



A FALL FOR
DESIRE

THE LAST TIME
YOU
Breathed
ME

EMMALEIGH LOADER

*The Last Time You Break
Me*

A FALL FOR DESIRE

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If You Want Love - NF
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Sweet but Psycho - Ava Max
Ashes of Eden - Breaking Benjamin
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Rest In Peace - Dorothy
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“Iris” by Diamante and Breaking Benjamin
“Heaven” by Julia Michaels

Prologue

Lara

Heartless - Rains

A nother storm brewed just beyond the window within my ivory tower. A hue of the darkest colors known to man flashed behind the veil of the drapes that hung heavy and brushed against the gray carpet, swaying in the wind as the window remained cracked open. A chilled breeze caressed my body while I laid there, staring at the ceiling above me, subdued.

The princess to a wicked, wicked criminal empire with little to no escape.

Not that I was sure I wanted one. The more I began to age with the days, the more that darkness I kept at bay crept back in.

I was losing the battle to be any kind of princess at all.

The sound that bellowed on the wind screeched, and the raw and untamable voice of a tortured man rioted within the air while it swirled around me like a dying banshee. I sighed and slammed my hands down against the mattress as I hissed in frustration and kicked out my legs in annoyance. I forced the covers to become dispelled from my thighs.

As I rolled to my side, I glared at the door and contemplated who I was ready to slaughter tonight.

I knew what they were doing. Even if the Wyelli family thought their princess was lost to her slumber. Something hot coiled in my core as the screams grew louder—built around me like symphonies of the sick and the twisted. It was slick in the sheen of sweat layered to my skin as the anticipation rose to new heights. It made me restless, and uneasy as I struggled to relax in my own skin. My bones quivered, and expectancy boiled in my veins while I crawled from the bed, to come to stand up on delicate feet.

I tiptoed toward the door, the hellfire lightning flashed at my back, which forced my ominous shadow to sneer back at me with encouragement.

The thunder roared, clapping through the earth as a brutal hand that ushered me toward the one place I knew I should never go. The one place I longed to see deep within the crimson-soaked walls of our mansion.

The dungeons underground were off-limits. Tunneled out and sealed away.

A chamber our enemies had night terrors about.

Only the men within my father's reign and my father himself stomped down those frozen steps and into the void of an eternal abyss you never returned from the same.

It's the place I knew he'd always be...

Bones.

My father's best friend and savage right hand. They called him that because he had a habit of ripping the bones from the bodies of his victims.

While they were still alive.

*Psychological torture as he broke them again and again
right before their very eyes.*

The madman always went for the ribs...

They didn't know I knew that either.

One. By. One.

*He pulled them as he scattered them across the dungeon
floor. It was a sick game. The way he forced the enemies of my
family to watch as they suffered unimaginable pain, knowing
they were going to die. Knowing that one by one, as their
bones laid so careless beside them, that the next breath they
were to take, would most possibly be their last.*

*It was demented and something about that made me clench
my thighs together.*

It was a warped kind of art.

*Now, he ventured up those steps bloody and worn. The
cruelness stalked me as it glared back. Fury shone brightly in
those wicked and chilled gray eyes as he prowled closer.*

When I stared at him, I stared at the soulless.

A reaper without remorse.

He had caught me once, long ago when I was only fifteen.

*He had caught me, in the dead quiet of the stilled night as I
crept through the halls with the intent to get an insight into the
madness that dwelled beneath my feet.*

*It was the first time I knew something dark hid within me.
The first time I knew I wanted him as I wanted him now. So
deeply I felt it pooling within me in my very apex as it gushed
with the thought.*

Leaving me wet, hot, and bothered.

Something broke in me that night.

*The night he shut me down. Rejected me. When I became
so lost to the blood that covered him and the lust that drove me
that I threw myself at him.*

It was the first time I ever thought to have snooped through the halls in curiosity, skulking like a predator within my own home.

That night I had only made it down to the third step, and then he was there.

Bled from the shadows like a demon of the night.

He was bloody then too. Wickedly depraved and rather frightful.

He had stolen my breath and made my body change. Just like it changed now.

It was the first time I had ever experienced lust and fear together and I came to the understanding that it was quite a lethal concoction.

Quite an addictive one too.

Because that was the night that I began to crave the fire.

The forbidden touch.

The immoral screams that would be torn from my throat until I was hoarse and my body was slack.

The dark and dirty fantasies plagued me. My heart betrayed me and my stomach joined my brothers, down in that abyss torturing our enemies with our father as I remembered all of my sinful thoughts.

Tonight though was no different from the others.

He had pinned me to the wall, hand around my throat as he pressed crimson lips to my ear and whispered, "Careful now, darling. The monster doesn't return the soul after he ruins it. You need to head back to your room. Now." The low-timbered vibration in his husky voice had chilled shivers skating down my spine and forced me to arch into him. My breasts pushed firmly into his hard chest, drawing his lethal attention as the buds, aroused and puckered, bled through the sheer fabric of my scarce nightgown.

My breathing grew heavy, and my eyes did too, thick with lust. I was half-baked, stoned on the scent of his intoxicating

cologne and sweaty excretion from the brutality I knew he'd been down there handing out.

But I couldn't stop myself.

From craving.

From needing to know.

From longing to see him in action.

My gaze flickered toward the doors, down into the darkness and a rough hand brought my face back to him. It forced me to peer into his eyes. Unwavering, I stood with a firm resolve, waiting for my punishment due to such disobedience. Such naughtiness. But it never came.

"Go to bed, Lara. There is nothing down there for you." He asserted. It brooked no room for argument as that cold face ticked—hard jaw, feathered in frustration.

"How could you possibly know that?" I asked, deciding I'd taunt the devil he so referred to. "How do you know that isn't my soulmate down there? Being tortured by the Wyelli brutes?" I smirked wickedly, the look taunting and aggravating as he tightened the grip on my jaw.

"Because your soulmate knows exactly where you are, love, and just who to kill should anyone else ever lay a hand on you." The shadows danced across his gaze. It hid all emotion, all except a carnal kind of rage that had trepidation slicked to the back of my throat.

But as I said. I just couldn't help myself.

"I doubt that, Bones." I cleared my throat in order to hide my uneasy gulp. His narrowed eyes dropped low as they assessed every inch of me. "I think my soulmate is a coward. A big, scary man hiding like a scared little boy in the shadows. Watching me every night, stroking himself while I play with the aching clit he so easily neglects. Don't you agree? Or why else would I still be so alone?" He thought that I didn't know that late at night, while I arched my back and spread my legs moaning his name, that he was there. Standing in the shadows as he watched me get off, all while he did the same. How he thought I could easily miss the gleam in his eyes that shone

like a cat, peering at me through the darkness, as they glowed like a demented entity ready to take my soul.

He could have it.

He could destroy it.

For just one, unrestrained night within his arms.

His cold hand threaded through my hair, and gripped me at the nape as he yanked me backward. My neck strained, the pulse thumping with wild abandon as he growled at me. A sneer of disgust was on his lickable lips while he towered above me, hunkered down to get his nose locked against mine, while his lip curled back.

His breathing was heavy. Untamed. I loved that I drove him wild.

“Watch what you say to me, love. These pretty delusions may just get you killed. I won’t tell you again. Go. Back. To. Bed.”

A bitter taste seeped onto my tongue. My gaze once again found the yawning entrance to the dungeon basement just as the thunder roared like a lion and lightning flashed. Both swallowed whole the sound of the helpless man being tortured to death below our very feet.

Oh how badly I longed to see such a thing.

“Bones. Yo, where you at, man? This pig is ready to be roasted,” Dalton, my eldest brother shouted up the stairs. I imagined him to be standing at the bottom as he looked for him. Still, we stood bathed in the shadows, tucked into the corner of the hallway where Bones quickly covered my mouth to keep me silent until Dalton sighed and retreated.

“Pig?” I asked with wild eyes. “You have a fed down there?” Horror filled me as I thought about all the ways this could backfire. As I thought about all of the ways those I loved the most could be ripped away from me by the deadly and unforgiving hand of a cop.

“Time’s up, darling,” he growled as he bent low at the knee and put pressure on the hold he had placed right across

my mouth which stalled any protest. He hiked my ass right over his shoulder and began stalking down the hall.

I yelped and his bloody palm consumed the sound of shock that exploded from my throat. As he charged back to my room, I pounded closed fists brutally against his back. Once we were inside, he spun and slammed the door shut before carrying on toward the bed where he threw me down carelessly. Before I had the chance to throat punch him, he was there. On top of me, pinning my slender frame beneath him at the same time as his unyielding hand collared me by the throat.

Oh how pretty tatted hands were. They were made to collar a woman's throat so perfectly.

I almost choked on the air taken from me so quickly. But my sick mind craved it.

Wanted more of it as I arched into him.

"Stop trying to piss me off, darling. And stop with your heartless ways. You know what he'd do if he caught you on those steps listening. You're not ready for his kind of training. The training needed to be within this family with a seat at the table, silly girl. You never will be. It would break you, going through what he thinks would make you. Prepare you. All it would do is destroy you." There was such a coldness to him, such an arrogant certainty that I was a delicate wallflower who couldn't handle the life.

The life I was born into.

Anger replaced the taboo lust I was feeling and I narrowed my eyes. I bit down on my lower lip as I brought my knee between us, embedded where it hurt him the most and he grunted, face blue as he wheezed for a painless breath, but none came. I shoved at his shoulders, trying to roll him away from me but he held fast, hand tightened until I began to see the most welcomed stars in my darkness.

My right hand swung up as it caught him on the inner wrist, weakening his hold. The move forced his hand to drop from my throat while I shoved and kicked him the fuck away from me.

“I’m not as delicate as you like to think and believe me when I say... You have no fucking idea what I can handle, Reggie Ramero. What I’m capable of. Now get the fuck out of my room.” Standing from the bed, I folded my arms across my chest and scowled at him. Imploring him to get the picture and get the fuck away from me. The embarrassment bled hot through my blood and stained my cheeks scarlet. His face contorted when I used his full name. The only person around here who would ever do such a thing.

Good thing, really.

It only sounded like a place of sinful paradise when it rolled off my tongue.

I knew what I wanted.

I knew he wanted it too. But at every turn, he treated me like a child and I decided tonight would be the last time he ever thought of me that way.

Clearing his throat with a vicious growl, he straightened while he turned to face me. “You will always be his daughter and he will always be my best friend. Stop with these games, little girl. You’ll only get hurt. I don’t want you. I never will.”

Those words did something to me. Something I can’t explain nor will ever, ever fucking attempt to. Because from that very moment, I realized he might be right.

That maybe all of my efforts to get his attention were void because he truly, wholeheartedly did not want me. That I was a fanatic with an eye for her father’s best friend. That every soulful look and veiled caress as he passed was nothing but a dream. A sick and depraved dream that kept me warm at night.

I had read the signals. How foolish of me to believe that once I turned eighteen, he’d finally make me his.

The man who could very well be my father himself if we wanted to throw around the age game.

But I didn’t care.

I knew what I felt.

“Keep telling yourself that, because one of these days, Ramero... I’m going to be long gone. I know what I feel. I know how I feel when I’m around you. But it’s you who continues to lie. And here I was thinking real men do no such thing.” He flew across the room, and a hand fisted in my long locks as he backed me into a wall. My head arched, meeting his defiant eyes with my own, and dared him to counter that. “This is the last time you break me,” I declared. My voice filled with venom. My only tool of defense.

“Break you? Little girl, I haven’t even begun to play with you.” He chuckled darkly. Gray eyes ablaze in something malevolent. You think you want this? Want me?” he breathed. Harsh and warm breath drifted down onto me like a warm breeze. It sent tendrils of my dirty blonde hair over my shoulder, to fall down my back. He leaned in with thick lips that whispered against mine as he smeared the dead man’s blood along the seam of them. “I’d destroy this pretty heart of yours. This world would swallow you whole and spit you out in pieces. You don’t even know what it is to be a woman, so why, do you think I’d ever want to become your man?” The question struck me. But I remained unmoving. Unblinking as I shut down my emotions and deadpanned his dead man walking’s ass right back.

He wouldn’t break me.

I wouldn’t allow it.

I may not have had the proper training to join the ranks with the Wyelli’s, but something broke inside me the day I was born. It opened a portal for a depraved kind of darkness to consume me. To filter through me.

They were too caught up in their own shit to even notice just how wrong I was.

Just how heartless when that darkness took hold. They didn’t even see it when it crept in and took over. They never saw it at all. So it often left me wondering... Do they even see me?

They overlooked how smart and cunning I was.

How wicked and violent.

How great I would be used as a weapon and not as a delicate wallflower.

Yeah, those around me had no idea just who I was or what I could do.

“You’re right, Ramero. I was playing silly games. It will never happen again.” I gave him what I thought he wanted but instead, something dark and frenzied skated through his gaze. They darkened like burning gold as he shook his head and barked out a laugh filled with disbelief. “I mean want you? Want what? To kiss cold lips that make me feel nothing?” he roared as he closed the small distance between us and my back hit the wall with a thud.

My scalp burned as he pulled even harder, brutal lips crashed down on mine as he kissed me.

Punished me.

Tormented me.

Set my lips aflame within a wildfire that left its mark.

He made me pay for my sinful cravings with that kiss.

I moaned, purring and panting under his control and I hated myself for being so weak. His thick thigh pressed between mine, his knee firm against my aching core as I rode him without shame. My clit was seeking the attention it had burned for all these years.

The second I touched him and pulled at the strands of his black and curled hair, clawed my nails across his shoulders, and ripped my way through his shirt, he dropped me like a dead weight and pulled away.

He left me weak and I almost fell to the ground but caught myself on the wall as my body churned with need. He looked back at me—disheveled, frantic, and untamed. A rough hand wiped across his stubbled jaw and he turned his back on me, stomping toward the door before he turned around once again and uttered, “Absolutely nothing.” He stalled, his stare intense as he added, “Don’t be so quick to join the life that will

destroy you, princess. You have the chance to fight to be freed from the weight of the crown.” Then he almost took my door off its hinges as he slammed it and walked away from me.

It cemented our fates.

It hardened my resolve.

I blinked unfeeling eyes as wasteful tears fell. Tears I no longer felt.

Because I no longer felt anything. Darkness, my old friend, had once again come to say hello.

The only thing I felt right now was absolute clarity.

It was time to join the family.

Because it was the crown I wanted most.

Chapter One

Lara

Wicked Way - Halestorm

I danced in the basement of the gritty club on the wrong side of town. The strobe lights bathed me in an ethereal glow as I moved back and forth, lost to the music as I blocked out everything around me.

Like a fire, I felt it inside of me as it spread throughout my core and settled in my bones.

I became something else...

Somebody else, under the intensity of the sweat that glistened along my flesh and the music that I felt deep into my soul.

I was a monster tonight.

A sensual beast who could use her allure to feel like something desired instead of someone feared. Because I was a monster. A woman that scorched. I pulled the joint to my lips and inhaled deeply. As I held the smoke in my lungs until my chest went so cold it burned, then I blew it out in small rings that worked my jaw.

I was a woman that lingered within the shadows as everyone moved around me like I was something so easily overlooked and not the woman that would see this town fall and those corrupted bastards that run it, right alongside it.

But I shouldn't be thinking about business right now.

Right now... I was here to have fun.

I was here to let loose and be free, if only for one night.

I could let the monster out.

I wound my hips as I dropped low to the ground and spiraled my way back up. As I stuck out my ass, I twirled in the heat of the dance floor. I moved like a queen held hostage by the music, the lyrics being my shackles.

“What’s a pretty thing like you doing on the wrong side of town, sweetness?” a sick and skin-crawling voice whispered in my ear as a flat chest pressed against my back.

I stopped dancing as I peered over my shoulder at him, eyes narrowed before a flirtatious smile spread across my thick, rosy lips.

“How do you know I don’t belong here?” I asked sweetly, turning into his hold as I threw my arms around his neck and allowed him to pull me into him. I batted my heavily make-up-covered eyes at him and he smirked devilishly.

“It’s the hair, babes. Much too clean from a chick up my way.” He leered, a scum-filled gleam in his depraved shit-brown eyes.

“Is that so? I guess I should remember that next time. What a shame it would be if someone from the hood mistakenly ransomed my ass to the wrong people all because I stole a bottle of shampoo. Crazy shit like that happens all the

time, doesn't it?" I teased. As I pushed myself further into him, his hand snaked around my nape and tangled within my golden strands while the other fell to my ass, and squeezed tightly. "After all, I'm just a nobody trying to have a good time without any drama, y'know? Can you do it? Show me a good time?"

His look turned vicious as he stepped forward, it forced me back and the hold in my hair tightened to the point of pain. I gasped before I hissed at the sudden change.

I stared back at him in shock, horror filled my wide eyes, as my breathing slowed right down. I appeared apprehensive as the world around me started spinning.

Afraid.

Docile.

Under his brutal hold, I refused to blink. To close my eyes under the attack, I knew I would come. I refused to close my eyes even when the memory of my past overcame me.

"There it is, again. That damn look. How are you to fool your enemies if you never look afraid, my daughter?" My father's voice drifted to me from the depths of the darkness. I hung there, arms bound as my toes swayed back and forth along the ground. The chains muted as I made no move to fight, no move to set myself free from the torture. From the pain.

I'd need it later.

"The greatest tool you have, Lara, is the darkness. I know how you think, and how you have the ability to shut it all down. To feel nothing, but the thing you need to learn most though, is how to feel, everything. Fake it. Convince the world that you hurt. Show them your tears. How else are you to convince your enemy who wishes to do you harm, how compliant you are? How afraid you are. That is what you want... them to think they have you right where they want you. Right up to the very second you slit their throat and the bastards will never even see it coming. Being a psychopath won't save you, Daughter. Playing the victim will." He steps

into the dim light, the yellow tinge adding a slight glow to his ominous and shadowed face. "Do you taste that, my wicked daughter? The sweetness of winning?"

"Enough games, bitch. I know exactly who you are and boy am I grateful to get to gut the Wyelli whore. Tell me," he sneered as he brought his face right up close to mine. He gripped my jaw, turning my head until I was forced to look up into the burning strobes that flashed bright around us. Moisture burned in my emerald gaze. "Will your daddy cry for you when he receives his princess back in pieces?... The way he cried for your mother?"

"W-what are you talking about? I don't know what you're talking about! Let me go, you're hurting me!" I struggled in his hold, trying to yank my arm from his brutal clasp but he only dug his nails deeper into my flesh as he drew blood. The cherry essence pooled around his digits, as it branded me with his fingerprints. I sneered silently as I turned up my nose at the thought of having him on me for longer than necessary. The first tears fell as I cowered. A plea for my life fell from my lips.

"Luca is going to be pleased we lucked out and your stupid ass walked right into his bar. How could you seriously not think we would know who you are? Who you belong to?" He licked his lips, as he leaned forward and trailed that fat tongue along the curve of my jaw which made me gag.

"Please! Please, let me go, I didn't do anything to you!" I almost sobbed, I almost broke down, and I almost came undone in his arms.

Almost.

He began to drag me across the dance floor and toward the exit. "Oh but how I'm going to do... so many glorious things to you. I have to say though, princess... From the stories we have heard about the wraith, we thought you'd put up more of a fight."

My heart thrashed. It pumped wildly and with such force, I thought it'd burst from my chest.

Is this happening right now?

Am I seriously being kidnapped...

Oh yes. Yes, I am.

The darkness swirled around me and a smile played on my lips hidden within the shadows.

Oh, this should be fun.

I loved when a mad thought played out like an epic plan unfolding...

I'm dragged to an exit, out into an alley and then the world goes dark.

* * *

Blood poured from my mouth, it coated my chest and slid down my arms to fall from my wrists to the ground beneath me. I yanked on my restraints, testing their strength as they cut in deeper. I clenched my pussy, and rubbed together my thighs for friction. The strange sensation blossomed, burning under the surface of my heated skin.

"This can go so much easier than this, princess. Oh, how it kills me to see such a pretty thing bleed. Just give us what we want and it can all stop. I can take away the pain," the vile man promised as he stood above me. A hand caressed my cheek as he implored me to give him the answers he sought. He spoke with a voice that was a gateway to Stockholm syndrome. You know the one... where they speak to you like they're your savior while they drive that rusted blade into your skin, over and over again. Then, when it's all said and done, warp your mind into believing you needed them.

Until you're begging for the pain.

Until you're begging for the blood.

But I'm a different kind of bitch and this princess doesn't cry.

She fucking maims.

I've given them my best show, now it's time to really fuck with their minds.

“Who is interfering with the gun shipment? Luca or is one of his misfits working out of hand and taking the guns for themselves? The Wyelli’s won’t let that stand. Tell me who the traitor is, when and where the shipment is coming in and I might just let you walk out of here,” I started. It was all a lie. Neither of these men would ever feel the pleasure of a tight pussy or ass if they are so inclined or even the heat of a warm sun again.

Their days were numbered. Destined to end in the cold depths of a cellar they’ll never emerge from alive. Fitting given that I wondered how many lives they had ended down here.

I’ll make sure they’ll never walk out of here again.

“Did daddy break his little girl? Honey, you’re tied to a chair, bloody and bruised, and you think you’re in the position to ask us questions?” The front man chuckled. He looked back at the other goon, amusement in his eyes but the goon just stared back with a look of trepidation and uncertainty. His gaze focused on mine, unable to blink or look away as if he was staring down the open mouth of a wild animal ready to devour.

Shit-for-brains as I liked to call the first one, strutted back over to the metal tray that held all of his little toys. I watched as he picked up something that looked like a grater. As he came back over to me, he overturned my hand to have my palm up while he put pressure on the top of my fingers and bent my hand in a backward arch.

“I warned ya, darling. It’s only going to get worse.” He scrapped that metal contraption across my palm. It ripped away a layer of flesh and forced me to grit my teeth as a fire burned in my eyes.

The darkness lifted me.

In my mind, I’m lying on the floor. Arms spread like a snow angel. Only I’m in the bowels of hell, fluttering like a dark angel within the flames that licked back against me with a sardonic smile on my face to help keep the pain at a lulling pleasure instead of a horrifying pain.

The trick... is giving yourself to it. Never fighting it. Always accepting it.

I lost myself for a moment, retreated back to that calm place that settled all of my demons and forged me into a wicked weapon trained on its target.

The sting toyed with my nerves, but I forced it away. Turning my tightly clenched and pissed-the-fuck-off face back to the shit-for-brains, I growled, "Name. I'm growing tired of watching you trying to break me. You're a buffoon. Your pal seems to have more cells in his head which is why he is yet to step to this side of the room."

Anger flashed raw and vivid across his brooding face. Those hideous and skin-crawling eyes darkened while he picked up the blade beside him and dragged it down my inner arm. He opened the flesh, my blood seeped like a river and my soul shook. There was an impulse that brewed within me. Something untamable with the need to savage, but I kept it at arm's length. I gave myself to the sensations. I can't explain to you how it feeds the darkness or why I crave it. I can't explain to you that instead of crying out in pain, I'm rubbing my thighs together in arousal as I bleed.

And you shouldn't ask me to.

My mind is no place for the innocent and the weak.

Hell, it would even break most monsters.

I couldn't allow myself to eclipse this space with my demons.

Not yet.

I needed to do this.

I was here for a reason. I allowed myself to be taken for a reason. To *bleed* for a reason.

I needed an answer. Answers for everything.

For the family.

It was taking them too long to follow the leads fed to them. The very same leads I'm determined came from a traitor

within our ranks.

My father suspects it. So does Reggie.

I refused to return home empty handed.

It's a dreadful feeling walking the halls of your home where devious lies dwell.

It's wrong. Never feeling safe. Never knowing if the moment you lay your head down at night and close your eyes if it will be the time when a clip is emptied into your skull in the name of revenge.

Fearing backlash from your enemies is one thing. Stalkers in the night.

Sharing a house with a traitor is another altogether.

Unnatural when we work on the bonds of loyalty. Without it, we have nothing. It's taken years for me to slowly find my footing within the ranks.

As the boss's daughter.

They talk a big game.

Just as they stand before me and tell me I'm ready, they flick the switch to the electrical cables and zap my ass again. All in the name of training us to survive this cut-throat world.

Reggie always told me I wouldn't withstand my father's training.

The brutality of it.

Some days, I wonder if I had been born normal, if he'd be right.

But I wasn't born normal.

I was born different.

Wicked.

I allowed them to hurt me, to abuse me because I needed my fix. Because I needed to feel that high. It might not make sense and it might be seen as something horrid, but the adrenaline, the rush I get from being beaten down, only to rise.

It was a better feeling than any drug could execute. A high forever lasting.

A Harley Quinn laugh burst from my chest, maniacal and unsettled chuckles as I taunted him, “Best you got shit-dick?”

One thing my father’s ruthlessness taught me...

Not only how to withstand the pain.

But how to use it as fuel.

The fact that I’ve always craved it, always helped. I needed it in a way I could never explain.

Large nostrils flared in his rage, but he clenched down on his teeth in restraint. “Tell us what we want to know, princess, and we’ll let you live. Give us the keys to the kingdom and I might even make you mine,” he gritted with an undertone of a roar he tried to swallow, that bled through as he tried to keep himself in check. As he tried to lure me with false promises of being his.

I’d rather give myself to a pound of hellhounds than allow him to touch me.

I barked out a vicious laugh, “Let me walk? Fuck’s sake, who trained you?” I asked, done with the charade. I turned the ring on my finger until the diamond stuck outward once again from being hidden within my palm. It’s a brutal piece. Pretty to look at, easy to miss when I’ve drawn it across your throat and gained first blood too. It’s too awe-striking apparently.

In this case. It’d be retaliation and somehow... second blood is much sweeter.

I used the diamond to cut through the rope, yanked my arms at the wrists, and broke the bindings. Then, I did exactly that. I slashed out with my hand, yielding my ring like a blade as I cut open his throat. His gaze widened, shock and horror vivid as he choked on the bloodied breath dispelled from his pulsating, wide-gaped wound.

“I’ll be sure to let them know it was a waste of fucking time,” I hissed, face distorted in derision as I turned on the other man in the room. The one who had remained calm and

collected throughout my torture with a gaze that gleamed suspicion. Well, calm and collected till now. He stumbled back as he knocked over the unit behind him in his haste.

“Question... Will you bleed as pretty for me before you die?” I canted my head, and stared at him like a feline in the wild.

“Eh, I-I!”

“You- Eh-I-I what? Tell me what I want to know, and I won’t play with my food before I devour it,” I taunted him. Mocking him. My threat one hundred percent a fucking promise.

“Yo-you’re a girl! You’re a girl! How? How can you withstand all of this? All of this torture? All of this pain! How are you still standing?” he roared in panic as he backed up until he splattered himself against a wall.

“I’m a Wyelli, motherfucker, now sing for me like a canary and I promise to make what comes next quick...”

Chapter Two

Reggie

Strange Girl - Halestorm

“They have fucked us in the ass for the last time,” Dom sneered as he scanned the heads that sat around the table. Dominic Wyelli was never a man to be tested.

How he handled his enemies—when he deemed it worthy of getting his hands dirty at all—was a form of art.

There was a reason we had been best friends for the past forty-five years.

Five of those years were spent as little ankle biters before we met at the age of five and decided we’d take those who crossed us out at the knees instead.

From that day on, we were heading in only one direction. The direction his father before him had laid out perfectly.

Dom was born into the crime family, I was bled in. Yet he always told me in many ways that were so much more impactful.

So much more meaningful having bled for your loyalty. For your family.

So for the past five months, all I had done is quietly seethe in the shadows at the fact that one of these cunts had betrayed us.

I sat on his right, hands balled into fists as I also watched the men around us, keenly.

Not that any would notice my scrutiny.

After all, I was the one that trained them.

My eyes would remain fixated on a wall, yet see absolutely everything.

These men also bonded to this family in blood. Some were born in. Cousins of cousins who had fought tooth and nail to be chosen to fill one of the seats.

To be trusted to run a specific part of our empire.

Yet I was one hundred percent sure one of them was betraying us.

Feeding information to our enemies and stealing right from under our fucking noses.

For the past five months, somebody had been interfering with our gun shipments. Detouring the ship en route, stealing half the inventory, then rerouting it back to our docking port. Given the fact we didn't know how they were hacking the boat's GPS or where the fuck they were rerouting it to, we hadn't been able to stop them.

It was a taunt to our strength.

Sending back half the shipment was a big fuck you, showing that these cunts didn't fear us.

That was a big fucking mistake.

I knew it wouldn't be one of the boys.

Dom's boys and my Hellcat's brothers.

Dalton, Dallas, and Dylan were as loyal as they get. I loved them like my own and knew them like the back of my hand.

Everyone else around this table though, I refused to put my trust in.

I glared at the empty seat, the one beside Dalton and right beside Dom.

The one reserved for my Hellcat when he thought she was ready.

Which I hoped was never.

I remembered that night, the night from four years ago like it was yesterday. I remembered the way she looked at me. The way the light left her eyes and that darkness she held— the one she thought nobody but her knew about— crept back in.

I hated myself for doing that to her.

For lying to her.

But I wanted to protect her more than the violence that I craved. I would have given myself to the void itself for my sins if it meant she remained unharmed and untainted from this world.

From the brutal hand of her father.

Dom loved his kids. But he held no mercy for them. Not when his biggest fear was watching one of them die.

Losing one of them.

He never wanted this life.

But there was no way out.

Only up. And the further up you went, the higher up you dragged your heirs.

He tortured them, in order to protect them.

As brutal as a marine and as savvy as a navy SEAL, he made sure his kids would be unbreakable, undefeated, and always with the ability to outsmart the outsmarted.

I never wanted that for her.

But by pushing her away, I threw her over the cliff's edge and straight into Hell.

“We have new intel. We finally got informed of when and where the next shipment is coming in,” he continued. It was a bluff. We didn't have a clue as to where the new shipment had been rerouted to, or who was behind it, but we knew if we lied the rats would sweat.

Monroe, Dom's eldest cousin shifted in his seat, but it wasn't uncertainty that flared in his brown eyes. It was excitement at making our enemies pay.

Smithy, however... when he gulped, his Adams apple shook like an earthquake had racked through his body, ready to tear it free from his throat.

“So, here's what we're going to do,” Dom added, a fist slammed against the table as he leaned forward, favoring his right side and he stared the rest of us down. Coiled fingers pointed at the room as he held his cigarette between them. The smoke wafted through the air and I inhaled it deeply as the need to light one myself hit me hard. But I was in stealth mode, a cig can wait until after I pulled some bones. The thought got my cock hard and my mind smiled as my face remained cold and brutal.

Dom didn't get a chance to inform the rest of us of his scheme. The door burst open and a shot was fired. Chairs shrieked across the vintage hardwood floor as the table cleared, guns drawn and pointed at the intruder who stood there, completely and utterly unphased as she glared down at the bullet hole that hit dead center between Smithy's eyes and sent him sprawled backward over his seat. Gunpowder and the smell of metallic blood mingled within the air, a scent that had my mouth wet and my heart untamed within an erratic rhythm.

Lara stood there, as tall as a regal queen and as fearless as a Viking warrior as the shadows encroached her. My eyes widened when I saw the blood which dripped from her wrists, down onto the ground beneath her. A vicious growl burned for

freedom within the back of my throat as my body buzzed with the need to fly across the room and pull her into my arms.

To burn out the eyes of anyone who watched her vulnerable as she bled. I knew she'd hate that. That it would send her into some kind of defense mode where she felt like she had to go that extra mile just to show she wasn't affected. It usually ended up with her hurt even more. Crazy with the need to prove she was unbreakable.

“Put down your fucking guns!” I bellowed, my order clear yet everyone remained unconvinced. As if Lara was some kind of threat. I pulled my gun and shoved it down the throat of the man sitting next to me. Donaho. I don't give a fuck if the man was fifty-five and Dom's cousin. I'd pull the trigger right here and right the fuck now. “Lower your fucking guns and get them off Lara's head, or I will kill you,” I sneered, deadly calm.

Dom and the boys heeded my warning and when Dom noticed nobody else followed the order, he shouted, “Now! Get your fucking guns off my daughter before I break your goddamn wrists!” As one, the guns fell and Lara sauntered further into the room and right over to the table while she pointed at Smithy. “There's your rat.” Then something heavy thumped against the tabletop. “That's the tongue of his informant.” A piece of paper followed, as did the knife she stabbed through the white page, pinning it to the table. “And here's the location of the next shipment. I'm ready for my seat now.”

Chapter Three

Reggie

Haunted - Diamante

“**W**hat the fuck, Lara?” I barked as I thundered my way toward her and yanked her arm higher into the air, extended so I could better see the damage. “Who the fuck did this to you? I will slit their fucking throats and pull out their eye sockets just to crunch the bones within their ear so the sound fucking echoes. All while they scream blindly in terror!” I encroached upon her space, while I seethed. I grew in height and had to fight every instinct within me to not back her up into a wall and protect her from everyone that stood around her until she was healed. Like some kind of primal animal in the wild that becomes vicious when their mate was hurt.

It was fucking crazy.

I was going crazy.

“Relax, I took care of it and I brought you a gift.” She reached into the inside of her leather, thigh-high boot and pulled out broken ribs that she threw onto the table next like they were nothing. Less than fucking nothing, as she turned her focus back to her father utterly indifferent and blanking me.

Hellcat was fucking certifiable.

She drove me insane for all of these years. As a fifteen-year-old with a delusion, all until she turned into a seventeen-year-old with a darkness that spoke to my own. When she turned eighteen, I finally noticed her as more than the daughter of my best friend. She became a person then, the first time that I saw her as a woman. A woman who held my heart.

I saw her so differently.

How quickly a year can change the world.

It was wrong, sick, and depraved and I shut it down every chance I got.

Even when she turned eighteen and I knew... I knew I had to taste her.

It was the hardest thing I ever did walking away. Lying to her. Hurting her.

But we were all wrong.

It was all fucking wrong.

Twisted in a toxicity that would dissolve her delicate touch had I ever allowed it to reach her. I thought I was being the bigger man. The man who was protecting her. Doing right by her but all I did was send her begging for the hand of the devil. She gave her soul to her father to dismantle and rebuild. She gave herself to his lessons and his torment, just so she could rise as somebody even I couldn't touch.

No matter how hard I tried. No matter how many regrets I held.

My hellcat never once looked at me the same after that night and it gutted me to my core. Now I'm left livid, boiled alive under my wrath, forged from the sight before me. But I

had to be careful. I had kept myself in check all these years, I couldn't come undone now.

“Lara, my love. Who did this? Who did this to you and how did you get his information?” Dom asked as her brothers kicked over chairs in their stride to get to her side.

