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GALLAGHER
CRIME FAMILY
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RUTHLESS CROWN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS
S.R. WATSON & RYAN STACKS

Ruthless Crown: An Arranged Marriage Dark Mafia Romance (The Gallagher Crime Family Book 1)

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Editor: Jenny Sims of Editing4Indies

Cover Designer: Sommer Stein of Perfect Pear Creative Covers

Model: Ryan Stacks

Photographer: Jean Maureen Woodfin

CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[SNEAK PEEK ~ Phoenix Rising: Issue#1](#)

[Ruthless Crown Playlist](#)

[Other Books by S.R. Watson & Ryan Stacks](#)

[About S.R. Watson](#)

[About Ryan Stacks](#)

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PROLOGUE
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Lennon

G unshots ring out in the alley below. My hackles rise with dread, my intuition laced with guilt. I never should have agreed to separate. The middle-aged prostitute before me doesn't flinch, seemingly unfazed by the shots fired as this is likely her constant reality. We came here to get information on the decline of business. Some of our file soldiers run a prostitution racket and are allowed to operate under the contingency that a hefty percentage be given to my father, the Clan Chief. Although not in the best of neighborhoods, this hotel was afforded to them to get the prostitutes off the streets and somewhere more secure for their *transactions*. My father suspects that the money he has received lately doesn't reflect the actual transactions. Before he brought down the wrath on these soldiers, he wanted to validate how business has been going with one of the top-producing prostitutes. I was likely more successful with this task because these working ladies had tripped over themselves to tell me how handsome they thought I was. It's not the first time I've capitalized on my looks. I'm often underestimated for it, but now I must get to my father. I peer quickly out of the window for a fire escape before backtracking to sprint out the door when I don't see one. I take the steps at the end of the hall, two at a time, as I descend from the fifth floor. Each step is heavier than the last as time works against me. I can't seem to get there fast enough. When I'm finally able to burst through the back door and into the alley, the scene before me is just as I predicted and feared. My father lies propped up against the dumpster. He guards his abdomen with his right arm as blood pools beneath him.

“Fuck!” I yell in despair. I kneel next to him to assess the damage. I raise his blood-soaked shirt and count several bullet entry points. “We have to get you to a hospital,” I say, trying to lift him, but he swats my hand away.

“There isn’t much time, Lennon. I’m not going to survive this,” he sputters as he chokes on the blood now seeping from his mouth, his Irish accent thick. “It’s up to you now. Take care of yer sister and your brothers. Rise to the top, son, and make them all pay.”

“No. I don’t accept this. We have to get you—”

“Please,” he says, and I know I don’t have much time before I lose him forever.

“Who did this? Was it one of our soldiers? Tell me!”

“No, mac. Last thing I want is for ye to seek revenge in a blind rage. This is what they want. The shooter could have aimed for a head shot. He left me coherent enough to tell ye who did this so ye can fall into their trap.” He grabs me by the sleeve. “It’s not who ye think. This was a move about power. It’s time to get yeer brothers involved and make sure they don’t get it. Be methodical and strategic, never emotional and predictable.”

So many thoughts and questions swarm my mind as the first tear runs down my cheek. I turn away, refusing to let my father see me weak. I never cry. Not since the day I took my first life at twelve. Even faced with the inevitability of his death, my father still looks out for his family. His final words rock me to my core.

“They killed your mother too. Don’t let them ...”

He never gets to finish that sentence. His body slumps, and his stare goes blank. He’s gone.

CHAPTER ONE

Lennon

I stare blankly at the dried blood crusted around my nail beds— the essence of life exsanguinated around each of my fingers. My latest target was someone's husband, someone's father, yet remorse eludes me. I feel nothing; the numbness won't allow it. My soul has a fiery fate of much more detriment than the life I just ended. Until then, my sins of darkness will reign unapologetically. This was who I was groomed to be. With the wall at my back, I push to my feet from the floor. I can't let midnight propel me into another day without serving my penance, my palate cleanser to reset my body count. I walk over to my desk and flip through the pages of a worn leather journal until I find a blank page. Grabbing the pen lying next to it, I add a diagonal tally to mark off another group of five. The black ink is a constant reminder that I'm not a good man. With the transition into my new rank as the Clan Chief, I'm not expected to handle these killings myself, but it is important for me to make a statement— a loud one. I'm just as ruthless as my father, so don't cross me. I won't ask or demand anyone's respect. I will just take it.

I TAKE THE STAIRS DOWN TO THE BASEMENT OF MY NEW Staten Island home, where my right-hand man, Oisín, awaits. He was once my father's before I moved up in rank. Although he disagrees with my choice, he understands its purpose. As a longtime adviser for our clan and now doubling as the head of my security detail and right-hand, he refuses to leave me while I'm at my most vulnerable. He isn't able to bring himself to

engage in the actual act, but just knowing he's present to oversee my penance is a debt I could never repay.

THIS RITUAL PLAYS OUT THE SAME AS IT HAS SINCE I'VE embraced this new role. Oisín closes the door behind me as I walk toward Apollo, the man he hired to do this unorthodox job. He never speaks ... formalities never exchanged. He towers over my five-foot-ten stance by at least five inches. I settle into my custom-built chair, allowing my arms and legs to be secured by the leather straps before the chair is tilted at a forty-five-degree angle. I close my eyes before the cloth covers my face. I let my mind escape to the job I have set up for tomorrow— one that doesn't involve murder. Tomorrow, I will take ownership of a prisoner. This house was acquired just for her, and the staff have been vetted. I have to dig deep for a penance worthy of such treachery, but I won't stop until I break her. The lives of my family depend on it.

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CHAPTER TWO
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Aurora

I got too comfortable—careless. I walked right behind the dubious black van without a single thought for my safety, I realize, as I struggle against the brut force of the man covering my mouth. The doors flew open, and I was yanked into the empty interior faster than I could let out a single yell. A bigger man, with a Borat-like mustache, was waiting to assist. He attempted to tie my feet, but thus far it has been futile since I haven't stopped kicking.

“Stop kicking, bitch,” warns the guy I've named Borat. “He told us not to harm you, but I'm sure I could make a case on why it was necessary.”

This gets my attention. Who is *he*? Is this my father's doing? Did he somehow find out I've been sneaking out, and all of this is just to scare me? Why else wouldn't these men wear masks? My father is the boss of all bosses, and I'm his princess. Nobody would dare cross the Italian Mafia unless they had a death wish. I stop squirming, and the second guy switches places with Borat so that he can hold me with a firmer grip. He's short and stocky and reminds me of Danny DeVito, just a bit taller. Danny quickly zip ties my feet and then my arms behind my back. He's definitely the calmer of the two. The van must be on the highway now because the frequent stops have ended, and our speed has increased. Borat cautiously removes his hand from my mouth, but he levels me with a stare. Even with the dim lighting, I take it for what it is — a warning.

“This is extreme, even for my father,” I say, shaking my head. “I don’t understand why I have to be hidden from the world. I didn’t sign up for this life. He didn’t want to give me any freedom, so I took it. That doesn’t mean I’m going to forget my one obligation to the family.”

Danny helps lower me to the van’s floor to sit but doesn’t acknowledge my venting. Borat snickers, but he doesn’t respond either. I can’t make out much of their distinctive features since there are no visible windows, and something blocks the view to the front where the driver is. They sound Scottish ... or maybe it’s an Irish accent. That would be more plausible since I’ve heard a few of the Irish men who’ve come to meet with my father. I don’t think we’ve ever had a Scot in the house. I was only able to get a glance at them when the back doors swung open and they grabbed me. I’m guessing these two are my father’s associates. I don’t know much about the inner workings of Mafia business, but I know that the soldiers are lower level—picciotti. These men can’t be soldiers or made men because they aren’t Italian. As the ride stretches on, doubt begins to seep in, but I push it away. This is my father we’re talking about. This wouldn’t be just a quick scare and then a drop-off back to my proverbial ivory tower prison. No, he’d want to make this abduction as realistic as possible. He wants me to be terrified and regretful for my decision to sneak away, but I’m stubborn. For fuck’s sake, I’m grown! I refuse to give him my fear. I’ve endured far worse. I am my father’s daughter, so breaking me won’t be easy.

I’ve been sneaking away for the past six months with the aid of one of our housemaids, Amerie, who’s only a year older than I. Her mother has been with our family for the past ten years, but she’s only been working alongside her for the past four years. She covers for me while I’m gone, ensuring no other staff enters my space on the third floor while I’m out. It’s not like I’m meeting up with anyone or disclosing my identity. I just like to indulge in a few hours of freedom to do normal people stuff. I’m always careful. Amerie disagrees with my father’s overbearing ways, but she knows better than to speak up. More than anything, she’s been a great friend since I’m not allowed to have any. Hell, nobody even knows I exist outside

of our house staff and the other Italian Mafia famiglie. I'm betrothed to one of their sons, although I only met him a year ago. Both times, he was a stone-cold, emotionless dick. He embraces everything our families have planned for us, and I don't. I've often shared with Amerie how I wish I could just run away and change my last name. The only thing that has stopped me is knowing how much it would break my mother's heart. She doesn't want this life for me either, but she has no say. My four brothers don't have a choice either, but at least they get to be out in the world and live their lives.

The van finally slows, and Borat and Danny get to their feet. I didn't even notice when they took a seat next to me. My perceived cooperation was rewarded with them leaving me alone for the ride. I've been inside my head, lost in thought. I tend to do this a lot. I estimate the ride has been about an hour, long enough to get out of New York City. Now the games begin. What lessons does my father have in store for me? Won't his men be disappointed when I don't give them the reaction they're anticipating? I'm not going to even pretend I'm scared. This is horseshit, as Amerie would say. I'll be twenty-one in two months—the day I'm to be married. I will be transferred from one prison to that of my future husband's, so this is nothing. Nothing is worse than the thought of being a prisoner forever.

Once the van comes to a complete stop, Danny throws some sort of sack over my head just as Borat yanks me to my feet. He drags me out of the van, then I'm airborne and thrown over his shoulder. I try to count his steps but lose count when I hear a new voice.

“Bring her to the office and return to your posts. I'll let him know she has arrived.”

Is my father here? What is the worst that can happen? What will he do to me? So many questions fire rapidly through my mind. I don't have to ponder for long, though. I'm haphazardly tossed onto a leather sofa as the sack is snatched from my head. It takes my eyes a few seconds to adjust. If it were any other situation, I'd admire the black matte walls and recessed lighting that illuminate the room in soft, gold tones.

Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves offer the same gold lighting. No expense was spared on this modern piece of art they're calling an office.

A door slams in the near distance, interrupting my perusing. The most ruggedly beautiful man I've ever had a chance to lay my eyes on walks right up to me. The tall, aristocratic-looking man standing guard at the door up to this point joins him. He reminds me of the English butler, Mr. Carson, from *Downton Abbey*. He rights me on the sofa before turning to the living god standing before me.

"Do you wish for me to remove these, sir?" Mr. Carson questions with a British formality, gesturing toward my zip ties.

"Is that even a real question?" I retort. "How long is this charade going to play out?"

"Excuse me?" The handsome devil quirks an eyebrow.

"Look. My father is a very powerful man, but even so, I'm impressed at his commitment to take things this far. I'm not scared ... I'm bored. If the point of this was to show me the danger I was putting myself in, then I got it. I won't sneak away again, but he and I need to talk. He has to be willing to compromise. I'm not marrying Niccolò."

"Sorry to enlighten you, principessa. I'm not one of your father's associates, and this is not some orchestrated plot to teach you a lesson," he says, his face hardened.

"So you're ...?"

"Your captor ... your owner," he finishes smugly.

I nearly laugh out loud because he can't be serious. Nobody is this stupid. My father would kill him personally with his bare hands. "Okay, Mr. Captor. I'll play along since you insist on keeping this lesson going. Why am I here? What is it that you want from me?"

He lowers his face to mine and levels me with an ice-cold stare—his breath a caress against my face and his eyes are an abyss of arctic blue. "Your virginity."

My words falter as he stands and heads toward the door from which he came. “Bring her to her room,” he orders to the man who questioned whether to remove my restraints. I don’t swallow the lump in my throat until my beautiful “*captor*” is out of sight. Could this actually be real? Did I get this horribly wrong? I still want to believe that this is nothing more than an elaborate hoax, but my gut is starting to doubt again.

The sack from before is placed back over my head. My fight or flight kicks in and I know that I need to take this abduction seriously just in case. “I’m not going any-fucking-where with you,” I warn as I start struggling against his hold. I feel a sharp jab in my thigh followed by the burn of something being injected. I want to keep fighting, but as each second goes by, I can feel my legs weaken and then my entire body. I collapse into his arms and let the heaviness of my eyes fade to black.



I WAKE TO THE SOUND OF UNBOLTING LOCKS IN THE NEAR distance. I don’t know how long I’ve been out but quickly realize I soiled myself. The wetness adds to my growing suspicion that this may not be fake. I’m lying on a gray stone floor, the black matte walls a continuation in this room. Mere inches from me is the most modern bed I’ve ever seen, yet I’m still bound in zip ties and was left on the floor to recover from whatever Mr. Carson injected me with.

The handsome devil, who has laid claim to my virginity, walks in and looks around the room before casting those haunting blues down at me.

“Still restrained, I see,” he states. “I guess you’re still holding that defiance of yours.”

“Go to hell,” I attempt to spit, but it’s mostly frothy. “I’m so thirsty, and I’m likely dehydrated.”

“I’m already living it, A mhuirnín.”

He pulls a knife from his pocket, and it’s enough to distract me from his muscled thighs. I can see every chiseled inch of

his physique through his black dress pants and collared, button-down black shirt. Nobody would ever mistake this guy for a low-level soldier. His accent isn't as prominent as in the men from the van, but it's there. That word he just used— he has to be Irish too. I flinch as he nears me with the blade, but he only cuts away the zip ties. I rub my sore wrists once they're free.

“Stand,” he orders.

“I'm not Mr. Carson,” I refuse him. “I don't want to.” Heat creeps up my neck from embarrassment. Can he smell the urine on me?

“Who the hell is Mr. Carson? You know what, I don't care. That wasn't a request. Stand now, or you won't like the consequences. Your choice.”

“My choice is not to stand. Not with you in here.”

I barely have the words out of my mouth before I'm yanked to my feet. I feel a gush at that moment, and I know that pee is not my only wetness issue. The familiar metallic, copper-like smell assaults my nose, and I know he has to smell it too. Once he has me on my feet, he steps back—his face hardened again. He's visually pissed.

“You still think this is a game and your father is behind this? I'm going to prove once and for all that he is not,” he says ominously, his voice slightly more elevated. “You had one thing right, though.”

“What is that?” I hear the shakiness in my voice. I somehow know that I only have minutes before my whole world gets flipped on its head. If this is not some fucked-up hoax, I don't want to think about the alternative.

“You're not going to marry Niccolò. I'm going to see to it.”

“Even you have to know how insane that sounds,” I retort, my hackles up.

“When it comes to you, what lengths has your father gone to groom you to be married besides holding you captive long before now?”

“Why does it matter?”

“Because I’m offering you the proof you need to finally get rid of the ridiculous notion that I’m in cahoots with him?”

I twirl my fingers together, pondering if I should be truthful. I’m afraid not to answer, I’m scared of the truth, but I’m more afraid of what he will do with these answers. Finally, I opt to call his bluff and give him the information he seeks. If he truly is a threat to me and my family, then he likely already knows what I’m about to reveal anyway.

“I’m not allowed to cut my hair,” I start as I touch my tightly wound bun bobby pinned in place. “I’m not allowed to be seen out in public or have social media accounts, I’m not allowed to have a relationship, and I’m not allowed to have sex. My purity is my value to my family since I’m not allowed to be a part of the businesses. Are you planning to rape me? Is that it?”

“No,” he says gruffly. “I won’t take your virginity. I won’t take away *that* choice. It will be yours to make. Now strip!”

I take a generous step back. This beautiful nutcase is delusional if he thinks I would ever give him my virginity without force. I can feel the blood still pooling down my pantsuit leg. The flow is a mere trickle, but enough to be evident if I do as he commands. I try a different approach rather than outright rebellion or refusal. “I can’t,” I admit, barely above a whisper.

“You can and you will,” he insists. “I don’t care that you’re soaked in piss or on your menstrual cycle. Undress now, or I will do it myself. Choices, remember?”

“That’s not a choice, moron, if the result is the same.”

“Yet the choice still remains. My removal will be nothing short of ripping those threads from your body.”

I look for any break in his stoic glare—any sign that this is a test. I get nothing. I don’t want his hands anywhere near me, so I do the unthinkable. *I strip.*

CHAPTER THREE

Lennon

I meant it when I said she would choose whether to give me her virginity. It just makes breaking her that much more fun. I give all my adversaries choices in most instances, even though they may not like those options. And that's exactly what she is— an adversary, a necessary job. I put her at about five foot four with a petite frame, easily broken without much effort. Yet she has the mouth and the courage of someone sheltered. She foolishly thinks her father can protect her from all evil in the world because of who he is. He never prepared her for a man like me, and it's unfortunate. Much like my sister, Aisling. I could smell her menses on her as soon as I approached her restrained body, so I knew I would have even more resistance to get her to do as I command. She slowly removes the plain, navy blue pantsuit. Tears stream down her olive-colored cheeks, the green and brown flecks of her alluring hazel eyes are rimmed with redness. I watch intently as she removes her last article of clothing— her cotton white virginal underwear. My cock strains against my pants, and I'm annoyed. It's been a moment since a woman has been able to awaken my desires. Arousal, of course. The desire to break my number one rule— no!

She balls her stained panties into her small fists as if the combination of dried and fresh blood coating her inner thighs and legs aren't visible. "Undo that hair thing," I order.

She does without hesitation, and as expected, she shields her now naked body from me. Her brunette hair falls like a curtain toward her knees.

“This is the extent to which I’m allowed to cut it,” she admits nervously. “Never shorter than knee length.”

“An extent to which we’re about to remedy right now.”

“Surely you can’t mean...”

“I surely do,” I confirm.

I remove the Army Swiss knife that I used to cut her restraints from my pocket. “Would you like to do the honors or should I?”

“I fucking hate you!” she screams as the tears flow harder.

“Such language for a princess,” I taunt. “Good thing that’s irrelevant.” She looks everywhere but at me.

“Give me the knife, you fucking prick,” she yells between sniffles.

“Fair warning,” I say as I close the distance. “Don’t try anything stupid, or I will be forced to hurt you.”

“Choices, right?” She’s finally starting to understand. Her tears of sadness have morphed into anger—good!

Her colorful language is entertaining. I would never let anyone speak to me as she has, but oddly, it’s refreshing to have someone who doesn’t simply do everything I say. She will have to anyway, but the verbal lashes increases the blood flow to my cock—it’s exhilarating.

She holds her hair taunt within her grasp as she begins to cut her hair just above her generous breast ... I’m guessing a full C cup. Her father did right to hide her away from men like me. Her grip tightens around the small knife once she’s done cutting, her knuckles redden.

“Do you really want this day to end differently than I originally intended?” I remind her. “Give me the knife.”

“I can’t wait until my father makes you pay for this little stunt,” she yells, passing me the knife blade first.

“You wanted proof that I didn’t abduct you on your father’s order, so I gave it to you. So far, you’ve been naked in front of a man who’s not your husband, and you cut your

precious hair that he's been so intent on you growing. Tell me now. If this was some sort of twisted lesson, would he have gone this far? Or do you need more proof, principessa?" I grab the knife by the handle and fold it close.

"You win, okay. I believe you. You've had your revenge against my father or whatever this is, so can you let me go now?" She bends to pick up her clothes lying in a pile in front of her.

"Leave it. This is far from over. You belong to me, and I have so many more of your firsts to conquer."

"You said I had a choice— that you wouldn't rape me. I will never give you something so valuable to my family. So how long before you give up this impossible feat and let me go?"

I bend toward her, low enough to run my index finger through the fresh blood dripping down her thighs. It thickly coats my finger as I rise again slowly, ensuring we never break eye contact. She tenses as I smear the blood across her cheeks, just beneath the eyes, before licking the remnants from my fingertip. Her face scrunches in disgust, yet her appallment doesn't faze me.

A smile spreads across my lips. "Apparently, you don't understand the definition of ownership, so let me put this simply. I own every aspect of you, and that isn't a *choice* for you to make. However, your freedom is highly contingent on your ability to see things as I see them. The harder you rebel, the more fun I will have breaking you. And if you don't believe anything else, do believe this — I *will* break you in the end, A mhuirnín."

CHAPTER FOUR

Aurora

I don't know what to make of what just transpired. Rage and disgust battle within me, leaving zero room for fear. Blood circles around the shower drain, reminding me of the humiliation I just had to endure. I can't believe he marked my face like war paint with my own blood. Not to mention he tasted it. How sick do you have to be to do something like that? I refuse to let him mind fuck me. After scrubbing my face, I lean my head back under the rain showerhead and let the stream run down my now butchered hair. My tears mix with the rivulets of slightly hot water as I try to think of a way out of this. I will not allow myself to be a victim. Whatever issues that jackass has with my father are not my problem. I'm a Valentini, and he'll have to learn the hard way what that name means. If I can find a way to get in touch with my father and disrupt whatever plans this nutcase has for my family, maybe I can earn some worthiness aside from my virginity. But how? I hear the doorknob to the bathroom turn, and I immediately cover my naked body with my arms and hands, already missing my hair to hide myself.

A young woman, who appears to be close to my age, walks in with her head tilted down. She's holding a stack of towels and toiletries. At first glance, she looks ordinary. A single ginger braid wraps around her shoulder and hangs to her waist. She's wearing a plain black dress with a white collar that looks to be at least two sizes too big. It resembles a maid uniform. What century are we in? Our house staff doesn't wear such cliché uniforms. They wear gray-colored scrubs, which I'm sure is more comfortable.

“I’ve brought you some towels, ma’am. Mr. Doyle has also sent other personal items for you. I left them on the bed,” she informs.

“Wait!” I exclaim, before lowering my voice. She seems harmless enough. Maybe she could be my way out of this place. “Who is Mr. Doyle?”

She finally looks up at me. Her greenish eyes and freckles are stunning. What is she doing here with my self-proclaimed captor? She’s clearly Irish too. Could she be working for the Irish Mafia? Is my captor part of the Irish mob? They’re supposed to have an allegiance with our family. I heard my father mention it to my brothers over dinner once. None of this makes sense.

“Mr. Dolye is the house manager. You will find a change of underwear in the dresser drawers,” she answers, quickly changing the subject. I had stopped listening for a moment.

“Why am I here?” I ask, hoping to get more insight other than serving up my virginity.

“I don’t know ma’am. I only work for Mr. Gallagher. The house staff are not involved in his personal affairs.” The name confirms he’s Irish.

“You don’t have to call me ma’am. My name is Aurora. What’s yours?”

“Fiona,” she supplies. “I really must get going, Ms. Aurora,” she insists, surely to avoid any additional questioning.

She pats the towels as she sets them on the sink, and for the first time, I notice the pack of menstrual pads on top. She backs away with a small smile. I don’t try to stop her. So Mr. Captor ... now known as Mr. Gallagher has shared with his house staff that I’m bleeding. *How lovely*. What else has he shared? I don’t buy into the formalities. She knows more than she’s telling. Otherwise, how does he explain all the locks on the other side of the bedroom door? They have to know that I’m being held here against my will at the very least.

I step outside the shower to grab the body wash and shampoo that Fiona brought in. It's better than the plain water I was content with just rinsing with. I'm not distracted by the sweet floral notes that permeate the air or this posh, all-black bathroom. I hope this is not Mr. Gallagher's attempt to groom me for what's to come. My legs aren't just going to fall open because he instructed his staff to accommodate me with underwear, pads, and freaking toiletries. I shower and then place the pad between my legs before I finish drying off to keep from dripping blood on the floor. I peep out the bathroom door to ensure the bedroom is clear before I head in there to search through the drawers. I'm astounded by all the sexy panty and bra sets, silk pajamas, robes, and nightgowns— not a single cotton garment to be found ... only luxury and elegance. And holy fuck, it is all in my size. Either these belonged to someone else before me who coincidentally is the same size, or this was purposely put here for me. *Planned*. This is both disturbing and creepy. I tamp down the fear trying to possess my anger. I can't succumb to it. I have to remain brave and find a way out of this nightmare.

I find the most basic garments from the provided selection — lacy Brazilian-cut panties and a matching bra. I've never owned anything so sexy and grown-up. I throw one of the silk knee-length night gowns over it. I walk over to the bed to see what else was left for me. In the pile, I find a couple of bottled waters, two packs of ibuprofen, and a brush. I place it all on the nightstand and climb into the enormous orange velvet platform bed. Similar to my captor's office and the en suite bathroom, this room is like a piece of art. Black matte with soft gold lighting extends to this room and is complemented with statement decor pieces. I'm sensing a theme here. It's a beautiful prison — much more luxurious than the traditional one I have at home. Exorbitant wealth appears to be the theme of this home, and I've only seen three rooms thus far.

I hear the bolts start to unlock again on the other side of the door. I tense, preparing myself for a fight, but it's only Fiona again. She's carrying a tray of food. "Sorry to disturb you again ma'am ... I mean, Ms. Aurora. I've been asked to bring you dinner."

“You know that I’m being held here against my will?” I retort. “Can you help me? I don’t want food. I want to go home.”

“I can’t help you, so please don’t ask that of me again,” she says, her posture stiffening. She sets the tray on the corner of the bed. “Don’t ask any of the house staff either. Their loyalty is with Mr. Gallagher, and it will only cause problems for you. If you bring it up again, I’ll be forced to report it.”

She backs away before turning to leave. There is no smile on her way out this time. The familiar locks re-engage. She said “*their loyalty*” and not “*our*.” She also said that if I bring it up again, she would be forced to report it. Does that mean she will keep tonight’s request between us? Can she be the crack that I need? I was too direct. Of course she wouldn’t go against her employer for some stranger she just met. I don’t know how long I have before my captor makes his move, but I need to build a rapport with her and fast.

My stomach growls at the sight of the food at the end of the bed—lasagna, garlic bread, and salad. Was this made just for me because I’m Italian? I get out of bed long enough to place it on the floor. I refuse to eat any of it no matter how hungry I am. I’ve already been rendered unconscious once by Mr. Carson. I won’t take that chance again. I won’t give my captor a chance to come in and take my virginity. I don’t trust that he wouldn’t just because he said he won’t. He took me after all. I push back toward the headboard. If he comes for me, I’ll be ready. There will be no sleep tonight. I will not be prey waiting to be slaughtered. He has severely underestimated what I’m capable of. They all have. If I have to save myself, then I will fight.

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CHAPTER FIVE
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Lennon

Earlier tonight, I added another tally to my body count. It's been a couple of weeks since my father was killed, yet I can't afford to pause or grieve. The soldiers skimming from my father with the prostitutes paid with their life. Now I need to refocus on exacting vengeance on those responsible for his death. My father's dying words were that this was about power and not to let them get it. Those words have played in my mind on an endless loop. There are five Italian Mafia families in New York alone, Cosa Nostra. They have a few additional families scattered throughout Boston and Chicago, but they are not of much significance. The most powerful reside here in New York and who our clan have pledged our allegiance to. The Italians also have an allegiance with the only other three Irish Mafia clans in the US, but they're of no relation to us. The Italians already have established power. Our associated numbers make us and the Italians a threat to the Russians. Are the Bratva behind my father's murder? Is the plan to decimate the Italian's numbers to weaken their foothold?

I'm still rationalizing when my brother Kai slides into the booth across from me. I asked him to meet me here because it's time. This Irish pub is owned by our family and is the one place I can expect complete privacy. The booths surrounding this one are empty as instructed, so no need to go up to our more private area. Chatter and jovial laughter filter throughout the pub as the lads enjoy the night out, oblivious to the meeting between my brother and me. The smell of bangers and

mash permeates from a table nearby, but I didn't come here to eat. It's outside of my dietary restrictions, anyway.

"Evening, brother," Kai says, interrupting my reverie. "It's been a couple of weeks since we've last spoken. I'm guessing you're ready to tell me what really happened the night Dad died."

He's straight and to the point. I knew he didn't believe the story I concocted for our siblings and clan. That night, there was a robbery at a convenient store not too far from where we were. I told them that our father was just at the wrong place at the wrong time—that he was shot and killed in the store along with the clerk. Because the perpetrator was caught quickly and killed behind bars, there was no expectation for us to seek vengeance. This lie was the only way to honor my father's request not to go about this in a blind rage. I gave my family time to grieve while I thought about how to be as strategic and methodical as possible. I've already implemented the first steps of this unannounced war—even with our opponents unknown.

"If you knew I was lying, why didn't you say anything?" I question.

"I knew you had your reasons. The media didn't report any additional casualties from that robbery. You're the Clan Chief now and have some huge shoes to fill. This conversation was inevitable, so I was willing to wait."

I watch his fists clench as I share the sordid details of that night and what our father made me promise. "I haven't figured out who he was referring to," I admit. "It could be the Italians, the Russians, or even the other Irish Clan. Fuck, it can be some of our own clan. He said it's not who I think. I don't know what to believe. I can think of motives for every single one of those motherfuckers."

"So until we know, they're all the enemy," he surmises.

"Exactly!" I signal the server to bring us both a pint of Guinness.

He bangs his fist on the table. I don't question my brother's loyalty, but I do question his readiness for all of this. Like the Italians, we have a hierarchy of rank within our clan, but unlike them, we don't have the same structure or expectations. Two weeks ago, I moved up in rank to chief, which is equivalent to an Italian boss or don. Kai move up to the Clan Captain, similar to their underboss. Before now, my siblings were given minimum expectations in their roles other than to know what the individual roles of our clan were. Kai and I entered the military at the age of eighteen and progressed through special forces. This path was meant for all of my brothers, but in the end, our father decided not to force them to enlist. In addition to my military training and my added Krav Maga training, I have been groomed since the age of twelve to take over one day. I just never thought that day would come so soon. Our twin brothers, Flynn and Fergus, have been allowed to live a regular life above ground whereas Kai has contributed to our businesses without actually being on the dirtier side of the underworld. Aisling has been sheltered much like Aurora, and Callum has been allowed to focus on college. Our father relied on other Irish made men and his adviser to allow our family to have autonomy over their own lives as long as he could. Shite has to change now, and I know Kai realizes this too. We can't trust anyone that's not our immediate family.

"Have you spoken to Fergus, Flynn, or Callum?" Kai inquires.

"No. Not until we figure out our next move." I wait until the server places our pints in front of us and walks off before I continue. "This is way bigger than you think, Kai. Whoever was behind this hit is responsible for Mom's death too." I was almost ten years old when my father sat me down and told me our mother had died in a car crash. Kai was almost nine. That was eighteen years ago, but we're the only two of our siblings who were old enough to really remember her and our brief life in Dublin before we moved here to the US.

"Goddammit," he swears. "Dad has been lenient with us as far as our clan duties, and they know it. How long had he suspected foul play? The sons in the Italian families are more prepared for this life than we are. We should have been

brought in earlier and assumed our roles in more than just name. Dad had enforcers and button men, to name a goddamn few, to do everything. Where does that leave us now that we can't trust any of them?"

"Fuck, Kai. Don't you think this has been weighing on me? You and the others have been allowed to put your head in the sand on most of this shite that our clan is involved in. You can't fault our father for wanting to shield his children from this shite as long as he could. Tell me, brother, what is it exactly that you think we do because I can tell you that extortion, drugs, and firearms isn't the extent of it," I retort.

"Enlighten me, then. I'm done putting my head in the sand."

Kai knows all about the extortion aspect. He's been a bodyguard to some of the most elite politicians and celebrities to gather intel for our clan that could be used as extortion. He's been keeping a file of these secrets until their value would be most optimized. That time is near.

"I have something to show you first." I purposely leave out that this *something* is a test. I have to ensure that he is ready to take on all that comes with this role as the Clan Captain. I finish my beer and then stand. He follows suit.

"Why are you driving yourself and not using Dad's caddie?" he asks as we approach my car. "Now that you're chief, it's probably not the best idea to go anywhere without reinforcements if the goal is to weaken us further," he points out. I'm sure Oisín would agree with him.

I know he has a valid point. "Yeah, probably the same reason it was just Father and me that night without backup. He had some reservations about the people in our own clan—some of the soldiers. I hate that I didn't question it then, but we never should have gone there without some sort of security. I thought he was just taking another opportunity for me to take lead ... a lesson, you know."

I grunt at my own stupidity. I don't know what I could have said to make things play out differently for that decision, but I can't help but still feel that I aided in getting my father

killed. I keep that revelation to myself, though. We drive several miles until we're outside the city at a warehouse I now own. I recently purchased it using untraceable means, including hiding it from our own clan.

“What is this place?” Kai asks as he follows me inside.

“A little piece of property I bought this week. Nobody knows it exists, not even our other clan members.”

The smell of fresh paint and waxed tiles permeate the air. This place has never been occupied and looks like any other commercial real estate with above board practices. Too bad this is not what this building will be used for. It's meant to be an illusion—to blend in with the norm. It has the best biometric security installed that money can buy and synchronized with my phone. Kai follows me into one of the isolated rooms where a man hangs from the ceiling with his wrists tightly bound by rope. The guy stirs when we enter, his blood already dried in puddles on my new floor. I had to rough him up a bit before hanging him here. He's lucky I had to get to a meeting with my brother.

I watch as Kai's jaw go slack. He's no stranger to violence given his occupation, but this is vastly different. I slide my handgun from the hidden holster on my hip and pass it to him. “Make him talk. This is one of the guys who have been trying to sell firearms in the local neighborhoods in our turf, yet he refuses to give up his source.”

Kai takes the gun, and I feel the hesitation. It's small, but it's there. “Who do you work for?” he asks, aiming his gun at the man, but he only spits on Kai as a response. That would have landed him a shot to the knee from me, but I let my brother play this out.

“Fuck you, asshole. I'm not telling ya shite.”

“He's fucking Irish,” Kai says after hearing the man's accent. “You already tried to beat it out of him, didn't you? He's not going to give us shite.”

My siblings and I don't have as strong of an accent as my father did or speak much of the language due to spending most

of our years here in the US. We still managed to pick up bits of slang from our father, though—especially when we were mad.

I confirm with a nod. He's finally catching on. His purpose here is clear. This piece of shite isn't going to give us anything. Kai's cleansing breath is audible around the enclosed empty room. This is his test. He walks up to the now squirming man, probably no older than twenty-five. Kai forces his mouth open with the gun and pushes it as far as it can go. The guy's eyes widen as my brother pulls the trigger. The back of his head explodes as blood and brain matter splatters on everything in its surrounding. The echo is deafening. I wasn't sure if my brother had it in him, but thank fuck he does.

"I know it's quite different to take a life in order to protect one, but you ended that motherfucker without him being an immediate threat," I surmise.

"He was a threat," he rebuts. "Everyone that isn't us is a threat until we find out who is with us and who's against us. He was Irish, Lennon. That can't be a coincidence. I never wanted to be part of the dirtier side of the business, so Dad relied heavily on you, but you don't have to do this alone anymore. I'm here now, and I'm all in."

"That's all I needed to hear, little brother. Your gut and instinct have prepared you for this life more than you know, but I had to be sure. Fergus, Flynn, and Callum are a different story. Let's not bring them into this underworld until we absolutely have to."

"We have to tell them something, though. They need to be on alert that we're being tested. We need to put a personal bodyguard with them."

"I agree. I'll call a house meeting and share that our parents were both murdered and that we suspect a play for power here. It's important that they carry on with their normal lives so that our next moves are silent."

We have the advantage since whoever is behind this thinks we're oblivious. I've carried out murders that have been warranted in relation to our businesses, and I've checked on every operation. To anyone who may be looking, it's business

status quo. It appears as if I've assumed my father's role and taken my rightful place as chief. Nothing amiss.

"So, brother, spill it. What am I getting myself into? There's no turning back now, so no more keeping things from me."

"Just add bribery, gambling, counterfeiting, and prostitution to this list of rackets I mentioned earlier. Not sure how much of these operations I want us to maintain. We have an opportunity to shift our involvement. We will need to vet our clan members again. We have to let some members go. I will use my transition to chief as an excuse. I will say that I want to make some modifications to our clan business and reduce our operations."

"You know that in itself will cause enemies. They will just go to the other Irish clans and feed them our intel," Kai warns.

"That's why it will be even more important to change up how we do things. If that's their reaction, they weren't loyal to begin with. We can't operate in fear, brother. If we're going to rise to the top, we have to be strategic and not be afraid to start over. We will reign victorious in this unannounced war. They won't realize that the battle has commenced until it's too late. And to be completely clear, *they* is everyone who isn't our immediate family until proven otherwise."

He pats me on the shoulder. "I wish Dad could see us now. We will rise and the ones responsible for their deaths will pay. What's our first step in this war?"

"We're on the third step, brother. I've already implemented the first two."

CHAPTER SIX

Aurora

I wrap the satin robe around me tighter as Mr. Carson escorts me down the granite floating steps. I wasn't given much choice other than I had been summoned by the *lordship* of the house. His grip tightens around my bicep as we descend. I don't want him to inject me again, so I don't resist his hold. The textured stone is surprisingly smooth beneath my bare feet. I let my gaze roam this space for the first time as I work to steady my nervousness. The black walls and strategic placements of reflected light balances well with the unique chandeliers and beautiful decor pieces. The filtered darkness throughout this home is both moody and brilliant. Even under my current duress, my love for art and interior design is piqued. We reach the bottom step that flows left into a sunken dining room. My captor sits at the head of an eight-person rustic walnut table— his leg crossed at the knee as he sips on his black coffee in a clear mug. Mr. Carson walks me right up to him and takes a step back, finally releasing my arm.

“That will be all, Oisín. Thank you,” his lordship dismisses.

“Yes. Mr. Carson,” I taunt, even after now learning his actual name is Oisín. “You can go.”

He ignores my jab, leaving me to stand before this other controlling prick.

“Sit,” he orders. These one-word commands are the most annoying fucking thing ever. “Or I can make you,” he finishes.

“The choices thing again, right?”

“Good to know you’re not completely dense,” he remarks.

I roll my eyes, but take a seat in the chair beside him anyway. I’m not in the mood to verbally spar with him, and I’m more than exhausted from my few hours of sleep last night. I didn’t make the whole night without sleeping, but I held out as long as I could.

A woman appears wearing the same uniform that Fiona was wearing last night. She is notably older with several gray hairs tucked neatly in a bun. She places a tray with an assortment of food on the table before pushing one small plate in front of him and the rest in front of me—eggs, pancakes, sausage, fruit, orange juice, and milk. There is no way I could eat all of this, even if I was willing to eat any of it.

“No, thank you,” I say. “I’m not hungry.” My growling stomach picks this moment to betray me.

“My patience is wearing thin, principessa,” he warns. “And I’m not a very patient man to begin with.”

“Why do you call me that? This is like the second time?” It could be more.

“Because you’re an Italian princess— a Valentini princess to the most powerful Italian Mafia family in New York.” He smirks, his tone menacing and condescending. “Now fucking eat. You refused my food once before last night. I won’t keep having my hospitality crapped on.”

“Look at all this food? Why is it that you only have a peanut butter sandwich? How old are you? Five?”

I know I’m probably poking the bear, but I’m still annoyed with his princess comment. I’m not his princess. Only my father can call me that.

He doesn’t answer. Instead he is on his feet within seconds, yanking me to mine. “Fiona,” he yells.

She comes running, her face flushed. “What can I do for you, sir?” she asks.

“I need to show this ungrateful captive what happens when you don’t obey. If she doesn’t want to eat, then I can think of

some alternative uses for that smart mouth of hers. Teach her!”

What the fuu... I don't finish the thought. I feel the pressure of Fiona's foot to the back of my leg, and I go down, falling to my knees before him.

“Unzip him,” she instructs, gesturing toward his dress pants.

“What? Hell no!” I say with more confidence than I possess right now. How is this even the same girl?

“Take out his cock,” she warns.

I sit back on my heels, unsure how I'm going to get out of this. Is he going to make me suck his dick right here ... right now? Where is the rest of his house staff?

“Pleaseeeeee,” I stutter, truly alarmed now. “Don't make me do this.”

“Either you take out my cock or I will fuck you in your ass right here on this goddamn dining room table,” the bastard threatens.

“You promised,” I remind him with panic settling in my gut.

“No. A mhuirnín. I said that I wouldn't take your virginity without you giving it to me. Your ass was never taken off the table. Now, I believe you have a choice to make.”

His glacial stare bears his intent. I know he's not bluffing. Fiona moves behind me, forcing me off my heels and back onto my knees. I want my father to torture this motherfucker before giving him a slow gruesome death. So much hate fuels me. My fingers tremble as I work to unbutton him. I've never done this before ... I've never seen a man's genitals in person. I finally get him unfastened, only to find that he isn't wearing any underwear. He's hairless, making the V muscles leading into his groin more pronounced. Engorged veins rest along his abdomen between these muscles—overtly masculine. I look away as I feel the heat creep up my neck. Embarrassment and shame battle within me. This isn't right.

“Take out his cock,” Fiona says a little more eagerly than before.

I hesitate. “You heard her,” he says, huskily—his eyes hooded.

I reach into his pants and pull out his already hardened cock. The engorged veins continue here. It’s so warm in my hand and big. No way I’m fitting him in my mouth, let alone the other place he threatened to put it. It pulses against my palm and something stirs within me. The sensation catches me off guard, so much so I barely noticed when Fiona drops down on her knees next to me. She takes his appendage out of my grasp and into her own. This girl, who once presented as shy, wraps her lips around the tip of him and begins to suck. She strokes him with the other hand as she takes him deeper into her mouth each time. I attempt to get up, but he stops me.

