doing so on wobbly fucking legs, without a *single fucking doubt* about whose property you are."

"You...you *bastard*," she chokes, even as she whines in pleasure from my tongue dragging between her clit and her asshole. "You don't *own* me—"

"You keep telling yourself that."

I suck on her clit, pumping my cock between her thighs as I spank her ass again.

And then she's exploding for me.

Her cum floods my tongue, her screams of pleasure testing the very limits of the soundproofing. Her body writhes and twists, pushing eagerly back against my mouth until I can't take it any longer.

Three days of missing the taste of her. Three days of abstaining from watching her on the cameras. And now, feeling and tasting her come all over my tongue.

It's too much.

With a groan, I give her ass a bite and then throw my head back. My hips pound up, fucking my cock between her creamy thighs as the swollen, sticky head pushes up between her lips. My balls tighten, and with a roar, I start to explode.

My hot cum spurts in thick white ropes across her skin, dripping all over her thighs, her ass and her bare little pussy until she's covered in me.

Marked by my cum.

The car comes to a stop.

"Sir," Wentworth says through the intercom. "We're here."

I smirk as Rose scrambles off my lap, her face bright red as I calmly tuck my cock back into my pants and zip up. I let her look around frantically for a few seconds before I clear my throat and speak.

"Yes?"

"Are there...I need..." she whirls to me, her face burning with embarrassment but also with lingering desire. "I need a napkin or something for...to..."

"To what?"

Her lips purse and her eyes plead as her cheeks turn crimson.

“*Oliver...*”

“For *what*, Rose,” I growl quietly, cupping her face and pulling her close.

“I...” she swallows thickly. “For your cum.”

“Why, Rose? Where is my cum?”

She whimpers.

She fucking *whimpers*, and I almost take my dick out again and fuck her right here and now.

“*All over me*,” she moans softly. “All over my...my...”

“Say it.”

She shivers.

“*My pussy.*”

“Good girl.”

She trembles.

“I don’t have a napkin or a handkerchief for you, Rose.”

Her face falls. “But I—I can’t walk in there with—with... *Oliver!*”

“Of course you can walk in there with my cum all over your pussy and your ass, with no panties on.”

I lean in, and my lips brush her ear as I whisper low.

“You had just better walk *very carefully.*”



FOR A MOMENT, I almost tell the two men and the woman who crowd into the elevator with us in the lobby of Henley and Marsden to wait for the next one. But, they're clearly not Atlas's people, and when one of them does a triple take on me, realizing who I am before he quickly looks away, barking at them is probably a bad idea.

I haven't been seen in public in two years, and I'd rather not draw any more attention to my little outing today than I have to. If I merely look away and ignore them all, there's a chance his friends will say "no, of course that couldn't have been Oliver Prince, don't be silly" when he tells them later.

If I bite his head off, well, it'll be obvious.

So instead, the elevator starts to slowly rise with the five of us inside. But we barely get two floor before Rose stiffens next to me. She starts to twist and writhe, like she's doing some sort of bizarre and uncomfortable dance.

*"What are you doing,"* I murmur quietly into her ear.

She shivers, blushing heatedly as she turns her scarlet face towards me.

"Yes?"



Her eyes bulge, and she twists and shifts again as her gaze darts to the company with us in the elevator. I lean my ear down close to her as she swallows.

*“I think...”*

Her breath catches as she twists again.

*“You think what.”*

She bites her lips, shaking as she leans so close her lips brush my ear.

*“I think it’s dripping.”*

That probably shouldn’t get me as fucking hard as it does.

I smirk as I turn my head to glance at her. Her eyes are pleading as she does this little shifting dance on her heels, as if she’s a little kid who has to pee.

But then, her dance stops cold, and she gasps sharply—sharp enough that all three of the lawyers in the elevator turn to look at her curiously. But all they see is a blushing young woman blurting the word “hiccup” while standing next to a well-dressed older man who looks a lot like Oliver Prince.

What they don’t see is my hand under the back of her skirt, slowly dragging my finger up her thigh. Slowly collecting the errant drips of *my cum*.

My hand slides all the way up, until Rose stifles another gasp by biting down hard on her lip...as my hand and my sticky fingers cup her bare pussy.

*“Let’s just put this back where it belongs, shall we?”*

Her jaw drops and her eyes stare as I push my cum-slick fingers against her pussy and rub it in.

The elevator dings, and the doors open. The three lawyers step off on their floor, four floors below ours.

The doors have barely shut before I'm on her, pinning her to the wall and crushing my mouth to hers. I rub her clit hard, mercilessly, my cum still on my fingers, taking her from zero to one hundred instantly.

Her legs shake, her face implodes. And in seconds, she's screaming her release into my mouth as I ram my fingers deep into her greedy pussy.

Right before we get to our floor, I pull back and straighten my tie. Rose is flustered as she tries to catch her breath, and straighten out her skirt.

"Wait."

I turn to her, blocking anyone from seeing her with my hulking frame as the doors ding open.

*"Open your mouth."*

She gapes at me.

*"Oliver..."*

*"Open. Your. Mouth."*

She does. My two fingers—slick from her cum and mine—slip between her lips. And my cock stiffens even harder as she closes them without being prompted further.

*And licks them clean.*

*"Very, very fucking good girl,"* I hiss before I turn away and level my steely gaze at the receptionist, who's looking at me curiously.

"Let's get to this meeting."

---

*HOLY SHIT.*

I stare at Atlas' smug face across the conference table. Years of boardroom meetings far more aggressive than this one have taught me to be able to keep my face perfectly neutral through just about anything.

But I wasn't prepared for Atlas to causally mention that he's just killed his own father.

"Surprised, Prince?" Atlas grunts, grinning at me. Beside him, his younger brother Ares Drakos sits impassively. Christ, the kid should go into arbitrage or high finance. His face is *utterly* inscrutable, even to me.

"Not terribly. It was mentioned to me a few weeks ago that you might be, ahh, planning to take over your family's throne sooner rather than later."

Well, it was sort of mentioned, when Adrian came over to warn me about getting between Atlas and Cillian Kildare.

I lift a shoulder. "Was that all?"

He scowls at me. "Excuse me?"

"I mean this meeting. Did you have us sit down together merely so you could brag about committing patricide?"

"Well, I thought you of all people could appreciate it."

I stiffen, jaw clenching before I force the natural expression back to my face.

"I'm not sure what you're referencing."

Atlas chuckles.

“Of course not. Of course not. Just a rumor, is it?”

It is. One of the fresh one’s the press has decided to glom onto in the last few months. Because nothing sells shitty clickbait articles like insinuating that the father of the psychotic murder is *himself* one as well. Based on nothing but my own father dying young and unexpectedly.

It was his darkness that took him down, though.

Not me.

“I’d find a better source than the tabloids for your ‘information’ about me, Atlas.”

He shrugs, and then his eyes slide over to Rose.

Hungrily.

I glare at him, teeth flashing.

“Again I ask, why are we fucking *here*, Atlas?” I snap.

His gaze rips back to me, and he smiles.

“I brought you here because I wanted to give you the courtesy of telling you this to your face.”

“My patience is running thin,” I mutter. “Arrive at your point.”

Atlas smiles.

“My *point*, you fucking prick, is that my father was weak, and patient to a fault.” He steepled his hands and leans over them toward me. “I, however, am neither. Additionally, my father was fine with allowing this stupid fucking game of yours to play out.”

“And which game is that?”

He glares at me.

“The one where I must wait to claim what is *mine*!”

In one motion, he's gotten to his feet and is halfway around the table, going right for Rose.

Yeah. That's not happening.

I'm out of my chair in a second, planting myself firmly between the psychopath and the girl gasping behind me.

*"Get out of my fucking way."*

"No."

His eyes bulge, and he snarls as he goes to take off his jacket, presumably to fight me.

Suddenly, his brother is next to him, shoving him back and muttering at Atlas in Greek. The older brother spits something back before glaring at me.

*"I am *not* a patient man, Prince!"*

His eyes narrow violently, glancing—or at least trying to glance—past me at Rose.

*"And I'm beginning to wonder if you're aware just what I'll do to you if you lay a single finger on my bride-to-be."*

It takes everything I have not to let go—not to let the "other" take over. To let my violence and my fury explode until I choke him to death right here in a building full of lawyers.

But somehow, miraculously, I hold on.

*"I'm fairly certain this could have been a phone call, Atlas. You're aware that we're not *actually* in Ancient Greece, yes? Phones do exist."*

Atlas just stares at me.

*"Keep making jokes, Prince. But if you've left a mark on her in any way—"*

“Perhaps my *mark* is already running down her thighs.”

Rose’s face is dark and red, and she’s glaring at me as I march over and put a hand at the small of her back.

“We’re leaving.”

---

BACK IN THE ELEVATOR, she suddenly whirls on me.

“What the hell was all that?!”

My brows knit.

“All what?”

“All *that!* That...*display!*”

“What are you talking—”

“Don’t you *ever* do that again,” she snaps.

“Do *what—*”

“Make me a goddamn bargaining chip! A cheap brag at a conference table!” she hisses, jabbing a finger at me. “Don’t you *dare* use me like a pawn.”

I look at her coolly as she glares daggers at me.

“Well?”

“Well *what,*” she snaps.

“Is it or is it not true?”

Her brows narrow. “Is what—”

Rose gasps as I slam into her, pinning her to the elevator wall.

“*Is my mark on you still dripping down your thighs?*”

Her breath sucks in sharply. Her eyes stare.

“I—I...”

The elevator doors open to the lobby. I release her, straighten my suit, and step out.



I SLAM the bedroom door shut behind me. Furious, I march over to my bed with every intention of burying myself under the covers and disappearing from the world for a while.

On the one hand, I just had one of the hottest and most sexually charged afternoons of my life. First, in the car, when Oliver took me over his lap and...

I blush deeply.

And put his mouth all over me. And—oh God, *spanked* me. And rubbed his *extremely* large dick between my legs, and over my clit.

My mind flashes back to the feeling of that velvety and yet iron-hard thickness rubbing over my pussy, teasing my little button. My legs tremble as the flood of memories triggers another flood of something hot and wet between my legs.

And then after that, in the elevator: him pushing *his own cum* back up my thigh and rubbing it against my clit. Making me come once again before I sucked his fingers clean.

Not because he demanded it, or because he ordered it.

Because I damn well *wanted to*. Because being around this man, for some strange reason, brings out the dirty in me.



Every forbidden fantasy. Every wicked thought. Every slutty, depraved desire.

My anger shoves away the lust.

*Damn him.*

I'm not at all mad about what happened in the car or the elevator. Because, see above. But what I *am* furious at and seething over is being made to feel like a pawn in some twisted game. A game that's being played around me, *involving* me, and yet it's also one I'm supposed to recuse myself from.

Yeah, screw that. And *screw* being used for whatever "alpha dog in the room" crap that was.

*Perhaps my mark is already running down her thighs.*

I wasn't aware it was possible to put together a string of words that could so enrage me and so turn me on at the same time.

But of course, if anyone were to be able to pull that kind of a string of words out of their back pocket, it's Oliver.

As if on cue, my bedroom door slams open behind me, and I turn to find the man himself glowering at me from the doorway.

"Wow, thanks for knocking."

"You're angry."

"And you're a bastard."

"Enlighten me."

I scoff, crossing my arms over my chest.

"I'm not here to play your games, Oliver."

“You quite literally are,” he snaps. “And I’ve noticed the change in your language, by the way.”

I glare at him.

“What about my language, *your highness*.”

“That mouth of yours is going to get you into fucking trouble.”

“Oh, is it?” I snap. “What are you going to do, wash it out with soap?”

“I was thinking I’d fill it with something else, actually.”

I wait for him to roll his eyes, or look away, or turn it into a biting comment. Instead, his eyes just continue to pierce mine.

Then he starts to move towards me.

I tremble, backing away, past the bed to the little sitting area by the windows.

“Ex—excuse me?” I finally manage to croak out.

Oliver’s eyes burn into me with a dark, savage hunger as he comes to a stop right in front of me, towering over me.

“I said, I’m going to find something else to fill your mouth with.”

I swallow.

“L—like?”

His lips curl wickedly. My heart races with a mix of fear, excitement and lust as he leans down, bringing a hand up to brush a knuckle against my chin.

I gasp quietly as I feel his lips tease against my ears.

“*Get on your knees*.”

My entire body quivers. My core tightens as my heart climbs into my throat and a wet heat soaks between my legs.

I swallow as I lift my eyes to his, setting my jaw, determined not to shake.

“You don’t own—”

“Oh, but I *very much do*,” he growls, making me bite down hard on my lip to live up to that whole no shaking thing. “And moreover, you like that I do. You get fucking *soaking wet* when I take control.”

My eyes bulge and my mouth falls open as I feel his hand wrap sensually around my throat, his mouth teasing over my earlobe again.

“And I’m getting really tired of pretending I haven’t figured that out.”

*Oh God yes...*

“So,” he purrs. “Get on your *fucking* knees and swallow my cock like a good girl, *right now*.”

I whimper, eagerly.

“See?” He murmurs into my neck. “I told you so.”

He pulls away, leaving me shaking and trembling as he moves past me to sit in the huge, elegant high-backed chair by the window. He settles into it, his jacket open, his tie from the meeting gone, his shirt unbuttoned a little at the top, showing part of his muscled chest and tattoos.

His legs are spread, and I don’t even try to stop my eyes from falling to the huge bulge in them.

Slowly, my eyes drag up to lock with his. Darkness and fire flicker behind his gaze. This isn’t forced. This isn’t anything against my will.

This is me giving in to what *I* want.

And he knows it.

“Take off your dress.”

His jaw grinds.

“Leave the heels on.”

I shiver and reach back, unzipping the back of the dress and shrugging it off my shoulders. It falls to my waist, and I blush as I move to cover my breasts.

He’s seen me naked, obviously. He’s had his mouth on my most intimate areas—even just hours ago. But I’ve never been completely naked in front of him.

I swallow as my eyes lift to his again. He doesn’t say a word. He doesn’t need to. His look says it all. His unflinching, dark gaze sometimes brings enemies to their knees.

In this moment, that same steely gaze heats me to my very core.

Sets me ablaze.

I shimmy out of the dress completely, letting it pool at my feet. My hands instinctively want to cover myself. But I push that thought away.

Actually, I don’t even need to push it away, because as soon as I step towards him, and see the way his fierce gaze devours every single inch of me, I can’t even think anymore.

Slowly, my heart thudding and everything going a little hazy, I drop to my knees in front of him. Oliver’s eyes lock with mine as he reaches for his belt, slowly unbuckling it before working open the button of his dress pants. Then undoing the zipper.

I can feel my pulse pounding in my ears as he drags the zipper down, slips his hand into his briefs, and then pulls himself

free.

*Holy. Fucking. Mother. Of. God.*

I've felt him throb against me through his pants. In the car today, I even felt him bare against my thighs and my pussy, and he felt enormous.

Seeing him now, in the flesh, with me on my knees, I realize I was *vastly* underestimating Oliver by assuming he was "big" or "large".

He's freaking *gigantic*.

I stare wide-eyed at him, my mouth hanging open, my skin tingling as he slowly pulls his trousers and briefs off and drapes them over the arm of the chair. I mean I just *stare*.

Good God, his cock is the size of my forearm.

Long. Hard. Thick. Swollen. A vein runs up the slightly curved underside, and there is something glistening wet at the tip. I mean Jesus, even his balls look enormous.

Slowly, my eyes shift their focus from the monster dick in front of me, to the monstrous man it's attached to. The man whose gaze is burning into me. The man whose smug smile, impossibly, makes me even wetter.

The man who brings a hand up and beckons me closer with two fingers.

I bite back a mewling whimper as I move between his spread legs, my pulse racing. On my knees, I lean into him, bringing a hand up and then hesitating.

Then I touch him.

My fingers curl around his swollen shaft, and I shiver at the feel of it: hot, silky, velvety soft and yet hard as stone. I

squeeze tentatively, gasping quietly when the glistening bead at the head grows bigger and then slowly trickles down the underside.

I don't think. I don't hesitate. I just lean forward, and in one motion, I swipe at that drop with my tongue.

"*Fuck*," he rasps, groaning, as I taste the salty sweetness on my tongue. "*Good girl*."

My thighs squeeze together and my pulse skips a beat whenever he says that. And he knows it. His eyes bore into mine, his hand reaching out to slide his fingers through my hair.

"Show me what a good girl you can be."

Heat pools between my legs as I lean in and run my tongue over the underside of his cock again. I shiver when he moans, when it twitches and throbs in my hand. My tongue drags higher, teasing up every enormous inch of him before it swipes over the head. I taste the dusky sweetness of him again.

And then, I rise up, open my mouth, and in one motion, I take his whole head into my mouth. Which, quite honestly, might be as much as I can handle.

Oliver groans, hissing in pleasure. His fingers tighten in my hair—not pulling or demanding, just guiding my mouth off his head and then back down onto it again. I take him deeper the second time, but it's still barely a fraction of him. He's just so big, I'm not sure how much I can get past my jaw.

But I'm so wet. I'm *sizzling*, I'm so turned on. And I want this so badly.

I want *him*.

I wrap both hands around him—even with them stacked, and my fingertips not even close to touching, there’s still like half of his dick I can’t touch. But just the same, I moan eagerly as I suck and lick at the crown, teasing the little slit at the tip as I stroke his thick shaft.

“Look at me, Rose.”

My eyes raise to his, and instantly, I’m moaning as his fierce gaze pierces into me.

“That’s it. Look right at me while you swallow my dick like a good girl. Your mouth feels so fucking good.”

I moan again, trembling and squeezing my core over and over as I bob my head up and down his head and stare deeply into his eyes.

“Play with your tight little pussy for me,” he rasps thickly. “Touch yourself and make that pretty pussy all wet while you swallow my cock.”

He’s barely finished speaking before one hand drops shamelessly between my thighs. I drag a finger through my slickness, easing it inside as I whimper around his dick.

I hum eagerly, sucking hard and moving my mouth and hand faster. Between my legs, my other hand strums my clit over and over, adding pressure as I start to shake.

“Such a good girl,” he groans, his eyes never leaving mine. “Such a good little cock sucker.”

That should enrage me. I should be incensed that he or calls me that. Instead, I swear to God, it’s like flipping a switch.

It almost makes me come.

Suddenly, I’m not just putting my mouth on his cock. I’m *worshipping* it. It’s the only word I can think of to describe the

way I start completely let go and release the pulsing, sultry, needy energy from somewhere deep inside me.

I moan like a fucking porn star all over his cock, drooling on it as I stroke him with one hand while frantically rubbing my clit with the other. My eyes lock on his as my core continues to tighten and clench—as I feel my body begin to coil and get ready for the impending explosion.

Impossibly, Oliver's cock thickens even more in my hand. It pulses, hot and hard, his jaw clenching as his eyes burn pure fire into mine.

“You're going to make me come,” he groans through clenched teeth. “I'm going to fill that pretty mouth with every drop of my cum.”

I whimper, opening my jaw as wide and swallowing as much of him as I possibly can. My eyes water, my fingers push down hard on my clit, and suddenly, I choke out a moan as I start to explode.

So does he.

My own orgasm is still washing over and through me as his cock swells huge and starts to pulse against my tongue. Hot, sticky, salty-sweet jets of his release flood my mouth, leaking out from my lips to drip down to where my hand is still gripping him. I start to swallow his cum as my fingers roll over my clit again and again, shoving me into a second orgasm as Oliver grips my hair and groans thickly.

Slowly, I pull away from him, gasping. My face is bright red, my lips puffy and swollen, my jaw sore.

But my whole body is sizzling with an electric energy that turns me to molten goo right there on the floor between his



legs. His eyes captivate mine, a fierce, commanding, intense look on his face as he reaches down and gently cups my jaw.

His thumb swipes over my lips, making me tremble.

“Open your mouth.”

When I do, I shiver as his thumb pushes a bit of his cum that was on my bottom lip into my mouth and over my tongue. My lips wrap around his thumb, sucking gently as I swallow once more.

“Did you take it all? Show me.”

*God*, why is all of this so damn hot? The commanding tone. The dominance. The dirty things he says to me and the filthy, depraved ways he makes me want to explode over and over.