“I'll fucking gut them.”

“Hang them.”

“Fucking destroy them.”

They all sneered, but they'd have to get in fucking line. Nothing would save them from me.

“They are already dead, brothers. Do you really think I'd leave them alive?” she queried with a smirk, reassuring them of her wellbeing. “And I did what Daddy taught us, of course. Flipped the tables and went straight to the source. The best tactic is always the one that knocks them off their feet, right? The tactic that gets inside their head?”

“And how did you do that?” Dom asked with narrowed eyes as he swiped a crimson strand of hair from her cheek, and tucked it behind her ear. He pulled out a chair but she refused to sit, shrugging off his attempts to help her.

I gripped her by the waist and pulled her into me before spinning her and pushing her into the seat. I lowered with her so that she didn't hurt when I forced her to sit. She stared back at me with such a closed-off look, a prolonged moment of disconnect, that my heart constricted.

“By allowing them to kidnap me,” she began before looking away as she pushed away my hands. “Luring them into a sense of power while I interrogated them from the electric chair.” She winked. Her smile was wicked, and her father looked livid at her disregard for her safety. “Left them thinking I was weak and cute, right before I got inside the mind of the smarter one who knew something was up. I bled for them. Then I made them both bleed for me. Right until I got exactly what I wanted and slit their throats.” As she pushed to her feet once again, I growled lowly at her defiance as I clenched my fists at my side to keep from reaching for her

again. “You’d be proud of me, Pa. I did exactly what you taught me. I let them believe that I was afraid.”

“And were you?” he asked slowly. “Afraid?”

She just stared back at him with an impassive look etched onto her fierce features.

“You could have been killed. That was reckless and impulsive. I fear that I have taught you nothing! What if they didn’t torture you? What if they went straight for the goddamn kill?” he shouted as he tried to hold himself back from blowing a fuse and making this situation worse for her. But that anger, that fear he had kept hidden inside about losing one of his children was raw and I could see it threatening the surface of his calm.

“Then we would have been having a funeral,” she deadpanned, staring him down. “I needed to do this and I couldn’t tell anyone about it because we were running out of time. I wasn’t going to risk this family and I sure as fuck was not going to break bread with a traitor. What’s done is done, and now we have five days to prepare for war. So again, I ask. Is the chair ready for me now?”

Dom shook his head, grief-stricken. He clenched his eyes tightly and turned his back to the rest of the room. “Go and get cleaned up. Have the nurse tend to you, we will discuss this later,” he demanded and with a delicate shrug on her deceptively fierce shoulders, she turned on her heel and walked out.

My teeth ground together, I could feel them crack as I bit down with more force than I was sure they could withstand. “Tell me you’re not going to give her a goddamn seat. She is a brat, Dom. A liability. Heading into the lion’s den is not how we do things around here. She will end up getting us all killed!”

“Relax, Bones. My sister can handle anything. She is a psycho after all,” Dallas inserted with a heavy thump on my back and a smug fucking smirk on his lips. I shook him off, taking a step closer to Dom.

He turned to me, eyes heavy with worry before they flickered back to the body. “Boys, clean this up. Not a word about what happened here today. The rest of you, get back to work and inform me of any changes. Same rules apply. Keep your mouth shut about the traitor. Reg, with me in my office,” he ordered and everyone followed suit.

I stalked down the hallway and into his home office. The darkness of it was a welcome sight as the shadows were thicker in this room. I always loved the shadows. It was an easier place to be yourself and to play with the monsters inside your head.

“She deserves the seat, Reg. She has done everything I have asked of her. Despite her reckless behavior.” He sighed as he pinched the bridge of his nose before taking a seat as he opened the bottom drawer to his desk and pulled out a crystal glass and a decanter of fire-starting whisky. He pulled out another glass before he poured it and offered it to me.

“She isn’t ready. You know what it means to bring her in officially,” I snap, it was a hard fate as I tried to keep my temper in check when all I wanted to do was slaughter and maim. I brought the glass to my lips and took a heavy sip.

“Why are you so against this, Reg? Is there something going on I need to know about? Has she done something?”

I gritted my teeth as I flexed my jaw in frustration. “Question is, why aren’t you? There was a time you would have killed if she stepped foot anywhere near this mess. After the promise you made...” I started and stopped immediately as he threw the glass and it shattered against the wall by my head. The shards fell to the ground and the sound was as loud as hearing a pin drop.

“Be careful, Reggie. Do not speak to me about my promises,” he growled and I took a step back knowing that this was a wound I shouldn’t poke. I knew the history. I knew what had happened. This one was better left alone.

When I nodded my head, he glared at me pointedly expecting my answer. “No. She hasn’t done anything. But she is the youngest, Dom. She has more of her life to live before

we make her a target for our enemies. You know how I love those kids.”

He waved a dismissive hand in the air as he scoffed, “Please. She is already a target. You know they call her the wraith. She is more feared than any of us. She has surpassed her lessons and learned all I could have taught her. She is ready to take her place beside her brothers. Beside her father. Even if we both deplore the thought. I can’t hold her back any longer. You never protested like this when we brought the boys in,” he noted, thick brow raised.

I ignored the prompt. “You call this holding her back? You know you were more brutal on her than you were on any of the boys. This is a mistake. I’m telling you now, she is not ready,” I stated, which caused his head to snap up as his eyes bored into mine with a brewed, unchecked fury at my outburst.

“Then make her ready. Because by the next meeting and when we head out for war, she will be standing right beside me. It’s done, Reg. I have made my decision. Now sit down and have another drink.”

Chapter Four

Lara

Play with Fire - Sam Tinnesz

I stood under the cool spray of water as I washed away all of the blood from my assault. The sting made me feel alive like the numbness would soon retreat and leave me once again with some kind of feeling, even if it was experienced differently to other people.

My father had called me a psychopath once. He knew who and what I was from the start. He knew that I may have been broken, but I was something that could become weaponized too.

I didn't resent him for the way he trained me. I envy him for it. Psychopath or not, I didn't have it in me to ever hurt my family. It was one lesson I was yet to learn.

Crimson rivers swirled around my ankles as it stained the water red that ran down the drain.

I scrubbed my skin raw, it opened the wounds, but I needed that man's touch erased from my flesh. When I was done, bleeding and needing to redress the wounds again, I stepped from the shower and reached for the towel.

I stopped, arm outstretched with the softest towel in my grasp when a dark figure filled the doorway to my bathroom. Reggie stood there, a dark and hungry look on his hard and cold-etched face. He looked demented, crazed even and there was something about those gray eyes that made me want to shiver in fear, laced with a hell of a lot of ecstasy.

As his gaze took in every inch of my naked skin, I remained frozen for a moment.

His eyes roamed slowly, almost like he was committing me to memory and when he licked his lips, they became wet under the languid taste as, despite my body reacting to the sight of him, the rest of me remained cold and detached.

He had his chance and he broke me.

I pulled the towel from where it hung and covered my body from his searing-hot sight, giving him my back. "What are you doing in here?" I questioned indifferently.

He didn't answer. All I could hear in the space surrounding us was his heavy breathing and then he was there, pressed against my back, hands on my hips as he pulled me into him and stilled. The air around us changed, something intimate and forbidden was whispered with every labored breath. I wanted to live in that moment, to imprint his touch onto my soul.

But I was no longer the naive girl he rejected.

I had forged myself into a steel blade from the ruins of my broken soul.

It may not be pretty, shattered, and held together with blood and violence, but I was still standing.

On my own.

And I would continue to do so.

“Reggie, leave,” I commanded in an unwavering voice.

I stepped forward, but his hands held fast. “You’re killing me, Hellcat,” he whispered, the heat of his breath trailed across the skin at the nape of my neck.

“Yet you’re still breathing,” I replied, flatly if not unintentionally sultry, as I tried to keep everything even and cold toward him. I held all my cards close to my chest.

“Seeing you like this, bloody and sore. It makes me want to slaughter everything and everyone in your name. It makes me murderous, vicious girl. Do you understand that?”

His chin fell to my shoulder, resting in the crook of my neck.

I should walk away, shake him off and kick him out. But a deep rooted part of me needed to know what he would do in this quiet, steam-filled moment.

“You have so many lessons you must learn,” he rasped, hand wrapped around my throat as he tightened his grip while he pulled me into him more forcefully. One hand wrapped around my waist, palm spread flat across my stomach as I let out a sensual gasp at the sudden change. “So many things I must teach you.” He turned his head, thick lips pressed against my chilling skin as he kissed me tenderly. The rough scratch of his stubble scraped against me and I had to bite back a moan at the sensations this man could draw from my body.

I arched into him, straining my neck a little more to give him clear access as he feathered chafing kisses along the side of my throat before he bit down into my shoulder.

I moaned then, helpless not to rub my thighs together as my core grew wet and began to ache for more of his attention, more of his touch.

Then I remembered all of those hateful words he showered me with four years ago.

Then I remember what a hateful bitch I was who adored playing with fire, if only so I could feel the scorching heat against my flesh.

His teeth were still sunk into my throat, and my pussy was still heavily in need of some attention as I stepped forward more forcefully and broke the contact. I turned to stare at his wide and shock-filled eyes and I smirked wickedly at him as I tilted my head, taking in his aroused and disheveled appearance. The man who couldn't be broken, the man who couldn't be forced to show his emotions and yet here he stood, lost to his desires and coming undone just at the sight of me battered and bruised.

If only I knew it would be that easy.

I licked my split lip, eyes heavy with lust as I traced my delicate fingers across the heated spot he bit me. As I sauntered past, he followed my every move, right over to the dresser where I opened the top draw and pulled out some sapphire laced panties. I dropped my towel, knowing the only thing he could see right now was my rounded ass as I shimmed myself into my underwear.

“What makes you think that after all this time you have the right to walk into this room and touch me the way you just did? My father would slaughter you if he knew what you just did to me, what you just saw,” I asked in a deceitful kind of calm as I dragged my legs and flicked my toes across the plush black carpet, over to the steel pole in the corner of my bedroom.

Pole dancing is an amazing full body workout, not to mention I may have used it for a time or two for the family. You know, giving old assholes way past their reign a good show, right before I laced their drink and watched them drop dead in the name of whatever criminal scheme we were pulling next.

Ah, good times.

“Lara,” he sneered, the warning clear in his tone that made me only want to push him that much further.

As I wrapped my hand around the pole, I got a feel for it as I positioned my body and did my first swing. The carousel. I moved with sensual grace as I refused to lose eye contact with a man who was barely holding on to his control. His entire

body stood tense and rigid. I could see the strain in his thick and hard muscles as they bulged under his pristine suit that he managed to pull off better than any man I've ever seen. Reg wasn't a thin man, he was a wall built of muscle and unyielding strength. I'd seen him brutalize men like he was beating a slab of meat with a mallet. The way he tore bones from their body while they were still alive, just so he could crush them right in front of their very eyes, just hits a hell of a lot differently. Imagine that—the horror, the torment. It was a mind fuck if I had ever seen one.

The man was a menace, a psycho of his own creation and craved all the same things that I did.

But he never liked to step out of the lines, to ruffle a few feathers and try something out of his comfort zone. Lucky for him, I never gave him a choice in the matter.

I ran my hands through my hair and pulled at the strands before I traced them along the length of my body, right down to the waistline of my panties.

“Stop!” Reggie growled, hard and fast as that strain grew more prominent. His feet were fused to the spot he stood.

Hands back on the pole, I made a show of transitioning into an Iron X move before I swung myself into a Jade, which is basically an upside down split on the pole. I held the shape as I allowed him to get a good view of my covered apex. Right before he went to lick his lips, I swung back down to the floor. I had never seen him so close to the edge, his pants tented with his arousal. For four years, he had always remained calm and collected. Right now, he looked crazed, vicious, and like he's about to rip my throat out while he fucks me into a state I would never recover from.

“Why? You intruded into my space, *Bones*. You're free to leave if you can't stand the heat. After all, whatever would people think if they saw you leaving here?”

“I came to see if you were okay, you're bleeding all over the damn pole, Lara.” I could see him as he gritted his teeth, and traced the tick in his jaw with my greedy eyes as I smiled sexily back at him. After an intense moment of will, I looked

back at the pole and realized that it was in fact, covered in blood. That just made me smile like a shark as I ran my hands through the silken crimson before I rubbed it into my chest, coating my body in my very own essence.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he snapped, as he took a step closer to me.

I smirked, eyebrow raised as I sucked my fingers clean. The sweet, metallic taste burst to life on the tip of my tongue and I groaned, eyes rolled as I shivered. One hand fell to my covered pussy as I stroked it over the fabric, hissing at the contact.

“It’s only a little bit of blood, Reggie baby. I know you like it too,” I murmured in a sultry tone as I sauntered over toward the bed. The pain of my injuries were there, hidden behind a veil of protection. I’d feel them later when I was alone in the dead of night. I always did. But when it came to *doing* something, *thinking* something, I had the chance for my mind to shut it all down. Then, for a short time, I felt absolutely nothing.

I moved to the bed, lying on my back and opened my legs while I trailed my fingers across my wet core. I slipped them under the waistline of my panties and began to tease myself, circling my opening before I went in hard and inserted two fingers. I arched my back, moaning to the sky as I let the feeling overcome me. I lifted my other blood-covered hand in the air, while I watched it, studied it, and allowed the sight of blood to push me toward my precipice.

At this point, I no longer cared whether or not Reggie was still in the room. I needed it, I was high from it and needed to come so badly, my entire body felt like it was on fire.

I could almost smell the faintest hint of gasoline as I felt the desire to send something up in flames. The fire would only add to my arousal, that would send me on a trip that I would carry with me for some time.

My breath was heavy, and my sensual pants that came out were broken and labored as I fought for every bit of air. I mewled and hummed, completely lost to the raging wildfire in

my core and the brewed hurricane that was ready to wipe my mind. “Fuck,” I hissed. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.” Transfixed on the blood, I imagined every slash of the blade and every strike of a fist from my torture.

I closed my eyes, allowing the memories to filter beyond my eyelids as I held the violence close to me like a vibrator to my cunt.

I never lied about being unhinged.

Sometimes, we needed what we needed. So fuck anyone who kink shames. I would make no apologies for who I was.

Just as I came, wild and vibrant colors of death and gore splinted free behind my eyes. Detonated like a bomb of mutilation and it only added to the heat, to the prolonged orgasm that had me convulsing on the bed, spread wide and utterly ungraced.

Right before I opened my eyes, floating down from my high, something brutal grabbed my jaw, and forced my head to the side and my mouth wide open. Burning hot streams of Reggie’s arousal shot down my throat as he came in my mouth. I swallowed thickly, his cum painting my lips white that I’d be sure to lick up as soon as he let me go. There was a taunt in my emerald eyes. I knew from his perspective that they gleamed with something wicked with a taunt of a challenge.

His cock was massive, thick and hung heavy right above my head. His very *pierced* cock. I lifted my brows, amused at the glistening steel of his Jacob’s Ladder. Once he had finished, he bent low and brought his face a fraction away from mine. He sounded like he’d run a marathon, then swam across the Atlantic and fuck if I didn’t love that sound.

“I’ll always win, Hellcat. No matter what game you play,” he rasped, voice deep and husked like churning gravel. “But since these games of yours are so persistent, game on, pretty girl.” Then his lips crashed down on mine, branding me in a brutal assault that made my lips swell and my flesh burn. A kiss as commanding as the one we shared all those years ago.

I felt as though I could succumb to the inferno. As it feathered throughout my chest, I was uncertain of how much more I could withstand. He pulled away, leaving me breathless and cold as he took that burning fire with him. He stood above me, a cocky smirk of his own staring me down and I hated that he thought he'd won.

But little did he know this was the game that I played.

“You’ve been marked.”

Chapter Five

Lara

Psycho Crazy - Halestorm

Deep in slumber, where the hollow void lies—I was happy there, in the darkness.

All until some asshole who was cruising for a bruising opened my drapes and let the god awful rays of the early morning sun in. Another one with no regard for their life jumped on my bed and rattled my goddamn bones. “Tell dad to prepare the car, we hold a duel funeral tonight!” I shouted from my pit, hidden deep beneath the covers of my satin throw.

“Aw, come on now, Sis. Just following orders.”

“Who ordered your death?” I groaned into the pillow.

Dallas ripped the covers from the bed and left me chilled in my shorts and cami. I cracked open an eye, one that

bespoke of a coming demise and he stepped back, hands high in the air in retreat with a silly smirk on his face.

“Jeez, you’re not a morning person.”

“Well, better get used to it if you want that seat. You’ll need a lesson or two,” Dalton added as he stared me down with a frown.

“Lesson?”

“First one being, stop being so damn fucking reckless. You will end up starting a war or getting yourself killed. Second, well the second is the first, because you know, that is really important, stop being psycho.” I rolled my eyes at him before I reached under my bed for the bong I had stashed there. Bob Marley pops up and I greet him with a frown. “And the third? Well the third is more defense training with Reg, so up you get.”

I choked on the toke I had just inhaled as I stared back at him with a look that was anything but friendly. “What?” I groused.

“Dad’s orders. He thinks you’re ready, Reg doesn’t. So he ordered him to *get* you ready,” Dallas added as I inhaled another deep breath, filling my lungs with something that would give me another feeling that I craved.

One of complete nothingness.

Getting high took me beyond the veil of life. I could sense things around me while at the same time feeling utterly alone in this world. Tight and tingly as gravity was sucked from me and everything floated, leaving me in a world of my own making without anything to burden me. Dallas reached over, took the bong from my hands and took a toke of his own. I fell flat back against the headboard and let out a heavy sigh. I hadn’t seen Reg in two days. Not since the show I put on in my bedroom, the one that the bastard had thought he’d won.

But I just got him right where I wanted him.

Weak and without restraint.

Four years ago, he made me feel like he had all of the control, all of the power.

He was wrong. If he thought now that I was rising, taking my seat at the table, that he could show me some affection and make me walk away, the sexy fox is more deluded than I thought possible.

He hurt me once, and as much as I liked to play, I couldn't ever let him hurt me again.

"Get your shit together, Lara. Get the psycho shit under control," Dalton chastised which got my back right up.

I sat forward, looking into those familiar green eyes, and asked, "How many times has that psycho shit saved your ass in the past?"

"Come on, don't start this shit, this fucking early. Dal, man, lay off."

Dalton was the eldest, the first in line to rule, and a square if I had ever seen one. He needed everything to be precise, and within his control. Anything unknown to him, unsettled him and he just couldn't have that. Dallas, however, is just as much as a no fucks given kinda person, just like his little sister.

I could be mature, I could rule an empire, and I could win in a war.

But I would not compromise actually living just to appease the brother that was born too soon, robbed of all his fun.

I'll always be this. Whatever *this* is.

"She earned her place, just like the rest of us," Dallas added, hand falling heavy on Dalton's shoulder breaking his intense glare at me.

"You're right, she did. It does not mean I have to like it. Other than the fact she's a girl, she is also my baby sister. I don't want this for her." Then he looks back at me. "I love you, Lara. I just wanted a different life for you."

"This was the only life for me, Dal. You know that," I offered as I took his hand in mine and offered him a reassuring

squeeze.

“I’d feel better if you weren’t running off and getting yourself kidnapped,” he mumbled, absently.

“But where is the fun in that?” I chuckled.

“Such a damn psycho,” he and Dallas stated at the same time, with wide and seemingly frightful eyes which just made me laugh harder.

“Want to watch me break an asshole’s nose?” I smirked, waiting for the light in their eyes to shine.

“Fuck yes.”

“Then let’s go.” I got up from the bed and headed to my wardrobe, picking out my workout clothes before getting dressed, then we all made our way out back to the summer house we train in.

As I walked through the door, I could feel the brittle bite of cool air hit me all at once. We kept it freezing in the training house. Once we built up a sweat, we needed the reprieve.

“You’re late,” Reg grunted, his back to us as he placed a weight back on the rack. He was dressed in gray sweats and no shirt. Muscles rippled and bulged, glistening from the sweat trailing in beaded droplets down his spine. Across the top of his shoulders, Reggie had half a skull that blended into his arm piece. It was broken and vivid and sitting within one of the skull’s glassy eyes, was a woman, one who looked awfully familiar but it was difficult to tell with the shading and the face darkened. It was etched as a sugar skull with a sand clock in her hand, roses, and a raven surrounded her head. It was beautiful, and it struck me every time I saw it.

“No fucking around, we have a lot to do. We fight and we stop when I tell you you’ve done enough. I need to know your endurance level.” As he stalked toward me, I shut everything down. The other night was long forgotten. “And, princess, I want to see the psycho today. I need to see just how reckless she truly is.”

That brought a victory smirk of joy to my face. This time, I’m fighting for myself. For everything that was taken away

from this family. All the hatred over the years, all the wars and deceit. The betrayal of Smithy. I carried it all with me. Anything and everything that had ever hurt us. It's kept in a vault, ready to be cracked open in my darkest hour.

To push me, drive me, and see me through to the end.

He wanted crazy? I was about to give him a psycho.

"Oh, shit, things are about to get fucked up. I'm going to ring Dylan," Dallas quipped as he reached for his phone.

"Out. We don't need an audience today. This is serious, boys, and if she does get a seat, it's on the three of you to protect her," Reg growled, snapping his teeth as he turned on them.

They both balked, shocked by the aggressive tone he used. It pissed me off like nothing else. How dare he put that on them. "Like fuck it is. We're a family. We protect each other, but if something happened to me it is *not* on them. It would probably be because of some reckless stunt I pulled. Don't you dare put that on them, Reggie!" I seethed as I took a few more steps onto the mat.

His storm gray eyes flicked toward mine as he looked me up and down in silence for a moment before he grunted with a little lift of his shoulders. His black hair, peppered gray at the temples, glistened. "Exactly. *Your* fault. Remember that."

"Bastard," I gritted as I moved the braid from my shoulder rougher than normal in my temper that was flaring to life. It was bright and it was ugly, and it was ready to play.

"You two good?" Dalton asked without batting an eye, assessing us as if he was trying to read between the lines.

"Of course we are," Reg bit back. "But we got work to do." Then he swung at me.

As I ducked his right hook, I was expecting his counter so I blocked it with my left arm. I followed through by capturing his other right hook and kicked out, hitting him in his core.

He grunted as he stumbled back and I charged with a right hook of my own that landed heavy on his jaw that snapped his

head to the side. He spun into it and got me with a side kick which sent me sprawled onto my back as I hit the mat hard with a resounding thud.

“Impulsive. Uncontrolled. You got too close,” Reg narrated and he stepped closer to me. It gave me the perfect opportunity to circle my legs in the air, using the momentum to bring myself to my knees and I took his legs out from under him in the process. I grabbed his arm and flipped myself over his body as I pulled him with me, getting him into a hold which would prove difficult for him to get out of when he could no longer breathe.

He choked and spluttered. But instead of tapping out, he elbowed me in the ribs, making me cough and wheeze. I held my position and point blank refused to relent. I wrapped my legs around his abdomen and pulled with everything I had inside of me, willing him to cave.

“Sloppy. Arrogant. *You got too close,*” I whispered with harsh and broken breaths into his ear making him growl. The sound sent vibrations throughout my body, which caused me to shiver in delight. “That’s it, big boy, show the reckless girl what you got.”

Reggie shifted as he pulled his feet out from under him and strained to get to his knees. Then he just let it all go and fell backward, crushing me beneath him. I lost my hold as I fought for air, choking on the saliva that had built in my mouth from the shock of having a giant land on top of me with abs made of iron. I groaned as I tried to push his deadweight from my body.

Both my brothers gasped. Dallas stepped forward, a look as cold as ice chiseled into his face. I knew he was about to say something as I stared at him from the ground, but I shook my head subtly and warned him not to.

After all, when we’re trained, it was without the gloves.

Reg rolled away from me as he stood with heaving breaths and glared down at me with something wild burning in his eyes. They were brutal this morning, filled with so many

emotions it turned into the riot of a great thunderstorm that thrashed in their depths.

The creases around his gaze were beautiful, written within the fine lines of history.

A history I had always dreamed of becoming a part of. I wish I knew more about the man that he was before he turned into the man he had now become. There must be countless stories about him from his youth, just on the tip of his tongue waiting to be heard.

“You need to think of all—” he started with his tirade just as I lurched from the ground and threw a punch straight and center to his face. I felt bone crunching under my fists, beading against my knuckles as the hit landed perfectly.

The cold and defined demeanor of his cracked wide open as the blood ran free. He clutched his nose, a sneer on his lips as he stalked me with his fury-filled eyes. “I think you broke my nose, Hellcat. *Fuck!*”

“You’re welcome. Nobody should *think* that they are *that* pretty,” I deadpanned as I ungracefully stood to my feet. “It’s so unbecoming. That’s all I got today. I can’t show you the psycho, Reg,” I uttered truthfully, letting him know this wasn’t all I’ve got. I saw the sadness in his eyes. The disappointment. But I couldn’t let her out.

“Yeah and why’s that?” he asked around a scoff of derision.

“Because nobody survives it.” Then I turned and headed straight toward my father’s office.

“We’re not done!” he shouted after me but I was already gone.

I was done playing games. I either had my seat or I burned the house to the ground around it.

It was time I made it, *that* simple.

When I got to his office, I knocked and waited for him to call me in. I wanted this to go smoothly and coming in all guns

blazing would only taunt his temper to mix with mine. I may have some anger issues, but I got them all from my dad.

Like father, like daughter and all that.

Our mom passed when I turned nineteen. A year after my heartbreak. More sorrow to add to the vault. That broke me too. In more ways than I was capable to explain. Everyone tried to be there, even Reg. But I pushed them all away.

I blamed Reg for why I became cold and honestly, that was only half of it.

It was the day my mother was taken and sent back to us in pieces by one of our rivals that changed everything. That was when I began to drown in the darkness instead of fighting to keep it at bay. I sacrificed my soul to the devil that night.

And I didn't mean my father.

I gave myself to the demon inside my heart and he had saved me every day since.

Having the ability to disassociate may not be healthy, but it was the only way I had survived.

That was the first war I had ever seen. My dad lost his mind during that time.

He didn't just burn the rivals responsible, he burned down everyone who associated with them and then some.

He destroyed everything in the name of love.

It was why I was here today, fighting for my spot at the table.

It was always an option for me to join, had I been his only child it would have been non-negotiable. But I wasn't, I was the youngest and he had promised my mother he would give me a way out.

But when I asked for it, he agreed with vengeance in his heart.

He made a promise to her he couldn't keep through his grief. Now he works to hold a promise that he had made to me.

A promise which allowed me the right to choose.

“Come in,” he answered from the other side of the golden-toned door. His voice sounded tired, weary and heavily weighted by something plaguing him.

I opened the heavy oak door and pushed my way inside. “Dad?”

“Lara, come in, my love. I just got word that you may have broken Reggie’s nose. Is this true?” he asked with a darkly raised eyebrow and something that looked like amusement bright in his green eyes.

“I did. He was being intolerable,” I responded truthfully as I took a seat opposite him.

“Uh, yes. He seems to say the same about you.”

“Does he now,” I drawled as I tried to keep my tone even.

“He does. What it is between the two of you that ignites like friction against steel, I will never know. But he only has your best interests at heart. I need to know you’re prepared. That you can handle this and he’s the man to make sure that happens.” I didn’t respond to that, instead, I watched him keenly. “Which is why I will be partnering him up with you on some assignments. You get the seat, love, you earned it. But this is the stipulation. Where he goes, you go.”

“Can’t I have Drilly instead?” I questioned with protest as I leaned forward in my high-backed, diamond-encrusted leather chair.

My father sighed and shook his head in disappointment. “No, love, you can’t. He got his name for a reason. That’s why his role is in the torture department.”

“Yeah, I get that. But it would be fun. Pairing a psycho with a psycho.” I got chills just thinking about it. The blood. The gore. Oh, fun times.

“No, Lara, I believe the word you’re looking for is catastrophic.”

I chuckled and conceded because he was right, it would be.

“So, do I have an assignment?”

“You do. I need you to check in on one of our locations. We believe our coke is being cut with something we do not approve of. We may be criminals but we have standards. We feed the habit and hope for little deaths. After all, what kind of investor kills their clientele? It’s a foolish business.”

“Alright, alright. I get it. Calm down, you always rant when you’re annoyed.”

“Darling, I’m beyond annoyed. I’m pissed the fuck off.”

I stared at him wide-eyed, not used to such an attitude coming from him.

Dad was usually calm and collected. He swore like the rest of us, but sometimes when he was in the middle of a rant it just came out so strangely. *Comically*.

“Don’t worry, I’ll clean up and get to the bottom of it.”

“First the guns and now the drugs,” he mused a little more quietly. Almost as if to himself.

I narrowed my eyes and leaned forward.

“You think someone is behind this?”

“You killed the traitor before we could find out.”

“He was one of a million, Pa. I’ll figure this out, don’t worry.”

I stood to leave but his voice stopped me. “I am proud of you, Lara, even if I never wanted this life for you. I’m still fucking proud of you, my little psycho.”

Chapter Six

Reggie

Monster Made of Memories - Citizen Soldier

We had suspected something had been up for a while. That we had a foe rising from the ashes. Too many things were going wrong, too many pieces were moving on the board and we sure as fuck weren't the ones moving them. I should be focused on that. In finding our enemies and peeling the flesh from their bones. Instead, I was playing babysitter to a brat.

A woman made from the flames of hell and well equipped enough to make me feel the burn.

She was a goddess. A sight to behold. A fucking distraction.

She made me crave her tanned and silken flesh in a way that took the resistance right out of me. I was left harsh and

cold, wanting to ravage her in a way that branded us both for the rest of time.

She tested my patience and all I wanted to do was meet her in battle.

I'd seen a lot in my forty-five years, but meeting a woman who could bring me to my knees was a new one.

She was something wicked and demented, something glorious and fine. She made my heart beat in a rhythm I found in sync with her own when I spent hours upon hours gazing at her seductive and warrior-built body.

Every day I grew weaker, trying to hold onto my restraint and every day since she had pushed my limits. That night, hot and alone in her room when she gave me a show I'd never forget, it took everything within me to walk out of that room like a man in control.

She loved it when I dominated her, when I took away the power that she chased, if only so she could feel wanted, needed, and desired for only five minutes.

Lara had always chased the danger and she had always chased it in the hopes it chased her back.

Well, love, the danger was here and the big bad beast inside of me was salivating for a taste.

Dom would kill me.

Shoot me dead.

I'd begun to wonder if that fate wasn't so bad if I got to call my sweet temptress mine for the night.

Fuck's sake!

I slammed my fist into the shower room tile so hard that it cracked under the weight. I sighed and a groan tore free from my throat. Goddammit. I was never going to be free from the deviant and perverted thoughts that ran through my mind. I gripped my heavy and ache-fueled cock in my hand and squeezed, willing some life back into the fucker but it refused to calm. Slowly, I moved my hand up and down to see if that would ease the pain of blue balls, but instead, it made the pain

worse. Furious and turned on as all hell after remembering that night, I began my assault.

I knew just how I liked it and I had fantasized that Lara knew it too. That she was down on her knees, as she looked back up at me with those emerald-beryl, crystal-filled eyes and pleased me in a way that shook my soul and sucked it down out of my balls. That she opened her mouth and took me—all of me—deep into the back of her throat and swallowed.

I yanked and I twisted, I played with my bars as I tried to make it hurt. I gave myself everything brutal I thought that she would give me if we ever got to the point of feeling one another.

With one hand, I tickled my balls, grinding them against me as I imagined it would be her hot and welcoming pussy. I pinched the head, rubbing my foreskin between my fingers before I jerked off quickly. All the sensations were in play, entwining with one another that threw me over the edge and had me spraying my load all over the tiles as I watched it being washed away by the cold spray of water that was dousing me.

They say you should go to church to confess your sins, but nobody ever told you that you were your sins. Built as a temple. The only one strong enough to hold them. I didn't need to confess my depravity to anybody. It had already been scripted within the fragments of my bones.

The fact that I was a sick, sick man wanting my best friend's daughter, was all that I would ever be.

I stepped from the shower, feeling fresh after washing away the sweat from the training and feeling filthy all at the same time at what I had just done. Three days. Three days since she stormed the meeting covered in bruises. Her pretty flesh was torn. And three days since I had been more at war with myself than I had been in the last four years.

It wouldn't have been the first time I had thought about her in order to finish and I knew it wouldn't be the last.

I just didn't think I could stay away anymore. But I had to. Dom was more than my best friend. He was my brother. The little kid that pulled me from the gutter, from a life of poverty and petty crime. He took a roughhouse, five-year-old and taught me everything he knew.

I went from a thug on the street corners to a thug in a suit with a few billion sitting in the bank.

But beyond all of that, he gave me a family.

I couldn't lose that. I couldn't lose him.

My worth or my purpose.

I stalked into my bedroom to find her laying on the bed, dressed in leather combat trousers, unlaced military boots, and a blue cami, under a dark leather jacket. I hadn't had the time to wrap the towel around my waist, so she had a full view of my body. I took the towel, ran it through my hair and made no effort to cover up as quickly as I knew I should.

"You know half the house probably heard you finish, right? The sound you make when you come isn't exactly quiet," she mused, giving me a saucy look before she turned her attention back to the ceiling.

"What are you doing in here, troublemaker?"

"Dad paired me with your funless ass. We have an assignment. I'm supposed to go with you to case out one of our locations." Just as I was about to tell her fuck no, she was staying here, she adds, "Dad said it's a direct order. From the boss, not your pal." She smirked, taking great pride in my anguish.

"Fine, but you fall in line and do exactly what I tell you, is that clear?"

"Nope, I'll do what I always do, caveman. Meet you at the SUV in twenty, if you're late I'm going without you," she offered flippantly as she stood from the bed and strolled from the room, no fucks given.

"For fuck's sake, Lara!" I called after her, as I walked toward the dresser to start getting dressed.

She's going to get us all killed.

Chapter Seven

Reggie

I'll Sleep When I'm Dead - Set It Off

Lara sat in the passenger side of the SUV convulsing like a jackhammer with a fucked fuse to some song that played on the radio. She bounced her leg and drummed her hands through the air, like she was the only one in the world and didn't give two shits about who watched her. It was endearing as much as it was intriguing to watch.

I needed to concentrate and yet my eyes were trained on her every two seconds, pulled from the road.

That was the thing so captivating about her though, how she lived for nobody but herself. I've never met somebody before who was so mature, yet who lacked in so many fucks to give. She could respect you and rip your heart out all at the same time.

