



*Beauty*

AND THE

VILLAIN

ONCE UPON A TIME A VILLAIN CORRUPTED A PRINCESS.

V.F. MASON

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# BEAUTY AND THE VILLAIN

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*To the power of love.*

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## PROLOGUE

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*A*ileen

As a little girl, I made a wish upon a falling star.

To experience a legendary love story where my heart  
would belong to a brave prince.

He would slay all the dragons standing in his way to the  
ivory tower.

Win my father's approval and ask for my hand in marriage.

Except, I forgot one crucial thing.

Every legendary love story has a villain.

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## CHAPTER ONE

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*“Adam begged God for Eve, and his wish was granted.  
Only Eve tasted the forbidden fruit that was too tempting to  
resist.*

*And in such became Adam’s downfall.”*

*Rush*

*R*ush

If angels descended from heaven and graced earth with their majestic presence, their human form would look like *her*.

Because everything about her reminds me of art that should be displayed in museums, allowing everyone to admire but never touch so no one would taint her magnificent beauty.

Dropping on the bench several feet away, hidden by the large oak tree dangling its branches so low they touch the ground inside the park, I intently watch every move of this creature, too absorbed in her dance to notice anyone or anything else.

Her bare feet soundlessly brush the grass while she performs various ballet pirouettes so gracefully one might be eternally mesmerized by her.

Putting a cigarette in my mouth, I flick the lighter open, shifting my focus briefly on the flaring flame awakening voices inside my head that scream into my ear about agonizing pain, bringing despicable flashbacks one after another.



Each one of them poking the beast living inside me that craves nothing but vengeance and blood for the injustice done to him.

She falls on the grass, yelping in surprise, and pulls my attention back to her, snapping me from the darkness calling my name every second, and after a brief moment, she gets up again, assuming the position and resuming her practice.

A light breeze envelops her form, plastering her skirt over her long legs, as dark clouds gather above us and a rumble of thunder shakes the sky. The lightning flashes while the birds around us fly away as if to find a place to escape the coming storm.

She stays unfazed by nature's display of power. Instead, a smile curves her lips as she sways to the side, showcasing her beauty under the sunshine streaming through the clouds, making her dark, wavy hair falling down her lower spine glisten.

She jumps high in the air, one leg bent behind her while the other is stretched out, her enticing breasts pushing forward when she arches her back, and then she lands back on her feet, spinning around several times before stopping with her arms up in a finishing pose. Finally, she opens her eyes outlined by thick, long lashes.

They are blue, just like the ocean during a storm; their depth so mesmerizing that if she possessed enough skill, she could hypnotize anyone into doing what she wanted while still keeping all her secrets intact.

A siren gazing at the horizon and waiting for a fisherman in order to deceive him with her beauty.

Her vivid orbs are a big contrast to her skin, which so easily shows the wild beating of her pulse when something upsets or scares her, giving her enemy easy access to her emotions.

Because nobody taught her how to hide from hideous monsters ready to sink their claws into her tempting flesh. Instead, she lives in an illusion of her family's creation,

treating the world as something extraordinary and safe, where love can cure all.

Naïve. Too young. Vulnerable.

A temptation every sane man must resist—otherwise, he will forever be consumed by this beauty.

Thankfully, there's nothing sane about me.

Aileen Scott.

Even tasting her name on my tongue feels so wrong and forbidden; however, it also stirs pleasure rushing through my veins from the anticipation that's more than a decade in the making.

My pawn on the chessboard that will bring me the king I so crave to destroy.

Because nothing would kill him more than the knowledge of me, a man twice her age and his worst enemy, putting my hands on the princess of the dark castle.

She will be mine.

After all, children always pay for the sins of their father, or so they say.

And her father committed so many sins that his daughter might forever be locked in my cursed castle, paying his dues.

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## CHAPTER TWO

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*“My father once told me life is like a chessboard.*

*If you make all the right moves and learn to control your pawns... removing any emotional aspect from the game... the victory will always be yours, no matter how skilled your opponent is.*

*I think that’s when my love for chess started. Because the idea of learning how to win appealed to the competitive streak inside me.*

*Who would have thought my love for the game my father taught me would ultimately become my downfall?*

*Some opponents are so ruthless they don’t play by the rules.*

*They create their own.”*

*Aileen*

*A*ileen

“Come on, girl!” I shout, tightening the reins on Rain, who neighs loudly and speeds up at my command, racing across the magnificent green land surrounding us.

The wind whooshes over us, billowing my hair back while air sticks in my lungs, demanding oxygen and a deep breath I cannot take.

All my attention focuses on our destination in the distance as an invisible clock continues to tick loudly in my ears,

reminding me of our mutual goal. I gently nudge her to go faster.

My moonlight-colored mare leans her head forward, her hooves pounding harder on the ground as the scenery around me changes in a blur. Birds chirp above me, and some follow us on the path to victory.

Because anything else is unacceptable.

“Faster, Rain, faster!” I scream when the brown fence appears on the horizon. She continues to gallop while my heartbeat speeds so fast in my chest it threatens to tear away from it and drop on the ground. “You can do it, girl!” At my encouragement, she neighs again, adding more fire to her race while happiness bubbles up inside me, and I throw my head back, welcoming the freedom riding my horse always gives me.

Nothing compares to it in this world.

Ever since my father gifted me my mare seven years ago, dragging me to his ranch outside Houston and pointing at the foal who wobbled on her thin legs and hid behind her mother, I fell in love.

I hugged her tight, laughing at the red ribbon attached to her neck, and whispered in her ear that we’d be the best of friends and I’d treat her well.

She tickled my skin by nuzzling into my shoulder as if agreeing with me, and that was the beginning of our unbreakable bond.

Although we lived in New York, I came every single month to visit, and when she was old enough to ride we learned to be so in sync with each other that we no longer needed any instructors or intruders disturbing our moments.

Of course, that’s when I started attempting more daring moves, performing dangerous riding maneuvers that didn’t thrill my dad, but he was powerless to stop my love for Rain.

For when I’m on top of her, rapidly racing through the land, the golden cage around me does not exist and I’m not the princess of the dark castle.

I'm just me.

Expectations, judgment, pain—they do not exist.

While joy fills every cell in my body.

Her loud whinny echoes in the air, snapping me out of my thoughts, and I grip the reins as I notice we've almost reached the ring, and she flies through the open gate.

Pulling the reins, I silently order her to stop as we rapidly move toward the people awaiting us on the other side. She obeys yet rears on her hind legs. My thigh muscles tense as I hold on to her for dear life when she almost stands straight, causing the air to whoosh out of my lungs.

Cheers erupt around us accompanied by loud whistles, and someone shouts, "Two minutes, forty-five seconds!"

And with a loud thud, she drops back to the ground, making me bounce a little, and I exhale a heavy breath before my laughter rocks between us. "Good girl," I say to her, patting her neck. She nickers, welcoming the touch. "I knew you could do it." She moves her head to the side, her mane swaying at the action as if offended I ever doubted her.

After all, just like her owner, my horse never loses and loves to break records or people's expectations of her.

Sitting up, I swing my leg back and get down, my boots sending sand flying around me while Rain steps back a little, huffing loudly through her nose and looking at me expectantly.

Throwing my hair over my shoulder, I remove my gloves and fish inside my jeans pocket for several sugar cubes.

Splaying my palm open, I let her eat them while continuing to run my hand over her muzzle, murmuring, "You did so good, Rain. I'm so proud of you." The sun streams from above, enveloping me in heat. My shirt is plastered to my sweat-covered body, and dust sticks to my skin. Numerous scents surround me, and I'd really kill for a shower now, but I do not break our routine, knowing how much Rain loves all the attention after a race.

Especially with me being gone more frequently in the last two years due to my studies, she is extra needy during my trips, but who could blame her?

I'm surprised she doesn't give me more attitude with her possessive tendencies.

"I think we need to rethink our friendship."

Half-turning, I glance at the fence several feet away, where my two best friends, Elena and Caroline, sit munching on apples. Rain zeroes her gaze on them too, her ears perking up at the sight of the fruit.

"When you called me two days ago and told me you were coming to Houston, I expected more from the trip than watching you beat your own record on this ranch," Elena says and then sighs when Rain strolls to her, breathing into her face. They do a stare-off for a while, both stubborn in nature.

Finally, Elena gives in and extends her apple to Rain.

My horse happily munches it quickly, and then Caroline does the same. When Rain finishes hers off, she gallops around the ring a little, needing space.

I wave at Maverick, the ranch hand who comes out of the barn ready to lead Rain to the stable. "You can take her inside once you finish her cooldown."

He nods at me, and I make a mental note to check on her before leaving—although everyone here loves her so much that she's now spoiled rotten.

Caroline huffs. "As if she ever does anything else. I sometimes wonder who she loves more, us or Rain."

Elena sighs heavily, placing her palm on her forehead and exclaiming dramatically, "Rain! Sadly, we don't even come close in that competition."

Rolling my eyes, I saunter to them and stretch my arms up, welcoming the relief in my aching muscles that only a warm bath can soothe. "For your information, I wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for your birthday party." She turned eighteen last month, but due to their tight schedule, her parents couldn't

throw her a party where they invited the richest of the rich. They are hosting the event tomorrow in one of the most prestigious places in the state, ready to show everyone how much they adore their daughter.

My parents were invited too, but they couldn't attend, since they traveled to visit my grandmother.

My brows furrow, finding it strange how they decided to do so out of the blue, but Caroline's voice pulls me from my musings.

“Do you mean you love us more than Rain?”

I cock my head to the side, replying sweetly, “You come in a close second.” I wait a beat and add, “After Rain, of course.”

Silence falls at my admission, the girls blinking at me as their jaws hit the floor, and then our melodic laughter fills the air as a hard gust of wind whooshes over us, bringing relief to my heated skin.

Caroline runs to me, opening her arms wide, and hugs me close, making us stumble back a little before rocking me from side to side. “I missed you, girl,” she whispers in my ear, and I return the embrace, welcoming her familiar cinnamon scent and smiling at our reunion. “Studying abroad officially sucks,” she grumbles into my shoulder while Elena shakes her head at her, dropping her feet to the ground and joining us in a few short strides, throwing her arms over us, and locking us all in a group hug.

“You spent our whole childhood dreaming about attending culinary school in France. I remember how you made us create all those wish boards for you to stare at and visualize your future,” Elena reminds her, and Caroline glares at her, hitting me with her head in my chin, and I wince a little.

“If it helps, studying here without you all sucks too.”

“Actually, it does help.”

“Ah, misery loves company. See, I always knew that.”

We all lean back, and I study my best friends since childhood, who I consider family even if we're not related by

blood.

They both present a picture worthy of hanging in museums, for people would be staring at them for hours, mesmerized by their beauty.

One has golden hair falling down her back in waves with grass-green eyes that have the power to stop every male in close proximity, and her curvy figure pulls them deep into her web. Elena changes guys like gloves, claiming that relationships should be forbidden when the world offers so much variety these days.

Her father, an oil magnate who adores her and watches her like a hawk and also happens to be my father's business acquaintance, disagrees. I suspect that's why he decided to keep her close to home and didn't let her study in New York like we planned all along.

Well, that and her tendency to end up in trouble wherever she goes. She picked filmmaking as her degree choice, planning to become a scriptwriter someday.

Caroline, on the other hand, is the polar opposite of her, with her fiery, curly locks barely reaching her shoulders and gray eyes that remind me of molten steel. Several freckles pepper her skin, and she has this whole don't-fuck-with-me attitude, and everyone is always surprised to find out she'll be a chef someday. She might bitch about the distance and how she feels lonely sometimes, but everyone knows that has always been her dream. I'm sure she'll have a restaurant of her own one day.

Her mother used to work as a maid until Elena's father fell in love with her when the girls were ten, and they got married, surprising everyone to say the least.

Although Uncle Sloan and Aunt Bethany have twin boys together, the girls are considered *theirs*, and they are all one big family that always welcomes me whenever I come to visit.

"College life is not what people make it out to be." Elena nudges me lightly with her elbow. "Why didn't you tell us?"



Caroline nods in agreement. “Yep. You could have warned us.”

I shrug, taking out a hair band and binding my tresses up on top of my head. “I loved it.” They chuckle, crossing their arms, and I exhale heavily. “Okay, okay. It wasn’t the best, but in my defense, my experience could have hardly counted as an example of how it really is in college.”

Being a smart child who skipped four grades back in school would do that to a person. As a result, I’ve never had any classmates my age, and the majority of kids stayed away from me—either too afraid to talk to me or finding me too much a child to be in their class.

I began college four years ago, at fourteen, and while it was much better than school, still being younger than everyone else didn’t really give me any experience, invitations to parties, nor new friendships. Except for the subjects, college hasn’t been much better or different than school.

Since I decided to get a minor in English literature, it extended my studies to five years. So I’m now in my senior year, and I cannot wait to finish, to finally be done with all this.

Maybe then the expectations everyone has for me will stop feeling like a heavy weight on my shoulders, dragging me deeper and deeper into the ocean of despair.

Elena snaps her fingers in front of me. “Earth to Aileen.” She roams her gaze over me, worry etched in her features, and I plaster a grin on my mouth despite not really feeling it.

Although I haven’t been feeling that settled for the last two months, ever since I turned eighteen and constantly have these sensations on my nape.

A possessive gaze glides over me every single time I take a breath, and it follows me wherever I go, inspiring an unfamiliar and ridiculous fire in my veins, boiling my blood in ways I cannot name or understand.

Maybe that’s why I jumped on the plane the minute Elena called me, not even minding missing classes so long as it

allowed me to get away from New York and all the constant goose bumps breaking on my skin.

Except being in Houston has changed nothing and has intensified the sensations, especially at night, disturbing the dreams that play in my psyche, whispering in my ears about something I fail to understand.

However, I wake soaked in sweat every single time, my body aching.

“Is this about Pierre?” Caroline places her hands on her hips. “Does that asshole bother you?”

I open my mouth to reply, when Elena speaks up, sending a warning glance her sister’s way. “Why would he bother her? They broke up months ago.”

Two to be exact.

“No, and he is not an asshole,” I tell them, dusting my knees and then moving toward the stable, ready to say goodbye to Rain, while the girls trail after me, still wanting an explanation. “Our breakup was a mutual decision.”

*Pierre’s hands glide over my waist, bringing me closer to him, and the air sticks in my lungs when his lips slide toward my chin, nipping on it lightly before he soothes the sting with his tongue. He presses me hard against the wall, ready to dive in for another deep kiss.*

*My heartbeat speeds up while disgust fills me, and the desire to push him away overpowers anything else. I fist my hands and say, “No.”*

*He freezes instantly, his hot breath filling my ear for a second before he jerks away from me, running his fingers through his sandy-blond hair.*

*My long summer dress covers me from neck to toe, yet despite that, I still want to hide myself from his prying eyes that have so many questions I cannot answer.*

*And frustration.*

*Frustration hits me with its invisible volts so hard I wish the floor would swallow me whole and take me away from my*

room, so I wouldn't have to face his disappointment again.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, and my body trembles slightly.  
"I'm sorry." I'm not sure what else to say.

"Please stop saying that, chérie. You have nothing to apologize for." And somehow, him reassuring me after all these failed attempts to push our relationship further only adds to my sadness, because there's something irrevocably wrong with me.

We've been dating for two whole years and have been friends for almost eight, yet I've never allowed him more than kisses, as any other physical activity scared me and sent repulsion through me.

"I'm just..." I search for the right words to describe my emotions as he picks up his jacket from the floor and puts it on. His attire emphasizes his wide shoulders and his handsomeness; he's the true dashing prince everyone dreams about. "I'm just..."

"Not turned on?" he supplies, and my cheeks heat up, and I want to protest. However, that's the truth.

My body does not want his, and while all his kisses and touches are extremely nice, and I love spending time with him, as he gets me like no one else... the idea of surrendering my body to him and discovering sex with him makes me sick.

Pierre blows air upward, sending his bangs flying in different directions, before he utters, "I think we need to take a break for a couple of months."

My stomach drops at this, and tears form in my eyes.  
"Because I'm not putting out?" Anger that is so misplaced laces my voice.

Pierre never tried to push me into doing anything I didn't want to and always stopped whenever I said no.

Besides, he is one of the best boyfriends a girl could wish for, the sweetest guy I've ever known who even my father likes.

And that says a lot, since my father rarely and mostly never likes anyone.

*A hollow chuckle slips past his lips. “Come on, chérie. You know that’s not true. It’s not about your fear; it’s lack of desire.” He winces at his next words as if they physically hurt him. “Maybe you need to allow yourself to date someone else and see how you feel about them.”*

*Someone else? Is this what he thinks this is all about?  
“Pierre, it’s not—”*

*His splayed palm shuts me up, not allowing me to defend myself. “Just a couple of months. We can do whatever we want. After that, we can make a decision about our relationship.”*

*Licking my dry lips, I clarify, “So we’re breaking up?”*

*“For the time being.” He palms my head, and he wipes away the tears sliding down my cheeks. “I know you love me, Aileen.”*

*“I do.” How could I not? He’s one of my best friends. My person.*

*Not to mention a guy I’d trust with my life.*

*“I think we need to see if you are in love with me though. Otherwise, what we are doing has no point.” With this, he places a soft kiss on my forehead, lingering for a second, and then leaves me, never to call me again—holding true to his promise.*

“Mutual decision my ass.” Caroline’s harsh voice pulls me back into the present, and I blink, realizing we’ve reached the stable. “That asshole was trying to get laid.”

Elena rolls her eyes. “That asshole, as you so elegantly put it, spent the last two months in Alaska, helping wild animals.”

Deciding to change the subject, I say, “I’m going to check on Rain, and then we can shower and hopefully go prepare for the party tomorrow, yeah?”

The ball promises to be amazing. We’ve already picked our dresses.

Besides, having my mind occupied with anything other than my complicated, nonexistent love life would be a

blessing.

“I forgot to mention something,” Elena murmurs, nervousness coating her tone, and I glance at Caroline, who shrugs, clearly not knowing a thing either. “I invited Pierre to the party.” She scrunches her eyes. “The invitations were sent while you were still going out, and he said he’d come. I know you guys broke up, but—”

“It’s all right,” I lie, not wanting our mutual childhood friends to suffer because of our breakup. Seeing him scares me, because he might be right and I was never in love with him.

But also, maybe it will give me an opportunity to actually realize that I *am* and miss him and want to be with him no matter what.

Although, even to my own ears, this sounds unbelievable.

Elena grins, throws her arms over my and Caroline’s shoulders, and squeezes us close until our cheeks touch. “Yay! The musketeers reunite again!” Caroline and I groan at the nickname she picked for us a long time ago that we never found flattering. “Let’s have a pajama party tonight and drive everyone insane!” she exclaims, and her excitement and happiness blanket my earlier worries, letting my nervousness slip so I look forward to a great time with my friends.

Everything else will fall into place, right?

## *R*ush

Whoever said that only princes and brave knights who won thousands of tournaments could attend balls was wrong.

Villains go there too, except their motives are vastly different.

Princes and knights dream about charming princesses and laying their hearts by their feet, wanting to earn their love, and in this light up their world with happiness and joy that knows no bounds.

Villains?

We corrupt the innocent creatures.

And what better way to corrupt a princess than teaching her what it's like to burn from passion?

A passion all the princes are simply incapable of.

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## CHAPTER THREE

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*“Be careful in the darkness.  
Because in darkness, sins and deceit rule.  
And things you never expect can happen.  
Changing the world around you in the blink of an eye.”*

*Aileen*

*A*ileen

I walk down the stairs, my heels clicking on the marble and drawing attention from the server, who rushes in my direction while holding a silver tray. “Miss Scott,” he says, and my brows shoot up.

I’ve never seen him before. Uncle Sloan must have made the attendants memorize all the names for this party.

“Thank you.” I smile at him, ready to refuse despite appreciating his efforts. I don’t drink juices, and alcohol is out of the question, because my dad would kill me.

However, I blink in surprise when I see iced green tea on it with a strawberry hanging on the edge.

Since when is my favorite drink served at this type of gathering?

The server notices my hesitation and says, “This was a special order for you.” I notice how he shifts from foot to foot, which in different circumstances would have made me uneasy, as it signals his nervousness.

But in my best friend's home, I have nothing to fear.

“Elena is really something else.” I wrap my hand around the glass and grasp the straw, taking a generous sip and welcoming the cooling sensation in my throat. “Thanks again.”

He nods, looks over his shoulder, his chin jerking, and then without uttering another word, he rushes toward the kitchen, disappearing so quickly I don't even have time to think about his bizarre behavior.

Shaking my head, I shift my attention to the archlike opening that leads to the huge ballroom, where classical music fills the air, mingling with people's chattering and laughter as their glasses clink against each other.

Musicians prepare their equipment several feet away on the stage, ready to play live music while Elena moves from guest to guest, a smile enhancing her features and her beauty shining under the crystal chandelier that reflects her silver dress.

And a gold mask with feathers on either side fits the masquerade theme of the party.

In fact, everyone here wears unique costumes and compositions, making it almost impossible to guess who they are.

The marble glistens while servers move between the bodies, offering food and drinks and even managing to answer questions about the artwork hanging on the walls that could be dated to the eighteenth century.

Pastel colors dominate the area, while the oak furniture offers a nice place to rest.

Elena twirls, her dress fluttering around her, and then she grins as she spots me. She squeals and darts toward me. “Aileen!” Several heads swing our way for a second before resuming their activity. “You're finally here!” she says, hugging me close, and a breath escapes me. “I started to think someone was holding you hostage upstairs.” She leans back,



winking at me. “If I offended easily, you’d have to face my hysterics.”

“If?” Caroline asks, also joining us as she adjusts the mask on her face and huffs in frustration. “You were on your way to storm upstairs to demand answers from our girl.” She hooks her arm with mine and cocks her head to the side. “But on a serious note, what took you so long?” she whispers from the corner of her mouth. “The Hastings have already fought twice, and someone spilled juice on their dresses, so there were tears and cursing. Entertaining to watch, all things considered.” She chuckles, and I roll my eyes.

For all the fun she makes of the elite, she sure loves the gossips, while I avoid them.

Maybe because no one is immune to them, and I’ve heard so many unbelievable things said about my own family through the years, without any proof, that I choose to ignore them all together.

“I had to change.” I slide my palm up and down my waist, keeping my gaze glued on Elena, who blinks and then watches me with interest. “You know, that happens when you decide *someone* has to wear a different dress five minutes before the party starts.”

I was all dressed in my pink outfit with a matching satin mask when the maid brought in a dress, informing me that Elena requested a change, because my other dress didn’t fit with her vision. Whatever the hell that meant, but since my friend is adamant about fashion choices on her birthday, I didn’t question it.

However, the style of the dress required a significant amount of time in order to put it on.

The pearl off-the-shoulder dress cascades down my body in silky waves, the material tickling and cooling my skin as the internal corset hugs my waist tight, pushing up my breasts and giving them a generous boost. The skirt allows free movement, so walking on the high-heeled sandals doesn’t threaten my health.

Compared to all the others around here, it's simple, and I would dare to say bland. What makes it stand out is the black mask in a catlike shape covering the top of my face, creating mysterious allure when combined with my blue eyes.

"Gorgeous pick, babe." Elena whistles under her breath. "Is this all for Pierre?" She rubs the material between her fingers, and sadness laces her tone when she adds, some of her earlier excitement gone, "He'd love you in any dress."

If I didn't know better, I'd think she has a little crush on him.

My brow furrows when her words register in my mind while prickling sensations rush through my veins. I look around, expecting someone to be staring at me, but everyone seems to be minding their own business. "What do you mean? You sent this dress to me."

She opens her mouth to comment, when Aunt Bethany calls her name. "Elena darling, come here."

She shrugs, smacks a kiss on my cheek, and dances off to her mom while Caroline tugs on her dress.

"I hate this stupid thing. Why wouldn't she let me wear a suit!" She scans me from head to toe. "You remind me of someone right now." She snaps her fingers several times. "Who... who... who...? Ah-ha!" She points a finger at me and almost pokes me in the eye.

Plucking a strawberry from the passing server's tray, I munch on it and then wash it down with my tea. Since she stays silent, I prompt, "Who?"

"A maiden who is about to get sacrificed for the greater good." What the hell? "Sans the mask, of course, but for real. This outfit makes me think you're about to be lit up while people cheer around you believing your death will fix their problems."

I love Caroline to pieces, but she sometimes says the weirdest stuff.

"I'm not sure if I should be flattered or disturbed, but thank you nevertheless," I tell her, finishing my drink while

she giggles and then huffs again at the sliding mask.

“Come on, let me have fun at this stupid-ass party. Dad invited all his friends and almost none of ours. No wonder Elena booked a VIP room and a limo for later tonight.”

Ah, right.

The trip to the karaoke bar, the so-called highlight of this evening. Elena even designed charts so we would know when to do our great escape.

“Not every day his baby girl turns eighteen.” At least that’s the excuse my father used when he threw a party for me two months ago to celebrate mine. Only I couldn’t sneak out, because Dad busted us, and we played chess instead. Needless to say, my girls made me promise that in Texas I would go all out. “How soon until we have to change though?” I walk toward the food table and place my glass on it before sliding my fingers over the snack selections, lifting up the lid, and settling on cashews.

Just as I’m about to put the lid back in place, it slides to the left and falls on the floor with a loud clang. “Damn it,” I mutter, ready to stoop down and get it, when a male hand picks it up instead.

The man straightens, and my eyes clash with the brown ones that I would have recognized anywhere.

Pierre.

“Hi, *chérie*,” he greets me and puts the lid back, sending his signature boyish smile my way, and for a moment, my heart pangs, with butterflies erupting in my stomach.

He’s so handsome in his tux, with his blond hair gelled back. A few girls look at him in appreciation, but he pays no attention to them. His whole focus is on me, and happiness flashes in his gaze.

Suddenly, memories come rushing back, reminding me why we were never a good match and how this was always headed toward a breakup.

When a body doesn't accept another one, it's a sign to end it, and I'm so happy Pierre was mature enough to understand it sooner than I did.

"Hi," I reply shyly and take a step to hug him but pause, not sure if it's appropriate after the breakup.

The thing about first relationships... you have no idea how to act around that person afterward nor the proper etiquette.

He must guess my thoughts, because he pulls me to him, and his lean arms hug me so tight I can almost pretend we are still a couple and everything is right in the world.

And I'm not craving something I shouldn't, waking up in a cold sweat every single night since I turned eighteen with my nightgown plastered to my taut skin. My body dreaming about the kind of pleasure I've never known, yet it knows Pierre would never be able to give it to me.

"Missed you, *chérie*," he whispers in my ear, and relief washes over me at his tone, as it has no indication of his feelings. But then tension fills me when he adds, "We need to talk."

Oh no.

I'll have to say it out loud then.

He leans back, cups my cheeks, his thumb brushing over my skin. "We have an unfinished conversation after all."

Clearing my throat, I nod. "Okay. During the karaoke time."

"Sounds like a plan." With this, he caresses me once again, and although he has done it countless times in the past, right now, it feels wrong and sends disgusting shivers down my spine.

While the burning in the back of my head intensifies.

"Hello to you, chef."

"Hey, pretty boy." Her voice stays cold though, and she stands next to me, snatching some cherries from a bowl, and pops one in her mouth.

Pierre grins at her and then extends his bent elbow to her. “Your mom asked me to escort you to her.”

“What? Why?” She spits the seed in the tissue, frowning.

“You have to say hi to some famous chef guy.”

She huffs, muttering under her breath. “To that asshole? You have to be kidding me.” She narrows her eyes on Pierre. “And you need to escort me, why?”

“Because ‘you will run away otherwise.’ That’s the exact quote.”

A laugh slips past my lips, and Caroline glares at me, while Pierre chuckles too.

She would run indeed, as she just cannot act normally around any famous men her family introduces her to.

In fact, she ends up either embarrassing herself or them, neither of which pleases her.

“Shut up, both of you.” She slaps Pierre’s elbow. “Screw your help too. Friends do not laugh at friends.”

His brow rises. “Didn’t you tell me after the breakup that you were taking Aileen’s side, so I should delete your number and never speak to you again should our paths cross?”

Damn, that’s some loyalty.

“A gentleman would have forgotten about it. A lady has a prerogative to change her mind.”

“I would, but you aren’t a lady, darling. And we both know it.”

“Ugh! Shut up!” she exclaims and marches to her mom, with Pierre hot on her heels, hiding his smile.

He loves to rile her up.

I’m wondering what to do next, since Elena is still busy collecting birthday wishes and checks from the guests, when the earlier server appears in front of me out of nowhere. “Miss Scott.” He’s holding a tray, but this time there is no drink present.

Instead, a single, white envelope with a red seal has been placed on it.

“This letter was delivered a minute ago.” A beat, and then he says, “It’s addressed to you.”

Taken aback by this information and the fact that someone sent me a letter, I pick up the envelope, seeing my name on it and nothing else.

Curious, too curious—a trait that has been a curse of mine—I break the seal and open the envelope that has a message contained inside it.

Wide, cursive, black letters mar the paper and remind me of those used in the past by kings and queens.

Someone sure fits the masquerade theme.

*I will be waiting for you in the greenhouse.*

*Come to me now.*

*After all... we have unfinished business to settle.*

I read the thing three times, trying to make sense of the cryptic message, and then spin around, wanting to ask the server who gave it to him.

However, the man is long gone, and I’m left standing alone, confused as hell.

My eyes sweep over the ballroom, finding nothing out of the ordinary as people converse, and my friends are all engaged in a heated discussion.

But then my gaze lingers on Caroline with her parents and note Pierre is absent.

In fact, I don’t see him anywhere and look at the letter again, gripping it harder between my fingers as my heartbeat speeds up.

Could it be him who decided we need to talk now in a secret rendezvous with stars as our witnesses?

And do I want to go in the garden and face him alone?

In the karaoke bar, I would have a chance to save myself from a scene should it all turn ugly or not face Pierre's pain in case he hopes for a different outcome. God knows how Pierre will react when I tell him he was right all along and that I feel nothing toward him.

*Stop being a coward*, I practically hear my father's voice in my head and search the ballroom one more time before making a decision.

Better to end all this now and have a nice night out rather than dread it the whole evening. And it's rude to ignore the letter anyway; he will just take it as another rejection.

Fisting my skirt, I push through the bodies, reaching the terrace quickly. I breathe in the fresh air, halting my movements as the garden's beauty opens up in front of me.

The lush, green expanse spreads out before me; flowery scents waft in the air, making me believe I'm in some kind of fairy tale.

"Pretty," I murmur, resuming my walk and brushing my fingers over the flowers, my heels clicking on the narrow sidewalk leading to the secluded greenhouse in the distance.

Aunt Bethany loves to grow ferns in her spare time, so her husband built this greenhouse for her. As kids, we spent a lot of time here hiding and pretending to be witches with healing powers.

We never stayed there long, because the humidity in the enclosed space felt like it was killing us.

Pierre chose an odd place to talk, to be honest.

A cricket chirps in the grass as thousands of stars light up the sky above me and the moon serves as my guiding light in the otherwise eerie space that evokes tremors in me.

*You've been here many times. Relax.*

My mental pep talk doesn't work, but I enter the greenhouse nevertheless. The door screeches, and the sound

fills the room, creating an even more frightening atmosphere around me.

The place is dark except for the moonlight streaming through the windows, and I walk farther, calling, "Pierre?" My voice echoes in the space, but no reply comes. "Hello?" I yell again, moving even farther into the room.

Ferns surround me everywhere.

On the tables, shelves, walls, even the floor.

"Hello!" I call again, this time more insistent as annoyance blankets my panic.

What if Pierre wasn't the one to send the letter, and someone just played a bad joke on me?

But who would dare do it in this house, knowing my family name?

I'm ready to bolt and inform Uncle Sloan about it, when a rose comes into view.

A striking red rose in a pot among all the ferns. Fully bloomed, it casts shadows on the floor, and the water on the petals glistens, tempting all onlookers to admire it.

Extending my hand to it, I gently rub a petal and whisper, "What are you doing here?" Roses do not play well with other flowers, especially in greenhouses; they tend to die fast in such environments. "Did someone put you here by mistake?"

Roses have always had a certain appeal to me, maybe because their beauty seems almost eternal.

I reach for the pot, determined to take it with me to save it from death, when the air around me changes and everything inside me goes still.

Because I'm no longer alone in the greenhouse.

Heat surrounds me, dangerous in its nature, bringing a surge of energy that slams into me so hard and warns me to save myself before it's too late.

Goose bumps break on my skin, while my heart gallops in my chest as fear along with curiosity sink into me and demand



to know who stands behind me.

“Pierre?” I prompt with hope lacing his name and then gasp when a strong arm wraps around my waist and pushes me hard against a wall. The air whooshes from my lungs while the hard muscles dig into my curves and send a thrill through me that scares and confuses me.

Various pots drop to the floor from the shelves, crashing into little pieces. All while the darkness surrounds us even more in this corner when the moonlight disappears and makes it impossible to see his face or any other details.

A butterfly-like caress touches my cheek; the knuckles brush over it softly before shifting lower to my neck, where he presses against my pulse point and pauses, as if enjoying the beating of my heart.

He slides his thumb to the side until his whole palm cups my neck, flexing around me, and I gasp, feeling a hot breath on my lips, inches away from mine, as my head is tilted back until it rests on the wall.

Right at this moment, he could squeeze it so hard I wouldn't be able to scream, breathe, or save myself from this onslaught of masculinity confusing my senses, tearing me in two.

My mind yells at me to push him away and run, too afraid of what havoc this could bring to the carefully structured world I exist in. Not to mention he might be some creep who has had his eyes on me and lured me here under false pretenses.

My body though?

My body has a mind of its own as it sways to him, anticipating his next move, enjoying the ticklish thrill traveling all over me and demanding it to continue.

*It's Pierre. Just Pierre.*

Why then does none of this feel like him and instead seems too forbidden and insane to indulge in?

Did two months bring such a big change to his personality and in turn to my reaction?

His lips brush against mine, and I open my mouth, ready to receive the kiss, when he bites on my lower lip hard, making me groan and tighten my grip on his shirt. The sting somehow only enhances the blazing heat enveloping me whole, his teeth sinking deeper as he tugs and pulls at it, and then his tongue swipes over the wounded flesh, soothing it.

We share a breath, our lips rubbing against each other, and my palms shoot up, slipping inside his collar, circling around his neck, and I still.

Rough, puckered skin underneath my hands greets me, spreading to his back it seems, indicating deep scars in flesh that's so abused it's impossible to get rid of them.

Pierre never had any scars. Maybe he acquired them in Alaska?

An owl hoots in the night as he resumes his journey down my body, his fingers trailing lower to my collarbone, breaking more goose bumps while something unfamiliar builds inside me, crying out in despair and relief at the same time.

His masculine scent reaches my nose and reminds me of the ocean air during a storm. It's creating a deeper need inside me, urging me to jump off this cliff toward a blissful, powerful pleasure, and I shake my head.

Did he always smell this nice?

And if he did... why hadn't I noticed it before?

A gasp escapes me when he trails his finger lower, circling the space around my necklace and disturbing my senses so much I'm torn between the desire to see his face and waiting to explore my reactions more, as they prove to me I'm not cold.

Not immune to the man's—Pierre's—touch after all and just needed time.

Every light caress creates a frenzy in my system, fire spreading through me and awakening every instinct that has

been dormant. My fingers curl on his neck and earn me a growl, bringing him closer to me, leaving no space between us.

I crave to prolong this haze he's bestowed on us as long as possible, basking in the newfound temptations and desires leading me to the downfall everyone speaks so highly of.

Am I reacting to him because I think he's Pierre?

Or am I reacting to him this way because I cannot see his face, so he could be anyone?

My nipples peak, probably visible through the offending silk that I want to rip away, and his fingers circle around one of them before he pinches it, the sensations cascading over me, adding gasoline to the maddening fire burning inside me.

All while he stays silent. His brooding presence enhances his every move, yet I want him to speak to me.

So I won't feel alone in this all-consuming craving that threatens to swallow me whole.

His muscled arm hikes me up, and instinctively my legs wrap around him in the most natural way, and I'm grateful I changed earlier.

For the other dress's skirt would've made it impossible for me to feel him right now.

His hard-on presses into me, my core dampening. My groan echoes in the greenhouse when he pushes against me—a foreign sound to my ears—while the air hitches in my throat as I await his next move. The blaze flaring in the pit of my stomach grows with each passing second.

I whisper, "Pierre," and his muscles jerk, and tension swirls around us, fury rolling from him in spades. When his fingers stab my skin painfully, I gasp, fueled by the awareness zipping from the top of my head to my toes that I've made an unforgivable mistake.

A mistake that might cost me the pleasure his touch entails.

Licking my lips, I beg, "Please."

That's all it takes.

His mouth slams on mine, shutting me up, and everything changes at once.

Two things become crystal-clear to me.

One.

This sinful mouth does not belong to Pierre.

And two...

I do not care.

A whimper traps in my throat when he sneaks his tongue in, breaking my lips apart and roaming inside my mouth. His tongue explores while seeking mine in a bruising kiss that fills me with passion threatening to destroy me from how much pleasure it brings me.

Every flick of his tongue against mine as they entwine in a scorching duet creates a frenzy in me, which fuels the desire rushing through my system as thousands of sensations hit me all at once, electrifying even the air around us.

Palming his head, I moan when he angles my head for better access and deepens the kiss, his strokes more confident and demanding while his thumb presses on my chin, opening me wider for his assault.

As if his single focus consists of one thing.

Ruining me for any other man who dares to kiss me after this, showing them that he has already claimed this territory and doesn't share.

Ever.

Ridiculous, insane, stupid thoughts because this man doesn't even know my name, yet in this moment, as his mouth dominates mine, pushing everything else away from my mind and setting my body on fire... I can't help but feel as though I'm his.

And what a glorious experience it is to be his.

His kisses should be forbidden, because they threaten my sanity and make me wish for things that should horrify me.

He groans when I palm his head and plaster myself tighter against him as the sizzling kisses continue. We fall down the abyss where secret desires rule and urge you to cross to the dark side because pleasure awaits you in every corner.

A place I've never been before this kiss.

My lungs cry out for oxygen, but if breathing entails ending this kiss, then I don't want or need it.

His hands slide down to my hips, where he grips me so hard a flash of pain shoots through me that causes me to jerk forward, hitting the hard bulge in his pants. Hot flashes blaze through me, one after another, while my core dampness even more, needing the friction to reach the impossible peak.

He tears away from me as I gulp for breath. My nails sink into his neck. I need to hold him closer so he doesn't vanish and leave me unsatisfied in this inferno he's awakened inside me that craves one thing only.

Pleasure.

He fists my hair, tilting my head back and exposing my neck to his demanding mouth. When he skims his lips over my flesh, his stubble leaves stinging sensations in its wake. He breathes in my scent, the bulge in his pants growing and pressing into me. I gasp again and then moan when he repeats the action over and over again, my panties becoming soaked. "Please, kiss me." I pull at his hair so he can ravish me in the night, but instead of listening to me, he opens his mouth wide on the soft skin between my neck and shoulder and sucks it hard. Pain zips through me in waves, mingling with the thrill. Knowing he has marked me gives me a heady sensation, creating a haze around my mind.

The thought is so insane I don't stop to examine it or think rationally, because logic and reality do not exist between us.

When he holds me in his arms, I'm a woman in a protective and sensual bubble designed for my pleasure and

desire alone while the handsome stranger shows me what it's like to come alive in the arms of another.

My fingers tangle in his hair, letting him have his fill until he flicks his tongue over my skin, and I wonder what it would feel like on my nipples and....

My cheeks burn just at the carnal thought, and a moan slips past my lips as I imagine it swiping over my folds and him getting me off with his mouth.

My core spasms and my breathing becomes heavier. I can almost feel him smile like he can guess my thoughts.

For all the experience he displays, maybe he indeed can.

He connects our mouths again, and relief fills my every cell as he rubs his length up and down, driving me insane with each swipe.

We breathe against each other and then groan when he thrusts forward, the tip of his erection tapping against my clit. My insides scream at me to pull him so close there will be no space between us and the tensions swirling in my veins and boiling my blood will erupt in a blissful ending.

“Kiss me,” I order, my voice raspy and needy, but who cares?

Nothing matters as long as he continues to give me things I never knew existed.

His chuckle echoes between us, the sinister and wicked sound sending sensations straight to my core, dancing on the edges of my nerves and enhancing the lust that's trapped me in its tangled web from where there is no escape.

He nips my chin before he swipes his tongue over my lips and slips it inside my mouth, this time gentler and slower than the previous times, yet still heated in its intensity.

He explores my mouth in even strokes, teaching me to follow his lead, and stakes ownership over something that doesn't belong to him.

For he is just a stranger in the night who will be my one mistake sacrificed at the altar of my lust and sensuality.

Each flick and lick he delivers drives me closer and closer to the pleasure waving on the horizon, whispering to me to let go and accept the inevitable.

Whatever that is.

I tighten my legs around him, and he swallows my moan as he thrusts against me again, thousands of sensations rushing through me, seeking something only he has the power to give me.

And then the sounds coming from outside burst our bubble with a deafening bang, and we both freeze.

“Aileen!” someone calls from far, far away, but it won’t be long before they come here, and mortification fills me at the picture that might be awaiting them.

And just like that reality comes crashing back at me.

“Who are you?” I ask, need still zapping through me as my body cries for not getting what was promised; however, another emotion joins it.

Guilt.

What if the man sent the letter to another Aileen, and I dared to touch someone else’s man?

Hot burning sensations wash over me, so ugly in their nature it makes me nauseous at just the idea of this man doing anything like this to another after what we shared.

Oh my God.

I’m such an idiot, and I cannot believe these are the thoughts that I’m having right now.

He lowers me until my heels touch the floor. I adjust my dress and ask again in the silence that weighs heavily on me without his touch, “Who are you?” I pray like hell he isn’t anyone’s husband or fiancé. If he gives me his name, I will be able to check it on the guest list.

Or put a face to a man who set me aflame, exploding lustful fireworks in my world.

He trails his fingers over the mark he made, lingering on it, as my skin tingles at the contact. Then he spins around and strolls to the door as if nothing happened.

“Wait!” I hurry to him and grip his suit jacket, tugging him toward the light. I get a flash of dark hair and a puckered scar on his neck that makes me gasp in shock. “What happened to you?” The question is out before I can think, and by the tension replacing any earlier emotion, I know it was the wrong thing to ask.

In fact, it feels as if the temperature dropped by fifty degrees, sending chills down my spine.

He shifts, staying hidden in the dark again, and his hand wraps around my wrist, the hot touch burning me because I can feel his anger.

Acting on pure self-preservation alone, I let go of him, and he strides to the door, his shoes thumping on the floor and somehow signaling finality with each step.

The minute he leaves, the silence settles around me and then is interrupted when someone yells again, “Aileen!”

I’ve just kissed a stranger who has no name or a face.

And the only thing I can think of are the scars marring his body.

Who would have been so cruel to put him through so much pain?

*R*ush

Adjusting the mask on my face, I smile at the passing people as I snatch the whiskey glass from the tray and gulp it, the alcohol washing away Aileen’s taste in my mouth, for the desire burning in my veins right now cannot stop me from my path.

Even if my mouth has never tasted anything sweeter or more innocent. Her surprised moans still echo in my ears and harden my dick just imagining her inexperienced hands wrapped around it as she discovers sex for the first time.



Too bad seducing her has never been part of my plan, because princesses spend too much time in their heads, instead of noticing reality around them.

Mainly focusing on that ex-boyfriend of hers who is such a perfect prince on the outside—and equally perfect on the inside—dutifully searching for her among the crowd ever since he arrived.

For all the talk about the breakup, and I heard everything—after all, I wired her room—and giving her opportunities to date other guys, Pierre still harbors the hope of ending up with her.

Guess his childhood crush has transformed into something else, while Aileen will never see the man in him. If she did, her body would have responded to him by now.

A knight in shining armor, a prince worthy of the princess, who dreams about marrying her someday and has been at her side for almost forever, whose entire world lights up whenever his gaze lands on her.

Truth be told, I never expected him to be such a saint, although watching him kiss my future captive, even if she despised it, ignited unexplainable rage inside me, and I wanted to push him away and then deliver the point with my fist to never touch what belongs to me.

For the time being.

Except such barbaric behavior would hardly suit my nature, and besides... I'm not interested in claiming the princess.

Still, too bad he is such a saint, because an imprint of my fist would have looked good on him.

Elena follows him, sorrow hiding in her orbs, although she smiles at all the guests they pass while giving discreet looks at Pierre, who stays oblivious to the fact.

Ah, someone has a crush on her best friend's ex-boyfriend.

Well, Elena can thank me later for the gift I'm about to deliver to her.

For Aileen will be gone soon, and she will have the opportunity to seduce the prince while her best friend fights for her freedom with a villain.

After all...

Life is unfair.

And I'm going to show everyone how much.

## *A*ileen

Leaving the greenhouse, I inhale the evening air into my lungs, hoping to calm my rapidly beating heart as fear glides over me, nipping my nerves and painting various pictures in my head while my body still buzzes with heat and lust that spreads fire in my veins.

My God, what just happened?

Placing my fingers on my sore lips from the kisses delivered to me by a stranger, the kind I've never experienced before, I jerk at the tingles still present. The masculine scent blankets me, leaving traces behind and urging me to believe what just happened really did happen, and it isn't me going crazy.

A man ravished me in the greenhouse in the dark, awakening my body in ways I never anticipated and showed me what lust and desire truly entail in all their glory, while all the kisses I've had before pale in comparison. I'm not sure how they could even be called kisses.

My fingers slide to my neck, tracing over the skin where he sucked harshly, wondering if he left marks on me for everyone to see. Without thinking about it too much, I remove the pins from my hair, letting it cascade down my shoulders and hiding the blemishes from view.

Somehow, I don't want to share them with anyone while I still do not comprehend what happened.

It might be my dirty little secret, and why does this idea excite me so much?

Is this the need everyone spoke about when they told me someday I would want sex?

The ache in my core and the dampness make it slightly uncomfortable to walk, and despite the confusion and being horrified of experiencing something like this with a stranger, I crave more.

To satisfy the hunger growing deep inside me when I remember his passionate kiss and how my hands rested on his carved muscles, welcoming his towering form over mine, loving how his arms and presence never allowed me to forget about the moment or want to push him away.

“Stop, Aileen, stop,” I order myself, walking through the garden, my heels clicking on the asphalt, and I finally see the mansion in the distance, so I speed up my pace. “It was a mistake.”

A mistake I would repeat over and over again though if he inspired all these emotions inside me.

That’s when I see Pierre, his brown orbs glistening in worry, running toward me with Elena hot on his heels. “Aileen!” He calls my name, reaching me and wrapping his familiar arms around me, pressing me close to his chest. “Are you all right, *chérie*?”

His arms have always conveyed trust and warmth, but now my hands itch to free myself from the embrace that seems too... too intrusive after what happened in the greenhouse.

Even though we broke up two months ago, I can’t help but feel like I’ve just cheated on him with a mystery man who managed to do what Pierre never could.

Make me crave carnal pleasures, turn me on to the point where only the ache in my core matters and the outside world ceases to exist.

It might be a mistake, but this mistake proved what Pierre suspected all along.

I do not see him as a man at all and never did.

“Yeah. Why?” I ask, my voice unusually raspy, and finally step away. I tilt my head back to meet his eyes roaming over me. His brows furrow before some kind of realization hits him. “I just needed fresh air.” As lies go, this one should be believable enough. I don’t see the point in explaining how someone lured me into the greenhouse under the pretense to meet Pierre.

And the dreaded encounter turned into a scorching one.

“Well, you certainly found more than just fresh air.” His tone drops a few octaves, becoming icy cold to my surprise. “I guess it proves to me that you reached a decision.” For a second, pain flashes on his face, but he forces his mouth into a smile. “I hope you are happy, *chérie*.”

“Pierre, what are you talking about?” I ask in confusion, but he shakes his head and spins on his heel, marching back to the mansion.

Elena snatches a handkerchief from her small purse and extends it to me. “Your lipstick is smeared.”

Embarrassment along with horror sink into my bones at the prospect of Pierre seeing all this, and I groan loudly, taking the cloth and quickly wiping my mouth.

I never wanted to hurt him like this, but I think even he convinced himself we were in love.

What do we know about love anyway... at this age, without having any experience?

“So he knows—”

“That you made out with someone so much your lips are red and you have a natural blush on your cheeks? Yep, I think he does.” A certain bite laces her tone, and fury sparkles inside me at her judgment. She’s my friend; shouldn’t she be on my side?

Besides, we broke up, and all this is hardly my fault. I didn’t go out trying to find a man.

“It’s all a big misunderstanding. And we are not together anymore anyway, so I don’t owe anyone an explanation.” I’m

even grateful Pierre saw it all, so he has no illusions about us. He should have ended it a long time ago and not waited for me to change my mind. He's so great; any girl would be happy to be with him, and he deserves that kind of devotion.

"I know," she replies, then sighs and rubs my arm. "Are you okay? I didn't know you were seeing someone. Who is he?" A wicked smile stretches her lips while she bumps her shoulder into me, winking. "A sexy hunk who seduced a good girl?" She fans herself. "He must be handsome if you preferred him to Pierre."

Isn't that a good question?

Because indeed.

Who is he?

Sexy or not... handsome or not... a man entered my life like a powerful storm, rocking my usual existence and turning the world on its axis, dumping me into a blazing ocean that has introduced me to a heat and fire I never knew before.

Somehow, right now, despite the lust still shaking me, I wish he'd never done it.

Because the lust and desire threaten to break the golden cage surrounding my life.

And how do I live without it?

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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*“Who wins the war?*

*The one who has the best strategy, and his nature is ruthless to  
execute it.*

*Things I have in abundance.”*

*Rush*

*A*ileen

Resting my head against the car seat, I exhale a heavy breath while watching the ever-changing scenery through the window, and my heart speeds up, sending joy into every cell in my body, making me fall in love with my hometown all over again.

Although my short vacation in Texas was amazing, I missed home so much and couldn't wait to jump on the plane to fly back.

If I were skilled enough, I'd write a sonnet to it, filling pages and pages of undying confessions to my one true love.

Thousands of lights brighten my magnificent New York City, showcasing its beauty from the gorgeous architecture and museums holding some of the rarest art forms to the busy streets where people either rush to their destinations or stay long enough to taste the delicious food, enjoying their life to the fullest.

Galleries, theaters, parks.

You have everything in the palm of your hand and can explore to your heart's desire; all you have to do is wish for it here.

And traffic on the street, where hundreds of cars are jammed together at this hour, most probably everyone praying for it to end quickly so they can get to whatever activity they have planned next.