“Open your mouth and show me,” he growls quietly.

I do. My mouth opens, and I even stick my tongue out a little.

“*All gone*,” I murmur softly in a voice that sounds too sultry, too dirty, too *slutty* to be my own.

“*Good girl*.”

I whimper as he pulls me up, cupping my jaw as his mouth slams to mine.



HE DOESN'T SPEND the night afterwards. But he does put me to bed.

He dresses me in pajamas, watches me brush my teeth, and then *carries me* to my bed.

For a second, my pulse spikes, wondering if this is about to go further. If he's going to join me in bed, and strip off the pajamas he just put on me, before taking the rest of me.

It's sinful how much I want that.

But it doesn't happen. Oliver merely pulls back the covers, slips me into bed, and tucks the covers back up around me. He leans over me, his eyes burning darkly as he lowers his lips to mine.

“Goodnight, princess.”

Then he's gone, leaving me burning and twisting under the covers as I replay what just happened until sleep finally claims me.

Then I dream of the exact same things.

The next afternoon, I'm sitting at the Stradivari in the music room, absently playing some Chopin. But my mind is so far

from the nocturne I'm playing, and it's sheer muscle memory moving my fingers over the keys.

I'm still thinking about last night.

About him.

About *all* of him.

I feel myself flush deeply, and suddenly, I stop playing. One of my hands drifts up to run a finger over my lips. I know it's just my imagination, but I swear they still feel swollen from the... *activities* of last night. And the dull soreness in my jaw is *definitely* real.

My face simmers with heat as I replay the fantasies I fell asleep to last night. Of him filling my mouth with his cum, and then wanting more.

Wanting *all* of me.

My lips purse as my face flushes so hard it throbs. Good God, how would that even work? Like, physically, how in the world would it even *fit*?

The blush on my face threatens to burn me alive as I sit back and take a deep, steadying breath.

It's not just thinking about taking him physically that's overwhelming. It's taking *all* of him—including his darkness. Maybe even *especially* his darkness. Because I love the commanding way he growls into my ear and holds me like I belong to him. The way he so easily reaches in and unearths the dirty fantasies inside of me I didn't even know were buried there.

None of this situation is normal. *He's* not normal. But neither am I these days. Maybe that's why all of this feels so wrong but also so deliciously, sinfully right.

“Practicing your John Cage, I see.”

I gasp, whirling as I hear Oliver’s voice. He’s standing in the doorway—not in his usual jeans and t-shirt, but in a dark, custom-tailored, three-piece suit that looks absolutely amazing on him.

My brows knit. “Practicing my...?” It clicks, and I roll my eyes.

John Cage, an avant-garde composer from the forties and fifties, once famously wrote a piece titled “4’33” which is literally four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence. The sheet music for it, however, is filled with all sorts of annotations and directions on how exactly to play that silence.

I grin. “Yeah, hard at work. The first sixteen bars are a bitch.”

He eyes me. I swallow, simmering under the intensity of his gaze.

“Can you get dressed and be ready to go in ten minutes?”

I raise my brows. “I...yes. Where are we—”

“Ten minutes, Rose,” he murmurs. “Meet me downstairs in the foyer.”

Then he’s gone.

---

AN HOUR LATER, the black SUV rolls to a stop outside an old wrought-iron gate not that different from the one outside Oliver’s house.

This one, though, is outside Brompton Cemetery.

I turn to glance questioningly at Oliver.

“Why—”

“There’s something I want to show you.”

Wentworth stays in the car as Oliver and I walk amongst the old gravestones in silence, deeper and deeper into the cemetery. Suddenly, we walk around a larger marker, and I give a start.

In front of us, there’s a handsome man maybe a few years younger than Oliver standing alone in front of a beautiful white-marble mausoleum. He’s wearing a dark peacoat with the collar turned up over an even darker suit and jet black shirt. There’s a startling intensity to his piercing, almost supernaturally green eyes, and the thin line of his lips that cut across a chiseled, angular jaw.

My eyes steal sideways to Oliver.

“I—”

“Rose, I’d like you to meet Cillian Kildare.”

I stiffen at the last name, my eyes widening.

“Your uncle.”

I stumble a step back as my legs threaten to give out. Oliver’s hand goes to the small of my back, steadying me as he turns so that only I can hear him.

“If you don’t want this, we’ll leave right now.”

A shiver creeps up my spine as I glance past him and again at the man standing beside the grave.

“Hello, Rose,” Cillian—my uncle—rumbles quietly in a thick Irish accent. He brings out the hand that was behind his back, and I realize he’s holding a bouquet of flowers.

“Thought you might want to be the one to give these to her.”

I frown. “To...whom?”

His lips curl up slightly on one side as he turns and nods his sharp jaw at the stunning mausoleum.

“To your mother.”

---

“IT’S BEEN a pleasure to meet you, Rose.”

I smile warmly at my uncle’s outstretched hand before I push past it to embrace him. He grunts quietly, stiffly hugging me back in front of my mother’s grave.

For the last hour, I’ve been learning about who I am—discovering where I came from, who my mother was, and the length to which my uncle has taken to keep me from living the life of a Kildare.

Part of me is angry that he knew where I was and left me there for my entire life. But on the other hand, I understand why he did it. As the head of the Red Right Hand criminal organization, he has *lots* of enemies who would have gleefully come for me and killed me without hesitation, if only to make Cillian have a bad day.

And honestly, I loved my childhood. It might have been different, and perhaps a little isolating. But growing up at Our Lady Hildegard, with Sister Carmen acting as almost an aunt to me, was wonderful.

It’s surreal to be speaking with my mother’s brother—to family I never even knew I had before that meeting with Atlas. But it also feels good to finally my history, and that I have family out there.

Even if that family—Cillian, at least—might be certifiably crazy. I mean it's been lovely to talk to him, and I'm not afraid of him, despite his work and his connections.

Okay, that's a lie. Maybe I'm a *little* frightened of him. There's a twisted darkness behind those green eyes that I think might run deeper and more insidiously than it does even in Oliver.

My uncle pulls back, holding my shoulders and eyeing me carefully. He nods his chin past me to where Oliver is sitting a little way off on a stone bench, giving us some privacy.

“Are you...” his brow furrows. “I'm not sure I like you staying all alone with him at that fucking haunted house of his.”

I smile.

“I'm fine. We're not alone, there's Wentworth and Lucile, too. And the house isn't haunted.”

“Agree to disagree. I can hear the ghosts of that place clanking their chains from here.”

He peers into my eyes.

“Is he treating you well?”

I nod. He looks at me even more keenly.

“I'm not blind, Rose. I watched the two of you walk over here from the gates.”

I flush deeply.

“You're a grown woman,” he grunts. “So I'm not going to lecture you. But...if he's coercing you—”

“He's not. And we're not...” I look away.

I don't even know how to finish that sentence.

“I won’t say he’s a good man,” Cillian mutters, lifting his shoulder. “But he’s not a particularly *bad* man, either. Just know, if he pushes things, or if he hurts you...”

I smile. “He won’t—”

“If he *does*, I’ll slice his throat ear-to-ear, and choke him with his own balls after I cut them off with a rusty spoon.”

I laugh nervously. Cillian looks entirely serious.

My face pales.

“I—yeah, I don’t think that’ll be necessary.”

“Let’s hope not.”

He shrugs, and it’s like his whole demeanor suddenly changes. The flash of bloodthirsty psychosis I just witnessed disappears, and he’s back to being the charming Irishman with a twinkle in his emerald eyes.

“It’s been lovely talking to you, Rose. I’d like us to see each other again soon.”

“I’d like that, too.”

He smiles, before suddenly, again, his whole demeanor switches in an instant.

“A bit of warning.”

I swallow nervously. “About?”

“Your father.”

I tense. We’ve already talked about my father, and I know Cillian did *not* approve of him and my mother.

“Whatever business Paul is doing for Prince...” Cillian’s face darkens, and his sharp jaw grinds. “When it’s over, be wary of him.”



I frown. “Look, I know you’ve got bad history—”

He laughs coldly. “Perhaps I didn’t make myself entirely clear earlier. I would happily buy a ticket to see your father being skinned *alive* and bring popcorn to the event.”

My stomach twists.

“And that’s *not* because I didn’t ‘approve’ of him and my dear sister. It’s not because I don’t like him. It’s not even because he was a gutless coward who *left* my sister before you were even born.”

Something cold stabs into my heart at the reminder.

“It’s because deep down, Paul Laurent is a *parasite*,” he snarls. “And I’m telling you right now: he’d sell his own mother for the right price.”

Cillian’s eyes gleam dangerously.

“Or his own daughter.”

---

AFTER MY UNCLE LEAVES, Oliver and I slowly make our way back to the car. It’s not until we’ve been walking for a few minutes that I realize my hand is in his.

A smile creeps over my lips, then I chase it away.

I glance to the side, silently reading the names on some of the headstones and monuments. Then my eyes land on a stunning onyx black monument a few rows over—a huge block pedestal with a terrifying figure of an angel posed dramatically on top, as if he’s in free-fall.

“*Wow*, who’s buried over—”

“Let’s go.”

I flinch at the way his hand suddenly tightens on mine, yanking me hard after him.

“Hang on, I just want to see—”

“*We’re leaving,*” Oliver snaps coldly.

I frown angrily as I yank my arm away from him.

“*Calm down,*” I hiss as I back away from him, moving between two other graves toward the one that has caught my interest. “I just want to look at this headstone for a second! No need to bite my freaking head off!”

His face turns stoic and cold, but I ignore him as I turn and march the fifteen or so feet over to the grave.

God, one minute he’s making me moan into his mouth, or bringing me to meet my uncle and showing me where my mother is buried. The next, he’s turning into a monster again. And the real thing is, the change happens *so freaking fast* it makes my head—

I come to a dead stop in front of the grave, my face falling and my heart wrenching.

Okay, I’m officially an asshole.

My throat tightens as I read the name etched in the cold black stone.

*Jacob Prince.*

Oliver’s son.

I try and turn to run back to him and apologize, but I can’t move.

“It’s the angel Beelzebub.”

I tense when I hear Oliver’s voice at my side. Turning slightly, my heart aches for him when I see the pain etched across his

face as he nods at the statue looming over us.

“Oliver, I’m—”

“Beelzebub was one of the original seven fallen angels. At least, according to John Milton he was,” he murmurs quietly. “A prince of heaven who descended into the shadows.” His shoulder lifts slightly. “Seemed appropriate.”

My heart wrenches again. Looking at the pain on Oliver’s face, I see past the bloody monster the world views Jacob Prince as, to the *son* he was before any of the violence.

*Oliver’s son.*

I turn back to the stone. Then I frown as my gaze drinks in the rest of the monument beyond the name and the dates. Like the fact that there’s...something splattered on the side of it. Like the burn marks over part of the base.

Like the words “murderer”, “psycho”, “killer”, and various other epithets scrawled across the black stone in chalk.

Tears brim in my eyes. Jacob Prince may very well have been all those things, a young man who burned seven women to death including his one-time stepmother when he was barely a teenager.

But that doesn’t mean Oliver deserves to see this desecration.

Before I know what I’m doing, I step forward and kneel at the base of the monument as I yank off my scarf.

“What are you—”

He goes silent as I start to rub at the chalk, blurring and then wiping away the cruel words. Smudging away the burn marks from when someone inexplicably tried to set *rock* on fire, and wiping off what I’m hoping is just raw egg splattered across it.

When I'm done, I stand, staring at the grave. Then I frown.

"I'll be right back."

"Rose—"

But I'm already rushing back through the headstones toward the white marble mausoleum. A minute or so later, I return and kneel to lay a single rose from my uncle's bouquet at the base of Jacob's grave.

Sister Carmen told me once that gravestones or markers, even funerals, aren't for the dead.

They're for the living. For closure. For the grieving process. For the memory of the soul that once lived.

I'm not laying a rose at the grave of a deranged, violent killer for the man himself.

I'm laying it down for the grieving father that the man left behind.

When I'm done, I step back. For a moment, Oliver doesn't say anything. But when my hand slips into his, he squeezes it hard and entwines his fingers with mine.

"*Thank you,*" he murmurs quietly.

We stand like that for a while, until a cold rain begins to trickle down. Even then, we stay like that, hand in hand: me, the child who lost a parent. And him, the parent who lost a child.

---

"WOULD YOU PLAY FOR ME?"

He's mostly been silent the whole drive home. Even when he walked with me up to the piano room, we've barely exchanged

two words since the graveyard. Until now, as he looks into my eyes before gesturing at the piano beside us.

I smile, nodding.

“Any requests?”

He shakes his head, his eyes searching mine.

“Play what’s in your heart.”

I smile at him again as I pull away and sit at the bench. My fingers trace over the keys as I search my mind—my heart—for the right piece. I falter, thinking through Beethoven, Chopin, Grieg, Ravel, and Debussy.

And then suddenly, I know.

Through the avalanche of classical romantics and later impressionists, my mind suddenly lands on Sister Carmen. One of her favorite movies was the French film *Amélie*, and I suddenly remember being thirteen and teaching myself to play Yann Tiersen’s gorgeous soundtrack as a gift to her.

And so slowly, my fingers find their places, and I begin to play the incredibly beautiful and haunting “Comptine d’un autre été, l’après-midi”.

My eyes close, and I can feel my body swaying and the music filling my soul as my fingers dance over the keys. I play for the loss of a mother I never knew. For a son lost to darkness and madness. For the loss of hope.

For the death of love.

I play slowly, until finally, the last vibrations of the very last note hang like flakes in a snow globe. I let my hands drop and then slowly turn to him. Oliver’s standing right behind me, and as I look up at him, our eyes lock fiercely.

My pulse thuds as he leans down, his hand sliding up my cheek to delve into my hair. He leans down even further, tilting my head up just before his lips sear to mine in a deep, explosive, fierce kiss.

This time, it's not just an explosion of lust. It's not boundaries shattering or walls coming down.

It's something deeper. Something bigger.

Something so real it hurts.

Suddenly, as if that realization has just hit him, too, Oliver pulls away sharply. His face hardens as he steps back from me, shaking his head side to side.

*"Wait—Oliver—"*

*"Rose—"*

*"Please don't stop."*

I stand, stepping towards him before he suddenly sets his jaw and slams a palm toward me, as if keeping me back.

*"Stay away from me."*

*"Why?"*

"You know exactly why," he growls quietly. "Because of what I am."

*"You don't scare me."*

*"Then you haven't been paying attention."*

I shake my head, shivering and pulsing with something alive and something wild as I push past his hand to be closer to him.

"I know what you are, Oliver," I whisper quietly.

*"Rose—"*

He flinches when my hand touches his cheek.

“And I know what I want.”

“You have *no fucking idea* what you’re playing with,” he rasps through clenched teeth, suddenly grabbing my wrist.

Before he can shove me back again, I close the distance between us, grabbing onto his shirt tightly as I stand up on my tiptoes, my eyes locked with his.

“*Then show me.*”

His eyes close tightly and his head tips back. His jaw tightens, the muscles of his neck rippling.

“I *want* you to show me—”

In one motion, his eyes fly open, his hands viciously grab my hair and my hip, and his mouth crushes to mine.



HIS MOUTH CRASHING down on mine sends us reeling backwards until we stumble into the side of the piano. My hands scrabble at the buttons of his shirt as he shrugs his jacket off, and when his hands slide over my hips, I shiver.

He pulls me hard against him, letting me feel his massive bulge throbbing against my stomach. I can feel his fingers between my shoulder blades as they tug the zipper of my dress down, and then the whole thing slips to my feet as he shrugs his shirt off.

For half a second, time stops. I just stare at his huge, sculpted body, and the grooves of his muscles. The etchings of ink. The shadows of scars. His gaze is hungry and fierce as he drinks in my nakedness now that the dress is off. I'm still following his rule about not wearing a bra or panties.

I blush shyly, my hands moving as if to cover myself. But with a low grunt, he grabs my wrists and pulls my hands up to his face. He kisses my knuckles before he spreads my arms to the sides, making my face burn hotly as he greedily drinks me in.

“Don't ever hide any part of yourself from me,” he growls quietly as he sinks against me. “You're too fucking beautiful, inside and out, to be hidden away.”



I moan as he kisses me again, my nipples dragging electrically over his rock-hard chest as he growls into my mouth. His big hands cup my ass tightly, grinding his massive erection into me until I'm sure I'm leaving a wet spot on his trousers.

Suddenly, he's spinning me around and bending me over the piano. My eyes go wide, and my face crumples with pleasure as I feel him lower behind me, his breath teasing over my thighs.

*"Oliver..."*

*Oh my GOD.*

His strong hands grab my ass and lewdly spreads me open as his tongue drags sensually up my lips. He parts them, sliding his sinful tongue deep into me as I cry out and hold onto the glossy wood beneath me for dear life.

Oliver's lips wrap around my clit, and he sucks and teases the little nub with the tip of his tongue, driving me *wild*. I moan and shriek when he sinks a finger into me, stroking the inside walls of my pussy as he mercilessly devours me.

"I want to taste that cum, Rose," he groans into me, licking me as I cry out. "I want your fucking cum all over my goddamn *tongue*. Do you know why?"

I moan, shuddering all over as he swirls his tongue over my clit and sinks a second finger alongside the first deep into my pussy and starts to pump in and out.

*"Do you know why?"* he repeats darkly.

*"No!"* I choke as the pleasure strangles me, my toes curling tightly against the floor as he fucks into me with his fingers and rolls his tongue over my clit.

“Because I still want to be tasting you when I watch you take *every fucking inch* of my thick, hard cock in your sweet little cunt.”

My eyes *bulge* as his mouth hums over my clit.

*Trigger: pulled.*

I cry out, moaning deeply and writhing over the edge of the piano as my legs sag. But Oliver’s powerful hands hold me up, my toes barely supporting any of my weight as I start to explode like a neutron bomb against his tongue.

Wave after wave of my orgasm crashes over me, my hips bucking and twisting as he strokes my g-spot and fastens his lips around my clit.

Slowly, he sets me down, letting my feet touch the ground. Instantly, I’m whirling on him, grabbing his face and kissing him deeply. I can taste my own juices on his lips, and I hungrily kiss him for more as he groans and wraps his arms around me.

It’s only then that I realize he’s naked now, too.

I shiver, panting as I pull away to look down between us. A heated tremor sizzles through my core as I stare at his huge dick flattened against my stomach. It’s a reminder—a marker—for how freaking deep he’s going to be once he’s inside of me.

“I’ll go slow,” he growls into my ear.

I shiver, raising my eyes to his, seeing that he’s reading my thoughts written so clearly across my face.

“And I’m not going to hurt you.”

I chew on my lip uncertainly, nodding and then whimpering as he leans down to kiss me hard. I moan into him as his hands

skim down my ass and my hips, gripping me tightly. Suddenly, he's picking me up, my legs wrapped around his muscled waist as he carries me around to the front of the piano and sets my ass down against the keys with a jangling, discordant sound.

He eases back, and my heart begins to race like a runaway train as I look down between us. At my legs spread wide for him. At how swollen and glistening wet I am for him.

At how *big* he is as he eases his swollen head against my lips, taking my breath away.

"Forget whatever *boys* you knew before," he rasps into my ear as he lazily strokes my clit with one finger, rubbing the head of his cock up and down my lips. "This is how a *man* fucks his woman—"

"There's none to forget."

I blurt it out in a rush, because I can't hold it back any longer.

In the weeks I've been here, through everything we've done together, I've walked this weird line—not telling him that I've never done anything before, but also assuming he understands that. But it's become clearer and clearer that I'm wrong about that.

I never told him he was my first kiss.

I didn't tell him he was the first man to make me come.

And now, literally milliseconds away from him taking all of me, I can't *not* tell him any longer.

Oliver stills.

"What did you say?"

My face floods with shame as I look away, my lips twisting between my teeth.

“*Rose...*”

“I’ve...I mean...”

“You’re a virgin?”

My eyes close miserably as I nod.

“*Yeah.*”

“I knew you grew up in a convent...”

“Just didn’t think I took it that literally, huh?”

I squeeze my eyes even more tightly shut.

