



MAFIA ROSE
BOOK TWO

thorn

BROOKE HARPER

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Contents

[Trigger Warning](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Also by Brooke Harper](#)

About the Author

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Trigger Warning

THIS BOOK CONTAINS

Dark Themes

Sexual Assault/Abuse

Stalking/Obsession

Murder

Violence

Revenge

Light BDSM

Edging

Kidnapping

Age Gap (10+ years)

Mafia/Gangs

Torture

Traumatic Past

Thorn

They expected me to bend. To wilt.

But this rose has thorns, too.

I have no family. No life. No dreams.

I have nothing left.

My father and Nikolai made sure of that when they made me a pawn in their mafia games.

A broken woman. A tainted bride. A bargaining chip. That's all I am to them.

But things are changing.

I am changing.

Learning. Growing. Rising from the ashes anew.

At first, I didn't understand what Nikolai woke in me when he used my body for his revenge plot. But now? Now, I have plans of my own.

He may think I'm his Rose to claim, to dominate, to control, but I am a rose steeped in war and born from bloodshed.

It's about time I live up to my name.

For Amber

Things will get better.

Chapter 1



Rosalind

Everything is pink.

Barbie pink.

My head aches as a sea of consciousness washes over me, and I'm met with bright pink everywhere. Groaning, I squeeze my eyes shut as panic flutters at my insides. What I want is to sink back down into blank, black oblivion, but I know I can't, so I force my eyes open again.

It's hard to focus, especially when my stomach heaves and twists. My head pounds. I don't know where I am.

Nikolai...where...?

This isn't my room. This isn't his place.

Nikolai. My enemy, lover, captor, tormentor: a man I should hate, but the one I crave.

Everything shifts as his devastatingly handsome face floods my brain. He's not here, and I don't know where I am, or what the hell happened.

I try and breathe in, but my breath catches and twists.

Calm down, Rosalind. Think.

There's so much fuzz in my head, like wads of cotton wool, that thinking is hard, but I try. Memories come back in sickening waves, crashing into me, threatening to drown me, suffocate me.

Calm, girl. Panicking won't solve anything.

Last thing I remember was being in my beautiful prison of Nikolai's home. He'd given me a sort of freedom—an unlocked door, a pitiful crumb for a pitiful and pathetic creature. What else could I do? Not fight him; he claimed he'd hurt me if I did. Not run; alarms and locks and armed guards abounded.

It was more than that. Maybe it's the fuzziness in my brain, but while I wanted to run, I wanted to stay. I wanted to tie myself to a cruel monster of a man. A man who can make my pleasure sing.

I wanted to run, and I didn't.

I wanted him.

I wanted the fire Nikolai set in me, a bright, seductive one I was helpless to resist. I still am because the very thought of his touch makes my body tingle and sing.

The thought of him makes me yearn, makes me... miss him.

Crap.

Where am I? That's the million-dollar question.

I don't remember much of that last piece of time in his place, only disjointed things, feelings.

I remember looking for him, trailing through his home, thinking...I don't know what I was thinking. That I loved him? That maybe this whole thing with us could work? How I

still don't know, but his mouth, his fingers on me make me lose my mind, that maybe we could talk because he can be sweet and I'm an idiotic fool?

I suck in a breath. I was looking for him, and his place was empty. No, not empty because a man... I swallow hard. That man...

Fear lances through me, down to the bone, a very different feeling to anything Nikolai set off in me. Nikolai is frightening, deadly, breathtaking. That man was ugly and dangerous. Vicious. The violence in his words—blunt edged, sadistic—makes me shake, even as I lie here, even as I can barely grab hold of them. Their meaning was dark and vile, and something that tugs at subconscious.

Think, Rosalind. This is important.

What did he say to me? He said...he said—

Father?

The word swims in, and goosebumps rise instantly on my arms. The man with the sheet from Nikolai's bed, from when we—I think he said something about my *father*?

It's too blurred, too tangled, for me to work out. I clench my hands on the slippery material under me.

My head pounds harder. All this damned bright color hurts. I squeeze my eyes shut against the bubblegum pink paint vomit.

When I was seven, a Barbie pink dreamland bedroom would have been my dream. Back then, I'd wanted a home, a white fence, friends, a daddy for me and my mommy. Barbie pink with fuzz and glitter would have made little kid me happy.

Now? I shudder and turn, pulling my legs up to my chest. Now, it's beyond creepy. Genius would freak.

The thought of my best friend rocks me, makes my eyes prick and burn. I miss her. I miss my uncle who wasn't my uncle. Max, the man shot and killed by Nikolai.

My heart squeezes hard.

This isn't my room at home, this isn't the prison room of Nikolai's. This...

Oh, *fuck*, where am I?

Frustrated, I roll onto my back, the inky blackness of oblivion out of reach. I flop my legs down. I try and stay calm with deep breaths. Frustration won't help. It leads to panic, and here, where I don't know what's going on, panic could be lethal.

Feeling a little calmer, I open my eyes. The pink noise invades my senses, but I make myself push up, hand slipping on the satin fabric. I miss freedom and... I miss Nikolai.

I shouldn't. I should hate him, but his touch is still there, like a drug, like a poison, swimming in my veins.

Looking down at myself, I swing my legs to the ground. White. Cotton, white, girly lace, the stuff of old nightgowns. I'd been wearing Nikolai's shirt, not this.

Slowly, I turn my head, and a sliver of unease trickles down my spine.

I'm not alone.

Someone clears their throat, and I look up along the lines of his legs to his face. A man is here, black suit, granite, lined face, graying at the temples, staring at me like he wants to bore down into my soul. Now, my heart hammers like it wants

to break through my ribs, and I'm cold and hot at the same time as fear rips through me, white hot anger right next to it.

Is he another tormentor? Another player in whatever sick game is being played? Did he take me? No, he's not the man who hit me and said those terrible things. This man reminds me of the big man who works for Nikolai.

Underling, then. Maybe I can reason with him, talk at least.

Licking my dry lips, I try to think of something to say, trying to find that balance I had with Nikolai before I sank into him, before that whole damn Stockholm Syndrome crap. Unfortunately, it's like the well is bone dry, like I'm out of fucks to give. I've short circuited, apparently, because placating isn't in my wheelhouse, and I glare, narrowing my eyes.

“Who the fuck touched me?”

The blank granite of his face doesn't change one iota as he sweeps his gaze over me. “You need to be more specific.”

It's one of those rough voices, hard, about as full of emotion as his face and eyes: empty and hidden.

“I wasn't wearing...this.” I run my hand up the front of the dress. The little covered buttons all along the front must have taken ages to do up and...*gross*. I gag before I lift my chin. “Who undressed me? Touched me?”

“I did.” Once more, his gaze sweeps me. “Buttons look right to me. Not into girly stuff, though.”

“You're a disgusting pig.” I'm playing with fire, taunting it, but I don't care. “Does it get you off?”

“No. Just following orders,” he says with a shrug. “I didn’t touch you more than necessary.”

I almost fall over as I stand, but he doesn’t make a move to help. Grasping the pink satin bed covers, I right myself, and then I take in the full horrors of the room.

Fluffy neon pink heart pillows. Candy pink giant bear. Pale pink wall, the Barbie pink on the others. There’s a white vanity edged in bright pink with a big pink chair and a pink fur rug on the floor.

My stomach heaves. It makes me actually want to puke.

Then, I catch sight of my reflection in the mirror on the vanity.

I just stare.

I’m in a dress that goes to mid-calf. It’s loose fitting, but it flows along my curves. From the tiny puff sleeves to the layered frills trimmed with old fashioned lace—Irish lace, I think it’s called—the thing buttons all the way up to my throat like an old school vice.

Old school as in for elementary students from another era.

It’s demure, pure cotton, and nothing like I’d ever wear. It’s *definitely* not what Nikolai would put me in.

Put me in. I grit my teeth. These men...

I swing back around, hands in fists. If this is the future, me being manhandled, touched, looked at naked by man after man after man, dressed to suit them like some disgusting living doll, then I don’t want to play. I don’t want any of this.

“Don’t ever touch me again, or you’ll regret it.” I mean it.

It's all fake bravado, but right now, I don't know where I am or who this oaf in the crisp suit and blank face is. I've been kidnapped, drugged, locked up one too many times.

He's completely unmoved, and his nonchalance only riles me more. "I mean it. I'm able to dress myself."

"That isn't your choice."

"Nothing is," I grit out, bitterness like poison in my mouth. "I won't have you touching me like I'm your personal sex doll."

My anger bubbles and spits and my eyes burn. Soft little Rose is how these people see me, a thing to use, even Nikolai. Desire and hate are tangled when it comes to him, but he's not here, and someone drugged me to take me from him, like a low-level pawn in some bloody and terrible game of chess.

Took me and he didn't stop them.

Unless...

Unless...

No. That path is too dark, and I can't go down it. He's alive. He has to be. I don't even care that I'm veering wildly off course with my emotions. I might both want and hate him, but I don't want him hurt, or...

I swallow and lift my chin. "So, you might as well kill me."

He isn't going to, I get that. He works for someone, probably the man who took me, and that means I'm worth something, *alive*. Killing me is above his paygrade right now.

I'm a bargaining chip.

So, I fucking push because that's all I can do. "Kill me." I spread my arms. "Go on."

He looks at me and just shakes his head. "No one is going to kill you, Miss Finnegan."

The name makes me flinch. I've heard it before, haven't I? From Nikolai? When talking about the man he wanted revenge on—the one he hated more than anything.

My father.

"Don't call me that," I say sharply. "It's not my name." His expression remains that smooth, cold granite. "It's Germaine. And...where are we?" I try and keep my head high, my chin set to wobble-free mode, but it's hard. What I *want* to do is to scream, run, fight. Escape.

Yet again, I don't know where I am, or who stole me, not beyond the slipping, sliding memories clouded in fuzz. Maybe I don't want to remember? A kind of self-preservation.

Right now, I need to hold my ground however I can. Something has shifted in me. The well with nothing left seems to grow.

"You're in my room, dressing me, undressing me, probably helping yourself to a feel when I'm unconscious, and now you're just standing here, watching me. It's creepy and disgusting and—"

"Enough." His voice is dark and rough, laced with warning. "What I am is your protector. You can call me Rafe. I did what I'm ordered. I didn't touch, and I tried not to look."

"So—"

"I have a job, and that includes dressing you." He pauses. "I'm also here to shadow you, protect you, keep you safe until

your father finalizes the paperwork.”

A black shot of electricity shoots down through my stomach to my toes. There’s that word again: Father.

“If you weren’t my bitch of a kid.”

He said that, didn’t he? The man at Nikolai’s with the bloodied sheet from when I lost my virginity. He said other things, disgusting things. Vile and ugly things about Mom, me...he—

Paperwork?

“I don’t have a father. What paperwork?”

“Mr. Finnegan has a deal,” he says. “Ms. Finnegan.”

“Germaine,” I push out through clenched teeth. I refuse to think I have any relation to that monster of a man. *Refuse.* “Rosalind Germaine.”

He doesn’t respond. I might be talking to an actual rock.

“I’m here as your protector while he finalizes paperwork for the deal. You’re part of that deal. Soon, you’ll be married and away from here.”

I frown. “Nikolai?”

“Don’t mention that name,” he spits out. “For your own sake. *Not* Nikolai Wilder, no. You won’t be seeing him again. Mr. Finnegan considers him his number one enemy. I’ll report to him that you’re awake. Ms. Finnegan.”

Rafe nods and holds a card to the door, which clicks. Then he pulls it open and steps through. I rush at it, unsteady, and just touch the handle when a beeping comes from the other side and the little pad next to the handle glows red.

The sound of a key scraping in the lock follows. Locked up, locked in, and nothing of my own. Again.

As I raise my hand to my mouth to try and hold in the fear and anger and resentment, light catches something on my wrist.

The bracelet Nikolai gave me.

I close my fingers around it, hanging my head and closing my eyes a moment, a heaviness moving through me. I can't just stand here and let things happen to me, not until I exhaust the possibilities.

I won't be able to, not from this room, not if the security on the door is any indication. However, I'm not about to let that hinder me. There are windows, other means. I need to get out before they marry me off...or worse. Shuddering, I open my eyes and raise my head, starting to move around the creepy pink monstrosity I'm locked inside.

There's a window to the right of the bed, shuttered by filmy pink and white drapes with white blinds beneath. I try to ignore the sink of my heart as I pull back the curtain and peer out into the daylight. I think I'm on the third floor, and there's a huge wall past the gardens. Men roam beneath me, men with guns and headsets.

I let the curtain fall back into place.

A small ensuite is situated to the left of the vanity. It has an oval sink, a large shower, and a claw tub, all of it in pale pink marble. Christ. There are small bottles of perfumes and soaps on the sink, creams and moisturizers, and on a crystal tray, trinkets for my hair.

A white case sits next to them, and I open it. It's full of a vast array of make-up, all still in their packaging, pinks and

sweet girl colors I don't use. My stomach heaves as I wobble a little from whatever's still in my system.

Even if I did use the colors in here, I never want to touch them. Not these ones. Not in this new pink prison.

I grip the edge of the marble sink and run a finger over the trinkets.

My heart starts to thud and slam as I pick up a piece. The hairpin is pure Nikolai. All the other things are ham fisted and childish. This? A tiny diamond in a white gold rose. Maybe I'm wrong, but it's him, and it sits with plain pins that he bought me to fix my hair.

I decide to take it with me to my prison cell of a room, setting in the drawer of the pink and white side table with the pink, gauzy lamp.

There's nowhere I can go. Nothing I can do.

I can only sit and wait.

I hate it. I hate everything.

With a shaky breath, I trace the delicate stones and chain of my bracelet. White gold with pink diamonds: the only pink I think I'll ever be able to stand. It's as stunningly beautiful as it was when Nikolai first gave it to me.

"It's yours, Rose. To keep, or throw away if you want, but it's yours."

Mine.

This is mine.

It means more than the hair pin because when he gave it to me...those words felt like love.

"You're a fool, Rosalind."

Even in this world of ugliness I've been thrust into, I'm so happy to have something for me, even if it was given by a beautiful devil.

I hope he comes for me.

Chapter 2



Nikolai

It's done.

Over and fucking over, that useless thought comes to me.

It's done.

I lost this round to win the war. I got two million dollars and a maid.

For Rose.

I lean back behind my desk and glare at the computer screen, the bottle of whiskey I've been drinking steadily two thirds gone. Swiping up my glass, I take a deep swallow, the warm honeyed edge tasting like dust. Then I top it up.

Fuck, I want to be drunk. Unfortunately, I'm not. The hole of dark in me gets danker by the second.

I did the right thing. I know that. needed to do it because nothing will be right until my uncle and aunt's deaths are avenged, until the man responsible isn't just brought to his knees. I want him stripped of everything.

Money. Power. Dignity. Life.

He needs to pay. His daughter? She's caught in the crosshairs, an unfortunate innocent in a dirty game, and one

who's sunk into me. I'm hooked deep, down into my darkest desires, my basest needs. I'm not done with my beautiful Rose, not by a long shot. Yet I needed to fucking seem to burn bridges for my maid and a measly pile of money.

He has her, for now. She's going to lead me to his lair, to his downfall, and then maybe I'll fuck her boneless in front of him. I'll take her ass, her mouth, fuck her so hard she screams and begs for more. I'll tie her up, spank her, maybe even get myself a St. Andrews Cross and give her an erotic lesson in pleasure, pain, and humiliation, all in front of daddy.

Then I'll take his fucking tongue and eyes, feed him his balls, followed by his dick.

Let him bleed out.

I down half my drink, keeping my gaze focused on that screen. An old antique clock ticks steadily behind me on the shelf. My door is shut, my feet stretched out under my desk. The tension in my stomach vibrates. A sickness coils inside, ripping at my guts.

I did what I had to do. The modified plan so we could get Sylvie back worked.

It's not as if my little Rose is dangling alone off a cliff in the wind. I'll have her back soon enough, and then I'll have Derek's secret lair, his darkest secrets, his army, power, money. I'll have everything. I'll *be* everything.

And he will die.

It's a good plan, but—

It wasn't until that fuck Finnegan stepped into my home, said that vile shit to *my* Rose, drugged *my* Rose, that I started to understand the cost. It's huge, that cost, more than I ever imagined.

If I were a man with a soul and a heart, I'd almost be inclined to say it cost me a piece of them, but they're a fucking fallacy, and she's just a girl.

"Say it again, Rose. Do you want me to fuck you?"

"Yes, I want you to fuck me. More than anything."

Was that the last conversation we had?

Music, her words; pure, unadulterated music. She wanted it with her blood, with everything her sweet, filthy innocence had.

Her tiny gasps of pleasure from my touch, my kisses, whisper about me. The smiles and sweep of happiness on her face when I gave her that bracelet resonate through my mind.

Her attempts at defiance. Her bursts of bratty exuberance and blunt questions. The anger and sadness. The way she could turn temptress and unsure virgin in seconds flat. None of it was a lie, and every part was compelling.

I'm not done with her, not at all.

I'm getting her back, along with everything I want. Then I'll decide when to let her go. No doubt, it'll be when she stops fascinating me, when I no longer crave her. A week? A month? Three? Maybe a year.

A dull throb starts somewhere deep in my chest at that thought.

It's just lust, nothing more.

I have a job to do, and that fucking dot on the GPS hasn't moved. Not since late last night, when it moved from Derek's main compound to his lesser one, the one on a smaller property.

It's not his hideaway, not unless he found all the trackers on her. Still, I have eyes on all his properties, and no one has left since four big, black SUVs drove into where the GPS sits static, blinking at me like a fuck you.

A rap on my door makes me swing my attention to the bottle, and I top up my glass. "Enter."

Tony sidles in. He's good at it, for such a big bruiser. He eyes the bottle, then me, but doesn't say a word about it.

I might like Tony. He may be my number two in so many regards, but I'll shoot him dead and deal with his wife, Mia, later if he dares voice whatever bullshit is in his head.

"Boss, I thought you should know the doctor's finished with Sylvie."

"Gonna live?"

"Physically, she's banged up, uh, torn a little, but yeah." He doesn't move. He clears his throat. "Mia suggested therapy."

I stare at him, down the whiskey, and fill up the glass. The edges on me have yet to soften. What I need is another bottle. I point at the wet bar.

It's a show of a good employee that Tony only hesitates a millisecond before getting me another. He clicks it down on my desk and removes the empty one. I'm pretty sure the eyeballing I give him is sour with extra sharp-edged knives.

"Do I look like a bleeding heart?" Then I wave my hand. "Whatever she needs, she can have it. Tickets out of here, therapy, money to set up elsewhere, a whole fucking new closet. Actually, nix that for a bit."

"Nikolai?"

“When she’s up to it, do all that,” I say. “But first, I want a list of all the motherfuckers who touched her.”

He clears his throat. “Don’t think it was a wine and roses situation, boss.”

“Scars, voices, faces. Anyone who touched her will leave this world with an extra serving of pain.”

“Got it.” A small smile crosses his hard face, then fades. “Boss, Nikolai, I know this was hard.”

“We just took a different turn in the dance. It’s on track.”

“Finnegan’s not going to hurt his daughter.”

I laugh, but it’s ice. “He fucking will. Not in that way, I’m doubtful he’s that sick. She’s worth something to him on the market, and she’s a prize he’s wanted for so long—flesh and fucking blood and an heir maker. He’ll hurt her, tear her apart. He’s going to pay extra for every single harm he causes Rose.” Tony remains silent. I add, “He hasn’t moved.”

“Do you think he’s that stupid to think you’re going to take this and move on?”

“No.” The word is soft and contemplative as I pick up my glass, peering at the amber liquid in the light. “I think he’s arrogant enough and stupid enough to think I’m weak, that he can beat me now.”

“Arrogance like that is a weakness.” Tony nods. “Finnegan has caused too much trouble, but it’s also not worth my life or marriage to not pass on Mia’s message. She says your Rose is sweet, delicate, rare, but don’t forget that roses have thorns.”

“For fuck’s sake,” I mutter. “I don’t need life lessons and metaphors from my employee. We’ll carry on with the plan.”

Derek can think he's won. He gets sloppy when his arrogance hits a ten."

I wave him away. When Tony's gone, I finish the drink and pour another. Oblivion has never seemed more enticing or more out of reach. Pulling the computer closer, I reduce the GPS tracker and pull up the recording of Rose's last minutes here.

When we watched it in the guardhouse, the live feed didn't have sound. My recording does, and the things she says to her are vile. I'm more than aware of the things I've said to her, how I've bent her to my will with threats and promises, but I know how to wring out pleasure, to reward.

If I could kill Finnegan and take all I wanted right now, I would. I know if I went in now, guns blazing, we'd walk away with a large chunk of it all and Finnegan's head.

I don't want a large chunk. I don't want most.

I want it all. I want Finnegan to understand loss and pain and real impotence. I need to take it all from him, and I will.

I just never expected Rose, particularly not for Rose to be *my* Rose.

I knew I'd feel a modicum of loss and regret when he took her, but not that wrenching, gripping loss. Not...any of it.

I miss her.

All that back and forth with killing her had been mostly empty after I had a taste. Still, to not want to kill her and miss her are different things, different worlds.

She got in. Deep. I miss it. Her.

Those kitten claws. The fights. The challenges. The compliances. How she fucking looked at me like I was her

world.

Right now, I see the way everything rushes from her. Even before he hits her, she looks like he punched her hard. Her beautiful face dims, her eyes go dark, and *fuck*.

I'm just not done yet. I need to keep her on my string. A little tricky, but doable.

Even from here, it's doable because I didn't ever let her go without a way in. Men like Derek don't inspire loyalty. No, they feed on fear, luring in degenerates and twisted fucks, but never with loyalty, not the true loyalty like my cousin Rush, like Tony and Mia and my men. I'll kill as soon as look at someone, but do right by me, and I reward it. The game is simple.

With a sigh, I pick up my phone, eye on the screen as I press call. "In here. Now."

Fuck. I rewind the video. That moment where he takes her down, where he grabs her, sticks a needle in her to flood her with drugs, and flashes her ass to the world makes rage ignite inside me. My hand forms a fist, knuckles going white.

He flashes that hot little ass in my shirt, letting men hold her, see it.

"Niko?"

I flick an irritated gaze at the door as Rush steps in. "Nikolai."

He has the audacity to look at the bottle, the audacity to shake his head, to get a glass to pour some himself. He sits opposite me, one foot on one knee as he takes a swallow. "Enjoying your nasty little plans, Niko?"

“Nikolai.” I’m not in the fucking mood, even if none of this is Rush’s fault.

He sighs. “You need to be okay with this. Get your head in the game, or let me know if we’re going to go in and take him down now—”

“No. I want the lair. His real contacts, the deep ones, all his money and assets and territories.”

“And her.”

I just look at him. “You still have that man?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you sure he’s trustworthy?”

Rush shrugs. “No one much likes Finnegan, him most of all. He does it for...reasons, and I can get word to him since they’re at Hawke’s Hollow.”

“Only a stupid fuck names his properties stupid ass names,” I mutter. Okay, maybe an edge is starting to soften, but not enough. I’m not leaving this spot until I’m drunk enough that I won’t get up and shoot the motherfucker dead.

“What do you want, Niko— Nikolai?”

I reach down and pick up the slender box from the exclusive hothouse I like. It was delivered a few hours ago, and now, just now, I’ve decided to do it.

He takes it from me and opens it, looking at the gorgeous red rose.

“I want you to make sure that’s delivered to the relevant party. If it takes a few days, get a fresh one. You know where. The supplier is waiting if you need one.”

For her.

My Rose.

Chapter 3



Rosalind

Hysterical laughter bubbles up in me as Rafe stands over me, watching as I eat.

The shit in front of me is some kind of stew full of kale and vegetables and bland as all hell. I force in another mouthful and then put the spoon down on the vanity—where I have to eat, as there’s no table here.

The vanity sits in a closet with a pair of white Mary Janes, a drawer of cotton panties and bras, ankle socks, a baby doll nightdress, and an endless supply of dresses that are all the fucking same button up, demure, white numbers.

At least they aren’t pink.

“I’m done.”

He doesn’t say a word as he takes the tray and leaves, locking the door behind him. I slump, even as that horrible, hysterical laughter bubbles again.

I’ve been here two days, locked in this room, Mr. Granite as my only company. I get fed on schedule. Day one, I refused, and he explained the ways in which I could eat, including—and I’m not kidding—being forced by him or with a feeding tube.

Who would have thought I'd long for Nikolai's prison? I take a shuddering breath, bored out of my mind. Misery eats at me, along with fear.

Mostly, I'm alone, which suits me. If I can't get out, then alone is best. Still, I know I won't be alone for long.

When I shower, I dry and put my dress back on immediately. I sleep in the thing. I don't want someone else touching me, not unless it's Nikolai.

I squeeze my eyes shut. What is wrong with me?

The man isn't here, and he took me captive as well, but he...he touched me, made me ache with want, gave me so much pleasure.

He—

I go still. A key scrapes in the lock, and slowly, I stand and turn. The light at the door turns from red to green, and I move, then falter to a stop.

It's not Rafe. It's... I swallow hard. It's the man who took me. He stares at me as I narrow my eyes.

"You called my mother a whore," I spit, the words spilling from me without thought.

"I've called that pathetic cunt a lot worse," he sneers.

Dark hot rage sweeps through me. It surges like a tidal wave, all consuming. It's like nothing I've ever felt, and it takes me over.

"Bastard."

"Cunt whore."

I hate him, more than I've hated anything or anyone, and I don't think, don't breathe. I just launch myself across the floor

and start hitting him, scratching. The only thing in my mind is hate and rage, the need for revenge. My fist connects with his face and my whole arm goes numb as he grabs it, wrenching it back, pulling me off him like I'm a fly.

He laughs—*laughs*—then punches me in the stomach so hard, I think I'm going to hurl. Pain ricochets through my body in resounding waves. He flings me back and I fall, landing hard on my ass, and my eyes sting with unshed tears.

I try to rise, but I fall back again as a memory hits me. I don't know where it's from, but it's there, so bright and vivid that the wave of sickness comes back. It's almost déjà vu.

I'm so small when he laughs, hurting my arm and punching me in the tummy. I'm sick and my mommy is screaming and going for him, but he punches her in the face.

He looks at me then and says—

“Be a good little girl, Thorne.”

I stare up at him, hurting everywhere: heart, soul, body. The hate is still there, a surge in my blood. He's said that to me before, back when I was a little girl.

The memory is new, old, and so wrong it's right. It's wrong in the way terrible things that happen are. You don't want them, but they happened, so they're true.

He's hit me before, when I was a child. He said those words, too.

I swallow hard and look up. Using every bit of my strength, I push forward, grabbing at the bed to help me. The darkness is ugly on his face.

“My name is Rosalind.”

He laughs and shakes his head. “It’s not. It’s Thorne.” That laughter, as cold, ugly, hard as his soul, stops, and he takes a step towards me.

It takes everything I have, everything I didn’t know I possessed, not to step back. Instead, I raise my chin and meet his gaze.

He sneers. “That defiance will fade. I’ll beat it out of you if I have to. I fucking tried with your mother, but a whore is a whore. Probably fucked that prick, Wilder, too.”

My heart slams, and I almost lurch as my vision wavers.

The man comes in closer. “What?” He smirks as he picks up a lock of my hair, twisting it viciously around his finger and yanking. “You thought you were the only one that bastard sank his tiny little dick into? A dumb whore is the worst whore. I’ve half a mind to let my men really show you what a man can do.”

“Rape?” I push it out.

His eyes narrow. They’re blue like mine, but ice cold. They’re familiar in a strange way, and my stomach lurches.

“Of you? No. You love to spread those legs, don’t you? We both know all the things you did with that weasel, Wilder. I should let them have you, destroy you and leave you as their little rag to use at the end of the day. I think you’d love that, wouldn’t you, Thorne? You might be mine, but you’re pure slut like your mother. That urge to put out to anyone with a dick ran deep in her and I couldn’t stop her.”

My head spins and I think...I think I’m going to be sick. Bile and vomit burn thick in my throat, but I swallow it down, the bitterness, the heat, wave after wave of nausea because I’m not giving him the satisfaction.

I hate him.

I despise him.

This is different to any other violent emotion I've felt. It's huge, so strong, hot, with ice deep in the center, like a permafrost.

"If you'd kept your slutty instincts under control, you'd be worth so much more. Maybe even a place at my side."

"Never. You sick—"

"Careful, Thorne," he warns, taking another step and lifting his hand. "Be very careful. I'm not above making you as ugly as your soul. I'd love to see you broken and bleeding and understanding your place in this world."

I keep my mouth shut, no matter how much I want to spew anger and hate at him, to call him a bastard, prick, coward, sick fuck.

He will hurt me if I do. Maybe not now, but he will. It's there, in his eyes, the set of his mouth, the way the vein at the side of his throat throbs. He *wants* to hurt me.

It's terrifying, like pee your pants and run terrifying.

I change tact. "Why?"

The softness of my voice makes him blink. "Your bitch of a mother stole you from me, Thorne. And you..." He stops. "You deserve it. Her blood is in your veins. The only thing that saves you is that it's not just your mother there."

"Then let me go. I'm not useful to you. You hate me, just like..." *I do you.* I swallow those words down. "Just like you hate her."

He waves a hand. “That’s the past. We have a future to focus on: yours. Pity you handed it out. Your virginity was powerful. I could have shaped you, married you to the best of the crime world. Then you could have ruled with your husband by my side. Fuck, even if you gave it to some random boy, there would’ve been ways around it.

“But no. You had to sully yourself with *him*. All I can do now is marry you off to the highest bidder, for a deal I need. You’re fucking lucky—this man doesn’t care that you’re used goods now. He’s seen your picture and says you’re pretty enough.”

My chin trembles a little against my will, and the small, tight smirk on his face when he sees it riles me further.

He thinks the tremble is because he’s won, but it’s not that. This is pure, unadulterated hate.

He hurt you and Mommy. The little girl’s voice from my past, the past I don’t remember except in dreams and these new memories, is there, whispering at me to run, to fight and strike out, to try and right all the wrongs that sit somewhere in my bones.

“What’s done is done.” His gaze rakes over me. “The dress looks good, but when you meet your fiancé, I want you fresh and pretty. Demure. Can you be demure?”

I keep my mouth shut.

“You know, I’m doing this for you. We never really met officially. You were too small to remember, but I’m your father. You can call me Daddy, or Sir, whichever you prefer.”

What he’s saying shouldn’t be a shock, but it is. It’s a massive slap to the face. I almost reel back at the force of his words.

It's one thing to have memories slipping in and out, another to be standing in front of him, this horrible man, to hear the words when my head's clear.

My father.

My stomach roils violently, and I clutch at it.

“Nothing to say? *Dear?*” The last word is a sneer and it pokes at me. “You look at me like I'm your enemy. You're a Finnegan, my kin. You're not a Wilder. His dick made you feel that good? Pathetic.”

“You don't know anything,” I say. “Nikolai is worth a thousand of you. I fucking hate you. If I could, I'd kill—”

The blow to my face sends me skittering down to the floor, numbness and pain spreading across my cheek. My ears ring, and I see double as tears sting my eyes. I blink them back and try to breathe.

“You fucking little bitch. Don't you dare speak to me like that. Don't mention his cursed name.” He stands over me, spittle flying as I stare up. “You think he likes you? Everything you know about your life, about him, is a lie. He fucking used you to get at me. He doesn't want you, and you? You will do everything I want, when I want.”

“No.”

He stares at me incredulously. “No?”

I stare back, like some kind of terrible cold and deadly war. God, I want to kill him. The rage and hate in me are insurmountable. I hate that I can't do anything to him; he's bigger and stronger in every way.

I can't do anything yet, I amend. I'll find a way. The clarity of the moment sears into me. He's the reason I couldn't

have a real life, the reason Mom was so jumpy, always on the run. *He* was why she was so worn out when she thought I wasn't looking.

He's the reason all this has happened to me. How I feel for him is like the purest glass: there's nothing there, no complications, no regrets, no second guessing. No, there's only hate and anger.

"No."

He nods. "You will. You're lucky I need you to look good for your fiancé. He has certain tastes. Maybe you'll enjoy them, but I'm betting even something as slutty as you won't."

Without a word, this man, my father, turns and leaves. I try and rise, but I can't. When the door opens again, the man of granite, Rafe, is there.

"Ms. Finnegan, I can't protect you if you act stupid. He's a dangerous man, your father, and you're about to learn a lesson in that."

I look at him, one hand on the bed. "I think I just did."

"Not that." He holds something up: a syringe. "This is punishment. You're going to be drugged every day." He crouches and takes my arm. His expression is as blank and hard as it was when I first met him. With a quick glance at the door, his voice lowers. "But first, look under the bed. That's your secret. Your message."

I frown and look, and there it is: a beautiful rose, with thorns, just like the ones Nikolai gave me.

Something pinches my arm, and a coldness starts to spread. Things waver and go black.

Chapter 4



“You okay, Niko?”

Nikolai

I don't even look at Rush as I reload my gun. We're back from a job. Someone thought it smart to skim off the top of a shipment. They won't be doing anything for me again, or breathing. Jo-Jo Slick is no more.

Queenstown won't miss him. He wasn't liked or trusted. No, he was a necessary evil. If I hadn't needed this shipment, I wouldn't have worked with him, but I did, and he tried to fuck me over and got caught. I left one person alive, the one who alerted Tony to Jo-Jo's scheme, and she's in charge of that operation now.

Basically, I am so not in the mood.

“Jo-Jo deserved it.”

For a moment, he doesn't answer.

“Nikolai,” he mutters. “You didn't have to—”

My cousin shuts up when I look at him. “Yes, I did.”

Four days and counting my Rose has been gone. Four days, and that fucking little GPS hasn't much moved. I holster the gun, loosen my tie, and head for my office.

“You know more drinking ain’t gonna do you any good, dude.”

Gritting my teeth against his words and his attitude, I think about getting a drink. It didn’t work the past few nights, and it’s not going to work now. To my chagrin, it won’t help.

“Mind your fucking business, Rush.”

“You don’t scare me,” he sneers as I slide him a look. “Much.”

He follows me into the office and helps himself to a drink before I can get to it. He’s a little pale, and his hand shakes as he downs it. We work in blood and death and violence, but tonight, I worked without control, to a level I don’t think he’s seen.

“I’m not sure why you’re shocked, Rush. You know me.”

“Yeah, and it worries me.” He flops down in an armchair as I strip off my jacket and pull out my phone.

Not one word from Derek. I don’t need one, but I expected crowing, bragging, *something*. Nothing isn’t like him.

Maybe—I hope—he’s prepping to move to his hidey-hole, but every time I check the GPS, it stays put. I know exactly what that means. “He’s got her locked up like she’s in solitary.”

“Did you think he’d roll out the red carpet for her? She’s alive because she’s his fucking daughter, but you also fucked her. You made sure he knew that. So—”

“Questioning my methods?” I ask quietly, leaning against my desk. “Because I’ve got to say, it’s a bold choice.”

Rush shakes his head. “Niko, I was there when they took her. I know what you went through.”

I breathe out, tapping my fingers on the edge of the desk. “We’re playing the game.” If it’s harder than I thought it would be, if Rose being gone hurts in a way I don’t get, then that’s the price. “We’re in to win.”

“He thinks he’s won.”

“I know what he’s thinking. It’s part of the plan, and it fucking sucks. Right now, I’m dealing low, underground. We set up our ducks and we’re working under the radar. He thinks I’m licking wounds. He thinks I’m nursing hurts, humiliated in my loss. To win the war, I need to lose some battles, especially on the surface.”

Rush flickers his gaze down at his glass and swirls it. “The coldness, Niko. The complete and utter lack of anything tonight, that’s what got me. You were beyond brutal, and you did it like you were just dismantling a motor or something.”

“Fuck, Rush. Put down all your self-help books and pop psychology. I’m pissed off, and Jo-Jo deserved it. He’s been skimming and playing and upping prices for years. Worse, he sells information. I warned him there would be problems if he fucked with me, and he did”

“Niko—Nikolai, are you sure you’re okay?”

“I just told you.”

He blows out a breath, then takes a swallow of the drink. “Wasn’t asking about Jo-Jo. The rose? Your Rose?”

I push a hand through my hair then fold my arms and fix him with a look. “You mean the flower you passed on through your contact? For Rose?”

“Yeah.” He pauses, holding the glass up to the lamp light like the damn whiskey holds the answers to the universe.

My chest is tight, my guts shredded. Darkness moves in my veins. “Rush, let’s get one thing fucking clear. Do I miss that tight body? Fuck yes. The things I want to do...” My pulse ticks. “Make no mistake, that rose wasn’t a romantic gesture. I need her to hold out hope. I need her thinking of me, stay vulnerable to me, aching—”

I stop.

He just stares.

“Because the day’s going to come when Finnegan’s little house is going to fall, and he’ll realize he didn’t win anything but a skirmish I planned. He has her now, but she’ll be back in my hands, begging for me, soon enough. Then he’ll see.”

Rush shakes his head. “Niko, do you think there’s more? Maybe something you feel for—”

I interrupt him harshly. “I’m not in the mood for your extra familiarity tonight. This plan, modified as it is, is taking a toll. I fucking hate it. I’m well aware of the danger she’s in.”

His eyes start to light up, but I hold up a hand. “Don’t mistake my words for softness and humanity. I don’t have it, except maybe for you.”

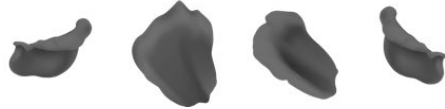
Rush chuckles and shakes his head again.

“This all depends on her getting through it, on her pining for me, on him revealing his fucking secret compound. Everything is there, all the sensitive things I need, access to all.” I flicker my gaze at him, then straighten and pull on my jacket again.

“Nikolai.” Rush’s mild humor is gone as he gets to his feet. “You can deny it all day long, but I’m worried about you. You’re not going to do something stupid, are you?”

“Me? Over a fucking girl? Over Derek Finnegan’s flesh and blood? Never in a million years. I’m going to get some work done.”

With that, I’m gone.



I stare up at the ridiculously named Hawke’s Hollow from the safety of my tinted SUV.

Maybe I lied to my cousin because this *is* fucking stupid, and this *is* over a girl.

I can’t do anything. She’s highly protected I’m sure, and I’m betting getting in might end badly. The odds right now are against me. After all, I only have one gun on me.

I didn’t come here to launch any kind of rescue. I meant it when I said she needed to fucking stay in there and do the job she doesn’t know she’s going to do.

The tracker hasn’t moved at all on my phone. Part of me wonders if he stripped her of the bracelet, but the one in the shirt is still there, presumably dumped after she changed.

Or was changed. I grit my teeth at that.

No one touches her. No one but me.

The hairpin made two very short journeys, and when I flip to both signals, they’re near each other, like they have been the whole time.

No, Rose is there. She’s wearing the bracelet, I’m sure of it, and she hasn’t moved.

A rage I don't know how to deal with thunders inside me. Usually, I can turn anger and use it as a tool. This...I don't know what the fuck to do with it. Have they fucking drugged my Rose? What kind of threat does that asshole of a father think she is? She weighs nothing. It's easy to scare her, and she's smart enough to know her battles. Being locked up is a battle she can't win. There's no reason she's been in one place for way more hours than sleep would account for. Maybe that sick fuck enjoys keeping little girls drugged to the eyeballs.

I squeeze my hand in a fist and bring it down on the dash.

My man is inside, and he hasn't reported any movement, even car-wise.

Thing is, I want to go in, guns blazing. I want to shoot Finnegan so full of holes, he resembles a colander. I want to do things to him that'll make what I did to Jo-Jo look like mercy. I want to ride out of there with my prize in my arms, safe and back in my bed.

Fallacy.

Fucked up fantasy.

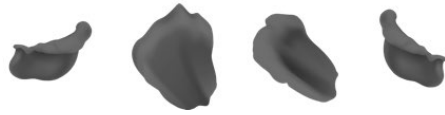
There's no happy ending for Rose, or for me. Or justice willing, that prime piece of shit Derek.

Once he's dead and I'm done with Rose, she can pick up the pieces of her life and I'll rule.

There might not be happiness, but I don't give a fuck about that.

Retribution? I'll take it.

Soon.



The next morning, I'm sitting in my room, dressed in jeans and a long black tee, shoes off. It's early, but the day's already been long. Calls, orders, bookkeeping of the type I trust to only myself, but now, I'm fucking watching that GPS.

It still hasn't moved much, except once when it zigged and zagged to one end of the tight perimeter and back again. He's definitely drugged my Rose, that sick fuck.

My phone remains resolutely silent, not even one provocative call from Finnegan.

I frown and grab my coffee. I grimace. It's cold, no doubt because it's been fucking sitting there for hours. I think about calling Mia to get me a hot one, but I'm not in the mood for her silent censure.

When Rush pokes his head around my door, I'm almost glad.

"Good to see you didn't murder anyone last night." He pauses as he throws himself onto the sofa opposite my armchair. "That I know of."

"Right now, I'm weighing the pros and cons of launching a full-on assault. You know, just to let off some fucking steam. Maybe take Rose. Have some fun."

"And what? Return her?"

I shrug. I'm not thinking this at all, but as fantasies go, it's a good one, except the returning part. That's not happening. Any of it. Pent up frustration and misplaced lustful thoughts aren't going to help with my real plan.

“Maybe. Maybe I’ll fucking stomp his head in and be done with it.”

“You’re not going to do that.”

“No, Rush,” I say, “I’m not. I’m just...frustrated. Something isn’t right. He’s still there and he hasn’t even fucking tried to rub this so-called win in my face. She...she barely moves.”

“Shit.” He rubs a hand over his eyes. “I like my job, Niko. This is family, and I’m there with you on getting him, but maybe we should, ya know, just get her back.”

I stare at him. There’s something in the way he says it. Slowly, I set down the coffee and lean forward. “Out with it.”

“You know that contact?”

No, I don’t know who it is, because it’s better that way. He won’t be able to get Rose out if things go south, but an eye in there, even one who works for Derek, helps. “What about them?”

He doesn’t look happy as he shifts on the sofa. “I think there’s something you need to know.”

I eye him warily. “What?”

“Derek is negotiating a marriage contract.”