Everyone but me, because this quiet time allows me to study people or rather their genuine emotions.

Because when people rush toward something, they forget to school their features, and they wear their darkest thoughts and desires for everyone to see, making themselves vulnerable in the process.

Every flick of their eyelashes, their hectic movements, or the wrinkles displayed on their face showcase experiences and habits they lived and acquired through the years. And the most ironic thing about it all?

They don't even realize it.

Perception though has always been one of my best qualities, and that's why I decided to study psychology, as there is nothing more interesting to my curious nature than the human mind.

The discoveries are endless, which means it will always stimulate the curious hunger ingrained in me since birth.

A smile curves my mouth when I notice a group of girls gathering in front of a statue, holding a selfie stick and posing for photos while laughing uncontrollably and exclaiming in delight every few seconds. Judging by the excitement swirling around them and electrifying the air with anticipation, I suspect they are tourists who are discovering the magnificence of this city for the first time.

A girls' trip filled with fun and mischief to create many memories together, friendships that will survive the test of time, built on a trust where one can share their darkest secrets without facing backlash.

The kind I created a long time ago with my two best friends who, despite the distance separating us, will rush to me if anything ever happens.

I should invite Elena and Caroline over for the Thanksgiving break, because waiting until summer would be true torture.

The grin slips from my lips when another group of girls flashes in my head, reminding me that despite the goodness existing in this world and surrounding me, there are still people out there who are vicious and hideous in their nature.

My hand tightens around my phone, my palm almost burning from the contact, as the words spoken in the voice mail I received by accident still disgust and surprise me even though they shouldn't.

After studying psychology for the last four years and delving deep into depraved minds, I've come to expect that different emotions can push people into such horrific actions you wonder how they could have hidden their evilness for so long.

And there isn't a dark emotion polluting your mind to the point you no longer recognize that envy and jealousy drive a person to harm the object who, according to them, possesses something they should've had, and do not deserve the riches destiny has bestowed on them.

*“Okay, I just told her we changed our plans and decided to do our project at Al's house instead of the library. She's anal about her grades, so she will show up; she has no choice. She's never drunk before, so make sure to slip some alcohol into the soda along with the pill. I'll tell her we girls will be running late so you guys will be the ones to greet her. Al decided to be the one to fuck her first, and the other guys will follow. Can you imagine her face when she wakes up and realizes what happened to her? I can't wait. I can guarantee this will work for us, it always does. Some bitches have to learn the hard way they aren't better than us.”*

Pressing the button, I roll the window down and welcome the freezing-cold wind slapping my cheeks and bringing relief



to my heated skin from anger while rage fills my bones, cocooning my pain and replacing it with fierce determination.

The group of girls planned a crime just because they felt threatened by my status and intelligence that resulted in me getting the internship they all coveted.

They don't deserve my mercy, and for the first time ever, I'm going to retaliate and put them all in their places.

Evil tests boundaries all the time, trying to see how far it can go, and someone needs to teach it a lesson of when to stop.

I slide my phone open and quickly type a message to my uncle and attach the audio to it.

He will know what to do, and these girls and guys will never have an opportunity to plan something like this again, so no one will ever suffer from their hateful and monstrous ways.

My heart breaks thinking about the other people who fell into the trap and might have been hurt but obviously never reported it.

Jeremiah, our family driver, speaks up. "You'll get cold, Aileen." He turns the vehicle right onto a slightly less busy street, and with the added speed, the wind slaps me harder, whipping over my body.

Wrapping my arms around myself and burrowing deeper into my coat, I extend my hand outside and enjoy the light rain drops on my palm. "I need the fresh air if you don't mind. Besides, you know this weather is my favorite."

Among my family, I'm the only one who runs outside the minute there's a hint of rain.

I guess being an autumn baby made the season extra special for me.

He catches my reflection in the rearview mirror, worry crossing his kind eyes, and wrinkles on his forehead deepen when he frowns, probably noticing something strange in my voice.

The man has worked for my family since I was born, so he knows me better than his own grandkids—or so he claims.

“Everything all right, honey?”

Mustering a smile for his sake, I nod and shift my gaze back to the road, not wanting to give him a chance to delve deeper and make me spill the truth.

He would feel obligated to inform my parents, and although I crave to punish those kids, which my uncle ultimately will do, it would be nothing compared to the mayhem and nightmare their life would become if my father got to hear about it.

Every single one of them would wish they were never born.

Once you prey on the weak, there is nothing that will save you from Lachlan Scott’s wrath, but more importantly... no one hurts his family and lives.

Especially not my mother—the queen—and me, the princess of the castle.

I love my father to pieces, but his hands should not be smeared in the dirt of my college classmates who decided to deceive me.

Jeremiah checks something on the GPS after we turn onto the narrow road between two massive, dark buildings sporting various cracks in them. Two cats run around the street filled with a weird smell that disturbs my nostrils. “Are you sure the address is correct?” he asks, studying the environment around us as the picture greeting us becomes grimmer and grimmer the farther we drive.

Voices echo on the street, mingling with the cats’ loud meowing, yet there are no people in sight. “Doesn’t look like your scene, honey.”

“Yeah, the address is correct.” Sliding forward and grabbing the front seat to stay steady, I lean closer to Jeremiah and look at my phone screen before glancing back to his GPS, comparing the locations. “Maybe the shop will be visible once we get off this road?”

Jeremiah shrugs. “Maybe.” Although judging by his tone, he doubts it; tension fills the car as his hold on the steering

wheel tightens.

He slides my window shut and presses the accelerator. “I’m sure we can find what you’re looking for somewhere else. Whoever gave you this location tried to fool you.” He pauses and winks at me over his shoulder. “All you have to do is mention your name.”

My father built his billion-dollar empire from the ground up, even though he came from rags.

Or so the legends say. He almost never speaks about his past, and we’ve learned to never discuss it, suspecting it must have been a very hard one to withstand since we have no living blood relatives from his side.

He made the name Scott one of the most powerful in the country, and the world, allowing us to live in abundance and luxury our whole life. Every member of the family who possesses his name is known as a force to be reckoned with.

Invitations to exclusive parties, private planes, expensive diamonds, and designer clothes no one else will ever have. Our reputation precedes us wherever we go, and all the riches this world has to offer lay at our feet.

However, what my father and our family possess, they earned with hard work, blood, and sweat.

One of the reasons our wealth never went to our heads, and we’ve learned to wear it wisely and rarely used it as a bargaining chip to get something.

Because there will always be people ready to please the Scotts, thinking the powerful family will owe them a debt they can cash in sometime in the future.

And if there is something my family hates more than disgusting humans... it’s owing a debt.

Collectors always come knocking on your door when you least expect it.

Besides, if I use inside connections to get the thing I’m looking for, my father will hear about this. And since it’s a surprise, finding it somewhere else is not an option.

“No, it has to be here. It will be the perfect gift—”  
Whatever else I want to say finishes with my loud yelp when he stops the car abruptly, my splayed palm on the front seat the only thing saving me from banging my head on it.

“Sorry, Aileen,” Jeremiah quickly apologizes, exhaling a breath, and I realize we’ve reached a dead end. A brick wall blocks our way, and the street lights flicker several times before they go out and cover the street with complete darkness.

“What the hell?” I mutter while Jeremiah snatches his phone and dials a number, pressing it to his ear summoning the security team trailing me twenty-four seven.

The security my father thinks I have no idea about.

If he only knew how many times I’ve tricked them into thinking I’m at a certain place only to be at another, he’d fire them all, but then again, my lips are sealed.

Uneasiness rushes through my system, awakening every hair on my body while my pulse races along with my mind playing images in my head, one darker than the other.

Was finding this place a trap? Did someone intentionally create a listing so I would come here? Was it all—

A knock on the windshield snaps me out of my dramatic hysterics, and my brows furrow in confusion when a man smiles widely at me. “Ms. Scott, I presume?” Blinking several times at the odd man as he adjusts his glasses on his nose and runs his hand over his gelled-back gray hair, I notice his mustache and beard, which almost cover his entire face, shift a little from the wind.

He’s freakishly tall too, around six foot four, and is wearing a large, turtleneck sweater along with slacks, which creates a rather comical picture. Everything about the man seems... out of sorts, as if he borrowed the clothes from someone else and, despite his best efforts, cannot make the style his own.

I nod, and his grin only widens. “I’m so glad you found the way. Please come with me. My shop is right there.” My gaze

follows his pointing finger and spots a slightly opened door among the bricks, the colors almost merging and making it invisible to clueless bystanders.

Jeremiah unsnaps his seatbelt, gets out of the car, and addresses the man. “I don’t think so.” I huff in exasperation when a dark vehicle pulls behind us, two men jumping out and pointing guns at the shop owner who doesn’t even flinch.

Instead, amusement flashes on his face, his dark eyes almost unreadable, and to my shock, he winks at me. “You don’t like to shop alone, do you, Ms. Scott?”

I’ve had enough of this absurdity.

My knee-high boots thump loudly on the ground when I finally get out of the car, my plaid skirt plastering against my legs at the harsh blast of air.

Shivering slightly from the cold, my sweater and open trench coat are hardly enough to keep me warm, I stretch my hand forward. “Mr. Richardson. Nice to meet you.” His warm palm barely grazes my skin, a powerful tension passing between us, and I still a gasp ready to emerge, surprised at such an odd reaction.

Clearly, earlier events in the garden with the stranger messed with my head, the exchange I’ve done my best to block from my mind, to never remember the demanding mouth owning mine, giving me heated kisses, which inspired scorching lust that I’ve never known and have only added to the humiliation.

Although sometimes I think it was all just a figment of my imagination to cure me from my guilt toward my childhood boyfriend once and for all. Clearly, whatever we had couldn’t be called love, because he never once inspired such reactions in me.

Shaking my head at the confusing thoughts, I focus on the present and tug on my hand still trapped in his. I must have imagined our bizarre reaction just seconds ago, but why is he still holding my hand?

He lets go almost instantly, chuckling slightly, only adding to the frustration and anger increasing behind me.

The security unit comes closer, almost breathing down my neck, ready to shoot the minute Mr. Richardson makes one wrong move. “I do apologize for the greeting, but you have to admit the location of your shop is quite strange. Buyers can’t help but feel suspicious.”

He takes out a cigarette and lights it up while firing a question at me. “Buyers or cowards?” The tension after his words escalates to epic proportions, the air almost electrified with fury from all the men surrounding me, and I can almost feel it touching my skin. For the first time, I detect a dangerous energy radiating from the shopkeeper, almost casting a shadow on me, as if ready to trap me at any moment and kill the other men.

And the thought is so ridiculous I barely hold back my laughter, because just the idea of this old man—who’s probably in his sixties—being capable of anything physical is hilarious.

If the confrontation happened tonight, his blood would be the one to smear the concrete under our shoes.

Although he probably doesn’t appreciate being cornered like this.

Glancing over my shoulder, I issue a silent command, and the two guards finally lower their guns, albeit their hands hold them in tight grips, hating the insult the man threw their way.

Too bad, their wounded egos don’t interest me right now.

Focusing my attention back on the seller, I ask, “Shall we proceed, then? I don’t have all the time in the world to waste.” More like dread them tattling on me to my dad who’ll ask a hundred questions, and I can never keep any secret very long under his interrogation skills.

If Lachlan Scott wants to know something, he’ll get it out of you by whatever means he deems necessary.

“Aileen—” Jeremiah starts, but my harsh stare stops whatever else he wants to say. “Very well. We’ll be waiting

here.” His words, laced with warning, are addressed more to Mr. Richardson, who chuckles once again, somehow finding the probability of him dying funny.

At this point, I start to question his sanity, because what normal man doesn't at least show an ounce of fear when a gun is pointed at him?

He motions to the door that he reaches in two short strides, disappearing inside, while I follow him, hoping I've made a wise decision.

But then only a psycho would consider hurting a woman when she has people watching over her, right?

A tobacco-mixed-with-dust smell greets me, irritating my nose and making me sneeze. I do my best not to cough from the smoke floating in the air from his cigarette and avoid stepping on the ash dropping on the concrete while we descend the stairs. The rusty walls reek of different sweet scents as if someone permanently smeared them in caramel, and I swallow the bile in my throat.

The only thought pushing me to walk farther into the basement is the beautiful antique piece, so unique only two more like it exist in the world, which only sparks the competitive streak inside me to possess it before someone else bids on it.

I fell in love the minute my eyes landed on it, mesmerized by the detailed artwork that should be displayed for everyone to see, and I wonder how such a creation was even possible.

It's the perfect gift for my father but more importantly a great symbol to celebrate the game we both love so much.

Otherwise, I'd walk right out, away from this weird-ass seller who doesn't even care about his customers, which, considering the prices he charges for his findings, is insulting to say the least.

“When a man possesses gold and diamonds, he has to guard it well. There are always thieves ready to snatch it from him at any moment, waiting for him to loosen his guard. Only a stupid man will ever allow it. Don't you think, Ms. Scott?”

“Please, call me Aileen.” Surprise travels through me at how disgusting my family name sounds on his lips, like he wants to spit it out and barely holds himself back from cursing at it. Musing on his words, I try to understand why he would say something so random to me.

Then it dawns on me. “You conduct business in this questionable place so no one unwanted ventures here?”

“Of course. This way I know whoever purchases from me truly wants it. If you’re not willing to go to the ends of the earth for the things you crave, you don’t deserve them.”

My brows rise at this philosophical approach that might cost him money, which is the main objective of an antique business, and at a bizarre conversation with a shopkeeper.

Nevertheless there are holes in his theory. “I would agree to disagree. Sometimes we don’t have a choice. We might desire things, but life goes in a different direction. Not everyone has an opportunity to fight ’till they get what they want.”

Sometimes, no matter how much you work, give all your heart and soul, devote all your time to it... things don’t work out the way you planned, and destiny spins everything on its axis.

I should know, since the throbbing ache in my right ankle constantly reminds me about that.

Mr. Richardson stops in front of a metal door, inserting a key and twisting it several times. “Empathy. An admirable quality, but unfortunately it’s a weakness evil people won’t hesitate to use against you.” He clacks his tongue. “Very dangerous emotion. Not everyone deserves our sympathy. You should be careful to whom you grant it.” His tone hardens at this, coating his voice in something almost sinister.

The earlier uneasiness washes over me once again, my stomach flipping while my heart accelerates... almost as if I’m standing on the edge of a cliff where nothing but endless ocean awaits me, ready to swallow me whole, pulling me to the bottom, and not resting until I drown in it.



He opens the door wide, giving me room to walk in. Rubbing my hands together, I enter a spacious basement lit by a bright light with what seems like endless rows of counters holding gorgeous artifacts glistening under the chandelier hanging from above.

By how the crystals reflect around the golden frame casting a glow on the place and creating a cozier atmosphere, softening the harsh lamps, I guess it is one of the pieces he plans to sell. The exquisite design must be dated back to the eighteenth century and would look amazing in my parents' living room.

"It's pretty," I say, walking farther into the room. My boots click on the spotless brown parquet, the sound of each step mixing with the jazz music echoing through the space, adding to the magical environment around me—because every object hidden behind glass or standing around me has been on this earth longer than I have.

Thankfully, different scents float in the air here, old wood and something they must use to keep the products polished. I inhale freely as excitement glides over my skin, for a second replacing every other emotion, because the beauty around me is surreal.

My love for pretty things ultimately will become my downfall, according to everyone, because when my mind loves something, it cannot help but seek ways to get it.

Mr. Richardson closes the door firmly, and I spin around to see him walk behind the register counter and kneel. "Your item is here. I put it away so it wouldn't catch anyone else's wandering eye."

"How thoughtful of you." Although, I highly doubt he has done it because of them; the price he set for it is by all standards too high, and any experienced antique shopper would know it. He probably thinks my young, naïve self isn't aware of that.

Giving a longing glance to all the other pieces, I focus my attention on the man and come closer to him as a few rattling sounds echo in the space.

He gets up, placing a black leather box on the counter between us. “Early twentieth century chess set. You won’t find it anywhere else in the country.” He flicks the locks open, and a wooden black-and-brown chessboard comes into view, shining so brightly I can’t resist brushing my fingers over the polished wood, tracing one of the squares. Several scratches mark the board; someone must not have been gentle with it, and the need to purchase it becomes even greater.

Perfection bores me to death. I much prefer artwork that survives through the years even if it’s slightly less than stellar. A certain kind of powerful energy dances around it, fueling something inside me. “Beautiful,” I whisper, tracing the pads of my fingers lower toward a small lock in the middle, binding the two halves together. Without waiting for permission, I open it and gasp at the sight of the ivory pieces, precisely cut, showcasing every small detail.

Wrapping my hands around my favorite chess piece, a pawn, I lift it to my face and examine the work, loving how it’s slightly bigger than the modern pieces.

*Resting my chin on my palm, I sigh heavily, dangling my legs above the floor as we sit in the living room. “Daddy, this game is stupid,” I grumble, growling slightly when he moves his knight several steps and takes my bishop, coming dangerously close to my king and queen.*

*I never should have agreed to learn this game. All I do is lose at it. But he always looks so engrossed in it whenever he plays with his opponents, who he destroys one after another, that I couldn’t help but want such skill as well.*

*He laughs, grabbing his coffee and sipping it while watching me closely. “Why, princess?”*

*“Because it has so many pawns and only five powerful pieces. Isn’t it stupid? I would have preferred more bishops or knights, rather than useless pawns.” I huff again, crossing my arms and glaring at the chessboard filled with my pawns on his side with only two remaining on my side.*

*Daddy taps on my nose and winks at me. “The strength of the pawn lies in its weakness.”*

*Blinking in confusion, I tilt my head to the side, curiosity sparking inside me. “How so?”*

*“Eight pawns are the ones you use the most to make all your moves. They protect the king and the queen while allowing the knight and bishop to move forward and conquer the enemy. The pawns are ready to sacrifice themselves to ensure the safety of their side. They are collateral damage.”*

*“But weakness is not something people admire, Daddy!”*

*“No game can be won without the pawns, and this makes them the strongest piece in the game.”*

I smile when I think about countless games played with my dad all these years, sometimes one lasting for weeks because neither of us wanted to give up.

The desire to always win lives in our blood, which annoys Mom.

It took me years to appreciate my father’s artistic approach to the game, to make it more interesting for his five-year-old child, because in the grand scheme of things, chess is about checkmating the king. You can win the game without even losing any pieces, and you don’t need lyrical words to describe the process. But giving them all purpose and living, breathing characteristics amazed me so much it quickly became my addiction.

I sometimes wonder if my father has more knowledge about the human mind than I ever will by studying psychology.

Mr. Richardson clears his throat, bringing me back to the present and reminding me of my whereabouts. “You’re quite enamored with it.” A beat and then, “Shouldn’t you admire other pieces first?” I don’t miss the distaste lacing his tone as he throws the pawn a dismissive look.

“No, it’s my favorite.”

He laughs, although it lacks any humor; instead, it only electrifies the aura around him, creating a sinister vibe that radiates from him.

“Let me guess, your favorite is the king?” Based on the behavior he’s displayed so far, I can assume he loves everything that brings power and more power, having no regard for weaknesses. Maybe it arises from his own character or lack thereof.

“King? No. He’s a coward. A true king doesn’t need to hide behind his queen and everyone else. He meets the enemy head-on.” Surprise rushes through me, along with confusion, because the description doesn’t really make sense to me. He acts as if the king is a real person instead of a symbol of a winning game. “A knight is my favorite. Unique moves and determination. Conquering and expanding territories. He protects everyone else.”

“The bishop protects the queen.”

“The bishop wouldn’t be able to protect the queen if it wasn’t for the knight.”

What kind of warped logic is this?

Everything about this man and his shop is beyond odd, so placing the pawn back into the box, I shut it and say, “The item fits the description. Just tell me where you need me to send the money, and we can put an end to this meeting.” Snatching my phone out of my coat pocket, I’m ready to transfer the amount he initially asked, merely waiting for his information, but he only grins. It seems as though his beard is hanging on his chin by a thin thread.

One wrong move and it will fall down.

Such thoughts prove my body is exhausted from all the events happening lately and I need to rest.

“Generosity has many forms on this earth. The ones that are genuine and the ones we showcase to get something in return.” Doesn’t the second observation contradict the first one? He must read a question in my eyes, as he elaborates, “You have a real passion for the game.” He taps on the box. “Only those who truly love it should play it with such art pieces. Otherwise, it’ll be so disappointing.”

Ignoring his creepy statement while simultaneously texting Jeremiah to get the car ready, signaling I'll be out soon, otherwise to come look for me, I prompt, "Your account number?"

Mr. Richardson slides the box toward me until it bumps into my stomach and announces, "Let it be my gift to you. You surprised me, and rarely anyone manages to do that."

I plaster a polite smile on my face while internally struggling not to scream, because clearly the man has an agenda on his mind.

He either wants something from my father or thinks his gift will give him connections to the Scotts.

A connection he might use to his advantage in the future.

He wouldn't be the first who tried it, but just like everyone else before him, his dream will crash and burn. "There is a saying, Mr. Richardson, that one of my uncles has taught me." His brow rises at my words, so I continue, hoping he gets the hint by my ice-cold tone. "Free cheese lies only in the mouse trap." Amusement flickers in his orbs along with surprise before his face becomes unreadable again. "If you feel the need to be generous, give your money to charity. Now, please tell me your account number if you want to sell the chessboard. Otherwise, I'm going to walk out now." He opens his mouth to protest it seems, but my splayed palm stops him. "Your account number?"

For some reason, people assume my compassionate nature means I'm a pushover and a fool who will allow anyone to walk all over me, but I was raised differently.

My resolve and anger are quiet, like a brewing storm only the most experienced captains can see coming. Because when it hits in full swing, destroying everything it touches, people don't know where to hide or what to expect next.

Everyone is deserving of my empathy until they show me otherwise, and then?

The fortresses guarding my emotions are forever closed to them.

I don't give people an endless number of chances to hurt me. One is enough.

"I have to say, Ms. Scott, you continue to surprise me." He takes out a phone from his pocket and puts it on the counter where an account number is displayed. "Send it here."

I quickly type the numbers. "Done." His phone pings with a confirmation message, so I grab the box, lift it up, and before spinning around and marching toward the door, I say, "Thank you, and I hope you'll have a nice day." Without waiting for his reply, I reach the door in three short strides and quickly go out.

Exhaling in relief, I walk toward the exit while thinking that, for the first time in my life, I almost lost my composure—with an elderly shopkeeper of all people!

Maybe this is just one of those days... where nothing goes according to plan and instead bursts into flames.

Pressing the box closer to me, I try to find comfort in the knowledge I secured the gift for my father and how much fun we will have playing it together with Levi, my brother, this weekend when he's home for a visit.

But strangely the comfort doesn't come, and the uneasiness sinking into my veins and traveling through my blood remains, as if signaling I won't ever know peace again.

*R*ush

Shutting the door behind her, I crack my neck from side to the side while enjoying the music gliding over my skin and awakening every hunting instinct inside me, reminding me the prey has just been close to me, and her scent still fills the air, almost making me regret letting her go.

Almost, because the perspective of how much pain it will bring her family when I execute my plan is too big an aphrodisiac to ignore.

My laughter bounces off the walls as I walk toward the back door, my leather shoes thumping loudly on the wooden

floor.

I grab the whiskey bottle hidden behind the counter and, flicking it open, gulp the liquid, welcoming the burning sensations in my throat.

Wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, I finally reach the mirror and grin at my reflection showing a man in his sixties who looks as if he borrowed his costume from Santa.

Slowly, I tear away the fake mustache, beard, and lenses along with the horrible fucking wig scratching my skull, then drop them in the trashcan—next to which the real Mr. Richardson lies, breathing heavily and snoring loudly. He should wake up in a few hours with a lot of money in his bank account, so my debt to him is paid.

The fucker didn't want me to borrow his personality willingly, claiming that deceiving his clients is not his business policy, despite the five million I offered for his services.

Too bad for him, I have little regard for people who stand in my way, but then again, considering his age and morals, the villain inside me displayed kindness and gently inserted the needle, allowing him to fall to the couch easily, not harming a hair on his body.

The things I do for this plan—someone should give me an award.

However, to get my hands on the prize, I had to personally sell the box, my very own Trojan horse, and just imagining Lachlan's face once he discovers its true meaning has the power to amuse me to no end.

Shaking my head and running my fingers through my hair, I finally see a green-eyed man whose orbs glisten in anticipation and victory, almost creating an illusion of the devil coming from hell to trap his latest soul.

Or Hades ready to claim his Persephone but without the permission of her father Zeus. Although her mother's suffering would rival that of Demeter.

Pain, so much pain, lies in the future for the Scotts, and every despicable part of me cannot wait to execute it.

To my utter disappointment, Aileen Scott proved to be one giant, naïve fool who wouldn't recognize danger even if it hit her.

Somehow, after the hundreds of reports gathered on her in the last months, which indicated to me her wild character, I expected her to share if not her father's ruthless nature, then at least her mother's ironclad resolve.

Instead, they raised a blooming rose and placed her in a glass cage, surrounding her with so much love and protection she doesn't recognize deception and believes in the greater good, compassion, and even mercy.

A delicate creature who came to this world unaware of the hideous monsters roaming the earth, ready to feast on her young flesh.

It's inevitable.

Vulnerability has a certain kind of a smell despicable humans recognize well and trail after until they can destroy it.

Ah, what a pity.

For a moment in time, I believed she might actually be an intriguing enigma, her eyes so crystal-clear, highlighted by long, dark lashes, that they reminded me of the night sky back home.

A home her father denied me when he issued an order that destroyed so many lives and buried me in the deception of his creation.

Familiar rage swirls around me, rushing through my veins and poisoning every cell in my body... where only hate and the desire to kill remain, filling the organ that pumps my blood with it to the brink, demanding I hurt Aileen in such a way she won't ever be able to return from the horrors inflicted on her.

Because only that has the power to shake the golden throne her father resides on and to snatch the invisible crown he



wears so proudly, the demon who crushed my life into tiny little pieces and never looked back.

Payback always comes one way or another, even to the underworld kings of New York.

Especially since he doesn't expect me to retaliate in such a way. He probably thinks I'll still abide by the rules he taught me.

*“Women and children are sacred. Innocent people are off limits. You don't use them. You don't blackmail with them. You respect the moral fucking code. Do you understand me? Because if you have no boundaries, it means your sanity is gone. And if sanity is gone, I will personally kill you.”*

Moral code? Sanity? Compassion toward the weak?

All of it went down the drain once I learned the truth, and if I must use Aileen Scott to get what I want? I will do so gladly and hurt her accordingly.

And the fucker won't have anyone else but himself to blame.

Nothing but a heartless villain resides in the depths of my soul, and anyone expecting otherwise is a fool ready to die.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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*“My family is so perfect people can write fairy tales about us,  
and almost all the facts will be true.*

*Except...*

*Even the most perfect families hide horrible secrets.”*

*Aileen*

*F*rom Aileen’s letters to Rush...

*Dear Rush,*

*Writing this letter will probably get me in big trouble. I’m not supposed to be sending any letters to grownups, but I’m willing to risk it.*

*Because aren’t you my best friend in the whole wide world? Or at least I assumed so when you found me crying on the stairs after that nasty group of kids called me names at school. Although I think you said it only to calm me down, because your shirt was soaked from my tears and you couldn’t find Daddy so he could handle my situation.*

*Nevertheless, I consider you my friend and the noble knight at the round table (I secretly think Daddy is a king, but don’t tell anyone. They’d say I’m silly.) deserving the highest of honors in this world.*

*Are you all right?*

*I haven’t seen you in forever at our castle, and Daddy’s forehead always creases in a frown whenever I mention your*

*name. He even told me to forget about you, as your heart became too dark to be around me.*

*What does it mean, Rush, and why did it happen?*

*Are you like the beast from the Beauty and the Beast fairy tale, where you've been rude to someone and a witch ended up casting a spell on you?*

*If that's the case, there is a solution for that. Maybe then the light will return to your heart and Daddy will allow you to come to the castle.*

*To be one of his knights again and see me of course.*

*All you have to do is fall in love with the beauty who will heal your soul and teach you how to be human.*

*You just have to find a woman brave enough to risk it all for you.*

*I hope this helps, Rush, because I really miss you. No one else shows me amazing drawings. Everyone just promises it will be better someday and people will love me.*

*You told me it doesn't matter if they do, because who cares what people think?*

*So, pretty please, Rush, break the curse and come back to the castle to ask Daddy's forgiveness.*

*PS: I think one of the maids in the castle has a crush on you, because she knows your address and agreed to send you my letter in secret. (Okay, so I totally bribed her with my puppy-dog eyes and pooched out my lip, begging her to find my friend and check if he is alive. Although, strangely enough, she shushed me several times and acted as if she would have a heart attack if my parents heard about this.).*

*Maybe she can break your curse though, so don't be too rude to her when she comes to deliver my message. She's very pretty and kind!*

*And if you are hurting and alone right now, just remember that because you're my friend I love you. So there is someone who can't wait to see you again.*

*Your friend,*

*Aileen*

*A*ileen

The loud screeching of the iron gate pierces through my sleep, and my eyes snap open. My mind's slightly hazy, but I lift my head from the window and notice we've reached home.

I must have dozed off on the way here, as the drive took almost an hour in evening traffic.

Sitting up straight and blinking away my sleep, I wave at the guards who nod at me, grinning, happy to see me home. You'd think I was absent more than a week, but then again when the majority of your staff have known you since you were a little girl wearing pigtails, they tend to get sentimental about your absence.

Jeremiah drives onto the long, narrow driveway leading to the huge, wide, brick building spread across the massive landscape located on the outskirts of the city.

The unique and gorgeous architecture of my parents' mansion includes several statues in arches that lure you inside yet try to inspire fear at the same time, as if you're entering dangerous territory where you might not know what you will face.

It serves as a warning to anyone daring to cross the borders if he hasn't been invited; my father doesn't take kindly to strangers entering his territory.

The two-storied structure has a lot of balconies, and most of the windows are made from stained glass, reminding me of the churches Mom used to take us to as kids. When the sun streams through them, colorful rays fall on the floor inside, creating a magical environment where I used to twirl for hours, my ballet tutu reflecting the light splendidly.

I thought angels descended from the sky to watch me practice various ballet moves, preparing for my performances,

and graced me with their blessing, allowing me to win all those awards gathering dust on the living room shelves, as my parents have a special place for my and Levi's trophies.

However, the trickiest feature of our Victorian-style house, which reeks of luxury and power, is the maze-like garden that reminds everyone of a hunting ground; that's how many twists and turns there are.

As children we used to pretend a horrible beast roamed inside it, seeking to trap us with no way of escape while hiding behind the beauty of the endless roses and orchids blooming so wildly the scent filled the air, creating a false sense of security.

Luring you to loosen your guard before someone would come to take your soul. At least a child's imagination created such vivid images.

It didn't stop us from running around there though; the many alcoves with benches served as our camps while we waited for the beast to come out and see if he might turn into a dashing prince.

Well, I did. Levi just wanted to beat the shit out of him.

As we drive farther onto the mansion grounds, the small, glassed building in the distance comes into view, the light still on, showing a figure in black attire swirling on the parquet. "Mrs. Valencia is still at the studio. Must be practicing the routine for the upcoming show."

"Yes, a lot of important people from the schools will come to check out Valerie, so Mom is working on creating a special dance for her. The choreography is insane. Valerie needs to get this scholarship, or she won't be able to continue her career."

My grandmother still sheds tears at the thought of me not following in my mother's footsteps to become a professional ballerina and conquer the dancing world.

Ballet has always been my mother's passion. She thrives from the energy it provides and has countless students all over the world who love her dearly.

So it was the most natural thing for me to fall in love with the dance as well after spending so much time in her studio, watching her perform, and dreaming about becoming as graceful as her someday.

By the time I was thirteen, I was already the best among my group and snagged a prima role in all the school shows, on track to one day give my all to the passion that consumed my every breath.

At some point though, after my devastating ankle injury that three surgeries failed to fix, my rigorous training started to ruin my relationship with Mom. The lines between mother and teacher blurred, creating something stiff in return that had no place for tender emotions or the amazing bond we shared.

Although giving it up almost killed me, that was when I decided to quit ballet, before it did more damage than good, locking away my eternal love for the dance that became a cruel memory in time and almost transformed me into a bitter shell of myself.

“Sometimes fate knows better, kiddo. What we love isn’t necessarily what we need,” Jeremiah says, piercing through my grim thoughts as he pulls the car up to the entrance where the butler already has the oak double door wide open for me, expecting my arrival.

Gathering the box in my arms, I pat Jeremiah on the shoulder. “I’ll take your word for it.” He wants to say something more, but I don’t bother to listen, because everyone pretending my injury was some kind of “good,” divine intervention is getting old and annoying. They have a soft spot for me and try to constantly reassure me, but it’s unneeded.

I accepted a long time ago that dream is forever lost to me.

“Thank you for the ride, Jeremiah.”

“Pleasure’s all mine, honey.”

Emerging from the car, I smile at William, the butler, who quickly takes the box from me. “Where should I put it, Aileen?”

I don't answer but ask my own question as we come up the stairs and reach the door. "Where's Dad?"

"Mr. Scott was in his office with the family."

Oh no.

Uncle Braden decided to involve Dad in my problem? The reason I messaged my mother's stepbrother was to avoid involving my family! Compared to my father and the other uncles, he stays calm enough in a storm to get legal involvement without serving up his own justice.

My stomach flips, dread sinking into my bones, and without replying I hurry along the spacious hallway, which is lined by strategically placed lights that showcase the decor's gold, red, and brown colors vividly creating a fairy-tale-like atmosphere around us as the shining marble glistens.

Beauty permanently resides here.

Expensive paintings acquired at outrageously pricey auctions hang on the walls, displaying Celtic myths centered around love and war, the endless stories of human sorrow that sacrifices something for the greater good.

The biggest form of compassion—or as my father calls it... complete foolishness.

*"People are selfish creatures, princess. No one will ever thank you for your sacrifices, because at the end of the day, people care only about themselves. So guard your heart well. Otherwise, it might burn on the altar of your compassion stomped on by the hideous creatures who only feed on greed and pain."*

Pulling my gaze away from the gory artwork that oddly is fascinating to me, I walk farther into the house, passing by the living room, zeroing my gaze at the end of the corridor where my father's office is located.

Classical music accentuates the Victorian-era atmosphere created by the expensive dark-oak furniture consisting of three couches, five chairs, and a round table that matches the lot. The same decor leads toward the ballroom and dining room, where my parents have their big events from engagement

parties to business mergers, hosting up to a hundred people, the richest of the rich. A set of double, glassed doors open into our lawn where people love to hang around the fountains, taking pictures but never truly venturing into the magnificent, scary garden.

Thankfully, the kitchen is located in a different direction and everything else is off limits to strangers, and the second floor fully belongs to us, keeping us secluded from prying eyes.

William trails after me, panting a little as I speed up, my heels clicking on the marble and probably already alerting Dad to our arrival, not that it matters.

I just hope to get there before Uncle Braden does irrevocable damage, tightening the border around my freedom, because Dad's protectiveness will skyrocket to epic proportions.

Nothing is more suffocating than life in a cage, even if it's invisible, golden, and loving.

I fling the door open and rush inside exclaiming, "Uncle —" The words get stuck in my throat though when the scene in front of me comes into view. My father is sipping whiskey as he sits behind the heavy wooden desk, leaning back in his leather chair, in the middle of a conversation with a guy occupying the chair opposite him.

Only that's not the family I expected.

Dad's crystal-clear blue eyes, just like mine, shimmer, focusing on me, and surprise flickers in them. His blond hair shines under the harsh light from the chandelier above, highlighting a few gray strands in them. As usual, he wears a three-piece suit tailored perfectly to his powerful, muscled form.

Despite being in his mid-fifties, Dad still has a dangerous and dominant aura emanating from him, which makes everyone around him subconsciously shy away from his stare or presence, as if the encounter can end up being deadly for them.



“Aileen. What a lovely surprise.” He gets up, finishes his glass, and puts it back on the desk before he opens his arms wide. “We expected you tomorrow.”

Without saying anything else, I reach my dad in four long strides, and instantly his strong arms wrap around me, squeezing me so hard that, for a second, I struggle to breathe. Instead of stepping back though, I shift my head to the side and rest my cheek on his chest, exhaling a heavy breath as calmness finally settles my nerves.

Ever since I was a little girl, no matter what scared me, all I had to do was find my dad, who made all my fears disappear, because who would have dared hurt me when he was near?

I cannot share what upset me so much tonight and how the loneliness of always being an outsider still breaks my heart.

Even though I couldn't care less about all these people, the knowledge my father would have slayed any dragon who breathed fire my way soothes some of the bleeding wounds inside me. “I just wanted to come home early,” I whisper against his chest, and he freezes, probably dwelling on my words, trying to find the source of the tremble in my voice, and then his hand runs over my hair gently.

“We're happy about that,” he replies, and my eyes close when his heartbeat under my ear slowly drains the tension from my body while gratitude fills my heart, because fate gave me a loving family that lets me soak up all their warmth without demanding anything in return.

Another hand joins Dad's, bumping against each other, and a shadow falls over me when the person leans to the side, clearly wanting to see my face, and the familiar scent of masculine cologne along with grass curves my mouth in a smile. Peeking one eye open, I see my blond-haired, blue-eyed brother watching me worriedly, a frown marring his forehead while his massive body blocks anything else from view.

A body he spends hours in the gym and field to keep in its best shape so he can perform to the best of his ability and hopefully become a professional athlete someday. “Hey, pretty

girl. Is everything all right?” he asks, his fingers brushing softly over my cheek and then tapping my nose.

“Never better.” My brows furrow after a beat. “What are you doing home so early though? Didn’t you have some important practice this week?”

He shrugs, relaxing a bit after my reassurance and sends a wink my way as a cocky smile widens his mouth. “Coach let us leave early. Turns out we both had great ideas to come home, huh?” He traps my nose between his fingers, pinching it a little, and I slap it away to his loud laugh. “At least you stopped frowning, pretty girl.” He glances to the side and points at William with his chin. “What’s in the box?”

Gasping, I lean back, ready to take the box, when Dad’s hands palm my face and tilt my head back, stilling my movements as his drilling stare scans my features. “Is everything all right, princess?” Despite this gentle hold, the tone itself implies I answer truthfully, because he will find out sooner or later.

“Yes, Dad. I’m okay, promise.” Lying through my teeth to my dad isn’t my highest moment, but that’s the best decision in the current circumstances. “Just the seller guy was a bit creepy, but I got what I wanted.” Wiggling free from his hold and nudging Levi in the stomach with my elbow for that pinch—he just chuckles, probably barely feeling anything—I move toward the desk and tap on it. “Please put it here, William.” He moves the few short steps and places it down carefully before dusting off the box with his white-gloved hand. “Thank you.”

He bows slightly, and since no one issues another order, he disappears into the hallway where he will wait by the door. Compared to most staff here, he hasn’t been working for us long, only a year, but despite being in his sixties, he still stays in surprisingly good shape. Even though Dad has a policy to never allow anyone inside the house until they’ve proven themselves on his other properties, he agreed to hire William inside after Mom reassured him the man hardly presented any danger.

The most striking thing about him though is that he always shows up when I might need something, helping me out or guessing my plans before I open my mouth.

Levi loves to joke that William must be my personal butler, since he seems to work only for me, and my orders are his top priority. He doesn't even shy away from my father, who barks at him to hurry up if he is busy with my things.

In fact, sometimes it almost feels as if my father isn't the one who signs his paychecks.

Which is strange, but since his work is always top notch, no one has seen a reason to fire him or question his integrity. And my mother finds it hilarious and claims they haven't had such a brave butler in a while.

"Creepy seller guy?" Dad's eyes flash dangerously, and I groan internally, already expecting him to summon Jeremiah here to question him about the man.

"He was just an old man who sells stuff. I think he was going for elusive and mysterious, but it turned out more gross and creepy." Dad scans me from head to toe as if deciding whether to trust me or not, so I shift his attention to something else, at least for the time being.

For my father never ever forgets anything.

Removing the lid, I exclaim, "Ta-da! What better way to celebrate our ten years of playing-chess-together anniversary than buying a vintage set dated back to the early twentieth century?"

"So you're counting since I joined the game too?" Levi takes out the chessboard and spins to face Dad, who places his splayed palm over the wood, gently tracing the light carving. "A chessboard with history. I like it."

"Indeed," Dad says, a rare smile gracing his mouth as he flicks the lock open, studying the pieces. He traps the king between his fingers and lifts it up. "Exquisite work. Would look perfect in my office."

I beam at his words, happiness spreading through me, because Dad really tries hard to show he cherishes all our

gifts. He usually never uses words to show his affection but does so by actions.

And somehow, this way his love fills every crack of our souls to the brink.

Levi frowns, rattling the chessboard a bit, and then points inside. “Why is there a different letter underside each piece?”

My brows furrow in confusion, and I lean closer, huffing in annoyance when indeed there are different letters carved on them. “I didn’t notice that back in the shop.” Pondering for a second, I ask Dad, “Do you think it’s fake, then?”

Instead, Levi replies, “Not necessarily. The English alphabet was invented by the fifth century. Maybe the original owner wanted to leave his signature on his pieces. You know, like *Josh was here.*”

“Yeah, because that’s what people in the twentieth century did. Carved messages on prized possessions. Maybe it was a designer who left his signature on the pieces?”

Levi rubs his chin, gluing his stare back on them, and clacks his tongue. “Designers didn’t claim their work by leaving imprints on the pieces back then. If anything the box itself should have carried their initials.” He closes it and then raises it above his head, searching for initials, but then lowers it, not finding any. “Nothing.”

“Or it can be a message,” Dad finally speaks up, his demeanor dimming, and the energy around us changes, becoming almost devilish while a light shiver rushes through me as if the temperature lowered several degrees.

Levi and I share a look, recognizing this very well, and wait for his next command that should be obeyed immediately.

When my father transforms from the warm man he presents to us to the ruthless one who decides to destroy someone or torture the secrets out of them he just became, we know to never question whatever he says.

This is an absolute law in this house.

“Leave them on my desk, Levi.”

My brother puts the chessboard back in the box, and while I know the status quo in the current situation, for the first time my life, I do not wish to stay silent or in the dark regarding them.

Something within me pushes to rebel. “Why? I wanted to play tonight. Everyone is here, and the old message hardly affects the game.”

“First, we need to check when the message was left. Then, I promise we will play.” Even though his voice stays calm, only an idiot wouldn’t notice the silent warning coating each word, almost ordering me to accept the terms without question.

However, to my shock, I can’t do that.

Mom always said my curious nature would land me in trouble someday, because my quick mind needs to know everything and soak up any information encountered on my way.

And while in most cases I manage to accept it, my father’s dark moods and his business has always raised hackles in the back of my mind, urging me to discover the darkness hiding behind it that everyone refuses to talk about.

On most days, I convince myself all of this is just part of my imagination. But when something like tonight rears its head, my curiosity increases tenfold, and I can no longer feed it with something else.

Crossing my arms, I fire another question. “Why does it matter when the message was left? In the worst-case scenario, someone sold me damaged goods. Why is that so scary we can’t play today?”

Levi’s brows rise at my resistance. Nevertheless, he turns around and throws his muscled arm over my shoulders, bringing me closer to him and surrounding me with his strength. “Yeah, Dad. What’s the harm in a little game?” My heart warms at his display of loyalty; no matter what trouble I end up in, Levi joins me by default, always taking half of the blame.

The best big brother a girl could wish for.

To my astonishment, pride fills Dad's gaze as he looks at us. "Defiance suits you, my daughter." He cups my cheek, wiping the frown from my face. "The reason is quite simple. If the message was left recently, then you could go back to the seller and demand a new deal. Get back your investment and maybe receive some other antique he has for a discounted price. Reputation is everything, and I doubt he'd want to lose it, especially with one of us badmouthing him. He'd simply have no business left."

My mouth drops at how brilliant his idea sounds, reminding me why my father is considered one of the most ruthless sharks in the corporate world. He knows how to play any situation to his advantage, manipulating people into getting what he wants, and that's what he's drilled into us since early childhood.

If you can get the upper hand and control your opponent, do so quickly and establish the power position.

"Score! Dad won this round, Aileen," Levi whispers in my ear and then groans when I elbow him hard in his stomach once again, catching his weak spot so he coughs a little from the blow. "So are we playing chess or not?"

Before anyone can reply, a soft yet stern voice speaks up. We swing our heads in sync toward it, as the woman it belongs to is truly the one who rules this mansion; to go against her word means trouble for everyone.

Even my father.

"My babies are home at the same time. There will be no chess tonight." She wiggles her index finger at our father, whose gaze heats instantly in her presence, which makes us roll our eyes. His obsession with her hasn't lessened through the years, and sometimes it really makes us feel awkward that they are still this much into each other.

But why wouldn't it?

Mom is a total knockout in her early forties; her silky brown hair still cascades down her spine in heavy waves while

her figure has stayed fit and slender due to her training every day. Dad growls at any man who so much as breathes in her direction; therefore, most everyone's eyes are on the floor in her company. "We're having a family dinner instead." Without further discussion, I walk to Mom and hug her tight, letting her vanilla scent blanket me as she hugs me back, rocking me in her arms, sharing her softness and warmth that's so different from my father's.

While Dad has always been a protector... Mom has been the one to push me to do the stuff my heart desires and never listen to anyone who thinks otherwise.

*"Sometimes, what or who you love the most might never be accepted by society, because it doesn't fit in the standard check box everyone is used to.*

*However, if you love it... truly love it, go after it no matter what. Because even evil has the color gray in it."*

Valencia Scott, a woman who, according to my uncles, tamed the beast, although I'm not sure why they consider my father one.

"Hi, Mama."

"Hi, darling." She grins at me, patting my cheeks as I lean back. "I cooked your favorite cake, the chocolate one." She kisses me on the forehead, murmuring against my skin, "Then you can play that damn game." A giggle slips past my lips, because everyone knows she loves watching us play but never stops complaining about it either. I move aside while Levi steps into Mom's empty arms—or rather, he picks her up, since he's twice her size.

And while standing in my father's office, soaking up the family energy all around me that protects me even during my darkest hours, I wonder if it's always going to be like this.

Finding solace in my family's presence, because whatever I do... I will never be judged within the walls of my family home.

Or will my curious nature inevitably break this bond by daring to do something even they would never be able to

accept?

**R**ush

Putting on my leather gloves, I stretch my fingers as a sinister smile shapes my mouth in anticipation of fresh blood.

Ah, nothing in this world compares to it.

The rusty, rotten scent that penetrates my nostrils and makes my head dizzy in a way nothing else ever could.

My boots thump loudly on the concrete as I stroll toward the brown, single-story house located in a quiet part of town, where a white picket fence “guards” the suburban territory.

My black clothes, turtleneck sweater and jeans, practically merge with the darkness all around me, making me part of it, which sends adrenaline rushing through my system and awakening every hunting instinct inside me, craving to inflict irrevocable damage to those who dared to harm my prey.

Or rather the beauty in the castle.

A princess who has my claim of ownership stamped on her, so every harm done to her serves as a personal offense to me.

And I don't ever forgive or forget.

Don't cross the villain if you don't wish to pay the price.

My knuckles tap several times on the wooden door vibrating from the heavy music blasting through the speakers, and by the silhouettes visible through the curtains, I can assume the party is in full swing.

The hunters decided to start celebrating before their prey even got here. Ah, the stupidity of humankind will never cease to amaze me.

Until you've trapped the prey, don't brag about acquiring it. Everything in life is fickle like the poker chip that might not land in your favor.



Only carefully executed plans bring fruitful results; the idiots are too impatient to receive them.

Since no one comes, I fist my hand and bang it hard, vibrating the wood. Several cheers echoing behind it tell me they have finally noticed.

A guy in his early twenties, Al, opens it, a wide grin plastered on his face as he licks his lips, ready to drag the prey he thinks I am inside; only his expression transforms into an annoyed frown when his gaze lands on me. “The fuck? Who are you?” His three other friends spot me too as they stop pouring themselves beer and share a confused look as well.

“Your worst nightmare.” I answer his question truthfully, too fucking bored to play elaborate games. His blood would stink too much to make it worth my while.

Al blinks and then huffs, grabbing the door, ready to slam it in my face. “Whatever. We haven’t ordered anything, so hit the road, dude.”

My splayed hand stops the movement midway, and hesitation fills his gaze as he tries to shut the door again, but his strength is nothing compared to mine.

After all, I’m capable of killing any prey, anywhere, anytime.

The cowards like Al, though?

They prey on the weak, sinking their claws into innocent creatures, and get off on the power, deeming themselves invincible gods who nothing and no one can harm.

Well, then.

The villain is here to execute the sentence that’s been years in the making.

“I’m gonna call the police, dude. Get out,” he says, and I just laugh, finding his threat hilarious, all things considered.

“Oh, we’ll do that. All in good time though.” Pushing the door and making it hit the wall, I kick Al out of the way. He lands on his ass, groaning in pain.

Shutting the door behind me with a loud bang, I see one of the guys lunging toward me with his hand extended, ready to deliver a blow, but instead I catch it with mine, twisting his arm back and then breaking it, causing his cry to reverberate through the space.

Another one takes out his phone, trying to dial the police, I assume, with his shaky fingers while backing into the corner. I knock it away from his hand, and it lands on the floor, where I crush it under my boot. He darts in a different direction, wanting to escape my wrath, but I catch him by the neck, wrapping my hand around it and spinning him to face the wall, slamming his face hard into it. The cracking sound echoes, signaling to me his nose is broken.

Blood smears the wall as I let him fall on his knees, whimpering and holding his nose, while the fourth and last one shakes his head, standing in the corner, and chants, "Please don't hurt me. Please don't hurt me. I didn't do anything." The guys on the floor make a weak attempt at standing up and defending themselves only to fall back when I deliver several more kicks to each one of them, enjoying their pain almost coating the air and filling it with the smells I love.

Fear and misery.

Ah, what a beautiful sight they all present, trembling and crawling toward the door as if it could save them.

Beautiful but not perfect—perfection requires more blood.

The stupid guy continues to talk, choking on every word. "I didn't do anything. They planned it all. I never touched anyone." My laughter rocks off the walls, only adding to the deadly atmosphere all around us, and the coward backs up a little more, even though he has nowhere to go. He drops to his knees, clasping his hands together, and begs, "Please, I didn't do anything."

In any despicable group of cowards, there is the biggest one who will snitch on them the minute danger is present to save his own ass.

Looks like I just found the one.

