

THE UNHOLY
TRINITY



ARIANNA

"IN LOVE AND WAR DUET"

ADRIANA BRINNE

ARIANNA
IN LOVE & WAR I

ADRIANA BRINNE



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THE END

UP NEXT

Afterword

Also by Adriana Brinne

Acknowledgments

About the Author

TRIGGER WARNING

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DEDICATION

*To Skylar, Cameron & Luna.
I hope one day you have the world.*



PLAYLIST



Listen to the full playlist on [Spotify](#)

“Daylight” – Taylor Swift

“Happier” – Olivia Rodrigo

“Falling Apart” – Skylar Gray

“The Difference” – Daya

“sad girls always finish first” – Alaina Castillo

“main thing” – Ariana Grande

“gentle” – Lexi Jayde

“Next Life” – ROSIE

“i don’t think I love you anymore” – Alaina Castillo

“stfu (i got u) – Alaina Castillo

“papacito” – Alaina Castillo

“I Burned LA Down” – Noah Cyrus

“what would you do?” – Tate McRae

“say im ur luv” – UMI

“Her” – Megan Thee Stallion

“W.I.T.C.H.” – Devon Cole

“cinderella’s dead” – EMELINE

“Escapism” – RAYE FT. 070 Shake

AUTHOR'S NOTE



Arianna “In Love and War I” is the fifth book in the Unholy Trinity series. The story contains sensitive topics that might be triggering for some. Please keep this in mind before starting the book.

I hope you enjoy Arianna and Bastian’s journey. Its power and heartache wrapped in a beautiful, chaotic but sweet package.

Trigger warning: Check for trigger warnings here: [TW](#)

WHAT IS THE UNHOLY TRINITY?



The Unholy Trinity is the most notorious crime organization in the United States of America. It was once run by three crime families who joined forces after a war over Detroit City. They each rule over their own family, but only one has full control over the entire organization. The organization is currently fair game since the Volpe family was extinguished, and the two remaining families took over the Holy Trinity, including the Irish (O'Sullivan Family). Now, the Nicolasi and Parisi families hold a small percentage of the city, while the other half is fair game to the Irish and Russians.

The Holy Trinity is not pure anymore.

It is Unholy.

The Unholy Trinity is composed of the Nicolasi, Parisi, and from now on, the O'Sullivan family. The Nicolasi family deals in the gun trade, the O'Sullivan family deals in the drug trade, and the Parisi family handles the more legitimate side of the organization, including casinos and strip clubs.

For years, the three most ruthless crime families of Detroit City ruled together in peace. The Capo fell from grace, and now the others lead by greed and sin.

WHO IS WHO IN THE UNHOLY TRINITY?



NICOLASI FAMILY

Andrea Valentina Nicolasi

Lorenzo Antonnio Nicolasi (Capo of the Unholy Trinity)

Valentino Alexander Nicolasi (The Cleaner)

VOLPE FAMILY

Lucan Tomas Volpe (Ex Volpe Boss)

Cara Mia Volpe

PARISI FAMILY

Arianna Luna Parisi

Kadra Sofia Parisi (Parisi Boss)

Mila Areya Parisi

OUTSIDERS

Sebastian Kenton

Thiago Sandoval

“He saw her before he saw anything else in the room.”
F. Scott Fitzgerald

BLURB



To the outside world, I look like royalty—a stunning and spoiled mafia princess with a cold heart and a mind of steel.

The Consigliere's firstborn.

The blood that runs through my veins is not blue but the color of coal and the crown that sits on top of my head is made of painful thorns. For years, I was stripped of my voice and free will until I learned the hardest lesson of all.

No one will save me.

No one at all.

In this tragic tale of heartbreaking betrayals and regrets, no dashing prince will come to save me from torment.

Fairytales are not real.

But he is.

A man with a dead heart and a soul as black as my own, or so I thought.

Sebastian Ambrose Kenton.

The future president of the United States of America is the man responsible for stripping me of all I've ever known and shattering the only dream I reached for.

Freedom.

He started this war inside of me the moment he accepted my father's offer.

I no longer hold the title of *Principessa*.

But mafia princess or not, I am no one's prey.

Arianna Luna Parisi is my name.

A name his world will never forget.

PROLOGUE

ARIANNA



“Even at my ugliest,
I’m still the best you’ll ever have.”

My mother used to tell me that my beauty would get me farther in life than my brains and my bloodthirsty need to succeed in a man’s world would.

In part, she was right.

My beauty did give me an advantage and opened many doors, but it also trapped me. It left me voiceless in a world where it was already difficult enough for a woman to be heard.

Father used to brag to anyone with ears that his name and legacy would serve as a shield against his many enemies, but he, too, lied.

Parisi.

A name fit for royalty, he used to boast.

A name meant for the boy who will one day carry my father’s legacy.

The boy that died.

Then, there was me.

The unwanted firstborn.

Therefore, yes, father lied.

They all lied.

My name was my golden cage, and my beauty will eventually fade one day. My looks and the Parisi name are also the reasons for my misfortune. That is what landed me where I am today. In the hands of a heartless man with vengeance in his soul. A man who believes the world should fall on its knees for him.

My father promised him a compliant princess.

A brainless brat who will obey his every command and hang to his every word.

As if.

Sebastian Kenton thinks of me as a child he will easily manipulate. But he does not know that I stopped being a child a long time ago.

I never got the chance to be one.

I, too, can play the dirty games big boys do, and I don't intend to lose.

Not against a man.

Any man.

Not anymore.

He might have deluded himself into thinking I am inferior to him, just as all egotistical kings do, but he has no idea the vicious little beast my circumstances created.

A beast that does not let go of its prey until it is fully satisfied.

I am smart.

I am strong.

I survive with every breath I take.

I am.

My brain has kept me above water all these years; it is the only weapon I have against him in this war he started the day he accepted my family's offer.

The moment he chose to strip me of all I've ever known.

Sebastian is threatening all I ever wanted, and I refuse to lose my life to him.

The insufferable man has a God complex, and it will be my pleasure to show him just how wrong he is.

He is a mortal man.

And like all mortal creatures... he bleeds.

I didn't know what I was being thrown into when my family handed me over on a silver platter to a faceless man.

A man who long ago sold his corrupted soul to reach the top of the food chain.

A vicious predator is what he is.

He will soon find out that, mafia princess or not, I am no one's prey.

I, too, am a predator.

The worst kind.

A survivor.

One you could never trust.

Not with your life, heart, or soul.

I wish I knew that the biggest threat to my heart and soul was the man currently holding my life in the palms of his hands.

Spoiler:

*The sun died every night so the lonely moon
could shine.*

REWRITE THE STARS

PART I



*Dearest Sebastian,
You are my reason.
- Arianna*

ARIANNA

BROKEN CROWNS



“Smile, sweet girl.
Don’t let them see you in pain.”
— *Nonna*

Love is a lie.
Love is not forever.
Love dies.
Love sometimes fools the weak and the hopeless. Two things I am not.
However, sometimes it creeps in, blindsiding me and leaving me defenseless against it.
Against the warmth.
Even when I count to three, breathe, and focus on rebuilding the unshakable fortress that guards my heart. The warmth remains until I gather the strength to rid myself of it.
How do I do that?
I kill it, of course.
As I have killed everything else that made me weak and vulnerable.
Everything that does not serve me a purpose.
“Pretty.” My baby sister, Mila, pulls roughly on my hair, trying to stir my attention away from the corny political commercials playing on the big screen and onto her.
Politics.
How tedious.
However, nonna finds it amusing and enjoys watching the world news with us when she comes to visit. I choose to believe it is her way of showing

her granddaughters there is more to this world than what we see and experience inside these cold and loveless walls.

Mila yanks on my hair once again, reminding me that she is here.

Like I could ever forget.

She's all that's good about me.

The light to my dark.

The beauty to my ugly.

My sanity.

Both my sisters are.

"Yes, you are very pretty, *stelina*." I try to muster a genuine smile for her. Only for her. She deserves better than what awaits her. Better than what greets her every time our father comes home mad at the world.

Mad at us.

Disappointed in the cards the bastard was dealt.

Yet, smiling never comes naturally to me. It makes me feel awkward and fake, which I hate. It is so easy for everyone else but not me.

Nothing is ever easy.

"No, no, no." My little sister shakes her small head while pulling on my hair three times. It has been a habit of hers since she was a baby. Although I have never seen her pull on our sister Kadra's hair or *nonna*'s. She only does it to me.

"Anna. Anna, pretty." Mila shakes her head wildly while giggling.

How does she do it? I don't know, but I never feel cold when she is in my arms. It is the only time I allow myself to feel anything other than perpetual emptiness and coldness.

Her words warm my half-broken heart.

Anna. Anna, pretty.

I don't have the heart to tell her that she is wrong. That I am not pretty. Not like her.

Not like most girls.

I am ugly on the inside.

Pretty girls don't feel rage.

Don't feel jealous.

They are not rotten, slowly decaying on the inside with every breath they take.

They are not me, and I will never be them.

I am what I am.

“Out there! Out there!” My baby sister’s excited chatter pulls me out of my thoughts, forcing me to look where she is pointing. I follow her tiny finger to the ceiling of my room. Most girls my age have posters of famous heartthrobs on their walls or those tacky stars that glow in the dark. I don’t. Instead, I glued countless photos of cities and beautiful places I dream of visiting one day. I borrowed the magazines from *nonna* and started ripping out pages of places I will find outside this ugly city.

Places I know I will never get to step foot in.

Still, I have them up there, so every time I close my eyes before bed and open them when morning comes, they remind me of what awaits me outside this family.

A big world.

A world with countless possibilities.

As long as those pictures stay up there, I won’t ever give up.

I won’t lose hope, even though hope is very fickle.

I twirl one of Mila’s pigtails as I sigh. “Yes, Mila. All those places are waiting for us.” I never talk to her in silly voices or talk gibberish back at her. I talk to my sister like a grownup. She is advanced for her young age, already knowing her colors and words some kids are only taught in school.

I teach her all I know, hoping it will help her have a fighting chance once I am no longer with her. That day will come. The day I will have to leave my heart here with her. With both of my sisters.

“We go there?” Mila looks up at me while she rests her head on my chest. When our parents are away, Mila sleeps in bed with me.

Green eyes meet light blue with specks of gray. God, her eyes are so rare, just like her. My rare star.

Looking up at the ceiling, I point to the photo of the Eiffel Tower. “Do you see that big structure, Mila?”

“Yes. Big.” She whispers in awe and giggles as she holds me tight.

I manage a small smile. It is difficult for me to laugh at times. I don’t feel it. Not like most people do. “Yes, it is.”

“We go there?” The heart inside my chest cracks for the millionth time in my short life. I don’t feel it anymore. I am used to this pain.

“Yeah. Maybe when we are older, we can sit in one of the cafés near the tower and drink coffee after shopping at the most exclusive stores in the city. What do you think?” I give her false hope because I would rather become one of the things I hate most, a liar, than break my baby sister’s heart, and this life

will break it. There is no doubt about that.

Mila taps her chin twice, as she does religiously every time a thought occurs. “Cupcakes?”

“I’m sure they have cupcakes there.” We are not allowed sugary treats in our house. Father could care less about what his children want, and mother only thinks about herself.

“Pops for Anna?”

Pops.

She means cake pops.

The first time Mila had a confetti cupcake, I had a chocolate fudge cake pop. *Nonna* dropped by on her last visit with treats for us but only because we were left unsupervised.

Those are the best days.

When our parents are gone, we are left alone with the house staff. We can pretend we are not Parisis and we are just three normal girls who are loved and free.

Free to choose their path in life.

Free to love whom their heart chooses.

Free to live without the fear of what awaits us once we come of age.

“Yeah... pops for me.” I feel like crying, but the tears don’t fall. I think I am broken, or maybe I have no more tears left to cry.

“We go everywhere,” Mila says before yawning. It is late and way past her bedtime. I hug her tiny body closer to mine and inhale her sweet baby scent.

“Yes, *stelina*.” I kiss the top of her head without taking my eyes off the ceiling. “One day, we’ll go everywhere and have everything. You’ll see.”

I don’t believe in much.

Not in our parents.

Not in God.

However, I believe in my sisters and the burning fire within them.

I believe in myself.

One day, we will get there.

We just have to survive the cold first.

The soft click of a door wakes me from a deep sleep. Slowly opening my eyes, I spot my sister, Kadra, climbing on the bed next to Mila.

“I didn’t mean to wake you.” She mumbles absently, and my body immediately tenses. “Go back to sleep.” Her voice. She sounds in pain.

Crack.

Another to the heart.

Turning my head, I look at her face in the dark, noticing that she is looking up at the ceiling as she always does when she comes into my room. “Look at me, Sirius,” I whisper.

“Don’t call me that,” Kadra says between gritted teeth.

“I will call you whatever I damn well, please. Now, look at me.” I hiss, trying not to wake Mila.

My sister does as she is told and turns her head in my direction, but her eyes look away from mine until I reach out and force her to look at me. Her eyes are dry, but her bottom lip is split open, blood trickling down her chin.

Goddamn him.

The urge to cry is there, yet not a tear falls from my eyes.

I am in pain.

I am in pain every hour of every day.

I can handle the shit he puts me through in his sick quest to make us into what he never got. A son. A future capo.

I can handle it, yes.

The punches and kicks to my body don’t hurt me like they used to, but the abuse towards my sisters slowly breaks me.

He knows it, too.

It’s the only advantage he has against me.

Since I learned to speak, I have rebelled against my father, but he found a way—the only way—to keep me in place.

To keep me on the ground under his feet.

Compliant.

Voiceless.

Chained.

“Hey, sis?” My sister whispers.

“Yes?” I close my eyes and count to three, trying to calm the rage inside.

“One day?” Kadra’s voice breaks with the force of her quiet sobs.

If I could cry, I would cry for her.

For Mila.

For us.

“One day.” I hold onto my sisters and whisper a promise.

That day will come.

They will get there, even if it kills me.

Even if I must sell my soul to the devil to give that to my sisters.

One day did come, but it was already too late.

My sisters were gone, and my heart had turned fully cold.

There was nothing but emptiness.

A hard stone in my chest.

Cold.

Frozen.

No longer beating.

BASTIAN

GODLESS



“She turned her back on the world.” — B
Present

Long ago, I learned the most important lesson a man like me could learn.
Real men don't beg.

They don't plead for their lives when they are cornered and about to meet their maker. You die as a man with your head held high and your best smile on display.

Real men.

Not these thugs, no.

Child molesters.

Wife beaters.

Sex traffickers.

They are all the same.

The scum of the earth. They commit horrible acts, yet at the end of the line, when they are stuck between life and death, they weep and plead for mercy as if they didn't deny their victims the same thing they are so desperately begging for.

I loathe scumbags like this motherfucker.

If I am honest, I barely tolerate half of humanity. How ironic it is that I ended up following in my father's footsteps.

A public server.

A man of the people.

The defendant of the ones that cannot defend themselves in a court of law.

It is quite fitting.

Poetic, almost.

I see myself as the two sides of a coin.

On one side, I am a man with morals. The one you follow blindly when I make empty promises of a better future for the city.

For our country.

For your families.

However, I am also on the other side of the coin.

Immoral.

Deceitful.

Vengeful.

I am the last face you see when my men send you straight to hell, kicking, screaming, and begging for mercy.

Benjamin Banning, my right-hand man, head of my security team, and insufferable prick, likes to joke that I remind him of a dark Robin Hood.

Committing crimes in the name of good.

I call bullshit.

I am not a nobleman.

I don't care to be one.

I never do anything out of the kindness of my heart.

Mainly because I don't have one.

A heart, I mean.

Only for her.

"How do you want him to go out, chief?" Armando, Sandoval's second in command, points his knife my way while keeping a tight hold on the sick son of a bitch currently defecating in his pants.

Rearranging my left cufflink, I give it some thought.

Not all evil should be punished in the same manner.

Some fuckers deserve to suffer a bit more than others do before they meet their end.

This sick cunt deserves to feel all the hurt he has caused others.

"Surprise me."

Then he gets to work while I stand back and answer this morning's emails. While I type, I watch from the corner of my eye as the man in the chair cries out in pain when Armando presses a hot silver on his naked back, leaving a round burn mark.

I breathe in the smell of burning skin and grin when the man's begging

becomes louder.

More desperate and... useless.

No one will hear him down here.

He will die alone like the unforgettable piece of shit he truly is.

The familiar rush of satisfaction spreads through me, and my lip curls in disgust when the imbecile huddles over and vomits all over Armando's leather shoes.

"*Cabrón.*" Armando hisses, pressing the hot silver deeper into his skin.

"Please, stop. Have mercy, Bastian," he whispers with a pain-filled breath, and fuck me if I don't wish it were me inflicting pain on this sick fuck. Wishing I was the one inflicting pain on all the others who came before him. They all deserve it because they are all the same.

They cry.

They beg.

Lastly, they die.

I must admit I miss the thrill I felt when it was me on the other end, punishing them for their crimes. I miss the thrill it provided me. However, blood? Not so much.

It does not have the same appeal.

Nothing thrills me anymore.

Life has become monotonous.

I breathe out a long sigh, "Wrap it up, Armando." Pocketing my smartphone, I look around the old, abandoned building. It used to be a factory, one of the first in the city, that distributed medical supplies and equipment to hospitals all over the country, but the owners ran it into the ground.

There is nothing left of it now.

Now, it has other purposes.

Here is where all the motherfuckers who cross me come to die.

This is their purgatory.

My beautiful hell.

Not only did Samuel Ashworth cross me alongside his father, but he also took part in one of the biggest trafficking rings in the country.

They dabble in the flesh trade to secure sponsors for their political aspirations.

I am not a saint, and I don't deny my criminal activities, but my sins will never touch the innocent.

This greedy fuck sacrificed innocent women and children to further his career and elevate his status in this city and between the elites.

His father, Jack Ashworth, once the governor of this city, is next.

I will let him sweat it for a while longer.

I won't rest until every single one of those sick motherfuckers pay for what they did to those kids.

The agony they put all those families through.

"Left or right, *cabrón*?" Armando asks Samuel while taunting him with his knife from side to side on his face. Playing with his prey.

Samuel does not get the chance to choose. Armando takes the choice from him just as the perverted asshole did to all his victims. To all those women and children, he didn't give a choice.

Fuck him.

I turn my back to them, look at the time, noticing it is past midnight, and make my way to the town car, where Banning is waiting to drive me home.

Another night, one less sick cunt on the streets.

One less white-collar criminal this city must worry about.

Banning opens the backseat door for me, and I step inside with a smile on my face when I listen to the screams of agony in the night.

"Where to, boss?" He starts the engine while I look out the car window.

There is a full moon tonight.

Round and bright, lighting up all the dark corners of this night.

Checking my wristwatch, I notice the time. "Home."

Home to her.

To my little star in the dark sky.

To the key to my cold, dead, and cruel heart.

BASTIAN

FATHERS & POLITICS



“There is only beauty in her madness.” — B
Chicago, Illinois

Not even two weeks after I was sworn in as senator of this city, rumors of my private life started spreading like a killing virus, with the media exaggerating and pushing their narrative.

It hasn't stopped since.

The damage control that is needed to combat every vile speculation from the media and my political adversaries is not only exhausting but also frankly irritating.

At this moment, I have one job, and that is to put my best smile on, speak half-truths, and let Celene handle the rest.

She is not only my secretary but also my legislative correspondent.

One thing I learned from watching my father, Ronan Kenton, through the years, first as District Attorney, then as Senator as he dove into a political career, is that the moment I took the oath of office, I lost my privacy to the people.

I am no longer entitled to my privacy.

I knew this, and I made my peace with it.

What I find ludicrous is the absurd notion that I need a woman by my side to keep the people pleased with my duties and service to the city.

My romantic life should not be their concern, and it does not affect my duties.

However, the media and my political adversaries joined forces to discredit me now that the people of the United States of America elected me

as their senator.

While I was campaigning, they tried to create a false narrative of me not being the right choice for this city because of my career as a criminal defense lawyer. Before I decided to enter the world of politics, I was considered one of the most cutthroat lawyers in the country, representing not only celebrities but politicians as well.

I still own one of the most prestigious and successful firms in this city, but it was time I aspired for more, just like my father.

My mistake was being young and cocky. I never lost a case, not once. My winning streak made me notorious and eventually went to my head.

A different woman every night.

Long nights drinking after winning a high-profile case.

Now, my past activities are being thrown back in my face as vulgar gossip.

Mainstream media is trying to appeal to the more conservative group of individuals with the ideal that I don't represent their values.

Of course not.

I am a criminal defense lawyer turned politician.

A corrupt one, at that.

I lied.

I cheated.

I don't share the same values as half of my constituents.

My father put his country before his party, which was his demise. He was a good man and an even better politician. Did they give a fuck about that? No. They only care about money, power, and their political agendas. That is all.

Ronan Kenton had a Purple Heart.

He served his country, not only overseas but in the line of duty, but then proceeded to give everything else to his country when he became a senator.

I don't deny it, but I will also not allow the media to dictate my life and my term.

I have big shoes to fill, not only in the media's eyes but for the public as well. I don't intend to follow the same path as my father. He was an honorable man, but I am not.

He loved his job and genuinely enjoyed helping others.

I don't.

His reasons for selling his soul to politics were selfless.

I cannot say the same for myself.

I will make everyone responsible for my father's death pay.

One by one, they will fall.

The crime organizations who took part in his murder will bleed and rot from the inside out once I am through with them.

And what better place to start than here?

Being a lawyer only did so much for me, but the highest power in the land, that will be their doomsday.

"Look, Mr. Kenton, the public fell for you because you appeal to them as not only the son of one of the best politicians this country had the honor of swearing in but also because of the single father angle we sold to them."

"My daughter is not to be used as an angle, Celene. I suggest you watch your words." I place today's paper on the kitchen table and readjust the sleeping angel in my arms.

"I-I didn't mean it like that. Pardon me, boss." Celene murmurs, but I pay her no mind.

Instead, I focus on Ellaiza.

My four-month-old.

The product of an alcohol-filled night I can barely remember. I blacked out to the point I cannot even remember her mother.

All I am sure of is that two weeks ago, the beautiful little girl was left outside of my office with a note claiming she was my child and with the name her mother had chosen for her.

Of course, I had my doubts since women have been trying to trap me for years, wanting to extort money from me, and I always wrapped it up, but this time I had a gut feeling that I had fucked-up.

I had a bad night and that bad night turned into a blur.

I have yet to put all the pieces together.

However, the moment I held that kid in my arms, I knew.

I knew she was mine.

Her gorgeous blue eyes and the small dimple on her left cheek are all me.

Banning says she has my nose.

Still, I took a paternity test to cover all my bases, protect myself, and protect the baby girl.

The test came back 99.99 percent positive that I am her father.

I never wanted kids.

Never even thought about it.

Kids are nuisances that drive you to an early grave; they were never in my plans.

Plans change, and here we are.

I am a single parent of a tiny girl who depends on me for everything. At first, it scared me shitless, so much so that I did my best trying to locate the woman who birthed the baby so I could send her back and not deal with this new terrifying reality, but every attempt to find her on my part failed. It is like chasing a faceless ghost.

One day that might change, and she might decide to come back into her daughter's life, but as of now, no contact on her part, and sometimes I wonder if it's best that the mother stays away.

I am a selfish prick, I know. However, what good would it be to return after abandoning your child?

It took me half an hour to fall in love with her.

Never knew love, not love so deep and so pure until her, and as much as I hate to admit it, I am terrified every hour of every day, agonizing over all the ways I might fuck this up.

My baby daughter coos while making grabby hands at the bottle of formula in my hand. Gently lifting her small head, I place the bottle in her mouth, and she starts to suck happily.

There are many things I notice about my girl that made me hesitant to believe she was mine at first.

Like how happy she is all the time.

She smiles, warming the ice around my heart.

Where does she get it from, I wonder? I don't know. It is sure as hell not from me. I was never a happy child, and now as a grown man, I don't remember how it feels to laugh.

A genuine laugh.

I had months to get used to the idea that I am no longer responsible for just myself but for a tiny human who depends on me for everything, too.

I changed my entire lifestyle for her when the paternity test confirmed she was mine.

I no longer do the shit that got me on the front page of the Chicago Column and all the tacky gossip magazines and blogs every damn day.

Every decision I make from now on, I have her best interest in mind.

She comes first.

Always.

Looking down at her while I feed her, I am in awe of how small she looks in my arms.

Those innocent eyes look at me, happy and alert, while she drinks her milk, content to be in my arms, grounding me.

She never cries.

She is the best baby a single and unfeeling man like me could have asked for.

She has a full head of dark hair that curls at the end, making her look like a doll. Just like the ones my mother used to collect when she was alive.

Mother would have loved Ellaiza...

“Man, this kid is the cutest fucking baby I’ve ever seen.” Banning hovers behind me, watching my daughter.

Sighing, I try to reprimand the asshole without startling my baby. “Didn’t I tell you to watch your mouth around my kid and that the next time you used profanities in front of my girl, I would have your tongue?” I don’t look away from Ellaiza as I watch her suck on the feeding bottle’s nipple while making funny faces at Banning.

That is another thing she didn’t inherit from me.

A sense of humor.

“You know damn well she has no clue what I’m saying. Right, little lady?” The big, tattooed motherfucker talks gibberish at her while making fun of me. How he has lasted this long on my team is still a mystery to me.

The fucker is always grating on my last nerve.

“She understands.” Ellaiza releases the nipple with a loud pop. I gently maneuver her on my left shoulder and proceed to burp her. The first time I did this, I was in over my head, but after researching the internet, I got the hang of it.

The shit you can learn on the internet will surprise you.

“Can we focus? We need to do damage control. The gossip is not a good look for the campaign.” Celene’s snooty tone interrupts me.

“And what do you suggest I do, Celene? Do your job. That is what I pay you for.” Kissing my baby’s cheek, I inhale her sweet scent and finish burping her before placing her in Banning’s arms. The man might be the bane of my existence at times, but I trust him with my beating heart.

My child.

“Let’s get you dressed, little lady, and let daddy handle the mean witch.” Banning hugs my kid closer and talks to her in a silly and irritating voice.

The same one I warned him not to use with my kid. I want her to be a kid, of course, but not an idiot or as academically challenged as my right-hand man. I bet Banning's mother used that idiotic tone with him.

Once he is gone with my kid, I stand up from the kitchen table and button my suit. I have a press conference to attend this morning regarding the latest mass shooting. I take a sip of my coffee and give Celene my attention.

Celene has been with me since I decided to run for Senator. She takes care of the press and serves as my assistant. She is beautiful, there is no doubt about that, but her beauty is forced. Not effortless. Black hair. Brown eyes. A slim waist. She is small and has curves in all the right places.

She is smart and efficient, too.

That is all I ask of my employees.

To get shit done as quickly as possible without fucking up, and to be discreet and loyal.

Celene takes a deep breath before speaking up. "I think you should find yourself a woman."

This again.

Already knowing where she is going with this, I shut her down. "No."

"J-just listen to me, Seb—" I stare her down. She damn well knows no one calls me by my birth name. "Pardon me, sir. I believe that if the public sees you settling down for a while with a good woman, it might help clean your playboy image and make you more appealing to the conservative party."

Not giving her absurd idea a second thought, I open my mouth to reject her suggestion when she stops me.

"Do it for the kid." She smiles sweetly while looking at the picture of Ellaiza I have framed on the coffee table. Too sweetly, I might say. "Don't you want things to settle down for her sake?" That was a blow below the belt.

Using Ellaiza to get me to comply.

Dirty tactic, but sadly...effective.

Sighing, "I'll give it some thought."

"Perfect!" Celene claps and says in a chirpy voice that grates on my nerves. She is so happy all the time, and no one sane could be that happy. "I'll get right to it, then."

I turn around and leave her there, plotting, while I walk out the door with my security on my tail.

Little did I know that from that moment on, my life would never be the same again.

A week later

“Mr. Kenton, I have Gabriele Parisi on the line.” Celene’s voice breaks through my thoughts as I finish typing an email.

Parisi.

He has been calling my office relentlessly for weeks now, and I haven’t given him the time of day once. I refuse to make deals with traitorous snakes, and Gabriele Parisi is the worst of them.

He has no honor.

The type of man that throws stones and quickly hides the hand.

He believes the world owes him shit, but that will change today.

I did say that there are evils that should be punished more creatively than others.

It will be my pleasure to send the Parisi criminal to hell, just not yet.

He needs to suffer first.

And how do you make a man like him suffer?

By burning the kingdom, they rule to the ground.

“Put him through.” Celene’s eyes grow big, probably wondering why I decided to take his call after all these weeks of ordering her to hang up.

Hitting the speaker button, I wait for the call to connect. “Yes?”

“Bastian—”

“It’s Mr. Kenton to you, Parisi.” I let him know that he does not intimidate me, and we are certainly not close enough for him to address me less formally.

We are not on the same level.

We never will be.

“Straight to the point, I see.” I am nothing but a straight shooter, and the last thing I want is to entertain this clown in an Italian suit, but eventually, I had to.

Gabriele Parisi presents himself to the world as a respectable businessman with legitimate businesses and properties, such as the Parisi Hotels, all over the country, but underneath the expensive suits, a common thug is trying hard to be more than what he is.

A puppet.

A follower.

A useless cunt.

The consigliere for one of the most known crime organizations in the country.

A man whose only job is to lick the filth under his Capo's Italian shoes.

"What can I help you with, Gabriele?" I make sure to address him by his first name, letting him know that he is not superior to me in any way. I do as I please, and I am not one of the many men who cower under the Parisi name.

"It's come to my attention that you're looking for a bride." Silence follows his statement. The devil works fast, but Celene proved that she works faster. After she proposed the ridiculous idea of me selling a fake reality to the media so I can get them off my back during the campaign trail, I thought long and hard about the pros and cons of the situation.

The pros are not as many as the cons, that is for certain, but she had a point.

The media has been having a circus after Ellaiza appeared out of nowhere, feeding into the idea that my promiscuous activities after office hours will somehow affect my duty as a senator. It is idiotic, I should not even entertain the idea, and I would not have if I didn't have Ellaiza to think about.

They are like starved crows, trying to feast on my bones and by association, my child.

The media scrutiny has become so relentless that women are appearing at my place of work and every single place I am trying to get to.

I am an attractive man.

A powerful man.

I am aware of that. I am not oblivious to the overwhelming number of women and men's attention I attract, but my kid does not deserve to have a crazy person approach me while I am out with her, wanting to become her mother.

So, for her and only until it all dies down, I agreed to the arrangement.

I will find myself a woman to court for a couple of months, maybe a year, while I parade her around the city. Have some sort of arrangement that works for both of us so I can get the lunatics and the media off my back.

They don't harass my other colleagues and opponents the way they do me, and that is because they are one of two things.

They are very discreet, paying large amounts to keep their shit on the low, or they are settled down with a wife and a couple of kids.

I never thought I would have children. I was not too keen on the idea until

that angel girl came into my life, but a woman for the rest of my life? That is something I will not agree to.

The arrangement will work best for me.

The problem is choosing.

So far, the women that Celene has presented do absolutely nothing for me.

They don't even inspire me to hold a conversation with them, let alone share my life with them for a certain amount of time.

Some have never been around a child a day in their lives.

Fuck.

I am regretting this already.

Suddenly becoming aware that Parisi is still on the line, "Please tell me why that is any of your business and what is the reason for your call? I'm a very busy man." I would rather shoot myself in the eye than entertain this clown.

I can feel the tension through the phone. This asshole is used to being respected and feared. He will get none of that from me. "I believe we have a pending discussion." He draws obnoxiously. Listening to Gabriele is the equivalent of having a drill on the side of your head.

"We don't. I made my point clear the last time we spoke. I have no interest in getting in bed with Detroit. My business is with Chicago and its boss."

"Ah, Sandoval." Gabriele clicks his tongue, resembling the snake he truly is. He has been trying relentlessly to get me to allow him safe passage to Chicago, so he can bring his dirty business here. I refuse him at every turn. Not because I cannot make it happen. There is nothing I cannot do. I have connections in the police department, and they often turn a blind eye when illegal activities come into the city because they get a generous cut.

We have an understanding.

The good and the bad guys of this city.

Sadly, we are all more rotten than good.

I might be many things, but a rat like the Parisi boss is not one of them. This city is mine just as much as it is Sandoval's, and Gabriele is aware of that, yet he refuses to let the issue go.

"Yes, Sandoval. If you want his business, then I suggest you take it up with him, but something tells me he already turned you down, and so you come to me." Before he gets a word in, I quickly get to the point, hoping this

imbecile drops the issue. “Now, before you try something else, my answer is still no.”

He laughs. “I believe I have something you want, Mr. Kenton.”

“I highly doubt it.” I hover my index finger over the red button on the phone’s panel, ready to end the call. “Goodbye, Gabriele.”

“My eldest daughter.” He is no longer amused. He sounds desperate. I knew the three families were having issues securing business outside of Detroit, not only because of Sandoval but the Russian and Irish, too. I didn’t realize it was that bad that they are willing to sell their daughters to the highest bidder to secure business.

It does not surprise me.

This filth of a human has always proven to be the scum of the earth.

His time is coming.

I am just biding my time, figuring out what would hurt him more.

A bullet to the head will not make him suffer.

I want him to bleed.

Strip him of what matters most to him.

His title.

His money.

His name.

His legacy.

Parisi.

The sound of a notification popping up on my screen grabs my attention.

A new email notification from Parisi.

An attachment.

I click on the link and wait for the image to load on my screen.

When it does, I am taken aback.

I have seen beauty before.

I have fucked some of the most beautiful women in the world.

Then there is her.

A beauty that would be considered otherworldly, I have no doubt.

Long blonde hair falls over an angelic, almost exotic face.

Green eyes, the color of emerald, pierce me through the screen.

One word comes to mind.

Perfection.

I remain quiet for several seconds, unable to look away from the screen.

This is not a woman.

This is a kid.

Motherfucker.

Anger coils in my stomach. “You’re willing to trade your flesh and blood for your dirty business?”

Gabriele laughs condescendingly. “It is our way to find our *principessas* a good match to marry once they become of age. I assure you she’s a thing of beauty.” Son of a bitch. That is their way. I know this. Their old way. They can choose not to abide by their out-of-touch and medieval rules.

This man has no shame.

I am not a saint by any means, but a miserable piece of shit father, I am not.

He would sell his daughter to a bastard like me without remorse.

Then the ugly truth of his offer comes to mind.

He might have other sick pedophiles lined up if I say no to his deal.

Looking at the girl, those green eyes that look like they hide a thousand secrets and that would no doubt start wars—I see my baby in her. Fuck.

The girl as beautiful as timeless art will be sold like cattle.

Who knows where she will end up if I say no?

I should tell him to fuck-off, but I cannot, with good conscience, let this bastard sell his daughter to another pervert like him.

Then an idea comes to mind.

An eye for an eye.

He might not love his daughter, which is safe to assume. If I ruin his kid, it will not do much damage to him.

But maybe....

“What is your daughter’s name?”

“Arianna.” Gabriele sounds more eager to share her name. To sign her life away for his selfish gains. “Arianna Luna Parisi.”

Arianna Luna Parisi.

Purpose thrums through me, giving me a buzz I haven’t felt in a long time.

My mind starts to wander to all the possibilities.

All the ways I can make this sick bastard suffer for what he did to my family.

I will start with his daughter.

Arianna.

Even her name tastes sweet in my mouth.

ARIANNA

HATE THY SISTER



“Where are they when
you need them?” - A

The first time I felt the excruciating pain of a broken rib, I was eight years old. Too young to witness firsthand how cruel this world can be to the innocent and those who cannot defend themselves.

My only crime against my father was not being born a boy.

No, scratch that.

It all started when the boy he so desperately wanted, and who should have lived, did not, and then there was me.

The first-born.

A female.

Useless in the eyes of my father.

Unlovable in the eyes of my mother.

It seemed he was punishing me for the death of what could have been when I was not to blame.

Then, after, he kept punishing me for his misfortune.

Because of two more girls.

Kadra and Mila.

My sisters' keeper.

That is who I have always been.

I might be cold-hearted, but he made me that way.

Contrary to popular belief, I have a heart. I have so many barriers around it that sometimes it is almost impossible to feel anything but coldness.

Rage.

Grief.

I felt all of that at once until I felt nothing.

I have numbed myself to the point where emptiness is all I feel. People cannot hurt you if you have nothing left for them to take.

Being betrayed repeatedly by the people who are supposed to keep you safe will turn anyone as cold as stone.

Cold hearts cannot be broken.

Gabriele beat the warmth out of me.

I used to laugh freely at everything Kadra said.

I used to feel warm inside every time Mila would ask for snuggles whenever she was scared or sad. I stopped feeling as others do the moment Gabriele, ruthlessly and without mercy, beat up my sweet Mila just because she was different. She was born different from Kadra and me, but she feels just the same.

Our father thought he could “fix her,” but really, he only made it worse. Therefore, he took his anger and frustrations out on his family. He couldn’t have a son, so he beat my mother until she couldn’t bear more children. I was not a boy, so he didn’t care for me. Kadra was born because of my mother’s betrayal, and Mila? Besides the fact that she was the last chance he had of having the boy he always wanted, she was also born with a mild case of autism. My mother turned to alcohol and her socialite life and left us to fend for ourselves in that house of horrors. Therefore, today we must prove ourselves worthy to lead the three families of the Holy Trinity. It is all a joke, though. I failed my task —I chose family over “the family” —and now Gabriele humiliates me by putting me in a cage with Kadra. She will pulverize me. I am calculating, smart, and cunning. Those are my strengths.

My beauty works for me when I need to fool people into believing I am something I am not.

A fighter?

That I am not.

That is Kadra’s lane.

I turn to my sister, and for the first time in a while, I feel fear.

For her.

For me.

For us.

We knew this day would come. That eventually, we would become puppets to the Holy Trinity.

She is staring at me with so much hatred and disdain. I want to tell her so many things. Tell her I had nothing to do with it. That I would never intentionally hurt either one of them. That I would bear all their pain to see them smile. I wish I could say many things, but they would be ignored. She will not believe me. She is in pain and channels all those dark feelings into strength.

So here I stand, about to fight my sister for a crown I never wanted but needed to be kept safe. To keep us all safe and change the archaic rules and traditions. Women are born leaders, and the mafia should get with the fucking times. They can be more than just mafia brides. They can aspire to be bosses, working mothers, businesswomen, etc. That will change when a woman takes the title of boss for the first time in mafia history. Kadra or myself. I stare straight ahead and watch the Nicolasi men pick up Valentino from the floor and leave with him. They might need to take him to a hospital or have the family doctor come look at him. Lorenzo did some serious damage, and I am not sure he will recover. He has been knocked out for ten minutes straight and has not responded. Still, what Valentino suffered cannot possibly compare to the damage to Lorenzo's soul.

If you thought he didn't have a soul before, nothing is left of it now.

Some of my father's men finally step forward and pick up Benedetto's lifeless body from the ground. Gabriele steps over Benedetto's blood and stands before Kadra and me. He was dreading this day. The day he will hand over control to one of his daughters. "Go on, make me proud." He lies through his teeth. Nothing we do would ever make this man proud. He is just putting on a show for everyone here. The loving and doting father. All a fucking lie. "Don't you embarrass me in front of my men." He says so softly that only Kadra and I can hear. It is always about appearances in the Parisi household. Lorenzo now stands in the shadows, waiting for his turn to fight again. All the boys completed their tasks. Valentino was the first when he used the weird girl with the obnoxious personality to get her thug-of-a-father into our pockets. Lucan ran Andrea out of town, and Lorenzo fucked-up his brother today. They all proved themselves capable of doing what they are told, no matter what it is, and put the three families first. I don't know what they asked of Kadra. What was her task? Did she go through with it? Kadra ignores Gabriele's statement, walks toward the middle of the room, and faces me. There is something scary, dark, and calculating in her eyes. Nothing is left of the shy and quiet girl who observed the world with big and hopeful

eyes. Just when Gabriele is about to reprimand her for being disobedient, the doors open, and a brood of men in suits invade our space. Men in nice suits, carrying handguns and what look like earpieces.

I have never seen these men before.

Not around us anyway.

However, I recall seeing men dressed similarly in the news and in the papers.

No, no, no.

I thought I had more time.

The one-way ticket to France is burning a hole in my suit jacket. This was my last stop before I was free.

Free of the dark future that awaits me.

And suddenly, everything makes sense. How calm Gabriele is acting and the solemn look on my sister's face.

Suddenly, it all makes sense.

While I was busy trying to scheme my way out of this hellhole to save not only myself but my sisters as well... Kadra conspired against me.

She fell for our father's manipulative tricks.

How could you, Sirius?

I walked through hell for you.

I bled for both of you.

In return, you made me your task.

Your sacrifice for the throne.

Her words replay in my head like a broken record.

"Hey, sis. Will we ever be free?"

No.

Not after tonight.

Part of me feels betrayed, and the other part of me, the one that had to harden her heart and push her sisters aside to survive, understands. Still, it stings just the same.

Even at my worst, I still gave them what little I had left in my heart, and she threw it back in my face.

I would have never thought my sister would sell me out to the devil. That is exactly who my future husband is. The handsome devil in the senate with plans to run this country. His six-year term will end eventually, and his team has written a statement of his plans for the presidency. He needs a wife, my father said. A wife that will make him look approachable and help his

playboy image. I feel only rage as I stare at everyone in the room. A rage that is slowly consuming my every thought and will soon corrupt my every action. The same rage makes me turn around and grab a blade from one of my family's men. I am too fast, and before the soldier can stop me, I back away with the blade in hand as I turn to my sister and father. "This was all a ruse to get me here, wasn't it?" I direct the question to my father. His uncaring expression only enrages me more. "You were aware this was happening, Arianna. Don't act clueless now. It is not becoming of a lady." He sits back down. "And watch your fucking tone when you're speaking to me." "Fuck you!" For the first time in my life, I curse my father aloud. In front of the Holy Trinity. I don't care. As of today, he has no power over me. No, Senator Bastian Kenton does. The room goes completely silent as my father stands from his seat with a murderous look on his face. I am being reckless. Impulsive. Emotional. I don't care. I am done. With a stronghold, I lift the blade to my neck, cut a chunk of my hair, and I throw it at my father's feet. The room erupts in low murmurs.

They know exactly what this means. I am cutting my ties with the family. I might as well be a rat. I don't give my father one more second of my time, and with the same blade, I cut more of my hair and throw it at my sister. It lands on the wall behind her. I could have hit her if I wanted to. She is a great shot, but I can hold my own. "And fuck you!" I shout at her. Frustrated with her lack of emotion. "I am done walking through fire for you! Both of you!" I scream for what I think is the first time in my life. I hate how my voice shakes. It shows weakness. I cannot afford that. With one last glance at my sister, I turn around with my head held high and my already broken heart leaving a trail of blood in my wake as I leave with the strange men.

At this moment, the girl I once was dies in this city.

I bury her with all my pain and my regrets.

In her place, a new me rises from the grave.

A girl who will not stop fighting until her last breath.

ARIANNA

A BORN-AGAIN BITCH



“There is something beautiful
and terrible about his eyes. Those haunting blue eyes.” — A

“Hey, jackass, where are you taking me?” I kick the seat in front of me, but like every attempt I have made before this one, it goes unnoticed. No one has said a word to me since they dragged me out of the mansion.

Imbeciles.

The damn monkeys in suits.

I cross my arms and slump back in the black leather seat of the van that is taking me away from all I know. If I’m honest, I’m not sure whether to be upset and scream in frustration or if I should feel ecstatic that I’m finally away from the hell that was my home for eighteen years.

Deep down, I know that a part of me — the part of me that died with the girl I once was — will always bleed for the two girls she left behind. The two stars no longer shine in her sky.

When I was hauled out of the Nicolasi mansion, four black SUVs waited for me. The men that took me shoved me inside one of the vans and now trail behind.

I was right.

The men that took me are not made men.

They are not like my father or his men.

They all wear black suits and earpieces, and their gun holsters are visible. They scream security not thugs in suits.

I breathe a sigh of relief when I realize I will not end up in the hands of a

made man. Thank fuck for small favors. I despised them with every fiber of my being.

Sheep in wolf clothing with a preconceived notion that women were born to serve them and bare their monsters.

I refuse to be one of those women.

I refuse to be silenced.

I refuse to be anyone but myself.

Even though I might not end up in the hands of a crime lord, that doesn't erase the fact that some sick bastard bought me. A good man or a decent man wouldn't have to stand as low as to purchase another human being.

There is no doubt in my mind that my father made a deal with my life. This means that the war I've been fighting all my life is not over.

The war for my freedom.

It just started, and it might never end.

Therefore, I sit back, cross my legs, and hold my head up high, looking like the very queen I know I am. I don't need a title, nor do I need a kingdom.

I am who I am.

That is all I need.

I am all I will ever need.

I sit still and wait for what comes next.

The mouth-breather who accepted my father's offer will regret ever thinking he could strip me of my freedom.

Oh, yes.

I was so lost in my head that I didn't realize the van had stopped and the driver was pulling the door open for me. I have half a mind to stay in the car, but I know it will only be worse for me if I refuse.

These are strangers, and I don't have a clue as to what their intentions are.

A freakishly tall man with broad shoulders underneath a black suit offers me his hand to help me out of the car, but I ignore him and hop off the van without his assistance. I might be their prisoner, but I will refuse their help at every turn.

The moment I am outside the car, the night air hits my face like a hard slap to my new reality. It is cold this time of year, yet it does nothing to me.

I always feel cold, even in the heat of summer.

A sudden chill runs down the back of my head, spreading all over my body as a sixth sense. Disturbed by the unusual sensation, I steal my spine and hold my head high as at least five men guide me through a plane track in

the middle of the night, barricading me.

It is odd how I feel no fear in a situation that any normal girl my age would be terrified of. I was taken from my family to end up God-knows-where. Any sane person would be trembling in fear and pleading for their life.

Not me.

I learned a long time ago that crying, begging, and praying get me nowhere. It only makes it worse for me.

The chilling feeling grows stronger when I notice a black van from the corner of my eye, heading towards me at full speed before it stops dead in the middle of the track.

I stand still as if frozen in time, waiting to lay my eyes on the person inside the car. The driver and passenger doors open simultaneously, and two men, dressed exactly like the men surrounding me, get out and jog towards the left side of the van while saying something into their wrists.

One of the men stands out the most with his tall height and huge build. From all the way here, I can only tell he has light brown hair. He is the tallest man here, and without exaggeration, I might say he is the tallest man I have ever seen, and that is saying something since the man who drove me here was unusually tall.

This one looks like a Viking wearing a suit.

The man opens the back door, and the first thing I notice are his stylish and expensive black leather Oxfords.

Huh, at least the old geezer has style.

My eyes roam upwards from his leather shoes to his impeccable, modern dark denim trousers and matching two-button single-breasted jacket with double-welt pockets and notch labels. Underneath the jacket, the man wears a white dress shirt.

It kills me to admit, but the man can sure dress and look expensive. The men back home wore expensive Italian suits, but this man gives me the impression that he likes his fashion the same way I do.

Modern, balancing past and present with his choice of style.

Luxurious.

And I already hate him for making me have anything in common with him.

I try hard to turn my face and ignore his presence. Ignore him until he gets sick of me and sets me free, but something deep inside of me tells me it

will not ever be that easy.

Not with this man.

He does not seem like the type that would be okay with being ignored and shoved into the background of one's mind.

The eerie sensation on my neck intensifies as I sense him slowly walking my way while his men stand back, alert and ready to strike whatever threat they sense to their boss.

Christ.

What did father get me into?

My eyes trail a path up his hard chest to his thick neck and notice tan skin, much lighter than mine but not pale by any means. I can't help but keep looking up until I find myself staring at a face that seems as if Dali, Picasso, and God themselves sculpted it from stone. High cheekbones, a straight Roman nose, and the palest, most beautiful blue eyes I have ever seen. They almost look gray.

And his hair.

God, his hair. Thick and black. A hair most women would kill to have, full and thick, with so much volume. Perfect.

The man walks my way, his head held high, oozing confidence and arrogance. I was wrong.

Dammit.

There is nothing geriatric about this man.

Nothing at all.

I have never been the type of girl to act like an idiot over a man, and I never will, but now, I am struck by how handsome this asshole is.

I find it fascinating yet infuriating that I notice such things and that I think of him as beautiful in a rugged manly way. I am more annoyed now than I was a second ago.

He is too. Annoyed, I mean. By the way, his narrowed eyes are staring daggers right through me, which snaps me out of it. For a stupid second, this man caught me off guard, and it will surely be the last.

Hopeless romantics believe in love at first sight. I don't. Only the naïve believe that a mere glance at another human's appearance is a sufficient way to inspire romantic feelings.

Even my sister, Mila, the dreamer of our family, would agree with me. There is no such thing as love at first sight, but there is hate at first glance, or at least, that is what I am telling myself while meeting his wolfish blue-gray

eyes.

Deep, menacing, and full of hunger.

A wolf with an appetite for my life.

That is who he is.

The cocky man stands before me, and with one gesture of his hand, he dismisses the men around me until there is only us.

Facing one another.

Hardening my features, I give him nothing.

Only a blank look on my face.

Not the smile that I am sure he is used to from women.

Nothing.

He, on the contrary, regards me with a condescending grin that reveals perfectly straight-white teeth.

Of course, his smile would be perfect.

“Arianna Luna Parisi.” His grin fades, and so does the twinkle in his eyes. The same I witnessed when our eyes first met. Now, he looks at me with distaste, as if he is not pleased with what he sees. “It is a pleasure to be in your acquaintance finally.”

He, indeed, is not pleased.

Oh, well.

I bet the pervert was expecting someone younger. A child bride, perhaps?

Tough luck, imbecile, I think to myself as I meet his stare full-on.

I am glad he wiped that pretentious smile off his face.

The animosity that I can work with, but that look he gave me before. Whatever it was, I am not used to it. I am defenseless against it, and it freaks me out. I can't allow it.

“Sebastian Kenton.” My father referred to this man as Bastian Kenton, but I refuse to be like everyone else that bows down to his royal ass and gives in to his every whim. “The pleasure is all yours.”

Something that looks a lot like amusement flashes in his eyes, but it quickly fades into hostility. His emotions give me whiplash. That is why I am not a fan of them. They make you stupid. “You may refer to me as Bastian or Mr. Kenton.”

So, the name is a touchy subject, is it? I will keep that in mind from now on. “And here I thought you would prefer it if I called you daddy.”

My *nonna* once told me my sarcastic mouth would one day get me into trouble. One day is here, and there is nothing else for me to lose, so trouble it

is.

A small grin forms on the corner of his lips, but it does not reach his eyes. “I’ll have my hands full with you, won’t I, Arianna, or should I call you little girl?”

Bastard.

His hands full, he says?

If he is not careful, the next time he calls me a little girl, his ass may very well be full of my three-inch spike Gucci heel. Breathing through my nose, I save the insults and verbal spars for later. I need to be out of this city before I show this man all my cards.

My *nonna* also used to call me a trickster because I can make anyone believe what I want them to. To fool them and con my way to the top of the food chain, just like powerful men in our world do. I know now that is what I must do to survive this man.

To survive this new life that is being forced on me.

“Say goodbye to your old life, Parisi.” Sebastian buttons his suit jacket and then gives me his back, dismissing me as if I am one of the men that work for him. Anger rises, but I hold it down. All in due time. I must be clear-headed to face whatever this man has in store for me. “You’re in my world now.” As soon as he says that, a black aircraft moves towards us and opens its doors for us to board.

The pompous jerk walks up the plane's stairs, leaving me behind.

I guess money does not always buy manners.

The Viking man who came with Sebastian motions for me. I flip him off, causing him to stifle a laugh as if he finds me amusing. Idiot.

I hold onto the railing and glance at the city I am leaving behind.

“Hold your head up high, kid,” Viking whispers at my back, waiting for me to climb the last step. “The only way you’ll survive him is if he respects you. If not, then you’re fucked.”

His words play like a loop through my head until I snap out of it and climb the last step that leads me inside the plane.

And when I do, it all sinks in.

This is my new reality.

Sebastian Kenton.

Current Senator of Chicago, Illinois.

A wolf hiding behind a charming smile and good looks.

A predator.

As of today... my keeper.

BASTIAN

I lay back in my seat and stare at the Parisi princess sitting cross-legged with her arms protectively folded over her chest as if that would keep her safe from me. She is much smaller in height and overall size than she looked in the photos her sick father sent me weeks ago when he offered his firstborn on a silver platter to his worst enemy.

She was not what I was expecting.

I must admit the photos don't do the girl justice.

Not at all.

She has long, shapely legs, and her neck looks delicate, easily breakable if that was my intention.

It might be, after that sass, she threw my way earlier.

She is a spoiled princess who was betrayed by her flesh and blood. Understandably, she will bite back if she senses danger.

All wild creatures do.

There is something dark lurking behind those icy emerald eyes that resembles wildness. Behind all those perfectly laid layers, a predator is waiting to attack.

Oh, yes.

And it's sick that I am looking forward to her fight.

For that first bite.

Taking a sip of my drink, my eyes remain glued to her profile as she sits perfectly still, as if she is not breathing, clutching the seat belt around her waist.

So much anger hidden underneath that uncaring facade of hers.

I wonder what could have possibly put those vicious demons in her eyes. What troubles could she have faced as the first-born, beautiful, mafia princess of the Consigliere of one of the most notorious crime families in the country?

Huh.

She is a puzzle.

The girl stares out the jet's window while I take advantage of the silence

to take her in.

She might be an expert at hiding herself from others, but I can see her.

She is scared.

Not of me, no.

Which is intriguing since I am the only thing she should ever fear.

Not the dark.

Not her family.

Not the world.

Me.

Not an airplane.

Yet, she is.

It is obvious by the way she is holding onto the seat belt as if her life depends on it. Does flying make her nervous? Has she even flown on a jet before? So many questions, yet I know she will not be as easy to crack as the other women I have encountered before.

This is a child with a chip on her shoulder and a cold heart.

A troubling combination.

Then it hits me.

Arianna is no ordinary mafia princess no.

Something about her called out to me the moment I saw her face through a screen. A maturity to her that could only be obtained by surviving great pain and tragedy.

There is also a feeling of familiarity when she stares into my eyes. As if I have known her before, which is absurd since I have never met this girl before today.