“Don’t you dare fucking move or take your eyes off her, or I will have you take over this lesson. Your mouth isn’t off the table either,” he says as he wraps a fist around her braid to push her deeper. She’s sucking faster now, and the feeling in my core intensifies. What the hell does this say about me? None of this is right.

“You’re sick. You know that?” I retort.

“You have know idea, but you will,” he promises. “Tell me. Have you ever had a cock between those lips of yours or sliding into your ass?”

He’s not even trying to hide how much he’s getting off on this. Fuck him for making me participate. “You know that I haven’t!”

“Just wanted to be sure no other man has had you in any capacity. And now, they never will.”

I don’t respond. I don’t even want him to elaborate on that ominous statement. I need to get the hell away from here. He’s truly a psycho. I watch as he pushes Fiona off his still hardened dick before letting his shirt fall to cover it. She licks her lips before standing. “Thank you, sir,” she says before she gets off her knees and walks off. I stand too because surely he

doesn't expect me to finish him off. I may not have had sex or given a blow job before, but I know the guy is supposed to come.

"You didn't come," I say, not meaning to express that out loud.

"But she did," he answers, seemingly amused.

"She's a good actress; I'll give her that. No way she enjoyed doing that and with an audience. You're quite delusional. Do you use all of your house staff to satisfy your sexual whims?"

He sits back down at the head of the table. "First off, she more than enjoyed it. She fucking loved it. She would suck and ride my dick as many times as I would allow her to. She doesn't give a shite about an audience as long as she gets to come. And no, I don't make it a habit to fuck my house staff. Only her and that lesson was for you."

"It's still wrong. And I don't need any lessons from you."

"It would seem that you've haven't learn to keep that smart mouth shut. Sit and eat your fucking breakfast, or I will finish in your mouth. One way or another, you're going to eat something. My dick is still hard and could go another round."

"Ugh," I huff, but I'd rather face potentially poisonous food than have his dick in my mouth. I sit and begin to eat the now cold eggs. The pancakes have shriveled slightly. I want to ask again why he only has a peanut butter sandwich, but I resist. What the hell do I care? I just watched him make his maid suck his dick in front of me. He's a weirdo and a psycho. If I had any doubts before about this man or this situation, they have been eradicated.

"You know, the sooner you cooperate, the better off you'll be," he says cryptically after some brief silence between us.

"Cooperate how? I'm not going to have sex with you, so what else is there?"

"Fucking between you and me is inevitable, Aurora." He says my name for the first time, catching me off guard. "As I've said before, I'm not a patient man, but for now, we have

time. I have other needs and expectations that you will adhere to if you don't want that time to run out. A list of these rules will be spelled out for you in a folder left for you on the dresser in your room."

"Can I just ask why you're doing this? You're a good-looking guy with a nice body." I drop my head after admitting he's attractive. Ugh, I could have left that part out. I don't want to inflate his ego. "Why hold me hostage here and wait on my virginity unless this has more to do with my family, and I'm collateral damage."

I know this can't possibly be about him wanting me, but I want him to admit it. I'm going to gather all the intel I can on this scheme of his and use it to make sure he pays. He calls for Oisín to escort me back to my room before he addresses me again.

"A mhuirín, we both know that this has nothing to do with sex and everything to do with what *your* virginity will afford me. I know that you've already sorted that much out at least. This was never about pussy. Cooperate and this arrangement will be mutually beneficial."

"How could I possibly benefit from hurting my family? If I give you what you're asking for, that's the only foreseeable outcome. I won't do it. I can't," I plead.

"I won't do it either," he professes. "I can't," he says, using my words back at me.

Oisín grabs my arm and helps me rise to my feet to let me know that my time is up. My lordship stands too and takes a sip of his coffee, seemingly not embarrassed as he tucks his now half-mast cock back into his pants.

"You won't do what?" I ask, already regretting my push for an answer.

"Lose!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lennon

I pace the length of my room, running an agitated hand through my hair while letting the shower run in my ensuite bathroom. I'm trying to resist the temptation that awaits for me there. My cock strains even harder against my pants with the visualization of Aurora on her knees, her delicate hands wrapped around my dick— her mouth only mere inches away. My steps falter mid room at the unannounced entrance of someone who has a death wish. My initial thought was that I've summoned the woman I'm in here fucking fantasizing about— Aurora. Did someone forget to lock her door?

“Hi,” Fiona says timidly as she enters farther into my personal space.

“Are you fucking crazy? You know my room is off-limits other than to clean at a time that I specify.”

“I'm sorry to intrude, sir. I just had to see you. Please don't be upset with me.” She drops to her knees.

“You've got less than a minute to tell me what's so urgent that you dare break my rules.”

She gestures toward my dick. “I just want to finish what I started. You never come for me. You're so hard still. I—”

“I will never give you my cum.” I interrupt her. “Don't mistake what this is. I've fucked you, and I've let you suck my dick. Each time you have come so that's the only thing that should matter to you. Don't mistake our sexual acts as an

invitation to come into my room uninvited or a segue to more.”

“I’m sorry,” she says again.

“Get off your knees and get the fuck out. Don’t ever make this mistake again, or I can’t promise I won’t hurt you.”

She scurries away without another word. Dammit. That’s what giving in to temptation looks like— a fucking headache. I won’t come for anyone ... not even myself. And if I get into that shower, that’s exactly what will happen. The urge to take me into my own hands for just a few strokes is so strong. Knowing that Aurora has never had another man do all the things I want to do to her makes my desires more than enticing. This unrelenting urge is foreign to me. I’ve managed to use the act of sex as my penance, and now my mind and body are not on the same page.

I enter the shower and manage not to touch my still unsatiated cock. I scrub my body as anger fuels me. I’m not this fucking weak— especially not for some sheltered princess whose sole purpose is for me to penetrate her family’s empire and blow shit up from the inside. I wash quickly and change into a T-shirt and joggers. Maybe I need to go for a run. *Fuck it!*

I find myself at Aurora’s door, unbolting the four deadlocks I had installed. She springs off the bed and runs for the bathroom, but I’m too quick. I walk her backward until her back is against one of the walls.

“Where do you think you’re going?” I taunt.

“Away from you,” she retorts.

One of my hands wrap around her throat to insert my dominance. “Is that so?” I bait. “Can you feel that?”

“Feel what?” She squirms.

“My control — your life in my grasp.” I tighten slightly as a demonstration before loosening my grip. “Have you read the fucking rules that I had Mr. Doyle leave for you?”

“I saw the folder on the dresser. I haven’t gotten around to it.”

“See, that’s part of the problem. You mistakenly think you have free will, and that will get you hurt. You’re disrespectful and entitled, two things I will not tolerate, so it will be in your best interest to read those rules immediately. My leniency for you expires today.”

“Why don’t you just kill me, asshole? I’m not afraid of you,” she smarts off, and a lone tear runs down her cheek.

I tighten my grip again, using my other hand to rip the silk nightgown from her body. She gasps, fear in her gaze.

“Maybe I need to take away some of that free will that I’ve allowed you to keep until you learn to behave and keep your smart-ass comments to yourself.” I unsnap her bra, and her gorgeous breasts fall free.

“Please don’t do this.” Her breath hitches as I palm one of her tits. I rub my erection against her stomach, inserting even more dominance. I can feel her swallow under the palm of my hand. Did she just push toward me? I lower my gaze and stare into her exotic brown eyes, allowing my lips to slowly claim hers. Our tongues swirl. Surprisingly, she deepens the kiss. My hand falls away from her throat. I lift her, and her legs wrap around my waist. It isn’t until I push her back against the wall again that she pulls her face away, her face crimson. She breathes heavily as she looks away from me.

“Please don’t do that again,” she tries.

“That was all you,” I say. “I bet if I was to put my hands between your legs right now, your wetness would coat my fingers.”

“Yeah, from my period.”

“Your only saving grace from discovery. You’re so turned on right now that your skin is flush. You have tells, A mhuirín, and I’ll learn every single one.”

“Can you put me down now that you’re satisfied with yourself?”

“Oh, I’m far from satisfied. I’m not leaving this room without collecting your punishment.” I stand her on her feet and walk her to the bathroom she was trying to run to—no doubt to lock me out. “Turn the shower on,” I instruct.

“What are you going to do?” She’s still trying to hold on to her defiance. She’ll learn.

“Take those panties off and get in the fucking shower, Aurora. You’re only making this harder for yourself.” Harder for me too, but I don’t disclose that.

She eases her panties down her legs, trying to hide the blood-soaked pad. She should know by now that I couldn’t care less about her menstruation. Blood, in general, is nothing new to me. If anything, it’s an occupational hazard. She covers her crotch with one hand while removing her panties the rest of the way. It’s comical. She steps in the shower and backs into one of the corners as she watches me pull my shirt over my head. She looks away when I drop my joggers. I step into the stream, and I can hear her gasp again.

“What are youuuuuu doing?” she stutters.

“Giving you what you need,” I say, pulling her under the stream.

“I don’t want this,” she insists, but her heaving chest hints at her deceit.

I think her mind and body are at odds, much like myself. She knows she shouldn’t want me to touch her, but her body’s reaction to me says otherwise. I move us slightly from under the stream before guiding her hand to wrap around the girth of my engorged cock. With her hands beneath mine, I begin to stroke, and she doesn’t resist. I can feel the tightening in my balls. I push down on her shoulders, and she drops to her knees submissively. It’s too much. The control I pride myself on snaps. I nudge her lips with the tip of my dick until she opens. I half expect her to bite me, but she doesn’t. She doesn’t suck at first, but the feel of her tongue as I push into her mouth farther has all the nerve endings in my cock pulsating. I grab her hair and begin to fuck her mouth. The moment she allows herself a taste, I come completely undone.

My hips piston until she gags. I step back and shoot cum all over her face, shoulders, and chest. That much-needed release seems never-ending. *Motherfucker!*

I broke my rule for her. I don't come ... ever! I was supposed to just teach her a lesson about her mouth, and she made me lose control. That won't fucking happen again. Without a single word, I leave her in the shower. I snag one of the towels off the counter and grab my clothes. I don't even bother to dry off or get dressed. I need to get the hell away from this girl. She is the adversary, and I'd do well to remember that.

"Read the fucking rules before dinner, and don't be late." She's still on her knees when I exit the bathroom.

Of course Doyle is passing her room as I leave in just a towel. He knows better than to comment, but Fiona is right behind him. Her gaze shifts downward immediately. I'm in a murderous mood, so her silence is smart.

"Lock her fucking door and see that she has some decent clothes. She is not to come to any more meals in her night clothes," I instruct, my tone harsh. I can't bring myself to care even though it's myself that I'm upset with.

I return to my suite just in time to find my phone ringing. It's Kai, so I answer, welcoming the distraction.

"Yeah," I answer.

"Finally, you answer. I've called you like five times already. Where have you been, man?"

"I don't answer to you. Don't get your new rank confused. What do you want?"

"Damn, man. That's how it is? You're pulling rank and doing a power trip with me? You were supposed to fucking meet me an hour ago at the pub. I was worried that something happened to your moody ass."

Fuck, he's right. I need to get my head back into what the hell I'm supposed to be doing.

“My bad, man. I’m just having a fucked-up day, and I put you in the crossfire. I forgot, but I’ll be there in about an hour.”

“Where are you? I went by your place, but you weren’t there. Would it be easier if I came to you?”

“No,” I say as I head to my closet to get something to wear. “Just sit tight and have some beers waiting. I’m on my way.”

“Are you driving yourself?”

“Yeah, why?”

“You know why. You really need to work on getting a caddie. Be safe, brother. I’ll see you soon.”

I end the call. I don’t want to simply use the caddie my father used. I don’t trust many people until we restructure our empire and vet the people we plan to keep in our clan. I’m dressed and out the door within fifteen minutes. Twenty minutes into my drive, I get another call from my brother. I told him I was on the way.

“I’m on the way, Kai,” I answer.

“I know, brother. There has been a new development.”

“What is it?”

“I just got a call from Alessandro.”

Alessandro is a capo with the Valentini Mafia. He’s Aurora’s next-to-eldest brother.

“Oh yeah. What did he want?” I ask as I switch lanes and pick up speed.

“Apparently, he has a younger sister who has gone missing. His father asked him to reach out to us for help finding her. He wants all alliance hands on deck. He doesn’t want to get the police involved. Some motherfucker is about to have the wrath of the Valentini on his ass.”

“I’m that *motherfucker*, brother. I’ll see you in twenty.”

I end the call before he can say another word. Let the fucking games begin!

CHAPTER EIGHT

Aurora

I fall back onto my heels and let the water stream down over my shoulders and hair like a waterfall. I touch my lips, feeling the slight ache in my jaw. I can feel my heart beating erratically inside my chest, overwhelmed with adrenaline and something else—triumph! That was the furthest thing from my proper upbringing and was so unladylike. He treated me like his dirty whore, similar to his behavior with Fiona a short time earlier. I'm equal parts ashamed and exhilarated, though I still hate him. Even though given no choice but to submit, I made him join me in submission. If his anger afterward were any indication, I'd say he didn't plan for things to go that far between us, which makes no sense. He initiated all this, yet he couldn't get out of here fast enough. I didn't want this, so why did I give in and participate? Again, what does that say about me? Yes, he's insanely attractive, visually and physically, but it doesn't excuse the fact he's holding me here against my will or that he has some agenda that involves using me to get to my family.

I don't want to dissect my twisted desires or why they exist at all. Instead, I need to understand why forcing me to pleasure him resulted in such hostility and mood change. Maybe I've been going about this all wrong. My way out will not be through his house staff. It will be through him. Something is not adding up, and I need it to. He wants me to cooperate and read his stupid rules, then so be it. I'm intelligent—I've had the best private home education money could buy. Where I lack experience, I make up for in knowledge. *And intuition.* It's time to stop playing defense and start playing offense. I

have something he wants, so why haven't I leveraged that? I've had the answer to getting out of this situation the entire time. I just need one thing ... *time*. I stand and wash the remaining cum from my face and body. I grab the towel hanging from the shower glass to dry off and wrap the towel around my body.

Fiona walks in just as I step out of the shower. She places another stack of towels on the counter with some pads as she did yesterday. "We've put clothes in your closet," she informs. "Please read the instructions Mr. Gallagher had us leave for you. He doesn't want you coming to any more meals in your night garments."

"Thanks," I say, not sure how else to fill the awkward silence.

"What is his first name?" I ask as I get out of the shower. She's not moving, so I'm just making conversation to take my mind off the lack of privacy.

Surprisingly, she lets out a small laugh. I can see that her eyes are rimmed with redness. This girl goes from timid to confident and bitchy at the speed of whiplash.

"If he fucked you, but he still hasn't supplied you with his first name? Then it's not my place to say."

"I didn't fuck him, Fiona. I'm a virgin. Why are you upset with me? I'm the hostage here, remember? I'm not trying to come between whatever you and he have going on."

"Why would you possibly think we have anything going on? What you witnessed today was nothing. I'm nothing to him, and neither are you. You did something with him because Mr. Doyle and I saw him leave this room practically naked. What did you do?"

I finish drying off and place the pad between my legs, no longer caring if she watches. I'm pissed. It's apparent that she has feelings for him and is taking things out on me.

"If you couldn't make him come, and then he comes to me to finish, then it's not my place to say," I retort, serving her

words back to her. I can feel that familiar exhilaration return as it courses through my veins.

Her tough exterior slips briefly before her face hardens. “You’re a fucking liar. He doesn’t come. Ever! He would never give anyone that control. Enjoy whatever fantasies you’re creating in your head about him. I’ve been his housemaid a long time before this place, so I know things. He’s going to chew you up and spit you out. You’re dispensable. I was here before you, and I’ll be here long after you’re gone.”

She spins on her heel and leaves just as angry as he did. Her emotional outburst was very telling about her true possessive feelings for him, but she also gave me a bit of insight. She said he never comes because he would never give up that control. That means he lost control with me, hence his reason for being so upset. It wasn’t the act itself; it was that he allowed himself to finish. Why the hell does that matter, and why me?

I startle when I enter the bedroom and find another much older woman standing in the center of the room with a chair and table with scattered hair products. I cover my breast as my pad swishes between my legs. I should just give up having any sort of dignity in this place. Everyone just comes and goes as they please.

“Morning, Aurora. I’m Bridget. I’m one of Mr. Gallagher’s house staff, but I’m also formally trained to do hair. I’m going to fix your haircut.”

I sidestep to get some underwear and a bra from the drawer. “That’s okay. It’s fine the way it is.”

“It’s uneven, dear. Besides, Mr. Gallagher insists. Go ahead and get dressed, and we’ll get started.”

I’m surprised once again. All of the silk undergarments have been replaced with comfy cotton. Sports bras, tanks, and gym shorts replace all the sexy lingerie that was once here. I find much of the same in the closet. Jogger sets, jeans, and T-shirts hang throughout, absent of any sign of the sophisticated pantsuits that I’m used to or any sophistication for that matter.

Is this supposed to be a punishment? Because if it is, it's the best one yet. I'll take comfort over being forced to dress like one of his conquests. I throw on a pair of shorts and a tank for now. My hair was ruined the moment I took the knife to it, so this woman can't do much worse.

She smiles when I sit in the chair in front of her. She wraps a towel around my neck before I feel the coldness of the water as she sprays my hair to wet it more. "I hope you like the clothes. Mr. Doyle had me add some things to the order for our errands person to shop for. He was supposed to do it before you arrived, but he got busy with other shopping we needed for the house. Figured you'd appreciate comfort over sexy, and I'm sure our errands guy appreciated not having to buy the sexy things." She chuckles.

"Where did the other sexy undergarments come from that were in the drawer before?"

She smiles sheepishly at me. "Fiona," she admits. "We knew you needed something your first day here, and we didn't want to make it obvious that Benji, our errands guy, forgot. It's our fault we gave him too much to do. Don't worry, it was all new—never worn. She took her things back when we got your stuff in. Hope that's okay." She parts my hair into four before securing each section with a clamp.

"Oh, it's more than okay. I don't wear that type of stuff anyway. I definitely wouldn't have guessed that to be Fiona's taste either." Not before today's breakfast, anyway. Fiona did a complete one-eighty—timid to whore, like someone with multiple personalities. My psycho captor had to buy those satin cock teases she put in the drawer for me. Fiona could not afford such luxury and quality unless he's paying her an exorbitant amount to be his kinky maid that moonlights as his nightly concubine.

"I need an answer, dear, so I can get started," Bridget says, interrupting my nonverbal tangent.

"Sorry, can you repeat the question?"

"I asked if you had a particular length or style in mind?" she repeats.

“I’ve never had a real cut before now, so I’d rather not have it any shorter than it is now,” I admit.

“No worries. I’ll give you some nice layers. You and Mr. Gallagher will love it.”

“Why would he care? I’m not his girlfriend. He’s holding me captive here. You have to know that. You all do.”

She stops spraying for a second as if contemplating what to say. “Mr. Gallagher is very unorthodox, but he is fair to those loyal to him. He doesn’t let many people in, so if he’s taken an interest in you, he has his reasons. Just obey what he says, and you will be fine. He won’t hurt you.”

She goes back to spraying the water, and then the snip of her scissors fills the silence. “He wants something that I can’t give without hurting my family,” I share softly.

“What do you enjoy, Aurora? What would you be doing if you were back at home?”

I see through her attempt to change the subject and allow it. “I love art, ballet, and listening to music. They’re my happy place since I’m not allowed much else outside of education.”

She comes to stand in front of me to continue cutting my hair. “What kind of art?”

“I enjoy painting and sketching. I love museums, home decor, and interior design. I just love all things art. This house is a real masterpiece.”

“You’re smiling. It must be a true passion,” she points out. “Yes, this home is extraordinary. Especially the part of the house where it looks like nature continues into the inside. The greenery and stones are like something out of a spa and brings so much Zen.”

I didn’t realize I was smiling, but it fades as I hear her describe a part of the house that I’ve yet to see. “Oh, I’ve only seen the library, dining room, and this room,” I tell her. “It sounds like an absolute dream, though.”

“I’ll talk to Mr. Gallagher. Perhaps he’ll let me give you a tour. I can’t promise anything, but I can try. I’m sure your

cooperation would go a long way.”

And there it is. Was all of this conversation and niceness to get me to follow whatever rules he has in *that folder*?

“Why does everyone keep bringing up those rules and the word *cooperation*?”

“He has expectations for all of us as it pertains to our jobs. For you, he has a different set of rules. Mr. Doyle has asked that we remind you of these rules. It will only make your stay here more pleasant. As I said before, Mr. Gallagher is a fair man. But he also possesses a side you don’t want to see, so I urge you not to cross him.” She removes the towel from my neck. “You can either blow-dry your hair or let it air dry. I need to get going. I’ve already said too much.”

“Thank you,” I say as she hurries out the door. I appreciate her kindness even though she clammed up at the end. I hear the locks re-engage on the other side of the door.

I opt to let my hair air dry. I guess I’ll read these damn rules that everyone keeps alluding to. They’re pretty straightforward and just as I suspected—controlling. The rules list all meal times. I will be present for all meals, dressed appropriately, and on time. I hope joggers count as appropriate because that’s all I got. I’m expected to learn domestic chores with the assistance of the house staff. Okay, that one is weird. What the hell for? Is this more punishment? I’ve never been responsible for chores at home. I’m sure he has adequate help for these things. I continue to read on. No talking back or being argumentative? Well, he can fuck right off. I’m tired of everyone having the authority to tell me what to do. Captive or not, I’m a fucking grown woman. I must agree to scheduled nights with him? To do what? This guy is insane. Oh, then I get to the best part. I will be given freedom to access more of the house and gardens as trust is established from adhering to these rules. This entire document is a crock of shit and is meant to take away my free will as he puts it.

I take a deep breath in through my nose and blow it out through my mouth. I have to hold on to the revelation I made in the bathroom. He wants something from me, so I have at

least that leverage. I don't want to do anything he listed; it's insulting. But if I want a chance to escape and get back to my family, I have to get him to let his guard down. The only way I can think to do that is to give the illusion of the dreaded *cooperation*.

I will participate in this twisted dance of wills. Let him think I'm easy prey. He foolishly thinks I'm the weakest of the Valentini. I will show them all. I will be victorious.

CHAPTER NINE

Lennon

My brother Kai paces my office as we wait for Oisín to retrieve Aurora. I thought it was best to bring him here to see for himself. Not a single person other than a select few I have vetted knows about this residence. As far as the rest of our family and clan knows, I still reside in Manhattan.

“How did you even know that Matteo Valentini had a daughter?” Kai questions. “I’ve never heard of her until Alessandro called me. I thought there were only the four brothers.”

“That’s not a coincidence. That was their intent. I know of her because she once entered her father’s office unannounced during a meeting he was having with our father. He was so upset and fired one of his house staff on the spot for letting her get past his guard. I knew not to question things at that moment, but I asked who she was when Father and I got home.”

“Why were the two of you there? And what did Father say?”

“I was twelve at the time, so Aurora couldn’t have been no more than five. Father was introducing me to their world and wanted to be sure that they knew what clan I belonged to and that I wasn’t a threat to them. That night, Father explained that Matteo didn’t want anyone to know his baby girl existed because he needed to protect her much like our little sister, Aisling.”

Our small talk is interrupted by Aurora's voice echoing down the hall. "You don't have to hold me so tightly, Mr. Carson. I don't know why you insist on being so rough."

"Probably because his name isn't Mr. Carson," Kai supplies as they enter my office. Oisín bids me a nod before turning to leave.

"Who the hell are you?" Aurora snaps, rubbing her bicep where Oisín had her in his grip.

"I see your lesson from earlier hasn't stuck," I say.

"Quite the mouth on that one." Kai chuckles. "What have you signed yourself up for, brother?"

"Ah, still working on her house training. She's not housebroken yet."

"I'm not a dog, you ass. And why am I not surprised this funny jerk is your brother?"

I close the distance between us within seconds. Grabbing her by the neck, I lift her and walk her until her back hits the wall. Seems to be our thing. "You need to mind your fucking tongue. Don't let my leniency with you be taken as a sign of weakness. I've tried to consider that you're an entitled, sheltered eejit who is simply clueless." My brother walks up, and I brace for him to defend her.

"You have no idea who you're baiting, and it shows. I think you need an attitude adjustment," Kai suggests.

I ease my grip and let her slide down the wall. "I couldn't agree more." I level her with a stare. "Strip."

"What? No ... please."

"If I have to give the order again, you won't like where I take this punishment."

She curses under her breath, but she obliges. She throws each article of clothing in a pile until she's completely naked before us. My brother walks around the leather sofa and takes a seat before lighting his cigar. "I think she should dance for us, brother," he offers.

The man before me is foreign. So it seems my little brother has a dark side, empathy for Aurora is nowhere in sight. I grin as I join him in the chair across from him. She cowers, struggling to cover her breasts and crotch as droplets of blood coat her inner thighs like before. I snap my fingers and gesture for her to come stand before us.

“We need some music,” I point out. I scroll through my phone to activate the Bluetooth for this room. “Hero” by Chad Kroeger begins to filter through the surround sound. There are no fucking heroes in this room. “Dance.”

Tears run down her face as she avoids eye contact with either of us. The irony of the title of the song isn’t lost on me. It’s the first song on my shuffle. I set it to repeat. Her first attempts at movement are clumsy and awkward at best. Her imitation of seduction is quite sad. We’ll have to work on that. She closes her eyes, and more tears stream down her beautiful face. Suddenly she goes on her tiptoes and kicks one leg out as she twirls. She stretches, jumps, and glides with more grace than I would have imagined coming from her. I don’t even care that she’s getting blood on my expensive stone floors. I can’t stop the smile that creases my lips. She’s so angelic when she isn’t opening her sarcastic mouth. My little bird isn’t in this room with us right now. She’s found a way to freedom—in her mind—through dance.

“Is she really doing ballet right now,” Kai jokes, breaking my trance. “Why are you smiling?”

I stop the music, but she twirls a few more times before she ends in some sort of stance I don’t know the name of. I pick up her tank off the floor and slide it over her head. Our eyes meet, but we don’t exchange any words. I pick up her remaining things and hand them to her. “Don’t be late for dinner,” I say, letting her leave on her own accord. I know Oisín is standing right outside the door. He never goes far when I’m in this office. He will see that she gets back to her room without a detour.

“Why were you smiling?” Kai tries again. “Did you enjoy that performance?”

“I did, actually,” I admit. “But not for the reasons that you may think. She’s not as fragile as I originally thought. Sure, she’s mouthy and a pain in my ass. That’s a defense mechanism to hide her fear.” I walk over to my wet bar and pour us both a glass of whiskey. “She has the ability to compartmentalize—the ability to get lost in her mind for an escape. This allows her to do whatever is needed. She is a survivor.”

I hand him the glass and lean against the back of the sofa. I swirl the amber liquid in my tumbler before letting the burn coat my throat.

“You’re going to have to watch that.”

“I know. I must ensure she is housebroken and not just pretending.”

“What are your plans for her anyway?” Kai asks, now back to being serious.

I take a seat for this conversation. Surely, my brother will have a lot to digest with what I’m about to reveal.

“I’m going to marry her,” I say, opting to get straight to the point.

“Wait ... what? Why? You know this sounds like a fool’s mission, right?”

“I’ve had time to analyze what Father said. This is about power. He could have meant the Russians or the other Irish Clan, but we have to look at this from all angles. We can’t exclude the Italians just because they already have power. The Lombardi family is the second most powerful in New York. Unlike the Valentini, their family hierarchy is younger now since their father passed a few months ago. Much like ours. They could be hungry to be on top and not just second most powerful.”

“But how would they gain more power? The Valentinis have a stronger foothold on the communities and a larger army.”

“You’d start by ensuring that the most powerful is aligned to you and only you—not the other Mafia families. To those

less powerful families, they'd be just as powerful. If they can't gain favor with the Valentinis, they'd absolutely jump at the chance to gain favor with the Lombardis."

Kai empties his glass. "Damn. That's some theory. Can you prove any of this?"

"No, but Aurora is betrothed to Niccolò Lombardi—the eldest brother and the fucking new boss for the Lombardi family. Sounds pretty feasible to me."

"Matteo isn't going to just hand his daughter over to you. God forbid he finds out you took her. Our entire clan will be in the path of his rage. I'm trusting you know what you're doing, brother."

"They reached out to you to seek our help to find her. I don't think they suspect I have her. Why would I? As far as they know, we didn't know she existed before now."

"Unless it's a trap to lead them to her."

"That's why I got this home under an untraceable account and only brought along a few trusted staff. I knew that Matteo would turn to us for help before he would dare involve the police."

"Well, what's the plan?"

"Once I have Aurora's virginity, Niccolò will have no choice but to refuse her. It's their law, and it's ironclad. It's the reason Matteo has been so steadfast with hiding her and ensuring she remains pure. No notable Italian heir will have her once she is no longer pure. They won't be able to hide that fact. I will make sure of it."

"Lennon, you're delusional if you think Matteo will let you ruin his only daughter's purity and their chance at a stronger alliance with the Lombardis. He's not going to then just hand Aurora over because nobody else wants her."

"Of course not," I say, rubbing my hands together. "I will break her and ensure she is indebted to me so much so that she will not reveal that it was I who took her virginity. That's the only way this works. I need to be the hero in this abduction—the one who finds her."

“Ah, so he will be indebted as well— so thankful you found her and actually willing to make an honest woman out of her.”

“Now you’re catching on. The Irish Mafia are known for having little structure, if any, making it easier for us to appreciate whatever power is afforded to us. We don’t give two shits about things like purity being a minimum requirement to marry into Mafia royalty,” I surmise, condescendingly.

“They have no idea what’s coming,” Kai smiles now. “Your mind is devious as fuck, brother, and I have to say I rather enjoy it. They thought Father was ruthless. So what now?”

“Tell nobody of this place. This includes our siblings and our clan. After today, you can’t come back here unless necessary and prearranged with me. Eyes and suspicion will be on us for sure. You can take one of my cars back home. I’ll retrieve it later.”

“Got it. One thing before I go.”

“What’s that?”

He takes a cleansing breath. “Don’t let Aurora be your Achilles’ heel.”

“She could never.” I chuckle. “This is me you’re talking to. Have you ever seen me be soft for a woman? She’s an adversary—a necessary job. I would never get that twisted.”

“In order to break her, it’s going to require some softness — a balance between dominance and sharing a piece of yourself. She’s been restricted from life. Toughness is all she knows. She’s used to it. You want to reach her? You’re going to show her something that nobody else has given her— softness and consideration as a human being. Her value to her family has been her virginity; now, it’s no different with you. You can’t be the same. She is prepared for it.”

He sets his tumbler down and leaves me speechless. That parting advice was so deep and strategic. He may be the younger brother, but there is always something to learn from

him. It's a much-needed perspective. *Fuck!* I don't know how to be soft. All I know is how to use dominance to bend people to my will.

My rules will remain, but I need to modify my plans for her. That will have to wait until tomorrow. Right now, I need to answer to my own penance. I have several infarctions.

"Oisín!" I yell, knowing he should have returned to his post outside my door.

"Yes, sir," he says, his hands behind his back in their usual proper fashion.

"It's time," I say simply.

He nods. "I will have him meet you in the basement, sir."

I'm not nor have I ever been a good man. I know this self-induced punishment will never atone for my sins, but I'll never stop trying.

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CHAPTER TEN
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Aurora

1 WEEK LATER

I t's been about a week, and my progress toward finding a way out here has been stagnant. Mr. Gallagher hasn't been here or at least not present at these meals he's mandated that I attend. I've participated in learning the chores as instructed and even made lunch today for the house staff. It's only fancy sandwiches with thinly sliced corned beef, fillings, and garnishes, but I feel accomplished. They refused to eat at the dining table with me as it goes against the rules, but they let me eat with them in their private area in what they call the West Wing. There are four housemaids, including Bridget and Fiona. The other two are Aoife and Mona. Fiona is the youngest of the four. Together, they are responsible for all the cooking, cleaning, and laundry under the direction of the house manager, Mr. Doyle. Aoife admitted that none of them were allowed to leave the estate. *Interesting.* For their shopping needs, an order is placed by Mr. Doyle and given to their errand person, Benji, to do the shopping. Other than Oisín, who seems to guard Mr. Gallagher closely, I don't know a number for the security detail here. They stay hidden. It's hard to plan an escape without this info, but I've been given more freedom to explore the main and West Wing of the house. They still bolt the locks on my door at night, though. The East Wing is where his *lordship's* quarters are and is strictly forbidden. Apparently, only Fiona, Bridget, and Mr. Doyle are allowed.

I shower and change for dinner, knowing exactly what's on the menu because I help prepare it. Guinness beef stew made with fresh rosemary, thyme, and of course, Guinness stout. I admit that it's a nice break from all the Italian food served at my house. I listen for the locks to disengage promptly at 6:55p. My doors are unlocked five minutes prior to all meal times so that I'm not late and of course for chore time. I'm learning the routine and it's not half bad. I'm not getting complacent, but if I'm going to be held hostage, I prefer this

arrangement to being locked away in some basement dungeon without human interaction. Other than turning a blind eye to Mr. Gallagher being my captor, the house staff seems like good people. They've all been very welcoming and patient with the exception of Fiona. She keeps her distance because she has to, but I'm sure she'd rather claw my eyes out. She is, at the very least, infatuated with his lordship. I descend the steps but nearly trip over my feet when I reach the sunken dining room. Mr. Gallagher is sitting at the head of the table, the same as he did a week ago— same meal except three sandwiches this time. *Peanut butter.*

“Um, hello,” I greet unsure what else to say.

“Good evening, Aurora,” He greets. “I've heard good things about your cooperation this week.” He takes a bite of his sandwich and his tongue darts out slightly to catch the crumbs left behind. He chases it with a cup of milk.

“Yes. It's been going well,” I answer, engaging in this small talk. I'm so curious about the sandwiches. It's like a meal for a toddler. At this moment, Aoife brings out the stew and places it in front of me. “I help to make the stew,” I inform.

“I'm aware,” he says. “Aoife, bring the bottle of 2009 Mouton Rothschild and pour Aurora a glass.”

“What is that?” I ask, never having been allowed to drink.

“It's a red blend mix of cabernet sauvignon and merlot. It's full-bodied, packed with black fruit preserves and exotic spice layers.”

He proceeds to guide me on the five S's of evaluating wine—see, swirl, sniff, sip, and savor. I don't know what I'm supposed to taste, but I indulge him. A few sips in, and I feel a tingle of relaxation. An encouraging smile spreads across his beautiful face, so I drink more. He really should smile more. It gives the illusion that he's nice. He twirls his forefinger in a gesture to Aoife who stands by. “Refill her glass, please.”

I nearly fall out of my seat with the word *please* coming from him. I've never heard it since I've been here. Even she

looks surprised as she obliges.

“Are you some kind of wine connoisseur?” I wouldn’t have pegged him for one, but nothing about this handsome devil surprises me.

“I’m a connoisseur of all things that I take an interest in,” he answers cryptically.

I notice his battered knuckles and the dried blood on the cracked skin for the first time. He has no other visible bruises, so I’d hate to see the other guy. He catches me studying him, so I take a gulp of my wine. I have to look away from his paralyzing gaze.

“Are you going to try the stew?” I ask, noticing that he is now on his last sandwich. I introduce more small talk in an effort to break the intensity I’m suddenly feeling between us.

“No, A mhuirnín. I rather watch you eat.”

The stew smells heavenly—like comfort plated on a bed of jasmine rice. The sprigs of rosemary are a nice touch. Only, I don’t feel comfort. I feel on edge. I’m being held captive by the heat in his gaze. I won’t deny that it’s somewhat disappointing that he’s not even willing to try the stew. I try to bring my thoughts back to the food.

“Do you ever eat anything else besides those peanut butter sandwiches?” I probe as I take a hearty sip of my second glass of wine. I’m done with those five S’s though.

“Of course.” He smirks. “Do you think I could maintain this physique on peanut butter? My dietary habits can be peculiar to some, but it’s necessary.”

“You must really like peanut butter,” I surmise.

“Actually, it’s to the contrary. I hate it. But necessity and one’s likes are not mutually exclusive. One is not dependent on the other.”

He watches me eat over the next five minutes, and his spectating is unnerving. I opt to break the silence. “What does A mhuirnín mean? It’s Irish right?”

“It means, my love.”

I chug the remnants of my wine, sophistication never a consideration. He has been calling me his love this entire time. Is that a term of endearment or just another condescending line he uses?

He pushes back from the table and extends his wounded hand to me. “Join me,” he says.

There is no dominant bite in the request. Why is he being so nice to me tonight? What is he up to? Hesitantly, I take his hand and let him lead me. He escorts us to a room with a u-shaped, black tufted velvet sofa. Depraved black and white art is displayed around the room, keeping with the dark theme of the house. Blacks and grays with light reflected much like art displayed in a museum. A stripper pole is situated in front of the sofa.

“I don’t want to dance again,” I say nervously as he lets go of my hand. He takes a seat and pats a spot next to him.

“Come sit. You’re not tonight’s entertainment.” I reluctantly do as he says, but I don’t relax my guard. He types a few things into his phone and then sits back, bringing me back with him. “You can relax,” he reassures.

Fiona appears with a single wineglass and the fancy bottle from dinner. She fills the glass and hands it to me, her smile forced. “Enjoy, Ms. Aurora.”

“Don’t go far,” his lordship apprises. “I want the ‘Watch Me Burn’ show tonight.”

She nods her head in confirmation and scurries away. “Is that what you were doing with your phone?” I ask, trying to sneak a peek. The iPhone still lies on his lap. “Summoning Fiona?”

“It’s my communication tool for the house staff— not my personal phone.” A man like him probably has lots of phones.

“It’s refreshing to hear you call them your house staff and not *the help* like my family does,” I admit.

“Well, that would be because the Italians see people as pieces on a chess board to move as they please.”

“The Irish Mafia are far from innocent,” I defend. “I mean, that is what you are, right? Irish Mafia?”

I take a hardy sip of my wine, already feeling more than buzzed from the first two glasses. I half expect him to deny my accusation.

“You’d be correct on both counts. I am Irish Mafia, and we aren’t innocent. We deal in sin, same as any other organized crime family,” he retorts. “But those under my charge, regardless of relation, are valued and appreciated. They’re never viewed as just *the help*. They’ve pledged their loyalty and have kept our clan’s secrets. This affords them my protection and respect.”

“Does that include Fiona? You respected the hell out of her earlier,” I point out. Not to mention he has some entertainment plans for her later. I take another hearty sip.

“I don’t disrespect Fiona. I give her an outlet to express herself— her sexuality. She’s bound to this estate with no access to prospects to sate her desires. So tell me about the things you’re passionate about. What do you like to do—your interest?” he finishes, changing the subject.

The whiplash is strong with this one, but I entertain his questioning. “I will if you tell me your name. And I’m talking about your first name. Not that you’re not going to tell me anything personal about yourself, but if I’m sharing, can I at least have that?”

I’m more than prepared for him to withhold his name from me, but he’s being nice tonight, so I thought I’d give it a try.

“It’s Lennon,” he says matter of factly. “Now, back to my question about your interests.”

I don’t push for more. “I love everything to do with art. I also enjoy ballet.”

“I got to see a bit of your ballet earlier. I was impressed.”

He shifts on the sofa and pulls me closer. My head is light, and my tongue is thick with so many more questions. I may not get this version of him again.

“Enough questions, my inquisitive little bird. I think it is time for the show, so no more Q&A.”

He reopens his phone and summons Fiona. She enters wearing a black leotard, fishnet stockings, and thigh high patent leather boots. *That would never be confused with a maid outfit.* My beautiful pervert scrolls through his phone until he connects to the app that plays music through the surround system. “Watch Me Burn” by Michele Morrone begins to fill the room, the show that he requested from Fiona now making sense.

Fiona steps on that stage before us, and gone is the timid girl who slips between shy and overtly confident with ease. Her moves are elegant and fluid, sexy and enticing. The familiar tingle throbs between my legs. I’m visually stimulated. The wine doesn’t help. The thoughts this man invokes within me are reprehensible. He squeezes my thigh, the bulge in front of his pants more than a little noticeable. He doesn’t take things further than this little show he has arranged for us, but the dull constant ache between my thighs is slightly disappointed.

When this abduction comes to an end, will I survive this? Will I survive him?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Lennon

“Come in, Lennon,” Matteo encourages.

I was called to the Valentini house to help aid the efforts to find Matteo’s daughter. I look for any indications that he suspects me or our clan.

“How are you, sir?” I greet as I enter his office. His Sicilian heritage-inspired decor is quite different from the moody darkness of my home. My residences both, in the city and off the grid are black like my soul. What other man would agree to help a man find the very daughter that he has possession of? If he only knew all of the depraved shit I’ve already had her participate in and all the other things I have planned to bend her to my will.

“I’ve definitely seen better days. Surely, you know why your presence has been requested.”

I walk farther into the room and sit across from him on the caramel Italian leather sofa. “I do. Alessandro filled my brother in. You’d like assistance finding your daughter. Any leads thus far?”

“No. I’ve only managed to find out that Aurora has been sneaking out with the aid of our maid, Amerie. She finally came clean after us drilling the rest of the help on how Aurora could have gotten past them. Amerie has been fucking covering for her. Thanks to her, my little girl could be in grave danger after I’ve worked so hard to protect her.”