“Shut up,” Al hisses, coughing on blood and plastering his hands on the floor, trying to sit up, only to fall on his stomach once again. “Shut up, Phil.”

“I never touched them. They”—he points at the guys—“all raped them. I never touched the girls.”

I tsk, stepping toward him, and he freezes while my question hangs in the air addressed to no one in particular. “Ah, but it wasn’t only the girls, was it? There were guys too.” Although their crimes toward the men were vastly different.

They brought nerds here under the pretense of liking them only to beat the shit out of them behind these walls coated in the misery of their victims who begged and fucking begged for salvation and got nothing but agony.

Phil pales and shakes his head. “I didn’t do anything.”

“Of course you didn’t.” He exhales in relief, sinking back on the heels of his feet, and wipes away the sweat sliding down his chin. “You just filmed them doing despicable deeds so they could have recordings that made sure their victims never fucking opened their mouths, didn’t you?” Reaching him, I fist the collar of his shirt and drag him up to face me as tears form in his eyes, like they could inspire my pity.

Cowards never show compassion toward those they hurt, yet they expect nothing less when they are on the receiving end of hideous punishments.

How pathetic, but then again, weakness always inspires distaste in me.

If you allow dark cravings to rule your mind and soul, you’re a lost cause who shouldn’t suck the air here.

“They made me. I had no choice. They blackmailed me!”

Sliding my hands on his arms, I tell him, “We always have a choice, Phil, between right and wrong. And as such, we must face the consequences they bring.” Then I break both arms by twisting them backwards. His scream fills the house, the most magnificent music to my ears. I kick him in the back, then push him to the side, enjoying his pain surrounding me, yet still not satisfying the beast hungry for more agony.

“Please,” another one speaks up, holding on to his nose that seeps blood through his fingers. “We’ll give you any amount of money. Please.”

“Didn’t your mother read you fairy tales when you were little, Billy?” He nods, groaning at that movement probably from his aching nose. “Did the monsters in there ever want money?” My question is rhetorical of course, because monsters crave one thing and one thing only.

Absolute power.

Billy whimpers into his hands, whispering, “Please.”

Glancing at my wristwatch, I realize I’ve already wasted more time on them than I intended and shift my focus to the weapons they prepared for Aileen tonight.

A thick rope to tie her hands and legs.

A drug to numb her senses but keep her awake and unable to do anything to save herself when they’d do unspeakable things to her body.

And finally a knife they planned to use to leave a scar on her skin in a hidden spot to always serve as a reminder of what they had done to her.

Their messages between each other play in my mind, fueling my blood with fury that knows no mercy and desires to unleash doom on them all, and even then, it won’t be enough.

Nothing short of their death would ever be enough for me, but their death is not an option tonight.

Such crimes deserve agony spanning years and not momentary pain that would absolve their souls from the consequences.

***Billy:** Al, guess fucking what? Aileen is all set up for tonight.*

***Al:** Finally, the princess shall be ours.*

***Phil:** I’ll have the camera ready. Her family is very powerful though. Won’t we be in trouble? She might talk.*

*Al: Please. Remember all the girls before? They never went to the police, and she won't be an exception. I doubt she'll run to her daddy dearest for help after we thoroughly enjoy her.*

*Al: Besides, she'll come willingly and won't be able to claim otherwise.*

Aileen doesn't even suspect the control I have over her phone—or her life really. Braden didn't even get the message she sent him.

Whatever case he would have built against them wouldn't have brought me enough satisfaction to forget about these fuckers.

Cracking my neck from side to side, I block away all thoughts about Aileen and concentrate only on my vengeance, bringing the hunter permanently residing inside me to the surface, ready to tear apart, piece by piece, the rotten flesh all of them represent.

Methodically, I bring them all together to the center of the spacious room and sit them in circle so their backs and shoulders bump into each other, and each movement brings them pain as they try to escape, but their limbs don't let them.

Then I wrap the rope around their middles, pulling them all together so tight they struggle to breathe, only to groan when I yank on the end and the rope digs into their bruised bodies.

However, when I pick up the knife, the silver glistening under the light and showing my reflection, they stay still, barely even breathing, watching me intently, dreading what I might do next. "Such a small thing," I say, twisting it between my fingers before tapping the sharp end that barely leaves a sting. "Yet if used right provides so much pain it's almost exquisite." Without warning, I drag the knife over Al's forehead, accompanied by his screams, leaving a wound oozing blood that slides down his face, mixing with tears rapidly falling from his eyes.

The same destiny falls on the rest, each of them crying out so loud one might think their limbs are being chopped off.

Sprinkling salt over the wound finishes the composition, not allowing it to heal and drawing even more pain to create an ache inside nothing will be able to soothe.

A little souvenir to remember me by.

Grabbing the tripod and camera attached to it, I put it a few feet away, zooming the lens in on them. “Phil, this is your shining moment.” I grip his hair, tilting his head back, as his hazy-from-the-pain eyes barely focus on me. “Spill all the secrets and all the names.” I sweep my gaze over them all. “Unless you want this agony to be prolonged, start talking.”

“Please,” Billy whispers again, and sighing dramatically, I hit him in the face so he’ll hopefully finally shut up, and his head goes back, surely breaking something.

While occasional pleading from the victims amuses me, these fuckers are so boring they hardly inspire me to be more creative about this torture.

Some prey just don’t have it in them to be interesting.

“Don’t disappoint me.”

Lining up behind the camera, I press the Record button and snap my fingers, zeroing my stare only on Phil, knowing full well how fear slowly spreads through his bones and urges his tongue to speak even though he shakes so much his teeth chatter against each other.

*“Always, always find the weak link and use it to your advantage to get what you want. Otherwise, someone else will find yours and destroy you.”*

A harsh lesson Lachlan Scott taught me a long time ago, and despite my hatred toward the man, I’ve used his teachings well, adding a personal touch to a few favorites of mine.

The words pour out of Phil’s mouth quickly, describing in detail the various crimes they have committed over the years while the other guys hiss or urge him to shut up, still longingly looking at the door as if someone might burst in at any moment to save them, giving me enough evidence to last a lifetime.

Hope should be considered one of the deadly sins that eats you from the inside out, bringing no relief to the burning inferno in your soul.

Because hope needs love, and how could you fucking hope when there is nothing to love anymore?

Finally he finishes, and I grin at them, stopping the camera and taking out the memory card, putting it in my pocket before grabbing the knife again.

Phil eyes widen when he sees it. He says through his dry throat, "You told us you would stop if I talked."

"I lied," I simply say and then pierce their dicks one by one, destroying the flesh beyond repair. Their agonized screams are the only sounds filling the house.

No surgeon in the world will be able to fix them.

The blood pours from their wounds, sending pleasure through my system at the sight of the red ocean and their whimpers and sobs.

Ah, those are the moments in life worth living for indeed.

Finally, when their screams transform into barely audible hisses, their skin pale as the wounds weaken their bodies, I wipe my fingerprints from the weapon before putting it back in place.

Lighting up a cigarette, I exhale smoke into the air and, with a wink toward them all, drop the lighter on the ground next to the curtains.

The orange and blue flames ignite the cloth instantly and spread rapidly, ready to destroy everything in their way.

Exiting the house, I wait five minutes before calling the fire department so they can save them in time to tend to their wounds.

And then in the hospital, they will be greeted by the police with enough evidence to put them all behind bars for the sins they've all committed.

Once upon a time, I used to be a dark protégé who believed killing such fuckers was the only salvation this world needed, but through the years, I've changed my mind.

For death is an easy price to pay.

But eternal agony?

Now that's altogether different and doesn't provide the relief the cowards seek.

I'm an insane, cruel bastard.

And Lachlan is about to find out just how much.



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## CHAPTER SIX

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*“Lust is a powerful weapon in the hands of those who know how to use it.*

*One must be very careful though while playing with it.*

*Because in the blink of an eye, a seducer might change into the one being seduced.*

*After all, any forbidden desires are always too tempting to resist.”*

*Rush*

***F**rom Rush’s unsent letters...*

*Aileen,*

*Your father is right.*

*You shouldn’t send letters to grownups. Especially those he warned you about.*

*The word friend is overrated anyway and one of the reasons I didn’t have one for a long time.*

*Because people inevitably always stab you in the back if it suits their selfish desires, and the wound bleeds harder if you trusted them.*

*When the chips are down, little girl, count only on yourself and don’t expect anyone to rush to defend you. If someone is willing to risk their life to comfort you, it means they have an agenda... because nothing in this world is free.*

*Even love.*

*After all, isn't love just an illusion of our creation,  
covering our deep need of possession?*

*For there is no greater curse than love itself, pushing us to  
do despicable deeds that the horrendous creatures inside us  
demand.*

*Better learn this lesson right now; it will save you a lot of  
disappointments in the future.*

*I'm not the beast trapped in his castle waiting for a beauty  
to break my curse with her undying devotion.*

*For the beast was a prince dreaming about divine  
intervention, sending him absolution to finally free the chains  
around his wrists.*

*Me though?*

*I'm the villain who fights for what he wants and gets it no  
matter what it takes.*

*Because villains don't have hearts, remorse, or empathy.*

*Don't write letters to me, Aileen, or allow your heart to  
worry about a strange man who showed you kindness when  
you cried your eyes out as if someone killed your favorite  
kitten.*

*I still have some sanity left in the depths of my dark soul  
that stops me from using you as a tool to extract revenge on  
your father.*

*That's the thing about villains though.*

*Inevitably, emptiness fills our every pore, leaving nothing  
but darkness residing in every bone of our body.*

*And on some days, it scares me.*

*For my darkness will have no boundaries.*

*Rush*

*A* ileen

Something brushes across my mind, tugging on it gently and pulling me from the deep land of sleep, which my exhausted body needs. It awakens me to my surroundings even though I refuse to open my eyes.

My gasp echoes in the night. For while I'm floating between sleep and reality, I feel a familiar heated touch scorching my skin like a burning imprint that leaves a permanent mark on my body and breathes life into the desire fueling my blood and bringing such deep need with it.

The butterfly-like touch—almost nonexistent, because it only appears in my imagination and the reason I don't want to wake up—glides over my flesh effortlessly. My silky nightgown is plastered against my sweat-drenched body despite the breeze slipping in through the open window and causing goose bumps to rise on my skin.

Moonlight streaming into the room highlights my nipples that have become pointed peaks, stretching the cloth over them. A moan escapes me when heat lightly brushes over them before something blows air on them, only making them prickle more and not giving me any relief.

The fire inside me grows, filling me with anticipation as the heat travels lower to my stomach. Fisting the nightgown tightly, I arch my back, seeking the warmth that reminds me of an open palm on my flesh.

That's why in my darkest fantasies this hand belongs to a man who is ready to use me however he sees fit, the man who kissed me in the greenhouse.

However, on the receiving end of this use always lies pleasure.

He has no name, no face, just an unbearable presence that makes my body crave things I've only heard about.

So I give myself to the fantasy that lives only in my head and arch my back again when he shoulders my legs open, placing my feet on the mattress as he settles between them.

Slowly, agonizingly slowly, his strong hands raise the nightgown, the silk annoying my sensitive skin, and I jerk in

his hold, wanting to get rid of the offensive cloth keeping me from experiencing his touch, but he doesn't let me.

He puts his forearm on my stomach, grounding me in one spot, and finally exposes my heated flesh soaking my white lacy panties as his hot breath fans my core.

My breathing speeds up, a whimper escapes from my throat, and I grab the nearby pillow, hiding my face in it and trapping my moan so no one can hear it.

All while the heat now travels through me in waves, hitting me over and over again, demanding the man do something, and he finally kisses the inside of my thigh, sucking on the skin so harshly they clamp around him and only intensify the need in my core.

His hand grabs my nightgown, pulling at it so hard it stretches against my nipples so tight it sends ripples of sensations through my entire system, awakening every hair on my body. I moan loudly, although it's muted by the pillow, welcoming the unfamiliar pleasure slamming into me all at once.

He moves his head to the other side, giving me a sucking kiss on the other thigh, licking the abused flesh, and I start to tremble, my nails sinking into the silk while my toes curl in anticipation of his next move.

He brushes his chin over my skin, the stubble tickling me slightly, and then his hot breath is back on my core, which must be dripping at this point, because my panties are glued to my flesh.

Momentarily, the warmth is gone as the hand slides my panties lower, exposing my flesh to his seeking mouth.

The air sticks in my lungs; I'm too afraid to move even to get much-needed air, waiting for something to sustain the lust forming in my veins and demands the hunger enveloping me be sated in order to survive.

Because leaving me so needy is cruel and inhuman!

I'm drowning in a blazing ocean when his hot mouth dives forward and gives my flesh a deep kiss. When he delves inside

me, I cry out, wanting to keep him there forever as the heat fills my every bone. I roll my hips slightly, meeting every stab of his tongue roaming between my folds, leaving fire with every swipe of his tongue, while his hands slide under my ass, keeping me in place for the onslaught of his mouth.

He licks me from bottom to top, his lips sucking on my clit and trapping it between his teeth as he tugs on it gently, and a moan slips out again, the fire inside me growing and growing. He soothes it with another lick and glide of his tongue over my lower lips, sucking on them one by one and repeating the motion several more times.

All while my pillow is almost torn apart in my hands as I grip it so hard. I breathe heavily into it with an occasional whimper and moan, while his expert tongue thrusts deeper and deeper into me, filling the emptiness, as my core clenches around it, yet needing something else to get the high it seeks.

Something I don't understand, and while pleasure rocks my body, electrifying everything from the tips of my hair to my toes, it only makes the need grow and barely soothes it, pushing me toward the cliff on the horizon but doesn't let me jump over it.

Still keeping my eyes closed, because it will be over the minute they are open, I remove the pillow from my face and whisper, "Please." My back arches again when his hand travels toward my core, fingers entering as his lips suck on my clit again. The double sensations earn themselves my moan echoing in the night.

One, two, three thrusts, and then his fingers pinch my walls. He slides his tongue up and down all while his fingers dive into me, driving me insane where the only thing in this world that exists and makes sense to me is the satisfaction he denies me.

Groaning in frustration and need, I bite my fist, trapping more sounds while giving in to the desire crashing over me as he continues to feast on my flesh, relentless in his passion. My teeth bite into my lower lip, drawing blood when the pleasure becomes unbearable, waves shaking me one after another and

almost claiming me in the lust-filled bubble where everything is wicked and forbidden.

His tongue replaces his finger and plunges back inside, licking my folds. His hands settle under me once again, clutching my ass cheeks as he lifts my hips up. He allows me to grind on his tongue, my core slowly clenching around it. Desire, lust, and pleasure all mingle together, zipping through my system so hard I feel like I'm drowning in a heated pool that scorches me from inside out, and I welcome every single burn it gives me.

The sheets under me are soaked from the sweat coating my skin. My head thrashes on the bed, and I bring the pillow back to my face while he prolongs the torture, playing with me as if I'm his most beloved instrument, and every single touch he showers on me delivers a tune that someday might transform into a masterpiece.

My breathing speeds up, my skin becomes too taut, and I'm almost uncomfortable as my body no longer can take it, needing to fly up high and quench the vicious hunger every swipe inspires, and he must feel it too.

He becomes more demanding, his mouth losing its earlier gentleness, and his tongue is relentless against my flesh until finally the bubble, the cocoon I've built around this encounter, is burst open. All-consuming pleasure fills me to the brink, blanketing my body and washing over my senses, stunning me in its intensity, and a scream tears from my throat, snapping my eyes open.

Waking up from the intense fantasy, so different to any sensual cravings I've experienced before with just imaginary men who might awaken my body.

This time around though, the thoughts of the greenhouse man filled my mind, painting wicked pictures in my head of what could have been if he was who gave me pleasure.

If his kiss alone inspired such strong emotions, I'm too afraid to examine them and prefer not to think about the encounter. What would his other touch entail?

But the man might not even exist, although that would imply I've gone crazy. So maybe the whole kiss was just a fantasy in my head like all these night rendezvous have been?

My God, what's going on with me?

Is it even possible to come this hard from an imaginary man in your head?

A man whose touch and lips seem too real to be part of my fantasies, but believing otherwise would mean complete insanity on my part, wouldn't it?

What kind of man thinks it's acceptable to sneak into my room to give me pleasure when the mansion is guarded and has a wired fence that would electrify any intruder?

Not to mention, my father would kill the man in the most agonizing way if he ever found him in my room.

"You've lost your mind, Aileen." Gasping for breath, I throw the pillow away as the ceiling of my room comes into view, illuminated only by the moonlight. An owl hoots in the distance joined by the crickets always occupying the garden.

Shivering slightly under the cool breeze blowing over my damp skin, I sit up in bed and huff in frustration. My nightgown and panties are in place, although my core still pulses from my orgasm, indicating once again how alone I always am in my pleasure.

I float high in the sky, and then the fall that always follows bruises my heart and reminds me of the loneliness present in my life.

Shaking my head at my own stupidity, I grab the nearby robe and put it on, although it barely protects me from another gust of cool air. I pad barefooted toward the balcony where the white curtains billow back.

Going outside, I wrap my arms around myself while tilting my head back and breathing in the fresh air, hoping it can calm me and extinguish the inferno still burning in my blood and confusing my mind.

How is it possible to crave someone so realistic yet not even dare to open my eyes before I find my release for fear of the fantasy disappearing?

The hair on the back of my neck stands, another shiver runs through me, but this one is different in nature, because it signifies danger, and I think I feel a movement behind me.

Spinning around, I push away the curtains flying around me, finding nothing but emptiness in the dark, but my hair gets in my face, blocking my view.

Placing my hand on my forehead, I mutter, "You've really lost your mind." I turn, then rest my hands on the thick, concrete banister, and focus on the magnificent garden under the bright, full moon. It looks so majestic in the dark night sky with thousands of stars keeping it company.

But tonight, even the serenity the view possesses cannot calm the thoughts swirling in my confused head. I need to find answers to the questions plaguing my mind, because something weird is going on in my life.

I've had this feeling for a while, as if possessive eyes watched my every move and butt into every aspect of my life.

I just assumed it was the security my father assigned me, but I'm no longer so sure.

Security never felt like the devil waiting for me to sin enough to drag me to his hell.

I gaze down and my brows furrow when my eyes spot William, wearing his black coat and carrying a purple suitcase, walking toward the iron gate. "William!" I hiss in the night, not wanting to wake the entire house yet too shocked at him hightailing his ass out of the mansion in the middle of the night! "William!" I repeat when he doesn't stop, only tightens the lapels of his coat and speeds up, quite fast to my surprise for a man his age. "Ah, for God's sake." Quickly slipping into my ballerinas, I run into the hallway and hurry down the stairs, rushing to the door and hoping to catch him in time before he leaves.

Did someone upset him, and he felt like he had to go?



Although my family is neutral toward him, I've grown attached to the grumpy old man who insists I drink my tea in the mornings and laughs at my stupid jokes. He's even suggested several times I go out more and meet new people, claiming every girl should experience her first adventures by the age of eighteen.

Sometimes it's almost felt like he was trying to save me from someone by pushing me into experiencing the outside world more.

I barely focus on this stark realization when the wind hits me hard, plastering my nightclothes against my skin. My raspy breaths fill the night as I run to the annoying man who has almost reached the gate. "William!" I scream, hoping to get his attention, but although he stops for a second, he resumes his fast walk once again. "William, seriously!" I shout, speeding up and thankful for all the stamina ballet has given me. I manage to catch him right before the car pulls up.

The car Jeremiah uses!

Gripping his bicep, I spin him around right before he puts his hand on the door handle. I nod briefly to the guard standing nearby, clearly not bothered by it all since Jeremiah is here. Usually visitors must go through the seven circles of hell before even getting near our property. "What's going on? Are you leaving us?"

He doesn't meet my eyes as he clears his throat and tells me, although it sounds more like urges me, "My time here came to an end. The contract ended today. Please go back into the house, Miss Aileen."

"Why are you leaving? Did my parents fire you?"

He swallows hard, his hands slightly trembling as he puts the suitcase into the trunk and then walks around, opening the vehicle's door. He repeats, "Please go back inside. Now. Before it's too late."

I frown.

Too late for what?

However, he's already in the car ready to slam the door, as if that would stop me.

Opening it wider, I climb inside and sit on the seat next to him. "Seriously, William. You know my curiosity will kill me. Tell me what's going on!" Without glancing at the driver seat, I order Jeremiah, "Don't go anywhere until he tells me what his reason for leaving is." I don't buy the whole contract bullshit, because he still has a few weeks left.

Something must have upset him so much he chose to leave rather than stay and hash it out, and whatever it is, we can fix it all.

Unless he betrayed my family, then him being fired is a kindness my father showed him.

Jeremiah doesn't listen to me though, and the car starts to move, pulling away from the gate and onto the road, and my mouth drops open. "What the hell?" I say, only then realizing that from the outside at night the car reminds me of the one my father has, but this one is vastly different inside.

Because it has places to sit on both sides like in a limo. I blink in shock when William whispers, "I really wish you'd listened to me, Miss Aileen."

A deep, husky voice laced with danger and sin speaks up. "Too curious and compassionate for her own good, William." Before I can turn to study its owner, a needle is injected into my neck, and slowly my eyelids droop as strength abandons me, making me sink into the leather seat.

With William's guilty face as my witness.

*L*achlan

I step inside my office and pour myself a glass of whiskey, enjoying the brown liquid slipping through the ice cubes clacking against each other. I drop on my chair, thousands of thoughts swirling in my mind.

Especially about the power of nature all around us.

Like water.

It transforms into anything under different circumstances to survive.

The logic can be applied to monsters roaming the earth, searching for their next victim too.

They adapt to anything if it ensures they win.

They will deceive, steal, hurt while obsessing over one single goal, not resting before it's achieved.

Their greedy nature is like hunger, constantly demanding food to sustain the body holding their dark soul.

I look at the chessboard sitting on my table and drum my fingers on the wood, the sound echoing around the walls.

Thoughts about it wouldn't let me sleep next to my wife, because the letters engraved on the pieces didn't make much sense, especially the repeated ones.

I've encountered the most hideous creatures in this world ready to stab their claws into my neck to have their revenge, and my experience doesn't let me believe everything is so simple.

No, instead, every hunting instinct inside me urges me to uncover the truth behind the hidden message and protect my family from the blow that's coming our way.

For when you reside in darkness and are deemed the king of the underground in this city due to what your true identity entails, you learn to trust your gut, no matter what.

A hunter might settle down and build his home.

However, he never stops being a hunter.

And one thing every hunter knows?

When *he* is the one being hunted.

Finishing my drink, I put it back on the table and open the chessboard, placing the pieces next to each other with their bottoms up to study the sixteen letters.

***ENMIRSHUAENIEISL***

I try different variations of words from them, but nothing makes enough sense to connect it to my life or anyone else's, even though it must be targeted at me.

I lean back in my chair, rubbing my chin with the back of my hand, studying them intently, because my instincts aren't wrong.

Jeremiah's words ring in my head.

*"It's like permanent madness resides in his gaze, Lachlan. I've seen some villains in their sixties, and none of them evoked such energy. A man on the brink of insanity."*

I freeze at the last sentence, playing it in my head over and over again.

*A man on the brink of insanity.*

I've come across different men in my life, all more psychotic than others who barely held on to their humanity and learned to live anew to fulfill their vengeance.

But there has only been one who failed to listen to me, and he became a rogue, vowing to execute payback after he discovered the truth of his past.

And looking through this prism at the letters, my left hand clenches while the right one puts the letters in the right order. I block every emotion from my body, because they cannot help during a crisis.

Instead, they would destroy me.

Finally, the letters make sense, displaying a clear message to me from a man who I hoped had died somewhere, given he has stayed so low. For eleven long years, we haven't been able to locate him anywhere.

A man who dared to do something none of my previous enemies did, because they knew my payback would be so catastrophic that hell would seem like heaven to them.

The father in me pushes me to hurl the chess pieces from my table with a loud roar, to dash upstairs toward Aileen's room while my heart beats rapidly in my chest. Fear unlike

anything I have ever felt in my life fills every crack of my broken soul, hoping to find my little girl in her bed.

However, the hunter already knows it's too late, and succumbing to the father part of me would shatter me.

Displaying weakness is not an option right now.

So instead, I grab my phone and dial a number, ready to do something I should have done more than eleven years ago.

Maybe even twenty-five, when I'd just found him.

Kill the beast poisoning my family, who will never rest until he has my blood smeared on his fingers.

Even if the blood comes from my broken heart for what he could do to my daughter.

The male voice greets me at the other end of the line, slightly raspy from sleep but alert nevertheless. "Yeah?"

"Arson. Gather everyone. Do you understand? Every-fucking-one."

While I issue commands, my eyes focus on the message shining brightly under the light and almost mocking me. I can imagine the fucking laughter spilling from his mouth.

### **AILEEN IS MINE RUSH**

No one hurts my family and lives.

Rush signed his death warrant.

For in this war between us, there will only be one winner.

Either he will die, or I will.

There will no longer be an in-between.

*R*ush

Checkmate, Lachlan.

The princess of the dark castle belongs to me now.

And if the king wants to get her back?

He must come out of hiding and find me.

In the land where the villain rules.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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*“Once upon a time a villain corrupted a princess.”*

*Rush*

*F*rom Aileen’s letters...

*Dear Rush,*

*I try not to be angry with you for ignoring my letter, even though it hurts my heart. Getting the silent treatment feels so wrong, and you shouldn’t subject anyone to it. You could have just said you are not interested in getting my letters, although this couldn’t be true. Noble knights should receive princess’s letters with honor. Or so the ballads say.*

*However, there is a tiny part of me hoping it got lost in the mail, and you are still hurting somewhere, thinking no one cares. In this case, please ignore the earlier statement, and I apologize in advance.*

*The maid came back home very frustrated, and whenever I asked her about you, she would just mumble under her breath.*

*She didn’t seem like a princess in love, so I guess the curse wasn’t lifted with her kiss, huh? Although it doesn’t surprise me much, because I already saw her flirting with someone else. The princess is supposed to love only the beast.*

*Oh well. She must have not been the one.*

*So many things have happened in the last year. I don’t know where to start!*

*I went to first grade, but turns out my brain is superfast and smart, which means they had to push me up a few grades. So all the kids around me are four years older than me, and sometimes it scares me, especially because most of them are not nice toward me. They probably don't like that I solve any math equation fast and ask the teacher for more. One of them even pushed me in the hallway, which resulted in my books falling down and a few of them laughing.*

*I didn't tell my parents, because they worry and probably would take matters in their own hands, but I don't want that. I enjoy the classes, and the classmates... well, I can deal with those I think.*

*The principal said it's a blessing to be smart, but sometimes I wonder if she just lied to make me feel better... because as far as blessings go, I'm not really feeling this one.*

*I continue to go to my ballet classes and have learned a few more routines that Mommy plans for me to perform in her school. Everyone says I have a natural talent, and I love the freedom the dance gives me, especially from all the mean looks playing in my head.*

*Ballet became my only salvation in the dark, giving my soul temporary peace and a place my heart belongs to without being subjected to anyone's scrutiny.*

*However, all this pales in comparison to what happened several months ago, and that's a true blessing!*

*I have a brother now. His name is Levi Scott. (Just like my late grandfather. My heart still hurts at his loss, although Mommy said he's happily watching us from above). He must be around my age or a year older than me. My parents aren't sure, because Daddy found him in some horrible place, beaten, starved, and super scared.*

*He spent around a week in the hospital, and we brought him home where it took some time for him to adjust. Mommy takes him to therapy too, but he still wakes up with nightmares often, and then we all sit with him and calm him down.*



*He's a bit savage in what he wants and is still learning to eat with silverware, but he loves to spend time with me. Although he's a bit afraid to be in Daddy's company. But I know it's temporary.*

*Daddy is my hero and the best man in the whole wide world, and Levi will learn it soon too. He already loves and adores Mommy.*

*I really love him, and I'm so happy he became part of our family. We even bonded over my love for Greek history and documentaries, although I secretly think he is bored watching them, and his attention constantly moves toward the sports channel our Jeremiah has on in the kitchen.*

*Our parents already plan to hire tutors for him, and hopefully he will go to school next year. I help him out with some reading too. I know someday a smile will grace his mouth, and he won't shake in fear when he hears heavy footsteps coming his way.*

*Too bad he didn't get an opportunity to meet you. I'm sure he would have liked you, because you guys have something in common. Daddy said you also lost your family young, so maybe you could have talked to him and slayed some of his dragons too?*

*I don't doubt it, but you left us, Rush, and sometimes I'm so angry I might burst.*

*Although anger is a sin, or that's what the preacher says (I think about something else during church, so I'm not sure. I just know mostly everything in there is considered a sin).*

*PS: Oh, I just realized something, Rush!*

*Daddy and everyone else here call me the most beloved princess of the castle. They say one day a charming prince will come and sweep me off my feet, loving me so much, just like Daddy loves Mommy.*

*A love worthy of legends. That's what Grandma calls it, although Mom always rolls her eyes at it, so I'm not sure these are appropriate words.*

*And while you aren't a prince by any means (I think you're supposed to have a castle for that. At least in fairy tales that's the case.), but you are a brave knight, and they used to fight in tournaments to win a handkerchief from a princess (Although I never understood this part. They could have died! And all for some cloth you use to wipe your nose).*

*So maybe I can be the princess who loves you unconditionally, and you will stop being a beast who has to hide from everyone else?*

*You just have to make sure I will fall in love with you, but it shouldn't be so hard! I'm willing to risk my heart to save you!*

*After all, you have the kindest eyes, and you have the power to slay all dragons, a true prince in my eyes!*

*I promise you, Rush, my heart will belong to you, and I won't accept other princes (Boys are stupid anyway. Even though the ones in my class are older, they still behave weirdly).*

*So if you are hurting right now... please know someday these wounds will heal.*

*Because you won't have to fight a battle to win my handkerchief.*

*I will come willingly. The idea that one of my best friends is hurting so badly somewhere just makes me so sad and hurts my insides.*

*I really miss you, Rush. You don't belong in the darkness where people fear you.*

*You belong in the light, and I'm going to bring you back.*

*You just have to wait.*

*Just wait.*

*Your friend,*

*Aileen*

**Aileen**

A Piercing pain assaults my senses, the tickling sensations rushing through my head and pinching my skin as if a thousand ants, crawling up my skin, nibble on my flesh and don't give me reprieve from their onslaught.

Groaning in discomfort, I move my head to the side only to whimper when the pain intensifies, sliding now toward my nose and jaw.

My eyes open, then close again when the bright sunlight blinds me. I cover my head with my arm, frowning in confusion despite the pain and trying to understand why it seems like the surface under me is swaying from side to side, moving rapidly somewhere.

What happened last night?

The last thing I remember is getting into the car with scared William and some random man, before everything went black.

Maybe William ended up calling security, and they brought me back to my room, because a light breeze glides over me, bringing much-needed relief to my heated skin, and the ocean smell floats in the air, filling my lungs, while seagulls squawk loudly far, far away.

Wait.

Ocean? Seagulls? Light breeze in the middle of fall?

Everything inside me freezes when these thoughts register in my mind. Fear slowly travels through my system, creating panic inside me as the haze vanishes from my mind and points to a not-so-good outcome for me.

*"I really wish you'd listened to me, Miss Aileen."*

Despite the pain, I sit up swiftly and once again force my eyelids open to study the environment around me. I blink several times to adjust my blurry vision to the blinding sunlight.

And when it clears, a gasp slips past my lips. The view that greets me might be considered magnificent by some, but it means danger to me and leaves me with no illusions about my

whereabouts, thus intensifying my fear to epic proportions. I slide back on the leather cushion as if it could save me from whatever this unfamiliar place brings.

I'm on a huge white-as-snow boat, rapidly moving forward. The engine propels us across the blue ocean, glistening under the bright sunlight streaming on me from the clear blue sky. There is no sign of life for miles it seems, because nothing but small green islands are visible as we pass by them.

With water gently splashing on me, I grip the gray rail next to me and study the boat itself. The cabin is several feet away, hiding whoever operates it with tinted windows. I see a small door, probably leading inside to a room, which usually would be luxurious in expensive boats and allow whoever uses this boat to relax.

Several ropes lay nearby used to secure it to a spot on the land, while smaller boats hang on each side of it in case of an emergency.

However, the true beauty lies in an enormous polished wooden deck with matching decor consisting of several built-in couches with white cushions, which provide a relaxing place to enjoy the great view of the ocean or sunbathe if one wishes to tan.

Through the years, my father always warned me to be careful and listen to his instructions, because there would always be people who would want to hurt his family or kidnap us for a large ransom.

And while on most days I felt like he was overreacting, never in my wildest dreams did I expect to be kidnapped and taken to a boat in the middle of the ocean!

While every nerve in my body demands I scream my lungs out and curse the men who managed to snag me right under my father's nose, I can't do that. It would allow panic and my emotions to dictate my every move.

*"Aileen darling, come here." Daddy calls my name, and I rush toward him, smacking against his knee and wrapping my*

*hands around it as I tilt my head back to listen to whatever he has to say.*

*He smiles at me and pats my head, then finally speaks up. "Starting today, we will have some lessons together."*

*My brows furrow. "What kind of lessons?"*

*"How to protect yourself if the need arises."*

*"But, Daddy!" I exclaim, slightly shocked. "Won't you always protect me?" Mommy said no one could ever hurt us with Daddy as our protector. Why should I waste time on learning a skill that I won't need?*

*Something crosses his face, but I don't know these emotions, and instead he pushes me back slightly before kneeling in front of me and placing his hands on my shoulders, his stare gazing into me and urging me to listen to him. "I will protect you until my last breath." I beam at his words but then huff in annoyance when he adds, "But I might not always be there. And in such cases, you have to be the one to make sure no one hurts you."*

Taking a deep breath, I inhale and exhale while fisting my hands and slowly block away the panic and pull forward rational thinking instead.

Hysterics won't help me and can only worsen my condition.

*"Clear head. Always a clear head, princess. No matter the circumstances, emotions will lead you nowhere. Trust no one while in danger and listen only to your instincts. Your life has value until they can get what they want. After that, you become collateral damage. Don't let anyone make you collateral damage."*

Palming my head, I silence my father's words, because they all mingle together, bringing flashback after flashback from the many lessons in self-defense, and I focus on the most important ones in order to survive in this situation.

First, I have to find out who kidnapped me and what they want from my family. Only then can I build a plan of escape,

although my eyes already search for any nearby weapons I could use to my advantage.

Ropes to tie someone up or choke them, sails to hit someone hard and maybe send them overboard. However, first I need to find out how many men are on this boat.

Then maybe I can sneak inside the cabin and call for help using the phone they have there.

Although I doubt any of this will be easy.

One thing is crystal-clear though.

William fed me to the wolves and acted as bait for me to follow him so they could lure me outside, and I'd be off guard.

This just proves my father is never wrong about people, and I will never again question his judgment.

Adjusting the robe tighter around me, hating how my clothes are practically see-through, I stand up and fall back on the couch when the boat makes a swift turn to the right. I groan in frustration when the familiar, deep voice from last night breaks the silence around me. "You're finally awake. Quite the sleeping beauty you are, Aileen." My name sounds almost wicked on his tongue, and I put my hand on the throbbing place on my neck, remembering the injection.

They must have drugged me; it would explain how I slept the whole way to another part of the country or world.

Spinning around, I see a man at the end of the deck leaning on the railing. His image is shadowed by the way the light is shining and the way he's standing. Stepping closer toward him, my bare feet slapping on the wood, I hiss through my teeth, "Well, if you wanted me awake, maybe you shouldn't have drugged me."

His laughter echoes just as the boat hits a wave, and we bounce a little. I sway to the side but keep my balance and walk even closer to him until the shadows finally stop hiding him. He's standing with his back to me, his face toward the ocean.

And shock slams into me, because only a dead woman wouldn't react to the perfection of the male beauty in front of her.

Especially when she expected some creepy perv instead.

His dark, silky hair falls to his bare shoulders, bringing attention to the deep veins and various tattoos spread over his neck, some designs leading to his muscular back where bulging muscles move with every breath he takes.

His white jeans hang low on his hips, emphasizing his muscled physique and contrasting with his tan skin marred by several deep scars as if someone purposely slashed him with a knife and waited for it to bleed.

I've seen a lot of scars on my uncles' bodies, and somehow ink mostly covered all of them. However, this man doesn't hide them or try to transform them into something beautiful to give them a new story or meaning.

Instead, tattoos glide all around them, showcasing them even more vividly and somehow making them the center of attention, which only adds danger to his form.

Sinister energy surrounds him, polluting the air, almost making it impossible to breathe, but I gulp air in my lungs, too stunned with my reaction toward this man when it has stayed dormant to any other male.

Are those drugs still in my system and their effect has me seeing my captor in a different light?

Or was the allure of the villain always stronger than those of brave knights and princes, and I'm just finding out about it now?

"You're sheltered but feisty. I like it," he says, pushing up from the rail and turning around to face me, bringing heat to my cheeks when his front comes into view. The carved muscles of his six-pack pull my gaze toward them and the deep V of his hips also covered in ink, daring anyone not to look at him.

*God, what's going on with me?*

Finally tearing my gaze away from his body, I focus on his face with high cheekbones and strong jaw sporting a five o'clock shadow, which only adds to his appeal to the opposite sex, I'm sure. "Who are you?" He must be over six foot four, and I'm tiny compared to him; however, I still hold my chin high, not letting him see my fear or the shock from my reaction. "What do you want from me?"

A smile curves his mouth, and he clucks his tongue. "Ah, Daddy taught you well, didn't he? Let me guess. You're gonna learn all the facts and then plan the right attack. Stay calm at any cost even though your body shakes so much your teeth chatter." Until he points it out, I don't even notice I'm doing it, and immediately, I clamp my mouth shut, biting my lip.

He leans closer and his breath fans my face while I'm glued to the spot, too shocked to even move. Desperation slowly sinks in, because he guessed my every thought. "Find the weakness, and when the monster least expects it, strike him there." The wind whooshes over us, billowing my hair, slapping his face in the process, and a lock falls down my forehead. He raises his hand and wants to touch it, but I lean back, not letting him.

My mind frantically searches for a clue to who this man might be; he apparently harbors a deep personal vendetta, since his voice lowered a few octaves and was coated in a snarl when he mentioned my father. Plus, he knows my father's techniques, so they've crossed paths one way or another. However, no matter how much I wrack my mind for a name, nothing comes up. My father only crosses his business opponents, but while this man might be older than me, he doesn't look like any of my father's business partners. "You might try, but it won't work. I don't have a weakness."

"Everyone has one. It's human nature to grow attachments that we cannot function well without," I automatically reply to his statement, the knowledge as always pouring from my lips before I can stop it.

"Ah, the bookworm speaks." He takes out a cigarette from behind his ear and flips a lighter between his fingers. "Rules are meant to be broken. Some people don't fit into certain



boxes and instead create their own. Generalization will lead you nowhere.”

Rolling my lips, I still the frustrated scream ready to spill from my mouth at this bizarre conversation. Shouldn't the kidnapper threaten and act... differently, not just chat with his victim?

A headache forms in my head, mingling with the fear wrapping around my heart. My father might have taught me self-defense, but the glass cage he built around my life to protect me hardly taught me how to deal with people who have no morals. Ignoring his statement, I decide to cut to the chase and do as my father instructed me. “Who are you?” This guy might use reverse psychology on me, making me lower my guard only to pierce his knife, figuratively speaking, into me, and I won't have it. “Why did you kidnap me?”

The clearing of a throat gets our attention, and we both turn our heads to where I see William standing. He holds a silver tray with a glass of water and some pills next to it. “Miss Aileen, you must be thirsty. I brought some aspirin too in case you have a headache.”

I blink, not sure if he's kidding or not, but judging by how he stands stiffly several feet away from me, he is serious.

Momentarily peeling my focus away from the mysterious man, I stroll toward William and wrap my hand around the glass.

The sun emphasizes even more of his wrinkles when he scrunches his eyes shut, waiting for me to throw my drink on him.

The vindictive part of me, the dark and cruel one residing deep in my soul, wishes to punish the man who betrayed not only me, but my family as well.

My father's voice though rings once again in my head, halting my movements and reminding me about what's important.

*“Make sure you are always in your best shape. Eat and drink, don't allow your body to get weak. The monsters who*

*might hunt you someday won't need to drug you to get what they want, because they don't need your consent. So never let your emotions get in the way of maintaining your strength."*

Bringing the glass to my mouth, I gulp greedily, welcoming the cooling liquid sliding down my dry throat while keeping my stare on William who peeks an eye open, surprise flashing on his face.

Finishing my drink, I place it back on the tray with a loud rattle and say, "Don't worry, William. In my family, retribution doesn't come in the form of spilled liquid or thrown food." He pales a little, gulping. "Our paybacks are much, much more creative and vicious." The tray trembles in his shaking hands, and he breathes heavily, probably anticipating what my father will do to him once he finds me.

And he will.

I have no doubt about it.

Until then, my only requirement is to survive and not let them destroy me in any way.

The man chokes on his smoke before his sinister laughter fills the air, and he addresses William. "See, old man? You shouldn't have been so worried. Our kitten has claws."

"I'm not your anything," I hiss, noticing from the corner of my eye several men stationed around the boat plus at least two inside the cabin. Which means roughly seven men if we count this asshole and William.

No matter what I do right now, I won't succeed, and their punishment might be severe just to teach me a lesson to stay put.

*"Remember what I told you about the pawn? Its strength lies in its weakness. Cowards don't value or understand bravery, so displaying it to them has no meaning. Whenever they see it, they want to smear it in dirt; it serves as a red flag to a bull. Play by the rules if it ensures your safety, and only act out when you're threatened. Watch all the time, and memorize everything around you. Details will save your life."*

Stepping back a little, I shift my attention to the view ahead of me as the boat slowly moves close to an island that's quite large. In the distance, several people wait for us by the shore while the boat honks loudly, hurting my ears, so I cover them up.

Misery and desperation wash over me, because we've almost arrived at their destination, where, by the looks of it, they own an island, and most likely no one will listen to a word I say.

Which makes escape almost impossible, and God knows how long it will take for my father to find me.

All while still not knowing anything about my captor!

Drilling my stare into the man, I search for any familiar clues but somehow come up blank. Maybe if he removed those damned glasses of his, I'd have at least some idea.

"Who are you?"

He fires his own question. "Aren't you our kitten though? At least for the time being."

My insides bristle while anger fills me, and even though my father's voice urges me to shut up, I can't! "You're insane! Who are you and what do you want? Just tell me already. What's the point of keeping this a mystery?" He doesn't want to kill me, this much is clear, but with psychos, you never know what their agenda is.

"Ah, Aileen, your forgetting me breaks my heart." He sighs dramatically, putting his hand on his chest. "You asked me to wait, and I've waited. But it seems you forgot all your promises." He tsks, sending smoke flying my way before throwing the butt away and lacing his hand in my hair.

Struggling in his hold, I push at his chest, wanting to free myself, and spit, "Let go of me!" But he doesn't listen, only brings me closer to him, and our chests end up bumping against each other, his muscled one digging into my soft flesh. A gasp slips past my lips when my robe opens and the silky nightgown leaves nothing to the imagination in the brilliant sun, but his eyes stay on my face. "Let go!" I repeat, lifting my

knee, but his other hand blocks it before it reaches its target, and then he wraps it around my waist, almost plastering his body against mine and leaving no space between us.

Tilting my head back, I wince when he pulls harshly at my hair only to soothe it with the pads of his fingers, sliding them up and down. “The day has come though, for me to collect, my beauty.”

Confusion ripples through my mind, because his statement hardly makes any sense.

Waited? Promises? Beauty?

The man speaks as if he kidnapped me for himself and considers me his because of some delusion. I’ve never crossed paths with any dangerous men, my nose staying firmly glued to my books. And besides, the guys around me never paid me any attention, finding me too young compared to all the other classmates.

I got the looks of course, especially when we went out with Pierre, but it was from guys my age.

I would have never forgotten meeting a man with such a powerful presence. My body reacts to him despite finding him disgusting; although self-loathing does little to stop the scorching electricity weaving through me at his touch, as if nudging some secret part of me that responds to him.

Why does it though?

“Miss Aileen, maybe—” William starts but quickly shuts up when the man momentarily tears his gaze from me and glances at him.

William.

After his words, I start to see the butler in a different light, his constant presence when I needed him the most or how he listened only to my commands.

He never acted like my father signed his paycheck, because this man, whose grip on me is so tight I’m shocked my bones don’t crack, paid him to watch over me and tend to my every need.

Like a butcher preparing the animals for slaughter by feeding them every day only to kill it later at the most convenient time.

All this information combined with my psychological knowledge paints his dark character quickly, and the answers are almost hideous in their nature, sending fear into every cell in my body, because that's not the kind of madness my father has prepared me for.

In every scenario we've discussed, the bad guys always used me as bait to lure him away.

Never once was the bad guy supposed to want me so much he would spy on me for more than a year!

A man whose weaknesses are probably his obsessions, which he craves to the point of insanity, and once he settles his mind on something or someone, no one and nothing can stop him.

He will destroy anything standing in his way.

Something in my behavior must have triggered a memory of someone for him, and the images merged so much he felt like he needed me.

"He started working at the mansion when I was seventeen," I whisper, all the blocks aligning in my head into a construction that scares me and unfortunately intrigues my curiosity that wants to better understand his complex psyche, which probably lost its marbles a long time ago. "You must be twice my age. You're sick." Obsessions usually go hand in hand with insanity, and lust pollutes their minds so much they cannot rest until they get their hands on the desired object or person.

A half grin lifts the corner of his mouth as he leans closer to me, his sunglasses showing me my frightened reflection. "I'm thirty-six so you're correct."

I push at his chest again, needing to put distance between us, because the emotions filling me right now are all jumbled together—not to mention his age!

But mostly how my body naturally leans toward him and betrays me in ways I haven't anticipated. How could this happen? Especially after he admitted his age that should send revulsion through me.

Could this be Stockholm syndrome rearing its head early, protecting me by showing this man in a handsome light, naturally inspiring attraction inside me so my sanity will be kept intact and the captivity more bearable?

All my book knowledge won't help me right now though since this is real life, and I have no experience with men to base my reactions.

So, muting the emotions his presence pulls from me, I decide to try a professional approach. "Whoever the woman was, I'm not her." Running my hand over my hair, I continue, "I might have her hair or eyes or something else, but I'm me and not her." Maybe if I manage to break his illusion, he'll let me go, because so far he hasn't displayed any abusive behavior toward me. "Please let me go."

He cups my cheek, his thumb brushing against my skin, and I freeze, too afraid now to make a sudden move, because an obsessive man might be dangerous and strike you when you don't see it coming. "Ah, my innocent girl. What did I say about generalizing? Not everyone fits into your psychological box either." His fingers skim over my chin before trapping it and digging painfully into my jaw. "Make no mistake, Aileen; you're the one I want."

"Who are you?" I ask once again as the boat rocks gently when we reach the shore and stops abruptly. Men shout loudly about giving them the ropes, and William passes us, muttering something under his breath. "Tell me your name."

He lets me go instantly, and I stumble back but quickly find my balance, noticing the men around me don't even dare look in my direction, keeping their eyes on the deck or ground, which speaks volumes about their boss's temper and possessive tendencies.

"Eyes always on me, darling," he growls, and I raise my gaze back to him as he removes his sunglasses, finally

revealing his molten, emerald-green orbs shimmering in the sunlight, holding permanent amusement in them but deep darkness too.

His eyes almost share a story with the world on their own, warning everyone about the dangerous man, a true hunter who will sink his claws into anyone if he so pleases.

Or a beast living under a curse whose soul was snatched away from him a long time ago, so he takes his anger out on everyone else, never truly finding solace in his darkness.

Only once, as a little girl, have I seen eyes completely focused on me... because the man listened to my pain and soothed my distress.

*His knuckles brush over my cheek, sweeping away the tears streaming down, and concern crosses his face as he says softly, "Don't cry, little one." I cover my mouth with my hand, although it does little to stop the sobs shaking my entire body. "Do you want me to call your dad?" He looks over his shoulder toward the huge building Daddy bought a year ago and the place where his and my other uncles' business is conducted. Although I'm not allowed to go inside.*

*He and Uncle Arson left me to roam in the garden with my nanny before Daddy takes me to the park so I can practice some of my moves for the upcoming show.*

*But I couldn't hold it in any longer, the hurt squeezing my heart relentlessly, and I succumbed to the despair, crying uncontrollably when this man found me.*

*"No," I reply and then lunge at him, wrapping my tiny hands around his bicep, and hide my face in his shirt, soaking it as tears continue to come. "Daddy will be too angry and tell lies to make me feel better."*

*His free hand gently runs over my hair. "How would he lie?"*

*"He'd say someday they will like me. But they won't." A sigh slips past my lips as I twist my head to the side and rest my cheek on his arm. "Or that's what they claim." I wait a bit and then add on a whisper, "Please don't lie to me."*

*“Aileen,” my nanny, Anna, says as she comes closer, patting me slightly on the back. “Let’s go check out the roses in the garden. I’m sure they’ve bloomed by now.” She blushes under the man’s stare. His eyes narrow at this, and he moves us to the side so she no longer touches me.*

*“She’s fine,” he cuts her off. “Smelling fucking flowers will hardly calm her down.” I giggle a little when Anna’s mouth drops open at him swearing in my company, but it seems he doesn’t care about my daddy’s rules.*

*“Mr. Scott will hear about this and—”*

*“Go ahead and tell him, then.”*

*She huffs, then opens and closes her mouth before addressing me. “I’ll be right back, Aileen.” And she storms off in the direction of the building as I groan inwardly.*

*Daddy won’t like her leaving me alone.*

*He peels me away from his arm so I have no choice but to gaze at his face.*

*Oh, he reminds me of the princes in all the cartoons!*

*No wonder Anna likes him and dragged me to this spot in the first place because she saw him sitting on the steps, writing something in his notebook.*

*Gross.*

*Grownups and their attractions are so... ewww.*

*He picks up the black notebook he placed on the stairs when he was next to me and flips it open. My eyes widen in surprise when he shows me hundreds of different sketches, each more beautiful and detailed than the next.*

*The sunrise kissing the ocean, the sun setting on a huge castle, a parrot sitting on a palm tree, just to name a few.*

*However, my attention is caught by something else, and quickly I put my finger on the page, so he stops scrolling. I push the papers aside and lean forward to study the drawing better.*



*This one is a bit different from the others, because it has splashes of color making the drawing seem almost too real.*

*A waterfall is showcased in all its mighty glory, falling on the giant rocks buried in the clear water. A strip of land is a short distance away, highlighted by the sunny day and my love for everything that has to do with the ocean. "This is so beautiful!" Cocking my head to the side, I ask, "Is it a real place?"*

*A strange note laces his tone when he answers, "Yes. One of my favorites at that."*

*I grin at him, wiping the remaining tears. "Are you an artist, then?" Maybe Daddy plans to invest money in his projects? They support young artists, because Mom thinks art should be cherished and appreciated.*

*He laughs and shakes his head. "No. I just love to draw." My brows furrow. Doesn't this imply he's an artist?*

*To my loud gasp, he tears away the page with the drawing and gives it to me. "Here."*

*"Really?" I ask, grabbing it and pressing it to my chest. "Thank you! I will hang it on my wall so I can look at it every day."*

*He taps my nose. "Just promise not to cry over stupid-ass people."*

*I nod, holding my hand up. "I promise."*

*And that's when Daddy emerges from the building, marching toward me, and the stranger gets up, winking at me one last time. I wave at him, thinking how the worst day in my life turned into one of the best.*

*Because now I have a friend who gave me a gift!*

*The eyes of my friend who I promised to help, because he suddenly became a persona non grata in our house.*

*The eyes belonging to a man I deemed my first and only crush by the time I turned ten, determined to lift the curse, believing in fairy tales despite my genius mind.*

And the eyes of a man whose true nature shattered my childhood heart, leaving me hollow inside and with tarnished memories, which resulted in me tearing the drawing he gave me to pieces.

