



A DARK
NEW ADULT
COLLEGE ROMANCE

Cruel
LIES

CRUEL SECRETS DUET

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
FAITH SUMMERS

CRUEL LIES

CRUEL SECRETS DUET BOOK 1

KHARDINE GRAY

FAITH SUMMERS

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IMPORTANT NOTE

Dear Reader Friend,

Thank you so much for picking my book to read.

Please note this story is a dark new adult romance which is intended for mature audiences due to the graphic content of this novel.

Please also be aware there might be content some readers might be sensitive to or find triggering.

This book is part one in the Cruel Secrets Duet. It ends with a **cliffhanger** and continues in Cruel Promises the second part of the duet.

For your enjoyment, please read this book first. If you don't, you won't be able to follow the storyline or know who the characters are.

I hope you will enjoy this book. It is the first in my Raventhorn world.

Happy reading.

Hugs and love,

Khardine (Faith)

CRUEL LIES

Cruel Secrets Duet

Book 1

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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writing as
FAITH
SUMMERS

PROLOGUE

CASPIAN

The night of my initiation

“**R**aise your right hand,” Father commands, staring at me with his deep green eyes, a mirror of my own. Sometimes, looking at him is like staring at an older version of myself.

I obey, raising my right hand, which bears the Elder Futhark rune for defense tattooed on the underside of my wrist. In accordance with the old laws, it is the only tattoo on that arm, unlike my left, which sports an array of Bratva symbols.

“Caspian Aleksander Ivanov, tonight, you become a Knight,” he announces so all the members of the council can hear.

His eyes never leave mine. He continues to give me that cold, callous, disapproving glare I’ve come to associate with him.

Right now, I couldn’t give a flying fuck how he wants to look at me because I made it this far. I’m about to become a Knight, a fully-fledged member of one of the most powerful, and deadly, secret societies in the world.

One who is owned by the Komarovski Bratva, of which the blood flows through my veins. Now that everything is about to become official, not even he can refute my achievements.

“Do you swear your life and allegiance to our cause?” he asks.

“I do,” I pledge, sounding like I’m getting married and taking my fucking vows.

“Then please take the oath.”

“Luramentum est vita nostra et mors nostra,” I say in Latin, which translates to: *The oath is our life and our death.*

When Father nods, I do too, and it feels like a silent, separate agreement between us. One where I’m agreeing to do everything he tells me, no matter what it pertains to.

Defiance is not an option.

I’m not thinking of doing anything of the sort, however. Years ago, I made it my personal mission to show him I could be just as deserving of our legacy as my brother was. Tonight, marks the start of my chance.

Nonetheless, as the fleeting thought occurs to me, I can’t help but wonder if it crossed my mind because of her.

Her—Willow Raventhorn. The one girl from my past who is forbidden to me.

In less than one day, she’ll be back in my dark world.

As Father picks up the ceremonial blade from the ornate stand next to him and raises it, I take note of his tattoos.

Of course, it’s not the first time I’m seeing them, but tonight, they seem to hold more meaning. As Pakhan, he is inked with the insignia for the Brotherhood, the runes for justice and death, and the symbols for Alpha and Omega—the beginning and the end.

My beginning and my end.

I’d be a fool to think otherwise.

The glint in his eyes suggests he knows what I’m thinking.

The vows I take tonight will reinforce the pledge of my life, but I know I’m fucking vowing to him, too.

Father slices a thin line across my palm, and when the blood seeps from the wound, I turn my hand over and allow it to flow into the fountain between us that contains one drop of blood from each of the council members, including his.

My blood blends into the water until it thins, becoming one with the others. The moment it does, a surge of triumph ripples through me along with the shadow of doom.

It's a juxtaposition I shouldn't feel, but I do because I know that even though I've proved myself, my father owns me now.

I will be his weapon to kill whomever he wants me to kill, and he will wield me in whatever way he sees fit to gain more power and control.

Death is the answer if I do anything other than obey.

I'm not scared of dying. My father killed my humanity long ago, and what he didn't kill was fractured by my past.

What I don't know is if being soulless is a blessing.

Or my curse.

THE PAST

Seven years ago

CHAPTER
ONE

CASPIAN

The night my soul died

I t was she who taught me art—my mother.

Although she's a writer, art is her passion.

She said art was a good way to manage my anger and taught me how to express what I feel on paper.

So, I draw, but what comes out of my mind is the shit nightmares are made of.

My mother died tonight, and my soul along with her.

They said it was an accident—a car accident by the lake house.

What I don't know is why she was there when she told us she'd be working at the magazine all day.

It doesn't make sense. I never knew my mother to be a liar, but I'm so distraught that all I care about is that she's gone and never coming back.

Willow must feel the same way I do.

Both her parents died, too.

Her father died in the car with my mother, but they said her mother shot herself back at the house.

It doesn't make sense.

Nothing makes sense, and I want to scream and rip my skin off until understanding comes.

I never got to tell my mother one last time how much I truly, truly loved her, or fuck, why I couldn't see past the darkness in my drawings.

I think she knew why, though. She kept asking me because she wanted me to tell her.

She wanted me to tell her my art was so dark and psychotic because I still suffered from what happened to me in Russia when I was eight.

My mind has been fucked since.

To others, I must seem disturbed for a thirteen-year-old boy.

It's because I am, and my father's bastard ways of showing me how to be strong doesn't help.

Right now, I feel soulless.

The best way to express what I feel is this drawing.



CHAPTER
TWO

WILLOW

The day I told the truth

Tears blind me as I walk across the soft grass in the meadow.

The sadness of losing my parents has weakened me so much I can barely function.

Grief weighs down on my soul, slowing my movements as if I'm walking through the marshes. My legs are shaking so much they feel like they're going to give out any second now, but still, I keep going.

It's been one week since my parents and Irina, Caspian's mother, died.

I don't know how I survived the week and how I'll get through the funeral in a few days.

I shouldn't be out, but I needed to do this. It's been long overdue, and I should be there before the funeral.

My heart is already broken. I don't know if I can stand there before everyone knowing the secrets I know and keep them from the one person I should have told.

I stop by the oak tree when I notice him approaching.

Caspian is walking over the hill. His head is dipped, so he hasn't seen me yet, but it's clear from the sag in his shoulders that the same grief I feel haunts him.

As I gaze ahead, I think of the other thing I should have told him—the truth of how I feel about him. We've been friends forever, for so long I scarcely have any memories of the time before we met.

He was the first friend I ever had. We met when my parents moved to New York from Russia. I was four, and he was five. Now I'm twelve, and he's thirteen. I'm at the age where I know what I feel is that special spark my mother used

to speak about when she told me the story of how she met my father.

At the thought of her, tears run down my cheeks.

I don't know what happened, but I know it had to be my father's fault.

My sister, Lillian, and I heard the adults talking the night we got the news and they said Mom shot herself.

They couldn't understand why she would do that, but I think I can.

Maybe that's how she felt when she discovered the truth. Caspian's mother being in this mix could only mean that's what came out.

My father was the Pakhan of the Komarovski Bratva. To others, he was a ruthless, heartless devil, but he was the love of my mother's life.

If she found out his secret, she'd know he betrayed that love. And I feel like I did, too.

Now, they're all gone, and I'm left here with this horrid feeling that's breaking my soul into a million pieces.

And I'm about to shatter my poor soul even more and hurt the boy I love.

I'm crying so much by the time he sees me that I can barely catch my breath.

He runs toward me, his handsome face contorted with worry.

I school myself and summon bravery just as he reaches me.

This is it. I have to do this. It's now or never.

"Willow, I'm here," he soothes me, taking me into his arms.

This is the first time we've seen each other since the accident.

The courage I gathered helps me to pull away before I break down.

“I’m sorry about your mom,” I say, even though I said it on the phone earlier.

I haven’t been able to get through to him all week. Everyone I spoke to told me I couldn’t speak to him, and I should try back later. I think I only had success earlier because I spoke with Zak, his older brother.

“I’m sorry about your parents, too,” he replies, but there’s a look of curiosity in his bloodshot emerald eyes I can’t place. “Willow, my father told me I couldn’t see you, but he wouldn’t say why. Has anybody said anything to you about seeing me?”

Oh God, that sounds like his father must know the truth.

My heart freezes at the same time my lungs constrict, but I push past the feeling.

“No, but I have to tell you something.”

Suddenly, his eyes widen, and it’s clear he’s desperate for answers. “What is it?”

“I need to tell you why your mother was at the lake house.”

That’s where it happened, in the lake house we use upstate for vacations. That’s where Mom killed herself and my father’s car was found over the side of the cliff on the bank of the Hudson River with him and his mother inside.

“What was she doing there?”

“She was there because of my father,” I say that in one breath, hoping it’s enough of an answer, but I know it’s not.

“What do you mean? Why did he need her there?”

“Caspian, they were having an affair.”

His skin pales, and even his normally vibrant eyes seem to dull to a pale green.

He shakes his head.

“Why are you saying that? She wouldn’t.”

“It’s true.” I bring my hands up to my cheeks as I watch his face darken with rage. “They were seeing each other.”

He presses down hard on his back teeth, and something shifts in the air between us.

“Who told you they were seeing each other? You sound like it’s been happening for a while.”

“It has,” I confess.

Caspian eyes me dangerously with that maddening darkness the kids at school fear. They know his father is as powerful as mine, but there’s something about the Ivanovs that makes you know to be afraid just from the look.

This is the first time I’ve ever felt that spine-tingling fear curling through my body. It leaves an unbearable coldness in its wake.

He takes one step back, and his eyes cloud. “Who told you they were seeing each other, Willow?” he asks again.

“I saw them,” I rasp out. “I ...caught them together, and my father begged me not to say anything.”

“When was this?”

This is the part that’s going to hurt him. “Two years ago. It happened two years ago, but I’ve seen them together several times since.”

His nostrils flare, and he balls his hands into fists. “You knew our parents were having an affair for two fucking years, and you never told me?”

My heart gallops, slamming into my chest. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know what to do.”

“You could have told me. You *should* have told me.”

“Caspian, I’m sorry.” I try to close the distance between us, but he holds up a hand.

“Get away from me. Just stay away.”

He backs away until he starts running. As he leaves, the rest of my world crumbles, and I know in my heart, I just lost

him, too.

CHAPTER
THREE

CASPIAN

The day I blamed her for my loss

I storm into the house, my skin feeling like it's on fire.

I snuck out earlier to meet Willow, but I wasn't careful coming back in. Instead of heading back inside through the secret garden, I came through the fucking front door.

My brain is scrambled from the bomb Willow just dropped on me, and I think my father already knew the truth.

Voices waft out of the living room, so I march in. There, I find Zak and my cousin Thorne standing by the mantle.

When they see me, both go still. Neither gets a word out as my father storms in from the other room.

"Where the fuck where you?" he demands.

I stare at him head on and bare my teeth. "Did you know the truth?" I demand, and he stops in his tracks.

"Answer me, boy!" He shakes his fist at me, ignoring my question.

"Did you know the truth?" I don't know who the fuck told me to challenge him, especially when I can see the answer I seek in his eyes. Maybe it's because I'm so sick of people lying to me, or maybe I'm fucking sick of him. In for a penny, in for a pound, so I keep going. "Did you know about Mom and Timofey? I know you did. That's the only reason why you'd tell me not to see Willow."

The other day, when he forbid me, I didn't understand why. Apart from leading the Komarovski together in the elite group, he and Timofey, Willow's father, were best friends. Much like their other friends, they've known each other since birth. I didn't understand why he didn't want to be there for Willow during this difficult time.

I do now.

“You think you’re a man challenging me?” He rushes forward and lands a fist in my face.

Bone cracks, and I fall on the ground, blood spurting from my nose. When Father reaches for his gun and aims it at me, Zak and Thorne both rush to my side, shielding me.

“Father, stop!” Zak cries, holding up both hands in front of him.

Enraged, Father pushes him out of the way and yanks me up from the ground, holding me by my throat.

I’m no match for him. He’s had forty-five years to build the solid muscle he’s sporting.

He curses me in Russian, calling me weak again. My God, how I hate him calling me that. How the hell does he arrive at that shit when I just stood up to him?

I’m staring him down as he’s trying to choke me. How the fuck can he see that as me being fucking weak?

“You little shit. How dare you fucking embarrass me? You’re just like your fucking mother. I loved her so much, but she decided to screw me over. You want me to confirm she was fucking my best friend? Yes, she was. So, there you go. I confirmed it.”

He throws me back onto the ground, and what I witness next in his eyes is something I’ve never seen before.

I’ve always heard stories of his love for my mother. Everyone talked about it. I witnessed it, but not like this. Sometimes, I think I hate him, but I know I don’t.

What I hate is that he doesn’t know the first thing about being a father.

He puts the gun away and looks at each of us, then allows his gaze to settle on me.

“I’ve been informed that Timofey changed his will, thereby severing a fifty-year partnership between our families in Dynamic Corp. So, not only was he seeing my wife behind my back, but he also screwed me over financially, too. Now

that you all know the whole story, I don't want any of you associating with *anyone* from that family.”

I process his words and the gravity of what he's saying. Everything he said was bad. That last part, though, was meant for me. The way his eyes blaze as he looks at me confirms it.

As close as we've been to the Raventhorns, Zak and Thorne aren't friends with Willow or Lillian.

It's only me with Willow, and my old man knows I care more for her than what I show the world.

When he walks out, I jump to my feet, ignoring the pain in my face and the blood running down my nose. I follow Father into the passage and shove his arm before he reaches the stairs.

He ignores me, but on this occasion, I'm not going to lie down like the little bitch he just made me out to be. Things still don't add up, and I want to know what he knows.

“How did you find out about them?” I shout.

That does it. He's listening now. He stops in his tracks and turns back to face me.

“I saw them a few months ago. They didn't see me. I've had them followed a few times, so I knew what was going on. It didn't take a genius to figure out why your mother was at the lake house.”

“If you knew months ago, why didn't you do anything?”

He bites down so hard on the inside of his lip he draws blood. “I have my reasons, and I'd rather keep them to myself.”

As I stare back at him, I know the answer. It's pride. Nobody messes with him, but Mom was the exception. I don't think he wanted to lose her, and a confrontation would have done just that.

“I don't have to guess who told you what was going on,” he adds.

“No, you don't.”

“How long did Willow know?”

“Two years.”

His face morphs into despair, and his eyes become so glassy I think I see tears. The sights stop my next barrage of questions. We’re all grieving, but his grief seems deeper and darker, like the desolation from my nightmares.

Without another word, he walks away, leaving me to my sordid thoughts.

Those thoughts follow me, haunting me every hour of every day.

It’s not until the day of the funeral that my mind empties as I stand before my mother’s casket in the cemetery.

I don’t have clarity. No, it’s not that at all. But my mind is riddled with so much grief and darkness that my brain is numb. I can’t feel it, and I can’t feel my heart either.

Father wanted a private funeral, so the only people here are him, Zak, Thorne, the priest, and me.

The four of us stand together while the priest gives the sermon and blessing in Russian, then it’s time to lower the casket into the ground.

“A moment, please,” Father says, stepping forward.

The priest stops talking as my father walks up to the sleek black casket and runs his finger over the top. He then rests his head on it, and I realize this was the reason he wanted the privacy. He didn’t want anyone besides us to see him like this. It makes me wonder what he classifies as weakness. Like this, he doesn’t look anything like the hateful monster I grew up with. Nothing about the tears that flow from his eyes resembles the man I know.

If you shed tears in the Bratva, that makes you a target. If you shed tears as a Knight, you’re dead.

That’s how he raised us, and I never knew what part of my future would be more dangerous—being in the Bratva or a Knight. It’s a fruitless thought because in the Komarovski, both have become synonymous with the other.

My father has shocked me so many times over the last two weeks. This reaction is another shocker.

“I forgive you, Irina,” he mutters, and I watch him closely. “I don’t care if you stopped loving me. You had to know that before we part. If you sought love from another, then that’s my fault because I didn’t give you what you needed.”

He dries the tears from his haggard face. He looks older than his years.

“YA budu lyubit’ tebya vechno. Uvidimsya na drugoy storone, Malyshka,” he says finally, which translates to: *I’ll love you forever. See you on the other side, baby girl.*

Malyshka—*baby girl* was what he called my mother because she was ten years younger than him.

It’s strange that he looks at me when he moves away from the casket, and there’s a moment when we both stare at each other. I didn’t even realize I was crying until my tears drip onto my hands.

When Father nods to the priest and the bearers approach to lower the casket, we each get to throw our roses into the grave.

As I give my mother mine, that’s when clarity comes, along with hatred.

I’m always angry because I’m usually suppressed by other emotions, but this feels like the first time in my life that I have a reason to be enraged.

Mom used to say we are all responsible for our actions, no matter how big or small. She was right.

I play the scenarios of what could have happened differently in my mind, and I see ways of how this day could have been avoided.

Mom didn’t have to die.

What she did was wrong, but she wasn’t the only one in the wrong.

The girl I used to keep locked away in my heart was wrong, too.

Willow.

No matter what her reasons, she had a hand in this day.

In my mind's eye, I see her vibrant red hair flowing in the wind as she runs through the meadow. I see her bright blue eyes as she stares back at me. I remember the day when I thought she was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen in my life and something unexpected happened to my heart.

It means nothing now. Not a Goddamn thing.

If Willow felt anything for me, even the friendship we claimed to have, she would have told me the secret. If she'd told me, I would have spoken to my mother. I would have done something. And who knows what could have happened after that? Maybe she would have stopped seeing Willow's son-of-a-bitch father.

I don't know, but what I do know is that my mother wouldn't hurt me or put me in danger. If she knew I knew the truth, she'd realize it would have been only a matter of time until my father found out. She knew he was dangerous, so I'm sure she would have stopped seeing Timofey.

In my heart, I believe this day would never have happened if I'd known the truth.

The one person who could have told me kept the secret.

That makes her dead to me, too.



CHAPTER
FOUR

WILLOW

The day he broke me

Caspian is here, just like I thought he would be.

I stop by the cattail reeds and watch him skip stones across the river.

His mother's funeral was yesterday. I wasn't surprised we weren't invited.

My parents' funeral is Saturday.

Once again, I shouldn't be here, but I can't accept this is it for us. I will myself to walk toward the boy I've been friends with all my life.

I stop paces away, and he glances over at me but doesn't say anything. I have a feeling he knew I was lurking because he doesn't look surprised to see me.

His green gaze drops from my eyes to the single white rose in my hand.

"I brought it for your mother," I begin, and he looks away.

He continues skipping stones, and even though I feel like shit, I continue willing myself to be brave.

"I don't want anything from you," he mutters over his shoulder.

"I know... but I brought it anyway." I straighten and push my shoulders back. There's more I need to say to him, but I decide right then not to talk about my parents' funeral because it's obvious he's not going. "Elaine and Adrian are going to be our guardians, so Lillian and I are leaving town on Sunday."

Elaine and Adrian are our godparents. My parents gave them the title because they couldn't have kids. I don't think anyone would have guessed that the need to look after Lillian and me would arise the way it has.

“I won’t see you in the meadow anymore, but I’ll still see you at school.” I watch the muscles tense in his back and the tick in his jaw quicken. I know him so well that I know he doesn’t want to hear any of this, but I still keep going. “They’re an hour away from Raventhorn. I guess that’s not much of a difference, but you and I have always lived so close. I just—”

He whirls around so fast I yelp. He snatches the rose from my hand and crushes it while he stares me down with eyes so dark my soul shivers with fear.

“You listen to me, Willow. You and I are not friends anymore. When you see me next, I will be your enemy.”

“How could you say that?” I stutter. “What happened wasn’t my fault.”

“I blame you for my mother’s death as much as I blame your piece-of-shit father, who couldn’t keep his dick in his pants. So, don’t you fucking dare come to me and act like we’re friends. The time for friendship is over. If you were my friend, you would have told me what was going on.”

“I promised my father—”

“Fuck you, and fuck him, too. He’s fucking dead, and the secrets you both kept didn’t just kill my mother, but you killed yours, too. Every time you see me or even *think* of me, I want you to remember that I blame you. I want you to think of all the ways what happened was your fault. You!”

Hot tears roll down my cheeks. I’m so stunned I can’t speak.

I have blamed myself; hearing him say it, however, is a million times worse.

“I’m sorry,” I mumble.

“Fuck you. I don’t want your sorrow. Now, run home, little girl,” he growls so fiercely my nerves scatter. “Run before I rip you apart.”

As those words fall from his lips, I realize I don’t know him anymore, so I run.



I RUN straight into Lillian's arms when I get home, and I break down.

She manages to get me into her room, which I'm thankful for because I don't want to have to explain what happened to Elaine. She and Adrian have been staying here with us since the accident, and both are drained.

"Talk to me, Willow," Lillian says, sitting me down on the bed. "Tell me what happened."

I drag in a long breath to clear my head and manage to tell her.

She runs a hand through her hair. It's a shade darker than mine and several inches shorter. Next to her alabaster skin, it looks like blood.

Lillian looks just like Mom and was similar to her in personality, too. And beauty. She's three years older than me and already the spitting image of her.

But I'm Dad all over, and that's why we're in this mess.

Dad had secrets, and so did I.