I could point out that she is far from being a little girl, but I opt for more intel. “Have you received any ransom notes or

calls? Could she have run away from this life? Any friends that could be abetting her?" I fire rapid questions at him, supplying a different narrative that he may not have considered. I want him unsure.

He pushes off the sofa and begins to pace. "Nothing. And that's what I'm afraid of. If this was about money, I would have heard something by now. It's been over a goddamn week. Besides, how insane would a son of a bitch have to be to shake me down for money? My daughter is my world. When I find out who did this, there will be no mercy. They will pray for death."

"Any friends?"

"She didn't have any outside of the staff, and look how that turned out. I don't think she would have run off, leaving Amerie in harm's way, which is exactly where she is at the moment. Amerie will endure pure hell everyday until my little girl is found. God forbid something happens to Aurora. Her life will end with my child's. This is her fault."

This information is helpful to know and can be potentially useful later as leverage with Aurora. Her father is torturing her closest friend for letting her sneak away. "I haven't heard anything, but I will keep my ear to the ground to see if there is a mark or vendetta against your family. I know that not many is aware that you have a daughter so I won't volunteer that information.."

"Did you know?"

"Know what?"

"That I had a daughter?"

He stops pacing to meet my gaze, looking for any signs of deception.

"No. I've only known of your four sons. It wasn't until Alessandro reached out to my brother, Kai, for assistance. I'll get our entire clan on this, but with need-to-know info only," I say.

He quirks an eyebrow before his mask slips back into place. *Fuck*, he knows or at least suspects. I've been trained to

watch for tales, the faintest reaction not recognized by most, and he definitely reacted. But he can't prove it.

“Thank you, Lennon. I appreciate you coming over and your clan's allegiance to our family. How has your transition been? Your men falling in line with the change?”

Surely, he knows that this isn't something that I would disclose to him even if they weren't. Our clan would never share the interworking of our business, just like his people wouldn't. Is this a test of my gullibility? It's an insult.

“The transition has been smooth as it could be when one simply didn't retire. My father was murdered, but our clan remains strong with me at the helm,” I assure.

“I'm sure they are. It was smart for your father to groom you early. Will your brothers take their rightful place to fulfill their duties now?”

I stand, signaling this conversation is over. This has turned into a fishing expedition to gain insight on our clan and has nothing to do with the disappearance of his daughter.

“Our clan has much to discuss, but right now is the time for my family to grieve,” I generalize before changing the subject. “I'll see what I can find out and let you know. Please keep me apprised of any leads I can help you navigate.”

He nods, and I show myself out. I drive straight to my place in the city in case I'm being followed. I take the lift to my high-rise and phone my brother Kai once I'm inside.

“How did it go?” He asks, knowing that I went to go see Matteo.

“Fine. He doesn't have any leads, but I told him that we would check around to see if anyone has a vendetta against him or his family. Not many know she exists, so we can leave that part out. I'm going to hit some of the local spots to see if anyone knows anything?”

“Good idea,” Kai says, immediately catching on that I am speaking as if I don't have her. My place could be bugged. “Want me to swing by to get you? We could go together.”

“That’ll work. How far out are you?”

“Fifteen minutes.”

“See you then. I’ll meet you out front.”

I head down to the lobby of my building to speak to the doorman while I wait. Rodrigo hears and sees everything.

“Evening, Rodrigo. How is everything going?”

His face lights up when he sees it’s me. He knows nothing about our clan but knows I’m not your above-board businessman. “Good evening, Mr. Gallagher. It’s been a while since I’ve see you around here. Work been keeping you busy?”

We both laugh because he knows I don’t work a nine to five. My penthouse suite affords me the privacy to come and go via my personal elevator so nobody wouldn’t see me if I didn’t want them too. I come down however to retrieve my mail and chat with him routinely just to stay in the know of the comings and goings of this building.

“I guess you can say I’ve been keeping myself busy. Been spending some time with the siblings at our family home,” I lie. We do have a family residence in Jersey where Fergus, Flynn, and Aisling have chosen to stay after our father passed. But I haven’t been there since after the funeral. The memories are too heavy.

“Makes sense. Sorry again about your dad.”

“Any new faces around here lately? Any new tenants?”

“Actually, there was some potential interest the other day in the sub penthouse,” he says as he opens the door for some incoming existing tenants. The sub penthouse is the entire floor below mine.

“What makes you think that?” I probe.

“Well, a well-dressed Italian fella stopped by the front desk. He was a new face, so I was looking to see if he was a visitor or a potential new resident. The next thing I knew, Bobby was escorting him to the elevator. I saw him swipe the penthouse card, so he had to show him the sub penthouse since you own our only main one.”

“How long were they up there?” I dig.

“Oh, I’d say no more than fifteen or so minutes. He hasn’t been back, though, so perhaps he is still thinking about it.”

“Could be,” I agree, knowing I couldn’t disagree more.

I was right to think my place may be bugged. Could be a coincidence, but I always trust my gut.

Kai pulls up to the curb just in time to give me an excuse to exit this conversation. Rodrigo walks me to my brother’s car and opens the door for me. “You gentleman have a good night,” he bids. We are far from gentlemen, but I give him a small wave.

“So what was that call all about?” Kai questions our recent conversation.

I put my finger up to my lips to silence him. As far as I’m concerned, his car could be bugged too.

“No call, brother. I was checking my messages when you pulled up.”

I point at my ears to gesture someone could be listening to us. “Uh, okay. Let’s get something to eat,” he says.

We fall silent for the rest of the ride. When we arrive at the East River Park, we take a stroll along the pedestrian pathway.

“Okay, it should be safe to talk now,” he informs.

“Yeah. I couldn’t chance that your car wasn’t bugged.”

Our strides fall in sync. “What makes you say that? What did Matteo say?”

“It’s not what he said per se. It was the questions he was asking and the way he looked at me. He asked if I knew he had a daughter, Kai.”

“That could have been just a coincidence.”

“I don’t believe in coincidences. You didn’t see how he looked at me when I said we only knew of his four sons. It was brief, but I saw it.”

“Saw what?”

“Disbelief. At the very least, I think he suspects involvement from our clan or us. He asked about my transition as chief and whether our clan are falling in line.”

“Basically trying to see if the clan respects you as our leader.”

“Exactly! He also asked if you and our brothers plan to assume your roles. He wanted to see our moves now that our father was dead. It was insulting that he thought I would tell him anything.”

“If what you suspect is true, they will be watching us.”

“It would be crazy for him not to. He’s following every single lead they have. Right now, he only has what some woman named Amerie told him. She is one of his housemaids and Aurora’s closest friend. He knows she covered for her to sneak out, so he is torturing her until his daughter returns.”

“Damn. That’s fucked up.”

“He could have let anyone of his sons meet with me today. To summon me to their home was unnecessary. He wanted me on his turf and to look me in the eye when he asked about his daughter. Not only that, I think he sent someone to bug my penthouse.”

Kai takes a seat on one of the park benches, and I join him. “Holy shite. Are you serious?”

I tell him about my conversation with Rodrigo and the man he thinks came to look at the sub penthouse but hasn’t returned. “It’s possible that he paid the front desk guy to look around my place and left bugs to listen in. Hence the reason for the way I was talking when you called me. Glad you figured out not to say anything over the phone.”

“You have to give me more credit than that, brother. With everything that you’ve said, I think you’re right. We need to do a sweep for bugs at our known residences and vehicles. You’ll have to show your face more at your penthouse so that you’re seen there if anyone is watching you.”

“I know. It’s a good thing that our clan and siblings are unaware of any of this at the moment. If they’re being

watched, it won't lead to anything. We still need to put a security detail on them, though. I'll look into that today."

"Good. Let me get you back so you can work on that. I'll work on getting us top-of-the-line sweepers and bring them over. We need to do this shit ourselves. I don't trust anyone."

"I agree. Until then, we must assume we're being followed and listened to at all times. If we find any bugs, we'll let them listen long enough to have the information we want to plant. Then we can get rid of them. I will stay at my penthouse tonight so just come over once you have the equipment."

We head back to the car so he can take me home. I need to accelerate this plan to modify our clan. It's more important than ever to assess who we can trust and to identify anyone who may have gone rogue. The Italians may have us in their crosshairs. They may have just started an unannounced war of their own.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Aurora

I t's been three days since I've seen Lennon. I haven't seen him at dinner, so I don't think he's here. He let his guard down slightly when we were in that stripper room, and I was hoping to get more of that. The longer I'm here, the more anxious I get about ever having an opportunity to escape. I didn't hear the lock engage on the other side of the door after dinner. I want to test it, but I will likely have one chance to make a run for it. I can't tip them off if they forgot to lock me in for the night. I will wait until around midnight and hope that's long enough for everyone to be in bed. They start their morning early, so I'm banking on it. I know I'm also chancing that someone remembers and double back to lock me in before then, but I have no choice but to wait.

Time drags on as I watch the clock for three hours. Once it's ten minutes until escape time, I change into a black sweatsuit and tennis shoes. I will need to be light on my feet but quick. When the time hits midnight, I blow out a cleansing breath and test the door, turning the knob slowly. To my relief, it opens. I only open it wide enough to squeeze through. I was careful to turn off the lights in my room so that I wouldn't introduce any new light into the hall. I ease the door closed behind me, ensuring I don't make a sound. I tiptoe down the stairs into the darkness, quiet but swift. I haven't been to the East Wing, but I suspect that would be the easiest to escape from since that's the forbidden area. The downside is I don't know my way around on that side.

I hug the walls as I round every corner, looking for any movement. I don't know how, but I manage to find my way to

the back of the house without being discovered. The backyard, if you can even call it that, is lit with so much light. The yard is aligned with neatly manicured trees, vines, a beautiful pool, and a stone pathway. I realize two problems. One, what if the alarm sounds when I open the door? What would be the response time? How long do I have before I'm tackled and punished? Two, if I gain access to the outside, how do I go undiscovered with all that freaking light?

Just as I'm about to open the back patio doors and make a blind run for it, I catch sight of a window ajar in the near distance. I only noticed it from the light reflecting directly off it, which is a serious risk of being seen. On the other hand, if the window is already partly pushed outward, an alarm shouldn't sound from me squeezing my body through. *I hope.*

I take another cleansing breath and just go for it. I don't have time to overanalyze my choice. Once my body makes contact with the cemented patio, I roll away from the direct light. I've found one darkened area behind some hedges. So far the odds have been in my favor. I peer around the gardens, but I don't see anyone. In the distance far beyond the trees, I see a non-gated area. This left side is slightly less lit and will have to do. I'm about to make a run for it when I hear voices to my right. Men's voices. Sounds like just two. I cling to the side of the house between two hedges, hoping not to get caught. I've come this far. The men get closer, but then they stop just short of reaching where I'm hidden.

"Lachlan says we only have to be here a short bit longer. Lennon is nowhere near the man his father was. He and his incompetent brothers don't know shit. Now taking this Valentini girl will get us killed."

My ears perk up when I hear them refer to me. I want to get a look at their faces, but I know that would be foolish.

"Maybe we should go to her father. Tell them that Lennon is holding his daughter. We'd be the heroes," the second voice suggests, seemingly familiar.

"No fucking way. He'd likely kill us anyway for being associated with the Gallagher Clan. We participated. We were

guilty the moment we did the actual abduction.”

Holy shit, I knew I recognized that voice. The second guy is Borat, so the first guy must be Danny.

“Yeah, you’re right. Do you think Lachlan can pull off getting the rest of the clan to overthrow Lennon?” Danny asks.

“I don’t know. He’s trying find a way to call a meeting without Lennon being present. That in itself will be a challenge since the Clan Chief is who has the authority to call or approve a meeting. He will likely have to reach out to the clan members individually,” Borat points out.

“I think this overthrow will only work if he and his brother Kai were absent from the picture altogether. The remaining siblings would be handicapped without their leadership. The others would have no chance to rival against us if we can get enough clan members on board,” Danny says.

“I think Lachlan is going to also reach out to some members of the other Irish families. We just have to wait a little while longer.”

“Let’s grab a beer,” Danny suggests. “He won’t be returning tonight. And I’ve already given the other men off. Told them we’d take this shift.”

That’s music to my ears. Sounds like they plan to slack off, leaving me free to execute my escape. Those fuckers are going to double-cross Lennon, and it’s too bad that I can’t stay to warn him. My freedom is at stake. Not much of it since I’m sure I’ll resume my sentence once I get home, but enough for me to appreciate.

Surprisingly, my heart aches for Lennon. If you had asked me a short week ago, I wouldn’t have thought I’d have these emotions. I don’t wish to be his captive, but I don’t want him dead either. Simple murder would be too kind. My father is not a very forgiving man. There is a reason our entire house fears him. He will likely torture Lennon for days before allowing him to die.

Once the voices fade to where I can no longer hear Danny and Borat, I make a dash for the back of the house to the edge

of the perimeter. I try to halt when I realize there's a cliff, but momentum carries me over. My hands do little to brace for my fall, my chest hitting first. I don't know how long I continue to roll toward the bottom before a large boulder stops me. Pain immediately shoots through my limbs, igniting instant regret. I didn't think my escape would be easy, but I didn't expect this. Every movement produces agony. I feel wetness along my shins underneath my jogging pants as the familiar metallic, copper-like smell assaults my nose.

My head throbs, and my chest aches. The chill in the night's air has a significant bite. I focus on tonight's full moon, willing myself to ignore the pain. I try to scale up the cliff, using my arms to pull me up, but the attempt is futile. There is zero chance that I can make it back to the house in this condition, and now an escape is no longer possible either. I rest my head against the cold rock. My eyes grow heavy, and I don't have the strength to keep fighting. I had one chance to get away, and I ruined it. Lennon or his house staff will discover I'm gone and will seek to find me. These set of circumstances will never come around again. He will make sure of it. I close my eyes until my consequences find me.



DAWN BARELY BREAKS WHEN I HEAR VOICES ... MORE LIKE commands. It's Lennon, and he's pissed. He's yelling for someone to search every inch of the property. I lazily gaze at the hues of orange and yellow sunrise, blending perfectly with the pinkish purple tones within the sky. It's so effortlessly beautiful. I try to engrain the sight into my memory, unsure of when I will see the light of day again.

"I found her," Lennon yells. "Goddammit."

My focus is still off as I feel the darkness trying to take me under again. Lennon doesn't wait for whoever has been searching with him. I catch glimpses of him inching his way down toward me, careful to respect the trajectory of the decline. When he reaches to pull me closer to him, I cry out in

pain. He curses again but stops trying to move me. He pulls out his phone and dials someone.

“I can’t move her,” he says into the phone. “Not without knowing the condition of her spine. I’m going to need a fucking gurney. Just be as discreet as possible.”

He ends the call but doesn’t utter a word to me. Instead, he leans his head against the incline of the hillside. “What the fuck were you thinking?” he says more to himself than to me. The question is rhetorical. “We were making such great progress, but now we’re back to square one.”

“You have to ...” I try to warn him, but my words just won’t come. “You have to stop ...” I try again.

“Don’t give me your defiant bullshit right now, Aurora.” He runs a troubled hand through his messy, loose hair. “I will leave your ass down here. You really fucked up this time. I didn’t want to have to hurt you—not physically anyway. But you have made that damn near impossible.”

“Stop ...” I try yet again, but it’s useless. Why can’t I get my thoughts out? Worse than that, why am I trying to save him?

If I get through this, perhaps I can exchange what I know to be returned to my father. At least give him a head start. Of everything he’s put me through, I won’t be able to keep quiet about who’s behind my abduction. Family will always come first.

More voices can be heard, causing Lennon to push off the hillside to ascend the incline. Simultaneously, I see some sort of board and straps being lowered to him. The pain has been relentless, so I welcome the chance to get off this cliff. Anything is preferable to this hell, even my captor’s beautiful prison. He log rolls me to one side to place the rigid board underneath the length of me before tying the nylon straps to the supplied openings. Last, he secures me to the board. He gives a thumbs-up, and the board immediately begins to inch up the cliff. I finally stop fighting the drowsiness. I’m safe ... from the cliff, that is. I just hope whatever fate has in store for me now, it’s not any worse than what I’ve been through these

last six or seven hours. Otherwise, why save me at all? He could have just let me die out here and then get rid of my body. I close my eyes, feeling every inch of the rough terrain beneath the thin surface of the board.

I let go and let the darkness consume me.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Lennon

I'm fucking livid. I want to fire the entire goddamn staff. The first act of incompetence is not ensuring that Aurora's door was locked. Then she manages to slip by my security? What if we were under attack? I pinch the bridge of my nose. This is unreal.

"I can't apologize enough, sir," Oisín apologizes for the umpteenth time. "I'd retired for the night."

"This is not on you," I reassure. "It was the job of the house staff to ensure that her suite was secure before going to bed. And let's not get started on the security. Where the hell was everyone?"

"Cormac reported to me that they found a window that had been left open. That has to be how she slipped out without the alarm sounding."

"Fucking Christ. More incompetence. How did it get left open? Didn't it initially sound whenever it was first opened? It should have alarmed and continued to do so until the motherfucker was closed."

"That window didn't have a sensor. It was somehow missed during the security installation. As head of your security, I take full ownership."

That was a serious ball drop on his part, but he is so loyal I don't have the will to yell at him. I just need to fix this mess. "Oisín, this could have been deadly. If anyone can just slip past my guards, they could easily gain entrance into the house. That's the most troubling. This can't happen again."

“No, sir. I will make the necessary changes. I will handle it.”

I go over to my wet bar and pour myself some whiskey. I leave for a few days and things go to shite. Not to mention it's still the matter of what I'm going to do with Aurora. She is vital to my plan, but I can't let her get away with this blatant rebellion. I thought we were making progress. The fucking paramedics are seeing to her in her suite. They insisted on taking her to the hospital, but Oisín shut that request down. I will bring the doctor here if necessary. Now I just have to ensure they don't talk. Aurora is proving to be more trouble than she's worth. I slam back the contents of my tumbler before heading to check in with the paramedics.

When I reach her room, I find Aurora still passed out. I'm sure the paramedics have questions about the locks on her door, but they won't ask them.

“What can you tell me?” I ask, getting straight to the point.

“She'll need to go to the hospital,” the older one says as he packs up his bag.

I get in his face, my nostrils flaring. “That's not what the fuck I asked. Don't make me break your face.”

“Lennon, don't,” Oisín cautions, appearing suddenly in the doorway. “Sorry, sir. They're just trying to help.”

He's never questioned me before. I have a lot of respect for him, but he's crossing a line that he won't be able to come back from if he doesn't watch it. “Walk away, Oisín, before things become strained between us. And don't you ever test my authority again.” My voice booms around the room.

He gives me a slight chin tilt before backing out of the room. I turn my aggression toward the paramedic who dares to think he can tell me what to do.

He begins to ramble, finally figuring out his loose tongue wasn't the move. “Uh...” he stutters. “She has a concussion and suspected fractured ribs and left ankle fracture. We wouldn't know without the assistance of radiology for an x-ray.”

“Well, what are her options? Because short of bringing a doctor here, the hospital is not happening.”

“There isn’t much to be done for the concussion or the fractured ribs—just rest and ice,” the younger blond guy says.

“And for the ankle fracture?”

“We’re not sure if it’s broken. If she were awake, we could assess if she could bear any weight on it. If she can maintain some mobility to bear weight, it’s likely a sprain. With a fracture, it will be nearly impossible. The bruising for both is about the same,” the older one explains. “Either way, she’s going to be in pain with the ribs. We don’t have prescriptive authority, so we can’t prescribe her anything.”

“The meds won’t be a problem.” Drugs are never a problem, but I keep that to myself. “Do you know who I am, or better yet ... what I am?” They both shake their head, the fear in their eyes hard to miss. “I’m head of my Mafia clan. This visit here today didn’t happen. Understand?”

“Understood,” the blond is quick to say.

“Good. You’re free to go after I get a picture of your driver’s license. If my clan or myself have to come find you for opening your mouth, you or your family won’t like what that looks like.” I take the picture and then pass his license back to him. I have something else in store for the older one who was slow to speak up. “What is your name?” I ask him.

“Daniel,” he answers reluctantly.

“Daniel, you’re not so fortunate. I need you to report back here twice a day to look after her. As long as you do what you’re told and don’t open your mouth to anyone, you and your family will make it through this. Don’t make the mistake of thinking I can’t find you or think I won’t know if you squeal. The risk is not worth it.”

I summon Oisín. I know he is just past the door—just out of sight. “Get him out of here.” I gesture toward the young blond whose name read Aaron on his license. I turn my attention back to Daniel.

“What about my job?” he asks.

“Not my problem,” I snarl. “Figure it the fuck out and just be here at seven o’clock in the morning and again at seven at night by any means necessary. It’s not my goal to bring harm to you or your family, but I will do what’s necessary to ensure that she heals without the threat to my privacy.”

His shoulders drop in relief. “I get it,” he assures. He hands me his license without my asking so I can take a picture. “I will be by before and after my shift. I promise not to say a word to anyone.”

“Make sure your coworker doesn’t either. I won’t take the time to decipher who’s at fault.”

“Understood.”

I leave the room, and he knows to follow. I escort him to Oisín, who just saw his coworker out. I head to my office to pour myself another shot of whiskey before heading back to Aurora’s room. I settle into the chair in the corner with a direct view of her bed. She better rest while she can. When she awakes, she will have hell to pay. I haven’t been able to calm down. The shite with the paramedics put us all at unnecessary risk if my threats fell on deaf ears.

I check stocks and encrypted messages related to my *inherited* businesses. Fiona came to check if Aurora needed lunch but quickly turned away when she saw me sitting in the corner. They’ve all been trying to avoid my wrath, but it’s coming, and there won’t be a single fucking place they can hide. Two hours in and Aurora begins to stir. I watch as she attempts to sit up and then aborts that plan as she groans in pain. I go to her, sitting at the edge of the bed.

Her eyes widen at the sight of me. “Welcome back to hell, sweetheart,” I greet as condescending as I feel. She groans again but likely not from the pain this time. “You’ll pay drastically for that little stunt you pulled.”

“Please,” she murmurs.

“Your pleas won’t save you,” I promise her. “My patience has officially run out. That means I will be moving your

timeline up, and I'm going to start by fucking that ass of yours," I sneer.

"You're in danger," she says, forcing herself to sit up, completely ignoring my very real threat.

I call bullshit, but I will let her get whatever it is she has been trying to get off her chest. It's just going to make her punishment that much more severe. Nobody jerks me around without paying the price.

"What the hell are you talking about? What danger could you possibly know about?"

"Lachlan." She manages to get out between pants. That gets my fucking attention. How would she know the name of one of my clan members?

"Spill, what do you know?"

"This pain," she says nearly in tears. "It hurts to breathe."

Fuck! I didn't plan on giving her shite right away. I wanted her to endure the fruits of her attempted escape. "Sit tight," I say as I storm off to my room.

I dig through the medicine box that I keep on the shelf of my closet until I find the Vicodin. I stop by the kitchen to grab her a glass of water and an ice pack before I head back up. I pass her one of the pills and the water first. She drinks it all, then I raise her sweatshirt to speed things along. The angry black and purplish bruising is humongous along the right side of her ribs. I'm used to bruising, but it looks unnatural against her small, fragile frame. I place the ice and hold it there. She pants harder and tries to escape the bite of the coldness.

"Don't you dare fucking move," I command. "You did this. Do you know how much risk you put everyone in? I had to threaten the fucking paramedics to keep quiet."

She places her petite hand over mine, but she stops trying to push it away. She closes her eyes, likely going to that place she escapes to in her mind. No words are exchanged for the next five minutes or so, and I don't trust myself to address her before she's ready. My anger is fueled even more by what she

could possibly reveal to me. Has she ever met Lachlan? She opens her eyes, finally ready to speak again.

“What about Lachlan?” I start.

“He’s planning a mutiny. He’s trying to get your clan to turn against you so he can take charge.”

“That’s a serious accusation. Where would you get such an idea?” I’m still trying to hold out that she’s lying— that maybe she somehow knows he’s Irish Mafia and just trying to throw out a name and hoping that it works. What motivation would she have to share if it were true, especially after trying to escape? Am I just supposed to believe she has my best interest at heart now?

“I overheard Borat and Danny when I slipped out of the window. I was hiding in the bushes so they didn’t see me.”

“Who the hell is Borat and Danny?”

“The two men who took me,” she says.

I can feel the blood drain from my face. She’s talking about Liam and Declan— two of my security guards.

“Tell me everything you overheard now, and I will show you mercy.” If she has anything credible, I will spare her.

“They think you and your brother Kai are incompetent and don’t know how to lead your clan. Lachlan told them to sit tight. They are trying to get the other members to overthrow you ... maybe even join forces with some of the other Irish clans. Apparently they can’t hold a meeting without you calling or approving one. They mentioned going to my father to tell them that it is you who took me.”

“God-fucking-dammit,” I yell as I push off the bed. I know that every word she speaks is the truth. There would be no way for her to make any of that up.

“Lennon,” she says much softer.

“What?” I answer with more aggression than I intended. She has managed the power of transference because she is not the source of my murderous thoughts right now.

“They want to kill you and your brother Kai. They think that’s the only way to overthrow you because your other brothers don’t know your world and wouldn’t stand a chance against them with you two gone.”

I turn to her now, allowing my anger to simmer under the surface. This question means everything, so I need her to be truthful. She could have let them carry out their plan, ensuring her freedom as a result.

I walk back toward the bed and look down at her. “Why tell me any of this, Aurora? Whether they chose to go to your father or set me and my brother up to be killed, you’d be free. Why take away your guaranteed shot at freedom?”

A lone tear runs down her cheek because she knows as well as I do that I won’t let her go even with her helping me. I’m rarely shocked or surprised by the shit people do and say, but the words that spill out of her mouth next rock me to my core. My entire world tilts on its fucking axis.

“I don’t want anything bad to happen to you. I don’t want you to die.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Aurora

I've been in and out of sleep, only waking to eat the food brought to me by Aoife and briefly to answer some questions from the paramedic guy who came to check on me. The pain and discomfort have been minimum thanks to the pain meds Lennon left with the house staff to issue to me during my meals. I haven't seen him since I shared what I overheard. He questioned why I would tell him what I knew, knowing it would jeopardize my chance to get away from here. The truth is, I do too.

My loyalty is to my family, yet knowing I was caught anyway, I couldn't allow things to play out in a way that would surely get him killed. I think back to how many times I've thought about the slow torture that would come to him at my father's hands and how justified it felt. So why did I interfere to give Lennon the best odds when the opportunity arose for this vengeance to be a reality? I could have been back home by now or at least soon, dealing with whatever consequences my father saw fit for the trouble I've caused my family. My fate could have been resumed— betrothed to Niccolò. I still need to find a way to get free because I know even with all that I've shared, Lennon will not let me go. Although not my intent, I hope my disclosure will earn me some goodwill. Lennon said he would show me mercy. My hope is that this mercy could also be extended to my family. I rationalize that if I had let things play out, Lennon would be dead, but what vengeance would erupt because of it? Who else would die as a result? Hopefully, I not only saved Lennon today but my family as well.

It's midmorning, and I need to get out of this bed. I took the Vicodin at breakfast, but the tray of food remains. I ease out of bed, careful to guard my ribs against the movement. The moment my left foot touches the floor, I instantly lift it — the pain breaks through the meds. The bathroom seems so far away. I alternate limping and hopping until I reach the tub. I've yet to use it before now, but I don't know if I can stand long enough to shower and wash my hair. The tub is encased in black marble with specks of gold. Three steps lead to this modern luxury because it's so deep. I lean over the steps to climb up knee first and rest on the tub's edge to turn the water on to draw a bath. It was a workout to get this far, so hopefully I can manage to get out once I'm done. I turn as the door at the other end of the bathroom pushes open, half expecting to see Fiona or one of the other staff.

“What do you think you're doing?” Lennon chastises, taking long strides toward me.

“Taking a bath,” I say, gesturing to the running water as if it isn't obvious. “I feel icky.”

I flinch as he nears. Is he going to hurt me now? What is the definition of mercy for a man like him?

“Aargh,” he half growls. He places a hand at my back and sweeps an arm under my legs before lifting me and setting me on the wider base of the steps.

He doesn't say a word. He digs through the fancy cabinetry that I have yet to take the time to explore. I watch in shock as he adjusts the temperature of the water before pouring some scented bath salt into the tub. He follows it up with a generous amount of silky liquid that makes bubbles. The lavender notes begin to waft in the air, and I must admit it's quite heavenly.

“You should have called one of the maids to help you if you wanted a bath,” he grunts. “I don't know why you keep insisting on being reckless.”

“I didn't want to bother them or wait on anyone,” I say.

He removes the sweatsuit I've been wearing since this entire incident happened. Surely, he can understand why I felt dirty. I raise my arms and let him undress me, but one wrong movement has me wincing as I suck in a breath between my teeth. His eyes meet mine as I work to slow my breathing.

"How much does it hurt?" he questions.

"I can feel the meds working, so the pain is much less. It just breaks through with certain movements, like when I first stepped out of bed."

"You need to stop trying to be so goddamn independent. The house staff is here to see to your needs. You're injured, so you need to let them help you. Your defiance keeps getting you into predicaments."

When he removes my panties, I look away. It feels too intimate. At least I'm off my period now. I can still feel his relentless gaze, though. He lifts me again and submerges me into the water. It's hot but not scalding. He slowly leans me back against the tub.

I can't resist a retort. "Do you really think one of the women could have gotten me in the tub the way you just did? Unless you meant Oisín or Mr. Doyle."

No way I would let either of those men assist me, but I'm making a point. His gaze snaps to mine.

"You're fucking mine, Aurora. I need you to get that because no man will ever see you naked without me making it so. You got that?"

He's alluded to his ownership before but never like this. It catches me off guard. "You can't make someone yours," I push back. "You can't actually own people."

"You can't be this sheltered and deluded," he huffs, his voice more than a little elevated.

"So if your father was able to successfully give you to Niccolò, what do you call that? Freedom? You'd be his property if I didn't claim you."

“You’re wrong, Lennon. Yes, he’d take ownership over my body and my free will, but never my mind. It’s the one thing I can control. I would never give that to someone who is undeserving—only the shell of me.”

He laughs. “Do you think he actually cares about your fucking mind? You’re a goddamn chess piece— an acquisition.”

His words hit their mark like a verbal slap. “I know my place,” I say softly. And it’s true. I’ve never felt of value to anyone other than what alliances my virginity will allow for my family. They could never fathom what it feels like to feel so insignificant. I don’t want to feel this right now.

“That’s just it. You don’t know your place,” he argues. “You still think it’s back with your family, complacent on allowing yourself to be given to Niccolò.”

“And how are you any different? You have ulterior motives of your own. Nobody actually wants me.”

He falls silent and pushes off the tub. He walks out, leaving me alone with the pain of that reality— the kind that the meds won’t help with. The tears begin to fall, and I let them. I’m so tired of trying to stay strong ... tired of pretending to be okay with my father’s plan for me. I’m tired of not experiencing life or ever feeling loved. Even with the minor acts of rebellion to get a glimpse of the world, I’ve done what was expected of me over the past twenty years. I want a chance to be free to be myself. I don’t even know what that looks like. I’m still crying when Lennon walks back in. He doesn’t acknowledge the mental wounds he just poured salt on. Bridget enters after him, carrying shampoo and conditioner and some handheld spray hose attachment thing.

“Lean back,” he instructs, his tone unwavering.

I don’t trust my voice right now. I’m doing all that I can to hold myself together in front of this man. I lean back— his eyes never leave mine as he grabs the shampoo from Bridget. He uses a hand to cup some of the water from the tub and wet my hair. He pours a generous amount of shampoo into his palm and begins to massage it into my hair. I’m sure he’s only

assisting with this chore to save the back of his maids and to keep his hired men from seeing me naked. I close my eyes as his fingertips apply pressure to my scalp. This doesn't mean anything, I tell myself. *I'm a chess piece.*

I open my eyes when I hear him tell Bridget to connect that hose thing. She attaches it to the faucet and turns on the water. He slides me forward and then leans me back with one hand supporting my head. My stupid freaking tears return as he rinses my hair because more than anything I want someone to genuinely care for me like this. I close my eyes once again—embarrassed.

“Wait in the other room until I call for you,” he tells Bridget.

A short time passes, but I know she's gone. The water continues to stream down my hair, and then it's gone. Unexpectedly, Lennon's lips gently caress mine. My eyes widen as he licks the seam of my lips. He's dropped the spray attachment into the bath water, but he still supports my head. I know this isn't real, but I allow myself to get lost in his kiss for a moment before I begin to flail. Water sloshes over the top of the tub. Lennon pulls back and stills my movement. He retrieves the spray attachment and resumes rinsing my hair as if the kiss didn't happen. He repeats the wash and rinse again, then walks over to the shower and turns it on.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“It's time for your shower. Unless you want to bathe in the dirt I just washed from your hair.”

“No,” I admit softly. I wasn't planning on washing my hair. My ribs wouldn't have allowed it. I'm forced to accept his pity or whatever this is. He's the king of whiplash.

He grabs a huge towel and sets it along the edge before lifting me out of the depth of the tub and placing me on it. He dries me slightly to prevent excess water from creating a fall hazard for us both. I'm further shocked by him when he walks us both into the shower. He's fully dressed in his T-shirt and joggers. He lowers me to my feet, and I instantly take pressure off my left ankle. He notices but begins to wash me. If I had

any inkling of dignity left, it's gone. He washes me everywhere. When he finishes, he places me where I can hold on to the travertine wall and turns off the shower.

He steps out first and removes his clothes and towels off. He wraps the towel around his waist. "Stay here until I get back," he instructs as if that was necessary at this point.

He isn't gone long, but I'm starting to tire and the meds are wearing off. Lennon returns with a new T-shirt and joggers on. He grabs another towel and steps in to dry me off now. He lifts me with his arms, but the jarring is a little more painful this time.

"Ahhh," I cry out.

"The Vicodin is wearing off?" he asks. I nod. He brings me to the room, but there is no Bridget. He must have dismissed her on his way to change because I know I heard him tell her to wait in here. "Let's get you dressed, and then I'll get you some more medicine. You need to eat something too. I'm not asking." He pulls back the covers with one hand and sets me on the side of my bed.

"Yes, sir," I answer sarcastically. Just as I was starting to appreciate his gentler approach, his jerk tendencies rear their ugly head. *He's not asking*, ugh.

"Careful, my little bird."

That's his only warning as he digs through my drawers to get me a tank and shorts—no underwear. I let him dress me—whatever is going to speed up this little dog and pony show.

"I will have Bridget bring you lunch, Vicodin, and another ice pack. I promised you mercy, and I will honor that, but don't test my patience again."

He guides my legs slowly onto the bed and then brings the covers over me. His harsh words are at odds with his actions. He leaves the room, and I'm happy for the reprieve. He's intense and invokes things within me that I'm not yet able to decipher.

I don't know how to be around him and that in itself is troubling. He has managed to slip past both my anger and fear.

He's a dangerous man, and I'm defenseless against him.

He's going to destroy me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Lennon

Fuck! She's getting under my skin, and I don't like it. Yes, I bathed her and washed her hair. I tried to tell myself that it was to assist my house staff who wouldn't possess the physical strength to support her body weight while doing these tasks. Yet a twinge of empathy presented itself when I saw her flow of tears. I've never kept a woman around long enough to experience such bullshit. There's no place in my life for feelings. Empathy gets you killed. I can't afford to let my thoughts linger on Aurora or the fucked-up cards she's been dealt. I dress in all black as my phone rings a little earlier than expected.

"It's time," Kai says on the other end of the line.

"Where?"

"Pier 6. I got the heat ready to go in my trunk."

"Good. See you in thirty."

I welcome the distraction, and it's just in time. This is what I do. Kill motherfuckers. Kai and I knew Lachlan would not go to the Italians without first gathering with the other rogue clan. They wish to overthrow me, and now they must die. This makes our job to reduce our clan numbers easy. I only want the most loyal by our side for what's to come. Rian alerted me that Lachlan reached out to him and some of the others for an off-the-books meeting. He didn't know the reason but knew it hadn't been cleared through me. Our clan knows all meetings must be arranged or approved by the Clan Chief. Anyone attending Lachlan's meeting is a traitor and must pay with

their life. I thanked Rian for coming forward and told him not to speak of it to anyone else and not to attend. From that directive, I'm sure he could conclude how that meeting would end.

I hop into my McLaren, letting the hum of speed fuel my adrenaline. They question my competence or my ruthlessness. I chuckle to myself as I switch lanes. I will send a message to the rest of the clan today to extinguish any doubts. Their families will be next. I will spare the children, but that is as far as my mercy can extend. My current penance won't be enough for the massacre I'm about to initiate. By today's end, there will be no salvaging my humanity.

I pull up next to my brother's Bugatti, far enough from the docks to be heard.

"Are you ready to do this?" I question as he leans against his trunk.

"More than you fucking know," he confirms. "I can't believe that motherfucker was plotting to kill us. Anyone in that marina deserves whatever they have coming to them."

He pops his trunk and pulls out two fully automatic M60 machine guns. Damn!

"Holy shite. You didn't come to play, brother. You brought the pigs." The M60s get its pig name from the grunting sound it makes. It has a cyclic rate of fire of about 600 rounds per minute. They won't stand a chance. We're going to spray the whole room.

"Not one body will be left standing," he promises.

We're familiar with the meeting room within the marina that they have chosen, so we quickly organize our plan of attack. We plan to storm in from two separate entry points and open fire, not allowing them to draw their weapons. Kai has staked this place out ahead of time and has counted twenty-one rogue clan members. That's more than half of our clan, but so be it. Between us both, we will take out ten to eleven each. They will never know what hit them.

We run stealthily toward our destined operation, our special forces training giving us the advantage that no sane person should ever take on. From this point on, hand signals are our only form of communication. Kai disappears around the corner to breach the marina office from the other side. Our watches are synced to tee minus two minutes to give us time to listen on the other side of the doors and assess. The second the timer reaches zero, I kick the door in and begin to fire—zero hesitation. The members in the room have no time to react. Kai and I spray the room with exact precision, executing our targets in less than a minute. Blood covers the room like a horror film, not a single life spared. Some of the fallen men are a surprise ... those that I would never expect to betray us.

“We’ve got to go, Lennon,” Kai says, bringing me back to the here and now.

I nod, and we sprint out the same door I entered. We throw our firearms back into his trunk and peel off before the cops respond. We already made prior arrangements to meet at the warehouse that nobody else knows about.

My adrenaline is still pumping when I arrive. My brother has managed to beat me here. We took different routes.

“Wooo,” he says as he exits his car. “That was so fucking exhilarating!”

I walk up to him and shake that mane of curls of his like I used to do when we were just kids. “Glad to have you by my side, brother,” I admit.

“Fucking, same!” he says. “The world is not ready for the havoc we’re about to wreak. They were probably just a tad better off with Dad.” He chuckles.

“Too bad he never got to see this callous side of you.”

“Yeah. I must admit I never wanted to be a part of this world before now. But to learn that someone has murdered both of our parents ... that lit a fire under me.”

I do worry about what this could do to his mental state. I repent— not as much to save my soul since I gave up on that a long time ago, but to keep that bitch karma at bay. If there’s a

slim opportunity to save my soul through my penance, then that's a bonus.

You have to have an outlet— a pathway for self-redemption or this world will consume you.

“Now what?” Kai asks. “We've lost more than half of our men. Excluding our brothers, we only have thirteen men remaining. Once the Russians and Italians hear of this, nothing stops them from sniffing us out. Our numbers are of no consequence to the Italians if they want to sever ties.”

“I've considered this, but it needed to be done. I'd rather ride with thirteen loyal soldiers than have to constantly watch my back with thirty-four,” I assure. “Now I will use this to add doubt with the Italians about our involvement in taking Aurora. I will go to Matteo, knowing that it will get to him anyway. I will spin it that we've been attacked. This will help to clear any suspicion that it was us who took his daughter. He will think that someone is out to get us both.”

“What if Lachlan or another one of those rogue clan members already tipped him or his family off?”

“Although we can never be too presumptuous, they'd have to be total idiots to make that their first move to overthrow me. Matteo is not a man of mercy. If that were true, he'd decimate our entire clan for the betrayal. No, they would have needed more time to figure out a way to come out of this with their hands clean. They wouldn't have risked it.”

“That's true. And I like your idea of using their betrayal in our favor.”

“If we're going to rise to the top, we have to anticipate how they think and calculate their moves. We have to always be at least two steps ahead. This positions us just right with the Russians as well.”

This gets his attention. He runs a hand through his hair, his curiosity piqued. “How so?”

Matteo will conclude from our recent incident that it has to be the Russians behind all of this. The Russians are not to be taken for granted. Although their numbers are no match for

ours, their reach can offset that if you attack them head-on. Matteo will set a plan in motion to make them pay. And this is where we come in.”

Kai grins— my devious plan already forming in his mind. “You’re one psycho motherfucker. I feel for anyone who isn’t us. We’re going to play double agents, aren’t we?”

“Yes,” I confirm. “We need the Russians indebted to us. With our reduced numbers, we can use their allegiance. We will still work to rebuild our clan, but it doesn’t hurt to have coverage from all angles in the interim.”

“How do we approach that without immediately being suspicious? Their outfit is in Los Angeles.”

“Leave that to me. We will need to let things settle here first. They will be watching us more than ever now, so it’s important not to give them anything of consequence.”

“Okay. Well, I’m going to get back. The socialite I’ve been guarding is scheduled to return from Paris with her parents tonight. I will resume life status quo until you give me another directive.”

