



SUGAR

THE CANDY SHOP

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
CANDICE WRIGHT

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Cover design by Jodie @ JODIELOCKS designs

Editing by Tanya Oemig

Proof reading by Briann Graziano

 Created with Vellum

*FOR Stacey Brutger, Marie Mistry, Mallory Funk, and T S
Snow, my fellow procrastinators and writing buddies, who kept
me mostly sane while writing Sugar.*

PROLOGUE

TWENTY YEARS AGO

I feel nothing. Not the frigid cold nor the mind-numbing fear I'd grown accustomed to. Something in me had broken, shattered into tiny pieces forever. I'm aware enough to know that the numbness isn't normal, but right now, after months of living an exhaustive emotional hell, I'm done.

And oh, how I revel in the quietness. There are no voices in my head screaming at me. No demons haunting me. No hands pawing at me. For now, it's just me alone, standing in the wreckage of the chaos I caused.

The acrid smell of smoke fills the air as flames reach up to touch the heavens, illuminating the dark night. I hope my family can see them from way up there and know vengeance has been served. Perhaps, over time, they will find some way to forgive me.

The water I just dragged myself out of beckons me back. There is nobody left to miss me. Nobody left to mourn me. Nobody left to remember me. I suck in a breath at that. Could it be that simple?

I turn when I hear sirens in the distance and know I'm running out of time. Fire rages in every direction I look but one. The dark water draws me closer, luring me in with its promise of freedom. Freedom, I do not deserve.

Instead, I walk away from peace toward the smoldering calamity behind me, letting the need for vengeance fuel me. I shake off the invisible shackles that bound me to a love that was used as a weapon against me. I ignore my bleeding feet and bruised body and make a vow to myself:

I will never bend.

I will never break.

And I will never fall again.

CHAPTER ONE

The rhythmic clacking of my heels echoes off the walls as I walk down the empty corridor. I don't bother with stealth, not for this. I'm too pissed, and every day I'm out here searching for answers, my anger grows. As pretty as my homeland is, I never wanted to come back here to Greece, but I'm running out of patience and options.

As I approach the gate, a guard takes me in, his eyes moving over my body before he licks his lips. I keep my glasses on and return the favor. Only while he's checking out my tits, I'm checking out his weak spots.

Once upon a time, he might have been fit. I'd say he's an ex-police officer or soldier from the way he stands, but the potbelly and slow movements tell me he's become lazy as a prison guard, probably believing the bars will keep him safe.

What a fool.

"English?" I ask him softly, my voice barely above a whisper, so he has to lean forward to hear me.

"Yes, I speak English. Do you have any identification?"

His English is good, making me lean toward the soldier theory.

I open my bag and pull out my driver's license and passport, both declaring me to be Sarah Parks.

"Remove your glasses." I remove them from my face and slip them into my bag.

He looks down at my ID and compares the woman in the image to the woman before him. Sarah's five-four, according to the DMV, but that's with my four-inch heels on. Right now, in my Louboutins, I'm closer to five-six. My icy-blonde wig and pale blue contacts teamed with my milky-white skin, give me a somewhat Scandinavian look, which is why I adopt a faint accent.

"You are American?" he asks.

"My mother is from Sweden. My father was an American soldier. I've lived in many places, but the U.S. is where I was born."

He eventually nods before handing back my IDs. I slip them both into the inside pocket of my blazer as he pulls his keys from the chain on his belt and opens the gate for me. The noise reverberates around the corridor, but it stops immediately after the gate is closed.

"I'll need to search you and your bag."

"I don't actually need to take my bag in with me. Is there somewhere I can leave it until I'm done?"

He nods and takes it from me, placing it in a basket and sliding it onto the top shelf of the locker near the desk.

"Hands against the wall."

I turn and do as he says, feeling my black sheath dress rise when I lean forward.

"Not many people come in here without notice, so when the warden called to say you were coming, I was surprised." He fishes for information as his hands slide over my body, checking me for weapons. He doesn't abuse the position by grabbing more than he should, but his fingers do linger a fraction longer than they need to. When he steps closer to run his hands around the underside of my bra, I feel the unmistakable bulge in his pants.

"The governor and I are old friends. He was the one who told me about this case, and I volunteered my services."

“Hmm,” he hums, I suspect wanting to say more, but he bites his tongue.

“What can you tell me about my new client?”

“Not much. He keeps to himself, but not because he is afraid. It is the opposite. Everyone here is wary of the man they call the Carver.”

“Well, the name doesn’t suggest sunshine and roses, so that’s to be expected, no?”

“Perhaps, but everyone in here is a little bit...” he taps his head as he trails off. “What does it say about the man when even the crazies are fearful of him?”

I smile at him sweetly before leaning up and pressing my lips against the shell of his ear. “That he’s the smartest person here.” I pull back and continue on, pretending I don’t see him adjusting himself. “Tell me, how many fights has he been in?”

“Since he has been here? I was not here in the beginning, but as far as I know, only one. He carved up the man’s face and genitals before skinning him.”

“And yet no time was added to his sentence?”

“He was already deemed insane and locked up here. If anything, that just proved it. A judge said he just doesn’t know the difference between right and wrong and that it is not safe for him or anyone else outside these walls.”

“He was given a twenty-five-year sentence to serve here in a mental health facility for the criminally insane. The governor explained that he will stay longer though if, after his time served, he is still considered a danger to others. I understand the legal system is a little different over here than it is back home, but that seems strange to me. If he was deemed insane at the trial, why was he found guilty?”

He shrugs as he opens the next gate with a clang. “Some people are special that way.”

I turn to face him and move closer to him. “You’re not saying my client is being treated differently because of his bloodline, are you?” I run my fingers across the collar of his

shirt and let my breath skate across his lips. “Because I’d hate to have to submit a report. I do so hate paperwork.”

“I’m not saying anything.” He gulps, leaning a little closer. “But if you’re hoping to get your client free, I’d tell you to stop wasting your time and find another client instead. The only way that man will ever see the light of day will be if he gets a full pardon from the governor.” He chuckles at that.

I shrug before stepping away. “Stranger things have happened.”

I walk away, putting some extra sway in my hips as I go, until I reach the next checkpoint. The guard there looks at me for a second before unlocking the gate without a word. He slides it open wide enough for me to slip through before closing it behind him.

I follow his lead and keep my mouth shut. Silence can make some people feel uncomfortable, so they start talking to fill the silence, which is when they tend to say things they perhaps shouldn’t have said. Silence never bothered me. It has always been somewhat of a comfort.

The man doesn’t speak until we reach the holding room, and when he does, he doesn’t speak English, and I don’t ask him to. I simply offer him a nod as he opens the door and ushers me inside.

I walk over to the chair meant for visitors, then look over to the table in the middle of the room and the chair on the opposite side. There are heavy-duty leather straps on the arms and legs, as well as chains bolted to the floor.

The guard points at the white line dividing the room, disappearing under the table, and emerging on the other side. He shakes his head in a do-not-cross warning.

I nod and sit, crossing my legs and resting my hands in my lap. He leaves the room, keeping the door open. I casually glance around the room, looking for the cameras, and spot them in opposite corners. Both turned off thanks to the warden, who agreed to let me have an hour with the prisoner

in exchange for a night in which he could do whatever he liked with me.

I twist my earring, which is fitted with a signal blocker just in case and inspect my nails as I wait for the prisoner to arrive. I purse my lips when I realize I need a manicure.

When I hear the jingling of chains and footsteps approaching, I brace myself. Visibly, nothing is wrong. I'm the picture of calm and collected, but looks can be deceiving because inside, my stomach is tied in knots, and I'm ready to run.

I stare at my hands as the guard brings the prisoner into the room and straps him to the chair opposite me. The only sound is that of the chains. I wait for the guard to leave and close the door before I lift my head and stare at a man I haven't seen in more than twenty years.

I barely manage to hold back my flinch as his cold, arctic blue eyes stare into mine. Memories slam into me, thrusting my brain back in time. I can hear the screams, smell the blood, and taste the fear on the tip of my tongue, but that was before I realized how bad it would become.

At six-four, he was always tall, though, to be fair, most people are tall to me at five-foot-nothing. His height, however, is the only thing that hasn't changed. His once lean swimmer's physique is long gone. The man must be two hundred and fifty pounds of pure muscle. He could probably bench press me one-handed. His size alone should scare the shit out of me, but it has the opposite effect.

He once resembled the monster I knew. Now he's something else altogether. His short black hair curls at the ends and looks like it needs a wash, and his beard could do with a trim, but overall, the man looks good considering where he spent the last twenty years.

He cocks his head, his eyes moving over me, assessing me, trying to figure me out.

I smirk. Good luck, buddy. You're going to need it.

"Hello, Calix."

Everyone back home thinks Calix is out and hunting me but I knew better. I've been keeping an eye on the man for years and there is no way they'll let him leave, not without a little help.

No, if my source is right, then I'm looking for a *skia*—meaning shade or shadow but in this case, I'm thinking they mean ghost. And that's where Calix comes in. If the murmurings are true then I won't need to hunt the ghost down, the ghost will come for Calix.

“Do I know you?” Calix frowns, his voice deep and gravelly, making a weird feeling roll through me.

“No, but I know you.”

“Is that right?” He looks around the room and squints just a little, a sign that he's noticed that the cameras are off.

“I've come to make you a deal.”

“Lady, go home. Guard,” he yells. The guard ignores him, having been given strict instructions not to respond to anyone calling him but me.

I lean back and cross my arms under my chest. His eyes drop briefly before they come back to my face. When he realizes nobody is coming, he looks at me differently, sitting up a little straighter when he realizes that I'm more powerful than I appear.

“Who are you?”

“I'm your guardian angel.”

He smirks at that, and damn, the man has a nice smile.

“My angel, huh? Tell me, angel, where have you been the last twenty years of my life?”

I cock my eyebrow. “Keeping you alive.”

He throws his head back and laughs. The sound coils around me, stroking me like a caress.

“Jesus fuck. If you're the best the man upstairs has got, I'm screwed. Do me a favor, lady. Get the fuck out of here before someone takes a liking to you.”

“I’m good where I am, thanks.” I smile, then look down with a frown, wondering if I also need a pedicure.

Calix breaks the silence first, an aggravated sigh leaving his mouth, and I look back up as he leans forward as much as his restraints will let him. “You think you can waltz in here dressed like that, looking like every man’s wet dream, and there not be consequences?”

“Oh, I’m counting on it.”

“And they say I’m fucking crazy. You take the cake. Okay, angel, I’ll bite. What do you want from me? But know, I charge a steep price for favors.”

“I want you to marry me.”

He stares at me for a second before he starts laughing again.

I don’t smile. Don’t look away. I keep my eyes on him and wait for him to calm down.

“Who put you up to this?”

“Nobody put me up to this.” I roll my eyes at the infuriating man. “You don’t have any friends, and somehow I don’t see your enemies punishing you by marrying.”

“You clearly don’t know my enemies, little girl.”

I stand up, slide off my blazer, and toss it on my chair before walking around the desk until I’m within touching distance. I reach up and drag a finger across his jaw.

“I know exactly who your enemies are. I know them better than you could even imagine.”

I move closer and grip the hem of my dress, shimmying it up to just under my butt, revealing my garter belt. His breath hitches as I straddle his legs and sit on his lap.

My lips move to the shell of his ear. “In ten minutes, an explosion will rip through this prison. You’re going to save me and the two guards outside, one of whom is married to the governor’s sister.”

I grind against him and feel his cock harden beneath me.

“When I come back, it will be for our wedding.”

“And why would I do that? Why the fuck would I do any of that?”

“Because I’m the only way you’ll ever be free again.”

I pull back to stare into his cold eyes. I can see him weighing his options, trying to figure out the best possible outcome, but he doesn’t have enough information.

“I’m a dead man if I leave, so why bother?”

“You’re a dead man if you stay. As of right now, the order of protection that has kept you safe has ended. That means the five families will be free to hire any motherfucker to take you out, and it won’t matter to them that you’re in here. They’ll get to you just as easily as I did.”

He yanks his arm, and with a pop, he has his now free hand around my throat, squeezing. A flood of wetness soaks my panties, and I know my pupils have dilated with need.

“I told you there would be consequences. You think you’re dealing with some two-bit criminal, but you have no fucking idea who I really am.”

I tug the front of my dress down and reveal my bra with the pretty little silver pendant in the middle. His eyes never leave my face. Instead, he smirks.

“It might have been a while since I’ve had a woman, but it will take more than a pair of tits to distract me.”

Shame. They are nice tits, but it’s my brain he should have been focusing on. They never think about misdirection.

I pull the pendant and yank the pliable steel cord threaded into the stitching where the bra’s wire would be. To searching fingers, it would feel like an underwire unless properly examined. Funnily enough, once hands are checking your boobs, their focus becomes more on the cup size than what’s supporting them.

As soon as the cord is in my hand, I wrap it around Calix’s throat and pull tight, twisting the ends so that there is no give. He lets go of me instantly and reaches for the wire

instinctively. I reach forward and bite his lip before releasing him, tossing the wire behind me so he can't reach it.

A thin red mark circles his throat where the garrote bit into his skin. If I had pulled a little tighter, he'd be dead, and he knows it. For some reason, that makes his dick even harder.

“Let's just say you have no idea who I am either. I can be your savior or your demise. Choose wisely because I won't make this offer again.”

I reach between us and slide my hand underneath my dress, slipping two fingers inside my panties before pulling them free. As I climb off his lap, I lean forward and run my tongue over the seam of his lips.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he snarls, but there is a hint of curiosity in his voice too.

“Offering you an incentive. After all, what good is having a wife if you can't fuck her?”

When he opens his mouth to answer, I slip my wet fingers inside. His eyes widen for a fraction before his tongue swirls around my fingers, and he sucks hard.

There's an explosion, and it takes me a second to realize it's not my ovaries. I grip the table and turn to the cameras, finding them still off. I look down at Calix, who is trying to free himself.

“Your answer?”

“What the fuck makes you think I won't just take my chances and run?”

“You're not stupid. You know you'd be dead in a few days. My way, you'll be a free man legally, and there will be nothing the five families can do about it.”

His head snaps up at that. A secondary explosion goes off, and an alarm blares.

“Fine. But double-cross me, and I'll kill you myself.”

I bend down and laugh in his face as I help to free him. “You'll have to get in line, Calix. There are plenty of people

who would love to see me dead. I make it my life's mission to keep them disappointed.”

Once he's free, he stands up and grabs me.

“Play the part. The cameras will be going online any minute now.”

“And what part am I playing exactly?”

“Why the hero, of course.”

He laughs as he drags me toward the door. “Jesus, if I'm the hero, what the fuck does that make you?”

“Well, I guess that makes me the bad guy.”

CHAPTER TWO

“He saved the lives of two guards, one of whom is my brother-in-law. Not to mention, he prevented a catastrophe from happening when he barricaded the guard’s room so the inmates could not escape.”

“I understand that, but this man killed two people. And he hasn’t finished serving his time,” the warden argues.

“I reviewed that case, and the evidence was circumstantial at best. There is no way that man should have been in here for as long as he has been. He has been a model prisoner.”

“He skinned a man alive.”

“I never pegged you as someone who listened to gossip. He defended himself after being cornered and attacked—an attack that was ignored by one of the very guards he just saved. Tell me, does that sound like the actions of a heartless murderer? Perhaps it’s time for a full investigation into the corruption—”

The warden, who had been playing his part admirably, sighs and shakes his head.

“If the governor thinks he should be pardoned, then who am I to contest it? I too am grateful for all he did.”

The governor looks at me, knowing it’s all for show.

“Good, I’ll have my office draw up the paperwork. I trust you to keep your mouth shut until then. If anything happens to Mr. Cirillo before then, I’ll hold you personally responsible.”

The warden mutters something under his breath as he signals to a guard. “Please show the governor and Miss Parks out.”

“Actually, I’m going to go see my client now, and the governor is going to accompany me. He would like to pay his respects to the man who saved his brother-in-law.”

“This is very unorthodox,” the warden grumbles, standing and seeing us out of his office, where a different guard waits.

“Erik, take the governor and Miss Parks to holding room C and bring Mr. Cirillo to see them.”

“Sir, it’s lunchtime—”

“I don’t fucking care what time it is or what Cirillo is doing. Hell, he can be taking a shit for all I care. Bring him to holding room C.”

“Yes, sir,” the guard responds immediately, fumbling with his keys and opening the gate.

I wonder if he’d still be intimidated by his boss if he knew I’d whipped the fuck out of the man last week while he crawled to me on his hands and knees with a gag in his mouth and a cage on his dick.

Now, I can’t say I’m particularly into the whole BDSM thing—though I do love the outfits—but if it’s a means to an end, I’m game. Now I have another little video to add to my collection that I can bring out when I need someone to do something for me.

It’s not dissimilar to the hold I have over the governor, though it’s not my pussy that got him into trouble but his love of dick. He has a very strict family ethic, and he uses that strong moral code to spew his propaganda about same-sex relationships as a means to keep him in office. If his constituents ever found out that their beloved governor liked being spit-roasted at a sex club on Saturday nights, they’d revolt. Then it’s bye-bye mansion and reputation, hello regular nine-to-five. Heaven forbid. To a snob like him, that’s a fate worse than death.

Neither of us talks until the guard leaves to collect Calix. Only then does he turn to me, his jaw tight. “I take it I’m done once this charade is over.”

“Careful, Mikal. Your petulance is showing.”

He leans closer to me, the aroma of garlic and herbs on his breath. He definitely had something with tzatziki for lunch. “There will be backlash over this. I’ll do my part to ensure you keep your secret, but you have to know the families will not take this lying down. Cirillo is a threat to their power.”

“Oh, I know.”

The door opens, and Calix walks in, followed by the guard. He looks at me for a moment, his eyes taking in my skin-tight knee-length skirt, my cream silk blouse, and my black glasses—even though I don’t need them. Today I’ve gone for the sexy librarian look, knowing it will stir up naughty fantasies.

The guard turns to leave, but I call him back. “The governor has kindly agreed to marry us. Would you stay and act as a witness?”

The guard looks shocked, but he nods all the same.

“Shoot, I need another.”

“I can grab another guard if you like. One that’s on their lunch,” he offers.

“Would you? Oh, that would be fantastic. Thank you.”

He smiles and scurries away. I turn to Calix and chuckle when I see the guard didn’t restrain him. The governor notices, too, because he takes a step back and behind me.

“Pussy,” Calix growls.

“Think you can refrain from choking me long enough to get married?” I ask, drawing his attention away from the governor.

“I’m not one for making idle promises. Introduce us.” He nods to the governor, but I don’t miss the shrewd look in his eye. He knows exactly who he is.

“Calix, this is Governor Sarris, and he was recently ordained. Convenient, right?”

“Yes, very,” he deadpans.

“He has agreed to officiate our wedding. Isn’t that wonderful, pooky bear?”

If looks could kill, I’d be dead.

“Wonderful,” he eventually says, his voice full of contempt.

We wait in silence for the guard to reappear with the governor’s brother-in-law in tow. I have to bite my lip at the irony.

“Mikal?” The new guard looks from me to Erik before going back to his brother-in-law.

“I’m here in an official capacity. And I wanted to thank the man who helped save you. What better way to say thank you than to preside over his wedding?”

“Right?” the guard says, clearly confused, but he rolls with it.

“If you’ll stand back,” Mikal points to the guards, who move to stand near the door.

“Miss Parks, if you wouldn’t mind standing beside your groom.”

“Oh, of course.”

I move to stand next to Calix, keeping my eyes on everyone in the room while focusing on my heartbeat so that I don’t have time to wallow over what I’m about to do.

When Mikal starts the long-winded speech about the sanctity of marriage, I tune out, considering the next step in my crazy plan. It isn’t until Calix elbows me that I realize it’s my turn to speak.

“I, Sugar Daniels, take Calix Cirillo to be my lawful wedded husband.” I repeat everything I’m supposed to, minus the *obey* part.

“Sugar Daniels, huh? Interesting.”

“I like it.”

He stares at me before a smile stretches across his face.

“I, Calix Cirillo, take Sugar Daniels to be my awful, wedded wife.”

I roll my eyes at his deliberate slip of the tongue.

CHAPTER THREE

I sit on my bed in my hotel suite and remove my wig, running my fingers through my hair in relief as it tumbles free from its confines. I look down at the blonde strands of the wig in my hand and sigh before tossing it on the bed and making my way to the bathroom.

The light comes on as I enter, and I walk over to the mirror, removing my contacts and washing my face before patting it dry with a towel. I stare at my reflection and feel a mix of appreciation and anger at the woman staring back at me.

With the blonde wig and blue contacts, it's easy to pretend I'm someone else. Now, looking at my chocolate locks and dark eyes, I'm reminded of who I am and why I'm here. The truth is that my anger stems from my own stupidity. If my plan fails, the house of cards I built my life upon will all come tumbling down. I knew better than to make decisions based on emotion.

I pull back my fist and punch the glass. It shatters on impact, but that doesn't stop me. I keep hitting it over and over, slivers embedding themselves into my knuckles. Once my anger is spent, I drop my arm and flex my fingers with a wince. Blood drips from my shredded skin into the sink, the red liquid standing out starkly against the white porcelain.

I run the water and shove my hand underneath it, knowing I'll require tweezers to remove all the shards of glass, but find that I just don't care. I turn off the water and wrap the small

white towel around my hand. With a sigh, I clean up the broken mirror before walking back into the bedroom.

I place a call for room service and order a bottle of champagne. After all, it is my wedding night. I lie back in the bed and stare up at the ceiling and huff out a laugh.

I'm spending my wedding night alone with a fucked-up hand in a country I never wanted to return to, but it's still a thousand times better than the last wedding night. There's a lot less blood involved too. I let my eyes slip closed, refusing to go back to that time. It does nothing to swim in memories that only serve to try and drown me.

The way I look at it, this marriage is a business transaction. I need Calix, and I'm willing to be the wife he wants, within reason, to get what I want. When it's all over, we can get divorced, or I can just kill him.

My cell phone chimes. I reach over for it and look at the screen. When a familiar number flashes, I place it back on the nightstand and bite my lip to distract myself from the ache in my chest. Ignoring the throb of my hand, I climb off the bed and strip out of my clothes. I hang them up and slip on a robe, forgoing the belt when I'm unable to tie it because my hand refuses to cooperate.

When the knock at the door sounds, I hold the edges of the robe closed and peek through the peephole. Room service stands with a silver cart carrying a bottle of champagne. I take in the attendant and frown. My eyes move over the uniform—down to his sneakers and back up—pausing on his hand, which rests on the cart.

“Crap.”

I blow out a breath and pull the door open, keeping myself just behind it.

“Hi, come on in.” I motion for him to enter. He hesitates for a second before pushing the cart into the room.

With his back to me, I close the door and grab the bottle of champagne, swinging it hard against the side of his head as he reaches inside his jacket pocket for his gun, and he drops to

the floor like a rock. Surprisingly, the bottle doesn't break. I look at it in appreciation before taking in the now-prone figure.

I roll him to his back with my foot and bend down to search him. I take the gun he was reaching for and spot the silencer on the end. Not an amateur, then. I search the rest of him and don't find any other weapons. I pull the belt from my robe, and ignoring the screaming pain in my hand, I roll him back over so I can bind his wrists tightly behind him.

Once that's done, I sit him up against the wall, the unconscious man missing out on the free show I'm putting on as my robe falls open. When I have him where I want him, I go over to the closet and pull out the bag of toys I used on the warden and rummage through it until I find the items I want.

I start with the ball gag, placing it in his mouth and securing it snugly behind his head. It wouldn't do if he woke up and started yelling before I was ready. Then I take the cock cage and smirk. It takes some maneuvering, but I manage to get the man's pants down far enough for me to put the device on him before he wakes up.

When he starts moaning, I walk back over to the closet and start to get dressed. I slip on underwear and a tiny pair of black workout shorts, along with a black sports bra. I opt for a red long-haired wig this time, already arranged in Viking braids. I lay it on the bed, ready for when I've finished.

I pack the rest of my things, moving around the room to make sure I haven't forgotten anything before taking a damp cloth and wiping down the areas I've touched. I clean up the blood in the bathroom and shove the towel I wrapped my hand in in my bag. I don't worry about my hair being found on anything—it's a hotel, after all. Nothing found here DNA-wise would be considered anything other than circumstantial. Besides, I'm not in the system. Once the large gym bag is packed, I place it beside my wig and add the guy's gun to it.

I know the hitman is awake when I hear his moaning turn to muffled yelling. I turn to find him struggling to free himself.

With a smile, I walk toward him and sit crossed-legged just out of reach.

“Hey there.” I wave before my eyes drop to his lap.

His eyes follow suit and widen at the cage attached to his dick and he struggles harder.

“Damn, that must be embarrassing for you. It’s not like we can even blame the cold because it’s always warm here.”

I can’t make out his reply because of the ball gag, but I’m sure it wasn’t nice.

I step closer and cup his jaw. “I’ll take this out so we can talk. And if you’re a good boy, we can both go our separate ways once we’re done. However, if you piss me off...” I leave it hanging. He can make of that what he wants.

I wait for him to nod, but he just glares at me.

“Or I can just put a bullet in your brain now. It’s entirely up to you. I can kill you with your own gun, stage it to make it look like a suicide, and leave a note saying you helped me.”

His eyes widen at that.

“Of course, that means once news gets back to who you work for, they’ll go after your family. But that won’t be either of our problems, now, will it?”

He shakes his head, grunting.

“So, what’s it going to be? Blink once for talk.”

He makes a noise, but eventually, he blinks once, and I release him from the ball gag.

“You stupid fucking whore. You’re dead. Do you hear me? Dead.”

“Of course, I hear you, and I’ll be sure to take everything you said into account. Now let’s get to the good part. Who sent you and why?”

“Fuck you.”

I sigh and stand. “I can see you’d rather your family deal with your shit. That’s cool and all. Your choice. I’m not here

to judge you,” I tell him, slipping on the black sneakers I left out.

“You are nothing but Cirillo’s whore.”

“Hmm...if you say so.”

“He will not be allowed to walk free. You will die for your hand in it.”

“Just to be clear, we’re talking about Calix?”

He frowns, looking at me like I’ve lost my mind.

“You are his lawyer,” he tells me.

“Ah, right. I forgot about that. So, you were sent to kill me, Calix’s lawyer, and this would somehow keep Calix locked up? I’ll be honest, there are way too many holes in your story. Now, I don’t think you seem all that smart, so you might believe this. But whoever sent you knows as well as I do that this is not how the justice system works. My death matters little in this. After all, I’m replaceable. So either this is just about revenge, or the person who sent you knows more than they’re telling you.”

“You know nothing, you—”

“Whore, got it. I’m bored of listening to you now, so how about I talk for a little bit? See, I don’t need you to tell me who sent you. That burn mark on the webbing between your thumb and forefinger tells me exactly who you work for.”

He curses before spitting at me. He misses by a mile, but I still look at him with disdain.

“You came here to eliminate me. The silencer was a nice touch, but you gave yourself away with the sneakers. If you had taken the time to check this place out, you’d know that as a five-star hotel, they take themselves very seriously, as they should for the price tag. The only question I really wanted answered was if you were here because of Calix or because you know who I am. But I think you already answered that.”

I pick up the black leather mask and the leash with the buckle from the bed and walk back over to him so he can see

me. He watches me warily, likely wondering what the fuck I'm doing.

"I'm gonna go now since it seems my location has been leaked."

"Let me go."

"Yeah, that's not going to happen. You didn't tell me anything I wanted to know."

He looks at the mask as I move closer. He shakes his head. "No. I'll tell you, okay? Kypianos sent me."

I frown. "The Kypianos family, one of the five power families sent you?" He nods rapidly.

"That brand on your hand tells me Santos owns you, so what exactly are you doing working for them?"

"Santos is dead."

I grin at that and ignore his struggles as I slip the mask over his face and fasten it. The only thing visible now is his mouth.

"Is he really?"

He pauses for a second, and it's enough for me to start laughing.

"You fool. I think, at this point, I'm actually doing you a favor. Santos never really did like sharing his toys."

I wrap the leash around his throat and tighten it before leaning closer.

"I told you I'd let us both walk away if you didn't piss me off, and unfortunately for you, you pissed me off the second you opened your mouth. Now, I'm sure you're used to dealing with the big boys. But let me tell you, you've seen nothing until you've dealt with a woman. I'm going to leave you here to be found by housekeeping. With your dick in a cage, a fancy gimp mask on your face, and a leash around your neck, the police will think it's a sex game gone horribly wrong. Shocking perhaps, but not unheard of."

He starts thrashing, so I pull the leash and brace my legs until the thrashing turns to twitching, and then nothing. When I'm sure his chest isn't moving, I buckle the leash in place and attach the other end to the bedpost. I remove the bathrobe belt from his wrists. Though they are red, the terry cloth material didn't do any damage to the skin. By the time he's found, the red marks will be long gone.

I shove the belt in the bag along with the bloody hand towel before slipping on a black hoodie with thumb holes to cover my knuckles. I take my time putting on my wig to make sure it's on neatly. With my transformation complete, I slip my oversized sunglasses on and grab my bag. I turn to give the room one last quick check before heading out.

I flip the *do not disturb* sign and wipe down the door handle with my sleeve before casually heading to the stairwell. I don't pass anyone, but even if I did, people would just see a woman heading to the gym for an evening workout, which is not unusual in this day and age.

Shoving the door open, I head out into the warm night and jog down to the shopping complex around the corner that's just closing. I left my car in the section that allows overnight parking. Once I reach it, I toss my bag in the back seat before climbing in and driving away.

I drive until I come to a small, secluded beach and park facing the ocean. It's deserted at this time of night, so I take off my wig and sunglasses, throwing them in the glove compartment. Next, I take off my hoodie and toss it behind me. On the passenger seat is a green plaid flannel I wore yesterday and stripped out of when I got hot. I slip that on and lean back in my seat. After making sure all my doors are locked, I take a deep breath and close my eyes for a minute.

Once my heart rate returns to normal, I think about what just happened. If anyone knew who I really was, they'd have sent more than some wannabe hitman. No, I believe his story about taking me out because of Calix. I just don't think that's the full story. I never did do well with half-truths. Like a scab, I pick at them until they bleed, even knowing that sometimes the truth is better left dead. I file it away for now, not wanting

to get distracted, though I do fire off a text to both the warden and the governor, warning them to watch their backs.

I grab the lukewarm bottle of water from the cupholder and drink it all. It may not be champagne, but I don't grimace at the taste. I smile because I'm still alive, and right now, that's not something I'm taking for granted.

CHAPTER FOUR

The pardon takes effect two weeks from the day we got married. I've been moving around the area, not staying in one place longer than a night, spending my days asking questions.

It seems the families are not as popular with the locals as they may have hoped. Truthfully, I doubt any of those motherfuckers give a shit what anyone thinks of them. What that means for me is that it's far easier to find people willing to talk than it was back in the day when Santos ruled with an iron fist. People feared him, which was the point. His reign was one of terror, and yet to hear people talk, he was the best thing since sliced bread. Stockholm Syndrome at its finest. I'm damn sure none of the fathers and brothers who idolize the man would feel the same way if they were expected to hand over their daughter or sister to him.

I didn't learn much, but I got enough to start painting a picture of what life is like in these parts now. The police are still heavily corrupt, most owned by the families, families which have grown bitter and unsatisfied with what they have. Like most powerful, greedy assholes, they want more.

Of course, nobody is willing to offer someone else a bigger slice. Civil unrest has begun to break out in pockets, and the families are fighting with each other on a much more public scale than they used to. Before, everything happened behind closed doors in a hush-hush fashion, but something has turned the tide, and I don't think it's Calix's early release. Or at least it's not just that.

I keep my helmet on to cover my face as I sit on my bike and wait for Calix to appear, ignoring how warm I am in head-to-toe leather in this heat. The buzzing noise signals the main gates to open, and as they do, I see a lone figure walking toward me. As he gets closer, there's that damn weird feeling in my stomach again, like when you drive over the rise of a hill and, for a brief second, you feel your stomach drop.

He looks around the closer he gets to freedom, looking for who, I don't know. I assume it's not me since I never told him I was coming. The gates rattle closed the second he steps through them. As soon as the lock engages, a crack fills the air. A bullet hits the ground near Calix's feet with a thump.

I swing the bike around and pull up in front of my husband. I lift my visor just enough to yell at him to get on. "Move it!"

He looks at me before looking around him. A bullet clips my side, making me curse.

"Either get the fuck on or I'm leaving you behind."

"Sarah?"

I don't answer, I just slam my visor down and start to move when I feel him jump on behind me. I grit my teeth in pain when he slides his hands around my stomach, inadvertently squeezing my side. I sped away from the high-security mental hospital, putting as much distance between us and the shooter as possible. I weave in and out of traffic, wanting to be long gone by the time the police show up.

We ride for a few hours, Calix not complaining once, until I pull into the parking lot of the cheap motel I booked for us last night. The room is on the far end of the building, away from the reception and the small diner. I park the bike right under the window of our room and wait for Calix to climb off. Once he does, I follow suit, fishing the keys from my pocket and opening the door. I flick the lights on and turn to find Calix behind me, looking down at his hands, one of which is red with my blood.

"What the fuck?"

“Next time I tell you to move, fucking move,” I snarl, reaching up to undo the strap of my helmet.

He steps forward, towering above me in all his pissed off glory, and moves my hands aside to unfasten the strap himself. I brace myself as he pulls the helmet free. I shake my head, my hair spilling over my shoulders, as he stares down at me in surprise.

He reaches for a strand and twirls it around his finger.

“Miss the blonde?”

“Not even a little.” He surprises us both by answering. He steps back, getting himself together.

“Strip. I want to see where you were hit.”

I’d argue just to be a bitch, but I need to check the wound. I don’t think it’s too bad. I mean, if it were, I would have bled out hours ago, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt like a motherfucker.

I lower the zipper on my jacket and slide it off, biting back a grimace at the pain, not wanting to show any kind of weakness in front of this man. When I look down, my white tank top is stained red on the right side. I look back up at Calix and pull it up over my head and toss it on top of my jacket, leaving me standing in my purple lace bra and leather pants.

Calix steps forward and drops into a squat, his fingers moving gently over my hip. Goosebumps break out all over my skin, and my nipples pebble, but I ignore it all and watch him as he stands back up. He disappears into the bathroom, and I hear the water running before he comes back a minute later with a damp washcloth.

“This is gonna hurt.”

“Just do it.”

I grit my teeth as he cleans me up.

“Looks like just a flesh wound. A millimeter in the other direction, and this could have ended differently. Don’t you ever put yourself between me and a bullet again, you foolish girl.”

“I’m your wife. If I don’t protect you, who will?”

He mutters something under his breath that I don’t catch, but I’m too tired to call him on it. It’s been a long few weeks, and I’m surviving on fumes at this point. If I don’t get some real rest soon, I’m going to crash.

“The bleeding has almost stopped, but it could use a stitch or two.”

“I’ve got some super glue in my bag.”

“Glue? Seriously?”

I nod and point to my bag near the table. “There’s a first aid kit in there. Trust me, the scar will be neater if you glue it.”

He goes to grab my bag as I look around the room to make sure nobody is lurking in the shadows. Occupational habit. He brings the whole bag over and opens it up for me, so I shove my hand inside and rummage around until I find the kit. I hand it over to him and let him find the glue.

He cleans me up with an antibacterial wipe first before twisting the lid off the glue and applying just the right amount to my split skin and pinching the edges together.

“You’ve done this before?”

“A time or two,” he answers vaguely as he looks up at me.

We don’t say anything more as we wait. Once he’s happy that the glue will hold, he lets go and inspects the wound again before nodding. Instead of standing up like I assumed he would, he reaches down and unlaces my boots.

I swallow down the unexpected lump in my throat, reminding me that this man is not his brother. I might be wary of him with good reason, but that doesn’t mean I can keep thinking of him as the enemy.

Thinking of him as my husband, though, makes something inside me tighten and my heartbeat quicken. I keep telling myself it’s a business transaction, nothing more, nothing less. Yet the electricity that crackles around us...

“Step out.”

He grips the back of my heel as I grab hold of his shoulder and lift my leg. We repeat the process until I'm standing in my fuzzy pink socks.

He looks up at me, his lips twitching in response. "I didn't take you for a pink fuzzy sock kind of woman."

"There's a lot you don't know about me, Calix, but I'm happy to entertain you."

He stands up without stepping back, his body pressing against mine as he looks down at me. "Is that so? And tell me, Sugar, how exactly do you plan on entertaining your husband?"

"I guess that depends on what he likes," I purr as his large hands move to my hips, his pinkie fingers skimming over my skin before he sighs and steps back.

"Get cleaned up, then we need to talk."

"Talk, huh? This marriage sounds like it's going to be so much fun."

He moves in an instant. Between one blink and the next, his hand is around my throat, and his other is cupping my breast through the lacy material.

"Don't push me, angel, because you won't like the consequences. I've been locked up a long time, and then you come along, and all I can dream about is you on your knees taking my cock down your throat. You think I'll be gentle with you, angel? I'm a hard man. I don't do gentle. If you push me, I'll break you in ways you can't even fathom."

I wait for him to release me before I step back with a smirk, looking him up and down like he has nothing to offer me. "I hate to break it to you, Calix, but you're twenty years too late."

I pat his chest and move past him, looking over my shoulder when I reach the bathroom door. "You were going to rot away in that place. I was the one to get you out of there, and I'm the one who put herself between you and a bullet. You might want to remember that before I decide being your wife is more of a headache than it's worth."

“Maybe if you did those things out of the kindness of your heart, I’d be less suspicious. But you need something from me, and I want to know what.”

I shrug. “When I trust you, I’ll tell you everything you need to know. But don’t mistake my silence for weakness. I can do what I have to do without you. Will it be harder? Sure, but all I know is how to do things the hard way. Why should this be the exception? Oh, and one thing you should know, Calix, I don’t do anything out of the kindness of my heart. If you’re looking for kindness from me, you’re gonna be disappointed. This world chews up and spits out kind people. You helped teach me that.”

I walk into the bathroom and slam the door before I give too much away. I walk over to the sink and run the faucet, splashing water on my face before looking up at my reflection in the mirror.

Jesus, it always comes back to this, tired eyes staring back at me in hotel bathrooms. It’s an endless cycle with no chance of breaking, at least not until I can figure out the safest place for us. I pause, a thought popping into my head, which I dismiss immediately, but it doesn’t disappear. It pokes away at my brain until all I can think about is why that place is the perfect place for us to hide out.

I grip the counter, knowing that if I do this, I’ll reveal exactly who I am to a man who has shown me no signs of loyalty. He could turn me over in a heartbeat and use me as a bargaining chip to keep his life. It won’t work, of course. As long as he’s alive, he’s a threat. I think he knows that. It’s what I’m banking on anyway because the two of us are much stronger together than we are apart.

If I’m honest, it’s more than just exposing myself to Calix holding me back, it’s facing the ghosts of my past. Ghosts that have haunted me for twenty years. I stayed away from this place and all the memories it holds for a reason. I never intended to come back, even though I’ve never truly been able to let the place go. I like to pretend I’ve moved on, but realistically, I know I was hiding—hiding from what happened to me, hiding from what I did, and mostly hiding from what I

would have to do. I love the life I've created. My girls are the family I never thought I'd have, and no matter how this plan goes, I can't find a way to reconcile the different facets of my life.

A pounding on the door makes me jump, which pisses me off. I'm not that girl anymore, the one who jumps at every loud fucking noise.

"You alive in there? I've already done time for murder. I don't want them to think I killed you too."

I yank the door open and look up at him. "Still alive. Now, can I get five fucking minutes?"

He stares at me for a moment before his hand lifts, and with surprisingly gentle fingers, he tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. "Do you want me to find something to cover your wound with so you can shower?"

I snap my mouth shut in surprise, not expecting that. I look into his eyes, trying to decide if he's being serious or not.

"Yes, that would be great."

"I'll be back in five."

He turns and leaves me standing in the bathroom doorway as he crosses the room and yanks the hotel door open, slamming it closed behind him.

I watch the door, feeling unsure of what to do, which makes me twitchy. I always have a plan. I like knowing what my next move will be, but Calix Cirillo takes all of that and tosses it out the window. He's not how I imagined he would be, and that's the most confusing thing of all. In my head, I thought of him as a monster, only a step or two down from his brother. Sometimes I forget that the last time I saw him was through the eyes of a terrified girl who knew she was going to die.

Now an endless amount of time has passed, though some days it only feels like minutes. Calix is not the man he once was any more than I'm the girl I used to be. We both have traumas that shaped us, and both had a hand in our own downfalls. Maybe that's why I feel... connected to him, why I

don't fear him, because I'm just like him. He knows what it's like to be both innocent and guilty and I understand that better than most because I was never just the victim. I was the girl that got away with murder.

While he's gone, I move to the bed and sit down gingerly beside my bag and wait for him to return. The room feels overly quiet now—so quiet that I'm half tempted to put the television on just so there is some noise in the background. I don't, though. I can't afford to be caught unaware, which means no distractions.

I lie back and stare at the ceiling, noting the water stain in the corner. There must have been a leak at some point. It's a far cry from home, and I've never felt it more acutely than I do right now. I miss my clothes and my shoes. But mostly, I miss my girls. I know they'll be pissed as hell, but it has to play out like this. I won't do anything to jeopardize their happiness. They all fought too hard to get it in the first place.

I scan the rest of the room, taking in the single window covered by flimsy blinds and the wooden door that wouldn't take much to kick in, and heave out a sigh. It's not so much that everything is cheap and nasty here that makes me want to break out in hives. The place itself doesn't bother me. Lord knows I've slept in worse. No, for me, it's the lack of security.

I remind myself that if this place is easy to break into, it's easy to break out of, and that's what I have going for me at the moment. I'm small and fast, even in heels. That's the advantage I'm working with because when someone comes for me, they'll come with guns like the lackey from before. I'm many things, but bulletproof isn't one of them.

With that thought in mind, I roll over and shift through my bag for my phone. I have twelve missed calls from an unknown number and half a dozen messages that I delete without reading. I shove the phone back and search for the lackey's gun. I shake my head when I come up empty. I can't say I'm surprised. That's why I left it in there after all. I only hope he doesn't need it to save himself because I made sure it was empty. I might want to test the man, but—believe it or not—I don't have a death wish.

I notice my wallet is missing. I only kept fifty dollars inside it, along with a fake ID. I can't find it in me to care. He did leave the bike keys behind, though. Either he couldn't find them or he'll be back.

I bite my lip, trying to decide which way he'll go. He's a free man. He could call someone to get him, and I won't see him again. Of course, he could also be back in twenty minutes with supplies for my side. I'm not sure which would surprise me more at this point.

Laughter sounds from outside as someone enters the room next door, followed by a feminine squeal. That was one option I've desperately been trying not to think about. That Calix might be out there fucking a waitress from the diner.

I realize he's mine in name only, but the thought of him being with someone else makes me feel sick. I'm surprised I care. I've already made a mockery of marriage. I'd be better off letting sleeping dogs lie. The problem is, I'm Sugar Fucking Daniels. If my husband comes home smelling like cheap perfume, I'll douse him in a bottle of Chanel N°5 and set him on fire.

CHAPTER FIVE

The feel of hands stroking across my stomach has me waking up with a startled gasp. I try to sit up, but a hand on my shoulder holds me down.

“Stay still.”

I relax a fraction when I hear Calix. My heartbeat races out of control when I realize that not only did he manage to get back in the room without waking me, but he touched me too. Normally, I’m hypersensitive when I’m touched while I’m asleep. I’m not sure why. Perhaps it’s because it’s the one time I’m at my most vulnerable. Whatever the reason, I’ve always been a light sleeper. The slightest thing wakes me.

I don’t say anything as he focuses on my wound, checking it before his eyes lift to mine.

“I’m going to put some gauze over it and cover it with this.” He holds up a roll of plastic wrap.

I nod, so he continues. I watch him work, studying the side of his face, taking in the scar near his ear that wasn’t there before he got locked up.

“What happened here?” I reach up and gently touch the scar.

He tapes the gauze down before lifting those pretty eyes of his to mine once more. “Someone tried to slit my throat from ear to ear with a razor blade. I was naturally not okay with that.”

He takes my hands in his and pulls me into a sitting position. I forget to swallow down the groan, my body feeling stiff and achy.

“Shit, I should have grabbed some painkillers.”

“There’s a bottle in my bag. You probably saw them when you took the gun.”

He snorts as he pulls me to my feet. With my hands still in his, he raises them above my head. “Keep them there.”

I shiver at his words and remind myself that the man is patching me up, not fucking me, but my brain doesn’t seem to be getting the memo.

He reaches around me and grabs the plastic and holds the end of it to my uninjured side. He wraps it around me, making sure my wound is completely covered, before dipping his head and tearing the plastic with his teeth.

“There. It’s not perfect, but it will do.”

“Thanks.”

I lower my arms. Holding them up is too much work. I look at the bathroom door before turning back to Calix.

He must know what I’m thinking because he sighs. “I’ll be here when you come out.”

“Okay.” I don’t say anything more. He either will be or he won’t. I may have manipulated him into marrying me, but if Calix truly doesn’t want this, then I can’t force him.

I walk inside and pause before closing the door. “I wasn’t sure you’d come back.”

“I wasn’t sure I’d come back either,” he admits, picking up the supplies from the end of the bed and putting them away.

“What made you?”

“I don’t know. All I know is that right now, it feels harder to leave than it does to stay. Besides, once it gets out that you’re my wife, you’ll become a target too. Like it or not, we’re better off as a team right now.”

“I know.”

I nod to the gun he pulls from the back of his jeans and places on the bed. “I took that gun from the last man that came to kill me. If you’re going to try, you’ll find I’m not that easy to kill.”

“If I wanted to kill you, angel, you’d be dead already.”

“You’d shoot me?”

“If I needed to, in a heartbeat.”

I chuckle and turn away, yelling over my shoulder, “You should probably make sure the gun’s loaded before you threaten someone with it. Rookie mistake, Calix.”

I swing the door shut before he can say anything and lock it. I lean against it for a minute before I strip off my remaining clothes and walk over to the shower. I turn it on, making the pipes groan in protest. I don’t bother waiting for the water to heat up. I step right under the spray and let the cold water dampen my arousal, though it only drops to a simmer. Being in such close proximity to the man is warping my brain.

I use the cheap shower gel to wash before squeezing a blob of the shampoo into my palm and massage it into my hair. I move on autopilot, doing something I’ve done a million times as I let my mind wander.

Once I’m as clean as possible and smell like I bathed at the Dollar Tree, I climb out and wrap the towel around myself. This time, I avoid looking in the mirror. I might end up punching my reflection in the face again, and the cuts and bruises are just starting to fade from the last time. I use one of the smaller towels to squeeze the water out of my hair before heading back out to the room.

“Shower’s all yours,” I tell him, avoiding looking at him even though I can feel his eyes on me.

I grab my bag and dig to the bottom, pulling out a pair of boxers and a pair of black bikini briefs, as well as one of the two T-shirts I have rolled up inside.

“Here.” I toss the boxers at him, which he catches one-handed.

“I’m not wearing another man’s fucking—”

I cut him off before he tries to strangle me with them. “They’re mine. I bought them to sleep in. Use them or don’t, but that’s all I have that will fit you until I can get you some things tomorrow.”