"Do you blame me, too?" I grate out. I thought she did when I told everyone the secret. I did so after I came clean to Caspian.

Lillian shakes her head. "I don't. We're all grieving. We do so in our own different ways. Caspian is angry and looking for someone to blame."

"He's right, though."

"No. I agree you shouldn't have kept the secret. I wish you had told me, but you loved Dad, so I understand why you kept quiet. There's no way anyone could know if you speaking up could have changed things."

Although she's right, I still feel like shit.

"I wish Dad didn't do what he did."

“Me, too. And he shouldn’t have dragged you into the shit either.” She dabs away her tears with the heel of her hand and tries to look strong but falters. “None of it makes sense, Willow. You know, what the police are saying.”

I nod. “I know. I’m trying to imagine what happened to match what they told us, but it’s weird.”

The police told Elaine and Adrian that Mom shot herself in the head. They said her prints were all over the gun. But the part that’s weird is the car accident. I imagined Mom going to the lake house because she found out about Dad and Irina. I wondered if she’d caught them together.

Did she try to kill Dad and Irina, and they escaped? The police said it was raining, and the car must have skidded off the road and went over the edge of the cliff. Dad was driving. Did he think Mom was chasing him with the gun?

Those are all possibilities no one will ever have answers to, and the messed-up thing about it is, none of those variations of what happened sound like the people we know.

So, what the fuck happened?

I bring my hands to my cheeks as more tears come.

“No more tears, Willow. We can’t keep doing this to ourselves.” Lillian shakes her head.

“I’m so broken, Lillian. And knowing Caspian blames me makes me feel like I want to die.”

“No. Please don’t say that. We have each other.” She paints a smile on her face and takes my shoulders. “We’re going to be okay. I promise. Look, I know what will cheer you up. I have something to give you. Something from Mom.”

“What is it?”

“A just-because gift. I have one, too. She was going to give them to us when we start back school.”

My heart squeezes. Mom was always doing things like that.

Lillian walks over to the dresser, opens the top drawer, and takes out two little velvet pouches.

When she returns and hands me mine, I find myself smiling. Mom loved velvet. She said it reminded her of the old world.

“Open it.”

I open the little drawstring and reach into the pouch to find a silver necklace. When I pull it out, I see the most breathtaking pendant attached to it. It’s oval shaped with the rune for love in the center.

I place my hand to my heart.

Lillian takes hers out, too. She has the rune for angel on hers.

“Let’s put them on.”

I do, and she secures hers around her neck, too.

“Let’s never take these off, or at least keep them close,” Lillian says, touching her pendant.

“Yes.”

“I’m going to take care of you, Willow. Okay?”

I nod, but what I feel is far from okay.

I keep hearing Caspian’s words, and guilt eats me alive.

CHAPTER
FIVE

WILLOW

The night I lost my sister

Yesterday was my thirteenth birthday.

My first birthday without my parents and Caspian.

Everyone rallied around to try to make the day special, but there was only so much they could do.

It's been a little over five months since my parents died, but every day hurts just as much as it did when I first found out what happened to them.

I try to at least look like the grief is easing up, but it's not.

To celebrate my birthday and the Thanksgiving break, Elaine and Adrian took Lillian and me camping at Bluff Island. Elaine and Adrian give us everything we want, and it's clear sometimes they overdo it. I know we couldn't have gone to better people, but I miss my parents.

Camping is what my parents would have done on a weekend like this, except we would have gone to the lake house. Obviously, we didn't go there, and I heard talks of selling it.

Good. It should be sold. I don't want that memory of what happened there anywhere near me.

We've been here for the last three days. Lillian and I are sharing a cabin near the river, while Adrian and Elaine's are closer to the clearing.

It's super late. So late, a deadly silence has settled over the surroundings like a blanket, yet Lillian is still out.

She met a boy on our first night here, and I saw them talking earlier. She said she was going out for a walk, but that was hours ago, so I'm guessing she's with him.

She doesn't know I know this but hooking up is how she copes. I've seen her with a few random boys at school. And she smokes, too—not just cigarettes.

Thinking of smoking makes me slide off the bed and make my way over to her duffel bag. There's a joint in the pocket and a little vile of powder I saw her sniffing one night when she didn't know I was watching.

I'm after the joint. I don't want to know what that powder shit is. Either would make our godparents flip out—especially if they caught me.

I find my intended object and a lighter, light up, and walk over to the window to open it.

It's pouring rain outside. Perfect, the breeze will help get rid of the smell.

I sit on the ledge and draw in a smoke, holding it in my lungs and savoring the feel of the numbness it gives my mind. I don't know how you're meant to feel when you smoke pot. I've only done it a few times, and each time, the pain seems less. It's only momentary, but for those moments, I'm not broken.

It's also in those moments that I allow myself to think of Caspian. He was true to his word. The next time I saw him, we were enemies. First, he didn't speak to me for two months, then, when he did, he was a bastard. It was as if we'd never known each other. His brother and Thorne continued to ignore Lillian and me, which was fine. Caspian, though, set out to hurt me every chance he got and made sure I never forgot his words that day.

My fault.

I take another draw and close my eyes.

That's when the door flies open and Lillian rushes in looking like she's been through a war. Mascara is smudged over her face, her hair is a mess, and she's crying.

I jump off the ledge and throw the joint through the window.

“What happened?” I ask.

“We don’t have time. We have to get out of here,” she blurts.

“Lillian, what the hell is going on?”

“I think we’re in danger.”

Every nerve in my body stands to attention. “Danger? Like what? If we’re in danger, we have to get Elaine and Adrian.”

“I can’t find them.” She cries harder. “Come, Willow, we have to get away from here.”

Lillian grabs my hand, and we rush out the door into the heavy rainfall.

“This way,” she urges, pulling me toward the thicket of trees that looks like a mass of shadows.

We run through the trees and keep running, our only light that of the moon.

It’s not until we get down the path that I hear the thud of footsteps in the distance behind us, but they’re getting closer.

“Shit. We have to hurry, Willow.” Lillian pulls me along hard, but the second she takes to glance at me makes her miss a step, and she trips. She falls, taking me with her.

We tumble down the ditch past branches and thick vines. When we reach the bottom and land in impenetrable mud, I’m sure my body is broken.

Lillian cries out, and I look over to her as she grabs her ankle. I rush to her side, but before she even moves, I can see the awkward angle her ankle has twisted in.

Shit.

“I think I broke my ankle,” she mumbles, lifting herself up.

“We have to go to the hospital,” I choke out.

“No, come on, we have to get out of here.”

The moment she says that, we both hear those footsteps again. And voices this time that sound like men’s. As the footfalls get louder, panic rises within me.

What the hell is happening?

“Help me.” She reaches out, and I move to her side, securing my arm around her waist. “I have a car just on the other side of those trees. That’s where we need to go.”

Easier said than done. That fall took us right off course. Now we have to climb back up to get to the trees, but we can’t go that way. That’s where the men are.

“Let’s go this way,” Lillian hisses, moving her hair out of her face.

We hobble along the path, making it across the swamp-like area, but that takes us down to where people go cliff jumping. I’m sure this is the wrong way, but all we can do is keep moving. We do so as fast as we can, but it’s not fast enough with Lillian’s ankle.

Glancing behind me, I can see a shadowy figure bounding through the trees, and my heart speeds so fast I can’t breathe.

Lillian sees him, too. When another man appears, we try to move faster.

We both start crying, and doom slaps me in the face once we reach the end of the path and realize we’re at a dead end.

The only way to escape is to go back where we came from or to jump into the river below. I don’t like the idea of jumping from all the way up here with Lillian’s injury.

“Come on, let’s turn around,” I say, looking around frantically.

When my gaze settles on Lillian in the moonlight, I see something in her eyes I don’t recognize, and it scares me more than anything.

“They haven’t seen you yet,” she states mindlessly. “They don’t know I got you. If they see you, we’re both going to die. I can distract them while you leave.”

“Leave? Are you crazy? What are you saying to me?”

Her eyes twinkle along with the shimmer of her necklace that’s just like mine. We kept those necklaces on just like we

promised.

“I promised Mom I’d always take care of you.”

“Lillian.”

“I love you, Willow.”

As the words fall from her lips, I realize what that look in her eyes meant.

But I’m too late.

With one hard push, she shoves me over the side of the cliff, and my scream is swallowed up in my throat as I fall.

I see her face, and then I don’t as I go down, down, down for at least thirty feet. I go straight into the water and down again from the force of falling from that height.

It takes me a moment before I can gather control over my body against the water to swim back up.

I break through the surface just in time to hear one long gunshot above me.

One lone gunshot and a scream—*Lillian’s scream*.

When another gunshot sounds, my soul shatters.

CHAPTER
SIX

WILLOW

The day I lost my mind

Bright lights blind me as my eyes flutter open. I screw my eyes shut from the impact, then chance opening them again.

The face of an elderly man comes into view, and he smiles. It's a kind smile, but my stomach twists because I have no idea who he is.

"There, there, you're okay," he says.

I look him over, notice the long white jacket he's wearing, and I realize he must be a doctor.

What happened to me?

My mind is fuzzy, and I feel weird.

"I..." I wince when the image of my sister forces its way into my mind.

I remember what happened, and the gunshots.

Oh God.

What happened to me after? I think I passed out from the shock.

"Please, you have to help my sister. I think she was shot."

"Steady there. They're still looking for your sister. I need you to rest now," the doctor replies.

"She was shot. I heard a gun go off twice."

He gives my hand a gentle squeeze and nods. "I'll tell the police just that. Your godparents are here. I'm just going to check your vitals before you can see them. Okay?"

"Okay."

Please God, let Lillian be okay. Please. I can't lose her, too. I can't.

I refuse to even think that she's dead. Thinking so will kill me. So, I push against that dark cloud of dread in my mind and decide to hope and pray.

The doctor leaves the room, and I think about what could have happened to Lillian. She said we were in danger.

What the hell did she find out, and who were those men?

My head aches as worry stabs through my mind. I just want Lillian to be okay.

The doctor returns with a nurse, and both tend to me. Minutes after that, Elaine and Adrian walk in, and both look as drained as they did after my parents died. Elaine is crying, and Adrian has bloodshot eyes.

"They found you in the river. Willow, you said Lillian could have been shot?" Elaine asks, pulling me in for a warm hug.

I nod. "I heard the gun go off, and she screamed." I choke back tears while her shoulders wrack with sobs and fill them in on what happened.

"Oh God," Elaine cries. "We just went for a walk."

Adrian puts an arm around her and holds my hand.

"We'll get to the bottom of this. The police are involved, but we have our own people looking for her."

That means his men from the Bratva will be helping. I feel more at ease for hearing that.

"Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me." He taps my hand. "I just want her home safe."

The door opens, and a police officer walks in.

"Hi, I'm Sheriff Tanner," he informs us in a deep southern accent. "We have no news yet. But I wondered if it would be okay to talk to Miss Raventhorn to get an idea of what happened?"

“Of course,” Elaine replies, looking back at me. I nod my agreement.

I give the officer a full recount of what happened, telling him exactly what I told Elaine and Adrian.

He takes notes and assures me he’ll do his best to find my sister.

Days later, when there’s still no sign of Lillian and I’m being called into the child and adolescent mental health department of the hospital to be questioned again, by psychiatrists this time, I know something’s not right.

Elaine came with me. She’s outside in the waiting area. We were asked if I could come in alone. That’s probably another heads-up of shit.

“Good afternoon, Miss Raventhorn. I’m Dr. Matthews. Please sit.”

I plant myself on the chair in front of him. “What’s happening?”

“I wanted to have a chat with you today about your statement,” he says in an emotionless voice.

“What do you want to know about my statement?” I throw back harshly. I can’t help it. This is bullshit. This doctor is going to be the millionth person I would have spoken to about my fucking statement. “I’ve spoken to so many people and told them the same things. My sister is in danger. That’s what you should be worried about, not my statement.”

“Calm down, Miss Raventhorn. I need to speak to you because there are inconsistencies with what you’ve told us. You said your sister could have been shot, but the evidence points to the probability that Lillian might have run away.”

My mouth drops, and I realize what the problem is. They don’t believe me.

“No, she wouldn’t have done that. She wouldn’t leave me. She promised to take care of me.”

“We have footage of her in a car that’s been reported stolen, and the police found searches on her browser for one-

way tickets to Paris and Russia.”

I shake my head. He’s blowing things out of proportion.

“We would do that sometimes and check flights. It was a game we played.”

He sighs and rests his hands down on the table.

“Willow, when we did your blood test, we found traces of marijuana in your system.”

Oh God. This is not good.

“I only took a little, and I never did it often.”

“I know you’ve gone through a lot this year with the death of your parents, and I think that it’s possible you’ve explained your sister’s disappearance with this story to help you deal with the truth.”

“No!” I blurt, jumping up so fast my chair falls over, but I don’t care. I hit the stack of documents off his desk and slam my fists down.

He stands and eyes me with caution.

“Willow, please calm down.”

“Calm down? My sister is in danger. We need to help her.”

“I appreciate you think that, but I don’t think she is. I think what’s happening is like I said.”

“You think I made that shit up, after all I’ve been through?”

“It’s possible. When the mind goes through trauma, all sorts of things can happen.”

“Fuck you. You weren’t fucking there. You don’t know what happened, but I do.” I’m at my wit’s end. Lillian is in danger, and if they think I made up what happened, that means no one is looking for her.

The door bursts open, and three hulking men come rushing in. They’re dressed in white scrubs, and one of them is holding a syringe.

“Miss Raventhorn, come with me,” the man to my left says.

My eyes dart from one to the next. What the hell is this now?

“No.” I shake my head as they move closer as a group. “Leave me alone.”

“We just want to talk,” the one with the syringe says.

I back away feeling like I just got pulled into one of those wacked-up movies where people think the main character is crazy.

Fuck. That’s what’s happening to me, and I have this feeling that if they stick me with that needle, Lillian will be lost forever.

With that reasoning, I make a move to bolt through the door.

But I don’t make it. I’m not sure who grabs me, but one of them does while I scream. They wrestle me to the floor and hold me down.

“Let me go!” I cry.

The door opens again, and Elaine rushes in frantically.

“What are you doing to her?” she shouts, trying to get to me, but one of the men stops her, holding her back, too, as I call for her.

I then feel the needle piercing my arm, and I scream louder. I find myself calling for Elaine, and as I slip out of consciousness, the last person I call for is him.

Caspian.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

WILLOW

The day I lied

My lips are chapped, probably a bloodied mess, too, from me chewing on them all night and most of the morning.

I tend to do that when my medication has worn off and I have the urge to scream and pull my hair out. My hair is short now because of that. I ripped most of it out, and the doctors cut the rest off to stop me from getting any bright ideas.

Yesterday was particularly bad.

It was my fourteenth birthday. I celebrated it in this shithole.

Elaine and Adrian came to see me, and they brought along my friends, Lucian and Eilish. It was nice, but I saw how worried everyone was.

It was hard when they left. Next to Caspian, I'm close to Lucian. I saw the way he looked at me with pity as he was leaving.

The nurse who takes me to my appointment is young and pretty. I saw her flirting with one of my doctors. The one who's a dead ringer for Henry Cavill. I don't blame her for flirting. If I weren't crazy, I might flirt, too, even though I'm miles too young for him.

She sits me down in the room I've labelled the interrogation room. I'm in here every Wednesday. That's how I mostly know what day of the week it is. Monday is when Elaine and Adrian visit. Friday is when they have that disgusting toffee pudding for supper that tastes like shit.

"You have Dr. Taylor today," the nurse says.

That's his name.

"You like him, don't you?" she bubbles in that sing-song voice I hate. She sounds like she wants to be a Disney

Princess.

“Not as much as you,” I throw back, mimicking her tone. “I don’t look at him like I want him to fuck me, but you do.”

“Excuse me?” Her cheeks flush.

“You heard me.” I will be nice to no one, and I don’t care what anyone says.

She seethes and walks out, leaving me.

Moments later, Dr. Taylor walks in. He sits down and looks over the cuts going up my arm.

I haven’t cut myself in a long time. I did last night after everyone left. What a shame; it means I’ll have to eat with my fingers again. They started allowing me plastic cutlery a few months ago.

“Why did you do that to yourself?” he asks.

“To feel something more than grief.” At least I’m honest.

Pity fills his eyes, but I can see he doesn’t know what to say to me. That’s why

he sets out those God awful images they make me look at every week. It’s the same psych evaluation images they’ve been using from the dawn of time. When they first brought me in, I played nice, but when I realized I was getting nowhere fast, I said whatever I wanted to say.

“What do you think of when you see this?” He holds up the image that looks like ink spilled all over the paper.

“A man with syphilis,” I reply with a smile, and his jaw tenses.

He holds up another and asks me the same thing.

“A woman with syphilis.”

“And this?”

“A man and a woman fucking with syphilis.”

He sets down the images and stares back at me point blank.

“Willow, I know you’re bullshitting me.”

“It’s funny you say that, so you should know I never made up what I said about my sister. You people let her die and locked me in here.” I can’t keep the agony out of my voice.

“I appreciate that you believe that, but that is not the case.”

They all repeat the same fucking line. I accidentally saw my file once and read that they’re supposed to say that to me when I talk about Lillian.

“Find another line, Doctor. That one is getting old.”

“Willow, do you ever hope to get out of here?”

It’s a good question. A damn good one. The answer is I would love to. I just don’t know what awaits me on the outside of these walls.

“Do you know who I am?” I ask. I might sound crazy asking the question, but anybody who’s anybody knows the name Raventhorn.

That name always puts the fear of God in people because of the links to the Bratva. But on top of that, they’re afraid because they know about the Knights, too, and it’s obvious they think they’ll disappear or some shit like that because they shouldn’t know about the secret society.

For me, the name Raventhorn carries so much weight because I’m the last one left. I’m heir to an unimaginable fortune and part of a legacy. Who would have thought my life would turn out like this?

“I do know.” He nods slowly.

“What sort of world will I live in where my sister is gone, my parents are dead, and the boy who was my best friend blames me for a secret I shouldn’t have kept?”

“Maybe you shouldn’t think of it like that.”

“But I do. Doctor Taylor, you have to believe me. I know what I saw that night. I’m not crazy, and I shouldn’t be here.”

He dips his head and picks up the images again with the same question of what I think. This time, I don’t answer.

I say nothing to anyone for the next few days.

Maybe that's why when the urge to scream takes me, I take advantage and scream the room down from the top of my lungs. I can't stop screaming, so they have to sedate me.



I'M ALLOWED in the garden today by myself.

I don't know what the fuck kind of medication they gave me this morning, but I feel like I'm floating away.

I sit by the koi pond, and that weird girl who's been here longer than I have comes and sits next to me.

I narrow my eyes and turn to face her. This is the first time she's come near me, and I have no idea why.

"What do you want?" I frown.

She runs her hand over her bald head and grins. She reminds me of Gollum from the *Lord of the Rings*, but I can see she was pretty once.

"I want to give you some advice."

"Why?"

"Because I've heard you talking with the docs, and you have it all wrong. I'm also sick of you because you don't have a fucking clue."

"You don't know me."

"I don't need to, to know you don't belong here. You think you can convince them you're not crazy by reasserting your statements, but that will get you another twenty years inside."

I've heard her speaking before, and she's never sounded so normal. She's usually talking shit about birds and cats.

"You sound different."

"I'm going to be real with you." She lowers her voice. "I need to stay here to keep myself safe from the people who want me dead. You don't need to be here. I heard the story,

and it sounds like your sister saved your life. How dare you disgrace whatever sacrifice she made for you by staying here? You don't know what happened to her, but I don't think this is how she wanted you to live. If I were you, I'd say whatever I have to, to get the fuck out of here. That's my advice."

Her words snap me into focus, and for the first time in forever, I feel like myself again.

She stands and nods, and I do, too.

"Thank you."

"No worries."

I watch her walk away, and I plan.

The next morning when I see the doctor, I know what to do.

"Miss Raventhorn, I thought we'd talk a little bit about the past because you were screaming for your sister the other night. I want to talk about that night Lilian disappeared. What are your thoughts on that?"

And here begin the lies.

"I want to keep my mind open to the possibility that I could have been wrong. Maybe she did leave, and it devastated me."

CHAPTER
EIGHT

WILLOW

The day I went back to school

“How are you feeling?” Elaine asks.

I place the shopping bag down on the bed and give her a smile I don't feel.

I should feel better given the fact that I made it back to civilization.

My birthday was a little over three months ago.

I can't believe I'm fifteen now. At least this year, I was released from the hospital on that morning. I didn't have to spend my birthday locked away from the world like a princess in a tower with no prince to rescue her.

Since coming home I've taken the time to adjust to normal life, hang out with my friends, and find myself. I still have weekly appointments but that will go down to once a month from next month while I'm at school.

I start back in two weeks.

Elaine just took me shopping to get some school stuff because she's going to be busy working. She's the executive director at Dynamic Corp while Adrian became the new C.E.O. after my father died.

I'm so not looking forward to going back to school, but at the same time, I'm eager to return to all things normal.

“It's nice to be back, but I'm starting to get nervous,” I confess.