“Talk soon, brother,” I say as I lead the way out.

I head straight to my penthouse. These next few days will be crucial. I will wait to reach out to Matteo until tomorrow. Once I cross my threshold, I must resume the act that I’m unaware my place is currently bugged. Kai and I already confirmed it that day when he returned with his sweeper. Rather than remove them and alert them that we’re aware of their presence, we opted to use them to our advantage. Let the Italians listen in so we can feed them whatever it is we decide to. The man Bobby supposedly showed the sub penthouse to was actually shown my place. I don’t think Bobby knew he was being used, but he will pay with his life all the same. He knew enough to know he shouldn’t have brought anyone into my penthouse.

The rogue clan members’ family, minus their kids, will meet this same fate. There is just no way to decipher what or wasn’t shared with them. It’s our family or theirs. I just have

to wait until the Italians and the other Irish Clan get wind of their death. I need them to believe that this is a further attack on us as a whole to clean house. The theatric performance of my discovery of their deaths will occur just under an hour from now. My telephone call to Kai will be a performance just for them— for those who are somewhere listening in. Matteo will know of this massacre and how we chose to spin it before I bring it to him tomorrow. I'm sure of it.

Now that I'm alone with my thoughts, my mind drifts back to Aurora and how this will play out for us. Rationally, I know that I should move up my timeline with her. I need her father to let me claim her as my own to strengthen our numbers, but she and I are not at a place where I can get her to keep our secret. The secret that I was the one who took her. We made real progress when she revealed what she overheard, but if I take her virginity, that progress will shatter into a million pieces. I have no other way but to make her fall for me— make her see that I'm the better choice over that other dick her father wants her to end up with.

I will make her fall for me ... I just can't fall with her.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Aurora

1 WEEK LATER

I t's been another week since I've seen Lennon—no more special baths or hair washing. Instead, I had to use the crutches given to me and the wooden bench in the shower. It took some getting used to, but Daniel, the paramedic, showed me how to splint it to lessen the discomfort. I finish my dinner early as I'm not all that hungry from the very filling lunch. I know I have about thirty minutes before Mr. Doyle comes to escort me to my room, so I decide to explore a bit before he comes. I know not to venture over to the East Wing again, but I'm curious to see what's in the basement— maybe a theater, gym, or even an indoor pool. I tuck both crutches opposite my fracture ribs and hop down each step. When I reach the bottom, I'm winded. It will be a bitch getting back up, but maybe Mr. Doyle would let me watch a movie if there is a theater. I've already read the few books left in my room. The how-to books on crocheting and knitting help pass the time, but it's nothing I plan on trying.

The first door I come to is cracked open. I startle at the sound of loud gurgling and choking. I know I should turn back around as fast as these crutches will allow me, but my curiosity wins out. I'll just sneak a peek, careful not to make a sound. I stick my head through to get a better view, and I'm not prepared for the visual I find. A man is in a chair tilted at an angle with a cloth over his face. His feet and arms are bound to the chair. Another tall man stands over him, pouring copious amounts of water over his face as he squirms and fights to breathe. Oisín stands behind the man, witnessing all of this but is doing nothing to stop it. I feel for the man being tortured, but I need to get the hell back upstairs. I don't want to be another witness to this. I'm about to back away when suddenly the man being drowned is given a reprieve. His chair lands on all fours, and the cloth falls away. My mouth falls open, and an uncontrollable gasp escapes. I try to back away, but trip backward over my crutches instead.

“Stop!” I yell as tears spring from my eyes, my ass on the floor. Why is that man doing that to him, and why is Oisín allowing it?

“Goddamn, how much incompetence am I going to have to keep dealing with?” he yells. “Unstrap me!”

Oisín immediately begins to do as he commands. “Sorry, sir. I will find out why she wasn’t secure in her room,” he promises as he undoes all the restraints. “Apollo, you’re dismissed,” he tells the Paul Bunion-looking guy.

“Not good enough,” Lennon booms. “Fire whoever is fucking responsible for her not being in her room right now.”

“Yes, sir,” Oisín says as he steps over me still on the floor followed by Paul Bunion on his heels.

I’m still crying when Lennon reaches me. His arctic gaze bores into me. He is beyond pissed. He reaches down for me, and I curl into a ball to fend from any potential blows that may come my way. I’m shaking uncontrollably.

“I’m not going to hit you, Aurora,” he says as I wait for the strike that never comes. “Not that your noisiness doesn’t deserve it. I would never hit a woman in anger. Even I have my limits.”

He lifts me off the floor and carries me farther into the torture chamber before setting me onto the chair he was just in. My eyes widen. I shake my head in a silent plea.

“Relax. I’m not going to waterboard you either,” he growls.

So that’s what they were doing to him. “Why were you letting them do that to you?” I ask, my lips still quivering.

“I’ll ask the questions here,” he deflects. “Why are you crying? Why are you so concerned?”

“It scared me,” I admit. “I thought that those men who wanted you dead sent someone to drown you— all the while Oisín just watched.”

“And why would you care?”

“Maybe because I’m not a psychopath. I wouldn’t want to see anyone murdered in front of me.”

“Do you really want to lie to me right now, A mhuirnín? The next lie that comes out of your mouth is going to cost you something,” he threatens. “And before you open your mouth ... know I’m not in a very forgiving mood tonight.”

“What delusion do you want me to pacify, and I’ll just say that,” I respond defiantly. I don’t know why seeing him defenseless was so triggering, so how can I tell him what I don’t know?

He growls once more before charging at me. In an instant, my chair is tilted back to a similar position I just witnessed. He slides my ass to the edge. He pulls at my sweatpants, and I immediately try to stop him. I’m no match for his strength, though. My sweatpants and panties are stripped from my body with minimal effort. *My time is up*. I know he is just seconds from stealing my virginity, and I’m petrified.

“Please don’t,” I squeal. “You promised.”

“I’m not going to fuck you—not yet,” he answers, cryptically. “But you will pay for lying to me.”

Crouching before me, he lifts my legs over his shoulders before I can even blink. Holy hell, he’s strong and agile. With my sweatpants and panties gone, my bare pussy is lined up with his face. I fall back against the chair, bracing for him to take me into his mouth, but there is a pause. Why aren’t I putting up more of a fight? I close my eyes, but he isn’t having that. He commands me to open them.

“You’re going to watch every second of me devouring this sweet pussy. I want you to see how greedy my tongue has been waiting for this very moment.”

“You can’t do this.” I don’t even know what the hell I’m saying. He didn’t ask me a question. He was giving me an order he intended for me to follow. He confirms my thoughts with a chuckle. My permission is not needed because I’m at his mercy.

The first lick to my clit has me buckling before he even gets into it. The sensation isn't like anything I've ever felt. I wasn't ready. He tightens his grip on my thighs, and this time, he latches onto my nub.

"Ahhhh," I cry out. He begins a skillful tempo of licks and nibbles. The tremor of my legs is uncontrollable. I can't reach his long caveman-like hair, but I need something to hold. I'm coming undone within his grasp. He swirls his tongue around my clit once more before he explores my depths. Every plunge of his wicked tongue inside me makes it impossible to focus. His back flexes beneath my calves as he pushes his tongue farther inside. I know this isn't right, yet I can no longer hold on. My head falls back while my body writhes from his oral assault. His mouth is insanely talented, and all I can do is ride the wave of my first orgasm as he rips it from me.

"Lennon ... oh God!" I moan his name like a woman possessed, but he doesn't stop. He sucks every last drop until a second orgasm rolls into the first one. Euphoria takes over, and I feel like I'm falling. It's all too much. Suddenly, something wet drizzles down my folds. It's his damn saliva. Did he just spit on me? The dirtiness of it revs up the dissipating ache—snowballing into a sensation that can't easily be put into words. He sucks my spit drenched pussy with fervor, and stars explode behind my eyes when yet another orgasm chases down the first two. I knew he was dangerous, and this proves it. I shouldn't be enjoying any of this, but my body has a mind of its own.

"I'm growing to like my pussy just like this," he professes.

"Oh yeah. And how's that?" I ask breathily.

"Virginal. I like that no other man has had the pleasure of tasting this sweet pussy."

He eases my legs down, but I swear I can't move. I just had three amazingly perfect orgasms. I've gotten myself off before by experimenting with my fingers, but what he just accomplished doesn't even compare. That was another level of coming that I've been missing out on until now. This man will totally wreck me.

“So what lessons have we learned?” he asks like he didn’t just have my pussy in his mouth. Like he didn’t just shatter my world with his tongue. I shake my head as to clear it. Surely, he doesn’t expect me to form a coherent thought after that. I’m an abyss of emotions, and I don’t trust myself to speak. “Guess you’re too euphoric to talk. Next time, it will be my cock. You won’t have words then either.”

And just like that, my vagina aches for another go. I’d be lying if I said my curiosity wasn’t piqued. What would sex with him be like? His masculinity is spell-binding, and I don’t doubt he has many more tricks in his arsenal. I stare at his lips with a newfound appreciation.

“Keep staring at me like that, A mhuirnín, and you’re going to get another taste of my cock.”

“That doesn’t scare me,” I reply brazenly, surprising even myself. Not Lennon, though. A glimmer of amusement sparkles in his eyes. Gone is the anger I saw before. Only lust remains.

“Tasting your cunt was something I could no longer stave off. I’ve thought about it nearly every day. Don’t tempt me with the pleasure of having you suck my cock again unless you’re ready for me to call your bluff. It’s only a matter of time, little bird. Your body will crave me until that sweet pussy of yours gives in. You can keep fighting it, or you can acknowledge the inevitable.” He gets off his knees and takes a step back. “You’re going to beg me to fuck you, and when you do, I’ll be waiting to oblige.”

I note his warning. It’s full of confidence and depravity. I don’t want anything from him ... okay, maybe that tongue again. That’s the farthest I can let things get. My loyalty still belongs with my family; therefore, my virginity doesn’t belong to me. It belongs to the man they wish for me to wed.

“I won’t ruin tonight’s endeavors, but come tomorrow, you and I are going to talk and I will expect the truth,” he says ominously. “Tonight, you have cost someone their job and should not be taken lightly.”

His ability to revert to seriousness cuts through my orgasmic fog. I forgot all about him instructing Oisín to fire whoever was responsible for letting me wander down here. Who did I cause to lose their job? Ugh, the euphoria is replaced by regret. I'm starting to learn that someone always pays. My insubordination has not been free—the debt has just been passed on to another undeserving soul. How is the house staff going to treat me now? I was just starting to gain their trust. Now, Fiona won't be the only one who hates me.

“I apologize, Lennon,” I try. “Please don't fire anyone on my behalf. I promise not to make any more trouble. Dinner finished ...”

He doesn't let me finish my explanation.

“Too late,” he says, leaving me in the chair, naked from the waist down.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Lennon

I enter my family's vacation home in Avalon, New Jersey, located on Seven Mile Island. My sister, Aisling, and my brothers Fergus and Flynn chose to move here when our father died. The memories in our childhood was too much—more so for our sister. Our father was overly protective of her, much like Matteo is with Aurora, but Aisling was his princess. Being closer to the beach has given her some reprieve, but she still took his death the hardest. The twins, Fergus and Flynn, are much harder to read. They agreed to move here with her, but I'm sure they're ready for a life of their own that doesn't involve babysitting our sister. Their interest is in architecture, and they're currently in the initial stages of building some masterpiece for themselves. Our clan needs them, but I don't know if forcing them to be a part of this world is the best idea. If given a choice, would I have chosen this life?

I enter the foyer of our Mediterranean-style home. It's everything my home isn't. The entire living space is white and airy, allowing plenty of natural light to filter through. The archways and vaulted ceilings are numerous with tantalizing vistas of the ocean. This home has three floors and makes for a great getaway for my siblings. Although they are two and a half hours from New York and from where we conduct most of our business, they still need to be aware of what really happened to our father and to be on alert. I couldn't insist that they have a security detail without explaining why.

I saw Kai's Bugatti parked out front, so I know he's already here. I walk toward the backyard since Fergus informed me that he was grilling some steaks, so we'd meet by

the pool. As soon as I push the sliding glass door open, the smell of the ocean becomes even more pronounced. The afternoon air is crisp with just enough chill to need a hoodie still. The guys are all sitting around the firepit throwing back a bottle of Guinness, even my baby brother. I didn't expect him to be here. He's a law student at Columbia University and is the most removed from all of this. I planned to arrange a separate meeting with him because I wasn't sure his schedule or studying would allow him to get away for the weekend.

"Callum," I acknowledge as he gets up to give me a hug. I'm not generally a hugger, but I welcome his embrace. I smile at his enthusiasm, his innocence evident.

"Look, the moody son of a bitch actually smiles." Fergus grins.

"You know that by saying that, you're referring to our mother as a bitch, right?" I deadpan.

"And he's back." Flynn laughs. "That was short lived."

"It's just a saying," Fergus defends. "Relax, brother."

"Get his ass a beer," Kai suggests with a smile of his own.

Flynn grabs another bottle of Guinness from the ice cooler next to the patio sectional and passes it to me.

"Where is Aisling?" I question.

"Oh, I didn't know if you wanted her down here for whatever you've come to tell us," Fergus replies.

Our baby sister is so sheltered from everything, so it would make sense that they'd think to leave her out of this. "This involves her too," I enlighten.

Callum pats me on the back. "I'll grab her. Take a load off."

I take a seat on the far end of the sectional, and Fin and Fergus join me. Kai grabs a couple of chairs from the table by the grill. I wait until Callum returns with Aisling, and they both have a seat. I take a generous swig of my beer.

“What’s going on, Lennon?” Aisling asks. “This doesn’t seem like a casual visit.”

“That’s because it’s not,” I confirm. The tension in the air is palpable. My family knows I wouldn’t waste their time with bullshit. “To my knowledge, none of you are in immediate danger, but what I’m about to share with you can’t leave this backyard. Not to even discuss among yourselves. Is that clear?”

“You’re scaring me, Lennon,” Aisling admits.

“Did I make myself clear?” I ask again, my tone much firmer than the first time. I don’t continue until I get a resounding yes from each and every one of them except Kai, who already knows what this is about.

“All of our lives depend on your silence,” Kai reiterates. “You never know who’s listening or connected to who. After Lennon shares what he’s about to say with all of you, it will be important for you to carry on as you normally would.”

Their silent nods indicate they are ready for me to continue. Kai instinctively knows how to better communicate with our siblings—the finesse needed.

“Our father wasn’t shot during a robbery at that convenience store,” I start. “He was murdered.” I watch as their individual expressions morph into surprise, anger, shock, and every emotion between.

I explain the details as they happened that night, including why we were at that hotel to begin with. I share what he revealed about our mother without exposing his suspicion that this was about power and not to let *them* get it. I don’t share that his dying wish was for me to gather all of them and for us to rise in power. I don’t share what I’ve already put into motion to do just that.

“Why the lies then, brother?” Fergus asks, shaking his head.

“For the same reason I’m insisting that you keep quiet now,” I say. “We can’t seek vengeance in a blind rage. Who ever is responsible for our parents’ deaths needs to think they

got away with it. They need to let their guard down. And in order for that to happen, everyone needed to believe the story I supplied about our father—especially his family, in case anyone was watching.”

“So why tell us the truth now?” Flynn asks.

“Enough time has passed. I never planned to keep you in the dark indefinitely. The less you knew the better, but I realize now you need to know enough to be on guard to protect yourselves. I’m putting a security detail on each of you.”

“Is that really necessary?” Callum asks. He looks like he is prepared to say more, but my glare silences him.

“Did you all hear what I just fucking said?” I’m trying not to grow anymore agitated. They’re clueless on the threats of our world—the one they’re linked to regardless if they want to be or not. “Someone or multiple someones plotted to take out our parents. Yes, mam was eighteen years ago, but our father thought it was relevant enough to share as he was bleeding out in my arms. We have no fucking idea who did this or if they’re done. As Clan Chief now, I have a duty to protect my family and our clan. That’s one less goddamn headache if I at least know that my family has security in my absence.”

“Sorry, brother. You’re right,” Callum apologizes.

“Is there anything we can do?” Fergus asks. “I know you, and you’re not going to let someone just get away with killing our parents.”

“I already stated what I needed from all you. Nothing! Carry on like you have been. I only shared this information so you could understand the need for the security.”

“We can do that,” Flynn assures. The group of them nods in agreement.

“Remember. After tonight, don’t even discuss this among each other. The conversation needs to be dead.”

“We understand,” Flynn says, answering for everyone again.

I have one more piece of business to handle. I discussed it briefly with Kai so he is aware, and we're on the same page. "Aisling, you and I need to talk. Let's head into the house."

She looks at her brothers but doesn't hesitate to get up. I nod to Kai, ensuring he knows not to let anyone else in the house. She follows me into the formal living room in the front area of the house. Her fingers interlock the way they do when she's nervous. Good to know I can still read her tells. It makes it easier to decipher whether she is lying to me.

"Sit," I order.

She tucks her belted, dark-green dress beneath her as she sits, crossing her legs at the ankle. My sister is the epitome of elegance and grace. My father saw to it. She has been groomed to be the perfect wife from birth, but I can't think of a single man worthy of her.

"What did you need to talk to me about?" She is still fidgeting.

"Are you still pure?" I ask, getting straight to the point. This isn't the conversation I want to be having with my sister, but it's necessary.

"If you're asking if I'm still a virgin, the answer is yes. I know the rules."

"Not just a virgin, Aisling. I mean pure in every way. You and I both know there are things that men and women can do besides vaginal penetration—anal, oral, any of it."

"I know the rules, Lennon. Father has already given me this spiel. He explained the time would come for me to marry someone of his choosing. And that I needed to remain pure for my husband. I know the job is now yours to choose, so you don't have to worry that I will forget my duty now that our father is dead."

She tilts her head down to hide from me. I fucking hate the guilt that gnaws at me because she is absolutely right. The duty to arrange her marriage is now mine, yet I don't want her to continue to be caged the way she has been—the way Aurora was.

“Look at me, Aisling. Can I trust you to honor that commitment?”

She looks up at me, and the tears threaten to fall. The heart that I thought was long frozen aches. This softness is reserved only for my family, but I still fucking hate it. I thrive with my usual numbness.

“Of course, brother. I know what is at stake. I’ve never given this family a reason not to trust me, yet I’m not allowed to be in public on my own— not allowed to make friends. It’s a lonely existence.”

I sit beside her and run several hands through my hair—unsettled by the doubt coursing through me. I said that I was going to be my own man. That means choosing how I’m going to lead. I’m not obligated to honor the same traditions and rules as my father. He wanted this family to rise to power with me at the helm, and I get to decide what that looks like. I do trust my sister. It’s just the other fuckers in this world who I don’t trust.

“Okay,” I answer finally.

“Okay?” She turns to me confused.

“I trust you, Aisling, so I’m willing to make some changes, but it won’t come without a sacrifice on your part.”

“What are the changes? And what do I have to do?”

“From this moment on, you will be free. Free to come and go as you please just like Fergus and Flynn. This means you’re free to make friends, go shopping, dinner, whatever you want to experience. You can even get your own place if you want.”

“What’s the catch?” she asks, hesitatingly. “That all sounds too good to be true.”

“I do have conditions,” I admit. “In addition to the security detail, you will have a bodyguard.”

“What’s the difference?”

“The security detail will mostly stay out of the way, only intervening when needed. They protect from the shadows, keeping a safe but enough distance not to impede with your

life. The bodyguard assigned to you will damn near be attached at your hip. He will be an inconvenience because he will never be more than an arm's length from you. He will be privy to every conversation and every interaction."

"It's the sacrifice part you were talking about."

"Yes. But I have a few more conditions," I add. "No boyfriends, and I require that you learn household chores. You may never be expected to do them as a wife, but I want you to at least know how."

"Why no boyfriends?" she asks, skipping right over the chores expectation. "I've never had one. Shouldn't I before I'm expected to wed."

"No," I answer firmly. "There is no need for unnecessary risk. Boyfriend equals temptation, and I don't trust any fuckers to be disciplined enough to keep their hands off you. This is nonnegotiable. The choice is yours. Things can just stay as they are if my terms are not satisfactory to you."

"I didn't say your terms were unsatisfactory. It was merely a question. I will do whatever is expected of me, but can I make one additional request?"

I don't fucking negotiate, yet here I am trying to be considerate for my sister. Unlike Aurora, she isn't mouthy or disobedient, so that goes a long way in her favor. "Spill it," I say, still feeling my patience wearing thin.

"Our restaurant," she mutters. "The Irish one."

"What about it?"

"I would like to help run it in some capacity. The chores part isn't a problem because I've already been helping out where I can at home to keep from being so bored. That includes cooking. I found a bunch of our mother's old recipes that I've been practicing. I'd love to try them at the restaurant."

I admit that I'm impressed by the initiative that she has already shown. She deserves to be given a chance to be more than a vessel for her virginity. I want her to have a real opportunity to enjoy the things she's passionate about.

“Honor and commit to all that we’ve spoke on and I will make that happen. You will need your own phone now. Once I get your security detail and bodyguard, we will move forward. And, Aisling ...”

“Yes?”

“Don’t let me down, and don’t ever not answer your phone.”

She promises, but I’m already halfway back to the backyard. I need to say bye to my brothers and make sure they remember tonight’s conversation never happened. I told Fergus and Flynn that I’d be in touch in regard to my upcoming changes with our sister.

The ride back to Staten Island is ample time for thoughts about my own situation. Things can’t remain as is with Aurora. I need to push forward, always moving forward, so I need to determine what that should look like.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Aurora

Today has been somewhat productive. I'm getting around much better on my crutches now that I can bear some weight on my left ankle. I manage to do a load of my own laundry and prepare myself some lunch. The house staff has been standoffish these last few days, with good reason. Because of me, Mr. Doyle was fired. Mona has been moved up to take his position. I've tried to communicate with her a few times to offer my help in the kitchen, and she's ignored me each time. Fiona really didn't need excuse not to like me, but even she has been noticeably absent from dropping off fresh towels for me. Bridget has taken over this task, but a half smile is the only thing she has managed to muster when she has been forced to make eye contact with me.

The staff has not been consistent with letting me out of my room, so I've missed some meal times and, worse yet, my pain meds. I've got my hands on some ibuprofen that was conveniently left out on the kitchen counter—my guess is courtesy of Bridget. Everyone else hates me. During lunch, I hoarded as much food as I could to bring back to my room—mostly deli meats and fruit. I suspect I won't be let out of my room for dinner. After my laundry, I spent the remaining chore time selecting some poetry books to take back to my room. This isolation and starvation tactic will have to end once Lennon returns. Surely, they wouldn't want him to know they've been mistreating me. And I won't be the one to tell. I don't want anyone else to lose their job because of me. Mr. Doyle was punished for something he shouldn't have— all because I wanted to be nosy.

The locks were engaged on my door at promptly four o'clock. And as I suspected, I didn't hear the familiar unlocking at seven fifty-five, nor did anyone bring me dinner. I grab a couple of bananas from my stash and sit back on the bed, prepared to read *Pride and Prejudice* that I took from the West Wing's library when something silver and shiny on the chair in the corner catches my eye. It seems out of place since I haven't noticed it there before. I ease out of bed to investigate, choosing to hop over rather than grab the crutches from next to the bed.

I sink down into the chair, baffled. It's a fucking iPhone ... and it's unlocked. I look around the room for cameras. I've never cared much before. I gave up on privacy and dignity a long time ago in this place. I didn't even consider the potential for cameras in this room when I attempted my grand escape. But now, I question whether I'm being tested. Lennon carries two phones. Could one of them have slipped from his pocket when he was last sitting here? *It's not likely*. He's too meticulous and hates incompetence. Even if he did, he would have noticed it long before now. It has to be a test, but why? Curiosity wins out. I have to see if I can make a call out. Surprisingly, my father isn't my first choice. I can't face him just yet.

I dial the only other number I have memorized besides my father and brothers. I call Amerie. Her phone rings exactly three times before an unfamiliar male voice answers.

"Hello? Hello! Who is this?" The tone is harsh and unwavering. "I'm going to trace this call. Is this Aurora?"

A lump forms in my throat as my hands shake. The locks begin to unlock in the near distance. I throw the phone, the fear of being caught adding to my overwhelming dilemma. I should hang up the phone and try again later. Fuck! I reach for it just as Lennon enters the room. He locks eyes with me and then the phone. The voice filters through the receiver still trying to decipher if it is me on the other end. Lennon's long strides eat up the distance between us in mere seconds. His eyes are murderous as he ends the call.

“Do you have a fucking death wish?” he booms. “I show you mercy and this is how you thank me?”

He snatches my tank and drags me toward the bed. He picks me up in a single lift and tosses me to the bed, causing me to cry out from the pain. Without the Vicodin on board, it's more than I can handle. I managed to curl up in a ball to embrace the blows I believe to be coming my way. I begin to sob uncontrollably, deeply triggered by what I know is coming next. I'm no stranger to a man's fist or the pain that lingers behind. I'm no stranger to the bruises left where nobody can see. I'm no stranger to being forced to keep quiet to keep the peace in my house ... to keep my father from killing my brother, Antonio.

“Please don't hit me,” I wail, my body shaking with unbridled fear.

“Look at me now. I'm all out of favors. You don't get to ask me anything.”

I don't want to look at him. I don't want to see his arctic, hardened gaze. I can feel the coldness of his words penetrate to the bone. I know following his command won't save me from his wrath, but I do as he says. I look at him, not surprised by what I see. Disappointment and rage peer back at me, his forward head scrunched with disapproval.

“I'm sorry,” I stutter as the pain still reverberates through my ribs. I splint with my hand, desperate to manage the ache. “I'm so sorry. I knew it was a test, but I had to know.”

He pulls me closer to the edge of the bed, and I squeeze a panting breath through my teeth.

“What goddamn test? Who did you call?”

“I saw the phone over there on the sofa. I knew it was purposely left there and that you or your security was watching to see what I would do, but I had to check on Amerie.”

“Who did you call?” he asks again, his voice even angrier if that's possible.

“Amerie. I swear. Only she didn’t answer. Some guy has her phone?”

He leans down closer until he is nose to nose with me, his teeth gnashed. “You got one time to get this right so it behooves you not to fucking lie to me. Had she answered, what were you planning to tell her?”

I won’t lie. I’m damned if I do, and I’m damned if I don’t. Things are already escalating. “Honestly, I didn’t get that far. I was going to ask her if my father knew she was responsible for letting me sneak away. I couldn’t have done so without her help,” I reply, trying to create some distance between us, but he isn’t having it. “I would have tried to get her to help me get home through someone she trusted that wouldn’t rat me out to my father.”

“Are you goddamn insane or just dense? What means would she have had to find you without telling your father?”

He finally lets go of my tank, and I duck as his arms move toward my face, but he only runs both hands through his loose hair. “Don’t hit me,” I yell.

“Why do you keep saying that? I’m not going to hit you. I have other ways to punish you. Now tell me, how did you get access to this phone.” He opens the phone and looks through it. “This is Mr. Doyle’s phone!”

“It was just sitting there ... I swear.”

“How fucking convenient. Am I supposed to believe that he just came into your room and left his phone for you to find? Even being fired, he would never betray me. He knows the hell that would rain down on him and his family if he ever did that. That man was loyal to a fault. The reason he is no longer in my employ is because of you. I had to set an example for the staff when you make careless mistakes that could jeopardize my home and my plans.”

“I don’t know what to tell you. I didn’t steal the phone. I thought it was a test. I wouldn’t lie.”

“Why? Because princesses don’t lie? You’ve been a fucking troublemaker since you got here.” He raises his hand

again, and I flinch. I can't help it. "Who's put their hands on you, Aurora?"

I tense at the question. How does he know? "And remember you wouldn't lie," he throws back at me.

"How are you going to punish me?" I ask, fear still having me in a chokehold. My attempts to change the subject are futile.

"I won't ask you again."

"Good," I reply. I'd rather let him beat me than snitch on my brother. I didn't even tell my own father. "Because there is nothing to talk about."

"I'm going to play the footage. If I waste time figuring this out myself, you won't like the consequences. Maybe I should just fire the entire goddamn staff and start over."

I reach for him, unsure why, but he backs away all the same. "Please don't fire anyone else because of me." I don't care about their erected hatred for me, I just don't want to be the reason he let them go.

He pushes off the bed and storms off. He left the door unlocked, but I don't run—couldn't even if I wanted to. I can only wait until he reviews the footage. Time seems to drag on as I wait for him to return. What will my punishment be? Mid anxiety, a thought formulates that I initially didn't contemplate. Once Lennon came through that door, I was distracted on how this would play out. Amerie is in danger. I just know it. That man on the phone called me by name, and that wasn't one of our house staff. Someone took her phone, and I'm petrified that it was my father. Does he know the part she played in all of this, or is he just having her phone monitored in case I call. I pray for the latter. My father knows how close Amerie and I are. If I could reach out to anyone, he must have deduced that it would be her. I have to hold on to that narrative because the former would be devastating. She has to be okay. They just have her phone in case I call.

Lennon returns, his murderous look constant. What did he find out? "When did you last eat?" he asks as soon as he

crosses my threshold. I wasn't expecting that question. He must have reviewed the lack of activity to this room. His eyes scan past me to the half open drawer next to the bed, noticing the food for the first time. I hid it in case they came to actually do their job. I didn't want one of them to take it back from me.

"I haven't been very hungry?"

"Yet you wouldn't lie," he retorts. "Get up!"

I ease off the bed, reaching for my crutches, but Lennon has other plans. He throws me over his shoulder and tracks his way downstairs. He runs into Mona first and instructs her to gather the others and meet him in his office.

"Please don't fire anyone. I will take their punishment."

"Even if that means getting fucked?" My mouth goes dry. I'm not a martyr. I can't give him that. "That's what I thought."

He stands me in front of his desk before standing beside me with his arms folded. The maids enter his office with Mona leading them. Their panic is evident, but Mona is a little harder to read. Once they're standing front and center, Lennon reaches back and retrieves a knife from the top of his desk. In an instant, he has maneuvered behind me and now has the blade at my throat. I begin to hyperventilate, each breath allowing the knife to caress my neck. The burn ignites as a trickle of blood seeps down my neck. Oh God ... he's going to kill me and make them witness it.

"So it seems my prisoner managed to get her hands on a phone—Mr. Doyle's phone. Any of you know how that's possible?"

"I don't know, sir." Fiona is the first to speak up. "Maybe Mr. Doyle put it down somewhere, and she got her hands on it. She has been to our living room and dining room plenty of times."

"That may have been more feasible if I didn't have footage to review with my security. Don't insult my intelligence."

"Anyone else have a theory?"

The silence is deafening. Nobody else wants to speak up after hearing he has already accessed the video of the house.

“Come forward, or I will slash her neck. The blood will be on all of your fucking hands,” he threatens.

“Oh God,” Bridget cries as the tears begin to fall. “I truly don’t know.”

Aoife, Bridget, and Fiona look downright afraid. Their collective tears would be appreciated if I wasn’t about to die. My own tears run down my face and onto his hand that has me hostage and knifepoint.

“Stop your blubbering,” Mona chastises the women. “This is all her fault. How many times do we have to suffer and put up with her? Do you forget she was the one who got Mr. Doyle fired?”

I’m stunned at Mona’s lack of empathy at this moment, but even more shocked that Lennon lowers the knife in response to her rant. He still holds me tight against him with his other hand.

“Tell me, Mona. Was it under your instruction not to feed her too or to significantly reduced how much she was checked on?”

Mona opens and closes her mouth like a fish out of water.

Busted!

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Lennon

Her hand has been shown. She showed her cards the moment she encouraged Aurora's murder. I review the footage at least once a week ... more often if necessary. I long suspected that Mona was having improper relations with Mr. Doyle, but it's clear now that she loved him. She deems Aurora responsible for his departure from the house—they all do. From my perspective, she only exposed the weaknesses that were in my midst. I gave the house staff one pass, but I couldn't continue to look beyond the incompetence. Mr. Doyle was selected to lead the house. How could he if he continued to make missteps? Mona wants revenge—more so than the others. Death as a consequence is not beneath her.

“Your silence is not an answer, Mona,” I push. “And I caution you not to lie or this knife will be your fate instead.”

She raises her chin in pseudo-confidence. “I reassigned the staff,” she admits. “That ungrateful cunt deserved to be taught a lesson. Look at all the trouble she's caused.”

I sidestep Aurora and stalk toward Mona until I'm towering over her. “And so you're the boss now?”

“No, sir,” she mutters. “I've been trying to keep things afloat in Mr. Doyle's absence. I didn't feel that Aurora deserved our attention.”

“Just because you were fucking him doesn't give you the right to make decisions for this house or my goddamn staff. I didn't put you in charge!” I take another step forward as she takes a step back. “Where did she get the phone?”

“I don’t know, sir,” Mona insists.

I don’t play these games. Somebody knows fucking something, so denial is not going to save them. I yell for Oisín. When he arrives, I set my truth finder in motion. “Get Apollo and bring him down to the basement,” I growl.

“Yes, sir. Right away, sir.”

Aurora’s eyes widen. She remembers. Her silent correlation to Apollo and the basement is correct. I plan to drown the truth out of them. They need a reminder lesson in fear. The maids follow Oisín with Aurora closely behind. She keeps turning to give me pleading looks, but I’m unfazed.

“Take a seat in the chair, Mona,” I instruct. She looks up at Apollo and then back at me. For the first time since I’ve called them into my office, her mask slips, revealing her uncertainty. She knows she has no choice. She takes a seat in the chair, and Oisín immediately straps her in. Once she’s bound, I walk up to the chair and lean over to get one last look at the terror on her face. I feel absolutely nothing.

“Begin!” On my command tilts her chair back and place a cloth over face as the other maids look on.

A collective gasp sounds around the room the moment the water begins to pour. Mona flails in her restraints as she chokes on the copious steady stream of water. I let it continue for a bit before I give the hand signal to stop. Mona continues to choke.

“I will ask you again. Where did Aurora get the phone?”

“Pleassssssssseeeeeee,” she cries.

I give Apollo the hand signal to continue. Her pleads are drowned out by the water. “Last fucking chance. I know somebody knows something. If I don’t get answers, I won’t stop Apollo from killing her.”

The maids begin to cry hysterically. They know I’m not bluffing. Aurora just stands there in utter shock, eyes rimmed red with tears streaming down her face. She’s finally getting a real glance at the man I am. *Ruthless. Calculating. Merciless.*

“Stop!” Aoife speaks up. “Please.”

I give Apollo the hand signal to halt. “You better have something useful to say, or I will have Apollo drone you both for wasting my time.”

He removes the cloth from Mona’s face as she continues to sputter, her face ashen.

“Tell him, Mona. Don’t make us witness this,” Aoife begs.

“I did it,” Mona finally says, her head hung low. “Mr. Doyle left his phone with me to return, and I planted it in Aurora’s room.”

“And why the fuck would you do that? What if she had called the authorities?”

She looks up at me, remorseful. “I let my anger get the best of me. I never meant to put you or anyone in this house in danger. I just wanted you to catch her with the phone and punish her like you did to Mr. Doyle. I didn’t even plant it until I knew you were back.”

“You did more than that, Mona. You tried to starve her. You turned the entire house against her. You took authority into your own hands to punish her,” I boom. “My soon-to-be wife.”

The room falls silent at my last statement. Fiona refuses to look at me now, and Aurora’s jaw is slack with shock. They need to know that she is untouchable. Any punishment she suffers will be at my hands.

“I didn’t know,” Mona apologizes. “I swear this won’t happen again. I was hurt and angry.”

“I don’t give a gobshite about your feelings. You can’t undo what you have done.” I order Apollo to unstrap her. “Get your shite and get the hell out of here. Go be with Mr. Doyle. Take Aoife with you. She is equally as guilty. She knew you had betrayed me and didn’t speak up until now. Just go before I change my mind. And I don’t need to tell either you what will happen to you and your families should you be brazen enough to mention me, this house, or anything about my affairs. You’re both lucky I’m letting you leave with your

lives.” I shake my head in disgust. Now I have to find adequate replacements.

“Everyone! Get the fuck out of here. And if you have a problem with what just happened in this room, you can follow Mona and Aoife out the door. I will not tolerate any more incompetence or disloyalty. I won’t hesitate to end your lives.”

The maids help assist Mona out of the room. They can’t escape my wrath fast enough. Oisín follows close behind. He will ensure that they’re both escorted off the premises. I grab Aurora by the arm. “Not you!”

“You’re sick, you know that? Were you really willing to kill her in front of your staff?” The small bit of blood from the bite of my knife has since dried. It was a minor scratch.

I spin her toward me to make sure to look her in the eyes. “I don’t bluff. She only received an inkling of my mercy because she has worked for my father for so long. She let emotions dictate her actions, and I can’t have that around me.”

“That was just so cruel. You’re just like my father. I don’t know why I ever thought you were worth saving,” she yells.

I laugh at her naivety. “I didn’t ask you to save me. I don’t know why you thought you possibly could. You choose to tell me what the traitors in my charge were planning, and you think I’m indebted to you?”

“You’re putting words into my mouth. I never said that.”

“Yeah, but it’s what you’re thinking. I’ve given you too much consideration because it’s not your fault your fucking family chose to keep you sheltered. You don’t realize that I could have snapped your neck by now and buried your body where nobody would ever find you.”

“Well then just do it!” she yells. “What do I have to live for anyway? To be beaten and traded to another prison where I’m likely to be beaten more and raped because I don’t want to fuck my husband? Or should I just continue to feel guilty because my virginity is the only thing of value that my family can leverage for even more power? I don’t want that life, yet

I'm disloyal for even thinking it. So just kill me, already. Everything is my fault. Save me from myself."

She sinks to the floor and curls into a ball. I sensed her giving up when I had the knife to her throat. I didn't imagine it. She has the weight of her family on her shoulders, and she doesn't know how to deal with it. I'm going to get to the bottom of who's been beating her, but I have to put that aside for now. I know exactly what she needs. I think I've known for some time, but I had to be sure. I grab her by the shoulder and pull her to her feet.

"You don't get to fucking quit. I didn't peg you for a coward. I don't claim cowards. You crossed me, and now you get to feel my wrath—in whatever form I unleash it."

I pivot her around and bend her over my desk. She squeals when I pull her jogging pants and panties down in one swoop. I wait for her to plead with me like she usually does, but the words don't come. I push the side of her face against the desk as I free myself. Her expression is blank. She's not here with me. She has fled to the place in her mind that she uses to escape. I refuse to let her check out of this moment. I turn her around and lift her so that her ass is now sitting on the desk, my hard cock jutting between us. I grip her chin and make her look at me. We stare at each other for longer than what's comfortable. Our breaths are erratic. A lone tear falls down her cheek. She's back. I pull her closer— my dick now resting between her folds.

"You promised not to rape me," she says somberly.

"I'm not," I reassure, my tone taken down several notches.

My mouth inches closer to hers— our breaths heavy. My instinct is spot-on. She wants me ... It's her mind she has to convince. My lips caress hers soft and slow. She doesn't fight me. She grabs my head and deepens the kiss. Our tongues duel for dominance as she wraps her legs around my waist, getting even closer to my erection. I purposely let her take control of this kiss. It's what she so desperately needs. She finally pulls back and rubs her fingers across her lips, uncertain. Shame and guilt veer back at me from the depth of her exotic brown eyes.

“Sorry. That can’t happen again,” she says, more to herself than me.

“Oh, it will,” I promise. “You want to know why you can’t resist me, Aurora?”

“Humor me,” she says, crossing her arms over her hardened nipples. I felt them through her sweater.

“You’ve felt numb for so long ... going through life and always doing what was expected of you. You’ve been dying to feel human—to feel alive ... to feel seen. I’ll give that to you. You hate me and everything that I represent, but your body craves the high I provide. You could have escaped if you only let my men have their way. Deep down, you didn’t want this to end. You didn’t want to return to the shell of a life you’ve had to endure for the past twenty years.”

“You’re quite the psychoanalyst,” she retorts, but she doesn’t deny I’m right.

“Let me help you feel alive, little bird. I’ve rescued you from your cage. Come be free with me.”

“What does that even mean?” she questions.

“We will save your virginity for another day, but I have another way to set you free. Do you trust me?”

“No.”

“You will.”

I lift her off the desk forcing her legs to wrap around me tighter. I secure an arm around her waist as I spit on the fingertips of my other hand. I use that hand to smear my saliva against her asshole. She immediately tightens. Now she’s getting it.

“Relax,” I encourage. My eyes never leave hers. “Be free with me.”

My cock nudges her tight hole, and she immediately buries her head into my shoulder. “This is not right,” she says, breathing heavy again. “You just tried to drown your maid. Hell, you had a knife at my throat.”

“I never need to try anything, Aurora. I execute all intentions. I wasn’t going to kill you. I just needed them to believe I would to drill down to the truth. This is more than right. This is the start of us.”

I feel the moment she relaxes in my arms. It’s all the encouragement that I need. I push her ass down slowly onto my waiting cock. The grip is unbelievable. She bites down on my shoulder but not as an attack. She’s embracing the pain. “Arrrggggghhh,” she cries out through her bites. She lifts her head to speak. “It burns.”

Once I’m fully seated, I pause to let her acclimate to my girth. “Pain is freedom, little bird. This is you taking some of your power back. This is you letting yourself be right here with me and not in your head.” I initiate another kiss, and this time, I lead. I devour her mouth with such passion and greed, overwhelming her senses and her overthinking this. I want to release those endorphins that have never been freed. Her tongue begins to swirl around mine. There is no turning back now.