However, the feeling is there, nagging at me.

In the half-hour she has been in my presence, she has acted both hot and cold, and I don't think she even realizes she is capable of being anything but cold.

There is warmth there, creeping behind all that sass and bad attitude.

For her young age, she dresses and carries herself as someone much older than her eighteen years of age. There is no doubt she is one of the most beautiful, if not the most beautiful young woman I've ever encountered, and I've met a lot of pretty women in my life.

This one is different.

She wears her beauty not as a shield but as a weapon.

My eyes travel from the fitted white suit that makes her look like a

business opponent instead of the teenager she is. I take in her wrists, fingers, and neck and find no jewelry. Rich girls like her flaunt their wealth as a sport, but this one does not.

Does she even own any jewelry? Does she choose not to wear any to blend in? To not stand out? Moreover, why does the thought of this insignificant girl wanting to blend in with everyone else to maybe protect herself makes my blood boil?

I finish what is left of my drink and place it down harshly on top of the small table next to my seat. She does not startle. She remains frozen, looking out the small window into the night.

Ice princess.

What hardships have you faced? How many demons have you slain?

Then my eyes moved up her neck to find the perfect honey blonde hair I couldn't stop looking at when I first saw her picture, chopped as if she did it herself, and something tells me she did. One-half of her hair is long and falls down her chest, almost touching her waist when she's sitting, and the other sits well above her breast.

She looks like a mess.

A beautiful mess, nonetheless.

Her chopped hair.

Her dead eyes.

The frown on her forehead.

The grim lines around her mouth.

Anger bubbles in the pit of my stomach when I take in all the signs.

Abuse?

Neglect?

Both?

"Where is home?" she asks, not bothering to look at me.

And I don't bother answering.

She will soon find out.

My eyes leave her, suddenly unable to breathe with the rage I feel, not only towards her bitch of a father but towards her as well for stirring feelings I have no business feeling towards a Parisi.

Pity is one of them.

Because when I looked into her eyes, I saw the same stare my father had when he got lost in the gruesome memories war left him with.

Then all the confusing feelings she stirred in me with just her presence

fade and get lost in a sea of anger and resentment inside me.

The one I battle every day.

I think of him instead.

My father, my mother, and I ground myself.

Hardening my heart once again, ridding it of any sympathy for the girl.

When I come back out of my thoughts, I notice the girl is no longer looking out the window but down at the chessboard in front of her. On our way to get her, Banning and I played a game, but it was interrupted before I could checkmate him.

I watch delicate fingers reach forward and move a glass piece. "Look here. Someone left the king unprotected." She says, trying to get my attention. She grins up at me, but there is no humor.

Nothing.

She is cold.

So cold, but those eyes don't fool me. Those emeralds have a fire in them that will not be easy to put out.

Chuckling, I lean forward in my seat until I am a breath away from her face. Arianna loses her cocky smile when I move my pawn strategically, as I have done countless times before since I was a young boy.

"Checkmate, darling." I have always found great satisfaction in winning at everything. At chess. At life. At war. This is no different. I will not lose. Ever. When it comes to this girl, it will not be any different.

Her nostrils flare, and her eyes flash with something resembling curiosity. I have never met someone quite like her, and I know with certainty that she has never crossed a man like me before.

"Men like you always win, no?"

"I don't know about other men, but I know myself. Yes, I win. Every time." I lean back and keep my eyes trained on her. Christ, she is stunning. Even more so with the daggers, she is throwing my way. She is not a fan of mine. I am heartbroken. "Want to know the secret to never losing, darling?"

"Not really." She mumbles while inspecting her nails. Brat. Fight me, kid. It will make this easier. "But I'm sure you're going to tell me."

Chuckling, I let her in on a little secret. The one my father, told me countless times when I was younger. "If you make the right moves and learn to control your pawns...you'll never lose. No matter how skilled your opponent is." Her eyes leave her nails and hold my eyes captive.

Calculating.

Curious.

Thrilling.

I see all of it in those cold depths of hers.

Something energetic runs through me, unsettling me. How can someone so cold make me feel anything but just by looking my way? Then something happens. Something I was not expecting just yet. Her curious eyes leave mine and focus on my mouth.

That sobers me up.

I have been attracted to challenges since I was a child, and this girl, in a matter of minutes, has proven to be the most enticing one.

She is a puzzle, and for a moment there, I find myself desiring to crack it.

Silence falls between us as we stare at each other, lost in the moment.

Fuck.

What is she doing to me?

Then she opens that pretty but vindictive mouth of hers and stuns me. "I'm not fucking you." Her voice doesn't tremble, nor does her stare waver from mine. *Oh, what a treat you are, Arianna Luna Parisi.*

A worthy opponent.

I haven't encountered many quite like her.

How ironic I have found a dangerous one in an eighteen-year-old girl.

Wanting out of whatever spell the pretty princess put on me, I snap out of it. Remembering her age. Remembering what she represents.

My greatest failure.

"Lucky for you, princess, little girls don't do it for me. I like for my women to be older and..." I make a show of looking her up and down and lying through my goddamn teeth. "More experienced."

Her nostrils flare, but her beautiful face remains void of all emotion.

I am fascinated.

Yesterday, that statement would have been the honest-to-God-truth, but after meeting her and experiencing her fight and courageousness firsthand, I must admit that I have never been more turned on in my life, and that messes with my head.

Which I cannot allow.

Her emerald eyes stare holes through me, but she remains silent. Like a beautiful doll used to handling cocky assholes like me.

That pisses me off more.

Because despite my feelings towards the past and how this girl fits in it, I

cannot help but look at her and be reminded of my father.

My mother.

My baby daughter.

Victims and innocents.

In a moment of weakness, I tell her exactly what is on my mind as I look into her eyes. “You can stop fighting now, Arianna. The war is over.”

The icy facade slips the moment the words leave my mouth, but then she remembers who she is and what I am to her, and the ice barricades are lifted again.

“You are wrong, Sebastian Kenton.” Cold and detached, with no light in her eyes. *You are just as fucked-up as me, darling.* “The war has just begun.” A threat.

Chuckling, I signal the stewardess for another glass. “So be it.”

Arianna goes back to ignoring me while I focus on the chessboard in front of me. Chess has never been a game of entertainment for me but a way for me to exercise my mind. I don’t see the black and white tiles, the pawns, or the queens. I see the game and the countless opportunities to destroy an opponent.

I can’t focus on anything but her words. How she managed to call me by my legal name, and I did nothing to put her in her place like before.

My cell rings, and I pull it out of my pocket to see it’s Parisi calling. “Yes?”

“Any deal you made with my father is void.” The voice of a teenage girl sounds on the other line. I look away from the board and focus on Arianna. “If— if you hurt her, I’ll—

“You’ll what?” I mock the girl on the line, but deep down, I am half impressed by her bravery. “Where is your father? And why is it you are calling me, child?”

“Fuck you. He will no longer be available to you.” The girl barks. “You won’t be making any more deals with him from now on either. No one will.” She falls silent, and I am tempted to hang up, but I am still processing what she just said. I could care less about the bastard, but if someone will make him pay for his greed and sin, it will be me.

However, how poetic it would be if Gabriele’s blood were drained of his body by his own daughter’s hand.

The thought does not calm the rage I feel inside but does lessen it.

I make a move to hang up on the girl, but a softly whispered plea keeps

me on the line.

“Please, don’t—” The girl takes a deep breath before continuing. “Please don’t hurt her.” The Parisi spawn takes a deep and shaky breath, but her tone becomes strong and even. “She’s been hurt enough.” With that, the line goes dead. Unlike her older sister, this one seems all over the place with her emotions. I could detect so much anger in her voice and desperation as well.

Please don’t hurt her.

I am not this family’s ally.

I am the enemy her father created.

She’s been hurt enough.

Even if I didn’t wish to cause the girl harm.

It is inevitable.

Hurting others is what I do.

Especially to the princess of the man that cruelly tore my world into pieces so many years ago.

ARIANNA

ROYAL HIGHNESS



“You motherfucking fuck.” - B.B
Malibu, California

There is something oddly peaceful about new beginnings. It should feel terrifying being thrown into the unknown, but somehow, I only feel peace, but that could also be because peace always comes before the war.

Not the other way around like most would have you believe.

Same as storms, and the man a few feet away from me speaking quietly to his employee, is surely one of the most dangerous storms I will ever face.

After we landed, I was brought here. To a beach house in Malibu. The place is small, and nothing like I would imagine a man like him to live in or own.

The place is not luxurious—it is quiet and away from the crowds of this city. No, it is not somewhere I would envision a man like him living in. It does not quite scream egotistical bastard.

Sighing, I stick my feet in the sand and take in everything around me. The pink sunset looks ethereal. The sun is setting to later allow the moon room to breathe. The mix of colors blend in together, making a beautiful shade of pink before night falls.

The soft waves break apart once they meet the shore and the serene breeze blows my hair gently.

This is new to me.

I have never been to the beach.

Hell, I have never been anywhere outside of Detroit. The only traveling I

ever did was in my dreams. Every time I closed my eyes and wished to be away from home.

Every time the whip hit my skin, or my father landed a blow, I would fly away to another place.

A place of beauty and peace.

A place like this.

Therefore, yes, I should be plotting all the ways I could free myself from this man and whatever he intends to do with me, but for the first time in my life, I do something for myself and don't think of anyone else.

I breathe.

After years of this constant feeling of dread and pain, while I drowned in nothing but hate, I breathe in and laugh like a maniac.

I laugh, and I cry.

Not caring if Sebastian Kenton, my enemy, sees me.

Just for this moment, I allow myself to be human.

How odd...

I found peace in this fucked-up situation.

Once I am done, I dry my eyes as if it never happened.

As if I didn't just break down in front of the sea and the sunset to witness a moment of vulnerability, I would never share with anyone else.

I move closer until my feet are touching the water.

Memories of dreaming of this moment with my sisters try to take me under, but I stop them before they hurt me.

I was powerless for a long time, but I will never return to that place.

Never again.

I am so deep inside my head that I miss the moment Sebastian left his bodyguard's side and joined me.

I don't look his way. I keep staring at the line where the sky kisses the sea and concentrate on the blissful sensation of the cold water touching my bare feet.

"Stunning, isn't it?" His husky voice is a whisper, but I manage to hear him. I want to ignore him. I should not give him a second of my time because he does not deserve it, yet, for some odd reason, I feel the need to hear his voice again. His tone is smooth and commanding, but it also makes me calm. I cannot stand it, yet I want to listen to him just as much as the sound of the waves.

Serenity.

How is it possible to feel both enraged and calmed by this stranger's presence?

The words are there, but they are stuck in my throat. I hold them back, not wanting to find a common ground with him. It is easier to fight. To wage war.

That is all I know. Anything else will be uncharted territory and could leave me defenseless.

He sighs, and for some reason unknown to me, I feel a weird sensation in my stomach. He sounds disappointed. Maybe annoyed?

Good.

That is...good.

Focus on that, Arianna. Focus on making him not want to deal with your baggage, and maybe that is the key to freedom.

However, that is too easy. Deep down, I know that. I am not a fool, this is not a fairytale, nor is Sebastian a dashing prince.

"This will be your home now." His emotionless tone breaks through my thoughts. "Banning will keep you safe, and if you ever need anything, communicate it to him, and he is under strict instructions to contact me and only me." He sounds detached and business-like as if I am some sort of transaction. Which I guess I am.

Wait a second.

I turn away from the sea and stare at the infuriating man's face. His black hair is perfectly styled, without a strand out of place, even when the breeze hits. He unbuttoned his suit and ditched the oxfords to join me in the sand.

"What did you say?" I must have heard wrong. He is leaving me here.

"You heard me." He tips his chin as he murmurs.

I ignore the way his eyes drink me in as if they can see through me all the way inside my soul. As if he could tear my walls with just one look of those wolfish eyes. "I won't be staying with you?"

I am so confused.

Sebastian's face remains void of emotion. "Of course not."

Of course not.

That is all he gives me.

This was not the plan. I was made to believe I would be marrying the Senator of Chicago, and that was the reason for my wrath. My life was given away without my consent to this man for him to do as he pleased, and now he is leaving me behind. In part, I am relieved, but something tells me this is not

all. It cannot be this easy. “We are not to be wed?”

Then he laughs. The motherfucker laughs, making me steel my spine and raise my guard back up. Christ, he truly is the most insufferable man I have ever met, and I have met many assholes throughout the years.

None like this one, though.

His brows furrow when he says almost mechanically. “I told you, darling. I prefer my women grown.”

Something about that bothers me more than it should. God, this jerk knows how to push my buttons without really knowing me.

Therefore, I do what I always do when I feel attacked.

I bite.

“Well, that’s a relief. I couldn’t think of a duller life than to be tied down to an old man.” I bite back, wanting to piss him off just as he did me. It should not bother me. God, this is good for me. He has no plans to marry or touch me, as I was made to believe.

This time he chuckles, and I narrow my eyes up at him. The man is so much taller than I am, and I am not a short person by any means. I have always been the tallest girl everywhere I went back home, but Sebastian is almost as tall as the Viking, Banning, he called him. I stare into those blue-gray eyes of his, and I am taken aback by the mirth there.

It’s obvious he finds me amusing, which only makes me madder.

“You should be grateful I am not shipping you off to become a child bride like your cunt of a father intended.” He drawls, irritating me with how quickly he changes moods.

“I don’t trust you.” I blurt out.

“Good.” He takes out his phone, unlocks it, and starts to type rapidly. “You shouldn’t.”

“You could set me free and rid yourself of the burden of taking care of me.” I try to persuade him.

“I could.” He types for a second longer before shoving his phone back into his dressed pants.

“I’ll find a way to free myself then.” He won’t budge. This is clear by his nonchalant attitude. Dammit.

“You should.” He steps closer to me, and all I can focus on is how his eyes laugh at me. Only enraging me further. God, I am an atrocious mess around this man, and I have only just met him. “In fact, I wish to see you try, but we both know that you care a little too much about the people you left

back home, and we both also know what will happen to them if daddy dearest were to find out you bailed on this deal, darling.”

The condescending asshole.

The evil, sadistic moth—

His grin widens from ear to ear. “Now, be a good girl and behave.”

I scoff at that. “Never.”

A small smile forms on his face before he reaches forward, takes a chopped strand of my hair and twirls it around his thick finger. “Such anger...”

I choose to ignore the flip of my stomach when he inches closer.

“How would you feel if you were sold like a piece of unwanted cattle to a stranger and your life no longer belonged to you?” I slap his hand away, suddenly angry at his callous way of disregarding this feeling of impotence currently cursing through my body. He does not owe me anything. I know this, but still, it angers me.

He is in deep thought for a long second. “You are free to do what you wish here, but you will keep a low profile if you wish to keep your sisters safe.”

Lifting my chin, I say, “Don’t threaten me.”

He then shrugs. “Take it as you will. I don’t care for theatrics. Just do as you are told, and try not to be a brat, yes? I know that might be difficult for you.”

A brat.

I have to remind myself that this man has my life in his hands, and if I step out of line, I’ll pay the consequences, whether, with my life or my sisters, and as angry as I am with how it all went down, I still wouldn’t do anything that would jeopardize them. “You’re an asshole,” I say, narrowing my eyes up at him.

His eyes gleam as he says, “I am.”

At least he recognizes it. Although I want the insults to make an impact, he does not care. It does nothing.

“You don’t care that you’re ruining my life, do you?”

“From this view, darling, I think we both might agree that I saved you from a more tragic fate. Now, remember what I said.” He steps back from me and buttons his suit.

The sun is almost gone, and the colors in the sky are fading and turning dark.

I refuse to admit it, but he is right. I have no one on my side. I have no one to call for help. I have nothing to my name. I left Detroit with only the clothes on my back.

I cannot act impulsively because that will get me nowhere.

I might have lost a lot in the past couple of hours, but not all is lost. This man could have sold me or used me as my father expected, but he is doing neither.

He is leaving me alone. But... why?

Then his words from earlier hit me full force.

You can stop fighting now, Arianna. The war is over.

“What did you mean when you said I can stop fighting now?” He is walking back to the house, almost reaching the gate that separates the house from the sand. He turns, but not all the way.

“You’re safe here. He will not hurt you anymore. Not as long as you’re under my care, darling.” With that, he steps inside the house and leaves me on my own.

Darling.

You are safe here.

He will not hurt you anymore.

Several suppressed emotions fight to come to the surface of my mind, but I push them away.

I had so many questions, but I am not sure I want the answers.

At least, not now.

That was the last time I was in Sebastian Kenton’s presence for a long while, but to my dismay, he was always present whenever I closed my eyes.

The asshole not only held me hostage but my thoughts as well.

I didn’t know it then, but the man that took me from all I knew also set me free.

He gave me my wings back.

The ones my father ripped so cruelly off my back.

BASTIAN

This was not how it was supposed to go down with the Parisi princess.

It was all set in stone.

She was to come to Chicago with me and fulfill her father's part of our deal, but she had to go and look up at me with those empty and sad eyes piercing through my hallowed soul and making me rethink everything.

Fuck me, those emerald-green eyes.

That girl.

That lonely and angry girl...

She might not think she is a kid, and maybe all the tragedy she has lived through has shaped her and given her a maturity not many eighteen-year-olds possess, but she is still just a kid.

I saw it.

That innocence buried deep underneath all that attitude.

The moment she looked out of the plane's small window with so much wonder and a child-like enthusiasm when she thought I wasn't paying attention was the moment I knew that if I took her and used her like I initially intended, I would be just like him.

The man, we both hate.

The man that ruined and broke his own child's heart.

I am no better than that son of a bitch, but at least now I can look at my daughter and know I did the right thing by someone else's little girl.

Who-the-fuck would have thought I would show mercy to my enemy's blood?

Sure-as-fuck not me.

Yet, here I am doing exactly that.

After some digging the weeks prior, I was to retrieve her. I took care of every threat to her life.

Every sick motherfucker her father had lined up if I had said no to his offer.

For now, she is free.

Unlocking my phone, I open the message her father sent me, and her picture pops up.

It does not do her justice.

Not at all.

Her chopped-off hair, mascara running down her face, and big green eyes pierced through me.

Stunning.

Yes, the girl is gorgeous, but not only on the outside. The inside too. That

fire inside of her that has not dimmed, not even a little bit, makes her even more beautiful in my eyes.

I am so fucked.

A child.

She is a child.

I keep repeating it like a mantra as I stare at her photograph, not understanding how a kid in a couple of hours has this hold on me.

She is dangerous.

Because she is made of the same cloth as me.

I saw it in the way she held my gaze and never backed down while I did my best to intimidate her.

I take one last look at the photo before I drop the phone on the seat next to me and look out the jet's window.

I will be landing in my city any moment now, and she will soon be forgotten.

Or so I thought.

I knew deep down that it couldn't be further from the truth.

ARIANNA

MALIBU BARBIE



“I dream of him when night falls.” - A

Why does time stand still when you don't want it to? Although wishing the hours away is futile, after all, there is nowhere else to go.

I feel stuck.

I have gone through this in my head a million times, trying to make sense of it all since stepping foot inside my new home. Should I make a run for it? Should I scream and fight?

What is the answer?

For the first time in what feels like forever, I don't have a clear one.

What I am certain of is that I have nothing to my name and no support from my so-called allies back in Detroit.

There is no lost love between them and my only ally...I shoved my knife into his back.

I messed up big time when I betrayed Lucan Volpe by exposing his little girlfriend's heartbreaking secret. I did a horrible thing. It was uncalled for, yes. However, what is the point of agonizing about it now? I don't make excuses for myself and what happened, happened...but I regret it deeply.

The girl did not deserve what I did to her out of anger and survival.

That is what I do, isn't it? I always put my sisters before anyone else, not caring if there were casualties who got hurt because of my selfish choices.

Now, I find myself in this predicament and nobody is here for me.

I am alone.

It has been three days since I was forced into a reality, and I still cannot wrap my head around it. I don't think I will ever fully get used to the idea

that my life as I knew it is over. Not that I mind all that much since all I've ever wanted was to leave that city, the heartache, and my parents behind.

As much as I hoped for it, a part of me doubted if the day would ever come, and now it is here.

I am away from it all.

The three families and my father.

I am also away from them.

My sisters.

My nonna.

They were supposed to be here, but it didn't turn out that way.

Kadra chose to believe our father's lies, completely disregarding the fact that I would have laid down my life for them.

Sirius betrayed me, shoving her sharp knife on my back, and I was left with no choice but to leave Mila behind.

Shut your mind off, Arianna. It serves you nothing to reminisce about a life that is no longer yours.

This is your life now.

"Ghost of You" by Mimi Webb plays in my ears as I approach the beach house that will be my home for God knows how long. The house sits by itself right on the ocean. By no means is it extravagant, but it has a cozy and homey feel to it. The kind of house that you see in romance movies. The back of the house is nothing but floor-to-ceiling, sliding glass windows with no curtains. Benjamin leaves the windows open all the time, per my request. I like to hear the ocean. The breeze and the smell remind me of that peacefulness I have been chasing all my life, and until now, never had.

That is why every morning I wake up and come to the beach. Sometimes, I sit down on the sand and look at the sunrise, and other times I come to run. I run as fast as I can, enjoying how liberating it feels.

It feels almost like I am running from the ghosts that haunt me.

The past.

The present.

Now...him.

My keeper.

At night, I am restless because I see him there, too. Goddamn tyrant. Not only has he taken over my life, but he is also infiltrating my thoughts and dreams.

Because I do dream about him.

I see him on these sands, barefoot, with his dark as-night hair blowing gently with the soft breeze. I recall the way he stood tall, proud, looking so intimidating, yet not once did he raise his voice or hands at me. Not once did he make me feel afraid for my life like the men I grew up with did.

Then I wonder what he thinks of me. Am I just the latest acquisition for his entertainment? Does he think of me as a charity case? A messed up little girl that he feels he needs to save.

All the above angers me.

Because I don't want him to see me in such ways.

And why do I care?

Frustrated with myself, I run faster until I am out of breath and my muscles ache. I push myself harder, trying to leave him behind with all my ghosts, but it is useless.

Ugh, damn you.

This is not who you are...no man will conquer your thoughts, and God forbid your cold heart. A small and sometimes annoying voice inside my brain—the bitchy angel on one shoulder—reminds me. God knows most people have a wise angel and a reckless demon on their shoulders battling for control, but not me, no. The angel abandoned me a long time ago, or maybe it was never there. Just a bitchy conscience who guided me down dark and selfish paths every time.

Maybe it is all bullshit.

Slowing to a walk, I remove the earbuds and enter through the glass front doors, placing the brand-new iPhone Benjamin gave me yesterday on the foyer's table. Taking a deep breath to calm my racing heart from my run, I make my way to the kitchen to grab a bottle of water.

Every muscle in my body burns. I have been running every morning since I got here. There is not much to do since I have zero contact with the outside world, not that they forbid it. There is Wi-Fi, and my phone has internet access. I am not a prisoner here, and every day that passes, it is more obvious that the man has given me every opportunity to run, and yet, I have not.

I am not dumb, nor am I impulsive.

“Had a nice run?” A deep, rough voice sounds from behind me, startling me.

The Viking.

“Fuck.” I don't startle easily, or I thought I didn't, but lately, it has been happening a lot. I think the gigantic ass enjoys creeping up on me, trying to

get a reaction from me. I get it. Some people don't know how to handle someone who does not care to uphold social norms or does not care to speak as frequently as they would like them to, and I understand why he would find it intriguing. Normal people are dreadfully boring, and even in my callousness and silence, I am anything but.

"So, you do speak." 'Of course, I speak, halfwit' is on the tip of my tongue, but I hold the vicious little monster back. Instead, I settle the bottle of water back on the refrigerator and close it before resting my back on it, facing my guard dog. "How are you this fine morning, princess?" He asks me how I am every morning, and I ignore him every time. I have nothing to say, so I don't entertain him.

Then I feel guilty. As much as I want to blame the world, I do understand that he is just doing his job.

Trust me, I get it.

"Don't call me that." I hate it. Ice princess. Princess. I have heard it all before. From my father whenever he wanted to remind me of my duty. From his men every time they mocked me or belittled me. From the airhead kids at the academy when they tried to hurt me just because they thought they could.

How wrong were they...

The title of princess is beneath me, really.

"What should I call you then?" From the corner of my eye, I watch him take a sip of his orange juice and look at me from the rim of the glass with a small smile on his face.

"Call me by my name. I don't care for anything else." I snap at him.

This time the man chuckles. "Shit. You are so similar it is creepy-as-fuck. God knows the world doesn't need another one of him."

What is he going on about?

I must say that besides his daily pointless attempts at conversation, I don't mind him all that much. He wakes up at dawn and hides away in the small home gym, takes calls from what I assume is his boss, and then spends most of the day working on his computer after feeding me.

He is a half-decent chef, as well.

Okay, I am being a petty bitch.

He is a great cook, and almost all the food he has prepared in the past three days I've never had in my life. We were not allowed.

Only boring, nutritious food for us, and nothing that might make us smile. God forbid our parents would allow even a small amount of joy in our lives.

Ignoring him, I walk around him and take a seat at the kitchen counter as I do every morning. It's weird, but even though we don't speak all that much, and the man has zero knowledge of my likes and dislikes, every morning I find a newspaper on top of the counter next to a small, white box filled with out-of-this-world, delicious baked goods.

Cake pops.

"Pops for Anna." Mila's sweet voice haunts me, and it takes everything in me not to throw the contents of the box away. It feels wrong.

"Hey, kid. Are you good?" A bowl of oatmeal with strawberries is placed in front me, pulling me away from the sad thoughts of my baby sister. My stomach rumbles so loud I am sure Benjamin can hear it, and that causes him to push the plate toward me. I don't say a word; just take one of the strawberries not really feeling the oatmeal today. He sighs and takes a seat opposite to me. I raise the newspaper higher, blocking him from my view. Immature? Yes. Rude? Of course. Somehow, it makes me feel as if I have a little control, even as absurd as it appears. Then his phone rings, successfully taking his attention elsewhere.

While he talks on the phone, I focus on the newspaper's politics sections. I flip the pages until I stop dead when the face of the man that is currently on the other end of Benjamin's phone call.

The news article reads.

"Senator Kenton steps out to attend the inauguration of the second Youth Center for under-resourced kids days after he inaugurated The Vivienne Kenton's Children's Mental Health Center in the South Shore area."

"Yes, understood, boss." Benjamin's voice does not deter me from reading the entire piece written to make the senator of Chicago look like Saint Thomas of Aquinas.

I stare at the man that has taken over my thoughts. He looks like your typical politician, but there is something more. Everything about him feels larger than life. I take in his smile as he is cutting a red ribbon.

He is wearing a full suit, and his hair is slick back from his face, the same as the night at the beach. He looks powerful and intimidating but tamed.

So...handsome.

I never had any interest in men.

Most of the kids at school irritated me to no end, to the point I had no interest in them.

I was too busy trying not to drown that I never had the chance to be a girl. To date. To form long-lasting relationships. I became numb to it all.

Now... I cannot seem to stop my thoughts from wandering back to this much older, handsome, yet extremely infuriating man.

I agonize over the fact that he is both my savior and my villain.

Stop it...

Then I see the woman standing behind him with hearts in her eyes. One would look at her, and I see she's a beautiful and sophisticated woman, hung up on the man she is looking at as if he is her moon and stars, but I only see a sad sack with cuckoo eyes.

However, why does the image of that age-appropriate and stunning woman next to him bother me? God, this is maddening. What is wrong with me? Him. That is what is wrong with me.

He dropped me off here with his head of security as if I was a dirty secret he didn't care to deal with, and he looks happy. Happy to be back in his world, and I am here. Lost. Confused. I try not to feel miserable, but when you are alone, that bitch misery creeps in.

Then I think about how everyone is happy, except for me and the green monster who has been my only friend since childhood takes over.

Lost in my head, I hadn't noticed Benjamin ended his call and is now looking at me while chewing on a piece of whole grain toast. He gets up from the table, goes to the kitchen, and opens a drawer before walking over to me and dropping some sort of brochure next to my plate.

Putting down the newspaper, I pick up the brochure.

A college brochure.

I do something I will regret later.

I tear up in front of a stranger who works for my enemy, but I cannot help it.

I never... Christ. How is this happening? Why? Is this a cruel joke?

"Fuck, kid." Benjamin's voice is oddly soft and gentle. I hate it just as much as I appreciate it. "I know this is not what you envisioned for yourself

or what you hoped out of life, but it could've been worst, and before you bite my head off, I know it's fucked up what your cunt of a father did but rise above it." That makes me look up at the man I have been ignoring, as if I couldn't be bothered by his presence. His brown eyes are kind, one thing I would have noticed if I gave myself a chance to get to know him. "Now, don't be foolish and waste this second chance at life. Because that is precisely what Bastian is giving you. The life that your father stole from you. The boss is an asshole, but he is no villain. Not to you. Now, take this opportunity, make something out of yourself, and for fucks' sake, make this easy for the both of us, yes? He will have my ass if something were to happen to you."

He knocks the wind out of me with each word he says. I am too choked up to say anything. There is nothing to say really, so I hold on to the brochures close to my heart and keep the tears at bay.

Tears of joy...

I have never cried tears of joy before.

Tears of frustration, fear, and sadness? Yes. Never because my heart was happy.

Because my heart has never been happy...

Could this all be genuine? And I'm so jaded that I can't see the good in this situation? I never thought any of this possible. Yes, I hoped, but it all seems so out of my reach. Never as simple as it is now.

So simple.

An impossible dream he has made possible without me having to fight or beg for it.

I feel a weird sensation in my chest. One I haven't felt since I was a child.

Hope?

Happiness?

Perhaps something else?

But what could it be?

Damn you, heart. Don't be stupid.

Eventually, you will get hurt.

Benjamin claps, capturing my attention. "Get showered and dress comfortably. We're stepping out in twenty."

I rise from my seat and ask hoarsely, trying to conceal my emotions. "Where are we going?"

He smiles. "First, we're getting rid of that deranged mental patient look

you have going on.” He points to my hair, making me reach for the chopped strands, reminding me of what they represent. Broken bonds and cut ties. “Then we’re getting you everything you will need to start your new life, yeah? Now hurry. I’ve been looking forward to getting the fuck out of this place at least for a day.” With one last smile, he gently pushes me toward the hall and leaves me to get ready.

I look down at the university’s brochure with all the academic offers and walk towards my room once there, I open the door and find a white box with a small black bow on it. Setting the brochures down on the bed, I focus on the medium sized box. Taking off the ribbon without messing it, I notice it is a rose gold MacBook Air. On top of the box, there is a note.

*Arianna,
The first rule of any game...
You cannot undo the move, but you can make the
next step better.
So, make it better. - S*

For the first time in what seems like a lifetime, I smile. Maybe because this is the kindest thing anyone has ever done for me, if not the only thing. Or maybe it is because he signed the note with his full name when the first time we met he corrected me when I refused to be like everyone else and call him Bastian.

“Move your ass, kid!” Benjamin’s voice booms successfully making me hurry my ass up. I take the note, shove it inside one of the drawers for safekeeping, and start to get ready.

Excited about what is to come.

Good or bad, I think... I think I will be alright.

Christ... what is happening to me?

Hope.

Hope is creeping in and that is a dangerous thing.

ARIANNA

LUNA



“Not even the devil wants his soul.” – A
Two years later

The day has finally arrived.

For so many busy days and long nights, I longed for it.

For a while, it was only a little girl’s dream that was too far out of her reach, and now it’s no longer a dream but a reality.

Mine.

I could have let my pride stand in the way and let this opportunity slip through my fingers, but instead, I worked hard as hell and made it happen.

I did listen to Benjamin’s, at the time, unsolicited yet wise advice.

It all made this happen.

Graduation day.

I am moments away from walking up the stage and receiving my diploma ahead of time.

In two years, with hard work, dedication, and lots of free time to study, I did what takes others four.

I wish I could say I did this on my own.

That is far from the truth.

Sebastian gave me all the tools I needed to succeed, including his most trusted man, who turned out to be not only my number #1 cheerleader but also my only friend.

A real friend.

Never cared for friends, and I didn’t really think I needed one, but he slowly and very painfully crept into the hollow hole in my chest and made

space for himself. As much as it pains me to admit, and I never will...out loud, of course. He is the only person in my corner now.

Scanning the sea of people gathered to celebrate us graduates, I search for the man I stopped referring to as my jailor and now call a friend. Benjamin stands surrounded by thousands of other friends and family members disguised as one of them and not as bodyguards. I know there are more of him today, as I overheard him talking on the phone last night about the security details for the event.

Today, he has the same look on his face he had every time he would stay up late with me, helping me study for tests or every time I finished a class assignment before its due date. A look that used to disturb me just as much as it would puzzle me. One I have never seen before.

That is a lie.

Another man stared at me the same way once.

Sebastian Kenton.

That fateful night he stared at me with a look I had trouble deciphering then, but now I know it to be pride. He looked proud every time I opened my mouth to hurl insults his way or sass him back when he tried to make me feel inadequate.

Back in Detroit, that would have gotten me a bloody lip or a broken rib, but not with Sebastian. It was as if he enjoyed that I didn't cower under the heat of his gaze or his intimidating presence.

I still don't know what he saw in me that day that made him decide to grant me liberties I was never allowed in my old life.

I became fascinated with the way the man held my gaze. Not once did it stray, unafraid of my wrath or sharp tongue.

Sebastian...

If I close my eyes and concentrate, I can still smell his rich cologne mixed with a hint of bourbon.

I hate that I notice such things about him and that I haven't forgotten.

It only took one encounter with the man for him to take residence in my brain.

Two years have passed, and he has made zero contact, yet I have never gone without protection or anything else I have needed to survive. Benjamin does a lot for me, but I know the orders come from his boss, or maybe it is just wishful thinking, and Sebastian could care less what happens to me.

I catch Benjamin's gaze and flip him off when I see him pointing at his

face as if telling me to smile wide. He knows I hate smiling, yet he never gives up trying to get me to do it. He laughs and continues taking photos of me while holding the ceremony's program. I didn't get one when I took my seat, so I don't know if I will be awarded anything.

I hope not.

Two weeks ago, one of my professors, Mrs. Fowler, approached me with the announcement that I was chosen as the class speaker because of my excellent grade point average. I immediately turned it down. Not because I'm ungrateful. Because I am not. I don't take this experience for granted, but because my experience at university is sure as hell not the same as all the graduates sitting around me today.

I took all my classes online. It is safe to say that I am not the person to speak on the matter today. I am more than okay being in the background and enjoying this moment for what it is to me.

A big piece of freedom.

A gift.

The only reason I came here was that Benjamin insisted, almost dragging me by the hair when I told him I didn't wish to attend because I felt pitiful. The shame crept in when I remembered that I am no longer alone.

He rooted for me every single step of the way, and if my being here makes him shut up about it and be happy?

So be it.

When I woke up this morning, he made his famous chocolate chip pancakes in the form of a graduation cap. At least, that is what I think it was. Lord knows it looked more like a blob than anything else, and before, I would have pointed it out but not at that moment. At that moment, I felt cared for, a thing no one besides *nonna* had done for me before.

Therefore, I told him 'thank you,' and we both ate quietly as we do every morning before the madness of this day started.

After breakfast, he gave me three dresses to choose from, and I picked a nude, off-the-shoulder mini dress that screamed sophisticated and stylish, not trashy like the other two did. Then I paired it with some clear strap heels. A styling team curled my hair and kept my makeup bare to the minimum.

I am all for glam, but I wasn't in the mood to have a full face of makeup today just in case my newfound stupid emotions got the best of me.

The team did a great job with my look today. I look beautiful. The leisurely stares I have been receiving from people tell me that much.

Nothing but the best for Mr. Kenton, I see.

I am sure the man owns the world at this point, with how crazy rich, and powerful the man is. I have met rich men before, but not Sebastian, rich.

Then my gaze moves, trying to find the man that helped me make this dream come true, but I know he is not here. He has never come around after that time, and this time will not be any different.

The only glimpses I get of him are from news articles or TV when he does his press conferences and morning shows appearances. I never talk to or ask about him, Benjamin.

But I do find myself at times— okay, mostly— keeping up with his campaign trail and learning everything I can about him through the information the media releases daily. Sebastian is not only one of the youngest politicians in the running for the presidency, but he is the most handsome and eligible, according to Times Magazine.

The way women and some men go gaga over him is embarrassing. Yes, I get it. He is handsome, but so is half of Hollywood, yet you don't see the public standing outside their houses or workplace asking them to father their children.

Okay, yeah, maybe they do. People are insane these days, but it is still extremely cringe.

Speaking of cringe...

There is no doubt Sebastian would not bother attending the ceremony when he has a new plaything to entertain. His whirlwind romance with French model *Thylane Bruna* has been front news since he went public with her two weeks after he left me in this city with Benjamin.

It was supposed to be me, the one on his arm, but I guess after meeting me, he found me lacking. He did say he liked his women more... experienced. I should be relieved that he left me alone, and I didn't have to play the part of his devoted girlfriend to fool the public just as it was intended. Yet, I still don't understand why it irks me.

He did say that he preferred his women to be more mature.

Damn you, Sebastian, for making me feel small without even trying.

For making me feel things, I cannot make sense of or even want to.

Maybe it is the thought that he found me lacking that angers me because some part of me— a small part— feels insecure when I see the company he keeps, but then I remember who I am, and it goes away.

The jealousy.

The insecurity.

I might be young and somewhat inexperienced compared to all those women, but he would be so lucky to ever land someone like me.

Ugh, he is not even here, and he's grating on my nerves. That is why I try so hard to keep thoughts of him away because each time, I am left in a bad mood or wanting to commit murder because of how angry he makes me.

That is the power of that man.

I wonder if she knows I am her boyfriend's dirty little secret. His charity case, but what good does it do him since no one knows about me?

I thought he wanted to show me off to cause a buzz and help his playboy persona in the eyes of the media.

Yet, he has kept me in the dark and the French model all over the spotlight.

There goes the green monster rearing its head. It bothers me even more because she reminds me of Andrea Nicolasi. The fashion heiress everyone fawns over because of her beauty and her good-hearted nature. Barf.

Curvy, blonde bombshells with bubbly personalities.

She is also the reason why I changed my hair color to a darker shade of blonde, added more layers to it, and cut my bangs in that trendy style that is all over social media these days.

Curtain bangs, I believe the stylist said they're called.

I chose that hairstyle, not wanting to look at all like the model-like women he has courted all his life.

Childish? Maybe.

These days, I do whatever feels right with little to no care about consequences.

I like this look on me, and I am contemplating changing the color to a warm brown, but I have yet to leap.

Maybe one day I will.

"Oh, my God. This is it!" The girl sitting next to me shrinks when the speakers begin with the first act of the ceremony. I don't know this girl. All I know is that she has spent the half hour we have been sitting here taking countless selfies and posting them on social media while also filming herself dancing. Maybe I am too out of touch with my generation, or maybe I am just a judgmental bitch, but it gave me secondhand embarrassment witnessing the spectacle, but to be fair, she is not the only one. I guess this is a popular trend. Huh. Not one I will ever participate in, but good for them, whatever

makes them happy, I guess.

Benjamin says I should be less judgmental and more accepting, but sadly that is not in my nature, and I've made peace with it.

Weird-dance girl puts her phone down on her lap, turns my way, and smiles brightly. It lasts only a second because the moment I take too long to return the smile, she gives me her back, and I don't miss how she calls me a bitter bitch under her breath.

Oh, whatever.

This is what separates me from girls like her.

I don't mumble shit under my breath like a coward.

I will say whatever to whomever in their face.

The loud chatter of the crowd around us settles at the same time the master of the ceremony speaks. "Welcome class of..."

And so, it begins.

BASTIAN

I vividly remember how my mother used to drag me out of bed in the middle of the night to watch the sky together whenever there was an eclipse or a meteor shower. I was never the kid to be into that type of Astro-shit, but it made her smile, and my mother's smile was worth ten times more than whatever was happening in the sky.

It always used to happen in December.

Lunar eclipses.

One of nature's many wonders.

None of it meant anything to me, but it meant a great deal to my mother, and she meant everything to us.

You see, she was an astronomer before she met and married my father. When he started pursuing his political career, she gave up her dream job to become a wife and mother.

My father always felt as if he somehow killed her dreams. For a long time, I did too. However, she was never bitter or treated us as if she missed who she used to be before she became a stay-at-home mom.

She loved us dearly just as much as she loved her moon, stars, and all the

shit that hides in the dark sky. She taught me everything she knew about Astronomy, and I would sit in her lap for hours listening to her talk about things I didn't quite care for yet learned to just to see her proud smile.

That is what I miss the most now that I am a grown man.

The warm comfort of my mother's smile and our mother-son time on top of a roof in the middle of a freezing night. Maybe that is why my daughter's room is decorated with stars and moons. From the paintings on the wall to the bedding. Everything.

I hired a home designer to take care of it. When she asked me what I wanted to do with the room, I told her to surprise me and surprise me she did because the moment I stepped foot inside the room with my baby in my arms, I felt my mother's presence all around us.

Although I am a nonbeliever in paranormal nonsense and the afterlife, I choose to believe that somehow my mother's loving presence hugs my child while she sleeps at night.

Then to mess more with my head, the girl I didn't quite see coming was born in December on the exact night a solar eclipse took place. The moon passed between Earth and the Sun the night she was born, of course.

Luna is her middle name.

An Italian given name that means moon. In Roman mythology, Luna is the divine personification of the moon.

Rare and beautiful, like her.

Fuck.

And it is even more absurd how I am aware of all this.

When I learned her birth date, I recalled what I was doing that night. I don't remember half the shit I did in my youth, but somehow that moment was clear as day.

Now, whenever I think of my mother and our times together watching the sky, I think of Arianna Parisi.

A vibration coming from my suit jacket brings me back to the present. I reach for my phone and notice a text message from Sandoval.

Sandoval: There is no trace of that parasite. It is as if the earth parted and hell swallowed him up. The goddamn cunt.

Parasite.

That is a name fitting for the once Parisi boss.

I type a quick reply and pocket my phone inside my suit, not wanting to

spoil this day with dirty business concerning the same girl that's about to be called on stage any moment now.

If only that rat bastard of a father could see her now.

She did what most women in the world she was born into could not.

She made something of herself and didn't become what was expected of her.

No longer a mafia princess but a brilliant young woman with the world at her feet.

Because whether she sees it or not, the world is hers for the taking. All she must do is grab it by its balls and make it her own.

How far I have come from wanting to use the girl for my own selfish gains to hurt her father to now moving sea and land to witness her thrive.

Ring, ring, ring.

Taking the phone out again, I answer, already aware of the caller.

"She did it, man." Banning's voice sounds over the loud noise of the crowd gathered at Arianna's graduation. I sit back in the back seat of the Bentley in the parking lot outside of the center where the ceremony is being hosted. I stayed back, not wanting to steal the attention from her. Besides, the girl is not fond of me. My presence will only sour her day.

"Did you ever doubt her?" I did not. The moment I first looked into her eyes, I saw something in them that I see every time I look at myself in the mirror. The hunger for knowledge and the thirst for success. It was all there, even when she tried so hard to keep her emotions in check.

"Fuck, no. Try and doubt that girl, and she'll show you." Banning laughs with a familiarity that does not sit well with me. When the unusual feeling of jealousy starts creeping in, I crush it with the reminder that I have no right to feel such things for her. "I'm sure she would appreciate seeing your ugly face in the crowd rooting for her."

I almost scoff at that.

I am sure she would not.

I am not only the man that stole what she values most in her life, her freedom, but also the same man that has a score to settle with her family.

My eyes find her in the crowd of graduates dressed in black gowns. She is not hard to find because she stands out even when she has a girl on her right doing some idiotic shit with her phone. The attention remains on the quiet girl with fire in her bright green eyes.

She is so beautiful.

Her blonde hair flows over her shoulders like gold waves.

“No,” I pinch the bridge of my nose, taking a deep breath. “This is her moment, and me being there will only take away from her shine.” The instant I step foot outside, there all eyes would be on me because of who I am and not on her, and that is something I am not willing to risk.

She has been robbed of every experience a girl like her deserves; I refuse to be like the others.

I might have accepted her father’s offering of his first-born daughter, but that is the extent of it. The second she was away from her cunt father, I severed all promises of allegiance.

I went back on my word and not for the first time.

I used to pride myself on the fact that I am a man of my word. Besides my many faults, I always kept it, but for a girl I barely knew at the time, I was willing to take on three families with a giddiness I never felt before to have her away from a place that did not deserve her.

A family that hurt her...

Nobody besides Banning knows the real reason why I have kept Arianna away from the spotlight. It was the only way to keep her safe from her father’s wrath against me. I didn’t uphold my end of the deal, and I knew the moment I took her from his city and cut his businesses in Chicago, he would retaliate.

A week ago, I received a call informing me of his whereabouts. As much as it pains me to let go of the need to be the one who sends him to hell, it is poetic justice if he met his end at the hands of the one he wronged the most.

I get to watch from the sidelines with a clean conscience as his legacy burns to the ground with his daughter by my side. However, it does not end there no. The same monster he created with his hatred and abuse will be the one to send Gabriele Parisi back to hell, where he belongs.

That is also the reason why I ordered Banning to get Arianna to attend her graduation. It not only makes the girl happy, but it is also a big fuck-you to her father.

I didn’t keep my part of the deal.

I didn’t make his then eighteen-year-old daughter my wife and kept her as a submissive woman as he wished me to.

She is slowly becoming everything her father despises.

A strong woman with the freedom to choose her path in life.

Then, I hear it.

“Arianna Parisi,” A loud voice booms over the speaker so loudly I can hear it from over here. Her name is called, and she stands up graciously, holding the attention of everyone in attendance hostage, including my own. Looking at her, I watch her smile so bright, childlike, and happy as she shakes the hand of the dean who is handing her diploma. Shaking my head, I put the phone on speaker while I listen to the sea of my men cheering loudly for her, rendering her speechless.

Her bright smile falls from her face, and a look of wonder takes over. My chest feels tight as I take in the scene. Fuck.

You did it, darling...

Time seems to stop as I take her in, enjoying the way she allowed herself to show vulnerability in front of so many people for only a second before she builds her guard up again. Arianna turns her head, smiles forcefully at the man who gave her the diploma, and walks off stage with that air of superiority that drives me insane with the need to take her in my arms, strip her of all her defenses, and leave her vulnerable for only me to witness.

Banning’s voice breaks through the thoughts of her haunting me day and night. “She should know it is you who has given her everything. The man who has made every single one of her dreams com—”

I interrupted him. “Leave it.”

“That girl needs more than just me...” Banning tries again, and this time his words hit the place only my child can reach.

That is how dangerous Arianna is to my sanity and my peace.

Because whether I admit it to myself or not, since the moment I first laid eyes on her, she took a piece of me with her, and I haven’t been able to rid myself of this obsession since.

It burns me and keeps me up at night.

Robbing me of all logical thought.

Throughout these two years, she has been away, Banning has sent photos and updates, and I found myself wanting more. I haven’t kissed or touched her skin, yet she has a hold on me that no other woman has ever had.

My mother.

My child.

And now this girl is turning my world upside down, and she is unaware of it.

The girl named Arianna Luna with a light that burns brighter than the sun. How ironic.

After a long silence, I speak first. “Did you do what I asked?”

Banning sighs and then says. “Of course. It is all set. Waiting for her when she gets home.”

Home.

Sometimes I forget they spent two years together with only each other. If I were another type of man, I would feel threatened by it, but there was no one better to keep her safe from harm, and that is all I asked.

Still, deep down, I can’t help feeling jealous over the fact that he now knows parts of her that I am estranged to.

“Alright, I am hanging up.” I look out the car’s window, but there is no sign of her. After walking down the stage, she took her seat, but now with the crowd standing and roaring in celebration, I’d lost sight of her. “Take care of her.”, I order.

“With my life, boss.”

I believe him.

Not only is Banning a better man than I am, but he is the most qualified of my men and the one that would walk through fire to keep us all from harm.

He has a good heart, and that will always make him a better man than me.

Always.

ARIANNA

VULTURES



“They’re ready to split my skin open
and feast on my bones.” – A

“Did you enjoy yourself, kid?” As soon as we step foot inside the beach house, Benjamin puts a paper crown on top of my head. The same one he got from the restaurant he took me to after the graduation ceremony. For the third time tonight, I snatch it from my head, but this time I tear it apart without breaking eye contact.

“I did until you started taking so many pictures and annoying the hell out of me,” I murmured while taking my heels off and dropping them on the kitchen counter. Benjamin laughs and starts making sure the house is locked. He does this every night before we go to sleep like clockwork. I don’t think anyone would be dumb enough to trespass this place if they knew what awaited them. During the first couple of days of living together, I snooped through his things, not sure if I should completely trust Benjamin, I concluded that he is not a regular bodyguard. The things he does for Sebastian, I am sure, are not taught in any police academy. The man is a beast, and I am not talking just about his physical attributes and how he handles a gun, but he is also very smart and clever when it comes to his job. With everything else, not so much, bless him.

But it does not matter because the man is loyal and... so damn kind, which at times, okay most of the times, irks me since I am still not used to such kindness and how to respond to half the things he does for me.

However, I am trying, and he has noticed too.

We are comfortable around each other.

So much so that we can throw jabs at one another, and no one gets offended.

It is playful, and that is another aspect of this new me I am coming to terms with.

I can be myself with him without being judged or mistreated for it.

“Will it kill you to say thank you?” Benjamin laughs.

I grumble while inspecting my nails. A girl came with the styling team and did them for me. Nothing too over the top. I like my style as I do everything else. Classy and not trashy. “You know it just might.”

He laughs while messing with the last lock on the front door before coming my way with a serious look on his face. “I am glad you enjoyed yourself today.”

He moves towards the living area, so he can report to his boss as he does every second of the day. I hate myself a little for wondering if Sebastian asks about my days because he truly cares about my well-being or because he wants updates on his acquisition so he can report to my father.

Not wanting to ruin my night, I get up from the stool I was sitting on and move toward the living area, where Benjamin is now seated at his desk, typing rapidly. “Thank you... Benjamin.” There I said it, and every time, friendship or not, it feels like someone is pulling teeth from me without anesthesia.

Some women are born with bright and bubbly personalities, while others, like me, were not that lucky.

I am more cold night than sunny day, and I have made my peace with it.

When I turn toward the narrow hallway that leads to our respective bedrooms, I notice white and gold confetti on the floor. What is this? I wonder, looking back into the living room to find Benjamin with a knowing look on his face and a huge grin.

“I told you I hate surprises.” Hate is not a strong enough word to describe how I truly feel about them. Nothing good comes from them. Absolutely nothing. In a past life, surprises were followed by painful words or broken bones. My bones and skin healed, but the taunting voices reminded me of the hell I once lived in.

“And we’ve established that I don’t give a fuck, you’re still getting them if I can help it, but before you go biting my head off like an extremely adorable yet annoying gremlin,” he looks pointedly at me, his smile never wavering. “I did warn him. Now go on,” he turns in his seat, dismissing me.

“I have some calls to make before I get some shuteye.”

I let the comparison to an obnoxious animal slide and concentrate on one thing.

I did warn him.

Who?

Sebastian?

Is he to blame for all this unnecessary and unwanted attention?

Why would he do this?

Why would he ever care to do this?

So many questions, yet he is never here to answer them...

Leaving Benjamin to it, I make my way down the dark hall noticing more confetti on the floor and white congratulatory balloons of all sizes. There is even one with a graduation cap on it and a diploma. Christ, the uncomfortable feeling in my stomach grows stronger with every step I take toward my bedroom door.

Pushing the door open, I hold my breath, not knowing what awaits me behind it. What I see freezes me in place. Roses painted gold all over my bedroom. On top of the bed, the desk in the corner, and more bouquets spread all over the room. Dozens of balloons floating, almost touching the ceiling.

I should not allow myself to enjoy this moment because I don't trust them. The last time someone celebrated me it was a way for my family to flaunt their riches among their crowd. It was never about me.

Nothing ever was, but this moment right here.

This day, today...is.

Moving around the room, I laugh at how extra this all seems.

Gold roses.

Only a man like him would think to give gold roses. I would have thought he would choose black roses since I bet that is how he sees me.

Black.

Boring.

Empty.

However, no.

He chose gold roses, and somehow even though it should not, it warms a part of me that has been frozen for so long that I didn't even know it was possible.

Fuck you, heart, don't be stupid now. You cannot afford another blow.

I skim the tip of my finger along the delicate petals of the flower and take

a second to admire them. How strange but beautiful.

These roses are not natural. They don't exist unless you dip them in gold paint, which is what they did to make them look like this.

Something on the bed catches my eyes, and moving towards it, I see a medium size box and immediately know that iconic robin's-egg blue hue known worldwide as Tiffany's blue. How do I know this? Because mother would receive one of every Valentine's Day or every occasion, father would give her a black eye, which was every day in the Parisi household.

Sitting on the bed, I gently pick up the box while my heart is racing, and my mind goes blank. I am processing all of this at once without much understanding of what is happening inside me. So many emotions hitting me all at once since this morning have made it difficult for me to remain unfeeling. *Liar...something inside you changed the moment that man walked towards you so many hours and days ago.*

Compartmentalizing that thought for later, I untie the white bow, and a note falls the moment I do. Picking it up, inspecting it, realizing it is the company's usual note when I see writing on the back.

*It only takes one to start a winter storm. -
Sebastian*

What a strange man...

Not understanding the meaning of his note, I open the blue box, and I am left speechless as my heartbeat slows at the sight.

A sparkly diamond necklace with a snowflake pendant.

Growing up, I never thought of the cold as beautiful.

Only sunny days with bright colors and clear skies.

Never the cold. It was always the color gray, rain, and storms.

Nothing to be desired until this.

Until the meaning of this gift.

Snowflakes are cold, and they do start blizzards when they stick together, but they are also... beautiful.

Roaming my finger over the matching earrings, I tear up a bit when I let all the emotions I've been holding back since I met this man and entered his world.

The war is over, Arianna... I replay his words inside my head.

It can't be.

Could this really be it for me?

A real chance at life?

It still seems like a silly girl's dream that one day will be ripped from her greedy and naive hands, and I will not survive it.

I won't.

Placing the box down, I keep his note in one hand when I notice something else on the bed. An opened black box with a single gold rose in it.

Crawling on the bed, I pick it up and notice it is not like all the other gold-painted roses.