In this man's world, she became the queen and brought them all to their knees. She fought tooth and nail for everything she had gotten, and she was fighting still. No matter how much crap I gave her for it. How much I tried to push her away from it, instead of directly into it.

I didn't give a fuck about what Dom wanted or what he *thought* was appropriate, not when it came to my Hellcat. It was one thing being the daughter of the head of the crime family that painted her as a pretty sweet target all on its own, but once she was out there in the field?

Once she became the hand that killed so many rival soldiers, she would become a game.

A sick and juicy fucking game, little pricks would want to conquer.

I knew men and I sure as fuck knew their ego.

It only left one thing, my little troublemaker wouldn't be able to leave my side.

It was the only way I could protect her.

"For the love of Satan, Lara. Would you stop?" I groused as I turned down the volume on the steering wheel but the little minx just turned it back up. "Lara, I mean it." I turned it down once more and she just folded her arms to scowl at me with a pretty pout.

"I'm trying to concentrate," she responded as she looked me in the eye with a somber expression.

"On what?"

"On that sweet tail that we have."

My eyes swung to the rearview mirror as I tightened my grip on the wheel. *Son of a bitch*. There was an unmarked blacked jeep that stayed far enough back to not be detected but close enough that they wouldn't lose us if we turned off.

"How did you notice that?"

"How didn't you? It's been following us since Coppers Street."

“Windows are too dark, I can’t get a good look at the driver,” I snapped as I took a left turn down Denvors Way.

“He’s wearing a cap, low rent. Not in a suit and is alone in the car. But I can’t make out any facial features,” she added, hand hovered above the radio to turn it up once again.

“Don’t,” I warned. “How can you possibly see that?”

“Windows are dark, but the moron has his open a crack. When we passed a building back there, I caught a glimpse of his reflection. His posture didn’t suggest anyone else was with him.”

Satan, save me from this woman.

I should have known we were being followed. I should have known to check for reflections on street surfaces. Yet, I didn’t. I was too transfixed on her. I needed to get my head out of my ass and in the game quickly if I had any chance in hell of protecting her and not being the fool that got her murdered.

“Say it,” I growled, my glare focused on the road ahead as I put my foot down.

“Say what?”

“That I’m an incompetent moron that should have noticed, I know you want to.”

“True, I do. But it’s not needed. I know you were just too enthralled with my lethal beauty. It happens to the best of you,” she responded so easily as she unbuckled her seat belt and reached for something from under the seat.

“The best of us? Who the fuck has been giving you all their attention?” I sneered, head snapped toward her.

“So you admit that you were?” She smirked.

“Lara,” I hissed.

“Like, half of mankind and womankind too. It’s okay, killer. You can’t rip the bones out of them all.” She chuckled like she thought this shit was funny. I gripped the wheel so hard, that the leather squealed in protest under my wrath.

“I need to lose this fucker.”

“Or we could play with him,” she suggested wickedly.

“Not the assignment,” I gritted back.

“So? Pa would still want to know who is following us. He also thinks that someone could be behind all of the shit that has been happening lately. This fool might be it.”

I thought it over and knew that she was right. Dom would want us to look into it further. I just detested the idea of doing such while I had Lara with me. The fucker had stayed on my tail for the last few exits, I could lose him easily. But as she said, what was the fun in that?

I loathed to admit, my skin tingled with anticipation and my heart galloped with need in my chest.

They didn't call me Bones for nothing.

I took the next exit and sped toward a dive part of town. It was off course from our location, which I did on purpose. No point leading the fucker to our warehouse. We drove through run-down streets and shattered store windows and I flung a right, then another right until I spun the vehicle around in the alley. Headlights off, we waited. I threw a wary look at Lara and noticed how she began to shut everything down. She sat tall and regal, calm and almost unmoving in her seat. She clutched a knife in one hand and a gun in the other, head canted as she glared out the windshield, ear twitched as she listened as if she was a feline in the wild who could sense a predator from a mile away.

“Stay in the car, don't move. That's an order,” I warned as I opened my door and stalked through the shadows. I could hear the wheels churn from the approaching vehicle and pulled out my gun from the waistband of my dark jeans, taking aim. I didn't wear a suit tonight so the access was easier.

I knew the moment he turned into the alley what he saw from behind the driver's seat.

A six-foot-five beast that towered higher than the greatest shadows and looked fiercely brutal covered in tattoos. My leather jacket was unzipped, my shirt was undone at the collar,

revealing my throat tattoos. The lights blinded me, or would have had it not been for the training.

Dom didn't just decide one day to dish it out to his children, he may have made it more brutal than what we received with his desire to make sure they survived, but we both lived it too.

Instead of my eyes becoming strained, watered, and sore through the light, I began to see patterns dance before me. Molecules of light came together and outlined the world hidden behind such brightness.

I could sense the presence of the person behind the wheel, and as I gave myself to the unknown, I allowed it to guide me. I fired my first shot, one that would embed a bullet into the back seat behind the driver's head. It would leave him with a missed piece of flesh from his ear and a fuck ton of pain from the blown eardrum.

"What the fuck!" a voice bellowed, drifted through the crack in that window that Lara observed before the car door swung open and a man fell to his knees as he stumbled from his seat.

I was there in a moment, a hand fisted in the back of his sweatshirt as I pulled him back to his feet. The low lights at the mouth of the alley cast a yellow glow so I dragged him back into the void. Back into the darkness where we could play.

Pinned against the wall, I shoved my loaded gun down his throat. He stilled, eyes wide as they became orbs of stark white from the headlights of his car. I knew he wouldn't be able to see me. That he had not had the training I'd had.

Mainly because I didn't think anybody had.

So I used it to my advantage. I remained silent, a sentinel of revenge and violence as I allowed him the time to form a pretty grotesque image of what was about to happen.

The mind was a frightful thing. It had the power to torture way beyond the physical limits of what our body could handle.

If you did it right, your mind would be so tormented that even in death, you were never free from the hell.

“Who are you and why are you following us?” I questioned. Calm, collected, in a voice as cold as a demon.

The man quivered in my hold and I have to admit, I was expecting a little more backbone. I had no need to shove him back into the wall, not when I wrapped my hand around his throat and tightened his airways. It forced him to try and dispel the gun, so I pushed it in deeper, watching as he choked and the color began to drain from his already ghostly, washed-out face.

With a vicious retreat, I removed the gun and knocked his front teeth on the way out. They clanged through the air, as they fell to the ground. As I applied more pressure, I made him stare into my cold eyes, seeing the lack of anything human dwelling there. Terror seized him and I knew that was my moment.

“I will only ask once, you will only be offered the chance once. Defy me, and I can promise you, my night will become very, very enjoyable.” The threat burned between us, and I knew at that moment, that a sick kind of joy would have fled in my ominous gaze. I removed the pressure but kept my hand firm around his throat.

He stood mute for a minute, just staring. After I nodded my head in permission, he began to ramble, “I- I wasn’t. I-I didn’t,” he wheezed, his body trembled but he refused to move. Almost like I had struck him and turned him into stone.

“Oooo, You’re right, Bones. Tonight just got a whole lot more enjoyable,” a sultry voice mused from behind me. I tensed, my hand involuntarily tightening around the throat of my hostage. She defied me. *Again*. “You remember the part where he said you only get one chance, right?”

“I told you to stay in the damn car,” I snapped and the mad woman chuckled.

“Yeah, like the world froze over in two minutes and I just happened to start listening to you. Here, catch.” I turned to her,

just as she threw her knife at my head. I let go of the man in order to catch it before it hit me. Fist clenched, I glared and it was at that second the bloke decided he'd try for his escape. He had hardly made it with his shoulders off the wall before a shot rang out and he fell to his knees, screaming.

I sighed and shook my head in frustration, just as she neared me. I grabbed her with one hand to pin her against the wall and kicked out with my foot, knocking the bloke from his knees in order to make it harder for him to get back to his feet. As I brought her in close, the smell of cherries, and wildfires mixed with gasoline hit me. The scent was overwhelming, and all her. She might play with fire way too often, but the scent of devastating destruction was something that she was born with and it drove me insane. I collared her, as I applied sweet, torturous pressure to her throat and brought my thick thigh in between hers. I leaned forward, my lips a mere whisper away. "If I give you an order, Lara, I expect you to follow it."

"Why would I do such a thing if it leads us here, Reg? I like it when you lose control," she mused, a smile as wicked as sin if it had a form on her taunted face.

Fuck it.

Of course, sin had a form and it was all her.

"You won't like me without control, pretty girl." The low timbre of my voice rasped throughout the night.

"You have no idea what I like, Reggie... but you will," she whispered as she leaned forward and nipped my lower lip, making me groan. "Do it, baby. Show me just how dark and depraved you can go. I know you want to, and I want to see it." I flexed my grip, and the wicked witch just smiled wider.

I knew ever since she was a child, she had wanted to see what made her father's best friend so bloody all the time. I knew she had heard the rumors and that led to her infatuation with seeing it. Yet still to this day, I had kept that side of me from her. I had never wanted her to see how I could become so enthralled with the bloodlust that I seem to lose everything else around me.

Much like her, I'd used it to survive.

"Lara," I growled, my entire body heating with the promise of something depraved.

"Do it, Reg. Look into my eyes."

So I did, I looked into her forbidden emeralds and saw acceptance there. I saw her telling me it was okay being who and what I am. It was a tough pill to swallow and I stepped back and removed my hand from her throat.

"Get back in the car, I won't ask again," I snapped as she moved to do just that. I turned away from her, not wanting to see if she made it inside the passenger seat or not. I gripped the blade in my hand tighter, staring down the snot-ridden crybaby at my feet. I yanked him upright and shoved his ass back against the wall.

"Lie to me once, shame on you. Lie to me twice... Well, you'll never get to lie to me twice." I smirked like a wolf as I ripped open his purple sweatshirt, right down the center, right through to the gray shirt he had underneath, and right through to bare flesh.

"W-what are you doing?" he cried as I poked his side with exploratory fingers.

"Showing you why it's never a good idea to lie to a madman. Do you know how many bones are within the human body?" I asked, watching as his dull blue eyes became lost to the light once again as he whipped his head up to stare at me. "Two hundred and six, unless you're a freak with extra. Fascinating isn't it?"

"N-no!" he stammered. I just glared. "I mean, yes-yes!"

"It's even more intriguing when you ripped them from a very much alive and unmedicated human being. Could you imagine, watching the bones that hold together your very own meat suit, turning to dust before your very eyes? One... by... one?"

He gulped, then began to scream for help. It wouldn't do him any good, this dive part of town is isolated. There was nothing here but gang bangers who wouldn't be looking to

involve themselves in anything other than what they were here to do, see or steal.

“No?” I queried. “Well, you are about to.”

Chapter Eight

Lara

Adrenalized - In This Moment

I sat on the hood of the SUV, watching as Reggie began his tirade in mutilation. I stayed silent, bathed in the shadows, and allowed him his time to shine. It wouldn't be as beautiful if I was standing beside him. He'd be distracted, too lost inside his own mind that I wouldn't get to meet the infamous Bones that the underbelly of criminals and assholes alike cowered from. There is something special about the moment you accept yourself.

Not just in front of a select few, but truly accepting *yourself*, as well.

Reg had yet to do that. He might become Bones around the men he served with, his brothers. But he held back in front of me. That meant he was cowering from himself.

Lying to himself, like he had been lying about the emotion between us for years.

He might be able to outrun his feelings, but I wouldn't let him outrun his nature.

I couldn't care less who stood before me and witnessed my crazy. I'm not ashamed of who I was or what I needed in order to get through the day.

I enjoyed what I enjoyed and right now, I wanted him to enjoy it with me.

The man squealed as Reg shoved a torn piece of the man's shirt into his mouth. He felt the man's side, probing the ribs on his right before he touched the tip of my blade to the man's skin and pressed against him. The action drew a bead of blood and I licked my lips.

"No matter what you say, this won't end. I won't stop until I'm satisfied. But how long it takes me to become satisfied depends on how swiftly you answer me. Do you understand?" Reg asked as the man shook. The muscles in Reggie's arms were something to be seen. Weapons that were coiled tight and hidden behind smooth leather until they were ready to ripple and almost shred the fabric.

I'm enchanted, and it had everything to do with the lethal man who stood tall and wild before me.

He was the embodiment of perverted desires for blood and carnage. The silhouette of danger and malice and so much fucking sin, it set me aflame and left my pussy sore and aching for the one man, who I knew could elicit so many sensations, that I'd likely beg him for a reprieve.

And I *never* beg.

I could see the bead of sweat that glistened down the side of the stranger's face. The fear, the trepidation, was sweet in the air. I stuck out my tongue as I licked time and space itself, savoring the taste of brutality in the evening. My thighs clenched and I needed to relieve some of the pressure on my clit, so I placed the head of the gun that I held in my hand between my legs, right onto my core. The metal was cool,

chilled by the night and whispered through the faux leather of my cargo leggings. As I widen my legs, my heels connected with the grill of the SUV and formed some sort of triangle as I arched my back. My head hung heavy as I refused to tear my eyes away from Reggie as he dug in the tip of the blade deeper into the flesh and began to carve and slice into the man's cavities. Even through the gag, the cry of pain was torturous.

"Why were you following us?" Reg asked in that low and deadly tone of his and it sent chills skating down my spine and I trembled. My entire body was moved by the ominous rasp of his deep and scratchy voice.

"Hmm-mm-er," the man mumbled with eyes so wide, they pushed against the sockets of his skull.

"Have to do better than that, I can't seem to hear you," he replied nonchalantly.

It was a vicious and tormenting thing to do, playing with someone's mind. Having given them an out, so close to their reach, yet at the same time, also impossibly far away.

It was a way to trap your victim, holding them hostage for all of time.

If only the man could speak, yet he can't. Because Reg took away his voice as he carved through the layers of skin to withdraw his first rib.

The snap that churned through the air was loud and compelling, it forced me to rock my hips into the loaded head of the gun as I held my finger to the trigger. I played Russian Roulette would she *cum or squirt* edition and by squirt I meant going splat and shooting a damn hole through the center of my body rocked by her deadly arousal.

As Reggie pulled out the rib, he held it in front of the man's face and allowed him a good look, all before he clenched his hand and snapped the rib in half once again. Bones are fucking strong, yet at the same time so beautifully easy to break. Especially when you were a man the size of Reggie. He pulled another rib and did the same thing. It sent

feral chills raised down my spine and I almost pulled the trigger.

I flexed and writhed as I swallowed down every purr and mewl. Reggie seemed to grow in height, and somehow the mood seemed to change. It grew thick and muggy, it stifled the air swelling in my lungs as I found it hard to breathe through the lust.

Reg removed the gag with a bloodied hand and I jerked, butting my hips against the gun harder and faster as I grew more insistent. He was glorious like this. A beast untamed as he destroyed and maimed. As he brutalized and painted the brick wall behind him with his crimson art. I whispered a low groan, one lost to the night.

“Sorry, I didn’t quite catch that. Who sent you?” The sound of his sinful voice sent waves of electricity through my body that trembled under the intensity of it.

“Y-you’re a fucking psycho!” the man gurgled, as saliva built in his throat. The sheen of crimson glistened within the headlights of the car as it trailed down his side and splattered against the ground at his feet. His words were distorted and he found it incredibly hard to breathe, most probably because a lung or two may have been affected by the little show we had going on.

“So I am, and I’m having way too much fun so I can go all night. If I have to ask you again, I will remove your tongue and fuck you in the ass with it. Do. You. Understand?” Reg groused and fuck me if I did not almost squirt a fountain in my lace panties right there and then.

“I-I don’t know who did it. I answered an ad on craigslist. All it said was to follow your license plates and report back to them with an unknown email as to what you do and where you go. It’s all on my phone. It’s all on my phone dammit! Stop, stop! I can’t breathe.”

“Don’t be so damn dramatic, I’m an expert. Your lungs are fine. I’m practically a surgeon.” Reggie said off-handed with a careless shrug.

Satan save me because that indifferent attitude was my undoing and I came so fucking hard, I let out a loud moan that had Reggie's head thrash toward the sound. The stare he held me with was so raw, so intense, and bloodthirsty that I quivered and my finger slipped, firing the gun and lodging a bullet into the grill of the stranger's car making it hiss some kind of gas that sounded like a roar that bellowed throughout the darkness.

"Password," Reggie snapped, which made the man he held and tortured into a bloodied mess confused. "For the damn phone, what is your pin?" He refused to take his eyes off mine. They weren't focused on my hand or where it held the gun. Not on my apex, that may or may not be showing evidence of my arousal, but solely on my eyes which became hooded in lust.

"Nineteen-ninety-one" he uttered.

"Cheers," Reg replied, then he slit the man's throat and allowed him to slump to the ground, choking on his own plasma with eyes that pleaded with mine to help him.

I turned my focus back to Reg, unable to look anywhere other than at the feral man who prowled closer to me.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he grouched, voice raw and rough.

"You just looked so damn sexy, I couldn't help myself," I answered, my voice no longer sounded like my own.

"You almost shot me, woman," he gritted as he stood knee to knee with me.

Blood dripped down his wrist, as it pooled along the ground at his feet. It was mesmerizing.

"Like you, Mr. surgeon, I never miss," I whispered in a sultry tone, as I laid the gun on the hood beside me.

"That turns you on? Me mutilating that man?" he questioned in a voice that darkened and made my cunt flutter.

"You have no idea how much," I replied lowly as I stroked a tender hand down his arm until I reached his wrist and was

able to bring the hand that held the knife high into the air.

I leaned forward, the corner of my eye caught the gleam of crimson and I opened my mouth to lick the blood from the blade, while I never once took my eyes from the storm gray complexities that captured me within their raging thunderstorm depths.

Reggie's eyes held so much turmoil, that they twisted and twirled into so many different emotions it was finally evident in his gaze. It was still almost impossible to decipher between them though. Ever since I was little, I'd stare into those eyes and promised myself one day, I'd figure it out. That I'd figure *him* out.

He snatched his hand free from mine and took the blade with him. His hard chiseled face turned up in disgust as he turned his head to spit at the ground in disgrace.

"You *never take* another man inside of you, troublemaker. Do you hear me?" he sneered in a voice that was so haunted, it was terrifying...

For a lesser woman.

I would never fear Reggie. Mainly because I fear nothing.

But I couldn't deny how menaced his tone echoed around me with an inhuman growl as he had his head turned away from me, hung heavy as he glared at the ground fighting for control through his shattered breathing.

"You *never* let another man touch you. Flesh, bone *or* blood," he continued. "Or I'll dismantle and flay their flesh from their carcass," he added sinisterly.

My heart thumped erratically and feral in my chest as it pounded against the cage of its confinement. I swallowed thickly, trying to gain moisture back into my dry throat as newfound arousal rushed through me like a brutal wave of a barbaric and relentless, savagely cruel sea.

Just how I liked it.

I refused to show that he pulled this sensation from me and that I was not the one putting on the show because *I* was the

one in control.

I had to be.

I did this to taunt him. To fuck with his mind and get inside his head. To make him fight for the control he had stolen from me time and time again.

It was the only way I had survived being around him for all of these years without losing my damn mind.

“Memory or thought. I will kill any man who consumes you. Understand that, Hellcat. Because I won’t even think twice about it.” Then he turned, cold eyes filled with turmoil glared into mine and it took me a moment to once again calm my mind.

“Strong words for a man who has never wanted me,” I whispered in a flat tone underlining with wanton need. The shadows fell across his face perfectly and it made the allure of him all the more primal, the more ruthless he looked.

“I’ve always wanted you, Lara. That was the problem,” he answered with a sigh. He took the knife and swiped it across his jeans removing any evidence of the man before. Then he opened his shirt and dragged the steel blade across his collarbone, making sure that he coated the end in his essence.

He brought the knife to my lips and gripped me by the back of my nape. His clasp was firm and forceful as he pulled my head forward and pressed the cherry red knife to my lips and dragged the blood smoothly across them, painting them pretty.

“Open up love, I need to remove a dead man from your system. Because nobody belongs inside this body but me.”

I narrowed my eyes as I wrapped my legs around his waist and pulled him into me. I ground my core against his very evident hard-on and smirked, knowing I had him. Slowly, almost tauntingly I licked his blood from the blade before I smeared the rest into my lips like lipstick, then licked them clean too.

He growled and lurched forward, intending to claim my swollen lips as his own. I brought the gun between us and

pressed it to his chin and forced him still with the action.

“Uh-uh. You broke me once, handsome. I warned you you’d never do it again.” Then I unlatched my legs and brought my knee between us and pushed him away.

He stumbled back as he stared at me with wide and shock-filled eyes. Danger swirled deep in his complexities.

I might want him, crave him, and *need* him like I needed the air in my lungs.

But he needed to damn well earn me.

Because *that* girl, I was not.

I got on my knees for no man.

Chapter Nine

Reggie

Put It On Me - Matt Maeson

I have wanted her since she was eighteen. Dreamt about her and that devilish body every night since. I knew then I was going to hell, now... I knew the man himself was saving me a seat.

Because nobody told me no.

Especially not the woman that I loved.

Because I did, I loved her. I had just been too damn stubborn to admit it.

Loathe to accept it and too much of a damn coward to fight for it.

To fight for *her*.

But that was all about to change.

For too long I had stood by my loyalty. Born and bred to the life and the man who owned the empire. But loving somebody didn't make me a traitor.

Even if it was my best friend's daughter.

“Oh, little troublemaker. I always get what I want. You know this. Let's end the games, because I promise you I'm done fighting this,” I stated with caution as I took another step closer to her and the fire burning in her emerald eyes.

“I don't think I will. Because when a man claims he gets all that he desires with little to no effort, it's warranted for a woman like me to bring them down a peg or two. Preferably to their knees. I offered myself to you on a plate, Reggie, but you denied me. Now watch as I deny you. Because you, Bones, have not fucking *earned* me.” She spoke with clear and confident venom in her voice that I knew she wouldn't relent.

I was many things but an abuser and rapist of women I would never fucking be.

She wanted me to earn her, *fine*. I would. And most probably in the most unconventional way she had ever before seen.

“Fine, Hellcat. I'll earn you and when I do, you'll at long last be on your knees showing me how glorious that quick-witted and always wicked mouth of yours can truly be.”

“You like to dream, Reg. I dig that. Now get the fuckers phone and let's head to the location.”

I felt like an asshole. As I acted so mediocre and aloof. Like I had not just spent the last four years with blue balls and a heart that fucking ached after it spent so many damn years encased within ice.

I'd given her absolutely no reason to trust me. I was about to change that.

She hopped from the hood and strutted over the man who was slowly dying. If you do it right, you could slit a throat and not kill them instantly. You could part their flesh just enough, they bleed out and you could make them feel every inch of their death. Unless you'd pussy out the last second and get

them to the hospital. Determined by what was on his phone, he might have had hope yet.

When I turned, the fucker stared up at me with something condescending in his dying eyes. Almost like he was judging me and my rejection from such a stunning woman.

As I glanced down at the phone, I thumbed in his pin and then clenched it in my hand as I flicked through it.

I strolled over to him and booted him in the head. My untied combat boot stuck him hard and his head flung back, hard into the wall, cracking his skull wide open. The blood splattered and Lara quirked a brow at the mess.

“Got to say though, Reg. He certainly did taste a lot sweeter.”

I snapped together my teeth and gritted my jaw so hard that my molars churned “You’re pushing me, little troublemaker. I’d tread lightly,” I warned with a harsh sneer as my body vibrated from the anger that brewed within my veins.

“I’m heavy-footed as well as heavy-handed. I’m used to it. I’ll also never stop pissing you off, so suck it up, and wrap it in a buttercunt.” She shrugged and I chuckled darkly. “What?” she asked as her smirk dropped.

“The saying is ‘Suck it up buttercup’ Not, wrap it in a buttercunt.”

“Whatever, when have I ever followed the crowd?” she asked, unphased as she strolled toward the passenger door.

“That would be never, love.”

“Exactly,” she mumbled. “The phone?”

“There is nothing here. Just back and forth about the dead man following us and an email to text the info to. They also paid him extra if he was to hurt one of us without killing us.”

“Of course,” she drawled.

“We’ll give it to Tech. He’ll probably be able to find an IP address or something,” I thought out loud as I gestured with a nod over to the car. “Let’s head out.”

We hopped in. I started the engine and reversed the SUV back down the alley. Luckily there was another exit and I hadn't needed to move the asshole's car.

So much harder to clean up that mess.

Once we clear the alley, I hit the dash and dialed Brodie, our clean-up guy.

"Sup," he answered on the first ring and I growled. "Who did you kill and make wind chimes out of their ribs from this time?"

"Me and the princess had a tail. Some low-rent shifty guy. Said he was hired to follow us from an ad on Craigslist. I'll fill y'all in with the rest later. For now, get your ass over to dive town and dispose of the body and his car."

"Princess okay?" he asked with concern, which gave me the urge to rip out his vocal cords.

"Princess is here asshole and she has a name and it sure as fuck isn't princess," Lara hissed as she rolled her eyes and played with the gun in her hands.

The gun that made her come.

The woman is fucking deadly.

"Sorry, I mean your *Empress Of Psychotic*. Are you okay? Uninjured? *Sane*?"

That made her chuckle and I tightened my grip on the wheel while I flexed my jaw.

"Darling, you know I have never been sane. Get to it, me and the big man have work to do," she instructed before she leaned over and hit the end call button on the dash.

Then she leaned back, pulled out a smoke, shoved her feet up on the dash, and took a deep toke.

The thing about Lara was that when she acted like this, you never got the sense of a stroppy, immature brat looking for attention, despite the fact I called her a brat a lot. But when she kicked back, stripped down, and had a joint of weed, cigarette,

or a bottle of whisky in her hand, she appeared unapproachable.

Deadly. Dangerous and if you were in her close proximity, your radar warned you to stay away.

She brooded but was always relaxed and tried to please nobody but herself.

“Want a pull?” she asked after she smoked half the damn cigarette.

“Give me the damn smoke,” I barked while I took it from her fingers and inhaled a deep lungful myself. I held it, allowing the toxins to burn in protest against my lungs before I blew it out in a cloud of smoke and sighed. Some of the tension from the half a week faded away.

“So what’s the deal with this location? Think it’s our people cutting it? Or just one, sneaking something into the drugs?” she asked as I thought about it.

“Has to be bigger than one person. Especially one of our own. To pull off the guns and now the drugs? It’s a taunt if I’ve ever seen one. It’s a flag to wage war and right now, we are on the blind side of it.”

“We’ll figure it out. I know we will, I’m pretty good at pulling information.”

My skin ran cold and my blood boiled. “Don’t you ever, put yourself in danger like you did the other night. *Ever*, Lara.”

“No promises, big guy,” she offered flippantly before she turned to stare out the window.

“I mean it!” I snapped as I glared at her.

“No promises, *Daddy*,” she teased and I growled, face turned back to the road ahead as my anger only grew.

Chapter Ten

Lara

I Come First - Halestorm

We drove down the road about a mile away from the warehouse that was hidden underground. It was tunneled out and down there seemed like a different world. There were rooms upon rooms of workers storing and packaging our product. We had tropical rooms dug with slopes and special climate changeable thermostats for the plants of the cocaine.

Everything was ran down there with the intent for nothing but the safest cut drugs on the market.

As my dad said, it was not good business to kill off the fools that filled your pockets.

It was routine to turn all lights off and to creep into the main area of the location in the event that somebody located the premises.

Reg flipped off the lights and crept down the rubbled soil slowly, his entire body was tense and rigid with anticipation. I'd guess because his *'What the fuck radar'* was going off too.

It's a good job that we did. Because the closer we crept, the more we heard the heavy bustle which should never have been there.

Chatter through the cracked window reached our ears.

Engines that hummed lowly in the breeze surrounded us.

Reg deviated from the path and pulled up close to a ditch which gave us a full view of the four cars parked around the underground entrance. Which would only be possible to somebody who knew the route to the tunnels like the back of their hand.

It was not exactly easy to locate when it was nothing but a hole in the ground.

"Call Dom, tell him we might need backup and the location has been compromised," Reggie ordered as he scanned the area and pulled out his gun to check the ammo.

I pulled out my phone to do as he'd asked when a soft cry, filled with so much terror split throughout the night. I leaned forward, eyes trained in the dark to see beyond the abyss and what I saw was the back of a suited man, bathed in the shadows who pushed a half-naked girl to her knees.

She couldn't have been more than fifteen. My blood ran cold and that chilled, calm and lethal fury I held so close, reared its beautiful, warped fucking head.

"Lara, *don't.*"

I was about done with his fucking orders tonight, but I refused to forget how I was trained, all that I was taught in order to not allow my emotions to take full control.

I heaved a deep breath and called the darkness. I shut everything down and became a machine in the making, trained for destruction.

"Four cars, eight men. Two women. One leader and four drivers. Then one of our men," I noted in a robotic tone when I

noticed there was another girl beside the first.

There was a man, who stood before the girls on their knees who was clearly the leader. They all faced John, *our* guy. Then either side of the leading man stood four of his men. There were four drivers ready and waiting to whisk the dead man walking away at the skip of a heartbeat.

Only they wouldn't be fast enough to save these men.

Not tonight.

I tossed the phone at Reg, "Make the call and then we act. There is no fucking way I'm waiting and leaving those girls out there, cold and alone with our new enemies," I declared before I opened the door silently and slipped from the car.

"Goddammit," I heard sneered behind me.

I kept to the shadows as I moved silently through the fields. Faint chatter reached my ears as I heard John mumble in unease, "This was not part of the deal, man. I don't want this. I don't want no part of this. The Wyelli's are going to kill me if they find out. We certainly didn't agree to no goddamn girls."

"New product. Test them and then ship them out with the next border drug run. The tunnels will be a fine way to smuggle them through. The next order will be a lot bigger. Do not disappoint me, and stop sniveling. It angers me," the man in the suit reposed evenly as he pulled at the sleeves of his shirt.

Fuck.

Nobody is supposed to know about the tunnels under the state that connect county to county and border to border. They have been founded since the start of the Wyelli empire over two hundred years ago. My ancestors thought it would be a good way to pass undetected and as it stands that is exactly why we had never been caught. Not us obviously, we had grunts for the dirty work, but even the grunts had never been caught on our watch.

The Wyelli's had always been untouchable.

“It ain’t worth the heat no more man,” John sniffed as he jittered back and forth on uneasy feet. Looked like he’d been sampling the product. Another reason to kill his sorry ass. “They’ll kill me.”

“If you don’t, I’ll kill you,” the shadowed man stated before he turned on his shiny heel and headed back toward the first car.

I stepped from the shadows and fired my first shot, taking out two of his men before anyone could tell what was happening. Just as easily, I allowed the abyss to consume me once more.

“We’re under attack! Cover the boss!” somebody screamed as I slipped from the darkness and dragged my knife across the throat of one man and into the spine of another.

Four down.

I turned, seeking the shadows to find their leader because he was a priority right now. We needed him to find out what the fuck he thought he was playing at. I found him as two of his men ushered him toward the car, head down and covered from the bullets they thought would fly. His men tried to shove him inside with haste, but he just stopped and stood tall for a moment as if he could sense my eyes on him. He stared back, calm and collected as he smirked at me mockingly.

The air left me in a brutal rush as my lungs felt heavy, weighed down under a heavy layer of turmoil at the face that stared back at me.

The world spun and it almost stole me to the mindless haze I was trained to withstand.

I raised my hand and took aim, ready to fire my second bullet. My finger tested the trigger and without hesitation, I pulled.

Reggie came out of nowhere and grabbed my wrist, making the shot go wide and implanting within the skull of one of the mystery man’s minions and that gave them enough time for him to dash inside the car and speed off kicking up

dust and soil in its wake. The other cars followed and left behind three other drivers who stepped from the car.

“Why the fuck did you do that?” I hissed as my temper flared.

“We need him alive, Lara. We need to know what’s happening here,” Reg reposed as if I was thick.

I sneered and shoved him away from me. “I know that, for fuck sake! Like I said, I never miss, asshole. My shot wouldn’t have killed him, it would have slowed him down so we could get to him!”

My nostrils flared as my hands trembled from my rage. It took everything within me not to swing at him. But I could never do that. It would cross the line between sensual dominance and domestic violence. So instead, I clenched my fist so tightly, my nails dug into my palm and drew blood. I bit back the hiss as I rolled my shoulders and tried to calm myself down from losing it and allowed the darkness to take me.

Reggie reached around me as he twisted us and tucked me into his hold while he brought his arm up. He hissed in pain as one of the suited men slashed him with a knife and opened his arm. Blood poured from the wound, thick ropes of tissues and plasm that meshed together.

Bone glistened in the light and that darkness returned once again with something I don’t think many, if not any, could withstand.

“Son of a bitch,” I sneered as I bolted forward, while I swung my knife artfully within my hand when I replaced my gun with it. I slashed and I carved, arcs of blood splattered throughout the air and rained down upon my body. It coated my face and blonde hair and I relished in every second of it.

I craved it, with a vengeance for more. It sparked mayhem and savagery in my core and I could no longer hold back the urge to brutalize. Something like an impulse clawed at my chest, pushing me forward with a need that made me see nothing but sheets of brilliant red.

When I came out of my darkness, I was kneeled above a corpse. I had removed his face, carved and weaved until he was unrecognizable. I slashed down his throat and ripped out his Adam's apple, crunching it beneath my knee. His eyes laid hanging from his skull, swaying in the soft winds that blew a little too forcefully. His chest had been cracked open, ribs shattered and organs pulverized.

I hadn't noticed how dark I had gone, how uncontrolled until I blinked and saw the callus and ferocious attack done by my very own hands. My breathing was heavy, broken and with every inhale, it stuttered out of me like a broken air con that choked out broken gushes of hot air that went nowhere. I never recognized myself when I got like this.

But I always knew it was me behind it.

My throat was dry, raw like sandpaper as it scratched and bled from the noises being pulled from my chest that heaved.

I swiped a hand over my face, unintentionally added my blood to my tanned complexion and I withdrew, staring down at the body in disconnect.

I kept my eyes trained to the corpse, not wanting to see my surroundings. I had said it before and I'd say it again, I make no apologies for what I am. But that didn't mean that it was easy for anybody else to see it when it was unleashed.

A noise captured my attention. A wet and gurgled grunt which forced me to bring my eyes up and turn my head to the left. Reggie stamped down on one man's skull, brain matter and skull fragments lost to the flattened soil as he inscribed the man's head back into the earth and then broke the neck of another in a way that had the bone protruding and parting from the flesh of his throat.

It was gruesome, grotesque. Fucking *awesome*.