I exhale his name on a breath. “Rush.”

Oh no.

I didn’t get kidnapped by an obsessive man mistaking me for someone else.

I got kidnapped by the villain.

To whom I promised eternal devotion.

And he finally came to collect.

*R*ush

Eleven years ago, I used to think the power Lachlan possessed, which allowed him to wear the invisible golden crown, meant everything to him, and I craved to destroy the alliances he built so he’d be overthrown.

A king is nothing without his loyal knights.

But my theory proved to be worthless when I discovered him strolling through a park with his kids and wife, laughing about something said to him, and how much—in his dark and dangerous way—warmth and love he showered on them.

And my plan and weapon to destroy the king changed.

Disappearing from New York and waiting for Aileen to grow up so I could exact my revenge in the most agonizing way was great torture to the monster whispering in my ear to kill Lachlan every single day, but I withstood its call.

Killing some monsters is a blessing to them, because some of them deserve to live with the consequences of their deeds.

Instead, I filled my time with blood, gore, and mayhem elsewhere.

Hurting or scaring Aileen in the process mattered little to me. Every chess player will sacrifice a weak pawn to win the

game. After all, her being in pain would drive Lachlan even more insane.

A means to an end serves no purpose beyond giving me what I want.

Except...

I must be the really fucking sick bastard her father deemed me to be, because hurting her then sending her back home once this is all over so the memory of my holding her captive will stay with her forever no longer satisfies me or seems like an option.

Running my gaze over her beautiful, mesmerizing face, shocked with her discovery and eyes reflecting that fear, I can almost feel it enveloping her senses.

Her earlier bravado starts to fade rapidly, although she still holds her head high, her silent defiance only adding to her charm.

The sun exposes every inch of her delectable body from the perky breasts to long legs, which I crave to wrap around my waist while driving inside her. I long to hear the heady moans escaping her mouth as she whispers my name through her full lips into my ear.

The moans of pleasure this innocent creature learns under my touch.

Something deep inside me stirs, something that's stayed dormant through this entire year of spying on her as I focused only on my agenda and did my best to ignore my body's reaction toward a seventeen-year-old girl who has ignited it in ways I've never felt before.

A deep possessiveness, a roaring beast clawing to get out and stake his claim on her so no man alive will think they can take her away from me without facing my wrath.

The need to cover her delicate flesh in my love bites for everyone to see so they will know who owns her. Every breath she takes spins lust inside me that travels through my blood and mixes with the hate her family name inspires, both battling for dominance... and both losing.

The lust almost dictates I pull her toward my darkness, smearing her in it so completely her father won't be able to accept her back, a trickery that would earn me my victory and keep the beauty next to me.

Just like Hades tricked his Persephone to drink the pomegranate juice that became her downfall.

While my eyes watched her all this time, I called her Aileen Scott, the daughter of my enemy who grew up into a gorgeous woman, one impossible to resist.

Looking at her now though, so strikingly beautiful she tugs on my dark soul in ways I haven't anticipated, and another name comes to mind that fits like a second skin and calms the beast demanding to fuck her right here, right now, so she won't have illusions about her escape.

Or a brighter future with someone else.

*Mine. Mine. Mine.*

The beauty found her beast after all.

Too bad he doesn't turn into a dashing prince.

And the kiss from the beauty will only draw them both deeper into his curse and corrupt the innocent soul who came to save him.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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*“Villains have existed on this earth since the creation.  
They roam around searching for innocent souls to satiate the  
dark hunger from within them.  
They are cruel, invincible, lethal, and have no mercy or  
compassion for those suffering at their hand.  
Ironically, they are still capable of making one simple mistake  
that might cost them everything.  
Have a weakness that’s too easy to break.”*

*Rush*

*F*rom Rush’s unsent letters...

*Aileen,*

*You continue to write to me even though you know better.  
Doesn’t Daddy warn you about the monsters hiding in the  
darkness, ready to snatch you away from him when he turns  
his back and lowers his guard?*

*If you were older, I’d call you a fool, although it seems I’m  
one too, because I still find ways to receive your letters that  
tug at the remaining human parts of me.*

*I should feel like a sick bastard for even reading your  
letters, but then I never answer them, right?*

*Or that’s the excuse I’ve given myself.*

*Maybe I write these letters because you are the only  
person in this world who doesn’t see me as a horrendous lost*

*cause, a roque protégé who everyone hates and considers insane.*

*A despicable, cruel man reflecting back at me in the rare occasions I find a mirror at my house.*

*Or maybe the truth of the matter is... I'm sick and enjoy your letters because just the idea of how much Lachlan would lose his shit once he learns about them brings me too much satisfaction to resist.*

*I gather them all in a special wooden box with your name engraved on it to someday present to your father and see the rage filling his usually cold-as-ice eyes.*

*You're his beloved princess, his greatest weakness of all.*

*The princess of the cursed castle that turned into a loving mansion once your mother graced it with her presence, brightening up the world all around her. We never exchanged a single word with each other, and she wouldn't even remember how I look if asked, however her warmth always radiated from her in spades, warming up the cold pieces of my psyche desperate to find solace somewhere.*

*Even among one of the most dangerous men who accepted me into his family and claimed to stand by me through everything.*

*How could an eleven-year-old boy not consider himself lucky when they found me in my hell and saved me?*

*Not be mesmerized by their life and crave to participate in the same horrible stuff because it brought peace to the rage fueling my blood every single day?*

*I used to look at your parents and imagined that despite my dark deeds and past, a good woman could fall in love with me.*

*The most hilarious part about it all though?*

*It was all a lie.*

*Their loyalty, their support, their warmth.*

*It all became fake when the truth came to light.*

*Because they didn't save me from my hell.*

*They created it in the first place.*

*So no, Aileen.*

*I won't wait. Not only because revulsion rushes through me just at the idea of waiting for you to grow up.*

*Lachlan's blood runs through your veins, and whatever belongs to him... is poisonous to me, pouring venom into every cell in my body and reminding me of the nightmares still haunting me and the agonizing screams ringing in my head with vivid images flashing in front of my eyes like a colorful movie that refuses to end.*

*Screams and images I'm unable to find reprieve from.*

*I won't ever forgive or forget what your father has done to me.*

*And because of that, you can never be the cure that soothes my wounds.*

*Or anyone else for that matter.*

*You might grow up into a beauty who seeks to find her beast, but I won't be that.*

*Never that.*

*And you know why?*

*Inevitably, the villain always takes away what you love the most.*

*It's in our nature.*

*A princess can fall in love with a knight or a beast.*

*But she cannot fall in love with a villain who will kill the king.*

*For I won't ever rest until his death or mine.*

*Rush*

**Aileen**

*A* When I was ten years old, Uncle Arson invited everyone to celebrate Christmas at an awesome ski resort.

The minute we arrived in the snow-covered town filled with different attractions and excited squeals from the people who engaged in different winter sport activities, we all jumped at the opportunity to choose the one we wanted to try the most.

Everyone either picked skiing or ice skating, except Levi, who decided to take on the snow board and soaked up the attention everyone gave him, since Dad decided to show him a few moves.

Me though?

I had my focus on the mountain where kids were snow tubing, laughing uncontrollably, and my feet itched to run toward it and experience it myself.

Without asking my parents for permission, I rushed in its direction, wiggling between large groups of people heading toward it, craving to be the next one to slide down and experience true awesomeness while the snow fell on me.

Fate had other plans though, because I hadn't made five steps before something hard hit me in the head, the pain so sudden and harsh everything inside me became numb, except the loud ringing in my ears remained.

My mind barely comprehended what happened. Everything became blurry around me, my knees wobbled, and thankfully someone caught me before my head hit the ground.

The stranger's strong arms picked me up while something hot slid down my forehead to my nose, and my cheek pressed against his warm chest.

The throbbing brought so much pain, distressed whimpers slipped from my mouth, but there was no reprieve from it as it followed every breath I took.

The doctors, who stitched me up and ran several tests after that, praised the stranger who noticed my distress and brought me in before more damage could be done. But no matter how



hard my parents tried to find him to reward him, he seemed to vanish into thin air.

All that trouble because one of the kids passed too hard and a hockey puck hit me.

I always considered that the unluckiest incident in my life that ruined everyone's holiday.

The disorientation and pain slashing my head from inside out at the uncovered truth of my kidnapper is just as bad, despite not experiencing physical distress.

It feels like someone placed me in a plastic box where all sounds are muted, and the only sound in my head is my own panicked voice thinking of ways to escape this villain, because my mind has no problem delivering image after image of the things he's capable of doing.

"Rush?" I repeat, hating how fear and panic glide over my skin causing goose bumps to rise on my flesh. Instinctively, my feet move back and scrape against the wood underneath them.

My father taught me how to stay calm in dangerous situations, but he didn't prepared me to face a man like Rush.

He's worse than the devil himself.

He opens his arms wide. "In the flesh, darling."

My heartbeat speeds up at his confirmation. My delusional mind had still hoped I mistook him for someone else.

I take another step back, craving to move as far away as possible, but the warning in his gaze halts my movements.

"Now, darling, is that the way to greet your beast?"

"You're not my anything!" I say, wishing right now to go back in time and stop my little self from writing those stupid letters to this man who decided to cash in on the promise a six-year-old made.

At least I was a clueless child. What's his excuse to wait for me to grow up? Was he stalking me all this time and waited until I became legal to claim me as his?

Staying away yet still watching?

Sick, disgusting bastard!

*Didn't think so just minutes ago when you admired his handsomeness.*

Apparently, the little voice in my head has no problem reminding me of my shame.

Rush snatches a piece of paper from the back of his pocket and opens it, reading aloud while his men bring out several suitcases from the cabin, still averting their gazes as if what their boss does right now is an everyday occurrence. *“You just have to wait. Just wait. Aileen.”*

Oh My God.

He never bothered to reply to any of them, but he kept them through the years? “I was a child!” I shout, not caring that a few men gasp in surprise. Scared or not, I wasn't raised to be a doormat, so I hold my chin up, meeting Rush's stare. “A six-year-old child who thought her friend needed help! I was not promising you eternal devotion, you disgusting psycho!”

“Ah, you break the emptiness that's my heart.” He chuckles, finding my outburst merely amusing, and why wouldn't he? All the power right now belongs to him.

After all, psychopaths don't display compassion or any normal human emotion; instead, they get off on subjecting all the clueless people who stand in their way to their power and manipulation.

He puts the letter back and winks at me. “According to this, you're mine. Words have a certain magic and consequences, my darling. Once you promise something, you should keep your end of the bargain. The devil will collect his due. Always.” He motions with his hand toward the land around us. “Welcome to your new home, Aileen. The land where the villain rules.”

Darkness consumes him so much there is no light left from the young man he used to be before he stepped on the path of no return.

Because only a monster would think his statement brings me any kind of joy! “This will never be my home.” Willing all my courage and self-respect into my fist, I straighten my back as determination fills my every pore, ready to fight until my last breath. “And I agree that words have consequences. That’s why you will choke on yours someday.” Especially when my father and uncles find me, and I will enjoy every second of his suffering.

My heart pangs painfully at the thought, contradicting my joy that more likely will be sorrow, because some stupid, naïve part in me, to my humiliation, still harbors warm emotions toward him.

Maybe he’s right about something.

I’m too compassionate for my own good, but monsters don’t deserve second chances, as they give none to those who cross them.

Murderers will never be able to have a fairy tale ending, because the path they have chosen will always have death at the end of it.

Rush sucks a breath through his teeth. “I’d be careful if I were you, darling. All this defiance is starting to turn me on.” He finishes on a whisper, and anger sparks inside me, rushing into my veins and blocking away all the rational thinking and knowledge about his past.

I raise my hand and slap his cheek hard, the sound echoing in the space, while my palm bounces back, stinging from the contact.

Everything around us grows very quiet as all the men freeze, staring at us with anticipation of Rush’s next move, and although my heart races, bumping against my ribs so hard it might burst, I stand still, mentally preparing for his retaliation as an angry, red mark forms on his cheek.

“Go back to work,” he barks without turning, and everyone jumps, frantically moving around on the shore and the boat, getting all the things prepared. I hear a screeching sound against the ground. “Are the stairs down?” he asks no one in

particular, not reacting to my slap, which only scares me more, because it goes against my predications.

Men who became monsters don't allow anyone to mark their skin or dare to raise a hand against them, especially not some weak captive who they brought for their own amusement.

"Yes," William speaks from behind him, concern lacing his tone, and he addresses me. "Miss Aileen, how about following me and—" Rush snaps his fingers in a silent command, and William sighs heavily, clearly upset he cannot save me from the beast's rage. "I'm so sorry, Miss Aileen."

Maybe he shouldn't have participated in organizing a trap for me then!

The sun beams above us, sending hot flushes over my system, yet my body still trembles, indicating to him how much the tension in the air affects me, and when he steps closer, I can't help but scrunch my eyes, already expecting the pain and hating myself for this weakness.

To be fair, who wouldn't be scared to face the wrath of a psychopath?

Rush is a villain who murders people for his own amusement and has no values other than torture and suffering of those he deems guilty.

The things he's capable of doing can send the strongest men into a panic attack, making them wish to escape his clutches, but he shows no mercy to his victims.

At the university, I studied the subject of serial killers intently, searching for clues that would give me insight on the man from my childhood who had been so kind to me yet so cruel to everyone else.

My father must have found out about his wild tendencies and wanted to imprison him, but he ran away before the police got him.

Because he wouldn't just kick him out, knowing what he had done in life, right? It would also explain why he was overprotective. Rush probably threatened him about

kidnapping me, so Dad increased the guards watching after me.

However, no amount of knowledge on the subject answers the question of why he's so fixated on me to the point of risking his safety and coming back to the town my father banned him from.

Serial killers are only obsessed about their victims who with the flick of their hair can trigger a traumatic memory resulting in them being confused with someone else and needing to execute their revenge to silence the voices in their head.

If I triggered a memory for him, I would already have been dead, so it must be something else.

Unless...

He really believes he is a cursed beast who only does despicable deeds because a witch enchanted him, and he hopes a beauty will save him and transform him into a handsome prince?

Madness after all includes delusions and a distorted sense of reality that only grows the more the person indulges in his darkness.

My God, why did I write all those stupid letters and not just enjoy my waterfall drawing? Instead, I added fuel to the fire of his insanity by making my persona almost irresistible to the beast by promising reprieve from the cravings consuming him every single day.

His masculine scent, tobacco with a strong cologne, penetrates my nostrils, alerting me to the upcoming danger as he steps closer to me, his energy hitting me and wrapping an invisible chain around my middle, pulling me toward him.

For a second, the air hitches in my lungs, and I wait for his next move, rolling my lips together to still the painful scream that probably will emerge from my throat when he dishes out his punishment.

Only to squeal in surprise when he throws me over his shoulder, my hair almost touching the deck as he spins around

and strolls toward the stairs leading to the shore.

Snapping out of my shock at his unexpected behavior, I hit his back with my fist, but he doesn't even react. "Let go of me!" I push up, hopefully covering my breasts from the gaping men, and shout, "Put me down, you psycho!" Glancing down, I see him stepping onto the dock, his boots thumping loudly on the wooden boards. Everyone separates to make room for him as he heads to the idling car, a sports one with an open sunroof at that! "Put me down!"

"Behave, darling. Or I'll find other ways to control this wild temper of yours."

Wild temper of mine! "Wanting to be rescued from a psychopath who kidnapped me to be his personal toy and lives in an illusion of his own creation is now considered a wild temper?"

"Psychopath?" Amusement dances on the edges of his tone as he puts his hand on my ass and tugs on the nightgown, pulling it down. "What did I say about labeling people? I'm starting to think all the talk about your extraordinary intelligence is false." He pats me lightly, and the fury boils inside me to epic proportions, the bitter taste of it in my mouth making me want to vomit.

"Don't you dare touch me!" I shout as hate for him grows within me. My furious mind searches the depths of my memory to find something that might help me hurt him enough, so he'll know what it's like to be on the receiving end of the cruelty.

Someone chuckles under his breath, and I glare at the man who hooks ropes around the wood pilings, securing the boat to the shore.

Horrible humans, he probably shares his boss's views on handling women, and God only knows what else happens on this island probably smeared in the blood of his victims.

But my glare and anger quickly change to a whispered "Oh My God!" when Rush grabs him by the collar and throws him

in the ocean, water splashing everywhere as the man gulps a few large breaths and coughs. “He might have drowned!”

Rush shrugs, his shoulder bouncing me, and I notice how his breathing doesn't even speed up and his movements stay smooth, as if I'm the lightest of feathers and my weight brings him no discomfort. “Let him. He shouldn't have laughed at my beauty.”

“He's insane. Insane!” I scream at William who is running behind us, his hand keeping his hat in place while his jacket flaps around from the wind. “I'm not your beauty, you sick psycho! My name is Aileen Scott, and I promise you'll regret dragging me here!”

Psychopaths have no regard for weakness. Instead, they feed on it and fear, loving to torture their victims until nothing is left of their morals.

Well then, Rush is in for a big surprise if he thinks I'll let him walk all over me and just accept these new terms.

My parents haven't raised me to bow my head to anyone, least of all to a psychotic narcissist who thinks the world revolves around him!

“As we recently discovered, darling, you don't keep your promises well, so I won't be holding my breath.”

The nerve he has!

“You—” The rest of what I want to say finishes on a huff as he stops abruptly, letting my body slide down his form, his rigid muscles digging into my soft ones. I gasp when my nipples graze over the hair on his chest, the sensation breaking goose bumps on my skin while hatred toward myself grows.

Before I manage to bolt somewhere, as long as it's far away from Rush, he pulls me closer, dips down, and lifts me up in his arms, one hand under my knees while the other one cradles my back as I thrash in them, trying to wiggle free.

William opens the car door for Rush, and he sits on the seat, placing me on his lap with my legs dangling. I hiss, “Seriously! Let go! Do you not have any dignity?”

His laughter fills my ear, his arms around me tighten, and the position leaves me very little room to move, especially with me sitting above his....

Trying not to think about it, I do my best to peel his hands from me, but it does little good, and I growl in annoyance, hating that my ballet stamina hasn't prepared me for a man like Rush. I'm already exhausted, and the sun streaming straight on us doesn't help me either; my head's becoming slightly dizzy. "Choose your battles well, Aileen. Didn't your father teach you that?" His voice stays even, although distaste coats it, which only makes me even more defensive of my father.

My father uncovered the truth about Rush's true nature, and that's why he harbors resentment toward him.

"He did. Among a few other things."

Desperation fills every part of me as I dread what awaits me in the place where we're headed, plus not knowing how to talk to this monster who doesn't seem to react to anything according to the books or my expectations.

An enemy you do not understand is the worst kind, because you can never prepare for his or her attack, which leaves you vulnerable to their moods and desires.

Fighting against him is a lost cause, because we are on an island where "the villain rules," as he called it, so even if I manage to escape his clutches... they will find me quickly since their knowledge of this location plays in their favor.

Monsters have their hunting grounds for a reason; they are the territory they know better than anyone, so the odds almost always end up being in their favor.

William gets into the driver seat and presses on the gas. The vehicle speeds rapidly along the road while the soft breeze swirls around us. Seagulls soar in the sky, searching for food, and my thoughts jump around, my mind trying to pick the most prominent facts to focus on. I do my best to ignore the heat scorching my skin from the male body radiating power so



strong it envelops me in a cocoon where nothing but his presence remains.

My father will come to save me, nothing in me doubts this truth.

Will they come in time though? Before the man, who considers me his beauty and his prized possession and reward for the patience he has shown all these years, does irrevocable damage to me?

Tears form in my eyes, but I tilt my head back, not letting them emerge and give satisfaction to the psycho who rests his head on the car seat, with his eyes closed. Instead, I shift my attention toward the scenery around me.

My eyes drink in the gorgeous natural beauty opening up as we drive through the tropical forest, with countless palm trees with coconuts dangling from them.

Farther, I spot different, smaller trees and bushes holding berries and fruits, and my brows furrow, trying to understand my location based on the data presented but come up blank.

An island possessing so many interesting resources and stumbled on by people who built a home here should be mentioned somewhere in some articles.

Exotic flowers grow through the rich soil and wrap around trees in weird shapes and forms. Their colors red, purple, and yellow create a happy image and add to the beauty of this place, which belongs in geographic magazines all over the world. Because such a view should be shared with humankind and not stay hidden.

Various bird species chirp around us, their voices echoing through the space combining with the ocean crashing in the distance and waterfall sounds somewhere far away. My curiosity longs to discover if maybe that's the one from the painting he gave me.

The farther we go, the more natural perfection I discover. I gasp, spotting several blue parrots sitting on branches and basking in the sun, unafraid of the passing car, which only proves my point. This land has been occupied for a long time.

The fresh air surrounding us somehow calms some of my nerves and allows me to think rationally, pushing away the fear and anger clouding my judgement.

The island has a lot of natural resources that could help me to survive if I find a way to notify my father about my whereabouts. Or can he just trace my phone here?

Anyhow, my future here becomes less grim and more optimistic as long as I keep a cool head and store everything in my memory.

“Like what you see, darling?” Rush asks, his green orbs zeroing their gaze on me. Glaring at him, I turn away to study the view in front of me as William pulls onto a narrow concrete road emerging from the forest and leading toward a massive building in the distance, guarded by a huge fence so thick it reminds me of those in the fifth and sixth centuries when the fences were responsible for keeping the people alive so the enemy couldn’t get inside. “It’s wired too. One touch and it might give you a heart attack. Don’t forget that while you consider your great escape plan,” he whispers into my ear, tickling my skin, and I move to the side, hating his smug tone.

If he thinks his words will dissuade me from finding a way out, he has another think coming. “I’m not surprised. Cowards always go to extra measures to ensure their safety,” I reply breezily, and William’s hands tighten on the steering wheel, a heavy exhale slipping past his lips.

At his age and the guilt he displayed, it’s a wonder he’s still healthy enough to run all the errands Rush makes him do.

But then again, loyalty is one of the strongest characteristics a person has, and if it’s given to the right people, they will cherish you forever and value you never crossing the line to abuse.

Bad people though always use any kind of attachments in their games, supplying their selfish desires that feed their every thought. Loyalty becomes a bargaining chip, pushing people to do hideous crimes to prove how much they love and support the monster who in most cases sired them.

Rush's chuckle raises my hackles as he says, "Ah, I do enjoy the claws, kitten. Although—" He leans to my ear, his hot breath fanning my nape, and I freeze when his hand slides to my waist, clenching my silky robe and pressing me firmer against him. "—I'll much prefer them scratching my back as you go insane from the pleasure I'm capable of giving you."

Heat washes over me at his hypnotizing voice, his touch enveloping me in the familiar hotness appearing to me in my dreams, and a pulse travels through my system, pulling at the lustful strings in my soul.

A disturbing realization nips at my mind, demanding all the clues be put together to reveal a hideous secret that might make me cry out in despair, but my heart must protect me, because I fail to focus on it and instead elbow him hard in the side.

A smile shapes my mouth when he sucks in a breath through his teeth, his hold on me loosening, and he growls, "Playing dirty are we, darling?"

"When in Rome..." I almost laugh at this villain who thinks the princess will be playing by his rules.

Contrary to what he believes, we aren't living in a fairy tale, and I'm not gonna sit peacefully in an ivory tower, waiting for rescue.

Fate always helps those who beg; however, the help is never direct, and sometimes we need to do most of the work so the lucky chance might be granted to us.

"Rush!" William speaks up for the first time as we pull closer to the gates. Several men stand by it and nod at us. They click their fingers to someone above to open the gate. "Show some respect for the lady."

Before Rush can comment on it, I say, "If you showed me some respect, William, I wouldn't be in this situation. Practice what you preach and all that jazz." And what could Rush blackmail him with anyway?

My father would have taken care of any problem if he'd trusted us and not become a snake we warmed on our chest,

then injected us with venom at the first opportunity it got.

“Our choices are dictated by circumstances, Ms. Scott.”

Rush tenses at the mention of my family name, his hand fisting on my waist, and I make a note to explore deeper this hatred toward us, because it might hold all the answers for me.

The heavy, black gate screeches annoyingly before starting to move to the right, making room for the oncoming vehicle. “Our choices are dictated by our consciences and beliefs. You clearly have some since you’re sorry but not enough to listen to them before the damage was done.” William shakes his head and presses on the pedal, the car roaring as we speed through the gates. My eyes widen at the picture greeting me.

Since the gates brought back memories about the fifth century, I half expected the inside to be even gloomier with gray and black dominating the color scheme and some modern establishment standing on the land where the villain resides while he plans his new crimes.

Rush strikes me as a man who loves to surround himself with luxury because it establishes his absolute power, and a modern setting would almost deem him the king on this little island of his.

The three-story mansion located in the middle of the enormous lawn covered by emerald-green grass glistens under the light instead though, showcasing its white and brown colors in all its magnificent glory.

The huge windows indicate around twenty rooms in the house with a small tower in the right wing, probably serving as the observatory of the entire island.

An enormous garden displays a variety of rose and orchid plants, along with trees serving as the perfect hiding places too since the alcoves are spread out haphazardly with the different species of flowers climbing over and through the walls and making them seem... empty. Because despite the garden being well manicured, it seems as if it has no soul or heart. It doesn’t vibrate with energy and warmth like the one back home.

Maybe because a villain rules it, and nothing but darkness fills his soul?

I see no statues or fountains, leaving huge gaps between all the beautiful flora, and as we drive closer to the mansion, I notice a shooting range a short distance away from the garden with various targets, tables, and weapons on them, probably serving as an amusement for this villain.

A man wearing the exact clothes William does emerges from the oak double doors, quickly descending the stone stairs with a huge smile on his mouth as we pull up to the mansion. When the car stops abruptly, Rush's hands are the only thing keeping me in place and not hitting my head on something. "Let go of me," I order calmly, wanting to separate myself from him while I look around.

God knows where he plans to take me.

Rush, of freaking course, ignores me and orders the newly arrived man, "George, open the door." He does so quickly, smiling at me, but it vanishes when he must read my thoughts or see the fury pouring from me.

My father once told me I must work on my poker face more since anyone can read me easily.

"Oh no, Rush. What did you do?" he asks him, shocking me, because his voice seems almost gentle and informal. "Welcome to the mansion, Miss...?"

"Aileen," I supply, slightly less hostile but nevertheless still guarded. He might not approve or even be aware of Rush's actions; however, trusting any of his people would be foolish on my part.

But then having an ally who might help me without realizing it would be brilliant, and I'm not ashamed to use any weapon available to me to free myself from this madness.

Rush secures me in his grip, swings to the side, and puts his legs on the ground, standing up with me in his arms!

Punching him several times in the chest, I demand, "Put me down! I'm capable of walking myself."

“Your feet are bare. You might hurt yourself,” he responds, glancing down at me as our gazes clash. “Nothing hurts what belongs to me. Especially not my beauty.”

I twist in his hold, doing my best to free myself but fail once again. “You’re hurting me right now!”

“Well, you’re trapped with the villain not the beast.”

“I don’t see much difference at this point!”

“You will, kitten. You will. All in good time.”

Stopping momentarily, my chest rising and falling from my heavy breathing, I try to remember all the details in *Beauty and the Beast*, the original French fairy tale.

If Rush believes he is cursed and I’m the antidote to the darkness polluting his veins, he will follow the scenario exactly, wanting to recreate the tale to change his reality.

The beast, according to the story, got the beauty because she wanted to save her family. Her father took a rose from the beast’s garden, and the beast considered it thievery for the hospitality he had shown him. He spared the father’s life though when he explained he wanted the rose for his daughter, and the beast let him go under one condition.

To send Belle back to him.

Even though the father refused after arriving home, despite the beast’s warning he would kill the entire family, Belle sneaked out on her own and arrived at the castle.

The beast started courting her, begging her to spend time with him, but she didn’t want to, because she was unable to love the creature beyond showing him companionship. Her nights were filled with dreams about a handsome prince, and she started to believe the beast kept him as a prisoner somewhere, but in reality, that was the prince’s true face before the curse was cast on him.

Belle begged the beast to allow her to go back home, and he granted her the wish, making her promise to return after two months. Once she agreed, he put a magic ring on her finger that with a twist teleported her back home.

Her family was surprised she lived with the beast and all the riches he had given her, but despite that, they tried to stop her from going back. However, Belle intended to keep her end of the bargain.

When she saw a dream about the bleeding beast who was on the brink of death, she used the ring to return to the castle, crying uncontrollably.

She finally realized she loved the beast, and he became a handsome prince who needed love to lift the curse.

And they lived happily ever after.

Except such an ending with a beast is only possible in the imagination and not real life.

According to this scenario, Rush wouldn't physically hurt me, but based on his hatred for my father, I doubt he will let me leave him, even if I beg.

So, during this so-called courtship, I have to find a way to escape; otherwise, my fate will be predicted for me.

His earlier words ring in my ear.

*"You're trapped with the villain, not the beast."*

If this story is not *Beauty and the Beast* but beauty and the villain...

Does this mean the rules are different?

**R**ush

Her blue eyes shimmer in the light as she studies me, her white teeth sinking into her lower lip. Her thoughts are so easy to read on her delicate face.

Aileen lives up to the meaning of her name.

A ray of sunshine brightening up everything around her, but like every light in this world, she can't exist in the darkness, because it would kill her.

Just like the truth about her father would.

Or rather *will*. Because I have every intention of removing the veils of deceit he placed on his daughter's head. She puts him on a pedestal, thinking a braver or better man doesn't exist.

He might be a great father to her.

But in my life?

He'll always be a monster, someone who sends fury through my body that seeps into my veins, making my dark heart rotten from the hate he planted there.

Determination and curiosity mingle in her gaze, and she swallows hard, sighing heavily as she makes another attempt to escape. My hands grab her tighter, enjoying the soft flesh under my palms but despising the silk that should never cover her skin. "Stay still, darling."

"Stop calling me darling and put me down! I prefer to have bruises on my feet rather than be carried by you!" She hooks her hair behind her ear, slapping my chest in the process and trying to kick me, but all her legs do is punch air. "Put me down!"

Clucking, I adjust her better in my arms, welcoming the heat her form inspires in me. The desire to own her in the most primal way burns within me, my male instincts on high alert, ready to destroy anyone who so much as looks at her wrong or finds her beauty mesmerizing enough to challenge my claim on her.

I've gone thirty-six years without obsessions, and now destiny finally has decided to grant me one, although the choice couldn't have been more ironic or wrong; it puts such a strain on all my plans.

Not to mention her age. No one would believe that I've never looked at her this way until that fateful dance in the park, her body vibrating with passion so strong I couldn't resist the pull, and wondered what it'd be like to be on the receiving end of it.

Indulging myself in her will hardly matter to my revenge and will only allow me to feed the wild hunger the beast



covets.

My obsession though will never become my weakness, since villains can take a liking to someone and even keep them against their will. The villain's one true love and alliance always stays to the darkness that accepted them when they were rejected by everyone else.

I don't desire her heart and love, only her body and lust.

With William and George hot on my heels, I walk toward the entrance while she still struggles in my arms. I can almost feel William and George squeezing the back of my neck, their silent disapproval so loud they might as well have said the words.

But then again, when did these two ever approve of anything I've ever done and stopped nagging about my behavior and manners?

Conveniently, they always tend to forget who raised me.

Quickly going up the stairs, I reach the double doors and enter. We pass by the gaping help and head straight to the second floor, to the wing on the right arranged specifically for her. I tell her, "I'll ask one of the maids to bring you food." She shrugs, pretending to be unaffected by my words, and my brow rises. "No protests or shouting that you'd rather starve than eat anything? I'm not sure if I should be disappointed or suspicious."

Anger flashes in her orbs, and her hands clench, fisting the abused silk hard. She takes a calming breath before finally speaking up. "My hate for you doesn't trump my common sense."

"Ah, kitten, if I'd known about your claws, I'd have kidnapped you on your birthday. They are too entertaining."

She wiggles her finger at me, almost poking my eye. "Don't call me kitten either!"

"Then what should I call you? Since beauty, darling, and kitten are off the table?" I nip her finger, and she gasps in outrage, snatching her hand away. "You're a hard woman to please, Aileen."

“Captive! That’s the only appropriate word,” she shouts back. “I’m surprised starvation isn’t part of your torture routine.”

“Where would be the fun in that, *darling*? My torture is much more creative.” My boots thump on the spotless floor as we finally reach her wing, and I kick open the door, stepping into the spacious room designed and furnished with her in mind.

My beauty of the castle deserves the best this life has to offer.

Who would have expected me to be this sentimental over some fucking bait and a means to an end?

Originally, her place belonged in the basement so she could cry her eyes out, my cameras recording her agony for her father to watch and to drive him more insane and reckless.

Add a little torture, just to ruffle her feathers, and nothing more, since the delicate creature never even lived beyond the borders her father drew around her. Aileen would have begged me for mercy, forgetting all about her family name and pride.

It would have killed Lachlan to know what was being done to his precious child, the pain far greater than anything I could dish out on him.

Psychological torture has a certain kind of charm only true hunters understand; the agony it brings envelops a human and makes him slowly lose his mind where nothing but fear remains.

However, the idea of Aileen begging me, alone and starved in the basement, no longer holds any appeal or even settles right with the monster roaming inside me who wishes to discover more about this young woman who inspires such a strong physical response.

I want to build twisted webs of desire and confusion around her brilliant mind that’s so used to judging everything and everyone by the knowledge she acquired in her books, not realizing that no one lives by the rules outside her small make-believe reality.

A sheltered princess who divides the world into white and black, right and wrong, heroes and villains.

While everything and everyone is much more multifaceted.

Just like her passion and lust for me will be.

After all, it's inevitable.

Her body cannot help but react to my touch, because it's the only pleasure it knows.

In three short strides, I reach the orange-canopied, king-sized bed and throw her on it, her loud squeal reverberating through the bedroom as she bounces a little on the mattress before settling down in the middle.

She removes some strands of hair from her face, her eyes sending daggers my way as she rights her clothes and sits on her knees facing us all. Her gaze darts between the three of us, probably trying to guess my next move and failing.

I grab a nearby chair, spin it around, and straddle it, the tips of my shoes bumping against its legs. "Now, darling, let's talk."

"If you think I'll follow your orders, then—" Her mouth shuts when I place my finger on my lips and grab the gun from my back pocket, clicking the safety off and aiming at William, who freezes, not even breathing. George makes a move to cover him but stills as well under my harsh stare.

They don't get to interfere in my plans or act out without my permission. They know better than anyone what a ruthless bastard I truly am.

"I indulged your hysterics earlier, because they amused me, but they start to bore me. And what bores me doesn't last long around me." Waving the gun up and down William's silhouette, I address a question to her. "Now, will you keep your mouth shut and listen like the good girl you are? Or do I need to teach you a lesson?"

She swallows, grips the nearby pillow, and presses it to her front as she looks at the gun one last time before shifting her

focus to me and nods.

Ah, compassionate creatures who show empathy, even to those who hurt or betray them, sign themselves a doomed future the minute they display such weakness to the monsters who control them.

Without realizing it, people put weapons into their enemy's hands themselves. In most cases, you don't even have to work hard during blackmail. Just a hint here and there, and you gain control over someone's psyche and actions.

Although, a person with a psychology degree should recognize manipulation when she sees it, unless her emotions cloud her judgment, which once again proves how naïve she still is.

"Very well." I lower the gun, holding my gaze on her, and continue as she rolls her lips together, probably to not cry out what a fucking monster her kidnapper is. "Now that you are a guest here, there are certain rules everyone has to follow. You included." Rubbing my chin with the gun's handle, I prompt, "Curious already, darling?"

She blinks a few times before replying. A majestic aura is present in every word she speaks, like I'm one of her subjects who she barely finds important. "Not really. I won't be staying long enough to care." She waits a beat and adds, "A guest implies someone staying of their own free will. Since I'm a captive, we can forgo the rules," she snaps back at me, the earlier fire blazing from her once again. Her chest rises and falls, her anger almost electrifying her body.

The gorgeous creature who never should have ended up in my hell, but I will saturate her with my darkness so completely she won't know how to exist without the things my body gives.

Addiction is a far more powerful aphrodisiac than most people anticipate.

Ignoring her statement, I announce, "Rule number one, you cannot leave the castle without me." I hold one finger up in the air and then lift the second one. "Rule number two,

you're allowed to roam inside the castle wherever you want  
—”

She rolls her eyes. “Let me guess, except the observatory tower? Should I expect a witch showing up in my dreams too?”

Winking at her, I send a grin her way. “On the contrary. I would enjoy your company there.”

Her nails sink into the pillow, her knuckles turning white, but her tone stays even as she responds to my jab. “Well then I’ll make sure to avoid it at all costs.” Her brows furrow, a line marring her forehead. “Wait. What do you mean I’m allowed to roam inside the castle?” She looks around the room before settling her eyes on me again. “Isn’t this the place where you’ll keep me?”

A chuckle vibrates my throat at her assumptions, and I cock my head to the side, resting my elbows on top of the chair. “Why would I do that, darling? You aren’t my prisoner.” Devastation crosses her face while panic fills her eyes, the information unsettling her, because it confuses her and pushes the norms she has placed on psychopaths and serial killers.

Hate is a fickle thing after all.

When someone evil doesn’t play fair, you can easily confuse it with love and affection, because the lines are too blurred.

“Finally, rule number three.” I lift the third finger up. “Every evening, you will spend time with me, and I don’t want any resistance or hysterics.”

She huffs in disbelief before raising her chin and spitting, “Shove these rules up your ass, Rush!”

I sigh dramatically, placing my hand over my heart. “Brave, very brave. But so foolish.” Her eyes widen when I point the gun at William again. “For your every resistance or hysterics, one of my staff will have to pay. Villains don’t react kindly to rejections.”

“No, you wouldn’t—” She glances at the men for reassurance, her voice trembling when she asks them a

question. “He wouldn’t, right?”

Only silence greets her though, as both butlers have stoic expressions on their faces, averting their gaze from Aileen, and as always scolding me internally.

Their speeches have been so long and the same through the years that I don’t even have to listen to them anymore as they never fucking change.

“Do you really want to test the depths of my madness?” The chair scrapes against the floor when I get up and push it to the side, stepping toward her, and she moves farther up the bed, her back slamming into the headboard while she frantically clenches the pillow. If I decide to indulge myself in her body, this useless shield will hardly save her. “Is your curiosity so strong it doesn’t mind a few casualties along the way?” My tone lowers, laced with a warning promising retribution should she dare to go against my orders. “Is it, *darling?*”

She breathes heavily, watching me carefully, likely searching for something human in me from when the darkness claimed my soul a long fucking time ago. Goodness no longer lingers around to lose battles over my sanity. “You’ll never become a prince, because nothing wipes away the evilness,” she whispers as a tear rolls down her cheek, but she quickly wipes it away.

A memory of her crying her eyes out on those damned steps flashes in my mind, bringing with it the emotions I felt toward her back then that made me pause my drawing and want to soothe the distress the little girl experienced.

Deep gentleness, because in her pink dress and princess status, who everyone doted on, she represented something pure, something that no darkness in the world could touch, and in this moment, she reminded me of *her*.

And *she* would have been disappointed in me if I sat there and did nothing when a little girl experienced her first heartbreak.

Only back then, feeling anything deep toward her didn't mean my downfall, and this time around, she can't be a weakness driving me away from my path.

Quashing the familiar feeling inside me, I tell her, "I'll see you at seven o'clock sharp." With this, I spin around on my heel and march to the door, throwing over my shoulder, "Should you need anything, ask William or George. Consider them your private butlers." As the men rush out before me, I grab the handle, ready to slam it shut, when her words halt my exit.

"My father won't rest until he finds me. It might not be today or tomorrow, but he will come after me!"

Half turning to her, I say, "I'm counting on it, Aileen. Otherwise, his name wouldn't be Lachlan Scott, would it?" She throws a pillow my way, but I manage to close the door before it reaches me, as my laughter echoes along the walls and fills the mansion with something wicked and forbidden.

Because tonight, my beauty will face a challenge she doesn't expect.

And we'll see how sharp these claws of hers really are.

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## CHAPTER NINE

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*“Beauty is a weapon.  
If used right, it can tempt anyone.  
Even the villain with a stone-cold heart.”*

*Aileen*

*F*rom Aileen’s letters...

*Dear Rush,*

*I’ve debated for a long time if I should write you this year... since you never bother to answer anyway. To be completely honest, I was so angry I vowed to never write a letter to you again.*

*You broke my heart with your silence. You were my one and only friend back then, whose drawing still hangs on my wall, urging me to visit the place depicted there sometime. Yet it didn’t stop you from ignoring me and becoming just like everyone else in my life.*

*Well, random people at least, since my family and my three friends are the very best.*

*Elena, Caroline, and Pierre—I met them all during one of our trips to Houston to visit Uncle Callum and his wife Aunt Giselle. They were all my age, and we bonded instantly. They never judged me for my differences and kept our bond, promising me to forever be on my side.*

*They even love my smart brain that seems to anger my schoolmates. My friends claimed my smart brain would always*



*come in handy in the future.*

*However, thinking about your pain still didn't settle my mind. I'm eleven now, so I know you aren't under a curse, because such things don't exist in a way.*

*But sometimes, the reality we create around ourselves, filling it with the wrong emotions as we chase something we should have abandoned, becomes a curse, doesn't it? Not letting the soul rest and stabbing the heart with an invisible knife over and over again, making the blood drip on the floor, drop by drop, that slowly sucks the life out of us.*

*Maybe that's what happened to you?*

*Sometimes when we hurt so much it almost breaks us, we prefer to block emotions all at once to not go insane.*

*So thinking (and fighting with myself) for over a month, I took the paper once again and started writing my feelings on it, strangely excited about resuming the correspondence between us.*

*You never reply, and I don't expect it, but expressing my thoughts toward someone who will listen without trying to cheer me up somehow works better for me.*

*Almost like a diary, but a living and breathing person—instead of that—who can validate my emotions.*

*When you are a gifted child or whatever else epithet adults use to describe my mind, everyone has their own idea of who you are and what you should do.*

*What's important to you.*

*For example, my principal and teachers claim I should study science and contribute to this world, since God has granted me such a wonderful gift. They constantly give me different brochures to top universities all over the world (I'm starting high school this year), so I can see the subjects and requirements needed.*

*My grandparents still harbor the hope I might pursue professional ballet, claiming the talent runs in the family, and I should explore it to give something extraordinary to the art.*

*My Uncle Braden advises me to explore my love for horses and maybe dedicate my future to some equestrian sports or becoming a veterinarian (that idea surprises me the most. I love Rain... but that's about it. I'm not really interested in any competitions).*

*And finally my parents, who don't push me into anything; instead, they tell me to just pick what I love. Whatever makes me happy.*

*That's just the thing.*

*I'm not sure I know what makes me happy.*

*And I have to decide in three years. No wonder people finish school at eighteen. How can you possibly choose your entire future so young?*

*To be totally honest though...*

*I'm afraid my choices will disappoint someone. And I'd hate to hurt my family or the people who care about me.*

*Mom says people need to learn how to be selfish in a healthy way and put their own needs above those around them because we live this life only once, and no one thanks us for our sacrifices anyway.*

*But what if my selfishness means bringing pain to those I love the most?*

*Can a person be truly happy knowing that someone else hates their choices?*

*The thing about being the gifted child... you are always lonely, so, so lonely. At least in my experience.*

*Because everyone around you has expectations. Your classmates are always strangers who never truly understand you, and you don't fit in anywhere.*

*Always an outsider.*

*No matter how much you love your family, and they love you in return, their love is unable to fill all the cracks in your soul with their warmth, and some places stay frozen.*

*That's probably why wolf cubs, for example, leave their house and form their own packs, right?*

*My greatest dream is to find my place in this world, wherever and whatever it might be.*

*A place where I belong.*

*Maybe I will search for this waterfall once I'm eighteen (Dad said I can travel alone only then) because whenever I gaze into the drawing, so much peace falls on me and calms some of my nerves.*

*Thank you once again for giving it to me.*

*Because sometimes it feels like you are the only one in this world who understands me, and how stupid is such a thought, right?*

*My friends say it's creepy to even write letters to a grown man, and embarrassment always fills me at it. It was one of the secrets I shared with them and never spoke about it again for fear of them judging me for it.*

*Is it really this wrong?*

*Writing the letters makes me feel less lonely in my confusion and pain.*

*According to Dad, you live far, far away and will never even show your nose in our city, because you've done something horrible.*

*So how bad can it be to write letters to a man who probably doesn't even read them and never responds?*

*Your friend,*

*Aileen*

*A* **ileen**

Wrapping my hands around another pillow lying nearby, I hide my face in it before screaming my lungs out into the material, unleashing my anger and fury into it along with sobs shaking my entire body.

Thousands of emotions rock me from inside out, paralyzing fear being the most prominent one, since Rush's cruelty and insanity has no boundaries. He was willing to shoot William to solidify his point, and by how devoted the former is to him, only one conclusion comes to mind.

He has known him since he was a little kid, so all the crimes Rush commits, he excuses due to some trauma and hopes his little boy will come back someday.

Except he won't.

A man who might show gentleness toward me now in his twisted and hideous way, but my one transgression... might cost someone a life, and God knows what else.

Psychopaths are not known for their patience or forgiveness. Empathy, love, or compassion don't exist in their universe, and they despise those who experience them, finding them weak and useless.

Selfish, egoistic, narcissistic.

And dangerous.

While most serial killers have their own unique style, shaped by the environment they were subjected to as a child, and in such choosing their torture methods accordingly, he hasn't given me much room to study him or find his blind spots.

Which creates a problem, because even the most controlled monsters have their triggers, and if I accidentally stumble on them, the consequences might be deadly.

*"Monsters have their wounds too, Aileen. Never poke them. Most of them cannot handle the pain and memories, and they act out of character. If you cannot predict someone's actions, you're risking your life. Never dig into your captor's past. Focus always on survival."*

Dropping the pillow on my lap, I cover my face with my hands and wince at my father's words, because they go against everything I believe in.

To win the battle, one must think of all the moves ahead, predicting every possible outcome and settling on the choice that has a higher probability of victory.

Without studying your opponent and finding the place where piercing them with a knife will hurt the most, how can you win the fight?

Besides, a small part inside me, the one that still harbors a soft spot for the Rush of my past, lost in his drawings while the sun shone brightly on him, making his shoulder-length hair glisten, scratches against my heart and urges it to discover all his secrets to understand his actions.

Never condone them or justify what he does, but at least find the reason for him becoming a horrible man who society warns us to stay away from.

A man who deems himself a villain living in a curse only beauty will break.

Although the belief contradicts my diagnosis of him, because psychopaths don't value love or crave it, so how in his despicable mind did he come to the conclusion it has the power to save him?

Crazy, crazy psycho.

However, the fairy tale scenario around this kidnapping serves to my advantage, as Beauty was never harmed in the original story, so at least he won't physically abuse me, and by having freedom to explore the castle, I have a better chance of finding a phone or computer to send a message to Dad.

Pressing the heels of my palms on my eyes, I inhale a breath and decide to finally stop feeling sorry for myself and focus only on my escape.

Hysterics won't help me in my situation, and acting like a brat won't either. Instead, I must watch my every move and hope the beast will meanwhile keep his end of the bargain.

Scooting forward on the bed, I put my feet on the floor where a soft, fluffy rug welcomes them, and my toes curl into the material, which pulls my attention toward the room.

White and orange colors—to my astonishment... my favorite—fill the room. The expensive wood furniture with a few small scratches dates the designs back to the Victorian era, and they must have cost a fortune.

The vanity with makeup essentials and hair care items is on the right side of the room. A small chair is situated in front of the small table. The composition reminds me of historical movies and how the ladies-in-waiting had their bedchambers equipped.

Several feet away, a huge vertical mirror showcases the chandelier swaying slightly. The colorful crystals reflect the sun streaming into them and casting lights on the floor.

Farther to the right, I spot a small couch, two chairs, and a round table with fresh roses in a gold vase, the flowery scent filling the air with its pleasant fragrance.

Getting up, I walk closer to the table and find several books on it. I pick one of them up, running my fingers over the worn binding, and open it up, sneezing at the dust tickling my nose and indicating to me he brought me some old books.

Coughing a little, I read the French title and frown when I realize it's one of the first editions of the *Beauty and the Beast* tale.

“Figures,” I mutter, dropping on the couch, losing interest fast. The two other books in the stack are of Greek Mythology.

Does he deem himself Hades by any chance too, who rules the underground and must resort to blackmail to get poor Persephone?

I'm not sure what's worse.

Being kidnapped by a villain or being kidnapped by a villain who thinks he is a combination of Hades and the Beast.

A soft billow of orange curtains under the ocean breeze tickles my skin and shifts my focus to the wide-open balcony door. I pad through it and onto the concrete balcony with a thick railing. My eyes widen at the view before me.

The deep-blue ocean in the distance shimmers in the sunlight, the waves crashing against each other and spilling onto the sand as seagulls squawk above. The water seems so clear and almost tempts me to run toward it and jump in, finding solace there.

The throbbing in my head irritates my eyes, and I touch my cheek, hissing at the pain and hating how this bizarre and terrifying situation affects my mind, tearing it into pieces—each seeking answers to the many questions.

Curiosity sadly is not a virtue but a curse.

