



Vengeful

KING

SOPHIE WINTERS

Vengeful King

CORRUPT KINGDOM #3

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For the readers and dreamers out there.

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CHAPTER 1

Katrina

Light shines through the window next to me. There are birds chirping, trees shivering in the breeze. It's picture perfect. A good day.

I want to enjoy it. Despite the antiseptic smell around me, the unmistakable aura of impending death, I want to just enjoy this day.

I look at the bedside table next to me. The name of the facility is there, on a notepad one of the orderlies must have left behind. *Green Hills*. There aren't really any hills here, but it can be green when there's been enough rain. It is now.

Now, with the green and the sunshine, I'm sitting beside my mother's bed. The bed she's been in for years. And if I really think about it, I know she's not going to leave ever again.

But I try not to think about that if I can help it.

I watch her face as she looks out the window, smiling. She's more lucid than normal today, her gray eyes almost as clear as mine. The color is almost all gone from her hair; she's fading out, but this isn't one of those moments. Right now, she's here. Solid.

It's hard to describe to someone who doesn't know what Alzheimer's is like. How it sucks the color out of you. It sucks the color out of my world, too.

It just *sucks*.

I try to push the thoughts away. I know I should savor this moment, now, with her. She's awake and aware, which is more than I can say for most days. I have to try to enjoy this right now. Even if I know it's going to end.

“Robert didn't come with you?”

My eyes dart up to her face. I hold my breath for a second, looking for that loss—a glazing over in her eyes, an unsteady cadence to her words. I don't see anything.

I shake my head and try to think of what to say. “No. No, Dad's working. But he'll visit soon.”

She smiles, turning back to the window. Maybe she's remembering something about my dad, about their youth. About their marriage.

I wish I could ask her about it. I wish she could give me some reason why my father left both of us, years ago.

But I don't count on men anymore. Or people. I know everyone will screw you over given the chance, and I can't say that I care that my father is gone. For all I know, he would have screwed over my mother and me.

No. It's fine like this. I'm the only one I can trust.

“He should visit,” my mother says, nodding once, definitively. “And bring Casey. He should meet your father, don't you think? You've been dating long enough.”

Not anymore.

“Maybe you're right. I'll see if we can come together next time.”

It's a lie. I broke up with Casey two months ago; he was an asshole. He was always asking why I visited my mother at all if she was 'gone.' As if I was supposed to stop caring about her just because she got sick.

“Whatever happened to his cat?”

“She's fine, mom.”

“I wonder if they'd let him bring her. I'd love to see her.”

I try to smile; it feels stiff and achy. “I’ll ask. That would be nice.”

Casey’s cat was hit by a car. He was one of those crazy people that believed cats belong outside, and his cat was always narrowly escaping death. Cars, wild animals, and whatever other threats roam the streets of Boston. I wasn’t surprised when it happened. I was surprised when he laughed about it.

That’s around the time I broke up with him.

“What was her name?”

This time, I stop breathing. I look at my mother, and I can see it start to happen.

She’s fading.

I swallow hard and try to push down my despair, fear, and anger. I watch her eyes grow hazy. She’s trying, struggling to access a memory that probably feels just out of reach. But for her, it’s gone.

Like she is. She’s gone.

I never used to think about what made people who they are. Now, with my mother fading more every day, I know. She’s not herself anymore; she’s not the same woman. The memories that made her who she was are gone, permanently. They’ve disappeared. She’s only an echo of herself now.

It’s a prolonged death, and it feels like hell. It feels like I’m watching her die a little bit day by day.

My mother turns to look at me, and I know in a second that she doesn’t see me for who I am. Her eyes slide right over me.

She smiles vapidly, patting my hand where it lies on the corner of her bed. She doesn’t keep eye contact; she turns to look out the window. I’m a stranger to her now.

But still, I try.

“I’ll ask. About the cat,” I say.

She turns to look at me. “The cat, dear? That’s nice.”

She's being polite. She doesn't know what I'm talking about. Her eyes turn away from me, absently roaming the grounds outside her window.

I bite my tongue and shut my eyes. I knew it wouldn't last. Her moments of lucidity are happening less and less often these days.

And now I've lost her. Again.

I stand up and kiss her goodbye, her forehead powdery and soft. She doesn't even acknowledge me. Maybe she doesn't even recognize me doing this. Maybe she's gone far away again, lost in her own mind—or what's left of it.

As I head toward the door, I stop to collect myself quickly in front of the mirror. It's small and square, cutting me off at the shoulders, and the woman staring back at me looks almost like a stranger.

God, I look awful.

There's misery in my eyes. I don't know if anyone else can see it. At least this time, I didn't get so frustrated I cried. But I look tired.

I see some of my mother in myself. We have the same gray eyes, though mine are clear and sharp. I have my father's hair; it's auburn, knotted up at the base of my neck. I threw it up on my way here, too busy to make it look good.

I look like both my parents, almost perfectly in divide. I have my mother's skin, my father's statuesque nose and lips. I have my mother's eyes. I am both of them, so much that I could be a textbook example.

I shake my head and push through the door, trying to clear my thoughts. I need to get out, before the smell of disinfectant and dying people makes me scream. It's too bright in here.

I rush toward the front doors. I'm nearly there when someone stops me, a noise of surprise and a thrown-out arm making me stop in my tracks.

"Miss—I'm sorry, I don't mean to hold you up. But I need to ask about payment."

The second the woman says *payment*, my stomach clenches.

“Oh.” I bite my lip, clearing my throat.

“You’re behind on your payments for the room,” she says quietly. “I just wanted to catch you before you left, because—”

“I understand,” I reply, cutting her off. I turn toward the front desk.

I don’t need to hear what she’s about to say. I’ve heard it all before.

You’ll default. You’re going to have to pay fines.

You need to pay the minimum at least.

Don’t you know you need to pay it? Don’t you know it’s worse if you wait?

Why did you borrow in the first place?

Shit.

I stand at the desk while the woman pulls my information up. I pull out my checkbook and start to fill it out. It’s all I can do to pay the balance due. I keep my face neutral, not letting my mouth move or my brow wrinkle. I focus on the writing and ignore everything else.

I try to pretend this is fine, that I’m just any other person in the world juggling paychecks and payment deadlines.

But it’s tough. Shit is getting bad. Money is running out.

Actually, it’s been gone for a while. Once upon a time, I had enough but then everything hit at once. I’m not just struggling through this moment, this room. I have old medical bills I still haven’t caught up on. I have my mother’s bills.

And more than all that, I borrowed money from someone I shouldn’t have, to try to pay it all.

I don’t even know the man’s name—I just know him as Mr. V.

A friend of a friend put me in touch with a guy who works for Mr. V, and I managed to arrange a loan through some

shady back channels. It was nerve-wracking. I knew it was a risky thing to do, but I also knew I had to do it. I had to get the money somehow. My mother was counting on me.

It seemed to work at first. I took care of things I needed to and cleared some of my outstanding bills. But the red came seeping back in. It pooled around my ankles again, and now I'm starting to drown.

I owe Mr. V repayment.

And I don't have it.

My hands shake a little as I give the woman the check and then make a beeline for the entryway. I shove my way out the front doors and drag in a lungful of air. It smells like rain, but the sun is burning hard and bright. I press the heels of my palms against my closed eyes for a second and almost jump when my phone vibrates.

Slipping it out of my pocket, I swipe the screen to read the text from a number marked "Unknown." I open it, and all I see is a time and place.

Shit.

I know what this is about, and it came faster than I expected it to. I knew repayment was expected, I just thought I had more time.

All the worry in my chest starts to roil. It churns like a hurricane, whipping my thoughts around as I stand staring at my phone. Worry turns to panic, my pulse quick and breath shallow.

According to the message from Mr. V, I'm expected to be in an abandoned lot in a shitty part of town tonight. Nine o'clock, when it's dark. When people might dismiss the sound of a gunshot as a car backfiring.

I curl my hand around the phone, gripping it tight. I don't want to face this. I'm afraid. I'm not ashamed to admit that, and I'm not stupid for fearing it. I'm smart.

But I'm not smart enough to get out of this.

Part of me wants to run. It would be easy, in a way. I have no reason to cling to the life I have here. I don't have a job I love or people who would report my absence. It's not like I have dozens of friends who would look for me, or miss me. It's not like I have an entire family here in Boston.

But I have my mom. And I can't leave her like that. Not when she's at the end of the line, in a facility, with no one else to visit her. I won't let the last days of her lucid life be spent with strangers in an Alzheimer's ward.

I have to go.

Moving on autopilot, I climb into my car and drive home, my mind racing. After the check I just wrote, I don't have shit in the bank. So I scramble for all the pockets of cash I have stashed away, all the emergency bundles meant to be the last drops in the bucket.

But it's not enough. Not even close.

I borrowed over one hundred thousand dollars from Mr. V.

By the time I finish pulling cash from tins and pillows, I barely have a thousand.

The parking lot I'm in is empty. Only one of the three tall lights is properly illuminating the place. The lot is isolated, away from the city, so far out of the way that they could do whatever they wanted and no one would know. No one would care.

I know this could be it. I could be walking into my own funeral. But I don't have a choice.

I keep my jaw tight and wait, feeling the night air and humidity prickle my skin. After several long minutes, I see a car coming, tinted windows and shiny black body gleaming in the moonlight.

It slows as it approaches me, doing a half-circle. I don't budge. Experience with people like this has shown me that I

can't squirm. They like squirming. They pounce on it the second you show weakness.

So I don't.

I stand completely still, trying to project confidence and calm. The car stops but the engine doesn't shut off. Two men come out from the back left, opposite me. One stays by the door. The other moves just behind my right shoulder. They both stare stoically at me, as if waiting for me to try to bolt.

The window on the right side rolls down. It's just a crack, just enough for me to smell something hard and burning, maybe cigar smoke. I hold my breath.

"Do you have what you owe me?" the man inside the car drawls. Mr. V. I can't see him and I never have, but I know it's him.

I swallow. "No. I... not yet."

I know it might seem stupid to say it. Maybe I should have tried to lie. Maybe I should have made promises. But I've seen enough of these guys to know that they don't give a shit. The truth is all I have.

There's a soft sound, and my stomach clenches as one of the bodyguards draws a gun, leveling it at me.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I shouldn't have come here. Maybe I should've tried to run after all, tried to get my mother out of town with me somehow. What good will I be to her if I'm dead?

That barrel is the only thing I see, an endless black hole. On the other side is the end. The end of my life.

"That's disappointing," Mr. V says quietly.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, barely daring to breathe. "I'll get it. I just need a little more time."

"No."

My skin goes cold at the finality in his tone. My chest is so tight that it's hard to breathe.

“Please, I—”

“You’ll repay your debt now,” Mr V continues, cutting off whatever useless plea I was about to utter. “And if you can’t give me the money you owe, you’ll have to pay in another way.”

My brows furrow as I shake my head, trying to get my terrified mind to process his words more quickly. “What do you mean? What other way?”

“A task,” he says simply. “Either I kill you for failing to pay your debt, or you do something for me.”

How am I supposed to say no?

I swallow. I know what the possibilities are; I’m not stupid. I know what I could be told to do will likely be dangerous. Probably also illegal. I’m out of my depth here, but I have no way to swim back to shore. No life preserver to save me.

“I’ll do it,” I say. The words come out in a choppy rush. “Whatever you want.”

Mr. V makes a noise in his throat, and I catch a shadowy glimpse of his eyes inside the car as he says, “Lachlan O’Reilly.”

I don’t understand. The name doesn’t mean anything to me. I’m so strung out right now that it takes me a moment to realize it’s even a name.

“What—” I clear my throat. “What about him?”

Mr. V’s bodyguard doesn’t move the gun. It stays there, trained on me, like a black eye staring right through me.

“You need to kill him,” Mr. V says. “You have one month.”

CHAPTER 2

Lachlan

The woman on my bed moans, her head tilted back. The headboard creaks almost imperceptibly. All around me, the house is silent and still.

My house.

We're on the second floor. I don't use my bedroom when I bring these women home; they're sex workers, not girlfriends. They don't give a shit about flowers and candles—and neither do I.

I don't believe in mixing sex and feelings. It doesn't end well, and there's no point. Not for me, at least.

I don't have the time. I don't have the luxury. Not many heads of mafia families do.

It's not that I don't like sex. I do. If I didn't bring home a girl every now and then, I'd probably go insane. But I can't just date any woman in my position, and I'm not about to spend the time and money on dates that will never go anywhere. No, I don't like sinking my effort and money into things that don't matter. It's not me.

Instead, I do this. I fuck women, no messy strings attached, and that's all. Easy.

The woman gasps when I drive into her. I'm not being slow or polite about it; I know she can handle it, and I'm not in the mood to pretend I'm *making love*. There is no love here. Just need.

She's trying to sell it, making noises, her hands twisting in the sheets. I can't help the annoyance I feel. I'm not into it. I don't need her to act like she's into it; I just need a warm, tight body.

The woman moans louder. I reach out instinctively, clapping my hand over her mouth to shut her up.

And I fuck her harder.

It's mindless. I don't think about anything; I just move. I find out how to finish, fast, and I don't bother worrying about whether she does. This is work for her, not pleasure. And it's almost the same for me. I'm just taking care of one more thing, like eating or securing a deal with another family. That's all. So I fuck her until I come and she does, too.

Or maybe she doesn't. Maybe she's just pretending, although I doubt it. Either way, I don't really give a fuck.

I pull out and toss the condom away. I'm not stupid about things like this. I don't need any strings, and a pregnancy is the biggest fucking string I could ever get choked by. When I hear the condom hit the trash can, I yank open the bedside table's drawer and grab the stack of cash there.

I hold the money out. "Here. Get out."

I'm not usually so brusque, but I have business today. I don't have time. Thankfully, the woman doesn't complain, just like I like. She takes the cash, adjusts her clothes, and leaves.

I don't want to be beholden to a woman's feelings after sex. So this is the best option. And it will be, until I have to do the one thing I'm expected to.

But that's a matter for later.

I tug my pants on, then button them as I walk downstairs. I always give myself enough time to clean up after. I know I need it today.

My bedroom has an in-suite bathroom, spacious and spotless. I stand in front of the sink and start running the tap. There's nothing in this place that isn't mine—no extra set of

anything, no second toothbrush. It's just me. Just how I need it.

I look up at the mirror, at myself. I can see traces of my mother and father in myself. That used to kill me; now, it's just a dull pain.

Dark brown hair, nearly black, and green eyes. Objectively, I know I'm a handsome man. At least on the surface. Whatever is below, it feels like I've been twisted up more than usual lately. And I don't know why.

I don't have the time to find out, so I tell myself what I always do: it doesn't matter. I have a job to do.

I hear the front door, the code beeping. I can tell by the sound who it is. Connor, blond and built like a wall. I see him when I leave the bathroom and walk past the front door to the kitchen. He's more cleaned up than usual, probably because of his new wife. Willow's done about as much for him as he did for her.

That was a best-case scenario. For a while, I thought I'd have to kill her. It's better this way.

He smirks when he sees me. "Busy?"

"Not really." I pour myself a glass of water. I don't drink before a meeting if I can help it.

"I'm the first, huh?"

"No, they're hiding under the couches."

Connor snorts and moves around to one of the couches in question. He sits in it normally, not like he used to drop onto the cushions. It's interesting seeing how he's changed.

The door beeps again. This time it's Aiden, blue-eyed and watchful. His tattoos are poking out everywhere, sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He nods at me, a jerk of the chin, and makes a beeline for the fridge.

Finn comes in last, itchy, almost keyed up. I don't think he's been drinking, but something must be making him nervous. Maybe it's just the withdrawal hitting.

He's the youngest, but he can outdrink everyone else. It's not a good thing.

At least everyone is here. My brothers don't usually make me wait, and since Finn is somewhat clean, he hasn't been causing trouble like he used to. Not quite, at least. But we'll see.

I let them settle before I start. We're family, after all, and despite that, we don't have much time to relax together. It's always about the family business. With Connor and Aiden recently married, they've been more preoccupied than usual.

I listen to them chatter for a few minutes and drink my water. It's good to see things like this, calm and peaceful rather than on the verge of imploding because of some convoluted plot by another member of the Assembly.

But it's only a matter of time.

I set my glass down; the clink draws attention. It's time to start. I circle around the couches before I sit, thinking. There's a lot to talk about.

"So. Let's take stock," I say. "There have been a few developments that need our attention."

They settle in. I start like I always do, following up on things that have happened recently. It's all simple, paperwork, really. Things that don't really matter much. But we've gained a lot of power in Boston in the last few months.

To begin with, both marriages have basically helped us consolidate with other families in the Assembly. Aiden married Rose, and she brought her father's family with her. Connor married Willow, and she brought her dead husband's organization with her. Two territories at once, joined to us in the strongest way possible. Perfect.

But power brings attention, and it breeds hatred. I know we have targets on our backs. It's my job to watch out for the threats and take them down before they try to take us.

When I finish, Connor nods. "Sounds like it's all good news. I guess we can stop talking about selling Finn off to pay the bills."

“And who would take him?” Aiden asks. “It’s not like he cleans. I feel sorry for whoever he marries.”

“Very funny,” Finn says, waving a hand at them. “At least I could please my woman if I had one.”

Connor laughs. “Spoken like a man who’s never had a woman.”

I don’t mind their jokes in the middle of business. It’s good hearing them like this; there was a time when we were all at our worst. All falling apart.

The deaths of our parents were hard. But we managed to make it through, and it seems like the worst of it is over.

I hope.

“If you’re done talking about women, I have business today,” I say.

They settle, turning to me, curious. When I say business, it’s with a capital *B*. It’s big. I know I have their attention now.

“Well, all right. Don’t leave us hanging,” Aiden says, amused. “What is it?”

“We have an offer on the table. It’s from a family here in Boston—powerful, but not part of the Assembly.”

“What kind of power are we talking about?” Connor asks, squinting.

“Old money. A legitimate family, if it weren’t for the fact that they have their hands in some dirty pies.”

“It’s always the pie,” Finn says, shaking his head. “What do they want?”

“A business arrangement. The father is offering his daughter in marriage.”

There it is. It’s in the open and this time, I have no distractions. No way to turn from this.

I don’t run. But in this case, I certainly fucking feel like it.

It’s been a long time since something has made me dislike my work. My life. But the idea of marrying a woman I barely

even know, of having her in my house every day and night, makes tension spread through my muscles. Still, I won't shrink away from doing my duty for my family.

"It would be a good advancement," Aiden muses, cautious. "A good connection for the family."

He's being political. Connor isn't when he asks, "Who? Who was she offered to?"

"Me."

The word leaves my mouth easily. Curiously, I don't feel anything. It's just a fact. It was me they offered her to, and I know the pickings were slim. For a prominent family, it had to be me. They wouldn't propose Finn, the youngest. I'd have to barter to get them to change their minds.

But I'm not going to.

"We could use the connection," Connor finally admits. "But is it worth it? They're not in the Assembly. They don't really know how it works."

"They don't need to," Finn argues. "You tell them to keep their heads down and follow directions, and they'll be fine."

"Assuming they don't get in over their heads. You know people get hungry when they get a taste of it."

"Maybe," I say, "But we'd know. And I doubt they'd risk it. Not if we...properly brief them."

I keep my mind analytical. I don't allow emotion in. This is business, strictly black and white. Risk and gain. I don't know this woman and I don't love her, but none of that matters. That's not the point.

Part of me wonders. Aiden and Connor both ended up loving the women they married for business. Things weren't easy for them, either. There was history, addiction, betrayal. But somehow, through it all, real feelings developed. Maybe the same thing will happen to me.

I'm not banking on it though. I know better than to hope for it or assume it will. Aiden and Connor falling for their wives was different. I'm not the same as them.

I have a responsibility. I have a duty to do what's best for my brothers.

It's what my father always told me. He knew I'd have to take the work up, even if he couldn't predict his untimely death. He wanted me to be ready. He tried hard to teach me what to do.

And maybe it worked. Maybe it worked *too* well. I'm here now, ready to write away the rest of my life. I know my mother wouldn't want me to, but it's not her voice I need to follow right now. Not when it's business.

My mother would have wanted me to marry for love. She would have told me, *follow your heart and it will solve itself*. But that's not true. Not in business.

I don't have the luxury of figuring things out the way Connor and Aiden did. I can't help save a woman or rekindle an old flame. I have to be perfect, and the woman I marry needs to bring something to the family. Something important.

That's what this will do.

We talk about it more, but I know where this is going. And after all the words and suggestions, there's only one conclusion I can come to.

"That's it then," I say. "We'll move forward with the negotiations."

I didn't expect anything different.

My brothers leave one by one, still chatting, still in good spirits. It's quiet when they leave, and I pour myself a drink, the sound of the liquid splashing into the glass echoing in the kitchen.

I've been trying to guide the family since our father died, and that means allowing no emotions in. Doing things for the good of the family, regardless of what I want.

I think about my parents. They were so in love. I don't know what my father would say about my decision; I never got the chance to know what he'd think of things like this. Like love and marriage.

All I want right now is to speak to him, just one last time.

CHAPTER 3

Katrina

After about two hours of listening to the tap above my sink dripping, I get up for the tenth time to try to make it stop. There's a pile of gathered napkins from takeout places on the counter; I snatch a few up and stuff them around the opening of the faucet. It doesn't really help; they soak through almost immediately.

This isn't the only thing broken in my apartment. It's a shitty place, really, with leaky faucets and creaky boards everywhere. Then there's the noise outside. Cars racing by at two in the morning, people yelling.

It's just another hell I have to keep coming back to.

I used to dream that I'd move to New York, or maybe go somewhere abroad. I had visions of my life that I thought would play out. I didn't expect anything to be handed to me, but I knew I could work hard and get what I wanted.

But that's not always how life works.

Instead, I've been sitting in my apartment for hours, using the neighbor's unprotected WiFi to do my research. I figured if I was being told to kill a man, I should know who the hell he is.

I still can't believe I'm being asked to do this. That I'm agreeing to it. But it's not like I have any options left to me. I don't have the luxury of saying no. Not when my life is on the line.

Then there's Lachlan O'Reilly. A name with no face.

I knew when I couldn't find shit about him that something was off. Everyone has a Facebook these days, or an Instagram. Twitter. Something. Social media is inevitable. But when I looked up Lachlan O'Reilly, I didn't find shit. Anywhere.

It set alarm bells ringing. But maybe, I reasoned, he just didn't go by his full name. Or maybe he's just old. Maybe he doesn't have social media.

Somehow, the thought of killing an old man doesn't make me feel better.

I start with what I know. I know he's in town, but that doesn't help. I try nicknames, try just his last name—but that's a mistake. Finding an O'Reilly in Boston is like looking for a needle in a sea of needles. Looking him up just keeps bringing dead ends, until I somehow end up in the back end of some business registry.

And then, like magic, there he is.

The business listing seems shady, and looking up the address only confirms what I'm afraid of. It's on the rougher side of town, where the only lights are neon and the streets don't boast many cars. People don't go there to shop or have an evening out. They go for one thing: Business. With a capital B.

Lachlan O'Reilly is a mafia man.

I glance up at the sink again, wondering what the hell I'm going to do. It's clear the man is involved in some shady stuff. The only places I can find him are in vague references to the owner of the club he has, and even those are hard to find. There's just not much there.

It doesn't give me much hope. In fact, it terrifies me.

It means he'll be well-protected. Not just protected in the conventional sense, either—protected with bodyguards, armed and trained, ready to kill. They don't care if they shoot someone. They've probably done it before, and much worse.

And he's protected in the media, too. I can't find him in the newspapers; there are no direct connections to crime, not even as a person of interest. So whatever he's done, he's kept

it away from the papers and the police. He has people on the inside, or he's so good they never catch him.

So how the hell am I going to pull it off?

They could probably kill me and not even bother covering it up. After all, who would identify me? My mother? She can't recognize me most days when I'm right in front of her. There's no one who would even notice.

Except maybe the bill collectors, when they're not paid.

I keep thinking about how I should just run. But I know I can't. So long as my mother is alive, I can't run away from this. I have to keep trying, keep fighting. I won't leave her like this.

But my task seems impossible. I'm not physically strong; I'm not a trained fighter. I'm not a hacker or a spy. I don't have any kind of skills that would help me get to this guy. I can't even get someone to do it for me; I don't have the money or the friends.

But there has to be something.

I get up and walk over to the sink, looking down into the small pool of water that never fully drains. I can see a blurry image of my face there, warped and stretched over the stainless steel.

People have always said I look younger than I am, maybe by a year or three. I'm twenty-four now; people have told me I look closer to twenty. I've always been carded. I'm not physically threatening at all.

But maybe...maybe he won't see a threat coming from a woman.

I don't know much about the mafia, but I've run into my fair share of third-rate gangsters. They've never been polite or respectful, and I was always wary of the way they looked at me or the other women around me. They didn't seem to care much about women aside from being handsy and escorting them out of clubs and off to wherever they had places they probably didn't actually pay rent for.

There's a chance this Lachlan guy will be the same.

Maybe that's why Mr. V demanded that I do this. Why he wanted me. Maybe he knew all along that I couldn't pay, and he was just looking for someone desperate enough to use for his plans. Maybe he knows I'm more likely to get past Lachlan's guard.

Maybe Lachlan has a reputation with women that I don't know about. Maybe he'll be easy to get to, easy to seduce. Maybe he drinks a lot. Maybe I won't be killing a lucid man, but instead killing a man drunk off his ass.

Maybe he's even a bad person. Maybe he forces himself on women. Maybe he's killed women or children. Maybe his business is drugs, and he's been responsible for teenagers getting hooked. I really don't know anything about him. But he runs a club and he's part of the mafia. So he can't be a saint, can he?

And even if I die in the attempt, it won't make a damn difference to Mr. V. He'll just try again or blackmail someone else into doing it.

I'm disposable.

Thinking of dying makes my stomach clench. I can't die. It's unimaginable. I can't leave my mother behind, can't just let life go by without me. I can't let this be the way I fall. Not after all I've been through. I have to succeed. There's no other option.

I've fallen pretty far. I've sunk to depths I never thought I would, gone places I never considered before everything went to shit. I've dug my heels into the dirt and refused to fall to any of it. But my options are running out, and this is looking a lot like the end of the line.

I'm going to murder someone just to keep myself alive and protect my mother. But I have no choice.

I turn away from the sink, finally ready. I know I have no choice. I have to do this. So if I'm doing it, I'm going all in.

When I looked up Lachlan O'Reilly, I found the name of his club. Tír na Nóg. I don't even know how to pronounce it,

but I know what a club looks like. I know how it works inside. I can navigate this, maybe better than Mr. V could have ever expected. Or maybe he knew about me already.

Not that it matters. All my experience is going to be for nothing if I can't pull off the one thing I really need to do.

I shut my laptop with a hard snap and go to my hanging clothes rack in the far corner. It's a studio apartment, as crappy as it is, and there's no room for anything. But I have one thing tucked away, the last figment of another life that I held onto for some sense of sanity. To remind me that there was a time when my life was more than this.

That it could be again.

But maybe it's too late, and if I have a sequin dress that leaves little to the imagination, I think now is the time to use it.

I jump into the shower without a second thought. There's no use waiting. If I'm going to do this, I know the clock is ticking. Mr. V will come knocking sooner or later, and I have to have something to show him. I need to try.

I dig out my only nice set of lingerie, a cream set with French lace. It still fits perfectly as I slip it on, a bra and panty set that sits just right on my body. The dress is short, barely reaching just far enough past my ass to be tasteful enough to walk around in. The front is low, hanging almost down to my belly button. It stays in place with prayers and some miracle of draping.

For just a second, I allow myself a moment to pretend. I look at myself in the mirror and imagine I'm someone else, with another life that doesn't require me to do what I'm about to do. I can see in myself what people used to notice about me—how tall I am, the way my auburn hair is naturally wavy.

You're statuesque, my mother used to say proudly. She would smile as she petted my hair, something distant in her gaze. I didn't know she was fading even then. *Someone is going to be very lucky when they win your heart.*

And it was a battle to her. She liked to tease me that I was hard to get close to, and that was before everything happened. Before my world turned upside down.

Now, what I see in the mirror is a woman who can be looked at but never touched. And maybe that's it. Maybe I'll never be touched again.

It doesn't matter. I have to focus, or the next time someone touches me, I'll be dead. They'll be dragging my body away. I flip my hair over my shoulder and fix a necklace in place, the point of it hitting just between my breasts, drawing the eyes down. I remember all the old tricks.

I'm going to need all of them now.

I throw a few cards into my phone case—not that any of them will work now, with their balances and the bill I just paid. I just know I have to keep appearances up, at least until I get an in at the club.

In reality, I know there's really only one way for me to get in. One way to get close. It's not like this Lachlan man is going to see me and instantly fall in love. He might not even notice me in a crowd of other women, especially in a club like the one he probably has.

No. It's going to take more. I'm going to have to stick my neck out, put myself in danger, so close there's no way I can fail.

I leave my apartment and start walking. Thankfully, it's not like I live in a great part of town—I don't have too far to go before I can get to where I need to be. I take the time to think about how I'm going to do this, how I'm going to handle the situation I'm about to be in.

I can do this, I tell myself. But I know just thinking those words doesn't make them true. I can use positive affirmations all I want. It won't mean shit if this guy decides I'm suspicious.

The closer I get to the dark side of town, the more I know that this is it. There's no turning back.

The streetlights get farther and farther apart, their bright glow dimming as the neon takes over. The pinks and blues of the signs around me blink erratically, beckoning me toward the tattoo parlors and clubs behind them.

The people on the streets are laughing, but their voices all sound sinister to me, dark. Like they're laughing at me. I try not to look around, try not to gawk like a tourist. I keep my eyes forward, my chin held level. I know they'll smell weakness from a mile away.

The farther I walk, the more crowded it becomes. There are men everywhere, tattoos and perfectly tailored suits disguising their true nature. They seem impeccably dressed, rich. But I know most of them probably have money from doing things that no one will ever speak about.

And there, looming in the distance, is the club. Tír na Nóg. I can see its name emblazoned above the entrance, lit in emerald. The letters are thin, classy. If I didn't know any better, I'd think it was a playground for rich bachelors.

But it's a playground for another type of man, I think. One that's even more dangerous.

I almost hold my breath as I walk up to the place. I don't know where to start; it's been such a long time since I've even been to a club as a patron. I approach the front doors, and the bouncer at the door gives me a quick once-over and murmurs something into his lapel. He doesn't stop me from going in. There's no door charge, then—or I've passed some test I didn't know I had to. Whatever the case, he lets me in, and then it hits me.

The music is balanced. I can feel the bass buzzing up through my heels, but it's not overwhelming. The lights are well done, too. There aren't too many and it isn't too dark inside. It's just perfect enough for privacy, well lit enough for security.

I scan the place as quickly as I can. I see a dance floor, shining deep green, almost black. It looks almost like marble. The private seating is curtained, sequestered away from the noise. There are almost imperceptible outlets beneath the

upholstered seats. So people do business here, I assume. The kind that you can't do anywhere else.

My heart thumps faster. There are people inside already, mingling in little crowds like they've got some kind of seating arrangement. I feel like a kid walking into a new high school where the lunch tables have been decided. I have no clue where to go.

I have to think fast. There's a hallway barely visible from the front of the club, back past the bar. It looks like there's a hallway. It's not the bathroom, so maybe it's offices.

Maybe it's where Lachlan is.

I take a deep breath. I know I have to go back. I have to apply for a job.

That's my only way in. I've known it from the start—I'll have to work, have to get close. And I'm willing to do it, because the alternative is that I fail. And I can't do that.

I make a beeline for the back. As I walk, it starts to come back to me in pieces—the little rules, the ways you move around a club to let people know it's comfortable for you. It's your home. It's not a place you can be tricked, roofied, cajoled away with a drink or a whispered word.

I used to know how to work a room. It's starting to come back to me.

But when I get to the hallway, I recognize a bouncer I didn't notice before. He looks me in the eye and I know whatever unspoken rule that let me get in doesn't apply here. Not to this place.

I try my first trick. I smile, barely a lift of the corner of my mouth, calm. Like this is my place, too.

"I need to get back there," I say. "I need to speak with someone."

He doesn't budge. "Speak with who?"

"It's about a position," I say, letting my smile widen a little. Purposefully, I allow my gaze to wander over his broad chest as my voice drops. "A job."

But the guy doesn't respond to my flirting. He doesn't give a shit about me. I can tell. He isn't even interested in me; his face is rigid, his eyes not wandering over my body at all. He isn't going to be swayed by sex appeal or sweetness.

Shit.

"I think you should go back," he says, tilting his head toward the dance floor. "While you can still enjoy yourself."

Is that a threat? My heart beats faster, fear chilling my skin, but I try to keep my head up, looking him in the eye. I have to get in.

"If you'll just—"

"Miss, I suggest you turn around. Now."

Dammit. It's not going to work.

CHAPTER 4

Lachlan

The club is a busy place on a Friday night. Most men like me keep odd schedules, all based on what deals we're making on any given day.

The benefit to being your own boss is that you can choose when you're off. But if you're serious like I am, you're never truly done with work. There's always something more to do.

Tonight is no different. I know my brothers are probably out with their wives, or out with friends. Doing things to unwind. They have that luxury; I've worked hard to make sure that's the case. Everything I do is to make sure my family is taken care of, protected, free to live their lives.

It doesn't leave me much time to live my own.

I don't have much of a life outside of business. There's too much, and it always happens at once. With Aiden, there was Rose and her father. With Connor, there was Willow and her messy entanglements. I've been so busy keeping up with them and their safety that it's been a long time since I've even had an evening to myself.

But it doesn't matter. I don't need the strings of a relationship. I have the women I bring around to my place, and that takes care of that need.

So tonight, I focus on the club. I do my rounds and check up on shit; I'm the one that has to take care of things here. It's my place, mostly, and I'm in charge of making sure the business is run right. It's my job. So I do it, and I do it well.

Chris is at the bar, working his usual shuffle. He's been here since my parents were here; he's about forty, but he looks barely thirty. He's in shape, a mafia man by blood. He's survived tragedy and horror for a few generations. Now, he works for me. Like he did for my father.

"How is it?" he asks, flipping a bottle in hand, not even looking up.

"Business as usual. Nothing out of the ordinary. And you?"

"Same. But the night is young." He winks, then slides a glass down the bar toward a man sitting at the far end. "If it isn't busy, perhaps it's a good time to take a rest, no?"

I appreciate Chris's attention. I know he cares about me and my brothers; he's known us since we were young. But I'm not going to show how worn down I am right now. I'm the boss. I have a reputation to uphold.

I shrug. "The night is young. Like you said."

"Well. Tell me if it's the usual, right?"

I nod. I don't usually drink when I work, but it's starting to sound like a good idea.

The club seems quiet tonight—or as quiet as it gets. I see familiar faces, business associates and family. Nothing is different.

Except for one thing.

I realize it when my eyes land on the hallway at the back, the place I came from when I started doing my rounds. It's the entrance to the offices, where Adams is posted to keep the drunkest patrons from wandering back.

There's a woman with him.

I can tell they're arguing. I can also tell she isn't drunk; her posture is perfect, poised. Or maybe she just holds her booze well. You can never tell from this far.

I make my way toward them. I'm not excited about breaking something up this early in the night, but hopefully

she's just lost. Hopefully she won't cause a scene. That's the last thing I need right now. I don't have the patience.

When I arrive, I step up beside her shoulder, hands in my pockets.

"Is there a problem here?" I ask.

The woman turns to look at me; her eyes widen when she sees my face. I'm used to that reaction from women and men alike. I know what kind of man I seem like. I know when she sees me, she can hear the unspoken words: *fuck with me and I'll kill you.*

It's unintentional. I resort to killing as a last option; I believe my family is smarter than that; I'm smarter than that. You can't blackmail a dead man.

But it helps to be feared. Most of the time.

Adams shakes his head. "I was keeping this woman from entering the restricted area."

"I want to be a dancer," the woman blurts, before I can say anything. Her voice doesn't shake. She says it matter-of-factly. Confidently. "That's why I'm here."

I frown. I'm not in the habit of letting random women apply for work here, but she's got the body for it, and she's clearly bold. Besides, we just had to fire a woman Connor once fucked, a woman who caused a scene. There's an opening for someone new.

"Stick around until the end of the night," I finally say. "I'll audition you then."

She nods once. She seems almost dazed, as if she didn't expect a yes. But it's not like it's a yes, yet. I'm about to turn away when she finally opens her mouth to speak again.

"Thank you. I'm Kate. Winters."

I pause. It's interestingly forward of her to say anything else to me. Maybe she doesn't know who I am.

"Lachlan O'Reilly," I say.

She nods. So she does know who I am; I just confirmed it for her. Interesting.

I leave her there, giving Adams a sharp nod. I appreciate him being thorough, and I'm glad I had a chance to meet this Kate Winters. First impressions are important to me, and she seems to have a handle on her shit. At least at first glance.

I return to my office to take care of business. There's paperwork I need to do, things that have to be taken care of before I venture back out. I lose myself in it for a while, and then there's a knock before the door swings open.

Connor enters, hands in his pockets. He looks relaxed, sedate. "How's the night going?"

"Quiet, for the most part."

"Mostly?" He raises an eyebrow, interested.

I should have known better than to say anything. I sigh and shove some papers aside. "We have a possible new dancer. She's trying out later."

"Is she any good?"

"I don't know yet. She's got the body. I'll find out if she has the moves."

Connor nods, then turns to look at the shelves behind him. They're mostly for show; there's a model of a house I haven't built on one, a few books on another. None of it is particularly useful, but it's good to have displayed when I bring someone back for business. It sends a message.

"You're not taking the night off?" he finally asks. *And there it is.*

"No. There's business to finish."

"Still. It's a Friday."

I don't want to argue with him. I keep my mouth shut, hoping he'll wander off to his wife or somewhere else so I can finish my work. I don't have any patience left to handle my brother. I know he means well, and I know he cares about me. But I can't go back and forth with him right now.

The door opens again. I give up on my paperwork and set it aside. It's Aiden this time, adjusting his watch as he enters.

"What are you two doing?" he asks.

"Talking about the new dancer," Connor supplies.

"New dancer?"

"Well, she hasn't been hired yet," Connor corrects himself. "But Lachlan says she's hot."

I didn't really. I shake my head. "I'm auditioning her later."

"Well, if that's what he thinks, I'm sure it'll work out," Aiden says, smirking.

I know they're giving me shit. I know they want me to have what they have, as happy as they are. But every time they bring women up, it just reminds me that I'm going to be navigating a business arrangement soon, a marriage to a woman I don't know.

It reminds me that no matter what, my future is the future of the family. I can't afford to fuck it up.

A dancer is out of the question. I can't even fathom it.

So it's all teasing, but it doesn't matter. I just wave a hand vaguely and try to focus on my paperwork again. "Like I said. I'm testing her later. We'll see how it goes."

"You do that," Aiden says, nodding at Connor. "We'll be around."

They won't be around for long. I know it already; they'll be back to Rose and Willow in no time.

They head out after a while, and the night passes in a blur of work. The club empties out eventually, people coming and going, and I don't keep track of the woman that came in. Kate. I'm not worried about her yet; if she even sticks around, I'll deal with her later.

I make regular rounds in between paperwork until there's almost no one left, and then I finally look for Kate Winters. I

find her near the bar, sipping on something—just water, I think.

Good. I like my dancers clean and sober; no addicts, no alcoholics. No drama. I need functioning people. They're working, after all. I want them to be present for their job.

There are still people lingering. I figure I'll wait for them to leave, but I still approach her. I have questions in mind. Things I want answered before I even consider bringing her in.

She looks up when I approach her. She doesn't waver when I look her in the eye, so that's good. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Why do you want to work here?"

Her response is immediate. It unlocks something like a magic key; I didn't expect such a quick reaction. There's a look that passes over her face; one I know well. It makes her eyes darken, adding a shadow where there wasn't one before.

"My mother," she says. "She has medical issues. A lot of bills. I need money for them."

There's a part of my brain that reacts to that, something that lights up. A memory of when I was visiting the hospital almost every day, watching my mother lie still and silent.

But I don't let it touch me. I don't mix business and private life; I can hear Kate Winters tell me her sad story, and it doesn't affect me.

I nod. I'm not entirely satisfied with her answer anyway; it doesn't tell me why she came to my club instead of any old cashier job. There are easier ways to make money, simpler ways. But then again, my dancers make good money. Maybe she guessed as much.

"Boyfriend? Husband? Girlfriend?"

"No one," she says. There's confidence in her reply again, no room for interpretation. It seems like she's telling the truth, and I have a fairly good eye for lying.

The club is empty by now. It didn't take long. I jerk my chin toward the stage, but I keep my eyes on her as I tell her, "Time for your audition."

CHAPTER 5

Katrina

He says *audition*, but that's not what I hear. It's not what I feel. I know this is life or death. Everything hinges on how well I do right now. If I can't make it, there may not be a second chance to get this close to Lachlan. There may be no other way for me to kill him.

I have to succeed.

I swallow hard; my throat feels dry, even after all the water I've been drinking. When Lachlan first left me, I was offered a drink, and I took it. I felt like I needed it. How else was I going to get through the night?

But after a little while, sipping on alcohol started to seem like a bad idea. I need my wits, need as clear a head as possible. I'm feeling wobbly enough, uneasy enough without adding alcohol to the mix.

And something tells me Lachlan doesn't like his employees to get drunk.

He walks away from me, and I try not to give in to the urge to run. Instead, I watch him, trying to gauge whether there's a way to get close to him. Maybe seduce him. Anything to make this go my way.

He walks dangerously, but not like he's trying to be intimidating. Like he's a big cat, a panther or something, full of muscle and power that's unused until the moment he strikes. He's simmering with potential. He could turn on anyone around him at the drop of a hat.

Maybe I don't have to worry about his bodyguards. Maybe he's dangerous enough by himself.

I can't run from this. I keep my breathing as steady as I can and walk to the far end of the club, where the stage sits. It's just as refined as the rest of the club; you could mistake it as a spot for live music. I step up onto the stage and try to keep my balance. I need to make a good impression.

Lachlan walks to a panel near the back of the dance floor; he adjusts the lights, making the club black in the blink of an eye. The only lights left illuminate the stage.

I can't see him.

I can't see anything. It's pitch black, the rest of the club swallowed by darkness. It feels immediately better, but there's an undercurrent of terror to it. A warning in my head. A reminder that I can't see what's waiting for me; I can only do what I came here to do. I can only dance.

The lights are hot on my skin. Even with barely any clothes on, I can feel them burn me. They feel like they're piercing my skin, turning me inside out. I feel like any second, a gun will appear from the darkness and it'll be over.

He'll say, *I know who you are. I know you were sent here to kill me. And I can't let you do that.*

But after a few seconds of standing in the dark, nothing happens. He's just auditioning me, and I need to dance for him.

I'm not totally out of my depth. I'm not unfamiliar with stripping. I did it for a little while in high school; I lied about my age, learned how to do my hair and makeup to try to look older. I learned how to talk. Learned how to pass without trying too hard.

But that stopped after my cancer diagnosis. I didn't have the energy to dance as I was going through treatments, and I never started up again after the cancer went into remission.

Still, the moves aren't totally alien to me. It's been a while, but I can feel myself slipping back. I just have to let myself go, to drift back to that place, that time, and let it guide me.

It's scary, unmooring my current self from the stability of what I know. The bills, the blackmail, the reality of my life. But there's relief in letting go. There's relief in letting myself be in high school again, just a girl dancing on a stage, young and brimming with some untapped energy.

Maybe there's still some left in me.

The music comes on. It's a song I'm familiar with, something on the radio these days. The bass is low and thrumming; the drums roll in the background. There's a discernible beat to it.

It was made for this. For dancing. For me.

I try to pretend I'm back in high school, more innocent than I am now, more hopeful. I would have believed this was for me back then. I'd probably fantasize that the songwriter wrote the song about me, that I was a muse. A dancer in the dark.

I try not to let my nerves show.

For a second, I indulge. I shut my eyes and think, *I'm her again. I'm living in the past, a dream I could have dreamed.*

I raise my hands over my head and start to sway. I go slowly at first, careful, like I'm finding my footing. I put one hand on the pole and walk in a slow circle like I'm tracing a path someone left for me. I let my breathing come slower, fill my chest, raise it high.

I take my first long step around the pole, swinging my leg out. I let myself slip down a little, like I'm falling.

God, I missed this.

As my muscles start to return to familiar movements, I throw myself into it more. I swing a leg around the pole, start easing into more complex moves.

I take hold of the bar with both hands, pulling myself up against it. I arch in a perfect curve, leaning back, dipping in a low arc. I let myself slide down, hiding my hand as I slide the straps of my heels off.

I know it's unusual to take the shoes off, but it feels right. It feels good. I'm taking away everything—all the little shiny pieces I wore to the club, all the unnecessary things. I'm stripping myself down to only me, only what I want him to see.

I step out of my shoes and up to the pole. I'm doing moves that take all my strength and concentration, and my muscles burn as I push myself, my heartbeat pounding in my ears along with the downbeat of the song.

After what feels like just a few seconds or an eternity, I flip over and sink to the ground again as the song fades out.

The moment ends like it's a broken spell, snapping with a flurry of sparks. I blink, the light suddenly too bright, my chest heaving. I'd forgotten how much strength it takes to pole dance.

And then I remember what I'm doing.

I press my lips together, heart thundering. I can't see anything. But then the lights come up a little, dim, and I see him. Lachlan.