"Guess nobody really does survive the psycho, hey, Hellcat?" he whispered, voice so husked and raw that it sent shivers skating across my chilled skin.

Blood covered his body, his leather jacket left back in the car. It left him in nothing but a shirt that rippled under his

strength and gathered around his shoulders, covered in crimson red.

His tattoos were on display and utterly glorious. My pulse thundered as it pumped just beneath the surface.

I could have tried to deny how I felt about him all that I wanted to, but I couldn't deny how I reacted when he became hurt. It unraveled me.

I looked up, and noticed John. He had been struck dumb in the chaos, and only now had he thought to run. I took aim with the gun and unloaded a bullet right into his spine.

It wouldn't kill him but it sure as fuck would paralyze him.

He wouldn't need to be able to walk in order for us to interrogate him.

He fell to the ground, flat on his chest as his face hit the floor hard with a thud. That look in his eye, it was one of the soul being dragged down into the depths of Hell.

I looked back at the two girls on the ground, heads covered as they trembled. "Hey," I whispered from my seated straddle of the dead man. "Over there, in the raised part of the field is a latch. Open it and get down into the tunnels. Tell Big Terry that Lara sent you. That they need to help you until backup arrives. Is that clear?"

One of the girls, with a tentative energy, gazed up at me and timidly nodded her head, breathing a heart-wrecking yes, before she helped the other girl up and ushered her to follow the orders I had issued. As the second girl went down, the first turned back toward me. "Thank you," she choked out, then disappeared beneath the ground.

I stood on shaky legs and stumbled to Reggie's side. He caught me with little effort, with eyes that assessed me before I took his arm and looked at his wound. My heart hammered at how severe it looked. He pulled back, as he hid it from my sight. "It's nothing. I'm fine, Lara." he protested with a groan before a determined look passed in his gaze and he pushed forward and with his good arm, tangled his hand in my hair

and brought my face close to his. Heavy breath kissed against my lower lip as he hovered above me, emotion thick in those stormy eyes which caused the world around us to still. “Admit it, troublemaker,” he whispered heavily. “It scared you. It scared you because you love me. You have always loved me. You’re just too stubborn to admit it now,” he pleaded with those hurricane brewed eyes of his, with the hard planes of his face that softened in the hope I would see the more gentle side to him.

I finally worked out one of those twisted tornadoes of emotion that I promised myself I would decipher.

Regret.

He held it in abundance. The thing was, I held it too.

“Don’t you think I’ve wanted to let you in? After all of these years, that I wanted to let down those walls?” My voice wavered, regret heavy in my emerald eyes. “The very ones you helped me build? But in the end...” Unshed tears welled in my sorrow-ridden gaze but I shut it down. My face was set, as hard and cold as stone, as I stared back at him and found my resolve wavered. “The thought of being *humiliated* by you, outweighed the potential of *ever* being loved by you.”

Heartache churned with reproach, it grew thicker and thicker until it consumed his dark depths and the first crack in my armor appeared. I’d never *not* understood why he held so many barriers between us. What we felt, well, it wasn’t exactly written in the stars and easy to declare.

It was always brutal and raw, written in blood and signed with the end of our days.

Especially living in a world like this.

But that was what made it real.

That it was a love worth fighting for. Yet he never saw my soul as worth the fight at all.

When I was younger though, I’d never understood how a man I had seen conquer the world could never conquer his fear.

Who could never be the man I needed him to be and put me and what we could have had first.

We weren't the first age-gap, forbidden and fucked up romance scripted into the world and we damn sure wouldn't be the last.

He had a choice.

I was ready to step into the storm. Woman enough to fight for my core desire.

My heart's delicate flutter.

He hid.

He lied.

And he broke me long before the death of my mother brought down the hammer that shattered my coffin and decimated my remains.

"It's cute, her little infatuation with you, Reg. If only her little heart knew the way your old ass fucked women into comas," My dad's voice chuckled through the crack in his office doorway as I lingered there, having wanted to speak with him and instead overhearing a conversation that broke my heart.

"Cute? Dom, it's a pain in the ass. It's like having a damn Chihuahua nipping at your heals every fucking second of the day," Reggie grunted in reply. Disgust heavy in his voice.

"Watch it, prick. That's my fifteen-year-old daughter you just called a dog," my father snapped back shortly with a hard edge to his tone in warning, but the humor was still there.

They both thought I was a joke.

"You know what I mean, man. Try getting laid when you have a brat trailing your every move. Ila came around with her hot mouth ready and fucking waiting and your daughter burned her!"

"Don't go breaking her heart now, or I might just have to break your face, my brother." My dad laughed and I could hear the sound of liquid being poured into a glass as it

swooshed around the rim. "Ila shouldn't have been standing so close to the stove. Accidents like that happen."

"She was looking for the champagne and Lara shoved her until she fell face first onto the damn burner on the stove!" Reggie replied in indignation.

"That was Gracie's fault, an oversight. She was the chef. She shouldn't have had the stove lit without a pan on it," my father defended around another chuckle. That one was heavy and sounded like it came from his core, like he found me so damn funny, he had to bend over with the ache of humor I brought to their night. "I'll talk to the boys, tell them to spend more time with their sister."

Reggie grunted in reply.

"Lara," he rasped.

"Don't. It's too late, Reg. I'm not that girl anymore. The girl who would have given you everything," I whispered as I tried to step away as I shook off the memory. But he held me close, muscles tight as they coiled around me in an unyielding shield of strength and conviction.

"Look, I know that I was an asshole. The things that I said to you? Don't you think I regret them? That I have regretted them, every single day since?"

"That's the thing about choice, Reg. They say it's never too late and that everything can be fixed. But betrayal is almost as permanent as if it was set in stone."

He shook his head as he turned his troubled gaze skyward while he heaved a deep breath and tried to center himself. He looked back down at me and gritted his jaw, "I deserve your anger. But *we* don't deserve you throwing away what we could be. Not now. Not after everything."

"And why now? Why only after I get given a seat at the table?"

"I wanted you, Lara. That day I walked away from you in your bedroom, I wanted you. You were never just Dom's daughter but always *my* girl. I protect what's mine, no matter the cost. I wanted to save you from this life but you ran right

into it anyway. So why are we still fighting this?" He flexed his grip, his frustrated hold turned bruising around my nape and it sent trembles down my spine.

"You never had the right to make that choice for me. No man ever has the right to take away a woman's choice," I declared with venom in my tone. "If you loved me, if you knew me and I was ever really *your* girl, you would have known. I never fought for the seat out of spite, Reg. My life has and never will be dependent on *any* damn man. I fought for this seat because it's my birthright. Because at a nine-to-fucking-five, I can't let the crazy out and do that." I pointed to the mutilated corpse who had somehow begun to look like it was rotting. I don't know if that is due to how bad the tissue damage was or just the low lights, deep in the thicket of tonight's abyss. "I needed it. I was drowning without it and you didn't even notice."

Reggie's nostrils flared as he gulped harshly. "I noticed it, baby," he whispered sadly. "I just didn't want to believe it. I saw the darkness in you, and I knew it was the same darkness inside of me. I could always accept you, it was accepting myself that I couldn't do. I love you, Lara. I love you." He grew more insistent and pulled me close as he plastered my body to his. "Can't that be enough to rewrite our history? To rewrite every mistake I'll forever have to live with. It's my burden and I have no right to ask you to forgive it. But right here, right now, I'm giving you my all. I love you, Lara!"

I gasped, the bite of cold air rushed down my throat at the startled intake. I had dreamed about those words. The words coated in sin and carried with a forbidden secret that would forever be *ours* and ours alone. I stepped into him, those wicked tears back, gathered like deep pools of anguish in my shore-crashing emeralds.

I allowed my chest to press into his more firmly. I allowed myself to feel every hard plane and rough edge to his physique. As I brought a soft hand to his stubbled jaw, it trembled and forced me to tense every aching and tired muscle within my body to hide the weakness. Slowed and controlled, I

brought my lips to his in the first kiss I have ever before initiated.

He never pressed for more, happy with the soft, emotion-filled contact of our satin smooth lips. I sank my heart, body and soul into him and he held me like he would never let me go. It made what came next almost impossible.

Our bodies fused together like they belonged and for the first time in a long time, my demons quietened.

I could breathe. The riot within my mind slowed and I submerged within the depths of something that felt akin to home. To *hope*.

It took everything I had to pull back, to break the kiss, look him in the eye and utter the words that once upon a time broke me, spoken from his very lips. “*Absolutely nothing.*”

And then I turned my back on him, just like he had turned his back on me.

Chapter Eleven

Reggie

If You Want Love - NF

Lara walked away from me without so much as looking back. She had taken my beaten and withered heart with her. Torn from my chest and held within her vicious grip.

I couldn't blame her for her rage. She deserved it just as much as I deserved that harsh lash back with the bitter words I had once spoken to her. I had been a foolish man, lost more to the desire to keep her safe than I was to the fact that she needed so much more from me.

But that was the thing about desire wasn't it? It was an emotion strong enough to blind a man when the need became too much to explore than the strength we had to deny.

Desire was an addiction.

One worse than any drug when it claimed you.

I had let her down, became the coward I swore I would never become and I ran and hid instead of fighting for the one girl a war was worth waging for.

So that is what I would do now.

I would wage a fucking war.

Even if it cost me my best friend, the man that I loved and the family I'd die for.

Lara and I walked into Dom's office not even an hour later, ready to give the report. As we entered, he was already walking toward the door. "I've called a meeting, follow me."

As we walked into the room where all the meetings are held, everyone was already seated around the table. I brushed my hand against Lara's as she walked past me, but she never even batted an eye at the contact. Well and truly in crime daughter mode.

And locked into full gear of hating Reggie mode.

I took my seat beside Dom and watched as his children filled the chairs opposite me. My heart panged with self-reproach as I looked at each one. I had seen them all grow; treated those boys like my own. Now, I was at risk of losing them too with the unconventional love I held for their baby sister. But as I gazed upon Lara, my heart and soul knew everything would be worth it. She gave me something I'd never truly felt before. Purpose. More so than a purpose I had created as I carved myself a life here, but one that was birthed from one's soul finding its match.

I couldn't explain why one person loved another.

Why out of a million, that one soul captured yours and you couldn't even utter the words 'I love you' at all.

All that I knew, truer than I knew my heart still beat, was that she was and always had been made for me.

My one in a million.

My warped and twisted, sweet but psycho soul mate.

Sometimes, a whole lot of pain was worth the one moment of bliss.

A road of coals was worth the one moment you got to walk back home to even streets.

She was my end of days and I needed her to believe that this time, I was all in no matter the cost. Even if it was my life, I'd claim her in death.

Dom cleared his throat, and leaned his elbows on the table. His aging face was tired and sullen and he addressed those around the room. "Lara, my love, what happened?"

It meant everything in this room that he was asking her such a question instead of his right hand. It was his way of welcoming her to the table and proving to her that he knew that she belonged here.

After a silent moment of staring at the table, she looked up and met the eyes of her father. "I saw the man that killed our mom," she stated, as the entire room leaned forward in shocked anticipation. I slammed my fist on the table and leaned forward in outrage.

The entire ride home she kept this from me.

She hid not only what she thought she saw but the pain it would have caused her to live through it.

We killed Frazier Black. We gutted him, broke every bone in his body and peeled layer upon layer of flesh from his dying corpse while he still lived for what he did to Mia Wyelli. He lived through a harrowing and tortuous death. Every. Single. Moment of it.

It was one written for the tales. Fucked-up tales of the worst kind of violence.

Myself and Dom killed that bastard in the most brutal and agonizing way possible that it took us three years. We locked his ass in a basement and dismantled him until his body could no longer withstand the torture and he ultimately died.

He had no child, there were no kids to speak of at all. Not even in the family.

Which worked in our favor when Dom lost his head and slaughtered everyone related to him and anyone who had ever sided with him.

Those dark, hate-filled and venomous years stuck with us. Even to this day I heard that man's screams and I got hard over the fucking sound of them.

That cunt was the worst of the worst and after what he did to the sweetest, kind-hearted, warm and most welcoming woman, wife and mother, I felt no fucking remorse for the atrocious acts we committed during that time.

He stole a mother from her babes.

A wife from her husband.

He deserved every last act we committed.

The color drained from Dom's face. He was taken aback, knocked from his throne as he slumped back in his chair with something that looked like sickness tinting his ghostly complexion green.

"It's impossible. We killed him, Lara." I talked for him and gave him this moment of calm to once again find the thoughts I knew were assaulting him right now.

"Fuck you," Dallas spat in my face.

"That isn't a face you can fucking forget," Dylan sneered despite the fact he refused to look up from the table he glared daggers of death at.

"She wouldn't get it wrong. Not Lara," Dalton conceded, so much emotion thick in his gaze.

"I said, he looked like him. But it wasn't him," she clarified as she leaned back in her seat and relaxed her hands on her lap. I could see her fingers flexing and knew she was itching for another fight.

That restless energy inside of her would build until it exploded and I don't think she would ever come back from allowing that impulsiveness to corrupt her.

“We killed everybody that he knew. He had no children,” Dom finally uttered, low and uncertain before he cleared his throat and got his head back in the game.

“Are you sure about that?” she questioned.

No. How can we be? We have no idea where that prick had stuck his little prick.

“He could have had a kid. It’s not entirely impossible. We can’t know who he fucked,” Dallas states as he pulled the thoughts from my unspoken mind.

“Why didn’t you tell me this on the scene?” I turned to Lara, the room melted away and all I was left with was her grief-ridden face.

“You are the reason he got away, let’s not forget that,” she hissed, refusing to even glance my way. Her jaw fluttered as she gritted her teeth in her rage.

“What was that?” Dom asked, attention peaked as he glowered at me with open hostility.

“I thought she was trying to kill him. I reminded her we needed him alive.”

“You questioned her capability? You questioned *my* capability in determining whether or not she was ready!” He heaved an unstable breath as his voice turned hard, brutal.

He had slaughtered with that voice alone in the past. It was cold enough to turn an inferno into ice.

And now all that wrath was trained on me.

There was a reason this man was the boss and it had nothing to do with his birthright.

Other than Smithy, the filthy fucking snake, nobody had ever wavered in their loyalty toward him. Not just this family.

I told Lara I loved her and I meant it. I wouldn’t run from this anymore and I wouldn’t run from the fact that I’d die to protect her.

“Yes, yes I did. You weren’t listening and I didn’t think she was ready. I’d do anything to protect her!” I stated and she

scoffed, shaking her head as she sneered at the table, top lip curled back as her eyes narrowed in disdain.

“She is not yours to protect!” Dom boomed. Heavy hands punched into the table as spittle flew from his lips. The vein in his forehead bulged and his cool demeanor withered in a second.

“The Hell she isn’t! She has always been mine!” I bellowed, the words fell unbidden from my lips but I didn’t regret them. Not a single one. “Mine! Mine to protect, mine to own and sure as fuck mine to love! That woman, Dom. The one you’re so insistent in throwing to the wolves is my fucking future and I’ll be damned if I sit back and watch you get her killed.”

The room fell deathly quiet. Not even the humming of the world around us could be heard as those around the table stared back at me. Some in shock, some in anger and Lara? Damn right, stunned. She breathed heavily, then held the air hostage within her lungs until her face tinted blue. “Breathe, troublemaker,” I ordered and she gasped, eyes wide as they remained fixated on mine.

She held me captive, so lost under her spell I didn’t see the right hook, that took me clean off the seat, coming right for my stoically awaiting face. Dalton had me pinned to the ground, hand wrapped around my throat as he cut off my airways and pummeled my face into a bloody pulp with his free hand. Kid was seriously trying to finish me off and he was unrelenting. Dylan kicked me in the side, he had to get in his shot before he tried to pull his pitbull of a brother from my body but it proved difficult.

I knew Dalton. I had trained him so I knew his capability and his strength. I lifted my hand to block his next assault and twisted his limb around my arm before taking it hostage in a lock that put pressure on his entire arm and shoulder. He bent to my will as he arched his back and moved with me in order to stop me from snapping his arm altogether. “Dammit it, kid. Stop already!” I shouted. It caused a few of the cousins to step back and retreat into the corner of the room. Even they knew I

was never to be tested and if Dalton was anyone else, I would have ripped off his arm and beat him with the fucking thing.

“You’re like her uncle! What the fuck is wrong with you!” he screamed in my face as he tried to advance once again as soon as I released my grip on him. Dallas and Dylan held him back as Dom sat there through the mayhem, as it spiraled around him. Yet he didn’t move a muscle or blink an eye as he steepled his fingers together and assessed me with a look as cold and as calculating as I had ever seen him wear before this very moment.

I fear nothing, but I couldn’t deny the chill that skated down my spine in the warning that brewed there, deep, thick and dark in those violent and wrath-riddled green eyes of his.

I looked for Lara and couldn’t see her in her seat beside him.

She was gone.

Every instinct inside of me told me to chase her, but I had to see this through first. I needed to prove to her and to myself that I meant every word I said. “Dom...” I tried, but he interrupted me with an explosion that echoed throughout the room.

“You’re my best friend. You’re double her age! You betrayed me and I’ll fucking destroy you for touching her!”

“I’ll kill him!” Dylan gritted as he tried to fly across the table, this time to be held back by Dalton when he was forced to face such a visual.

“Fuck’s sake!” I sighed, while I clenched my fists at my side and took a deep and chilled breath. “This is coming out all wrong. Look, nothing has happened between us. I haven’t let it. I haven’t touched her. I denied this, *us*. What I felt for her since she was eighteen. Now she hates me for it. She hates me for being a coward, for refusing to accept my feelings and punishing us both because she felt it too. Only difference is she had the balls to chase it.”

“Get out! Everyone, get out!” Dom ordered as he stood from his seat and stalked closer toward me. The sound of

everyone leaving fell on deaf ears. It was the threat in the harsh and broken brothers of hers that was a warning to stay alert.

“You are done here. As my right hand, as my friend *and* as my brother. Leave, walk out of those doors on your own two legs or I promise I will break them both. You’re not worthy of my daughter, Reggie. You never fucking will be,” he spits, calm, cool and collected but I felt the fire in those words like a torch to my skin as he went nose to nose with me. “*Leave.*”

It fucking hurt. It bruised and scarred everything inside of me as I stood there trying to regain the calm through the anguish.

“I’ll never leave her, Dom. I can’t. I don’t know how. I understand that you’re mad, but you need to understand that I love her and I won’t give up. Not this time. No matter what anybody says. Even you, brother.”

“If you love her, don’t make her watch me kill you. Leave. This is the only chance you will get, Reggie. Because I will protect my daughter at all costs, *even* from you.”

“Funny, I was just about to say the exact same thing to you. Pull her back Dom, don’t put her in the line of fire. Especially if we think this has anything to do with the Black’s.”

Chapter Twelve

Reggie

Control - Zoe Wees

I'd already put her through enough, I wouldn't allow her to see me and her father getting physical because it was likely in that event, one of us wouldn't relent until it became a fight to the death. No matter the loyalty, the love, when the bloodlust struck, it consumed.

"I never betrayed you, Dom. I just fell in love. I have beaten myself up about this for four years. I have tortured myself with this emotion that churned so deeply inside of me that I never thought I'd come out of the other side of the darkness I had to bury myself in. When she was eighteen, she came to me. She told me she felt it too and that I was what she wanted. I was cruel, I turned her away because I thought it was the right thing to do. Because I was disgusted with myself for wanting her that way in the first place. But all that did was

hurt us both. I hurt her and I never intended to. Not to this extent. I'm done being a coward. I never betrayed you, Dom, and you know it. If I recall, if anyone in this family should understand how I feel, it's you. After all, wasn't your one true love also forbidden?"

He stepped forward, hand around my throat as he pushed me into the wall. I stood tall, allowing him to get his fill. I glared down at him as I implored him to see the truth within my turbulent eyes. "Shut your mouth! Don't you dare talk about Mia."

"Hurts doesn't it? Thinking about the one you love and will never see again. You savored every moment with her. I won't wait until I'm on my deathbed to pity myself of the love I had and lost. I'm alive, dammit. I'm fucking here and it's about time I get to feel even a sliver of the happiness I have always wanted for you, brother. Want the same for me, bless this. Give us your approval because I have a hell of a lot of work to do before she'll even look at me again."

He seemed to contemplate something as his face turned to stone. He stepped back as his hand fell from my neck and he turned his back, walking away from me and giving me the devastating answer I never wanted to hear, "Leave," he stated once again, his tone void of any emotion. Even the hate he wielded so perfectly.

I had fought for love and I had lost it all. My family. My brother. The boys I had treated as my own.

My roots were being stolen from me. The only life I had ever known.

It hurt in ways words could not explain. But I buried it under the scars I had gained fighting at this man's side over the years. The scars I would gain still, protecting this family, even if they didn't want me to be a part of it. Even if it was from the shadows.

I gulped while I sniffed away my emotions and broadened my shoulders not allowing the pain to show on my face despite the fact I felt like I had truly been gutted and left for dead.

He'd only think me weak if I allowed such a thing.

If I had to give up the treasure for the girl though, I fucking would. So the pain in my heart right now, caused by being forced to walk away from the only life I have ever known can go fuck itself with the spikes of a porcupine.

Because the pirates got it all wrong.

It wasn't the gold or the jewels that were priceless.

It was the love of a woman as demented as the demons in your chest and looks good in the blood that they craved, that was worth sacrificing it all for. Even my life.

“If you go near her again, Reg. I'll kill you.”

“Then I advise you not to miss, brother. Because nothing will keep me away from her. Not even death.”

He remained silent then, faced into a corner that held his darkest thoughts captive as he gave nothing away. I wanted him to turn, to change his mind. But our fates were set. I guess the path chosen for me was the one of destruction. It's true that I destroy everything good and pure that I touch, so it's a good thing my little Hellcat held a hell of a lot of sin of her own.

“I'm not going anywhere, Dom. You need to get used to it because it will break her if you don't. You know she needs me. You know she is spiraling. Don't fight it over pride. It will be the death of you.”

Then I stalked from the room and prowled toward Lara's bedroom. We were not going to leave things like that, I refused to allow it when I had just given her my everything. She could damn well give me something back in return. Even if it was only an admittance that she still felt something for me.

The boys stood at the bottom of the grand staircase that spiraled upwards and split off into two separate runs, overlooking balconies that veered off to the left and the right of the second floor. My eyes flew skywards in the hope I would see her standing on top of them.

Heard and answered—there she stood. Tall and sorrow filled. I could see it, even from here. How the life of heartache

and turbulent grief was so evident, so stark in those twinkling emeralds and yet not one person around her noticed it.

She stood in those leather leggings, a laced bralette and a leather jacket. Dressed in a way that the world forever underestimated. But I saw her. I understood her!

Through the drugs and the liquor, through her no fucks given, risqué outfits, and relaxed, the world can't hurt me demeanor, I saw *her*.

And I saw her still.

“Lara.” Her name fell like a praise from my lips. The raw and husked sound of my tone, burned from the back of my throat thick with emotion that swelled.

“Don't look at her, don't you dare even talk to her!” Dalton sneered as he folded his arms across his chest in clear warning. His threat was idle, and didn't unnerve me in the slightest

I ignored him, my focus only on her. As I implored her to not make this any harder than it already had to be. “You told me if I wanted you, I had to earn you. This is me earning you, troublemaker. No matter the cost, this is me putting it all on the line.”

She stared at me, unmoving. I shook my head, at a loss as to what more I could say or do for her to trust me.

“You said that to this prick? The prick that raised you like a niece and now wants to bump fucking uglies?” Dylan snapped as he pushed off from the staircase and prowled closer with violence in his eyes. “I'll fucking kill you before I let you touch her, you fucking perv.”

I lunged at him, my beefy hand wrapped around his throat as I lifted him from his feet and slammed him flat on his back, down onto the ground. He smacked his shoulders off the floor, but I caught his head in my hand before I lowered it and tightened my hold around his throat, making sure he fully understood what the fuck I was saying.

“Listen to me, you little fucking shit. I know this is hard, confusing and whatever the fuck else comes with these emotions we have never before tested in such hot fucking

waters, but here we are. We work through the emotion of all this shit, as a family. We talk about this shit, we don't go around shouting out crap that would make any man who wasn't you, lose his fucking tongue."

He sneered up at me in disdain and I stepped back, leaving him spluttering heaving breaths on the ground below me just before Dalton and Dallas reached us and helped him back to his feet.

"Yes, I have always been your uncle. And yes I will always see you as nephews. *You*. Not *her*. I have never seen her that way. Not since she turned eighteen and I saw that fire in her eyes. The one that threatened to burn the world around her if it wasn't tamed. I walked away, goddamnit. I walked away because I thought I was protecting her. And look at her now. She is a fucking queen within her own right and that pretty crown of hers is soaked in more blood than the three of you have drawn combined. She is the soul of this empire and one day, she will fucking rule it and do you know why?" I asked, wondering if any of them have ever thought about the day that she changed. About the day she let the good little daughter go and became this darkness that got the job done, no questions asked, no prisoners taken.

It was the day she found her mother's head in a box. "She will rule this world because of spite. Because I told her no. Because I told her she wasn't good enough. She bit the hand that fed her those lies and she rose in the fucking ashes. She has been falling into this darkness of blood and mutilation, putting herself in these reckless situations and instead of calling her on her shit, you guys laugh at it like it's a joke. How long before one of those moves kills her? How long before you realize it isn't me that's the threat but your own inability to see her for who she truly is? A glorious fucking nightmare that will burn down within the flames if she doesn't have someone to walk with her through them."

"Do not take credit for who I am, Reggie. I became this in spite of you, not because of you. Quite frankly, I've lived four years without knowing your touch. Without feeling your love. I think I can live four more while you experience exactly what

it is that I felt that day. You turned your back, remember? Now watch me do the same.” She did exactly that, she turned her back on me again as she headed back toward her room and left me to face her ruthless brothers alone.

Those words should have barbed me. They should have cut so fucking deep, blood seeping through my shirt. But they didn’t. I smirked instead, happy with the way I heard her voice tremble as it wavered.

And yet again, nobody could hear it but me.

“What the fuck are you smiling at, dick?” Dylan asked as he frowned at me.

“Hope. You should find it sometime, asshole.” I smiled back at him.

“Do you really love her?” Dallas asked.

“With the entirety of my bleak, dark and depraved, rock-hard heart, boys. Your sister has a way of setting the ice aflame.”

“She has a tendency to set everything in her vicinity aflame,” Dalton mumbled. “This... I don’t know how I feel about this.”

“That’s okay. I’m still trying to figure it out too. But you’ll always be my boys and I’ll always be the same old and grouchy bastard you’ve always loved and detested,” I jested as I swung my gaze back up toward the empty balcony.

I froze when I felt the butt of a gun against the back of my head, pushed firm into the back of my skull as it cocked, and I heard the clicking mechanism chirp in my ear. “Do you love her enough to take a bullet for her though, brother?” Dom’s voice whispered around me, low and deadly. I blinked then sighed as my shoulder deflated and the tension left me with the air I puffed out but remained hard and coiled around every muscle in my body.

My heart thrashed in my chest, as I clenched and unclenched my hands in frustration.

Tonight was a night full of fucking firsts.

I was not used to standing down. In restraining myself when the darkness calls.

I left the kid with his tongue and I was about to leave my best friend with his hand.

Life was full of surprises.

“Dom,” I growled, low and violent as it rasped out of me with a husked rumble. “Get the gun off my fucking head before I shove it so far up your ass it will give you flash backs of the Christmas party in 09.”

“Then answer my question. You love my daughter so much, would you die for her?”

It was a very simple answer. I could almost hear it echoing within the silence as a slow chant that filtered around me.

The answer was fucking easy.

“Yes.”

And then the gun fired and the bullet shot through the air hitting its target.

Chapter Thirteen

Lara

A Little Wicked - Valarie Broussard

I couldn't breathe. My body felt like ice as fear and disbelief coursed through me, disarming me from the inside out. I panted and heaved as I ran my hands through my hair and pulled at the strands. I thought I was having a panic attack and that scared me even more as my eyes blurred and my pulse spasmed under my skin.

Scared.

I never get *scared*.

And now I was on a downfall and I didn't know how to slow it down. How to stop it. I never actually thought he would outright confess his feelings to my father like that. I mean, how was that even possible?

That after four years, the man I called a coward on that staircase that night had now risen to claim the woman he only now realized he had truly lost. Was it a game? Was he playing with my emotions because I had finally made him see I was not something to be conquered. I had so many questions and none of which were welcome.

This was my game.

The way I teased and taunted him. The way I lured him in only to push him back, wanting the dominance he exuded when he pushed back even harder.

But he just went and flipped the fucking tables.

He outted the relationship that had only been a fantasy for as long as I could remember and now it was taking form, shaping into a world of new possibilities and I didn't like it.

I didn't like change but fuck me if I lied one more time and said that I didn't like him...

That I didn't *love* him.

Fuck.

I was truly fucking, fucked.

He was offering me everything I had ever wanted and the fear that I had beaten out of me, was the only fear that was now stopping me from running into his arms.

This man hurt me. He betrayed my love and taunted me with vicious words. He tarnished my worth and he broke my heart.

How could I become a woman who forgives and forgets?

I was not a second chance kind of girl. The more I tried to tell myself to give in and let go, I felt like that humiliated girl, stood bare in her bedroom all alone again with tears in her eyes and vengeance in her heart.

I needed an escape.

I needed the violence.

I needed the pain.

I needed the *club*.

Just as I had snuck out of the house and made my way into the underbelly of the fight club, my phone roared to life in my pocket as it vibrated against my inner thigh and caused me to have to rub my legs together to gain a little friction. As I pulled it from my pocket, I noted the name on the screen straight away and put the phone to my ear as I answered swiftly. “Techi. Whatcha got for me?”

“A hell of a lot of nothing and a hell of a lot of *what the fuck, Lara?* Your dad’s best friend?” His broody tone echoed through the phone and I frowned. Techi wasn’t much older than I am, but he had a hell of a brain. It was why my father recruited him and gave him the name Techi.

Dude was a genius.

“Unless you’d like to depart from your spleen, I’d stick to the topic at hand,” I uttered, not at all joking.

“Yeah, right. Probably too soon,” he mumbled. “Right, anyway. The email was a burner. But we knew that. After what you said before that very entertaining meeting, I did some digging. Turns out, Black had a son. An illegitimate son with one of the whores that worked down at Shirtley’s Sugarhouse back in the day. I tracked it through a hefty amount of cash that was sent to her. But she never seemed to cash it. She gave birth six months later.”

My blood ran cold at the thought of another Black being out there. But not just another Black, a Black who was following in his daddy’s footsteps. I never got to butcher Frazier.

I was sure as fuck going to love mutilating his mini me.

“Great work. Have you told my father?”

“Yeah, he knows you’re gone as well. He wants you back at the house before he sends out a search party.” He chuckled, which made me huff a small laugh in return.

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll be back to hear the war plan right after I knock out some teeth. I need a few more to finish my canvas.”

“You’re the only weirdo I know that uses human body parts in your artwork.” I could hear the grimace in his voice and it made me smile wider.

“That’s what makes me so damn unique. Wouldn’t you agree?” I teased.

“Sure is, boss, now hurry home because your pa is on the warpath.”

The line went dead and I let go of all the pretenses I held close for comfort. I fell to my knees outside the club, down the side of the alley and allowed the dirty bricks to bite into the tenderness of my brittle knees. I never cried and yet here they were, the tears as salty as the sea and as unwelcomed as when the heat clashes with the cold and created a tornado that devastated thousands.

I was at the center of the tornado right now as I allowed it to rip me apart at the seams. I could feel it, everything inside of me as it was torn to shreds in my grief.

I never dealt with my mother’s death. I never knew how. I lost myself in trying to rise, in trying to prove to myself and everyone around me I had what it took and most importantly, I did it so I wouldn’t die. I was drowning in the light before I allowed the darkness to save me.

I tried so hard to be normal and then I had the epiphany that changed my life.

There was no such thing as normal. It was subjected to the warped perspective of an individual mind. So, I put on my head-stomper boots and kicked some rival ass.

I became the person who I was always supposed to be and when I stopped fearing it, I began to understand that I wasn’t going to have to fight for the acceptance of my family.

I already had it.

All of this time I was only fighting for the acceptance of myself.

Maybe that was why I pushed Reggie so hard. Because once upon a time, I *was* him.

Reggie gave me the power and I wielded it like a blade.

He never hid. Lied about who he was to those around him. Only to himself. To *me*.

He wore that joker smile, proud of his chest coated in blood.

But now, all of that hard work was fading fast.

I felt like the vulnerable little girl again who had scraped her knee and forced the tears to come just so her mother would hold her. I cried even harder when I smelled her. The subtle smell of roses and honey drifted on the wind and wrapped around me and it was a sensation more than I could handle. I jumped to my feet and charged through the doors. My body recoiled as it shivered under the aspiration and I ran from it.

I ran as hard and as fast as I could.

Away from the spirit of my mother.

The Gate, also known as ‘The Club’ or ‘Fight Club’ was owned and ran by us. We had called it The Gate because in that cage, when you fought your opponent, it took you to the gates of Hell themselves. You felt the burn and you never left without the brand of the devil on your skin.

I charged through the boisterous crowd who grunted and groaned in my direction before they saw who I was and retreated, clearing the path and casting weary glances as my fury and devil-etched, tear-stained face. I bolted up toward the cage and forced Chilly to open it. As I stalked inside, the fighters grounded to a halt and stared back at me. Uncertain as to what the fuck was happening, they both dropped their heads in respect.

“Didn’t know you were on the books tonight, Lara,” Johnny said as blood oozed from his open wound along his brow.

“Now I am and I want to fight the both of you. Don’t pull your punches or I’ll break your Goddamn wrist, got it?” I hissed as I got myself ready.

“Sure thing, boss,” Eddie ventured tentatively as he shared a horrified look with Johnny.

I never gave them a chance to retreat or rethink. I let the monster out and I allowed the berserker within me to soar.

Johnny wheezed, head snapped back revealing a perfectly shaped Adam’s apple that I crushed under the palm of my hand. My elbow flew back, clashing with Eddie’s nose. It popped and the spray back of his cherry blood pushed back against me and splattered against my cheek.

I smirked savagely as I circled my prey and stalked their every move. Eddie threw a punch and it sent my head swinging. I chuckled like Harley Quinn as I felt the rush.

Fuck me, that one smarted.

I liked them when they smarted.

“Keep ‘em coming big boy. Make me feel the pain,” I teased as I spun into a roundhouse kick that sent him sailing through the air in a gravity-free spinning cartwheel. He landed with a thud and I lapped at the blood pooled along the seam of my lower lip.