“Fine.” He turns and heads to the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

“Fine,” I mock before slipping my panties on.

I catch sight of the tip of my tattoo before it’s hidden beneath my underwear. I pull the soft black T-shirt over my head as I hear the shower turn on in the next room. Running a comb through my hair, I sigh—what I wouldn’t give for a blowout right now. But I have more important things to do than worry about my hair.

Tossing the bag aside for now, I make my way over to the bed and pull back the comforter. I climb in and cover myself, burrowing into the warmth. I was okay before, but after the shower and with my hair still damp, I can feel the chill of the air conditioning now.

I listen to the sound of Calix in the shower as I begin to relax. By the time he comes out, I’m barely conscious. He moves around the room, doing who knows what, before he climbs into bed beside me. He mutters something about twenty years, but I’m asleep before I can process it.

WHEN A NIGHTMARE TAKES hold of me a couple of hours later, I bolt upright in bed and scan the dimly lit room, looking for... It’s empty, apart from Calix and me. I turn to look down at the man and jolt when I find his tired eyes staring back at me.

“Bad dream?”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

I lie back down and struggle to get my breathing under control, wondering if I should just get up. It's always hard to go back to sleep after one of those nightmares. It's as if a specter from the dream world has followed me into consciousness, leaving me feeling sick and wary. I roll to my side and stare at the window. From this angle, I can just make out the pink glow of the neon sign for the laundromat across the street.

I feel Calix move as he slides closer, and then I feel his arm around my waist, pulling me into his warmth.

"What are you doing?" I whisper.

"Keeping you safe from the bogeyman. Now go to sleep."

I'm tense. I know it, and he knows it, but he doesn't say anything. Instead, he strokes a spot on my stomach with his pinky finger until the repetitiveness of the movement has me relaxing, and I drift off.

When I wake again, it's to find Calix on his back with me sprawled across his chest and a rather large problem wedged between us.

It's early, way too early, but I know there is no chance of me falling back to sleep now. I slept more last night than I have in the last two weeks. Generally, I don't need that much sleep to survive, but everyone has their breaking point. Mine must have been last night, finding solace in a six-foot-four stranger taking care of me.

I carefully try to extract myself from Calix when his large hands grip my hips, holding me in place. I freeze for a second, unsure if it was intentional, but then I feel his dick harden between us, and I realize I'm not the only light sleeper. Trying to get off him has clearly woken him up.

Unsure of the man beneath me, I ready myself, waiting to see what his next move will be. But all he does is hold my hips, stopping me from climbing off him. I'll admit, I'm pretty fucking comfortable here. If he wants me to stay where I am, I'm more than happy to. It's just hard to ignore the voice in the back of my head. With a sigh, I give in and bury my head

against the crook of his neck, my lips barely a millimeter away from his throat.

As my breath skates over his skin, he tightens his hold on me and starts to rock me against him. My breath hitches in my throat as the hard column of his cock rubs against my clit. He pauses for a second. When I don't freak out, he does it again.

My hands slide to his shoulders, my fingers digging into his skin as he guides my hips up and down his cock. My mouth presses against the skin of his neck, eliciting a groan from him.

One of his calloused hands slips under my T-shirt and glides up my bare back, holding me tighter. His hips start moving against mine again as he gets caught up in the moment. Our movements become more frenzied now as we grind against each other, the friction of our clothing only adding to my pleasure.

I place kisses against his throat before lifting my head. I stare into his blazing eyes before slowly lowering my mouth to his.

He opens for me with zero hesitation, his hand quickly moving from my back to my head. He holds me in place while he devours me. He kisses me like a man who has been starved of human contact for twenty years.

My body reacts to his in a way that surprises me. The heat coils around us like a snake, constricting my breathing and infecting my brain with a venom that eats away at my hatred for this man because of who his brother is. It's as I feel my orgasm rushing toward me with the speed and finesse of a runaway train that I come to the terrifying realization that I might actually like the man I married. Given how our marriage was doomed to fail before it even started, this revelation leaves me feeling sad and lonely. We haven't even started, and I'm already mourning, not so much for the heartbreak I know is to come but for the loss of what we could have been to each other in another life—if we weren't who we are.

He shudders against me, his lips pulling from mine only so he can whisper against them.

“Angel.”

It comes out as a warning and a curse. I interpret it as a green light to come, and I do, silently screaming as my nails dig into his skin and I flood my panties. I feel him freeze as he comes too, his grip painfully tight as he holds me against him.

I rest my forehead against his as we catch our breath. My hair falls around us, shielding us from the world. For one blissful moment, I’m just a girl, and he’s just a boy, and there is just pleasure and potential between us instead of pain and suffering.

CHAPTER SIX

The moment breaks the second Calix rolls me onto my back and climbs off the bed without a word, disappearing into the bathroom before slamming the door behind him. The sound echoes around the room, tugging at the void inside my empty heart, but I don't take it personally. I know he's as affected by me as I am by him. He wishes he wasn't. The thing is, he's not wrong to wish for someone else. I'm a bad choice all around. There is no happy ending in our future. That speeding train of pleasure will derail at some point, leaving nothing but chaos in its path. There are no guarantees either of us will survive what's coming, so catching feelings right now sounds worse than catching herpes.

I sit up gingerly, the skin of my wound feeling tight and tender. I lift my shirt and take a peek. Thankfully, it doesn't look like there is an infection. Even so, I decide to head out to my base and grab a couple of bottles of the antibiotics I keep on hand. A girl never knows when she might need them, like if I'm ever abducted by aliens or trapped in a farmhouse while zombies rage outside. I'll be grateful that I'm so damn prepared all the time.

With a deep breath, I stand and walk over to where I left my bag. I take out a pack of wet wipes, then strip out of the wet underwear, tossing them in the trash can before cleaning myself up. It's easy to buy more. Besides, Calix is going to need a few things. I unpack the rest of my clothes and get dressed, sliding my last pair of panties up my legs before tugging on a pair of black leather leggings. Taking another

deep breath, I pull on a white long-sleeve T-shirt and my biker boots, which almost kill me to lace up.

Once I'm done, I pull my hair into a low ponytail and shove a piece of gum in my mouth, not willing to disturb him and whatever he is working through just so I can brush my teeth.

Using the complimentary notepad and pen with the motel's logo, I leave a message for Calix that I'll be back soon, then grabbing my helmet and bike keys, I head outside. I take a deep breath of the cool, crisp morning air, letting it center me before I pull on my helmet, climb on my bike, and take off. I ride to the rented storage unit to trade out my bike for the car.

As much as I enjoy riding, it's not practical for the rest of the journey. Plus, I don't think I'll survive having Calix wrapped around me for much longer before one of us snaps.

It doesn't take long before I'm pulling up to the rental unit and unlocking the door. Once inside, I park the bike and take off my helmet. The unit itself isn't large, but it's been my home base while I've been back, housing everything I need, including my car. It's windowless and the only way into my unit is through the rolling shutters that are padlocked and only I have the key for. A small desk sits on the left wall with a slew of plastic storage boxes stacked up beside it containing everything I might need from clothes to toiletries to weapons. Pinned above the desk is an array of papers all regarding leads and possible sightings of Santos.

Leaving the bike, I double-check that the supplies I picked up a few days ago are still in the trunk of the car, then climb into the driver's seat and head out, locking the unit behind me. I drive to the nearest drive-through and order a selection of food, taking a couple of notes from the stash I shoved in the glove compartment. The young girl who serves me looks only half awake, making idle small talk as if it's a prerecorded message. I take my food with a *thanks* and place it on the passenger seat before heading back to the motel.

When I pull up, I notice the door to our room is ajar. I pull my gun from under the seat and check the chamber before

climbing out and edging my way inside. I stop when I see Calix with nothing but a towel around his waist, straddling a man. Usually, that would have warranted a second look, given how utterly lickable Calix's body is, if he wasn't beating a man to death.

"Um...pooky?" I refrain from using his real name until I know what the fuck is going on.

Calix's head whips up, his eyes on fire when he sees me, then the gun in my hand.

"Where were you?" he growls, a deep guttural sound that, dare I say, has a layer of worry to it. Though, maybe I'm reading into it too much.

"Getting food and a few things. I left you a note." I point to the dresser and frown when I don't see it.

"There was no note, only this motherfucker sniffing your underwear."

I blink as my brain processes that before I stalk toward them and drop down into a squat, my eyes on the moaning man pinned to the floor. His face is covered with blood, but I still recognize him as the guy renting the room next door. I spot my discarded underwear in his hand and frown even harder.

"You stole my underwear out of the trash?"

Not sure why that's what I lead with, but ew. What is it with men sniffing panties? You don't see women going gaga with a pair of men's boxers over their faces.

"What the fuck are you even doing in here?"

The guy focuses on me for a second before he opens his mouth and seals his fate. "I heard the bike. I thought he was gone."

I look up at Calix, who is staring down at the man with murder in his eyes. I look down at the beaten man once more. "You're lucky I didn't leave him any bullets for his gun."

Calix huffs at that, making me bite back a smile.

“So let me see if I’ve got this right. You heard the bike leave, and naturally, given the type of man you are, you assumed it was his bike. Not mine because I’m merely a woman. I can only assume you’ve never had a woman ride you, or you’d know how utterly ridiculous that is,” I rant.

“Focus, angel.”

I sigh, knowing he’s right. “You came in here while the shower was running?” I ask, looking at Calix for confirmation. When he nods, I continue. “And you found my panties and note, which I’d like back, by the way.”

“POCKET,” he slurs.

I reach into the front pocket of his jeans and find the note crumpled up. I hand it to Calix as I use my gun to tap the side of the asshole’s face.

“Then what? What was the plan after that, huh? Did you come just for my panties? Hmmm...” I bend my head closer, my voice losing its joviality. Instead, it takes on a hard edge. “Except if it were only about the panties, why not just leave once you had them? Why stay and pocket the note? Unless you wanted to take something else too, something that wasn’t yours to take.”

The man starts crying, and I know I’m right.

“Boy, did you pick the wrong room.” I chuckle. “Do you know my husband was just released from prison after doing twenty years for murder?” I don’t tell him I’ve killed way more people than my husband ever did. I don’t like to brag.

Then a thought occurs to me. “You brought a woman back to your room last night, and you still snuck in here to rape me before the sun was barely up? How did you get in here, anyway?”

Calix goes rock solid at the word *rape*, and I realize I have to do something quickly. I don’t want Calix to kill him before I finish asking my questions.

“Let’s tie him up and deal with him in a minute. I have food and some clothes for you.”

Calix doesn’t move. He just continues to stare at the man with death in his eyes. Slowly, I reach up with my free hand and cup Calix’s hard jaw and lean over so I can place my lips against his.

He doesn’t respond as I work my mouth over his. After a minute, I pull back and whisper, “Come back to me.”

At my words, he blinks, snapping out of his haze, and looks at me like he’s seeing me for the first time. Then his hands are in my hair, and he kisses me hard. I can almost taste his relief that I’m okay as I melt into him.

Reluctantly, I pull back and look into his eyes, holding his gaze for a second to make sure he’s actually back. “You okay?”

He blinks once, then nods.

“Alright, can you watch him without killing him while I bring the things in from the car? I still have some questions I need to ask him.”

“Just hurry up. It’s been a long time since I got the pleasure of choking the life out of someone. I forgot how good it feels,” he snarls, making me grin.

“Such a good boy.” I kiss the tip of his nose before standing and sashaying away, shoving my gun into the back of my pants.

“Keep looking at my wife, asshole, and I’ll make you eat your own eyeballs.” I hear him warn the asshole on the floor. I have to fight back another smile. Is there anything more endearing than a murderous man ready to kill someone in your honor?

I head to the trunk first, popping it open and slinging the sports bag full of supplies over my shoulder, then move to the passenger side for the food. I’m about to close the car door when I remember the kit under the seat. I set down the take-out bags, yank out the kit and open it up, grabbing the zip ties I keep inside, before closing it and shoving it back in its place.

With the food now in my hand, I lock the car and head back inside, placing the bags on the foot of the bed.

“Hold him still for a second while I get these on him.” I walk over with the white plastic restraints and wait as Calix twists the guy’s arms so they’re in place.

Once I finish binding his wrists and feet together, both Calix and I stand. “There. Why don’t you find something in that bag to wear while I sort the food out for us?”

“You got me clothes?” He looks from me to the bed.

I frown. “Of course.”

“Why?”

“Because I knew you’d need them. I had to guess the sizes, so I’m not sure everything will fit, but...” The rest of my words are cut off when he slams his lips down on mine once more.

I don’t fight him. I’m finding I really like his lips on mine. So, sue me.

He pulls back before we can get carried away. “Thank you.”

I nod, hearing the gratitude in his voice. It’s strange knowing that I’ve managed to do the impossible and get this man out of a place he was destined to die in, and all that did was make him suspicious. Buying him clothing, however, an act so simple yet one that was stripped from him for twenty years, has made a much bigger impact.

He turns and pads over to the bed, yanking the zipper of the bag open, and he looks through what I bought him.

I look away when he drops the towel, before our interrogation turns into something else entirely. Keeping my eyes averted, I take out the food from the brown paper bags. The smell of it all makes my mouth water. I didn’t realize how hungry I was until right now. Thinking about it, I haven’t eaten since yesterday around lunchtime, so it’s not surprising.

Calix steps up beside me, and I turn to look at him. He’s now wearing a pair of black jeans, a black T-shirt, and a black

leather jacket. The black-on-black thing works for him, which I absolutely do not admit to him. I hand him a breakfast sandwich and watch as he takes it from me and sits down on the end of the bed.

He opens it and takes a bite before moaning in delight. “Fuck.”

“That good, huh?”

“I swear everything in that place tasted like cardboard. I’m not sure how that’s even possible, but it’s true. It’s like they found a way to extract all the flavor from food and leave it bland as fuck.”

“Maybe they did. Maybe it was a secret torture technique.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me. Speaking of torture, I think we might need to have a little talk. Seems I may have underestimated my new bride.”

I shrug before taking a bite of my sandwich. “Don’t worry about it. It happens all the time.”

He doesn’t say anything to that, just devours his sandwich before taking another one. Once I’m finished, I wipe my fingers on the paper napkins and leave Calix to finish off the hash browns.

I crouch on the floor beside the bleeding man and ask him the question I asked before, hoping Calix will be able to control himself. “How did you get in here?”

He looks from me to Calix and decides I’m the lesser of two evils. He swallows hard before spilling his guts. “I’m the janitor and handyman. I have the master key to all the rooms.”

“And how many times have you walked into a woman’s room and taken her panties? I bet you have a nice collection going, right?”

He shakes his head. I bring the gun up and point it at him, which has the shake turning into a nod.

“Yes, okay, but I never hurt anyone.”

I twist my lips into a macabre version of a smile and watch the color drain from his face. “Now, why do you have to lie to me like that?”

“I’m not, I swear,” he wails.

I trail the gun over his cheek before tracing his lips with the tip of it. When he cries out, I thrust the barrel of the gun into his mouth and make him choke.

I grin at him. “Not so fun when you’re the one gagging, huh?”

I feel Calix move up beside me, but I don’t take my eyes off my new toy.

“The question is what to do with you.”

He mumbles something, but it’s hard to make out with the gun still in his mouth. Interested in his answer, I reluctantly remove the weapon. He coughs and sputters, tears mixing with the blood on his face.

“Just let me go. I won’t bother anyone again.”

“If you insist on lying, at least make it sound convincing.”

“I’m not lying. I have more to lose than you think by saying anything. It’s time for me to leave anyway, before—”

He clams up, but something in his tone sets off warning bells, and I’m not the only one who hears it.

“What did you do?” Calix snarls at him.

The guy looks almost green as his eyes move to the wall separating this room from his.

“Oh, you motherfucking son of a bitch!” I cold-cock him with the gun, knocking him out before turning to Calix.

“Watch him.” I move toward the door, but Calix’s hand on my wrist stops me.

“What is it?”

“The girl he brought back last night?”

Calix nods slowly.

“I don’t think she did the walk of shame this morning. In fact, I don’t think she walked anywhere at all.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

I slip the handyman's cap on and tuck my hair underneath it before pulling my gloves from my pocket and sliding those on, too. I make sure nobody is around as I leave our room and walk around the back of the motel.

This side of the motel only has five rooms, three of which are closed due to issues with the plumbing or some shit. Now I'm wondering if Mr. Handyman had anything to do with the problems the motel has been having. The two rooms that are in working order are his and mine, with the three out-of-order ones between our rooms and the main reception.

Right now, it works in my favor. There is hardly any foot traffic on this side of the building. Still, wearing gloves will catch someone's attention, so I keep my hands in my pockets. I walk around the back of the building and past my room until I reach the small window of the bathroom next door.

It's open a little, and even though it's small, I'm fairly certain I can squeeze through it. My size a blessing in situations like this.

What I do need, though, is a leg up. I look around and spot a trash can behind one of the empty rooms. I walk toward it with my head down and reach for it when I spot the plastic crate beside it filled with newspapers that I'm guessing are supposed to be recycled. That will work even better.

I grab the crate and carry it back to Mr. Handyman's room and use it so I can get the top half of my body through the window. It's a squeeze, and I can feel the split wooden frame

grazing my arms and stomach. I just hope I don't end up with a lot of splinters that need removing.

I ignore the pain in my side, grateful that I at least remembered to pop a couple of strong painkillers that I brought from the rental unit. Though I'm sure I'm going to regret this later once the adrenaline and pills wear off.

Thankfully, there is a wide window ledge that I use to pull myself in with and sit on before lowering myself into the tub that has a thick black ring of scum around it. Careful not to touch anything I shouldn't, I quietly make my way into the bedroom. I pause in the doorway when I see the blonde woman lying on the bed with her metallic blue dress up around her waist and her legs spread wide with dried cum on the inside of her thighs. Most people in this state would rush to cover themselves when faced with a stranger, but not this girl. She's staring sightlessly at the yellow, flaky ceiling, clearly having been dead for some time.

I step closer and see she has makeup smeared over her face, mascara from crying, and lipstick mostly from being force-fed a rancid cock. Her eyes are bloodshot, and not from drinking too much last night but because of blood cells popping from the pressure of having her oxygen cut off. Large red handprints mark her throat, that's already starting to bruise, and bite marks cover the top of her breasts, which are exposed where the neckline of her dress is ripped.

I close my eyes for a minute and say a silent prayer for the girl who went out to have fun and stumbled into a nightmare. I wish I could say this was shocking for me, but it's not. This is the world we live in. It's not something that only occurs in movies or books. It doesn't just happen to other people. It's everywhere, in all walks of life. Trailer parks and upscale mansions, people in the breadline, and people who wipe their asses with money. It could happen to any one of us because evil doesn't give a flying fuck about anything but leaving devastation in its wake. Some people who walk this earth should be wiped from it, but the reality is that it's usually the good people who suffer the most and the bad guys who thrive.

I move away from her, my eyes landing on the red patent clutch tossed carelessly on the chair in the corner. I move over to it and pick it up, rifling through the contents. There isn't much inside—a lipstick in the same shade that's smeared over her face, a brush, and a cell phone that I don't touch. Instead, I take the driver's license and bank card from the inner zipper, pull out my phone, and snap a photo of each of them before returning them to the clutch.

I look back at the girl now that I know her name.

Demi Soot. Nineteen years old from Chora, Naxos.

I have no idea what she's doing in a place like this with Mr. Handyman, but a pretty girl like her probably had stars in her eyes before they were extinguished.

I place the clutch back on the chair and walk the room for anything that might stand out. I see a man's jacket tossed over the dresser near the outdated television and head over to it. I check the pockets and hit the jackpot when I find a wallet.

I pull it out and flip it open, and frown. *You can't be serious.* I figured the man was a peanut short of a Snickers, but to leave his wallet behind at the crime scene makes him dumber than a bag of rocks. I'm not sure if this place offers maid service, but regardless, housekeeping would be around at some point to get the room ready for the next guest.

I scan his details.

Adrian Andino. Forty-eight years old from Ialysos.

Andino? Why does that sound so familiar?

Hmm—fuck. I remember.

I walk to the window and look out through the crack in the drapes, up at the sign hanging proudly over the reception area. *Andino Inn. Est 1955.* I look around the room and wonder if it's ever been revamped since then.

Now, at least, I know why this man—Adrian—isn't worried about housekeeping. He isn't the janitor, this is his place, and he can control who comes and goes from this room. Shame the motherfucker didn't account for me.

I think back to when I booked the room. I did it online using a fake name and credit card to give myself a level of anonymity. There wasn't much that stood out—certainly nothing that would raise any red flags. Except maybe the box I had to check to say if I was male or female. I didn't give it much thought at the time—I had far more pressing things going on. Thinking about it now, it's an odd thing for a motel to ask someone. Unless they're screening their customers based on their sex.

“That fucking fuck,” I curse into the too-quiet room. I look over at Demi and feel a wave of sadness hit me. This poor girl didn't stand a chance.

That's when I notice that there is fresh cum on the girl's pubic hair as the light catches it. He didn't just defile her when she was alive. This sick fuck desecrated her body afterward, too.

I shove his license in my pocket and leave the room the same way I entered it. Once outside, I retrace my steps and return to my room, hoping my anger burns out before I get there. Anger makes a person reckless. When I open the door, the handyman, who is awake now, turns to me. All I can picture is his hands around Demi's throat as he fucks her. I can see her fear-filled eyes in my head as she struggles, clawing at his hands that prevent her from screaming, all the while knowing I was right next door, oblivious to everything.

I stalk toward him, ignoring Calix, who is sitting on the end of the bed, and kick the fucker in the face. I lift my foot to kick him again but find myself being pulled back into Calix's arms. I fight him, the cap falling from my head, but he keeps hold of me. I don't want to hurt him, so I eventually stop struggling, though I'm aware I'm balancing on the edge here. One wrong word, and I'll shoot this guy's dick off without blinking.

“Calm the fuck down and tell me what's going on,” Calix growls in my ear.

“What's going on is Mr. Andino over here is a sick fuck. And he's no more the janitor than I am a virgin bride.”

Andino stares up at me with blood running down his face.

“How many came before Demi?”

“Demi?”

I move to kick him again, but Calix yanks me back.

“If you’re going to rape and murder someone, at least have the fucking decency to remember their name.”

“She wanted it—” It’s Calix’s growl that cuts him off this time.

“I have no idea if she went into that room willing or not. Maybe she did. Maybe you slipped her something that made a bad idea seem a little less awful. What I do know is that she absolutely did not consent to you choking the fucking life out of her, and she categorically didn’t consent to you fucking her corpse.”

Calix releases me and moves to grab Andino, but I block his path.

“Wait, Calix.”

I keep my back to his front and peer down at Andino with a promise of death in my eyes. “How many before Demi?”

“Nobody ever died before. It was an accident. She wouldn’t stop fighting, and I didn’t want you to hear her,” he admits.

“But you liked it, didn’t you? You liked it so much you couldn’t resist fucking her as her warm body slowly turned cold.”

He looks away from me, and I have my answer when I drop my eyes to the crotch of his pants and see him begin to harden. I step forward and kick him in the dick. This time, Calix doesn’t stop me.

Andino starts rolling around crying, but I have zero sympathy. Bending down, I grab a handful of his hair and yank his head back so that his eyes meet mine.

“What happened to the girls who came before Demi?”

“They all left. I threatened them to keep quiet. I knew where they lived because of their driver’s licenses. I keep them on file.”

“And that worked?” Calix questions.

“Not everyone is like us, Calix. Some people believe the bad guy. They have already hurt them once. What’s to stop him from doing it again? Fear is a powerful weapon, and many victims don’t think they have the power to fight. Plus, looking at Demi makes me think that Andino here screens them somehow. I bet he picks them a little young, a little flighty, and a little too reckless, making it easier to work his particular brand of crazy on them. The problem is, it won’t be enough anymore, will it? Not now that you’ve tasted death and liked it.”

“No, I’ll stop, I swear. I just need help. My parents tried, but then they died, and...”

“And the monster finally found himself free of his shackles,” Calix finishes for him.

“Tell me how many people are staying here right now.”

“Aside from you, four. Two are due to check out today. The other two are staying through the weekend.”

“Which is when you would’ve made your next move.” I shake my head and look up at Calix.

“How do you want to handle this?” he asks me.

“I’m going to get the guests out of here first. Tell them there is a gas leak or something and give them a full refund. Hopefully, that will work.”

“You can’t—”

“I can because if you don’t do as I say right now, I’m calling the police. Trust me when I say you don’t want that, not with how much of your semen is on and inside Demi. Now, where do you keep the money?”

He swallows hard and tells me where to find the safe and that the key is in the front pocket of his pants. I reach for it and slip it into my own pocket before going over to my bag.

I pull out the blonde wig and grab the box of colored contacts that turn my chocolate eyes blue and head into the bathroom with them. Once I take the gloves off and have the contacts in, I slide the wig on and make sure it's in place before walking back into the bedroom.

Calix does a double take and shakes his head, his lips twitching. "Hello, Sarah."

"Carver," I reply before looking down at Andino.

"Do you know how my husband got the nickname *Carver* while he was in prison? No? How about I give you ten guesses while I go shut down your motel and send your guests safely away? If you don't guess correctly by the time I return, I'll let him show you exactly how he got it."

I step up to Calix and lean in close so only he can hear me. "I won't be long."

"What about him?"

"Well, we can't call the police. Neither of us wants the attention. And honestly, there are too many people ready to have you locked up again, regardless of your innocence. That means we need to do a little cleanup."

He grins full out, then. "Alright. I'll admit, you have my curiosity peaked. You are so much more than I thought."

"Stick around, and I'll blow your mind."

"Of that, I have no doubt."

He presses closer to me, so close our bodies are flush with each other's. He tugs a strand of blond hair between his fingers before dipping his head and grazing a kiss against my cheek.

"They say blondes have more fun, but I'm inclined to think you're going to be a whole lot of fun no matter what color your hair is."

I laugh before pulling away. "Can't say I've ever been considered the fun one."

"Maybe you're just not hanging out with the right people."

The thought of the people I left behind sobers me up quickly. I step away, shutting down the lightness of the moment as I walk toward the door.

“I won’t be long. Try not to kill him before I get back.”

“Something you should know about me, angel. I don’t make promises I can’t keep.”

I STARE at the two stubborn women in front of me. The other two were more than happy to check out with a full refund a little early.

“I’m telling you; you can’t stay here. I’m sorry for the inconvenience, but this motel needs to be shut down, effective immediately.”

“This room has been booked for two months. Where else am I going to stay? I only get to see my kid once a month as it is,” the curvier of the two women states, her arms folded over her chest in defiance.

The tall, lean woman nods her agreement. “I had a last-minute training course come up at work, and this is the only place in my price range that is close to the venue.”

I pull a wad of cash from my back pocket and split it down the middle before handing half to each of the women. “That’s more than enough for a fancy hotel, with enough thrown in for room service too.”

The tall woman nods, shoves the money in her bag, and heads for the door.

“Thank you. I’ll be out within thirty minutes.”

She’s gone before I can reply, but that leaves the other woman standing before me shaking her head.

“Look, I’m not trying to be a bitch, but I have nowhere else to go, and I can’t miss seeing my son. I won’t. His father will drag me straight back to court and have my access completely revoked.”

I tilt my head and study her. “Are you a bad mom? Is that why you don’t have custody of your kid?”

She huffs out a frustrated laugh. “My ex-husband is an asshole. Worse, he’s an asshole with money. If you consider the fact that I married him and had a kid with him, then yeah, I’m a bad mom. But if being a good mom is measured by how much I love my son, then I’m the best mom on the planet. There is nothing I won’t do for him, nowhere I won’t follow, just to be close.”

“What’s your ex’s name?”

“Theodore Calimeris.”

I school my reaction to the familiar name. “I’m assuming the divorce proceedings did not go well if this place is the best you can do.”

I realize that sounds more like a criticism than a statement, but before I can explain myself, she sighs.

“It was a shitshow. I mean, technically, we’re still married, but it’s only a matter of time before it’s all finalized. I signed a prenup because I was marrying my soulmate. Unfortunately, I wasn’t my husband’s soulmate. Neither was the nanny, or the cleaner, or any of the other women he fucked on the side. He’s the reason I’m staying here. Not because I can’t afford better, although that part is also true, but because he booked it so I wouldn’t be too close to the house in case I caused a scene.”

“Would you cause a scene?”

“Not in front of my son, no.”

I pause for a second and take her in. Her hands are fisted at her sides, but I’m not sensing anger directed at me, more frustration at the situation and the helplessness she must be feeling.

“Come with me. I need to show you something.”

She hesitates, but I turn and leave, keeping my pace slow until she catches up to me, then I speed up a little. I wait until we are next to the three rooms that are closed before talking to her in a low, quiet voice.

“I’m going to level with you here...” I pause and wait for her to tell me her name.

“Calisa.”

“Well, Calisa, you leaving today is something that might not have happened if Adrian Andino had his way.”

“Andino? You mean the owner?”

“You met him?”

“No. Only the creepy handyman guy.”

“They are one and the same. And, just saying, there is a reason he gave off a creepy vibe. What I’m about to show you needs to remain a secret because I’m about to make this bastard pay in ways you don’t want to know about.”

“Pay for what?” She looks at me as I put on one of the gloves I shoved into my pocket. I pull out the keys I took from Andino earlier and find the one on the ring that looks like my room key before slipping it into the lock and turning it.

“For this,” I tell her softly as I push the door open and step aside for Calisa to enter.

“Oh, Jesus, fuck,” she curses as I close the door and step up beside her, looking down at the dead girl.

“He did this?”

“He did. He’s a serial rapist. He chooses and rapes women who stay here, but according to him, it was the first time he killed one of them. I don’t know if that part is true or not. But I can tell you that he has a taste for it now. I could see the bloodlust in his eyes and the hardening of his dick when he talked about it.”

She turns to look over at me, her naturally tanned face devoid of any color. “You think I was going to be next, don’t you?”

“You or the other girl, yes. You were going to be the only ones left here.”

“Apart from you,” she points out.

“Yes, well, I checked into this hotel alone, so I’m sure he was shocked as hell when he broke into my room this morning to rape me, only to be confronted by my six-foot-four ex-con of a husband.”

Her lips twitch at that, but she sobers quickly, turning once more to look at the girl on the bed. “She was so young. Someone out there is waiting for their daughter to come home. They have no idea that they’ve already said their last goodbyes.”

I stare at Demi and try to imagine her face in life. A grin on her lips and fire in her eyes—all of it snuffed out by the sick whims of a man.

“My husband booked this hotel for me. I’ve never stayed here before, but he insisted. Said he knew the owner personally,” she whispers, turning to look at me once more.

I look into her glassy eyes as a tear rolls down her face.

“You think he set you up?” I keep my tone neutral, but knowing who her husband is, the thought had already crossed my mind.

“He’s a bad man,” she chokes out.

“Come on,” I say.

She hesitates, looking back at Demi. She steps forward and tugs the sheet that’s balled up at the foot of the bed, gently pulling it up to cover Demi’s body before leaning down and pressing a kiss to her forehead. I swallow a lump in my throat as I watch a mother say goodbye to someone else’s child in a moment of solidarity. Perhaps she hopes someone will do the same for her child if the worst should happen. Either way, the act of compassion stirs something inside me that I can’t ignore.

She steps back and turns, her legs shaking as she walks back over to me. “I couldn’t leave her like that,” she tries to explain, but I shake my head. I get it.

I hold out my hand to her, and she takes it as I lead her out of the room and back the way we came.

“You’ll make him pay?” she asks in a small voice, echoing the words I offered her before.

“I will. I promise.”

We walk in silence back to Andino’s office. Once inside, I pull out my cell phone and the money from my pocket and hand them to her.

“Look for a swanky hotel near your son. Choose a room, and I’ll pay for it and book it under a fake name so your husband can’t track you. You show up tomorrow for your regular scheduled visitation, and if he asks questions, you play dumb. Tell him that due to a gas leak, you were sent to an alternative motel along with the other guests, fully comped.”

She nods and does as I ask, scrolling through my phone as she shoves the cash into her pocket. She hands me the cell once she’s found one. I look it over and upgrade the room before paying.

I hand her the cell once more.

“Forward yourself the booking email or send yourself a screenshot. Once you get there, you’ll be Sarah Parks. Add your cell number once you’re done, and I’ll text you so that you have my number too. You call me if you have any issues with your jackass ex.”

She nods her head taking in everything I say with a look of shock on her face.

“What about when you’re back home? Will he bother you then?”

She wraps her arms around herself. “No. I’m an afterthought. He doesn’t think of me at all until my visiting day is due. I’ll be okay until next month, but then...” her voice trails off.

“You call me before, and we’ll figure something out. I’d also like you to send me all court documents and any information you have on your husband. I’m not going to make you any promises, but if I can get you more access to your son, I will.”

She swallows and starts crying silent tears. “Why are you helping me?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

She stares at me in awe, which has me shifting uncomfortably and looking away.

“Thank you. Shit, I don’t even know who you are.” She chuckles.

I smile. “Neither do I most days, but you can call me Sugar.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

I take a sip of my lukewarm beer and focus on the man in front of me digging a grave instead of the man sitting beside me, his arm brushing against mine as he drinks his own beer. It's a brief touch here and there, and yet every time the bare skin of my arm touches his, a rush of heat threatens to engulf me. On the outside, I'm as cool as a cucumber, but on the inside, I'm one stroke away from incinerating.

"You sure everyone is gone?"

I nod. "Yeah, I double-checked the rooms myself."

"Any issues?"

I think about Calisa and shake my head. "No, everyone was happy to take the money and go somewhere nicer. I checked the reservations while I was at it, and nobody is due to arrive today."

"Probably because he already had two girls lined up and wanted a little time with them without running the risk of being disturbed."

"Probably," I agree as the sun beats down on us.

Andino stops to wipe the sweat from his brow before looking up at us. "That has to be deep enough."

"A little deeper. You don't want her body to be found by an animal, do you?"

He sighs but shakes his head. "Can I at least get a drink? It's so hot out here."

“When you’re done. We don’t have all day, you know.”

He grumbles something but goes back to digging.

“You’re calm,” Calix says, finishing his beer and placing the empty bottle on the step beside him.

“Is there a reason I shouldn’t be?”

He looks at me like I’m nuts, which is when I remember that dead bodies in motel rooms and watching people dig graves aren’t exactly normal.

“Would you prefer I panic? I could cry if it would help,” I offer with a saccharine-sweet smile.

He snorts before turning back to Andino. “No. I’m just surprised, that’s all. I’m never surprised, and yet you’ve done nothing but shock the shit out of me since the second we met.”

I finish my beer and place the bottle next to his. “I’m just me, Calix.” I shrug as I climb to my feet and walk over to Andino.

He stops digging and looks up at me as I approach. “It’s good, right?”

“Better.”

“I still don’t know what was wrong with the other one you made me dig. The soil was the same over there as it is here,” he grumbles as I look over at the tree and, more importantly, the grave I had him dig beneath it.

I hold my hand out for the shovel, which he passes to me. He reaches up again for me to grab his hand and help him out, but I don’t.

“You’re right, there was nothing wrong with the soil near the tree.”

“What? Then why the fuck did you make me dig another?”

I smile at him, lift the shovel, and swing it at his head. He screams, but since he’s standing inside the hole, he has nowhere to go but down. He drops as I lift the shovel again, but it’s yanked out of my hands. I turn and see Calix looking at me in that mix of pissed off and surprised way of his.

“What?”

“What, she says. Fucking *what*?”

I cross my arms over my chest and tap my foot—the universal sign of a pissed off woman—but is he fazed by it? No, of course not.

“What did you think was going to happen after he dug the graves?” I frown. I mean, did he think we were looking for treasure or something?

“I think you have a fucking husband here. Why didn’t you just ask me to help?”

I stare at him in confusion. Why the heck would I need help?

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” he snarls, giving me up as a lost cause. He jumps down into the grave, shovel and all, as he continues to beat Andino to death with the shovel. It’s overkill since I’m pretty sure he was dead after my hit, but who am I to spoil his fun?

Once he has burned out his aggression, he tosses the shovel out of the hole and pulls himself out. I’ll admit, I’m the one who’s surprised now. He just pulled himself up by his freaking fingertips.

He must read the expression on my face and realized where my train of thought was going because he answers my unspoken question. “Not much to do when you’re locked up besides work out.”

“Yeah, but still...” I check out his arms and his large frame. I’ll admit, I’m impressed. Don’t get me wrong, I have skills. I’m a Candy girl, after all. But there is no way I could swing on my fingertips like some modern-day Tarzan.

I pull myself together and reach for the shovel, but he holds it firmly.

“I’ll do it.” His voice brokers no argument, which makes my temper flare.

“Do I give off damsel-in-distress vibes?”

“No—”

“No. Give me the shovel. I can fill in the damn hole.”

“Why, though, when you have me, and I can do it in half the—” I cover his mouth with my hand.

“I’m gonna stop you before you say something that will result in me burying you. If you had stopped with the *me, big man, and you, weak female routine*, I’d have told you that I have something else for you to do. Something I’m sure you’d find easier than I would. Believe it or not, I do know how to ask for help, Calix. It’s just that I know how to handle my shit and don’t always need rescuing.”

I take a deep breath and pull my hand away.

“I need you to carry Demi out here and put her under the tree. I can do it if you’d rather not, but...” I let my voice trail off as he hands me the shovel.

“I’ve got it.” His voice is gruff as he replies. I reach over and grab his arm.

“I know you’ve seen a lot, done a lot. I’m sure you have ghosts that haunt you, just like I do. So, know that I’m not trying to patronize you when I say this but brace yourself. It’s not pretty.”

“Death rarely is,” he grunts as he turns and walks away.

I guess in that we disagree. I always found the thought of death quite alluring. Not in the sense that I’m in a hurry to die, but in the way that when it comes, I’ll welcome the peace it brings. There is a part of me that yearns to just be still. To not have to look over my shoulder. To not be me. In death, I’ll be free, something I’m not sure I’ll ever be in life. There are too many facets of me to find that kind of peace. I’ll always be a little fucked-up, a little broken. But then, so are some of the best people I know. I chase death almost as much as it chases me. It’s as if the reaper and I have an understanding. I have wrongs to right before it’s my time to go. When it’s done, I’ll willingly go anywhere with him.

The wind blows, making my hair whip around my face. With a sigh, I tuck it behind my ear and start shoveling the dirt

back into the hole it came from, covering up Andino's body. I wish I'd had more time to make him pay, but he was an unfortunate blip along the road I didn't foresee.

I'm only sad that I can't return Demi to her family, not without drawing heat on both Calix and me and we can't afford that right now. Right or wrong, it doesn't stop the guilt from eating at me.

Once Andino's covered and the hole is full, I drag over the two huge planters from the patio area and sit them over the grave. By the time I'm done, my tank top is plastered to my body, and my side is throbbing like a motherfucker.

I pick up my shovel once more and head up the small hill to where Calix is filling in Demi's grave. I start to help him, and for once, he doesn't argue. Instead, we made quick work of laying to rest the young woman whose life ended far too soon.

One day, I'll find a way to let her family know what happened to her. In the end it doesn't matter if that day is today, tomorrow, or next year. Demi is never going home again.

Once we're done, the sun is much lower in the sky. My stomach rumbles, reminding me we haven't eaten since breakfast.

"Come on, let's shower and get out of here."

I drag the shovel with me, my arms feeling like spaghetti as I make my way back to our room. I don't bother waiting until I'm in the bathroom before I start stripping out of my clothes. I have my tank top off as I open the door to the bathroom but stop at the sound of Calix's voice.

"Let me check your side first."

I hesitate for a second before turning a fraction and lifting my arm.

Calix steps closer and peels the dressing gently from my skin. "It's been bleeding. You need to rest."

"Sure, I'll get right on that."

“Smartass. Take a shower, then I’ll put a clean dressing on.”

I nod before walking into the bathroom and closing the door.

I strip off the rest of my clothes and climb into the shower, ignoring the chill as the water struggles to heat up. It doesn’t faze me, though. I need to wash this day from me so badly that I’d stay under here if it was pelting me with ice.

I wash myself clean and shampoo my hair twice before climbing out and wrapping a towel around myself. I grab a spare one for my hair and twist it around my head until I’m confident it will stay in place. I give myself the once-over to make sure everything is covered before heading out into the room, letting the steam escape with me.

Calix is closer than I thought, making me stop in the doorway as he approaches. He stands as close to me as he can without touching me before dipping his head and whispering against my ear. “It’s a dangerous game you play, wife.”

My breath hitches as he pushes against me, turning me so he can brush past and use the bathroom himself. I don’t bother telling him that I’m not playing a game, but if I were, he’d be none the wiser. Today has already been a long one, and the rest of the night promises to be just as exhausting.

As the door closes behind Calix, I take a deep breath and shake it off. Let him think what he wants. What does it even matter anyway?

I dry off and get dressed in a clean pair of denim cut-offs and a white T-shirt. I shove the rest of my things in my bag before looking around the room for anything I might have forgotten. The room is empty. Everything except for our bags has been put in the car. Calix had questioned me about the car earlier, and I told him it was more practical than the bike. Of course, that’s only half true, but he seemed to accept my explanation.

I take the supplies for my side out of the front pocket and put them on the bed before braiding my wet hair to keep it out

of my face. I carry my bag out to the car and toss it in the trunk before grabbing the matches I purposely left handy. I shove them in my pocket and make my way back up to the main building and into the kitchen area of the diner.

I open the oven door and turn on the gas full blast, letting it flow freely. I don't hang around. Instead, I make my way back to my room, remembering how much Calix freaked out the last time he came out of the shower to find me missing.

Thankfully, I'm back just as he's turning off the water. I sit on the edge of the bed and wait for him. He comes out with a towel hung low around his waist, his lickable abs on display and still wet from the shower. I squeeze my legs together and look away.

The rustle of fabric and the sound of a zipper tell me he's getting dressed, thankfully. When the zipper sounds again, I realize he's shoving the things he has taken off into the bag I left on the bed for him. I turn to take it, but he stops me.

"Let me do your dressing first."

I lift the hem of my T-shirt to just under my bra and focus on a spot behind Calix's head as he checks out my side before wrapping it in clean gauze.

"Alright, you're done."

"Thanks. We should go."

He nods and shoves the last of his things in the bag before swinging it over his shoulder. "Ready when you are."

I hold the door open and wait for him to toss his bag on the back seat next to the bottle of ouzo.

"Can you pass me that?"

He grabs the bottle and hands it over, a look of distaste on his face as he eyes the brand. The same brand his brother used to drink.

"Be right back."

I take the bottle into the room and set it on the small dresser under the window after pouring some of the liquid on

the end of the drapes. I then tuck the corner of the drape into the neck of the bottle. Once I'm sure it won't tip over, I let it go before striking a match.

I watch the flame for a second, feeling the power that only comes from fire. The one substance that can raze everything to the ground. The very essence of both destruction and rebirth.

I hope that wherever Demi is now, she finds peace. "Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust," I whisper into the empty room as I touch the flame to the drapes. I watch the tiny flame spark and catch the material before I drop the match to the ground and leave.

Jumping in the car, I turn the ignition and put it in gear as the flames flash through the window.

"That's going to draw attention."

"That's okay. There's nothing here anymore."

CHAPTER NINE

I don't drive far, just enough so we can see when the flames paint the sky with all their mighty fury.

"You know they'll find the bodies, eventually."

"I know."

"And yet you don't seem fazed that we might find ourselves smack in the middle of a murder investigation."

"Because I'm not. I checked in and out as a single woman, just like a dozen others did. I left a digital footprint, so if someone looks, they'll see that he had a gas issue. If they're lazy, which so far has been my experience with the cops here, that will put a bow on it, and they can write it up as an accident.

"If they investigate and do happen to come across Andino and Demi, then any evidence of me and you will have been destroyed by the fire, and there are no witnesses around to identify us. I wore the wig and contacts when I spoke to the others, and none of them saw you. Trust me when I say I'm not going to throw my life away on a sick fuck like Andino."

"Maybe not, but you'd throw it away for a girl like Demi. I saw that look in your eyes. Even knowing she's gone, all that —" he waves to the burning building "—was for her."

I shrug but don't deny it as I put the car into reverse and head away from the scene. I keep the windows down so I can hear any approaching cars, despite the smell of smoke filling the air, but it's all clear. I sure as heck can't hear any sirens.

With no neighbors and located off the beaten path, this place could burn for hours before someone notices.

“So where to now?”

“Somewhere, hopefully, nobody will find us,” I answer vaguely as an explosion rocks the area. Calix curses and looks at me, and I smile, flipping on the radio and turning it up.

It isn't until I have both hands back on the wheel that I realize what song it is. A vicious sensation stabs me in the chest as I recognize the country twang of Sawyer James, one of Lollie's men, singing the song that brought them together after she starred in his music video, though I suspect there was something there before then. I bite my lip to stop myself from thinking about home. One day, if I'm lucky, I'll be able to go back and beg for forgiveness. But not until I know for certain trouble won't follow me.

We ride in silence for an hour, each of us lost in thought, when I feel Calix squeezing my knee. I look at him and reach over to turn the radio down.

“What's up?”

He points at the upcoming drive-through. As soon as I spot it, my stomach grumbles.

“I like the way you think.”

I take a right and turn into the drive-through, scanning the menu board as I do. I turn to ask Calix what he wants. He's staring at the menu with that odd blank look on his face, once again reminding me that when he went away, a lot of this shit didn't exist.

“Trust me to order for you?”

He looks at me and nods.

“Anything you don't like?”

“Pickles.”

“What? Jesus, you think you know a person, and then boom, I find out I married a freak.”

He cocks an eyebrow at me, but just I grin.

“Hello, can I take your order?” The woman’s voice comes through the intercom in Greek before she repeats the question in English. I guess this place sees a lot of tourists.

I adopt a French accent, just because I can, and order two burgers with everything, one with no pickles. Two large fries, two chocolate shakes, and two chocolate muffins. Then, just to be sure the man beside me doesn’t go hungry, I add two chicken wraps and two Cokes.

The voice repeats back my order. I confirm it’s correct, and she tells me to drive up to the window to pay. All the while, I’m conscious of Calix taking everything in, memorizing what I’m doing so that he knows for next time. I don’t draw attention to it or say anything. There will be a lot of things the man will need to adjust to now that he has his freedom back.

Once the food is ready, a young guy—probably still in high school—hands the brown paper bag to me through the window, which I pass to Calix before taking the drinks. I hand one of the shakes to Calix and put the Cokes in the cupholders while I take the other shake and set it between my thighs. I drive away as the impatient bastard behind me starts laying on his horn. He’s so lucky I’m not in the mood, or he’d be blowing that horn out his ass.

“Do you want to find somewhere to park so we can eat?”

“Yeah, but you may as well eat while it’s hot.”

He doesn’t need to be told twice. He sticks his hand into the bag and starts munching on the fries as I head toward a local scenic spot I remember being around here somewhere. It’s getting dark, so I almost miss the turn, but I see it at the last second and make a sharp left.

“Hold on. The roads are gonna get a little bumpy,” I warn him as he holds his drink in the air.

I drive to the end of the road, then turn right and park. There is a steep drop, but it only goes down to a wide ledge about thirty feet below. Even so, sitting here at the edge where the earth meets the sky, I always feel something stir inside me.

