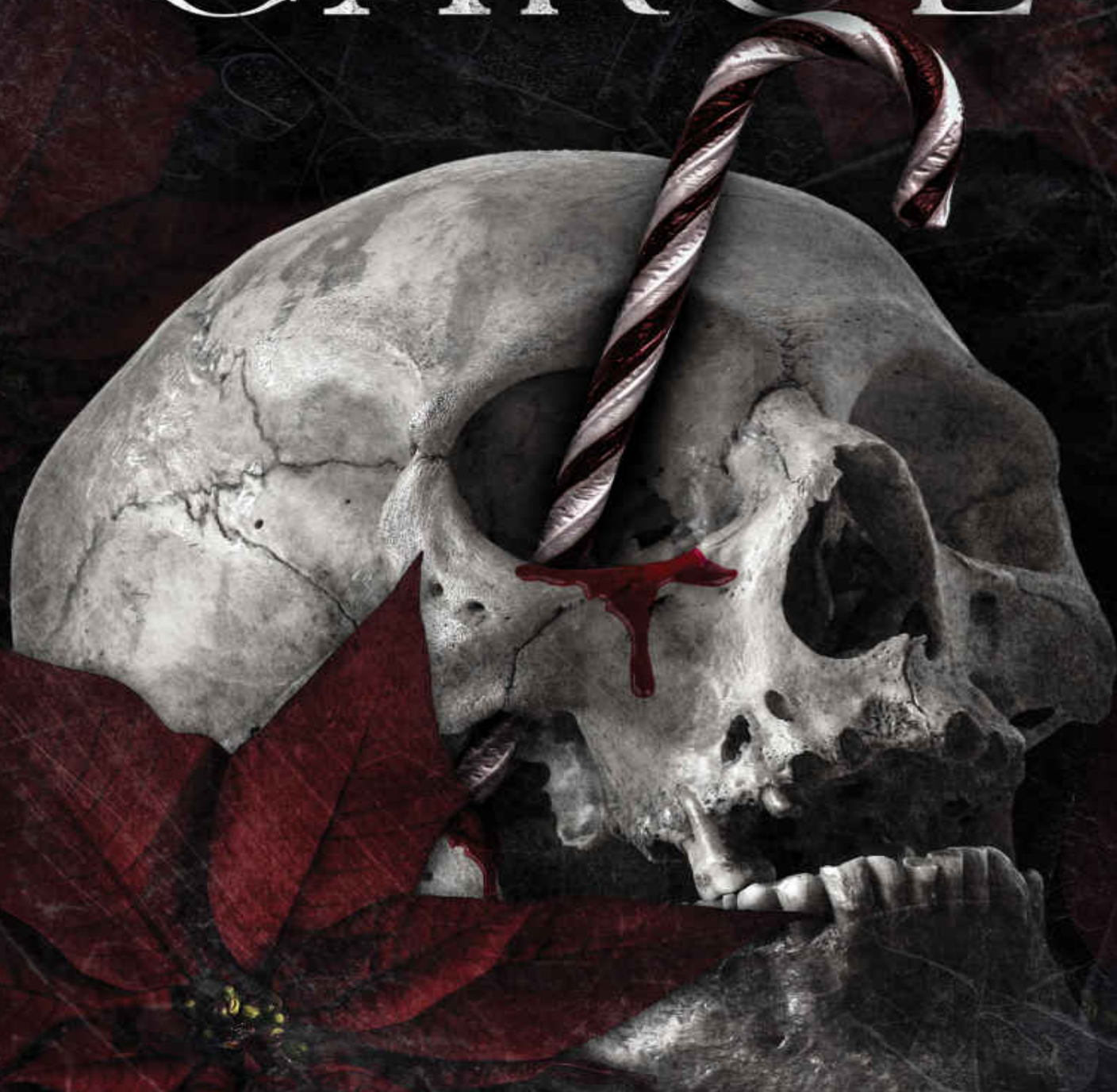


J ROSE

# A CRIMSON CAROL



What's Christmas  
without a little revenge?

# A CRIMSON CAROL

A DARK FESTIVE SHORT STORY

J ROSE

WILTED ROSE PUBLISHING LTD

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Published by Wilted Rose Publishing Ltd

Edited by The Eclectic Editor

Cover Design by The Pretty Little Design Co

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ISBN (eBook): 978-1-915987-18-1

ISBN (Paperback): 978-1-915987-19-8

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# DEDICATION

*For the little girl who hated Christmas.  
What's a holiday without a little blood and murder, anyway?*

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# TRIGGER WARNING

This dark festive short story includes content that may be triggering for some readers, including graphic violence, torture and child abuse.

There are also sexual scenes involving knife play, blood play and asphyxiation.

Reader discretion is advised.



*“Will you decide what men shall live, what men shall die?”*

- Charles Dickens, A Christmas Carol

## PROLOGUE



*M*y life has always been haunted by ghosts.  
Past, Present and Future.

As the daughter of the infamous Greek mobster, Elias Cirillo, I grew up in the shadow of my family's blood-stained reputation. We left our homeland when I was still inside my mama's belly, following a trail of money and greed across the continent.

With each slashed throat and cocaine-dusted export, my papa's criminal enterprise expanded into a formidable empire. He was an almost mythical figure that infected men's hearts with the unfamiliar taste of fear. Nobody dared to mess with the Greek god or his precious family.

I was named after the goddess of war, Athena. That's where Papa's relentless ambition for my future began. Bottle-fed amongst machine guns and batches of crystal meth, the art of survival was a skill I acquired at a young age. He began my brutal training as soon as I could walk.

By the time I left my family behind nearly fifteen years ago, I was a deadly weapon, with each and every part of my life painstakingly controlled by men who sought to use me. Nobody could infiltrate, destabilise or wreak havoc on rival cartels like me. Execution was my speciality.

"Julienne?"

Clutching my clipboard in a white-knuckled grip, I startle at Nurse Suzanne's hand on my shoulder. I was staring at the incubator while lost in the past.

“You okay?”

I clear my throat. “Fine. Do you have Baby H’s CT scan results back?”

Nurse Suzanne flips open a thick folder of paperwork. “We’ve identified a contusion that has caused haemorrhaging on her brain, and a diastatic skull fracture.”

Looking back at the incubator, I study the unconscious baby. She’s tiny, barely a month old. Purple and black bruising marks her small body, and it makes my blood boil. In the eight years since I qualified as a paediatrician, I haven’t seen a case of abuse this severe.

“Where is the mother?” I ask wearily.

“Still being interviewed by police officers upstairs. The social worker will be here within the hour to remove custody until the case is resolved.”

“Has she admitted to any instances of abuse?”

Nurse Suzanne grips the paperwork tight. “She has a broken collarbone and a concussion of her own, Julianne. The interview is standard procedure, but I’d be inclined to interview the baby’s father.”

Checking the central line and heart rate monitor, I note the latest readings on my clipboard. Baby H is a fighter, even with a bleed on her brain.

“I’m sure the police will do so. Our concern is the welfare of our patient.”

“Of course,” Nurse Suzanne blusters. “I’ll call the surgery department. Doctor Bridgers is ready to operate.”

“Good.”

She bustles from the room to prepare. Resting my hand on the incubator, I look at the baby one last time. She will be under the care of the surgeons now.

“Godspeed, little one.”

As the nurses take Baby H away, I return to my cramped office. The moment the door closes behind me, a furious

breath escapes through my gritted teeth. This job has given my life purpose—or should I say, Julianne’s life. I wrapped her identity around myself like an abandoned chrysalis.

I used to hurt people. Break them. Rip them apart cell by cell. In this reality, I fix them. Healing is my profession now, and it keeps the fragile boundary between my two selves relatively intact. On days like this, though, I’d like nothing more than to take a chainsaw to that baby’s abuser.

*Breathe, Athena.*

*You’re my daughter, first and foremost.*

Mama hated the warped, toxic world of the cartel. But more than that, she hated what her beloved husband became. A greedy dictator who took their daughter and turned her into his personal war machine, driven by the ambition to be on top.

Sitting at my desk, I let my head fall into my hands as I recite the words. *I’m Julianne. Thirty-three years old, devoted to her work, plain and unremarkable.* That’s the persona I’ve adopted. I have to stick to the script, even inside my own head.

My desk phone rings, the shrill noise grating against my skull. I pick it up with a sigh.

“Doctor Telford speaking.”

“Julienne. You’ve got a delivery,” the matron says impatiently. “I’m not your personal assistant. Get your coffee subscription delivered elsewhere.”

“You are charming after midnight, Penny. I can assure you that I haven’t ordered anything personal to the hospital. What is it?”

“Open it yourself, doc. I have a staff rota to plan.”

The line goes dead. Snorting, I stand and straighten my white coat. Penny will send whatever it is to the incinerator if I don’t go now. She’s a disillusioned, under-paid dragon who really needs to retire.

Out in the ward, the normal hustle and bustle of hospital life carries on. We work all hours, keeping the hearts of our young patients beating. I never intended to specialise in

paediatrics after training to be a doctor, but I find children more intelligent—and often less insufferable—than most adults.

At the front desk, Penny sits in the adjacent office with several empty coffee cups surrounding her as she takes a phone call. I offer her a salute, wading through piles of disorganised paperwork. There's a large cardboard box on the desk, labelled with my name.

*Julienne Telford.*

*Private & Confidential.*

Grabbing a pair of scissors, I'm preparing to slice through the thick tape when the door to the ward slams open so hard that the glass rattles. A tall, heavy-set man in a stained work uniform stomps down the corridor towards me.

He stops in front of the desk, slamming his hands down to gain my attention. I suppose he thinks that he's intimidating, looming over me with no one else around at this late hour. The stench of alcohol wafts off him in a thick cloud.

"I demand to see my wife and baby," he spits out, scattering saliva. "They're here, aren't they? I need to see them right now."

I place the scissors down. "Sir, I'm not at liberty to divulge any confidential information. Please take a step back for me."

"Didn't you fuckin' hear me?!"

"I heard you just fine."

"She's here!" he screams in my face. "Harriet is here. My wife fuckin' beat the shit out of our baby. I have to see her!"

"Raising your voice at me will not achieve that. You will be notified as next of kin in due course if your wife and child are here. Go home."

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Penny standing from her desk. Her eyes are widened, asking a silent question. *Help?* I subtly shake my head in response.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” the man sneers, his face turning purple. “Move out of my way or we’re gonna have a problem.”

“Keep making threats, sir, and I’ll be forced to call security.”

In his rage, he attempts to lunge across the reception desk to hit me. I ignore the sound of Penny calling for security to come up and take matters into my own hands. He’ll get to that baby over my dead body.

Dodging his clumsy move, I strike out and clip him in the solar plexus. Knocked off balance, he stumbles back while attempting to remain upright. I dance around the desk, advancing towards him with my fists raised.

“What kind of goddamn doctor are you?” he screeches.

“The kind that protects her patients. Security are on their way. I suggest you calm down and wait outside before things get worse for you.”

“Worse for me? I wanna see my fuckin’ baby! She never stops screaming. I didn’t mean to hurt her so bad... I didn’t mean it...”

I see red. This piece of shit has admitted to giving his one month old the worst case of head trauma I’ve ever seen. Any fear regarding professional consequences leaves the building. Let them suspend me.

Feinting to the left, I grab his muscled bicep and tug, pulling him off balance. He tries to struggle but falls straight into my trap as I pin his arm at a painful angle and shove him into the wall.

“One move, and I’ll break your wrist. Beating your wife and child will be near impossible with a fractured radiocarpal joint. Trust me, I’m a doctor.”

By the time security arrives, he’s full-body sobbing. They take one look at our predicament and break out the handcuffs reserved for special occasions. The police will be down here soon to take this asshole off their hands.

Dusting myself off, I straighten my clothing and watch as he's dragged away. A small crowd of staff has gathered behind me, and a couple of scared faces peek around their open doors.

"Nothing to see here," I tell them all. "Just a little disruption. Everyone back to work." I point towards the two children. "Back to bed, please."