I begin to move slowly at first. I pull out and push back in. She breaks the kiss and grabs my hair this time. Each additional stroke gets easier to penetrate as she begins to relax and let me fuck her. The feeling is incredible ... so much so I know that I will be breaking my rule again. *For her*. Our eyes lock as I pump faster. Harder. My hands now grip both of her hips as I propel her savagely on my cock. Her eyes are hooded, but she doesn’t break eye contact.

“You really are mine now,” I inform her. “I’ve claimed you.”

She comes beautifully to my spoken promise, sending me right over the edge with her.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Aurora

I lean over the vanity and stare at my reflection in the mirror. I look the same yet I feel different somehow. My virginity is still intact, but my innocence is not. I'm no longer pure—far from it. I just had anal sex for the first time and am unsure how to feel. It was orgasmic at the moment—liberating even. His masculinity was all-consuming, and I admit that I wanted to be devoured by him. What does that say about me? I was supposed to be playing offense. I was supposed to be leveraging my virginity. Instead, I'm this wanton woman trying to find the regret for my actions. I'm no better than Fiona. Well, except he's hell-bent on claiming me as his own. For his own selfish reasons of course, but I don't want to think about that. I keep telling myself no harm done. I'm still a virgin for Niccolò, and I still plan to find a way back to my family.

I pull my terry cloth robe to the side and run a finger across the thin scratch along my neck where Lennon's blade grazed my neck. I was ready to let go. If he had ended my life, I wouldn't have to worry about disappointing my family. My dreams for my life are not aligned with what they want for me. I haven't spent much time in Niccolò's presence, but the little time that I have, I deduced that he is just evil. I'm per tried of what a life with him will look like. I don't understand how my father could give me to him. Do I matter that little to my family? Yet if I question their plan for me, I'm being disloyal. I owe them everything. It's just hard to accept that at times. I just want to be free. However, I know that I will never be.

I stare back at my plain face, free of makeup or anything special. I examine the bruises on my hips. Lennon is a complete asshole. *Raw. Calculating. Ruthless.* He is unapologetically himself, and I can respect that. He is who he is without consequence, and I'm jealous of that freedom to just be. When I'm with him, I indulge in the transference. He holds the key to my gilded cage, but for the briefest of moments, I feel free too. I get to pretend that the future that awaits me doesn't exist.

"Who hurt you, Aurora?" Lennon asks, appearing suddenly in the bathroom with me. I wasn't expecting to see him again this soon. I need time to process the debauchery we shared in that makeshift torture chamber of his.

"You mean besides you," I try to deflect, pointing at the bruise starting to form on my hips.

"Don't."

His tone is serious. Gone is the sexual deviant from thirty minutes ago.

"What do you want from me? You know I'm not going to talk about that. I can't."

"You can and you will, Aurora. This is not up for debate. Either tell me or I will take out your entire fucking family before they know they're under attack."

"Why would you threaten that? You don't even know who's responsible. My family isn't just some mediocre Mafia family easily destroyed. The Valentini are feared for a reason."

He stalks toward me and lifts me to place me on the vanity counter. I think he likes picking me up. It's his signature move. "I give zero fucks about your family's reputation. The Gallaghers were a force to be reckoned with before someone murdered my father. Now the world has me to contend with, and I promise I'm much worse." He traces the bruises extending to my thigh. "They're all to blame. Every. Single. Fucking. Family. Member," he emphasizes.

"I didn't tell anyone," I say, forced to defend my family.

“It doesn’t matter. It was their job to protect you. You realize I would never let anyone hurt you once I officially claim you to the world. You will have my protection. I will protect you with all I am—something your family failed to provide.”

“That’s unfair,” I tell him. I want what he says about his irrevocable protection to be true, but not at the expense of my family.

“I will ask this one last time, Aurora. Don’t make them all pay for your silence. Who hurt you?”

I don’t want to betray my family, but I also don’t want them to pay for my brother’s mistakes. While I don’t think his clan is more powerful than my father’s army of soldiers, I don’t want to gamble with any of their lives. How many of my family members could Lennon take out before he and his clan are defeated? I can’t afford those odds. I tamp down the consideration of what could happen to him during this war that would surely erupt if he tries to take on my family. His welfare shouldn’t be a consideration in snitching on my brother.

“Stefano,” I say with bated breath. Fuck!

“The fucking youngest brother?”

He is older than me by a few years, but yes. I solemnly nod, already feeling the guilt for betraying him. “Please, Lennon. He is going through a lot. He is forced to live in the shadows of our older brothers and gets no respect from our father. I don’t want any harm to come to him.”

“How often does he beat you?” Lennon growls, not giving a shit about my explanation.

“It’s only been a couple of times. It’s mostly just verbal abuse. I’ve learned the signs. It’s normally after he’s had a blowup with our father for not meeting his impossible standards. Stefano drinks to dull the pain and then he comes into my room to take his frustration out on me.”

“Why the fuck would he do that? No fucking man worth a grain of salt would ever result to this. He’s a coward—too afraid to stand up to your father, so he abuses you.”

Lennon backs away from me and begins to pace. He runs an agitated hand through his hair.

“As you so keenly spoke on before, I’m my father’s princess. Hurting me is hurting my father. I think he wants me to tell so that his retaliation is recognized, but I’m afraid of what our father would do to him—afraid of what it would do to our family.”

“I’m going to fucking kill him,” he says more to himself than to me.

“Lennon, you can’t. Please promise me. Please!”

“What makes you think you can ask me for favors? I own you, remember? I fucking destroy anyone that fucks with what belongs to me.”

I know I need to find a way to de-escalate him. It’s my fault that my brother is in harm’s way. “I didn’t belong to you then,” I try. I don’t belong to him now, but I keep that to myself. That statement wouldn’t help current matters. “I’ll do anything. Just please... don’t hurt my brother.”

He halts mid pace, his gaze snapping to mine. His strides back to me are swift with intent. He grips both of my thighs where I still sit on the vanity. “What are you proposing, Aurora? Do anything, like what?”

“My virginity. It’s yours if you let my brother be. I’ll submit.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” He squeezes my thighs with such force I cry out. “You think I want your fucking virginity in exchange for your brother’s ability to continue to walk this earth?”

I grab his wrists, and he loosens his grip. “I will do anything for my family. It’s what you want, so you win.”

He grabs my face with both hands, but not how he grips my thighs. The look in the depth of his beautiful eyes is foreign. Empathy. “I don’t want to claim your pussy like that. When I do, it will be because the inevitable has happened. You will give yourself to me because you want to. Not because you want to save your fucking deadbeat brother.”

He releases my face and looks away from me. “This is your one and only favor. I promise not to kill him. For you.”

He looks at me one last time before he exits the bathroom. I’m finally able to release the breath I didn’t realize I was holding. I slump against the mirror. Did I really just offer up my virginity to save my brother, only to have him refuse me? He said for me. I try not to read too much into that promise, but a newfound respect for Lennon flourishes. I gave him an opportunity to take what this abduction has been about—similar to when I had a chance to escape and didn’t take it. What does that mean other than we’re both fucked up? He promised not to kill my brother, and I trust he’ll keep his word, but he never promised not to hurt him. I know better than to push for that inclusion. I need to take tonight’s conversation as a win. Things are evolving between us, but to what extent still remains to be seen.

I hop off the counter and start the shower. I let the robe fall to the floor just as Lennon re-enters the bathroom. “I decided to use your shower,” he says by way of explanation. He grabs my hand and pulls me in with him.

I lean my head back into the stream, unsure how to be around him. He takes the shampoo from the built-in shelf and pours a quarter size into his palm. I think he is about to wash his hair, but he begins to wash mine instead.

“I like this haircut on you,” he mentions. “It’s more sophisticated. It fits you.”

“Thanks,” I reply. Not sure what else to say.

We indulge in the silence while he continues to wash and rinse my hair twice. “You deserve someone who will take care of your heart,” he says almost too quietly. “I can protect you. I can fuck you. But I can’t guard your heart, Aurora.”

I don’t know what he wants me to say to that. He puts the shampoo back, and showers without any attempts to utter another word. He steps out of the shower, dries himself, and then leaves me dumbfounded once again. Did he only come back to give me a warning—to tell me that he is emotionally unavailable? How am I supposed to take that? I didn’t ask him

to guard my heart or to have feelings for me. I'm not reading into anything he's said or done. His rage toward my brother earlier was about ownership. He truly believes that I belong to him. He'd have the same reaction toward any of his possessions. I'm his leverage against my father, and I do well to remember that. I finish my shower, determined to forget about this entire day. It's best to table any feeling or thoughts I have until tomorrow when I can think a bit clearer. Lennon is the ultimate mind fuck. An enigma. I can't lose sight of another way to escape.

I can't lose sight of my own plan.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Lennon

She completely fucking bewitches me! I had her. All I had to do was agree to take her virginity in exchange for sparing her sorry-arse brother. But like a fucking eejit, I couldn't because her submission wouldn't mean that I have broken her—it would be because of that fucking savior complex of hers. Every day that passes, I chip away at her armor— her resistance to me. Her body responds to me so beautifully, but it's not enough. I want her mind. Only then will I be willing to accept her virginity. I don't want her to concede to me ... I want to break her.

I sit behind my desk and power on my laptop. Control is slipping through my fingers, and it's fucking infuriating. I haven't honored any of my penances, and I haven't finished what I started with the families of the clan members we massacred. This ineptitude ends now. How can I call myself a leader without follow-through? I have to hold myself to a higher standard. Tonight is going to be a long night. I open the folder on my screen and retrieve the information I need for tonight's work. I send the information to my phone just as it rings. It's Kai.

“What's up, brother?” he says, slightly intoxicated. Loud music sounds in the background.

“What do you need, Kai?” I try to rein in my annoyance. I got shite to do.

“I'm going to ignore the attitude, brother. Just calling to see if you want to come down and join me, Fergus, and Flynn at the club.”

He's speaking of the nightclub we own in the city. We run a lot of drugs through there, but not by my hands. It's another racket that we let our soldiers manage and deliver the earnings. We don't touch any of the work ourselves. Our made men do the work, and we get paid. They get an established percentage for their efforts.

"Nah. The club is not my scene, and I don't have business there tonight," I reply.

"Come anyway," Kai insists. "If nothing more than to get some hang time with your brothers."

I know I need to put more face time in with my brothers—especially if we will likely need to bring them into our world soon. I need to assess their mental ability to handle it. I have no worries about the physical. They can hold their own.

"You know, you're right," I agree. "Give me a couple of hours. I have something to do first."

"See you at midnight, brother," Kai says before he ends the call.

I head to my room to dress in deadly black—it's what I call my attire when every article of clothing is black. Tonight will serve multiple purposes ... redemption and penance. I need to redeem myself for my latest slacking from my responsibilities and then I must honor my much-needed penance.



THE MUSIC'S BASS VIBRATES UNDERNEATH MY FEET AS I STAND at a table in VIP with my brothers.

"What can I get you, sexy?" one of the bottle girls flirts. She looks new, but I'm not here often enough to know for sure. Does she know that I'm one of the owners? She's wearing a corset, ass shorts, and fishnet stockings.

"How about a ride on my cock?" I grin. Kai and Flynn snicker at my suggestion, but Fergus is too busy working on his own hookup.

“I was talking about to drink, Mr. Gallagher. But that can be arranged too,” she winks.

“You know who I am?” I asked amused.

“Of course, I do. You’re the older brother to those three,” she says, gesturing toward Kai, Fergus, and Flynn. “I see them in here often enough, but I have to admit I’ve never seen you.”

“Then how do you know who I am?”

“That one told me,” she says, pointing at Kai. “Besides, you have that badass big brother vibe about you. It’s kind of hot.”

“I think she wants to fuck you, brother,” Fergus says, finally joining us. His attempt to whisper is futile. He is more than a little drunk. I look over at Kai who isn’t exactly sober either.

He reads the concern on my face. “Don’t worry, Lennon.” He points at the men over in the corner. “The security you hired have our six. We just needed a little unwind time tonight.”

I turn to the bottle girl who is still all smiles. “Bring me the limited edition Patrón Extra Anejo Lalique.”

“That’s a nine-thousand-dollar bottle. What are we celebrating tonight?” She grins.

“I don’t think you really want to know the answer to that, hotness. Just bring me the fucking bottle.” She simply winks, not taking a hint that I’m really not in the mood for pleasantries.

“What are we celebrating?” Kai asks as he takes me in for the very first time after me being here for at least fifteen minutes. “Deadly black,” he says more to himself.

I joked with him before about my choice to wear all black when I’m about to take a motherfucker out. It’s me dressing for their funeral. I wore something similar for our clan that we killed. I’m surprised he has enough wits about right now to put two and two together.

“What about it?” I asks, already knowing where this questioning is headed.

“The two hours before you got here. You didn’t?”

“I did,” I confirm the question that only I know that he’s asking. He wants to know if I murdered the families of our rogue clan members. I spared the women and children, but the known male members of these dishonorable men met a different fate. The fact they lived in such proximity made the task that much easier. I even had time to switch cars. There is only one that I use for such instances, and it can’t be traced back to me.

Kai suddenly sobers. “Why would you go without me?” He leans in closer so that only I can hear him. “I told you that I was in, brother. You don’t have to do this on your own.”

He could never understand. “These were innocents, Kai. Their only crime was being related to the rogue motherfuckers who chose to cross us. I couldn’t chance that they’d retaliate or possibly give information to use against us. It was us or them, but you don’t need that shite on your conscience.”

The bottle girl returns with the amber tequila and not a moment too soon. I’m not having this conversation right now because this act was my cross to bear. My soul may be fucking unsalvageable, but I won’t damn my brother’s soul with mine. She arranges four shot glasses before pouring the tequila. I shake my head at my brothers and down all four. I refill each of the shot glasses and repeat throwing them all back. I tuck the bottle under my arm because I’m not sharing. Those fuckers are drunk enough.

“The time has come, I guess,” I tell Kai. “Pick a caddie. One that you trust, and have him pick my ass up.”

“Sure, Lennon. But our conversation is not over. I’ll call Reno. We can trust him to be discreet.”

By discreet, he means Reno won’t disclose the location of my new home. “Why don’t you clock out, hotness? I’m taking you home with me.”

“You got it, sugar,” she agrees. “By the way, my name is Angela.”

I couldn't care less what her fucking name is, but I manage to keep that retort to myself.

“You're going to bring her to *the house*?” Kai asks, more than a little worried.

“Now who needs to relax? Just tell Reno to bring the limo with the blacked-out windows. *Angela* doesn't need to know where the house is. I'll make sure the limo brings her back too.”

“I just hope you know what you're doing, brother,” Kai says as he backs away with his arms up.

“I do. Now just see to it that our brothers wrap things up and get home safely. Nobody needs to linger tonight. We've been seen. This place is our alibi, but make sure security is extra observant in case I didn't get them all. In case they have family we're unaware of.”

He nods just as Angela returns. We don't have to wait for Reno to arrive with our special limo. Once inside, I take a couple of swigs of the tequila and pass it to her. I'm not sure what the fucking plan is. She doesn't even make my dick hard. I just needed a distraction from tonight and from Aurora. The alcohol finally starts to relax me, the proverbial weight I've been carrying beginning to lighten. Angela grabs my dick through my pants, but I grab her wrist.

“I'm in charge here ... got it?” I blow out a cleansing breath. “If you have a problem with that, tell me now so I can get my guy to drop you off.”

“No,” she reassures, taking the bottle back from me. “I got it. You're in charge.”

She passes the tequila back to me, a little too eager for my taste. I miss the defiance of Aurora. I flip through various playlists, letting the loudness of the music drown out any attempts at conversation. When we return to my place, a devious smirk forms on my lips. An idea finally forms on how

this night is going to play out. It never ceases to amaze me of the fucked-up shit I think of.

It's nearly two in the morning. We exit the limo, and I bring Angela straight to what I have coined as the adult entertainment room. It's my room with the stripper pole. I'm surprised see Oisín in the doorway. Me coming in must have woken him up. I wasn't expecting to see him, but since he's here ...

"Sorry to have awakened you, Oisín. Do you mind retrieving Aurora for me?"

He nods. "As you wish, sir."

Angela climbs onto the small stage and dances around the pole sans music. I take a seat, prepping for the fireworks. I've allowed myself to be soft around Aurora to show her a different side of me. I followed Kai's fucking advice to use this softness to break her. I hate vulnerability. It's weak. And I need to remind her just who the hell I am. Ruthless.

Oisín returns with a sleepy Aurora. Her hair is wild, and her cotton pajamas are far from sexy. She rubs her eyes to adjust to the light. I know the moment she spots Angela. She looks back and forth between us, confused.

"That will be all, Oisín. Sleep well. I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night, sir," he bids, leaving me to this shitstorm brewing.

"Have a seat," I invite her.

"Hi. I'm Angela," Angela introduces as she jumps off the stage. "What's your name?"

The tequila has definitely kicked in. "What's going on, Lennon?" Aurora asks.

"Come have a seat," I say a little more forcefully. She sidesteps Angela and comes to sit next to me. I can feel her tension. "Angela, excuse her manners. This is Amy, my houseguest."

Aurora's gaze snaps to mine at the fake name I've given her. My stare silently dares her to say differently.

"How cool is that? Both of our names start with A," Angela says as she gets back on the stage. "I met Lennon at the club tonight. He offered me a ride on his dick." She snickers before dancing again without any music.

"Well, you don't need me for that," Aurora says, an unmistakable look of pain crossing her naturally beautiful face. "What am I here for? To watch?"

That was my original intent, but I don't think my dick would rise for the occasion even if I wanted to. As much as I wish she did, Angela just doesn't do it for me. I call her over from the stage anyway to prove a point. I pull her onto my lap. The tension radiating off Aurora is palpable.

"How bad do you want my cock, Angela?"

"I've been waiting for you to fuck me since the limo. I knew the moment I saw you in VIP that I'd let you do any dirty thing imaginable to me. No strings ... just one no-holds-barred night of anything goes! I'd do your houseguest too if that's what you're into."

"No, thank you," Aurora says, trying to turn away from us.

"This is my reality, A mhuirín. Pussy comes a dime a dozen. I don't need you to give me yours as a barter. Women would do anything to fuck me. So remember that the next time you think that what's between your legs is so sacred."

It takes me a second to realize I'm yelling, and she has started sobbing. Angela is oblivious and has started to undo my pants. She frees my cock, and Aurora snaps. She jumps to her feet.

"Fuck you! You're such a fucking jerk. Bringing this bitch home to show me just how desperate bitches are for your cock. I'm not yours, and you're not mine, so why the fuck do you think I would care about any of this? I fucking hate you!" she screams as the tears fall harder.

"That's a lot of fucks in those bold statements," I say, wondering where the hell I left my tequila. I must have left it

in the limo. “I think it’s fascinating that you think you can talk to me in this manner and not get punished for it.”

I push Angela off my lap and stand to tower over Aurora. She furiously wipes the tears from her face with both hands.

“I don’t care. You’re going to have to fucking kill me tonight because I refuse to watch you fuck her or let her do anything to me. You can’t make me.”

I’m about to fucking snatch her up when a sobering thought dawns on me. I have to know for sure.

“You’re in love with me,” I accuse.

“Are you insane? Did you hear anything I just said? I don’t care about you or that tramp. Just leave me out of it.”

“Look, sweetheart. You’re not going to keep calling me names. I was invited here,” Angela argues, picking this moment to speak up. I silence her with a brief stare before turning back to Aurora.

I grab her by the waist as she attempts to back away from me, walking us both toward the wall.

“You don’t care about me, right? What did you say? Ah yes, you hate me!”

“That’s what I said. I’m sorry I didn’t let your men betray you. You would be dead, and I would be home,” she continues, spitting such vile words.

I push back from her like she burned me. Something akin to regret passes across her face, but it’s gone before I can be sure. I pull out my secondary phone and summon Oisín. When he arrives, I apologize.

“Sorry to disturb you yet again, Oisín. I’m afraid tonight has taken a different turn. Please escort Angela to Reno and ask that she be discreetly dropped to her home. Then I need you to meet me in the basement with Apollo.”

“Right away, sir.” He doesn’t hesitate or ask questions.

Aurora’s ears perk up at the mention of Apollo’s name. She knows what he’s associated with. Her eyebrows reach her

hairline, but I'm on her before she tries to make a break for the door. Her running is futile. I don't trust my inebriated balance to throw her over my shoulder, so I drag her toward the basement instead.

“So you're going to drown me now?”

“I don't deal in false bravado and empty threats. You need to say what you mean and mean what you say.”

“What does that even mean?” she cries as she tries to resist being dragged down the basement steps.

“You're going to prove the words you said!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Aurora

The words that I've let escape my mouth are deplorable. I know that I said some hateful things, and I really don't want to dissect why. I don't want to think about the ache that settled deep within my chest at the sight of Angela or the unwelcome hurt I endured listening to the things she was willing to do to him. We stand in the middle of his fucking torture chamber, waiting for Oisín to arrive with Apollo. I told him he would have to kill me tonight, and now he's calling my bluff.

My time is up. Lennon walks Oisín the minutes he walks through the door and whispers something unintelligible. Oisín's face pales as it morphs into something other than his usual stoic expression.

"Don't do this, Lennon," he warns. It's the first time I've heard him drop his formalness. He didn't call him sir.

"Oisín," Lennon growls. "I've spoken, and it's not up for debate. Just do your job. You have your orders."

"You can't ask me to be part of this," he says as he begins to walk away. I don't know what he asked of him, but whatever it is...it has to be worse than I thought.

"It's happening with or without you," Lennon threatens. "Leave now, and I die."

What the actual fuck? I watch in horror as he takes a seat in that damn torture chair. Apollo wastes no time strapping him into the restraints. Oisín aborts his retreat to stand by his side. He isn't happy about whatever is about to go down.

Apollo tilts the chair back on its back feet, the angle like the other time. Lennon closes his eyes before Apollo even places the cloth over his face. I don't understand. That was supposed to be me in that chair. What is he doing?

“Come,” Oisín orders me begrudgingly.

My fear that has been simmering just beneath the surface, awakens to full-blown panic. I look around the room, but I know running would be futile. My heart slams against my chest with each step toward Oisín and Apollo. I just want to go back to my room and pretend this night never happened. Apollo reaches down and picks up a water hose lying next to the bucket full of water. He places the hose in my hand before turning a lever to start the continuous stream.

“Pour,” Oisín orders, point toward Lennon's face covered with the cloth.

“What? No!” I drop the hose, but he only picks it up again.

“It's your life or his,” he says as he places the hose back in my hand. “Pour.”

I swallow the huge fucking lump in my throat. This is a bluff—a test. Surely he will stop this before it gets too far. I turn away as I direct the stream over Lennon's face. Several seconds go by, but then he begins to buck against his restraints, his head shaking from side to side. I immediately redirect the water to his chest to give him a reprieve.

“Don't stop pouring,” Oisín instructs. He clears his throat. He's obviously struggling with this too. “Don't stop until he stops moving.”

“You want me to drown him? To kill him?”

“It's his life or yours,” he warns again. “Either keep pouring or exchange places with him. Now pour.”

I'm torn. I begin to cry as I pour. I don't want to kill him. I didn't mean all those horrible things I said. I watch in trepidation as Lennon's struggle against his restraints begins to slow. I'm fucking killing him. I drop the hose.

“Stop this! Fucking just stop. I’ll trade places with him. Please!”

Oisín motions for Apollo to right Lennon’s chair and unstrap him. Lennon continues to choke on the water. I snatch the cloth from his face, and his ashen face delivers a punch to my chest. His eyes lazily work to focus on mine. I grab his arms as soon as they’re free to try to pull him to his feet. I don’t make much progress there, but Oisín pulls him up the rest of the way. Lennon sways on his feet. I immediately take his place in the chair, ready to endure what’s coming. My tears won’t stop. I almost killed him. I don’t look in his direction while Apollo straps me in. I cry harder when he places the cloth over my face.

“I’m sorry,” I say. If these are my last words, I need Lennon to know that I didn’t mean those hateful things I said. “I don’t hate you, and I would never want to see you dead,” I admit freely now that my face is hidden behind the cloth.

I wait for the water to come, but instead, I feel his presence hovering over me. “Why would you trade your life for mine, Aurora? I’ve abducted you and threatened to wear you down until you give me your virginity. I’m a threat to you as long as I’m alive.”

“I can’t watch anyone die, especially not because of me.”

“Don’t give me that savior bullshit,” he chastises, removing the cloth from my face. “Or we’ll be right back where we started.”

“What do you want from me?”

“The fucking truth. I put my own life on the line to get it, so we won’t be ending this until I get it.”

“I don’t know what the truth is,” I rationalize. “I don’t know why I feel the way I do or what to do with these feelings. All I know is no matter how fucked it is, no matter how stupid I’m being, I can’t bear the thought of any harm coming to you.”

“Look at me, Aurora.” I force myself to look at the haunting blue eyes staring back at me. I’m only going to ask

these questions one time, so don't you dare fucking lie to me. Understand?"

I nod. I just want this inquisition to be over with us both safe.

"Did it hurt to think about me and Angela doing things together?"

I don't trust myself to speak. A lump forms again in my throat and the ache in my chest that never really left has me wallowing in a different kind of torture. I nod in the affirmative instead.

"I need to hear the words," he insists.

"Yes," I force out. New tears begin to fall. I swear I'm always fucking crying, and I hate it. I hate feeling this way and for allowing myself to be vulnerable in front of him right now, but I know I don't have a choice. I don't want to do that waterboarding thing again.

"And you'd rather give your life than take mine?"

"Yes."

"So you don't hate me?"

"No."

"What's the opposite of hate, A mhuirín?"

"Love," I whisper, finally realizing where he's going with this questioning—the entire point of this test.

"It's a thin line between the extreme emotions of love and hate. Your emotions definitely err on the side of extreme, little bird. So if you don't hate me, that only leaves one emotion. Are you in love with me, Aurora?"

A pregnant pause consumes the room for what seems like an eternity. He already knows the answer to this question, and now I am faced with such a drastic reality, too.

"Yes," I answer finally as I close my eyes.

"Leave us," he tells Oisín and Apollo. He's already undoing my restraints as they leave.

“Why?” I croak out. “Why did you bring that girl back here? Isn’t Fiona enough?”

He steps back and looks at me after my wrists and ankles are free. “Because I’m done with your sacrificial bullshit. You hide behind honor and your savior complex. You lie to yourself about why you don’t want to see harm come to me. You couldn’t possibly be honest with me until you were honest with yourself first.”

“I don’t lie to myself,” I defend. “I’m more than realistic about who I am and what I mean to everyone else.”

“I’m not speaking of just your precious virginity, and what it means to your family or the person you give it to, Aurora. I challenge you. I’m the first man you’ve had around you in a non-platonic way. You feel alive when you’re with me ... I don’t make you feel like a prisoner even though I’m holding you captive here. You’ve had an opportunity to escape. At some point, you fell for me because I’m the only variable difference from your usual guarded life.”

“I watched Fiona do things to you,” I point out, trying to poke holes in his theory. “I know you bought her lingerie.” I don’t even know why I’m bringing any of this up other than to decipher between her and Angela and why I was so bothered by one and not the other.

He pulls me up out of the chair, the smell of alcohol still prevalent on his breath. “You didn’t feel threatened by Fiona. She was before you and also my maid. You look at her as a prisoner like you without a choice. You think she only does those things with me because I make her. My dismissal of her was obvious, so you knew I didn’t want to be with her. Angela, on the other hand, was hot and willing ... a potential prospect. You thought I wanted her. You were jealous that someone so beautiful and free wanted to do all the dirty things you won’t let yourself do.”

My back is against the wall. He has a strong grip on my cotton pajama top. This whole conversation is overwhelming. “So the whole point of tonight was to get me to admit that I love you?”

“I never said you love me. I said you’re in love with me. There’s a difference. And as far as Angela, I didn’t bring her over here to get you to admit anything. I just brought someone home to play with. Figured we’d have someone for the actual sex part until you’re ready to fuck me. I don’t want your virginity the way you tried to give it to me. I want it when you crave me so much that you beg me to get between those thighs.”

“What makes you think I’d want you to touch me at all after tonight? You hurt me, Lennon. And I’m so fucking mad that I care or feel anything. This probably isn’t even real. As you said, I’ve never interacted with a man like this. So maybe you being the first is all this is.”

He slides his hand under my top and places his palm flat against my chest. My breath hitches, and my heart begins to beat erratically. “You feel that?” he asks. “That’s your answer. It’s as real as it can be at this moment.”

I manage to get a hand free and place my palm against his chest, expecting to feel nothing. He doesn’t stop me. My jaw falls open at the increased beat of his heart, just as erratic as mine. “It’s the same,” I mutter.

He doesn’t acknowledge what I’m inferring. Is he in love with me too? Is that even possible? “It’s been a long night, little bird. Come.”

He takes my hand and leads me out of the torture room and up the stairs. He’s not dragging me along like before, and I still have my life, so that’s progress. The house is quiet and dimly lit as we pad up the floating stairs to my room. I’m slightly alarmed when he gets into my bed and pulls me in next to him. I’m not having sex with him. “Shhhh,” he says even though I haven’t spoken a word. “Rest now.” He pulls me further into him and snuggles his chin into the crook of my neck. I’m hyperaware of his frame engulfing me, the heat from his body searing mine. It takes several minutes for me to get my breathing under control, but I do. I’m not afraid. I feel protected. I don’t know what tomorrow will bring, but I’m more than happy to have the chaos of this early morning come

to an end. I close my eyes and let this man's presence in my bed consume me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Lennon

I wake first, and it takes me a moment to realize I'm in Aurora's bed. I'm still fully dressed in my deadly black.

All of last night's actions come flooding in—the murders, Angela, and last, having Aurora deliver my penance. Well, it started that way before I used it to get her to tell me the truth about her feelings. I know Oisín will be more than a little perturbed with me today. I was so sure of Aurora's feelings and what she would do if she had to prove she hated me that I put my own life on the line. Had I been wrong, Oisín would have been delivering the news to Kai that he was now the new Clan Chief. I risked everything — for answers—*for her*. What does that mean? It means that limited edition of Patrón has the powers of Satan. She begins to stir in my arms with her hair fanned across her face. I can't help but watch her—well, until Fiona walks in.

She takes one look at Aurora and me in bed together and spins so I can't see the hurt on her face, but I know it's there. “Sorry, sir. I didn't realize you were in here. I came to check on Ms. Aurora because she's late for breakfast, and her door was left unlocked. I'll see myself out.”

She scurries away without waiting for a response from me. I never made any promises of more with her. She was part of my penance, and in exchange, I gave her countless orgasms to satisfy her needs. Between Aurora's jealousy last night and now Fiona's, I know things can't continue this way. I have a legacy to continue ... one that Aurora is an intricate part of. I don't know for how long, but at least the start of it. I can't be distracted by the jealous whims of women. If I'm going to

marry Aurora for the sake of gaining more power than any other Mafia family, I need to focus on cultivating the relationship needed with her to make that happen— no different from any other business relationship. Love is messy and can't be a driving force. While I think her feelings for me will be an advantage to move things along, I have to also work to ensure that it doesn't evolve to a landmine that blows all that I'm working toward to hell.

She rolls onto her back and looks up at me before rubbing her eyes and looking at me once again. "Yes, I'm still here, little bird."

"Why are you in my bed?" she asks groggily.

"Do you prefer I not be?" She rolls her eyes before turning back over. I swat her ass for her nonverbal sass. "That's what I thought."

I'm about to suggest we shower and get breakfast when a knock sounds at the door. She turns to look at me. "Come in," I say, figuring Fiona has already spread the word that I'm in here. Otherwise, nobody would bother.

Oisín enters the room, back to his annoyingly proper British self. "Sir, you have a visitor in your office. It's your brother Kai."

I fucking facepalm. He'll have plenty to say about me doing last night's job without him. It's too early for this shit. My head throbs as I swing my legs over the edge of the bed. "Tell him I'll be down in a second."

"You're squinting, sir. Should I get you something for the póite?" he asks, referring to my hangover.

"How very observant of you. Yes, if you wouldn't mind."

"Could I interest you in a full Irish breakfast too, sir? I wouldn't know, but your father once said it was the best cure after a night of getting hammered."

"A Guinness will do," I say as I get out of bed.

"As you wish, sir."

“I should have known you were drunk,” Aurora says as soon as he’s gone. She sits up and crosses her legs on the bed.

“Not another word, little bird. Have a shower, and I’ll meet you in half an hour for breakfast.”

She crosses her arms over her chest, but I’m not ready to talk about last night with her. I have another fire to extinguish in my office. Oisín passes me the beer as I reach the end of the stairs. He hasn’t mentioned it, but I know he has his own thoughts about last night.

Kai is pacing the length of my office when I enter. “What the fuck, man?” He starts before I even get a word out.

“You might want to calm the fuck down,” I warn, taking a swig of my beer. Brother or not, I will not allow anyone to disrespect me ... especially in my home.

“Don’t pull that rank or big brother crap with me. You were off your tits last night and reckless.”

My siblings and I don’t speak much Irish slang, but when we do, more than likely it’s because we’re pissed. We get that from our father. His vocabulary was quite colorful when he was mad, and we always found it comical.

“Look, if this is about last night’s job, I took care of it.”

“Yes, it’s about last night’s job. Why do you think you have to keep doing things without me? I told you that I was all in. If something happens to you, where do you think it would leave our family, Lennon? We’d be picked off one by fucking one.”

“I’m trying to save your goddamn soul, Kai. The shite that our clan is involved in can weigh on you and bring you to a very dark place. Some of the lives I take are warranted, but sometimes it’s not—like last night. Those family members were guilty of nothing but being related to the wrong fucking rogue scumbags. Yet I couldn’t let them live. They were a threat to our family, and I will protect you all at all costs.”

“I get that, brother. It was necessary. You did what needed to be done, but you don’t have to do it alone. I surrendered my

soul with eyes wide open the moment I transitioned to Clan Captain.”

“I hate this life for you and even more knowing that the timeline for our siblings are dwindling.”

“I know what you mean. Is that supposed to be the hair of the dog?” he asks, gesturing toward the beer in my hand.

“Something like that,” I answer.

He chuckles and then heads to my wet bar to pour us something stronger. I’m not really in the mood for whiskey, but he’ll need that drink more than I do when I tell him my news. I wait till he passes me the tumbler, and we both have a sip. I set the beer down on the desk in exchange for the liquor.

“So I do have other news,” I share. “I’ve been in touch with Eoghan.”

“Cousin Eoghan?”

“Yes. He is Clan Chief ... been that way for the last year now. He reached out to me a few days ago.”

“What could he possibly want?”

Eoghan’s father, James, and our father were brothers. Their father, our grandfather, Lorcán, was the reason our father left their clan and moved to the United States. He met and fell in love with our Greek mother but was forbidden to marry her. Marriage was arranged between him and an Irish woman of another powerful Irish Clan. Our father had forsaken his duty in the name of love and was disowned for it. As children, we were taught the history of our family and shown pictures of our parents’ old lives, but that is as far as the connection extended. Our mother chose our father over her family too. We wrote both sides off long ago. It was their loss if they didn’t want to know us. I wasn’t expecting the call I got from Eoghan, so I was surprised to learn that our father had been in touch with him before he died. With our father out of the picture, James took over the reins about twelve years later. He and our father never made amends. James blamed our father for abandoning his family for a woman. James was just as ruthless as our father and made many enemies, but cancer

ended his life. Even with him dead, their clan's reach is of the same power as Matteo—the strongest and most feared.

“Our uncle James died a year ago. Eoghan had been in touch with our father just before he died, hence how he got my number. Father had no interest in returning to Dublin although Eoghan tried. He was even willing to step down and let our father claim his rightful place, but our father declined.”

“Does he know that Father is dead ... murdered?”

“Yes. Even thousands of miles away, the family's ear is to the ground. He initially called to send his condolences, but I knew that wasn't the extent of the call.”

“Ah, bloody hell. Does he think that we want to return to Dublin now that Father is gone?”

“No, but Father knew more than he was telling us. He was working toward building an allegiance with his clan. Eoghan promised he would have our back if something happened to him.”

Kai takes a hearty gulp of his whiskey. “Do you trust that? It's mighty convenient that Father isn't around to collaborate his story. What is he proposing?”

“He wants to work together—to strengthen our numbers, which would be more of a benefit to us than to his already large army. But in turn, our international business would flow both ways. I'm heading to Dublin tomorrow to talk in person.”

“I don't trust it, brother. Why now? We haven't existed to that family before now. I'm coming with you.”

I blow out a cleansing breath. This is the fight I've been preparing for. I knew he would insist on coming. “I need you here. Especially after the job last night. We need to ensure that our siblings—”

“No fucking way!” He interrupts. “I'm not letting you go across the goddam country to meet up with our fucking traitor family that has never had any interest in us before now. Trust the security detail that you've allocated to them. They will be fine, but you ... you'd be on your own.”

“I’ll bring security with me,” I say, knowing I have no intention.

“Bollocks! You know if you arrive with security, that will set the tone of the meeting. It says you don’t trust whomever you’re meeting with, and it will be doomed before it starts. I’d have your six, and it won’t be out of the ordinary. I’m your brother and Clan Captain, so I’d have a purpose to be there.”

It’s pointless to argue with him because I know he’s right. It’s a form of disrespect to bring security to a meeting with your alliance or someone you’re supposed to have mutual trust. Fuck!

“Okay, but we’ll have to be in stealth mode. Nobody can know we’ve left the country. We need to go and be back in a few days. And we’ll need to bring Aurora.”

“What? Why would you do that?”

I deadpan. “When you insist on tagging along, you leave me no choice. Nobody knows I have her or my plans for her except you. Without you here standing guard, I can’t risk some fucking incompetence or traitor shite happening in my absence. She is the glue to our plan, so losing access to her is not an option. I can’t handle what I need to and worry about her being here without me.”

“Are we taking the jet? How do you plan to get her out of the country without anyone knowing or realizing who she is?”

“I’m going to tell the house staff that I’m taking her to my place in the city, but that my rules for them not leaving the estate stands. I can move our jet and expect to be in stealth mode. Eoghan will have to send his to pick us up. I told him my moves needed to be silent, and he didn’t ask questions.”

Kai drains the rest of his glass. “I trust that you know what you’re doing, brother. I know you’ve thought this through. I just hope that Eoghan doesn’t have any ulterior motives.”

“I hope not either. But with us both gone, know that is an increased risk for our siblings should something happen to us both. And because of that, Oisín will be the only one to know

our intended destination and when to expect us back. I will outline explicit directives should we not make it back.”

I finish my drink in two gulps. I hate leaving our siblings, but I know what Kai proposes makes the most sense. I can't do this alone.

“Now that that's decided, what was up with you and that bottle girl last night? Is she still here?”

He has no idea what a shit show that was, or else he'd have something else to give me grief about. “No. I had Reno take her home last night.”

“You know you could have fucked her at her place, right? You didn't have to bring her here and risk her finding out where you live or, better yet, bringing her to the place where you're hiding the woman you're trying to woo out of her virginity.” He laughs, and I snatch my beer off my desk.

“I was careful to keep the blacked-out windows up so she couldn't see out.” I had that custom reverse tint done for that limo in particular. I use that one to shield the intended destination from whomever it is necessary. Last night was different but still useful. “And make no mistake, brother. I never need to woo a woman out of her virginity. Aurora's virginity will be mine once she stops fighting the inevitable and gives in to what her body already knows it wants.”

“Well, she did admit that she was in love with me early this morning.”

“Holy shite! How did this come about? I thought you were with Angela. Was it after she left? Did she run into her? Man, you're playing with fire.”

I finish off my beer and smirk at my brother's enthusiasm. He needs to get laid if he finds my predicament this interesting. “Aurora didn't run into Angela. I invited her to the party.”

“Seriously? And I'm sure that went over like a bull in a China shop,” he facepalms.

“You don't know. We could have had an orgy of a lifetime, well, minus Aurora actually putting out.”

“Uh, I do know. You said that Aurora admitted she was in love with you. No woman in love with a man is going to appreciate said man bringing some random chick home unannounced. It’s not like you’re dating or have a relationship to withstand bringing in a third party. You’re her damn captor. I’m sure she’s just getting used to the idea that she has feelings for you at all.”

“And you get all this insightful female shite from all the women you guard,” I tease.

“I pay attention.” Kai laughs.

“Well, you’re right. She was beyond pissed. I had to send Angela home. I won’t get into the dirty deets of it all, but I got some insight out of the whole debacle. I pushed her to the brink of insanity until she admitted what I already suspected. Not sure if it’s real, though. Maybe she has Stockholm syndrome or something. I’m the only man she has had extended contact with outside her family. But it’s real to her right now, so that’s all that matters.”

“Be careful, brother. That’s all I’ll say on the subject for now.”

I push off my desk. “Let’s grab breakfast. You might as well eat since you came all this way to annoy me. Besides, I think Oisín probably told the house staff to make me a full Irish breakfast for my hangover.”

“You don’t have to ask twice. I’m starving.”

When we arrive at the table, Aurora is already sitting in her usual spot. She pushes the eggs around her plate when my brother sits opposite her. She startles but is sure to slip her mask of unfazed back on.

“Morning, sunshine,” Kai greets.

Aurora rolls her eyes at him before looking over at me as I take my seat. “It’s rude not to speak when someone addresses you, little bird. Where are your manners?”

“I must have left them upstairs in my room,” she deadpans. “He’s being condescending.”

“Aurora!”

She huffs, but thinks better of whatever she is about to say next. “Good morning,” she says begrudgingly.