No.

This one is rarer.

One of a kind.

A single rose dipped in molten gold.

A literal gold rose.

Holding his note and rose close to my heart, I look around the room, taking in the bouquets, the balloons, and the confetti, and I let myself enjoy the moment.

I don't know what this all means or what the uncaring man wants, but for this moment in time, I am just a normal girl with a lot of joy in her broken heart.

I must admit the feeling is addictive. No wonder it hurts so much when it goes away.

A loud thud sounds from outside and then a crash, bringing me back to from the high.

Then, there is one knock on the door, and before I can say come in, Benjamin is there with a furious look on his face. One I only see when he senses a threat or is in full bodyguard mode. "Grab your things, kid. Now!"

I know better than to ask; I do as he says because of the look on his face.

Something is wrong.

Rising from the bed, I grab the small bag he made me prepare the first week I stayed here in case of an emergency. I open it and shove the gifts inside, then I move towards the desk, opening a drawer and taking all my notes with me, not wanting to leave them behind. Once I have everything, I join Benjamin in the living room and find out exactly why he is alert and furious.

A mob of people can be heard outside the beach house, and the flashes of

cameras are visible through the slightly opened curtains.

Shit.

Paparazzi.

I move closer to the window, but Benjamin holds me back when we both hear someone scream my name.

Benjamin looks at me with a puzzled look on his face, and I know he, too, is wondering how they found out about this place and how the hell they know my name.

“Fucking fuck.” A man of clever words, he is. His phone rings while I try to make sense of the circus around us. “On it. She is with me. It is on its way. Yes, sir.” Benjamin gives cryptic answers to whoever is on the other end of the line. The next thing I know, he is pulling me to his side, shielding me with his suit jacket, and opening the back door, and then all hell breaks loose.

Shouts.

Questions I have no answers to.

Flashing lights.

It only stops when I am being hauled inside a helicopter.

“You okay?” I stare into Benjamin’s concerned stare and nod once, not really knowing how to react to this unbelievably messy and weird day.

We say nothing else.

There is not much to say.

Somehow, my identity was revealed to Sebastian’s world, and chaos broke out.

Looking down at the beach house, I feel saddened that I am leaving behind the most peaceful experience of my life. I stare at the grown men and women snapping photos of us like vultures wanting to expose someone’s life and privacy for their own gain.

The helicopter takes off, and the pilot turns his head toward Benjamin and asks him for the location.

I am not at all surprised when Benjamin replies, “Chicago.”

What surprises me is the fact that I am not afraid.

Not at all.

Maybe I should be.

Sebastian is not like any man I have ever encountered before.

He is a mystery and a walking contradiction all in one incredibly handsome and cocky package.

It would make any sane person nervous to be in my position, but not me.

Not that I was all that sane, to begin with.

Taking one last look at the small house that was my haven, I take a deep breath and prepare myself for what comes next.

I should have known right there that my life would be completely changed when I stepped foot in Sebastian's home base.

MY WILDEST DREAM

PART II



*"I didn't see you coming
and now I can't unsee you.
You are everywhere.
You are everything." - S*

ARIANNA

ELLAIZA



“Better I break your heart
than your neck, darling.” – B

I wake up to a breeze blowing in from the balcony doors. It takes me a moment to remember where I am. Silver and white curtains bellow softly as the night comes back to me. The thoughtful gifts of a nonchalant man. The scene in the beach house. The strange men with cameras shouted my name. The fifteen-minute helicopter ride and the half hour in a private jet landed me here. Chicago. The city where Sebastian lives.

I was so emotionally drained from yesterday’s events that I don’t remember arriving here. I don’t even remember getting into bed.

Where am I?

This is becoming the story of my life. Waking up in new places and seeing strange faces.

I roll onto my back, feeling the soft white sheets, and take a second to breathe. The feeling of uncertainty is creeping in again. I have always considered myself a strong person, and I have proven it more than once a time in my short life. But I must admit to myself, and myself only, that sometimes fear takes root in my heart, even if it's just for a little while before I remind myself that I have overcome worse, and this too shall pass.

One day, I will have complete control over my life. I need to survive this new chapter with this man to see it happen. As much as I like to argue with myself that he has given me no reason to fear him, I know he, like all the other men in my life before he came along, is a predator. One should never let their guard down around them.

They will swallow you whole.

The gifts and the new opportunities he has given me did touch a part of my heart that has been closed off for a long time, and I am grateful even when I can't express it. But that will not erase the fact that I am at his mercy, and that is dangerous.

Especially for a woman like me that has only herself to keep her safe.

The loud banging of cabinets outside the door brings me back to the moment. Looking around the room, I notice white walls and black marble floor tiles. A huge double door right in the middle of the room leads to a balcony. A single black door next to an antique vanity sits on the other side of the room, close to a window.

God, this room is the size of a small condominium. Exactly how rich is this man? Rising from the bed, I move around the room, getting a better view of everything. It has a modern, classy vibe, just like the decor of one of those famous Hollywood families.

Modern, sleek, and classy.

It screams, 'I have more money than you will ever acquire in your lifetime, and I will shove it in your face.'

I walk to the other side of the room, where there is another double door, and open it, completely stunned, when I find a walk-in closet the size of our living room at the beach house. I step inside, and the moment I do, all the sensor lights turn on automatically until the chandelier in the middle of the ceiling lights up.

This is not real.

White on white decor.

This is what heaven would look like if I believed such a thing exists.

Anyone that looks at me and realizes that I am the daughter of one of the richest criminals in the country would think this is nothing new to me, but it is. All the things Sebastian Kenton has given or shown me are new to me.

All of it.

Walking farther inside the closet, I look up, noticing that one side of the room has rows of shoes up to the ceiling. The other side has purses of all sizes, colors, and shapes. The other wall has a moving rack of clothes circling. There are floor-to-ceiling mirrors on every corner of the room and a huge glittery white sofa next to the wall of shoes.

Then I am surprised to see more than twenty shopping bags on top of the sofa and down on the floor. This is... wow. It is just too much, but I cannot

help the overwhelming and strange feeling in my chest.

That bitch, joy...

Then I notice the brand name on the bags.

Valentina Co.

What a way to kill the moment, Sebastian.

I decided right there that it will all go to charity.

To the less fortunate, but then I wonder. 'Haven't they suffered enough?'

Shaking my head and all thoughts of people who serve me nothing, I turn away from the sofa, looking for the exit, and catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror.

What stares back at me makes me cringe.

Messy hair sticking to one side of my face.

"Gross," I whisper to myself while looking at my reflection.

Then I see the same dress I wore to graduation and the ruined makeup making me look like a wild raccoon.

In my defense, I had no time to shower and get out of these clothes with everything that went down.

Hell, I don't even remember getting into bed. No one would blame me for looking like a Jersey Shore reject after a long night of making a fool of themselves.

Knowing I will not be comfortable facing whatever it is that waits for me today if I don't shower and start looking human again, I head out of the closet-heaven and get right to it.

"Well, hello there, sunshine. You look..." Benjamin points a kitchen knife my way and cringes. "Cute."

Cute, my ass, but still better than yesterday.

"Shut up," I mumble while walking toward where he is standing cooking breakfast. I don't fail to notice how huge this place is. This is a home fit for a king, not a politician. I guess these days, it is all the same. "Where are we?" Taking a seat at the counter facing Benjamin, I dive into the plate of chocolate chip pancakes he placed in front of me. My stomach rumbles, which makes him laugh.

"You got a hard-on for my pancakes, kid."

I finish swallowing the piece of buttery goodness before replying because I have manners, unlike the Viking in front of me. “Don’t be crude, Benjamin.”

“Would it kill you to speak like someone your age?” He smiles while adding more pancake mix to the heated pan. “To answer your question, we’re in Bastian’s home.” Ugh, why must everyone insist on calling him that? His name is Sebastian. I dislike the way people tend to shorten your given name. If my mother wanted me to be called Ari, she would have named me that instead of Arianna. Benjamin sets a glass of orange juice in front of me, and I am reminded of how much the grown man does for me. There are things about him that I still don’t know, and perhaps I will never know, which is fine with me. We are all entitled to a little privacy, and he has given me as much. “I need you to do something for me.”

I take a sip of my juice and look at him expectantly.

His eyes are hard, and all tenderness disappears. “I need you to behave.”

Setting the glass down on the marble table, I open my mouth to tell him exactly how I feel about his request, but he interrupts me when he raises his hand. I swear I try to stop myself, but it’s a reflex that won’t go away. I flinch.

Don’t show weakness...

Too late.

Fuck.

I swear that if someone dropped a pin, we could hear it in this silence.

Raising my head, I avoid his eyes, “It’s no—”

“Look at me.” His voice is tender again, laced with regret. Shit.

“Never. Do you understand me? I would never hurt you, and neither would anyone here.” He says this with so ferocity that it is hard not to believe him. I do. I believe he would never lay a hand on me, but people change. I learned first-hand how the people closest to you are the ones that cause the most damage.

However, something inside tells me I am safe with him. It is the others part I am not so sure about. Still, I nod.

I unclench my jaw, straighten in my seat, and look into his eyes, no longer cowering or afraid.

Benjamin sighs when realizing there is only uncomfortable silence between us. I always do this. I retreat into myself when I feel attacked or, in this case...embarrassed. “Why don’t you familiarize yourself with the

property while I make some calls?”

Grabbing a napkin, I wipe my mouth, then hop off the stool and leave him to deal with what I just revealed without wanting to.

I am not naive.

I know Sebastian knows more about me than I want him to. The question is, how much does he know? I doubt father told him anything but his version of the truth. The one that does not make him look like an absolute piece of shit father and human being. Not wanting the only friend I truly have to think any less of me, I walk out of the kitchen and into the hall in search of room to breathe.

Will he reveal my secret?

Will he report to his boss that I am not only the cold-hearted brat he believes me to be, but once I was a child who only knew neglect, heartache, and abuse?

Dammit.

Little by little, the ironclad walls I built to keep me safe are crumbling, and it is all due to every kind gesture and thoughtful gift these men have given me.

I never knew love without pain.

Kindness without punishment.

There was never anything freely given that they didn't use as a weapon against me.

That is why I learned never to expect anything.

I learned to be without affection.

Kindness.

Everything that shaped a child into a decent human being.

Not the mess that I sometimes am.

A mess I keep hidden so no one can exploit it.

Until Sebastian came into my world and threw me into his own.

When I find myself inside the spacious living room area, I stop and stare at everything around me, realizing how cold it feels.

Cold and dark, I am used to.

However, this is something else entirely.

For a home, it feels...empty.

There are no picture frames.

Nothing but the minimal.

Does he not have a family?

Parents?

A girlfriend?

Children?

And why does the thought of my not-so-savior having a family of his own trouble me? Before I give the absurd feeling much thought, the loud and desperate cries of a child sound in the distance, making my heart stop dead, taking me back to a time I wish I could erase from my memory and my heart.

I don't think about it.

I move rapidly in the direction the sound is coming from.

I run towards the end of the narrow hallway that leads to the right wing of the house, completely opposite side of where I am staying. Taking the stairs two at a time, it does not take me long to find the door where the crying is coming from.

From outside, I can hear whimpers that pull at my torn heartstrings, and I make myself stop to think before I act impulsively. One thing I don't usually do, but then the child screams louder, a scream that lets me know he or she is in pain.

Fuck it.

Pushing the door open, I step inside the room, and I am stunned to see a young woman in the corner of the room with her phone out, taking photos of herself inside what is a little girl's room while the child screams.

I see red.

I might have lost my mind. That is the only excuse that explains what I do next. Not caring if she is the child's mother or Mother Theresa reincarnated herself, I step between her and the tiny bed. "Get the fuck out." I have always been unapproachable and cold, but the sound that comes out of my mouth surprises even me.

She turns stunned, dropping her phone in the process, and when she goes to grab it, I move first and step on it. "I said get the fuck out. Now!" I hold onto my cool, not wanting to scare the child more than she is already.

The idiot gapes at me for a second, not saying anything, probably too stunned to come out with a proper response from the top of her head. Then her eyes narrow, and if looks could kill, I would still be here. The woman cannot even do that right. "You have no right! Where is Mr. Kenton? And who the hell are you?" She looks over my shoulder, most likely thinking someone will come to her defense. They can try, but the outcome will still be the same. The bitch was taking pictures while a child cried and screamed at

the top of her lungs, and instead of comforting the toddler, she took pictures and posted them God knows where.

I calm my breathing and step forward until I am crowding her space. She is a pretty woman, that is certain. Your typical good girl with pretty eyes and a nice smile. Wearing a demure dress with bright colors. Her choice of wardrobe is hideous. What can you expect of a woman wearing lemon-themed jewelry with a collar polka dot orange dress?

She is likely not the child's mother or family since she referred to Sebastian as Mr. Kenton, but who knows? These god-awful days anything is possible.

Bending over, I pick up the phone and pull back when she moves to snatch it from my hands. The little girl starts hiccuping and whimpering, causing a mix of emotions inside of me. Giving the hideously dressed girl my full attention. "Don't make me repeat myself. You won't like what happens if I do." I say it with so much venom, the same one I use for the ones that piss me the hell off, and she leaves the room huffing and murmuring what a cunt I am.

Idiots resort to cursing when their low-IQ brains can't come up with anything clever to say.

Turning towards the tiny bed in the shape of a princess chariot, I look inside to find the source of all the screaming. I never liked children. I find them extremely irritating. All they do is cry, poop, eat, and nap.

And when kids start talking back...

The horror.

The only children I could tolerate were my sisters, and they, too, sometimes tested my love for them with their tantrums when they were younger. That was mostly Kadra since Mila was an easy child.

A sweet child.

The whimpers of agony coming off this baby girl take me back to a colorless nursery where a beautiful baby was left to fend for herself because no one other than her sisters cared.

Maybe that is the reason why my heart leaped, and I felt the need to rush in here and make sure this kid was all right.

A soft snuffle snatches my attention, and that is when I see the little girl.

I never believed in love at first sight. Not really. Only fools believe it is possible to feel something so strong for a stranger in mere seconds, but... something weird takes hold of me as my green eyes clash with teary blue

ones. Eyes the same shade as a man that looked at me once and disarmed me for only a second, he still managed to do it, just like this child.

A baby girl.

A little girl that looks just like her father because there is no doubt this kid is related to Sebastian.

The baby girl has a full head of hair the same shade as her father's, and I find myself smiling when I notice the ringlet of curls framing her beautiful face. Unruly dark hair, blue eyes, and an adorable dimple on her chin.

This is Sebastian's daughter.

Then I look at the bed, all the toys, and then around the room, noticing the white and silver decorations all over.

There are pillows in the shape of the moon and stars.

I am guessing by the looks of it that the theme chosen is astrology.

How...beautiful, yet odd for a child.

"Daddy." The little girl whispers so softly that I almost don't catch it. I lean closer and look at her, not knowing what this feeling in my chest is. I only know that it has left me breathless, and I cannot seem to look away from the kid.

Wet blue eyes look at me for a second before her tiny mouth breaks into a shy yet adorable smile.

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

What is this feeling in my chest? Surely it cannot be— "Daddy." The little girl wiggles around until she gets out of bed and stands, looking up at me. Huh. What a clever girl.

Blue, curious, and naive eyes meet mine. "Mah, daddy?"

Her daddy.

Sebastian.

I drop down to her level so she does not feel intimidated by my strange presence. I look into her eyes and tell her. "Your daddy is at work, darling girl."

Darling girl. It just slipped out. The term of endearment my *nonna* used to call me.

The moment I responded, her entire face lit up. The more I say, the more she looks at me with a small smile on her face, and I find myself wanting to keep her talking to me. She stopped crying, and my chest doesn't hurt now

that she's no longer with tears in her pretty eyes. For some inexplicable reason, I engage with this child.

It just feels...right.

“And what is your name?” I ask her.

The little girl points up with her small chubby finger, making me look at the ceiling, and what I see steals my breath away just like the second I laid eyes on the small girl.

The ceiling is lit up, made to look like the universe with countless blinking stars and constellations.

In the middle of all of it, a name is written in stars.

Ellaiza.

“Ellaiza.” I look down at the girl while she stares back at me, nodding softly. “What a pretty name for a beautiful girl, yes?”

The little girl nods as if she agrees with what I am saying. I find myself smiling from ear to ear, and she does too.

She is not only stunning but smart too.

The infuriating jerk’s genes run strong.

“Diwty...” She scrunches her face and squats as if she is uncomfortable, and I recognize that look anywhere.

Her diaper is full, and it is chafing her.

Then anger takes over me again when I think about how that bitch was here with the little girl and didn’t change her diaper because she was too busy with herself. I reach forward, look inside the girl’s diaper, and find that she shitted herself. It smells awful.

“What are these people feeding you, girl?” I scrunch my nose, trying hard not to gag, but it is proving to be a challenge since the smell coming from that diaper is nauseating. Ellaiza throws her little head back, causing those gorgeous curls to bounce. She giggles, finding me amusing.

Huh.

This is also new.

Nobody finds my special brand of sarcastic and condescending sense of humor amusing, but apparently, she does.

“Come on, let’s get rid of that horrendous smell before I lose my sense of smell and will to live.” I lift Ellaiza and keep her at an arm’s length.

“Poopy,” She offers me a smile and claps her chubby hands twice, reminding me of my youngest sister, Mila. My chest feels tight, and I must remind myself that this is not her, and there is no point in reliving painful

memories.

“You are funny, stink,” I tell her while moving around the ridiculously huge nursery in search of her changing table. “That mean bit—” I catch myself before I curse around someone else’s child. “Excuse me. I meant witch. She will not be around anymore, Ellaiza. You needn’t worry.” I converse with the child as if she is a grown-up and has any idea what I am saying.

Finding the changing table right next to the little white bookshelf with dozens of baby books, I walk towards it. “My name is Arianna,” I tell the little girl.

She looks at me with a grin on her face that is melting me from the inside and out. God, how perfect this child is. She had to be that Neanderthal’s kid. “Ana?”

I am stunned for a moment, not expecting the sudden rush of sadness taking over me the second the little girl calls me the name my little sister used to call me.

“Would you mind telling me why I had to escort out a hysterical nanny screaming and threatening to sue the boss?” Benjamin says as he enters the nursery. I turn his way and find him looking at me with an amused expression.

I place Ellaiza on the changing table and hold her chubby leg to keep her in place. “The jerk was taking photos of herself with a crying baby in the background. I let her off easy.” I did. Assholes like her should not get away with asshole behaviors. How else will they learn not to be assholes?

Benjamin goes farther inside the room and joins me next to the table, looking down at the little girl with adoration in his eyes. I see Ellaiza has him wrapped around her little chubby finger. “Bastian won’t find it as amusing as we do.”

“Who said I find the situation amusing?” I look down at Ellaiza and offer her a small smile when I see her poking her belly button. “Besides, I could care less what your boss thinks. The ass—” I stop myself before I call this kid’s father an asshole. “He left his child with a moron.” It is true. He was the one who hired an opportunistic idiot to look after his baby girl. I did his ass a favor by running her out of here.

That woman should not be looking after babies. Hell, I would not trust her with animals, either.

Benjamin shakes his head at me. “You let me do the—” He cannot finish

his thought because he is interrupted by a dark and menacing voice coming from behind us.

“Step aside, Banning.” I look over Benjamin's massive shoulder and find Sebastian standing at the door's threshold, looking amused and annoyed simultaneously. How is that even possible? I don't know.

How is it that the man looks even more handsome than the last time I saw him? My breath gets caught in my lungs as I watch in silence as he passes me by without even a glance.

On the contrary, I can't seem to look away.

His raw and intense masculinity. The way he carries himself is as if he is larger than life, and he knows it.

The suit makes him look intimidating and regal, and his smell...

God, he smells like a million dollars, if that is even possible.

Manly, fresh, and clean.

Expensive.

Benjamin steps aside when his boss moves closer to his daughter, a look of pure adoration takes over his face when he hears the child mumble incoherently, then it quickly disappears when he turns his head my way. He narrows his eyes and clenches his jaw before he dismisses me completely.

Then both Benjamin and I stand rooted in silence as Sebastian rolls up his sleeves and begins to change his daughter's diaper without uttering a word. A few minutes pass while he gently and carefully tends to his kid, and something about a powerful man dressed head to toe in designer rolling up his sleeves to wipe a little girl's dirty behind does something to me. I lose brain cells every second I am in this man's proximity. There is no other explanation for this bizarre behavior. That must be it.

I watch Sebastian hand Ellaiza off to Benjamin without looking away from me. “Banning, leave us.”

When I take a step to follow Benjamin and Ellaiza out the door, a firm hand wraps around my arm, stopping me.

A shock of electricity courses through me at the contact, making me look at the incredibly rude man right in those blue eyes of his. The moment our eyes meet, something happens. I see it in the way his nostrils flare and his entire body language changes, becoming more rigid.

He felt it, too...

“Stay,” he whispers darkly.

This is a bad idea.

He is a bad idea.
A larger than life one.

ARIANNA

WE MEET AGAIN



“You are an idiot, but you’re my idiot.
No one fucks with you but me.” -A

Feeling a sudden wave of heat spread through my body, I shake my arm from his strong grip then I step away from him, not because I fear him but because I am not able to get a hold of all the feelings stirring in the pit of my stomach from being this close to him.

Christ, how is it possible to feel so much at once and not know what it all means?

Hate.

Fear.

Anger.

I am very well acquainted with those, but everything else I have been feeling lately...

I have no clue.

Excitement.

Curiosity.

Warmth...

When I am on the other side of the room, and far away from him, I can breathe without difficulty. Why it is that the handful of times I have been around Sebastian Kenton, I can’t catch my breath?

It is as if he is stealing it all for himself.

The gigantic ass.

Looking at him, I notice his eyes drop down the length of my body and stop on my thighs. The oversize shirt I am wearing falls right above the top of

my naked thighs. His stare is heated, but not in a way that suggests he's being a creep but, in the way that he's assessing me as he would an opponent which I guess I am to him.

Likewise.

The sound of a door clicking shut reminds me that both Benjamin and Ellaiza are gone, and I am left alone with a man who is looking at me as if he would like nothing more than to wrap those large hands of his around my throat and squeeze until all life slips from me.

What is his deal? He should be thanking me for getting rid of that dumbass nanny he had looking out for his kid. Although I wonder who is the bigger idiot, the nanny or the man that hired her?

He doesn't say anything for a full minute and then his eyes return to mine from across the room. "Dare I ask what you find amusing about this situation, princess?" Something has changed. Before he used to call me princess and his tone was always dripping with disdain and mockery, but this time it feels different. Almost personal I would say.

I respond the same as I would to anyone else when they try to give me nicknames I care little for. "My name is Arianna. We've established this before." I stand straight, meeting his icy stare head-on. "Use it." I snap.

Sebastian's full lips split into a cruel smile that instead of making him look ugly and condescending, does the opposite.

He is so handsome, and it is not fair.

Assholes should not be handsome. Although that is very hypocritical of me since in no way am I ugly or a nice person.

Pot meet kettle, huh?

The gorgeous ass moves slowly across the room until he reaches me. "And what if I don't? What then?" He speaks, sounding amused, not at all bored like before.

So confusing...

The way he tries to challenge me as if he enjoys my bitchy side.

One second, he acts cold towards me then he behaves almost decently, only to revert back to his asshole ways. I never know which side I will get when it comes to him. "Then you leave me no choice but to start calling you creative names as well," I tell him truthfully. I have a few names I would like to call him aloud. Although, they don't hit the same when I call him names in my head.

"Oh?" He laughs mockingly. "Names? By all means. Share them with

me,” he never breaks eye contact, not even once.

He wants to do this.

Very well, then. “Let’s see. I have been playing around with Senator Cunt. Is that to your liking?” I look down at my nails, trying to sound and look as confident as he does. “I think it’s catchy. You can even use that for your campaign ads. Please feel free to credit me.” I raise my eyes from my nails and stare right at him, feeling a buzz I have never felt before. It makes me feel... less cold and more alive. Huh. Who would have thought I would find amusement in verbal sparring with a man who makes my blood pressure rise? A man who is not only dangerous for my health but also a damn menace.

Sebastian remains quiet and takes two more steps until we are almost touching. I try my best not to show him how much he affects me. “Not all that clever but I must give you credit. Yes. You are funny, Arianna.” I don’t know why, but I look at his hands and notice he is keeping them at his sides, looking almost statuesque like one of those breathtaking sculptures made for the Roman Gods. Why is he not moving his arms? Surely, Benjamin didn’t tell him about my reaction earlier... no. That cannot be it. I remember distinctly the times I was around him and how he would adjust his cufflinks or play with his Rolex. The man is always moving his arms and using his hands, whether he is typing on his phone or doing other things, but never this.

That is one of the things I have learned about him and have engraved in my brain. I still don’t know why. They do say you should study your enemy and learn as much as you can to use against them later.

Bullshit... The little devil on my shoulder mocks me.

Not wanting to give it more thought, I step back from him, but he takes two steps forward, making me step back again as if we are dancing with no music on.

Step away. You, incredibly handsome and egotistical man... I’m broken.

Trying to break this hold he suddenly has on me, I switch up the conversation to something that makes me feel as if I am not losing control. Arguing stupidity. “Why the fuck did you leave your kid with a mouth-breathing idiot?” The air in the nursery suddenly feels hotter than before.

“Watch your mouth.” He replies, unaffected by my sudden change of topic and outburst. “Don’t you know princesses don’t curse and raise their voices? It’s quite unattractive.” He clicks his jaw, mocking me again.

And, of course, he would have that mindset.

A man as pretentious as him would think it is beneath a lady to curse, but he had nothing to say when I called him Senator Cunt just moments ago.

He is as confusing as he is infuriating.

I must admit I have been cursing more than I used to all because of Benjamin's influence in my life, but in this instance, it is necessary.

This man knows how to push my buttons.

Where is a pair of heels when I need them? The sharpness of the heel would come in handy right now. Since he dislikes cursing so much, I say with a big condescending smile on my face. "Fuck you."

"What did you just say to me?" His cold and deadly tone would scare the living hell out of most grown men, but not me. I try to hold my own, and if I feel anxious, I try not to let it show. I will not be making that mistake again today. "You heard me, or do you need me to spell it out for you?" I am playing with fire. I know this, yet I cannot seem to shut my mouth when he is around. "F. u. c—" The moment the offensive words slip from my mouth, I regret them because the look that takes over Sebastian's face makes my heartbeat race and my hands sweat.

Oh, great.

I knew I poked the bear when I felt his rough hand grab the back of my neck and pull me closer. So close that I can smell the oddly intoxicating mix of alcohol and peppermint on his breath.

Stunned and left speechless for what feels like the first time since I met this man, I raise my gaze and meet his blue eyes. I find no anger there, but I see annoyance and something else I can't put my finger on.

On times like this, I wish I were more like the women he is accustomed to. They would know exactly how to handle this situation and this man.

I do what I always do when I feel threatened.

I fight back.

I calm my breathing, give him my most natural smile, and hope it doesn't make me look like a demented doll or a creepy clown.

Staring into those wolfish eyes of his, I can't help but notice his rugged beauty from up close. I always knew he was a handsome man. The most handsome man I ever laid eyes on. He looks more mature than he did when I saw him last.

His black hair is perfectly styled, and I secretly wish I could rub my hands through it and mess it up just so I can see the side of him I am certain many don't see.

The mortal man and not the corrupt politician that everyone fawns over. He looks so proper and controlled. I kind of wish he looked more like he did back at the beach. Wild and untamable black hair flowing in the wind.

Without the suit jacket and tie.

Just him.

Yes, he is beautiful in a way he has no business being, but then I remind myself that eventually, that stunning face of his starts talking and annoys the living hell out of me.

Time seems to stop as we stand facing each other. I swear, if I try hard enough, I can hear the rapid beating of the traitorous organ inside my chest. Sebastian opens his mouth, and I prepare for what insult he will hurl my way next, but then he pauses and looks down at my mouth, and as if my lips have a mind of their own, I use my tongue to wet them out of habit when I'm anxious. Something severe washes over his expression, making his jaw harden and his eyes narrow.

Heat?

Is that desire?

It surely can't be, can it?

Ugh, why is everything so complicated and hard to decipher when it comes to this man?

What surprises me most is that instead of reacting as I did when Benjamin raised his hand at me, I don't flinch, nor do I cower under the force of his intense stare.

His touch does not hurt... it burns in a way I have never felt before.

Pain was always just pain for me, nothing else. Pleasure never followed.

Until now.

Until an obnoxiously infuriating man who tests my patience with every condescending and fiery look, he sends my way.

I wonder how many hearts he has broken.

Most likely a million.

I feel his hard body press against me, and I'm suddenly left defenseless against him. His eyes sparkle when he notices my breath hitch. I know he knows it, too.

"You should watch your mouth around me, darling." His breath fans out over my face. "You believe because you spent a handful of minutes with my child that you know what's best for her? Is that it, Parisi?" I cringe at how he says my name as if he's tasting venom. As if it makes him physically ill.

It hurts.

It shouldn't. God, how I hope it didn't, but it does.

Why, though?

My jaw tightens while I fist my hands, trying hard not to pull away from his hold and reach forward, slap him across the face, or worse, kiss the hell out of him.

And that thought scares me just as much as it causes heat and excitement to course through me like lightning.

The same feeling I experienced when his fingers touched my skin.

With a sluggish pace, I step forward, bringing us closer. Sebastian towers over me while I peer up at him, watching his firm jaw and those eyes that I am sure could set me on fire at any given moment with the intensity of his stare.

For a second, I reconsider stepping back when he does the unexpected. Instead of pushing me away, he inches his face closer to mine so I can feel the tip of his nose touch my heated cheek.

Chest rising in sync with his, I ask him. "What are you doing?" Raising my hands, I push on his hard chest, but it does nothing but amuse him. That is weak, but that's the only thought I can form. This close to him, I am reduced to one of those idiots that drool over him and have zero respect for themselves.

No way.

I might be younger and have less experience dealing with egotistical assholes with more mood swings than suits, but I am not one of those women.

I refuse to be.

I raise my chin and push up on him, giving him as good as he gives, letting him know that this war of power he has going on is not one I plan to concede.

Never.

This can be easy, or we can tear each other apart. He needs to pick a side.

He can't be both the hero and the asshole.

This is not how it goes.

And it is as if he doesn't know himself.

Damn, you.

Sebastian chuckles before replying. "Is that it? You believe you know more than her father?"

I let his words sink in because, although I am not the child's parent, I know firsthand what neglect in a child looks like. I not only experienced it but also witnessed it more times than I care to admit.

"I did what you or any other concerned and decent human being would have done if they were in my position." Looking more confident than I feel inside. "The bitch let Ella cry until her eyes were red and puffy while her diaper was dirty, all the while she was texting and snapping pictures. Ex-fucking-cuse-me if I put a stop to it, and I believe the words you're looking for are thank you." I am and will never be sorry for how I treated the airhead nanny today. So, I stand annoyed while I witness two types of expressions take over his face.

First, sadness, concern, and then pure adulterated rage.

Shit, I did it now.

Watching the fury in his eyes makes me feel more confident and reckless.

I take great pleasure in hearing the hitch in his breath. Our lips are mere inches apart, and his scent is a combination of cleanness, freshness, and sandalwood. He is dangerous, and I am becoming addicted to how he makes me feel by barely touching me.

"Do I make you nervous, Arianna?" He states while he breathes in slowly, almost seductively.

Licking my lips unconsciously. "I should ask you the same question, Sebastian." I don't know what makes me do it. Maybe it is the way he says my name as if I am a creature he's never come across before, yet he would rather take a knife to the eye than bow down or admit defeat in this conversation.

His mouth parts, yet no sound comes out.

His silence is just as deadly as his sharp tongue, that's for certain.

I watch intently as he licks his plump lips, and I am ashamed to admit that the sight of this man's tongue sets me on fire. "What's wrong? Cat got your tongue?" I notice that the more I challenge him, the wilder and feral he becomes. His control slips, as does mine.

Huh.

What a messed-up pair we are.

After a long breath of silence of him just holding on to my neck and me pressing against his chest— so close that I can feel the rapid beating of his hard and something else... something hard— he chuckles low and raspy. "You never cease to amaze me, Arianna Parisi." I am amazed as he runs his thumb

along my bottom lip. “But don’t fucking push me or play games you know you won’t win.”

The wonder in his eyes is gone, replaced by the same tiring bullshit.

Boredom.

Superiority.

Malice.

“I’m not the one playing games, Sebastian. You are.” Slapping his hand away, I show him the stubborn monster that lurks beneath my pretty surface. Peering up at him, under my long lashes, I shake my head while I free myself from his hold. “And just so happens you lost this one,” I tell him condescendingly, never breaking eye contact with him. The air between us pricks with electricity—I can feel it to my toes.

Suddenly feeling overwhelmed by this moment and this man, I turn my back and move away from him. I am almost to the door when he moves closer, joining me there. I watch with my head held high and a triumphant smile on my face as he reaches inside his suit pocket and retrieves a handful of white envelopes before handing them to me. “I could have turned your piece of shit father’s offer down and saved myself the trouble of you, but I didn’t. I saved you from becoming someone’s whore at eighteen years old. From where I stand, darling, you should kiss the ground I walk on instead of throwing so much sass.” I hold my breath as I watch him turn the knob and open the door with his free hand. “When I tell you to behave, you do it.”

When I open my mouth to tell him exactly what is on my mind, he cuts me off. “And hate me as much as you want, I couldn’t care less, but my child is off limits.” That makes me stop. He thinks I am so awful of a person that I would hurt a child because of my feelings for her father. That...stings. As if I am the same as the man that gave me my name. “If you hurt her in any way, I won’t hesitate to snuff the life out of you, which extends to your sisters. Are we clear?”

Anger bubbles in my stomach, but I contain it before I say something that might make the asshole retaliate, so instead of cursing him out as I want to, I nod once.

“Good girl,” he sighs as if he is disappointed. “Take them.” He drops the envelopes in my hand and steps back away from me, giving me room for me to leave. Getting the hint, I get the hell out of there, fuming and...fuck, I don’t even know what.

All I am certain of is that Sebastian Kenton despises my family’s name.

That means that my being here with him is not a game.
Not to him.
It is something more.
But what?
I might have made him speechless, but he won this battle.
He showed me exactly who is in charge.
Him.
And me?
I am not the queen on his board.
No.
I am the pawn.

BASTIAN

POLITICAL HEADACHE



“I have no desire to keep up
with the farce that I tolerate you.” - B

S eated back with a glass whiskey in hand in my guesthouse, which is for my security team, I watch on one of the screens as the girl walks through the hallways of my mansion with nothing on but a white oversized shirt that leaves nothing to the imagination.

I have never in my goddamn life lost control.

Not in the courtroom.

Certainly not with a woman.

Yet today, I did.

All rational thoughts left me the moment the girl pushed up on me, challenging me with those stunning green eyes of hers.

I also have never met anyone as infuriating and tempting as Arianna, and it's messing with my head.

She is a child...

She is a grown woman.

The two devils on my shoulders battle it out, but I know the truth, needing no reminder.

She is grown, yes, but it is painfully obvious that she has a childlike innocence to her that calls out to the darkest part of me.

Softening me, which I cannot allow.

However, here she is.

In my world and my life.

The girl is devastation wrapped in a pretty-black, seductive bow.

Fuck.

Throwing back what is left of the warm liquid, I slam the now-empty glass down on top of the desk. I don't take my gaze away from the screen, not until the girl stops in front of her door, looking around as if she expects someone to come out of the dark and surprise her.

What an odd bird she is.

Letting out an exasperated sigh, I think back to an hour ago when I had her so close to my body I didn't even know where her body ended, and mine began.

Her heat burned my skin, and I can feel it even now.

I left the little smart-mouthed vixen with the last word, and yet, I feel like somehow she bested me.

I feel both proud and annoyed by her little stunt.

Now I have her scent all over me.

On my clothes.

On my skin.

Ingrained in my goddam brain.

A mix of vanilla and berries.

Sweet and simple, a total contrast to the girl.

She isn't sweet or simple in any way.

Just what I need.

I pushed her, testing her limits in hopes she would step down and learn her place, but the girl, as always, will never stop surprising me.

She didn't step down, and she pushed back.

I wish I could say it pissed me off, but that would be a lie. It did the opposite. It made me hard as fuck.

I love that she is not going to roll over and take it.

That she won't make this easy.

I can't wait.

I roll my heavy steel ring round and round, hoping it would serve as a distraction to the anger I feel slowly growing in the pit of my gut as I think back to Banning's words to me before I arrived at the mansion and met them both inside my daughter's room.

The girl flinched when he made a move she sensed as threatening. Motherfucker.

If her cunt of a father hadn't fallen off the grid, I would've brought him back here and made his daughter watch as I cut both eyes out and made him

choke on them before slitting his throat.

That is saying a lot because I abhor messes.

All types of messes but especially bloody ones.

The one mess I am particularly and surprisingly fond of has a face.

A name.

And lately, has my head in a tight chokehold.

“What have you done to me?” My voice is almost a whisper as I look at the screen, zooming in on her face. She is so beautiful, with her face void of any makeup, her golden hair up in a messy knot, and a long white shirt that barely covers her ass, that it almost takes my breath away.

I adjust myself because this need has been growing since the first time I laid eyes on her and seems to be growing more rapidly, not dissipating. She was brought to my home late last night after the location of the beach house was compromised. Intruders, as well as paparazzi, barricaded her safe place. Like a man obsessed, I have been in and out of meetings with my security to find the underlying cause of this. Someone on my team fucked up and I need to find out who before it happens again.

Their mistake will not go unpunished.

That is a promise.

She could have been hurt...

She could have, and it's been nagging at me all morning. That's why I rescheduled a meeting with the mayor and came home early, wanting to see for myself that she was alright. I don't know why I felt the need to pause my day to deal with the beautiful brat, but here we are.

I wasn't planning on acting like a complete bastard to her, not after the night she had, but the damn feelings she stirred in me with just one look made me feel wild and out of control. Two things I am not.

Never have I acted so out of character, yet seconds with this girl have me scrambling to find the right words like a fool or a teenage punk. I should not feel anything towards the girl.

She is young and broken. She deserves to leave her mark on the moon without being tied to someone like me and all that comes with my life.

Then I saw her through Ellaiza's baby monitor, ripping the clueless nanny a new one. The fire and ferocity with which she defended a child she never met— my child— left me transfixed, staring at the monitor as if I have never seen anything more perfect.

I almost choked on my whiskey when I saw Mona, our temporary nanny

until I could find someone older with more experience in the childcare field, fuming like a crazy woman on the verge of tears after a twenty-year-old girl dragged her ass.

In all honesty, the little brat was right when she implied I made a mistake in hiring Mona to look after the most valuable person in my life, but the egotistical part of me would not admit it to her.

I am mad not only at the nanny but at myself for not protecting my child from someone that could have hurt her. It makes my blood boil, and that is a mistake I will not make again.

That is why I treated my new houseguest so poorly. She knew better in a couple of minutes than I did. Ellaiza's father.

Fuck.

And then, when I tested her limits by caging her in with my other arm, she didn't pull back or fight my palm on her neck, keeping her in place right where I wanted—no needed her to be. Closer.

The irony is that I was the one to pull back... which is what the little brat wanted. She owned my ass. I am still besotted by the attitude she was throwing down.

Her smirk is the hottest sight. A challenge and a threat.

She is both.

She can only lead to trouble, but I know deep down that I cannot wait.

Running both hands over my face, I pat my suit pocket, fishing for my cigars but coming up empty. Groaning in frustration, I sit back on the white leather chair and spread my legs wide, still staring at the screen, when my phone rings on top of the table next to me.

Grabbing it, I notice it's Thylane calling. I hit the green button, answered the call, and watched Arianna walk around the huge hallway with countless paintings that were a pain in the ass and a hit to my bank account to acquire — I watch her as she runs her delicate fingers along the paintings.

"Yes." I skip the pleasantries because as much as I enjoy Thylane's company. We have never had the kind of relationship where we ask each other questions about our days or things normal couples do. We get straight to it. We pretend in the streets for our benefit, and we fuck.

That is it.

It has worked thus far.

She understands my terms and was more than willing to sign a nondisclosure agreement. The moment she betrays my trust, she will lose

everything she worked and fucked so hard for. However, she made our agreement easy and comfortable for both of us by being a woman of class and a kind human, entirely contrary to me.

Which is why I decided to end it with her. She deserves better than what I can give her, and now that I have a complication with a smart mouth living under my roof, it will only become a hassle to juggle both women.

Liar...

You no longer want her. You want... I kill the thought before it goes any further.

“Bastian, darling. It’s been a while.” Her strong French accent used to make me hard as fuck in an instant, but not now. It has not been the same for a while. It is as if the fucker recognizes what it wants, and she is not it anymore.

“I hope you’re doing well?”

“Marvelous.” She laughs a jovial laugh. I put the phone on speaker as I served myself another glass of whiskey, needing the burn for what will come next. “As you know, London fashion week is coming up, and I was wondering if you’ll be accompanying me this year as well?”

I take a sip of my whiskey, loving how it burns my throat. “I must respectfully decline. I think our time together has come to an end, love.”

This is where they usually curse my name or cry me a fucking river. I don’t know which reaction I will get from her.

“Oh.” She laughs, seeming embarrassed, making me feel like an asshole, but she knew whom she got in bed with, and Prince Charming, I am not. The media will also have a field day with the news of what I am hoping is an amicable split, and it will be news for a while until something else comes up. “Was it something I did?”

My eyes remain glued to the screen where the camera points directly at Arianna’s closed door. “You did nothing wrong. You are a phenomenal woman, and I wish you nothing but great things. But I am afraid this arrangement has run its course.”

“Well...” There’s a long pause before she speaks again. “It was fun while it lasted, lover.”

I always took issue with the way she would refer to me as her lover in public, and I should have put a stop to it before, but I never did. We fucked plenty, yes, but we were never lovers.

“Have a good life, Thylane.” Taking a long sip of my drink, I wait for her

to end the conversation, giving her that much after ending things through the phone.

“You too, Bastian. If you ever need me, don't hesitate to call.” With that not-so-subtle offer, she ends the call.

She was beautiful, but just like the rest that came before her... easily forgettable. It is safe to say that I will not be calling. Once I end something, it is finished.

I pocket my phone and take a deep breath. I know I did the right thing. I don't need more problems in my life, especially during campaigning.

The blonde mouthy bombshell is a beautiful nuisance, and I already have my hands full with her.

The door to my right slams open and Banning enters the room with a smug look on his tedious face. “Couldn't help but hear, boss. You're one crazy fucker for ending things with that hot piece of ass.” Ever the gentleman and class act, this one.

“Sit down and bring me up to speed.” I motion for him to take a seat opposite of me. Right now, he is not my oldest friend but my employee. “Do you have any leads on who's responsible for the leak?”

I have a tight circle of men who know better than to cross me, not without paying the ultimate price. I have three bodyguards on my property, twenty-four-seven making sure my daughter and I are safe from outside threats.

They take care of everything, all the shit that comes with making enemies. I have had plenty of death threats, and recently, they have extended to my child. I am not the kind of man who plays. I pay my team a fortune, and, in return, I sleep better at night knowing we are taken care of.

My guesthouse is a two-story, 3,500-square-foot, eight-bedroom, six-bath house, and two of the rooms are filled with nothing but top-of-the-line security monitors and computers, allowing my men to keep an eye on everything.

My security team is composed of ten men. I have handpicked both ex-CIA, Navy SEALs and a few ex-cons.

Best of the best that money can buy.

I spent half an hour reviewing the details of our new security schedule, including the Parisi girl, and another half hour of him bringing me up to speed on what is happening back in Detroit with her family.

I always found the mafia to be weak and easily breakable. Too many egos hold an organization together until one becomes a rat and craves more. More

power. More money for their own families. Just more.

That is exactly what is happening with the three families of Detroit.

The Nicolasis hold the title of capo, but for how long? How long will they keep the peace before all hell breaks loose?

And that's when their outside enemies come in.

The Bratva.

The Irish.

The Cartels.

They are all waiting patiently, as I did once, for an in to take the—oh so-powerful families down.

Until her.

I might have waved the white flag when I took Parisi for my own, but one wrong move against her will surely start a war.

I don't start wars, contrary to what the brat might think, but I do finish them.

They will not like it when I do.

“She won't make it easy for you, boss.” Banning's concerns bring me back to the now. I stare into his eyes as he leans back on the chair and looks at the monitor before his eyes return to me. “Arianna is a wildcard. These two years with her have taught me that she's not all bark... she bites hard when provoked.” He laughs, finding the girl amusing. I know they formed some sort of bond or understanding, yet the thought bothers me to the point I sometimes want to punch the smile off his face whenever he talks about her.

Like right now, if he does not lose that goofy grin off his face.

Fixing my tie, I stand from my seat and hand him what is left of my whiskey. Friends or not, what is mine will always be mine until I say otherwise. And for the moment, the little Parisi princess is mine, and I don't share well. Never have. Most likely, I never will.

“Sandoval reached out with news of threats being made to one of the Nicolasi princesses from some woman-hating freak. It's all too close to Arianna.” Walking towards the exit, I stop and say the last word. “From this moment on, you become her shadow. She does not make a move without you being there with her. Train the new team to serve as your backup. If anything happens to her on my watch, it's your head.” With that threat to my longtime friend and trusted ally, I close the door behind me.

Whatever threat comes our way, I will handle it. Because like I wish for my child, the same goes for Arianna Parisi.

My current obsession.

The sins of the father will not fall upon the shoulders of the daughter.

Not while I am breathing.

Fuck.

This is the moment I should have realized my life would never be the same. All because of the beautiful ice princess currently sulking under my roof.

ARIANNA

GUCCI WHEELS



“He likes them young.” - A

It has been days since I arrived at the moody asshole’s mansion and since I last saw him. The man gets up at dawn and arrives home late to avoid me. I am sure of it.

The lengths he is going through to not run into me annoy a part of me, but another part, the petty part, enjoys the power shift that happened the night he tried to push my limits and didn’t succeed.

I didn’t back down, and it changed something between us. I saw it in his eyes the moment I pushed back.

Yes, he has all the cards on his side, but I showed him I would not back down on any of his threats or challenges. I am not so easily scared or intimidated.

At least, not when it comes to him.

Besides, I’ve never felt both scared and excited at the same time, and it’s all because of him.

Now, thoughts of him plague me.

Taking a seat on the kitchen island, I look for the newspaper as I do every morning and notice someone left the politics section next to my plate of food. Looking up, I see Benjamin staring at me as if I’ve grown two heads overnight.

I take a sip of my coffee and then ask, “What?”

Shaking his head, he chuckles as if he knows something I don’t, which irks me this early in the morning. “Nothing.” He points the eggbeater at me. “Would you like your eggs scrambled, or do you want an omelet?”

My stomach grumbles. I went to bed last night without my usual late-night treat. Something I never did before.

“Surprise me,” I tell him while placing a white cloth napkin down on my lap.

“Asshole.” He murmurs, amused and loud enough for me to hear.

“Why, thank you.” I shrug. Benjamin finishes cooking and places a plate of scrambled eggs with bacon on the side in front of me. As always, his food smells and tastes incredible. The giant with no manners and a tender heart knows his way around the kitchen, which has me curious. “So, you’re not only my babysitter, but you’re the cook here too?” I take a bite of the bacon and look at Benjamin expectantly.

“Just say thank you and shut the fuck up, kid.” He flips me off and turns around to prepare himself a plate.

Grinning, I take another sip of my coffee and gaze at the paper. In today’s news, the presidential runners of each party and their assemblies are being covered.

I skip most of the boring details until I find the one that interests me.

Who will run for President in the upcoming election? Rumored Republican and Democratic candidates.

With two years to go until the next presidential election, reports are swirling about which public figures may throw their hats in the ring for what is already shaping up to be one of the most heated political races in this country’s history.

I read the basic information on some of the runners-up until I get to the last one.

Sebastian Kenton

Age: 32

Less than two years after he was sworn in as Senator of the city of Chicago, Senator Kenton announced his intention to run for president. It is still unknown who will be his choice to join him on the ticket. Kenton, who serves as a U.S. Senator and is a well-known criminal defense lawyer, has garnered a reputation for speaking his mind on issues he supports and the ones he does not. Rumors of his ties to the Chicago crime family didn't stop him from winning the race to Senator, and I believe nothing at this point will.

Senator Kenton is an obvious frontrunner in the upcoming election. He is the candidate to watch out for.

At the bottom of the article, there are countless images of Senator Asshole being followed by paparazzi with a supermodel or two on his arm. There are others of him sitting in a restaurant, head bent low, talking to a handsome man covered in tattoos, and if I am not incorrect, he looks Hispanic.

How is it that the public speculated about his ties with criminal organizations, yet they still put their faith in him? That tells you the state of the country.

The good guys never fail to disappoint, and the bad guys seem to get the job done. What an odd turn.

I keep flipping pages, and all I see are images of him and his flavors of the month. I want to have some smart retort—something clever to say—because I shouldn't care. But I do. And I find at that moment, all I can do is try to manage this swell of emotions because there's no reason for me to

feel... the way I do.

Rolling my eyes, I skip through all the gossip, not wanting to ruin my day when it's just begun. The image of him with other women angers me; it shouldn't, but it does.

He's no one to me, but... hell, I don't even know what he is to me.

A man that saved me from early prostitution and has taken me as a charity case? God, that sounds horrible.

It's true, though, and nothing more.

He can't be anything more.

He just can't.

I think about the way his hot breath fanned out over my face as he was so close to me, so close I could almost taste his lips. I see them, too. When I close my eyes, the image of his lips, his grin, and even his smell attacks me, hitting me full force and leaving me defenseless against the memory.

Then I remember the letters he gave me.

Letters from my youngest sister.

It's all too much.

I'm too much of a coward to confront what those letters might say. I have been putting all my energy and focus into other things.

Things like obsessing over my tyrant.

I ignore the fact that I referred to him as mine. He is not, but I must admit something has shifted between us. Hell, maybe it's my crazy brain.

I alternate between eating my breakfast and reading the newspaper. That's all my mornings consist of for my entire stay here so far, besides spending more time with Sebastian's darling girl.

I've been hidden away with nothing to do but watch TV and witness a parade of women interviewing for the position of taking care of Ellaiza Kenton.

No one of them seems genuine in my not-so-humble and very judgmental opinion. They get all googly-eyed when they ask if the father will be conducting the interviews, but sadly for them, Benjamin does the first round of interviews, and then the lucky women that pass his security background checks get to have a sit down with Sebastian.

At least, that is what I was told.

I finish eating my breakfast just in time for Ella to wake up from her morning nap. That kid sleeps more than the dead do, and I must admit that I miss her. She's the only thing keeping me from losing my mind from

boredom.

Getting up, I pick up my plate, take it to the sink, and wash it. I've never done chores before in my life, but Benjamin made sure to humble me the two years we've shared space and had no help. I don't mind doing it.

Benjamin has taught me things no one cared to back when I lived with my family.

He even taught me to drive, and that was a mission on its own. I almost killed us once or twice, but the man seemed to enjoy being close to death. He's an odd one, but who am I to talk?

"Ana." Ellaiza screeches happily, making both Benjamin and I look her way.

"Good morning, little lady," Benjamin says between chews, the pig. I turn away from the sink and walk toward the living room area, where Ella is safely secured on a bouncy gadget that moves in a circle. Bending down, I pick her up, giving her a big kiss on her fat little cheek, making her giggle.

My heart warms.

Only for her.

For a long time, it was so cold, but lately, here... I don't feel so cold anymore.

"What do you ladies want to do today?" Benjamin finishes his breakfast, downing what's left of his coffee, and throwing his dishes on the sink, turning our way with a grin on his face. Today he's fully dressed in his bodyguard uniform. Black suit and expensive shoes instead of his usual dark jeans, combat boots, and shirt.

He is in full bodyguard mode today.

"Uhhh," my eyes leave him and look down at Ella. She's wearing mismatched polka dots black pants with a yellow unicorn shirt and a red headband. "Who dressed you today, girl? Ronald McDonald's stylist?" I make a point to offer her a smile while, on the inside, my stylish soul is dying while witnessing such an atrocity.

She's cute and could rock any style, but this pushes it.

Ella looks at me with a grin as if she could give two single fucks what I think. I wink at her and lift her up higher on my waist.

"She dressed herself." Benjamin comes towards us and takes Ella from my arms. "And she did a wonderful job, didn't you, little miss?" He talks gibberish to her, making her laugh.

"Don't lie to her." I reprimand him. I also know that it is important for

kids to learn how to express themselves and choose what makes them feel happy, or some shit like that. I read it in one of the baby books Sebastian left on the living room sofa two nights ago.

Still, Ella needs to look her best and that combination. Yeah, that is not and will never be her best. Looking at the two of them, the big Viking fixing the headband on the tiny girl, an idea comes to mind.

Since both Ella and I seem to be her father's prisoners, by going out, I get to kill two birds with one stone.

I get to annoy the man that has been avoiding me like the plague.

And I also get the chance to show little miss Ella there's more to this world than being stuck inside this house.

"I know what I want to do today." I grin while both Ella and Benjamin's heads whip my way. One looks at me with a face that tells me she shit her pants, and the other looks at me as if he knows I'm up to no good. "And I want to drive." My grin widens when Benjamin looks horrified.

Such a drama queen.

I'm an excellent driver.

There's no doubt about that.

There is no way.

Why would he do this? When he can't stand the sight of me.

I don't get it.

"I-is this for me?" I stand back, stunned, watching as Benjamin opens the back of a matte white Bentley *Bentayga* SW12 and shoves Ella's black Gucci stroller inside.

Holding on tightly to the baby, I walk toward the front of the car and run my fingertips over the sparkly silver ribbon on the hood. A gift.

More gifts.

From a man that wants nothing to do with me. It's getting ridiculous. I cannot refuse his gifts because the next thing I know, there is something more expensive waiting for me instead.

"It is." Benjamin jogs around the car, meets me at the front, takes Ella from me, and begins to strap her onto her car seat that is in the backseat of my brand-new car.

I don't miss the fact that the car comes with a car seat for her, melting me a little.

I might be reaching, but it makes me believe the tyrant trusts me, even if just a little with his child.

And there's that feeling again. That strange skipping of my heart.

"But why?" It is not my birthday yet, and the father of my favorite human has already given me more than enough for my graduation.