They scuttle away without complaint. Penny is the only one who remains, staring at me with an aghast expression. Smiling sweetly, I grab my parcel and return to my office. That certainly livened up her dull evening.

Back behind my desk, I study the box in the dim light. The neat handwriting is unfamiliar, and it weighs a fair bit. Slicing through the tape, I open the box without paying much attention.

The sickly-sweet scent of rotting flesh immediately hits me. Acid burns my throat as I slowly unpeel the flaps of cardboard to reveal the contents. My demeanour doesn't change. No dramatic screaming or fainting.

In fact, I don't feel a thing. I'm no longer Julienne, sweet and sensitive. My training takes over as violence and rage thrum beneath my skin, but they never break the surface. Emotion was an unnecessary distraction in my old life.

In the box, blood-stained plastic encapsulates a bloated, swollen face. Through the discolouration, I can make out the identity of the decapitated head. Those sharp eyes haven't met mine in fifteen long years.

"Papa," I murmur.

Nestled beside the head is a card. I slide it out of the red envelope, stroking a finger over Santa Claus's cheesy grin. Opening the card, it begins to play a familiar Christmas tune as Rudolph's red nose lights up.

The same handwriting scrawls out a message inside that sucker punches me in the chest. Final proof that Julienne Telford's time on this earth has reached its end.

*Merry Christmas, Athena Cirillo.*

The card falls from my hands, revealing my papa's decaying remains again.

“Well... fuck.”



## CHAPTER ONE



“*F*or this week’s fighter, we welcome back our champion, Athena! Win yourself a tidy sum just in time for Christmas. This one’s a sure bet!”

Max’s jubilant voice echoes through the speaker system after his announcement, riling up the eager crowd. On fight nights, the bets can enter the tens of thousands. I’m not here for money or pride, but my reputation speaks for itself.

“Athena will be taking on our newest competitor, the fearsome Tiger. You know the rules—winner takes all, and the match ends in death or not at all.”

More ravenous cheering and laughter engulfs me. I’m warmed up and ready to battle. My white coat is back in my apartment several cities away, along with my fake identity. This game only requires bare fists and a confident grimace.

After relocating to a quiet suburb in England to commence medical school, I quickly realised that my new identity was merely a veneer, and one that took great effort to maintain. Expelling my need to beat, bruise, and break other humans became a non-negotiable form of self-care.

With the drum roll playing, I tie off my long, golden-blond hair in a tight braid and stride out of the locker room. Ridges of muscle and old scars mark my tall, lean body, visible around my sports bra and shorts.

“Here’s the woman of the hour... Athena!”

The underground fight club is bathed in shades of darkness. The scents of sweat and blood hang in the air,

punctuated by the sounds of drunken swearing and the clink of beer glasses. Papa would've loved this place. It's a cesspit. Perfect for shifting product through the city.

Ignoring the catcalls and chants of my name, I descend the metal staircase to enter the pit. It's sunken into the concrete and lined with a chain-link fence that entraps its competitors. The only way to escape is glory or death.

"Put your hands together for our wild card, making his debut... Tiger!"

Granted access to the pit by a heavily armed gangster, my competition enters with a swagger. He's short and built like a truck, his oiled skin bursting with muscles. On his face, several tattoos mark his skin. It's common for gang members to honour their kills in ink.

"Sure you ain't in the wrong place, little lady?"

I roll my shoulders back with a sigh. "Feel free to keep your patronising, macho bullshit to yourself. This is the twenty-first century."

Tiger smirks, flashing a gold tooth. "Alright, lassie. I'll break your neck while respecting your equal goddamn rights. Is that better for ya?"

"Jeez, a feminist. Aren't I lucky?"

As soon as the horn blares, I attack like a viper—fast and furious, cutting through the air with razor-sharp speed. Tiger attempts to land a punch, but I drop and slide straight through his parted legs.

He bellows at the blow I deliver to his exposed crotch. Cupping his sore dick, he spins to attack me, unprepared for the elbow I jam into his throat. Tiger hits the stained floor with a huff.

"How's that for equality, asshole?"

Blow after blow, punch after punch, I rain down fury on his damned soul. He's bigger and stronger than me, but with the surprise of speed on my side, he's far behind in this race now.

The crowd grows louder, baying for blood. My knuckles are split and aching as crimson soaks my skin. In the back of my mind, a taunting song plays on a loop. That musical Christmas card was a sick taunt.

*Snow is falling all around us.*

Tiger's jaw shatters, cutting off his screams.

*Children playing, having fun.*

Blood splashes against my lips in a hot spray.

*'Tis the season for love and understanding.*

Hammering his torso, I feel a rib crack.

*Merry Christmas, everyone.*

Taking a quick break to suck in air, I chance a look around me. Thunderous applause encourages the violent animal escaping its cage within my mind. Even if my papa is dead, the message he instilled in me remains. Here is where I feel most alive—back in my old skin.

While scanning the crowd, something catches my attention. I don't know why. Fingertips of unease drag down my spine, mixing with grief and anger. I'm not sure when I started crying while beating on Tiger, mourning the man that taught me how to fight.

A pair of dark eyes peers back at me, standing apart from everyone else. His throat and the shaved sides of his head are heavily tattooed, highlighting a wickedly sharp jaw, pierced nose, and full, cruel lips.

I freeze, trapped by the ghost in my midst. Past and present collide in a silent explosion, broken by the chain-link fence keeping us apart.

“Athena,” Drake mouths. “Look out.”

I react too late to avoid the hands that wrap around my ankles. Drenched in blood, Tiger topples me to the floor, rolling his heavy weight on top of me. All I can see is Drake's almost black gaze watching the show with amusement.

With a guttural growl, Tiger begins pummelling me into a bag of bones and organs. I'm detached from the pain, content to float on a lake of fire until he tires himself out. His punches are already slowing down.

When he collapses on my chest, closer than a sated lover, I lean into his throat. We're both drenched in crimson, coated in one another's essence. That's what makes killing so intimate. You become one with your victim.

He can't speak with a broken jaw. I don't care what his final words are anyway, intimate or not. His life is his to lose, and his death is mine to own. My teeth sink into his flesh as I drink his blood from the source.

Copper soaks my face as I tear his throat out, the wound spraying like a geyser. I spit ripped skin onto the floor. Biting. Chomping. Tearing. His body goes limp, drained of life force by exposed arteries.

The crowd goes wild, so loud I fear the city thriving above us will hear what savagery takes place beneath their feet. Pushing aside my aches and pains, I somehow find my feet without slipping.

In the madness, Drake has disappeared.

Was he a phantom all along?

"She's done it again! Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you... Athena, our beloved champion!"

Stumbling over to the metal door, I trip up the stairs. The applause doesn't stop, hungry vultures celebrating their winnings. I wonder how many children's presents will be bought with this blood money.

Making it back to the locker room before I black out, the strength deserts my body. I collapse on a faded workbench, checking my aching chest by touch. Scapula. Sternum. Costal cartilage. Nothing broken.

"Hell of a fight, kitten."

*Fuck.*

I can't believe it.

My head hits the bench with a defeated thud. “You know, I hoped that you were a figment of my imagination. Guess I’m not that lucky.”

Emerging from the shadows that cling to him like second nature, Drake props himself against the wall opposite, a cigarette hanging from his lips. He looks different to the hot-headed eighteen-year-old I left behind.

Bigger, burlier and carved with aggression that pours off him with palpable authority. He’s the kind of person you’d cross the street to avoid, unless you fancied a quiet death.

Wearing a pristine tailored suit and unbuttoned white shirt that highlights the endless tattoos on his skin, he looks strangely clean cut compared to the villain I know him to be.

“Drake Hardwright.”

He blows out a smoke ring. “Long time no see, Athena. I see you haven’t changed. Need a hand with all that blood?”

“When have I ever needed your help with anything?”

“Trust me, my night would’ve been easier if you’d died out there.” His attention is cold and steely. “I placed a very large bet against you.”

“It’s gonna be a tight Christmas for you then, isn’t it?”

“Apparently.”

Easing myself up with a groan, I grab the hand towel from my discarded bag and set to work cleaning the blood from my arms and face. Drake finishes his cigarette, crushing the butt beneath his Italian leather shoe.

“This isn’t a social call,” he grinds out.

“I assumed as much. Have you come to collect my papa’s decapitated head? It’s dissolving in a vat of acid as we speak.”

Drake’s smile widens. “Your own father? Kudos.”

“I’ve taken great care to construct my life here. I won’t let anyone ruin the peace I’ve found. This was clearly a threat.”

He actually laughs. It's a cruel and grating sound, one that brings back too many memories. Drake used to laugh while I sliced throats and danced in blood, bathing in the brutality. He's a cold-blooded psychopath, unhinged and remorseless.

"I'm proud. You haven't gone soft out here, playing Plain Jane. How does a paediatrician become the champion of an underground fight club?"

Tossing the towel aside, I poke my bruised ribs. "None of your fucking business. I'm not interested in a reunion. What do you want?"

"Revenge," he deadpans. "Some motherfucker killed my patéras and cut his head off. You're going to help me punish whoever did this."

"That man was not your father." I pin him with a hateful stare. "He took you in and made you into a monster, just like me. Be glad that he's gone."

"Are you glad, kitten?"

I'm shocked at the wave of grief that washes over me with his question. Elias Cirillo was a stone-cold bastard, but he was still my papa. Regardless of why I ran away as fast as I could.

"I'm over the moon. Fuck off, Drake. I hate you, and I'm not helping you do shit."

Skulking closer with the deadly grace of the Grim Reaper, Drake towers over me. I flinch as his hand strokes over my red-stained braid, reaching my swollen cheek. His thumb teases my skin, hard and calloused.

"Nico is going to take over your papa's empire," he utters softly. "He's already declared himself."

I shake off his acid-like touch. "That son of a bitch has been biding his time for two decades."

Drake's smile takes a dangerous edge. "It's Christmas. The whole family has gathered to mourn. One of these snakes has stolen your birthright and delivered it to Nico on a gold platter. Let's find them."

"A birthright I never wanted."

“But it’s yours, nonetheless. At least give it to someone deserving of the throne.” Drake’s hand curls around my throat, his nails cutting my skin. “I hate you too, Athena. This is business, nothing more.”

“Business?” I laugh, ignoring his tightening grip. “Nothing is more personal than vengeance. Is that what you want, Drake? Revenge for me leaving?”

Invading the last of my personal space, his lips stop a mere breath from mine. I can smell the tobacco and expensive aftershave clinging to his skin, taking me back to the late nights we spent bathing in each other’s glow.

We fucked. Killed.

Fought. Bled.

All in the name of family.

“Your life will never be safe for as long as Elias’s killer is out there. They know who you really are,” Drake points out with a grin. “This vendetta must end, and you must be the one to swing the guillotine.”

“I don’t do that anymore.”

He glances up towards where the baying crowd is still shouting. “Don’t you? That looked like an execution to me. Get up off your ass, Athena. We have work to do.”

Squeezing my throat painfully tight before releasing, Drake strides from the room. I’m left reeling, still dressed in fresh blood, while staring after the psychotic killer whose heart I broke fifteen years ago. It seems my quiet Christmas plans are no longer an option.

## CHAPTER TWO



The city is as soulless and bleak as I remember. Over the years, I often caught myself wondering if it had changed. Where drug deals and assassinations took place in broad daylight, perhaps now children played or wildflowers grew through the cracks in society's facade.

Nothing has changed.

My ghosts never left this graveyard.

Steering his blacked-out muscle car through the rural outskirts of our territory, Drake drives in silence. His tattooed hands clutch the wheel in a strangling grip. We've barely spoken a word in the hours it's taken to come home, years of history and a compact handgun between us.

I note the silver ring wrapped around his pinkie finger, boasting our family crest. It often left marks on the faces of men my papa beat to death. Now, it has been bestowed upon his favourite caged animal.

"Tell me about the body," I break the silence.

Drake doesn't even flinch. "We found him in his office. He was killed by a single shot to the chest, his head removed with a machete. Within an hour, Nico burnt down the nearest warehouse belonging to the Angelos family."

"You think Tobias did this? After all these years?"