God, I’m such an idiot. He doesn’t want *this*. A man like him doesn’t want some ridiculously innocent *girl* who’s never once done this before and has no idea what she’s—

I gasp as his hand cups my jaw, forcing me to open my eyes and look into his—eyes which are full of icy blue fire and a roaring intensity that suck the air from my lungs.

“Do. You. Want. This?”

I swallow, drowning in his fierce gaze as my head nods up and down.

“*Yes,*” I choke. “But you probably—”

“There’s nothing in the world I want more.”

His mouth slams against mine, devouring my lips and my tongue as I melt against him, instantly insanely hot for him again. His fingers stroke my clit and lips, opening me up as he guides his head up and down my slit, until he’s slick with my arousal.

Until my legs are wrapping around him again, and my fingers are clawing at his chest as I moan eagerly into his mouth.

I'm ready.

I'm *so* ready.

I want this.

“You're not a pawn.”

I look at him curiously when he pulls back, my eyes locking with his, searching them.

“The other day,” he growls. “You told me not to use you like a pawn.”

My heart skips, and I lose myself in his gaze.

“I can't, and I never will, because you're no pawn, Rose.”

“I—” my brows knit as I shake my head. “You say that, but—”

I gasp, clenching and shuddering in pleasure as he sinks the swollen, *thick* head of his cock into me, opening me up completely for the first time. One hand tightens possessively on my hip as the other one tilts my chin up, his lips brushing mine.

“Because only a queen could take my king.”

It's me who goes in for the kiss this time—hungrily slamming my lips to his and letting my tongue dance with his. I whimper, wincing here and there at the *sheer freaking size* of him. But whatever small moments of discomfort there are melt instantly the deeper he sinks into me.

The more he takes me.

The more he claims me.

I pull back, sucking in lungfuls of air, feeling him so deep that he must be in my damn *throat*. Then I look down, and my eyes widen when I see at least a third of him is still not in.

“*Oh my God—*”

“I know you can take more,” he growls into my ear. “So spread those pretty thighs wide and show me how a good little girl takes every inch of this big, fat cock.”

His hips push forward, and my eyes roll back in pure bliss as I feel the last few inches sink into me, until we’re skin-to-skin.

Until he’s balls-deep in me.

His mouth hungrily devours mine as he slowly eases out, teasing my clit with the big head before he gradually sinks back in. I start to moan wildly as my body begins to melt for him. My nipples drag against his chest. My legs spread wide, and my ankles lock behind his back as he starts to thrust into me.

*Good. Freaking. GOD.*

Very quickly, reality blurs, and all I know is his hands gripping me, his mouth devouring me, and that huge cock of his driving in and out of me. He goes slowly, like he promised he would, but Oliver fucks the same way he’s built an empire and the same way he glares contemptuously at the world:

Without mercy. Without compromise. Without retreat.

And I’m *drowning* in how fucking good it feels as he makes me his.

His hips rock against me, his mouth on my lips, my neck, my breasts. My hands claw at his chest, running my fingers down his scars before I grab his hips and urge him on.

My ass slams against the keys of the piano over and over, until the cacophony of the piano and our moans fill the room completely.

A beautiful, violent, haunting melody.

My ears start to ring as his huge cock pumps into me over and over, touching places inside of me I've never known were there—stretching me to my absolute limit and then some.

Turning me inside out until I'm not sure if I'm going to orgasm or have a heart attack.

I cry out, dipping my face to his neck and biting his skin as my nails dig into his hips. He fucks into me harder and deeper, the slick, wet sounds of our bodies slapping together filling my ears along with the noise from the piano until my whole world goes white.

*“Oliver!”*

When I come, it's an out-of-body experience. It's like my soul leaves my physical form as all the molecules in my cells ignite at once. I scream, clinging to him desperately and shattering over and over.

He groans as he slams his mouth to mine and buries every inch of himself deep inside as he starts to come, too. The force of it has my pulse skipping as I his cum pump into me—more and more, over and over, while I hold him so tight it feels like I can't even breathe.

Then I'm dimly aware of him gently easing out of me, scooping me into his arms, and carrying me away.



HER HAIR IS damp against my chest as we lie in my bed, my arms wrapped around her. I'm sure the hot bath in the clawfoot tub helped. I'm sure my tongue did too when it gently caressed her pussy for the last forty-five minutes. But I'm still worried about her being sore.

After all, I am *not* a small man. But more importantly...

That was her first time.

*I was her first.*

A vicious, savagely possessive feeling surges inside of me as I look down at the delicate angel half-asleep in my arms.

*And I'll damn well be her only.*

There's a part of me that hates myself for not cluing into just how little experience she had. Now, since the bath, it's been made abundantly clear to me exactly how inexperienced she is.

I wasn't just the first man to feel her pussy clenching and coming around my cock.

I was the first to taste her.

The first to make her come.



The first to goddamn *kiss* her.

*Fuck.*

If I'd known...

I shake my head. If I'd known, then what? Would I have been "gentler" in our past encounters? Would I have been a little less gruff and commanding in my tone, when I told her to "get on her fucking knees and swallow my cock like a good girl"?

God help me, even as I think of it, my cock stiffens between us. I'm honestly not sure knowing what I know now would have changed anything. Not with the way she electrifies me. The way she infuriates and challenges me.

The way she ignites parts of my soul and my heart I thought I'd cauterized years ago.

Rose giggles softly against my chest, turning her head to grin at me. Her hand slides over, and I groan as she runs a delicate finger up my stiffening cock.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

"I'm fairly certain you can deduce the nature of my current thoughts."

She grins like the cat who's caught the canary. When her fist starts to curl around me, I shake my head and take her hand in mine.

"I want you to rest first."

She rolls her eyes.

"You didn't *break me*, you know. You were gentle, just like you said."

"Ish," I mutter.

She blushes. "Okay, gentle-*ish*. But trust me, it was perfect."

“It’s more that I need you to rest because I’m not sure I’ll have as much control of myself next time.”

Her face heats, and she sucks on her bottom lip as her eyes go wide with lust.

“Oh, *really*...?” She breathes.

“Really.”

She shivers as she traces her hand up my chest and snuggles close against me. Then I see her eyes flit to my bedside table before coming back to me. Then back to the table—the drawer, specifically.

Fuck it.

I mean well and truly *fuck it*.

She can know. At least, part of it.

“It’s called Tarkov-Thymos Disease.”

She blinks, her eyes darting to mine.

“What?”

“When I told you I got seizures,” I mutter quietly. “That’s... not what they are.”

She nods, her eyes holding mine.

“So, what is...?”

“Tarkov-Thymos Disease? It’s...” I close my eyes. “It’s why I’m the way I am.”

“Mind-blowingly anatomically gifted?”

I chuckle, then my smile fades.

“Mind-blowingly *angry*.”

She frowns. “You’ve...dealt with a lot, though. You’ve had a lot of trauma over the last—”

“It’s not just regular anger,” I murmur tiredly. “It’s...all-consuming. It’s like a madness that completely takes over and shuts the rest of me out, until all I know is hate and rage.”

My mouth curves down as I look at her.

“I call him my beast. My monster.”

She shivers against me.

“It’s an *extremely* rare neurological disorder, where the body’s own immune system attacks parts of the amygdala—that’s in the temporal lobe of the brain—causing irrational and all-encompassing bouts of rage and aggression. When I get an attack, it’s because my brain chemistry has gone off. The disease spikes my adrenaline and utterly obliterates my serotonin levels.”

I look away.

*And it will eventually kill me.*

*Soon.*

Because Tarkov-Thymos is one-hundred-percent fatal, usually by your early forties. The episodes will get worse, and more frequent. The makeshift medicine I take to stave off the inevitable will stop having an effect.

I’ll eventually succumb to a rage-induced madness and go into a fugue state for days or perhaps a week while the disease happily goes to work destroying my brain and other vital organs.

And then it’ll kill me.

But I don’t tell her that part. There’s no need for her to know.

Rose frowns. “Is there a cure?”

I shake my head. “When I say rare, I mean fucking *rare*. There’s only been twenty-five documented cases *ever*, and four of them are men in my family. My grandfather had it, as did my father. As do I.”

My jaw grinds.

“As did Jacob.”

She doesn’t say anything. She doesn’t have to. The way she leans down to kiss my chest says more than words ever could.

“Is that what—” She breaks off. “Sorry, forget it.”

“No, speak.”

She glances at me.

“Please,” I say gently.

“Is that why Jacob...”

“Killed people?” I finish for her. I shake my head. “No. He was just...troubled. Really, *really* troubled.”

“I’m so sorry, Oliver.”

I smile wryly, nodding a silent thank you.

“He’d had a host of other mental issues since he was a kid as well. Pyromania, delusions of superiority, malignant narcissism complex...”

I look away. Her hand takes mine, squeezing.

“I know they’re wrong, you know.”

I frown, glancing at her.

“Who’s wrong?”

“The press, when they speculate that you covered up...you know.”

“And what makes you think they’re wrong?”

“Because I know you loved him. And as angry as you’ve been, and as much as you’ve hidden yourself away from the world, I know you have a moral compass. I know that deep down you’re *good*.”

“Quite a few people would disagree with you.”

“Well, now *they’re* the ones who are wrong.”

I smile as I lean down to kiss her softly.

“There’s really no cure?”

I look away.

“Oliver?”

“There’s a chance. A small one.”

“Really? That’s great!”

My brow furrows.

“It’s a *very* small chance. And it’s based entirely on gene sequencing technology and research I don’t have.”

“Can you get it?”

I smile thinly.

“That’s precisely what your father is out there getting for me.”

Her brows shoot up. “The holding company?”

“Kensington Gardens Limited,” I sigh heavily. “Basically, it’s an old shell corporation of mine that owns a lab called Nanosplice Biotech Incorporated. They’re the actual ones with the research and tech.”

“What happened that you don’t have it anymore?”

My lips thin.

“Your father happened.”

She stiffens, paling.

“Oliver—”

“When I was young and *supremely* foolish, I was also supremely greedy. I wanted to dodge taxes, so I set up a holding company under my then-wife’s name.”

A shadow flickers over Rose’s face.

“Vanessa’s parents were diplomats, and she had dual citizenship in both the UK and Monaco, the latter of which has a zero percent tax rate. I bought Nanosplice Biotech to make a cure for one of the rarest diseases in history, which didn’t exactly make it a high profit venture,” I mutter sardonically. “So, the whole company was operating at a massive loss, but if it ever *did* make any money in the future, I wanted to have it in Vanessa’s name to minimize the tax burden.”

I frown.

“A year later, Vanessa ran off with your father.”

Pain furrows deeply over her face.

“Christ, Oliver...”

“You need to know that I didn’t ever care about her.”

I look her hard in the eyes.

“I mean that. We married because we were from the same ‘type’ of old-money family. That was it. We had Jacob and then practically lived apart.”

She swallows. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I can see the jealousy written all over your face, little one.”

Her mouth goes small as she scowls.

“Am not.”

“Are too.”

I grin.

So does she.

“The reason I very much dislike your father—”

“You can use the word hate if you want.”

“Ok, the reason I fucking hate your father...”

She chews on her lip.

“It’s not because of any jilted lover shit. I was *relieved* when Vanessa left me for him, even if I was furious that she so easily abandoned her own son in the process. What I hate Paul for is that in the divorce, Vanessa got that holding company.”

Rose winces. “Because it was in her name?”

“Yes. And a few years later, when she died—”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

She tries to hold it back, but I can still see a devilish grin on her face.

“When she died, she and your father were legally married, so the company fell to *him*. It’d been shuttered for years by then. Even now, it only really exists on paper and on a hard drive. *But* that hard drive contains all the research and models for the Tarkov-Thymos cure.”

“Where’s the hard drive?”

“That’s the million-dollar question. It *was* in a bank box in Chicago. But I bribed my way in there years ago, and it’s gone. My guess is it went to whomever your father sold the holding company to. Because that’s what he did.”

She nods, pulling close to me.

“What happens if you don’t find the cure?”

“It’ll be fine,” I lie. “The stuff you gave me the other day...it’s a shitty, temporary band-aid version of a cure. The kind you can make even without the gene sequencing technology on that hard drive. A doctor I employ in Malaysia makes it for me.”

“So, you can keep taking that?”

“Yes.”

That’s not a lie. I *can* keep taking it.

It’s just that one day soon, it won’t work anymore. It won’t bring me back from the edge.

“*Good*,” she mutters fiercely.

I grin. “Now, why is that good, princess?”

“Because I’ve gotten used to your moodiness and your grumpiness.”

“I’m not grumpy.”

“True. You’re much worse than grumpy.”

She giggles as she leans in and kisses me softly.

“But I like that.”

Her face flushes.

“Just like...I like you.”

My heart thuds in my chest.



“I like you, too.”

She grins. But then suddenly, the same shadow crosses her face that I saw earlier.

A green, jealous shadow.

“Speak your mind, Rose.”

Her brow furrows.

“It’s nothing.”

“Bullshit.”

She scowls. “Okay, *fine*, I was thinking about the fact that you’ve been married twice before, including my father’s ex-wife, which is a little....”

She makes a face, and I look at her inquisitively.

“You mean Matilde?”

“*Yes*,” she snaps. “I mean *Matilde*—” She spits out the name.

“You’re jealous.”

Her face turns crimsons as her mouth tightens to a pout again. She doesn’t say anything as she turns away from me onto her side.

“It’s fine.”

I smirk.

“Rose, I’m twenty-two years older than you.”

“I know that,” she mutters petulantly.

“I’ve lived a *life*.”

“*Clearly*.”

I grin. Not because her being angry brings me joy—it very much does not. I grin because that jealousy is so much more

than just jealousy. Not to mention it's adorable.

It's the same way I'd react if I'd known *she* was married twice before. Or if any other man had ever laid a fucking finger on her.

Honestly, I'm impressed with her restraint, given how similar we are.

"Rose, if you're jealous—"

"*Fine!*" She snaps, glaring at me over her shoulder. "Yes, I'm jealous, okay!?"

"I never touched Matilde."

She stiffens.

"We married out of spite. She was angry at Paul for leaving her and her two young children—your half-sisters. I was angry at Vanessa for abandoning our son." I frown. "There was also an element of rivalry between myself and my old friend, Noel..."

I exhale slowly.

"It doesn't matter. Bottom line, we married to give some stability to our children's lives, and because she wanted to piss Paul off. We slept in different rooms. I literally never once touched her."

Rose is still mostly turned away from me. But I can see the way her lips pull into a small smile.

"As for Vanessa—"

"I don't need to hear about—"

"Yes, you do. Vanessa and I married when we were both eighteen. Because our families wanted it. Christ, her father and mine were going into business together. It was a *medieval*

fucking arrangement. And conceiving Jacob was quite literally the last time we were ever together physically. That was over two decades ago.”

Rose doesn't say anything. But when I slide my hand up her bare hip, she shivers and exhales a shaky, heated breath.

“Still jealous?”

“*Maybe*,” she pouts.

“It's terribly attractive, you know.”

She half turns to me, her face flushed red as she rolls her eyes.

“*Yeah, right*. I'm sure the insecure little girl being jealous of your ex-wives is *super* hot—”

“Being jealous doesn't mean you're insecure. It means you're angry that someone else laid hands on what's rightfully yours.”

She bites her lip, her eyes locking with mine.

“Rose, if you were to tell me about a man in your past, I would be *livid* with jealousy,” I growl thickly. “Not because I'm insecure. But because he'd touched what is *mine* and mine alone to touch.”

She shivers as my hand glides over her smooth skin, and her eyes widen.

“This is mine,” I mutter, grabbing her ass before my hand slides higher over her hip and her ribs. “And this is mine.”

I cup her breast, my fingers pinching and rolling her nipple, making her breath catch sharply. I tease lower, and then even lower, feeling her stomach draw in beneath my touch.

“*And this*,” I rasp, cupping her pussy, “is. Fucking. *Mine*.”

My cock is rapidly thickening to steel. And when I stroke a finger through her lips and feel the dewy wetness with my finger, something suddenly snaps in me.

Something *hungry*.

In one motion, I'm rolling over her, hearing her whimper as I pin her roughly face-down to the bed. My knee shoves her legs wide apart, and Rose moans when I sink two fingers deep in her slippery, greedy little pussy.

"And it would seem that jealousy makes you *wet*," I murmur darkly.

She shivers, panting heavily as her hips rise to meet my fingers.

"Maybe my past isn't what you envisioned. Maybe *none* of me is what you envisioned as a little girl, when you imagined a prince on a white horse riding up to carry you off," I growl into her ear.

Rose moans as my knees spread on either side of her hips, and as I lower my swollen cock head to tease over her lips.

"I—" she gasps as my fingers slide out of her and my cock sinks between her lips, hovering at her entrance. "I—I don't know what I imagined—"

"Every little girl dreams of a handsome prince."

"But you're no prince," she chokes, whimpering and then gasping my hand slides up to wrap around her throat and squeeze just a little.

"*No*. I'm not."

"You might actually be a villain."

“Then I suppose I should thank your shitty father for the daddy issues he gave you.”

“*Oh my fucking God,*” she chokes, absolutely flooding my cockhead with wetness as she whimpers eagerly.

“Seeing as you’re *dripping fucking wet* for this villain’s cock.”

I drive halfway in with one stroke, and the sound that comes out of Rose’s lips is almost enough to make me fucking come right there.

“Oh my *fuck!*” she screams, clawing at the sheets as her face twists in delicious agony.

“*More...*”

I slide out, and then push right back in, going deeper than before. She’s so fucking tight, but so goddamn *wet* for me. All I can do is stare down to where her pretty pink lips are stretched so fucking obscenely wide around my thickness, greedily sucking more and more of me into her until her ass is pressed to my abs.

“You want to be fucked by the bad guy?” I growl. “The you’d better be ready to get fucked like a bad little girl.”

“*Wreck me.*”

Two words. Two words that might be the filthiest fucking two words she’s ever said in her life. And they set me off like a gun.

I snarl, gripping her throat as I withdraw and then slam into her like a piston. Then we’re off, two animals savagely attacking each other. I pound into her; she claws at me. I grab a fist full of her hair, pulling tight as she begs me to fuck her harder.

I lose myself in her, ramming her into the bed in a blind haze of lust and passion that swallows us both whole. Until we're lost in a tangle of limbs and panting breaths. Of pleasure and ecstasy.

Rose is coming all over my dick for the third time when I can't hold back any longer. I pin her down, burying my cock to the hilt in her clenching, impossibly tight little cunt as I empty my balls into her, over and over until we both collapse onto the bed.

I drag her to me, holding her so tight I'm almost afraid I'll break her. But when I do loosen my grip, she only hugs me tighter.

"Just like that," she chokes breathlessly. "*Just like that.*"

She twists her head, and our lips crush together.

A cursed beast, and a beauty that makes me feel human again.

At least for now.



HER EYES FLUTTER behind the lids, her lips move without saying words. I frown when her brow furrows, but when she suddenly grins contentedly and burrows deeper into my pillows and sheets, nothing on earth could stop the ridiculous smile from spreading over my face.

Yes, I'm watching Rose sleep. And Christ almighty, it's something I could get *very* used to doing.

The morning light filters in through the window curtains. With a scowl, I rise from my chair to walk over and close the blackout shades a little, dimming the room slightly before returning to sit again.

Let her sleep. I *did* keep her up last night.

Only because *she* kept *me* "up", until it started to feel like an unspoken contest to see who would tap out first.

Rose did.

*I won.*

I grin, rolling my shoulders, the soreness in my muscles a reminder of last night. Okay, it was a barely eked out victory on my part. But it was worth every single ache and pain I'm feeling this morning.

This is how it's been for a week, ever since the night we went to the graveyard. The night of beautiful piano music and fevered kisses.

The night I claimed her as my own.

For a week, we've hardly left this room. For a few days, I think both of us had this vague notion of "keeping up appearances": to Lucile, mostly. Rose would sneak back to her own room before daybreak or shoo me back to mine.

On day three, when Lucile rolled the breakfast cart up to Rose's room to find me devouring her mouth against the hallway wall, I'm pretty certain the charade ended.

And now, we're just locked in my quarters, drowning in each other.

My eyes drift over the rise and fall of her bare breasts as she breathes rhythmically. The tantalizing way her slightly up-turned nipples turn a rosy shade and tighten, as if her dreams have suddenly turned more interesting.