“See. What’s that so hard? I see my brother has his hands full with you. “You do know that men have died for less?”

“Kai. Stop antagonizing her so she can eat.”

At this moment, Fiona and Bridget arrives with my peanut butter sandwich and the full breakfast for Kai. Fiona places Kai’s food in front of him but goes out of her way to avoid eye contact with me. I’m guessing she’s still pissed about finding me in Aurora’s bed a short bit ago. I don’t do the jealousy. Don’t understand it, actually. It’s a waste of time.

“What the hell are you eating, man?” Kai asks, oblivious to the jealousy still radiating off Fiona.

“Are you blind? It’s a peanut butter sandwich.”

“Okay, wrong question. Why are you eating it when we have this feast of a spread in front of us. Is that supposed to be some unknown cure for a hangover?”

Aurora’s ears perk up. She’s not even hiding her curiosity. She’s tried to ask me about the peanut butter before.

“It’s my penance.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Aurora

I don't care much about Lennon's condescending, jerk face brother, but I'm glad he asked the question I've been dying to know. What is his penance and what does it have to do with peanut butter sandwiches?

Lennon looks particularly perturbed, but he answers his brother anyway. "It's my sacrifice for all the bad shit I partake in. I forgo some of life's simple pleasures to make it fair. Not right because I can never make it right, but if these sacrifices can weigh in just a tad on the forgiveness scale of my sins, then I'll take it."

He takes a bite of his sandwich like he hasn't just said a mouth full. "But you hate fucking peanut butter. You always have since we were kids," Kai points out.

"It wouldn't be a penance if I sacrificed with things I enjoyed," Lennon deadpans, taking a sip of his milk.

The pieces finally fit, and my mouth shoots off before my brain catches up to logic. "That's why you do the waterboarding thing and why you hate allowing yourself to come. It's all for your self-induced penance," I practically shout, enthusiastic that I figured it out. It's not until I see the incredulous look on his brother's face that I realize I've said too much.

"What the fuck is she talking about, Lennon? What waterboarding thing?"

Lennon dabs the napkin at the corner of his mouth, not the least bit fazed by my untimely outburst. "What? Not interested

in the details of my choice to edge, brother— my cum or lack thereof?”

“Don’t change the subject. I know all about edging and don’t need any additional information on the subject. I’m more interested in what Aurora means about your waterboarding thing.”

Bridget hesitantly intervenes to ask if we need anything else. “Bring me a large glass of water and the ibuprofen from Oisín that he never brought to me,” Lennon says. “I need something to combat this hangover and my brother isn’t helping.” She nods and hurries off.

“Are you punishing yourself, Lennon?”

“Don’t be overly dramatic. The fucking waterboarding is in a controlled environment and monitored. When I take a life, it’s important that I remember that mine can just as easily hang in the balance. I need to feel what it’s like to be on the brink of death to appreciate each day I get here.”

He pinches the bridge of his nose, obviously ready to be done with this line of questioning. I hate that I said anything. His humanity is showing and my stomach knots at his vulnerability. He’s just a fallible man—fighting his demons like the rest of us.

“And the reason you went without me last night,” Kai, finally says under his breath. He looks up at his brother with a hint of sadness in his eyes that I don’t think I’m meant to be witnessing. “Don’t try to save my soul brother. I will join in on your quest and serve my own penance, but make no mistakes about it. I’m in this with you so whatever we face, we face together.”

“Your decision,” Lennon says, drinking the last of his milk. “We don’t have to say another word about it. Your soul ... your penance.”

“Did you tell virgincakes over here about ‘*spending the week at your penthouse*’ ?” Kai asks, fingers gesturing air quotes.

“What the hell did you just call me? What about your penthouse?”

“You’re a dick ... you know that?” Lennon responds. “No, I hadn’t. I was going to discuss it after breakfast in ‘private.’” He mimics the same air quotes. You know you both have a big mouth.”

“Hey, I’m happy to help. Let’s go to your office and discuss before I leave so we don’t have to chance this over the phone,” Kai suggests. He stands and grabs a pastry before heading toward Lennon’s office.

“Fine. Aurora, let’s go. We have much to discuss, and my brother needs to get going.”

Lennon grabs the water and pills on the way to his office. I take a seat on the same sofa that I was once restrained on the day I arrived here. Kai takes a seat next to me, to annoy me I’m sure.

“You’re not going to my penthouse, Aurora,” Lennon says, getting straight to the point. “I need to leave the country for a few days, and I’m taking you with me. The story for the rest of the house is that I’m taking you to my penthouse.”

“Can I ask where or why?”

“No.”

“Well, can I at least ask when so I know when to pack? Is there a suitcase for me? Are you going to kill me and dump me in another country?”

Kai snorts next to me, but Lennon levels him with a stare. “I wouldn’t need to take you out of the country,” he deadpans. “And there is nothing for you to pack. It will be handled. We leave tonight.”

He turns his attention to his brother and gives coordinates that I assume align with an address, but whatever he’s organizing, he’s careful to exclude me from knowing. Suddenly, another piece fits.

“Wait, is he coming with us?”

“I sure am, virgincakes,” Kai confirms. God, I want to punch him in the face.

“Why do you keep calling me that?”

“Because it gets under your skin, and you’re a virgin for now. We’ll see if you manage to hold that status when we return from this trip.” He winks.

“You’re awful, you know that?”

“Or so I’ve been told a time or two. I may even get to watch or participate, whichever you prefer.”

“That’s fucking enough,” Lennon booms, surprising us both. “This isn’t a game. We’ve got shite to handle. Get your arse back to the city and wrap whatever needs to be done for this plan to be seamless. You wanted in, and now you’re in. Don’t make me regret that decision.”

“Just as I thought.” Kai smirks, but he doesn’t elaborate. “Consider it all handled. See you tonight.”

He exits the office, and Lennon pinches the bridge of his nose again. Surprisingly, he takes a seat next to me where Kai was just sitting. “I’m taking a risk bringing you with me, Aurora,” he begins. “And I need to know that we’ve made enough progress between us to trust you.”

“Trust me to do what? I don’t know what you’re asking of me.”

He blows out a cleansing breath. “I don’t need you to do anything. I need your understanding.” He is quiet for several moments before he continues. I need to be candid with you and for you to be mature enough to understand that what I’m about to tell you benefits us both.”

Holy shit! Things just got heavy. “Okay,” I say, not sure that I agree, but I need him to continue.

“Promise me!” he orders, his voice slightly elevated

“Please don’t ask me to promise something when I don’t know what I’m agreeing to. I can only promise to listen and try to be understanding. I want to work toward ending this captor-captive situation if this is what this is about.”

“Sort of,” he admits. “We can’t keep going like this or at this pace. I’m going to share some information with you, but to be clear, I’d never let you use it against me. My family’s life depends on that.”

“So what are you saying? Spell it out for me.”

“Kai would probably disagree, but I find myself in a unique situation, so I’m going to tell you my plans for you and how it benefits us both. Should you not agree, well, like I said. My family comes first.”

“You’d kill me,” I finish. He didn’t say the words, but he doesn’t have to.

“That wouldn’t be my first choice, but there would be no way I could return you to your father. I would have to ensure that you never stepped foot back in this country again, or I would have to kill you.”

“Wow. That’s some choice,” I say. “Go along with what you tell me; if not, either face death or likely be sold.” I can read between the lines.

“Look, I don’t want either of those things. I want you to be my wife and work with me.”

“Marriage is supposed to be about love ... not coercion and ultimatums.”

“Not in the world you were born into, little bird. Hence why your father is willing to trade your virginity for more power. Love is arbitrary and only complicates things.”

I can feel his arctic stare but can’t bring myself to look at him. He’s not giving me much choice at all. “So what are your plans for me?” I ask, staring at my intertwined fingers for something to focus on.

He pushes off the table and pours me a glass of wine from his wet bar in the enclave of his office. He hands it to me before sitting across from me now, no doubt to see my reaction to whatever he is about to spring on me. I finish off the wine in nearly two gulps. He notices, but doesn’t speak on it.

“We both know that to be betrothed to an Italian Mafia heir, one must be pure. Once you’re no longer a virgin, your father will not be able to marry you to any notable member—only someone of lower rank and status.”

My eyes snap up to him. “Yes. That’s why it has been so important for me to stay pure. My father said we needed to merge with the Lombardis to strengthen our power for future generations. I never wanted to be part of this underworld, but my marrying Niccolò would deter the other families from considering rising against us later. But you already know that. It’s the reason you want to marry me— so your clan can have that power.” I’m on a roll. It’s all making sense now, and I can’t believe I didn’t put the pieces together before now. “Only you’re not Italian, so it doesn’t matter that you’re an Irish boss. My father would never give you my hand in marriage. But if you dirty me up where no other high-ranking Italian would want me, he’d have no choice but to consider it.”

I get up from the sofa and pour myself another glass of his wine, and he doesn’t stop me. This is worst than I thought.

“I knew you were smart, little bird—that given enough context, that you’d figure it out without me having to *spell it out*. So now I can move on to how this benefits us both.”

He gets up and joins me at the wet bar. I get one sip in before he takes the wineglass from my hand and sets the drink back on the bar.

“How could that possibly benefit my family or me?”

He tilts my chin up. “For starters, you don’t want to marry Niccolò. You’re in love with me, remember?”

“Love is arbitrary and only complicates things, remember?” I say, delivering his words right back to him. His face lowers to mine, his breath a caress.

“Touché, but you have an opportunity to marry a man you actually love who you can trust will fiercely protect you. Our clan can provide that same merge of power that the Lombardis would have afforded your father, if not more. But as you have so astutely guessed, it starts with you, due to us not being

Italian. With my father deceased, I'm looking for my rule to be more diverse."

"And what benefit do I get out of this?"

His lips graze mine. "You mean besides me?"

"Yes. It has to be more than just me getting out of marrying Niccolò," I say, my voice shaky from his closeness.

He steps back and runs his hand through his hair. "We'd end this captive-captor situation, as you put it, and begin to plan what we're going to tell your father about where you've been. You'd get to save Amerie and have her come stay with us while we plan our wedding. You'd no longer be a pawn to be used for power. You'll be my queen and treated as such—free to do what you enjoy, with security of course. But you wouldn't be transferred to yet another gilded cage to be locked away and hidden by her husband."

"What do you mean save Amerie?" I can't even focus on the other appealing things he mentioned because it sounds like my one and only friend is in trouble.

"Your father has her locked away. She's being tortured everyday they don't find you because she help you sneak away."

"How can you possibly know that?" My breath hitches for a different reason. I've put my friend in harm's way.

"My clan have an allegiance with your family. I met with Matteo, and he asked me to help find you. He needed to be discreet since not many know that you even exist. When I inquired what he knew thus far, he told me that he managed to find out the truth from your housemaid, Amerie. She had been assisting you to sneak away. Your father says if you died, she would suffer the same fate. Until then, she is enduring the daily punishment of whatever your father sees fit."

"Nooooooo!" I scream, dropping to my knees. The day he caught me with Mr. Doyle's phone, a man answered when I call her phone. I rationalized that my father's men just had her phone to monitor her calls in case I called. She has been in trouble this entire time. "This is all your fault. I've been here a

long time already. That means you knew she was being tortured everyday that I was gone and you still kept me from my family. This could have ended by now. How could you ask for my trust and do this?"

"Make no mistake, Aurora. The well-being and future of family comes first. I already told you this. Why would I risk that for someone I don't even know? Until recently, I didn't know you either, but I do now, so I want to give you a chance to end this." He lifts me off the floor. "I've only been honest with you. I could have let this play out, which would have resulted in you giving me your virginity as your feelings grew for me, or I could have taken it. I didn't want to fuck you without you knowing the truth. That in itself says a fucking lot about how things have evolved between us."

I have no words. I can only cry instead. "There is literally no way out without hurting Amerie, my family, or myself. I have no idea what I've done to deserve any of this."

Lennon walks us over to the sofa and sits with me on his lap. "Don't go playing helpless now, little bird. You've been a fucking fighter since the moment you were abducted. Your defiance was the sexiest thing about you. I'm offering you a life raft here. All you have to do is grab it."

"How?" I sniffle. "Everything is so fucked up."

"I can save her. Tell me that you're ready to be with me, and I will make it happen."

"But if my father has her ..."

"You let me worry about that. Give me your word that you're giving me the gift of you and fall in line with what we need to tell your father. In return, I will show you a glimpse of my power and my reach. I will save her without any harm coming to your father or your family."

"And all I have to do is agree to everything you just said?"

"Agree and mean it. Because if you agree and then betray me, the consequences will be catastrophic for you and your family. You don't want to experience my power and reach when it's used against you."

“Okay.”

“Okay, what? I need to hear you say it. Nothing can be left open for interpretation.”

I know I have no choice but to give him what he’s asking for if I want him to save Amerie from any more torture. If I refuse him and he sells me off or worse, kills me, she will suffer the ultimate consequence. I don’t know what the rest of all of this will look like, but my time is up, and I’m choosing to fight another day.

“I agree to your plan. I’ll marry you and all that includes. I will give you my virginity.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Lennon

I t's been a long thirteen hours of nonstop travel. We had to wait until nightfall to take our discreet limo and ride the five-and-a-half hours to Portland, Maine. We have no business connections there. Eoghan arranged for us to take his private jet from a private hangar in Maine, thus prohibiting anyone from tracking our exit from the country. The nonstop flight was six hours to Dublin, allowing me to get some sleep on the jet but not much. The five-hour time difference has us landing close to two in the afternoon, so sleep will have to wait. I have just enough time to check into the penthouse suite of the Four Seasons while my brother and Liam, the one bodyguard we brought along, check into suites a floor below me. Liam was one of our father's bodyguards, but he wasn't around when he was murdered. He'd taken some time off to be with his wife and the arrival of their new baby girl. He has been devastated over the loss of our father, but it wasn't his fault. The decision to meet with that prostitute without personal protection wasn't smart in hindsight, but the mission itself seemed simple enough. I still carry the burden of that joint decision, but Liam shouldn't have to. When I reached out to him for a private job, he was not hesitant to accept. He didn't ask questions other than the coordinates of where to meet. His primary role on this trip is to sit on Aurora and ensure she doesn't do anything stupid. Although she and I came to a mutual agreement before we left, I have to take every precaution necessary to ensure she follows through.

I update Kai before we met up so that he could be kept in the loop as he has requested. He wasn't a proponent of the

information I shared with Aurora, but he is trusting my lead on this. I had to move things along. I wanted to break Aurora and in some aspects I did. I wanted her to give me her virginity on her own accord, but I can respect the fierce loyalty she has for her family. That loyalty and discipline negated the feelings she has for me and what her body so desperately craves. I needed to give her a reason to along with my plan and that meant appealing to her savior complex after all—the one route I didn't want to take because I can be sure that any of it's real. I can't be sure that she won't turn on me the moment she no longer has to worry about saving Amerie. Liam doesn't know who she is, our arrangement, or why I brought her. He only knows enough to keep her from outside communication, including interacting with the hotel staff and leaving the penthouse.

I sat next to Aurora on the flight over, and she wasn't particularly talkative. She opted to use the Bose wireless headphones I gave her along with my secondary iPhone with the restricted access to listen to music. I even downloaded a few games on there for her to play. I know I unloaded a lot on her, but she'll have to grow up quickly. I can't baby her. I need a wife at my side who I can trust. I just hope her father is on the right side of this war I'm starting and doesn't have any implications in our father's murder.

Once I ensure Aurora's settled into our penthouse, I tell her to be ready for me when I return. She has until I get back to get in the right headspace to let go of her virginity. I'm not a complete dick. While I can't return the love she has for me, I want to give the romance of a first time. I don't want the act to be transactional. She doesn't deserve that. She will want for nothing as my wife and I will definitely give her a better life than she could have ever aspired to with Niccolò.

I meet Kai in the lobby as he is finishing a call. Kai and I both have an advanced special forces background— skills unmatched by any mobster. That gives us an edge when it comes to critical thinking and hand-to-hand combat. I've asked that he enlist the help of his old comrades to locate and rescue Amerie from confinement. My suspicion is that she never left Matteo's home. He would want to keep her close to

oversee her torture. The men's mission is to gain entry as stealthily as possible without harming Matteo or his men—well without killing them. They can use whatever force is necessary, so a good arse kicking is not off-limits. They're being paid handsomely for their discretion and to leave who hired them out of it. Once Amerie is freed, she will be taken down South to Texas, to get some distance from Matteo's reach. The hired men will send evidence of her release into an old friend's custody until I solidify marriage to Aurora. I promised her that Amerie could come work for us, and as long as she keeps her vow to me, I will honor that promise.

“Done,” he informs when he sees me. “My point of contact will let us know when the job is done, but it shouldn't take long. This is child's play compared to being behind enemy lines.”

“Good.”

We both head to the hired car that Eoghan has sent to drive us to him. Upon his suggestion, we're meeting in the boardrooms of his legit businesses. It was interesting to learn that he was once part of the corporate world before taking over as Clan Chief for his clan. That's quite the pivot. We arrive at a high-rise building and an escort meets us as soon as we step out of the car. We are guided past the building's security and up to the twelfth floor. Eoghan waits for us at the head of the table, sipping on some fancy bottle of water. The room is two sided floor-to-ceiling windows, giving nearly a panoramic view of the entire city, including the mountain and sea in the distance. He immediately gets up to shake our hand when we enter. He stands at about six foot four but looks like an older version of the redheaded kid we used to play with. He definitely hit a growth spurt. His buttoned-up suit and tie appearance is at odds with being associated with crime, and I dig it. A wolf in sheep's clothing—hiding in plain sight.

He shakes Kai's hand first. “Good to finally see you again. We were wee lads when yer father moved to the States with you.” Yes. His accent is definitely distinct. “How was the flight over?”

He shakes my hand next before we all have a seat. “Good. Thanks for sending your jet to get us,” I reply.

I can tell Kai still has his guard up, but he is being cordial at least.

“Oh, don’t mention it. I know how important silent moves are. Hence why we’re meeting here and not back at my home.”

“Why is that?” Kai speaks up.

“Ah, I can feel the speculation, and I understand. Our families haven’t been able to work together in quite some time, but I want to rule differently. Our generation has an opportunity to lead a change, and we can decide together what that looks like. I don’t expect either of you to leave what you’re building or have built in the States, but at the very least, I’d like us to be united in power and strength. I want our reach to extend both ways.”

“But you haven’t run this by your higher-ranking clan, hence why we’re meeting here?” Kai pushes.

“You’re correct,” Eoghan confirms. He strolls back over to his seat, and we follow his lead and take the two chairs on either side of him. “This whole meetup has been discreet. I didn’t want to have this conversation over the phone, but I also wanted to be respectful of your decision to move forward or not with my proposal. My clan trusts me and have been nothing but supportive of my rule. I just didn’t want to bring forward my proposal to work with your clan if there was nothing to bring forward. If your answer is no, then nothing changes. You’d always be welcome here regardless.”

“I can appreciate that,” I note. “We didn’t mention this visit to our clan either as we were unsure of what you’re proposing exactly.”

“Well, let me lay it all out on the table. I’m looking to modify the rackets our clan are involved in as you may want to do the same. You may be interested in picking up some of the ones I want to let go of. I want to focus on a few and build our empire through an extended reach. You could do the same here, but that’s just the business aspect of it. I want your clan

to have the numbers of our army if ever needed in the States; in exchange, we have that same commitment from your clan. I want the Gallagher Clan here to be an extension of the Gallagher Clan in the States. Our joint rule would be legendary.”

“I don’t think that has ever been done before,” I admit. “From the Russians to the Italians, they may have an allegiance internationally, but it’s not intentional as far as sharing rackets and resources. They’re much too greedy and possessive over their own hierarchy to consider something like this.”

I remove the top from one of the fancy waters in front of me. “And until now, we have been operating under the same premise,” Kai says, grabbing one of the waters for himself.

“That’s why I said we have a chance to change shite up. Let’s build a fucking joint empire, leaving a legacy for our future heirs. We can’t continue down the path of the way things have always been done,” Eoghan says enthusiastically.

Kai actually smiles. “I admit this is not what I expected. This could actually work.”

“Good. I knew the two of you would have reservations about my intent as you should have. But I’m not my father or grandfather. We have a robust army now, and our rackets are more than profitable. However, there is so much more that we could be doing. With only having only one brother and three sisters, I don’t want us to be vulnerable should some wanker get any ideas to weaken our power.”

I can more than relate to his predicament. I have three other brothers in addition to Kai, but this is not their world—not yet anyway. Should something happen to myself or Kai before we could effectively prepare them to rule, our empire is vulnerable. Because of this, it makes sense to merge our reigns to reduce that vulnerability. Eoghan’s clan needs us as much as we need his if we ever hope to rise in power. The more power we have, the more we’ll be seen as a threat. We will need to build a stronger infrastructure that’s impenetrable.

Eoghan shares some of his ideas to strengthen his reign within Dublin by marrying the Irish princess of the second most powerful Irish Mafia here. He doesn't exactly trust their Clan Chief and believe he is into some rackets neither of us agree with, such as the flesh trade, but it's a way to maintain the truce established between them and his father. Given what he has shared with me, I feel okay to let him in on part of my plan for now. The rest of my intentions will come as we establish more trust between our two clans.

I delve into the details the night of our father's murder and what he managed to tell me before he took his last breath. I admit that I'm not sure yet who he was speaking of, but until we find out, everyone is a suspect. I tell him of my plan to marry an Italian princess of one of the most powerful Mafia families in the US to strengthen their allegiance to us.

"That's bloody brilliant," he praises. "You're just solidifying more numbers. But if their family is as powerful as you say, how did you get the boss to agree to that? Those wankers are adamant about their traditions and keeping that power within the family."

"Through the very thing you just said. Their traditions are ironclad, and I plan to use it against them. Their boss hasn't agreed to anything yet, but he will."

I don't tell him about Aurora in relation to her virginity and how I plan to use it to force Matteo's hand. While I'm looking forward to working with Eoghan, I have no intention of sharing too prematurely.

"I think this has been a great start," he says, leaning over the table to shake our hands. "Are you able to stick around for a couple of days? Maybe see some sights. Now that I have your and Kai's willingness to give this proposal a go, I want to bring it to my clan. I would like us to connect again before you leave, but at my home the next go round so you can meet the clan."

"I can stick around for a few days. I was planning on it anyway." I look over at Kai.

“Yeah. Same here,” Kai agrees. “It will be nice to explore a bit. It’s been way too long since I’ve last been here.”

“Then it’s settled,” Eoghan says. “I’ll have the driver bring you back to your hotel, and I’ll be in touch after I talk with the clan. Thank you both for hearing me out. We’re going to do some great things together.”

The ride back to the hotel was quiet, neither of us wanting to discuss what we thought about the meeting in the company of Eoghan’s hired driver. Kai and I make plans to speak later, but first, I have more business to tend to, and it has nothing to do with the sleep I’m so in need of. I hope Aurora is ready to fulfill her promise.

Time is up!

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Lennon

I place the 1975 Vintage Glenfiddich and La Maison Du Chocolat on the nightstand. There will be no wine for her tonight. That's child's play. I'm introducing her to my exquisite taste for the finest scotch tonight. I remove the Chanel L'Huile Jasmin massage oil from my jean pocket before removing my clothes and leaving them in a pile beside the bed. Aurora is lying flat on her stomach, scrolling through the playlist of my secondary phone. I've already connected it to the Bluetooth of the room's surround system. This penthouse is fully automated, so she's been exploring all the features. She gives me a casual look over her shoulder before resuming her quest to find music. I told her to be naked and ready when I returned, and surprisingly, she has followed through. Once I'm naked, I fill her tumbler with scotch. I pass her the gentleman's drink before pulling the sheet back to admire her naked form. Every sensual curve is displayed, but my favorite is the two dimples above her ass. Chris Issak's "Wicked Game" begins to fill the room. Aurora sings about not dreaming that I'd meet someone like you and not wanting to fall in love. Her voice is actually heavenly—smooth as silk. Too bad she's a little late on the falling in love part. With the jasmine massage oil in hand, I climb onto the bed and straddle the back of her thighs. I drizzle the oil from her shoulders to those sexy-as-fuck butt dimples. I admit I've never invested this much into foreplay, but I want tonight to be special. I'm not a complete dick. I know what she's giving up tonight—the loyalty to her family.

I knead her back with mild pressure ... although I'm far from being an expert. Her delicate flesh beneath my hands stirs up an ache deep in my balls. I definitely prefer to be massaging something else, but I'm willing to go slow with her. I want this to be good for both of us.

She takes a small sip of the scotch before once again looking over her shoulder at me— her eyebrows scrunched. “This is strong. It burns going down,” she mentions. “What is this?”

“Only the finest scotch— a rare cask. My future wife needs to be able to join me in a stiff drink aside from the wine.”

She seems satisfied with that answer and consumes a few more sips.

“Your hands feel nice,” she admits. “I’ve never had a massage before.”

“You’ve never done a lot of things. Tonight is a first of many.”

My hands slowly caress her sides, back, and ass. It's nice to just massage and admire her body, but my cock is hungry for what is to come. She has finished the entire glass of liquor, so I'm enthusiastic to move things along. I slide my hand down her back once more before letting it continue down the center of her ass. Memories of fucking her here flood my mind.

As I begin to rub her pussy, her response to my massage is evident. Her tight little cunt is hot and dripping with her essence. I use her juices to coat my fingertips, making slow, deliberate circles. Alternating the pressure of my massage, I part her folds and introduce a finger—just the tip. Her greedy pussy clenches my finger as a moan escapes her.

“Does that feel good, little bird?” She nods, but I need to hear her say it. I want her words — the sweet sound of surrender.

“I can't hear you, babe. Tell me you want this, or I will stop.”

“Yeesss!”

That's more like it. She's so close. Can't have her coming just yet, though. I need to be balls deep to feel the quake of her body and the undeniable clench around my cock. My fingers are just an appetizer of what is to come. I admit that I didn't know what this moment would be like after our conversation to get to this point, but it seems it has no bearing on this moment or the mood. She is totally in the moment with me. She wants me. I slide my finger out of her heat, and without warning, I bring it to her mouth. I nudge her lips apart for her to suck.

"Taste yourself, little bird. See how good you fucking taste. Your pussy is so soaking right now. You're aching to have me fuck you," I say barely above a whisper next to the shell of her ear. "I know you've been wanting my cock for a while, but you fought every urge. Tonight your body will take what it wants. It will be victorious."

"I want toooo," she murmurs around my finger but doesn't finish that sentence.

She sucks my finger with just the right amount of suction and pull. I imagine her lips wrapped around my dick again instead. My dick is impossibly hard. I don't know how long I can maintain this slow pace. Seeing her like this is a turn-on in itself— guard down and at my mercy.

"Do what?" I ask, forcing her to elaborate.

"I want your cum. I bet you taste just as good." My finger pauses in her mouth. She just hinted that she wanted to suck my dick. All blood drains to my shaft, not a coherent thought left. I need to be in her mouth now.

"So you're telling me that you want to suck my cock and swallow my cum?" I clarify. The words are extra dirty coming from her.

"One good turn deserves another," she says, and it's the hottest fucking thing I've heard out of her mouth. Even though she's sucked my dick before, it's the first time she has initiated it. I pull my finger from her mouth— eager to oblige her request.

Her skin glistens from the oil as I back away to let her free. Her eyes are hooded, the scotch doing a fine job of helping to relax her inhibitions. She gets on her knees, fighting slightly to stay upright as the mattress sinks beneath her weight. My dick bobbles as it jumps with excitement. She stares at its movement, cataloging every detail of my length and thickness. I let her get a good look. I wish I knew the depraved thoughts running rampant in her mind right now. She licks her pale-pink lips in appreciation, and her eyes darken with unmistakable need.

Encouraged by the sight, she grabs my length. She takes a few introductory licks, getting reacquainted with my shaft. Licking from base to tip, she explores the engorged veins that lead to my sensitive spots. When she finally opens wide enough to take me into her mouth, I inhale a breath through my teeth. I can already feel the familiar tingle deep down in my balls. My cock twitches against her tongue. She hollows her cheeks to take more of me, her suction perfect. I have to set the pace, or her hot little mouth will make me come too soon.

I ease out of her mouth before slowly giving her a little more of my length. I'm careful not to rush ... I want to indulge in every second.

“Your mouth is incredible. Undeniably incredible.”

This spurs her on. She tries to take more of me as she jacks my dick with the rest she can't fit into her mouth. I have other plans, though. I allow myself a few more pleasurable sucks before I pull entirely out of her mouth. Without notice, I push her back on the bed and drop to my stomach. My face aligns with her pussy as my tongue plunges into her still dripping pussy with perfect precision. I suck, nibble, and playfully bite her clit. I lean her back even farther to give it a slight slap, and she buckles. She doesn't shy away from the pain—good to know. I will explore that later. I continue the relentless strokes with my tongue, driving her to the orgasm I know is so close. Her legs tighten around my head, and she gets a fist of my hair.

“That’s right, little bird. Hold on for the ride,” I encourage between licks.

I plunge my tongue deep into her opening as my other hand finds her bundle of nerves. The grip she has on my hair and neck makes me desperate to see her come again—only the next time, it will be with more light.

“Lennon,” she cries as she gives me what I’ve been waiting for—her first orgasm of the night. I decided to give her that to have something to compare it to. Her next orgasm will be around my cock. I watch her face as I continue to suck on her pussy through her aftershocks. And damn, does she come beautifully. The sex face she makes is worth the delayed gratification I’m imposing on myself.

I roll off her onto my back before I pull her to straddle my lap. I lean back against the padded leather headboard while grabbing a single decadent piece of chocolate strawberry from the nightstand.

“Open,” I instruct with a tone that makes her shudder.

My order doesn’t leave room for hesitation or thought. The manner in which she submits to me excites me a bit more than it should. She does as she’s told and accepts the piece of chocolate. My heart slams against my chest at just how sexy she is. My dick is mere inches from her tight pussy, yet I feed her like I’m not anxious to consume her. She leans forward, and her breast grazes my mouth as she does. I stick my tongue out for a quick lick before she levels her head to mine. I grab both sides of her face and bring her lips to mine. A slow grin spreads across my face. I kiss her with all the intensity building within me, this desperate need to consume her. She inches closer until she’s hovering over my cock. She rubs herself against it, and the inferno of need within me grows. I know she can feel me lengthen and harden between us. She gyrates her hips, wanting to feel my cock penetrate me. I think she has been more than ready.

“Slow down there, babe. Your next orgasm will be on my dick. I want that hungry little pussy riding me just like your gyration.”

I slap her ass, giving her the sting she craves.

“I’m ready, Lennon,” she announces.

“Are you now?” I quirk an eyebrow. “I think the wetness of your sweet little cunt gave that away a long time ago.”

“Why are you teasing me? I thought you—”

She doesn’t get to finish that question. I flip us over, and now I’m the one hovering on top of her. She wraps her legs firmly around my hips as I give a brief pause to get ready to accept all of me. My eyes are trained on hers as I make a show of stroking my length. I stroke it a few times, and her eyes follow the motion. I line my dick up at her entrance and slide it through her wetness, building me up more.

“Relax, little bird. Just feel.”

My forehead wrinkles, and her grip around my biceps tighten. I still briefly before introducing more of my cock. I stretch her open, and after some brief seconds, she welcomes the bite of pain. I continue my unhurried progress forward until I’m fully seated to the hilt. She throbs around him. Feeling her clench, I begin to thrust slowly.

“Shit!” she cries out.

I continue my leisurely strokes. Her hips begin to move on their own accord, desperate for every inch I’m keeping away from her. Sensing her need, I drive deeper.

“This pussy was made for me,” I inform her. “It’s gripping my dick so hard.”

My eyes never leave hers as I pick up the pace. The sound of my balls slaps against her wetness, echoing through the room. I pull her tighter as my hips begin to piston harder—deeper.

“Ahhhh,” she screams out.

“Am I hurting you, babe? Is it too much for you?” I attempt to slow my thrusts, but her legs wrap around me tighter.

“Please don’t stop,” she pleads.

“So my little bird welcomes the pain.”

I resume my punishing strokes, and she holds on for the ride. Each thrust gets her inevitably closer to her release. A few more deep strokes and she's exploding around my cock in waves. Her legs tremble as I thrust my way to my own release. My mouth dips down and latches onto her shoulder as I fuck her savagely. As I explode within her depths, the aftershocks consume me. My dick remains inside her while I ride out my best orgasm to date. She winces when I finally slide out of her.

"Come on," I say as I get out of bed, reaching for her hand.

She accepts my hand and lets me assist her out of the bed. She turns to look over her shoulder, and her mouth goes slack. Fresh blood stains the hotel sheets. She looks down between her legs as if the blood could have come from anywhere else but her. Dried blood coats the inside of her thighs. She's mortified. Not sure why since the very first day I abducted her I made her strip while she was on her period. Blood doesn't bother me.

"Um ... sorry about the sheets," she apologizes.

"Stop it, babe. I'm not letting you dwell on a little blood. I've tasted your blood, remember? Do you need more face paint?"

"You wouldn't," she says, appalled.

"I would, so ignore it." I kiss her forehead. "My little cock warrior wanted it rough, so I obliged. It's only sheets. We'll get them replaced."

I grab her hand again and walk us to the shower. Without letting go of her hand, I turn on the water. When the temperature has heated to my satisfaction, I pull her into the shower with me.

"Look at me, beautiful bird," I encourage. When she does, I pull her further into me and kiss her slowly. This kiss doesn't harness the wild passion like before. It's tender and sweet—two adjectives I didn't think I was capable of. I hold her close and continue to kiss her under the rain showerhead. I feel the moment some of her embarrassment begins to ebb away.

I finally break the kiss, but only so I can wash her. It smells masculine, but I don't mind her smelling like me. I use extra care when I use the washcloth between her legs, but she still flinches. Her swollen vagina is sensitive to the touch. I pat softer and remove the nozzle to aim the warm water where she needs it. I hold it there, letting the warmth dull the ache.

"Too much too fast," I gather.

"It's fine, Lennon."

I nod, but I'm not convinced. I step farther underneath the water to wash, and she watches as the water repels from my taut muscles. I turn my back to her to wash my front. She begins to massage my back similar to what I treated her to earlier. She eases her hand around my abs and plays with the hardness beneath her fingers. My grip on her wrist halts her exploring.

"You have to stop before you make me hard again," I warn, turning around.

I shut off the water and reach for a towel for us both. I dry myself and then her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Aurora

I expected to be filled with self-loathing today—to feel guilty for giving my virginity to Lennon and betraying my family. Instead, I feel surprisingly free. And knowing there is no way my father can make me marry Niccolò now brings a smile to my face. Kai dropped by our penthouse this morning. He had evidence and pictures to prove that Lennon had followed through on his promise. Amerie was freed from my father and was en route to Texas. I never doubted that I could trust his word. I'm starting to accept that his ways are indeed mercurial and unorthodox, but I'm not his enemy. He wants to marry me and give me a life much different from the one my father and Niccolò had planned for me. Although I believe the love to be one-sided, I've already resigned myself to keep my end of the arrangement. I will marry him and keep his secret about how the two of us came to be.

We're on the way back to the hotel, walking hand in hand—our strides in sync. The hand holding may be simply to keep me from running, but I won't let my mind go there. There has been a shift between us, and I wonder if he feels it too. I'm indulging in this cocoon that Dublin has wrapped around us. Will it disappear the moment we get back on the jet to the States? Lennon treated me to breakfast at a quaint little café not too far away. They had the cutest little lattes with hearts drawn into the foam. We even looked at a few dress shops where he insisted that I pick out something from this Pink Diva Boutique. My instructions were to find a dress for dinner tomorrow night because he wants to take me out again. He has a meeting this afternoon and again tomorrow. After that, we

will enjoy a night out before we head back to New York. I found an emerald-green V-neck mini dress. The girl behind the counter packaged it up and gave the bag to Lennon to carry. The back swings from his left hand while his right hand is in mine.

“I need to meet up with Kai and will be gone for the rest of the afternoon,” Lennon informs once we’re back inside the penthouse. “Enjoy the rest of your day ... watch some movies, listen to music, just don’t leave the penthouse.”

“I know the rules,” I reassure. “You don’t have to worry about me; you will see that in time. My loyalty is to you now, so give me the same trust you asked me to give you.”

“I do,” he replies, and my breath hitches. I wasn’t expecting that response. “I’m not sure why or if it’s wise, but I do trust you, Aurora. Don’t make me regret it.”

“Never.”

He applies a chaste kiss to my forehead. “Liam will be outside your door if you need him. Order lunch, but save room for dinner tonight. When I return, we’ll have a nice dinner on the terrace underneath the stars. Oh and prepare for round two.”



THE DAY HAS COMPLETELY GOTTEN AWAY FROM ME. I HAD pizza for lunch and binge-watched almost a full season of *Blacklist* on Netflix. I must have passed out on the sofa in the living area. The sound of Lennon’s voice in the foyer awakens me. I overhear him asking Liam to order room service and take the rest of the night off. I run my hands through my hair, trying to straighten my appearance. I’m still wearing the same sweatsuit from this morning ... even down to the sneakers. I haven’t done anything to get ready for our date out on the terrace if you can call it that.

“Sorry, I must have been more tired than I thought. I’m just going to jump in the shower and change.”

“Don’t bother,” Lennon says cryptically, a single eyebrow quirked. “I’m glad you’ve gotten some rest. You’re going to need it. How about I dirty you up a bit more before dinner?”

“I wouldn’t be opposed to that,” I admit.

“Strip.”

He has a thing for these one-word orders, but in this instance, I don’t mind. He takes a seat on the sofa where I was just sleeping to enjoy the show. I can feel his eyes on my butt as I dig my thumb into the waistband of my sweatpants. Brazenly, I ease them halfway down my hips. I hear his breath hitch, fueling my confidence. I slip my sneakers off so I can peel them the rest of the way down in the most seductive way possible with sweats. I turn to face him before pulling my sweat top over my head. I’m left standing in the lacy black bra and Brazilian-cut panties from the dresser that I never returned. I have no shame that these cock tease garments originally belonged to Fiona or that he probably bought them for her. *He’s mine now*. The heat in his eyes is unmistakable. I straddle his muscular thighs and begin undoing the buttons on his collared shirt. He helps me by completely removing it. God, his bare chest is the epitome of chiseled art. I begin working on the belt of his jeans. He looks up at me with unadulterated lust, but when he tilts his head down to conceal what my striptease is doing to him, it ignites a fire in my core. He’s hiding his eyes, but I know he’s just as aroused as I am. I loosen his belt and get his jeans unbuttoned before he stops me. He palms my ass, and I feel his hardness pressing against me. I begin a slow grind against his manhood, and he rewards me with a hiss. He unfastens my bra, and I immediately cup my breasts as the straps slide down my arms.

Lennon pulls my hands away and removes the bra the rest of the way. “Let me see you, A mhuirnín. You have no reason to be timid. Your body is meant to be worshiped.”

I can feel the heat flush across my skin. Determined to be the fearless woman he believed that I could be capable of, I grab his hair from the back of his head and push my core farther into his erection.

He stills my hips before letting his lips graze my nipple. His tongue sneaks out for a sensuous lick, and I'm on fire. He pulls my nipple into his mouth while he alternates sucking and biting. A moan slips from my lips and he smirks at me. "You like that, little bird?"

"Yes." A knock on the door interrupts us, and I startle.

"I wasn't expecting the food this quickly. You can grab a robe from the bathroom or not," he says as he gives me a small wink. "Either way, meet me on the terrace. I'll get the room service."

I attempt to untangle myself from his legs, but he surprises me by standing with me still straddled around his waist. He nips my bottom lip before palming my ass with a firm grip. "Saved for now so enjoy the reprieve. Nothing is going to save you after we finish eating," he threatens.

"Maybe I don't want to be saved," I reply with a smirk of my own. A single eyebrow arches in amusement at my retort, but he says nothing. I head to the bedroom and fall onto the plush bed. I'm reveling in the luxury fabric of the down comforter when Lennon walks in and pins me to the bed.

"What are you doing? I told you to grab a robe," he whispers in my ear. He captures my lips in a wild kiss, and I whimper. "I'm not going to fuck you yet because once I start, I won't stop until I've had my fill. We both need to eat first for the energy."

He thrusts his hips into me once before getting up. "Room service is gone, so you can either grab that robe or come to dinner half naked. Truth be told, I prefer the latter, but it's your call. Whatever you decide, make it quick." With that, he leaves the room. I'm not going to sit in front of him in my panties while he's at least half dressed in his jeans. I'm not that bold. That will take some time.

I grab a robe from the bathroom and join him at the dining table. He has everything spread out, and it looks mouth-watering. I note that he has a bottle of wine for me tonight instead of the hard stuff like last night's drink of choice.

“Decided to go with the robe, huh?” His grin is infectious, and I just want to kiss it off his gorgeous face. He should definitely show this playful side of himself more.

“Well, I didn’t want to distract you during dinner,” I joke.

“Sorry to inform you, but you’re a distraction with or without a robe. All I can picture is how I’m going to have you screaming my name soon.” I take a sip of my wine to swallow my horniness, and he chuckles. “I’m going to enjoy watching you learn to own your sexuality. It’s okay to crave sex. As long as it’s with me.” He winks.

“I’m not some sexual fiend,” I say, feeling like I need to defend myself. “I’m not going to miraculously turn into the whore Fiona was for you.”

“No, babe, of course you’re not. And you should never compare yourself to Fiona again. She has never had this version of me sexually or otherwise. You’re going to be my wife—my first and only. There’s a difference. My mission is to pleasure you senseless and introduce you to things you never knew you wanted.”