She gives me a hug and cups my face. “It's normal to be nervous. You've been through a lot. But at least you're home. I'm so happy you are, and I like this, too.” She lifts a lock of my hair. I allowed it to grow back, and it's now way past my shoulders. “You look so much like your mother. I'll bet you'll

drive the boys at school crazy with that fiery hair the same way she did.”

I smile at that and think of how beautiful Mom was.

“I think the boys will be keeping away from me.” I won’t be a fool and think people didn’t know I was in mental institution, how I ended up there, or how long I stayed there.

“Be positive and strong, my dear girl. These are the first steps to getting your life back.”

My life.

It feels like it will never be the same again, and neither Elaine nor Adrian have spoken about this, but they were legally appointed guardians over me. It’s the least of my worries, and a good thing, but part of me feels trapped because it won’t be reviewed until I’m eighteen. When it is, I’ll have to go through a psych evaluation which will determine whether or not I still lack mental capacity.

It’s jarring to think I might not have my freedom by the time I’m eighteen like so many others, but at least I know I’m in good hands.

“Thank you for being there for me,” I tell her.

“Always. I’ll let you unpack.” She nods, and her bright brown eyes crinkle with a smile. “I’m sure you’re eager to look at your stuff and pick out what you want to wear tomorrow.”

“Thanks.”

She gives me a curt nod and leaves.

I look at the bags we bought and sit on the edge of the bed.

My fingers wander over the pendant on my necklace, and I think of Lillian like I always do.

I worked my ass off to return to the world of the living. That included making everyone believe I thought Lillian ran away. I lied so much even I started to believe my words.

Almost and never.

I know what happened that night, and now that I'm home, I want nothing more than to investigate to find out what happened to Lillian.

But I wouldn't know where to start. Not to mention my fear of saying the wrong thing to the wrong person. I'd find my ass right back at the institution, and all my hard work would be for nothing.

I know all I can do now is take life as it comes, but that doesn't mean I'll forget Lillian.

She was killed, and she saved me.

I'll never forget that.



AT RAVENTHORN ACADEMY, no one cares about your surname, and that's saying something considering the place was named after my forefather.

Surnames mean nothing to the glorious student body who fall part of the world's elite. *Literally.*

They're all perfect, perfect beings who came straight from the loins of powerful oligarchs, sheiks, members of the Bratva, Italian Mafia, Camorra, the Triads, and Yakuza.

Students start here from the age of twelve to eighteen. Then they go off to Raventhorn University or one of the other Ivy league universities in the alliance.

I will do the same one day in the near future. The common factor everyone shares here, is they come from families who are associated with the Knights.

Although the Knights are owned and controlled by the Komarovski, the membership and alliance also include those who are descendants of the original bloodline of Knights and those invited to work for them.

Each member or associate bears the symbols of the Knights that allows them to identify each other and rank, but only my father was inked with the crest of Raventhorn, the

Knight who started all of this in 1015 AD, just before the crusades.

My family name could have changed several times in history, but we were required to keep the Raventhorn name, trading in any Russian or Germanic names we would have had in the past. There are only certain exceptions when the name change will be allowed. Because my father had two daughters and had no other siblings with children, I'll fall under that exception when the day comes that I chose to get married.

Based in the heart of New York, Raventhorn Academy is one of ten branches across the world, but New York is the headquarters. The university which I prefer because of the location and architecture is in Boston, a stone's throw away from Harvard.

Even though Dad had businesses associated with the Bratva and Dynamic Corp, he worked at the university because he was required to as the leader.

With my father's passing, the leadership of the Komarovski and the Knights jumped to Caspian's father.

I've worried about what he might do to me. He and his son.

I haven't seen Caspian today. Yet.

I still have a few minutes left of the school day.

Apart from the anxiety of what it will be like seeing him again after two years, I'm also anxious because tomorrow is the Reaping.

That is the rite of passage every boy of sixteen years of age must go through to join the Knights. Dad used to talk about it with honor, but I think it's an archaic, barbaric practice that should be banned. Dad probably talked the way he did because he knew he wouldn't have to worry like most other parents who have sons.

The Reaping, as the name suggests, is a harvesting of the strongest. The weak are separated through death or injury that would make you beg for death.

It's crazy I've been thinking about Caspian going through the Reaping more than the gossip that has been going on around about me all damn day.

People might not care about your surname here, but being damaged goods gets their attention.

Within one hour of stepping into the building this morning, I was christened Psycho Girl. *Nice.*

Now that the day is over, I've had my fair share of my new nickname, strange questions that originated from other rumors, and the lingering stares of those looking at me like I just landed from Mars.

Thank God I had most of my classes with Lucian and Eilish. And our lockers are still right next to each other. That's where we are now, packing up to leave.

"How about we go to the movies tonight?" Lucian asks, tucking his pen behind his ear. "We can celebrate your return."

"Yeah," Eilish joins in. "How about dinner and a movie? Gina and Al are away tonight, so it would be perfect."

Gina and Al are her adopted parents. I'm sure with the trouble Eilish is always in, going out on a school night might not be such a great idea. They may, however, be willing to do it because of me.

"Why not? Let's do it," I say with a nod in the spirit of getting back into the swing of things. I know they also want to talk to me somewhere where we can be comfortable.

"Cool. Let's go to that Chinese place in town." Lucian gets excited and starts talking about the food, but his voice trails off when laughter fills the halls.

The sound has us turning toward it, and I wish I didn't look because here comes the boy I was most nervous about.

Caspian heads the trio, flanked by his brother on his left and Thorne on his right. And my God, he's changed completely.

I always thought he was beautiful, but two years have made him handsome. Handsome in a way that's so alluring I

can't look away when I know I should.

He has to be at least a whole foot taller than he was when I last saw him, and now he sports the kind of muscles you'd see on a warrior.

Over the years, I've gotten good at blocking him out, but now that I'm seeing the real-life embodiment of him, even I have to admit he's hot as fuck.

Hot as fuck, Willow? Couldn't you find better words?

He zeroes in on me, and I realize I can't. Those green eyes framed with thick black lashes, too long for a guy, smolder with a magnetic flame that roots my feet and makes my heart skip several beats.

He looks at me long and hard before he shifts his gaze to Lucian, and something menacing I recognize returns to his glare.

It used to be that he'd be standing with us, but his departure from our friendship caused a great divide. Now it's us against them.

"Hello, fuckface," Caspian says to Lucian. Even if he looks different, that taunting voice hasn't changed one bit.

"Go fuck yourself, Caspian Ivanov," Lucian replies, and when I look at my friend, I realize he's changed, too. It's only because I've seen him over the years that I haven't really noticed the subtle changes.

Seeing him with Caspian fully illustrates the changes. They nearly look the same in stature, and I realize why. It's because of what they're preparing for.

Caspian responds with a mocking smirk and glances at Eilish. "Heard your little pill-popping girlfriend sucks dick like a pro."

"What the fuck did you say!" Lucian drops his bag like hot coal and rushes up to Caspian like a raging bull.

A quick glance at Eilish's reddened face confirms something I don't know.

“You heard me. They’re saying she managed to blow nearly the whole football team in one afternoon. I’d say she’s got a great job lined up for the future.”

Lucian always defends us. He’s done so for as long as I can remember. When it comes to Caspian, though, we’d all usually take his shit and walk away. But it doesn’t look like that’s the case any longer.

Lucian throws a fist at Caspian, but he dodges it. The movement causes Lucian to lose his footing, but he regains back effortlessly and rams himself into Caspian. The two smashes into the rows of lockers, and they now have the attention of everyone in the hall.

That blow should have hurt Caspian, but he gives a maddening laugh. The kind of psychotic laughter I heard all the time in the hospital. I always thought there were differences in the tones. I got so used to hearing them; I could pick various emotions apart. It’s like a mother recognizing the different types of cries her baby makes. Right now, his laughter sounds like someone who likes pain.

Lucian throws another punch, and this time, Caspian grabs his hand, stopping the blow. Lucian can fight, but it’s clear who has the upper hand.

“Do it, and I’ll make damn sure your *mommy* goes back to stripping and sucking cock to pay for her next meal.”

The blood drains from my body, and I’m as frozen in shock as Lucian is.

Lucian’s mother used to be a stripper before she married his stepfather. That was something he found out by accident. He only shared it with me. He never even told Eilish, and I swore to take that secret to my grave.

How the fuck did Caspian find out?

And his threat?

Jesus. Time might have gone by, but we know not to think he’s bluffing, or that his threat is empty.

He could do exactly what he said. It's his stepfather who is part of the Brotherhood. He sits on the council. That's the basis for how we all met way back when. Lucian is Italian and has no blood connection to the Brotherhood.

Because Caspian's father is in charge, he could be an asshole and do something as heartless as demand that Lucian's stepfather leave his mother and take away the life she's lived for the last ten years.

When Caspian sees he has Lucian right where he wants him, that mocking smirk returns.

"Scared now?" he taunts, releasing Lucian's hand. Lucian steps back, but Caspian angles close to him. "You know if I survive tomorrow, I own your ass. So, you better pray I die."

"Don't worry, I'll pray to all the gods and whoever will listen your death comes swiftly."

They're talking about the Reaping, and the possibility of death is very possible.

I've only heard stories, and those make the *Hunger Games* seem like child's play. Both Caspian and Thorne will have to do that tonight. Survival is the first step to becoming a Knight.

Lucian will go through the same rites of passage next year, and if he gets through, he still won't be able to overpower Caspian, because of who his father is.

This is what I came back to.

"Come on, bro, let's get out of here," Zak urges with a heavy hand on Caspian's shoulder.

On the underside of his wrist, I catch a glimpse of his tattoo from his Reaping that would have occurred two years ago. He has the rune for defense on his wrist. I heard two boys died that year within minutes after it all began.

Caspian looks at each of us. Deep within his stare, there's a hidden message that says he knows our secrets.

Pill-popping girlfriend and spilling Lucian's mother's sordid secrets. What's he going to say about me? Is he going to

call me Psycho Girl, too? I think it might hurt more if those words came from him.

One more nail in my coffin.

As soon as I think about myself, his eyes snap back to me, and I gear myself up for his abuse. But all he does is stare at me.

His eyes lock with mine, then his gaze drops to my wrist for a few beats. I already know what he's looking at. Although the marks on the rest of my arm have faded substantially, that particular scar over my wrist is still prominent. The silvery line provides a good look into how fucked up I must have been in the missing years.

When his eyes return to mine, I expect that abuse again, but he just walks away with Zak and Thorne in tow like they're his minions.

I watch him go, and I wonder if this is it.

The thought makes me feel like a traitor to my friends, who've stood by me all these years. Look how he just treated them, yet here I am, admittedly worrying if this is the last time I'll ever see Caspian Ivanov.

Anyone taking part in the Reaping won't be at school tomorrow, so this moment would be the last if anything does happen to him.

Before he turns the corner, he glances back at me. Then he's gone, and a terrible idea that goes against everything I stand for forms in my mind.

CHAPTER
NINE

CASPIAN

The night of the Reaping

Fucking fuck.

I might actually die here. *Seriously.*

Thorne and I have just climbed out of the putrid swamp and managed to hide ourselves, but now we're stuck.

I know I've been overly cocky over the last few weeks, but that was more about compensating for my fear. The fucked up thing about it is, I'm not afraid of death. What scares me is weakness. I hate anything that makes me look weak, especially in front of my father.

My father—that motherfucking twisted bastard who orchestrated this whole event. The moment the trial began, I could see my dear father's signature written all over the twisted-as-fuck traps that were set for us.

The location we're in is enough of a testament to that.

The Knights have specific locations across the world, but you don't know where the event is going to take place until a month before. Once chosen, the area is heavily guarded. To visit the premises before the Reaping means imprisonment, and you're stripped of your chance to take part forever.

The location my father chose this year is Ambler State Forest. We're right in the heart in an area off limits to the public.

That motherfucker rigged the ground with every trap known to man. And my personal favorite is that he's pitted us against the fucking Komarovski's clan of assassins.

Thirty sixteen-year-old boys against assassins so deadly they literally could kill you with one look. These types of men perform all sorts of black op missions for politicians worldwide, killing whomever they're told to kill and making it

look however they need it to look. They will be whom I'll most likely fall part of in the future because Zak will fill my father's shoes when he's gone.

We've been thrown into a battle where we're being hunted, and the mission is to survive the traps and the assassins. If either gets you, you're dead.

Escape what my father has called the Viper's Lair and pass your personal challenge, then you get your foot through the door to becoming a Knight.

All we have is two choices of weapons. Thorne and I are experts at throwing knives, so we took our knives and armed ourselves with Glocks. Our plan is to have each other's backs until we can't.

It's mostly every man for himself, but neither of us is about to let the other die. I didn't allow him to die when I was eight, so I sure as fuck won't let that happen now.

We've been covering each other for the last few hours, but I have a feeling things could change any moment. It's been too quiet, and that's never a good thing.

Thorne and I have been training together for the last two years for this event, mostly under Zak's supervision, and I suppose my father's best. But even with that, nothing could have prepared us for tonight.

So far, we've dodged poisonous arrows, explosives, and bullets, had to escape a grenade by jumping off the cliff into the river with jagged rocks we could have broken our necks on, and we were chased by wild dogs that looked like they were set free from the Serengeti. I'm not sure how we're still alive.

I understand Father's attempts to be fair, but you'd think he would have done a little more to train us given the fact we could lose our lives. But that's the kind of bastard he is, and I'm still the motherfucker who lives to please him.

"It's too quiet, Caspian," Thorne whispers.

"I know."

“What should we do?”

I have no fucking clue. I’ve had this day in my mind my whole life. It was supposed to be the epitome of who I am, but now that we’re here, I don’t want to be.

I’d be a liar if I told myself that seeing Willow yesterday didn’t do something to me to screw with my mind. Seeing Willow and looking at that scar across her wrist.

She cut herself.

I’m aware of the struggles she’s faced over the last few years, and while my feelings toward her haven’t changed, seeing that scar tugged on the old version of me who used to care.

So, I’d also be the liar if I didn’t acknowledge that part of me came out, and my first observance on seeing her was her beauty. That fiery red hair and those eyes always get me, and yesterday was no different.

Maybe that was why I was such a prick to her friends who used to be mine. Or not. They always grate on my nerves because I know they will follow her, and I don’t like how close she is to Lucian. I never have, even when we were friends.

What the fuck am I even thinking about?

Jesus, we could be fucking dead in the next few minutes, and I’m here thinking about a girl.

I’m standing here with my back pressed against an oak tree with my cousin next to me, guns in hand, and I need to think about what’s coming next.

The fucking shitty thing about this trial is, we have to feel our way through. It’s like a game, and they’re watching and controlling what happens.

“Caspian,” Thorne prods at my silence.

“I’m thinking.” I’m trying at least, and it just dawned on me that if they’re watching—or rather Father—he’s not going to like us working together.

I was waiting for something dramatic to happen where Thorne and I would have to part, but if I know my old man, it's not going to be something like that.

It dawns on me that my father might want us to part now to continue the trial.

“Thorne, I think we have to split up.”

He casts a wary glance at me. “You think so?”

“I think he wants us to.”

“Okay. Let's do this. See you on the other side, brother,” he says. He only calls me brother in moments of gratitude, but we've been as close as brothers can be all our lives.

“I will see you,” I promise, and with that, he goes left, and I go right.

I walk straight past the thicket of trees, and when a light flashes over me, I jump behind a bolder.

I stay there for a while and listen, but I don't hear anything. That doesn't mean there's no one there.

I'll know I'm on track to the personal challenge when I see something that's supposed to mean something to me. As to what that thing is, I don't know.

Risking death, I step out of my hiding place and keep my gun close. Satisfied there's no one around, I move fast but try to be light on my feet.

I continue my pursuit through the thick darkness until suddenly, a light shines down ahead of me onto a stone pillar right there in the middle of the forest.

Fuck, this must be it.

I must be out of the Viper's Lair, and I have one more thing left to do. One more challenge.

I run up to the pillar, and when I see what's settled in the center in a bowl, it confirms I've passed the first part of this test.

In the bowl is my mother's charm bracelet. I pick it up and hold it out to the moonlight. As I look at it sparkling, I miss her so much it hurts.

"I thought that might be a nice touch to the evening," comes my father's gravelly voice from the darkness.

He steps out of the shadows dressed in full black. I lower my hand and steel my spine.

"Father." Despite what I feel, I say his name with reverence and dip my head.

I was not expecting to see him here, and I can't help but wonder why he's made his presence now. I know for a fact he didn't do this for Zak. My brother wouldn't have kept that from me. He told me everything he knew to survive the Reaping.

"Thank you for the touch," I add.

He gives me an audacious stare. "Walk with me. It's time for your loyalty to be tested."

I pocket the bracelet and follow him through the woods.

He leads me to the edge of a cliff, but at the precipice stand three men. Two are my father's enforcers. The other between them is a man I recognize straightaway. How could I not? He used to be one of my father's bodyguards.

He's been badly beaten and looks like he's on his last breath.

When we reach them, I look at my father, who's giving me a wicked grin.

"What's going on here, Father?" I ask, as if my gut isn't giving me the glaring answer.

The guard's presence here means he knows what I did.

"This is to be sure you can fulfil your duties. This man stole from me, but you already knew that, didn't you? Did you really think I wouldn't find out what you did?"

Fuck. I didn't, but I hoped.

The guard was trying to save his pregnant wife, so he stole money from Father's company. Thousands went missing. When I found out, the guard told me she had been kidnapped because of a job he'd done for my father. So, I helped him get her back and allowed him to escape knowing my father was looking for him.

I kept my silence because of what happened when I was a child. As my father keeps his gaze riveted to me, I'm reminded of that very incident so long ago. It was the first time I'd witnessed the extent of his cruelty and watched him kill.

I'd caught one of the gardeners in Father's bedroom looking through his drawers. I told my father what I saw, and the next morning, he called me into the living room, where he stood with his guards.

Lined up against the wall opposite him were the gardener, three others who worked with him, and their wives.

He became the infamous Aleksander Ivanov I'd heard horror stories about as he said, "This is what we do to spies in the Bratva." Then he killed them all. He gunned them down as the women screamed for mercy.

He filled their bodies with bullets and didn't stop shooting until all that was left was a bloody mess of gore.

"Please choose your weapon," he says when I don't answer. He wants me to do what I should have done months ago and kill the guard.

"No, I beg of you. Please, have mercy," the guard cries.

"You know we show no mercy," Father says to me. "Or weakness."

There's that fucking word again he associates with me.

"I'm not weak," I grit my teeth.

"Then prove your loyalty to me. Don't, and I will kill you myself, and your cousin along with you. He won't go on to his challenge until you complete yours. Now, choose your weapon. The clock's ticking."

What a fucking asshole.

I try to contain the tremble in my hands as I reach for the gun. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I reason that the guard will die quicker if he gets a bullet to the head.

“Have mercy,” the guard continues to plead. His voice grips on to anything that resembles humanity in me, but when I think of my cousin being killed, I make my choice. “Please —”

I whip the gun around and fire one lone shot into the guard’s head. Blood spurts everywhere, and he shuts down like someone switched him off.

“Well done, Caspian,” Father says. “You passed.”

I can barely hear him speaking, and everything else he says fades into the background.

The guard was my first kill.



CHAPTER
TEN

WILLOW

The night he threatened to destroy me

No, I didn't bribe my driver with a thousand dollars to take me to Ambler State Forest and lie to my godparents, telling them I'd be studying with Eilish until late.

And no, I didn't lie to Eilish either when she asked if I could come over to study. I told her Elaine needed my help with some paperwork.

Except, I did lie.

I lied my ass off to the people who matter to me most. And for what?

A boy who wouldn't care if I lived or died.

What the hell am I really doing here? Here in this grove of trees—in the pitch blackness of night—with a pair of binoculars staring down to what I think might be the exit to the Reaping ground.

I don't know for sure, but from all the way up here—probably a hundred feet away—I saw some tough-looking men who looked like they could be Bratva men walking through the gates.

That was earlier, well before the sun went down— about four hours ago. That's how long I've been here.

The crazy part of my mind just wanted to see for myself if Caspian made it through. I have a feeling no one will tell me if something happens to him, and I don't want to overhear it at school, or have my friends gloating about it.

That's why I came.

John—my driver—gave me six hours with the warning that he's not getting into shit for my shenanigans. He was especially worried because Adrian is here, like all the other council members.

Obviously, I'm worried Adrian might see me, too, even though I'm well hidden away and dressed for this stakeout in black.

I think I felt worse for lying to Eilish. After the encounter yesterday with Caspian, she went quiet, and Lucian did, too. None of us spoke about what he'd said, but we still had dinner and saw the movie. We watched the last *Saw* film, but we could have been watching anything because none of us were paying attention.

Eilish was crying. Lucian sat between us, and I noticed he was holding her hand. They aren't together even though I know without being told that Eilish has always had a massive crush on him.

Lucian would never hold her hand like that, even in front of me, if he didn't feel bad for her, or if he weren't privy to whatever secret they're keeping. It made me worry and wonder what the hell kind of pills Eilish had been popping.

I tried to ask her about it today, but she brushed off the conversation and said she was fine. She said Caspian was talking shit, but I knew he wasn't.