I narrow my eyes as that rage from last night swarms back in, thick and fast and furious.

Rush takes one look at me and swallows. “Nikolai, for what it’s worth, I said negotiation, not wedding.”

“A marriage contract usually has a fucking wedding. It’s a dead giveaway in the term ‘marriage contract’.”

He sighs. “From what I hear, she’s been trouble.”

With that, I almost smile. Almost. That's my Rose.

“He sees her as used goods.” He doesn't meet my eye, and yeah, she fucking is. I used her to within an inch of her life, and she loved every goddamn moment. I haven't used her nearly enough. “He's trying to sell her to some weaker link, someone he can use to build his empire.”

“That's another body on the pile. I don't know who he is, but I hear this guy is old, loves them young, and he likes to... hurt. This is going to happen.”

My vision blurs from the absolute fury whirling inside me. Suddenly, I'm on my feet. Throwing my arm out, I sweep my computer, books, and coffee from the table, sending it all crashing to the ground.

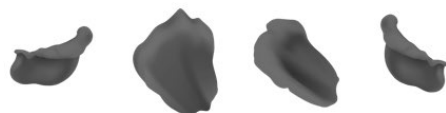
Rush is on his feet, too. “Dude, calm the fuck down, before you do something idiotic like go in there unprepared and get us or someone innocent killed.”

“I'm not fucking stupid. Now get the fuck out. Now.”

Rush hurries out, and I march off to the walk-in closet and swiftly change to work out clothes.

He's right. I want to do exactly that. If I do, the innocent I've claimed as mine might die before I'm done with her.

I take off up the stairs to the top floor where my gym is, and I get to work.



By the time I'm done working out, I'm exhausted, and it isn't enough. Once I get to my bathroom, I turn on the shower and strip naked.

I need her.

Some fat old fuck who likes to do perverted things to girls wants to marry her, and her fucking father is going to let that happen.

I'll be stopping it before that happens.

Hot water sluices down over me, and I close my eyes, putting a hand against the wet wall of the shower.

Fuck. Rose.

I can see her in my mind, and I'm so fucking hard, I'm aching. Not thinking, I take my cock in my hand. Rose is everywhere, and this is the first time since she's been gone that I've let myself—

The floodgates of lust and need and obsession aren't just open: they've been obliterated.

I start to pull at my dick, hard and rough. Christ, the velvet wet tightness of her cunt. That magic. The sounds she makes. As I jerk off, it's not my hand anymore. It's her sweet mouth, wrapped tight about me as I fuck her throat.

I come.

Hard.

Chapter 5



Rosalind

When I'm not drifting on a hazy ocean between worlds, I'm so out of it, I can barely focus, even walk in a straight line. Speaking is slurry, slow, and my brain is fogged.

I woke under the shower, a large hand holding me. I screamed and fought and hit and bit and then things went dark again. The next time that happened, I just sank down into a ball.

Things are so disjointed and nothing seems to flow.

Now, someone is standing over me. It's him. The Granite Man. "Eat."

"Can't."

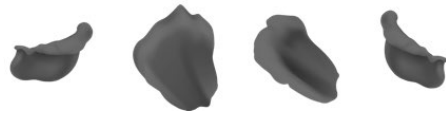
"Eat." I'm pulled up and a spoon is shoved into my mouth. "Swallow. It's soup."

I do as I'm ordered because everything is lead. When I'm finished being fed, I start to cry. He doesn't say a word, just leaves the room after pushing me down and pulling that satin cover over me. Mercifully, the world goes away, and I drift down.

Only one thing is bright in my head: the rose. Nikolai's handsome face.

It's enough.

It has to be.



Sometime later, I wake to darkness, my mouth dry. I almost fall out of the bed as I try to stand up. I stumble like some kind of drunk zombie, knocking things down, banging into the doorframe of the ensuite, and I use my hand to drink water from the faucet.

When my thirst is slaked, I hold onto the edge of the sink, shaking because it took a great deal of effort to even walk this short distance, and now, I have to go back.

I breathe in deeply. "You got this, Rosalind," I tell myself.

Somewhere in my head, Genius tells me to get my shit together. She's not wrong. With a breath, I turn and make my slow and painful way back.

I return to bed, closing my eyes, the hated dress still on. Maybe it's a new one, I don't know. I'm vaguely humiliated, but there's enough foggiess not to really feel.

"Nikolai," I whisper. "I miss you. Please..."

He's not here. He's not coming for me. I know he somehow sent a rose, but what even is that? An empty token for a stupid girl?

I miss him, but I'm angry at him, too. He let this happen to me. I thought... I thought maybe I might mean something, as

batshit as that might be, as wrong and fucked up as that is.

I'm just a thing to be used, and a pretty rose is meant to what? Say I'm not alone? Why isn't he here? Why did he let this happen?

I curl up, miserable and cold inside. All I wanted was a normal life, one where I could finally step outside the prison of life on the run, a life of isolation until Genius, and let myself be me.

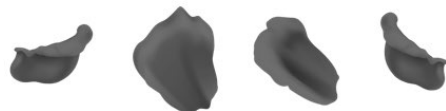
Whoever that is.

It's why I wanted to do the pageants. That's a deep secret I never let myself acknowledge before. While they were certainly a way to fast track my career, I truly did them to be seen.

Instead, I went from isolated prison to a gilded, pleasure filled cage of Nikolai, then into pink nightmare and drugged solitary.

The drug in the food starts to tug at me, but it's not as strong as what I'd been given before. I'm not sure what that means, except that I can think a little more clearly.

I lay in this horrible bed, lonely, missing Nikolai, aching for him. Right or wrong, he's the one thing keeping me going. That, and the rose.



Impartial hands strip me down and pull on another dress, moving over the buttons, trying not to touch me. At least I have on the cotton underwear. At least I have that.

I crack open my eyes, and there's Rafe, Granite Man. He's trying not to look at me, and I guess I should be grateful.

My mouth is dust, but I manage to croak out words. "Don't." He doesn't pause, just continues to do up the buttons. "Please," I whisper. "Don't."

"Ms. Finnegan, I have to. There, done." He does up the last one under my chin, and then he looks me in the eye. "You'll need to take off your panties. Sponge yourself. I've set it up."

Heat burns me and I almost look away. "Why?"

"After that, you'll have your smoothie. It has a half dose so do not fuck up. Act like it's the full one, or it'll be comatose for you and toast for me. Got that? And Thorne?" The gruff voice doesn't change in tone or add a speck of emotion. "I get you want to fight, but don't. No matter what."

"Why are you doing this?"

"I'm not your friend, so don't think that. I'm your protector. You're a job. I don't get off on touching girls who don't want me to touch them."

Or drug them. That seems to hang in the air, too.

I think about his words. I'm still foggy, and I'm still going to be drugged, but not as much. I need to be smart. I pick the battle, and more clarity gives me an edge. I'm not, however, just giving in. "On one condition: I dress myself from now on, and wash myself."

"Just behave. Now, drink your smoothie." He hands me a cold glass of thick green glop from the bedside table.

Kale. Spinach. Apple. Cucumber. That's what I'm thinking from the look of it and the smell. Maybe yogurt: that's also

been the theme so far. I like smoothies normally, but with more fruit. These...these are gross. Still, I take it like a good girl and drink it, forcing it down.

He takes the empty glass and gestures to the bathroom. I don't want to look this man—anyone here—in the eye, but I do. Maybe it's stupid, but a part of me wants him to see me, what he's doing, making me do. Rafe barely blinks.

In the bathroom, there's a soft sea sponge and make up set out, and a big bowl filled with water, perfumed with a sweet, cloying, flowery scent. I push that away, pulling off the panties and bathing that way, even though I have memories of one of those humiliating showers from the night before. I try not to think about why I'm being made to do this.

After, I apply the makeup. Pinks, of course, and a simple black mascara. The lips and shadow give me an innocence that belongs on a little girl playing grown-up. The mascara is a hint of sex.

It turns my stomach.

“Your father wants pigtails,” Rafe says through the partially closed door.

That's when I see the little, pink, bobble-headed ties. Seething, I do that, hands shaking, but even as that anger snakes through my veins, it starts to dull under a layer of fuzz. My limbs grow thick and heavy, not like usual, but enough to hinder.

When done, I turn and lurch out of the bathroom, and Rafe catches my shoulders. “In a few minutes, the first wave will wear off, but you'll still be impaired. Not like this, but enough to feel it. Thorne?”

“Yes?”

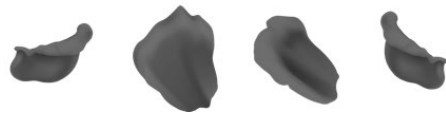
“When we’re down there, you’re to kiss Mr. Finnegan’s cheek and call him Daddy. Understood?”

I mutinously keep my mouth shut. Finally, I nod. “Yes.”

“Sit.”

I do as he asked, and he takes one leg and then the other, pulling on knee-high white socks and buckling the Mary Janes.

“Let’s go, *Miss Finnegan.*”



The voices of men send a shiver down my spine. The drugs in my system are still moving through me, and moments shift out of place. I’m suddenly in a room with the man I hate more than anything, hard eyed and cruel, yet smiling like a papa bear as he sits on a padded chair.

The effect rocks me, makes me want to turn and run, makes me want to attack him, but I smile back and stumble over to him.

“Hello, Daddy.” His cheek is creased, and as I lean in, all I want to do is open my mouth, bare my teeth, and sink them into him, down to the bone, biting, ripping, spitting his flesh in his face.

I’m not violent. Thoughts like this don’t ever come to me, thoughts where the fantasy is something I could and would do. Except now. I want to do this with a desperation that has dark and poisoned claws.

I’d never leave this room alive.

I press my lips to his cheek, pretending it's a vicious, scarring bite.

“Good little girl, Thorne,” he murmurs. “Now, turn.” I do. “Vitale, this is my little girl, Thorne.”

“She's prettier than her picture, Derek,” the man says.

Horror spreads. This Vitale is fat, old, balding, ugly, cruel. It's there in his lascivious look. Sitting across from my father in a leather chair, he waves a beringed hand at me. “Come here, child.” He spread his thighs, the material of his suit shining in the light as he pats his knee. “Sit.”

For a second, I don't move, and then I force myself, the horror turning into a dull numbness. The moment I sit, his hot, fetid breath, stained with the peat of Scotch, hits me. Vitale slides a hand down my back and the other goes to my knee, nudging them apart.

“So, she's not a virgin?”

“Well, it's the modern age,” my father begins. “Close enough.”

The hand slides up my thigh, forcing my legs further apart as this horrible man pinches at my flesh. I want to run, to fight, maim. Kill.

All I can do is sit.

There are four big men in this room, and that doesn't include the creep who's lap I'm on. I do something, and things get be worse. So much worse. Nikolai taught me that.

At least with him, punishment had an edge of erotic pleasure. This punishment will be pure pain.

I force myself to be doll like, even as his hand goes to the juncture of my thighs, sliding over the dry folds of my pussy

and up.

“Smooth. Soft. Baby bare,” Vitale grunts. “Lovely. I’m checking, though. Some of these pretty packages are loose as fuck, and I want tight.”

I whimper.

“She likes it,” he says. “Don’t you, honey baby?” I can’t look at him. “She’s shy,” my father mutters, a note of steel in his tone.

The man starts to poke at my outer lips, seeking entry into me. I’m so dry that my body refuses to comply, refuses to open the way it did with Nikolai.

And...oh, God...he’s going to...he’s going to... I can’t help it. I squeeze my eyes shut and try and pretend it’s Nikolai, but this isn’t Nikolai, this isn’t—

“Stop, Vitale.” The words halt that poking, rough hand. They’re deadly, full of menace.

“She’s going to be mine. You’ve sold her to me for a nice piece of my wealth. I’m going to test the wares.”

“Not in front of me, you’re not.” Derek doesn’t even bother hiding the threat and the disgust. “I’m her fucking father. You had a feel, that’s enough. Come here, little girl.”

I almost fall from the creep’s lap as I move. He has my thigh, and he digs in deep for a moment before he releases me. My father pats at the armrest next to him and I nod, perching on the edge, keeping my gaze downcast as I try and regulate the rapid state of my breathing.

“Now, I have a contract. Read it.” He nods to one of the big men, who steps forward with a leatherbound ledger and

hands it to the fat, ugly Vitale. I wish the fog of drugs were back and dragging me elsewhere, I wish—

No. I don't. Being out of it won't help me. It's better to try and cling to clarity, work out what's going on. If any chance to run comes up, I'm taking it. Running from this fortress isn't an option. I'm under lock and key more than even at Nikolai's, but if I'm to be...married, then...

Vitale sighs. "This is more than we agreed on."

"She's worth it, don't you think?"

The man's eyes narrow. "I wasn't allowed to taste her."

"When you do, it will be more delicious because she'll be yours, and no one, not even me, will be able to interfere with your plans for her."

Vitale practically drools as he looks at me. "Spread your legs and lift your dress, honey baby."

"Do it, little girl," my father says.

Heat burns my body as my fingers clench down on my skirt, but I do it. All those eyes—apart from my father's and Rafe's—watch.

Vitale licks his lips and leans forward. "So young. Tight. She looks completely untouched. It's a pretty, pretty pussy."

"Put your dress down, whore," my father breathes. "Now."

Shaking, I do.

"Are you sure she's not a virgin?"

"You can have fun finding out." My father's throne-like armchair in the over decorated, over manly room, creaks. Dark woods. Leather. Animal heads on the walls. Antique guns. It's awful, just like him.

Vitale grins. “I can’t wait, Derek. This will be a good alliance. So beautiful.” The man clicks fat, ringed fingers and another man appears with a gold pen. He signs the document with a flourish.

“Thorne,” my father murmurs, “tell him you’ll be good to him.”

I lick my lips, unable to look up. Not out of fear, but because I’m scared the hate and rage will burn in my eyes. “Yes, Daddy. I’ll be good, Mr. Vitale.”

“Oh, honey baby, you’ll be calling me Daddy, too.” He pauses. “Are you sure I can’t take her for a test run?”

“No.” My father rises, and the chair Vitale sits on creaks and groans. As they talk, I tune them out. It’s something about territory and business, and...my limits for the day have been stretched.

When the door shuts, my father is there, in front of me. He grabs me by the face and jerks me up to my feet. The hate and disgust shimmer in his eyes as he makes me look at him.

“You really are a disgusting little cunt of a whore. Letting him touch you. Letting him and all the men look at your exposed pussy in front of your father. Pathetic. You’re lucky he wants you. I say lucky...” He laughs harshly.

I make myself do it. Go compliant. Say the word. “Daddy?”

He releases me, pushing me back, and I tumble to the floor, narrowly missing the corner of the side table. “Congratulations, Thorne. You’re engaged. You’re finally doing something worthwhile with your life.”

I can’t move as he strides to the door. “Garcia? Take her back to her room. She disgusts me.”

When he's gone, Rafe picks me up to my feet. "Let's go, Ms. Finnegan."

I have no choice but to do as I'm told.

Chapter 6



Nikolai

“If you don’t fucking speak in the next five seconds, I’m going to shoot you dead.”

Tony barely blinks. We’re on our way back from a meeting and it did not go well. I got what I wanted; I always do, but let’s just say my usual charm had been replaced with the sharp edge of the knife and the barrel of a gun. Not literally, but even metaphorically, I’m aware I’m a scary mother fucker.

He changed gear. “Those were allies, boss.”

“They still are.”

Turning the wheel, he swings through the dense underbelly network of titty bars, low-level brothels, bars, and warehouses in territory owned by a vicious biker gang. Allies. Ones I managed to shake today. It wasn’t an easy task, and not a fruitful one, either. They hold grudges.

“Send them a gift basket. One of those edible arrangements.”

That makes him bark out an unexpected laugh. “Unless it’s one of drugs and pussy, I don’t think they’ll be interested.”

“They’ll get over it.”

I pull out my phone. I know what's got me in this mood. Everyone fucking does. Everyone on my team, I amend. The GPS I pull up hasn't moved since the big one yesterday. I say big, but it was all in the same compound, the house. What the fuck is this asshole doing?

Rush's words continue to eat down deep, an aggressive cancer. Knowing I could swoop in and take her with an organized attack makes everything worse, not better like I thought it would. Because she's there and I'm...

I feel like I'm failing.

It's new, that feeling. It's not real. I'm not at all, but sitting about, seemingly helpless, seemingly weak, is not in my wheelhouse. "Derek is up to something."

"No shit, Boss." Tony turns again as we begin to enter my territory. "But threatening to shoot and maim your people isn't helping. Nor is snapping. Everyone's walking on eggshells."

I turn to glare at him. "I wasn't aware I have so many children working for me."

He doesn't respond. He doesn't have to. He's right. I'm an utter fucking prick right now. Rush even keeps out of my way.

All I need is something to happen. This marriage bullshit won't be for a while. Mafia weddings never are, and Derek's the type to make a big show of things like that. He loves to be big man and knowing something will annoy me is going to make him feel like King Kong.

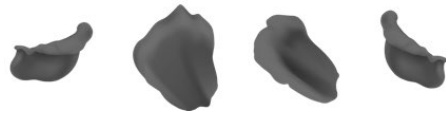
Or so he thinks.

He'll take her to the compound before then. Prepare her. Train her to be the docile mafia princess. My Rose is anything but docile.

Fuck. I miss—

My phone beeps, and I look down: a message from Rush.

“Forget the long way, Tony. Cut through. We got fucking trouble.”



I haven't stopped pacing in the meeting room. My hands are clenched, and I'm itching to pull out my gun.

“What do you want to do, Niko?” The anxiousness in Rush's voice is real.

Derek made a move. The fucker threw the first real stone in the war, the official one. He murdered someone, one of mine. It's an outlier operation, very small, but he murdered an underling and tried to take it as his. For us, it would be a small loss, but he'd see it as a big gain.

We stopped it. My people are stellar, the best of the best. I don't allow just anyone into my circle. Now there's the next step, which would be retaliation. I'd be more than within my rights. It's a stupid, ham-fisted move on Finnegan's part. That brutal, sick fuck either wants to escalate, or he's being overconfident. I move now, chances are, I'll get part of what I want.

But...

“Nikolai? We have the numbers and the weapons,” Rush says. “What do you want to do?”

I grit my teeth, a muscle working hard in my jaw. “Nothing.” I stop my pacing. “Actually, send a message to him.”

“To where?” Tony asks as he leans against the table.

Rush has an iPad and is going over logistics. His face has a gray tinge; he’s furious, scared. Honestly, I think my little cousin is scared I’ll do something completely idiotic, which I won’t, no matter how much I fucking want to.

I start pacing again, tapping my fingers against my thigh. What I could do is cower and send a message via text or to his old compound. He’ll have someone there. Still, I know Finnegan won’t buy that. No way would I be so broken, and for him to know I desperately want Rose will make him think I care. That puts her in more danger than she’s already in.

Since I stopped his attack, since I know he deliberately made an act of war, I have to play this right. “Hawke’s Hollow.”

Rush’s head jerks up. “We could retaliate. There are vulnerable places and no one will step in to protect him.” Then he pauses. “Unless you’re worried about Rose.”

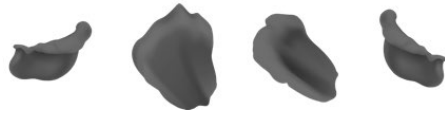
I narrow my eyes, swinging my head to him. “I’m not ready to escalate.”

Doing that to her needlessly? She might be that fucker’s flesh and blood, but she’s mine. She’s inside me. I won’t risk her for something this petty.

The edges of Rush’s mouth don’t turn up, but there’s a softening as some of the stiffness leaves him. “Fair enough. What’s the message?”

Oh, fuck, this is gonna hurt. “Tell him stop, you’ve won.”

I storm out of the room without a backward glance.



The longer the silence after my response to Finnegan, the more my rage grows. I'm out of patience, running on fucking fumes, and even those are dissipating.

I have to hold out. The reports yesterday were stagnant. No one else went out or into that fucking compound yesterday, but today...

This morning, vans rolled in. They rolled out to various locations, like Derek's planning a move. *The* move, my gut tells me, but the thing about guts is that they also tell you things you don't want, like there's something more. Town cars started to arrive at Hawke's Hollow about an hour ago, and there's action inside.

The GPS signal has moved. It's still in the confines of that place, but there's activity in there.

A message lights up on my phone from an affiliate. It's short.

Got an invite to Finnegan's. In an hour.

I storm from my office to the living room where I know Rush sits. He's set up camp here in one of the many bedrooms. He's got a job to do, yes, but I'm thinking it's more about keeping an eye on me. That pisses me right off, but at this moment, I'm glad. I need him.

"Rush." I toss him my phone.

He reads the message, frowning. "Invite?"

Throwing my phone back, he starts to work on his tablet, then his phone. When he finishes, I've got my teams on

standby. I'm fucking ready to roll.

"There's...a party, Nikolai."

"In the middle of what just might be a war."

He eyes me doubtfully. "We had that message sent, so—"

"Derek Finnegan's a lot of things, but he's not actually stupid." I pinch the bridge of my nose. "No matter what I say sometimes. If he was, he wouldn't be a threat." I pull up the GPS on my phone, only to find it still in the same place, not moving much. Shit. Fuck everything. "I need eyes in there. Real eyes. Mine."

"Nikolai."

"Not physically. I need video." I cut him a look and take a seat on the sofa. If I stay standing, I just might go in, guns blazing, the hell with everything. I force myself to breathe.

"Can't get to my contact. It's worn out its welcome for a while. Too much contact and Finnegan will notice."

"How the fuck do I trust someone who willingly works for him?"

Rush blows out a breath. "He's got reasons. What about the affiliate who contacted you?"

"No." I shake my head. "This needs to be precision." Suddenly, I look at him. "I know someone. Out of town, New York way. He's high up and does business with both of us. He has power, stays neutral, and..."

"What?" I don't blame Rush for the unease as he inches forward in his seat. "Why don't I fucking like this, Niko?"

"Nikolai," I say absently. "Heard of Serpentine?"

His eyes widen. “You keep things even keeled with him. Nikolai, I—”

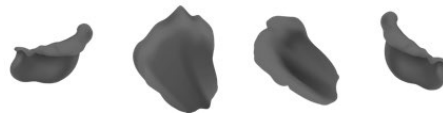
“He’s in town, and he’s going because there’s no way Derek wouldn’t invite him.” I send a quick text and get a guarded response. Yeah, the fucker’s going.

Serpentine isn’t a threat to me, but he’s a powerful ally or enemy. I did something for him once, and he owes me a favor. I’ve kept that close to the vest, waiting until the time is right.

This is all wrong. It’s a waste.

I send him a text. “He’s going, and he’ll be meeting me in an hour,” I tell Rush. “He owes me and I’m calling him on it.”

My cousin’s face says it all. I’m blowing up something big that I can and should use down the road, all for a fucking girl.



That afternoon, I get a video sent to me, no sound, from Serpentine. He’s beyond happy I used the favor. I’m not.

The party is still going, and he only put in the relevant time to make an appearance, which I know is the backdrop for a deal that has nothing to do with the war.

We keep watching the video. Rose isn’t there, but one fat fuck I know and despise is—Vitale Lugo and of course, Derek.

“Wait.” I wave a hand at the computer. “Go back.” Rush does. “Slow it.”

There. In the corner, the shadows, I see her, and my heart crushes. It’s a moment, but it’s my Rose, peeking out, dressed up, I think, in a flash of white. I replay it, over and over,

pausing on that spot, trying to see more, even though it's impossible.

“Why the fuck are they having a party?”

“You got nothing from others? Serpentine?” Rush asks.

“The others are still there, but he's gone and he's not going to say a thing. He took the video, sent it, and the favor is done,” I say.

Rush is frowning at me. “How—”

“He likes high tech shit. He likes to tape everything. It's easy enough to get cameras small enough to go undetected. That isn't important, the—” I stop as my phone beeps, and my pulse starts to hammer. The GPS is on the move. “Get everyone ready,” I say. “He's moving her.”

Rush is holding his phone in his hand now. “Nikolai,” he says, “some cars just left.”

“So? She's still there.” I gesture to the dot still in the compound.

He raises a finger. “Hang on.” Rush makes a call. “Talk.” He continues to mumble into the phone in a rushed whisper. I'm losing my patience.

“People are leaving, party's fucking over, and she's still there,” I say as he continues listening to the person on the other end.

“Yeah, but it's not the guests...” Rush looks up at me. “Priestly's following two of Finnegan's cars, along with one other. Those three are definitely heading in the same direction.” He stops for a long moment, listening. “And...”

“What?”

“They’re heading into Vitale territory.” He looks at me, frowning. That frown deepens and then melts into an expression of realization that rocks my bones with numbing cold. “Oh.”

Oh? I don’t get it. Don’t get it or don’t want to get it, I’m not sure which because the numbing of my bones holds something. I glance at the GPS feed as the dot starts to move out of where the house would be and then towards the gates. I look back to my cousin. He hasn’t moved, and he’s gone white.

“What the fuck is it, Rush?”

He swallows. “Niko, I think I know what this is. They’re heading to a church.”

My blood turns into ice. I know exactly what he’s going to say.

“I think...it’s the wedding. I—”

“Fuck.” I thought I had more time. I thought Finnegan would wait. I thought—

A rage like I’ve never felt crashes into me, and I yell, sending everything to the floor. I pick up the computer—a brand new one—and hurl it into the wall.

Fuck waiting.

Fuck the calculations, the buildup.

Fuck the plan.

“Nikolai.” I check my gun, then put it back and stalk over to where I have a backup. That’s loaded, too. “Where are you going?”

“Where do you fucking think?” I snarl, not looking at him as I head for the door. “I’m going to get back what belongs to me and kill Derek in the process.”

Chapter 7



Rosalind

“**N**ow, little girl,” my disgusting father says as he leads me out to a waiting car in the white, frothy concoction I’ve been fitted for. “It’s not that I don’t trust you, but I need you to behave.”

He nods to someone. I don’t turn my head to look, no matter how much I want to. I have to pick my battles, and seeing who he’s nodding to isn’t one of them. It doesn’t matter. What matters is that I’m outside, at a car, and that means freedom may lie ahead of me.

If I’m smart.

If I’m lucky.

If I play his repulsive games.

I just give a meek bow of my head, right as the hand of one his many goons takes my arm, hard. It’s not Rafe. His touch is impersonal and firm, but never cruel. This is borderline torturous in the grip.

I make myself stay calm. Breathe, which is hard because I’m still drugged. That’s how things roll here: keep the girl drugged, move her, pose her, touch her like she’s a doll. Crushing that line of thinking, I stand, pretending to be unable

to move. I'm not sure if what they're giving me is addictive; the most I've taken is ibuprofen before Nikolai.

Even then, he only knocked me out once.

Once more, I drag my thoughts back. The drugs are still in my system; I can feel them in the heaviness to my limbs, the slight weight on my thoughts. It's low-level, just like Rafe said, so I can function more than I should be able to, but I act like I'm fucked up to the gills. Rafe steps past me, says something to the man at the front of the car, nods to my father, and then, without looking at me, slides into the back seat.

My so-called protector. I don't like him. I don't like any of them, and yet...he's all I have. The only piece of humanity around me, and he's emotionless. I thought...I thought...

Wrong. That's what. Thought wrong because I needed to create a fantasy. I took him not wanting to touch me and letting me, in the end, mostly dress myself as a sign of something. Not friendship, but allies?

Like everyone and everything else, he doesn't care. I made it all up. What was it he'd said to me? We're not friends. Sure, he halved my dosages, but it wasn't friendship. At least there's no Stockholm Syndrome with him. I don't understand him, I don't empathize, I just used the only piece of softness here as something to hold onto, that's all.

"Look at me, cunt." Derek Finnegan, winner of Father of the damn Year.

I raise my head slowly, and he grins. It's ugly, self-satisfied, lacking in anything that could even be mistaken as warmth.

"Daddy?" The word sticks into me, bitter and sharp.

His smile broadens. “You’re a filthy whore like your mother.” His eyes glitter with hate. “But you’re younger, prettier, look like me. Because you’re mine, you’re worth something.” Finnegan steps back as he takes me in and nods. “And that’s good,” he says. “Very good.”

I’m wearing the horrible dress Rafe brought me. Deep inside, I shudder at it all. He told me to shower and turned away, letting me do it myself, something for which I’m grateful. The only order was no underwear, which still creeps me out. I know what that means.

So now, here I am, in a small child who wants to be a grown up’s wedding dress, going to get married. What would my father do if I threw up all over him?

Kill me. The flatness of that is pure truth. Instead, I stand and wait like the pathetic docile thing I have to be.

The goon holding me jerks my arm up, and my father nods to him. “A nice big dose, I think.”

This time, I look. The goon has a syringe.

“Another needle, Daddy?” Somehow, I manage that without grimacing.

“Of course, little one. Just so you have a good time, whether you want one or not.”

Since I’m in the world’s most awful wedding dress, a cool breeze making me shiver, maybe whatever he’s going to give me will help block out the coming events. I sort of want that because I know who’s waiting at the end of this.

I steel myself, hoping I can fight the effects, because maybe there’s going to be a chance to run. Maybe—

Pain slams into me as he backhands me across the face and my head cracks back. If the goon didn't have hold of me, I'd fall.

He hits me again. Again. Then to top it off, as coppery, salty warmth pushes a little at my teeth, he slams his fist into my stomach.

“You are a worthless fucking slut. Nothing more than used goods.” He smooths his hand over my hair as I struggle to breathe. “You’ve made a mess of your make up, little girl. Fix it in the car.” His gaze slides over me as the needle pinches my skin and a familiar coolness enters my body. “Now, he wants you very compliant, Thorne, so spread your legs when he asks. He might share you with his men. I don’t know. Whatever he does, you’ll do it. Understand?”

I stare at him, not speaking. He raises his hand again, then takes me in, dropping his hand to cup my head, fingers digging painfully into my scalp.

“I’m doing you a favor, getting you used to the pain you’ll be feeling. This drug is different. He wanted you to be aware of everything and unable to stop it. Who knows? You’ll probably enjoy it. Now, get in there, say yes when you’re asked, and do your job. I’ll see you at the church.”

He turns and walks away. I hate him. Even as the drug moves through me, it’s something I hold on to: the hate, the need for revenge.

“In.”

I’m pushed into the car, the door slammed shut behind me, followed by a click. I’m locked in with Rafe and the driver in the front.

Rafe just looks at me with that stone-carved face and hands me a bag. “Clean up, Ms. Finnegan. There’s a spot of blood on your lip.” He reaches down and hands me a small plastic bottle of water and a white, folded handkerchief. “Rinse and swallow and then when you’re ready, we’ll put on the veil.”

“You said if I was good—”

“He could have fucked you up so much worse. Bleeding everywhere. Bruised more than you are. Put on your make up and get ready for your new life. When we get there, we part ways.”

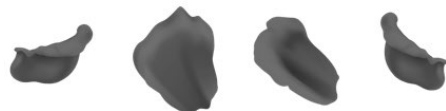
Panic scrabbles at me. “G-Goodbye?” The word lacks punch, even as the panic is grasping now.

“The drug’s working.” He lets out the smallest sigh. “You’ll do your job because your life depends on it. Maybe Vitale will keep you drugged. A small mercy.”

“A small mercy would be let-letting me go.”

“Not happening.” He stops speaking, and I slowly get ready, fixing my face, wishing there was something in the small selection of makeup I could use as a weapon. Alas, a mascara wand isn’t going to hold up against men with guns.

My only choice is to run, when and if I get a chance.



The small stone church sits in a pretty, leafy residential area. I don’t know Queenstown, but I’m pretty sure we’re still here. I sit in the car, plotting a way to escape, except it all keeps

slipping from reach as my mind shifts and slides. Holding on to anything is hard.

When the door opens, it's to drag me out, the veil that Rafe handed me throw on. Rough hands pull down the thick tulle to cover my face.

I stumble, but whoever has me holds me up. From a distance, the zoom of cars filters in and I think about screaming, but I'm not sure I can. My father will be here somewhere, and so far, he's the only one who's hit me. I don't think he'll stop anyone else doing so if I act up. In fact, he'll probably want pictures.

The cool breeze pushes at me again, flutters the edges of the veil. As I glance down, there are more than one set of polished black shoes and black trousers. When I look up, my vision's hampered. The thickness of the tulle is thin enough so I can see shapes.

I really want to scream, and I open my mouth, but someone pinches my arm and the hand on the other tightens.

"Your daddy wants you to know," says the unfamiliar voice, "that if you fuckin' do anything outta line, I can hurt you. Where we are...no one will help. Now, move."

I grab at my voluminous skirts and try to walk as I'm marched up over the curb and pulled down a path. There aren't any steps, just darkness, and a door slams. I'm inside... *somewhere*.

Whoever had me let go, and I raise trembling fingers to try and lift the veil. I can't catch it. I keep trying until finally, I lift it and look about.

The room has chairs and tables stacked in it, a door behind me and one at the other end. I try the door behind me, but it's

now locked, one of those automatic things. No escape that way.

I make my way to the other door, the drug working through me fuzzing my head and mouth, making my feet sluggish. I reach for the door. I grab the handle, and it turns.

A shot of adrenaline clears the fog for a moment.

Unlocked.

As I pull it open, male voices cascade in, and I ease it shut, letting the veil fall again.

My eyes burn, and my throat closes as I hang my head. No way out. I'm trapped again. Sucking in a breath as I try and fight whatever they pumped into me this time, I know I need to stay calm, and work out some kind of escape. When I'm in the church, maybe I can pretend I need the bathroom? Or...I swallow...or, after this wedding, maybe then I can run. Residential means people, right? So—

The door opens and a voice filled with creepy delight bursts around me. "There you are." He sounds young. "Dad said when he's had his fill, I can have you."

Oh, God. Is this the horrible fat man's son? I shudder as soft hands, damp and warm, close around my arm. Music starts up and chairs scrape, and I'm led, stumbling, out of the room. Even from behind the veil I can see we're not in the church.

A part of me wants to laugh. I'm not good enough for a church wedding. I'm glad.

The fog swirls around me as I'm brought up to a stop. Fat fingers rip at the veil and...something's wrong. Black spots start to burst into life in my head as it's yanked up, and my stomach twists in nausea as I almost pitch forward.

“Beautiful, honey baby,” the fat, disgusting man breathes out over me. “What’s my name?”

“D-D-Daddy.”

“Good little girl. I hope you remembered not to put on panties. I’m ripping open that cunt the moment we’re done. As your wedding present, they’re all going after me, every one of them. Look, honey baby.”

I try and focus through the nausea and bursts of black. There are men in the room, only men. My so-called father isn’t here, just a guard from his place, one I saw on my way out today, and men on this horrible man’s side. The son. Guards. Old men. Big men. All of them looking at me like meat, like they can’t wait.

I manage, with effort, to look at the man with the bible. He’s like no priest I’ve ever seen. He probably isn’t one. This Vitale might be Catholic, but this isn’t that kind of wedding. This is going to be a gang rape disguised as one.

Something claws at me, and I lift my eyes to my husband-to-be. I try and push words out, but my mouth is swollen. Words don’t want to come, but I push hard. “P-Please. J-Just you.”

Disgust sinks in as I say the words, but better to have it be just him than all of them. I shift my head to look for a way out, but Vitale grabs my cheeks. I’m barely registering the pain; I’m floating on that sea of fuzz that only washes me now with fear in bursts, like the unconsciousness that keeps flaring up. If I go down. I’m lost.

“Now, honey baby, where’s the fun in that? It’s your wedding day. You’ll be dessert and after, I’ll only let chosen

few continue to sample you.” He lets me go, and I sway, fighting the encroaching dark.

“Begin.” Vitale nods to the man with the book as everything dims down and I sway into the man who’s going to marry me. He grins. “So eager.”

“Dearly beloved,” the man with the book intones, launching into the marriage words.

A hysterical giggle breaks out without my permission, and Vitale back hands me, catching my cheek with a ring. I stagger. His son rights me and pushes me to the old man. In front of me, the priest or officiant continues. I try and look around, try to plead for help with my eyes, but no one’s looking at my face. They’re looking at my breasts in the weirdly girly, yet low cut bodice. I try and make my limbs work so I can run, but they’re molasses. It’s all I can do to stand here, fighting the unconsciousness pulling at me.

Vitale grabs my hand and squeezes painfully every time I have to repeat a line. I do. I fumble through the words, my voice thick and slurred and slow. I can’t stop myself, and there’s no way out of it. No way. The darkness is getting thicker, deeper, and my head starts to spin.

Vitale looks at me. “Say it. Say I do.”

“I...I...do.” I don’t. I don’t. I don’t know what’s happening. My stomach is heaving, and maybe, just maybe, someone kindly gave me an overdose. I’d welcome that with open arms.

If I’m dead, then I won’t know. All I want is Nikolai, but he gave me up. All he did was send a rose. I want him. I need him. He’s sweetness compared to this.

“Come here,” my disgusting husband says.

I take a wobbling step, and then I start to pitch to the side, the world wavering, and I'm swallowed up into blessed darkness.

Chapter 8



Nikolai

As much as I meant it at the time, I'm not going to kill Derek. Too much is riding on my plan of revenge, but fuck it if I'm letting some vile slime with a penchant for hurting girls touch my Rose. She isn't his. She's mine.

I'm going to enjoy killing him, even if he hasn't touched her. The fact he wants to—and I know a man like him more than wants to—is enough. If a stray bullet hits Finnegan in his knee, or shoulder, then hey, fuck that, too.

It's taken too long to roll. The thought won't fucking quit in my head. I know it took us a minute, maybe less, to hit the road, Tony behind the wheel. The call is out, and we're speeding through Queenstown, enough cops on our payroll to look the other way if they see us.

Tony is an expert, and he knows the backstreets and short cuts so I don't worry. Everyone is ready for this, converging onto Vitale Lugo's fucking territory. If he tries to make war—if he fucking survives—let him. I'll crush him and everyone he's ever even thought about.

It won't come to that. I'm killing him and everyone in there.

“You okay, Niko?” Rush asks.

I check both my guns for the tenth time, not trusting myself to look at my cousin. I need a moment. My blood is boiling. I might lose my shit. I don’t want him here, but I couldn’t stop him when he jumped in the car and refused to get out. To stop to argue would have wasted precious seconds, and I can’t afford a single one.

“Fucking dandy.”

He taps on his phone. “There are cars, and most drivers are out now.”

“Most?”

“All that were out there. Some weren’t with the cars.”

I just nod, catching Tony’s gaze as he drives. He’ll take care of Rush for me.

“Uh, the church—”

“Is empty. It’ll be the building to the right, one of the church halls.” Rush looks up at me. “No church is kinda like a fuck you to her as being ‘used,’” I push out.

My phone pings, letting me know my second team arrived. Not being in a church makes it better. I really don’t give a shit, but there are those who view the walls of a corrupt institution as sacred. I suck in a breath and try to calm, even though I’m shaking inside, going insane at the idea that we’re too late.

“But that makes no sense,” says Rush.

Tony mutters something, then swings hard right. “Yeah, it does. It’s a fuck you to her, not to mention to Finnegan. This is how it’s gonna roll, Rush. You and I will take the east, Boss will go in through the front. Teams are waiting, but some might get out.”

“No—”

“My orders,” I say, “my fucking way.”

Tony will keep him safe. I hate losing Tony in this, but my teams are good. Besides, this is my show and Tony is wise enough to know I’m going in, guns fucking blazing, no matter what.

The moment we pull up, I’m out, and the car drives off. I don’t think of my cousin anymore as I struggle to keep the anger at a usable level. The rest of my men are waiting outside the doors.

I take it in. No guns glint from windows in the cool afternoon air. My men have cleaned the street of any bodies already. Behind the windshields of a couple cars, slumped men sit, very dead. My only regret is I didn’t execute them myself.

Signaling, two of my men open the doors to the building and we burst in. At first, we’re in a room with a bunch of men, all armed, and a craziness hits me.

Where the fuck is my Rose? The fucking so-called groom? Her fuckhead of a father?

I just start shooting, working through the men in record time, adrenaline and the need to cause pain coursing through me.

Rose! Where the fuck is Rose?

I leave my men to it and push through heavy doors, gun freshly loaded, just in time for me to see that fat fuck and my gorgeous little Rose, who crumples to the ground.

My stomach pitches sideways as I take it all in. The pitiful fucking wedding turn out. The lack of Derek, all the security, not one asshole there to catch her as she fell.

I don't think, I just start shooting before they can move. So do my men. There's more in here than I'd like, and I'm guessing they're Vitale's goons. I want them all dead—no survivors—so I go in hard, chest then head shot, over and over again.

This is the saddest fucking wedding ever. The thought goes through my head as I shoot until I have to reload. A bullet whizzes by me, narrowly missing, and I spin, shooting the fuck in the face.

The room is a riot of noise, and I point my gun at Vitale, but before I can pull the trigger, a large man shouts, "Stop or she dies."

I turn my head. A guard has a gun pointed down at Rose's limp head. She isn't moving.

In seconds, I weigh it up. This is an empty threat. She's worth too much, and no one on Vitale's team would dare kill Finnegan's daughter. I swing my gun and shoot the man between the eyes.

"I'm not good with ultimatums," I mutter as he falls like a sack of potatoes on top of Rose.

I go for the groom, but he's gone, ran off during the commotion, probably hiding or looking for a secret exit. The frightened man with the book tries to scramble away, but I shoot him, too.

Fuck him. Fuck everyone. Fuck Derek for handing her to the piece of shit, Vitale Lugo.

Then I drop, shoving the dead man off Rose, and breathe out at the warmth of her skin, the rise and fall of her chest as I scoop her up. "Let's move."

Without wasting another second, I stride out, surrounded by my men, Rose pressed against me. My gun's still in my hand and she stirs. "Rose, I've got you. We're going home."

It's not really her home, but it's where she belongs right now. It doesn't take us long to hit the pavement, where one of my men has a limo waiting. It's highly pimped out in a bulletproof exterior, and the door's open, like I'm carrying my bride from our fucking wedding instead of a bloodbath.

I don't need to say a thing as I slide in. He closes the door and gets into the driver's seat.