"The vendetta has continued ever since your mama's death at their hand." Drake stops at a wrought-iron gate, punching



numbers in the keypad. “Elias killed more Angelos scum than he sold narcotics.”

“I thought he might have left the past alone after I disappeared. No more reminders, or something like that.”

He scoffs. “Elias’s rage consumed him when you left. He kept tabs on you for all these years, respecting your decision while also waging war against the whole world in his grief.”

Staring straight ahead at the wealthy oasis carved into a city of desperation and criminality, my old home comes into view. Cirillo Mansion is guarded by an army of paid thugs, protecting the heart of our family. Its black bricks and gothic windows imprison the darkness inside.

“Tobias Angelos is the first suspect, then.” I comb through my golden mane of hair, feeling uneasy. “He’s an obvious choice. Who else?”

Drake parks between a perfectly polished Bentley and a midnight-blue Lamborghini. The whole family is here. I recognise my aunt’s vintage Porsche behind Nico’s small-dick-energy sports car.

“Who stands to gain the most?” he drawls.

“As my first cousin, Nico is next in the line of succession. Without me here, he inherits my papa’s throne with immediate effect.”

“The perfect motivation.”

“But why send me the head?” I muse. “To boast?”

Straightening the lapels of his spotless charcoal suit, Drake switches off the engine. “Or to scare Julienne Telford into staying away from here.”

I can’t suppress my snort. “He clearly doesn’t know me well. If anyone should be afraid, it’s him. I’m still Athena.”

“Are you?” he drones coldly.

Glowering at his blank expression, I climb out of the car and slam the door. Hard. Fuck him. Fuck this place. Fuck my family and the line of succession. I’ll march in there, beat

Nico's ass into submission, and secure my safe future as Julienne Telford. Not Athena.

All in time for turkey.

Happy fucking Christmas.

Smoothing my skin-tight leather pants and low-cut tank top, I walk back towards the life I left behind. My heels sink into the stone drive, each click announcing my arrival. Drake follows, tucking his handgun into his suit.

The heavily armed men guarding the front door both bow their heads as Drake gestures for them to stand down. Frowning at me, neither of them seem to know why they recognise me. I've been gone for a very long time.

Inside the mansion, the scents of cigar smoke and crackling flames are broken up by the bitter tinge of stored drugs. Thick, patterned rugs meet lacquered black floors, and family portraits line the walls.

I stop beneath a huge painted scene, studying my own young face. Framed by golden hair, I peered up at my papa's formidable six-foot-two height with affection. He looked so powerful—his hair cropped close to his scalp, showing off harsh lines forged through a lifetime of labour.

Drake's body heat meets my back. "We're not here to go for a walk down memory lane, kitten."

"I almost forgot what he looked like."

"Isn't that exactly what you wanted?" he sneers, his breath tickling my neck. "You left us behind. This is all you're allowed now. A portrait and some shitty memories."

Turning around, we're trapped almost chest to chest. I can still see the cruel boy that I once coveted in Drake's older face. Nobody scared me more than him, not even the enemies my papa told gruesome stories about. Only Drake could dismantle a person limb from limb, all while grinning.

"Is this what you wanted?" I breathe, licking my lips. "To see me hurting? Does my pain bring you some satisfaction?"

Drake's almost black irises writhe with emotion. I am the only one that can bring it out in him; no one else is able to break through his impenetrable defences. When his entire family was killed in a territory dispute as a kid, he turned off his remaining humanity.

"Yes," he answers darkly. "This is exactly what I wanted. You had a life here, and you chose to walk away. From the family. From us. Everything."

"I had no choice."

Drake shifts even closer, gripping my shoulders. "I waited for you at our spot that night, counting the hours as they passed. You never showed up."

I try to move, but he refuses to release me. His fingers dig in, aggravating the bruises from my recent fight. The thrum of pain adds to the twisted sense of excitement his touch brings against my will.

"You left me waiting in the dark," he accuses.

"I didn't want you to stop me from leaving."

"If I'd known, I would've buried a knife in your heart instead. At least then I could've had a corpse to worship instead of fifteen years of nothing."

Hands curling into fists, I measure the distance between me and the gun holster beneath his designer suit jacket. It's close enough to access.

"You'd rather see me dead than happy?"

Drake bares his teeth. "Happy without me? Fuck, Athena. You tore my heart out and took it with you as a trophy. I've been dead ever since."

Before I can choke the life from his lungs for my own self-preservation, the sound of glasses clinking breaks our little bubble. Drake seems to shake himself, still clasping my arm, and drags me deeper into the mansion.

The sound of voices and drinking emanates from the formal living room that's beneath the double staircase and

ancient grandfather clock. We sneak into the room, met by grand Christmas decorations and a huge, freshly cut tree.

“Tonight, we gather as a family to honour our leader, Elias Cirillo. May God rest his soul.”

Nico’s voice is a smooth, coaxing tenor that enchants his victims. He has my mama’s deep, Mediterranean colouring and inky-black hair. His mother, my maternal aunt, brought teenage Nico to England when the whole family emigrated in the late nineties.

His black mourning suit shows off his flawless, angular features and perfectly trimmed beard. Standing beside the Christmas tree, he holds a crystal tumbler of amber liquid in the air.

“Did we miss the party?” I call out.

With several shocked gasps, the entire family turns to face us. I spot Aunt Aliana and her third husband, Richard, plus all seven of Nico’s siblings. My papa’s closest confidante, Julio, and his sons are also present.

Even the young children are here—I’d heard that Nico had three kids with a wife that he swiftly cheated on and deserted. All members are dressed in black, their grief-stricken faces lit by the gleam of candles and Christmas lights.

“Athena?” Nico exclaims.

Stepping into the room, I take in the familiar panelled walls and glinting chandeliers. “Hello, cousin. It’s been a long time.”

“What are you doing here?”

Ignoring everyone’s bemused expressions, I run a finger along the open fireplace’s mantlepiece, inspecting for any dust. Every surface is covered in wreaths of holly, trinkets or framed photographs.

“I’m here to pay my respects,” I answer drily. “Some kind soul decided to post me an early Christmas present. I wasn’t able to bring my papa’s head back with me, I’m afraid.”

Several of the women gasp once more, clutching their stolen pearls or taking deep swigs of red wine. Nico doesn't react at all. Not even a flicker of surprise or guilt. He's perfected my papa's poker face.

"Tell me, how is the investigation going?" I turn to face them all. "Presumably, you've dedicated every resource imaginable to hunting down his murderer."

Julio clears his throat. "The situation is a little more complicated than that, Athena. You've been gone for a long time."

"Spoken like a true best friend to my papa, huh? You always were a waste of space."

"Athena," Nico scolds. "You can't just waltz in here and start throwing your weight around. Things have changed."

Nodding, Julio rests a hand on the gun strapped to his hip. The threat is clear. His loyalty has transferred to the next pig-headed male in the family.

"Your arrogance hasn't." I stroll up to Nico. "This entire empire belongs to me. Until my papa's killer is found, no decisions about its future will be made."

"I was Elias's second in command."

Taking the drink straight from his hand, I finish it in one gulp. The liquor burns going down, bringing back memories of debriefs in my papa's office. After my first kill, he forced alcohol down my throat to calm me down. I was just thirteen years old.

"I'm his daughter," I remind him gently. "You've made a move on his kingdom before his corpse is even cold. Shame on you."

"Please." Aunt Aliana's eyes sparkle with tears. "Let us put these differences aside. Athena is home for Christmas. We can be together again as a family."

Opening her arms for a perfume-scented hug, I reluctantly step into her embrace. She squeezes me like a vice, her lips touching my ear.

“Careful, child. I don’t want to see you dead too.”

Releasing me, she nods tightly. I touch her withered hand before turning back to face my frowning cousin again. He quickly wipes his expression.

“It’s good to have you back, Athena. We’re holding a memorial ball for Elias tomorrow evening. I’d be honoured for you to attend.”

“Do I need an invitation now?”

His smile widens. “I wouldn’t want security to mistake you for a stranger. How embarrassing that would be. No one will recognise you.”

With his parting shot fired, Nico turns his back on me to replace his stolen drink. I place the empty glass down and walk away before the knives strapped to my body accidentally end up in his eyeballs. Then we can talk about embarrassment.

“Come on.” Drake gestures towards the door. “I’ll take you to your room. Nobody’s touched it in years.”

Following his lead, I leave the strangers that once were my family to their late-night drinks. The people I remember feel far away, replaced by empty vessels of ambition and greed. That’s what Papa did to people.

In some ways, I’m glad he’s dead. No one else will suffer the excruciating rebirth we all endured under his leadership. Our lives were easy sacrifices in his pursuit of power and money. That’s his legacy.

## CHAPTER THREE



The Carlisle hotel is a shimmering, eight-story beast. Protected by more security than the Bank of England, it hosts the grandest events on the criminal cartels' calendar. This is where we gather to drink, dance and celebrate.

Sat in the back of my aunt's vintage Porsche, she rides up front with her latest husband. He's a velvet-suit-wearing asshole with far too much to say. I don't like that he's been granted access to our family without complaint.

"A hospital?" Aliana frowns as she checks her reflection. "I'm struggling to imagine you working there, Athena."

"Fifteen years is a long time, Auntie. I had to make a life. There's no future in killing and running from capture."

"And that's what you have now? Is there a man or woman involved in this future, may I ask?"

Grabbing the blood-red lipstick from my diamond-encrusted clutch, I finish applying the last of my makeup. My golden-blonde hair is loose and styled in glamorous waves, almost reaching mid-back.

"I don't have time for anything but my work," I eventually answer.

"But I thought you left the family for this so-called future."

Stumped, I can't find an adequate answer. She's right; my reasons for leaving then were simply incompatible with the

harsh reality of becoming a new person. I couldn't afford to let anyone close in case the facade slipped. It's a lonely existence.

Climbing out of the car without replying, I slam the door a little harder than necessary. Ice-cold winter air bites into my exposed skin. I drove myself into the city centre to pick up a suitable outfit this morning, grateful for an escape from that damned mansion.

My strapless dress is low cut, exposing my pale skin and pronounced collarbones, upon which my mama's diamond necklace rests. The bruises from my recent fight are on display, but I wear them with pride.

The dress's material is a sweeping skirt of tulle, stained the deepest shade of dark blue and studded with tiny gems that look like constellations.

With a brand-new hunting knife and handgun hidden in my clutch, I ignore the murmurings of guests around me and walk up the red carpet into the hotel. For a gangster's memorial, this place looks more like a high-end fashion show.

Guided into the depths of the hotel, open doors beckon into a melee of clinking champagne glasses, soft jazz music and pristine tuxedos. The guests mill about, gossiping and marvelling at the display of wealth. I recognise many of the business leaders, and even a few dirty politicians.

“Athena.”

Hand wrapping around my wrist, Nico oozes confidence and authority. His tuxedo fits impeccably, showing off his slim body and scattering of dark tattoos. For a middle-aged man, he looks good.

“You look ravishing, as always. So good of you to make it.”

I stifle an eye roll. “Cut the crap, Nico. One more pointed comment and I'll bury my knife in your kidney. We good?”

His grin is sleazy. “Oh, we're good.”

Releasing my wrist, he raises his champagne glass in a mock toast and blends back into the crowd. Just seeing people



showering him with condolences and praise makes me want to puke. I've always hated him.

Guilt is written all over that slimy snake, but all I can do is stand here and play the game without proof of his crimes. When this is all over, my quiet, countryside life will still be waiting for me. I don't have to be this person forever.

Snatching a champagne glass from the nearest waiter, I scan the crowd. Family members are evenly distributed, plying charm on unsuspecting guests that have come to pay their respects. This entire thing is a delicate dance, a sales pitch under the guise of mourning.

When a strong arm winds around my waist, I almost drop my glass. Heavily tattooed skin, scarred knuckles and the scent of musky aftershave announces his unmistakable presence. Drake is a force of nature, commanding the very gravity of whatever room he enters.

"You look different."

I take a sip of champagne. "Take your hand off me before you lose it. I am not yours to touch, Hardwright."