He's unreadable. He stands by the lights for a moment, watching me. I don't know if he wants me to say something, do something. I don't understand his silence.

He strides up to the stairs suddenly, but his footsteps are measured. Careful. He walks up the steps to the stage like he knows how many there are without looking. I can't move. I can only watch him approach—and I realize that he has green eyes, like a forest just after rain.

He walks around me when he finally steps up to the stage. I try to stand still, try not to show any discomfort. I don't know what he wants or what he's looking for; I only know I can't waver.

It feels like an inspection. I'm self-conscious, my thoughts racing. Does it look like I'm holding in my stomach? Do I seem too tired? Am I not tired enough?

Do I seem suspicious? Does he know?

But more than that, there's a thought nagging at me, on repeat in the back of my mind. I don't want to listen to it, but I can't help thinking it.

Does he think I'm beautiful?

It's such a stupid question. But I can't help it. He must have some kind of standard for his dancers, and it would help me get close to him if he thinks I'm attractive. Even if it feels vain for me to wonder.

I'm wondering about it when he touches me, one hand running lightly over my hip and toward my waist. He traces the curve with just his fingertips, but it's not intimate or longing. It's almost clinical, like he's inspecting me this way, too.

Does he do this with all the dancers? *He must. I'm not special.* But my throat feels dry. My heart hasn't stopped racing. I feel just as vulnerable and exposed as when I was dancing.

His touch may be detached, but my body isn't. As much as I don't want to react, everything about his touch is making me respond. My body doesn't care about the situation; all it knows is there's a man touching me, his hand careful and slow.

Like a promise.

I can feel goosebumps rising. Everything in me is burning, dying to touch him. But I can't. Not even to test him. If I do and it goes wrong, it's over.

So I stay perfectly still and wait.

“Where do you live?”

“Close,” I say, responding immediately. I can feel that he doesn't want bullshit. I don't know how much detail he needs, though, and I'm not about to just give him everything. Not when I don't know what he's thinking.

He's still walking around me, slow. He's at my right shoulder. I can feel his breath against my skin.

“Have you held a regular job before?”

“Yes. I’ve had three jobs since high school. I left the second of my own volition. The third fired me when they decided I spent too much time at the hospital.”

I keep my voice neutral. I don’t want to sound like I’m blaming someone, avoiding responsibility—even if it wasn’t my fault. I want him to know I can keep my shit together.

I think he’ll appreciate that.

He’s at my shoulder now, almost face-to-face with me. “And your mother. What is it?”

“Alzheimer’s. She has to be in a care facility. It takes a lot to keep her safe from herself.”

I don’t see pity in his eyes when he circles to face me. Pity, I’m used to. This is different. He has nothing there other than acknowledgement, like I’ve just told him my address. Like it’s not a big deal.

I almost like it. He’s not being weird about my family story, about the tragedy of it.

His eyes wander down my chest. I can feel my heart swoop, threatening to sink. I can feel what’s coming. I don’t know how it will play out.

He’s looking at my port scar. It’s from the treatments, from when I was fighting cancer. The scar has faded a bit by now, and you could almost miss it from a distance.

But he’s close.

“What’s this?”

I don’t want to tell him. I realize it suddenly, feel it so deep in my bones that it’s startling. I don’t know why I feel this way. I just know that suddenly, I can’t fathom telling him a single thing.

“An accident,” I say. It’s not a lie. The whole thing was an accident, a random stroke of misfortune. At least, that’s what the doctors said.

So young. Such a shame.

He takes my word for it, at least for now. He doesn't push. He just brings his eyes back up to my face, calm and unwavering. Serious.

“Do you have any drama? Any shit you're bringing into my club?”

“No.”

It's true. I don't have a partner, don't have family, don't have anyone who will come looking for me here. Not now. I have no ties left to me except my mother, and she's sitting in a facility. She rarely remembers my name.

I don't have drama. You need a life for that.

Lachlan looks me in the eye. “You'll get a trial,” he finally says. “Two weeks.”

And just like that, all the air in my lungs escapes. I breathe a sigh of relief, feeling my body unravel from the feet up. I feel like everything has been lifted from me, even though I know it's just begun. This is only the first step.

And I don't have much time.

But all I need is two weeks. Two weeks, and I'll find a way to kill him.

CHAPTER 6

Lachlan

It's only been a few days since the decision was made to move forward with the marriage arrangement, but already, I'm sitting in my car, on my way to meet with the man proposing to become my father-in-law.

How quickly things move.

I feel like I've been working since I woke up, but that's normal. I handle so much business every day that it all eventually becomes a blur. It's never bothered me before; I know it's my responsibility to handle things. I know I can do it.

But lately, I've been feeling restless—like I'm settling. As if I could *settle* by taking control of one of the biggest families in Boston.

The car pulls up to the place. It's a hotel, Gold Tower, new and shiny. There's a café on the rooftop, and I make my way there, carefully adjusting the cuffs of my sleeves and buttoning my suit jacket as I walk.

The elevator is gold, old-fashioned, with a neatly starched attendant by the buttons. He doesn't ask where I'm going; he knows. I slide my hands into my pockets as I watch the floors fly by, waiting for the doors to open to the roof.

Finally, they do. I step out and into the fresh air, looking around the well-organized setup. It's not crowded; the tables are spaced well, the perimeter of the roof lined with flourishing planters brimming with flowers. Overhead, there's

a gauzy canopy that does just enough to filter out some of the shining sun.

It's certainly a gorgeous place.

A man approaches me—one I recognize, even if I've only met him once. Ezra Cross is the owner here, and the father of the woman I may be about to marry. He's tall, obviously from a good family. Everything about his posture speaks to a cultured upbringing and physical prowess.

He has intelligent eyes, though I can see they lack the stain of things I've seen—of death, deals gone wrong, the underworld. Ezra Cross has blue eyes and the feel of a senator. He's not a man from the world I've always inhabited.

But he doesn't have to be, so long as he's willing to look the other way.

"O'Reilly. Thank you for coming," he says, offering his hand.

"Of course." I smile, but it's more like a mechanical movement than a feeling. "Shall we?"

He smiles. I know he's probably wary of me, of my kind. But I know how to be a gentleman, and I know business. Cross is probably just glad that I'm playing the part he expects for his daughter.

That said, he could still decide against this entire thing. After all, it's his daughter. She could end it all with tears. Something tells me he's the kind of man that would do anything for his only child.

"Of course. Why don't you join us?" Ezra gestures, guiding me toward his table.

I can see her even from here. As we approach, I notice the way she's trying studiously not to be too interested. She smiles at her father, then looks back down at the table. She's making tea of some kind, adding in sugar and milk.

"This is my daughter," Cross says. There's an unmistakable pride in his voice. "Naomi."

"Miss Cross," I say, tilting my head.

She's younger than I thought she would be. Lovely. Maybe she's twenty. There's a sweetness to her face, something soft in her posture.

And I feel nothing.

It's what I expected. All my musings about my brothers and their marriages were just that. I always knew my situation was different. There's no potential for something between me and Naomi Cross. She's a business setup. That's all.

I don't stoop so low as to be cold toward her, but I know there's no reason to be polite. No reason to draw this out any longer than I need to. As naïve as she seems, I'm sure she knows this is just business. If she was expecting more, her father's been lying to her.

I watch her murmur something to her father before she collects her teacup, ducking her head politely at me. She doesn't meet my eye.

Not like Kate.

The thought comes suddenly; it startles me so much that I forget what I'm doing for a moment. I don't know why I thought of that woman, but suddenly, the image of her dancing is in my head. She moved sensually, free, not self-conscious. Not at all like Naomi, so stiff and shy.

Not that it matters. I don't know why it came to mind in the first place. I brush the thoughts aside and focus on the deal at hand.

Naomi leaves, and I sit down with Cross, settling in for what I know will be a tangled dance. The negotiation we're hashing out is not an easy one.

"I need to know I'm not sticking my neck out. Or my daughter's," Cross says.

I nod, calm. "I understand."

In reality, I don't. It's frustrating. If he loves his daughter so much, it's beyond me why he'd put her in this situation. But I know the truth of these things. Cross is the last in a long line of his family, the second-eldest son. He may not be the

firstborn, but he has the power. His brother has health issues, and there's a chance Cross could take everything.

He wants what isn't his, and I understand that. He's making this business arrangement to gain ground. It's the same for me. I want an in, a way to legitimize the family. I want to branch out from the club, find more footing in the real world.

We both have things to gain from this negotiation. It's the details that are the hardest part.

We sit and talk for an hour, punctuated by coffee and lapses into silence as we consider each other's words. I know this won't be finished today. We're both just feeling each other out, gauging what might need to be sacrificed, what can't be compromised on.

We don't come to an agreement, but progress is made. By the end, I know more about what Cross wants, and he understands that I'm not some uneducated muscle man. I'm not some garden-variety criminal with too much money. I know what I'm talking about, and I can match him step for step.

Cross stands at the end of it, something more serious in his gaze when he looks at me this time. He might have underestimated me.

"It's been enlightening, O'Reilly. We'll meet again."

"Yes," I agree. "We will."

I leave the hotel thinking about Naomi and Cross, about the deal I need to secure. There's time yet to make this work, but the sooner it happens, the better. I know now how to handle Cross. It won't be much longer before I'm standing in a chapel, marrying a woman I don't know.

I won't be the first man in the family to do it.

The thought should be comforting. I should feel better, thinking about how Aiden's and Connor's marriages were both arranged. How they were both made for security, for the family. I should be confident given how they both turned out. How deeply both my brothers are in love with their wives.

But I know it won't be the same for me.

I start the trip back to the club with bitterness on my tongue. The bad mood clings to me, somehow refusing to leave. It has its fingers dug deep into me, clawing away at the strongest part of me. I want to be unaffected, but I'm not.

I have no objection to marrying for the gain of the family. That's what I've always known I'd do. It was never a bad thing to me, never something I questioned. I've known since I was young that marriage is a great tool for gaining ground and alliances. It was never about romance for me.

But for some reason, being in that meeting with Cross made my shoulders tighten. It made me tense in a way other deals haven't. Not even when I've been in the Assembly, defending my family.

It just doesn't make sense.

I know the only thing I can do now is unwind, do some work. Focus on anything but the meeting and the marriage on the horizon. I can distract myself; I have enough responsibilities to do that.

When I step through the front doors, I find the small crowd that's gathered with their attention on the stage. I pause, following their gazes, and find Kate on the stage. Dancing.

She's gorgeous. I know the patrons notice her too, something different drawing them in. They're watching in a way they normally don't—and I can't say I blame them. There's something about Kate that draws you in. Something powerful.

She's beautiful. There's a strength in her when she dances, a careful power that's alluring and mysterious. She works the pole without a single misstep. And she looks like a fucking goddess while doing it; every little detail is right, from the way she lifts her legs to the way her hands are always perfectly placed. From head to toe, nothing is out of place. She's perfect.

I can't help watching, just for a few moments. But I know I shouldn't, so I tear myself away, reminding myself I have

things to do. I head for my office and settle in behind my desk, ignoring the distant beat of the music from the main part of the club.

But even with my mind distracted by work, I can't quite stop thinking about Kate.

I can't stop thinking about the way she stood on that stage when it was just the two of us, her chin held high and her gaze unwavering. I can't stop thinking about the way her face was so perfect and still, like a painting or a statue.

How her lips parted just slightly when I touched her.

I finish some of my work, but I can't keep going. There's too much going on in my head. I have to leave, go home. I'm turned on and on edge.

I leave out the back so I don't have to go through the club and see anyone dancing again. It must just be that I need this itch scratched, need to get it out of my system. It's just something I need to take care of. That's all.

I'm in my car when I call the number; I want someone at my house as fast as I can get them. The woman on the other end knows me, and she greets me politely before getting down to business.

"One?"

"Yes. Immediately."

"She'll be on her way."

I pull up to my place and barely pay attention to parking. I can feel my blood being pushed through my veins; there's a beating in my chest that's different. A hunger I can't quite describe. I need this, and I need it now.

I'm antsy when I get in. I pour whiskey, just a thin amber sheen across the bottom of my glass. I down it at once, but the burn as it pours down my throat doesn't do much to distract me.

When the doorbell rings, I'm keyed up. I open it, and the woman barely steps inside before I'm on her, kissing her neck. That hunger is still right there as I push her back into the office

behind her. I can hear her moan as I guide her back, and there's a flicker of annoyance in me. I hope she won't be as theatrical as the last girl.

I pull a condom out and roll it on. I sink into a chair and guide her, one hand on her neck. She slides onto the floor easily, practiced, and ducks. She starts to suck my dick without any more encouragement. She knows what to do.

I try to let myself drift, but all I can see is her blonde hair and the way her blue eyes flick up to me occasionally, watching, trying to understand what I'm looking for.

I don't even know what I'm looking for. I just know this isn't it.

It's not doing much for me. I want it to, want to get this out of my system, but it's going nowhere. I'm hard but far from finishing, waiting for something I can't name.

I take her chin and get her to stand up. She backs up against the wall behind her; I slide a finger inside her, feeling that she's wet. She moans when I work her open, slow, exploring. I try to focus on the movements, the sensations. The sound of her.

But something is wrong.

God damn it. I just want to fucking finish.

I drive into her, filling her with my cock in one thrust. I don't hold back, moving harder and more roughly than usual. The woman slaps her palms against the wall. Her chest heaves; I watch her breasts rise and fall. I watch her back arch. But none of it does anything for me.

Fucking hell.

I slam into her several more times, growling with each thrust. Then I curse gruffly and pull out, letting her skirt fall back down. She blinks hazily, her cheeks red.

As she straightens to look at me, I jerk my chin toward the door.

“Get out.”

She's lost at first. Thrown for a loop. I can see in her expression that she's a little offended, or maybe disappointed. But she's getting paid all the same, so after hesitating for another second, she leaves. What does it matter to her?

When the door shuts behind her, I pull the condom off. I toss it in the corner and sink back into the chair. I start to jerk off, letting my mind wander.

And again, my thoughts stray to Kate.

It's immediate. Like a magic word, I can feel myself getting rock-hard. It's intense, a rush that happens almost all at once. I finally lose myself, ignoring everything that's wrong about this, instead letting it take over.

I think about what it would be like to have her on her knees instead, sucking me off. I can almost see her when I shut my eyes, feel her auburn hair tangled in my fingers. I know she wouldn't be fake—I wouldn't let her. I'd push her right to the edge of what she could take, and I'd savor every moan and whimper that fell from her swollen lips as they stretched around my cock so perfectly.

My fist moves faster as I think of fucking her. I'd lay her out and watch her perfect breasts bounce. I'd hold her waist, feeling her curves beneath my hands. I would slide into her all at once, letting her heat tighten around me. Maybe she'd moan then, unable to stop herself, reacting to my cock filling her.

I think about slamming into her harder. I think about her bracing her hands on the headboard, about her back arching off the bed. I think about how I'd leave marks on her skin where I held her, gripping her tight as I drove in harder and faster.

I can hear it. I can hear how wet she'd be, hear myself slamming into her body again and again. I can hear her gasps as she gets closer, her cries as she wordlessly tells me she's going to come.

I can see her perfect body twist under my hands, clenched tight around my cock. Taking all of me in. Wanting nothing

more than for me to fuck her again and again, make her come until she forgets everything but my name.

I'd empty myself inside her. I'd feel every rush of her orgasm, every muscle in her body tensing. As I think of Kate beneath me, sweat beading on her soft skin, I come hard, spilling all over my hand.

The tension slowly drains from my shoulders, but even as it does, my jaw clenches.

Shit.

This is going to be a problem.

CHAPTER 7

Katrina

It's strange, working again. Working a job like this.

I've been so focused on my mother that I barely noticed the days, months, and years flying by. It's just been a blur of trying to look after her and dodge bills I can't hope to pay.

Now, I'm right back in the thick of something I never meant to return to.

I'm on my way to the club for work, something I didn't think I'd ever have again. I know what my employment history looks like. A background check would show terrible credit, landlords working to give me a break on rent for just one month too long before giving up on me. People would say it's sad about my mother, but that's not enough for them.

It's not enough of an excuse for me to be broke and failing.

But that doesn't matter at this job. Not really. All the O'Reilly man cares about is that I don't bring drama into his club, and I know I won't. So I'm here, waiting. Preparing.

Looking for a chance.

It's only been about five days since I was brought on. It's part of my trial run, part of the brief stint I'm supposed to have before Lachlan decides whether I'm worth it. Every day I've shown up, I've been terrified he'll be there. Watching.

Figuring out why I'm really here.

But so far, there's been nothing. Lachlan hasn't drawn me aside, hasn't pulled me onto the street by my hair. He hasn't

had me followed, as far as I know. He has no idea I'm only here to kill him.

But the thought hangs over my head every waking moment, and I can't make it go away any more than I can make my debt go away. I can't avoid it.

I'm getting anxious to make a move.

I know I shouldn't rush into this, but my gut roils every time I see Lachlan. Part of me desperately wants to just get it over with, but another part of me balks every time I think about it.

In my time at the club, I've been trying to learn everything I can about Lachlan and his brothers. It's been hard to keep track; there are several people who stop by and come into the back of the club every day. After two days, I figured out names and faces.

Aiden, Connor, and Finn. Three brothers, three different ages. Two are married. That surprised me—that they were married. They look so young, barely in their mid-twenties. Like guys I'd know. But they're married, although I'm positive that Lachlan isn't.

Figuring out their routines has taken me the full five days of my employment so far. I've watched the bartender and the bouncers, the O'Reilly family going about their business.

I hope they haven't seen me watching. I'm so aware that for every moment I'm looking, someone could look right back at me. And then what?

How much would it take for them to get suspicious of me? And would they give me a chance to explain, or just put a bullet between my eyes?

Today, as I get to the dressing room, the dancers are all talking. I see Lilah first; a tall brunette, long-legged and fit. I think she's trying to get enough money to support her med school dreams. She's talking to Desire, a curvy blonde who refuses to tell anyone her real name or business. All we need to know, according to her, is that she's always around if we ever need someone to spot us for dinner.

“Are you sure?” Lilah asks, tugging a garter on over her heels. “I mean—”

“It’s unmistakable,” Desire says, shrugging. She’s pulling her blonde mane over her shoulders, tousling the strands as she talks.

“Why? I mean, God. She seemed like she had her head screwed on straight.”

“Don’t they all.”

I take a seat in front of the empty mirror to the left of them. Lilah glances at me, smiling. I smile back, trying not to feel like a fraud. Are these women going to have a job when I leave? They must, right? I’m sure one of Lachlan’s brothers will take over.

Desire sighs as she finishes applying her lipstick. “Still. There’s no other evidence. I mean, they’d never fire her that way if it wasn’t bad.”

Lilah shakes her head. “She seemed like she had no drama. But fucking one of the brothers? Why the hell would she do that? She needed the job.”

“Clearly not as much as some of us,” Desire says, shrugging. “I mean, she knew. They’re basically off-limits.”

Shit. I don’t like the sound of that. I need to get close to Lachlan, and the easiest way to do that is to seduce him. Now I’m hearing they’re off limits?

That the last dancer got fired for fucking one of them?

I want to ask which brother it was, but I’m too nervous. So I lean in and listen, hoping they’ll bring it up themselves.

“She should have known better,” Desire argues. “I mean, God. The one rule we have that you absolutely can’t break.”

Lilah fishes for an answer. “Maybe she was in love. Maybe ___”

“In love? With one of the O’Reilly brothers? Yeah, because they’re so talkative with us.”

“Well, maybe he was with her.”

“Lilah, Lachlan hardly talks to any of us, and technically, he’s our boss. He’d have plenty of reasons to if he wanted to.”

“But it wasn’t Lachlan,” Lilah says, arching a brow and smirking. “You know it was Connor.”

Desire laughs. “Yeah, you’re probably right.”

At least it wasn’t Lachlan, I think. But it doesn’t help much to know it was a different brother that the last dancer was after. I just wish I knew more about it. Were they caught? Was it the brother who fired her?

Is any of it actually true?

It’s all just rumor now. I can’t know if it’s true; all I can do is try to finish what I came here to do, as hard as it’s going to be.

And maybe it’s not as bad as I’m thinking. Maybe, since one of the brothers already slept with a dancer, the rule is possible to break sometimes. Maybe it means that I’ll get my chance, and it won’t matter that it’s a fireable offense.

Because hopefully, I’ll be long gone.

I get up from my vanity and peek out from the backstage area, wondering what’s going on outside. I can immediately see the brothers gathered at the bar. They look relaxed.

Well, most of them look relaxed. Not so much Lachlan, although he seems more at ease than I’ve ever seen him before. He’s still stoic, though. Reserved. There’s distance in his face and I can see it even from this far away. He’s handsome but remote.

I shake my head. I can’t look too long. Instead, my gaze lands on the women—the wives. Rose and Willow. I’ve heard their names in passing, but this is only the second time I’ve seen them here. Rose is blonde and perfectly proportioned. Willow is petite, her dark curls gathered at the nape of her neck.

The women are standing aside, but it doesn’t look like they’re being excluded. They’re huddled together, laughing

about something, their heads bent as they talk. Not a care in the world.

There's a pang of jealousy in my gut that I can't help when I look at them. When I see their bond, the way they seem to look out for each other. All of them seem to look out for each other, even if they're criminals. Even in their drama and horror, they have each other.

Which is more than I can say about myself.

I don't have anyone that will look out for me the way they look after one another. I don't have a family, blood or found, to fall back on. I don't have support.

I don't have someone willing to kill for me.

Instead, I have myself, and a mother I would kill for... but who barely remembers my name.

I shake off the thoughts invading my mind. I have a job to do, and it's almost time for my set to start.

I have a small spot in the middle of the night's routines. Lachlan peppered me in among the other dancers—never in the limelight, but close enough that he can gauge my performance. It won't matter how well I dance if no one watches.

The songs aren't my choice. They were picked for me, and I kept my mouth shut about the options. I knew better than to argue. I just went along with it, made a routine, and started going on stage.

As I dance, I try to forget. I forget that I have to kill Lachlan and I think only about dancing. I think about myself as just another one of the girls, just another dancer doing the work for the money. I pretend I got this job on my own, and the money I could make will all go to me. I won't have to worry about paying for anything or budgeting my meals.

It's a nice fantasy, and it helps me let go of the sadness that clings to me like a cobweb and focus on putting on a good show.

I'm in the middle of the first song when there's a disturbance in the crowd. A male voice catches my attention, angry, raised loudly enough that it jars me from my fantasy. I look up... and my heart stops.

Shit.

It's my ex, Casey. The one my mother was asking about the other day, the one she always forgets that I left. He was controlling and petty, and I walked out of his life the second I felt like I could get away. I thought it would be clean and easy. We never really loved each other, so our breakup was inevitable.

Or at least, that's how I saw it. But judging from the shit he's yelling, he's clearly not over it.

He's being belligerent. He's shoving his way around, and from the looks on the other patrons' faces, I know they're wondering who the hell this guy is.

Does he know who they are? Does he know how easily the men who own this place could kill him?

I'm sure he doesn't care, or he's too drunk to realize that this might be the last thing he ever does. The last mistake he ever makes.

My heart is pounding. *Fuck.* I can't even begin to imagine how he could fuck up my chances. All the work I did to get here, and he's about to ruin it because he isn't over a relationship that was toxic from the very beginning.

Before I can react, Casey barges onto the stage.

“Oh, so this is why you wanted to break up, you fucking cunt?” he shouts. “So you could shake your ass for a bunch of goddamn strangers? Look at you, you look like a fucking slut!”

My heart jumps into my throat; all my professionalism is gone. I stop dancing, backing away and slipping behind the pole, as if keeping it between us can create some kind of barrier.

Suddenly, I feel exposed. I'm in lingerie, and I've never cared much before, but I feel so bare now. I feel like there's nothing between me and Casey. Nothing to stop him from hitting me, doing whatever he wants to do with his anger right now.

And I've never seen him as angry or as drunk as this.

It terrifies me.

“You fucking whore! Were you sleeping around when we were together? Were you letting men feel you up? Getting off on it? Getting off on sneaking around behind my back? I knew all that shit about your mom was a goddamn lie!”

My ears ring. He's yelling at me, shouting, causing a scene. I stumble backward, flinching away from Casey. But as much as I'm freaking out, I can feel something else rising in my chest. Anger. I'm pissed.

How dare he? How fucking dare he? He treated me like shit for the entirety of our relationship, yet he has the audacity to come in here and act like I'm the one who wronged him? Like we could have had something real? He never liked how much time I spent with my mother, and now I know why. He distrusted me so much that he figured I was cheating on him.

And now he's about to ruin everything just because of his bruised ego.

The bouncers are coming for Casey. I can see them weaving their way past the crowd, and I pray they'll get to him before he does something stupid. His hands curl into fists, and he advances toward me—

And then suddenly, another body steps between me and Casey. Someone larger.

Lachlan.

He's bigger than my ex, I realize. He's also more threatening. But that threat isn't pointed at me; it's directed at Casey, dark and menacing.

Casey blinks, but before he can react, Lachlan steps forward. Moving with the grace and strength of a predator, he

grabs Casey by the arm and drags him right out of the club.

All I can do is watch them go, my heart pounding, my pulse thundering in my ears.

Oh god. What is Lachlan going to do?

CHAPTER 8

Lachlan

It's not the first time someone has acted up in my club. There are always men who can't hold their alcohol, or women who get too wild. When you own a club and there's alcohol involved, it's the perfect cocktail for misbehavior. And the dancers?

Well, it just means the rowdy ones get rowdier.

I knew all of that when my brothers and I took on the job of running this place. I knew the difficulties involved, and that's why I worked twice as hard to vet our people—the dancers, the bouncers, and everyone in between.

Still, there are always nights like this, when I have to deal with someone outside of my influence. Someone who shouldn't be in my club in the first place.

This time, it's a stocky blond man.

He's still red in the face when I drag him out. He twists in my grip at first, trying to look back at Kate Winters. *No drama*, she said.

Right.

I'll deal with her later. For now, I have this man to handle. He's obviously drunk; I can smell it.

I can immediately tell he probably doesn't belong on this side of town, as much as he may want to. He may be rough, but he has the polished edge of a man that grew up behind a picket fence and looked with longing eyes toward muddier pastures.

He probably thinks he's hot shit. Most of them do.

"Hey, cool it, man," he says, trying to pull away from me.

I almost laugh. Bold of him to think I'm going to just let him go, after the scene he caused. "What's your name?"

"What? Casey. Look, man, you know how—"

"Casey."

I stop as I say his name; we're standing in the alley behind the club, right next to the door to the back hall and the offices. It's easy to access.

Back in my father's day, there was someone that had to be disposed of. He was shot right here and after, as retainers took care of the body, my father walked through that back door and into the bathroom to wash his hands.

I'm hoping I won't have to resort to that. I'd hate to get blood on my suit.

"Listen, Casey," I begin calmly. "You fucked with what belongs to the O'Reilly family. And we don't allow people to pull shit like that in our club."

I say it like it's a fact because it is. Like gravity, there are facts about my family territory. This is one of them.

You don't fuck with what's ours. And if you do, God help your miserable soul.

Casey is getting pale, but the flush of alcohol at the high points of his cheeks remains. He's sobering up because of the situation, but the drink still clings to him. It's probably whispering sweet, foolish words in his ear. Telling him to run.

He wouldn't get past the back door.

"Katrina's my ex," Casey says, bolstering himself like it makes a damn difference.

It doesn't. But the name surprises me. Katrina, not Kate. Similar enough—she might have given it as the nickname she's used to hearing, the name she's comfortable with.

But I'm not giving the benefit of the doubt to anyone in this situation. So I make a note of the fact for later, when I go back in to deal with her.

If she's even still there.

"She's a whore for dancing for money," Casey says. He's shaking his head slowly, like he's been concussed. "You know what kind of a woman does that?"

I don't answer. Part of me is disconnected the way it always is with business, watching from behind myself, emotions locked away. The part of me that's present is methodical. Thinking. I'm calculating everything he says, every reason he may have to disrupt my club.

None of them are satisfactory.

Casey's on a roll. I can see it, the steam building, his confidence billowing like a sail in the wind. He's stepping closer to me, *a mistake*, and he's waving his hands. He thinks he has an audience.

He's in front of judge, jury, and executioner. There is no audience. Not anymore.

"A lazy slut," Casey says, savoring each word. "Good-for-nothing piece of ass. She might have been good when I had her, but she thought she was hot shit. She left me, thinking she could find something better, and now what is she doing? Dancing in some hole in the fucking wall."

My jaw clenches, my fingers curling and uncurling. A smarter man might pick up on those warning signs, but the asshole in front of me clearly doesn't notice.

"She had a taste of my cock, and she couldn't handle it," Casey says, grinning. "And now what? She's shaking her ass in front of every filthy street rat, trying to fill up like the whore she is. I bet she isn't even tight anymore. I bet she already let you have your way with her."

Something snaps. I can almost hear it. That part of me that's distant, the part that feels, is still in the background. Still locked behind a gate.

But something breaks, and the coolness of my control, my business façade, shatters. I can't listen to him any longer.

It comes out of nowhere for me, but it's even more blinding for him. I punch Casey so hard he reels back, shoes skidding on the damp concrete. He slips and before he can right himself, my other fist is coming at his chest.

I've been trained to fight. I know how to handle a gun, a knife, my own fists. It's not hard for me to knock Casey back into the wall of the club. Once he's there, I hit him again.

And again.

There's a method to every punch. It's nearly robotic, the way my fist comes in precise jabs at him. I can tell when he gives up, when his attempts to speak become garbled sounds and then nothing. He slumps against the wall. When his knees buckle, I press an arm against his chest and hold him in place.

And I punch him more.

When his eyes roll back and he loses consciousness, I finally step back, my chest rising and falling as I drag in deep breaths.

Fuck.

I haven't outright killed him, although I easily could have—and in truth, I was tempted to. But that's not what bothers me about this situation.

What bothers me is that I lost control. And that knowledge burns in my mind.

I don't bother dragging him out of the alley. I leave him where he lies, then walk to the back door. When I get there, one of my bouncers opens it. I wave vaguely toward the alley.

"Get him out of here."

He nods. "Yes, sir."

It'll be taken care of. For now, I'm done with Casey.

Somehow, beating the shit out of that man hasn't done enough. There's anger still simmering inside me, and it needs an outlet.

So I stride toward the dressing room. When I reach it and pull open the door, everyone looks up. I don't look at the other girls. My gaze goes immediately to Kate—no, *Katrina*.

“Everyone out,” I say. My voice sounds oddly calm to my own ears, but the dancers must hear the danger lurking beneath, because they move quickly.

Katrina starts to go with them, and I stop her with a look. “Not you.”

She stops, standing like a rock in a river as the other girls swerve around her on their way out the door.

I wait until the last one is gone and the door has shut behind her before I make a move.

Katrina is scared. I can see it in her eyes; her hands are curled into fists, fingers white-knuckled. She's a ball of tension, waiting for something to happen.

I step closer, only stopping when there's less than a foot of space between us. Her delicate honey scent fills my nostrils as I lean over her, forcing her to tilt her chin up to meet my gaze.

“You lied to me.”

She's barely breathing. I can see her lips part, trembling a little. Her eyes are searching mine for something. Maybe she wants to know how angry I am; maybe she wants to see if she can lie again.

“I don't know what he told you—”

“You lied about your name, *Katrina*.”

Her full lips press into a line. The nervousness in her expression is clear, but so are the racing thoughts. “I didn't m—”

“You lied about not having drama,” I continue, my voice low and dark. I don't want to hear *didn't* from her lips. I know she lied. Now, it's just a matter of figuring out if she lied about anything else.

Her gray eyes are steady. It's incredible how unflinching they are; I could admire that, if I wasn't busy trying to figure

out what she's hiding. Either she's stupid for facing me like this, or she has grit. Something that means she's not an average dancer.

I'm looming over her, in her space, and she still hasn't backed away. She just looks up at me, the perfect angles of her face illuminated by the soft glow of the dressing room.

"I did lie about my name," she finally admits. There's no apology in her face, no waver in her voice. "I've been avoiding him. Casey. I used a different name because I thought it would make it harder for him to find me."

I wait for the *but*. I wait for more, for another admission. But instead, she says, "I never thought he'd find me here."

She swallows and I can see it. I can see the tension in her. But she doesn't break my gaze. She just looks at me, letting me see the truth in her eyes.

Whatever else she lied about, she's not lying that she's been avoiding this man.

I'm barely placated by that fact. If anything, I'm still angry. I'm angry that this happened at my club, where I make a point of running things smoothly. I bust my ass to make sure nothing goes wrong here. To make sure our business stays strong and steady.

I'm angry at Casey for being a fucking cunt, for running his mouth and being a slimy bastard to a woman who doesn't belong to him and never will.

And I'm angry at the woman in front of me for the way she gets under my skin.

I don't know why it's true, but it is. Even now, as I glare down at her, I can feel it. Some pull that draws me in. My control is strained to its breaking point, the beast inside me roaring to be let out.

I'm always careful and logical when it comes to doing business in this club. But the caveman side of me, the part that isn't in charge of anything and doesn't have to worry about business or appearances, is drawn to Katrina.

And I don't know why.

I lean closer to her, watching the way her pupils dilate in response.

“Did you lie about anything else?” I ask, quietly. Slowly.

Katrina looks at me, her gray eyes steady. Steely. “No.”

There's a small flush in her cheeks, a hint of her previous exertion on the pole and her high emotions. I can't tell if she's lying or telling the truth. I'm too distracted by everything else about her.

So I take her chin in my hand, gripping it tightly.

“You'd better be telling me the truth,” I say, my voice gruff and low. “I don't tolerate shit like this from any of my employees. In fact, I should fire you right now.”

Katrina exhales sharply, her breath a whisper against my face. A new kind of fear lights in her eyes, and she tries to shake her head, although she can't with my hold on her.

“Don't,” she says, but the word is so airy it flies away. There's more strength in her voice when she speaks again. “Please. I need this. Please.”

It's the first *please* that gets me. It shoots through me like electricity and just like that, my cock is hard. That one word triggers everything I've been ignoring.

I need this. Her words are in my head, echoing, the way they sounded on her parted lips running on repeat in my mind. I want to hear her say it again. I want to hear her beg. God, the sound of her begging affects me in a way I didn't anticipate. It hits something low and primal in me, and my thumb slides over the curve of her jaw.

With her chin in my hand, I could kiss her. I can imagine it now; it would just take a moment, just a tilt of the head.

Just a kiss.

But where would it go from there? In this room, no one could hear. No one outside. I could bend her over the table and fuck her, right on the other side of the stage. She could watch

herself get fucked in the mirror. I could have her naked, pull off all her lingerie, shred it off her body like tissue paper.

That thought sends a flush of heat through my veins, my gaze dropping to her lips. She's barely breathing, and when her tongue darts out to wet her plump bottom lip, a low groan burns in my throat.

I start to drop my head, all reason vanishing from my mind in this moment—but as I do, I catch a glimpse of our reflections in the vanity mirror. And just as suddenly as the desire appeared, reality comes rushing back in.

What am I doing?

I release her, nearly shoving her face away when I let go. I step back and leave her confused, probably as disoriented as I feel. I don't have a clue what the fuck I was thinking, what I was about to do. After all my promises and rules, how could I have come so close to kissing her?

Was I seriously about to throw everything away and act on the tension between us?

“No more lies,” I growl. “If I find out you kept anything else from me, you'll regret it.”

Then, gritting my teeth, I turn on my heel and stride out of the room.

CHAPTER 9

Katrina

I know I'm in a dream because the colors blur together, the edges of my vision fuzzy and indistinct. I think I'm in the dressing room at the club, but it's empty just like it was when Lachlan kicked everyone else out.

We're alone together, just like we were then.

He looms over me, his eyes burning as he devours me with his gaze. My heart thuds so heavily against my ribs that I swear it's making my breasts shake. I'm sure he can see it, or even hear the pounding beat. He has to know how much he's affecting me.

He's tall, formidable, the angles of his face sharp as he looks down at me.

My mouth is dry. Tension builds between us like a palpable thing, and I don't know if I should open my mouth. I don't know if speaking will break this spell.

And what will he do when it breaks? Will he kiss me or kill me?

That thought makes a small tremor run through me, and the tiny movement of my body is enough to snap the thread of tension between us.

In a flash, Lachlan moves.

He's on me suddenly, palming the back of my head and crushing his mouth to mine, hard and rough.

"I told you," he murmurs gruffly against my lips. "No more lies. So don't pretend you don't want this."

His tongue slips into my mouth, and I moan. He doesn't go slow; he dives into me, rough around the edges. I can feel my lips swell. One of his hands curls around the back of my neck; the other slips over my body, coming to rest on my hip.

He holds me in place, fingers digging above my hip bone. He kisses me so hard that I can barely catch my breath. When he breaks away, I barely have time to orient myself before he spins me around, his wide hands on my arms. I'm almost dizzy from the movement.

Then he yanks my clothes off. I can hear my dress rip; there's a soft sound as sequins hit the floor, twinkling brightly. My nipples harden, the lace covering my breasts straining.

"So fucking beautiful," he groans.

My breath catches in my throat. I try to arch into his touch, wanting more, but he presses firmly against me. He pushes me down, and I feel my chest press against something hard and flat. A table, maybe—I don't really know. I don't care.

All that matters is that he's touching me.

His hand slides over my ass. I'm trembling, waiting for him to touch me, imagining what it will feel like. His fingers drift lower, and I think maybe he's going to slip them inside me.

But instead, his hand moves away, and then he slaps my ass.

I cry out in surprise, but the sensation sends a new rush of arousal straight through me. I'm so wet I can barely stand it. I know my panties are soaked; I want him inside me so badly.

"Please," I whimper. "Please, I need..."

"I know what you need, Katrina."

His voice is a rough burn, and he twists my name between his lips like he's still getting used to the sound of it. When he rips my bra off, I suck in a breath. He does the same with my panties, and the chill of the air against my pussy tells me I'm just as wet as I thought.

He slaps me again, out of nowhere, and I cry out again. But this time, when the sound leaves my lips, he drives into me.

His entire cock fills me in one smooth stroke.

It stretches me wide, overtaking every atom in my body, splintering me apart as he plunges deep inside. I flatten my palms on the table, my body shaking at the sudden sensation. It's all I can do to keep myself where I am, keep my legs from giving out entirely.

I can feel my body pulse around him, clenching with each wave of pleasure. He stays in me for a moment, letting me relax around him.

And then he pulls out and slams into me again.

There's no careful movement in the way he fucks me. It's hard and rough, a completely brash pace that doesn't stop or let me relax. I cry out every time he rams into me, the pleasure and fierce heat blinding me. After the third time I scream raggedly, he reaches for my shredded underwear and stuffs them into my mouth.

"That's a good girl," he growls. "Take what I'm giving you. Take it all."

I can smell my own arousal. I pant around the fabric, trying to hold myself up. But he closes his hands around my wrists, pinning my arms behind my back. It forces me to bend over, my breasts crushed against the table as he drives into me.

I'm terrified by the way he feels, big and powerful, locking me into place. But I'm also more turned on than I've ever been in my life.

It's everything about this that makes me shake. Lachlan is big, taller and broader than any man I've been with. He's so strong that I can't move when he holds me in place.

He drives into me faster. I can hear the sound of our skin slapping, hear how wet I am as he plunges in and out. I can feel every pulse of his cock and I know I'll feel it when he comes inside me. I want him to, want him so badly that I can't understand it.

I slide my legs apart farther, trying to take him deeper. One of his hands is on my ass, his fingers digging into my flesh so hard I know it'll leave a bruise.

He slaps my ass again and I moan. "Please. More..."

The feeling of his hand against my skin and his cock inside me are too much. I push back against him, trying to get him closer to me. I want all of him. I want him to fill me up entirely, even if it's painful. Even if it's too much.

His cock is hard as steel inside me. It's so good when it forces me open for him, pressing against my walls. I can feel every inch of him as he fucks me.

"You like that, don't you?" he rasps, satisfaction in his voice. "I knew you would. Now come for me, Katrina."

Grabbing a fistful of my hair, he tugs on it, forcing my back to arch. His other hand reaches around and toys with my nipple, pulling and rolling it as he fucks me. He's not careful or gentle. He grabs me like I'm his... and my body responds as if somehow, that's true.

He slams into me, into some deep part of me that makes me scream around the fabric filling my mouth. And just as he does, I come hard.

White light blinds me. My eyes roll up as I clench around him—

And then I wake up with a start, panting heavily.

My clit is still throbbing. The dream might've been all in my mind, but the orgasm was real. I can still feel the echoes of it shuddering through my body. I'm sweaty, the sheets plastered to my skin. I can't even think for a moment, the remnants of the dream keeping me dizzy and blind to the world.

Jesus. What the fuck, Katrina?

I shake my head, heat rising in my cheeks. I can't believe I had a sex dream about the man I'm planning to kill. What is wrong with me?

The thought makes my gut twist. It invades the pleasant buzz of the orgasm, bringing me right back down to earth. I shut my eyes and squeeze them tight. I don't want to get out of bed, but I drag my sorry ass out anyway. I got home from the club later than usual last night, after my encounter with Lachlan in the dressing room, and it took me a long time to fall asleep. But I can't sleep in—I have a lot to do today.

I shower and try to forget about the dream, although flashes of it keep invading my mind.

I'm meeting my mother today. I want to see her as often as possible these days, and the ultimatum from Mr. V only makes me want to see her even more. I have to see her before there's no time, just in case.

Just in case I fail.

The drive over to her facility is quick, and as I leave my car and head up the walkway, the gardens in front of the building seem to mock me with their bright flowers. They feel too cheery for my mood.

I go to my mother's room, and I know the second I step inside that it's a bad day.

"Hey, Mom," I murmur, coming to stand beside her bed.

She doesn't recognize me. Not fully. She smiles and greets me, but I'm just another nurse to her.

"It's a nice day outside," I tell her, settling down in my usual chair. "It reminds me of that time you took me to the park to fly kites. There's hardly a single cloud in the sky, just like that day."

She nods vaguely. I try to bring up other memories, times we spent together—but she can't remember them. She's lost them. It's bad, but I try to make the most of it. She's out of it, but she's still here. Still alive.

That's all I can ask for right now.

As much as I want to be in the moment with her, I can't stop thinking about what I have to do. I'm running out of time to carry out my mission. I'm halfway through the two week

trial I was given at the club. I'm almost a quarter of the way through my allotted time in which to carry out my task for Mr. V.

It's all slipping away so fast.

And what's worse, it's getting more complicated by the day. I could've sworn Lachlan almost kissed me last night—which would've been a good thing, since my hope in becoming a dancer was to have the chance to seduce him.

But what I wasn't prepared for was *my* reaction, the way my heart raced and my skin went hot. I wasn't prepared to get home and have a dream about him, a filthy dream where he did so much more than kiss me.

I need to end this. *Soon*. Before I get any more fucked up in the head over it than I already am.

After a few hours with my mother, I give her a kiss on the cheek and then head back out to my car. My pulse picks up as I drive home, and instead of going my usual route, I head to a gas station I've never been to before. Keeping my head down to avoid my face being picked up by any security cameras, I grab a jug of antifreeze and bring it up to the register.

While my mother dozed during my visit, I did some research on my phone. There are more effective poisons than this in the world, but none that I have access to. So this will have to do.

My skin feels too tight as I finally make my way home and get ready for work. Once my hair and makeup are done, I pour some of the antifreeze into a small plastic travel bottle. I watch it pool thickly inside and try not to think about what I plan to do with it.

My stomach is tied in knots, but I steel myself and block it all out. I don't have time to lose my nerve or grow a conscience now.

I have to survive, and I have to keep my mother safe.

It's time to go to work.

CHAPTER 10

Lachlan

Assembly meetings are always tenuous things, hanging on a thread depending on a dozen different factors. It's difficult to manage six different families, all with different personalities and territories in Boston. Things can get tricky.

Messina, Underwood, Sharpe, Donovan, Kozlov. O'Reilly. There are six names, six families. It was always this way and it was always going to be.

Until us.

With the upheaval of the Raven Syndicate and Willow ascending to the head of the organization, things have shifted. Her marriage to my brother changed things. And that was after my other brother, Aiden, married Donovan's daughter, Rose. Now there are two marriages, two families tied to the O'Reilly name.

We have more power than we were ever meant to have. And it makes the others nervous.

The Assembly was formed to keep the families in check. It was meant to give us all voices, give us a way to communicate without resorting to violence.

But after everything that's happened, that truce is feeling shakier than ever.

Today, at least, the meeting went well. The other families are preoccupied with their business, too caught up to remember to chase my family. They're busy thinking about shipments and security.

Willow and Connor are doing well managing the Raven Syndicate. They've aligned its interests with the O'Reilly family business dealings. It was done well, quietly, without much incident. They didn't draw any attention to it, but they didn't hide it, either.

Willow refused to hide. She's proven to be remarkably adept at running her organization, working in partnership with Connor.

I had reservations about her at first. I would have been an idiot not to; with her history, it's a miracle she made it out intact. But she's here now, and I know from listening that she has her head screwed on right. All her time spent in the company of mafia men taught her how to play the game. She just needed the chance to do it, to prove herself.

I'm happy with how she and Connor have managed the Raven Syndicate. I couldn't have done it better myself. And now that they're taken care of, all my attention can turn to the handling of the club and skirting around the questions the other families bring up at meetings.

Like whether there's going to be another marriage, another takeover.

"That went well, all things considered," Aiden murmurs as we leave the building where the meeting was held.