Unlike me, one thing he's not is a liar.

If I thought I might have gotten her to talk to me tonight, I would have sacrificed coming here and seen her instead.

The problem with Lucian's mother, Gabriella, is a whole other matter, and I pray Caspian doesn't pursue anything more. Lucian will talk to me when he's ready, or not at all.

Whatever my friends are doing tonight, I'm sure both would hate me if they found out I was here. They'd know there's no other reason for my presence besides the obvious.

I must also have some death wish coming to a place like this after what happened to Lillian and me. The whole place looks exactly like the campsite. There's even a river like that place, too.

If I didn't know any better, I could be right back there.

When my mind starts to wander to that night and my chest tightens like I'm going to have a panic attack, I count backwards making use of the cognitive behavioral therapy techniques I learned in therapy. It works when I think of something that calms me, which is listening to classical music or anything by Black Lab.

Mindlessly, I move my foot over a smooth rock embedded in the earth and rest my head against the tree to my left, allowing the rough bark to graze my cheek.

I'm so lost in my thoughts that my awareness heads for the hills, too, so I'm not prepared when a hand covers my mouth.

My heart all but jumps out of my throat, and a scream pours out of me, except it comes out as a muffled sound against the flat plane of the calloused hand.

I'm yanked backward then shoved hard against the tree; my breath stuck in my throat as I realize just how bad this idea was. A tall, hooded figure looms over me with broad shoulders and granite for muscles. I felt his arm.

The air leaves my lungs when he moves his hood away from his head and I see it's Caspian.

"Are you lost, little lamb?" he asks in a menacing voice that makes me shiver from the inside out. "You're a long way from home, Printsessa. Someone in your condition shouldn't be lurking around in the shadows of a dangerous forest."

Shit. I was not expecting this.

I thought I might see him coming out of the woods.

How did he even find me?

Light from the moon cuts across the left half of his beautiful face but the rest of him illuminates when he moves me out of the shadow of the tree's branches.

His eyes have a silver sheen to them that makes him look scarier and as my heartbeat races a million miles per hour, I think of what the hell I'm going to say to him.

"What are you doing here?" he demands.

“I...”

He searches my face, and suddenly, understanding enters his eyes.

“Oh, I see.”

He knows.

He knows that I’m here for him. What do I do now that I’ve made a fool of myself? He hates me, so there’s no reason for me to care what happens to him.

My interest however, piques when he moves back slightly and holds up his right arm, showing me the underside of his wrist where he’s been tattooed with the rune for defense.

I already guessed that if he’s here, it means he passed, but seeing the evidence for myself holds more significance.

He did it, he survived, and now my mind can rest. Except it can’t because this is just the beginning.

“Well done,” I mutter.

He moves closer so our faces are inches apart. The smile that inches across his face reminds me of a predator about to devour their prey.

He must know he’s making me nervous. I think he knows, too, that I’m afraid of him.

“Worried about me, Printsessa?”

Printsessa—he used to call me that when we were kids. With my father being the Pakhan, I was a princess then. Hearing him say it now feels like a mockery of my fall from grace.

“No.” It’s an obvious lie, but one I think can be excused since we both know the truth.

“How did you get here?”

Oh fuck. I can’t get John in trouble. This was the very thing he warned me about.

Caspian narrows his eyes and inclines his head to the side.

“Did you hear me?”

“I had a ride,” I reply, already knowing that answer won’t suffice.

“Well, I’m sure my father, or Adrian, would just love to check out that ride.”

“No. Please don’t say anything. It won’t just be me who gets in trouble.” As the words tumble out of my mouth, I pray the knowledge he won’t just hurt me will stop him from pushing me for answers.

“In your condition, I thought you would have exercised better judgment.”

I’m glad it looks like he’s changed the subject, but I can’t help but notice he’s said that word again—*condition*. As if I have some disease or something.

“What do you mean by ‘condition’?” In the past, I wouldn’t have challenged him, but after all I’ve been through, Caspian’s taunts and jeers are minor to me.

However, when he grabs my wrists and holds up my arm, cold air expels from my lungs.

In the silver glow of the moonlight, we both look at my scar, and the little ounce of bravado I have fades away.

“This condition.”

“I’m not crazy,” I say by default, even though he hasn’t asked me about my sanity. It’s what he’s alluding to, though.

“Why’d you do it?”

I purse my lips together and stare at him. A few agonizing seconds pass, and my throat tightens. I don’t want to explain anything. He’s the last person I want to talk to about what haunts me.

At the same time, part of me remembers how we used to be, and I wish I could go back to that time when I knew I could tell him anything. If I could, I’d be able to tell that version of him the truth about Lillian—another secret that might destroy me.

He's not that Caspian anymore, though. The boy before me has a black heart and a soul so dark he broke me into a million pieces with just a few words.

"Nothing." I try to yank my hand free of his grasp, but he tightens his grip.

"Doesn't look like nothing to me, Printsessa."

"Stop calling me that."

His smile widens. "Why, because you aren't the princess anymore?"

"Yes, exactly. Can I have my hand back now, please?" I pull once more, hard, but he still doesn't let up. "Caspian, let me go."

Anything else I might have said empties from my mind, and my eyes bulge when he presses my wrist to his lips. My mouth falls open as he kisses over my scar, and the emptiness of my brain makes me feel lightheaded.

Just as I'm trying to process what he's doing, he pulls away and catches my face with his free hand, pinning me to the tree. I gasp, unsure what the hell to do.

"In your condition, I wouldn't take risks. Princess or not."

I wish he would stop saying that. "I said I'm not crazy."

"You keep saying that." His voice comes out in a husky rasp, and the deep baritone tightens my stomach and sends a shiver of desire through me. "But I'm not sure I believe you."

"I'm not crazy," I breathe out. This time, it feels like I'm affirming the words to myself.

"I am." He laughs.

"Well, good for you."

The laughter fades, and he slants closer. So close he's a breath away. A kiss away.

A kiss.

I've never been kissed before.

One inch closer and our lips would meet for that kiss I used to fantasize about when we were younger. I used to wonder if it would feel anything like what I saw in fairy tales. Now I'm wondering the same, but as I'm older, I'm conjuring the arousing kisses I've read about in romance novels.

My God, if he moved just a little closer and actually kissed me, I think the fabric of reality would split in two and rip the fibers of my being along with it.

And I guess I must be crazy if I'm thinking about kissing him.

The thought jars me, and as our gazes tangle again, a wild lusty feeling steals over me, heating my body. It's a juxtaposition to the cold night air surrounding us.

When desire brims within his eyes, I feel like I'm on fire, and the cocky masculine grin dancing across his lips suggests he knows the effect he's having on me.

Get it together, Willow.

Fucking get it together. He's your enemy.

I repeat the words in my head, but it's not working against this strange magnetism between us making the blood throb in my veins.

Uncontrollably, my eyes drop to his lips then flick back to his devious stare.

Seeing he has me right where he wants, he lowers his mouth to the shell of my ear, and his warm breath tickles my skin.

"Crazy isn't always a bad thing, Printsessa." His words vibrate in my ear, the husky timbre of his voice doing sinful things to my body.

"I don't care."

"I'm not sure I believe that either, or even if you do."

"I do," I insist.

He pulls back a fraction. "Crazy is why you're here to see me when you shouldn't be anywhere near me." His smooth,

strong voice glides across my skin like cool silk, forcing my heart to gallop. “Crazy is what made you get that ride of yours to drive you three hours away from home to this forest, and crazy must be why you’re looking at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you want me.”

Tremors dash up my skin, and I feel like I’ve been caught doing something illegal.

Then I realize I have.

Caspian Ivanov is the last person I should feel anything for—wanting him being the worst. Our past is too ugly and complicated.

But is he right?

Is that how I’m looking at him?

Is that what I feel.

“No.” Even if it’s true, I don’t want to want him. I try to pull out of his grasp, but he tightens his grip, keeping me there.

He raises a brow. “No?”

“No.” My voice quivers.

“Then maybe you should stop me from stealing a kiss.”

Before I blink, his firm lips crush to mine, and a current of scandalous pleasure spirals through me.

The last shred of sanity wills me to push him away, but his tongue flicks across the curve of my lips, and greed tempts me to kiss him back.

So, I do.

I kiss him, and the kiss changes into something raw and carnal, just like him.

When his tongue pushes into my mouth, my nipples tighten, and my pussy clenches, astounding and appalling me. I’ve never felt that before. I never knew I could, yet here I am, feeling it all, and it’s better than any fantasy.

I want to hate this moment.

I want to hate him for how he's treated me, how he broke me, and how he never tried to understand why I kept that secret from him.

But I can't hate him or the moment, and that's the part I do hate.

As I accept that, the combination of him, his kisses, his touch, and the delicious desire writhing through me makes me forget everything in my wretched chaotic world.

Melting against him, I return his kisses with the same scorching passion he gives me, and when he smooths his hand behind my head to deepen the kiss, I feel devoured.

My nipples pebble, feeling like rough cuts of diamonds as they brush against his chest, and I want him to touch me everywhere.

As if reading my mind, he runs his hand down to the waistband of my jeans, and his fingers brush over my bare skin, but the jolt of pleasure returns my sanity, making me pull out of the kiss.

Said sanity slaps me in my face. I'm appalled at my weakness toward him and my behavior.

His eyes narrow and darken to the devil I'm used to, and his jaw tightens into a hard line.

"You shouldn't have come here tonight, Willow Raventhorn," he seethes, intense anger rippling through his gaze.

He inches back toward me, and this time, it's threatening. There's no trace of the passion and desire we shared moments ago.

"I'm going to tell you one last time to stay the fuck away from me. Stay the fuck away and forget me, or I'll destroy you. Heart, mind, body, and soul."

I slump against the tree, trembling under the weight of his glare, my knees turning to water. His warning sinks in, lacing through the fibers of my mind until it reaches my heart.

“Go!” His voice reverberates off the walls of my soul, and I move.

First, I’m walking; then I’m running.

Thank God, it’s not until I get to the bottom of the hill that a tear runs down my cheek.

I can feel his eyes burning into me, but I don’t look back.

He was right. I shouldn’t have come here tonight, and what I need to do is exactly as he said—stay away and forget him.

It would be easier if he didn’t leave my mouth and soul burning from his kiss.

My first kiss with the boy of my dreams, and it was more than I could have imagined it to be.

Except instead of the fairy-tale prince, I got the devil who threatened to destroy me if I ever went near him again.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

CASPIAN

The night my world changed

I shouldn't have kissed her that night.

I knew she'd ruin me if I ever did, but I did it anyway.

Dragging on the last of my joint, I savor the way it eases my mind, numbing it.

All those months ago, when I told Willow I was crazy, I was being completely and utterly honest.

Fucking crazy is the only label I can give this ritual of mine of watching her—stalking her. I know what I'm doing isn't just watching.

Watching might be me looking at her every now and again at school or when I happen to catch sight of her at the mall with her friends.

Stalking is the term you'd give when the watcher knows what time the object of interest gets home, eats dinner, has her therapy sessions, and when she goes to bed.

Stalking is what you call knowing how to sneak onto the grounds of her home and evade her guards.

I've been doing this for close to a year now, and I'm here at least three times a week. This crazy habit began a few days after the Reaping.

The obsession only grew worse when Zak left for college. I no longer had anyone to keep me in line. Can't count on Thorne to do shit like that when he's just as crazy about pussy as me.

At first, I couldn't shake the memory of that... *kiss*—if you can call it that.

That kiss drove me insane. I regretted it the moment my lips landed on hers, and I felt that familiar stir in my dark soul.

I was surprised to feel it and chalked up the clash of emotions to the effects of the Reaping and my first killing.

I knew it wasn't that, though. It was her.

It was seeing her again after so long. Unknown to anyone, at that time, it had been the first I'd seen her in months. The last time was at the mental hospital just before she was released. Prior to that was the year before when she was a fucked-up mess. That was just after her sister went missing. Missing or ran away, I have no idea. Whichever it was, it did a number on Willow.

Willow looked up to Lillian, and I'm sure she relied on her a lot after her parents died. I imagine Lillian had her reasons for leaving, and wherever she is, she must be doing whatever she planned. At the same time, it was obvious that her departure took a massive toll on Willow.

As fractured as our friendship was, I put the problems aside, and I saw her.

I only went to look, though. She never knew I was there. I observed her in the garden through the window.

I must have stayed no more than ten to fifteen minutes each time, and no one ever knew I went to visit.

I'd like to keep it that way. I'm conflicted enough as it is without people knowing more than they need to about me or probing into what I might still feel for her, which I'd rather not acknowledge.

A prime example of that is the fact that when I came here after the Reaping and saw her naked for the first time, I wanted to do more than kiss her.

I've had that pent-up lust hardening my cock ever since.

My father would have a field day with that. He'd no longer have to think I was weak. He'd know. Willow would be the evidence of such, highlighting how I'd succumbed to a girl I was supposed to stay the fuck away from.

That first night, I stood right here and jerked off while I watched her change for bed. I nearly got caught with my

fucking dick in my hands by the guards patrolling the grounds. I never made that mistake again, and I wish I could stop making this one.

Every time I come here, I go home, end my night with a jerk-off session, and promise myself I won't go back to her house. But rest assured, by the next day, either I see her at school, or I think of her, and I can't think of anything else but coming back.

Each time, I imagine my cock sinking into her tight little pussy and all the ways I'd own her. Every part of her would be mine, and that's the problem because I shouldn't want her.

It's funny I told her to stay away and forget me, yet I'm the one who can't leave her alone, or forget her.

It's nine-thirty now. At this time of night, she's just getting ready for bed.

I never leave until she comes out of the shower and takes her clothes off.

Seeing her naked is my guilty pleasure. That's what I'm waiting for as I allow my mind to be fucked over by whatever the fuck Thorne mixed up in this joint. I can tell it's something new. There's an edge to it that dulls the darkness in the recesses of my mind.

I straighten when I see her coming out of her en suite.

Where I'm positioned, in the crook of the oak trees by her window, I see all.

She's wearing that fluffy pink robe that swallows up her body and has a towel wrapped around her head, which she takes off first then applies some product to the long strands of that lustrous red hair. It's vibrant against the pink robe.

It's even longer now than when she first came back to school. She reminds me of a mermaid. If nightmares didn't still plague my mind, I might be tempted to draw her as such. The temptation might be more enticing if I could forgive her.

I can't explain this thing I'm doing, but I keep doing it, and it doesn't seem like I have any intention of stopping.

She dries her hair with a blow dryer and places it into a messy bun. Then she moves the notebook she uses to write her articles in and sets it in her school bag.

When we were kids, she used to carry a notebook around with her so she could write down things that would interest her. That was inspired by my mother and way back when Willow used to be fascinated with her writing talents.

That's what she wanted to do when she grew up—write. It seems like she has the same plan.

When she's done with her bag, she gets to the part of the evening I've been waiting for. The anticipation of seeing her fully rounded breasts with her little pink nipples grabs me with such a force I have to palm my dick.

She pushes the robe down her body and grabs her moisturizer. The poor little lamb rubs the lotion all over her body, completely unaware of the viper watching her.

Like a drug, her perfection makes my head spin, and I hold in the urge to rub one out. The sadist inside me thinks it's more thrilling to hold on to the stir of arousal until I get home and beat off hardcore within the granite walls of my shower.

I watch her rub the lotion all over her breasts, massaging the cream into the skin, and she fucking looks like she's enjoying touching herself way too much.

My damn mouth waters, and I wish I could touch her like that. When she reaches for a little silk pink baby doll nightie from her bed and shimmies into it, I find myself cursing. But the fucking thing is so flimsy I can see the outline of her nipples pressing against the fabric.

I expect her to turn off the lights and climb into bed, so I gear myself up to leave. Except she doesn't switch her lights off. Guilt washes over her face, then she moves to her bedroom door, opens it a fraction, and checks as if she's making sure no one is around.

Her suspicious behavior piques my interest.

What are you up to, Willow?

When she closes the door, she puts the little latch down, locking it—something she never usually does when I've been here.

The moment I start to wonder why she did that, she returns to the bed and picks up her school bag. She pulls out a little pink box, which I can't quite see properly, but I don't need to as moments later, she takes out a vibrator.

A smile sweeps across my lips, and I know I must look like a psychotic pervert, but fuck me, what else am I supposed to look like?

I don't know any guy in my shoes, who wouldn't be grinning from ear to ear like the fucking Cheshire cat.

I already know she would never have walked into a store that sells things like that and bought it. No, no.

Willow Raventhorn is still so very sweet and innocent like the lost little lamb she is.

It would have been her dirty little friend who got that for her. Eilish likes to think no one knows her secrets, but I do. Her problem is she's too fucking sloppy. She has the worst taste in men who like to brag about their conquests, and she makes enemies with the wrong girls. She should know if you're going to shit on the head cheerleader by fucking her boyfriend and his best friend; that's not something that's going to stay quiet.

My little lamb, on the other hand, is a virgin. No one told me. I just know.

I can see it now as she fumbles curiously with the vibrator, not knowing what the fuck to do with it.

I hardly care. Just the sight of her with it, dressed like that, is enough. It's hot as fuck.

I thank the gods of sex when she turns off the light but leaves on the lamp on the nightstand so I can still see her.

She lies down on the bed, parts her legs, and the moment she places the vibrator on her pussy, all the blood in my body rushes straight to my dick.

Pleasure fills her face, and I commit the way she looks to my memory.

Her back arches off the bed, and she covers her mouth with her free hand, holding in her moans.

Fucking hell, my damn imagination kicks into overdrive, and I swear I can almost hear her.

Suddenly, she turns her face toward me, as if the sex gods granted me further grace. I know she can't see me. I'm fully blended in with the shadows, but it's like she's looking right at me. Within her stare, I get the full visual of what Willow Raventhorn looks like when she's in the throes of pleasure.

When she grabs her left breast and moves aside the fabric of the nightie so she can massage her nipple, I'm a goner. I'm pitching a fucking tent.

My eyes are glued to her, and I don't want to look away.

Then the thought occurs to me that she must be thinking about something to look like that—or someone. The fucking vibrator might be doing all the work, but I know her.

I might never have seen this side of her before, but I know her. From that look in her eyes, I know that her imagination is going as wild as mine. That makes me wonder who she's thinking about giving her that pleasure.

I clench my hands when it occurs to me that it could be Lucian, but the same way I know she's thinking about someone, I know it's not him.

Who, then?

Could it be me?

I watch her enough day and night to know she's not seeing anyone, and all I can think of is how she gave herself to me when we kissed.

The sinful thought that she could be thinking of me widens my psychotic smile, and I wish I could be in that room now, tasting and touching her everywhere.

I grab my cock and squeeze as the thought rushes through my mind like someone gave me a dose of napalm.

If I were in that room, I'd give her everything she needed; then I'd steal her virginity and fuck her senseless. I'd fuck her so hard she wouldn't be able to walk for days.

I keep my eyes peeled to her as she comes. Her hand over her mouth no longer seems to suffice. She grabs her pillow and covers her entire face. She stays like that for a few moments, then removes the pillow to reveal a flushed face.

She's breathing heavily. When she calms, she slides off the bed and heads back to the bathroom with the vibrator. She comes out minutes later, places it in the nightstand drawer and unlocks the door.

She's such a Goody-Two-Shoes, but good thinking. Anyone who needed her during the time she was touching herself would have had to knock.

Willow gets back in bed, and when she rolls onto her side and her breathing evens out, I know she's sleeping.

I've never stayed this long before. It makes me wonder if she ever touched herself in other ways before she got that vibrator, and I just missed it.

It doesn't matter. What matters now is I need to go take care of my dick before I explode.

I sneak off the property, jump into the 1970 Mustang I have parked near the woods and take off.

It drives like a dream and gets me away from temptation and trouble as fast as I can drive without drawing attention to myself. Granted, if any cop dared to stop me, one look at my license, and he would shit himself just from looking at my name.

Thirty minutes later, I get home to an empty house, not uncommon for a weeknight.

Father is always out until late, and sometimes he doesn't come back for days. Thorne isn't here either, so he's probably out banging some girl.

I find the relief I sought in the shower. Once again, I'm jerking off, promising myself I'm not going back to Willow's, knowing come morning, I'll be changing my mind.

My phone rings when I walk into my room. Thinking it's Thorne, I reach for it buzzing away on my desk. I don't usually get calls at this hour, mostly because I give very few people my number.

It's not Thorne calling, though. It's my father, and he never calls me.

I answer straight away, and when I hear a sniffling sound on the other end of the line, I know something's wrong.

"Father, what happened?"