Benjamin shuts Ellaiza's door and stands next to me, handing me the small gadget that serves as the car's keys. I reluctantly take them from him. "Boss had it custom-made. It took a while to arrive from overseas." Then he opens the door for me, and I am left speechless for the millionth time since I arrived in Sebastian Kenton's life. "You are one lucky prisoner," Benjamin says sarcastically.

Oh, wow.

The glamorous and egotistical bitch that lives inside me screams when I take in the custom-made leather silver skin. The white rugs and the white LED lights that light up the car as soon as the doors open. This is every vain woman's dream.

I am not even sorry to admit it.

When the car lights up, Ellaiza starts babbling like crazy and clapping her small hands.

So, she approves of it, too.

I climb inside the car, take a seat, and look at her through the rear-view mirror while I wait for Benjamin to join me in the passenger seat. "You share your father's expensive taste, baby girl?" I grin when she smacks her lips together as if saying yes, yes, I do.

That's one thing I find myself doing a lot here.

Laughing.

Smiling.

And it never feels forced.

The passenger's door opens and closes fast when Benjamin takes his seat. He puts his seatbelt on and turns my way after ensuring Ellaiza is safely strapped in her car seat for the third time. "Let's hit the road." He types a quick message on his phone, and he's too quick for me to see if he's texting my tyrant. "And for the love of God, watch where you're going. Dying in a car crash with you and a two-year-old is not the way I want to go."

Ellaiza laughs like a lunatic as if she has any idea what is happening

while I turn the engine on, watching it roar to life.

I've never heard anything better in my life, and I don't mean the loud noise of the very expensive and over-the-top car.

Almost twenty-five minutes later, the three of us roam the high-end stores I could find with Ellaiza happily alert while I use Benjamin's emergency credit cards to buy the whole store for her.

I don't miss the frowning men with cameras following us around, asking questions they have no right to ask, but I ignore them like they don't matter because they don't. I am also not oblivious to the curious eyes of the saleswomen in every store we stop by.

Again, I pay them no mind.

All that matters is the baby girl safely tucked in her Gucci stroller, blabbering happily to her new pink stuffed Versace bunny that cost more than my first semester at university.

We shop until we drop or until Benjamin says he has had enough.

We leave the last store with a sleepy Ellaiza, an amused Benjamin, and a brand-new wardrobe for the Kenton princess.

Her father may bite my head off, but it will be worth it if she smiles at me the way she did our entire time here.

If I must max out her father's cards, then so be it.

Ella is worth it.

ARIANNA

NOT SO COLD



“You brought my dead heart back to life.” – A

What was the most fun I’ve had in days, maybe years, took a turn for the worst.

Shortly after arriving at the mansion, Ellaiza woke up from her nap in the car, acting so unlike herself that it made us worry. She looked flushed and couldn’t keep her head up. I recognized the signs because my sisters used to act the same whenever they felt under the weather.

We made it home safely, and Benjamin turned on the babysitter mode, quickly taking her temperature to find out she was running a fever.

She is.

My heart instantly broke.

Did I do something wrong?

Did I make a mistake by taking her out?

God, is she sick because of me?

“It’s okay, baby girl.” I coo at her and cuddle her while Benjamin finishes talking on the phone with her pediatrician.

We can’t get a hold of her father, and it is only making Benjamin act more agitated.

It’s almost six o’clock in the evening, and the fever is settling down, but we’re still not out of the water.

“Daddy.” She mumbles weakly, breaking my heart even more so. There are tears in those beautiful blue eyes, so much like her father’s, and her skin is red and flushed.

An ear infection, the doctor believes. Benjamin had one of the other security people run out and get her medication, and now we are waiting for it to work.

I want to console her by telling her that her father is on his way, but I refuse to lie to her. It feels wrong to do it, even though it is for the greater good. Benjamin said Sebastian is attending a business meeting with some investors for his overseas hotels, and he has no signal.

“Close your eyes, darling girl.” I push her dark curls back from her face while she lies back in her crib. “You’ll feel much better once you get some rest. You’ll see.” I whisper.

“I’ll be right back.” Benjamin looks down worriedly at her and then heads out, leaving me alone with a very sick toddler who has my barely functioning heart in her tiny little hands.

I nod at Benjamin but remain quiet, not wanting to startle Ellaiza as she’s slowly but surely finding sleep. Her blue eyes become groggy as the medicine starts to take an effect.

At first, I didn’t understand what it was about this little girl that made me feel so much at once. She was just a girl, but then I realized by spending time with her that she was not just a girl.

She reminds me of my sisters and me in a way. The only difference is that Ellaiza has people that love and would die for her.

We didn’t.

She slowly but very strongly started creeping through every broken crack of my heart and made herself a permanent fixture there.

In days, she managed to conquer my heart without any resistance from me.

Feeling my legs give out, I drop to the floor beside her bed. Reaching up, I grab her tiny hand and don’t let go for even a second, not even when sleep claims us both.

BASTIAN

I don’t realize I have been holding my breath until I could breathe properly the moment I step foot inside my home, where my very sick baby is.

Sidestepping my security, I enter my home and hurry my pace toward Ellaiza's room. Since the moment she came into my life, there haven't been many sick incidents because my kid is a healthy baby, but on the rare occasions that she does get sick, we have her pediatrician on call.

I have never been away from her for more than a day, and today was no exception, but I will not forgive myself for not being here when she needed me most.

Fuck.

I had two business meetings today and one late dinner with some of the investors for my chain of restaurants in France. There was no signal while we were up in the air, and once we landed, Benjamin's countless text messages, emails, and missed call notifications were able to come through.

I had my heart in my throat the entire car ride here, and still, to this moment, I have the same crippling feeling in my gut. One that will not go away until I see with my eyes that my little girl is okay.

Racing through the halls, it takes me but a minute to find myself entering my child's nursery, and once I open the door, my heart settles and softens for two entirely different reasons.

My baby girl is fast asleep, looking a hell of a lot better than the pictures Benjamin sent an hour ago, with one chubby fist in her mouth and the other holding tight to Arianna's fingers.

Making sure my baby's breathing is even, I reach forward to ensure her fever is gone.

A relieved sigh escapes me when I confirm she is no longer warm.

Taking a deep breath, I let my eyes travel to the sleeping beauty currently passed out under my daughter's bed, holding tighter to her as if it is all a dream that might slip through her fingers the instant she opens her eyes.

Wavy blonde hair falls over her cheeks, accentuating her youthful looks. Her face is rid of any makeup, and her plump lips form an adorable 'O' shape while she snores softly.

My eyes zero in on their joint hands, and suddenly my chest feels tight. Since the moment she arrived in my home, she and my daughter have been inseparable, and I don't know how to feel about the new development yet.

However, tonight, I am grateful she was here.

I am grateful that she didn't leave my girl alone and that Ellaiza had someone besides Benjamin to look after her in my place.

Someone who...cares.

Hovering over the crib once more, I place a soft kiss on my daughter's forehead. "Sweet dreams, my heart."

Then, I gently pick up the sleeping girl off the floor, covering her when her oversized shirt bunches up, almost exposing her to my eyes. I ignore the unknown and overwhelming feeling in the pit of my stomach the moment Arianna is in my arms. How she feels so small and vulnerable is a total contrast to how she acts when awake.

I hoist her up higher, careful not to wake her, and walk towards her bedroom. Once inside, I gently place her under the covers. She stirs in her sleep but quickly settles down.

She looks peaceful and young. So young and carefree. The permanent scowl she reserves only for me is nowhere to be seen.

Gorgeous.

I have never seen anyone as beautiful as Arianna, and that has me all tied in knots because how could I look at this girl and not feel all the hatred I feel towards her father? How is it possible that every dark thought fades away when I stare at her?

The resentment and the pain should be present, but they are not. They haven't been for a while, or maybe they never were, and I have been fooling myself.

Because all I see when I look at this stunning creature is a beautiful mess and a thousand what-ifs.

What if she were older?

What if she were someone else?

What if we met at another time under different circumstances?

What if I was the right man?

I am no longer the same man I was the day she walked into my life.

I was never distracted, never deterred from my goals, and I have never been impulsive. So, imagine my not-so-pleasant surprise when I found myself being all three at once.

Turning my head towards the window, I notice there is a full moon tonight. The sliver of light slipping through the curtains illuminates the room, making the sleeping girl look like an angel.

A goddess worthy of her name.

Shaking my head lightly, I suppress the need to laugh aloud at the absurdity of this moment. Of my thoughts. "What a tender heart you have, darling." I draw the blanket over her narrow shoulders and lean close to her

ear, combing her bangs back with my fingers. “Perhaps you’re not so cold after all.”

Something shifted between us, and there is no denying it.

The instant I looked at her, I knew things would never be the same. Good or bad, it does not matter as long as it is her.

My priorities. My plans. They have all shifted so completely that as I listen to her breathe softly, all I can think is I can’t imagine going back to life before her.

A life without her.

ARIANNA

NERVOUS



He looks at me as if I
am the missing piece in his life.” - A

“You look so pretty,” I whisper to Ellaiza as I comb her hair with a tiny brush trying to contain those unruly curls of hers.

She’s perfect, and she knows it.

“Ella pwetty.” She turns her little head and looks over at me before tapping her nose with her palm.

So silly and not very humble, I must say.

My type of girl.

I jokingly roll my eyes at her. “What a little diva you are.” I place the brush down on her tiny vanity and move towards her closet with her in my arms to choose a comfortable outfit for the day.

I took it upon myself to take over babysitting duties from Benjamin, not wanting to be apart from the little girl for a second. Although, it was quite the challenge since her father has been hogging her without leaving room for the rest of us.

He hasn’t left her side all day, and the only reason I got to sneak in and spend this time alone with her is that Sebastian was called into his home office for an emergency meeting, or so I’ve heard.

I understand why he is unwilling to part from her.

Being away from your kid while she was hurting and needing you must be a tough pill to swallow, but he made it home just in time to ensure she was safe and healthy again.

He’s not a complete ass, after all.

Please, girl...

Oh, hush! Let me have this, at least.

Insulting the man is the highlight of my day, as sad as that sounds.

“Anaaaaaa.” The little hellion smacks my right cheek. Rude. That is her father’s child right there.

“Yes, stink?” I stare at the bubbly baby girl and offer her a soft smile.

“Hi!” She exclaims adorably.

I laugh before responding. “Hello.”

I’m glad to see she’s feeling better today. I still have my heart in my throat after last night’s scare.

Making sure her diaper is placed correctly, I finish buttoning Ella’s brand-new Burberry pearl white pajamas and move on to matching socks. From now on, she will always match and be styled properly.

No more crazy outfits.

I adjust her left sock on her tiny baby foot. The room temperature is cold, and even with the thermostat on, the socks will make sure her feet stay warm all night.

The weather is getting cold in Chicago now that winter is here.

Last night made me realize how little I know about kids and how much I care about the little monster currently slobbering all over my Gucci dress.

“You gave me quite the scare, little girl.” I frown at Ellaiza, and she grins while playing with the tendrils of my hair. “Oh, you think it’s funny, huh? I’ll give you something to laugh about.” I tickle her belly, causing her to break into a fit of giggles making my heart sing. Is that even possible? For a heart to sing?

I am not sure, but somehow that is how it feels whenever Ella smiles my way or giggles in that sweet baby voice of hers.

I am not the only one currently under her spell.

Her father is madly in love with her, and Benjamin is equally besotted with the little girl.

Placing Ellaiza down on her miniature white couch, I make sure she stays still while I grab my phone from my jeans back pocket, unlock it, and open the camera app.

Besides reading the paper and spying on a certain grumpy politician, I spend my days taking countless photos of Ellaiza when I get to dress her up in her brand-new clothes.

After graduation and finding myself lost in this place, I haven’t had the

chance to think about what to do with my life now that I was given a brand new one. What I found was that I enjoy doing little things I couldn't do before.

Laughing.

Playing with a child without looking over my shoulder, waiting for punishment.

I like spending hours reading and writing on my notepad about little things, stupid things, but writing anyway.

I don't take myself so seriously here; maybe that's why I can feel free here and not fight it.

I don't feel so hollow, and that's dangerous because it could end.

The blissful feeling in my chest won't last.

A knock sounds on the door before it's pulled open by Benjamin. "Well, look at you." His smile widens from ear to ear when he looks at Ella sitting on her baby chair, looking exactly like a queen on her throne. He picks her up and throws her in the air, making her break into a fit of giggles. Then he looks at me, "You hungry?"

"Starving, actually," I mumble, rising from the floor.

"Good." He walks over to the L-shaped couch on the far side of the nursery, takes a seat, and turns the TV on while the annoying talking pig plays on the screen. Placing Ella on his lap, he gets comfortable and then turns his head my way. "Dinner is served, and the boss is waiting."

"Waiting for...?" I narrow my eyes when I see his obnoxious grin. The one that tells me he finds my discomfort amusing. Asshole.

"You," Benjamin says before leaning down to Ella's level to whisper in her ear. At least Ella has the decency not to laugh at whatever the traitor said. Good girl. "Go on. Boss does not take kindly to tardiness." He laughs when I flip him off when I am sure Ella is not looking.

He wants me to join him for dinner.

Very suspicious.

He's been treating me as if I don't exist, besides his incessant need to lavish me with gifts.

What changed? I wonder.

A nagging voice in the back of my mind tells me. Perhaps, he has something to say about you taking his child on a shopping spree and maxing out his cards.

On the other hand, maybe it is the fact that right after your trip his kid got

sick.

Oh, hell.

Taking my sweet time walking down the stairs, I halt when the strong aroma of garlic and cheese assaults my nose. Just then, my stomach grumbles and my mouth salivates because of the delicious smell.

The only thing I had to eat all day was a bowl of salad and a mid-afternoon snack.

I am famished, but my stomach is also in knots.

Why did he call me downstairs? And why does he wish to have dinner with me?

It makes no sense.

Not one to back down from a challenge, I came downstairs. A part of me is anxious as to what this all means, but another part of me is curious.

I haven't seen him in days...

Just when I reach the corner that leads to the dining area, I see him.

Sebastian.

He is sitting at the head of the table with three carton boxes of what I am sure are pizzas in front of him.

Huh.

There is something about the image of a sophisticated Sebastian sitting down on a six-grand, luxurious, white-marble table with the sleeves of his Hermes black dress shirt rolled up, with what I know for certain is a silver *Jaeger-LeCoultre* watch that costs more than most of the cars in his garage, on his wrist, eating something as simple as pizza, that is amusing.

And extremely attractive.

The thirsty bitch of a devil on my shoulder gives her unsolicited opinion.

I am crazy about pizza.

Three-meat pizza, to be exact.

Simple, yet delicious.

The fact that it is on the menu tonight makes me ecstatic, mostly because I am getting tired of the healthy food I am being served here when Benjamin is not the one cooking.

Out of habit, my hand comes up to my hair to brush my bangs from my

eyes as I enter the room, and my eyes clash with emotionless gray ones.

“You are late.” He says while he motions for me to sit next to him, where a plate is already waiting for me.

“Oh, am I?” I feign ignorance but come on...the man only had to wait five minutes. It is not as if I made him wait for more than twenty like I wanted yet couldn't bring myself to. The bitch guilt is one of the many feelings annoying the hell out of me lately, and it is always present where Sebastian is concerned. I feel... indebted to this man, and it kills me.

“I don't appreciate tardiness.” His voice is rough and laced with annoyance.

I take the offered seat and turn my face toward his. “So I've heard.”

Sebastian narrows his eyes but says nothing else as he begins to pour himself a glass of Dom *Perignon*. Of course.

The expensive wine couldn't be missing.

“Why am I here?” I share exactly what is on my mind because I am not one to beat around the bush.

“Because I want you to.” He takes a sip of his glass and pushes a pizza box my way. “Eat.” That's it. He doesn't care to give an explanation. It just is.

A million things run through my mind, but I am smart enough to know this is not the hill I want to die on, and I also know to choose my battles wisely.

I overthink everything because I don't trust this man. Kindness and all. He is a stranger. A generous stranger, but a stranger to me, nonetheless.

The carton box he pushed towards me has chocolate dunkers on it, and right next to it, there's an order of breadsticks.

My mouth waters just at the sight.

I ignore the offending salad and dive straight into the junk food.

I am a foodie.

I love food.

For so long, I was denied the kinds of foods most people take for granted or spend their entire lives avoiding. Now, I stuff my face whenever I have the chance, not denying myself one of the greatest pleasures in life.

Eating shit that's not good for you yet tastes delicious.

Then, I look at Sebastian's plate and try with all my might not to gag.

The offending slice of pizza on his plate has fruit in it.

Pineapples.

Big, disgusting chunks of pineapples.

And here I was, so sure this man had taste in all aspects of his life.

Apparently not, if that is the topping he prefers.

There's a tingle at the center of my spine, and I twist in my seat to find Sebastian glaring at the untouched slice of three-meat pizza sitting in front of me. "Is something wrong?"

"Yes." I take a bite of my pizza and chew before speaking. "That is gross." I point at his plate.

"Forty-five percent of the world's population who enjoy pizza might disagree." Forty-five percent of the population. Yeah, right. He pulled that number out of his ass.

"Now you are just making things up." I chuckle under my breath because of the absurdity of this conversation. Truth is, I am nervous about what this impromptu meeting means, and silence does not help.

I hate the silence.

Nothing good comes of it.

He goes back to pouring himself a glass of wine, and I continue eating my slice in silence until I find myself taking glances at the odd creature next to me from the corner of my eye.

"You are staring," he taunts with a knowing smile. "May I assume perhaps that what you see pleases you?"

I huff, rolling my eyes. "Don't flatter yourself." I stare at him, trying hard to contain the small twitch on the corner of my lips. "You have something on your teeth. That is all."

I am a liar.

And a horrible one at that, and he knows.

Ugh.

He has nothing on his teeth, but he does have a tiny crumb of pizza stuck to his bottom lip, and it's driving me nuts.

"Whatever you say, darling." He drawls, his mouth spreading into a grin.

I feel a tingle in my stomach when he grins.

That half smile of his is perfect, just like him.

As in, he's a perfect ten, emphasis on perfect.

I narrow my eyes at him, not liking the way he is making me feel right at this instant. Not one bit.

He looks at me with one perfect eyebrow arched.

It boggles my mind that I haven't looked away yet. There is something

about a person looking at me too closely that is unnerving. Why is that not the case here? The longer this continues, the more my raving pulse seems to carry down to the juncture of my thighs. To...everywhere.

“Thank you.” He breaks the silence first, stunning me. Those are two words I never expected to hear from him.

“You are thanking me?” I put the half-eaten pizza down and wipe my mouth with a clean napkin. “For?”

His jaw pops as if to say he would rather be doing anything but this. “For taking care of my child when I wasn’t there to do so.”

There are a million and one sarcastic things I could say right now that would make that vein in the middle of his forehead pop, but I decide to save them for a rainy day. Joking when it comes to the little girl feels wrong, even when messing with him, would bring me great satisfaction.

We found common ground, he and I.

His daughter.

I take a sip of my coke. “You are welcome,” I reply awkwardly, not used to this.

“Huh.”

My eyes find his. “What?” I ask.

“I didn’t expect that reaction, that is all.” he shrugs, unbothered.

“What did you expect?” For me to throw some sass, no doubt.

“Your special brand of annoying sarcasm,” Sebastian murmurs while twirling his glass of wine between his fingers.

Shrugging, I say, “Tomorrow is another day.”

He laughs.

A genuine laugh.

The same one that makes me feel weak on the knees.

A smile so different from the one that is captured by the tabloids and newspapers.

This one doesn’t seem forced.

What is happening?

I stare at him in wonder because that is exactly what Sebastian Kenton is to me.

Wonder.

A mystery I can’t quite decipher.

And he burns so bright that it makes me jealous at times.

Because just like the sun, when you stare at it for too long, it starts to

hurt.

It hurts...

He must've seen the look on my face because a second later, he sobers up, and the smile is gone, replaced by a puzzled look.

Look away... but he doesn't, and just like that, I find myself under a spell because I can't seem to look away from those hypnotic gray eyes. I feel an invisible rope of intimacy that wasn't there before tethered me to him, or maybe it was, but I didn't notice. I was too busy fighting it. Fighting him.

This is the man underneath the wealthy and famous politician. This is the father. Then I remind myself that this is not real.

Seriously. I must be imagining this.

He meets my gaze, and I get that same sense I've had with him before. As if he is so deep in thought, but when he hears you and looks at you, he sees inside you.

"You will be free." Suddenly the rough tone of his voice breaks through his spell. What did he say? "Give me to the end of my campaign trail, and I'll set you free."

"You will let me go?" I breathe out, too stunned to even think straight. "Just like that?"

Sebastian nods, the perfect picture of indifference. "It is a crucial time for me, and with the campaign, I cannot afford more scandals, but Ellaiza has grown attached to you..." he says as if he, too, can't understand the bond the little girl and I have formed. I can't even believe myself at times, too. How come someone as innocent and warm as that child grows attached to someone as cold as me? "I need time to make the proper arrangements for you—"

Dropping my napkin, I reach forward and touch his hands without ever realizing I am doing it. "Truly?" There is no joy in my tone. Freedom doesn't mean what it used to be before.

His idea of freedom means a world without Ellaiza.

Without Benjamin.

A world without him.

And suddenly, the room feels cold.

Sebastian looks down at my hand, touching his with a frown, yet he doesn't object to my touch.

My heart starts beating slowly.

Why is it so cold?

"If that is what you wish, yes," Sebastian says before rising to his full

height and staring at me. Then, I feel his warm, strong hand grab my chin and pull my face upwards so I can stare at him. “I am not a good man, Arianna. I believe you already know this. I have never been anyone’s hero, always the villain, and that is how I prefer it.” He chuckles softly without humor. “With you is different...I don’t wish to be your villain.” Holding my breath, I hang on to his every word, still not over the fact that he plans to let me go if I wish to. “Goodnight.” With a soft kiss on my forehead, he leaves.

He leaves me with both my mind and heart a racing mess.

I don’t wish to be your villain.

ARIANNA

BONDING WITH AN ASSHOLE



“Don’t ask questions when you don’t care for my truth. Are you slow?” — A

To say things did one-eighty after the meal, I shared with Sebastian would be an understatement. Not only is he home more, but he has taken it upon himself to email me at all hours of the day about internships in various high-profile companies in this city that might interest me. The man is relentless in his quest to find me a good fit, going as far as to offer me an internship in his legal firm.

Of course, I turned him down even though I am grateful for the opportunity, but the thought of having to work for him sucks the soul right out of me.

I see the way he deals with his employees. He is never rude, but he has them jumping through hoops every hour of the day, and I know we would be at each other’s throats more than usual.

Besides, the law is not the career field I chose.

He might think I am being difficult, but I am still figuring out what I want to do with my life. I used to dream of all the things I would do if I were given the chance. Now the chance is here, and all the possibilities overwhelm me because I feel...guilty.

Because I survived the cold.

I was given everything my sisters, and I would’ve never had if it was up to our father.

One day came for me.

Not for them.

Every second I spend with Ellaiza, her grumpy father, and Benjamin, I am reminded of how incredibly lucky I have been. Although, I don't think luck has anything to do with it, more like Sebastian.

I swear if I didn't believe in such things and knew better, I would think the man is God. Although, there's no doubt in my mind that Sebastian believes he is above the law of men and the judgment of a higher being.

He has opened all the doors my name and my father shut for me.

I am no longer a mafia princess who dreamed of better days but an educated woman with the freedom to choose her path in life.

The thought of leaving this haven Sebastian built for me hasn't crossed my mind once in weeks, and it is all because of them.

How can I leave the only people that give a damn about me?

Benjamin has taught me the meaning of friendship.

Sebastian has given me the world, but it is not only the material things. He has also given me the one thing I never had before.

The belief that I can be anything I want and do anything I set my mind to.

He has given me a reason to smile.

His daughter.

This beautiful little life I am now a part of.

Many things stopped hurting me long before I came here, but the thought of leaving Ella makes me sick to my stomach.

She stole whatever was left of my heart, one sweet smile at a time.

Speaking of the little brat, it is just us today while her father is out for the morning and Benjamin is out back in the pool house, training the new security team. I notice that there are more men in suits around than before.

I wonder what made Sebastian add more men to his security. Did he receive a threat? His job is a dangerous one, but so is his mouth. Both things make him prone to death threats.

Does it have anything to do with me? The thought of my father sours my mood.

"Daddyyyy." Ella's high-pitched, sweet voice brightens up my mood instantly by chasing the ugly thoughts away.

I look down at the carpeted floor where Ella is playing with her stuffed bunny and completely ignoring the puzzle next to her.

"Your daddy is working, baby." I drop to the floor next to her and stretch my legs on either side of her tiny body. I grab my phone from where I left it on the sofa and open the camera app. "Smile for him, Ella." Her tiny head

rises, and she looks directly at the camera and makes the most adorably annoyed face ever. Her expression is as if she is tired of life or me. Maybe both. And because I find every little thing she does cute, I snap a picture and send it to her father.

That is something I do now.

It started as a joke.

Out of the blue, two days ago, he sent me an email with three internship opportunities. I looked through the offers, but nothing felt like the right fit for me, and when I didn't respond as fast as he wanted me to, he texted me.

Now, he stalks me not only by email but by text too.

Instead of responding to his email, I open our text conversation instead and send him the photo of Ellaiza acting like a grump. Ella screeches in annoyance as she does every time she is not getting the attention she wants. Other people might find her demanding little personality annoying, but not me. I find it endearing on her. Not her father, though. He is not that cute when he's being ignored.

Liar...

Ignoring the voice on the back of my head that lately seems to be a Sebastian fan, I reach my arms forward and hug Ella to my body. "You have me wrapped around that chubby little finger of yours," I whisper to her before placing loud kisses on her little neck, causing her to wiggle her small body and smile adorably.

I never believed in love at first sight, and I am still on the fence about it, but there is no denying that the moment I laid my eyes on this baby girl, something shifted inside me, all around, everywhere.

Ellaiza is everywhere.

Ping.

The phone in my hand sounds off with a new notification. I lean back on the sofa, holding Ella tighter to me, and get comfortable. It is Sebastian's response.

Tyrant: Beautiful.

Tyrant: Why is she frowning?

Tyrant: Is she hungry?

Tyrant: Tired?

The bubbles keep popping up, letting me know he is still typing.

Ella giggles, and I smirk at her. “Your daddy is annoying, baby. Wait until he gets you a phone when you turn five years old.” Ella giggles louder now, as if she understands me.

Sometimes it feels as if she is the only one who does.

A baby.

I type a quick reply to Sebastian.

Me: She is your spawn, Sebastian. Of course, she is pissed this early in the morning.

Tyrant: Pot meets kettle, darling.

What an a—

The phone flashes with another text from Sebastian.

Tyrant: Did you go through the emails I sent? I am going to the trouble of searching for good internship opportunities for you. The least you could do is reply.



I have come to enjoy using tiny pictograms instead of words. For someone like me that does not particularly enjoy talking, the smiley faces and objects are a clever way to respond to this man. I don't have to waste my time writing, and it bothers the hell out of him.

It is a win-win for me.

Tyrant: Very mature, brat.

Brat... lately, that even sounds more like a term of endearment than an insult, like before.

These people are making me soft.

I wait for his response when I don't reply, but it never comes. Of course, the man is relentless, but he still has a gigantic ego. Smiling to myself, I raise Ella until both of our cheeks are touching, and I snap a picture. This time for my eyes only.

I have countless pictures on my phone, but only some of them I post on social media. I succumbed to the self-centered app.

I don't post often, and I only did it because I was curious and because it

made the vein on Sebastian's forehead pop when he found the account. Benjamin most likely blabbed, but in the end, I won that battle.

The infuriating man wanted me to enjoy life and act my age. Well, I am doing exactly that, even if I sometimes delude myself into thinking my life is anything but normal. One night, I posted a photo of myself in a baggy shirt wearing thigh-high Prada boots, facing the lighted floor-length mirror in the enormous walk-in closet, and the next thing I know, notifications kept popping up on my phone. I didn't understand what was happening at first until the next morning. Sebastian looked at me weirdly but didn't say a word, and Benjamin joked that I was an influencer now.

Whatever that means.

I love fashion and expensive things, as shallow as that might sound, but I don't post on social media to flaunt it. It makes me feel like I am in control, as silly as that sounds. I didn't have control of many things, and now I do. I get to be me and put that out to the world because I want to. I choose to and not because I must keep up with appearances like my parents made me do when I was younger.

I get to decide, and it makes me feel empowered.

That is something else I wouldn't have had if it weren't for the man that keeps popping up in my head when I don't want him to.

"Where is Sebastian?" A nasal voice snaps from somewhere close to Ella and me. My eyes trail away from a babbling Ella in my lap and meet the source of the nauseating and condescending tone.

The woman from the papers.

Crazy eyes.

Sebastian's secretary.

The woman is stunning, I must admit it, but she reeks of desperation and cattiness. A very ugly combination, I might add.

"And how would I know?" I look away from her and give all my attention to the little girl, currently smacking my cheeks as if they are her playing drums. I do know where Sebastian is, but it gives me satisfaction that this woman does not. "You're the one who works for him."

She huffs indignantly and walks closer to the sofa. Ellaiza pays her no mind when the woman tries to talk to her. Such a good girl, my Ella. Very clever of her to spot a bitch at such an early age.

The woman has never attempted to approach me in all the time she's spent here with Sebastian. Today that he is not here, she does. How

convenient.

“You’re the new nanny, right?” She says it with a look of pure distaste.

Oh, she’s a bitch. Okay.

She knows damn well I am not the nanny, but if she wants to play the spiteful game, we will play. I am very good at it.

“And aren’t you supposed to be with Sebastian in his meetings to fetch him his morning coffee?” I remind her of her place in his life, and at the same time, I get a jab in. I know who she is and what she does for the tyrant, and if she thought she could come here and belittle me and I would swallow my tongue, she was wrong.

I always bite back and enjoy it every time.

I smile when the woman’s eyes narrow at me, and her nostrils flare, clearly indicating that she didn’t take my words kindly. I know fetching coffee is not part of her duties, but I hit her where I wanted—her ego.

I continue bouncing Ella on my thighs, making her laugh, and I choose to believe my girl is laughing at the vindictive woman currently foaming at the mouth. Wow, just a little snarky comment pisses her off. Noted.

“No, pwetty, no.” Ella slaps my cheeks repeatedly, and I look down at her chubby face.

“I know, baby. I know,” I whisper to her, making sure it is loud enough for Sebastian’s secretary to hear. “Those shoes are hideous.”

“Look, you little—” Before she calls me an insolent little bitch, like I know she was planning to, Benjamin enters the living area.

“Celene, what are you doing here?” Benjamin’s tone is dry.

So her name is Celene.

She doesn’t look like a Celene.

More like a Gertrude or a Martha.

Benjamin steps forward and takes Ella from me, and I suppress the urge to snatch her back, already missing her warmth. He then turns to Celene with Ella safely tucked in his gigantic arms.

“Mr. Kenton was supposed to meet me at the office to go over tonight’s rally, but he never showed up and won’t return my calls or texts.” She sounds annoyed and a little bit flustered, too. Huh. In my case, I feel an odd sense of satisfaction knowing that not only has he communicated with me today, but he is also always the one to initiate any conversation between us.

Can’t say the same for her.

I pick up my phone, tune them out, and type a quick message to

Sebastian.

Me: Your coffee fetcher is looking for you. You might want to answer those calls before she files a missing person report.

Three dots appear on the screen; a second later, his reply comes through.

Tyrant: Look through the internships I suggested.

I smile not only because he will not give up on the matter of the internships but also because he replies to my messages in a matter of seconds and ignores her.

I could brag to Celene about it, but I don't. Instead, I blow a kiss to my girl Ella who turns her small head my way as Benjamin leaves the room with her and a very angry-looking secretary.

I smile wider while I lean back on the sofa, and then I proceed to turn on the TV, where an old interview of Sebastian is playing.

He is talking about reparations in the city and how crime rates have lowered in the past three years.

I would never admit this to anyone but myself, but I could listen to the man talk for hours when he is in politician or lawyer mode. He is not only brilliant but tenacious as well. A man like him was meant to be on top. There is no doubt of that, not that he does not know that.

He knows he is brilliant and powerful, and the one thing that pisses me off more...gorgeous.

I watch with a frown on my face as he offers a flirtatious smile to the reporter who sat down to conduct the interview. The woman, as expected, blushes from her neck up.

I gag mentally and change the channel, having had enough of the blushing woman and the very obnoxiously flirtatious Sebastian.

A painful dream wakes me up once again for the second night in a row. I haven't had them in a while, but every day that I get closer to Ella and find myself bonding with Sebastian might be triggering the memories of my past life back in Detroit. A shiver runs through my body, and I feel cold — colder than usual suddenly.

I slip the covers off my body and get out of bed. I grab my silk robe and slip it on. When I cannot sleep, I go to her. Sometimes I watch Ella sleep, just staring at her beautiful face, lost in the dream world, and I know that everything is alright.

Entering her room as quietly as possible, I move in the dark, guided by the glow-in-the-dark designs on the ceiling, and find my way to her bed.

It's way past midnight, and Benjamin retreated to his room hours ago. Sebastian never came home. I don't dwell on how that bothers me. What is he doing? Why do I keep wondering what he is up to? Ugh.

"Anna." She is awake. Ellaiza might sleep like the dead, but only during the day. A smile breaks free, and I can't contain it. I can't ever seem to stay unaffected regarding this little girl. At night, I can be free to love her fully without fear and without her father finding out just how much his daughter means to me.

Because she is a weakness, one I don't want anyone to exploit.

He doesn't know that my days here start and end with Ellaiza. My beautiful girl took hold of my dead and cold heart and hasn't let go since the first time I laid eyes on her. At first, I didn't want to care. Not when I felt animosity towards her father, and I thought about freeing myself from him.

Not when loving someone makes you weak.

Not when loving her means, I'm betraying my sisters.

The ugly reminder of how everything ended still burns. It happened, and I can't change it. I remind myself. I am what I am. I will never forget that either. "Anaaaaaaaaa."

"I'm here, baby." I quickly grab the tiny bag I left here earlier and then move to where Ellaiza is sitting in bed.

This little girl's room never ceases to amaze me. At night, it is even more beautiful than in the daylight. White walls with bright stars covering every surface of the room. Rows of stuffed animals and toys are neatly placed in every corner of her playpen. Right next to her bed, which sits in the middle of the room, there is a mobile with stars and the moon hanging from it. She loves it. I love watching her smile at the little stars hanging above her and her making grabby hands at them when she is fighting off sleep.

Always reach for the stars, stelina.

The painful memory attacks me without warning. I shake the thoughts away and focus on the little darling looking at me with a huge, naughty smile on her gorgeous face. This daredevil is spoiled, not only by her father and

Benjamin but also by me.

She could bring a cold heart back to life. I love her fiercely, which weakens me, but I'm too far gone.

"Mommy." Ellaiza whispers adoringly, breaking my heart and putting it back together at the same time.

My perfect girl.

You light up my world.

"I'm not your mommy, sweet girl." This is our routine. She calls me mom, and I correct her, knowing I don't mind it. I wish she were mine and we could run away to a place where it was just the two of us. "Mommy, up!" Ella giggles, kicking her chubby legs and lifting her arms.

I know what she wants.

To be held.

My touch.

I melt a little inside.

"I got something for you." She looks at me with a frown on her face. Something I love about Ellaiza is that she has all the sweetness her father lacks. I give her the bag so she can see it up close. "It's a princess dress for the cutest princess in all the land." I laugh at her attempt to pull out the item. "Here, let's put it on you."

A couple of minutes later, Ellaiza wears a light blue dress with sparkling tulle fabric and a tiara. I brush her curls away from her face, and she was ready to go. "Ella, pwetty. Me pwetty." She claps her hands excitedly, and my once-broken heart beats faster. How can someone so small and that I've known for such a short amount of time have this huge hold on me? Maybe it's because she's lonely like me. Her father loves her with everything he has and more, but she's never around kids, and the paparazzi and strangers are always trying to get to her. They don't care about her. Just her father.

She's like you.

Like your sisters.

Maybe.

She's my best friend. How sad that might seem to some, but also, how beautiful is this love? I dislike most of humanity, but I love her.

The world failed my sisters and me, but it will not be the same for Ella.

I won't allow it.

I'm cold.

I'm heartless.

I might not be the best role model nor the best choice for her, but she is stuck with me, and I would do anything, and I mean anything, to keep her tender heart from being harmed. To keep her from ending up like me. To keep that beautiful smile on her innocent face. I grab my camera phone and snap some photos of her. "Smile, darling girl." I smile when she does the opposite of what I tell her, as usual, and make a face as if she is about to poop her fresh new diaper. Silly, beautiful brat.

I choose from the seven pictures I took and make my favorite one my screensaver.

Then I hear the door click shut, and I turn around, but no one is there. Was someone here?

I don't have time to think about it when a stuffed toy hits my cheek. "You brat!" I fake reprimand her, but she mocks me. I laugh more because that is all I do when Ella is around. I kiss her forehead and breathe in her sweet scent before putting her back on her bed and lying down with her.

"Moh, moh," Ella whispers in that sweet baby tone of hers that melts my insides.

She means more.

More kisses.

I am more than happy to oblige.

I am certain that this kid's kisses could heal any wound, and I have plenty. Yet when I am with her, I don't feel so broken.

I feel...whole.

Leaning down, I peck a soft kiss on Ella's cheek. "There."

She grins, those blue eyes so innocent, so sweet. "Moh!"

B.E.

Before Ella, I used to find affection so tedious, but now, I cannot imagine a day when I don't feel her tiny hand in mine or her sweet kisses on my cheek.

Taking her by surprise, I pepper kisses all over her face, her small nose, her chin, her cheeks, and her eyes, making smacking noises as I do.

Ellaiza giggles, making me laugh, as well.

Her laugh is infectious.

It also works miracles.

I don't mind laughing when it is with her.

Ella grabs my face in both of her tiny hands. "Me tuh!"

Then she proceeds to smack little slobbery kisses all over my face.

Turning me inside out. Twisting me in two.

My heart is in her tiny, tiny fist.

For the first time in years, I say a small prayer in my mind.

Begging whatever God there is, or forces of nature, to let me have this for life.

Forever.

Is that too much to ask?

Taking a deep breath and hugging my beautiful girl closer, I close my eyes. "Goodnight, my sweet girl."

BASTIAN

"It's a princess dress for the cutest princess in all the land." A sultry, low whisper sounds from inside my daughter's room.

Arianna Luna, what a mystery you are. So cold with me, but not with my child. So much love shines in her eyes whenever she stares at my Ellaiza.

She believes I don't notice, but I do. All I do is notice her.

What am I going to do with you?

I am so fucked.

Completely besotted by a twenty-year-old with more walls around that beautiful heart than the ones in this home.

God help me. I am fucked.

BASTIAN

MIDNIGHTS



“Every broken thing he touches
becomes whole again.” – A

“**S**he managed to fight sleep and is waiting for you.” Banning says as he opens the door of my daughter’s room.

“The girl?” I ask.

“Went to bed about an hour ago.” Banning says with an idiotic grin on his face as he opens the door wider and steps aside.

I nod once and make my way inside my baby’s room, shutting it softly behind me. Taking a deep breath, one I have been holding since I left a meeting that ran late, I step inside the room. I walk towards my daughter, who is happily babbling while watching a princess ride a horse through the sea on the screen.

Her favorite Disney movie.

The one with the two sisters and the snowman.

Before, I never missed our nighttime routine, but lately, it has been hell juggling both my career and my fatherly duties. Ella comes first, always, but sometimes things happen, and I have no choice but to deal with them.

“Ellaiza.” I gruffly say, choked up with emotion. Most of the time, I feel like I’m failing her, but then I look at her innocent face, and I am instantly reminded of the thousands of kids like her that end up in the hands of the depraved.

I might do a lot of shit I am not proud of, but dismantling sex traffic rings and lowering the crime rate in this city, my daughter’s city, are two of the most selfless acts I have ever done, and it is all because of her.

Being a father opened my eyes to things I never thought about before.
Now, that is all I think about.

How this world we live in is too rotten for angels like my baby girl.
Like Arianna.

The images of the little kids that we managed to rescue tonight will haunt me for the rest of my life. They are safe and in their parents' arms, but a part of them died at the hands of every single sick cunt that touched them.

That took what was not theirs to take.

Their innocence.

Flashbacks of tonight's events hit me. I did my part with the help of the law, and now it is up to Sandoval.

I deliver the filthy, and he gets his hands dirty.

That is our arrangement.

We both win.

"Daddy!" My daughter's happy squeal chases the ugly images away, replacing them with all she is.

Pure sunshine.

Magic.

I hurry to her side when she starts bouncing in her bed.

She is the one thing that makes it worth it.

My one love.

My only reason.

All sunshine, love, and exuberance smiling up at me with arms outstretched.

Ellaiza.

My daughter.

The only thing beautiful and big enough to fill the hallowed hole in the middle of my black heart.

The only thing bright enough to give me a glimpse of light.

She is the one good thing I have in my life.

She is dressed in a light pink, Versace shirt and matching pink socks. Looking like the stunning princess she is. No doubt it is one of the items the brat got for her with my credit card.

Smiling, I sit down on the tiny bed and take my daughter into my arms, relinquishing the sweetness of her presence. "Thank you for waiting for me, baby," I tell her, kissing the top of her head. She pulls her head back and gives me a wide smile. Fuck, that smile undoes me.

Ella frees herself from my arms and pulls herself up using my shirt to do it. I place my palm on her back to prevent her from falling backward. “Wecom, daddyyyy!” She starts jumping again, little legs propelling herself as high as she can go, hands clutching my shirt tightly, and all that dark hair bouncing around her chubby face.

A slight chuckle rumbles out, and I start tickling her sides. “I think it is time for you to go to bed, baby. What is up with all this energy?”

I bet the brat that has been holding my entire thoughts hostage lately is to blame for this burst of energy this late at night. She thinks I don’t know it, but she has been taking naps with my kid during the day.

Whether it is to make my kid keep me up at night or for me to have these moments with Ella, I have yet to find out.

I am grateful regardless, even though I strongly disapprove of her disobedience.

Ella howls with laughter, clutching her stomach and kicking her small feet. “No, moh, daddy. No moh.”

“Kisses then?” I peck her face with kisses, but soft and with all the love I have for her.

Pure and selfless love.

She bats at my face, laughing and squirming all over the place. “No, no, no.”

“Rude.” I widen my eyes with the tease.

“Kissy, daddy,” she says with a jerk of her chin while holding up her tiny finger.

I pull back, unable to do anything but gaze down at this little girl who is looking at me like I am her everything. Her hero. The most precious grin spread across her face, so massive it dimples her cheeks.

Wanted to be that for her since the moment I first held her in my arms.

Her hero.

Her rock.

Her world.

All the things she is to me.

I want to be the kind of father worthy of someone looking at him like my baby does.

Like I am not covered in lies and regrets.

As if my soul was not shrouded in the blemish of the things I have done and the lies I have told.

Running my hand over the top of her head, pure affection bleeds out. “I love you to the moon and back, Ellaiza. Forever.” I vow.

Blue eyes shine. “Wove, daddy.”

Love clutches my chest, and I smile. “Forever?”

“Mah daddy.” She says while wrapping her tiny arms around my neck and squishing our noses together.

“My Ellaiza.” I breathe her in.

I don’t know how a bastard like me was blessed with a love so pure and so real, but I am grateful to whoever took pity on me and decided to give me the most precious gift of all.

My Ellaiza’s love.

Checking my watch, I notice it is way past her bedtime, and if I don’t settle her down now, she will be up all night. “Time for bed, little girl.”

“No, nite.”

My grin was wry as I sat back and hooked my knuckle under my kid’s chin. “Princesses need their beauty sleep, do they not?”

Ellaiza scowled. “No.”

I shook my head, my lips softening as I stared at the child I would do anything for. “Elsa goes to bed when her father tells her to.” Thank fuck she is young and does not realize I am full of shit.

A pout takes over her face. “Daddy, bed?” She points down at her bed, letting me know what she wants. A heavy sigh heaves from my lungs, and I toss the covers aside and lay down with her on my chest.

I would do anything for this child.

Whatever she needs from me, I will gladly give.

The heart of my chest? Done.

The world? Working on it.

Now, she wants her father to sleep next to her in this tiny-as-fuck bed. Like every time she asks, I comply.

Because one day, she will not be this little. A time I am heavily dreading.

But until then, I will treasure every kiss, every hug and all her love.

In a minute, she falls asleep slobbering all over my white shirt and snoring loudly.

My world.

My entire heart.

The love of my life.

Who would have thought?

Love.

What a strange and overwhelming feeling.

Looking up at the lit moon on the ceiling, I can't help but think something is missing.

Rather someone.

ARIANNA

PRÉCIEUSE



“Keep your dreams close to your heart
and you’ll see how they come true.” - A

“Do you think mommy loves us?” Arianna’s middle sister whispers, detached from the pain of the night before. The night when her little sisters were exposed to the heartbreaking reality of the world.

Their world.

Does mother love them?

She never knows how to answer that without lying to her.

Without breaking their fragile hearts.

She believed her mother loved them once, in her way. In a selfish way.

But not more than herself and her vices.

The girls always come second, hell, not even second.

Last.

Instead of giving her an answer that will only crush her heart, Arianna opted to remain silent and hugged her tightly.

Can a broken heart still love? She wonders.

Then the image of Kadra transforms into their little sister, Mila, looking at her with teary eyes as if she holds the key to their salvation.

The feeling of hopelessness takes over Arianna, wrapping her like chains that burn her skin.

The loud cries of her sister sound all around them, torturing and breaking her little by little.

Where are you, Anna?

Why did you leave us?

*One day?
You are just like everyone else who has hurt me.
You will thank me one day, mia cara.
Her father's voice taunts.
Their voices are loud and relentless.
Every haunting memory morphs into something ugly, robbing Arianna of
breath and leaving her defenseless.
Then complete silence takes over her senses before chaos breaks loose.
Cries of pain.
The sharp snap of a whip.
Blood.
So much blood.
And laughter.
Evil laughter of all the men that laid their hands on the eldest Parisi girl
and found it amusing.
Then nothing.
Her sisters are gone, and only her father's ghost remains.
"It should've been him." Her father hissed it into her ear as she wept. As
the man forced her from her knees onto her feet. He pressed the gun into her
hands. "Prove your worth, child. You or them."
Shots rang out.
Echoed in her ears for eternity.
A cry of pain.
Her soul shattered, and not for the first time.
After that night, nothing mattered.
No right or wrong.
It was her or them.
No other choice.
She rocked in the corner, silently asking for peace. For mercy. For her
father not to be this way.
Holding onto hope.
However, hope was never kind to the three girls.
A ringing in her ear stops when the sweet giggle of a child drowns out the
evil laughter and cries of pain.
It almost feels like serenity, something she has never felt before.
"Anna." The child holds her tiny arms out for Arianna to hold her.
She holds her tightly and loves her.*

*Loves her like she has never loved before.
She wants to be good for her.
Less cold.
Less broke.
The baby girl's laughter leaves her, and suddenly the room grows colder.
Then the child, too, disappears.
Leaving her cold.
Freezing and hallowed once again.
They are all gone.
Ellaiza's sweet cries become desperate, sounding far away, almost like
an echo.
Tears blurred Arianna's vision, making it difficult to catch her breath.
The child's cries pain her until she can't hear her any longer.
Complete silence.
No warmth.
No peace.
"No. Please. No."*

I jolt upright with a choked gasp.

A rasp of pain.

"Christ." My eyes dart around to take in my surroundings. My senses were shocked to find I was no longer tumbling through the fears and memories that tormented me, but rather, I was in the comfort of my bed in Sebastian's house.

My breath comes out uneven, so I try to settle my racing heart.

Pale ribbons of white stream in through my bedroom window as the moon shines brightly outside, letting me know that it is still nighttime.

The clock on my nightstand reads 3:07.

It is way past midnight.

Sweat soaks my flesh and sheets while my heart raged with grief as I remember the nightmare vividly.

The scars on my bruised heart screamed as if they were still red and raw. The ones on my body healed a long time ago.

That hurt I can handle.

It was the ones written on my heart, embedded in my black soul that made me feel like I was still being torn apart.

I sucked in air to draw oxygen into my lungs, reminding myself that I am no longer in that place. I am not back to that day that had turned into the darkest night.

I am safe, but my mind always returns to those painful moments. Where the dreams lured me into a nightmare that had been real.

It was the moment I lost my soul.

My will to hope and dream for something other than freedom.

Pushing the covers off me, I climb out of bed and walk out the door, knowing I will not be finding sleep again.

Not with how I am feeling.

Ella is sleeping. I usually find myself sneaking into her room and watching her sleep, but not tonight. Tonight, I will not let my demons get near her.

Instead, I take the steps, two at a time, and walk downstairs, needing a glass of water. The mansion is quiet at this time of night, with everyone asleep except the new security keeping guard outside the premises.

When I reach the last step, I take a turn and find the man that haunts me more than my nightmares, hunched over on the white extravagant sofa playing a game of chess by himself. I watch him move a piece on the board with his thick fingers in a strategic way.

Figures that this man is awake at the devil's hour.

Black magic is what he is.

Although, there is something different about him tonight.

Something I can't quite put my finger on.

From this far, he looks lost in thought, and from what I can tell, not pleasant ones.

Dammit, he's so beautiful. Sometimes it's hard to even look at him.

Just like the sun.

Larger than life.

Shining so bright.

I find myself staring at him, and it feels as if I am looking at him for the very first time. Without the charming and condescending smile that I have grown to tolerate. Without the suit and all the pretenses that come with it.

Without the same walls, I have so high up all around my heart.

Here, at this moment, he looks less intimidating. Although, power oozes

out of him no matter what he is wearing or how he looks.

It is like a second skin.

As if he was born with it.

Born to succeed.

Born to be on top.

Born to be him and no one else.

He wears only a pair of black silk pajama pants and nothing else. His naked chest is on full display, and I cannot help but drink him in while he is oblivious to my presence. I would never allow myself to pause for a second and take him in when others are around, but at this moment, when there is only him and me, I do.

Sebastian is all man.

All rogue beauty.

Nothing but bristling, thick muscular arms and legs bound in overbearing strength.

His skin is smooth, not marred with ink or scars.

And that makes him even more perfect if that is even possible.

My eyes travel to his wide shoulders, down to his bulky chest, and all the way down to his packed abdomen. Even when sitting down, he looked menacing.

Wild.

Untamed.

Messy jet-black hair as if he spent all night running his fingers through it.

Hair like the little girl currently sleeping soundly upstairs.

Gorgeous.

Him.

My chest tightens at the sight of him, and it is futile to ignore the fact that the organ inside my chest that's been dead silent for years becomes erratic when Sebastian is nearby.

Suddenly wanting and needing those blue eyes of his on me, I break the silence, interrupting his lone game. "Your conscience keeping you up?" I whisper, making him raise his head and stare straight at me, sending daggers through my soul. His eyes drink me in shamelessly, as I did to him a second ago. I hold my breath as his eyes pierce through me like a weapon that poses a great danger to my heart, soul, and sanity. In response to the not-so-subtle way he is observing me, I raised one eyebrow in a show of defiance.

Sebastian then laughs in a way that causes my stomach to flip.

Something about his laugh has changed as well.

It's no longer mocking or cruel but genuine.

Why is he smiling at me that way? I wonder, not coming up with one logical reason.

"Ne soyez pas ridicule." Don't be ridiculous. He utters in perfect French. That's another side I discovered about Sebastian. The man knows more than three languages, and one of them is French. I overheard him speaking to Ellaiza, teaching her young. As if the man could be any more attractive, but when he speaks French, my insides turn to mush, and the egotistical bastard knows it and owns it.

"Ne soyez pas un connard." Don't be an asshole. My pronunciation is not as flawless as his, but not horrible either. And if it is, he never says it.

Never mocks or corrects me.

In his twisted way, the man has only been pushing me to be better since the moment we first met, but the anger I felt towards not only him but life in general stopped me from seeing past my grief and sense of loss.

It stopped me from seeing what was right in front of me all along.

A tired laugh escapes him, without humor but not mocking either. "Tell me something, Arianna. Do I look like a man that worries over something as trivial as a conscience?" His smile widens, and a shiver spreads through my body while I feel a rush of warmth between my legs. Startled but not shocked by the discovery that my body is not dead when it comes to this man, I try to school my expression, not wanting him to see how much he is affecting me.

Every part of me is set aflame when he looks my way. I have both come to hate and love the feeling it invokes in me. After many long years of nothing here with him, I am beginning to feel again.

That is dangerous...

And addictive.

I move closer and sit opposite him, not waiting for an invitation. Assessing his game, I already know this is a losing game, and I am not only talking about the chess board in front of us. Without meeting his eyes but feeling them all over my skin, I move a piece. There is something oddly satisfying about this game. *"Pour moi, oui..."* To me, yes. I refuse to believe that a man that loves his child as dearly and fiercely as Sebastian does is all bad.

He clears his throat before replying, "Then you know nothing about me, darling."

Sighing, I look at him for a second before looking back at the board. “Maybe you’re right.” I only know what he has allowed me to know and the media’s narrative.

I know he took me from my old life only to give me a better one.

He has given me and done more than my blood.

Deep down, I know a part of him, but I also know there is more underneath all that condescending and demanding persona of his.

“Why are you up this late?” He moves another piece, entertaining me when clearly he has won even before I sat down.

“Can’t sleep,” I tell him truthfully because I have no energy for sarcasm and deflection.

“Hmm.” Sebastian mumbles.

“What is it?” Staring at his face, I wait for his response.

“You can’t outrun ghosts, darling.” He leans back in his seat and takes a sip of his brown liquid. “Eventually, they catch up.” The way he says it makes me believe the almighty Senator of Chicago is not that untouchable after all.

I am curious...

“Do you have ghosts, Sebastian?” I anticipate his next play and move my piece accordingly.

He moves a chess piece and looks at me intently. “I do.”

I am shocked he admitted to a weakness.

“Huh.” A soft chuckle slips from my mouth. I don’t even realize I did it until he stares at me with a small smile of his own.

Thud.

Thud.

The same pressure in my chest takes over just the same as every time Sebastian has smiled my way before.

“What?” He searches my face with furrowed brows.