Her eyes flutter open, and for a moment, the need and pleasure there make me hard as fuck. Need for me. Pleasure at seeing me. Then it shifts out of focus. She blinks and tries to draw back as distrust hovers there. Her fucking pupils are too big, and there's blood at the corner of her mouth, splattered across her white dress. I grip her hips hard as I hold her on my lap, moving her so she straddles me. It's torture, it's glorious, and it's vital.

I need to feel her. She needs to feel me. There. Hard. Real.

I shift my gaze past her to catch the driver's eye. From the front seat comes Rush's voice over a speaker. "Well?"

"I've got her. I want men out to hunt down Finnegan. Bring him to me. It's time we had some words."

There's a pause, a crackle, then: "The plan?"

Fuck. I breathe out. "It stands." I stroke my hand over her hair, and her soft little breaths do something to me. I don't want to talk to anyone but Rose. I need to make sure she's all right, and this fucking dress... "Talk. Vitale, on the other hand..."

"Got it, Niko."

I turn to Rose, capturing her face gently in my fingers, and she winces. The fury in me shoots high. She's bruised, a little swollen on the side with the trickle of blood. I lean in and lick the blood, then feather my lips over hers.

Rose sighs softly, so warm against me as she sways. My stomach clenches. They've definitely drugged her, the cowards. They've probably kept her like this all the time we've been apart. I don't know what they gave her or how much, but I'm plotting the deaths of everyone involved. If I can pick them off one by one, I will. If not, the moment I have Derek's power and assets, I'll fucking rip them apart barehanded. Speaking of...

Rose is wearing some kind of hideous thing, and she smells like candied flowers. I take hold of the bodice and rip, tearing the dress off, tossing the shredded thing to the floor. She's naked on my lap.

White hot anger lances me as I brush my fingers over her nipples, not even letting the pleasure of how they peak for me register. Instead, I slide lower. She's lost weight in the time her father had her. I dip between her thighs. She's dry, starting to moisten, but she doesn't wince, doesn't seem swollen or hurt. What I want is to unleash myself and lay my claim all over again, thrust deep into her, hard. I want to push my fingers inside her and fuck her into an orgasm, but I don't.

She sways again, and she whispers. "Nikolai, you came for me."

"Yeah, Rose. You're mine. Did they hurt you?" I shuck my jacket and pull it around her. "Did they?"

Her eyes darken, her pupils too wide. She can't quite manage to focus. "No...he..."

“What?” Keeping my voice calm is one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do.

“He tried to put his fingers in me, but Daddy stopped him.”

Daddy? Fucking Daddy? Her voice is thick and slurred. My blood turns to solid ice.

“Call Tony,” I bark at the driver.

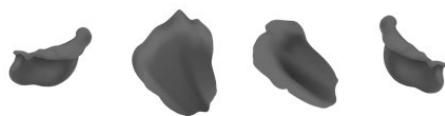
A few seconds later I hear, “Boss?”

“When you get Vitale, I want him alive and brought to me. Understood?”

She touches my face with trembling fingers, and my attention is back with little Rose. “You left me with them, Nikolai. Just...collateral dam...” Then her eyes flutter shut, and she slumps down.

Collateral damage. It’s what I told her she was to me—*all* she was to me. It isn’t true.

I’m going to enjoy ending one Vitale Lugo. Her father? Oh, that’s going to be drawn out and more painful than I ever imagined.



No one dares come near me when I get home. I carry Rose’s unconscious body up to my bedroom and tuck her, naked, into my bed, exactly where she belongs.

I want to bathe her, but something tells me she needs to do that herself. This time.

Normally, I wouldn’t give a fuck, but this isn’t normal, and I let this go a little too far. I should have found another way to

get Sylvie, just like I'm going to have to find another way to get Derek.

I look at her, and something deep in me shifts. It's uncomfortable, like a bone sticking into me, or a knife. I have to deal with it. Cope. Ignore it.

She's so young and vulnerable, dark circles smudged beneath her eyes, thick lashes brushing her cheek. Reaching out, I smooth a gentle hand over her, then brush her hair from her face. Slowly, I pull the sheets back and take her in from where I stand.

Marks on her upper arm, both from a needle and a hand. There's a bruise blooming on her stomach. Bruises have formed from fingers on her upper thighs. I know I should call a doctor to check her out, but not when she's passed out. She's been violated, perhaps not sexually, other than that nasty fuck trying to finger her, but violated all the same. I don't want to add to that.

I'm more than aware that everything I've done might be seen as violation, but Rose responded and begged each time, even when her head told her not to. She belongs here with me.

There's a knock on my door, and I sigh, covering her. Tony is there, Mia hovering, and I shoot them both irritated looks. I point to his wife. "No."

She looks for a moment like she's going to defy me, but for all her hardass fire, she knows my limits and what I can do, so she only sends me a dark glare and goes downstairs. Tony doesn't say a word or react. I fold my arms and lean against the door where I've left it open a crack. "News?"

This time, he reacts. "None. Vitale has gone underground."

“I’m not worried about that fat fucker. He’ll pop up and when he does, he’s mine.” I wait a beat. “Finnegan?”

“Didn’t even go to the wedding. He didn’t return to the compound.” A flare of hope sets off in me, but Tony’s eyes crush that hope. “All hands were on deck and we don’t know where he is.”

For a moment, I think about ordering the execution of Roland, who watched the compound, but he followed protocol. We thought Finnegan had left with the wedding party.

“Fucking coward,” I mutter. “He’ll appear, too.”

I know what he’s thinking: he’s gone to his secret compound. The fact that I have Rose back and she isn’t in the hands of Vitale, which makes their deal null, means he’ll show up, and when he does...

Of course, there’s a possibility he’ll lay low for months. Unfortunately for him, I’m good at waiting, except perhaps where Rose is concerned. I’ll get him. Besides, now that I’ve seen what he did to her, what sick fuck he handed her to, I’m ready to pull out all the fucking stops. My contacts are extensive, more than anyone knows.

There’s a soft sound, the rustle of sheets from my room.

“Bring me Vitale, and don’t go near Finnegan. That plan is still a go.”

He nods at my door. “Boss?”

“I’ll get him, and when I do, when I have everything, I will rip him limb from fucking limb.”

With that, I go back into my room, shutting the door with a click. Rose is sitting there, still a little out of it, but awake. I cross to her, but she skitters away in the bed, shrinking down.

There's mistrust and the kind of defeat in those pretty blues that I haven't seen before.

I narrow my eyes. "Don't fucking look at me like that, Rose."

"Why not?" Her voice is still slurred at the edges, but her anger, that's beyond clear. "I don't belong to you."

"Oh, you think so, do you?"

"Y-Yes." She rips the sheets from her, exposing all that lush and bruised, naked flesh, and heat moves through me. "You can use me, but you won't ever be able to keep me. I don't belong to anyone."

I come to stand over her and laugh. This? This I can do. "That's where you're wrong, Rose."

"Fuck you."

"Soon enough, when you're not drugged the fuck out of your gourd." I slide my hand around her neck and she hisses in a breath as color blooms high in her cheeks and her eyes flutter. She's almost mewling for me, her head moving to my hand, pressing into me, and I don't even think she realizes it.

I gently pull her up so she's on her knees. "Let's get something straight, Rose. You belong to me. No one else, just me, and you know it."

"No—"

"Oh, you do, and I'll be proving it to you all over again if I have to." I slide my other hand down to pinch her nipple. She gasps, moans, and I move to the next. I keep going until they form stiff peaks, and she blushes everywhere with anger, with arousal, with need.

“See, Rose? You’re all turned on and wanting me. You can’t deny that. If I put my hand between your thighs, I’m betting you’re all wet.”

She moans and pulls away a little. I remember what she said in the car and anger pulses in me.

I lean into her and feather my mouth over hers, kissing her slow and sweet, a gentle kiss, full of unhurried seduction. She moans again, her breath hitching as she sways into me, fingers at my shirt. Her lips open, and that is pure fucking Rose, the heat and softness and wetness, the taste that’s both innocence and wanton, dark and light. It’s what I’ve dreamt of, fantasized about.

Pure and unadulterated Rose. She’s naked. I’m dressed and I want—

I lift my head, breaking the kiss, her little sounds of protest music in the air. “Did they hurt you, Rose?”

She shakes her head. “No.”

She’s lying and she won’t look at me. I think she knows I know. I reassure her anyway. “They won’t hurt you ever again, I promise. I’m going to kill your fuck of a father, not just for my own revenge, but for you. I can see the bruises.”

“No.” Her voice is fierce, and I ease her head up to look at me. “I want to kill-kill him myself.”

I smile slow. I like this part of her, the unleashed aggression. It’s been in her, the hard core, the promise of violence and the need to avenge. I kiss her again, not hard, no matter how much I want to pillage her mouth, bury myself in her.

“That, my Rose, maybe be something I can arrange.” I release her and gently push her down to lay on the bed again.

“Nikolai...”

“Sleep, Rose,” I murmur. “We’ll talk later, after you rest.”

Because I don’t actually trust myself, I head out, leaving the door cracked open.

Chapter 9



Rosalind

I toss and turn, unsure what's a dream and what's not. The darkness keeps swallowing me and spitting me out. There's the ugly man, the one who tried to violate me. He stares at me, untold horrors glittering in his eyes, his words echoing about what he's going to do.

Then I'm surrounded by the familiar scent of Nikolai. It's embedded into the sheets. I burrow down, but big hands pull me from under a heavy, dead weight.

"*My Rose.*" Nikolai is there. I'm in his arms, clinging to him. The darkness is calling. I open my eyes, and he's got me tight, pressing me into him like I'm precious, like he's my knight. The blackness waves over me, here and gone, and he rips off my dress. I'm naked in his arms.

"It's your fault," he says. Now, we're in a bedroom—his bedroom—and he's there, in a suit, hands stroking me, so sure. I try and shove him away, but I'm so weak. I want to pull him to me. "Hush, Rose. You're safe."

I'm there. The wedding, that monster trying to put his finger in me, making me spread my legs, expose myself. I scream, and I'm wrapped in arms that are strong and so familiar, I ache.

“Little Rose.” That deep, dark voice both soothes and riles me at the same time. I fight, trying to get free. He’s too strong. I try and hit him, but his lips kiss my palm.

“I hate you, Nikolai. You did this. You did this and you made me...want you...then you gave me away.” Tears push at me, and I want to punch him, scratch his face.

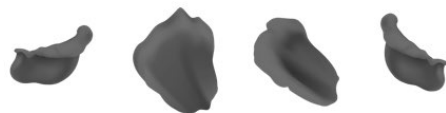
“No, you don’t.” *Did I say that aloud?* “Yeah. Go to sleep, little Rose, you’re safe.”

Guess I said that out loud too. “Not with you,” I say, words slipping and sliding.

As much as I want to hurt him, I also want to melt down into him. I want him inside me, taking me, branding me and making me forget what happened. I need to run. I’m falling. I can’t...I can’t... “I can’t, I can’t...”

A sob heaves inside, and Nikolai rocks me into him. “Shh, sleep, I’ve got you. I’m not letting you go. You’re mine.”

I slip right down into something like dreamlessness, safe in his arms.



I don’t know what time it is when I wake, but I sit up with a start, horror ripping through me. I’m naked, and oh, God—

The sharp, disjointed breaths stop as I take in my surroundings. The huge bed with crisp white sheets. The manly and plain room. The sofa and chairs and coffee table. A familiar scent is there on the sheets, on my skin, sitting on top of the sweet, girly floral. It tugs something deep inside. The

malicious warm spice. Cigarettes, jasmine and earth. Sex in the afternoon.

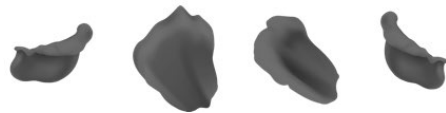
Nikolai.

I remember him sitting and reading, looking so devastatingly handsome and dangerous. Polished. A sharp spasm of want passes through me as I remember the utter savagery and violence on his face, anger and pain and fear in his eyes as he carried me from that wedding.

A dream? I don't know, but this isn't.

I curl my palm in the sheets and sink down, pulling the cover over me.

He isn't here, but he was. His presence is in the air like a vibration. Even though I might hate him, might need him and want him, I'm safe. I close my eyes. This time when I drift off, I feel clean.



The teasing aroma of coffee, eggs, and bacon pull me into consciousness, and my stomach growls. There's a tray on the coffee table in Nikolai's room. A jolt runs through me, not as strong as before, but a jolt of realization of where I am.

"Mr. Wilder said you'd be hungry. There's water, fresh OJ and coffee."

I look at the tray, topped off with a rose.

I clutch the sheet to me, even though the voice is female. I look up. It's the older woman I've seen here before. She's small and has a meek air about her that's fake. She's tough as nails, I can see that in how she eyes me, and she doesn't smile.

For a moment, I think she's mad at me, but then I realize it's not anger aimed towards me. Maybe Nikolai? I'm not sure, but I see the concern in her expression, the kindness, as she watches me.

I wouldn't cross her, though. She's different from the maid who crushed on Nikolai, the one I had before. The maid... something, something happened. I don't remember what, though. I don't ask, either. Right now, my well is still empty, and my stomach clenches with hunger.

"Thank you," I say meekly.

"There's a robe. Nikolai said you'd want a bath or shower. I moved your soap and shampoo in here for now." Then, the woman bustles around and leaves. I get up slowly and my legs almost buckle. Everything hurts, and my face feels like I ran into a wall, or a couple of fists.

Pulling on the robe, I sit and eat. Soon, everything is gone. When I'm done, I stand. I don't want to wash the lingering scent of Nikolai from me, but I can smell the horrible perfume from my father's house, so I head for the shower, where I spend way too long scrubbing myself.

Finally, I dry off, leaving my hair wet. I pull on the robe and wobble back to bed. It's pathetic, I know, but I need...I need a few more minutes.

Who am I kidding? I'm still a prisoner. This is still a cage. It's just nicer. What I need is to get away. *And go where?*

Genius. She must be worried sick. She must have called the cops.

I fill in some time with fantasies of escaping and having everyone locked up, but... No way would a man like Nikolai not have cops on his payroll. And—

A rap sounds sharp on the door, and before I can say anything, the woman comes back in, not saying anything as she tidies up my tray.

“Good,” she says, so soft, I’m not sure I’m hearing her. “You ate it all.”

“I-I’m sorry, I should have left—”

She spins, eyes hard, full of anger. “No, you should have eaten it all and you shouldn’t have been in that position. I could smack him, I really could. I’m Mia,” she goes on after a calming breath. She’s still buzzing with anger. “Tony is my husband. We’ve been with Nikolai—Mr. Wilder—for years, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to smack him sometimes.”

I snort a laugh. The image of this small woman giving a man like Nikolai a thwack is so absurd...

“I’ll send up some clothes.” Her gaze rakes over me, and her eyes flare again. “Are you okay? Do you need to see anyone? A doctor?”

I look away, not sure why she’s being nice. People aren’t nice in this world, and they always want something, even Nikolai.

Especially Nikolai.

“No,” I whisper, “I’m fine.”

She’s silent a moment. “If you need to talk—”

“Can you get me out of here?” I ask, looking at her again.

“No.”

I breathe out. I expected that answer, but it still pinches. “Why are you being nice?”

She half chuckles. “I’m nice when I choose to be. You’re a soft, sweet thing, Rosalind, but you have fire. This life, it hardens people, changes them.”

I’m not exactly sure who she’s talking about, but I don’t press for more. I just nod.

“It’s unfortunate you’ve been caught up in this mess.”

“Where...” The words come because I have to ask them, even though I don’t know if I want the answer. “Where’s the other maid? Sylvie?”

“I’m not a maid. I’m the housekeeper. Well, that’s what Nikolai calls it because I oversee everything in the house, but my job is much more complex than that.”

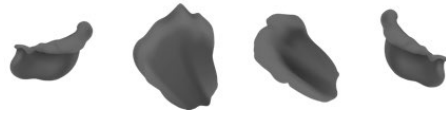
“Sylvie... She was taken, I know that,” I say. “I...I tried to be her friend. Is she okay?”

“She’s alive.” I shiver at the flatness of her tone, at what the words hold. There’s an ominous note to the short answer, but Mia goes on. “This life is not for the weak. You should remember that. Now, try and sleep, Rosalind. It’ll help you heal.” She points to a button on the wall to the right of the bed. “It’s old. Nikolai never uses it because cellphones are more efficient, but it was part of the house when it was built decades ago.”

I frown. “What is it?”

“These old places have them. It’s a bell and it works. Press it if you need me.” With that, she switches on the bedside lamp, setting it to low. Then, she turns off the overhead light as she walks out, leaving the door ajar.

Burrowing down in the bed, I close my eyes, and secretly, shamefully, I imagine the sheets are Nikolai’s arms, holding me close.



I'm running fast with my mommy. My heart is in my throat, and my stuffed doggie is held tight. I'm scared, so scared. I'm hurting. Mommy is wild eyed; she's scared too, and that makes me pee myself, just a little. She's so big and she's bleeding.

Mommy whispers to be quiet, that I'm a good girl, so good at being silent and moving fast. Tears stream down my face. My hand is in hers, tight, so tight my fingertips are cold and getting numb, but if she lets me go, I'll scream.

I love my mommy. I hate the bad man. I hate him. He's my daddy, but I hate him. He scares me. My head is sore and sticky from his fist. Mommy hit him with something and dragged me out.

Everything is back there except my doggie.

Suddenly, she shushes me. Her mouth is at my ear. "Let's play a game," she whispers. "Pretend we're invisible statues."

My mouth trembles, but I do what she says. I'm so scared that the pee dribbles out, wetting my undies. Then a big shape appears, blocking out the light.

"There you are, little cunts." He grabs mommy and hits and hits and I scream—

Arms have me, and I fight, hitting, slapping, a high-pitched scream ripping free as I'm plunged into the dark. But I'm big now, and I can fight. A-And, the arms don't let me go, but they're not cruel. I breathe hard as a voice starts to come in

through. Not him. Not that monster. This... This is something safe. Good.

I breathe, sharp-edged, ragged, but deep.

“Rose,” he says softly. “I’ve got you.”

“No...” I stop struggling in fits and my breath evens, smooths. I’m not at my father’s house, I’m not a little girl with my mom. I’m here. I’m naked and Nikolai has me, holding me tight against his hot, bare chest. I don’t open my eyes as I burrow into him, into his heat and strength, vaguely aware I’ve traded one monster for another.

“Rose, sweet Rose, you’re okay.”

I’m crying. I can feel it, the wetness on my cheeks. “N-Nikolai?”

“Yeah, it’s me. You’re safe.”

“It was so real.” I open my eyes. It’s dark in the room, only a sliver of pale silver from the blinds breaking up the dark. It must be night.

“You had a nightmare, Rose. Hush, I have you.”

This is Nikolai. That knowledge solidifies, streaks through me, like the fact it wasn’t a dream.

“No, it was real,” I croak out. I struggle to get free, but he refuses to release me.

It was. I don’t remember much more of it, but in my bones, at the bottom of my soul, it wasn’t a dream. It was a memory from my hidden depths.

I sag against Nikolai, letting him stroke soothing paths down my spine, and I breathe in that evocative scent of his. It calms me and I burrow in against him. I shouldn’t. I know

that. I should pull free, not seek more of him, but he's holding me like I'm both the most precious thing in the world and his, like I might break if he lets me go.

God help me, but I want that. I want him. He chases those demons away. He makes me feel safe. He shouldn't, but right then, I'll take it.

Holding me, his mouth brushes against my temple, and he toys with the bracelet I'm still wearing, the one he gave me.

"Sweet Rose, I'm sorry. You had a nightmare, or a memory."

He's going to ask me what it was, I know it. I can't...I suck in a breath and push back. This time, he loosens his hold. I just reach up and cup his cheek. His skin is slightly rough with stubble, so warm and real. I need something real and good. "Please," I whisper, "please..."

"Tell me what you want," he says, voice dark and beguiling.

"You...I want you to make me forget everything for a while." I need to chase the new demons away. With everything else I've been through, I don't think I can handle anything else. I'll shatter.

He doesn't answer for a long time. "That, I can do."

Nikolai crushes me to him and kisses me.

Chapter 10



Nikolai

I shouldn't do it, not after all she's been through. If I were a different man, one who had real morals, one who gave a fuck about right and wrong, I'd keep my hands to myself, but I'm not.

I also know that right now, she needs this, and so do I.

Lifting my head, I look down at her, those blue eyes dreamy, pure latent flame, her mouth reddened from that hard kiss. *I shouldn't do this... not after all she's been through.*

That thought comes at me again, but I'm going to. I need to. She's been a fucking fever in my blood. She's haunted my dreams, stalked my every thought since Finnegan took her. Since last time I was in her. Since I took her virginity. Since the first time I tasted her.

I rub a hand down between her tits, all the way down to her cunt, and I slide my fingers between her thighs. That glorious glide that only comes with her arousal, the wetness there, for me. She whimpers in a way that no fucking memory can ever quite live up to. When she's here, in my arms, that soft little sound does things to me.

“Nikolai,” she whispers, turning her face up, like she’s offering herself to me. “Please.”

I take my hand from between her legs and curl it into her soft, thick hair, hauling her up against me. Her heart hammers as her breath comes hard, uneven, and it’s such a turn on, I’m hurting with the need to bury myself inside her.

Dragging her on me, I claim her mouth again, hard. Open. Tongues. Teeth. The kiss is rough as fuck, hotter than hell, and as vital as the oxygen in the room. Rose responds like she was born for this kiss. Her hands are on me, clinging, offering herself even as she kisses me back.

It’s a wild, carnal carnival ride, and she’s mine, every fucking part of her. The soft, warm skin, the wetness of her cunt and mouth, the tiny whimpers of need she makes.

I’m claiming her back, and she knows it. Her body knows who and what she is. Mine.

Without breaking the kiss, I lower her to the bed, turning so she’s on me. She moves, her cunt sliding along my erection still in the confines of my underwear. It’s the kind of tease I’ll take.

Normally, I’d never let her have this kind of attempt at control, but she needs it, like she’s finding herself again, and it’s erotic as fuck. Her evocative mix of innocence and vixen. The slight clumsiness entwined with instinctual goddess moves.

She’s humping against me, and I keep my hand in her hair, taking her mouth in deeper, harder kisses, I catch her lower lip, sinking my teeth into it, right near where I licked the blood. It’s a bite of pain that I’m painting over with new and she squeals, jerks, moans, tugs against me. The tug is a slow pull,

like she needs it, too. When I run my tongue over that whole lower lip and release her, she sighs and comes back for more.

My blood spikes. *Yes.*

This is the kind of rough foreplay that sets all the extra fires. It's the precursor to the wild, dark heaven that exists between her thighs, that tight, hot tunnel I cannot wait to take again.

I roll us again so I'm on top, and I kiss my way down, biting and sucking at her throat, pulling her flesh and skin until she whimpers with pain and need and pleasure. Laving at her tits, sucking her nipples deep, I move further down, shucking my boxers as I go, my erection springing heavily out, so painful in its full salute. As much as I want to fuck her, slam inside until I'm balls deep, I need to taste her more. Rose needs to understand in every cell that whoever dared try and touch her didn't leave a mark.

There's only mine.

She's gasping, crying, whimpering, pleading. I push her thighs apart, licking a path along the wetness of her slit, nibbling her outer lips, slipping fingers down to tease her hole.

Rose pushes at me, trying to lift her hips to take me, but I hold her easily down with my other hand. This is a lesson in exquisite torture, of how she needs to know who and what I am, and just how much she was made for me, how much she belongs, exactly who it is she craves.

"Say my fucking name, Rose." I lick up to her clit. She gasps, spasms. "Fucking say it."

"Nikolai!" It's a harsh whisper, a soft cry. "Nikolai. God! Nikolai!"

I close my mouth about her clit and suck.

“Oh! Oh, more, please, Nikolai...”

I slide a finger just into her cunt. “Tell me who you belong to, Rose.”

“You.”

That’s right. “What do you want?”

“You!” The broken sound is music, rough and pagan and soaring. “You.”

“To do what, Rose?” I push a little deeper, then go back to suck a moment at her clit. She’s delicious, dark and sweet, and the taste of her is so familiar, so burned into me, I don’t know if I can ever get enough. “Tell me what you want me to do.”

“Fuck me. Please.”

I rise up and rub the tip of my cock at her entrance, and then I push in, stretching her. Halfway in, I slam home. She convulses, that tight passage squeezing down on me over and over.

“Did I say you could come?” I start to hammer into her, punctuating each word with a deep, hard thrust. “Did. I. Give. You. Permission?”

“No, I...I couldn’t help it.”

“Good thing I’m feeling fucking generous, Rose.” I sink my teeth into her throat and suck.

She screams, wrapping about me, her ankles locking around my waist. Then it’s on. We crash together. No one is done here; not her, least of all me. It’s a hard, rough, wild fuck. I drill into her, bottoming out each time, drawing back and slamming in. She’s a constant stream of sounds and words, all demanding, pleading, full of need, heat, pleasure, pain.

Every time I pull out, her hips come up, her hands scratch at my back as she tries to push me back down, back into her. We can't get enough. It's brutal, it's wild. Her pussy is so hot and tight, and she comes again, harder this time.

I grit my teeth as I bury my face against her shoulder. My hands fists in her hair as I hold her where I need her. I'm holding back. I want her to come. Over and over. Again and again. Push her past boundaries. Off that cliff. Into flame.

“More. More. More. Nikolai. Harder.”

I'm hitting her hard, deep inside, and it's not enough. I want her ass. I want to destroy her, mark her in every way.

I raise my head and take her mouth in a deep, brutal kiss. She gasps into me. “You're gonna fucking come again, Rose. With me.”

“I can't.” Those hips rise for me.

I slam hard into her. “You can.”

“Nikolai...” She's trembling underneath me, and I slide a hand between us to rub her clit. I set a nasty rhythm, one I know works for her, one that will make her come even if she's too sensitive. It's there. I feel it, lurking in her.

With my cock, I mimic the times I've finger fucked her beyond reason. Torn her down. Made her shatter. At first, as I keep that deliberate hammer pace as she pushes at me, even as her cunt says yes. Then, the change.

She starts to melt, starts to shake. Her body takes her over and the wave starts. The contractions grip my cock like some wild and relentless torture. She feels so fucking amazing, so unbelievably tight and hot. She comes so fucking hard she screams, convulsing on the bed. I keep it up. I grit my teeth

and hold off from spilling into her, even as my balls tighten, the urge to come so strong I might go mad.

I want more of her. I want her to come again. I want her milking me like she wants to strangle my cock. Fuck... She's so fucking hot. Tight. Tighter with each clench of her pussy's walls. Her orgasm is mythic, sharing its waves of intensity with me, and I'm there for all of it, but my control is slipping.

I can't stop it this time. The cum is rising, and the pleasure is starting to burst as my cock starts to pulse. I lose it. I start to just go wild. I thrust into her with abandon, pull her thighs high and ride out her next orgasm, sending her spiraling again, more hard clenches on my cock as she wails. I flood her with my cum, convulsing in an orgasm so intense, I think I might black out.

Her pussy wrings out every last drop from me, and I collapse on top of her, finding her mouth, taking her in kiss after kiss. There's no finesse, just mouths that need each other, like a drug, like addicts riding the high. She's so fucking delicious, I could exist on her mouth for months.

I slide my hands in her hair again and angle her face to take more, and she gives so sweetly, willingly, that if I had it in me, I'd come from that. The kisses start to slow to shallow, sipping things, tiny tastes, licks, feathery caresses.

Then I stop, breathing hard and uneven, and I drop my face into the damp heat between her throat and shoulder, hand tangled in her hair, her scent now mingled with mine and the heady aroma of sex.

When I'm done, when I have the strength, I roll off her, breathing long and hard. She...she whimpers, little sounds of pleasure that coil into me. Her hands whisper against me like she needs me.

I turn to her. “Rose?”

“N-Nikolai...I...”

There’s a vibration in her, that hum lingering from her orgasm, I can feel it. I want to obliterate every single thing anyone did to her at Finnegan’s, obliterate and replace it all with nothing but me and pleasure. Her body trembles as I touch her.

“Rose,” I murmur, whispering my fingers down her hot, soft cheek, over her swollen lips, down to circle one tit and then the other. “You’re not done.”

I push her on her back and rise, spreading her thighs as I slide down the bed a little, going back down to her cunt. It’s a beautiful, glorious mess. The lips are swollen. It’s too dark to see all the details, but I can imagine the redness. I can feel the glorious wetness of our mixed fluids. I start to dip in, paint her.

She quivers, stiffens. “I can’t, Nikolai. I’m too sensitive. If you’re trying to punish me, you have. You already made me come more than I thought I could.”

“Rose,” I say, looking at her in the darkness. “You’ll always fucking know when I punish you. This is not that.”

“It is. I’m done.”

“You’re not.” This is ownership, making my mark, wiping out every single bad thing that happened when she was gone. This is her giving her soul to me. I slip my fingers over her hot, wet flesh, pushing into her a little, making her moan and gasp and jump.

“I’m sore.”

“My sweet Rose.” I let the steel slide into my voice. “I don’t give a fuck. You’re going to come.”

As I hold her, I start to finger her, pushing in, curling my fingers in that hot tightness. I use my thumb against her clit and bring my face in close to hers.

I'm getting hard again. I kiss her as I finger her, and then I pull her on me and I line up, only moving my fingers to replace them with the girth of my cock.

"It's too much. I can't."

"You fucking can." I thrust into her, pulling her down to kiss her hard. I tongue fuck her mouth as I thrust into her pussy, then tease her clit.

"No...nooo...oh, yes..."

Pressing down on her clit, I push in and up hard. She cries out as she unravels again. I roll us while she's coming on top of me, trembling, and I release into her a second time. Afterwards, she's boneless, and I'm not far behind. A wild satiation is in my blood. Wild because I don't think I'll ever be done with her. Not for a long time, anyway.

I stay in her as she curls against my chest, her sweet, rose-scented hair spreading out as I trace the shape of her mouth with a finger. Rose sighs and rubs her cheek against me as her hand rises to touch my chin.

I need a new tattoo, I think. A rose. Something small. It's a stupid thought, but with her like this, on me, still inside her, it's like I need the moment commemorated.

Her breathing slows, evens, and my Rose has fallen asleep on me. *Fuck*. I'm in her, half soft, and she's sleeping. It's that gentle, deep sleep she was in when I came into the room, stripped off her damn robe and then my clothes and, against my better judgment, turned off the lights and climbed in.

The drugs have left her system. Mia said she'd slept most of the day, only getting up to eat and shower. I'm glad. She doesn't reek of that vile sweet perfume Finnegan made her wear. She smells like her now. Like me. Like sex.

This is just a moment. That's all. I need her to be soft and compliant. I need to get her to the place of her half trusting me, for the plan. Although, I don't know if I'm letting Finnegan get his violent hands on her again, so some things may need to be tweaked.

If I have to, I'll do it. My revenge is that important. There's room to stretch it and shift it, to give her a share in that. She wants to make him hurt for what he did to her, and I love it.

My Rose is growing. Kittens turn into cats quickly, and tiny claws and teeth become honed weapons. I stroke a path down her back, and as I'm about to drift off to sleep, she moves.

"Nikolai," she whispers, soft and warm, in her dreams.

Something in me shifts.

Chapter 11



Rosalind

A warmth engulfs me, fills me, and wherever I am, it's full of golden light.

I'm in white, a gossamer veils drifts about me, and there are white roses and jasmine.

It's my wedding.

My heart thumps hard as fear slices through me. The horrible man is up ahead, only this time, he's not facing me, and my clothes have changed. It's not the creepy dress. This is silk, and it clings to me like a second skin. Everything else is familiar. The music. Men in black and a makeshift aisle. The groom grows leaner, broader, taller, and as I approach, the fear veers into something else, almost like sweetness. When he turns and smiles at me, my breath catches.

He's devastatingly handsome in his tux, those dark, smoldering eyes and those killer cheekbones. His hard, cruel mouth that can turn sensual and hot turns up at the edges, knocking me sideways inside with the thrill and a lick of heat.

Nikolai.

My groom is Nikolai, and he looks at me like I'm his, but this isn't ownership. No, it's something else. It's the look of a

man about to marry the love of his life. There's love there, and it's for me. I'm floating. My mother's there in the crowd as I pass, Genius too, and she cheers. I can only look at Nikolai. He's a dream.

His smile is admiring, too. It's one of respect, of a man who chose me because I'm worth it and he sees me, who I am, deep inside.

He's mine.

My heart flutters and swells, and happiness blooms in my stomach. I reach for him, knowing if we touch, the world will be right, but I can't seem to connect and—

I gasp, and my eyes pop open. My heart flutters, beating fast.

I'm in bed, naked, sticky, and sore in all the good ways I associate with sex and Nikolai. Early morning light filters in around the edge of the blinds, and Nikolai is next to me, ass exposed, so fine my mouth goes dry. The dark, gorgeous tattoos on his broad back are familiar, and I want to trace the line of the writing down his spine.

My breath catches—what the hell was I dreaming? Marrying this man? Wanting him to love me? I'm way too aware that my emotions for him are tangled and wrong, that he's a monster, just like—but different from—my father. Why the hell would I dream that?

This man is beautiful, but he's hard and dangerous, cold with a searing hot center. He's cruel and controlling, and I'd give him everything with one push. I already do, but that's my body, not my heart. He's not a man who's going to marry anyone, least of all me, and he's certainly never going to look at me with love.

He's a killer, my kidnapper, even now. I've traded one cage for another, one villain for another.

Those soft feelings that move through me for him aren't real...are they? They're from the Stockholm Syndrome. Something that's like love because I'm what? Pathetically grateful he can make me come?

I raise my hand, shaking, to my lips.

Something changed in me. A shift, somewhere between being taken from here, that disgusting fat man touching me, and my father's nasty words and nastier punches. It's a shift that hasn't moved back with Nikolai's reclaiming of me.

I'm a pawn, a tiny thing in a game. I know I shouldn't feel things for him. I knew it before, knew it during my time with my father, know it now.

And yet...

He makes my heart flutter, butterfly wings against my ribs. His dark hair is a mess in sleep, and I want to touch it, burrow down into him.

I hate it, I do. I hate the confusion and the want that feeds my anger, the shame. Fuck, the shame twists in with the anger and the want, making it worse. Last night, I begged and pleaded for him to take me, begged for him to make me forget for a while.

Nikolai Wilder wants me, yes, but it's as something to possess, to break and mold and use as bait. After how he let my father take me... It was part of his plan, I know. How else could my father's men get into his private home so easily?

He's a powerful man, Nikolai—one who has more control and power than that man who calls himself my father. Why

come back for me at all? That's the part I don't understand. Why give me up so easily only to take me back?

He got a rose in for me, yet left me there? Only stepping in when...what? Not the marriage, even though the little innocent Rosalind who still somehow lives inside me wants to believe he just had to rescue me. It doesn't matter really. I'm just a tool for Nikolai to get what he wants. What he did was just another move in the game.

Knowing all that, I still asked him to take me. What does that make me? So fucked up that there's no hope? A disgusting whore, like my father calls me? Why the hell would I dream about a happy wedding to him?

With a shuddering sigh, I push back the covers and cross the room to shower. The water is hot, soothing, but it doesn't wash away the dirt that clings under the surface. It doesn't touch the shame.

When I'm done, I turn off the water and I grab a towel that's half crumpled on the rack. Lifting it to my face, I breathe it in. It smells like detergent, something fancy, probably organic, and him. I almost throw it away, but as pathetic as I am, I dry myself with it, squeezing the water from my hair.

What I need are clothes, but the only thing in here are his trousers, his white shirt. Heart thumping, I close my fingers on that shirt and pull it on, buttoning it so it covers me from breast to thigh, the cuffs flopping down over my hands.

"You can't be in here," I say to my bruised, haunted, pale reflection. I turn and force myself not to look at him as I leave his room.

No one is around, and I pad down to my room—no, my prison. I place my hand on the door and breathe in, head down, eyes squeezing shut a moment.

That something in me remains changed, different. I don't even know what it is, and I don't prod it. Right now, it's enough that it's there, that I'm seeing things from a different perspective.

I straighten up. The door to this room is unlocked, and I know if I turn the handle, it'll open. Why the hell am I stepping willingly back into my gilded cage?

Instead, I turn and walk down the stairs, trailing a hand along the gleaming wood of the banister. I stop on the bottom step, right before setting foot on the landing, as that something inside me shifts again.

Nikolai doesn't care whether I live or die. He cares about getting what he wants and using me to get it. He just doesn't want me to die before that happens.

That isn't caring. It's cold. Monstrous. Unforgivable.

I step down on the landing and immediately look at the alarm. Armed. Of course, it is. Wouldn't want Rose to escape and ruin his fucking plans. The hatred comes back, and I do my best to cling to it.

I need a distraction since I can't run, so I head to the library, over the landing and down the hall. I push open the door, and it's glowing with light from a lamp and the gray of the morning light. There's an armed alarm there, too.

My heart clenches.

That's when I see that there's a young man in here, on the sofa, feet up on the arm, cushions under his head, an iPad in

one hand. He drops it to his stomach as he eyes me from where he lies.

“W-Who are you?” I frown. I recognize him, but not by name.

“Rush, Nikolai’s favorite cousin.” He pauses, a smile playing over his mouth. “His only cousin, but I’m sure if there were more, I’d be the favorite.”

“Niko...” It slowly starts to come back. He was at the pageant, backstage. He’d stepped over Uncle Max’s dead body and called Nikolai Niko.

Rush sits up. “I wouldn’t call him that if I were you. He barely likes me saying it. Rose, isn’t it?”

“Rosalind,” I say, even though there’s a part of me that likes being called Rose. It’s better than Thorne.

He’s very handsome, probably almost as dangerous as Nikolai, but he’s younger, much younger, maybe closer in age to me. He looks softer, kinder, sweeter, but since he’s related to Nikolai, I don’t think any of that can be true. This man might not be as dangerous as him, but he’s not a romp in the park. I don’t think anyone in this world is.

His gaze moves over me, and I feel weirdly naked, even though the look’s all appreciation in that way guys get when they see a pretty girl. He doesn’t want me, even as he likes what he sees, and that makes me feel more naked than when I’m with Nikolai. When I am, I’m owned. Marked. Safe.

I shake myself internally. I have to stop these thoughts. I need to.

“Niko’s shirt. It’s one of his favorites.” He rolls his eyes. “If any man can have a favorite out of a sea of doppelgänger shirts, it’s my cousin. Glad he got you back. He was...”

“What?” I ask when he doesn’t finish.

He just shakes his head. “Let’s just say he wasn’t fun to live with. Didn’t shoot any of us, so there’s that. Don’t get into trouble. I don’t think any of us will survive his wrath next time. He...he—”

Once more, he stops. I narrow my eyes and start to run my finger along the spines of the books, not really looking at them, but it gives me something to do.

“He’s using me.”

“It’s complicated.”

“No, it isn’t.”

He sighs, then chuckles. “You’re not what I thought you’d be. I think you might be more than Niko bargained for.”

That makes me smile. “Why don’t you give me a gun,” I say, feeling bolder, “and I can prove it.”

This time, he laughs. “You don’t know how to use a gun, Rosalind, and never, ever point one at him unless you intend to immediately shoot to kill.”

Noted.

“He doesn’t scare me.” I’m lying, yet weirdly...not.

“Oh, man. Can I be there when you have it out with him?” He stops. “Not like sex. That’s gross. I just mean if you ever get the ovaries to ream him out, I wanna be there.”

I smile, and a small giggle escapes. There’s nothing funny about it, but I think I needed this. I think I need someone I can pretend is an ally, like I did with Rafe, except this man is chatty and has a friendly air and...

Maybe I'm losing my mind, but I like this Rush. It's an immediate thing, probably from some sad corner of me who needs a friend and my only one isn't here. She most likely thinks I'm dead.

I breathe out, and stumble over to the armchair. In a flash, Rush is on his feet, towering over me like Nikolai does. He puts an arm around me and guides me down to the chair. Unlike Nikolai, I don't feel that cascading spark, the electricity. It's just a nice, gentle, friendly touch.

"Woah, girl," he says. "It's only six a.m. A little early to hit the bottle."

"You're not funny."

He sits on the sofa, a soft grin on his face, his gray eyes dancing. "I am. It's part of my charm. Niko scares and I charm. I'm all fun and sexy man, baby."

"You should be careful with that humble pie you're eating, you might choke," I say.

"Is that your way of telling me I'm insecure? Because, ouch, you're just as evil as Niko, girl."

I try and laugh, but I just let out a huff and look down.

"I'm kidding," Rush insists. "You're sweet and he isn't. Good. Well intentioned. Anyone can see it, even Niko. You're most definitely too good for him." He pauses. "He's...he's not what you think."

My gaze shoots to him. "I'm sure he's exactly what I think."

"Yeah, well." Rush rubs a hand over his chin, eyes cutting to the door a moment. "He is, but I meant, Nikolai hasn't had an easy life."

“And I have?”

“No, I don’t think you have, but Niko, he...well, a lot of this is his story, but Finnegan’s rotten to the core.”

He doesn’t apologize and I’m glad. “I know.”

“Niko came up on the streets.” He looks down on his hands. “He fought his way up, worked hard after my dad brought him into the family.”

“*Brought* him in?” I ask. “I don’t understand.”

“Not many people know this—and Niko prefers it that way—but his parents died in a shootout. They were Russian, hence his first name, in the wrong place at the wrong time, but he’s pure Wilder. My dad sort of adopted him, raised him as his own. He was like an older brother to me growing up, even though dad called him my cousin.”

Nikolai was adopted into this crime family? I had no idea.

“Dad showed him the ropes. He always wanted me to lead after him, but I’m not cut out for that kind of stuff like Niko is. When Finnegan killed my mom and dad... well...”

I stare at him. I don’t want to hang onto his words, but I do. There’s a hunger in me for information about Nikolai, to understand how he works, to understand *him*.

“Nikolai took control, the place he deserved. I wasn’t old enough, and I know Niko held it for me, but this life...” He shrugs. “Like I said, I like where I am. I don’t want to run things. Niko made me change my name last name officially to Rodes. Added protection.”

“Or to take you out of the game.”

Rush shook his head. “No. He...he doesn’t have a blood claim like me. He did it to protect me.”

He seems convinced, but how can he be sure Nikolai cares about anyone other than himself? It doesn't seem possible for him.