Johnny was up next. He threw himself at me and wrapped his hand around my throat. Lifted from the ground, he slammed me against the floor of the cage in a move that replicated Reggie’s not even an hour ago and the air rushed from my lungs like the huff of a dragon.

It blew wild and fierce against Johnny’s face and made him blink back the wind that assaulted his dark lashes. He followed me down to the ground as he straddled my waist and solidified his hold.

Darkness crept in from the corner of my eyes, darkening the world around me and I allowed it. Letting go as I basked in a moment of the in between. Floating like I was once again sucked between the veil of life and consciousness. It was peaceful here. It was silent.

But my daddy taught me to never throw a fight.

After I had been given exactly what I came here for, oblivion. I swung my legs up and snapped my eyes open. Johnny's widened in horror as he saw the destruction that dwelled within my harrowing and demented depths. My legs wrapped around his throat, and I squeezed until he could no longer breathe. He tapped out, fist slammed over and over again against the mat but I held fast, squeezing until I knew he was in oblivion too.

As I allowed my thighs to go slack, I leaned forward and whispered in his ear, "You're welcome," before I tossed him aside and stalked from the cage bloody and bruised, smiling in a warped kind of victory.

I needed the silence.

I needed the dull ache of pain that tried to awaken the numbness I have forever lived with.

What I could not handle was the pain that tore apart my chest and brutalized my very being.

What I could not handle was feeling like my mother had died all over again.

On numb and shaking legs, I stumbled toward the exit. An arm caught my wrist and stopped me, I looked up to see David, The Gates manager and one of our loyal men. "You alright, girl? I don't think I've ever seen you like this before," he asked, his buzz cut, shaven head and dark thick brows furrowed and beaded under the hue of the weak yellow lights that swung overhead. He was covered in tattoos and about seven feet tall with a chest built like a wall. But he had a heart of gold underneath it all.

"Like what?" I asked in a flat, emotionless tone.

"Bested," he replied without hesitation. "I don't know what's going on, girl. But you need to pull your head out of your ass and bring the psycho back. You hear? Bring her back. Because she was a thing of beauty. Sorrow? It looks awful on you." He smirked and let go with a comforting pat to my shoulder before he wandered back through the crowd.

I let his words sink in as I shook off the depression and searched for the anger.

It would be the anger that saved me and destroyed them all.

I kicked open the door and prowled into the back alley ready to head home and see what our plan of action was.

When I stepped into the darkness, an abyss consumed me.

Chapter Fourteen

Reggie

War Of Hearts - Ruelle

“**W** hat. The. Fuck,” I growled slowly.
Deadly. Viciously.

My ears still rang from the shot he fired. The one that whizzed right past my ear, deafening me, and embedded itself straight into the wall before us. I glared at the hole, the thought of the fact it could have been in my skull turned me deadly as I turned around to face Dom. The boys looked stricken as they stepped back with agape mouths.

“What. The. Fuck,” I reiterated again. Because the more times, I said it aloud, the more chance that fucker had of surviving.

“I asked you a question, and you answered. Given your history, I had to test that answer to be sure it was truthful,” he

declared proudly. His slick brown hair, brushed back and parted at the side, glistened under the lights.

He looked put together but rough.

That was his style.

Mine was just fucking rough and right now, rough was all I wanted to be.

“You could have killed me!” I groused low and slow as it came out through clenched teeth. Controlled. Because I was about to go nuclear, and killing my girl’s father would be a sure way to get her to remove my heart and eat it.

“If it was for her, would it have mattered?” he questioned and the answer fell with ease.

“Not in the slightest,” I admitted, then I sighed as I needed more than anything to be only fighting one battle at a time. “Look, I never asked for this, Dom. But I won’t give it up either. I only feel alive when I’m around her. The darkness of my sins shines like the night sky, lit by the moon illuminating the abyss and I no longer feel so violated by them. We have lived a long life, brother. Don’t I deserve a little bit of peace?” I asked, bone weary and tired to my core. I never wanted to lose the only family I had ever known, but to live in misery was to live as a dead man walking. I no longer wanted to live for those around me but for myself, just fucking once.

“You deserve the world, Reg. You always have. My daughter just isn’t it. I won’t approve of this union. She deserves a man who would sacrifice it all for her. Who would fight against the odds so she has that one, single, glorified moment where she feels like she has been chosen above the world and not just settled on. Mia always used to tell me that was the greatest feeling of all. Feeling like she was worthy because I gave the world up just to hold her in my arms. I chose her over everything. You never chose Lara. You walked away. For four fucking years, you turned your back on the very woman you claim to love. I always thought you a man of your word, I guess I was wrong.”

Something dark inside of me reared its ugly head at that statement. Mainly because he was right. But I couldn't live in the past, nobody ever aged in history and it was my intention to grow older or in my case older with the certifiably insane woman that I adored. I was about to say something else, I was about to try and find some other tactic to get through to the asshole I had grown up with but nothing felt right. As much as I loved and adored Dom, it wasn't him I needed to prove my love to. I held the bridge of my nose as I fought for some sense of calm. Head thrown back, I let out a heavy sigh to the ceiling and shook my head. As I looked back at Dom, it was to see his stance unwavered. The bullet hole still sat in the wall spoke a testament of how he was feeling right now.

Just as I made the decision to let the dust settle and figure out a way to get through to Lara, Dom's phone rang and he pulled it from his pocket with an undefined huff of frustration, "Speak," he commanded before the color drained from his face. His eyes were hollowed and his cheekbones grew dominant as the life was literally sucked away with whatever words were spoken on the other side of the line.

"Dom?" I stepped forward, my heavy hand landed on his shoulder as I squeezed and willed some color back into his hard features. "Dom, man. What happened?"

The boys sensed the same thing I did and shouted up the staircase for Lara. When there was no answer, Dallas sprinted up to her room but returned empty-handed and with a frown on his confused face.

"She would have gone to The Gates. She always goes there when she needs to blow off some steam," I uttered, not taking my eyes off Dom's.

"How do you know that?" Dylan asked as he ran his fingers through his dirty blond hair.

"Because I know her."

"Get her back here now, Tech," Dom demanded before he hung up the phone and held it with such a vicious grip that I thought I heard it crack the edges.

“Dad?” Dalton called as he stepped to our side. “What’s the matter?”

“He has a son,” Were the words that whispered past numb lips that trembled. I had never seen him this shaken up before. When we got Mia sent back to us the way we did, the first thing he did was go insane. The world flashed red as he gave in to his vengeance and then he broke. It was night after night, locked away within the dungeon under our very feet, crying into my shoulder that brought him back as a father and boss. He needed to let it out and I allowed him to.

“Frazier. He had a son. A son with some whore, but a son nonetheless. That is who Lara saw,” he informed us and the puzzle pieces finally clicked into place.

“And what? He found out who his daddy really was, got pissed and built a rival empire just to get revenge?” It seemed like an unlikely event, but then I thought about it, and honestly, it made perfect sense. It was the least anyone who stood in the foyer would do if faced with the same situation. I ran a frustrated hand over my stubbled cheek as I enjoyed the friction that chafed against my palm and grunted in annoyance.

“At least we know now. We can stop him,” I stated with conviction. The growl in my voice was a wicked and brutal sound that traveled around the extensive-sized space with an ominous air.

Dom looked back at me, so many emotions thick in his gaze but he remained as stoic as ever. He shut it down, everything that would hinder the hunt was lost to the darkness he and his daughter shared so beautifully. I looked back at the boys, each one, in some way, had their grief written across the hard planes of their face and I decided I’d let them have it. They needed it.

They needed to feel the pain, if only for a moment.

Too much of that numb feeling we conditioned ourselves to live with, the more it would knock us on our asses the moment the tiniest bit of emotion crept back in to say hello.

The best way to build a tolerance to something your body detests is to allow it to feel it in small doses.

“I know it feels like we lost her all over again, but we haven’t. This pain isn’t new. It is something we have lived with since the day that it happened, we had just become accustomed to how much it hurt without having to explain it with our words. We’re being forced to explain it now. But that’s okay. Because we always communicate best when we’re covered in blood and the cries of our victims drown out the emotion falling from our lips or leaking down our cheeks.” I stared at each one in turn as I spoke with such conviction, I knew they had to feel it themselves. “Who’s ready for war?”

“We end this. Once and for all,” Dom sneered, the venom thick and it brought a smirk to my face.

“Damn right.”

His phone rang again and he reached for it with an angry hand, “What?” He fell quiet as he listened. “What the fuck do you mean you can’t find her? Where the fuck is my daughter!” he boomed as the chandelier above us swayed with the heated gush of air that expelled from his lungs. “Her phone? Where?”

I yanked the phone from his hand without a second thought as I placed it to my ear and I paced back and forth. “Start talking,” I growled with an evil that layered the tone in my voice.

Evil is what I would become if anybody had laid a hand on her.

“Oh fuck, sorry, Reg, man. I’m sorry. She had a fight, kicked two guys’ asses, then on her way out, I spoke to her. Got a phone call from Techy telling me to make sure she actually headed home but when I turned back to her, she was gone. Her phone was on the ground.”

I broke the phone in my heavy grip and stalked toward the door. “Where are you going?” Dom called after me.

“To get my girl back,” I stated as I turned back to him.

“You don’t even know where she is,” he returned and there was something off in his deep green gaze that had my hackles raised.

“You think that matters? Do you think I won’t tear this damn world apart to find her? That I’m afraid of what will happen to me? That I’m afraid of what comes next? The only thing that comes next, Dom, is the death of any fucking person who has laid their hand on her. Do you hear me?”

His phone buzzed again as I forgot I held it in my hand. I glanced down as the screen lit up. Beyond the cracked glass a text appeared. Lara’s beautiful face flashed before me, beaten, bloody, and bruised. That image alone stole all the light around me and painted it red and violent. The air calmed, the sounds surrounding me faded and all I was left with was a remorseless, inhuman, blood-thirsty creature that was ready to destroy it all.

Words sat beneath the image but it took me a moment for my gaze to stop swimming with monstrous images and me to calm my breath enough that I could make sense of them.

Pretty in red, the little princess is soon to be dead...

Can you find her in time?

Come alone and find your package.

Will it be alive and breathing? Or bloody and mutilated?

1329 Dillard Street. Bring your best ;)

I must have read those words a thousand times. They played over and over again within my mind as I tried to force myself to remember the words printed on the screen of that phone after I dropped it to the ground and ran for the door. Dom called after me but nothing was slowing me down. Not even the fact that this was most definitely a trap. Nothing would stop me from getting to Lara, even in death I would find her and haunt the asses of anyone who thought to harm her into a fucking aneurysm.

I ran for the garage and instead of taking one of the decked-out and bulletproof SUV’S, I jumped on the back of a

2017 MTT and peeled out of the mansion as fast as the two-wheeled ride would take me.

Frazier's kid had to be behind this.

So far this week, we hadn't managed to get under anybody else's skin. In our line of work, it was all about power and when you had a rival, it was known. To hide in the shadows would make you weak and nobody worth their salt would take you seriously, even if behind closed doors you were shitting a brick because you knew you messed with the big dogs.

This asshole though had no idea he just poked the cage of a hound sent from Hell itself.

I pulled up at the location fifteen minutes later. The local community swimming center sat on a desolate street. It was one that was founded for the youth who couldn't afford swimming lessons and the community did what they could to change that. It was small, isolated and hued in a dingy kind of darkness. My heart thrummed in my chest at such a brutal pace that my chest itself constricted, tightening until the point of unbearable pain.

I had no idea what I was walking into.

There were a million ways this could go after being sent that damn address like it was a casual date for a hook up instead of a ransom for the life of the woman that I loved.

There were so many warning signs, but if I tried to make sense of my heroics, I'd lose my damn mind. I couldn't stop, think, or slow. I had to charge, to run into battle with a war cry and hope that my determination was enough to get her out the back door alive.

I had no intention of making it out of there with my life if the choice brewed down to my life or hers.

I'd walk with the man of death himself to see her walk back into the life she loved to hate.

I shut off the engine and stepped down from the bike after I kicked out the stand and opened the saddle back and pulled out some supplies, and fitted what I could to my body.

The sky above me began to lighten as the sun fought for the spotlight when it broke through the dark and baleful clouds. The weather was cooled, a low thrill to the air that held your skin in a vice of knowing it toed the edge of becoming a cold chill. It was an ominous awakening as a new day dawned in late October. Even though I tried not to, I couldn't help but wonder what the next few moments would bring.

It was easy being the man unafraid of anything. But no matter how accustomed you were to the danger, to the dark that was awaiting to taint your soul just that little bit more, the thought of what one second to the next could bring would always plague your mind.

Because that was all our life was made up of, wasn't it?

Seconds.

And that was the difference between life and death.

Seconds.

I didn't know it at that moment, but soon, I'd learn a deeper truth about a man without fear.

That fear wasn't an emotion to be felt by man or woman, but instead a face and it was the face of the one you loved dying slowly before your very eyes and it being all your fault.

As I moved through the night, I kept my ears open and my senses on high alert. I scaled the building and checked all points of entry. Once I secured the front doors by taking a chain and ensuring that they could not open, I mapped out the only other point of escape and my only entrance.

The back fire-exit.

I peered through the windows as I searched the shadows with the stealth and training of my military and Dom-insured background. Black silhouettes moved beyond the planes of the glass separating me from Lara. A commotion stirred from within the building and I knew I couldn't wait any more. As I wrapped the spare chain around my fist, I kept my gun easily accessible and the knife I held tight in my grip before I kicked in the back door.

No family, no brother and no firing squad.

I was on a one-man mission and I'd be damned if I failed.

The pool was cast in a deep and brooding blue hue that wavered with the surface of the water as it rippled from the activity that happened around it. There were no lights turned on, only the reflection of the water that lit the way. A man screamed and a woman laughed. I'd know her Harley Quinn cackles anywhere. My body zinged with heavy tension, thick with trepidation as I stalked further into the run-down looking pool center. Graffiti coated the walls and the words 'No Hope' stared directly at me scrawled along the top of the archway above me.

"You're so fucking dead motherfucker. You know that right? *Fuck* is my pussy getting wet thinking about all the ways I'm going to fucking destroy you," Lara hissed around an energized and frenzied declaration that I felt zing straight to my balls. They grew heavy at her voice like they knew their wicked mistress was only a few feet away.

It was the greatest torment possible for me and my cock.

"Would you shut up already? Gag the bitch, Ken," a male voice grouched in an Irish accent.

The thick and heavy kind where everything sounded like a damn slur.

"We did. She chewed through the damn thing, remember?" another male responded. He sounded older, more withered in his tone.

I wondered if his vocal box would still make a sound after I tore it from his throat.

"This is mothersmutting madness, y'know? I'm horny as hell and you two cunts are definitely not the ones I want to fuck," she quipped, not at all bothered by the threat she faced.

"Mothersmutting?" one man asked amused and a little taken back at her witty use of the word.

"Do you have no filter, ye sassy little fecker?" the Irish snapped as his heavy feet dragged along the ground as he

lumbered forwards.

I was hidden within the shadows while I moved closer, into a position that would give me the advantage in taking full control of the situation.

“Nope. So come on then lads, who sent you? Luca? Frazier’s kid?” she questioned as she tried to use the same tactic she always did. Take them off guard, creep inside their minds and fuck shit up.

I could see them both as they stopped and turned to glare down at her, faces furious at the question that spilled past her glorious lips. The dark haired man leaned forward as he traced the edge of his knife along her cheek and drew blood. She stared back at him with defiance and mockery bright in her emerald gaze and when that knife trained across her chin and to her lip, she licked the blade and allowed it to slice a small gash into the underside of her tongue before she closed her mouth and sucked the appendage, “Hmmm, I love the taste of blood,” she mused, a tickled gleam of depravity in her eyes.

“You crazy fucking bitch.” The man recoiled as he held the blade to his chest lovingly, as if she had just defiled the thing.

Lara chuckled and shook her head. “Please. This is me on a low-key kinda day. But I am bored now. So answers would be nice.” Her face turned vicious and if looks could kill, we’d all be engulfed within the flames as the second man stabbed her in the thigh and left his knife there, sticking out of her skin in an attempt to intimidate her with such a sight.

With the pain.

Instead, she looked at him blankly and shrugged. “I’ve had worse.”

I’d seen enough and was ready to end this, I’d get answers as soon as I got my pound of flesh. But as I stepped forward, a wire was wrapped around my throat and tightened from behind. I was walked forward by whatever brute of a man had just bled from the shadows and was forced into the low light of the water’s moonlit-looking glow as the three of them turned to look back at me in shock-horror.

“Ah shit,” Lara grouched as her eyes rolled skyward. “Well, it’s been fun boys.”

I dropped the chain and used the hand that held the knife to stab it over and over again into his forearm that make him yelp and hiss like a wild animal. I clawed at the meat hooks that were wrapped around me, obliterating my airways as he crushed my windpipe like it was nothing but paper he could rip apart.

Whoever held me was a big fucker, big enough that his fingers felt like fat little chubs as I flexed and wiggled my own under his grip until I took one of his digits in my hand, right after I pried it from the wire, and snapped it with a vengeance. I could hear the crack as it broke clean in half and the man screamed in brutalizing anguish. His hold went slack and that allowed me to spin and turn into him. Face to face, I didn’t spare a moment for pleasantries or a sneaky little kiss, instead I reared back and headbutted the bastard until he flew backward and straight through a glass window that lead into what looked like an office.

I turned, frantic as I lunged forward at the same moment I threw the knife I was holding and allowed it to plant itself in one of the man’s shoulders. Lara chuckled again as she jumped from her seat, hands bound behind her back and kicked out, sending the man with the knife in his shoulder right at me when she struck his back. I caught him by the blade and pushed it in deeper before I pulled it back out and dragged it across his throat. His skin parted as curdled tissue became exposed and blood flew freely. It splattered against me, coated me in red and I smirked like a maniac at the feel of taking a life and watching the bad seep back into the rotten world that made the bastard soulless in the first place.

“Don’t fucking move or she dies,” the Irish hissed, gun pointed to Lara’s head as he had them backed up onto the edge of the diving board. He tried to shuffle them backward, to get them onto the other side of the pool but Lara was resistant.

“Lara, stop. Don’t fight him, love. I’ll get you out, just don’t fight him,” I panicked as I lost myself in her complexities. I prayed this man was bluffing, that this would

not be the moment to show a man without fear how to truly be afraid. My heart rate slowed down, to the point that I had to question if I was still breathing or not. Silence descended as the world faded to black and I tried to work out my next move.

Kill this fucker.

That was my next move.

My only move.

I allowed the darkness to take me as I prowled closer, ready to take the bullet myself if I had too. Lara met my gaze and smiled at me softly. There was humor in it, a little saucy smirk that told me everything would be okay, that she appreciated this and she'd show me just how much later.

But her eyes?

They held uncertainty and that is what robbed me of the oxygen I needed to survive another day.

She threw her bound wrists into the air and placed them around the back of the man's head in order to try and restrain him. But she was reckless. All she did was push the gun that was directly pointed to the back of her head, further into her skull. They struggled as she fought for dominance and then lost her footing. They both crashed into the depths of the still waters just as the resounding echo of dread blasted through the air. A wild boom of a gun fired shattered the earth around me as the sound become lost to the crashing of the waves created from their descent. Blood billowed within the crystal depths of the pool and spread further still until it looked like a shark had torn apart an ocean full of feed.

My heart broke, splintered down the center as my life slowly drizzled away into the netherlands and a wild and harrowed desolation-filled scream tore from my throat and exploded from my chest. I dove into the pool, swimming to what felt like the bottomless depths of an endless sea and willed myself to see through the chaos and foam that bubbled around me. Two bodies twirled at the bottom of the pool and I

swam even harder to reach them. As I did, I pulled whoever I could reach first into my hold.

If it was the Irish, I'd need to kill him.

If it was Lara, I'd need to save her.

But in my terror, I hadn't notice the man I pulled from the water was already dead, bleeding out in my arms, but I broke his neck anyway to ensure he stayed that way. I frantically searched for Lara and pulled the next body close to me as I tried to fight for visibility. We burst free from the water's surface as beaded drops of H₂O lined along our brows and the rest cascaded down our flesh and clung to our clothes.

"Lara? Oh fucking god, come on, Hellcat, talk to me. Fucking talk to me, Lara! Wake up!" I plead with so much sorrow in my voice, I choked on it. I stuttered and stumbled as I battled for every word. "Wake up, baby, wake up!" I turned her in my arms and strange filled eyes stared back at me.

"I'm not passed out, Reg. I know how to swim and it was that fucker that took the bullet. I'm all good," she said slowly, sympathy thick in her eyes as she coughed up the water that sat idle in her lungs as I pulled and pushed her around under the surface in order to get her some air. Tears filled my eyes and I blamed them all on the chlorine. "I'm okay," she whispered as she lifted a hand to cradle the side of my face.

"Don't you ever fucking scare me like that. If I say stay put, you stay fucking put, woman," I sneered, anger and fear mingled within my broken and clipped tone.

"Cold day in hell when I start listening to you, baby, and the last time I checked, it's still hot down there." She winked at me and my heart started to beat once again.

It beat in sync with the pulse that fluttered at the base of her throat, the subtle flicker I was drawn to as I uttered numbly, "Did you just call me baby?"

Chapter Fifteen

Lara

Black Sea - Natasha Blume

I was not a touchy-feely kind of woman, but I was tired of being so afraid. I hid it behind appearing brave, but I'm not. I still carried the fear of rejection with me and it kept me from taking any kind of step in moving forward. The mind was a powerful thing and when it was afraid, your soul felt it too. More importantly, though, I was tired of being alone.

Humiliation was a moment of grief in return for a life-long lesson.

I had that lesson many years ago and it stuck. But I was not that woman anymore.

With humiliation came a shot to the head or a knife to the throat. I could be brave enough to trust him one last time, to give him my heart and hope he didn't break what was left of it,

because I'd only... "Tear your heart from your chest if you do," I whispered, not even aware that I had also said the rest out loud too. He looked down at me as he cradled me within his arms, riddled with a look that could burn the Atlantic and move mountains across the sea.

He looked at me as if I had just given him something as powerful as the world and my heart fluttered as my pussy clenched. "I'm tired of the games, Reg. I'm tired of fighting all the damn time just to hate you. Protecting myself from your rejection is turning out to be a lot more painful than the sting that came with the rejection in the first place."

"I never should have walked away that night. I couldn't turn my back on you without a kiss. Without taking you just for a moment. It tore me apart but I honestly thought I was doing what was best for you. But that rejection ended up being a knife to your heart because I was too selfish not to steal a taste and keep it. I needed you to hate me so you wouldn't love me, Lara. I thought loving me would be the death of you."

"I never stopped loving you."

"And I never stopped loving you. I never stopped watching, stalking and following your every move. In every shadow I stood and with every second I craved. I've never known a moment where you haven't consumed it, Lara. I fucked up, but I'm also not a good man. I deal in death and gore, not love and emotions. I fucked up and I'll probably fuck up again. It's something you'll need to deal with because I'm not going anywhere. But know, my sweet but psycho woman, that I adore you. Know that I'll spend the rest of my life trying to make it up to you," he declared as he lowered his upper body as he brought his lips to mine. They hovered, waited, assessed if this time I'd give myself to him without a protest on my lips. So I met him with lips of passion instead of hatred.

I leaned forward and kissed him slowly. I could feel the smooth satin of my lips pushed firmly against his as I snaked my hand around his shoulder and curled it into his thick hair. I

tussled the strands and threaded them through my fingers as I curled my hips into him.

A hot sensation heated along my pelvic area, deep into my core as it moved lower and lower until it sat heavy and wanton in my apex. We moved with the water, the small waves that filtered across my body added a heady sensation of desire to my senses as the coolness mingled with the inferno that was rising.

I clawed at his skin, pulled at the fabric of his soaked shirt. “I’m tired of waiting. I want you. I need you. Fuck me like I’m a good little slut, Reg. Your good little slut. Right here, amongst the dead men who tried to take me from you. Show them that I’m yours. Show them that I’ll only ever be yours.” My sultry whisper traveled on the soft breeze around us that carried my sexily sinister words to his awaiting ears. He shuddered, his large body trembling as he growled and ripped my body from the water. He cupped the back of my head and brought my body flat against his as he stood within the depths.

“You speak such filthy words, pretty girl. Such dirty, sinful, fucking words that get me harder than steel. Do you feel that baby? Do you feel how thick, hot and heavy you make me even in the water?” he rasped and my body quivered. His breath sent tingles that rushed through me, leaving me nothing but a leaf that swirled without aim through the streets in a storm.

Reggie flexed his hips, which made his huge cock grind against me, slick and smooth against my cunt as the action made me crave him even more. I could feel the bars in his dick, the steel protruded and ridged, but it still glided swiftly against me and the sensation drove me insane.

I growled, uneasy in my own skin as I felt need claw against my insides like a brutal beast needing an escape. “*Reggie*,” I breathed, head thrown back so the ends of my hair could move through the water.

“I love it when you moan my name, say it again, baby. Say my fucking name,” he husked, hot lips trailed down my throat

as he left me marked all over. I opened my eyes and saw the body floating toward the shallow end of the pool and smiled.

It felt orgasmically sinful to be this wicked and depraved.

Whoever wanted to be nice?

It felt so damn good being so damn fucking bad.

“Reggie, Reggie!” I moaned. “Own me, baby, claim me.” There was only so long a woman could wait, and if he didn’t give me what I needed, I’d give it to myself.

I rocked my hips, moving in the rhythm of a dancer with her degree in the art. I could feel the pressure build, and when he wrapped that hot and wet mouth of his around my nipple and bit down hard as he sucked, I almost shattered but instead of falling over the precipice, I was blasted back from the edge.

Reggie pinched my clit as he moved his hand under the waistband of my leathers quicker than I could process after only toying with it. The sharp and sudden sting had my orgasm dissipating and a gasp torn from my throat.

“Holy, fuck my cunt!” The words rushed out of me like an avalanche and I couldn’t take them back even if I wanted to. My mind and my body struggled to work in tandem, leaving me with little outbursts of sexy desired insanity. I lurched forward and sank my teeth into the column of his throat so hard, that crimson blood pooled within the opening and rushed slick down the back of my throat as I moaned like some fucking vampire at the shock of what he had just done. I needed some kind of release and physical violence was it.

“So violent,” he mused as he moaned and grunted around the pain that turned him on. “Only when I’m inside of you, baby. Only when my cock is sunk so deep into this cunt that I can write my name on your womb and claim it with my babe. That’s what you want, isn’t it? To be dominated, to be owned? This body, these tits.” His large hands kneaded my breasts, working them into a sensation that sent pulsating waves of ecstasy to my clit that throbbed. “This womb, and my most favorite. This glorious, fucked up and psychotic mind of

yours, darling. Now and forever you will belong to me, my sweet but psycho, woman. Do you understand me?"

Fuck yes, that was what I wanted, what my body burned for in the dead of night when I was left alone with nothing but my dirty thoughts that featured my father's best friend. This man had always owned me. There was something primal and dark that just curbed the hunger I searched for without ever really knowing I was searching for it at all.

"Say you understand!" he ordered, and I did. Fuck me, I did.

"I understand."

"Good." He kissed me as he pulled my bottom lip into his mouth and bit down so hard that it drew a hiss from my burning lungs.

He used the knife and cut down the leg of my pants, tearing them from my body at the seams, and left me in nothing but my soaked leather jacket, lacy bralette, and panties to match. I tore the knife from his grip and held it in my mouth by the handle as I helped him remove his shirt and toss it askew in the pool. Then I placed the blade on his chest, right above his heart as my eyes met his in acceptance.

"Whatever that warped little mind has conjured, baby, know that I'll love you all the same."

I smirk at that, at his knowledge that nothing about me is nice and normal. I leaned forward and puckered my lips as I placed them on his chest. A soft peck as I retreated and stared back up at him coyly as I floated in the water.

With one hand, I reached down and freed him from his jeans, fisting his huge cock as I pumped him back and forth and fingered the steel as I quivered again with need.

"Okay, I'm rethinking this now." He chuckled darkly, but my sinful eyes taunted him to retreat. I pushed forward even further, right until I placed my puckered lips above his heart while I still played with the rhythm I teased around his cock. I brought the blade to his chest and pointed it into his skin, then

proceeded to trace the outline of my lips with the knife until I had carved my kiss into this chest.

He hissed, as his hips pumped into my fist and the water sloshed and splattered over my arm and created a small whirlwind of water between us. When I pulled back, I looked down at my handiwork and beamed. The lines were a little shaky but I'd fix that later. I lapped up the blood, drawing my tongue through his essence as I wrapped my legs around his waist and climbed him with ease thanks to the pool water.

I kissed his throat, exploring every inch of him that tasted like a succulent spice I knew I'd crave like an addiction. He collared my throat, tightened his hold and made me purr loudly through the steady, intimate quiet that surrounded us. "Cute. But. Fucking. Psycho," he enunciated with pride before he pushed down on my throat and sent my head submerged into the deep depths of the pool. I held my breath, my lungs burned as arousal spiked. Before I had the chance to break the surface once again my panties were pulled aside and the thick head of his cock pushed past my entrance and the entire length of him seated so deeply into my core that the arch of my back allowed him to fill me with greater depths than I thought possible.

I screamed under the blanket of water and it turned into a sultry and pain-filled moan as I broke the surface like a goddess of the sea and wrapped my hand around the back of his neck as I breathed in clean air, tinged with death, deeply.

I bounced wildly as I ran for that high. It was a sensory overload of emotions and desires that were ready to tear my body apart. I used my hold on his neck and lifted myself higher so that I could wrap myself around him. I traced my tender fingers over the ink on his shoulders and moaned in approval.

Reggie was covered in tattoos, but it was this one that had always spoken to me. Now that I was closer, I could see the woman in more detail. The fine lines of her sugar skull make-up contoured her face perfectly and I gasped at how much she looked like me.

“Reggie,” I sighed, unsure as to what I could say at this moment as I stared at myself within the eyes of a haunted skull.

“What? You thought that I wouldn’t always carry you with me? I was just counting down the days until I could make you mine, Hellcat. I just didn’t know it until I thought I had lost you,” he rasped into my ear and I shuddered.

After everything, I realized now, that after telling me I was nothing, I was actually the one thing that consumed him. I realized that in fighting ourselves and our desires, all we had done is throw that time of our lives into the void, precious moments we would never get back.

But I couldn’t dwell on the past, I could only live in the now. In this moment.

In our forever.

All I could do is give myself to the man I had always belonged to.

I swiveled and rocked, bounced, and played until I laid back again and floated on the surface of the water. His rough hands held my hips bruisingly as he pumped into me with wild abandon growling how beautiful and intoxicating I was.

To say that this experience was otherworldly with the way the water felt beneath me, smooth and cool as it mixed with an inferno of our raging wildfire of desire. I glided through the ecstasy like I was on another planet, that would be impossible to fully explore.

“You’re everything I ever dreamed you would be, love. This cunt, it was made for me. This heart? That was made for me too.” With his hold on my neck, he helped me upright again as I held onto him, moving in tandem with him as the rough and wild thrusts settled to a slow and passionate collision that had me heaving for every breath. “I fucking love you, Lara. Now be a good girl and come all over my cock for me, baby.”

And I did.

I shattered so fucking hard, the stars took me as close to heaven as I'd ever get. I felt his release, it consumed me as it sprayed fire against my walls. I clenched, sucking him dry, as I drained every last drop. I lived in the moment, refusing to want to let reality dawn once again. This moment was one created from dreams and fantasy alike.

My desire just became a real rush of addiction.

"I only want you," I whispered a little brokenly.

"You have me and together, I promise we'll be happy. After we kill the threats that linger my love, there will be nothing to ever stop me giving you the entire fucking world, I promise. I'll give you everything."

"You just did, Reggie. You just did."

Chapter Sixteen

Reggie

Cruel World - Phantogram

I handed Lara my shirt as she lazily pulled it over her head and allowed it to fall to her thighs before she once again put on her wet leather jacket. We were still soaked, standing on the edge of the pool as we righted ourselves and got ready for the next steps of this shitshow. It hadn't even occurred to me that cunt I threw through the window was still alive.

Turned out that when I tossed his giant ass through the glass, a large shard of it lodged itself against his spinal cord paralyzing him where he laid. I kicked him in the hip with my foot, watching him jiggle a little with a smirk on my lips and when he didn't cry out from the pain I knew this fucker was more than fucked.

"Think he'll talk? Providing he doesn't choke on his own damn blood first?" Lara asked as his head lifted slightly from

the ground as he did exactly that.

Choke. Splutter and sprayed like a crimson sprinkler of beautiful blood.

I shrug, lip downturned as I stared down at him. “Depends. Clearly he can’t feel his legs. But that don’t mean he can’t feel his face.” I squatted, knife to his jaw as I began to drag a neat precise line along the bone under his chin, like a surgeon with the sharpened steel. He screamed, the sound raw and rough and it chafed against my nerves. He sounded like a wounded grizzly. Looked like one too. “See?” I grinned up at her with my lopsided smirk before I turned back to him. “Who hired you?”

“Dominic Wyelli,” he gasped and those words knocked me from my ego.

“Well that was easier than I thought,” Lara commented as she glowered down at him with narrowed eyes. “My father hired you to kidnap me?”

“H-he said that it was a test. A-a test of love,” he gurgled as the blood grew increasingly within his mouth.

“I’ll kill him. I’ll fucking kill him,” I growled as I drove the knife right through his eye and straight into his brain. Lara raised her brows at me. “I don’t care if he was one of our men, nobody fucking touches you and lives.”

“Aww, baby. I love it when you go all caveman.” She licked her lips and my chest rumbled. Fuck me, she was everything I thought she would be.

Perfection. Crazy. *Mine*.

So fucking mine, I was ready to fuck up a few faces to prove it.

Even my best friend’s. Her fucking father.

My chest burned where she had carved her kiss over my heart and I traced it with my fingers.

My crazy fucking psycho.

Everything about that moment felt unbearably right. It was like I was coming home from war, returning to the one place that held my solace.

I already felt it, the danger.

I'd become a dangerous man for this woman and even her father wouldn't be safe.

I stood as I picked up the discarded chain from the ground. "We need to leave. I have to have a word with my best-fucking-friend."