Chuckling, he removes his arm and plants himself in front of me. Rather than a tuxedo, he wears a three-piece suit, the black shirt contrasting his deep, olive complexion and crop of dark hair left long on top of his head, obscuring ink that creeps across his skull.

"Little Athena is all grown up," he taunts.

Finishing my champagne, I glower at him. "I'm here to investigate, not play your childish games. Help or leave me in peace."

Drake takes the empty glass from my hand and discards it, entwining our fingers instead. His touch is ice cold, like Death himself is pulling me into an embrace. I'm imprisoned by his searing gaze.

"Tobias Angelos is an enemy of the past," he explains in a low voice. "Nico? He's your present foe, and a powerful one too. But you're missing one important piece of the puzzle."

Steering me onto the nearby dance floor, where whispered conversations and deals with the devil are being struck, we begin a slow waltz. Drake's hand meets my back, his fingertips drawing circles against my spine.

"There," he directs.

I follow his line of sight. Dancing with a flawless, red-headed woman, a commanding presence ensures no one gets too close to them. With salt-and-pepper hair, a trimmed moustache and shocking silver eyes, the man watches everyone like a baying predator.

"Who is he?" I whisper back.

Drake twirls me outwards, his hands roaming over my skin as I crash back into his chest. "That is Antonio Russo. Sicilian mafia, to be precise. He's a new friend of your cousin's and the future of the cartel."

My blood runs cold. "What the fuck is Nico doing with the Sicilian mafia? Has he lost his goddamn mind?"

We continue dancing, maintaining careful appearances. Everyone is watching as news of Elias's lost daughter returning home spreads.

"Antonio controls the docks and half of the city's police force," Drake reveals. "Nico has been negotiating a deal with him for months. Profit share in exchange for access to one of England's busiest shipping routes."

I should be paying attention to this development, but all I can feel is Drake's calloused touch on my skin. I know it's all for show, but the way his muscled chest presses against my breasts is torturous.

"Nico's going international," I surmise.

"Precisely. Elias endorsed the idea, seeing it as a way to finally defeat the Angelos family and their exports business. Even if it meant getting into bed with the Sicilians."

"Clearly my papa was losing his mind." I watch Antonio talking to his men in the corner. "That son of a bitch cannot be

trusted. You know the Sicilians were involved in your parents' deaths."

Drake's eyes simmer with fury. It's enough to send goosebumps across my skin. I've seen that look on his face before, usually when he's preparing to slaughter thirty people without breaking a sweat. It scares me.

"I'm perfectly aware," he growls. "Antonio Russo will get what's coming to him. The Sicilians had everything to gain from eliminating Elias and handing the cartel to Nico as an act of good faith."

"You're suggesting they cooked this up together."

"Why not?"

In the corner, Antonio stares across the dance floor. The moment his silver eyes meet mine, I feel the unspoken threat. He smiles, slowly and deliberately. I glare back, hoping he feels the sheer depth of my hatred.

"Help me prove that monster was involved in my papa's death, and I'll give you his worthless hide to do with as you please."

Contemplating my offer, Drake cocks his head. "I suppose it would be satisfying to carve the meat from his bones and feed it to his own dogs."

"His family has killed enough of ours."

Drake's hand is still entwined with mine. He looks down, seeming to realise we're touching, and frowns at the point of contact. This isn't the first slaughter we've planned together, and it's sickening how right it feels to be doing this again.

"Still hate me?" I laugh quietly.

His lips twist in a rueful grin. "Forgiveness isn't my strong suit. I hate you for leaving me here alone."

"Well, I hate you for bringing me back to this hellhole. I guess that makes us even now, doesn't it?"

The clink of silver on glass silences the room. Violins cease and the dancing halts, with all attention turning to Nico

at the front of the crowd. His glass is raised in a toast, seizing the hearts and minds of everyone here.

“Elias Cirillo was a beloved father, uncle, brother and friend. But more than that, he was our leader. The world is a darker place without him tonight.”

Nico’s eyes meet mine. His glass is raised, and everyone synchronously copies the action.

“To Elias,” he calls out. “May God grant me the strength to continue his legacy. I will honour you with my life, Uncle.”

I swear his lips twitch in the tiniest smile. It’s a personal message sent straight at me, his eye contact not wavering for a single second. My spine straightens as fire races through my veins. I lose sight of the plan.

If I can get a little closer, my knife will sail straight into his heart. That won’t be enough though. I want it to be up close and personal, his blood drenching my very essence as I avenge the life he stole without permission. That bastard has to *hurt*.

“Athena,” Drake mutters. “Come on, let’s get a drink.”

“No. He has to die.”

“Not here. There are too many people watching. You’ll have an all-out war on your hands with the Sicilians and your own family.”

“I don’t give a flying fuck.” I yank my hand from his, seething with rage. “He’s taunting me. I’m not going to stand here and take it.”

Drake grabs me again, this time dragging me off the dance floor. I hiss and scratch at his hand, earning myself some startled looks, until he pulls me into a deserted corridor. The exit door shuts behind us.

“Get the hell off me!”

“This is exactly what Nico wants,” Drake snarls in my face. “He’s baiting you, for fuck’s sake. You’re the only thing standing between him and the throne.”

“I don’t care. He’s standing up there like a goddamn martyr, winning all those suckers over. It makes me sick!”

Releasing my arm to run a frustrated hand over his face, I take advantage of the brief lapse in judgement. Drake grunts in pain as my fist connects with his jaw, slamming him backwards into the wall.

“I’ll kill him myself, with or without you.”

“Dammit, Athena!”

By the time he’s launched a counterattack, I have my hunting knife against his throat, and he’s pressed his drawn gun to my temple. We both freeze, caught in a mutual checkmate.

“Your move,” he thunders.

“You first. Go on, pull the trigger.”

“I’m not the one who drew their weapon first. Got the guts to use that knife, kitten? I’m all yours. Take your best shot.”

“Is that what you want?” I cackle in his face. “Look at the big, powerful Drake Hardwright. Begging for his death.”

Chest rumbling, he presses the gun even harder against my temple. The cold kiss of steel feels like a defibrillator on my heart. I can breathe and think more clearly, knowing death is a single move away.

Fighting is futile.

I could never kill him.

The knife drops from his throat. My body is trained to surrender to Drake, even as my brain screams otherwise. He’s beaten and bruised me into submission enough times to hold control over the organ in my chest.

“You’ll be the one begging,” he warns. “Move your fucking ass before I paint your brains across this pretty wallpaper.”

## CHAPTER FOUR



Shoving me down the corridor, Drake moves the gun to the base of my skull. I can't help but laugh as he directs me into a nearby bathroom, quickly locking the door behind us. The pressure of the gun vanishes as pain lances through my head.

“Argh, fuck!”

Warmth spreads down my neck from the blow. I manage to avoid falling over, hitting the row of gleaming sinks instead. Drake watches with a smirk, enjoying every second of my pain.

“What the hell was that for?” I shout at him.

“You're being a stupid cunt.”

“And you're not?!”

Gritting my teeth, I reposition the knife still in my hand and advance. Watching his organs spill across the bathroom floor will be better than any Christmas present I've ever received.

“You can't kill Nico without me,” he taunts. “Who will believe a word you say? They'll tear you apart afterwards. I'm the only one that will vouch for you.”

“I don't need your help. I never did.”

“Now that's an outright lie.” He casually crosses his legs. “Remember the Emerson job when we were kids? That asshole dealer would've stuck his cock in you if I didn't intervene.”

I plant my feet in attack formation. “I had a plan. Letting him get close enough with his pants down was part of it. You didn’t need to get involved.”

“You’re delusional if you think I was going to let any other man lay a hand on you.”

My first strike is blocked as he quickly twists, dancing away from the blade. Slicing the air again, I catch his suit jacket and tear through the expensive fabric. Drake halts, inspecting the damage with annoyance.

I smirk this time. “Sorry.”

“You can pay for that to be fixed, right after I teach you a lesson. You seem to have forgotten who owns your hide.”

Leaping towards him, I prepare to stab. “Other way around, dickhead. I own every twisted piece of you.”

Rather than dodging, Drake lets me come straight at him. With no defence or protection, he awaits the killer blow. At the absolute last second, I sidestep, letting the knife sail into the wall instead. He would’ve happily died if I didn’t redirect.

“You’re insane!” I scream, tears burning in my eyes.

His body blocks me in from behind, a hand landing on my hip and squeezing. I stare at the wall, letting tears soak my cheeks. I’m so angry, lost in a world that I spent years trying to forget. Everything about this place is toxic.

“I’ve always belonged to you,” he murmurs in my ear. “Ever since your papa took me in and beat me for crying over my dead parents. You snuck in to clean my wounds and stitch me up again.”

I laugh through my tears. “Not many twelve-year-olds can stitch like I could back then.”

“Don’t be proud. I have an ugly-ass scar to remember it.”

His breath is hot on my skin, laced with the scent of whiskey. Involuntarily, my back arches to press my ass against his crotch. The pressure of his hard cock is immediate. He’s probably been aroused this entire time.

With one hand still on my hip, Drake reaches around to clasp my throat. I take one last breath before he cuts off my air. My existence has always been his to toy with, even with hundreds of miles keeping us apart.

“You want me to fuck you, little kitten? Is your pussy wet and begging for me to fill it with my come?”

I can't snap back at him, his grip causing my chest to start burning.

“I can't tell you the amount of times I've stroked my cock while thinking of you. Killing you, burying your body, beating you until you fucking apologise for breaking my heart. I've dreamt about it all while jerking off.”

His other hand snakes lower, over my chest bone, to squeeze one of my breasts. I can't help the whimper of need that escapes.

“I'm going to bury myself inside of you, then we can decide who kills who. Either way, our lives are destined to end together, Athena.”

Turning me around with a rough shove, Drake's hands land on my shoulders. I'm pushed to kneel on the bathroom floor before him. Unzipping his trousers, he frees the thick length of his cock.

“I haven't seen you like this in a very long time,” he teases, stroking his erection. “Open wide. I'm going to use you like the hateful bitch you are.”

“Get fucked,” I snarl at him.

His eyes twinkle with devilish amusement. “Oh, I plan on it. Do I have to break you myself? You know I'll do it.”

For a brief second, I consider biting his dick off. It'd certainly teach him a lesson. Then he pulls the gun on me, still grinning like a maniac.

With the weight of the barrel against my forehead, I relent. When it comes to Drake Hardwright, I lost the battle and the war a long time ago. His length enters my mouth, the velvet sheath hitting the back of my throat.



“Suck, Athena.”

His low growl of pleasure is music to my ears. I’m on my knees, surrendering my soul to his calloused touch, but the power remains in my hands. I hollow my cheeks out, letting my tongue glide against his cock.

With his hands fisting in my hair, Drake steers my movements until he’s roughly fucking my mouth. My eyes water as warmth pools between my thighs. This is humiliating, but I’m still dripping wet for him.

When someone knocks on the locked door, neither of us move. Drake’s gripping my hair painfully tight, and I’ve still got a mouthful of his dick. Footsteps eventually walk away from the door after knocking a few times.

“I need to feel you around me,” Drake groans.

When he pulls his erection from my mouth, I slump back on my haunches. He looks like an avenging angel the way he’s dominating over me, his cock gripped by a tattooed hand. As he helps me up, my legs tremble with need.

I hate it—the dependency, the weakness.

This is exactly why I left him behind.

Coming to my senses, I wipe the moisture from my mouth and attempt to dodge past him to escape. An arm shoots out to block my path. I tumble into his body, cursing as Drake’s hand clamps back down on my throat.

“Running away, kitten?”

“Let m-me go,” I wheeze.

“I did that once before. Never again.”

Using his strength to bend me over a bathroom sink, his hand moves to my lower back to hold me in position. He looms over me from behind, lifting layers of tulle to expose my bare ass. Cold air kisses my soaked cunt.

“Where are your panties?” Drake growls.

My throat pulses with pain from the earlier choking. “Someone didn’t give me time to pack a suitcase.”

“Jesus. You’re gonna be the death of me.”