“Is the revenge he wants for his family?” I press for more.

“Yes,” Rush says but then rethinks it. “Well, no. It's not for his parents. It's for mine. He considered them more family than his own. I think their deaths fucked him up more than me.”

Interesting... What can I do with this new information? I'm not sure.

“Nikolai's life's been hard. There have been challenges for his leadership. Not now, no one would ever dare, but he's been single minded in his plan of revenge for a while now. For me, for him, and now I'm thinking, for you.”

“Not for me.”

He sighs again, “Yeah, for you. Niko's hard, harder than you can imagine, but he protects what's his, and...” His eyes go to the door again, then back to me. “He saw it happen. All of it. His parents. Mine.”

There's something about the Niko—Nikolai—that Rush has painted in my head. A kid who grew up fast, who saw horrors, who took on all the responsibilities to protect his cousin, preserve his legacy should he want it. Weirdly, I can see Nikolai doing that.

The confusion grows, not wains. I push it away and find a smile when I look at Rush. “So,” I say, “please tell me you have a better sob story to get the girls in bed.”

“Sure do. Wanna hear it?”

I laugh, and I'm about to say yes when—

“No, she fucking doesn’t, Rush,” Nikolai says behind me, his voice dark, icy, severe. Just hearing it makes my skin prick and blood dance.

Rush looks up past me to Nikolai, then to me with a nervous smile.

Stepping in front of me, Nikolai’s body blocks my view of his cousin completely. “Don’t even look at her, Rush. You’re my cousin and I might care about you but make no mistake. Think of touching Rose and I’ll kill you. Now, get the fuck out.”

His vicious words make my heartbeat falter, but Rush seems unfazed. “Yeah, yeah,” he says with a dramatic roll of his eyes. “See ya later, Rosalind. Enjoy the beast.”

“Asshole,” Nikolai mutters as Rush strolls out.

Feeling more invigorated by all the new information I’ve learned, I get up and grab him, tugging him to face me. He just stares at me until I drop my hands.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he asks through a clenched jaw. “Why are you down here? You left while I was asleep?”

Like you’ve done so many times to me?

Annoyance prickles. “What is your problem?”

His eyes narrow into slits. “My fucking problem is I had to rescue you, and now my entire plan is ruined.”

Chapter 12



Nikolai

I run a hand through my damp hair, then push the short locks into submission. Goddamn Rush. Goddamn everything. A pulse of dark intent pounds through my veins. I could kill.

I look at Rose, so lush and fresh, even with the bruises, but what irks the shit out of me is how she laughed with Rush, how when I came in, there was a lightness to her.

A lightness, until she saw me. She looked at me and the joy, that ease, dulled.

My irritated look hardens on her. She's wearing my favorite shirt, and she's butt naked beneath. It would've ignited heat in me on any other occasion, but not with Rush getting an eyeful too. He saw more of Rose than I'd like. As much as I loathe it, I'm going to have to leave her clothes in her room from now on.

But fuck she looks good. Maybe I should tattoo my initials on her. Fuck, yes; I could get behind that. Then again, I'm not sure I want to mar all that pristine flesh with a tattoo, even with the appeal of her permanently labeled as always and forever mine.

She isn't, though.

Today's a full day, extra full because I spent the moments between showering, dressing, and coming down here adding more to my list.

Now, Rose is staring at me with anger pinching her brows, like I've ruined her day with my words or my presence. Maybe both. "If I'm ruining all your plans, throw me back, Nikolai."

"Throw you back?" I ask, taking a step closer. "To where? Your father? The man I rescued you from?" Rose doesn't back away like I expect, and I know she can feel the blaze of my anger at her and Rush doing...whatever the fuck they were doing.

No, she holds her ground and raises her chin. "Back to my life," she says. "Just...return me."

I take her in, head to toe. She doesn't even quiver, and it's costing her, but she holds it, holds her own. Her face... There's fire there, blazing, in her eyes, her voice. She's getting bolder, and I've a mind to undo my belt, loop it around my hand, and beat that hot little ass of hers.

Last time I spanked her, she got so fucking wet. My cock starts to stir.

"Do you want a spanking, Rose?"

She sucks in a breath. There's the slight quiver, but it isn't fear. No, it's need, and it makes my cock start to stiffen. "I want to go home."

"Do you now?"

She swallows but doesn't move. "Yes."

She's looking at me differently. The soft, moony-eyed little girl with a crush is there, but she's not front and center. This is

a young woman with backbone and flame in her veins. Steel.

Oh, fuck. It's hot. Hotter than sweet Rose. This Rose has sharpened thorns, and when she learns how to dip them in poison? When she learns how to twist metaphorical knives with intent? That's a woman I could obsess over, more than I am now. That's a woman I might think of keeping longer.

I want to meet *that* Rose. I'm not going to, though. She'll be long gone by the time she ever gets to that point. Who am I kidding? There won't be enough of her left to become that, just all the broken shards of what might be.

Collateral fucking damage.

It is what it is, no matter what minuscule softness she managed to stir in me when she whispered my name. It's not real, and even if it was, it wouldn't matter. She's here because I have a job to do.

I take one step towards her. "Not happening."

"Fuck you." There's a wildness that comes with those rush of words, a wildness that's fear, excitement, a taunt. She doesn't step back, and her tits rise and fall, little stiff, peaked nipples poking at the material of my shirt as she does so.

"Hankering for punishment?" She doesn't answer, but her gaze glitters a little more, her breath erratic. I look at her again, really look at her. What...?

Oh. *Fuck.*

"*Rose.* You want me to put you over my knee and spank you, don't you?"

My words hang there. She's crossing all sorts of lines, and I think I know which one she's aiming for. Really, I should kill her for that. I won't, though.

But punishment...

“Fuck you, Nikolai.”

“Fuck me? You know you don’t get away with saying shit like that to me, right?”

“I said. Fuck. You.”

“You know I could kill you for that. However, I think my little Rose wants a spanking. She’s asking. Begging.” I pause. “That it?” Her eyes get a little unfocused as her lips part, and my cock gets harder, bigger. “Yeah, you are. You want the good kind of pain, don’t you, Rose?”

Sidling closer, I brush against her, and her soft gasp tells me she feels my erection. Good. She wants it. Wants me. Wants whatever I decide to do, no matter what her mouth might say. Her fire was always there, but when I got her back...yeah, that was gone. But now? It’s back, embers stoked and flames flickering higher than ever. I’m glad it wasn’t snuffed out.

Rose is fucking made for those flames.

I trace her lips, then tease open the top buttons of my shirt on her. “Never said you could wear fucking clothes, Rose. We have rules.”

“You want me to let your cousin see me naked?”

I take one of her breasts, palming it, squeezing. “You flash your fucking body to anyone without my permission, and I’ll punish you. The bad kind.”

She flinches and the fire dips low. I curse myself. Wrong fucking thing to say. I let her be taken. It’s my fault that I didn’t come up with a better plan on the run, a plan that didn’t entail her being hurt by Finnegan, or having that sick fuck

Lugo trying to finger her. It pulls at me, twists something in me that sends sharp pain surging.

“Maybe,” she says, “my clothes will fall off, and what are you going to do then, *Niko*?”

An arrow of electricity shoots straight through me at that. I narrow my eyes and pull my hand free. Then I grab her face and back her across the library, right into the desk. She’s breathing hard, fast, uneven; her eyes begging, demanding, challenging.

Fuck, she’s the hottest thing I’ve ever seen. It’s almost like little Rose was made for me.

“You want to play games, Rose?” I push her back. “That it?” I catch her as she stumbles, hold her. I’m not letting her fall. If she goes down, it’s going to be to her knees, to service me.

She bares her teeth. It’s like a shot of pure lust. “You don’t scare me anymore.”

“Liar.” I take hold of her face again. She swallows, but the defiance is so vibrant, so electric, it dims the fear I see. Her skin is that warm silk I can’t seem to get enough of, and she needs to be naked. Now.

I release her face, her hips, and, shoving the shit on the desk to the floor, I push her down on her back. She stares up at me, the challenge bright, but the need brighter. It’s in me, too. I grab my favorite shirt with both hands and wrench it in two, buttons flying. Fuck it. I can get another. I prefer what’s under it. What’s under it is perfection: warm, wet, lush Rose.

Her thighs are wet, right at the top at that little gap. Her cunt...the moisture clings to her outer lips, too. I part her thighs so the view’s better. I drink her in, the splay of her legs

where I stand between them, her hooded clit, the soft swelling of her need, that sweet musk of her arousal.

I need her.

“Nik—”

“Shut up, Rose.” I come down over her, taking her mouth, silencing her properly in an open mouthed, hot, erotic kiss. So hot and wet, her tongue eager, lips soft and clinging.

Christ, her mouth gets better and better with every taste. She mewls and for a moment, when her hands come up, I think she’s going to push me away, but she doesn’t. She pulls me to her and deepens it, with more passion than finesse, and that’s hotter than someone who knows what they’re doing, really doing. When Rose learns that, she’s going to be the most dangerous thing on the planet, way more dangerous than she already is.

My cock twitches at the thought, and I groan into her, kissing her so hard and deep, my head spins. I break the kiss because there’s more I want. She’s panting, her mouth red and a little swollen from the kisses, her cheeks pink and flushed. Her tits heave, full and so fucking delectable, I almost go to town on them. I drop to my knees, pulling her to the edge of the desk, hands on her thighs, spreading them even wider for me, opening her up.

“So fucking gorgeous, Rose.”

I look at her pussy. It really is gorgeous, those soft folds, the wetness. The redness from the rush of blood there. That dark wet center needing to be split open and displayed. A rose blooming. She’s a work of fucking art. Her thighs shake, and I tuck the sight away for my spank bank.

“W-What are you doing?” she asks.

I don't touch her, just keep looking, like I need to sear it in deep into my mind. Coming in close, I blow on her pussy, and she moans.

“Nikolai, w-what—”

I close my mouth on her, sliding my tongue over that sweet cunt so she screams out.

“I'm shutting you the fuck up so I can think. So shut the fuck up. I haven't had breakfast yet, and I'm suddenly ravenous. I like to think and eat. In silence. So...say one thing and I'll stop. I'll leave you on the brink under orders not to touch yourself.”

She breathes in sharply.

“That still stands, by the way,” I say. “Your order not to touch what's mine. All this is mine, every fucking inch of you. No pleasure unless it's from me.”

I don't wait for an answer, and instead, I begin to feast. I run my tongue slowly from her asshole, up along her slit, dipping in, then up, stopping short of her clit. I do it over and over, in measured licks.

My Rose doesn't say a fucking word. In fact, she's trying not to make a sound. There are tiny gasps and moans and sighs that she swallows as she moves, trying to get my face against her, trying to get her clit where she wants it. I think about ordering her not to move either, but right now, I love that uncontrolled urgency, her need.

She's panting now, little sounds escaping, whimpers in the air, and I start to touch her, pushing my fingers into her, and she's so wet, I glide easily into her tight heat. I curl them as I begin to lick and suck her clit, pulling up and down, then thrusting back in. It's slow, measured, keeping her orgasm out

of reach. Every time she starts to shake and clench, I soften and change, and then I start all over again.

Rose gasps, and she's thrashing, moaning and whimpering, her breath a mess of pants and hitches, her hand pulling at my hair. I fucking love it: the pain, the control, her responses. The sweet, dark taste of her. The heat. Eating her could make me come on its own, but I focus on her, on her pleasure.

Fuck, she's everything. She really is.

I keep it up, that slow relentless pace, until she moans so loud, I know I've hit paydirt, found a sweet spot in her. Now, I want her to come. I work it, that sweet spot. Fingers, lips, teeth, I let her try and ride my face as I build it up and up, and then, when she's starting to contract, I push through it, not stopping.

She wails as she shatters and clenches and then tries to pull away. I don't let her. I'm not fucking done. I grin against her and push and push until she softens and raises to me again, and I eat her into a bigger orgasm that makes her entire body convulse, and she squirts. I lap it all up, drink down all her wetness, lick her down to a soft space where she's just rocked by little spasms.

Finally, I sit back. I wipe my mouth on my sleeve, and she's motionless, splayed out, her tits with their stiff nipples rising and falling without rhythm, her thighs twitching here and there, stomach quivering.

Oh, fucking Christ.

I rise slowly and stare down at her. I've never seen anything as beautiful as her, like this. She's beyond art. She's sublime.

“Rose?”

She opens her mouth, closes it.

“Rose, you can speak.”

“Oh... Oh, my God. Nikolai, I can't... You broke me.”

As her eyes flutter open, I almost laugh. Then, my gaze sweeps the room, making sure no one's decided to come see what the noise is. We're alone in here, but not in the mansion. Rush is still in the house, as are others.

Shit. Rose is a sweet mess, and I ruined the shirt. I need to send her up to her room, but not naked. There's a throw in a basket at the end of the sofa, and I pull it out. No doubt Mia put it there.

Rose still hasn't moved and right now, I'm not sure she can. I could be a complete bastard and just leave her, throw the blanket on her and tell her to get out, but...I can't. She needs... Her hand weakly opens and closes, her thighs spread, and she's so damn wet.

Rose needs to be held. It doesn't mean anything to give that to her, to hold her. So...

I lift her up and into my arms, carrying her to that sofa, and I sit, pulling her against me, and then I drape the throw about her, sliding one arm around her waist, the other stroking her cheek.

She sighs and leans into me. Rose is where I want her, straddling me, facing me, making a delicious little damp spot on my thigh. Though I relish that wetness, the heat of her pussy, I know I'll have to get changed again. It's not because I don't want anyone to know what I've been doing. I don't give a fuck if I smell like sex. I just don't want to share that scent of her. I curl my hand around her flushed cheek and guide her in, feathering her mouth with mine.

“Rose?”

“Yes?” There’s soft need and satiation there, and a little self-loathing, which I choose to ignore.

“I need to get out of here shortly, so here’s what you’re going to do.”

Rose goes completely still. The after-sex glow evaporates. “What’s that?”

“You’re going to do what I can’t.”

Her gaze goes cold. “Which is?”

I push her from me and stand. On the sofa, she’s not a puddle like I thought she’d be. She doesn’t cover herself, either. She just raises her chin and looks up at me out of those now cold, pretty eyes.

“Not today or tomorrow, but when I’m ready. When that happens, you’ll go back to your father’s inner circle and get me and my men in safely. Before that, you’re going to reach out, ask for help. I’m betting he’ll give you a number you can reach him on, one I don’t have.”

“No.”

“No?” My voice is light, my tone anything but. “No isn’t an option.”

“I mean, no as in if I refuse.”

“I’m more than fucking aware of the meaning of the word.” I narrow my eyes at her. “And if you refuse to do this...”

“You’ll what? Kill me?”

I smile my coldest, nastiest smile. “Yes.” She doesn’t say a fucking word. “I’ll kill you first, Rose,” I say, “then I’ll find

your father and kill him next, just like I always planned. If we do it this way, you do this, things might be different.”

Rose sucks in a breath, her coal hair with the ember undertones shining in the light. It catches a nipple and swell of her breast.

“Different how, Nikolai?”

I want to touch her all over again, but I don't. “Different as in, if we do it this way, then you'll have a chance to live the life you want.”

Chapter 13



Rosalind

Nikolai told me to go to my room, but I don't.

There's an old-fashioned landline I find in the library. I never saw it before, but, then again, last time, I never quite had the nerve to really poke and snoop about. It's in a recessed area, like it was way back when landlines were new, and people had special places for them. There's even a chair, dark red velvet, way in the back of the room next to it.

Of course, it doesn't work. I clench my hand tight, trying to push down the frustration. My constant companion, frustration.

When he said that to me, those generic words about living, he never explained further. I asked but he left. Because Nikolai Wilder does what he wants.

It's not fair, not at all, and taking a breath, pulling the throw tight about me, I storm out, marching through his place until I hear voices. Male voices, the austere, low, rich tone of Nikolai, and a gruffer voice. The study door isn't closed all the way and that's how I justify pushing in.

Darkness comes my way as he looks at me. Then, he casts a look at his companion. "Tony, give me a moment."

The big guy, Mia's husband, nods and leaves. Nikolai sighs and stretches behind the desk, a suit jacket over the back of the chair, black, and this time, his shirt is cream. He must have gone up and changed, and honestly, I'm not sure how I feel about it: glad he's not going about the day smelling like me, or annoyed.

He raises a cool brow. "I'm busy, Rose. I've given you a little room, but don't mistake it as kindness or leniency. You went through shit, but that leeway's coming to an end. I told you to go to your room, so why are you here?"

I almost shrink away, but I make myself stand there, glaring instead. "You don't get to say all that to me back in your dumb library and walk off. You want me to go back there, after everything that happened? Why?"

His mouth curls slow in a cold little smile, one that causes heat to twist in me. "I've told you all you need to know for now. I'm busy."

"So you're not going to share your plans with me?"

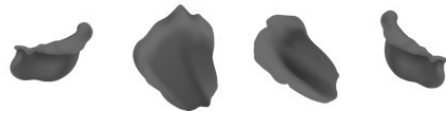
"Not. Yet."

"Even though I'm the one who has to put myself in harms away? That isn't fair." I clutch the throw tight, and then I look at him, tilting my head, and I let it go.

It slides off me to the ground. I'm naked like he seems to crave. Maybe I crave it, too. I'm not sure, but I love how he looks at me like I'm dessert, even though it's wrong. Can it be both right and wrong at the same time?

His eyes narrow as he goes still, taking me in, every single inch. When he's done, I'm shaking. It's like he felt me up, put his mouth everywhere.

“That’s just too fucking bad, Rose.” He pulls his computer to him. It looks brand new, like it was just taken out of the box. “Go. I’m busy. Oh, and Rose?” He doesn’t look up. “Cover up and go to your room, or it’ll be the bad punishment.”



It’s hard to eat when Mia brings me lunch, along with a single red rose. There’s a pretty red dress, too, but the note says, *tomorrow, no panties.*

I shiver as a thrill passes through me, even as the anger and frustration rise.

At least the books are still in my room and the door is unlocked. Still, I don’t leave. Where am I going to go? He’s gone—I saw a car peel away from my window, and I’m guessing the place is on lockdown again. There are more guards outside, though not as many as at my father’s place.

Maybe I could seek out Rush, but honestly, he’s not going to help me escape, and I’m not about to try to seduce him. It wouldn’t work. Sure, he looked at me like he admired me, but it wasn’t lust, and he loves his cousin.

So, I read.

I take a bath.

I’m so fucking bored, I actually wander downstairs wrapped in a robe to check out the locks and alarms. I trail from room to room, but the computers are either not there or password locked, and no one’s left a convenient phone for me, either.

Voices come from the back where the kitchen is, and every time I see a camera, I stop, smile,, and give it the finger. In fact, I entertain myself for about an hour seeking them out and doing that. Maybe I'm courting certain trouble, maybe I'm not, but what's he going to do?

Punish me.

Spank me, fuck me, and not let me come.

Keep me naked and finger me.

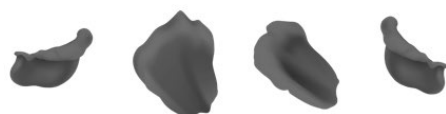
I shiver at that. I actually think of getting on my bed and masturbating, but I'm not quite game. Besides, there's something achingly delicious in the denial, in the handing over my pleasure to him.

I'm sick in the head. I don't get how I still want him and despise him and like him and resent him, all at the same time. How, if I let myself, I could easily slide down into something more than "like."

When it's late, I discard the robe and slide under the covers. I think it's late. Dinner's come and gone. I close my eyes, trying not to think about what he wants me to do. I need more than what he's willing to give. I need...What is it I want? A reason, I guess, to make it all worth it. No, I want a reason to let myself freefall.

"Stupid Stockholm Syndrome, I mutter, reaching out and turning off the lamp.

I settle back down and drift into sleep.

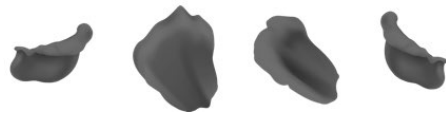


The bed sinks, waking me, and I'm cold. I half blink, but it's Nikolai, staring at me, so I just close my eyes again.

The sheets rustle as he slides in next to me, bare, hot male flesh pressed against me as he pulls me into his arms. His cock is hard, and it twitches against my ass as he brushes his mouth against my temple.

“I'll keep you safe, Rose. That's my fucking plan.”

I sigh and fall into a deep and sweet sleep, safe in his arms.



He's not there when I wake, and it hits me.

Last night, when I was half asleep and he came into my bed, he didn't do anything. He just held me, kissed me, told me he'd...what? He was going to keep me safe.

Everything is sideways inside, and I get up on shaky legs and shower. When I pull on the dress—no underwear—I'm pleased there are no buttons. I'm pleased I was left to dress myself.

The house is quiet and still, empty, when I leave my room. I stand there in the hall, heart beating fast as I look around. It might be quiet, but Nikolai is here. I can feel him like a vibration in the air, a frequency I'm tuned into. No one else seems to be here, but I know he is.

I descend the stairs, the smooth, polished wood cool under my feet, and I head to his study before turning at the sound of a tiny, distant noise.

He's in the kitchen, leaning against the counter, a folded paper in one hand, a piece of toast in the other. Next to him is

orange juice, looking almost as good as him, and a steaming mug of coffee.

As much as I want to beeline to his juice, I want to go to him, too. He's breathtaking, a small frown marring his brow, the shadow of his cheekbone on the left side where the morning sun hits. He needs a shave, but there's something primal and hot about the slight stubble.

Oh, my ovaries...

He knows I'm here, though he doesn't look up. He doesn't move, but he knows. Finally, he speaks. "For fuck's sake, Rose, you've seen me before. Quit staring."

I glare. "I'm not staring." I'm so staring. His mouth twitches very slightly at that lie. "Any juice for me?" I ask carefully.

"You can have mine."

He makes no move to hand it to me, so I skitter over, just as he eats the last piece of toast. Nikolai's hand comes down on my wrist as I reach for his juice, and he pulls me up against him.

"I'm trying to decide," he murmurs, "if you're being a brat because you ache for a spanking or something else. Do you want to be spanked, Rose? It can be arranged. Are you wearing panties?"

"You didn't leave me any, so your note was stupid." I'm slipping and sliding again. He's too close, and for all the turbulence he sets off in me, I think there's a part that wants him to spank me. I push it away.

"Making a point, little Rose," he says, dropping a kiss on my nose.

I don't know what to do with that. I come apart a little at the seams. It's so casual, so matter of fact, so...normal that I almost start shaking, but he lets me go.

"Have your juice." He steps away, but not before my gaze drops to his sizable erection.

"I'm still a man, and you're fucking irresistible." Then, he goes to the other side of the kitchen. "Toast? Cereal? Eggs?"

"I'm fine."

"You'll eat."

"Nikolai, I need a few minutes before I have food." Because there are butterflies storming in my stomach. I pick up the juice and stare at the bright orange with the bits of pulp, the cold glass soothing. "Why am I here?"

"I told you."

"Beyond that. I...I don't know. I don't get how you keep wanting to sleep with me knowing who that man is. I don't know how I feel. Not...not about you." Heat flares, but he doesn't speak, only watches. His gaze burns into me. "You confuse the hell out of me, but I don't mean that. I'm confused about me, who the hell I am. I thought I had an idea. I had a path. The pageants, the UN, all these plans. I thought I was someone else, and then... then my uncle isn't my uncle, and my mom was hiding from my father, and my family is..."

I shudder, squeezing shut my eyes a second. "My family is horrible and dangerous, and he's in me, isn't he? That monster. You hate me because of him, and I'm not sure I blame you."

"You're not that fuck, Rose," he replies.

"I'm his daughter. Ugh." I look at him and take a sip of the juice. Right then, it tastes like nothing at all. "I'd hate me, too."

I kind of do. He's horrible. What if—"

"No." He pulls a glass down from a cupboard, and it clicks on the marble of the counter. "That's one mistake I'll admit to. I thought you might be like him, but you're not. Fuck, the fact that you want him dead tells me that."

"Nikolai." His gaze goes to me as he spins the glass.

"Rose. Derek Finnegan is an arrogant, violent, sick son of a bitch. He gets off on hurting women. Steph, your mom, she ran with you to save you. She gave evidence into our lives—in this business—and I'm not happy about that, but I think she did it in the hopes she could save you."

I stare at him and say, "But then you brought me into his orbit."

"Finnegan would have found you. Fuck, you in pageants? Might as well have taken out billboards across the country announcing where you were."

I take another sip because I need to do something.

"He's an asshole," he says. "I'm not going to tell you what he's done to women—innocent women, but—"

"I can imagine."

His sigh is so soft, I have to blink back sudden tears. There's something in that sound that hurts. "No, sweet Rose, you really fucking can't. You might think I'm cruel, and you'd be right, but he's got evil in him. He loves hurting women, sometimes so bad, it would be a mercy if he killed them."

I almost throw up as my stomach heaves, and I set my glass down with shaky hands. "I-Is that what he did to your aunt?" He doesn't say a word as I look at him. "Rush said

there was a shootout... that your parents died? His parents took you in and—”

He turns, shoulders heaving. “You know what Finnegan did?”

“Rush—”

“He should’ve never told you,” he says harshly. “He had no *right* to tell you.”

“I think he was just making small talk...”

“It’s not that,” He replies, then pauses. “Did he tell you what Finnegan did? To your Steph?”

My stomach drops. “My mother? No—”

“He once beat Steph and you so fucking badly, you should have been hospitalized. No one stepped in. His men, they let him do it.”

Everything in me is numb. I don’t remember. I...how old was I? “Even you?”

The absolute fury and rage in his face is frightening. He picks up the glass, hurling it across the room, and it shatters against the wall. I scream a little, dropping the juice as I try to get away because he’s stalking up to me.

He stops, and takes deep, hard breaths.

“Even me?” He shakes his head and laughs. He rubs a hand over his face. “I was just a fourteen when my parents died, a kid. I didn’t know about this life. I spent years on my own, hustling, doing what I had to survive. Then my uncle found me, took me in and... My uncle was working with that sick fuck then. Trusted him. He had a young daughter. You.”

Nikolai stops, and he's got one hand in a fist, his body vibrating as if he's fighting the violence and anger rising within him. There's so much I don't get, but he didn't answer my question, which is an answer in himself, isn't it? Then again, if grown men did nothing to stop the abuse, how could I expect a teenager to? Shit, I don't know. I don't know anything. Nothing is the right way up.

Nikolai crosses to me and takes my face gently in his hands. "Rose, he would have found you. And—" He pauses, and I get the feeling he doesn't say the next part of his thoughts. "I'm a monster, too, just not on the scale of Derek."

Does he blame himself for not stepping in? I take a breath as I stare up at him, leaning a little into one of his hands. "Maybe I'm the monster, not you," I mutter. "I don't remember anything, apart from the nightmares, or memories. You went through hell, and his blood—"

"Fuck, Rose, families are made of all kinds of things, but being the byproduct of him inseminating an egg doesn't make him a dad. It doesn't make you like him."

"Nikolai, you're not evil." I really don't know if it's true, but surely, he can't be. I wouldn't have feelings for him if he was.

A strange intense look comes to those dark eyes, and he leans his forehead against mine. "I need...I need to fucking kiss you," Nikolai whispers.

My head's still raised, and my lips part because I need it too, and he takes the invitation. The kiss is slow, like time is made of slow-moving molasses and just as bittersweet. It's the kind of kiss that undulates, and the soft touch of his mouth, the slide of his tongue on mine, makes my toes curl. I press against him. He tastes of coffee and him, and I need more of

his heat. He's not often soft like this, and I want to meld into him.

My hands slide about his waist, and he's hard again, so big, and I rub against him as he cradles my head, continuing that seductive sonata of a kiss.

My throat is tight and everything is focusing down into the kiss, the coming together of our mouths, and I move against him more, a little sigh breaking forth. He growls softly and it's a spark that ignites a bite of passion that fans itself, and soon we're kissing hard, unable to get enough of each other. It's urgent and—

I pull my mouth free, and drop my head to his hot chest. The beat of his heart echoes mine as I try to bring the shattering parts of myself together. "Please let me go."

To my shock, he does. Even more surprising is that he steps back, watching me.

"I'll...I'll do it," I whisper. "I'll help with your plan."

His eyes narrow, and he nods.

"But I have conditions, Nikolai." I have no idea where this is coming from, but I just let it flow.

"What is it you want, little Rose?"

I take a breath. "You're rich, you're influential. I need you to fix everything you took from me. I want to get back into pageants."

"That ship has sailed."

"It wouldn't take much. I'm sure you could get me back in."

"No."

I take a shaky breath and rub my sweating hands down the thighs of my dress. “What about my friend, Genius?”

He doesn’t respond.

“I want to call her.”

“No fucking way.”

“But—”

“Rose,” he says, “she’s alive, okay, and she isn’t worried about you.”

I recoil like he slapped me. “No, that can’t be true. She must be freaking out.”

“She’s been fed a lie.” He pulls open a drawer and pulls out another paper. He flicks to a page, opens it, and folds it, handing it to me.

With horror and disbelief, I skim the small article. “I’m the beauty queen who couldn’t hack it, so I ran off? To...find myself? What the hell? I wouldn’t. This...this is all I had, the only thing that was ever mine. Genius knew that. I worked so hard...”

Anger rushes over me, fast and furious, and I glare at him. There’s a strange expression on his face. Amusement? Confusion? I don’t know, but I can’t deal with it right now.

I want to slap him again, and I fist my hand at my side to fight back the urge. He took so much from me—everything I’d built. Rage growing, I turn and run off, back upstairs.

“Rose!” I hear his bellow behind me, but I don’t slow, and he doesn’t follow.

Once in my room, I slam the door and drag the armchair over to block the way.

Right now, I can't face him again, or I might end up doing something that'll *really* get me killed.

Chapter 14



Nikolai

“**Y**ou okay, boss?”

I give Tony an irritated look. “Don’t make me shoot you.”

He snorts with laughter as we sit in the SUV. I’m waiting for a delivery. It’s been a problematic one, out on the edges of no man’s land in Queenstown. Price hikes, squabbling, the usual shit. Normally, I don’t bother myself with this but today...yeah.

Maybe I should have told her the truth about seeing her as a child and witnessing Finnegan’s abuse, but what good would that have done? I was fucking young, and it wouldn’t make a difference. For years I’ve blamed her, I’ve blamed fucking Steph for betraying us after...

It doesn’t matter.

“You sure this is a good idea?” Tony asks cautiously.

“Being here? My other plans today? The Finnegan plan? You have to be more fucking specific,” I reply.

He huffs like a kid. “Her.”

“Leave it alone.”

The delivery unfolds in front of us, out in the open, and the two people overseeing it are jumpy.

“Remind me why we’re here again, boss?”

“I told you, Tony.” I gesture ahead. “Problematic.”

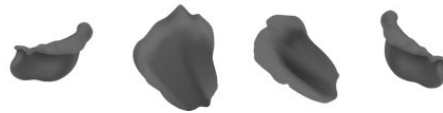
“Nah. They’re fucking scared because you’re here, and this, today, isn’t a problem. So, why are we here?”

We’re here because I can’t be in the house. Rose needs time. The hurt in her face over everything is still burned into me, and I want that gone.

“Field trip,” I say. “It’s good to fucking get out.”

“I get you’re trying to make it look like you’re jumpy, but that girl—”

“One and only fucking warning, Tony.” Then I look at him. “Let’s roll.”



The man in front of me whimpers. I look down at the piece of shit, my face utterly blank, even as cold rage flares within. We’re on stop five today. The shipment went fine. No trouble.

But this....

“Jack the Sword? Do you think you’re a fucking pirate?” I pull my fist back and slam it into his face. “You run a sad little titty bar on my land, and you’re not paying your fee to run all kinds of illegal shit here.”

“Please!” He holds his hands up, blood bubbling from his nose where I’ve broken it. “I don’t have the money. Times are tough.”

Same old bullshit. If he had a family...The man likes money, likes to treat the girls without respect, taking too much of their wages. He doesn't protect them. He loves to gamble, drink, and fuck. He loves coke. I have no issue with any of that, except the girls—they make him money. You treat moneymakers with respect because otherwise, they might bring my attention to the problem, like now. He owes me money, lots of it too.

I'm not one of his bitches. I'm the man who scares his nightmares back into their holes, and he's too fucking stupid to see it, until now.

"Tony," I say, not lifting my gaze from Jack. "Toolbox."

He comes over with an actual toolbox and opens it for me. Jack whines and pisses himself more. I select a hammer.

"Maybe take a photo, before and after? Get his...manly state." I gesture with the hammer at his crotch and the fucking guy squeals like I'm going to bring it down on his little, dribbling prick.

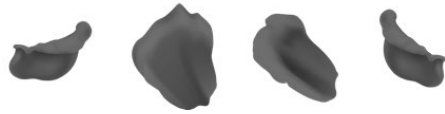
Tony pulls out phone and snaps a picture.

"I'm not in the best fucking mood today, Jack." I gently bring the steel end of the hammer down into my palm a few times. "You keep giving excuses for why you can feed your coke dealer cash, but not me. So, this is what we're going to do. I'm upping the fee, and if you don't pay, you stop breathing. For now..." I twist the hammer's handle in my hand. "I'm going to give you a taste of what's in store if you don't pay on time, every time. Got it?" I glance at Tony.

"No, please!" Jack cries.

Tony takes his arm, holding it out, and I swing the hammer, breaking his bones.

I feel absolutely nothing inside. Nothing. At all.



After the eleventh stop, I lean back against the leather of the seat and close my eyes, absently rubbing a hand over my knuckles. What I want is it to fucking hurt. I need to bleed.

Maybe then, whatever this shit inside me is will fade away in oblivion, where it belongs.

Every time I close my eyes, I can taste Rose, feel her, see the anger and hurt and self-loathing in her face. I don't even know why I care. I really should have killed her and sent her in little pieces to her father, like he did with my aunt. Yeah, I should have fucking done that before she got inside me and made it impossible to kill her.

"If I kill her," I say, like Tony and I have been chatting about tea parties, "this might just get solved."

"I've known you a very long time, Nikolai. You're not killing her."

"I want to."

"No, you don't."

"Fuck you, Tony."

"Mia would have something to say about that."

I snort a laugh, then slide my gaze out the car window.

"This morning, I was going into the kitchen, and I heard you say some things," he starts.

I clench my hand. "Eavesdropping?"

“No.” He falls silent again, the leather of the seat almost squeaking as he moves. “I left. You didn’t tell her, did you? I heard her ask.”

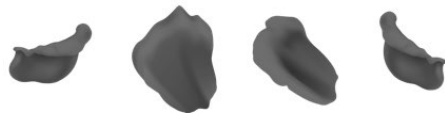
“No, I didn’t fucking tell her. I haven’t even thought of that in years, not since it happened. There were bigger issues, like Steph causing problems, Finnegan’s taking my aunt and then killing my uncle.”

“Just checking, boss.” His phone buzzes, and he glances at it and nods. “And this whole new addition to your plan?”

“It’s going to work,” I assure him. “We make sure information is planted, and then...”

Then I use her.

My Rose.



We head to where the trouble is, where we were heading anyway, but the message Tony got switched up a few of today’s events. I need to meet with these suppliers, and there’s an issue. This is different from this morning. This is sensitive stuff, where I need to step in.

I’m fucking furious.

The drive here, the conversation, my unwanted emotions, they’ve made me dangerously furious, something I can’t afford here. So, I lock it all down.

I’m the big man, as they say, and I rule without compunction. I’m ruthless but fair. I don’t double cross, and I expect the same. If you’re loyal to me, you get rewarded. You go against me? Your death warrant has been signed and

expedited. This situation is different because as much as I love nothing more than to let go and unleash hell, I can't ruin the relationship I've built here.

I blame Rose. If she hadn't sunken her claws in me, I wouldn't care which way this went. She's such a contradiction, hard like diamonds and softer than a summer cloud. She's like glass and steel. She's got bratty sub vibes and sweet innocence. She could rule the fucking world and get swallowed by it. My Rose is a conundrum I don't know what the fuck to do with.

No. She's a means to an end. That's it. End of story. I need to remember that. I don't catch feelings. Ever. This is no different.

"I can go in," he says, yanking me from my thoughts.

I shoot Tony a look, my hand on the door to the warehouse. "I think I can handle it."

The moment we step inside, I see what Tony didn't tell me, how this is going to test my patience.

Annoyance spiking, I glare at him. He shrugs. "I tried to warn you."

"Harder and with more words next time."

Rush is here, exactly where I don't need him, and Tony knew that. I'm thinking this is more than that, though, because my cousin doesn't look happy.

I rub a hand over my jaw, taking in the scene. The supplier's on the floor of his office, a bag over his head, and Rush is wearing knuckle dusters. I almost sigh. This is another mess I have to clean up. I cross to the man on the floor, pull off the bag, and crouch in front of him.

It's a supplier, not the boss. Fuck.

The man locks eyes with me and starts to shake. I slap him almost gently, which makes him quake even more. "And you are?"

"D-Dean."

"Compose yourself, Dean. You're not giving your outfit a good name here." I slap him again. "Now, why are we trussed up like turkey?"

"I...I...took some money and your man found out. I needed it. I was gonna pay it back tomorrow."

It's not the truth. I can see that. Rush lets out a wild growl and comes at the guy.

I don't move from my position. "I like these shoes. Let's not bloody them up."

My cousin raises his fist again, but I hold up a hand. Slowly, he lets the fist float down to his side.

"What's the deal here?"

"I told you—"

"Not talking to you, Dean." I stand and look at my cousin. I'm trying to rile some excitement, but it's just one more mess to deal with.

Rush's shoulders rise and fall. "He's a low-ranking worker. I got here early and found him." He nods to a backpack. "Full of the drugs. He had this."

I take the phone. It's a burner, so it's accessible. I skim the one number in there and the messages, and I sigh loudly.

"I'm just...tired, y'know, of all this bullshit, Dean." This isn't a lie. I am. I pull out my gun, check the magazine, and

put it back. “Why does this have to be a fight? Why take my shit and sell out to Finnegan?”

“The bounty.” The man’s voice is high and thin.

“Saw that in the messages, and if you had brains, you’d have come to me and proved yourself and made a shit ton more money. I just don’t fucking get why you lot always make things messier.”

I point the gun and shoot him, once in the chest, and once in the head. Blood and brains splatter, and he falls forward, dead.

I didn’t know about the bounty, but it’s not shocking. Finnegan’s testing the waters, testing the ties to me, loyalties and...He needs to be gone.

Approaching footsteps announce the arrival of the real suppliers, and I turn. The woman, Glori, glances at Dean in disgust but with zero surprise; the first man, Jiminez is stone, and the third of them, Ranier, gives a nervous glance at the body. It could be something, could be nothing. I don’t usually leave dead bodies in their house.

“He was stealing,” I shrug. “From you and from me.”

“I won,” Glori says to Jiminez. “You owe me a grand.”

“Fuck.” Jiminez pulls out a wallet and hands her crisp hundreds, which she tucks away in her bra.

She’s older, hard, beautiful, and if we didn’t have a working relationship, I’d have been up in that like she’s always wanted me to be long ago. Unfortunately, I don’t cross and muddy those lines, and while I’ve been tempted in the past, I never gave in.

Now? Not even a flicker of interest.

I watch Ranier, who doesn't look at the gore anymore. I guess this isn't his usual. Apart from the occasional field trip like this, most of our dealings are in exclusive clubs and bars and restaurants, or at someone's estate. He's more the numbers man, the one who moves shit around, so raw-edged field trips aren't in his wheelhouse. That's probably all there is behind the slight wobble.

"There's a bounty on you," Jiminez says to me like he's discussing the weather as he slides a hand into his pocket, not interested in the dead guy.

"Just found out." I glance at my man. "Tony?"

"Yes, boss?"

"Take Rush and have this cleaned up."

When they go to get the clean-up crew, I stare at each of the suppliers. They have power and reach, and I know Finnegan would have tried to get them on his side. It's what I'd do if roles were reversed. Finnegan would strip their assets, screw them sideways up the ass, and laugh. He doesn't understand that power comes with sharing it out. He's more into making future enemies.

"This shit is the start," I say and gesture to Dean. "It's all Finnegan can do, get the weak. If you hear of anything, I need to know."

"You could," Jiminez mutters, "take up the fucking gauntlet and declare war. No one will blame you. That attack on your territory..."

I narrow my eyes and study them, one after the other. "I *could* play right into his hands, give him the reason to retaliate and escalate, to target people we all need."

Ranier glances away. "There are others."

“Who’ll possibly choose to align with Finnegan.” Glori crosses her arms. “The man’s a bully, a coward, and he’ll get the weakest link in the melee and use them.” Her gaze comes to me. “That’s what you’re thinking, isn’t it, Nikolai?”

Smart woman. “Yes. Exactly that. He did it years ago, divided and pitted people against each other. It’s easier than finesse. Less stable, but easier. He blackmails. Murders families. No one is safe.” I wait a beat.

Then I continue. “He wants me to lose my shit, so I’m not going to.”

“Really?” Jiminez presses. “Because that’s not what I heard. There’s been a lot of chatter about you storming into Vitale’s wedding, guns blazing. Over a girl.”

I grit my teeth. “I have a plan and now I have the leverage, the key. If he goes underground, he’ll rule from there for years, causing havoc.”

“The same old?” Jiminez asks.

“The same old is him moving, yes, and continuing to undermine our profit margins. Your profit margins. Mainly yours.” They all still. I got their attention, and now I go in for the kill. “He has ways of strangling supply chains. I can open them up.”

“How?” Gori asks.

“Eliminating him,” I say. “But not with war. I want precision, him dead and gone and the balance returned.”

She smiles. “As in you having everything.”

“As in me taking over and making sure the plentiful pie is shared as it used to be. So, I need your help.”

“The bounty, Nikolai?” she asks.

I shrug. “Part of the life. Are you going to help?”

“That’s very dangerous if Finnegan’s wanting all of yours and you want all of his. War is usually the answer, and we stay clear of war. We do our jobs. If he takes everything...” She doesn’t finish.

If he does, then they’ll either need to move on or dance with the kind of devil Finnegan is, and that’s not a dance. It’s a bloodbath.

“I’ve taken things before, which is why we have this balance,” I say. “Why you work here like you do. I need your help if I go on.”