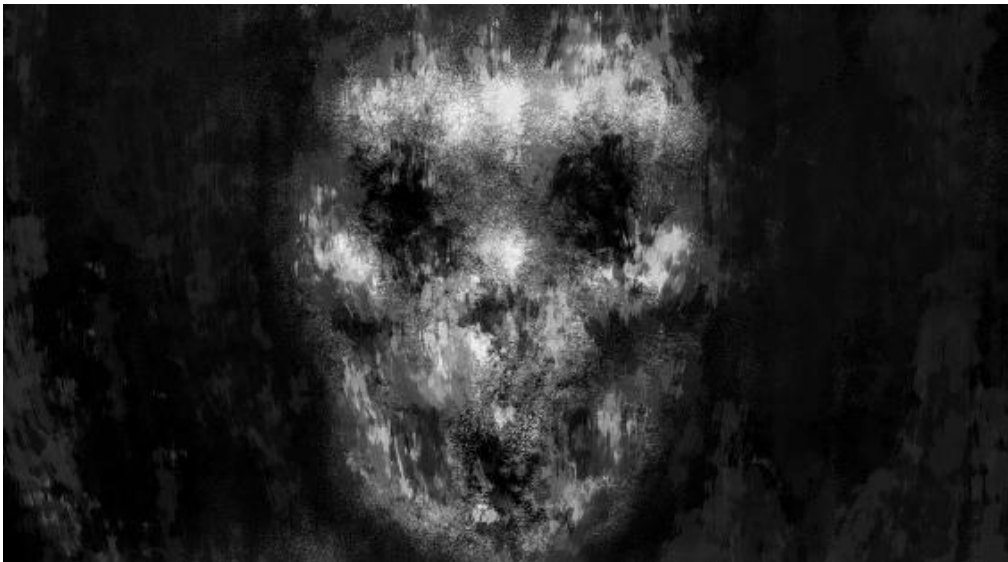
"It's Zak, son."

I straighten, and it's like I just know whatever he says next is going to change me forever.

"Is he okay?"

There's silence, and I hear him take in a quick breath.

"No, he's gone, son. He was found dead in the woods."



CHAPTER
TWELVE

CASPIAN

The day I became the Viper

I thought the world ended when Mom died. In many ways, it did.

I never knew there was more pain to come. More death and suffering I wouldn't be able to handle.

Today was Zak's funeral. Unlike my mother's funeral, my father had more guests. He allowed family to attend, and a few of our friends. In total there were about twenty people.

Still limited, this time for other reasons—safety.

Zak was murdered.

My brother was murdered. No ordinary person could have done that. First, you don't just murder the son of a notorious Russian mob boss who's in charge of a secret society that could crush you. And next, it was Zak. To get through the Reaping is one thing but getting through such a thing says exactly who you are. He was months away from being initiated as a Knight. He had the type of Bratva training you'd expect for who he was, so no mere person could just kill him.

Yet, he was shot three times. Twice in the back and once in his heart.

It was like he walked into a fucking trap.

It's been three weeks since his death. Three weeks of my father utilizing everyone in the Brotherhood, our alliances, and every cop who can move in this hemisphere to catch whoever took Zak from us.

We've had nothing, no success whatsoever. No answers.

I might be young and inexperienced in the dark criminal underworld we live in, but I have this suspicion that one of our own did this.

Someone we know or we're in contact with. I have a feeling my father thinks the same thing, but he hasn't said anything.

Today came, and it didn't feel real.

How could it? Zak was my brother, barely nineteen years old. How could he be dead?

This time my father cried, and I know it wasn't because people were around us. It was because of his rage.

We stood together until the burial; then he left with the other guests.

I'm still here, and I don't know if I can leave.

I'm sitting by the grave, hugging my knees to my chest and staring at the freshly laid earth on my brother's grave.

I've watched day turn to night, and nothing inside me wants to go home, although the cemetery closes in an hour. Even if closing time comes, no one would ask me to leave.

I keep thinking about how this could have happened, and why?

I'm not sure which I should focus on first.

I'm mulling it over when I hear gentle footsteps approaching. Then I look over my shoulder and see her—Willow.

She's carrying a white rose and is dressed in black. That red hair, though, is too vibrant for this sad day. She has it tied back, but it's almost offensive to the dark cloud surrounding me.

Warily, she looks at me; then she continues walking forward until she reaches the grave, right beside me.

I haven't seen her since that night. I haven't been to school either.

The last time I saw her holding a white rose, she was twelve years old, and I was thirteen. Now she's sixteen, and I'm seventeen.

I crushed that rose, and I can see she's wary because she thinks I'm going to do the same thing to this one.

But she's not that girl from the past. This one is stronger. Strong enough that she didn't care she wasn't invited to the funeral; she came anyway. And even though she's scared of me, she doesn't care I'm here. She came to pay her respects to Zak, and that's what matters to her.

She lays the long-stemmed rose on the grave, and her hair falls over her shoulder like a waterfall of blood. I see beauty against her pale skin.

Our eyes lock when she straightens, and I think she's just going to walk away.

Only she doesn't. Like some angel, she floats over to me, bends down, and plants a kiss on my forehead. The kiss feels like a balm on my wounded soul, like solace. It gives me a moment of reprieve. Just a moment, for the length of time it lasts.

The respite fades after she moves away. Again, I expect her to say something, but I know she won't even if she wants to.

Everyone's scared of me. Scared of what I'll do and say. It's best to say nothing because then chances are I won't say anything either. And that's exactly what happens.

We both stare at each other for a few beats. A tear runs down her cheek. She wipes it away then walks away.

Her presence and the gesture, however, give me the strength to leave and go home an hour later when the grounds close.



MY FATHER IS in the living room when I get home.

He's standing by the floor-to-ceiling glass window with a glass of scotch in his hand. On the coffee table is an empty bottle. Since Zak's death, not one day has passed that my

father hasn't finished a bottle or two from his extensive liquor collection.

He gives me that look I hate when I walk in.

It's that cold stare, as if I've done something wrong. He's looked at me like that more often than not over the last few weeks.

"I was at the cemetery," I say even though he hasn't asked, and surprise, surprise, he doesn't answer.

Instead, he walks over to the wine cabinet and takes out a bottle of his favorite red.

He pops it open, drinks straight from the bottle, and strides over to the sofa to sit.

"I just got word from Peter," he says. Peter is his Sovietnik in the Bratva. He was checking out a lead—our last lead. "We're at a dead end. The lead didn't pan out. I don't know what the fuck to do from here. That fucking lead was my last hope."

Ice works its way through my body, numbing every fiber of my being. That lead was my last hope, too.

"So, that's it?" I grate out. It can't be it. There must be something else.

"Yes. Obviously, the investigation won't end here, but we'll be running around with nothing solid to follow."

I grit my teeth. "You know this doesn't make fucking sense, right? It had to be an inside job."

He growls and throws the wine bottle into the wall. It smashes, sending shards of glass and splashes of red everywhere.

Bolting up, he raises his fists and bares his teeth. "Don't you think I fucking know that?"

"But you haven't talked about it."

"Because I don't want to. And not with you." He glares and sneers at me like I just spat on him.

I can see the weight of grief breaking him bit by bit, but there's more to his rage that twists my stomach into knots.

Even if Zak was being trained to take over the leadership of the empire when my father either retires or dies, he was the favorite.

In the back of my mind, I fear my father believes he lost the wrong son—like he wishes it were me who died, me who was six feet under. My own rage pushes me to ask him, but I don't. I hold back because the truth is, I'm fucking afraid of his answer.

So, all I can ask is the only question his comment provokes.

“Why not me? Of all the people, shouldn't you be talking to me about something so sinister? If it's an inside job, it means you can't trust your men. Whoever killed Zak lured him into the woods, somewhere with no witnesses, no cameras, no story to tell, no trace.”

He gives me a crude laugh filled with all the sarcasm in the world. “Listen to you talking big. You think you suddenly have what it takes to fill your brother's shoes? I have news for you, Caspian. You never will. You will never measure up to him. He was a born leader—one who would have taken our empire to the next level. I would have been proud to die and leave the kingdom to him. He never even got to be a Knight and die with the honor of his forefathers.”

The sting of his words cuts into me like a thousand knives, and I'm left speechless.

Grabbing another bottle from the cabinet, he leaves the room and the house.

I hear his car tear down the drive, then nothing more.

I'm left standing in the center of the room with that numbness and rage building and rising within me.

It threatens to weaken me, like it would for anyone who's lost so much and knows their only surviving parent hates them.

However, I refuse to be weak.

I will prove to my father that I'm just as deserving of the empire as Zak was.

I will do more than fill my brother's shoes because I'm not just going to prove and push myself higher in the Bratva and the Knights; I'm going to find out who killed Zak.

My father is always talking about the Viper's Lair. To him, it's a place. For me, it's a formidable state of mind.

That is what I'm going to become to get what I want.

As formidable as the viper.

May God help whoever stands in my way because I won't have any fucking mercy.



PRESENT DAY

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

WILLOW

Today is the day.

The day when everything changes for me.

I can't stop my body from trembling as I enter the contemporary-looking boardroom at Dynamic Corp with Elaine and Adrian.

Nerves spiral over my entire body when my gaze lands on the men we're supposed to meet with, all seated around the round table that looks like a depiction of the legendary medieval table that belonged to King Arthur.

Before me are my psychiatrist Dr. Sharp, Borgia, my father's lawyer, and Peter and Oleg from the Knight's council. Peter and Oleg are also part of the elite group of the Bratva and on the board at Raventhorn University, so I've seen them before. I grew up seeing them.

Peter is the Sovietnik of the Komarovski and Oleg the Obershank. They're here because this meeting involves Bratva business.

Apart from Dynamic Corp and having to preside over the schools, the main business my family were in charge of was the bank. It is the law that it stays in my family unless there are no heirs.

Dare I say it, I was worried Caspian's father would be here, but I guess these two suffice, along with Adrian.

This meeting is the meeting I've been waiting for, for years. The one we haven't talked about because of the sensitive topic of my inheritance and my freedom.

When I turned eighteen last November, the clock started ticking.

Although my godparents have been a blessing and looked after me like their own, I'm at a stage in my life where I want my life to feel like mine again. I'm about to go off to college

next week, so I want things to be normal and have some closure.

Everyone here, including Adrian and Elaine, will be the deciders of what will happen to my future. I just hope it will be decided in the way I want.

The thought of the opposite happening tightens my chest and sends my nerves into a frenzy. It takes me back to instances in the past where I felt like ripping my hair out.

It's one of my signs of an oncoming panic attack.

Most people can't breathe—that happens to me, too—but I get the creepy nerve thing for anything that feels like it's beyond my control.

Since the same therapy helps calm me, I start counting backwards in my mind and think of the music I love.

As the words from Black Lab's "The Real You" fill my mind, I plaster a professional smile on my face. On the drive here, I had the song blasting in my ear.

"Welcome, Miss Raventhorn," Borgia greets me. His eyes crinkle in the corners, deepening his already pronounced crow's feet. Like most of the men my father associated with, he speaks with a hint of a Russian accent.

"Thank you," I reply.

"Please, take a seat." His bushy gray brows, which match his hair, lift when he motions to the three empty leather chairs before him.

I sit in the middle, allowing Elaine and Adrian to sit on either side of me like pillars of support.

It was their idea to hold the meeting here. Neither like having anything to stress me out inside the house.

I didn't have the heart to tell them it wouldn't matter where the meeting took place; I'd still be stressed out as fuck.

I had my psych evaluation last week. I get the results of that today, too.

As if sensing my discomfort, Adrian taps my hand, and I meet his warm brown eyes.

“It’s going to be okay,” he assures me with a confident nod.

I smile, not sure what to say because his words could mean anything.

“I think we’re ready to start,” Borgia states.

Bringing my hands together, I pray they’ll stop shaking.

“I’m aware your godparents have given you minimal information about today, which is fine. I’ll be going over all the key information in depth,” he explains. “Before we continue, do you have any questions?”

At least he’s talking to me like a person. My psych evaluation was with Dr. Sharp’s team. By the time they were done analyzing me and probing into my mind, they made me feel like I couldn’t take care of myself.

“No. I’m just eager to hear everything.”

“That’s understandable. Well, if it’s okay, I think we should begin with the matter of your inheritance first, as that discussion will impact everything else we talk about.”

I want to ask how because I don’t think my inheritance has anything to do with my mental health, but I hold back. I don’t want to appear difficult or like I only care about myself, as the matter of my inheritance involves all of us.

Under the old laws, everything owned by the members of the alliance was pooled together to create a conglomeration of wealth. That’s why the organization is so wildly successful and has lasted for centuries. So, I understand things have to be done a certain way.

“That’s fine,” I answer.

“Perfect. Well, I don’t think I need to say that your father left you and your sister a sizable inheritance. This will all become available to you when you turn nineteen. As we’ve unfortunately been unable to locate Lillian as of this date, all that was left for her will be bestowed upon you.”

Oh, Lillian, my heart still breaks for you.

My heart breaks every time I have to pretend my sister ran away. It's breaking now, and I have to paste on that fucking perfect poker face so they can't read me.

"Certain expectations will be required of you as well," he adds.

"What kind of expectations?" Shit, maybe we should have talked a little more about what was going to happen today.

"We'll get to that part in a little while."

Okay, that doesn't exactly sound good.

"All right." *Stay calm and focus, Willow.*

"I'm going to go through the assets that fall part of your inheritance; then we'll talk about the legitimacy stipulations your father put in place." He reaches for the document before him. "The first asset your father left you is Dynamic Corp. To date, Dynamic Corp does not fall part of the companies under the alliance. Only a few people know that."

My interest piques.

"What exactly does that mean?"

"It means that is your gift. It's *your* company."

My mouth drops, and I suck in a breath. "Mine?"

Oh my God.

"Indeed, that company was set up by your great-great-grandfather, and it was intended to be run outside the control of any organization your family belonged to. Your father was very clear that this continue to be the case with no affiliation to the Bratva or the Knights," he explains.

I just stare in disbelief.

I can't believe Dad did that for Lillian and me. I think it was so we could have something to call our own. The whole setup of the Bratva and the Knights is all male-dominated. There's no way we'd get anything like this, no matter how hard we worked.

And, my God, what a thing to give us. Dynamic Corp is a robotics technology company which develops advanced mechanical and electrical engineering equipment for the medical and aeronautics industry. My great-great-grandfather set the company up.

“The company truly becomes mine on my birthday?”

“It does. However, there are some other important matters we need to discuss and agree to before any discussion of the transfer of ownership. The most prevalent being the bank. Unlike Dynamic Corp, the old laws stipulate that the bank must be controlled by the Knights. That’s where your expectations come in.”

I tense up and look at him. “Okay, what do I have to do?”

“Well, the first thing, you’re good, which is great, is pursuing your studies at Raventhorn. The other thing is marriage.”

My body bows, and I grip the edge of my seat like I’m on a wild roller coaster ride. I feel like I’m going to fall off the face of the planet.

“I’m sorry, what?” Obviously, I have to check I heard right. There’s no way I did.

“Marriage, Miss Raventhorn.”

My head snaps to Adrian and Elaine. When they both stare back at me with guilty expressions, I realize they knew about this. They would have always known.

“You guys knew?”

“Yes,” Adrian confesses reluctantly. “I’m sorry, Willow.”

“That’s something we should have talked about.” I can’t imagine them thinking it was okay to let me find out this way.

“We felt it was best like this, so you’d focus on getting better and not worry about it,” Elaine offers.

Is she kidding? How could what they did be best when I’m freaking out?

The only things I thought I'd have to worry about was the issue of my freedom, mainly because I'd planned to look into what might have happened to my sister. Covertly, of course. I saw it as my chance.

I also worried about seeing Caspian again when I get to Raventhorn, which I suppose is virtually nothing to get worked up over.

I haven't seen Caspian properly since the night of Zak's funeral, and we haven't physically spoken since the night of the Reaping. The Reaping was almost three years ago. But it's that stupid kiss that's still screwing with me, even though I stayed away from him like he told me to.

I just didn't have the heart to stay away on the night of Zak's funeral. I knew Caspian would be hurting deeply.

None of those things are important in comparison to this fucking bomb that's just landed on me. I can't get married. It's out of the question. There must be something else I can do.

Looking back to Borgia, I shake my head.

"I can't get married. Not yet, and not like this." Not in this primitive forced manner.

"On the contrary, Miss Raventhorn," Peter cuts in, giving me a firm stare. "It is not something you can get out of by refusing . To comply with the terms and conditions of inheriting the bank, you must marry."

"What if I don't want the bank?" I throw back. I know by saying so, I'm not thinking straight. Rejecting the bank is throwing away my legacy. The entire line of Raventhorns who have gone before me would be ashamed if they'd heard those words coming out of my mouth.

Peter steepled his fingers, and I see the dangerous Bratva man he is when he glares back at me. Next to the Pakhan, he's essentially God of the Komarovski. Add the fact that he sits on the Knight's council as the second seat judge on the Omega division, and he's essentially a god to me.

"I'm afraid that's not up for discussion. To turn down your birthright and essentially break the alliance that has been

agreed to in blood is considered treason and punishable by death.”

Panic unlike I’ve ever known sweeps through me. It ravages through my insides and leaves me feeling fragile, like thin ice about to shatter.

Death?

Punishable by death? So, they’d kill me?

“Peter,” Adrian says. “I apologize for speaking out of turn, but the last thing we need to do is scare her. She’s just a girl.”

I’m grateful for Adrian’s support, but I hardly think anything he says is going to tamp down the possibility of death if I refuse to comply. Even though Adrian is the sixth seat judge, his word won’t save me in any way.

“I’m very aware she’s just a girl, but this is the first time in history we’ve been in this position—both Timofey and his wife are dead, and their eldest daughter is missing. There are no more Raventhorn heirs.”

And right now, I wish I weren’t the last. I don’t tend to think like that at all, or about my family tree, because it’s rather sad. My mother was an only child, and all I ever knew from her side were great aunts who have now passed away.

That side of the family wouldn’t even be factored in because the bloodline came with my father. He had two sisters, both of which died in a fire when he was a boy. If they’d lived and had children, one of them might have been in my shoes today.

But there is just me.

“I think you can agree we need to act in the best way possible given the situation we’re in,” Peter continues but shifts his gaze to me.

“So, you’re just going to force me to get married?” My voice trembles, a contrast to the strength I hoped to feel when I first arrived. “How can that be right?”

“We don’t see it as forcing, Willow.” He uses my name in a more familiar way, and I don’t like it. “It’s more about duty.

Long has the marriage pact existed between families in the Knights. When the Komarovski became aligned with the Knights, we honored the old laws.”

“But I didn’t know about any marriage pact.”

“It doesn’t matter. The other thing that was important to your father was marriage. Arranged marriages have always existed amongst us, and he was a firm believer in it. He and your mother had an arranged marriage.”

Well, maybe that was why he cheated on her. This is unreal, and it looks like I’m stuck.

“Choosing a suitable husband for you and Lillian were his top priorities. At the time of your father’s death, you would have been too young for him to select one for you, but that was always the plan.” Peter sets his shoulders back. “So, I’m afraid, the marriage pact is something that needs to be honored. Now, Lillian was promised to my son, Dorian. In her absence, you must take her place.”

God, how could this get any worse?

Dorian Belkov is a motherfucking asshole who thinks the sun revolves around him. He’s the same age as Lillian. He’s a senior at Raventhorn now. Every time I’ve seen him, he’s either been high on shit or torturing some poor soul who was weaker than him. Literally torturing.

I do not want to be with someone like that.

“The agreement was for them to get married when they finished college,” he continues in a tone that suggests he loves the sound of his own voice. The same as his son. “That could have been the same for you, too, but the matter of your inheritance has been on hold for the last five and a half years. We’ve been on hold for that time, too, waiting for this day. At the very least, your marriage needs to happen by your birthday, so we can start the transfer process and get things back to normal.”

Fuck. All I have is two and a half months.

Shit. I can’t believe this is happening. I feel like I just woke up and stepped into some weird reality where things are

the opposite to everything I thought.

“And that brings us to the other matter to be discussed—your guardianship,” Borgia speaks, cutting back into this uncoordinated tango of words.

God, what is he going to say about that now?

“Please, tell me I get my freedom.”

“Not quite yet.”

My stomach drops further into the chasm of hell. “Why not?”

“Although we’re satisfied with your psychological evaluation, we’d like to see how you cope with being away from home and married life. We preempted the news today might take quite a toll on you emotionally. I don’t think it would be prudent to hand over your freedom, or Dynamic Corp, if you become emotionally unstable.”

“That’s not fair,” I wince. “How can that be fair to me?”

“Miss Raventhorn, your father was a very good friend of mine. He entrusted me with his affairs and made me executor of Dynamic Corp. It would be against my duty of care to recommend severing the legal guardianship and giving you the company when it’s reasonably foreseeable that you might find things hard in the very near future.”

“So, what’s going to happen?”

“We’re proposing to extend the guardianship by a year then have it reviewed.”

“One year? I’ve already been waiting nearly a year. I turn nineteen in a handful of months.” I’ll be nearly twenty by the time they review it. And if it’s decided that I’m still not fit, then what? And are Elaine and Adrian going to continue to hold those rights over me? “Besides, how strange is it going to be to get married when my godparents still have my rights?”

Borgia cuts a glance to Elaine, and she shuffles around to face me. I look at her, realizing this part must have been reserved for her.

“In light of your upcoming wedding, we’ve decided it would be more appropriate for us to hand over your guardianship to Dorian.”

My lips part. Words slam around in my brain, but they don’t process properly into anything lucid.

“What? But I don’t know him.” This is a nightmare. A real living nightmare.

“He’s going to be your husband. If anyone is going to have control of your rights, it should be him. In the same breath, he’ll also oversee the running of Dynamic Corp with you until you’re free of the guardianship.”