As I thrash and battle to escape him, Drake cracks a palm across my ass. The burst of pain adds to the warmth trickling through my veins like honey. I can’t even control my own body anymore; that’s the power he has.

“Fight back all you want,” he invites.

“And give you the satisfaction?”

“Yes.”

Soothing the sting with a light caress, I bite down on my lip as his finger meets my pussy. He circles my clit, briefly pinching the tight bundle of nerves, before plunging his digit deep inside my slit.

“So wet and tight. My perfect little whore.”

Gripping the edges of the sink, I swallow my moans of pleasure. He doesn’t deserve the satisfaction. Drake is unimpressed by my defiance, pushing a second finger inside my slick heat. It’s been a while since anyone touched me like this, and the pleasure is blinding.

“I hope that my face haunted you for every guy you slept with since you left,” Drake hisses in my ear. “I hope that you didn’t have a single moment of peace.”

His other hand leaves my hip, letting his fingertips brush over the fresh blood still trailing down my neck from where he struck me. Drake swirls them in the sticky moisture, gathering my essence before bringing his hand to my cunt.

His fingers disappear from within me, replaced by the wet lubricant of blood on my pussy. Air escapes my gritted teeth at the mark of possession. He’s desperate to crawl inside my veins and reach the remains of my skeletal heart.

The pressure of his cock against my entrance is a confusing taunt. My body and mind battle each other, both seeking different things. All I can do is watch our bloodied tangle in the mirror. Drake looks up, our eyes meeting in the reflective surface.

He stares at me, wordless.

His dick refuses to enter me.

Desire sears all my nerve endings.

Cheeks flaming, I give in to the pathetic voice of submission in my head. “Please, Drake.”

“What do you want?”

Needing to regain some scintilla of control, I use my position to push backwards against his crotch instead of answering him. The move spears his length deep inside my cunt, causing me to cry out for the first time.

Quickly overcoming his surprise, Drake digs his fingers into my hips as he begins to move in response. It starts slow at first, an almost tender collision as I watch his eyes roll back in his head. Despite the hateful words he spews, he’s loving this just as much as I am.

His strokes start to lengthen, pushing deeper. My walls clench around his powerful cock, hugging it tight and refusing to let go. The defiant voice in my mind has left the building in a blaze of glorious defeat.

As tension pools in my lower belly, Drake’s gaze darkens again. There are two people inside of him—light and dark, angel and devil. He’s a sadistic monster, gaining strength from my submission, and a scared boy looking for a replacement family all at the same time.

“This is what we had,” he pants, bruising my skin with his touch. “This fucking connection. You threw this away.”

On the cusp of letting my release consume me, Drake chooses the cruellest moment to pull out of me. It’s a painful loss, causing me to scream out in frustration. His cock is streaked with blood and strands of our desire.

“Selfish whores don’t get to come,” he scolds.

I batter the mirror with my fists, still bent over and trussed up like a piece of meat for his inspection. Humiliation is hot on my skin.

“Fuck you, Hardwright!”

Slamming my fist backwards while bent over, I watch it sail straight into his leering expression in the mirror. Drake's too slow to react, and his nose bursts in a glorious shower of red. He stumbles while cupping his face, giving me a precious second to move.

By the time he comes to his senses, I've grabbed the knife that was embedded in the wall and positioned it against his jugular vein. He blinks, a trail of crimson staining his chin.

"You're going to make me come," I order around ragged breaths. "Or I will fucking cut your throat and leave you here to die."

"You don't have the guts."

Furious, I move the knife and slash it across his inked hand. The thin cut barely makes him flinch, but his posture stiffens. If anything, the pain encourages him.

"Come here and fuck me properly."

With the knife back at his throat, Drake chuckles. He steps close enough to grab my thighs beneath my dress, hoisting me up so my legs can wrap around his waist. Each move causes the knife to slip deeper into his skin, yet he doesn't show a flicker of discomfort.

My back crashes into the bathroom wall as his lips attack mine with violence. Our teeth clash and tongues tangle as his cock buries back inside of me at an even deeper angle. I moan against his hot mouth, feeling my nervous system implode.

In the storm of sensations, I don't realise he's easing the knife from my grip until it's too late. His hips are crashing into mine so hard, it's like our bodies are trying to become one. I wouldn't mind dissolving beneath his skin.

We're both slick with blood, our two essences mixing into a shared elixir. The white material of his dress shirt is splattered with red, dappling crimson against the dark swirls of ink covering every inch of his skin. The effect is mesmerising.

He looks like a monster.

An angel-eyed, broken creature.

Grabbing my left arm, he pins me against the wall with each punishing thrust. The knife is held in his hand like a fountain pen, the tip pressing into the delicate flesh of my inner wrist. Hot blood spills over.

“Drake,” I moan in pain. “What are yo—”

“Be quiet. I won’t let you forget me again.”

The knife digs into my skin, cutting too deep to be a warning. He’s carving something into me, and even I, Athena Cirillo, am too weak to deny Drake what he wants. We’re all mere mortals compared to him.

Pain envelops me as my wrist burns fiercely. His knife strokes are controlled, precise—a display of depraved perfectionism. I bite down on my whimpers of pain until he finishes his work.

Drake’s relentless pounding into me reaches a crescendo as he inspects his artwork, breathing so hard that I don’t know how he’s holding the knife steady. I’m caught between screaming in pain or pleasure.

“Come,” Drake commands, tossing the knife.

My broken mind bows before him without question. I feel my release crest, the tightrope of tension inside of me snapping. I cry out so loud, I’m sure my treacherous family can hear it.

Drake roars through his own climax, and I can feel the hot spread of his seed pouring inside of me. It feels so fucking good, knowing he’s given a part of himself to me and coated the innermost parts of my being in his identity.

We melt into each other, gasping for breath. When he can’t hold my weight up any longer, our legs both crumple. We end up collapsing onto the bathroom floor in a heap. Warmth runs down my inner thighs, and Drake smiles knowingly.

“Not a word,” I snap. “I’m on birth control, just so you know. The world doesn’t need serial-killer Hardwright babies running around.”

Drake's face buries itself in my blood-stained chest, like a child seeking intrinsic comfort. His ear is pressed right against my heartbeat, straining for each pump of blood keeping me alive.

"We'd make cute psychotic babies," he murmurs.

"Don't make me castrate you. I may want to do this again sometime. It'd be a shame if you were a eunuch."

"I'll keep my dick, thanks."

I watch his eyelids flutter shut as he snuggles against me. It will always be terrifying—the way his inner child slips out of its unmarked grave, desperate for love. Drake can't be vulnerable in front of anyone else.

"Stay," he whispers.

A lump gathers in my throat. "For Christmas?"

"Forever."

Holding back a refusal, I stroke my fingers over the dark strands of hair plastered to his head. The last bit of tension drains out of his body at my touch, and tears sear my eyes again.

When it was good with us—fuck. It was like nothing on earth. I would've died rather than lose Drake. But the bad times? The death, murder and constant darkness? It nearly stole my humanity, and that scared me to the point of no return.

As Drake rests, I look down at my throbbing arm. The Greek letters he cut into me are dripping with blood, promising scars that everyone will be able to see.

*Σε αγαπώ.*

The translation comes to me, despite the years since I last heard these words in my native tongue.

*I love you.*

## CHAPTER FIVE



Christmas is a torrid affair in the Cirillo family. Festive games usually result in death threats and drawn weapons while presents range from new rankings to additional responsibilities in the cartel.

When I was sixteen, I was awarded the honour of arranging a heroin export with our neighbouring allies, the ruthless Spanish mob, for Christmas. Not exactly a stuffed stocking or late-night visit from Santa Claus.

Standing outside in the first swirls of winter snow, I consider the family graveyard at the back of the property. We always bury our dead in a place of honour. Papa's body has been quietly committed, placed next to my mama's grave.

"Merry Christmas, Athena."

I tighten my trench coat, chilled for a different reason. "I came outside for some peace and quiet. It wasn't an invitation for company."

Halting at my side, Nico studies the distant graveyard with a solemn expression. He's dressed in a deep-red, velvet suit with a black shirt. I force myself to ignore my papa's cufflinks in his shirt sleeves.

"Today of all days, can't we set our differences aside?"

"Papa should be inside, celebrating with the rest of our family." I glare at Nico. "You took that from him."

He sighs, his expression oddly sad. It's the first glimmer of real emotion I've seen from him in the days since I returned.

The flicker of humanity almost knocks me off-kilter.

“For years, all your papa wanted was to have you home again.” Nico lights a cigarette. “Every Christmas, he lit two candles with the kids. They left whiskey and a carrot for Santa, while he asked for his family to return.”

In the falling snow, he offers me the lit cigarette as an olive branch. I reluctantly accept, taking a deep drag to keep my tears at bay.

“I don’t want to take anything from you, Athena.” Nico’s eyes meet mine. “Elias was like a father to me, but this land is your birthright.”

The cigarette smoke curls between us, cutting the air of disbelief. I can’t hold in my strangled laugh.

“Is this part of your plan? Kill my papa, send your attack dog to bring me home and then lay on the flattery until I surrender my claim to your kingdom?”

“I didn’t order Drake to get you. That asshole answers to no man, not even your papa. He contrived to bring you home by himself.”

“Why should I believe you?”

Nico grabs me by the shoulders and shakes. “Because we’re blood, dammit! Enough with the suspicion. I did not kill Elias Cirillo.”

“What about your precious pals in the Sicilian mafia? Bet you paid handsomely to use their services, all while keeping your hands clean.”

He scoffs. “You see only what you want to—enemies all around you. I wonder, Athena, if your true enemy lies within.”

I shove him away from me, dropping the cigarette into the snow-dusted grass. Nico steps back like he was burnt.

“Rather than attempt to dig around in my mind, why don’t you just admit it? Tell me that you killed him. Admit the truth, and I’ll leave.”



“This is the truth!” he shouts. “Elias and I had a meeting scheduled with Antonio Russo the day he died. Your father never showed up.”

“A meeting with him? Why?”

“We were going to persuade Elias to drop his fight against the Angelos family and look to the future of the cartel.”

I stop in my tracks. “What?”

“Elias wasted years and millions of pounds on that stupid vendetta. They admitted to killing your mama years ago and vowed to drop their fight. It was Elias who continued to butcher and punish them.”

“So, you’re saying that Tobias did this?”

The excited cheers of children opening presents sound from inside the mansion. We both inch further away from the glow of Christmas lights, dousing our conversation in shadows.

“Tobias would never reignite the vendetta,” Nico asserts. “He no longer has the capabilities to fight us. His men are all dead, and he’s an old, frail man.”

Fisting my long, blonde hair, I stare up at the swollen clouds. Nico watches me, his dark outline lit by the gleam of twinkling lights from inside the house.

“You’re lying.”

“For what possible reason?” he answers wearily. “All I want is to protect my family, Athena. I don’t want to see anyone else get hurt.”

The back door to the house slams open, disrupting our argument. Aliana pokes her head out, a pair of reindeer earrings hanging from her ears as she scowls at us.

“We’re all waiting inside for the pair of you. Come on, dinner’s ready.”

Nodding, Nico offers me an arm. It’s like a cobra inviting me to come closer and surrender to its fangs. Plastering on a

diplomatic smile, I take his arm and let him lead me into the formal dining room.

Beneath the imposing Christmas tree, a tsunami of wrapped presents awaits their new owners. Nico's kids are all eyeing the packages, grumbling about the rules. It's always one present before dinner, and the rest after.

"Sit, sit." Aliana ushers us in, dismissing the serving staff. "Let's talk before they bring the turkey out. Athena, come sit next to Richard."

All seated, the entire family fills the long table. We're bathed in warmth from the roaring fire, while scents of spruce, fresh cinnamon and roasted turkey filter through the air.

My heart thuds behind my ribcage. It's been a long time since I smelled the familiar essence of home on Christmas Day. It's usually a lonely, microwave meal and a day of drinking straight from the bottle, though I often snag an overnight shift for the distraction.