I nod. "They've noticed the Raven Syndicate moving. It was too slow for most of them to protest, and it's done now. But it isn't so offensive that they'll raise a fuss."

"They may not now, but what about later?"

Connor pipes up from beside me. "I doubt it. They'll be embarrassed if they drag it back up later. They'd only bring it up if there's some big issue and they want ammunition against us."

"To the assembly, 'big' means something different every time," Finn says, raising an eyebrow.

I can't lie; I never expected Finn to stick around long for the meeting. For such a long time, he's been too drunk or too high to function. He barely managed to keep himself alive,

much less tend to family business. It's nice to have him around.

"They don't like the way the balance of power is shifting," Aiden points out. "They're going to be unhappy. They may talk about restructuring the Assembly."

"Sure, but screw them," Finn says, grinning broadly. "I mean, look at us. We control about forty percent of this city. And we did it in under two years!"

"Oh, yes. And *we're* very proud, aren't we?" Connor replies, sarcasm thick in his words. "Especially you, the hero of the day."

Finn opens his mouth, but all that comes out is a flustered noise. Connor is already laughing. It's good-natured, but he's right; Finn wasn't involved in much of it. He took the deaths of our parents the hardest, which is why we all cut him slack.

"Have we commissioned a statue of him yet?" Aiden asks, his voice dry. His lips are curled up in a smile. "I mean, he deserves one for his part in this."

"Yeah, I get it, you're all so fucking funny," Finn grumbles.

It's good to hear him banter with them. It's good that he's upright, sober, lucid. There was a time when I didn't know if this day would come.

And the marriages went better than I ever could have expected. Connor and Aiden love their wives; they're happy. What started as business propositions turned to something real.

I don't know if that will happen a third time. Maybe not for me.

Despite all of it, the messy trials and fights, the demons we all carry, I'm proud. I'm proud of what we've done as a family.

I think our father would be proud.

I hope I'm right. I've worked hard to live up to his image, his legacy. He was respected in the Assembly, even if he wasn't always liked or loved. People listened when he spoke. I

hope I can achieve some measure of what he did—some kind of legacy, even if I never have what I want for myself.

“We should keep an eye out,” Aiden says quietly. He breaks me from my thoughts, and I look up to find him by my side, glancing at the other Assembly members as they follow us out of the building.

I exhale slowly and refocus on the discussion at hand. “Yes. I don’t think they’ll make a move, but as more time passes, they’ll get bold.”

“It may not be long,” Connor adds. He steps up to us, leaning against my car. “It’s been a few months since the wedding.”

Finn crosses his arms over his chest. “I’ve heard it around the clubs, you know? They’re unhappy, but they’re not pissed anymore. They’ll be thinking now. Maybe trying to find a way to destabilize us.”

I shift away from my car. I can feel the moment they tune to me—my brothers and Willow. They’ve noticed I’m preparing to speak, and they know it’s important. They lapse into silence, eyes on me, ready for whatever I have to say.

“Our success painted a target on our backs,” I begin. “The better we’re doing, the more enemies will want to bring us down.”

I hate to sound pessimistic, but I know that reality isn’t kind. With everything we’ve been through, we know better than most that peace doesn’t last in the Assembly. Maybe someday it will, like it did before our parents died—but right now, it’s a simmering pot.

It’s just waiting to boil over.

“There’s peace now, but we know that can change. And Dmitri taught us not to trust that peace. Not entirely.”

Willow’s eyes sharpen. I know she’s thinking about her ex-husband and what he did, the strings he pulled. She probably knows best of all of us what Assembly members are capable of. Especially when they want to bring another family tumbling down.

The last time someone came after us, there was a kidnapping. There was death. This time, I don't want a single thing to go wrong if I can help it. I want to get ahead of any bullshit that's going to be thrown at us.

This is my family. I'm not going to let anything happen to it.

"Keep an eye out," I finally say, stepping toward my car and ending the discussion for now. "On everyone. Including the Assembly."

With that, I get into my car and lead the way back to the club.

The entire way, I think about what might be coming. I know which members of the Assembly I trust more, which I trust less. But Dmitri was unassuming when he orchestrated the sabotage that nearly killed Rose and Aiden. I can't trust my assumptions.

When I park at the club, my mind is still on business. I'm thinking about everything I have to deal with; the tension is building at the base of my neck. I'm dreading paperwork.

But then I walk through the doors of the club, and the familiar neon lights blink hypnotically, drowning everything else out.

Katrina is on stage. She's drawing people's eyes like usual; it's something in her movement. In the way she looks so untouchable. Lots of dancers look untouchable; that's part of their charm. You can only look. The rules are enforced and there aren't any exceptions.

But Katrina is different. She's almost like a statue come to life, a mysterious goddess with her long auburn hair and stormy gray eyes.

"Fuck, the new dancer is good," Finn says, appreciation in his voice.

His words break the spell, drawing my eyes away from Katrina, and I shake my head once. "No sleeping with the staff."

I say it as a reminder of the rule, but it's a silent reminder to myself as well. I can still taste her on my lips, the phantom of what I imagined kissing her would feel like.

I still can't understand why. But she's in my head, crowding out every sane thought.

So I do the only thing I know how to do and throw myself into business shit to keep my mind off her. She draws me in so much, even when I don't realize it. I can look at her and lose fifteen minutes until she walks off stage and I'm left blinking, wondering how the time passed.

I focus on my paperwork and try to buckle down. My brothers come and go, and then it's nearly closing, and everyone is gone. The club is empty; I can feel it. It's almost three in the morning.

My office door opens. At first, I expect it to be one of my brothers, but it swings so slowly that I know it can't be them. And then I see her—Katrina, out of her dancer's uniform but wearing something much better. A dress that clings to her curves, draping over her body enticingly.

She pauses in the doorway, and I realize she's holding something. She lifts a bottle of whiskey, an apologetic smile on her lips.

"Hi. Um, if you're not busy, I wanted to apologize for last night."

I hesitate for a moment, then nod, holding out my hand. "All right. Come in."

She steps into the room and passes the bottle to me. It's nice; I wonder if she used her paycheck on it, or if she begged it from the bar. I might be paying for the bottle either way, but I don't mind. It's the gesture that matters.

I pour each of us a glass. The crystal is textured and fine under my palm as I pass one to her; she accepts it carefully, her fingers barely brushing mine. I watch her tip the glass back, watch her sip without flinching. She's not a stranger to this, then.

“I really am sorry about what happened last night,” she murmurs after a moment. “I had no idea Casey would show up here.”

“How long ago did you break up?”

She sighs. “A couple months ago.”

“Did it end badly?”

“I didn’t think so.”

“Clearly he felt differently.”

Her smile is dry. “Clearly.”

I swirl my glass, then tip it back. The burn of the whiskey is a welcome distraction from work. *She’s* a welcome distraction. Too welcome, if I’m being honest.

I look at her as she sits in the chair opposite my desk, sipping her own whiskey. She’s wearing a long necklace with some kind of pendant, and it hangs just below her breasts. They’re almost entirely exposed in her dress, the vee in front reaching nearly to her belly button. But the dress is draped just so, and it doesn’t look vulgar. Just sexy. Enticing.

I look back at the amber contents of my glass. “So. Why were you with such a cunt?”

“I was lonely and stupid when I met him.” She shrugs, no other excuse following those words.

I can appreciate that she isn’t trying to ingratiate herself to me. I don’t need lies or excuses. I want the truth, and she’s willing to give it. I appreciate that.

“Has your taste changed?”

Her gray eyes flick to mine. There’s a blazing heat in the second our eyes meet, but she looks away just as quickly.

I know she felt it. She shifts, and as her hair slides to one side, I can see goosebumps at the base of her neck. I’m affecting her.

“Yes,” she finally says. “I don’t know why I ever settled for a man like him.”

“Like him?”

“Rude. Demanding. He was always complaining,” she muses, eyes distant as she remembers something. A bad memory, maybe. “I was never exactly what he wanted.”

“I can’t imagine why.”

It’s more telling than I meant it to be. She looks up at me from under her lashes for a second, then returns to her glass.

“Maybe I just didn’t look the way he wanted,” she murmurs.

My cock throbs. I don’t know what man in their right mind wouldn’t like the way she looks. It’s everything—not just her face but her movements, the poised angle of her body and the way she’s careful with every part of herself.

“He obviously wanted you,” I say. I stand up from behind the desk, and she looks up at me. Her eyes are locked on mine, her lips parted just a little. “Why else would he have chased you so far?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he didn’t want me. Maybe he just wanted to control me. Like a doll.”

She gulps down the last of her whiskey, then sets the glass down on my desk. She stands up, and as she does, I stride around the desk toward her. We face each other, standing so close that her chest almost brushes against me as it rises and falls with each breath.

The air is thick with tension, quiet and heavy.

“You’re not a doll,” I murmur. “You’re marble.”

Pristine, hard, beautiful. Untouchable.

Or at least... she should be. But the only thing I want in the entire world right now is to touch her.

“I have a rule,” I tell her.

It’s *my* rule. There wasn’t really one before, but as soon as I took control of the club, it was the first thing I did. I know why I made that decision, but now, looking at her, I can’t quite remember any of the reasons.

Katrina is barely breathing. She's looking at me, her gaze trailing over my face. "What rule?"

"No fraternizing with dancers."

"Oh."

There's a bare flicker of dismay in her eyes. It sends something rushing through me, a low heat that adds to my arousal. It's easy to see the little emotions hiding behind her gray eyes. It's easy to tell what she's thinking when I'm this close to her.

It's been a long time since I've met a woman like her. No one has ever gotten under my skin like this.

"Should I break that rule for you?" I ask her, my voice a low rasp.

"What?" She blinks, as if she can't focus. Like it's taking all of her attention to think with me standing so close to her.

I take a half-step closer, until she's trapped between me and the desk. Letting her see the raw desire in my eyes, I repeat my words.

"I'm willing to break my rule. Once. For you. Do you want that?"

Silence falls as my words die out, but I can hear my pulse rushing in my ears. The adrenaline in my veins is matched only by how much I want her.

She hesitates, her eyes wide, the directness of the question throwing her for a loop. It's the first time I've seen her steadiness waver, and for a long moment, I think she might try to slip around me and escape out the door. That she might run, like a deer runs from a wolf, and never look back.

But she doesn't.

Instead, she makes a small noise in the back of her throat, surges up onto her tiptoes, and presses her lips to mine.

CHAPTER 11

Katrina

Lachlan's mouth is firm against mine, his scent surrounding me as our kiss deepens.

This is what I've been waiting for, working for.

But it's nothing like I expected. It's so much *more* than I was prepared for.

He pulls me closer, tugging me flush against his body. One of his hands is on my lower back, resting just where my dress stops. If he moved it any farther up, he'd be touching my skin. I can almost feel it.

The tension I felt from the moment I stepped in his office explodes. There are no strings holding us back, no self-imposed boundaries stopping us.

I feel like I'm burning with a fever, my entire body reacting to him. What started as me taking a chance to complete the task I've been blackmailed into is morphing into something completely different. Every cell in my body reacts to his touch. His lips on mine feel incredible. He's hard, unyielding. He's like a force of nature, and I can't do anything but cling to him.

His hand slides upward, and when his thumb brushes my spine, it sends a jolt of electricity through me. I moan into the kiss, and he shoves me back against the desk, starting to bend me backward.

Fuck. Oh god.

I can't remember the last time someone kissed me like they wanted to consume me, like they wanted to have all of me. Maybe it's never happened. Certainly not with Casey.

Is he going to do this now? Here?

It's hard to think with his mouth on mine, but I force myself to remember what I'm supposed to be doing.

I have to kill him.

It's hard to remember. He's touching me in a way that tells me this isn't going to stop. He's not looking for a makeout session; we aren't kids. He wants everything.

He wants to fuck me, and he'll do it right here, on his desk.

The thought sends a fresh wave of adrenaline through me, an unexplainable kind of yearning.

The thoughts are jumbled in my head, confused by the way he's touching me, the way he bites my lip. He isn't going to let me think or breathe. He's going to keep taking what he wants until he has me bent over, fucking me hard enough to trash his perfect desk.

And I want him to.

God, I want him to. That thought scares me—I know I shouldn't, know it will make this harder. I can't get distracted, and certainly not by the man I'm supposed to be killing. I have to focus.

So I do.

I have what I need. I just need him to stay distracted while I do it.

I pretend to clear something off the desk behind me, then lift myself and slide back on the smooth surface. I brought the bottle with me, hidden in the small clutch I always bring to work. It's thankfully open enough for me to dig around and find the antifreeze.

I don't turn away from him. I shift my weight and click my heels against the desk a little to distract from the snap of the bottle's lid.

I blindly feel for the lip of the glass he was drinking from and squeeze in the antifreeze, still kissing him so deeply that it's hard to breathe.

I'm not sure if it's Lachlan's kiss or the knowledge that I'm about to poison him that makes my heart rate skyrocket. All I know is that I'm blinded by fear and arousal, confused by the haze of danger and want surrounding me. I can't untangle the feeling of his hands on my body and the knowledge that I can never have him. Not if I want to stay alive.

I wish I didn't have to do this. I wish I could pretend, wish I could just say yes to him and take this one moment for myself.

But I can't.

After shoving the empty bottle back into my clutch, I break away from him suddenly, panting. He's breathing almost as hard as I am, and when I look at him, I can see his cock straining against his pants.

"I, um—I... need a drink." I lick my lips, not having to feign the dizziness I feel. This is all so fucking overwhelming.

Heat burns in his eyes, darkening his irises, but he nods and grabs the bottle of whiskey, adding a splash to my glass. I take it and slip away from the desk, feeling his gaze track me as I go.

"Losing your nerve, little vixen?" he asks, his voice a rough burn.

Fuck, if only he knew how loaded that question is.

"No." I shake my head, lifting my glass. "I want this. I need it."

That's true too, although not in the way he thinks.

I watch him as I take a sip of my whiskey. I'm waiting, hoping he'll drink his fast, hoping he won't taste the slight sweetness of the antifreeze. I read that it can take several hours for the effects to fully kick in, but if I can get him to drink and then distract him by fucking him, that will give the poison the time it needs to get into his system.

Then I hope like hell he'll pass out, and I can slip away. I don't want to be here to watch this man die.

Not after he kissed me like that.

“Good.” He nods, his tongue running over his full bottom lip. “Because if I’m breaking my rules tonight, I need to make it count. I need to fuck you out of my system, and now that I’ve tasted you, I know that’s going to be harder than I thought.”

The truth in his voice makes my stomach dip and swoop. I don't know how to respond, so I just take another drink, letting the burn of the whiskey join the burn in my cheeks as I flush.

Still watching me intently, he picks up his glass. My gut twists, anticipation sending my heart racing. I know what comes next. Not in detail, but enough. I chose antifreeze because it was what I had access to, not because it's simple or foolproof. Now I just have to hope it works. Even if it's painful, even if I don't want to do it.

He brings his glass to his lips, and I stop breathing for a moment as I wait for him to drink.

But he doesn't.

He freezes.

His eyes narrow, and then he murmurs, “You put something in my drink.”

Oh, fuck. *Fuck.*

Panic floods me. It sets my brain on fire, white-hot fear blinding me from everything else. I know I'm facing death right now. He's not going to let me get away with this.

Not even if he was about to fuck me.

I'm running on pure instinct. Before I can think twice, I lunge across the desk, snatching up an ornamental fountain pen that's perched on one side. Hurling myself toward Lachlan, I raise my hand to stab him in the eye.

But he's ready. He has one arm up to block me, his other hand moving to grab my wrist. His gaze is sharp, his eyes

narrowed at the pen in my hand.

A feral growl bursts from my throat as I struggle against him. I'm not even thinking about killing him now; I just want to get him down, injure him enough to figure out how to handle this.

It's my life or his, and I can't give in. I can't let him kill me, can't die here—not while my mother is in a facility. Not when I swore I'd protect her.

But he's too fast, and he clearly knows how to fight, where I don't. With one sharp jerk of his hand, he twists my wrist, making me cry out in pain. The sharply pointed pen drops from my hand, clattering to the floor.

“No!” I gasp, fear rushing through me in a torrent. I try to knee him in the balls, but he spins me around, tugging me back against his chest and trapping me.

“You've made a very big mistake,” he growls.

“Fuck... you!”

I shoot an elbow backward, and it connects with something, making him grunt softly. I try to surge forward, try to break his hold on me, but one thick arm wraps around my neck, pinning me in place.

It tightens, cutting off my air supply, and my heart jackrabbits in my chest.

I slap at him, kick my feet, try to reach behind me to gouge at his eyes... but none of it is enough.

Sparks dance before my eyes as my lungs burn.

And then the world goes black.

CHAPTER 12

Lachlan

I don't know how the hell we got here.

I can hear myself breathing fast, my pulse thudding in my ears. I look down at the woman slumped in the chair before me and all I can think is, *what the fuck?*

What the actual fuck?

For a second, I feel crazy. I stare at Katrina and I know it's her; this isn't some imposter. It's her, with her auburn hair and regal features. Even unconscious, she somehow still looks composed.

Not like she was just trying to kill me moments ago.

I'm reeling. It takes me a second to refocus and pull myself back from the moment. I have to breathe deeply, telling myself to think. I can't lose my mind over this. I have to figure out what the fuck just happened.

I'm still turned on. My blood is pumping through me and I can feel my cock still semi-hard. The struggle and the feel of her lips on mine are still sending my adrenaline sky-high. I feel like we just broke apart; I can still taste her skin, still feel her hands on my body.

As turned on as I am, I'm just as pissed. This is unbelievable. There are so many things wrong with what just happened.

I'm still breathing hard. I shake my head and reach for Katrina, trying to ground myself in the present. I need to figure

out what the fuck happened. I turn her, careful, sitting her properly in the chair until she's slumped in place.

What the fuck just happened?

I almost died. I almost died because I was distracted—by a *woman*, no less. Something that's never happened before. I can count on one hand the number of times I've been distracted in the middle of something dangerous.

But I've *never* been distracted by a woman.

I was taken in by Katrina, and she betrayed me. She tried to kill me.

Why?

I can't think of anything. I try to comb through every interaction we've ever had, every memory I have of seeing her.

I knew she was different when I met her. I knew she had nerve. When she came in looking for a job, she was in a standoff with a bouncer. Not many people have done that, especially sober. Not with my bouncers.

The first few days she worked, there was nothing remarkable about her. She came in early, did her work, and never drank or used. She was clear-headed and determined. She did her job well, too—everyone noticed her when she danced.

Hell, *I* noticed her.

As the days went by, I'd almost forgotten about her trial period. To me, she was just going to stay. But then her ex showed up, and the first kink in the machine appeared.

She reacted when he appeared. It wasn't fear exactly; it was more like embarrassment. Like she was scandalized that some man she'd once dated had made such a public scene. And when I asked her about it, she admitted she hadn't wanted to be found by him.

But looking back, all those things could have been lies. Maybe she was afraid that I'd know her real name, or that this

ex of hers would tell me something she didn't want me to know.

But what?

Her ex didn't say anything important. It was all his bullshit about how she was a slut. He didn't say anything about who she was, or that she had a secret. And I don't recognize her name, though I know now it might be fake.

I should find her I.D. I lean over her, looking for her purse—and then I notice what's in her hand. A bottle. I pry it from her loose fingers and don't even have to twist it open to know what's inside. Antifreeze.

It's not a bad way to poison someone—it's accessible; you can get some anywhere. But it's amateur. She's obviously not a professional.

And that's fucking confusing.

I would have understood if she was a professional. I would have been worried about who sent her, but I would have been able to explain this. But even when she tried to fight me, I knew she wasn't really trained. She was lashing out, desperate.

She *needed* to kill me.

I pick her phone up from the floor. It has a fingerprint lock; smart, but easy to get around with her in the room. I press her finger to the screen and wait for it to unlock. Once it's open, I start to scroll through her contacts.

There aren't many numbers. It would be sad if she hadn't just tried to kill me. Right now, I'm in my own head, focused on the potential danger. I see a number for a place that sounds like a hospital, another one for a bank, a number for a nurse. There are a few names, but opening them doesn't show any recent messages.

If she has friends, she hasn't talked to them in months. She hasn't really talked to anyone recently. I can see auto text messages in her inbox, all about pending bills and late fees.

But there's one near the top, from a number that isn't added to her phone book. I open it and the second I see the

words, I know what it is.

There's a time and a place. She's obviously working for someone.

But who?

Fuck. This is the last goddamn thing I need to be dealing with.

There's nothing notable about the images on her phone background or lock screen. They're generic, defaults or random pictures she's taken. Flowers. There aren't many apps on her phone, just banking and email. This isn't the phone of someone who has free time or friends.

No games, no food delivery services—it's like she doesn't live in the world. Like she's just getting by in a small sphere, between home and work. Even her old texts to her friends are strangely impersonal. Maybe the relationships were dying for some time before they finally ended.

Or maybe she stopped pretending for her last cover job. Maybe she moved on to me, and she was getting ready to make new friends. New ways to hide.

I don't know any more after looking through her phone. I shove it into my back pocket, annoyed, and turn back to Katrina.

What the hell am I going to do with her?

There are too many possibilities, and I still don't know how or why she came to kill me. I open a drawer in my desk and pull out zip ties, then bind her hands behind her back. She might not wake up any time soon, but I'm not taking a chance.

I pull out my own phone next and place a quick call to one of the men in our employ.

"I need the back of the club clear," I say as soon as he answers. "No one in or out. Bring the car around, and cut the cameras."

"*Yes, sir.*"

I wait a minute for my security team to do what I need, then throw Katrina over my shoulder. It's easy to carry her; she's not heavy, shorter than me. I take her out of my office and make my way to the back door.

I never stop rolling the security cameras. I don't want anyone to get a chance to do something stupid. But this, I don't want anyone seeing.

Not even my brothers.

My car is waiting. I open the back door and drop Katrina inside, laying her out on the leather seat.

When I get in the driver's seat, I take a moment to think. There are places I could take her, but I run the risk of being found out. Our safe houses are for everyone in the family. Any of our runners could come by at any moment, taking refuge from a police tail or anything else.

No. I need privacy, and I can't let her out of my sight. I still don't know who she works for. I can't take the chance that she might lead them somewhere else. At least if it's my home, I'll know I can defend myself.

I pull away from the club and start driving.

It's not far. I need time to think.

As I drive, I can't help glancing in the rearview. Even passed out, she's gorgeous. Just one look at her makes my cock twitch, memories flooding back.

She was as turned on as I was, before everything went to shit. I've fucked enough prostitutes in the past months to know she wasn't faking it. If she was, she's the best goddamn faker in the world.

Katrina wanted me. I saw it in the way her body reacted to me. She flushed, nipples hard, cheeks pink. She leaned into me, her breathing shallow. I can still feel her lips on mine. She was *hungry*.

It was like she hadn't ever been touched. Like I was the first man to make her want, to make her lust. It was a fucking ego boost, to be sure. And it was hot. It felt like I was the first

person to touch her in years. Like she was parched, waiting in the desert for a drop of water.

I was ready to fuck her on the desk. Even if my office wasn't soundproof, I would have done it. I didn't care. My thoughts weren't on the future or the danger. All I was thinking about was how supple her body was in my hands, how good she'd feel when I got my cock inside her.

With her legs around me, I was ready to shove her dress up and fuck her hard. I wanted to make her scream. I wanted her to feel better than she'd ever felt before. It was like a challenge—one I was happy to accept.

But now, I'm just frustrated and confused. And pissed as fuck.

I pull up to my house and take Katrina out of the car and inside. After striding down a hallway, I tug the basement door open and take the stairs slowly with Katrina on my shoulder.

I have a room in the basement where I have the equipment to tie someone up. I don't use it often; as a rule, I try not to bring my dirty work home. There's a time and place for that.

But occasionally, there's no other choice, and we have to bring an enemy here.

I take her to the basement, to the chair in the sealed room. I set her down and bind her more thoroughly this time. Somehow, without thinking about it, I avoid the ropes and chains in the corner. I may need information from her, but I'm not going to tie a woman up in a way that will hurt her. I don't relish torturing women.

But I'll do what I need to, to ensure this threat isn't going to hurt my family.

I look her over as I tie her down. The scar on her chest is noticeable in the harsh fluorescent light. I remember her saying it was an accident. I wonder if that was a lie, too.

Was it a fight, maybe? Another job gone wrong?

I can't imagine why she'd be the person to kill me. It just doesn't make any sense. Why send a woman? Everyone in the

family knows my rules about the women at the club. It's not a secret. I've never broken it before. They would have had no way of knowing I'd be interested in her.

It would have been simpler to catch me at home, or even coming out of an Assembly meeting. Hell, they could've disguised any one of the delivery people that brings in the alcohol and other things we need at the bar. I would have stepped into the alley, been shot, and it would have been a mystery.

I remember how my father was killed. It's fresh enough that it's a grim thought. But it drives home what I already know.

This could have been done right. But it wasn't. So either this is a distraction, or whoever sent Katrina wasn't worried about whether she'd live.

I don't know what to think about those possibilities. I don't have any sympathy for her; I don't know her, and everything she told me could be a lie. She tried to kill me.

But the more I think about it, the more it seems like she's in just as dangerous a position as I am.

I step back and look at her one last time. She looks peaceful in her sleep, but that won't last. She'll be disoriented when she wakes up.

Just how I want her.

I have questions, and I'm going to get answers. Whoever sent Katrina, I need to find out why. How. I need to know so I can take steps to keep my family safe. My brothers don't know shit yet, but I won't tell them before I have a handle on the situation. This is my responsibility.

I hired her. I let her into my office. I almost let her seduce me. It's my job to take care of her, whatever that entails.

I look at Katrina, tugging at my lower lip as I wonder what the hell I'm going to do next. Then I turn on my heel and leave her alone, tied up in the empty room.

CHAPTER 13

Katrina

I never slept well, after my diagnosis. The cancer changed everything. It kept me up at night, paralyzed me, gave me anxiety that blackened everything but the moment I was living in. I couldn't shut my eyes when every time I did, all I could think was that I might never open them again.

After I made it through, I couldn't sleep because I wanted to do things. I wanted to live life. But it wasn't long before I was right back in the hospital again, this time with my mother.

After her diagnosis, sleep was a thing of the past.

So when I wake up now, it's not easy. It's in a panic.

I don't know where I am. I'm disoriented, struggling to bring myself to the surface. It feels like swimming up through syrup. I'm groggy and I can feel a headache forming, the front of my skull pounding. I don't know what's happening.

Did I leave work? I feel like I'm sitting upright; maybe I fell asleep in my car. I can't have fallen asleep at the club.

When I think of the club, my heart starts to pound. Things come back, little by little, and I find myself realizing that everything is wrong. This is all wrong.

I tried to poison Lachlan.

I remember it in a flash, the shape of the bottle in my hands, the smell of the antifreeze. I can see it before me like it's happening now. I tried to kill him because I had to; I needed to. I didn't have a choice.

And as soon as I remember it, I remember what came before it.

I kissed him.

I remember what it was like, how it felt as he devoured me. I can feel the shape of his lips on mine, feel the heat of him against me. I can remember my pulse racing and my breath coming in bursts. I remember how hot I felt, how my body was on fire as I let him hold me.

He was standing before me, between my thighs, and I was on his desk. I was kissing him.

I can feel my face flush. *I did that*. I might have thought about how he was attractive when I first started work, but this—this is unbelievable. Risky.

Wrong.

I remember how it shifted. How a kiss became a crisis, and I dove for a fountain pen. Looking back, it's almost funny how I tried to get it to work. Like I would ever have the strength or speed I needed to kill him. Like I even wanted to do it.

I tried. I struggled, and I remember that—I remember struggling with Lachlan, trying desperately to get through the fight. But even as I recall it, I don't remember thinking *I have to kill him*.

I just remember thinking, *I have to survive this*.

Even now, I can recognize my mistake. I squeeze my eyes shut and try not to cry. All this time, despite how much I wanted to protect my mother, I couldn't commit. I couldn't really go as far as I needed to. When it came to it, in that final moment, I didn't have the strength to really go after him.

I failed, and that realization fills me with fear. I try to move, but I'm bound; I realize I'm in a chair. My wrists are tied down, my ankles stuck to the legs of the chair. I can't move.

I pull at my arms, crying out in pain and frustration. All it does is hurt.

I want more than anything to break down and cry. I've lost, failed in the end, and I can't do shit about it. My mother is somewhere out there, probably being watched by Mr. V. If she's even still alive.

I can't.

I can't think about that. She has to be alive; Mr. V probably thinks I'm home with Lachlan, maybe thinks I'm going to kill him now. I don't have much time. I have to survive this, have to get out or succeed somehow.

I pull at my arms again. I want to be free so badly. I don't care anymore; if I can even run for my life, I will. I just have to get out.

But then I hear something.

There's a sliver of light beyond me; the floor is concrete, dotted with air bubbles. I stare at the light and watch a figure approach me. He's in darkness at first and my eyes aren't adjusted yet.

But then he comes close, and I know him immediately.

Lachlan.

I freeze. I don't breathe, don't speak; I don't know what to do. I can feel tension thick between us, choking me, rendering me silent and motionless. I almost want to shut my eyes just to make sure he's not in my mind, but I can't take my eyes off him.

He stands there and I look at him, unable to look away. Afraid to.

He has scruff on his jaw; it looks like he hasn't slept. My heart pounds as I wonder how long I've been here. Has it been a day? Longer? I don't know but I wish I did, wish I had a better idea of how to handle this.

There's a look in his eyes. It's wild, dangerous. Something simmers there that I can't quite name. His usually stoic face hasn't changed, but his eyes give him away. He's furious.

My heart is in my throat. Looking at him like this, I'm more terrified than I've ever been.

I swallow hard. Before, in the club, I understood why he had to be composed. Hard. There were people watching, and he had to be a figure of importance. Strength. I knew his type even if I didn't know the mafia.

Now, there's no one but us. His cold mask scares me because I can't tell what he thinks. I don't know what he thinks about me, what he thinks about what happened between us before I tried to kill him. Does he think that was part of it, too?

I could lie and say I did just kiss him to distract him.

But that's not true.

I wanted to. That frightens me almost as much as this moment does—I wanted to kiss him, wanted him to touch me. I knew he was dangerous and I was attracted to him anyway. Maybe even because of that.

Lachlan stands before me, hands in his pockets. Silence hovers between us for another long moment before he asks, "Why did you try to kill me?"

I can't speak.

It's not just fear that closes up my throat. It's the knowledge that anything I tell him is a risk. Mr. V is somewhere out there, but I don't even know who he is. I have no name or face for him, really. I just know what I was told to do.

Lachlan stares down at me. He's close, but he steps closer when I don't answer. I can see his jaw tighten, the gleam in his eyes burning brighter. My heart races faster.

"Who sent you?" he asks, his voice harder. "Open your mouth, or I can find a way to do it for you."

I can feel the fear in my veins like ice. It's yelling at me to answer him. *Save yourself, save yourself from the pain. Answer him!*

But I know I can't.

I don't even know who Mr. V really is. What do I tell Lachlan? That I met some man who ordered me to do it, and I

agreed? If I tell him about my mother, Lachlan could just as easily find her. He could hold her hostage, use her as leverage against me.

He could do anything. He could even kill her in retribution.

I keep my mouth shut. Lachlan glares at me, then leans over. His wide hands grip the chair, and the wood creaks. “What did they offer you? Tell me.”

He doesn’t plead. He demands answers, and I know that means he doesn’t care what I want. He isn’t going to negotiate.

Not after I tried to kill him.

I want to squeeze my eyes shut and pretend this isn’t happening, but I can’t. I have to face it. I failed, and he wants answers now. Answers I can’t afford to give.

Suddenly, he reaches out. His hand grips my jaw, yanking my face up to look at him. It’s not painful but it’s sudden. I blink, unable to look away, pinned in place by his stare.

I can feel the strength in his hand. My body reacts to it immediately, a flush running across my skin even though I try to fight it.

“I’m the oldest of my brothers,” Lachlan says quietly.

I don’t know what he’s talking about. Why is he telling me this? I barely breathe, trying to figure out what to do or say. Lachlan narrows his eyes, his expression serious and deadly.

“It’s my job to protect my family.”

The words stab right through me.

I understand them. I know them because they’re what I feel, too. They’re the reason I took this job in the first place. I only ever tried to kill him for my mother, for the one person in the world that I have left to me.

“You’re a threat. But you’re not the biggest threat,” Lachlan says quietly. “There’s someone else who’s really behind this. If you give that person up, I might not kill you.”

Might.

He's lying. And it doesn't matter. I don't know who Mr. V is. I don't know shit about him. If I admit that, Lachlan will just kill me anyway. He has no use for me.

I've seen his club. I've been in the back. Even if I told him the truth and he believed me, I still know too much about his brothers and their business. I've been in his office, too. He can't risk leaving me alive.

He will kill me even if I give him what he wants. So the only way to stay alive is to hold out and hope he wants the answers badly enough.

I can see him getting angrier. The fire in his eyes burns brighter, and he leans toward me, his mouth pressed into a line. He's holding back even now.

Which means that his anger is even stronger than this.

His hand on my jaw twitches. I can feel his fingers move, feel him react physically. And then just as fast, he yanks his hand away, breaking from the touch.

He moves back just an inch but it feels like a mile. My chest heaves; I feel like I've just come up for air. Lachlan stares at me, unwavering and harsh. There's a cold determination in his gaze.

"You *will* break for me."

There's no question. Not for him.

Not for me.

He leaves the way he came and I watch the sliver of light shrink until it's gone, leaving me to adjust to the darkness. My heart is still pounding; I can hear my pulse threading in the aftermath. I'm terrified.

But somehow, under it, I'm still turned on. I still can't forget how it felt for those few minutes in his office, when all that strength and power was used to give me pleasure. When he hauled me onto his desk and kissed me like he was going to consume me.

He says I'll break; I believe him. But half of it will just be me, struggling to untangle everything I feel and want.

I sit in the darkness, my heart pounding, and try not to think about what would happen if I gave up and told him everything.

It would be so easy just to let it all spill out. It would be so simple to tell him everything, beginning to end. But he wouldn't believe me. And it wouldn't make a difference.

So I can't give up. I have to fight, until the very end.

Even if in the end, I die.

CHAPTER 14

Lachlan

I storm up the stairs in a blinding wave of anger. When I emerge, it's the morning sun that blinds me, birds chirping outside the living room window and tree branches stirring gently in the breeze.

It's been one night since I brought Katrina here. Katrina, not *Kate Winters*. Not some dancer looking for a job. Not some random woman.

Katrina, the woman sent to kill me.

It still doesn't make any goddamn sense.

I'm pissed. I can feel my blood pumping through my veins, my skin hot with anger. It digs its fingers into my brain until it feels like it's on fire.

I'm pissed at Katrina. I feel betrayed, as ridiculous as that seems. We never had anything but somehow, it sure fucking feels like it. It feels like there was a chance at something more and she threw it away for this. For a failed murder attempt.

More than Katrina, I'm angry at whoever hired her. I know they're part of the underworld, whoever they are. They have to be. They chose Katrina and sent her after me. They sent an untrained woman to do something she'd very likely fail at. They can't have really thought it would work.

Beyond those things, I'm pissed about the situation.

Did the person who sent her know what would happen? That I'd be interested in her?

I've held fast to my rules about dancers for so long. But this one woman came along, and for the first time in my life, I found someone I wanted.

The whole thing is a fucking mess.

I was going to take my time learning her body. I was going to draw it out, getting her wet, making her moan and writhe on my desk. I was going to make her come so hard she'd forget everything but my name.

That thought appalls me now. It appalls me that I was ready to throw caution to the wind, let some woman I barely knew control my thoughts like that. I was letting my dick do the thinking.

And now where am I?

I'm pissed at myself. Even beyond wanting her, I'm pissed at not being able to torture her now.

I threatened her. I told her to talk, made a useless comment about making her talk. It was just words. In any other circumstance, I would have broken her fingers. I would have made her hurt.

But I couldn't.

I couldn't bring myself to do it. It wasn't a fear of violence, an unwillingness to get my hands dirty. As much as I use it as a last resort, I'm not a stranger to physical violence. I've thrown punches, stabbed, fired bullets, done everything I had to.

I couldn't hurt Katrina, and that's not like me.

I don't condone violence against women—men who stalk their exes, husbands that beat their wives. That kind of violence is disgusting, and the people who do it are not human. They're filth.

But in my time, I've known vicious, bloodthirsty women. In my line of work, I've met them all. I've met women who killed their husbands to be with men they'd just met at a club. I've known women who sold their daughters to men with

laughing faces. I've known all kinds. Kinds that try to topple empires, only to destroy families.

I don't spare women because they're women. They're capable of the same evil as any man I've known. They need to be dealt with just as ruthlessly, when it's needed.

But this is different.

When I interrogated her, Katrina was scared. Truly scared. She sat there, gray eyes wide and brimming with terror. It's not the way a monster looks when they're caught.

And despite all my promises to protect my family, I couldn't do anything to her. Not when I looked at her and all I remembered was how open she was when she kissed me, when she let me touch her.

That wasn't a lie.

I look out the window and wonder how the hell I got here. After everything I've done, after all I've worked for, how the fuck did I let this happen?

My phone buzzes violently on the marble counter, and I reach for it, irritated. The screen has a name on it: Ezra Cross.

Shit. I haven't been thinking about the wedding at all.

Especially not when I was kissing Katrina, parting her thighs so I could plunge into her and fuck her so hard she wouldn't be able to walk.

I take a deep breath and try to focus on the call. Whatever the hell he's calling about, I need him to think nothing has changed. I need him to believe me. I can't have him doubting that this is a good business arrangement.

I answer calmly. "Hello, Mr. Cross."

He speaks without preamble. "Mr. O'Reilly. I have concerns about the arrangements."

"Well, as I said the last time we met—"

"I'm aware we'll have another meeting," Ezra says. "But this couldn't wait."

I struggle to stay calm. I don't need this; I don't need another wrench in my plans. Not when Katrina has thrown the rest of my shit out of order.

"All right. What is it?"

There's a beat of silence. I can imagine Ezra righting himself, satisfied with the response. He doesn't know enough about the mafia world to know our customs. I have to give him leniency, even if it's aggravating.

"Well, it's about the chapel," he says. "You know my daughter isn't getting married anywhere else. But I see in your documents that you think it's a security risk."

I shut my eyes, frustrated, and pass a hand over them. "As I recall, I did say it was achievable. But the security will be tight, and all rules need to be followed."

"This is because of territory?"

"Yes."

Territory. Like the mafia are dogs, marking territory. I clench my jaw. I know Ezra Cross is not a mafia man; he doesn't know enough, wasn't born into this. But right now, I don't have the patience to talk to him. I don't have the patience to explain why he needs to listen to me.

And I can't let on that security is even more important now, because there was an attempt on my life. If he knew, he'd never consent to letting his daughter marry me, business or no.

"Well, that was all. It's non-negotiable," Ezra says slowly. "She wants this, and she deserves it."

"I have no argument."

Now get off the fucking phone.

All I can think about is what I should be doing to figure out whether someone else is going to come after me. I curl a hand over the edge of the counter, gripping it roughly. I can barely keep myself still.

"Well, then I suppose I'll save the rest for our next meeting. I appreciate your time."

“Of course. We’ll talk soon,” I say, barely grinding out the words.

I hang up and before the phone is in my pocket, I’m out the front door and in my car, peeling out of the driveway.

I have people all around the city, from the top to the bottom. Intelligence has always been important in the underworld. Having eyes and ears everywhere means having a chance to act before you’re attacked, and I value that more than anything else.

I visit Andre first. He’s in his restaurant, cleaning up the place before lunch opening. He doesn’t look up when I come in through the back, but he does tie up his apron. I ask him what he knows; it’s not much.

“But I heard about the wedding,” he says. “Surprising. Is it going through?”

“We’ll see.”

I leave him and head to sixth street. There’s a man on the sidewalk there, leaning against a wall, his hair tangled and overgrown. He sees me coming and doesn’t straighten; his clothes are dirty and worn. I can smell him before I get close.

He doesn’t have much either, so I pass on a few bills and tell him to let me know if something happens.

I visit the others, people all over the city, all without information for me. I even go to the law firm where our family friend Amara works, though I doubt I’ll hear anything from her.

She’s on her way to a deposition, brown hair pulled back into a ponytail, lithe in her heels. She’s joked that one day, we’ll date the same woman. She’s a good friend, an even better lawyer—and one who’s helped us out of more than one tight spot.

“I’ve heard about the wedding,” she says. “No cousins to sell off?”

“It’s my responsibility.”

“Never did understand that,” she murmurs, flipping her files into her other arm as she gets into her car.

“Understand what? Responsibility?”

She looks up at me, her face serious. “Marrying for the family.”

I never thought she would. But as she drives off, I think about how many people have heard of the potential wedding. How many people know what’s going on in the family.

Whoever came after me must have wanted me to be taken out quickly. Maybe they knew about the wedding, maybe not. I don’t know.

No one I speak to knows Katrina, either—at least not by description. So who is she? Is her real name even Katrina? It must be, given what her ex said, or maybe she lied to him, too.

Every lead is a dead end, and even after hours of searching, I don’t know much. I don’t know *anything*. It’s frustrating as fuck.

When I get home, I storm inside and slam the door behind me, then lean against it and run a hand through my hair.

Even that small motion angers me. I stopped doing it publicly years ago; I thought it looked weak. It was a hard habit to break. But I couldn’t afford to show any weakness. I’ve always tried to project strength, especially after my father died.

And that’s more important than ever now.

I haven’t told my brothers about Katrina yet, but I know I need to. They have to hear it from me, and there’s not much time. I want to have something to tell them first, but that possibility is looking slim.

After running around town, I’m no closer to the truth. I don’t know who could have done this, who could have sent Katrina after me. I have no clue who’s been making moves behind the scenes and chances are, I won’t find out without digging more. Harder.

But time is running out. The wedding is in the distance, getting closer every day. Katrina is in the basement, waiting, and every moment that passes is another minute my invisible enemy could use to plan against me.

I don't have the luxury of waiting around for her to decide to talk. I have to act now.

I have to deal with this woman.

CHAPTER 15

Katrina

I feel like I've been locked in this room forever.

My head is throbbing, but the headache is receding as I peer through the darkness. My eyes have adjusted enough that I can see that I'm in some kind of basement. The floors and walls are concrete, the chair I'm tied to made of heavy wood.

As I'm scanning the barren space for the hundredth time, searching for any way out, the door at the top of the stairs opens suddenly.

I hold my breath, my entire body tensing.

Lachlan. I know he's coming back. I don't know if he's coming to kill me, or if he's going to follow through with his threats. I try to see if he's carrying anything, but in the darkness, I can't tell.

He looks the same as he did when he first left. His face is cold, his movements contained. There's no energy or wildness in the way he steps across the room toward me.

But the closer he gets, the more I can see the anger simmering beneath the surface.

It's hiding in his eyes, in the tight curl of his hands. He looks like he could kill a man right now. Or he could kill *me*. But he doesn't, at least not immediately. He just walks up to me and pauses, shoes scuffing as he stops.

He's thinking. Calculating. I don't know what he's looking for but I try to stay absolutely still, hoping maybe he'll figure

I'm not a threat and let me go. Maybe he'll have some kind of pity and offer me a deal.

Instead, Lachlan walks around behind me and snaps away the restraint circling my chest. It feels like freedom when it opens, and I take a deep, slow breath. I watch him undo the other restraints and hope soars in my chest.

Is this it? Is he about to let me go, maybe say it's over? Maybe he found Mr. V, took him out, and it's all over now.

I try to look at him and figure out what he's thinking, but it's impossible. I can't say anything, too scared to break the silence and somehow anger him enough to tie me back up. I just follow his lead as he takes me by my wrist, his hand on the tie there, pulling me through the basement.

My heart pounds as I follow. Suddenly, being untied doesn't seem like such a good thing. Is he actually letting me go? Or is he just taking me to my death? I can feel my palms becoming clammy, sweat beginning to prickle my forehead.

Maybe I was stupid to hope. Maybe this is it and I'm just walking right to my grave.

But then Lachlan reaches for a door and when it swings open, light blinds me. I squint, pulling back a little as I look into the room. Part of me expects to see a morgue.

But it's a bathroom.

It hits me in a rush how full my bladder is. I hadn't realized it before, but as soon as I see the bathroom, I realize how badly I need to pee. There's a rush of relief in my chest as I step into the room, and I turn around to close the door behind me.

But Lachlan's foot is resting against the door as he stares down at me, impassive, the lines of his face unmoving.

He's not going to let me close it. He's not going to give me privacy.

I can feel my cheeks burning. He probably isn't doing it to humiliate me, but just because he doesn't trust me. Still, the

humiliation works in his favor, too. The more uncomfortable I am, the more likely I am to break.

Part of me wants to refuse, to ignore this opportunity just to spite him, to refuse to give him this one other thing that he's trying to take from me.

But I don't know how long I'm going to be here or if he'll let me go to the bathroom again. I can't ignore this; I'll just end up hurting myself even more. So as much as I hate it, as much as I'm embarrassed, I try to force it down and pretend I'm alone.

Lachlan doesn't turn away. He just looks through me, not truly looking but watching, making sure I don't do anything. I finish, my face burning, and pull my underwear back up as fast as I can.

I'm still in the dress I wore to the club. It feels inappropriate now, almost forced. Like I'm wearing it just for him to look at me while I'm captive.

But I know he doesn't care about me or my body. He's focused on figuring out what I know. Why I tried to kill him.

When I finish, I wash my hands. Lachlan speaks again as I turn. "This is a privilege. You could have more, if you talk."