“Nothing.” I move a pawn forward, knowing I have already lost this game. The man never takes pity, and I would rather eat shit than win dishonestly. “I wouldn’t have pegged you as the type that worries over trivial things like ghosts.” I throw his early words back at him.

“And I wouldn’t have pegged you a coward, darling.” He spits the words out without caring about the impact they might have on the other person’s heart. A normal girl would feel outraged at his clear dig, but not me. Oddly, I have come to admire and appreciate his blunt honesty, even when it burns.

Rolling my eyes, I change the subject. “Why do you love this game so much?”

“*Le jeu calme la tempête à l'intérieur.*” The game calms the storm inside.” He takes a sip of his whiskey without taking his eyes off me. I have never felt this way before. Not warm, but not cold either... Just right.

Huh.

Another intimate confession...

It calms the storm inside.

I didn't expect that answer. Not from him. He doesn't seem like a man who would willingly share his faults or weaknesses, but he just did. To me. What do I even say to that? Sebastian has demons just like the rest of us mortals. “Who taught you how to play?” I whisper, almost cautiously. In the time I have been here with him, I haven't seen signs of his family. It is just him, his daughter, and his team.

At first, I had no interest in learning anything about him, but as time passed, I have come to want to know more about his world and not just the superficial one of riches and politics.

His world.

What makes him...him.

The people he cares for.

His past.

Him.

I searched his name on the internet one night, and all that came up was the media's narrative of him and some of his work as a criminal defense lawyer.

His father's name came up as well, but it felt wrong somehow to read about his past through someone else's idea of the truth.

I want to know, yes, but the truth from his mouth.

I won't accept anything else.

Sebastian gives me a flat look, all warmth gone from his gaze. What just happened? Maybe his family is a touchy subject.

That I can understand.

We are both quiet for a moment before he speaks. “Did you open the letters?” He says while moving his last piece, claiming the victory without calling checkmate like last time we played.

Her letters.

Mila's handwritten letters.

The ones I have safely tucked underneath my pillow unread because I am afraid.

I throw him a flat look, not wanting to talk about it. No, I haven't opened the letters. Because Sebastian is wrong about me. I am a coward when it comes to my sisters. "No." That is all I give him, but as expected, that is not enough for him.

My family is a touchy subject as well.

I am momentarily startled by strong fingers gripping my chin gently, lifting my face until I stare right into Sebastian's eyes. My breath hitches, and my skin tingles because of the feel of his touch.

"You are a good sister, darling." He says low as I close my eyes and let his words wash over me.

You are a good sister...

I'm not.

I know it, yet he says otherwise, and at this moment, I want nothing more than to believe him, but I know better.

How can I be a good sister when I failed them? When I let our father's hate infect us all to the point, it broke me.

Batting my lashes, I keep the tears that are threatening to fall at bay, not wanting Sebastian to see me cry. "And you are a good father." I croak out, opening my eyes and meeting his deep, soulful ones. His face is void of any emotion but his eyes. They say more than his words ever could.

His eyes are gentle. "She deserves the best of me."

"She does." I nod in agreement. Ellaiza deserves all that is good in this world because to both her father and me, she is all that is good and kind in this world, and there is no doubt in my mind that this man, with his hard edges, is doing his very best for her. "You love her." The words slip out without me realizing it.

The love between them is something I've never witnessed before. Something I never and will never have.

A father's love.

"More than life itself." He says fiercely without looking away from me. Allowing me to see the truth.

I believe him.

"You would destroy anyone who tries to hurt her," I murmur, already knowing his answer yet needing to hear it from him.

I never had that.

A man that would go to hell and back, move mountains, and challenge even God to make sure no harm comes my way.

The men in my life were the threats.

They were the ones who caused the most pain.

But Ella knows only love.

She won't grow up questioning her worth or fighting the world as I did.

She has a godlike man ready to tear the world apart for her.

Her father.

Sebastian's eyes become hard, and the words that fall from his mouth are daggers. "Without a doubt. Anyone who even thinks about hurting my child? There is not a soul on this Earth who could save them from me. From the pain I would inflict. From the hole on the ground where their body would lie if they even dared to cause her any harm." The tenderness that was in his eyes just moments before has disappeared, becoming dark, almost crazed. So unlike the controlled man the world sees him as.

My throat tightens, and I struggle to swallow around the lump that gathered in my throat. At the same time, my heart races with the clear implication of what he is capable of doing to any threat to his heart. His daughter, Ellaiza. I know most parents, except ones like my own, would easily claim it. Claim without shame or regrets how they would destroy anyone or anything who hurts their child. It was only normal to want vengeance if they were faced with that horrible circumstance.

"I would never hurt her." I breathe the words out with my whole heart, just loud enough for him to hear. I rather cut my own heart out and hand it to him than hurt his little girl. My sweet, sweet Ella. I don't know why I tell him that, but I do. I can't explain half the shit I do, say, and think when this man is near.

"You can't promise that, darling." He empties his glass without looking away from me. When he's done, he places the glass on top of the table next to him and leans forward, his muscles bulging as he does. With both forearms resting on his knees, he stares at me so intently I find it hard to breathe. I wonder if he feels the same way I do when he looks at me, or am I just a silly fool? But the way his chest is rock solid, barely moving, makes me think that I affect him in some inexplicable way too. "Things happen, and people change..."

"*Pas moi. Je ne aurais jamais.*" Not me. I would never. I say fiercely, meaning it with my heart and soul. "*Elle est sacree.*" She is sacred.

I let him see the truth of my confessions in my eyes.

Because as much as my mouth has spewed many insults and lies his way...my eyes will always betray me. My eyes will always reveal my truths to him. To the man that is supposed to be my enemy in every way, yet now, at this moment, with his mask off, I feel as if we're not on opposite sides.

At least for tonight, we have found common ground.

Love.

We have one thing in common.

Our love for his child.

I admit it to myself.

I love a part of this man, and I don't even know how it happened.

His daughter.

His blood.

She crept inside the hollowed hole in my chest, and if I am not careful, her father can do the same, and I am not sure if I'll be able to stop it.

Because letting him in will be almost the same as losing myself in him, which is just something I won't be able to survive.

I wouldn't be able to survive his ghost.

We stared at each other for a beat, and I couldn't pull my eyes away from him.

I'm compelled, admiring his raw beauty.

His intensity.

I am enthralled by this man who, for the first time in years, made me want to look closer.

Made me want to find out what's underneath the powerful man with the world eating off the palm of his hand.

Crave to find out what's deep in the core of who he is.

I know I shouldn't.

My mind knows that could be my ruin.

It didn't matter.

That hunger for more of him had lit.

A hunger I should never act on. I shouldn't be so reckless. I knew my soul would never recover from the kind of heartbreak this man would bring.

I always thought the saying 'the heart wants what it wants' was complete and utter bullshit until Sebastian Kenton.

Because even broken, betrayed, and barely beating, my heart relishes in the fact that this man made me feel alive for the first time in so long.

The Kentons.

How ironic...

The most dangerous threat to my heart is the one that brought it back to life.

“Go to bed, Arianna.” Sebastian’s rough voice brings me back to the now. “It is late.” And for the first time since he took me from Detroit, I do as he says. Not because he told me to, but because I cannot handle the reality of this moment.

I have always been a realist. I pride myself on that, but lately in this place, all I find myself doing is asking myself what if.

What if this is where I am supposed to be?

Here with him.

With them?

What if this was why Detroit never quite felt like home?

Maybe home is not a building or a state.

Maybe home is them.

Him.

Dammit.

No.

This can’t be happening.

But what if...?

I don’t know if it’s the intensity with which he is staring at me as if he wants to swallow me whole or the fact that his commanding tone causes goosebumps to spread all over my body, but I decide to leave him be. Rising from my seat, I turn my back to the man that has flipped my world upside down one chaotic action at a time, and I walk out of the room towards the staircase that leads to my room, but not before having the last word.

“*Bonne nuit*, Sebastian.” I whisper ever so softly.

A chuckle slips from his mouth. “Sweet dreams, *précieuse*.” And just like that, I can’t keep the triumphant smile off my face all the way back to my room. As much as Sebastian’s mood swings give me whiplash, I know that I affect him just as much, if not more, than he does me.

He called me precious.

A term of endearment.

I have been called many names throughout my life, but that is not one of them.

I have never been precious to anyone except my *nonna*.

Huh.

After that, I got to bed and found sleep, and not one nightmare invaded my dreams.

No, because I dream of him.

My nightmare and my dream.

Sebastian.

BASTIAN

I watch her leave, and after what seems like an eternity, I can release the breath that was being held hostage in my lungs from the second she walked into the room.

The girl manages to suck all the air out of a room without realizing it.

There is a lot Arianna Parisi is oblivious to.

Such as the way my entire body becomes rigid when she is near, painfully aware of her presence.

The way everyone else ceases to exist when she is around, and how I cannot force my gaze to stray from her whenever she enters a room.

Suddenly, nothing seems as interesting as her.

Her thoughts.

Her breathtaking beauty.

Because as much as I find myself attracted to her body, her brain and her clever thoughts are what do it for me.

And her smiles.

Her smiles are rare, but when she smiles, fuck me, does she shine.

And when she frowns, I can't stop looking at her, and when I should find her disobedience and sarcastic remarks distasteful and juvenile like I do with most people, I don't with her.

I should, fuck, I should, but instead, I find her adorably amusing.

I am so fucked.

And the most irritating part?

My body seems to have a mind of its own when it comes to this girl.

Because even when I know, it is wrong, my body does not give a single fuck... it reacts.

Burning fire spreads through me, almost tormenting me when she challenges my every order or thought, and I don't know if I should bend her over and spank that ass raw or punish that sweet plump mouth of hers.

"Fuck." I breathe out. I have never, in my entire thirty-four years of life, been this confused by my own emotions.

I pride myself on my control.

With her, I lose all of it. All rational thoughts slip my mind, and all I can do is agonize over thoughts of her.

Sitting back on the sofa, I light a cigar. I inhale, filling my lungs full, one hand firmly gripping the empty bottle of whiskey and the other holding onto the queen on my chessboard.

I should be giving all my attention to what matters most now, my political aspirations, but all I can seem to focus on is her.

On how right she feels here in my home.

In my world.

With my kid.

My enemy's daughter has infiltrated my world. My goddamn life.

I must be sick.

That is it.

It is just a fixation, and like most of my compulsions, this one shall fade with time.

Liar...

I let out a frustrated sigh and look out the window from where I am seated to the blackened sky smattered with stars.

Trying to get my shit together. To figure out just what the hell I thought I was doing. How was I supposed to maneuver this?

Because it was getting harder and harder figuring out how to be in Arianna Parisi's space and act like she had not gotten under my skin. Like I was not constantly watching her. Wanting something I most definitely shouldn't want.

The reaction that had shaken my insides when I'd watched her from outside the door of my child's bedroom and saw her holding Ellaiza as if my baby was the blood of her blood. Every interaction between her and my daughter disarms me.

A motherfucking arrow straight to the heart.

Piercing.

I am a fool for entertaining the idea because, deep down, I know that I

could never have it. That I'd ruin it, but I still haven't been able to shake the sense that I was looking at something right.

Something good.

What was missing inside these walls.

Beauty, magic, and hope.

She has me all tied in knots.

This is straight fucking stupidity.

That shit wasn't in the cards for me.

I already got lucky with my daughter. Wanting more seems as if I'm reaching for an impossibility.

Before Arianna came into my life, the word impossible was not in my vocabulary, yet here I am, restless and fucked-up over the twenty-year-old child of the man that took what mattered most to me once.

My hate for Gabriele Parisi might not extend to his daughter but feeling anything toward her feels like a betrayal. A slap to the face for what I lost.

I couldn't lose sight. I couldn't jeopardize what I was living for by going after something I couldn't have.

But then the image of Arianna a moment ago, looking at me with so much love and light in her eyes, fuck, there was light and warmth—things that weren't there before—when she talked about my baby girl doing things to me. Shook me to my core. My chest felt like it was going to implode as I glanced at her and witnessed all that joy lit on her gorgeous face.

It made my chest feel tight, something that no other woman has managed to do before.

Yeah.

The brat flipped that shit on me, hadn't she?

Now, I was left floundering.

Tiptoeing.

Pretending like, night after night, I wasn't dying to trace my fingertips over every line of her body. Get lost in those green eyes and that honeyed flesh. Felt as if I was losing my mind with how badly I wanted her.

I should fuck someone else and get her off my mind. Fuck her out of my brain.

Someone that knows and can give me what I want.

No-name basis.

No connections.

No chance of a knife being driven into my back.

Because I know Arianna is not someone you fuck. No. She is the type of woman you court, love, and then put a ring on her finger and a baby in her belly.

Yeah, she is not a quick fuck.

She is a problem.

Should be my enemy and nothing else. I needed that shit drilled into my brain.

Chuckling at my stupidity, I throw my head back on the soft pillow and exhale, blowing the smoke from my lungs and watching it disappear into nothingness.

Right along with my common sense.

I lied.

I lie to myself every second I think of her.

Every time I recite all the ways, she is wrong for me.

How I am wrong for her.

I also lied when I called her a coward. The girl is anything but a coward. She is a powerhouse at barely twenty years old.

Every day, here with me, in a world she is not accustomed to, is a test of her strength and bravery but sometimes, we all need a subtle nudge in the right direction, and something tells me that the key to that girl's frozen heart is her sisters. Gabriele won the moment Arianna severed her ties with the people who clearly care for her deeply, and he is still winning.

She has yet to see it.

ARIANNA

GREEN MONSTER



“Jealousy is beneath me
but the hell with it. He is mine.” – A

“Êtes-vous certain que c’est le mouvement que vous voulez faire?” Are you certain that is the move you want to make? My cocky opponent’s flat tone only makes me roll my eyes.

Sebastian is teaching me how to play chess.

Correction.

How to win at chess.

He surprised all of us this morning by freeing his schedule and spending the morning with us.

Ella is currently busy bouncing in her chair while watching an episode of the talking pig while Benjamin is in the pool area, for the second day in a row, training the security’s new members.

“*Soyez silencieux.*” I tell him as I move my pawn toward his king two squares forward.

I know that with him, it is a losing game.

The clever bastard never loses, although I’ve noticed he tries to prolong the game, giving me time to study his moves.

I find the game of chess fascinating, but I am not oblivious to the fact that Sebastian is a skilled player, not so easily defeated. What makes him a worthy rival is that he finds satisfaction in crushing his opponents.

Sebastian’s throaty laugh washes over me like a warm bath in the middle of a freezing winter. The man has the kind of laugh that would make even the most miserable of bitches stop and stare to admire how rare it is.

He has many laughs.

The one that he only does when he is being an asshole. Mocking.

The laugh that he reserves only for Ella. Full of love and tenderness.

Then, there is the one that he shares with me lately.

A laugh full of wonder. A laugh that makes him look younger, even more beautiful than he usually does.

The charming and beautiful bastard does things to me.

Things I can't fully name yet.

New and exciting things that I've never felt before or care enough for.

“Souviens-toi de ce que je t'ai appris. Surveillance toujours tes arrieres.”

Remember what I taught you. Always watch your back. Sebastian tells me before positioning his bishop in the center of the board. All his bishops and knights are ready for attack.

He shared with me all I need to know to make sure I win the game.

First, I need to learn the moves because each piece can move only a certain way. Second, to always open with a pawn. This opens pathways for your bishops and queen to enter the game. Three, to make sure to get my bishops and knights out and ready to attack. Fourth, the pawns are just as important as any other piece. Pawns can become queens.

But the most important lesson, one that I have ingrained in my mind every time I play now, is always to watch my back, and to do that, I need to study my opponent's last move and anticipate what they'll do next. Nothing is for certain when playing the game, but it is important to get a good read on your rival because they might be laying traps to capture my piece.

Knowing there is no chance of me winning the game now, I reach forward and pick up a piece, but before I place the pawn right where I want it, Sebastian stops me.

“Here is another tip for you, darling. Be patient. Never play too fast because, like in real life, patience is the key to chess success.” I raise my gaze from the board, and my eyes clash with his.

There is not an ounce of cockiness in his gaze. No. They're warm, and I dare say there is a twinkle in them, almost playful. He looks at me as if he is waiting for something, but I don't know what.

His stare makes me uncomfortable, but not in a creepy, perverted way as I hoped it would in the beginning but the opposite. It's an uncomfortable feeling when someone looks at you as if they've known you all their life and as if they're peering through the window of your soul.

It is exciting, too.

And I had to come to terms with the fact that Sebastian Kenton excites me in all the ways a man does a woman.

"Respirez, réfléchissez puis attaquez. N'agissez pas de manière impulsive en cas de doute." He says in a husky tone while staring at my face. Not angry. Not annoyed or impatient. He tells me to breathe, think, and then attack. How ironic that a couple of weeks ago, all I wanted to do was just that.

Attack.

And now?

I don't think I could ever hurt this man.

Not the man that gave me so much in so little time.

The man that gave me Ella.

The same man who has breathed life back into me without realizing it.

He has ruined me.

This I know.

Not wanting to dwell on how this beautiful condescending man has crept inside my brain and taken permanent residence, I think carefully about my next move.

I think of every possible outcome before finally moving my king pawn forward to e4, opening room for my queen to move diagonally. Sebastian quickly moves his piece, and then I capture his advanced pawn by attacking the diagonal.

He can't be serious.

I am angry now.

This man...

I watch as his thick fingers move another piece allowing me to move my queen and pin his king.

And that's game over.

Checkmate.

"Well, look at that." Sebastian laughs as he sits back, his eyes not leaving mine once. "You beat me." His grin widens when I narrow my eyes at him.

The big fat faker.

"You damn well know you let me win, Sebastian." I sneer. "Don't do that again. Don't patronize me. You know you stole me the glory of beating your ass fair and square." How can someone be so sweet and such an ass at the same time?

Sebastian. That's who.

That definition would be right under his name in a dictionary.

Big fat faker. Right next to condescending, narcissistic, overbearing, and infuriating.

Don't forget otherworldly handsome... My inner voice chips in.

Not now.

Suddenly, the grin on his face disappears before he opens his mouth to speak. "Losing in any form displeases me just as much as being accused of something I did not do." He leans back on his seat with his thighs spread wide, my eyes instantly going to the bulge between his legs. Narcissistic jerk. *God, what is he doing to me?* "Besides." There's a smile in his tone when he catches me looking where I shouldn't be. Dammit. Heat creeps up my neck, tinting my cheeks pink, I am sure. I act indifferent, as if nothing happened. As if I didn't just notice his erection. As if this verbal spar between us did not turn the man on and send heat shooting between my legs. Sebastian raises his perfectly shaped left eyebrow while he plays with his watch. "I am not the kind that would let you win to spare your feelings. It serves you no good."

In his weird way, the man is right. Throwing the game does nothing for me.

It does not help me improve at all.

Knowing he threw the game and now he is just talking out of his ass, I let it go because he won't ever admit that he did throw the game so I could win.

How odd...

I will never stop learning something new about this man, and every day that passes, I find myself hoping I can peel off more of his layers to discover what is underneath the man the world sees as a playboy politician with plans on conquering the world.

A small grin pulls on my face, and I breathe out, "Asshole."

"Watch that mouth, or I will be teaching you another type of lesson."

My breath hitches when the suggestive words slip from those plump lips of his. We both stare at one another for what feels like a lifetime. I am too stunned to form a proper sentence, and he stares at me, waiting to analyze my reaction to his comment.

These moments are uncharted territory for me. I feel a lot. So damn much, but I never know how to put what I want into words, all because of what it means to give this manpower over my emotions and actions. *The fear...*

Yeah, that too.

The clearing of a throat makes us both break eye contact and stare at the newcomer.

Ugh.

Not this woman.

The thirsty glorified secretary.

Celene.

Wearing a skintight nude skirt with a tucked low-cut white see-through shirt with a red bra. Very classy.

Not caring about the woman and her undesired presence, I turn back to face Sebastian to gauge his reaction. I am surprised to find Sebastian's eyes on me and not her.

A sense of satisfaction courses through my body to know that, as much as Celene throws her large breasts in his face, Sebastian prefers to look my way.

Unsatisfied with the lack of attention, the annoying woman walks over to where we're seated and positions herself behind Sebastian, hovering over him.

I give her a droll look, allowing her to see that I know what her game is and that I have no interest in entertaining her.

After all, queens don't bother with peasants, as my very wise *nonna* used to say.

"What is it you want, Celene?"

She leans down with a sultry smile on her irritated face. "Seb—" The icy look Sebastian gives her over his shoulder has her rethinking her next words. Celene clears her throat before continuing. "Mr. Kenton," she says, annoyed that her boss put her in her place before me. I don't hide the smile on my face while she stumbles with her words. "The governor's office reached out requesting a meeting as soon as possible."

I inspect my nails, waiting for Sebastian to get rid of her, but he's taking his sweet time doing it.

I feel the heat of his eyes on my skin, and I raise my head to look at him.

I see it, then, the face he makes when facing a challenge. "Wait for me downstairs." It's all he says while still glaring at me. Why the hell is he mad? He is the one entertaining this clown.

When Celene leans down and presses her breast to his side, I see red, but I manage to hide it. Not giving the woman what she wants. A reaction out of me.

Celene gives me a gloating smile, then opens her obnoxious mouth, but before she gets a word out, I stand from my seat. All the while, Sebastian still allows her to touch his skin.

I watch her put her hand on his bicep and squeeze. To some, that might look like a comforting gesture or maybe a greeting, but I know better.

The bitch is acting catty.

“Thanks for the lesson, Mr. Kenton.” I ensure that Ella is okay, then I leave the room without waiting for a response. Not that I am expecting one.

I could have stayed and challenged the woman, but what is the point? She wins if I react to her silly teenage mean-girl antics.

Besides, the asshole just sat there and allowed that woman to rub up on him as if she were his lover, which begs the question...

Do they have something going on?

Anger rushes me, my cheeks grow hot, and my pulse wild, and that irrational rage takes hold when the image of them together assaults me.

Anger and jealousy.

All mixed up together, feeding the green monster that has lived inside of me since I was a child. Once my only friend and ally.

Blinded with anger towards her, him, but especially myself for thinking that a man like him could be interested in me. A young woman that he kidnapped slash rescued from a glorified criminal.

Needing space, I hurry outside the mansion and find myself jogging toward the gate. I don't know where I am going, but with every step I take away from them, I can think clearer.

The shouts are what get me out of my head.

Shouts of grown men and women calling out my name and the clicks of cameras going off.

Paparazzi.

I stand there with only a gatekeeping them from reaching me. Any second now, someone will come for me. One of Sebastian's security men or Benjamin, I know it, but before someone comes for me, I let the ugly green monster out to play.

All I see is red.

I feel too much at once.

I am... jealous.

I have never begrudged another woman for a man.

Not once.

But this man has me acting in ways I never imagined I would.

The people outside shout louder, shooting question after invasive question at me.

A bald man with a camera shouts. "Arianna!"

"Here! Look over here!" An attractive older woman waves her hands frantically at me while a short, redhead man records me.

"Where is the senator?" Another question.

"Are you the nanny?"

"Who is Senator Kenton to you?" That question does it.

Holding my head up, I look their way with a smile that pains me. Not genuine like the rest. "Are you familiar with the term Sugar Baby?" That statement only makes them act more frantic, itching for more gossip. I know I fucked-up. I acted childish and impulsively. It is as if something took over me.

Something ugly and petty.

The same Arianna that I was before.

I am about to open my mouth and retract what I said when a strong arm lifts me off the ground and takes me away from the scene. I find myself pressed against a wall and a hard chest that belongs to a very angry man.

I did it now.

"What have I told you about acting impulsively, darling?" His eyes are furious, yet he doesn't raise his hands or yell. Why doesn't he? I did something that clearly will cause problems for him, yet he doesn't punish me like the men in my life used to when I acted out of place.

"I-I don't know what cam—" He cuts me off.

"You are jealous." He is not asking. Sebastian looks down at me while pinning me to the stone wall that is covering us both from the paparazzi and media outlets. I can't come up with a logical explanation to refute his observation.

What can I say? That your bitch of an assistant pissed me off, and I also felt jealous and hurt because you allowed her to touch you?

God, I would rather be struck down by lightning right in this instant than admit that I acted like a brat. Just the way he sees me. Shit.

"Jealous? Of her? Don't make me laugh." I lift my chin, chuckling, hoping that he doesn't see through my bullshit.

Sebastian's eyes narrow into tiny slits. Yeah, he does not buy it. He remains quiet while I lose myself in his furious stare.

Okay, he is being a tad over-dramatic. It was a silly comment, but then I think about the implications of my statement to his career.

Oh, no.

I didn't think. I just acted.

No wonder then man is looking at me as if he wants to strangle the life out of me right about now.

"Don't ever do that again." Sebastian's voice breaks me from the trace. Looking up at him, suddenly feeling less angry and more anxious, I say. "Look, I am so—" he doesn't let me finish my sentence when his strong hand grabs a hold of the back of my neck and pulls me closer until my lips are a breath away from his.

I feel it again.

Not fear as I usually do when a man corners me.

But the strange sensation that's been unknown to me for so long.

I wonder if Sebastian feels it too.

Desire.

This feeling, for me, is a miracle.

An impossibility, just like any dream, when it comes to the man who is holding me as if he's not sure whether to kiss or kill me.

"You acted impulsively. Like a brat who got her little girl's feelings hurt, and instead of speaking her brilliant mind, she decides to act like a petulant child."

I know he is right, but no way in hell did he say that.

Brat.

Petulant child.

"Wait a damn second. I did—" He doesn't let me get a full sentence in.

"Don't make me repeat myself because you won't like it when I do. Don't ever let your emotions cloud your judgment to the point you put yourself in danger." Sebastian's lips are so close that I could almost taste them, but that's not what has me out of breath, no. These are his words. He is not mad about what I said to the media. How? I would be furious if someone dirtied my name as I did minutes ago.

"Why are you like this?" I whisper, not sure if he's even able to hear me. "Why do you care?"

My heart flutters in an entirely different way.

God, I was traversing dangerous ground.

I blink, trying to process what I am feeling.

This tingling in my belly. This fullness in my chest.

Was that what this was? Did I...want him? Did I want him to touch me? Want to touch him? For the sake of what? Dipping my fingers into forbidden waters? To experience something unlike I'd ever experienced before?

To sate the feeling that suddenly washed through me?

Something hot and sticky twisted my stomach into a thousand knots. A feeling I hadn't felt in so long.

I gasp a little under the pressure of it. Shivers raced down my spine and spread down to throb between my thighs as he edges an inch closer.

Nothing but a man towering over me.

"I don't fucking know. You drive me mad, Parisi." With that, he turns my world on its axis when he pulls me closer and takes my lips in his.

Confused and a little bit angry, now at myself more than him, I give into the feeling. All rational thought is no longer in my brain. We both have our hands in each other's hair while we suck the air right out of the other's lungs. The man kisses me as if he's a starving man and I am a full-course meal.

And I kiss him as if my life depends on it.

Because, right now, it feels as if it does.

Too suddenly, he pulls away. Both of us are out of breath with the haunting realization that nothing will ever be the same between us again. "Ah, it seems as if I enjoy playing with fire, darling." He reaches out and strokes the pad of his thumb down the length of my cheek.

My jaw drops open at his touch, and he goes to brush that thumb across my bottom lip.

Fire.

Flames.

"Why did you kiss me?" It is the first thing my lust-fueled brain can come up with.

He ignores it, though. "So sweet," he whispers. We get held there. Just...staring at each other.

Want.

Need.

Discovery.

I saw it in a fraction of a second, gone when he ripped himself away, and every line of his gorgeous face went rigid. Pure, unrelenting steel. "She won. She wanted a reaction, and you gave it to her."

Ice slicked down my spine, and my knees nearly buckle with the sudden

change in his demeanor.

My chest squeezed tight.

Tied in jealousy and confusion.

I couldn't help the way my entire body felt as if it'd come alive.

Sparked into existence after I'd been numbed into nothingness for so long.

"If you ever feel the need to run away again..." Sebastian pulls away from me, suddenly making me feel emptier as if that's even possible. "Run to me."

With that bombshell, he turns his back to me and walks towards his garage, leaving me behind feeling confused, angry, and more than that... alive.

And with the sweet taste of his lips still lingering.

There is no doubt in me that this man is my sanity's demise.

Because fuck.

I got the sense Sebastian Kenton might undo me.

If I allow it, he will obliterate the fortress I've had to build around myself to survive all these years. Because unbeknown to him, little by little, he has managed to unravel all the dirty threads that were barely holding me together.

Without realizing it, he is making a broken girl whole again.

Feeling eyes on the back of my head, I turn toward the mansion and find Celene behind one of the windows, staring daggers at me.

Did she witness all that?

The spectacle I made outside.

The kiss between the object of her obsession and me?

I hope she did.

I hope she saw how he held my face and kissed my lips. I hope she sees that image every time she thinks of him. Because he is not hers to think of. To obsess over.

Not hers in any way.

And because my inner bitch has a mind of its own, I smiled triumphantly her way.

A smile that says 'take that, you overbearing psychotic bitch.'

One that doesn't hurt me.

One that comes naturally.

Celene's eyes narrow while looking at me with hateful eyes.

Yup, this one will be a problem.

Oh, well.

Sebastian is wrong.

She might have made me react in ways I am not proud of, but she didn't win.

By the look of misery and hatefulness in her eyes, I won this round.

And I will win all the ones that come next.

Rounds, battles... and war.

BASTIAN

OBSESSIONS & GAMES



“She could steal the devil’s heart.” – B

It was just after 9:00 PM the same day when I pulled into the circular drive of the mansion, hidden somewhere in the South area of the city where no one dares step foot unless they have a death wish.

The owner is the only son of the man who owns this city and my longtime friend.

Thiago Sandoval.

The soon-to-be head of the Sandoval crime family.

Our fathers used to run in the same circles back when we were children and before my father passed away. Father and the Sandoval boss were not friends by any means, but they did hold a certain respect for one other. My father was the good guy that followed the rules and believed that the country would persevere with honesty and hard work and Thiago’s father believed the world was made for the rotten and that only they could survive in a dog-eat-dog country.

To some point, I believed them both until one night changed my perception of good and evil.

And how ironic that two boys who grew up in the same circle with very different values became allies and good friends.

I was the politician’s son, and he was the criminal’s spawn.

And years later, here we are.

We both learned the harsh truth of this world we belong to. For me to be on top, I need someone willing to get their hands bloody and do the job and for Thiago to keep control of the city, he needs well-established connections

with the elite of Chicago.

That is where I come in.

Just like good and bad.

We balance each other out.

Ring, ring, ring.

Reaching the car's touch console, I press the flashing button and accept the incoming call, knowing she must be dealt with. What she pulled today is not acceptable and will not be tolerated again. "Yes."

Celene's voice carries through the car's speakers. Has her tone always been this irritating? "Mr. Kenton," she takes a deep breath before carrying on. "I wanted to ask how the meeting with Joan Masters went?"

"Celene." I breathe, knowing she will assume I have forgotten about her childish stunt. She assumed wrong.

"Yes, boss?" Her voice lowers.

"What happened today at my home will not be happening again." You don't refer to me as anything except boss or Mr. Kenton. We are not close, and you are my employee. Nothing else." I hear a long intake of breath, but it does not stop me. I was pissed when she did it, but I needed to see what she would do. Arianna Parisi and I got what I wanted. "Know your fucking place. One more out-of-place conduct and you are gone."

"Boss, I didn't mean an—"

"This is my last and only warning, Celene." Not giving her a chance to explain, I hang up the call. Gripping the steering wheel, I take deep breaths. Hours later, I am still furious. My mood has only worsened as the day went by.

Droll meetings that lead to nothing but ass-kissing from both allies and opponents.

And the news has been all about me and my nameless Sugar baby, as the media is now calling her. I still feel the dread that took over me when I saw all the cameras crowding her. A feeling I have never felt before, Ellaiza and now Arianna.

She seemed so small compared to the crowd, and the only thing I could think of was how one instant I was far away from her, she would have gotten hurt.

It only takes a second, and that is one thing we both know all too well.

Then I lost my mind when I ran outside, lifted her into my arms, and kissed her senselessly.

With all the want, fear, and frustration that lives inside me when it comes to her.

I know what I feel towards the brat, although I am not quite sure where it all started. I feel it, and it is like a sickness spreading through my body with every second I spend with the girl.

But today... today, I saw the same sickness in her eyes.

The need.

The want.

Hell, even the crazy jealousy that is rooted deep in me when I see her standing too close to Banning or when she smiles up at him as if he hangs the stars for her.

She might not realize it, but she does it, and it messes with my head.

Every second they spend together, I need to remind myself that he is not only a valuable member of my team but a good man and friend so I don't kill him.

Turning the engine off, I take in the sight outside the car.

This place reeks of sin and debauchery.

The same as its owner.

I come here once a month and play my part to keep my name in the mouths of the underground area of Chicago where the Sandoval family reigns.

I do whatever it takes to keep myself at the top of the food chain without becoming a mindless criminal. Not many men can achieve to install fear in the hearts of men without the use of their fists and guns.

I did.

I also managed to quadruple my parent's legacy and made it my own.

My empire.

Because you don't get this rich playing by the rules and that is something I learned at just fourteen.

Just when I am about to open the car door, my phone pings twice. Alerting me of two new notifications. One from Banning and the other from that Godawful app that has turned me into a goddamn stalker. I choose to open Banning's message first, just in case of an emergency. A smile stretches on my face when I open the image he sent with a caption that reads cupcake monster.

Ella is safely strapped to her highchair in the kitchen with three burned birthday confetti cupcakes on the tray in front of her while she has pink

frosting all over her onesie, face, and hair. Pinching the screen, I zoom in on the picture.

Her smile.

Fuck, my baby's smile could make the devil's heart melt. That, I am sure. Because she did it with me.

Her eyes undid me, and her smile brought me back to life when all I had in me was anger and an emptiness that only fueled that anger.

Don't get me wrong. I am still a miserable bastard to everyone else but her. And she is growing too fast for my liking. Not long ago, she was this tiny little baby that could fit in one arm, and now she's talking and giving me sass as if she is grown. I also don't miss the cupcake next to Ellaiza's right hand with white frosting and the letter A on it.

Arianna's birthday is not that far behind.

Sighing, I type a quick message to Banning, reminding him to kiss her goodnight for me since I will not make it tonight.

One night a month, I don't get to tuck her in and kiss her goodnight.

This reminder only adds to my bad mood.

Seeing the time, I notice I am late, but let the bastard wait. It is about time he got a state of his own medicine. Thiago has a bad habit of not only annoying me with his useless chatter at times but also his bad habit of running late every time we meet.

I proceed to tap the notification that Arianna posted a new photo on her account. I don't know how to feel about this new hobby of hers. She took learning other languages to occupy her time and learned how to play chess while she made up her mind on what to do with her life long-term, and now she added social media to the list.

After countless nights when I should be busy focusing on work or the campaign, I opted to stalk her social media because, as idiotic as it might seem, somehow, it made me feel as if I was learning her heart.

What makes her...her, and it only served to feed this unhealthy obsession I have with the girl.

Not only does she post images of herself but also of things that make her smile and that she wishes to experience one day. How could I forbid her something that makes her smile and brings her joy?

I wish she didn't have as big of a following as he has.

Many eyes on her.

Looking at what does not belong to them.

She has as many followers as most famous people on the platform.

I assume they enjoy her content and wish to see more.

That is what fucks me up.

There are countless photos of her looking beautiful and like the true definition of sin. The girl could rival any high-end supermodel on a catwalk with her beauty. The content on her page is all white and pink, colors I used to find bland until I saw them not only on my child but also on my walking and talking headache.

Arianna only wears three colors.

Black, pink, and white.

The brat says that everything else looks tacky on her.

Chuckling, I find her latest post. An image of a tiny vintage cafe.

She must have found the photo on social media and posted it like most of the other content on her page. I stare at the photo for a long moment before an idea comes to mind, reinforcing the fact that I have lost my mind.

“Fucking Parisi.” I breathe aloud.

I have lost my mind, indeed.

A knock on my windshield brings me back to the now before the right-hand man of Sandoval opens the door to my Maserati.

“Senator,” Rodrigo says as he steps back for me to stand. “It’s good to see you, sir.”

Rodrigo Valencia is a tank of a man. I have witnessed him take three men down who posed a threat to his future capo with only his bare hands.

He is next in line for the title of underboss when Thiago ascends the ranks to Capo.

“Valencia. How is your family?” I ask as I rose from the driver’s seat. I inhale the cold air and casually readjust my suit jacket as a bolt of anticipation jumps into my veins. I enjoy the thrill the game gives. The game and the glory of looking at Sandoval’s murderous face when he loses.

The last time I was here, I won a chain of restaurants that had belonged to the Sandoval family for generations. I know nothing about running a cuisine business, but the look on Sandoval’s face when he lost will remain ingrained in my brain for years to come.

“All good, sir.” Valencia nods once before stepping behind me.

Three cars were parked facing out along the long, curved driveway.

A matte-white Aston Martin.

A sleek black G-Wagon, and a bright orange Ferrari.

I am certain I will be leaving with all of them tonight.

Another security man slips into the seat of my car so he can park it next to the rest while I stride toward the expanse of concrete steps that lead to the double doors of the mansion. When I hit the top landing, one side opens, and I am escorted into Sandoval's home by a guard named Luis, who is dressed in a designer suit. His holster peeking out from under his jacket, and a massive scar ran the length of his neck. "Mr. Kenton. *Bienvenido.*" Welcome.

"*Luis. Es un placer verte de nuevo.*" I grin. It is a pleasure to see you again. I speak perfect Spanish. My mother was half-French, born here in the states. She ensured I learned the language of her mother's family and that I was fluent in more than one language. Spanish is one of them. I must say it has come in handy for more than just building connections and business, but it is nice to understand when others speak ill of me in their languages. It is fun to insult them in their mother tongue as well.

He roughed out a chuckle. "Tell me I won't be wiping any brains from the walls tonight." The last time I visited there had been a small disagreement when one of Sandoval's associates had felt played and threw a massive tantrum. The little bitch...

Patting Luis's shoulder I say, "Now, what would be the fun in that?"

He smiles while shaking his head. "You're dangerous, Senator. I don't know how you two haven't killed each other by now." He means his boss and me.

Running my hand over my trimmed beard, I remain quiet.

Loyalty is what keeps us from murdering each other.

On both sides, we need loyal men to succeed, and we are fully aware of that.

That is why his body has not been found in the Chicago River yet, and mine has not been hanged outside my office for the world to see.

Luis leads me deeper into the bowels of the home decorated in dark colors, oversized rugs, and expensive art. Thiago Sandoval is a rich motherfucker. Bred of dirty money and wicked schemes.

We have made each other richer.

I turned his dirty money clean by dealing in legitimate investments that had been turned over many times. And he is returning the favor by inviting me into his underworld and connecting me with the right people to climb ahead with my political aspirations.

Luis and I head down a long corridor before we dip through another set of

double doors and head down the wide, spiral staircase to the basement where Sandoval's underground casino is located.

"Good luck, Senator."

Chuckling under my breath, "Now, you and I both know I won't need it."

Fighting a smile, he dips his head before heading back to the main floor, leaving me to it. The first thing I notice is that the air is thinned, dense with the scent of expensive liquor, and reeking of expectation.

We all come here to win.

Gathered around the table is a group of greedy men. Most of them are filthy rich and have plenty to lose. Moving toward the open seat opposite Sandoval, I glance around at the men's faces with a knowing smile.

Old money and men with a superiority complex with small cocks to back it up.

The same as always.

I know in a heartbeat, I will win.

Desperate people never win.

And I sure as hell am not desperate, nor do I plan on losing tonight.

One time was enough.

Because losing costs you everything.

That is why I let my greed rule me while down here. It is the only way to survive this world. Being smart gets you far too. It makes you push ahead and take what you need before someone else steals it from you.

No one will ever take from me again.

Taking my seat, I watch as Sandoval lifts his chin in my direction, the smug bastard puffing at his cigar as he rocks back in his chair. He sits at the center of the round table with a knowing smile. He knows I will do whatever is required to win tonight. Like I always do.

Luis came downstairs and dumped all the keys he'd collected onto the middle of the table and a stunning diamond necklace, most likely from one of these fucker's wives, while the dealer divided chips for their worth.

The necklace had a diamond pendant in the shape of a heart.

Classically beautiful.

Rare.

Then an image of a girl with emerald-green eyes and a heart of ice similar to the one on the table flashes through my mind fueling me with more hunger to win than I came down here with.

I look down at my cards and then at the ugly asshole beside me who is

rubbing his hand on the back of his beefy neck as nerves visibly rattle through his body.

A tell.

A grin pulls at my mouth.

This must be the dumb fuck who bet diamond necklace.

Oh, this will be fun.

Winning always is.

An hour later, I left the owner of brand-new cars which I gifted to three of Sandoval's men and a diamond necklace.

See... greedy men always win.

ARIANNA

BON VOYAGE



“She is both the cure and the disease.” – B

Sister,

Did you know that there are seven billion people on this planet, yet there could never be another you? You are the perfect sister for me. What are the odds of that?

- Mila

My hands tremble as I finish reading my little sister’s letter. She poured her heart into these letters, and I couldn’t even bring myself to read them. I was too angry. Too hurt. Too afraid. Angry at them. But not just them, but myself as well. She does not fault this. Our job was to protect her, and I couldn’t even do that. She carries the same scars Kadra and I do in her sweetheart. I failed her, and because of it, I hardened my heart to the point I was empty. Nothing and no one mattered but me. I put myself first, and in return, I broke my sister’s heart. How does one come back from that?

And now, being here, all those feelings I suppressed for so long are coming to the surface. Tormenting me.

Breaking me and making me whole at the same time.

Sitting back on the couch, I cross my legs, getting comfortable, and hold onto the envelopes of letters Sebastian gave me.

He is no longer just giving me a future but my past as well.

Gently folding my sister's letter, I memorize it and tuck it inside the envelope.

I always knew Mila was too good for this world. She was magic in a world of broken people like me. I truly believe she was sent to Kadra and me as a blessing. The only one we ever got.

There could never be another me.

You are wrong, sweet Mila...

There are plenty of people like me in this world.

You are the rare one.

There is no one, and there will never be anyone like you.

I wish I could tell her this.

But I know deep down in my rotten soul that the best thing for her is to be far away from me.

Kadra will never let anything bad happen to her. I know this. I know my sister, and although hatred lives inside her, fueling her... I know that my sister's damaged heart remains with our youngest sister.

The second night I spent here, I overheard Sebastian and Benjamin discussing my family. That night I learned that my father fell off the face of the planet. No trace. Nothing. Gone.

Good riddance.

Deep down in my soul, I know that she made it happen.

She freed us.

I was supposed to be the one that got us to someday, but it didn't work out like that. Kadra's strength is admirable, and it is the reason why she was able to take out our father and claim his crown.

While I planned for freedom and to get us away from him, she acted.

So yes, I know Mila will be okay.

I hope that maybe someday she will be able to forgive me.

But have you forgiven yourself? The logical part of me whispers.

I haven't, and I don't think I ever will, but somehow I have learned to endure this pain day by day.

I look through the letters and notice she painted and drew on each envelope.

This is her.

This is who my sister is.

A ray of sunshine.

The thought of the pain I might have caused written on these letters cripples me. I can't do it.

I am not strong enough.

“Ma!” Ella singsongs, bringing me back and away from the painful thoughts. Placing the letters aside, I rise from the couch and move towards where she’s happily clapping her hands, jumping on her baby swing. I smile through the pain in my heart when I see her making grabby hands at me. I used to correct her when she called me mom, but I stopped when her eyes teared up. I can't handle tears, especially from this little girl who owns me wholeheartedly.

I don’t know where the hell her real mother is, but I am all she’s got. God help her soul. A mother’s burden is another woman’s blessing. Is that how the saying goes? Whatever, you get what I mean.

I love Ella as if she were my own, and I don’t have the heart to refuse her when she calls out to mom because if that is how she sees me, then that is what I will be to her.

Whatever she needs, I will be.

I take her out of the swing and hug her to my chest. “You got bored of the ugly little pig, huh?”

“Cubcak!” She tilts her head to the left and smiles sheepishly at me. She means cupcakes. The one she helped Benjamin bake last night. She made more of a mess than help, not that I would ever tell the little hellion that.

She has her father’s temperament.

Speaking of her father...

He came home late last night, not that I was waiting for him or anything, but like most nights, I couldn’t sleep and heard him pull up. Even in the dark, I could make him out, dressed impeccably in a navy suit. I swear he sensed me looking at him through my bedroom window because one second, he was strolling up the pathway to the main double doors, and the next, he stopped right below my window.

He confuses me, and I am not someone who enjoys not being in control.

With him, I lose all of it.

Control of my emotions and my actions.

However, he does too.

I don't need life or world experience to understand that he feels it, too, whatever the hell it is that is growing between us.

And after yesterday's moment of insanity on my part, I understood that it was all his fault.

Yes, I am blaming the man for it all.

He did something to me, and now all I see is him.

When I close my eyes at night, it is his face I see, and when I wake up in the morning, he is there too.

Haunting me.

The beautiful bastard.

Because as many faults as the man has, and he has many, enough to draw up a list, there is also the undoubted fact that he is beautiful in every sense of the word.

Sebastian is so devastatingly gorgeous he tripped up my feet and set my cold heart on fire. Made it burn for the first time in years.

In a way, it never had.

In a way, I am sure no one else ever will.

Late afternoon light floats through the window as I move with a happy, bouncy baby in my arms toward the kitchen in search of more cupcakes. It's been us and Benjamin all day while Sebastian has been busy conquering the world.

I am not even sure the man sleeps. Every time I see him, he has Celene trailing behind him or his phone in hand, typing away. All he does is work besides the time he spends with his child.

"Everything okay, ladies?" Benjamin's voice booms through the kitchen's intercom. Rolling my eyes at Ella, making her giggle while she's sucking on her thumb, a clear sign that she is hungry for that cupcake, I holler back at Benjamin. "We're fine. Just like we were five minutes ago when you asked." When he's not in the same room as us, he makes sure to ask for updates through the intercoms in every corner of this gigantic home.

Benjamin laughs, the sound making Ella look up curiously, trying to decipher where he is and where the voice is coming from. Tapping her chubby cheek gently, I grab her attention while pointing at the far corner of the wall where the intercom is perfectly placed between the light switches and the AC one. "Don't be a brat."

“When am I not?” Shrugging, I place Ella on her highchair, open the fridge, and grab the rest of the birthday cakes Benjamin baked for us. That Viking of a man spent his night baking girlish goodies, not only for a toddler but for me as well. Beautifully decorated cupcakes with pink and white frosting and sparkly sprinkles made Ella shriek with happiness all through the baking process.

The gesture almost made me cry...almost.

“Have at it, stink,” Placing one cupcake on her tray, not wanting to hear her father or Benjamin bitch at me over the surge of endless energy she gets when she consumes large amounts of sugar. I learned my lesson.

Ella tilts her head at me and bangs her small hand on the tray, annoyed.

I suppress the urge to burst out laughing. Most people will think the sass of a toddler is a bit crass, but not me.

It warms me.

How her tiny body carries so much confidence and attitude at such a young age. It makes me proud, and I encourage her, even at this young age, to form thoughts and speak her mind as much as she can.

Ella is as brilliant as she is beautiful.

I reach forward and make a show of grabbing her cupcake. “Should I take it then?” I say, mustering a stern look.

The little girl pouts, giving me those puppy eyes that undo me. “No,” she says with so much force that she crumbles the small cupcake in her tiny hand, making a mess.

“What do you say?”

Ella looks up at me with a huge grin. “Tankoo.” I hand her the cupcake, only for her to shove the entire thing in her small mouth, covering not only her mouth and nose with frosting but the entire upper part of her light pink princess dress.

Christ, my chest could combust at any given moment with how much I feel toward this child.

“Good girl.” I wink at her and wipe her mouth. “Was that good?”

“Nomy, nomy!” She then oinks like a little pig, making me laugh at her antics. That damn pink pig on TV...

Ella breaks into a fit of giggles when I make disgusting faces at her because of the mess she made. The kid even threw three bites of chocolate cake at me, staining my new Gucci shirt. Then I join her, and we’re both laughing like two loud hyenas, and I have never felt happier than in this

moment right here with a stinky little giggler making a mess.

I hear clicking sounds behind us, followed by a white flashing light.

What...

I turn, giving my back to Ella, and find her father leaning against the wall with his ankles crossed, one hand holding his phone pointing towards us, and the other hidden behind his back.

“What is so funny?” He pockets his phone, completely disregarding the fact that he just took a picture of us. My heart flips in my chest for the second time today. These two are doing things to my heart, and I am helpless against them. I motion to my shirt, watching as those wolfish eyes took me in. “*Votre child is a menace,*” I tell him his child is a menace as I walk towards Ella and take her out of the highchair. The moment she is in my arms, the little traitor wiggles her feet and calls out to her father.

Sebastian, not one to ignore his kid, struts over to us next to the kitchen island, smiling from ear to ear as he nears his kid.

Thud.

Thud.

Warmth spreads through as I watch them both smile at one another as if nothing else matters when they're together.

When he is close enough to us, Ella throws herself at him and completely ruins his expensive suit with chocolate and frosting. Holding my breath, I stare at Sebastian's reaction for a second, scared of how he will react. The moment takes me back to a time when a little me ran up to her father, proud of herself for a job well done planting flowers in the garden with Modesto, our landscaper, with dirt on her hands. That day I not only got scolded for ruining his dress pants, but I was left with a bruise on my tiny arm where he held me so harshly to keep me from ruining more of his clothes.

I know Sebastian would rather rip his own heart out before ever hurting his child and that he is nothing like my father, but I cannot help holding my breath and thinking the worst. It is now that I come to terms with the trauma of my childhood. Everything I buried deep down in the darkest corners of my mind and heart is resurfacing now that I see how humans are meant to be loved. What a father's love for his child looks like is completely different from what I had.

Sebastian turns my way with Ella happily playing with his blue tie, ruining it with her sticky fingers. I watch as he drops a soft kiss on her forehead and breathes her in tenderly. “*Que font mes files aujourd'hui?*”

What are my girls up to today?

“Daddy,” Ella answers by bringing her small chocolate-covered hands up to his face. “Wook, cubcak!” Then the little hellion smears chocolate all over her father’s chin.

Sebastian chuckles. “I can see that, my heart.” He smiles at her and gives me a stern look when I laugh at how ridiculous the man looks right now. Dressed like a million dollars, all covered in brown goo. Shrugging, not at all bothered, I walk around the kitchen, grab a clean tablecloth, and hand it to him. Once he is clean, he moves closer to where I am leaning on the kitchen island and hands me a medium-sized box.

I look down at his hands skeptically. “What is it?”

He hoists Ella up with a strong grip on her back and gives me a dull look, but he cannot fool me. There's heat in his gaze and laughter. So much laughter. “That is a stupid question, darling. If you want to know what it is, I suggest you open it and find out.”

“*Tete de noeud*.” I smile sweetly up at him while calling him a dickhead.

“Watch that mouth.” He snaps softly, not wanting to startle his daughter. Ignoring him, I open the box to see what’s inside.

A small globe.

Setting the carton box down, I hold the globe up towards Sebastian with a raised brow. Every gift he has ever given me has a meaning. A gesture of kindness. This one, though, I don’t get.

Sebastian looks down at Ella, whose busy playing with his tie, then back at me. His eyes hold many secrets, some I am dying to uncover. He no longer looks at me with empty expressions but with tenderness reserved only for his daughter. “Ellaiza’s third birthday is coming up. The day she came into my life, I promised to give her the world and show it to her as well.” His eyes become even more loving when Ella claps her hands and yells gibberish in that sweet baby voice I love so much. I can tell her father does too. “She can’t voice what she wishes to see, so I leave it to you. Spin.” He gestures down at the globe.

Is this man even real?

Swallowing hard, my eyes leave his and move to Ella’s smiling face. She is one lucky little girl. Her father is giving her everything she deserves. Good. Not wasting a second, I spin the globe and wait for it to stop and the needle to land on a country.

But that does not happen.

Instead, a tiny chocolate-covered hand reaches forward and stops the glove herself.

“Bu!” Ella screeches. Blue. She means blue. The color of the globe. I did say she is brilliant.

“Huh. Look at that.” Sebastian’s tone sounds mischievous, as if he knows something I don’t. It usually irks me to no end, but not now. Not at this moment.

The three of us look down at Ellaiza’s small hands-on top of the glove and see where it landed.

My heart stops in my chest.

Both elation and sadness are taking hold of me.

Paris, France.

Floods of overwhelming emotions, from grief to anxiety, attack me all at once while I think of what this means.

Grief because Paris is Mila’s one day and mine.

Anxiety because Ella will be leaving me.

She will be away for who knows how long.

Panicking, I open my mouth to refuse when I have no right, but then the sweetest little sound stops me dead.

Ella’s giggles.

She claps and giggles while looking at me as if she somehow could sense my change in mood.

My hesitation.

The tragedy that lives inside of me.

Her laughs and her enthusiasm make it all better.

Grabbing Ella’s hand, I concentrate on her, not wanting the man who’s taking over my heart to notice how affected by everything he does I am. “You are going to France, *mon amour*,” I tell her, and she laughs so much as if I am the funniest person in the world to her. As if she understands every piece of me. The good and the ugly, and she still loves me.

“You are too, darling.” Sebastian’s rough voice makes me look away from Ella and meet his stare. Blue eyes meet green. My breath hitches when his words sink in.

He wants me to go to France with them.

“Wh—” he cuts me off before I can even get a word in.

He steps closer to my body, the heat of his stare setting me aflame. Sebastian hands me Ella and then turns around, walking the same way he

came in.

Holding my girl, I watch him leave with my heart in my throat.

Before he exits the room, he says. “You are coming with us. So, pack your bags and try not to give me lip. You wouldn’t want to break a little girl’s heart, would you?”

The clever, beautiful bastard.

And because the little hellion is a little traitor when it comes to her father, Ellaiza proceeds to smack her chocolate-covered lips on my cheek, giving me wet and messy kisses, melting my insides one sweet kiss at a time.

This is it, then.

I am going to my dream country with the humans of my dreams.

Dreams.

They were only myths, and now they’re everywhere.