Taking charge as matriarch of the family, Aliana stands and looks over us all. Even the kids fall silent, along with my other cousins, their wives and Nico's latest mistress.

"I wasn't sure that it would be appropriate to celebrate, given our recent loss." Her eyes shine with unshed tears. "But if there's ever a time to come together as a family, to grieve as one, it's Christmas."

There's a low hum of agreement.

"When Elias married my sister, I threatened to kill him if he ever broke her heart. Decades passed, and he spent every day loving her." Aliana's eyes lift to mine. "He loved you both so much."

Staring across the table, cataloguing familiar faces, I feel the warmth of love in my chest. It feels alien after so long spent alone.

"We want you to stay, Athena," Nico interjects. "Elias built this business for his family. It's your legacy now. I won't dishonour him by taking that away."

Knocking back his whiskey, Julio reluctantly nods. One by one, each adult around the table nods, casting their vote. My papa's innermost circle is throwing their arms open wide.

"I... have a life," I choke out.

A new voice interrupts. "This is your life."

Strolling into the room in a crisp, black suit, Drake carries armfuls of presents. The children all shoot up, ignoring their mothers, and rush over to relieve him of the goods. He pats their heads in turn.

"Drake?" I breathe.

His near-black eyes lock on mine. "We are your family, Athena. Your life is here, it always has been. Nothing else matters."

Surrounded by the warmth of a loving family, I feel my resolve start to weaken. The idea of my soulless apartment and empty life has never felt less appealing.

Everything I've been looking for—acceptance, belonging, love—is all here. Right where I left it. I ran away to escape the person I was becoming, but Papa is gone now. He can't control me anymore.

This is a chance.

I can remake the cartel.

"You're going to stay," Drake states firmly.

Nico nods his agreement, while Aliana watches me closely. They're all hanging on for my answer. My family wants me here. I have a home again. The truth tears its way out of my mouth as I feel a flicker of wild hope.

"Things have to be different. I can't... I won't do what I used to. My father's wars must be left behind."

Of all people, I don't expect Julio to speak.

"We need someone to lead for the future," he says reluctantly. "Not the past. We can't keep fighting ghosts."

"The vendettas have to end."

The corner of his mouth lifts. “I think they just did.”

Taking the time to look around the room, I feel the weight of the decision to be made. I didn’t come here looking for a reunion. I have a life. A job. A purpose. Revenge was my sole motivator.

But perhaps it’s from darkness that the brightest stars emerge. Everything I’ve been desperately searching for is right here in this room. Maybe we can begin again.

I can be the one to ensure these children won’t have their futures dictated by violence and anger, as mine was. They will know freedom. That can only be done from within though. I have to be here to make those changes.

Lifting my wine glass, I feel Drake move to my side as I prepare to toast. His chilly exterior has softened, and I feel a supportive hand rest on my lower back. I’m not alone in this life-changing moment.

“I won’t honour my papa’s legacy,” I tell them all. “That time has passed. If I accept this, we do things my way.”

Nico raises his glass. “We’re yours to command, Athena.” His lips twist ruefully. “Never thought I’d see the day.”

“Yeah... me neither.”

With our toast recited and drinks swallowed, the table bursts into applause. I stare at them, not quite sure what just happened. Aunts, uncles and cousins. Family I’d long relegated to the clutches of the past.

Aliana beckons for the serving staff to begin bringing food in, still smiling broadly. As a scramble to fill plates and wine glasses ensues, I catch her arm and we stand, heading over to the Christmas tree.

“Oh, Athena. I’m so glad you made the right choice.”

“Thank you.” Glancing over my shoulder, I lower my voice. “When I first came home, you gave me a warning.”

Her mouth pinches into a tight line. “It’s a special day. We should not talk of such unpleasantries on Christmas.”

“Please. Just tell me why.”

Aliana hesitates, her eyes downcast. “Everyone has been so focused on our enemies and who could’ve gotten close enough to Elias.” She plasters on a false smile for anyone watching. “Only family could get that close.”

“Family?”

“I’m glad you’re going to stay,” Aliana whispers, blinking aside tears. “But someone at this table wanted you to take over. This was all planned.”

Releasing her grip on my arm, she returns to the raucous children devouring turkey and roasted potatoes. Dread slips over me like a glove as I inspect everyone else, enjoying red wine and bad festive jokes.

My ascension was staged.

Someone wanted me to make this decision.

Retaking my seat, I find that everyone has shifted down a spot to let Drake in next to me. The dark swirls of ink covering his entire body are softened by the gleam of candles. I can almost picture what he used to look like.

His skin used to be clear of all tattoos, while his knuckles were un-scarred and face free of etched frown lines from years of hardship and struggle. He was just a young, innocent boy then, desperate to be loved.

“This isn’t over yet,” I whisper in his ear. “Someone planned this entire thing. I don’t think Nico killed my papa, but it had to be family.”

Beneath the table, his hand glides underneath my black, velvet dress to rest on my inner thigh. I inhale sharply.

“It’s a big family,” he purrs, stroking my skin. “You have the power now to find who did this.”

“We,” I correct quietly. “We have the power now. I won’t do this alone, Hardwright.”

His fingertips dance upwards, teasing the scrap of red lace covering my pussy. I bite my tongue as his nails scrape over

my covered clit, even though we're surrounded by family.

"Your closest ally shouldn't be someone that you hate."

"That's exactly why I'm keeping you close," I murmur back. "Enemies always make the best allies."

His hand leaves my quivering pussy to grab my arm. Despite being covered by my long sleeves, the fresh brand on my wrist still burns with pain.

"But I don't hate you," Drake replies softly.

I stare into his eyes, our audience melting away. At first glance, all that can be seen is contempt for the world. Most don't take the time to look deeper.

"And I don't hate you," I admit.

His coldness seeps away, falling victim to the fires of possession. Drake's smile is intimate, promising more than I ever dared to hope for. The truth is carved into me, and neither of us can deny it any longer.

Maybe I haven't lost all that I had.

Maybe I do belong, after all.

Maybe this is what I've been waiting for.

## CHAPTER SIX



With the children passed out and the adults in food comas, I take the opportunity for a breather. Serving staff are cleaning away our hours-long celebration, preparing to clock off for the night.

Ducking out of the formal living room where whiskey and cigars are being shared before an open fire, I sneak into the one room I've avoided since coming home. The door creaks ominously as I slip inside and shut it softly behind me.

My papa's office.

Thick curtains are drawn against the heavy snow, dousing the generous space in shadows. Glossy floorboards, sheepskin rugs and tightly packed bookshelves sandwich his monstrous desk in place.

Switching on one of the Tiffany lamps, I trail my fingertips over the surfaces. His office is exactly the same as it was when I left. I can feel my papa's ghost in the dusty air.

"Papa." I collapse in his desk chair. "I've spent so long being angry with you for all you put me through. But I know you loved me and wanted me to be strong enough to survive this world."

Silence answers me.

"I just don't think you realised how much your love hurt." Picking up a framed photograph, I study my parents as they embrace. "It hurt too much to stay."

They look so happy in the picture. Young, hopeful and seeking a better life. This was before wealth and power corrupted my papa's innocent ambition. He became a different person, but deep down, he cared for me the only way he knew how.

"You were training me for this." I stroke a finger over his younger self. "You did the best you could. I can live with that. Merry Christmas, Papa."

The door creaks open again, and I flinch, almost dropping the frame. Drake's familiar, hulking form enters the darkness. His footsteps are swallowed by my heartbeat hammering in my ears.

"What are you doing alone in here?"

I shrug, placing the frame down. "Thinking."

"About?" he drawls.

"Forgiveness."

Stopping in front of me, Drake's expression is thoughtful. He's close enough for me to smell the embers of the fire on his clothes, intermingled with the scents of Christmas pudding and aged liquor. He smells like home.

"Can you forgive me?" Drake blurts.

I stare up at him. "What for?"

Rather than answer, he shakes his head. I stand and grab his bicep before he can turn away, pushing him into my vacated seat. He lands with a thud.

"Athe—"

"Shut up already. I want my Christmas present."

"In your papa's office?"

Lifting my black dress, I climb into Drake's lap, spreading my legs on either side of his waist. Even as he looks at me with surprise, his cock hardens.

"He's gone," I whisper, swallowing hard. "This is my office now. Are you going to help me rule, Hardwright? Is that



why you brought me home?”

Breathing hard, Drake cups my cheek with one hand. I sigh as his thumb brushes over my lower lip.

“I brought you here because it’s where you belong,” he answers gruffly.

“And where do you belong?”

I begin to move on his lap, grinding against his hardening dick. Drake grips my hips, the fabric of my dress bunching around my waist. I feel powerful on top of him, like a zookeeper taming a wild lion.

Drake’s hands slip beneath the fragile waistband of my lace panties. The fabric easily tears, and he brings the damp lace to his nose, inhaling deeply.

“I belong with you,” he answers, pocketing the lace. “You’ve always been my queen, Athena. But I’m never on the bottom.”

I wrap my arms around his tattooed neck, loving the roughness of his trousers against my bare pussy lips. His erection is pressing right against where I want it, held back by a fabric prison.

“Tonight, you are. You’re going to be quiet and serve your queen. She’s on top now.”

He curses under his breath as I release his belt buckle and reach into his trousers. His sheath feels like steel in my palm. Drake leans in to kiss my neck as I palm his dick, working it from base to tip.

Lips grazing my ear, he bites down on my earlobe. I gasp, squeezing his length as more heat pools between my thighs. I could easily make myself come like this; the anticipation is so sweet.

“Give it up, kitten. Let me fuck you right.”

Growling at him, I quickly undo the crimson tie at his neck. Drake tries to pull away as I loop it over his head, but I squeeze my thighs tight around his waist, pinning him to me.

Shifting on his erect cock, I manage to line it up with my slit. Drake's teeth are gritted as he tries to fight off the tie being knotted at the back of his head. Lifting myself, I slam down on his cock so hard that his mouth falls open.

"Submit," I moan in ecstasy.

Pushing the tie into his mouth, I tighten the knot until he's thoroughly gagged. Drake bites down on the length of silk, his gaze burning with fury. I don't give him time to wrestle me off his lap.

His dick is buried inside me at an exquisite angle, brushing up against the tender spot that I've never been able to reach alone. Positioning myself, I lift my hips and begin to move in a slow grind.

Seeing him trapped beneath me, his groans of pleasure gagged into silence, is a huge turn on. Drake doesn't surrender to anyone, and certainly not in the bedroom. He prefers to beat, bruise and carve his love into people's skin.

"This is how it's going to be, Drake. I didn't come back to be your plaything again. I won't shower myself in blood for your satisfaction."

Beginning to ride him harder, I grip his chin so he meets my eyes. We fit together like a lock and key. His darkness was made for me, but I need more than that to survive. I need his love and affection too.

"You're going to help me," I implore with each thrust. "Things have to change. We cannot keep ruling through violence. I won't let it consume you anymore."

His response is muffled by the gag, but his hold on my hips tightens to the point of pain. I continue to slam down on his cock, driving my orgasm with the knowledge that nobody has ever owned Drake like I do.

"You can be more than what he made you, Hardwright."

Something settles in his eyes. The atmosphere changes. Submission turns to defiance, and his hands move to my waist as he lifts me from his lap.

As I protest, Drake deposits me on my papa's paperwork-strewn desk. He yanks the tie from his mouth with one hand and spreads my legs with another.

I'm pushed backwards until my back meets the wooden surface, my legs spread so far open that Drake can see every inch of me. His eyes greedily eat me up as cold air meets my exposed cunt.

My legs are trembling, the cusp of my orgasm still begging for a final thrust to shatter. I was so close before his patience for my game expired.

"I'm exactly who I should be." Drake grabs my wrists and pins them to the desk. "I was born to fuck you just like this, Athena. Born to own you. Dominate you. Break you into pieces that will fit inside my rotten heart."

"I'm a person! Not a toy."

"You're my goddamn person."

He pushes back inside of me in one thrust, still pinning me to the desk. Papers scatter and photo frames crash with each pump of his cock. I can't move a muscle as he batters me into a boneless heap.