I’m speechless. I didn’t even consider the first that he would be sharing me. It may not be his virginity, but I will be the first woman to call him my husband. And if I had to guess, the first woman to be able to call him mine. I squeeze my legs together to suppress the tingling he just caused down below. He uncovers the silver domes of food and lays the fish entrée in front of us. I’m hungrier for him.

I take a bite of my fish, which melts in my mouth. We eat in silence for a few minutes, but I can see he is watching me. Neither of us bothers with small talk. The night is magical with stars twinkling in the sky, but the man sitting across from me is the magic. We finish our meal, and it’s Lennon who makes the first move. He comes to my side of the table before holding out his hand.

“Come.”

His fucking one-word orders have grown to be my kryptonite. It makes me wet every single time. I put my hand

in his, and he guides me to the bedroom. He slides his hands underneath my robe to ease it off my shoulders. It falls to the floor in a heap along with my confidence. My nipples pebble from his perusal of my half-naked body. I'm horny, yet I'm still working to get used to being naked in front of him. His stare sears me from the inside out.

"Lie on the bed," he says, interrupting my trepidation.

I do what I'm told and wait for further instruction, but there is none. I watch in amazement as he removes his jeans and stands before me commando. His massive erection is more than apparent. I wish I had his nerves of steel. He slowly climbs on top of me and begins to remove my panties. As he inspects my body, his jaw twitches, and his eyes darken with need. He pins my arms above my head and secures them with one hand. He uses his other hand to explore the length of my body. His touch is light as a feather as he skims along my breast and stomach before reaching his intended destination.

"I see that you're already wet. I love that you're this responsive to me." To emphasize his point, he runs a finger down my now slick folds. The heat from his fingertips ignites a need to have him inside me. I whimper, and he captures my lips with a passionate kiss. His tongue mimics the motions of his fingers as he circles my nub. I can feel the familiar knot in my belly, and I begin to tremble in his arms. "That's it, little bird. Come now." The rasp of his voice sends me over the edge, and I explode with the most intense orgasm to date.

Lennon brings his fingers to his lips and licks away my essence. It's the most erotic thing when he does this. "So sweet. Your taste is fucking fantastic." He kisses me again, and I taste myself on his tongue. "See how good you taste, baby?"

"Yes," I say breathlessly.

He rubs his erection against my folds. "See how hard you make me?" He is long, thick, and hard. He wraps my hand around him, and I can barely close my hand around his girth. He moves my hand up and down his length, and I feel him hardening even more. A bead of liquid forms at the tip of his

cock, and I massage it between my fingertips. He sucks on my neck and groans as I continue my exploration of what I now get to claim as mine.

“Your hand feels so good, but I need to be in you now. Spread your legs for me, babe.”

He aligns himself at my entrance, and I feel the tip nudging my folds. As he grips my hips, he plunges forward in one quick thrust. “Oh my God,” I moan.

“Shit, you’re still so tight. Your pussy is clenching my cock.” He allows me time to reacclimate to his size before he begins to move.

He pulls out slowly before slamming back into me. Setting a delicious rhythm, I feel my climax building again. “Lennon,” I moan. He watches as he enters me before pulling out again. He maintains this slow in-and-out pace until the torture is too much for us both. He slams into me, and I know that slow and steady is over.

“Fuck, yeah. Feel me pound your greedy little pussy—my pussy.” His pace is animalistic now, and it hurts so good. I know I’m going to be even more sore than I was today.

He yanks my head back with such intensity that my scalp stings in protest. With my hair wrapped around his fist, he begins his assault on my neck and pushes me over the edge. Light explodes behind my eyes as I yell out his name.

“Turn over,” he instructs. I turn so I’m lying on my stomach. His hands caress my ass and give it a gentle squeeze. “You have such a nice ass. I love the two dimples that sit just above the globes of your ass. It’s easily one of my favorite parts aside from your sweet cunt.”

He licks one of the dimples and then the other. He gives my ass a few smacks. “God, you’re so fucking addicting. Get up on your knees for me.”

My ass is in the air, and my face is down on the bed. I feel so exposed, yet I’m dripping wet. He rubs his cock tauntingly against my wetness, and I push back against him. I’m so hot for him I can’t stand it. “Please, Lennon,” I beg.

“So impatient,” he teases. He smacks my ass again but slightly harder this time, sending echoes throughout the room. The stinging catches me off guard, but then he plunges in me from behind, and pleasure joins pain in delicious synchrony. I push my ass back toward him, trying to absorb all he’s giving me. He’s pounding me so relentlessly that my legs begin to quake. He’s balls deep inside me, yet I still can’t get enough. I bite my lip to contain my screams, but it’s pointless. I yell out his name, coming so hard my legs give out. He holds me up with ease as he continues his punishing strokes.

“Fuck,” he screams, and I feel him throbbing inside me with his own release. He looks down at me, shocked. His eyes are wide, and he’s panting. It does a lot for my confidence to see him affected this way. “Fucking hell, little bird,” he says when he finds his breath. *I’m thinking the same thing.*

I can barely breathe, yet I need to answer him. “Yep,” is all I can muster. I grin, and Lennon surprises me by jumping out the bed. For a minute, I think he’s done with me.

“I’m going to draw us a bath. You will be so sore after taking two consecutive days of my punishing cock, but the hot water will help.” The mischievous look in his eyes tells me he isn’t sorry one bit.

“Feeling pretty proud of yourself, huh?”

“Yes. Very. Every time you move tomorrow, I want you to remember I claimed that virginal pussy—your fiancé. I plan to claim every inch of you.”

“You are so crass. And don’t I need a ring to be your fiancée officially?” I blush profusely. I’m not used to language that is so raw and dirty. But I like it coming from him.

“I don’t need a ring to claim you as mine, but don’t worry. As soon as we let this charade play out with your father, I plan to put the biggest rock on your fucking ring finger for all to see. Now time for that bath.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Aurora

1 WEEK LATER

It's been a week since we returned from Dublin. So much has evolved for Lennon and me. Our relationship is unconventional, but I can appreciate the strides he's trying for me. We had a lot of opportunities to talk over the weekend and he wants to build trust between us. He doesn't want to have to constantly look over his shoulder and wonder if I'm going to betray him. I gave him my word, and in return, things have been different since we got back to New York. For starters, he brought me back to his penthouse in the city instead of the house he was holding me captive in what turns out to have been Staten Island. None of his house staff has been here. It's just been him and me this week. I have a special phone to use for deliveries or anything that I may need since I still can't be seen yet—not until we arrange a story for my father. He's trusting me with a burner phone to communicate with Amerie in the meantime. I'm not allowed to tell her where I am, who I'm with, or how she was rescued, which is hard but necessary.

Lennon is out doing whatever he needs to be doing regarding his Mafia life, and he's left me here without supervision. It's an olive branch of his trust. His world doesn't scare me. I grew up in the underworld of organized crime, so I much prefer my destiny with him than any other. I'm even trying on this whole domesticated thing since it will be a bit before we have house staff again. I'm just getting ready to put in a load of laundry when my burner phone rings. Only two people have the number—Lennon and Amerie.

It's Amerie. "Hey, girl," I say, happy to hear from her again. We've only talked a couple of times since I've been back.

"Sorry! I can't talk long," she says on the other end of the phone, sounding winded. "I need your help. I'm so scared, Aurora."

“Slow down. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“I’m in New York. I know you’re not home, and you can’t tell me where you are, but I need you. I don’t want to be alone. Please let me come to where you are.” She’s crying now.

“Why aren’t you in Texas? How did you get back to New York?”

“Please, Aurora. Your brothers are looking for me.”

I can’t betray Lennon’s trust by bringing her here and thus giving up the identity of the person who has me, but I can’t leave her out in the cold either. I will have to go to her, and once I know what is going on, I will call Lennon and tell him. I don’t have the penthouse key card to regain access once I leave anyway. Lennon will have to understand. He will know what to do. If my brothers are after her, I have to help her.

“Okay. Look just tell me where you are, and I’ll come to you. We’ll figure something out.”

She gives me the name of some seedy motel she managed to check into. It’s all that she could afford. I will leave Lennon a note in case he comes back before I have a chance to call. I know I should probably call him now, but I don’t want him to stop me from helping her. And if my brothers are on her trail, I wouldn’t want Lennon to run into them blindly. I have to make sure to get Amerie in the clear before I alert Lennon. I scribble the note explaining what I’m doing and why I couldn’t tell him beforehand, but I will call him I know more. I dress quickly and throw on one of Lennon’s coats with a hood. I slip out of the high-rise apartments without being seen or approached—no security detail to stop me. I walk the endless blocks it takes to get to the motel where Amerie told me to meet her. The soles of my feet are on fire from the long trek, and the jacket and my jeans are soaked from the downpour halfway here. I’m about to reach into the jacket pocket for the phone to call Amerie when a cloth covers my mouth, and I’m pulled into someone’s tight hold. Is it one of Lennon’s men abducting me again? I can’t even scan my surroundings to look for a van. My limbs are weak, and my eyes are heavy. It doesn’t take long for me to succumb to the darkness.



“DON’T HURT HER TOO BAD,” I HEAR A FAMILIAR FEMALE voice. “We need her to be able to help us. Not dead.” Light begins to filter out some of the darkness behind eyelids as a foot meets my ribs. Two more kicks and I can see Amerie tugging on the assailant’s arm. “Stop. She’s coming to. Let’s just get this over with.

I’m lying on my side, my face in contact with grimy carpet. I look around the cheap motel with the suspicious bedspread. I try to catalog everything I can.

“Get up, Aurora,” Amerie demands.

I look up at her, my ribs throbbing. I don’t understand. “What’s going on? I thought you needed me?”

The nerdy guy with shaggy hair, who has been doing a number on my ribs, yanks me from the ground and tosses me on the bed.

“I fucking needed you when your father had me in that dungeon of his having me tortured everyday. I had to shit and piss in a bucket and fuck for my food, Aurora. And that was the easy part.”

Tears begin to run down my face. “I’m so sorry that happened to you. I had no idea, but I got help for you as soon as I found out.”

“And that’s just it. How the hell did you manage that? I took all kinds abuse for you and all this time, you were in the hands of someone who was willing to help you. Who did you run off with because it sure in hell wasn’t the guys I was working with.”

Something isn’t adding up here. She just said the guys she was *working with*. “Amerie... what are you talking about? What guys?”

“Ugh, you’re pathetic, you know that? You were supposed to be an easy mark. I worked in your ivory tower to help my mom, and when I got old enough, your father gladly hired me

on. My mother was satisfied with the little money, but I hated watching you have the best of everything and still complain about your life. It was exhausting pretending that I cared. Then one day, I had someone reach out to me with a plan that would afford me to finally have a life that I could be proud of.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying someone spotted you on one of your trips out and put two and two together who you were. The funny thing is, it was some of your fucking father’s soldiers. They wanted more too. They waited until I left the house one day and approached me with an offer. All I had to do was alert them when you left the house again. They were supposed to grab you and hold you for ransom. Once they got their money, I would get my cut—one hundred thousand dollars. That’s enough to leave New York and start a life somewhere else.” She slaps me across the face before spitting on me. “Only you fucking let yourself get taken by someone else other than your father’s soldiers. At first, I thought everything was going according to plan until the same two soldiers stopped me on the street because they thought I had worked their plan with someone else. Your father beat me until I admitted that I had been covering for you. He didn’t believe that I had no idea where you went or how you got out of the house.”

“I didn’t let myself get taken,” I yell, rubbing my face where her hand connected with my face. “I wasn’t on some goddamn vacation. I gave away my virginity to save you. All the while you have been a traitor from the beginning.”

She laughs in my face. “Oh, this is gold. Wait until Daddy discovers that his precious princess is nothing more than spoiled goods. I’ll ensure that nugget of information gets out. Say adios to that engagement to Niccolò.”

She lacks any sort of sympathy for what I just revealed. I was only telling half of the truth. Yes, I slept with Lennon as an agreement to save her, but our arrangement is so much more than that. I love him, and ultimately, I chose him over everything else.

“Fuck you!” I scream. I can’t believe that someone could hide who they really are for that long. I thought that she was my friend.

“No, fuck you, Aurora. I’m going to call Alessandro and let him hear your voice as proof of life. Once he wires the money Marty is asking for, we will end your miserable life. This works out better because now we get to keep all the money.”

I don’t know how she plans to get away with what she’s proposing. I see all kinds of flaws with that plan, starting with my brother wouldn’t give any ransom money without ensuring that I’m safe first. Second, no way she and this nerdy kid could take on any of my brothers. I’m content to let them try. My burner phone rings in my jacket pocket, and Amerie loses her shit.

“Moron. You didn’t check her pockets?”

“I didn’t have time,” he says under his breath, wrestling me unnecessarily to get the phone from my pocket. “But at least now, we can use it to make the call to her brother.”

“There has been a change of plans. I have a better idea,” Amerie says deviously. “Strip her naked and put her in the fucking tub.”

I begin to fight the moment he starts trying to remove my clothes. I endure some punches, kicks, and hair pulling from them both before they’re successful in their quest. By the time I’m thrown into the equally disgusting tub, I’m exhausted. I can only curl into a ball as the Marty guy records me on the burner phone. I listen to him state their demands, adding that I’ve already been beaten, my virginity taken, and next would be the end of my life if they didn’t get three million in unmarked bills by tomorrow night. He said that he would be in touch.

“Let’s take this a step further.” Marty grins. “I’m going to send this video to some of the news outlets. Let this hit all the papers and news to gain public outcry. Her family is not exactly on the up and up. Media attention is not something

they'd want. They will want to end this as quickly and quietly as possible.”

“You're a freaking genius, Marty,” Amerie praises. “By the time we call Alessandro, he will be more than ready to pay the ransom. We can leave bread crumbs to those two initial soldiers. Let them take the fall for this. This was originally their plan, after all.”

“On it. With any luck, this video will be just in time to make tonight's news.”

My damp clothes are thrown in the tub with me before they lock me in the bathroom. I waste no time putting them back on. I'd rather be wet and cold than to have my naked flesh in contact with the grime for a second longer. I get back into the tub, the better alternative than the floor, and just cry. I don't know how much more I can take.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Lennon

I'm beside myself with worry. Kai has been here at my penthouse since last night, trying to talk me off the fucking proverbial ledge. We combed the streets last night looking for clues to where she could have gone. We went to that shitty as low budget motel first and nobody had seen her. I put one of my guys to sit on the plaid just in case. I wanted to beat down every door, but Kai convinced me otherwise. I read the note she left for me over and over, wanting to believe that she didn't betray me the first chance she got. I foolishly abstained from putting security outside the door because I wouldn't be gone long, and nobody was supposed to know she was here.

"Try not to beat yourself up, brother. We'll find her," Kai assures.

His words are not comforting. He and I both know how royally I fucked up. "Is she even with Amerie, or was that I lie too?"

"I called, and Amerie left Texas, so that leads me to think that the two of them are indeed together. Amerie was left alone to stay in the mother-in-law quarters behind the main house. We had no reason to think she'd run after we rescued her. It was in her best interest to stay put," Kai explains. "Marjorie think she may have stolen some things from the house to buy herself a bus ticket here to New York."

Marjorie and John are an older couple who are the relatives of one of Kai's comrades. Nobody knows who they are, and he knew she would be safe there. Only she and Aurora have schemed to get her away from me.

Kai's phone rings, and my ears perk up. He says a few words and then he pushes past me to turn on the television. It's fucking Aurora. She's curled into a ball, hiding from the camera as some asshole demands ransom. I see the different shades of purple bruises already forming on her skin and guilt gnaws at me for my first thought being that she betrayed me. The news lady reports that they received the video anonymously, and that if anyone had any tips, call the number on the screen to the NYPD. Fuck the police. I'm going to find and kill these bastards.

"She didn't betray me," I growl. "I need to find her now!"

"I know, brother," Kai says. "That was Matteo calling me. He thinks these people have had her all this time, and they're finally going public with their plans to ask for a ransom."

"He used the burner I gave her to make calls," I say, suddenly realizing their first mistake. "He used it to record the video of her."

"We already tried to track that phone. It wasn't active to trace."

"They've used it once. I'd put money on it that they used it to make the ransom call. Once they do, we can triangulate the call, but we won't have long. Get Alessandro on the phone. I have an idea."

We use Kai's above board occupation as a bodyguard to the most elite politicians and celebrities to fabricate some secret access we have to technology not otherwise available to civilians. We do have said technology, but we're able to speed up the process because I have the details of the burner phone that he would be using since it's my fucking phone.

We need to hide the real reason we know about the burner phone and our ability to track it. I'm the one who purchased it and set it up. I tell Alessandro that we're coming over to Matteo's house, but we need to be in a central place for when the ransom call comes through so I can quickly trace the call on whomever phone the call comes to. We'll only have one shot at this. I hope they don't get the call before I can. Kai and I are in my car in minutes.

“Keep your head, brother,” Kai reminds. “Otherwise, Matteo and her brothers will be on to us. You’re too invested right now. Your feelings are showing.”

I switch lanes to speed up, zigzagging through tonight’s light traffic. “What feelings are you talking about? I’m pissed that she was taken on my watch. I didn’t protect her from her own gullibility,” I say, getting angrier by the minute.

“That too. But somewhere along the way, you fell for her. You don’t have to dissect that right now, but if you’re honest with yourself, you’ll see I’m right. You, my brother, are one ruthless motherfucker. You gave Aurora that freedom because you wanted to earn her trust. She is no longer something for you to conquer for the sake of gaining power. She became human to you, and that allowed you to love her.”

“Look. I don’t know what the hell I feel or how we got here. I admit that I care about her, but those goddamn feelings are how we ended up in this mess. When I get her back, I’m going to fuck her senseless, and then I’m not going to let her out of my sight again.”

Silence falls within the car for the rest of the drive. Kai is right. It wasn’t until this moment that I realized I do love her, and it scares the fuck out of me. She’s been changing me one layer at a time for a minute now. I’ve given up my self-induced penances for her. I’ve allowed myself to be in the moment with her and enjoy her responses to the little romantic things I’ve done for her. It’s all so out of character for me, yet her happiness has come to mean so much to me. I never even noticed that I was slowly becoming a different man for her, but Kai has.

“You need someone like her to give you balance out your savage. And she needs a man like you to love and protect her. I know I give her shite, but it was only to test you—to get you to react. She will be the happily ever after that you didn’t know you needed or wanted,” Kai says once we arrive at Matteo’s place. “Now put your fucking mask of indifference on, and let’s work with her family to get her back.”

“You’re one mushy fucker,” I tell him. “But I agree. Let’s get her back so I have another shot to do this right.”



AS ANTICIPATED, THE DUMBASS USES THE BURNER PHONE I gave Aurora to call her brother. Alessandro puts him on speaker and drags out the conversation long enough for me to use the software I connected to his phone via c port adapter. They’re at the motel dump across from the one Aurora told me she was meeting Amerie at. We just don’t know which room. The guy asked Alessandro to meet him in the alley just a few short blocks away to make the drop in two hours. He would then have his partner release her. He is supposed to go alone.

“I’m pretty sure I recognize that voice,” Alessandro says once he ends the call. “That was fucking Lorenzo. He talks really fast and has a distinctive lisp. He and his brother Enzo are two of our soldiers.”

“So you’re telling me this is the work of two of our own?” Matteo booms.

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you,” Alessandro confirms. “It makes sense because not many knew about Aurora outside of our family. I just don’t know why they waited so long to try to collect payment.”

“Because they’ve been in on trying to help us find her. They’ve been privy to our every goddamn move. They waited until some of the heat settled to make their move. I’m going to kill both of them and their entire damn family. If we can’t trust our own fucking men, then who can we trust?” Matteo yells.

So Matteo’s soldiers are behind this? But why? This betrayal works for my cover story, but something is not adding up. “They’re currently at the Pink Plaza Motel,” I notify. “I say we go there now and surround the fucking place.”

“Yeah, we can pull the fire alarm, then blast them when they’re forced to come out,” Stefano suggests.

Stefano is the youngest brother who thought putting his hands on her was okay. He's only still standing because of her plea to me. "That's just fucking stupid," Matteo replies, shutting his idea down immediately. "What if they have your sister with someone waiting to be given the all clear? I swear you don't use your head."

Stefano doesn't say another word, but his embarrassment is evident. "We go there ahead of time to stake out the place to see where they go prior to the meetup if at all. Once we know your daughter is safe, it will be open season."

"Let's go! Lennon, can you ride with me?" Matteo inquires.

"Sure. Kai can take my car."

Once we're in the car and heading to the seedy motel, Matteo shares why he wanted me to ride with him. "I have some rogue Mafia members in our midst, and I'm not sure if it's contained to just Lorenzo and his brother Enzo," he starts. "They purposely broadcasted that my princess was raped. The status of her purity was a message to me and all the Italian families, especially the Lombardis. Someone is trying to weaken us and our ability to form stronger alliances with the other families. Niccolò called to wish our family luck and ask if there was anything he could do to help after seeing the news. In the same fucking conversation, he called off his engagement to Aurora. No high-ranking heir or family will want her, which is the whole point. The ransom itself may just be a cover for this scheme."

"You know that I just went through something similar with my clan," I point out. "I suspect that someone is try to weaken us as well."

I used this alone time with Matteo to spin the story of my rogue clan members. It helps for him to believe that someone is out for us both because I think they very well may be.

"Yes. That's why I wanted to get you alone. I wanted to reach out to you when your clan was attacked, so I apologize that I didn't. I've been just so consumed with finding my daughter."

“Oh think nothing of it. I know you had other obligations. I’ve been trying to discover who was behind the attack, but so far nothing. Twenty-one of my clan were killed. That can’t be a coincidence.”

“You don’t have to give me an answer now, but I have a proposal for you to consider. I know the timing is shit, but I think it’s important that we move on this quickly if you’re amendable to what I’m about to say.”

“What’s the proposal?”

I wasn’t sure where he was going with this conversation, but I never expected this. “I would like you to marry my daughter.”

“What?” I’m caught completely off guard. I was still working on a strategy to convince him of this very proposal.

“I know that you’re not Italian, and I will receive a lot of hate for this, but I will refuse to marry my daughter off to someone unworthy of her. I know the Irish don’t care about things like virginity as much as a condition of marriage.

“No. It’s not a hard stop. We consider other things as well.” I know I want this too, but I can’t be too eager.

“I want us to join forces, Lennon, and find the motherfuckers who are out to ruin our families.”

What he really means is that he wants his daughter to be able to marry a boss—someone with real power and reach, and if it can’t be a Don, then a Clan Chief is the next best thing.

“I want to be considerate and at least talk to my brother Kai about this union of sorts, but I think you and I want the same things. I’m sure something can be arranged. For now, let’s make sure we get her home safely.”

“I always knew I liked you,” he says. “Let’s get these sons of bitches.”

The sequence of events happened rapidly and was executed perfectly. The two soldiers who took Aurora were amateurs at best. The only surprise was Amerie’s involvement. Because we arrived early enough to sit on the motel, we

witnessed Amerie manhandling Aurora before shoving her into an apple-red Mustang. Some scrawny tall guy, who looked close to her age, got in on the driver's side. Lorenzo and Enzo got into a black Dodge Challenger, followed closely by the other dumbasses who had Aurora. They pulled all the way into the alley of the drop point while Amerie and the guy drove past them to block the other entry to the alley. Matteo already had snipers hidden on top of the joint building, looking down to that alley. We just joined one of them on the rooftop. Kai and Aurora's other brothers are on the rooftop across from us. I don't blame Matteo for keeping this rescue mission to just my brother and I, along with his immediate family. He's unsure who he can trust and won't risk this going sideways. We're all wearing surveillance earpieces, synced to the same line to hear everything in case Alessandro needs backup. Lorenzo and Enzo have worked for the Valentini and know their reputation better than anyone else. Did they really think it would be this easy? Lorenzo and Enzo exit their car with only a few minutes to spare before Alessandro's arrival. They're already leaning against the Challenger holding AR-15s when Alessandro exits his car.

"I hope you came alone," Enzo warns as Alessandro approaches him on foot, dragging carry-on size luggage with the money. Only, they will never get to see it.

"I did what you asked. I just want to get my sister. The two of you betrayed our family, so I advise after you're paid not to show your face around here again. You both know the limitless bounds of my father's reach."

"Are you really threatening us when we still have your precious sister in our possession?" Lorenzo chuckles. Alessandro continues to close the distance between them.

"I'm not making threats. I'm simply stating facts."

"Stop where you are. You're close enough. Leave the suitcase and back away slowly with your hands up," Lorenzo instructs.

Alessandro does as he says while Enzo runs to retrieve the bag. Enzo lays the suitcase on its back, opens it, and inspects

the mustard-colored currency straps of one-hundred-dollar bills. Each strap is equivalent to ten-thousand dollars, and a total of one million dollars is in the suitcase. Lorenzo makes quick work of counting the total currency straps after flipping through a few stacks to ensure it isn't just hundred dollar bills on top. Enzo keeps his machine gun locked in on Alessandro while his brother counts. Once he is satisfied he gives a hand signal for the other car to release Aurora. She comes running down the alley toward her brother, but we have to wait because she is still in the line of fire. Lorenzo and Enzo are already back in their car attempting to get away, but Enzo has his machine gun pointed on her as she runs by. This was their lame plan to ensure her brother wouldn't shoot. Once Aurora is close enough, Alessandro instructs her to jump into the back seat. Smart. As soon as he's in the clear, he jumps in his car and puts it in reverse to head in the opposite direction of the two brothers.

Amerie is also reversing, but in her haste, she hits the dumpster, effectively keeping Lorenzo and Enzo from making the quick getaway they planned. This is our cue. Kai fires a man-held portable rocket launcher, successfully blowing up the two cars. The Valentini reach in the arms trade is unmatched, and he brought out his biggest guns for this mission. No need to stick around for the aftermath. Nobody is surviving that hit.

We descend the stairs at a record pace. Kai waits for me when we come busting through the door. That fucker is fast. He was chosen to be the one to carry out the actual hit since his familiarity and expert training would give us the best odds of being swift. The rest of us were there for backup.

We speed off in different directions. Aurora is safe, and now we wait. Our next move and how things will play out from here rests with her. Will she betray me now that she's free? This is only the start of redemption for my mother and father, but it all starts with her. Once I have her hand in marriage, the rest of my plan which involves bringing in my siblings, can commence.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Aura

1 WEEK LATER

The scent of peony and blush suede bath oil from Jo Malone wafts from the tub, bringing back the recent memories of Dublin when we soaked in the tub together between fuck-a-thons. This is my thoughtful Lennon from the cocoon. I stand in the bathroom doorway, and he motions for me to come in. As he turns to shut off the water, I quickly remove the clothes I've been wearing for the last couple of days. I never want to see them again. They can be burned for all I care. Once I undress, my unwanted shyness comes back with a vengeance. I attempt to cover my lady parts the best I can. It's hard to just let myself be naked in front of him with all this light and him staring at me. It doesn't help that he's the epitome of perfection. A small smile creeps across his lips, but it has a hint of sadness. That smile falters with he sees the bruises on my ribs.

"So many fucking bruises," he growls. "I wish I could have killed those motherfuckers myself." He's already lectured me about my stupid actions, but he is working to move past them. Things worked better than either of us could have imagined. My father gave Lennon his blessing to marry me—more like it was his idea.

"Lennon, please stop. I don't want to think about Amerie or the betrayal. Please let it go. Help me forget. Erase what they put me through."

"Did Amerie let that fucking guy touch you? I mean—"

"I know what you mean, and no, Marty didn't actually rape me. The two of them just wanted it broadcasted that I was no longer a virgin as an extra kick to my father. They knew no heir would want me now. They brought in two of my father's soldiers at the last minute to be the muscle for their flawed operation. Apparently, Lorenzo and Enzo were the intended abductors before your men ruined their plans. On the bright side, the path is clear now to get married, so at least something

good happened out of this entire debacle. The bruises look worst than they actually feel.”

“Thank fuck you weren’t raped. I’m not angry with you, but I hate that you trusted someone so fucking evil. I’ll drop it now for your sake. This week without you has been hell. I’m just glad your father agreed to let you spend the weekend here at my penthouse to *get to know* me. You’re safe, and that’s all that matters, but those bruises make me feel murderous. If we uncover that more than those four are involved, I’ll kill every motherfucker who had a part.”

“Let’s get back to the here and now, okay? I miss you. You’ve drawn this wonderful bath for me. I don’t want to waste it.”

That suggestion works to bring him back to focusing on this moment. A wicked smile forms on his beautiful lips as he walks me the rest of the way to the tub. He helps me into the bath, and I’m happy to be submerged within the warm water and silky bubbles.

“Relax, little bird,” he encourages.

I lean back as he gets on his knees and leans over the tub. He then begins to wet my hair. It isn’t until he applies some herbal shampoo that I realize he is going to wash my hair again like he did once before back at his home when I fractured my ribs. I close my eyes as his nimble fingers massage my scalp. At this moment, nothing else matters. All the horrible events in the days begin to dissipate into a distant memory. Amerie is dead to me even though she really is, and I don’t want to give her another thought.

Lennon rinses my hair with an attachment that he connected to the faucet, and a moan slips past my lips. I wonder if it’s the same one he got from Bridget. The water pressure on my scalp feels amazing. His hands pause at my moan, and I smile. I love how easily I affect him. He moves on to bathing me with a sponge, but his attention to my breasts lets me know just how affected he really is. I should have the cleanest breasts in the world.

“I think they’re clean now, Lennon,” I say in reference to the girls.

“Hmm, let me check,” he offers. He leans down even farther over the tub and takes a nipple into his mouth. I’m stunned for a second, but then I melt into him. There is an instant tingle down below that gets me worked up. I need him now. My whimpers are the only encouragement he needs. He swirls his tongue around my nipple, then switches to the other one. He has me squirming within seconds. When he steps back to remove his clothes in a frenzy, I know exactly where this is going. He gets into the tub with me, and water sloshes everywhere. I try to lean forward, but he has me stand, turns me to face him, and then takes my place. He pulls me down to straddle his lap. The look in his eyes is devious. I’m all in.

“Lift up, babe,” he prompts.

I know what he’s really telling me, so I lift and line up his already hard cock at my entrance. I’m so wet for him that no priming is needed. I ease down on his length, and I can’t help but bite my lip on the way down. He fills me completely, and it feels so damn good.

“Shit,” I moan. “God, Lennon.” Those are the only syllables I can get out.

“That’s right. Take it all. Take what belongs to you.” He bounces me up and down on his dick, but the pace is too slow. I’m so hungry for this man, and I just can’t get enough. I tighten my knees on his outer thighs to stabilize my balance in the slippery water before I slam back down on his cock. Setting a chaotic rhythm, I’m desperate for release.

“Fuck me, little bird,” he encourages with a wicked grin.

He continues his assault on my nipples, and I swear I’m about to explode. His hands caress my back, and the alternating sensations have me on the brink of sensory overload. So gentle and sensual, yet this is pure fucking—savage and raw. My legs quiver as the buildup begins again. The grip of my knees on his thighs slips, but Lennon doesn’t miss a beat. His hands snake down to my hips, and he keeps us on the rhythm I have set.

“I’m almost thereeeee ...” I scream.

“Get there because I’m right there with you,” he admits. He slams me down one more time, and I lose it. I come all over him with the force of a tidal wave. He lets out his own groan before falling over the edge with me. I can feel him throbbing as I milk every ounce of cum from him. My legs shake with the aftershock as we both work to come back from that epic release.

“So it looks like I’ve gotten you all dirty again,” Lennon says while smiling.

“It’s okay. I like your kind of dirty,” I tease.

I remain in his embrace. Neither one of us wants to be the first to let go. I can already feel him growing hard again. I snicker, and he smacks my ass.

“See what happens when my dick is anywhere near your sweet cunt? You make me insatiable.” He rubs the spot he just smacked. “Let’s take this to the bedroom. I’m far from done with you. Tonight, we’ll fuck, make love, and then fuck again. I want to do all the depraved shit to you that I know we both need to get out of our heads. The rest of the world can wait.”

I stand and let the water drip off my body. Any momentary shyness has taken a back seat to my lust. I watch as his pupils dilate while he looks me up and down before standing up with me. He tilts my head back and captures my lips for our deepest kiss to date. Our tongues meet for a slow, sensual tango communicating what our words can’t. God, how I love this man.

He breaks the kiss and is the first to get out of the tub. He instructs me to stay put while he dries off and disappears. He is gone for maybe ten minutes. When he returns, he grabs another towel and motions for me to lean toward him. He scoops me out of the tub and cradles me in his arms. He dries me off a bit before placing me on my feet to finish the job. We don’t bother with clothes and simply walk to the bedroom hand in hand. The room glows from the candles, and more peony and blush permeates the air. This must have been what he was up to while I waited in the bath. Though he is a little

rough around the edges, he is great with setting the mood and arranging a romantic ambiance. He picks his secondary phone from the nightstand, and with a click, Chris Issak's "Wicked Game" begins to play. He never releases my hand, though. I'm ready for him to kiss me again, but surprisingly, I'm thrown onto the bed on my back.

"First, we fuck," he says by way of explanation. Lennon crawls up the length of my body before his hands firmly grip my thighs. "Wrap your legs around me, little bird."

I don't hesitate to follow his command. "Yes, Lennon," I say as my head falls back onto the bed.

I'm his for the taking. He uses one hand to stroke me and finds that I'm already soaking wet with anticipation. The shadows dance across his handsome features as the candles flicker. Within seconds, I feel his rock-hard cock nudging my folds teasingly before it rests at my opening. I squirm in frustration. I need him in me now. And oh, does he deliver. He slams into me, and I can't hold back the scream that leaves my body—not from pain but from the most exquisite pleasure.

"Yes. Just like that," I encourage as my hips gyrate to take more of his length. At this moment, my shyness has taken a hike.

"Hmm, this pussy is greedy tonight. Good because I plan on worshipping it thoroughly," he promises.

The lust in his voice is so fucking sexy. He wraps his hand around my hair and gives it a slight tug as he drives into me. I'm so lost. The delicious bite of his strokes is almost too much to handle. I match his punishing rhythm until stars explode behind my eyes.

"Lennnoonn."

After a few more thrusts, I feel the telltale throb of him coming with me. He bites my shoulder as he groans out his release. As promised, he gives me at least three more earth-shattering orgasms before we both fall asleep from exhaustion.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Aurora

We arrive at his family's locally owned Irish restaurant. My father surprisingly let me spend the weekend with my soon-to-be husband. Now that my virginity is no longer a point of contention, they want us to get to know each other. That and I think he wants me somewhere safe while he investigates if any more of his soldiers have gone rogue. Now that I don't have to be hidden, Lennon arranges for me to meet his sister, Aisling, and his twin brothers, Fergus and Flynn. We exchange pleasantries, and the awkwardness is somewhat dissipating. Aisling disappears shortly after but promises to be back. The server brings us what is known as Dublin Coddle. This authentic dish is a type of stew comprised of onion, bacon, pork sausage, and potatoes. It's usually served with boxty bread. I've had the pleasure of eating this a couple of times when Lennon's house staff made it, but I haven't had an opportunity to learn to make it. That doesn't stop me from trying to analyze the recipe. It seems simple enough, but I'm sure something this traditional isn't easily replicated. The conversation has mostly flowed between him and his brothers and continues even though the food has arrived. I, on the other hand, have no reason to wait. I take my first bite, and Lennon's focus shifts. He watches me intently as I consume a second bite. A moan slips past my lips, and I'm instantly at the center of his and his brothers' attention. I look away from their gaze, but I can still feel their eyes on me. Lennon sits up a little straighter and takes a generous sip of his whiskey. He's much closer to me now as if that could be possible. My thoughts take a detour from the food. Suddenly, I'm hyper alert — the way I usually am with his physical touch. The heat of his thigh

rubbing against mine is intense in this booth that's now too small. The smell of his cologne wafts in my direction, acting as an aphrodisiac. Fergus and Flynn take a bite of their food, finally giving me a reprieve from their attention. Can they sense the electricity between their brother and me? All it takes is a single touch, and my insides liquefy. I can't explain this insane attraction even if I tried. Instead, I take a few more bites of my own food, but Lennon is yet to take one. He is everything Niccolò is not. Niccolò is tall and a thicker build from all the Italian cuisine he probably consumes. He has average good looks, but the fact he's heir to his father's throne probably makes up where he falls short for most women. I take a moment to indulge in Lennon's perfection—my comparison to Niccolò is really no comparison at all. From hair that falls wildly past his shoulders for a good pull to his chiseled square jaw and facial features, he is the very definition of savagely handsome. His eyes are the bluest I've ever seen, arctic even, so it's easy to get lost in them. His plain white T-shirt makes it hard not to notice how defined he is—an attribution to his discipline. The tattoo sleeve on both of his arms is never something I thought I'd be into, but I find that it adds to his overall sex appeal. He's managed to change my perspective from the beginning, and though I've given it a good fight, I never stood a chance against his magnetism. And this was long before he fucked me. I have to bite the inside of my cheek, realizing I've allowed my thoughts to stray so far from this dinner and its purpose that it's downright shameful. Not really my fault, though. Another moan slips as I force my thoughts back to my stew. It's nearly all gone.

“Good, right?” Lennon asks, taking another sip of his whiskey. He squeezes my thigh under the table, and I have to focus on what he's talking about. *Oh, the coddle.* He's referring to the moans I couldn't suppress. If only he knew that the food was just a part of it. Don't get me wrong, this coddle is nothing short of amazing, but having him this close is distracting. And somehow I think that is his intent.

“Good is an understatement. This is like heaven in your mouth,” I reply, diverting my attention back to the stew after I finish the bite I was chewing. “I've had it at your house

before, but even then, it doesn't come close to this. Don't tell your house staff I said that."

"I'll have to be sure to let Aisling know. She tweaked our mother's original recipe, but she refuses to share what that is." He winks, now taking a bite of his own food for the first time. I know he won't finish it, but it's a nice change to see him eat something besides peanut butter.

He and his brothers eat in silence for what seems like an eternity. Meanwhile, I'm on my second glass of wine, and I can already feel it starting to relax me. A rare smile spreads on Lennon's face, but before I can inquire why, a gentle hand touches my shoulder.

"How was everything, Aurora? You mind if I call you Rory? Aurora is a mouthful." She laughs. I turn in my seat to see Aisling standing looking effortless polished. I didn't get much time to really observe her earlier before she disappeared, but she is so beautiful. The Gallagher genes are definitely shared, but unlike her brothers, who have an obvious edge to their rugged good looks, Aisling is dainty and elegant right down to her pearl earrings, knee-length dress, and heels.

"Everything was amazing. I can't express how much I loved it," I praise. "And sure, call me Rory." Lennon has long given up on his stew, much like I anticipated. "I almost volunteered to eat your brother's," I joke, gesturing to his nearly full bowl.

"Lennon, why didn't you give her some of our boxty to try? You'll have to excuse my brother." She apologizes for him. I was thinking earlier that boxty bread was usually served with the coddle, but I didn't want to ask about it. The stew was filling all on its own.

"Sorry I had to run off as soon as you arrived," she apologizes. "I had to check on a few things in the kitchen. I'm trying to add more of my family's presence here in more than just name."

"Oh, that's quite okay. As I said before, I really enjoyed the meal."

“Our boxty is a great complement to many of our dishes, but it goes especially well with the Dublin Coddle.”

“I totally forgot. My apologies,” Lennon says.

“Can I get some to go perhaps?” I don’t want to come off as greedy, but I’d hate to disappoint. Okay, really, I’m dying to try their version of boxty if it is anywhere close to being as good as the stew was. I wanted to save some for later, but that was an epic fail.

“Of course, Rory. Lennon, you, Fergus, and Flynn are needed upstairs in the privacy booth. Kai is here, but he didn’t want to interrupt your dinner. He said to wait until you were done eating and then ask if I could let you know he was waiting. Don’t worry, I’ll keep Rory company until you boys return.”

Lennon gives an exaggerated eye roll, but he stands to leave the table. His brothers slide out and follow him— giving me a slight nod on the way out. Before they’re completely out of sight, she takes the seat across from me.

“So my brother tells us he helped rescue you from some of your father’s men.” It’s more of a statement than a question. Apparently, she wants to use this time to question me, but I know the rehearsed script, and I’m sticking to it. Nobody can know the real backstory aside from Kai. Not sure why since Lennon is holding that reason close to his vest, but for now, I won’t muddle the waters. “Crazy because the way my brother looks at you, he has definitely taken a liking to you. This is the weekend together?”

I don’t want to be rude after she has been so generous, so I go with a fraction of the truth. “Yeah, I was taken by two of my father’s soldiers. My fiancé dumped me after he found out that I’m no longer a virgin. I’m now betrothed to your brother, but it’s definitely not a hardship. We’ve been getting along effortlessly this weekend.”

She grabs my hands across the table, and my first instinct is to pull away, but I don’t.

“I’m not looking to pry. I don’t want to meddle in my brother’s affairs. He doesn’t typically let anyone close to him if you’re not his family, so if you could get this acquainted with him quickly, I like you already. We’ve encouraged him to let some lucky woman make him happy.” She grins. “You know I could use some help around here if you’re interested.”

My ears perk up at the word help. Is she offering me a job? That is definitely not where I thought this conversation was going.

“Help?”

I want to make sure I understand her correctly. Who offers a complete stranger a job without knowing their experience? Wait ... what else did Lennon tell her? Couldn’t have been much since she clearly doesn’t know about my complete lack of skills in this area. I’m still learning to cook some small meals. I’m still learning to clean and do laundry.