“No, you don’t. You want our help, but we work low and invisible. Most don’t know which family or gang we work with. You know because you’re that smart, Nikolai, but intelligence isn’t a shield. Not for you or for us. Invisibility is. So, if we do this for you...” Glori doesn’t even look at the other two. “What do we get?”

“Glori, I like your style.” I give her a cold smile. Her smile back holds old heat. “Territory, and I’ll set up a laundering operation for you.”

“We have those.” She looks me up and down.

“Not like mine.”

“Okay, Nikolai, we’re in.” Again, she doesn’t look at the others.

“Good.” I smile once more. “Listen up. Once Finnegan’s dead, I plan to take *all* his toys. His assets, money, power and territory.” I look each of them in the eye. “His suppliers. I’m going to unblock the chokeholds. And you...for your loyalty over the years, you will have the added bonus of all of Queenstown you can’t get to and beyond. If you want to

branch out, so be it. You run a fair and good operation. I reward.”

Ranier clears his throat. “We *have* been loyal, but Finnegan’s slippery, and while we want your offer...” He glances at Glori, then back to me. “How can you guarantee this will happen? There’s war coming. He started it, but how can you guarantee if we publicly throw in with you that we won’t lose?”

My smile broadens into something sharp and vicious. “You’ll have to trust me. This time, I have a little bargaining chip. One Finnegan wants back and won’t be able to resist.”

My Rose.

Chapter 15



Rosalind

It's starting to get dark out, and I can't concentrate on the book. It's one of those blockbusters, an over the top spy story that's been made into three different movies and is something I imagine someone like Rush reading. Someone knocks on the door, and Mia appears, a harried expression around the edges of her mouth.

"I need a new maid," she says, so soft I'm not sure I'm meant to hear it.

"You only had one?" The words are out before I can stop them, but she doesn't seem bothered.

"Nikolai isn't a fan of a houseful of people getting in his way. Yes, I have help. I meant a competent one."

She means Sylvie. The girl pulls at something in my memory, something that was said before I was taken, but I can't grab it.

"Dinner will be late." Then she nods to me. "When everyone's home. If you want something now, I can send it up."

"A phone?"

She presses her lips together on either a smile or a shard of disapproval, I don't know which. Then, she leaves.

I want to call Genius. It burns in me with guilt. I should have thought about her more after Nikolai took me, but then, I didn't give anything a lot of thought, besides trying to survive and work out the rules of his world, while also dealing with all the humiliation and dark, vibrating excitement he set off in me.

I don't think he's going to kill me anymore—willingly, at least—but I still don't know how I'm going to survive this chaos. He wants me to put myself in danger, and I...I might let him. I'm not even sure why. There's a part of me that's doing it because he asked, even though I know he's using me, like everyone else in his world. There's a part that thinks if I do it, I'll be free. Then, there's a part that wants to do it to extract revenge on my father.

Thinking of that asshole skeeves me out, so I strip down and go into the bathroom, turning on the shower. I start to lather up, and my fingers slip down with the sponge, between my thighs. Maybe...

There's no camera in here, at least not one I've found. Though my body is tingling, my clit starting to ache, I just clean. I don't spend time touching and exploring and raising the pleasure to release. A dark thrill throbs inside me over the fact that I'm obeying him.

Crap. I shove my thoughts away as I reach for the shampoo and start on my hair.

I need a plan. There's not much I can do until I can get out of here. This fortress of a house is too guarded, too under lock and key to escape, but maybe I can keep my eye out for a phone.

When someone has one, I can steal it the moment they put it down and call Genius. Of course, there are pins. I can try and watch for those, see if I can catch one. Maybe I can ask for some take out, or pretend to be sick and have them call a doctor.

“You’re not thinking, idiot,” I say to myself. True, because there’s stuff like thumb prints and face ID. A doctor could be good. I could beg them to call for me. “Yeah, and maybe find a pigeon, train it, and have it fly to Genius with a message tied to its leg. Good plan, Rosalind. Really stellar.”

It’s all silly. No doctor would step foot in here unless they worked for Nikolai. His staff doesn’t wander around on the phone. I wouldn’t be able to get into his or his cousin’s, and trying to escape, not that I was even planning on it, isn’t even a pipe dream.

Too many men. Too many guns. So much surveillance.

Suddenly, a shiver runs down my spine as the hot water sluices over me and the clink of metal on tile grabs my attention. My breath grows thick as I slowly turn. I know who it is, and I’m not wrong.

Nikolai.

My legs tremble and even in the shower, the heat in me pools.

He looks like hell, and the most beautiful thing I’ve seen. Even in the shower, my mouth goes dry. His gaze is bleak and hot as he rips off his tie, and to my horror, red mars both his knuckles and his white shirt. His face—it’s on his face.

Blood.

I don’t think. Heart slamming against my ribs, I shove open the glass door and stumble out.

“Oh, my God, are you okay? You’re bleeding!”

Somewhere in the back of my head, I’m aware of the ridiculousness of the situation, but I don’t care. I reach for him.

“Not mine.”

I stop, and then I turn, like I can run and hide in the shower. I barely take a step before Nikolai’s fingers catch in my heavy wet hair, and he pulls me in. His hand drops to the back of my neck where he grips me, spins me to face him. In an instant, I’m up against him, breathing hard.

He walks me back, still against me, his eyes glittering with dark, black flame. I can’t breathe as he steps, fully dressed, into the shower with me.

The water beats down, but he doesn’t stop, not until I’m pressed against the cool slick tile. “W-What are you doing?”

Nikolai doesn’t answer. His face is wet and now blood free, and I’m so turned on I might die. Then he swoops in and his mouth slams down on mine in a deep, brutal kiss. He forces his tongue into my mouth, my lips parting, and I hate him, love him, resent him. I’m hot and angry and melting. I need him like I need this kiss, like I need air.

So, I kiss him back, just as hard, just as deep, just as brutal. It’s a mating, a wild thing that beats and bleeds between us, and I plaster myself to him, rip at his shirt, try to free him from his trousers. He lifts his mouth, and that hard black flame is bleak, reaching inferno as he spins me, pins me up against the wall, kicking my bare feet apart with his shoes.

He’s hotter than the water as he pushes against me. The hard girth of his erection is there and he rubs against me,

biting down hard on my shoulder as one of his hands grabs my breast to twist and pull my nipple.

I cry out, a yelp of pain and pleasure, as the electric bolt caused by his fingers shoots straight to my center. Then he lets go, dropping his hand between my legs where he starts to rub and pinch my clit. I scream and moan because it's that hot, that painful, that glorious. Then he goes further, shoving two fingers in me to fuck me with rough, hard thrusts.

I'm on the brink so fast, I can't believe it. "Do not fucking come, Rose."

"I-I don't think I can stop it."

"You can or this will be the last orgasm you ever get from me."

"No..." The word comes on its own. He bites my ear, sucks my lobe, and then he puts his mouth right there as he keeps thrusting. "Are you ready to come? Are you right there, Rose? Do you want me to say come?"

"Y-Yes!"

"You can't. Hold it, Rose. Hold it."

Oh, God. I try and think about my hate, but it makes the pleasure build. I think about sports, I count backwards, and I'm sliding into the rough pleasure of each thrust of his fingers. It starts to bloom, and I'm shaking, I'm shaking so hard, I don't know what to do.

"Please," I pant, "Please. Please, Nikolai. Please, I can't. I'm trying. I... Can't!"

"You can."

He doesn't stop. Those fingers work me harder, deeper, rougher and I'm crying, moaning, shouting, pleading.

“I fucking hate you. How dare you! I hate...I need this. Oh, Christ I need this. I need you. I crave this. Please.”

He stops. Just stops when I'm almost there. The pleasure crashes all around me, a low wave shy of orgasm.

“Good girl, Rose. My beautiful, fucking Rose. Your cunt is so tight, and it's mine. Tell me.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. I'm trapped, both between him and the tile and between frustration and bliss. “M-My cunt is yours, Nikolai. Only yours.”

He bites and sucks my throat, his hand sliding around and over my ass, then down between the cheeks to stroke my asshole. “I'll be taking this, too. All your tight holes will be mine. I'll take your ass, Rose, soon, but not tonight.”

Then he pulls my hand from the wall and pushes something into it: the smaller shower head wand. I don't use it when I shower since I like the rain-head above, and my fingers slip as I grab it and a hard warm beat of a stream shoots out. I don't hear his zipper, not with all the water, but oh do I feel his heavy, hard cock as it pokes at me.

“Now Rose, this is what's going to happen. You're going to put that right on your clit, and you're going to brace yourself on the wall. This is going to be a hard, rough ride.”

He starts to move his cock between my thighs, deliberately teasing at my entrance.

“Now, Rose.”

I push it against me and almost scream again. The relentless pressure is like nothing else, and I'm immediately there once more, teetering on the edge.

He thrusts into my pussy, all the way, balls deep, bottoming out in me. I'm so stretched and full.

"Nikolai..." I moan his name. "Can I come?"

"Fuck no. I'll tell you when."

He starts to drill into me, and I'm mashed between him, the little shower head, and the shower wall. I'm being filled and emptied. I'm cold, wet, hot, as a thousand fingers drum my clit. All the colliding sensations make my head whirl.

Each time he slams home, he hits something so deep in me, it's like a dull pain that is edged with a rolling pleasure. Soon, I'm seeking it because it shifts into something I need. It's not pain, now, it's something else, a deep, resounding sonic wave of nerve endings clamoring for more.

The hand not on my hip coils in my hair, holding my head back as his mouth latches on to my throat. He bites and sucks hard. I'm vibrating, starting to shatter, but I'm trying to hold it, to not let it all go.

The pleasure hooks deep with each of his deep and savage thrusts. I cry out when he withdraws, moans when he slams back in, and I start trying to push back. I want him deeper. Harder. Rougher. Someone is spewing words. It's me. I want him to ruin me. Destroy me.

"Your cunt, Rose, fuck, your cunt. It's a vice. It's milking me. You want to come, don't you?"

This time, I'm there, deep in my words. "Fuck me, Nikolai. Make it hurt. Give it hard. Harder. Fuck you, harder. Show me. Show me you mean it. Take my pussy. Do it. Fuck. Oh. Fuck."

"You fucking dirty little Rose. You love my cock. The things I'm going to do to you. Destroy all your holes. You

want that, don't you?"

"Yes..."

"You're going to fucking ruin me. Fuck. *Fuck*. Come with me, Rose. *Now*."

I let go. A dam bursts, and I convulse on him, his cock twitching and spurting inside me. He shoves me so hard against the wall of the shower, I might split my lip if he didn't have such a hard hold on my hair.

"My Rose."

When he shudders once more against me, his cock still so big and hard in me, he pulls me back, under the water, and slowly he withdraws, the wand head clattering to the tile from my weakness.

Nikolai turns me in his arms, taking my face, and kisses me long and slow and deep. He takes his time, nibbling at my lips, sucking at my tongue, dancing with it, soft little licks along my bottom lip, and when he takes my mouth again with a sweet burst of tenderness, I'm lost. I'm glad I'm soaked because I might be crying.

"Can you stand, Rose?"

"I...I don't know."

Nikolai turns me again, one white sleeved arm about me, a black trousered leg coming between my thighs. One handed, he puts the soap on the sponge and starts to gently wash me. He takes his time, and I want to resent him, to fight, but I don't. His touch is like love.

I'm pathetic, I think vaguely, but right now, I don't care. My well is empty in a different way, a good way, like satiation. Tiny tremors tumble here and there in my blood.

Finally, when I'm clean, he turns off the shower, and, with an arm still around me, he walks me out. Then he grabs one of the large towels and wraps it around me. He picks me up and sits me on the sink, and strips down to just his underwear. I can't read his expression, and he doesn't say a word as he dries me, and then, scooping me up, towel and all, he takes me to the bedroom to lay me on the bed.

Slowly, I reach out to him. A droplet of water falls from a thick lock of his wet, dark hair, to his face, but Nikolai catches my hand and brings it to his wet, warm lips and shakes his head.

"Nikolai?" Pain starts to streak through me. Is...is he rejecting me? "Nikolai?"

"I can't."

I go completely still. He...he destroys me to my soul, and he can't? I try to speak, but no words come. All I can do is look at him.

His eyes shutter and go dark.

Then Nikolai releases me and walks out the door, pulling it closed behind him.

Chapter 16



Nikolai

I realize a beat too late that Rush has said something to me. Last night, I couldn't sleep, so I worked into the early hours and tried to drink away the taste of her. The feel. The heat.

But...fuck.

Her filthy words, those demands, they had me hard and jerking off on three separate occasions. This morning, too. All I want is to return to the scene of last night's crime and feed her my prick. Slam down into her throat, her cunt. Take that fucking ass of hers.

I didn't.

I don't.

With a sigh, I sit up from my slouch behind my desk and grab my coffee. "What was that?"

"I was saying I don't fucking like it."

Quickly, I replay the early morning conversation in my head. "Yeah, well, Finnegan's a coward."

"Niko..." Rush leans forward, hands perched on the other end of the desk. "He's got a price on your head. He's trying to get into our territories, get info."

“And he hasn’t got the balls to step up and reach out to me.” I know what that worm’s doing. It’s cowardice, yes, but it’s also him trying to build a wave, to make it seem like I’m weak since I haven’t done anything else after taking back Rose.

I’ve heard the jealous lover rumor this morning. I’ve heard how I have to steal to supposedly get a girl. I’ve also heard that Finnegan’s daughter is a slut and a whore who spreads her legs for money and anyone who asks. Those people are on my list. They don’t get to say that about my Rose. Me? I don’t give a fuck. Her? No.

“He’s playing a waiting game,” I add on.

Rush eyes me, then turns his own mug in his hands. “Should we just go for it?”

“No. We have a fucking plan and we stick to it. Icing on that plan? Little Rose agreed.”

He recoils a little. “Niko.”

“Nikolai.” I raise a brow. “You want me to fucking send her in against her will? Lie?”

“You did last time.”

I tap my fingers on the desk, right next to where my gun’s sitting. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that.”

“I just meant—”

“I know what you meant, Rush. It’s the only way. She’s young and pretty and maybe you think you like her or something, but feelings mean shit in this game. They get you dead.” A muscle works in my jaw, and I take a swig of the coffee. The heat burns on my tongue.

“I want that fucker gone, too, but why not just go in and take what we can?”

“It’ll create a vacuum and one of his underlings will take his place. All or nothing, Rush. Rose is the key. We smoke him out. Push it along.”

He gets up and paces. “Ah, shit.” Suddenly he snaps his fingers and whirls, almost spilling the drink in his other hand. “Tomorrow night. I almost forgot about the charity ball.”

I frown. “The charity ball?”

“For St. Monica’s.”

Fuck, I hate those inflated parties. I donate a lot of money every year to their cause and make an appearance. It’s good for business, both legal and illegal, and for connections. Showing up is something I do unwillingly. It’s not the money—I really don’t give a shit about the donation—I just don’t like going. It’s a colossal waste of my time. With so much shit going on, I’d completely forgotten the event was coming up at all. Rush loves that crap. Maybe he—

“Fuck.” I can’t miss it. I know I can’t.

“You forgot too. Ah, shit.” Rush sighs. “You aren’t allowed to shoot anyone there, do you hear me? Everyone who’s anyone will be there. We’re talking the politicians, the socialites, moneyed families, big business, sport stars, movie stars. Remember that hot actress you fucked last year? The really famous one with the big—”

I don’t really remember. I’ve fucked a lot of women.

“What if Finnegan goes? He knows you’ll be there.”

That’s a possibility... “It’s on our territory, but it’ll be full of protection, so I don’t think he’ll try anything there, out in

the open.”

Rush comes up to my desk and sets down his coffee. “He might make a grab, especially if you bring her.”

“Then he blows everything up in his face,” I growl out. “He wouldn’t dare.”

“Maybe you skip it this year. Maybe you came down with something and couldn’t make it.”

I shake my head. “Too convenient. If I don’t show, I look like a coward.” Rising, I look my cousin in the eye. “He’s not going to make a play for her there, not on our territory and not with all the media attention.”

“So,” Rush says, frowning, “he might not even go.”

“There’s a chance Derek won’t appear, but someone will, someone to report back to him any information they can smuggle out of the place. We’ll have spies around, too. Bring in people to play the part.”

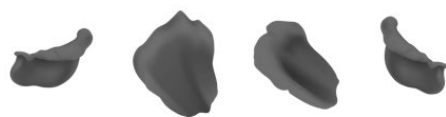
“What part?”

“If he wants information, we’ll give it to him, but it won’t necessarily be right.”

“Send him on a while goose chase sort of thing.”

I touch my nose to let him know he got it right this time. Then, picking up my iPad, I start making notes. When I’m done, I hand it to my cousin. “Get on that.”

With that, I leave the room, heading up to see Rose. Tomorrow night, she’s going to be my star.



Her door's shut, not locked, but she hasn't attempted to run, and apart from when she walked about giving the finger at every camera she found—which was most—she doesn't really leave.

I half grin as I trace the wood of her bedroom door. I should be beyond mad at her bratfest. I should have punished her when I saw those recordings, but there was something so hot about that “fuck you” to me. I liked it.

But...yes. By now, I'd expected her to try and sweet talk someone, test every window, but she hasn't. She wouldn't get far anyway, and I'm sure she knows that. I have too many guards, and there's the tracker in the bracelet she keeps on, something I think I like.

She's gained some freedom of a sorts, and I'm being nice—nice for me at least—with the extended boundaries. Maybe she wants to stay with me after all, be with me. She has that masochistic streak of liking the humiliation and pain and pleasure I give her. She might deny it, but it's there every time she begs, every time she tries to touch me, every time I see her try and fit me into some kind of sympathetic box that just won't fit.

Maybe she wants to get revenge of her father and knows I'm the only one who's going to provide that means to an end for her. Who the fuck knows? Who cares? It's all the same in the end. We want each other. We can't stop. We both bleed in some way in that violent and sadistic need. We want the same thing: her father wiped out.

I take a breath, turn the door's handle, and step in, faltering when Mia's startled gaze meets mine.

What the fuck is she doing here? It's not around a mealtime.

Benedict Arnold.

I narrow my eyes. They're sitting on the bed, and they've been talking, but seeing me, Rose's expression becomes guarded, just like when I'd found her with Rush.

Mia's is a very careful defiance. Not because it isn't in her. It is. She's stood up to me on occasion. Mia knows exactly who and what I am and what I'm capable of. She knows the monster I am. The brutal, uncaring man.

I note the new pile of books on the bed. Mia's got balls, I'll give her that, but this is my territory. My house. They're to follow *my* rules, and I never told Mia to gift Rose with more reading material. That order was never given.

Mia's face is cool and calm as she looks me over. I glance at the door and then at her, silently telling her to leave us, but when she takes her time getting off the bed, my gaze turns more aggressive. She puts a little more speed in her step as she leaves. Then, when the door shuts, I cross my arms and turn that look on Rose.

I wait for her to stumble through some apology, of an excuse, to drop her gaze, but she doesn't. She just glares back. Rose rises, then turns and crosses to the window, staring at the morning light. Her back is stiff, body language electric and defiant.

"Go away, Nikolai," she says.

I drop my arms and take her in again from the distance. Her thorns are showing, but she's also sounding too small for her, and I don't like it. I can take soft, I can take meek, fuck, I can take the defiance and anger and hate, but not small. Small isn't her.

I rein in my anger. “If I walked in on some kind of coup, it’s not going to fucking work. Why was Mia here?”

She hangs her head a moment. Then her chin rises, and she turns. “She was here because I asked her to bring me some better books after breakfast.”

“So now Mia’s your little underling? Snap your pretty little fingers and she does your bidding?”

Rose’s eyes narrow. “No. She’s the only one who’s nice to me in this place. Besides your cousin, but you told him to keep away from me.”

I nod. “So what? You want to go?”

“Of course, I want to go. Do you think I like being a prisoner? Everyone shoves me around like they can use me. So yes, I want to go, but you’re not going to let me, are you?”

Fuck, I should spank her for that. She’s putting me into the same boat as Finnegan, that disgusting creep who tried to marry her off and would have destroyed her, body and soul.

“I see, Rose,” I say in a dangerous, low voice. “You can go.” She doesn’t say a word, but I hate the little flare of hope and suspicion in her eyes. “Just say the word and I’ll let you go where Daddy can scoop you up and sell you off again, to someone worse this time.” I shrug. “Hell, I’ll make the call to him myself.”

She glares, her mouth shut. Anger and hate radiate off her in waves.

“Or do you want to go back to the fat, perverted fuck who —” I stop and amend my words, just slightly. “Who’d share you with everyone, all at the same time? Maybe you want that? Had a taste of sex, so now you’re hankering for something with more than one man?”

She doesn't speak, and the anger grows hotter.

“Got Daddy's number here. Probably have Vitale Lugo's, too. He'll probably want you dressed up like a little girl again. He does like them young.”

Rose gives me a look of such hateful disgust, but instead of lashing out, she turns away from me again, and something in me snaps. I stalk over to her, grabbing her by the hair. With her facing me, I pull her head back so we're eye to eye. I'm furious, ready to spit venom everywhere, more than I have.

“Answer me, Rose. If you want your daddy, if you want that sick fuck, I'll make that call. I'll even strip you down, put a bow on you, and deliver you myself. Do you want that?”

She hisses out air, and her eyes are wild. She starts to fight me, clawing at the hand clamped around her hair, and my blood heats beyond the anger, something that's depraved. I want to take her hard and prove to her what and who she really wants.

I hold her tighter, and she fights harder. I really am fucked up because I'm more than turned on. I want to mark her deep until she tells me the truth...That she wants only—

Rose wrenches free. I stare at her, and then she comes back. She hits me, punching me so hard across the face it makes my ears ring. Not slapping, like she's done before. No, this is with an enclosed fist and strength behind it.

Oh, my Rose. You're in it now. All the fucking way.

Chapter 17



Rosalind

The resounding crack from where I hit him rings out.

Time seems to stop. We stare at each other as pain ricochets up my arm as my hand goes a little numb. He doesn't move, apart from shifting his jaw side to side and wiping the spot of blood at the corner of his mouth. He looks at his hand, then at me, and then he wipes the blood on his shirt. Just a spot, but it's shocking, worse than the actual punch.

Horror engulfs me. What did I do? I should be panicking. I should be thinking he's going to kill me, but weirdly, I find myself dismissing that thought. Nikolai isn't going to kill me.

He's going to punish me. My clit throbs. A smile, slow, vicious and hungry, appears on his face, and my breath tangles somewhere in my lungs. That throb inside me spreads, grabbing at all my nerve endings. He takes a step closer to me, and I...I stumble back, just a little.

Oh fuck.

His grin spreads. Liquid heat starts to flow inside me. I'm scared, I'm horrified, and I'm so damn aroused that there's no place I want to be but here.

He's going to punish me. The thought hits me again, this time with deep erotic need.

I want to say something, but I don't because the longer I don't speak, the more his hunger grows, the more the violent edge of him sharpens. I want that. I want to be punished. I want to hurt. I want him to make it so filthy and depraved that I'm flying high on him.

I raise my chin and narrow my eyes. The grin turns so nasty and filthy with a hint of sleaze that it makes my heart slam against my ribs. Nikolai takes one more step until he's almost against me. Almost, but not quite, and the distance is torturous. Then, he grabs me, hand on my throat. A whimper squeaks past my lips, and he uses his hold to throw me to the bed.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I lay there, staring up at those glittering dark eyes and evil wolf smile that gets bigger and badder by the second. My breath is a harsh sound in the room as I scramble onto my elbows. I'm burning all over with anticipation. When he kneels on the bed so he's on top but not touching me, the heat of him soaks into my bones.

Nikolai's head comes down, and he sniffs a path from my breasts to my throat. I almost shatter from that alone. He lifts his head and half crawls over me, forcing me flat onto my back as his fists sit on either side of my head, his face a savage work of art.

I just stare at him, my blood buzzing in my veins. I'm so wet, so hot for him, that if I move my thighs, it's borderline too much pressure.

“So, still not going to fucking talk?”

I go to open my mouth but I keep it shut. I'm so turned on that I'm half insane, but I remember why I punched him, why I stopped speaking. He had said some really messed up things to me. While I don't want to think he'd hand me over, I can't guarantee it either, and I want to live. This battle against him and myself is rioting inside me, and right now, I despise him for those words. I hate him for the taunt about releasing me when we know he won't. Even worse, I hate how easily we fall back into this rhythm, this cat and mouse game. It comes almost naturally. I want to be immune. I want to hurt him, punish him the same way he's punishing me. I want him to know what lack of power is. I want control back.

So, I don't speak.

He laughs. It's an ugly, rough, erotic sound that slides over me, making me shiver. The smile is still there, and he nods. "Well, why don't we put your sweet mouth to use, then?"

Nikolai rises, looks down at me, studies me. The hunger is almost a fever in his eyes.

In deliberate, sharp moves, he undoes his belt. I don't know why Nikolai wears one with his suit, but maybe it's so he can beat women when he feels like it. Sliding it out of the loops, he pulls it taut with a thwack. The sound seems to echo in the room, draw my attention like a rifle shot.

Nikolai doesn't move. He commands my attention as he holds the belt, looking at me, buckle and end in one hand, the curved middle in the other.

"I think I can definitely put that mouth to better use. Rose, my sweet little filthy girl." His gaze is hot on my lips. "You want this, don't you? You do. You're begging for it with every word you refuse to say. I bet you're dripping between your thighs, aching. You want me to hurt you, don't you? Fuck you

so hard you can't see straight? I'm not going to do that. I'm taking that disobedient mouth of yours. That pretty mouth is made for my cock."

He's taunting me, riling me up, trying to make me speak. The more he does, the more I resist.

Nikolai releases the belt to one hand and grabs me with the other, hauling me from the bed by a fist in my hair, a fist against my skull, and he pushes me to the floor, pulling me up to my knees. Letting go of my hair, he unbuttons and unzips his trousers and pulls out his cock, fisting it. It's hard, huge, and those glistening drops of precum make my mouth water.

"Now, Rose," he says softly, taking my face in his hand with the belt. The other works his cock in savage jerks. The hand on me is gentle, the contradiction of the two staggering. It turns me on even more. "Pretty, sweet Rose with that soft, sweet mouth." He traces the line of my lips with his finger. The scent of him is intertwined with the smell of the leather from the belt. "A mouth that's all mine to do with what I want. I want to fuck it. So, be a good girl for me."

That dichotomy of soft touch and gentle tone with the lewdness, roughness of his words does wicked things to my blood and bones, my libido. The filth of the things he says, full of nasty barbs, are all thrown with precision at me. The softness. The belt. His hard, huge angry cock.

It's a complete turn on and even through the haze of hate and anger, I'm so wet and so needy, I can barely think. What he's saying, it's like he can see straight into the core of me, into my secret self, past the wars and tangled feelings to the absolute truth.

I should be ashamed, but I'm not. Later, maybe, but not right now. Right now, I want it, all he can give.

“Be a good girl.” Nikolai thumbs my mouth open. “Take my cock. Fucking play nice, or I’ll make you regret it.”

I open for him, wider, as his thumb skims my tongue. He grins like a hungry, sleazy, filthy wolf, but he doesn’t force himself into my mouth. Instead, he drops the belt over my head and loops it tight around my throat. There’s no gentle easing, no softness now. No sweet touches. I’m his to use, and that’s what he does. He uses me without preamble.

Using the belt, Nikolai lines me up to the perfect position and thrusts hard and deep into my mouth, all the way in, down to the back of my throat, making me gag.

The leather cuts into the back of my neck, but it holds me there on his cock, and I struggle against him. I can’t help it. Nails digging into his thighs, I cough s tears leak from my eyes. It’s too much, too deep, but above me, he lets out a guttural sound of pure male delight.

“Fuck, yes. Fuck.”

Then he begins to move. Nikolai tightens the belt as he uses me like he’s hammering into my pussy, bottoming out in my throat with each thrust. They’re hard and deep and brutal. My mouth is a vessel for him, nothing more. He uses that belt to control, to place, to get his maximum gratification as he thrusts hard into me.

I’m so unbelievably turned on. The belt’s tight, but just enough that it makes the pleasure of this violent act more intense. It makes me drip and my clit throb and my walls start to clench. I want to drop my hand and rub myself, sink fingers into me, and get off. I don’t because I know he won’t like it. This moment is supposed to be about him.

He uses the belt to control me, bring me in, and he tightens and releases, tightens and releases until I'm not even there. I'm in the moment so deep, his cock is the world and getting him off is my only purpose. I want his cock deeper and deeper, and I'm sucking him hard as he thrusts, my tongue flattening to stroke the underside.

More. More. More. It's a mantra in my head. I want more.

His thrusts become harder, more violent, like he knows what I want, or he just doesn't care. That turns me on, too. Another spasm of electric pleasure pulsates through me.

I don't care that each time he hits the back of my throat and pushes further and holds me like that, nose against his pubis, his scent invading every pore, that I can't breathe. I make a choking sound. I want it. I love it. I live for it. His cock is my everything right now.

When he pulls back to push back in, I try and follow, but the belt cuts in so I'm left, helpless, as his toy, his thing to control. Even with the frustration of not having what I want, I love every disgusting, depraved moment.

I open as much as I can, sucking him, lapping at him, and another spasm hits me, harder, brighter, more soaked in pleasure than before. I scrabble at his trousers, his thighs, trying to pull him into me.

"Oh, fuck me, Rose. You dirty, filthy thing. This is so fucking good. So good. You're incredible, beautiful. Fuck, Rose. Fuck. My sweet girl. Oh, Jesus. Suck me harder. Oh, fuck."

A litany of words fall from him as he skull-fucks me. They start making no sense. He says nasty things, sweet things. He praises me, he calls me his special cunt, which should turn me

off, but it doesn't. He tells me how he's going to destroy me, mark me, worship me, make me beg. He tells me how beautiful I am like this, how sexy, how I'm made for his cock. So many words, and he just keeps on fucking me without mercy, and I'm a shaking, drooling, slobbering mess. I can't get enough.

It's a brutal, hard face fuck, and I just want more and more. I'm whimpering, there's saliva everywhere, and I think I love him. I think, in this moment, my hate morphs into love. I'd do anything for him. I'd suck him down all day every day, promise him the world, my pussy, my ass, every single part of me because I want his cum in me any way I can get it. I want to drink it down. I'd kiss and lick his cock, service it. I'd let him fuck me anywhere. I'd seduce him morning and night. I'd beg for him. Right now, in this moment, I want—

“Fuck.”

He pulls me off him by the hair, and I moan in protest. He hauls me up and into him, and I must be a wet, gross mess, but he looks at me like a goddess. Then he kisses me hard, thrusting his tongue deep, and the kiss is just as brutal and insanely good as his dick in my mouth.

Nikolai breaks the kiss and rips off the robe I'm wearing off in a flash. I arch for him automatically. With the belt still around my neck, he spins me and rough bends me over the mattress. Then, he slams into my pussy from behind. He doesn't even touch it, just shoves his cock into me the way he did with my mouth, and I shudder at the pleasure.

I'm his. I'm his. I hate him. I love him. I'm living for this.

I scream as he shoves a finger into my ass at the same time, and I think I come. I can't tell anymore. I spasm hard as violent pleasure rockets out through me.

“Bad girl, Rose. I didn’t. Give. You. Fucking. Permission. To. Fucking. Come.” He says each word with a hard, rough thrust into me, both with his cock and that finger in my ass.

It’s...oh, God. It’s like nothing before. I want him harder, deeper. I want his cock where his finger is. Deep. I want to be used. I want him everywhere.

Nikolai lets go of the belt and slides that hand around my chest, and he grips one breast as he arches me up against him.

Oh. Fuck. He’s hitting so deep now. The angle change is slight and significant. I feel it everywhere. I can’t move. He just holds me there and uses me. Hard. Fast. Violent. Deep. Bottoming out with each savage thrust.

I’m moaning, crying, sobbing, and then it starts again, huge waves. Pleasure is in every single pore. It’s too much yet somehow not enough, and as he comes, I scream. His grunts of pleasure behind me intensify every electrifying sensation pulsing through me, and in that moment, I realize that I’m in a lot more trouble than I originally thought.

All because of this Nikolai Wilder.

Chapter 18



Nikolai

Rose is tucked into bed, sleeping.

I fucked her so hard that I lost myself completely. I fucked her so damned rough that her orgasm was just as violent, and I held her until she curled into me and passed out from exhaustion.

Shit.

I let that go...Part of me wants to say too far but fuck that. She seethed with hate, pushed my buttons, fought me, and she loved every second of it. She let me use her as a fuck toy, took a brutal face fucking, and she was enjoying it as much as I was.

Shit. Just thinking about the sounds she was making, her face as she stared up at me with those huge blue eyes, loving every second, wanting more, I'm getting hard again. When I finally pushed into her cunt, it was absolute heaven, and when I let her finally have that big orgasm she'd been chasing for a while, it didn't end. She fucking squeezed and squeezed my dick until I thought I was going to come again. I've never... *never* had that intense an orgasm before.

My little Rose is full of surprises, and she loved it all.

Me? I'm liking this defiant side of her. The claws. The stubbornness. She's fire and heat. She's perfection. I'm realizing more and more that being inside her is dangerous. It feels dangerously like I could want her forever.

Shit.

I spent too long in that bed with her while she slept. I held her, traced patterns over her soft, warm skin, drew my initials. When it dawned on me what the actual fuck I was doing, I got up, went to my room and scrubbed myself. I beat off because... Because she sets a need in me that I can't seem to satiate, like I have to come more than when I was a hormone-flooded teenager.

After I rubbed one out, I switched the water to cold and stood there, cooling my blood. When I dressed, again, I found Mia and set her with instructions to feed Rose lunch when she wakes and report in. The last I checked on the camera feed, Rose is still tucked up, asleep.

I sigh. Being a busy fucking man, after that shower, after I dressed and gave my orders to Mia, I went to work. I spent the afternoon getting the plans ready with Tony and Rush. If they noted the scratch marks, the bruises, the fact I had another shower, they didn't say a word. When we were done, they went off for their jobs and I hit the books to make sure all is fine and dandy in my world.

Now, we're done for the day. Rush is done for the evening, probably got some hot little number to bang. Probably? It's Rush. He'll be in Queenstown in one of our properties, safe and fucking his heart out. Girls love him, and he loves them. That's fine with me, as long as he doesn't think about touching Rose.

Tony's with Mia. I've got the house to myself, security outside and Rose upstairs sleeping.

And me? I'm fucking hungry so I'm making dinner. I finish slicing the bok choy and dump it in the bowl. I'm in the mood for spice. Thai. And—

“You're cooking?”

I turn, gaze sliding over Rose, who looks exactly like what she is: someone who woke up after being fucked within an inch of their lives. I linger on the light mark on her throat. *Fuck*. I know I should feel worse about it than I do, but it's hot and I don't.

“You've been in my room.” I wave the knife in the air along her body. She's wearing one of my shirts again, but this one I hadn't put out for her. She must have sought it out herself.

“You destroyed my robe and you took the dress,” she replies simply.

I probably should have some clothes for her, but...fuck, does Rose look perfect in my button down. “Fair's fair, I guess,” I say, turning back and prepping the herbs.

She comes up and eyes the pot and the wok, then the bowls and the rice cooker. “You're cooking.”

“You said that, Rose. Did I loosen some brain cells?”

She narrows her eyes, like she's trying to work out where we are now, or how far she should push. “Maybe next time.”

“Yes, I'm cooking. I can cook. I'm actually very good at it. I just choose not to very often. I prefer take out, or someone else cooking for me.” I eye her again, this time very deliberately. I'm betting she can't cook because she takes a

small step back before she stops herself. Then she crosses her arms, which has the delicious bonus of exposing her right breast.

It's that sweet pale gold blush of hers, and her rose-colored nipple and areola are just perfection, as are my bite marks and bruises from today. I should probably be more careful. *Probably.*

She sees, and drops her gaze down, but she doesn't cover up. In fact, she unfolds her arms and undoes two buttons, exposing more naked flesh to me.

“Fucking little vixen.”

She sniffs. “So, you can cook but you want a woman to do it for you?”

The rice cooker beeps. I switch on the wok and add the already just cooked ground chicken, the roasted powdered rice, and after I toss it, I add the chili powder, chilis, onion, and bok choy. I turn off the heat, add the fish sauce and fresh lime, and stir in the herbs.

“I'm fine with a male personal chef, when I have one, but Mia's a good enough cook, and we get someone in on special occasions.”

She watches as I serve up rice and the larb gai, adding the fresh cucumber, carrot and lettuce. I have a bowl ready to fill for her, but I don't. Instead, I pick up a fork and spoon—the Thai way— and prep a mouthful.

Rose tilts her head. “I'm not sure I believe that.”

“Here, try this. *Larb gai.*” I feed it to her, and her eyes widen in real pleasure. When she's done, I feed her some more. If I'm a little close, it's only to feed her and not because

I like the warmth of her, her scent, the softness she exudes, the way she can inexplicably make a man feel cleaner than he is.

“That’s...so good.” She makes her sex moan, and my dick twitches. “But don’t all men want a woman to cook and clean? A housewife, or like my mother used to call it, a slave with a diamond ring?”

“No.” I snort and feed her another mouthful. “Not all men. If you’re asking, I won’t ever take a wife. It’s one more person for someone to kill. I also don’t expect a woman, should I have one, to cook for me.”

Her hand comes to rest on my sleeve. “So you don’t want to get married?”

There’s a note of hurt I don’t understand in her voice. I know she once might have thought she was in love with me, but not now, not after all I said to her, not after I let her father take her.

“No,” I say softly. “I’m never getting married.”

“Good because you’re an asshole. I feel bad for any woman forced into that arrangement.”

“Forced? I assure you, I wouldn’t have to force anyone to be with me.”

“Or kidnap them?”

I sigh. Normally those words would mean punishment, but there’s more hurt than anger in her tone, her expression, and that only confuses me more. What does she even think this is? Courting?

“Have I treated you so badly, Rose?” I shake my head. “No, don’t answer that. I have, but I treat you better than those other men. There’s that.” A part of me wants me to say I care,

but that's a lie, isn't it? I know it is. I'm high on the sex still, even if it was that morning. It's intense fucking hormones running rampant when I should know better. I change the subject.

"I've worked out my plan, Rose. If it all goes well, you'll have your revenge."

"And you'll have yours."

"We can share."

Rose nods, leaning into me a little, and I offer her more food. There's something about it, but I'm not sure what. It's almost like she's giving me what she thinks I want, or at least trying to. Then again, does it matter? She can't escape, and I think it's more than clear what waits for her if her father is still in the picture.

"So..." She looks at me, hand remaining on my arm. "If I'm going to be an instrumental part, what is it you want me to do?"

"Every fucking thing I say. When it's time, I'm going to let you call him. Then, he's going to take you somewhere. The house you went to before is now empty. He's moved on. What I'm most interested in is his lair."

"Lair? Like a super villain?"

"More like a gremlin. He's going to go underground, like I said, and his secret fortress is where he has everything I want. If he gets there without me knowing, we lose him, and you'll be in danger."

If that happens, I'll send her away, but he'll still try and come for her. He'll send someone, bounty hunters, private eyes, anyone to do the job. He'll get her, and that's not an option.

“Your bracelet will track you,” I say softly. Maybe I shouldn’t tell her. She recoils just the slightest bit at that. I’d have missed it if I wasn’t so fucking tuned into her, if I didn’t watch her so closely.

She lifts her hand from my arm and touches the piece, and then she takes the bowl and cutlery from me and eats it herself. I think about stopping her. I like feeding her, but this isn’t happy romantic bliss. This is about me prepping her for what’s to come.

“You’ll call him, make it desperate, garbled, and then you’ll hang up. I’ll take you to that compound and leave you there, looking rough. When it’s time, I’ll come and get you. I will. Wherever you end up, just keep the bracelet on.”

She nods. “Rough?”

I drop my gaze to her exposed tits. “Rough. Gloriously rough.” I get up and serve myself some food and take a seat at the table in the kitchen. I motion for her to sit next to me. Rose takes in the chairs and chooses the one opposite. I almost laugh. Fucking little minx.

“He doesn’t like me, Nikolai. Actually, I think he hates me.” Her gaze drops to her bowl as she pushes some rice around. “Why would he come and get me?”

“You’re his daughter. You’re worth something to him. Revenge for me getting you first. Take your pick.” I shrug. “It’s pride, mostly. He’ll see it as a win, that he’s top fucking dog, that he got you from me, that you chose him.”

She really doesn’t say anything. Just, “I see.”

We eat in a soft, gentle silence, like companions, and the animosity she’s been showing isn’t there. To make it more complicated, the softness isn’t pure either. There’s something

weighing it, almost like hurt or sadness. I can see it in how she sits, spine curled forward, chin tilted down. I want to ignore it, so I bring up the charity ball.

“Tonight, there’s an event, a big charity ball. I have to go because I donate a shit ton of money each year, so I have to show face.”

Her head shoots up. “You? You’re involved in charity? What is it? Guns for Thugs?”

“It’s for battered women and shelters. For kids.”

She’s looking at me like I’ve revealed I’m from another planet. I narrow my eyes. “Don’t get ideas, Rose. It’s an act. It’s a huge charity. They have a bunch of feel good crap that rotates around women and kids, and I don’t know, three legged kittens and puppies.”

“I see.”

“It’s a great way to keep up my legit persona and make contacts, as well as wheel and deal in the open. As I said, an act. I’ve got hands in a lot of jars, Rose. This is one. I want you to go with me.”

She recoils. “Me? Why? So we can pretend to be in love again and make my father feel impotent?”

“I’m sure he does that on his own.”

“And what if I say no?” she asks.

I lean forward and take hold of her wrist. “Not an option.”

“Of course not.” She sniffs and drops her spoon with a clatter. “I can’t wait to be put in a dog collar and paraded about like a prize, as your sex slave.”

Her hiss of sarcasm is delicious, and my dick twitches and stirs. “Absolutely, if that’s what you want, my little Rose. I’m more than happy to oblige.”

“I’m sure you are. Do you want me naked?”

“Don’t tempt me, but wrong event.” I’m not letting others see her naked, not again. Did it once and it still annoys me, knowing there are probably some still jerking off to what I let them see. “Actually, I meant for you to come along as my legitimate companion.”