As a kid, I was fascinated with nature, specifically weather phenomena, and natural disasters. I watched this movie as a kid, where they studied the weather and investigated ways to produce early warning systems so people would have more time to evacuate. I'd always loved the idea of doing something like that when I grew up, but we all know how that turned out.

Now, sitting here, I wonder if there is a parallel universe out there somewhere where another version of me got to live out that dream. I wonder if it's everything she hoped it would be.

"How did you know about this place?" Calix asks, looking over at me. He hands me the bag of food with one hand while he continues eating his fries with the other.

"I came here once or twice many years ago."

I dig into the bag and pull out a burger. No pickle is scrawled across the top, so I hand it to him before taking out the second one for myself.

"That's it? You don't like to reveal much about yourself, do you?" he grumbles, which turns into a moan when he takes a large bite of his burger.

I do the same so that I don't have to answer, but then realize that if I don't at least make an effort, this is all there will ever be between us. Stilted conversation and sparks of lust.

"I don't like talking about myself. When people reminisce about their lives, it's because they are thinking about happy memories. I don't have many of those, so I'd rather look to the future than to a past I spent a long fucking time escaping."

He swallows before taking a sip of the milkshake, his tongue darting out to lick his lips. I have to fight back a moan of my own, and it has nothing to do with the food and everything to do with that one simple action.

"I get that," he states before going back to his food. I want to laugh. If only he knew how linked our histories are. A part of me feels I should warn him, at the very least, of where we're going. But the other part, the piece of me that's a

vindictive bitch, demands her pound of flesh. I want to see the emotions on his face when our pasts and present collide in the most spectacular fashion and he figures out who I really am.

I need to see if he feels anything. Though I'm desperately trying to keep past Calix and present Calix separate in my head, my heart isn't quite so forgiving.

We finish eating, leaving the wraps for later. I'm full, and after the events of the day, exhaustion tugs at me.

"How much further until we get to wherever it is you're taking me?"

"You make it sound like I'm kidnapping you," I mutter as I wipe my fingers and toss the paper napkin in the bag.

"A few hours," I answer with a sigh.

"If you want to sleep for a little while, I can drive for a bit."

"I'll be fine. Besides, I'm pretty sure your driver's license has expired, and with our luck, you'd get pulled over and arrested ten miles down the road."

He snorts but doesn't argue.

I reverse out the way we came, taking one long, wistful look at the view before we're back on the road, heading south. The music plays softly, and I hum along as I take in the sights. As much as I never wanted to come back, I can't deny how beautiful the place is. I guess I'd forgotten. It's funny how one black mark can taint everything like that.

"So, you grew up here?" Calix asks, breaking the silence.

"Kinda. I didn't live here as such but it was where we went when we needed to get away from the world and reconnect or just have some down time. We're heading to my family vacation home."

He turns sharply to look at me. "And you think the best place to hide out is in one of your parents houses? What if they decided to use the place when we're there?" he snaps incredulously.

“My parents are dead, Calix,” I tell him, keeping my tone neutral. “So, unless there is a local ghost whisperer around that I don’t know about, I don’t think you need to worry about running into them any time soon.”

“Sorry.”

“You’re right to be concerned. You don’t know me from Adam.”

“No, I’m sorry about your parents. I lost mine too.”

I hold back the *I know* that’s on the tip of my tongue.

“Were you close?”

“No.”

I feel his eyes on me, so I look over at him briefly.

“We were not that kind of family.”

“What kind of family?”

“The good kind,” he says, then turns to look out of the window.

I want to ask him a dozen more questions, but then turnabout would be fair play, and I don’t have the brain capacity to keep my lies straight right now.

“Then, as callous as this sounds, you’re better off without them.”

“You assume I’m not like them?” He laughs, a bitter sound that, instead of scaring me, makes me want to wrap my arms around him.

“I never assume. I judge solely on a person’s actions.”

“You do remember picking me up from outside a high-security prison after I served twenty years for murder, right?” he asks me sarcastically.

“Not all murderers are bad people.”

He huffs out a laugh. “I think God might disagree with you there.”

“Do you think every man who goes to church and prays is a good man? Is that how you decide if someone is righteous or not? Because, let me tell you now, the world is made up of a vast array of colors, so many shades and tones that it can blind you. What it’s not is black and white. Tell me, who is the saint, and who is the sinner? A man of the cloth who touches little boys, or the man who stabs him through the heart without remorse for touching his son?”

“That’s different.”

“Is it? We all start down this dark path somewhere. Some people, like you, are born into this world. You take your first steps on this dark path, but others are people like me. We ended up here because there was simply no light in our world anymore.

“There is comfort in the darkness. An expectation of depravity and desperation. It doesn’t sneak in and surprise you like it does in the light. We know about the monsters under our beds, Calix. It’s in the little kid’s handbook. But nobody ever warns us about the monsters that live in the light. The kind of evil that can charm the birds from the trees with one hand while snapping someone’s neck with the other.”

“Someone hurt you.” It’s not a question. It’s a statement.

“That’s life, Calix. People get hurt. I’m not special. My story isn’t unique. The only thing that makes us different is how we process the things that happen to us. You can either lie down and take it or stand up and fight back. I’ll admit, lying down often seemed easier. But when you lie down, you get stepped on, and I was so fucking tired of being someone’s doormat.

“So now I fight back. I fight because it’s who I am, and I fight even when I know I can’t win. I fight for me. I fight for all the girls who came before me who couldn’t fight for themselves, and I fight for those who’ll inevitably come long after I’m dead.”

His large hand finds my thigh and rests there as he leans his head back against the headrest and closes his eyes.

“I don’t have anything to offer you. I don’t bring anything to this marriage but trouble, but I can offer you this. Nobody will ever hurt you again. Not while you’re with me.”

I keep quiet and bite my lip, focusing on the road. But in my head, all I can think is, who is going to stop him from hurting me? Because he will, when the time comes.

Everyone always does.

CHAPTER TEN

By the time I pull up outside the gates of the house, it's past two in the morning. Calix is asleep in the passenger seat beside me, oblivious to my racing heart and sweaty palms as I stave off a panic attack. I take a few deep breaths and will my stomach to settle as the past and present collide. I remind myself that I'm not the same girl I used to be. I'm stronger now, and there is nobody here to hurt me. Hell, all that's left are memories and ghosts. Lowering the window, I key in the code and wait for the gates to swing open with a creak, like something out of a horror film.

I drive through and watch the gates close behind me in the rearview mirror as I keep going down the long, winding driveway until I reach the front of the house. Well, *house* is somewhat of an understatement. The imposing white stone building has six bedrooms and eight bathrooms—definitely a little more than a house, but still smaller than my actual childhood home that Santos burned to the ground.

I step out of the car and look up at the house I once loved before letting my eyes drift closed as I remember this place... before. The pretty flower beds always had something blooming. The large oak door with its fancy lion door knocker always felt magical when I was little, like if I opened it, I might end up inside a castle. I guess this place almost was, in a way. My father treated me like a princess, at least until I became older and realized our family wasn't like other families.

I'm not sure I truly understood that my father was a criminal. To my young mind, criminals robbed old ladies in back alleys or kidnapped children on the way to school. My dad was always a superhero in my eyes, at least until he wasn't.

I open my eyes when I feel raindrops falling on my face, and I look up at the sky and whisper a silent *thank you*. The rain might not be enough to wipe the tainted memories from my brain, but it's enough to keep me focused. I turn to the door and stare at the lion knocker. The same lion I stared at the last time I was here wallowing in grief and so fucking angry at the world. Tomorrow, I'm going to go online and find something to replace it with. Maybe a giant dick. That would certainly make me smile when I saw it, and hopefully, in time, it will help me forget.

I turn when I hear the car door open. The rain falling almost obscures my vision as Calix climbs out and slams the door behind him.

He strides toward me, reaching for my arm. "What the fuck, angel? Are you trying to make yourself sick?"

"I'm fine. We're here anyway. Let's go inside."

He steps back to look up at the house. I watch him with trepidation as his eyes move over the colossal building. For a minute, I don't think he's going to recognize the place. But just as the thought crosses my mind, his body goes rigid, and his head whips around and stares at me.

I open my mouth to explain, but nothing comes out as his eyes move over my face.

"Selene?" he whispers like he's seen a ghost.

I shake my head, ignoring the stab of pain I feel at hearing that name.

"Sophia?" he chokes out.

"Once upon a time." I nod and wait for him to process my words. When he does, he goes from shocked to pissed in seconds.

He grabs both my arms, squeezing hard enough to leave bruises as he shakes me. “Is this some kind of fucking joke to you?”

My eyes widen, not expecting that. “A joke? You think this is a fucking joke?”

He growls and drags me to the car before shoving me down onto the hood. The rain intensifies as if feeding off our combined anger as he leans over me.

“You remember me now, huh?” I taunt.

“You fucking bitch. You set me up?”

“Set you up for what, Calix? Look around you. Do you see an ambush lying in wait?”

“That means fuck all, and you know it.”

Rain drips off his hair onto my face.

“So, tell me, what are you after, wife? Life insurance policy? A kid to become the next heir?”

I recoil, even though I’m not surprised at his words, they hurt, and I let his fury fuel my own.

“You self-righteous son of a bitch. I’ve done nothing to earn your anger. It was *you* who dragged *me* into hell. Or did you forget that?”

His eyes move over my face and down to my chest, where my shirt is plastered to my skin.

“I never saw his mark, but that doesn’t mean anything. People who were loyal to Santos remained loyal. Not even death could change that.”

“Loyal? You think I was loyal to a man who kidnapped me and orchestrated the torture and murder of my family?” I spit in his face before swinging my head up and bashing his nose.

He loosens his grip as blood trickles down his face, but he wipes it away and grins at me savagely. Suddenly, his hand is around my throat, pinning me in place as he yanks at the buttons of my shorts, popping them open as he tugs them down with my underwear.

I don't fight him, not because I'm afraid, but because I'm turned way the fuck on. If hate sex is the only sex I'll get with my husband before I kill him, I'll take it.

He keeps his hand on my throat, but his eyes move down to my now exposed sex, and then they land on the tattoo. I've had many years and lots of chances to get the Santos brand covered up, but in the back of my mind, a voice stopped me. I never understood why. I hate the thing with a fiery passion. I just somehow knew that one day I'd need it.

He growls, part anger, part something else, and then he releases my throat. He bends down, kissing the brand that was marked into my skin so many years ago, before standing up and popping open the button of his jeans.

I reach up and cup the back of his neck and pull him to me, my mouth crashing into his as he fumbles to free his cock. Once he does, he guides it to my wet entrance and thrusts himself all the way inside me. We groan in unison. There's a little pain and a whole lot of pleasure as I slide my fingers underneath his T-shirt and score my nails into the skin of his back. He fucks me hard and fast as the rain pours down around us. Man and wife, strangers in every way, yet my body reacts to his like I've always known him.

My shorts hinder my movements, stopping me from wrapping my legs around his waist and pulling him deeper. Our mouths stay fused together as we explore each other. I memorize his taste, his smell, how he feels moving inside me. I know the other shoe will drop eventually, and when he's gone, all I'll have left are memories of this moment. It's bittersweet because I'm not sure I've ever felt as alive as I do right now, being fucked by a monster while surrounded by ghosts.

He rips his mouth free from mine. I can taste blood on my lips and something that is uniquely Calix. He trails his tongue down my throat as he moves his hand to my clit, circling it with his thumb as he fucks me against the hood of my car.

"You want to come, angel?" he snarls, and I can only just make it out over the storm.

“Yes,” I hiss, trying to lift my hips to gain more friction. With my legs bound by the denim and Calix’s weight pinning me in place, it’s impossible.

“Tell me, who’s inside you?”

“You are,” I groan, thrashing my head from side to side as the pleasure begins to burn through my body, making my skin hum despite the cold.

“Whose fucking you, baby? Say my name.”

“Calix,” I scream as he flicks my clit, leaving me teetering on a precipice.

“And who am I?” he leans down and growls in my ear.

“My husband,” I cry out as he pinches my clit.

The intensity of my orgasm has me seeing stars for a moment as I repeat his name over and over. I hear him curse as he thrusts once, twice, three times before pulling free and coming all over Santos’s brand.

Both of us are breathing heavily and soaked through to the bone, and yet I can’t find it in me to care. He stares at my tattoo before looking into my eyes with a look of sheer possession.

“You might have started as his, but you’re mine now.”

“I was never his.”

He pulls back and tucks himself away before ducking into the car and returning with a handful of napkins. The rain soaks them, but I’m able to clean myself up enough to get dressed again. Once I’m done, we stand and stare at each other, neither of us caring anymore about the rain.

“You married him.”

“You make it sound like I had a choice when we both know I didn’t.”

“Everyone has a choice, Sugar. Or should I call you Sophia?” he asks, his voice thick with sarcasm.

I laugh, and even I can hear the contempt in it. “Like you had a choice when you collected me on your brother’s orders and dropped me at his feet?” I step closer to him. “Like you said no when you locked me up in that room like some kind of princess in a tower? Only there was no white knight to fucking save me. I had to save myself.”

“By marrying a man who tortured your family.” He laughs darkly.

“You know the only person who ever stood up to him only did it once. And do you know why?”

He snorts. “Nobody ever stood up to Santos. That was the problem. Nobody but—” He shuts up before looking at me.

“You wanted to know how I was so sure about you? The truth is, I wasn’t. I’m still not. What I do know is that you called him out for handing my sister over to his men, even though it was you who collected her. You didn’t agree with them raping her,” I whisper, but I know he hears me because he flinches. “Everyone has a line in the sand they won’t cross.”

I am overcome with sadness as I think of the once vivacious Selene staring back at me with hollow eyes, her body littered with bruises and cum leaking out of her.

He reaches up and cups my jaw. “She knew the rules. She was playing with fire the first time she stepped out on Santos. She knew the risks, knew you’d all pay for her actions, and she did it anyway. So no, I don’t condone Santos’s actions, but I can’t find much sympathy for the girl who tried to trick the devil and failed and offered up her family as sacrifices.”

His words are like a slap in the face. I swallow down the vomit, knowing deep down he’s right. It’s why my sorrow is always twisted up inside me with anger and hate. There is so much animosity inside me, I wonder how I manage to keep it all contained.

“That’s irrelevant. I’m talking about you pissing off Santos, and three days later you get arrested for a double homicide that you didn’t commit.”

“Yeah, and how do you know that?” He pins me against the car again, his eyes burning into mine.

“Because you were with Santos the night of the murders.”

“So?”

“He slipped you something to make it seem like you had too much to drink, more than you actually had. Think about it. Your whole night was blurry, right? You said you couldn’t remember anything. You woke up covered in blood, next to the victims, with the murder weapon in your hand, and not a mark on you to claim self-defense.”

“Santos said he was called to a meeting, and I went home. That when I left, he had no clue where I went.” His anger beats at my skin, but I push on as the rain begins to taper off.

“He did go out, but the only meeting he had was with the people he killed. Then he had his men stage the scene with you as the murderer.”

Time stands still around us as my words hit him like bullets.

“When he came back, he was covered in blood and smiling. The next morning, you were arrested.”

He stares at me for a moment longer before whirling around and punching one of the trees lining the driveway. He hits it again and again as he roars with fury. I stand up and remain silent as he expels some of his anger.

When he’s spent, he leans against the trunk with his head bowed and blood running from his hand.

“You stood up to him, Calix, but you lost twenty years of your life. What chance did a teenage girl have?”

He turns to look at me, an expression on his face I’m not familiar with, as he grates out, “What did you just say?”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The already volatile tension between us coils tighter as I frown.

“Your brother set you up for murder.”

He shakes his head and steps closer. “I had my suspicions. I knew something wasn’t right. Santos had all this power, and yet he couldn’t help me? I knew. I just refused to accept it. But that is not what I’m talking about.”

His fingers under my jaw tip my head back to look at him. He’s trying to mask his fury, but it’s a battle I don’t see him winning, not tonight. “How old are you, Sugar?”

I’d normally make a flippant comment about how it’s rude to ask a woman her age, but it’s slowly sinking in that Calix has been missing a huge chunk of information. If he doesn’t know this when I thought it was common knowledge, at least within our circle, I have to wonder what else he is oblivious to.

Calix is forty now and has spent half of that locked away for something he didn’t do. Worse, he was put there by a man he used to idolize, and here I stand, smashing everything he thought he knew about his brother to pieces.

“I’m thirty-five,” I tell him. I see his eyes flutter as he quickly does the math—once, twice, and even a third time because he doesn’t like the answer he keeps getting.

He steps away from me and stumbles back, horror on his face at the implications. “You...”

I step toward him, but he moves back out of reach. Surprisingly, I find my feelings hurt by the actions, though I'm not sure why. "I was fourteen the day you came to our house with your brother and took us. Fourteen the day you locked me in that room. Fourteen the day you were arrested and gone, as if I only dreamed you up."

I take another step, steeling myself against his reaction. "I was fifteen the day my family was killed, and I was fifteen the first time your brother raped me."

He flinches and reaches for me, but his hands hover in midair like he's afraid to touch me. I step closer until my body is flush with his, and his hands drop to my hips. He looks down at me with so much pain in his eyes.

"I was fifteen the day he married me," I whisper.

"Fifteen when the boat exploded, and I threw my battered body overboard and swam for shore. As far as anyone knows, Sophia Michelakis died right along with her husband."

"And now you're Sugar, a woman completely unlike the girl you once were," he murmurs. "Why come to me if not to kill me? I did this. I set all this in motion. I swear to God, I didn't know. I thought you were older, like your sister. He thought—"

I shake my head. "No. Selene was only three years older than me, Calix. Santos knew exactly how old we were. He liked that I was so young and impressionable. He thought he could train me to be an obedient wife after what happened with Selene."

I wrap my hands around his arms and rest my face against his chest, drawing a little heat from him because now I'm starting to get cold.

"You've been lying to yourself, just like he lied to you for all these years. Santos isn't just a bad man who makes bad choices, Calix. He has evil in his veins. He feeds off it, and he fucking loves it. You're not the same, not even close."

His hands squeeze my hips, and his fingers dig into my skin. "You're talking about him in the present tense, Sugar.

The man is dead.”

“Dead like me?”

He pulls back and looks down at me. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I came back because Santos is alive.”

“Bullshit.”

“You don’t know how much I wish it wasn’t true. Look, let’s just go inside, and we can talk.” I’m shaking now, the cold seeping into my soul.

He must feel it because instead of arguing, he nods and moves to the car, popping the trunk and grabbing the bags from inside. I grab the things from the back seat and dig around in my bag for the key I haven’t used in years. I walk up the stone steps and stare at the key like it was a snake ready to bite me.

I know I need to go inside and get warm before I get sick, but I just can’t make myself unlock the door. Calix’s hand appears over mine, pressing the metal into my palm for a moment before he takes the key and opens the door.

Considering this house stars in as many of my nightmares as our actual home does, I half expected the door to groan and a dozen bats to fly out, but nothing but blessed silence reigns. Shoving the key into his jeans pocket, he reaches for my hand and tugs me inside. We make it as far as the hallway before I’m hit with the first flashback.

It’s as if I’m right there on the day my whole world changed. I can see my father staring into my eyes with a look of defeat and horror in his expression before it morphs into one of sorrow. At the time, I thought it was for him. But now I understand. It was for me. He might not have known exactly what was to become of me, but he knew whatever it was, it wouldn’t be good. I was just a kid. But thanks to the life my father led and the men he associated with; my life had been forfeited. I was condemned to hell, paying the price for someone else’s sins.

“Come back to me.”

I blink and look up to see Calix's worried eyes staring down into mine, his warm hands cupping my jaw as his thumb swipes gently over the tear that rolls down my cheek.

"We can go somewhere else."

I shake my head. "The flashback didn't even happen here, it happened at our home. The one Santos burned down. I don't know why this place is making me remember shit I'd rather forget. Maybe it's because the last time all of us were here was the last time we were all happy." I look around and just feel empty. "I've not been back here since you found Selene and Dorian here." I whisper. "Trust me, there is nowhere else safer than here. The house has been empty for twenty years. This is the last place anyone would look for either of us."

"I don't like it. I don't want you anywhere near this place." He swallows, looking away as he takes in the house. The house where he caught my sister and delivered her to hell.

"Shit. I don't want either of us here."

"I don't like it either, Calix, but we don't always get to do what we like. It's been twenty years," I whisper, not wanting to wake the past.

He bends his head and presses his forehead against mine. "Yeah? Tell me it doesn't hurt just as much as if it happened yesterday."

I clamp my mouth shut, making him sigh. Damn perceptive bastard.

"You've really not been back here at all since that night?"

"No. I bought the house when it went on the market five years after my death, using a corporation I set up. I hired someone to clean it and make sure it's maintained. There will be gas, electricity, and water, but no food. I'll have to figure that out tomorrow."

"Why would you buy this place after everything that happened?"

"Two reasons. The first, I couldn't bear to think of someone else living here, letting the memories trapped within

these walls disappear. The thought of a family replacing the one that came before it..." I shake my head. "I know it sounds juvenile, but I can't help it. This house hosts my sisters nightmares, but it holds traces of my happy days too."

"What was the other reason?"

I look around the hallway, spotting a faint mark on the wall where I remember my father measuring me and swallow. "No matter what happened here. It's all I have left of them," I whisper, looking up at him.

"How can you stand to look at me? I dragged you into this. You were just a—"

I grip his T-shirt and yank him down, kissing him soundly before pulling back. "I hated you for the longest time. Hell, I hated the world. But holding on to all that hate was eating away at me. In the end, I had to let it go for my own sake. As I got older, I was able to process it all a little more. And my job helps. The truth of the matter is, you didn't hurt my family or me. You were following orders like you'd been raised to do."

"It doesn't make it okay, angel."

"No, but it stops me from holding you responsible for something that wasn't your fault. If you hadn't grabbed me, one of Santos's other men would have., same with Selene. You were twenty, barely a man. You've lost twenty years paying for a crime you didn't commit. I'm not going to persecute you for something else when the blame rests solely on Santos's shoulders."

He bends down and picks me up, and I wrap my legs around his hips, holding on as he slides a hand into my hair and kisses me hard as he carries me upstairs. There is a desperation to the kiss, a hunger that's always present between us but that's spilled over and impossible to contain.

It's not until Calix breaks the kiss that I realize he didn't take me into a bedroom but into one of the bathrooms. He releases me, and I slide down his body as he reaches behind me to turn the shower on. Then he slides his hands under the hem of my wet shirt and pulls it up my body. Once I lift my

arms, he tugs it over my head, tossing it on the counter behind us. With warm hands, he reaches behind me and unhooks my bra, sliding it down my arms and tossing it too.

Dipping his head, he presses a kiss to my collarbone before his lips skim down my chest, pausing only long enough to flick his tongue over one of my hardened nipples. I suck in a sharp breath, but he continues on his journey, popping open the fly of my shorts and peeling them and my damp underwear down my legs. When they get caught on my boots, he unties them and looks up at me.

“Step out,” he orders me gruffly.

I grip his shoulders for balance and do as he says, leaving myself naked in front of him. His hands slide up my body as he stands, circling my waist before he touches the dressing on my side gently. He looks at me, his eyes saying a thousand things that his mouth doesn't. *How could I save him when he didn't save me?*

I don't verbalize my reassurance. Instead, I reach for his shirt and start to undress him. He has to stoop so I can pull his T-shirt over his head. I toss it beside mine as he toes off his boots. I gently drag my nails down his chest, my fingers moving down the ridges of his abs before I move close enough to flick my tongue over one of his nipples. When he shivers, I grin. Hmm, something to explore later.

I mimic his movements, popping open the fly of his jeans before sliding my hands down the back of them and cupping his ass. I shove the material down to his thighs, and his cock springs free between us. When I drop to my knees to tug off his jeans, I find myself at eye level with it. As Calix steps free from the denim, I look up at him and stare into his hungry eyes before I lean forward and lick a path up his cock.

“Jesus fuck,” he growls, his hands moving to my hair.

I open my mouth and slide him in, taking as much of him as I can before pulling back. I look up at him again when nothing but the tip of his cock remains in my mouth. The look he's giving me almost makes me orgasm.

“Sugar,” he warns me before his hands tighten in my hair. “I can’t be gentle. It’s been too long, and you feel too good. Can you handle that?”

I roll my eyes and deep-throat him, making him curse in Greek.

“You’re killing me,” he moans before I suck him hard. That seems to be his breaking point. Whatever restraint he had snaps, and he takes control, fucking my mouth with vigor.

I let him use me, getting off on watching the man fall apart. When he comes, he pulls out of my mouth and shoots his cum over my chest. Offering me a satisfied smirk, he holds his hand out and helps me up, his eyes fixed on the cum running down my chest.

“Let’s get you cleaned up so I can dirty you up again.”

Umm, yes, please.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I'm in a world of my own, gazing out at the sea in the distance, when I sense I'm not alone anymore. I turn and look up to find Calix beside me, wearing nothing but his jeans.

“We need to talk.”

“Ah, four words a woman loves to hear, along with *it's not what it looks like*—newsflash, it's always what it looks like—and *it's not you, it's me*.”

He shakes his head and sits down beside me. “A lot was said last night. We have a lot to unpack between us.” He swipes his hand over his face. “Fuck, I could use some coffee.”

“How about this? I'll go get some groceries while you hide out here, and when I get back, I'll make us something to eat, and we can talk then.”

“Alright. Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?”

I shake my head. “It's better if you stay here. I won't be long. Is there anything in particular you want?”

“Pizza,” he replies immediately, making me chuckle. He grins, and it's welcome after last night, even if I know it won't last.

“I'll see what I can do. I won't be long.” I stand up and brush myself off before heading inside and grabbing my bag.

The area hasn't changed much since I was last here. Some of the shops are different, and there are a few more coffee

houses. Other than that, it's still familiar, bringing on a wave of nostalgia. I make my way to the supermarket and shove a ball cap on my head and a pair of sunglasses over my eyes before heading inside.

I pick up a couple of frozen pizzas, a few beers, and a bunch of other things I think Calix might like, along with toiletries and coffee. Using the self-serve checkout, I scan the items and manage to make it back to the car without speaking to another soul. That doesn't mean I'm not vigilant, though. I do a couple of loops around a nearby housing estate on my way back to the house, just in case I'm being followed.

I lug the bags inside when I get back, calling out to Calix that I'm back. I don't get a response, so I put everything away and then go try to find him. With nothing much to do, I figure he's taking a nap. When I find the bed we slept in empty, I head back downstairs, searching the rest of the house and the backyard before realizing he's not here.

I didn't set the alarm when I left because Calix was going to be here, but I do it now, feeling uncomfortable here alone. I'm also pissed. He's supposed to be lying low, but instead, he's off somewhere, doing God knows what? He didn't even leave a note.

I stomp into the kitchen and make a salad for lunch, not in the mood for pizza any longer. I make huge bowl and serve myself a portion before putting the rest in the fridge. I take my bowl and bottle of Coke out to the backyard where it's easier to breathe, the air feeling a little less oppressive.

I sit on the top step and eat my lunch, wondering if I even have the right to be pissed. I'm his wife, sure, but this isn't exactly a conventional marriage. If he puts himself in danger, that's on him, not me. So why does the thought of anything happening to him make me feel sick to my stomach?

I force myself to eat, even though it feels like a lead weight in my stomach. I shift my focus to something else. *Someone else*. Someone I've been desperately trying not to think about.

Rémy.

As if my thinking of him conjures him, my cell phone vibrates in my pocket, and I know before pulling it out that it's him. It's always him. I didn't give him this number. I didn't give it to anyone. It's a burner I use as Sarah, but no matter how many times I've changed my number in the last few months, he always manages to find it.

My finger hovers over the answer button, but despite how much I want to answer it, I don't. Hearing his voice right now will break the thin strands of my sanity, and I'm barely hanging on as it is.

What Rémy and I have—or had—is beyond complicated. Both of us are frequently hired to kill people. Where it's just one of the services I offer, Rémy is a full-time assassin and one of the best in the world. I've known him years, but our interactions were fleeting until five years ago, when we were on the same job. Only I was hired to protect the person he was hired to kill. I managed to get the guy out, give him a new identity, and relocate him. The fact that I managed to do it all without Rémy knowing made him take more of a liking to me than before.

Now, I won't lie, the first thing that drew me to him was his sexy French accent. The second was the fact that he was off-the-charts hot. Light-haired, green-eyed, and tanned from spending a lot of time outside, the man looks like he'd be at home on a beach in nothing but a pair of board shorts just as much as he'd be in a three-piece suit. Being good-looking, though, can be both a blessing and a curse when you're an assassin. Being hot makes it easier to get a woman, in particular, to submit to you and make choices she perhaps wouldn't have otherwise. The downside is that a good-looking man is going to draw attention, which is the exact opposite of what an assassin wants. But Rémy was somewhat of a chameleon. He had mastered the art of blending in, a skill I often struggled with myself.

Our mutual attraction only went as far as our libidos. For the most part, we are on opposite sides. Even if we weren't, we knew all too well that in our line of work, we would

always be each other's weak spot. And we had too many enemies collectively to have weak spots.

Our first meeting after years of going backward and forward with each other didn't end with us rolling around in the sheets together. It was more of a fistfight than anything else. By the time we called a temporary truce, both of us were bruised and bloody—and, let's not forget, horny as fuck. I tried not to read too much into it. Adrenaline can do strange things to people. But every time our paths crossed, we ended right back where we started, fighting with each other. Fighting eventually led to fucking, and despite promising myself that each time would be the last time, Rémy was impossible to walk away from.

Until now.

Coming here, knowing what I was going to have to do to put my plans in motion, I had to quit whatever fucked-up thing me and Rémy had going on. I told myself it was for the best. I could feel myself slipping into territory I had no business being in.

We promised to keep things casual. Frenemies with benefits, neither of us putting any kind of expectation on the other. It was the perfect arrangement. Until it wasn't. Walking away should have been easy, feelings aside. When I called Rémy to tell him I was done, that should have been the end of it. It seems something shifted for him, too, because he's done nothing but call me since.

I've blocked his number, and he gets a new one. I change my number, and he finds it within days. I never answer. All his messages go to voicemail, which I delete without listening to. He never texts me—a habit that spills over from his job. No texts and only short calls are made from untraceable burner phones.

My cell rings again. Number withheld this time, but I know it's still him. I watch the screen light up and sigh wistfully, wanting to hear the sound of his voice more than anything right now. But I don't trust myself with the man, and Calix deserves better than that.

Powering it off, I finish the last of my food, which now tastes like sawdust. I sit and stare aimlessly out at the yard until I become restless. Standing up, I shove my cell phone back in my pocket and take my bowl inside, placing it in the sink.

With nothing else to do, I wander around the house and feel an acute sense of loneliness set in. It makes my stomach cramp and my palms sweat as the walls feel like they're closing in on me. I find myself moving quicker, jogging up the stairs two at a time before hesitating at the end of the long hallway. Last night we slept in the guest room to my left. I was too tired and too preoccupied with Calix to take on the emotional tsunami that will drag me down when dealing with the bedrooms. But now that Calix is gone, I don't have an excuse to put it off any longer.

I walk slowly down the hall, as excited as someone taking their final steps down death row. I hesitate at the next door I reach before turning the knob and pushing it open. When I take a deep breath and smell nothing but musty, stale air, I find myself blinking back unexpected tears. It's stupid, of course. No scent will linger after twenty years. For a moment there, I almost expected to be hit with the subtle notes of my mother's favorite perfume and the comforting warmth of my father's aftershave.

Instead, there is nothing.

I step inside the room and find it tidy like it always was. Everything packed neatly away as if someday they might return. I don't open the closed doors. The scab that had healed over already feels like it's bleeding. I glance around and feel the absence of life here. Yet, if I close my eyes, I can see the specters of my parents as they get ready for one of their nights out.

My mother sits at her vanity, slipping in her pearl earrings, a gift given to her on her wedding day. I watch my father move behind her, a soft smile on his lips before he bends and kisses the bare skin of her shoulder. I blink and look away. The haunting images disappear as I hurry from the room and close the door, trapping the bittersweet memories inside.

Despite the urge to run, I keep going, moving to the next room. My hand shakes as I push it open and walk inside. I swallow hard as nausea surges up inside me. The room is exactly as I remember it. It's clean—cleaner than it was kept when it was occupied, but that's what I pay my ladies for. They keep the place tidy, but they never move the items laid out in the bedrooms. They clean around them as best they can. I'm sure they think I'm insane, especially since they have no idea that this house has always been mine. To me, tiny pieces of my family are preserved in these mementos, and if I move them, the memories will fade away.

I walk over to the vanity table. Unlike my mother's, this one is covered haphazardly with lipsticks and makeup brushes. Photos of teenagers in pretty beaded frames line the wall above it. Friends who all grew up and carried on living as the memory of my family faded from their minds, and we became nothing more than a cautionary tale people told their daughters about.

In the world I grew up, women were merely pretty accessories for the men who stood beside them. Cattle to be traded and sold between families in hopes of making allegiances and producing heirs. Pretty little rich broodmares who had no worth beyond what was between their legs.

That doesn't mean all the men treated their women badly. Far from it. Some were protective, and some, over time, learned to love their partners, as in my mother and father's case.

But then some were nothing but monsters. They were revered by men and feared by women because they knew if they ended up with one of the bad ones, that was it for them. There is no escape once the vows have been said. The legally binding contract declared you the property of your husband.

My sister and I were aware that life as we knew it would be over once we turned eighteen. Nobody would come to our rescue after the vows were exchanged because what happens between man and wife is protected by the sanctity of marriage. Even if that means the wife is left bloody at her husband's feet. Everyone knew what Santos was like, even those who

pretended otherwise. Any woman of his, wife and mistress alike, would know that their days were numbered. I wanted to live my life the way I wanted for as long as I could. But in the end, we all became nothing more than casualties of a war.

I spot a photo of the two of us hidden just behind the others. Reaching for it, I lift it and study us. We looked so much alike that people often mistook us for twins, despite the three-year age gap. With our arms wrapped around each other and our heads thrown back in laughter, the only obvious difference is the two inches in height.

I turn to the white lace bedspread and flash to a memory of my sister and me lying side by side laughing. I can't remember what we were laughing about anymore, but whatever started it turned somber when the subject of weddings arose. We knew things then that other girls our age didn't. They had their adolescent hearts set on fairy tales and white knights. They wanted to fall in love and live happily ever after. But dreams like that were foolish for girls like my sister and me.

I remember her playing with a strand of my hair, her other hand clasped in mine as she sang softly to me. The lyrics spoke of hope and dreams but the melody was full of so much melancholy it was almost mournful. It hurt to listen and yet I urged her on, still hoping for something more; in that way that only a dreamer can.

Thinking back, I'm pretty sure if we knew what would befall us, we would have run far away from the life neither of us wanted. We thought we'd have time to figure everything out, but we were so naive. I trail my fingers over the bedspread and fight back the urge to cry.

A sharp breath behind me signals the arrival of the man who hasn't strayed far from my thoughts. I don't turn and look at him, though. I stare at that damn bedspread as if I can somehow make myself go back in time and change the outcome. Maybe I should have fought harder or run faster, but I did neither of those things. I think that's the part I find hardest to deal with now, being who I am, the knowledge that I went willingly to my death. That I did nothing to save myself or my family.

“You were just a kid.” Calix’s voice makes me turn to look at him and find him staring at the book on the bed.

First Kiss Fiasco. I vaguely remember it, though for obvious reasons I never finished it. I do remember that it was a teen romance novel, and I was easily captivated by that type of book.

“You both were. How did I not notice how young she was?” He gazes around the room—the shelves that hold books, the posters on the walls of the teen idols we crushed on, and the stuffed teddies sitting on the shelf looking down at us.

“You were not here to notice things, Calix.” I cough to clear my throat, which has gone dry. “You were here to retrieve my sister for your brother. Nothing more, nothing less.”

He doesn’t answer, but then what could he say? I might have forgiven him for the most part, but forgiveness doesn’t erase my memories or the knowledge of the part he played. Being back here is making everything I suppressed and hid from roar to life.

“Where did you go?” I ask as I back away from the room, forcing Calix to back up too. Being in here with him right now is too much. I close the door behind me and look up at him.

“I have some people who are loyal to me. I need to reestablish those connections if I ever want to stop looking over my shoulder,” he replies.

I nod, even if I still think he should be lying low. I bite my tongue. He doesn’t need my opinion here. If he ends up dead, that’s his problem, not mine. Okay, I’m still a little salty about the whole disappearing act.

“I wasn’t sure if you’d come back,” I admit without looking at him. I head back downstairs with him right behind me.

“I wouldn’t just sneak out and disappear, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“It might have crossed my mind. You sure as heck lost your mind when you thought I had left you without saying

anything.”

He sighs. “We still need to talk. You said a lot of shit—” I hold up my hand to cut him off.

“Let’s go to the kitchen. I made a salad if you’re hungry, and I need coffee.”

I don’t give him a chance to say no. I head to the kitchen and walk straight over to the coffee pot. Something tells me I’m going to need it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I stare out the window, the silence weighing heavy on me as Calix processes everything I just told him, minus a few details I'm not sure I'm ready to share with him just yet.

He sighs and leans back, drawing my attention back toward him. "That doesn't explain how or why you think Santos is alive right now."

I bite my lip and offer him a little more. "The nature of my job means I can find out things not everyone can."

He narrows his eyes at me. "You're not a cop, are you?"

I snort. "After everything you've seen me do since we met?"

"Some of the most crooked people I've met are cops."

I nod and concede his point. "No, Calix. I'm not a cop."

I pull out my cell and scroll through a few photos before finding the two I'm after.

"Anyway, one of my girls was working on something when we found this." I turn the phone around for him to see.

He looks down at the screen and frowns before looking up at me. "The Santos brand. But a lot of people wear this brand. I'm pretty sure Santos was trying to build an army of followers."

"Well, an army is only loyal if they believe in their leader. A person who is blackmailed or coerced isn't going to protect anyone other than themselves."

I look down at the photo of the girl's ankle and stare at the stylized *S*, barely refraining from throwing the cell phone out the window. "These victims are not from twenty years ago, Calix. Hell, this girl was just eighteen."

Now that gets a reaction from him. He takes the phone from me, studying the photo to see if he can find something more, something he might have missed.

"When were these taken?"

"Six months ago."

"I haven't heard anything. If he's alive, why wouldn't he come to finish me off if I'm the only possible competition for the throne? Hell, the contact I saw today is loyal to me and said nothing, and that man is many things, but he's not a liar. He would have told me. I saved his son."

I shake my head. "I don't know. I have a few theories, but I never could tell how your brother's mind worked."

I blow out a breath and bite the bullet. "I want to ask you something, and I need you to be completely honest with me."

"Okay."

"Are you still loyal to him? Santos, that is."

He looks at me like I've lost my mind.

"You said it yourself, Calix. Loyalty is everything in this world. You were born and raised in it. You know the rules better than most. Besides, you only have my word for things. Why would I assume you'd believe me over a man you share blood with?"

"Blood means fuck all when it's tainted. The man left me to rot. He—" His mouth snaps shut as he looks up at me.

"The first few months I was there, I was targeted all the fucking time. I ended up killing a man to make a point. I thought that was what kept everyone away until I found out Santos was dead. That made more sense because I was the heir." He shakes his head. "I have no problem trusting you when it comes to Santos screwing me over. Like I said, deep down, I think I already knew. What I'm having trouble with is

believing he's still alive. Santos believes he is some kind of king. There is no way he'd be hiding out somewhere for twenty years. That's just not his style."

"What about if for a chunk of those years, he had no choice?" I whisper.

"What do you mean, no choice?"

"As far as anyone knows, Santos Cirillo and his young bride both died in a tragic accident when their boat caught fire in the middle of the night. But it was all a lie."

"This is why you asked me if I was still loyal to him?"

I nod slowly. "Because if you are, what I say next seals my fate, and I already have enough people gunning for me."

He looks like he wants me to explain that last part but bites his tongue before we get sidetracked. "What happened that night?"

"It was cold. Unseasonably so, especially for here. I was frozen solid as I stood on the deck of the boat naked as the day I was born. I looked like the perfect virgin sacrifice, but of course, I was no longer a virgin, thanks to Santos."

I turn to look out the window again, not wanting to think about that night any more than necessary but knowing he needs to hear this.

I was angry, Calix, so fucking angry. I knew my death wouldn't mean anything to Santos. He'd have the next girl already lined up to take my place. I wanted my freedom, but I wanted my revenge more."

"You did something to him," he states quietly.

I nod. "He'd drank too much, the whole raping thing tired him out I guess, so I hit him over the head to make sure he stayed that way."

Calix grimaces, but I continue on. "I had nothing to wear. He liked me feeling vulnerable, so that was just a bonus. I didn't care anymore. I was just done."

“I used his cell to call someone and then I made a deal. A deal I had no business making, but I did it anyway. I waited an hour for him to arrive, and when he did, he came alone.”

“Who came, Sugar?”

“Andrew Kypianos.”

There is a moment of silence as Calix takes that in. “The head of the Kypianos family?” And Cirillo’s enemy. Oh, they kept the peace, for the most part, but that was only because they were outnumbered. It had nothing to do with loyalty. Andrew loathed Santos.

“I made a deal. My freedom and his silence in exchange for Santos as a new toy.”

I wait for him to react, but apart from looking a little surprised, I get nothing.

“I got a sick thrill out of knowing he was suffering what my parents did, what my sister did. But my need for vengeance came at a steep price. If I’d have just let him burn with the boat, nobody else would have gotten hurt.” I feel tears behind my eyes and blink rapidly to stop them from falling. “See, while I was busy living my life, I had no idea that Andrew had died. He had no children, but he did have three nephews. The oldest one, Felipe, took over, having no clue who he had in his hands. The official story is that all prisoners were disposed of, but the rumor mill is teeming with tales of a man who escaped.”

“People and their rumors,” Calix murmurs.

“Nobody knew who he was. He was emaciated, had long hair, and a beard. He looked old and weak, which was probably true, but evil has an innate way of keeping you strong. I found a few witnesses who describe the same caveman-type figure, but he doesn’t show up on any of my tracking software. And trust me when I say it’s state-of-the-art.”

“That person could have been anyone.”

“I know it was him, Calix.”

“Look, I get what you’re saying, and I can see you believe it, but none of this is proof. Do you really think a person can survive nearly twenty years of torture and then be capable enough to make an escape?”

“If anyone could, it would be Santos. The man lived on spite and the souls of the innocent. I know it sounds crazy, Calix, and you don’t know how much I wish I was. But he’s alive. I can feel it.”

He huffs out a breath and stands up, walking to the window beside me. He looks out at the picturesque view before speaking. “If he’s alive, then where the fuck is he?”

“That I don’t know, not for sure. But those girls I was talking about? They were being forced into prostitution and snuff films that went down in the States. Each victim had his brand burned into their skin.”

“It could be someone else. A copycat. Someone pretending to be him to protect their own identity.”

“But why? Why pick a man as high profile as Santos, who everyone thinks is dead? And why now? It’s only going to draw people out and make them ask questions. That’s not the best way to conceal your identity.”

“Fear is a strong motivator. Throwing the Santos name around will have people wary. A copycat could easily buy himself respect if people truly believed he was Santos.”

“And buy himself a whole new set of enemies. The payoff just wouldn’t be worth it.”

“Who knows how these assholes think? Maybe it’s something as simple as one of the other families trying to stir shit up again.”

He turns to look at me when I sigh.

“The night we got married, a hitman came to my hotel room,” I admit. “He wore the brand of Santos. I originally thought he was there because Santos had figured out who I am and that I’m alive. Instead, he was there because of who I am to you.”

His face goes hard at this. “What the fuck, Sugar? How come you didn’t tell me this?”

“I’m telling you now. I dealt with it okay. Anyway, my point is, he wore Santos’s brand, but he, like you, were under the assumption Santos is dead.”

“So, someone else was calling the shots. Who?”

“Kypianos.”

He frowns. “As in Felipe? The head of the Kypianos family?”

I shrug. “I didn’t get a first name.”

“Well, there you go then. It has to be him. I don’t know the reasons why, but he must have known about Santos being a prisoner, especially given his position within the house. He was likely behind the hit outside the prison too. The question is, is he working alone or are the whole family after me—after us?”

“You don’t know that Felipe is behind this, Calix—”

“And you don’t know that Santos is. Just stop for a second and think about this. Put your feelings aside and look at it from a bystander’s point of view. If Santos was held captive for twenty years and tortured at the hands of his enemies, he would be at death’s door. And if by some miracle he wasn’t, the first thing he would have done once he found out I was not only alive, but a free man, would be to kill me.”

“You haven’t been out long. He might not know. Or maybe he was the one behind the shooting at the prison the day you were released.” The look on his face tells me he’s not buying it.

“All I’m saying is keep an open mind. If its Santos then I don’t think Greece is enough for him anymore. He was locked away for years without any power, and where better to get that, and more, than the States?” I tell him, needing him to know this was bigger than he could possibly understand.

“Sugar—” The cell that’s still in Calix’s hand vibrates, cutting him off. He looks down at it before handing it to me.

“Private number,” he mutters before I shove it into my back pocket. “You’re not going to get that?”

“If it’s important, they’ll text,” I tell him, knowing exactly who it is.

“Look, we’re talking ourselves around in circles.” He looks out the window again before continuing on. “You realize if Santos is alive, then we’re not legally married.”

“That won’t be an issue, Calix, because if Santos is alive, then I’ll kill the asshole myself.”

MY BODY IS ON FIRE. That’s the first thing my mind registers. I’m tugged from a delicious dream and find myself writhing on the bed in pleasure as a hard body nestles between my legs. I gasp as a thick cock thrusts inside me. He feels so damn big. My pussy feels stretched to its limits, but the burn is intoxicating. I arch up to him as his lips find mine. They kiss me with a ferocity that borders on feral. He fucks me savagely into the mattress, leaving me helpless to do anything but hold the fuck on.

When he pulls his lips from mine and sinks his teeth into my neck, I come, and I come hard, with a scream on my lips. My pussy clamps down around him, making him growl out his own release as I milk him dry.

Feeling utterly sated, I lift my hand and cup his jaw, which feels smooth under my touch. “You shaved.”

“I forgot how much you like my beard.”

My eyes snap open. Not because of the beard comment, but because the man inside me isn’t my husband. “Rémy!” I gasp before shoving him away.

He laughs and rolls off me as the horror of what just happened sinks in, followed by white-hot rage. I jump from my bed and flick the light on. I come face-to-face with the man I’ve been desperately trying to avoid. The heartbreak I

had been feeling has been replaced with the urge to murder, so at least there's that.

“You fucking asshole. What are you doing here?”

His laughter cuts off as he climbs from the bed and faces me, his cock still hard even after fucking me. “You wouldn't answer my calls, Sugar.” There is a threat in his voice, but I'm so beyond pissed that I don't care.

“Are you insane?” I pick up the closest thing, which happens to be the lamp, and throw it at his head. He ducks, and it crashes into the wall.

He turns back to me and grins. “Fucking then foreplay. We always did do things backwards, didn't we, Sugar?”

“Damn you, Rémy. You have no idea what you've done.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

His eyes flash with anger as he stalks toward me. I resist the urge to back up, my own anger making me feel invincible—and a tiny bit homicidal.