The curve of her hip with the sheet barely clinging to it. Her long hair, falling across her face.

God, I could take a picture of this scene and lose myself in it.

As I watch her, the flicker of uncertainty I've been warring with for days worms itself back into my thoughts. Not uncertainty about her, or us.

It's worrying if she can ever really and truly be mine if she's still technically here as a prisoner.

As collateral.

As a guest who never meant to come here, and can't leave.



My brow furrows deeply. With a grunt, I rise from the chair again and quietly make my way to the bedside table. I fill the syringe with my dose and scowl as I slide the needle in.

It's not working as well as it once did.

I'm running out of time.

I'm about to settle back into the chair to continue watching Rose sleep when my phone buzzes. I glance at the text on the screen and frown when I see Oren Frey's name.

*Shit.*

Quietly, I slip from the room, moving into one of the spare rooms down the hall and shutting the door before I call him back.

"Oliver. Hope I didn't wake you."

"You didn't. What do you have?"

He's silent for a second, and my brows knit impatiently.

"Oren—"

"Look, I'm prefacing this with the caveat that I personally haven't seen him, because security is way too tight—"

"Seen *whom*," I growl.

He clears his throat.

"Paul Laurent. He's been shot."

I blink, going still.

"Twice. In the chest."

In another life, I might have gleefully cheered the demise of that grifting, slimy piece of shit. Or opened a bottle of the best fucking champagne on the planet.

Except, fate or karma being the twisted motherfuckers that they are, Paul might be my one shot in a million at a fucking lifeline right now.

“Is he dead?”

“Alive, for now. My source says he’s just coming out of surgery, but that it’s very touch and go. Apparently, the odds aren’t looking good.”

“Do they have a shooter?”

“No. I’m reaching out to some contacts I’ve got in the London Metro Police, but I haven’t heard back yet. The only chatter I’m hearing is from my source, who says it was a random attack.”

*Fuck.*

My jaw grinds. “Okay. Keep on top of the situation and any developments. I’m going to reach out to some medical experts I know and see about flying them over. Which hospital is he at?”

“Oliver, again, I haven’t *personally* seen Paul to fully understand his condition—”

“But your source has?”

“Yes.”

“*Which* hospital?” I growl thickly.

“Saint Thomas’.”

“Good. Keep me abreast of *any* developments, Oren.”

“Will do.”

My heart sinks as I hang up and turn to walk back to my room. For a week now, I’ve been trying to fit a square peg into a round hole: trying to understand how whatever-this-is between

Rose and I can exist at all, given the circumstances under which she's staying here.

Whether she can ever really be mine if she's here as my prisoner.

And that's why my heart wrenches violently in my chest, my jaw setting firm as I stand over the bed where she's still sleeping.

Because now I have my answer.

---

"I JUST..."

In the gray chill outside my front door, Rose blinks, tears filling her eyes as she looks up at me.

"Oliver..."

"*You need to go, Rose,*" I say, hating every single word that comes out of my mouth.

Yes, I have my answer now, and I fucking *hate it*.

"But your arrangement with—"

"Forget the arrangement, princess," I whisper quietly, taking her small hands in my large ones and bringing them to my lips.

"You *have* to go see him."

Her jaw sets.

"What if I don't want to? What if the curtain has been pulled back too far, and I know too much now??"

It was never my goal to turn Rose against her father. But she's heard enough from me, and from Cillian the other day, to have a much more realistic picture of Paul now.

To know he's not the dashing and charming life of the party he likes to paint himself as. The Gatsby-like smooth-talker, flush with cash and favors.

She's come to understand the *real* Paul. The lying, thieving, backstabbing cheat who puts himself and his own needs above all else.

Or at least she's at least gotten a glimpse of that real version of him.

I smile into her eyes as I kiss her knuckles again.

"He's still your father, Rose. I might hate him for all the reasons I do, but I'm not his blood. *You* are."

"*I don't want to go...*" she chokes, blinking back tears as she pulls closer to me. "*Please, I don't—*"

My eyes close, my chest tightening as I grit my teeth.

I can't believe I'm saying this. But it needs to be said. She *must* be allowed to fly free in order for me to know if any of this is real.

"My father was a real tyrant," I mutter, my voice gravelly and low. "A class A bastard and a supreme hard ass. He was relentless as he tried to mold me into his 'perfect heir', as if I was going to be Alexander the Great and I needed a step-by-step plan to conquering the world by age eleven. And I *hated* *him* for it. For all of it."

I breathe deeply as I pull her close.

"When I was nineteen, he..."

*Succumbed to the very disease destroying me, because there's no cure.*

“He got sick. He was dying. We’d barely spoken in years, since I was away at boarding school most of the time, and then university. But he sent word that he wanted me to come to visit him on his literal death bed.”

Rose’s brow furrows, her eyes searching mine.

“I didn’t. I never came to see him, and he died four days later, after we hadn’t spoken a word to each other in almost two years.”

Her face falls as my eyes lock on hers.

“I might have hated him so much I could taste it,” I hiss. “But I’ve regretted not saying goodbye to him my *entire adult life*. You need to go to Paul, Rose, because, trust me, you *will* regret it if you don’t. And I never want that for you.”

She starts to cry as she sinks into my chest. My arms circle her, holding her tight.

“Can I come back here?”

I almost choke on my emotions as I cup her cheek and raise her face to mine.

“*Always.*”

My lips drop swiftly to hers, bruising her mouth with the ferocity of my kiss.

Then she’s pulling away, and I’m watching her walk down the steps to the waiting taxi. She turns to smile sadly at me at the door, tears sitting unfallen on her lashes.

Words I should say but can’t hang on my lips.

She gets into the car.

And then she’s gone.

I watch as the taxi disappears from sight before I hear a throat clearing beside me.

Wentworth.

“Sir... If I may...?”

“You may,” I grunt.

“If she’s gone, and if Mr. Laurent survives...”

“There’s nothing keeping him from never giving me the company or the cure even if he does find it,” I growl quietly, my eyes piercing the gray mist of the dreary day. “I know.”

*Just like I know that I love her.*

Just like I know that doesn’t matter, because the darkness in me will soon devour me.

“Sir, can I get you a cup of—*Master Prince!*”

Wentworth rushes to my side as the dizzying haze of red and black chokes my throat and brings me to one knee on the top step. But I shake my head, gritting my teeth and waving him off.

“I’m fine!” I snap, seeing double as I grit my teeth. “I’m fine. I just need...” I close my eyes. “I need a dose. But I’m fine.”

Wentworth rushes into the house to get my medicine. I slump to a seat on the top step, shaking.

But I’m not fine at all. Not when I’m trying to ignore the voice in my head telling me I might never see her again.



“I’M HERE to see Paul Laurent!”

I’m a *mess*.

Mentally, I’m shot. My nerves are frayed. My eyes are puffy from crying in the taxi for the past hour.

Partly because of my father. Because Oliver was right. I might see him now as I *should*, after hearing everything I’ve heard from Oliver and my uncle. But he *is* my father, and I’ve been panicking about his condition the whole drive to Saint Thomas’.

But mostly, my tears have been because I left Oliver without speaking the words in my heart that I’ve been holding back from saying. Holding back because I’m scared that they’ll make me look like the sappy little girl I’m always worried he’ll see me as.

Except now, I’m kind of over caring what those words make me look like. The second I get back to him, I’m going to blurt “I love you” in his face and damn the consequences.

Behind the check-in desk, the nurse frowns as she scans a computer screen.

“Hmm...Paul...I’m sorry, what was the last name?”

“*Laurent!* Please! He’s just gotten out of surgery for gunshot wounds to the chest and I—”

“Miss Kildare?”

“Maybe they spelled it wrong?” I plead. “Try it with an A instead of a E at the—”

“Miss *Kildare*.”

The hand lands heavily on my shoulder, and I gasp when I whirl to see a charming-looking man in a suit smiling at me. I frown in confusion before I realize it’s because he’s been calling me by a name I’m not used to.

“I’m sorry,” I blurt. “Yes?”

He smiles. “Miss Kildare, my name is Roger Mills, I’m a liaison officer for VIP patients. If you’ll follow me, I can take you to your father.”

“How—”

“He’s doing *wonderfully*. I mean he’s had a bad day, of course, but the surgery was a resounding success, and we’re expecting a full recovery.”

Relief floods my system, my shoulders suddenly relaxing.

“Oh my God, that’s... amazing.”

“I’ll take you to him. This way, please.”

Gratefully, I follow Roger through the crowded hallways to an elevator.

“He’d suffered significant blood loss by the time he got to us, but the bullets missed anything vital, which is very good news indeed.”

“But he’s okay?”



The doors open to a much quieter floor, and I follow Roger out and down a side hall.

“He’s doing very well. You’ll even be able to talk with him, at least for a little while.”

I grin as we head down another hallway, and then another. Then I frown as Roger pulls back a curtain of opaque plastic sheeting hanging over a darkened hallway.

“Um...where are we going?”

He laughs. “I’m terribly sorry. We’re in the middle of renovating part of this wing after a generous benefactor’s donation. But the VIP ward is right through here.”

He chuckles, shaking his head ruefully as we both duck under the plastic into what admittedly does look like a construction zone.

“I know it sounds frightfully elitist, and believe me, it makes *me* roll my eyes too. But we do care for a certain class of wealthy or famous patients here who do need an extra level of security and privacy. Your father included, of course.”

I just nod as we stop in front of a door to a recovery room.

“Right through here, please, Miss Kildare.”

Roger smiles warmly as he opens the door to my father’s room and ushers me in...

To darkness.

I stiffen, my throat clenching shut.

“Where—”

Powerful arms grab me from behind. I try to scream, but a rag gets jammed into my mouth and a bag goes over my head.

---

MY PULSE IS THUDDING like a drum in my ear. At first, in the back of the car or truck they bundled me into, I tried to keep track of the left and right turns we took. But then I stopped when I realized how ridiculous that was.

I'm not James Bond. And I don't know London at all.

Now, I have no idea where I am.

I'm sitting tied to a chair somewhere quiet and indoors. I'm still blindfolded, and I'm still gagged. That much I know for sure. And my skin crawls with the unshakable notion that I'm not alone.

That someone is in here *watching* me.

A door opens with a soft click, and suddenly, the room is filled with the deep mutterings and murmuring of men's voices. I shudder, clenching my hands tight into fists and trying not to shake as I hear footsteps approaching me. I flinch when a hand grabs the edge of the bag over my head.

"Ah, *there* she is, my lovely bride."

*Oh, God.*

My heart turns to ice as the bag is yanked off my head. I blink against the sudden brightness of the room. But I don't need my eyes to adjust to know from the voice alone who it is.

Atlas Drakos is grinning wickedly at me as I stare at him in horror.

"So, we meet again, *Rose*," he growls thickly, turning to pace the room back and forth in front of me.

Behind him, near the doorway, are two other terrifying-looking men. One, a younger, extremely handsome man with the same violent glint in his eyes as Atlas, I recognize as Ares Drakos, from our meeting.

The other man is a *giant*—easily seven feet tall and built like a Viking, with dark, piercing eyes, jet black hair, and tattoos covering his neck above the collar of his shirt and his forearms where his shirt is rolled up to the elbows.

Atlas chuckles blackly as he comes to a stop across the room from me.

“I have a sneaking suspicion that our mutual friend Mr. Prince hasn’t exactly kept his hands to himself, no?”

He grins lecherously as he turns again and looks me up and down, making me flinch against my bonds.

“How could he not be tempted? A pretty little thing like you, locked up with him in that big, lonely house of his?”

He eyes me appraisingly again.

“Yes, I am *sure* he’s had his fun with you. So, perhaps no. Perhaps you will not be my bride.”

My pulse quickens before I see the sadistic glint in his eyes.

“Just my *whore*.”

My stomach wrenches with revulsion.

“Mhmmph mph mppph mppphh Mmmmphhh!!”

Atlas laughs as I scream at him through the gag over my mouth.

“Quite a little firecracker!” he crows. “I’d keep that gag on when I take you for myself, only I’ve been dying to watch

those pretty lips open wide for my dick. What did you say, slut?”

I pale as he grins and reaches for me. He yanks the gag from my mouth, and I choke on the cool air before glaring up at him.

“I said *don't you fucking touch me.*”

His eyes glint and his lips curl dangerously.

“It would appear you still need breaking in.”

I sneer at him.

“What did you do with my father?”

Atlas starts to chuckle.

“Kratos!” he barks.

Behind him, the huge man with the tattoos nods his chin. I swallow. Kratos as in Kratos Drakos, another of his brothers.

“*Nai adelfé,*” the man grunts in a voice that sounds like crumbling rock.

“Bring him in, if you would be so kind.”

Kratos turns to open the door, sticking his head out and rumbling something before turning back with his arms crossed over his massive chest.

A second later, the door opens.

And my heart shatters.

“*Dad...*”

The word barely breathes from my horrified, stunned mouth. Because standing there, smiling sheepishly and looking *miraculously* devoid of any gun-related injuries, is my father.

“Hi, sweetheart.”

My heart drops and my face turns ashen as I stare at him.

“Dad, what’s going—”

“The grownups are speaking, little girl,” Atlas snaps coldly before turning to my father. “I have to say, Laurent, I wasn’t convinced.”

My father laughs nervously, shrugging. “Well, what can I say, Atlas. I’m a man of my word.”

I stare in disbelief, trying to piece together what the hell is happening.

Atlas snorts. “If you were a *man of your word*, we wouldn’t be here today, now would we, Paul?”

My dad grins even more sheepishly.

“Ah, well, the past is the past now, I can assume...?”

Atlas turns and levels a look at me that turns my blood to ice.

“You assume correctly. Our score is settled.”

My mouth drops open.

“*What?!?*”

“Rose, sweetheart...” My dad twists his mouth, shrugging his shoulders. “Look, baby, Mr. Drakos is a powerful man. You’ll want for nothing—”

“Are you *insane!?*”

Atlas is chuckling as my dad wrings his hands.

“Rose, you’re new to this world, so you don’t know how it all works...”

“I know you don’t *sell your family* to, what, settle a debt?!”

“Oh, his debt was settled when he sold me Prince’s precious holding company ten years ago.”

My face turns gray as my gaze rips past my father to Atlas. He grins widely.

“Yes, the one with that biotech company he wants so *very* badly. So badly that he had your father here out hunting around for it, no?” His grin widens. “Your father, who’s in fact been staying all warm and cozy at the Trafalgar Suite at the Ritz for the last month?”

When he sees the way in which the color has drained from my face, he starts to chuckle.

“You see, Rose, I *own* your father. I have for years.”

My eyes dart to my dad, who spreads his arms apologetically.

“A man will do a lot for you when he’s scared of you. But he’ll do even *more* when he’s scared of you *and* he owes you money. Like sell me the biotech company his woman stole from her ex-husband, who apparently needs it very much. Or at least, needs whatever is on *this*.”

He turns to nod his chin at a little workstation set up in the corner of the room, complete with a laptop, a modem, and an external hard drive.

“*Anything*, Rose,” Atlas grunts with a dark, smug look on his face. “Including fetching me his own daughter so that he will finally be out from under my thumb.”

The floor drops out. My heart wrenches horribly as I turn to stare in shock at my father.

“*Dad...?*”

My father swallows guiltily as he turns away from me. Atlas roars with laughter.

“Your daddy didn’t ‘finally discover you’, Rose,” he sneers. “He knew exactly where you were the whole time; his little

emergency fund, waiting in that convent for him to—”

“*Enough*, Atlas,” my father mutters, before suddenly gasping as Atlas brings a hand back as if to hit him.

When the hit doesn’t come, and my father flinches anyway, the three Drakos men and the two other guards in the room chuckle.

“He ‘found’ you, Rose,” Atlas rasps. “Because I told him to *get you*, as the final payment to settle his debt to me.”

He turns to my dad, who’s still doing everything in his power to avoid my horrified eyes.

“You can go, Paul. And you should hope we never, ever cross paths again.”

“*Dad...*”

He glances at me once—just once—his brow furrowed and his mouth small.

“I—I’m sorry, Rose.”

“*Dad!*”

“I’m so sorry.”

And just like that, without another word, he’s out the door and gone. I choke, like I’ve just been slapped.

Atlas chuckles.

“Don’t be sad, my little whore. Daddies come, and daddies go. Isn’t that right, brothers?”

He snickers as he glances back at the two other Drakos men standing by the door.

“Get it? Daddies go—”

“*We got it*,” Ares hisses.

Atlas rolls his eyes as he turns back to me.

“Please forgive my two brothers’ sentimentality. Don’t worry, you’ll find no such womanly weakness in me, my little toy.”

I grit my teeth, forcing myself to breathe as I glare at him. He grins.

“So very, very feisty. Oh, I will enjoy breaking that spirit of yours. But first, why don’t you tell us what the information from that biotech company is that Oliver wants so badly.”

I lick my lips and swallow.

“I don’t know.”

“Bullshit.”

“I don’t. Why would he tell me anything? I was his prisoner.”

Atlas smirks. “Do I look like a stupid man?”

Yes, I want to say so badly. But I know I don’t want to pay the price for indulging in that.

“Smart girl,” he grunts when I’m silent. “It’s medical then, yes? It must be. Ares! What was it they were working on?”

“Gene sequencing,” his younger brother mutters, folding his arms over his chest. “It looks like it was for some kind of a vaccine or curative therapy.”

Atlas’s lips curl wickedly. “*Curative therapy*. So, a cure, yes?”

Ares nods. Atlas turns back to me.

“A *cure*,” he murmurs. “For what?”

“I don’t know.”

He brings his eyes level with mine.

“Do *not* force me to break you in right here in front of my brothers, my little whore.”



Fear stabs through me, but I shake my head.

“I *don't know*.”

“Did Prince ever have your ass?” he snaps. “Because I might start with that until you’re begging to tell me the truth—”

“I don’t KNOW!”

“Brother, stop.”

Ares’s face darkens, his jaw clenched as he steps forward and drops a heavy hand on Atlas’s shoulder.

“Leave it alone, Atlas. She doesn’t know.”

Ares glances at me, holding my terrified eyes for a second before turning away.

“Just leave it.”

“Should I remind you, *dear brother*,” Atlas seethes, whirling on Ares, “just *who* is in charge of this family?”

The room goes silent.

“I’m merely saying, we have other things to do, don’t we?”

Atlas grins as he turns back to me.

“Indeed we do, indeed we do.” He exhales sharply. “Fine, don’t tell me. It doesn’t matter anyway. I can guess it’s something dire, given it’s something he needs *so* badly. Is it cancer?” He grins coldly. “Or something else that’s equally fatal, perhaps?”

He sighs, moving towards me as my skin crawls.

“It doesn’t matter even if it is. Because you see, my little whore, I *detest* loose ends. So, whatever his ailment, I’m about to put him out of his misery.”

Any remaining color drains from my face.

“No—”

“Oh yes, very much yes.”

Something cruel and twisting jabs into my heart, and I choke as the tears begin to well in my eyes. Atlas grins at me and turns to his brothers.

“Get the men ready. We’ll be leaving soon.”

He turns back to me as Ares and Kratos go.

“I’ll enjoy making you cry later, whore. But first, you need to pay for that insolent tongue of yours.”

He glances at the two swarthy guards behind him.

“Anything from the neck down is *mine*,” he snarls before he grins a sadistic smile. “But feel free to use her mouth however you see fit.”

Atlas smirks at me, turns, and slams the door shut on his way out.



INSTANTLY, the two guards glance at each other, then at me, huge smiles spreading across their faces.

“Fuck, but I do love a job with benefits,” one chuckles to the other as they both prowl towards me.

“Wait....please—”

“Less talking,” one chuckles. “And more suck—”

The door slams open behind them. Before they can even turn, and before I can see who it is past them, suddenly, two popping sounds echo in the room. Both men are gurgling, and I’m confused as to why my shoes are suddenly wet, red, and sticky, before suddenly, I understand.

*Oh my God...*

Both guards have slumped lifelessly to the floor, blood pouring out of the holes in their chests. I yank my head up, shuddering as a man slips into the room, shuts the door, and locks it before turning to level his steel gray eyes at me.