I don't answer. I stand at the sink, my hands still wet, and feel my limbs go rigid. I want to leave the bathroom; I feel trapped in the small room now, stuck between him and a wall. There's nowhere to turn. I can only face him and choose to answer or not.

And I'm not going to answer.

"I'm not asking for much," he continues, voice low. "But I could be."

It's a threat. I can feel a chill run down my spine; I know this is the real reason for him bringing me to the bathroom. He's giving me something good so he can show me what it would be like if I cooperated. So he can remind me how bad it could get if I refuse.

If I keep my mouth shut, I'm sure I'll end up peeing in a bucket next.

But I still can't tell him anything. I keep my lips pressed together, my heart pounding and my pulse rushing in my ears.

Lachlan's jaw twitches. The anger is still there, simmering beneath the surface. But he doesn't make a move, doesn't even speak to me again. He just pulls a phone out of his pocket and taps on the screen.

It's *my* phone. The thought sends an uneasy shiver through me. I can tell he's really going through it, and I also know he must have unlocked it when I was knocked out. He pressed my finger to the screen and got it to open.

This feels like an invasion, him laying my life open like this. I know what he's seeing—almost no contacts, barely any pictures, a handful of messages. It's the life of someone with a chronically ill mother, someone with little free time to herself.

I don't have friends to lean on. It's just me, alone, struggling to make things work and take care of Mom.

He's seeing too much. It's like him looking through my phone means he's seeing how alone I've been, how I don't really have anyone.

He's seeing that if I died, no one would notice. I've already disappeared and nothing has happened. This is just showing him that no matter what he does, no one will care.

No one.

He pauses and I hold my breath. I don't know what he's looking at, but I know what's on my phone. The text from Mr. V, the man who gave me the money I borrowed. The one that sent me a time and place.

Shit.

Lachlan leans back against the door frame, his pose entirely casual, like he isn't holding me hostage and looking through my phone. I almost think he's not going to say anything, but then he does, his voice even and calm.

“What's this about?”

I don't answer. I wait, holding my breath, hoping that maybe I'm wrong. Maybe he didn't find the lender; maybe he's looking at the few photos I have from before my mother's diagnosis.

But of course, I'm wrong.

"Twenty-two, fifty-six. Elm Avenue. Turn left. Six miles past," Lachlan recites.

I wince. I can remember every bump in the road, every mile that seemed like a thousand as I went to meet the man I owed money to.

Lachlan raises an eyebrow. "Why were you meeting this person?"

It's a simple question, really. I could just tell him. All I have to do is open my mouth and say, *I owed him money*.

But I can't. I just *can't*.

My silence breaks whatever thread of calm he's been holding on to. I can see the moment it happens, the moment his control snaps.

It sends a rush of adrenaline through me as he steps toward me, crowding into my space. My heart thuds, my mouth going dry as he gets close.

Despite the danger, all it does is remind me of his office. I know I should be scared, but my body doesn't recognize that. All it knows is the memory of him kissing me, his hands touching me.

It can't seem to decide between being afraid and being turned on.

I know he sees it in me. He's so close that I see the light in his eyes when he recognizes it, when he notices my breathing get shallow and my face flush.

And then before I can react, his hand is on my thigh.

I have to bite my tongue to stop myself from moaning. I must be delusional; I have no idea why I'm reacting so strongly. But his hand is on my thigh, tracing up my skin,

moving painfully slow. I can feel my entire body react to him. It's a buzz beneath my skin, a humming potential.

He doesn't speak. I almost wish he would, wish I could tell if this is real or not. Maybe it's all manipulation.

But there's desire in his eyes that I can tell is real, a light that he can't deny. It burns there as he looks down at me, his hand roaming my body.

I barely breathe, barely swallow. I just stand against the wall, my body trembling.

His hand moves up my side, sliding under the fabric of my dress. He brushes over my breast, and it takes all my strength not to make a sound. My head is swirling. His fingers stop, then pinch my nipple. It sends electricity through me. I inhale sharply and it feels like giving in.

The heat is running through my entire body. I'm so turned on I can barely think straight. I try not to show it, try not to do anything—but I can't help it.

I can't help the gasp that leaves my mouth when his hand cups my breast, squeezes and rolls my nipple. His other hand slides over my spine, resting just over my ass.

I can feel my breath come in thin bursts. Everything is so bright, my head is spinning, it's all too much. I can't untangle the fear I had for my life minutes ago from this.

One large hand slides between my legs, teasing my clit with pressure that goes hard and the abates, over and over.

"I knew you would still be wet for me," he rasps, the words barely audible. His fingers keep working, his jaw clenching tight, and my legs wobble.

He's pushing me, working me up. Edging me. I can feel an orgasm building low in my belly, just out of reach. All he has to do is go a little further.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I'm so close to begging him. I'm desperate for just a little more friction. I know I'm wet through my panties, my heart racing and my entire body tuned to him. I've been through so

much shit in the past twenty-four hours that my body is desperate for something good.

And this? This feels so fucking good.

Until it stops.

“Goddammit.”

With a grunted curse, Lachlan wrenches his hands away from me, leaving me quivering and weak. He picks me up and throws me over his shoulder, making the world spin around me, and I’m so disoriented by the sudden change that I barely even realize what’s happening until we’re back in the basement room again.

He sets me down in the chair and starts tying me up once more. It enters my mind to run, but I don’t entertain the thought. I can’t outrun him, and I don’t even know if the door is unlocked. If he has guards outside.

My clit is still throbbing, the wetness of my panties making them stick to my skin. I’m right on the edge, painfully aroused, my pulse pounding.

Lachlan stands over me when he’s done, his face hard.

His cock is hard too.

I can see the bulge in his pants. The evidence that I’m not the only one who was affected.

“I’ll give you time to think about what your answers will be,” he says, his tone clipped and business-like, as if he doesn’t still have my arousal on his fingers. “Then we’ll continue our conversation.”

And then he leaves.

I’m blindsided. I can’t think straight. My brain is a muddled mess of need and disappointment, fear and desire. I’m terrified of him, repulsed by this kidnapping—but still, some part of me is drawn to him.

I must be fucked in the head. There must be something wrong with me. Because even through everything, even

though I should be focused on how much danger I'm in, I still wanted it.

I wanted him.

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CHAPTER 16

Lachlan

Fuck. I have to get away from her.

There are no other thoughts in my mind as I stride out of the basement, leaving her with a vague threat that I know I can't follow through on.

I was ready to do what I needed to when I went down into that basement. I knew what my job was, what was on the line. I had reminded myself that my family was in danger. That she was my only lead. I couldn't call my brothers with nothing to show.

Now I don't have a choice.

I curse, my voice rough, and get as far away from the basement as I can. I retreat to my bedroom, still on edge, still too fucking turned on.

All I can think about was how she felt under my hands. How every inch of her skin was like velvet, how her breathing was so unsteady I thought she might fall to her knees.

I'm desperate to come. I feel like I might burst, fire running through my veins. All I want is to let go.

But I don't allow it.

I curse again, back pressed to the door as I grit my teeth.

Almost as if moving of its own accord, my hand goes to my belt, undoing my pants and reaching inside.

Goddammit, I can't do this.

Fury beats inside my chest as I squeeze my cock, forcing the erection to subside. I shut down my thoughts until I'm not picturing her face, her ass, the curve of her thigh. Her nipple under my fingers. I flush out all my memories of her soft hair and full lips. I take all of it and throw it out. I can't afford it.

It's difficult. I have to focus all my attention on forcing my heart to slow and my breaths to even out.

Once I've regained some measure of control, I find my phone and call my brothers, telling them to come over.

I go downstairs to meet them when they arrive, wrenching the door open to greet them. Aiden, Connor, and Finn are in good spirits, although they turn serious when they see me. They know I never call them over for no reason.

I lead the way to the kitchen, trying to keep my composure, but I'm still a little unsteady from my encounter with Katrina. I can't completely forget about it, even if I've pulled myself back from the edge.

Aiden notices right away. I know he does; I can see it in his eyes. Before they even sit down, Aiden's watching me. His expression is serious, face drawn.

He knows what it means for me to be unsettled by something. The last time it was like this, our mother died.

I wait for everyone to sit before I start. "Something happened last night."

I pause. There's so much about last night that I can't tell them. I *won't* tell them. I need to be trusted and respected. I know my brothers would never turn against me, but I don't want to give them a reason to doubt my decisions.

I can't tell them that I almost broke my own rule.

"At the club?" Aiden prompts, the silence stretching too long for him.

"Yes. I was in my office; the club was winding down. You remember the new dancer?"

"Yeah. Kate, right?" Finn supplies.

“Katrina. Her ex came in a day or two ago, drunk. He told me her name was Katrina.”

“Okay. So, she was hiding. That’s why the name,” Connor says. “Makes sense. But that’s not what we’re talking about, is it?”

No. No, it’s not.

I can’t tell them the truth. That I almost lost control around a woman, how I wanted her so badly. How I was seconds away from fucking her on my desk, in my office.

So I focus on what I can tell them. On what’s important.

“She visited my office. Brought a bottle of whiskey. She apologized for her ex.”

Aiden’s gaze sharpens. “How did she get it?”

“I’m not sure. But it wasn’t spiked. We each had a glass.”

“And then?”

“I wasn’t paying attention. Sometime after the first sip, she spiked it. With antifreeze.”

Finn’s eyes widen. He glances at the others, disbelieving. “Antifreeze? Did—”

“I didn’t drink. I knew something was wrong; I could smell it.”

“That was stupid,” Connor says. He shakes his head. “It’s... amateur. She didn’t know what she was doing.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“So then, why?” Aiden interrupts. “Why even do it?”

“Well, when I didn’t drink, she went for a fountain pen. Tried to stab me with it.”

“She tried to *attack* you?” Aiden blurts, incredulous. “Are you fucking—”

“She wasn’t trained. Didn’t know what she was doing. But she tried.”

Silence settles for a long moment. I know they're processing what I've told them. A woman tried to poison me, then attacked me when it didn't work. It was out of the blue. She was a dancer.

But clearly, she wasn't *just* a dancer.

"Who the fuck did this?" Connor asks, serious. There's a storm in his eyes; he's probably thinking about how things went down. "Who the fuck would be this fucking bold?"

"And stupid," Finn adds, an edge to his words. "Sending a woman? An untrained woman? They didn't even know there was an opening. We haven't exactly advertised it."

"So how did they hear about it? Is it someone who's visited?" Aiden speculates. "We get low-level grunts from the Devils. Maybe it was them."

"They know better," I say, shaking my head. "And they aren't exactly in the same business as us. We don't really threaten their territory. Besides, their leader has a hard enough time giving a shit about regular business. Why would he try this?"

"Could it be anyone from the Assembly?" Aiden crosses his arms. There's uncertainty in his voice. "We were just talking about this—how there's a target on our backs. But this doesn't seem right."

Finn shrugs. "I agree. If they want our territory, they'd have to widow Willow or Rose, no? If they want our ties."

They don't say it, but I know what they mean. If I'm gone, the family doesn't fall apart—not exactly. Aiden and Connor both know how to handle the family business. They're not inept. If I was gone, they'd carry on. Our family would be unstable for a little while, but not broken. Not destroyed.

So why? Why me?

"None of you have been threatened?" I ask lowly. "Maybe it was supposed to be coordinated."

"I doubt it," Aiden says. "Not with some untrained woman coming after you. And no, I haven't noticed anything."

Maybe. Maybe he's right and this wasn't well-planned. But most of our enemies are thoughtful, and any one of them would have thought this out if they decided to come after me. This just doesn't make sense.

"Maybe it's not the Assembly," Connor suggests. "Maybe it's someone else entirely."

I laugh once, short and devoid of humor. "Like who? We would have heard if it was some amateur gunning for us. Everyone I spoke to had no clue."

I still don't know how the hell someone is managing to get away with it. With Dmitri, we learned a lesson. But even looking at those close to us doesn't give me any insights. I don't know who could have taken this chance or why.

"I'm trying to get answers from this woman," I finally say. "She's the best lead we have."

Trying. As if I didn't just nearly lose control again. As if I'm not strong enough to just get what I need from her, when I need it.

"We can take her off your hands," Aiden offers. He watches me when he says it, calculating. "Interrogate her for you. Help you deal with her."

"Yeah," Finn adds, smirking. "Maybe she needs some incentive."

"No."

It comes out calm, steady. That's not how I feel.

What I feel is a rush of possessiveness. A rush of refusal, anger. As if the thought of someone else trying to handle her is that repulsive. I've failed to do what I need to, but I won't let someone else do it.

I keep myself under control and continue. "I'll handle her."

Connor nods once. "It's better that way. She's already here; she knows you. If she's inexperienced, she might crack. Might decide she can't stomach it."

“She might have buyer’s remorse,” Finn adds, shrugging. “Or maybe after some time away from whoever hired her, she’ll realize they don’t have as much leverage as us.”

“I’ll keep you posted,” I say, stepping away from the kitchen. “I know what I have to do.”

And just like that, it ends. Aiden is last, trailing behind the others, and he stops to talk to me. “We’ll keep our ears out for any hints.”

“Thank you.”

“Call if you need anything.”

If you need us to take this, he doesn’t say.

“I will.”

I know I won’t.

CHAPTER 17

Katrina

I don't know how many days it's been since Lachlan took me.

At first, I told myself I could last as long as I needed to. A week or a month didn't matter to me. I could live through anything just to have the chance to make it back to my mother.

But the days have blurred together, and I don't know when it'll end.

I've been tied up for so long. Lachlan lets me up occasionally, to use the bathroom—but nothing ever happens there again. He never touches me, never pushes me against a door and slides his hands over my body.

But he does look, and I can see in his eyes that he wants me to think about it every time.

And I do.

It's not just looks that he gives me. He's been pushing me since that first day, teasing me. Sometimes it's just a barely-there touch, hands sliding over skin, no pressure or promise. Those times are the easiest, but they're not *easy*.

Then there are times when he squeezes, takes my breast in his hand. My ass. He holds me in his palm and I try to pretend that it's bad, that it's pain, but I can't. My brain can't work hard enough to block out the rush of need I feel when he does it.

Sometimes he does more. He plays with my nipples, presses his fingers against my neck.

He's using my arousal as a weapon to try to break me.

I feel like every nerve ending in my body is screaming. His touches are getting harder to ignore, harder to fight. It's like I'm going crazy. He never goes just a step further, never follows through on the promise of his hands on me.

I can't stop thinking about it, though.

I think about him fucking me almost constantly. It's in the back of my mind like white noise. I don't even imagine him untying me or taking me upstairs, letting me leave this basement. I just imagine it like this, in the dim light, frantic and messy. Rough.

It's all about lust. It's about the look in his eyes when he's touching me, the look that tells me there's a part of him that feels exactly the way I do. There's something in both of us that wants to give in. Something that wants to let this happen.

I want him to. I want him to spread my legs wide and sink his fingers into me. I want him to string me out and just when I think he'll stop again, I want him to go deeper until I come on his hand.

I want him to tie me down and fuck me senseless. I want to see his cock, see what's beneath the bulge in his pants that's always there when he leaves me wanting. I want him to be demanding, push his cock to my lips, fuck my face while I'm still bound in the same damn chair.

All these images are running through my head and I feel like I'm feverish. My body is screaming for release. It needs more.

But I'm pissed. Pissed and unsettled by the way he was able to make my body respond. Like he knew what I was looking for, knew what I needed so desperately.

I've been on my own for a long time now. The last boyfriend I had was a disappointment; he only cared about himself. He only cared about his own pleasure, his own problems. He left me unfulfilled and empty.

Lachlan isn't my boyfriend. He's my captor. He's untouchable to me. But somehow, he's gotten under my skin in a way no other man ever has.

I turn my attention to getting free. I've tried a few times; it's never worked. I'm only making my wrists ache and my skin burn. But there's nothing else I can do right now, and I have to do something.

I try to pull my ankles away from the chair. It's hard to get leverage; I can't feel my binds loosening an inch. So I tug at my arms again and again, until I think I can feel something.

I hold my breath. I don't want to imagine something is there when it's not, but I feel something. Like the last time he tied me up, he didn't do as good of a job. I pull again, and this time, I feel something loosen.

My pulse surges. *I can get free.*

The thought blinds me, deafens me to anything else. It's real; it's happening, and I need to act on it. Now.

I pull harder. The more I pull, the more I feel it loosen. Soon there's a gap and I slide my left hand out, uncaring of the burn and pain when I yank it before it's really free. I almost laugh when my hand jerks free. It takes all my control not to yell in triumph.

One hand is free. A second later, so is the other.

I have to run.

I don't know whether to sneak out or just make a break for it. I have no idea where I am; I don't think I'm at the club, but I can't be sure. I don't know what I'll find when I leave the basement, much less the building. I could walk out into the middle of the city, or I could be in the middle of nowhere, with no way to get out.

As those thoughts swirl in my head, all I can do is shut everything out. I can't wait to make a plan or sneak around. This might be my only chance to get out. I have to take it.

I make my way up the same stairs I've seen Lachlan climb so many times before. They're wide and concrete, and my legs burn with each step. It feels like I haven't stood or moved in weeks. The door to the basement is heavy, but unlocked. I open it just enough to slip through and dart up the rest of the stairs.

When I emerge, it's nighttime. The room is dim. To my right are tall glass walls looking out toward a lush garden and backyard. To my left is a wall and a hallway. I'm standing right at the edge of a living room; there's a large carpet laid over slick floors. The furniture is sleek, colorless. Every surface is clear or polished and reflective. It feels like I'm in a glass cage.

I can't stick around and look. I turn the corner and find a hallway; I blindly follow it, running a hand along the wall to keep track of where I'm going. I turn left, then find a dead end. There's another room, a workout room. I turn around and try the opposite direction.

It feels like I've been wandering forever. The more I turn, the more I feel like I'm in an endless maze. Panic is settling in my gut, fear rising in my blood. I have to get out. Every second I spend here, I'm in danger.

Finally, I turn and see a hallway leading to a door. I don't think twice. I run for it, my steps almost silent, barely touching the ground. It feels like I'm flying.

My hand closes on the doorknob. I reign myself in, hold my breath. I turn gently, trying to stay quiet, hoping there won't be any noise. Hoping I'm not opening the door to him.

But just as I'm pulling the door open, I feel a rough hand grab my arm. I look back fast, my head snapping around, and see Lachlan.

He caught me.

It happens in a flash and then my adrenaline surges, rushing through me like a wildfire. Every cell in my body screams at me to fight. I twist in his grip, a wordless cry of frustration leaving my lips. I can't let him take me back. I won't go back again.

I try to pull my arm away, but he drags me from the door. No matter how hard I try to grab for the doorknob, it slips out from my fingers. I try to catch the door frame; it's just out of reach.

As much as I struggle, he's too powerful for me to get away. I don't want to make it easy for him, though. I struggle as much as I'm able, throw my hands and fists in every direction, trying to make this hard for him. I get a few hits in; I can feel them connect. I know it won't hurt him. I just want to make this as much of a pain in the ass for him as it's been a nightmare for me.

He doesn't have much trouble pinning me, tossing me over his shoulder. He's pissed, all muscle and anger as he grapples with me. When he throws me over his shoulder, it's careless. Like it's no struggle at all. It's an inconvenience to him.

He takes a few turns. I try to remember the way, even if I don't know that it was the front door that I reached. He takes me up stairs, and I count each one. I watch hope disappear around a corner as he brings me to the second floor.

He opens a door and suddenly, he's throwing me onto a bed.

His bed.

I know it's his; it smells like him. Like the cologne that drew me in when I was in his office, when I was unable to resist him. The soft sheets and pillowy mattress feel incredible to my exhausted body.

But more than that, knowing I'm in his bed sends a rush through me. My limbs feel like they're buzzing. Even though he hasn't touched me except to pick me up, I'm already on edge. My body is already tuned to him.

Lachlan has always seemed controlled, almost cold. But he doesn't look controlled or icy as he looks down at me. All I see in his eyes is heat.

And my body responds.

I'm getting wet despite myself. It's infuriating.

Before I can react, he's tearing my dress off. I can hear it rip, then feel it torn from my body. I'm so shocked that I don't move. I just lie there, exposed.

I tell myself it's the cool air that makes my nipples hard, but some part of me knows the truth. I'm turned on, more than I've been in such a long fucking time.

He doesn't give me time to breathe. He just turns me over, sitting on the bed and pulling me onto his lap. A thousand thoughts rush through my head in that one moment—that he'll make me suck him off, give me the cock I've been dreaming about for days. I imagine what it will feel like, how he'll push my head down until it hits the back of my throat.

But that's not what happens.

He spansks me, hard, and I cry out in surprise. My mind goes blank. I can feel the sting, the slap punctuating the pleasure that's been building in me. I barely have time to process what's happening before he does it again, his rough hand coming down on my ass.

I realize I'm getting wetter. I'm enjoying this.

I can't help the rush of humiliation I feel. *Am I really going to enjoy this?*

After all that's happened, how could I? How could I pretend he hasn't kidnapped me, tied me up, treated me like his prisoner?

How could I ignore all that just because I want him?

His hand slides over my ass this time, not rising to spank me again. He slips his fingers over my pussy, not delving them inside, and that simple slide makes my entire body shake. I can hear the whine that leaves my lips, broken and needy. I feel like my brain isn't working anymore; there's no logic running through my head. I'm just letting this feeling drive me, need taking over.

He pushes. He flicks at my clit and it sends a fresh rush through me. I gasp, but it doesn't finish—it just hits me, powerful, and then it recedes just as quickly. I moan and try to push back against his hand.

He's pushing me toward orgasm again, but he's not letting me have it.

I can barely make out the words when he speaks. “Tell me what I want to know,” he says, his voice low and dark. “Give me what I want, and I’ll let you come.”

I can’t open my mouth. But then he’s touching me again, giving me a taste, and pulling away.

“Tell me,” he says, a command. His hand is gone again.

I know what he’s doing. He’s pushing me. He’s messing with my head, getting me lost in this pleasure and torture. I can’t even focus anymore. My control is gone, lost somewhere between the hallway and his bed.

He touches me again, his finger sliding up to my hole, just barely touching. My body screams.

“Tell me what I want to know.”

“I don’t know!” I feel my body tense, every muscle coiling. Lachlan’s hand is gone again. “I don’t know, I swear. It’s some man! Mr. V. He told me to kill you—”

“Why?”

“To clear a debt,” I say, the words coming out so fast it’s almost like babbling. I feel like I’m heaving everything out, giving up what was poisoning me in the first place. “That’s all I know!”

He doesn’t say anything. He just plunges his fingers deep inside me, clean and hard, no warning.

And I finally come, wave after wave hitting me as I scream in pleasure, the orgasm hitting me like I’ve never felt it before in my life. Every part of me is on fire. I’m blinded, and nothing but this pleasure makes any sense. I can feel him with every wave, every jerk of my body as my muscles contract around him.

It hits in sharp pulses like an ocean crashing over me, and after what feels like forever, it finally ends.

I collapse on his lap, all the strength gone from my body, and I know it’s over.

CHAPTER 18

Lachlan

I'm fucked. I know it when I hear myself, breathing hard, adrenaline and desire coursing through my veins. I'm barely mastering myself.

Her scent, the feel of her coming apart the way she did, the sound of her screams—it all turned me on so fucking much.

In this moment, I'm glad she's too out of it to notice. I'm glad she can't see how much I'm affected. I shouldn't be struggling like this; I shouldn't be as close to the edge as she is.

I shouldn't be ready to say, *fuck it. I want her now.*

But I can't help the little bit of pleasure that slips into my voice, the remnants of what I did creeping in. My words are a low rumble when I say, "Good girl. All I wanted from you was the truth."

That's a fucking lie.

I wanted more. When I was spanking her, it wasn't just about the truth. It wasn't just about finding out who wanted me dead. I was turned on, and half the time I had my hands on her, I wasn't thinking about my life or my family at all.

I was thinking about how much I wanted her.

I could have pulled that information from her any other way. I didn't. I chose to do what I wanted most, what I never should have stooped to doing. I chose to use pleasure to draw out what I wanted from her because it was what I wanted. I

just pretended it would be fine if I used the excuse of making her break.

Now, I'm not so sure that I didn't break a little, too.

I pick her up and she makes a surprised noise in my arms, but she doesn't struggle when I carry her to the bathroom. Naked, I can feel how warm her skin is. I grab a towel on my way, bundle it onto the toilet seat before I slowly set her down. She still hisses when her ass touches the lid, but the pain on her face is fleeting.

I switch the shower water on and let it fill a few inches, crossing my arms while I wait. My mind is racing ahead to everything this could mean, the possibilities and implications of what I got out of her.

I need to know more.

When the tub is full enough, I guide her in, giving her my hand for support. When she's seated, the pain comes back, a flash of discomfort before she cautiously settles in the water. I let her orient herself before I speak again.

"You said his name is Mr. V. Do you know anything else about his name?"

"No." Her response is tired, subdued. Now that the dam is broken, she's not resisting. The answers come easily. "I never knew any more than that."

"You didn't hear anyone else refer to him as something else? Never saw it written anywhere?"

"No."

I turn and reach for a bottle on the sink behind me, then pass it to her. She gingerly takes it; I notice that our fingers don't brush. But she's close.

Again, a wave of desire hits me. I still haven't let myself release that want. I still haven't given in. I want to fuck her so badly, but I reign myself in.

I keep asking her questions instead. I need answers—more than she's given me. More than a mysterious name and endless possibilities.

“When did you first meet him?”

“A day before I came in to the club. I was told the time and place, and I showed up.”

“And how did he arrive?”

“Black SUV, tinted windows. One of his men exited the opposite side from me and came around to watch me. He rolled the window down just enough to talk.”

I can imagine it. Either these men are professional, or they’ve seen enough movies to pretend. Every person from the regular world I’ve met doesn’t have a clue what mafia security means. They assume men with shotguns and hundreds of tattoos will crawl out of every corner.

What security really means is people in strategic places, sometimes hidden in plain sight. It means putting three people between you and the enemy, and having six escape routes.

In this game, staying alive long enough to win is the top priority.

Katrina rests her arms on her knees. Her skin glistens, the water clinging to her in droplets. Once again, I’m reminded how easy it would be to give in. She’s naked, everything out in the open, everything between us broken down.

But I master myself and continue questioning her.

“Have they had any more contact with you?”

“No. And the number isn’t even from him; it’s from the one who loaned me money.”

“How do they know him?”

“They’re one of his men, I guess.”

So this guy has at least one loan shark on his bankroll. It’s not some independent grunt with a grudge. This is someone with strings to pull.

But why not just send one of his own men to do the job? It’s not like attempted hits have never happened before. They’re all kept quiet, usually failing, usually ending in the

attacker getting away or being killed somehow in the action. It's rare for an assassin to be captured.

They're usually told that once they're in enemy hands, they're done. And some of them kill themselves before they can be interrogated, especially if they're with a family that has less leniency when it comes to prisoners.

Despite everything she's telling me, I still feel no closer to guessing who could be after me. I don't think it's someone new to the game, but that's about all I know.

I watch Katrina run a hand over her arm, clearing soap off. There's a relief in her eyes, like it feels good to have given everything up. But I can also see resignation and dread in her gaze.

Clearly, she thinks she's going to suffer for failing. For telling me. She held out so long that there's no other explanation.

I respect how long she held out. I respect how she handled her situation, even if it was me she was targeting. I know enough to know she isn't a killer. She's just a woman who was given an impossible mission.

"Is there anything else you can remember?"

She closes her eyes. "I could smell leather, a little bit. Maybe alcohol, but it was fainter."

Nice car. Expensive taste, or drunk tendencies. I shake my head. It's a good detail, but there's little to go on. I have to find more.

"I'm not going to kill you," I finally say.

She turns to look at me, gaze quickly snapping to my face like she's looking for a lie. She won't find one. I have what I want from her, but I still need her. I'm not going to throw her away when she's still useful.

And besides that, this attraction is still burning in my gut. I still can't untangle the desire I have. It may be selfish and stupid, but I'm not willing to let it go yet. I'm not willing to

completely erase her. I still want her, even if it means compromising my footing to let her live.

I can see she isn't still trying to finish her assignment. I've broken through the last wall she put up. I can handle her, and there's no reason to just kill her.

That's what I tell myself, but I know I'll have to explain myself to my brothers. Especially once enough time passes.

They'll ask why she's living with me, and I won't be able to tell them it's because I don't trust anyone else with her. *I want her with me.*

Maybe it's a bad idea to keep her with me, but I don't see another way out. And besides, I have a job for her to do.

“You're going to help me figure out who wants me dead.”

Her eyes widen. In a split second, I can see terror in her eyes, burning down to her core. She knows what could happen.

She's going from one impossible situation to the next.

Seeing this fear, I know for certain that she never could have killed me. The antifreeze was a lucky break, and the only reason it nearly worked is because I wanted her. Because I let her too close in the first place.

Looking at Katrina now, I can see she's not meant for assassination plots and convoluted mafia games. She's just trying to survive. For whatever reason, she has debts, and those debts are killing her.

If I hadn't been the one she targeted, and if I wasn't so willing to let her live long enough to get answers, she'd be dead by now. If she'd targeted any other family, she might have been dead before she left the office.

But she's not. She's here with me.

When the terror fades, all that's left in her expression is the realization that she has no choice. Her lips press together, a solid acceptance setting in her features. She knows if she doesn't help, I have to kill her.

I can't let her live after this. Not when she knows everything about me. Not when she's been so close to the family.

Now that I have what I want, all my anger has faded. The frustration and fury I felt before when I visited her in the basement is gone. It's almost surprising how there's no trace of it left, no remaining disdain. It was easy to make myself feel like she was just another monster. I'd met so many before.

But now, with the truth on the table and Katrina naked in the bathtub, I don't feel the same. I can see her for what she is—a woman desperately trying to survive. I can't fault that.

In fact, I have some respect for it.

I get up from beside the tub and take a few steps to my phone. I don't look back to see if she's drying off or still in the water; I don't look back to see if she's going to attack me. I know she won't.

I dial Jamie's number. My cousin answers before the first ring ends; he's alert, his voice coming through clearly.

“Lachlan. What do you need?”

“I need some clothes brought over.”

I give him details and then hang up, waiting at the bathroom door. Katrina slowly inches out of the bathtub after a few more minutes, and I bring her back into the bedroom. I can hear when Jamie arrives with the suitcase I asked for; I wait until he leaves to go downstairs to retrieve it.

I don't bother locking the bedroom door. I know she won't run again.

I bring everything back upstairs and open the suitcase on the bed. There are a few items inside, a carefully selected array of sizes.

“These are for you,” I tell Katrina. “Get dressed.”

She grabs a few items and drops the towel, dressing quickly and avoiding my gaze. But I know she's aware of me watching her. I don't hide the fact that I'm looking.

I can see the marks I left on her—the redness on her ass, the color on her lips. I like them more than I probably should.

I can't help imagining what it would be like to leave more marks on her body. Watching her get dressed, the only thing on my mind is how easy it would be to just take her clothes off again. I could touch her, feel the softness of her body, smell my soap on her skin.

God, she's already covered in me. It wouldn't take much to just let go of my control, let the arousal I feel build up again. I know I'm seconds away from getting hard.

Now that the truth is out, does it matter? I could do this. It would be like going back to that office, back to the moment when she wasn't a woman sent to kill me yet. When she was reacting to me and I wanted her, wanted her so badly I wasn't going to wait to take her home.

She's home with me now. There's nowhere else to go. I could push her back onto the bed she's standing next to and fuck her now. She came once already, but I know what to do to get her wound up again. I know how tightly she's coiled, how much she responds.

How long has it been for her, before me? I almost can't believe she's single. I almost can't believe she hasn't had a man give her the pleasure she obviously wants in so long.

I want to give her that pleasure and more. I want to let go of what's holding me back. I have no reason not to, don't I? *It's all out in the open now.*

I have my information. I could have her, too.

I can feel my body reacting at just the thought of having her. I can feel my heart pump harder, my blood run hot.

I turn away.

I can't do this. Not now, probably not ever. I have to focus. I clench my jaw and then tell her, "Reach out to your contact with Mr. V. Tell them you need a meeting."

"What?"

"You have the number. Text, or call."

She's silent. I know this is what I need; this will give me a chance to find out who this person is. I turn to look at her, to see what it is she's feeling. I don't know what she might say.

I can see she's scared. Like before, she's scared of this person—this Mr. V. But that fear isn't strong enough to stop her. Because she still nods.

“Okay. I'll do it. Give me my phone and I'll text them.”

She's not going to break. I know it with absolute certainty. She's going to do this, take this risk, because she knows there's no other choice. There's no other way.

And I have to find out who's after me. Why they're after me. Or the next time someone comes and tries to kill me, I might not get away so easily.

I might not get away at all.

CHAPTER 19

Katrina

He says it like it's so easy. *Tell them you need a meeting.* As if things will go smoothly when I've been gone for days. As if they won't suspect anything.

But I have no choice but to do what he says. I can fight the situation all I want, but Lachlan has shown that he's willing to do whatever he needs to in order to make me follow along. This is no longer about me sticking to my guns. It's about me trying to survive being used as a pawn by people with more power than me, people willing to kill me.

I steady my shaking hands when he gives me my phone, then send the message.

Will Lachlan kill me if I don't get a response? Maybe he'll think I was lying about the number, about the man who told me to kill him. Maybe he'll think I really did do this alone, that I was doing it for the money.

As if any woman would dance for a mafia club just to rob the place.

But maybe he'll think that, and if he does, he's going to kill me. I can see the sharpness in his eyes; it doesn't matter that he was touching me just moments ago.

The memory of his hands on my body makes my cheeks flush. I duck my head so he won't see and try to drive the images from my head.

I clutch the phone in my hand and try to imagine what the best-case scenario is for this entire mess. Maybe Mr. V will get back to me and Lachlan will watch while I meet the man. Then

Lachlan's men will swarm the place, he'll get what he wants, and he'll let me go.

Maybe he'll let me work at the club to pay off my mistake, and maybe I'll still keep enough money to help my mother. Or maybe I'll be even after I give Lachlan Mr. V and I can just leave, go on my way like nothing ever happened. Like the last two weeks haven't been a nightmare.

I know life isn't perfect, though. So I don't hold out hope that I'll make it through this.

Finally, my phone buzzes. It's a message. I don't breathe when I open it; I half expect to see an answer like, *We know. We've been watching.*

You're a traitor.

We're coming.

It makes me hesitate. The fear that something worse could be coming almost paralyzes me, but I know I can't avoid this. I can't run from people bigger than me. So I open the message.

There's another day, time, and place. And the words, *We expect you alone.*

I thought I'd be able to breathe. This is good news. But I'm still frozen, my heart pounding, jaw clenched. The fear still courses through my veins. I have to meet these people again in a few days. This time, I don't know if I'll survive it.

I'm scared.

Lachlan looms over me, looking at my phone. He steps around me, nodding once. The movement is sharp and final. "This is good. You will go to the meeting, and I'll use the chance to find out who it is that wants me dead."

It's like he's done this before. Like nothing has changed, now that he knows he has to face this. The prospect of dealing with the nameless Mr. V doesn't faze him.

But me? I'm in so far over my head that I don't know if I'll ever resurface.

Time passes in a rush over the next few days.

I'm constantly under Lachlan's watch, but he's not trying to torture me for information anymore. And the more I'm left locked in the house, the more I start to realize things about the man who has my life in his hands.

He never fails to wake up at the same time every day, clear-eyed even after just rolling out of bed. He doesn't skip anything—not a morning workout, not breakfast, not a shower. He's so disciplined it's almost robotic.

But I can tell how determined and serious he is. Any time he gets a phone call from one of his brothers, he answers immediately, setting aside anything else to pay attention. His family and his business comes first. He doesn't stop working at the club or doing his job just because his life is in danger.

It's almost like he doesn't know that people are after him. But he does, and that makes it even more crazy to me. He's just living his life exactly like he was before.

Despite being so close to him, I don't get anything more than what I can guess and overhear. Lachlan doesn't let me into his life; he doesn't include me, doesn't explain his phone calls to me. He doesn't allow me any closer than I have to be.

He doesn't touch me, either. He hasn't stayed in the bathroom or shower to watch me since that first day, and he isn't hovering over me when he's home with me. He barely acknowledges me; he hasn't looked at me the way he did before, barely controlled and burning with fire.

He hasn't touched me again, but a part of me wishes he would.

What's wrong with me?

The day of the meeting, I wake up queasy. I can't focus or eat; my chest feels tight, my head dizzy. I know what's coming and despite all my attempts to not think about it until the last minute, it's already here. I can't escape it.

I get dressed uneasily an hour later, far before the meeting. I have nothing else to do and I'm full of nervous energy, my heart already racing in my chest. I wish I was home, wish I could just pick up my books or something else to distract me.

But this is it.

Lachlan leads me into the basement and as I follow him, all I can think is that maybe I was wrong. Maybe he's just going to lock me up again and go himself to find whoever Mr. V is.

But he just leads me into a small room with blue lights and wire racks on the walls, and I almost stop in my tracks at the door.

There are guns everywhere.

I notice them first, but after I start to look, I see everything else. Grenades, knives, things I don't know but that look like technology. I know this entire room is about his other business—about the mafia. This is the place he goes when he needs to get his hands dirty.

He picks something up from a black case and turns to me. It takes all my strength to stay still when he leans close to me, his hands fitting an earpiece in place.

"I'll be coaching you," he says quietly. "I'll tell you what to say and do."

I don't reply. I don't think he needs me to. I just focus on not giving in, not leaning in to him. I can smell the pine in his shampoo, the heady scent that draws me in.

I've been kept just out of reach from him for the last few days. I haven't been this close to him since I first arrived. Now that we're this close, all the memories come rushing back, and I'm reminded of how much I wanted him. How much I still do.

He steps back and I try to get myself under control. I watch him go to a sniper rifle—I recognize what it is only by shape, and it sends a chill up my spine to think that he might have used it before.

He works on the gun carefully, but not slowly. His movements are precise. His hands are deft. He adjusts a scope, clicks things in and out of place. I watch him move and remember the way he touched me, the way he made me fall apart.

I'm terrified by how easily he handles the rifle, but at the same time, I'm drawn to the way his hands move. The way he looks right now, coldly determined, touches a part of me that I can't deny. There might be violence in his persona, but it's not turned on me at the moment.

And right now, it's the only thing keeping me safe.

When he's done, he leads me back up and out the front door. It's the first time I've left since I came here unconscious.

It's beautiful outside. I've seen the backyard from the living room windows; the front of the place is just as green. There are trees enclosing the front of the house, isolating it from everything outside. There's a drive curving past the front door and into the distance, past trees with hanging leaves that obscure the road.

I get into the car with Lachlan and stay silent as he drives to the club. He doesn't make an effort to conceal where we are; I don't know what that means. In my mind, it only means that either he'll kill me or he trusts that I won't be able to leak information about any of this. And if he doesn't think I can tell what I know, he either thinks I'm not smart enough or he knows that I won't be able to get out from under him.

Maybe he'll use me the same way Mr. V tried to—as an agent, disposable and forgettable.

I clench my hands on my knees. I can't think about what might happen in the future. I may not even get that far. I'm still trying to survive what's happening right now.

Lachlan pulls up to the club, right next to my car. He doesn't unlock the door immediately and I sit there patiently, my heart pounding as I think about what's coming next.

“This is going to be simple,” he says. “Follow instructions and you'll make it through.”

“Okay.”

I don't know what else to say. I know he doesn't care about how afraid I am or how much I want to run away. He doesn't care that my life will be in danger.

He's doing this for his family. He isn't going to stop at anything to get what he needs.

The door finally unlocks. I get out and into my car; for a few seconds, I sit there, enjoying the brief relief of being somewhere familiar. I turn the music up, hoping to drown out some of the fear, and then pull away from the club.

The drive isn't far. I cross through town and follow back roads to the place I need to be, and Lachlan follows me. He's close enough that I know he's there, but as we get closer, it's harder to keep track of him. I know he's going to get in position while I pull up.

I think about running. I keep seeing signs for the highway, and I'm tempted to turn the steering wheel and just leave. It would be so easy.

But Lachlan wouldn't hesitate to shoot me, and Mr. V would kill me if I got away. I don't have time to get to my mother, and I don't want to leave her behind. It's impossible.

So I can't run. All I can do is keep driving to the parking lot I'm supposed to meet Mr. V in.

It's almost entirely abandoned, save for the single car in the back of the lot. It's away from the street lights, shadowed, almost invisible at first glance. The windows are so tinted they're almost black. I can't see who's inside, but I watch the window roll down a little and I do the same.

“Step out,” the man commands.

They want to see if I brought a weapon, make sure no one's in the car with me. I step out slowly, then watch someone get out of the passenger's side to come around the car and watch me.

My heart thuds in my chest. The security man pats me down, making sure I don't have a gun. Then he steps back.

I can't hold my tongue. As soon as the window is down, I blurt, "I need more time."

I can almost feel the disappointment emanating from the other car. I can feel the annoyance. The man in the car doesn't make a noise, but I can feel his aggravation.

"You haven't even used up all of your time yet, in case you didn't notice."

"I know. I just—I just need more time."

I can hear in his voice how much he's annoyed by my request. I don't expect him to give the time to me, though. It was never part of the plan. The point was to have an excuse to get him here, talking to me, so Lachlan can figure out who it is.

"Tell him you have a plan," Lachlan says in my ear. His voice is low, almost inaudible. "And take a step to the right."

He wants to see the man's face. I move uneasily, hoping they don't notice. I swallow hard. "I have a plan. I'm getting close."

"Do you, now?"

"I can promise I'll do it. I just need time."

"You already had time. You still do."

I clench my hands in my pockets. Even though I knew what he'd say to me, it still feels like a crushing disappointment.

Lachlan's voice comes into my ear again. "Step forward. Tell him again."

I take a step forward, even though my gut is screaming at me to run. The shaking in my voice is real; I can't control it. "I need more time."

Finally, Mr. V leans forward. "You know what you have to do. You know the consequence."

My heart shoots into my throat; I feel like I could throw up, my stomach cramping from nerves.

Then I hear Lachlan in my ear again. “I’ve got it.”

I can’t answer; I’m too focused on Mr. V, his voice low and dangerous as he speaks to me.

“Do not come back until you’ve finished the job. And if you ask for anything else, I’ll kill you.”

I stand frozen as the guard gets back in the car. I don’t move when they pull away; I just stand there, terrified, all my thoughts wiped away by the reality of what’s just happened.

I’m alone in this. I feel entirely alone, the parking lot empty, the threat still hanging in the air around me. I can almost hear the clock ticking. I don’t have much time before I’m dead, one way or another.

“You did good,” Lachlan says in my ear, breaking the silence.

Did I? I wonder. Or did I just make sure that they’ll want to kill me when this is all done?

I don’t know what happens next. I only know that I’m running out of time.

CHAPTER 20

Lachlan

When Katrina steps aside, the man in the car leans close to the window. Even without the help of a street light, the faint glow of lights from Katrina's car is enough to illuminate parts of the man's face. With a scope pressed up to my eye, it's easy to see who he is.

Yuri Vasiliev. A man who should be dead.

What the fuck?

My mind races. I can't think of a single way that this could be possible. There's no explanation. No man can come back from the dead.

"You did good," I tell Katrina once he's gone. I don't say anything more; I just pull back from the edge of the roof of the building I'm on.

I disassemble my rifle in a few swift moves, tucking it into its case and carrying it toward the fire ladder I came up. As I descend, it feels like my mind is spinning. Every answer I come up with isn't good enough. There's no human way to survive what Vasiliev went through.

I thought I was thorough. It's putting me on edge to realize that maybe I wasn't thorough enough.

Katrina is still standing frozen in the parking lot by the time I reach her. Vasiliev's car is long gone, and there's no risk of being seen. I gesture for her to follow me; we turn the corner and walk a few blocks to my waiting car.

Someone from the family will deal with her car. Someone will come back and comb for any little clues Vasiliev may have left behind, though I doubt they'll find any.

But I can't leave any stone unturned. Not when a man came back from the dead.

Katrina gets into the car and I can tell she's keyed up. Her hands are clenched on her lap, but she flexes them often, like she's forcing herself to relax and forgetting just as fast.

It takes a few minutes for her to work up the question she wants to ask. She looks over at me, hesitant. I wonder if she'll think better of saying something, if maybe she'll second-guess herself and shut up.

But she doesn't. She lets the words come out, as uncertain as they might be.

“Who is Mr. V?”

I glance at her. There's no lie in her gray eyes; she's not asking to check if I know something. Even though she said she didn't know Mr. V, some part of me still harbored doubt. Looking at her now, I know she didn't know. She still doesn't know.

I don't have to tell her, but I can't see why it matters. She can't use the information anyway. And maybe knowing more will mean I'll be able to use her help with this the way I just did.

I tap my fingers on the steering wheel and think about where to start. It's hard to untangle the memories; it's been a while since I even thought about the man. Thinking about him now feels strange, like an old ghost has resurfaced.

“When my family—the O'Reilly family—was first getting established in Boston, Yuri Vasiliev was a frequent ally.”

Katrina's brows furrow. “How long ago was that?”

“One generation, officially.”

I shake my head. I can hear my father's voice in my ear, explaining all of this. It wasn't long ago that he was still alive,

still able to steer the family. I valued his advice so much, and I thought I'd have decades still to turn to him for support.

And then there was no more time left.