A loud knock on the door followed by someone entering snaps me out of my thoughts, and I quickly spin around, pushing the curtain away, ready to face Rush again only to blink when a young woman wearing a black dress and flats shows up. “Ms. Scott.” She bows a little, and her mouth spreads in a grin, although her gaze stays guarded. “My name is Jesse, and I’m one of the maids here.”

One of?

My God, how large a staff does he need to look after him in this mansion?

“Please call me Aileen,” I tell her, coming closer, and her cheeks heat up as a relieved sigh slips past her lips.

“I wanted to ask you about supper. Should I bring the food here or will you come to the dining room?”

Anger sparks inside me. The desire to shout at her proposition is so strong I bite on my lower lip, because the people here shock me.

Their boss brings an unwilling young woman to the island, and they all act as if it’s no biggie, and their only care is where I wish to eat.

A sinking sensation travels through me, and the question flies out of my mouth before I can stop myself. “Are there other women like me here?”

Her brows furrow. “Like you, miss?”

“Rush’s captive who he brought to participate in his fantasies or whatever you call his illusions.” She blinks a few times, so I elaborate. “Other women who are hidden somewhere in this house?” It would explain all the staff and guards roaming the perimeter; maybe the villain divides his time between his unwilling harem, trying to see which one will finally break the curse.

“Oh.” She clasps her hands together, rubbing them against each other, letting me know about her nervousness. “No, miss. To tell you the truth, he’s never brought a woman home.” She motions around the room. “All this was arranged just for you. You’re very special.”

I still the sarcastic laugh wanting to erupt.

Special?

More like unlucky.

Swallowing back the acid forming in my throat because my parents taught me better than to be mean toward the staff, I muster a smile, and some tension eases off her shoulders. “My clothes don’t suit the dining room.” My stomach grumbles again, reminding me I haven’t had food in my mouth since Mom’s dinner, and my strength always needs to be at 100 percent capacity. “So please just—”

She slaps her forehead, startling me, and exclaims, “Of course! William instructed me to explain it all to you. My apologies.” She darts to the left, where there are two doors that I assumed were the bathroom. My brows rise when she opens one of them, turns on the light, and points inside. “This spacious closet has everything you need, Aileen.”

I trail after her, my jaw almost hitting the floor at seeing the endless hangers displaying a variety of clothes from dresses to shorts, each having a designer’s tag attached to it, and there are even shoes to match.

The closet could be a room itself, even having a couch to sit on with several mirrors letting you twirl around to see yourself at all angles.



There is even a glassed display of expensive jewelry if the brand names are anything to go by. They shine under the lights, all the stones so clear and polished I can see my reflection in them.

They represent a symbolism that sends shivers down my spine.

The villain's gift, the same kind of gifts the Beast gave Belle to lure her into his web, so she'd fall for him.

Except as traps and temptations go, these won't work on me, since all these riches have been at my disposal my whole life.

"Isn't it pretty, Aileen?" Jesse asks, her gaze sliding over the things longingly. "Almost like a store, although we don't have such stores in our small town." She sighs. "One can only dream to visit a big city someday."

"Town? There is a town on the island?" Excitement builds inside me at the prospect of a living, breathing town with people who can help me escape.

It quickly dies though when she shakes her head. "Our town is located on a neighboring island, a fifteen-minute boat ride from here."

Disappointment fills every bone; hijacking a boat would be impossible under so many watchful eyes, and sneaking onto one is out of the question too.

The gun aimed at William is still fresh in my mind. Endangering anyone here because of my actions doesn't sit well with me, and a psycho like Rush probably kills his people for even smaller transgressions, let alone unintentionally helping his captive.

Even if they work for him and support their deeds, I cannot have their death weighing on my conscience. "So this island is inhabited."

"Rush's family has owned it since forever and passed it through the generations. We are always welcome to work here, and the pay is really good. Plus the horses are great."

I still. “Horses?” On a tropical island? Just how much money does this man have exactly?

“We have a stable spreading over several acres, designed by Rush himself. You must have missed it because it’s hidden by the building. Less sun falls there, so it’s better for the horses.”

“I see.” What else is there to say?

By the tone she uses talking about her boss, it’s clear she considers him some kind of angel who was sent from above to help them all, and his love for the animals probably softens her heart even more.

At this point, I wouldn’t be surprised to discover he has his own cult or something.

She goes farther into the closet, opens a drawer, and lacy lingerie comes into view, their provocative design heating my cheeks but also swirling anger in the pit of my stomach.

Arrogant villain who thinks he would someday see me wearing all this for him!

Hopefully, he holds his breath on this one and suffocates to death.

“There is a big selection of different colors to match every dress,” Jesse explains, her eyes linger on a sapphire bracelet several feet away from her, before she settles her gaze on me. “So have you decided where you would like to eat?”

An idea pops in my head, causing me to smile, and I open the glass case, grabbing the bracelet made of platinum. “Yes. The dining room it is.” Then I extend my hand toward her, the bracelet dangling from my fingers, and ask, “You like it, right? Take it.”

Her eyes widen, and she gasps. “No, Aileen. I just... I just looked, because it’s so pretty.” She stammers a bit, rubbing her wrists, too nervous to meet my stare, probably thinking it’s some kind of punishment for looking at it in the first place.

“It’s a gift. And besides—” My fingers drum on the glass, pulling her attention to the shelf. “—Rush has chosen so many

for me that I won't know when or where to wear them." I shake the bracelet a little. Under the lamplight, the sapphires create small, square shadows on her. "You're the first person who was nice to me here, so please accept it."

Jesse gapes at me for several seconds but finally reaches out for the bracelet, gently accepting it.

I let go, enjoying how her entire face brightens up at the gift, happiness coming from her in waves, which emphasizes how much she wanted it. "Thank you so much, Aileen. It's too generous." The smile she gives me shows how much she really appreciates it, and part of me hates myself for using this bracelet as a device to manipulate her, creating a bond and good emotions toward me, so she'll be more willing to help me out in the future or blab something she shouldn't.

Empathy and compassion can last only so long until the person is pushed to the brink and needs to concentrate on survival only.

Manipulation becomes a powerful tool in the hands of those who know how to use it, and despite what Rush believes about me, I'm not a sheltered flower who thinks life is all about rainbows and sunshine.

"I will then inform the kitchen staff to serve breakfast now. Once it's ready, I'll come back to show you the way."

"Splendid."

Pressing the bracelet to her chest, she goes to the door and closes it softly behind her as I run my fingers over the dresses and clothes, pondering which one to wear.

Running away today is off the table; first, I need to learn my environment to form a plan. I snatch a blue summer dress with wide shoulder straps that ends just inches above my knees, walking with it into the bathroom to take a shower and analyzing everything so far.

Rush is in for a big surprise if he expects me to follow his rules and sit on my thumbs, awaiting my rescue or indulging him in his delusions.

Closing my eyes, I imagine an invisible chessboard and Rush sitting at the opposite side of the table. His smirk urges me to participate in the game that has the power to destroy or free me from the invisible chains his captivity has placed on me.

And while I might be many things... backing out of a challenge is simply not in my blood.

My hand wraps around the imagined pawn and moves it forward, ready to battle with everything in me to win.

For no matter how ruthless my opponent is, I know how to strategically eliminate him in a way he won't ever see coming.

This game of ours eventually will have a checkmate.

And Rush will be the one to lose his king.

*R*ush

I enter my spacious office with a huge window that brightens up the entire room, emphasizing the expensive dark oak furniture consisting of a wide desk, three chairs, and a leather couch in the corner.

A small bar stands in the right corner, holding a wide selection of alcohol, which every night club would be jealous of.

I go to it, grabbing a glass and pouring myself a drink while ordering, "Let's hear it." George opens his mouth but pauses at my lifted finger. "Make it short. My patience is already wearing thin." Putting a few ice cubes in the glass, I march toward a chair and drop on it, then place my feet on the desk and lean back.

Amusement flicks inside me, already anticipating their usual scolding.

The only reason they are even allowed to say anything is because, to my astonishment, I still respect them. A rare emotion almost no one in this world gets from me.

Or maybe it's the deep gratitude for what they have done for me?

*William grabs my elbow, pulling me out of my room into the dark hallway, as screams echo in the distance accompanied by a horrible smell polluting the air and making me cough into my arm. "Hide your nose, Rush," he instructs me, and I do as he says, his splayed palm pushing me toward the stairs as heat surrounds us.*

*My brows furrow, and I wipe my eyes. Why, all of a sudden, has it become so hot inside the castle? Aren't we in the middle of a tropical storm during which everything blooms and gives temporary reprieve to the sweltering land?*

*William doesn't let me dwell on it though. When another piercing scream fills the night, accompanied by several gunfire-like sounds, he orders, "Run, Rush. Run!" Quickly racing down the stairs, gasping at the destruction awaiting me there, I end up in George's strong arms. He lifts me up just before the orange-blue flames envelop my body. More shouts and screams echo in the space.*

The glass in my hand cracks a little, the sound snapping me back to the present and away from the painful memories eating at my soul every single day.

I let the liquid mix with the blood on my palm, enjoying how it slowly glides down my skin, leaving stinging sensations in its path.

Only pain makes me feel alive and takes away the hurtful screams permanently residing in my ears.

George narrows his eyes at me, puffing his chest out. "I cannot believe you went through with this idea and brought that poor girl here." He glares at William, who sighs heavily. The old man needs to check his lungs or something; he's been fucking sighing since yesterday. "You should be ashamed of yourself. You told me she's the sweetest!"

"I tried," William defends himself to his husband, sinking into the opposite chair, his gaze still glued to the floor. "I gave her many hints to go somewhere. But she refused to listen to

me. And he—” He motions at me with his head. “—didn’t listen to me either. What else was I supposed to do?”

His little speech amuses me, as if her running away anywhere would have saved her from me.

Although I should have predicted William’s gentle soul would be too horrified to subject her to my revenge, he probably agreed to work for Lachlan in the first place to protect her and hoped I would change my mind once the time came.

Inserting him in the devil’s mansion was hell, but it paid off, as he gave me all the information I needed and watched Aileen like a hawk, always providing the detailed reports that allowed me to take care of all her worries.

Especially when someone tried to fuck with her.

This alone should have been a sign of trouble for me, my obsession growing to something unsettling and bringing chaos to my carefully placed life and plan.

Indulging in dangerous cravings might send me into a spiral of pleasure, yet every craving has the power to destroy the addict.

And I haven’t come this far to let an innocent little girl shatter my self-control and ruin everything just because her charms call to the hidden and darkest part of me.

George snaps his fingers several times, his cheeks heating up while he places his hands on his hips. “Something! Not allow him to kidnap her and dump her in all this mess! She wasn’t even alive when it happened, yet she has to pay the price?” He focuses his attention on me, his brooding brown eyes drilling into me. “I’m very disappointed, Rush. She’s an innocent girl.” He clears his throat. “Your mother—”

Everything inside me freezes. A beautiful image or a mirage really flashes in my head, then quickly transforms into the hideous creature she became when the monsters tore her to pieces, leaving nothing but blood and gore behind.

William’s eyes widen in alarm when my icy cold voice stops whatever George wants to say next. “Don’t.”

They might be the men who raised me and protected me when it mattered the most, but even they don't get to talk about my mother.

She's the only memory that causes a deep ache in my shadow-filled heart, because all emotions are forever lost to me.

George's and my stares clash; the silent battle is evidence of how he barely restrains himself from telling me what he truly thinks about all my deeds.

A sinister smile shapes my mouth, almost anticipating the break of his control. It would give me an opportunity to finally send him away and not experience the pang of unwelcome guilt as his eyes try to find the boy I once was and fail because he no longer exists.

*He killed him.*

And now he wants me to show mercy toward his own flesh and blood just because she's innocent and has no idea what has truly surrounded her all these years? Who her family really is and what they do?

My laughter reverberates through the space, hollow and dangerous in its nature, alerting everyone nearby of my ruthlessness.

Lachlan didn't show consideration to the nine-year-old boy I was when he destroyed what I valued the most, so he reaps what he sows.

George's lips part, ready to unleash his fury on me, but he stops at the last second as William grips his elbow, whispering, "No."

Ah, always the peacekeeper who hopes for a brighter future and believes love cures all on this earth.

Even for vicious monsters hunting for pain and blood, feasting on the flesh of the weak.

George peels William's hand away from him, adjusts his suit jacket, and straightens, lifting his chin high. "While the

girl stays here, she won't be harmed. Do you hear me, Rush? You will not—"

"Watch your words, George. Last time I checked, I do not need your permission to do anything." Leaning forward and resting my elbows on the desk, I focus my attention on him so he won't miss a single thing. "If you don't like something, the door is wide open."

Hurt flashes in his features momentarily, reminding me how this man carried me on his back when I was just seven years old after I scraped my knees and couldn't walk back home. He told me interesting stories so I'd stop crying.

As no one welcomed tears and weakness inside the walls of this castle.

Especially not mine.

His voice trembles a little as he replies, "Very well then. Very well." He sends a seething glance William's way. "I hope you're proud now." With this, he spins around, opens the door, walks out, and shuts it so hard the walls vibrate from the blow as the sound echoes through the space.

I expect my second butler to follow; after all, whenever one of them is in distress, the other always seeks the company of the injured party, wanting to soothe him.

To my surprise though, William stays, and I groan inwardly, already hating in advance whatever else he has to say.

My brows rise as he sits back in the chair, placing his hand on his forehead. "I don't appreciate your tone when you talk to my husband, Rush. I agree with him, however. You cannot harm Aileen while she's here. I won't be able to forgive myself if anything happens."

Picking up the cigar lying on the table, I wrap my palm around the lighter before flipping it through my fingers. "Your conscience doesn't interest me. I warned you both a long time ago. If you cannot handle the heat, get the hell out."

William shakes his head at me, once fucking again sighing in resignation, while I light up my cigar, and draw back on it



in small puffs to pull the smoke into my mouth.

I welcome the heady sensation spreading through me and blanketing the annoyance of this conversation. “I will behave toward Aileen however I see fit. And if anyone tries to stop me or give me unnecessary advice, they won’t stay long enough to utter another protest.”

“Rush—”

Fed up with their soft hearts and compassion toward the weak, which has no place during war and revenge, I snap my fingers, pointing at the door. “We’re done here. Leave. I don’t want to be disturbed anymore.”

He gets up, coughing into his palm from the smoke floating in the air as he slowly walks toward the door. His hand rests on the doorknob, and he half turns to me, an unreadable expression crossing his face as he delivers a blow I do not expect. “Your mother and sister wouldn’t have wanted that.”

Rage rushes through my veins, sparking old festering wounds as if spilling hot oil over them. Thousands of memories play in front of me one after another, creating a horrifying picture that no one should have ever seen.

Because the words speak to the hidden part of me, to the boy still breathing somewhere in my psyche, craving to find goodness that this cruel life has denied me. So maybe then I can be worthy of the atonement I once so wished for.

I might not have been destined to become a villain, but I became one—an inevitable result of the events that forever changed my fate.

And as such, Aileen Scott won’t get mercy from me.

Because if I have to burn in hell every second... so will Lachlan’s daughter.

Obsession or not, desire or not... I will never give up my revenge.

Because my revenge is the only thing keeping me alive in this nightmare that’s my life.

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## CHAPTER TEN

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*“The fairy tale was always about a beauty and her beast.  
Why then do women always expect the beast to turn into a  
prince?”*

*Shouldn't we love the beast without any expectations?*

*Or are we willing to give our hearts to a vicious creature only  
with the expectation it might cure him and pour goodness into  
his dark and cruel soul?”*

*Aileen*

***F**rom Rush's unsent letters...*

*Aileen,*

*You just never give up, girl, do you?*

*Still writing to me despite your vows and pain, like the  
gardeners who take care of the roses even though the sharp  
thorns pierce their skin, leaving scars.*

*We can never be friends, because we stand on different  
sides of the bridge. On one end is your father, and I'm on the  
other, while you're trapped in between.*

*That's the thing about choices though.*

*They always tip the scale in someone's favor.*

*Your main problem lies in the fact that you are a little girl  
who has an extraordinary mind, but you let it rule you. Let  
people convince you that you're so different you have no place  
alongside them.*

*You are smart, Aileen; however, you aren't a fighter, and that's... disappointing in a way, considering who your father is.*

*The underworld king of New York.*

*He's ruthless, cruel, and powerful.*

*You should learn from him how to behave toward those who hurt you or don't value you.*

*And also?*

*Never base your choices on someone else's feelings. Humans are ungrateful creatures who use your sacrifices to their advantage, and your happiness matters very little to them.*

*Empathy is a virtue in a sense, but it becomes a curse worse than loneliness or agony when greedy monsters feed on it, turning it into eternal suffering for the one giving it to them.*

*Find friends your own age, girl.*

*Because someday, I will be your greatest nightmare, and your heart will suffer.*

*Somehow, for now, it still unsettles me, maybe because your image evokes gentleness, reminding me there is pureness in this world.*

*Pureness I will coat in dirt and blood.*

*And the waterfall you so seek to see...*

*Trust me, it's not the place where you belong.*

*Because a princess doesn't find solace in the land where the villain rules.*

*Rush*

*A* **ileen**

My long hair drips on the tile, creating a small pool around my feet.

I stand in front of the huge mirror in the room and study my reflection, detesting how the blue dress plasters to my form so much it showcases every dip and curve of my body.

Every little exhale and inhale draw attention to my breasts peeking up from the top, and I wish to cover myself a little or run back inside the closet to find something more decent to wear.

There is nothing more decent in there though, as every piece of clothing my gaze has landed on so far also has a snug fit or shows too much of my legs or other parts of my body.

Rush intentionally placed me in this vulnerable position, silently hinting at his absolute power and that he might demonstrate goodness, but only on his strict terms, so I will never forget who rules this island.

“Perverted psycho,” I mutter under my breath, even though everything inside me rebels at the idea of calling the strikingly handsome man a perv, but what other name does he deserve?

I have compassion toward sick people who do not understand the difference between a broken psyche and reality in which they harm others. They require professional help, or rather they needed it as children in order not to grow up into a hideous version of themselves.

But Rush understands his actions and thrives among the pain and confusion he brings, so he deserves nothing from me.

Shaking my head at my reflection one last time, I school my features, giving nothing away. “Let the game begin,” I announce to the empty room, then slip into the tennis shoes nearby, walk to the door, and carefully turn the knob, creating minimal sounds to have enough time to study the environment around me.

Stepping into the spacious hallway, I realize he placed me in the right wing as there is nothing nearby.

Spotting the stairs ahead of me, I move that way, studying the bare, white walls that seem impossibly bright compared to the squeaky, black marble floor. The contrast of the two is almost baffling, presenting an intentional artistic composition

that sends uneasiness down my spine and only adds to the heavy aura surrounding this house.

The hallway has three ways leading to different destinations, invisible to my eyes from this distance, while the stairs stand right in the middle as if allowing everyone to come and go as they wish without disturbing anyone.

Because to hear anyone roaming through the space would be impossible, and one of the reasons my parents would have never settled on such a design.

A person might come to kill you, and no one will know because your screams would be trapped behind the thick walls secluding you from your family.

Unless the family didn't give a shit about each other, then I guess this is the perfect house.

Reaching the stairs, I grip the brown wooden banister and gasp in surprise when it scratches my palm only then seeing several dips in it as if someone tried to carve something on it a long time ago and then painted over it to cover it up. The harshness of the wood still possesses the power to hurt someone though.

As I descend the stairs, the first floor is open to my view, which consists of the same colors, to my disappointment.

The hallway though is slightly different from the upper one as its rounded shape leads to the massive oak double doors where two guards stand.

Noticing their rigid posture and the guns in their hands, I quickly make a mental note to not cross them unless I can get my hands on a weapon myself.

They blink in surprise at me and then quickly avert their gazes as if looking at me might sign a death warrant for them.

With Rush though, who knows, right? He doesn't strike me as a man who shares, and since, for the time being, I'm his most beloved toy....

"Ugh," I exclaim, dropping to the last step and seeing a narrow hall that seems to go to the kitchen, because different

smells float in the air and tease my starving stomach, causing the organ to grumble loudly to my embarrassment.

*“Never starve, princess. The food might be bad or make you want to vomit, but eat it anyway. Think only about survival.”*

There is one door in the distance, metal to my astonishment, and has a keycard port to get inside, and since it reminds me of the basement, chills rush through me, breaking goose bumps on my skin.

God only knows what a serial killer keeps in his basement.

Reining in the fear sliding into my veins and poisoning my blood, I call out to the guards, “Hello!”

One of them glances my way and once again glues his stare to the floor, nodding slightly. “Hello, miss.”

“Just call me Aileen. Nice to meet you.” It takes every ounce of self-control my father taught me to keep my voice friendly and cheerful despite wanting to spit in their faces because they work for Rush and support his making captives of women.

That’s why I need to interact with them and show them my emotions, so I’ll stop being just a random girl and instead become a humanized version of myself they can empathize with.

Only then might they be merciful and hopeful, and in the current situation, I need as many alliances as I might get.

Before they can reply, a flushed Jesse emerges from the kitchen and runs to me, tugging her dress on the way. By how red her lips are and how several pins are missing from her hair, I’m guessing she had a very eventful encounter.

With Rush?

Unfamiliar emotions glide over me, wrapping around me like a tight rope cutting off my oxygen supply, but the burning sensation remains, tasting so bitter on my tongue I can barely swallow.

My nails dig into my palms as I fist my hand, and momentarily hatred spikes inside me, so sudden and foreign I'm not sure how to react to it all.

Jealousy.

Green, hot-blooded jealousy at the idea of Rush spending time with Jesse and doing to her what my imaginary man does to me at night.

Shouldn't Beast from *Beauty and the Beast* have eyes only for Belle and not anyone else? Or do the villains of this world have obsessions, but someone else takes care of their physical needs? Is this why he didn't try forcibly to snatch what doesn't belong to him?

God, I have officially lost my mind already, and the man has hardly played any tricks on me. What else explains this insanity?

Who cares who he touches? If his attention stays on other women, he might not even try to initiate anything physical with me, preferring to treat me like a porcelain doll on a pedestal who he must win over to lift his curse.

*He must follow the fairy tale; otherwise, it's impossible to predict his next move.*

My justification for my confusion and anger hardly soothes the inferno burning brightly in my chest.

"Aileen, you're here. Come, come." Jesse puts her hand on my back, urging me inside the arched opening several feet away that leads to a spacious sunlit room with huge terrace doors.

It has an oversized black leather couch with three chairs nearby; a rectangular glass table stands in the middle of them. On the table are two ashtrays and a pack of cigars along with a whiskey bottle.

Jesse continues to move, so I follow her to a dining room with a huge oval table that already has several dishes on it and one serving plate for me, I assume.

We pass by a room, which reminds me of the ballrooms in the old days. A small weapons collection proudly hangs on the wall for everyone to see and scare the shit out of them.

All in all, the mansion is empty and dead inside.

If Rush's family owned this land for more than a century, how come the house has no history at all? No portraits, statues, anything to cherish the generations and generations of people who lived inside these walls?

Even if he hadn't shown me his true colors earlier, it would have been easy to guess his soul is cold and ruthless by the interior alone.

"I hope you like the food." Jesse breaks the silence and points at the table. "George went all-in on this one."

George? As in the second butler? His appearance and posture didn't indicate he has another function in the household, but maybe he's a cook.

I sit by the table on a heavy wooden chair and wince when it scrapes against the floor. Taking a white napkin, I spread it on my lap.

By the smells wafting in the air, I realize he's prepared Italian food, which is my favorite. As Jesse removes the lid from the first silver dish, she proves my point, because pasta greets me. "With chicken. Your favorite according to Rush." Her cheeks redden even more on his name, her tone hitching.

She places some of it on my plate, the scent instantly hitting me and making my mouth water in anticipation.

I quickly grab the fork and stab it into the grilled chicken, because thinking about those two brings nothing but chaos.

And fury.

Such strong fury I hate myself for it.

"George took into consideration all your likes and dislikes." She lifts another lid on the tray where I find a salad. "We thought it would be a great start. He also made a strawberry cheesecake."



“Thank you,” I reply, my stomach growling and demanding food. So without pondering on it, I put a bite of chicken into my mouth as Jesse places salad on my plate.

The delicious taste hits my tongue, sending pleasure through my system, and I can’t help but moan at the relief my body experiences when it gets food. At least starvation won’t be one of the things I’ll have to fight here, although it gives me little reassurance.

My father once told me goodness and evilness lie in the eyes of the beholder, and never has this statement been truer than right now.

All this freedom, kind staff, and my favorite food might seem like Rush does his best to win me over with his warped logic and present a brighter picture than the nightmare he dumped me in.

However, what it really represents is a mind game designed to lure me toward him and lower my guard.

Because villains display goodness only when it serves their selfish desires.

And just like that, the taste vanishes, creating an illusion of cotton in my mouth necessary to survive, but it almost makes me nauseous.

Jesse must notice my change of mood as she asks, concern lacing her tone, “Is it too hot? Or too spicy?”

Picking up a glass of water, I shake my head and take a large sip, washing away the food and digging my fork in the pasta, determined to eat enough to gather my strength and then roam around the castle some more, finding its vulnerable places that might allow me to escape or send a message.

“It’s good,” I reassure her, and she grins, pulling my attention to her smeared lipstick in the corner of her mouth. Trying to keep the bite out of my tone and failing miserably, I tell her, “You need to clean your lipstick.”

She blinks in confusion, gasps, and picks up the silver lid. She wipes it away with her finger and looks at me, guilt

written all over her features. “I’m sorry. Mark came back early from his fishing trip.”

The fork full of pasta pauses midway to my mouth, and my brows rise. “Mark?”

She nods, placing the lid back on the table and locking her hands behind her. “My fiancé. We got engaged last year after graduating high school. We plan to have a wedding next year, after we save some money for a honeymoon.” She looks around and then slips out the chain from under her uniform, tapping the small gold ring. “We hide it for now, because we don’t want Rush to know.”

I’m slightly taken aback by all this information. Clearly, when I gave her the bracelet and removed the formalities between us, I swayed her my way if she’s sharing her secrets with a newcomer. “He would disapprove?”

She shrugs. “He’s never had any dating policies, but none of us want to lose our jobs here in case he does. He pays well and has never made a pass at any of the maids.” She wiggles her nose in distaste. “Compared to some other men in my experience.”

The relief slams into me so hard I still for a second as the information fully registers, along with the stupid joy that transforms instantly into self-loathing so strong my head starts to throb from thousands of thoughts dancing in my mind, each more depressing than the other.

It’s Stockholm syndrome combined with the whole fairy tale scenario. I feel safe when the captor cares about me, since this ensures my survival, so it’s easier to grow sort of an attachment for him to have his eyes only on me. With a clear scenario, I have more chances to escape.

What a pile of crap, but I’m willing to believe that as long as I don’t have to think about the fact that part of me feels a weird connection to the psycho who kidnapped me.

How come though? Why does my body feel this way? Does it know something I don’t?

“Congratulations,” I finally say, and she beams at me, wanting to say some more, but the deep yet soft voice coming from behind interrupts her.

“Jesse, help Marta in the kitchen with the cheesecake.” Her eyes widen at the male, and she nods at me before racing to the kitchen, leaving me alone with George.

Although the man showed conflicted emotions earlier and probably didn’t know about me coming here, I tense in his company, not knowing what awaits me.

As I discovered with William, good-natured old men can be deceiving assholes as well.

His kind gaze sweeps over me, the wrinkle between his brows deepening even more as he addresses me. “You shouldn’t do it.”

The hackles rise on the back of my neck while annoyance zips through me, mixing with anger because of the nerve this old guy has.

Reaching for some bread, I fire my question at him. “Do what?”

“Form alliances inside the castle.”

Gripping the knife by my side, I dip it into the butter before spreading it on my bread and concentrate my focus on it. “Why? It wasn’t in one of the rules dished out by Rush.”

He ignores my statement, comes closer and leans on the opposite chair, his calming yet stern energy coating the air in warning, and something akin to... trepidation? “You’re playing a dangerous game, young girl. One that will end badly if you try to use people as weapons.”

“Me being friendly with the staff hardly will bring any harm. You see, my parents raised me with the belief we should be kind to the people who spend so much of their time on us.” I wait a beat for the information to sink in and then add, “But then how would you know about respect and decency? You serve a serial killer who kidnaps innocent girls during the night and then locks them inside the castle on a secluded island. Not to mention threatens to kill one of you if I break

the rules.” With this, I munch on my bread, finally feeling my stomach grow full, and decide to finish my lunch or breakfast, still not sure what time it is here.

Regret flashes on George’s face. “I disapprove of what he does; you should know that.” He looks to the side before snapping his attention back to me with determination reflecting in his brown eyes now. “This doesn’t excuse the fact that you plan to do something by establishing contact with the staff though. I beg you not to be like him in this regard and use innocent people in your twisted game.” He smacks his lips together. “All your attempts will be useless anyway. There is no escape from this island.” The last words are uttered almost in resignation as if he’s spent his life searching for a cure that represents this island but failed.

My laughter rocks off the walls, sarcasm dripping from my every word, as I reply, “You don’t disapprove enough though to help me get out of here or let me send a message about my whereabouts.” He grits his teeth, his hands clasping together on the top of the chair, and he exhales heavily. Too bad for him, this won’t sway me to his opinion. “If you expect me to sit on my thumbs and do nothing while Rush does what he pleases, then you’ll be severely disappointed.” Finishing my bread, I dust my hands and get up, the napkin falling by my feet. “I’ll pass on the cheesecake.” I want to step back to the living room, but his strong grip on my elbow halts my movements.

“Allow me to give you a lesson my mother once gave me.”

“Not interested.” I pull at my elbow, but surprisingly it doesn’t help me escape his hold. On most days I would have never shown such rudeness toward other people, let alone the older generation, but he sides with Rush, so by default he cannot expect good behavior from me.

“Evilness cannot be won with evilness. Only goodness overshadows it.” Our gazes clash as he continues his speech, confusing me to no end. What does he expect me to do? Roll over with whatever punishment or sick idea Rush comes up with? “You’re stubborn and brave like Lachlan.” My eyes widen at the fact he knows my father, which only frustrates me

more, as he has all the information to save me but instead orders me to stay put. “But Rush hates Lachlan and all his methods. You’ll never win this game if you abide by your father’s lessons. Because a stone-cold heart stays deaf to hatred and resolve. Only love melts it.”

Apparently Rush is not the only person who lives in some kind of delusion around here; his staff shares his fantasies about fairy tales. “I don’t need his heart or love. I want my freedom back.” How could he even think I would fall in love with Rush?

He kills people for his own amusement! What sane woman would choose a man capable of such horrifying deeds? Even if he treats her like a queen.

A sad smile appears on his mouth, and he lets go of me, patting my arm before stepping back. “You can get it only if you have his heart. Otherwise, prepare for the death at the end of this journey, child. Because he won’t rest until he kills your father.” With this bomb dropped on me, he walks away from the dining room, leaving me standing there shocked while fear unlike anything washes over me, threatening to suffocate me or shatter me from the intensity of it.

My father? My father is the one he seeks to destroy? Not just bring him pain by harming me?

Gripping the nearby chair for balance or I might collapse from the prospect of my father dying at his hand, I will my mind to play all the conversations with Rush we had so far.

Especially the last one.

*“My father won’t rest until he finds me. It might not be today or tomorrow, but he will come after me!”*

*Half turning to me, he says, “I’m counting on it, Aileen. Otherwise, his name wouldn’t be Lachlan Scott, would it?”*

Does this mean the whole Beauty and the Beast scenario somehow got twisted in his mind, and instead of wanting the beauty, he just stole the beauty to get to the father? A sort of reverse scheme his madness found amusing enough to display?

Which means I was never the prey he wanted... but the bait to lure away the one who the monster craves to sink his claws into and kill.

And what better way to do it than to kidnap his beloved daughter, knowing full well my father would move heaven and hell to get to me?

“No, no,” I whisper, tears forming in my eyes at the deadly prospect awaiting my father if he shows up here.

How could he even fight against someone like Rush?

My father is nothing like this despicable villain.

Not to mention his advantage on the island.

A loud knocking echoes through the room, tearing me away from my horror and snagging my attention to the terrace door.

Coming closer, I see through the glass Rush standing at the shooting range, which consists of ten targets, while several different weapons lie on each table built for each target, giving people a big variety to showcase their skills.

He stands by the third one, his bare chest glistening with sweat. The bulging muscles on his arms are emphasized by the sun as they move fluidly when he picks up an ax.

Gripping it hard, he flips it up in the air before catching it by the handle and throwing it at the target with full force. It slams into the wood right in the middle and sways backward a little, the action itself speaking about the power in his blow.

Rush shifts toward the next target, his movements so smooth and calculated he reminds me of a tiger plowing through the grass in search of his prey. He picks up another ax once again, repeating the action and hitting the target easily.

His abs flex when he reaches another target, wrapping his hand around the ax, and the wind billows his hair back. He almost represents a picture of a beast roaming his land and scaring everyone who dares to step over his borders, for the consequences will be bloody and deadly.

As he has no mercy or compassion to speak of.

This time the ax hits the target so hard the circle breaks a little and falls on the ground along with the weapon.

Rush chuckles, sipping from the glass in his hand, and he grabs another ax, runs it over his chin back and forth, then moves to the next target, throwing it there along with a second ax.

After this, he rapidly moves through the remaining targets, hitting the center every single time.

Is it my father he pictures on the receiving end, choking on his breath as blood fills his mouth?

Is it my father he blames all his dark deeds on and wants revenge for being banished from our city?

The villain who derives so much joy in destroying the wood targets... I can only imagine how much happier he'll be when he hurts an actual human.

He can't kill my father.

"No, no, no."

Spinning around, I bump into Jesse who holds the cheesecake plate. After our collision, it drops to the ground, shattering into tiny little pieces just like my heart in my chest that bleeds so much I barely hold back the sobs in my throat.

"Aileen!" Jesse calls my name, but I stay deaf to it, my tennis shoes slapping against the marble as I run up the stairs, needing the security my room provides even if it's just a mirage in my mind. After all, Rush can storm into it at any moment.

Flying inside, I shut the door and press my back against it, finally allowing my emotions to pour out of me.

Sliding down as tears stream down my cheeks and hopelessness fills every bone in my body, I sob into my clenched fists, terrified at the future in which my father will fall victim to the villain's trap and sacrifice himself for my sake.

An inevitable course of action... if I do nothing and just let destiny decide our fates.

My father won't give up until he finds me.

Rush won't give up until he kills him, according to George.

Which leaves me no other choice but to try to escape on my own and reach Dad first so he can come here prepared and not be harmed by an insane psycho.

The beauty in the fairy tale sacrificed her life to save her family by offering to stay with the beast forever, even though her father tried to go back on his word. The beast accepted it because she represented a cure and hope for his hopeless existence.

But when a villain craves revenge... what can beauty possibly offer him to stop him from inflicting pain on those she loves?

*R*ush

Aileen finally has discovered her true purpose on the island.

A slight change to my plans, but then I suspected the old man would warn her about the danger slowly creeping around her.

He has managed to surprise even me though by spilling the beans so early without really establishing any kind of emotional connection with the girl, just dumping all the information on her that must drive her crazy right now and makes that fragile psyche of hers shake in fear at the possibility of me killing her father.

An inevitable outcome.

Compared to all the other fairy tales, I'm a villain fighting against villains, since there are no heroes among us all.

But the princess in my captivity doesn't know that and possesses something most of us lost a long time ago.

Hope.



And this hope will drive her to do unimaginable things, dancing to my every tune as long as it ensures her and her family's survival.

When the bait decides to become the prey, she or he will do anything in their power to tempt the hunter.

Discovering how much she's willing to sacrifice will be so much fun I might even video it for her father to watch.

*"You lost your head, Rush, and you will pay for this. You're a dead man walking."*

Ah, how the mighty have fallen.

As the dead man walking still breathes, and the man who deemed himself a king just lost the battle over his princess.

Because when he comes to collect her... he will just find shattered pieces of her innocence and nothing more.

And I'll enjoy every second of his pain before killing him once and for all.

## *A*ileen

Leaning on the bathroom counter, I watch the water splash against the white basin as a memory from my childhood flashes in my head, so vivid and bright I can almost smell Mom's jasmine tea floating in the air.

*Dad places all the chess pieces on the board, slowly and methodically, while I huff in exasperation. "Hurry up, Daddy." I glance at the huge clock hanging on the wall as the big arrow moves dangerously close to seven, which means my evening show on history will start soon. "Today, they are going to talk about various philosophers and scientists." Excitement laces my tone, and I wink at him. "They even promised to touch upon the classical Greek period where the first study of psychology can be traced to. Isn't it awesome?" Even though most of my teachers don't understand my fascination with the human mind, finding the study too ordinary for me, I love it so much. How can the idea that whatever happens to us in the past might affect our future and*

*in this understand a lot of things clearer in this world not be interesting?*

*“Patience is a virtue, princess.”*

*“It’s so not,” I grumble and clasp my hands together when he’s finally done.*

*“Ladies first,” he says, picking up his glass as he watches me move my pawn on the right, my foot tapping on the marble floor, awaiting his next move, and I glance at the clock again.*

*Which doesn’t stay unnoticed by Dad. He taps on my nose, and I glare at him. “Where is your focus right now, princess?”*

*“On the game,” I reply, focusing my stare on the chessboard where Dad chooses his knight to make his move, using a rather unusual strategy at the beginning of the game.*

*Didn’t he say pawns should be used first because they are more disposable?*

*Ugh!*

*“No, it’s on the unknown future.” My brows furrow in confusion, and he elaborates. “Your show is still not on, and countless possibilities might happen why you may not watch it.”*

*Resting my elbow on the table, I put my chin on my hand while dwelling on his words and move yet another pawn.*

*“That’s depressing, Daddy.”*

*He laughs, using his knight once again, and I groan loudly when he destroys my pawn, flicking it away from the board.*

*“That’s how it works, sweetheart. Focus must always be on the game and the present.”*

*“So the future doesn’t matter?”*

*“The future depends on the choices you make right now.”*

*Daddy always has strange metaphors for everything we do, but here I fail to see how his statement has any merit.*

*Sending a smug smile his way, I move my own knight and reply, “Not true. My winning or losing the game doesn’t change the fact that I will watch the show eventually.”*

*“You can watch it either as a loser or a winner. Which one do you prefer to be?”*

*I prefer to watch my show, but this truth won't fly with my father. Lately, he has been so demanding when it comes to his various lessons and making sure I think outside the box. While Mom thinks he does it to train my curious mind, I don't agree.*

*It almost feels as if Dad is preparing me for something, but what that is, I have no clue. Why else though would he work on my strategic thinking as if a war might erupt any moment and my mind will be the only thing to help me survive?*

*“I guess a winner?”*

*“Then focus on the game and nothing else.”*

As my father's voice fades away, I notice the water filling to the top of the basin and twist the faucet closed, thinking back on that fateful game where I ended up missing the show but won the game for the first time ever.

My father gave me a valuable lesson back then; emotions lead to destruction and might rob you of the thing you want most. The show was recorded, and I watched it anyway but with my victory warming my heart.

If one craves to win his opponent over, he must act and think like him, using all the weapons in their arsenal to defeat the person instead of standing on his or her high moral code.

Likewise, when a villain kidnaps me in order to bring my father to his island... I should play by the rules he assigned and immerse myself in the spider's web he wove around me instead of trying to break free from it. Then he will think he trapped me.

Cutting off webs serves little purpose; the key is in killing the spider who continues to come up with new ways to make my life miserable.

Rush might talk until he turns blue so he doesn't fit a description or be assigned to any box; however, studies on psychopaths have proved otherwise.

A hesitant knock on the door echoes through the space. Snatching a towel from nearby, I press it to my face, then drop it on the counter and shout, “Come in.”

Giving myself a quick onceover, I step into the room where Jesse carefully puts a black garment bag on the bed. “What’s this?” She jerks a little and quickly spins around, worry still etched on her features.

“Mr. Rush asked this to be delivered to your room so you can wear it for dinner. Seven o’clock sharp, he expects you at the dining table.” She blushes once again, clearing her throat. “He told me if you need any help with makeup, I should assist you.”

A humorless chuckle slips past my lips as I go to the couch and plop down, my dress flapping a little at the action. “Why? Does he have special requests regarding it too?”

“No. Just the dress.”

He has filled the closet in this room with so many dresses that several women wouldn’t run out of things to wear for a year, yet he still needs me to have special attire for this dinner?

Whatever fantasy he lives in, he clearly follows it exactly.

She continues to chat. “We’ll have some fresh roses delivered to you soon. He would love to see one in your hair.”

“Would he?” I grit through my teeth, but Jesse doesn’t notice as she nods and walks to the vanity, where she opens a drawer and takes out a large pin. “This will help to keep it steady in your hair.”

Apparently, he just needs to breathe an order and people around here comply with it. And he expects me to follow suit.

Who cares if he kills people, right?

Just a minor con in the otherwise splendid work environment.

“Has he always been this romantic?” Wonder laces my tone, and I sigh for good measure too as she halts her movements and looks at me.

“Like I said, no woman has ever entered—”

“Yes, here. But surely on the island he had some first love.” If this island belonged to his family for generations, I highly doubt he spent all his time alone here, and they must have traveled to the small town to attend school, no?

And since he still chose to stay here over any other big city in the world, it means he feels attachment toward this place and whatever better attachment than a broken heart or lost love?

Maybe a sad story where a father objected to him being with a woman, and that’s why he harbors so much hate for my dad, who in his psyche merged with the bad man from his past?

Jesse ponders on my question for a while, her brows furrowing, but she shakes her head to my disappointment. “Not that I know of. But then he’s way older than me.”

An idea pops in my head. “Do you go home often?”

“Once a week on Saturday. That’s when my mama cooks a homemade dinner.” She pats her stomach, and for a second sadness washes over me, thinking about my mom, who’s probably going insane from worrying about my whereabouts.

Which only fuels my determination to participate in this game and end it as quickly as possible.

But with my focus firmly on the invisible chessboard.

Thank God my father raised me right.

“Could you possibly ask anyone about it? Someone must have heard stories about his personal life.” Jesse shifts from one leg to the other uncomfortably, fear emanating from her, so softening my tone, I add, “I’m afraid someone might show up and destroy our happiness. He calls me his beauty, and my stomach flutters every single time, but how can I be sure he isn’t lying?” Even though the sentence tastes like acid on my tongue, I push my point, hoping Jesse has valuable information related to his background that will help me piece out his psychological profile in my head.

Especially if there was a woman who hurt him so much he went psycho. This would explain why he stays on his island and dragged me here. If he replays a scenario from the past, then the place has a significant importance.

Playing along blind won't end well for me or my family, so focusing on the game means pretending to believe this fairy tale retelling while using Rush's grand plan against him.

If George thinks only love can soften him or change his mind, then love will be what I give him, because the monster covets it.

My heart burns from hatred toward him, but I will fake the legendary love story and fall in love with the beast who dreams about salvation when he deserves no atonement for the sins he has done. And then when he feels the warmth of love and acceptance that's nothing but deception, I will trap him in my own web from where there will be only one way.

Prison.

For such a man should never roam this earth freely.

"My older brother might know something. He's around his age," Jesse finally says, drumming her fingers on the vanity. "Although I'm sure you have nothing to worry about. It's the past, right?" Before I can reply, she continues, "My mama says if people didn't marry, there was a reason."

Yeah, like the guy turning psycho and her running away.

If she gets to survive after rejecting him, that is.

But since such an explanation is not an option right now, I settle with something else. "Thank you. I really appreciate it." I get up and saunter toward the closet, grabbing the nearest pink maxi dress and extend my hand to her. "I think this will look pretty on you." Even though traces of guilt nag at the edges of my mind, reminding me Mom wouldn't be proud of me in this moment, but reality has left me no choice.

It's impossible to conquer the evil without some questionable methods.

Jesse is the only connection right now with the outside world, and although I cannot ask her to help me call someone or send a message, the information she might acquire for me will be so helpful.

“Are you sure?” she asks in shock, but her hands already grip the dress, rubbing the material between her fingers as joy flashes on her face. “It’s so pretty, and you’ve already given me a bracelet.” At my nod, she pulls at the dress and presses it to her chest. “Thank you!”

“My pleasure. Besides, I would need years to try them all on.”

She laughs. “According to my mama, it was always like this. Although Lavender never shared her clothes and preferred—” She clamps her lips together, her hands fisting the dress while my ears perk up, and everything inside me freezes at the female name on her lips.

“Lavender?” And a beautiful name at that. Again, stupid, irrational jealousy scrapes its claws over my skin, leaving invisible marks that annoy my senses and confuse my mind, because feeling such emotions toward Rush is beyond ridiculous.

Or maybe the idea of a man who is obsessed with me having sex with someone else unsettles me, as it contradicts his statements?

If he wants me so much, he must keep his dick in check, then otherwise, what’s the point of kidnapping me if anyone would do?

*Congratulations, Aileen, you’ve lost your mind.*

Jesse takes a few steps back and hastily replies, “I have to go. The cook needs my help in the kitchen. You have to be downstairs at seven sharp.” She spins around, ready to bolt to the door, but I grab her elbow, half turning her to me, and ask her once again.

“Who is Lavender?”

Instead of answering me, Jesse places the dress on a nearby chair and shakes her head. “I shouldn’t have said

anything. I really need to go.” She races to the door, opens it, and closes it so loudly the walls rattle a little while I blink in confusion.

Who the hell is Lavender, whose name has the power to make even chatty Jesse shut up and leave a gift I’ve given her?



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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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*“When the heart shatters inside your chest, the noise is not loud.*

*It’s a barely audible crack that destroys your life as you know it, throwing you into a new cruel reality.*

*Reality where your love matters little to those who never had it in the first place.*

*And as such, they always belong in the darkness, where the light you harbor in your soul only hurts them.”*

*Aileen*

***F**rom Aileen’s Letters...*

*Dear Rush,*

*Tears steam down my cheeks, dropping on the paper and smearing the ink, making the words all jumble together, but I don’t care.*

*I probably won’t ever send you this letter, but my heart and soul burn from the truth I just discovered in my father’s office about you.*

*Holding these emotions inside is impossible; they will poison my blood slowly until everything becomes rotten, and I refuse to let a monster like you do it to me.*

*Even though I met you only once, your handsome image has always stayed in my head, which resulted in me calling you a brave knight who deserves to be at the round table.*

*Only you were never a knight, were you?*

*Instead, you're the beast, lurking in the darkness, ready to kill whoever you wish for your own amusement and then disfigure the bodies of the people who are someone's family, in a way they would never recognize them.*

*There is nothing more sacred in this world than human life, and you take it carelessly, deeming yourself some king of darkness.*

*According to research, the usual serial killer has a past that puts him on the bloody path he chose, a horrible past that brought so much pain to the little child or adult they can no longer take it and find solace by hurting others.*

*Creating illusions where they think they actually hurt someone who hurt them, and in this way, they get payback every single time.*

*While my soul empathizes with the hurt you must have experienced as a child... I could never condone what you do.*

*You chose darkness when you had all the opportunities to choose the good side, all the help my family offered... you just turned your back on them.*

*We don't have a choice about certain circumstances.*

*But the kind of person we emerge from there depends entirely on us.*

*I no longer consider you my friend and hope whatever curse was put on you... it consumed you enough to disappear forever.*

*However, thanks to your true nature no longer covered by the gorgeous mask of deceit, I have finally discovered my career choice that will hopefully make a difference in this world.*

*I will become a psychologist who deals with hard cases involving children to provide needed help for them.*

*So the dark calling that lured you toward being a hideous creature doesn't tempt them too, and instead they will find strength, like most people after abuse do, to move on and live a happy life.*

*The fairy tale about the beauty and the beast is beautiful.*

*But some hearts are so dark, so rotten and cruel... they don't deserve salvation or love.*

*Because everything they touch will be coated in dirt, pain, and hurt.*

*I hate you, Rush.*

*You broke my heart.*

*Aileen*

**A**ileen

Wrapping my hands around a rosebud, I lean forward and inhale the calming scent, welcoming the flowery smell filling my lungs that reminds me so much of the garden back home. If I close my eyes, I can almost pretend to be there with no worries in sight. The thick petals are blood-red, blooming so beautifully it's almost a crime someone cut them to put in a vase.

For a second, rebellion boils inside me, and I consider forgoing his stupid request to wear a rose to the damned dinner. The memory of him pointing a gun at William though disturbs my mind and doesn't allow me to take such risks.

Besides, if I have to play my role, acting like a brat would hardly win me any favors.

Plucking the rosebud away, I lift it to my hair and spin around to face the vertical mirror, ignoring my reflection that gave me a big shock the minute I saw the dress.

The white creation cascades down my curves, tightening around my waist and breasts and giving them a generous boost with the thick straps. The skirt billows around my legs when the ocean breeze blows inside. I will have room to dance if I so wish. In fact, the dress reminds me of all the dresses I used to rehearse my dances in.

Just way more revealing.

I pin the rose on the right, adjusting it closer to my ear while my hair falls to my waist in heavy curls.

I wrack my brain, trying to work out what Rush could possibly want to do tonight.

Ugh, for my whole life, my so-called smart mind guessed everything, but around this man... I feel like a naïve fool unaware about things in life.

The sound of a clock chiming reverberates through the space, announcing a new hour, breaking goose bumps on my skin. I quickly slip into the heels that were delivered by a new maid an hour ago and rush downstairs.

I spot William standing by the door to the living room, wearing his butler clothes and white gloves, pointing inside. “The dinner is ready, Aileen. We have chocolate cake on the menu tonight.”

“Well, if you have cake, then I suppose I should do a happy dance, William.” His cheeks heat up, and I shake my head at him. Because I’m still mad, a question escapes me, “If I refuse to eat it, do you think he’s gonna shoot you?” Without waiting for the reply, I dash into the room and stop abruptly when hundreds of lit candles greet me. Spread on the bare floor, they light up the place so much one might think there were additional lamps hidden somewhere.

They are put in a specific order, because they surround a huge circle in the middle, leaving an empty spacious place in the room that must have been reserved for special gatherings. My attention shifts to the dining area, where the candles also are spread over various shelves. The table is full of dishes with wonderful smells filling the air and pulling me in its direction.

Our shadows reflect on the walls from the candlelight and also by the moonlight streaming through the terrace door. The stars light up the sky and create a magical atmosphere where wicked creatures exist and might attack you at any moment.

How fitting.

Since the chairs are empty, I cross my arms and address William. “Where is the devil?”

“I prefer Hades. It has a special ring to it, doesn’t it? Especially when Persephone finally graces my hell.” The deep, husky voice speaks up, tugging at the strings in my soul, and for some reason, my heart pangs painfully, which only intensifies my fury.