“Don’t you touch me!” I choke, scrambling to kick myself away from him. But I’m still bound to the chair, and all the movement does is make my heels skid horribly through the sticky blood pooling under them.

I gasp as he rushes across the room towards me with a knife in his hand.

“Don’t you fucking *dare*—!”

“Rose! I’m a friend!”

I blink at the American accent, stunned as he uses the knife to cut the zip-ties holding me to the chair. When I’m free, I lurch from him, backing away as I take in the brownish-blond hair, the powerful, lean build, the steely, handsome look on his chiseled face, and the tattoos running down both arms.

“My name is Oren Frey. I’m a friend of Oliver’s.”

“*Prove it.*”

He eyes me with something midway between amusement and respect.

“Well, I’m not shooting you, and I’m not calling out for that fuckhead Atlas, am I?”

When I don’t respond, he turns to gesture at the two bodies on the ground.

“And that’s gotta count for *something*.”

He’s got a point. More importantly, he’s got a gun.

“Sorry,” I mumble. “Just being cautious.”

“Smart girl. Look, I’ve been tailing your father at Oliver’s request for a few weeks. Which is how I was able to follow you here after they took you at the hospital.”

Oren frowns darkly.

“I need to apologize. I’m afraid you were there based on information I gave Oliver about your father’s shooting. Information which I didn’t learn until right before you arrived was complete bullshit.”

“Do you have a phone?”

His brow furrows. “Yes?”

“Then you can apologize later. We need to warn Oliver that Atlas is coming for him.”

“*Shit.*”

He yanks his cell out and dials, listening for a moment.

“Voicemail,” he mutters disgustedly.

He tries again, then angrily shoves the phone away.

“I’m guessing he’s not much of a phone guy these days?”

I go cold, shaking my head. “Not really.”

“Then we need to get moving. Follow me. Stay behind me. I’m parked around back.”

“Wait!”

I rush over to the workstation in the corner and grab the laptop and the external hard drive.

“Okay, now we can go.”

He frowns. “What’s that?”

“His life.”



“*THERE* WE ARE.”

In my library, I scowl as Lucile smiles at me, tucking the blanket around my shoulders as I slump on the couch.

“Better?”

“I’d be *better* if you stopped treating me like a toddler.”

“Well, as soon as you stop toppling over like one, I will.”

I glare at her. She glares right back. Lucile cracks first.

“How are you feeling?” she continues in a gentler tone.

“I’m fine,” I mutter, brushing her off.

“Oliver.”

My eyes close.

“It’s getting worse,” I growl quietly. I open my eyes and turn to look at her plainly. “It’s getting really bad.”

Her brow worries, pain and fear flashing across her face before she shakes it away.

“You’ll—” She smiles weakly, patting my arm. “You’ll find it. I know you—”

“Lucile.”

Her face scrunches up as she looks away.

I know this is hard for her. Through all my grumpiness, and my wrathful asshole-ish behavior over the years, she's the closest thing to a mother I've known since I was a kid. Hell, she's been *more* of a mother to me than my own ever was.

Now she has to watch me die.

No mother should ever have to do that.

Obviously, Lucile and Wentworth are both fully aware of my condition. And I've prepared for this eventuality. They both already make about thirty times what most housekeepers and butlers do. And after I'm gone, they have a small fortune each coming to them, along with properties of mine I've always felt they'd like.

Wentworth is getting my beach house in the Seychelles, complete with the fishing boat I'm sure he'll spend most of his time on. To Lucile, I'm leaving a top-floor penthouse on 5th Avenue, near Broadway, because she loves musicals.

"It's not bloody *time* yet," she snaps. "There's still a chance \_\_\_"

"Lucile."

I shrug the blanket off, wincing at the lingering tension in my chest and head from my episode earlier as I reach out and take her hand in mine.

"Thank you."

"For?" she says tersely.

"For putting up with me."

She smiles a crooked, sad smile. "You do know I'm just in it for the inheritance, right?"

I grin as she dabs at her eyes and leans down to kiss the top of my head.

“You’re not going anywhere yet, you big grumpy—”

“Sir?”

We both look up to see Wentworth standing in the doorway, frowning.

“Sir, there’s a car coming up the drive: fast.”

Even as he says it, I hear the sound of tires squealing and gravel kicking up outside. I jump up and storm to the front door, flinging it wide just as a black SUV screeches to a stop.

The passenger door opens.

And my whole gray, dim, dark world lights up.

It’s her.

My Rose.

“Oliver!”

She races to me as I grin. But when I see the terrified look on her face, my smile fades. She crashes into my arms, clinging to me tightly as I wrap my arms around her.

“What’s—”

I frown when I see Oren Frey getting out of the driver’s side.

“You ever heard of answering your cell, Prince?”

My brow furrows as I pull back, looking down into Rose’s terror-stricken face.

“What’s happened? Is Paul—”

“He lied,” she chokes as the tears start to stream down her face. “*He lied!* And Atlas Drakos is coming to kill you!”



---

“THANK YOU, MA’AM.”

Oren nods politely at Lucile as she hands him a cup of coffee. Across the kitchen island, I’m sitting in a dark cloud of wrath and fury, with Rose sitting on my knee.

She’s just finished tearfully telling me everything. And if I hated her father before, I’m ready to snap him in fucking *half* now.

Paul’s been working for Atlas, who’s had my old holding company Kensington Gardens Limited, but more specially, Nanosplice Biotech, for years? And he set up this whole thing to get Rose into that motherfucker’s hands, all to settle a *debt*?

I’m going to fucking kill him.

“How many men do you think Atlas Drakos could put together?”

Oren frowns into his coffee.

“I’m not one hundred percent sure. But I’d guess, on short notice, twenty?”

“And if he’s had more than short notice?”

Oren’s face lines grimly.

“Probably ten times that.”

Rose gasps sharply, her hand clenching on thigh as my face sours.

*Shit.*

My eyes drop to the hard drive on the kitchen counter in front of me. I have no idea if what’s on there is a cure or not.

But it's my only chance.

I start at the sound of a shotgun being cracked open. My eyes fly to the doorway, where Wentworth is loading up a double-barreled hunting shotgun, with another one under his arm. Lucile marches over and takes his spare, instantly cracking it open and reaching for the box of ammo on the counter next to him.

"Exactly what in the fuck do you think you're doing, Lucile?"

She glares at me.

"I've protected you and cared for this house for nearly forty years, Oliver. I am *not* letting some thugs barge in here and—"

"Put down the goddamn gun."

"Begging your pardon, *sir*," she mutters. "No."

Beside me, there's a click as Oren releases the clip on his gun, checking it before slamming it back in.

"*Oren*," I shake my head warningly at him.

"I can help, Prince."

"Like hell you can. You've got a wife with a baby on the way. You are *not* staying here for a gun fight."

"Remind me which of us is a trained marksman?" he fires back at me.

I stare at him, at a loss of words.

"Yes, and I was trained by Her Majesty's Royal Marine—"

"That was *fifty fucking years ago*, Wentworth!" I snap.

Oren lays his gun on the table and spreads his arms in appeal.

"Do you have any better ideas about how to hold off twenty or perhaps two hundred armed and angry Greeks?"

My eyes land on the hard drive again.

“I do, actually.” I swivel my gaze to Oren again. “Give me your phone.”

He frowns as I take it, punching a number and an address into it.

“This is a bio-lab in London that I own. And that’s the number for a Dr. Richard Reed. Call him and tell him you’re on the way, potentially with the chemical structure of what he needs to finish synthesizing.”

Rose stiffens on my lap, turning to me, her eyes shining.

“Is this...”

I shake my head.

“I don’t know,” I mutter quietly, taking her hand in mine. “But there’s only one way to find out.”

I glance back at Oren.

“I need you to do this for me, my friend. It’ll take some time, and I need someone I can trust to be there if Atlas figures out what’s going on and goes to the lab. Understand?”

He opens his mouth to protest again. But when he notices the urgent look in my eyes that only he, and not Rose, can see, he relents.

“Okay.”

“Take Lucile.”

“Oh, like hell am I—”

My gaze stabs into her with the same urgency.

“You need to go with Oren. You’ve been my nurse for years, Lucile. Dr. Reed is going to need my current medications,

dosages, all of that.”

Her face pales as she nods and glances at Oren.

There’s a heavy knock at the front door. The whole kitchen goes silent and still.

“*For king and country,*” Wentworth mutters under his breath as he cocks the shotgun and whirls to leave the kitchen.

I’m faster, though, shoving past him and storming into the foyer.

“Sir!”

“Atlas isn’t going to *knock*, Wentworth.”

But I’m very curious who the fuck *is*. I grab the door and yank it wide with a snarl on my lips...

...and come face to face with Adrian Cross.

“I know you’re hell bent on burning your bridges to the fucking ground,” he mutters. “But I’m a stubborn bastard.”

I look past him, frowning as I see close to twenty armed men climbing out of four SUVs.

“How did you...”

“Like I keep trying to fucking tell you, Prince,” he smirks, “this is *my* world. So yes, I heard you might be needing some boots on the ground.”

I look at him. He looks at me.

Suddenly, I’m hugging him close.

“It’s good to see you again, my friend.”



AS THEY WERE PREPARING to leave, Oliver almost physically forced me into the car with Oren and Lucile. That is, until I fought him so hard that half of the mafia soldiers outside looked concerned.

“I need you safe!” he barked.

“And where am I safest?! Out there where we don’t know who’s playing for which side and where Atlas’s men are? Or *here*, with you!?”

He dropped it after that.

After Oren and Lucile start for the lab in London with the hard drive, Wentworth makes a surprisingly delicious—and *large*—dinner for all of us, including all of Adrian’s men outside. There’s a sort of quiet humming energy around the house as we make small talk with Adrian and his broody second-in-command, Cade.

After that, Oliver takes me upstairs to his room. Which, weirdly, sort of feels like *our* room now.

I sit on the edge of the bed, watching him sink into one of the big chairs by the fireplace and roll his sleeve up. He frowns in practiced concentration as he draws the medicine out of its vial

with the syringe. He scowls as he brings it to his arm, choosing a vein.

“Let me.”

I stand and go to him, feeling the tension throbbing under his skin when I lay my hands on him.

“Oliver...”

He exhales slowly, looking up at me.

“*Let me.*”

I take the syringe and run my fingers over his skin until I find a good spot. The needle pierces the skin, and I deftly press the plunger, allowing the medicine to flow into his bloodstream.

“Thank you,” he murmurs quietly.

“So, this cure...”

“Would mean I wouldn’t need any more injections.”

My lip worries.

“You’ve been taking them more often, I think. The injections, I mean.”

Oliver is silent.

“Does that mean you’re getting worse?”

“I’m...” he smiles quietly and shakes his head, his piercing blue eyes finding mine. “It’s going to be okay.”

His hands slide over my hips, pulling me close. His lips press to my stomach, kissing me through my sweater. I smile wider as he kisses me again, and when he lifts the hem of my sweater together with my shirt beneath, I shiver as his lips trace across my skin.

“*What do you need?*” I whisper.

*“You,”* he growls. *“Always, I need you.”*

His lips nibble at my bare skin, teasing over my belly button before sliding lower. I shiver, my pulse quickening as he raises the sweater and t-shirt even more, sucking on my skin as he lifts the clothing up over my breasts.

I pull the garments the rest of the way off myself, my long hair tumbling over my shoulders and my breasts as he works the zipper of my skirt. When it drops, I whimper at the savage, dark and hungry groan that rumbles in his throat.

He brings his mouth between my thighs, making me gasp quietly as he nuzzles my pussy. He looks up into my eyes as his huge hands grip my hips and his tongue drags up through my lips.

*“Oliver...”*

I shudder in pleasure, my legs quivering as he slowly teases up my slit to suck my clit between his lips. Electricity zips through me as he growls into me, sucking on my aching bud and dancing his tongue over it.

One hand slides up my thighs, and I moan as he sinks two fingers into me. His other hand teases up my torso to cup one of my breasts, pinching and twisting the nipple until my hips eagerly push against his mouth.

He strokes and nibbles at my pussy, maddeningly pushing me so slowly towards the release that it feels like he'll never let me come. My legs tremble, my head swimming. But he holds me up with his hands on me.

With his mouth on me.

My reality blurs, my entire being rocking deliriously on the edge of my release, but unable to get there.

He won't allow it.

*"Oliver..."*

"You want to come so badly it hurts, don't you, little one?"

*"Yes..."*

"Then beg me."

I shudder, gasping as the commanding tone in his voice sends pleasure throbbing through my core.

*"Please!"*

*"Please what?"*

*"Please let me come!"*

*"Again."*

His hands drop away from me. All I can focus on is his tongue, and I cry out as he swirls it over my clit.

*"Please let me —OH MY GOD..."*

In one motion, he pulls me into his lap, centers me over the huge, swollen head of his cock, and then buries it deep in my pussy with one swift yank down of his arms.

I come instantly.

The building tease of his tongue, the sheer size of his dick, the way he goes *so* deep, and the way he hits so many places inside of me...it's all too much. I sink down onto his pulsing cock, coming before he's even all the way in.

I cry out, and immediately his mouth is on mine, swallowing my moans as I spasm around him. I grab his face with my hands as I start to lift up and then back down, riding and bouncing on his thick cock as one climax tumbles into another.

*"Oliver!"*



“Ride my cock, baby girl,” he groans, gripping my ass and rocking his hips up to meet me. “Let me see you take every inch of me.”

*“Make me yours,”* I moan.

I gasp when his mouth brushes against mine, his teeth nipping at my bottom lip.

*“You already are.”*

I shriek in pleasure. The room blurs around me, until all I know is the place where the two of us are joined together, and the way my heart surges out of my chest as if it needs to be even closer to his.

“Oliver, I—”

*“I love you, Rose.”*

My world explodes. The pleasure crashes into me, and suddenly, I’m coming even harder as I slam my mouth to his.

*“I love you too...”*

I moan the words into his lips as he groans and drives deep into me. He kisses me fiercely as his cum spills deep, his cock pulsing over and over. I cling to him like I’m afraid I’ll blow away on a breeze.

But I know a hurricane couldn’t take me from him now.

My eyes dart to the side table, and the syringe and the vial of medicine sitting on it.

My chest tightens.

*Nothing.*



I'M ALREADY wide awake before the fist finishes pounding on the bedroom door.

“Sir!”

Wentworth. My arms tighten around Rose as I glance at the clock on the bedside table to see it's four in the morning.

Rose stirs in my arms, suddenly bolting awake and gasping as she sits up quickly.

“Sir!” Wentworth bellows. “They're on their way!”

She shudders next to me.

“I'm coming, Wentworth. Have Adrian get his men ready.”

After I hear him dash off, I turn to her, taking her hands in mine.

“We...we could leave,” she chokes. “I mean all of us. Go anywhere else—”

“Atlas may be a knuckle-dragging caveman, but he's not an idiot. Nor is he one to give up when he's caught the scent of blood in the water.” I shake my head. “Wherever we go, he'll follow. No. This needs to end here, tonight.”

I've thought about running. Of course, I have. But it's a temporary measure. Atlas is a hunter, and he'd keep hunting us forever.

I won't do that. And whether this cure works or not, there's no way in hell I'd leave this world knowing she'd be in perpetual danger from him.

Atlas has made the mistake of coming for Rose.

And he'll die before he lays a finger on her.

I'll make sure of that.

We both dress quickly, and then I stop her at the door.

"Listen to me," I growl quietly. "I need you up in the north tower, where your father was."

She stares at me.

"You want me in the *jail*?!"

"It's only a jail if you're trying to get out. If you're trying to get in, it's a fucking fortress."

Long before building was turned into the manor home it is today, it was, in fact, a literal fort.

Tonight, that heritage is going to be put to the test.

"Oliver—"

"The code is nine-two-two-six. Got that? Nine-two-two-six. Open the cell, get in, and shut it behind you. It'll lock."

"Goddammit, Oliver—!"

My lips slam to hers, kissing her so hard she winces before she grips me tightly.

"I need you out of harm's way, love."

She swallows, shaking in the moonlight.

“And what about you?”

My jaw tightens as I reach for the door.

“I *am* the harm.”

---

“I HAD a lookout stationed along the road to your place,” Adrian mutters as I stride into the foyer. The front doors are slightly ajar to give us an opening through which to fire, and there’s an entire barricade of furniture piled in front of them. I glance to the left and right, seeing various tables, couches, wardrobes and cupboards pushed against the windows.

My mouth thins grimly.

This is war.

“The lookout spotted Atlas and seven other cars full of men headed this way. He should be here any second now.”

*Seven cars full of men. Fuck.*

He turns, eying me.

“You should go, my friend.”

“That isn’t happening.”

“Oliver, again, this is my world, not—”

“It was always *my* world, too,” I growl. “We all just pretended that the golden mask I hid behind made it disappear.”

He eyes me coolly.

“You’re sure about this?”

“He dies tonight.”

Adrian’s lip curls.

“My my, Golden Boy...”

“Shut the fuck up and give me a gun, Cross.”

He grins, grabs a Baretta off the table next to him, and hands it to me.

“You even know how to—?”

I drop the mag, check it, and ram it back in before I chamber a round. Adrian’s brow arches eloquently.

“Well, that answers—”

“*Boss!*”

We both whirl at the sound of one of his men calling out. Through the gap in the doors, I see headlights flooding up the driveway.

They’re here.

---

“SEND THE GIRL OUT, PRINCE!”

The whole scene before me feels like a moment frozen in time. Like someone’s hit the pause button to give us a second to catch our collective breath before pure chaos explodes in our faces.

Outside, taking cover behind their cars, are probably close to forty of Atlas’ men, guns out. Facing them, taking cover in my fortress of a home, are myself, Wentworth, Adrian, and eighteen of his men.

“*Five seconds, Prince!*” Atlas roars again. “Don’t make me turn your fucking palace here into rubble. Give me my little whore!”

Rage explodes in my veins, a snarl on my lips before Adrian's hand drops to my shoulder.

"Breathe, Oliver," he murmurs quietly. "Don't let him bait you."

"Five!"

"Two-to-one odds, my friend," I mutter at Adrian.

He shrugs.

"Eh. I've had worse."

"Four!" Atlas bellows.

"Adrian, you're a father now. And you have Celeste." My brow furrows. "I can't let you—"

"*For the Kings and Villains,*" he growls under his breath, cocking his rifle and aiming the barrel over the sideways table in front of us, out through the gap. "And the empires they raise and raze."

"Three!"

We both see it before someone yells a warning.

Headlights, coming up my drive.

I glance at Adrian and he glances back at me, both of our faces grim.

We are now *hopelessly* outgunned.

"The Kings and Villains," I mutter under my breath.

"The—"

We both flinch as the gunfire starts roaring, and we duck behind our cover together with Adrian's men. I can hear the staccato thud of bullets hitting the front of my house like hail. Peppering the stone and wood. Smashing out the windows.

I can hear the pop of car tires outside. The screams of men being hit by gunfire—

I freeze. Adrian does too, and we both whirl to glance at his men stationed by the windows.

They're not firing.

*So who the fuck is shooting—*

I follow Adrian's gaze through the gap in the door...to where Atlas's men are now caught on the wrong side of their cover, shooting back at someone shooting at them from the *other* side.

"That crazy fucking psychopath..." Adrian breathes, with something like admiration in his voice.

Someone in a black suit and a black shirt is out there, pistols in both of his hands, a sociopathic, maniacal grin on his face, and flanked by twenty or so of his men.

Someone who looks a hell of a lot from here like Cillian Kildare.

"FIRE!" Adrian roars. "And avoid the crazy fucking Irishmen, if you can help it!"

Suddenly, the sound of gunfire erupts throughout my home, all of us jumping up from our cover to start laying down fire on Atlas's other side.

Bullets slam into the house, smashing through glass and upholstery, peppering the walls with holes, and sending people diving for cover.

Cornered though he is, Atlas is *not* going down easy.

"Watch the flank!" Adrian's second-in-command Cade roars, whirling to bolt across my parlor to one of the side windows.

He fires through the glass, shattering it before ducking for cover.

“I see two or three headed for the back!”

“I’ve got them!”

I whip my head around, glaring at Wentworth. “Like *hell* you —”

“*Sir*,” he mutters stiffly. “Old as I am, and as hard as it may be for you to imagine it, I was a soldier for years.” His mouth tightens. “I’ve got this.”