“Your what?” She frowns. “You mean date?”

I smile very slow. “Yes, as my date.” As she stares at me, I get up and come around the other side of the table. I lean on the edge and draw her up to stand in between my thighs. I run my fingers over her mouth, and then I kiss her slowly, thoroughly, drawing her out, until she sighs and melts. “Is that a yes, Rose?”

“You’re not really asking.”

“If I am?”

She’s quiet for a long moment as she thinks it over. There’s that odd expression on her face, part hurt, part steel, part something else. I could threaten her, but what’s the point? She already understands the score. She’s a very smart young woman. While I can make her go, and I would, I’m curious to her answer.

“Rose? How about this. I’m asking, not telling. Will you come as my date?”

Blue eyes shining a little brighter, a small smile appears, one that twists a little in my chest.

“Yes.”

Chapter 19



Rosalind

Of course, he won't get married. Not to me. He'll end up with some mafia princess for...reasons. I know enough that men always say that to someone they don't want, so I don't know why I'm surprised, or hurt, or feeling anything at all. Oh, hell, that dumb wedding dream's sure done a number on me. I don't want to marry him. He's a monster; gorgeous, devastating, a thing I crave, but this life isn't mine. He's using me.

I want to say it's Stockholm still, but this craving...it's unavoidable. Their world, one I was born into, has stripped mine away. Because of him, I have exactly that.

Nothing.

So no, my need for his touch has nothing to do with Stockholm Syndrome, not anymore. I recognize what he is, I know the danger, and something in my soul sees it all as familiar. Maybe it's my dad's blood in my veins, I don't know.

I pull my knees up under my chin, wearing one of the dresses Mia left for me this morning, thankfully not a pink one. I hate pink now. It's also not red. This is a pretty one, with white and yellow flowers. It's simple, thick straps, something that falls along the lines of my body to just below

my knees. It reminds me of springtime, but it's way too simple for tonight's event. I wonder what Nikolai will let me to wear for it.

Let me. I snort at that. The fact that I have to let a man tell me what to wear and when is absolutely insanity.

When he fed me last night, I felt...not loved, but special. It's a craving in me, that, but his words hurt, too, the soft flatness of his stating he wouldn't ever get married. I don't know why it bothers me so much. It was just a dream. I guess some part of me—some childish, romanticized image of my future—still cares, still wants some kind of normalcy in this chaos.

This ball tonight may just be what I need right now, the perfect place to escape the isolation and see things more clearly. This won't be just mafia. It's going to be big.

Yet...when he asked, I said yes because there's a small part that wanted it, was flattered. And—

There's a knock on my door. "Come in."

I'm not sure why I say that. It's not like I can stop anyone, especially Nikolai, but it gives me a little autonomy, no matter how fake it might be.

The door opens and Tony comes in, his bulk taking up most of the door. He clears his throat. "Rose—Rosalind, Nikolai sent this up for tonight." He holds out a big, glossy, golden box, and of course, on top is a single red rose.

I narrow my eyes, thinking about ignoring it, making him wait, but Mia's husband hasn't hurt me or humiliated me, so I get up and take it from him. It's heavy. Then he turns, picks something up from outside, some more boxes to leave on the

bed, all glossy gold except one. It's a flatter square in an almost satin black.

“Thanks.”

My stomach flutters as I take it all in. Whatever's inside these things are going to be beautiful. A dress, maybe underwear, shoes, and...that box... jewelry.

I glance back at Tony, who rubs the back of his neck and looks a little uncomfortable. “If you're thinking of running tonight, don't.” He breathes out and shifts. “There are worse things than Nikolai.”

“My father.” I hate saying that.

He nods. “Nikolai won't let you get far. For your safety.”

“And when he hands me back?” I stiffen my spine, not sure where this is coming from because I'm not even bothering to deny I was thinking of running tonight. “How safe is that?”

“He's a deadly man, a careful man, and he considers you his. He protects his own. He'll keep you safe. Plus, we'll be there.” A hardness comes into his face. “This is between us, but it's the truth.” With that he leaves, but then he pokes his head back in. “The jewelry box? Nikolai will drop by to help with that.”

I sigh and turn, taking in the dubious spoils. With shaking fingers, I set the box to one side, aching to look inside, but something tells me to wait for him.

Instead, I open the box with the dress and gasp. It's a shimmering gold material, almost a deep burnished gold, and I pull it out and fall in love. It's a fitted bodice and a flowing skirt that has gathered extra fabric to resemble the heads of

roses. It's high fashion, something models would wear on a Paris runway.

A piece of paper flutters out, and I catch it.

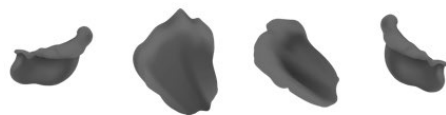
Please be my beauty queen

-N.

The note makes me smile. Maybe it's the "please," or maybe my mind has just given up, but the note is weirdly sweet somehow. Do I want to indulge in the fantasy of a date with my lover, just for a few moments?

Heart skipping, I pull out the black, glossy shoes with the high heels and lattice detail. There are golden thigh-highs and black garters, and underwear, if you can call it that. It's just wispy, black lace so scant and see through, it's like being naked. More naked than naked. There's no bra, but I'm guessing it doesn't fit under the dress.

Without wasting another minute, I jump in the shower.



Nikolai is sprawled on my bed, gazing at the panties he's holding, and I shiver. I let the towel around me drop. His dark eyes go from the panties to me, and then he proceeds to take his time to eye-fuck me, lingering last between my thighs.

He grins. Then he does something bizarre. He licks the gusset of the panties, and I swear my entire body twitches and spasms. It was hot walking out here seeing him holding them, knowing I'll be wearing them, but it's hotter still knowing I'll

be wearing him—something his tongue’s touched—close. I can’t explain it, but that’s how it feels, like I’ll be wearing him, up against my pussy, all night long.

“Fuck, Rose, you don’t need weapons to bring a man down. You are the weapon.” He gets up and hands me the panties. “Put them on.”

I do, and he unclips my hair where I had it up for my shower. He studies me and then sweeps up my hair and twists it, pinning it again. “Up, I think.”

I want to touch him. He’s barefoot, in dark jeans with a distressed knee and a gray, soft-looking T-shirt. The tattoos on his arms are hot. I’ve seen them before, obviously, but when he dresses down and I see them, it’s like he sets a fire deep inside me. Nikolai is just pure man and sexual power, whether he’s naked, in jeans, or in a suit.

I think I love him most like this. Not love, but...appreciate. It’s a raw edge, an intimacy.

“Here.” He helps me into the dress and buttons it up down the back, smoothing the off the shoulder sleeves. I go to look at myself in the mirror. “No. Not yet. Stay where you are.”

The words are careless, but as commanding as if he’d barked them at me. So I do. I stay.

He returns and he lays something around my throat. It’s cold, smooth metal, and he clips it into place, checking with his finger that it’s not too tight or too loose.

“Another collar?”

“Yeah, because they’re fucking hot on you, Rose. This is subtle, like the first one. And...I marked you. It’s obvious I had a belt around your throat, so I figured you didn’t want the

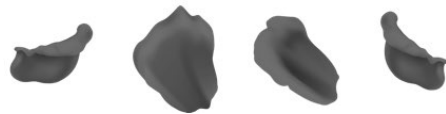
fucking world to know what we do alone. I don't give a shit, but I think you do. So, since it's a date, I'll give you that."

I suck in a breath. "On your terms."

"On my fucking terms." He touches a spot just above the piece on the left side of my throat. "We'll leave this mark, though, and..." His fingers brush the swell of my right breast. "This."

He turns me and our gazes meet. The air is thick and heavy with intent. "Any other bruises from those fuckers? Cover those." His lips brush mine. "Look the part of my date. I'll see you down by the car in about thirty minutes."

He kisses me again, and then he's gone. If I live to three hundred, I'm not sure I'll ever understand him.



Nikolai leans against the huge black SUV when I get outside. He's on his phone, and he's cutting a lean and debonair figure in black. He looks up, and, as he straightens, my heart lurches.

Debonair? In the rich, black tuxedo with the single button and pale dove gray shirt, black bowtie, he's dangerous. Hotter than hot. The man could melt entire solar systems.

If I wasn't in this dress, I'd drool all over it. As it is, I can barely stop the trembling and throbbing that starts deep between my thighs. My panties are going to be dripping by the end of the night. They're already damp.

"Come here, Rose." The fire in his gaze excites me, and I cross to him. "Fucking stunning."

Nikolai touches the onyx studded, black metal lattice that adorns my throat, and there's a matching ring on one finger, a thicker black one on his thumb, too.

"It's beautiful," I murmur.

"It doesn't look like a collar, just a choker, but make no mistake, this black rhodium is just that. My collar."

He opens the SUV's door and helps me in, smoothing the voluminous silk skirts around me. He clips the seatbelt into place, which makes me want to giggle—big, badass mafia boss worried about car safety and road rules. Then he taps the driver's seat and the driver nods. We roll out. His hand is next to mine, touching, the heat and spark a thrill in my blood.

"I wanted to get a limo, but they're not quick, and my car and the town cars don't have the room I want."

My stomach dips at that, and then it soars as his fingers absently stroke against mine. There are lots of things I want to say, but I just nod and wait.

"This is a big event. Tons of famous and important people, Rose, so you need to be on your best behavior."

"I always am."

"Uh huh." There's a smile playing with the corners of his mouth.

"When I have to be," I add.

His gaze cuts to me, and the temperature in the car soars. "You have to be, so stay by me at all times. You're mine and everyone's going to know it. If I'm talking to someone, don't speak to anyone else. No one should have the actual balls to speak to you directly."

"If they do, I shoot them? Stab them with a cocktail fork?"

“Fuck me.” His gaze is fire on my skin. “If they do, say very little, smile, and look happy.”

Happy. I want to be happy. If Nikolai weren't my captor, if he was—not normal, he could never be normal, he's too... *Nikolai* to ever be normal—different and actually my man, then I'd be happy. “I can do that.”

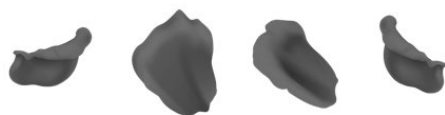
He studies me a moment. “Don't drink too much. Enough to take an edge off is fine, but not enough to make a mistake.”

“And my father?” It's so hard saying that, and it's getting harder when it should be easier.

Nikolai slips his fingers into mine and squeezes, like he can see the struggle, feel my revulsion. “Don't worry about that fuck, sweet Rose. I promise, you'll be protected as long as I'm around.”

“Really?”

This time, there's no smile, but there's something calming in the hardness his gaze. “I'm a man of my word.”



Okay, I'm starstruck. The entire place is like something out of a movie. Everything is elegant and the right kind of glitz. I've seen award parties and the galas at the Met. Not in real life, but on TV, online, photos. This...it puts them to shame. It puts pageants to shame, which me in my ridiculous innocence thought were the height of glamor. Glamor and wealth are everywhere, and all the women are gorgeous in their insanely expensive dresses and jewels.

I feel so out of place. I'm a sheltered girl with one friend who, for all intents and purpose, is a prisoner. I'm a nobody with the most gorgeous, hottest man in the room. Women look at him and sigh. I get some sharp and nasty looks, and there are a few men who eye Nikolai longingly as well. There are sport stars and movie stars. There are politicians and a few billionaires I recognize from online gossip sites.

Of course, security abounds. I recognize a number from the grounds of Nikolai's place. Sneaking away might be harder than I first thought, but I can try, as soon as I get a chance.

"Soaking it all in?" I shiver at the soft heat in Nikolai's voice as he hands me a flute of buttery champagne. He's just finished talking to a very serious woman about so much money and different charities, I actually feel a little sick at the vast numbers.

The woman fluttered her eyelashes at him, but Nikolai didn't notice, just toyed with a strand of my hair and dropped a kiss on my forehead, like all he sees is me.

"Enjoying yourself, sweet Rose?"

When I look up, he smiles. It's intimate and hot and sweet, and I almost tumble, even though I'm standing still. The hand at my waist tightens a little, and he leans in.

"Be fucking careful. You keep looking at me like that, reacting like that, and I'm finding a dark corner to fuck you in, which is not really the plan."

I swallow, and my panties are now officially soaked. I press my thighs together, hard, just to get a tiny bit of relief.

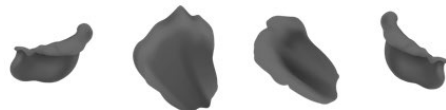
"I saw that."

"You saw nothing."

He just smiles, and I realize I just gave myself away. He's such an asshole.

"Come on," he mutters. Nikolai introduces me to so many famous and important people, my head starts to spin. Ironically, the more I meet, the less I care. The only thing that matters is him, his hand on me, how he's touching me. My arm, my cheek, my hair. The entire world knows I'm his, but he's also stating he's mine.

It's an act, I know it's an act, but it's one I want to indulge in. I like belonging.



"Rose," Nikolai murmurs against my ear, voice full of dark, seductive undertones. "You're breaking one my rules."

His fingers slide over mine, stopping me from lifting a champagne flute to my lips. "I didn't notice..."

He leans in, one hand sliding about my waist as he takes the drink from me and downs it, only to have a passing waiter set it on her tray. Nikolai touches his lips to my ear. "Lies, Rose. You know what happens to naughty girls."

A dark thrill passes through me as he gives me a heated look, so full of promises of punishment, the kind I like.

"Good bad things?"

"Very bad and very good." And we're off again.

I'm spinning inside, sliding down into the kind of anticipatory pleasure only Nikolai can bring. The lights are a soft glow, the noise and laughter of the people a backdrop to elegant music. Nikolai dances with me, only me, fingers on the

top of my ass and on the curve of my lower back. He's a little too close, way too thrilling, and I'm a mess of need inside.

He talks to people, and I do my job of smiling and making non-committal small talk. People might think I'm an idiot, it doesn't matter. He's the one they primarily want to speak to.

I notice something else, too. It's not how handsy he is as the night wears on, not how the heat of him seems to be part of me, how he takes time to murmur things in my ear, to check on me, to make me feel I'm there, with him as part of a couple. No, I notice how Nikolai is incredibly deft at seeming to be open while giving absolutely nothing in return. Not one person he speaks to goes away learning a thing about him. He's present and there, charming as the depths of hell, but he deflects, mirrors them.

As a skill, it's one I want. I'm not entirely sure if he uses it on me, and the thought terrifies me.

"You need anything?" Nikolai asks.

I look up at him, his fingers trailing along the back of the collar as the senator he's talking to finds himself at an abrupt end to their conversation. I'm what Nikolai is focused on. Maybe I have been the entire night.

Just you, I want to say, but I swallow the words because I need to remind myself this is nothing more than a game. "Bathroom?"

He kisses me softly. "To the back, and don't do anything fucking stupid."

Then, he lets me go and turns to someone else. Yet, I feel his gaze on me as I cross the huge room. Even when I get to the smaller hall where the bathrooms are, out of sight, I still

feel his eyes on me somehow. It's silly, only in my head, but he's left his mark on me.

Of course, I don't really need the bathroom. I was hoping for an exit door, but frown when I find nothing of the sort. Instead, there's a bank of public phones. I pick one up, and shock skitters up my spine. There's actually a dial tone. It works.

Trembling, I look carefully around. I don't see Nikolai. Who am I going to call, anyway—

Genius. It-It's not breaking the rules by calling her just to say I'm alive and okay. Right? She probably isn't near her phone. I don't let myself second guess myself as I dial her number.

She answers after the third ring. "This better be good. This better be Callum—"

"It's me."

There's dead silence.

"Zomg!" She says it like a word. "Roz! I've been so fucking worried. Where are you? Did you, like, melt down? If you say you did, I don't believe you. You don't melt like that. I've filed reports, but the cops do nothing! There was a stupid article. Where are you? Tell me! I'm coming—"

My heartbeat is jumping erratically, but it's so damn good to hear her voice. "Genius, listen. I don't have long." I grip the phone tight in one sweating hand. "I just wanted you to know I'm okay. I-I can't say much."

"What do you mean? Roz—Roz? Are you okay?"

"Yes. Well, kind of. I'm not hurt, but don't tell anyone I called. It's too dangerous."

“Jeebus, Roz. What does that mean? You’re freaking me out here.” Genius’s voice turns harder with concern. “Tell me where you are. I’ll come get you.”

“No!” I practically bark out the word, but just thinking about her getting involved in this world of crime and murder makes my stomach spin. “Listen, I’m with someone. It’s not my choice, but I’m good. I’m safe for now. I’m in—”

A hand comes down on the switch hook connector things. I freeze as the line goes dead. All I see is the black jacket and the beautiful, pale dove gray cuff with onyx and black rhodium cufflinks, and my held breath turns into ice shards in my lungs.

I look up. Nikolai. *Shit.*

Chapter 20



Nikolai

“**F**ucking hell, Rose.”

I want to kill her. Maybe not in the literal sense, but figuratively? Absolutely. Has she lost her fucking mind? The quiet fury in my face and tone makes her turn pale; her wide, startled blue eyes are filled with shock and guilt and something else.

Quiet acceptance. Need. Anticipation.

I should fucking drag her from here by the hair and fuck her stupid outside. I should spank her and lock her up. I gave her a few moments to go to the bathroom because I figured she'd try and maybe find a way out. She wouldn't have—I've too many people on my payroll for her to take a step towards an exit without me knowing.

She's also safe here, or I wouldn't have brought her. What I didn't expect is this, her using the phones and calling her fucking friend. Since I had spotted an affiliate of Finnegan's in the crowd, I decided it might be a good thing to follow Rose after all. That's when I caught her.

I narrow my eyes. “Want to explain what you think you were up to? What you were trying to do here?”

“N-Nikolai, I-I wasn’t trying to escape.”

“You wouldn’t get far if you tried,” I remind her.

“I just wanted to talk to...”

I take the phone hand set from her and set it down with a light touch, one that makes her jump more than I think slamming it down would have. She’s smart, my Rose. So, oh yes, does she know exactly how fucking furious I am.

I look her up and down. “I know who you called. Are you insane? I heard every fucking word.”

She swallows, and the booze in my system kicks my temperature and recklessness up a few notches. So does Rose. She makes me want to take all the fucking risks. She wants me to indulge in the best, filthiest, nastiest of troubles.

“Then you...you know that—” she continues to stammer on.

“What do I know, Rose?” I ask with mock sweetness. I grab her, pulling her up against me and holding her there, so she can feel exactly what she should know. “That you turn me on? Goes both ways. You *know*.”

She sucks in a breath, and a tremor of excitement passes through her as she presses against my growing erection.

“Oh...” Rose whispers.

“That,” I say. “You like that.”

“Nikolai...”

“*Rose*...” I mimic her. “You want it? Work for it.”

Her hands come up to my chest.

“Is that all you have to show me how much you want it?” She shakes her head and her hands creep higher, and above my

collar, her pulse speeds up. Fuck, she's the most glorious thing I've seen.

"Higher, Rose. Around my fucking neck, like you live for me. Crave me." My gaze drops to her mouth, and her half-closed eyes, the flush of arousal whispering over her cheeks. "But you do that naturally, don't you?"

"What?"

"Crave me?"

"Yes." Her softly hissed word borders on a moan, and her eyes glitter and light up like a fever as she bites her lip.

She either wants to take it back or she wants me to take her. Both, I think, and that, right fucking there, is what makes her irresistible to me. Just that. Nothing more, apart from all those other delicious things about her.

"Do you want me to fuck you here?"

"No."

"Rose..."

Irritation and heat flicker in her eyes as they open to look up at me. "Yes, damn you. Why do you make me say it out loud like that?"

"Because I like it too much." Playing with fire has never been so good. I'm getting into trouble here because as much as I'm turning her dials all the way up, I'm doing the same to mine.

"You know I do. I don't...I don't know why you make me keep saying it. It's not right to want you."

"Isn't that what makes it so fucking good?"

Her gaze darts away. "Let me go."

She says *let me go*, but her body pushes into mine and her soft sigh says *more*. I try and drag my head back to where it needs to be, which is hard with a pretty golden rose all over me, smelling so fucking sweet.

“You’re going to get punished, Rose, mark my words, but I need you to know that you could have brought danger on your little friend. If Derek’s watching—”

“No.” Rose stares at me again. “He doesn’t know she exists.”

The horror in her voice rips at something in me, but I ignore it.

“Maybe,” I say, “but he does now. Phones get tapped, especially these. Do you even get how advanced technology is? What if someone other than me followed, listened in? There are cameras. He has people here. I’ve spotted a number of them, which means there’ll be more. You’re safe because you’re with me and this is my territory. I made you a promise and I’ll keep it, as long as you fucking do what I say.”

She jerks in my arms, but I don’t let her go. “I didn’t know,” Rose whispers. “I didn’t. I thought...I just...I’m lonely. I missed her. I didn’t want her to worry. I didn’t tell her where I was.”

“No,” I say, “just that you being with me isn’t your choice.”

“It isn’t!”

I’m being completely unreasonable in the anger that flares at her words. I know that, but it doesn’t change the fact she might have gotten her friend killed, if someone did in fact listen in or tap the line, or take pictures. I don’t think

Finnegan's that organized, but he'd kill her friend—or worse—just to make a point.

Rose wouldn't survive that. The guilt would destroy her. It's not going to happen because the moment I heard who she was on the phone with, I sent a text to take care of it, added security detail tailing her friend. I really don't give a fuck, but Rose does, and I don't need her in pieces until I'm done. That's the only reason her stupid friend is under my protection.

“You were going to tell her where you were, Rose. As it is, you're lucky these phones come out as private numbers. Goddamn it, get your shit together.” Because I can't spank her, I take her mouth.

It's a slow and devastating kiss, thorough, not quite deep the way she likes, but it borders on savage eroticism. It's a dance of tongues in a slow, erotic show, small nibbles, dipping into her in just the right way.

She flows into me, hands coming up to rest on the back of my neck, twining in my hair. Rose tastes like innocence and sex, like champagne and a dark sweetness that's all her.

I could kiss this girl for hours. Instead, I lift my head and look at her. “There are people, weak people, who'll sell you for a pittance, so don't wander off.”

“Be careful,” she whispers close to my mouth. “You're starting to sound like you actually care about me.”

I lean in to suck her lobe and bite, hard. To her credit, though she jumps and moans, she doesn't squeal. “Rose, I have zero fucks about punishing you here,” I say.

“And yet...you're just talking.”

Before I can say a word, someone comes up to thank me for my donation. Thing is, I also have zero fucks to give about

social norms, about polite protocol, so I don't let her go as I chat. I even get myself a whiskey from a waiter, making no effort to introduce her to the mayor.

He wears a small smile, like he's witnessing what he isn't: young love. Two people in that stage where they can't get enough of each other. He's wrong and he's right. I want her to be that; not love, but unable to get enough of me.

I could fuck her every which way and not be bored, but it's going to happen. She's a blip, a very strong, long blip that shows no signs of fading, but that's because her time will end when I get my revenge and the money, power, land, connections from Finnegan. Then she's out of my life, and I'll rub about a thousand out to her. Eventually, that'll fade too. She's just different. Young, sweet, with sharp claws.

He's saying something, and I wind back the conversation, but then Rose giggles and smiles at the mayor.

"You say the nicest things, Sir."

"Malcolm." He's about sixty-five and sporting a slight semi as he talks to her. "You come visit me the moment you get away from Wilder here."

"I'd love that," she says.

I clench my jaw, anger stirring with the whiskey and burning its way through my blood. What would this fine heeled set say if I gutted the mayor and then killed her for flirting?

"Say goodnight, Rose," I say with an ease that costs.

She holds out her hand, and he slobbers on it. I'll also cut out his tongue and feed it to rapid dogs as he bleeds out. When he goes, she gives me a sly look.

“What am I going to do with such a bad girl?” I turn her slowly, not letting go. “You’ve already broken a rule tonight. Are you trying to push your luck and try for number two?”

Her arms come back around me, and she rubs her face against my chest. “I was just trying to be nice.”

“You’re just testing the limits.” I’m aware we’re both being reckless. We’re both a little tipsy, maybe I’m a little drunk. Keeping track of drinks in places like this is hard, let alone when I have a wide-eyed innocent who’s dirtier than anything I’ve known on my arm.

“Am I?” she asks as her voice slips into coquettish with a hint of seductress.

I brush my mouth on hers and catch her bottom lip, biting down and running my tongue over it until her knees buckle. Raising my head, I look about because no way am I letting her go when my balls are drawing tight, my dick pressing hard at my tuxedo’s trousers.

This Rose needs to be fucked. Punished. Fucked again.

Okay, maybe I’m definitely more on the side of drunk than tipsy. Not enough to hinder, but enough to blast any commonsense to dust. There. A coat room, the big one, where they keep the coats of those who tend to stay the whole time. It’s got room and it’s perfect. I start walking us there, navigating around people, turning out voices and laughter and music.

“Oh, yeah, Rose. See, you just keep fucking with the rules. You started a conversation with the mayor. You gave that lascivious old bag a hard on and you agreed to go and get molested at his office.”

“I didn’t!”

“You did.” I kiss her again, hard this time, bordering on brutal, and she moans low. “When you said you’d visit, when you let him basically baptize your hand.”

“Nikolai, I didn’t.”

“You did.”

“You didn’t answer him, so I stepped in.”

No one is in the room, so I tug her inside, down the back to where the long coats and furs are.

“What’s going on? Why are we in here?” she asks, glancing around.

I push her against the wall, pinning her there, and her loud gasp of shock is intoxicating in itself. Her tits heave, and her mouth parts as she stares at me with wild eyes.

“Nikolai—”

“You broke the rules, pretty Rose, and now you need to be punished.” I nip her throat. “Here.” I slide a hand up her leg, dragging up her skirts and pushing between her thighs. She’s so fucking unbelievably wet. “And now.”

Chapter 21



Rosalind

Nikolai's drunk. Dangerously so.

He's not fall down drunk, or slur-your-words drunk, but he's had one too many and it's given him a compelling, reckless edge that makes him not only full of dark, erotic promises and threats, but makes him want to act them out.

Nikolai has me pressed against the wall, and he's pulled my panties to one side. His fingers are slowly assaulting me, deep into my depths, where I need him. It's so good. Better than good. It's sublime.

He kisses me with a deliberate abandon, and I can't feel my toes. I can't move. All I can do is sink into that fevered relief the pleasure of his fingers thrusting into me brings. The taste of him is pure heaven, and I know I taunted him, wanted this, as much as I wanted to run, as much as I wanted to speak to Genius.

Now, he has me pushed up against the wall in the back of a big coat room with a rack in front of us. He's going to fuck me. Here. Now. In this public place with a party going on just outside.

Nikolai lifts his head. “Question is, just how to punish you.” I shiver. “Unfortunately, I’m not wearing a belt this time. Such a shame really. I would have loved to take it to your ass this time, give you a taste of a hardcore beating.” He continues the slow, deep thrusts into me. “There’s no chair here so I can’t really turn you on my knee, pull your panties down, and spank you into submission.”

I start to shake and the walls of my pussy grip at his fingers.

“Rose,” he says, that quiet, hot mocking laced in his voice, “you’re not going to commit the cardinal sin of coming without permission are you?”

I moan as I thrust my hips on his fingers, needing more, needing him harder, faster, rougher. This is designed as delicious torture, to keep me on the edge. “You aren’t letting me come, you...fuck.”

He grins and takes my face with his other hand, but he doesn’t slow his deliberate invasion of my pussy. “Oh, Rose, do you know how much I love it when you get so riled up, you lose yourself and court further punishment? Do you even know the nasty things in my head? I want to do them all, and I will. You’ll beg. We both know it.”

“I won’t.” Not even I believe that.

He laughs as he turns my head to suck and kiss and lick my throat around the collar. Suddenly, he stops and lets me go. He slides his fingers beneath the hot, damp skin at the back of my neck and the choker and pulls, constricting the air flow. Just a little, just enough for every single part of me to surge to life and focus there, on his fingers moving in and out of me.

I want to come. He tugs in time with the thrusts as he watches me. I climb and climb, the orgasm right there, just out of reach but edging closer as the pleasure in me grows. When I'm about to come, he stops.

“Bastard.” I spit the word as he pulls away from me. He's hard, so damn hard, and I reach for him, even as I glare at him with hate and need and lust.

“Rose.”

“I hate you.” I want to cry. I want him.

“I don't care.” He continues to look at me like I'm a painting and he's deciding where to lay down his next brush stroke. I'm shaking and quivering, my body empty and aching, the pleasure marred and heightened by that stolen orgasm.

That's what he does, steals them from me. I can't control my breathing, and honestly, my eyes burn. There's so much in me, I'm going to burst. I will if he doesn't touch me.

Nikolai moves in. One step, and he grabs me and spins me in place before shoving my chest up against the wall, so hard and so sudden, the air wooshes from me.

I don't know what he's doing. I try and turn but he murmurs one thing. “Don't.”

So, I don't. I stay like this, in the position he's put me in. There's a soft thud and my skirts lift, move. So does he, and... *oh my God.*

His hot breath is on my ass, hands sliding over it. His muffled voice comes up at me. “So fucking beautiful, Rose. I've never seen such a perfect, beautiful ass, and it's mine.”

My heart thuds so hard, it might break ribs, and my pulse is sprinting fast and getting faster. I'm lightheaded, and

everything in me is focused on him and my pussy and ass and the fact he's on his knees, under my dress, face at my butt.

He slides the panties aside, and slips two fingers down between my cheeks. He strokes my asshole. "This is going to be mine, too, and I can't fucking wait for that moment."

"Yes..."

He licks my left cheek, and then he bites me hard. I yelp as pleasure and pain shoot out.

Nikolai stops. "Rose, you need to be quiet, or I won't ever touch you again."

I nod, even though he can't see me. I know we'll be caught if someone comes in, if I make a sound. I don't need to look back to know that, so I close my eyes and whisper, "I will."

"Good girl." He nuzzles me and then he moves back, his hands sliding up to my hips as he pulls me. "Bend over more."

My legs quiver as I do that, and I'm rewarded by the slide of his tongue, cool against the heat of my aching folds.

"You taste divine. I'm going to feast now, so stay fucking silent. I'll let you know when you can come."

This time, he shifts my panties further as he kisses me, my inner thighs, up higher, along my outer lips. Then he sets to work, taking his time as he slides his tongue along them, biting, sucking, delving his tongue into me.

I almost scream when his fingers dip in, and then one slides up to my clit as he uses his fingers on me, his tongue. Instead, I clench my teeth as I rock against him. He's eating me with a savage intensity, his fingers playing my clit, playing me inside. He starts to rub that spot, and I shake and bite my arm to stop any sounds escaping. I want to come, I need to

come, I'm a mess of sensations, everything spiraling out and closing in on the intensity of his administrations.

Then I hear something. Footsteps. Wildly, I look over my shoulder, in between the coats. They're moving as someone starts to whistle tunelessly, and the bastard fingering me, eating me, ups his intensity. He starts to hammer into me with his fingers, press and rub my wet clit, stick his tongue into my ass. Then he bites and sucks my outer lips, and I'm rocking wild on that edge. If I come, I'll scream, I know it.

The coats still move and if the coat check pushes them apart, he'll see me. See us. Then the person moves on, the whistling fading out as he leaves.

Just when I think we're safe, a small little orgasm hits, readying for the big one to bloom. Nikolai fucks me harder with his mouth and fingers and tongue. I'm shaking so much, I might fall.

He lifts his mouth from me a moment and says the command I've been waiting for. "Come."

He fucks me harder, and I let go. The gates burst, and I'm swamped, adrift and the pleasure hits me so hard, spots of black burst in my eyes. I bite my arm and the pain sets off another tremor. Head heeling, I start to collapse, and he's out of me, out from under my skirts and standing. He catches me in his arms and swiftly turns me into him, peppering me with kisses, smoothing my cheek, holding me against his chest. His heart is wild in his chest, his breath harsh, fast and uneven. God, we smell like sex. I start to laugh.

Nikolai takes my face and pulls back a little, bringing me up to meet his gaze. "You know, Rose, if—"

He stops and shakes his head, then he picks up my skirt and wipes his mouth on it. My panties are bunched, and I don't care. I'm still in aftershock mode as the euphoric waves roll through me. Right at that moment, I don't think I can walk.

Nikolai kisses me slow and long and sweet. "Damn." Then his gaze hits my arm, and his forehead wrinkles with a frown.

"Did you bite yourself?"

I nod. "You said not to make a sound. It was the only way."

This time, when he kisses me, it's so relentless, he steals what little breath I have left, making me wobble into him. "There is absolutely no one like you, Rose. No one."

I want more. A part of me whispers that's just insane, but I don't care. I want more. I want him to do the things he said he'd do if he had a belt or a chair. I want him to do all the things he didn't share.

"Can you stand on your own?" he asks.

Disappointment settles over me, washing away the after-sex glow. Is that it? I was hoping for more. "But you didn't punish me."

"I did."

"You let me come."

He tilts his head, gaze shifting over me. "You like me withholding?"

"No. I mean, not if you don't let me, but when you make me wait and then let me come, it's so good."

He's openly staring now, and then the fucker starts to laugh. "Christ, Rose. Your dirty innocence is so sincere. Fuck."

"Don't make fun of me."

He takes the hand the mayor kissed and wipes it on his shirt, then he turns it and kisses my palm, letting his tongue draw patterns. He turns it and kisses the top. "Actually, I'm not making fun of you. I fucking love that about you. I love that innocence. You're dangerous, Rose, and you have no idea. You're right, that wasn't real punishment. It was a reward. I'll punish you later."

"Promise?"

"Fuck yes." Then he grabs me by the collar and hauls me against him, the humor gone. "Just remember who's in charge, that I own you. You want the punishment you enjoy, but I can punish and hurt. Rewards and pain come in different guises. Remember that when testing your boundaries with me. When I tell you to do things, like tonight? I expect you to obey."

Just like that, the resentment falls back into place. He says he's not making fun of me, but he is, and now he's pushing me back into my box, letting me know what I went and forgot.

He doesn't care about me. He desires me. Those aren't the same. I'm his prisoner, even though I'm here and have been given a tiny piece of so-called freedom. He only wants me because of something he can't do.

Get my father.

Then again, I want that, too.

He releases the hold and cradles me against him again, and this rollercoaster that he can be has me all over the place.

“You think too much. We riled each other up, I made it hotter, and you loved every second.”

I close my eyes. “I hate myself.”

He wipes a finger under my eye, and when I open them there’s moisture there. He puts his finger in his mouth and sucks away my tear.

“I’m going to give you a lesson for free. If you get out of this, remember it.”

“What’s the lesson? Carry a big gun?”

“A regular one will work, but no. Great sex isn’t something to hate yourself over. You’ll never have it this good, but... Enjoy it when you find it.”

I’m not really sure that’s what he was going to say because there’s an odd look on his face—like the thoughts in his heads are painful ones—but he draws me in again and kisses me briefly.

That’s when it dawns on me. His erection is still there, pressed up against my stomach. Big and hard. He made me come but...

“Nikolai, let me take care of you.” I don’t even know where the words come from, but they come and live and breathe. I expect him to grab me and fuck me, but he doesn’t.

He only shakes his head and turns to the wall, breathing deep. “Give me a couple of minutes and then we need to get out there. “

“I can fix it now.” I say it because I want him in me, anyway I can have him. My mouth, my pussy, I don’t care. I just want him. I want his cum.

He leans against the wall, turns his head to me, and that slow grin full of filth and heat and promise appears. “Oh, you will. Soon.”

Chapter 22



Nikolai

It takes me longer than I'd like to get my dick back down.

Rose is poison to me. She makes control hard, even when I need to have it. Dear fucking Christ, when she just told me with complete earnestness why she likes me withholding her orgasms, I could have come from that.

She disarms without meaning to, and I almost told her if things were different, a man could fall in love with her. Not me, I don't do love. I don't have it in me. Hate, lust, obsession, murder. I have those, but not the soft things she wants or deserves.

If I were a different man, and this was a different situation, I could see it. Rush would fall like a ton of bricks in my shoes. Then again, he's got a heart and soul. I don't.

Of course, I didn't say any of that to Rose because last thing I need is for her to think she loves me again. Wanting me, keeping her on an edge, that works. It gives me control, it lets me manipulate, but I can't have her thinking it's love.

I got caught up in my punishment. She tasted too good, felt even better, and I love it when I make her come, but I'm still going to give her what she needs, what I want. Punishment.

Right now, I need to get back out there with her. She looks like I just fucked her, and I'm good with that. It's going to get back to her father. It's going to keep assholes from thinking they can touch her, like the mayor, who I've still half a mind to kill. What the fuck am I going to do when I've had enough of her? Trail her and kill any man who looks twice?

"Come on," I say, taking her hand, needing another drink. I lead her out and the coat check guy's eyebrows start to rise as we pass him, but he takes one look at the expression on my face and finds something else to do.

I grab a drink from the nearest waiter and down it, almost choking. Tequila. Not my favorite.

Rose glares up at me as we make our way through the crowds, stopping here and there. When I get another drink—whiskey this time—she glares harder.

When we pause besides the band, who's getting ready to play their next set, I take a sip and run a thumb under her bottom lip. "What?"

"Normal people get one for the girl."

"I'm not people, sweet Rose, but..." I nab a champagne flute and hand it to her. "Make it last."

She downs it in seconds. Fucking brat. She's petal soft, but she's also got thorns in there to protect all that beauty.

My phone buzzes again—one of the reasons I didn't fuck her back there. Someone's been trying to get my attention, and I don't need to be balls deep if shit goes down. Bad enough I was fingers and tongue deep in her hot, tight cunt.

"Hold on."

A woman's making a beeline for us, and she's got the look of a fucking reporter. I don't do interviews. I can't stop photos happening, but beyond that? No fucking way.

I down the rest of the whiskey, place the empty glass on the windowsill, and pull Rose into me as I look at the phone.

About ten messages. All from Rush.

2 more goons. Finnegan ppl. Know 1. B careful.

Someone's talked. I scroll back. From his messages, there's five of Derek's men, a whole lot on my territory. Finnegan's either pissed, trying to start the war, or wants to do something audacious like take Rose now. I doubt it's the latter, more a mix of the former, but...

I type one handed as the woman stops in front of us:

Mode 2

It's a little overkill, but I want my people ready and primed. That means take them out on a signal, by any means, no questions, no matter where. Tony's with Rush outside, so they'll have the car ready, and now, all I have to do is get out.

"You're the runaway beauty queen," the woman says to Rose, and my entire body jerks her way.

Shit. She looks from Rose to me, clearly trying to mentally add up the years between us. Swiping out my arm, I step in front of her to block her view of what's mine. "We're trying to enjoy ourselves tonight. No interviews."

"Is it true the pressure of the competition got to you?" the reporter in a slinky silver gown asks as she tries to move around me. My annoyance grows. "Some people are even saying you were kidnapped."

Anger spikes through me, white hot. “Who?” I snap at her. I square my shoulders, which is enough to make her shift back. “Who is saying that?”

I’ll make sure to have each of them eradicated.

“I...Uh...” She stammers through the sentence, eyes wide. She must’ve not expected my aggression, but I don’t fucking care. She overstepped.

It might be the alcohol fueling me, but when her gaze flicks my way again, as if to emphasize her last point, I consider all the ways I could murder her right here, right now, and not cause too much of a scene.

Just as I’m about to rain verbal hell on her, a hand on my arm steals my violent thoughts. I glance down and see Rose is beside me again, her touch a calming presence. She doesn’t say anything, but in her eyes, I can see her thoughts. She’s telling me not to worry—she’ll handle this. Then, like a switch, Rose’s face lights up. She hooks her arm into mine to draw me in and turns back to the reporter.

“Kidnapped? No.” She laughs like it’s the most absurd thing she’s ever heard. “I just realized there are more important things than a stupid beauty pageant crown. I met my Niko.”

Niko? Oh, I’m definitely punishing her. She’s good at putting on the act. Rose is Academy ready, so I’ll reward her too. I’m thoroughly impressed, so I lean in and press my lips against hers.

“Oh.” The reporter smiles meekly. “I see.”

“I’m going to enter again—maybe a different pageant or for next year’s Miss Elite Royal. We’ve kind of fallen hard and fast for each other, but it’s everything.” Rose adjusts my

bowtie, and the woman's gaze zeroes in where she bit herself. Then she does an absolute vixen move. She drops her gaze to her arm and smiles. "Especially the sex."

"Rose," I whisper against her ear, but make sure it's loud enough for the reporter to hear, "your punishment's going give you multiple orgasms." Rose blushes and buries her face against my chest, feigning coyness.

"Well," the woman says and clears her throat. "Can I get your story?"

"That's not for sale," she replies with another giggle. "It's just for my Niko." Then, she takes my hand and drags me away, back across the room, leaving the reporter stunned.

She's not the only one. I am baffled and impressed by that exchange, by how well Rose handled it. Now that we're alone, I want to show her just how impressed I am.

"Rose," I say, pulling her to me, "let's get the fuck out of here."

She stumbles, and when her gaze pins on something beyond me, the joy and excitement drain away. Spinning, I follow her line of sight.

There they are. The two new arrivals. Finnegan's scum. Fuck her father and his weak little tests of my limits. The man's too fucking scared to start a war, and I'm not about to be intimidated.

Rose, on the other hand...She recognizes them. One I don't know, the other I've seen. While they can look, they can't do a thing here at the ball. My Rose whimpers like someone just kicked her, and the fury in me climbs higher. I push it down and latch onto the cold anger instead.

"You know them?" I ask.

“Y-Yes.”

Fuck this. I gently turn her and kiss her, tiny little sipping kisses aimed to do nothing but soothe, and the little shakes that started in her slow and stop. Still holding her, I lift my head and touch my forehead to hers.

“They can’t touch you. You’re with me, Rose. This is my territory. They’d be dead before they got a finger on you.”

“B-But—”

“Rose, listen, smile...” She does. “Good, I want you looking like you don’t care, like you’re happy. Channel what you did with that reporter woman because that was spectacular.”

“It was?”

She frowns as I lift my head from hers, and I smooth the lines away with my thumb. I drop a kiss on her lips once more. “Beyond what I expected. You’re with me. Remember that.”