“So now we are part of a myth? I think you should keep your delusions straight. All these names are starting to give me whiplash.”

A chuckle meets my reply, and even William cracks a smile, finding my sarcasm highly amusing.

Turning toward the sound, I see Rush standing by the bar in the right corner, holding a glass in his hand as he puts several ice cubes inside that rattle against each other when he shakes it and then raises it at me. “Pick whichever you prefer. After all, you might be a Persephone or a Beauty, but it doesn’t change the fact that both women were trapped with men they didn’t want.” He takes a large sip and walks in the table’s direction, bringing attention to his black jeans that stretch against his muscled legs while the black shirt has the top buttons open, showing his chest.

His hair is made into a bun, and everything about him screams forbidden and dangerous, even though he could have easily served as a model for perfect masculine beauty.

An image from my dreams appears in my mind, the hotness of a hand gliding down my stomach and fisting my dress, creating such deep desire inside me I couldn’t breathe.

Trapping the gasp in my throat, I fist my hand, making sure to dig my nails into my palm so I will focus on anything but this man.

God, why does he bring up these memories? Or is my psyche protecting me? Because if I have to use my body to sway him to my side and ensure he doesn’t kill my father, it needs to at least get pleasure from it.

Less traumatic for me, right?

Maybe that’s it?

Or I'm just a vain person who finds her kidnapper attractive.

"Your mind is a curse sometimes, right?" Rush's words snap me out of my musings as he drops on the chair at the head of the table. "Never letting you rest, overanalyzing everything."

"It's a blessing actually," I say, going to the opposite end of the table and sitting on the chair where William instantly places a napkin on my lap.

"Your letters spoke otherwise."

I really wish I could go back in time and stop my little self from writing all her thoughts to this guy who now uses them against me. "I was young and stupid. I did and said a lot of things I shouldn't." Hopefully, he can read between the lines and get the hint, because he will always be my biggest regret in this life.

"As opposed to now, when you're old and wise?" Amusement laces his tone that transforms into laughter when I send a glare his way. "Trust me, darling. These letters will be the least of your worries once this is all done."

My splayed palm lands on the silverware next to the plate, and my hold on it tightens, imagining stabbing him in his smug face, but then my earlier resolve comes back, making me rein in my anger.

*Just play along.*

God, give me all the strength and sneakiness I do not possess to act my role and study my target well in order to find freedom.

His brows rise. "Nothing to say?" He clacks his tongue. "I'm disappointed."

I extend my hand toward the salad bowl, but William beats me to it and picks it up himself, putting a generous amount on my plate. "I expected more resistance to my rules. After all, you have to dine with a monster. Shouldn't it spoil your appetite?"

Digging my fork into the salad, I twirl it on the plate and reply with my calm and even tone while an inferno spreads in my chest. “Going against the flow requires too much energy and usually never gives good results.”

“So you will blindly follow anyone, because that’s easier?”

He must find the idea itself insulting.

Men like him create their own ruthless rules and bend everyone to their will, so succumbing to anyone’s order is akin to a death sentence to them. “No. But sometimes fighting the situation is worse. A fish that swims with the flow will get to its destination one way or the other. The one doing so against it will never reach it.”

“Ah, I recognize Lachlan in these words. Daddy dearest did everything in his power to keep you locked in his castle, didn’t he? So you’d never question the invisible borders he drew around you.” The hatred coating this statement is too much for me to swallow, and I snap.

“My father is one of the best men I know. He never restricted my life choices.” His green orbs flash in warning at me, clearly he despises anyone defending my father, even me. “Why do you hate him?” The question is out of my mouth before I think, and the energy around us changes rapidly, electrifying it so much I can feel the tension touching my body while silence falls in the room.

It couldn’t possibly be just because he outed him about his serial killer ways. The man still walks freely and doesn’t have law enforcement chasing his ass. So why all this revenge? Besides, my father is just a businessman, yet Rush has come up with an elaborate scheme to drag him to this island to hurt him?

I have lots of questions and no answers in sight, which only adds to the fear growing inside me with each passing second.

At this moment, two maids enter, holding heavy trays with more food, and judging by the scent, it must be well-cooked steaks. William reaches for the plates, his hands trembling, but

he quickly places one in front of me before doing the same to Rush.

Rush finishes his drink and barks an order. “Everyone out.” William pales a little, glances my way, and opens his mouth to protest, but he jumps into action when Rush says, “Now.”

In a second, we’re alone in the dining room. The only sound echoing through the room is the wax crackling inside the candles.

My gaze stays trained on Rush. I think he’s going to ignore my question, when he leans forward and speaks up. “You’ll find out in good time.” He picks up his knife and fork, cutting the steak, although his reply hardly gives me any peace. “*Bon appetite*, darling. Steak is on your list of favorites, right? Enjoy.” He puts meat in his mouth, chewing loudly, and I blink in confusion, finding this whole thing beyond bizarre.

He invited me over so he could eat?

Noticing my hesitation, he lifts his chin and then points with the knife at my plate to start digging in, but it seems I’d suck as an actress, because I cannot act for shit. “Are you so lonely or hideous that you have no company for dinner?” He pauses chewing, and I add, “This explains rule number three. Loneliness pushes people to do lots of things.”

“Here comes the psychological analysis. Do tell, darling. What does it all mean?”

Cutting my meat, I quickly shove it in my mouth and swallow, hardly chewing anything. “I’ll avoid long paragraphs and just summarize it for you. It means you are an asshole.”

A half smile curves his lips, pleasure filling his eyes, because he clearly sees it as a compliment. “What a splendid evaluation, Miss Psychologist.”

Giving up all pretense of eating, because one more bite is going to make me sick, I drop the fork on the plate with a loud clatter. “I’m done eating, so if you’ll excuse me....” I get up, ready to run upstairs and be done with this stupid dinner. I’ve



had so much happen to me in the span of twenty-four hours and hardly any time to reflect on any of it.

His voice lowers when he orders, “Sit down.”

“Why? I joined you for dinner. Rule fulfilled.” He has no excuse to inflict pain on anyone right now; that’s of course if he keeps his word.

Although the idea of him being honorable is truly laughable.

He wipes his mouth with a napkin and gets up himself, sauntering toward the bar again, where he grabs the bottle of whiskey and opens it, the lid falling and landing on the floor, then rolling under the furniture. “How well do you know the original French tale of *Beauty and the Beast*?”

“Well enough.” Especially when it used to be my favorite as a kid. The idea of a lonely prince cursed to live in solitude without any love broke my heart.

“The beast threw a feast, didn’t he, on the night of her arrival?” My brows furrow at this, trying to understand how this is related to our conversation, and then realization hits me.

Is this his way of... wooing me?

Did he think feeding me a steak would sway my emotions toward him? Or does he have more up his sleeves for the night.

Then another thought hits me like a smothering wave, creating a vacuum around me, while different scenarios play in my mind.

The beast threw a cabaret and then... asked her to spend the night with him, and she refused him every single time.

Fear sinks its claws into me, the air sticking in my throat at the idea of him expecting me to join him in bed, and if in the fairy tale the beast was okay with the word no, something tells me Rush doesn’t like to hear it.

“Ah, you paled so much, captive princess of mine.” He brings the bottle to his mouth, drinking greedily from it as the whiskey sloshes inside. “Don’t worry. I don’t take what’s not

willingly offered. When you come to my bed, you'll crave it as much as me."

The audacity of this man! "It will never happen, so you might as well stop all the wooing now."

"Never is such a strong word, darling."

Huffing in exasperation, because I'm so damned tired of his elusive sentences that allude to God knows what and make little sense to me, I exhale a heavy breath and pull at the last straw of sanity. "What else is on the agenda tonight, then? We can cross dinner out. A musical maybe? Do you sing too?"

"This wasn't wooing, darling." I frown at him, and he elaborates as he comes closer, his leather shoes thumping on the marble and sending prickles down my spine with each step. "A villain doesn't woo." My heartbeat speeds up, beating wildly inside my chest when he stops directly in front of me and traps my chin between his thumb and finger, sending zapping jolts through my system. His fingers dig into my skin, and a hiss slips past my lips when he tilts my head back, but I'm afraid to outright defy him as his entire demeanor swirls fear around us. "He sees what he wants and takes it no matter the consequences or people standing in his way." His hand wraps around my waist, and he drags me closer, our faces just inches away from each other. I look into his emerald eyes filled with so many secrets and something else... something I've never seen in another man's gaze directed at me. "For if a beauty belongs to a villain, no one has the power to separate the two."

"In every fairy tale or story, the villain loses. He never gets what he wants. Because a dashing prince or knight come to the rescue," I whisper, shockingly mesmerized by the madness seeping from him and tempting me in ways I haven't anticipated.

Because the man might be a monster, but he so strongly covets a woman that he doesn't even think she might become his one weakness? "Please let me go."

He slides his hand to cup my cheek before traveling to my hair and fisting it so hard a gasp of pain echoes between us. "I

used to be a prince once. But a certain underworld king destroyed my life.” His hold on me tightens, and I stay frozen in place, too afraid to break the connection that might stop his confessions that are so crucial to me understanding him. “Whoever comes here will find nothing but death.”

All my theories about his motives before this moment vanish and burn, the invisible ashes falling over us while leaving nothing but despair in their path.

Because this revenge is deeply personal. His rigid muscles, the fury lacing his words, but mostly the blank stare indicate no human emotions reside in him.

The underworld king who destroyed his life is my father, and nothing will deter him from his decision.

After all, villains never become heroes throughout the stories, right? They die at the altar of their ambition and unwillingness to change.

“Why do you hate my father?”

His fingers slide gently over my scalp, tremors rushing through my head sliding warmth into my bones, and he steps back, letting me go, and instant coldness surrounds me, which only adds to the confusion whirling in my mind. “For a woman who was called a gifted child, you act incredibly stupid.”

“You’re using me in your twisted game and think I have no right to know why I’m being punished? Why you keep me in this cage until you lure my father here!”

A hollow chuckle echoes off the walls, his entire demeanor changing while the notes of disgust settle in his tone. “You have no idea what a punishment is, Aileen. If you did, you’d know this”—he swirls his finger in the air—“is nothing like it.” He grabs my elbow and drags me to the ballroom, striding so fast I stumble a little on my heels on the way. “Believe it or not, I showed you consideration when I offered you dinner. But since you are not hungry, we can move to the real entertainment of the night.” He throws me right into the middle of the circle, and I sway a little before catching my

balance, my skirt floating around me while my hair blows back, because the terrace door is wide open and lets the wind inside.

Rush claps three times, and soft music starts to play: a familiar ballet tune I have used recently in my practices in the park when suffocating all my feelings became impossible, and I needed an outlet for my frustration.

“What’s going on?” Before the question is even out of my mouth, I know the answer by the wicked glint in his gaze as he roams it over me, making me feel almost naked, which sends another hot flush through me.

“The beast threw a cabaret, but we are in a different fairy tale, right, darling?” He snatches something from his back pocket, and it dangles, my eyes widening at the silky blindfold. “Let’s put our special twist on it, shall we? Dance for me, my captive princess, like no one is watching.”

He walks toward me, and I step back, wanting to escape whatever idea has formed in that psychotic mind of his, but I come up short when my heels connect with a candle. He reaches me in three short strides, and everything in me wants to scream and curse at him, to somehow find solace from the things he expects me to do.

I wasn’t raised to bow my head to anyone, least of all to my father’s enemies.

*“You can get it only if you have his heart. Otherwise prepare for the death at the end of this journey, child. Because he won’t rest until he kills your father.”*

To checkmate him, I must have his heart or whatever his idea of love entails. The woman who loves a villain cannot judge his every move or act as if she hates him.

Two, three, or four days or however long it takes for Dad to get here... even in the short amount, my mission might be completed, because men like Rush fall hard and fast. Life denied them a lot of things. So when they see what they want?

Their entire being holds on to it.

So, finally reaching a decision that has heartbreak written all over it, I say, “Candles are everywhere.”

He grips the single chair nearby and straddles it, the tips of his boots hooking behind its legs.

Since he stays silent, I voice another concern of mine, “I’m wearing heels, not to mention my injured ankle.”

Shouldn’t the beast care about my pain?

But by how only amusement flashes on his face while his eyes remain dead-cold, I know the villain in him cares little about my discomfort and craves one thing only.

Absolute power over me to establish a connection that’s going to be my downfall.

Although, little does he know that no power in the world can make me see him in different light and willingly accept this captivity and bizarre fantasies he resides in.

“It hasn’t stopped you from dancing in the park.” The air hitches in my throat at the reminder, goose bumps popping all over my skin while that day plays in my mind where I spent hours practicing on the grass despite my doctor’s advice to never do such things again.

Forbidding a dancer to dance is like ripping away their soul, stomping on it and then telling them to learn to live without it, because the agonizing hurt rocks your entire system and makes you wish for things that are forever lost to you.

The princess went against the king’s rules, and as a result, the villain saw her, coveting her to the point of insanity.

A severe punishment for one disobedience.

Taking a deep breath in my lungs, I reach with my trembling hand for the blindfold and snatch it away from him, the silk cooling my skin while another blast of warm wind whooshes over my form, bringing temporary relief to the fire spreading rapidly in my veins.

*“Focus on the game. Just that. Whatever you do, it doesn’t matter.”*

Putting on the blindfold, I tie it hard on the back of my head as darkness surrounds me and the music becomes louder or so it seems with at least one of my senses lost for the time being.

My hands grip my dress tight, despising to show him my weakness while the heart in my chest gallops so hard it's a wonder it doesn't rip out of me.

I jump at his harsh yet husky voice gliding over my skin like the silkiest of ropes ready to cut off my oxygen supply at any moment and in this claim my young life. "What are you waiting for, princess? Dance for me." He claps two times. "And I might consider granting you your wish."

Scrunching my eyes, I zero all my attention on the music, focusing on the familiar beat awakening my dormant parts, buzzing my body with the anticipation as my muscles relax ready to give it all to the performance that comes to me as naturally as breathing.

Raising my arms, I make several graceful movements with them in sync with the music, slowly swaying my upper body right along with it as a raspy breath escapes me and my toes curl inside my shoes.

Right before I twirl, fear sinks its claws into me, the candles' scent polluting the air and not letting me forget about the danger present all around me. One wrong move might result in a burn lasting a lifetime.

The villain's hideous mark on my skin for everyone to see, a mark announcing to the whole world what he has done to me and in this remaining in my memories and soul forever with no reprieve from him in sight.

Oddly enough, the fear and adrenaline mix together, creating a blazing combination in which more determination fills me, urging me to perform so well he can choke on all his threats, realizing that nothing scares me.

Even if it's one giant lie.

The wind billows my dress back as I continue to dance, more daring with each step and rising on my tiptoes as much

as it's possible in these damned heels as the music's tempo rises, announcing the culmination of a climax while the owls hooting in the distance only add to the sinister atmosphere all around me.

For a second, I can pretend I'm back on the stage with thousands of lights illuminating the audience for me, creating an illusion of a protective cocoon where I immerse myself so deep into the art until nothing but beauty remains.

With each twirl and movement, I do what my heart desires and loves the most since I learned how to walk.

Dance. Dance. Dance.

A smile curves my mouth, and I lean forward, extending my arms while lifting one leg up, balancing on the other, a movement I haven't done in a while, and a bubble of laughter almost escapes me.

Almost—because a despicable voice breaks my protective bubble, shattering the illusion and once again bringing me back to the hideous reality. “I've even earned your smiles now.”

Ignoring his words and not giving him the satisfaction of knowing just how much all this disturbs my senses and makes my soul bleed, I twirl fast on my leg, pressing on my injured ankle, and instantly a stabbing pain shoots from my ankle to my calf, so deep and profound I still, breathing hard.

Tears form in my eyes, and I lose my balance, falling to the side where most of the candles are judging by the heat and internally preparing for unbearable agony and consequences.

The burn scars will never fade away and always stay a souvenir this encounter left behind.

Only for my gasp to echo in the space when a strong hand wraps around my waist, pulling me back and pressing me against his hard-as-granite chest, the masculine scent and warmth instantly settling all around me.

“Caught you, my princess,” he whispers into my ear, the timbre of his voice rumbling against my skin, sending tremors all over me and tugging on something inside my mind that I

wish to forget. “Never endanger yourself again. Rules exist for a reason.”

Too confused to comprehend what’s going on, I reply, “You told me to.” And I hate this statement, as if I do anything anyone demands of me, but he left me no choice, right?

Princesses don’t argue with the villains who intend to kill their kings.

“To teach you a lesson, Aileen.” He skates his lips to my wildly beating pulse, hovering above it as he adds, “You’re too precious to get hurt.” He places his mouth on my pulse, sucking it hard and for sure leaving marks behind as the air hitches in my throat, electric volts rushing through me one after another, existing on their own as if knowing something I don’t.

While my rational mind still stays alert and I dig my nails into his hand, wanting to rip it away from me, even if it means him pushing me toward the candles, for his madness might not know any boundaries. “Don’t,” I whisper, pleading lacing my tone as fire swirls in the pit of my stomach, creating an inferno designed to burn me alive in the heated ocean he slowly blankets my senses with. “Please don’t.”

A sense of shame fills me at how my body, despite my protests, sways backward, seeking his mouth as if it’s sure he could bring us pleasure in the most primitive way, recognizing him almost subconsciously.

Desires I never knew dance around me in a swirling pool, needing to be seen, yet seeing them would mean my capitulation to the villain.

Withstanding his assault in order to free myself and save my father is one thing.

Enjoying and craving it is quite another. It would be akin to betrayal to my own family, and who could ever live with such a burden?

He licks over the abused flesh, breaking more goose bumps in his wake, while I feel his other hand gripping the skirt of my dress, sliding it up and exposing my bare thighs to



the onslaught of wind that does little to soothe the blazing heat within me. “Please,” he says, tasting the word on his tongue that sounds incredibly wicked coming from him and electrifies the tensions around us, his breath fanning my neck right before he licks over my earlobe. He nips on it and murmurs, “I love it when you beg, princess.”

I gasp when his hot palm settles on my panty-covered core, throbbing under the skirts, and he skims his fingers over my flesh, up and down, each slide driving me a little insane, casting a haze around me while my breath becomes raspy.

“Stop,” I ask again, shaking my head, trying to hold to my protests and resisting the lust calling my name and assuring me that my compliance right now will be better for me in the future.

For if he truly wants me, nothing and no one would stop him from having me.

His hand on me stills, he cups my most intimate part, and my cheeks heat up, my thighs clamping together. I trap his palm between my legs on a reflex, a flush zipping through me in waves as my chest rises and falls in anticipation of his next move. He nuzzles into the curve between my shoulder and neck, his rough stubble scratching my skin and somehow only adding to the tempting call pulling me toward the doom flashing on the horizon.

Yet I still find the strength to utter, “Please stop.” If he pushes me hard enough, I think I won’t resist him for all the brave words I’ve uttered before.

Can’t he at least leave me my dignity, since he already took everything else from me and made me collateral damage in his plan?

Apparently, an innocent body starved for attention and passions it’s only heard about doesn’t care who delivers said pleasure, as long as it sustains the hunger eating at me and dampening my flesh.

He chuckles, the sound tickling my nape as his other hand fists my dress hard, pulling at the cloth, and I hiss when my

aroused nipples hurt from the contact, probably showing him in full glory how all this for some reason turns me on.

No, not me.

My body that tries to protect me from being violated.

If I repeat this phrase enough in my head, I might finally start to believe in it, because such explanation works better than the truth, in which I find my captor attractive above all other men.

Even my amazing ex-boyfriend!

He sucks in a breath through his teeth. “Back in the greenhouse, you never said stop, princess. Just kiss me.”

I freeze at this statement, the air sticking in my lungs, horrified whimpers slipping past my lips at the implication while all the blocks align in my heart, together forming a picture that escaped me for so long. Yet it shines light on all my confusing emotions toward Rush ever since I saw him.

The stranger I kissed in the greenhouse... was him?

The man who ravished my mouth in the most lustful way and then disappeared in the night... the man whose scars I touched and wondered who could have hurt him so much... is my captor?

A man I dreamed of at night and imagined, when the last time....

Oh, no.

“No,” I whisper. “No.” My nails dig harsher into his arms, because the realness of the pleasure and orgasm I experienced back home speaks volumes and finally gives me an answer to all my questions.

Although I wish I still existed in a carefree bubble in which a man entered just my fantasies and not my home.

However, the villain who slipped into the ivory tower and stripped me of my innocence in a way without my consent doesn't let me pretend anymore. “Please. The sweetest whimper of yours. Especially when I get you off on my

tongue.” He steps away from me and then spins me around, my groan rocking between us when he locks his arms on me once again, pushing me against his chest while I still try to deny the truth.

My splayed palms settle on his torso of their own accord, and without thinking, I slide them upward to his collar, marveling at the muscled form that tenses under my touch, his heartbeat speeding up the only hint of the emotions washing over him.

His masculine scent teases my nostrils, sending shivering sensations through me, whispering in my ears about upcoming danger as I’m on the path to a hideous discovery.

Yet temptation is so strong I cannot resist it and willingly go to my downfall.

Since I still have the blindfold on, I can trust only in my touch just like in the greenhouse, and my fingertips trace over the puckered bare skin on his neck, echoes of pain present in every rugged edge.

He sucks a breath through his teeth as if it still throbs despite the wound being at least a decade old, and everything in me wishes to soothe the hurt so carelessly inflicted by someone.

Gliding my palms farther, I find his silky hair and thread my fingers in it, my soul crushing into tiny little pieces, because my mind and heart finally come to an agreement that destroys the first sexually arousing encounter I ever had and intended to forever keep locked in my brain.

My greenhouse stranger who evoked chaos in me and made me crave wicked, forbidden things...

It’s no doubt him.

“No,” I whisper again, when the need to soothe the pain hits me again, just like in the greenhouse, the buzzing starting in my ears while lust sparks within me. “No.”

Not sure to whom my protest is addressed anymore though.

To Rush, who took what was not willingly given, or me, for wanting him still and being hopeless when it comes to desires he inspires within me?

His hold on me tightens, his denim-covered hard-on pressing against my flesh, and it sends gasoline to the inferno flaring in my blood as he growls, “Yes.” And that’s all the warning I get before he slams his mouth on mine.

And the outside world, common sense, and even my family cease to exist.

He imprisons us both in a heated kiss that turns raw when he forcefully pushes my lips open and engages us both in a passionate duet, where our tongues brush against each other with each swipe, while thousands of electrifying prickles glide over my skin one after another, creating a longing in the pit of my stomach as needy sensations envelop me whole.

Pulling at his hair, I raise on my tiptoes and angle my head back for better access as he deepens our embrace, swallowing my moan, the kiss becoming more daring as we both succumb to the temptations, the music booming around us and sending us down the lustful abyss.

All while the desire grows, his hard-on digs into me and sends wave after crushing wave through my body, awakening every hair on my skin and curling my toes, while my fingernails cut into his neck, earning myself a hiss from him.

My lungs demand oxygen, begging me to break the kiss, but I refuse, pressing even closer to him, and then whimper when he grips my ass cheeks hard and hikes me up, my legs instantly wrapping around his waist.

We share a groan when his thick bulge thrusts against me with each step, creating friction, driving me insane, and consuming me whole while sensations rock my entire system, craving something from me that I do not know how to give.

Yet without a shadow of a doubt, I know they would soothe this lust casting a spell on me that is an aphrodisiac in itself, creating passionate webs around my mind and

corrupting it so much it no longer cares about what's right or wrong.

It only cares what Rush can give me to free me from this madness in which one might burn alive as the blazing heat scorches me and urges to participate in the most wicked things, as long as it ensures my pleasure.

His boots thump loudly on the marble as we move, all while we continue to kiss, this time gentler, his tongue lazily seeking mine as he plays with it, giving me deeper strokes that only intensify the desire between us.

He stops, his muscles tensing before I hear something shattering, and then he places me on a flat surface, my thighs connecting with the warm, smooth wood.

He tears his mouth away, and a moan of protest escapes me, echoing through the space as I gulp for air, breathing hard, still holding on to him and scrunching my eyes despite the blindfold.

Because then I don't have to face the hideous reality and can focus only on the pleasure hovering nearby, ready to claim me and give me reprieve from the madness existing within me since our first encounter.

And with my eyes firmly shut, I don't have to think about him... the one who touched me so gently I have no idea how he could commit any crimes.

In the dark, I can pretend once again despite knowing the truth.

Even if the person I lie to is myself.

Sometimes, sweet lies are a salvation saving us from our self-hatred, allowing us to indulge in our most forbidden desires; otherwise, we'd never dare to explore them.

After all... princesses in this world rarely get to do what they want, for they always have to do what's right.

And just for a moment in time, I'd like to do what I want, even if it has deadly consequences and might create more trouble in the future.

His hand travels to my hair, fisting it as he pulls it, exposing my neck to his wandering mouth, his lips pressing on my skin and leaving invisible imprints all over it that burn from inside out, sending electricity straight to my core, and I whisper, "Please." My fingers curl into his shirt, but my request earns me a chuckle, the vibration breaking more goose bumps on my flesh.

"Ah, princess. Your please is the sweetest sound in this whole fucking world." He trails his lips to my collarbone, scraping his teeth over my skin before sucking on the flesh hard and sending a tremor through me, my thighs flexing around him. His other hand glides down, down, down until he pushes the dress up, exposing my lace-covered core and groans, the sound skirting over me and stoking the fire burning inside me. "Look at that pretty pussy all soaking wet for me." He rubs me through the sodden lace, up and down, and I gasp when he cups me, the heat of his grip adding to the maddening need consuming me.

"Who made you this wet, Aileen?" he asks, biting on the mounds of my breasts, and my back arches, seeking his touch as he swipes his middle finger over the cloth, then pressing on it, almost entering me and yet not giving me what I crave so much.

"Please," I whisper, gripping his shirt and trying to pull him closer to me to soothe the ache in me that has his name written all over it. "Please." This one ends on a whimper when he circles my opening, and the heel of his palm presses hard on my clit while he drags his tongue upward, leaving damp imprints on me until he reaches my mouth, and we share a breath.

"Who are you begging, Aileen?"

I cry out against his lips when he pushes his finger in, simultaneously working my clit, my walls clamping around him, only I moan in protest when he pauses once again, making me suffer in the thin line between agony and pleasure yet not finding any of it.

"Answer me."

“You,” I reply, opening my mouth, ready to welcome his kiss, but he rubs his lips over mine, still not doing a thing while I’m going insane from the desires hitting me from every angle. “Please.”

He has another question for me, the one that’ll send me to the depths of despair, as I do not wish to acknowledge it, happy in my pretend bubble where past and present don’t exist, and we’re right now in the vacuum space without time and moral codes. “What is my name?”

My hands drift upward, my nails sinking into his nape as I pull him even closer to me, and my voice is so raspy when—to my utter horror—I beg, “Please don’t make me—”

He stabs his tongue deep into my mouth, trapping it in the passionate kiss that dumps me into a pool of lust, and I moan when he deepens it, engaging us in a powerful duel.

He cups my cheek, his thumb pushing on my chin and opening me up wider for his assault while the scent of my arousal wafts into the air, but I have no time to mourn the loss of his touch on me.

He thrusts his hips forward, swallowing my gasp as his jeans-covered cock connects with my core, making the walls contract while the need in the pit of my stomach grows just imagining the thick bulge driving into me, breaking through my virginity, and claiming what should never be his.

But my body would gladly give it to him as long as he continues driving into me and promising blissful oblivion only he can provide.

He changes the kiss, lazily roaming inside me and seeking my tongue out, and they brush against one another as I sway my hips a little, adding to the friction, while desire grows and grows within me, making it hard to breathe as my pulse speeds up.

I wish to snatch away the offending piece of clothing preventing me from fully feeling him, craving skin-to-skin contact while he pulls back and thrusts hard again, the air

sticking in my throat at the action, and I almost see stars, as I've never felt anything like this before.

If he is mimicking the art of love making, no wonder people enjoy it so much. Despite the darkness surrounding me, I'm already addicted to the pleasure that can be nothing but my downfall.

Tightening my hold on him, he growls when I fist his hair and turn the kiss more aggressive, my legs locking on his back, desperately trying to reach the peak flashing on the horizon, afraid someone might snatch it away before I can experience...

Whatever his kisses and touches are promising.

If he thrusts one more time, I might....

My disappointed moan echoes in the space when he ends the kiss, tearing himself away from me, and his hands fall on my hips, his fingers digging into me. "Who do you want, princess?" His seductive voice glides over me as he nuzzles my neck, nipping on my skin while sending a sensual tremor through me.

I shake my head, everything in me rebelling at the idea of giving him what he wants.

Because then I will no longer be able to pretend that the beauty despises the villain—instead, she covets him like no other.

I cannot live with this. Right now, he is just a man, a fantasy, a mirage I don't even see.

Otherwise, what does it make me if I'm willing to succumb to the temptation that's a man who kidnapped me and plans to kill my father?

However, mind, body, and heart are tricky things, for the latter two fight the former so hard all I can feel and think about is this agonizing ache throughout me that demands to be soothed in the most delicious ways.

A hunger he inspires and I'm afraid no one else can sustain.



I sigh when he wraps his hand around my throat, squeezing it lightly, not enough to cut off my oxygen supply but enough to make me aware of every beat of my heart as his breath fans my cheek.

“What do you want, princess?” His lips graze my chin and move toward my earlobe in which he bites gently. “My tongue licking this untouched, eager pussy?” A shiver rushes over me at the suggestion, remembering how good it felt in my midnight fantasy. “My fingers stabbing into you deep and preparing you for what’s to come?” He kisses my neck and then thrusts forward, moving us both on the table as his hard-on digs into me, and a hiss escapes me. “Or my dick breaking in this tight virgin pussy that turns on only for me?”

His crude words should scare me, the possessiveness and satisfaction coating his tone bordering on obsession and hinting at how much he loves the fact that no one got their hands on me before him.

Instead, though, something else stirs to life within me, wishing to jump over the cliff to the lust and desire threatening to destroy me as long as he is the one who will catch me there.

For if I have to drown in the passionate ocean of his creation, so should he.

His teeth graze my flesh as he tugs on the strap of my dress and pulls it off my shoulder, trailing his tongue over the exposed skin before bestowing featherlike kisses on me.

Every single time his lips touch me, electrical waves shake me and travel straight to my clit, dampening my core as my panties soak even more to the point of obscenity.

“Please.”

“Please who, Aileen?”

The question hovers between us, and without a shadow of a doubt, I know he will leave me if I do not give him the answer he craves.

The beast won’t be satisfied until he knows that Beauty wants him even with all his flaws, because it speaks to the wounded part of him.

He doesn't care the truth hurts me, but then, should I have expected anything else from the villain?

They are selfish creatures, and I must be one too, because right in this moment, only my pleasure matters to me. So I shut up the voice of reason screaming at me to run far away with my soul intact.

Before darkness consumes it.

My curious nature though has a stronger pull on me and pushes me toward the unknown, so taking a raspy breath, I reply, "Rush. Please, Rush."

His palms flex on me, and the energy around us changes, becoming more electrified and tense, which oddly only adds to the scorching heat enveloping us both.

And then he orders, "Remove the blindfold, princess."

With my trembling fingers, I do as he says, and the world comes into view once again. Blinking a few times, I adjust my vision and then still when our eyes lock, such striking need etched on his features that everything in me leans toward him, loving and despising at the same time that I'm the one he wants.

Without thinking, I grab his shirt and tug him close, locking us in a kiss, threading my fingers through his silky dark hair, all while we gaze at one another.

The desire in my veins grows, spreading all over me, and I whimper when he presses himself closer to me, my curves molding to his hard, rigid muscles that my hands are itching to touch, to stake their own claim.

So everyone knows that this man has a woman he craves to the point of insanity and no one should even think about snatching him away.

The idea of how ridiculous this thought is doesn't even register in my mind as he pushes more stuff off the table, the porcelain and dishes falling on the floor with a loud clatter. My pussy spasms at the light growl escaping him, his bulge tapping on my clit and sending maddening sensations that hitch the air in my throat.

My yelp rings between us when he sends me lying flat on the table, the crystal chandelier shimmering under the candles' light as I look up at the ceiling. I moan when he pulls my dress down, my small breasts springing free, and he traps one of them between his lips, my nipples becoming tight peaks, bringing the sweetest agony.

I lace my fingers in his hair, pulling him closer to me as his tongue circles my nipple, coating it in saliva before sucking it hard, making me arch my back as thousands of zipping sensations wash over me in powerful waves. My gasp echoes in the air.

All while his hand weighs the other breast, squeezing my nipple, and I moan, "Rush, please!" The heaven and hell on earth I'm experiencing should be illegal, and yet it's more hellish, for I still don't see an ending that would give me reprieve from this torture.

Instead, it ignites my need even more, and he groans against my flesh when I fist his hair tighter, silently begging him to continue, and he does, biting on the nipple before soothing it with his tongue once again. He licks all around it and then moves to the other one, lifting it up a little to his searching mouth. He draws it in, repeating his action as his hand drifts lower. My stomach dips under his burning touch, and then he bares my core once again, the light breeze whooshing inside breaking goose bumps along my skin.

Closing my eyes, I welcome the pleasure slowly building inside me and wiping away everything else, the scorching heat wrapping around me so tight it feels I might burst open at any moment. And I would love every second of it, as long as it entailed the bliss sinking into my veins.

He snatches his mouth away, blowing on my wet nipples, which only hardens them more and sends sensations directly to my clit. My thighs tighten around him, and he grips my asscheeks, his fingers digging so deep I gasp in pain and surprise alike.

"My little ballerina," his husky voice whispers, so silky and smooth it could be a temptation in itself, for it has the

power to hypnotize any mind it wishes. “Does this pussy need to come?”

I nod, although he probably can't see it, and his chuckle rumbles my skin as he rubs his chin over my collarbone before straightening up. He pushes me farther up the table, a few more things dropping to the floor, yet I can't focus on it.

As he places my feet on the edges of the table, widening my thighs, he rips the panties away, leaving me bare to his gaze. I want to close my legs, my cheeks heating up, although the desire burning in me threatening to destroy everything in its wake wins against my shyness, so I just stare at him.

His fingers skate up and down my folds, scooping wetness and then coating me, circling around the opening but not entering.

“Rush.”

My plea does little to sway him, although he brushes his thumb against my clit, making me aware of every nerve in my body. “Watch, princess.” He catches my gaze, my palm curling and gripping my dress at the sheer lust shining in his eyes. “Watch and scream my name.” His fingers drift upward, sliding them up and down as if studying me, and my core clenches, feeling empty without something inside. He presses his middle finger to my opening, pushing slightly in, and then cups it so hard I whimper. “This is mine, Aileen.”

I shake my head, never wanting to admit such a thing.

He might be the first man I've allowed to touch me, but I'm not his.

I will never belong to a villain, a monster, a man who has no regard for human life. “No,” I find the strength to reply.

“Yes. You no longer have to hide your passionate nature behind a pillow.”

The wicked man doesn't let me dwell on it long though, as he leans forward, his splayed hands sneaking under me and lifting me to his mouth, his hot breath fanning my core fueling the lust driving me mad and chanting only his name, as he

holds the key to the thrilling bliss waving at me from the horizon.

“Grab the dress and watch, Aileen,” he commands again, and I’m too lost in the sensations rocking through me to protest, doing as he says and locking our stares. My hands naturally thread through his hair, needing to hold on to him to feel like I’m not alone in this bliss that is such a threat to my sanity.

If I have to burn, then the villain should too.

“So soft and pretty,” he says before sucking on the skin of the inside of my thighs, leaving red marks on my flesh once again, as if wanting to announce to the whole world that no part of me stayed untouched.

For he claimed them all.

He rubs his stubble over the sensitive skin, trailing his tongue over the abused flesh as if apologizing to it. “And mine.” His hands flex underneath me as his gaze becomes deadly and possessive, indicating retribution to whoever thinks otherwise. “Mine and no one else’s.”

I stay silent as my heart bleeds at this, because it’s not the truth and just as mirage.

*Don’t think about it. Focus only on the pleasure he can give you.*

My body freezes in anticipation of his next move, greedily awaiting the pleasure his sinister smile promises me. I cry out when he rolls his tongue out, licking me from bottom to top, dipping into the fire of his creation.

Thousands of electric volts charge my cells, hot flashes traveling through me in waves while my skin goes taut, stretching so tight around me that I gulp for breath while the dress feels so wrong on me.

My thighs clamp around him, my hands gripping him harder, never wanting him to stop this sweet torture as he sucks my clit, trapping it between his lips and then pulling at it with his teeth right before sliding his tongue up and down my lips, one by one, and then repeating the action all over again.

“Rush,” I moan, trying to get him closer to me, although it’s physically impossible, loving how the blazing heat envelops me whole and only grows with each swipe, the bliss so close I can almost reach it.

And it intensifies when he drives his tongue inside me, my walls sucking him in as he roams all over them, fueling the fire that’s my lust and earning a moan from me. My nails cut into his nape, asking him to provide me a cure from the all-consuming insanity that wants to burn me alive, for the powerful bliss would send me deeper into a darkness akin to the one surrounding me.

His tongue becomes more relentless as he stabs it hard into me, creating a frenzy and a friction, pushing me closer and closer to the edge as my core contracts around him, never wanting his tongue to leave, and he growls against me.

“Rush, please.” I tug on his hair so hard it’s a wonder I haven’t ripped some out at this point. “Please, make me...” I bite on my lower lip, too shy to say the words out loud, and yet they ring so loudly in my ears.

Because all this is almost unbearable.

He lifts his mouth from me, his lips glistening with me, and asks, “Make you what, Aileen?” His hands slide out, and he puts them on my thighs, spreading me wider for him. Since I stay silent, he orders, “‘Make me come, Rush.’ Say it.” The air hitches in my throat, more goose bumps popping all over me, as zipping sensations grow while we stare at one another. “Say it, princess.”

His finger slips over my core, tickling it, which only adds to the fire boiling in my veins, and I push the words out, too forbidden and wrong, and yet they ignite my body like nothing else ever has. “Make me come, Rush.”

“Good girl,” he praises me and places his whole mouth on me, making me arch on the table, holding on to him as he glides his tongue through my folds. He owns me with each swipe, bringing me closer to bursting the passionate bubble wrapped around me to finally experience the overpowering bliss.

He presses my lips together and bites on them before licking over the flesh and then gliding his tongue right inside again, over and over again, pushing against something in me while his thumb flicks my clit from side to side, the double sensations spreading the blaze all over me.

He groans when I claw at his shoulders, the vibration adding to the pleasure building and building within me, and finally, I erupt, a scream tearing from my throat, and I fall back on the table, gulping for breath.

Rush licks me one last time and then straightens up, dragging my limp body upward and connecting our mouths in a deep kiss, letting me taste myself on his mouth and gasp into him. I tear my lips away when my lungs beg for oxygen, breathing heavily and hugging him so close, because he grounds me in the present.

As clarity finally comes to my mind, bringing reality right along with it, I freeze.

Because the realization of what I have done just now hits me, devastating me so much I want to scream in despair.

And yet in the land where a villain rules, it's not an option.

**R**ush

She gasps into my ear, her hot breath fanning my face as her nails dig into my back, leaving marks on my already scarred skin. Her legs tighten for a second around me, pushing my hard-on against her pussy that must be dripping for me.

Her flushed skin smells divine, disturbing my senses and soaking me in something tempting and unfamiliar that blocks away everything but this woman in my arms who manages to awaken dormant emotions inside me.

Her response to me, her every moan and groan while her body discovers the pleasure of her flesh, is a heady aphrodisiac to the possessive beast residing in me, demanding I stake my

claim all over her and lock her in the tower so no one will get to her.

Because she's mine and belongs to me, a personal gift destiny has granted me for all the fucked-up shit I had to put up with.

A twisted and wicked gift, because she has to be returned at the end of it all. An innocent bystander serves only as bait to lure the real prey.

*"A hunter can easily become prey if he becomes enamored with the prey. Because emotions win over instincts, and a hunter with his instincts turned off cannot execute any plan."*

I might hate Lachlan with a passion, and nothing short of his death will be satisfying enough to me, but even I know he is one smart fucker who knows the human mind like no one else does.

His words have merit, and if without fully sinking into her, I already have such a strong reaction to this young, sheltered princess... what will happen next?

My obsession will be all-consuming and deadly, because her body might react to my touch, but she won't ever let me put my hands on her once I hurt her father.

This much I know.

Slowly, her eyelids flutter open, her sapphire orbs gazing at me with confusion that gradually transforms into shock and then mortification. A distressed sound escapes her mouth before her legs drop to the floor, and she pushes at my chest.

I step back instantly, and she shakes her head, her lips opening and closing before she rushes to the door, her dress flapping around her and her shoes tapping loudly on the marble. Like Cinderella when the clock strikes midnight, although we role-play in a different fairy tale.

Slamming my fist into the wall, I trap the roar wanting to get out from my throat and rein in the chaos swirling in my chest that has no place in my revenge.



I can indulge in her body and innocence, bask in the sunshine that's her pureness until her father comes here.

And he'll come sooner rather than later. The bastard's love for her is absolute.

But we will part ways once this all ends. A future in which the villain keeps the beauty doesn't exist.

As opposite to the beast in the fairy tale, he won't ever give up her father in exchange for her eternal devotion.

So having her here on borrowed time will have to be enough.

Love is a weapon in the hands of those who wish to kill me. Because my love entails madness and obsession where the woman will become vitally important to me, and existing without her will have no meaning.

The center of my dark universe shining her light all around her and temporarily giving me reprieve from the nightmare I woke in more than twenty-five years ago.

Such love should be called a curse, as it only serves as destruction and doom to the woman on the receiving end of it; my family history proves this much.

I'm a monster with no mercy or compassion toward those standing against me, willing to use anything and anyone if it ensures my victory. No cost is too high for me, and if someone has to become collateral damage?

I don't give a fuck.

But even the most despicable monsters have lines they never cross.

Subjecting Aileen to living with a man who killed her father is one of them. I vowed a long time ago to never bring an unwilling woman to the hell that's my bloodline.

Her heart might love her family, but she's still a very innocent creature who is guided by her emotions, because she is consumed in love.

A creature who sees pain and darkness and wants to soothe it, shine her light upon it, and her attraction to me will convince her to love me.

So the only thing I can do right now is break her heart.

And ironically, this might be the one thing I can use after death to atone for my sins.

For saving her from myself will be the one good deed I've done in this life.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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*“Her beauty mesmerizes me.*

*Her mind surprises me.*

*The desire to own her body consumes me.*

*Her compassionate and gentle soul though?*

*Her soul hurts me.”*

*Rush*

*F*rom Rush's unsent letters....

*Aileen,*

*A sheltered princess of the dark castle surrounded with love and acceptance all her life... has no fucking room to judge those who lived without it.*

*When you know what it's like to suffer every single day while the ones hurting you laugh and then laugh some more... when what you want doesn't matter, and you're treated worse than dirt under their nails... then and only then can you sit on your high horse and give psychological labels to people like us.*

*Madness has many forms on this earth, one more intense than the other. They constantly fight over dominance in your head, seeking to rule you in a way that feeds their hunger.*

*One must be strong enough to keep the balance, although nothing ever excuses the deeds done by our hands. They are permanently smeared in blood.*

*A noble heart like yours seeks to cure the madness all around you, thinking that love and affection can heal even the deadliest of wounds, except that's not true.*

*Some wounds fester for years, and putting on fucking medicine won't help. You can either carve out the organ or... learn to live with it in a way that brings peace to the mind and calms the madness.*

*You cannot save everyone, Aileen. The monsters will cease to exist in this world only when humans do, because we are two sides of the same coin.*

*Like Newton's law says.*

*Every action has an equal and opposite reaction.*

*Despicable deeds are balanced by goodness that likes to thrive in the bright light... but somehow stays deaf to the cries in the darkness.*

*You want to help the kids once they're rescued, but do you pay attention to what happens before that? Or does the child have to go on his or her own until then?*

*I agree that we have our choices, and my choices don't make me a saint no matter how I use my darkness. I kill, in the most vicious ways, those who deserve it, enjoying their tortured screams and the blood pouring from them, creating a red pool in my dungeon.*

*The smell of their fear filling the air, their fake remorse, their pleadings... nothing in this world will make me turn my back on the beast inside me and stop being a villain.*

*I make no apologies for my choices and respect everyone who resisted the calling. Anyone who lived in a nightmare deserves it from me.*

*But sometimes nightmares don't stop, Aileen, so you vow to make sure no one else has to live in hell like you.*

*There are gray colors in this world, and not always the good side is the salvation everyone speaks so highly of.*

*Because even the good people who helped you might turn into a monster in the blink of an eye when you least expect it.*

*A harsh lesson your loving family taught me.*

*Yes, my heart is rotten and only serves to pump blood through my veins.*

*And you will find out how much when I finally take you away.*

*So, yeah, Aileen.*

*Hate me. Hate me the way I hate your father.*

*Maybe that will make the captivity I'll subject you to more bearable.*

*A rose living in a glass case blooms under the care of loving people who protect it from the outside world, not letting its beauty be tarnished by anyone or anything.*

*It goes against nature.*

*That's why there will always be someone who comes and snatches it, shattering it into tiny little pieces, leaving the rose to survive on her own.*

*Rush*

*A* **ileen**

*A rough and calloused hand slides down my chest, leaving goose bumps in its path. The heat of the touch sets aflame every cell in my body, sending fire through my veins.*

*A soft moan slips past my lips, my back arching closer to the palm that brings me so much pleasure and relief, awakening hidden parts inside me that stay dormant during the day.*

*It makes me believe I'm alive and not existing in a loving golden cage with bars blocking the real world away.*

*For if a princess dares to go outside her castle's borders, the villain might catch her and trap her in his darkness.*

*So the king protects her at all costs.*

*The palm shifts lower, fisting the nightgown around my stomach and pulling it down as our combined groans rock between us.*

*A heavy weight settles on me. The hard muscles dig into my soft ones, almost merging together, creating a unity that inspires shivers down my spine. I open my mouth when hot breath fans my cheeks, ready to receive the kiss the villain will bestow on me and—*

With a loud gasp, my eyes snap open, and I sit up in bed, waking from the sensual nightmare enveloping my mind.

My rapidly beating heart gallops so fast inside my chest it's a wonder it doesn't jump out of me.

Underneath me, the sheets are soaked in sweat while perspiration coats my skin. I push the blanket away and welcome the harsh wind coming from the wide-open balcony door, billowing the curtains and giving me occasional peeks outside.

By the way the darkness still surrounds most of the room, with light that touches a few places closest to the balcony, I assume dawn has broken, but it's still early, since the house is quiet.

The birds chirp in the distance, singing to each other. Their voices echo, inviting you to follow and discover the creatures who emit such a pure melody.

I swing my legs over the side of the bed, curling my toes into the fluffy carpet, and pad toward the sound, stopping at the balcony door. A smile curves my mouth at the sight of several blue birds sitting on the banister, basking in the weather as they continue to chirp.

They have long beaks and long blue-white feathers. No matter how much I wrack my mind to remember what they are called, nothing comes up.

My smile turns into a frown though when my gaze lands on the ocean, the waves nipping at the sand while seagulls fly around and dive into the water in search of food.

Despite my love for the ocean right now, it serves as a reminder that I'm God knows where, trapped with a psycho who deems himself the beast that will take my father's life.

Unfortunately, yesterday was not a bad dream but reality.

A reality in which I have to deal with a despicable human who thrives in darkness, who wants to drag everyone else into it and smear them in dirt that doesn't wash away.

*A despicable human you let into your bed, thinking he was part of your imagination. Who kissed you at Elena's party. And yesterday, he....*

Fisting my hands, I desperately try to calm myself. Every molecule in my body possesses so much self-loathing right now I'm surprised my own hatred doesn't burn me to ashes.

I should have hit him in the head and run away from that room, all acting and planning be damned.

He took what was *not* freely given, even if my body accepted him.

Instead, his words and body fogged my mind so much they placed me in some kind of wicked haze where no one but him existed, his tempting voice luring me farther and farther toward a darkness where forbidden, undiscovered sins ruled.

Lust, passion, and insanity reigned, while common sense and self-preservation stayed dormant, letting the villain run the show.

I took a shower yesterday, trying to wash away all the memories of him, and quickly put on a long, off-shoulder shirt and shorts, wanting to have clothes on in case he came back for more, but thankfully he never did.

*Yet every single night you went to bed, craving the dreams about him again.*

Still though.

It was a fantasy! I never agreed for it to be a reality.

Groaning in frustration, I spin around and pull at my hair, despising how weak and pathetic I sound right now.

Yes, I was supposed to play a willing participant, but we both knew I enjoyed what he did.

Well, my body did; my mind and heart still loathe him and want him to die in some pit someday, all alone and choking on his every word.

Even to my ears, this sounds like such a lie, but this man wants to kill my father.

He cannot deserve my compassion.

“It’s okay,” I whisper, rubbing my arms and deciding to be kind to myself.

Whatever I do while in captivity in order to survive, save my father from him, and escape his clutches won’t ever be used against me.

Every game, after all, is about strategic moves and never about emotions; so what if I received pleasure at his hand?

Just my psyche’s way to protect me and keep going toward my goal no matter what.

Besides, my response probably deeper solidified his belief that I’m easy to control, but at the same time, I noticed something in his eyes... traces of gentleness not present there before, mingling with desire so strong it slammed into me—even now breaking goose bumps on my skin and sending a tremor down my spine.

Villains wish for love no one wants to give them; this emotion was denied them from an early age, and as such they crave it desperately.

I’ll be damn convincing in my so-called love.

First though, I have to find a way to call my father and notify him of my whereabouts and not to come here alone.

He will need the police!

He and my uncles have no idea how to deal with people like Rush.

So far though, I haven’t seen any phones or cells. Do they even use them?



Or maybe Rush forbids them inside the castle, so the victim can't have a connection with the outside world?

He might be wicked, but he isn't stupid. And my father always told me to never underestimate my enemy.

God, I'm so thankful my father took a lot of time teaching me all this stuff, drilling all these lessons, which are so useful now, into me from an early age.

My brows furrow as I walk toward the vanity table, snagging a hair band from it. I make a ponytail on top of my head and welcome the cooling air settling on my bare skin.

Why did my father spend so much time doing it though?

Why would a king prepare his princess for an attack when he has so many knights guarding her?

Come to think of it, all my uncles taught their kids how to survive in dire circumstances, and they even hosted combined self-defense classes for us. They showed us how to cook in the wild by finding suitable food in the forest, which we all found gross, but they didn't listen to us and still ordered us to eat it. We spent our childhood bitching about all those trips and actively tried to avoid them.