BASTIAN

PARIS



“Do you see me for me, or are you just infatuated with the flawless exterior?” – A

When we stepped into the suite of one of my three hotels in Paris, pure joy lit up Arianna’s face. The used-to-be-dead organ in my chest did a little jump, as corny and unrealistic as it sounds, at the sight of her rare smile. It never ceases to amaze me since she does not smile often, but when she does...fuck. I stop and stare, memorizing every angle of her flawless face.

We landed in Paris, then drove an hour to get here.

To the Kenton Plaza Hotel.

My family’s legacy.

It’s no ordinary hotel. It is located on the prestigious avenue Montaigne, the tree-lined boulevard of French fashion, and has a partial view of the Eiffel Tower from the huge balcony with its gold double doors.

This hotel offers my guests the very best of Paris.

My father chose this location for the couture address. The famous avenue of couture, where a century of designers and artists have pursued boldness and passion. Here, our guests are to seize, enjoy, and celebrate the city.

My mother used to go on for hours about how our hotel was the definition of Paris. Dior, Dietrich, and diamonds.

Where icons and trends were born.

Where love stories have played for years.

Where you continue legacies and write stories.

It is magic.

With the help of our Parisian splendor and our famous art of hospitality.

The flora and red geraniums that adorn the hotel facade were inspired by my great-grandparent's love story, and it helps create a fairytale setting and romantic moments for our guests.

"Wow," Closing the door to our suite, the most expensive one in the hotel, which takes up the entire last floor, I watch Arianna's mouth forms a soft "O" shape as she turns in circles, taking everything in. "This is..." she says loudly for me to hear, but then murmurs the rest. "Better than the picture in my room..." Pictures in her room? Then the thought that this sheltered, and once-angry princess never had the chance to experience the world.

The memory of the day she was brought to me with chopped hair and eyes with tears and ghosts in them flashes in my mind, angering me.

Not wanting the ugliness in my soul to touch the sleeping angel in my arms, I settle my breaths, stop for a second, and stare.

No place in the world does beauty like Paris, and there is no one more beautiful than Arianna at this moment. She fits in perfectly here, among fashion, luxury, and so much beauty.

She looks breathtaking today. Effortlessly stunning.

She is wearing a classic white button-down shirt with jeans, and she added a pair of stilettos. That outfit shouldn't make her look as elegant as she does today, but the combination plus the diamond necklace. I got her for her last birthday makes her look like she owns this city.

I chose to ignore how my gift on her neck makes me feel because I have yet to understand this sense of pride combined with possessiveness.

The bellhops finish placing our luggage inside the room, and I move towards them to give them a little something for their troubles. My employees are well taken care of here in my hotel.

They leave, and then there is only us. Moving around the room, I look down at a sleeping Ellaiza, kissing her small nose. Fuck, how good does it feel to love this kid. All I do in life is for her.

"I'll be at the bar if anyone needs me." Banning smiles like a freak at us before hurrying out of the room. The man and his addiction to foreign pussy will be the end of him one day.

Walking towards Arianna, standing right in front of the double doors that lead to the balcony with a view of the magical city, I say. "Aimez-vous?"

She doesn't turn to acknowledge my questions. Instead, she remains frozen with both hands on the balcony's knobs. "*Est-ce que je suis en train de*

rêver?” The simple words are draped with tragedy and broken promises, causing my chest to tighten.

Settling Ella on my left arm, I move from behind Arianna and open the double doors for her, revealing this magical city to this broken yet brave dream of a girl. “*Bienvenue à Paris, ma chérie.*”

Arianna takes a deep breath and turns her head towards me.

The moment she does, the wind is knocked out of me, leaving me feeling stunned and amazed, like a traveler who is experiencing this beautiful city for the first time.

Something in my chest cracks, maybe my heart or the walls I built around it long ago, at this moment with my child sleeping soundly in my arms and the girl who came to me with more demons than smiles finally laughing with her entire precious heart, I feel like I came home after years wandering in the cold and ugly unknown.

My head knows it is wrong to feel any type of way other than hate towards a Parisi. The problem is my head didn’t know how to keep up with my heart which was already pounding up a storm in my chest after being useless for quite some time.

Here I am, mind full of questions while the rest of me does not give a fuck.

The only thing that mattered was the feeling that coursed through my veins.

This strong determination that I need to claim what is mine.

All her smiles.

Her soul.

Her everything.

Mine.

“*Les rêves ne se réalisent pas pour les filles comme moi.*” The smile falls from her face the moment the tragic words fall from her pouty lips. Dreams don’t come true for girls like me. “*Et si par hasard elles se réalisent. Ils ne durent pas.*” She whimpers out a frustrated laugh. And if by chance they do come true, they don’t last.

Sadness battles with the anger that strokes inside of me.

With the way the sight of her teary eyes incites me.

With the eye-opening realization that she was mine, she didn’t know it yet.

“*A partir de maintenant, ils le font.*” I vow, meaning every word.

From now, every single dream her heart conjures will be within reach.
Air wheezed from her lungs. “Why? What changed?” She forces out.
“Everything.” It cracks through the quiet, dense air.

We both stand there, with my child between us and a whole city waiting for us behind Arianna. A million questions surround us.

At this instant, I don’t know which of us the gravity is. Which one compelled the other because I knew right that second, I would follow her anywhere.

Rich locks of blonde hair flow around her precious face. Her green, childlike eyes were alight, flames dancing in their depths. No longer cold or detached, but hopeful.

The tiniest, sweetest breath escapes her full, pink lips when she whispers. “Sebastian.”

And I knew right there that my world would no longer look gray because this girl was every color known to man exploding all at once.

Pure-fucking-magic.

Reaching out, I trace her lips with the pad of my thumb, urging her to look up at me.

Flames danced and played around us.

Ready to consume me.

“Arianna,” I said her name like a prayer for an unholy man.

A praise.

Laced with affection and possession.

“D-do you think...” she takes a deep breath before carrying on. “Do you think I was always destined to end up right here? With you?” She rasps. “Or was it all a stroke of luck? Is it all a dream?” she looks at me with an expression that slayed me right through.

“All I know, darling. All I am certain of is that you are exactly where you’re supposed to be.” Looking down at my little girl and then back up at the woman who is turning my world on its axis, I speak. “Right where you belong.”

I mean it.

I meant every word.

Because not only is this perfect creature the brightest moon in my sky, but also all the stars are hidden in a vast cosmos.

That is the only thing I can see.

ARIANNA

Paris is breathtakingly beautiful any day, but Paris in the winter? It is out of this world magical. Yes, it is very cold in December, so much so that we have been dressing in layers to keep us warm while we tour the city.

Ella looks like a cute white teddy bear, all cozy in her Chanel baby jacket and a matching beanie hat with two ears on top.

She looks scrumptious, and everyone that passes us while we walked the streets of Paris thought so, too, since most stopped to stare and point at her while their faces melted with tenderness.

Yes, that is the Ella effect.

On the other hand, for this weather, I chose a white turtleneck and paired it with some jeans and black high-heeled shoes.

The black trench coat and matching wool hat were a must.

Simple yet very Parisian.

Besides, it was the perfect outfit choice for this day. Where it is quite cold, but no snow has fallen yet.

I hate the cold.

The snow, as well, but somehow here with them, I feel anything but cold.

The streets, trees, and most of the businesses have been decorated with Christmas lights, displays, and decor for the season.

Garlands hang from the front steps of the small businesses, and wreaths hang from ribbons in the windows. There are sleds by the front doors, wreaths, miniature Christmas trees all over the pavements, and more.

It is as if Christmas exploded all over this wonderful city.

Straight out of a Disney fairytale.

A dream that was too perfect for someone like me.

So, jaded.

Angry.

It seemed so out of reach.

Sebastian's words from earlier come to mind. *A partir de maintenant, ils le font.* He said, and I felt the truth of his words, of his vow down to my shredded soul.

Dreams were just dreams to me before. A little girl's wishful thinking that

most likely would never come true.

Until today.

Until this man.

Until this man crash-landed into my life like a shooting star. Like a being from another planet because that is exactly how I see Sebastian Kenton.

Out of this world.

His energy, his presence, and his rogue beauty.

Dreams do come true for me because he makes them so.

I would never have imagined I would be the type of girl who stood back and let a man take over her life. I am not. Trust me. But I must admit that the tyrant has helped me find my voice, and never once has he silenced or torn me down to lift himself.

No.

I'll even dare say that he has given me wings to fly.

God, what a cornball I have become.

After resting all day yesterday, and this morning, Sebastian woke us up with a schedule. Seriously could this man be any more anal, yet I can't stop the huge smile on my face that's been present all through this morning while he shows me, Ella, Benjamin as well, the city, and his favorite places.

Now, we are sitting here, in a cozy coffeehouse called *Café Flore*, located in a charming corner with a view of the Eiffel Tower, and instead of feeling sorry for myself and the cards that I was dealt, I breathe in the wonderful moment and enjoy it.

I watch as Ella plays with the macaroons the waiter brought her, along with a tiny cup of milk so she could feel part of the experience. Taking my phone out of my coat's pocket, I snap a few pictures of not only Ella but also our beautiful table and delicious baked goods decorated with flowers. I even sneak one of Sebastian leaning back in the small seat, looking handsome as ever and pretentious as hell, too, even a little intimidating in his dark gray full suit and a black coat over it while sipping on a cup of coffee.

Then I turn over and take another picture, but this time of Benjamin flirting with a French woman. When he notices me, he subtly flips me off without his new friend noticing. How very crass of him, yet I don't mind it. Not even a little.

"*Quelle belle famille.*" A young man exclaims as he approaches our table. I instantly turn into protector mode, not used to people being so warm and happy around me all the time, and this man has the biggest smile I have

ever seen on a human before. It would be creepy as fuck if he weren't as cute as he is in his white coat, ripped jeans, and cream-colored coat with a bag filled with what I think are paint materials hanging off it. "*Et si nous chérissions ce beau moment pour toujours avec une caricature de famille, oui?*"

Ah, a street artist.

Before I have the chance to politely correct the man about his family comment, feeling a bit embarrassed, Sebastian jumps in. "*Ce serait merveilleux, n'est-ce pas, Arianna?*" He turns to me and smiles so arrogantly that I suddenly have the urge to kiss or slap that smile of his.

"*Magnifique.*" The guy claps and then proceeds to paint us while civilians and even paparazzi become aware of exactly who the handsome man is. I wondered when people would start catching up, but unlike in the States, the paparazzi and civilians here are much nicer, respecting his space and not treating him like a piece of meat.

They stare at him as if he is God's gift to humankind, to my utter annoyance, and snap pictures of him but from a distance. It is nothing like the chaos back home.

Home.

Never had one of those before.

An hour later, Sebastian gives the young artist a large sum of money before thanking him for his work and time. "You don't tip me that much for my services, you bastard." Benjamin blurts out with narrowed eyes, but mirth is written all over his face, letting me know that he is not serious at all.

"I let you live when most times all I want to do is throw you off a bridge. That should be enough for you." Sebastian mumbles, and at the same time as he gets up from his seat and buttons his suit.

Benjamin whispers so Ella cannot hear him but loud enough for her father to hear. "Asshole."

"Nuisance." I cannot help it. I laugh aloud. Not only because of the ridiculousness of these two grown men fighting like small children but also because of the caricature of us.

"What is so amusing?" Sebastian stares at me with a small grin on his face.

I hand him the caricature portrait and wait for him to see it.

"Oh fuck." Benjamin laughs louder, now attracting the attention of everyone around us. "Looking good, boss."

Sebastian is not amused by the artist's vision of him. There is a cute portrait of us sitting in the cafe Ella in her stroller, looking adorable as ever with the cartoon effect. Me right next to her, looking pretty and, well... normal. But then there's Sebastian hovering over us with a scowl on his face, making him look like the Grinch who stole Christmas. I guess the artist was being funny, or that is the vibe that radiated off the big surly grump.

Either way, I think he looks handsome.

I always do.

Oh, and the artist even sneaked Benjamin into the portrait, protecting us from a distance. The image of the four of us, I will treasure it forever and keep it safely tucked in my memory for however long this all lasts.

"Where to now?" Benjamin grabs Ella's stroller making her giggle while making silly faces at her and tapping her nose.

Sebastian smiles at that, then moves to stare at me. "Where to, darling?"

Not feeling shy whatsoever, I tell him what I have been dying to do since I arrived in this couture city. I want to visit the pulse of Paris' design and fashion. The fashion district is studded with flagship shops from classic designers like Versace, Hermes, and Saint Laurent but also houses of resolute fashion, trendy boutiques, and concept stores.

Sebastian shakes his head at me while I grin up at him and make it happen. We find ourselves walking the street while people stare at us. I take countless pictures of not only us but the designer stores as well.

The designer diva in me is in fashion heaven right now.

My fashionista twin, Ella, behaves like a lady enjoying the trips and even pointing at things which then her father, of course, purchases for her.

When we're almost to the last store, I stop dead, causing them to stop behind me as well. I turn around, giving the couture famous store my back.

"*Que se passe-t-il?*" Sebastian speaks first. What is the matter?

"English, please." Benjamin looks worriedly at me.

"I think I've had enough." I lie through my teeth.

"There's one more store. Are you sure you don't want to go in?" Benjamin asks while Sebastian stares right through me as if he is trying to decipher all my secrets.

"Nope." I take hold of Ella's stroller and turn around the way we came.

I don't tell them that the last store belongs to Andrea Nicolasi and her mother. Shame courses through me when I think of what I did to a dead woman. I might have had my issues with her daughter, but spilling someone

else's secrets was uncalled for.

Besides that, the petty side of me does not like Andrea's designs.

Her mother's? Yes. But hers?

Not so much.

Besides, something about the bubbly blond heiress irks me.

Sebastian understands I don't want to talk about it and lets it go. "Let's move along, then."

And we do.

We carry on touring the city and all it has to offer.

By the end of the day, Benjamin carries dozens of bags from every store we shopped at while Sebastian holds a sleeping Ellaiza.

And me?

I carry this beautiful day in my heart, hoping it lasts.

To whatever high force is out there, I ask... please let me keep this.

Let it last.

ARIANNA

YOUR WORLD



“It is your world, darling girl.
Make of it what you wish.” – B

The cold wind hits my face softly and blows my hair as I breathe in. “This is just...” I can’t even find the words to express how over-the-top and sweet this gesture is. When Sebastian asked me what I wanted to do today, and I responded by telling him something that he has never done before. I would have never imagined this is what he would pick.

What he hasn't done.

Something inside of me warms when realizing that this is his first time, and he chose to experience it with me.

A hot air ride balloon overlooking the city in the late afternoon with the sun ready to set and allow nightfall to take over.

I thought riding hot air balloons in the winter was uncommon because of the cold weather, but yet again, this determined man made it happen.

Suddenly a flashback hits me of my little sister, Mila. “*Did you know that hot air balloons played an integral role during the Civil War?*” For the first time in a long time, I smile instead of feeling heartbreak when remembering my sister.

I wish you were here, Mila. I think to myself.

Carefully moving forward, I hold onto the strings at each side, the same ones the nice man guiding us through the air told us to hold on to if it was needed. Christ, from up here, it feels as if I could kiss the sky.

“Perfection?” Sebastian says roughly behind me, choosing the right word to describe this view and this moment for me.

Holding tightly to the balloon's basket, I look down, not even a little afraid but excited. Almost like a little girl on Christmas morning. Joy fills every crack in my heart, making it anew.

"Yes, perfect would be the word to describe it." I breathe out, look over my shoulder at Sebastian, and find him staring straight at me, not at the beauty around us. He has an intense look in his eyes that leaves me breathless. Shadows play across his striking face as he pierced me with that gaze. His cheeks were sharp, and his jaw sharper.

He looks so handsome like I have never seen him, in a sleeveless white button-up and cream-colored dress pants paired with some Gucci loafers. Today, he looks as handsome as ever but less intimidating. He looks even younger and more...free.

Dare I say, happy?

Forgetting that we are not alone, everything fades as I watch Sebastian move closer to my body with a determined look on his face. My heartbeat slows, just like the world around us, until there is only him.

Only me.

Only us at this moment.

He reaches out and splays his strong hand across my chest, right where my heart lays. "I once believed your heart was dead just as mine was before you and my daughter crash-landed into my world, but I was wrong. So very wrong." Sebastian says softly while piercing me with his intense stare. Holding my breath, I make sure to hold tightly onto the string, waiting for what he will proclaim next. "Your heart is strong, soft, and so goddamn pure, Arianna." He says, rendering me speechless.

My brain cannot develop a proper sentence because I was not expecting this. Sebastian has a bad habit of stealing the breath right out of my lungs, and now he leaves me without words for the first time in my life.

He inches closer to me, leaning against the basket, so close that I can almost taste the words that come out of those luscious lips next. "This heart." He presses his hand on my chest, setting me aflame even in this cold weather. "It is beating so hard, is it not? These beautiful hearts of yours. Do you feel it? Racing and strong." Shivers tumble in a slow slide, and he chuckles low. "Whose heart is it, Arianna?"

Everything races now.

My pulse, my breath.

Scared out of my mind for what this all means, I lie through my teeth,

deep down, knowing he can see right through me. I think he is the only one who can. The only one that made the effort to discover what is underneath the broken and mean girl facade. “Mine.”

Sebastian grins menacingly as if he has already won the war for my heart, his eyes flaring with challenge and sparkling so bright. “We will see.” Then he does the one thing I have been both dreading and dreaming about since I first laid eyes on this perfect man. He takes me into his strong arms and kisses me.

I have been kissed before, but it never meant anything besides curiosity. I wanted to see if I could feel something, anything other than emptiness. No kiss before Sebastian comes close to this.

The kiss is just as he is.

One of a kind.

Never have I felt like my soul caught on fire as I do at this moment. He kisses me softly and slowly.

Tenderly.

I would never have imagined that such sweet tenderness lived inside this man. How wrong I was about him. I once thought him cruel and selfish, and now...now, he is everything. All I never thought I wanted but all I so clearly needed.

He gently pulls away, breaking the kiss. Words are not needed between us, but the feeling is there. “*Fraises.*”

I frown, not understanding.

Then he licks his lips, “Your lips taste like strawberries.” A small smile forms on my lips when he says. “My favorite.” Before winking at me, so full of himself.

A soft laugh escapes me. “You are ridic—” Before I can finish my sentence, our guide cuts me off. “*Eh bien regarde ça.*” Both Sebastian and I turn to look up at where he is pointing. “*La première chute de neige.*”

The first fall of snow.

Yet again, everything stops as I stare at the beautiful snow falling from above, blanketing everything it touches in pristine white.

I read once that snow represented a deep sense of sorrow and despair, but maybe it is more. More than just cold.

Pure.

Lovely.

Rare.

Maybe for me, it can be more than that.

Innocence and new beginnings.

Taking in the scene before us, I am filled with wonder. “It is truly a beautiful world, isn’t it? Despite the wrongdoings of evil men.” I take in another breath, calming the rage that threatens to spill when I think of the evil I met when younger. Instead, I focus on the now. The snow. On how the wind is blowing softly around us. The grandiose scenery. “I never thought this would be the world I got to experience...” I’m choking up on the last words. “Not me. My world was colorless. Black and white and gray.” Until you, I want to say, but I stop myself before it slips off my tongue.

Until you painted it.

Giving me serenity.

Peace when all I knew was war.

Lavender.

Yes, he painted my world lavender.

I feel myself being caged between Sebastian’s front and the balloon’s basket. Whispering in my ear, he points at everything down below. “The world is yours for the taking, darling.” His breath makes shivers spread down my back. Pulse beating rapidly, I listen closely. “You just have to want it enough to make it your own.” With a gentle kiss to the back of my head, he seals my fate. The heart-stopping realization that what I wanted most in life does not have the same appeal as it did back then.

Freedom.

I no longer want to be free.

How do I tell this man that, slowly but surely, he has become my world along with his daughter? That all I want is to be his?

His world.

ARIANNA

BLISS



“His is the love that comes
once in a lifetime.” – A

O h, dear God.

It smells like the bathroom after Benjamin is done using it.
Horrid.

Turning towards Sebastian, who is walking side by side with me, I ignore how handsome he looks out of his suit yet again today. Instead, I narrow my eyes at him and tell him. “When I asked what I should wear, you said to dress comfortably. What you didn’t say is that I would be ruining my boots by stepping on nasty-smelling shit.” I grumble, halfway joking. I don’t mind nature at all, although I would consider myself a city girl and proud of it, I would like to be prepared not to ruin expensive clothes. He did buy it, so...

Sebastian murmurs before taking longer steps. “Watch your mouth.”
Making me roll my eyes before replying.

“You do know you’re not my parent. What’s with you telling me to watch my mouth?” Honestly, I never spoke so crassly before meeting the man. My mother used to tell me that respectable women didn’t raise their voices, nor did they use bad language. Said the neglectful mother and the addict.

Ironic, is it not?

“Trust me. I am well aware I am not your parent, nor do I want to be.” The heat that is coming off him could melt an iceberg, hell, it is making me feel hot when it is seriously cold this late in the afternoon.

Then his words hit me.

Trust me, I am aware I am not your parent, nor do I want to be.

Then I wonder what he wishes to be. His comment is not mean or vindictive, but almost... flirtatious?

Am I thinking this is more than it is?

Ugh, why are emotions so complicated?

Not really knowing what to say to that, I ask while looking around. There is only us here. Us and snow and high trees decorated in blinking white lights. "Where are you taking me anyway, and why did we leave Ella and Benjamin at the hotel?" We spent the entire morning watching French movies, and Benjamin blackmails Sebastian into paying for a late breakfast. I don't know what the lovable Viking has on his boss. All I know is that it resulted in all of us enjoying a nice brunch in a stunning and very rustic spot. Speaking of Benjamin, I cut Sebastian off before he speaks. "And is it safe for you to be out in a strange country without security?"

That makes the egotistical beautiful man laugh under his breath. "I can handle myself, darling." I trail behind him. He looks at me with a playful grin on his face before looking up. "Now, fasten your pace before snow starts to fall again."

Snow did stop falling this morning, allowing the sun to come out, yet not even the sun could warm up this lovely winter day. Walking behind Sebastian for a couple of minutes longer, he stops when he reaches his destination, making me stumble and hitting his back.

"Oomph." Before I am falling back to the hard ground, Sebastian's arm instantly grabs my waist, preventing me from falling and keeping me steady.

"Watch your step."

"I wouldn't have stumbled into you if you hadn't pause so abruptly, Sebastian." There is that heat again. In his eyes, in his touch, on my skin. The ass dismisses me and keeps walking ahead, that is when I see it.

Heaven on Earth.

At least for a little girl who at one point dreamed with her little heart about this.

I stand there rooted in place, my heart beating rapidly with excitement, wonder, and God's many questions. A feeling I have come to associate with Sebastian Kenton.

A stable.

A horse stable.

Built of black wood and stone floors.

Simple, yet classic.

A safe space for the animals.

The small building is divided into separate stalls

Only two animals are visible from here.

A white horse with a long and full mane, and a black one.

I don't precisely know the breeds, but from what I come to know about horses, I am thinking the black one is a Stallion.

"This cannot be happening." I breathe out. Sebastian must be some kind of freak that knows everything. "What kind of black magic are you made of?"

Sebastian looks at me, bored but with a subtle smile on his face. "I am a very resourceful man, darling." He shrugs as if it is nothing. "Besides, you should know by now that there's nothing I don't know about you."

"That's kind of creepy since I don't know that much about you. It's not fair."

"Life's not fair. We've established this." He moves forward closer to the exotic creature. "You just need to ask." He stops and looks over his broad shoulder at me with a look I have come to know so well. Amusement and tenderness. "Come meet Bliss."

Thud.

Thud.

Oh, heart, you are in for a world of hurt with this one.

"Bliss?"

He grins, and then leaves me standing there wondering what he is talking about when he approaches the white horse. "Yes." Sebastian pets the animal tenderly. "She's yours. Don't be rude, darling. Come."

Oh...

With my heart in my hand, I walk towards the stable where Bliss is.

Mine.

Did this man say the stunning white horse is mine?

He did.

"She is a *Lipizzan* horse." Sebastian urges me closer. "Known as the horse of royalty. She fits you, don't think?" My eyes leave beautiful Bliss and clash with his intense blue ones.

"She is stunning." I croak out.

"Yes, she is." He won't look away from me. Why won't he look away? Please look away... I am afraid once you look deep inside, he'll see all the ugly that I hide. "Happy Birthday, Arianna."

“My birthday is not for two weeks. You should be celebrating Ella, not me.” I say breathlessly, choked up with emotion. No one has ever cared. Only my sisters. My birthday was just another day for me. Nothing special. Nothing to celebrate.

“I can celebrate you both.” Sebastian opens the gate to the stall for me.

Stepping inside, I look back at him. “Why are you doing all of this for me?”

He shrugs as if it is not a big deal. It is. It is everything. “Because I can.” An angry, intense look flashes before he schools his expression. “Because someone should have done it. You should have never had to go through what you did. Your cunt of a father and your useless mother should have never made you feel like you did not matter. You do.”

Don't cry.

Hold it.

Don't you dare cry.

His rough fingers touch my cheek lightly before whispering. I want to say so many things and ask more, but I am held back by this overwhelming feeling that he invokes in me with every word, touch, and selfless gesture.

Lost in his eyes, I know I am fucked because it is no secret to me that I am losing myself in him.

“Is she mine? This is too much.”

Sebastian steps back, removing his hand from my skin. “Nothing is too much. I have told you this already.” I watch as he expertly guides Bliss out of the stable. “She's yours.”

“How?” I look at the beautiful creature, with my heart in my throat, then I look up at the man who seems too good to be true. “How did you know?”

“Know what, darling?” He asks, still guiding Bliss out of the small building.

It is impossible for him to know. I know this, yet it feels as if he has made every single wish I've made with my heart come true.

“I asked for a white horse once. The only thing I ever asked my parents for Christmas. Not a real-life one, of course I knew that my parents would never agree or even care enough to grant me that wish, but I settled for a toy horse I saw on TV that Christmas. I knew Santa was not real. Magic didn't live inside that home, yet I still hoped that Christmas would be different.” I laugh without humor and watch as Sebastian's face contours in anger. “Morning came, and there was nothing under our tree. That day I learned an

important and harsh lesson. If I wanted something, I'd have to make it happen myself. Dreaming, wishing, and hoping only left me disappointed and so angry." I breathe out, terrified that I just gave this man, a man that poses the biggest threat to my heart, a piece of it, willingly.

"I wish I could kill him, and if he weren't half dead already, I would. I would bring him to you, rip his heart out of his chest, and drop it at your feet." With one hand holding Bliss's leash, he tucks a hair behind my ear, so tenderly, so damn...sweet. Nothing like the terrible promises of murder that have slipped from his lips. "I swear I would, if only to wipe the sadness in your eyes whenever you think of your past."

"He will die eventually, but you can't kill a ghost."

"You can, darling." He says it so confidently. If I knew better, I would believe him. "Ghosts can only be if you let them rule you."

But how? All I've ever known is heartbreak, war, and ghosts. "How is that possible?"

"By showing that bastard that he did not break you," Sebastian whispers.

But he did. He broke my heart.

But... as broken as it is, it still beats.

It beats wildly when Ellaiza hugs me.

It beats strong when Sebastian looks at me like he is doing right now, as if I am the only one.

It rages in moments like this one where life is good.

It beats when Benjamin cooks for me or does little things to put a smile on my face.

My father might have broken my heart, the first man to ever do it, but slowly, these people, my people, have healed it.

Made it stronger and better.

Kinder.

I watch the man that has taken over my life, sanity, and now my heart standing confidently and looking back at me as if he wants to breathe me in and keep me inside him forever.

As weird as it sounds, I wish I could do the same. Keep him with me forever, his daughter and Benjamin, as well.

"I didn't see you coming, Sebastian Kenton." The words slip out without a chance for me to hold them back.

"Likewise, Parisi." He gently pets Bliss while staring right into my eyes. "But what a beautiful surprise you are." He grins, and my heart stops.

I wonder if I stop his heart, too, when I smile. When I look his way?

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

There goes the heart of an ice princess, beating erratically after the one man I thought I would never care for.

A man with a soul as deep and beautiful as his eyes.

Not black.

Not at all.

Sebastian walks while Bliss gallops. "*C'est l'heure d'une autre leçon, belle fille.*" It is time for another lesson, beautiful girl.

Beautiful girl.

He thinks of me as beautiful, and as much as that warms my heart, what touches me is the fact that he sees me as strong.

The most confident, brilliant, and powerful man I know believes I am strong.

He values my mind and has shown me a thousand times throughout my time with him. I never had that before, a man that cared for my mind and not just my beauty.

He has given me that, too.

An hour later, we are both riding our horses through the field at a slow pace. The weather has warmed up a bit more than before we arrived here, and the sun has brightened the field, making this day perfect for riding.

I have never ridden a horse before, only admired them from afar, on magazines and TV, mostly. With an hour lesson from Sebastian, I've gotten the hold of it. I am no expert by any means, but I can ride Bliss slowly and carefully.

Sebastian looks like a Roman warrior riding the black Stallion expertly next to me, wearing black dress pants and a full-sleeve black shirt, and his hair is perfectly styled back away from his face.

Never has a man been more handsome to me, and I doubt they will ever be.

His beauty is the type that slaps you in the face, making it hard for you to

see anything or anyone else.

We ride for a while in silence, staring at the lovely scenery around us when I speak.

“You said I could ask you anything...” I look straight ahead, a bit nervous about the question that has been nagging me for weeks.

I hear him mutter. “I did.”

“Where is Ella’s mother?” I ask carefully, not wanting to come off as nosy or...petty.

He sighs, clearly not in the mood to talk about her.

“It is fine. You don’t need to tell me.”

“I did say you only had to ask.” He smiles before a serious expression takes over. “I don’t know the woman. I barely remember the night Ellaiza was conceived.”

I try hard not to look judgmental, but by the smile that lights up his face, I didn't do a good job at it.

“I drank too much and fucked a stranger and was given the greatest gift I could ever receive. I might regret the mother, but I don’t regret my child for one second.

“Has she tried to make contact?” Something about that makes me hold my breath, feeling possessive over the two of them.

“No, she disappeared right after leaving my child on my office doorstep.” What could have made a woman leave her child? My Ella, and not look back? But what doesn't make sense is that the woman had the child of one of the most powerful men in the country with enough money to take care of his future lineage, and she hasn't resurfaced asking for anything.

Odd and a little bit suspicious.

Maybe it is my untrustworthy nature making up things, but still... something doesn't feel right.

“Well, it is her loss. Because if that baby were mine, there’s nothing I wouldn’t do to keep her with me.” I say fiercely with all the love I have for that kid.

Sebastian frowns for a second, and then he smiles so subtly that I have to look twice to make sure it happened. I always speak my mind, lately, I speak what comes from the heart.

“What kind of black magic are you, Arianna?” he throws my early comment back at me, and I don't mind it. Not one bit.

Maybe we’re both rare, and that is why we make sense.

Because we do.

I have never thought of anyone as my equal, only lesser forms, until I met him.

I am snapped out of my thoughts by the sound of a nervous Bliss before she shakes me off her, and I find myself being thrown off the horse.

Everything happens so fast that it is blurry.

One second, I am terrified and falling, then the next, strong arms grab me, and we're both falling to the snow with a loud thud.

The wind is knocked out of me, but miraculously, nothing hurts.

He stopped me from getting hurt, putting himself at risk, as well.

Sebastian is on top of me, lifting himself by his left forearm so as not to squish me. His eyes are worried, searching every part of my body to ensure I am alright. I watch as he raises a hand, brings it to my face, and then moves to check the back of my head where his other one is shielding me from the ground. "Does anything hurt? Are you alright, darling?" He looks frazzled now. "Something must have spooked the horse."

Oh, dammit, Bliss.

But suddenly, I feel the urge to laugh. Aloud. "*Eh bien, il n'y avait rien dans votre leçon à ce sujet.*" Well, there was nothing in your lesson about this.

Sebastian leans back for a second, confused as to my reaction, but then in a second, he claims my mouth in a savage and furious kiss.

A kiss unlike the others he has stolen from me.

Not tender.

Desperate, as if he needs me to breathe.

Between kisses, he says, "*Tu me rends fou.*"

Right back at you, Sebastian.

You drive me crazy, too.

We lie there in the cold, kissing each other.

Madly.

Desperately.

As if we could, with one kiss, erase everyone that came before.

I feel his thick thigh between my own, causing a fire between my legs as only he can.

Sebastian breaks the kiss, pulling himself back. "You do things to me, Parisi. Things I have never felt before. It is more than just lust that I know." His lips are an inch from mine, our noses touching, our souls joined. "This

thing in my chest is cosmic. New to me, and fuck me, so addicting.” He whispers.

“Watch your mouth. Gentlemen don’t curse, Senator, or haven’t you heard?” I joke breathlessly.

Sebastian’s hands slip around both sides of my neck, and he exhales his greatest confession near my mouth. “I am breaking all my rules for you. I become someone else when you are around.” He drops a soft kiss on the tip of my nose. “I need you.”

I gasp before my fingers curl in his shirt. “Sebastian…”

He’s never said something as monumental as this to me before. I doubt this man has ever needed anyone, yet here he is, his beating heart pressed against mine, my hand, and confessing sweet truths to me.

Terrified, I am not only truthful to myself, but to him too. “When I look at you, I feel too much, and it terrifies me. You terrify me.” I whisper while he holds my gaze in a trance. “Because somehow you make the world stop for me. Nothing hurts, and everything seems possible with you. And as much as all these newfound feelings scare me, the thought of not having you scares me most.”

There.

I said it.

What I have been dying to say for weeks.

Months.

Hell, even years.

Because it seems as if I have been falling for this man before I even met him. Before I even knew what falling was.

Kismet.

That is exactly what we are.

Sebastian groans and kisses me so hard and gently at the same time. He kisses me as if I am precious. As if I am his and he is all mine. His hand spreads over the back of my head while his other takes me by the hip and drags our bodies even closer. So close that I can feel the straining muscles on his body through his clothes.

This is also new to me.

This insane need for more of him.

He is addictive, yes.

His kiss keeps me panting for more.

We both become hungry and impatient.

“So good,” Sebastian says between breathless kisses as my hands work his shirt, untucking it from his pants until I can touch the skin of his hard chest.

The cold from the snow is nothing compared to the raging fire crawling through my bloodstream as he kisses me and touches me frantically.

“I-I need you, Sebastian.” There. Another truth. I do need him, and not only to relieve the ache between my legs.

The lust-crazed man moans as our kisses grows more frantic. Feeling brave, I bite his lower lip and suck on it to soothe the pain of the bite as Sebastian positions himself between my legs.

When it all becomes too much, my hips rise to meet him, rubbing, begging. My breaths shallow, and my heart pounding so hard that I could feel it like a plea against his chest.

His heart is beating.

Wildly.

I do that to him.

Heat rises to the point of losing my mind, but it all stops. He stops before it goes too far. Where I want it to go. He snatches his lips from mine, looking down at me. Confused, I meet his gaze, not knowing what happened or what to say.

Sebastian looks...sad for a moment, almost regretful. What did I do wrong?

“Not like this.” He drops his head and brings it down until both our foreheads touch. “Not with you.” He whispers before rising from the ground, bringing me with him.

Not like this.

Not with you.

His words warm me back to the stables.

Warming me deep down to my soul.

BASTIAN

TYRANT



“What I would not give to see her
smile at me like that every day
for the rest of my life.” – B

It's truly astonishing how life changes in a blink of an eye. One day I was a shadow of the man I am today, barely living, just existing, going through the motions while indulging in every vice at my disposal. All that was important to me was my career. My goals. My aspirations and retribution.

To now.

To this moment in time where I not only have a daughter who fills my days with laughter and joy but a girl, a Parisi, who has turned my world upside down and made it her own.

My thoughts.

My days.

Fuck.

Everything, she owns me, and I have only kissed her.

Yes, she is beautiful, but that is not all. I have come across and fucked many beautiful women before. But it is the fact that she is warm and sometimes cold that keeps me on my knees. The way she challenges my authority, not giving a single fuck.

She never seeks validation or praise.

She is a breath of fresh air in a world where almost everyone acts and looks the same nowadays.

“*Bonjour Paris,*” she throws her arms in the air while the wind blows her

golden locks and the sunlight shines on her face. “You’ve been good to us.” She throws her head back when I hit the gas and laughs widely while the wind blows the scarf, and all that beautiful hair is let loose.

The girl looks like an actress out of a 1940s classic.

With shades on and a scarf wrapped around her face.

Extra.

Unique.

Her.

While my child sits between us in her car seat, looking the same as Arianna.

In a matching set.

They look ridiculously adorable.

However, what looks more stunning on them are those smiles.

Those infectious smiles pierce my heart and leave me wanting more.

More laughs.

More smiles.

More of them.

Ellaiza screeches and raises her little arms above her head, imitating her best friend. Because that is exactly who Arianna has become to my daughter.

Her person.

Her best friend.

And it melts the remaining ice around my heart.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and so does my smartwatch. Taking a quick look, I see a missed call and instantly recognize the area code.

Sending the call to voicemail, I keep driving through the streets of Paris with both of my girls. One happily clapping at the other’s bizarre antics, and the other singing along to a song I don’t recognize. A pop song about kissing in the rain and screaming some man’s name.

We drive for an hour while Benjamin trails behind us in a black van, making sure no one gets close enough to hurt them.

The paparazzi here in Paris are nothing like the ones in other countries, especially the States. They do snap photos and follow us, but they haven’t yet tried anything like crowding us. All the other foreign countries I travel to don’t care that I am a politician, but they care about my businesses and the money my name generates for the gossip tabloids.

Pulling over, I halt the white 1967 Ford Mustang convertible I rented for the afternoon on the curve, and through the rearview mirror, I see Banning

pull up behind me. I put the brakes on the car and leave it running. I drop a kiss on my daughter's head and lean forward to press a soft kiss on Arianna's lips, taking her by surprise. I am done overthinking, and there is no point in fighting the disease that is this girl. I am positive there is no cure.

Opening the driver's door, I climb out and wait for Banning to take my spot. I swiftly walk to her side. She frowns while she pouts in a mean way, in that face she makes drives me insane and raising my blood pressure. "And where are you going?" she asks while playing with Ellaiza's small hand. My heart always warms at the sight of them together. My daughter deserves it, and so does Arianna.

Smiling down at her, I tell her. "Something that needs my attention came up. Go with Banning, and I will meet you back at the hotel." I give my right-hand man a look that tells him all he needs to know without me having to voice it.

"Fine. We will see you later, then." Arianna smiles while putting her sunglasses back on and looking straightforward. The brat. Grabbing her chin, I make her look at me.

"Good girl." I tap her on the nose, and her frown deepens before she bares her teeth at me. Stepping back from her before I do something that I will not regret later. Not at all. I hand her my credit card. "Have fun, and try not to get into much trouble, yes?"

"Can't make any promises, tyrant." she sasses. Then I hand Banning the keys, not missing the knowing look my man throws our way.

I look at both my girls one more time before stepping back. I watch as Banning revs the engine and leaves with them.

I pull my phone out of my dress pants pocket and scroll through the missed calls. I will handle whatever issues Detroit has when I return to the States, not now. She is safe with me. Everything else could burn for all I care.

I stroll back to the SUV, hop on, call the man that has been blowing up my phone since this morning and drive off.

"*Bonjour, mon ami,*" Sandoval answers with a fucked-up French accent.

"Is there a reason why you have been calling me nonstop this morning? Or are you just in the mood to piss me off?"

"Both." Thiago chuckles while I hear the distinct sound of a glass clinking. The asshole has been drinking more than usual, but that is to be expected after everything he has been through. If what happened to him happened to me, I would drink myself into an early grave. "You've been all

over the news lately and with a pretty-young thing. It looks fun, although young pussy is not my kink.”

“Thiago.”

“Sí?” Yes?

“I suggest you shut your fucking mouth, or the next time I see you, I will make Armando cut off your tongue.”

Thiago chuckles darkly, “The big bastard would never, Seba, and you know it.”

Sighing, I pay attention to the road ahead, driving towards the hotel. “Tell me what you need to say and fuck off.”

“A war for power is brewing in that city.” I know he means Detroit. “Keep her close and don’t let her step foot there. She is no longer protected by their code, and her sister does not call the shots. The Volpe scum does, and the Nicolasis are a fucking disease. Cannot be trusted. None of them. Hell, I don’t even know why you bother with enemy pussy.” He slurs the last part.

I end the call, knowing Sandoval is on a self-destructive path, and there is no point in prolonging this torture that is this conversation.

His words replay on a loop in my brain.

Keep her close...

A war is brewing...

She is no longer protected.

I know that no one can be trusted, and as much power as the new ascended Parisi boss has, it does not compare to the word of a Capo.

As long as she is under my protection, the Detroit filth won't touch her.

I spend the ride to the hotel thinking of how I will handle things in Detroit, and there is only one solution.

Shit.

I take care of what is mine, and there is no doubt that Arianna Parisi is mine.

I might have broken plenty of promises in the past, and most likely will break many more in the future, but none I have made to her.

I didn’t lie when I told her the war was over.

Pulling up at the hotel, I step out of the SUV and hand the keys to the valet with the cash I have left on me.

Ping.

A new message from Arianna pops up on my screen with an attachment

notification. Tapping on the screen, I open the message and find that she sent a photo of herself and my daughter Eskimo kissing while holding a small lock with their initials standing in front of the Eiffel Tower. She follows the picture with a row of teddy bears. The ones she always sends with pictures of my daughter.

I stand there in the middle of the hotel's entrance looking down at the photo with this strange sensation in my chest, knowing well there is nothing I will not do to keep that smile on her face.

A smile that tells me her ghosts are slowly fading, no longer haunting her as they used to when she first came to me.

A smile that no longer seems forced or awkward.

A smile that fills me with pride and fucking joy.

I type a quick message and wait for her reply while saving the photo as my new lock screen.

Me: Whose heart is it, darling?

Brat: Forever Ellaiza's. 🧑🏻👧

Me: Who else?

Brat: Mine. 🧑🏻♀️

Me: Liar.

Brat: Tyrant.

It is funny how she calls me a tyrant when the little brat has been ruling me since the fateful day her bitch of a father sent me her photo and offered me her life.

Me: Be a good girl, yes?

Brat: Being good is not my nature, Sebastian. We established this already...

Me: And you are full of shit. I think we both can agree on that.

Brat: TTYL 🧑🏻👋

Me: What the fuck does that mean?

TTYL?

Me: Open a dictionary, Arianna. You'll be surprised with how many words there are.

Brat: Get with the times, Senator Kenton. It might help you get the young vote... 😊

Little shit.

Smiling to myself, I type a quick reply.

Me: See you soon, darling.

Three dots appear on screen for a couple of seconds before she her text message appears.

Brat: Until then, tyrant. ❤️

Never has she sent a heart icon.

Fuck me...

With a smile on my face, I enter the building with a new purpose.

One that sets my soul on fire.

ARIANNA

21 CANDLES



*“He feels like daylight after
a lifetime of nights.” – A*

“It’s not much, but...” An eleven-year-old Kadra whispers so no one outside the door can hear her, just loud enough for her eldest sister, the birthday girl to. Kadra holds a burnt pancake up to her sister Arianna, with sadness written all over her face, while their youngest sister, Mila, looks proud while holding up a drawn cake colored in all shades of blues. “It burned while I was trying to keep a lookout for father’s guards. Nonna was supposed to bring you a real cake, a chocolate one, like the type we see in that TV commercial, remember? I don’t know what happened, but she didn’t show up.” The middle sister whispers worriedly.

“I am sure everything is fine. Something must’ve come up. Don’t worry.” Arianna whispers back while holding the plate with the birthday pancake in one hand and Mila’s cake drawing in the other, smiling at her little sisters. “And this is so much better than chocolate cake.” She hates lying to her sisters, but today she does. To keep them from worrying about their grandmother, who never misses a scheduled visit, and to not break their hearts for not being able to give their big sister a cake.

None of that matters to the eldest Parisi sister.

Not really.

All she cares about is that her sisters are in that moment with her and not hurt.

Their parents don’t celebrate their daughters’ birthdays, not in the way all loving parents do. On the day their children were born. Like today.

December 23rd.

Gabriele and Milena Parisi celebrate on the day it is most convenient for them, and they only go to the trouble of throwing a big celebration to keep up appearances amongst the other families.

The Volpe and Nicolasi families, among other business associates.

And even then, the girls don't get to eat cake because, in their mother's words, sugar is for ugly girls. Girls who don't care about their appearance and don't wish to find a suitable husband.

Arianna Parisi wishes she could be free to tell her mother what she thinks about her judgmental, old-school, and downright offensive ideals.

Tell her that cake and sugary treats are for happy girls.

But if she dared say that, she would most likely get a bruised cheek, or worse, one of her sisters could pay the price for her insolence.

"Do you honestly like it, or are you just pretending for our sake?" Mila whispers ever so softly while narrowing her pretty eyes at Arianna, looking at her big sister seriously.

"Anything you both give me, I love and treasure," Arianna says truthfully, meaning it with her whole chest.

"One day?" Kadra looks down at their youngest sister, who is munching on a burnt piece of pancake, knowing it tastes like dirt, but eating anyway, not to hurt her sister's feelings. Because that is who the three of them are.

They would do anything for one other.

Arianna looks at both her sisters, knowing down in her soul that one day might not come for her, but she vows to always fight for her sisters even when they don't see it themselves.

Even when they find themselves on opposite side of a war.

"Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you..." The sweetest, most angelic voices break through the silence in the room in a whisper. The youngest Parisi sings happily to her sister, unaware of the turmoil that lives inside of her, but unknowingly soothing it with her sweetness and grace. "Happy birthday, beautiful sister. Happy birthday to you..."

A hard slap to my cheek wakes me from my dream. My eyes flutter open while rubbing my cheek. I find a sweet but naughty face smiling at me while

holding one pink balloon in her tiny hand.

“Me day! Me day!” Ella hands me the balloon and sings while bending her short legs and dancing on my stomach. Groaning, I sit up, grab her by the waist, and throw her up in the air making her giggle.

The pain in my heart that was there a second ago from the painful dream fades when this beautiful little girl laughs and looks at me the way she is now.

Since meeting Ellaiza, it has felt like I have been born again.

I see things through her eyes.

Hopeful eyes.

Everything seems less dull and more vivid. More hopeful.

My ears hear different sounds.

My heart beats to a different melody.

All because of her and the man who gave me her.

Her father.

“Anna, Anna.” Ella frees herself from my grip and stands, holding onto my shoulder and pointing at the ceiling with a grin.

With a warm and happy heart, I look up to find dozens of pink and gold balloons all over the room. A huge letter E made of pink roses sitting on the corner of the room, close to the balcony doors, and countless bags and a few toys for Ella.

Baby girl’s birthday is today.

Grabbing her, I tickle her belly while kissing her soft cheek. “Happy birthday, little girl.”

Ella shakes her wild curls, laughing like a lunatic while saying between breaths. “Big girl. Me big girl!”

“Oh, well, excuse me.” Ella throws her head back to look at me. “My mistake, then. You are a big girl now.”

The brat turns three today, and while I still have to wipe her ass, she’ll be a little girl. I won’t be telling her that, though. “Issa k.” Ella sasses, and I roll my eyes playfully at her.

Then the suite’s door burst open to reveal Benjamin holding a tiny pink cake, grinning like a fool. “The birthday girl is up! Great, now we can eat cake for breakfast, little lady.” Benjamin’s voice booms as he steps closer to the bed.

“Cak!!!!” Ellaiza screeches while jumping in bed. I keep a hold of her tiny frame to keep her from falling face flat off the bed. Then, I look up at

Benjamin with a what the hell is wrong with you look. He knows it is not my birthday. It is Ella's day, not mine. Before I can whisper that to him, Ellaiza's father walks in, looking as handsome as ever in a three-piece suit this early in the morning while holding a bigger cake in his hands.

A chocolate one.

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

This man...

"Good, you are up." He grins at me then the smile falls off his face when he looks down at what I am wearing, an oversized shirt that has risen and barely covers my thighs. Then he looks at Benjamin, who is standing on the other side of the bed, not even looking down at me but focusing on whatever Ellaiza is rambling about. Sebastian bends down, grabs the bed's duvet, and covers me with it.

"A tyrant and now a caveman. Lucky me." I sass him.

"Shut it," he mutters.

I grin at that, and he rolls his beautiful blue eyes playfully back at me.

Who would have thought we would get to this point?

Not me, that is for sure.

"Ellaiza gets two cakes? You are one lucky and loved girl." I exclaim while I look back at where she is trying to stick her tiny finger in her pink cake.

"Yummy, yummy, Ben!" She says while sucking pink frosting off her tiny finger.

"Ellaiza, where are your manners?" Sebastian says while holding a white paper up toward his daughter.

"Sowwy." She moves towards her father, snatches the paper from his hand, and shoves it right in my face making me laugh. "Anna's day tew." She means Anna's day, too.

I take the paper from her to see it is a drawing of a circle with tiny dots on it colored in pink and yellow. I hate yellow in most things. I find it offensive how horrid it looks but on this? On the drawing of the sweetest tiny girl I know? I find it beautiful and priceless.

The most valuable thing I own.

Because it came from her.

From her tiny sweet heart.

Choked up with emotion, I grab Ella's chubby hand, bring it to my lips, sticky fingers and all and kiss it. "Thank you, baby," I whisper to her, trying to hold back my tears, not wanting to make a scene. Looking into those blue eyes of hers, I say, "You're an artist, Ella. This is the best gift anyone could have ever given me." And I mean it.

She smiles brightly and throws herself into my arms, hugging my neck tightly. "Wove yew, mommy." The room falls silent the second the sweet words slip from her mouth. I am stunned, not because I haven't heard them before but because she has never said it in front of her father.

Shit.

Holding Ella tighter to my body, I look up at Sebastian, who looks down at us with an odd look on his face. He doesn't seem angry or offended by Ella's use of the word mommy. No. He looks fiercely down at us, almost like a very possessive and determined God.

Soft but lethal.

Without breaking eye contact, I dare say the words I once thought I would never say again. Not without meaning. But God, do I mean it. "And I love you, Ellaiza." I kiss her once more and drop her down onto the bed next to me, so the men that love her the most in this world can sing happy birthday to her.

Then the air is stolen from my lungs again when Sebastian places the chocolate cake with black frosting on the bed in front of me. "Happy birthday, darling," he says so tenderly it makes me tear up just as much as the knowledge that he got me a cake. He did this. They did this all for me.

I read what's been written on the cake with white frosting. It reads happy birthday, brat, and instead of feeling offended, I laugh. Aloud and with so much joy in my heart.

Because although Benjamin has made a big deal of my birthday the last two years, I appreciate it greatly...I was still broken, mad, and sad.

But today is different.

Today I get to eat cake, a cake made for me, with people I care for without fear, shame, or sadness.

Meeting Sebastian's eyes, I tell him, "Thank you." It is not much, but it's all I am feeling now. All because of him. I never said thank you before to anyone except my sisters and my *nonna*. So, when I do say thank you, I mean it.

I not only say thank you for the cake but for everything they've done for

me. I say thank you for Sebastian's existence. I don't say it aloud, but the words are there in my heart.

“You are welcome, brat.” Benjamin appears next to me, ruffling my hair, adding humor to this very emotional occasion as only he can. I am grateful for this Viking, too. He was the first person in a long time to show me kindness. Benjamin whistles loudly before saying. “Look at all these gifts for you. It’s like Christmas morning up in here.” He then turns to his boss. “I expect the same treatment when my birthday rolls up. I can do without the pink, though.”

Sebastian gives his right-hand man a warning glare, but I know he doesn’t mind Benjamin’s unusual humor. Well... at least today, he doesn’t.

We sing happy birthday and eat cake while we watch Ella open her presents.

It doesn’t go unnoticed how there are twenty-one bags and boxes for me.
Twenty-one.

With a Birkin bag in my lap, I feel the bed dip, and Sebastian is sitting next to me, looking into my eyes.

Happy.

That is it.

He looks happy...

“For every birthday I didn’t get to spend with you,” Sebastian whispers.

I suck in a breath when his words sink in, filling me with so much emotion.

The gifts.

Bliss.

Paris.

All of it replays in my mind as I look into those hypnotizing blue eyes.

And I know this feeling in my chest is not only gratitude.

No.

It is love.



“*Tu es ravissante, ce soir.*” Sebastian says as he offers me his hand, looking as dashing as ever. Somehow, he looks even more handsome tonight. Happy and less stressed. Maybe it is the fact that he seems less grumpy. Happiness

does take a few years off, or so some people say.

“*Je sais.*” I take his arm and let him guide me through the hotel's lobby towards the restaurant. Turning my head, I soften my expression. “*Mais merci.*”

Chuckling, he pushes us through the crowd of people gathering around and waiting to be seated. Not us, though. I don't think this man has ever waited for anything in his life, especially when he owns the building.

After a second of standing outside, the restaurant's chef himself comes to greet and seat us. “*Monsieur Kenton, bienvenue.*” He is a handsome man, maybe in his late twenties, with light blonde hair tied in a man-bun and gold-colored eyes. There is no doubt he is handsome, but he has nothing on the jealous caveman currently pulling me tighter to his body.

So, possessive...

“Pee on me, why don't you?” I whisper to Sebastian.

“I just might do that, darling, if Chef Pietro keeps staring at you as if you're one of the five-course meals he serves here.” He bites back fiercely, and a thrill runs down my body.

I sigh before telling him. “This is nothing new to me, Sebastian. I've been a possession since the day I was born. Paraded by my father like cheap merchandise.”

Sebastian frowns at that, but before he can say anything else, chef Pietro interrupts us by walking closer and taking my hand in his, lifting it towards his mouth in greeting. “Welcome to *Magnifique*, beautiful.” I want to be cordial with the man, but then I notice the chef's eyes lingering a little too long on my chest. Making me feel like all the disgusting men I've come across back in Detroit.

I know I look older than my age today. Completely different from my usual look. I'm dressed in an elegant black Versace midi dress with lightweight material. It hugs my figure. The bust is gathered and collected at the center of my chest by a silver ring. It comes just below my knees, and I paired it with black leather high heels. My hair is bound in a sleek, high ponytail, with my bangs parted in the middle. On my ears are the diamond snowflakes earrings Sebastian gifted me and, on my finger, the matching ring. I am wearing light pink lipgloss along with eyeliner and mascara.