Clenching around him, I feel the wave of my release coming at full speed. I want to deny him the pleasure of teasing such compliance out of me, especially as I wanted to be the one to make him come.

My wrists ache from the force of his grip as I cry out, hoping the office door swallows my screams of rapture before the family hears us. Drake's strokes grow ragged as he races towards his own climax.

"So fucking beautiful," he grunts, quickly pulling out of me. "I want to see my come dripping all over you. Open your mouth, kitten."

Pulling me down the desk so I'm sitting up on the edge, Drake grabs a handful of my hair and shoves my head down to his crotch. The tip of his cock pushes past my lips as salty warmth hits the back of my throat.

I swallow the first drops of his come, lifting my head to look at him through thick lashes. He's panting hard, watching me milk his cock with a look of awe.

His hips jerk with explosions of pleasure and as I duck back down, come splashes against my lips, coating my face in hot, sticky strands.

"Fucking Christ," Drake curses.

He finishes all over me, his essence trickling down my neck and seeping across my collarbones. I feel filthy. I'm covered in Drake—his scent, his come, the bruises and marks of his claim on my soul.

Control is the very air he breathes, but even with his seed dripping from my eyelashes, I'm the one in control of him. He will always fall before me, begging for one more taste.

Yanking his trousers back into place, he grabs a handful of tissues from a box on the desk. I try to take them, but Drake cups the back of my head, gently dabbing at the mess himself.

I gawk at him in disbelief. This soulful man isn't someone I recognise, but I'll stick around for him. Even if it's small glimpses amongst the torment of his devilish alter ego.

"Look at you," he murmurs. "I'm so fucking thankful that you're going to stay. Your place is right here with me."

"Are you giving me another reason to stay?"

Drake drops the tissues into the bin and picks me up. I nestle in his lap as he takes a seat, snuggling so close to him that I could almost slip inside his skin. His heart is beating so fast.

"Fuck giving you a reason," he whispers into my hair. "I'll give you the whole goddamn world if that's what you want."

Reaching around me to dig in his pocket, his fingers emerge, pinched around a glimmer of gold. My lungs immediately stop functioning as the past overwhelms me.

The truth is, Drake wasn't just my right-hand man and occasional hook-up. He was far more than the violent monster

my papa created and sent to war, sworn to protect his only daughter.

Drake was barely an adult, but Papa approved of his plan to marry me. The proposal was a complete reality bomb. I loved every fucked-up piece of this animal, but the idea of being chained to him for the rest of my life was terrifying.

“You said that you’d think about it.” Drake studies the engagement ring. “I waited at our spot for hours, hoping that when you came to give me an answer, it would be yes.”

“Drake... I’m sorry.”

“I’m not asking for an answer now. Hell, this isn’t even a proposal. Call it a Christmas present.”

“Normal people don’t give engagement rings for Christmas.”

“We’re far from normal, Athena.” Drake tilts my head so our eyes meet. “I’m not trying to scare you away again. I just need you to know that you’re it for me. You always were.”

“Even when I broke your heart and disappeared?”

“I came and checked on you once or twice,” he admits. “On your papa’s orders, of course. You looked happy. I could let go as long as I knew you were okay.”

He reaches inside the low neckline of my dress, tucking the ring inside my left bra cup. The heavy weight of gold is cold against my skin. Nodding, I look around my papa’s trashed office.

“We should probably clean up in here.”

“Why?” Drake grins at me. “You said it first—this whole place is yours now. Do whatever the fuck you want.”

“What I want is to burn this mansion to the ground.”

His brows furrow. “Why?”

I gesture around the office. “Look at this place. He died in here, alone. Whatever sick fuck killed my papa did it in the one place he was meant to be safe.”

“You don’t feel safe here?” Drake guesses.

“How could I? If someone who hated Papa can get that close to him, none of us are safe. Not until we find the person responsible.”

Frowning to himself, Drake clears his throat and lifts me from his lap. I’m placed back on my feet as he glances around the room.

“I’ll clean up here. Go find the rest of the family.”

“You’re sure?” I smooth my dress back down.

Drake leans in and slants his lips against mine. I deepen the kiss, letting our tongues dance in each other’s shared breath. His hands brush over my covered arms, lingering on the brand.

Breaking the kiss, Drake pushes me towards the door. I wipe my lips before slipping out, trying hard not to grin to myself like a fucking teenager. The engagement ring in my bra can wait to ruin my post-sex buzz later.

“Athena?”

I freeze halfway back to the others, cursing under my breath. Nico’s winding down the double staircase, a lit cigar still in hand.

“I’m not even going to ask.” He looks over my wrinkled dress and still-mussed hair. “You should be careful with Hardwright.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” I respond stiffly.

Chuckling, he strolls over to me with the ease of a confident salesman. No matter what he says, Nico will always serve his own interests. He’s surrendered to me, but that doesn’t mean I can let my guard down.

“I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“Drake would never hurt me.”

Nico inhales cigar smoke and blows it towards me. “Guard dogs will still bite the hand that feeds them. If they’re threatened enough.”

“Stop talking in fucking riddles and say exactly what you mean. I’m not going to spend the next fifteen years deciphering your bullshit.”

He stops a few inches away. “Who benefits from you assuming your place at the head of this family? Who wanted you back the most? Who was closest to your papa?”

Chest burning with fury, I grab Nico’s arm. We tumble across the hallway and into a nearby room. I slam the door behind us, ready to chew him out.

The laundry room smells like blossom detergent as the machines run to wash the tablecloths and used napkins from dinner. The cigar hangs from Nico’s mouth as he smiles.

“Don’t like the truth, Athena?”

“I should’ve known it was all an act,” I hiss at him. “You put on a good show in front of the family. Now you’re trying to drive me out.”

“On the contrary, I’m happy to see my beloved cousin on the throne. I just think it’s high time you started pointing fingers in the right direction.”

“Beloved, my fucking ass.”

Nico reclines against a washing machine, still chuckling. “Your father loved Drake like a son, sometimes more than his actual family members.”

“So what? You’re jealous?”

“Hardly,” he growls. “I’m twice the man that sociopathic lunatic is. We all worked ourselves to death, building this empire. All Elias cared about was his little updates when he sent Drake to spy on you.”

“Stop trying to turn me and Drake against each other.” I laugh at him. “He already told me about following me once or twice. I know.”

“Once or twice?” Nico splutters. “Athena, he followed you for fifteen years. Every move you made. Drake was your constant shadow. Day in, day out.”

Frozen on the spot, I stare up at him with an open mouth. “That’s not true. I would’ve known. You’re lying.”

“But it wasn’t enough for him, was it?” Nico continues without hesitating. “The obsession no longer sated him. He needed a reason to get you home again, this time for good.”

“Stop it!” I grab him by the lapels and crack his head against the machine. “You spiteful old man. I’ll never give you Papa’s empire, no matter what games you play.”

“And what better way to bring his precious little kitten back home than a murder investigation and a tantalising inheritance.” Nico shakes his head. “I tried to take over and give you a chance to stay away. You didn’t take it.”

“You offered everything to me this morning!”

“My claim was never secure,” Nico answers. “Cartels run on strict principles. The only way to win the family’s loyalty is for you to surrender the throne to me. Nobody could ever challenge me then.”

Releasing his suit jacket, I take several steps back. It’s like I’ve been punched straight through my ribcage. This entire thing was a game of chess to Nico, a way to rightfully take the keys to the kingdom.

“Why would I surrender to you now?” I ask shakily.

“Because you know the truth,” Nico insists, stepping closer. “Who killed your papa, Athena? Who has haunted the last fifteen years of your life?”

“It wasn’t him. Just stop!”

“Who knew exactly where to send Elias’s head?” Nico presses on. “Who retrieved you, brought you back here and encouraged you to take over?”

“Liar!” I scream at him. “I’ll have your fucking tongue for this before I kill the rest of you. My papa won’t be the only family member to die in this place, but you will be the last.”

Nico hesitates, his head cocked. “Interesting. I suppose it makes sense that he would lie about where Elias was found. I’ll give him credit for that.”



“Go on then. Tell me he wasn’t killed in his office. Keep on lying. You’re digging your own grave. Your men report to me now.”

Nico laughs in my face. “You stupid girl. I honestly thought better of you. The office? Seriously?”

“Laugh one more time and see what happens.”

“I know you’ve removed your fair share of heads,” he continues, regardless of my threat. “Tell me, dearest cousin. Any evidence? Blood? What a mess it would’ve made.”

“Messes can be cleaned,” I rationalise.

“Without ripping up carpets and redecorating?”

I halt, more threats hanging off my lips. The seed of doubt in my mind begins to bloom, growing roots and winding branches that wrap around my sanity. The office was untouched.

“Come along, little Athena. Catch up.”

With his cigar crushed in a crystal dish, Nico straightens his suit jacket. My mind races a mile a minute, searching for an explanation. I hit an impenetrable brick wall.

“Elias was found at the very edge of the property by the groundskeeper,” Nico reveals. “Two miles behind the orchard, there’s a bridge leading to—”

“The old slaughterhouse.”

His eyes sparkle with mischief. “Who knew it was there? I certainly had no idea, and I grew up on these grounds. Such a perfect spot for a brutal murder.”

Vomit burns at the back of my throat. Suddenly, the space between our current hiding spot and the office feels momentous. My entire body begins to tremble, infected by gooseflesh.

“You two often snuck away to spar and wreak havoc alone,” Nico muses. “Where did you go? We all knew you were doing more than training.”

I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. Not a single word. Nico looks on with triumph as my feet begin to backtrack. I'm itching with the urge to flee, plummeting me back into my younger self's shoes.

"You can leave this place, Athena. Just say the word and I will take over. Drake will be executed for his crimes, and you can go back to your home."

"I thought... this was my home," I croak.

He tries to rest a hand on my shoulder, but I dodge out of the way.

"Don't fucking touch me."

"Let me help you," Nico consoles. "Everyone is here. We can undo what's been done. You'll be on a helicopter home before midnight."

Shaking my head, I make a dash for the door. Nico attempts to grab me, but I duck out of his arms in a flash. He hisses my name as I run back into the hallway, spinning around in terror.

The door to the office is wide open, revealing nobody inside. Before anyone spots me, I snatch my coat and break outside. The bright gleam of the mansion's Christmas decor disappears as I run into the night.

## CHAPTER SEVEN



The gleam of moonlight casts strobes across the frost-bitten grass. Blood from my bare feet mixes with fresh snow to leave a crimson trail behind me, stretching frigid miles in the pitch black.

Limping through the orchard in its winter coat, I follow the moon and each cloud of breath expelling from my mouth. It's below freezing. Hypothermia will set in soon, but I can no longer feel the cold.

In one hand, I hold the future. A golden engagement ring is being squeezed tightly. In the other, the past weighs heavily in the solid mass of my handgun. Two paths lead me away from this dark night.

When I reach the abandoned slaughterhouse, I try not to let nostalgia overcome me. We spent so many hours here, hidden from Papa's men. Fighting, cleaning weapons... touching, kissing, exploring.

This is where I became a woman.

This is where Drake stole my heart.

This is where he waited when I ran.

This is where my papa died.

Stopping in my tracks, I don't dare step any closer. A place that once represented freedom and hope to me now feels inexplicably haunted. Only ghosts reside here now, beyond time.

Sinking into the snow, I sit cross-legged, holding a ring and a gun. A life and a punishment. A future and a death sentence. The moon is my only companion.

Much later, footsteps approach before I succumb to the cold. He's as silent as the devil himself, sneaking into innocent minds to spread corruption and sin. I don't need him for that. Darkness already lives within me.

His feet draw to a halt beside me. We both stare at the deserted building, barely held together by crumbling bricks and rafters infected with birds' nests.

"How did it feel?" I ask in a robotic voice.

Drake's knees collide with the frozen ground as he collapses, almost in a prayer-like position. He doesn't look at me, staring straight ahead.

"It felt like salvation," he answers roughly. "It felt... like the closest I'd been to you in a long time. I could almost feel you in the air as he died."

My tears fall in silent, suffocating ribbons.

"Did he suffer?"