* * *

I tore down the drive and had hardly pulled to a stop before I ensured Lara was stable, jumped off and prowled toward the front doors. I kicked them open as I charged into the foyer, "Dom!" I bellowed and my voice carried around the entire house. "I'm going to fucking kill you!" The boys barreled in from the lounge, disheveled and rugged in a complete mess that stank of distress and fear. "So he told you then? I guess that is the only goddamn reason you're not out there tearing the damn streets apart trying to find your precious sister!" I couldn't hide the venomous sneer in my tone, nor did I want to. These boys were old enough to know better. To know right from wrong, just like Lara. She would never have stood by if this had happened to one of them. That fact only infuriated me more.

"Reg," Dylan sighed with sorrow.

"Don't! Don't you fucking dare! Look, look at her fucking face. Did you care when he had her tied up and was fucking cutting her?" The edges of my vision were dark, splotched in red and there was only one person I wanted to take my wrath out on.

The door creaked open a little more behind me as Lara walked in with a stoic expression as she took in the sight of her brothers. She scoffed as she folded her arms across her chest. "Figures."

"We're sorry, Lar. Once we found out, he wouldn't let us leave," Dalton mumbled with regret thick in his voice.

“Whatever,” she responded, but I could see the disappointment and sadness in the eyes she tried to make so fierce.

“Dom!” I roared with a new found anger at the sight of her underlying vulnerability.

“I take it they are all dead?” he answered in a casual tone that acted like a grater to every single one of my senses as steam practically blew from my ears.

I spun on him as he walked so carefree into the foyer and leaned against the table by the front door. I lunged at him, fist swung high as I brought it down in a swift right hook that sent his head spinning. “What the fuck is wrong with you!” I shouted, my body trembled as my anger rose as my blood boiled with a frenzy to kill.

He was still my best friend. The father of my girl. I couldn’t kill him but fuck me if I didn’t want to.

He swung back and missed. I’ve fought side by side with this man for forty-five years. I knew his every move. But I couldn’t deny that I also wanted to feel the burn. A fight was no good unless you could feel the rush. He swung again and I placed my jaw in front of it. He connected with my face and sent a wild ache sprawling throughout my jawline and cheek. I grunted, then smirked like a shark as I threw a brutal punch to his core. He doubled over, breath broken and sharp as he tried to regain stability after having the wind knocked out of him.

Lara rushed forward and placed her hand on my shoulder, my arm coiled back ready for another hit. I stopped and peered down at her. She didn’t need words, just those beautiful fucking emeralds. I stepped back and sneered, disdain trained on the back slumped against the wall.

“You’re a fucking asshole,” she stated as she pulled back her right arm, fist clenched, and just as the room felt she was going to land a punch of her own, she swiftly brought her knee up and planted one vicious strike to his groin. The color drained from his face as his lips tinted blue. His eyes widened and pain unlike anything I had ever seen flickered in his gaze.

Ouch.

Then she stepped back and stood at my side as I leaned against the bottom of the staircase and fought for a calm that wasn't coming. "She is your fucking daughter, Dom. Haven't you put her through enough?" I asked as the tension drained out of me. It was a genuine question. One I needed a goddamn answer to.

"Everything I have done for her, for my boys, is all because I love them. You know that." He wheezed as he straightened himself with great difficulty.

"I thought I did. Until you had your princess kidnapped and tortured to prove a fucking point. All because you were too fucking stubborn to accept me at my word, that I love her. That I'd fucking die for her."

"Babe, I know that you're pissed... but that was just foreplay." She smirked and I growled, my jaw hard as I ground my teeth. The sound was disgusting and evident in the room. "Nothing I couldn't handle."

"Not funny and something you shouldn't have fucking had to handle!"

"Wasn't supposed to be funny. But for your information, Reginald Ramero, I am *always* funny." She shrugged before she turned back to her father. "Why? He is your best friend. I'm your daughter. Was it so hard to just be happy for us?" she asked with something withdrawn in her tone. The darkness was keeping her safe right now, but it would soon fade and I wondered what would be left. If she'd allow me to see any more of her vulnerability.

"Why?" I bellowed outrageously.

"Dad," Dallas warned him to answer.

"You're old enough to be her dad!" Dom roared, shaking the rafters as his heavy hands slammed down on the tabletop in the foyer, upheaving all the letters which sat there as he sent them on a downfall to the ground.

"I'm not her dad, Dom," I replied with a sigh as I shook my head and straightened myself to my full height. I stared

back at him, a taunt in my dark and kill-laden gaze. “But I’m most definitely her daddy.” I took a menacing step forward and that vicious stone-set face of his shattered and a huge humor-filled laugh echoed from his chest. It stopped me in my tracks and I turned to look back at an equally confused Lara.

“Watch it, asshole. That is still my daughter.” He held his belly as he stumbled forward and brushed away the invisible lint from his suit jacket. “And I’d still shoot you,” he added seriously. “It may not be a method either of you approve of, but it was a test. My test. I have always approved of you with my daughter, Reg. I’m a father. My greatest wish for any of my children is untold happiness. No matter who gives it to them. And you, my friend, are my brother. I knew this wasn’t a game to you, but I had to be sure. I had to be certain you really would tear it all apart for her,” he explained with triumph like it was so fucking normal.

We called Lara a psychopath, I began to think the apple didn’t fall too far from the crazy tree.

“You’re sick,” I uttered in bewildered shock.

“But effective, am I not?”

“You’re a crazy fucking bastard.” I grunted as I shook my head and a chuckle escaped me.

“We killed our own men, Dad. What did you think would happen when they took me?” Lara interjected, not at all impressed as she stepped toward him.

“Quite frankly, sweetheart, I thought you’d slaughter them all before Reg even left the mansion. There was a reason I assigned those traitors the task. Two birds and one stone and all that jazz.” He lifted a hand and tilted Lara’s head, to better see the cuts on her face. “I was hoping you wouldn’t need it this time. But it looks like you did,” he commented as he saw the cuts she allowed them to brand her with. “I hope they suffered.”

“They did. And then we fucked on their corpses.” She smiled widely and Dom recoiled.

“I may have deserved that,” he relented and shivered in disgust. “Just because I approve, doesn’t mean I want to *see* or *hear* about it, got it?”

“Too fucking bad, mate,” I growled as I reached for Lara and turned her into my arms. “I’ve waited four fucking years for this.” Then I lifted her as her legs wrapped around me, my hand fisted in her hair and I kissed her so deeply, the rest of the world faded away.

Chapter Seventeen

Lara

Sweet but Psycho - Ava Max

The sun slowly rose in the distance as it cast an orange and golden-yellow glow over the docks. Not *our* docks, the docks our gun shipments were being rerouted to. I went back to the tunnels after we cleared everything up and interrogated John. Oh and yeah, this was after I got my ass kidnapped by my very own father.

Also *after* I saw Fraizer's son for the very first time.

Lucas Black.

The double of his heinous, vile, fucking father. An image that has burned a hole in my brain ever since the day I first saw the man who murdered my mother. Our family had once been allies before Fraizer wanted to test the line of succession. He wanted more than what he was worth.

Not only did his greed kill my mother, but it killed him too.

I wasn't allowed my pound of flesh back then. The kill was all Dad's. But I was not that same broken nineteen-year-old girl anymore. I was a woman and a queen, and I would be damned if I didn't feed this beast inside of me. Every part of me hoped that he would be here to oversee the interception himself, but I knew in my core he wouldn't be. I could see by the look in his eye the other night that he was a showman. The kind that stood behind the line as he fired his orders and watched an empire grow from doing nothing but sitting on his ass. Not too different from his father. He had the same ethics.

Work for shit and gain all the treasure.

I could never understand that. The front line is where I'd always be.

And if my crew went down, I'd be right beside them.

You can say what you want about the Wyelli's but we were a special breed of monster.

But that's the thing about darkness laced with evil, isn't it?

The perception.

Because underneath it all, we were all just vile, insidious creatures waiting for the moment we could burst free. The moment we could let the beast out and unchain the villain within us. Everyone had it. Everyone was capable of such atrocious acts given the right motivation to pursue them.

We were all the same, yet so very different.

But what is the difference between our evil and the evil of those who commit the very same acts?

The difference between a murderer and a cop with a gun?

Our victims.

Monsters who fight for the world and then there are monsters who fight for the kill.

I couldn't say I'm not a little bit of both, but we had a code.

Loyalty and respect. We saved our evil for the *worse* kind of evil.

Fighting fire with fire and all that.

And right now, I couldn't wait to light the damn match.

"Are you alright?" Dalton whispered into my ear as he stood at my shoulder while my mind spiraled into the void of an eternal abyss.

"I'm fine," I lied.

"No, you're not. I know you, sis. I know when the darkness becomes too much."

"That's the thing. You see it as darkness, Dal. But this darkness? It's *my* desire and I very much adore it."

His green eyes met mine and while they were eerily similar, the spark that gleamed within them was vastly different. He was not as tainted. He stared at me for a long moment, pensive and still, as I turned to better see him. "I'll never understand you, Lara, but I fucking love you. Never forget that, okay? I'll always be here for you and you will never, *ever* be alone. I'm sorry I let you down the other night." For a moment, his gaze wavered as it dropped to the ground heavy with regret. "You have never been a coward, you know?"

"Neither have you, Dal," I responded earnestly as I turned my entire body into him and forced his eyes back to mine. "Neither have you!"

"I have, we all have. Especially when it comes to Dad and following orders. You've never done that. You have never fallen in line. You do what's right and you make no apologies for it. There is no excuse for what happened when we stood by and let Dad play out his sick game. We should have protected you. Things will change from now on, okay?" he implored, eyes alight in declaration. He bumped his shoulder against mine and smiled wider. "I think it's time I let my psycho flag fly like you, aye, little sister?"

I shook my head and chuckled while I buried my face in my hands. I brushed out my hair, let out a deep sigh and looked up at him. Dallas and Dylan had crowded around us, while they eavesdropped and both smiled at me sheepishly. “I love you all the way that you are. And if it ever came to my life or yours, know that I would die in a heartbeat,” I warned them with the truest words I’ve ever spoken. “But I do think you should let the psycho flag fly. It would be wicked to be known as the psycho siblings of the Wyelli empire.”

“Think it’s about time that we shared the title and stopped letting you carry all the weight,” Dylan jived with a wiggle of his shoulders and a dance of his hips.

Heavy hands landed on my waist and I was pulled back into a hard and firm chest that I found comfort in. Reggie’s scent enveloped me and I sighed in content. I smirked and it felt strange as it spread across my face so naturally. I couldn’t remember the last time I felt this at peace with myself and my family. It was like all those fractured pieces in my soul had softened at the edges.

This wasn’t a bad love story, so I won’t say that once I got the man, everything broken within me healed.

That wasn’t how reality worked. But the shards had stopped cutting so deeply that they drew blood.

Under it all, I was still the little girl who missed the warmth and love of her mother.

The naive teenager that allowed her heart to be broken and the lonely woman that wanted her place at the table where her entire family had sat for generations before.

I was still human.

I would always be *this* and I would always desire the violence.

It was a frenzy, food for the beast, a drum to my beat and the pulse under my skin.

But that was okay because this world had a place for everybody who was different.

“Do you think he’ll show?” Dylan asked.

“Not a chance,” myself, Reggie and Dalton responded at once.

Reggie nuzzled into my neck and kissed me softly. “Missed you,” he whispered gruffly into my ear.

“I missed you too,” I responded as I moaned and nestled deeper into his arms.

“*Gag.*” Dallas heaved, making a show of being doubled over.

“Vile.” Dylan grimaced nose upturned in distaste.

“I’ll never get used to this shit, but just know this, sis... if he fucks with you, I’ll kill him,” Dalton conceded with a shake of his head and hefty shrug. “It’s so fucking weird,” he added absently.

“Who you kidding, kid? If I hurt her, she’d kill me. Or what was it..? Rip out my heart?” Reggie asked as he pulled back and turned his shoulders to stare down at me with an amused smirk on his thick lips.

“It was indeed,” I confirmed with an assertive nod of my head as my blonde curls fell over my shoulders and framed my face like a veil. Reg tucked a loose strand behind my ear and leaned forward to place a possessive kiss on my swollen lips.

“They should be here soon, we should take our places and check our weapons,” my father instructed as he came to a stop at our side. He looked out over the water that glistened like tiny diamonds and I followed his line of sight. The boat was slowly drifting in from the distance which meant that Lucas’s guys should be here soon to unload half of it before the cheeky cunts sent the rest back to us with a big fuck you.

“I’m proud of you, Lara. You did this. You got the information we needed,” he stated as he kept his eyes trained on the water that rippled. He was still awkward around me and Reggie. But that was understandable. The man had been his best friend for forty-five years. It was not like our love story was conventional.

But the best things never were. Conventional never made the headlines or sparked awe in somebody's soul.

“Can we stop with all this shit?” I snapped and it made everyone jump and they all turned worried eyes on me. “First, Dalton and the goon squad come to me with their heart in their hands and now you're telling me that you're proud? Right before we go head to head with our underhanded, cuntish den of slithering bastard, rivals?” I added before I stopped and took a breath. With a little less heat and a lot more hesitation I added, “It sounds like a goodbye and I don't do goodbyes.” I untangled myself from Reggie and moved into the thicket of bush that surrounded the perimeter of the docks. I pulled the gun from the waistband of my signature combat leathers and checked the barrel before putting it back then refastened the steel blade wrapped around my thighs. The cool feel of the chains around my neck seeped into my chest and gave each breath I took a refreshed feel as I reached up to toy with them.

It was a unique necklace, one that held six dog tags that had fingerprints engraved into them.

My mother, father, brothers and the last one that hung from my throat was Reggie's. I had them made after my mom died, and had them engraved with unique shapes specialized to them. Reggie's fingerprint is shaped like a distorted rib cage. You wouldn't notice it until you studied it. Before then, it would just look like a blob of rippled ink.

Nobody said anything after my outburst, probably because they knew I wouldn't handle it well if they did. While I cranked my neck and rolled my shoulders, tires churned over gravel and I knew things were about to kick up in pace.

Everybody took their positions and by everyone, I meant my father, Reg, myself, my brothers and six of our most trusted men. When you were confident within your abilities, you didn't need to bring an army to stand at your back. Just enough men that you trust enough to sneak through the ranks and take the bastards out at the knees. A little trick we all learned from my father and Reggie.

Apparently the ankles wouldn't do.

Reggie moved to my side as we squatted behind the vibrantly green foliage and peered out into the clearing. Just as the boat idled closer to the shore my heart began to race.

The sweet promise of violence began to creep throughout my entire body and I trembled in anticipation.

“Violence smells so sweet on you, troublemaker,” Reggie rasped into my ear and it sent arousal straight to my core as he pushed himself up against my back and trailed his hand down my stomach to settle and rest over my leather-clad pussy. He cupped me, applying pressure that sent my broken breaths into eager gasps carried by the wind. I ground my hips into him, high on the fact that we were out here in the open, hidden by nothing but a veil of leaves that kept us concealed from our enemies. The thought that at any moment, bullets could fly, I shuddered in excitement.

Two blacked-out Mercedes pulled into the docks and then two men jumped out of each car. A blacked-out van pulled up behind them next. I watched in calculation as I jutted my hips forward and flexed my cunt into Reggie’s palm as four of the suited men turned around and took formation, giving their backs to the waters and searching for any threats. Whoever trained them was as thick as a bag of dog shit. They hadn’t even checked the area before they turned their back on the van and opened it up ready to load our guns into the back.

So arrogant in their theft they thought themselves untouchable.

Oh, how it would be fun to prove to them otherwise.

“Do you think you can come for me, pretty girl? Right here, right now in utter silence while we wait for our enemies to show us their throats?” he whispered and everything within me danced at the husked sound of his voice. My eyes flickered to the side, searching our surroundings on instinct even though I knew that nobody could see us. We’re dotted all around this clearing and all hidden in various ways. I rocked a little more persistently, before I turned, knocked away his hand, and fell to my knees.

“No, but can you?” I asked in a sultry response. My tone was heavily coated in lust and I quite enjoyed this game he had just begun.

I’m a screamer. There’s nothing fun about sex and everything that came with it if you couldn’t let go and scream your release to the rafters. So, no. There was no way I could come in silence and not fall weak at the knees. It would be fun however to see if this beast of a man could do the same thing. If he was capable of silence while my warm mouth wrapped around him so tightly, that I sucked him for all that he was worth. I reached for the belt buckle on his jeans and unfastened it. He stared down at me with wild and panic-filled eyes that were blown huge in arousal and I smirked.

“You’re the devil, Hellcat,” he uttered breathlessly. “And you better open wide because if we’re doing this, I’m not going to stop until the head of my cock touches the back of your throat and you choke on me, baby.”

If only he knew... *I had no gag reflex.*

I opened wide, tilted my head back and gave him a look that taunted him. A look that dared him to try, and he took it—he ran with it as a devilishly handsome and arrogant smirk lit up his face. He pulled back, lurched forward—not by any means taking me slow and gentle—and my pussy wept at the control he had over our bodies. I let him in, relaxing my throat and swallowing him whole. But instead of pulling back and bobbing up and down, I held him there for a moment in a vice that was unrelenting. Those wild gray eyes bugged out of his head and I smirked around my mouthful of rock-hard cock and groaned. The vibrations engulfed him and he shivered. I sucked, pulling on him deeply and introducing him to a new sensation altogether.

“Oh fuck,” he snapped a little too loudly. “What-what are you doing, Hellcat?” he asked as he buried his large hands into my long head of hair.

I pulled back, letting him go and he stumbled forward with a look of indignation on his hard-chiseled face. “What are you doing? I never told you to stop!” he hurriedly said, burning

with the need of red hot desire as he chased my mouth with his solid soldier, bravely sacrificing himself for war.

“I thought the goal was to be quiet, hmm?” I asked and bit down on my lower lip to hide my teasing smile.

“Not when you suck like that. Quick, we don’t have long,” he rushed as his head snapped up and he looked back out over the clearing. “Two men on the shoreline, ready and waiting. ETA on the boat is probably another six to seven minutes judging by the distance. The other rats are still standing sentinel,” he informed me and I chuckled, getting back to work.

I took him to the back of my throat and worked him up and down as I placed my hands on his hips and used my hold on him as leverage as I began to play with my tongue, swirling it around the piercings in his cock. Once I knew he was close to the edge, I let go and held his balls in my hand, and squeezed tightly until he bellowed a harsh whispered, “Devil’s fuckery!” He shot his release deep into the back of my throat and I grinned in victory. I wiped the side of my mouth and sucked my fingers clean of his cum and he stared down at me like an owl opening its eyes for the first time. “You, little troublemaker, are Satan with tits. That was the best head I’ve ever had!”

“Speaking off, I need that list. You know, one of your past conquests? It’s time I added them to the kill file I have stored under my mattress,” I stated offhandedly as I stood back on my feet.

He tucked himself back into his jeans and looked at me suspiciously. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Deadly.”

“Okay then, sweet but psycho,” he uttered gruffly with a lopsided grin.

I turned around just in time to see the boat pull into the dock and I could hear the faint sound of a mumbled appreciation from one of the men standing on the shoreline. “About damn time. Daisy is waiting for her man to return ripe

and ready,” he remarked and it sent shivers down my spine with how slimy it felt.

I crept closer, moving around the edge of the bush, and stepped over the rocky gravel underfoot with Reggie right behind me. I bent low and withdrew the glass beer bottle I had filled with gasoline, stuffed with a gas-soaked rag that I had stashed here earlier, and held it to my chest as I moved further around to the side and closer to where my brothers hid.

My pretty little Molotov cocktail.

“Who are you kidding, Nev. You have never been a man. The only reason that chick is with you, isn’t because of the size of your dick but the size of your bank account.”

“Fuck you man, it’s daddy she screams when I make her come!” the man retorted in defense.

“Not in praise, mate. In a curse to the father that fucked her up so badly she settled on you.” The other man chuckled as I snuck the lighter out of the back pocket of my pants.

There were four men in that van, all bulked with muscle so that they could load the cargo with ease. I watched them all like a hawk flying overhead.

I saw Dalton poke his head up from the other side of the ridge where he waited and when he saw what was in my hand, he bunched up his nose and smiled like a fool. You knew the smile, the one that looked all heartfelt and sweet like you were shy with some kind of embarrassment and also shocked, great minds think alike. It wasn’t until he pulled up his own beer bottle that I realized why.

I huffed a laugh and rolled my eyes at him. When the first man lifted his foot to get a foothold on the ledge beside him in order to reach into the boat and grab a crate from one of the crew, I lit the rag and threw it in their direction. It shattered against the ground and sent a ball of fire billowing high into the air. The dark and golden tones of the flames danced and writhed like the colors of an eternal star and my insides flipped at the beauty of it. Then men screamed, one fell into the water as he sent both his arms into the air, flailing as his pant leg

caught fire. Guns were drawn and bullets were fired, all by idiotic men who had no idea what they were firing at.

“Is it common practice for men to unload their weapon before they have identified a target?” I asked, genuinely curious.

“No, but didn’t I say they’d show us their throats? This is it, love. You ready?” Reggie asked in restrained excitement.

“Born ready.”

“Let’s get this show on the road,” Dalton cheered as he stepped from his hiding spot and the gunfire died down, the cunts finally out of bullets.

One of the men hurried to reload, but Dallas sent an ax flying toward his head. I knew guns were common practice in the mafia, but when we could, we loved to get a little creative. A family that desired the gore as much as the elation that came with the kill, was one that enjoyed the creative kill, side by side. The axe embedded within the man’s skull, but he never died straight away. Instead, time stood still and sound died away as his eyes widened like saucers, bugged out from his skull as they bulged over the socket. He brought tentative hands to his head, feeling for what had impaled him before he weakly pulled it free, and when he did, he pulled half of his frontal lobe with it. He fell forward, hitting the ground instantly, falling onto the ax as it split apart his chest. Dallas pranced over to him with a pep in his step and kicked him in the side that sent him onto his back.

Retrieving his ax, he smirked and uttered, “I believe this is mine.”

I chuckled, then watched as the fire spread, the gas leaking all over the ground forcing it to spiral out of control. One of the men from the van became engulfed, his entire body burned bright like star fire embers as his whole physique turned a blinding shade of red as he cried out from the pain and I stared longingly at him in curiosity. He moved around, dancing in circles as he tried to find an escape from the raging inferno that had consumed him.

His screams grew louder and I grew more curious as I stepped toward him, gun raised as I fired a bullet over the edge of the dock and took out the bastard trying to climb free from the waters. My skin heated as the flames licked against me and I tilted my head as I peered through the fire and saw eyes that had melted, pleading with me for an out.

“Lara!” my father called, and it snapped my attention back into the now, my warped need to see beyond the veil of life faded as I turned my back on him, pleased with the sounds of his cries while we took out those who betrayed us. It almost felt like a theme song, a Wyelli anthem and I smirked at the thought. “Head in the game!” he ordered as he sparred back and forth with one of the men from the van that was four times his size.

My father was calm and collected, he knew the right places to strike in order to bring your opponent down. They were the exact same spots that he taught me. When you strike, you go in ruthless for the kill. He barely broke a sweat as he toyed with his prey and watched them drain all of their energy in this one man fight before my father struck out. Hand open, palm up, he thrust his fist forward, right into the man’s nose and shattered every piece of brittle bone and cartilage that he sent straight into the man’s brain, bringing him down to his knees. As he fell, his head hung heavy and my dad gripped him by the hair, pulled back his head, then dragged his knife across his throat, leaving him there in the debris of churned gravel and rubble soil.

Someone from behind rushed me as huge arms wrapped around me in a tight bear hug. I was lifted from my feet and smashed down into the brutal and unforgiving ground. I was so enthralled at the wrathful beauty of my family, so lost to the chaos and the destruction, I lost sense of my surroundings. I tried to cover my face, but my arms were pinned at my sides while this huge man pinned me down. I felt the blood vessels as they burst under my skin, the bruising swelled around the shapes of his knees and I could feel the pain of his weight radiate through me.

I gasped as my back arched, the pain welcomed as I shivered at the agony while a torrent of punches rained down on my face. Bones crunched and churned and I laughed like a maniac as blood seeped from the cut around my eyes. My mouth filled with the metallic taste and I waited until that spark of elation hit—until the adrenaline coursed through my veins like a superpower and recharged the energy that sat idle within my veins. I rolled the upper half of my body in a half circle as my shoulders brushed against the firm ground.

I chuckled to myself.

Right before I reared back, opened my mouth, lurched forward and sank my teeth into the cunt's face. I bit down with everything that I had, my teeth ached at the pressure I was forcing upon them but I bit down until I cut through the layer of flesh that separated his skin from his bone and then I pulled back, dragging it with me.

He screamed, the sound was harrowing enough to make somebody's stomach sink. But not mine. I laid there as I blinked through the blood welled within my eyes and stared up at his nose that now looked like a circumcised dick and smirked as I flashed him my bloody teeth. The brute fell backward while he cradled his face in extreme pain and dropped his head into his hands, trying to stave away the searing burn of agony that made my heart dance in victory.

“Lara!” Reggie bellowed while he wrapped a chain around the neck of one of the men who stood sentinel. The man's face burst with varied colors of red and purple as the veins slithered from beneath his skin and protruded like thick snakes from under the flesh.

I swiped my face with the back of my arm and a thick layer of cherry-red blood stared back at me like a silken sheen from the contrast of my black leather. I looked up and smirked back at him while I steadied my breathing and stumbled to my knees.

“You fucking bitch, cunt!” the man shrieked, as he tried to peer at me as he cupped his hands around his face.

“A bitch? One hundred percent. A cunt? I definitely have. Was that supposed to be an insult?” I queried as I stalked closer to him, knife spun between my fingers as I made a show of how I could wield it.

“Didn’t your mama ever teach you to never hit a woman?” Blood trailed down my temple and when it reached my lips, I licked it up, my breath hard and broken.

“I don’t see any woman here,” he spluttered back.

“Fair enough. But I definitely see the grim reaper,” I rasped as I licked my lips. The man’s eyes widened as the brown depths swirled in horror. “He’s standing right at your back,” I added before I drove my knife into his throat and cupped his head with my other hand so I could better pull him onto it.

From an outside perspective, it would look like I had him cradled lovingly to my hip, not that I had just driven a knife into his trachea. I allowed him to fall to the ground as the others wrapped up and handled the rest. Reggie was breaking bones, Dalton was amputating limbs and Dylan had the last man standing on his knees with a rusted razor to his throat as my dad loomed above him like death himself.

“Where is Lucas Black?” my dad asked calm and collected as he circled the man, helpless and bound on his knees before us.

A frightful sight of ruthless creatures bathed in blood and unphased by the carnage.

“Fuck. You. Wyelli scum.” Nev, as I recalled him being named, sneered as he spat at my father’s feet and threw himself forward, onto the razor held to his throat until it cut through him and he choked to death on his own blood.

“The fuck was that?” Dalton asked, shocked as his brows furrowed and his lips turned down into a confused frown.

“Somebody loyal,” my father muttered in recognition. He shook his head and pulled at the edges of his suit jacket.

The only man I have ever known to wear a damn suit to a massacre.

“This just got a hell of a lot harder,” Reggie grunted as he and my father shared a look that I couldn’t decipher.

“Yes, brother. It did.”

I wasn’t worried. Everyone was trackable. You just had to know how to do it.

Chapter Eighteen

Lara

Ashes of Eden - Breaking Benjamin

I dug through the old files. Everything we had on Frazier Black. Nothing was worth noting. Nothing new had occurred within his name or in ties with his legacy.

Afterall, there wasn't supposed to be any legacy left.

Even all the properties that he owned had been demolished. Nothing that man ever touched remained standing.

I came to the conclusion that Fraizer hadn't known of Lucas's existence at all.

That the money paid into Wendy Sommentree's Stage name—*Juicy*—account was a buy of her silence.

A bribe to keep their affair hidden from his wife. She wasn't the first, but she had been the last. He spent the rest of his days not knowing that he had an heir, a son and I knew with utter certainty that if he did, he would have killed Lucas without hesitation.

There was a reason that vile man never had a child and it was all because of his greed. He would have hated anyone who could have stolen his throne and his power.

But I had a funny feeling that it wasn't his long lost father that Lucas was trying to avenge. But the life he thought he deserved. I saw it in his eyes at the tunnels. The same look that stared back at me in the photo of Frazier and Cassie—his wife—that I held in my hand. A cold and numb kind of fury burned idle in my veins.

I was strong in many ways.

But I wasn't strong enough to run from the pain of what happened to my mother.

Like a moth, I was always drawn back to the torment.

Truth is, I was fixated on her death.

I kept files and images of the Black's. Of her murder. Everything Techie could ever find I stockpiled them within a sub-space inside my walk-in closet.

“Iris” by Diamante and Breaking Benjamin echoed around me as I stood inside my closet now.

The open space was vast, squared in shape and accented in black and gold designs. It offered opulent shelves and long black railings as well as multiple drawers built into almost every wall. A golden black, with splotches of blood red, island sat in the middle of the room filled with more drawers and a huge mirror engulfed the very back wall. I walked to it before I placed my hand up high, flat against the glass in the top right corner and pushed. The hand scanner activated and the mirrored wall pushed inward and allowed me to step into the narrow abyss before it closed behind me and another wall—a black wall—parted and allowed me entrance into my panic room.

The black wall remained open and my two-way glass allowed me to see back into my closet. I threw the photo I was holding to the side and pulled down another box as I roughly flicked off the lid. Photos of my mother stared back at me. The first one being a family photo of all of us, even Reggie. It was my eighteenth birthday and she beamed brighter than the sun. She was radiant, glorious even and every time I looked at her it was like I was staring at somebody so angelic, she could have been blessed by the angels.

Her light emeralds twinkled, and I saw myself in those eyes.

Everyone always commented on how much we looked alike. How I was her double and I would always run from it. Deny it and shut down all of the comments with a vile and cruel backlash of brutal words spoken by a broken daughter in tremendous pain.

I couldn't accept that I was anything like her.

I also couldn't accept this deep hatred I also held for her.

A hatred nobody knew about.

How could they? How could I admit that out loud?

My mother was murdered. She suffered an unimaginable hell, and the anguish she must have felt screams to me in the darkness of every night I laid my head down to rest. I would hear her cries as they bellowed around me and brought me the demons of torment.

I imagined it.

I saw it.

And most often I swore I could feel it.

She was innocent and she was taken from us too soon, through no fault of her own.

But I couldn't help this irrational hatred that brewed from her leaving me at all.

How could she do that to me? To us...

How could she have not come home?

It twisted me and turned me into a sick fucking cunt for harboring those feelings.

People wonder why I spiraled into the darkness by choice and never fought it when it came for me. They had said they didn't understand why I was the way that I am.

Dalton said the same thing to me not even forty-eight hours ago.

But this here was the reason why.

That was why I needed the darkness.

That was why I needed the void that held all of my anguish.

It took away the knowledge of what a horrid and unforgivable person that I was.

What a vicious and ungrateful, bitch of a daughter that I was.

I traced my thumb over her face and wished that I could have felt something other than nothing. "I'm sorry, Ma. But you created the monster."

"The monster has always been there, Lara. Her death just gave you the courage to let it out," Reggie uttered behind me. His voice a husked whisper that engulfed my silent pity.

"How did you get in here?" I asked as I kept my back to him and stared blankly at the photo that sat at the top of the pile in the box.

"You think you have secrets from me? I know everything, pretty girl. I even knew to hire Techy to get my handprint activated on the scanner," he admitted and I didn't have it in me to address it any further. I was drowning at the moment, held down by a heavy sea of trauma.

Reggie stepped behind me and pulled me back into him. He kept me facing forward as he rested his head on the crook of my shoulder and wrapped those ripped arms around me like he feared to let me go. "It's amazing, isn't it?" he spoke and the words were just enough to penetrate the fog that had slowly taken hostage of my mind. "How perceptive and

evolved we could be regarding others. How profound our advice could be. Yet when it comes to our own emotions, everything we know we already knew just fades into oblivion and you feel utterly alone and back at square one.”

I breathed deeply and let out a heavy sigh as my shoulders deflated and I rested my heavy head back against his chest as my neck began to ache.

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about how you blame yourself. About how you’re mad at your mother but refuse to admit it because you think it makes you a bad person.” He pulled back and turned me to face him but I was unable to meet his gaze as I stared emptily at his chest. “I’m talking about how you hold all of this darkness inside of you and it’s only a desire for as long as you don’t think it’s also a disappointment. You have always told the world you make no apologies for who you are, but in here, in this very room all you do is apologize to the dead.” I gulped at his words, a soft hand cupped my jaw as he tilted my head back and forced me to look at him. “I knew your mother, Lara. She would have been fucking proud of you. I want to show you something,” he whispered, but hovered above me in an intimate silence for a moment, those eyes bored into mine, before he reached into the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out his phone. He thumbed through it before my mother’s voice rang out and my heart stalled within my chest.

“It all starts with pain, baby. That’s just what builds us and makes this shitty ol’ world go round. The world can be saved by the right kind of darkness and lucky for you, I am that fucking darkness. You hurt what I protect, what I love, so you know what comes next right?” my mother hushed in that same low and lethal tone that I used. My breath halted, trapped in my lungs as my chest constricted. *“You die.”*

Reggie turned the phone and I could see my father dressed in blue denim jeans, leather boots and a leather jacket leaning up against a brick wall. He had a cigarette hanging loose between his fingers as he stared back at my mother with utter love and devotion bright in his eyes, a sweet smile of declaration on his lips. He watched my mother as she stood

tall and regal over a beaten and bloody man on the ground. She held something in her hand and when I looked closer, it looked like one of those banana cutter things that circulated on social media.

“You crossed the line when you took one, single, impure, look at my daughter. And now you’ll pay for it.”

“Damn, Dom. You got yourself a wild one. You better treat her right,” Reggie chuckled in a tone that was so full of comfort and familiarity.

“Oh I will, I love the fuck out of this woman. Besides, she’d kill me if I gave her anything less than she deserved. Isn’t that right, baby?” my father had asked as he pushed from the wall and stalked to her side. He pulled her into him and kissed her hard. The passion was like an entity that bled into the night around them.

“Alright, alright. We have brats to return home to, remember?” Reggie groused as he feigned disgust and discomfort. But I could hear the joy in his voice.

They were a family.

I hadn’t really understood the depths of the fact that he had lost her too. That we all had.

I mean, I knew. Of course I did. My brothers would have suffered the same, but it was so easy to get caught up in your own turmoil that it was almost impossible to see it in others.

He shut down the phone and placed it back in his pocket and he looked down at me with sorrow and grief in his gray eyes. “She never would have been disappointed in you, Lara. Because you’re exactly like her. She would have been fucking proud, baby. I knew you wouldn’t believe me so I needed you to believe her.”