He wraps his hand around my throat and pins me to the wall. “Oh, I know exactly what I did. I claimed what’s mine. Now when you fuck your pathetic husband, all you’ll think about is how he isn’t me. How he can’t fuck you like I do,” he snarls before his lips are on mine again, hard and punishing.

I feel my body respond to him even as I thrash and fight. Bringing my knee up, I aim for his balls, but the man is too quick to fall for that. He manages to deflect me, only catching a knee to the thigh, which is every bit as ineffective as it sounds. It’s enough to break his concentration, though. Once there is a sliver of space between us, I take the opening and punch him in the face before sweeping his legs out from underneath him. He falls backward onto the bed. Without giving a second thought to my nudity, I straddle his waist and punch his stupid face again and again, feeling punch-drunk when my knuckles split.

Bending down, ignoring his blood-soaked teeth as he grins at me, I glare into his eyes. “If you ever pull shit like this again, I’ll kill you myself.”

His eyes flare, but not with anger, but with lust. Before I can react, his large hands slide me down his body a fraction, impaling me on his hard cock. I yelp in surprise, but he smiles smugly at the ease with which he glides inside me.

“You’re always so wet for me, baby. Way I see it, this pretty little pussy knows exactly who it belongs to.”

I scramble to get off him, but he flips me over and rolls to cover me. “Fuck you, Rémy.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I’m going to.”

He tugs my hips until I’m on my knees before pressing my shoulders into the bed and yanking my arms behind my back. He holds them in place with one hand while lining up his cock against my slick pussy with the other.

“Please, Rémy. I’m married.” I try to appeal to something inside him when I realize I can’t move an inch.

He thrusts inside me, making me gasp at how deep he is in this position. “I don’t give a fuck whose ring is on your finger, Sugar. It’s my bruises on your skin, my blood on your lips, and my cum inside your pussy. He might think you belong to him, but I own you,” he growls, fucking me harder. My head is a mess—anger and desire mixed with guilt and so much regret. I try to fight my body’s response to his, but after all these years, he knows my body better than I do. He fucks me like a man possessed, never giving me a moment to do anything other than take it.

“You think you can just walk away from me? From us?” he snaps, and I hear the hurt laced in his anger.

“I have to,” I choke out as my whole body flushes with heat.

“Fuck that. I refuse. So run, little girl, and hide. Do whatever you think you need. But I’ll find you. I’ll always find you. And when I do, I’ll fuck you over and over until the only name that spills from your lips is mine.”

He thrusts into me hard, the bite of pain throwing me over the edge, dragging him right along with me. I scream as I come and hear the click of the door opening. The dawning horror does nothing to stop my orgasm from smashing into me.

It isn’t until Rémy’s body is ripped from mine that I’m able to get myself together enough to climb off the bed. On

weak legs, I turn to find Calix beating the shit out of a laughing Rémy.

“I’m just keeping her warm for you, man,” he taunts, causing Calix to snap.

“Calix, stop!” I yell as he reaches behind him and pulls a gun from the waistband of his pants. I don’t question where he got it from as I step between them.

Always willing to take the advantage given to him, Rémy pushes open the window he must have entered through and climbs out buck naked.

“See you soon, Sugar,” he calls out ominously, leaving me facing my very livid husband.

“Calix.” I step closer to him, my hand resting on his arm. He rips himself free of my touch. I school my features so that he doesn’t see how much that hurts.

He seethes. “Not playing games, huh?”

I open my mouth to explain but then shut it again. What am I going to say? It isn’t what it looks like.

“I thought he was you,” I whisper, knowing I’m making it worse. I’m still trying to work through everything that just happened.

He looks at me in disgust. “That’s the best you got? He was inside you!” he roars, getting in my face.

I stand my ground and lock my legs, feeling everything beginning to unravel. I swallow hard as his hand wraps around my hair and yanks my head back. I have no choice but to stare into his cold eyes. Right now, he’s not Calix. He’s the Carver.

“You let him touch you.”

“It wasn’t like that. I fought him, Calix.”

“Yeah, angel, it looked like you fought him real hard while coming all over his dick.” His face gets close to mine, his lips barely an inch away, his breath fanning over me. “That what this is, Sugar? You want your cake and eat it too?”

“Calix, please.” As much as I want him to listen, I don’t know what to say. When I replay everything in my head, I know an explanation will sound like a lie.

“Please, what, angel? Is it my turn now? What was it he said? He was keeping you warm for me.”

He pushes me to my knees, and I let him, the shame of everything he is saying washing over me. It doesn’t matter that I didn’t instigate any of this. Part of what he’s saying is true, though. I could have fought harder, but how could I fight when fucking Rémy feels like coming home?

Calix rips open his jeans and shoves them and his boxers down over his ass. He might be pissed at me, but his dick is hard as granite. I’m not sure what to make of that.

“Open,” he orders, and after a second, I do.

He’s not gentle, not that I expected him to be. Using my hair to hold me in place, he fucks my mouth like it’s my pussy. He ignores my gagging when he goes too deep, and he’s unmoved by the tears that run down my cheeks. I let him use me, convinced it’s a penance I have to pay. While this whole thing has turned into a nightmare, it brings with it a startling clarity that I’ve tried to deny.

I’m in love with one man and married to another. Yet neither of them is really mine.

He grunts, and I feel his dick swell just before he pulls from my mouth and comes on my lips and chest. I’ve done many things over the years. I’ve used my body as a bargaining chip and sold myself for the greater good. I’ve done a lot of things I’m not proud of, but I never truly felt like a whore until now.

He tucks himself away and stares down at me, his face void of emotion. But he can’t hide the turmoil behind his eyes. I stand up, my legs shaking, but I pretend not to notice. He looks me up and down like I’m trash, making me want to grab the bedspread and cover up, but I won’t give him the satisfaction.

“Does it feel good knowing his cum is running down your legs while mine paints your face?”

I’m done with this bullshit. I might have fucked Rémy, but if he’s not even going to give me the chance to explain, I’m better off walking away.

When I move to walk past him, he grabs my arm. “I asked you a fucking question.”

“Take your hands off me,” I hiss.

When his grip tightens, I don’t think. I react. I flip him over and watch him crash to the floor. His shocked face brings me a fleeting measure of satisfaction as I look down at him. I lick my lips and watch his eyes darken as I taste his cum.

“To answer your question, no, it doesn’t feel good. All it does is prove what I already knew.”

He huffs. “Yeah, and what’s that?”

“That all men want from me is to fuck me and then fuck me over. You’re not special, Calix.” Though for a brief moment, I thought he could be.

“Wait, you’re mad at me?” He laughs as I shake my head.

“You don’t know me, Calix. If you did, you’d have some serious questions about what happened. But I can see by your face that nothing I say matters.”

He climbs to his feet, and I sidestep him, making sure to keep myself out of his reach. He sees the move, and if it’s possible, the mood in the room blackens even further.

“I’m not going to fucking hurt you,” he snarls.

I don’t bother telling him it’s too late, he already has.

“Trust me, the last thing I want to do right now is touch you.” His blow lands as he heads for the door. He turns to look at me and opens his mouth, but whatever else he was going to say, he swallows down before storming out.

I take a deep breath, but it does nothing to calm my battered nerves. Hearing the front door slam, I walk over to the window and see Calix climb into my car and drive off, the

wheels spinning and kicking up dirt and gravel. I keep watching as my emotions strike at me with the force of a battering ram. Then I do something I haven't done in years, something I swore I would never do here, of all places.

I slide down the wall, pull my knees up to my chest, and cry my fucking eyes out.

I DON'T KNOW how long I've been sitting here, but when I look up, I notice it's getting dark. My eyes are puffy and sore from crying, but I'll admit I feel ten times better. Months and months of pent-up emotions had to spill out eventually.

I get to my feet and head to the bathroom. I stand under the hot spray for the next thirty minutes, washing away every trace of the two men determined to break me in their own ways. Well, not today, boys. Why would I let you succeed where others have failed? Feeling calmer and more in control, I climb out and dry off before grabbing my bag from the closet.

I didn't bother to unpack. I like to be prepared, and something in me is always ready to run at a moment's notice. I pull on a clean pair of panties, a pair of pajama shorts, and a T-shirt, forgoing a bra. Not having the energy to do my hair, I towel it dry and throw it up in a messy bun. After pushing the bag into the back of the closet, I look toward the bed and scowl at the rumpled sheets.

"Stupid men always fucking everything up," I mutter as I strip the sheets from the bed and trudge downstairs to the laundry room. I throw them in the washer and head back upstairs.

I'm heading to the kitchen when the alarm starts blaring, and I freeze. Thinking that it could be Calix but not wanting to take the chance, I run upstairs and grab my gun from my bag and check to make sure it's loaded. I shove my feet into a pair of biker boots and head to my parents' old room. Ignoring the room details, I make my way to the panel on the wall and type

in their anniversary. It turns off the alarm and brings up the video feed from the security cameras.

The images are grainy. The system is so outdated, I'm lucky it works at all. I make a mental note to upgrade when I spot two figures at the front gate. I can't make out if they are familiar or not—the picture quality is that poor. I can't tell anything beyond that they are both men, tall, and not afraid to use the gym.

“Just once, I'd like the bad guys to be short and either skinny enough for me to snap or fat enough for me to run from,” I grumble, making my way downstairs and out the front door.

I pull my gun and keep to the trees lining the driveway, using them as coverage as I head toward the gate. Once I see them, not wanting to take any chances, I decide to forgo questioning them in favor of not getting killed. I aim and shoot the man closest to me in the back of the head. The second guy whirls around and pulls his gun, but he's not fast enough. I fire two bullets. One hits him in the center of the chest, the other hits him between the eyes. Both drop to the ground, both dead. I go to pull my phone out but remember that I'm in PJs with no pockets and no cell phone.

Spinning around to head inside, I realize my mistake too late. I only saw two men on the screens. I didn't account for a third. A gun cracks down across my cheekbone, making my head snap to the side. Overwhelming pain has me seeing spots, but despite that, I raise my gun and fire, earning a muttered curse. With my vision blurry, I'm not sure if I hit anything important. I aim again, but the gun is ripped from my hand. A punch to the same fucking cheek drops me to my knees. I try to crawl away, but the pain is swallowing me whole. When I feel a kick to my ribs, I close my eyes, lie down in the dirt, and let the blackness take me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When I wake up, the first thing that registers is pain. I can't pinpoint where it's coming from. My whole body feels like it's throbbing. I crack open an eye and swallow when I find myself in an unfamiliar room. Carefully, I turn my head and find myself alone.

I slowly get up and take in the room, which in itself is unremarkable. There's a bed with a faded striped blanket over it and a little table next to it. A dresser that's seen better days sits across the room and beside the door. I see another door off to the side, slightly open, showing just enough of an off-white tiled wall to know that it's the bathroom, and that's pretty much it.

I hobble to the closed door first. When I find it locked, I make my way to the window covered by black drapes. I reach up and curse under my breath at the pain. Wrapping one arm around my tender ribs, I use the other to tug the fabric back. Thick black bars block the window from opening—not that it would matter because beyond the bars are what appear to be steel shutters.

“Just your run-of-the-mill hostage hotel,” I mutter as I make my way to the bedside table and pull the drawer open. It's empty. As quietly as I can, I head to the bathroom, scanning the room as I go, looking for a weapon—and finding nothing, of course.

Sliding my hand up the wall, I flick the light switch on and swallow down a gasp as I catch sight of my reflection. I grip the edge of the counter to keep myself up as I stare at my

bruised face. My cheek is bruised and swollen, as is my lip, which is split, but at least the bleeding has stopped. Turning my head, I see more bruising around my temple and dried blood matting my hair, suggesting there is a cut back there too.

The guy who hit me sure as shit packed a punch. It seems he wasn't happy with just knocking me out, though. My aching body tells me he continued beating me even after I passed out. I'm grateful I still have my clothes on. That eliminates the likelihood of being violated—past tense. I won't take it off the table of things to come because I'm dealing with monsters now. The ones I know usually treat rape as if it were meaningless.

I lift my T-shirt and wince at the purple and black bruising on my stomach and ribs. I take a deep breath, and though it hurts like a motherfucker, I'm pretty sure my ribs are just bruised and not broken. As long as I'm not bleeding internally, I should be good. I also take a moment to check my gunshot wound, hoping the attack didn't cause it to start bleeding again. It seems to be fine. Thank God for small miracles.

The door to the room opens with an ominous click, but I don't leave the bathroom. Stupid, I know. It's always better to fight in a larger space if possible. I'm already at a disadvantage with my small stature. Right now, though, I don't have it in me. It's not going to matter if I'm in here or out there. I'm in no shape to fight, and they know that.

With a sigh, I slide my top back into place and limp into the bedroom I woke up in just minutes ago. I pause in the doorway, and my eyes widen in surprise. I don't know exactly who I was expecting, though I had been trying to narrow down the list. This man, however, was most definitely not on it.

“What the fuck?” the very pissed off Russian curses as he rushes toward me.

I flinch at his rapid approach, and I hate myself a little for it. Sensing that, he hesitates when he reaches me. With another curse in Russian, he reaches out and wraps his arms around me, tugging me to his chest. It's the softness that breaks me. I was ready for anything, but apparently not kindness. The tears

fall before I can stop them. Once the emotional barricade is breached, I can't turn them off again.

A sob rips free from my chest as I grip the front of his shirt and feel myself fall apart in the arms of a man who very likely came to kill me. But that begs the question: why would the head of the Russian Bratva come himself and not send one of his minions? With a deep, shuddering breath, I pull back and look up into the warm, amber eyes of Maxim Popov. We might know what each other looks like—with friends in common, I made sure to do my research, and I'm sure he did the same—but we've never met before. Right now, I can't think of a single reason he would be here unless it's to get rid of me.

“Are you here to kill me?”

He frowns before lifting one of his large hands and trailing it gently over the swell of my cheek. I hiss in pain, making him growl. “I was told to come here, and I would find a gift,” he says in Russian-accented English.

Now it's my turn to frown, even though it hurts. “A gift?”

He cocks his head, his eyes moving over my face before they drop to my lips. “You know, I got a call from Aslanov telling me his woman and her sisters were looking for you. So imagine my surprise to find you here, like this.”

“Where is here?” I look around the room and try to step back, but Maxim doesn't let me go.

“You are in Tyumen Oblast.”

“Wait, I'm in Russia?”

He looks confused for a second, this time letting me step back when I try to free myself of his hold. “You didn't know this? What the fuck is going on?”

“That's what I'd like to know.”

“Tell me what you remember.”

“I was at home when intruders tripped the alarm. I saw two of them on the screen coming through the gate and managed to get the drop on them. I didn't account for a third man. Rookie mistake,” I mutter, pissed at myself. “The asshole hit me with

a gun, I tried shooting him, but he hit me again, and that's all I remember until I woke up here. Jesus, Carver is going to lose his mind." I use Calix's nickname just in case he has enemies here listening in. I refuse to believe that anything has happened to him. The man has nine lives.

"Where is home, and who is Carver?"

"Home right now is Greece, and Carver is my husband."

His eyes widen a fraction, but other than that, he shows no outward reaction. "So, someone kidnapped you and brought you here to me. That's a long journey, a journey you have no memory of. You must have been drugged too. How do you feel?"

"I feel like I've been hit by a bus, but otherwise, I'm fine. If I was given something, it has already worked its way out of my system."

He walks toward the door before pivoting and heading back toward me. "Why tell me you were a gift? Why involve me at all?"

I shrug. "Who told you I was a gift?"

He pauses, looking at me, his eyes narrowing a fraction. "An old friend," he answers evasively. Just like that, we slip back into our roles.

"Right, well, good luck with that, but I need to go home."

"You do, yes. You have people worried about you."

"No, not to the States. I can't go back there just yet. It's not safe."

"Not safe for who?"

"Not safe for anyone. I won't put my girls at risk. I'd rather die than let that happen."

He sighs and strips out of his jacket, which he tosses on the bed. He walks back over to me and takes me by the arm before leading me back into the bathroom.

"First, we get you cleaned up."

I want to protest, but I'm sore, and I need to know exactly how much damage was done. Once we're both inside the room, it suddenly feels far too small. Maxim turns and stares at me. He slides a hand under my jaw and tilts my head to the side so he can inspect the damage. I avoid making eye contact, feeling a little odd being this close to him.

"I don't think you need stitches, but the bruising will last a few weeks. I'll call for ice. Are you hurt anywhere else?"

I hesitate for a second, but it's just long enough for Maxim to answer his own question. He growls low.

"Show me."

"Maxim, I said I'm fine. I just need—what the fuck?"

His hands move to the hem of my shirt. Before I can stop him, he has the material pushed up to underneath my breasts. He curses, a long string of profanity mixing both English and Russian, making me grin. I can't help but find his anger at me being hurt adorable.

"You think this is funny?" He looks at me incredulously.

"No, I think you getting angry over me being hurt funny, when five minutes ago I thought you were here to kill me."

"I do not kill people who haven't earned a dance with the Grim Reaper."

He drops into a squat, his large hands sliding around my waist, making me flashback to another room with another man.

I pull back and move to grab the material of my shirt, but he stands up and presses me back against the sink.

He murmurs something in Russian that sounds like *shh ahn-gyil* and then switches back to English. "I feel your panic, but it is not needed. I won't hurt you."

My heart thuds in my chest. It's not fear that he'll hurt me that's freaking me out, it's fear of something else altogether. I scramble for something to say and latch onto his words.

“What does *ahn-gyil* mean?” Because of the nature of my job, I know multiple languages, but Russian has always eluded me. I do know a few words, though I have never heard this one.

He winks at me before squatting back down and slowly lifting the hem of my T-shirt once more. He doesn't curse this time as he takes in the bruises, but his facial expression can only be described as murderous.

“I want to kill whoever did this to you. I want to rip out their fingernails and feed them to the assholes one by one.”

“Okay.”

“Then I would move on to their fingers before I made them eat their own intestines.”

“And they say romance is dead,” I tease, smiling, which drops when I remember that I'm a married woman.

“Women want hearts, no? I would bring you a heart.”

“Why do I get the feeling you don't mean the chocolate kind? And I'm married, remember?”

“Yes, so you say, but nobody seems to know this. Therefore, it stands to reason you tell me this lie because you feel threatened.”

“And lying about being married would achieve what, exactly?”

He stands up, dropping his voice lower as he presses me against the counter again. “Well, you might assume an honorable man wouldn't touch you if you belonged to another.”

“I belong to no one.” I walk into the trap he sets.

“That's what I thought.” He grins before he slams his mouth down over mine.

I freeze, my shock rendering me unable to do anything for a second. I shove against his chest, but the man is like a brick wall. He nibbles my lip and tugs it between his teeth.

Foolishly, I open my mouth to tell him to fuck off. That leaves me open to his tongue sliding inside.

Naturally, he takes advantage of the situation by grinding his hard dick against me. That's okay, though. I take advantage of the situation too, by sliding my hands up the back of his shirt and pulling the gun free from the holster he's wearing. I click off the safety and press it to his head in one swift move.

By the time the sound registers in his brain, it's too late. "You make me lose my mind," he mumbles against my lips.

"Not yet, but I'm about to," I snap. "Now step back."

He sighs and takes a step back and then another, putting some much-needed distance between us.

"What the ever-loving fuck? I told you I'm married." I try to ignore how breathless I feel, my heart galloping like a wild mustang. He stares at me, his arms folded across his chest as he waits for me to continue.

"I'm going home. To Greece," I clarify.

"To your husband?" he adds snarkily.

"Yes, to my husband."

"And how sure are you that this husband is not the one responsible for all this?"

My mouth snaps shut at that. My immediate reaction is to tell him Calix wouldn't do that, but that was before he thought I'd betrayed him.

"What's to say that this man you want to hurry home to didn't arrange all of this just to get you out of the way?"

"I don't deal in what ifs. I deal in facts. So, unless Calix admits to me that he did this himself, I'll keep on believing that someone took me—either to get to me or to get to him."

"Calix?" He tilts his head like a hunter studying his prey.

"Let's just go our separate ways. You can pretend you never saw me, and I'll return the favor."

He stalks toward me again, not giving an iota about the gun pointed at him. As much as shooting him feels appealing, the last thing I need is the Bratva chasing me down. I pull back and drop my arm. He grabs my wrist, not squeezing but keeping my hand in place so I can't aim it at him again.

"I'm afraid I can't do that, *ahn-gyil*."

"That's twice you've called me that now. What does it mean?"

I allow him to take the gun from me and duck under his arm as he slides it back into his holster.

"It means angel."

I suck in a sharp breath and close my eyes in defeat. "You know who my husband is, don't you? You knew all along." I open my eyes and turn to face Maxim.

He merely nods his head.

"Are you his friend or his enemy?"

"That, my dear, all depends on you."

"Have I ever mentioned how I hate cryptic motherfucker wannabe Bond villains?"

He chuckles, the sound rich and dark, like my favorite chocolate. "Yes, this is going to be fun."

"Well, if you're having fun, I want to have fun too." And with that, I pull back my arm and punch him in the face.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Well, it has to be said, punching the Russian pakhan was not one of my finer moments, but seeing the smug as fuck smile wiped off his face totally makes it worth it.

He licks the blood from his lip before pulling a white handkerchief from his pocket and dabbing away the blood. “Feel better?”

“A little. Maybe if you let me hit you a few more times, I’ll feel a lot better.”

He laughs before turning and walking toward the door. “Yes, you’ll do nicely.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

He turns toward me, ignoring his bloody nose as if it’s a regular occurrence. “You know who I am. You know the kind of man I replaced. I am trying to bring the Bratva into the future, but there are those who prefer the old ways.”

“You can’t be surprised by this.”

He shakes his head. “I’m not. I expected it, however, the people who would like to see me fail seem very good at getting information about me. Too good.”

“You have a traitor in your ranks,” I surmise.

He nods. “Yes, it seems so. What I need is someone to watch and listen. Someone who won’t immediately arouse suspicion because most men will be too busy adjusting their cocks when they see her.”

“Her who?” I ask, though I suspect I won’t like the answer.

“Why you, of course. My lovely girlfriend.”

Yep, I was right. I don’t like that answer at all. “I realize you do things differently here in Russia, so I’m not going to maim you for suggesting I be your girlfriend when I have told you repeatedly told you that I have a husband,” I say as calmly as possible.

“Fake girlfriend. It’s just a cover, Sugar, so you can help me catch a rat. You wouldn’t want me to call Aslanov now, would you? I’m sure he’d be very happy to find out I’ve found you?”

“It’s like you want me to keep punching you. Are you seriously blackmailing me?”

He grins unrepentantly before he swings the door open, showing a man who looks at Maxim’s face before his eyes shift to me. His expression filled with the promise of death.

“Yuri, Miss Daniels will be staying with us for a while. Please see that she has everything she needs.”

“Sir?”

Maxim looks at him, and Yuri snaps his mouth shut, knowing better than to question his boss.

“Did I stutter, Yuri?”

“No, sir.” He steps back and allows Maxim to walk past him.

I head for the door too, but Yuri blocks it.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, ahn-gyil. Be a good girl for Yuri,” Maxim calls as he walks away.

I squeeze my hands into fists, wanting to rip his pretty head from his body. Yuri cocks his eyebrow at me as if he knows exactly what I’m thinking.

I flip him off and turn away, moving to the window. If the stupid bars weren’t there, I’d be out of here the second the door closes. But for now, I’m stuck like a caged animal.

Maxim needs to watch himself because caged animals tend to bite.

Yuri mumbles something about food before closing the door, leaving me to berate myself for the stupid decisions I've made lately. And boy, I've made a few. Calix being one of them, apparently. Part of me refuses to believe he could be behind this. Hell, this is more Rémy's style, but Rémy doesn't have a single reason for this bullshit. After all, he got what he wanted. He was the domino that made all the others fall.

The look in Calix's eyes when he left tore my insides apart. I swear, no matter what happens, that look of betrayal will be one that haunts me till the day I die. I know he's ruthless. He might not be as sadistic as his brother, but he's still a Cirillo, and the blood running through their veins is toxic in a way that poisons everything it touches.

Could he do this to me? Yes. He has it in him, but would he? That's the part that has me struggling. I remember how soft his hands were on me when he tended to my wound. How pissed he was when he realized that Andino had snuck into our hotel room to rape me. I remember the relief in his eyes when I walked through that door and he realized I hadn't left him. That man would sooner die than have a hand in my beating and kidnapping. Right?

I consider taking a shower to wash the blood from my body, but I'm suddenly exhausted, so I curl up on the bed and wonder how best to deal with the current situation. If I can't get my head and heart on the same page, then I'm better off far away from Calix, at least until I've dealt with my own turbulent emotions. Right now, he's too angry to hear what I have to say. I wonder if he's worried about me or if he thinks I just up and left him—ran off into the sunset with Rémy, perhaps.

I rub my hands over my face, sick of thinking of Rémy and Calix. If Maxim wants me to play spy for him, then fuck it. I'll do it. I'm safer here than back in Greece, and I can't go home until I've cleaned up the mess I've made.

Of course, staying means it will be harder to find the answers I'm looking for about Santos, but Maxim is not without resources. If I do him a favor, he'll owe me one of his own. What's better than being owed a favor from the head of the Russian Bratva?

A LITTLE WHILE LATER, Yuri returns with a tray of food and an ice pack. He places everything on the dresser before he retrieves a duffle bag from the hallway, which he places on the floor near the dresser. He looks at me and, in halting, broken English, tells me to eat and accept the gifts from the pakhan.

I sit up and swing my legs over the side of the bed, wincing slightly at the movement. Yuri is gone before I can say anything. I hear the lock turn a moment after the door closes, but I can't resist trying the handle anyway. Confirming what I already know, I turn with a sigh and move to see what's in the bag. I open the zipper and look inside to find bottles of shampoo, conditioner, lotion, and shower gel, as well as a razor, a toothbrush, and toothpaste. In the small inside pocket, I find a bunch of high-end makeup. I take it out and shake my head, instantly regretting the action, and wonder how on earth Yuri managed to find all this shit so quickly. Then I consider what I'm capable of and smile. Placing it all back inside, my hand brushes something soft at the very bottom of the bag. I pull out the delicate material and hold it up to find a short, silky nightdress in a deep eggplant color. I check the label, and—surprise, surprise—it's my size.

Not knowing what to make of it all, I carry the bag into the bathroom and place it on the counter. Leaving the bathroom, I walk over to the dresser and pick up the tray of food and the ice pack before moving to the bed.

Though I don't feel particularly hungry, I know I need to eat to keep my strength up. Lifting the metal lid covering the food, I'm happy to find a sandwich, a bottle of water, and an apple. I don't think I could stomach anything too rich or fancy. Not that this place looks like it does rich and fancy.

I bite into the soft bread and moan in appreciation at the taste of juicy roast beef and sharp cheese. My appetite kicks in after the first bite, and the sandwich is gone before I know it. I pick up the ice pack and gently place it on my swollen cheek as I crunch on the fresh, crisp green apple. Once I've finished the apple, I set the core on the tray and the ice pack on the small side table before grabbing the bottle of water. I check the seal, then scan the bottle for anything resembling a needle prick. When I don't find anything, I twist the cap and drink the whole bottle in just a few gulps.

Thanks to my being unconscious, I haven't had anything to drink, which isn't going to help my throbbing head. At least I didn't pee the bed. And as soon as I think about peeing, I have to go. I hurry to the bathroom as fast as my injuries will allow, yank my shorts down, and pee for what feels like forever.

Since I'm already in here and feeling gross, I strip, grab the toiletries from the duffle bag, and finally take a shower. The water pressure is awful, but the water is hot, and that helps ease some of the aches. I carefully wash the dried blood from my hair, then clean the rest of my body. Once the water runs cold, I climb out and wrap a large towel around myself before grabbing the smaller hand towel to pat my hair dry.

Loath to put my dirty clothes back on, I decide to stay in the towel. I use some of the shower gel to wash out my underwear before draping it over the shower head to dry. As I'm about to walk back into the bedroom, I remember the silky nightdress. Unfortunately, there is no underwear in the bag, but at least I have something to sleep in other than a towel. I dig in the bag for it, then drop the towel before slipping the silky material over my body. Once it's on, I adjust it until my boobs are covered, and it skims the middle of my thigh.

I glance up at the mirror and huff. "Well, at least it matches my bruises. God, I'm a mess."

Opening the door to the bedroom, I freeze when I see a garment bag laying across the top of the dresser that wasn't there before. I look toward the door to the room, not liking that someone was in here while I was in the shower, not one little bit. With that thought in mind, I shove the dresser until it butts

up against the door. My poor injured body protests, but I'll never be able to rest if I think someone can so easily get to me. I lean against the dresser once I'm done and breathe through the pain, feeling old beyond my years.

WHEN I CAN BREATHE AGAIN without breaking into a cold sweat, I stumble back over to the bed, exhausted. The mystery bag will have to wait for now.

With my body feeling like it's been hit by a car; everything is taking far more effort than it normally would. Out in the real world, I'm always on the go, never stopping until I crash, then waking up and starting all over again. If I'm in pain I push through it, but here, there is nothing for me to do or to distract me from my injuries.

I'm not sure what Maxim has planned for me or if he's setting me up. One thing is for sure, I need some sleep to make it through what's to come. I pull the covers back, shut down any thoughts my brain tries to conjure up about who else might have shared this bed, and climb in. I tug the covers tightly around me and drift off almost instantly.

THE SOUND of wood splintering and the screech of furniture moving across a wooden floor have my eyes snapping open as I reach for my gun, which, of course, isn't there. Looking around, I find a livid-looking Maxim storming toward me. I shake my head to clear it, sleep still clouding my thoughts enough that I can't process what the hell is happening right now.

"You didn't answer," he snarls, dragging me from the bed.

It's only my sharp gasp of pain from my protesting muscles that has him freezing in place.

"Shit. Fuck," he curses as he steadies me, his grip loosening slightly.

“What the hell is going on?” I snap, ripping my arm free from his hold so I can support my ribs.

“I knocked. I shouted. You did not answer,” he growls, his anger dying out as his intense eyes move over my face.

“I was asleep, you moron,” I growl back, momentarily forgetting who I’m talking to but honestly not caring.

He reaches for me, a sly grin playing on his lips. He trails a finger up my arm, taking the strap of my nightgown that must have slipped down and moving it back into place. My skin breaks out in goosebumps at his touch, and I feel my nipples harden. I fold my arms over my chest to hide them.

“You’re quite possibly the most fearless person I’ve ever met. I would kill anyone else who spoke to me the way you do.”

“You’re not the first person to say that to me, but it turns out I’m hard to kill.” I turn away, hating the way my body reacts to him.

He lifts his hand and turns my face to look at him before dipping his head and whispering against the shell of my ear. “I don’t want to kill you, Sugar. I want to fuck you.”

“It’s too bad we don’t always get what we want.” I move to step back, but his hand snaps out and grips my hip.

“You see, that’s the thing. I always get what I want. How do you think I made it this far?”

“Honestly, mostly murder and mayhem.” I manage to get out, proud as fuck that my voice sounds cool and unaffected.

He grins, dazing me for a second before he skims his nose across my cheek. “Such hostility wrapped in a sexy little package. Tell me, Sugar, are you going to fight me this hard in bed, or is this just your idea of foreplay?”

I poke him in the chest with my finger. “I. Am. Married. I realize it means nothing to you, but it means something to me.”

“We’ll see,” he replies cryptically.

“Have you taken your medication today because you’re crazy?”

“Oh, Sugar, you haven’t seen what crazy looks like yet,” he whispers before pulling back, his eyes moving down the length of my body. He groans. Shaking his head, he backs up farther. “If you don’t want me to bend you over this chest of drawers and fuck you so hard you forget about your husband, then I suggest you get dressed.”

I look at him like he’s batshit crazy because I’m starting to think he truly is. “You’re insane.”

“I know. Now get dressed. We have places to be.”

“Places to be?” I rub my temples, feeling another headache coming on.

“A dinner party. I want to give you a test run.” He smirks.

I ignore the innuendo and shake my head. “I have nothing to wear, unless you want me to go in my bloody PJs?”

He frowns and turns, looking at the garment bag I’d forgotten all about.

“I think you’ll find that you have everything you need.” He looks at his watch and frowns. “You have thirty minutes. I need to make a call.”

He turns and leaves before I can punch him again, which is probably for the best. The man is infuriating.

I stomp over to the bag and unzip it, reaching inside and grabbing the hanger. Lifting it out carefully, I find a stunning floor-length gown made of black lace. I lay it across the bed and reach into the bag again, pulling out a shoebox and, inside, a pair of strappy, red-soled heels. Pure shoe porn. I check them and see that they are also my size, and I can’t help but laugh.

“He might be crazy, but the man has his talents.”

I check the bag and find nothing else inside. “Of course,” I mutter, rolling my eyes. I guess I’ll be going commando tonight. I hope this thing covers all the goods. With a sigh, I head to the bathroom to fix up my face.

Once inside, I grab the makeup from the duffle bag. Thankfully, it's a good brand for covering up bruises, though there isn't much I can do about the swelling. I take my time, wincing whenever I touch a particularly tender spot, especially my lips, which are now scabbed over. When I'm finally finished and feel somewhat like myself again, I figure it was worth it.

My hair is a little crazy right now, and I don't have much time to do anything fancy, so I run a brush through it before parting it down the middle and tucking it behind my ears. Then, with a small amount of conditioner thinned out with water, I smooth down my hair as best I can. Once it's as good as it's going to get, I move back to the bedroom and wiggle into the dress.

It's not as easy as I'd hoped. I'm ready to lie down by the time it's on, but as painful as it was squeezing into it, I can't deny how sexy I feel. Skin-tight with a high neck, the dress covers me from my throat all the way down to my toes. It even has long sleeves, so all my bruises are carefully hidden from sight. The black lace gives the illusion that I'm completely naked underneath, but there is a thin layer of skin-colored material covering all the parts that need covering. But my favorite part of the dress is the slit that starts at mid-thigh, separating the material and showing a whole lot of leg when I walk. It's both risky and demure.

I eye the shoes and grit my teeth, knowing this is going to hurt, when I hear the key in the door. I turn to face it as it opens and Maxim walks through. He freezes when his eyes land on me, and—no kidding—his mouth drops open. He whispers something in Russian, and even though I have no clue what he said, I feel my skin flush.

“You look—” His eyes move over me hungrily. “Edible,” he finishes.

“Well, I'm not on the menu,” I tell him as I sit on the edge of the bed and stare at the beautiful shoes.

He must realize my problem because, before I can say anything, he's on his knees in front of me. With his eyes on

mine, he lifts my foot, making my dress fall open. I place my hand over the top of the split, not wanting to give him a show, as he slips the shoe on and fastens the strap. His hand slides up my calf briefly, making my breath hitch, before he gently places my foot back down and reaches for the other.

He repeats the process, all the while his eyes stare into mine, until he has the buckle fastened. Then his hands slide up my calf, only this time they keep going. His eyes drop to follow the path his hands take. When they reach my knee, I reach over and stop him, completely forgetting about my lack of underwear situation. It's the grumble in his chest that reminds me. That, and he shakes off my hands and slides them up my thighs, his thumb a hair's breadth away from my pussy.

I use my very pointy shoe to shove him back. "Learn some fucking boundaries, Maxim, or I swear, pakhan or not, I'll geld you," I warn him, my pulse beating wildly out of control. As much as I'm trying to hide it, I'm turned on. If he had reached the holy land, he would have felt evidence of that himself.

I stand up and smooth my dress into place, then look down at him with the most condescending look I can muster. "Well, are we doing this or what?"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“So, tell me what I need to know,” I say quietly once the partition is closed and the driver can’t hear us.

“The house we are going to belongs to one of my brigadiers, Boris Golubev. He will be there with his wife, Polina, but he will leave later to fuck his mistress, Vera, and no one will blink an eye, even Polina.”

I roll my eyes. “Gross, but not surprising.”

“This world is different from the one you’re used to, Sugar.”

“You have no idea what I’m used to, Maxim,” I point out.

He shakes his head. “You must bite your tongue. Women are not allowed to speak their minds so freely. If a man wishes to indulge his woman behind closed doors, he will. But in public, she will always defer to her husband.”

“I might not like or agree with any of it, but I know how to play the game. Once I step out of this car, I’ll be the doting girlfriend, and nobody will suspect otherwise. I know what I’m doing, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it, now, does it?”

He dips his head in acknowledgment.

I bite my lip. “I need to get a message to Calix.”

“No,” he answers before looking away.

“I wasn’t asking for permission, Maxim. I’m not looking for a way out of our deal. At least for now, I’m happy enough

to stay here and help you, but I won't leave Calix to worry. He'll end up exposing himself to find out answers."

"You really think he cares that much?"

Ouch. That barb drew blood.

"It doesn't matter what either of us thinks. It's about doing the right thing. If he sniffs around asking questions, it might not just put his life in jeopardy but mine too."

He's quiet after that, and having nothing else to say, I turn and look out the window and watch the world pass by. It's not until we pull up to a rather ostentatious townhouse that he breaks the silence.

"Fine." I turn at the sound, and he nods. "Tonight, you make everyone believe, and tomorrow I will provide you with means to contact Calix."

I smile. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet," he warns as he opens the door and climbs out, offering me his hand.

"I'm about to throw you to the wolves."

I take his hand and climb out, flashing a lot of leg. He closes the door, but he doesn't let me go. Instead, he pins me against the car.

"There are people watching from the living room window," he murmurs as his lips skim over my pulse point. I feel my stomach flutter, and I squeeze my hands into fists, knowing this no-underwear thing is going to bite me in the ass.

His teeth nip the skin lightly in warning, so I blow out a breath and slip into the role of the vixen I'm all too familiar with. I slide my hands slowly up his arms and pull myself closer to him.

"We better get inside before people think I'm more important than I am." I warn him using his body to keep me hidden for a moment while I prepare myself.

He turns his head lightly, catching my eyes. I give him a seductive look for the onlookers and lick my lips before

leaning in close.

“You want them to see me as nothing more than a pretty toy. If they think I mean more to you than that, I’ll become a person of interest. And you better believe if they think they can get to you through me, they will try.”

He curses but pulls back and urges me to slide my arm through his. “It’s going to be a long fucking night,” he grumbles as he walks me up to the house.

“Yeah, well, try being me. I’m walking into this virtually blind. I have to say, Maxim, you’re not exactly forthcoming.” I mutter quietly.

His lips twitch as he looks at me and winks. The expression clears from his face as the door opens to reveal a short, round man with thinning hair and a fake smile holding his arms open for Maxim to enter. He speaks to Maxim in rapid Russian, leaving me to look around the large entrance hall as we step inside.

When Maxim nudges my arm, I turn back and find the guy’s eyes on my tits, staring as if I were naked. He says something to Maxim before he licks his lips. I don’t know what he says, but the air around us seems to freeze despite the man’s smile. A smile that slips right off his face when he finds himself pinned to the wall, Maxim’s hand around his throat and knife pressed dangerously close to his eye.

Maxim’s voice is so low I can’t make out the words—let alone what language he’s speaking—but when the sleazy guy starts apologizing profusely, I get the gist. Maxim shoves him away before sliding his knife back inside his jacket pocket. He growls at the man before his hand moves to the back of my neck and pulls me to him.

Before I can stop his next move, his mouth is crashing down on mine in an act of ownership. For a second, I freeze, but then I remember that none of this is real. It’s all an illusion, and if there is one thing I’ve mastered over the years, it’s how to act.

I allow myself to melt into him and remind myself to go with it when his hands move around to cup my ass. I feel the evidence of his arousal pressed between us, and for a moment I, worry about how far he's going to take this. A cough drags his attention away, leaving me with bruised lips and what I'm sure is a dazed look on my face.

The man approaching us must be someone Maxim trusts because he greets him with a casual grin and a man hug, even though he keeps one hand on my hip.

“Speak English, my friend. Alina might not speak, but she hears just fine. She doesn't, however, understand a word of English,” Maxim tells him in English.

I fight back a grin at the clever bastard before adopting a confused expression.

“Alina, this is Po, one of my most trusted brigadiers.”

I keep my eyes wide as he chuckles and repeats what he just said in Russian to keep up the ruse. I nod and smile at the man, but I don't offer my hand. I wrap myself around Maxim and look up at him as if he hung the moon.

Gag.

The man walks away as Maxim leans down and kisses the tip of my nose.

“Nice work,” he whispers.

“You're a clever bastard,” I whisper back before shutting up just in case anyone else is around.

“I have my moments. It's going to kill you not to speak all night, though, isn't it?”

I smile innocently at him. Let him believe what he likes, but not having to make small talk with a bunch of misogynistic assholes sounds like fucking heaven to me.

Po returns with a woman who looks me up and down before looking away. I don't take offense to the snub. I'm confident enough in my own skin to know she's a fucking bitch. With the way she's looking at Maxim, like she wants to lick him from head to toe, I'd say she's jealous.

I offer her a small smile and a wave as Po explains to her in English that I can't speak, and Maxim would prefer if they all spoke English since I don't understand a word of it. She grins callously, loving that she is in on the supposed secret. She tells him in choppy English that she will tell the others.

She heads off to do his bidding while Maxim and Po talk. I pretend I'm Maxim's adoring plaything, pressing my body against his and gliding my hand over his jacket, clueless to everything going on, but instead, I store away everything I hear. Maxim squeezes my hip a few times, and I know I'm affecting him. Serves him right. He's the one who wanted to play this game.

It dawns on me later, as I'm sitting between Maxim and an older man who spits when he talks, that I'm learning far more about Maxim's business than he intended. His hand slides over my thigh and squeezes, drawing my attention. His lips move to my ear, and he tells me the men will be retiring to the other room to talk business.

I nod and accept the quick kiss he gives me before I find myself with the handful of women that attended this evening. Wonderful.

After five minutes of watching them point and laugh at me, I find it almost impossible to keep my face neutral. See, I suffer from a condition known as involuntary eye-rolling syndrome. It mostly affects me when I'm around stupid-ass bitches, and the only cure is to set them all on fire. Unfortunately, that's not an option tonight. Instead, I stand up and head off to find a bathroom.

I find the bathroom relatively easy and decide to make use of the facilities while I'm here, even if it's just to kill time. The world I live in might be a crazy, chaotic mess at times, but I'd take that any day over the fake ass bullshit Maxim has to deal with.

I don't know how people can live like this every day and not end up jumping off a bridge instead. I can feel my IQ dropping just being here. That's not to say I think the people out there are dumb. I don't doubt how clever they are for a

second, especially the women. They are just playing a role similar to mine. It's listening to them bitch about me like I'm dense just because, as far as they know, I can't speak.

I will never understand why people feel justified spewing their toxic bullshit at someone because they find them to be lacking in some way. Nobody is perfect. We shouldn't want to be. It puts too much pressure on people to strive to obtain the unattainable. All that happens is that we chase the things we want and never stop to appreciate all the things we already have. To me, that sounds utterly ridiculous and fucking exhausting.

Knowing if I stay in here any longer, it's going to be weird, I wash my hands and leave the room, only to bump into a hard chest. I stumble back before steadying myself, forcing down the urge to scowl at the man. He yells at me in Russian, so I have no clue what he says, but my lack of response pisses him off. He grabs my arm, making me want to knee him in the balls. I let him drag me away instead of laying him out cold.

I stumble on my heels and adopt a scared face as I'm pulled into a large room. Every man in there turns to face me as the asshole holding me gestures to me and snarls something.

My eyes find Maxim's. He looks pissed off. He stands and stalks toward us. The room goes quiet as he makes his approach, reaching out for the man's hand on my arm. Maxim squeezes it until the guy lets me go. But Maxim isn't done. He snaps the asshole's fingers, making him cry out. He says something before he switches to English and orders everyone to follow suit.

“Nobody touches what is mine. Understood?”

The asshole nods, as do most of the others in the room.

He takes my hand and walks me to the chair he just vacated before he sits and pulls me onto his lap.

My dress falls open as he pulls my legs up over his and splays his large hand over my ass. He makes no attempt to cover my modesty. If the look on the guy's face who is

opposite is anything to go by, he just caught a glimpse of something he shouldn't have.

“Because I can't trust my own men with one tiny woman, she stays. Anyone who speaks Russian during this meeting will find that Alina will not be the only person in this room unable to speak,” he casually warns them while simultaneously reminding them of my *condition*.

“She does not speak?” one of the men questions.

“Not she was born mute,” Maxim replies, lying with a straight face.

“Now, where were we?” He goes on to speak about shipments and payments as I rest my head against his shoulder and listen to the rhythmic beating of his heart.

The meeting drags on forever. While it does, I feel eyes moving over me the whole time, making me feel like I need a bleach bath to ever feel clean again. I start to feel myself drift off when the room starts to clear out. I'm about to open my eyes when, in a quieter voice, Maxim continues speaking.

“You have any idea who might be passing them information, you need to tell me now.”

“I know nothing. I've sent out some feelers, but right now, everyone is in the dark.”

Maxim huffs, and his hand rubs my ass almost absently.

“What about her? She is new. She could be a plant.”

Maxim laughs as if it were the funniest thing he has ever heard. “Alina might have the tightest pussy in the world and a body to rival a porn star's, but she is not so smart.”

“It could all be an act—”

Maxim cuts him off, his voice as sharp as a knife. “Do you think I'm stupid, Fyodor?”

“No, Pakhan, of course not.”

“Do you think I spill my secrets at night while my cum drips from her cunt?” he hisses.

“I—”

“Or maybe you think because she has a mouth made for sin, I let her lead me around by my balls?”

“No, sir. I—”

“I think you should stop talking, Fyodor, before I cut out your tongue and feed it to you. Alina is good for two things—fucking and sucking.”

This time, the guy doesn't say anything, but Maxim is already worked up.

“Who I fuck and when is none of your business. I could bend her over this table and fuck her until her legs gave way and order you to watch, and there isn't a fucking thing you could do about it. Alina is no more a traitor than I am a saint, but if for some crazy reason I am wrong, then I will deal with her myself.”

“Yes, Pakhan,” he answers in a much more subdued voice than before.

“Go and find out where the fuck my missing shipment is,” he snarls.

I hear the guy's chair scrape back as he stands, so I wait until I hear the door open and close again before cracking open my eyes.

“We're alone,” he says, looking down at me. He lowers his head until his lips hover over mine. “But I can't promise there are no cameras or listening devices, so keep up the act until we leave.”

I blink once, twice, to let him know I hear him loud and clear, just as he presses his lips to mine. I keep my lips closed as I kiss him back, trying to keep myself emotionally detached from the whole thing, but it's impossible. Maxim forces his tongue into my mouth, leaving me no choice but to take everything he throws at me. By the time he pulls away, I'm a sweaty mess.

“Fuck, I wish I could just slide my fingers into your wet heat and lick them clean. I bet you taste fucking delicious.”

I whimper, remembering at the last second that I'm not supposed to be able to talk. With a sigh, he presses his forehead against mine for a second before he stands up with me in his arms and places me gently on my feet. He bends his arm and indicates for me to take it, much like he did when we entered, but things have changed.

"Let's get the fuck out of here," he grumbles, leading me out.

People look at me as we enter, but the crowd has thinned out slightly. Noticeably, the women are absent. Or should I say, the original women are absent. A girl about ten years younger than me, dressed in only a black bikini top and a pair of booty shorts, grinds on top of one of the men old enough to be her grandfather. I bet his dick is pushing against the expensive material she is gyrating back and forth on.