“Vasiliev was a Russian criminal. He worked for himself; he wasn't tied to any big organization,” I explain. I can see the man's face in my mind as I speak. “He went where the money was. And he allied with the O'Reilly family, right up until he betrayed us. Tried to stab us in the back.”

I grip the steering wheel tighter, the leather creaking under my palms. I can remember every detail of the night things went to shit.

Yuri had been a constant presence in the family; he was around, even if he wasn't involved in our family dinners. He'd always had a rangy look about him, a sharp smirk and disaffected gaze. He'd never seem dangerous to a fool. If you were smart enough, you knew he was smarter than he looked.

Yuri's existence was built on being useful. Being quick. He could get in and out of a place in five minutes, case even the hardest joint in ten. He had a silver tongue and a slow way of talking that made you think he wasn't in a hurry to screw you over.

And somehow, even being as cautious as we were, he still managed to try to fuck us over.

“I was on a job with him,” I finally say. I can remember it—a small detail, nothing complicated. “He tried to take me out and take all the money for himself.”

Katrina's eyes widen. I can see her mind is spinning; she's probably thinking about whether I was hurt. I know she doesn't know much about the mafia. Maybe she's imagining me dangling from a cliff, or maybe facing off with a dozen armed men.

In reality, it was messy and fast—so fast that I didn't have time to do anything but react.

We were on a bridge. That was the backup plan—take the goods, run like hell a few blocks and over the bridge, and get

into safe territory. Let the crew pick us up. It was risky, but it was our backup.

I'd felt when things went wrong, it was too wrong. Almost perfect in the way it failed. I felt like it was a double-cross, or at least sabotage. But I'd stowed the thought when the alarms were going off, thinking I'd figure it out back in O'Reilly territory.

When I ran with Vasiliev across the bridge, it didn't cross my mind that he'd do anything. I'd thought of him as a suspect the same as anyone else, but I didn't imagine he would try to kill me.

And then he'd turned with a gun in his hand, and I'd reacted.

"I heard it. That's what gave him away," I say, remembering. "He had a flask in his coat pocket. It clinked against the gun. I heard it, saw the gleam, reacted. It was close."

"Jesus."

"I blocked him with one arm, shot him with the other hand. I didn't think. It happened fast, and then he staggered back. He went off the bridge."

That wasn't exactly right, was it? He *had* staggered back. I shot him. But when he got close enough to the railing, I pressed the barrel of the gun to his chest and watched him tip over.

There was a part of me at that moment that didn't care about family or rules. I only cared that the man had tried to kill me, and I wasn't going to stand for that. I didn't care if his death wasn't what we'd usually do. I didn't care to try to nurse him, take him back for interrogation.

I all but shoved him off the bridge, and now he's back.

"I left him for dead," I say lowly. "Clearly, he survived."

I still don't know how it's possible. That far up, bleeding out, I can't see how Vasiliev made it. But the more I think

about it, the more I have to write it off as pure fucking luck. Vasiliev was nothing if not persistent.

The implications of his return are massive. It means he survived, and since he's trying to kill me, he remembers. It's pure spite that's driving him. I never stole anything from him—except his life.

Vasiliev was in the business long enough to know how grudges in the mafia work. He knew that he was in the wrong; he broke his tie when he tried to kill me. He tried to steal from the family. Even if he'd succeeded, he'd be persona non grata for the O'Reilly organization. And the other families wouldn't trust him for what he did.

Maybe the fall drove him off the deep end. Maybe all he cares about now is retribution. *But is someone else bankrolling him?*

I have to figure out why Vasiliev is back, what he's been doing all this time, and why he chose now to try to take me out.

"It's time to check in with the Kozlovs," I say. I don't know why I'm still telling Katrina this, but it feels good and concrete to say it aloud. "They're a Russian mafia family in Boston. They tend to keep an eye on their people, and on any other Russian interference."

If they knew Vasiliev was back and didn't tell me, that would be bad. More so than a problem, it would be annoying. It would, quite frankly, piss me off. I don't have time for betrayal right now.

I need to know if the Kozlovs are involved or working with Yuri at all, and what they might know even if they aren't.

There's a chance they'd protect Vasiliev over helping me. He's Russian, after all, and the ties of a nation are strong. But he's been out of the picture for years, so maybe he doesn't have connections. Still, the uncertainty is there, especially since I know the Assembly members aren't happy with my family.

They think we're too powerful. Maybe this is them taking action.

I don't like the implications of Vasiliev being alive. But I know that no matter what happens, I killed him once. I can do it again.

I pull up to the house and unlock the front door. Katrina is silent when she follows, but I can feel something tenuous in the air between us. It's like a guitar string that was plucked and is still vibrating, still sending ripples through the air.

I barely set foot in the living room before I hear her sob once, a rough, gut-wrenching sound. When I turn to look at her, the back of her hand is pressed to her mouth. Her brow is furrowed as she stares at the floor, obviously trying to hold herself together.

It's the first time I've seen her break down. She was falling apart when I got information from her, but that was different. This is true crushing despair. I've seen it.

I know she doesn't want to be involved in this. I know she probably just wants to go home—but I also know that's not possible, likely the same way she knows it.

Even if I didn't need her to figure this out, she'd be unsafe every moment of every day. Vasiliev knows who she is. He probably wouldn't hesitate to tie up a loose end if he decides he was too lenient on her before.

I don't know why it matters, but I can't stop myself from stepping toward her. I reach out and hold her chin, turn her face up toward me. Her gray eyes are cloudy when they find me.

“Breathe,” I command.

She doesn't speak. I can hear her unsteady gasping start to deepen, matching my pace. Her eyes are locked on mine.

Suddenly, there's heat flaring between us. I can feel the fire spreading through me, almost burning where my hand is touching her skin. I'm aware of her body so completely that I forget about how we got here, what we were doing in the first place.

All I can think about is how fucking gorgeous she is. She's looking at me with her gray eyes, her full lips parted, a flush on her cheeks.

And she's stunning.

I can't help it. I want more.

With her chin in my hand, I pull her in and kiss her.

She responds immediately. I feel her body melting under my touch, like she was made to respond only to me. She presses herself up against me, fitting perfectly in my arms. I lean into her more, press her back, swallowing her moan when she responds to me handling her.

I can't hold myself back. I slide my hands over her ass and she moans, fingers digging into my shoulders. I lift her suddenly, palms still on her ass, and slide her onto the small table near one end of the couch. I hear my books and things falling off, but I don't give a shit.

I tug her pants down, rough.

"Fuck." She whines a little, and I know her ass is still sore. It only makes me want her more—the sound of her whine, the thought of having her so out of control like I did when I had her on my lap.

I don't stop to think. I pull her legs apart and slide a finger against her pussy, feeling how wet she is. She moans, her legs trembling from the sudden sensation. I lean in to eat her out, my tongue on her clit, and she cries out.

She tastes so good. I finger her at the same time, feeling her body tense around me. She's immobile for a few minutes, gasping, her thighs shaking on my shoulders. It's so much at once that she can't even respond.

But I know it won't last long.

"Let me have you," I growl. "Open for me, baby girl. Ride my hand."

I can feel it when she gives in, whatever was holding her back finally breaking. She rolls her hips against me, and then her fingers thread through my hair. She tugs at me, pulling me

close, and I almost smirk. I know she's given up, given in to me. She's letting herself get lost in this.

I move faster. I plunge my fingers deeper, harder. Katrina gasps, her legs tensing, holding me closer. I work her open with my fingers and tongue, thinking only about what it will feel like when I finally get inside her.

God, she's fucking perfect. When she isn't holding back, it's incredible—her body rolls against me, the movement of her hips fluid.

It feels like forever since I've seen her dance, but it reminds me why I wanted her in the first place. She moves like no one else. It's amazing how fluid her body is, how easily it responds to me. She was sexy when I saw her on stage. Right now, in my hands, she's on fire.

"There you go," I rasp. "So fucking good. Just like that. I know you want to come. So be a good girl and come on my goddamn face."

I can feel her getting closer. Her breathing is coming in gasps and her hands are tight, one on my head and the other gripping my arm.

I want her to come. I go harder, hitting a spot that makes her cry out. I hit it again and again, feeling her hips jerk against me faster. She's chasing it just like I am, and I know she wants what I want.

"Lachlan!"

She screams my name as she falls apart.

And damned if it isn't the sweetest fucking sound I've ever heard.

CHAPTER 21

Katrina

I don't know how we got here, my hand in his hair and his mouth on my body.

It feels like a fever dream. One second, I was terrified of reality—of the crushing truth that I was stuck in the middle of an old feud between two dangerous men.

The next second, Lachlan had his hand on my chin and was kissing me.

I never thought it would happen again. The first time, in his office, was the only time I felt was real. When he was pushing me for information, I thought it was just his way of getting back at me. I thought when he touched me, even if he wanted me before, it was all about breaking me.

Now I'm not sure.

This time isn't about getting me to do something. I'm already in his house, under his control. I wouldn't run even if I could; I know I'd be dead in a day, either because of Mr. V or because of my own problems. So he has no reason to do this to me now, no reason to use pleasure to draw me in.

Unless he just wants me.

He can't. I tell myself he can't want me, not after I tried to kill him. And I can't want him. He's dangerous, and being around him is dangerous. Even without our history, I should steer clear of a man who will only bring danger everywhere with him.

But I can't stop myself.

There's something about the way he kisses me like he's devouring me that breaks my strength. I can't fight him when he touches me, when he knows everything that makes me melt. I can't fight him.

I know I shouldn't, but all I can do is give in.

I shut my eyes and pretend that none of the world can intrude here. This is just about want, just about sex. I shut everything out and focus on what he's doing to me now.

Every move he makes sends pleasure shooting through me. He seems to know just what to do to make me melt. Every time his fingers plunge into me it feels just right; every time his tongue flicks against my clit, my legs shake.

It's easy to forget who he is when I can't think straight.

"Give me another," he demands, clearly not satisfied with the first toe-curling orgasm he gave me. "Again, Katrina. Do it."

He pushes and pushes until I feel my entire body clenching, my breath coming in bursts. I'm barely breathing at all when I finally come hard, a white-hot heat blinding me for a long minute as I feel the adrenaline run through me.

I can't quite believe this is happening. I can't believe that I just came on his face twice, that I'm sitting here with his head between my legs. I can't believe it's happening at all, with anyone.

I shouldn't want this, but I do. It's the only thing that's bringing me down from the panic, the fear, the reality that's crushing me.

I want to forget about everything. I want to let the world keep spinning outside these walls, because for once, I'm getting something I want so fucking bad. I'm getting the pleasure I haven't had in so long.

And I want it from him.

"God. Please. Fuck..."

I clench my hands in his hair as I groan.

“I’m not your god,” he murmurs against my skin. “But I like the way it sounds when you pray to me, baby girl.”

He’s still moving, still pushing me past my second orgasm. I feel oversensitive with his fingers inside me, moving hard and fast. He burns through the afterglow and has me keyed up all over again in what feels like seconds.

This time, it’s a low burn. The pleasure building up in me feels harder, hotter. It’s a persistent burn like a wildfire. I can’t escape the sensation, and I can’t help moving my hips when I feel it coming. I don’t even have the presence of mind to be bashful or ashamed anymore; I just chase the feelings, looking for the pleasure I know is coming.

The third orgasm comes slowly. I feel like it hangs just out of reach forever, and when I finally do come again, my ears ring.

“There you go,” he growls approvingly. “So fucking sweet when you soak my face.”

I’m almost blind and deaf with how hard it hits me. Lachlan’s hands are on my hips, digging into me, holding me in place while I jerk against him. He doesn’t stop. He keeps moving.

He makes me come again, just as focused as before. I almost slide off the table; I feel so wet, so breathless. I’m barely breathing at all. My heart is racing, pounding in my ears.

I didn’t know I could come so hard, so fast, or so many times. I feel like I’ve been running a marathon.

And I know he can make me come again.

I feel sore already. It’s like I can feel him everywhere on my body, like he left a permanent mark. Even when his fingers slip out, they’re still there, my body feeling their shape like they never left.

When he draws back and stands up, I can see that he’s hard. Even with his pants still on, I know he’s big.

“What are you going to do?” I whisper, my heart fluttering.

He licks his lips, his eyes half-lidded. “What I’ve wanted to do since the day I first met you. Since the day you first invaded my thoughts. I’m going to fuck you out of my system.”

He lifts me up as if I weigh nothing, and when my feet hit the floor, my legs wobble.

There’s a sting of fear as I realize this is really happening, followed by a greater wave of desire. I’m afraid of what it might mean to let him inside me, but I want him more than I’m afraid of the consequences. Some mad, wild part of me needs this.

“Do you want that, baby girl?” Lachlan demands, our bodies less than an inch apart as he stares down at me. “You want me to end this madness by giving us both what we’ve been craving?”

“Yes,” I whisper, so far past the point of lying that it doesn’t even occur to me to try.

“Good.”

He pushes his pants down as I watch, still breathless. There’s a darkness in his eyes, a hot desire that burns when he looks at me. I can barely focus anymore.

“Then get on your knees,” he says, a command in his tone.

I’m on my knees before I realize that I moved at all. I don’t even adjust my clothes or fix myself up. I just hit the floor, desire and adrenaline coursing through my veins.

Is it because he has power over me? Because at any moment, he could pull a gun and press it to my temple? I know he has one. I know how dangerous he is. If he wanted to take me by force, he could. He could have done it a hundred times by now.

But he doesn’t have to.

Because I want this.

I don’t want to admit that’s the truth, but my body doesn’t care. It’s already burning with desire, already sore and buzzing from the pleasure he’s given me.

“Take out my cock,” he tells me, his voice thick.

My hands shake a little as I undo his pants and shove them down enough to let his cock spring free.

A soft gasp leaves my lips, and Lachlan smirks darkly.

He’s big. His shaft is thick, and I can imagine it filling me up, stretching me wide. I can imagine what he would do to me.

I want him so badly. I think about that when I run my tongue up his length, taste him, feel his hand slide into my hair.

“I’ve been dreaming about your lips for days. Now I want to feel them around my dick. I want to hear you gag on my cock.”

My heart thunders, my clit throbbing at his words. I take him in my mouth, slow at first, getting used to the shape of him. I can hear him groan above me, his hand tightening in my hair. I barely register any of it, so focused on taking his cock in my mouth. I go as far as I can and then pull back.

I don’t take time to tease him. I barely take the time to relax around him, diving back down as fast as I can. I don’t care if my voice is rough tomorrow; I don’t care about any of it. I just chase the feeling of his cock hitting my throat, the rush it gives me blinding me to everything else.

After just a minute of getting used to him, I sense something change. He has both hands on my head and I know what’s coming.

“Fuck,” he groans. “What are you doing to me? Goddammit.”

He uses my mouth, no waiting between thrusts. My eyes water when he fucks my mouth and I breathe carefully, but it’s still so hard that I almost gag sometimes. It’s so rough, but it turns me on so fucking much.

I want to touch myself so badly, but more than that, I want *him*. I want him inside me. It’s all I can think about as his cock slides past my lips. Every time, I’m imagining it inside my pussy. I’m imagining how it would feel, how it would be just

as rough. I imagine him hitting the same spot he hit with his fingers, only harder. Faster.

He curses, his thrusts picking up their pace. I can barely hold on; I keep my hands on his body, even though I know my nails are biting him. I can't do anything but hold him as he fucks my mouth, rough and fast.

"You're ruining me," he mutters under his breath, and it almost feels like he stole the thoughts from my head.

I want him so badly. I want to come and I want to feel him come inside me, want to feel every inch of him.

I have to force myself to keep still and not touch myself. I'm burning with need, but I stay motionless as he starts to move faster again. He watches me mouth as he does, his eyes dark and burning with something.

Maybe it's need, or maybe it's anger. I don't know; all I know is that it's so hot, I can't see anything else. Not even when he goes rough on me again, holding my head in place as his cock thrusts in and out of me. He fucks me harder and I feel my jaw ache, my lips stretched around him. I'm dizzy with pleasure.

"Don't miss a single drop," he growls. "I want all of my cum down your pretty throat."

The words end on a grunt as he finishes in my mouth. The salty taste hits my tongue, and just like he demanded, I swallow it all, every drop.

He pulls away slowly when it's over. I feel almost empty when he does, like I'm missing something. I'm breathing heavily, chest rising and falling.

When I look up at him, I find something heated in his gaze. He stares down at me, unreadable, and I feel my heart race again.

Is this it?

I don't know if it's coming. I don't know if he's willing to go this far, if he'll fuck me. Maybe this is him realizing what a mistake it was to do this in the first place.

For a long, breathless moment, we stare at each other in silence, like two wild animals about to spring into action. He looks like a lion about to pounce, and it makes my heart race.

Because if he's a predator, what does that make me?

I don't want to say anything. I feel like it'll break the spell, and I don't know if I could handle what comes after that, as much as I want it.

Then, suddenly, my phone rings, its familiar sound breaking the silence.

The moment shatters.

Lachlan grabs the phone from his pocket, looking down at me with suspicion. The distrust makes something inside me clench with pain. I don't know why—he has no reason to trust me.

He answers on speaker. I hear the phone click, and as soon as the other line connects, I know what it is. I know the familiar white noise, the sound of a PA system crackling. It's my mom's facility.

"Hello, Katrina?"

"She's not available at the moment," Lachlan says, still looking at me. His gaze is shuttered.

It's almost frightening how easily he shut down, how quickly he had his cool mask ready. But I remember what he looked like before. How *I* made him look.

"Oh," the nurse says. "Well, we've been trying to get in touch. She hasn't stopped by in a while, and her mother is asking after her. We just wanted to make sure everything is okay."

There's barely any concern in the woman's voice. It's firm, polite. I know she's calling to see where I am, but she's also calling to see if my mother's room will be paid for. If she has any support, or if they'll kick her out and put her somewhere else.

Somewhere worse.

My heart skips a beat. I feel immediately guilty, immediately aware of how naked I am. And I feel relieved. This is the one part of my life I didn't want to lose, and now I know my mother is alive. Now I know she has some part of herself left, that she's asking for me.

"I'll pass it on," Lachlan says. He hangs up.

I don't wait before I speak. "Can I go see her?"

I'm sure he'll say no. I know it's a risk to let me out, and he'd never let me wander alone. He still doesn't trust me. He won't risk me passing on information or taking the chance to run.

I don't know what he wants from me or if he wants me at all. I just know that Lachlan is willing to use me to play this game of chess with Mr. V, to get back at the man that came back from the dead.

"Fine."

I blink, startled. I didn't expect him to say yes at all, but there's decisiveness in his voice. He looks down at me, clear-eyed in a way I can't be right now. I'm still half-naked, still vaguely turned on. I'm a mess.

"I'll go with you," he adds. "You're not getting out of my sight."

I don't want him to come. I don't want another person knowing about my mother, especially when I know he only cares about protecting his family. He might respect me looking after mine, but I don't think he'll ever choose me over them. If it comes down to it, he'll use my mother against me.

But I don't have a choice in this. I have to do what I can, and right now, that means taking this small victory.

"Okay," I say. "Tomorrow."

CHAPTER 22

Katrina

I don't know when I started to become comfortable living in Lachlan's house. I don't even know if you can call it comfortable.

But when I wake up in the morning in the room he's kept me in for the past several days, I feel more rested than I have in a while.

I'm still sore from yesterday, though. When I get dressed, every bend and motion reminds me of what happened. I can't help the heat that rises in my cheeks when I remember the way he fucked me so hard with his hand. The more I think about it, the more one question comes to mind.

How the hell did this happen?

I was scared after meeting Mr. V. Meeting him again after being taken by Lachlan reminded me of reality; it reminded me that no matter how much I wanted things to be over, they never would be.

Not as long as Mr. V was alive.

But Lachlan seemed to know what I was feeling. And whether he did it to comfort me or to distract me so I could be used, he still did it.

Now, in the light of day, I can't believe what I did. It feels like a stupid mistake, but one I wouldn't hesitate to make again. I should know better than to let myself fall for it, to let him make me fall apart. But I can't deny him.

As much as I know it's a terrible idea, I can't help giving in to his touch every time.

The phone call from my mother's facility was a reality check. It stopped me from going further, though it made me realize I was already going to. It made me feel guilty, too—guilty that I hadn't been trying since I was kidnapped to get in touch with her, to convince Lachlan to let me see her.

But the entire time I was hostage, I just wanted to make it out alive. And part of me was convinced that no matter what I did, I wouldn't be able to save her if I told Lachlan about her.

I was worried she'd be used against me. Now, he knows about her, and he said he'd take me to see her.

I don't know if I can trust him. I don't know if he'll keep his promise to take me, and I don't know what he'll do once we're there. I don't know if he'll threaten her or use her against me.

But I have to take the chance. My mother is so far gone that every day I see her could be the last day she remembers she has a daughter. I don't even try to make her remember it's me any more; sometimes, she looks for me when I'm in the room. But as long as she knows I exist, I know there's some part of her still hanging on to life.

I want to see her now, while *I'm* still alive. And if I have to go with Lachlan, so be it.

He doesn't speak much when I come downstairs and meet him. He doesn't even ask where the facility is; I guess he looked up the phone number after the call. I follow him outside, feeling like there's some strange tension in the air I can't quite put my finger on.

We're both silent in the car as he drives. Part of me still worries that he won't actually take me, that this is some kind of ploy that will end with my mother being threatened. But that worry is small, and the closer we get to familiar roads, the less I believe it.

After everything I've seen from Lachlan, I don't know where he draws the line—but I think maybe this is it. Maybe

because he will protect his family at any cost, he knows what it's like for me.

Or maybe he's just waiting for the perfect time.

I shake the thoughts off when we pull up to the front doors. My heart races, throat dry as I step out of the car. Every time I come here, I worry that I'll arrive just a second too late.

It's a nightmare of mine to be out of touch when the facility is trying to contact me, too late to arrive in time before my mother is gone forever. But today is not that day.

I notice as I'm walking in the way the nurses stare. At first I wonder if maybe I look different, as if my time with Lachlan has changed something about me. Then I realize they're looking at him.

I almost forgot how intimidating he is. He's tall, sure, but it's more than that. There's something powerful about him, something scary.

He has a presence that can't be denied. When he walks, he looks like he's going somewhere, like he's about to do something. He looks like he could end your life with a word.

He probably could.

I don't know how I feel about any of it. I don't know how I feel about *him*. I know I'm drawn to him, and that it's powerful. But he's also dangerous. He could kill me at any moment if he decides I'm no longer useful.

And yet, I know there are other sides to him. I've seen them. He comforted me when I was almost falling apart after meeting Mr. V, and he praised me for having the courage to go in the first place. He didn't even have to let me come see my mother, but he did.

There's kindness in him. I didn't want to admit it before, but I know it's there. It's so deeply buried that I can almost overlook it. But when he doesn't know I'm looking, I can see it. I can see the way his eyes change when he looks around the facility, before they harden again and he's lofty and cool.

I make my way to my mother's room. The nurses don't bother me for once; Lachlan is like a repellent, his presence alone keeping them at bay. I'm grateful for that, at least.

My mother's room is bright. The curtains are drawn, but the vase by the window is empty. The flowers I brought last time are gone.

I go to her bedside; she doesn't even turn around. There's a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. I know it's a bad day. When I speak, I try to keep my voice quiet, hoping she'll come back just a little.

"Mom?"

She turns to me, her smile vague. She pats my hand, but her gaze is distant. "Oh. Hello, dear."

I know she doesn't recognize me. Her tone is polite; she doesn't hold my hand or lean in for a hug. She just acknowledges me like she would a nurse, then turns back to the window.

Lachlan is standing in the corner, watching, but I try not to think about him.

"Mom, I'm sorry I haven't visited," I say, keeping my voice firm but low. "The nurses said you asked for me."

"Oh, I'm fine," she says. She turns to look at me again, her smile empty but cheerful. "You tell them I don't need anything. I'm happy as a clam."

"Okay, Mom. I didn't get to pick up flowers today; I'm sorry."

"Oh, that's fine. It's lovely outside anyway."

I swallow hard. I can see the glimmer in her eyes fading. She's getting further away, drawn by some memory of some time or place she can't quite grasp. I wish she'd stay with me, but I know I can't stop it. All I can do is watch her go.

I sit by her bed and resist the urge to reach out to her. I don't want to startle or scare her. I've had visits descend into painful fits because she didn't know me, didn't understand that I wasn't a threat.

It's the ugly side of this disease that no one will talk about.

So I just stay near her because it's all that I can think to do. I sit at her side and try to talk to her, hoping something I say will spark recognition and bring her back.

I've been told that nothing is guaranteed when she's like this, far away. There's little chance she'll latch onto anything I say. But I still try because even if it never works, I can't do nothing. I can't sit here and watch her fade away while I wallow in silence, wishing I could turn back time to when things were better.

I feel exposed like this. It feels like Lachlan is watching my every move, taking it all in. Seeing me. It's vulnerable, almost intimate. It's a part of my life I rarely show to anyone, much less a part I'd think to show to him.

I try not to focus on him, but my mother notices him. "Who's this?"

I don't know if she's coming back. Maybe she just knows he's not a nurse, or maybe she's finally registering that it's me, and she's wondering who the strange man with me is. I try not to get my hopes up, but the possibility makes my heart thump.

"A friend," I say. I don't know what else to tell her.

I don't want to tell her his name. I don't trust that she's out of danger yet. He may still decide she's a risk, that she'll repeat anything to anyone. I don't want to put him in a position where he makes that call.

She doesn't ask anyway, and there's a flicker of recognition in her eyes when she looks at me. It's that faint gaze that tells me she knows me, that she may not remember that I'm her daughter but she recognizes my face.

It's all I can ask for.

The visit is hard. It's a harsh thing, pulling me back to reality from the whirlwind I've been living for a week. But I'm reminded of all my mother is struggling through, and I'm reminded of my part in it. She has no one to count on but me. When I'm gone, it matters.

I want to promise I won't disappear again, but I know it's out of my hands. Right now, all I can do is tell her that I love her and talk about memories we have, as if I can stop them from leaving her mind like sand through a sieve.

I just talk to her, Lachlan behind me, as long as I can. I talk until the sun lowers outside her window, and then I know I have to leave.

I stand slowly and go to kiss her forehead. I can barely smell her perfume, the familiar lily-of-the-valley that haunts my memories of her when I was a child. I have to force tears back when I see how she smiles, fond but still distant.

"Goodbye," I say, and I try not to feel like it's the thousandth time I've said it. Like every time, it feels more like I'm saying it to a different person.

I step back from her bed to leave. Lachlan is still there by the door, silent, taking it in.

I don't know why, but I want to say something. So I whisper to him as I leave.

"Thank you."

I don't have anything more for him. I feel exhausted, used up, done. There's nothing left. So I lead the way out, wanting to look over my shoulder the whole way, hoping this isn't the last time I ever see my mother.

CHAPTER 23

Lachlan

She's so quiet when she thanks me that I almost don't hear it. But her *thank you* sticks in my mind as I follow her out of the facility.

I could see the similarities when we first walked into her mother's room. They had the same look about them. The only difference was the openness in the woman's eyes, a kindness where Katrina was guarded and stoic.

It's almost as if the roles have reversed, parent and child.

I find myself glancing at Katrina on the drive back. Seeing her with her mother was...different. Something about her wasn't grounded to me before. She was almost too good, too perfect. I didn't think about her outside of the club or my house.

Now I know. Watching her interact with her mother gave me perspective. I feel like I know more about her now, like this was a window into her life.

And I can sense not many people get to look through this window.

I respect that. I'm private not just by necessity but by design, and I know how uncomfortable it can be to have someone so close to something so private.

It reminds me of my mother and of Rose, my brother Aiden's wife. Rose was in my position at one point. She was there when our mother declined, when we had to make the decision to let her go. It wasn't easy. It hurt my brother Finn, and it hurt me like hell, too.

It was a shit time.

I know the grief Katrina is living with, in a way. My own mother was comatose for years, unresponsive after the loss of my father. I would visit her with my brothers, but the real pain came from visits alone. Those were the truly empty ones, the ones that sobered me.

I knew every time I visited could be the last. I knew her condition was bad, and keeping her on machines would only last so long. There was no way I could keep lying to myself or my brothers.

In the end, when the time came, I was almost relieved. I knew my mother wasn't really there anymore, that she would want to be with my father. I knew it was my feelings, my brothers' feelings, that were keeping her tethered. We just didn't want to let her go.

Looking at Katrina, I know what she's feeling—she's feeling the loss of someone before they're even really gone. It's a years-long death, a painful goodbye that fools you into hoping until one day, you just can't afford to hope anymore.

I wouldn't wish it on anyone.

The losses of my father and mother changed me. I wasn't just forced to handle the family business and affairs too soon; I was also struck by how many experiences I didn't get to have, things I was never able to say. I know I shut down, that it was part of the reason I truly gave up on having a relationship.

After all, if my parents died so young, why would I believe I could have a happy ending?

I almost say something. I almost tell Katrina, *I know how you feel*. But I don't. I hold my tongue and my secrets inside, even as I remember the ache of loss and how alone I felt at the time.

I don't want to share too much with her. I don't want to let this slip, give her something to latch onto. Something for *me* to latch onto.

She's already too deep under my skin. I know that; I've felt it since I touched her, since I crossed the line. It's

inescapable. I did something I can't take back. I let her in. But I don't want to let her in even more, let her know something about me. Something private.

I don't want her to see even more of who I am.

I can't risk showing her any more of me, as much as I'm getting the urge to. So I stay silent on the way home and try not to think about the silent pain in her posture, the loss in her eyes as she gazes out the window.

I try not to wonder if she's remembering better days with her mother.

When we're home, she's still silent. I lock the door and can't think of what to say that wouldn't sound inappropriate. It feels like leaving a funeral.

But I don't have a chance to say anything. My phone buzzes and there's a message from Aiden. I shift, settling into my business mind, trying to focus.

We're meeting with Ezra to talk about the merger, it says. Hash out wedding details.

I stare at the word *wedding*, and then I clench my hand around my phone. "Shit."

I forgot all about the meeting. No doubt Aiden's message was an uncertain prodding, him trying to figure out why I hadn't reached out yet. After all, I'm the one getting married.

But I'm here forgetting my own wedding.

I can't ignore this meeting; it's not an option. But I'm not sure how Katrina is feeling. Having just seen her mother, I don't know if she'll take a risk to escape or do something equally stupid. Maybe she'll take my absence as an opportunity to try to run.

She'd never make it, but the prospect of dealing with that on top of the meeting isn't something I want to do.

Even if she won't run, there's still something in me that shrinks from the idea of leaving her alone. So I shove my phone into my pocket and kick into gear, my mind already racing.

Ezra expects to meet us somewhere on our home turf, in one of our houses. He expects familiarity and a show of power. A demonstration of what he's buying into. I don't want to shove this responsibility off onto one of my brothers; it has to be my place.

But Ezra can't see Katrina. I can't risk having her around him, and I certainly don't want him knowing she's been with me, hostage or not. He can never know she's been here. It would risk the negotiations, the marriage, everything.

Just thinking about how thoroughly it could fuck things up is enough to put me on edge.

"Go upstairs and stay there," I say shortly.

I know I'm being curt when I dismiss her, but I also know that this is not up for debate. She needs to be out of sight immediately, and she needs to stay there.

Still, her eyes are wide when she hears the way I'm ordering her away. There's a flush in her cheeks, the faintest glimmer of disbelief hidden in her eyes. I know this doesn't match how I was earlier, how I took her to see her mother. It's not like I was involved, but I know she must have thought I cared. That I was being human. Understanding.

She looks hurt. There's confusion clear on her face, withdrawal as she backs up reflexively in response to my harsh tone. But she turns away in the end, and she does what I asked. She goes upstairs.

I don't know why it matters to me that she's hurt at all. But the sour taste in my mouth doesn't go away.

I don't know why, but having her around right now makes me angry. It puts me on edge. It's the idea of having her privy to my conversations about the wedding that sends frustration shooting through every cell in my body.

I shouldn't care. It's not like what happened between us was a promise; it was a mistake.

But somehow, I do care. And I'm pissed.

She doesn't argue. She leaves and I walk through the ground floor, irritation mounting when I realize I only have fifteen minutes before my brothers arrive. I take what I can from the office and leaf through the papers, trying to refresh everything I already know.

I can't believe I fucking forgot.

The door chimes faster than I hoped. Aiden is the first to arrive, serious, hands in his pockets. Connor and Finn are close behind, though they're less on edge. They always are.

But I'm about to ruin that peace.

"So," Aiden begins. "You mentioned you know who it is now."

"I do. It's Yuri."

I don't mince words. They react how I expected—with shock, confusion, anger. Finn swears, turning in a circle as he processes the information.

"How did that motherfucker survive?" Connor asks, disgusted. "He's like a fucking cockroach. Jesus."

"He was a bastard," Aiden agrees. "I thought he was dead for good."

I shake my head. "The fall should have done it. I still don't know how he escaped, but he must be messed up from the fall. I'm betting that's why he tried to get other people to do his dirty work."

"I always hated him," Finn mutters. "Even before he started acting suspicious."

"Yeah, we know," Connor replies, but there's strain to his teasing.

I know they're remembering. Yuri was never perfect, but near the end, calling him a loose cannon would have been an understatement. He was a nightmare to work with.

Looking back, it's clear that he was discontent. He was looking for something bigger, better. He was restless despite

the benefits our family provided him. He wanted more excitement.

And he got it, in the end—even if it wasn't the kind he was looking for.

“We need to figure out what his game is,” Aiden says lowly. “I don't buy that he's just after you. If what you were told is right, he's been conning people with loan shark schemes.”

“I know. I'm following up on it, but it's hard to find leads without stirring up the shit.”

“I bet,” Connor says, an eyebrow sarcastically arched. “It's not like those people would ever have a reason to hide, right?”

I think about Katrina and her mother. She really was the perfect person to fall into Yuri's lap—with her mother sick, she wouldn't leave town. But her drive and devotion meant she would do anything she needed to, to survive.

I hear the chime of my security system as I stand there, and the bell sounds lower than I remember. Ominous.

“Ezra's here,” I say.

It feels like the end of something.

My brothers clam up about Yuri as I go to the door; we all shift into business mode, ready to exchange polite niceties while we play a dangerous dance of maneuvering around the situation.

He's there when I open the door, him and two men that look obviously like the stuffed-shirt security type. I don't begrudge him his choice; in fact, it was smart of him. It wouldn't help if things went to shit, but it might save him some time to get away while they die.

But this isn't that kind of meeting. We aren't here to exchange tense words; he's a guest. I greet him, let him in, and shut the door behind him.

“Welcome,” I say. “Let's get down to business.”

He's polite through the meeting, discussing business details as if they aren't part of an agreement to sell his daughter as collateral. It's not a pretty setup, but it was unavoidable. There's not much someone from the normal world can offer someone in the mafia, someone part of the underworld of the city. I have power in darkness that he can never achieve.

But Ezra will legitimize us, and his assistance could be invaluable. With him on our side, we'd have even more access to the world that everyone else knows.

We all benefit from this deal. And it wasn't as if I had any romance or need for a relationship when Ezra came into the picture.

It wouldn't matter if I did anyway. My place as head of the family means that this is my responsibility. I can't shrink from it.

I've known since I was a boy what my role is in the family. And they need me to uphold them now more than ever.

"That just leaves the wedding," Ezra says, and the change in his expression is immediate.

I wonder if his daughter feels the same.

There's a real joy in Ezra's eyes. Even if his daughter might not be excited, he obviously is. I don't know if he's genuinely happy for her, or if this is some disgustingly misplaced glee at being rid of his child. Either way, he doesn't shrink from the arrangement.

"The church has already been booked," I reply, trying to keep my voice neutral. Even more than the business part of this arrangement, talking about the marriage feels like a minefield.

This is the man's only daughter that he is selling into marriage. It's a big loss to take, a big risk to hand her over to a man from the underworld who is a complete stranger. Who could do anything.

But Ezra seems to trust us, trust *me*. I don't know if he's stupid or just perceptive enough to know I would never be

violent toward a woman that may not even want to be my wife, a woman tied to a contract just as much as I am.

Ezra nods curtly. “I’ve booked the rest for her. She’s found her dress, unless there are any requirements or objections I have yet to hear.”

“Not at all,” I say smoothly. “This is her wedding, after all.”

I don’t care about a wedding ceremony, but it’s expected of the family, so it has to be done. The Assembly will want to see it to make sure the marriage is legitimate and out in the open. Ezra’s business associates will want to see it happen. Everyone will benefit from being invited, sipping someone else’s wine and eating wedding food.

For some reason, more than ever before, all I can think of is how much I hate this plan. But I owe it to my family to go through with it. I owe it to them to lead from the front, to take on the burdens that are hardest to bear.

I could be facing a loveless marriage with a woman who feels like a prisoner for the rest of our lives. But I’ll do it in a heartbeat because it is asked of me, just the way I need to.

I barely listen to the rest of the conversation. Aiden is handling the venue anyway, and Connor is managing security. I’d do it all myself if I could, but I know I have to focus on the ceremony.

Everything has been laid out. It’s no longer plans and negotiations, feeling each other out. The deal is set. It’s happening.

“That’s all then,” Ezra finally says, and he sounds pleased. It’s all I can hope for right now.

I nod sharply and escort him to the door. “We’ll be in touch. Thank you for meeting with us.”

When I shut the door, it feels like closing a book. I know things have changed now. My path is set. There’s no backing out now.

“We’ll look into what we can with Yuri,” Aiden says quietly, bringing me back to the present.

I clench my jaw and force my mind back to business. “Before that, I want to pay a visit to Nikolai.”

“You think the Russians are in on it?” Connor asks, uncertain.

“No. But if anyone knows anything, it’ll be him. And we need to know now.”

“All right,” Aiden says, casting a sideways glance toward the stairs. “We can leave now.”

“We will,” I say shortly. “But not alone.”

I go upstairs, one thing on my mind. Katrina is still there, silent, sitting on the bed in the room I left for her when I first let her stay out of the basement. She still seems hurt, still wary when I appear.

I have to remind myself to harden against this, harden against the obvious distrust in her eyes. I don’t owe her anything. She’s not supposed to be my woman or even my guest; she’s a prisoner. A pawn to figure out what Yuri is up to and how to protect my family.

It doesn’t matter what’s happened between us. I don’t need to feel guilty or angry—though I do, deep under the mask of business that I’m wearing.

“You’re coming with us,” I say coldly.

I turn and walk out, and I don’t look back to see if she follows.

CHAPTER 24

Katrina

The brothers are silent when I appear. They barely acknowledge me; only Finn really looks, and the curiosity in his gaze is veiled by open distrust.

I can't blame him. He knows I tried to kill his brother.

Still, I wish I didn't have to go with them. I know where they're going; they're going to meet the Russian mafia family. Lachlan said he had to check if they're involved. If they are, it might mean a fight—a fight I don't want to get in the middle of.

It's even worse now that Lachlan is being so cold to me. It seemed like after visiting my mother, things had shifted. Maybe it wasn't perfect, but it felt better. Different. He seemed... warmer. Like he was actually starting to understand me, even if I hadn't intended for it to happen.

I never expected him to understand me or sympathize. I'd only dared hope he would find me useful enough to keep me alive.

But after visiting my mother, it seemed like maybe he saw me as a human. Like maybe he saw my pain, my hope, the reason I was doing any of it. I had hope that maybe things would change.

But now he's changed again, and he's being harsh and cold.

I don't like that I'm hurt by it. I wish I didn't feel any way about it at all. I don't want to feel disappointed, almost betrayed by the way he's turned around and treated me like

I'm just some woman who tried to kill him. As if he hasn't held me captive, seen my mother, known me more than most people in my life.

But for some reason, I am hurt. I do wish it was different. Some part of me wants him to look at me the way he did before—like there was something familiar about me, something understandable.

It's not like that now. Now, we're strangers.

I don't speak in the car. He's silent too, his brothers following in another car just behind us. I don't want to be the one to say anything. I figure if he wants to talk to me, he'll say something. Maybe he just doesn't want to look weak in front of the others.

But he isn't open in the car when we're alone, and the doubt I have is crushed. He's not going to open up to me again.

I try not to feel anything about it as he drives. I force myself to repeat the words in my head, to remind myself *I shouldn't want him as a friend at all*.

And I definitely shouldn't want whatever drove him to touch me in the first place.

When we arrive, it's to a building on the outskirts of the docks, right on the border of the south side of downtown. It's near where I live, I realize, and I wonder what would have happened if I'd found the Russians instead.

Would they have given me the money I needed? What would I have done in exchange? All this time I thought I was so far away from these people, and it turns out they were just past my back door.

I stick close to Lachlan when I get out of the car. I can feel his brothers watching me; it makes my skin itch. I don't know what they're thinking, but they're intimidating. They're not just tall or big, they're imposing. It's their presence.

Like they've fought and killed before.

I keep my head down and follow Lachlan into the building. I may not know how to feel about him or my feelings toward him, but I still trust him more than his brothers. At least I'm familiar with him.

I don't have any illusions about this, though. I know if push comes to shove, he'll save his brothers over me. I just have to make sure that doesn't happen.

The building looks like it used to house offices. It's gutted in places, worn down by time and maybe a few gunfights. There are men everywhere, as soon as we enter. None seem worried about Lachlan's entourage, but I notice the first man that sees us murmur into his sleeve.

They'll know we're here.

I clench my hands and try not to think about what might happen. The men around us may not seem hostile, but I know that could change at the drop of a penny. If they feel threatened, they might do something.

We stop after ascending two floors. There's a man at the landing when we leave the staircase; he's dressed nicer than the others, his silvery hair pushed back from a strong face with high cheekbones. He looks older than Lachlan by maybe fifteen years, well-built and alert.

"O'Reilly," the man says, dipping his head briefly. It's respectful, but not deferential.

Lachlan stops short. "Mikhail. I'm here to meet with Nikolai. It's urgent."

Mikhail glances over Lachlan's shoulder. He has shockingly bright gray eyes, and they're sharp as they assess the group before him. He nods once, gesturing with his left hand. Behind him, a group of men move.

"Lucky he was back in time," Mikhail says. He leads the way across the floor, toward the elevator in the center of the building. "One day earlier, and this urgency would not have been answered."

Lachlan doesn't comment. He follows silently and then we all crowd into the elevator. It's exposed, a grated box with

thick cables visible at the top. I feel my stomach turn while we rise, feeling like I'm in a cage all over again.

I'm grateful to get out when the doors finally open at the top floor. Mikhail hangs back, but I can see security scattered along the pillars to either side of us. The effect is like a long hallway leading to a table at the far side of the floor, right at the large glass windows overlooking the docks.

The man standing by the table is large and wide. He's like a brick wall, his deep blue suit pants stretched over obvious muscles. He's older, his hair more white than black, but he's still imposing. I believe Lachlan and his brothers would have a serious fight on their hands if they tried to take him.

"Ah. O'Reilly," the man says, waving a hand at the desk before him. "A drink?"

"No, thank you."

The man nods. He doesn't seem put out by the refusal; he's nursing something clear in a glass, half facing the window. "You have business with me."

"Yes. Have you been branching into loans recently?"

"No. Other than protection, but that's been part of our business for years," the man says, a smirk on his lips. "But don't tell the Devils."

Somehow, I feel like the Devils is a name. Like he's talking about specific people. At least his answer seems civil so far—but I'm not going to let my guard down.

If I have to run, I'll run. And maybe I can escape for good.

Aiden nods. "Yuri is back, Nikolai."

So that's him. Nikolai, the man behind the desk, pauses. He looks at the brothers, more serious, something shuttered about his expression. He's doing a good job of hiding his reaction.

"We only wanted to know your part in it," Lachlan says smoothly. "If you're in league with him...well, it would be a problem."

I hold my breath. I can feel my heart racing; I have to fight not to look around the room. I don't know how the brothers do it. They all hold their ground, serious, no cracks in their armor.

They didn't beat around the bush. I expected them to ease into this, be careful of accusing this man. But they're airing out exactly what they came for, no secrets or minced words.

Nikolai sets his glass down and turns to fully face Lachlan, his gaze steady and serious. "In league? Not at all. I didn't even know Yuri was back. This concerns me."

It's obvious from the staunch look on his face and the rigidity in his spine that he's telling the truth. Whatever Yuri used to be to this man, he's not a friend now. I'm at least a little relieved that this man seems to be on good terms with the O'Reilly family.

"Does it?" Lachlan asks.

"I keep tabs on everything, you know. Especially when it comes to Russian operatives."

"Of course."

He doesn't say it, but we all hear Nikolai's silent words: *I don't like that I didn't know this.*

I'm sure he's more than just put out. This is serious. A man is back from the dead and attempting murder. If Lachlan and his family were different, maybe they would have retaliated without meeting Nikolai first.

I don't know much about the mafia world, but from what I've seen and what Lachlan has told me, Yuri is a problem for everyone.

"Has he contacted you?" Nikolai asks.

"In a way," Connor says dryly. "He tried to kill Lachlan."

I can see Nikolai's eyes widen a fraction, a reflex before it's controlled. "When? Where?"

"The club." Lachlan gestures at me. "He hired Katrina."

Nikolai's gaze swivels to me and I want to hide. I fight the urge to step behind Lachlan and stand my ground. I know I'm

not impressive or imposing. I know I don't look like an assassin.

But Nikolai still looks at me with interest, and it sends a cold trickle down my spine.

I don't want to be a part of this world, this life. I wish I had never taken the loan, never been blackmailed. I wish everything was easier.

But I can't shrink from this. I took the loan, and I was blackmailed into murdering Lachlan. I did what I could, as inexperienced as I was, and I nearly made it.