“Okay. I just...I just didn’t expect to see people from *his* compound.” She takes a breath. One was nice to me, if nice is the right word.”

I go still. “Did he touch you?”

“Not like that. Said his job was my protector. He...I think he delivered your rose. How did you do that? I don’t understand. I don’t...” She looks down, and then she says, very quiet and very sure, “I hate this. All of it. I don’t like being scared and used and traded. I hate it all, Nikolai. You could have gotten me back.”

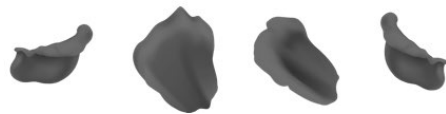
Shit. I roll words about in my head. This isn’t the place for whatever this conversation is. “I couldn’t. I risked a lot to get that rose to you, so you’d know I’d come for you.” I’m not

sure if she believes me, but I want her to. “We should go. Look happy, look at me like you love me.”

“Act?”

My mouth quirks, and I know I deserve that little barb, so I let it slide. “Yes.”

Together, acting like we’re in love, we leave, walking right by the two of Finnegan’s men.



Outside, I order Tony and Rush to make sure things are taken care of, Derek’s thugs followed when they leave. I’d love to have them take out that trash, but I’m not interested in full on war so close to getting what I want.

A cool night breeze brushes over us as I help Rose into the SUV.

“Home,” I say to the driver. Then, I glance at Rose, my cock twitching. I still need release and she needs some quick punishment. I lean forward, lowering my voice. “Raise the screen, headphones on.

The screen allows me to look out and him not see into the backseat. There are rearview cameras on this SUV, so it’s safe. Not like I give a shit right now. My mind is on one track, and that leads to Rose.

“Get on my lap,” I say, lowering my zipper and pulling my cock out into my hand. The thought of what I did to her in the coat room, of what I’m planning to do now, is enough to have me primed and ready in seconds. Fuck, is she going to feel good.

Her eyes go wide as she looks at my cock.

“Now, Rose.”

She does as I say, thighs on either side of me. I take her hands and put them on my dick. My girl knows what to do; she works me, from root to tip, and I feel it everywhere. I reach behind her and undo some of the buttons, then I pull the top down, exposing her breasts. I pull it all the way to her waist, trapping her arms. I pull up her skirts and move her panties to the side. They're still soaked, and her cunt is swollen and red and glistening. I play with her clit until she gasps and moans.

“This is a small punishment. You're going to ride me. You're going to work me all the way into that cunt and bounce on me, and you're going to milk me dry. When I come, and only when I come, can you orgasm. Got me?”

“Yes.”

The embarrassment is there, along with delicious heat. I continue to stroke and play with her clit, and she angles, like she's begging for me to play with her cunt, too. I enjoy the lewd view of her. It's perfection. Since I have one hand free, I lift one of her perfect tits and pull her to me so I can suck her nipple. I move to the other tit and do the same, and then I raise my head. “Get on me, Rose. I want it hard and fast. Make me come. You need to do it before we get home. Otherwise, no orgasm.”

She does, pushing herself down onto me, and I watch the fuck out of it, me splitting her open, her body swallowing my cock. It's fucking beautiful. Then she starts to ride me, bouncing up and down, and forcing me in and out of her in a mind-blowing rhythm.

“Harder, Rose. Slam down on me. I want to feel me bottom out in that cunt of yours. I want you to feel this.”

She does, and she moans, her hands coming to my shoulders, the straps digging like restraints into her arms. She'll look good in ropes, I think. I don't do that nearly enough, but I want to with her. Oh, fuck she's pure heaven. She's riding me wildly, her pinned up curls falling free. She's getting lost, so tight, and it's taking everything I have not to let go and flood her with my cum.

It's there. My balls have drawn up and it hurts from holding back, but it's so fucking good. Waiting, making her work, thinking she might not get me to come.

Rose bites her lip as she fucks me as hard as she can. She starts to roll her hips as she does, grinding her clit into me. I want to rip her dress off. I want to turn her and drive into her from behind. I want to take control and pound her into oblivion.

I don't. This is one of the hottest moments of my life, my little Rose riding me like there's no tomorrow. This is real. It's Rose getting off and trying not to, trying to get me off and me holding back as long as I can.

She spasms a little, then starts to slam down on me, and that does it. Her slip of an orgasm and renewed effort pushes me way over the edge, and I come violently, my dick jerking inside her. I grab her and bang her down on me, lifting and slamming as I shudder and shake and groan out her name. I paint her insides with my cum, and she reaches bliss, too.

Oh, fuck, if I had a heart... if I believed in love, it would look like Rose.

Chapter 23



Rosalind

Nikolai helps me get dressed, pulling up my sleeves, covering me, and then, as we pull into the drive, the gates closing behind us, he turns me on his lap to do up the buttons on the dress.

I'm in freefall, breathless, humiliated and embarrassed and flying high on the buzz of the sex and the thrill of being seen. The back of the car is a mix of leather and sex, and my cheeks burn as he helps me out. I'm sure I look like I had a wild ride. Nikolai looks...like Nikolai. Dangerous and seductive. Cool. In command. Only the flame in those dark eyes and the slight swell to his bottom lip where I might have bitten him gives anything away.

Then his mouth turns up into a low-key smile of pure satisfaction. "He didn't see a thing, and I'm betting there's a part of you that would get off on it if he had."

"How do you know?"

Damn him, anyway, for seeming to see inside my head. Nikolai guides me up the path and to the door, where a guard I haven't seen is waiting. They glance at each other and there's the slightest nod before the man moves off. We step into the soft glow of the foyer.

“I know because it’s all over your fucking face.” His hand is at my waist, warm and strong, and I want to sigh into him. I also want to turn and run, like a child. Instead, I climb the stairs with hm, feet starting to ache in the heels.

“Nikolai, he could have seen—”

“No.” He pushes me up against the wall outside my room. “He couldn’t. No one sees unless I want them to, and I don’t fucking want them to. I don’t share my toys, and you’re my favorite. Still, I also know you’d have done that if he could see. Wouldn’t you?”

His fingers trail a path from my mouth to my throat, down to the tops of my breasts. It’s a touch full of sweet sparks. *Toy. Share. Favorite.* Those words are about me being nothing to him but something to own and use, and they both burn and feel good. I hate it. I love it. I want it.

“Yes,” I whisper. “I would have.”

“But he couldn’t because I had him put up the glass so he couldn’t see. You got the thrill, and you got to come. I think,” he says, stepping back and pushing open my door, “I’m not done.”

“You’re not?” My voice is thready and breathless.

He smiles slow once more. “No. I’m going to spank you, and when you’re writhing and begging and so, so wet, I’m going to fuck you all night long.”

He leads me into my room and proceeds to do just that.



The next day, nerves nibble at my edges. I'm in a simple sundress, the red one, and I'm pacing. I want to get out. I want him to ask me to stay with him. I want to get therapy. I want a normal life and to see my friend. I want this to be over with.

"You'll wear a hole in the floor," Mia says from the door.

I glance at her. Now that I know her severe expression doesn't hold animosity, I smile. We haven't had a chance to talk much, but I think she's been busy.

She sets the tray down. "Eat and then Nikolai will see you in his office." Mia's gaze touches mine and her face softens. "Anything else?"

"No. Thank you." Then I frown. "Mia. What happened to Sylvie?"

Her face changes and she goes stiff. "Derek Finnegan."

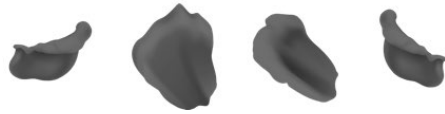
My father. My hand clenches tight.

"It's not your fault," she says gently. "She's alive. Nikolai is taking care of her needs. She'll come through."

With that, she goes. I walk to the bed and sink down next to the tray. The sandwich is fresh, thick crusted bread with salad and ham and cheese, and it looks wonderful. I want it as much as I want a bowl of razor blades, but I take a few bites and drink some water, just to feed my body and placate the beautiful monster waiting downstairs.

Something's going to happen. It's there, in the lurch of my stomach, in the slight tingle of nerves in the tips of my fingers as I get up and go to the bathroom, twisting my heavy dark hair back into a simple ponytail. Closing my eyes, I turn from the mirror and take a breath. Something's going to happen, and it could be my chance to get out.

I'm going to have to try.



Nikolai's frowning as he types on his computer. His tie's askew, and he needs a shave. He's still wearing the rings from last night, but his jacket is tossed on the chair in front of his desk and his sleeves rolled up.

I'm betting he's been working since he got up, which must have been before dawn, since the side of my bed where he slept after he spanked me and fucked me and made me come over and over was cold. I'm ashamed to say I got up around five when I woke and checked, stumbling half asleep down the hall naked.

Part of me had wanted to crawl into his empty bed that hadn't been slept in, but I didn't. I just went back to my own.

"I'm not that fascinating, Rose," he says, not looking at me.

I glare and grip the doorframe. "No. You're not."

This time he looks up. Dark humor glimmers in the depths of his eyes. "What do you want?"

"Mia told me I had to report in to you. Prisoner inspection?"

He sighs and leans back in his chair, that dirty little smile starting to play as he lets his gaze drift over me. "Did she now?" Then he sits up and sighs, all cold and hard once more. "Derek's on the move, Rose, and a little...apoplectic. Seems you did your job so well, I got a sweet call from him." He

pauses. “By sweet, I mean fucking bat shit furious, demanding you back.”

“Oh.” I swallow. It was always coming to this, and I agreed to it, but...so soon? And... A shudder races through my bones. I don’t want to go. No. I do. Just not to that man.

“Oh.” Nikolai gestures to the chair. “Sit.” I make my way over to him. “Rose, you need to listen, okay?”

I nod, my heart clenching tight.

“I played it very cocky, very nasty. He’ll probably fucking tell you all kinds of shit, but you’re going to call him and tell him you want to get away, tell him you’ve been pretending with me. Make sure you fucking keep that bracelet. As soon as you get to the compound, I’ll get you.”

“And if you don’t?”

He looks me in the eye. “I’ll fucking get you. I’m a lot of things, but I am a man of my word.”

“Won’t...won’t that make you look weak? Maybe we can take him out now.”

“I want it all. There’s—it doesn’t matter, but it’s not enough to kill him. I want him destroyed. I want him to know what it’s like to lose everything.”

I suck in a breath. “And then you’ll let me go?”

He smiles. Cold and dark. “Yes.”

I don’t know if I believe him, but right now, it’s all I have. If I do this, if I survive, then I have a chance at freedom, and that’s worth it, almost as much as watching my father burn, almost as much as me pouring on the fuel and lighting the match. All the spoils Nikolai talks about mean nothing to me, but my father’s death? That does.

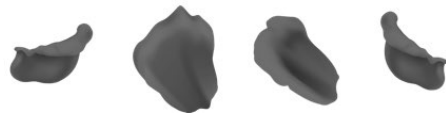
I hate this world of theirs, the violence, and I hate that I want to kill a man, hate that I've been sucked into it. Once it's done and if I survive, then I'll be free, even if I have to run, hide and start again. It'll be worth it, no matter the pain, to do that away from Nikolai and his world, far from my father's, or whatever is left of it after Nikolai burns it all to the ground.

"Give me the phone." I hold out my hand.

He shakes his head. "Not quite yet, Rose. In a bit. Tonight. I have plans that Finnegan will know about because he's fucking keeping tabs. I just wanted to make sure we're on the same page. Are we?"

"If I get my freedom, if I get to live my life away from all of this, then yes. We are."

He just smiles.



"You ready?"

I sit on the edge of the bed, hands clasped, looking at the sneakers on my feet with the little white edges of sock peeking out.

"Rose?"

Taking a breath, I glance up at Nikolai standing in the doorway. The soft light of the hall hits his back and he's almost a shadow shape, even as my lamp shines. I can see him perfectly. Maybe it's the way my heart thuds and squeezes that makes everything take on some kind of distorted hue.

"I called. He didn't pick up."

Nikolai sighs. “Yeah, I know.”

Of course, he does. He handed me the phone and stood outside the door when I did it. Even now, the word daddy sits like bitter poison on my lips, as does the rushed whispered tone I used. Now...now I'm all trussed up and ready to go, to my doom or to the rest of my life. If, of course, this man lets me go.

I'll have to run, first opportunity. The thought whispers and flutters in my veins. *No money, nothing.* I can do it. I know I can.

He slides his hands in his pockets, gaze on me. “I wish there was another way.”

“No.” I laugh and shake my head. “You don't.”

“Maybe once, I wouldn't have...cared, but you're not to blame for the sins of that fucking man. I see that now.”

Hope lurches into life inside me. He crosses the room and stands in front of me, and he crushes that hope dead.

“I'm not about to fucking let you go. Life doesn't work that way. You got the short end of the stick, so make it work.”

“I understand.”

He takes my face in one hand and something savage moves in him. “I fucking know you understand, but that's not what I'm asking. Are you going to make it work?”

“I want him gone, too,” I say. I mean it.

“Good.” His other hand curls around my arm as he hauls me up to my feet.

Nikolai releases me and rakes his gaze down over the white sundress I have on. I hate it, hate the pale-yellow

sneakers and the innocent simplicity of the strappy dress. It's not pink, and it's not that weird Victoriana style little girl, but it's young and sweet and along the lines of what my father just might pick.

I raise my chin.

“Hate it, don't you?”

“What would you like me to say, Nikolai? I love this dress?”

He shrugs like he doesn't give a damn and he probably doesn't. “The truth.”

“I hate it. Despise it.”

“Because it's too pretty? Too innocent?” He comes in close, the savagery a live thing in him calling to something in me. “Or because it's something Daddy would want you to wear?”

“How—” I stop.

He knows. They probably all swap tips on whatever fucked up fantasies they have, or what fantasies the man my hated father wants to sell me to. I'm not stupid. That's got to still be on the table. Nikolai would have said he'd taken Vitale out, not to reassure me, but to prove he could do whatever the fuck he wants.

Like force me to step into danger. Not force, but manipulate, and I went with it because it's the only chance I've got.

“No, of course you know they like this stuff.”

“Thing is, Rose, I think you look too fucking untouched. We need to do something about that.”

My breath catches. “A goodbye fuck?”

His fingers come up again and move gently across my lips, in direct opposition to the violence in his face. “A fuck, Rose.”

He drops his hand, sliding it down my body and my breath flutters, blood heats, as he grabs the hem and rips.

I gasp at the sound, at the rough touch of his hands at my waist. He pulls it up, bunching it. “Let’s get rid of those panties.”

He rips at those two, and the simple cotton hisses and cuts into my thigh a moment before they hang loose from where he’s almost torn them off me. My hands bunch as he pushes his fingers into me. He smiles.

I’m wet. Why does he affect me like this? I’m wet and I moan.

“I’m not done.” His words slide against my ear as he pulls out of me, ripping at the top of the dress, enough to break a strap, enough to jerk my body, enough to rip the bodice.

Every harsh thing makes my blood start to boil and my juices flow.

“I’m going to fuck you so hard, you won’t see straight. I’m going to fuck you so hard you’ll be dripping my cum when you see him. You’ll smell of me. Sweet Rose, I’m going to destroy your pretty little cunt so the only man you ache for, the only man you’re made for, is me.”

He starts to bite my throat, his fingers back at my pussy. Nikolai slams his fingers into me, and I shake with each entry. Pleasure is quick and throbbing and wanting to spill. I know he can feel the swift rise of my orgasm because he pulls out and pushes me back. I stumble, backs of my legs hitting the bed.

His eyes glitter. I growl. He grins low.

Then I come at him. Nikolai's arm hooks about my waist as his mouth comes down on mine so hard, it hurts. I pull at his hair and he turns, slamming me into the wall. He doesn't stop kissing me, doesn't stop mauling me, and I'm burning. Needing. I attack him back. It's the only word I have for it. Attack. We go at each other, kissing, biting, and then he lifts me. I wrap my legs around his waist, the thick head of his cock at my entrance.

He pushes in. All the way home.

Yes.

This.

Right here.

This is what I want.

Chapter 24



Nikolai

I want to break things. I need to mark her. Sending her off is fucked up, I know, but it's the only way.

I slam into her tight, hot cunt. She's so fucking wet. Rose is always wet for me. As I fuck her hard and violent against the wall, she comes on me, so hard it almost sets me off, but I'm not letting her go with one orgasm. I'm going to utterly destroy her, push her limits.

I can't kill her, I can't keep her, but I can ruin her. No man will ever fucking even *register* in her orbit compared to me. It's sick, I know, but I don't care. I'll get her back, and when it's time to release her, she'll only think of me, this, and how we're fucking *made* for each other.

Because she is. Sharp edged, full of thorns, and soft petals, full of strength and softness and a violent need for this, she's made for me. This isn't the sweet thing I took. This creature is wild, wants pain, pleasure, violence, the extremes of sex.

She's moaning and crying and hissing words at me. Every time I bottom out in her, hitting her hard, she shouts at me. Abuse, taunts, demands. She pleads and cajoles. She threatens. She does everything she can for more, and I give it to her. I'm

with her. I want more, I want this so far over the edge, we're in a different fucking dimension.

"Take that, Rose. Fucking take my cock. I'm going to destroy you like you want."

"Yes. Yes. Do it. Do it. More. Do it, fuck me. Ruin me, you sick bastard." She's spilling out words. "Is that all you've got, you dick? Fuck me harder! Make it hurt so good. *Nikolai*. Do it. *Harder*. Faster. *Rougher*. Give me what you promised!"

She spasms again around me, gripping me fucking hard with those tight, slick walls. She keeps riding me as I continue to slam into her hole.

Her hands are against my scalp, pulling at my hair, and I growl and bite her so hard, she yelps. Rose pushes her throat further against my mouth. "More, please, more." I suck that spot and bite again.

I turn and pull her from me to throw her on the bed. I don't give her time to move. I'm on her so fucking fast, ripping her legs open wide as I slam into her again. I hammer at her, sucking and biting her tits through the dress, the material hissing like music as it rips some more. Then I pull out again, right as she starts to shake and come.

"You want me to fucking destroy you, Rose? You want it so hard the entire fucking world will know just how dirty you are? Just how good you are? Just how fucking filthy and perfect you are? Exactly how much you crave me? Crave my cock?"

"Yes..."

I flip her and pull her ass up, plunging deep into her from behind.

“Oooh my God!” she pants, growls. “You love this. You beautiful, sick, depraved—Oh! More, more, please. More.”

I give her what she wants. I tangle my hand in her hair and pull hard as I slam into her, balls deep. I’m struggling to hold back.

She gasps. “You ass. You crave me, too.”

“Yes. Rose. I fucking need this cunt. Divinity. Filthy divinity dressed up in pretty innocence. *Fuck.*”

She comes again, and she moans low, her ass coming at me as she works me through the contractions and the shaking of her body. She slams down on my cock as I thrust up. It’s not enough. I need more.

I haul her up and off me, hand in her hair as I pick her up and march her into the bathroom, impaling her to the hilt as I go. She grips me hard, her face glorious in its savage, angry, lust-filled twist. She bounces, hard, all the fucking way down, all the fucking way up.

I dump her on the edge of the vanity and, still drilling her, lift her legs to my shoulders. Christ, she can bend. Like this, I have utter control, and I take it with gusto, watching as my cock ploughs in and out of her. It’s a sight I need, a sight I’ll never forget. How she splits open for me, stretched around my big cock. How her lips are swollen, so fucking slick and red. How her clit begs for attention.

She grabs my arms, and her nails dig in. Rose tilts to give me more access, to get me even deeper. It’s the only movement she has, and she fucking uses it.

“Harder, Nikolai. Goddamn it. Make it *hurt.*”

She’s going to come again, and her angry, aggressive lust is beyond what I ever dreamed. It’s perfection. It’s my match

and it drives me fucking insane. She's so turned on by this savage mating, I can't hold back.

As she starts to come, legs, cunt, stomach and shoulders all shaking and twitching, I slam hard and push down on her clit with my thumb. She screams so loud, her contractions on my cock are like a hard belt around my neck.

I come just as hard, twitching, shaking, my orgasm violent and intense as I flood into her, holding my pulsing, spurting cock deep as I pump my seed into her tight depths.

The pleasure is so intense, I sway. After, I can't move. One of her legs is on my shoulder, her other hanging down, and she's panting, harsh and erratic, her head back, eyes closed. On her face—if I live forever, I'll never forget it—sits the dreamiest, most satiated smile I've ever seen.

My heart lurches sideways and I don't want to move. I don't want to take the next step in the plan. I want to stay here, buried in the bliss that is her cunt. I want to stay surrounded by her heat, the electric buzz of her, the softness, along with the memory of the nastiest, sweetest words a man's ever fucking heard. I want to take her and wrap her up and strip her down and fuck her slow and gentle and destroy her that way.

That's not happening. I'm not interested in that route. I can't ever be. I have plans, things to do.

Slowly, I pull out of her and tuck my deflating prick away, doing up the zip of my trousers. The dress is ruined, stained, mussed. Her panties...well, that was just for me, the destroying of them. I take them and tie the ripped ends. I'm not planning on leaving her there too long, just enough for Derek to lead me to his compound.

That's it.

Then I'll fuck her every which way. I'm sure after the revenge, I'll be over her and she can go. My stomach clenches at that thought. She's coming into her own, I realize as she raises her head and stays like that, dripping the two of us from her cunt, her eyes decidedly unashamed, her eyes definitely wanting more.

I look at her as she slowly raises her head as she blinks, the slight haze of post-sex bliss beginning to clear. I gently pull her leg down and scoop her up, carrying her into the bedroom where I set her down and kiss her softly.

It's a gentle kiss, one that could be mistaken as caring, one that feels dangerously close to it. I don't have that capacity, but oh, is she kissable. A woman I want to spend hours kissing. She's so sweet, like morning roses. She still tastes of that innocence I think's just part of her. For all the things I need to do, I want to just spend some time right now kissing her. Rose, it seems, wants that too, as she moans and sighs and sways unsteadily into me.

It's pure addiction. She's pure addiction, and I want to indulge, just a little longer, but I can't, and I ease her back.

From her sex-mussed hair to the flush of her cheeks, to the bruised and swollen mouth, that's enough to say to anyone she just had sex. Take in the rest? The blush on the tops of her breasts, the big hickey forming on her throat, the rips and wrinkles and cum stains on her dress, the line of glistening moisture running down her leg? She looks absolutely and deliciously destroyed.

I smile as I straighten her clothes, making sure that even with the tears, she's covered in all strategic places. She smiles back, her eyes still soft. I slide a gentle hand over her cheek before dropping it and stepping back.

“There, now you look freshly fucked. It’s a good look. He’s going to want to lock you away.”

Her smile fades like I said the wrong thing, and a flash of darkness like pain comes to her eyes and she looks away, biting her lip. I’ve hurt her and I didn’t mean to. I don’t know why I care, but right now, I do. It was a compliment, to her and her skill and...

Fuck, I need her to look dreamy, dazed, fucked, not hurt. And...I... Shit. “Rose—”

A loud knocking on the bedroom door stops my words in their tracks. “Hey, Niko,” Rush calls out. “Move it. We’re waiting. Finnegan’s not there yet, so we gotta move. Finish doing...what you’re doing and let’s get this started.”

I smooth a hand down over my tie, straightening it. I should shower, but I really don’t have time for a change of clothes, and...fuck it. I’m making a short appearance somewhere and some of my men will track her from the compound to wherever Finnegan takes her.

“You can drive, right?”

Her mouth doesn’t tremble. Her lips set in a line and her eyes are hard, though I can still see the darkness there. “Since I was thirteen. Apparently, it’s a skill every kid who’s on the run and doesn’t know it has in their arsenal.”

I raise a brow at the bite in her voice.

“My uncle—you remember him from when you shot him? He taught me.”

I narrow my eyes but ignore the snap and cold-edged taunt. “Bracelet on?”

Her eyes narrow. “Yes.”

“Let’s get this show on the fucking road.”

I lead her down the stairs, ignoring the expression on my cousin’s face when he sees us in the foyer. He’s aware what was happening. I’m pretty fucking sure everyone in a ten-mile radius knows what was happening. His face, however, is saying he didn’t expect it to be like that.

“You thought we were having fucking tea, Rush?” I mutter as we pass him.

In the yard, three cars are ready to go. There’s the one with a small team of my guys, a basic black car Rose will ‘steal’ from me, and the one with Rush. I don’t particularly want him on this, but apart from Tony, he’s my most trusted, and Tony is already tucked away near the compound, ready to roll.

Opening the driver’s door of the basic black car, I gesture her in. There’s a twinge of something uneasy deep in my guts as I round to the passenger seat. After the first car peels away, I hand Rose the keys. She takes them in a snatch of a movement that makes me want to haul her back inside and spank her.

Or maybe, I just want to drag her into the house once more.

The plan is risky, but I keep that to myself. “I’ll give you directions, Rose, and we’ll go over what you’ll say. Something like you can’t do this with me. You feel used. Whatever works. Point is, you call him again because you stole a phone from me when you dropped me off. I’m giving you some freedom and you’re taking it and running. To him because you think he’ll keep you safe from me.”

She nods, breathes, then shifts and looks at me. “If I keep running?”

There it is. The spike. The surge of unease. She's thinking it, of course she is. It wouldn't be Rose. Newly minted, thorny Rose is experimenting with shattering boundaries, with testing her own limits. My limits.

She wants to fucking run. I'm placing my bets that she wants her father punished more.

Still... I coil a strand of her thick, soft hair in my fingers as I murmur the directions to her. We drive to the place I told her to, and when she parks, I make her go to Finnegan's. I have them on a piece of paper I made her write out, too. For my part? There's a small meeting in the townhouse across the street I'm 'attending,' and Rush is no doubt waiting for me out back.

"If you run," I say, "I'll find you. I'll make you pay, and you will not like the consequences. This is not a threat. This is not sexual. This is a promise. I'm a man who keeps his word. Remember that. Good words. Bad words. I keep them. You'll suffer."

She stiffens, her chin jutting slightly as her fingers tighten on the wheel. "So much," she mutters, "for choice."

"This isn't a fucking democracy. I'm the fucking ruler and you do what I fucking say if you want to live."

"And then?"

And then I take you home and fuck you senseless over and over until I reach the point that I no longer want you. "Stick to the plan, and then it'll be all over."

"You won't want me anymore." Her voice is tight and small and I make a noncommittal noise. She can take that as she wants, run with it, anything to make her do what I need her to do.

“Rose,” I say softly as she sits, hands still on the wheel. She doesn’t look at me. She’s angry, lonely, lost, scared, and... “My Rose, I’ll be there, watching. We do our parts and he’s gone. I’ll let you pull the trigger, wield the knife, whatever you want to do to bring him pain before he dies.”

She nods, and then looks at me. Rose looks like what she is: a little too young, a little too sweet, a woman born of this life who hates it. The fire isn’t in her gaze like I thought. It’s cold and angry, yet there’s a distance, too.

I fucking hate that. It’s like she smells of me, is what she is, freshly fucked by me, and yet I’ve never felt further from her. I hate it.

I want to hate her, but I don’t. We’ve come too far for that. What I feel is complicated. Desire. Savage need. Obsession. Maybe a strange urge to protect.

I pull her close and for a moment, she resists, but then she flows into me. I take her mouth in a deep kiss that turns desperate, heated, tinged with bitterness and regret. When I come up for air, we’re both panting, and I hand her the burner.

“Call. Smash it. Follow the directions and go in. You won’t see me, but I’ll watch, keep you safe.” Then, I get out of the car and don’t look back.

The roar of the engine tears at something in me, and I cross the street into the townhouse. I head out to the back where Rush waits in an alley. He looks at me as his hands squeeze and release the wheel. Yeah, my cousin looks at me like I’m trying to torture a kitten.

“She’ll be fine,” I say, the words not sounding right.

Rush nods. “So we wait until we know she’s there—”

“Get out.” My words come from nowhere and everywhere at once.

Rush stops talking and faces me in the dark interior of the car. “What?”

“Get. Out.” I open the passenger door and round the car, pulling him out from the driver’s seat. “Have you gone mad?”

“No. I’m going after her.”

“Niko—”

“Now. Tell the other team to hold off, position a little further out.” I slide into the car, check my gun. “I’m not doing anything stupid, but I don’t want her alone. Too many people draw the wrong attention. I’m going after her.”

“Nikolai.”

“I’ll call.” I slam the door and turn the key in the ignition, taking off after Rose. I’m not being stupid, not being rash, but I need to have eyes on her, be close in case of trouble.

Besides, I might have a better chance without my army with me. Rose is going to live through this. I’m bringing Finnegan down. I’m taking everything and Rose is going to survive.

After all, I gave her my word.

Chapter 25



Rosalind

The word *run* keeps reverberating in my head as I grip the wheel like it's my only lifeline. If I just keep driving, maybe I can get away. It's a beautiful thought, freeing. Just drive and not look back.

I glance at the gas tank. It's about a fifth full, but I could just keep going until even the fumes run out, toss the damn bracelet and drive. If there's one skill I have, it's the ability to adapt and go. I'm good at hiding, too. Keeping my head down. Playing games. I know how to survive. Everything in my life led me to making it through Nikolai's imprisonment. It got me through my father's. I know how to bide time, to wait until an opportunity presents itself. After all, I watched Mom do it my entire life.

Maybe I didn't know I was picking that stuff up when we left in the middle of the night, or when she'd subtly change when she caught sight of a stranger, how she'd wait and take me shopping and just drive.

She never used cards. I swallow, pain lancing me. Even my not-uncle did the same. Cash over cards.

There's cash in the apartment, hidden, if I can make it there, or use the phone Nikolai gave me. I could call the cops,

but they'll be on his payroll, or worse, on my fathers. I know not all of them, but there's an innate thing from mom that's built in where we never trust authorities. She didn't say that, but when a boyfriend stole from her, she never reported it. She packed us up in the middle of the night and left.

So...what about Genius? After the warning from Nikolai, I can't make her go to my place, not if it's been watched. I don't want her in danger. Oh, hell. I don't even have a driver's license. I can drive, but I never got one. Now I know why. I—

Breathe.

The thoughts keep tumbling in my head. Okay, so I just keep going, keep driving until something happens. Nikolai gave me a car and— Shit. He gave me a car. How the hell do I know if it's got a tracker? If someone's following?

I glance in the mirror, catching a glimpse of a black SUV, the kind all the mafia and soccer moms use. There's also a sleek black car about two behind me.

My breath hurts my lungs and my stomach contracts. Nikolai can rock my world and melt me and turn me on so much that I crave him. I don't even know what it is. It can't be love. Love doesn't have spikes and knives and make you bleed. Lust? Some kind of fucked up thing in me?

Am I made wrong? Is the fact that Derek Finnegan is my father something that's made me twisted and poison and not a normal person? Is that tainted blood the reason I need and want and crave Nikolai? The reason I wish he wanted me as his. An equal, not property. Equal like...love.

He'd never want me the way I'd want him. I know that. For all that he can make me melt and sigh and orgasm, he can threaten. He's a man of his word, just like he said.

Maybe...I grip the wheel tight and blink back the burning blur of tears in my eyes that I won't let fall as a lump sticks hard in my throat. Maybe I'm just so tainted and wrong that not even Nikolai could care for me.

That's not even the problem. My problem is what do I do now. If I run now, my father knows I'm alive, so that's two monsters after me.

I just don't know if Nikolai is the better monster or the worst. Better in the way that I have a chance to live and taste freedom after all this, but maybe he's the absolute worst for my soul? Let a beautiful, hard, dangerous and devastating monster like Nikolai in, and I think he might destroy my soul.

“Stop it, Rosalind. Stop.”

It's great advice. I wish I could take it, just like I wish I could drive on, but I can't. Nikolai will come for me. My father, too, and...I want my father dead and gone. I want him to suffer.

Maybe I'm a monster, too.

I pull up near that hated place I was taken. The only reason I know it's the right place is the gate and the high stone wall. Well, it's also the address on the piece of paper Nikolai gave me.

The black SUV passes, but I don't see the other car. For a while, I sit there, unmoving.

I bite down on my lip and give in to the trembling, and the tiny, unwanted thrill from that good pain of my bite because I can feel where Nikolai bruised me in those brutal, violent kisses I demanded.

What I need to do is stick to the plan and then run, or take my freedom if Nikolai sticks to his word.

Picking up the phone, I stare at the black mirrored screen. I...I don't think I can do this, call my father.

“He hurt your mom. He hurt you, tried to marry you to a horrible man...shit, maybe you are married to that vile man, Vitale...” It's the least of my worries, that thought. “Derek Finnegan killed Nikolai's parents, Rush's. He did something very bad to Sylvie, and he hurt me when I was little.”

Just like Nikolai said. Suddenly, a memory flares to life.

I'm...I don't know how old. Very young because everyone is huge. They're giants and it's all in bits and pieces, like blurred edged snapshots. It's close to the others I've had recently. Maybe it's the same, I don't know, but it's so visceral.

Mommy screaming. Mommy going down. Men shouting. Me attacking my horrible Daddy. And him. Hitting. Hurting. It hurts so bad. Blood. Nasty, horrible words. He tells me he's going to kill me. I try to hit again, and something snaps and pain is everywhere and I go down as a voice rises up. Someone steps forward.

He fights Daddy. Goes down and I...I don't remember anything more.

All I know is Derek Finnegan, the man who fathered me, tried to beat his little daughter to death. Did Nikolai lie and someone stepped in? Maybe I'm hoping that happened. I close my eyes. If someone did, Derek beat them, too. My fucking, evil father. He's the *true* monster.

That's why I'm not running. Not until he's gone. Not until he can't hurt another little girl. Not until he can't touch me ever again.

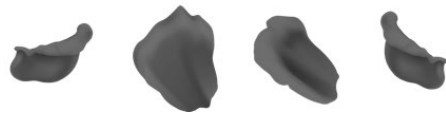
I'm shaking hard. Maybe I can fight him now, take his gun and kill him. Maybe when he gets here, I can rev the engine and run him down. It's not Nikolai's plan and he'll punish me—not in the good way I love—but if my father is gone, then surely...

Surely, it's worth it, but my father isn't going to walk. He'll be driven. He's big. Mean. Getting his gun is a pipe dream.

Watching him bleed out, though... it would be sweet, perfect revenge for mom, for me, maybe even for Nikolai and Rush and their losses. Surely, there's something I can use. The element of surprise might work.

I'm not stupid. I lack strength to do that. The only thing that seems to look like it could work is the original one. So, Nikolai's plan it is.

With a breath, I make the call. "D-Daddy, it's me. Thorne."



The gates are open when I run in, using every skill in my arsenal to act scared, look like I'm trying not to cry. It's not hard because I'm scared and trying not to cry, but I have to keep the anger, the rage, the hate from being seen.

It's more difficult than I imagined.

The phone's destroyed, car door open and key still in the ignition, just like Nikolai planned. I'm on the wide drive, looking around, trying to go for innocent panic.

Up ahead is the house. It's set back, way back from the road and neighbors. Combine that with the high stone wall...

No one will hear me scream in there.

I tremble. I don't want to go in the house, but I have to. I need to. I start for it.

If I had run from a man who held me prisoner, who broke me and used me, if I was a moron and thought I could come to this terrible man for salvation, I'd go for the house, for shelter, no matter what. Flinging wild glances around, I set my sights on it, like I've just made sure I wasn't followed, and I beeline for the entrance.

A car roars up and doors slam. In seconds, rough hands have me tight. Now the fear's utterly genuine, as are the tears swimming in my eyes.

"Whore. Knew you couldn't stay away." I look up. It's the man who injected me before the wedding. "Wanted some of us? Daddy's gonna be here soon. Pity we gotta keep our hands to ourselves. For now."

I swallow and it takes all I am not to rip free and run screaming. "D-Daddy wouldn't like that."

He pulls me up against me, copping a feel with his hand on my ass as he drags me in through the door. Other men are there, big and ugly, wearing suits, nasty guns on display like they're holding their dicks. Hysterical laughter sweeps me and I struggle to keep it down. Big guns, small pricks?

Get it together, Rose.

As I'm dragged deeper into the dark hall, a few hulking shapes with guns lurk in the shadows, and another vehicle pulls up outside behind me. There are voices, but they're muffled from the words of the shadowy men I pass.

"Tasty meat," says one.

A man adds, “Can’t wait to DP her.”

Another says, “Ass and cunt?”

“I’m thinking double cunt, double ass.” They laugh.

My stomach turns and I want to hurl. They all start in on running trains, on bats and cue sticks, on renting me out. On and on they go, each thing so nasty and depraved in the wrong ways that if I could run, I’d be dust.

The goon who’s got his hand roaming my ass, trying to slip fingers under my ruined panties to dip into my crack, who has my arm in a death grip, leans in and breathes stale cigarettes over me. “Finnegan promised you to me first, after he kills your lover. Your husband—unfortunately you gotta fucking go to him and his men first. So you’ll be worse for wear, but a hole’s nice and warm and you’re young, so I bet you’ll stay tight for me. Not for long, though, not when this lot all finish fucking you.”

He turns into a hall and drops the hand from my ass. “But,” he says, “don’t worry. I know a pretty fucking slut of a whore like you wants to be used. Maybe I’ll have cum rag tattooed on you. What about free access on your ass?”

He laughs, like he’s said something hilarious instead of impossibly ugly and wrong.

I fucking hate this man. I hate them all. I’m so ill from what he’s saying, I can barely walk, and the rage in me keeps spiking. In what world do they think they can say this to a woman? In what world, thugs or not, do they think they can do this? And...Oh. My. God.

Sylvie? Did...did they do these things to her? Not the tattoos because they sound like deliberate things to scare me,

but everything else? All the rape? Did they? What about others?

Mom? I retch.

He jerks me to face him. “Daddy won’t like it if you also stink of puke. Bad enough you stink like someone came on you. I bet it’s that fuck, Wilder. You’re in for a beating, girl.”

I add each and every man here to my kill list. I don’t need to know their names to recognize them. This one? I want to rip him apart with my bare hands.

I try and stay calm. This rage that consumes me is new and completely terrifying, and it’s seductive as hell. I want to dive into it. I want to soak this place in blood for what they want to do to women. Maybe, before I leave, Nikolai will help me.

Thank goodness I’m wearing the tracker. I—

“Bring her here,” comes the voice of my father.

I look up. We’re at the end of the hall, in a heavy wooded and leather-laden room, and he stands at the end. Like Nikolai, he’s in an impeccable, bespoke suit. Unlike Nikolai, it’s nothing but a costume that fails to give him the utterly dangerous air of my lover. I don’t mistake that for him being harmless. He is what he is and no veneer or urbane tailoring can hide it. Derek Finnegan is an ugly, rough and violent brute, the kind who would torture dogs, kittens, children, women. He’s the type of brute that enjoys it, without guilt, without compunction.

He’s evil.

I swallow down the burning, bitter bile. His mouth lifts in a sneer as he rests a hand against a stupidly ornate, heavy wooden desk.

“Well, cunt, you’re a disgusting little mess, aren’t you? Realized your lover only wanted to fuck you out of revenge for me? Had to come running back to Daddy?” He straightens, and there’s pure hate and disgust in his eyes.

He wants to hurt me. Badly. That prowls in him, beneath the skin. It takes everything I have not to spit at him, not to lunge for the paperweight of...is that Al Pacino or Robert De Niro?...and smash it into his head.

Instead, I hang my head and play the game. “I...he took me, Daddy, made me think he...I-loved me and he didn’t. I stole his phone and he let me drive him to a party, and instead of going home, I...I called you and came here.”

Gathering up all my nerve, I squeeze out a tear. One thing that having to do pageants have taught me is that perception is everything. If you give off cool and confident and you’re scared inside, no one sees that fear, just the confidence, so if I project the fear, then... “I’m sorry!”

“Thorne, if you weren’t still actually worth something to me, I’d throw you to my men to rape you into unconsciousness and let them keep you to do with what they wanted. As long as I don’t have to see your worthless face, I’d be happy. You stole money from me. Power. But you came home, so you can work your fucking whore ass off to make it up to me.”

“Daddy, please.” I hate that word. Calling him that is so vile, I need to wash out my mouth. Instead, I look at him, pleading, holding out my hands, and I make my chin wobble like I’m about to lose it. “I’m sorry.”

“Stupid little bitch, aren’t you?” He shakes his head. He pulls out a cigar from a box on the desk and sniffs it, then slides it into the breast pocket of his jacket. “Just like your fucking mother. Sold yourself for ass, and he doesn’t even

want you.” He shakes his head and laughs. “I know Wilder fucked her. Gave her money for it, too.”

I struggle to breathe and drop my gaze. “He kidnapped me. I didn’t choose any of this.” It isn’t a lie. I didn’t. God, did Nikolai and my mother...? I...I can’t believe that. Can I?

“I didn’t choose him,” I say. “I didn’t choose imprisonment or marriage or you, but you’re all—”

He punches me in the face, hard. Pain bursts like colored stars behind my eyes as blood soaks my face, and I go down. I stay there, dazed, wiping at my face, crying for real from the pain and shock. He stands above me face, twisted into ugly violence and hate.

“Fucking ugly little cunt. You’re nothing but a useless whore. Nothing but a receptacle for me to sell and trade. You disgust me and now...” He drags me up by the hair and punches me in the stomach. I spray blood on him. “You’ve made me damage the merchandise, a little more than I wanted.”

He slaps my face, pinches my nose, and I howl. “Not broken. Got your ugly little mouth. Probably had it wrapped about Wilder’s little dick, did you? You stink like sex.”

I can’t speak. I can’t move. A numbness invades my bones. I need...I need Nikolai, and he isn’t here.

My father bares his teeth. “You think he cares? He doesn’t. He wants to try and hurt me. That’s why he fucked you.”

“No—”

“Yes.” He looks at me with pure hate. “Time to go get ready, stupid cunt.” He wraps his hand hard in my hair and brings my head down hard, slamming it on the edge of the

table. The room spins and my vision doubles and then he does it again.

Everything goes black.

Chapter 26



Nikolai

“**T**ell them to hold,” I say to Tony over the speaker phone.

I parked one street over from Hawke’s Hollow. In the shade of a tree, near the road, where, with my binoculars, I can see activity. Two vans and then a black car, one I know belongs to that fuck Derek.