I was lost for words, trying to formulate what I knew in my mind. “But-”

“She was the sweetest woman you could ever meet. Wore her heart on her sleeve, but she embraced that darkness too. As soon as she needed it.”

“Who was that man?”

“A local pedophile -”

“- Did he?”

“- No. He took photos of you at the park once when you were seven. When I investigated, I found he had many more, of many children. Your mother took care of it.”

“By...?”

“You don’t want to know. I could never finish that video. Mainly because I couldn’t stomach watching her do it.” He chuckled softly and I huffed a small laugh.

“Thank you,” I whispered as I reached up and placed a soft kiss on his lips.

“Anything for you. Your burdens are mine, love. Share them with me. You’re never alone in this world, you never have been. I’m just sorry I couldn’t be the man you needed me to be before this moment.” I could hear the truth of those anguish-filled words. They were like a jaded knife to my heart.

“Nobody ever aged in history, Reggie. Let it go because it is very much my intention to grow old with you.”

He smiled down at me, the dimples in his cheeks, so scarcely seen, dented and the sight brought a huge grin to my face. “You’re beautiful when you smile like that. When you look at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like the end of the world wouldn’t matter if you still stared into my eyes.”

“Because it wouldn’t. I don’t fear death, Reg. I fear never living. All the moments we miss,” I told him honestly as I fluttered my lashes and stepped forward to close the distance between us and settled my head onto his chest.

He held me tight, in an unrelenting grip that enclosed around me and lifted me higher than the clouds in the sky. “Get dressed, pretty girl,” he ordered softly as he stepped back and created space between us. “Wear something special.”

“Why?” I asked as I stared at him warily and half turned my hip to head toward my dresser clothes.

“Because we aren’t missing any more moments, meet me in the foyer in thirty minutes.” He jolted forward quickly as he pulled me in for a kiss, then retreated as he left me alone in my panic room which just so happened to be where I kept my best clothes.

I pulled a dress from the rail. One made of utter beauty and spent the next half an hour getting ready. I felt so unlike myself. I left behind the faux leather and risqué bralettes in favor of a dress that was once my mother’s.

Skin-colored meshing clung to my chest and arms. Black, webbed vines spiraled from my wrists, across my chest and down my torso. It gathered around my breasts scarcely and the design was so intricate that it covered everything, but still left skin colored parts of me to bleed through the fabric. The vines reminded me of tree branches. Glittered in a subtle rose gold that feathered down into a gown of the same design, the black was just a little more widespread.

I felt like a goddess and a sick tornado whirled to life in my core as I found myself hoping that Reggie loved it too.

I had gathered a small section of hair and tied my bangs into a small ponytail, then twisted it in on itself. I started at the top of my head and followed the action down to the top of my crown. It created a Viking-style looking mohawk that had high volume but was small and delicate enough to still look pretty. I curled the rest of my golden blonde hair and allowed it to fall around my shoulders in a heavy bounce of loose waves and then I painted my eyes a deep and smokey burgundy before I applied a thin layer of a nude brown to my thick lips.

I left my bedroom and descended the stairs, to find Reggie at the bottom of them in a white shirt, red tie and a black silk waistcoat, blue suit jacket and a color matched pair of jeans and those same shitkicker leather boots of his.

It made me wonder if that was why I always favored mine, unconsciously drawn to the man who wore them.

“Wow, you look-” He breathed and shook his head as if he was coming out of some kind of daze. Those stormy eyes of his, for the first time ever, had a sea blue that broke through them and took my breath away. “You look stunning, Lara.”

Emotion was thick in my throat and I struggled to swallow. I wasn't used to such an onslaught of emotion so quickly it took me a moment to find my bearings and to not tuck tail and run.

I forced myself to look steady and with shaky hands and weak legs made my way to him slowly. He took my hand in his and I'm sure he could have felt me tremble. But then again he may have thought the same of me as I'm sure his hand also quivered in mine. He stood like that for a moment, unable to take his eyes from mine and mine from his as the world around us slowed and time itself stood still.

There were no words to accurately describe our journey.

From the naive little girl with a crush to a woman who had all her heart desired.

It was still a little hard to believe, if not a little daunting too. I was waiting for the other shoe to drop, for the blindfold to be removed and the world to be standing there laughing at me. After all, the broken girl rarely got her happy ending.

He had been adamant for so long in denying his feelings that at some point, I began to do the same. I knew that I had always loved him, but honestly, I never had any intention of forgiving him. Not until he steam-rolled that meeting and not only told my father of his love for me but the rest of the family too.

He stood firm in their wrath and took all that was handed to him. Even with a gun to his head that my brothers had informed me of later. Back in that pool center, I saw the fear in his eyes. It was unnatural and didn't belong in those deceitful depths but I couldn't deny that it was there and it was irrational.

Because people like us didn't do fear.

It was a moment of self-doubt that kept us from the moment when we then decided to face it.

Because in the end, everyone decided to face it.

“You look a little lost,” he whispered into my ear as he pulled me in close. “You have that look again.”

“What look?” I asked quietly, face pressed gently to his chest as we stood there and at some unknown moment began to sway.

“The one that tells me you don’t believe what is happening.”

“Do you blame me?”

“No, love. I don’t. But I need you to understand that nothing will make me that man again. I will never be the person to hold your heart in my hands and crush it. Fuck you with wild abandon as I hold a knife to your throat? Sure. Watch you come undone as my gun teases your clit all while you scream my name? Most definitely. But I will never hurt you in a way you never beg me to, darling. And I will spend as many years as it takes in making you believe that.” The sensual rasp in his tone sent my heart into wild flutters as my pussy clenched and my thigh became saturated in my leaked arousal.

I opted for the no panty option tonight and now I’d begun to wonder if that was a mistake.

“Lara,” he groaned as his head rolled as it fell heavy onto the top of mine. “I can smell you from here.”

“That’s the point. You denied me for four years, let’s see how long you can deny yourself for the rest of this evening,” I taunted with a smirk on my lips as I pulled away from him and strutted with slow grace toward the front door.

“You’re a wicked, wicked woman,” he groused from behind and my smile grew more broad.

Guilty.

Our Bugatti la voiture noire sat idle with the engine running outside the mansion. I descended the steps and waited

at the bottom as Reggie prowled quickly behind me. “Wow. You pulled out all the stops tonight,” I teased to cover the growing anxiety in my core.

“I told you once I’d give you the world, I meant it.”

He opened my door and helped me inside before he walked around to the driver’s seat. He threw the car into gear and reversed out of the driveway with a little speed that carried the wind behind the wheels. “Where are we going?” I asked as he turned to give me a once over.

Mischief was bright in his eyes as he offered me a lopsided smirk but otherwise remained quiet. He drove for around twenty minutes until we ended up around the cliff roads that carved narrow and dangerously into the side of the mountains that offered choppy waters below. I rolled down my window, the breeze in my hair as I closed my eyes and upturned my face to the night sky with a smile on my painted lips.

“You look stunning like this, Lara. So angelic when you’re good to yourself,” he noted in a tone that was so low, I almost missed it.

“It’s easy when I’m with you. You take away all of the noise,” I whispered in return, unaware if he had heard me at all.

“Are you ready?” he asked and I opened my eyes to turn my head to face him.

“Ready for what?”

“To feel the elation you desperately crave,” he answered as he pressed down with his heavy foot onto the accelerator and the car jolted forward with a jetstream of speed pressed behind it. He flew around the cliff roads with my back pressed firmly against the seat. My heart hammered like a jackhammer as my pulse thundered beneath my skin.

My mouth was dry, all the moisture suctioned down to my pussy as that elation he referred to rushed through me and I threw my head back and laughed.

I felt like I was flying.

The car was a bullet through the wind as everything settled into place and the world around me was sucked away.

Not too long after, we pulled up to a restaurant that had just opened up on the other side of town.

It was one we owned but I hadn't yet been here, too busy with other business and tracking down the assholes who held the answers for the deceit within our empire.

It was opulent and grand. The building lit in low lights that gave it that breathtaking glow within the night as it stood out from the others on the same street. As we entered, we were immediately shown to a back room locked off from the others that dined here.

“What is this?” I asked, as I took in the backroom.

It had low lights that highlighted the rustic brick wall on the far side of the room. The opposite was aglow in ancient books with old and withered bindings as a grandiose book shelf sat into the wall itself. Black metal swirls accented each wall and were delicately placed throughout the dining room. Upside down candelabra bats were attached in the very corners of the room where the wall meets the ceilings. A massive, warped iron candelabra hung in the center of a room shaped in three tiers with lit candles all around them. The bottom level had appeared to be hovering around a pentagram attached to the spoke.

The entire room was dark and broody, yet so intimately done that it set the mood of a spectacular evening.

“Reggie, I designed this room” I noted out loud, stunned beyond belief.

It had been a random sketch I had made, wondering if I ever left the mansion would it be possible for my own home?

But leaving had never been an option.

Not until I was married and even then, it was a big if.

My father liked us to all be under one roof.

“I know,” he husked into the sensual gloom. “I found your sketch one day and spoke to your father about having it made

here, off limits to anyone but you, to use as you pleased. We both felt like you deserved your own space, one you could claim and escape to if you ever felt like you needed an escape at all.”

“I can’t believe you did this.”

“I’ve always been watching you, Lara. Even when you thought I wasn’t. I have always been there, in the shadows hating myself for wanting you and hating myself for never being strong enough to claim you.” He showed me to my seat and I sat down tentatively.

My eyes sought his and my heart stuttered within my chest as I fought to calm my breathing and keep myself even. I had been a pro at masking my emotions around this man, all until this very moment. I felt the walls I had built break all over again. I knew I no longer wanted to hate, I wanted to make room for love, but I was still afraid that he would walk away.

Being humiliated isn’t something you could just switch on and off whenever you felt like it. That night had left internal scars within my heart ever since and they were scars I had thought were there to stay. For a moment, we fell into silence. I had no words left to speak as my mind absorbed the moment he had crafted for the both of us. It was such a thoughtful thing to do and it only cemented the fact that his words had been declaring all of this time how he had truly felt for me. I smiled, not allowing the past to haunt us anymore. I had told him that history doesn’t age and I had meant it.

It was time I took the profoundness I shared with the world and applied it to my own life.

After the waiter had entered, we placed our orders and Reggie took my delicate hand in his. “I met your dad when we were five, y’know? I was on the streets, fucking around in petty crime. Dad was a deadbeat, Mom was a drug addict. I learned pretty quickly how to take care of myself. He found me literally biting the ankles of one of the fuckers that had caught me. I was a kid, but he didn’t care. He was more than happy to rough me up a little. Dom came across us and pulled a knife from his baby blue dungarees and slashed the blade

across the back of his thighs. That's where that lesson came from. Took him down instantly. He was with your grandfather, Raymond. That moment changed everything. Raymond took me in and treated me like his own." He had a faraway look in his gaze so I leaned forward and caressed his cheek with my delicate touch. "He became my best friend. I was a cunt, I know that. But I felt like I was betraying everything I stood for. Everything I loved. Not to mention ethics, I'm old enough to be your dad. It was a lot for me to handle, Lara. It was a lot for me to accept. It's no excuse, but I just wanted you to know the truth behind everything that happened between us back then."

He looked back at me, his aged eyes withered further in the expression of the heavy burden he had just shared with me. "I thought I was crazy. The soft touches and stolen glances. My heart felt like it had been captured by a prince and I had waited three years to be saved from the burning tower. Only, when I turned eighteen, it was the devil that came for me and he left me there to burn. I had never felt so worthless. Especially when I knew in my heart that this was real. I thought there was something wrong with me. Then when Mom was killed, I no longer cared about any of it. I hadn't even cared if I survived it. I was drowning," I admitted quietly as my eyes fell to the tabletop. The waiter entered once again and placed my salmon and jasmine rice in front of me and Reggie's steak and sautéed potatoes in front of him and silently left us to it. "I knew you hadn't seen me as anything more until I was eighteen. I knew that. And I knew why you pushed back against it. I just had this silly dream that I would be worth losing it all for. When I was ten, I found letters written between my mom and dad. Letters that scripted their endless love and forbidden romance. I had no idea she was the daughter and heir to a rival family. I had no idea that my dad had gone toe-to-toe with my grandfather to claim her even when he had no idea if he would support it. From then, I guess I had just always wanted to know the feeling."

He sighed and cleared his throat, as he tried to keep his voice even and not torn with emotion as he replied, "I'm so sorry, Lara. You deserved that and more."

“No, I didn’t. Not then,” I answered as I brought my emerald eyes back to his brewed storm and told him the truth I had been too afraid to admit for all of this time. “I know that now. Even if you told me how you felt when I was eighteen, a year later, everything would have fallen apart and the only thing I would have done was burn you with me. We needed this. The time and the space. It gave me time to find myself. To know my worth and to give in to the darkness. I was at war with myself, Reg. I always had been. I wanted to be this good girl. One my family could be proud of and every time I lied to the world, it only killed me slower. I wanted to be a host for my desire, not something that killed that desire like the plague.”

That was the first time I could say that out loud. That I could admit that there was a chasm of pain inside of me that I didn’t know how to handle.

Even when Reg told the family about his feelings for me, I shut down. Walked out. I had no words left to say because the game I played with him finally became all too real.

He huffed a broken chuckle and shook his head right before he brought those dark eyes back to meet mine and I gasped... Because there it was again. That bleeding blue. “Your eyes... They are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen,” I whispered in awe as I leaned over the table a little bit more. I had to stop myself so I didn’t bathe my tits in salmon and rice.

“Funny, I was just thinking the same thing about yours. They shine like crystals. Glorious, otherworldly crystals.” He met me in the middle, our lips touched and my soul soared as it reached for the stars that twinkled above us. I hadn’t noticed until we broke the kiss and my head fell back as I gazed up at the ceiling to inhale a deep and steady breath. The roof had parted as the panels retreated and opened a skyline of glass that showcased the stars.

“Wow,” I sighed.

I felt his eyes burn into me, never breaking my focus. “Yeah, wow.” He breathed and I could have sworn my cheeks

heated.

“This all feels so... Surreal. I’m not this girl. I’ve never been this girl,” I uttered as I shook my head and cut into my salmon to take my first bite and give myself some time to breathe.

“That will change. You’re my girl now, love. You can bet you’ll know that you’re the center of my entire universe.”

I smiled at that as I chewed and watched him do the same with a trouble-brewing smirk on his mischievous lips. “I feel guilty. We should be out there looking for Lucas.”

He nodded in agreement and then shrugged as he thought better off it. “We should. But that bastard will still be a snake in the grass tomorrow. As you said, we have to take our moments. Not waste them because the world will never stop spinning if we do. Our troubles will still be there when we wake, the only difference is our hearts will feel a little less heavy.”

The swinging doors opened once again but we had been too blinded by one another to notice this man—dressed to the nines as a server—was not in fact *our* server.

I smiled coyly at Reggie with a promise of glorious sensations to come later tonight held within my gaze. I remained like that, smiling at the man that I loved so consumingly, that I hadn’t understood why his face had dropped at that moment. Why his eyes had widened and a look of pure horror stole away his features. Why the color drained from his face and crept down into his neck until all of him looked as white as a ghost.

I wondered why he rushed from his seat in slow motion. Why his chair had skidded back and he had lunged toward me. Then I noticed that the view of the world was tilting and I was falling from my seat. It wasn’t until I hit the ground brutally that I heard the bang that resounded throughout the room. It echoed around us like the explosion of a bomb. The impact as I hit the floor had my smile falling from my lips, replaced with a frown. Another shot was fired and I felt Reggie fall to the

floor beside me, firm on his knees as he pulled my head into his lap, and his heavy hand fell to my stomach.

“No, no, no. Please, no. Don’t do this, baby. You’ll be okay. Everything will be okay,” he rushed brokenly. A glassy sheen tormented his gray eyes and I frowned at the sight. I hadn’t thought I had ever seen this man cry before this very moment. “Open those eyes, beautiful. Open those crystal emeralds for me, baby. Open them!”

I hadn’t noticed I was even closing them until I suddenly felt weak, the colors around me faded to black as I fought for strength, “Call Dom! Call fucking Dom now! Get me the car, someone get me the fucking car!” Shouted voices ensued around me. At first, they were evidently heard, all until they faded as the sound became distorted. Hushed and broken words whispered beyond the veil of life and death and I could no longer make sense of them.

All until one sentence was whispered directly into my ear. “I love you, Hellcat. Please don’t leave me.”

Chapter Nineteen

Reggie

Torn to Pieces - Pop Evil

I held Lara in my arms as I became frantic to do something, to do anything other than watch the woman I love die in my arms. But what could I do other than scream and shout orders out to those around us? What could I do but glare at the dead man at the head of the table, slumped to the ground with a bullet hole in his head as he stared back up lifelessly as the rest of his body remained hidden by the table?

I was torn between those eyes of death and the eyes of life that were fading right before me.

I fucked up.

I did this.

I brought her out into the world while we had all this shit going on when I should have kept her safe at home. I was

deluded into thinking that I could protect her. That I could move quicker than a speeding bullet that I watched soar through the air before it implanted itself into her chest. That I could move heaven and earth and even raise a little Hell in order to keep her unharmed.

But I was just one man.

One worthless fucking man.

My hands were saturated in liquid crimson and this time, I detested the sight. It didn't bring me joy or peace, or warped images of broken bones. Instead, it brought me heartache and despair as my heart constricted brutally in my chest and it gave me the pain of a heart attack.

But I couldn't waver, I couldn't falter in my grief.

I needed to save my girl.

I lifted her into my arms and charged for the door, I couldn't wait for a second longer. Her eyes had closed and she had stilled in her breathing. Blood pooled from the wound and I was helpless in stopping it. I had applied pressure, but if we had waited for an ambulance, I knew in my broken heart that she wouldn't make it. I rushed into the night, the cold air knocked me back a step as it assaulted me and stole away all of the heat from the room we had just left. The car sat idling by the steps, engine running as an ashen-looking chauffeur stood there with the door open.

I helped Lara into the passenger seat, but as I tried to hold her steady, she slid down, the leather slicked in her own blood. I cursed and somehow managed to get the belt around her to hold her up so she wouldn't end up on the floor. I rushed to the driver's side, slid in, and took off without any regard for safety. My foot was pressed to the floor, the speed gauge pushed to its limits as it fluttered back and forth between what it was capable of and what I was pushing it to. I skidded into the parking lot of the nearest hospital, left the car running as I jumped from my seat, and bellowed through the doors that had just automatically opened as somebody casually walked inside. "I need a gurney. I need help, somebody help me!" Just as I pulled her into my arms and stood from the car, a convoy

of blacked-out SUVs pulled up into the lot with haste, the engines roared and the tires squealed. Dom and the boys were in front of me a second later, bellowing demands and seeking answers that I couldn't give them. Not yet, I pushed past them and hurried toward the door. It felt like I was fighting against quicksand, every step almost impossible to take as I fought through the pain. A couple of nurses and an orderly stood by the doors waiting as I laid her down and took her hand in mine, my grip was unrelenting and the possibility of breaking it was lost to my fear of never being able to hold her hand again.

“Female, twenty-two. Bullet hole to the chest, SATS have been fluctuating. I lost her pulse,” I rattled off, filling in the blanks as they rushed her toward surgery. One of the perks of my days back in the military. One of the nurses took more observations right there and then and called them out to the people around her as we moved, none of which were good.

“And you are?” A short brunette asked as we turned a corner.

“Me? I'm her fiancé.” Because there was no way if she survived this, that I was not going to make her my wife. As the doors to the surgery wing swung open and they rolled her away from me, I grabbed the orderly by the arm and pulled him into me, my eyes lifeless and cold as they bore into his. “If she dies, I'll burn this hospital to the ground,” I sneered and he gulped before he took off behind the doors that kept me separated from my future. I looked down and stared at the blood that covered me as my stomach revolted.

“What the fuck happened?” Dom roared, as he gripped me by the shoulder and turned me around to face him. “What the fuck happened?” he asked again, more brokenly as a sob caught in the back of his throat.

“I-I don't know,” I answered honestly. The last half an hour was nothing but a blur of moments coiled together without a face or name. Without a voice or structure. “She was just sitting there, smiling at me. She was just smiling at me all until she wasn't anymore,” I uttered numbly as something wet trailed down my cheek and the world around me spun out of

control. There was a void that had opened in my chest and all of my anguish became directed there, to that endless space that harbored all of my pain.

“And the person who did this?” Dalton asked, as he cleared his throat and set his face. I could see the strain in his features, the ones that hurt savagely as he tried to keep his tears at bay.

Dallas wasn't so lucky. He sat on the ground, head in his knees as he sobbed, before rearing back and slamming his head into the wall. Dylan knelt beside him and pulled his brother in close and cradled his head to his chest. Green eyes peered up at me, sunk in so much sorrow that I had to look away from the torment. From the familiarity.

I had to look away from them all.

“He's still there, at the restaurant. I killed him before he rained down any more fire,” I told them before I looked back up and met Dom's eyes in fury. “He aimed directly for her, Dom. She was his target.”

“I'll head back there now. I'll see what I can find on the body,” Dalton decided as he turned to leave but stopped to look back at me. “Keep me updated.” Then he walked away.

“Dalton!” Dom called, as he followed his son down the hall to speak with him before he went to search the body of the man who could have potentially murdered his sister.

* * *

It had been days, maybe weeks.

I was uncertain at this point as I sat beside Lara's bedside with my head laid flat beside her.

Her hand cradled in mine as I held my finger to her pulse.

I hadn't left.

I hadn't showered and I had hardly slept.

She hasn't woken yet, doctors were unsure if she would.

They had said at this point that it was a conscious thing. That she hadn't woken because she hadn't *wanted* to. Survival

instincts they had called it. Bred from trauma and self-preservation. They said that her body needed to heal, so her brain was potentially waiting for that to happen. The other option was that she has just retreated into her mind. That she had not wanted to wake up at all.

It was a hard pill to swallow but after everything she had been through it did make me wonder.

I began to question her.

To question *us* and I didn't know how to process that.

I twirled the ring on her finger. The engagement ring I had placed there the second she was out of surgery and lost myself in the emerald diamond. The center was stretched like glass, and I could see my reflection in it. But it wasn't my face that stared back at me, instead it was a crystal ball of our future.

The one I had hoped we *would* and *still* could have.

A contradiction of the fucked up place within my mind right now.

I sat up, reached into my pocket and pulled out the crumpled letter that Dalton had found on the dead man from the restaurant.

Once upon a time, a life was stolen.

A little boy lost.

To the riches and the wilds, the boy was double-crossed.

I was discarded and left to rot. I had nothing left to lose, Dom.

So I decided to build an empire, and burn those old wounds you created.

I made the first move and struck the match.

I'm safely concealed away and you'll never find me. I'll watch as my enemy falls and relish in knowing that he never even saw me coming. I will destroy everything you ever created, everything you ever loved.

I won't stop until you're left in the ruins of the empire you built.

Of the empire that you stole.

I attacked the heart of Wyelli's, Dom. I attacked your little slut.

And not one of you could protect her.

How does it feel? To know that I will take it all. That I was the one who killed her and my dad was the one who killed your wife?

She fell like the blood on a rose, so fucking beautiful. Soon your world will turn blue.

And every single one of you will suffer for what you have done to me.

L. Black

I reread those words a million times before I fisted the sheet of paper again, and rippled it in my wrath. Lucas was behind all of this. He had taken everything that I loved, the heart of this family and he had tried to snuff her out like the embers of a burning star.

But stars never died. They just burned throughout the abyss, always stared up at through one moment or another in time. Through generations... Centuries.

Dom had been on the warpath, formulating a plan of attack from the hospital conference room. After Lara was stabilized we had her moved to our own private facilities. The best doctors that money could buy tended to her twenty-four seven. Dalton was never here, always out looking for answers and clues as to where this cunt was hiding. That only added to Dom's anxiety and made him impossible to be around. He refused to leave the hospital, but he also refused to sit by her bedside.

It was too hard for him and brought back many memories of the last time his heart was ripped open. I knew the feeling because I was reliving it too. Every single second of agony was heightened by an unbearable pain that tore through me.

Half the time I was uncertain how I was still alive because my entire being hurt that deeply.

I couldn't give up hope.

I had to be here, the first face she would see when she opened those pretty eyes of hers that had captured me for all of these years.

The eyes that had haunted me ever since I realized how I truly felt about her.

It was a fucked up thing, wasn't it?

Regret and wrongful decisions.

For four years, I had denied both of us the happiness we deserved out of some warped sense of loyalty and rightfulness, and for what?

To one day come to my senses only to have her ripped from my arms the moment I gave in and decided that everything that would befall us was worth the risk?

I chose the road of morality and devotion to my family.

To my best friend.

I spent all those years in peril, without having truly lived at all and I did it all to make those around me happy. Yet those very same people lived without any regard for what lingered deep beyond my facade, not one person noticed how miserable I was in return.

I'm a good liar. I knew that. But it still begged the question.

Who was I truly trying to protect? To honor?

Because it wasn't the family. I had begun to understand that now.

I was hiding from myself because I was a coward. A man I had written off before even having given myself a chance.

I never should have taken her on that date, it was a stupid move from a love-struck man.

I hated myself for it now, but I wouldn't change it if ever given the chance.

And that is what had me fucked up more than anything else.

Because I got that one moment of seeing the smile on her angelic face.

After years of being the one to put a frown there, I could never give away the moment I got to see the day I put a smile there instead.

What kind of sick and twisted cunt did that make me?

I knew in my heart that Lucas would have struck either way. That this was in his plans since the day he formulated this fucked-up journey of his.

I knew that one way or another, he would have lit the match and tried to set that fire, taking my Hellcat with the inferno that would blaze.

But I should never have made it this fucking easy for him.

She walked down those stairs, and my entire world ground to a halt. She looked like a wicked angel that had no place on this earth. The dress she wore billowed out around her like the demons of hell themselves had held it up for her descent. She painted her face in dark and wicked tones, just like her.

She had turned all of the darkness she wrapped around herself on the daily into an awe-struck moment of absolute beauty that would see angels weep and the devil purr. We were suspended in time, and I wished more than anything that we were still there, captured by that moment so that I could hold her within my arms and protect her from the danger I knew would befall her the second we stepped foot outside the mansion doors.

Everything that was finally so fucking right, twisted into something so beyond wrong I couldn't even put it into words.

Lara laid there, eyes closed, and kept me from drowning within those enthralling emeralds. Her chest still, breaths subdued as she fought for her life.

I had the untamable urge to hunt this motherfucker down and destroy him, but I was unable to leave until she wakes up.

Until I knew she would be okay.

I couldn't risk not being at her side and her thinking that I had abandoned her when she needed me the most. It was an impossible thought, one that had my fists clenched into her bedsheets. With a roar at the turmoil of thoughts that had coiled into a hurricane within my mind, I stood from my seat and sent it flying backward until it thundered into the wall. I spun and embedded my fist into the wall, the debris and plasterboard fell like dust onto the discarded chair that laid on its back.

The door swung open and Dom bombarded his way inside. I kept my eyes shut tight, chest labored as I fought for one painless breath. "You need to take a breath," he grouched. "Go and get some coffee." There was a demand in his tone and it had my eyes snapping open to glare at him.

He looked like utter shit. His shirt was open, displaying his chiseled abdomen and tattoos that covered the expanse of his chest. An intricate design of his children's names that weaved between the lines and were hard to see. Small tokens that reminded him of each and every one of his kids made up the unusual pattern. To look at it, you would think it was just some random design.

But unless you knew what it held, you would think it held nothing at all.

His hair was a mess, sleeves rolled to his elbows and his jaw was covered in unshaven stubble as he rubbed his hand across his face roughly with a frustrated breath.

"Fuck off, Dom," I sneered and his head snapped toward me with something cruel in his eye.

"The fuck did you just say to me?"

"I told you to fuck off and get out. We don't need you here!" I snapped with a savage snarl, face as cold as stone as I stepped forward begging for a fight.

“She is my daughter, I’m not going anywhere. And the fact that you think you have some moronic claim over her is laughable. You will never, *ever*, replace me, Reg,” he spoke low and deadly as he met me step for step.

“What’s laughable is you playing the doting dad. You haven’t been in here once to see her, to check on her. She has and will always be mine, and if I have to protect her from the likes of you, a man who picks and chooses when to show his fucking love, then I will.”

“I’d like to see you try.” He chuckled darkly, those green eyes of his brewed menace and violence. “I’d like to see you fucking try and keep me from my daughter. Because brother or not, I will fucking kill you. You hear me? I will fucking *end* you.” I thought he was about to do what he promised right there and then with those words, but instead, he heaved a deep breath and took a step back. “I know you’re hurting. We all are. This isn’t your fault, Reg. Playing the martyr doesn’t help us and it sure as fuck won’t help her.”

“Not my fault? You should have me strung up right now. My entrails laid at her very fucking feet for my failure. I failed her, Dom. I failed you! I never should have taken her out,” I bellowed, my fist made contact with the wall once again, to the hole that sat beside it. The impact made the entire thing cave in as the wall on this side of the room collapsed in on itself.

“Stop destroying the fucking hospital I pay for,” he snapped as he yanked me away from the wall by the shoulder. “You took her on a date? So fucking what? You think if you hadn’t made plans for the two of you that she wouldn’t have? Or that she wouldn’t have gone back to The Gates to blow off some steam? She is there almost every night. You couldn’t lock that girl up if you tried. So stop with the pity fucking party and straighten the fuck up. My daughter deserves the best and right now, you are nothing but a sniveling pup. Bring back the beast, Reggie. You’ll both fucking need it.”

“He’s right,” a soft voice croaked. “Bring back the fucking beast. I know mine’s ready to play.”

We both turned, flabbergasted at the low and vicious voice that whispered around us in brutal conviction. Lara flickered open those beautiful emeralds and my heart stuttered in my chest as she sought out the voices which must have woken her.

“Lara!” I rushed as I hurried to her side, fell to my knees and took her hand in mine.

“My love, how do you feel? I’ll call for the nurse,” Dom spoke as he ran for the door. “I need a fucking nurse in here, now!” Then he was at the end of her bed, hands wrapped around her ankles above the covers as if he just needed to feel she was alive and well. Her voice was raw and low, with each word spoken, I wondered how it didn’t cause her pain.

“I feel...” she whispered before those striking eyes locked with ours. “Like there is a fire burning in my chest and the only place I can unleash it is on the fucking cunt that ruined the best night of my life.”

Chapter Twenty

Lara

Rest In Peace - Dorothy

“I can walk,” I gritted as I stood from the bed and made my way toward the bathroom adjacent to my room.

“Dammit.” I pulled up short when rough hands wrapped around my shoulders and pulled me back into a hard chest. “Reggie!”

“Just let me help you, please,” he pleaded as I sagged in defeat within his arms. “I need to help you.” he added and I sighed, my head rested back on his chest.

“Fine. But you need to stop acting like you have something to fix, Reggie. Because you don’t and every time you act as if you do, you ruin that night for us,” I told him slowly in hopes he would finally let some of that guilt fall away.

It was a burden neither of us needed to carry.

“Lara.” He sighed.

“No, Reg.” I turned into his arms so he could see the insistence on my face. “That night was everything. I don’t care how it ended. At that moment, there was nothing but me and you. Even when that bullet hit me...” He closed his eyes tightly, as if he couldn’t bear the words. I lifted my hand, cradled his face, and forced his eyes back to mine. “Even then, the smile held. Because all I saw was you. It’s been over a month. I’m fine. I’m healed. I just want to move on and find Lucas, okay?”

“Lara, I almost lost you,” his whispered voice was doused in thick and raw emotion that had me swallowing hard as if it was my own. “You don’t understand what that feels like.”

“Yes, actually. I do. Because I almost lost you too.”

Those words seemed to shock him as he stopped arguing and helped me into the bathroom. He aided me in pulling the clothes from my body and stepping into the shower. The scar across my stomach was still welted and I absently ran my hand across it.

Reggie discarded his own clothes before he stepped under the spray of water behind me. “Dammit, woman! It’s hotter than the flames of Hell in here,” he hissed and it made me smirk.

“Just how I like it,” I murmured as I turned to face him, he pulled me into him and placed those sinful lips upon mine and captured the air within my lungs. The inferno heated all around us, cocooning us within the heat. Reggie backed me into the wall, hands on my hips as he lifted me gently so I could wrap my legs around his waist, my hands tussled within his dark head of hair.

“I can never feel that way again,” he whispered into the kiss. “I can never lose you.”

I hummed as I dragged my lips against his in a soft tickle. “Neither can I. But we all die one day, Reg.”

“Not now, not yet. Not for many fucking years,” he vowed, although it almost sounded like a prayer.

“I’m not going anywhere and neither are you. If a bullet couldn’t stop me from coming back to you, death doesn’t have a hope in purgatory to steal me from you.”

“I can’t wait. I don’t want to. Marry me, Lara. Marry me in front of those we love the most,” he asked as he pulled back to gaze at me intently. The water cascaded down our bodies and fell from us like a veil being parted.

I stared at the ring on my finger and my heart blossomed and grew full at the prospect. I wanted it more than everything, but I couldn’t, not while Lucas was still out there. “And have him try to take another day from us?”

“Fuck him. I won’t mess up again, he won’t get to us this time.” The look in his gray eyes was devastating. It took the wind right out of me and I wanted more than anything to tell him yes.

As I ran my fingers through my wet hair, I pulled my hand over my face and smeared the water into my lashes as I tried to gain a calm breath. “We need to end this first.”

Reggie grunted, sorrow in his eyes as they fell to the ground. “Let me clean you.”

I lifted his chin and kissed those wicked lips. “After you make me dirty?” I asked hopeful.

He smirked at me but it was a little withdrawn. I hated to see that look on his face and know that I was the one that put it there. “Please, Reg, understand.”

“I do, love. I do. That doesn’t mean I like it. The sooner we find that cunt the better. In the meantime, I’m going to make you feel what it’s like to be alive.”

He leaned forward, mouth open as he pressed a hot-mouthed kiss to the column of my throat. He growled as he kissed and sucked, sending endless shivers throughout my body and straight to my core. My pussy fluttered, aching to be filled by this man.

I needed it. Craved it.

It coiled like desperation inside of my soul.

“Don’t play with me, Reg,” I panted, the steam and my arousal made it hard to breathe. “Not now. I need you to fill me. Make me feel the burn, make me feel exactly what it’s like to be your woman!” I gasped, back arched against the tiles. I reached out a hand and turned the little gauge on my shower head so it would turn the spray of water from clean to crimson and the sight only added to my lust. We were covered, bathed in red and the endless possibilities where a depraved scenario like this could lead us into a situation where the blood was real, became overwhelming.