Maybe Nikolai can see that. Maybe this man that dismissed me when I walked in is looking at me now, wondering just what I would do to get the job done.

Maybe he's trying to figure out what drives me. But there's only one person in this room that knows about my mother, and it seems like he doesn't care anymore.

Except Lachlan suddenly steps in front of me, cutting me off from Nikolai's view. And even as he does, I can see the darkness in his face. The possessiveness.

But he doesn't turn to look at me. He's still cold, still turned away. He doesn't cast a single glance in my direction. It feels like this isn't even about me, really—it's a different kind of territorial anger. Like Lachlan is telling Nikolai he can't have any more free information. He can't even look at me.

Nikolai doesn't push. He shifts his weight, obviously losing interest in me. I can see it happen, but Lachlan doesn't move.

"I will see what I can find. Ask my own contacts for information," Nikolai offers. "I'll let you know what I find."

"We'd appreciate it," Aiden replies. "We'd like to know where he's operating from and what he's doing."

"Aside from attempted assassination," Lachlan adds, his tone cool.

"Then we shall see," Nikolai says calmly. "And I'd like a word with him too."

“It’s a deal,” Lachlan says shortly. “We appreciate your time.”

I can barely blink before I’m being ushered away, still out of sight of Nikolai. I keep wanting to look over my shoulder just to make sure he’s not following, but I bite my tongue and keep walking.

I just want to get out.

CHAPTER 25

Lachlan

I'm not happy about the meeting. Knowing that Nikolai isn't involved is helpful, but I'd be lying if I said it wouldn't have been easier that way. Now that we know the Russians aren't in on it, the options are endless. There are too many places to start.

But Nikolai, in a show of good faith, has promised to look into it. If someone on the fringes of his community is helping Yuri, he'll find out.

Before I leave the place, Aiden stops between our cars. "We'll check back in soon," he says. "There's a lot to do."

I know he's talking about the wedding, not just Yuri. The reminder makes me clench my jaw, but I agree before I get in my car.

I shouldn't be feeling like this. I'm still trying to keep walls up between myself and Katrina. But Nikolai didn't help; the second he looked at her, I slipped. I felt the possessiveness flare up within me. I cut her off from him without thinking, even though I knew nothing would happen. He wouldn't touch one of ours, prisoner or no.

I don't want to get attached, but I'm lying to myself by thinking I'm not already. I'm drawn to her, attracted to her. I'm impressed by her strength and the resilience I've seen since I brought her home from the club. Those are the most important qualities to me in life, and in a woman, they're undeniably attractive to me.

But I can't have her, period. Not really. I'm promised to another woman, the wedding just around the corner. Regardless of the fact that I've barely met this other woman, she is the future that is waiting for me. There's no alternative.

I have my duty and my path. I can't stray for this woman that was sent to kill me. I can't give everything up for this attraction.

Still, I can't help but notice how pale and shaky Katrina is. I can see it when she climbs into the car, when her hands shake as she pulls her seatbelt on.

It's more scared than I've seen her since she was tied up. I know it's because of the meeting, because of Nikolai and his men. The meeting made this all a reality for her, a reminder of how deep she's in now. She's in over her head.

Even though she's brave and stubborn and strong, even though she holds her own amazingly well, it's too much. She may have grit, but that's not all you need in this underworld. She doesn't know anything about the Assembly and its families. She doesn't know the complex web of relationships, truces, old blood.

It's incredible she made it this far. I know what Yuri is like; he doesn't tolerate anything. He has no patience. I'm surprised Katrina made it as long as she did without interference from him.

When I pull up to the house, she's still shaky. I can see it, noticing how it burrows deep in her bones. The fear is real for her now.

I don't want to care. I don't want to involve myself with her, but I'm moving as soon as the front door opens. I don't know why I'm doing it at all, ushering her to the kitchen. I just know she needs food before she passes out.

Katrina sits in the chair I direct her to. I can see the surprise on her face, eyes wide and lips barely parted. She's swept up in it as much as I am, though, and she doesn't object. She just pulls her legs up onto the barstool and watches me.

I don't know what the hell I'm doing, but I know that making food will bring me some peace. I'm used to cooking for myself, and it always reminds me of my mother. It grounds me.

I take some things out of the refrigerator for pasta. I don't pay much attention to doing anything in order; I just take out a cutting board for the tomatoes. I know Katrina is watching me, sitting across from me as I slice.

I can feel her hesitate. I don't want her to, but I know I shouldn't encourage her—so I keep my mouth shut.

“Your brothers. Do they always come over together?” she asks suddenly.

I blink. It's not what I expected. I can't find a reason to not answer. “Usually.”

“Because they work together? Or do they live close to each other?”

“We all live near each other,” I explain. “In our territory. It's easier to all arrive together.”

Katrina nods, her gaze distant. She rests her chin in her hand, but I can see the gears turning in her head.

“Do they all have houses, too? They're married, right?”

“Yes. Finn isn't married, but Aiden and Connor are. Connor's marriage is newer.”

“Right. Are their places like yours?”

“Not really. Aiden has more of our mother's furniture. He likes the old-fashioned look.”

I peer across the island at her, curious. It's a lot of questions. I don't even know why I'm entertaining them.

But there's something noticeably fascinated in her gaze, a pull that I can see even through her nervousness. She's scared to push me, but she wants to know.

I realize that it's not just casual questioning, either. I remember what her phone looked like; her contacts were nearly empty, and no one had spoken to her recently. She

doesn't have anyone. Her mother barely remembers her most times.

She's clearly been on her own for a long time.

Despite myself, I'm curious. I'm curious if I'm right, if she's truly alone or if there's one person in her world that she confides in. I'm curious if she lives alone, where she lives, if she's ever wanted more.

I don't know what I'm doing when I open my mouth, but I ask, "What about you? Any brothers or sisters?"

"No." She pauses, then her eyes seem distant. "Well, none that I know of."

I'm not sure whether to push, so I wait for her to open up on her own. It takes a few minutes; I can see her struggle the same way I did at first when she started asking questions.

It's a dangerous line to toe for us. But in the end, the desire to talk about these things is stronger than any fear of consequences.

"My father left when I was young," she explains. "He just...I don't know. Thought it was all too hard."

"What was? You're an only child," I say. I don't add that if he left, that was an excuse. Something to ease his ego. No real man would leave a wife and child like that.

"I had cancer."

I can't help the way my hand stutters. I don't know how to respond at first, but I set down the knife I've been using to cut vegetables. I turn and lean back against the counter, searching her face.

I remember the scar on her chest. An accident, she'd said. It seemed plausible at the time.

"How young?"

She shrugs. "High school. I missed a lot. And he was gone, so...it was just me and my mom."

"Was she also...?"

“No. No, the Alzheimer’s came after. Early onset, they said. It wasn’t triggered by anything; it was just time for her.”

I can’t imagine what it must have been like. I can’t fathom an eighteen-year-old Katrina battling cancer, missing prom, mourning a father that wasn’t worth her tears. She fought it all and came out the other end only to face her mother’s decline.

I’ve known she’s strong. Hearing all this—even just the minor details—only confirms what I already suspected.

Katrina isn’t just strong. She’s unbelievably powerful, unbroken. Everything she’s been through might have hurt, but she’s come out intact. Whatever hurts she has now, they’re nothing compared to what she could have had. She could have shattered entirely.

“I didn’t have much time after recovery to celebrate,” she adds. “It was out of one hospital and into another. There was no celebration.”

“But you deserved one.”

“Maybe. But living was enough for me.”

She smiles, and despite the obvious struggle and pain she’s been talking about, it’s real. She truly believes that surviving was enough.

Hearing her speak about her life draws me in, despite my intentions. It reminds me why I was weak in the first place, why my resolve wavered.

And looking at her now, the hunger I have for her rises once again.

It’s the same as when I watched her at the club. I could see then that she was different, stronger. I wanted her because of that. Now, knowing what I do, I only know that I was right. I only know that I want her even more.

I shouldn’t do this. I’ve told myself the truth—that I can’t have ties to this woman. I have a duty to my family, an upcoming wedding. But those things don’t seem as important now. Not when I’m looking at her across the island, seeing her for who she is.

The voice telling me *don't do it* isn't as strong as the urge to move closer to her. I don't think anymore; I know all the reasons not to take things further. I know all the things that could go wrong.

But I don't give a damn.

I walk around the side, right up to her, and kiss her.

I can feel her surprise. She's frozen by it for a few moments, locked in place by shock. But that fades, and she's suddenly kissing me back. It deepens as she melts into me, responding like she's been waiting for this the entire time.

Maybe she was waiting. I know what it was like when I touched her before. I know I'm not the only one that's affected.

She kisses me back, a low moan in her throat, her hands clinging to the front of my shirt. I can't help how I respond. I hold her thighs, gripping tight, feeling her body in my hands. I can feel her tremble at my touch, shake when I kiss her deeper.

I want more.

I can feel the chemistry between us take over. However much we both know we shouldn't do this, I know we both also want it. I have my family, Katrina has hers—but despite that fact and the way she tried to kill me, the way I took her captive, we can't stop ourselves.

I kiss her hard, bringing my leg between hers. She seems to move without thinking, grinding against my thigh. I know she's rubbing her clit through her jeans, letting the feelings take over.

I stop thinking. I can't afford it right now. I know what I want and right now, I'm giving in to it.

"I like the way you respond," I tell her, pulling away from her lips to bite her neck. She shudders in my arms, her hands jerking my shirt. "Like how you're shaking in my arms. How much do you want it?"

"Please," she gasps. "I... god, please."

She's just as dizzy with need as I am. I run my hands over her thighs and wonder what I should do first.

I settle on moving back, away from her. She's startled at first, breathing heavily, cheeks flushed. Her eyes are hazy with desire. I put my hands on her waist and pull her off her chair in one move, a little rough. I see something spark in her eyes.

So that's what she wants.

I spin her around, then push one hand hard against her back until she's bent over the counter. Just the sight of her like that is enough to set my blood on fire. I don't hesitate before pulling her jeans down, tearing her panties away without a thought. I hear something rip in the process, but I don't stop to see what it is.

"I shouldn't want you," I growl. I can't help the words; they've been locked in my mind, angry and frustrated, and I can't keep them there any more.

She sounds like she's going to ask what I mean. I don't want to answer, so I start to eat her out.

Her gasp is immediate. I can feel her thighs shake around me, hear her palms slap the counter as she tries to find purchase. I'm mad at myself for giving in to her, but the sound and taste of her is addictive. The more I let myself go, the more I want from her.

I pull back just long enough to slick my fingers with her arousal.

"Fuck, all I want to do is devour you," I say.

It's the truth.

As much of a bad idea as it is, it's what I want—and I'm not going to turn back now. So I keep eating her out, listening to her moan as she trembles with pleasure. I keep going until I feel her get close.

I don't want to need her this badly, so much that reason vanishes. But I can't change what I've done, can't change that we're here.

So I keep going as she comes, crying out loudly, the echo of her pleasure filling the room.

I barely wait for her to take a breath before I'm standing again, shoving my pants down. I slide my cock against her pussy, unbearably hard, the feeling of her wetness against me making my pulse race. She bumps back against me, a surprised gasp escaping her lips.

I can almost hear my heart pounding. I know I shouldn't do this. I haven't fucked her yet, but as soon as I do, I have a feeling it'll change everything. I should keep a wall up between us. I shouldn't cross this last line.

But I need her too much.

I put my hand on her throat and watch her arch back against me. It's exactly what I want, like she can read my mind. I slam into her all at once, not soft or gentle—it's a deep stab, and I can feel her clench around me immediately.

She whines, and I feel it against my hand, the sound in her throat vibrating under my palm. I want to hold her tighter; my other hand grips her waist, fingers digging into her skin. I know I'll leave bruises and the thought of my handprint on her skin makes me even harder.

This isn't soft or gentle. I fuck her hard, driving into her with force. She doesn't even try to stay quiet; she moans openly, loud when I slam into her. The rougher I get, the more she seems to like it.

I need to dominate her body, and she seems to want that more than anything.

“Spread your legs wider,” I command.

She does immediately, her legs shaking when she moves. I don't slow down for her; I fuck her as she adjusts, feel just when it's perfect, plunging deeper than before.

“Good girl,” I say. “That's perfect. You're so tight on my cock, aren't you?”

I slam into her hard, grinding against her. She lets out a whine, pressing back against me. I slap her ass and she jerks

against me; I feel her tighten around me, a wave of pleasure overcoming her.

“Tell me,” I demand. I pull her harder, right until she’s almost flat against me. I bite at her neck and speak right into her ear. “Tell me. Are you a fucking slut for me?”

“Yes,” she gasps.

“Good girl.” I shove her back down again, fuck her hard. She gasps out in pleasure. “Are you wet? Is your tight little hole hungry for me?”

“Yes,” she manages, the word broken when she moans. “Please—”

I slap her ass again, but I don’t finish. I turn her fast and lift her onto the counter. I blindly reach for the knife I know is there and cut her top off, throwing it to the side.

I grab her ass and yank her to the edge of the counter. I drive into her without warning; she throws her head back, a moan shaking her body. I twist her nipples, take one in my mouth as I fuck her hard. The sound of her body against mine is addictive.

I can feel her get close again, tightening. I don’t want her to come yet. I’m too lost in the feeling of her heat, the way she’s tight around me. I don’t want her to come already; I want to draw this out as long as I can. I want to break her entirely, just like my resolve is broken.

I pick her up again, this time slamming her against a wall. I fuck her there, grip her hair and make her look at me as I thrust deeply. Every time her eyes flutter from pleasure, I tug at her hair.

“I want you to look at me,” I say, my voice a rough growl. “Look at me when I’m fucking you. I want to see you come.”

I can see the desire and need in her eyes. There’s no way to hide it like this; there’s nowhere for her to go. She just shakes against my body, eyes hazy while I fuck her hard.

She comes hard, a cry torn from her lips. I feel every muscle tense, her body tight around my cock. I let her finish

and then I grind against her, not letting her breathe—she comes again to my cock in her, pushing her orgasm again.

I can't hold back.

I pull away from the wall, my hands still on her hips, and make her ride my cock. Every time I raise and lower her I feel the need burning inside me, every inch of her body responding to me. She clings to me as I move her, unable to do anything else, her nails biting my back.

I fuck her as hard and deep as I can. I don't care about anything but this, the feeling of her on my cock. I know I shouldn't do this but right now, I don't give a shit. I only know what I want.

I can feel her shudder around me, oversensitive and spent, and I drive into her until I come inside her. It's sudden and powerful, a blinding heat that takes over everything.

When it's over, I step back to the counter and let her down after a moment. The feeling of her sliding off my cock is addictive; I want to get inside her again just to feel what it's like. But I let her breathe for a moment, sitting there with flushed cheeks and hazy eyes.

It only occurs to me as she's sitting there, basking in the aftermath, that I didn't use a condom.

I always do it. I always take precautions with the women I bring home; I know I can't afford anything that might happen. I've always been wary of the possibilities—paternity claims, someone who's not clean.

I wasn't even thinking this time. I was so caught up that it didn't even cross my mind.

That's dangerous. I know it is; I feel my chest clench, a tightness entering where I was ignoring it before. This was more than just stepping over the line. I might as well have fucking sprinted across it.

I look at Katrina and see a question in her eyes. I'm not sure if she realized what I did.

“I’m clean,” I say, resting my hands on her thighs. I shouldn’t keep touching her, but I can’t help it.

She nods, cheeks still flushed from exertion. “It’s okay. I’ve been on the pill.”

I don’t know why, but a stab of disappointment hits me. It doesn’t make sense. I know that’s dangerous, too—liking the possibilities is dangerous. It’s dangerous, being attracted to the thought of her not being protected, of me not giving a shit, of us doing this.

But I don’t want to think about it. I brush the thought aside; I can’t consider what it means. I shove everything aside, because it can wait. I don’t want to give a fuck right now.

I move closer to her. I’m still hungry for more; I suck on her neck, wanting the taste of her on my tongue again. I’ve already given in once. The dam has been broken.

Now?

“I don’t plan on letting you leave my bed until you can’t walk,” I murmur gruffly, a promise in my voice.

CHAPTER 26

Katrina

It's been days. Days since Lachlan kissed me in the kitchen and then made me scream for him, since we both broke down and finally crashed together like two planets drawn into each other's orbit. I'm in his bed now, sore and sated, but alone.

I can still smell him on the sheets. It surrounds me, the richness of his cologne and soaps. There's *him* underneath it all, too. I turn and bury my nose into the pillow, inhaling deeply.

I still can't believe I'm here. Part of me is still shaken by it, still waiting for the other shoe to drop. I denied how much I wanted him for so long; it's almost like a fever dream. But I haven't woken up yet.

It felt so good to be in his arms.

I didn't want to admit it, but alone in bed, the thought comes freely. I enjoyed what he gave me. I wanted something rough, something powerful. I'd never been able to have something like this. All my partners have been unsatisfying in the end, and most have been assholes too.

But this isn't that. I'm getting much more than I ever have before.

It still feels like I'm waiting for something, though. Maybe in part, it's the issue with Yuri. Lachlan is still waiting on news from the Russians, and the O'Reilly family has its own investigation running. Everyone is preoccupied.

So it feels like we've slid under the radar to do this.

I don't know how this happened. It's probably because I was alone for so long, and I tell myself that having nightmares for partners before Lachlan didn't help. It's part comparison, after all.

But it's not just that, because somehow, this man I was supposed to kill—this man who took me captive—has started to feel like the only thing grounding my life. He's been the only constant, the only thing that's remained the same.

Something that's becoming as necessary to me as air.

As much as the sex felt like a shift, it isn't unfounded. After all, when we met, the attraction was there. It didn't matter who we were or what we were doing. I wanted him, and he wanted me.

It was just everyone and everything else that got in the way.

So he makes me feel things I've never felt before, makes me want things I've never tried. I'm addicted to him in a terrifying way, and it's especially terrifying because I still don't know how he feels about me.

He opened up when I visited my mother only to pull away again, cold throughout the meeting with the Russians. Then he changed completely, suddenly giving in to what we'd both wanted from the beginning. But I still don't know if it was real or just a spur of the moment, just an attempt to get it out of his system.

I just don't know.

I do know waiting in bed won't change anything. I learned that lesson a long time ago, when I was in chemo. I learned that waiting for life to happen is a mistake.

So I roll out of bed and pull my hair back. I go down the stairs, sore but relaxed, and catch a glimpse of myself in the hallway mirror.

I look good. Better than I have in a while, maybe. I'm still in pajama shorts, and they're so short they make my legs look a mile long. My shirt is thin, almost see-through, and it hangs off one shoulder.

I look like what I wanted to look like when I was alone. Like someone's been fucking me and paying attention to *me*, instead of me looking after someone else all the time.

I'm almost entirely down the stairs when I hear voices and realize Lachlan's brothers are visiting.

I feel an immediate rush of excitement I can't quite squash, followed by a pang of uncertainty. I want to know them better, especially after asking him a few questions about them, but I don't want to just rush in when they probably don't trust me.

And I feel almost shy. I don't know if I can look any of them in the eye properly without feeling like a teenager, feeling like I'm about to get caught at every turn. I don't know if he's told anyone about us, or if there's even an *us* to talk about.

I hold my breath and walk right into the living room. I'm surprised to see not just the brothers, but two women. *Rose and Willow*, I remember, and I can remember who's who based on the descriptions I heard at the club.

Rose is blonde and smartly dressed. I heard she works for a museum, and she looks like it. Willow is small and thin, her hair wavy and dark. She has a wise look about her, but a hopefulness too that looks young.

They see me come in first. They smile, not too friendly but welcoming enough. Rose is the first to say something.

"Hi. Katrina, right?"

"Yes. You're Rose? I heard your name at the club."

"Only good things, I hope," she says, smiling. There's no hesitation in her voice; she's in command, confident. "Did we wake you?"

"Oh, no," I say quickly, glancing down at my clothes. "I just...didn't expect people."

I'm self-conscious of my outfit almost immediately; it's pretty obvious Lachlan and I had sex. It's probably also apparent that I'm comfortable enough to come downstairs the

way I look—so even if we hadn't, it would look like I was trying.

Willow nods toward the men. "Well, they're preoccupied, so don't worry."

I can see as much. They're bent close in conversation over something on the coffee table; they don't even seem to notice me.

I realize Rose and Willow are giving me curious looks, glancing over at Lachlan, too. I wonder what they're thinking. Do they know something I don't about Lachlan? Do they know if this is normal for him, if this thing that we have is momentary?

I try to tell myself I don't care. If it doesn't last, it doesn't matter.

That's a lie, but I'm pulled out my thoughts when Rose and Willow pick up the conversation they must have started before I arrived.

"Are you getting sick yet?" Rose asks Willow, smiling as she tips a cup of tea to her lips.

Willow presses a hand to her stomach, an almost subconscious move. "No, thank God. It's been...surprisingly uneventful."

"Well, no big news is good," Rose says, glancing at her own stomach.

I realize for the first time that Rose is pregnant—more visibly than Willow, who is apparently also pregnant. I don't know why it surprises me, but it does. Rose drums her fingers on her stomach, thoughtful, and I try not to stare and wonder how far along she is.

"How's the decorating?" Rose nods at the men, grinning. "Connor letting you move anything?"

"He didn't at first," Willow says, rolling her eyes, but her expression is fond. "He said to wait until after the baby. But I told him what the doctor said, so he gave in."

Rose glances at me and whispers, “Connor didn’t know pregnant women could exert energy. You know, picking paint colors.”

They both laugh and I can’t help smiling. I know I’m not one of them, exactly, but their inclusion is welcome. It’s been so long since I’ve had friends, since I’ve been around women like this.

I didn’t realize how much I missed having friends, having people to laugh with. Looking at Rose and Willow, I know their lives aren’t easy. They’re married to men in the mafia. They must worry any time their husbands are late; they must live with the knowledge that terrible things could happen.

But they obviously care about each other and support each other. Rose and Willow laugh, and it reminds me that strength in friendship is incredible.

I wish I had something like they do. I want that support, that happiness. It’s been so long since I felt like I had anyone to lean on.

Willow sighs. “I think I should get back. I still have business to finish; the Syndicate has been busy. I have people keeping an eye out for Yuri, and I want to make sure they’re safe while they do that.”

“I’ll head out with you,” Rose says, patting her hand. “I think I need a nap. I’ve been tired lately.”

I watch them get up and as soon as they do, Connor and Aiden look up. It’s almost supernatural the way they seem to recognize their wives preparing to leave; there’s a flurry of jokes and goodbyes thrown around before they all leave, heading out the door in a slow-moving mass.

They keep talking and laughing as they go. They sound like joy—like a family, like something I’ve never really been able to have. It makes my heart ache.

When they’re gone, I realize I’m alone again with Lachlan. He’s leaning against his desk, watching me. I can’t help pushing my hair back, suddenly self-conscious of how underdressed I’ve been.

“I’m kind of embarrassed,” I say, the words jumping out before I can stop them.

He stares at me, something burning in his eyes. “Why?”

“I didn’t mean to meet them like this. I mean...”

I want to say, *I’d rather have been dressed*. But if I think about it more, I realize that I had an idea in my mind of how I’d meet them, as if it was going to be a big deal. As if meeting them was going to happen in the future.

Like this is a real relationship.

That scares me. I still don’t know what Lachlan wants from me; I still don’t know if this will last. I shouldn’t be imagining any kind of future.

“They liked you,” Lachlan says, bringing me back to reality. There’s something dark in his eyes that makes my stomach flip. “It doesn’t matter.”

He crosses the room in the blink of an eye. I gasp when he lifts me up, kissing me deeply. I moan into his mouth, melting at his touch. I can’t help responding to him; I can’t fight it.

He steps forward and then suddenly, he tosses me onto the couch. I feel my heart beat two times faster, excitement flooding my veins. There’s heat in his gaze when he looks down at me. He unbuttons his pants and I feel my mouth go dry.

“Touch yourself,” he says.

What?

I feel like my brain is short-circuiting. I don’t know what to say to him. I’m distracted, lost, completely fumbling. I want to say something, but I don’t. The need to have him is too strong. I don’t think about feeling self-conscious.

I don’t think; I just move, my hand moving to my clit. I go slow, aware of how wet I already am. I touch myself and think about him, what I want him to do. He’s right in front of me. It’s frustrating but so hot, watching him watch me.

I can tell I'm getting too close too fast. I know I'm moving faster, ready to finger myself, wanting more.

But he stops me, his hand on my wrist. His gaze is still burning. "Get your tits wet. I'm going to fuck them."

It should be ridiculous how straightforward he is, but hearing those words from his mouth only makes me want him more. I obey without question, tugging off my clothes, then slicking my fingers and sliding them between my breasts.

He presses them together then, leaning up until his cock is lined up just right. He slides it against my skin and I can feel how hard he already is. His heat is tantalizing, just out of reach. I watch him move until he speaks again.

"Touch yourself," he says. "Don't stop."

I don't have to be told twice.

I watch him slide back and forth as I touch myself; I imagine him fucking me like this, his cock inside me instead of just on my chest. I can barely think straight; I slide my fingers inside myself without thinking, chasing pleasure.

I come suddenly, a burst of ecstasy hitting me. I gasp and then he moves suddenly, away from my chest. His cock is at my lips and I hold my mouth open as he presses inside. I choke on his cock, too fast and too hungry for him. But I grab his hips and urge him even deeper, desire pooling low inside me.

He fucks my mouth roughly, jamming into the back of my throat. I barely hold on to him long enough for him to come, shooting hot and fast down my throat. He pulls back when he's done, looking at me with dark eyes.

I know he's seeing my flushed cheeks, chest heaving as I catch my breath. His hand is on my chin and he tilts my head up to look at him.

"I'm not done with you."

It's a dark promise that sends shivers up my spine.

He pulls me up from the couch and switches our positions; he pulls me to sit on his face.

I don't waste time—I move as soon as I'm there, giving him access as he eats me out. I'm so close and then I come, the feeling blinding me with pleasure.

I reach back to stroke his cock; he's hard again, already getting close. He's still eating me out, fucking me with his tongue. I ride his face hard, unable to control myself, chasing the high. I feel like my heart is speeding out of my chest.

It's messy but good, and I barely have time to think before I'm coming again. I can feel how hard he is in my hand; I just want him to fuck me.

He presses his hands to my breasts and pushes me back. I hit the couch breathless. He leans over me, his cock sliding against my pussy. I know he's going to fuck me. I want him so fucking bad.

But suddenly, his phone rings and the moment breaks. He turns, annoyed, and looks at the screen.

I want him to ignore it, but I can see it's important. It must be Nikolai. Lachlan answers, his voice cool and controlled, and I find myself hoping the call will be short.

But then I hear the name *Yuri* and I know there's a chance this will end—maybe in more ways than one.

CHAPTER 27

Lachlan

I don't want to stop, but I know what it means when I see Nikolai's name on my phone. Still, it takes me a moment longer than it should to pull away from Katrina.

I want the world outside this room to stop spinning, leave us alone for just a few moments. It's intrusive even now, even in the middle of what should be a perfect moment.

Nikolai's phone call only reminds me of what I already know; I don't have the luxury of having what I want, when I want it.

"O'Reilly," I say, answering the call with as much professionalism as I can muster.

Nikolai responds just the same. "I've found information about Yuri."

"Good. I expected no less."

I watch Katrina as I talk. She's hopeful; I can see it in her wide eyes, the way she leans in. She's forgotten what we were doing almost completely. I can't pretend I haven't switched gears too.

This matters. This could be the difference between securing my family's safety and having to look over my shoulder for months to come.

Katrina bites her lip, obviously worried. I know she wants this news as much as I do.

"Yuri's a slick piece of shit," Nikolai finally says, his tone grimly humorous. "But he didn't run far enough. He's been

operating out of a scrap metal processing plant. Near the docks.”

“No respect.”

I say it to drive home a point—the docks are, after all, Russian territory. Yuri isn’t necessarily in the wrong. But he does not have Nikolai’s blessing, and his blatant attempt at having me murdered is nasty business.

If anyone else had found out about Yuri, or if he’d tried to kill someone else? Chances are they’d be far less forgiving of the Russian syndicate’s stray dog.

One rabid mutt can make a whole pack fall.

It was something my father used to say when he was alive. He had to do the dirty work of taking care of men in our own organization that overreached, men who decided they wanted more than the comfort and security they were already given.

There’s a status quo in the underworld. When you shake things up, you don’t just shake a branch or two. You shake the whole damn tree. And Yuri has shaken the biggest tree he could ever find.

This isn’t just my problem any more, or just my family’s reputation in danger. Yuri is coming dangerously close to pissing off his own people.

And if he does, he’s truly fucked.

“He has a small operation,” Nikolai continues. “But it looks like he’s planning on making a move, trying to reclaim a section of the city.”

He says *reclaim* with a sneer I can hear, an audible curl of his lip at the thought of Yuri claiming anything. Yuri was never a man in charge, after all. He was the lap dog of other families, other people. He was like a contractor to the O’Reilly family.

Until he turned around and tried to kill me.

Hearing that Yuri has big plans is laughable. He’ll never make it. But he’ll still be a pain in the ass, and that’s really

what matters. The last thing I want is to deal with his foolishness as I'm managing everything else on my plate.

"This is probably why he's targeting you," Nikolai points out. "Foolish, but he has the right idea."

"Foolish indeed." I don't comment on it being the right idea. I know Nikolai won't go to war with my family; he's just being objective. Not that I can say the same. "He may not live long enough to learn from this mistake."

"Well, it would be his fault for overstepping."

"Yes, it would."

"And he's branching out," Nikolai adds. "Into territory dangerously close to the O'Reilly business."

The more I hear, the more I'm furious. Yuri was always an underling, and a loose cannon near the end. The fact that he's managed to return from near death and gather enough people to be a nuisance is bothersome, to say the least.

He just had to come back when everything was in chaos. Aiden and Connor are freshly married, both of their wives pregnant. The deal with Ezra is in the making. There's so much to handle right now, and then Yuri just had to show up and blackmail a woman that it turns out I'm intensely attracted to, the first woman I've felt this way about in a long time.

It's really fucking aggravating.

"I appreciate the information," I tell Nikolai. I can hear the sharp edge in my own voice, my patience thin.

I don't say anything else; I hang up. Nikolai knows what I'm feeling. He knows as the head of his family just how badly Yuri has fucked up. This is more than personal.

This is a matter of pride.

Katrina bites her lip before asking, hesitant, "What did he say?"

"Yuri's holed up by the docks," I say curtly. I take a moment to smooth my tone over before I continue speaking. "He's trying to make a move. He's targeting me for power."

Katrina doesn't say anything. She's quiet, her lips pressed into a line, barely breathing. I can see just how scared she is of him, just how much she truly thinks this man can kill her. It's as if he's some ancient god, ready to descend without warning.

It makes me furious. Something flares in my chest and before I can think, I lean closer to her. I look her in the eye when I say, "He is going to die."

I believe every word. I know I'll make it true. There's no way that I'm going to ignore this problem or let Yuri do whatever he pleases until it hurts me or my family. I'm not a man to sit back and wait.

I know how to be smart about attacking. Right now, I'm thinking of all the ways I can and should make him pay for what he's done.

And despite myself, I can feel how I'm becoming more and more protective of Katrina.

I'm becoming protective of this woman, and I know I need to stop. I know my brothers saw her come downstairs when they were visiting, and I know they wonder what I'm doing.

There was no room for interpretation when she was barely dressed.

They saw her and saw a familiar sight—a woman in barely-there pajamas, rolled fresh out of bed. They saw in the way she moved that we fucked, and that we fucked hard. They knew it; they know me too well not to have seen it.

I know they didn't judge me for what they saw. They know my marriage is business only; they wouldn't expect me to not have a woman in my bed. They have no illusions about some kind of chastity or blind dedication to a woman I've barely met and never known.

But my brothers know better than anyone else that I don't keep women in my bed for long, and they're usually not ones to stick around for pleasant conversation. I hire women for my bed, and they leave after. They don't stick around to lounge in pajamas and talk to my brothers' wives.

I know that they recognize just how unusual this is, with me and Katrina. It's not just one or two nights. I'm not paying her; she's not a casual fuck I brought back home.

And she tried to kill me.

More than anything, I know that must bother my brothers. The woman who tried to kill me not so long ago has been sharing my bed. It's a matter of safety, a matter of potential harm. They want me safe.

They don't know her the way I do.

I look at Katrina, her eyes wide and fear still lingering in her features. I know what she's feeling. I know she's terrified, thinking of all the things Yuri probably threatened her with before. I know now that she's isolated in life. She doesn't have anyone to support her.

She has no friends, no family except her ill mother. Katrina is alone, and despite her strength, she can't hold up against this onslaught on her own.

I don't want to give in, but it's hard to fight. I can't help reaching out to her, tucking her hair behind her ear. Her lips part just slightly, a desperate hope in her gray eyes. I can see her searching for something in me.

I don't know why I hope she finds it.

"He will die," I say again, but my voice is lower. Softer. I need to reassure her, though I don't know why. I just know I have to.

Something in her gaze tugs at my heart. It's a dangerous feeling, but it's unavoidable. Her gaze is steady, old hurts and pain hiding beneath a veneer of strength. I can see the cracks she's worked hard to shore up. There are gaps in her defenses, places she looks after to keep herself safe.

But she's let me in, and I know that's important. It's just as important as this moment right now.

I want her. I want her more than just for sex, want her in a way that's deeper than desire. I want her more than I care to admit to myself, more than I dare let myself feel.

I know every reason I shouldn't want Katrina. I've told myself all of those things dozens of times. But now, looking at her, I can't think of anything. I can't care. Because she needs me, I'm willing to do anything I can.

Leaning down, I press my lips to hers. It's different than before—there's less heat, less frenzy.

But in the place of everything else, there's hope. I can taste it on her lips.

There's meaning to this kiss. I don't want to give it voice, admit what it is—but it's there. There's no denying it.

Then her phone rings.

It's shrill, sharp. I don't want to break the kiss, but I have to. Katrina looks back at her phone, a flicker of uncertainty flashing in her eyes. She reaches for her phone.

I can feel in my gut that it's bad.

I don't know why, aside from maybe a sixth sense I've honed in my time in the mafia. There's something wrong here, some alarm ringing in my head. I know this won't be good news.

She answers and I listen; it's not hard to hear the conversation when it's so close.

And the voice that comes through the small speaker on her cell makes my hands curl into fists.

"Hello, Katrina," Yuri says.

I can almost hear when Katrina stops breathing.

"What?" she says. It's breathless, almost empty, floating in the air.

"You know, I've found myself with more friends, as of late," he continues. "It's not been so long that I've forgotten what it feels like. What it *looks* like, when you are being scoped out. Being hunted by people who try to stay in the shadows. I know Nikolai's men have been digging for information about me."

Katrina swallows. I watch her stare into the distance at nothing, her eyes brimming with terror. This is her nightmare.

Somewhere along the line, it became mine, too.

“Please—”

“No.” Yuri says it quietly, so quiet I almost don’t hear. “It was clear you were never a good candidate. But now I know the truth. You are working *with* him. You’re no longer working to kill him. You gave me up. Betrayed me.”

Katrina shakes her head silently; he can’t see her, but I know it doesn’t matter. Her world is falling apart.

Neither of us thought this would happen so fast.

Yuri speaks again. This time, the anger in his voice is clear. “I didn’t want to take the time, but it seems you give me no choice. I must teach you a lesson—and Lachlan too.”

“No—”

“I’m going to destroy the one thing that matters most to you,” Yuri says, matter-of-fact. There’s no cruel spite in his words. It’s how I know he is one of the old guard, one of the men that would do anything and everything asked of him.

Katrina’s hands dig into the couch. Her knuckles are white. “Don’t.”

“I’m going to take from you,” Yuri says slowly, “your dear old mother.”

Katrina’s face goes white, and my heart sinks.

CHAPTER 28

Katrina

I can't think. My mind is empty, sheer panic invading every one of my senses.

Your dear old mother.

Yuri didn't laugh. He just hung up, as if that was the end. As if nothing more was needed.

And it isn't.

Distantly, all I can think is that I failed. I didn't just fail to kill Lachlan; I failed to ensure that my mother would be safe. I failed to do anything at all. She was in danger the second I was kidnapped, and I didn't do anything after that to try to barter for her safety.

And now she may be dead.

I don't want it to be true. I can't let it be true. Not after all I've done. I agreed to Yuri's demands, agreed to try to kill a man. I got into the club. I worked there for a week. I *tried* to kill Lachlan and was kidnapped for it.

I've gone through so much for this to be the end. I did it all for her.

What am I going to do if she's gone?

Lachlan stands suddenly. I look at him, still dumbfounded, as he starts yanking his clothes on.

He heard, didn't he? Is he going after Yuri?

If he is, I can't go with him. I need to see my mother. I need to know if she's okay.

I reach out without thinking, my hand catching Lachlan's arm. He only looks at me long enough to say, "Get ready."

I don't know what he means. But I know I have to trust him.

I scramble to get dressed. Lachlan walks through the house as I do, arming himself—it's surreal, watching him go from a regular man to someone in the mafia in the blink of an eye. I see the guns but I still don't really register that he could kill someone.

He *will* kill someone, if it comes to it.

He's preparing for something. I don't know if he's preparing for war or not—but he hasn't called his brothers. So the more he moves around, the more I start to realize he's going to help me. He's going to take me to see my mother.

I don't think anymore. I just want to see my mother, make sure she's okay. All I can think about is how I didn't see her yesterday, how I should have seen her.

Why didn't I visit her? Why did I ever leave her alone?

The last time we spoke, she didn't really remember me. I don't want that to be the last time I ever saw her. I always hoped that in the end, she would know me, even if just for a few moments.

I had this idea in my head of how she would go, of how it would be pleasant and not as horrifying as the rest of her illness has been.

But I should have known when I got mixed up in this mafia business that there was a real chance it wouldn't happen. There was a risk that my mother would just be collateral, and someone with no heart would come after her for my mistakes. My shortcomings.

I just hope that hasn't happened yet.

Lachlan rushes me into his car and peels out of the driveway. I hardly notice how fast he's driving; it still isn't fast enough. I wish I could just teleport there, blink and appear in her room to make sure she's okay.

Every second we're driving, I lose control just a little more. I can feel tears sting my eyes, though I force them back. I feel my leg jumping with nervous energy, my heart thudding in my chest. Every cell in my body is screaming at me to run, even though I know it wouldn't be faster. I just have to *move*.

But we finally pull up to the facility and I have the door open before the car comes to a full stop. Lachlan gets out too; he flips his shirt up just enough to easily reach his gun. He's not going in with it drawn, but I can feel he's ready to pull it in the blink of an eye.

I follow him into the building. We don't stop at the front; the nurses know me, and I hope they can sense that it's important. I hope they know that I'm about to fall apart, terrified of what I'm about to find.

I rush into my mother's room without stopping to prepare myself. I don't care about what I might be walking into; I just have to know she's okay.

But she's not okay. I'm too late.

I stop just short of her bed. It feels like a dream, the light outside her window too bright. I'm almost floating in place, not really touching anything, disconnected.

She's already dead.

The logical part of my brain notes the way she looks—the stillness in her face, the disarray of the sheets. The way her pillow is placed behind her head.

I think she's been smothered.

All I can think about is how that's what the disease has been doing to her. It's been smothering her, little by little, taking away the oxygen of her memories while she succumbs to the emptiness that they leave in their wake. It's been a long, slow death.

But this isn't a mercy. This is wrong.

I've never felt crushed in the way that I do now. That's the only word for it—*crushed*. Everything is compressed, everything broken down into concentrated despair.

The shock of it ripples through me. I can hardly believe what I'm seeing; my brain refuses to process it. Even as I stare at her body, I can't connect it to the woman I know. The mother I love. This isn't her; it can't be her.

Though I know deep inside that it is.

I turn and see something—*someone*—flash by in the hall. Lachlan sees it, too; he starts chasing after the person.

It must be Yuri.

It takes me two seconds too long to force my feet to move, but I do. I chase after both of them, something rising in me as I move. There's a feral anger gnawing at my heart, rising up to drown the pain.

I can't believe he was so fucking bold to still be here, to linger around while I found my mother. I can't believe the bastard did this instead of sending a goon. He came himself. He made it personal to him. Despite all the times he refused to be involved, he did this now.

I follow Lachlan, but we're both too late. I can't see Yuri anymore; I don't know if he was picked up or just hid somewhere. I just know he's gone.

The anger fades as fast as it came. I don't have the energy to hold it up. I can't scream or rail at him. I can't curse.

The grief is too strong. It sits in my chest like a lump, poisoning everything, making me want to curl up and feel nothing.

I turn away from Lachlan and move mechanically, walking back to my mother's room. There's nothing for me anymore, but I can't help holding on to the fragments of what I lost. I have to see her again, as if she'll magically wake up perfectly fine.

The nurses are in the room by now. I don't know if they realized what happened or if they heard the commotion we made when we ran. But they're trying to resuscitate my mother, attempting something that will never work. I know it won't work.

It's too late. I was too late.

That crushing burden of responsibility sits squarely on my shoulders. It overwhelms me, filling me up inside with regret and guilt. I can barely breathe.

I know when a nurse comes to me with a grim face that it's over.

There are arrangements to make. The practicalities of dealing with someone's death. I move on autopilot—I tell them about the plan I made, about what she wanted. When she was alive, my mother was practical enough to figure out what happens now. She was good enough to realize that I needed to know, so I would have time to grieve.

Time. This wasn't even a proper death. She didn't just succumb to the disease; someone killed her. But I can't tell the nurses that. All I can tell them is which funeral home will pick her up and when I'll make arrangements to pay for the final balance on the room.

I don't notice much around me except for Lachlan. He's at my side, ever present as I work on figuring out how to handle the reality of death.

And even if everything else is a nightmare, I'm grateful that he's with me.

CHAPTER 29

Lachlan

It happens all so fast, in so little time—but it seems like hours.

I watch Katrina in the aftermath of finding her mother; she's strong, but I can see the cracks beneath the surface. She wasn't prepared for this.

How could she have been?

It takes me a while to come down from the simmering anger I feel. Part of me wants to go after Yuri right now, but I know I have to be smart. Yuri is cunning, and he's shown his skill. If he's been building up his power to try to make a comeback in Boston, I'll need to work with my brothers to take him down.

And Katrina needs me right now.

I can see the loss in every move she makes. She keeps her chin up and eyes dry, but her hand shakes when she signs the papers. She's ground down, trampled by the experience. I can't blame her.

I remember my experiences with death. They weren't pretty.

I know Katrina is mourning the death more than others would. After all, most deaths like this aren't murder. She was prepared to be at her mother's side until everything was gone, all memories erased—not until some man who blackmailed her came in to kill her mother.

I wish she'd never become involved in this, if only so this would never have happened.

But it's done now, and Katrina takes it seriously as she goes about the business that needs to be done with the facility. She talks to people about arrangements and payments, and she talks to people about belongings.

She handles it all, and then it's over and she's left standing in the hallway. There's nothing more to do. Nothing more to distract her.

I move to her immediately. "Let's go."

I know she can't stay here. The death is lingering, present like a third person. I get her out the door as fast as I can, and then I take my time driving home. Every time I glance at her, I'm waiting for her to break down.

She looks broken. There's an emptiness in her eyes, a deep sadness that permeates everything. Every muscle in her face is slack. She's barely hanging on, barely using any energy to just *exist*.

Now that she doesn't have to deal with the practicalities, I can see the grief eating away at her heart. I can see her holding the threads of her tattered life, not breaking yet but so close to just giving in to the grief.

We get home, and the second I step through the door, I guide her to the living room. I can barely recall what it was like when we were here before, full of passion and impatience. Those feelings are far out of mind now.

I don't know what she needs, but I know what I needed when this happened to me. So I talk.

"My mother's death was slow, until it wasn't," I say. "She was in a coma. It was bad and worse, depending on the day."

Katrina doesn't answer; I don't expect her to. I don't expect anything from her; I just want to do what I can, reach out the only way I know how.

She stares at her hands, and I keep talking, hoping something will connect.

"I'm the eldest. I had to make the decisions. We kept the machines on so long—too long. In the end, I wasn't sure I did

the right thing fighting so hard when she kept trying to go.”

Katrina looks at me, and I finally see that she’s crying. It’s silent and painful, sad in a way that tells me she’s cried hard over her mother before. She’s had the kind of grief that wracks your gut, and she can’t spare anything more than numbness and pain over this.

All she has left are these silent tears.

I know what it feels like, so I tell her that.

“With my mother, I didn’t break down. Finn did—he had a hard time. But I just couldn’t. It felt like she was dead the whole time, and I only realized it when I finally made the decision to let her go.”

Katrina shakes her head. “I knew it was coming,” she whispers. “But I wanted to go through the pain, even for one more year, just to have those moments where it was like she was there.”

“I know.”

I’ve never told anyone as much as I’ve already told her about my mother. For so long, I kept silent. I didn’t even tell my brothers what I thought, what I felt. I kept my mouth shut even when we all drank together, when Aiden admitted he felt bad that he’d never considered my mother should go in peace.

Through all of it, I could only keep quiet and act like the head of the family. I didn’t show weakness, didn’t show regret. That wasn’t an option.

I’ve lived so long trying hard to be unbreakable. Watching Katrina suffer the death of her mother only reminds me that I never had the chance to truly mourn my own mother or remember her with anyone else. And suddenly, I want to.

“Before my mother passed, I visited her late one night. I took one of her books,” I explain, and I can almost feel the pages beneath my fingers. “I wanted to give her something good, if she could even hear me.”