I avert my eyes as I casually scan the room, taking in the players and their reactions. I see three men talking animatedly to each other in the far corner, near a table of canapés. I nudge Maxim and point to the table. He frowns but nods as another man walks over to us and begins a conversation with him about fuel, ignoring my presence completely.

Damn, I'm so over this whole night. I walk to the table, putting some extra sway in my hips, and catch the eye of one of the three men. He sees me approach and stops talking as I pass him and stand next to the table, scanning the food.

"English." He drops his voice, but I doubt it's for my benefit if he assumes I can't understand it.

I don't react as I reach over and pick up what looks like some kind of bruschetta, and I listen to what they say.

"Nine o'clock at the tower. He says he has a man ready to make the deal, but if he fails and it gets back to Maxim, he will deny everything he knows."

"Of course he did. Asshole," one of the other men spits.

"Enough. The sooner this is over, the better. If I have to look at that smug bastard's face again..." his voice trails off as I feel eyes on me.

I swallow the bruschetta and reach for a chocolate-dipped strawberry, taking a bite out of it.

“Hmm...I will have fun fucking his whore. I bet she takes it in every hole.”

“Even if she doesn’t for him, she will for us. No whore tells me no.”

I’m going to have fun killing that man one day. I just know it. I turn and walk back toward Maxim, ignoring the three men as I reach for a glass of champagne from a passing server, offering him a smile as I take a sip. When I reach Maxim, I move right into him.

He offers me a curious smile before turning back to the man he is talking to and shaking his hand. I offer the man a polite smile when he nods his head at me, and then Maxim is ushering me out the door and into the waiting town car. Neither of us speaks until the partition is closed.

“Thank fuck that’s over.” Maxim sighs, pulling off his tie and tossing it on the seat beside him.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Maxim, but Russian parties are tedious as fuck. I’d have run away and joined a circus by now.”

I lift my foot and rotate my ankle in circles a little, trying to ease the ache. I love shoes. They make me feel sexy, more confident, powerful, and taller. While some people collect art, I buy shoes. They are my one weakness. My girls used to tease me, saying I could do anything as long as I was wearing heels. Walking in a pair of four-inch stilettos is as natural for me as breathing. But tonight, even though I sat most of the evening, these shoes definitely don’t mix with the pain the rest of my body is feeling.

“I have no talent in that area, I’m afraid. Alas, I’ll have to settle for pakhan.” His eyes drop to my feet. “Sore?”

I nod. “But they make my legs look good,” I say, not wanting to tell him the whole truth.

He opens his legs, lifts my foot, and rests it on the seat between them. His hands make quick work of undoing the

strap and sliding the shoe off before he lifts my foot and digs his thumbs into the arch.

“Ahhh,” I groan out loud, unable to keep quiet.

He groans as well before moving a little, but I don't care what he's doing as long as he keeps massaging my foot. Once that one is done, he repeats the process with the other foot, making me almost come from the pleasure.

“Maxim Popov, you, sir, are a god,” I murmur, feeling boneless.

I let my eyes drift closed. With the combined vibration of the car's engine and the feel of Maxim's hands on my foot, I feel myself relax completely for the first time in days. When his hands start to wander up my calf, I open one eye and glare at him, which is when I realize something.

I gaze out the window, and even though it's dark, I know I've never been here before. “Where are we going?”

“Home.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

With my shoes back on, I climb out of the car and stare up at the huge building that resembles a museum more than a house. As I stand there, Maxim drapes his jacket over my shoulders, and I burrow into it as the icy wind whips around me.

“This isn’t a home, Maxim,” I state, and he just shrugs.

“It’s passed from pakhan to pakhan. It’s been that way for many generations.”

“Okay, but why am I here?”

“Because I want you here. You need to play pretend girlfriend and trust me when I say no one will believe that the pakhan would allow his woman to live in a cheap hotel. From now until this deal is complete, you will stay here with me.” His voice leaves no room for argument.

I bite my lip, knowing this is a bad idea, but I can’t see a way out. At least here, there are no bars on the windows, so if I need to make a quick escape, I can.

“You’ll be safe here.”

I turn to look at him.

“I don’t know if you’re lying to me or yourself, but we both know I’m far from safe.”

I walk up the steps to the house and wait for him to open the door, which, surprisingly, is unlocked.

“*Safe*, he says, yet the man with a million enemies leaves his door unlocked.”

“If someone is trying to kill me, a door won’t stop them.”

He holds it open for me to enter.

“Maybe, but why make it easy for them?”

He doesn’t reply to that, but I make a mental note to slide a dresser in front of my door again tonight. Unlike Maxim, I know the danger I’m in. Whether it be a rundown hotel or an expensive mansion, I’ll take as many precautions as I need to keep myself safe—or at least give myself enough time to escape.

“You want a tour?”

I shake my head. “A glass of water would be nice, though. And then I need to tell you what I overheard tonight.”

He shows me to the kitchen, which looks like something out of a magazine. It’s all modern and sleek and way too clean and clutter-free to be used often. I climb onto one of the bar stools and accept the glass of water Maxim pours for me.

“So, tell me what you heard.” He sits on the stool beside me and turns to look at me.

“Most people kept to themselves, and I couldn’t do much, or people would suspect something. Hell, that asshole grabbed me just for peeing.”

His face glowers at the memory. “I think he assumed you were snooping around. But don’t worry, he won’t touch you again.”

“I’m not worried. I’m just explaining. Most people treated me like an idiot once you told them I couldn’t speak or understand English. I heard the women bitching about me, but the men, even though they kept their eyes on me, were mostly preoccupied with you. You’re quite the intimidating figure. Anyway, those three men I passed on the way to the food table—you saw them, right?”

He nods. “I figured you were up to something. Yes, I’m familiar with them.” He doesn’t offer me their names, and I

don't ask. It doesn't matter to me anyway.

“One of them, the tallest one, said something about meeting at nine o'clock at the tower. They're supposed to make a deal, but I'm not sure what that entails. And, unfortunately, they didn't mention what day it would go down, but I figure you could have the place watched if you knew where they might be referring to.”

His face is blank now, but I can tell he's pissed. “One of my buildings is referred to as the tower because it dominates the buildings around it. What else?”

“That was the only information of any use.”

“That's not what I asked. What else did they say?”

“Oh, you know, the usual. Once you're out of the way, they can fuck your whore in all of her holes, yada, yada, yada.”

His face goes red, and he looks two seconds away from exploding.

I reach out and grab his arm. “Hey, I'm good. Like you said, nothing is going to happen to me. Besides, I can take care of myself. And men like that—they're all talk anyway.”

“I don't fucking care. I don't like them talking about you like that,” he snaps.

“It's just men being assholes. Need I remind you—you did it yourself earlier when you were talking to one of your men.”

“That's because I need them to see that I saw you as expendable. They know not to touch what is mine. But as you said earlier, I didn't want to paint a target on your back, so I made it seem like, eventually, my interest in you would fade, and you'd be gone.”

“I figured that out already, and that's the only reason why you are not walking around with a very sore pair of balls right now. My point is that you all have this way of talking to each other when it comes to women, and none of it is flattering. I feel like I need a shower just from being in the same room as half of them.”

He curses and looks away for a second before he climbs off the stool and squats down to take my shoes off again.

“What is it with you and my shoes?”

His simple answer— “I don’t like you having sore feet.”

I look down at him, confused about what to do with the man. He messes with my head, and he’s mostly a dick, but he has a surprisingly sweet side that I’m drawn to. I don’t like that one little bit. It’s much easier to hate someone when they are an asshole. It’s far harder to hate someone who, in another life, could have been a friend or even more.

“Um, thanks. Can you show me to my room? I really want to take a shower and climb into bed.”

He stands and offers me his hand. “Of course. You must be tired.” He shakes his head. “I forgot about your injuries. You hide your discomfort so well. I have painkillers upstairs.”

“I’m okay. I just need to rest. I won’t take something if I don’t know what it is I’m being given.”

“I have a doctor—”

“Maxim, I’m fine. I promise. If that changes, I’ll let you know.” *Liar, liar, pants on fire!*

He looks at me skeptically, but lets it go. I follow him upstairs—not looking at his ass in his suit pants at all—my eyes moving to his hand that carries my shoes. Something about it tugs at me. I don’t do well with sweetness, but I can’t deny that it makes me curious to know how a man, who probably spent his life surrounded by darkness, learned these small gestures.

He opens the door on his left and shows me in. He flicks on the light and heads to the attached bathroom while I take in the queen-sized bed and the dark wooden dresser and matching bedside tables. It’s masculine without being too much. There is a door on the left that I assume is the closet, and then the bathroom.

After a moment, I follow Maxim into the bathroom, pleasantly surprised at the size of it. I eye the bath and notice

the jets and decide, fuck it, I'm going to soak until I turn into a prune instead.

“There are spare toothbrushes and towels and whatever else you might need in these cabinets. I can get you something to sleep in for tonight, and tomorrow I'll have things brought in for you.”

I don't put up any kind of resistance. He's the one keeping me here, so I'm not going to complain about him buying me clothes.

“Sounds good. I need to send a message to Calix.”

He tenses for a second before sighing. “I'll bring my laptop when I bring you something to wear.”

“Thank you.”

“Do you need anything else?”

“Not right now.”

“Alright, I'll leave you to yourself. I'll be in my office at the end of the hallway if you need me.”

“Okay.”

I wait for him to leave, which he seems reluctant to do. He eventually goes and closes the door behind him. I run the bath and rummage through the cabinets for some bubble bath. He doesn't have any, which isn't exactly shocking. I do find some Epsom salts, so I pour a generous amount in and swirl it around as I wait for the tub to fill.

My body screams in protest as I strip out of my dress, but when I climb into the hot, soothing water, I decide the pain was worth it. I lie back and close my eyes, letting out a soft sigh as my body becomes one with the water. If I thought I could get away with staying in here forever, I would. But after I feel myself drift off for the third or fourth time, I realize I'm fighting a losing battle. After surviving everything I have, the last thing I want is to drown in a bathtub.

I wash, climb out, and wrap myself in a fluffy towel before swiping my hand across the mirror to clear away the steam. The warm water has added a nice pink tint to my face, but now

that the makeup is gone, it does nothing to hide the bruising on my face.

I look away, feeling older than my years. I'm so damn tired. Tired of fighting all the time. Tired of seeing bruises on my face and on the faces of others. It's not that I want a quiet life. I love the work that I do and would most likely die of boredom if I stopped. It's just...I've been entrenched in darkness for so damn long—there has to be more than this. There has to be some kind of balance. I thought seeing my girls happy and settled would be enough to fill that gnawing emptiness inside me, but it's not. Something is missing, and I never knew what until Rémy. When I forced myself to walk away from him, I locked my emotions up tight behind a wall I built, knowing it was the right thing to do despite the pain it caused. I thought I'd be okay, but then Calix started chipping away at that wall. And now it seems Maxim is determined to make his way inside, too. It's getting harder and harder to fight against the onslaught of emotions I'm feeling. Emotions I don't have time to deal with, at least, that's what I tell myself. I know that once I allow the door to crack open, everything will spill out of me, and I'm not sure I'll survive the fallout.

With the towel tucked around me, I make my way back into the bedroom and stop when I find a large shirt and a pair of men's boxer shorts on the bed. A ghost of a smile plays on my lips as I walk over and put them on. They smell fresh and clean and comforting. They smell like Maxim. It's a thought that makes me question my sanity, and not for the first time. There is nothing about this whole fucked-up situation that should be considered comforting.

With a sigh, I head out and walk silently toward the end of the hallway, looking for Maxim's office. I hear him before I see him. At first, I think he's on the phone, grunting at someone that way men seem to do. But as I step into the open doorway, I see him at his desk with his eyes closed and his head thrown back.

I let my eyes drift down to his now naked chest and bite my lip. I knew the man was built. It was impossible not to notice through his fitted shirts, but I had no idea the man

looked like *that* underneath his clothes. I'm so caught up staring at all his muscular goodness that it takes my brain a second to realize that there is another, far more delicious muscle on display.

This time a whimper escapes before I can swallow it, making Maxim's head drop to look at me. I freeze, waiting for him to snap at me—or tuck his cock away at least—but all he does is keep on stroking himself as his eyes move over my body. His movements pick up, and even though I know I should leave, I'm completely engrossed in watching him. The way he squeezes harder than I would, pinching the tip as if to stop himself from coming.

My nipples get hard, and my breathing picks up, but still, I don't move. I don't do anything to break the carnal spell he has weaved over me. I don't realize I've slipped my hand inside my shorts until Maxim curses.

“Come here, Sugar,” he orders. And like the mindless sex zombie I am, I obey without question.

With as many dicks as I've seen in my life, you'd think I'd be immune to their powers by now. But apparently, even I can be dickmatized.

“Open the shirt.”

Sanity prevails, and I shake my head, taking a step back.

“I won't touch you. I just want to see you.”

It's the pleading tone in his voice that threatens to unravel me. Throwing my morals to the floor like discarded panties, I open the buttons of the shirt slowly. His eyes follow the movement until it parts for him, revealing my naked breasts beneath.

He growls, his hand moving faster as he strokes his dick. “See what you do to me, Sugar? Watch me, knowing I'm picturing your hand around my cock.”

My breathing stalls for a second, my hands fisting at my sides as I fight the urge to start touching myself again. Of course, Maxim knows. He sees entirely too much.

“Do it, Sugar. You know you want to. Slide your fingers inside your pussy. I want you to imagine it’s my cock as you come all over them.”

Helpless to resist, I slide my hand back inside my boxers and start stroking my clit, harder and faster than before. I’m already close to the edge just from watching him stroke himself.

“Fuck, what you do to me,” he mutters.

I dip my fingers inside myself as I reach up with my free hand and tug one of my nipples.

“Yes, Sugar, just like that.”

I moan, knowing this is wrong, but nothing has ever felt so bad and so good before.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he snarls as he comes in his hand and over his stomach.

The sight of it triggers my own release. I grip the edge of the desk to stop myself from falling as a shockwave of pleasure pulses through me. When Maxim says my name, my eyes snap to his as he slowly walks toward me. He takes my hand, the one I just fucked myself with.

“Thank you,” he whispers before he slides two of my fingers into his mouth and sucks.

I whimper as his tongue strokes over me, the act more illicit than if he’d just stuck his dick inside me. He slips my fingers free, then reaches over with his hand. I hold still while he traces my lips with his thumb. When I realize I can taste his cum, I yank myself back as horror and shame wash over me.

“You said you wouldn’t touch me,” I choke out, but I’m more mad at myself than at him.

“Sugar—” he starts, but I ignore him, practically running from his office. I don’t stop until I’m back in my room, slamming the door behind me.

Any peace I found earlier in the bath has been washed away, leaving behind a sick feeling. I might not have let Maxim fuck me, but I just fucked myself. I feel the urge to

jump in the shower and wash away the shame I feel, but I'd have to pass the mirror. And right now, I don't think I can even look myself in the eye.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I avoid the man as best I can over the next few days, only talking to him when I absolutely have to. He tries to engage me in conversation, but I turn and walk away. I don't trust him. Worse—I don't trust myself.

Keeping at least one of his promises, he loaned me his laptop briefly to contact Calix. That's when it dawned on me that I didn't know his email address. Hell, after just being released from prison, the man doesn't even have a cell phone. I kick myself for not thinking about it earlier. I should have picked one up for him. I should have—

“Are you done with the silent treatment yet?”

I look behind me at the sound of Maxim's voice but turn back to the window before answering. “I don't know what you're talking about.” *Lie.* “I just have nothing to say.”

I hear his footsteps approach before his hand is on my arm, spinning me around, his face in mine as he grits his teeth.

“I don't like you holding yourself back from me.”

I snort. “I don't really care what you like. I don't like the fact that I can't go home. I don't like the fact that I can't reach my husband to let him know I'm okay. I don't like the fact that I'm being blackmailed by the Russian fucking—”

His hand covers my mouth, making the rest of what I am saying come out garbled.

“Don't say fucking unless you want me to push you to your knees while I thrust my cock inside you. I'm not a good

man, Sugar, and right now, I want to do very bad things to you. So, unless you want me to pin you down while I take what you're so desperate to deny us both, then I suggest you shut up."

We're both breathing heavily by the end of his speech, partly from the murderous intent I feel toward him and partly because I want him to do all the wicked things he mentions.

"I'm going to remove my hand now."

The moment his sin leaves mine, all the fight drains from me.

"I don't want to fight with you," I tell him wearily. I just want to keep out of his way, find this stupid freaking spy, and then leave while I still have a sliver of dignity left.

"Shame. Fighting with you is the best part of my day."

He pushes himself away from me and heads for the door. "I'm giving a speech tonight at a charity event. It's black-tie. An outfit will be arriving for you within the hour. Do you want me to bring in someone to do your hair or your makeup?" His tone is even, but I can still pick up the threads of his frustration.

"No, I can manage."

The bruising has faded now to a gross yellowy-green color, but at least it's easier to hide with makeup. Plus, the swelling has gone down, which is a bonus. He nods and leaves.

I wrap my arms around myself and return to gazing out the window. I watch as snowflakes dance in the air before covering the ground in a thick white blanket. There is something about snow that always feels like a fresh start. But as new and fresh as it might seem, I never forget how it can also be brutal and chaotic. Sometimes I feel like a snowflake myself, caught up in a blizzard, being thrown around all over the place until I can't tell which way is up anymore.

I don't know how long I stand there before the smell of something cooking draws me from my room, and I head toward the kitchen, where I find the old Russian cook stirring a large pot of stew. We don't talk to each other due to the

language barrier, but we offer small smiles. She indicates for me to sit as she ladles stew into a bowl and slides it in front of me before bending and pulling freshly baked bread from the oven. She breaks off a hunk and hands it to me, then mimes dunking it in the bowl.

I grin, and despite burning off a few taste buds in the process, I do as she asks, moaning in appreciation as the flavors explode on my tongue. She smiles wider and claps her hands. I place my free hand over my heart and thank her, knowing she'll understand the gesture if not the words. She leaves me to eat, which I do happily, emptying the bowl and devouring the bread.

I wash my bowl, ignoring her protests when she returns. Instead, I kiss her cheek, take an apple from the fruit bowl, and walk back up to my room. Sure enough, when I arrive, I find a garment bag on the bed and a shoebox on the floor. I stare at them for a moment before glancing at the clock. I'm not sure what time we're supposed to leave, but it's already five o'clock. I'd rather be ready and wait than make us both late.

Decision made. I take a shower, making sure not to get my hair wet, and style my hair with the straightener that magically showed up in my room on my second day here, along with enough clothes to last me a year. Next, I do my makeup, going for dark to match my mood with smoky eyes and glossy red lips for a hint of sultry. Once I've finished my face, I use the concealer to cover the fading bruises on my arms before I unzip the garment bag and reveal the dress.

I swallow. It's perfect. Exactly the kind of dress I would have chosen for myself. It's just another chip in my wall, made by a man who seems to notice things about me that others seem to miss even after years of knowing me. The shade of red is almost a perfect match to my lips. It's long and strapless, and like the previous dress, it shows nothing yet is effortlessly sexy, perhaps because it leaves something to the imagination. I stare at the dress and know none of the underwear I have will work, so for the second time, I'll be going naked underneath.

I lay the dress on the bed and open the shoebox, finding a pair of heels that look like they're made from glass. Though

stunning to look at, I have to wonder if I'm going to end up with shredded feet by the end of the night. I sit on the edge of the bed and slip them on, turning my foot to admire the way they sparkle in the light. Standing up, I'm shocked by how comfortable they are.

Lifting the dress, I step into it, shimmying and tugging it up my body, the skin-tight material hugging me in all the right places. Turning to look in the mirror, I widen my eyes at my reflection. I look like a cross between Cinderella and the Evil Queen. A little bit of sex and innocence all wrapped up in what pretty much amounts to a big, red bow. I place my hand over my stomach when I feel butterflies swarm, confused by the feeling, until I realize I was thinking about Maxim and what his reaction to my dress will be.

“Shit.” I'm in really dangerous territory here. Even if there were no Calix or Rémy, there could still be nothing between Maxim and me. I'd never survive in his world, and he would struggle to find a place in mine. Besides, you don't just walk away from the Bratva. It's a permanent position that only ends with death. It's a blood-in-blood-out kind of thing. It's a world ruled by men, where women are nothing but shiny trinkets that make the men look good. Their opinions hold no weight, their choices are few, and their lives are lived by someone else's orders.

Been there, done that, got the blood-stained hands to prove it. I worked too damn hard to carve out a life for myself to give it up for a man because he has a nice smile and a big dick. I deserve better, but then, so does he. I would be the worst choice for the Russian pakhan.

I laugh, then. I can't help it. It seems that in the midst of everything, I realize I have a type. *Unattainable*. Each of the men I've come to feel something for couldn't be worse for me than if I straight-up started dating a serial killer. Hell, at least one of the three might as well be one, given Rémy's body count. The universe must be laughing at me right now. Like dangling a carrot and teasing me with all I can have before ripping it away. It's cruel, and yet it's the story of my life.

I stare at my face and see the strain in my features as I try to slip on the mask of indifference. It's becoming harder every day to pretend that I feel nothing when I feel everything, and at the center is an acute loneliness that threatens to drown me with each breath. I don't know what to do about it. I'm living a life that feels like a speeding train running off the tracks.

I shake it off for now, pushing the feelings back down, and I do what I always do: promise myself I'll deal with it later. Right now, I have to concentrate on tonight. I stand up tall, pull my shoulders back, and remind myself that bad days don't make a bad life. For every tear I've cried, I've also laughed until my stomach cramped. I might not be okay right now, but I will be.

Heading for the door, I pause with my hand on the knob and take a final deep breath before opening it. I spot Maxim at the bottom of the staircase, dressed and ready, staring at something on his phone. I take a second to enjoy the view before I start toward him.

He must hear me walking down the stairs because he speaks without looking up. "I was just coming to tell you we need to leave in five minutes. Are you ready?"

"Yes. I'm ready." My voice comes out soft, and I wince at the melancholy in it.

Maxim hears it too, and lifts his head, his eyes landing on mine. They widen a fraction as he takes me in, moving over my body like an erotic caress.

"Fuck me," he hisses as I make it to him. "Forgive me," he grunts out, and I frown.

"Forgive you for what?"

"For this." He yanks me to him and slams his mouth down over mine.

My body comes to life on contact, like a match being lit. I grab his arms, intending to push him away. But that stabbing loneliness swirls inside me, making me grip him tighter and lean into him.

When he pulls free, the fire dies almost immediately, and a little bit of self-loathing seeps in. I look up at him and don't mask how I feel. He winces at the expression on my face. Reaching out, he cups my jaw, trying to read me.

“Sugar?”

“It has to be you,” I whisper.

“What?”

“It has to be you. You have to be the one to pull back,” I tell him, feeling a tear slip free and slide down my cheek.

His expression darkens as he follows its path.

“I'm not strong enough to walk away. It has to be you.”

“I can't.” His voice is guttural, laced with frustration and regret. “Not even if it makes you hate me.”

“I don't hate you, Maxim. But I'm finding it really hard to like myself right now.”

He blows out a breath and rests his forehead against mine. “Okay,” he says softly, and I relax a fraction at his agreement, even though I feel like bawling my eyes out.

“Okay,” I repeat as his hand slides into mine.

“Let's go spend the night with a bunch of pretentious assholes.”

I smile through my pain, not fooling either one of us. “Sounds like fun.”

IT'S NOT FUN. Not in any way, shape, or form. It's hell on earth being in a roomful of people, feeling utterly alone as Maxim does whatever Maxim does, and I keep my eye on him from a distance. His men speak in English when I am near, which helps a little, but everyone else talks away in rapid Russian, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

The clinking sound of a knife tapping on a glass catches everyone's attention. We all turn in the direction of an elderly man dressed in a suit worth enough to feed the homeless he is raising money for. He says something that I assume means the speeches are about to begin. I glance up at the large, ornate clock and see that it's five minutes to nine. We've been here for almost two hours, but it feels more like ten.

Everyone focuses on the stage and claps, so I focus my attention that way and swallow when Maxim approaches the steps at the side of the stage, jogging up them two at a time. Drawn to him like a moth to a flame, I move through the crowd to get closer. As if sensing me, he looks into the crowd, his eyes finding mine as he begins his speech.

I don't understand a word, naturally, but he has the whole audience captivated. Standing at the base of the steps, I take a moment to glance at the people in the audience and watch those watching him. Some smile, some scowl, but nobody speaks as the man of the hour gives an impassioned speech about the homeless epidemic affecting the region, or at least that's what I was told he would be addressing.

I hear a chime and look up through the arched windows and see the large clock tower next door signaling that it's nine. Maybe once he's finished his speech, we can leave. I mean, most people my age are in bed now, right?

Turning back to the stage, something catches my eye, making me look back at the clock tower, and it dawns on me.

Clock tower. Nine o'clock.

I run up the steps toward Maxim, who turns to me with a frown just as a red laser centers itself in the middle of his forehead. Out of time, I throw myself at him, knocking us both to the ground as glass shatters and screaming tears through the room. Pain slices across my cheek as I look down at Maxim, who stares up at me, his eyes locking on my cheek.

Turning from him for a moment, I look at the now broken window as a figure stands and rips off the black ski mask that once hid their face. My eyes stare into Rémy's. My breathing

falters as my heart threatens to beat out of my chest. Then he's gone, and Maxim rolls us and yanks me to my feet.

Ignoring everyone around us, he drags me through the room to the back hallway, but instead of racing me out to the car, he spins me and pushes me against the wall. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"Saving your ass, you ungrateful dick," I scream back, adrenaline racing through me.

"You could have been killed, you stupid, stupid woman," he snarls before his mouth is on mine.

He kisses me with a ferocity that leaves me breathless and confused until sanity prevails, and I realize he's broken his promise to me yet again. I pull back and break the kiss as he yanks my dress up and shoves his thigh between my legs. Without thinking, I lift my hand and slap him across the face. His head flies to the side, but if anything, it turns him on more. I move to slap him again, but he grabs my wrist, anticipating my move.

"You need to stop. I can't keep doing this with you. We're going around and around in circles. I am married. I won't fuck you and betray my husband."

"The same husband that threw you away?" he snaps.

I fight his hold, but he has me pinned, and his hands are like manacles around my wrists as he rubs his thigh against my pussy.

"He didn't throw me away. You know nothing about him."

Transferring my wrists to one of his hands, he pins them above my head as he pulls his cell from his pocket and dials a number.

Placing it on speakerphone, he watches me as the call connects and an aching familiar voice speaks. "Did you fuck her yet?"

"No, but I'm going to. One man's trash is another man's treasure."

When Calix doesn't say anything, what's left of my heart withers.

"You're not bothered that I'm going to plunge my cock into your wife?"

"Why would I be? You're not the first man to fuck her. I doubt you'll be the last, or did you forget what I told you?" he replies with disdain. "Though I can't say I'm surprised. She's good. Almost had me fooled too."

"Seems to me being locked away has made you stupid. The man who slept with your wife just tried to kill me and nearly killed her in the process when she saved my ass."

He releases my hands so he can inspect the cut I can feel on my cheek, most likely from the shattered glass.

"She saved my life when it could be argued that her life would be that much better with me dead. Something tells me things are not as black and white as you made them seem. I didn't get to where I am by being a fucking idiot. In my world, loyalty is everything. After tonight, you can kiss your wife goodbye because she's mine now."

Maxim hangs up on him, his eyes never leaving mine as he shoves the cell phone inside his jacket. Words fail me. I open my mouth, but nothing comes out.

"Calix a fucking fool, ahn-gyil. He might be done with you, but I'm not. I'll never be done with you." He fiddles with the buckle of his belt and frees his cock, stroking it a few times before shoving my dress above my ass and lifting my leg over his hip.

"Calix doesn't deserve you. Neither of us do. But I won't throw you away. If I had my way, I would chain you to my bed and never let you leave."

He lines himself up and eases his way inside me. I feel numb, shock rendering me useless. I have nobody but myself to blame. I know better than to let my feelings get involved, yet here I am, feeling like I've been stabbed in the chest by one man as I'm impaled by another.

“Sugar, come back to me.” Maxim urges, his lips moving over mine, softer than before. As his words register, I realize the frantic fucking I was expecting is anything but.

He’s soft with me, fucking me with slow, deep strokes, filling me up until I’m bursting at the seams. “You’re so fucking beautiful it takes my breath away.”

Tears flow at his words. I’m not sure why. He licks them away before kissing me like he’s making me a promise. The problem is, he keeps breaking his promises, and I’m not sure if I have anything left in me to give. But I let go, melt, and let him take over, needing to just be free, even if it is only for a little while.

“That’s it, Sugar. Come for me.”

I groan as he reaches between us and strums my clit, pushing me closer to the edge. It isn’t until he savagely thrusts into me and pinches my clit that we both come. I feel him erupt inside me, pulse after pulse of cum filling me up as I squeeze and milk him for all he’s worth.

He kisses my nose, my forehead, and my uninjured cheek before lifting my hand and kissing the inside of my palm. Without a word, he tugs his tie off and carefully pulls his cock free. I wince, then look down in surprise when Maxim gets to his knees and cleans his cum from my thighs with his silk tie.

“I hope that’s not your favorite.” My voice sounds hoarse, like it belongs to someone else.

“It is now.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

I lie in bed, staring at the ceiling long after Maxim has fallen asleep beside me.

Once he finished fucking me in the hallway, we ran for the waiting car. When we got home, Maxim spent a large chunk of time on his phone yelling at people. He's rounded up the three men who knew what was planned, but he's still pissed that he'd been wrong about the tower.

When I tried to leave him to go to my room, he lifted me onto his desk and cleaned the blood off my face. He threatened to call a doctor, but it had already stopped bleeding. He was worried there might be glass in the cut, but I knew from the pain there wasn't. Once I'd been able to take stock of everything, I'd figured out pretty quickly that it wasn't glass that had hit me but a bullet burning my skin as it grazed my face.

That's the second time I've been hit by a bullet meant for a man I have feelings for. Maybe if I let the bullets do their job, I wouldn't have to worry about these pesky feelings anymore. Tonight had been close, though. Too close. But the bullet has nothing on the damage Calix, Rémy, and Maxim are inflicting.

After dragging me to his bed and fucking me over and over again, Maxim eventually fell asleep, leaving me to process the bullshit. Calix knows where I am, so it stands to reason that he might very well be the reason I'm here. The fact that I was beaten and brought here drugged, potentially on his orders, dulls the pain he inflicted on me, and rage takes over.

With Maxim asleep and unable to distract me, I realize he knew what Calix was doing and why. He saw what I was going through and did nothing but try to get me into bed. Maybe that was the plan all along, just to prove some stupid point, but after tonight... things have changed. There was a desperation to our last round of lovemaking, like he knew I'd wake up with more clarity and demand answers, answers he knows will damage our already fragile relationship.

Then there is Rémy. He was sent to kill Maxim, which means he'll be back to finish the job. To protect Maxim, I'll have to kill Rémy. To protect Rémy, Maxim must die.

Knowing sleep is an impossibility, I climb from the bed and slip on Maxim's white shirt. I do up a couple of the buttons and head to the kitchen to make some cocoa. Keeping the main lights off, I switch on the light over the stove and the under-counter ones. They give me enough light to work without blinding me. I find a mug and search the cupboards, looking for cocoa, when lips press against the crook of my neck.

Jesus, the man is insatiable. I open my mouth to tell him I'll be up in a minute when I notice his smell is wrong. I whip around and come face-to-face with Rémy. The mug slips from my hand, and Rémy reaches out and catches it without ever taking his eyes off mine.

"I almost lost you," he states, anger pouring off him in waves.

He places the mug on the counter before picking me up and sitting me beside it.

"Rémy—" I shut up at the look in his eyes. I've only seen him look this way once before. It was the night a rival of his took out a hit on a small boy that Rémy refused to take.

Rémy doesn't have many rules when it comes to who he kills, but he has a hard no-children policy. His rival fucked up, a fact he learned when Rémy fed him his own intestines.

"Why'd you do that?"

I don't say anything, so he shakes me.

“Why, damn you?” he snarls.

“Because he matters to me.” Even if I wish it weren’t true.

His eyes glitter in warning. “You’re a busy girl, Sugar. First the murderer, now the mobster?”

“People who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones,” I snap as I try to get down, but he stops me.

The thing about Rémy is he is not like any man I’ve ever been with. I’ve never let my guard down enough to let someone completely dominate me, but Rémy didn’t give me a choice in the matter. He demanded my submission from our first time, and I gave it to him. It was as natural as breathing. Old habits die hard, so when he orders me to hold myself open for him, my fingers twitch and I almost do. But instead, I lock my legs together. In hindsight, that might have been a mistake.

I’ve just made myself a challenge.

“Do you think you can resist me?” he mocks as he slides his hand around my throat and squeezes hard enough to cut off my air supply.

I control my reactions. I don’t panic. I don’t fight. I stare into those soulless eyes and wait for his next move. I might not win in this fucked-up tug-of-war, but I’ll be damned if I surrender.

“Open your legs, Sugar, or I’ll kill your little toy upstairs and fuck you over his corpse.”

I hesitate for a second, letting him see the murder in my eyes as he forces my hand. Because here’s the thing about Rémy: He’s a fucking psycho. He’s also a professional liar, and yet he has never lied to me, so if he says he’ll kill Maxim and fuck me over his corpse, that’s exactly what he’ll do. I spread my legs wide and hold them open for him, but I close my eyes so he can’t see my reaction.

He lets go of my throat, and I suck in a deep breath before coughing. “I can see his cum leaking out of you,” he tells me with zero inflection in his voice. I say nothing. What would be the point in lying when the proof is there for him to see?

After Maxim had finished fucking me, I tried to get up and clean myself, but he pinned me to the bed. This was the first time I was able to get away, and now I wish I had stayed exactly where I was.

I jump when I feel Rémy's fingers pushing inside me before they curve and he drags them down my walls, making me shudder. It takes me a second to realize he's trying to scoop out Maxim's cum. He bends his head and places his nose against my clit. His breath tickles me, making me squirm while he breathes me in. His tongue flicks out in a barely-there touch, making me gasp. There is no way he can't taste Maxim, but he seems completely unfazed.

He continues to flick my clit with the tip of his tongue. He never increases the pressure, never dips his tongue inside me. He continues to assault me in the most maddening way. He brings me to the edge before easing off, over and over, until I'm on the brink of breaking.

When I whimper his name, he stands up and shoves his jeans down over his ass and frees his cock. He yanks me off the counter and spins me so that I'm bent over it. He kicks my legs apart and surges inside me. I have to bite my hand to stop myself from screaming at the intrusion.

He grabs a fistful of my hair and fucks me roughly. There is no way I won't be covered in bruises. Bruises I'll have no way of explaining, which means it will be like what happened with Calix and me all over again. But my fear and heartbreak or nothing to stop the spiraling pleasure from wrapping its noose around my neck and tightening.

Yanking my head back, he stares at the mark on my face—the mark he put there. If possible, his thrusts get harder, faster, more punishing. I just don't know if he's punishing me or himself.

“I know they don't fuck you like I do.”

“You know nothing.” I moan when he hits a spot deep inside me that both hurts and makes me see stars.

“I know you. Every fucking inch of you. These tits, this pussy. This ass.” He slaps it hard, making me yelp, then yanks out of me and spins me around, breathing heavily.

“You thought I would just let you walk away? I told you the last time—”

“I know what you said,” I snap. “What the fuck do you want from me?”

“What do I want?” His voice is low and filled with so much darkness that a sliver of fear works its way through my arousal.

“I want to destroy you.” He grins before he covers my mouth with his hand and picks me up.

He storms out of the room but doesn't make a sound. The man is part ninja, it's what makes him so good at what he does. It isn't until he heads upstairs that true fear kicks in.

I start fighting, struggling in his hold, but he grips me tighter, not caring if he hurts me. He pushes open the door to Maxim's room and stands there with me in his arms. I stop fighting, my chest tight, my palms sweaty. Maxim lies sprawled on the bed, fast asleep, the sheet tangled around his legs and just covering his dick from view.

I go rigid as Rémy walks us over to the bed. I shake my head, praying that he can't be this cruel. But he's Rémy. This is exactly who he is, and I can't even pretend ignorance. It was his ruthlessness that attracted me to him in the first place.

He moves us to the empty side of the bed and bends me over it. I try to push back, but he holds me in place with one hand as he lines up his cock with the other.

“Please don't do this,” I whisper my frantic plea.

“You took yourself away from me, but you'll learn.” He thrusts inside me, gripping my hips and holding me in place as he fucks me.

Surprisingly, he isn't as rough as he was in the kitchen. His aim isn't necessarily to wake Maxim, though I doubt he'll care if he does. No, this is all about ownership and Rémy's

realization that, just like I fell for him, he fell for me. It wasn't part of the plan. In fact, we tried everything to keep our feelings out of it. But you can't put your trust in someone's hands and not expect them to imprint on you somehow. Especially people like us who don't trust anyone.

I keep my eyes on Maxim and pray he doesn't wake. I don't need a witness to my humiliation. My primed body doesn't care about the fucked-up situation. It needs a release, and when Rémy's movements become erratic, I know he's ready to come.

I tense when I feel his wet thumb at the entrance of my ass, and when he pushes past the tight ring, the burn is enough to send me falling over the edge into oblivion. I bite down on the bedding to keep from screaming, the intensity causing tears to run down my face.

He shoves himself inside me one more time and comes hard, filling me up and pushing out the last of Maxim's cum with his own. He leans over me when he's spent and slides his hand into my hair, turning my head just enough that he can press a soft kiss to my injured cheek.

"Next time he sticks his dick inside you, it will be my cum that eases his way."

He licks my tears away before nipping my ear with his teeth.

"I don't know what it is about your tears that turns me on," he groans, his cock flexing inside me. "But when I see you again, I'm going to fuck your lying mouth until you cry all over my cock."

He pulls free and gets to his feet, leaving me kneeling on the floor with his cum leaking out of me.

"The next time you see me, you better kill me because it will be the only chance you get before I take you out," I warn him.

He shakes his head as he makes his way to the door. "The game has changed now, Sugar."

“Fuck you, Rémy. This isn’t a game. It’s my life,” I whisper-hiss, looking at Maxim to make sure he’s still asleep.

He looks at my cheek one last time, something flickering in his eyes before he nods his head. “See you soon.”

He disappears before I say anything else, leaving me to drag myself to the bathroom. I turn on the shower and slide down the tiled wall to the floor of the stall, drawing my knees to my chest. I wrap my arms around my legs and let the hot water pound down on me.

I never knew what I was capable of or what I was willing to put up with until Rémy. I could have killed him. I should have killed him, but I can’t bring myself to hurt him, and because of that, I have to leave. Rémy has found me twice now. Neither Calix nor Maxim will be safe while I have Rémy hounding me. I give in to the feeling of hopelessness.

Somehow, in my bid to fix things, I made everything so much worse. I’m not even any closer to finding Santos. I lift my head at that. What if the trick is not finding him but letting him find me? Maybe he’ll kill me before I get close enough to kill him, but at least it would all be over. And then maybe I can get some fucking peace.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I nurse my drink, using the straw to move the ice around the glass. It feels strange sitting here just as I am. No wig, no contacts, no false name. Well, I guess that's not exactly true. Sitting here as Sophia is a lie. Sophia did die on that boat. She sure as hell wasn't the same person who reached the shore.

Using that name now makes my stomach turn, but being bait means enticing predators, and I don't have the luxury of waiting. I need Santos to find me before Rémy does, and he will. He would never let me run unless it was on his terms. I should have realized that from the start.

I turn in my chair, my skirt sliding up my thighs, drawing the attention of the men closest to me. I pretend I'm oblivious, sipping on my drink as I scan the room. It's a risky move for me, sitting in the heart of the city that swore its allegiance to my tormentor.

Cirillo territory is a mess now. People were displaced after Santos's death and Calix's incarceration. I could hear the whispers of Calix being free the second I walked in, so I know the man hasn't been keeping a low profile. Whether that's because he has plans to join his brother, usurp him, or he's just not interested in keeping himself hidden remains to be seen. Honestly, it's not my problem anymore.

My life isn't here. It's hundreds of miles away with a family I made, not the doomed one I was born into. I have my own houses, cars, and money. I can do what I want when I want. No man needed. I refuse to settle for anything less than what my girls have found.

These men in my life who demand their pieces of me without giving me anything in return can find a new toy to play with. I'm too old and too jaded to settle for scraps. What I want from them is truth, trust, and, dare I say it, love. Is that so much to ask for? Maybe I'm looking for the right things in the wrong men.

A finger tap on my shoulder has me looking up into the eyes of a man who looks like he eats children for breakfast. His eyes dip to my chest, which, given the bra I'm wearing, isn't surprising. If he didn't look at the girls, who are barely covered, I would have assumed he was gay.

"You come here often?" he murmurs.

"Wow, so people really do use that line? Who knew?" I roll my eyes and move to spin back around on my chair when he places his hand on my arm to halt my movement.

He chuckles and apologizes, "I'm not used to talking to such a beautiful woman. Forgive me."

Talk about cheesy. I'm tempted to tell him I'm lactose intolerant, but he'd probably take it as a come-on. His eyes flick up briefly before dropping to my chest again as he signals for the bartender to pour me another drink. I turn and hold mine up to show the bartender I'm good when I realize I walked right into this guy's trap.

Unfortunately for him, he might be good, but I'm better. He's slick. A quick move, with zero hesitation, and the little vial in his hand is upended into my glass, the clear liquid instantly hidden in my fruity cocktail.

What he didn't account for was the mirror behind the bar. I bite my lip and sigh, signaling to the bartender, who walks over with a huff at being messed around with.

"I'll just take a bottle of water, please. I have a headache." I hold out a few notes, showing her that there is a tip in it for her too.

She nods, takes my drink, and brings back a cold bottle of water.

The guy behind me tenses but plasters on a fake smile when I turn back to him.

“Sorry about that. I’m not feeling great. I should go.”

“Let me walk you out.”

“I’m okay. I just got a message to say my cab’s outside.”

He tuts. “Cabs are not safe. Not for pretty girls in big cities like this.”

I barely refrain from rolling my eyes. Damn stupid people, making my condition flare up again. “I’ll be fine. I have the hotel room to myself tonight, so I’m going to take some pain meds and crash. I’m sure I’ll feel better tomorrow.” I offer him the information, knowing he’ll soak it up.

“Well, if you’re sure. I hope you don’t have to travel too far. I’d hate for you to get sick.”

“No, it’s only ten minutes from here. I’m staying at the Dalton View.”

He smiles and wishes me well before turning to leave. His cell phone is out of his pocket and in his hand before he’s even out of sight.

I place a quick call of my own before heading out through the staff-only exit, winking at the busboy I flashed my tits to earlier when he doesn’t stop me. I step out the door, scan my soundings, and head for my rental. Climbing in, I grab what I need from the glove compartment and drive to the hotel.

Once inside, I head to my room. Opening the door, I move quickly, not knowing how long I have. I change from my short skirt and tight, low-cut top into a pair of black jeans and a black sweatshirt, shoving the old outfit in the trash. When that’s done, I place my gun in my thigh holster after strapping it on. Repeating the process, I shove a small pistol into my ankle holster before slipping a small penknife into my bra. I twist my hair up into a messy bun, securing it with a pair of chopsticks with ends that have been filed to a sharp point, then I press the stud on my earring, which scrambles all electronics within twelve feet of me. After arranging the pillows in the

bed to look like a person, I flick off the light and step back into the shadows to wait.

My mind drifts back to Maxim. I wonder what his reaction was when he woke up to find I'd disappeared. Part of me suspects he'll be pissed, but another part thinks he saw it coming. Was it cowardly to sneak out in the middle of the night? Maybe. Do I care? Fuck no. I'm so fucking sick of being used.

Thankfully, I'm not without my own connections. After a couple of hours hiding out at the airport, I had a new passport and a stack of cash to get me out of Russia and back to Greece, where I am now trying out a new plan of attack. The one that came to me while I was feeling sorry for myself curled up in Maxim's shower.

Hunting down Santos has proved even more difficult than I anticipated. Clearly, he has the means to stay hidden indefinitely. So, the only play I have left is to draw him out. Santos is a natural-born hunter, but he's too smart to fall for a trap. There is only one thing he'll risk exposure for. Me.

If the boogeyman doesn't come out of the shadows for the girl he was obsessed with, then Calix is right. The man is dead, and someone else has taken over. I don't believe that any more now than I did before, but I guess I'll find out soon enough.

After an hour of my mind spinning in a million directions, I hear the familiar sound of a key card in the lock. When it beeps, I remind myself to come back and teach the desk clerk a lesson. Two guys walk in, one from the bar earlier and another, a little older but in better shape.

I wait for them to close the door and approach the bed. When the guy from the bar reaches for the pillows, I quietly pull my gun, flick on the light, and shoot him in the face before leveling the gun on the other guy.

"Put the gun down," the guy says softly, as his hand moves slowly to grab his own piece. I shoot him in the shoulder, and then, because he's pissed me off, I shoot him in the other one too.

“I’d like to see you try to shoot me now.” I grin.

“You crazy bitch,” he roars, charging toward me, his arms hanging limply at his sides. He freezes when I aim at the center of his forehead.

“You know, everyone says that, and I just don’t get why.” I do, actually, but he doesn’t need to know that. Besides, everyone’s a little crazy these days.

He looks at me like he thinks I’m nuts.

“Don’t look at me like that. You broke into my room, armed, with the man who tried to drug me earlier, and yet I’m the crazy one for protecting myself? I think you need to reevaluate your expectations. It’s only in movies where women sit around waiting to be abducted.”

“You have no idea who you’re dealing with.”

“Oh God, not this again. Is there like a handbook you all have to read or a script you have to memorize when you’re initiated into the henchmen ranks?”

He scowls at me but doesn’t answer.

“I mean, at least there isn’t a looks requirement, or you’d be shit out of luck. If I had met the last guy they sent to kill me under different circumstances, he might have stood a chance of getting a little action. He was cute, you know? You, however, look like something I drew with my left hand.”

I squint, pretty sure I can see steam coming out of his ears. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. I tend to get a little bitchy when people try to kidnap me. It’s something I’m working on.”

“Really?”

“No.” I drop all emotion from my voice and glare at him. “Tell me what your orders were.”

“Fuck you.”

“Not even if you use someone else’s dick. But I’ll make you a deal. If you tell me what I want to know, then I won’t

fuck you with my gun here. I should warn you. I do tend to get a little trigger-happy.”

He looks like he wants to argue, then his eyes shift to both his shoulders and down to the dead body on the floor, and swallows. “We were supposed to take you with us.”

I wait for more, and when I don’t get it, I shoot him in the foot. “Do you need me to explain what trigger-happy means? The caliber of henchmen has really slipped over the years.”

“The cops—” he cries from the floor, where he dropped after my bullet destroyed several bones.

“Won’t do shit. It’s why you guys are here, right? Let’s see. There have been, what? Four gunshots. But can you hear any sirens?” I cup my ear and widen my eyes as if shocked. “Nothing. Crazy, right? I could hear John banging Karen last night and Derek getting assfucked by his brother-in-law, yet nobody can hear four gunshots?”