I clap a hand on his shoulder.

“Be safe.”

And then he’s off, dashing surprisingly quickly through the house toward the kitchen and the back door. The rest of us start firing back out of the front of the house, pinning Atlas’s men down from our side while Cillian’s men do the same on the other side.

A grim smile spreads over my face.

*We’ve got this.*

We’ve actually got—

Through the hail of gunfire exploding all around me, the single *bang* that echoes from somewhere behind me turns my blood to ice.

Somewhere behind me in the kitchen.

*Wentworth.*

“Oliver!”

I rip my arm away from Adrian as I turn and charge through the house. I crash into the kitchen, and in a single motion, my



arm raises and my finger pulls.

The man standing with his gun pointed at a motionless Wentworth slams back against the wall. His eyes roll back as he slumps to the floor, blood pooling around him.

Wentworth groans as I hurdle the kitchen island and crouch down next to him.

“*Master Prince—*”

“Wentworth!” I rip my jacket off and press it against the blood soaking his midsection. “Cross!” I roar back into the house. “*CROSS!*”

“Tried...to...stop them, sir.”

I follow his eyes to where two of Atlas’ men lie dead at the back door.

“No, Wentworth, you *did* stop them,” I choke, putting more pressure on his wound. “You—”

“*Rose, sir...*”

I go still.

“Wentworth—”

“He’s...going for...her.”

“Who—”

“Atlas...” he groans, raising a hand and stabbing a finger towards the back staircase.

*Fuck.*

Adrian barges into the kitchen and swears under his breath.

“*Help him,*” I snarl as I lurch to my feet and bolt for the stairs.

“Prince—”

*“JUST HELP HIM!”*

I take the stairs three at a time as the blinding red mist begins to claw its way out of its cage. I’d say “not now”...

...but right now is *exactly* when I need my monster.

Because I’m going to tear Atlas Drakos into fucking *pieces*.



“WHAT A PERFECT PLACE FOR YOU.”

Fear spikes in me as I back against the far wall of the cell in the north tower. In front of me, grinning sadistically at me through the bars, is Atlas.

“Because when I get you back to my home, this is *exactly* the kind of place I’ll put you. A *cage*, as befits a little whore.”

I swallow, eying him.

“Open the door.”

“It’s locked.”

“I can see that, you fucking cunt. What’s the code?”

“I don’t know.”

His lips curl into a snarl.

“Do you know what I’m going to do with you?”

“Blame me for your erectile dysfunction and chronic premature ejaculation, if I were to guess.”

Pure rage explodes across his face, and I flinch as he slams himself against the bars. He chuckles darkly at me.

“I’m going to fuck you in every hole you have until you are bleeding, and you beg me to stop. Then, I’m going to do it again.”

Bile rises in my throat.

“Then, once you’re broken, I’m going to put a son in you.”

My stomach actually turns as I shrink further against the bricks behind me.

“And after you give me my heir,” he chuckles. “After *that*, I’m going to allow you to truly be the whore that you are. I’ll let every single one of my men have a turn at you, every single day. How does that sound?”

I swallow, not dignifying his disgusting question with an answer. Rage clouds his face.

“I’m tired of waiting, bitch.”

I shiver when he yanks his gun out and points it at me through the bars.

“The code, *now*.”

“I don’t know—”

I scream as the shot explodes against the brick right next to me.

“*The code*,” he rasps.

“I’d sooner see you shoot me than give you a son,” I spit at him.

Atlas’s eye twitches. His gaze drops to the keypad, and I shiver as he suddenly aims the gun at it. Then, slowly, his eyes drag over the old iron bars to where they’re sunk into the crumbling brick.

His gun points to the bars.

“I’d cover my ears if I were you.”

*Oh God...*

My hands clamp down over my ears as he starts firing, sending sparks and clouds of rock dust into the air as he empties his clip into the side of the bars. He ejects the empty clip and slams in a fresh one, and then starts again, blasting away until suddenly, all goes silent.

I shudder, pulling my hand away from my ears and coughing in the dust as I try and peer through it. Slowly, the clouds of mortar and rock clear.

*Holy mother of God.*

The whole side of the cell wall, where the bars attach to the brick, is crumbled and broken, the bars themselves hanging askew.

Atlas doesn’t need the code.

He’s just shot the whole cell wide open.

I shriek as he starts to kick at the bars, slamming them away from the brick. The iron groans and whines, caving in kick by kick. Until suddenly, with a horrible wrenching sound, the entire freaking wall caves in.

The dust settles, and when I look up, raw fear stabs into me as I lock eyes with Atlas—without bars between us.

“I’d bend over and get ready, whore,” he snarls as he starts to step over the rubble. “Because I’m going to fuck your ass right here and—”

For a second, my brain glitches, and I think he’s just been hit by a car.

A car in a hallway, in a tower, something like a hundred feet above the ground.

But then, when that “car” roars, I realize what it is.

Who it is.

*Oliver.*

I dash from the cell, lunging over the broken bars and rubble and whirling to see Oliver slamming Atlas’ skull against a wall.

Again, and again, and *again*, snarling with pure rage and hate. The gun drops from his limp hand. And suddenly, Atlas goes still.

Oliver gives Atlas one last snarl and then drops him to the ground in a heap. He turns, shoulders heaving, a wild, vicious look in his eyes as they land on me.

“*Rose...*”

Something’s wrong. His voice is rougher, edgier, rasping even more darkly than usual. And that look in his eyes...it’s like it’s *him*, but it’s him trying to fight to look past something else. He groans, pain exploding across his face.

He needs help.

“Stay here!” I scream. “I’m going to get your med—”

It happens in slow motion. Behind him, Atlas lumbers to his feet, blood trickling down his face. I scream a warning, but he’s already swinging the huge chunk of brick in his hand, and my heart wrenches and shatters into a thousand pieces as I see it crash into the side of Oliver’s head in an explosion of rock and dust.

His eyes glaze over and roll back.

And then he falls to the ground.

“*NOOO!*”

Atlas sneers, spitting blood as he bends down and snatches up his gun.

He advances on me menacingly as I back away from him down the hall, until I come to a stop with my back against one of the big paned windows overlooking the manor roof and the gargoyles below us.

“You’ll pay for all of that,” he snarls. “You’ll fucking *pay* for —”

The roar behind him startles us both. And what happens next takes place so fast, I don’t even process it all until it’s over.

Oliver lurches to his feet, his face a mask of pain and rage, twisting his features to the point that he doesn’t even look like the man I know anymore.

Like the man I love.

He slams into Atlas from behind, grabbing him around the middle and charging. I flinch to the side...

And my very soul breaks with the sound of shattering glass.

There’s a single cry as Oliver smashes Atlas through the window and out into the dark abyss below.

And then, the only sound is my own screams filling the night.



*GET TO HIM.*

*Get to him, NOW.*

The battle is over, but I'm hardly aware of it as I run headlong through the house as hard and as fast as I can.

My mind tries to piece together what I saw from the shattered window up in the tower, and I hope to God I'm going in the right direction.

Bile rises in my throat as I replay the whole thing: Oliver slamming together with Atlas out the window, the two of them dropping like rocks to the angled roof at least fifteen feet below.

Atlas hitting the peak of it, his back making a sickening, cracking sound I'm not sure I'll ever forget before his body tumbled like a rag doll down the roofline, jarring against a gargoyle, before dropping at least forty feet to the ground below.

But Oliver landed on the flat of the roof, sliding down the other way, hitting the peaked roofline of a dormer before tumbling over the side of *that* and disappearing from my view.



If my mental map of the house is right—and I'm praying harder than I've ever prayed for anything in my life that it is—that puts him on his own balcony.

*Please be right. Please be right.*

Tears flood my face, and a sob rips from my throat as I fling myself down the hall of the west wing.

*You can't die.*

I smash through the doors to his bedroom, my pulse pounding like thunder in my ears as I lurch across the room towards the balcony.

I was right.

Oliver's lying out there on his back, his face twisted. But his chest is rising and falling shallowly.

"OLIVER!"

I rush to him, tears streaming down my face as I collapse next to him.

*"Rose..."*

"Don't talk, save your strength," I choke, shaking as I run my gaze and fingertips over him frantically, searching for obvious wounds.

"Rose—"

*"Please just don't talk,"* I sob, my eyes blurry with tears as I look deep into his eyes.

"You're okay!" I blurt, more to myself than to him. Because Oliver doesn't look okay.

Not at all.

But I do my best to smile through the wrenching pain in my heart and the tears flooding my face as I push some of his hair away from his face.

“*You’re okay! You’re going to be okay!*” I choke, my breath hitching. “We can fix—”

“*Rose...*”

He winces as his hand comes up to cup my face.

“*Please, just lie still—*”

“There’s no fixing this, Rose.”

I look him all over again, my brow furrowing.

“Where does it hurt? Your back? Your neck? Oliver, can you move your toes—”

“It’s not that.” His eyes close, pain lancing across his face as his teeth grit. When he opens them again, the eyes looking into mine are all him—not the monster.

“This...thing inside of me...”

“You need your medicine—”

“It’s too late for medicine.”

I shake my head, tears falling onto his chest.

“No, it’s *not*,” I hiss. “Please, let me just—”

“This disease is terminal, Rose.”

I go completely and utterly still as a thin, cold rain begins to mist down around us. My eyes blur. A lump thickens in my throat. And it feels like an icy hand is tightening its clawed fingers around my heart, tighter and tighter, until my soul starts to crack and bleed.

“*No...*”

“Rose—”

“No,” I shake my head, shattering as hot tears shred down my cheeks. “No, we can fix this. We can—”

“There’s no fixing this, little one.”

“I...I...”

This isn’t fair.

*THIS. ISN’T. FUCKING. FAIR.*

“I don’t understand. You have the medicine—”

“The medicine was just to buy me time. And it did.”

His lips twist into a wry smile.

“It bought me time with you.”

My body wrenches as I choke back another sob, gripping his hands tightly.

“Please. No...”

“Rose...”

“I’m going to fix you.”

He smiles, the light in his eyes fading away as he reaches up to cup my face.

“You already did.”

“Please don’t go...”

“I love you, Rose.”

“Please don’t go, because I love you too.”

Thunder booms in the distance, and suddenly the hand against my cheek goes still.

Then drops.

“NO!”

Oliver’s head falls to the side, his eyes going dim and closing as my heart breaks into million jagged pieces. My face lifts to the sky, and I scream all my anguish and pain and rage into the rain before I fall, broken, across his chest.

“*Rose!*”

I blink at the sound of my name being called from somewhere in the distance.

“*Rose!*”

Slowly, eyes blurred with rain and tears and heartache, I lift my head and scan past the edge of the balcony into the darkness.

“ROSE!”

Lucile.

I scramble to the railing and look, bleary-eyed, over the side to see her and Oren standing next a car, waving their arms frantically.

“*Catch!*”

I barely have time to react as Oren underhand lobs something up to me. I gasp when it almost slips out of my hands, then tighten my grip around it like iron, yanking it against my chest. When I look down, my heart roars.

It’s a thin metal canister with the word “sharp” and the biohazard symbol on the side of it.

My hands shake as I yank off the top, my breath catching as my eyes lock on the syringe inside.

“ROSE!”

My eyes rip from the syringe to Lucile below, who's shouting something I can't hear over the drumming of the rain, harder now.

“WHAT?!”

She pantomimes a stabbing motion into her neck. Adrenaline explodes through me as I whirl around and crash to my knees beside Oliver.

*“I'm going to fix you...”*

He grunts in pain and barely stirs when I jam the syringe into his neck and push the plunger down. I make sure every single drop of liquid has gone in before I pull the needle, toss it aside, and collapse onto his chest again, my arms tight around his still frame.

*“Stay with me...Stay with me...”*

Thunder booms overhead. The rain pours down like cold tears as I hold him to me and sob into his chest.

*Please don't leave.*



TURNS OUT, I'm one tough bastard to kill. Even though something—whether fate, or karma, or a higher power of some kind, or just the chaotic nature of life itself—came pretty fucking close to pulling it off.

At first, I thought I *was* dead. When I opened my eyes to white, glowing lights?

Yeah, as non-religious as I've always been, there was a moment where I was fairly certain I was about to have my lack of faith shoved up my ass by an avenging angel. And then, an angel really did appear.

Except it wasn't vengeful.

And this one, I knew.

This one had big blue eyes, and long chestnut hair, and a smile that lit up my whole world.

This angel also hugged me so hard it hurt *everywhere*. But that didn't stop me from hugging her right back, tight enough to never let her go.

*“Told you I'd fix you.”*

---

ROSE HAS BEEN at my side ever since I woke up, visitation rules be damned.

And the nurses around here are fucking *brutal* about keeping the rules.

But she wouldn't budge. She would *not* leave, to the point they literally had security guys with handcuffs and goddamn pepper spray up here ready to go ballistic on her. That's when I roared for everyone to shut the fuck up and promised to make an eight-figure donation to the hospital if they just fucking dropped it and let her stay.

She stayed.

Now, two days later, they're finally letting me have visitors, and I'm sitting propped up in my damn hospital bed like an invalid when my first guest knocks, then peeks around the door.

A grin cracks across my face as Lucile bursts into tears and rushes at me.

"My goodness, you look terrible, Oliver."

"Is it my hair?"

"Ah, maybe that's it."

Yeah, maybe it's my hair. Or the broken ribs, sprained shoulder, sprained ankle, bruised face, cracked skull, and half a dozen stitched up window-pane cuts all over my body. Or the IVs pumping me full of liquids and renal meds, since the stuff Dr. Reed threw together in record time has the potential side effect of shutting my kidneys down, so that's fun.

But it worked.

The cure *worked*.

The darkness reaching out of the void to drag me under is gone. The monster who's been ruling my life from the shadows for most of my time on this earth has slunk away and disappeared.

I have to say, it feels...weird...not having him there.

It's quiet.

I grin at Lucile. "Good to see you, too."

"We thought we'd lost you," she chokes into me as she hugs me tightly, which makes me basically explode in pain. But fuck it.

"Just think. You were *this* close to that 5th Avenue penthouse."

She and Rose both scowl at my dark humor.

"That's not funny," Lucile scolds.

"It's *kind* of funny."

"Not even a little," Rose mutters, poking me in the arm.

"Hey, watch it. I'm wounded, remember?"

She grins, rolling her eyes. Slowly, my smile fades as I turn back to Lucile.

"And Wentworth?"

He's alive, they've told me that much. But that's all I've heard for two days.

"He's a very lucky bastard," Lucile clucks. "The doctors say the bullet went right through his side. Missed every single thing it could have possibly hit."

The air I've been holding rushes out of me.



“Oh thank goodness!” Rose blurts.

“That *is* lucky.”

“Well, my poor stove wasn’t so fortunate. The shot went straight through Wentworth and smashed right into that digital display I love so much.”

I grin. “You’re probably due for an upgrade anyway.”

“I’ll take the same model, please.”

“Done.”

She purses her lips to keep the sob in, but it comes out anyway. Tears stream from her eyes as she hugs me tightly. I hug her right back, ignoring the stabbing pain, well, *everywhere*.

“I love you, you know,” I murmur as I hug her close.

“I do know, but it’s nice to hear it again after something like ten years.”

I chuckle as she pulls back.

“So, is this going to be a new thing?”

“Is what going to be a new thing?”

“The smiling, the hugs, the L word.”

I grin as I reach over and take Rose’s hand.

“I’m thinking it might be.”

“I’m thinking that’s the smartest decision you’ve made in your life,” Lucile smirks. Then she glances at Rose and winks.

“Well, the *second*-smartest decision.”

Rose slides off the bed and gives Lucile a long, close hug before my housekeeper finally retreats out of the hospital room.

Rose hops back onto the bed with me, giggling and then blushing as my hand snakes around her waist. My fingers slip over her hip, delving down into the yoga pants she's wearing.

"Um, *excuse me?*"

"You're excused. Now spread your legs."

She laughs and pushes my hand away. Well, tries to. It doesn't budge.

"*Oliver...*"

"Yes?"

"What happened to 'I'm wounded'?"

"I *am* wounded. But this hand isn't. Nor is my tongue, for that matter."

She gasps sharply as my hand slips inside her yoga pants to find her wet for me.

"You've *really* taken this no panties thing to heart, haven't you?"

Her face blooms with heat.

"Force of habit now."

"Why don't you get in under these sheets, and I can show you what else isn't wounded."

At this precise moment the door to my room opens again. I turn to glare at whoever the fuck it is, but my gaze softens slightly when I see it's Adrian.

"You look like shit."

"Thank you", I smirk, shaking my head and gritting my teeth as Rose subtly pulls my hand out of her pants, under cover of the sheets, of course.

“How do you feel?”

“Like I fell off my fucking roof, and then got hit by a train.”

I nod at the sling encasing Adrian’s left arm.

“Wait, what happened to you?”

He shrugs. “Caught a bullet. In a *gun* fight. Imagine that.”

“You okay?”

He grins. “I’m fine. Trust me, it’s nothing compared to the shit you’re going to catch from Celeste once you’re well enough to take it.”

“Hey, I fucking *told* you to leave—”

“Problems with authority. Professional criminal, remember?”

I smile as he turns his gaze to Rose.

“You really did save him, you know.”

She blushes, shaking her head.

“No, Dr. Reed and his formula saved him.”

“I think you should give yourself a bit more credit than that. So please, let me say thank you for saving one of my oldest friends.”

“He *is* old, isn’t he?”

Adrian howls with laughter as I turn to glare at an impishly grinning Rose.

“Yeah, laugh it up, Chuckles,” I mutter to Adrian. “We’re the same age.”

“At least I can stand on my own.”

“Prick.”

“Welcome back, Prince. I’ve missed you.”

I grin. Adrian clears his throat.

“I was going to wait, but fuck it. I’m just throwing it out there. The rest of them want to see you.”

“Who?”

“Take a wild guess. You might be a grumpy prick, Prince, but your old friends have missed you. Noel’s putting a whole thing together. I think it’s supposed to be a surprise, so…” he shrugs. “You know, try to act surprised.”

I chuckle. “I’ll think about it.”

“Do that. Hell, the way you’ve been hitting the gym the last few years, you may even have a shot at Noel in the ring.”

“I just might, at that.”

Adrian approaches the side of the bed, and the two of us chuckle awkwardly as we try and hug it out through the various bandages around me and the sling on his arm.

He clears his throat as he pulls back. “I should head out. But, uh, there’s one more person outside waiting to see you.”

“Who?”

He smirks. “I’m sure he’ll let himself in. And after that, I think it’s safe to say you two can get back to whatever-it-is you two were about to do before I cock-blocked you.”

Rose groans, blushing fiercely as she hides her face. I just grin at my old friend.

“Thank you again, for your help.”

“I already told you, Prince. You don’t have to thank me.”

“To Kings and Villains.”

“To Kings and Villains.”

---

ADRIAN IS BARELY out the door before I twist towards Rose and move to kiss her hungrily.

Which is exactly when the door opens *a-fucking-gain*.

This time, when I turn to glare at whoever it is, my body stiffens and Rose gasps sharply.

But before I can say or attempt to do anything, Ares Drakos raises his hands, palms out, conciliatorily.

“I’m just here to talk.”

I glare at him. Even without Atlas beside him, he still cuts an imposing figure—tall, dark hair, dark eyes, in a crisp white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up, along with tailored midnight blue slacks and matching vest that pair well against his bronzed complexion.

“I’m serious, Prince, I merely want to...” he rolls his shoulders. “Clear the air.”

I hold his cool gaze for a few seconds before I slowly nod and turn to Rose.

“Give me a—”

“I’d prefer it if she stayed, actually.”

My gaze rips back to Ares.

“And why is that?”

“Because I respect her. She’s got balls, so to speak. And also, Miss Kildare, I owe you an apology for my brother’s behavior and his treatment of you. I’m truly sorry for the way Atlas acted, and his intentions towards you.”

Rose swallows, nodding slowly.

“Apology accepted.”

He nods with a thin and practiced smile on his chiseled face before he drags his eyes back to me.

“On the subject of my brother—”

“If you’re looking for a single ounce of remorse or sympathy, Ares, I’m fresh fucking out.”