When I asked how I should dress, Sebastian said to go all out, and that is precisely what I did.

Chef Pietro notices my discomfort, yet he doesn't release my hand, and

before I can voice how he is making me feel, Sebastian steps in. “If you don’t remove your hands from my girl, tomorrow, you no longer exist, and neither will your restaurant, Pietro.” The ice, in Sebastian’s words, freezes the air. No one has ever stuck up for me like Sebastian.

No one has ever done what he has.

No one.

I lick my lips, not concerned at all by Sebastian’s threat. I try to wipe the smile off my face and can’t.

Chief Pietro raises his hands as if he meant no harm and looks sheepishly back at me before releasing my hand and turning back to guide us to our table.

Once inside the restaurant, I notice it is surrounded by clear glass, which allows us not only to see outside the restaurant, but civilians on the streets can see inside while people dine.

Besides the oddness of that, the restaurant is beautifully and lavishly decorated. The low lighting gives off a romantic and cozy vibe.

There are also fresh flowers and candlelight on every table, tasteful artwork on the walls, and linen tablecloths and napkins.

On the farthest corner, a young girl sits on a piano playing classical music to set the mood.

Magnifique offers a sophisticated, unique, and expensive experience paired with fine dining.

“Mr. Kenton, I meant no harm, and I hope my poor judgment does not affect our business relationship.” Chef Pietro says to Sebastian. I believe the man meant no harm. He just acted unprofessional, tacky, and sleazy.

“Send the waiter our way.” That is all Sebastian says before pushing my chair back and helping me to my seat. Chef Pietro mutters that someone will be with us shortly before disappearing back into the kitchen.

“I think we overreacted,” I tell him as I watch him pull a seat over instead of sitting in front of me, as most people are.

“He was being rude.”

“He was staring at my tits. Rude? Yes. However, is it causing him to lose his restaurant? No.” I blush when Sebastian’s eyes drop to my cleavage before slowly rising and meeting my gaze. His gaze doesn’t make me want to scrub my skin off. It makes me feel as if I am on fire. A fire that never hurts.

A serious look takes over his face. “I don’t like it.”

Lost in his stare, I ask. “You don’t like what?”

“Men looking at you as if they have a right. They don’t get to look at you.” He says, almost sounding like a brat. Something he is not. He is all man. “It makes me feel twitchy.”

“Twitchy?”

A vicious smile takes over. “Yes, twitchy. Murderous. It makes me want to rip their eyes out of their sockets with my bare hands.” He chuckles darkly. “Fuck, baby, and I hate messes.” His eyes, so blue at that moment they take my breath away, feel like they bore their way into my soul.

Baby.

The word coming from him makes lust spread through me and happiness blooms in my heart.

I don’t mind Sebastian’s possessive side because I, too, feel possessive of him.

I, too, feel twitchy when women stare at him for a little too long, like in this instant when a woman about Sebastian’s age approaches our table with a huge smile on her face. For him, of course. She has barely acknowledged me.

The woman keeps flirting with him despite my presence, annoying the hell out of me and feeding the green monster that lives inside of me.

The jealousy.

The only reason I am not sticking the knife in Sebastian’s hand right now is that he seems uninterested and unaffected by the woman’s advances. He orders, in perfect French, a bottle of their most expensive wine, the spiced duck for him and macaroni stuffed with black truffle for me.

Handing her back the menu, he dismisses her.

Fifteen minutes later, the server comes back a little too giddy with a pep in her step. She places Sebastian’s duck in front of him and then places my plate in front of me without taking her eyes off Sebastian. I don’t pray. Not really, but I silently pray to the miserable bastard who was tasked with me up in heaven, asking this woman to drop her plates or fall on her ass in front of me.

Petty? Yes.

Do I care?

Not really.

Hot anger courses through me like it never has before.

Not only because I feel jealous, because I am not insecure, but for the fact that this woman is blatantly dismissing me as if she does not see me as Sebastian’s date.

She pops the bottle of wine, filling Sebastian's glass first and then setting the bottle down on the table. Looking smugly at me, she asks, "Would you like a soda or water?" The bitch says in broken English. I hate that she sounds sexy and exotic. "Oh, I know you." She looks back at Sebastian, who is looking at me, not her, with an amused look on his face. He noticed. The asshole knows and is looking at me, waiting to see what I'll do. "It is so nice of you to buy your employees dinner, Mr. Kenton."

She didn't.

She didn't just call me an employee.

Reaching forward, I ignore her lesser presence, grab the bottle, and fill my glass, bringing it to my lips. I stop and make a face before handing it to her. "Oh, look at that. The glass is dirty. Would you mind fetching me a clean one?" I smile innocently at her.

The server stands there, fuming with narrowed eyes.

And to drive the point home, I turn away from her, grab Sebastian's face, and kiss him without a care that she is standing there like an idiot. Serves her right for acting a fool. I hear her mutter something in French before her steps retreat.

I could care less at that moment.

Instead, I let Sebastian pull me closer by the back of my head and lead the kiss.

It is a passionate kiss.

A kiss that says you're mine, and I'm tired of women throwing themselves at you. Pulling back, breathless and satisfied, I open my eyes, and there is that smile that has the same effect on me as his kisses.

He looks arrogant and pleased.

I bet he enjoyed the scene I made.

Before he opens his mouth to gloat, as I know he will, I raise a hand and stop him. "I don't want to talk about it."

Sebastian chuckles and then takes a sip of his wine. "As you wish, darling."

Now he knows for sure that I am just as territorial as he is.

Taking a bite of the macaroni, I moan aloud, causing Sebastian's eyes to heat. God looks so dangerous when he stares at me as if he wants to swallow me whole and keep me with him forever. We eat our dinner and enjoy a nice conversation which flows naturally and effortlessly. We talk about anything and everything, losing the concept of time. Looking away from Sebastian

through the window, I notice a few paparazzi gathering with their cameras raised and taking countless pictures of us.

I notice the server from earlier is outside, too, most likely on her break, smoking a cigarette. The asshole looks at me as if my presence offends her. How amusing. I don't know if it is the wine or if I am losing my mind. Maybe both. *Damn you, tyrant.*

Leaning forward, I drop a soft kiss on Sebastian's lips, not only for the cameras and the bitter server watching from outside, but for all the women that came before me. I kiss him once more, open my eyes while his lips are on mine, and flip them off.

That'll for sure make the front-page news.

Oh well.

ARIANNA

SECRETS & STARS



“I once was dead inside
and then there was you.” – B

“Whenever I think you can’t surprise me, you pull this,” I mumble in disbelief as I stare at what he did. At what is in front of us. “And here I thought topping the last surprise would be an impossible task.” I keep looking at the room in awe.

I should have known nothing was impossible for him.

Unbelievable.

Dim lights with stars lighting the room from above us, simulating the night sky.

Some constellations and the various forms of the moon appear on the huge screen.

Sebastian chuckles as he guides me down the steps of what looks like some sort of theater. A Planetarium and Observatory, to be precise. “You should know by now, darling. That there is nothing I can’t do, and the word impossible is not part of my vocabulary.” He looks down at me and winks so arrogantly, so confident in all he is. “It’s not on your vocabulary from now on either.” My heart flutters at the sight of him smiling big, proud of what he has done.

“Seriously... how?” Looking down, I see dozens of white roses on the floor leading up to the center of the theater, where there is a giant white blanket with matching satin pillows all over it.

He had a picnic prepared.

As we get closer, I see he has a spread of tiny foods such as different

kinds of cheeses, fruits, and a bottle of wine ready for us. Walking down the last steps that lead to the center of the room, he helps me down onto the blanket.

“This is not somewhere I would ever think you would take me,” I tell him truthfully.

“Why is that?” He drops down on the floor, offering me a glass of wine. I had my first glass of wine back at the restaurant with him. Most of my firsts, if not all of them, have been with Sebastian, and as odd as it might seem, I am glad all of them have been with him.

Taking a sip of what is in my glass, I look up at him. “I don’t know... it’s just that sitting down watching the stars seems so simple and chill.” I say truthfully. I am used to over-the-top gestures from him, and don't get me wrong... him booking a private viewing while having a picnic inside this place is pretty over the top, but the simplicity of the act is what gets me.

Which I find simple and sweet.

“I am capable of pulling off simple and... chill.” The way he says chill is as if it pains him. It’s hilarious to me. He visibly cringes.

“I see that... now.” I smile, knowing that simple is not a word I would ever use to describe this enigma of a man next to me whose idea of romance is to fly me to Paris, offer me the world, and give me an expensive as-hell horse.

Sure... simple.

Not that I am complaining.

I would never.

Because no one has ever done what he has done for me.

Taking another sip of the delicious wine, I then put the glass down and look up at the changing images on the ceiling screen.

I've never been one to be interested in astronomy or any science in general. For me, it has always been words. Reading and writing.

History and English were my preferred subjects in school.

Lately, I've dived into politics, finding it fascinating.

But the stars, moons, and everything that hides in the sky? Never interested me enough to study it, but I did enjoy learning about it through my little sister Mila.

She made everything dull seem interesting and joyful.

“Did you know that we are days away from the last full moon of the year? The cold moon.” Sebastian changes the topic abruptly while leaning back on

the floor, staring up at the screen above us, where a special projector creates a simulation of the night sky on the dome ceiling. Looking up, I, too, watch as the screen changes showing us the moon in various phases, stopping at the full moon.

The cold moon, as he referred to it.

My heart swells.

So big.

An outpouring of joy as I listen to this man spur fact after fact, reminding me so much of my little sister.

She loved to offer curious facts, too.

“I did not know that,” I whisper back. The screen changes again to a different angle of the moon. “Is it called the cold moon because December is when it starts to get really cold?”

Sebastian smiles at the screen. “Precisely.”

“It is truly beautiful...” I whisper in awe.

“It is...” Sebastian remains looking up while I watch his side profile. So handsome. So perfect. So irresistibly. “The sky is infinite and holds many secrets we’ve yet to discover. It is truly one of the best things I’ve ever seen.” Right now, he looks the most relaxed I’ve ever seen him. As if this isn’t anything new for him.

As if it’s home.

The fake sky above is indeed beautiful, but it doesn’t come close to him.

His mind and his beauty.

“I think you’re the best thing I’ve ever seen.” I can’t keep it in. This feeling swelling in my chest sweeps through me like a warm spring breeze. Something that promised better things were to come.

Sebastian looks over at me, holding my gaze captive. Staring so intensely as if he is staring through me, seeing all the secrets that I hide inside my soul. “You got it all wrong, darling. I’m nothing special. Now, you... Arianna.” He stares intensely back at me. Wonder and lust swirling in his eyes. “You are right up there with the moon, the stars, and the whole damn galaxy.” He says roughly, stealing the air from my lungs.

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

It’s official... my heart has fully transitioned into this man’s bitch.

There is no other way to put it.

When he looks at me I feel things inside of me clench.

Things that only clenched when he was around.

Then Sebastian winks, igniting my imagination.

Smiling softly, I say, "Let's agree to disagree then." Because he is something special, and he knows it. "Humbleness doesn't look good on you, Sebastian." It's true. As much as a sweet Sebastian makes my heart stutter... his cocky and condescending side makes other parts of me come alive.

Laughing, he replies. "It doesn't look good on you either."

We're hopeless.

Contentment is lapped in the bare space between us, familiarity and serenity wrapping us in a warm blanket of comfort as we sit back and watch the screen above. I listen closely as Sebastian narrates all he knows about the sky and all that is part of it.

As much as I enjoy learning new things, listening to him blab about it like a gorgeous nerd fills me with joy. Then a question comes to mind, so I ask. "How do you know so much about this stuff anyway?" I put my glass of wine down and pop a green grape into my mouth. "I thought you were a lawyer."

Sebastian looks back at me, his entire demeanor changing from calm to rigid. "My mother was an astronomer, and she made it her mission to teach me all she knew. I never found a love for it as she did, of course, but it made her happy to share her passion with me, so I sucked it up." It makes sense why he knows about the subject so much and why his entire face lit up while he shared what he knew about the moon.

His mother...

"You never talk about them. Your parents." I whisper, watching him closely. "Will you tell me about them?"

"You mean to tell me you haven't googled me, darling?" He grins cockily at me.

I could lighten the mood a little with a sassy reply, but instead, I tell him. "I could have, but I didn't. It didn't feel right to look you up on the internet and read about you from the media's point of view," I whisper almost timidly. I notice Sebastian's eyes turning soft. "I want your truths. Not their lies."

He sucks in a breath. "How do you figure that what they report are lies?"

I don't hesitate when I answer. "Because they don't know you. Not the real you, at least." Not like I do, I want to say, but stop myself. And I do. He doesn't need to tell me his life story for me to know his heart. Yeah, he's a

condescending jerk with a huge ego, but he's so much more. His heart is gold. At least to me. To his daughter. I'm not so sure about the rest of humanity.

"Hmm." He stares at me as if he just discovered something new about me and doesn't know how it makes him feel yet. I know the feeling. It happens to me almost every day with him. It's as scary as it is terrifying.

"So, will you? Tell me about them." I try again, not wanting to be pushy but curious as to why this man has no one except his daughter.

Sebastian sighs and looks back up at the ceiling where the stars are. "My father, Ronan Kenton, served in the army for many years before he settled down and pursued politics. He was a good man. The best man. One that followed the rules and always played by the book. He did what was right, not only for his family, but his city and country. He married my mother, who, at the time, was also pursuing a career she loved dearly, but she gave it all up for love. For him. For me. She couldn't be the politician's wife, a mother and still be working as an astronomer on TV. Many factors didn't allow it." I listen intently as he tells me the story of his parents with a sadness that makes my heart tight.

He goes on to tell me more about them and how they were phenomenal parents. God, they sound wonderful. Hearing all about how good and kind they were made me feel all warm inside, the total opposite of my parents.

"Where are they?" I whisper, making him look away from the ceiling and down at me.

Many emotions swirl in those beautiful blue eyes of his.

First, sadness, then loss, anger, and back to sadness. "They were brutally murdered. It was front-page news that year." Sebastian laughs without humor. Sad. So sad. "A lowlife gangster threw a fit because my father refused to participate in his filthy plans for Chicago and didn't cooperate. So, he decided to order a hit that ultimately resulted in the murder of both my parents. The most kindhearted people the world ever had the pleasure to know were gunned down like criminals for everyone to witness." Sebastian's voice is no longer laced with sadness but with hatred. His face, was no longer peaceful or sad, but now ugly with rage.

I feel all of that now, too.

For him.

For his parents.

But mostly because I was once part of those lowlife gangsters who like to

play God.

Without hesitation, I reach out and take his much larger hand in mine. It's warm. A complete contrast to mine. I am always cold, but he isn't.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper, not finding the right words to make the sadness disappear. "How old were you when you lost them?" I can sympathize with him, but our situation is not the same. He lost his parents. I cannot lose something I never had.

Parents.

Good parents.

My heart warms when instead of shaking off my touch, Sebastian grips my hand tighter, and looks at me. "I turned fourteen that year."

Oh, no.

He was so young.

A child.

A child who lost his entire world at once and was reminded of it every day because it was so public.

I am sad for him, yes, but mostly I am furious.

"Where did you end up? Who took you in after they were gone?" I ask, wanting to know as much about him as he will allow me.

"My grandparents from my mother's side took me in until I went to college." At least he had someone. Yes, he had money, but sometimes money is not enough. Children need stability, attention, and, most of all, love.

I hope he got that from his grandparents.

Changing the topic, wanting to see him smile again, I ask him about his mother, and he tells me all about how lovely she was and how she never once regretted leaving everything she knew to stand by her husband's side and care for Sebastian full time. He also tells me that she was part French, and the hotel back in Paris belonged to her side of the family until it was passed down to him when he came of age.

He comes from old money, not dirty money like I do.

We're so different.

He was born good, but the world and the cruel actions of a heartless criminal hardened his heart, while I was born into cruelty, and now the world is giving me a second chance at life.

"Arianna." Sebastian grips my chin, making me look straight at him.

"Yes?" I whisper, enthralled by his gaze.

"I never understood why my mother insisted we watch the full moon

every December. I found it nothing special.” He says while something that looks a lot like adoration flashes in his eyes. “But now...now, I know why.”

I breathe out, heart beating a mile a second as if it wants to climb out of my chest down onto Sebastian’s lap. “Why is that?”

“Because there is not a more beautiful phenomenon than that of a full moon.” He says before smiling, stealing my breath. “It lights up the darkest night with its rare beauty. Just like you did with me.” Sebastian gently raises his hand and cups my face in an adoring gesture. “And as gloriously beautiful the full moon is, it doesn’t hold a candle to you.”

The overwhelming urge to kiss him takes over me, and I do. Leaning forward, I take his face in my hands and kiss him, as these thrilling yet scary feelings I have for him pour out of me with this kiss. Sebastian groans in my mouth, and then we break apart. Both of us were breathless as he stares at me with so many emotions flashing in his eyes. “Tell me to stop, Arianna.” He says roughly. “Say the word, and I won’t go there, but know this.” The hand that was on my cheek moments ago drops down to my neck, where the necklace he gave me sits. “If you give yourself to me, there is no going back. There is no stopping this. You are mine.”

I search his eyes for a sign of deceit, but there is none. “I don’t want you to stop,” I whisper close to his lips and watch his eyes turn dark with lust. “I don’t know how or when it happened, but...” I breathe out, ready to share my truth with him, but he cuts me off. “Whose heart is this, darling?”

Afraid out of my mind of what this means for me. For us. I tell him the honest-to-God truth. “Yours.” I smile softly at him, pressing my forehead against his. “It’s yours, tyrant. Although, it is also a little bit mi—”

He chuckles, not letting me finish my sentence. Knowing where I was going with it. “Shut the fuck up, darling, and give it all to me.” With that, he takes my lips in his in a desperate and savage kiss that I feel down to my soul.

Warming my insides and breaking me at the same time as it makes me whole.

And that is what is so terrifying about this man.

He has the power to undo me and put me back together with the snap of his fingers.

We devour each other’s mouths for a second longer, and then Sebastian lays me down gently until my head hits a satin pillow. He looks down at me so tenderly, so reverently that it makes my heart beat steady, calm, and

determined to focus on feeling this moment in his arms.

Maybe I am acting foolish, but all I know is that I trust him. Just like he has trusted me with his heart.

His daughter.

His life.

He doesn't have to say it.

I see it.

I know.

With the little things he does, I know.

I should feel nervous, and to some extent, I am, but mostly I feel safe.

Here in this moment with him.

Sebastian presses his nose into my hair and says, "Relax, darling." Leaning in, he gives me a hard kiss, swiping his tongue along my bottom lip before he pulls back. "I've got you."

"I don't know what I am doing. I neve—" I stop talking when I notice him looking smug as fuck when he learns I have never had sex before. I am not naive. I know he was made aware of my every move over the last two years, but he has no idea about the years he was not around.

"Good." The smile widens when I narrow my eyes at his arrogant attitude. He then gently wraps his hand around my throat, his fingers playing with the diamond on my neck. His eyes now turn from soft to possessive. "I'll teach you." He squeezes my throat a little tighter, causing a soft moan to slip from my lips. I blush, cheeks burning red. "Do you like that, Arianna?"

"I do." My chest rises and falls with force. I tell him the truth for the first time in a long time. I don't hide behind sarcastic replies. At this moment, with him, I am me. I am free.

"Don't be afraid to tell me when you don't enjoy something. You speak up, and this stops."

"I like everything you do to me, Sebastian." I look at him unafraid, my heart swelling. "And if something ever feels wrong, you bet your sweet ass I'll let you know."

Sebastian pulls back, hovering over me, and starts tearing his clothes off. "That mouth of yours..."

"You did say you were going to teach it a lesson..." I taunt, loving how his blue-gray eyes grow intensely with the challenge.

"I will." He smiles wickedly as I watch him unzip his pants. "Just not tonight. Tonight, I plan to teach you other things." He looks down between

my legs and bites his lips. Christ, the man knows what he is doing to me. When his long, thick length is set free, I hold in the moan that threatens to escape when I see the size of his cock. That can't possibly fit inside of me.

"Do you like what you see?" Sebastian asks, not an ounce of arrogance in his tone. He asks curiously and gently. Perhaps he noticed I've suddenly become nervous after seeing his monster dick. All large, veiny, and slightly to the right.

Pushing the nerves aside, I lift myself and take my clothes off. His burning gaze emboldens me, making me feel like I am the most beautiful woman he has ever seen and as if he's dying for a taste of me. "Teach me, Sebastian." I fall down gently, and he comes with me, following me as if we were both in sync. "Teach me how you fuck." He regards me with a heated look I can feel deep in my belly. Sebastian's crazed and hungry expression gives me confidence.

His eyes flash with desire before he leans down and kisses the side of my neck, working his tongue down to the cleft between my breasts. His tongue, wet, warm, and hungry for more, starts a fire between my legs. He palms both my breasts, playing with the hardening tips. Sebastian looks at me while I watch him suck one tip into his mouth, releasing it with a loud pop. "Ah..." I moan, unashamed.

"Does that feel good?" He does it again, the bastard, teasing me, knowing that it feels pretty-fucking-great.

"It does..." I stiffen, the pressure between my legs intensifying when I feel his hot tongue go lower. "You taste like strawberries and my favorite candy," he murmurs as his tongue tastes my skin. He then spreads my legs wider, and my breath hitches at the sight of him between my naked legs. "I wonder..."

"What?"

"If your cunt tastes the same." My heart races at his words. So filthy. How does someone like him exist? Both a gentleman and a savage predator? How can a man be both? But he is, in this moment, he is both of those things.

And I find I like it.

Both the saint and the sinner. Although Sebastian is a saint as much as I am sunshine.

"Sebastian..." I moan his name when his bearded lips hover over my center. Blue eyes meet mine, and my entire body comes alive when I feel the tip of his tongue part my pussy lips and swipe up and down my slit. "Oh,

God...”

He laughs darkly, and I feel the vibration driving me more insane with need. “Not God, baby. Just me,” he tells me before sucking my bundle of nerves and releasing it with a soft lick. I jump at the startling sensation, my head falling back and my legs spreading wider, beginning to shake. I feel his arm, the one with his watch, press firmly, holding me still. I can’t help it. I moan and say his name so loud as if I am evoking a spirit or some shit. So loud, I worry someone outside the theater may listen and find out the filthy acts this man is doing to my body.

I become hotter, and my pussy wetter when Sebastian groans as if my pussy is the best meal he’s ever had. I try to hold in the moans of pleasure, but it becomes hard when he increases the pressure of his mouth, flattening his tongue and licking me from my clit down to my ass and up again. He licks me fast and deep, more demanding and hungrier. Lifting one of my legs over his shoulder, he plunges his tongue into my trembling body. Oh, fuck. I pant. “It feels...Fuck. It feels so good.” My breathless admission makes him tighten his grip while his tongue licks me faster, and his mouth sucks harder.

“Please...” I rasp, wanting him to finish it. Finish me. When I feel myself going over the edge of sweet release, he stops, coming back up and taking my lips in his. He takes my lips, allowing me to taste myself on him, and then he pulls back and grins. “It does. Strawberries and candies. All sweet and all mine.” Before I can respond, I feel him lowering my leg and positioning his dick where his mouth had just been. My breaths became haggard when Sebastian hits my pussy lips with the tip of his cock. Slapping it hard, coating his length with my juices.

He then cups the side of my face and at the same time he tells me, “I don’t have a condom on me, darling. I didn’t plan on this happening, but I am clean.”

I nod, understanding what he is implying. He does not want to use a condom, but he is leaving it up to me.

Kissing me softly, he starts to slide gently inside me, and I wince at the slight pain, writhing to adjust myself. “*Vous vous sentez comme le paradis,*” he whispers as he takes my bottom lip between his teeth. “Such a good girl, darling. That’s it, take my cock.” He grunts as he moves deeper inside me, and a rush of wetness hits, making it less painful and more pleasurable.

Without warning, Sebastian thrusts inside and whispers sweet nothings in my ear. Like how I’m such a good girl for taking his cock just right and how

tight I feel around him. I look down at where our bodies are joined and watch how his huge dick slides in and out of me in small inches. Then, I look up and meet Sebastian's eyes. He looks into my eyes, holding me captive right where he wants me. Then he hits a spot in my pussy that has my moans growing louder and wilder as I throw my head back, digging it into the satin pillows.

He grunts as I push back, both of us establishing a rhythm. Once I feel myself going over the edge, my nails scratch his back, and my heels dig into his thighs.

"Fuck, yes, baby, take it." He fucks me harder as I lift my pelvis to take him deeper.

I do. I take all of him like his good girl.

The sensation that burns through my body takes over me. I've had orgasms with my hand before, but nothing has ever felt like this. So intense and so... right. Holding Sebastian tighter to my body, I wrap my arms around his neck and bury my face in his chest, loving how his sweaty skin feels against mine. Then I feel it, the tightening and clenching around his length as I come and drench him in my juices.

I see stars, and I am not talking about the ones on the ceiling and all around us. "Oh, yes. Ahhhh!" I scream out my orgasm, but then he goes and pulls out of me, kneeling between my thighs. I see blood on his bronze skin.

The proof of my virginity.

No longer mine, but his.

He took it, and I let him.

Gladly.

Sebastian grips his length, and I watch as he jerks it in tight and fast movements, throwing his head back and groaning. He looks so beautiful standing there, strong and confident. I watch the way every single muscle on his body is standing up and taut as he pleasures himself. He is so sweaty, big and flushed. All horny and mine.

I moan, reaching down and touching myself as our eyes clash. When I spread myself open for him that's when he loses it.

With an animalistic groan he comes.

He comes first on my breasts and then on my stomach.

Feeling brave and hot after his show, I dip my fingers in it and rub his cum all over my breasts.

"You're filthy, darling." Sebastian sounds spent and satiated as he leans

down over me, his chest heaving and his groans of pleasure echoing around the room.

“That was...” I bring him down over me by reaching up and winding my arms around his neck. “Perfect.” I’ve never felt this comfortable and vulnerable at the same time, but here I am, feeling all these emotions at the same time for this man.

Sebastian kisses the tip of my nose, then stares into my eyes. “It was...It was everything, Arianna.” Then we are kissing and eating each other’s lips.

No thing has ever felt this right.

We stay there, wrapped in each other, looking up at the stars, trying to calm our racing hearts. “I wish we didn’t have to go back,” I tell him what’s been bothering me since he told me this morning this would be our last night in Paris. It all feels like a fairytale, and leaving this magical place feels like it all could end at any second.

Instead of reassuring me all will stay the same, Sebastian does something better. He hugs me tighter to his naked body and kisses me senseless, letting me feel him.

Because that's how it is with us.

Words mean something, yes, but actions speak louder.

And he tells me all I need to know in a thousand meaningful kisses.

BASTIAN

DETROIT FILTH



“And who says romance is dead?” – A

I used to believe that the most precious things in life have a number on them. How that changed in two years is beyond me, but it did.

It changed everything.

It changed me.

My goals.

My life.

All of it.

The loud giggle of a toddler makes me look up from my spot on the kitchen table, where I am drinking my coffee and reading the latest polls in the newspaper.

I thought my Paris appearances and the gossiping would have a bad impact on the voting, but it had the opposite effect.

It boosted my popularity.

Setting the newspaper down, I look out the window to see my daughter and Arianna walking hand in hand around the garden.

My mother’s garden.

The one she would sit for hours at night with her father, watching the stars.

I smile when Ellaiza puts her hands up for Arianna to lift her off the ground and when she does, my heart melts.

The sight of those two disarms me.

I wish I could freeze this moment in time, not wanting ever to let go of it.

I watch them from a distance as Arianna shows Ellaiza all the flowers in

the garden, laughing and handling my daughter just as you would a delicate flower, with love, tenderness, and care.

Fuck.

What has she turned me into?

I don't even recognize the man I am anymore.

She, like Ellaiza, has made me a better man.

A less miserable son of a bitch.

This feeling in my chest when I look at her has a name, even if I haven't admitted it to myself yet, because the moment I do, it all changes. More than it already has.

I no longer belong to just myself.

She will own me.

Fully and wholeheartedly.

Like she owned me the night I made her mine.

I can still taste her strawberry lips and feel her soft curves. When I close my eyes, I hear the little moans of pleasure and wonder that slipped from her mouth when I took her innocence for myself. The way she looked up at me with so much trust and emotion in her beautiful green eyes when I pushed all the way in and claimed not only her body but also her mind.

Her soul.

I want her.

All of her.

Happy and safe, and mine.

However, to keep it that way, there is something I must do first.

Pulling out my phone, I search the missed calls log until I find what I need.

The phone rings once before the person on the other end answers. "Kenton." The middle Parisi sister says in a low tone that reminds me a little of her older sister. The only difference is that where Arianna sounds sultry and, at times, uninterested, Kadra's tone is low and detached, with a slight pitch to it that reveals her true age. She is very young still, but you would not believe it with the shit she has done in the past two years. The girl is a beast with a thirst for blood. Blood from the ones that did her wrong. That is clear.

"Parisi."

"Is there something you need?"

"Ten minutes?"

"Ten minutes for what?"

“Ten minutes with your father.”

“No.” she clips.

I try again. “It will only be ten minutes.” I only need five, but she does not need to know that. “I just need to ask him one thing, and I promise I will not hurt him.” I lie.

“You lie.” The girl, like her sister, is wise beyond her years. I guess trauma and pain will do that to you. I sure as hell know. There is a long pause before she speaks again. “You can’t kill him.”

“I won’t.” I did not lie. I won’t kill the son of a bitch. I will hurt him, though.

She sighs before saying, “Ten minutes and my men will escort you.”

She agreed.

She didn’t do it for me.

She agreed because, deep down, she knew this was something I needed to do for her sister.

For Arianna.

My finger hovers over the end button, but she speaks. “Is she happy? She looks like she is...” There is no bitterness in her tone. Only sadness.

“She loves you. Both of you.” Then I end the call, not caring for her feelings or hang-ups, but knowing that Kadra Parisi is one of the ghosts haunting Arianna that I cannot erase.

The naked man in the corner of the room sits up slowly once one of the Parisi made men escorts me inside the room. “You have 10 minutes.” The guard dressed in all black with a slight Russian accent tells me. “Make good use of them.” With that odd comment, he leaves, closing the door gently behind him.

Fuck, it smells putrid in here.

And just as bad as it smells, the fallen consigliere looks.

I step closer to the bloodied man, his eyes scanning the hundreds of knife cuts that have been given to him. Every single mark he had given to Arianna’s heart meant a thousand for him.

“Oh, the Great Kenton heir?” Gabriele’s voice mocks, and his dark eyes narrow as I walk in farther inside the room. The ex-consigliere looks like

death itself. Covered in his filth and with new and dried blood staining not only his skin but his yellowish dress shirt, as well. The ex-Parisi boss raises his head to look behind me, waiting for something or someone. “Did my firstborn not come to say her goodbyes?” He chuckles, amused. “You know... you haven't thanked me for the gift I gave you. Arianna might be useless, but she is a real beauty. Just like her cunt of a mother.” Gabriele laughs so hard that blood starts to spurt out of his mouth, making him grimace.

Good.

Just him mentioning Arianna sets me on edge, but the more he talks, the more I am reminded that scums like this son of a bitch must be put down and do everyone that favor.

Taking my time, I undo my cufflinks. “You gave me nothing, Gabriele, because your daughter is not an object to give. To sell as if her choice did not matter. I took her, yes, but she saved herself.” She did. She never backed down. She didn't come to me crying and begging for her life. She changed her fate the second she opened her mouth and showed me what she was made of.

Not ice.

She is all fire.

Burning so fucking bright.

I don't tell him exactly how his daughter saved herself.

Gabriele's maniacal laugh has blood spitting out his mouth again before his crazed gaze returns to mine. “You didn't marry her. What? Did you find her lacking? Is that why you went back on your word?”

“I did not,” I admitted. “I don't need to force a woman into marriage, and your daughter has a choice with me. She has everything with me. You did not break her, motherfucker.”

“Oh, but I did.” Gabriele smiles evilly, clearly remembering a fond memory. It takes everything in me not to reach for the whip hanging on the black wall above his head and choke the cunt with it. “She left this city, broken, and alone, with nothing. Just a useless girl who could never be or do what was expected of her.” Gabriele smiles, wiping the blood from his mouth and causing it to smear across his lips. “All of them are useless. Useless and fucking defective.”

“You are one dumb motherfucker,” I say. Seeing this would take longer than expected, I pull out a cigar, light the end, and then reach for the knife

that's been burning a hole in my pants pocket since I stepped foot inside this basement.

"You want to know something, Bastian?" Gabriele asks while staring at the knife in my left hand.

Exhaling deeply, smoke fills the small room. "Not really, no."

"I wish she were born a son," the evil bastard reveals. "The three of them. Such disappointments. With sons, I could be running this city. Fuck, running the other two families, but I was robbed of it all the moment my heir died and Arianna was born."

Filth.

Fucking piece of shit.

He has no idea how lucky he is.

Arianna is not a curse.

She is a fucking blessing.

A dream come true.

Smiling as I sit down at eye level with crazy, dark orbs. "You didn't get a son, yes. But you do have an heir. One who rules your men and might be running three families soon enough. That is your heir and your eldest? The one you so cruelly think of as a mistake and disappointment. That one will rule mine."

"Ah, the great Kadra!" The devil smiles from ear to ear, but I see only resentment in his eyes. "I made her."

"Your daughters were not made by you, you delusional fuck. Your cruelty didn't make them strong. It was not your creation. They were born strong. Born to lead." I play with the knife in my hands.

"Ahhhh! But they are broken, Bastian. Broken to the point they no longer stand together, and that makes them weak." He laughs some more while I inhale my cigar harshly. "You can't save her, you know. Just like you, couldn't save your parents." He wheezes out a laugh.

There it is.

"You admit it." I stare at the demented man before me, knowing it could have very well been a mirror between them, showing him what he would have looked like many years down the road if he had not met his daughter. "You ordered the hit that took out my parents."

Gabriele's maniac face changes into one of anger. "Your father was as weak as you are."

"No, he was smart enough not to make deals with a low-life consigliere

who didn't call the shots. You were nothing but the capo's whore." Anger grew in his eyes.

"I was smart enough to orchestrate your bitch of a fat—" Leaning forward, I grab his bloody face and hold the asshole's mouth open and shove my cigar down his throat until he swallows it, then without warning, I take his left hand in mine and chop a finger off.

Gabriele Parisi owls in pain, "Will you do it? Will you end my life as I ended yours so long ago?" He says between wheezes.

I throw my head back in laughter as I stand up from the chair. "I won't end your suffering, fucker. Although I would love nothing more than to shove this knife in your back, bleed you dry and send you to hell but look around." I point the knife at him. "This is your hell. The one you created the moment you failed your daughters, and you'll burn and bleed down here until the little monster you gave life to decides what your end will be."

I take a great deal of satisfaction when I see Gabriele's dark and soulless eyes finally show an ounce of fear as he watches me retreat from the room. Opening the black door, I walk through it, putting myself on the other side. Before I leave, I speak, and what I say makes the sadistic cunt's face turn pale. "And something tells me she is just getting started."

Looking at the disgusting red substance dripping down the knife and then at his finger in my hand, I suppress the urge to find the nearest shower and scrub my skin until I am clean and have gotten rid of Gabriele Parisi's filth.

Detroit's filth.

Looking down at my bloody hand again, I sigh, "The shit I do for her."

Boarding the jet with the same clothes I had on when I visited the Parisi mansion, I lean back in the seat and finish what is left of my drink.

That cunt Parisi finally admitted he order my parent's murder. He also admitted to hurting his fucking kid. My Arianna. I should've chopped his cock off along with his finger.

My phone rings and I hit the green button and wait for the call to connect.

"I would think you went there to end the miserable fuck who murdered your parents. Was that not the plan all along?"

"Plans change," I reply while looking down at Gabriele's finger that I am

holding in my hand.

“I can see that, Seba,” Sandoval says sarcastically, then a long pause follows as I look out the jet’s window.

I didn’t spend a second longer in that city, jumping in the waiting jet as soon as possible. I used to hate being away from home, but it displeases me even more now.

I no longer have just one person waiting for me at home.

But two.

“How did you do it?” The Chicago boss asks.

“Do what?”

“Let go of that anger you held towards every Parisi?” He asks as if I have lost my mind. I did, and now it is hers like everything else.

Placing the bloody finger inside a jewelry box, I snap the lid close. “Arianna has no fault. My issue is and will always be with her father.” I don’t tell him how, with every smile of hers, the anger dissipated and turned something ugly into something beautiful. No, I am keeping that to myself.

“I couldn’t do it. I want all their heads.”

I tense. “Old friend or not, if you—”

“Your little princess is safe.” Sandoval chuckles menacingly. “Only because I value your friendship. *Solo por eso.*”

I know Thiago Sandoval, and as much of a bastard he is, he does not hurt innocents, and Arianna was only a pawn caught in the middle of a selfish war.

“You will not touch her sisters either. They have nothing to do with it, and you know it.” I find myself advocating for the life of Arianna’s two sisters. How far I have fallen. “Besides them, you can burn those families down for all I care.”

“Oh, I will,” Sandoval mutters. “Unlike you, brother, love and mercy no longer rule me.” With that promise to reign hell, he hangs up.

Unlike you, brother, love and mercy no longer rule me.

His last words stay with me all the way back home.



When I get home, I find her waiting for me, sitting quietly on the couch in the dark. “You waited up for me, darling?” I smile when she narrows her eyes at

me. She always throws sass my way when she believes I am acting condescending.

“Don’t flatter yourself, Sebastian. I was in the mood to play a game of chess by myself. That is all.” she shrugs, and the movement causes the strap of her black shirt to fall down her shoulders, making me look at her creamy skin.

Fuck, she is beautiful.

I step inside the living room area, shrugging off my suit jacket and walking towards her. Pushing the chess table aside, I drop to my knees between the table and the sofa, right between her legs.

“Will you tell me now where you went?” she whispers, looking me straight in the eyes. That is one of the many things I admire about this girl. Her unwavering strength and the fact that she, unlike most men, does not cower under the heat of my gaze.

Once we landed in the States, she and my daughter, boarded a plane directly to Chicago, and I left for Detroit. She asked then why I was leaving so abruptly, and I told her that I had business to attend to, but I would be back before she knew it.

I kept that promise.

As I will keep every promise I make to her.

“I went to Detroit,” I tell her honestly because I will never lie to her unless it is crucially necessary. Only then. Arianna’s entire demeanor turns from warm and soft to rigid cold. Her natural state, her coping mechanism. Her green eyes narrow, this time, not playfully. No. I see suspicion staring back at me, and it pains me. Lifting my hand, I push a tendril of golden hair that fell free of the messy bun on top of her head behind her ear.

I will never stop being amazed by her beauty and grace.

Arianna is like every work of art created by mankind combined in one beautifully wrapped package.

No, fuck that.

Humankind only, no.

Every inexplicable phenomenon created by a higher being is exactly what she is.

She asks calmly and unaffected, but I see it in her eyes. A million questions and betrayal. “What for?”

“To see your father,” I tell her bluntly.

Confirming her suspicions, she tries to push me away to get up from the

sofa, but I don't allow it. Gently grabbing hold of her thigh, I keep her seated in place. "Don't run. Not from me. We don't do that. Get angry and fight me, but don't fucking leave." I tell her. At the same time as I lift my right hand and offer her the jewelry box.

Piercing, green eyes narrow on the item, offended by the idea that I brought her jewelry to placate her for going behind her back to the life she left behind.

"Keep it."

"Open the goddamn box, Arianna." I try to say it as calmly as possible but fail miserably. "Please." I say through gritted teeth.

That does it.

I never asked before, and I, sure as hell never said please, but I do for her. Her delicate fingers take the box from my palm and open it.

Instead of asking a million questions or losing her mind, as most people would in her position when being given a box with a chopped-off finger, she looks down at me, waiting for me to speak. My girl is smart. She knows what it is, but it is up to me to tell her what it means, so I do.

Taking her hand, the one that is not hiding the box, I tell her.

"If I could kill the fucker, I would. I promise I would have brought you his heart and given it to you on a silver platter, but it is not his time yet, and I am not the one who needs to do it. I know this now." Tapping the lid on the navy jewelry that holds her abusive piece of shit of a father's finger in it, I say. "This will have to do for now." I wanted to rip her father's heart out of his chest and drop it at her feet. A gesture that lets her know there's nothing I wouldn't do for her. But I opted for a finger instead, leaving the heart of that bastard to his heartless middle child.

I wait for her response, but she gives me nothing. Instead, she does something better. Arianna looks down at the dry blood still visible on my shirt and then meets my gaze with a small smile that leaves me breathless.

She didn't run because of the clear sign of her father's blood on my shirt.

She doesn't squirm at the nasty-looking finger.

No.

She gave me a knowing smile, and I know at that moment that this girl. This perfect creature, was made for me.

A second later, she is grabbing my face with both hands and kisses me, igniting the fire that lives inside of me whenever she touches me. Rising from the floor, I lift her from the sofa and into my arms without breaking the kiss.

With that kiss, I tell her everything my mouth will not.

Then, I take her to my bed and fuck her throughout the late hours of the night, showing her how fucking obsessed I am. How badly I want and need her. Until there is no doubt in her mind that she is mine and there is nothing I wouldn't do for her.

Absolutely fucking anything.

ARIANNA

MEAN GIRL



“Oh, I am still a bitch.
I’m just a happy bitch now.” - A

It is an odd feeling waking up in the arms of a man you once swore to hate and know you’d never felt more at home.

In his arms and his world.

It is both surreal and terrifying.

Sebastian terrifies me, not in the way most would think, but in a way that has me coming for more of him.

The big bastard is now a part of me.

That is the scariest part.

Now lying here in this bed, skin to skin, I have never felt safer while I listen to the steady thrum of his heart beating against my ear.

Strong and lethal.

Just like the man.

The early morning light blooms at the base of the window in brilliant gold, making him look ethereal. Godly and otherworldly. The black satin sheets are down to his waist, and every inch of him is bare except for his dark gray underwear.

I can see him better than I did last night and the first time we were together back in Paris. The night he showed me new things I have never experienced before. The night he made not only my body but my soul come apart for him.

Come alive.

Flashes of last night hit me as I feel the way his pulse speeds at my touch.

Sebastian, to me, has always been the perfect vision of poise and control, but last night he didn't seem human. He reminded me so much of a demon straight out of hell who came for me in the middle of the night, but not once did I feel unsafe.

On the contrary, I felt like he was made for me.

His perfect three-piece suit was disheveled and had blood stains on it. He looked angry, proud, and pleased.

His eyes were darker than usual.

Dark and angry.

Dangerous even but not to me.

He proved it when he knelt in front of me and offered my father's chopped and bloody finger. I should have run the hell out of there because a man capable of such an act is not a man you should give your heart to.

I did.

Or he stole it.

Who the hell knows how it happened, but it did, and there's no going back.

This feeling in my chest, joyful as if I am walking on clouds, is too addicting to give up. I feel it even now with him, sleeping next to me, shifting, and tucking me closer as if his body gravitates to each movement of mine.

As if even in his sleep, he is aware of me.

Yes, it is terrifying because I can't fathom ever losing this. Losing them. The family I never had. The little family that came to feel like coming home after years of walking this earth alone.

I never believed in naive things such as fate and love at first sight. I refused to fall under, but here I am, falling hard and going under, afraid I will never break the surface again.

Because it is not just my heart on the line.

It is Ella's as well, and he knows it too, yet here we are.

He trusts her with me, and that's all my heart needs to know.

Because whether Sebastian Kenton realizes it or not, he gave me the heart that runs and laughs and giggles out of his chest the day I stepped foot inside his home.

His daughter.

All that used to matter to him.

What he treasures most.

I peer up at Sebastian's face— so perfect and serene, a dream.

I had a lot of those once, but they always felt so out of reach from me, but here one is sleeping peacefully next to me.

Who would have thought?

Not me.

As if he felt my mind running with thoughts of him, those captivating blue eyes blink open in the rays of sunlight that streak into his room.

It is the happiness and serenity that shines in them that has me moving on top of him until my naked chest is pressed to his.

In this position I can feel the strong beating of his heart.

“*Bonjour, chéri.*” Sebastian grins, pressing his hard erection against my navel before grabbing the back of my neck and pulling my face closer to his. “Mmm.” He moans as he shamelessly lets his hand roam down my back onto my ass, then spreads me wide open, pushing me harder into his length. That is all it takes for my breaths to jolt, and my heart to hammer.

Just one touch from this man sets me aflame.

A sexy rasp floods from his mouth when I straddle him. The black satin sheets fall, revealing my naked body to his greedy eyes. “You are so beautiful,” Sebastian says at the same time as both his hands fall on my hips, gripping me possessively. I believe him when he calls me beautiful, and instead of making me feel like ants are crawling on my skin like most men do when they look at me, he makes me feel cherished.

Sebastian is a drop-dead gorgeous man, yes, and it is a great part of his charm and appeal, but to me, he is so much more than what I see on the outside.

It is his love for his daughter that makes my heart skip many beats.

How brilliant his mind is and how determined he is to always win.

His condescending mouth also does it for me. It should annoy the hell out of me, and most times it does, but other times it makes me want to kiss him senselessly to shut him up.

On instinct, I rub myself against him, loving the way his dick grows harder and huge pressed against the naked lips of my pussy.

That's all it takes.

My naked skin against his.

Just with that contact, my pussy becomes wet, dripping all over his dick. I whimper a needy sound when he slaps one ass cheek, biting his lip at the same time, urging me to use him for my pleasure. So I do. I rock over him

again, needing more because when it came to Sebastian Kenton, it would never be enough. He woke up something inside of me that was dead before I felt the burning sweetness of his touch that first time.

“Fuck me, baby. Take what you want.” He rasps before curling one hand in my hair as he meets me, his hips barely lifting from the mattress. I watch him closely as he spreads his other palm over my ass to guide me in a slow, seductive rhythm.

This moment feels more intimate.

It feels... meant to be.

As if this is where I was meant to be all along.

In his arms and in his life.

I ride him slow and sensual as he looks up at me just like he looked at the sky back at the Planetarium.

In awe.

My eyes remain glued to his, and the sounds that wheeze from our mouths are desperate.

Wanting more, as if we both needed the other to survive.

That is how this moment feels.

Earth-shattering.

My breath quickens, same as my heartbeat, as a sweet release is slowly nearing.

Sebastian holds me by the back of the neck, our noses close to touching. He rocks against me, again and again, while he watches me with this look that I knew would do both of us in.

A look that promises many things for me.

Good and bad.

I want it all.

“Sebastian,” I whimper, needing more of him.

His hot breath on my face. “What do you need, darling?”

“You. I need you.” And I did. Inside me. Everywhere.

He shifts us, so his cock is no longer against my center, but his thick fingers were there instead, slipping inside my pussy.

He doesn't give me a second to catch my breath, no.

My walls instantly clench around his fingers when he drives them deep, causing me to moan aloud, whimper with need, and ride his hand.

Harder.

Rising on my knees and grinding back down.

His hold tightens on the back of my neck. “Do you like it when I fuck you with my fingers, Arianna? Look how that little pussy stretches for me.” I look down at his fingers gently slipping in and out of me. My juices dripping from his thick fingers. “Good girl. Ride my hand, baby.”

This time the moan that rolls up my throat is one of desperation. One of need.

“Oh, fuck, yes. Please.” My nails scratch at his chest, clawing for a way inside. Mine. Mine. The jealous little monster that lives inside of me screams as I fuck Sebastian’s hand.

He laughs arrogantly, aware of how strung up I am at this moment. “Watch that mouth, or I’ll fuck it hard before I take that cunt again.”

Increasing my speed, I fuck his fingers with all the desire that is building inside me and say, “Do it. I want to taste you, too.” I grin wickedly down at him when his eyes become hard with desire and challenge. Then the bastard removes his fingers, causing a whiny moan to slip from my mouth.

In a second, he lifts me by the ass and forces my face between his legs. I did it now, I think to myself with a triumphant smile on my face.

I watch as Sebastian fists his shaft and runs hand up his long, thick length.

My mouth waters at the sight of it.

Long, hard, and all man.

Mine.

My entire body comes alive, and my pussy begins to ache. “I like it.”

“You like what, darling?” I blush at the same time Sebastian grins. “Say it. Use your big girl words.”

“Your cock, Sebastian.” I snap, no longer feeling shy but annoyed and... horny. “I like your cock.”

Chuckling softly, he drops down closer and rests on one forearm while simultaneously stroking himself with the other. His mouth is now in my ear. “My cock likes you, too.” I suck in a breath as he fucks his fist slowly. Tempting... so hot. “Want to know a secret, Arianna?”

Not looking away from that glorious cock, I ask. “I’ve wanted to fuck that bratty mouth for so long. Every time you sassed me all I thought about was making you gag on it until those pretty green eyes of yours had tears in them.”

Filthy.

Confident.

Egotistic.

Perfect to me.

“What are you waiting for?” I challenge unashamedly. Because he makes me feel like I can ask, say, and do anything without worrying about the repercussions. Sebastian makes me feel strong, brave, and weak all at the same time.

Because this was torture.

The tease likes to torture me.

“Open your mouth.” I do. “Wider and stick that pretty pink tongue out for me.” He gritted the words between clenched teeth.

Opening my mouth wider, sticking my tongue out, he slaps me with his cock, and I should feel wrong about this moment. How dirty it makes me feel, but I don't. It only makes me go wilder for him.

Wetter between my legs.

“Take me into your mouth, baby.” Sebastian grounds out as I suck the head of his dick first, then slowly lick the base and the veins at the side, enjoying the taste of him. I do that for a couple of seconds longer until he has had enough of my torture, wraps my head around his fist, and grunts out. “All the way back, Arianna. Suck it hard.”

I do, moaning when the head hits the back of my throat.

“Fuck,” Sebastian's body buckles. “Touch your pussy for me,” He demands.

A low whimper escapes me as I balance on one arm, letting the other press between my thighs, starting to work my clit as I continue to suck him.

A little harder.

His hand tightens in my hair as he starts to slam back into me, making me take him even deeper into my mouth.

Sebastian's breathing grew deeper, and his grunts louder. The sight of him looking so wild and hungry for me made me suck him faster, wanting to make him come undone for me.

When we both are close to the edge, Sebastian yanks my hair, snapping my head back and making me release his cock with a loud pop.

“I knew that mouth was dangerous, darling...” he says, then he is pushing me on to all fours. “As much as I was enjoying that sweet-as-fuck mouth, I need your tight little cunt strangling my cock.”

Filthy...

Then I feel his large hand pushing me down on the bed until my face is

pressed against his pillow, and then I hear the distinct sound of a wrap tearing.

A condom.

The first time was reckless, but we haven't done it without protection since. He says he hates the barrier between his skin and the silky walls of my pussy.

He seriously told me that the last time he was inside of me.

Both palms land hard on my ass cheeks when he says, "You are mine, Arianna." Sebastian presses himself against my pussy. The tip of his head is engorged, fat, and throbbing against my wet flesh, driving me mad every time he rubs it over my clit. Needing more of him, I meet him to get closer. "Your body is mine. Your mind is mine, and that beautiful heart of yours..." He drawls, and then in one swift move, he is inside of me. "All mine. Always." He moans.

"Sebastian." Pleasure races, and tingles swell and spread through my body.

Teasing me.

Ragged grunts tear out of his throat, and he drops his forehead against the back of my head as he pounds me savagely.

Losing control.

"What have you done to me? I can't get enough of you." His thrusts become rigid, faster, and harder.

Bliss builds inside of me until like him, I lose all control.

The orgasm hits me rocking my body, tearing me apart and putting me back together at the same time.

A shockwave that rushes like wildfire through me.

Oh, God.

The things this man does to my body...

I am still lost in post orgasms bliss when I feel him thrust twice more before every muscle in his body flexes in ecstasy.

Turning my head, tired and spent, I watch as he pulls out of me, rips the condom off, and jerks off.

Sweat drips from his body, his hair a disheveled mess, and his eyes flash with uncontrollable lust.

At this moment, he looks like a beast.

One that, even now, as he is shooting his cum on my ass, marking me with his seed, still looks hungry.

Christ, look at him... I did that.

“Arianna...” My name, a low moan as his body rocks with the intense wave of his release.

My body writhes, aftershocks rocking through me, my pussy still pleading for more of him. “Sebastian,” I whisper while my eyes grow big when he swirls his fingers through the cum he spilled on my skin and then rubs it all over my ass cheeks and lower back. Then he does something that has me freezing in place, shocked by the odd sensation. He spreads my ass cheeks wide and rubs his cum on my puckered hole, and then his mouth is in my ear, “I want this ass too. Soon.” My pussy clenches with the filthy promise of what’s to come.

I gasp when he withdraws, then pushes off the bed staring at me once before turning on his way. “What a beautiful mess, darling. Let’s clean you up.”

He strides for the bathroom, so confident and fully naked. His shoulders were wide, and his back rippling with taut, packed muscle. His ass looked round and perfect, and I was sure this man was sent to torture my sanity and me. He returns with a wet hand towel and cleans me up before taking my lips in his.

He pulls away with a cocky smile when I whimper at the loss of his lips. “Darling.”

Smiling, I say. “Yes?”

“I want you to go somewhere with me tonight.”

“Where?”

He replies. “That’s a surprise.”

“I don’t like your surprises.” I do, but I also like messing with him.

“Why are you lying?” The egomaniac smiles from ear to ear, and as much as his naked ass is one glorious sight, that smile. That smile on his face makes my stomach flip and my heart sing.

God, what has the man turned me into?

“Fine. Whatever the tyrant wants.” I roll my eyes playfully.

“Now look how pretty you look when you behave.” He is messing with me, or we need to work on his comprehension skills when it comes to my favorite language.

Sarcasm.

I think both.

Pointing a finger at him. “Don’t push it, Sebastian.”

Pure devotion is embedded in his smirk. “Be ready by eight o’clock.”

Smack.

Smack.

“Ouch.” I reach down and grab Ella’s tiny hand in mine. “Don’t be rude, baby. We only hit people we dislike.” I tell her playfully. Christ, what a role model I am.

Ella tilts her head and grins wickedly at me. The little brat knows more than most would presume. Laughing softly, I rearrange her on my lap, and hand her my phone to keep her entertained.