He swallows hard before speaking. “We’re supposed to take you back to Cirillo’s villa.”

“Why didn’t you just say that? I mean, all of this could have been avoided. Come on, no time to just lie around.”

He looks stunned.

“Oh shoot, I’m sorry. Let me help you.”

I step forward and offer him my free hand. He stares at it as if it’s covered in bugs. “I’m not going to hurt you,” I tell him before reaching for him.

He flinches away, so I place the barrel of the gun against his head. “Well, if you don’t want to come—”

“No, wait, I’m coming.” He manages to get to his feet unaided and pretty quickly for a man who’s been shot three times. I’d be impressed if he weren’t such a dick.

“After you.” I point to the door and move up beside him, reaching into the belt of his pants for his gun as I press mine against the small of his back.

“How far is the villa?”

“It’s about an hour away.”

“Yay, road trip. Shit, I should have packed some snacks. Oh well, next time.”

He turns to me and frowns. “You know you’ll probably be shot on sight.”

I smile widely then. “That’s okay. I don’t plan on letting any of them see me.”

I CLOSE THE TRUNK, locking henchman number two’s body inside. He still has the look of shock on his face from when I shot him in the head. It amazes me that they assume they’ll walk away. Do they think that having boobs somehow makes me more compassionate? If anything, having boobs makes me more vengeful. Some women, I’ll concede, might be happy being a doormat, but I learned early on that if I didn’t want to be walked over then I needed to be prepared to cut off a motherfucker’s feet.

Pulling on a black ski mask, I make sure my hair is hidden. I check that I have enough ammo in my backpack and my gun in hand before I make my way toward the villa. The henchman’s pass was enough to get us through the gates, though I doubt it will help me get in the house, but I take it with me anyway, just in case.

My stomach churns the closer I get to the building. I’m not sure I understand why. I’ve faced the worst the world has to offer, but there is something about this man that turns me back into that terrified little girl. If nothing else comes from tonight’s showdown than one of our deaths, at least the hold he has on me will finally be broken.

The house is unlocked. I’d say I’m surprised, but I’m not. Seems evil does think it’s untouchable. Maybe they just assume people would have to be insane to cross them, but as I said before, there is a little bit of crazy in everyone. You’re only the top dog until someone more vicious comes along.

Right now, I'm more than capable of tearing this man apart with my bare hands.

The darkness is comforting, offering me the ability to move around undetected, like a ghost. A cry makes me pause and frown, my head swiveling to the door I just passed that I assume leads down to the basement. It seems I'm not the only ghost haunting this place.

I swallow hard, remembering another time and another basement. The only comfort I draw is from the knowledge that I torched that place the second I could, burning the house to the ground and taking all its secrets with it.

I hesitate for a second before heading toward the door. I place my hand on the knob and turn it. It swings open silently, the crying louder now. I creep down the steps, descending farther into the darkness.

As my eyes adjust, I see row upon row of cells. No, not cells. Cages. The kind you keep dogs in. Looking inside, I see people curled up on the cold stone floor. They all seem out of it, but I can still hear the sobbing, which has quieted down now to whimpering. I follow the sound farther down the aisle and stop in front of the next-to-the-last cage.

I gaze inside and gasp when I see a dirty little face staring back up at me with the biggest blue eyes I've ever seen in my life. I put the gun in the holster and drop down into a squat, pulling off the ski mask before taking the chopsticks from my hair and shoving them into the old-style lock. I spent a long time mastering this technique, but that doesn't mean it's a fast process. After what seems like an hour, the lock clicks, and I pull it free. Slowly, I open the door. It creaks, sounding loud and ominous in the dark room, but nobody stirs.

I bite the inside of my lip and hold out my hand, waiting patiently, wanting nothing more than to scoop the kid up and run. But if they scream, they'll bring everyone down here. A little hand slides into mine, snapping my thoughts back to how cold they are. Hesitantly, they allow me to pull them from the cage.

When they're standing under the lone dim bulb above my head, I get a better look at the kid and realize he's a little boy of no more than four years old, caked in dirt, wearing nothing but a long T-shirt. He looks at me as I sit down on the cold floor, watching him. His hand in mine is the only connection between us, yet somehow it changes something inside both of us.

He pulls his hand free before he climbs into my lap and buries his face under my jaw. I squeeze my eyes tight to stop myself from crying. But at least the boy's tears have stopped for now, so I'm counting that as a win. I wrap my arms around his too-thin body and hold him tight enough to offer him some warmth, but not so much that I hurt him. I breathe him in, the smell of urine permeating the air, but I can't find it in me to care.

Pulling back, I look down at him and skim my finger down his cheek. "We have to go," I whisper.

He looks from me to the other cages, then back again. The silent question passes between us as if coming from someone so much older than his years.

"I'll come back for them. I promise. But we need to go before we get caught. I can't help anyone if I get locked down here too."

With him still in my arms, I stand and head back the way I came. When I reach the foot of the steps, I realize this isn't going to work.

"Okay, kiddo. I need you to climb on my back. Think you can do that?"

He nods as I place him on the third step and slide the backpack off. I adjust the straps, lengthening them so that once he climbs on my back, I slide the backpack on behind him. I pull the straps tight after tugging his little legs through them, offering me a little peace of mind that he won't slip. His arms wrap around my neck, thankfully not too tight, as I take us back upstairs.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen when we get up there, but I want you to do something for me, okay, little man? I want you to bury your head against my neck and squeeze your eyes closed. You keep them closed until I tell you to open them. I don’t care what you hear or how loud it gets. You keep your eyes closed,” I tell him quietly as I take out my gun.

He doesn’t respond with words, and at this point, I’m wondering if he speaks at all, but he does what I ask. That helps ease the guilt over what I’m about to potentially expose this poor child to.

Once we reach the top, I push the door open a crack and check to see if the coast is clear. When I see nothing, I open the door wider and leave the basement. It’s quiet up here as I gently close the door behind us. I stare at the front door before turning my head and looking up at the staircase. If I leave now, I might never get another shot like this. But if I stay, I can’t guarantee we will make it out alive.

The decision should be an easy one. The kid should take priority, but still, I hesitate because neither he nor I will be safe until Santos is dead. The decision is taken out of my hands when I hear the sound of a gun cocking. I whirl in that direction, aim at the shadow, press my finger to the trigger, and fire. The bright light illuminates the face of the man briefly, making me stagger back when I recognize him.

“Calix,” I choke out before turning and running.

I never thought he’d come back and work for his brother. Not after everything I told him. I’m a damn fool. I run through the house and skid in a pool of blood on the kitchen floor. I slam into the counter, pain erupting in my hip and side, but I don’t give it a second thought as I spin, putting myself between a bullet and a boy for the third time in as many weeks.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I keep my gun up as I edge around the counter toward the door. There are three entry points to this room. I have to split my attention between them as I back up, and in the dark, that makes it hard. I bump into something, but thankfully I don't lose my balance.

A body lies at my feet, the source of the pool of blood, I'm assuming. I can't investigate and see if they're still breathing. I won't risk the kid for that. We are almost to the laundry room when a figure steps into the room.

I have my gun aimed at them, ready to shoot as the lights flick on and the man from my nightmares claps loudly. The boy at my back tenses and squeezes me tighter, his fear palpable. Ironically, his fear lessens my own, my maternal instinct to protect him driving out everything else.

"I have to say, Sophia. I'm impressed. I never expected you'd pull off all that you have. I guess we're more alike than I realized."

"We're nothing alike," I snarl, backing up, stopping when I feel someone behind me.

A gun clicks, and the boy whimpers. I know, I fucking know, this is it. I'm not going to walk away from this, but I'll be damned if the last thing this boy sees is someone giving up on him. If we die, I want him to know that someone cared enough to fight for him—fight until their last fucking breath, if necessary.

“Well done, Zale.” Santos grins that sadistic grin of his, but it doesn’t make me cower in fear. It makes my anger coil around me like a snake ready to strike.

The boy sobs silently into my neck, tears running down my exposed skin. I know he set me up. I just don’t care. Fear can be a powerful motivator, and this boy, Zale, is a freaking baby. I reach my free hand up and stroke his leg, offering him comfort in the only way I can.

“Take him,” Santos orders.

The person behind us moves to grab him, but I tighten my grip.

“Touch him, and I’ll kill you all.”

Santos laughs hysterically, but it’s the kind of sound a serial killer would make. There is no joy, no warmth. The sound is so empty and cold, it hurts my skin.

“I think I’ll have fun fucking the sass out of you. Either you hand the boy over, or I have my brother shoot him. I have no use for him anymore.”

I run through all the variables and outcomes in my head, knowing none of my choices are worth shit. But if it’s Calix behind me with a gun aimed at us, then I have one last move to make. I may not trust this man. Hell, I may kill him before the night is through, but I know in my core that he won’t hurt this boy. If Zale can’t be in my arms, Calix’s is the next best place to be.

Keeping my gun on Santos, I talk softly to Zale so only he can hear me. “I’m going to hand you over to Calix for a little while. You be good, okay?”

He cries, but he doesn’t fight me as I release the straps of my pack, and Calix moves to grab him. Zale cries harder now, gripping tighter. I peel him off me, ignoring my tears as I turn and surrender him to Calix, who has blood running down his arm from where I shot him. The look on his face isn’t one I’ve seen before, but I don’t have time to analyze it.

I pass Zale over to him before I hear movement behind me. I whirl and have the gun pressed to Santos’s stomach. He

grabs my hair and kisses me, his dick hard between us. It takes everything I have to not pull the trigger, but I see more men enter the room behind him. I know if I shoot Santos, Zale will be next.

I rip my mouth free as the men move to stand in a semi-circle, but I note belatedly that Zale and Calix stay on the opposite side of the kitchen. The same side I'm on.

“Do you think you can beat me?” Santos hisses before swinging his hand and backhanding me across the face.

My head whips to the side, but I turn back to him and grin.

“Getting weak in your old age, huh, Santos?”

I pull back and punch him in the throat. He stumbles back, and I find five guns pointed at me. He rights himself just before falling to the floor. When two more men step through the door and stare at me with zero emotion in their expressions, I harden myself against it all, reinforcing the protective wall around my heart to stop from feeling the immense pain I know will hit me later.

Rémy and Maxim.

Boy, I can sure pick'em.

Recovering, Santos looks behind him at my expression before turning back to me with an expression of pure glee.

“Did you really think I didn't know where you were and what you were doing, who you were doing, every second of every day?”

“Honestly, I didn't think about you at all, Santos.”

He scoffs. “Oh, Sophia, you're such a pretty little liar. I live in your mind. You never could handle a man like me.”

“You're just the boogeyman, and I take out men like you for a living, men who get their kicks preying on the weak. But I'm not weak anymore.”

“Really? Because from where I'm standing, you are.” He laughs hysterically before giving me an evil grin. “You fell for it over and over again. Offering up your cunt in the hopes of

making a man fall in love with you. Sounds a lot like that starry-eyed girl I fucked on the floor in front of her daddy.”

I swallow down the bile, avoiding eye contact with Rémy and Maxim, who step up beside Santos. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Calix slide Zale to his feet and shove him into the laundry room, pulling the door closed behind him.

“Santos, Santos, Santos. Some things never change, do they? Always acting the like big man in front of a crowd. But only weak men rape and beat little girls.”

I look from him to Maxim, whose jaw ticks, then to Rémy, whose eyes are on the fading mark on my cheek.

“I can’t say I’m shocked to find Rémy here. He’d sell out his own mother for the right price. I’ll admit, Maxim is a surprise. You did try to have the man killed, after all.” With Rémy here, it’s not hard to figure out who ordered the hit.

“Not sure how you managed to convince your brother of your innocence after framing him for murder, but I’ll give you your dues. You always did have a silver tongue.”

Calix walks around me to stand beside Rémy.

Santos shakes his head and laughs. “My brother is too smart to fall for your lies. He knows, just like you do, that family trumps everything. Oh, wait, you don’t have any family, do you? How callous of me.” He laughs as he looks at the men at his sides, who remain silently staring at me.

“Maxim and I have come to an understanding. And since I have no use for you now, I’m thinking you’d make an excellent pack whore for his men. I’m quite looking forward to him throwing you to the dogs and watching them tear you apart.”

I grin, feeling oddly free. This is it, the end of the road. And though I’m taking a battered heart with me, I’m still about to go out on my terms.

“You keep forgetting, Santos. I’m not the same girl you used to know.”

I lift my gun and press it to my chin, keeping my eyes on his. I hear the other players in the room stirring.

“Now, now, wife—” he begins, but I cut him off.

“I’m not your wife.”

“No. She’s mine.” Calix jumps in, spinning and aiming at Santos.

A heartbeat later, the man who destroyed my life drops to the floor with a perfect circle in the center of his forehead. I stand frozen in shock as Maxim and Rémy turn and open fire on the other men until my ears are ringing, and the only people left standing are the men who screwed me over. And then saved me.

“Sugar—” Maxim says my name softly, stepping toward me.

I back up, the gun still pressed against my jaw, the wall I built around my heart disintegrating into dust. As anticlimactic as Santos’ death was, I can’t help but feel relieved that it’s finally over. That doesn’t mean I’m in a forgiving mood though.

“Put the gun down, Sugar.” Rémy’s angry voice whips through the room like a live wire.

I ignore him, trying to make sense of everything before deciding I just don’t care. I keep the gun against my jaw and back up toward the laundry room.

“I think I’ll go now. I can either walk away on my own two legs or fly away in the arms of an angel because I’m so done with all this bullshit.”

“Let us explain.” Calix steps closer, but I back up, pushing the door to the laundry room open.

“There’s nothing to explain. I’m sure you all have a really good reason for doing what you did. I mean, you’re good. All of you are. You played your parts to perfection.”

“We had to make it believable,” Maxim says softly, my eyes shifting to look at him.

“Oh, it was. Believable, that is. I believed it all.” I shake my head, feeling a tear slip free, much to my frustration. “I loved you,” I tell him. “I loved you all.”

I swallow, feeling my hand shake, but I keep the gun pressed to my chin. There is something freeing about admitting it out loud.

“The guilt was eating me alive. Fuck. I hate who I am with you. I can’t look in the mirror anymore. You did that.”

Calix flinches at my words.

“You hurt me over and over, but you did it in such a way that I believed it was all my fault. I felt dirty,” I choke out, my eyes landing on Rémy’s. He growls and steps closer, but I shake my head.

“I’m happy Santos is gone. Thank you. I just think it’s time for me to go home now. Back to my life and to the people who love me so completely that my leaving would have mattered to them. It’s true and real and makes me feel alive.

“What we have is toxic. Nothing good can grow from the seeds we planted. There’s no light, no happiness, no hope. I don’t trust you. I...”

Footsteps have me whirling around, the gun up and ready. But when a small body collides with my legs, a sob rips free from me as I collapse to the ground and wrap my arms around Zale.

I feel the men crowd around me. One of them takes my gun, and I let them. I hold Zale tighter and cry. I cry for all I’ve lost, and I cry for what I’m about to do. Even though I stand by everything I said, I still love them. Still want them with every fiber of my being. I just know I deserve more.

“I want to go home,” I whisper.

“I’ll get my plane ready to take you anywhere in the world if you promise to just listen to us first.”

I look up at Maxim’s voice and glare at him through my tears. “Okay, but once we’re done, I’m leaving,” I warn them

all. Nobody fights me, and for some reason, that just makes me cry harder.

Being a hormonal woman sometimes is a fucking joke— I freeze solid, vomit rushing up the back of my throat as a thought crosses my mind. I haven't had a period in six weeks. If I'm hormonal, it's not because I'm getting my period. It's because I'm pregnant.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Before I can deal with the shitshow that my life has turned into, I have a promise to keep. I pull out my cell phone and dial a number, explaining what I need and hanging up once they agree to help me. I hesitate before making the next call, but I know it's time. I dial the number I know by heart and listen to it ring.

When it picks up, I have to force myself to speak through the emotion threatening to choke me, "I need you."

"Sugar? Jesus fuck." I hear Lollie curse down the line as I squeeze my phone so tight, I hear it crack.

"Yeah, it's me. I'm sorry—"

"Tell me what you need." She cuts me off. "Everything else can wait. Are you safe?"

I look up at the men I love watching me and snort. "No. Not even close."

I reel off the address of the place and the house I grew up in.

"I'm on my way, Sugar. Don't you dare die on me."

She hangs up, and I shove my cell back in my pocket. I tip Zale's head back and dry his eyes.

"Everything is going to be okay now, but I need you to be strong for me for a little longer while I help out the other people."

He crawls out of my lap almost immediately and nods.

“Such a brave boy.” I press a kiss to his forehead as I stand, then scoop him up and cover his eyes before carrying him through the room, ignoring everything and everyone else.

I search the rooms until I find one with a sofa and a television, and I lay Zale on the sofa. I pull a blanket from the back of it and cover him, then turn the TV on.

“I’ll try to be quick, but some of those people are sick and will need help. You stay here for me, and I’ll keep coming and checking on you and find you some food.”

He nods and burrows under the blanket, his eyelids drooping almost immediately. I tuck the blanket around him and wait for him to drift off before I leave the room.

Calix, Rémy, and Maxim are all waiting for me outside the room, but I ignore them and keep walking, heading for the basement where I found Zale.

“Sugar—”

I whirl around and point at Rémy. “Don’t. Not now. There are people here that need me. Zale needs me. I don’t have time to fall apart, so whatever it is you want to say, just don’t. For now, I want to get these people out of here.”

“People?” Maxim looks from me to Calix, but I walk away and leave them to figure it out.

I push the door to the basement open and jog down the steps, the smell of shit and piss seems even stronger than before.

“Fuck,” Maxim curses from behind me.

I turn and see the guys looking in the cages.

“The boy was in here?” Rémy grits out.

I nod before looking at Calix. “Do you know where the keys are?”

“I’ll find them.” He turns and heads back upstairs as I walk up and down the rows of cages.

At the far end of the room is a steel door. I didn’t notice it before since it blends in so seamlessly with its surroundings.

“Sugar, these people are dead.”

I press my hand to the door, feeling a sense of urgency. “I know. But I still made a promise to get them out, and I will. I refuse to leave any of them trapped down here.”

Footsteps on the stairs have me turning to see Calix coming back down. I meet him halfway down the aisle, and he hands me a set of keys. I flip through them, looking for one that’s a little different. The keys for the cages are all remarkably similar, but there is one that’s a bit larger and more industrial-looking than the others. I take it to the door and shove it in the lock, then brace myself before I open it.

The room must be soundproofed because when I open it, the sound of whimpers hits my ears. I walk into the dark and drag my hand down the wall, looking for a switch. When I find it, I flip it on and swallow down a cry of my own.

Cells line each wall, but unlike in the previous room, these cells are concrete rooms with the front made up of reinforced glass. Inside, the cells have been decorated to recreate snapshots from my memories. The first cell is a replica of the childhood bedroom from my home, right down to the book on the end of the bed. There is a young girl sitting on the floor near the head of the bed. She looks up at me with dead eyes, but that’s not what has me sucking in a sharp, painful breath or Calix cursing behind me. It’s the fact that she looks just like me—or the me from twenty years ago, at least.

“This is why he said he had no more use for me. He has all these younger versions of me to break instead,” I hiss as I move to the next cell and find a copy of my old classroom. In the corner is a child sitting facing the wall, naked from the waist up with welts crisscrossing over her back. She turns when she senses she isn’t alone and stares at me, a woman she’ll look exactly like in years to come.

“Get them out,” I all but yell. My hand shakes as I pass the keys to Calix and walk down memory lane. The life I once led gets twisted and darker, with reality and fiction morphing together until I stop at the cell that depicts the place my parents were killed.

It's empty now, and the room has been ripped apart, something that never happened while I was there. It makes me wonder if this room is showing someone else's memory instead of mine. I look down and see the bloodstains, and my mind flashes back to that night.

I jump when I feel a hand land on my shoulder, but I don't pull away when Rémy's scent blankets me and his arm bands around my chest. It's the only thing keeping me on my feet right now.

"He got the bloodstains right," I say numbly, staring at them, wondering how he did it. Perhaps that day was burned into his memory like it was mine, making sure neither of us could forget.

I pull away from Rémy and move to the next cell. It's empty. There are no scenes from my youth, no painful flashbacks from hell. Just a dark cement room waiting for its macabre makeover. The next is the same. As is the next, and the next.

I'm about to stop looking when a flicking catches my eye. Stepping closer, I move to look through the glass and find a bed pushed against it. On the bed is a girl, maybe fifteen or sixteen. She's naked and bruised over eighty percent of her body. The wall behind her is designed to look like portholes on a boat.

I shake my head and ignore the room that's eerily similar to the room on Santos's boat that I blew up. I sit on the floor and press my hand to the glass next to the girl as Maxim and Calix work on opening the cells and checking on the girls as quickly as they can. This girl stares vacantly at me. After a moment, she lifts her hand and presses it against mine. And I swear, glass or not, I can feel her.

Afraid to speak, I stare into her eyes so she can read me, and I make her a vow that I will get her out of there. I can't change what happened in the past, but I can make sure she has the future she deserves. That they all deserve.

A commotion in the other room catches my attention. I look up and see the governor barreling toward me, his face

pale. He has armed officers with him who have their guns aimed at all the players in the room.

“What the fuck is going on, Sarah?”

I stand on shaky legs and face Mikal. “Santos Cirillo kidnapped me to add to his collection.”

I point to the girls emerging from their cells, looking terrified. He does a double take before really looking at them, noticing the similarities between us, no doubt. I know the cops noticed right away.

“Santos Cirillo?”

“Put your damn guns down. These girls have been through enough,” I yell at the cops before answering. “Yes. He kidnapped me.”

He looks shocked by the news that Santos didn’t die, which means I don’t have to kill him. After a moment, he rubs his hand down his face.

“I have dead bodies upstairs,” Mikal says, his face taking on a greenish tint. The man always was a bit of a pussy.

“One of them is Santos. I killed him when he tried to kill a four-year-old boy in my arms. The others were his men. They tried to defend their boss. My men did what any man would do. They shot first, protecting me and the boy.”

I see Rémy look at me when I use the term *my men*, but he says nothing.

“The boy?” one of the cops asks.

“Asleep upstairs. I didn’t want him seeing any of this. We need ambulances. These girls need the hospital. The others out there, we’re too late to save, but I’ll be damned if I lose anyone else.”

Mikal steps closer, looking up at me with interest. “Who are you really, Sarah?”

I stare at him with dead eyes. “My name is Sophia Michelakis.”

“But...you died.”

“So did Santos, but here we are.”

He lifts his head and looks at my men, recognition dawning. His features harden when they land on Calix.

“Firearms are a direct violation of—”

“How’s Paul?” I question, naming one of his regular fuckboys.

His face bleaches white as he coughs to clear his throat.

“I can’t cover this up.”

“I don’t want you to. I just want you delay the information getting out until I’m ready. That and I may need to borrow Santos for proof of death purposes.

“And then what?”

“And then I want you to tell the truth. It’s what we deserve.”

“We?”

His eyes flick from me to the girls to the cells before understanding dawns. A flicker of pity in his expression makes me want to rip his balls off.

“These girls need the hospital, Mikal,” I remind him.

He jumps into action after that, ordering the cops into action before lifting his phone and making some calls. I take the keys from Calix as he goes to open the door next to me. I take over, sliding the key into the lock.

“Can you check on Zale?” I ask him quietly.

He hesitates before nodding, pressing a kiss to my temple before leaving. I open the door and step inside. I hear the girl’s breath hitch, but she doesn’t turn. I look at Rémy standing in the doorway. He must read my mind because he pulls off his shirt and hands it to me. I take it and close the door, not locking it but making it clear nobody else is to enter—not until the paramedics get here.

I walk over to the bed and climb on behind the girl, placing Rémy’s shirt over her to cover her nakedness. Before I can

question the pros and cons, I wrap my arm around her and bury my head in her hair and tell her a story. The story of a little girl who lost everything, but instead of giving up, she transformed herself from victim into a warrior, helping all the other little girls who were just like her. By the end, we're both crying.

She turns toward me with a painful hiss and looks up at my face as I rearrange the shirt back over her. "What happens now?" she asks me in an American accent, which shocks the shit out of me. I hide my reaction as I reach up and smooth the hair from her face.

"We get you strong, and then we get you home."

Tears slip freely down her cheeks, leaving tracks across her bruised skin. "I don't have a home anymore. He took that away."

I close my eyes and keep stroking her hair. "He took that from me too, but I found another family, another home, filled with people who love me."

She's quiet—so quiet that I think she's fallen asleep. When I look down, I see her eyes still on me. "I'm scared."

"I know, but you're not alone anymore. You'll never be alone again."

She buries her head under my jaw and grips the front of my shirt tightly in her fists so I can't leave, and that's where we stay until the paramedics arrive.

I SIT in the private room where I've been waiting for news for the past fifteen hours as Calix keeps guard. Rémy and Maxim have disappeared to make some calls, so when the door slams open, I assume it's them until I hear a familiar voice cursing.

"Is she dead? She better not be because I'm going to kill her." My head whips around at the sound of Dulce's voice. And there she is, standing beside Lollie and Reece.

I climb to my feet and take a few steps toward them before my legs give out, and I collapse to the floor. Calix reaches for me, but my girls get there first. They're on me like mother hens, stroking my hair and wrapping their arms around me, promising me everything will be okay.

Once I have a better handle on my emotions, I look up into Lollie's wet eyes. "I'm sorry. I couldn't put any of you at risk. You guys are everything. I wouldn't survive if something happened to you because of me."

"We're a team, dammit, but more than that, we're a family, Sugar. Don't you ever do that shit to us again."

I bite my lip and nod as Dulce pulls back and scowls at me. She yanks my hair hard enough to make me swear before letting go.

"Finley and Dove miss their auntie."

"God, you're killing me."

"Not yet, but the day is still young. I swear, Sugar, if you pull this shit again, I'll...I'll...cover all your sex toys with itching powder."

"I missed how evil you are."

She grins, and though I hurt her, I know I'm forgiven. I turn to Reese, who looks pissed, but before I can speak, she holds up her hand.

"I'm so fucking angry at you. I'll get over it, but I reserve the right to be a bitch for the next few weeks and to throw this in your face whenever we argue."

"Deal," I whisper.

She hugs me again before standing.

Lollie reaches over and squeezes my hand, and we sit there like that for a minute, neither of us speaking. She holds my hand like I once did for her in another hospital in another life. When the door slams open again, I jump as Lollie and Reese spin around.

Rémy and Maxim storm into the room, ignoring my girls, both focused solely on me. Maxim holds his hand out to me to help me up, and I take it, my eyes on his face and the anger on it.

“What’s wrong?”

“Later, okay?”

I nod and let it go, figuring it might just be Bratva related.

“They are keeping everyone for the next few days to run more tests and observe them,” Rémy tells me as I look up at him.

“What aren’t you telling me?”

“Some of the girls need surgery. The damage they sustained...” his voice drifts off, but I don’t need him to explain.

I swallow, my girls drawing closer. “What about Zale? Has he said anything yet?”

Rémy shakes his head. “No. The doctors had to sedate him because he has a broken arm that hasn’t healed properly. They want to break it and reset it.”

I blow out a breath. “Alright. As long as he’s not in any pain, that’s good, right?” I reassure myself.

“Really good,” Lollie agrees. “Now tell me who Zale is and what the fuck is going on.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I fill them in on everything as Maxim, Rémy, and Calix stand sentry behind me. I leave the men out of my story as much as possible so that they don't pester me for answers I just don't have to give them. I ignore their presence as best as I can, but it's getting harder and harder to do, especially when my girls keep looking up at them.

"So, it's over now? You can come home?" Reese asks when I finish my story.

"I have some loose ends to tie up, but yeah, I can come home," I tell them, feeling the guys behind me tense.

"Sugar," Rémy's growls, his French accent coming through thick with his anger.

"What's the story with these guys anyway? Most people collect magnets or keychains when they visit other countries, but you had to go one better. A Greek, a Russian, and a Frenchman. Ooh la la," Dulce teases, making Reese snort.

Dulce ignores her and stares at Maxim. "Why do you look so familiar?"

"You son of a bitch," a deep voice snarls.

Turning toward the door, I see a crowd of familiar faces pouring in. At the front is Dulce's husband, Dimitri Aslanov. He makes a beeline for Maxim and punches him in the face.

Maxim stumbles back, but he doesn't go down. Instead, he steps up toe-to-toe with Aslanov. "You get that one for free, but touch me again, and your wife will be glad she has a few

spare men because I'll cut your hands off and gift them to her.”

“Hey, not cool. I like his hands. Can't you, I don't know, take an ear or something?” Dulce whines, making me look to the ceiling for strength.

With a sigh, I walk over and place myself between Maxim and Aslanov and put my hands on Aslanov's chest. Rémy growls from behind me, but I ignore him.

Dulce, though, laughs loudly. “Oh, pipe down. Sugar and Aslanov love each other because they love me. That's it. If either of them hurts me, the other would kill them in a heartbeat.”

She's not wrong, but it does nothing to soothe Rémy, who crowds closer.

“You should have fucking told me where she was. You knew we were looking for her,” Aslanov snarls at Maxim.

“Careful, Dimitri, that sounds an awful lot like an order, and we both know I don't take orders from anyone.”

“Oh my God, put your motherfucking cocks away. Look, Aslanov, I get that you're mad, and I understand why, but I asked him to keep it from you. I needed to make sure Dulce was safe. You understand that, right?”

He looks down at me and frowns, but eventually he sighs, knowing he'd have killed me if Dulce had gotten mixed up in my shit. “Don't do it again. I don't like seeing my wife cry.” He kisses my forehead and steps back.

“You're such a dick,” I hear one of Dulce's other men—Hunter—say with a sigh as he steps up with Cain. Both hug me before making space for Griff, who picks me up and spins me around before he is yanked away by Calix.

“You might want to call your dogs off, Sugar. They look like they bite.” Reece's man Graves steps up. I tilt my head, and my lips twitch when I realize Glitch is the one in control right now. I don't tell my girls this because I like all their men, but Glitch is my favorite.

“Hey, Glitch.” I wave at him as Blink turns to Vega and Law.

“How does she always do that?”

“Do what?” I tease before giving them each a quick hug.

“Recognize greatness.” Glitch winks.

Icarus, Lollie’s biker, offers me a chin lift as he wraps his arm around his woman. “Glad you’re okay. Talon and Sawyer send their best. They’re back home holding down the fort.”

It clicks then as I look at Dulce. “You left your kids with a porn star and a cowboy?” I can’t help it, I grin.

“And a crocodile.” She smiles widely.

And at that, I laugh—the first genuine laugh since this mess started.

“So, are you going to introduce us to your men or what?” Reese asks, crossing her arms.

I roll my eyes. “This is Maxim, the Bratva pakhan. Rémy, world-class assassin extraordinaire. And Calix, Santos’s brother,” I tell them with a saccharine-sweet smile. “And they’re not my men.”

I feel the pissed-off vibes coming from behind me as I focus on the shocked faces before me.

“Now, angel, you forgot to tell them I’m also your husband,” Calix drawls, throwing his arm around me.

“He’s what?” Lollie shouts just as a doctor pokes his head around the corner.

“Miss Michelakis?” The look on his face sucks the oxygen right out of the room.

“Mrs. Cirillo,” Calix corrects, but I shake him off and head to the doctor.

“What’s wrong?”

“Let’s go somewhere more private.”

I shake my head. “Just fucking tell me,” I tell him, feeling everyone draw closer.

Hands at my waist offer me warmth and comfort as the doctor dips his head and sighs. “We ran a number of tests on all the children you brought in. Two of the younger ones have extensive internal damage caused by sustained abuse. We’re repairing what we can, but neither child will ever be able to bear children of their own.”

I nod slowly, keeping my sadness masked as he continues.

“The oldest child, Lena, shows signs of giving birth, and after an examination, I determined this to be true. But when questioned, she became emotional and shut down. I’ve called a psychologist and a team of therapists down to aid the victims, but it will take time.”

“Not victims, survivors. Take me to Lena.”

“She doesn’t want to see anyone right now, but she did ask me to give you this.”

He hands me an envelope with a crudely drawn angel on the front. I turn to look at Calix, who is staring down at the envelope too. He looks up at me and offers me a nod before he steps back.

“There is something else too. When we ran all the tests, we also ran some blood tests, trying to identify the children, and we found the boy, er—” he checks his notes “—Zale, well, I believe Lena is his mother. The father shares DNA markers with Mr. Cirillo here. We tested him after we treated his gunshot wound.”

Aslanov reaches for him, but the doctor speaks up quickly, realizing his error. “He’s not the boy’s father. I’m sorry. He’s the boy’s uncle.”

“Santos is his father. Why am I not surprised?” I shake my head. “Anything else?”

“I’ll keep you updated as soon as I have anything else. Everyone is resting comfortably for now as the police work to find their parents.”

I nod and walk on leaden feet to the nearest chair and sit with the envelope in my hands.

“Let’s give Sugar some space. Come on, we can wait outside.” Lollie rounds everyone up and forces them outside. Everyone but Rémy, Calix, and Maxim.

Rémy stands near the window while Calix and Maxim flank either side of me. I want to tell them I don’t need them, but then they might hear the lie in my voice, so I don’t speak at all. Instead, I open the envelope and slide out the lined paper.

I read the letter aloud, feeling my voice shake.

DEAR ANGEL,

I heard one of the men call you that and knew I was finally free. I prayed and prayed so hard and God finally sent me an angel just when I thought he’d forgotten about me.

I don’t know if you know this, but my name is Lena Smith. I haven’t been called that in a really long time. He calls me Sophia and I hate it. I hate him. I hate what he did to me and what he took from me, but mostly I hate myself.

Do you know I had a baby? He died and all I felt was relieved. Do you think that’s why God took so long to send you?

MY VOICE CRACKS, and I have to take a minute to get myself together before I can carry on.

“Santos told her her baby died?” Maxim growls.

“He was an evil bastard. He’d get off on that kind of thing,” Rémy states.

Calix is quiet, not because he doesn’t agree, but because he’s finding all this out now after years of loving a man who was nothing more than a monster in disguise.

I THINK he’s with my parents and my brother. They’ll look after him. They really were great parents. I just wish I told them I

loved them more. I wish I didn't act like a brat all the time. I wish I could go back and do it all differently. I would never have gone online, never agreed to meet that boy who wasn't really a boy at all.

I wouldn't have accepted that drink.

THERE'S a water stain on the paper where her tears fell while she wrote.

I THOUGHT about what you said. I'm glad you found a family again. I wish I was as strong as you, but the truth is I don't want a new family. I want the one I had. I want my life back. I don't want another one.

Don't be mad. Don't be sad.

I just want to see my mom. She'd have liked you. She'd really like how you took care of me when she couldn't.

Maybe God will forgive me and if I'm really lucky, he'll make me an angel just like you.

Lena.

I STARE at the note until her words dawn on me.

I look at Rémy, who gets it at the same time I do, then I'm up and on my feet a second later with the others right on my heels. I run for the ward I know the kids are on, and when I get there, I collide with the doctor that spoke to me before.

“Where's Lena?”

“She doesn't want to see anyone.”

I grab him by the white lapels of his coat as Rémy and Calix start yanking open curtains looking for her.

“She's going to hurt herself, doc. Now where the fuck is she?” Calix snaps.

The doctor looks at me and points to the cubicle. Calix runs for it before I can get there.

“What’s going on?” I hear Reese ask from behind me. I ignore her, skidding to a stop when I get to Calix and find the room empty.

“Shit. Where would she go?” Maxim growls.

I think back to her words before snapping my head around, looking for the exit. “She wants to be an angel,” I reply, heading for the fire exit.

“What does that mean?” Maxim asks, running to keep up with me as the others follow behind.

“She’s going to fly,” I say, looking at him as his eyes flash with understanding.

“Fuck.” He shoves the door to the roof open with his shoulder, and I run past him, stopping when I see Lena standing on the building’s ledge.

Snow is falling lightly and must have been for a while as it coats the rooftops in a thin layer of powder, making my footsteps crunch.

“Stay where you are, don’t freak her out,” Dulce says softly behind me as I slowly walk forward.

“I’ll see if I can find another way to get to her,” Rémy tells me quietly before he disappears.

I walk over to the ledge and softly call her name. “Lena?”

She turns and looks at me over her shoulder. With rosy cheeks and snowflakes in her hair, she looks like any other girl her age. Only, I can see the darkness swirling in her eyes, consuming her from within.

“I thought this would be easier.”

“Maybe it’s hard because it’s not supposed to be this way. You’re destined for great things, Lena. I can promise you that.”

“Why did this happen to me? What did I do that was so bad?”

“Nothing. God, sweetheart, you did nothing wrong.”

“Yeah, then why does it feel like I did?”

She scratches at her arm, and I see red marks all over them. “I can’t get it out.”

“Get what out, Lena?” I ask softly, inching closer.

“The dirt. I can’t get the dirt out. I thought if I scrubbed hard enough, I’d be clean again, but it’s inside me. It’s infected my blood.”

My insides are ripped to shreds knowing this girl needs more help than I alone can give her. “You’re not dirty. You’re so bright it almost hurts my eyes to look at you.” I hold up my palm and catch snow. “You’re like this snowflake. Perfectly beautiful, exactly as you are.”

“You can’t see what’s inside me, but I can feel it. It’s bad. I need to clean it out.”

“Then let me help you. We’ll go down to the ocean and swim until the dirt drifts out to sea.”

“You’d do that?”

“I’ll do anything you ask me to.”

“Will you forgive me?” she whispers, her tears dripping off her chin, melting the snowflakes on her skin.

“There is nothing to forgive.”

She smiles sadly. “I’m sorry.” She takes a step back and falls.

I don’t think, I just act and throw myself over the edge as screams erupt behind me. I grab the edge of Lena’s hospital gown. The stupid thing tears a moment before a hand wraps around my ankle, and I smack into the side of the building with a painful thud.

Lena hits the ground, landing on her back with her legs bent at an awkward angle, her arms splayed on either side of her, an almost serene smile on her face as blood pools around her body. Hands pull me back as I take one last look at Lena.

The white snow mixes with the red blood, making it look almost like she has pink—

A sob escapes me. Before I know it, I'm screaming and punching and kicking at Rémy, who is trying to contain me. All I can see is Lena, the broken girl who wanted to be an angel. And her pretty pink wings.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

I sit in the chair near the fire with a blanket around my shoulders and hot tea in my hands, but still, I can't get warm. I remember my father sitting in this same chair when I was a child and me crawling into his lap. The second he wrapped his arms around me, I knew everything would be alright. God, what I wouldn't give to have that same innocent naivety today.

I wince as I shift, my body aching from where it collided with the wall. My ankle took the brunt. Rémy had circled around the roof to come at Lena from a different angle when I followed her over the edge. Somehow, he managed to catch me out of the air as I fell. Everyone is at the hospital watching the rest of the kids. It was the only way I'd agree to go home and rest.

I should have known that Maxim, Calix, and Rémy wouldn't leave me alone. Not that it matters. They're pissed at me—hell, everyone is pissed. I get it. What I did was reckless, but it wasn't a conscious thought. My body was moving before my brain could kick into gear. It was instinctual to save her and, in a way, myself. But I failed, just like I did back then.

I feel them enter the room, but I don't look up. Their emotions beat at me viciously, flaying the skin from my bones. I don't try to justify my actions. Don't offer them false apologies or pretty promises. If it had been one of my girls, I'd have lost my damn mind. Yet knowing this, I can't drag myself out of the despair holding me captive. It holds me tight in its icy fists and refuses to let me go, unable to swim from the

depths to the surface to breathe again. Instead, I'm stuck in the darkness, surrounded by my ugly thoughts and my guilt.

I'm pulled out of my grief by a hand in my hair, twisting my head almost painfully. My eyes meet Rémy's livid ones as he drags me from the chair to my feet.

"You stupid, stupid woman," he snarls.

Maxim and Calix step up beside him, their arms crossed over their chests in an almost comical mirror image of each other. The three of them make an odd group. They might not be trying to kill each other right now, thanks to their focus and their combined anger being aimed at me, but they'll never be friends. All that links them is death and chaos, and now me.

I open my mouth, but words won't come. I don't know that if it happened again, I would do anything different. Maybe I wasn't meant to save Lena, but that doesn't mean I wasn't put on this earth to save the dozens of other girls that came before her. Girls I saved because I reacted on instinct. It's the same feeling that made me fly back to Lollie the day she slashed her wrists. If I had listened to reason or told myself I was being stupid, she wouldn't be here right now, and Icarus, Talon, and Sawyer wouldn't have that beauty in their lives to wake up to every day.

I blink, Rémy's eyes disappearing, and I see a pink snow angel and a serene smile. Yeah, so maybe I wasn't meant to save her, but that doesn't mean I shouldn't have tried. At least she died knowing I cared. Knowing I would have given my life for hers because she mattered that much. I might not be able to give her life, but I gave her peace. And now that she's safe, beyond any more pain, I'll carry her demons for her.

"Strip," Rémy orders.

I frown in confusion, coming out of the fog. "What?"

"I said, take off your fucking clothes, or so help me God, you won't be able to sit down for a week."

I look at Maxim and Calix, who stand there stoically, not stepping in or saying a word.

"Don't look at them. They won't help you now."

He steps forward and grips my chin, not hard enough to bruise but enough that I can't look away from him.

“That day you stepped between Maxim and the bullet I fired; I thought my heart would stop. I swore to all that was holy that nothing was ever going to take you from me. And then I stood there and watched you hold a gun to your jaw.”

His face is like stone but his eyes burn with fire. “I didn't really believe you'd do it until today. Until you thought nothing of diving off that fucking roof,” he roars. “You almost took yourself away from me, from us, from all those crazy fuckers at the hospital that obviously care about you. You did that. I can protect you from just about anyone, but I didn't think for a single second I'd need to protect you from yourself.”

“Rémy,” I whisper his name like a plea.

“I can't breathe without you, but you didn't think of me at all. You just jumped, not caring that my heart would have died right along with you.”

His words crack the numbness down the middle, the hollowness inside filling with all the stuff I don't want to feel. Tears run down my face as Rémy leans forward.

“Next time you find yourself in a situation like that, and let's be honest, you will because trouble finds you no matter where you go, I want you to think. I want you to remember me, us, and all the other people that need you in their lives. Now take off your fucking clothes before I rip them from you. It's time we showed you exactly who you belong to.”

My anger at them is still there, but I'm feeling too many other things right now to deal with that. I know Rémy. He'll do what he wants, including me. Fighting him will only delay the inevitable. Plus, I need to feel something other than grief.

He releases me and steps back as I reach down and grab the hem of my black T-shirt and lift it over my head. Goosebumps pebble my skin as they watch me, but I ignore them as I reach for the fly of my jeans and tear them open. I shove them down my legs, not aiming for sexy. That's not

what this is. I kick them off and reach behind me for the clasp of my bra when Maxim steps forward. He reaches around and unfastens my bra, pulling it free from my arms, his eyes on mine instead of my bare breasts.

“You ran from me.”

“You knew I would,” I tell him, remembering the desperation in his lovemaking.

He nods.

“I expected more from you,” he tuts, moving behind me.

His words stoke the flame of my anger, fanning it until it begins to grow once more.

“Funny, I could say the same.”

He yanks my arms behind my back and ties my wrists with my bra, the lacy material digging into my skin as he whispers in my ear, “You should have run further, ahn-gyil. You underestimate my hunger for you.” He bites my ear before stepping away. He takes off his jacket and tosses it on the chair closest to him.

Because I’m watching Maxim, I miss Calix moving until he’s standing right in front of me. His eyes dip to my chest, then down the rest of my body, taking in the bruises and scrapes marring my skin.

“Every time I see you, there are bruises and blood.”

“They’ll heal,” I tell him coldly, not looking at him as he squats down and hooks his fingers in my underwear and drags the scrap of fabric down my legs. I step out of them, blinking to hold back my tears.

We’ve been here before, Calix and I, and it never ends well. The bruises on my skin are nothing compared to the bruises this man left on my heart.

His hands glide up my legs as he stands, his hand covering the brand. “One day, I’ll cover this with one of my own.”

“Go fuck yourself,” I snarl, which makes him chuckle.

“Now, why would I do that when I have you, wife? Fight me all you want. It just makes my dick harder, picturing you squirming around on my cock, your tight pussy milking my cum from me.”

“You don’t have me, though, do you, hubby? You threw me away like trash.” I turn away, but he grabs my jaw and yanks it back.

“I did what I had to do to keep you safe. Yeah, that marked you. I can see that. I knew I was in deep with you. I just didn’t know you were in deep too. What I feel for you...that’s what people start wars over. I’d sacrifice everything just to count your heartbeats, hear the rapid pounding of your pulse, and feel your soft breaths against my skin. Because all those things mean you’re alive. I’d rather live a life of loneliness knowing you’re breathing than be the reason you’re buried in the dirt.”

He steps back then, his eyes flashing before his jaw ticks. “It was all for nothing in the end. I still nearly lost you. Do you really care so little for yourself?”

I laugh, my eyes moving from his to Maxim, who is now pulling off his shirt, to Rémy, who stands with his arms crossed in the center of the room watching me.

“You all think you know me? Think just because you stuck your dicks in me you have some kind of ownership over me? Fuck you all. You know nothing. You see my tears and think, what? That I’m so sorry I scared you all that I’ll beg on my knees for forgiveness? Did you all forget your parts in this? If you think for one second that sex is going to fix everything between us then you’re all giving your dicks way too much credit. What happened today, and all this shit between us is just a blip in comparison to what I’ve been through, what I’ve seen, what I’ve done,” I tell them, whispering the last part as my voice chokes.

“So yeah. You all took what you needed from me and got your rocks off in the process, knowing I was going to get hurt. But you did it anyway. You did what you did because, to you, at least, your reasons were valid. So why is it that when I make

those impossible choices, I'm reckless, stupid, thoughtless, selfish? Did I miss anything?"

They don't say anything, but I notice Calix is tugging his T-shirt off over his head.

"Not everything is about you. It sure as fuck isn't about me. I wasn't thinking about me, you, or my friends when I dove for Lena. All I was thinking about was her. Twenty years ago, I stood naked at midnight on the beach with water lapping at my feet, and I figured the only way out would be to walk into those dark waters and let them swallow me whole. I had nobody left to miss me. Nobody to save me. I had nothing. I was nothing. So, saving Lena was also me trying to save myself. It's part of why I save every girl I do. Redemption."

Rémy cocks his head to the side, working something out. Whatever it is, he masks it before he steps forward. He sits in the chair I was in, and before I can figure out his next move, he has me yanked over his lap.

I yelp, unable to break my fall with my hands tied behind me. The breath is knocked out of me, and my tender body protests, but Rémy doesn't give me a second to get myself together before his palm slaps my ass hard. The sting makes me gasp as a burn spreads across my skin. He rains down smack after smack until my whole ass feels like it's on fire.

"Never, ever will you do something so fucking reckless again."

"It's who I am," I sob when his hand soothes over the heated skin.

He unties my hands and lifts me onto his lap and cradles me like a baby. "No, it's a part of you, but it's not who you are. Who you are is mine."

"And mine."

"And mine."

I turn to find a very naked Maxim and Calix behind me. Rémy practically tosses me to Calix, who carries me upstairs to the bedroom. I stare at the tangled sheets on the bed. The last time I was in this room, everything fell apart.