He snorts, shaking his head as he looks away towards the window.

“I’m fine without either. Look, Prince, I loved my brother as any brother should love his own blood. Of course I did. But...” his face darkens as he glances back at me. “I loved my father more. And my brother killed him. Atlas was a foolish, impulsive idiot, and our family is, frankly, stronger for his passing.”

“Well then, you’re welcome.”

His eyes glint.

“Don’t push it.”

“So, *Mr. Drakos*,” I murmur. “Where does that leave us?”

“Neutral. My brother attacked you unprovoked in your own home, and you held your ground. He acted irrationally and recklessly, putting our organization in jeopardy and getting ten of our men killed in the process. As far as I’m concerned, the matter is over and done with.”

“And as far as your other brothers are concerned? And your sister?”

“They’ll follow my lead. It’s my uncontested throne now.”

“Well, congratulations.”

He nods.

“Mr. Prince, Miss Kildare, I believe this concludes our business. If the fates are kind, we’ll never meet again.”

“Good luck with your throne.”

“Thank you. I wish you both happiness. And to you, Mr. Prince, a speedy recovery.”

---

THERE’S a reason they hold off on allowing visitors.

Because visitors are fucking *exhausting*.

What feels like a million visitors later, and after I’ve finally managed to pull Rose into the ensuite bathroom to fuck her against the wall until she floods my cock with her cum, we’re nestled in bed together.

Rose is fast asleep. But even though it’s pushing one in the morning, I’m having a hard time following suit.

My mind is still restlessly whirling when the door to the room opens yet *again*, and an orderly in teal scrubs with a mask over his face backs into the room pulling a medical cart.

“Are you fucking serious? It’s one in the—”

The orderly shuts the door, locks it, and turns back to me as he peels the mask from his face and winks a piercing green eye.

Fucking *Cillian*.

“And how are we feeling today, Mr. Prince?”

I glare at him. “Who the fuck are you supposed to be, the Joker?”

“It’s called going incognito.”

“Yes, but *why*?”

Cillian shrugs.

“Eh, I killed some prick in here a few years ago with a defibrillator, and they apparently frown on that sort of thing.”

“Imagine that.”

He strides over to the window and cranks it open as he slips a silver cigarette case from his scrubs.

“Really?”

“I hope you don’t mind.”

“And if I do?”

“I’m putting the odds of you hopping out of bed and doing something about it as fairly low.”

I roll my eyes.

“Fine.”

He flicks a Zippo, lighting the end of his smoke. In the shadows by the window, the cherry burns, casting an orange glow over his face.

“I owe you a world of thanks, Cillian.”

“For what, showing up the other night?” His brow furrows deeply, the angles and lines of his face in stark shadow as he sucks on the cigarette. “Nah, you don’t.”

“I think I do.”

“I wasn’t there to save your ass, Prince. I was there because I saw a chance to cut the Drakos family off at the knees.”

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news—”

“I know, I know,” he sighs, lifting a shoulder. “But I’ll take Ares over that troll of a brother of his you tossed out a window



any day.”

I frown as he glances over at me and grins.

“Fantastic work on that, by the way.”

He takes a drag of his smoke and turns to blow it out the side of his lips through the open window. He glances at Rose sleeping next to me, and frowns.

“*What is it?*” I mutter through clenched teeth.

“Do I need to ask you about your intentions towards my niece? You understand that even if she and I aren’t that close, she’s still blood, Oliver.”

“I do understand that. And let’s just say my intentions are...” my brows knit. “Grandiose and deep.”

“Never took you for a poet. Oh, by the way...”

Cillian clears his throat.

“Are you close with Paul?”

“I am the farthest fucking thing from *close* with Paul.”

“Good. Then I can stop this ridiculous act of referring to him in the present tense.”

My brow arches.

“He’s dead, if that wasn’t clear.”

“You?”

He nods.

“For my sister. For my niece. And also because he was just a fucking *prick*. Oh, I found out what he was doing breaking into your house in the first place, if you were curious.”

*Shit.*

I'd legitimately forgotten about that. It almost seems like that was years and years ago.

"I'll bite. What was he after?"

Cillian drags slowly on his cigarette.

"Paul was inking a deal for a salacious tell-all book about your son."

My body stiffens.

"So, he was looking for information he could use in that. Anything he could find. Old psych evaluations, journals, anything."

The glow of his smoke illuminates his face menacingly, shadowing the fierce scowl on his face.

"They're not wrong when they talk about me being a bit of sociopath, Prince. But even *I* have limits."

"*Thank you,*" I growl quietly.

"No need to. May your boy rest in peace."

---

AFTER THAT, finally, the visitors stop. I wince as I turn, but the pain is forgotten as Rose snuggles back into my arms.

"Was someone just here?" she murmurs sleepily.

"Shh, go back to sleep."

She smiles, her eyes closed as she sinks into my embrace, her fingers entwining with mine.

"The doctor said earlier that they're pretty sure you'll be released by tomorrow night."

"*Good.* This bed sucks."

“So does the privacy, or should I say lack thereof.”

I chuckle, nuzzling the back of her neck.

“I’ve been thinking.”

“Of?”

“That it might be time for you to move out of the east wing.”

She giggles quietly, rolling her eyes as she flips over to face me, eyes shining in the glow of the city lights streaming in from the outside.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you kicking me out of your house, or asking me to officially move into your wing?”

“I’m officially *telling you* that you’re moving into my wing, my room, and my bed—permanently.”

Rose flushes as I grab her hip and pull her close.

“Going to make an honest woman of me, are you?”

“Something like that.”

She shivers as my hand slips down the back of her sweatpants, gripping her ass as my cock thickens to steel against her.

“*Oliver...*”

Her mouth crushes to mine as her sweats and my hospital pants are quickly shed. I roll onto my back, and she climbs on top of me, her silky thighs sliding to either side of my hips and her small hand wrapping around my thick shaft. She whimpers as she guides my swollen head to her glistening lips and gasps sharply as I sink into her.

“*Fuck, Oliver...*”

*“Take all of me,”* I groan as she starts to ride me. *“Good girl.”*

Her lips sear mine as her hips roll in a soft, undulating rhythm. Her slippery pussy drags up and down my throbbing dick like silk, going slow.

Dragging it out.

Making us both insane from the tension and the slow build, until there’s no stopping it any longer.

My fingers dig into the flesh of her ass, guiding her up and down every inch of me—faster and harder until my mouth covering hers is the only thing stopping her from waking half the damn hospital with her moans.

When she comes, so do I, both of us exploding together as her sweet pussy clenches tight around my spasming cock.

Then, nestled in my arms, my heart beating against her back, we fall toward sleep.

I was wrong about fairytales. Yeah, most of the time there’s no prince riding in on a white horse to save the day.

But happily ever afters most definitely do exist.

And sometimes, it really does take a beauty to tame a beast.

## EPILOGUE

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*Six months later:*

CHANGE IS GOOD.

For a long time, it scared me. I liked my routines and the small world I existed in within the walls of Our Lady Hildegard. The sisters, the books, the garden out back, and of course, my piano.

But then, change found me. *Big* change. And though I spent so long being bewildered by that change, caught up in it like a rogue wave, and then so much effort *fighting* the next change, eventually change and I found a middle ground.

Or maybe I just fell in love.

Because that changes everything.

Whatever it is, change is no longer bewildering or scary to me. I also no longer look at it as a one-way door you can never go back through.

Life is fluid. Life keeps us on our toes.

So does trying to keep up with Lucile in the kitchen.

“Hot behind you!”

I gasp, flattening myself against the counter as she rushes behind me carrying a hot sheet pan of roasted veggies. She drops it on a trivet before whirling around and instantly goes to the stovetop, stirring one pot while adding ingredients to another. And then she's off again, picking up a knife and chopping.

She's literally in the middle of making *six* recipes at once. And here I am struggling with a single freaking pie.

Lucile looks up suddenly, as if feeling my eyes on her. She grins from ear to ear when she sees the horrified look on my face.

"Oh, it's not a competition, dear. Besides, I've had a *lot* more practice."

"Yeah, and I'm failing at one apple pie."

"Now, give yourself some credit. It's a tart, dear. That's a step above a simple double-crust pie."

"Oh, well, in *that* case..."

She laughs heartily. "Bring me up to that piano of yours, and we'll see who ends up floundering. I couldn't play Chopsticks to save my own arse."

I grin.

"Pass me the dill, would you, dear?"

And just like that, she's right back into it: a one-woman culinary machine.

"Behind you."

I shiver at the rough, rasping voice right in my ear.

"*Hot.*"

His hands grip my hips, pulling me against him and letting me feel the stirrings of his erection against my ass.

“Oh, good, you’re here.”

Oliver at least pulls his thickening dick away from me at the sound of Lucile’s voice. His hands, however, stay right where they are.

“I’m here Lucile, yes.”

“Did you finally figure out what you were going to drag out of the wine cellar for dinner?”

“I did. A ’96 Margaux, a ’78 Lafite, and a couple of bottles of the ’11 Petrus.”

Yeah, just like eighty grand in wine for one dinner.

Welcome to my insane reality.

Not, of course, that tonight is a typical dinner. This is a big one, and I know Oliver and I are both nervous, even if we show it differently. I get panicky and start trying to take on projects that are way beyond me—making apple tart, for example.

Meanwhile, he just gets kind of sulky and extra broody and growly. Which is outrageously attractive, I have to say.

I love that that part of him never really left.

The cure that Dr. Reed managed to synthesize that night with the help of the gene sequencing data from the recovered hard drive did its job. Oliver’s Tarkov-Thymos is effectively neutralized in his system.

In fact, he’s pushing money into restarting Nanosplice Biotech, under a new name, with Dr. Reed at the helm. He wasn’t wrong: there’s literally only one other person on the

planet alive today with Tarkov-Thymos—a young woman in Pakistan named Emaan—and Oliver obviously just gave her the cure.

There's hardly a profit to be made from a cure for a disease nobody's even heard of.

But it turns out that same gene sequencing technology can be applied to a *lot* of other stuff. And in Oliver's opinion—both of our opinions, actually—it's not about money, anyway.

We have more of it than we know what to do with. More than we could ever spend in a hundred lifetimes.

So, the new company will focus on curing the incurable for free, and reimagining patented cures for other ailments that currently cost a fortune and then making *those* free, too.

Like I said, it's not about the money.

And Big Pharma *hates* us.

We don't care.

“You'll need to help Wentworth with the—”

“The leaf inserts for the table, yes. I already did. Anything else, *dear?*”

Lucile glares at him.

“Bloody cheek,” she mutters, turning back to her stove.

I turn to wag a finger at him.

“Hey, be nice.”

“I'm always nice—”

I snort.

“To *you*,” he finishes, sliding a hand over my hip.

I blush, slapping it away as I glance at Lucile.



“Um, hello?”

“It’s your own damned fault. Stop being so fucking enticing.”

I roll my eyes, glancing down at my “enticing” outfit consisting of jean shorts, a baggy sweatshirt, and an apron, all covered with flour.

“Oh, does monsieur like my *sexy look*?” I purr in a downright terrible effort at a sultry French accent.

“Is it corny to say it’d look even sexier on my floor with you riding my—”

“I can only pretend I’m not listing *for so long*, thank you very much!” Lucile yelps from across the room.

*Sweet Jesus, take me now.*

I groan, hoping I could sink into the floor as my face turns magenta. Oliver just chuckles.

“Just seeing if you were eavesdropping, Lucile!”

“You can go and play Penthouse letters somewhere else,” she chides. “And get dressed! They’ll be arriving soon enough!”

I throw a glance at the time and wince.

*Crap.*

“Lucile, I…”

I gaze despondently at my sorry mess of tart crust and sloppy filling.

She grins at me. “Oh, leave it. You’re basically done. I’ll finish it.”

I rise up on my tiptoes to kiss Oliver softly. “I’m going to start getting ready. You coming up?”

“In a sec. I need to finish up some things down here with Wentworth.”

“Okay.” Then I’m scampering up the stairs to our room.

I’m excited. Our dinner guests tonight include Sister Carmen, who I haven’t seen in *forever*, Adrian Cross, his wife Celeste, and their teenaged twins, Ronan and Simone.

But the person that I think I’m the most excited to see—and to meet in person for the first time, though we’ve talked a bunch on the phone—is my half-sister, Naomi. Cora, my other half-sister, isn’t coming, nor have we really connected much since I first reached out. But, according to Naomi—and pretty much anyone else who knows her—I’m not missing out on a whole lot.

“A real asshole” is how her own sister described Cora to me.

Oh well.

When I first heard about my father’s death, I thought I’d be sadder than I was. I waited for the grief to hit me, and when it really, well, *didn’t*, I was worried that there was something seriously wrong with me.

That is, until it all sort of made sense.

My father was *never* the savior he made himself out to be. He didn’t swoop in to “finally” find me and carry me off to this world of glitz and glamour.

He used me.

He knew exactly where I was, and never *once* let me know he was even aware of me until he needed me to settle a debt.

That stings. A lot.

So, it's no surprise that learning of his passing didn't break my heart. I went twenty years without knowing him. Then had just two months living in a fantasy world he'd concocted around me.

And now he's gone. And I'm exploring the new family I've surrounded myself with—either by blood or friendship.

Family like Lucile, and Wentworth. Family like Naomi, and my uncle, who I'm slowly getting to know.

Family like Oliver.

In our quarters, I strip and take a quick shower. When I'm done, I towel off and then head into our walk-in dressing room and closet to figure out what the heck I'm wearing tonight.

I'm standing in front of the mirror holding up one gown and then another against me, when suddenly a huge figure materializes in the reflection.

I gasp when I notice him, and then grin as we lock eyes in the mirror.

“Need a hand?”

“I do, actually.” I bring one dress in front of me. “Red, or...” I swap it for the other. “Black?”

His brow furrows. “Hmm. What about...”

He reaches for both hangers, and promptly tosses them both away.

“What about neither?”

I simmer, blushing to be standing naked in front of the mirror with the large, gorgeous man that I love standing behind me—and over me, and basically all around me, given our size difference.

Which is *also* outrageously sexy to me.

I *love* that he's like a foot and a half and easily a hundred and forty pounds of muscle bigger than me. It's exciting and *just* scary enough when he takes me in his arms, or to bed, how big he is.

How big *all* of him is.

In the mirror in front of me, my eyes lock with his and start dancing.

"You're saying I should wear *this* to dinner? I don't know. Might cause a stir..."

He glowers darkly.

"It'll *cause a stir* when I start murdering people who look at you."

"Oh, but that might ruin dessert."

"Then perhaps this outfit is just for me."

I grin at him. "It's always just for you."

"How about right now?"

I gasp as he moves against me, his hands sliding over my skin and his thick erection digging into my ass.

"*Oliver...*"

"Yes?"

I whimper as one of his hands slides teasingly over my hip, delving down between my legs, so close to but not quite touching me where I want him to. Need him to.

"We...dinner..."

"Can fucking wait," he growls, yanking his shirt off.

I whimper as he tosses it aside and then drops his pants. Instantly, his fat cock springs free against my ass, pulsing hot against my skin and making me shudder as he presses tightly to me.

His finger teases up and down my inner thigh, the other hand lazily dragging up my ribs until another finger is tracing just shy of my nipple.

“*Please...*” I gasp.

“Please *what*, my love,” he rasps darkly into my ear.

“*Please touch me. Please—Oliver!*”

I moan as his fingers suddenly find where they should be—one hand pinching and rolling my nipple, the other one slipping between my legs. He drags it up my dripping wet pussy, teasing my clit before his fingers sink into me.

“*Oh God yes...*”

“Always so fucking wet for me,” he murmurs. “*Good girl.*”

I swear to God, one of these days I’m going to come just from him saying that against my earlobe.

Suddenly, he’s dropping down behind me, and I gasp as his tongue drags up the cleft of my ass.

“Do you remember what I told you once about backing against walls around me?”

I shiver.

“Yes...”

So that I’d *have something to hold the fuck onto* were his exact words, I believe.

“Better hold on to that mirror.”

I throb with heat, and I barely have time to bend over with both palms against the glass when I feel his hands spreading me open, and his mouth delve between my thighs.

“Oh *shit*, Oliver...”

His devious tongue works into my pussy from behind, fucking me as I claw at the mirror. He growls, grabbing my ass as he sucks on my clit and dances his tongue over it. My body quivers, and my legs shake as I lose myself against his mouth.

As always, he’s relentless, licking me from my clit to my ass and then back again. I cry out as my orgasm slams into me with his lips around my clit. But he doesn’t ease up at all. He just keeps devouring me as I roll from one orgasm to another.

His mouth drags back to my asshole, and I squeal in pleasure as his tongue pushes into my tight little puckered ring.

“*Fuck*, Oliver...oh *FUCK*...”

He spreads me open wide, burying his tongue in my ass as he reaches around to roll my clit under his thumb. It feels as if he’s everywhere at once, and the bliss that radiates through my body has me floating as I moan wildly and cling to the glass for dear life.

“Let me taste that cum one more time, Rose,” he groans into my thigh. “I want your juices running down my chin when I watch your little pussy swallow every inch of me. So be a good fucking girl and come on my fucking tongue.”

He devours my pussy, tonguing my clit and spanking my ass raw until suddenly, my body wrenches and writhes as I explode against his mouth.

Slowly, his tongue drags back over my lips. And my ass, making me whimper. And then up to the small of my back. He

keeps moving, letting his tongue and lips drag up every bump in my spine until he gets to the back of my neck.

I moan as he grabs my hair in one hand and my hip with the other, his teeth raking over the nape of my neck as my body melts for him.

But then suddenly, he's lifting me up, muscles bulging as he hooks his arms under the backs of my knees, spreading my legs lewdly wide open right in front of the mirror.

I flush, shivering with ecstasy and lust as I stare at the filthy way he has me displayed exactly how he wants me, my pussy wet, pink, and glistening as he positions me right above the throbbing head of his cock. Precum drips down his veined shaft as I start to shake with the anticipation of him.

"I want you to look right here in the mirror," he growls, slowly bringing me down so that his swollen head nestles between my pouty pink lips.

"I want you to watch yourself get fucked with every inch of this big cock like a good girl."

He pushes, letting the head glide over my clit, making me jolt and suck in a breath sharply. He eases his cock over my stomach, not penetrating me, but gliding his silky cock across my skin. He lowers me bit-by-bit until the head of his cock is almost against my sternum.

My eyes blaze at the sinfully erotic sight of this huge man holding my small body exactly how he wants, with his massive dick throbbing against my skin.

"That's how deep I am inside you when you come all over my cock," he growls into my ear.

It's so hot. It's so unbelievably, outrageously hot that I can literally feel—and see—myself getting even wetter for him.

Oliver groans, lifting me again until his swollen head slips between my lips to sink against my opening.

Our eyes lock in the mirror.

*“Fuck me,”* I choke breathlessly. “Baby, I need you to fuck me so—*oh fuck!*”

He lowers me down, and my eyes bulge at the obscene way my lips stretch around his thick head. I’ve made love to this man more times than I can count. But almost every single time, I’m still downright shocked that he can fit.

Oh, but he can.

Inch by inch, his gorgeous cock drives into me. His muscles ripple as he guides me lower and lower, until the air pushes from my lungs and his heavy balls press to my clit.

*“Fuck, that is so fucking sexy,”* he groans into my ear. “You look so fucking pretty with my big cock buried in your sweet little pussy.”

I gasp as he lifts me up, letting a full half of him ease out before he groans and pulls me back down.

*God* do I love this feeling—when he fucks me like this, making me feel like a toy for him. A little fuck-doll for him to ram his big cock into, over and over.

Months ago, I would have recoiled at that thought, and worried that there was something depraved and wrong with me.

But that was the old me.

The new me is literally fantasizing about this.

*“Fuck me,”* I choke as he starts to pump me up and down. “Fuck me like I’m your little fuck-toy.”



His teeth nip at my earlobe.

“Oh, but you *are* my fuck-toy, princess.”

I cry out as he starts to fuck me harder, pounding into me and bouncing me up and down every inch. My hand drops to my clit, rubbing it furiously as my eyes stare hungrily at the lewd sight in the mirror. I cup my breast, pinching my nipples as I twist my head, my mouth eagerly searching out his.