Reggie bit into my throat before he nibbled his way to my ear and bit down on the lobe. He pulled back and took in the bloody-looking rivers that swirled around our feet. “My sweet but psycho, Hellcat. You make your showers into blood baths?” he questioned with a hike of one of his thick brows.

“I like what I like, don’t kink shame me,” I moaned as he ground his cock against my entrance that wept.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, love,” he mused. “I have the same showerhead.” He winked at me before he snapped his head down and took a hard and puckered nipple into his mouth and made me cry out from the pain and pleasure of it as he toyed with the rosy tip between his teeth. My pussy spasmed as I purred, head thrashed side to side as I clawed at his shoulders and drew blood.

“Now, Reg. I need you now!”

“So needy,” he whispered as he lined the head of his pierced cock up to my clenched pussy, which was currently rippling around nothing but air. “I love it when your demands sound like begs.” He pushed the head inside of me as my mouth fell open into an O. Just as quickly, he was gone again. “But I love it, even more, when you scream my name. Do it, love. Scream my name and I’ll give you what we both crave at the moment.”

I could feel how deeply my nails had sunk under the layers of his flesh and my cunt soared at the sensation. “Reggie! God Reggie, please! I need you! I need you now!”

“Is that who you pray to when you need me, love? To God?” he asked as he pulled his hips back and thrust into me in one quick and brutal move that had all of the air within my lungs dispelled at once. He reached up, hand wrapped around my throat that trapped the rest of the air hostage and my eyes widened.

Fuck yes, oh fuck yes!

Being here, coated in the promise of blood was a live wire to my clit. It ached and throbbed as it begged for more of him. More of this sinful man doing sinful things to my body. There was something so sensual about the depravity of it all.

It was the wrongness of it that turned me into a slip and slide.

“You worship Reggie now,” he stated, face dark and fierce with those gray eyes that spoke of violence and dominance. It sent my nerves into overdrive. My entire body burned and I thought I would combust with the flames. “When you pray to anyone, you pray to me.” Then he began his assault.

I could not put into words the cosmic energy that exuded between us. He was relentless in his pursuit. It was vicious and wild, but so controlled. It was almost gentle. I knew he was holding back but the feelings it brought made it almost insignificant to however he took me.

Rough and hard or raw and gentle.

It never left a question in my mind as to who I belonged to and who was worshiping me at that very moment.

He gave me the world, stole the air from my lungs and fed it back to me with every kiss. Colors, bright and vibrant, filtered throughout the room, and all I was left with was the feeling of him. It consumed me, filling me completely until all that I knew was Reginald Ramero. I didn't want to be anywhere else, with anyone else. All I needed was this red hot ball of fire inside of me. It coiled and spiraled until I was sailing over the precipice and he was thrown over the edge with me.

Our hot breaths mingled as one and added to the stream of hot water. After we came down from our high, Reggie cleaned me and carried me back into the bedroom where he laid me gently down onto the bed. My naked frame was covered in a fluffy towel. He tucked a strand of loose blonde hair behind my ear and smiled down at me. "You're stunning, Lara." My insides heated at his affection and I blushed, my cheeks turned scarlet.

I reached up to pull him into bed with me when his phone buzzed on the counter, he picked it up and swiped as he brought it to his ear. "Yeah?" he barked, not at all happy with the interruption. His entire body went stiff as his eyes turned dark, so dark, they were almost onyx. "I'll be there."

"Reggie, what's wrong?" I asked as I sat up, he pushed me at the shoulders as he laid me back down and offered me a reassuring smile with a gentle kiss on my forehead.

"Nothing, love. Dom wants a word. Go to sleep, I'll be back soon."

Then he got dressed and a moment later, he was gone.

Chapter Twenty-One

Reggie

The Phoenix - Fall Out Boy

“We found him,” Dom growled down the line. I felt my entire body stiffen as Lara asked me if something was wrong. I hated lying to her but the last thing she needed at the moment was to be stomping around the city wearing the expression of murder on her beautiful face. Not to mention false hope if we were to show up and he wasn’t there. Bastard has eluded us for over a month now.

I dressed, then hurried out of the door to meet the guys out by the garage. We loaded into the decked-out SUVs and hit the road. Dom vibrated in his seat, a look I’ve only ever seen once before on his weary features. The boys weren’t far off from matching his buzzing intensity. I, however, remained calm and stoic in my seat. Tension coiled tightly in my shoulders and my body prepared for what was to come.

“How did Tech find him?” Dylan asked as he bounced his leg up and down in the seat.

“It’s what we pay him for,” Dom growled, not one for small talk. “Be ready. This fucker dies today. We leave him with nothing, no face, no name, and no fucking legacy. He is not Frazier Black’s boy, he is a nobody who we will leave burned to a crisp in the ruins. Understood?”

“Understood,” the boys echoed.

I stared out the window, counting down the seconds until this was over and I could return home to Lara. An hour later, on the outskirts of the city, we pulled off down a beaten path into the woods. The gravel churned under the wheels and growled back at us through the car. We checked our ammo and loaded our weapons. The driver crept slower the closer we got. I reached out a hand, landed it on his shoulder, and halted him from driving any further.

“That’s close enough, we’ll walk from here. He probably has the place rigged.

“Yes, sir.”

“Get out, stay focused,” I barked and everybody followed suit. “We got this, brother?”

“Bitch please, we didn’t waste all of those years in the military to let some punk-ass kid who is new to this world take us out now with a booby-trap.” He chuckled darkly and so did I.

When we served together, it was Dom’s rebellion from joining the life. We were young enough for him to get away with it before it was his time to rise in the ranks. Like him, his father was a good man, if not a little old-fashioned. And I guess, like Dom, his father was the same way inclined when it came to Mia.

She was tested into the ranks as well.

Dom was a little more than unforgiving with his father when it was their trial to prove though.

Can't say I blame him, I did almost knock Dom's ass out for his sick games.

Let's face it, the entire family is twisted.

Wouldn't change it for anything though.

We stalked through the woodlands, knees bent low to the ground. Each of us dressed in our military-grade armor that would deflect any attack. We blended into the night. A small cottage lit in a dimly glowing yellow light stood out from the distance.

"Stop!" I ordered, as I threw out my hand and caught Dalton by the scruff of his neck.

"What the fuck man," he hissed as he turned to glare at me. I pointed at the trip wire bordering the property and he frowned, his face twisted into a pout. "Ah, shit. Thanks, man."

"You moron." I chuckled as I bent low to the ground and tested my finger along the length of it. I stared back at Dom and showed him my teeth. "Curiosity?"

"Never killed a smart cat." Dom smirked like a shark as he used his fit physique to jump and lie flat to the ground in a steadfast push-up. "Come on lads, get down."

"You two going to fuck shit up just for fun?" Dallas chuckled.

"Duh." We both sang in unison.

"Aren't you the elders that are supposed to be responsible?" Dylan chuckled.

"Call your father old again, boy, I'll show you just how us *elders* do it," Dom sneered with a savage smile.

"Damn, the prospect of blood makes you crazed," Dalton scoffed as he shook his head and burst out in a short, low laugh.

"Runs in the family," I retorted. When we were all on the ground, laid low and stretched out wide enough to cover our heads, I pulled my knife from my leg sheath and cut the wire.

An explosion rippled throughout the air, the heatwave blanketed us in an inferno as a cloud of fire billowed like a cloud in the sky and burst toward the cottage. The act sent my heart into a wild gallop as my energy soared and my ears rang. Everything was so hyper-sensitive, hyper-aware, and hyper-ready to slaughter.

But I could do that without my Hellcat.

“That was fucking awesome,” Dallas rushed with a look of joy on his face as he rolled over to look at the flaming sky.

“Cover your eyes, you idiot,” Dom chastised.

“Sorry, Pa.” He groaned as he rolled back over and buried his head into the dirt.

I chuckled, not at all bothered about my eyes as I risked a peek and saw that the explosion had died down. Sirens echoed, resounding throughout the woods as a chorus of chatter hastily spoken joined in with the fray.

“Security,” I grunted.

“Time for the kids to play. You two get Lucas,” Dalton instructed, easily falling into a leadership role and allowing any sense of humor to die hard from his features.

He was in stealth mode now.

We watched as the three of them crept from the shadows and with precise and hard-wired precision disarmed and dismembered every security member there was on the frontline.

“And you say that Lara is the nutcase,” I uttered under my breath.

“Because she is,” Dom grunted.

“Yeah, well, Dallas is waving around a severed arm and Dylan just high-fived it.”

“Oh please, that is nothing like the time you took a terrorist’s head and used it as the head of a snowman that one year on base when they actually cashed out and got us that snow machine.”

I tilted my head and pursed my lips. “Can’t argue with that,” I conceded.

“Match made in the depths of Hell you two are.”

“And we love it.” I smirked as I stood to my feet. “Let’s go.”

On the move, we circled the cottage until we found a back door unattended and stupidly unlocked. Guess the prick thought having some booby-traps and some armed men were enough to keep the Wyelli family out.

Thankfully, we weren’t bloodsuckers, just blood lovers, and didn’t require to be invited in.

As we stalked inside, we searched the property in mission mode, everything was slow and calculated as our senses led the way. The sound of a shower drizzled in the far room and we prowled toward it.

A door opened and a male’s voice rang out, “Dave? Dave? What the fuck was that?”

“Knock, knock,” I whispered in a low and frightful tone.

“What? What the fuck was that? Who’s there?” Lucas cried in a voice that was working way too hard to sound hard and in control.

“Who’s there?” Dom sang back with a wicked gleam in his gaze as we shared a look of mutual destruction.

“Who? Who’s there?” Lucas cried once again, this time his voice faltered.

“Death. Death, kicking down your door,” Dom and I singsonged together as we both coiled and reared before kicking down the door. It flew off its hinges and flew inwards, smacking against Lucas as he smashed back into the steamed window of the cottage with enough force, the glass cracked.

“I’m going to butcher you, little boy, just like I butchered your daddy,” Dom sneered, all pretenses were gone as the bloodlust came for control. He lunged, pummeled, and pounded Lucas into a bloody mess. His nose was crooked, his eyes fused shut and his breathing slowed.

I leaned against the doorjamb, one heel kicked over the other foot as I stood chilled and relaxed allowing Dom to have his time.

I'd play later.

This man was going to feel every inch of my depravity for what he did to the woman that I love.

Dom was losing himself, savage in his pursuit for death and it was then I realized this wasn't going to be some form of art for him like it normally was for people like us but in fact, he intended to kill Lucas with his bare hands alone.

I walked forward and gripped him by his bulletproof vest and yanked him away from the near lifeless man on the ground. "Dom enough!" I barked.

"Get the fuck off me, I'm going to kill this motherfucker!" he roared, uncontrolled as he fought my hold on him.

"The fuck you are," I snapped. "You killed Frazier, Dom. You had your pound of flesh. This bastard? He's all Lara's."

"No. No! He's mine. He tried to take her from me. He tried to take my baby girl. I'll kill him!"

"Exactly," I snapped as I smacked him aside the head. "He made this personal. She needs this. This, Dom... is her closure. Her demon to slay."

* * *

Lara

My Redemption - Halestorm

I was in a deep sleep. The world around me faded to a musical haze of absolute nothingness. A shrill cry echoed through my dreamscape and it almost sounded musical. An ominous horror that traveled the halls in a scary movie. I fluttered open my eyes, as I groaned into the pillow. My blurred gaze landed on a note the second my hand fell upon something silk. I woke up slowly, almost in a trance as I reached for the note, sat up, and stared at the dress that lay on my pillow a moment before I read the note.

Find me in the place it all started, love.

But this time, descend the stairs into the bowels of Hell.

Love, Reggie.

I reread those words before my gaze once again fell onto the beautiful, white silk dress he had laid out for me. The breasts were cut out like a bralette, pinched under the bust as it slimmed down at the waist. It was long and simple with spaghetti straps and a long and seductive slit up the thigh. The back was low-cut and gathered at the curve of my ass as a thin layer of sensual lace crisscrossed at my lower back where my back dimples would smile.

Still half asleep, I dressed and held the note in my hand as I padded barefooted down the hallway, lulled by the sound of painful cries that carried in the air around me. I was engulfed, urged on by that wicked hand of depravity.

I reached the top of the steps that lead into the dungeon and stalled. I had never gotten this close before. Every time I tried, Reggie was there to pin me to the wall and whisper naughty, sinful things into my ear with lips covered in blood. I shivered at the old memories and took an apprehensive step forward. My palm itched, needing something I couldn't place.

It was more forceful, more insistent as my heart thumped wildly in my chest. The pulse under my skin thundered and echoed within my ears that were tuned into the station of anguish. I crept down the stairs as if compelled to follow the harrowing torment that echoes from the bowels of this darkened hole.

The end of the stairs propelled you into an abyss. There was no light, nothing. But I didn't need light to follow my senses. I turned left and stepped forward. After a few feet, the darkness turned into a low and gloom-filled, yellow-tinged light that showcased my way down a brick lane. I ran my hand over the cold brick walls and quivered as the coldness of them seeped into my skin, I smiled at how refreshing that felt. On the right, old cages lined the way, built into the walls like cubby-hole prisons. They were full-sized, just risen off the ground. I peered inside one, it was empty. The floor was

nothing but warped iron bars and under the risen cage was a floor that retracted. I smiled, my guess being that is where our prisoners would be forced to expel their bodily fluids.

I looked around and noticed the small thermostats opposite each cage that would burn an inferno if turned on.

“Burn the evidence, Daddy. It’s the only way to know we will always be safe.”

“My sweet girl, I’ll always protect you,” my father whispered into my hair as he tucked me into bed.

“No, Daddy. We protect each other. Open the ground and allow the flames of Hell to consume all of our bad deeds. That way, no one can tear us apart.”

I stood in awe, as I stared at the cages. He used my suggestion. I was only eight at the time. I knew even then what happened down here and even then, I welcomed it. The only thing I feared was misjudgment.

Evidence.

Losing my family.

The cries grew louder so I continued on my way, passing the rows of cells until I rounded a corner. The darkly lit dungeon cast shadows over the baleful space and I smirked at the malevolent and eldritch feel of the place.

Reggie stood there, head bowed and shoulders heaving as a man bred from the darkness. The air around him seemed to darken like he compelled the shadows and used them to blanket his frame, which consumed his complexion. A man lay on the ground, curled into a fetal position as a bloody steel chair sat behind him. A low-hanging light heated his skin as he clenched his already swollen shut eyes tightly.

He lured me to the dungeons.

The ones that had always been forbidden to me.

And the sight before me was utterly glorious.

“You got me a body?” I asked lowly. As not to disrupt the frightful air that swirled around us.

He turned, head still hung low as his eyes bore into the ground before he peered up at me slowly.

His eyes are completely black, savage, and brutal as they bore into mine and a chill skated down my spine and I smirked back at him.

“I got you an entire victim. Call it an early wedding present, love.”

My heart skipped a beat as my depraved smile widened. “For me? But I didn’t get you anything,” I pouted as I strolled over to him with a pep in my step.

“I got you, that’s all I need,” he said as he pulled me into him and kissed me deeply. “Lara,” he whispered as he pulled back to look me in the eye and the emotion there almost broke me. “This is Lucas.”

I stumbled back before I quickly recovered from the shock. I turned venomous eyes on the sniveling man and sneered like an animal in the wild. “Is that so?” I asked in a deadly tone.

He whimpered.

He actually fucking whimpered.

“Did this prick just fucking whimper?” I asked in a spit of disgust. “The man who shot me just fucking whimpered?” I lowered myself before him and kicked his head back so I could better see his beaten face. “What were the words you wrote so confidently? *How does it feel? To know that I will take it all. That I was the one who killed her and my dad was the one who killed your wife?*

“She fell like the blood on a rose, so fucking beautiful. Soon your world will turn blue.

“And every single one of you will suffer for what you have done to me. Doesn’t look like you’re a man of your word, Lucas. I don’t like men who don’t stand by their word.” I pried open his mouth and dug my fingernails into his tongue. “Here’s a bit of advice though, never wound what you can’t kill.”

He spluttered and gurgled, but no words were tangible. I spat in his face and stood quickly in anger as I stamped my foot down onto his face, his broken nose reshaped for a second time and I could feel the bone move like a snake under the heel of my bare foot.

“Where is my dad?”

“He agreed you should have this one,” Reggie rasped as he stepped close behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. He spread his bloody palms across my stomach and left his bloody handprints there. “We don’t need a massive wedding if you don’t want one, Lara. Right here, right now, these are our vows. Ones binding by death. Witnessed by the angels who condemn us and the demons that can’t wait to claim us.”

“I’d marry you in a heartbeat, Reg. Even down at town hall. But right here, right now? That sounds like a dream,” I whispered into the darkness.

It felt like here, our words were sacred, spoken on unholy ground. I smiled, ready to rain down hell, and let my psycho out to play. I spun in a circle, my silken gown billowed out around me and I threw my arms into the air with a squeal.

Reggie’s eyes bugged out of his head as he watched me in what must have been the first school-girl-inspired behavior he had ever seen from me. I chuckled a dark and whimsical sound that echoed around the dungeons of demise.

“What’s your poison, love?” Reggie husked and I spun to face him as he waved his arm to expose a deep, hallway-filled arsenal of weapons and torture devices.

I clapped my hands in glee. I ran for the table and picked up a lethal looking athame. All black sleet and hard edges. I did a little giggle of joy. The black blade bled up into a semi curve of the handle that rained down like horns and up even higher to the actual handle itself. It curved at the top of the blade and bled into a pentagram.

Perfect.

“Not the weapon I thought you would have chosen,” Reggie commented as he leaned against the wall and lit a smoke. I padded over to him as he held it out and I sucked greedily on the other end, holding the smoke in my lungs until I blew them out in pretty circles.

“Why? This is so my blade. Might as well make it fun and do a sacrifice for the big man. Haven’t done one in a while.”

“The fuck?” he barked as he stood up straight and took a step back. “The Devil? Are you talking about the fucking Devil?” It was comical at how afraid he looked right now that I chuckled.

“Hell yeah, playing with blood is fun.” He shook his head in shock as his eyes widened.

“You worship the fucking Devil?” he asked again like it was a hard thing to understand.

“Yeah, he’s my dude.” I smirked and that broke him out of the fog. His head snapped toward mine as he stalked me with a predatory gaze.

“I won’t share you, Lara. Not even with the Devil,” he sneered and I bit my lip coyly.

“Don’t worry, handsome, me and the big man broke it off when you came to your senses. But how do you think none of the women stuck? Satan kinda killed them off.”

“Lara,” he growled, gray eyes fierce.

“Yes, handsome?” I asked innocently.

“You cute fucking psycho,” he scoffed as he shook his head in disbelief.

“You’ve always been mine, Reg.”

“Then why did you make me work so hard to get you back?”

“Because you never had me in the first place, you needed to know that. I don’t fall in line for no man. You wanted me? You had to damn well earn me, baby.”

He chuckled darkly. “Well I have you now, love.”

I bit his bottom lip and drew blood, salivating at the taste of copper in my mouth. “Yes, you do. Now teach me?” I asked in a sensual whisper.

“Teach you?”

“How to do the bone thing.”

“As my love commands.” He bowed valiantly and took my hand as he walked me over to the slobbering man on the ground, rocking back and forth.

Pathetic.

Say what you want about my dad, but I’m sure as fuck glad he made us strong. He made us unbreakable.

Reggie bent down and yanked Lucas by his hair and pulled him onto his back. He extended his leg and brought his foot down onto his knee, shattering the bone instantly when Lucas tried to fight Reggie’s hold, turn and crawl away. “Try to crawl now, motherfucker,” he growled as he extended the shattered leg.

There was something so satisfying about justice. No matter how brutal and bloody it came around. I craved the waterfall of demise and seeing the bad utterly punished.

“Come here. It’s time to learn how to remove the shin.”

“Whoo! Fun!” I cried in warped joy as I hurried to his side. I kneeled before him in a pool of blood that stained my dress crimson and I somehow loved this look so much more.

Reggie wrapped his arms around me as he kneeled behind me and cupped my hands that held the athame. “The tibia is thirty-six centimeters long,” he began and he somehow made carving up a man sound so fucking sexy, it became a class I wished I could have taken in college. “So we cut deep, right beneath the bone,” he instructed as together we moved my hand and began to draw the incision down his shin, on the right side of the bone.

We proceeded to do this on both sides until I was able to pull away the layers of flesh and expose the bone. “Oh

goody!” I cheered as the shattered knee cap made it a lot easier for me to pull out.

“Like a pro,” Reggie murmured sensually in my ear. “Now break it,” he ordered with an urge I couldn’t ignore. I tried to snap it in my hand but it held fast. I frowned and stared down at the stubborn bastard that refused to break. “Not as easy, is it?” he teased and I growled.

I charged toward the wall, placed one end against the corner and stamped down on the other, then smiled in victory when it snapped in two. Small fragments splintered throughout the air and I smirked like a maniac.

“Only hard when you don’t get creative.”

Lucas screamed. It was so loud, that it echoed more than a shrill cry and my eardrums almost burst. I kneeled back beside him. I carved his ear from his head and shoved it down his throat as the crimson rivers thickened. “Can you hear the sounds of your screams?” I asked as I danced on my knees beside him. He choked and spluttered, the ear stuck halfway down his windpipe as he choked, too big for him to swallow.

“That’s not how it works, babe.” Reggie chuckled and I spun on him with a frown. “The ear generates the sound. It would be more like can you *taste* it?”

I scoffed, conceding and shrugged my shoulders, then turned back to Lucas. “Can you taste it?”

His face turned blue as the humor of the torment and torture dies away like burning embers of a flame. Darkness consumed me as that sinister urge to watch this man die filled me so wholly, that I felt nothing but malevolence course through my veins.

Lucas spluttered and choked as the white of his eyes became encaptured by a deathly colored yellow as he drew his last breath and the air rushed from his lungs in a vicious and horrid choke.

Reggie held me close and rocked back and forth. Together, we kneeled bathed in blood and constructed a frightfully

warped and beautiful masterpiece. He accepted me. All of me, as I accepted him.

He knew the darkest parts of me, the parts I had kept hidden even from myself.

He knew of my hate for my mother's death, the hate I held for myself for hating her.

He knew of my thirst for violence, pain and death, and he never judged me for it. Even when he was hell-bent on keeping me from becoming a target fueled by the vengeance of men with bruised egos at a woman's wrath. He watched me, protected me, even from the shadows. Even from myself.

He held my desire in his blood-soaked hands and he caressed it instead of shattering it to dust. He nurtured the depraved parts of my soul just as I nurtured his.

Here, in the dead of night, only a sick and twisted kind of love dwelt.

And I couldn't be happier.

"How about it, love? My thick, hard cock sliding into your tight and fluttering, gushing-wet pussy. Right here, bathed in real blood?" He growled and I trembled within his hold.

"I think you just read my mind." Then I turned, drawing the blood from the ground.

He captured my wrist and shook his head. "I think we need to do this right."

He draws the blade across my collarbone as he did before back in that alley, only this time on myself. He leaned forward, lips hovered just above the line that wells a pretty colored crimson. "Tell the Devil, his services are no longer required. You have a new darkness to consume you now." Then, he licked away the trail of my blood and hummed with appreciation.

Epilogue

Lara

Burned At Both Ends II - Motionless In White

I spun under the dark lights of gothic beauty. The old derelict church hidden and abandoned in the Woods Of Massacre came together just as I envisioned. People boycotted this place years ago when it became public news that this was a favored place for murderers to make their dumps.

But death didn't make this place any less stunning.

If anything, it made it even more enchanting.

I was a monster that walked amongst the innocents I protected. I somehow felt like every life that was stolen and forever lost here stood at my side and blessed this union.

It was a silly thought. But I couldn't help but feel the apparition of them brush against my skin.

It brought an unhindered smile to my burgundy-painted lips.

The black candles soared and protruded from black and ruby-encrusted candelabras that hung from the walls that lined the aisle. I flattened my dress.

The black fabric shimmered under the yellow light of the flames. The bust curved to my breasts and held in my waist. The raven gown fell straight down the length of my legs. A swirl and diamond embellished skin cut-out shape sat high on my thigh. A skirt wrapped around my hips to turn the dress into a wedding dress, but it could easily be detached. It was understated, but it was me.

When I was wearing it, I felt like the most beautiful woman in the world.

My dad bled from the shadows and stepped up beside me. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I’m floating on the stars,” I admitted with a sigh.

“It’s a good feeling to have. I still remember the way it felt when I married your mother,” he whispered, voice thick with emotion.

“Pa, I can’t. I can’t think about it.” I shook my head and stepped away, needing to clear my head.

“I know,” he rushed as he reached out a hand and gripped my wrist, pulling me back into him. “I know, love. I know. I just wanted to give you this.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a large jewelry box. When he opened it, I gasped. What sat inside was more beautiful than any creation. A dagger formed the shape of a hair clip. It was covered in sapphire and burgundy stones but was primarily black. It took my breath away as tears welled within my darkly painted eyes.

“It was your mother’s, she wore it on our wedding day,” he uttered in a voice thick with emotion.

I choked on it.

On all of it.

His emotion, my emotion. The turmoil of not having my mother here today—It ruined all of the happy parts of me and I thought I might drown from the pain.

I fell to my knees, as I cradled the clip and cried like a child. This was the first time I had ever cried in front of my father. The first time I had ever shown weakness, but the anguish that tore apart my chest was too much to bear.

I could no longer breathe, the air stolen from my lungs as my chest ached in the coldness that consumed me to the point of pain. My throat burned and my body trembled.

My father fell to his knees and pulled me into his arms. He wrapped them around me and I struggled to remember the last time I allowed him to hold me.

To help me when I was suffering.

“Daddy,” I sobbed and I felt foolish for it. “Daddy, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Shh, you have nothing to apologize for, my love. *Nothing.*”

If only that was true. But there was so much more to my mother’s death than I had ever admitted. More to the reason I allowed that darkness in.

I was to blame for her murder.

“If I hadn’t snuck out, if I hadn’t gone to The Gates, she would never have come looking for me. I was angry. I was consumed with pain and humiliation and I just wanted to fight it out. I needed to make something hurt as deeply as I was hurting inside and she only left the mansion that night to try and help me. Because she *loved* me.” I cried harder, my voice was unrecognizable as it became raw and painful. “Frazier was only able to grab her unattended because of me.”

“Enough of that,” he barked as he held me tighter, only so he could shake me and bring my chin up so I could look into his eyes. I choked on a sob, shocked at his reaction as he held my face in his hands. “Your mother was a fighter. Just like you. And just like you, she would have done anything for those she loved. You were her angel, sweetheart. It killed her

inside, every day to see you suffering. But she knew. She knew even then why.” He laughed a little brokenly as his gaze took on a faraway look. “I used to think it was because of a boy. She told me that it was. She even told me that it was about Reggie in fact.”

“How?” I gasped as my eyes widened.

“Because your mother knew her daughter. She said you had a crush, that she trusted Reggie, and wouldn’t be surprised if one day you grew into the woman that would tie him down. I laughed it off, told her I’d kill him should that happen,” he scoffed and his eyes found mine again. “But she also told me that wasn’t why you were spiraling. She said you were struggling so much because you were hiding. Hiding who you were, who you craved to be. That you feared the darkness, instead of embracing it. We loved you regardless of how insane you were up here, darling.” He tapped my temple softly with a sad smile on his tear-ridden face. “That is what she was coming to tell you that night. You are not to blame for her death and those that are, are long dead and buried in equal pieces. The crazy didn’t just pick you, love. It runs in the family. Now, wipe those tears, we have a wedding to wrap up and a honeymoon to send you away on.” He helped me stand and pulled me into his arms, then he squeezed me tightly. I felt so much love, so much warmth, seep from him into me and I basked in the sensation. “I am so fucking proud of you, baby girl. Your mother would be too.”

I wiped my tears and fixed my face as my father and I walked back down the aisle and waited for the seats to be filled with our closest family and friends. It was a small wedding, with not even thirty people on the guest list.

This was for us, nobody else.

“Heaven” by Julia Michaels resounded throughout the church and my stomach dipped with excited anticipation. My father held me close, my arm threaded through his own as he walked me back down the aisle with an expression of pride on his face.

All of my brothers stood at Reggie's back, tears in each one of their eyes.

Even Dalton had a glassy sheen in his gaze as he looked at me like his heart was so full of joy and utterly broken at watching his baby sister grow up all at once.

Dad handed me over to Reggie, who was even more handsome than the first time I ever saw him. He stood before me in a deep crimson suit, one that was so dark, it was almost black, and took both my hands in his.

The world grounded to a halt. Everything faded away until the only thing left was me and him.

Reggie

Lara stood before me like an image of perfection. Her black dress fell to the ground in a ruffle of dark grace and utter beauty. The deep V of her bodice contoured her figure perfectly. The subtle swirls and stunning beading made her glisten under the low light. The spaghetti straps encrusted in black diamonds shone almost as brightly as her sparkling emeralds.

Once, I was a foolish man who lived for the masses and not for his desire.

I made myself miserable trying to conform to society and expectations.

I lived my life by the blood while unknowingly stopping the flow of my own within my veins. It wasn't until Lara revived me that I learned what I was truly missing out on.

Love and life lived in tandem.

You were merely existing until you had someone to exist for.

My biggest regret was all the time lost. All the nights missed that I could have held her.

Even in her darkest hours, I watched from the shadows, unable to take that step forward. It wasn't until she forced me to walk the plank that I really understood there was nothing to fear in the waters if you could swim.

I took her hand in mine and lost myself in the eyes I found my solace. “Lara. I was a dying man before you. Your infatuation was a frustration and then when you turned eighteen and you got that look in your eyes, it was me who became infatuated with what I saw there. A kindred soul, an aching spirit, and every part of me wanted to reach out and calm the demons that I saw there. But I was a coward. Not even half the man you needed me to be. I have no idea why you loved me and love me still, but for every day that you do, I promise to become a man worthy of that love. Through crimson rivers, baby. I’ll swim with you through them all.”

I almost choked on my words as I tried to get through them. Tears rimmed my eyes but refused to fall, only my wife would get to kiss away my weakness, just as I will hers.

“Reggie, that first night, when you caught me on the steps of the dungeon when I was fifteen and sent me away, you woke something in me. I had always felt different, so utterly out of place that every day became a trial I would have to face alone. But when you rose from the abyss, covered in blood, I knew what it was that I was missing. You may have tried to hide your darkness from me, but what I saw in your eyes that night was recognition. You made me face who I was and who I was to become. Everything that has happened, happened for a reason. The world wasn’t ready for our love back then and I wasn’t ready for you. No matter how much I try to believe differently. I would have burned you in trying to find myself. And unlike a phoenix we wouldn’t have risen in the ashes, we would have gone down with the flames. Your resistance, your patience, and your morality are what made this possible. You took something that walked on tender legs and strengthened it. You saved our love, and for every day that you love me, I promise to love you harder. I promise to love all of you, even the darkest parts.”

She spoke with ease and utter conviction, tears welled within her eyes but her posture was straight. She stood before me like a fucking queen and I’d be lying if I said it didn’t make me weak in the knees.

“Ah, dammit! Kiss her already!” Dallas cried.

“So damn sweet, but I want to party!” Dylan joined in.

“Would you two fools shut the fuck up,” Dalton chastised as he reached over and smacked them upside the head. The people in the church erupted into fits of laughter.

Lara spun and glared the dagger of death at her brothers who were quick to fall mute. Dalton smirked smugly and I chuckled at the sight.

Then, at long last, the words I had been waiting for...

“You may now kiss your bride.”

And fuck me if it wasn't the best kiss of my life.

Prologue

Reign Of Temptation

Willow

I waited impatiently, as I bounced my leg up and down in the dingy waiting room of the prison. It stunk but that didn't bother me. I just wanted to get this over with.

I hadn't been raised a beauty queen, I could handle the down and out slumps of a shithole like this. I had been waiting for over an hour and I was about to lose my wrathful temper that often left others scorned.

I stood up and charged toward the desk where a brown-haired woman sat looking less than bothered and like she could be anywhere else rather than here. "Visiting hours started at five-thirty. It's now six-thirty-four, where is he?" I snapped, as I placed my black painted nail down on the counter and gained her attention rather quickly as her head snapped toward me in haste. After a moment of shock, she

glared at me and readied herself to argue. “I wouldn’t. I am not in the mood,” I warned as I leaned forward, closer to her retreating face.

“Uh-” she started just as the loud buzz of the door boomed throughout the tiny waiting room and a guard stepped out.

“This way, ma’am,” he beckoned and I scowled at him.

I walked through the clinical feeling halls and into the visitor’s den.

“Dad,” I called as I hurried to the table.

He stood and opened his arms, pulling me into his hard and unwavering embrace. “Hey, Spitfire. I’ve missed you, sweetheart.” He nuzzled his nose into my hair, inhaling deeply as he drew the scent of home and familiarity into his lungs.

“I missed you too,” I mumbled into his shoulder.

“Sit, we don’t have a lot of time and there are a few things I need to tell you.”

I hated when he said things like that, it would normally mean my life was about to change into an explosion of chaos.

“Pa,” I groaned as I took a seat opposite him. I caught the eye of a man in the corner, bathed in the shadows but lost him as he looked away and spoke to the person who sat across from him.

It was the same every time I was here.

And every time, he was impossible to see properly.

“Things are changing on the outside, honey. And unfortunately, that means big changes for you, Spitfire. Someone is challenging my rule and it’s making it almost impossible for me to keep leading the family from behind bars. You’re my only heir. One that nobody knows about.” His ice blue eyes paled under the lights and a chill rushed through me.

My eyes were the same color, an eerie shade of ice that often put people on edge with my long black hair and fierce, sharp features. “What does that exactly mean, old man?” I questioned with a hike of my brow and he grimaced, offering

me a sheepish look that I didn't appreciate. "Don't. This family shows no weakness," I hissed and he smirked at me.

"And that, Spitfire, is why you're ready."

"Ready for what?"

"To be the ruthless leader of a notorious crime family. Don't worry, kid, I know you'll do the Russo's proud."

Fuck.

Did I say chaos? I was supposed to scream mayhem.

About the Author

Emmaleigh Loader is a stay-at-home mum of three - her two boys and her brother-in-law - and a wife, who lives in the UK.

Her favorite things are storms, the sea, and anything witchy! She finds winter beautiful and enjoys the beauty of the sun. She loves anything dark and adores loving alphas and strong women. She's an avid reader, and despite living with disabilities, pushes herself to be someone who her family, husband and sons are proud of.

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