“Not help like you’re thinking.” She laughs. “I’m not trying to put you to work as staff. I just started overseeing this place a couple of weeks ago and tweaking some of the recipes and adding new ones have been a project of mine. Word of mouth alone is bringing more and more customers through the door to try out our enhanced menu. I don’t really have someone to bounce ideas off and someone to give me honest feedback. It’s been a success thus far, but the staff will always be in agreement with me since I’m one of the owners. Plus, it would be insightful to get feedback from someone who isn’t Irish as to how it compares to other cuisines.” She gives my hand a squeeze. “And just having the company would be nice.”

Aisling has said a mouthful. Sounds like she is looking to have a bit of girl time while getting my feedback on the delicious menus she’s tweaking. I wouldn’t really call that help, but I’m not opposed to getting to know her. Lennon’s said that I would be free within reason to explore life, something that hasn’t been afforded to me before with my own family. Much like me, Aisling has all brothers, so I know their protection is relentless. I know Lennon hasn’t shared the details of our history other than we’re getting married, but did

he share about the gilded cage I was raised in? Is this why Aisling extending her hand to me in an offer of friendship?

“Aisling, your offer to hang out and taste all the delicious dishes you make here is hard to pass up. Your hospitality and generosity have been more than I’ve experienced in quite some time.”

“But?” she prompts. “I’m sensing some hesitation.”

I look up into the distance to see Lennon and his brothers sit with Kai in the upstairs sectioned-off VIP area. I look back at her, and she’s staring at me ... waiting for me to answer her.

“The thing is,” I start. “I suspect that I grew up much like you— hidden from the world.” I remember that I supposedly only met her brother this weekend, so I have to pivot my story. “The one person I trusted wholeheartedly and thought to be my friend took part in me being abducted. I’m so wary of people and my ability to build a healthy friendship.” I have to look away, but she squeezes my hand again to make me look at her.

“Rory, that’s totally understandable. I’m not offering to be your best friend today. I’m offering you a chance to spend time doing normal things and for us to enjoy each other’s company because you’re right. We were raised similarly, so I think we could both benefit from some human connection.”

“In that case, I gladly accept. Sorry, I didn’t mean to lay all of that on you. It sounds fun.”

She surprises me by pouring herself some wine in the glass that Lennon was drinking out of and then refilling mine. She holds up her wineglass for a toast, so I do the same.

“Here’s to a new chapter of beginnings.” We toast and both finish the entire glass. Lennon picks this moment to walk back over. I guess their little pow wow is over.

“What is the celebration about?” He looks back and forth between us both, his curiosity piqued.

“Aurora is going to help taste some of my new menu items. We will have lots of girl time too. It’s a new chapter for us both.”

“That didn’t take you long.” Lennon chuckles. “I actually think it’s great. Aurora needs a real friend. Just make sure she needs to accept how genuine you are. The two of you are more alike than you think.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Aurora

1 MONTH LATER

The passenger door to the McLaren rental lifts like a butterfly wing, and Lennon assists me to get inside. This version of him still feels like a dream—one that only I get to experience. I've claimed him just as much as he has me, and that downright frightens me. I keep waiting for the proverbial shoe to drop. He rounds the front of the car and gets in on the driver's side. He starts this luxury on wheels, and it hums to life beneath us. He wastes no time peeling off and bringing it to a cruising speed. His eyes are on the road, and I use this time to sneak small glances in his direction. The muscles in his arms flex as he handles the steering wheel, the veins protruding. I can see every cut of his delicious abs through his fitted tee. The thick column of his neck is even sexy. He runs his hand through his shoulder-length hair, and my eyes follow the gesture. It does something to me every time he does this. All I can imagine is pulling his hair while he fucks me.

I bite my lip at the thought. He turns and looks at me, and I'm hit with all that gorgeousness at once. He winks at me, and I know I've just been caught checking him out. I flush crimson. He shares a devilish grin at my embarrassment. I look away, determined not to be an insatiable creep. Instead, I attempt to enjoy the scenery of the Pacific Coast Highway as it hugs the coastline. Winding roads, tight turns, and beautiful beaches stretch on for miles. I've never been outside of New York, so this is a visual delight. I'm pulled out of my reverie by the feel of Lennon's hand grasping my knee.

“What are you thinking about so hard over there?”

“Just enjoying the scenic view,” I say as I continue to take it all in. That's at least mostly true. The view I'm really distracted by is him and this mess of hormones that has me horny for him.

“Hmm, okay,” he says. He gives my knee a squeeze before removing his hand. I immediately feel bereft. Looking once more out of the window, I see that we are leaving the city limits. What hotel are we checking in to? He’s been secretive about where he’s taking me. We take a series of turns, climbing higher in altitude as we drive along the mountainside.

“Why are you so tight-lipped?” I joke. “You’re a man of many secrets.”

“That I am,” he admits. After some brief silence, he gives me a small inkling of where we’re going. “I’m taking you to our new California home. It will be a place we can escape to when we want to get away from New York.”

He glances at me for my reaction, but I’m stunned. This is all happening so fast. Our wedding is in a week, and it has all been a whirlwind. And while I do know that our union would be beneficial to the allegiance between his clan and the Italian Mafia, I have to believe his feelings for me to be true. I’m still acclimating to this change between us, but it has been a nice change of pace.

We finally pull up to the home, and it is just as luxurious as I knew it would be. This man doesn’t do simple or low key. He spares no expense with his properties or cars, much like my father. This beauty is a three-story home overlooking all of Los Angeles. The sun is setting now so the yard lights reflect off the manicured landscape and palm trees. We’re tucked in off the beaten path, offering seclusion and privacy. Lennon opens the front door with the pad of his thumb, and I don’t miss his subtle touch to my lower back as he guides me in first. Heat sears my flesh from his fingertips. Our eyes meet, and unspoken lust passes between us.

“Let me give you the tour,” he offers. “The first thing I’m sure you noticed is that it’s not the black matte vibe I usually go for. Figured you’d appreciate the neutral walls. We can design it to be what we want it to be.”

This decor, while contemporary and beautiful, is definitely at odds with his personality and his typical bold choices. I can

appreciate his consideration for inclusion. He wants me to feel like this is my home too.

“The view is gorgeous,” I compliment as we tour the rest of the house. Floor-to-ceiling windows line the entire back of the house. I can see the illuminated pool and custom waterfall. The seclusion will definitely be an asset here.

“Yeah. You get a view of the city from every room. I love all the natural light that filters in during the day and the twinkle of the city lights at night. Let me show you the rest of the house.”

The wicked gleam in his eyes hints that he would rather us be doing something else. We step into the living room, and the open space is a complement of creams and browns—more neutrality. Contemporary furnishings and decor are plentiful, but I prefer his bolder choices. The home is still nothing short of breathtaking, though.

He pulls me to him, and my body melts into his masculine frame. He uses both hands to tilt my face up to him, and his kiss is neither soft nor comforting. It’s raw and savage. His tongue seeks entrance, and I let him in. His hands slide under my dress, and my panties pool with wetness. “I own you, A mhuirín. You belong to me. I need to hear it.”

I don’t hesitate. I don’t know if that proverbial shoe will ever drop, but I can’t deny this man. “I’m yours.”

He growls his approval before ripping my panties off. He picks me up, and I have no choice but to hang on for the ride as he makes determined strides toward the bedroom. “I can’t make any promise of being gentle, little bird. I’m going to fuck you so hard. My dick is at a constant salute when I’m around you,” he says. He stands me on my feet only to slide my dress over my head and undo my bra. He stands back and takes me in like I’m a visual masterpiece. I fight the urge to cover myself. I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to the way he devours me with his eyes. He begins to remove his own clothes, and holy hell, I’ll definitely never get used to his Adonis-like body. I lick my lips as he peruses me with a smirk. His hardness is standing at attention, nearly touching his navel.

The vein that runs along the dorsal side adds to its virile perfection. The thickness is intimidating, but the fullness inside me is nothing I can put into words. He grabs my hand and wraps it around the head. He glides my hand up and down the length of him and I can feel him hardening even more. I try to swallow the lump in my throat.

“You ready for my cock, baby?”

He winks at me, and I squeeze my legs together to stave off the ache rolling through my core. Lennon lays me down on the king-size bed before he pries my legs apart. My bare pussy is on display for him. I bashfully attempt to close my legs, more than a little embarrassed, but he’s not having it. “Nuh-uh, open your legs for me. I want to see how wet you are.”

“Don’t want to leave any sight unseen,” I try to joke to lighten my apprehension. I love the sex, but I’m not the biggest fan of feeling this open and vulnerable.

“Never when it comes to you. I own every part of you. Your body is visually stimulating, and I want to appreciate every part of you.”

He nibbles at my inner thigh, and I let my head fall back on the bed, letting his words ease my tension. He grips my hips in his arms and uses his hold to keep me still as he swipes his skilled tongue across my clit. I nearly buck off the bed. His licks are slow, controlled, and torturous. He makes little swirls with his tongue that should be illegal. “Fuck, you have such a gorgeous pussy. I can stay right here and devour your essence all day,” he praises. He sucks on my clit with such fervor. He inserts one finger and then two, stretching me. I moan and thrash about because it’s too much. He tightens his grip to hold me still and continues his assault. He tongues me deep, and it has me grabbing his hair as I buck my hips. I think I’m going to pass out when the first wave of ecstasy rolls through me. My legs tremble around his head, but he doesn’t stop. He begins nibbling at my bud alternated with a lethal swirl of his talented tongue. I pull on his hair as I ride out my second orgasm. *Shit, he’s still licking me.*

“Lennon, please.” My legs clamp around his head as he brings me once again to the brink of another orgasm.

“There it is. That is what I was waiting to hear. I want you begging. I want your tight little pussy good and wet because once I sink my cock into you, I won’t be able to hold back.”

His filthy promise sends me right over the edge. He backs off the bed, pulling my legs to bring me with him. He stands and lifts me so that I have no choice but to wrap my legs around him. “I love these sexy fucking legs wrapped around my waist and your pussy wrapped around my cock.” His hands grasp my outer thighs as he lifts me just a tad more. He lowers me slowly onto the length of his cock, and I begin to stretch to take every delicious inch. The feeling is heavenly, and I’m already anticipating the ride. Once I’m fully seated, he gives me a moment to adjust to his fullness. I attempt to lift my hips to start us off, but he kisses me instead. His lips caress mine as he explores my mouth. I can taste myself on his tongue. His hands tangle in my hair as he deepens the kiss. I am free falling. He grinds himself against me, and I whimper with need.

“Fuck me, Lennon,” I plead as fire ignites through me.

“Whatever you want, little bird.” He pulls out and inches back in me slowly, and I stretch even more to accommodate his girth. It’s sweet torture. He begins sucking on my neck, and the combined feeling is almost more than I can handle. “Your pussy is gripping my cock so hard,” he growls.

The wiggle of my hips is the only sign he needs to spur along. He bounces me on his cock—the first few strokes are slow, and I meet him stroke for stroke. I know the instant his control snaps because he starts pounding me harder. His hips piston with each increasing stroke. I hold on for the ride as he impales me. His balls slap against me as he finds a way to go deeper. His arms work double time as he uses his strength to bounce me on his impressive erection. My walls clamp down on him as I come hard and in turn milk his release. He growls in pleasure. We both bask in utter ecstasy. Our pants are in sync. He lowers me to the bed and begins sucking on my breasts.

“These are mine too,” he says as he nips at one of my nipples.

I can feel him getting hard again. *Oh my*. He flips us over, and now I’m on top. He grips my hips and begins to bounce me on his dick. He sets the pace and watches as my tits bounce in time with the rhythm he set. It’s not long before I find my own rhythm as I grind down on him between strokes. *Shit*. I’m not going to last. I throw my head back and scream his name as the stars dance behind my eyes.

“Fucking hell, that is the hottest thing I’ve ever seen,” he says as he finds his release. He turns me on my side, and I think we’re about to cuddle. *Wrong*. He begins to fondle my now tender breasts. “I love watching you come. I’m going to enjoy watching this look on your face all night.”

“You’re pretty insatiable,” I point out as he massages my hip.

“How can I not be? Your body just keeps demanding a repeat performance. If your unwavering wetness is anything to go by, I’d say you’re the insatiable one.”

To emphasize his point, he runs his dick along the crease of my ass. Holy mess. He’s already hard again. I look over my shoulder at him, and he gives me the most wicked grin. “I told you that it’s all your fault. I’m just obliging. This pussy is going to be so sore tomorrow.”

He lifts my leg slightly and slides into me from behind. Again, his strokes are slow and deliberate. His hands find my breasts, and he twirls my nipples with his fingertips. I back my ass into him to meet his strokes, and he lets out a guttural growl. He pounds into me harder, and I can’t deny how much I want his relentless strokes. I reach back and pull his hair.

“Shit, what are you doing to me, Aurora?” He plunges into me one last time ... we’re both falling over the edge. He slaps my ass and rubs it. We have a long night ahead of us. My stomach picks this time to announce my hunger.

“Are you hungry, baby? I meant for us to eat first after our long day of getting here. My dick just had alternate plans.”

“I could eat.” I laugh. My savage king has worked up my appetite.

He jumps out of bed and doesn't bother with clothes. I guess I'm not, either. “Come on. Let me make you my famous spaghetti. It's even better than the Italians.”

I doubt that, but I'd eat my hand now. I've never witnessed him cook anything, so this should be interesting. I follow him to the kitchen and sit at the counter as he prepares. He pours me a glass of wine, but I'm distracted by the way he moves about the kitchen. He chops the mushrooms and parsley ... such a simple task, but he manages to make it look sexy. After all the prep work is done, he brings the noodles to a boil. He saunters over to me and lifts me out of my chair. He sets me on the counter and starts his assault on my lips. The kiss is tender and slow. I didn't initially take him for a kisser, but it's kind of his thing. He's great at it. He places a tiny kiss on my nipple. One and then the other. He pulls one into his mouth and begins to suck. A whimper slips past my lips, and he smiles. He pulls away, and I tighten my grip around his waist to keep him in place.

“Tease,” I accuse again.

“Just keeping my pussy warm. You don't have to get ready if you stay ready.” He smirks, arching a single eyebrow for emphasis. He pulls away, and this time, I let him.

Amused by his Lennonisms, I finish my wine, and he pours another. Devious thoughts are at the forefront. I want to be brazen and tease him too. I wait until he carries our plates of spaghetti to the dinner table. He puts our plates down and pulls out a chair for me, but I want his, so I take it. His cock is already at half mast. I take his growing hardness into my hand, and he hisses at my touch. I lean down and lick the tip before taking the head into my mouth. I suck him slowly as my hand massages his balls. His head falls back, and his eyes close in ecstasy. He grabs my hair, ready for me to take him deeper. My mischievous smile forms around his cock as I pull back and pat his throbbing erection as it moves on its own against my hand.

“Are you toying with me?” He looks down at me —equally amused.

“I’m just keeping you warm, baby. You don’t have to get ready if you stay ready,” I regurgitate, using his same words on him.

“Touché, my little equal opportunist. Gauntlet thrown and picked up,” he warns with an ominous chuckle.

We eat our spaghetti, and I must admit that it’s delicious. Not better than authentic Italian spaghetti good, but I’ll give it a close second. He stares across the table at me, and I can see the lust in his hooded eyes. *Oh. God.* Will we even get to finish our food? He looks ready to pounce at any moment. I manage to finish, so I get up to bring my plate to the kitchen. I don’t even make it there before he grabs me from behind. He throws me over his shoulder fireman style, taking the plate out of my hand. He carries me the rest of the way to the kitchen to place the dish in the sink before heading back toward the bedroom. He slaps my ass, and I let out a squeal. He pushes the door closed with his foot and then does something unexpected. He lowers me down so that my ass rests upon a wooden dresser. He kneels just enough to secure my legs around his head. My head leans back against the cold mirror as he buries his face in my pussy and begins his special kind of torment. He sucks on my nub with renewed fervor. His arms wrap underneath my legs only to pin my hips against the wood. It’s a struggle to buck in this position so he is in total control. I try to squeeze my legs closed, but this just locks his head between my legs, his face perfectly aligned with my pussy. His tongue plunges inside me, and I cry, overwhelmed by the delicious assault.

He looks up at me with that smirk I love so much. “You were saying, A mhuirnín?” I’m boneless. *Spent.* He walks us over to the bed, but I’m not sure how much I have left to give. He slides up between my legs and begins nibbling on my neck. He gifts me with two more orgasms before we both finally ride out the abyss of exhaustion, but not before he whispers those four glorious words that I wasn’t sure I’d ever hear from him.

“I love you, Aurora.”

.....
EPILOGUE
.....

Aurora

3 MONTHS LATER

I grip my gothic black bouquet in one hand as I inch my way toward the altar—one foot in front of the other, just as I rehearsed. Although dyed, my bouquet is supposed to symbolize rebirth, but it serves as a distraction for the briefest moment. The heavenly floral bloom consists of thirty-five roses. I started counting them as soon as I began the procession. My nerves are wreaking havoc, but I blow out slow, even breaths. This is really happening. I sneak glances at the church pews on each side of me. My family and Cosa Nostra are sitting to the left of the aisle, while Lennon’s family and clan sits to the right. We definitely have more in attendance on our side, but my union with Lennon merges our families and allegiance. My father squeezes my bicep with his free hand, and his support is comforting, *somewhat*. Ed Sheeran’s “Perfect” plays as I continue to walk toward my future husband. The chapel is saturated in pure black with only hints of gold to match my wedding gown and the décor my fiancé insisted on. It’s absolutely beautiful and more fit for a princess than the traditional white. Unsurprisingly, even the church pews are solid black. I don’t know how Lennon achieved such a feat, but they have to be custom for the wedding to appease his compulsion for darkness.

TEARS WELL IN MY EYES, BUT I REFUSE TO LET THEM FALL. I don’t want to ruin the makeup I sat for hours to have put on, but the emotions of today are all-consuming. My knight is dressed in his typical black and didn’t ride in on a horse to rescue me. Instead, he had me abducted and held as his prisoner until I eventually fell for his savage charm. This is not your typical fairytale, yet I wouldn’t want it any other way. I’ve never felt more alive than when I’m with him. It wasn’t long ago that I was set to marry Niccoló—a man that I could never visualize myself loving. Now, against all odds, a different man has managed to conquer my virginity and claim

me as his. We infiltrated each other's hearts, slipping past the guard we held erected for so long.

LENNON'S FOUR BROTHERS AND MY BROTHER ALESSANDRO are the groomsmen. My housemaids, with the exception of Amerie, along with Aisling are my bridesmaids. When we reach the bridal party, my father releases my hand to allow me to step up to the platform to join Lennon before taking a front-row seat with my mom. I hand off my bouquet to Aisling, who I made my maid of honor. My housemaids didn't want the spotlight. I've been slightly nervous to look at the beautiful man before me, but the wind is knocked out of my sails when I do. The way his muscled form fills out his all-black tux is downright sinful and equally distracting.

How am I supposed to focus on the ceremony? His megawatt smile makes the butterflies in my chest flutter. He silently mouths that I look beautiful, and I blush. The words the priest begins to speak are a blur as Lennon's cerulean blue stare continues to hold me captive. A small smirk plays at the corner of his lips. He knows the effect he's having on me. When prompted to share our vows, we join hands. I recite the words I have memorized, but they don't seem to express all I feel. When it's Lennon's turn, the man of few words and one-liners delivers the most eloquent promise to love and cherish me. Holding back my tears are futile at this point, and the tears begin to trickle as he places the mic at his side so our loves ones can't hear. He delivers one additional promise. His mouth caresses the shell of my ear as he whispers, "I also promise to always fuck you hard just the way you like it and give you multiple orgasms. You will always come first." I can feel the heat creep up my neck. I can feel the priest's stare but I can't look at him now. I wipe the tears from my eyes as I stifle my chuckle. Holy fuck, I can't believe Lennon just made me wet in the lord's house. He gives me a suggestive wink before he takes a small step back, my hands still in his. Now, I just want him to rip this dress from my body and consummate this marriage. If I was distracted before, there is zero hope for me now. We exchange rings and say our "I dos." Once we are

announced as husband and wife and he's instructed to kiss the bride, it borders on obscene. The priest clears his throat, and Lennon finally has the tact to release his lip-lock. Aisling passes my bouquet back to me and gives us a congratulatory smile. Lennon holds up our joined hands before we begin the recessional with our bridal party close behind.

"HOW LONG DO WE HAVE TO ENTERTAIN THESE PEOPLE AT THE reception?" he whispers. "I'm ready to start the honeymoon with my wife."

"THESE PEOPLE ARE OUR FAMILIES," I REMIND. "THIS IS THEIR day too. We have the rest of our lives to make love," I tease. His rush to escape is obvious.

"YOU'RE RIGHT IN THAT WE WILL HAVE THE REST OF OUR LIVES to make love, but that's not what's happening tonight or probably even this week." He grins. "I want to fuck you to oblivion, and once that's out of my system, this lovemaking you speak of can be put back on the table."

I PLAYFULLY PUSH HIS ARM. "SHUSH." HE'S NOT EXACTLY quiet about his plans for us. Thankfully, it doesn't appear that anyone heard him.

"SHUSH ME NOW. BUT LET'S SEE HOW QUIET YOU CAN BE when I bring you to those orgasms."

I BITE THE INSIDE OF MY CHEEK BECAUSE I KNOW HE'S RIGHT. Tonight and for the foreseeable future will be no-holds-barred, and I welcome every moment of it. I got the guy, and our future begins now.



THANK YOU FOR READING **RUTHLESS CROWN**, THE START of our new dark mafia romance series! We hope you enjoyed Lennon and Aurora's journey. Can't wait for you to meet the rest of the Gallagher family. In the meantime ... are you looking to meet another sexy alpha to swoon over? Love rock star romances? Check out this sizzling ***SNEAK PEEK*** of **[PHOENIX RISING: ISSUE #1](#)**

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SNEAK PEEK ~ PHOENIX RISING: ISSUE#1

PROLOGUE ~ PHOENIX

The dancing lights shining down on me are hot as fuck. My shirt clings to my chest from the sweat. My guys are going hard on the guitar and drums while I deliver these “Have Faith in Me” lyrics. We’re on fire tonight! We rock Club Luxe every weekend, and it never gets old. “So, cling to what you know and never let go...” I make sure to make eye contact with the women standing front and center as I sing because one of them will be my conquest tonight. The eye contact personalizes the experience for them. *Or so they think.* We’re on the second verse when I spot her. I don’t know how I missed her come-hither eyes or that rack. Even with the lights in my eyes, I can see this sexy brunette with double D cleavage spilling over her midriff top and a skirt so short it barely covers her ass. I wink at her, and she blushes. The women to her right and her left blush too because they mistakenly think that wink was aimed for them. I’m sure they’d be down for a foursome, but this last set has me spent. I’m not in the mood to pleasure three women tonight. No, the sexy brunette is the lucky winner. I pull my shirt off over my head and watch as her eyes narrow. That telltale sign has sealed her fate. She will be on my cock before the bar closes.

Our gig for tonight is finally finished. I’m sitting in this makeshift backstage area designated for us by the bar. The room is a pretty decent size, so I can’t complain. Not to mention, the owner, Steve, has tricked this room out with black and white leather sofas and other contemporary shit we don’t need. All we need is a place to change and store our

equipment, but he goes the extra mile to ensure we keep coming back. We fill the house every weekend with mostly horny women, thus bringing in the men too. It's a win-win. My thoughts are cut short by a timid knock on the door. Bandmates, Killian and Ren, have already left for an after-party with two chicks. Asher was the first to leave. He said something about grabbing a few things from the store before his stepsister arrived tomorrow. *It's after midnight, but okay.* The only person who it could be is my pussy for tonight. I had already given the green light to club security to let the brunette through if she came sniffing around backstage. I was beginning to think she wouldn't show—afraid of the possible rejection. Who am I kidding? I'm sure she is aware of her assets and how to work them. Women like that always get what they want. She is in for a surprise, though, because so do I. When she crosses the threshold of this room, I run the show.

My sexual appetite is unparalleled, and so are my desires. Not every woman is privy to my tastes—I'm selective in that regard. I will have to see how this one behaves. If she submits, I'll tilt her world on its fucking axis. If she needs persuasion, I'll let her suck my cock before I show her the door. Those are the terms I live by.

Opening the door, I'm greeted with a wicked smile. Her intentions are written all over her face. "Hi," she says coyly. I'm not fooled by the innocent act, though.

"Come in. What is your name, sweetheart?" I step aside to let her in. The security guy gives me a thumbs-up before I close the door behind her.

"Shannon," she purrs. My eyes are drawn to her red lipstick with thoughts of those lips wrapped around my dick. "Nice dressing room," she adds.

"Thanks. So, what's on your mind, *Shannon*?" I ask, getting straight to the reason for her visit. I've never been one for pleasantries.

"Excuse me? What do you mean?"

"The reason you've come to my dressing room?" I can see she's trying to hold on to this coy act, but I'm not having it.

“Oh...well. I wanted to meet you. The other guys are great. I’ve been coming here for a while, but tonight was the first time I had a chance to be so close to the stage,” she replies. *Such bullshit.* I hate liars and women who come back here, only to play innocent.

If you want to fuck me, own that shit. That I can respect. I can smell how wet she is for me, yet she wants to hold on to this illusion of being a good girl. I’m about to shatter this little game she thinks she’s playing.

“Nice meeting you, Shannon, but what I really want is to be sucked off. So, the way I see it, if you’ve gotten what you’ve come for, then there is the door. If you want to get me off, then get on your knees.” I watch as hesitation crosses her face. She’s probably not used to men being so blunt. Instead, she’s used to them being wrapped around her finger. Her hesitation only lasts for a second before a smile crosses those lips. She drops to her knees, and her submission is enough to make me hard. I stroke my cock a few times, so she can watch it grow through my jeans. Her salivation is confirming everything I thought about her. *Good girl, my ass.* I take my dick out and rub it across her lips to tease her. She opens her mouth to take me in, but I pull back. *My show.*

“I say when, sweetheart,” I tell her. I tease her a little more until a bead of pre-cum forms at the tip of my dick. She greedily licks it all up. “Open,” I command. She does as I say with enthusiasm, so I let her take me to the back of her throat. *Holy shit.* Doesn’t she have a gag reflex?

Her expertise at sucking me off has definitely given away that she is not new to this. Fuck, she is amazing. She bobs up and down on my length, and I can feel the tingling in my balls. I’m so close. I grab her by the hair to guide her for a few strokes before I try to pull her away. She refuses to be separated from my dick. I explode in her mouth, and she doesn’t even flinch. She continues sucking and licking until she has every last drop. I let my shit throb for a few seconds while I watch the look of satisfaction on her face. I wasn’t planning on fucking her, but she’s earned it.

“Stand up and take that skirt off.” She quickly stands and does as I say. This one is a quick learner. I reach over and pull her shirt underneath her tits. Damn, they’re completely suckable, but I need to make this quick. The bar will be closing soon, and I need to be out of here before then.

“The panties, too?” she asks.

“Nope.” I turn her around and bend her over the counter. Grabbing a condom from my pocket, I slide it on before pulling her panties to the side. Just as I thought. No priming needed because she’s so wet. I slam into her, and she cries out in ecstasy. I fuck her hard and fast as her knees buckle. I knew this one would like it rough.

“Fuck, yes!” she screams. “Fuck me harder!” After I pound into her a few more times, she’s coming all over my dick. The clench of her pussy is enough to pull me over the edge with her. After I’m done, I peel the condom off.

“Thanks, Shannon. It was really nice meeting you.” I wink. She smiles and begins grabbing her skirt and fixing her clothes. She knows her time has come to an end. I go into the bathroom adjacent from our dressing room to clean up a bit, and when I come back, she is gone. Asher has already taken the rest of my stuff back to the lake house with him, so I don’t have anything to pack up. I grab my helmet from the corner and make my way outside to my bike. We play here again tomorrow night.



CHAPTER ONE ~ HARLOW

This is ludicrous. Possibly the worst idea I’ve had yet. I’ve spent the past few years making sure I was invisible to the opposite sex, and now I’m going to live with four men for the summer. My stepbrother, Asher, has invited me to stay with him and his bandmates at their lake house before classes start this fall. We haven’t seen each other in a few years and have only kept in touch by phone. I really miss Asher, but I question whether I can really go through with this. On the one hand, it

is a chance of a lifetime. I will get to observe the journey of his band as they strive to get a record deal. If I'm going to be a music journalist, I need to know every aspect of the music business—not just the glamorous illusion, but also the road to fame. On the other hand, I'm awkward around men. To think about being around four of them absolutely petrifies me. Gah, why do I have to be such a chickenshit? I know Asher won't let these guys do anything to me. He's said so himself. They're all man whores, I'm sure. Their band name, Phoenix Rising, is probably synonymous with rising from some random's bed rather than from ashes. Either way, if I'm going to be successful in the business, I need to find a way to prohibit my past from crippling me. This just may be the therapy I need—a push out of my comfort zone.

I stand here at the curb of the arrival section of Birmingham Airport. Asher should be here at any moment to pick me up. My nerves are all over the place. I clutch my hot pink luggage tightly to redirect my focus. My luggage is the most colorful possession that I have. Black is my usual color of choice. From my baggy jeans to my black nail polish, everything I wear is black. The darkness matches my soul and my past. It keeps people away from me, especially men. I don't trust them. The only person to penetrate my fuck-off shield is Irelyn. She is my best friend and my complete opposite. We met at the community college I just transferred from, and from day one, she refused to be ignored. She didn't stop until she broke down my defenses. She thinks I'm just a cynic, but she only knows the lies that I told her to explain why I am the way that I am. The pink luggage was a gift from her, and a rebellious attempt to protest my black obsession. *Whatever.* A sleek, black Escalade pulls to a stop in front of me, interrupting my thoughts. Asher steps out of the SUV, and I swear he has hit a growth spurt. I don't remember him being so tall. He comes around the back of the SUV as he runs his hands through his blond hair. His cerulean blue eyes crinkle, and a frown creases his brows as he takes me in.

“What the hell happened to my baby sister?” he jokes. There is an underlying seriousness in his tone. I've always had brunette hair, but now my waist-length tresses are blue-black from my

home dye job. I'm told my hair makes my gray eyes look freakish. My hair is my veil to hide when I don't want to be seen. I'm not the girl he remembers from three years ago.

"What do you mean? It's still me," I chide. He begins putting my suitcases in the back as he shakes his head.

"Still you, but Gothified." He chuckles. "My princess has turned into Goth Barbie," he teases. Princess was the nickname he had for me before our parents separated, and Mom moved on to husband number three.

"Hush, you still love me. And Gothified is not even a word."

"Of course it is. I just need to get used to your new look." He closes the trunk and opens the passenger door for me. He is still the sweet guy I remember. Even though he is a little taller now, he's still lean like a swimmer. With his charm, I bet all the women swoon over him, but I don't want to think about him in that way. I want to keep my sweet image of my stepbrother pure. Hopefully, he's not a whore magnet like most guys in a band. Okay, to be fair, I don't know any guys in any band—all I know is what I see on TV.

"You're late, brother. This look is not new. This has been me since you left," I point out.

"Whatever, Goth girl, let's get you to your new home for the summer."



With three levels and a deck that leads to the lake, this place is a dream. The main level is on the second floor, where I am now. The bedrooms are on the first and third floors. The furnishing and décor are contemporary and don't look like the home of rockers. Leave it to Mr. Nolan, Asher's dad, to spare no expense for these guys. That trait is what attracted my mom to him until she got greedy and went for a bigger fish. I think my favorite is the floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room, which let in all the natural light. The only thing missing is having Irelyn here with me. She is visiting family instead, and

then she'll be transferring to the University of Alabama with me in the fall. I'm walking around the state-of-the-art kitchen and admiring the cherry wood cabinetry when the other bandmates arrive downstairs.

"The guys are here," Asher says excitedly. He hops up from the sofa and heads to go meet them and to clue them in that I'm here, I'm sure. The guys come upstairs in a boisterous manner, bantering about whom was going to put away the groceries they just bought. Asher introduces them to me, and I must say, my first impression is that they aren't as bad as I originally thought they'd be. So it seems. Killian Andrews is their lead guitarist, whereas Asher is the bass guitarist. Like my brother, Killian has shoulder-length hair, but his is brown like his chocolate eyes. Ren Lowry is their drummer. He has a black Mohawk and seems to be the only one who rivals my Gothness, as my brother would say. I'm digging his all-black attire. He gives me a slight chin lift as a greeting.

The guys are all welcoming. They don't appear to be judging me for the way I look. I get that a lot, but it's kind of the point. I'm just about to ask who their singer is when he comes up the stairs. *Holy shit balls*. I wasn't ready. I hear Asher introducing him as Phoenix, but I'm speechless. Phoenix looks me up and down and smirks. I bet he gets this reaction from women all the time, but this is different. I don't fawn over men. They're not even on my radar. My heart quickens, and I work to swallow the lump in my throat. My nerves have kicked into overdrive. This feeling is foreign to me. This guy is so far from what you would expect as a singer of a rock band that it is unreal. He stands about six inches taller than my five-foot-four frame and is built like a fucking tank. The name Phoenix is so fitting for him. He is simply gorgeous. His shirt hugs his chest like a second skin, and I can see every etch of muscle. The tattoo sleeve on his left arm is an intricate work of art and draws your eyes even more to his fit physique. From his goatee to his perfectly styled short hair, he is perfection. His angled facial features are chiseled beauty. The fucker knows it, too. I can tell this one is going to be trouble. He arches an eyebrow in question, waiting for me to say something.

“Hi. Nice to meet you,” I manage to say without getting tongue-tied. Geesh, I feel like an idiot. He is just a good-looking guy. *Get it together.* “Where is my room?” I ask, turning toward Asher. I’m going to have to stay far away from this Phoenix guy. The others seem nice enough, but my gut is telling me that he is trouble with a capital T.

“The guys and I discussed it. You can take the master bedroom on the third floor,” Asher says. A look passes between him and Phoenix before he grabs my luggage to take them upstairs. Phoenix follows us up the stairs.

“They discussed it,” he comments. “That was my room. I got booted to the room next door, so don’t think you’re going to get that bathroom all to yourself,” he informs. I don’t want to come in taking over their space, so I just nod and look away as we pass the only other bedroom on this floor.

“There are two more bathrooms in the house, Phoenix,” Asher chastises.

“Yeah, but I want to use that one. That is the only master bathroom and the only one with a rain shower. Don’t worry; I won’t bother your *princess*. She is not my speed anyway.” Phoenix smirks. Asher’s face hardens, and I know he is getting ready to put his foot down. The last thing I want is to cause problems on my first day here. I can’t believe he told them he calls me princess, but like Phoenix just confirmed, I’m not his type anyway. I grab Asher’s arm to shush him.

“It’s fine. Really. I’m sure he and I can set up some sort of schedule. We’re the only two rooms up here, so it’s no problem,” I assure.

“Whatever. You don’t have to agree to that. You’re the only female in the house and should have your privacy—”

“Don’t make this awkward,” I plead, cutting off his rant. I look over at Phoenix, and his smugness is revolting. He didn’t win. I just don’t want any special privileges or to upset the balance of the house.

“Fine. One complaint and he’s out,” Asher promises.

“I’ve yet to have a woman complain about anything that concerns me.” Phoenix winks. He leaves the room chuckling.

“Fuck,” Asher groans as he leaves the room with him.

I take a look around the room now that I’m alone. This bedroom is huge. It has a sitting area as well as doors that lead to a balcony overlooking the lake. More floor-to-ceiling windows compliment the space. The four-poster bed looks inviting until I imagine all the kinky sex that has taken place in it. I shudder at the thought as I walk into the en suite bathroom. Somehow, I knew it would be a dream. I can see why Phoenix didn’t want to give it up. The rustic travertine tiled shower, encased in glass, could fit like ten people. I see the rain shower that he spoke about next to a regular showerhead. It even has a bench in there. *Interesting*. The Jacuzzi tub sitting off to the side of the shower is the icing on the cake. I know where I’ll be spending a lot of my time. I love to soak and read. Well, more like an escape into a different realm of reality and pretend I’m the heroine who gets the happily ever after—not the dysfunctional life I have.

First, I guess I’ll unpack. The walk-in closet within the master bath is massive. I flip the light on and am shocked to already see men’s clothing hung up and sneakers lining the wall. So, it appears he hasn’t cleared the space yet, or does he want to share the closet, too? It’s definitely big enough. It’s almost big enough to be a sixth bedroom. *Whatever*. I’ll just grab my favorite romance novel and read for now. I push the suitcases against the opposite wall as his shoes and grab my book out of my bag. I walk back into the bedroom and curl up into the oversize chair next to the window. I’m not getting in that bed until I change the sheets—just in case.



CHAPTER TWO ~ PHOENIX

The guys are discussing what songs we’re going to cover tonight from the band, I Prevail. Honestly, I’m tired of singing other people’s shit, but our music is not ready yet. We only

have one original song that we perform, titled “Something to Believe In.” I write all of our music, and that song has special meaning since it’s the first one I started working on. It has significance to my past, but the guys just think it is a badass song. We don’t play it every set, but when we do, we play it to close the night, and it brings down the fucking house every time. The topic changes to what after-hours club they plan on hitting up tonight after our show, and I smile as I think about Asher’s “*princess*” upstairs.

I’ve overheard him call her that nickname. It was odd as shit, to say the least, to hear the word come out of a grown man’s mouth. Imagine my surprise when this princess arrives dressed from head to toe in black, looking as dark as my soul. I see the Goth image, but something is amiss. I just can’t put my finger on it yet. I saw the instant attraction she had for me, yet she chose to pretend otherwise. The shift of her eyes toward the ground when I speak to her gives her away. I’d kill to know what thoughts ran through her mind. What she must think of me? I’m very aware of how most women see me. They want any opportunity to fuck me, and some even want to “tame the bad boy.” *Fucking hysterical*. Not her, though. I can tell little Miss Harlow is planning on staying the hell away from me. Too bad it’s a challenge I’m willing to accept even though she’s not really my type.

I got a peek at what she really desires, and I plan on opening her up. I bet she has a hot body under all those baggy clothes. Those piercing gray eyes of hers got my attention. It’s going to be fun exploring the rest of her. Asher has warned us all off her, so she will have to come to me, but she will. She will submit. In the end, they all do. Yup, my summer just got a little more interesting.

I watch as she comes downstairs. Apparently, she is coming to tonight’s gig. This should be fun. I hope she’ll be in the front row. She is in for a treat. I have a special performance just for her. This will be the real test. She looks around nervously, and I almost feel sorry for her. *Almost*.

“Ready for tonight, princess?” I ask cheekily as we load the Escalade with our equipment.

“Don’t call me that,” Harlow whisper hisses. Hmm, so she has some bite. I don’t mind. Even better.

“Why not? Asher calls you that. You don’t like it?”

“It’s condescending when you say it,” she points out.

“It isn’t meant to be.” I smirk. “It’s just so fitting,” I continue while gesturing toward her all-black appearance. She huffs and walks around to the other side of the SUV.

So the goal is not to get under her skin. No, I want to get under something else completely. The more she resists me, the harder my dick gets. This feeling is foreign to me. Women usually make this shit too easy. I won’t lie and say it isn’t great to have my pick of pussy, but a challenge may be just what I need for a change of pace. I have to be careful not to get too involved, though. The last thing I need is to have her fall in love with me. Asher really would kick my ass if I break his sister’s heart. No. Get in and get out. That’s the challenge. My dick accepts.

RUTHLESS CROWN PLAYLIST

Smother ~ Daughter

Hero ~ Chad Kroeger, Josey Scott

Under the Influence (Violin) ~ Joel Sunny

Watch Me Burn ~ Michele Morrone

Crazy In Love Remix ~ Beyonce

Go Fuck Yourself ~ Two Feet

Cardigan ~ Taylor Swift

Running Up That Hill ~ Kate Bush

Rolling in the Deep (Violin) ~ Rachel Pierce

Closer (Violin) ~ Ember trio

Radioactive ~ Imagine Dragons

Waste ~ Kxllswxtch

War of Hearts ~ Ruelle

Available for Me ~ Hailey Knox

Wicked Games ~ Chris Issak

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ABOUT S.R. WATSON

USA Today Bestselling Author, S. R. Watson, is a Texas native who currently resides in Washington with her children. She grew up reading the Sweet Valley series (Twins, High, & University) among others. Her passion for writing began in high school and continued even after earning her nursing degree and becoming an operating room registered nurse. Discovering the Twilight series and 50 Shades Trilogy, inspired her to finally share her own stories.

S. R. Watson published her first book in 2014.

When S. R. Watson is not writing, or working as an OR nurse manager, she loves to read and binge watch her favorite shows.



ABOUT RYAN STACKS

USA Today Bestselling Author, Ryan Stacks, is a Walla Walla, WA native who currently reside in Utah with his wife Anna. Most would consider him a jack of all trades. His first love is wrestling and he's wrestled his entire life. In addition to his talents on the mat, Ryan has many achievements. He's a published international cover model and he released his first book, Peppermint Mocha Love with SR Watson in December 2017. For this novella, he debuted as both an author and cover photographer. Ryan Stacks has partnered with S.R. Watson to create many more stories that'll take you for a ride.

When Ryan Stacks is not writing, he spends his time making fun TikToks, traveling, being active with the youth in his community by coaching wrestling, and helping in Young Life as a leader. In addition to his commitment to the community, Ryan has taken his fitness career to new highs as a men's physique competitor - placing top 3 at the national level.