Our lips crush together, and I lose myself in him. I bounce on him over and over, feeling his massive cock plunge into me again and again as the waves begin to crash over me.

“*Oliver!*”

I come screaming his name into his mouth, and he’s right behind me. He sinks himself to the hilt, groaning into my mouth as he starts to pump and spill his cum into me. I pull away from his mouth, lust clouding my eyes as I stare at the way he pulses into me, his balls clenching and pumping.

The way my body writhes and shivers with pleasure as we float together—

Then I glance at the time.

“Oh my God, they’re going to be here any second!”

He chuckles at my sudden and breathless outburst. And I moan quietly as he slowly pulls me off him and sets me gently on the ground.

“You might want to shower again, Rose.”

“Why?”

“Because you look like you just got fucked silly.”

I blush fiercely, slapping his arm. Then he chuckles as he pulls me close, one hand on my hip, the other cupping my face

possessively.

*Perfectly* possessively.

“Want some company in that shower?”

“Will it mean we’re going to be late to our own party?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then yes.”

He grins as something savage rumbles in his chest, pulling me close in a tender way.

This is the exact point at which perfection lies: where the softness of him mixes with the monster. Or, at least, the aspects of the monster that I fell for.

That I crave.

His mouth lowers to mine, and I moan softly as his lips brush mine.

“I love you, Rose,” he murmurs.

“I love you too.”

We close the distance between us.

And yes...

We’re *scandalously* late to our own party.

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The world of the Kings and Villains will expand this Spring with a brand new series involving the Kildare and Drakos families.

Haven’t gotten enough of Oliver and Rose?

[Get their extra scene here](#), or type this link into your browser:

<http://BookHip.com/FSAVVTE>

This isn't an epilogue or continuation to *Prince of Hate*. But this extra hot "follow-up" story is guaranteed to keep the steam going.

## SAVAGE HEIR PREVIEW

Thank you so much for reading *Prince of Hate*! If you enjoyed the book, I'd be incredibly grateful if you could leave a review!

If this was your first book from me, I wanted to let you know that all of my books take place in the same "world". As in, characters from one book or series will often appear in other books or series. In saying that, if there were characters from *Prince of Hate* you were curious to read more about, you can find some of their stories right here:

Adrian Cross: [Dark Kingdom](#)

Noel Ransom: [Burned Cinder](#) & [Empire of Ash](#)

Kristoff Zima: [The Hunter King](#) & [The Hunted Queen](#)

Oren Frey: [Stalker of Mine](#)

You can read more about the Kashenko, Volkov, Tsavakov, and Reznikov Bratva families mentioned in this book in the [Bratva's Claim](#) and [Savage Heirs](#) series.

A brand new series involving Cillian Kildare, Ares Drakos, and others, will be releasing Spring 2023.

You can find more information and suggested reading orders on my website.

Scroll on for a sneak peek of *Savage Heir*, book 1 in the  
Savage Heirs Bratva Academy series.

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## Chapter 1



TENLEY

“You can’t actually be serious.”

My eyes slide from my hands, busy buttoning up the front of my raincoat, into the mirror where they meet Charlotte’s. I smile curiously.

“Of course I’m serious. All the sports programs here are *way* too competitive for me to have a prayer at getting into, and the math team doesn’t have its first meeting until halfway through the term.”

My roommate pales, shaking her head. “No, you need to find something else. Seriously. Look, I know this is all new to you, but I’m telling you—”

“Char, it’s just tutoring. I’ve done it a million times before.”

Okay, I’ve done it a million times before in public school, in North Carolina and then DC after we moved there. I’ve never done it at the single most exclusive, prestigious private preparatory school in the world.

But just the same... tutoring is tutoring, isn’t it? And apparently, even at *the* Oxford Hills Academy, which guides

the world's most elite, connected, and—let's be real—*rich* students get into whatever higher education best suits their perfect pedigrees, there are still ones who need a leg up.

And tutoring looks *amazing* on pre-college resumes.

“Tenley...” Charlotte's lips are thin, and the color has fully left her face as it shakes back and forth. “You can't tutor *him*. You can't go *near* him.”

My brow furrows as I turn with a smirk. “Charlotte, I helped with SAT prep in some of the most dangerous schools in DC.” I glance around at the stunningly gorgeous living area—complete with Tudor-style paned glass windows, curved, intricate ceiling beams, wood inlay shelves of books, and a fireplace that would fit right in at Hogwarts. “I mean, look where we are. I'm sure I'll be—”

“They call him ‘The Wolf’ for a reason, Tenley,” she hisses quietly.

I swallow. It's not the first time I've heard the nickname.

In the three days since I moved into the student housing with Charlotte, I've heard the moniker whispered like a curse, or maybe a prayer, throughout the common areas of campus.

Ilya Volkov: The Wolf of Oxford Hills.

I've looked him up online. I mean how do you *not* after a nickname like that. I've never even met him or seen him face-to-face. But one Google image search later and I fully understood why he's the Wolf.

Because when that man looks into a camera lens, it's like a predator ready to pounce on his prey.

Well, that and the fact that his last name is literally Russian for “wolf”, I guess. His last name is also as synonymous with

organized crime in Russia as “Capone” would be in the states. In fact, his uncle is *the* Yuri Volkov, head of the notoriously brutal and cold-blooded Volkov Bratva family.

My face flushes as I think back to the face of Ilya spread across the search engine page. Dark hair, green eyes, and the chiseled good looks and bone structure of an aristocratic model. But the whole visage is washed in a brooding darkness that you can’t help but shiver at.

Just like I do, right now, even thinking of it. But I steel myself and shake that shiver off. Ilya Volkov might be “The Wolf.” He might—allegedly—be heir apparent to one of the most dangerous, powerful, and wealthy crime families in the world. He might, bewilderingly, be on academic probation after some issues last year.

But I won’t let any of that affect me or throw me off. Because all of this is part of The Plan.

Okay, so The Plan has been slightly edited by the media and consulting team surrounding my father’s anticipated political moves. But it’s still mostly The Plan I’ve had in my head since I was twelve.

Graduate valedictorian, then Columbia for undergrad where I will, of course, graduate with honors. After that, it’s right to Harvard Law, and interning at the renowned Welsley and Kane who will make me a Junior Associate. From there, I’ll make moves to the even more prestigious Lancer, Stein, and Ramirez firm back in DC, where I’ll make partner within two years. After a few years there, I’ll climb the ladder into a judgeship for the District of Columbia. And by the time I’m forty, I’ll make the push to the final goal: Supreme Court Justice Tenley Chambers—the youngest Justice in history.

Lofty? Perhaps. Impossible? Not with The Plan, which is why I have it.

In the last year, though, The Plan has changed. Sort of. It's been "recolored," as Jill, my father's new PR chief, put it. Because The Plan now involves a lot more than me.

The Plan now involves my father possibly becoming the next Vice President of the United States.

Currently, my dad is the US Secretary of State. Which, I'm under zero illusions, is almost entirely why and how I'm at Oxford Hills. It's the power and prestige he wields, not the money. We were never struggling when I was growing up. My dad did well as a Naval officer and lawyer with the military courts.

But there's "doing well" for normal people, and then there's "doing well" for the kind of people whose kids go to Oxford Hills.

And Oxford Hills is in a class entirely its own.

The students here are the upper echelon—the elite of the world's elite. The sons and daughters of billionaire tycoons, oligarchs, and royalty—literal, real royalty. I'm from an upper-middle-class suburb and public school. The other students here are from actual castles, or houses with their own zip codes, and have never washed a single teaspoon.

But six months ago, my dad was approached by Senator George North. The New York Senator is highly speculated, by the entire political media spectrum, to be the next President of the United States. He's already gotten a thumbs-up from the soon to be exiting current POTUS, and his team has picked my father to be his potential running mate when he announces.



Six months ago, life got *very* complicated. Suddenly, public school and the burbs wasn't enough. Being a model student with the highest marks possible wasn't enough. No, I needed "elite status." I needed "pedigree."

I needed "a social life."

So, here I am: out of DC and across the ocean to the bucolic English countryside where Oxford Hills sits. Here, my image will be "perfected" by elite classes, elite friends, and an elite *boyfriend*.

My mouth tightens at the very thought of it.

Patrick North, Senator North's son, is also at Oxford Hills. Though, he's been here for the last three years, given that his father is a US Senator and billionaire investor. Granted, I'm not a political PR expert. But the idea of the soon-to-be-President's son dating the soon-to-be-Vice-President's daughter seems... gross to me. Jill and the PR team, however, thinks it's a slam-dunk for the polls. Senator North agrees, and my dad seems to just be along for the wild ride.

So now I have a new school, a new country, and a new fake boyfriend to pose for the cameras with.

But at least the new roommate is all sorts of awesome. Charlotte's like me. Which is to say, being here gives her imposter-syndrome to the max, too. Char's been at Oxford Hills for a year already. But like me, she doesn't *really* belong here.

A little over a year ago, Charlotte's mother, a very regular, normal schoolteacher from a London suburb, married the King—the actual, real King—of the small country of Luxlordia. That makes Charlotte an actual, real princess. Or, to a

“normal” person like me, it does. To other royalty, it makes her an imposter.

That’s basically how we became fast friends two months ago when we were notified we’d be roommates this term at Oxford Hills. A single phone call turned into almost nightly FaceTiming, and now we’re best friends. And all because of the joke that the only reason we’ve been put together as roommates is because we’re the “imposters.”

The faux princess and the presidential race prop.

“Tenley.”

Her voice snaps me out of my own head.

“You can’t—”

“Charlotte, I’ll be *fine*,” I smile. Even though inside, my stomach knots. My heart clenches along with my fingers into the palm of my hand. I’m trying to be brave. But I can’t help but feel like I’m about to walk right into the lion’s den.

Or The Wolf’s, as the case may be.

I glance outside through the elegant paned windows at the rain pouring down on the English countryside. I pull up the hood of my burgundy raincoat and turn back to the mirror. My blue eyes meet their reflection. I tuck an errant lock of red hair behind my ear, under the hood, and I take a breath.

Okay, I can do this. It’s all for The Plan. And Supreme Court Justice and Time Magazine Person of the Year Tenley Chambers is *not* afraid of the Big Bad Wolf.

I glance back at Charlotte, curled on the couch, and smile. “I’ll be back in an hour or so I guess.”

“Yeah, unless he *eats you*,” she mumbles with a worried frown. I roll my eyes, wave, and turn to head out the door into

the rain.

Ilya Volkov is *not* going to eat me.

Student housing at Oxford Hills is quaint, but moneyed. There aren't big buildings full of dorms with communal bathrooms or anything like at other private schools. Students are paired two to a "cottage"—whimsically beautiful Tudor-style houses arranged in quads with three others just like it, with a shared, gorgeously manicured and landscaped backyard area.

Each cottage has a downstairs kitchen—though there's a Great Hall dining area that serves three meals and two teas a day—a study library and living room. Upstairs, there are two bedrooms with private bathrooms, and a common area between them.

Outside, I tighten my hood against the downpour and trudge across campus. The housing address for Ilya that the student services office gave me simply says "Lordship Manor." I haven't explored much of campus since I moved in three days ago. But an online map had it situated on the far side of the stables—yes, there are stables—and past the archery range. Yes, there's an archery range.

My rain boots splash through puddles along the slate and cobblestone walkways that crisscross the grounds of Oxford Hills. There are only a few other people out in this weather, but they seem to ignore me even when I give a wave.

I'm quickly learning that the children of the world's elite aren't the friendliest bunch.

I pass the stables, smiling at the smell of hay and horses. The archery range is empty and gray in the downpour. I've got my head down to ward off the rain, so I don't notice the wall and the gate until I'm almost smacking into it.

I startle and step back. I glance up, and my eyes widen.

Past the ivy-covered stone wall and ornate iron gate, is a *stunning* old home. It looks like it belongs on the grounds of Versailles or something—a huge, beautiful and yet imposing stone manor, half-covered in ivy. Black-iron windows dot the facade, and the front door looks like it would withstand a siege from a rival kingdom.

I'm about to dig my phone out and figure out how close I am to Ilya's cottage when my eyes suddenly snap to the words carved into the stone wall next to the gate. My mouth falls open in shock when I read "Lordship Manor."

What. The. Fuck.

*This* is where Ilya Volkov lives? It's no cottage. It's a fucking castle. I shake my head in disbelief. But, this is it, alright. And palace or not, the student I'm supposed to tutor in order to bulk up my resume is in there.

This will be fine.

*Unless he eats you.*

I tremble as I push the gate open and step through. I fast-walk up the stone walkway to the enormous, black iron and old-wood door. There's no doorbell.

I frown. What the hell am I supposed to do, use a battering ram? Have my squire call up to the Lord of the realm?

I take a breath, haul my fist back, and pound. Then I pound again, and again. Finally, I hear the sound of a lock being drawn back. The door cracks and then swings open. I blink in surprise.

The girl is not who I expected. She's... stunning. Tall, leggy, blonde, and absolutely gorgeous. And here I am standing in

the pouring rain in a baggy red raincoat, hair stuck to my face, no makeup, looking like a shipwreck survivor.

The wrinkled-nose look of disdain she gives me seems to back that up.

“Who are you?” She sneers in a haughty, posh British accent. Her manicured brow arches with distaste.

“I—I’m the...”

I suddenly realize there’s a party going on behind her. The inside of the manor is even more gorgeous than the outside. And it’s full of students drinking, dancing, making out, smoking cigarettes—and something else by the smell of it—and roaring with laughter. Music thuds.

“Were you *invited*?” She sneers.

I frown. “No, I—I mean, I’m the—”

She suddenly smiles widely. “*Oh!* Oh, no, honey,” her smile thins. “We won’t need the maid service until tomorrow. And when you do come back, do make sure you come through the service entrance at the back, yeah?”

Her cold eyes pierce me as her lips thin. “Kay, *bye...*”

She starts to shut the door in my face. But my rain boot juts out to stop her. She looks at me like I’ve just peed on the royal jewels.

“Are you *fucking*—”

“I’m actually the tutor?” I smile weakly. Then I take a breath and compose myself. I stand a little taller. “I’m the tutor. I’m here for Ilya.”

She stares at me. But slowly, her lips curl in amusement.

“Ilya?” She says with a smirk.

“Uh, yes. Does he live here?”

She grins widely. “You’re sure you’re looking for Ilya. Ilya Volkov.”

Good grief.

“I’m sure,” I say tightly. “Can I—”

“Stay here, I’ll get him.” She starts to turn. But then she glances back at me and shakes her head. “You’re sure about this?”

“Pardon me?”

She chuckles as her eyes slide up and down over me, like she’s sizing me up. Her lips smirk.

“Oh, hon,” she shakes her head and gives me a faux-sympathetic look. “Just remember, you had the chance to run, and didn’t.”

She shuts the door. I stand there in the pouring rain, blinking and trying to figure out what the hell just happened.

The minutes tick by. After about five of them, I realize I’m being pranked, or hazed or something. Yeah, screw this. I can tutor anyone. But I don’t need to deal with this mean-girl shit.

As I start to turn to head back home, though, I hear the door creak. I roll my eyes, ready to give miss Ice Queen the finger. Slowly, I turn with the sneer on my lip as the door swings open.

And then my heart stops beating for a second.

Suddenly, I’m face-to-face with The Wolf himself.

The dark hair, the piercing green eyes. The dark, menacing look on his perfectly chiseled face. My eyes drop, and I blush.

He's also shirtless. Shirtless, and... built. And tattooed to hell and back. My face burns as my eyes drink in the broad, muscled shoulders, the lines of his photoshop-perfect chest and abs, and the grooves of his hips diving into the waist of his black jeans.

I slowly drag my eyes up to his stern but slightly amused face. And I tremble.

Ilya Volkov is stunning. And terrifying. And gorgeous. And dangerous looking. His hair is both tussled and perfect. Those almost supernatural green eyes pierce into my very soul. There's a smug smirk on his perfect lips, and what looks and smells like a spliff dangling from them.

He leans against the doorframe holding a crystal tumbler with what looks like whiskey or scotch in it. His cold, amused gaze sweeps over me.

I shiver under it.

"Well?" He growls—growls, literally. Like a... well, like a wolf.

I frown. "Well... what?"

His smirk deepens. "Well are we doing this outside in the rain or in my room?"

"I... uh, your room would be good?"

He chuckles darkly. I glance past him at the raging party going on.

"Look, if you're in the middle of something, I can always come back later—"

"I'm ready right now." He shrugs, his eyes never blinking or leaving mine. "We could go right there on the floor in the middle of it, if an audience is your thing."

I frown in confusion. “I’m sorry, do you know who I am?”

He shrugs. “I know what you want, and that works for me just fine.”

My frown deepens. “You know what I—” I shake my head. “I’m Tenley.”

“And I’ve got things to do, Tenley,” he grunts thinly. “So if it’s a shag you’re so desperate for, why don’t you turn around, lift that skirt, and say please.”

My mouth falls open, and I *stare* at him. “*Excuse me?!?*”

His lips grin; the spliff still dangling from them as smoke curls around his piercing green eyes.

“I said to be sure you said *please*—”

I don’t know what takes ahold of me. I just know that I am *not* putting up with frat-boy bullshit like this. I’ll take the being relocated to another fucking country. I’ll deal with the fake boyfriend crap. I’ll cater my perfect Plan to fit the new realities of my life. I’ll even deal with snobby rich brats talking down to me because I wasn’t born with a jeweled scepter up my ass.

But I will *not* put up with this shit.

Without really thinking it through, my hand darts out. I snatch the glass from his hands, haul back, and splash the contents of it right into his face.

I swear, the music behind him stops. The people behind him freeze and stare with horrified expressions. And it’s only then that I truly realize what I’ve just done.

I just threw a drink in the face of The Wolf—heir apparent to the most brutal mafia family in the world.



And yet, he says nothing. He doesn't even blink. His gorgeous face drips with scotch. The spliff in his lips dangles limp and soaked against his chin before he spits it out. His jaw grinds.

But suddenly, a fire sparks like molten green magic in his eyes. I gasp as he rapidly closes the short distance between us. His hand juts out, and I choke on my breath as he grabs the front of my raincoat at the neck in a fist. Fear spikes through me as he yanks me hard into him.

The glass drops from my fingers, landing in the wet grass next to the walkway. The hood falls back off my head. Rain pours down over the both of us in sheets as those eyes burn like green fire right into mine. His perfect lips pull back into an animal snarl, white teeth flashing in fury.

I'm petrified. I can't even scream, let alone try and break free and run for my very life. All I can do is shake as my wide eyes stare up into his.

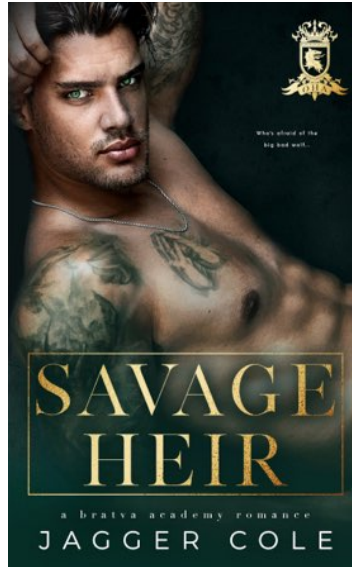
The seconds tick by as I wait for death. Until finally, his mouth opens.

*“Run away, little red,”* he snarls thickly and quietly. His grip tightens, almost choking me with the neck of my coat. *“Run away, before I eat you up.”*

He shoves me back and lets go. I don't think. I don't ask what he means. The fight or flight internal war is over in a quarter second: flight wins.

I turn, and I *run* as fast as I can from the big, bad Wolf of Oxford Hills.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jagger Cole

A reader first and foremost, Jagger Cole cut his romance writing teeth penning various steamy fan-fiction stories years ago. After deciding to hang up his writing boots, Jagger worked in advertising pretending to be Don Draper. It worked enough to convince a woman way out of his league to marry him, though, which is a total win.

Now, Dad to two little princesses and King to a Queen, Jagger is thrilled to be back at the keyboard.

When not writing or reading romance books, he can be found woodworking, enjoying good whiskey, and grilling outside - rain or shine.

You can find all of his books at

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