“Calix—”

He kisses me, swallowing my protests. He lowers me to the bed and follows me down. He positions himself at my entrance and slides inside me. I whimper, and instead of pushing him away, I pull him closer, like a part of me is trying to absorb him. He fucks me in slow, deep strokes, building me higher and higher before he rolls us, reversing our positions. His mouth never leaving mine. I jump, pulling my mouth from Calix, when I feel hands on my back.

“Relax, Sugar. Let us look after you.” Maxim’s voice washes over me as he pushes me forward, and a soft snick sounds before cool liquid splashes over my back entrance.

He slips a fingertip inside me, making me tense. He presses kisses to my spine as Calix slows his movements.

“Relax,” he repeats before sliding his finger deeper inside me.

After a few minutes, he adds a second finger, then a third, until I’m squirming and muttering incoherently. When he pulls them from me, I know what’s coming. I feel myself tense again with nerves, but Calix murmurs endearments in my ear as he reaches between us and strokes my clit while Maxim eases his cock into my ass.

I squeeze my eyes shut, taking shallow breaths. Once the sharp sting of pain disappears, nothing but pleasure remains. I moan, which Maxim and Calix take as a green light. They grip me harder, fuck me faster, and bring me to an orgasm so intense that I blackout.

It takes a moment or two for me to regain consciousness. When I do, my body shivers because someone is playing with my clit. I open my eyes, unsurprised to find Rémy between my legs.

Maxim and Calix are gone, but I can hear the shower, so I know they haven’t gone far. Rémy is so focused on my pussy that he doesn’t notice me watching him. He slips his fingers inside me, dragging out Calix’s cum and rubbing it around my clit before he climbs to his knees between my legs and uses

some of the cum to wet his cock. My pussy spasms at the carnal image in front of me. I'm not sure why I find it so arousing, but I do.

Instead of thrusting inside me like I expect, he drags the head of his cock over my clit. He looks up at me, his gaze intense as he repeats the action. I squirm as he strokes himself over my clit, sliding it backward and forward and side to side, reading my body's reaction to what I like best.

When I know I'm going to come again, I cry out his name in warning. As if he was just waiting for me, he comes, coating my clit and his fingers before he thrusts his dick into my pussy and finishes inside me. Pulse after pulse warms me from the inside out as I come, squeezing him tightly, making his orgasm last that much longer.

It drains the last of my energy, which might have been the point. I can't run if I can't keep my eyes open. I'm aware enough of him pulling free and of feeling a warm cloth cleaning me up, but that's all I remember. If I had stayed awake, I'd have seen each man find a spot in the room to watch over me while I slept.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

I hug Cain and thank him again before he heads to the private jet. Hunter and Griff are already on board with all the kids we're flying back to the States.

It's been a week since the incident at the hospital. A week since Lena took her life. In that time, I've had to deal with anger and arguments from everyone, but slowly they've begun to come around.

After talking it through, we decided the children would be safer in the US, at least until we can trace their families. I don't know if Santos worked alone or if others were involved—if they were, their first step would be eliminating the kids so they couldn't talk. Not that they were up to talking yet. Most were far too traumatized. Cain runs a charity dedicated to children. With a billion dollars at his disposal, a Candy girl for a girlfriend, and a team of people to act as twenty-four-hour guards, I know they couldn't be in safer hands.

Still, I was going to miss them. Especially the little guy in Dulce's arms. I open my arms for him, and he comes to me willingly. He lays his head on my chest and sucks his thumb as I breathe him in.

“You are going to love staying with my friends, Zale. They have lots of horses. I know Griff will teach you to ride if you ask him.”

He lifts his head and stares at me before he places a hand on each of my cheeks. He doesn't speak, hasn't spoken a word since I found him. The doctors think it's a combination of

things, most of them stemming from trauma, but they are hopeful that one day that will change. It doesn't matter to me. As far as I'm concerned, he's perfect just the way he is.

He leans forward and kisses me before wrapping his arms tightly around my neck. I can feel his tears on my skin. It triggers my own, but I fight them back, needing to be the strong one here.

Pulling back, I look down at him and wipe his tears with the pad of my thumb. "I'll see you soon, little man."

I kiss his forehead and hand him over to Dulce, who leans forward and wraps one of her arms around my neck. "Don't be too long, okay? We miss you."

I smile but don't offer her anything else. I leave her to say her goodbyes to Aslanov, who is hanging around for another few days while I tie up some loose ends. Loose ends that are better off being tied with the kids and Dulce far away from here. Besides, she misses her babies.

I walk over to Lollie and Reese. "So, you know the plan. Any questions?"

"When are you coming home?" Reese asks.

"Once everything here is settled."

"Why do I feel like you're not telling me everything?"

"Paranoia?"

She scowls at me, making me chuckle.

"God, I missed you." I wrap them both up in a group hug before stepping back. "Go. The sooner we have all the pieces in place, the sooner the game can be over."

"Promise?" Lollie asks softly.

"I promise this will all be over soon."

I leave with a wave before they can push me any further. I jump in my car and drive toward the beach, knowing Rémy is tailing me. We might fuck every morning, noon, and night, but the trust between us all is broken in a way that's beyond repair. Nobody wants to walk away and admit defeat, so we each

stand there with jagged shards of our truth in our hands, bleeding out because we're too scared to let the person beside us share our burden. Denial has been our friend for so long, but it ends tonight.

I park and climb from my car and slip off my shoes despite the unusually cold temperatures. The day Lena died, it snowed all day, something that's virtually unheard of in this region. It hasn't snowed since. I can't help thinking that maybe it wasn't simply strange weather but a path to guide an angel home.

With my shoes in my hand, I walk down to the water's edge and stand on the cool sand, looking out at the choppy, dark water. I've seen this ocean a million times in my life. I've seen it look calm and inviting and in the throes of a chaotic storm. Watching it now, I wonder if it's tuned into my emotions because it looks ominously dark and uncertain today—like it could turn on you in a heartbeat and drag you down just for the hell of it.

“Don't you have someone to capture or kill?” I ask when I feel Rémy step up beside me.

“Nope. I've retired.”

I turn to look at the man in surprise. “What?”

“I figured keeping you alive is a full-time job.”

“Rémy—”

“Don't, Sugar. Don't say something to piss me off.”

“Everything I say pisses you off, so it's not looking good.”

“What's going on in that head of yours?”

“It's time.”

“Time for what?”

“Time for me to hear what you three need to say. Time for me to answer some questions. It's time for me to go home.”

He spins me and pulls me to his chest. “You are home, Sugar.” He places my hand against his heart. “This is home. You can go anywhere on the planet, but that won't change.”

I look at the ocean, both scared and elated that he might be right. “What we have will never work.”

He snorts and shakes his head. “Never took you for a coward.”

“I never took you for a dreamer.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me, Sugar.”

“Right back atcha!” I snap, pushing him away.

My shoulders slump, and the anger drains out of me. “I’m tired, Rémy. So fucking tired of it all.”

He wraps his arm around me and holds me to him. “I know, Sugar. But you’re not alone anymore.”

I bite my lip, remembering that after our talk, I might find myself very much alone. “Let’s just get this over with.”

“You make it sound like we’re going to torture you.”

“It’s not that. It’s just been a long time since I had something to lose.” I have my girls but it’s not the same.

“I HAVE to fly home tomorrow, but I’ll be back,” Maxim tells me as I accept the tea he offers me.

“Okay,” I reply, my gaze going back to the window.

“The deal I made with Santos was all a lie, Sugar. The only way he would let me close to you was if I was going to play a part in your downfall.”

“I figured that out after he lost his brains all over the kitchen floor.”

“And yet you still harbor such anger toward me.”

“It might have been an act for you, Maxim, but I still felt every cut you inflicted.”

“Ahn-gyil, I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Maxim.” I turn and offer him a small smile before sipping my tea and sliding the cup onto the windowsill.

“He knew you were alive.”

I turn at the sound of Calix’s voice. He’s standing in the doorway, with Rémy just behind him. They both walk into the room and sit down, Rémy in the chair and Calix on the other end of the sofa from Maxim.

“I figured that out too.”

“No. You don’t get it. He knew you were Sophia, but he also knew you were Sugar, meaning—”

“He was about to redirect his anger to draw me out.”

He nods. “When I caught you with Rémy, I lost it because I thought what I was feeling for you was one-sided. I didn’t know it happened the way it did. Rémy explained, but at the time, I had no idea.”

“I tried to tell you,” I remind him softly.

“And if the shoe had been on the other foot. Would you have believed me if you’d found me fucking another woman?”

I flinch at his tone. “I would have been gutted because I was falling for you even though I told myself not to. But I’d have still heard you out.”

His mouth snaps shut at that.

“Rémy and I had history. We were always on different sides, but we had respect for each other, and that respect turned into something more. We promised we’d keep our feelings out of it, but it was impossible. It’s one of the only promises I broke.”

I shake my head, looking at Rémy, who has gone unnaturally still.

“I knew we couldn’t be together. He knew it too. When I suspected Santos had resurfaced, I had to come here. That meant ending things with Rémy and marrying you.”

“You still haven’t told me why that was important. With Santos being alive when we were married, it invalidated it.”

I bite my tongue before backtracking a little. “We’ll come to that. What happened after you left that day? Did you really hire those assholes to beat me and deliver me to Maxim?”

“What the fuck? No, of course not. Those were Santos’s men.”

I wait for him to elaborate. He sighs and slides his fingers through his hair. “I stormed out and got wasted. It was fucking stupid, I know. That’s how Santos’s men found me. They took me back to the villa, where he acted like our reunion was the best thing to happen to him. Like the motherfucker didn’t steal the last twenty years of my life.”

He stands and starts pacing. “He knew you got me out of jail as Sarah, my lawyer, but he didn’t seem to know all the details—like the fact we got married.”

“If he had known, you would be dead right now,” Maxim tells him.

Calix nods. “I know. I played dumb. Said you called yourself Sarah and that you told me you were hired by Santos to get me out.”

“You played him, letting him think he was playing you,” I say, impressed.

“He was so busy playing the doting brother, happy that I still had no idea he set me up, that he never stopped to question the logic of it all. Instead, he worked the angle that I owed him.”

“Of course he did,” I mutter, rolling my eyes.

“He told me he sent men here to see if you were stupid enough to come back and that I was to pick you up and deliver you to him.”

I swallow hard. “What did you do?”

“I got here just as that asshole started kicking you. I shot him, and then I called Maxim.”

I look at Maxim. “And how do you two know each other exactly? You never did tell me.”

“He saved my life,” Maxim answers.

I didn’t expect that. I ask Calix, “When? Why?” That might sound callous, but in this world, protecting the enemy is not the norm.

“It was a two years before I was sent down. Maxim was beating the shit out of two guys who tried raping a girl at the same club I was at. We’d been there gathering information on the then Bratva Pakhan when one of the guys I was with thought Santos would be impressed if we took out one of the favored sons. I can’t tell you why I did what I did. Maybe it was because I knew one day he would rule, and a man who was just as strongly opposed to raping a woman as I was, is the kind of man I could respect. Or maybe even back then I could see the writing on the wall with Santos and thought Maxim might one day make an interesting ally. Whatever the reason, I killed the guy. But not before he got a shot off,” Calix replies.

Maxim picks up the story. “Bullet hit my thigh, nicking the femoral artery.”

I’d seen the mark, of course, but having seen so many gunshot scars and wounds, I stopped asking questions. I just accepted them for what they were.

“Calix made a tourniquet from his belt and plugged the wound with his fingers until paramedics arrived. After that, we saw each other from time to time, and respect built between us. We emailed and sent ouzo and vodka to mark occasions. It was dangerous to be associated with each other, so we kept our friendship secret. I was saddened when he was put away.”

“I knew sending you to Maxim would keep you safe. Santos didn’t have the manpower yet to launch an attack against the Bratva to get you back.”

“You were so cruel. I heard you.”

He drops his head and sighs. “Hating me meant you stayed away. You wouldn’t come home anytime soon to fix our shit if

I made it sound like there was nothing to fix. It broke my heart, but I needed you to hate me,” he tells me as he walks over and wraps his hand around the back of my neck.

“Well, mission accomplished.”

He looks pained for a minute before he presses his forehead against mine. “There were no other women, and there never will be. It will only ever be you.”

“But you said—”

“I lied.”

“You lied? You lied?” I yell before shoving him.

“I slept with Maxim because I thought you were done with me. I thought I’d hurt you, I—”

His lips quiet mine with a soft kiss. “I know. It’s okay.”

I shake my head. “No, it’s not, Calix. How can it be?”

“He loves you.” I shut up at Calix’s words. “How can I not want that for you?”

“And you want that? For another man to love me?”

“Angel, I want you to feel so much love you don’t know what to do with it all. You deserve that. Does it help that you fell for badass motherfuckers who would die for you? Absolutely-fucking-lutely.

“Maxim commands an army. And Rémy? Well, that guy makes Bundy look well-adjusted, but he caught you when you nose-dived off a fucking building. The way I see it, I can share your heart if they can share the burden of keeping you safe.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, my heart tripping over itself. I have no idea how to process what he’s saying, which I’m guessing he knows. He steps back and sits down as Maxim carries on.

“The spy job was a fluke. As you know, I had a rat problem, but the aim was for you to be seen on my arm as my property. Santos would hate that, and hateful people get sloppy. I didn’t know he hired an assassin to kill me, though.” He laughs. “Believe it or not, that was just a coincidence.”

He fucking laughs. I walk up to him and smack him upside the head. “Not fucking funny.”

“And you.” I whirl on Rémy, who holds his hands up, a grin playing on his lips.

“I didn’t want an attachment. Too risky. It wasn’t difficult to stay single because people bore me, but then you came along, and you were always surprising me. I like surprises.” He licks his lips.

I huff, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Santos hired me to take out Maxim. Powerful men collect powerful enemies, at the time he had no idea you were there. His aim was to destabilize the Bratva so they would focus on themselves and not Santos’ return to the throne. He was clearing the path for his homecoming.” He shrugs casually before looking at the Maxim. “It’s nothing personal, man. You were just another name on the list.”

Maxim rolls his eyes and mutters something in Russian. “Like I give a shit about Greek politics. I have my hands full with my own men.”

“You knew Santos was alive all along?”

Rémy nods but says nothing else as my temper flares.

“You knew he was alive and you said nothing? You didn’t question why I might need to know? I had you protecting his brother for years, and you didn’t think to, I don’t know, run it by me?”

“Wait, what?” Calix looks between us.

“We don’t talk about jobs, Sugar. It’s one of our rules.”

“Fuck the rules, Rémy. Santos he...he—”

Rémy stands and walks over to me. “I know that now, but I didn’t before. You think I’d take him on if I knew he’d hurt my girl? No, I’d have eviscerated him.”

I blow out a breath.

“You protected me? What’s he talking about?” Calix stands, demanding answers.

I sigh and shift my focus to Calix. “As far as the world was concerned, Santos was dead. That means the families were back in power, and the only threat to that was you, the heir to the throne.”

“I have no interest in ruling.”

“You think they’ll believe that? They’ve been coming for you for years.”

Calix looks to Rémy for more. He crosses his arms over his chest and scowls.

“What? You think you kill one guy and that’s it? Give me a fucking break. Are you sure you love this guy? Doesn’t seem very smart to me,” Rémy mocks.

“Want me to show you how I got my nickname?” Calix steps up to Rémy and shoves him, not the least bit intimidated.

“Enough, both of you,” I snap before facing Calix again.

“The families wanted you dead. They might be in power, but that power is dependent on your life. With you out of the way and no heirs, they could burn the country to the ground if they wanted to, and nobody would stop them. I asked Rémy to watch out for you when I couldn’t. He has contacts. They kept their ears to the ground. If it looked like there would be trouble, he stepped in.”

“Stepped in how?”

“How do you think, moron?”

“Rémy,” I snap.

“Well, what the fuck does he think I did? I mean, he knows what I am. Does he think I taught them to knit so they had a positive outlet for their anger?”

“Man, what is your fucking problem?” Calix snarls.

That’s what I would like to know too. I glare at Rémy.

He throws his hands up in the air and growls. “I’m no better than Santos.”

We all stare at him, waiting for more, but when he looks at me, the penny drops.

“Rémy, don’t—”

“Don’t what? Tell them the ways I made you pay me for Calix’s protection because you were too broke to offer me cash?”

I suck in a breath and feel my skin begin to heat.

“The fuck?” Maxim growls.

“Rémy,” I snap sharper this time.

He looks at me, and for a second there is a flicker of remorse in his eye before he masks it. “Don’t tell them how, even when you pulled yourself up out of the shit, I still made you pay me with your body. I turned you into my whore.”

I burst out laughing at that, surprise crossing his features at my reaction. I step up to him and press my finger to his chest, digging my nail into the T-shirt he’s wearing. “Aw, don’t feel guilty, Rémy. I was a whore long before you came along.”

He flinches. Actually flinches.

“You don’t like the truth, huh? I guess you thought you were the only man that wanted to use me. Sorry to break it to you, Rémy, but every man I’ve ever met has used me in one way or another.

“I walked out of that ocean naked. I had no clothes, no money, and no name. What I had was youth, a pretty face, and pussy I could sell to the highest bidder. So yeah, I became a whore, and I feel zero remorse over it. I have money, cars, houses, a business, friends, family—all things I earned because I was really good at sucking dick.”

Now all three of them look pissed, but I’m so fucking done with this. “What’s wrong? You didn’t mind a whore when your fingers were inside me that day in prison.” I grin viciously at Calix before turning to Maxim.

“You sure as hell didn’t mind a whore while you fucked your friend’s wife.”

I grin at Rémy, who looks like he wants to strangle me. “And you, fucking me when I was asleep, so I thought you were him.” I nod to Calix. “Or pinning me to Maxim’s bed while he slept so you could fill me with your cum. Oh, my whorish ways suited you then, huh?”

“You’re a bunch of fucking hypocrites. This body has been beaten, raped, shot, stabbed, torn, tasered, and drugged. All by men who had the audacity to look down on me for selling the very thing they’re so willing to defile. So your guilt weighs on you now? Boo fucking hoo. You act like my being a whore is something to be ashamed of. It’s not. Taking control of a body—that everyone thought they owned but me—was the best thing I ever did. I don’t expect you to get it, but I sure as shit don’t have to listen to you talk about it like it’s some shameful secret.”

Nobody says anything to that, but the tension is so thick I feel it pressing down on me. I need to get out of here.

“Look, it’s been fun.” I huff out a dry laugh. “Yeah, no, it hasn’t really been fun at all. It’s been an adventure, though. I’ll give you all that. I’m leaving. Once this is all over, I’m flying home.”

Rémy moves toward me, but I step back toward the window and hold up my hands to stop him. “Jesus fuck, what do you want from me? Oh, I see. You need another payment for services rendered? Is that it? Well damn, why didn’t you say so?” I start to take my top off, but he stops me, wrapping me tightly in his embrace, my own arms pinned to my sides so I can’t move, despite my struggles.

“You’re not going anywhere without me,” he warns me in that voice he uses right before he kills something.

“Sure, whatever you say, Rémy.”

He glares down at me before a cold smile stretches over his face. “If you run—”

“You’ll find me, blah blah blah. So you said. Thing is, Rémy, I just don’t care. We’re not in a relationship. I don’t

owe you anything. You want to come home with me? Watch me fuck other men while I move on with my life? Have at it.”

When his hand is around my throat, and I find myself pinned in place with the window sill digging into my back that I realize I might have pushed him too far.

“Rémy,” Calix warns him. “She can’t breathe.”

“She can’t run if she’s dead,” he grunts out.

“True, but she’ll also be dead.” Maxim points out the flaw in his plan.

Rémy’s hold on me loosens just enough for me to suck in a breath. “I could break your legs. Can’t run with broken legs.” He’s not joking, though I can’t help but grin at the fucking psycho.

“I’d still drag myself out of here, right after I bite off your dick.”

He releases my throat but presses his body against mine. “Stay. I’m a dick, but I’m your dick.”

I close my eyes, the desire to give in slashing at my heart, but I can’t. “Tell me why? Why should I stay?”

“Because you love us.”

I stand up on tiptoes and press a kiss to the underside of his jaw. “It’s because I love you that I have to go.”

He moves to grab me, but the taser I hid on the window sill just behind the drapes is already in my hand and ready to go. I press the prongs to his neck and watch as he drops to the floor. Maxim and Calix look at me in shock before the door behind them opens, and they are shot with tranquilizers that will hopefully keep them unconscious until this whole thing is over.

“Hey, darlin’.”

I smile at the man. Hot, aging bikers might not be my thing, but that doesn’t mean I’m blind. “Hey, King. I was wondering when you were going to get here.”

“He’s going to be pissed when he wakes up.” Aslanov sighs, looking down at Maxim.

“Payback’s a bitch. They drugged me to get me to Russia. They left that out of their story, but mama didn’t raise no fool.”

“You’ll be lucky if you can sit down for a week by the time he’s done with you.”

“If I’m still alive—”

“Don’t even fucking joke about that. Dulce would gut me.”

“Everything’s in place.” I look up at the sound of a new voice and smile at the handsome man I haven’t seen in forever.

“Scope.” I grin.

He rushes over and hugs me. The smells of leather and oil from his cut and the faint smell of Mercy’s perfume are oddly comforting.

“How’s Mercy?”

“Pissed. She knows why you have to do this. She just doesn’t have to like it.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“Time to get this show on the road, darlin’,” King’s soft voice says as he steps up beside me.

“You ready?” Aslanov looks me over.

“Yeah. I’ve been ready. I just needed...” I blow out a breath. I just needed all the pieces on the board to be in the right place.

“I’m ready.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Trinitas Cathedral looks like something tourists would spend hours walking through, taking pictures of the stunning stained-glass windows as they oohed and awed over the ornate architecture.

This place, though, is strictly off-limits to anyone but the five families and their representatives. A religious bunch, they believe in the sanctity of the place, adhering to rules they might not somewhere else, such as no blood shall be spread beyond that of a sacrifice. That's pretty damn vague, and after reading the covenant backward and forward, I figured it was vague on purpose because I found a passage that could change everything.

I stand in the vestibule in a long purple silk robe, watching as the others arrive. As much as my stomach threatens to empty its contents all over my Jimmy Choos, I can't help but smile and feel a little smug that things are playing out the way I hoped. I run a hand over my still-flat stomach and allow myself to wonder what the future holds before shutting that down. Nothing is guaranteed. Getting attached is pointless.

I look down at the invitation in my hand, the same as those I sent to all the families—very specific and delivered in a manner that would be impossible to ignore. Pinned to a dead body from one of their houses. A body that had the Santos brand burned into their faces.

The pews on either side of the aisle face inward as opposed to the front. Everyone can see each other as they take their seats. I wait until the last person is seated before I signal with

my hand for the doors to be locked. The ominous clang makes my guests anxious as they start arguing and shouting out questions.

Ignoring them all, I slip on my patented Sugar smile and strut to the pulpit. If I thought my presence would make everyone quiet down, I would have been sorely mistaken. Men jump from their seats, outraged that there is an unknown in their sacred place, but no one draws their weapon.

Oh, I don't doubt some snuck a few in, though they were all supposed to be handed over at the door. I can't say I blame them for wanting to know what the fuck is going on, but killing the messenger means no answers for the questions they have.

"Quiet," I roar before pulling my gun and firing into one of the windows. A window that has been preserved for hundreds of years, and I don't give a fuck.

Gasps fill the room, but everyone quiets down except for Felipe, the head of the Kypianos family. In the pew behind him, watching me warily, is Belen.

"How dare you come in here and—"

"Oh, sit down and shut the fuck up, Felipe. Nobody gives a shit what you have to say." He sits, shock written on his face, either from being told what to do or from being yelled at by a woman—it's a toss-up.

I look around at the faces, most of them familiar to me, yet there is zero recognition from any of them. "First of all, thank you for coming."

I ignore the loud snort as I move up the aisle, dragging my fingers over the wooden pews, showing these assholes no fear. "I won't drag this out, mostly because I can't stomach being in your company for any longer than necessary. It seems the five families have started to lose their touch since I've been gone. You used to be...better, or so I thought, until you all proved me wrong. But I try not to hold grudges. A few rotten fruits do not mean you burn the whole orchard, right?"

“Who are you?” a deep voice bellows as I turn and offer the fat asshole in the front row a smile. *Theodore Calimeris*, head of the Calimeris family. Man, did he let himself go.

“Where are my manners? My name is Sugar Daniels. My friends call me Sugar. You, though, can call me Sophia Michelakis.”

That gets a reaction. People start yelling again, and it’s honestly really fucking annoying. I shoot out another window, which shuts everyone up again.

“You’re not being very nice to me. And to think, I even brought you a gift.”

At my words, Scope strolls in from the back, holding Santos’s severed head by his hair. I give him a beaming smile and feel the change in the air shift from anger to fear. He places the head in my arms before kissing my temple and moving to stand at the vestibule with his arms crossed.

“Oh, don’t mind him. That’s just Scope. He’s one of the presidents of the Chaos Demons MC, but to me, he’s family.”

I let that nugget of information sink in. I walk over to George Galaris, the head of the Galaris family, and hand him Santos’s head. He grimaces before handing it to his second-in-command.

“Now, where was I? I did my welcome speech, brought my gift...”

“Maybe you could get to the fucking point,” Theodore snarls.

I lift my eyes to his, and his face pales as all the friendliness disappears from my expression. “Ah, yes, the point. Excellent idea. Let me explain why I brought you all here. It’s a long story, so get comfortable.

“Once upon a time, there were two sisters. One was sold to a bad man, and one was stolen by him. That man was evil, so evil that people spoke about him in whispers just in case, like the boogeyman, he appeared out of thin air to kill them. But instead of uniting and dethroning him, you worshiped him and fed his godlike ego until he was gone. Then you scrambled

over his carcass, tearing off strips of meat for yourselves, hoping one of you would get more than the other.

“You could have been free, learned your lessons, saved your daughters. But power corrupts, and the darkness Santos instilled in you festered and spread.”

I look around at these men and laugh at the fear and unease in their eyes.

“Some of the greatest people I know are criminals. Labeled bad seeds who don’t follow the law. And that might be true, but they have something none of you do. Honor.”

Men start filing in behind Scope, moving to take a place beside him. Men who I have helped over the years. People I built alliances with, readying myself for this very moment. There are MC members from Chaos Demons, Kings of Carnage, Raven Souls, and even Sons of Purgatory. I look at Will and Cash as they walk out, looking ready to throw down at a moment’s notice, and hide my surprise when I see both Kai and Jude beside them. Seems Viddy was feeling generous.

King steps up beside me and pulls out a cloth pocket square, and I kid you not, he dabs at a bead of sweat on my forehead.

“There. Much better.” He winks before turning to stand with everyone else.

I face the families again and revel in their shock, knowing they’re familiar with at least a few of these people and are aware of just what they’re capable of. I look at the heirs of each house and wait until I hear the whistle behind me to continue, knowing she’s ready.

“After the shitty job you’ve all done, I’ve decided it’s time for a shake-up.”

“You can’t do that. You don’t have that kind of power,” Theodore snaps, even though he looks nervously at the men behind me.

I chuckle as I take a step closer, the sound dark, like thunder rolling in before a storm.

“I think you’ll find I’m the only person here with any kind of power. See, you’ve been so busy trying to one-up each other while hiding your dirty deeds that you’ve failed to see the bigger picture.”

“What is she talking about?” One of the others asks.

“Who the fuck knows. *Skýla* is talking shit,” Theodore mutters.

I reach for the odious man who is now sitting in the pew right in front of me and grab his hair, yanking his head down as I lift my knee. His nose erupts, but it doesn’t stop me from doing it again. I let him go, and as he drops to the floor, I smooth my hands down my robe. I look down and see a spot of blood on my new shoes, which just pisses me off. My eyes flash to the asshole rolling around on the floor in pain. Not only is he an awful father and a shitty husband, but now he is the ruiner of my shoes.

With a growl, I lift my foot and stomp it down on the asshole’s face, over and over, until I break out into a light sweat. He screams, but no one lifts a finger to help him, everyone moving as far away as they can without drawing attention to themselves. I bring my foot down one last time, my heel piercing his eye socket with a satisfying pop, cutting off his scream, leaving blissful silence in its wake.

I stare down at the now-dead man and realize my shoe is completely stuck, so I step out of it and kick off the other one, pouting.

“They were new,” I complain.

“I’ll buy you ten pairs for Christmas.” A familiar voice rings out behind me.

I turn and smile at Scope, who grins a little bloodthirsty.

“Now, where was I?”

“You have all the power,” Will prompts.

“That’s right, thank you.” I turn back to the families.

“You all know that the five families are only in power because the ruling families were gone. The Michelakis and

Cirillo names are the only names that matter, right?”

“But you are a woman, and how do we know you are who you say you are?”

I cock my head and sigh. “Sorry, boys,” I warn the men behind me as I reach up and pull the strings that let the robe fall from my body, leaving me naked and my Santos brand on display.

“Holy fuck!” I hear grumbling behind me as I face down the lecherous men eyeing me with lust and trepidation.

“You know what this brand means. Know what that makes me.”

I bend and grab the robe, ignoring the groan behind me as I pull it back on.

“You might have been Santos’s wife, but you are not the heir. Calix is, and he cannot take the throne with a conviction —”

“Bullshit. I’ve read the book. I know the rules, so don’t try to lie to me, you pathetic weasel. Though it’s true that Calix is an heir, he’s not next in line. I am.”

“That’s not how it works.”

“King?”

King disappears and reappears a minute later, urging the governor through the door with a file in his hands.

“What the...?” George starts, taking the file from Mikal in stunned shock. George flips it open and pulls out an envelope before ripping it open. His eyes widen as he reads the paper inside.

“What is it?”

“A marriage certificate between Sophia Michelakis and Calix Cirillo.”

It’s fake, but they don’t need to know that. I mean, the marriage is real, and that’s all that matters.

“So that makes me a Cirillo of Michelakis descent, and that trumps Calix’s claim, no?”

“You still need a vote. At least one ruling family has to accept you as the new boss, and I can guarantee you that no one here will side with you.” A smug voice laughs.

“I’ll side with you.”

I smile at Calisa as she stands from the back pew.

“Sit down!” a man in the front row shouts at her, spittle hanging from his mouth.

“No. I don’t think I will.” She walks down the aisle toward me before reaching out to clasp my hands with hers.

“Sorry for your loss,” I tell her with a wink as we look down at her husband with a shoe sticking out of his eye.

“I’m heartbroken, truly.” She grins.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing here, Calisa?” The man who yelled at her before grabs her arm. Before I can raise my gun, a Chaos Demon is there, yanking him away.

“Thank you, Knight.”

“She is not head of the house. She can’t make those decisions,” the man yells before Knight shoves him to the floor.

“Actually, she can. See, her husband was head of the family, but now that he’s dead, his son becomes heir. Since he is only a boy, his legal guardian becomes temporary head of the house.”

“What? No!”

“fraid so. I wonder how many other wives have had that tidbit of information hidden from them?”

“I’ll be sure to get the word out,” Calisa offers before she turns to the man being restrained by Knight. “Lovely seeing you again, John.”

“You may have manipulated the weaker link, but you have no power over how we run the families. You cannot take us all

on.” Felipe blusters.

“I could, but I won’t. Because, just like with Calisa, I believe there is good in these families worth saving. You know, once I’ve gotten rid of the garbage.”

The sound of a gun cocking and aiming my way has me grinning as every man at my back pulls their own weapons.

“Calisa, time to leave.”

She doesn’t argue. She just turns and heads through the crowd of bikers.

“What happened to no bloodshed on holy ground?” I ask with my arms wide.

“You started it,” George yells. “A curse will befall us all unless we make it right. A sacrifice must be made to the Holy Trinity.”

“I accept.”

He looks confused as I point to the marriage certificate he dropped on the floor—or Calix’s name on the certificate—before I say, “In the name of the Father”—I cup my belly—“the Son—” A shocked gasp sounds from beside me as I laugh. “And I guess as the returning ghost, that makes me the Holy Spirit. Thank you for your sacrifice. Now!” I yell as the men at my back take out the heads of each house. Each one is dead before they know what is happening.

“Your sacrifices will not be made in vain.” I look at the remaining family members and their stunned guards.

“Congratulations! You are now the heads of your families. But understand this: my word is fucking law. Cross me, and what happened today will look like a day at Disneyland.”

I turn to walk away but spin back around. “Oh, and one more thing.” I pull my gun back out of my pocket and fire a round into John’s head who drops to the floor at Knight’s feet. “Send anyone to touch me or my family, and I’ll remove every single person from this earth that has a speck of your blood in their veins. There will be nowhere you can hide from me.”

With that, I stroll through the blood on bare feet, through the smiling faces of the men who came to protect me, and out through the doors. I walk as far as I can from the cathedral barefoot before I drop to my knees and suck in as deep a breath as I can before blowing it out.

The crunch of footsteps registers behind me, but the comforting hand on my shoulder stops me from shooting. “You good?”

“Yeah,” I say softly, taking King’s hand when he offers it to me.

“You did it. How does it feel?”

I look out over the fields of wildflowers as I think about my answer. “Hollow. I thought I’d feel absolved somehow, but nothing will bring them back. Vengeance has kept me going for so long that I’m not sure I know how to be me without it.”

“You’ll figure it out, just like you figured out how to be Sugar. But then, you’ve had a lot of practice being someone else, haven’t you?”

I look at him sharply, backing away. He holds his hands up in surrender. “No judgment, darlin’. I’ve spent more time than most being other people.”

“You know?” I whisper.

“I know, and I promise to take that secret to my grave. But I worry that while you’re reinventing yourself, you’ll forget the remarkable woman you already are.”

“I’m not special, King.”

“We’ll just have to agree to disagree on that, Sugar. Are you ready to go home?”

I turn and look back at the cathedral. “Is everyone out?”

“Yeah, the boys have cleared the building. Here.”

He hands me a detonator. I take it from him, and with one last look, I hit the button, watching as the building explodes.

“Let’s go home.” I sigh.

“What is it?” he asks, taking in my face.

“I really am sad about my shoes.”

King looks at me for a moment before throwing his head back and laughing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I stare out at the city and take a sip of my drink as the neon lights illuminate the dark sky. I've been home for three weeks now. Three weeks, and I still feel like empty. I glance around my apartment, at all the things I've collected over the years, but everything feels wrong. Like it all belongs to someone else.

Picking up the bottle of vodka from the table, I take a healthy swig. The burn of the alcohol does nothing to ease the numbness inside me. Everything feels so fucking pointless. But mostly, I feel detached from the world, like I live in a bubble, and instead of it protecting me, it's cutting me off, isolating me from everyone. I'm trying to be me, but who even am I anymore? The girls know something is wrong, but they're giving me space to work through it, probably worried I'll run again if they push too hard. I take another swig before I place the bottle back on the table.

With a sigh, I flick the lock on the doors and push them wide open. The drizzle is cold on my heated skin as I walk out onto the balcony and breathe in the night air. The faint noises of the city below drift up to me.

I wrap my hands around the railing, feeling the breeze lift the hem of my dress, making the short material swish around my legs. Deciding not to give anyone who may look up a show, I turn to head inside and halt when I find Rémy standing behind me. I swallow. The look in his eyes does not bode well for me. I knew he'd come. To be honest, I thought he'd have been here sooner.

“You have something to tell me.” His voice is eerily calm—too calm, as his eyes drop to my stomach.

I don’t pretend to not know what he’s talking about. “False alarm. I just got my period. Must have been the stress—” I don’t get anything else out before I’m spun around and bent over the railing.

“Rémy,” I yelp as he lifts my dress and slaps my ass hard before yanking my panties off me.

“Jesus, Rémy, I told you I’m bleeding,” I growl, trying to shove him back, but he’s having none of it.

His hands move between my legs, stroking my clit before he tugs on the string of my tampon and pulls it free, tossing it to the floor. And then he’s inside me, filling up all those hollow, empty parts, and the fight goes out of me. I hold on to the railing for dear life as he fucks me so hard, I worry I’ll go over the edge. Of course, it wouldn’t be the first time I’ve fallen off a building.

“Should have run further. Should have hidden better. You’re not going anywhere now,” he snarls, pulling me so my back is pressed to his front, his hand around my throat as he thrusts up into me over and over with such savagery, I swear I can feel him in my stomach.

“No more, Sugar. No more,” he says quietly, and something about it breaks through the numbness.

He thrusts inside me and groans, flooding my womb with his cum. A few flicks of my clit, and I’m coming too, screaming his name into the night. When he pulls out, he spins me around and picks me up, sitting me on the railing.

“Rémy,” I scream, grabbing him as he leans me over. The only thing stopping me from falling is his hand.

“I could let you go. I could follow you down. There is something poetic about being tied to someone the moment their soul leaves their body.”

“Please don’t,” I whimper, my hands wrapped around his arm.

“Tell me why. Tell me why I shouldn’t just end it all. Why shouldn’t I just end this suffering for both of us?”

“Because I love you, dammit. I love you,” I choke out as the rain falls faster.

He yanks me to him, hooking my leg over his hip before he thrusts inside me again.

How is he still fucking hard?

“I’m always hard around you.”

I didn’t realize I said that out loud, and then I lose my damn mind and the rest of my inhibitions as he strips me naked and fucks me like an animal in every position possible.

I collapse in his arms, my breathing erratic, and I shiver, the rain soaking me to the bone. I have scrapes all over me, and tomorrow I’m going to look like one giant bruise, but I just don’t care.

“I like seeing your blood on my cock.”

“We really need to work on your pillow talk,” I grumble, making him laugh as he rolls me onto my back.

“No more, please. I think I’ve sprained my vagina.”

He doesn’t fuck me, though. He spreads my legs wide so he can rub his cum into me. There is something primal about it, but I feel gross and tell him so.

“There is nothing gross about it. This is you and me.” He lifts his fingers and licks them clean, much to my horror.

He grins then and tries to kiss me, but I wiggle away. “Not a chance. Not all of us are animals.”

“Only for you. There’s just something about you. I can’t explain it, can’t put a name on it, or find a label that fits. All I know is that you’re mine, and I’m done listening to you try to pretend differently.”

I blow out a breath, the shivering beginning to intensify. “There are things you don’t know. Things I don’t want you to know. I—”

“Do you think I want you to know the dark and depraved things I’ve done? That I want to risk seeing you look at me differently than you do now? No, fuck no, but I’d rather you hear it from me than be blindsided by someone else. I’m not saying I need it all today, but someday, oui. I want to hear the story of how you became Sugar Daniels. Now let’s get you inside before you catch the flu, and I have to explain to the Bratva pakhan that his delivery is going to be delayed.”

“His what?”

He picks me up and tosses me over his shoulder before slapping my ass. “You’ll see, Sugar. You’ll see.”

I TUG AT THE RESTRAINTS, but they don’t give at all. “That motherfucker. That goddamned motherfucking son of an asslicking—”

“That’s some mouth you have on you.”

I jump when I hear Maxim’s voice and turn my head, which is one of the only damn things I can move.

“You try being tied up like a Thanksgiving turkey.”

His lips twitch, but he doesn’t say anything as he walks toward the bed.

After falling asleep in Rémy’s arms, I woke up here, an hour ago, naked and tied to Maxim’s bed with a red ribbon like a pornographic gift.

“Can you untie me?”

“Now, why would I want to do that?” His voice is dark and seductive, but I’m not falling for that shit.

“Maxim, I’m not fucking kidding.”

He shrugs out of his jacket before slipping his cufflinks free of his shirt and rolling up his sleeves. I squeeze my eyes tight to shut out the image. I have no idea what it is about

rolled-up shirtsleeves on muscular tan arms that do it for me, but it does.

I hear the clink of his belt, which has me snapping my eyes open just in time to see him sliding his pants down his legs, quickly followed by his boxers. His dick is hard as he takes me in, his hand moving up and down its length.

“Let me go,” I growl as he climbs on the bed between my legs.

He leans down over me and grips my throat before he snarls in my face, “Never.” His teeth bite my lip, making it sting, before he kisses me hard.

He forces his tongue into my mouth, his hand moving to my jaw so I can’t pull away. I fight him, or try to, even though I know it’s a lost cause. Not because I don’t want him, but because I do. We’re on opposing teams, and nobody is going to blindly accept a relationship between us.

He pulls back, but only so he can stare down at me, his eyes so cold they might as well have frosted over. I shiver in response, but the twisted part of my brain is well aware that it has little to do with fear.

“You think you can just walk away from me and I’ll let you?”

I’d roll my eyes if I didn’t think it would make things worse. “So, it’s a pride thing? You’re pissed because I called it quits before you could? Come on, Maxim. What are we even doing here? You know all this is impossible. It was fun while it lasted, but—”

“Fun?” His voice is barely a whisper, but still, it drips with venom.

Oops. Abort, Sugar. Abort.

He dips his head and presses a kiss to my collarbone before moving farther south. His lips move to one of my nipples. He sucks it into his mouth, making my back arch before he bites it, making me moan.

“Was that fun?”

Before I can answer, he moves down my body, his lips skimming down my ribs before his tongue dips into my navel. It's right around then that I remember my situation.

"Wait, I'm on my period," I rush to say before this gets awkward. Well, more awkward because, it has to be said, I'm feeling all kinds of uncomfortable right now.

"No, you're not," he murmurs, his nose grazing my pubic bone.

"What? Maxim, I'm not kidding. You go any further, and you'll look like you took up cannibalism in your spare time."

He looks up at me, his dark eyes glistening with amusement. "Sugar, you've been here for three days. Trust me when I tell you your period is finished."

My eyes widen in shock, not just at being drugged again, though if I had bothered to think it through, I would have figured that part out for myself. No, it's the mortification that comes with that.

"I—How—Who?" I can't even form the words as I feel my face flame.

He grins salaciously, enjoying every second of my discomfort.

"Who cleaned you? Changed your tampon, took you to the bathroom? I did. Like I'd let any of my people touch you."

"But...oh my God." I close my eyes, feeling mortified.

"Relax, Sugar. It's just blood. I must admit, I like taking care of you, having you at my mercy."

His tongue swipes over my clit before he sucks hard, making me gasp.

"Fun, right?"

Then, just as I suck in a breath, it's forced right back out as he thrusts two fingers inside me.

"You know, you look so innocent when you sleep, so soft and sweet. It made me want to corrupt you."

I laugh at that. “Too late.” It turns into a moan when he slides a third finger inside me.

“Yeah. Sugar Daniels is a tough, badass bitch,” he muses as he thrusts his fingers into me harder and faster. “That just makes your surrender that much sweeter.”

“I can’t surrender if I’m being held captive.”

“Is that right?” He climbs up my body and lines up his cock with my entrance. “Then tell me to stop. Tell me that you don’t want me to slide inside your body, that you don’t want to feel my cum filling you.”

He strokes me with the head of his dick, waiting for the words, but they don’t come. He smiles in victory. “That’s what I thought.”

He slides into me, but only an inch. He keeps his thrusts short and shallow, building me up but never pushing me high enough.

“Maxim,” I whine.

“What, Sugar? Isn’t this fun enough for you?” he coos.

Okay, I’m beginning to think I shouldn’t have used the word *fun*. “I need more.”

“You can’t handle more,” he snaps, making my inner bitch rise to the surface.

“Don’t tell me what I can and can’t handle.”

“So brave, all tied up on my bed. Tell me, Sugar, what would you do if I walked away now? Left you aching and needy while I went downstairs and fucked someone else? If I fed them the cum I promised you?”

I bite my lip to stop my threats of bodily harm from slipping out. I know he wants me to react to his words.

He chuckles, going a little deeper as he uses his thumb to stroke my clit lightly. It’s not hard enough for me to get off, though. It keeps me on edge, making my whole body pulse with need but with no promise of relief in sight.

“You want to tell me you don’t care, is that it? That this cock—” he bottoms out inside me as he says the word cock before pulling out “—could be anyone’s?” he continues.

“I never said that,” I snap.

“And you’d be fine with me fucking someone else?”

“I never said that either.” I grit my teeth.

“But you don’t want me, Sugar. You can’t have it both ways. So, if you don’t want me, you better make damn sure because when our paths cross later, and they will, you’ll be okay if I bring my wife and child with me? You won’t die a little inside if I fall in love with someone else? If I give them all I want to give you?”

My eyes sting at his words. It feels as if he’s reached his hand inside my chest and yanked my heart out. He slips his cock free before climbing off me and heading for the door.

“Thanks for the warm-up. It was fun.”

Then he’s gone, leaving me to fall apart in peace.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

I must cry myself to sleep because when I wake up, it's to hands freeing me from my bindings. I moan as pins and needles rush up my limbs.

“Easy,” Maxim’s quiet voice echoes into the dark.

He frees my legs and picks me up, carrying me to the bathroom. I’m not sure my legs will support me, so I don’t protest, nor do I put up a fight when he sits me on the toilet and turns his back to me. The man changed my fucking tampon. I’m beyond embarrassment at this point.

I pee, wipe, and flush before he turns and helps me over to the sink, where I wash my hands. It isn’t until he picks me up to carry me back out that I catch what I missed before. The smell of perfume coming from him.

My body goes rigid, and before I can stop myself, I rear back and punch him in the side of the head. He drops me to the floor, my tailbone connecting painfully with the hardwood floor. I ignore the pain as I scramble to my feet and hurry to the door. He’s on me before I can yank the door open. He presses me to it, the rough denim of his jeans scraping against my skin.

I don’t know when he got dressed. Probably after fucking the woman who came after me.

I kick back, and when he stumbles, I sweep my leg out. As he loses his balance, I grab the door handle again, but he yanks me down with him, flipping us so that I’m pinned underneath him.

“Stop,” he yells as I struggle.

I don't, though. Instead, I throw my head forward and headbutt him.

“Motherfucker,” he growls, his hands pinning my wrists above my head.

“You want to play rough, Sugar? Fine, we'll play rough.” He uses his body to keep me pinned while he frees his cock, then he shoves my legs apart and thrusts inside me.

“I hate you,” I scream at him as my body welcomes him inside.

“No, you don't. You're just a fucking coward. Too afraid to take what you want, so you run away like a scared little girl.”

I lift my head and sink my teeth into his neck.

“Fuck,” he howls, his dick getting even harder. He speeds up, fucking me into submission. “You love me. Say it.”

“No. I won't tell you shit. Not when you smell like another woman.”

He pauses for a second before pulling out and hauling us both to our feet. He drags me to the bathroom and shoves me in the shower. I yelp when he turns on the cold water, and he steps in behind me, bending me over the built-in bench before surging back inside me.

“You come to me with another man's cum inside you, but another woman hugs me, and you lose your mind?”

He yanks my hair back when I don't answer, never slowing his punishing pace. “Oh no, you don't. You don't get to shut me out. Stop being a fucking bitch and tell me the truth,” he yells before his voice softens. “Tell me I am not alone in this, that what I'm feeling is not one-sided.”

I swallow as he reaches around and squeezes my clit hard.

“Tell me,” he roars before letting go of my clit. The blood rushes to it, sending me flying over the cliff with nothing to catch me below.

“I love you. I love you. I love you,” I scream over and over again, sounding like a mantra as tears drip from my chin.