Not that our fathers let us, and no amount of begging our mothers helped since they supported their husband's decisions.

A realization nags at the edges of my mind, tugging on it painfully as if urging me to put all the puzzle pieces swirling in my head in one whole picture that will have all the answers for me.

A humming sound coming from the hallway snaps me out of my thoughts, and quickly putting on my tennis shoes, I open the door and peek outside, wondering who it might be.

Emptiness greets me and straining my ears to hear better, I ponder the fact that it seems the house is still asleep.

Or under some magic spell.

A chuckle slips past my lips at the thought, although it is strange nevertheless.

Back home, the mansion buzzed with activity from five in the morning, the staff doing their best to prepare breakfast for us all, but here, who the hell knows what rule Rush lives by?

Maybe no one is allowed to roam inside the castle while the villain is asleep.

Ready to close the door, as the sound must have been a fragment of my imagination, I freeze halfway when I hear it again.

The humming that becomes stronger followed by hysterical laughter that, despite its chilling notes, holds traces of desperation and sadness in it.

Ignoring the fear slowly sinking into my bones as I look around and see no one in sight—not even the damned guards—I trail after it, realizing it's coming from downstairs.

“Mhhh. Mhhhm. Mhhh.” The chilling humming continues, and I go to the living room, then to the wide-open terrace door. I pause upon noticing a figure standing in the doorjamb, swaying her head from side to side, facing whatever view greets her in the garden.

The woman has long, blonde hair falling down her back, which contrasts with the flannel nightgown covering most of her and giving just a hint of her body, while her bare feet peek from underneath it.

She holds the curtains on either side tightly, pulling at them hard as she sways, and I look at the curtain rod securely attached to the wall, but it might fall at any time if she continues to put so much pressure on it.

“Mhmmm. Mhmmm. Mhhhm,” she hums, laughing again, and thousands of thoughts swirl in my head, one scarier than the next.

Who is this woman? Is she another victim? Jesse said Rush never brought women home, and judging by the limited information I had on his psychological modus operandi, various female victims wouldn't really fit the description.

So, why would she hang around here emitting weird sounds?

I clear my throat ready to ask her a question, when she freezes at the sound, spinning around so fast I blink in surprise. She wraps herself with the curtains, and my eyes widen at the sight of her.

Her clear, emerald-green eyes land on me, and she cocks her head to the side, but the madness shining brightly in them announces to me she isn't stable.

After visiting some psychiatric wards while studying a specific class in psychology, I've learned to recognize sick people well.

However, that's not what has my attention the most.

No, it's the burn scars marring her neck and trailing to her collarbone and probably lower, but the nightgown hides them.

And her face...

A beautiful face holding a deep scar on her right cheek, as if someone placed their knife on it and then dusted salt on the wound so she would never forget the pain of it.

Instinctively, I cover my mouth in shock, too horrified that someone had been so cruel to this young woman and inflicted so much pain on her. My soul hurts just thinking about it.

My move doesn't go unnoticed by her, and she hides her face behind the curtain. Since it's white and see-through, I still see her watching me, but she won't let me look at her.

Or at least in her mind, she is protecting herself from rejection.

"Hi," I say, and she blinks, clutching the curtain tighter when I take a step toward her. "It's okay." I raise my hands up, showing to her I have no weapons. I'm not sure what she has experienced, but assuring her I mean no harm right now should be my top priority. "It's okay." She slightly shifts to the side, opening up the uninjured part of her face that's so stunning I bet men would go crazy over her. "You're very beautiful," I tell her, and a ghost of a smile appears on her mouth at the praise. "What's your name?" I need to determine her psychological state; something hideous must have happened to her.

She blinks again, peeks even more, and then—her voice incredibly raspy as if she doesn't use it much—says, “La—” She places her hand on her neck. “Lav—” She giggles, rubbing her neck, almost welcoming the vibration coming from there, and my soul bleeds for this unknown woman who must have been so hurt she doesn't even use her voice and finds the sound of it enjoyable. “Lavender,” she says and laughs, letting go of the curtain and hugs herself. “Lavender. Lavender. Lavender!” She ends on a scream, chanting her name now while rocking back and forth on her heels.

Lavender.

The name Jesse mentioned earlier but refused to give me any details, and I understand why.

Focusing my stare on her more, I study her features despite her giggles and especially her eyes, so blank and hollow where the laughter doesn't reach and truly speaks about the damage done to her.

Eyes very familiar to those that haunt me in my nightmares, as they belong to the stranger who captured me.

Sister.

She must be Rush's sister; otherwise, why would he have kept her here?

While I wouldn't say they look alike, these eyes cannot be coincidence.

She can't be his mother or his aunt; her smooth skin on the other side and no wrinkles can attest to it.

She must be younger than Rush but older than me by a decade, but her childlike behavior makes it hard for me to determine her exact age.

“Lavender,” I repeat after her, and she grins, nodding and running to the other end of the room, grabbing an apple and biting it hard, then munching on it. “It's a pretty name.”

“Lavender,” she says again, bites the apple, and then drops it on the floor. “Lavender. Lavender. Hmm. Hmm. Hmmm.” Again, the annoying humming while she hectically roams her

gaze over the living room, slapping the wall and then frowning and rubbing her hands. "Pain." She swings her gaze back to me and waves her palm at me. "Pain. Pain. Pain!" she screams, the burn scars stretching against her taut skin at the effort, and tears pool in her eyes, which makes me want to cry too, my heart too weak to withstand watching someone in such misery.

I want to help her somehow, even though I know it's dangerous. Such people are unpredictable; the smallest gesture has the power to make them mad and attack you.

I should run to my room and stay there until Lavender goes back to wherever they keep her during the day.

However, how can I leave her all alone in this dark house with the sun rising on the horizon and the loneliness enveloping us can be felt in the air?

Maybe Rush is right.

My compassion and empathy will be my undoing someday.

Taking a deep breath, I walk to her slowly while she still waves her palm, and then I extend my hand to her.

She glances at it, frowns, and then looks at her palm before placing it in mine, grinning at the touch, and I shiver at how cold her hand is.

Her nails are nonexistent. She must bite them all off, judging by their condition, and I notice traces of blood on her knuckles. "I'm sorry it hurts." Her lips wobble at my words, which lets me know she understands me well. Despite her behavior, intelligence and comprehension spark in her orbs. Placing my other hand above hers and trapping her palm between mine, I say, "Don't hit the wall."

Her brows furrow, anger flashing on her face, and she glares at the wall. "Mean wall. Always mean. Mean! Mean! Mean!" The hate lacing her tone makes it clear that the wall must be a representation of someone who hurt her, *or* someone hurt her by keeping her caged, surrounded with walls.

Either of these possibilities sound devastating.

Why the hell hasn't Rush gotten her any psychological help and instead keeps her prisoner on this stupid island? With his money, he could have hired the best professionals to heal her.

My quick evaluation of the situation makes me think she went through a deep traumatic experience and now hides behind this self, not wanting to get out of it.

Because it would mean facing her deepest fear, which not everyone wants to do.

Especially not when the psyche is damaged.

The man doesn't even show compassion to his own sister!

"Mean wall, yes," I agree with her, and she grins again, but it slips from her lips when I add, "Don't hit it though, okay?" I tap on her injured palm. "Otherwise, it will bring more pain." Her mouth opens in an O-shape, surprise evident in her eyes as if she never thought about it.

"My name is Lavender," she says carefully, measuring every word, and that's the first full sentence she's uttered. "Like a flower."

"Yes. A beautiful flower that symbolizes purity and grace among other things." She casts her gaze down, studying her feet, dirt smeared all over them. "It fits you."

She ignores these words. Maybe she doesn't understand them?

Then she raises her eyes back to me, repeating, "My name is Lavender." She lifts her hand and tentatively taps on my collarbone. "You?" She shakes her head as if not liking what she said and then huffs. "*Quel est ton nom?*"

Slightly taken aback by her fluent French, I answer her question nevertheless, grateful my parents used to live between two countries for a while, which taught me to become bilingual. "*Je m'appelle Aileen.*" She snags her hand instantly, stepping back while an unreadable expression settles on her features.

“Aileen,” she repeats, and I nod. She clenches her fists, her jaw ticking while craziness coats her orbs. “Aileen Scott,” she whispers my full name to my astonishment.

I have no time to dwell on it, because with a cry, she wraps her hands around my throat and pushes me hard against the wall, my back hitting the concrete, and I groan, pain traveling all over my system.

“Aileen!” she screams into my face, rage pouring from her in spades as she digs her fingers into my neck, cutting off my oxygen supply, and I try to slap her hands away from me. She’s in a haze right now where she sees nothing but the target of her anger, so all reasoning is useless.

Apparently, every person in this damned house thinks I’m responsible for some shit!

My lungs burn for air, my head becomes dizzy, and despite me not wanting to hurt her because she is clearly sick, I slide my hands to her elbows, ready to press on the special place for her to loosen her hold on me and then deal with her anger.

I might be understanding and sympathetic for her condition, but I will defend myself.

I have no chance to do so though as one second she is choking me to death and the next she is gone.

I gulp for oxygen before coughing harshly, my throat burning. Suddenly, my eyes widen as I see Rush standing behind her.

He’s wearing gray sweatpants and a white T-shirt. His muscled arm is wrapped tightly around Lavender’s waist as she thrashes in his embrace, continuing to scream, “Aileen! Aileen! Aileen!” She tries to bite him, her hands trying to peel away his hand although it stays unmovable on her, which only adds to her frustration, and she stomps harshly on his bare foot. “Let go! Let go!” This time panic coats her voice, fear entering her gaze while tears form in her eyes. “No, Rush, no.” She shakes her head from side to side, her hair getting on his face, but he pays no attention to it.

He takes out a syringe from his pocket, removing the cap with his mouth and spitting it on the floor where it rolls to the side, and stabs the needle in her bicep. She starts crying, tears streaming down her cheeks. “No needle. Please no needle,” she whispers, focusing her stare on me, and I no longer see rage or madness in there.

Just pure pain that despite what she did to me, tugs on the strings of my soul, making me want to reach out to her, but I squash the instinct, firmly staying glued to my place.

He throws the syringe away and slides his hands under her knees and back, lifting her in his arms as her eyelids slowly droop and her head lolls to the side, clearly whatever sedative he used on her working fast and knocking her unconscious.

Swallowing, I wince when my throat hurts as if cats have scratched inside it, which doesn’t go unnoticed by Rush who settles his emerald orbs on me.

For a second, gentleness and regret flash in his gaze, but it’s so quickly gone I must have imagined it.

Nevertheless, something idiotic inside me compels to soothe him. “I’m all right,” I croak, my voice raspy from the pressure she put on me, and his eyes darken when he shifts toward my neck. Instinctively, I rub my fingers over the abused flesh.

“It shouldn’t have happened. I apologize, Aileen.” I blink in shock at this. “No one is allowed to hurt you. No one.” His voice drops a few octaves, sending chills down my spine, and some part of me wants to burst into tears after all this, but I hold them back. The situation hardly makes it appropriate to show my weakness.

A villain who protects the princess still remains a villain at the end of the day.

“No one but you?” I supply, and somehow these words create a frenzy around us, twisted webs surrounding us and reminding us of my true purpose on this island.

Lavender might have physically hurt me, but Rush’s action hurt me all the same.



Or the villain's beloved toy cannot be harmed?

We stare at one another for what seems like forever before William breaks the connection, racing inside the room still in his pajamas, worry etched on his wrinkled features. "Oh my God. What happened? I heard screams and—" He halts his movements when he takes in the situation around him, and he sighs heavily. "Lavender escaped again?"

Escaped? Again?

Instead of answering his question, Rush passes him and barks an order. "Tend to her wounds. Make sure she is not in pain." A beat and then, "Whoever was watching Lavender is fired. Get them the fuck out of my house." He strides toward the hallway, his feet slapping the marble while he adjusts Lavender in his arms. "And the guards too. Right fucking now, William."

"Yes, Rush." He turns to me, plastering a smile on his face that doesn't reach his eyes, and extends his hand to me. "Miss Aileen, let's go to the kitchen and make you some tea."

Tea?

Is he kidding me?

Finally snapping out of my stupor, I slap his hand away and say, "I'm fine." Running after Rush, I catch up with him at the top of the stairs from where he heads in the opposite direction of my room, farther into the left wing.

"Go to your room, Aileen," he orders without turning back as we pass by several rooms, moving rapidly toward the black double doors right in the middle, which shimmer under the rising sun streaming through the nearby window. "We'll talk later."

"I'm not your staff to dismiss."

He chuckles at my sarcastic reply. "Careful, kitten. You don't want to anger me."

"Or what?" By his earlier display of anger over the harm done to me, he has placed a powerful weapon in my hand.

Rush might talk until he turns blue about being careful, but he won't hurt me, which means it gives me more freedom to push the boundaries in my quest to uncover the truth behind this kidnapping.

Lavender might be the key to unlock what happened that made him the way he is... and why he hates my father so much.

My curiosity might not be a virtue, but it sure as hell saved me a lot of times.

Rush kicks the doors open as we enter the spacious room. I turn on the light, and confusion slams into me at the sight greeting us.

A pink-and-white color palette surrounds the place consisting of the queen-sized bed, vanity, and a couch along with a small table. Various fluffy stuffed animals are scattered over the perimeter, some of them torn while others sit neatly.

White carpet covers the floor, hiding the marble, and I notice a radio to the side.

She even has a small library, and a door leads to the bathroom where the water is still running by the sound of it.

However, this room is lacking two things.

Mirrors and windows.

Only bare white walls that Lavender hates so much, and I detect small traces of blood on it, indicting to me how she got the bruised knuckles.

Papers lie on the floor in the big pile, the paintings I realize each depicting something rather dark, yet the shapes and forms barely make any sense to me.

“How old does she think she is?” Judging by everything here and her behavior, she must not understand she is a grown woman.

Rush walks to the bed, gently placing her on it and grabbing a blanket from the floor. He puts it on her while she sighs into the pillow, her chest rising and falling peacefully.

He runs his fingers over her forehead, an unreadable expression crossing his face, and finally he answers my question. “Five or six.”

“And how old is she in real life?”

He swallows, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “Twenty-nine.”

Oh my God.

Although the truth is horrible and my heart aches for her, I can’t even be angry about her wanting to kill me.

My mind though swirls with all the information I gathered in psychology to find a fitting explanation to what might have caused her to behave like this.

Usually when a person gets stuck in a specific age, he or she experience such a strong trauma that damages their personality and psyche so much they cannot handle it and stay at the age where it happened, as if living after it never occurred.

The pain to face the truth becomes too strong, threatening to kill them, and they prefer to hide deep in their psyche.

Sometimes people manage to get out of it with the right help, but sometimes they don’t.

As strange as it sounds, sometimes the best catalyst to pull them out from such a state is reliving a similar trauma that spurs them into action, and they finally close that chapter of their life.

But if she has been on meds for more than twenty years, I’m not sure anyone can help her anymore.

“What happened to her?”

He steps back from Lavender, turning his full-of-rage stare on me.

“Your father happened.” I freeze at his words, shaking my head while his hollow laughter echoes through the room, not even stirring his sister. “That perfect daddy of yours destroyed her life.”

“No! It’s not true,” I hiss, my father would have never harmed an innocent. Never!

Especially not a child or a woman.

“Believe what you want, Aileen, but do so with the knowledge that the villain that I am was created by the monster that’s your father.”

“You’re a liar!” I shout and then cover my mouth, glancing quickly at Lavender. Lowering my tone, I add, “Besides, if you loved her, you would have gotten her psychological and psychiatric help. Not imprison her here!” With this, I spin around, fully intending to visit Lavender again and find out the truth, because whatever Rush thinks happened must have never happened.

My father could never, ever be responsible for all this devastation soaking the walls around us, reeking of agony and pain.

I can accept the fact that my father might not be a saint and display way more of his ruthless personality and tactics toward those standing in his way.

I can accept that there might be secrets I’m not aware of.

I can even accept that somehow in the past, he might have done something bad to Rush to neutralize him on his territory and in this protect us and himself from the villain’s madness.

What I won’t ever accept, though?

Is someone claiming my father is a monster who could harm innocent people.

George rushes inside in his standard uniform, the keys dangling from his pocket. “We called the island. They will send someone new right away. I’ll keep an eye on Lavender until then.”

Seriously.

Does he have dirt on these two old men who have no dignity left and allow Rush to treat his sister like a prisoner?

Just how desperate do you have to be in order to support something like this?

Kidnapping an enemy's daughter is one thing, but treating a girl who probably grew up with them like this... there is just no excuse, no matter which angle I look at it from.

I huff in disgust. "I see I'm not the only captive in this mansion after all." His cheeks flush, and he opens his mouth to defend himself, but I don't give a shit. "Save it for whoever cares." I march to my room, ready to grill Jesse until she gives in and spills all the details. Maybe she will even help me sneak inside Lavender's room. That girl has a soft heart compared to all these creeps.

I take two more steps before my yelp reverberates through the walls when Rush spins me around and then dips, throwing me over his shoulder while fury sinks into every bone in my body.

Clenching my fists, I hit him hard in the back and scream, "Let me go!" I try kicking him in the chest too, but he wraps his hands so firmly around my knees I have no movement. "Let me go!" Hit. Hit. Hit. "I know the way to my room!" I'm ready to deliver another blow to his spine, hoping he has some sensitive spots there, when he takes a swift turn to the right. I freeze in surprise, my brows furrowing when he moves toward the yellow doors in the distance standing out in the darkness by how vivid the color is. I have no clue how else to describe this wing of the second floor, because windows aren't present, and everything around us almost drowns in darkness, while the paintings hanging on the walls are more horrifying than the ones downstairs.

My insides scream at me about the upcoming danger ready to swallow me whole, but I put a lid on it, because while in his presence, I cannot panic or show him my fear. This bastard feeds on it. "Where are we going?"

Instead of answering, he reaches the double doors, kicks them open, and we enter. My eyes widen at such a bare decor.

Everything around me—and by that I mean a bed and a desk with a chair—consists of shades of black. The marble

glistens under the sun coming through the balcony door... or rather lack thereof.

As if someone just ripped it away, leaving a huge open space that allows the wind to whoosh inside and send shivers down my spine.

All in all, the room just reeks of nothingness and gives me very little to work with in order to judge his character or find some weakness.

Damn him.

He strolls toward the bed, and I scrunch my eyes shut, mentally preparing myself for being thrown on it while he decides to do only God knows what, but I won't go down without a fight.

He might have caught me off guard yesterday with all his confessions and played tricks with my body, but it doesn't mean I will give in.

I will use every dirty-fighting trick in my arsenal to get away and run back to my room. No one else in this mansion will help me anyway.

However, he still continues moving, so I peek one eye open only to see him reaching the balcony opening and then stepping outside, the sun blinding me for a second.

Confused, I look around and spot a small gazebo with a round table in front of it where several crystal bottles stand.

His body tenses, and then he pushes me forward, and a yelp escapes me when he places me on the soft cushions, stepping away while I wince, hating the pain in my throat that still aches after Lavender's hold on me.

Rush grabs one of the bottles, flicks it open, pours the water into a mug, and extends his hand to me. "Drink."

A huff escapes me. "No thank you." Who knows what he put inside it?

He must read my thoughts on my face before a chuckle slips past his lips while amusement flashes in his gaze. "Darling, if I was one of those men who needed a drug to get

the woman, trust me, we wouldn't be talking right now.” Although I hate to admit it, he's right. If drugging me was on his agenda, he wouldn't even bother to give me a drink. He'd just inject it into me.

He points at my neck. “It's hot water. It will soothe the discomfort.” He sweeps his orbs over me, up and down. “You have no bruises.”

“No thanks to you.” I snatch the glass from his hand, hissing at the warmth against my palm, and bring it to my mouth. “Your sister deserves better.” I take a large sip and welcome the burning liquid bringing relief to my throat but not eliminating the sting entirely. “You truly have no morals.”

He places his hand on his chest and sighs dramatically. “Oh no. Alert the church. How can I live with such a sin on my conscience?” He leans on the thick concrete railing, the wind blowing his hair from side to side, and right now he reminds me again of a pirate who watches his possessions. “And for your information, not that it's any of your business, psychiatrists failed to help her. So I brought her here.”

“Then you haven't gone to good ones.” A name pops in my head, and despite my hate, I decide to give him a hint that he'll hopefully use. Lavender might still have a chance. “Phoenix King. She is one of the best in the world and has her own clinic. With your connections, you can afford her.” Dad does business with her husband, Zachary, so I know for a fact she is a good woman who wouldn't turn her back, even on a hopeless case.

Anything is better for Lavender than being trapped on this island and getting constant injections.

“She gets injections only when she shows violent tendencies toward people and nothing else can stop her. She ends up either harming herself or people around her.” I realize I've spoken the words out loud, since he replies to them. He waits a beat before elaborating. “And that rarely happens. Usually once a year. She leaves me no choice but to sedate her.” Although his voice stays even, I detect regret and anger

in them, as if he hates himself for being so cruel to his own sibling.

I tamp down the emotion quickly, because he deserves no understanding or pity.

My mind swirls with this information, putting all the blocks in the construction, so I fire another question. “Who inspires such a reaction?”

“Ah, darling.” He clacks his tongue. “Don’t analyze me or my past. They have no answers for you.” He holds my stare, cocking his head to the side. “The bright mind indeed is a curse, isn’t it?”

The mug pauses midway to my mouth at this, reminding me of the deepest secrets I shared with him in my letters, treating them more like my diary where I could write what my heart wished without facing any judgment.

Certainly never expected them to be used against me.

“How would you know?” I ask, and a smile curves his mouth at my jab, not that it’s done any good anyway. The psycho deems himself a genius who came up with this evil plan of his. “You can stop quoting the things I said as a child. My feelings and emotions changed within years.”

“Did they?” He picks up a pack from the table, snatches a cigarette out, and puts it in his mouth, flicking the lighter between his fingers before lighting it up. “Or you learned to hide them behind that perfect façade of yours?” He exhales smoke around us. “A princess never complains or questions her life. She dutifully allows others to control it while she sits in her ivory tower, expecting a rescue from her pathetic existence.”

My fingers curl around the mug, the desire to toss my hot drink on him so strong I barely control myself. I press my feet on the cold concrete and mentally count to ten to calm the rage awakening inside me that’s akin to a tornado ready to destroy the opponent, even if it means burning him. “It doesn’t surprise me you see it as a pathetic existence.”

His brow lifts. “It doesn’t?”



“No.” Placing the mug back on the table, I get up and for the first time notice the view of the entire island here. Truly a beast’s lair where he can observe his subjects so no one can do anything behind his back. “Villains don’t know what love is and never recognize it.” I walk to him, my chin raised high while he drills his stare into me. “So you see everything as control.” I lean closer to him while the muscle in his cheek tics. “Who is more pathetic? A woman who was raised in love, or a man who craves it but never gets it, because his deeds are so despicable no one would ever fall for him?”

My last words hang in the air between us while the birds chirp in the distance, and my heartbeat gallops wildly in my chest, awaiting his next reaction. Inwardly, I chastise myself for not keeping my mouth shut. Antagonizing him won’t do me any good, but his smirk earlier just rubbed me the wrong way.

To my astonishment, he laughs.

Laughs!

The sound rocks between us, tugging on my nerves while I fist my hands, wanting to smash them into his face, but once again, I resist the temptation that’s really starting to be unbearable. “Ah, darling. I do enjoy the fire in your veins.” He catches my chin between his fingers, and I slap them away, stepping back from him. “I wonder how else we can explore that feisty nature of yours before your father gets here.”

“You’re disgusting,” I hiss, ready to turn around when he grabs my elbow, pulling me to him until our chests bump and our faces are inches apart. “Let go of me,” I grit through my teeth, despising how electricity rushes through me at his touch, reminding me of last night. Someone should write a book about how you can hate a person, but your body still reacts to them for some reason, playing psychological tricks on your psyche.

I have no intention of listening to them or succumbing to them, so his plans are destined to fail.

I still find this whole encounter bizarre. Why did he bring me to his room?

Then again, anything he does makes little sense to me.

“Be ready in two hours.” The change of subject is so abrupt; all playfulness is gone from his tone, replaced by something wicked yet so secretive. I blink in surprise, and he elaborates. “We’re going on a little trip.”

A protest almost spills from my lips, because I don’t wish to go anywhere with this villain, but then a thought pops in my head.

They might have a phone there, or even if it’s just to show me the island, it will give me a better understanding of my surroundings, which is always a plus.

However, acting too eager would be suspicious too, so I ask, “Why?” I pull my elbow, but his hold stays relentless. “I don’t wish to go with you anywhere.” My mind though is already thinking about suitable clothes to wear and what else I can sneak in my pocket should the opportunity to run away arise.

What if he takes me to the small island nearby where Jesse’s family lives?

“I don’t care about your wishes, darling.” Rush lets me go, and I walk back several steps to be as far away as possible, creating a bigger distance between us, yet his dominating presence still fills the space. Even the wind brushing over my skin speaks of his power as if announcing to the whole world that going against him is foolish and dangerous. “We can test your theory, then.”

My brows furrow in confusion as I rub my elbow, and his gaze momentarily slides there. “What theory?”

“If the things you spoke about in your letters no longer matter to you.” He walks to the table and presses the cigarette butt into the ashtray before picking up my mug and finishing my drink.

I stay glued to my spot, wondering what exactly he means by that and what else I said in those damned letters. He shakes his head at me and says, “If you are waiting for my permission to leave, then you’re dismissed.”

“Go fuck yourself, Rush.” I gasp and cover my mouth at the words I’ve never spoken before, which only amuses him more, but before he can comment on them or throw in another stupid innuendo, I race to my room.

Shutting the door behind me and leaning on it while my heart pounds in my chest so strong the pulse drums in my ears, I push away all fear and focus on surviving and the opportunity that fate has granted me.

Who knows?

Maybe this is the last day of my captivity.

And in a few hours, this nightmare will be nothing but a horrible memory.

But the thoughts don’t sound convincing even to my own ears.

Because every villain who sets out to corrupt a princess has an ace up his sleeve.

I hope his isn’t powerful enough to twist me in his dark web even more.

*R*ush

Slapping my open palm on the rail, I lift the bottle to my mouth and take a few sips, enjoying the cold liquid sliding through me, serving as a healing balm to the fire burning inside me and adding flames to the blood in my veins.

My sister almost choked Aileen to death. The sight of her face all red and the fear that shone in her sapphire orbs, still play in my head, creating conflicted emotions in me that demand an action, but I do not know how to respond.

A means to an end, a bait, a toy that can be played with, but easily replaced should never awaken anything human in me—the desire to protect her or show her she is safe by my side.

Lavender has every right to hate her even though she is not to blame for what her father has done to us.

Why then do I feel anger toward my own flesh and blood, which tastes bitter on my tongue, and irrational fury flares over me, hating how she dared to hurt what's mine?

Mine.

A word I should never use aimed toward Aileen, because everything on this island is an illusion, even her physical reaction.

A hollow chuckle slips past my lips. What I've done to her and will do in the future will hurt her way more than what my sister just did, and somehow this knowledge only adds fuel to the fire that's my rage.

Doubt has sunk its claws in me ever since last night, dragging over my skin and exposing deep wounds covered by the pain that has become steel armor over the decades, and it whispers in my ear to let her go.

Let her go before she truly hates me or my darkness taints her, clipping her wings in a way she would never be able to fly up high in the sky again.

And ironically that's one thing I could never do.

My palm clenches in a fist, and I slam it hard on the balustrade, welcoming the pain shooting up my arm, yet it does nothing to calm the inferno in my soul.

*"Clear mind, Rush. Always keep a clear mind. Where instincts die... you die. Do you understand? The nightmares win when you do not rule your own hell. Heaven is forbidden for the likes of us."*

Little did Lachlan know his advice would be one day used against him.

Then again, people who go against him rarely survive.

I'm surprised he let me live this long with all the threats I've been spitting his way or his proteges', promising to dethrone their king who wears an invisible golden crown.

Not that he could have sought me, but he didn't really try hard enough or use all his connections; in fact... it almost looks like he allowed me to live, hoping I would change my

mind, since I haven't crossed the line in his book with all my actions before.

Because if you lose your head, Lachlan ends you, preventing you from becoming a monster who kills the innocent.

And somehow this information infuriates me even more as echoes of the old respect and affection I held toward a man who found me in the pits of despair resurface in my dark soul. They bring with them guilt for daring to go after his family.

Wow, how the mighty have fallen.

One night spent with his daughter, and I'm already regretting a lot of things.

Even the hell he subjected me and everyone in this fucking castle to.

"I've heard about the incident." George's voice pulls me out of my thoughts, and I half turn to see him behind me, leaning on the doorjamb.

"If you are here to give me a lecture, then save your breath. I'm not interested in it."

"Lecture? No, I've given up on those. You cannot ignore it though or brush it under the rug." My brow lifts as I take a sip while he continues. "Today, she almost choked her. What if tomorrow she grabs a knife and stabs her?"

A cold shiver runs down my spine, a feeling I haven't experienced in years, while a hideous picture forms in my head of Aileen lying on the floor, bleeding to death, because I failed to come in time to save her from the madness consuming my little sister.

Madness that has no cure and slowly destroys the girl she once was.

"Make sure whoever you hire next to watch over her never allows her to venture where Aileen goes. Besides," I say, shifting my attention on the horizon where the sun shines brightly on the ocean, glistening and shimmering in the

distance and inviting everyone to dip into it, “her father will be here soon. Trust me on that.”

The clock is ticking, and she has already been missing for more than twenty-four hours. I bet he called all his friends to help him rescue the princess from the villain’s clutches.

“You’re playing with fire, boy, and I hope it will not burn you.”

I barely hold back the laughter threatening to escape, because these words are so fucking ironic, especially coming from him, as he knows my past better than anyone.

A fire already burned me and everything I loved a long time ago.

And I’m still gathering the ashes floating in the air, reminding me about the day that changed my life forever, stripping me of my rightful place and instead transforming me into... nothing.

“Relax, George. Lachlan won’t touch the innocent. So you’re all safe.” Although he shouldn’t worry either way, since I will not let Lachlan win this round.

I start to sound like a broken record even in my own mind.

George sighs and then informs me, “Your uncle called.” I put the bottle back on the railing, splashing the liquid around me. “He plans to come soon.”

“No,” I reply simply, wiping my hand over my sweatpants, and then walk past him inside my room, heading to the bathroom. “No one enters the island until the revenge is done.” Lachlan will not kill my people but sure as fuck won’t spare my uncle who opened my eyes and showed me the truth the underworld king hid. “Tell him to sit his ass down.”

George follows me. “You know he loves to visit Lavender on her birthday. You guys are his only family, or so he claims.” Although my butler says all this, I never miss how distaste and something else mar his words whenever we speak about my uncle. Or how William and he avoid his company. “I cannot stop him.”

This much is true; he does make it his mission to visit the island on Lavender's birthday every year, hoping she has come back to us, only for her to scream in rage whenever he comes near.

In fact, she never needed to be sedated until today except when he showed up... as if triggering a traumatic experience.

According to the psychiatrist who looked after her in the ward where Uncle put her, in order to help her, it's because he reminds her of our dad, and that brings up all the events from the fire and afterward.

"You can warn him," I say. George opens his mouth to protest, but my raised hand shuts him up. "That's an order. Make sure he obeys it." My bare feet slap against the tile when I step into the bathroom and spin around, gripping the door. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have to get ready for a picnic."

George's eyes widen, his jaw drops, and he manages to ask a question before I shut the door in his face. "A what?"

Yes, today the villain will take the princess to see something she has been dreaming about for years.

So she will have at least one good memory from this captivity.

And I will not fucking examine why it matters to me so much when, at the end of it all, the outcome will be the same.

Her vicious hate for me after I kill her father.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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*“They say first love is the purest and most painful emotion you might experience.*

*But what do they say about first lust?*

*A lust that consumes you.*

*A lust that’s so tempting it’s impossible to resist.*

*A lust so forbidden it might cost you everything.*

*A lust that knows no boundaries.*

*A lust that’s a curse.”*

*Aileen*

*A*ileen

The clock strikes ten o’clock, the sound echoing through the space as I stare at my reflection, sweeping my gaze over the clothes I’ve picked for this journey that still stays a secret.

Jean shorts and a T-shirt along with tennis shoes so I’ll have free movement in case of an escape, but I also wrap a hoodie around my waist despite the sun shining brightly outside indicating rather hot weather.

We are in the tropics though, right? The weather might change in the blink of an eye, and I need to be prepared for any outcome.

Who knows for how long I will have to hide?



At this point, I can be sure of one thing: if or when I dare to escape his clutches and outsmart him... consequences will be severe. So running back to the mansion will not be an option for me.

My fist clenches, crunching the foil packet in my hands that I stole from the first aid kit Jesse brought earlier to tend to my throat.

Although calling it a first aid kit is an exaggeration, since it's more of a box consisting of various medication from those that cure headache to sleeping pills.

I noticed them the minute she removed the lid from the box, and my first instinct was to grab them fast, but Jesse turned her attention to me, so I had no choice but to politely chat with her about some stupid shit her fiancé did.

She didn't ask any questions about my throat or my little adventure this morning, and I didn't push her either. Whatever she'd say would be a lie anyway.

No one is willing to talk in the Rush's lair.

So when someone called her from the hallway, needing help to figure out where to get something, I took the pills and put them under the blanket.

She left shortly after so I could prepare myself, but little did she know she indeed helped me.

Opening my palm, I study the pills that're my only weapon right now.

They will easily dissolve in water, so if Rush arranges a date with sexual plans afterward, I will find a way to give it to him and run away.

Or if he has a phone on him, then that's an option too.

I'm aware I can kill him, but right now, I don't really care, considering my options are limited on this cursed island.

Slipping the pills in my front pocket, I say a prayer to God to please help me withstand anything and save myself.

I stroll to the door and then to the first floor only to pause on the last step as Rush stands in the distance, his head thrown back while his hair blows under the AC buzzing around us.

Although this time around, his muscles are covered, it does nothing to diminish his majestic presence, and I hate it so much.

Mostly because I notice it despite the disgust his name alone evokes in me.

Of course my body loves it though, since he has trained it to his touch.

“The princess is finally here.” He opens the door and motions with his hand, and I go to him, snatching a bottle of water standing on the nearby table on the way. “Shall we go on our trip?”

“You can stop using this patronizing tone with me,” I snap, stepping out, quickly slipping a pill inside it, pretending to take a large sip. It takes around an hour to dissolve, if not more. “Where are we going anyway?”

A loud neigh echoes in the air, disturbing the birds chilling in the trees. They fly up high, chirping loudly, and when I glance ahead following another neigh, a gasp escapes me at the gorgeous creature stamping her hooves on the ground, resisting the reins around her as some random man tries to keep her steady.

Rain is here.

My Rain!

“Oh my God!” I scream, darting toward her and flying over the steps, my hands wrapping around her muzzle. “Rain, girl!” She nickers, tickling my ears before breathing heavily through her nose, showing her happiness as well. “Ah!” Tears form in my eyes at seeing someone familiar, and I inhale her scent that reminds me of peace and better times where happiness and safety were my prerogatives.

The man clacks his tongue, pulling at the reins when Rain steps back a little, and I rip the leather from him, giving him a death glare. “Don’t touch her!” He looks over my shoulder, of

course he does, and Rush must indulge my order as the man nods, dropping the reins.

Rubbing my hands up and down her neck, I watch the sun brighten her color, but confusion quickly replaces the happiness along with the ever-present fear. “What are you doing here, girl?” Dread settles in me, and I turn to Rush, who strolls to another horse standing several feet away. He seems slightly bigger than Rain, and based on his behavior that tries to establish dominance right now, I assume it’s a male.

His black coat glistens as he stomps his hooves on the hard ground and throws his head back, his mane moving in waves and bringing attention to his magnificence. The animal must have cost him a fortune.

Rush pats the horse on the muzzle, who neighs at his attention, and answers my silent question. “I figured you’d like some company here, so I brought your horse.”

Oh my God.

This asshole even kidnapped my horse!

“You’re... you’re...” Words fail me at his actions, so I just shake my head.

“Should I have picked Elena or Caroline instead? It can be arranged. Just wish for it, darling.”

“I swear if you drag my friends into this, I will—”

Rush chuckles, finding the idea of me doing anything to him hilarious. “Your horse was bored holed up in Texas. Some time on a tropical island won’t hurt her.” I open my mouth, but he continues talking. “Don’t worry. She’ll return along with you. Besides...” He pats his horse one more time before moving to the middle. “Storm likes her.” As if on cue, the horse neighs as if in agreement.

“Storm?” The name slips from my lips before I can stop myself, my curiosity getting the better of me.

His green orbs settle on me, sparkling under the light that emphasizes their richness and, for a second, mesmerize me. “The storms here are something else. They turn everything

upside down, soak the ground, and the strong winds destroy everything in their wake. All while the thunder shakes the earth and sky so much the waves crash on the rocks over and over again. Nature is never more powerful here than when it's storming." He rubs the horse one more time, earning himself a nicker. "It seemed fitting to name my horse after my favorite thing."

Uneasiness rushes through me, and I take a deep breath as his words make so much sense to me, and I despise it.

My love for storms and rain urged me to name my horse after it, and what are the odds that he had similar thoughts?

Why is a man who can speak so beautifully about something that touches my soul, a villain set on killing my father?

Rush grabs the reins, and then in a fluid movement gets on his horse, snapping his fingers at me. "Come on, Aileen. Or we might miss the perfect time."

Perfect time for what?

Spotting a small bag attached to the saddle, I put the bottle in it and find sandwiches there as well.

Does he think we are going out on a picnic?

I get on Rain and grip the reins tight in my hand, wincing a little at the pain traveling from my calves to my thighs, reminding me of all the dancing I did last night.

Rush clacks his tongue, and Storm starts trotting to the gates, and to my surprise Rain follows him without waiting for a command from me.

What is this?

"Did you fall in love or something, girl?" I mutter, settling more comfortably and lightly nudging her to pick up her pace.

"Aren't you afraid to give me so much freedom?" I fire a question at Rush once we are outside, and the gates shut behind us. "I might just take off."

He sends me a grin. “Try, darling. You’ve been warned about consequences though.”

I hold back my laughter. Does he think I value my freedom less than the lives of people in the castle?

I’m not a vicious person, but I will survive no matter what.

He points at the beach. “Let’s give them some room for movement, and then I will show you something. Consider it a belated gift for your eighteenth birthday.”

“You can choke on your—” He doesn’t bother to listen, already galloping ahead, and I have no choice but to do the same, huffing in frustration.

The wind slaps my face, and familiar excitement builds in my stomach, breaking goose bumps on my skin as Rain gets in her rhythm, enjoying the outdoors while I finally have control over something in the last twenty-four hours.

Rain has always been associated with freedom, and thankfully she can give me reprieve even on this cursed island.

Once her hooves step on the sand, she races forward, going so fast I tighten my thighs around her while she pushes her head forward, neighing and leaving imprints on the sand. “Faster!” I call, and she listens, speeding up. Closing my eyes, I can pretend I’m back in Texas aiming to break one more record while my friends wait for me at the end of the journey.

The heavy stomping next to me alerts me to my reality in which my captor races right along with me, his horse moving so rapidly he manages to even confuse Rain, who just huffs, doing her best to catch up to him, but he leaves us in a spray of sand.

Show off.

My mare though, just like me, doesn’t like to lose, and by how she picks up her pace, I know she is about to use all her strength just to prove something to these two, and I cannot allow it.

If we are to escape from them, she will need to be strong and not exhausted.

Gripping my reins tighter, I swing us to the side, which results in Rain veering into the ocean, splashing water all around us and into my face.

She neighs in displeasure although cools off a little bit, enough to get the attention of Storm, who gallops to us and even nibbles on Rain when he gets closer, which only angers my mare.

She huffs and avoids his touch, ready to stroll past him, and Storm just watches her in confusion before trailing after her. “Your horse seems obsessed with mine,” I say, breaking the silence around, and Rush laughs. “What’s so funny about it?”

“They’d make pretty foals.”

“Over my dead body.” His brows lift, and I decide to change the subject so he won’t say more shit that annoys me. “Is this your surprise? The beach?” I ask, hoping it’s not, since I cannot hide or run out in the open. “I’ve seen a few of those in my lifetime you know, so as gifts go, this is not original or great.”

Maybe my criticism speaks to the delusion in his head, and he’d want to impress me more to win my affection.

Anything is better than the beach!

The sun beams brightly above us, burning my hair and my skin, while Rush replies, swinging Storm’s head in a different direction, so I urge Rain to follow them. “Your surprise is in the forest.”

Putting my hand on my forehead, I scrunch my eyes, noticing green bushes in the distance from where colorful birds fly up high, cruising around it in flocks.

Forest.

A perfect hiding place from the villain.

“Is it the one we passed by on the way here?” Looking around at the enormous piece of land opening up to my view, I gather it has more unexpected places than one might think. In

fact, most of it must stay uninhabited, since he has a castle behind us, and that's about it.

Isn't it dangerous going into the forest where animals might catch you and eat you?

"The island has only one forest." With this, Storm races ahead, moving at full speed, and Rain does too, swaying me backwards as she gallops after the male.

Five minutes and the horses stop in front of heavy bushes blocking our way. Rush drops to the ground, the leaves crunching under his leather boots. "Good boy," he murmurs to his horse who nuzzles into his neck a little, which earns him a chuckle, and then his owner steps closer to Rain, extending his splayed palm to her.

She doesn't react until it touches her muzzle, and he gently runs his hand over her while addressing me. "Get down, Aileen."

Fisting the reins harder, I fire back, "Why?"

"We'll walk the rest of the way. It's too dangerous for them to enter." He waits a beat and elaborates, "Some plants are poisonous and might get on their skin. Plus, there are insects. I prefer not to risk their health."

Internally screaming and cursing him, I stay calm outwardly, turning to the side, ready to jump down, when his strong arms grip my hips, easily placing me on the ground, our chests brushing against each other while his masculine scent disturbs my senses.

His rigid muscles dig into my curves, and my body instantly remembers yesterday when—

No!

My body and basic instincts designed to save me in the most horrible situations don't control me right now.

Stepping back, I bump into Rain and then spin around to pet her some more and clear my throat. "Isn't it bad for them to stand in all this heat?"

"Who says they will?"

That's all the warning I get as he orders Storm, "Stable." And to my astonishment the horse neighs, nudges Rain, then trots back to the beach, and my mare follows.

"What are you doing? They are going to get lost and die in this heat!" I shout, darting after them, but his arms wrap around my waist. He picks me up as he walks to the bushes, the leaves brushing my legs. "Put me down!"

He does as I demand but still hugs me tight. My breathing speeds up, my mind swirling with all the possibilities Rain might face.

One more worry added to the never-ending list on this island!

He whispers in my ear, his breath tickling my skin while his fingers unlock around me slowly. "Trust the animals and this land. My horse knows what to do, and Rain will follow his lead. Like it or not, among the two of them, he is the alpha."

Freeing myself from his hold, I spin around and poke his chest hard and grit my teeth. "I swear, Rush, if anything happens to my horse and she dies here, I will kill you myself in the most agonizing way. Trust me on that!"

"Ah, the princess will issue an execution order?"

"The princess will perform the execution herself."

Oh my God, someone shut me up, because all my threats here are so pointless and silly.

Rush taps on my nose and winks at me. "I love my horse and like yours. So don't worry. What I like doesn't die or suffer on this island." He leans closer to me, his lips a breath away from mine. "Keep that in mind, darling." With this, he adjusts the backpack I'd seen earlier on Rain, on his shoulders—when did he take it?—and takes out a knife from his leather sheath. "Follow me closely and do not try to run. The heat is insane at this hour, and quite frankly I'm not in the mood to chase you around the forest." He starts cutting through the thick bushes, making room for us, and when we push through the enormous leaves, I'm already wondering what awaits me there.



Only to gasp in awe when nature comes alive around me. We've stepped into a different dimension where everything is colorful and gorgeous, because the painter who created this masterpiece is God himself.

Birds in all the rainbow colors sing loudly from up high in the trees as they stare at us, cocking their heads to the side and flapping their wings. Hidden in the shadows created by the trees, the emerald-green grass shimmers.

Flowers are everywhere, haunting in their beauty, but I know better than to touch them.

Just like with people, their looks can be very deceiving.

"It's... gorgeous," I say, while my mind calculates which leaves might be used to gather dew from or which trees to hide under when I escape Rush at the end of this journey.

There should be fruits somewhere as well, enough to provide a little nourishment until my father gets here.

Rush's phone peeks from the bag, so I need to find an opportunity to steal it and make a call that my father can trace.

Then I can wait, but I will handle it.

"My mother used to call it heaven on earth."

I freeze inside at this information; he's never spoken about his mother before, but that's not what shocks me.

It's the lack of emotion on the word, his detached tone.

That speaks either about his utter indifference toward a parent, which isn't surprising considering he is a psychopath...

Or...

It speaks about the unbearable pain locked deep in his heart.

"A fitting description," I say. He doesn't elaborate further. We prowl through the forest, staying on the narrow path that must have been carved for him. I voice a question. "It belonged to your family for generations, right?"

“Yes. My great-great-great-great-grandfather was a pirate roaming the ocean until he found this island and settled on it along with his wife. Or so the legend says.”

“More like claimed it without permission,” I mumble under my breath. “So this land is your legacy?” I’m not sure what the laws and procedures are in order to own a secluded place like this, but it must cost a lot and require reams of paperwork. Why would my father—or the police—not find him in all this time based on that information alone? “A perfect place to hide your deeds.”

Rush looks at me. With the man bun and the jeans along with the shirt stretching over his form, he reminds me of a pirate himself who conquered this land once upon a time. “It used to be my legacy. Until a certain monster burned it to the ground.”

The condition of the second floor, and the mansion, flash in my head, aligning the blocks in my head. The words are out before I can stop them. “By monster you mean my father?”

“The one and only king of the underworld and his loyal knights.” I yelp when something falls toward us from a tree, but Rush catches it in time: a whole snake! He throws it onto the grass and continues our journey. Any minute now, I’ll believe I’m starring in an adventure movie. “Have you ever wondered how your uncle Arson got his name?”

Now he is dragging my uncles into it too?

“Yes. His parents must have given it to him.” His question does scratch old memories. In the past, whenever I got curious about all their names and tattoos, everyone always brushed me off.

He barks a laugh, flipping the knife through his fingers, and it reflects the sun and casts more shadows on the grass. “Why is that funny?”

“The idea of you being so clueless about the people you call family is hilarious and kind of pathetic.” He hisses through his teeth. “So many disappointments laying ahead of you.”

Here come the ever-present innuendos.

“My father and our family have nothing to do with whatever happened to yours.” Somehow though, the more I say these words, the less I believe them.

Not that my family or Dad harmed his, but that they don't mingle in any dark stuff.

Maybe because through the years, there have been weird signs that I ignored, but in light of this kidnapping, I am becoming suspicious.

Like them all having hushed conversations that ended whenever their families entered.

Dad's obsessiveness over safety and having security all the time.

And the deadly and dark aura around them.

Could my father be the sort of man who hunts people like Rush and hands them to the cops?

A vigilante of sorts?

They have this special, unofficial program for all these teenagers with haunted eyes who appear in and out through the years, and in special houses, they learn to be well educated and to exist in society. They never stay longer than necessary and then stay away from us and our lives forever.

Unless my father summons them all, which almost never happens.

I just thought my parents helped these less fortunate kids, but could these teenagers be victims who had no other place to go?

This theory would explain a lot of things.

Villains and their childhoods.

Maybe Rush's father was someone bad, and that's why he is set on revenge?

“What about your parents?” His back tenses, and he stumbles a little at the question but then picks up his pace,

walking so fast I have to run after him to keep up. “Where are they?”

“Dead.” His dry reply makes me blink in surprise, and coldness rushes through my veins, sinking into every bone while the compassionate side of me weeps.

No matter how old you are, you always feel the absence of a parent, and that kind of hurt never truly goes away.

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“It’s been almost twenty-seven years. So thank you but no need to shed tears for me.”

Twenty-seven years?

He was nine then.

Squashing the pity and empathy, I spit, “No one is shedding tears for you.”

“Good. Stay hydrated, darling. Besides—” He glances over his shoulder, giving me his perfect profile. “—they wouldn’t sway me into saving your father’s life. An eye for an eye.”

What in the hell happened on this island twenty-seven years ago that resulted in the disasters with these two siblings hating my family?

I open my mouth, ready to demand answers but snap it shut, glaring at his back when he orders, “Save your speeches and listen.”

Listen to what?

And the noise registers in my ears, akin to water splashing in the sink, while the fresh ocean scent tickles my nose, luring me farther into the forest.

“What is this?”

We reach more thick bushes; this time, the sun slips through the cracks as the noise becomes louder.

Rush stops moving. I bump into his back and sway, fisting his shirt for balance. “That’s your gift, darling.”

“Stop calling me— Oh my God,” I whisper when he pulls at the bush, opening up the view, and my eyes widen at what greets me there.

All I can do is just stare at the beauty surrounding me while Rush grabs my hand and tugs me forward, taking us into this hidden... paradise.

No other description fits.

Emerald grass with flowers peeking through leads to the glorious sight straight from the painting Rush once gifted me and I tore apart only to glue back together, as the sight spoke to my soul on a level I never understood.

Waterfall.

The wet rocks shimmer in the sunlight as the water cascades down in full force from the cliff. The crashing sound creates a unique space where everything else fades away.

Butterflies float in the air, adding to the vivid picture all around me, and I wish I had a camera to capture all these exquisite shots.

“Do you like the surprise?” Rush’s voice pulls me from my shock, and I let go of his hand. “Once upon a time, a little girl told me that just the painting of this brings her peace. Does reality live up to your expectation?” His hot breath fans my cheek as he leans closer, our mouths a breath away from each other, and the tingles dance along my skin while my heart drums wildly, sending awareness through me. “Or did my drawing exaggerate its beauty?”

We hold each other’s stare for a second before I turn away, exhaling heavily, hating the emotions he awakens in me. “I guess you have a talent.” A beat and I add, “I’ve never seen anything more beautiful than this.”

Although the word *beautiful* often becomes a part of my vocabulary to describe the island’s nature.

“You mean besides killing people?”

My palms clench, but I’m happy he brought it up, so I have a constant reminder of why I should hate him. “Did you

give up painting along with your humanity?”

“No, I still indulge in it from time to time. We villains have hobbies too.”