Wow, so much for Dad wanting the company outside the control of the Bratva or the Knights.

“So, that’s it? These are all serious things you’re talking about, and I have no say in what happens to me?”

“I’m sorry.”

Peter clears his throat in an exaggerated manner, turning our attention back to him.

“The decision is final. The matters discussed today have been reviewed by the Pakhan and sanctioned by the council,” he states boldly.

The Pakhan.

I’ll bet he had a field day organizing my life. Or rather, my doom.

I’ve seen Aleksander Ivanov only once since my parents died. It was clear as he looked down his nose at me that he had a real vendetta against me for the whole fiasco regarding the affair between his wife and my father. He would have hated me, too, because the partnership between Ivanov Tech and Dynamic Corp was severed.

I’m sure he’d do anything to worsen my circumstances, including screwing with my course, or stopping me from working at Real Magazine. It was owned by his wife, and I’ve had my heart set on working there since I was five and she got me interest in writing. I got accepted to the apprenticeship

program at Raventhorn, but that could mean shit. It could be taken away just like everything else.

What a damn mess.

“We move to vote for the following: one, that Willow Raventhorn’s guardianship be extended for a year from today and is transferred to her husband once she is married. Two, that after she is married, ownership of the bank and Dynamic Corp be conferred on her and her husband jointly, and we proceed with business as usual.” He keeps his gaze fixed on me the whole time he speaks, unblinking, unwavering.

“We also vote that we return here in one year’s time to review the guardianship. If we are satisfied, Willow Raventhorn will receive full control of Dynamic Corp. Should these stipulations be frustrated in any way, we will reconvene. If the unfortunate occurs and you pass away, then the entire inheritance, including Dynamic Corp, will be divided amongst the eight judges in the Society of Knights. All in favor, raise your right hand.”

As the hands go up, I feel like I’m fading away, and the seed of helplessness takes root in my soul.

Once again, I’m going to have to do as I’m told if I want to get what I want.

My freedom.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

Caspian

Tonight, is the night.

The night of my initiation into the Knights.

I fucking made it through a year of challenges, rituals, and missions. Each time proving myself, again and again, getting stronger and more formidable.

I've dreamed of this day since I was a boy, knowing how proud it would make my parents if I succeeded in getting this far.

I wanted to make myself proud, too, as a way of combating my inner demons and the nightmares from Russia that still haunt me. However, when Zak died, becoming a Knight meant something more to me. It became another means to getting closer to finding out who killed him.

And why.

It's been nineteen months since his death.

I still have no answers, but I will never stop searching or trying to find any way humanly possible to get justice and revenge.

The cold from the stone floor seeps into my bare feet as I walk toward the large oak wood doors of the ceremonial hall. Both doors are open, ready for me to walk through and embrace the next phase of my life.

Because of who I am, I will be the first to take the Oath this year.

Stopping by the doorway, I wait for my name to be called. This is the first time I've been to this part of Raventhorn Hall. It's where the Knights' Council meets every week and where ceremonies are held.

The ancient amber-cobbled walls remind me of the old burial grounds in Moscow where my great-grandparents are buried.

I'm underground, but the ceiling is high like the other buildings at the university. On the center is the Raventhorn Crest, which has two blue ravens on either side of a shield and the letter R engraved in the middle, along with a golden fleur-de-lis banding the ravens together. The crest has been modified over the centuries to embrace the alliances we've formed with other groups from different countries.

Surrounding the crest are the inky black carvings of the Elder Futhark runes the Knights consider emblems, paired with their counterpart Greek symbols Alpha, Zeta, Sigma, and Omega. These are also the names given to the four factions of the Knights.

The Alphas are responsible for upholding the laws. They are paired with the rune for justice and leadership.

The Zetas are responsible for intelligence and information gathering. Their rune is the one for communication.

The Sigmas are tasked with the first order of Knighthood, which is protection and defense against enemies. As such, they have the rune for defense.

Last, but not least, are the Omegas. They represent judgment and are the faction that contains our judges. They are represented by the rune for death and balance.

Like the Alphas, they uphold the laws, but they decide your fate if you break the law. They also step in when important matters need to be decided.

There are currently only eight judges in that faction, my father being the head as he's the leader of the Knights.

The rest of the council consists of twenty-four members who are mostly from the Bratva.

To become a member of the council, you have to be invited or inherit your place. Outside the council, the members are varied, comprising the world's elite, such as politicians and leaders of other powerful criminal organizations and their heirs.

Everyone initiated into the Knights starts off by being a Sigma first. After ten years of service, you're invited to apply for membership in the Alpha and Zeta factions. After another ten years, you're invited to move from one faction to another or stay where you are.

Only Alphas can become Omegas, and the same rules apply as getting on the council. Except, you have to be voted in if your predecessor wasn't one of the three judges in charge.

Tonight, I will become a Sigma, but unlike the other pledges here, my path will be different. Unless something happens to me, everything I do from now on will be with a view to become the leader of the Bratva and the Knights someday.

Once my initiation is complete, I'll be tattooed with the Greek symbol for Sigma just under my wrist, where the rune for defense currently resides.

All my life, I've seen firsthand how the Bratva operates, and it felt like the end all be all. This is different.

The Brotherhood of Knights is older and existed long before the Bratva.

They were originally Vikings who then became the notorious group of Knights who went on secret missions for Vladimir the Great in the eleventh century. They assisted in battles, spied on spies, and wiped out their enemies ruthlessly.

They were led by Raventhorn, named such for the raven he owned who would come back with a thorny stem when he sent it out to check for enemies.

That was where it all began—the earliest form of organized crime.

The same group of descendants stayed in Europe over the centuries and tended to gravitate toward Russia for economic purposes. After the former Soviet Union, the Bratva was born, and then Komarovski—a code word for the Oath—formed.

That was how the Komarovski, and the Knights, became one and the same, although they operate as two separate entities.

I snap out of my reverie when my father calls my name, and I pull in a deep breath before I walk into the hall, taking my steps strong and proud.

As I walk in, the other Knights look at me.

The whole council is here. All thirty-two of them form a circle around the hall.

My father is standing at the head of the room, right between the giant stone statue of Raventhorn with his sword and the Fountain of Promises.

The judges are on either side of him, and the other council members are further down.

Walking barefoot feels weird, even for me, the rebel who is used to roughing it in the great outdoors.

We are required to have our feet bare as a form of humbling amongst the elder Knights. It represents your willingness to accept them as leaders and follow the Oath for the rest of your life.

Like me, the men are dressed in their Knight tunics, and they look far from the iconic images of robed secret society members film and TV have depicted for decades. The tunics we wear bear a striking resemblance to the Templars, except ours are full black, and we don't bear the mark of the cross on our chests. We have the Raventhorn Crest.

When I reach the Fountain of Promises, I dip my head with respect. My father does the same. The fountain is tiny, roughly two feet wide, but it represents the water source the Knights would have used in the old days.

Returning my gaze to my father, I gear myself up to take the Oath. Except now that I'm amongst the men I wanted to get close to, my mind jumps ahead to planning my next steps.

Someone in this room is connected to what happened to Zak.

If my brother's death was an inside job, and I'm sure it was, then someone in this room either killed him or set it up. That means they wanted him dead for a reason. My feeling is he saw or heard something he shouldn't have, and that person took the risk of killing the Pakhan's son to make sure he didn't talk.

I'm going to find out who it is.

Tonight gets me closer to answers because I become one of them.

"Raise your right hand," Father commands, staring at me with his deep green eyes, which mirror my own. Sometimes, looking at him is like staring at an older version of myself.

I obey.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

Caspian

My wrist is sore from my new tattoo, but it's a beauty.

Sometimes it's good to feel pain. It's distracting.

Distraction is something I probably need right now to deal with whatever my old man has up his sleeves for me.

My initiation was over two hours ago, but he asked me to hang back so we could talk.

I've been in his office since, going through my social media while I've waited. Everyone else is partying back at the house.

I live in Erebus House, where most of the heirs of the judges reside. It also happens to be the home of the Sigma Alpha Fraternity, and we're known for throwing the wildest house parties. Tonight is, of course, a celebration of our initiation, so

fuck knows what the guys could be up to now. They'll be partying for the entire weekend, getting wasted, fucked, and shit-faced stoned with whatever concoction of drugs they can make.

Thorne will be right in the mix of the wildness, which means I'll probably have to wait until tomorrow night or even the night after to speak to him.

I'm eager, but at the same time, I have to respect the excitement. I might even indulge myself a little, although I've already done my fair share of indulging over the summer.

I promised myself I'd take my sophomore year more seriously.

The lock on the door turns, and I straighten, swiveling around to sit on the sofa as opposed to lying back on the winged arm.

Father walks in dressed in his usual clothing. I changed, too, into a dress shirt and slacks before I came up here.

The corners of his mouth tip into a little smile, then it fades. Smiles like that are for moments like these. It means he's satisfied with tonight. What I don't know is why he wants to see me.

We weren't scheduled to meet until later in the week. He has this thing where he meets Thorne and me on a Wednesday for dinner. I call it a thing because it's unbecoming of him and doesn't fit his callous personality,. Especially regarding me.

To say things have been tense between us since the night of Zak's funeral is an understatement. After that night, I only spoke to him when I needed to, and it was very noticeable.

He acknowledges me with a nod and sits in the armchair opposite, crossing his legs at the ankles while he reaches for the humidor to grab his favorite Cubans.

"Congratulations, son," he says with a smirk.

"Thank you."

He holds out the humidor for me to take a cigar. I do to be polite, although I don't want it.

I smoke all kinds of shit, but what I don't like is this façade that looks like father and son spending quality time together when we aren't that. He wants something from me. What the fuck is it?

We both light up at the same time. He takes a long drag, and when he releases a ring of smoke and sets the cigar down on the ashtray, I realize he's ready to talk.

“I wanted to see you to discuss something with you.”

“What is it?” I raise my brows.

“WILLOW RAVENTHORN.”

There we go, and I was just waiting for her name to be dropped. I think he'd been gearing up to talk to me about her for weeks, but I knew he was waiting for something. It wasn't the right moment he was waiting for, but something else. Something that might have happened regarding Willow over the last few days.

“What about her?” I ask nonchalantly, as if her name doesn't stir the remnants of my dark soul.

“I'm sure you're aware she's starting here in two days.”

I raise my shoulders. “Yeah, sure, but so what? I haven't seen or spoken to her in years.” That's a half-truth but feels more like a lie. I went to see her one last time before I left for college. I went to my usual hiding place in the trees outside her bedroom, where I could quietly observe her without her seeing me.

That was a little over a year ago.

“Be that as it may, there are a few things I want to make sure are clear in case you run into her.”

“What kind of things? And the place is huge. We might not even see each other.”

“You'll see her.” He gives me a knowing look that seems to hold more meaning. It makes me wonder if he knew about me going to her house like a stalker. “She's been accepted to the apprenticeship program at the magazine. I would have loved to refuse the application, and even better, stop her from attending this school, but the laws we live by prevent me from doing so.”

Jesus... would he have gone that far? Why am I even surprised? Of course, he would.

Wouldn't I have done the same at one point? Or now?

I haven't forgiven her. All this time has passed, and that secret she kept still makes me crazy. I know it makes my father crazy, too. But he's not the one who's fucking attracted to her .

I can't even believe I can still admit that. I'm nineteen going on twenty, and one woman has managed to make me feel anything. The only way to get her out of my head is to fuck to forget, like the asshole I am.

"So, she'll be working at the magazine a few days a week?" I fill in, and he nods.

That's what Mom used to do here. The main office for *Real Magazine* is in New York, but because she had a passion for helping writers who were interested in working with her someday, the apprenticeship program was set up. Since *Real Magazine* is of the same caliber as *Time Magazine*, there was no hesitation in organizing the program.

Although I do wonder, if at the time, she had no problem setting things up because she was seeing Willow's father. I don't know, and I never will.

All I know is the program was important to her, so we continue to take care of it.

Zak did so when he first came here, and I took over after him.

"I don't see the problem," I state, holding his gaze.

"The problem is this; I just want to make sure my word still stands when it comes to her. Aside from work, I don't want you anywhere near her."

So, this is a fucking warning. Willow Raventhorn is forbidden to me.

"Outside of work, I have no reason to go near her." *Liar.* I'm such a fucking liar. I'm sitting here with my best poker face, acting like I haven't thought of her when I have.

How could I not? This is college. We have our freedom to do whatever the fuck we want, and she'll be living here on campus within my grasp.

That doesn't mean I'm going to act on my impulses.

I don't plan to.

“Remember you said that. Anyway, I'm not as worked up by the magazine because she'll be marrying Dorian before Christmas, and those people don't like their women working.”

I'm stuck on the words *marrying Dorian*.

What the actual fuck?

Willow is getting married?

How the fuck did that happen? I never knew she was promised to anyone, least of all to Dorian. It couldn't be anything other than some arrangement because he's not her type.

“She's getting married to Dorian?” I hate the way my voice changes. There's a slight rasp to it, one my father notices.

“Yes.” He gives me a tight-lipped smile. “It's to do with her inheritance. Obviously, I'm not overly fond Peter's family will be getting the Raventhorn inheritance and empire, but their union was agreed in blood.”

It's a marriage pact, so Dorian's family will get everything. It doesn't tip the balance in leadership right now, but it does in wealth and power, which could change the leadership structure if the need arose.

As much as we combine our wealth for the interest of the Brotherhood, that doesn't count for shit when getting the Raventhorn inheritance could place your net worth above everyone in the whole motherfucking society.

If there were any reason to remove the leader, the judge with the most wealth and power would be voted in, in his stead. That judge would not only become the leader of the Knights, but he would become the new Pakhan too. That is the law of the Oath.

My father is not going to like a threat like that hanging over his head, and it seems like Willow's father has thrown

one more dagger in the heart of mine. Timofey Raventhorn strikes again.

Was that motherfucker actually out to get my family? No one can fucking tell me he wasn't. He's screwed with us in every way possible, and the effects of his shit keep coming back to get us. And it's always in a way that ties our hands behind our backs.

Things have never been good between my father and me , but that doesn't mean I want him to lose everything or suffer. The possibility of him losing everything means it affects my legacy too.

“Did you know about the marriage pact?”

“Yes. However, Lillian was promised to Dorian. Had Lillian decided to stick around, both sisters would have had the wealth distributed equally. As it stands now, that is not the case. Because the pact was signed in blood, it must be fulfilled by the next living relative, which is Willow.”

His cool voice is a façade. He'd be a fool not to see the potential dangers in Dorian's family having so much power.

“You're just going to let them have all the power?” I narrow my eyes.

“We are descendants of Gael, and he was screwed over too when Raventhorn died.”

Gael was one of the Elder Knights. From the original twelve who formed the Knights. My father raised me on stories about him. He was always highlighting some conspiracy in the works amongst the brotherhood because Gael was murdered after Raventhorn died, and no one ever knew how. It reminds me of Zak.

“History taught me to choose my battles,” Father adds. “And wield power over the things I can control, which is why I don't want you going near Willow Raventhorn. Do you understand me?”

Loud and fucking clear, Father. I'm the pet again, and I'm to do as I'm told.

“You don’t need to worry about me and her,” I promise, but even as I say the words, I’m not sure the rebel in me won’t try to see Willow outside of work.

“I truly hope so. You do realize that you’re a Knight now, when I tell you to do something from now on, it’s a direct order.” Another strained smile lifts the hard line of his mouth. “There are consequences for disobeying direct orders.”

I smile back, showing him he’s not fazing me, although we both know the thing I loathe most of all is being controlled, especially by him.

“I understand perfectly.”

“Good to know you are loyal to me.”

To him. I hate how right I am sometimes. Everything is about him.

That’s fine. I’ll play the game as I have been. I still need to prove to him I can more than fill my brother’s shoes, and right now, I’m still only taking the first step.

“Loyal always and ever.” I bow, to which he gives me a narrowed look.

He’s trying to figure me out, but I’ve gotten too good at hiding, so he can’t.

I know he’s been as eager as me to find Zak’s killer, and he probably has some crazy surveillance set up on everybody. But the difference between him and me is exactly that. We’re different, so we approach things differently. He’s too close to the men he associates with to spot something suspicious, but I think I might.

At least, I hope. Whatever happens, and whatever I plan, what I need to bear in mind is this is my shot for *everything*. To get answers for Zak and prove myself as a Knight.

I can’t fuck things up in any shape or form, so I need to focus.

“Was there anything else to talk about?”

“Just one thing, while we’re on the topic of serious things.” He picks up the cigar again while I take a drag of mine. “I’d like to discuss the subject of your own marriage by the start of the new year. I think Prince Dustan’s daughter would be a good fit for you.”

Well, since Penelope LeBlanc seems to be a good fit for practically every guy on campus, there’s no reason she wouldn’t fit me. I don’t believe for one second, he thinks she’s a good fit for me, even if her father is the Prince of Monaco.

This is clearly another warning, a double-edged one. He’s warning me away from Willow again and also reminding me he owns me. I have to marry whomever he tells me to.

“As you wish,” I simply say, but he must know I’m not happy about that.

“Wonderful. You may leave now. I’ll see you and Thorne on Wednesday.”

“Of course.”

I put out my cigar and head out without looking back at him, although I can feel his eyes on me.

As soon as I step out of the building and the cold night air hits my face, reality hits me repeatedly, and I find myself thinking of Willow’s upcoming nuptials.

She’s actually getting married.

I wonder how she feels about it. I haven’t seen her in a long time, and while I think I know her, I might not. What I’m thinking of is her in the past.

So, she might be okay with Dorian.

I don’t fucking know.

I walk across campus, and before I even reach the quad, loud music greets me.

When I see the house I share with the fifteen other guys in the Sigma Alphas and people outside drinking and dancing, I already know I’m in for a wild night.

My thoughts are confirmed when I walk through the door. I've been to some wild parties back in high school, but the ones we hold here are more akin to something you'd see in someone's dark fucked-up fantasy.

The group of cheerleaders the guys christened *The Nymphs* are here, and they're all naked. I've never known if they were a perk because of who we are or if they made themselves that way.

Some are sitting on the sofa in the living room, allowing the guys to do lines of cocaine off their breasts; others are taking turns waiting to be fucked. That's the one difference between high school wild and college wild. Public sex.

Until I came here, I'd never seen it so out in the open before. There are at least ten couples having sex in the midst of the drinking, dancing, and drug-taking.

I spot Thorne walking out of the kitchen with a topless girl on each of his arms.

He smiles when he sees me and already looks wasted.

"Cousin, you better take your pick before the hot girls are gone," he laughs. "Where the fuck were you?"

"Long story."

He holds up a hand. "And one for another time. I need to fuck."

The girls giggle, and he kisses them both.

"Later, cuz," he mutters.

"I hope your dick doesn't fall off."

"Pot calling the kettle black."

He's right, so I give him a pass.

When he saunters away, I head upstairs to my room. I'm not in the mood for the party.

That doesn't mean the party doesn't follow me, or rather it's here already when I walk through the door.

Becky Hawthorn steps out of my en suite wearing nothing but the smile on her face and the heels she knows I like so much digging into my back as I pound into her.

Her platinum blonde hair is down and slinked over her right shoulder.

Her smile widens when she sees me looking at her, and her massive, surgically enhanced breasts bounce as she takes confident steps toward me.

“I knew you’d appreciate me waiting up here for you,” she coos.

“I told you not to try and figure me out.”

“And yet I never listen. That’s one of the things you like about me, though, isn’t it?”

She drops to her knees when she reaches me and starts undoing my belt.

She’s right about that not listening part, except tonight, I’m not going to stop her.

My dick springs free as she eases my boxers down, and she takes me into her pretty little mouth like the subservient she is.

Her blonde head starts bobbing up and down as she sucks my dick harder, and my balls tighten. But instead of seeing her, I imagine red, vibrant hair.

When she looks at me and smiles while she has my dick in her mouth, I see Willow’s face, and that makes me pump into her mouth like I’m going to destroy her. Just as I promised I would if she came near me.

I start fucking her face and imagine how Willow would look if this were her.

As I blow my load, I realize I’m a fool.

I can’t get Willow Ivanov out of my head because I still want her.

But now, she’s even more forbidden to me than she ever was.

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

WILLOW

If Dorian looks at my breasts and licks his lips one more time, I'm going to stab his eyes with my dinner fork.

Stabbing him might land me right back in the mental institution, or prison, but it just might be worth it because he wasn't just looking at me. Every time Elaine bent over to set the food down or serve it, he was staring at her breasts, too, and I caught him checking her out when she walked back to the kitchen.

Adrian saw him looking at me just now, and his disdain was clear.

We're at dinner. Elaine and Adrian invited Peter, Suzanna, Dorian's mother, and Dorian to dinner.

Elaine's been the perfect chef, cooking her finest meals, something we usually reserve for Christmas or other special occasions. Adrian has been an amazing host, and dare I say it, Peter and Suzanna are actually nice people. Peter was nothing like how he was at the meeting. In fact, he spoke to me about journalism and seemed interested in my course. Suzanna was the same, although she kind of went quiet when I said I wanted to pursue a career in journalism and work for the magazine when I graduated.