He pulls free, and I feel our combined releases run down my legs. Turning me to face him, he ignores the water beating down on us as his forehead presses against mine. “There was no other woman. One taste of you, and I was ruined. Nothing else will ever compare.”

I reach up and cup his jaw, reading the truth in his eyes.

“I did get a hug from a ninety-year-old woman, though, when I caught her after she tripped. She was cute, but not my type.”

“What’s your type?”

“You. Turns out I have a sweet tooth.”

He reaches behind him and pulls his wet T-shirt off over his head and tosses it into the corner before shoving his jeans the rest of the way down his legs, kicking them off with his boxers. Reaching for the shower gel, he pours some onto a sponge before washing me from head to toe. He wasn’t lying when he said he liked taking care of me. But is it enough?

“I’m not sure I’m going to like what’s going on behind your eyes. Do I need to fuck you again?”

“Depends.”

He grins before pinning me against the cool tiles. “What’s going on in your head?”

“How is this going to work, Maxim?”

“Honestly? I don’t know, but the difference between me and you is that I don’t care. I’m willing to ride this thing until the wheels fall off. Besides, as much as what we do and who we are will be a hindrance, they will also be our saving grace.”

“How so?”

He reaches around and turns off the water before grabbing a towel from the hook and wrapping it around me.

“Individually, we have many enemies. Collectively, that’s a hell of a lot of people gunning for us. Imagine how

formidable we'll be if we join forces. Who the fuck is going to mess with us?"

I stare at him, contemplating his words, as he wraps a towel around his waist. "It won't be that easy."

"I never said it would be, but easy is boring. Tell me what you're thinking."

"I'm thinking you're insane."

"I'll take your comment under advisement."

I sigh, picturing him with a woman wrapped around him and a little girl in his arms, with his hair and coloring, and wince. Walking away from him might be the smart thing to do, but the thought of him making a life with someone else guts me.

"What about seeing each other? You live here, I live in the States, and Rémy is...well, Rémy. And Calix..."

"We're all richer than sin, Sugar. We have private jets and properties all over the world. For now, we can just fly to each other when we want, and later, if things go the way I think, we will reassess things."

"Reassess?"

"Yes, reassess. You know that you don't always need to have all the answers. Sometimes your attempt to survive makes you forget one simple thing."

"Yeah, and what's that?"

"To live. Live wild, live free, live without limits because you know better than anyone that tomorrow is not guaranteed. Stop worrying about doing what you think is right, and instead do what *feels* right."

I lean my head against his chest, feeling his heart thud under my fingertips. "Alright, Maxim. You win. For now, I'm not going to worry about the what-ifs. I'm just going to focus on the here and now."

"Good girl."

“Good girl, me again, and I’ll chop you up into teeny tiny pieces and feed you to my fish.”

“You have fish?”

“I suddenly feel the need to buy some.”

He chuckles and wraps his arms around me.

“Don’t make me regret this.”

“Oh, ahn-gyil, you know I will make you regret it every day, but I’ll also buy your forgiveness with multiple orgasms.”

“Orgasms, you say. Hmm...tell me more.”

“STILL NOTHING?” Maxim asks as I hand him back his cell phone.

I shake my head. “No, nothing. Rémy is going to track him down.”

“Hey, look at me.”

I look up into his eyes and offer him a fake-as-shit smile.

“Just give him time. It’s not just everything going on with you. His whole life is up in the air.”

“I know. It’s part of the reason I left.” I sigh. “He wanted no part in leading the families, but being with me will automatically draw attention to him.”

His hands slide to my hips as he holds me in place. “That’s his issue, Sugar. If he can’t get past it, then he’s a fucking fool because he’ll lose his reward.”

“His what?”

He lifts his hand, and in it is a beautiful lace mask. He places it over my eyes before tying the ribbon behind my head.

“His reward. His life has been shit, but if it was me and I went through what he has, I would know it was worth it if you were what I got at the end of it all. Hell, I’d willingly walk in his shoes if I knew that one day, I would rule beside you. I’m

not saying it will be easy, but he'll fit into your life a fuck of a lot easier than I will."

Before I can say anything, he presses his finger to my lips. "I don't care how hard it is, Sugar. I have no problem being your dirty little secret."

I snort, knowing he's serious. But one day it will get old, and he'll want more. Or he'll want out. I guess we'll cross that bridge when we get there.

He pulls a black ski mask from his pocket and slides it over his head. It should look ridiculous with his suit, but my wet panties beg to differ.

"We look like breaking and entering Ken and his bougie Barbie."

He grins, his white teeth stark against the fabric of the mask. "It's for a good cause."

"A thug and belle's ball?"

"It's for the awareness and rehabilitation of gang members." He rolls out the standard speech I'm sure he's given it a million times.

"And the truth?"

"It's a recruitment drive."

"Of course, it is. Though I thought the Bratva were pretty strict about their members."

"Names and lineage are important, but henchmen are important too, not to mention they're..."

"Expendable?"

"Exactly."

"You're an asshole."

"I never claimed to be anything else. Don't fool yourself into thinking I'm a good guy, Sugar, because you'll only be disappointed."

"Don't piss me off when we're about to leave. I know who you are, Maxim, but you know who I am too. I won't interfere

with your life if you don't interfere with mine, but I have lines that I won't cross. Though I won't ever tell you what to do, I will walk away if you cross them. I have to be able to look in the mirror at the end of the day."

He nods. "I know. Of course, I won't actually let you leave, but I know where your hard limits lie. I am not unreasonable."

"Whatever you say, Pakhan. Now let's go fake smile our way through the evening. There will be alcohol, right?"

"I'm Russian, Sugar. What do you think?"

He grins and takes my hand, leading me out to the waiting car. He holds the door open for me as I lift the hem of my dress and climb in. He gets in beside me and tells the driver where we're going before closing the partition.

"I must say, I like this color on you."

I look down at the white silk dress I'm wearing under my wool coat and laugh. "And it has nothing to do with the fact that you know I'm wearing nothing underneath it."

"You look like an angel, sweet and innocent," he teases, pressing a kiss to my neck as his hand slides up the inside of my thigh. His pinky skims over the lips of my pussy.

"But one slip of my finger, and I can turn my good girl bad."

"Unless you want me to arrive with a wet patch on my dress, behave yourself."

He grumbles but pulls his hand free. "Fine. But only because I don't want anyone else getting ideas."

I shake my head and look out the window so he can't see my grin. We relax in comfortable silence as the driver whisks us through the city to the ball. It's not a long journey, but it's enough that I'm cozy by the time we get there, and the thought of stepping out into the frigid night doesn't appeal to me one little bit.

"Come on, I promise it's warm inside."

“I don’t know how you survive living like this all the time. I could cut glass with my nipples.”

“Sounds like a party trick that I’d love to see.”

He opens the door and climbs out, taking my hand and ignoring the flash of camera bulbs from the media. “But to answer your question—” he continues as if it were just the two of us and not a dozen other people staring at us as we exit the car “—I don’t know any different.”

“Remind me to take you to the beach when you come to visit.”

“You’ll wear a bikini?”

“No.”

His shoulders deflate until I lean in. “It’s a private beach, so I prefer to go naked,” I whisper before walking ahead of him.

He curses in a mix of Russian and English. The only words I catch are fuck and hard-on, but it’s enough to make me laugh.

“You’ll pay for that,” he growls in my ear as he wraps his arm around me.

I look up at him, having no idea my heart is in my eyes. Though the world will see in the morning when we appear splashed all over the news as the mystery couple who bewitched the crowd of onlookers.

The night itself turns out to be a lot more fun than I thought it would be. With people’s identities hidden, it gave them a chance to let loose, which made people-watching that much more fun.

Standing there sipping my drink, I realize it will be difficult with Maxim, but it won’t be impossible. Nights like this proved it. If you want something bad enough, then you make it work. I smile when I catch the man himself heading toward me.

The smile slides off my face when I see his expression. “What’s wrong?” I ask him once he reaches me. Instead of

answering, he takes my elbow and leads me outside. “What’s going on?”

Still nothing as he practically drags me to the car before shoving me inside.

“What the hell?” I yell before he climbs in and takes my hands in his. “Okay, Maxim, you’re scaring me. What’s wrong?”

“It’s Calix. He’s been shot.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

I hold Calix's hand and stare at his face. He looks peaceful, almost like he's asleep—or he would if it weren't for the bandage wrapped around his head and the tube down his throat.

“What happened?” I ask, my voice hoarse.

“I don't know. I was on my way here to track him down when a contact called me and told me he had been shot.”

I look over at Rémy, who is leaning against the wall. “I want to know who did this.”

“I'm working on it. Maxim is out there with a team of guys retracing Calix's steps.”

I look back at Calix and swipe the tear I feel running down my face. “Work harder,” I snap. I know I'm being unfair, but I feel so utterly useless.

Rémy moves up behind me and places his hands on my shoulders. “He'll be okay, Sugar. He didn't make it this far just to give up now.”

“He thinks I don't want him. If he dies now, it's with the knowledge that I walked away.”

His hand squeezes my shoulder harder.

“I can't remember if I told him I loved him. I told him I hated him, though. I remember that. I don't, you know.” I look up at Rémy, giving up on trying to hold the tears back. “I never did, not even a little bit.”

Rémy pulls me to his chest just as the machine beside me starts going nuts.

I turn back to Calix and see him convulsing on the bed.

“Oh, God.”

The door slams open, and medical staff rushes in. Rémy yanks me back so they can work on him. When his body goes limp, I’m almost relieved until one of the nurses yells that he’s not breathing.

The doctor looks at me and shakes his head. “He has a DNR. I’m sorry.”

“No. NO. I’m his wife, dammit. You will bring him back to me.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t.”

“Then get the fuck out of my way,” I snarl as I climb up on the bed and straddle Calix’s waist.

“Miss, you can’t—”

I pull my gun and point it at the doctor. “Either help me or get the fuck out.”

He freezes. One of the nurses moves over to Calix. “If you are going to give him CPR, the tube needs to be removed,” she tells me calmly as she extracts the tube from his throat.

I nod, putting my gun away, and I begin chest compressions, counting under my breath.

“Touch her, and I’ll rip your hands off,” Rémy growls, and I assume someone was going to try and stop me.

“I’m calling security,” one of them yells as I lean down and pinch Calix’s nose and cover his mouth with mine. I breathe into him, willing him to live, before I sit back up and pump his chest again.

My arms shake with exhaustion, but I keep going. When I’m lifted off the bed, I scream and fight, but Rémy’s lips at my ear stop me. “Let me help.”

I nod and move to Calix's head, letting Rémy do chest compressions while I breathe for him.

When security arrives to remove us, I pull my gun and fire a warning shot. They clear out pretty quickly after that.

"Please, baby. Please don't do this to me," I beg when I hear the bones in his chest crack.

I breathe for him, my tears soaking us both, but then I feel it. I turn my head and place my cheek against his lips, and I feel his breath on my skin.

"He's breathing." I look up at Rémy, who nods.

"Get help. I'll watch him."

I run out of the room and nearly collide with the doctor. "He's breathing."

The doctor scowls at me before heading back into the room.

"Miss, you need to come with me." The security guard grabs my arm.

I look behind me and give in. As long as they keep working on Calix, I'll go. I don't want anything to distract them. I nod and allow the guard to lead me to the elevator. He hits the button for it, and we wait in silence. It dings, signaling its arrival.

When it opens, I take a step and jump when a gunshot rings out. The guard drops to the floor, and I find myself face-to-face with a ghost.

"Dorian?" I gasp.

"Surprise."

Moisture floods my mouth, and I throw up all over the floor. He yanks my arm and pulls me into the elevator. I distantly hear Rémy's roar, but it's as if I'm underwater. Dark spots appear before my eyes, and when I feel a sharp prick in my neck and everything starts to fade, I welcome the darkness.

WHEN I WAKE UP, I know something is wrong. My shoulders and arms are killing me. I try to move them and find that the reason they hurt is because my wrists are bound together and I'm hanging from them.

It takes my pounding head a second to remember what happened, and when I do, I feel my pulse quicken and my breathing pick up. I fight to get it under control before anyone notices.

Cracking open my eyes, I'm thankful the room is dark. I don't think I could handle bright light right now. I don't sense anyone else in the room with me, but I take a minute to even out my breathing, just in case. Once I'm sure I'm alone, I fully open my eyes. It takes a minute to focus before I shift through the shadows and realize I'm in a barn. Not just any barn, either. The one at the back of my property.

The breeze blows over my skin, and I realize I'm only wearing panties. Taking stock of my injuries, I assess if I hurt in places I shouldn't. Apart from my arms and head, I think I'm okay. I sway my body and kick out my feet, which aren't bound, trying to see if I can dislodge myself. All it does is intensify the pain in my arms.

The door to the barn bangs open, and in walks Dorian with the cocky swagger I once found so attractive.

"Ah, you're awake. Good. I wouldn't want you to miss any of the good stuff."

"How?" I choke out as he steps closer with what looks like a cattle prod in his hand.

"How what?"

"How are you still alive?"

"Magic." He grins, and I can't believe I never saw the evil in it before.

He traces the bare skin of my shin with the cattle prod and licks his lips. “I have to say, you grew up good. Filled out in all the right places.” He hits a button, and electricity jolts through me, making me scream. It lasts seconds, but the pain is excruciating.

“Why?” I gasp out.

“Why did I shoot your little boy toy? Because I hate him. The first time I missed thanks to you and that stupid bike, but when you were gone, well that made things much easier. You should have seen his face when the bullet hit him.” He laughs.

Motherfucker shot Calix.

He steps closer, dragging the prod over my stomach and up between my breasts. “I hadn’t planned on trying you out. It was bad enough the first time around, trying to fake interest, but now... Well, now you have the body of a woman, not a child. Yes, I think I’ll enjoy making you scream my name.”

He circles my nipple with the prod and hits the button. Pain erupts in my breast, my scream ripping from my throat as my bladder threatens to empty itself. He pulls it away, leaving my body twitching and the taste of blood in my mouth where I’ve bitten my tongue.

“Or maybe I should just fuck you with this. What do you think? It would be the ultimate orgasm, huh?” He places the prod on the floor as he reaches for my panties.

“No,” I scream, squeezing my legs together, but it comes out more like a whimper.

“Oh, come on now, don’t be like that.” He rips the strip of lace from my body, but I barely feel the sting as he reaches for the prod once more.

“Why?” I sob.

“Why? Why? Why?” he mocks, stepping so close that I can smell cigarettes on his breath. “I was just following orders.”

I blink, trying to understand what he’s saying.

“Oh, you didn’t think I was really into you, did you?” He roars with laughter.

I swallow down the pain, grit my teeth, and slip into bitch mode, knowing I can’t afford to fall apart. “Huh. That makes sense I guess.”

He pauses and looks at me with confusion. “What makes sense?”

“That you didn’t really know what you were doing with your dick. It’s okay. I didn’t know any different back then. I also didn’t realize how much bigger most men are than you.”

“You little bitch,” he spits, lifting the prod.

“Yeah, you better use the prod. At least I’ll feel that.” I laugh.

He snarls and whacks me in the stomach with it. The air rushes out of me as I swing back, but he doesn’t zap me, which I’m counting as a win.

Moving over to a lever on the wall, he pulls it, and I drop to the ground with a thud. My arms feel like they’ve been ripped off as blood rushes back to them. I scream in agony as he walks toward me, unbuckling his jeans as he steps closer. I try to get to my feet, but he’s quicker, dragging me to my knees by my hair as he fists his cock and presses it to my lips.

“Open your fucking mouth, and if you bite me, I’ll break your jaw.”

Yeah, I don’t respond well to threats. I open my mouth, and when he slides his length into the back of my throat, making me gag, I bite down savagely.

He screams, and when I release him, he drops to his ass. I don’t waste any time. I roll to my back, kick up my feet, and wrap them around his neck. I squeeze with all my might and twist sharply, feeling his neck snap. With the last of my strength gone, I let go, staring up at the beams above me before closing my eyes.

I hear voices and my name being called, but I don’t have the strength to reply. I lie there, and I laugh. I laugh until tears

run down my face. When Maxim appears above me, I smile. I must be dreaming. Yes, dreaming has got to be better than reality right now.

“Jesus fuck.” He drops to his knees and cradles me, making me cry out.

I don’t like this dream. You’re not supposed to hurt in your dreams.

“Hold on, Sugar. I’m going to cut these ropes.”

When my arms flop uselessly beside me, fire raging up them, my brain decides it has had enough and everything goes black.

THIS TIME when I wake up, there is pain—always with the damn pain. But there’s a familiar smell surrounding me, stopping me from panicking. I crack open my eyes and find Rémy watching me.

“Hi,” I whisper, my voice sounding like I smoke twenty cigarettes a day.

Rémy’s head bows before he picks up the pitcher of water from beside the bed and throws it across the room.

“Hi? Hi? You could have been killed,” he roars, making my head pound.

“Enough,” Maxim snaps, coming into view.

Rémy grips the edge of the bed. He takes a deep breath and blows it out before sucking in another. Once he has his shit under control, he walks closer to me and buries his head against my stomach. I jolt but hold him to me when he starts to move. Running my fingers through his hair, I look up at Maxim.

“Calix?” I whisper, almost afraid to ask.

Maxim nods to the left. I look over and find Calix in the bed beside mine, watching me.

“Oh, thank God.” I burst into tears.

Rémy curses before pulling back and picking me up. He walks me around the bed and lays me gently beside Calix, who winces as he wraps his arm around me. I close my eyes and breathe him in as I soak his hospital gown with my tears.

When I’m all cried out, I look up at him. He’s pale, and lines of pain bracket his face, but he’s alive. “You scared me.”

“You scared me too.”

“Yes, if you could refrain from getting shot, kidnapped, or anything that might make me go prematurely gray, I’d appreciate it,” Maxim huffs.

I reach for his hand. He inches closer, nudging Rémy out of the way.

“You found me.”

“I always will.”

He pauses for a moment before sitting on the end of the bed, linking his fingers through mine. “Both your shoulders were dislocated. They’ve been put back, but you’ll be sore for a while. There was a burn mark on your leg and another on your breast.”

Rémy growls, so I tell them what happened. “He used a cattle prod on me.”

Everyone goes silent before the room explodes with the use of the F-word.

“Hey, I’m okay.”

“You were naked. His dick was out. Did he—” Maxim asks quietly as Calix’s arms tighten around me.

I swallow and shake my head. “He was going to use the cattle prod to...you know. I had to piss him off because I wasn’t sure I could survive that. He wanted me to suck him off. I decided to bite instead, then I broke his neck,” I state casually.

Silence again. I can feel their eyes on me, but I avoid eye contact with any of them. “He’s dead, right?” I ask, looking

up.

Maxim shakes his head. “He’s paralyzed from the neck down, but he’s alive. He’s upstairs with one of my men watching him.”

“Someone want to tell me who the fuck this guy is?” Rémy grits out, barely holding himself together.

I blow out a breath. “To tell you who he is, I have to tell you who I am.”

“We’re listening,” Calix murmurs, his voice sounding as fucked as mine.

I look up at the bandage covering his head and nod. *It’s time.*

“His name is Dorian.”

“Dorian? Why does that name sound familiar?” Calix croaks, looking at me.

I close my eyes, shame making me a coward, but I can’t bear to see the look in his eyes. Have him look at me with hatred. Though nobody could hate me more than I do.

“Wait. He was the guy fucking your sister?”

I shake my head and open my eyes. “No. He was the guy fucking me. I’m Selene.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The doctor entering the room offered me a welcome reprieve, and when I was told they wanted to take some x-rays of my arms—just as a precaution—I didn't put up a fight. Am I delaying the inevitable? Absolutely. But all I can think of is how tense Calix had been beside me and the words he once threw my way.

I can find little sympathy for the girl who tried to trick the devil and failed, and offered up her family as sacrifices.

It's not that I disagree with him because everything he said is true. I was a selfish bitch, and my stupidity cost my family everything. I've had to live with that knowledge every single day of my life since.

Once the x-rays are done, they leave me in a wheelchair in the waiting room for the doctor to review the images. I zone out, thinking about the choices I made and all the things that led me here. I hear the nurses talking about a patient that's been brought in with a broken neck and an injury to his penis. A whisper of, "At least he can't feel the pain in his dick," followed by a snicker, almost has me laughing, too, until I remember everything that man put me through. I want him to feel the pain. I've been in pain for years, why shouldn't he feel it?

I look around, making sure nobody is watching, before climbing from my wheelchair and making my way down the corridor. I see the man Maxim assigned to watch the room talking to a pretty nurse who bats her long eyelashes at him.

Using his distraction to my advantage, I slip inside the room and make my way over to the bed. I find Dorian staring up at the ceiling, his eyes filled with fear. It feeds something inside me.

“Well, well, well. What do we have here?”

His eyes flit to mine, his shoulders move a fraction.

“Not so much fun now that the tables have turned, huh? Now I don’t have a cattle prod, but I’m sure I could improvise. Let me see.” I look around and find a pen on the rolling table next to his chart.

“A scalpel, that will do. After all, this flap of skin that used to be your dick isn’t much use anymore, now is it?”

“Stop,” he whispers as if his voice won’t go any louder.

“He speaks. Impressive. I did expect to find you with a tube down your throat, breathing for you. I’m a little disappointed, I won’t lie. Now, where was I? Oh, yes, my dickenectomy.”

“Please,” he begs.

I walk closer to his head and drag the pen down his cheek, knowing he’ll think I’m slicing his face.

Tears run down his temples as I lean over him, my lips inches from his. “Tell me everything, and I’ll leave you to your new, pathetic existence.”

He shudders and starts talking in such a quiet voice that I have to lean closer to hear him. “Santos likes them young.”

Even though I know this, I let his words sink in as I try to unravel his secrets. The image of my past twists to take another shape.

“When you were promised to him at twelve, he was happy, but he didn’t want to wait for your eighteenth birthday like your parents insisted. By that point, his interest had waned and shifted.”

A breath rattles out of him, making me realize that talking is draining him.

“That’s when he enlisted my help.”

“You set me up?”

“No, Santos did. He told me what to do, what to say, and how to play it. You fell so easily for me, it was laughable.”

I squeeze my hands into fists but keep my cool. Killing him won’t give me answers.

“Don’t feel bad. He always planned to kill you all. He only had eyes for Sophia. As soon as he saw her, nothing else mattered. It’s funny, really, the way it played out. Did you know she was the one who told him about us? She didn’t know it was a setup, but she was pissed about all the attention you were getting instead of her.”

I frown, thinking back, trying to remember without the haze of guilt coating everything. The way Santos would look at Sophia made my skin crawl, but I had seen the flirty looks she had given him back. It didn’t matter, though. She was just a child. She didn’t know any better.

“When you came back, he thought you were Sophia and believed the lie you lived. That’s what you wanted, right? He had me watch you, and I knew. I’d been inside you after all.”

“There was a body.” I swallow down the bile, picturing the pieces of what was once human that were tossed into my cell with me. Santos told me it was Dorian, and I believed him. Why wouldn’t I?

“He went to a lot of trouble to convince me you were dead. Why? Why not just kill you? You were a loose end, after all.”

He laughs, but it sounds wrong, too much air wheezes out of him.

“I was the love of your pathetic life, but he was mine, and you took him from me.”

I blink at that. “You were lovers?”

“What we had went beyond sex.”

I laugh. “Poor, poor, Dorian. Santos had no interest in you or your tiny dick. You said so yourself. He liked underage,

untried pussy.”

“Like you’d know. You weren’t even a virgin when I fucked you.”

“And why do you think that was?” Now it’s his turn to blink.

“You think Santos waited until he could marry me to take what he already considered his? You’re a fucking fool, but then I guess we both were. Where did you even come from? I would have known if you worked for Santos.” I close my eyes when the answer hits me.

“Dorian Kypianos,” I whisper, opening my eyes as the pieces fall together. “You’re from the Kypianos family, one of Andrew’s nephews. That’s how Santos made it out of captivity alive. You nursed him. You’re the one who tried to have me killed in my hotel room. He didn’t know who I was but you did.”

“You just couldn’t stay dead, could you? I needed you gone. It was bad enough listening to Santos rant about Calix and his precious Sophia. I saved him and all he cared about was them. I sure as hell wasn’t playing second fiddle to you too.

“That’s why you tried to kill Calix. You were jealous.”

“Calix was a fool. He should have loved Santos like I did,” he slurs, his eyes flickering.

“You loved a manipulative monster. I would know because once upon a time, I loved one too.”

I laugh before leaning over him. “You have to admit it’s kind of poetic that Calix was the one to kill Santos. You should have seen it when his head exploded all over the place.”

His monitor starts to beep like crazy as his breathing turns ragged. With a grin, I flick it off before I tug the pillow from under his head and hold it above him.

“No. You said if I talked, you’d leave me alone.”

“And you believed me? And you thought I was gullible. Say hello to Santos for me.” I press the pillow over his face and laugh when I remember he can’t even struggle.

I whistle a happy tune as the scent of terror permeates the air. Once I’m sure he’s gone, I place the pillow back and stroll out of the room without a care in the world. Instead of going back to my room, I take the stairwell down to the first floor and make my way out to the parking lot. I hail a cab and give the driver directions. He doesn’t blink an eye at my hospital gown.

I lean my head against the window and watch as the hospital fades from view, using the time alone to reinforce my defenses. I have no doubt the guys will track me down soon enough. By then, hopefully I’ll have rebuilt the walls around my heart to withstand any emotional blow thrown at me.

IT TAKES them two weeks to find me, though I can’t say I’ve made it easy for them. After taking care of some business and reassuring the girls that I was okay, I came back to the place where everything started.

I lie in the dirt and stare up at the sky. It’s crystal blue without a cloud in sight, so when a shadow falls over me, I sigh. “Took you long enough.”

“Well, bullet wounds take time to heal.”

I jump, sitting up as Calix sits down beside me. “I thought you were Rémy.”

“Sorry to disappoint you.”

“No, that’s not what I mean, I—”

“Relax, Sugar, I’m joking. Rémy and Maxim are in the car. They’re pissed, but they’ve agreed to let me talk to you first.”

“I wasn’t running. Not really, I just needed to...to...”

“Heal.”

“Yeah.” But not from my injuries.

“They were scared something happened to you.”

“You weren’t?”

“I knew you weren’t in danger, especially not when we found out Dorian was dead. I figured you were licking your wounds. Wounds that he created but that I picked at with my callous words. I’m sorry.”

“No, you were right.”

“I was a dick. I know nothing about what happened, but I’d like to know if you’ll tell me.”

I blow out a breath and look over at him. “I’m so glad you’re okay. I thought I was going to lose you and that you wouldn’t know how I feel about you.”

“I know how you feel, angel. I can see it in your eyes. Nobody has ever looked at me like you do.”

“How do I look at you?” I whisper.

“Like I’m your home.” He reaches over and cups my cheek, looking at me with so much love. “Tell me.”

“The marriage contract between Santos and me was made when I was twelve.”

He grunts but doesn’t say anything, taking my hand in his and squeezing.

“I was so mad. I didn’t want to marry Santos. Hell, I didn’t want to marry anyone. I was a fucking kid, but what I wanted didn’t matter. The contract was signed, but Santos wasn’t happy that my father insisted on waiting until my eighteenth birthday before we got married. He should have been more specific.”

“What do you mean?”

“He didn’t say Santos couldn’t touch me, just that he couldn’t marry me.”

Calix wraps his arm around me and pulls me into his body. “How old were you?” His voice is hoarse when he asks.

“The first time he raped me? Thirteen. A year to the day he signed the contract. It was a fuck you to my parents for thinking they had any power. He told me if I breathed a word, he’d go after my sister. She was only eleven”

“Fuck, I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry about. You didn’t do anything to me.”

“Didn’t I? I dragged you out of that fucking house and handed you over to a monster. I knew something wasn’t right about Santos, but I didn’t know how bad it was. I never bothered to look below the surface, too cowardly to rock the boat.”

“And when you did, look at what happened to you. You were the only person who stood up for me, who told Santos what he was doing to me was not okay. That’s why I couldn’t let you die in prison. As mad as I was at you, I never forgot that you were the only person who gave a damn.”

“I would have spent the rest of my life behind bars if it would have spared you.”

I don’t know what to say, so I just snuggle closer. “You know you really are my husband. I was never married to Santos.”

“I know. Makes me the luckiest son of a bitch on the planet.”

His words provide the comfort and acceptance I need to carry on. “I met Dorian when I was sixteen,” I tell him softly. “He was the only person that didn’t treat me like a leper. Nobody would touch me. Most people barely said a word to me. Even my parents turned the other way because, as far as everyone was concerned, I was now the property of Santos Cirillo. Dorian was different, or at least I thought he was. He was soft with me, gentle.” Despite what I taunted the man with, he really was my world. It’s what makes the betrayal cut so much deeper.

“He reeled me in like a white knight with promises of escape. He treated me like I was spun from gold, and I soaked

it up like a flower starved of water.”

“You loved him.”

“In a way that only a sixteen-year-old could. He was my one bright spot in a bleak world. Santos was still raping me, and each time he was becoming more and more violent. I honestly thought I was going to die before I ever made it to the wedding. I almost hoped I did. Dorian was the only thing that pulled me through, but it was all a game. A test I was destined to fail.”

“What did he do?”

I huff and play with the hem of my shirt. “He lied.”

“About what? You have to give me more than that.”

“He lied about everything. He lied about his feelings for me, lied about protecting me. He lied about everything. Everything he told me was fed to him by Santos.”

He sucks in a sharp breath. “What?”

“Santos set me up. I was getting too old for his tastes, but my sister...” I blow out a breath. “Dorian was in love with Santos. Santos, being the smart man he was, saw an opportunity and took it. He wove a story in which I became the traitor, my sister became his consolation prize, and my parents became collateral damage. When I told you he took out everyone who would remember me, it wasn’t a lie. I was just referring to me as opposed to Sophia. Though why he kept Dorian alive, especially after the charade of faking his death, I don’t know, unless he needed him for something else. In the end, keeping Dorian alive is what saved Santos’ life.

“The day you came for me was the last day of freedom I tasted in over a year. Santos threw me in his dungeon and let his men do whatever they wanted to me.”

I hear a ragged breath, but it isn’t from Calix. I tense, but when Rémy bends and lifts me, settling me in his lap, I relax a fraction. Maxim sits on the other side of me and takes my free hand while Calix continues to grip the other.

“Finish your story, Sugar. We’ve got you,” Rémy murmurs into my hair.

“I lost all sense of time. Life was just pain and more pain. The days blended into each other, and I’ll admit, I spaced out a lot. Reality was something just out of my reach until he raped Sophia. I think he wanted to do things differently with her, you know? He gave her everything her heart desired, didn’t lay a finger on her for a whole year, instead he took his frustrations out on me. But it’s impossible to keep the monster leashed forever, and eventually, he snapped.”

I start shaking as I come to the next part of the story, causing Rémy to hold me tighter. “You don’t have to carry on.”

“I do. I have to get it out.”

Calix presses a kiss on my shoulder.

“He branded her and raped her while his men pinned me to the floor and made me watch. I saw the light in her eyes die. She didn’t scream, didn’t fight, she was just gone, and Santos was pissed. I’ve never seen him like that before.”

“He punished her for it,” Maxim says softly.

I shake my head, feeling my tears fall. “No. He carried her out of there like she was precious cargo. Took her to his boat so he could make her his wife. He punished me instead. Had his men hold me and made me watch them rape my mother over and over before they slit her throat. All while reminding me that it was my fault.”

“I’m sorry. Fuck. If I’d have been there—”

“You’d be dead. You became a liability the first time you stood up for me. Be grateful that he only removed you from the board instead of eliminating you altogether.”

I lean back into Rémy and feel the steady beat of his heart. I use it to ground me as I carry on. “After my mother was dead, I thought they’d get bored and leave. Most did, but two of them stayed. They drugged my dad,” I whisper. “Made him have sex with my mom’s body. And then... Then they turned him on me. I couldn’t do it anymore. I just couldn’t. When one

of them was leaning over me, I grabbed his gun and shot them both. Then I shot my dad in the head.” I sob as Rémy rocks me. “He couldn’t come back from that. Nobody could.”

“It was an act of mercy,” Rémy tells me.

“I am not God.”

“No, but you’re a goddamn miracle,” Maxim snarls. “Look at you. Look at what you survived. I am in fucking awe of you, baby.”

“Finish up now so we can take you home and love you.”

Despite it all, I chuckle at Calix’s words. I take a deep breath and wipe the tears from my eyes. “I shut down after that. I remember moving through the house, killing every guard I came across, then finding a can of gasoline and dousing the place. I lit a match and set fire to the house before making my way down to the marina.

“I could see the boat. It was sitting out near the buoys. Two speedboats were heading back to shore, so I hid under the dock. One of them held the heads of four of the five families. The other carried Andrew Kypianos, who looked like he wanted to commit murder, and a priest who was muttering about forgiveness. I waited for them to leave—it felt like I waited forever. Once everyone was gone, I took one of the boats and headed toward Santos’s boat. I stopped halfway and swam the rest. I was so weak; I didn’t think I’d make it. If it had been anyone else on that boat, I would have given up and let the ocean swallow me, but I couldn’t leave her there.”

“So fucking brave. So determined. I’m so proud of you, angel,” Calix whispers.

“Don’t be. I’m not.”

“Well, you should be,” Maxim states.

I look at him. “I killed her.”

He blinks but doesn’t say anything, letting me finish.

“Santos was passed out. I hit him with the butt of the gun to make sure he stayed that way and tied him up. I needed to make sure my sister was there before I got rid of him. I

smelled the blood first. That distinctive metallic smell that I knew too well. She was on the bed facing away from me. She was so still. To anyone else, she could have been sleeping.”

“He hurt her,” Calix says softly.

“She hurt herself. Took a razor blade and slashed her arms.” It’s why finding Lollie the way I did affected me so badly. It was like history repeating itself.

“She was still alive. She hadn’t cut deep enough. I rolled her over and tried to stop the flow of blood as she told me all that she’d gone through. She begged me to let her die. That I owed her that much. I stared down at her, saw the angry brand Santos had put on her, and I knew she was right. She would never be free. I kissed her goodnight just like when we were little, and she closed her eyes, then I shot her.”

Vomit stirs in my stomach, but I push on. “When I stumbled back out to Santos, I beat the shit out of him. I took all my anger and let it fuel me, not caring that he was already unconscious. When I had enough, I shot him, only to find I was out of bullets. Everything that came next is what I told you. I called Andrew and struck my deal.”

“The brand you have wasn’t from Santos?”

I shake my head. “Andrew had a tattoo artist do it for me before he killed him to keep his silence. He wasn’t strong enough to go up against Santos without help, and I handed him over on a silver platter, so he did what he could to set me free.”

“I don’t understand why you pretended to be Sophia.” Rémy sounds confused, but Calix looks at me with knowing eyes.

“You knew, didn’t you?”

“Knew what?” Maxim asks, looking between us.

“That if by some miracle Santos survived, that tattoo would be the only thing that might save her.”

“Selene was expendable. But Sophia, God, he was obsessed with her. Besides, it helped me when it came to the

families. They think I'm Sophia, the rightful heir. Selene was just a traitor."

"No, you're fucking not."

I shrug. "It doesn't matter now. I did what I had to do. In a weird way, Sophia got to live a life through me. The brand ensures I carry her with me, and I never forget to lead with my head, not my heart. That's why you guys scared me so much."

"We're not going to betray you, Sugar."

"I know. I trust you."

"Why take over as the head of families, though? Why put yourself through that? It's like swimming through shark-infested waters with a slit throat," Calix asks.

"I thought that was obvious. She's protecting you." Rémy laughs.

"What?" Calix looks at me with wide eyes. "Sugar, no."

"It's okay. Really, it is. I can make a difference, and this way, you can get some peace, and Zale will be safe. Nobody needs to know he's an heir. I want him to grow up surrounded by love, not vipers. He deserves that."

"And what about what you deserve, Sugar? Fuck." He stands but sways.

Maxim jumps up and catches him before he falls. "Do I have to remind you that you were shot in the fucking head just over two weeks ago?"

"Let's get them both home. We can figure everything else out later. You got him?" Rémy asks Maxim as he scoops me up.

"Yeah, I've got him. Let's get out of here."

I look over Rémy's shoulder at the place where Santos's home used to be. I watch with a smirk as Calix shrugs Maxim off, only to open his pants, pull out his cock, and piss on the ground of my once-prison. It's a fitting end and brings a smile to my face before I bury my head under Rémy's chin and let him carry me home.

EPILOGUE

FOUR MONTHS LATER

I uncross my legs and stand, walking toward Calisa, who holds out the file for me. I scan over it before looking up at the heads of each family I have gathered in our new meeting place.

“We’re sure this is the last of them?”

“As sure as we can be,” Alistair, the new head of the Kypianos family, admits. “That doesn’t mean we won’t stop looking, though. We have the software you provided running down the Santos brand. We’ve had nineteen hits so far. We’re working on recovering those girls as we speak.”

“Thank you, Alistair.”

I look around the room before perching my ass on the corner of the desk. “I know it feels like we’re cleaning up a mess we didn’t make, but the families being complacent is what led us here in the first place. I believe in us. I believe we can be a formidable force to be reckoned with. But to do that, we have to stand united. I’m not saying we have to braid each other’s hair or that your businesses need to be squeaky clean. I’m not asking for miracles here, people,” I joke, hearing a few returning chuckles.

“But Santos reigned for so long because none of the families worked together to overthrow him, even when he resurfaced. Individually, you knew he had the upper hand, but together, you could have wiped him out. Yet you let pride get in the way, and each of these girls paid for your sins.” I open

the folder and hold up the first picture—a woman naked, on her knees, with the Santos brand burned into her shoulder.

“She is someone’s daughter, someone’s sister. Imagine if she were yours.”

The people in the room shift uncomfortably.

“None of us have clean hands here. We all played a part in her downfall, but now it’s time to stand up and do fucking better.” I toss the folder on the desk beside me and watch as more photos spill out.

“You do what you have to do to fund your families, but I draw the line at people. No man, woman, or child will ever be sold like cattle under my watch,” I tell them, my voice leaving no room for arguments.

Calisa speaks up, “I think I speak for everyone when I say we wholeheartedly agree.”

The others nod in agreement. I take a deep breath and blow it out. “Good. Now that that’s out of the way, does anyone have anything they wish to discuss?”

“Our communities are suffering.” the new head of the Galanis family says. “Though some of us have seen profitable years, the wealth didn’t filter down to everyone.”

“That’s because your predecessors were greedy bastards. Ruling with fear, though effective, does you no favors. Your people won’t stay loyal and will be easily bought. To make your families strong, you’ll need to give back to the very communities you take from. I’m talking about jobs, education, and housing. That is up to each family, but I can help. As you know, I have a few connections in both the US and Russia. This isn’t a *you scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours* thing. Just show me you can do better, and I’ll provide you with every resource I can.”

People throw out questions after that, and I answer them, feeling zero sense of animosity. If anything, the room is buzzing with excitement. It seems I’m not the only one ready to see a change.

When the door opens and Calix strolls in, people quiet down. Everyone is still wary of the man, and neither of us does anything to their fears.

“Is it that time already?” I check my watch and curse.

He doesn't answer. He walks up to me and, not giving a single fuck about anyone else in the room, slides his hand around my waist, tugging me off the desk and yanking me to him. His lips are on mine a moment later. Everyone else fades away, and I lose myself to him.

A cough breaks us apart. I reach up and wipe the lipstick from his mouth before addressing the room. “Calix is going to take over. I'll be back in a few days, so please don't do anything stupid in my absence. He gets a little murderous when people piss him off.”

I look up at Calix and lower my voice so only he can hear me, “Are you sure you're okay with this?”

“I never wanted to rule, but I have no problem worshiping my queen.” He grins. “Go, I've got this. Rémy is waiting for you outside.”

I press a quick kiss to his lips. “Love you.”

“I love you too.”

I offer everyone a smile, and I head out to Rémy, who is waiting for me with a cell phone to his ear.

“You know I am not your personal assistant,” he snaps.

I smirk as I hear a familiar Russian accent down the line.

“I should have killed you when I had the chance,” Rémy mutters before holding the phone out to me. “It's for you.”

I put the phone to my ear and grin as Rémy places his hand on the small of my back and leads me toward the waiting car. “Hey, Maxim. What did you do now to piss Rémy off?”

“Breathe,” he deadpans, making me laugh. “I'm not joking, ahn-gyil. That man does not like me.”

“Rémy doesn't like anyone but me.”

The man in question slides his hand to my ass and squeezes it in confirmation.

“This is true,” Maxim sighs before I hear him yelling at someone in the background. “Sorry about that. I swear I’m surrounded by idiots. I had hoped to fly back with you today, but alas, it was not meant to be.”

“Maxim, I don’t expect you to drop everything for me. We both have busy lives, I get it. I’ll be back in a few days. Why don’t you fly over then? I’ll even take you to the beach like I promised.”

“And you’ll be naked?”

“A deal’s a deal, right?”

“Fuck, and now I’m hard. I’ll be there, ahn-gyil. Even if I have to kill everyone here.”

“Whatever makes you happy. Just don’t get caught.”

He huffs. “Of course, I won’t get caught.” There is more yelling in the background before Maxim curses. “I have to go. Are you going to be okay?”

I nod before remembering that he can’t see me. “Yes, Maxim. I’m good. I’ll call you when I land.”

“You better. Tell my assistant to keep you safe.”

“You really do have a death wish.” I laugh before hanging up.

“What did he say?” Rémy asks as he holds the car door open for me.

“To have a safe trip.”

He climbs in behind me before hitting the button for the partition to slide up, separating us from the driver. “Your mouth is too pretty to tell lies.” He slips his hand into my hair and yanks my mouth to his, but he doesn’t kiss me. His mouth hovers a whisper from mine.

“Perhaps you should give my mouth something else to do then.”

His grin turns wicked as his grip tightens. “Oh, Sugar, you really should be careful what you wish for.”

“WHAT DO you mean you’re not staying?” Dulce stomps her foot, making me roll my eyes.

“You don’t even live in this city. It’s not that much different.”

“You’ll be a day away. It’s very fucking different.”

“Dulce,” Aslanov warns.

“No. I just got her back.”

I step forward and wrap my arms around her. “I’ll be back all the time, but I have to do this, Dulce.”

She sighs and hugs me tighter. “Being a responsible adult sucks,” she complains as Reese grumbles about big babies and pulls me from her arms.

“You sure about this?”

I nod, looking over at Rémy, aka my shadow. Since retiring, he’s become my personal killing machine. The man takes my safety very seriously. “I’m sure.”

Reese nods and gives me a quick squeeze before stepping back and letting Lollie step up to me.

“Don’t cry,” I order.

“Shut up. You’re not my boss anymore.”

I laugh and wrap my arms around her.

When I came home, I told Lollie the truth about who I am and what I did. The version I had previously told her had been the mostly fabricated one of me playing Sophia. Lying to her had never sat well with me. Thankfully she understood the reasons why I did what I did and never held it against me. She remained by my side, hand in mine as I spilled my secrets to Reese and Dulce who cried along with me.

Lollie pulls back and offers me a watery smile. “So, Calix and Bundy here are moving in with you? What about Maxim?”

“That’s a little more complicated, but he flies in all the time, and distance does in fact make the heart grow fonder.”

“I bet the sex is great too.”

“Oh yeah,” I whisper.

“Okay. I know you’ve gotta do this, but if you need us, you better call. I’m not even kidding. You’ve already used your get-out-of-jail-free card. You keep shit from us again, and I’ll beat your ass.”

“You think you can take me, huh?”

“Maybe not, but I’ll sick Charlie on you.”

“I’ll call if I need you. Hell, I’ll call if I don’t. I’ll be back so often it will be like I never left.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

She nods before stepping back into Sawyer’s embrace.

“Are you going to see Zale before you go?” I look over at Aslanov and grin.

“Already been. He looks so good. I’m glad he’s settling in.”

Zale had been placed with a foster family, who now want to adopt him. They are amazing with him, and he’s flourishing under their care.

“Any news on the other girls?” he asks me as a knock sounds on the door.

“The ones that went home are getting the help they need, and the ones that stayed are doing as well as can be expected. They’ll get there. They’re strong.”

“Come in,” I yell. My PA pokes her head around the door and looks at me with a smile.

“Your guests are here.”

“Okay, thanks. Bring them up.”

“Alright, guys, I’ll FaceTime you once I land.”

I get extra hugs before everyone heads for the door.

“Dulce, Aslanov, can you hang back for a second?”

“Sure,” Dulce answers for them both, dragging him over to the sofa.

“What’s going on?” Aslanov asks.

“I couldn’t have picked a better person for Dulce. I know we haven’t always seen eye to eye, but I’m so grateful she has you in her life. And I want to say thank you for what you did for me.”

“You’re family, Sugar. It’s what families do.”

“I’m glad you said that because I have something for you. You deserve this, and she deserves to have you. Take it from someone who knows.”

“What are you talking about?” He looks at me, puzzled, before turning to Dulce, who shrugs.

The knock at the door has me tensing. Rémy moves to answer it, and when it swings open, I offer King a wide smile. He steps aside and shows his old lady, Sunshine, into the room.

“Oh, my God,” Dulce whispers.

“Hey, Sunshine. I’d like you to meet someone.”

Aslanov stares at her like he’s seen a ghost. Sunshine, having already been briefed by King, walks slowly toward Aslanov, taking him in before stopping just in front of him.

“I always wanted a brother,” she whispers, her voice full of tears. He catches her as she collapses into his arms.

I grab Rémy’s hand and drag him toward the door, pausing to look over my shoulder at Aslanov’s eyes burning into mine. He doesn’t need to say anything. I can read it all over his face.

“You’re welcome,” I mouth.

King squeezes my shoulder as I walk past him. “Take care of yourself, Selene,” he whispers.

“You too, Westley.” I kiss him on the cheek before Rémy wraps his arm around me and leads me outside.

We stop when we make it through the glass doors. I turn and look up at the building and feel a lump in my throat.

“You can change your mind. We can make it work.”

“No. It’s time. Besides, The Candy Shop doesn’t end with us four. There’s a whole new generation of Candy girls waiting for their chance to make a difference.”

“You sure?”

I swallow around the lump in my throat, knowing it’s time to blaze a new path. One that might still be a little warped and a little crooked, but instead of it leading to a place of vengeance, this one leads me home.

To men who won’t make me bend and who won’t see me break.

To men who’ll never let me fall.

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

JodieLocks Designs – For my beautiful cover.

Tanya Oemig – My incredible editor - AKA miracle worker. I'm so grateful to have you on my team. You're amazing and I adore you.

Briann Graziano — Proofreading Goddess.

My Beta Angels – You ladies are everything. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for all you do. I heart you all.

Julia Murray — my amazing PA and friend.

Thais, Stacey, Marie and Mallory – my sprinting crew. Most days I only make it through because of you guys.

Aspen — For the times you drop everything just to read my words. You're my ride and die and I couldn't love you more.

My readers – You guys are everything to me. I am in awe of the love and support I have received. Thanks for taking a chance on me and on each of the books that I write.

Remember, If you enjoyed it, please leave a review.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Candice is a romance writer who lives in the UK with her long-suffering partner and her three slightly unhinged children. As an avid reader herself, you will often find her curled up with a book from one of her favorite authors, drinking her body weight in coffee.