“Fairy tales fail to mention that.” My sarcastic jab is met with yet more laughter, so I walk to the waterfall, slipping off my shoes, ready to dip my toes and distract him. The villain needs to be appreciated for his deed in order to loosen his guard and give me an opportunity to escape. “No wonder your ancestors stayed here.” My feet connect with the cold liquid, some rocks stabbing into my skin, and I adore how crystal-clear everything around me is. “One might wonder how such a paradise turned someone into a monster.” I lower down a bit, scooping some water in my hands and letting it slip through my fingers, longing to go under the waterfall and hide from Rush’s prying gaze, because this whole interaction confuses me to no end.

Why bring me here?

Or is this part of the wooing again?

“Why did you bring me here?” I step farther in the water, thinking about ways to make him drink from the bottle.

“So you’ll have a good memory to remember me by.”

His reply takes me by surprise. “Does it matter what I think?”

Rush takes out a blanket from the bag and spreads it open, settling it on the grass. “Do you want to hear my fairy tale, darling?” He laces his fingers in his dark locks. “Might be too dark for your liking.” He sits on the blanket, placing his splayed palm behind him. “But it will feed your natural curiosity.”

My curiosity has nothing to do with it. Understanding him is key though, because I prefer to prevent disaster.

And one might get whiplash from all his mood changes.

“I think, after this kidnapping, nothing is too dark.” I get out of the water, glancing longingly one last time, and brush my feet over the grass before joining him on the blanket. “Tell

me.” I cross my legs but eye my bag lying next to me, the bottle peeking through the opening.

He tilts his head back, his lids dropping while he enjoys the breeze flowing over him. “Once upon a time, far, far away, there was a prince who lived in his kingdom.” I pick up the bottle, open it up, and pretend to drink, watching him, but he pays me no attention, his whole focus on the story. “It was ruled by a powerful king. He adored his queen and his children, surrounding them with love and safety. People loved him, and his empire thrived under his touch. His friends wanted to be like him, while his enemies craved to destroy him.”

Yeah, all this sounds a lot like distorted reality, so I half listen to all this nonsense.

A person who grew up in such a loving household almost never ends up being a monster.

The pill dissolved on the ride here. Now, I just need to give it to him and wait for the meds to kick in. He should be out within an hour, and I can run away with that phone. “What happened to the king?”

“He trusted someone he shouldn’t, and his entire family paid the price.” My brows furrow at this, and his orbs drill into me, their intensity so strong I barely resist scooting back. “The land became a cursed place, soaked in despair and agony.”

“Again... I’m so sorry for your loss.”

If something happened to my family though, my uncles and aunts would have stepped in to help Levi and me.

Where is the rest of his family, and why did they allow him to become a serial killer?

“Are you?” he asks, sitting up straight. His thigh brushes against my knees, rushing electricity through my system. I choose to ignore it, because physical responses to him are unavoidable.

Doesn’t mean I want anything to do with him though. “My loss urges me to lift the curse on this land. And only the blood of the man responsible for it will do.”

The air hitches in my throat, and I clench my fists, my nails sinking in my palms while the words get trapped between my lips.

Water.

I need to give him the water so he can fall asleep and shut the fuck up. Then he will stop scaring me so much.

And remember to act my part of Beauty, who stayed respectful to Beast despite rejecting him time and time again. “My father is responsible for the downfall of yours.” This at least sounds somewhat believable. Maybe Dad ruined his father’s empire, and this man turned psycho and destroyed his own island?

Nothing else makes sense! Otherwise, it sounds as if my dad is this monster who has enough power to kill someone.

I hold his gaze, playing with the bottle in my hands, and his eyes momentarily land on it. “And to answer your question, yes. I still feel sorry for you.” Something unreadable crosses his face, so I continue, hoping to play my cards right. “Villains are the product of certain environments and choices. I have no right to judge what made you who you are.” A surge of energy passes between us, and I swallow hard, licking my dry lips, and speak the words that are truly in my heart, even though they fail to help right now. “However, what you do after you get out from whatever hell you lived in is entirely on you. Because right now, you have a choice, and you choose violence.” I turn around to look at the waterfall again, but strong fingers on my chin freeze me as the man gently shifts my focus back on him.

Rush studies me for a few seconds, his thumb brushing over my lips and breaking goose bumps on my flesh. My heart beats wildly against my ribs, but I cannot stop myself from staring at him, for the first time noticing a scar on his chin mostly covered by the stubble.

As if someone pressed a burning knife to him and purposely caused him pain. My fingers itch to run over the damaged skin, something inside me craving to soothe the



sting. Would the villain's heart then crave something more than violence?

Experiencing any tender emotions toward him though is a sin. Because how can I feel anything but hate toward a man who intends to kill my father?

A man who awakens conflicted desires in me, bordering on deadly and maddening?

He speaks up, the rumble of his deep voice dancing over my skin. "Life doesn't always give you a choice, princess. Some souls are cursed by their existence alone." He leans closer, our noses touching, and my eyes close, expecting a kiss, ready to accept it if it means acting the role.

Although that's one big lie too.

Maybe this is me experiencing the bad-boy-appeal phase, who always ends up hated by your parents. According to Elena, everyone goes through this stage at some point.

This man though could never be called a boy.

His hot breath fans my cheek, his scent penetrating my nostrils, and his masculine energy surrounds us, wrapping me in its web tightly, yet nothing happens.

Instead, he snatches the bottle out of my grip, and I hear the lid twist. I open my eyes in time to see him take a greedy pull from the bottle, his Adam's apple bobbing while he drinks the water.

Or rather.

My weapon.

He finishes the whole thing to my relief and throws it on the blanket, telling me, "There are two more bottles in the bag, and food. Are you hungry?"

"No."

He gets up and extends his hand to me. "Let's go."

"Where?"

I would prefer to stay here and wait for him to go numb rather than have him plummet somewhere on the rocks with the ocean taking his body away.

Not to mention his phone is here, and I'd like to have quick access to it.

Since he stays silent, I accept his help. He pulls me up before tugging me back to the waterfall. "When I was a little kid, I found this place by accident."

"The waterfall?" I clarify in confusion, still surprised he didn't use his chance to kiss me for all the innuendos he has made.

Does he intend to follow the fairy tale on this one... expecting another kiss only when I fall in love with him?

And this disappoints me too, for my body and his lust aimed at me are my only source of distraction.

Or so goes another lie I feed myself.

"Yeah. My father forbade us to wander so far on the island. It wasn't safe, at least according to him."

Us? Isn't Lavender younger than him by seven years. So who is us?

For all the revenge he plans against my dad, his voice stays unbelievably cold when he talks about his. In fact, it's so icy cold it sends a chill down my spine. "My free spirit couldn't be contained for long though. I guess I wasn't meant to be a prince anyway." He winks at me, and I yelp when he drags us farther into the water, up to my thighs, pushing us toward the waterfall, where the water crashes hard over the huge rocks.

"I don't want to go there," I hiss and panic a little when the water reaches dangerously close to my shorts, threatening to soak them. "Look at these rocks!"

"Come on, princess. Live a little."

He moves forward, and I slip on the rock underneath me and sway backward, catching his shirt firmly in one hand while he balances me in his hold. Huffing in frustration, I spit,

“If you continue to bulldoze toward God knows where, I won’t have a life to live!”

Rush clacks his tongue. “Do not worry, darling. I won’t let you fall.” And my yelp reverberates through the space when he picks me up, swinging my legs to the side, and my arms wrap around his neck, holding tightly to him.

“Please put me down,” I say without much heat, since he moves to the huge rocks where the water current is so strong I wonder how he walks so easily through it. The slapping sounds become so loud they create a buzzing in my ears. I shout, “Where are we going?”

“To a place that became my salvation once upon a time,” he replies, his legs making noisy splashes as he continues on his journey. My eyes widen when I notice several huge rocks.

If Rush loses consciousness right now, he might fall and hit his head so hard it will....

No.

I cannot.

I cannot allow my compassion to win over this fight and feel sorry for him, even if my insides loathe me right now for doing this to a man who’s shown me so much kindness.

Stockholm syndrome will not rule my actions.

My father’s life depends on it.

A smile curves my lips when I see golden fish swimming around us, most likely tickling Rush’s feet, and his earlier words register in my brain. “A hidden place?”

“In a way. No one could ever find me here.”

Why would a boy living in a castle need such a secluded and dangerous—for a child—place to be alone in?

I shift my attention to his features, his strong jaw ticking while his green orbs glisten under the bright sunlight. His black hair billows back a little, a few strands slipping free from the man bun.

Passionate and dangerous with a sprinkle of forbidden and desirable.

I could pretend I'm a damsel in distress who got kidnapped by a handsome pirate, and he brought me to his island to have his way with me like in all those romance novels. Except it's not a fantasy, but a hideous reality, and romanticizing this villain will bring me no good.

Naïve.

For the first time, I agree with everyone who has bestowed this word on me. Because a wiser and older woman would never have such thoughts toward a man twice her age and her father's enemy.

*And a murderer—let's not forget about that.*

I blink in surprise at the water cascading down the cliff just inches away from us while Rush has no intention of stopping. "What are you doing?" I ask once again, my nails digging into his neck, and he hisses through his teeth. "Is your plan to drown us?"

He chuckles once again—apparently everything I say is damn hilarious to this man—and he pushes quickly through the water so fast it barely touches me. A gasp slips past my lips when we end up in a huge cave.

"Oh my," I whisper, and it instantly echoes off the stones surrounding us as the ocean smell floats on the air, making me study the environment around me that is straight out of all the adventures stories I've ever read.

Just enough light streams in for me to see the rocks, sand, and spider webs as well as old papers scattered around the perimeter, yellowish with faded ink.

A wooden box lies open several feet away, as if crooking a finger to walk farther into the cave where there is nothing but darkness, so only God knows where it ends.

Rush puts me gently on my feet, and I feel the hard ground underneath them. Small rocks press on my heels and toes, yet I pay no attention.

Instead, I trail my fingers over the walls where certain words are carved with a knife it seems, huge yet barely visible while red splashes stain the place next to them, indicating that someone was bleeding while leaving this forever imprinted on the cave wall.

FRIDAY.

JULY.

FOOD.

LAVENDER.

NINE YEARS.

TEN YEARS.

ELEVEN YEARS.

NAME.

NAME.

WHAT IS MY NAME?

RUSH. RUSH. RUSH.

I swallow past the bile in my throat, horrible thoughts playing in my mind creating a rather grim picture from these words, and Rush speaks up, breaking the stretched silence. “Welcome to my second home, Aileen. Do you feel like you belong?” My heart pangs painfully in my chest at the sarcasm lacing his tone and his mocking laughter. Whatever he experienced behind this waterfall must have turned him into a monster.

Belong.

I once wrote a letter to him where I wondered if this waterfall would bring me peace.

I finally have my answers.

It brings me heartache and makes the princess’s heart ache for a villain who at some point couldn’t even remember his name, if these carvings are anything to judge by.

His kindness no longer astonishes me though, because he brought me here with the purpose to once again show me how

he would never give up his revenge. What a fool I was and always will be, living in my glass-cage reality, surrounded by something he was clearly denied his whole life.

Love.

“Forgive me for the mess. I haven’t been here myself for over two decades.” He stands behind me, enveloping me in heat, but I still glue my gaze on the carvings, refusing to look at him and let myself feel anything but determination. “Ah, the memories.” He picks up one of the papers, slaps it over his thigh, and then flips it in my direction. It has an image of a brown tree. “Drew it with my own blood. Not bad, right?” He grabs another object from the ground.

A pocketknife that’s seen better days, since rust blankets most of it.

“Why did you live here?” This question escapes me almost in resignation, because all I do is ask a question on this island where no one gives me answers.

Rubbing the carvings one last time that speak about agony a little boy couldn’t voice in any other way, I go to the wooden box, noticing how dirt covers most of the navy-blue blanket and several pieces of silverware along with a cup. Leaning closer, I touch the exquisite wood that could easily be displayed in museums, because it must be dated back to the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century.

Maybe his ancestor was indeed a pirate who brought all these riches here.

“My father’s kingdom burned to the ground, so as a prince whose head was wanted on a silver platter, I had to learn to survive in exile.”

Everything inside me goes still at the answer, the different puzzle pieces coming together in my mind, at least partially creating a picture of what might have happened here all those years ago.

Someone must have hated his family very much, since they hadn’t spared even the kids, who suffered the most in this case. As tragic as their parents’ death was, they weren’t the

ones who suffered with scars and painful memories, turning one into a madwoman and the other into a psycho.

“And you hid here alone for two years?”

He rests his shoulder against the wall, crossing his arms and legs, studying my reaction while I step back from the box when a spider crawls over it.

Since he still stays silent, I elaborate, “It must have been hard. They could have easily found you.”

This earns me a laugh, hollow and sinister in its nature, once again reminding me that the villain is back and intends to go for the kill.

“These people were strangers who decided to conquer what didn’t belong to them. They didn’t know shit about this island. Me, on the other hand. . . .” His voice trails off, and I groan inwardly, already expecting further elaboration that will birth anger within me, because I do not believe it. “Certain people from New York. Guess who, darling.”

I want to slap away the smug expression on his face and scream at him that my family would never have done something so hideous, but right now is not about my feelings.

It’s about his.

“You’re alive.” I state the obvious fact and come closer to him, noting the pulse beating on his neck, which only emphasizes the deep scar marring his skin. “It means they failed.”

A muscle twitches in his cheek as something flashes in his eyes. “I’m a villain, princess. They succeeded.”

We stare at one another for what seems like forever, so many thoughts dancing in my head, and my soul crushes at the realization that he might have been different had he grown up with love and affection.

Maybe he’d be a prince.

A prince worthy of the princess’s love.

I feel invisible ropes of regret wrapping around my throat, making me struggle to breathe, and gulping for breath, I pass him and get outside, not caring how the water soaks my clothes, wanting to get away from him as fast as possible.

Because in this moment, by sharing tidbits of his past, he almost seems human and speaks to the part of me that wishes to take all his pain away.

My compassionate nature cannot help wanting to help him and in this fix his soul, although just the idea is laughable.

If there is one thing all women should learn, it's the idea that they cannot fix any man.

Love doesn't always cure all, not when we have impossible choices on our hands.

"Aileen!" he calls after me, but I refuse to listen, prowling toward the shore and crying out when I fall, the water splashing all around me, but I quickly get up.

I'm not sure who I'm trying to outrun, myself or the villain chasing after me right now.

"Aileen!"

The voice comes closer, and then a strong hand grips my elbow, spinning me around until my chest bumps into his muscled one, and a gasp slips past my lips when he fists my hair, tilting my head back. Our gazes clash while fury vibrates through him. "You do not run away from me. Not here," he growls, tightening his hold on me, and goose bumps break on my skin, familiar desire swirling all over me and reminding me how powerless I am against it.

Despite my family. Despite my degree. Despite any rational thoughts and morals, my body still craves him and becomes a weapon he can use time and time again, because he knows it welcomes him.

Staring at him right now, the sun beaming above us and showcasing his male beauty in all its glory, presenting him as a true pirate who owns this land, I make a decision.



If my body is a weapon, then I will use it in order to free myself from this madness consuming my every thought and breath, turning me into a person I no longer recognize.

A weapon that will be Rush's downfall.

Although my heart breaks into tiny little pieces, I palm his head and pull him down for the first time ever, initiating our kiss as the light breeze washes over us. Birds chirp soundly in the sky, mostly muted by the waterfall behind us.

In this paradise, I will give up my innocence for the greater good.

And won't hate myself too much for enjoying it or developing feelings for a man who is forbidden and dangerous.

Rush freezes, his whole body tensing, and then he presses his thumb on my chin, opening me wide for his assault as his tongue swipes inside, and we lock in a deep, hungry kiss that knows no bounds.

The owning and possessive quality of it communicates to me that he doesn't just kiss me, no. With each swipe, he stakes a claim so no one has doubts who has absolute power over it or evokes such strong emotions in me. He won't tolerate me belonging to anyone else.

The villain considers me his, and whoever dares to take me away better prepare for war, as he will never, ever willingly give me up.

The scorching heat travels through me, making me sway toward him, and his grip on me tightens as I give him better access to me, meeting him stroke for stroke.

Prickling sensations envelop me whole, and he swallows my moan when I feel the thick bulge against me, my core dampening just at the thought of finally experiencing it inside me. I snatch my throbbing mouth away, gulping for much-needed air when he lifts me up, my legs automatically wrapping around him as water falls behind us.

He starts moving toward the shore, each bounce against his cock sending hot flashes through me as it digs into my clit, and

he pulls at my hair, making me look him in the eyes. “What do you want, princess?” I arch my neck when he bites on my lower lip, tugging on it and then swiping his tongue to lick over the sting, and the pain just adds to the blissful waves rocking all over me. “Voice your desires now.” He scrapes his teeth over my chin, and then his mouth drifts lower to the underside of my chin as he trails his lips to my neck, sucking on the flesh hard, as if the marks he left behind weren’t enough.

I gasp when he slaps my ass cheek and the electricity zips straight to my core, making me clench my thighs around him.

“Answer me.”

My body sets aflame at the husky, demanding tone that pushes me further toward the lustful abyss, and without thinking much, as nothing exists when he is close, I circle his neck and lean closer to his ear, whispering, “Rush.” He steps onto the grass and stops, awaiting my reply, and groans when I lick over his pulse. “Take my virginity.”

The wicked words are out before I can stop them, and for a moment, the world stills around me while they hang between us in the air, only our heavy breathing breaking the silence while my heart gallops inside my chest, anticipating his reply.

For a moment in time, I wish to be his and for him to be my first, even if this memory and encounter will haunt me until the day I die.

“I will,” he finally says, and a shiver rushes down my spine at how possessive this promise sounds. He kneels on the grass, laying me on the blanket. “Because it was always mine for the taking, wasn’t it, princess?” he asks and slams his lips on mine without awaiting a reply to a question that seems so wrong.

And yet holds so much truth in it.

We lick at each other’s mouths, connecting in a sensual duet, while his hands splay on either side of me, caging me in and creating a protective cocoon around me charged with desire and need so strong I can feel it sinking in my veins.

Spreading my legs, I welcome him between them, rocking my pelvis against the thick bulge, seeking a friction that can provide me relief to the burning fire spreading through me and demanding my complete capitulation to the temptation hovering above me.

Eve finally tasted the forbidden fruit, and if I'm going to die a sinner, then I want to taste it all.

Especially how this man takes a woman when he considers her his.

My nails cut into his nape, imprinting his skin for everyone to see, and especially other women, so they won't use their charms on him or try to get his attention, for this man belongs to me. We share a moan when he lies on top of me, my peaked nipples covered by my shirt rubbing against him.

Madness, utter madness, and yet I claw at his shoulders, grinning against his mouth at the hiss escaping him and knowing my nail marks will mar his already scarred skin.

And I know he will wear them proudly.

He separates us as we share a breath, and a sinister smile curves his full lips when he sits up and tugs at his T-shirt, removing the offending clothes keeping me away from him. I drink in his male beauty, the carved muscles, tattoos, tan skin glistening in the sun, and even the scars.

Everything inside me wishes to kiss them all and soothe the pain inflicted by horrible people, so the echoes of the hurt still existing within him will go away, blanketed by the pleasure I give him.

I place my splayed palm on one of them, right in the middle of his chest, and my fingers rub over the puckered flesh, tracing every dip, and I raise up, giving it a gently kiss as he jerks in my arms.

"My sweet, sweet girl," he murmurs and then pushes me away a little, gripping my T-shirt and taking it off. He throws it away and then unclasps my bra, and my cheeks heat up as sudden shyness overtakes me. "Don't be shy, Aileen." He

pushes me farther back until I'm lying flat on the blanket once again. "You're mine. And every part of you is beautiful."

Tremors rush through me at his voice and how his green eyes flash in wonder and need as his gaze roams over me, when he unzips my shorts and drags them down over my legs right along with my panties, leaving me naked.

And yet I've never felt more beautiful in my life.

"God, fucking look at you," he growls, falling down on me and cupping my breasts, weighing them and pinching them hard, making me moan as my hands fist his hair. He squeezes one of them, brushing the nipple with his thumb before licking over the tip and then drawing it in hard. Thousands of sensations traveling through me spread pleasure in every nerve of my body.

"Rush." I hike my leg over him, trapping him in my hold as he lavishes my flesh with attention, succumbing to the desire swallowing me whole accompanied by the electric volts prickling all over me.

My need for him grows, and he turns his head to the side, repeating the action with my other breast, and thrusts his hips forward. A hiss escapes me at the contact, and my legs spread even wider to accommodate him, the rough texture of his jeans bring with them pain and pleasure yet do little to satisfy the hunger clawing at me from the inside out.

He bites on my flesh one last time before his mouth trails lower to my stomach, scraping his teeth over the taut skin and dipping his tongue in my belly bottom, tickling me a little. I place my hands on the blanket, fisting it between my fingers while he shifts even lower, his hot breathing skating over my most sensitive part that's dripping for him.

"Ah, look at this pretty pussy eager for a lick." He makes more room for himself as he shoulders my thighs apart, rubs his cheeks over them, and breathes me in. "My princess is in need, isn't she?" He slides one hand underneath me, raising my center to him, while with the other fingers he opens me up, my hips jerking at the touch. "What do you want, Aileen?"

Without hesitation, I answer, “Your tongue.”

“Good girl,” he praises me, and somehow that only ignites the burning flames within me. I moan when he rubs his lips over my core, the soft touch almost making me come undone under him, but it’s still little substitute for what I really crave. “Prepare, princess. Your man is about to eat.” That’s all the warning I get before he puts his whole mouth on me, his tongue sinking into me, brushing between my walls, and roaming inside me.

Crying out, I arch my back and place my foot on his shoulder, opening wider for him, and he groans, the vibration causing me to hold my breath as the spiral of maddening need consumes me whole.

He licks my lower lips one by one, then slides upward, capturing my clit between his lips and flicking at it before pressing it hard, while his finger enters me for the first time, stabbing it deep and stretching me around the digit all while he lavishes my clit with attention.

“Rush,” I say, begging for this torture to end and yet not wanting him to go away, this pleasure spreading through, wrapping ropes around me and pulling me toward a cliff, urging me to jump, for complete bliss awaits me.

His tongue replaces the finger again, licking deep at me, and my pussy clenches around him as I start to grind on him, no longer caring about anything else.

Just the pleasure this man is capable of giving me. My fingers thread in his hair, pulling him closer. “Rush.” My broken voice though does little to sway him from his path as he sneaks two fingers this time, pushing deeper and deeper, burning me from such an invasion, only for me to moan when he strums his tongue over my clit before he licks my lips, biting on them, the triple sensations almost sending me flying.

Almost, because before I can succumb to its lurking and tempting calls, he snatches his mouth away and rises, his chin and lips soaked from my wetness, and my pussy spasms, already missing his invasion.

“Rush,” I say, staring at him as he lowers his zipper and his cock springs free, my eyes widening at the thick and long organ with pulsing veins, precum leaking from the tip.

I lick my lips, wanting to scoop it up and taste it, and he groans before chuckling as he fists his length, gliding his hand up and down. “Not right now, princess.” I whimper at the denial, my hands pulling at the blanket. He snatches a foil packet from his pants and rips the condom out, putting it on with a smooth move. “I promise you will be so well acquainted with my dick you won’t know how to live without it. And this pretty mouth—” He leans forward, swiping his thumb over my lips. “—will be pleasing me on a daily basis.”

Lust rocks over me at the picture he paints in my head, and more wetness coats my thighs while the anticipation and need become unbearable, chanting one name only.

*Rush.*

The tip of his cock glides against my opening, up and down, and I hiss at the contact, opening wider for him. He captures my mouth once again, giving me a hard kiss right as he enters me with one forceful thrust, breaking through my virginity, and my gasp gets trapped inside his throat while he continues to kiss me.

The horrible sting aches, and I push at his shoulders, not wanting him anywhere near me and despising the cock currently bringing me so much discomfort.

And if this is sex?

I don’t want it.

Rush though stays unmovable and stabs his tongue even deeper, kissing me so hard while I’m getting used to his pulsing length stretching the walls of my core.

Tearing my mouth free, I whisper, “It hurts.” I expose my neck to him as he sucks on it, adding tremors to my system. “I don’t like it.”

His chuckle rumbles between us. “Just for a second, princess.”

His amusement hardly amuses me. “How would you know? Had a lot of virgins?” Somehow, the idea that he was someone else’s first sends me into a jealous spiral, wanting to claw his face.

“No, darling. Just you.” With this, he rocks a little bit inside me, back and forth, as if tasting my reaction, and I gasp when the sting isn’t gone but something akin to pleasure shows up again, mixing with the pain. “You’re very special, princess.” He pulls his hips back, so slowly I feel him brushing against my skin, and then thrusts hard into me once again, moving us on the blanket. “And mine. Fucking mine for the taking.” He drives into me hard again, but this time an odd thrill rushes through my veins, and he catches my gasp with his mouth, kissing me once again.

While starting to move in and out, driving deeper and deeper into me, he mimics the lovemaking with his tongue, roaming inside me all while filling me with bliss and a sensual haze that consumes me. It pushes me closer and closer to the sweet oblivion calling my name with each thrust.

We are connected in the most primal way as he continues to make love to me, the cocoon around us growing bigger and bigger, threatening to burst at any second.

I welcome his every stroke and thrust, the harsh length stabbing into me, and my legs wrap tighter around him as I hold on to him, answering his kiss as we fight for dominance, and of course he wins.

Gradually, the speed increases, his thrusts becoming more erratic, deeper, and I gulp for oxygen while he slams into me, the rough texture of the blanket scraping my skin.

I don’t care though, not as long as he continues to do what he’s doing.

The passion imprisoning us to each other is the only important thing to either of us.

His finger travels between us, and he pinches my clit while slamming even harder into me, shaking me, and pushing and

pushing me until everything inside me shudders, bringing the most pleasure I've ever known.

I lie back, watching in fascination at how the veins in his neck go taut as he jerks inside me, one, two, three times before he stills, throwing his head back and groaning as he finds his own release.

Sliding my hands upward, I bring him to me and lock us in a hug, loving the feel of his muscles and for a second never wanting to let him go.

But then crushing reality comes back.

And I do what I have to do.



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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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*“Good and evil have no color gray in them.*

*Or do they?”*

*Aileen*

*R*ush

She breathes heavily underneath me, her soft curves wrapped around me while she tightens her legs, keeping us glued to each other as her hand runs up and down my spine before falling besides us.

Her scent teases my nostrils, the possessive instinct inside me urging me to hide her away from the outside world and to leave more marks on her skin to announce to everyone that she belongs to me.

And anyone daring to say otherwise has nothing but death awaiting him.

Because a princess submitted to the villain, giving him her virginity. And fuck, no matter how depraved or fucked up it is... she became mine, and the blood on my dick serves as proof of that.

Aileen makes no move to slide away or demand I free her from my hold, but I feel her detachment right away, already hating herself for allowing me to touch her.

Rolling onto my back, I take her with me, and she ends up lying on my chest, her head tucked under my chin while her dark locks blanket us both. The soothing sounds of the waterfall in the distance almost creates a bubble around us,

preserving us in this moment where the past, present, and future do not exist.

In this moment, I finally understand why in all those fucked up fairy tales that the princes arrived before the villain could do shit to all the princesses.

For what fucking villain would ever allow anyone to take away the princess from him after he indulged in her delicate body and tasted her in his mouth?

A sharp headache settles on me, and I scrunch my eyes, fighting the sudden exhaustion in every bone in my body, begging for me to drift off to sleep.

Sleep always has been a luxury for me in this world. The boy I once was depended only on his instincts, so I could never allow my mind to shut off.

Did my innocent princess manage to cure even that?

My fingers dig into her bare skin, earning me her throaty gasp while I will myself to stay awake, as we have to go back to the castle.

The leaves on the trees rustle under the harsh wind above us, while the water has intensified its flow. Its energy booms with an urgent alertness, causing the birds to fly off to hide.

I've lived in the wild alone, so I recognize the signs of an upcoming tropical storm, and you do not survive one in the dark.

It will become dark fast. The clouds will start gathering around us, pouring endless quantities of rain for hours... or days.

Besides...

A storm would give *him* an opportunity to strike, and I cannot allow it.

A long time ago, we established the rules of the game, and we do not wander onto each other's part of the island.

Just one more thing added to the never-ending list of sins of Lachlan Scott. If he hadn't happened in our life, everything

would have been different.

Then she moves slightly on me, her hair tickling my chin, and an emotion I do not understand slides through my veins.

It confuses me in its nature. It's as if it almost commands me to soothe any distress she experiences and cherish her in the ways she's never expected.

But she is a means to an end, right?

A princess I stole to catch a king and give her back to her dark kingdom once I execute my vengeance.

Except I no longer wish to do so.

Can't a villain just once keep the princess to himself and draw her into his corruption and darkness so she'll stay chained to him for eternity?

Just once, would it be so bad to be a selfish creature, not thinking about anyone else, and covet something that's so forbidden?

In my life that has been nothing but a nightmare with endless betrayal from those who were supposed to love and protect me the most... would it be bad to trust and choose her?

My one and only obsession.

But trusting her and keeping her entails never executing my revenge on her father.

Although arguably, her choosing to stay in my clutches would hurt him way more than any physical torture I could inflict on him.

She exhales heavily in my ear, her lips grazing my skin, and my heart that has been a stone melts under it, craving to know just once what it's like to be on the receiving end of the emotion everyone speaks so highly of.

Love and the devotion that comes with it.

She might hate me, but her body accepts me, because I trained it to do so. She will suffer with me, but does the villain care about that?

However, I do know that if Lachlan dies by my hand, her well-trained body will be lost to me forever, and she'll try to kill me herself.

*“No, no. Please don't. Not in front of the boys. Please.”*

The hysterical voice screams in my mind, never letting me rest or forget, and the terror is still as fresh as it was all those years ago. It blankets the newfound desire and squashes it hard.

Because showing mercy is one privilege I could never afford.

Wetness coats my chest, signaling her tears, and I'm about to lean back to study her features when a sharp pain radiates through my system, sending signals over my entire body. Dizziness consumes me, begging my eyelids to drop.

Only my sheer strength lets me keep them open enough to see Aileen sit up on top of me, beautiful in her nakedness and how she holds on to something tight.

A knife she stabbed into my side.

I'm too stunned at her action to react, and she twists it even more, adding to the previous pain, and this time doing more damage to my wound than she originally had.

“What have you done, princess?” I ask her as she wipes away a tear sliding down her cheek.

She scoots back, then jumps up before I can grab her and darts in different directions, quickly gathering her clothes and putting them on while I roll onto my stomach, breathing through the pain.

“Aileen.” I call her name, but she ignores me, lacing her tennis shoes and then adjusting the backpack I brought on her shoulders, all while she avoids looking at me. “Aileen,” I utter, a chore as my body fights with me for dominance, insisting I succumb to the oblivion calling my name, promising to give reprieve to my mind.

I've never been this exhausted, almost as if she drugged me.

The bottle flashes in my head, and despite everything, a smile shapes my mouth that turns into a groan when another wave of pain hits me.

Brave, very brave.

Too bad her bravery might cost us all.

“Aileen,” I call again, digging my fingers into the ground while trying to stand, only to fall back on my stomach, which moves the knife even more.

By the heat underneath me, I know the blood has already soaked my chest.

Falling asleep while injured in the forest would really up the scale in my enemy’s favor, since it gives the universe a bigger chance to off me.

Right now, though, I do not give a fuck about my health or how my heart burns from her betrayal, making just the idea of wanting to give up revenge for her laughable.

Her goodness and acceptance were a plan designed to kill me and never actually something she would have welcomed deep down.

Despite all this though, fear consumes me, sinking into every bone urging me to stop her before she makes the fatal mistake of running away from me when the sky slowly darkens above us.

I’m a man who survived in hell and came back from it.

She is a sheltered girl who has no idea what or who lurks in the night on this island.

No one gets to harm what’s mine and live.

No one.

Aileen belongs to me, and I intend to keep her after all this ends, although I will no longer be nice about it.

And if *he* harms her... I will have no choice but to end him, and I cannot allow this option either.

So mustering up all the strength I possess, I fist my hands and rise up on my knees, gritting my teeth hard while calling her name again. “Aileen, come back.” I exhale heavily and add, her image spinning around me, “Come back here.”

She halts her movements, standing several feet away, while the first gust of harsh wind slaps us both, billowing her hair back.

Yes, my compassionate girl wouldn't be able to leave me here alone. She might be a deceiving creature after all, just like her fucking father, but darkness still hasn't claimed her heart.

Instead of spinning around and obeying my command, she speaks up loud enough for my hazy mind to hear. “I told you. I will never be your willing captive.” With this, she races to the bushes, disappearing from view while I fall on my side, too exhausted and weak to fight against my natural instincts.

Two thoughts remain in my brain as familiar darkness wraps its clutches around me so tight I wonder if I'll see the real world again, as the pain pulses in my veins.

One.

The villain finally corrupted a princess, since she used his methods in order to free herself, dipping her toes in the evilness that should have never touched her.

Two.

I beg God if he exists for her to run far, far away and hide long enough for me to find her first.

Because if *he* finds her first, I will lose my sanity once and for all.

*A*ileen

Thunder echoes in the sky. I look up and notice the gathering clouds cloaking everything around me in darkness. Lightning flashes brightly as raindrops rapidly fall, sending panic through my system.

Still running ahead, farther in the forest, my feet pound hard on the ground beneath them. I swing the backpack to my front, holding it protectively so the phone inside won't be damaged.

A barking sound echoes in the distance, and I speed up, moving in the opposite direction. To face Rush or his goons after what I've just done is impossible.

My heart squeezes tightly in my chest, hitting me with remorse and pain all at once as I remember the look on his face.

My utter betrayal after what just happened between us.

"I had no choice," I repeat to myself, reminding myself that people do a lot of bad stuff while in captivity in order to free themselves and that my actions should be excused.

Except after willingly sleeping with him and receiving pleasure from him I never knew existed, while my heart whispered illicit promises and wishes in my ear, begging me to give him a chance and maybe see this whole situation from his perspective... I do not think I have an excuse.

And maybe that's why I found the courage to use that knife to cut off at the root the growing emotions and obsession before they bloom in my soul to the point I won't be able to control them.

Besides, how could it even enter my mind, knowing what he plans to do to my father?

My beloved father, who gave me everything in this life, just for me to fall for a man who intends to kill him.

More thunder shakes the sky, louder and more powerful than the previous. The violent wind sways the trees from side to side, and no living creature is in sight.

Even the animal kingdom prefers to stay hidden during this weather that suspiciously looks like a tropical storm.

I wander farther in the forest. My brows furrow at the sight of weird lines on the ground, serving as warning signs it

seems. I step over them, racing ahead while searching for a place to sit down and make the call.

I've been on the run for the last twenty minutes. In his condition, he won't be able to find me anyway, and before he gets any help, he might...

Oh.

I stop abruptly, stumbling a little and hitting the tree with my side while breathing heavily as worry envelops me, hating my weakness all together.

What if Rush dies?

"No!" I order myself and then spot a space in the distance consisting of a rock overhang that might offer some protection from the rapidly growing rain and is perfect to rest.

Jogging toward it, I duck under and drop the bag on the ground. Taking out the hoodie I grabbed on the way, I put it on and shiver a little from another gust of wind before snatching the phone out as well.

And then groan in frustration when there is no signal.

"Damn it!" I exclaim, getting up again and then extending the phone hoping to see little lines but nothing comes up.

Holding my hand in the air, covering the phone from possible water damage, I step out and look around, then walk farther and farther from my so-called safe space. Lightning flashes in the sky, followed by thunder, which makes me jump in place.

I should really get back under the rock instead of being under the trees where lightning could strike me at any moment.

I walk several steps again where it becomes darker and darker, paying attention to my tracks so I can go back.

My eyes drink in the hollowness of the land around me, so different from the rich nature before, and I frown, finding it odd.

Almost like someone wiped it out.



Although maybe the storm just shows it in the right light.

Suddenly, the signal icon appears, and I whisper, “Yes,” as excitement fills every cell of my body, and my heart beats wildly in my chest. I type my father’s number.

He picks up on the second ring. “Hello.”

At the sound of his deep, rich voice something breaks inside me. “Dad,” I say, tears forming in my eyes as sobs escape me, and once again I’m a little girl who runs to her father to fix whatever problem she had.

“Aileen,” he shouts, and I can just imagine him clenching the phone harsher. Several hushed voices can be heard in the distance. “Trace this fucking phone, Arson.” All my uncles must have come to support him. But shouldn’t the police trace it though? He must have called them as well, right? “Are you all right?” More sobs slip past my lips, and he curses under his breath, and I hear the anguish in his tone when he elaborates. “Darling, whatever he did to you was not your fault, and I promise you, he will pay for it.” Such a deadly note rings in my ear that I blink, shocked at the danger emanating from him, even through the phone.

“Dad,” I repeat and continue through the tears, wanting to soothe some of his pain. “I’m okay. I just... I did stuff, and he and I...” I cannot believe the words escaping my mouth as more sobs shake me, accompanied by thunder.

The last thing my father needs to hear is me losing my virginity to an enemy.

“Listen to me, Aileen. Whatever you did was necessary for survival. Focus on that and kill off any other emotion.” The command snaps me out of my shock, and I straighten up a bit, rubbing away my tears while nodding.

“Did you earn that phone call, darling? What did that bastard offer you?” Something crashes on the other end of the line; my father must have broken something in his anger.

“No. I stole his phone.” Silence greets my statement. “We’re on an island, Dad. His family owns it. And he wanted to kill you! So please do not come here alone, and bring the

police with you. He's crazy." Once again silence, so I push back the phone to check the connection is still there. All while ignoring how my heart fights with my mind over how I speak about Rush, and that part of me hates so much what I'm doing right now.

That's inevitable though, right?

No matter what I do, one of them will be in danger, so I have to choose sides. "Dad?"

"How did you steal it?"

That's what he cares about of all things? "I ran away."

His reaction is not what I expect. "You what?" I wince at the loud shout. He barks, "Faster, Arson, faster. She ran away from him."

"She did what?"

Is this Uncle Callum?

"The phone has protection installed. I need a few more minutes."

"We don't have minutes."

And more furious typing echoes in my ear while I try to make sense of all this.

Since when is Uncle Arson some kind of tech wizard who can break into systems?

And why are they freaking out over me running away?

Does Rush turn into a beast when his blood is spilled or what? At this point, nothing will surprise me, even some paranormal shit.

"Dad."

"I'm here. Find a place to hide and stay there, do you understand? Do not wander around that island, and keep your head low. We will be there as soon as possible. I promise you, Aileen. He will regret he was born."

Who is this man on the line with me?

He sure as hell is not my father, because how could he stay so calm and still order people around while his daughter is kidnapped?

Shouldn't he be restless or shouting thanks that I'm alive?

The heavy pouring intensifies, soaking me and sending tremors through me, but I still remove the hoodie to protect the phone in my hand while looking behind and not seeing the path to my rock.

Darkness settles all over, and the only light is from the occasional lightning.

Fear sinks its claws tight, leaving invisible marks on my skin, while my heart urges me to run back to Rush to save him from nature's tantrum.

*"These people were strangers who decided to conquer what didn't belong to them."*

Talking to my father and uncles right now feels like meeting strangers too, as none of them act as I expected.

"Why does he hate you, Dad? He said some stuff, but I... I just... it's not true, right?" The question is out before I can stop it, and I hold my breath, hoping to finally hear the answer that would settle my mind and heart once and for all.

Where Rush is just a hideous creature who kidnapped me for no reason and cast the blame where it didn't belong. So I can live in peace even if I killed him.

"Everything I did, *we did*, has an explanation. Rush has no idea what really happened. And who he trusted. When you hear our side of the story—"

I freeze, the outside world disappearing while the buzzing in my head becomes so strong I think I might collapse, and my heart gallops in my chest, bleeding at his admission.

Their side of the story?

Lavender's and Rush's scars, the fire, the hate, the cave... the little boy who lived alone because his parents were killed.

All that information plays in front of my eyes with me defending my father time and time again.

And now he admits it was all true?

“Your side of the story, Dad?” I whisper. Cold that has nothing to do with the weather chills my blood while panic surrounds me, threatening my sanity. “He calls himself a villain, Dad. Because you made him one.” A beat, and I ask, “Did you?”

“There is a time and place for this question. The answer is way more complex than—”

“It’s a yes or no question, Dad!” I yell and then cover my mouth, because I’ve never spoken to my dad in such a tone. They raised me better than that, and shame fills me.

He exhales and bangs a fist on the table by sound of it. “Aileen, darling. Trust me when I say that Rush’s anger is misplaced.”

“Yes or no?” I repeat with steel lacing my every word, and familiar stubbornness pushes through the shame. “Are you a murderer, Dad?” More tears emerge, and I hate it, because this cannot happen to me.

Not to my family.

Because it means all my life was one giant lie where everyone hid behind beautiful masks while, in truth, they were monsters who destroyed souls.

“Found her! Oh fuck, no,” Uncle Arson mutters, but neither of us pays attention to that as it’s one of those moments.

The countless moments through my eighteen years on earth of questioning some of my dad’s decisions and actions and always having an explanation for them.

But the disaster on this island... what can possibly explain it?

My father stays silent, but Uncle Arson’s reaction makes me frown.

If they have been on this island before... why would they even bother searching for it, try to trace the call after I told them?

Unless they were never here?

The weather chooses this moment to pull all my focus on it as the wind becomes so violent it pushes me back. The rain is pouring so heavily I can't see anything in front of me.

Blindly, I sway to the side, but it becomes even worse, and the phone drops on the ground. "No!" I shout, reaching for it, only to sway backward when a blast hits me again.

Falling on my knees, a cry still in my throat, I crawl toward it, but already the rain has destroyed it, the device soaked so much the display isn't even flashing.

Since the wind continues to be ruthless and relentless, I crawl forward, doing my best to dig my nails into the ground and hold on to it as the water fills my shoes, making them heavier on my feet. "God, help me," I mutter, just moving with no sense of direction, hoping to find shelter somewhere as the lightning flashes across the sky again, brightening up everything around me, and my stomach drops since I don't recognize it.

I must have wandered to some other part of the island when I was running away.

"What do I do, what do I do?" I chant over and over again, sliding on the slippery ground; however, I keep crawling as standing presents way more danger.

All my father's training hasn't prepared me for this.

After what seems like forever, I sit on my haunches, too exhausted to move a single muscle while wiping at my face to try to see my surroundings.

And that's when the scenery around me changes, and I hear an engine roaring, so loud it hurts my ears. Bright headlights blind me.

Putting my hand on my forehead, I scrunch my eyes while the wind continues to batter me. I gasp when several large cars

pull up, creating a circle around me and trapping me between them.

All while the cars' lights are aimed at my face!

What's going on?

A door of the car in the middle, right in front of me, opens. At first I see an umbrella before leather shoes come into view, stepping on the ground and sending water flying around him.

And just my luck, the rain decides to loosen its intensity. He strolls easily to me as he hooks his hand in his pants, the platinum watch reflecting the headlights and screaming about his wealth.

As if the army isn't enough.

The umbrella blocks his face, but I do see a tall man dressed in a three-piece suit.

Everything about him screams power and then more power; however, there is also something else.

Wickedness that sends an alarm all over me, prickling my skin, and my gut yells at me to run away, but I can't.

"Aileen Scott." For the first time since coming to this island, my full name is not accompanied by a sneer, and my brows furrow at his husky voice that seems familiar.

Too familiar.

"I have to say I didn't expect to see you so soon, but what do you know. Fate still finds ways to surprise me."

"Who are you?" I ask, coughing on the rainwater and wiping it away from my face. "How do you know me?" And then I shake my head. "Rush reached out to you. You work for him. Head of security?" Relief washes over me at the thought of him being okay and awake, instead of bleeding to death.

At least my father knows my location and will come to save me. Although at this point, I'm no longer sure who the villain is among the two.

A sinister chuckle echoes, settling a sense of doom on me as he clacks his tongue. "The idea of me working for Rush is

hilarious.” He rubs his chin, stopping just inches away from me. “Or being in his company at all.”

I still at this information, my hands clenching so he won't see the tremor his admission inspired while chaos erupts inside my head.

Why is there a man on this island who hates the owner yet manages to have all these people working for him and thrive in power here?

Slowly he tilts his umbrella back as my gaze slides up, up, up to clash with crystal-clear green eyes as his face comes into perfect view, and I'm so shocked I can't breathe or utter a single word.

Because the man staring back at me has Rush's face... but I know it's not him.

A twin.

How many siblings does this man have, and why do they keep popping up all over the place?

His hair falls to his shoulder in straight lines, unaffected by the wind, bringing attention to his tan skin and high cheekbones, while a permanent smirk resides on his clean-shaven face.

The V of his shirt is unbuttoned, and not a single scar is in sight, showing the major difference between the two.

While Rush might have been a pirate in a previous life and accepted the role of the villain in this one... the man watching me right now could be called by only one name in any fairy tale.

Prince.

A smile curves his full lips when he studies me. “Ah, the pictures failed to give you justice.” He extends his hand, leaning forward, and his knuckles graze my cheek, breaking disgusting goose bumps in their wake. “True beauty. No wonder my twin stole you the minute you became legal.” I jerk my head to the side, avoiding his touch, and then cry out when he fists my hair, tugging on it painfully. “Careful,

Aileen. Compared to my twin, I have no patience or goodness left in me.”

I swallow hard at his warning that adds to fear pulling me deeper and deeper into the abyss, pushing hysterics to the surface.

He considers my Rush good?

“Let go of me,” I hiss through my teeth, darting to the side, but his hold on me stays firm, and he straightens, dragging me right along with him while I wince and try to unclench his fingers. His grip on my hair is like needles being pushed into my scalp. “Let go!”

He angles my head back until our mouths are inches apart, and I feel his hot breath on my skin. His other hand rises, the fingers sliding over my pulse before wrapping tight for a second, cutting off my oxygen. “Rush might be a villain, darling, but I’m much, much worse.” He loosens his fingers, and I gulp for breath while he continues. “And since you are on my part of the island, you now have to play by my rules.” His focus shifts to my collarbone, and anger crosses his face, hidden swiftly by indifference. “By the hickey marring your skin, he already sampled some of your innocence.” His sadistic laughter rocks between us. “I guess it’s my turn now.” He winks. “Welcome to my dark part of the island, Aileen. Where children pay for the sins of their fathers and wicked desires rule. It will be fun.” Another laugh, the sound hitting me much harder than any blow could. “At least for me.”

“Rush will find me,” I say with conviction, remembering the warmth of his arms and the obsessive tendencies he displayed toward me. Right in this moment, I can’t believe I was stupid enough to run away from him.

He might be my captor, but on this island, he’s my only protection and security. He won’t give up his obsession no matter what.

He cocks his head to the side. “That might be so. But he can’t cross the border. If he does, he’ll have to kill me.” Everything inside me freezes as my mind refuses to believe him. My villain will move heaven and earth to get me, even if



afterwards he'll punish me for hurting him. "Do you really think he'll put you above his own twin?"

No, no, no.

This cannot happen.

I ran away from Rush straight into the monster's arms.

Whose madness shines brightly in his gaze, and even his twin seems like a hero compared to him.

"Rush and my father will save me."

He hisses through his teeth at my threat, and then a sob escapes me when he pulls at my hair, moving us toward his car and paying no attention to how much pain he inflicts on me. "Maybe. But not before I break you, sweetheart, and seeing my brother hurt will be a glorious sight indeed."

All this time I thought I'd woken up in a nightmare.

I was wrong.

For right in this moment, a devil indeed has created a trap to sacrifice me.

And my only hope for survival?

Is the villain who I stabbed and left for dead.

**Click here for [The Heart of a Villain](#), conclusion to Beauty and the Villain duet.**

**Once upon a time a monster and an angel fell in love...  
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## LACHLAN'S PROTÉGÉ EXCERPT

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### Valencia

My eyes snap open. I look straight ahead and take a deep breath, then step into a pose. I'm illuminated by the moonlight shining brightly into the room from the glass-like ceiling above me. This silent space is filled with a mysterious atmosphere, creating an almost-perfect setting for a romantic evening.

The familiar first notes of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* echo through the room, and I assume the position, rising on my toes and swaying from side to side while slowly moving to the corner. I hop on my toes again, owning the stage as if nothing matters, blocking the outside world away.

To each dramatic note, I perform with my hands and facial expressions, giving away all the hopelessness of the swan, the beautiful young woman Odette, who's been captured by the dark sorcerer and can't be reunited with her lover.

The pain and heartache fuel her desire to fight against him, so she feeds on them even if they threaten to destroy her.

I swirl and swirl, rising up and down, up and down, and then a cry of pain slips past my lips as my feet land on glass. I halt my movements, barely breathing from the glass digging into my skin.

I glance down to see my white pointe shoes slowly coating in blood from all the scattered glass covering the floor; if one is careful enough to avoid it, he is a master.

My feet agonizingly throb. I can barely stand on them. My rasping breaths help me to concentrate on something other than the pain.

I've been doing nothing but dancing for the last hour. I've never performed for this long without a break in my life.

The sound of the lighter flicking fills the space as he lights up his cigarette, takes a deep breath, and exhales it in my direction while resting comfortably on the chair right in front of me. "Ah, Valencia. You know the rules. Never stop." His deep, dangerous voice raises goose bumps on my skin, reminding me once again that the monster never sleeps.

He just feeds on my misery.

He tugs on the rope wrapped tightly around my waist and I stumble forward. I can't help the groan of pain when he directs me onto the big pile of glass. The air freezes in my lungs while I pray for the hurt to pass so I can continue.

But I can't.

Instead, fear unlike anything before spreads through me. Injuries like this may ruin a dancer's career forever, and if I don't have dancing, I won't have anything in this life.

But he knows that.

Another tug. This time, I can't keep up. I land on my knees, biting my lip hard so I won't groan when the bare skin on my palms and knees land on the glass.

"Get up," he orders, but I don't.

He can dish any punishment he wants. God knows the cuts and throbbing skin are an indication of that. But I won't let him taint the one thing in my life that I love the most.

He's already taken everything else; he doesn't get to have ballet too.

He exhales heavily at my disobedience and rises, straightening his perfectly ironed three-piece suit, then walks to me as his expensive Italian leather shoes make an unmistakable sound against the floor.

With each step he takes, my heartbeat speeds up faster and faster to the point of feeling it in my throat. He places the metal head of his cane under my chin and lifts it up.

I meet his stare head on. I hate everything about this man.

Or at least I hope it's hate.

“So that's your choice?” he asks as his lazy gaze roams over me, but I say nothing.

I won't give him the last part of me that matters.

Even if it seals my death tonight.

**Click [here](#) for Lachlan's Protégé.**

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# CONTACT

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