"One shot to the head. Another in the heart."

"Did he suffer?" I repeat forcefully.

Drake's head drops. "He begged for his life. Death was quick and painless. I delivered his head myself to your department."

Looking down at the ring in my hand, I take a deep breath. "Did I take as much convincing as you thought, Hardwright?"

He doesn't respond.

I click the safety off and turn to point the gun straight at the side of his head. He still doesn't look up from studying the snowy ground.

"Answer the question."

"You were the easiest part," Drake admits in a whisper.

"So, it all went to plan, huh?"

Finally, his eyes lift to meet mine. I can't decipher the emotion twisting his features. There are too many to count, all colliding in violent explosions.

"Perfectly," he rasps.

Climbing to my feet, I keep the gun trained on him. Drake doesn't move a muscle. Under the light of the moon, we both study each other, caught at a crossroads.

"I spent all that time searching for who could've killed my papa," I say through my tears. "All along, it was you. The Ghost of Christmas Past, Present *and* Future."

Drake's face collapses under the weight of pain. "I won't apologise, Athena. Not for this. It was the only way to bring you back."

"With a fucking lie!" I shout at him. "A terrible, monstrous lie. I gave you my trust after all these years."

"Because you love me."

His words land like a bullet to the kneecap. I snarl with animalistic rage, striking him across the face with the gun. Drake doesn't make a sound, head hanging as his blood drips.

"Who could love a monster like you?"

"You," he answers thickly.

"This isn't love. It never was." I throw the engagement ring into the bloodied snow in front of him. "This sick, toxic thing between us is the reason I ran."

"Please, Athena."

"Don't say my name. Don't even think it. You've lost the right to breathe the same fucking air as me, Drake Hardwright."

He looks up, pleading with me with his pitch-black irises. Any hints of blue have vanished in the shadows of night. There's no shimmer left, just soul-sucking darkness that invites me to drown in his gaze.

"Please," he whispers.

“You know, I think that may be the first time you’ve ever used that word.”

He attempts to move closer, but I cock the gun in warning. It’s trained on a spot right between his eyes. One more inch, and I’ll paint the Christmas snow red. Drake seems to nod to himself.

“All I wanted was a family again,” he says, picking up the discarded ring. “I watched you live a lonely existence for fifteen years, knowing you’d be happy by my side.”

“Don’t justify what you’ve done by blaming my choices. I was happy with my life. I was happy!” I scream back.

“Were you?” Drake deadpans.

“I didn’t need you.”

“We will always need each other, Athena. Living apart isn’t living, it’s just... existing. I can’t exist alone anymore.”

“You deserve nothing more.”

Stepping closer, I press the barrel of the gun to his forehead. Drake’s hand closes around the ring in his palm with a sense of finality.

“Then take the shot,” he commands. “Take the fucking shot, because I won’t stay away. I won’t leave you alone.”

My hand shakes in the winter air, a war of the mind ripping me apart. Drake is smiling, despite everything.

“Run and I’ll chase you.”

I bring my other hand to the gun, steadying it. “No. You won’t. Our story ends here.”

“Take the shot then,” he repeats.

Staring down at the broken piece of my heart, his face is blurred by my tears. Emotion clogs up my throat. Anger, grief and despair meld into one confusing maelstrom.

He has to die.

Even if I can’t live without him.

All I can do is... exist.

“Do it!” Drake shouts, pushing his head against the gun. “Come on, Athena. Take the fucking shot. I will never stop loving you!”

“You have to! Just stop!”

“I will follow you to the end of the motherfucking earth if I have to. I will never, ever stop.”

“No!”

“Do it, goddammit!”

With his shouts piercing my skull, I rest my finger on the trigger. One little pull, that’s all it would take. He’ll die in the dark, just like my papa did. He has to pay for what he did. All of it.

With a tearful scream, I point the gun down at his left thigh and squeeze the trigger. Blood spurts from above his knee, spraying across the snow as Drake howls in agony.

Without hesitating, I put a bullet in his right leg too. His screams of pain are like music to my ears, more satisfying than his deathly silence would ever be. I tuck my gun away, watching him battle for consciousness.

“Good luck chasing me now,” I say sadly. “You asked me if I could forgive you. If we ever meet again, I might give you the answer.”

I turn and walk away, leaving the slaughterhouse and its in-house butcher to bleed into the snow. Drake doesn’t even shout my name, watching me leave from his collapsed position.

The orchard beckons, and beyond that, a life without Drake Hardwright in it. An existence, however basic or lacklustre. But this time, I’ll be running. The devil is at my heels, seeking my forgiveness.

Perhaps I’ll give it to him.

But he has to catch me first.

# EPILOGUE



## FIVE YEARS LATER



“*P*aging Doctor Moore. We’ve got a Category One heading in.”

Sighing, I place my pen down and return the stethoscope to my neck. Christmas Eve can go one of two ways—blissfully quiet or utter carnage. I should’ve known it was bad luck to break open the mince pies.

Leaving my small office, I head up the ward to the front desk. My supervisor, Doctor Sawyer, waits for me with a steaming cup of coffee in hand.

“Evenin’, Phoebe.”

“Doctor Sawyer,” I greet with a wave. “Where do you want me?”

He turns back to the computer monitor, checking the information passed along by the paramedics. We run through the preliminary report together, noting anything important.

The American medical system works differently to my previous hospital placements in England, but Doctor Sawyer’s supervision has given me confidence. I’m still learning and adjusting.

After bouncing from state to state for a few years, I settled in a small town near Portland, Oregon. I love the welcoming people and working in the snow-capped shadow of Mount Hood.

“No big plans this Christmas?” Doctor Sawyer hedges while snapping medical gloves into place. “My wife’s still

pissed that I volunteered for this shift.”

“Nope.” I follow behind, lost in medical notes. “My cat’s happy with a bowl of tuna and trashing my Christmas decorations while I’m out.”

We set up in the medical bay, prepping all the relevant equipment for our arrival. Thirty-five-year-old male, motorcycle accident. While I miss working with children, this vacancy was too good to pass up.

“You want to come over for turkey tomorrow?” Doctor Sawyer offers kindly. “My wife loves a stray. She’ll feed you well.”

For a brief second, I’m almost tempted to say yes. The promise of a home-cooked meal and human companionship sounds agonisingly good. I’ve been alone for a long time.

“Our son is home from working in Vancouver,” he continues, hooking up IV lines. “He’s a good kid, Phoebe. You’d like him.”

The lid on my desperation slams shut. Clearing my throat, I clip the medical notes to the overhead board.

“That’s kind, doc, but I have a call scheduled with my parents. I wouldn’t want to miss it. Thank you though.”

“That’s quite alright. I hope your folks aren’t missing you too much. We’d like to keep you around here.”

A lump forms in my throat. I hate lying to good people, but I’ve survived this long by sticking to the intricate cover stories I spend months inventing.

“There’s nothing left for me in England. I’ll be staying right here.”

“That’s good news for me.” Doctor Sawyer beams before the ward erupts with the noise of our arrival. “Right, then. Let’s see what we’ve got.”

By the end of the shift, we’re all sweating and bloodstained, but our patient is alive. He’s looking at potential spinal damage, but only time will tell if he makes it through tomorrow’s surgery.

As I leave the ER, the clock tower adjacent to the hospital strikes midnight. Drunken revellers burst out of the packed bars and sing carols at the top of their lungs, filling the street with holiday cheer.

Passing the nearby church, the sound of hymns rolls over me in a comforting wave. Midnight mass is in full swing, lit by the glow of pillar candles and God's grace.

Christmas is here.

Another year has passed, alone.

My apartment is several blocks away, giving me time to decompress after another wild shift. By the time I reach the building, rain has started to fall in thick sheets.

It soaks into the scrubs I put on to walk home in. Chilled to the bone, my hand shakes as I try to slot my key into the door, cursing under my breath. All I want is my bed.

"Excuse me? Miss?"

Startled, I drop the keys completely. As I bend down to pick them up, I catch sight of the stranger waiting at the bottom of the steps. He's dressed in a leather jacket, his face shielded by a baseball cap.

"You forget your keys or something?" I guess tiredly.

"Or something," he replies.

It takes me a moment to recognise his British accent. After five years in the US, I'd forgotten what people sound like back home. My back hits the door as I back away.

He approaches with a significant limp. I look over his hulking shoulders, spotting a hint of ink beneath the scarf wrapped around his neck. My heart skitters in my chest.

"Are you looking for someone?" I ask, uncertain whether to scream, run away or throw myself into his arms. "You sound like you're a long way from home."

Walking up several steps, he inches closer. I don't realise I'm holding my breath until he removes the baseball cap. It

whooshes out of me when his identity is revealed. Part of me wonders if I'm dreaming; he's haunted me for so many nights.

The ink that used to mark his partially shaved head is now covered by a crop of thick, dark hair, the ends curling over his ears. His skin is more weathered, and his eyes gleam beneath the streetlights.

"I wondered when you would show up."

Drake smiles, but it seems different, somehow. I remember his coldness, his hatred, the contempt that carved his features, allowing only glimmers of a happier being within.

This man is softer. Wearier. His edges have been dulled, and his limping walk leans into a level of vulnerability that his predecessor never would've allowed the world to see.

"I'm looking for Doctor Phoebe Moore."

I blink at him. "What's your business with her?"

His grin is crooked. "I've been chasing her for a very long time. She has something of mine that I'd like."

"And what's that?"

"The answer to a question."

Slotting my keys in the door, I finally get it open. Warmth beckons me inside, offering refuge from the heavy rain. It's pelting into Drake like machine-gun fire, but he doesn't seem to mind.

"Who might you be, then?" I ask next.

"Tom Renard. I'm new here."

"Welcome to America, Tom." I step inside the building, casting him a look over my shoulder. "It's Christmas. You should come inside for a drink."

"I don't celebrate," he answers with a smirk.

"Well, I do. I'm sure Phoebe's around here somewhere to answer that question of yours." I hold the door open for him. "Christmas is a time for family, you know. Even family that despises one another."

Closing the final steps between us, Drake steps inside. Rain clings to his skin in glistening drops as he shakes himself off in the entranceway. I watch him with bated breath.

“Do you hate your family?” he asks softly.

“I don’t have a family anymore.”

Taking a deep breath, I step closer to him. Our chests brush as my hands bunch in the fabric of his dark sweater. He’s close enough to taste.

“I’m still looking for mine,” he admits in a whisper. “I hope that I’m in the right place. I’ve travelled a long way.”

“You found me because I let you,” I reply, our lips almost touching. “I waited, knowing that one day, you’d come.”

“I never stopped looking,” Drake murmurs. “You had a good head start while I learned how to walk again.”

“Sounds painful.”

“It was.”

“Good.” I lean in to rest our foreheads together. “You had to hurt, Drake. I needed you to feel what I did. The loss. The pain. The betrayal.”

“I know, Athena. You did what needed to be done.” He cups my cheek. “I’ve been chasing you for so long, I almost forgot what you looked like.”

“Still me.”

Drake searches over me, drinking in all the little details before his eyes meet mine again. “I don’t want to be your ghost this time.”

“What do you want to be?”

“Your future,” he whispers back. “I have a question for you. I’ve been waiting for a long time to hear your answer.”

I silence him by pressing my lips to his. It’s a brief whisper that turns into a frantic reunion. His mouth moves against mine, demanding and surrendering at the same time. I break the kiss to respond.

“Fuck your question, Hardwright. You know the answer already. It’s Christmas, so kiss me. You’re home now.”

**The End**

## AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading this short and spicy festive story!

Athena & Drake may return in the future.

For now, they have their happy ending.

Want to read more like this?

Check out my other books on Amazon!

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J Rose is an independent dark romance author from the United Kingdom. She writes challenging, plot-driven stories packed full of angst, heartbreak and broken characters fighting for their happily ever afters.

She's an introverted bookworm at heart, with a caffeine addiction, penchant for cursing and an unhealthy attachment to fictional characters.

Feel free to reach out on social media, J Rose loves talking to her readers!

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Come join the chaos. Stalk J Rose here...





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