For the two hours I have been sitting on this chair, she’s been quiet, but now she’s acting up, tired. “Pweety, mommy.” My girl mumbles tiredly, looking down at the cartoons playing on my phone.

Mommy.

My heart hurts and beats faster when she calls me mommy. She doesn’t do it often, but on the odd times she does, it softens my hard edges a little bit more. I should have tried harder to stop it, knowing I am not her mother, but how could I do that when she looked at me with so much tenderness and sweetness in her eyes?

Kissing her head, I whisper. “You’re the prettiest, Ellaiza.”

“I no.” This one is all her father. Beauty and gigantic ego.

“Is this okay?” The kind woman who’s been styling my hair for the past thirty minutes turns the seat around until I can see myself in the vanity mirror of my room. After I showered, I was met with more than twelve people invading my room with dresses, shoes, and everything they needed to prepare me for tonight.

Sebastian didn’t tell me exactly where he was taking me, but the gown he chose tells me it is somewhere fancy.

A high society event, perhaps.

I am wearing a custom silver-colored Versace gown with a turquoise underside and a long train with subtle snowflakes close together, intended to look like the constellations he showed me back at the Planetarium.

The gown’s details are stunning, as if someone took their time to perfect his vision.

There's no doubt in my mind that he helped design it.

For me...

Rising from the seat with Ella in my arms, I look at my reflection.

I look different.

Not because of the dress or the professional hair and makeup.

No.

The smile.

Genuine and doesn't hurt.

"Thank you," I tell the team Sebastian sent to help me prepare for tonight. All of them were kind and professional.

"You look stunning." The makeup artist, Decy, tells me as she adds the finishing touches. "This color brings out your green eyes. I am jealous." She says with a smile on her face. Not catty or hateful, but sincere.

"You did a wonderful job." And she did. She kept the makeup at a minimum but outdid the eyes with silver and touches of blue to match the dress, finishing up the look with wing eyeliner and nude glossy lips.

Decy nods and steps back to gather all the materials. They all do.

My hair falls down my naked back in soft waves, and my bangs are brushed to the side.

"Pwincess." Ella giggles, shoving my phone in my face. "Click!" Click to this toddler means to take a picture, so I do. I open the camera app and take a mirror selfie with my girl hanging from my hip.

"How sweet..." An annoying voice says from behind us, dripping with venom. Instinctively, I drop my phone down on the vanity and hold Ella closer to me. "You may leave." She dismisses the team as if they work for her. The bitch.

Holding my head high, I turn around to face her.

Celene.

Looking as hateful as ever with her ugly ass choices of clothing and an ugly smirk on her face. She might be a pretty woman, no doubt, but she reeks of envy and desperation.

The recipe for ugly.

"Look, Ella." I bounce her on my lap while pointing at Celene. "The evil witch is here."

My girl looks at Celene, raises her fist, and frowns.

"That's right. We don't like the witch. No, we don't." I whisper in her ear loud enough for Celene to hear.

The annoying woman rolls her eyes and moves closer to where I stand. “You think you have him. You think you won...”

Looking her straight in the eyes, “I don't think so, no. I know it.” I grin. “You know it, too.”

“Oh, silly naive girl...” She tries hard and fails to belittle me. I know who I am, and from this view, it is obvious the case is not the same for her. Insecure and hateful shrew. “You are just a child. A child aiming for the soon-to-be commander in chief and all the glory of owning a man like Sebastian.”

The vindictive idiot calls him by his full name here because he is not present to put her in her place. She is not only an insecure imbecile but a coward as well.

“That’s where you're wrong, Serena.” I purposely call her the wrong name.

“Celene.” She snaps at me, already losing her cool. Tsk, tsk. How easy it is to ruffle her ugly feathers.

“Whoever.” I hug Ella closer, rubbing all this pure love in her face. “A man like Sebastian can't be owned. His heart, on the other hand...” I let her come to her conclusion. The woman is already delusional.

A cruel smile takes over her face in a weak attempt to intimidate me. Again, she fails as she will always fail to face off with me. “You’re ruining his chances to become president. His head is not in it, and it's all because of you.”

For a second, I let her words make me wonder if it was true. If the shit I pull with the media hurts his campaigns, but only for a second. This is what she wants. To get in my head. Turning my back to her, dismissing her, I look at myself in the mirror, not missing the way her face contorts in anger.

“You may go now, Serena.” I am being petty, I know, but oh well. Fucking with hateful idiots is so much fun. “Say bye-bye to the witch, baby” Ella does not even look up. The witch has already been forgotten.

“Good girl.” I kiss her cheek, happy as can be.

Sebastian’s secretary mumbles under her breath, insults, I am sure, and shuts the door loudly behind her.

Celene is a mean girl.

All bark and no bite.

I, on the other hand, I bite hard until the flesh is all but marred skin and blood.

BASTIAN

BEFORE HIM



“There will never be another for me.” — A

“Do you have any idea what you standing there looking like that does to me?” I hover at the doorway of her walk-in closet and watch Arianna spray perfume in front of the mirror. She is wearing the Versace floor-length silver gown that I had custom-made for her for this occasion.

The gown shimmers in the light, making it look more turquoise than silver, a slit riding up to her right thigh, the material slinky and sliding down her silky, smooth golden skin.

She is glowing tonight.

My moon that burns so bright it is blinding.

Sparkling emerald eyes meet my gaze in the reflection. She has her back to me, exposed, tempting me to bend her over the vanity and fuck her while she stares at both our reflections in the mirror.

I would, too, if only I hadn't accepted the governor's invitation to the event months ago.

The only positive aspect to this night is that she will be on my arm, not a trophy, but a damn blessing.

Never believed in those until both of my girls.

She smirks, happy and carefree. I feel that expression all the way to my soul, and my fingers itch with the need to trace the lines of her gorgeous face. She has her hair down, beautifully falling down her back.

Silky blonde strands.

Fuck, do I love that hair.

I especially love it wrapped around my hand as I take her from behind.

She is wearing the diamond necklace, the snowflake I gifted her, and the matching ring on her finger.

My heart squeezes at the same time my cock tightens in my pants. That is what she does to me just by being her. She is a vision.

Her gaze slips over me as I slowly edge forward, feeling myself being pulled by an invisible thread.

Attraction quivers in the space as we both take the other in.

She turns, facing me now. “You don’t look too terrible yourself.” Her sultry voice has this hold on me. Fuck, I have never felt this way before.

It’s her.

A rough chuckle fumbles out as I wrap my hands around her waist and press my nose to her neck.

I inhale.

A blend of rose, jasmine, and synthetic aldehydes.

“Did you just sniff me?” She laughs softly while I move back and stare into her eyes.

“I did.”

She rolls her eyes at me in that way that makes me want to kiss her senselessly or fuck her nine ways to Sunday. “I love it when you look at me like that,” she murmurs. A slip of playfulness pulling at the edge of her pretty mouth.

“Like what?” I ask, dropping my head back down to her neck, loving the way her soft skin feels against my rough, bearded chin.

“Like you want to tear this gown apart and fuck me until all I see is you.” Her voice was breathy, needy with a shot of tease.

Fuck yes, I do.

That is all I think about lately.

Every second of the day, I fantasize about being inside of her pretty-pink cunt.

“All in due time, darling.” I rumble as I kiss a path down the column of her neck.

“You’re so cocky...”

“You would know, darling.”

“Ugh, you are an ass, Sebastian.”

“Watch your mouth.”

“You have no problem with my dirty mouth when you're fucking me.”

This girl...

This odd creature undoes me when she fights back.

When she sasses me.

She is right. I can't get enough of her mouth, and I did enjoy fucking that mouth this morning.

I am counting down the hours until I can fuck it again.

My chuckle grows deep as the need burns hot in my stomach. My right hand slips up the front of her dress, over her stomach and breasts, until I am holding her by the front of the neck where the diamond necklace rests.

I become transfixed with the way her breath hitches at my touch. I feel the whimper curl up her delicate throat, and I put my mouth back to her ear. "I don't." I nip at her neck, and she shudders. "Tonight, when I ruin that tight little pussy with both my mouth and cock, I want you to scream obscenities for me at the top of your lungs, darling."

Desire races across her flesh.

Her breathing quickens, and her body trembles in my hands.

So beautiful and so filthy.

Perfect for me.

Silence falls as I hold her close. Pulling back, I look into her eyes as I place my right hand on her chest, where her heart is beating faster now. "Who do you belong to, Arianna?" I hold her closer, possession filling my blood when I ask her.

She meets my stare through the mirror. "I belong to myself, Sebastian," she smirks.

Little liar...

She damn well knows the truth.

A hungry groan rolls in my chest. "You have ruined me." She has. I no longer recognize the man that I am with her in my life, and strangely, I don't mind.

Not one single bit.

"And you ruined me, tyrant." She smiles softly up at me.

Fuck, she looks so stunning.

Like a princess.

I hold her close before I force myself to step back. "We should go, or we're going to be late."

As much as I am dreading spending my evening with the blood-sucking leeches of the high society of Chicago, the other part can't wait to walk in

there with the most beautiful woman in this city, fuck, the planet, on my arm, and make every single motherfucker there wish they were in my shoes.

Another part of me cannot wait for the night to be over to get her out of that dress and into my bed.

ARIANNA

“Oh, great.” I don’t hide my displeasure once the double doors of the building are opened, revealing the gathering inside.

A high society gala.

Men dressed in tuxedos and women in gowns.

Dancing.

Eating and drinking.

Kissing ass.

Awesome.

“It will be fun.” Sebastian kisses the back of my hand at the doors to the Museum of Arts of Chicago. “Besides, it is for a great cause. Let’s keep that in mind.”

I take in the place and notice it is beautifully decorated with Christmas trees in every corner and fairy lights lighting up the place, giving Winter Wonderland vibes.

“Yes, and the perfect opportunity for self-absorbed pricks to kiss ass and push their agendas,” I mumbled. Quite judgmental, I know.

My very own self-absorbed prick laughs while leading me further inside the gathering. It doesn't escape me how many of the guests have their eyes and cameras trained on us. I swear Sebastian Kenton is an enigma. He has the ability to suck the air out of a crowded room without trying. Just by being there. “You wound me, darling.” Sebastian grins wickedly, looking so dazzlingly handsome in his tuxedo tonight. I could forgive him for making me spend the night with these people instead of a perfect night with my girl watching her favorite pig. “I will be discussing business tonight. I guess that makes me a self-absorbed prick, as well.”

“It does.”

Laughing and looking down at me, he says. “And yet, you let this self-

absorbed prick fuck and kiss you senseless.”

He cares little that we're surrounded, and someone might hear his crude comments.

Shrugging, I look up at him, ignoring the people around us. “Well, what can I say?” Clicking my tongue, I watch as his blue eyes fall to my mouth. “You're the only self-absorbed prick I can tolerate.”

“Brat.” He mumbles as we walk through the sea of people gathered, already enjoying their night. From the corner of my eye, I spot Benjamin standing strong and vigilant in the corner with a shrimp cocktail in his hand and the other hidden behind his back, most likely gripping his gun just in case something were to happen.

He gives me a small smile, and then his eyes move to the crowd.

Turning to Sebastian, I say, “I love it when you compliment me, Sebastian. However, save something for later.” I wink at him, and it only makes him laugh. God, that laugh. An irrational part of me wants him to keep it to himself here. Not wanting anyone to witness how handsome he looks when he smiles. Truly smiles. Not the act he puts on in front of others.

The laughs and smiles he reserved only for me.

“Come, let's enjoy the night, shall we?” He leads us towards our table, where some of the occupants I have seen on TV.

Old money heirs and corrupt politicians gather to raise money for the less fortunate.

My Sebastian fits in perfectly.

I might know the best sides of him, but there are still ugly parts there, and I am not blind to them.

He comes from old money, yes, and he does play a dirty politics game.

I don't mind it at all, though.

You can't survive the crime world by being an honest and goodhearted man.

And the political world is just the same as the world I was born into.

Selfish, corrupted, and sometimes heartless.

We take our places at the table, where his peers greet Sebastian quite hypocritical while some of the women look at him as if they are witnessing God himself. Ugh, it annoys the hell out of me, but not once do I show it. Besides, it helps that Sebastian hasn't let go of my hand once, and the rude women have taken notice.

Sebastian threads his fingers through mine.

At his touch, warmth spreads over my flesh and sinks to my tethered soul. Slowly but surely, everything that came before him is fading away.

The cold.

The hurt.

The dark.

Smiling, I take a sip of my water, then pick up my phone and scroll to my news app and notice photos of us arriving at the gala have already been posted.

I entertain myself for twenty minutes while Sebastian talks politics and business with the men at the table. I don't miss the fact that the women do their best to ignore me as if I am not there. As if I am just a child and they're too good for me.

I pity them. They sit there clutching their pearls, judging everyone while their husbands ignore them, too busy talking business or stealing glances at other women.

That is the case with one of the older men sitting right to Sebastian. The pretentious man with a beer belly keeps staring my way with gross lustful eyes, which Sebastian notices and has him rising mid-conversation as if no one else matters but me.

Somewhat rude but oh so hot.

Ignoring the greedy, envious, and intruding eyes of the people around us, I take his hand and let him lead me to the dance floor. Just in time for the band to start playing their version of Frank Sinatra's *The Way You Look Tonight*.

There is something about the way Sebastian looks at me that makes me feel both safe and in danger. If I'm honest, I'd like a man to be a little obsessed with me—I mean, not stalkerish—but that he can't go an hour, okay, not a day, without seeking me out.

And what is worse is that I am a little bit obsessed with him, too.

Everything and everyone fade into the background, and all that exists is us at this moment.

"Uh," laughing awkwardly, I look up at Sebastian's curious eyes. "I can't dance." Suddenly feeling vulnerable, I look down, not wanting to make a fool out of myself and embarrass the men in front of everyone here.

He places a finger under my chin, lifting my face to stare into his eyes, then thinks about it for a second with a small smile on his face. "Stand on my feet."

No way.

Nope.

“Absolutely not.” I scoff. “I am not a child.”

Grinning, he lifts me off my feet with little to no effort and places me on top of his very expensive shoes. “There. That wasn’t so hard, was it, darling.”

He seems amused and not embarrassed at all.

Shaking my head, I wrap both arms around his broad shoulders as he brings me closer to his body. “Tyrant.”

He chuckles while I stare into his eyes. “You love it.”

I do love it more than I should.

“Everyone is looking our way.” I change the subject when Sebastian’s hand comes up to the back of my neck and brings my face closer to his. I feel eyes on us, and witness camera flashes go off.

There is no doubt that Sebastian will be one of the main topics on social media tomorrow.

Out of nowhere, Celene’s words hit me.

Is my presence in his life making a mockery out of his career? His reputation? I don’t have time to dwell on it because Sebastian brings me back from the torturous thoughts.

Only Sebastian and his little girl can bring me out of the dark.

He holds me closer while he moves to the best of Sinatra, then his soft, warm lips cover mine, and he kisses me. I feel a zap of electricity snap to life between us. The same intense feeling courses through my body every time he is near me. Whenever he puts his lips on mine. The muscles in my lower belly twitch in response, then my core clenches when I feel his tongue drag across my bottom lip. “They want something to write about. Let’s give them tomorrow’s front page news, darling,” he whispers against my lips, and my body shivers because of his possessive tone.

I hold him closer, needing more of him.

“Good girl.” He mumbles, lifting his head and tucking my face against his chest under his chin while wrapping his free hand around my back.

Then we dance.

Just the two of us in a crowded room.

The band plays two more songs, then a man in a suit that I’ve seen with Benjamin approaches us, tapping Sebastian on the shoulder and whispering in his ear. Sebastian nods, dismissing the man.

Once the current song ends, I step down, my heels touching the floor, no

longer on Sebastian's shoes.

“What?” I ask him as he leads me back to our table. “The greedy have summoned you, Sebastian?” I grin.

“Be good, yes?”

“I've told you before, Sebastian. Being good is no fun.”

“You won't ever make anything easy, will you, brat?”

“Nope.”

Once I am in the seat, he cups my cheek, and his eyes scan over my face. “You're going to be okay while I go talk to some associates?”

“I'll be fine, Sebastian.” I squeeze his hand in a reassuring gesture and melt when his eyes soften when he looks at me.

That never occurs.

His tender side is one he only shows me and Ella.

“My men are right there if you need anything. I won't be long.” He touches his lips to my forehead with a kiss that is so soft it feels like a whisper, and then he lets me go, steps back and gets lost in the sea of people.

I watch him go, counting the seconds until he comes back.

“Wow, that was...oddly sweet.” A dry laugh follows the unnecessary comment. The girl, about my age, with golden skin, dark hair, and a great sense of style, takes the empty seat opposite of me. “And here I thought that man was made of stone. He might be a soft teddy bear, after all.” She laughs dryly and takes a sip of the glass of wine in front of her.

Something about her comment irks me. Maybe it is that she is talking about something that does not concern her, or maybe it is the way she speaks about him with familiarity.

Narrowing my eyes, I lean forward on the table. “Who are you?”

“Quinne Jones,” she smiles arrogantly over the rim of her glass. She takes a sip, and places it back down on the table. “And you are the infamous Nanny.”

I open my mouth to clap back when she puts her left hand out, cutting me off. “No need to get offended. I know who you are to him.”

“And yet, I don't have a single clue of who you are and why you feel the need to speak on things that don't concern you.”

“Oh, she bites. I like you already.” The girl, Quinne, grins, although her eyes have zero light in them. They look exactly like mine did before when I looked at myself in the mirror.

Cold.

Angry.

Sarcastic.

I don't have to be a genius to see the signs.

"I wish I could say the same, Quinne Jones." When the waiter reaches our table, I lift my glass, and wait for him to refill it. Thanking him, I take a sip, and look back at her. "I need to know a person to like them."

"That's not quite true. There are a lot of mouth breathers that I can't stand, and I don't know them. I don't need to know them." She's insane. It doesn't make sense, yet I agree.

I guess I'm insane as well because sometimes I come across people, and without really knowing them, I know I don't ever want to be associated with them.

Either their vibes are just off, or there's something in their eyes that lets me know they're no good.

Nonna did say once that the eyes were the windows to our souls.

Pulling my phone out of the small clutch, I open the nanny camera app Benjamin installed so I can watch Ellaiza in real time. She stayed behind with the house staff and half of Sebastian's bodyguard's keeping her safe. The footage shows Ella on her playpen watching cartoons.

It's almost her bedtime.

God, how I wish I was with her right now. I don't like being away from her for too long. Putting the phone back in my clutch, I lift my head and notice the girl, Quinne, is looking at me strangely. "What?"

"Trashy news sure travels fast..." she says while scrolling through her phone. "At least they caught your best angle," she smirks.

"Please, I don't have a bad angle." I snap, thankful we're the only ones on the table.

Quinne's face darkens. "Whatever you say, Arianna."

Frowning, I ask. "What did you see?"

She offers me her phone, but then Sebastian is there, lifting me off the seat with a murderous look on his face. "We're leaving."

"What is going on?" I ask suddenly, annoyed and confused.

"Kenton." The sleazy-looking man stands behind Sebastian while more people gather around us. "Things are that bad you had to resort to purchasing young pussy?" I cringe when the disgusting pig laughs.

The laugh doesn't last long because, in a second, Sebastian's murderous stare turns lethal before he punches the asshole hard enough that the man hits

the ground while everyone else gasps and gawks at the scene.

Oh, fuck.

Then it all happens in a blur. One second, we're witnessing the asshole moaning down on the floor, and the next, Sebastian and his security are escorting me out of the building while paparazzi shout questions and claim that I am some sort of paid whore.

My heart is racing fast, but not once do I break.

No.

I steel my spine and hold my head high, not letting the filthy speculations get the best of me, just like I did with Celene.

"Senator!" A paparazzi calls Sebastian's name while shoving a camera in his face. "Are the allegations true?"

More shouts, and more accusations.

Through all of it, I focus on Sebastian and how fearless he looks getting me out of there, ready to tear anyone apart who comes close enough, but then I feel someone step on the train of my gown, and I am falling forward, but before I hit the ground, Sebastian's arms are pulling me upwards, then I am flying, being thrown over his shoulder while his other hand is pushing the crowd away.

"Senator. Is it true that you have business with the Italian American mafia?" A woman shouts behind us, making Sebastian stop. I feel his entire body become rigid while my freezes.

How do they know?

I witness Sebastian's security team form a wall with their bodies between the paparazzi and us. Then our Van pulls up. Sebastian gently puts me down, taking my face in his hands. He frowns when he looks at me.

His gentle fingers pull my bangs to one side, then pain explodes on the spot he touched. "Ouch." I lift my fingers to the right side of my forehead, and there's blood on it.

Shit.

I must've hit something when I stumbled with the paparazzi, but with the adrenaline, I didn't feel anything until now. "I am okay. It's nothing." I tell him when I notice Sebastian's eyes flash with a rage I have never seen before until tonight. I always knew he was dangerous underneath his fancy words and suits, but this man in front of me? This is something else entirely.

It is a man no one should ever cross.

A man that promises pain.

Reaching behind me, he opens the van's door and helps me inside before turning back to the media. Cameras and microphones are being shoved in his face, angering me, but I stay back and let him do his thing.

Completely enamored with all that he is.

I knew that what I felt for him couldn't be just simple gratitude or a crush.

No.

This feeling in my chest grounds me, and at the same time, lifts me to the clouds.

This feeling couldn't be anything but the scariest feeling of them all.

Love.

The kind of love that comes once in a lifetime.

Heart racing like crazy, I take in the scene before me.

Sebastian against the world.

Sebastian standing proud, angry, and scary as hell, dead set on tearing his whole world apart for me.

"Listen closely because I will not be making another statement." He raises his head at the same time he adjusts his cufflinks. I can't see his face because he has his back to me, but I can see the faces of the men and women around him. Some were annoyed, some eager, and others completely in awe of his commanding presence. "I don't know who leaked the vile lies and accusations, but rest assured, I will be taking matters into my hands in finding who did it. I will also come after every single one of the news outlets and magazines who are taking part in slandering my name and hers without proof." Sebastian says darkly, emotionless, then turns his back on them, dismissing them as if they mean nothing, as if they don't exist.

"Seba—" His name gets caught in my throat when he hardens his stare and says one final thing to the paparazzi. "And I will personally come after the one who tripped her, causing her to hit her head. I recommend you quit your job and leave this city before I get my hands on you. It won't be pretty."

I suck in a breath when he threatens them publicly for the entire country to witness. With that, he climbs inside, next to me, and shuts the van's door, keeping us safe from the frenzy outside. Sebastian looks upset and fucking pissed still.

Taking his hand, I tell him. "I am okay."

He doesn't look at me, just keeps staring absently out of the car's window.

"You were hurt. On my watch." His chest rises and falls rapidly.

Bringing our entangled hands to my lap, I whisper. "It is not your fault."

These things will happen.”

“Not to you. Not ever again.” He vows fiercely with so much emotion it steals my breath. “I promise you that.”

I believe him, too. I believe he is capable of doing whatever needs to be done to keep me from harm, but life happens, and as much power as one man holds, it will never be enough to stop life from happening. “I will have the head of whoever had the balls to cross me, Arianna. I promise you that, as well. They will regret it.”

I almost feel sorry for the dumbass who thought he or she could get away with crossing a man like him.

I offer him a half smile, then he tucks me closer to his side and I rest my head on his hard chest.

I listen to the beat of his heart all the way back to his home.

Before him, all I had was the cold and my rage.

And pain, so much pain.

Now I have so much, and it scares me, but it won't stop me from holding on to this feeling that warms me to my bones.

Because I know in my heart that this is it.

This is all I ever wanted and all I ever want to know.

This love.

His love.

ARIANNA

FIRST LOVE



“What is this strange feeling in my chest robbing me of breath?” – A

“Turn around, darling.” Sebastian orders from behind me, and I do. I watch as he gently helps me get out of the gown, leaving me naked except for a tiny nude tong. Then, I stand there, leaning against the bathroom sink, and watch him undress. He starts by discarding the black ribbon to the floor, then he peels off his white shirt, and finally, he kicks off his black dress pants, leaving him in a pair of black boxers that mold to his thick erection and sit just below the defined V of his hips. There are shadows in his eyes. Ones that were put there by the assholes back at the gala and the person who leaked those vile accusations to the media.

Yes, Sebastian made a deal with my father. No, he didn't make me a child bride.

It's complicated, yet it doesn't concern them.

They don't bother to get to the bottom of things before publishing shit to cause a buzz and make money.

Not wanting to think about it and just enjoy the moment, I fix my eyes on him. My eyes move down his abs and over his hard chest. God, he is perfect. My breath catches when our gazes lock. From one look, I can see that he's on edge, and although that should scare me, it doesn't. If anything, it turns me on even more than I already am.

I stand in front of him naked, completely exposed to his eyes, and he stands there, setting my entire body on fire with just one look.

He doesn't move or even seems to take a breath, stone-like, as he devours

every inch of me that is now bare to him. His hard chest moves in sync with his breath.

He then reaches for the waistband of his boxers and begins to take them off. My insides clench at the sight of him. Once upon a time, I would've told you that no man is perfect. They're all flawed but leave it to Sebastian to prove me wrong with his perfect body and equally perfect cock.

"You keep looking at my dick like that, darling. I am going to forget that you're hurt, bend you over that sink, and fuck you till all there is for you... is me," he groans before he steps inside the shower where the water is already running and wrap his fist around himself urging me forward.

I join him as he closes the mirror door, trapping us inside. I hold my breath, the anticipation of him touching me again almost too much to even think about. When he pins me to the wall, perfectly placing us under the spray of water, a gasp and then a mewl slide up my throat as he captures my breast in his mouth and cups the other one.

Crazy with lust, I move my hands up his sides, which are wet and hard yet smooth under my palms. When his mouth travels to my other breast, my hips buckle. "Sebastian."

"I am right here, Arianna." He lets my breast go with a pop, then his tongue trails up over my collarbone and along my neck. Then, his mouth is on mine. I open for him, his tongue sliding between my lips as his hips press forward, pushing me back to the wall. I feel the tip of his cock against my clit before he pulls back, then, in one brutally beautiful thrust, he fills me.

When he stills deep inside me and pulls his mouth from mine, my lashes flutter open. Staring into his gorgeous eyes, I know that I would do absolutely anything to keep the demons away from this man. Wanting him to feel all I am feeling at this moment, I kiss him and move my hands from his sides to his shoulders, then I brush his wet black hair back from his face, needing to see his eyes.

"Fuck me." I breathe against his mouth as warm water falls between us.

"No." He captures my wrists in his hands and pulls them up over my head. Then in one swift movement, he is lifting my legs, wrapping them both around his waist, leaving no space between us.

"Sebastian," I cry as he slowly thrusts inside me, keeping his blue eyes locked on mine. My nails dig into his hands which are holding me hostage, and my heels move to the back of his thighs. I close my eyes, knowing it's all too much. This feeling is too intense, but his teeth nip my bottom lip, causing

my eyes to fly open.

“Keep your eyes on me, Arianna. Always on me when I’m inside of you.”

“Oh, shit,” I whimper, feeling too much at once.

“Who do you belong to, Arianna?” He pulls back and thrusts forward harder than before.

I gasp but remain quiet.

“Who do you belong to, Arianna?” Sebastian grunts as he pulls back. “Say it.”

“You say it,” I bite back.

He grins at me before pulling out so slowly that I feel every single inch of him drag along my inner walls. “Feels like your pussy knows it’s mine already, darling.” His lips brush across mine, then they move to my ear. “You belong to me.”

“For how long?” I ask without thinking. I ask the question that I’ve been asking myself since the moment we met.

“Until you realize that you’re too good for this world. For me,” he says quietly, then drops a quick kiss on my temple. Right where the band-aid he placed there after he tended to the cut is.

My throat instantly gets tight. “That will never happen,” I whisper. He then lets my hands go, freeing me, and I curl them around the back of his neck and pull his mouth down to mine. I kiss him, hoping he can feel what it’s in my heart.

All he ignited inside of me.

With this kiss, I hope he understands there’s no place I would rather be than right here with him. Because I love him. God, I love him so much. I never knew something so beautiful could bloom inside my cold heart, but it did. For him. For his daughter.

As we kiss, he slides in and out of me, his pace never faltering. Hard and fast. Each thrust of his hips is sending me closer to the edge. Closer to a sweet release. As my body starts to hum with electricity and my core pulses around his length, I listen to the sound of his harsh breathing pick up as his heart beats just as hard as mine against my chest. I cling to him, not wanting to let go, then I fall over the edge while the walls of my sex pulse around his cock.

“This... this is too much.” What I feel for him. What he makes me feel. All of it.

“Fuck, baby.” I hear him groan as he drops his forehead to mine, then he

thrusts deep one last time, and then he, too, falls over the edge.

We stay like that for a long moment before he pulls back and places me down on the shower floor. “Are you going to pass out on me, darling?”

“Yes.” I don’t even attempt to disguise how truly spent I am. The man is a beast. An insatiable one at that.

He laughs. The sound makes my heart beat faster, and I smile.

He places his fingers under my chin and tilts my head back until we are eye-to-eye, then his gaze searches mine for a long moment. He doesn’t say anything, but that doesn’t mean I don’t feel the look he gives me down to my toes before his mouth touches mine. “I meant it.”

“What?” I whisper back.

Grabbing the soap from behind me, he lathers his hand, and begins to scrub my body sensually, igniting the fire again. “You are mine.”

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

As if my heart understands this pivotal moment, it starts to race.

“Are you mine?” I ask, vulnerably, with my heart on my sleeve.

“There could never be anyone else...”

After dropping that bomb, he smiles knowingly and continues to wash me, and he tends to me before taking us both to bed.

BASTIAN

I watch her sleep, her beautiful golden hair spread on my chest and her face tucked between my neck.

Flashes of the night hit me as I listen to her breathing peacefully.

Her beautiful face lit up when we were dancing while everyone else stood back and watched us.

I recall how she held me so strongly, as if I were but a dream to her. A dream she could wake up from any second and have slip from her fingers.

Then I see the way that fuck Peters looked at her, then the disgusting shit he spewed. I should’ve finished him off right there in the middle of the room while everyone else witnessed what would happen to any of them if they

crossed a line with her.

Then the shouts and vile accusations from the paparazzi flash through my mind with the image of her vulnerable, being harassed to the point she tripped and hurt her head.

The blood.

The fucking blood on her head haunts me.

It triggered me, and everyone was a witness to it.

I let myself lose control, and I don't regret it.

Not one bit.

Hugging her sleeping form closer, I look down at her.

Arianna Parisi.

You did the impossible.

You made me fall in love.

Madly and obsessively in love.

My first love.

The love between a man and a woman.

I knew it, but now the entire world will know it, too.

Only a man in love would have done what I did tonight.

Arianna stirs in her sleep, then mumbles incoherently and whispers something she has done every night she has shared a bed with me.

"I got you." Kissing her forehead, I look at the window where the moon's light shines brightly, just like the girl in my arms. "I got you, darling."

BASTIAN

HOPES & DREAMS



“If you love something let it go.

If it’s yours it’ll come back but if it doesn’t...then you’re fucked. — B.B

“**N**o. No. Dis.” I follow the cheerful voice of my daughter to her room, where I find her playing dress up with Arianna.

I stand back in the doorway, quietly watching them in their little world. Ellaiza is dressed as princess Ana while Arianna is wearing a white-blond wig, as the ice queen does in the movie. I know that story by heart now with how many times I have been forced to watch it.

When I first found out Ellaiza was mine, I didn’t give much thought to the reality of her not having a maternal figure in her life. I thought I was enough and that my love and protection would fill the void of her mother’s abandonment.

I truly believed that until Arianna.

Watching her not only care but love and protect my daughter so fearlessly and how the love is reciprocated melted whatever icicles were left in my heart.

This girl, with so much baggage from her past, can love like no one I have ever met before.

She loves wholly, fully and fearlessly.

“Well, look here, Ella. The silly snowman has come to tickle you.” Arianna raises the stuffed snowman Banning got Ella for her birthday and starts tickling my daughter on the floor.

Both of their laughter wash over me like a warm summer day.

A feeling I only experience when I am with them.

No one else.

Arianna smiles from ear to ear, so beautiful it takes my breath away.

She looks so young, smiling and acting silly when entertaining my child.

Fishing my phone from my dress pants pocket, I open the camera app and snap a few shots of them.

Playing.

Laughing.

Holding onto each other.

My heart beats faster as if the organ recognizes the two most important people in my life are a few feet away.

“I wove you, mommy.” Ella sighs, trying to catch her breath and looking up at Arianna as if she was her entire world. I should have corrected her the first time I witnessed my daughter refer to Arianna as her mother. That would have been the wise thing, but instead I stood back and let them both enjoy the moment.

The moment when my daughter showed the woman, who is now part of my heart also, what unconditional love is.

How could I take that away from my child?

From both of them.

I have always been a selfish man.

“I love you, my baby,” Arianna whispers devotedly and reverently.

Fuck.

She then picks up my daughter and hugs her close to her heart while Ellaiza looks right into Arianna’s eyes. My brilliant kid raises her small, chubby finger, pointing at Arianna’s bandage on her head with a pout. “Boo boo?”

Arianna takes Ellaiza’s small hand in hers and brings her to her lips. “Oh, it’s okay, baby. It’s just a scratch.”

It is not okay, and it certainly is not just scratch.

She bled.

Some motherfucker hurt her.

You put her in that position...

I did.

I should’ve done better, and I fucked up.

Ellaiza smacks her lips against Arianna’s forehead. “Ah, betta.”

Smiling through the discomfort, Arianna responds, “All better.”

Then they move towards the rocking chair next to the window, where

they spend twenty minutes reading a story and looking at the pictures in the book.

It is Ellaiza's favorite book.

The book is about a seven-year-old who travels the world, meets new people, and learns new things. Not very realistic, but it makes her smile, so it'll do. "I want this all for you, Ella."

"Me?" My baby girl points at herself.

"Yes," Arianna whispers sadly with a faraway look in her eyes. I hate it. I want to kiss it away, but instead, I stand back and listen to what she has to say. My heart is in my throat choking me. "I want you to be free to explore the world and be whatever you wish to be. And most of all, I want you to fall in love with life before anything else."

Thud.

Crack.

Thud.

My heartbeat slows, and I swear I can feel the fucking thing crack inside my chest.

At this moment, I realize my mistake.

I tried my best to shield her from the dangers of her world, but I ended up thrusting her into mine, which is not that much different. Last night proved it.

Now, here she is, looking younger than usual and vulnerable while the snakes in my world trash-talk her, wishing my daughter everything she didn't get to have or experience.

Am I the same as her bastard father?

Did I also get in the way of her and her dreams?

Maybe that is why she hasn't accepted any of the internships I have arranged for her.

"My sisters and I dreamt about visiting all these places you see in this book, Ella," Arianna whispers while my daughter raises her head and grins up at Arianna. "I go?"

A look of complete devotion crosses over Arianna's face, but it fades away quickly when she answers. "You'll go places, Ella. I know it. You'll do great things. Things I didn't get to do, you'll do them. You'll see."

The sadness in her tone almost brings me to my knees, but I try my best to hold my emotions in check. I was too busy enjoying this blissful feeling of getting all I never thought I wanted, and I was too blind to realize that she never chose me.

Nor did she choose this life.

How could she? When she hasn't experienced anything else but being inside her father's cage, and now being here with me, not really knowing anything else.

Closing the door softly, I leave my heart inside that room.

You'll go places...

You'll do great things...

Things I didn't get to do...

Fuck, this hurts as if a gun went off and a bullet pierced my chest.

Her words haunt me all the way back to my office.

I have everything I ever wanted and never knew I needed, but does she?

ARIANNA

After tucking Ellaiza in for the night, I go in search of her father. It's been a crazy week, but everything else feels insignificant when I am with them.

I find Sebastian in his study, sitting in the darkness while drinking a glass of scotch. The only light comes from the moonlight outside and the flat screen TV on the wall.

He's watching the news channel where they are playing the video of what happened at the gala. Sebastian looks both furious and worried. Walking to his desk, I grab the TV remote and turn off the news. There's no point in reliving what happened.

It happened, and now it's done.

"I was watching that, darling." He murmurs.

"And now you're not." I shrug.

Sebastian's eyes twinkle when he looks away from the TV and stares straight at me. "Brat."

"Tyrant." Rounding his desk, I push him back a bit and take a seat on his lap. He is still wearing the same clothes he wore this morning. The only difference is that he has discarded the tie. His hair is messy, as if he's been running his fingers through his gorgeous black locks. Not feeling shy at all, I wrap both arms around him, and his free hand falls on my naked thigh. The oversized shirt I am wearing barely covers me.

My entire body becomes alive, recognizing his touch. It is the same feeling that erupted when he'd touched me all the time before.

We sit there in silence while I look at his face. I will never get used to his beauty or the way I feel when I am in his arms. This man really is made of black magic.

Wickedly handsome.

Cunning and fearless.

Mine.

His eyes take me in.

Hating how quiet he is and his mood any longer, I break the silence first. "What's wrong? Is it about what happened la—" He cuts me off, and the hand on my thigh comes up to my face.

Blue-gray eyes meet green.

"Want to know the first thing I thought about the first time I saw you, darling?"

"Back in Detroit?"

He shakes his head slowly, "When your father sent me your picture."

Anger coils in my stomach when I am reminded of what my father did. "What am I going to do with a spoiled little mafia princess, I presume," I reply sarcastically, hiding the wave of sadness that hits me when thinking about it.

Sebastian doesn't smile, nor does he laugh. Something is wrong. His fingers trace the skin of my face tenderly. "I didn't see the past or the sins of your father when I saw your face." My heart starts to race as I listen to him. "I saw my future..."

I saw my future...

"Sebastian..." His name is barely a whisper.

His hands fall from my face, and I instantly feel the loss. "Would give anything to be a different man for you." He takes a sip of his drink and looks away from me towards his home office window.

I have witnessed many sides to Sebastian Kenton, but not this one.

This vulnerable side is new to me.

"I don't want another man or a different you." Taking his face in my hands, I force him to look into my eyes. "I just want you."

Placing his glass back down onto the desk harshly, "Everyone is..."

"Who gives a shit about anyone that isn't us, Sebastian? I sure don't." I snap. "They don't know us. Not really."

“Watch that mouth.” he chuckles, but there’s not an ounce of humor like every time before.

I take a second to calm my racing heart. “I mean it. I wish...”

“You wish what?” His face is a breath away from mine.

“I wish you saw yourself the way I do.” There, I said it.

“Like a self-absorbed tyrant?”

“That’s part of your charm, yes.” He grunts. “But I also see a man who has the power to spark to life what once was dead,” I whisper, trying to make him see himself the way I do. “I see a loving father and a fearless protector. You are good and kind, even if you don’t see it, Sebastian. “When...” I get choked up with emotion, but I try to hold myself together. Taking a deep breath, I continue. “When I look at you, I see a beauty I never recognized before. I see all that was missing...”

His eyes, which were void of emotion a second ago, melt when I caress his bearded chin. “You, Arianna Parisi, are made of solid gold. Never forget that. Whatever happens, always keep that in mind, baby.” I suck in a breath, stunned by his words. They warm my heart, but something lurks behind what he just said. It almost feels like goodbye. I don’t get to dwell on the fact for more than a second when he takes my lips in his, robbing me of air.

I kiss him back with the same intensity, trying to make him understand that together we’re solid, too.

Solid gold.

Pure and rare.

Unshakable.

I know it.

I feel it every time we kiss.

I won’t leave him in search of a better man. There is no one better than him, and there’s sure as hell no getting rid of me.

This is it.

We are it.

There is no place my heart will not find him.

ARIANNA

BROKEN HEARTS



ARIANNA

“There’s a thin line
between love & hate.” - A

This morning, I woke up alone in bed. After Sebastian and I talked in his study, he brought me back to bed and made love to me until I passed out. There was something different in the way he held me.

Something changed, and it has me on edge.

He kissed me tenderly, but it was not the same. It almost felt melancholic.

Now, he’s nowhere to be found.

Not with Ella or Banning and not in the pool house where he spends time with his security team. I checked everywhere, and I couldn't find him.

Taking the stairs, I make my way to the living room, where I find a gleeful Celene looking out the window.

I am in no mood to deal with this woman today. Not with all that was said between us last night. Celene turns away from the window and looks at me as if she already won.

“You made quite a mess...” she chuckles while holding up today’s paper.

Not caring one bit about what she has to say, I ask. “Have you seen Sebastian?”

She smirks cruelly. The bitch. “I have.”

Feeling exasperated, “Where?”

She turns and points outside. Following her, I see that Sebastian is outside in the freezing cold while rain is pouring down with the paparazzi harassing him. Heart in hand, I rush to the door, knowing something is off.

“While you’re out there, ask him to tell you what really happened to his parents.” Her eyes turn dark and a smug smile appears on her face.

With one hand on the door’s knob, I turn around to face the vile woman. “Not that is any of your business but he did tell me what happened to his parents.”

Laughing, she moves closer to where I am standing. “Oh, really?”

“What’s so funny?” I am tired of this woman. It’s been obvious for a while now that this crazy bitch can’t be trusted.

“How much of a joke you are, little girl.” I remain calm not wanting to give her the reaction she wants. “You have no idea the things one can find about another person when money is involved. It took me a while to figure out why he chose you out of the countless choices of women I presented to him two years ago. You, a child, that was his choice.” She looks at me as if I am the dirt under her ugly shoes. “I did some digging and I found out why he chose you, Parisi.” The way she says my name reminds me of the way Sebastian used to before. “Go.” She steps back and points to the door. “Ask him for the name of the man who murdered his dear parents in cold blood.”

Bitch.

How can someone look so giddy while talking about someone’s tragedy?

Confused, annoyed and over her shit, I give her my back and walk outside in search of him.

Wearing a white dress, it becomes soaked when I step a foot in the grass, making my way towards him. Meeting him in the middle, I forget we are surrounded by a dozen men and women with cameras and focus on him.

Dressed in a full suit, with his dark hair even darker from the rain falling down his forehead. Heartbreakingly gorgeous.

But then I see it.

The emptiness in his eyes was like before.

Cold.

Detached.

God, no.

Celene’s words hit me full force as I look into those blue eyes I’ve come to love so much, looking back at me as if I mean nothing. As if I am nothing.

Then I think back to Paris when he was closed off talking about his mother and when he acted strange when I asked what happened to his parents.

Missing pieces fall into place as the world comes crashing hard around

me.

No.

Tears well in my eyes, and I don't blink them away. They mix with the rain anyways. "Who murdered your parents, Sebastian?"

There I see something other than emptiness.

Surprise turns to grief, then nothing again.

Empty.

Hollowed.

Unforgiving.

Sebastian has always been straightforward with me, or that is what I thought until now. Now, I don't know what to believe.

"You don't want to do this now, Arianna." His voice sounds detached, almost robotically. Bored even.

"Tell me!" I snap, not caring that I make the front news again. Not caring about anything but the truth. "Tell me the name."

His eyes don't look away from me when he delivers the first blow. "Parisi."

"No." Shaking my head, I wrap both arms around myself, subconsciously knowing this won't end well.

"Parisi. Gabriele Parisi." He says my father's name with so much hatred that I feel it all around me. His hate. His grief.

All because of me.

Because of my family.

"Why?" I don't have to say it, he understands. Why keep all of this from me? I don't understand. Not completely.

"My apologies, darling. You were collateral damage." He says as a small smile appears on his face.

"No." I say hoarsely then think back to everything he's done for me. This is not happening. "Why then? If I was just collateral to you, then why bring me my father's finger with promises? A vow? Why do all that you did? No..." I hug myself tighter as the rain falls harder around me. Just as fast as my tears. "Why ruin your reputation and chances to win the campaign by associating yourself with a Parisi?"

"I needed you to fully trust me." He shrugs, unfeeling. "Revenge tastes sweeter when the other person doesn't expect it, and you, my darling, had no clue the game you lost the moment you stepped foot inside my world." He steps closer until his black oxfords are touching my bare feet. "My career and

reputation were never at stake, Arianna. You underestimated just how much my father was loved by the people of this city and just how much they hate the Parisi, Nicolasi, and Volpe names. My parents can rest easy now.” Hatred, unlike I had never seen, darkens his blue irises, leaving me cold and...hurt.

So hurt.

Confused, but knowing this is a losing battle, I try one last time.

I am not my father.

If only I had known...maybe I could have...

I try one more time before my heart gives out.

This hurts.

“I know you, Sebastian.” I step forward, and I'm instantly hurt when he steps back from me as if he wants nothing to do with me. “You don't want this. I am sorry about your parents and what my father did, but I—”

“That was your first mistake.” He cuts me off as the flashes of the cameras become more aggressive. “Thinking you mattered enough for me to let you in.”

“Bullshit.” My heart pounds faster, annoyed and angry.

Sebastian's eyes flash, and I see his need to tell me to watch my mouth, but he doesn't. Instead, he does something else.

He shoots me with an invisible gun straight through my chest, piercing my heart. “Save yourself the embarrassment, darling, and leave quietly. Banning will take care of you. This is my last show of mercy.” I feel Benjamin at my back, pulling me back gently away from Sebastian.

“What about Ella?” I shout desperately. Oh, God. No. Not again. My heart won't survive losing her just like I did my sisters. I watch Sebastian's eyes turn sad before quickly concealing them with the same emptiness, I hate so much from him.

Cold.

Heartless.

Merciless.

I could forgive him for acting like an asshole, wanting to hurt me in a misguided attempt to protect me from all this chaos, but taking my girl from me?

I could never forgive that.

“Don't do this, Sebastian.” My voice breaks as everything around me fades to gray.

Sebastian, the man that holds my heart in his cruel hands, looks at me and crushes my heart mercilessly with the words that come out of his mouth next. “She is young. She will forget.”

But what about me? I want to scream at him, to claw at his chest until I can get my hands around his deceiving heart and break it, just the same as he did mine.

I will never forget.

How could I?

She is a part of me, just like her cruel father.

Raising my head and hardening what’s left of my heart, I stare into his eyes.

“Betrayal hurts most when it comes from the person you trust most.” He says robotically, heartless even. So unlike the man I came to trust.

Just what he wanted.

Sebastian Kenton broke my heart.

No, it was broken long before he came along... he killed it.

He left me bleeding in the cold right before Christmas.

Fuck, a knife to my eye would hurt less.

And they called me heartless, an ice princess.

They haven’t seen anything yet.

BASTIAN

“Betrayal hurts most when it comes from the person you trust most.”

My brave girl stands in the rain, soaking wet with droplets of water running down her beautiful face. She always looks stunning, but now? With tears in her eyes and fury in her heart, she looks like a goddess. My Goddess. The flash of the cameras and the voices of the media outlets and paparazzi fade into the background as I stare at my future falling apart right in front of me. The pulse of rage pounds my temples along with the noise inside my head, screaming for me to stop this insanity. To wrap my hands around her and keep her safe inside. She deserves better.

Fuck, does she deserve everything her fucking bitch of a father failed to give her. More than I can give her. She deserves to live life to the fullest and

make her own decisions. She should be able to do normal things most take for granted, without fear of being harassed by the paparazzi or called ugly names by people that know nothing about her or us.

I want her to have all of it.

All she hopes my daughter has in life.

She deserves it, too, and being tied down to me so young without really knowing what it feels like to be your own person and fall in love with the life of her choosing.

To find herself and fight for what she wants.

My heart broke last night when I heard her talk to my daughter. It broke all the other times when she showed me the real her.

My beautiful girl was once cold-as-fuck— that will never change, but her heart is pure, and when she gave it to me, I felt like the luckiest bastard in this fucked up world.

I felt like I could bring the world to its knees for her, and fuck, in my way, I'm doing it now. She can't fly above the clouds with my world holding her back. With the sins of her father still present between us. "You son of a bitch. How can you be this heartless? This is cruel to her!" She yells at me as more tears fall. Her bangs stick to her face. "This is more than just me and you and our fucked-up past! She was in the middle. That baby... she loves me and I love her. How could you!"

This is killing me.

My heart is bleeding for her.

Bleeding for the little girl that won't have her best friend once this day ends.

I lied to her when I made it seem as if my daughter will forget her. Ellaiza won't forget. I'll make sure she never does.

Goddammit.

Let her choose her path.

Let her fly and find her way back home.

More clicks and questions come from all around us, but I shut them out.

Just me and my girl.

I know her grief will turn into anger, and the scars I gave her will fade away with time. She's young, beautiful, with so much potential, and I'm holding her back.

I, on the other hand, I'm not sure if I'll ever be the same again.

I have my little girl, and I will always put her first, but the woman right in

front of me is my dreams and nightmares, all wrapped up in a beautiful package of cunning smiles and a sweet-as-fuck heart.

I love how different she is with us. How she would let the world burn and fall but keep us safe with her. I would do the same, beautiful girl. I would do anything for you. So, fly away and spread your beautiful wings, but find me again one day. Find us once you find yourself. Because you're our anchor.

My fucking lifeline.

She hates showing emotion, and right now, she's doing it in front of the entire country.

The entire world.

And to think she didn't know what love was.

This is it, darling. Love is you. Love is me breaking my own fucking heart so you can be all you ever wanted.

Free.

The rain comes down hard.

I watch her beautiful tear-streaked face contouring in anger. Anger towards me.

Hate.

Her long blonde hair is wet and running down the front of her white dress, and my heart stops because she has never looked more beautiful to me until she backs away, taking my heart with her. I feel an agonizing pain in my chest as I watch her hold her head up high and walk back toward him.

Motherfucker.

I could kill him, but I know there's no one better to keep her safe from harm.

From my enemies.

From the evil of her world.

Arianna keeps walking backward, and I dread the moment she gives me her back. This was not how it was supposed to go down, with other people around to witness her hurt.

Fuck.

This is cruel, even for me. I hate myself, but I need her to want to be here. To choose to be here, but not like this.

Not bound to me because she feels like she has nowhere else to go.

I forced a life on her that she didn't choose.

The scar on her temple reminds me how ugly my world can get, just like the one I took her from.

I stop myself before I reach out to her. I don't stop her, though the pain in my heart is so excruciating it's as though I've been cut by thousands of sharp knives. The black van waits for her.

My girl hesitates, her hand on Banning's much larger one.

This is it.

The end of me.

I can feel my heart pound like a storm inside and know it's hers calling to me. "I hate you, Sebastian," my head pounds, and the organ in my chest beating rapidly breaks the moment her words wash over me. "*You showed me how to love, and now I promise you, I will show you what it is like to hurt.*" She vows coldly.

Colder than this fucking rain.

Not more than I hate myself right now.

Her eyes lose the beautiful light I've come to see shine bright in them the past couple of months, and I watch as the love of my life shuts down and covers herself with her armor.

The one that keeps her safe from the world.

The walls of steel she built around herself so no one could ever hurt her again.

You hurt her.

You're just like her father.

No.

This is for her.

She deserves fucking everything, and she will accomplish all she wanted since she was a young girl.

I am not clipping her wings. I'd rather she hate me now than at the end of our road when she realizes she could've been more, could've been more than a child bride like the media is calling her. More than a mafia princess who was sold like she meant nothing.

She means everything, and she will realize it soon.

I hope that one day she comes back.

She finds her way back to us.

I owe her this.

And just like that, in the middle of a media storm, I lose myself. I lose my heart. There's only one thing holding me above water, but I still feel like I'm drowning. The car speeds out of the gates, taking my heart and soul with it.

You failed her, Sebastian. Just like you failed your parents. You might

not have killed her, but you broke her. *You're the same as me.* Gabriele Parisi haunts me as I watch his daughter run from me.

Walk out of my life, taking my heart with her.

The grass under my feet is wet, and mud covers my shoes. The loud noises of the media outlets snap me out of it. I look up at the sky, close my eyes, and let the rain wash over me.

This is chaos.

This is hell.

This will be life without her.

I did say I would do anything for you, darling. Even let you go so you can be all you want in life, breaking my own heart in the process.

Find your way back, darling.

I will be here.

THE END



*Some say revenge is a dish best served cold...
and President Kenton you're about to find out just
how true that statement is.*

*Never really yours,
Parusi*

UP NEXT



BASTIAN
“In Love & War II”

AFTERWORD

If you made it this far, thank you. Thank you for loving this couple as much as I do. This story is bittersweet, I know but I promise its worth it.

Arianna declared war & her tyrant has one hell of a fight ahead of him. Ge ready because... nothing is fair in love & war.

I would also appreciate it if you left an honest review. Reviews mean the world and it helps me tremendously. Thank YOU.

Until the next one!

ALSO BY ADRIANA BRINNE



Unholy Trinity Series

Andrea “The Beginning”

Lucan “The End”

Unholy Night - Halloween Novella

Fallon “The Madman”

Cara “The King”

Arianna “In Love & War I”



Unholy Ground Series

Throne of Deception

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What can I say that I haven't before? First, I want to thank you guys my readers for all your support and words of encouragement while I wrote this story. You will never fully understand just how much your faith in my words means to me. You, the reader, are the reason why I keep writing when things get rough. When I don't feel like myself and that I am not enough for this job. You keep me writing and that is priceless to me.

Thank you for that.

Mom, I love you.

I hope my books make you proud.

I hope I make you proud.

Gisele,

My honest as fuck and wonderful friend, thank you for keeping me grounded when I act crazy as fuck, lol. You are a real friend and I am so lucky to have met you through our mutual love for fictional assholes. Thank you for putting up for me! Love youuuuuuuuu!

Elsa,

You make my books a thousand times better with everything you do. I always say this and I and will always mean it. I could not do this without you. Thank you for joining me on this journey and I hope we get to do this for a very long time. Love youu!!!!!!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Adriana Brinne is a new author who fell in love with reading from a very young age but never felt brave enough to share her words with the world. She was born and raised in a tropical island surrounded by only beauty and water called Puerto Rico. She is a full-time IT specialist, and, in her downtime, you can find her reading new adult by her favorites, reviewing books, and watching The Big Bang Theory.

She has a love for all things dark in romance and almost every trope created except cheating and death trope. I hate them and you won't catch me writing or reading about it. The Holy Trinity characters are screaming to have their stories told and I plan to do so. You can expect from me all the feels, strong girls, and asshole heroes that worship them.

You can connect with her on Facebook www.facebook.com/adrianabrinne or join her reader group Unholy Ground <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1105422413262256>



TRIGGER WARNING



This book deals with child abuse trauma. It also contains foul language, explicit scenes, violence & torture.