I shake my head. I don’t remember what happened that night—it was almost two in the morning. Maybe I was tired

from work. I just remember leaving wherever I was, making the trip to the hospital. There was almost no one there in the evening, just the sound of machines.

I sat alone with her for so long that I lost track of time. But it didn't really matter.

"I think even then, I was letting her go," I say quietly. "Even if I didn't acknowledge it, I was starting to realize that it couldn't last. And then in the end, I was right. We had to let her go."

Katrina looks at me, still crying, but there's no fear in her eyes. There's no hurt. She just leans into me, holding me, pressing against my chest for support.

She seems comforted, even if she's still crying. Like she knows what I mean.

We can't choose when death happens or even how, sometimes. But we can get through it. The regret I felt over my mother's death has faded some with time, softened by the realization that I didn't have any better options at the time.

I pull Katrina into my lap and stroke her hair, waiting for the tears to slow. I know it will take time for her to ever feel okay about this, if she ever does—but I hope I can give her some measure of peace.

I realize suddenly as I hold her that I don't want anyone else to do this. I don't want anyone else to touch her, don't want anyone else to comfort her like this.

I want to be the person she comes to when she is in pain, when she's brokenhearted. I can't describe it, can't control the emotion—I only know that I don't want anything else. I want to keep her in my arms like this forever.

I'm in too deep now. I know that with absolute clarity, more than I let myself believe before.

There's no lying about what's happening. I can't pretend that I'm doing this only for a few weeks, only until I have something else to preoccupy me. I can't lie to anyone that Katrina is only staying until Yuri is dead.

I don't want to put her in danger, and I don't want her to leave my side. As much of a risk as I know it is, I can't push her aside. Not after all that's happened.

It was never my responsibility to look after her mother or help her in any way. But holding her now, I know that I would do anything to keep her safe.

I can't walk away from her.

Katrina

I don't want to wake up.

I realize it's morning slowly, but I keep my eyes stubbornly shut. I don't want to face reality, though I can feel it bearing down on me like sunlight through a crack in the curtains.

My mother is dead.

I keep shoving the thought to the back of my mind, but it comes forward every time, refusing my attempts to ignore it. I squeeze my eyes shut even harder and try to focus on where I am.

I'm in Lachlan's bed. I slept beside him all night, trying to cling to his presence to block out everything that's happened. I don't remember when we ended up there or how I finally fell asleep; I only know his body was beside mine all night, and I tried desperately to feel like that was all I needed.

I still feel hungover on grief, exhausted. My body is sore, my eyes dry from crying. I can feel a headache forming at the front of my forehead, stress and sadness overwhelming.

Yesterday feels like a terrible dream.

It feels like a nightmare, but I know it's real. I know the haze over the memories isn't a dream fog; it's the thick confusion of shock. The truth still hasn't fully hit me yet.

Lachlan is still beside me. I can feel his warmth, smell his familiar soap and cologne. I feel him wake up, too. I feel his arms strong around me, pulling me tighter into his embrace.

I know he's trying to ground me. He's giving me comfort, as much as I feel like I don't really deserve it.

"I feel like it's my fault. It's my fault that my mother died," I say. The words are almost a whisper; I don't even know why I said them at all. But I did, and the words keep coming. "If I hadn't got mixed up in all of this, she wouldn't have been a target."

I didn't let myself think about it before. Now, lying in the silence of the morning, the light leaves nowhere for me to escape to. I'm curled in on myself, shielding my body from invisible blows I can't stop. Blows coming from my own mind.

I believe what I said. Part of me believes it so much that I couldn't stop the words from coming out.

I killed my mother.

If I had been smarter, if I'd been better, if I'd done everything right—all those thoughts swirl in my head, coming back to the surface like an oil spill on water. I worked so hard to not think about them last night, but they're present once again.

Lachlan's embrace tightens. I can feel his arms flex around me; I know he's reacting to the confession.

"You got mixed up in all of this because you were working so hard to provide for her. To take care of her," he says, his voice low and rough with sleep. "From the moment I knew, I was impressed. You're dedicated to the people you love. It's incredible."

I turn to look at him. He lets me shift in his arms; I find his eyes and gaze into them. He's not lying, but I didn't think he was anyway—he has no reason to. He has no reason to care about me or my mother's death at all.

But he does. He does care, and I can't really explain it.

I just know I need him more than ever, and I can't help the pull I feel toward him. So I don't stop myself when I fall into him, fall into a kiss.

It's deep, slow and sensual in a way I didn't quite expect. I feel like I'm losing myself in it, and I think he is, too. But the longer it lasts, the more heat I feel, the more need builds up.

It's a welcome distraction from the pain and loss I've been feeling. A small part of me is guilty for letting need overcome my grief. But another part of me recognizes that I can't just ignore every feeling I have, and I can't just wallow in the darkness.

My mother has been dying a long time, and the feelings I've had about her condition are too messy and complex to keep in neat little boxes. I have to let myself remember that I'm alive, that this isn't all my fault.

So maybe I'm a mess of sadness and exhaustion, but that doesn't mean I won't let myself feel what I feel for Lachlan.

I push against him, grind against his cock. I feel my pulse race, my heart pound. I want to let go. I let my mind drift and try not to think about anything but now, what I'm feeling.

"You want it," he says, his voice low in my ear. "Don't you? You want me to fuck you again."

I don't answer. I know he knows what I need; I don't need to say anything. His words only make the fire in me flare, the heat seeping through me. I want him and I'm not going to deny it.

I grind against him, eyes shut, letting the need spread from deep within me. I can feel his hands slip my shirt up, pulling it over my body. I'm completely naked underneath; the sheets rasp against my body, sending goosebumps across my skin.

I can feel him undress too, until we're both naked in the sheets beside each other. He pushes himself up and I miss his heat immediately; he reaches for the bedside drawer.

I wonder what he's reaching for. The last times we've had sex, he hasn't used a condom—I wonder if he's being careful, or if he's looking for something else.

When I open my eyes, I see him pulling out a vibrator.

It surprises me, the sudden appearance—it's medium-sized, slight enough that looking at it makes me hungrier for his cock. But I know he's going to work me up to it.

He takes the vibrator and passes it over my clit, teasing. I can feel my eyelids lower, pleasure making my breath hitch. I can't think. I can only feel a surge of pleasure rushing through me.

“Good,” Lachlan says, his hand on my hip. “Don't move.”

He slides the vibrator over my clit, then slips it inside me.

The sudden pressure is shocking in the best way. I can barely breathe, gasping at the sensation. I can feel myself tighten around the vibrator, my body shaking as the feeling overwhelms me. It's as if the vibrator is all I can feel, my body around it the only thing that makes sense.

“Turn over. On your stomach,” Lachlan says suddenly.

I turn over without thinking. I don't question what he says; I just roll over, hoping he'll be inside me soon. I want to feel him.

But after I turn, he speaks again.

“Show me that pretty ass. I'm going to open you up.”

The demand startles me. I blink, dizzy from pleasure, and try to understand what he just said. I've never done something like this before—the other men I've been with were only concerned with one thing.

But I want him, and I want this. I don't care that I'm out of my depth. I don't feel self-conscious or nervous. Not with Lachlan.

I start to roll over to face him again, instinct taking over. But he spans me suddenly, and a gasp escapes my lips before I can hold it back.

“Don't move,” he says.

Heat flares inside me. I stay still as he teases my pussy again, vibrator sliding along my folds. I want more but I keep

my mouth shut and try not to say anything. I can feel my body shaking with effort as I'm hit with wave after wave of pleasure.

"Touch your clit," he says, his voice rough. "Loosen up for me."

"Fuck," I whimper.

I reach down and touch myself, fingers stroking my clit. He slides the vibrator up to my ass, just teasing, barely pressing.

It takes all my control to move slowly, dragging out every feeling as I touch myself. Then he does something and I hear a snap; I know he's getting the vibrator slick. My heart stutters and jumps; I feel my body contract for a second, instinct taking over.

"Don't stop," he says, and his hand grabs my ass. He digs in, squeezing. I can't stop a moan from escaping my mouth.

Finally, as I touch myself, he starts to press inside.

It feels like too much at first, the feeling foreign and almost painful, an unnatural stretch. But I ignore it and keep touching myself, losing control, making myself relax. I keep going until it's more pleasure than pain, until my body starts to crave more of the delicious stretching feeling.

I'm so stimulated that I almost don't notice when his hand moves to my throat, wide palm pressing just enough to hold me back. It makes desire spike through me, and I arch back into him.

"You're doing so well," he says, his voice low. I can tell he's turned on, and it turns me on even more.

He finally slides the vibrator all the way, pressing into my ass as I touch myself. My breath hitches; I'm close to coming, so close that I know it would just take a little more to get me over the edge.

He must be able to tell, because he tightens his grip on my neck. "Don't. Don't come yet."

I whine, unable to form words, frustrated by the feeling that's just out of reach. Lachlan edges me, fucking my ass with the vibrator and then sliding his fingers into my pussy. I almost fall apart as soon as he touches me.

He fucks me both ways, getting me so close I feel tears gather in my eyes. My breath comes in bursts, my heart racing. I need to come, but he stops every time I get close.

I need more—and just as I think it, his cock slides into me.

I do cry out this time, a moan and scream mingled together, my entire body shuddering. I'm not touching myself anymore; I'm holding onto the sheets of the bed, trying to ground myself with something real.

Lachlan curses; he still has the vibrator in my ass, and I can feel the press between the vibrator and his cock. They fill me up so much I can barely think.

“Please,” I beg, so desperate I don't even care what I'm saying. “More. Please, give me more—”

“Tell me how much you want it.”

“Please, I want it, I need your cock,” I say, almost babbling, totally lost. “I wanna come. Please, let me come—”

I can't keep talking. My words are all lost in moans as he fucks me; he keeps pushing me, then drawing back.

He finally pushes me to the point where I can't take it anymore, and he lets me come, slamming into me so hard that I see stars. I can feel it hit me all at once, a hard wall of pleasure, an orgasm that feels like a bomb.

My entire body tightens around him. I cry out as I come, my hips jerking as I ride each pulse. I can feel his contour, the shape of his cock inside me with every sharp contraction. I can feel the vibrator, too, the twin shapes pulsing inside me.

He waits for me to finish. I'm burned out and oversensitive, but he waits until I'm done to fuck me through it, push past my orgasm as his hips snap against me.

He rides me hard and then he pulls out and comes on my back, his hand still tight on my ass, almost bruising in its

force.

I can barely think. I'm dizzy with pleasure, disoriented, overstimulated. He grips my chin and turns my head, pulling me back toward him. I follow him without question and he kisses me, taking the little breath left in my lungs.

He grinds against me and I feel my body weakly shiver in the aftermath. I kiss him back, dazed and sated in a way I've never felt before.

He picks me up then, carrying me to the shower, strong despite the overwhelming sex, and I can't help the way my heart flips. I can't help feeling something more, something I can't name yet.

I don't want to linger in thoughts. I just let myself enjoy the moment, sated and exhausted, and relax in his embrace.

Maybe this was his way of trying to distract me from my pain.

And for just a short while, it worked.

CHAPTER 30

Katrina

The cool water feels like heaven on my skin. I feel like I was overheated; it's like coming down from a fever, the frenzy of what we just did.

That's what it's like. Sex with Lachlan is a frenzy, a fever. It's a fire I want to feed every time it happens.

Now, I stand in the shower, the water massaging my spent muscles as I stand under the spray. Lachlan smooths his hands over my body, soap foaming luxuriously, and I shut my eyes. This is the best thing I've ever had.

God, how did I live before?

I can't even stomach the thought of going back to what I was doing before Lachlan. It was such a waste. Now, having had him in my life, I feel like I know what I could have. What I *should* have.

After all, I've lost so much and worked so hard to do the best for my mother and myself. Why can't I have this one thing? This one person?

Lachlan's hand traces down my spine, toward the middle of my back. He pauses there and I feel my cheeks flush; I know he's looking at the mark he left.

"I like how you look wearing my cum," he says.

It sends shivers through me all over again. I want to say something back, something witty and sexy, but I can't speak. My mouth is dry, my words all gone. I shiver under his touch,

and all I can think about is how much I want him to fuck me again.

He doesn't continue, though, and I know it's best this way. There's so much happening outside of us right now, and as much as we may want to lose ourselves, we can't. Not when there is real danger waiting for both of us.

I want to drift away and only think about Lachlan, about the feeling of his hands on my body—but reality presses in. My mind is already turning to everything that has to be done.

There's my mother's funeral. Most of the arrangements were already in place; before she was sick, she was serious about dying. She always wanted it to be easy on me, didn't want me to have to mourn and plan at the same time.

So the funeral is looming, but so is the impending confrontation with Yuri. And that's what scares me the most.

I always knew he was dangerous; now I know just how far he would go.

I don't know what his next move will be, but I know I'm in danger. I might be by Lachlan's side, but I don't think that will stop Yuri. He'll separate us at any cost, or he'll find a way to reach me. I know it's paranoid of me to think that way, but I also know I'm right. Yuri has shown just how dedicated he can be.

We both get out of the shower and get dressed. I try not to listen in as Lachlan makes a call to his brothers, but I can't help picking up on the words he says—*important, dangerous, dead*.

Yuri.

I don't know what's next, but thinking about Lachlan's brothers, I feel strengthened, even a little. I feel like maybe, if it's all of them together, I might have a chance. I might be able to get out of this alive.

I follow Lachlan downstairs; his brothers show up within a few minutes, filing in with serious expressions that say they know what we're up against. They know the stakes.

They know Yuri already killed my mother. He'll do it again.

"We need a plan," Lachlan announces, once we're all in the living room. There's no trace of the softness that was in his face when he held me earlier, the understanding when he told me about his mother.

He's all business now.

"About time," Finn says. His grin is sharp. "Are we taking Yuri out?"

"He's not just a threat to me," Lachlan says sharply. "He's a threat to all of us. After what he did yesterday—well, it's obvious that he's not playing."

Aiden crosses his arms. "He was on camera at the facility. He did this in the open, without a single care. Either he had someone in on it, or he's so reckless he doesn't care."

"Either way makes him dangerous," Connor points out. "We need to take our next steps very carefully. A wrong move could mean he ends up winning again."

"We can't wait around for him," Aiden says. "All our poking and prodding won't give us any more answers. We have to—"

There's a knock at the door. It's loud and sudden, breaking the spell-like tension swirling in the room. But as soon as I hear the sound, there's a new tension between the brothers.

I know immediately that they don't know who it is.

Lachlan reaches under the table. I see the others begin to spread out, moving toward different parts of the room. I wonder if there are guns hidden, or if they're preparing to fight for their lives with whatever they can get their hands on.

Before anyone can speak or react, there's another loud knock.

"Boston PD!" A man's voice comes through, shouting loud. "Open up!"

I blink, shocked. Aiden's gaze swings to Lachlan, and there's a silent moment of understanding between them. I can see Lachlan's lips thin into a line, anger and frustration clear on his face.

Aiden goes to the door and opens it. The policemen on the other side don't wait for permission; they all file in, hands on their guns, checking corners as they go.

"Lachlan O'Reilly," one of them says curtly. "You're under arrest."

I barely hear the man that cuffs Lachlan saying something about charges. He's talking about the right to an attorney by the time I finally unfreeze, swaying toward Lachlan before stopping myself, uncertain.

I'm terrified that this is going to turn into a gunfight right here and now. I don't know what the O'Reilly family's relationship with the police is, or how the mafia deals with cops. All I know is that I'm stuck in the middle and my heart is racing, reality bearing down on me.

The brothers aren't hiding how pissed they are. I half expect one of the cops to say something about it, to directly challenge them. I'm holding my breath for the moment that someone sets things off.

But luckily, violence doesn't break out. The brothers hold their ground despite their simmering anger, and I stay frozen in place as the cops start to lead Lachlan away. I want to go with him, but he shoots me a look as he's led out.

Worry curdles my gut, and it hits me in a rush, how deeply I've become attached to him. *Really* attached, more than I ever meant to.

I am truly falling in love with him.

It doesn't matter that he's a criminal, that he's done things I know aren't pretty or nice. It doesn't change how I feel.

Somewhere along the line, despite the horrors and death, I began to love him. I began to crave not just his body but his comfort, his attention, his care.

And now I'm too far in to get out.

I watch Lachlan disappear through the door and all I can think about is whether I'll see him again. I curl my hands tight, every muscle in my body tense.

When the police leave, the O'Reilly brothers immediately jump into action.

"Stay here," Aiden tells me. He's already pulling his jacket on. "I'll have Rose come by to check on you. We'll take care of this."

He says *we* in a way that seems to warn me, as if he knows how much I want to run out the door and bring Lachlan back. I don't say anything; I just nod and go upstairs, the shock of the arrest still weighing on me.

I stop at the top of the stairs. I don't do it for any reason—mostly I'm just still reeling, still unsure of what to do with myself.

But then I hear the others talking downstairs, and I can't help listening.

"Ezra has an in with a cop," Finn says. He sounds savage, angry and fired up. "He can help us."

"He may have a dirty cop, but you can bet Yuri does, too," Aiden warns. "We're going to have to be careful with this."

I don't know who this Ezra is; I never heard his name in the club. Maybe he's not part of the family. I turn toward the banister and cling to it, hoping that hearing their words will give me some kind of comfort.

"Maybe it's not the best idea to call in a favor from Ezra before the wedding," Connor says. "I mean, Lachlan isn't married to his daughter yet. He has no reason to agree, and he could use it against us."

"No. The deal is done," Aiden says, an air of finality in his words. "Since Lachlan is marrying Naomi, it's in Ezra's best interest to keep him out of jail. We'll call him."

I don't really register that they said *marriage* until I hear the door shut, and by then, I know they never meant for me to

hear what they were saying.

But I did. Lachlan is engaged to be married.

I don't anticipate just how it hits me right in the heart. I sink down on the stairs, pain radiating from my chest so powerfully that I almost worry I'm going to have a heart attack.

How can it hurt this much?

I clutch my chest and try to think clearly. It's hard when the brothers' words are swirling in my head, echoing endlessly. *Marriage.*

Naomi.

That's her name, Naomi. This woman I've never seen or known about. I wonder what she looks like—is she tall, short, curvy, thin? Brown, black, red, or blonde hair? Is she elegant or sexy? What do her eyes look like?

Does he love her?

All this time, despite everything, I've been falling in love with Lachlan. But at the very same time, he's been set to marry someone else.

Someone he never told me about.

I've been blinded and infatuated. I never thought to ask, never thought to figure out what all his meetings and business were about. This man—Ezra—has been at the house recently. But I didn't think much of it, and I didn't ask.

If I had, would Lachlan have told me? Would he have admitted his engagement?

Or would he have lied to my face?

As I sit on the stairs, I can feel things click into place. I finally think I get it. He's just been using me. All of this—the times he comforted me, the times he had me in his bed—they were all nothing but sex and a chance to get at Yuri.

He used me to sate his desire, to fuck as much as he wanted before his marriage. He used me to feel like he had one thing over Yuri, one thing he took from him again. I was just a

badge of triumph, something to point to and say, *look*. He didn't just stop me from killing him. He made me love him, and he fucked me however he wanted.

My stomach turns. I dart up from the stairs, rushing into the bathroom. I throw up into the toilet, knees hitting the tiled floor so hard I know they'll bruise. My eyes squeeze shut as I heave over and over again.

Even after my stomach is empty, I keep my eyes shut, trying to keep a hold of myself. I don't want to fall apart right now.

But when I open my eyes, I see blood.

Fear rushes through me. It's almost strong enough to black out the despair, and the longer I look, the more I'm afraid. The same thing happened when I had cancer before.

Did it come back?

I don't want to think about it, but there's no escaping the sight of blood in my vomit. I slam the lid down and flush, but I can't bring myself to stand. My head is swirling and I don't know if it's from heartbreak anymore or from cancer.

How could it come back now, of all times?

I can feel tears stinging my eyes, but I can't cry. I don't have the energy. I sit there with my cheek on the cold porcelain of the toilet lid, feeling numb and broken.

My mother is dead. Lachlan doesn't care about me and never did; and now, I may have cancer again.

I drag in a breath, trying to find strength from somewhere deep within myself.

These brief days of happiness with Lachlan, even if they weren't real to him, were real to me. I had hope for the first time in years. I remember how that feels, and as much as it hurts to know he didn't care, I don't have to let go of the hope I found inside my heart.

I can build a better life for myself.

I can be free of my demons.

I can end this.

I want vengeance on Yuri. That's been in my blood since the moment my mother was killed. I want to look him in the eyes and make him pay for what he did.

And I want to get away from Lachlan. I know he doesn't give a shit about me for anything other than sex, and I never want to see him again.

Beyond that, if my cancer is back, I don't want to die that way. I don't want to die tied to a bed, regretting all the things that got away from me.

I'd rather face death on my own terms. I'd rather live and be free.

That determination drives me, bringing me back to my feet. I get off the bathroom floor and leave the bedroom, making my way down the hall with purpose.

I know what I want to do, and even if it kills me, it'll be on my terms. I am the only one that's going to decide what happens with my life from now on.

Not Lachlan, not Yuri, not even cancer.

This is it. I'm making my last move.

No matter what it takes.

Lachlan

I'm pissed. It's more than just anger. I can almost feel my blood boiling, anger simmering in my veins. There's a rumbling in my chest like approaching thunder.

It's not just an inconvenience; it's an insult.

The inside of a jail cell is no place for an O'Reilly man, much less the head of the family. But here I am, stuck, taken from my own home in the middle of important business. In the middle of figuring out what needed to be done.

Now, the very man I was supposed to stop has me locked up.

Despite that, I'm not truly worried about getting stuck. I'm not even considering going to prison long-term; I'm fairly sure that Yuri doesn't really have anything on me. He can't have given the cops much.

I've always made sure the family did its business carefully. Even more than that, I try to take care not to directly involve myself in most of the minor deaths that happen in the business. I take care not to get entangled in the messy, low-level shit.

I'm the head of the family, the man behind the curtain. I orchestrate everything. I get involved only when it's absolutely necessary.

So Yuri can't have much on me. He probably played this as an insult, and it played well as one. It did its part in making me fucking mad.

But the insult isn't even the biggest issue for me. The most important thing to me is that I was taken away from Katrina.

I can't stop seeing her in my mind's eye. The look on her face as she watched me being taken away hit me right in the chest. I never stopped to really think about what the wives in the family might have felt—what they thought when their husbands didn't come back from a hit. When they were taken from their homes.

I'm used to having no one but my brothers. They have been the only ones in my life, the only people I could count on. The only ones I let close.

But that doesn't feel true anymore.

Instead, what I'm thinking of now is whether Katrina is all right. The look on her face when I was taken was a complex tangle of fear, anger, and shock. I wonder if she's home alone, or if one of my brothers sent her to their houses.

But then, they would have no reason to protect her. Not really.

They might suspect what's between us, but I'm sure they don't see it the way it is. They might think I've fucked her and that's it. They may think I used her while she was around, an easy piece of ass that was available to me. Just a little bit of running wild while I have the chance. Before I'm married.

I'm sure they don't know that things go so much deeper.

She's worked her way into my heart. Katrina is there, deep in me, deeper than I can get out. I can't pretend it's not true, that I don't care about her. I care about her more than I've cared about anyone in a long time.

And now that we're separated, I feel it more than ever.

I sit in my cell and try not to pace. I try not to shake the bars of my cage, scream and yell for them to let me out. It won't do any good.

But I want to be out. I want to get out, *need* to get out. I keep thinking of Katrina, scared and alone, wondering what's going to happen and whether I'll ever come back. I can't leave her there.

But I have to sit and wait, because right now, the family I worked so hard to build is doing its work to get me back.

It's a while before my brothers arrive. When they do, the door at the end of the hall opens and I hear distant voices arguing. I wonder if they're cops, but I don't care. All I care about is my brothers, walking alone.

There's a cop behind them, holding the door, grim anxiety in his face. I'm sure he's a dirty cop. He must be the one that orchestrated this.

I'm released from my cell, and we walk out as swiftly as I was brought in. A little less than three hours after I was arrested, I walk right back out, my brothers forming a wall around me as we go. They're not going to put up with any shit from the cops as we leave. We have somewhere to be.

When we're finally out of the building, Connor speaks up. "We called in a favor. With Ezra."

My jaw clenches reflexively. But Connor isn't done, and I have to school myself before I reply.

"He bribed a cop. Used a connection he had," Connor adds.

I don't like it.

I hate that I had to rely on Ezra, though I know why my brothers asked for the favor. Our payoffs are higher up than cops, and they're far more tricky to manage.

But it rankles me to have called on Ezra, especially since I'm no longer sure about our deal.

I tell myself it's because of this fiasco. Ezra may not want his daughter married to a man that could be taken away at any moment. I promised him I could protect her.

But that's not the only reason, and the other reason is one I don't even want to voice. If I do, it'll seem even more real.

But I can't say anything. I don't know how to tell my brothers what I feel about Ezra's help, so I think about the one thing I do need to know. The one thing weighing on me.

"Katrina?"

I ask with just her name. *Is he okay? Where is she?*

"I asked Rose to be with her," Aiden says. There's something in his tone that says he understands why I'm asking, even if he doesn't know the extent of it.

He knows she's important, even if he doesn't know why. Even if he doesn't know what I've done.

But I'm relieved to hear him say the words. All I could think about was her, and at least now I know that someone is with her. Helping her.

"So Yuri had a connection," Finn mutters. "Somehow, after barely being back. What else don't we know about him?"

"Whatever else can wait," Aiden says sharply. "Right now, we need to figure out how to cover our asses and plan our attack."

“Attack?” Connor asks, tense. “You mean we’re going after him?”

“We need more information,” I say darkly. “He came back from the dead. That isn’t something just anyone can do.”

“Sure. But if he has a dirty cop in his pocket, he may be waiting for this.”

“Maybe. But we aren’t going to sit around after what he pulled.”

I mean it. I don’t want to wait around anymore; we’ve tried probing for information so many times now. We know where he is; we can take the fight to him.

And besides, I won’t be worrying about Yuri while I’m still trying to handle the marriage arrangement and my situation with Katrina.

I get into the car with my brothers, and Aiden gets behind the wheel and cranks the key in the ignition. But before he can pull away from the curb, his phone rings and he picks up on the car speaker.

“Yes?”

“I just got to the house,” Rose says, her voice thin through the car audio. “Did you leave?”

“Yes,” Aiden says. “I left with the others. But she’s there.”

“Oh,” Rose says, startled. “You didn’t take her with you?”

“No, why would I?” Aiden glances at me, obviously confused. “We left her there so she could talk to you.”

“But Katrina isn’t here. It’s empty.”

I can see Aiden glance in the rearview mirror, looking back at me. My other brothers react too, their expressions dark but not surprised. I know what they’re thinking.

They’re thinking that she just ran.

But my heart twists. I know that’s not true. Even as Aiden speaks with Rose and tries to get more information, I know it’s not true. I don’t believe Katrina would run.

“Did you go inside?” Aiden asks, his fingers drumming on the wheel.

“I rang the doorbell, went around, used your key. I looked. She’s not here.”

“Shit.”

“I don’t think anything is missing,” Rose adds, uncertain. “It doesn’t look like she took any of her clothes and things.”

I can hear that she wants to say something, but she doesn’t. Aiden just presses his hands over his eyes and nods.

“Okay. Thanks for going by anyway. We have to go. I’ll call you soon.”

I don’t listen to them say goodbye. There’s a horrible feeling settling in the pit of my gut. I think about how broken Katrina looked yesterday, after her mother died. She hasn’t even had a chance to bury the woman yet.

She’s more similar to me than I ever wanted to admit. I see so much of myself in Katrina; it made me want her at first, and then it made me care for her more than I ever intended to.

She reminds me of myself, and I know what I would do if someone just killed my mother.

I don’t want to believe it, don’t want to consider the implications. But the truth is heavy in my head, and it presses down on me.

There’s only one place she would go, one thing she would do.

“We’re going to Yuri’s home base,” I say grimly. “I know where she is.”

CHAPTER 31

Katrina

When I got up off the bathroom floor, there was only one thing, one person, on my mind.

Yuri.

I don't want to let him control my life anymore. I don't want to live in fear of him. I've been afraid for so long—for weeks. I've been looking over my shoulder, checking my phone, thinking that every stranger is someone preparing to kill me.

It's exhausting. The last time I was this afraid, it was just cancer.

Just. The cancer might be back now; I can't fathom dealing with it and Yuri at the same time. Cancer is a struggle, and it's not a pretty one. I can't try to stay alive and deal with Yuri's plotting at the same time.

I'm not going to die on his terms.

I don't think much as I make my way to Yuri. I take the cash I have stowed from working at the club and catch a cab across town; I wander through the docks, trying to find the place I know he's hidden. I don't care about hiding. That's not my plan.

I'm angry. Tired. I can't stop thinking about how I might be sick again, how Lachlan was engaged and never told me. I keep thinking about how he held me after my mother died.

Was that a lie? Or was he just hoping he could fuck me again after I stopped crying?

It never meant anything to him.

I use the despair settling in my chest to drive me forward. The second I start to see signs of danger lurking around me, I know I'm in the right place. There are signs of activity everywhere—tire tracks black on the ground, unmarked cars sitting empty in random places.

I'm close.

When I finally find the right building, I pass through the first set of men guarding the door without an issue. I don't know if they saw me coming or if they don't care what a woman wants inside.

There are men farther inside; the place reminds me of the empty factory where Lachlan's Russian contact was hidden. But there's something smaller and dirtier about this place, something that reminds me Yuri hasn't been back from the dead for long.

The men in the center of the room openly appraise me, something amused in their gazes. I ignore the way they skim my body, the way they're obviously trying to guess what kind of woman I am.

"I'm here to talk with Yuri."

Their gazes shift. Some of their leering looks wither, but they're still too handsy when they pat me down. I try to ignore them and focus on standing still, playing through my mind what I want to happen.

They take me to Yuri, flanking me, keeping me in check. I would tell them I don't pose a threat, but that would be a lie.

When I finally enter the room with Yuri, I know what I want to say. And I know I can't get out alive.

"I want to help you take him down," I say. "Lachlan."

Yuri turns away from the window. There's nothing in this room, just a concrete block two stories up from the ground floor. In the light, Yuri looks as horrifying as I always knew he was. His face is scarred, twisted and deformed from the trauma of his near-death experience.

I'd be scared of him if I wasn't so furious inside, so righteously angry. All I can think of is how this man stood over my mother and smothered her with a pillow.

She didn't even get a chance to fight back, I think. But I will.

Yuri appraises me. He doesn't seem convinced. "Do you, now?"

"He was only using me," I say. I let bitterness creep into my voice, trying to pretend it's just about Lachlan.

In reality, I'm more bitter right now that someone like Yuri would kill a woman as fragile as my mother. She posed no threat. And when he did the job, he couldn't even do it with dignity. He had to do it the dirtiest, lowest way he could.

I can tell Yuri is suspicious. I just need to get closer to him. So I dig my heels in and dig my grave deeper, piling on the lies.

"I can be a double agent," I say.

"You don't even know what that means."

"I can help you get to Lachlan," I press. I try to ignore how angry I am at his demeaning tone, at the way he looks down on me. "I *will* do it."

"You failed once."

"I won't this time." I shift, trying another angle, desperately hoping he'll just give in. "I just want this—us—to be over."

"Over?" He smiles, cruel and full of himself, and I feel anger flare in my chest. "You think it's this easy?"

"Yes. Over. I want you to promise that you'll let me go when it's done." I hold myself steady, looking him in the eye. "It's simple. A life for a life."

Yuri looks at me, calculating, as if he's thinking about the risk I took to come here. Maybe he can sense the truth in my words; unlike the parking lot, I feel like he believes me now. He understands what I'm asking.

He understands that even if I'm lying, he's the one with the final word here.

I'm putting everything on the line. I know that if he agrees to this, if he lets me close, I might be able to end this for good. I don't care about the promises I'm making. They're not real.

I'll never have to go against Lachlan. I'll never have to betray him again. If Yuri accepts me, I will end this today. Now.

"It's tempting," Yuri finally says. "After all, I have you under watch. I'm sure you haven't noticed."

There's sarcasm in his words, a cruel joke at my expense. I hold my tongue. I want to tell him *you're not as smart as you think you are*, but I can't. I have to hold back.

"I'm giving you the man you want dead," I say, keeping my voice stony and cold. "Take it or leave it. I can get to him in a way no one else will be able to after me."

I know I'm treading dangerous waters. I'm all but saying that Lachlan trusts me, that he cares about me more than as a captive.

But giving away that information makes Yuri's eyes spark with interest. He's buying it. He's thinking about how I turned against him for Lachlan, about what Lachlan is like.

I'm sure he knows Lachlan is never around the same woman for long. I'm sure he knows about the coming marriage, and maybe he thinks it's actually me that Lachlan will marry.

And wouldn't it be ironic if he thinks I'm the one Lachlan cares about, when in reality, he's engaged to another woman?

I know he's considering my offer. I can feel it.

The guards who brought me into the room must feel it too, because they relax their hold on me a little.

And I take my chance.

I slump against one of the guards holding me, breaking his grip on my arm. It's so sudden that it catches him off guard.

His friend moves to grab me, but I scramble for the gun tucked into the first guard's belt.

"Fuck!" he bellows, but I barely hear the words.

They underestimated me because they thought I was weak and afraid, but I'll only get one chance at this.

My hand feels like it belongs to someone else as it jerks the gun up, aiming at Yuri.

Then I fire.

I hit him in the chest; I can see the bullet hit home. I can see the impact, the way it tears at him.

But it's on the wrong side of his chest. I meant to hit his heart, but I fucking missed.

I don't care. I'm going to shoot at him until one of us dies.

Yuri curses and stumbles backward. I don't blink. I try to shoot him again, but the guards don't give me a chance. One of them hits me in the back of the neck, and the other yanks the gun out of my hand. I struggle, but it's no good. They aren't underestimating me anymore, and they've got me outnumbered.

This is it.

It's over.

CHAPTER 32

Lachlan

Aiden cranks the wheel, and I grit my teeth, wishing he would drive faster. I should've insisted on getting behind the wheel, but there was no time.

My heart is pounding in my throat. I haven't been this desperate, this afraid in years.

I don't know why Katrina would go after Yuri on her own. He's powerful and connected, and she isn't even a part of the underworld. Before Yuri showed up to collect his money, she had no idea what went on in the mafia at all. Even her time with me wouldn't have given her what she needed to go after Yuri in a smart way.

Chasing after Yuri is insane. I don't know why she's doing it, but I do know I'm right. I'm sure she isn't just running away from me. She's going after the man that killed her mother.

I'm so sure that she didn't run. I can't explain it; I can't even argue that she's never tried to run before. She has.

But this time, I know it's not true.

And I can't lose her.

"Anyone else think we're pushing it?" Finn asks. He sounds testy, like he's ready for an argument to explode.

But Connor answers him, and he's not immediately against him. "Is there a reason we need to rush this, Lachlan? I know you think she ran off to face Yuri, but I don't know."

“She’s been terrified of him this entire time,” Aiden points out. It’s not an agreement, but he is trying to persuade me. “Why would she go to him now? And does it matter? It’s not like there’s any more information she has, right?”

I know what they’re trying to say. *Why are we saving the woman that tried to kill you? She doesn’t have anything we want, right?*

I know I could make excuses. But they would all sound useless, too little and too vague. I can’t expect them to listen to me forever if I’m telling half-truths and blatant lies.

“Lachlan,” Aiden says firmly. “What the hell is going on?”

I clench and unclench my jaw. It takes a few minutes for me to finally come around to the truth, letting the words leave my mouth to fill the silence in the car.

“I’m not going to risk leaving her,” I finally say. “Not when she’s the one I care about. I don’t want to marry Naomi. Katrina is the one I want.”

Every word feels like pulling teeth. I rarely use the word *want*; it’s not something I can have in my vocabulary as head of the house. But I’m using it now, and the more I say, the more I feel like I’ve made this final.

I’ve been falling for Katrina since before she even tried to kill me. I’ve fallen for her more with her in my home, and I can’t ignore that any longer. No matter what my duty is and what arrangements are in place, I can’t ignore this any longer.

I feel selfish for saying it. I feel like I’m letting my family down; I’m not supposed to want. Even if I did, the family should come first—their safety, their power is what matters.

My happiness has never been important. The family is important. It will last forever.

But I’ve said it now, so I wait to hear the inevitable arguments. I wait for my brothers to point out what I already know—that Katrina isn’t part of our world, that she tried to kill me before.

But I don't care. Even with that knowledge, I know I'd do whatever I need to, to help her.

"Well, that much has been clear for days," Connor says, breaking the silence.

I glance at him, confused. "What?"

"You obviously care about her," Finn says dryly. "We already knew that."

"I love my wife," Aiden adds. "And Connor loves his wife. You deserve a wife you love, too."

I want to say, *You're different. You're not the head of the family.*

But I don't.

I want this to be true. I want it to be true that I can marry who I want, do whatever I want. But all I've been taught since I was born is how to be strong and how to sacrifice. This was just one more thing I needed to sacrifice.

But Finn just shrugs, accepting of what I've said. "We can figure things out with Ezra. Right?"

"Right," Aiden says.

As if it's that simple.

But despite my disbelief, I know they'll support me no matter what I do. They'll find a way to break off the engagement with Ezra; they'll do whatever it takes to make sure I get what I want.

"We're in a really good position in Boston," Aiden says. He's businesslike again, already planning. "We have a lot of power and a lot of allies."

"More than a lot," Connor interjects. "If the Assembly is nervous, that just goes to show what we can do. We can figure it out."

I knew all these things already, but hearing them now brings me peace I didn't know I needed.

I haven't been able to stop myself from loving Katrina, no matter how hard I've tried. And I have tried. So now, accepting what I can't change about how I feel for her, the only thing left to do is think about the implications. There is a promise I made to Ezra that I'll have to break. There's a lot I stand to lose.

But the O'Reilly family is strong because I made it that way, just for a moment like this. We have allies and support. I can find a way to appease Ezra, or if it comes to it, get rid of him.

For the first time, I can just allow myself to feel what I feel for Katrina and admit it. I can admit to myself—and to my brothers—that I love her.

But just as soon as I do, fear grips me again. I need to get to her right now. I care about her more than I've ever cared about a woman before, much less anyone outside of my family.

Thankfully, Aiden is focused, and he manages to bring me back to reality. I can't waste time inside my own head right now. I have to focus.

“So, what do we know about Yuri's setup?”

I focus on his question and start thinking seriously. “Old place by the docks. He's verging on our territory, and he's also stepping on the Russians' toes.”

Connor nods. “He doesn't have too many men with him. I'd say about twenty, all said and done.”

“Twenty there? Or total?” Aiden asks sharply. “I don't want to walk into a party underdressed.”

“There, I think,” Finn supplies. “He doesn't get a lot of feet on the ground, thankfully. He's got a few loan sharks, but they seem to be bad about keeping tabs on people. That's probably why it took them so long to go after Katrina.”

And if we'd found out about him before then, maybe she never would have been blackmailed into killing me.

I've thought about it ever since discovering Yuri was behind the attack. If there had been some whisper, some sign, I could have acted against him before he decided to rope a woman into this mess.

I'm still baffled as to why Yuri used Katrina at all. It's stupid. I thought he was smarter than that—after all, his plan to kill me years ago only narrowly failed. He was never an idiot when he worked for my father and family.

Maybe almost dying killed off some of his skills, or maybe it just killed his caution. Maybe he thinks he can't be killed at all.

I'll show him he's wrong.

"This isn't at all how we would have planned to take him down," Connor says, groaning. "I mean, fuck. We can do it. But it's going to be a shitshow."

I know he's not angry with me. But we all know what this means. There's a chance people could escape, a chance we just have to kill them all to stop that from happening.

But no survivors means no answers.

We have to make a decision. And if it comes down to keeping someone alive or making sure Katrina is safe, I know I'll choose her over the mystery of Yuri coming back from the dead any day.

We're getting close to his place near the docks, so I instruct Aiden to turn the headlights off and slow the car just a little. The last thing I want is the entire place knowing we're coming up on them. As Aiden drives, we arm ourselves, dropping one of the back seats to reach into the trunk.

"Things could get dicey," Aiden says calmly. "But we all know how to handle this. Don't panic and we'll be fine."

I know he's saying it for his benefit as much as ours. It's been a while since we went in guns blazing, but this kind of thing requires more finesse. We have to be careful not to screw ourselves over. There are twenty men and only four of us; even if we call backup, we'll have to handle it alone before they arrive.

We pull up close to the building and get out as quietly as we can. The others pile out of the car, and I prepare myself, holstering the guns I need and thinking about what the inside of the building might look like.

My brothers follow me around the side of the building as we prepare to break in. There are no words exchanged anymore; we don't need them. We know what we have to do.

I think of Katrina one last time, of how much she was hurting from her mother's death and the chaos that followed it. I think of her holding me, and I think about how much I wanted to be the only one to comfort her.

I'm coming for you, I promise silently. And I'll end anyone who's tried to hurt you.

CHAPTER 33

Katrina

I barely keep track of what's happening between the gun being torn from my hands and Yuri's guards grabbing me. When struggling doesn't work and I know I have no chance of escape, I give in—but part of me still doesn't want to be beaten.

Part of me wants to find a way again. Part of me isn't satisfied that he's not dead; part of me is utterly disappointed that I wasn't able to do it right the first time.

But I couldn't kill Lachlan when we were alone. How did I ever think I could kill Yuri?

He's still bleeding from the gunshot wound, the one I put there. His hand is clamped over his shoulder, stemming the flow of blood.

His *right* shoulder. I didn't shoot the right side, the one where his heart is. I can't believe myself.

But seeing Yuri bleed is satisfying. It's a reminder that in the end, he's just a man. A man that won't live forever. He has numbered days, and maybe I've made that number smaller today. That has to count for something.

He's obviously hurt, but more than pain, I see anger in his face. He's pissed.

I never should have come this close. His men should have guaranteed that. But I did—I managed to get in, get an audience with him, and steal a gun. I shot him, something I'm sure not many men have done. This is no longer about our deal

or about his feud with Lachlan. This is about what happened just seconds ago.

I cracked him. And he won't let me live, now.

He looks at me with pure venom in his eyes. I would pull back from him if I could, but his guards hold me there. They keep me locked in place as he strides toward me.

He backhands me, hard, his hand slapping across my face. I feel my head jerk with the force of it and I'm almost reeling, dizzy, held in place by the sheer strength of the men on either side of me.

But despite the shock of it and the pain that lances through me, I still have the energy to spit in his face.

I'm terrified of dying.

But more than that, I refuse to give him the satisfaction of cowering.

I'm not going to shrink from him.

I keep thinking about my mother. She died helplessly, alone in a hospital bed, already wracked by the disease that was slowly eating at her. Even if she was awake, she wouldn't have known the danger until it was too late.

And she wouldn't have been able to do anything about it.

I refuse to let Yuri kill me the same way. I refuse to let him sneak, to let him smother me when I can't fight. That's not how I'm going to go.

"I would never work for you," I growl.

I don't think before I say it. I just spit it at him, fuming, angry that he's still breathing and upright. I wanted so badly for him to fall.

Yuri just glares at me with fire in his eyes. "You forget—"

"I haven't forgotten," I say, smiling. I want to taunt him more than anything else. "Coward. You sent me to do your dirty work in the first place."

I can see him react to *coward*. I can see him get close to erupting over that word, infuriated by my accusation. What I say shouldn't matter to him, but it does. I can see it.

I can see the hatred in his eyes. He's angry because I'm right.

"You were obviously scared of him," I continue, laughing shortly. "You were scared of Lachlan. You must've been so afraid that he would finish the job he started last time. When you betrayed him."

I don't even have time to blink before he hits me again. Pain explodes in my head; I can feel nausea start to set in. I know I don't have long if I'm going to survive this.

I've been slumped, but suddenly, a fresh wave of anger hits me. I'm not going to lose this way. I'm not even going to entertain the thought. I have to fight, until the very end of it all.

I jerk again, tugging free from the guards. I don't know how I do it; maybe they loosened their grip, thinking I was done. Maybe I had a burst of strength brought on by anger and a refusal to die. Whatever the reason for it is, I'm free.

I lunge at Yuri again. One of the guards gets close and I elbow him in the chest, hard. I can hear him grunt at the sharp jab and it sends triumph flooding through me.

For a second, I think that I'm going to make it. I think that I'm going to do it, I'll get him, I'll finally end it. It won't matter if they kill me once I get Yuri. I can die happy knowing I did what I came to do.

But the few seconds I gain are lost almost immediately. The men get control of me again; I can feel their hard, wide hands shoving me away from Yuri. I practically go flying into the concrete.

I'm slammed against the wall, vulnerable again. Yuri doesn't even bother glaring at me this time. He doesn't stare, doesn't speak.

He just pulls out a gun.

My heart freezes as I stare into the black hole at the end of the barrel, braced for death to come.

A shot cuts through the air, and I flinch, my body tensing in expectation.

But the bullet didn't come from Yuri's gun.

More shots ring out, and then I hear voices rising, shouting and yelling. Confusion. More gunshots.

It isn't happening in this room, I realize. It's echoing all around us, seeping in through the concrete. The building is under attack. Yuri's under attack.

"Handle it!" He screams, suddenly distracted, no longer intent or focused on me. He's frenzied, spinning away, scrambling to react.

I don't think. I bolt.