That was odd, and I might have tried to figure out what her silence meant if I weren't so distracted by her son ogling me right here in the open.

The three of them are sitting beside each other on one side of the table, while Elaine and I are opposite. Adrian is at the head, which is why he can see Dorian. I'm sure he caught him at least twice. He doesn't look happy about it, but I'm not sure he's going to say anything. I figured maybe he wouldn't because Peter is higher than him in the Bratva and the Knights' Council.

If that's the case, I think this might be my first real view into the politics, and that's one more thing to add to the list of

shit I don't like.

“So, are you looking forward to heading out to Raventhorn tomorrow?” Peter asks.

Switching my focus to him, I nod and smile. “I think it's going to be exciting and new. I'm nervous, but it's the good kind of nerves.” That's partly true.

The exciting and new parts of that answer are legit; the rest, not so much. Being at Raventhorn with his asshole son is going to open the door for things I don't want.

“I think that's how everyone starting there is going to feel. I was the same. Maybe worse.” He smiles, and again, I note how different he is than at the meeting, where he terrified me with the threat of death if I rejected my inheritance.

“I think you were worse, dear,” Suzanna concedes, and they both laugh. Like Elaine and Adrian, they were childhood sweethearts. Even if their marriage was arranged, I don't think it would have been a problem.

They talked about their families being close, so again, it would have been understandable for them to marry. It reminded me of the way my parents were close with Caspian's family. They were like that with Lucian's as well, though, not as much.

It makes me wonder if my father would have picked either of them for me. I wonder if it would have been Caspian. Probably not, since he chose Dorian, who was the same age as Lillian. So, it might have been Lucian.

There's no point deliberating over any of that now. I'm getting married to Dorian, and every time I think about it, a part of me dies.

“I was terrified,” Elaine says, cutting into my thoughts. She laughs. “It took me a while to get used to the campus life and the way things changed.”

“Same here,” Adrian adds. “Even though we had each other. It was weird how things just changed, but then it got better, quickly.”

“Raventhorn is a great college to study at.” Suzanna beams, tucking a lock of her dark brown hair behind her ear. “Isn’t that right, Dorian? You love it there.” She smiles proudly at her son, who is already looking at me with his seedy eyes.

“I absolutely do. College is about freedom and the chance to become the real you without restriction. I guess within reason, though.”

At twenty-one, Dorian is handsome with the classic looks you’d find on the big screen. He has unruly black hair, unnaturally bright blue eyes that look almost indigo, and a face with rich angles. I remember back in high school when girls would swoon over him. I’m sure that hasn’t changed, the same way I’m sure people would think I’m nuts to complain about marrying him.

Only the sane people would understand my qualms about being with a

perverted dick. I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone like him before.

“Sure,” I say gingerly.

“Let’s just say, you’re gonna love it.” He winks, and the gesture twists my stomach into knots.

“Let’s toast to college and the future.” Adrian raises his glass of wine.

Everyone else follows suit. I do, too, except I have orange juice. My godparents never let me even taste alcohol, although I know they’re aware I’ve had it several times at parties.

“To college and the future,” Peter agrees, and glasses clink.

Adrian starts talking about football, and suddenly, the conversation shifts to that with the upcoming nationals.

That’s when I catch Dorian looking at me again. In fact, I don’t think his eyes left me. It’s just me who looked away first.

Now that everyone's engaged in conversation, it's easier for him to single me out again and hide in plain sight while he taunts me. I keep my gaze trained on him like I'm challenging him. On seeing that, he smiles and runs his tongue over his bottom lip while he looks at my breasts.

Right, there was no mistake in that, and I'm not going to sit here and take it anymore.

I get up, and Elaine looks at me.

"You okay, sweetie?" she asks, breaking away from the conversation.

"Yeah. I need to rest for a bit. I feel a migraine coming on." Although I've never had a migraine in my life, I've used that excuse successfully many times over the years.

"Oh, do you need me to get you anything?"

"No, I'm fine. Some painkillers will do the trick." I nod, so she doesn't worry. "I'll try to come down and say good night."

"Okay, if you need me to do anything, let me know."

"Of course."

Quickly, I walk away, avoiding Dorian's lingering gaze. Everyone is still talking about football, so I doubt they would have noticed my discomfort.

By the time I'm out of their line of sight, I dart up the stairs and rush to my room.

Once the door closes, I rest my back against the solid wood and release the breath I've been holding. My lungs burn as I exhale, and my skin feels so hot I feel like ripping it off. Those good old nerves coil at the base of my spine, and when my chest tightens, I automatically start counting backward, then fill my head with the words of my favorite Black Lab song until I calm down.

That marks twice this month that I've staved off a panic attack. Neither might have been as full-blown as the ones as I experienced years ago while I was at the hospital, but the fact that I still get them worries me. It's a sign that I'll never really be normal again.

Who could be when shit keeps happening?

I'm enraged that the one thing I was looking forward to is being taken away from me, and I feel suppressed and suffocated with this wedding coming up.

The years have been so unkind to me that I've rarely thought of marriage. I've had no relationships at all, and I'm still a virgin.

The only boy I've ever kissed is Caspian, and that kiss ravaged me from the inside out. Like he was staking his claim on me, heart, body, mind, and soul.

Fuck. He said he'd destroy me, but he already did so long before that kiss. That kiss just destroyed me in other ways, so when I felt desire, it was always for him.

Jesus, look at me still thinking about him while the man I'm to marry is downstairs.

When my skin starts heating again, I head to my en suite and splash water from the cold tap at the sink over my face several times.

Feeling a little better, I grab the towel and dry off, but when I straighten and see Dorian's reflection in the mirror gazing at me, I nearly jump out of my skin.

I whirl around to face him, meeting that uncanny smile of his, which becomes more sinister, and I realize there's something more to him I don't like. Something dark and disturbing.

I could say the same thing about Caspian, but this guy makes my skin crawl, and there's a sense of familiarity about him that feels different from the times I've seen him in the past. But what would that be? And when?

Forget that. He's here now. In my bathroom.

We're alone together.

"Migraine?" he states. "Good excuse."

"What the hell are you doing in here?"

“Is that any way to speak to your future husband?” He chuckles and walks up to me. I try to step back but bump into the sink.

“You’re in my room. That is not okay. It’s also not okay for you to question me.”

“Mouthy. I don’t remember you being mouthy. Lillian was, though.”

At the mention of my sister, my chest squeezes.

“She couldn’t shut up either,” he adds.

“How dare you talk about my sister like that?”

He balls a hand and slams his fist into the wall above me, making me jump. I try to move away, fearing he’s going to punch me, but he grabs my arm and holds me in place, then gets up in my face.

“I don’t know who you think you’re talking to, but you need to watch yourself.” He grits his teeth, and darkness washes over his face. He intensifies his grip on my arm so tight it burns.

“You’re hurting me.”

“That’s the idea, sweetheart. Now, you listen to me. I own you now.” That smile returns to his face, and the darkness becomes menacing.

It terrifies me, and I know in my soul to be careful of this guy.

Mortification sweeps through me when he grabs my left breast and squeezes.

“Stop touching me.”

“No.” Instead, he pulls my top down and pins me between the wall and sink while he moves away the cup of my bra so he can see my naked breast.

I squirm as I try to free myself, but the sleazy grin that inches across his face suggests he’s getting off on my attempt to fight.

My fucking doctor hasn't even seen this much of me naked, and it breaks my heart that this fucking asshole has forced me to reveal that much.

“Stop it. I—”

He cuts off my words by shoving his hand over my mouth and slamming my head back into the tiled wall.

Doom settles in the pit of my stomach when I think of what he might do to me next, but I thank God and his heavenly host when footsteps echo on the floor outside my room.

It's then I realize I never heard Dorian's when he came in. He was just there behind me as if he appeared from nowhere.

Cursing under his breath, he adjusts my top, fixing my clothes. “Saved, Princess, but just for the moment. I can't wait to fuck your brains out.”

Fuck your brains out?

With horror, I realize that's probably what he came up here to do—rape me.

Just as Elaine walks into the bathroom, he moves away, but it's clear I'm upset, and something untoward happened between Dorian and me.

“Everything okay?” Elaine asks, her eyes shifting from Dorian to me.

“Yes,” Dorian replies. “I heard Willow mention her migraine, so I came to see how she was.”

A smile spreads across Elaine's face, but I can tell from the way she's looking at him that she's not buying his bullshit.

“That's so sweet of you, Dorian.” Her eyes brighten. “Call me old-fashioned—I know you two are getting married, but I don't allow Willow to have men in her room.”

Thank you, Elaine. Thank you so much.

That's bullshit, too, because it's the first I'm hearing it, and Lucian is always allowed in my room. Then again, everyone can see we're friends, so maybe that's why. Had it been

another guy, and had I been the type of teen to give her trouble, Elaine might have enforced that non-existent rule.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I apologize. It won’t happen again.” Dorian becomes the perfect gentleman.

Fuck him. Disgusting bastard.

He would have forced himself on me if Elaine hadn’t come up here.

“That’s okay, dear.”

“Well, I’ll get back downstairs, then.” Dorian gives her the sweetest smile then looks back at me. “Hope you feel better. Remember what I said. It will help.”

What a bastard. He wants me to remember his promise to fuck my brains out and that he’ll own me. Message received, loud and clear.

I say nothing. All I do is stare.

With that easy wink, he leaves, but I don’t miss the hard look Elaine gives him once his back is turned.

I notice I can hear his footsteps now, but I think it’s because he’s not sneaking away the way he must have crept up here before.

Elaine moves closer to me the moment his footsteps fade and pulls me in for a hug as if she knows I just went through a bad ordeal.

“What happened?” she mutters in my ear.

I hold back tears. I’m not going to cry because the time for crying is over. When I leave here tomorrow, I won’t have Elaine or Adrian to run to. I might be just a girl, but I’m not. I’m an adult now, so I have to summon the courage and start acting like one.

“I’m okay,” I decide to say.

Elaine pulls out of the hug and cups my face. “What happened, Willow? I wasn’t born yesterday. He didn’t look like he was checking on your non-existent migraine.”

“You knew I was lying?” I sniffle.

“Of course, I did. Your mother trusted me to be a mother to you. If I didn’t know simple things like that, I didn’t do my job right.”

I always find solace in her words. I do so now, but at the same time, I wonder if she ever knew I was lying about agreeing that Lillian ran away. I shove the thought out of my mind. There’s enough to worry about.

“Thanks, Elaine.”

“It’s okay. I thought you might have needed a break from the table because of him, so of course, when he left the table, too, claiming he wanted to use the bathroom, I decided I was going to head up here. He tried to do something inappropriate, didn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“Christ, what a bastard.”

“I don’t want to marry him, Elaine,” I whisper, shaking my head. “I don’t want to marry someone like that. Why the hell did Dad even promise Lillian to him?”

She shakes her head. “I don’t think it was about that. Peter was a very good friend of your father’s. So, it was business that was arranged in what your father thought was fair. The same way your parents were compassionate when they made Adrian and me your godparents because we couldn’t have kids.”

When I think of my parents now, I can imagine what must have happened. Dad was so strict with certain things, but I remember him being tactful, too, so that explains a lot.

“I think when it came to it, he was thinking that Dorian’s family would get some of the inheritance, and I guess whoever he chose for you, if he’d gotten the chance to choose.”

“It’s not fair to me now.” I purse my lips together.

She takes both my hands into hers and gives them a gentle squeeze. “I’m so sorry, my darling girl. There are so many things that happened to you that weren’t fair. This is just

another. The oath was signed in blood always, so this is out of our hands. If it were in our hands, Adrian and I would fight tooth and nail. So, you just have to be the strong woman I know you can be. You hear me?"

With great reluctance, I nod, and I worry even more.

How can I be strong when my choices have been taken away from me?

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

WILLOW

Lucian speeds way too fast down the freeway, and his hands grip the steering wheel like he's going to break it.

I've just finished telling him and Eilish my newest debacle.

We're on our way to Raventhorn and talking about my latest shit. That wasn't the way I wanted to spend a journey that was supposed to be exciting.

Seeing how disheartened they look now makes me regret telling them anything.

Eilish is sitting in the back of the Range Rover, and I'm next to Lucian in the front.

I probably should have spoken to them before now, but it was the kind of thing I wanted to talk about face to face. Lucian spent the summer in Russia with his parents, and Eilish was in Paris with hers. They both came back over the weekend.

"I'm sorry, guys," I muttered, bringing my hands together.

"What are you apologizing for?" Eilish leans forward, resting her hands on the back of my seat. Her blonde hair picks up in the wind, and she smooths it back.

"I didn't mean to ruin the journey. I've talked nonstop for nearly half an hour."

"We'd both be offended if you hadn't told us," Lucian says, and Eilish agrees. "I don't know what the fuck to say."

"Did you guys know anything about the whole arranged marriage thing?"

We've never spoken about that before.

"Not so much." Lucian tilts his head to the side, allowing a lock of his black hair to fall over his eye.

"But you knew something?"

“Again, not so much. You know things are touchy when it comes to my family.”

He’s referring to his stepfather, Viktor. I hate playing devil’s advocate, but I’ve never seen anything wrong with him, but Lucian always has something to say. In my heart, I know it’s because his real father is still in prison, and he believes if he weren’t there, his parents would be together. With that said, his relationship with Viktor is strained at best, but he does what he needs to for his mother’s sake.

“Viktor’s a judge, but he’ll only force me to do shit I don’t want to do if it’s absolutely necessary,” he explains. “The only thing I can think of like that was the Reaping. I remember when he first told me about it, I was ready to kick his ass, and I was only ten. It took me years to adjust, and in the end, I did it for myself, not for him, even though I realized he actually didn’t want me to do it. So, I don’t think he’s going to push a wife on me.”

I remember Lucian’s Reaping all too well. It took place in Uzbekistan, so I couldn’t have just snuck over there the way I did for Caspian’s. To say I was worried as hell is putting it mildly.

“The same goes for me,” Eilish adds in. “Things are weird with my family, too, but then they always were.”

I twist around so I’m staring at her.

There’s something going on with her. Something’s been going on for years, and I still don’t know what it is. She shut down in ways and stopped sharing her deepest feelings. Confessing that just now sounds like the old Eilish.

I met Lucian when I was eight, and Eilish joined our band when we were ten. She was adopted by her family at that age and actually moved from Boston to New York. So, going to Raventhorn is like heading home for her. Except I don’t think it’s a good thing. She’s never, ever spoken about that time in her life. Understandable because her real family was killed. That’s all we know. We don’t know if that family consisted of a mother, father, or any siblings.

Neither Lucian nor I have ever prodded. When we first met her, she didn't speak at all for six months, then suddenly, she did. Probably when she realized she wasn't going to get rid of us.

"Babe." Lucian reaches his hand back to take hers, and she holds it briefly until he lets go and returns to holding on to the steering wheel.

They're still not together, but I wish they were.

"Al's a judge, too," Eilish mutters. "But he's never going to force me to do something like that. He told me so. I think it might be a little different for you, though, because of who your father was."

I dip my head with remorse and nod when I return my gaze to her.

Our fathers—real, step, adopted, or otherwise—form the current lineup of judges on the Knight's council.

Adrian got voted in because my father willed it so, but he's the same level of judge as Eilish's Al and Lucian's Viktor. So, he hasn't got the same type of power as the first three.

It's them who hold my future in their hands. All my plans for having some freedom are thwarted. It almost feels like some invisible plan to control me.

I don't know. The more I've thought about it over the last while, the more it seemed that way, but when I pick it all apart, I don't know if I'm important enough to control in such a way.

"I don't know what to do," I rasp out. "I'm marrying this asshole in a few months and heading out to college for what?"

"Are you kidding me?" Lucian glares at me. "Do you want my advice when it comes to Dorian?"

"Of course."

"Great, here it is. Fuck him."

My skin turns red instantly.

"What?"

“Fuck his ass.”

Eilish bursts out laughing. So does he.

“You idiot, we thought you were being literal.” Eilish smacks him upside his head. “Please tell me you aren’t telling Willow to fuck that asshole.”

“Not that way. So, fuck him as in screw with him. “

“How the hell am I going to do that when I’m practically engaged to him?”

He holds up a finger like he just got some bright idea. “There you go. That’s the magic word, *practically*. You aren’t engaged, Willow. So, my advice to you is to live accordingly. And that threat about owning you is fucking shit.”

“He was being serious.”

“Of course, he was serious, but you can’t let that bother you. It sounds like this wedding will be in December, just after your birthday. That gives you close to three months of freedom. If I were you, I’d live it up, and this time, I do mean fucking when I tell you to fuck every man in sight.”

Eilish slaps him again. “What is the matter with you? You can’t tell her that. That is the worst advice ever. You know what those people are like.”

“Woman, what the hell is wrong with you? You can’t hit me like that while I’m driving.”

“I just did.”

“And I stand by my advice.” Lucian looks at me and widens his eyes. “Freedom, Willow. You earned it after the shit you’ve been through. Don’t let the system own you. Fuck knows what’s going to happen when you two get married, so live now while you can. You know Dorian will be living it up with every nubile female with legs before and after your wedding.” He glances back at Eilish in the rearview mirror, who suddenly seems more agreeable.

“Okay, so maybe your advice might not be all that bad now,” she says.

“I just wish none of it were happening,” I say, and they both cast sorrowful glances my way.

“I know what will cheer you up. We should definitely go to this,” Eilish says with a radiantly mischievous smile. She reaches into her bag and pulls out a flyer.

It’s for a frat party the Sigma Alphas are throwing at their house.

I got the same one in my sorority pack, which arrived last week.

Eilish and I are going to be part of the Theta Alphas.

There are six fraternities and sororities at Raventhorn. Three male, three female.

Both the Sigma and Theta Alphas are sororities reserved for heirs and relatives of the judges.

Of course, I also heard about the wild parties they throw on campus, so I expect this to be like that.

Lucian smiles when he catches sight of the flyer. “Fuck, yeah. We should go. It’s tonight at the Verge, the campus club. I heard they’re doing all kinds of shit for that party.”

“Let me have a look,” I try to cheer up and take the flyer.

When she hands it to me, I scan over it and wonder exactly how wild it will be. I’m all in for parties, but I don’t know about wild. I was hoping to settle into my new home and look at the classes I wanted to sign up for. I knew they’d be doing a lot for freshmen this week, and it’s a slow one so that we can get used to campus life, but I didn’t want to hit the parties until this weekend.

“I heard they hired the guys who run the Dark Odyssey to design the party,” Lucian says.

“What’s the Dark Odyssey?” I ask, and they both exchange wild glances.

“Please tell me you’ll start taking my advice from tonight.” Mischief dances in his eyes.

“Why? What’s the Dark Odyssey?”

“It’s an infamous sex club.”

My jaw drops. “What the hell? And how do you know that?”

He looks at me like I just landed from Mars. “Willow, you do know I’m a crazy sex god, right? All that hot Italian blood flowing through my veins and all. I’m a man who knows his way around the female anatomy. So, of course, I know things like that.”

“Oh, please, no one wants to hear about your sexcapades,” Eilish cuts in.

“I hadn’t started talking, but now that you mention it, I feel obligated to inform you that, I Lucian Sokolov, your resident sex god, already have chicks lining up to suck my dick.”

“Eww.” I make a gagging sound. Big mistake. When he laughs, I realize to my embarrassment that was ultimately the wrong thing to do.

“God, so innocent. Poor girl,” he taunts.

“You fucking pig,” Eilish chides, looking at him with disgust.

“Just be grateful your father didn’t promise you to me. You’d be roasting pig every Sunday.”

I bite back a smile. Eilish is a vegetarian and always gets testy when the subject of eating animals comes up, which is continuous when we’re around Lucian.

“I wouldn’t be cooking anything of the sort,” she throws back. “You would be eating tofu and spring veg.”

“Aww, baby, you thought that far ahead to what you’d cook me if we got hitched?” He feigns innocence, placing his hand at his heart.

“Bastard, remind me why I’m friends with you again.”

I shake my head at them and continue holding on to that smile. If either sees me, it will cause a whole other argument. Eilish will call me a traitor, and Lucian will think I’m taking his side.

“Anyway, getting back to my knowledge of this party, the point is I know what to expect.”

“So, it’s going to be a sex party?” I look at the flyer again. Nothing is mentioned about that. I didn’t think it would be.

“It’s a whatever you want it to be party. When you heard wild, they meant something else, and this just highlights that college will be a very different experience from what you imagined. We’re the heirs of people who belong to a powerful secret society, meaning, we’re going to be associating with people who can have whatever they want. Whatever it is.”

“I’m here for that,” Eilish says, raising her hands and bopping her shoulders like she’s dancing to her favorite tune.

“Me too, babe. You in, Willow Raventhorn? You have the name. Don’t let your *great-great-great-great-great-great* grandpapa down. Pretty sure I left off a few greats, but you get the point.”

“I do, and yes, I’m here for that, too.”

“Then let’s party!” He lets out a loud whoop, like when his team wins a football game at school.

In return, I smile a smile I don’t feel, but I do it for them both. They deserve to be happy and excited today. My problems aren’t theirs, and it’s not fair for me to keep lumbering them with my baggage.