My Rose went in twenty minutes ago, and I can’t see past the heavy iron gate. Tony’s called because a van and the car are just pulling out, the second van close behind.

They’re all too close, so I don’t know which vehicle Rose is in, and my heart’s thumping fast and hard in my chest, guts in knots.

Shit. The three vehicles part at the other end of the street. Derek’s car going one way, the other two in the opposite direction, toward my territory.

In the top corner of my phone, the GPS is on the move. I set down the binoculars.

“What do you want to do, Boss?”

She’s not in the car. She’s in one of the vans. Logic says since Derek’s car is on the move, to follow that, but...

Fuck it.

“Follow the car, I’ll take the others.”

“Nik—Boss?”

I start the engine and throw the car into gear, letting them pull ahead before I follow the GPS. “I’m following. I want to see where they’re headed, but we need eyes on the car now,” I say. “Call you later.”

I hang up. Maybe this is stupid, but I don’t want to let her out of my sight, so to speak. Instinct tells me Finnegan’s not about to just leave her behind. He wants to hurt me and he thinks he can do it with her. He also wants to finish that fucking wedding to get whatever connection Vitale Lugo promised.

He can’t hurt me, of course. There’s nothing left and he not getting Rush, who is well fucking trained. Rose is... Rose... I swallow and it’s like broken glass is in my throat.

If he fucking hurts Rose again, I’ll make him wish he’d never been born. Touch her and I’ll fucking pull out his fingernails and cut off his fingers. Hurt her and the things I’ll have done to him before I start his torture and long road to death will make what he did to my aunt and Sylvie look like walks in the park on a fucking Sunday.

No one hurts Rose. No one.

I want to put my foot down and catch them up, get her now, rethink this plan. Oh, I still want everything, but without Rose on the table. I grit my teeth. Rose is integral and that fact rips into me.

In the distance comes the familiar wail of sirens and for a moment, I’m hoping Finnegan wrapped his car around a tree. No. I don’t. He needs to suffer.

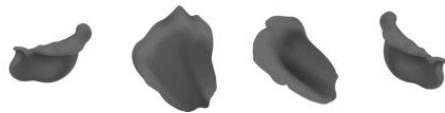
My phone rings and I punch answer. “What?”

“Lost him, boss. There’s an accident and he’s on the other side.” Tony’s voice is grim.

I punch the steering wheel because realization is dawning on me about where the van is going. Long forgotten Finnegan property, right on the edge of mine. Fuck. Shit. Fuck.

“Send anyone we have to keep a look out for him. I’ll be in touch.”

“Boss we can meet you.” He pauses. “Oh, shit.” He’s seen the GPS, too.



The house, old, set back, seemingly empty, isn’t. It’s private and it’s well fortified. It’s where Finnegan lived and ruled his small patch before he began moving in on others, amassing enemies and bodies and power. It’s where he lived with Steph and baby Thorne. My Rose.

I’ve been there. I saw him beat Steph unconscious because he could because he got off on it because she probably accidentally smiled at someone without any meaning behind it. It’s where my uncle decided to extract himself from any entanglements with Finnegan. It’s where I helped sign a bunch of death warrants. It’s where he nearly killed his little daughter because no one had the balls to step up and take the brunt.

No one—

I stop. I’m not reliving events that can’t be changed or going down the terrible paths those events led to. It is what it is and fucking Finnegan will die, *after* I get everything.

This place isn't his secret compound, but it's always been well fortified, the kind of place he can keep an army hidden, where he has the element of surprise. It's a great holdover to keep my Rose until he moves her to his compound.

The two SUVs are there, but not Derek's car. I'm going to sit here all fucking night and tomorrow until they come out. I'm—My fucking phone rings again. Rush.

“Dude, Niko. Where are you?”

“What's up?”

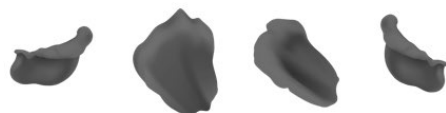
“I sent Tony to you.” There's a little nervous note in his voice. I'm in a mood and he overstepped, and the little fuck won't quit calling me Niko.

I pull out my gun and load and reload it, just for something to do. “One, it's Nikolai. Two, I give orders. Three, I asked you a fucking question.”

He's silent a moment and there are voices in the background. “Nikolai, I know. I'm gonna answer you, dude. Right now. I sent Tony because I need you here.”

“What you need you don't always get,” I say in my most dangerous tone.

He lets out a noisy sigh. “Tony will contact you, and you've got the GPS if something happens. But you're gonna want to hear this. The guy I had on the inside? He's here. He wants to talk. He's got information.”



When I get in, I go straight upstairs and grab the world's quickest shower, throwing on my black jeans, a t-shirt, and a

long black sweater. Then, I head back down. Whoever it is can wait. The information can wait until I'm ready to roll. If I have to go in, I need to be ready. I need to be dressed the part. I have a Kevlar vest and I take that, along with my holster, clips, rounds, and a selection of guns.

They're in my office, waiting. I don't look at one person while I dump my crap on the desk. I take a breath, put on my nastiest game face, and turn. Narrowing my eyes, I swing my gaze from the older man to my cousin and back again. This is the man Rose recognized.

"Is there a reason why I shouldn't kill you right now? You touched Rose."

The man pales a little. He's big, mean, a face of stone and about as much expression, but there's a touch of fear.

"Nikolai," Rush says. "This is Rafael—Rafe—Garcia."

"Again, tell me why I shouldn't fucking put you in the ground."

The man nods. "Do what you want to me, but take the information I have first, Mr. Wilder."

I don't want to. I want to beat his face into pulp. So many violent urges are erupting in me. I'm not saying I'm a peace-loving man, but violence is something best handed out when it's most impactful. Right now, I'm not fucking interested in levelheaded, impactful or best. I want to destroy.

It's Rose. She makes me fucking weak. She stole something from me and I miss whatever it is. I just don't know what it is and I hate it. The sooner I fucking get her back, the sooner I never have to see her again.

"And you?" I swing to Rush. "You fucking dare bring Finnegan's filth in here? He fucking touched Rose."

“On orders. I didn’t enjoy it.”

I swing back to this Rafe. “Not good enough for you?”

“Nikolai, listen—”

“And,” I say, “why are all these other people in here?” I stab a finger at Priestly, one at someone else who’s name I fucking forgot. “Go do your fucking jobs. Now.” I’m aware I’m being a snarling beast and that I need to get it together. “You? Garcia? Fucking talk. Fucking make it worth my while or I’ll take one of my guns and feed it to you.”

The guy nods. His expression doesn’t change but he gets a little paler. “There’s video from when Finnegan had her. He only has his office on feed and recorded. He likes to keep track of deals, punishments, other...things he does there.”

“Here.” Rush pulls over my computer and inserts a thumb drive, and then he pulls up the link and hits play.

It’s a punch right to my solar plexus as Rose appears. Frightened. Dressed...I don’t even know what the fuck he has on her. Finnegan says nasty shit to her. She sits on that fat fuck’s knee, and he sticks his hand under her dress and then Finnegan barks out something about that’s my daughter and then—

I turn it off.

“Stop this sick shit, Rush. Jesus. Fuck.”

Rush goes red, swallows. “There’s more. Rafe said Finnegan did have her room set up for a day, but decided against it.”

I don’t want to see, and I can’t look away. I shove Rush and play the other one. She’s in some kind of small room that looks like the nightmare version of a six-year-old’s dream. It’s

just so... pink. I listen and watch, grit my teeth as the fucker standing here dresses her. He looks away, looks like he doesn't want to, and does it so impersonally that it's quite possibly the only reason he lives right now.

I'm real fucking close to picking up a gun and killing him.

I fast forward until Finnegan comes in. He says sick, ugly words to her and something that feels hot and a little like shame burns the back of my neck and ears. I didn't say those things to her, but yeah, I haven't been nice.

It's not my job to be nice to her, though, not when I got her. Now, I might like her enough to let her live, even if she wasn't in my blood, even if I didn't crave every inch of her. My blood turns cold as Finnegan uses her as a punching bag and... My finger shakes as I turn it off.

I don't turn. It's all overlaid in my head with the little girl. Him hurting her. Him hurting my Rose. Death is too good and the only answer for a creature like Finnegan. I want to burn him from the feet up.

Taking in a slow, measured breath, I stare at the now blank screen. "Tell me why," I say in the softest tones, "I shouldn't gut you and kill you slowly?"

There are men who'd pay for this sick shit, men who'd rub one or ten out to Rose being beaten, Rose being made to expose herself to that fat man. Men who'd love to watch them rape her and abuse her. I think, I'd be watching that if she wasn't Finnegan's kid. I think, I bet there's a recording of all the fucked-up shit done to Sylvie.

I know this is the ultimate fate in store for Rose, even though I'm getting her out. I sent her back. To that.

“Before you answer, Garcia. My maid. Did you join in the fun on that? Be very careful in your response, and be honest. Because if I discover you’ve lied, nothing can save you.”

“I don’t care if you kill me, and I didn’t touch your maid. It’s not my thing.”

I laugh. “And yet you work for Finnegan.”

“Money, and...” I don’t need to turn to see the look exchanged with my dumb fuck of a cousin. I can feel it. “He took my kid. She’s five. Collateral until I prove my worth. I didn’t do my homework when I came here from Boston. Worked an outfit that had ties to Finnegan. Rush here has her somewhere. That’s all I want. Protect my kid.”

“A bargaining chip?” I slip on my sweater and pull Kevlar over the top and secure it. Then I put on my holder and start selecting which weapons I want.

“No. I’m asking. You’re not him.”

“I’m not a fucking saint, or a babysitter club, Garcia.”

“Niko,” says Rush.

“Nikolai.” I start loading the weapons. “What do you have for me, Garcia?”

“The place he’s taken her, it’s a fortress.”

“No shit. I know it.”

“It’s a trap to see if you come.” I really don’t care right now. He fucking hurt my Rose. “But he has a lot of stuff there you probably want. It’s his hold over in his move to his new compound. He wants a war, but I have codes, both to the alarms and the video feeds.” Garcia finishes talking and I turn.

“I’ll need those. I need everything and everything you have on the new compound.”

The man nods and Rush sends me an uneasy look. I give him a warning glance, one he doesn’t heed.

“We’ll sit tight and wait until he moves her there. Then we’ll go in,” Rush says. “She’ll be fine. She’s his daughter, so don’t worry—”

“I’m not worried,” I snap. “I don’t give a shit about Rose, and you know it. This isn’t about her. She’s a means to a fucking end. This is pure revenge for your parents, for mine, to take back territory Finnegan stole. It’s to take it all. I don’t care what happens to her after she leads us to the compound.”

Rush eyes me like he wants to call me out, but even he knows not to push my limits. I’m having a hard time keeping the rage to somewhere just below Armageddon.

“Do you know where it is?”

The stone face doesn’t change expressions, but his eyes do. They hold regret. “No. Things were all moved to this place and a trusted, very trusted, select group are taking care of the final steps.”

Fuck. I’m going to have to leave Rose in there, but I’m not leaving her without me nearby. I have to be there. I have to be ready. First sign of anything and I need to act. There are variables I don’t want to risk. What if she loses the bracelet or Finnegan takes it? It isn’t that I care. I just promised I’d keep her alive. And...I can’t stand this emptiness she’s left. I fucking despise the turmoil her in danger sets off in me.

Fuck Rose. Fuck everything.

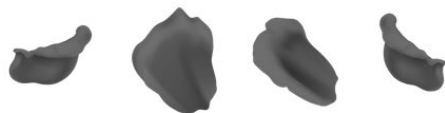
“You, Garcia, you can live for now. Can I watch the feed from anything?”

“Yeah.” He nods and holds out a piece of paper. “I know these by heart. It’s a feed that runs through a dark web site, one that stays incognito so Finnegan can log on from wherever. He has places in this one wired, including the front door, but he can turn them off remotely.”

Which means I can. “All that there?” The guy nods. “The alarm codes?”

“Yeah.”

I snatch the paper and finish weaponizing myself. With that, I stride out, not caring if anyone follows me.



When I arrive at the house, the gates are open. I stay parked in the shadows, a gun at the ready, memorizing the alarm codes and watching the feed.

I know this place, know the best ways in, and that isn’t through the front gate or the back of the property. There’s a long-forgotten little side gate that’s low enough, overgrown, a relic from the garden area that Steph liked. Derek never went there. Soft family shit wasn’t his style.

Nothing happens for a long ass time, and I’m seething, unable to sit still, like I need to do something. In my head, I go over where he’d have people. One at the side entrance. The gates are open, so he’ll have a couple in that guard house and on the doors to the house. That’ll mean a guard or two near the kitchens that lead out to the yard and gardens. Obviously at the front door, but if the gate is like that, just one. More inside.

Shit.

I'm not planning on going in yet. I'm not planning anything, am I? What I'm—

Then she's there, on the feed on my phone.

I can't breathe. Her face is a mess. Blood. Swollen, bruises. She's limping. Then her fuck of an abuser steps in.

Everything in me goes utterly cold. She lifts her face to him and even in that mess, she's heartbreakingly beautiful. He can never take that from my girl. Her eyes glitter with the thorns and claws and hate as she says something.

If I can make it, I'll get golden. Derek or Rose will lead me to the stronghold, and I'll have everything. It's there. I can taste it. And—

He punches her. Then again. She doubles and goes down, and he brings his foot up, and something in my snaps.

His face. I've seen that before. He's going to kill her or at least try and do a good job of it. He's going to hurt her, break her. It's like I've touched a live wire with a hundred volts running through it. For a moment, everything goes horribly numb and shocked. Then the rage just takes over, reddens my vision. Switching the phone to silent, I pocket it. I take the gun. I'm out of the car fast, running.

I can't let this happen. I can't. Not my sweet Rose. Not to her. I tried once and this time, I'm going to do it. While the fury rages, I understand with perfect clarity what I'm doing. I'm going to fuck up everything, lose everything I'm close to having. It's not just revenge. I can't lose her. If I do, I lose a vital part of myself.

I don't understand it. It makes no sense, but it's true. I might die, but I'm going to take out everyone I can along the way, and I know all the hiding places.

With the white-hot rage, I twist it into something else, and I move, silent, sure, to that hidden gate. It takes me a minute to scale and leap over, and I land light on my feet.

There, ahead, is a man. I make my way to him and grab him about the neck, choking him with my arm. As he struggles, I shoot point blank in his chest. Before he can drop, I land one in his head. Crouching over him, I wait, but no one comes, so I continue, darting from shadow to shadow, moving from place to place.

At the kitchens, I take down two men. Chest shot. Head. There's another ahead, and I take him too. Making my way to the front door, the code there in my head, I take out every fucker placed strategically. They go down dead without a sound. I reload, moving to the next. There are more here than I thought, but not as many as expected.

Derek is nothing if not a coward, but I know him. He has Rose. That and my rage give me the advantage to do what it takes to get in and get her out. When a weapon and rounds are done, I pull out the next gun, make sure the silencer is in place, and continue.

I need to get her. I need to. There's no option and anyone in my way dies. That simple.

At the door, I'm punching in the code when someone grabs me, and we both pull off a round. He drops and I stagger from the hit of pain to the chest, like someone stomped on it with an anvil. I don't let it stop me. I can't. I shoot him twice more because his body is there. I turn, breathing difficult, as I punch in the code. It works and the light goes green. Slipping inside, I reload.

I don't see anyone or hear them. My heart thuds painfully against my bruised ribs as I check each room. It's too quiet.

Oh, God. If I left it too late, if Rose is gone, I—Hear her voice.

“Please,” she says. “No...”

Chapter 27



Rosalind

My eye is swelling, and every breath is pain. I thought my father was going to kill me when he punched me again and I went down. He raised his foot and changed his mind.

For now.

He laughs and leans on the desk. I don't know if we're in the same place or a different one. It's a different room, and I was blacked out for...I don't know how long. When I came to, my vision shifted and blurred, like I was on an out of focus ocean. I think... I think he drugged me again because it's that feeling in me, the disorientation after the drug wears off. Of course, he's also been using me as his own personal punching bag, so who knows.

You better get it together Roz.

This is a big room with sofas and books. The desk is, I think, one of those old-fashioned ones for writing letters. It's like woman had a hand in decorating this place. There's also something faintly familiar, but that could be concussion. He hit my head against that other desk really hard, and my head pounds.

Concussion and the drugs.

“Please, no?” he says mimicking me. “You don’t want to see your dear husband? He’s waiting and he doesn’t mind a mess of a slut. That saves him some trouble. I’ll call it a belated wedding gift. He’ll probably add to it, but what can you do, Thorne? I’m sure when he’s fucking you and fucking you up, you’ll like it.”

I glare up at him. In one hand, he has a gun, in the other, a neat pile of clothes.

“You let that fuck Wilder dress you like the cunt you are, I see.”

“Stop it.”

He just laughs. “I don’t think so. This is a nice good bye for now, don’t you think?”

I swallow, and my mouth and jaw hurt. His words sink in. Goodbye? Oh, God, he’s really handing me over to this Vitale and I don’t know what’s worse: the fact I’m with him, or that he’s not taking me to the compound.

Unless... What if this is it?

The bracelet’s still on, and a wild, insane hope swoops through me that we’re at his compound and Nikolai is on his way. If that’s the case, I need to stall.

“Don’t make me do this.”

He tosses the clothes at me. “Get changed bitch. Your husband will be here soon enough, and I’ll get paid. I’m going to kill him, too, take what is his. It’ll go to you and your firstborn, but I’m thinking to just take him and his family and bastard son out now. If you’re still useable, I’ll sell you again, breed you with someone else. Then, when you’re done with that, I have plans for you. Or, my men do. They’ll play with you between husbands.”

He kicks me, hard. I cough and roll, trying to form a ball. He just laughs. “Right now, my men are all throughout this house, waiting because your cunt of a lover wants you, too. What is it with that little pussy of yours? Got a bit of the Steph magic? Or is it just you’re such a whore you’ll let him do anything?”

I squeeze my eyes shut and stay still. “He...he...won’t come.”

He kicks me again. “Shut up, bitch. Maybe not. He doesn’t care. Soon, I’m off to my stronghold and he won’t matter. From there, I’ll make sure he’s dead, or your husband will.” My heart plummets, and he cackles laughter. “You want to know why I messed you up? Made it look bad? Gonna tell fucking Vitale that Wilder did it. Maybe kill two birds. He’ll go for him, kill Wilder. Save me the trouble.”

“Are you scared?” I push the words out and he kicks me again. “Too scared to face Nikolai yourself?”

“No, bitch, just busy. You’re going to enjoy all the men, aren’t you, whore? That why you came to me? His little dick not good enough?”

I clench my fingers around the white clothes, unfolding myself and pushing up, staggering to stand. When I do, I look at him, at the clothes, and shudder, tossing them down.

He glares at me with violent hate. When I’m standing and not swaying, I force myself to look him in the eye. “You sell me and let that man rape me? His friends? Then what? You’ll take me back? Give me to your men, let them use me?”

“You’re not worth more than that,” he sneers. “You became worthless the moment you let Wilder fucking get his filthy hands on you.”

“I’m your daughter.”

He laughs. “Yes, you look too much like me to suspect you’re the spawn of one of your cunt of a mother’s affairs. Bitch couldn’t keep that pussy to herself. Should have sold that, too.”

Something snaps and I launch at him, trying to hit him, scratch him, and when I touch flesh, I dig in as hard as I can.

“Get the fuck off me, you cunt.” He pulls me away and throws me back. I hit a heavy chair that scrapes back, skittering on the floor. Dull pain from where I land ricochets through me. I try and stand, but I can’t, and his shadow looms over me. I thought I was scared before, but it’s nothing compared to what the pure murder in his face sets off.

“I should kill you.” He backhands me hard. “I should cut you into pieces and send them to Wilder, like I did with his precious aunt, before I killed his uncle. The man was an idiot, but Wilder—he’s an idiot, too. Fucking tenacious and hard to kill. He knows how to get power, enough that I couldn’t go in and kill him when I got my chance, but he’s going to die.”

He crouches down as grabs my hair with one hand, shoving the cold barrel of the gun against my cheek. “I’d cut you up, if I thought he’d care. He won’t. I’ve plans for him, for his empire. And you? Worthless.”

I try and breathe, but each breath is a struggle. They come in grating, uneven gasps, like heaves, like I’ve an open wound in my chest. It pleases him. My fear. My pain. The sounds I make. That pleasure gleams in his eyes, shows in the slight smile on his face. I need to keep him talking. I’m not surviving this if Nikolai doesn’t come.

He won't, I realize. He's not coming because this isn't the compound. Didn't my father just say something like that? If so, then I need to try and get him to take me there. I can barely think straight through the pain, the pounding in my head, the fear.

I have to try.

"Be a good girl, Thorne, or I'll fucking shoot you and find a way to do this without you."

His words are iced water in my face. "I-I'll be good. Daddy."

I hate that word, hate it so much. I cling to it because this perverse monster likes it. I think he gets off on the power it gives him. I don't know or care. It's a tool in my pitiful arsenal and I'll use every one I have. "Please, Daddy. I'm sorry."

He releases my hair and stands, but the gun stays trained on me. "You make me so mad, Thorne, like the cunt who birthed you. If I'd brought you up..."

I force myself to say it. "I wish you had. Daddy."

He smiles. The bastard smiles and it takes everything I have not to hurl, everything I have not to scream. "The bitch stole you, shaped you. It isn't your fault."

"Tell me about her. And...and you. Your story?"

He shakes his head. "She was pretty. She used those looks and her cunt, and I tried to beat her into submission, but she wouldn't. Stay. Down. She wasn't one of us, not like you. She was so fucking useful. I sold her here and there, and that bitch liked it, gave it for free. I should have killed her when she stopped being useful, killed her when she gave me you, but no."

He goes on and on about her. How he loved to beat her senseless. How he bought her things. How he got her to sleep with men he wanted things from. Alliances. How she'd cry and he'd beat it out of her. Then she had me and she kept defying him.

I don't know if he liked her once, if he loved her, or if he just saw a pretty girl he knew he could manipulate. Someone not of this life, as he puts it, but it sure sounds like she came from a small family of criminals. He spotted the sixteen-year-old school girl and he married her.

Obsession. Hate. And... Is this me and Nikolai?

Nikolai never sold me. Apart from that one humiliating time he made me walk into a room of men naked, right after he finger fucked me and turned me on against my will, he never, ever wanted another man to see me like that.

True love, Rosalind. You idiot. All these men, they're the same. You're a fool.

I hate this man in front of me, more and more with each passing second. It's becoming a sickness in my blood, that hate. What he did to my mother...The strength it took for her to stand up to him and protect me, to run.

My heart bleeds for her, and if I could turn back a clock, find a time machine, I'd hug her tight and tell her...tell her she's amazing. Tell her she deserved better. Tell her she's strong.

I can't. That's a fairy tale. They don't exist, unless we're talking the ones that end in death and blood. I should play the game. I know it. I should just agree, tell him my mother was worthless, just like me, that he's a big, strong man.

I can't. Pushing myself clumsily up, using the chair, I stand.

“Derek?”

His head jerks at me as his eyes narrow and the gun comes in to train on me. “I told you. Daddy or Sir.”

“Derek. Thing is,” I say, my voice clear and strong, even though I'm shaking inside, even though I'm terrified. “Thing is, up until Nikolai took me, I had no idea of your name, no idea who you were or that you existed.”

“You did.”

I shake my head. “I didn't. You think my mom loved you, but was some kind of slut who couldn't stop herself? Nothing is further from the truth. She ran to protect me because she loved me. She hated you, hated you so much that she never once uttered your name. Ever.”

He's staring at me, pointing the gun. If he kills me, then I'm dying knowing he hears this. Because he's a small little man, a coward, one who under the delusion Mom obsessed about him like he does about her. I...I need to hurt him. “You were absolutely nothing to her.”

“I was everything,” he yells. “Everything. Since she was sixteen, she wanted me. She just couldn't stop being a fucking whore, just like you. I should shoot you dead.”

“Then do it. If you make me go with that man, if you whore me out and give me to your men, then I'd rather be dead. Pull the trigger.”

Before he can do anything or speak, there's a soft beeping in the room and he goes to the desk, backing up to it, gun on me. He scrabbles for his phone, then finds it and picks it up. He frowns and presses a button. “What the fuck is going on?”

In the relative silence, I can hear someone speaking, but I can't make out the words.

"I had that second alarm put in late this afternoon, and it just went off." He waits, listens, keeps the gun on me, and starts making motions like he's shooting me.

"You didn't see anyone? What about the others?" He pauses, lowering the gun. "What the fuck do you mean they're not answering? Send someone." Another long pause. "I don't fucking care if you're the last fucking man here." He grits his teeth. "I'm fucking aware the trusted crew are at Beale Street. You want me to shoot you or to lower your ranking? Find out where everyone is. And for fuck's sake, call in back up from fucking Hawke's Hollow. Now."

He hangs up and tosses the phone.

"Trouble? Daddy?"

His head swings full to me, the gun rising again. "Shut your fucking mouth. I'm thinking two things. Either you want me to kill you or you think your lover is coming. I want him to, that was the plan. One of them."

I swallow hard. An alarm was set off? But we're not at the secret place, so... What if the alarm is Nikolai?

Terror streaks white hot through me. He'd come blazing in with a team, not by himself. Wouldn't he? My father's insane, but he's also deadly, a loose cannon. It's like he has about a thousand plans he threw in the air and is seeing which comes down. Me turning up might backfire on Nikolai.

One alarm, no cavalry? That says to me one person, not him and his army. I swallow again, trying not to shake. My father has an army.

He stares at me and then he lets out a savage snarl of a laugh. “You stupid little whore. You bitch. You think it’s him, and...you’re worried?”

“No—”

“Don’t lie. It’s all over you. Just like his cum.” He starts to pace, the gun trained on me as he does, his gaze darting to his phone on the desk.

“P-Please.”

“Shut your stupid whore mouth. No, see, here’s what I’m thinking. He sent you to me. You didn’t get away. He sent you. Fucked you, then sent you because he’s sick of you.

“And if it is?”

He laughs. “I’ll beat him. I did once, literally. Should have killed the little punk then, back when he really was no one. Trying to interfere, stop me doing what was my right. I beat him then and I’ll beat him now. if he does come, it’s not for your worthless ass. It’s for me.”

His word cut into me, and he doesn’t stop. I can’t stop the terrible shaking, the roiling sickness that churns inside.

“Your stupid face, Thorne. Fuck. That’s what I couldn’t work out. He’d never let you go.”

I stare, push out, “Because he cares. He—”

“He doesn’t care about you, cunt. Just me.” He rounds on me and pushes the gun to my head before stepping back. “I bet he told you to come, that he said he’d get you. Did he tell you he loves you?” He laughs, and my heart shatters.

I know he doesn’t love me, but what he’s saying, it’s so close to what happened that... “No.”

“Yes, Thorne.” His eyes glitter with a savage knife’s edge. “We play games, and you fell for it, got caught up in emotion and let him manipulate you. He’s using you like he did last time when he left you for me, left you so he could get his hands back on his little maid he wanted to fuck. I know he did. She sobbed his name as I fucked her up the ass. I bet he had her again when he got her back in the trade and you...you just thought he wanted you?”

“This isn’t true.” All the horrible things he’s saying, I latch on to Sylvie and I almost throw up. I heave and taste the bitter burning of it in my mouth, but I swallow it down. It’s nothing more than bile, and...

Oh, poor Sylvie. My father, he...

“It is. He’s probably coming back, but not for you. He’ll kill you. He’ll try to kill me and my friends. That’s the man you’ve been offering your cunt to, you stupid little bitch. Nikolai wants you dead and gone, and this is easy, or so he thinks.”

My mouth is dry. “No.”

“Yes. He doesn’t care. He’s sick of you. Probably fucked so many women, probably pretended it was your cunt of a mother he was giving it to. He doesn’t like or care or want you, Thorne, and you’re a fucking fool to think he does.”

I can’t breathe. I can’t. I try to get it into my lungs, but it catches and I’m breaking into pieces. The idea of Nikolai loving me is so ludicrous, such a stupid, stupid little dream I can’t let have air. I know he doesn’t and never would, but to hate me and throw me to my death at the hands of my father?

It hurts, like I’ve been stabbed. It makes horrible, terrible sense. He sent me here. He let me be taken before. It was all

for revenge and getting his hands on the power my father has.

And...and...and... It doesn't make sense. Does it?

He let my father have me for Sylvie, or that's what this man here says, but him throwing me to this particular wolf? Nikolai knows what my father is like. It's why he wants revenge.

I can't quite reconcile this brutish, terrible move with the softness he's shown me. It's not a lot. Some might call it nothing, but with Nikolai, his promising I'll be okay. The smiles and feeding me. The tender kisses...rescuing me from the wedding from hell, holding me.

I...

My head is spinning fast and wild, and I don't know what's true and what's manipulation.

I do know one thing.

Derek Finnegan is the worst of all.

Derek Finnegan deserves to die.

I know one other thing: Derek is right that Nikolai doesn't love me, might even be right about him being sick of me, but this man here is a sick bastard who likes to twist the knife, to hurt.

Nikolai wouldn't leave me to die. He'll come. I'm so terrified he'll come for me.

"You can kill me, Derek," I say. "But then Nikolai will never stop coming for you. He'll torture you and then kill you. So, if I was you, I'd run now, without me. Run and never come back."

"Or," he says, "kill you."

I lift my chin. “Your call.”

Chapter 28



Nikolai

Every word he says to Rose lands like blows I can almost see. I don't need to be in the room. I don't need to witness it. I can hear it, a vibration in the air.

Pain, betrayal, the utter fucked up shit he said to her about Steph, about me and Steph, which never, ever happened, how I want her dead.

Right now, I'm trapped. There's a chance if I somehow back out and get away, I can send a message with Beale Street so we might find his secret fucking compound. Or, since he's about to go there, round up as many of his goons as possible. I'm thinking that Garcia might know who's at the top of the food chain.

If I leave, then I'm leaving my Rose to a fucking madman, and right now, the best I can do is wait and strategize.

I can see Derek from the shadow I'm in, against the wall. He can't see me, and the fucker has a gun. He's taunting, hurting, wanting to make her bleed in his favorite way. He likes his fists and boots and he likes to use words. If I move in, the guy who's in the room one door up will see me, and if I take him out, Derek might shoot her.

I'm really fucking trying to see a scenario where I get both me and Rose out. I have the name Beale Street. I have Garcia. This is enough to justify me pulling her out if I can. The white-hot fury has morphed into almost paralyzing fear. Fear I won't be able to save her. Fear that I fucked up.

I don't care about my plan. I care about Rose.

When I was a kid, a nobody, starting with my uncle, I recognized him as the one who killed my parents. I liked Steph enough—couldn't work out why she was with this fuck, until I saw they had a kid. I never lied to Rose about that attack when she was two.

Mostly.

No one else stepped in except me because I thought he was going to kill the kid and then Steph. Steph...she chose to stay, but a kid didn't have a choice. So I stepped in and told him to stop.

He beat me. I fought him, but he had two men hold me, and he beat me.

No one did anything. My uncle wasn't there. This was my first big dealing, even if it was small.

If that had been it, I'd have taken the lesson, and used it as a steppingstone. I know he only had me held because I would have taken him down. I never gave a shit about that. Lessons learned and all that bullshit. No. It was everything else.

When I told my uncle about his sister's murder, I set the path. I got them killed. Rose and her mother got them killed.

That's what settled in my head. I helped Steph get out with some money. Then, she turned evidence. Me? I took over and built my uncle's gang into the force to be reckoned with. In my head, I tangled Steph and her kid in with the deaths and

betrayals and marked them both along with fucking Derek. Finding Rose was a boon, just not the one I expected. And now...

She's my Rose, though, the new one with her thorns. She's taunting him, winding him up, pushing through the pain that pulsates in the air to sink her own barbs in. About me, about her mother, about how pathetic he is. She's utterly magnificent and it just might get her killed.

If she dies, I...I can't let that happen. I'm going to have to make a move because that fuck points the gun at her. I'm going to take him down and I don't care what happens to anyone else but her.

His phone rings, and I press against the wall as Derek answers and the guy in the other room appears. "What the fuck? If the alarm went off, I know what that means. He's here. You—get out there."

The guy lumbers past me, not even looking.

"Why do you fucking think I wanted one put at the garden gate?" Derek's voice rises and he's close to losing it. "If no one's answering, look for the fucking bodies! Get out from your fucking little guard house and find the fucker!"

He doesn't know I'm in the house. He thinks I'm out there.

Derek starts up again. "Kill them, no matter the cost. Kill them and bring the corpses to me."

He slams down the phone and then he trains the gun steady on Rose. I can't see her, but that's what he's doing.

"Thorne? Come here."

"Are you going to kill me like I asked?"

Goddamn fucking Rose. Is she wanting him to kill her?

Something snaps. I don't think. I step out and into the room, gun on Derek. "If you are," I say, "I'd rethink it."

Derek goes red then gray. "You fucker. You can't have her."

"I don't want her," I say, lying. I can't look at Rose, but her little moan strips skin and flesh from my bones. "I'm here for you."

"You invade my home, you step into things when you shouldn't, again," he spits. "You take my family from me. My daughter."

"You weren't treating her very well, were you? Selling her? Offering her to all and sundry? No, I'm not finished with her, so I'll kill you and take her. Of course, I can let you go. End the war."

"Not on your fucking life, Wilder, you piece of shit. You know I had Lila, right? She begged for me. Then I cut her up and sent her to your stupid, ugly uncle. Then I killed him, too."

The knife's edge, twisting. "History. I don't care about that. I'm offering you a deal. Walk and you live, and you get to keep face."

"You fucked my Thorne."

I grin slow and terrible, and I can feel the air shift and change to my left, where my beautiful, damaged Rose is. "I did."

He's going to kill her because he thinks I care. He's right.

He'll never survive any of this because if he touches her, I will fucking hunt him down. All his people and their families.

I'll take them all out. He's not going to survive because he doesn't deserve it.

I'm the better shot with and without the vest, so I take it off and hold it out for Rose to take. Keeping my eyes trained on Derek, I feel the weight of it go from my hand as she does.

"That won't save her and you know it," he sneers at me. "But it tells me you care."

"No, I really don't. Since you're a shit shot, I just know I won't need it. It'll only slow me down."

There's a tiny sob. I ignore it. I have to. She has a chance with the vest at least. And if the opportunity comes, and he does shoot at me, I hope she'll run.

"So, you give her your vest in some misguided fucking attempt at heroics?" Derek asks.

"No," I say. "If I was doing that, I'd tell her to *fucking run when the opportunity comes*. Do you see me doing that?"

"You fucked her."

Even if he kills me, he will never live because Rush and Tony and everyone else will carry out my instructions. It's something I privately talked to Tony about. But Rose? I need to save her, so I hurt her. Make her bleed. Turn her against me. Forever.

"Yes," I say, "I did. Fucked Steph, too. Guess who was better?"

He swings the gun at me, and then, at the last second, he turns it on her as he pulls the trigger. I leap in front of it because he's aiming at her head.

Something hits me. Rose screams. Derek laughs and cocks his gun, and I slam into the ground.

Then, pain like I've never experienced rips through me, like bone and organs are smashed and torn, and the world turns dark at the edges. I still have my gun and I raise it and shoot. It goes wide. Someone grabs my gun. Soft hands. Hands I know.

Rose. She's alive.

She points the gun and pulls the trigger, over and over again. Derek screams like a banshee and runs, and Rose keeps shooting until it's empty.

"Always...always was a coward." I close my eyes and breathe out. Something shakes me, and there's a voice. Sweet, the voice of a rose.

Rose.

I open my eyes and she's there, staring at me with those beautiful blue eyes in that bloodied face. "Rose...you...you're all right."

She stares at me, and I can't read the expression. There's so much pain and anger and all these other things, and she keeps wavering. She has my gun. Her hands are on me, coming away with blood.

"I...I...never...not Steph..." I try and raise my hand to her face, but she shifts back, rightly so.

The world goes black.

It's there again, and Rose is whispering something, face close to mine. I can't make it out. There's a roar in my head, like blood, like my heartbeat, like my reckoning has come.

Rose. She's here. Alive.

"Your beautiful...face... He... Worse...worse than it is... I... lo—"

The blackness takes me again.

I come out of it again and it's darker, grayer, blurred, all I can see is Rose. I hurt her to save her. I destroyed a part of her to save her, but she's alive.

My hand comes up and this time, it slides on her face. Oh, that connection. She's so soft, warm. I want her to be mine, just mine. Beautiful Rose.

“Stay... Stay with me...until the end... Please...”

I don't deserve it, just like I didn't deserve her. I know that. I'm a selfish, fucking coward... To the end...

Before I can say anything or ask her again, the world ends.

Chapter 29



Rosalind

I press down on the wound, using the clothes my father gave me. They're red and I can't stop the bleeding.

I don't even know if I want to. I don't know if he's alive.

Nikolai.

His eyes are shut, and he's not moving and he's still the most devastatingly handsome man I've seen. He ripped me into shreds, more than a bullet would have, more than my father did. My mother? Oh, God. What kind of sick fool am I?

But... Nikolai came after me, gave me his Kevlar that I'm wearing. He jumped in front of the bullet meant for me. He said...he said... he didn't sleep with my mom, but I don't know the truth from the lies. I don't know what's straight and what's manipulation.

Worse, I don't know if it even matters.

"Don't die," I whisper, even though I shouldn't. It hurts, more than anything in the world, more than anything said here. It hurts to try and imagine a world where Nikolai isn't living and breathing and ruling his terrible kingdom.

I'm covered in his blood and he's not moving. I blink hard as the tears start to come. My throat's so tight, I don't even

know if I can speak above a whisper. He asked me to stay. I wipe my face on my arms, smearing blood and tears on my skin.

“Don’t...please don’t die.”

“Rose...”

My heart lurches. A sob breaks free. “Nikolai, you’re still alive. Please, hang on.”

His eyes remain closed and suddenly, I snap shut my mouth. I still have his gun, and though my father ran like a coward, and I have no idea if one of my bullets hit him, I don’t know if we’re out of danger.

Hand still on Nikolai’s chest, I twist to see. His breathing is terrible, a grating low rattling gasp that scares me. Shit, I need to see.

“Rose...” His eyes open.

“Nikolai, I need...I need to check to see if we’re alone. Can you do this?”

I take his large hand and put it on the covered wound. Then I get up and hurry to the door, gun in hand. I know it’s empty, but it makes me feel safer somehow.

In the hall, there’s no movement, and at the other end, through the open front door, comes a sweep of bright headlights. Then there’s the roar of an engine and a car takes off. I listen as long as I dare, but no one is there.

Then I turn. I need a phone. I have to call an ambulance and—

A dark thought comes.

Why?

My fucking father ran like a coward. The man bleeding out, who I—the man on the ground kidnapped me and liked having sex with me enough to not want to kill me, but it doesn't change the fact that he once said he would.

I pull off the bracelet and drop it to the ground. We're alone, and I could just run, go, be free. Find another life, another identity. I could actually be free and never, ever look back. His groan breaks into my thoughts.

“I'm...I'm glad this time, I saved you...” His voice is slurred. He's looking at me from dark, unfocused eyes, his fingers slipping from the wound. “I tried that night...Thorne... Rose...I tried but... Got everyone dead... And didn't... didn't... but this time...”

I stare at him. The man who fell when I was young, when my father beat me and my mother surrounded by his men—was that...

I was so young. I don't know what's memory and what's just been put there from words and bad dreams.

I should run. Now. Save myself.

He smiles as his eyes come in to focus for a second. I think what I see is something like relief. Relief like he can see into me and see I'm thinking of running. Relief like he's glad I'm alive.

Then, his eyes close. “Go...Rose. Live your...life...”

A cry breaks free, a wounded thing inside me howling. My heart is shards that cut and make me bleed.

I'm not my father. I'm not Nikolai. I'm me, and I do not let people die, especially not him.

With a gulping cry, I rush back and drop to my knees, ignoring the slam that resounds through me, full of pain from that move.

I press down on the wound with one hand and drop my face to his mouth. He's breathing, barely.

“Don't you fucking die, Nikolai. Don't you fucking dare. I need to make you suffer, you asshole. Don't you die on me. I have a lot of anger and you will live and deal with it, you hear?”

The words fall. Half don't make sense. I tell him I hate him. I tell him I'm going to kill him. I tell him I'm his. I tell him I'm not. I demand, threaten, plead with him not to die. I say he'll never see me again, and I want him to live knowing that. In the end, I just plead. His breathing is getting shallow.

“Please don't die, please, please. I need you to live. I need you to live. Please don't die. I'll do anything. Just. Don't. Die.”

My other hand is going over him, there are weapons everywhere. Bullets. All I want is a phone. Fuck. There's a lethal switchblade. Where's his phone? He must have it.

I don't want to move him, but I have to. Sliding my hand under his back, I shift him, and he makes an unholy sound as his eyes open, so unfocused, I know it will give me nightmares. It's like looking death in the face.

I hit paydirt. I pull out his phone, wasting time easing him back. Crap. Face ID. His eyes are shut again. I lean in close. “Open your fucking eyes you no good piece of shit.” He doesn't.

I sob brokenly. “Please Nikolai. It's Rose, please open your eyes for me. You're a moron for getting shot for me.

Open your eyes so you can live and punish me for ruining your plans.” They stay shut, and I wave the phone in front of his face. “For me. Show me you care. Pretend you love me, Nikolai. Please.”

His eyes open and the phone unlocks. A wild burst of adrenaline streaks through me, and I go to contacts, fingers shaking as I find Rush. I hit call. It takes him way too long to answer. After the fourth ring he does. “Niko—”

“Rush, please!” I’m crying now, my words a panicked rush. “It’s Nikolai.”

“Rosalind? What happened?”

“My-My father shot him. I’m calling an ambulance—”

“No. I know where you are. We’re on our way.”

I look at Nikolai, who isn’t moving. I don’t know if even he’s breathing.

“Please,” I say. “Please hurry. He’s... He’s *dying*.”

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About the Author



Brooke Harper creates dark and sexy worlds for her characters to play. A lover of strong coffee and old tombstones, she spins dark tales of sex and sin, pain and passion, and misery and madness that'll have you flipping the pages and begging for more.

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