I sprint for the nearest doorway, hoping there's another way out. Anything. I run thoughtlessly, trying to keep my feet under me, and I can hear the noise of the fight echo through the building as I go.

The sound of footsteps follows me. I don't know who it is, but I don't trust it. No one calls after me; I know it must be Yuri dogging my steps, hoping to catch me alone and off guard. But I won't give him the chance.

I take as many turns as I can, forgetting where I came from, sprinting through room after room. Soon enough, I'm slamming through a door and directly into a staircase.

The only way to go is up. The only other choice is the way I came, back into the gunfight that's happening.

So I run up the stairs.

Several stories up, I burst through the door before me and onto the roof, immediately pulling back from the shock of cold wind blasting in my face.

My instinct is to turn back, but I can hear the thud of footsteps racing up behind me. I don't know who it is yet. I just know there's nowhere to go.

I don't have far to go, and I'm afraid to get too close to the edge. I don't want to fall. So I skirt around the entrance, along the wall and around the side. Maybe if I see who's coming, I can get back to the door first.

But the door slams open just as I turn the corner and I know from the angry growl that it's Yuri. I hold my breath when he stops short; I try to will him to turn around and go back. But it's too late.

He comes around the side of the building to where I'm hiding. He's too fast, or I wait too long. He has me cornered.

I'm about to turn when he steps into sight, gun leveled at me. He's breathing hard from running, face red and eyes burning with fury.

"Bitch," he spits. "I should have—"

He never gets to finish.

I didn't hear Lachlan come up the stairs. I just see him turn the corner suddenly, spinning into view, making my heart leap inside my chest.

I don't have time to be happy to see him. I don't even have time to say his name. As soon as I open my mouth, Yuri is turning around, and I scream.

I can't tell what happens at first, but I hear shots and then there's a struggle. I see one gun skid away and clatter off the edge of the roof; the other flies through the air. I don't know where either of them land. I stand frozen in place, terrified, not wanting to watch but unable to leave Lachlan behind.

He can't die.

He can't, I tell myself, like thinking it can make it true. *Not for me.*

My entire body is shaking with adrenaline, and I can barely understand what's happening, but I see flashes of silver. Knives. Yuri darts forward, Lachlan steps back. They slice and jab, each trying to catch the other off guard. It's a fast-paced dance.

I want to rush in. I want to throw Yuri off or do something to help turn the tide, but I know I'll be in the way. So all I can do is stand there and pray that Lachlan isn't hurt.

Yuri jabs suddenly, and I hear Lachlan hiss. My heart sinks, and all I can think is *no*.

No, not him.

I can see that Lachlan's arm is bleeding. It seems like just a cut. But he's grimacing, frustration and anger clear on his face. I feel like I haven't taken a breath in hours; I can't take my eyes off him. I just want him to be okay.

When Yuri manages to break Lachlan's knife, he grins triumphantly, and I feel like I might be sick. But Lachlan doesn't miss a beat, wrenching Yuri's arm behind his back and disarming him. They're fighting hand-to-hand now, elbows and fists flying. I can barely keep track, but I know that Lachlan is slowly gaining ground. He forces Yuri back, more of his punches hitting, faster as he gets closer.

I can see blood on their faces. I don't know how injured they are; I just know it's bad. It's brutal. I've never seen two men fight like this.

But Lachlan is vicious, and he pushes Yuri toward the edge of the roof. I hold my breath, hoping it will end.

And suddenly, it does.

I watch as it happens almost in slow motion, Lachlan taking hold of Yuri and pausing for a fraction of a second. I don't know if he's waiting or saying something.

But the next thing I know, Lachlan throws Yuri off the roof.

I barely hear the scream. I only watch him disappear, gone over the edge, and it hits me in a rush that it's over.

He's dead.

CHAPTER 34

Lachlan

You couldn't kill me. And you can't have her.

Those were the last words I said to Yuri. They felt like triumph on my tongue when I spoke them.

I watch him fall. I want to see him hit the ground, as gruesome as it is—I want to know this time for sure that he's dead. I want to know that he's gone.

I want to know that he can never hurt me, my family, or Katrina ever again.

As I look over the edge of the roof, all I can think of is the night years ago when Yuri fell from the bridge. I was younger then, terrified that I'd almost died. I was confused, angry, conflicted. I couldn't believe a man I trusted had betrayed me.

I know now more than ever that it's easy to betray. Real commitment and devotion are the hardest things in the world to find.

Yuri doesn't move, his limbs bent at awkward angles as blood seeps from his skull.

I step back from the ledge, finally letting myself breathe again. There's a dull pain settling into my body that reminds me I'm injured. Cuts, bruises, gashes, all earned in the fight. I'm going to need patching up, and it's not going to be fun.

But none of it matters. I don't care that I'm hurt or that it's going to be a pain in the ass to deal with. I just turn away from the edge of the roof and make my way to where Katrina is sprawled nearby.

I've wanted to go to her since I got up on the roof, but I couldn't. Now I do, and now I can't move fast enough.

I can see that she's still in shock. Her eyes are wide and she hasn't moved, hasn't made an effort to get up on her own. I stride to her and pull her up, not waiting to hear her speak.

She says my name, but it's breathless and it's all she can say. I don't immediately answer her; I need to know that she's okay first.

I check her for injuries; even as I look, I can still see the scene I walked into when I emerged on the roof. Yuri was there, his back to me, his gun drawn. Katrina was before him, something steely in her eyes—but she faltered when she saw me. She looked at me, and some crazy mix of desperation and regret crossed her features.

In that moment, I didn't know whether she was already shot or hurt. All I knew was that Yuri was in front of her, and I wanted him gone.

I can see now that she isn't too badly injured. There's a nasty bruise forming on the side of her face; I know Yuri probably hit her. It makes my blood boil. I can see more bruises on her arms, from where she was likely held by Yuri's guards.

Now that I can see that she's alive and intact, the first thing I feel is a rush of anger and frustration. I can't stop myself when I snap.

“Why the fuck did you run? Why did you go to him?”

I was worried, more than I've been in a long time. That concern is manifesting in the only way it can right now; I'm still high on adrenaline from the fight.

There's never been anyone else like her in my life. I can't be calm about this. She's the one woman I could ever see in my life, and I almost lost her to a crazy man who came back from the dead.

Katrina presses her lips together. I can see her composing herself before she says, “I just wanted out.”

“That’s not it.” I know there’s more; I know she wouldn’t have just run off because she was tired of everything. That’s not in her character.

Katrina shuts her eyes for a second. I don’t know what she’s thinking, but I can sense that she’s building up the strength to say something.

If I didn’t know her better, I might expect betrayal again. But I’ve come to know her, and I know what kind of person she is. The only reason she did Yuri’s bidding was for her mother. She would never do something like that again.

Katrina opens her eyes and I can see her eyes aren’t burdened with guilt; they’re heavy with regret. Pain.

She says, “I know you’re engaged.”

The words leave her mouth and hang in the air between us, not an accusation but not quite just a fact.

The words challenge me. I know what the right answer is for the family—*yes, I am, it’s business*. I know I could tell her that it means nothing, that other men have kept a mistress and a wife at the same time. I could tell her that love isn’t always an option for men in my position. For heads of a giant family.

But that’s not what I want to say. It’s not what I want to do.

I’ve never acted on what I want before Katrina. It was never an option for me. But now that I’ve taken the first step in admitting I want her, I can’t stop. I don’t want to be married to another woman; Katrina is the only one I crave.

When I finally reply, the truth resonates in my words, strong and powerful.

“I’m not marrying Naomi,” I say.

Katrina’s eyes widen. I can hear her breath catch; her cheeks flush, eyes fixed on me. She doesn’t move. It’s like there’s a spell created by the confession, and one that could break at the slightest touch.

“I won’t do it.” I look her in the eye, serious and firm. “You’re mine, and I’m not letting you go. Not even if Yuri fucking crawls back out of his grave again. Never.”

I mean every word of it. I don't care about the marriage arrangement anymore; I don't care about appearances or pretending I would be satisfied with anything else. I know the power my family has. I worked hard to build it up to where it is.

If there is one thing I won't give up, one person I won't let go, it's Katrina.

I look her in the eye and then I pull her in. I kiss her hard, feeling her warmth against me, and think about how much I want to have her to myself. I kiss her like I'm claiming her, putting a mark on her, showing the world that I won't let anything touch her or take her from me.

I wouldn't care if all of Yuri's followers came after me. I don't care if Ezra hounds me forever for giving up on our arrangement.

The only thing that matters to me is Katrina.

She kisses me back as I hold her, clinging to my shirt as if she's trying to stop herself from being swept away. I can feel her pouring everything back into the kiss, her relief and desperation.

When it ends, she whispers so close I can feel her breath on my lips. "Thank you," she says, so quiet I almost don't hear it. "For coming for me."

"I will always come for you." I hold her tighter. "I will always protect you."

I don't know how we came to this. I only know that I lusted after her once, then hated her for what she did. Now, I know I could never be separated from her. I love her too much.

I pull her in and guide her to the stairs. As much as I want to stay here forever and let the others handle the mess, I know I can't just step away. There are things to be done.

I'm careful with every step we take. I know there could still be some of Yuri's men hiding; I keep Katrina behind me and my gun drawn. I'm lucky it didn't fall off the roof, but it only has three rounds left. I know I have to be careful.

As we move, it seems like most of the fighting is over. I can barely hear any shouting anymore, and there aren't any gunshots. When I round a corner and see a man running away, heading for the stairs, I ignore him and keep moving.

The next floor, I find a man with a gun. He turns and faces me, but before he can react, I shoot him and move on, kicking his gun away as I pass him twisting in pain on the floor.

There isn't much left behind. Several of Yuri's men must have fled when they realized he was dead; the place has windows, and I'm sure they saw him fall. He's still down there, on the ground, clear evidence that he never had nine lives.

He barely had one.

The fight is over. I know it as I watch Yuri's few underlings scatter, desperately escaping the mess. And when I finally reach my brothers, I feel relief settle in my chest as I find them all present and mostly intact.

Aiden is looking at Finn's side, bent over at the waist. He glances over his shoulder when I come in.

"How bad?" I ask.

Aiden shakes his head. "He'll live to drink another day."

"Let me see."

Aiden steps aside and I look at the wound. It's from a gunshot; it's not terrible, but it will probably need stitches. I nod sharply, seeing the look in Finn's eyes. He's not faltering. He shrugs it off like anything else, and I smirk.

Aiden and Connor are roughed up, but they're mostly clean. I can see the struggle in their clothes, smudged with dirt and streaks of blood. But that's the only sign that anything happened to them at all.

They took care of several men when I was gone.

"We can go now," I say, and the words have an air of finality. "It's done."

Aiden nods. The five of us make our way out of the building, still cautious, still knowing there could be a person with a gun around every corner.

But nothing happens as we leave, and I'm relieved to get out and into the fresh air. But there's one last thing I want to do.

I walk up to Yuri's body and shoot him in the head twice. Then I shoot him in the heart. I don't blink each time; I just let the bullets hit him, watching his unmoving body jerk at the force.

Aiden sends me a questioning look when I turn back around. I just shrug and say, "I'm not taking any chances this time."

Connor runs a hand through his hair. "We'll have to deal with Ezra soon."

"He did give us a hand in this," Aiden adds. "The sooner we speak, the better."

I don't disagree. But right now, I don't want to think about it. I have Katrina at my side, and she's all that matters.

"Soon," I say. "I need to get Katrina home first. Can you handle cleanup?"

"Yeah." Aiden nods, tossing me the keys. "A crew of our men is on the way."

I can see in their faces that we'll talk about this later—we'll have to talk about the implications, about appeasing Ezra, about what will happen now that we've broken an arrangement that would have done so much for the family.

But now is not the time. Now, I have Katrina to think about.

The ride back isn't as quick as I would like. The day's traffic has already started to crowd the roads, and every stoplight makes me uneasy with anticipation. I just want to be back home.

Katrina doesn't talk. She half-dozes, obviously exhausted from the encounter. But she never lets go of my hand.

As soon as we're back and the door shuts behind us, she turns to me, tilting her chin up to meet my gaze. There's worry in her eyes, regret when she touches a cut on my face.

She starts to say something. Maybe it's an apology, maybe something else. "Your—"

I don't care. I don't care about my injuries; they can wait. I can survive them. Right now, I can't survive without her. So I grab her, pull her close, and kiss her.

It's hard and hungry, more forceful than I initially meant it to be. But I am hungry; I want to feel her, want to know that she's still whole and with me.

I just keep thinking about the awful moment when I reached the roof, when I thought that she was already dead.

I pull back and see she's dazed, flushed from the kiss. I hold her jaw in my hand, dropping my head a little as I growl, "I can't fucking lose you."

I almost wish I could be the kind of bastard that just keeps his woman locked away from the world, for only him to see. But I know it's wrong and I would never do that to Katrina. Not after she's spent most of her life hidden away from the world, struggling and suffering.

So I do the only thing I can.

"You can't do shit like that again," I say lowly. "Do you understand?"

She's breathless, staring up at me. But as I hold her there, I see realization in her eyes. I can see her understanding just how much I mean it, how much I can't go through this again.

I don't want to lose her. I can't lose her. I'll do anything to protect her—but I need her to be safe, and I need her to tell me everything. I can't have her run off like this again.

She nods, but that's not enough. I'm not satisfied—my worry isn't satisfied, the possessiveness boiling in my chest isn't satisfied.

I want her safe in my hands only, and I need her to understand that. We've come this far and she hasn't run away.

I need to know that if she wants this, if she wants to be with me, she understands.

The life I've lived in the mafia is dangerous and rough. The woman by my side needs to know the risk, understand the games we play. I need someone who will trust me to do what needs to be done.

I step back from Katrina; I can feel my chest still heaving with adrenaline from the fight. I know what I need and want; I just have to know if she wants it, too.

Beyond needing her to understand, beyond needing her to promise to be careful, I need to feel her body. I need to see her fall apart in my hands. I want to be rough. I want her to know that pleasure and pain with me are just the same.

I know she's loved it before. I need to know that she still wants it now.

"Strip," I say, the word a short command. "And put your hands on the window."

CHAPTER 35

Katrina

Strip and put your hands on the window.

My heart is racing. I can feel my skin flush, feel my breathing get shallow and short. All the adrenaline and fear I've been feeling dissolves, replaced instead by the need to feel him. It's so intense that I can't think straight for a few moments.

I've always wanted him. But now, in the aftermath of nearly dying, I want him even more.

I know he's pissed, and I know what his punishments can be like. But this is different. I don't fear what he'll do; I don't fear being intimate with him. I crave it.

I want his roughness more than I've wanted anything else before I met him. I want the way he makes me feel when he fucks me hard, when he's not trying to be gentle or sweet. I don't need that.

I need this.

I strip slowly. I can feel my pulse throb with every piece of clothing I remove and discard, dropping things onto the floor without a care for what I'm doing. I watch his eyes darken as I get undressed; I can almost see what he's thinking, what he wants to do.

I'm barely breathing by the time I'm naked. I walk over to the window and bend over; I feel exposed, but it makes me shiver with anticipation.

I know I'm bruised from the fight at the docks. I know he's bruised and cut too, more than me, but none of that matters right now.

Nothing seems to matter anymore but this. This fierce connection.

I've never wanted anyone more than Lachlan. I've never been so ready to give anyone anything the way I want to give Lachlan what he wants from me. I've never felt the need I do for him. I've never trusted a man to do what he wants the way I do with him.

Lachlan steps away for a moment. I don't notice at first that he goes, but when I hear him enter the room again, I look over my shoulder. I'm confused until I see that he has a switch in his hand.

My heart lurches, an initial wave of nervousness flooding through me. Despite the way it should make me afraid, I can't help the arousal I feel.

I shouldn't feel anything but fear, but I'm already getting wet just looking at the switch in his hand.

"You can never run from me again," Lachlan says.

His voice is low. It sends a shiver up my spine; I have to control myself, force myself not to turn around and face him. I feel like I've been waiting for hours, my hands against the window as he speaks behind me.

I want him to touch me so badly, but I have to wait.

"You can never hide. Never put yourself in danger," he continues. He pauses, then says, "I'll do anything to protect you."

Those words are more powerful than anything else I've heard. I know he means it; I've seen that he'll go to incredible lengths to protect me. To get me back.

It should terrify me, hearing that he wants me with him, hearing that he'll do anything for me. But it doesn't.

It's everything I've ever wanted.

I've spent so many years being broken and beaten, being cheated. More than anything, I've always wanted someone to fight for me. Someone to lean on. Lachlan is all that and more.

He's ready to fight for me, ready to kill for me. But he's also ready to give me pleasure and pain together, so perfect that I can barely handle it.

He runs the switch over my ass and I start to tremble. I can't control myself. He runs it over my thighs, careful and slow, and I feel myself tense in anticipation.

He brings the switch down on me without warning. It's sudden and I cry out, my entire body clenching. But even as I react with shock and pain, I'm wet. I'm so wet that I'm almost embarrassed; I feel like I must be so wet that it's obvious.

He doesn't stop. He hits me again, then again. Each time feels perfect, burning but real, and I react to the switch every time it hits my skin. I just want him to touch me, or to touch myself—but I know I can't. Not yet.

He keeps going until my ass and legs are burning, heat coursing through me. I feel like I'm melting and on fire at the same time.

"You're beautiful like this," he says, tracing my body with the switch. "You look so good covered in my marks."

I can't form an answer; I'm panting, struggling to keep myself still against the window. He gets closer to me and I hope he's going to touch me, hope he's about to thrust into me. I can't stop myself from tilting my hips, trying to get closer.

"You belong to me," he says, and the words are so quiet I almost don't hear them. But he's firm, serious, and his voice is full of truth. "Count them. Count each stroke. And know it every time you do."

I take a shaky breath. He brings the switch down and I count, *one*, barely able to voice the word. I keep counting all the way to five, waiting with each strike for him to finally touch me, finally take me the way I want him to.

He gets to ten and I'm senseless, pain and pleasure overwhelming me. I just want *him*, and then suddenly, he

tosses the switch away.

I inhale sharply, anticipating what comes next. I hear him shove his pants down and I want to look so badly, but I don't. I can't.

He drives into me without warning, hard and fast. I cry out at the sensation; it feels like ecstasy. He doesn't give me time to breathe or react; he slams into me and doesn't stop.

He fucks me hard and fast, and the roughness of it matches the burn I feel on my skin from the switch. I can barely think at all; all I can do is feel the pleasure of him filling me, fucking me so deeply I can barely handle it.

I can feel him getting close; I know I'm getting close, too. There's nothing slow or planned about this. We're both rushing, both trying to feel each other completely.

He comes inside me and I feel every pulse as I come too, tight around him as stars burst behind my eyes. I moan and my hands slide against the glass, looking for purchase and finding nothing but the sweat-slicked window.

I pant and press against the window, looking for support. Lachlan grinds against me, and every move he makes sends sparks through me. I'm too sensitive.

He pulls out but doesn't move away; I can feel his fingers drag across my pussy, through his cum as it seeps from me. Even his touch makes me burn.

He brings his fingers to my lips. "Taste it."

My breath catches. I open my mouth, letting him slide his fingers in. I can't help sucking on them, thinking about what I want to do, how much I want to keep going. I can feel him getting hard again, his cock resting against my ass.

He pulls me away from the window and turns me around to face him. My legs feel weak when I finally see him; he picks me up, his gaze dark. He slides into me again and I gasp, still oversensitive. But I can feel pleasure building up again when he pushes into me.

The glass behind me is cool against my ass as he presses me against it; it feels good on the burning skin where the switch hit. I cling to him while he holds me, overwhelmed by everything I'm feeling.

“Please,” I beg breathlessly. “Don't stop.”

He doesn't, and I can only hold onto him as he fucks me, deep and hard.

I don't care if this thing between us is fucked up. Maybe I tried to kill him, and maybe he kidnapped me—but none of that matters. Not to me.

It doesn't matter if this is too intense to be safe. I've spent my life sick or caring for the sick, running from loan sharks and murderers and everything in between.

I've never felt more protected and solid than I do when I'm with Lachlan.

So I hold onto him until we both come, gasping and spent, exhausted from it all. I feel raw but perfect. I hold onto him, leaning back against the glass as I feel the ache of good sex settle through my body.

Lachlan pulls back just enough to kiss me. My breath catches; the kiss is deep, true. I don't doubt him anymore. I don't doubt that he was telling the truth when he said he didn't want to marry another woman, when he said he wanted me.

When he pulls back, he looks me in the eye. An expression I've never seen before passes over his face as he murmurs roughly, “I love you.”

“I love you too.” I say it without a second thought, without hesitation. I know it's true.

But after I say it, I can feel a single thought nagging at the back of my mind. One thing threatening this perfection, this happiness.

I know I can't keep it to myself.

I have to say the one thing I don't want to. The one thing that's terrifying to say out loud. And even though I've done it

before, I don't want to now more than ever. Not when I'm finally happy.

But I can't do that to Lachlan. He has to know.

So I take a deep breath and say, "I might have cancer. It might be back."

When I say it, I can feel the words stab my heart. Each one feels like a ringing bell, like a death sentence. I've always known this could happen. It never mattered as much as it does now.

Now, I have something to lose. Someone who will lose me.

I can see fear burning in his eyes. It makes me hurt so much, but it also makes me love him that much more. I know he cares. I know it matters to him. There's determination in his gaze, despite the fears.

"I'll protect you from that too," he says, his voice low. "I'll take care of you. No matter what."

He kisses me and I lose myself in it, letting it burn out everything else. It melts away my fear until it's just the two of us, just how I've always wanted it to be.

CHAPTER 36

Lachlan

It's been several days since the docks, since saving Katrina. But it's still fresh on my mind, still haunting even if it's no longer a threat.

Even in my home, sitting in a room with my brothers, I can remember what it was like to think she was dead.

I look her in the eye and I can see she's worried. So I do the one thing I know will remind her that I will protect her—I pull her toward me and kiss her hard. I won't leave any questions in her mind. I want her and everyone to know that she's mine, and I will protect what's mine.

Her gaze is still worried when she pulls back. “But what will happen?”

“Leave that to me and my brothers.” I shake my head, still holding her waist. “We've dealt with men like Ezra before.”

I turn back to my brothers, who are assembled at the table. I didn't step far away to comfort Katrina; I don't care that they see us together. They're the ones that told me to be with her, after all. They're the ones that convinced me to be happy for once.

Aiden nods, serious. I can see he's thinking about every other fight we've had in the past few years, every betrayal and dangerous deal we've managed.

“He'll be pissed about the wedding being called off, but he'll know it's better to stay on our good side than to start some shit with us.”

I know we can live with our debt. He may have gotten me out of jail and I may have called off the wedding, but those are minor offenses in the grand scheme of things. I'm sure we can manage whatever it is that Ezra wants next.

I glance at my brothers and they nod, recognizing what I mean and what we'll have to do as a family. They all know how in love our parents were; I know they don't begrudge me having found a woman I love. After all, Aiden and Connor have their wives. They understand what love means.

Family matters. And although I've done nothing but make sacrifices for the family, Katrina is going to be my family too. I'll protect her just like I protect my brothers, and they will protect her, too, the same way I look after their wives and will look after their children.

Our bonds are stronger than Ezra could break. We'll get through this.

I kiss Katrina again, a reminder and a promise, and I like the way that she clings to me. The feeling stays with me even when I leave, leading my brothers out and to a meeting with Ezra.

I've known this was coming since I made the decision to choose Katrina. I'm not going to run from the confrontation. But I'm glad my brothers are with me. I know that if Ezra makes any remarks about Katrina or the situation, it will be difficult for me to keep cool.

Ezra is waiting at a neutral meeting place, a coffee house that neither of us owns. It's a precaution to ensure no one crosses the line in the heat of the moment.

I can tell he's not pleased when I walk in. When I sit across from him, I can see a sharpness in his gaze that wasn't there before.

"I don't think there's a reason to draw this out," he says, curt but not threatening.

I try to be diplomatic. "My family appreciates your understanding. We'd like to make arrangements. We do value our relationship."

Ezra doesn't seem too convinced, but I can see that he came prepared. He has something in mind. He nods at me, firm, like he knew I would say as much.

"I expect there are limits to these...arrangements."

"If you have ideas, I'm open to hear them."

I don't tell him that he's right. I won't overextend my family, and I know the real worth of the marriage proposal. It would have been binding, but it wouldn't have been the biggest thing we could have done for him.

Ezra looks thoughtful, but I can see it's a thinly veiled act. He knew what he wanted when he came; he's just trying to pose it to me in the right way. I try to be patient, and I hope that it's not too much.

I don't want to have to tell him no.

"I've been having a business issue that I might need some help sorting out," Ezra finally says.

"We'd be happy to offer what assistance we can," I reply, but I'm careful.

He could ask for anything, and I will draw the line where I always do. But I know we're indebted to him. I have to try. I don't commit to anything just yet; I need more details.

"Yes. Well, there's someone getting in the way," Ezra says slowly. "It shouldn't be hard for you."

It's a clear suggestion. His favor isn't something small; it's a hit.

Even among the mafia, taking out hits on other people is a delicate business. Things can go wrong very quickly, just as they did with Katrina and me. People are human, after all, and you can only anticipate so many things.

I can't lie to myself and say I'm not worried about what I might have gotten my family committed to. I knew there would be a price to pay, repercussions to my choice, but I am prepared to shoulder it. If I have to take this one myself, I will.

I'll do it to keep Katrina at my side.

“We’ll be able to work something out,” I say. It’s not exactly a promise, but it’s close enough.

Ezra nods again, this time a little less sharp. It seems like however pissed he was before, he’s at least calming down. We have something to offer him, and he’ll take it.

We arrange the details—when we’ll meet, when we can talk about the situation. This isn’t the place to discuss something so delicate, so after a few more minutes of discussion, Ezra leaves.

I’m left with my brothers, hoping the favor Ezra wants isn’t too big. The meeting is done, though, and we’re all still alive. My mind is already turning back home.

I know my brothers notice. I can see Aiden smiling a little, almost amused, like he can read my mind. But it’s Connor that finally says something, grinning.

“Go back to your woman, Lachlan.”

“I’m sure she’s missing you,” Finn adds, his voice full of innuendo.

I just grin back at them and say, “I plan to.”

CHAPTER 37

Katrina

I don't enjoy going to the doctor. I've spent too much time in hospitals, too much time waiting to mourn. But I'm torn between those memories and the fear that if I don't go, I'll miss something until it's too late.

So as much as I hate it, I make an appointment and keep it.

Plus, this time, I have Lachlan.

He's a rock to me, solid and reassuring. I'm more nervous than I thought I would be; I can barely concentrate on anything but my mounting fears.

When I first thought that my cancer might be recurring, I was in such a rough place that I didn't care if I lived or died. I went after Yuri on a spur of the moment, convinced that it didn't matter what happened in the end. I couldn't see a reason to be hopeful, or for things to go right.

Now, I have so much to live for.

I can tell Lachlan is anxious the entire drive. He's stoic, but there's a hardness in his eyes. He hovers close to me when we get to the office, shadowing me protectively when I'm ushered into different rooms. By the time I finally meet the doctor, I feel like Lachlan is ready to snap the man's neck if he needs to.

And somehow, just like always, it makes me feel better.

"We're going to run a few tests."

I nod, biting my lip. "Okay."

Dr. Ames smiles at me, and despite myself, I find it easy to talk to him. He's not like the other doctors I've had. There's no grim warning in his face, no weary expression that says he's seen people die today. He just rolls his chair closer and starts to talk.

I don't pay too much attention through the tests, the samples, everything else. I just focus on getting through it. By the time Dr. Ames steps away, I feel a little more prepared.

But I'm still scared. Nothing can stop that; nothing can stop me from being afraid of having to leave Lachlan.

He knows I'm worried. I can tell when he steps into my space after Dr. Ames leaves, crowding close to me, reassuring. He holds my face in his hands and looks down at me with intensity and honesty.

“No matter what, I'll fight for you. I'll take care of you.”

I believe him. I trust him, and I know that he won't leave no matter what happens right now. I know all of this so deeply that it makes everything else unimportant for a few minutes. The tests, the results—all of it fades away. All I know is that Lachlan loves me, and he'll fight for me to the ends of the earth.

I kiss him without hesitating. He kisses me back, firm, and it feels like a promise. He's not going to back down from this fight.

It takes a while for the doctor to return. I find myself doing the same things I used to do—trying to analyze Dr. Ames' face, his movements, the way he prepares himself before he talks to me. *Is it bad news? Good? Or more tests?*

When he finally sits, I almost want to shake the man and demand an answer immediately. I can't stand waiting.

“Well, we have good news,” he says.

I don't jump out of my seat just yet. *Does 'well' mean that there's bad news, too?* I can't stop my head from spinning. I try to empty my mind, reminding myself to just let him tell me.

“There’s no recurrence of cancer,” Dr. Ames finally says. “No sign of it from what we can see. You do have a stomach ulcer that probably caused the blood; those can happen because of stress.”

“I—I was under a lot of stress,” I admit. I’m still partially shocked by his answer.

Not cancer, I think to myself. I want to hear it again just to be sure I’m not going crazy. I grip Lachlan’s hand tighter, hoping there’s no bad news waiting.

But the doctor just smiles and says, “Your blood work did reveal something else, though. I think congratulations are in order. You’re pregnant.”

I can feel my heart stop. The words are foreign to me, almost like they’ve been spoken in another language. It takes a second for me to comprehend what he said, then another to really process the thought. *Pregnant*.

Joy rises inside me, but a small part of me is also scared of what Lachlan will say or think. Things have moved so fast for us until now.

Our time together has been a whirlwind. What will he think of this?

I know he cares about me, that he chose me over his arranged marriage. But I have no idea if he wants kids at all, much less right now. I don’t know if he wanted to start a family with me. I don’t know if he *can* do that, since I’m still learning about the mafia and his responsibilities in his family.

When I look at Lachlan, he’s staring down at me with wide eyes. But then he blinks, pulling me into his arms and kissing me with ferocity.

I’m so shocked that I immediately flush, embarrassed, but I don’t stop myself from leaning into it. I never can when it comes to him.

It’s more passionate than is probably appropriate for a doctor’s office, but it tells me all I need to know. He’s not angry, not dismayed, not reluctant. He wants this.

When he breaks away, he rests his forehead against mine. I can see the awe in his eyes, the joy lighting up his face.

“We’re going to have a baby,” he says.

It’s the best thing I’ve heard in my life.

My mother’s memorial service takes place a week later, and it’s bittersweet.

The good news about the baby has had time to settle. I’ve had time to settle, readjusting to a new place in Lachlan’s life and home. *Our* home, now. But even as I made my place, I was reminded of the one thing I hadn’t had a chance to do.

I have to say goodbye.

The service is small. My mother didn’t have many friends that stuck by her through her illness; it was rough on everyone that was close to her. Some people weren’t even in the state when it happened, and those that were just didn’t care enough to be there.

I’ve been on my own for a long time, so I don’t have many friends who would come. It makes my heart ache, thinking of the both of us and our empty lives.

The memorial could have been grim. It could have been hell, a reminder of all we lost and all we couldn’t have.

But now that I’m with Lachlan, his family is my family. And his family is big and tight. It seems like the entire O’Reilly mafia has turned up for the memorial, and it warms my heart. They didn’t know my mother, didn’t even know me until recently.

But they’re still here, still listening—and that means more to me than anything else.

The memorial passes slowly, and I listen to the words of the few people that came and had something to say about my mother. I listen to them and cling to every story, every kind word. I need them more than anything, more than I realized.

I hold on to Lachlan's hand through it all. I need him to ground me. This is one of the hardest things I've ever done, and I know he understands. I need his support to make it through.

But I have to let go of him at some point, because I have to step up and face this as my mother's daughter. As a woman confronting the pain only I will really know.

When I get up to speak, I feel the pain wash over me again, like it just happened a day ago. I realize I never had time to properly mourn her, and now I have the chance to handle it all. I have the chance to finally confront what I've been waiting for.

I took care of her for so long, and it ended so suddenly. Now that Yuri is nothing but a faint memory, I can focus on what I really feel, what I really felt back then. I can focus on the good things about my mother's life, and not just the pain. Not just the slow death.

There's so much I could tell the gathered people. There's so much I want to say. I know nothing can really encompass what she was; not really. But I can try.

So, I tell them about her.

I tell them about how she loved gardening, how she had the best flowers in the neighborhood. I explain how my mother had an expansive knowledge of the earth and its fruits, and how she taught me those same things. I talk about wanting to garden again.

I tell everyone how hard she worked in life. I explain her struggles, and the way she worked so hard to raise me. I tell them that she's the reason I made it through cancer treatments, the reason I lived at all.

I tell them how she was always there for me, especially after my father left. I talk about how much I loved her and miss her, and how I'll keep her close to my heart.

"She can rest easy, I think, knowing that I'm safe," I finish.

I look over at Lachlan when I say it. I look at him and find his eyes burning, a strength in him matching my words. I

know what I'm saying is true. He will always protect me, and he'll protect our unborn child.

My child will never have to go through what I went through. Unlike my father, Lachlan will never leave and never do anything but love and protect my child, and me.

Tears fall down my cheeks as I say goodbye to my mother, but they're not just painful. They're not just despairing. They're cleansing.

I'm making room for hope to grow in my chest.

CHAPTER 38

Lachlan

The weeks after the memorial service for Katrina's mother are hard. I know she's working through grief; I know it's difficult for her. I'm there for her as often as I can be, trying my best to show her that I know what she's going through.

We have this in common now.

It's a terrible thing to share, but it's healing. I try to spend as much of my day with her as I can.

There are days where it's easy and she's smiling at her memories, and there are days when she's crying, slipping for just a moment into thinking her mother's death was her fault. I listen to the memories when they come and refute the guilt when it comes, too.

Slowly, I know she'll make peace with this.

At the same time, there's fallout from Yuri's death. His people have popped up across the city, but they haven't been given safe haven. The Assembly has acknowledged Yuri's misstep, and they've made a formal pact to deny his followers any right to power or safe quarter.

The best thing Yuri's death has done for us is reveal to some up and coming criminal organizations in Boston that the O'Reilly family is not to be messed with.

The way we dealt with Yuri might not have been how we'd wanted it to go, but it did prove to others that even in a pinch, the O'Reilly family could protect themselves.

I think about Yuri and the aftermath as I walk through the club one night, watching my brothers at the bar. They're with their wives, laughing and talking amongst themselves.

Jade is there too, and I notice Finn giving her a strange look. She seems to return it.

What's that about?

I can't think about it too much. I'm drawn into a conversation with Aiden, who's watching me keenly. His wife, Rose, is probably resting her feet somewhere. The pregnancy is coming along well for her, and I suspect she'll be staying home more soon.

"Ezra wants to meet with us soon," Aiden says, his voice barely raised. The crowd almost drowns him out, but I lean in close. "He wants to discuss repayment of the favor we owe."

I can hear Aiden's lip curl on the word *owe*. I know we could have cut off Ezra the second the wedding was no longer going through, but I also know it would've been a bad idea. We need his partnership. So as much as this 'favor' might be tricky for us to handle, we'll do it.

I remember what Ezra said when we last spoke. It had sounded like he wanted a hit taken out on someone.

Death is a serious thing in the mafia. We don't take it lightly, and we're careful about it. If Ezra wants someone dead, there's going to be a hell of a lot of arrangements to make.

But we'll deal with that as it comes. I know we can handle it. For now, I'm focusing on tonight.

"I'll set up the meeting," I say, nodding toward the bar. "Somewhere he'll be reminded that this isn't his world."

"You think that's necessary?"

"Yes, I do. Ezra may have us owing him, but he knows nothing about the mafia. In the end, he's in over his head. We could have him framed with a word."

Aiden shakes his head. "But that wouldn't work out in our favor."

“No, it wouldn’t. We still need the partnership. It’ll be easier to get this way.”

Aiden nods and picks himself up off his chair. “Well, let’s make it happen, then.”

I watch him go to Rose, and I smile to myself. Tonight isn’t a night for business. It’s a night for the look Aiden gives Rose, the fondness in their eyes when they lean into each other.

And I have someone waiting for me.

I go to Katrina; she’s waiting at a table, one hand on the stem of her glass. A drink with no alcohol. She’s pregnant, and just the reminder makes me feel ridiculously pleased.

I wrap my arms around her when I’m close. She leans back against me, tucking herself into my embrace. I bury my face in her hair and let the smell of her body and perfume cloud my senses. It’s all I want right now.

In this moment, I think to myself that no matter what Ezra wants, no matter what happens in the future, this right here is worth all of it. This woman in my arms.

Katrina is all I really need.

Epilogue: Katrina

I'm standing in the shower, letting water pour over me. It's evening, and the tiny window near the top of the shower is almost pitch-black.

Every day, I feel better. More like myself—or rather, a newer, better version of myself. Like the person I could never be until I met Lachlan.

Someone strong and powerful. Someone loved.

It feels like my life led up to him. It doesn't make the suffering any better in retrospect, but I can see just how wonderful my life is. I know how incredible Lachlan is, now that I've crawled out of the deepest ditch I could have fallen into.

I've gone from living in a shitty apartment, drowning in debt, to having a comfortable bed and a man I love. A man who would do anything to protect me.

It's a dream. But it's real, and I'm living it.

I step out of the shower after a few more blissful moments. I want to stay under the hot spray forever, but there's something else I want more that pulls me away. Someone waiting for me.

The second I set foot in the bedroom, I feel Lachlan grab me by the waist and press me against the wall. It's sudden, shocking—he must have come home from the club while I was showering. I didn't expect him.

He's on me like an animal, ravenous and single-minded. He does this often, devouring me with his mouth and hands. Sex with him is always rough and intense, but I love it. I crave it.

Today is no different. He kisses me hard, so hard I feel like my lips bruise. I'm breathless at once. He crowds into my space and I'm glad my back is to the wall, giving me enough support to withstand the force of his attention. I want to melt beneath him.

He kisses me, groping me as he takes my mouth. I can feel his hands slide under my towel, tearing it away and tossing it into a corner. I'm naked, still damp, my skin hot from the water. I feel even hotter when he touches me.

He drops to his knees without warning. I gasp as he starts to eat me out. He slings one of my legs over his shoulder and again, I'm glad to have the support of the wall. I can barely hold myself up like this.

His attention is complete. His tongue flicks at my clit and makes me unravel in a way I can't describe. I tangle my hand in his hair, lost in bliss, and moan as he works me up. I lose myself in the feeling, getting closer, the pleasure building up low in my body.

I can feel an orgasm coming, but he pulls back when he senses me tensing. I groan but he doesn't touch me again.

I yank at his hair, unable to stop myself, frustrated. "I hate you."

He grins up at me, lips shining in the dark bedroom.

"No, you don't," he says, licking his lips. It's obscene and I'm transfixed. "You fucking love this. And you love me."

I shake my head but he slides a finger over my pussy, tantalizing, reminding me of what he could give me. I shiver under his touch and hope he'll keep going.

But he just sits back on his heels, still looking up at me, something dark in his eyes.

“I could fuck you slow. Make you want it even more, never give you enough.”

I know he would. He’s done it before. But right now, that’s not what either of us want, and I know he’s not going to hold back. So all these things he’s saying are just to remind me, just to make me wet.

It’s working.

He drags a hand over my thigh and says, “I could play with your ass, not letting you touch that pussy. Get you so wet you’re crying. But I’d make sure you don’t get any relief. Not until you’re begging for it.”

“Just do something,” I finally say, unable to stop myself.

I need him to do something, anything. I feel like I’m so close to coming, and I almost work myself up to it—but he slaps my pussy and warns me, “Don’t come. Not yet.”

I hate it when he does this, but I love it, too. This is how he tortured me once, and it’s still torture, but in the best way. A part of me loves it, because when I finally get to come, it’s so intense that I feel like I might die.

But I know Lachlan would never hurt me.

Not unless he’s about to make me feel really good.

He finally starts eating me out again, pushing me to the edge a few more times. But every time I get close, he pulls back again, edging me.

By the time he gets me close for the third time in a row, I’m shaking all over. My entire body is trembling and I can barely keep myself upright. I feel like the shower was a waste; I’m sweating, my heart racing. I just want to sink to the floor, and I want him to fuck me, finally give me what I need.

Just when I think he will, he steps back. “Get on the bed,” he says. “Hands and knees.”

I don’t think twice.

I can hear him reach for lube as I get into position on the bed, and I hear the bottle snap. He gets close and then I feel

him prepping my ass, stretching me out.

“Good,” he says, his voice low. “You like that? I know you’re hungry for it.”

I can’t speak. My breath hitches and I groan, feeling him work me open. I want more, and I want to touch myself, but I don’t. I won’t do it unless he tells me.

He has something in mind for me. When he’s like this, I let him do what he wants. It’s usually better than anything I could have dreamed of.

He works me open with his fingers, stretching me out, getting me ready. I try not to move or push back against him, but it’s so hard to stop myself. It’s so hard not to react.

“I’m going to fuck your ass,” he says, one hand pressed against my back. It’s possessive and heavy, pushing me down even more.

I can feel my entire body shaking. I’m desperate to come, desperate to let go. But he spanks me suddenly, his voice a low growl.

“Don’t come.”

Tears sting my eyes. It feels incredible, but I’m also desperate to finish. I just want to come. But he doesn’t let me, still going slow, still getting me prepped.

Finally, without warning, I feel his cock press against me. I gasp and tilt my hips toward him, hoping to get him closer. He holds me tighter, keeping me still as he pushes into me. The pressure feels incredible; I can barely think. I hear myself saying something, but I’m not sure it’s even words.

I’m so close I can’t stand it. I can feel that he’s close, too; I feel how hard his cock is, how tantalizingly slow he’s going. I know we’re both seconds away from finishing.

He runs his hands up my back and then around to my breasts, tugging at my nipples. He lifts me against his chest until I can feel our skin touching, and then he starts to fuck me.

It feels incredible; he goes at a steady pace, sending me right back to the edge he kept pulling me back from. And then he leans forward, whispering in my ear, the words satisfied.

“Touch yourself while I fuck your ass. Use your fingers, fuck your pussy.”

A whimper falls from my mouth. My hand flies to my clit, rubbing it, sending more powerful waves of need through me. My other hand delves lower, sliding into my sopping wet entrance, trying to match the thrusts of his cock.

“Such a good girl. Come for me. Now.”

That’s all I need to hear. My body is already obeying, the sensation so powerful that I almost feel like I’m going deaf. It’s like a white light, a flash of pure pleasure drowning out the rest of the world.

He doesn’t stop. He fucks me through it, harder, and yanks my fingers from my pussy to suck on them.

“Fuck,” I breathe. “Feels so good. Harder. More, Lachlan. Give me more.”

I feel oversensitive as he growls and slams into me, my entire body raw.

He starts to use his fingers to fuck me; now that I’ve come once, he pushes me into a second orgasm, holding nothing back. This time it’s harder, more desperate. But he doesn’t even let me catch my breath from that.

He gives me climax after climax, blinding me to anything else, making it overwhelm me until I’m screaming with pleasure. It’s almost painful at this point, strong and fast. I can’t think anymore. It’s just too much.

I feel like every nerve ending in my body is on fire. I can’t understand what he’s saying anymore, and I can’t focus enough to do anything but hold on as I ride each wave of intense pleasure. My legs shake and my body is weak.

Finally, he comes in my ass. I hear him groan, and then I feel his warmth spreading through me as he finishes. My entire body clenches around him, tight and sated.

And finally, I collapse on the bed.

He follows me, our bodies thumping onto the mattress. I feel spent and sweaty, like I just had an entire workout. Lachlan turns to me and pulls me in, kissing me hard and deep, and I savor every moment. Every taste.

I feel so filled in every possible way. I feel looked after, like I have everything I could want from him. The pleasure and the lingering soreness encompass me as I lie there, and I look him in the eye when he pulls back from the kiss.

He doesn't break eye contact when he reaches behind him and pulls something out from the bedside table. I watch him, bemused, until he holds a box out between us.

My heart skips.

He opens it with one hand. It takes me a good minute to fully realize what I'm looking at and what it means.

It's a ring.

I half laugh, breathless and stunned. "Are you really proposing while your cum is leaking from my ass?"

His eyes darken. I can see heat in their depths, and it makes me shiver.

"There's no better time to propose."

My heart does a flip.

He's proposing.

It's so real suddenly. I don't even know how to respond, but before I can speak, he continues.

"I'm going to mark you in every way," he says, his mouth moving along my neck. "I'm going to fill you up with my cum. Every part of you is mine, Katrina, just as every part of me is yours. I love you, and I want to spend the rest of my life worshiping you. Will you marry me?"

I shiver in his arms, excitement and need flooding my veins.

He kisses me roughly and I break away just long enough to whisper my answer.

“Yes.”

He slides the ring on and I watch it fit perfectly on my finger, sparkling brightly in the moonlight. It’s more than I ever dared hope for. It’s more than I ever expected I would receive.

He rolls off the bed and pulls me up, carrying me. I laugh breathlessly as he carries me to the shower, a knowing smirk on his lips.

“I’m so fucking glad you said that. Because, baby girl, I don’t know how to stop loving you. I don’t know how to stop worshiping you. And with my ring on your finger, I plan to spend the rest of the damn night inside you.”

As he sets me down in the bathroom and turns on the shower, a rush of happiness overwhelms me. I’ve gone through hell and come back for this, and I wanted it more than anything. I wanted him, his love, his child. I wanted to be the only woman for him.

And now, I will be.

Also by Sophie Winters

Corrupt Kingdom

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[Brutal Knight](#)

[Vengeful King](#)