I don’t know what I’m going to do. I can’t imagine taking Lucian’s advice and essentially becoming a slut, but the aspect of being free, at least in my mind for three months, is appealing.

I just have to figure out what I want that to mean.

Maybe I could still use that freedom to do what I can to look into what happened to Lillian. More than anything, I’d love to do that.

Being able to leave campus and be away without someone checking in on me all the time to see how I am is going to be good.

Half an hour later, we pull up at the mammoth-sized metal gates that have the Raventhorn crest on either side.

Goosebumps rush over my skin at the sight of the beauty, and that's just the gate.

A guard walks out of the security station, and we get out our ID passes.

There's an immediate change in his reaction when he looks at mine. I guess it's to do with my name. His reaction is completely different from how I was treated at the Academy.

"Welcome to Raventhorn University. I hope you enjoy your stay."

"Thank you," we all mutter in unison.

It's hard to believe I haven't been here before, but since it's also the Knights' headquarters, no one is allowed here until they're supposed to be here.

As the gates open and we drive through, my heart seizes when my eyes catch sight of the twelve colossal-sized statues lining the driveway.

They're knights. *The Knights*.

The twelve Elder Knights: Cypress, Erebus, Lapetus, Boreus, Gael, Adriel, Amergin, Lochru, Myrrdin, Erik, Blade, and Raventhorn, who is at the head of them.

Their statues must be at least a hundred feet tall.

My parents raised me with all the legendary stories about them, and they told me about this part, too. About the feeling you get when you first drive onto the campus and see them.

Dad described it as momentous and breathtaking. Despite my worries, I feel exactly that now.

The statues are made of stone, and I feel like I could have been pulled onto the set of the *Lord of the Rings* or some other fantasy film that drags you out of this reality.

Each Knight is depicted in a special way in a different fighting stance. There's one with two long swords, another couple with their swords and shields. Some have the capes

from their tunics billowing in the wind and fearsome expressions on their faces. They all look like the titans of old.

The titan of them all, though, is Raventhorn himself.

By the time we reach his statue, my nerves are tingling.

He stands tall and proud, just the way I imagined him to look.

His hair is long and flowing past his shoulders. He has a broad sword in one hand raised in the air and a shield in the other hand. On his shoulder sits a raven.

No one ever knew his real name, but I guess that was why he was so good at keeping secrets and how everything I know all began.

“Look at him, Red,” Lucian says in an almost reverent whisper, calling me by the nickname he gave me when we were kids because of my hair color.

“I know.” My voice is barely audible. I feel that same force that compels a sense of fervency.

I’m still looking at the statue of Raventhorn when we drive by. I turn to see it properly in all its glory, and I wonder how he’d feel if he knew I was the last one left in the whole bloodline.

The last Raventhorn, and possibly the weakest.

I’ve never been weak, but I feel like it, and I don’t want to.

It’s the thing I never want to be, but every day, I fear I might never be anything more than that.

It’s a sordid thought to have riddling my mind when today is the beginning of the rest of my life.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

WILLOW

We managed to get on the two o'clock tour of the university grounds.

The tour took a little over three hours, and even when it ended, we were all so fascinated by everything we saw, we could have kept going for another three hours.

Raventhorn University has twenty-one schools. Twenty are spread across four campuses, and one is shared with Harvard.

The courses range from law to medicine, to the professional arts and social sciences. They practically have all the main courses here, and a degree from this university is worth its weight in gold anywhere in the world.

Not only are the buildings for each school phenomenal, but Raventhorn

has amazing architecture throughout, and I could tell straight away that the design was inspired by distinguished European universities like Oxford and Cambridge in England. A majority of the buildings also reflect gothic-looking designs like the castles in Russia and Romania.

For instance, the art history building looked like something Dracula would have lived in, while the English department looked like somewhere Victor Frankenstein would have been doing his experiments.

Yup, I live my life in way too many classic novels. But I love the escape. It was my mother who got me hooked on reading, while Caspian's mother got me addicted to writing.

When I was little, I used to write about everything I saw. It was her idea to get a notebook and start jotting things down. Very soon after, I had my own Willow Chronicles, and as the years went by, I built up my stories.

It was only after my parents died that I stopped, and I didn't pick up a notebook again until I was out of the mental hospital.

As our tour went past *Real Magazine*, it was like something was calling to me to come inside and work.

It made me eager to start my apprenticeship. I'm supposed to go there for orientation tomorrow with my supervisor, and I can't wait.

I have a feeling anything like that is going to help get me through this crazy time.

The tour ended at Raventhorn Hall, where I know the Knights meet. This is where Adrian and the other members of the council meet once a week, and the other members who are supposed to be in attendance, once a month.

The building is huge, but there's a bigger one in the city that is used for the yearly meetings all men in the Brotherhood attend.

We were shown that much of the hall for obvious reasons, and once the guides were finished with us, we were handed over to the presidents of the Theta and Sigma Alphas, who were tasked with showing us where the students live. There we split up, bidding goodbye to Lucian until the party later.

I know I shouldn't feel so attached to him the way I do because things will probably change for all of us. High school was high school, and we'd been with most of the kids there from when we were babies. The university is four hundred times bigger with people from all over the world.

Things are bound to change. They already are because we're in separate courses.

He's doing computer science, while I'm doing journalism and Eilish business.

I'm also doubting any prospective girlfriend is going to like me hanging on to Lucian like my life depends on him.

The president of the Theta Alphas is a girl called Misha Romanov. The moment I heard the surname, like everyone else, I knew her to be the daughter of one of the judges. Judge number six and seven are the ones I only know by name.

Misha is built like a Barbie doll, and in her pink summer dress, she reminds me of Elle Woods from *Legally Blonde*, although I haven't pegged her for being as nice.

From the way she spoke as she started showing us around, I got stuck-up-bitch vibes, so I just paid attention to the tour.

There are twelve manor houses named after the twelve Knights and are only for the heirs or relatives of the members of the Knights' Council. Each house accommodates twelve people. Six of those houses double as the frat and sorority houses.

The university also has ten dorms, which house two hundred students in each and are for those member heirs who aren't part of the council.

The whole accommodation area looks like a little town with its own shops, banks, restaurants, and coffeehouses. All the buildings have the same European vibes, with ivy-covered cobbled walls and lush green grass surrounding them.

I could imagine a person never leaving the grounds for their entire stay at Raventhorn. That would be sad and unique all at the same time.

Once Misha is finished showing us around, we're taken to Myrrdin House.

The route there goes past Erebus and Cypress House, home of the Sigma Alphas.

As we walk past the grassy grounds of both contemporary three-story houses, I think of Caspian and wonder which he might live in.

Being here is almost like a trip back to years ago when we lived near each other and used to meet in the meadow.

Would he speak to me if he saw me?

Would I want him to?

Fuck, I'm doing it again, thinking of him instead of forgetting him like he told me to.

Shoving him out of my mind for the umpteenth time, I focus on where I'm going.

We reach Myrrdin House five minutes later, and the same effect washes over me as when I first saw it.

The house makes me think of somewhere a poet would live. It's in keeping with the design of the other buildings on the premises, but it's the only house that's right by the river. That makes it even more beautiful.

Adding to the beauty is a stone bridge that connects to the house.

Once we step inside, we gather in the living room with the four other freshman girls in our group. There we meet the five additional girls who already live here.

The living room is beautiful with its high ceilings made of wooden beams. I would have loved to look around a little, but I get that stuck-up-bitch vibe again when I look at the girls who live here.

It's clear we're not going to get a tour of the house and any viewing will have to be done in our own time. Or at least me. The quizzical haughty stares seem to only be cast my way.

Of course, they would be looking at me like that. I'm Willow Raventhorn. My parents were killed, my sister went 'missing,' and I was in a mental institution for two years. I'm probably this week's gossip.

Misha stands at the head of us and plasters a phony-as-hell smile on her face.

"Welcome to Myrrdin House, ladies, one of the two houses that belong to the Theta Alphas. I just wanted to go over some house rules and other things before you head off to your rooms." Casually, she flicks a perfectly manicured hand to her left where the five stand. "These are Kelly, Amanda, Rachel, Yuliana, and Skye. Along with me, they are your superiors regardless of who your father is, adopted or otherwise, or what your daddy's surname is."

Of course, she looks at Eilish and me as she speaks. Again, message received, and those stuck-up-bitch vibes I was getting

were real.

I feel like saying something, but I wouldn't know what.

“Given who we are in this particular sorority, we thankfully don't have any of the stringent requests the other sororities have here or at other universities,” she explains.

That makes sense, given that you have to belong to a sorority or frat here whether you want to or not. But she's just talking about the Theta Alphas. I heard the Sigma and Theta Kappas still make you go through hazing, and it's hell.

“That said, we still require certain behavior and a standard which we expect from all of you. You'll find the list of rules and expectations in your bedrooms. Please follow all of them. We don't take too kindly to shit or rule breakers. Is that understood?”

“Yes,” I reply along with the other freshman girls.

“Perfect. The one most important rule I want to highlight is cleanliness and awareness of noise. The house and your room must be kept clean at all times, and because this is one of the party houses, expect a lot of noise. We host parties up to three times a month, and they are wild. If you are studying or the noise bothers you, I advise you to go elsewhere. That's it for the moment. If you have any questions, feel free to speak to me or Kelly, my second-in-command.” She flicks her hair over her shoulder. “You may go. Your rooms have your names on the doors.”

When she motions to go up the stairs, we do.

I dare not breathe until I get to the top of the stairs, and I can't see Misha or any of the others anymore.

I cut Eilish a glance, and she makes a face.

The first two rooms are for the two girls behind us. The next two are for the last two.

I smile when I see mine and Eilish's rooms are right next door to each other.

Straightaway, I know that must be our parents doing. The rooms are also at the side of the house so I can see the river

and the bridge from the landing. It's so beautiful. The view from here reminds me of being at my grandparents' vacation home in Russia near Ruskeala Mountain.

Excitedly, we dash into our rooms to check them out.

A sharp breath leaves my lips when I go in mine and see I have more than a *room*. It's an apartment.

There's a living room with a flat-screen TV on the wall and brown leather sofas— a little kitchenette with my own refrigerator, cupboards, and a stove.

The floor is carpeted throughout this section of the apartment and stops at the double sliding doors leading out to a private terrace, which I also seem to share with Eilish.

I make my way out there and take a greedy gulp of the fresh air, savoring the view. There's a little pathway that goes right onto the bridge.

This is perfect, absolutely perfect. If nothing else, it will help in moments when I just need the tranquility of nature to calm me.

I head back inside and go to the bedroom which is at least two times bigger than my last. The view from my window brings another smile to my face.

The bridge and the river are in my direct line of sight.

Relief floods me for seeing all that I have. I'm the last person to be a bitch, but I'm glad I don't have to mix with the other girls too much, or at all, if I don't want to. I imagined fighting for space in the fridge and over cooking times. Worse of all, sharing a bathroom.

I've always been grateful I never had to share anything, even when I lived with Lillian.

The décor of the wallpaper inside my room is different from the rest of the apartment. It's soft pink and gold with a smooth satin finish. The colors compliment the silky sheets on the king-sized bed in the center and creamy wooden shelves lining the left side of the wall.

Everything looks like it was designed with me in mind. The more I look around, the more I realize it probably was.

The last thing I see is a tall vase of yellow roses on the floor by the desk.

I walk over to it and reach for the little tag with Adrian and Elaine's names written on it. There's a gift, too.

I open it, and my heart expands with love when I see the framed picture inside.

It's of my parents and Elaine and Adrian when they must have been the same age as me.

The four of them are standing together at the statue of Raventhorn.

They look so young it's scary and so carefree. Elaine has the same hearty smile, and Adrian looks as serious as ever. It's difficult to look at my parents without feeling the pain of losing them and knowing what happened to them years after this moment.

There's a letter inside.

I open that, too. It's from Adrian.

DEAREST WILLOW,

Welcome to Raventhorn. I hope your big day was as exciting and intriguing as it was for us.

I thought you'd like this picture, regardless of what happened to your parents. I wanted to show you them in love and happiness, just like Elaine and me.

That picture is of us on our first day.

I thought you'd like to be close to Eilish, so Al and I arranged for your rooms to be next to each other.

The best thing you can have in a strange new place is a friend.

That includes me. I'll never be your father, but I hope you can consider me as such and call on me whenever you need

me.

I'm just a phone call away, and I'll be on campus every Thursday.

Congratulations, my girl.

Here's to the rest of your life.

Love always,

Adrian

P.S- The flowers are from Elaine. She loves you, too.

THE WORDS BRING a smile to my face and melt my heart even more.

Eilish appears at the door smiling from ear to ear. Her smile brightens when she sees my room.

“My God, this is beautiful. My room looks the same, except the colors are blue and gold, and I have white roses,” she says. “Did you get a letter, too?”

I hold it up, and she moves closer. She puts her hand on her heart when I show her the picture.

“Oh my. They hardly look any different from us. I got a picture, too, of Al giving Gina a piggyback ride on their first day here. They look scary young.”

“I thought scary, too, but it's nice.”

“And I miss them.” A tear which surprises me tracks down her cheek.

Eilish is always arguing with her parents. Things haven't been too bad over the last year or so, but prior to that, it was really bad.

“I figured you would at some point.”

“It's crazy, right? I was counting down the days to get here. Now we're here, and I miss my parents. Gina cried for over an hour this morning, and I nearly allowed her to bring

me here. I thought it would be worse, though, if we said goodbye here.”

I agree with that. “I think that was why Elaine and Adrian were so agreeable to me heading out with you and Lucian. I was counting down, too, but now that we’re here, it’s not as exciting as I hoped it would be.”

Worry crosses her face, and she reaches out to touch my arm.

“Are you okay, Willow?”

“No.”

“Do you want to sit and talk for a while?”

I nod.

We’re supposed to get our books in an hour, and then we have orientation. That’s where we’ll split because they’re doing it in alphabetical order by surname.

We sit cross-legged on the edge of my bed like we do when we’re at my house.

“I’m really sorry about Dorian, Willow. I truly am and wish I could break you free. I’m sure Lucian feels the same way.”

“I wish I could break free, too.”

“I wanted you to have true love.”

“Is there even such a thing?” I must sound like such a cynic.

She shrugs. “I don’t know, maybe not, but I wanted you to have it if it does exist. You’re a good person, and you’ve been nice to me for the whole time you’ve known me.” There’s a flicker of sadness in her eyes. “You didn’t have to be as nice as you were when we first met, and I appreciated it. I appreciated you.”

“I know you did. What’s it like being back here in Boston?” I chance asking her.

She blows out a ragged breath. “I don’t know. I guess we’re not far from New York. We never were, but it felt like it to me. I’ve been back a few times by myself.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I went to the house my family used to live in. It’s still abandoned, and kids are calling it haunted. It looks it. Feels it, too.”

That’s the most she’s said about her past in a long time, and she gave slightly more context to her inner thoughts.

“Do you want to talk about that? Or anything else that might be bothering you?”

She’s still popping pills. I found out she was taking Valium at one point, and it wasn’t prescribed. She’s still taking something because her moods go up and down. I think she might have moved on to something a little more hardcore now, which worries me.

“I’ll be okay, Willow.”

That’s what she keeps telling me.

“Will you?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. I do, however, think Lucian is right about the freedom thing.” I hate the way she subtly changes the subject back to me. “It’s what I would do. Please, for the love of God, do not lose your virginity to that asshole.”

“Not you, too.” I go with the change in topic, once again hoping she’ll talk to me when she’s ready.

“I’m serious.”

“You want me to be the Raventhorn slut. Hey, I could add that to my list of fucked-up credentials.”

“I think there are more fucked-up people here than you think. Anyway, I highly doubt you want to remember Dorian as being your first. That would be complete shit.” She nods with determination.

When that good old mischief sparks in her eyes, I know we’re going to talk about her favorite subject—men.

“I think it would.”

“Well, you know what to do. Willow, the men here are hot and actual college men, not the high school boys we’re used to. That party tonight is the perfect playground.”

“You want me to lose my virginity at a party?”

“I’m just saying if it happens, go with it. The Dark Odyssey parties are masquerade themed, and at the club in Chicago, you’re given a silver coin to hand to the person you want to spend the night with. You only take off your mask if you want to reveal yourself.”

“And how do you know all this?” I smirk.

“Don’t worry, I haven’t been, unlike Lucian. God knows how he got in. I just have my sources. Guys who’ve been and are into all that stuff.”

“I’ll go, but I’m not going to hook up.”

“Fine, at least you’re going.”

“I’m just trying to make myself feel better. Everything here has been so nice so far. I don’t want to spoil it with my bad mood.”

“*Everything?* I know you definitely don’t mean...” she pauses for effect and lowers her voice. “Misha. *Queen Bee.*”

I giggle. “Everything except her,” I whisper back. “She was totally talking about us earlier.”

“Yass, of course, she was. Glad to see the tone is set for what we can expect. And did you see the rules and regs?”

“Not yet.”

Eilish holds back a laugh as she slips off the bed and pads across to the dresser. She picks up a large pink envelope and returns with it.

When she plants herself back on the bed, she reaches into the envelope and pulls out a document that looks like it has at least ten pages in it.

“Christ, is that all the rules?”

“Sure is.” Her bright brown eyes twinkle. “I read the first page and decided to come and see you so we could laugh together.”

She walks back to the door to close it, then we both start reading the first page together.

The moment she bursts out laughing is the same time I do. It’s at rule number five.

Apparently, we’re not allowed to wear pink on Wednesdays.

Rule six is just as bad. If we want to have any men stay over, we have to tell either her or Kelly first.

“What is this, high school?” I laugh.

“I knew that would make you laugh. Behold my success.”

We continue to read through the rules, which are mostly hilarious, but I doubt we’ll find it funny when we have to start living by said rules.

Soon, it’s time to head out again, and it gets to the point in the evening where I find myself alone.

It’s dark now, and I’m on my way back to the house with my books.

When I reach the corner by the bridge, I feel eyes on me, so I turn but find no one there. The place is empty.

I sigh, shaking my head at myself. The last thing I need here is paranoia to set in, but I could swear someone was watching me.

But why would they be?

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

CASPIAN

The Verge is run by the seniors at Cypress House and Erebus, so tonight's debauchery is no surprise to me.

Apart from the crazy house parties, we have this club that's open every night of the week and where most people frequent because they take things to the next level.

Tonight's masquerade-themed party designed by the Dark Odyssey is a typical example of that. I heard they're turning the whole basement into a sex dungeon.

That will be interesting, but not what I'm here for.

Thorne wanted to meet here. He's had a breakthrough on an idea in relation to our access to the Knights' database.

The system became available to us two days ago. We couldn't access it before because it's only responsive to retinal ID. We have Sigma-level clearance, which is sufficient to check personal details on the members of the Knights, but there are limits. We'd need a level-two clearance to dig a little deeper into their assets and other activities logged.

I'm hoping Thorne found a way to bypass that.

I walk inside the club and dip my head at the bouncers, who give me that nod of respect I always garner when I come here.

Once I enter the foyer, I turn down the mask, and the Dark Odyssey's traditional bag with the silver coin the receptionist tries to hand me.

I've had my fair share of silver coins and masked sexual experiences at the actual club in Chicago, which led to several hookups where no names are given.

Continuing out to the dance floor, I'm greeted by flashing club lights and sucked into hardcore club music. The place is already brimming with people, which is no surprise. I'm sure most were counting down to tonight. It's not the first time the

club has hired the Dark Odyssey, but tonight is the first event where they've been given free rein.

The club has three levels that go down toward the basement. This one is the first. It also has two levels that go up, but they run around the outskirts of the dance floor with rows of seats and three bar areas. That's where I'm heading, and I can see those areas are packed, too.

This party would have been the first the freshmen were invited to. The magazine helped design and send out the invitation packs to all the new students last week. So, the people on the dance floor are a good mixture of old and new students.

Nearly everyone is wearing a Venetian-style mask, and just like at the Dark Odyssey in Chicago, most of the women are dressed in sexy lingerie.

That part wasn't on the flyer; neither was any mention of sex. Not in English anyway. The guys who run the Verge designed the logo for the party with runes that spelled it out. If you don't know how to read runes, you wouldn't have known, but that wouldn't have stopped you from finding out.

Those who could read runes would have spread the word. That's how news travels on campus.

Eyes of women lock on me as I stride by. I always command attention from women who want to fuck me. Either they want me because of my looks, money, and power, or because being the Pakhan's son is an asset. Hook me, and you're sorted for life.

I take the stairs leading to the second floor and spot Thorne by the balcony with his arm around a girl with lilac hair. When he sees me, he gives me a nod, and I nod back.

"Sorry, Layla, duty calls. See you tomorrow night," he promises his new conquest and gives her ass a squeeze.

"You better," Layla answers and saunters away, hips swaying like she has a tune stuck in her head.

Thorne checks out her ass for a moment, then smirks when he returns his gaze to me.

“Hey, don’t give me that look, *Viper*,” he chides, calling me by the name I, funnily enough, got christened with after my first mission.

The name stuck because of the viper tattoo I have on my neck. It stuck in my head, too, because of my goals.

“How do you expect me to look?” I chuckle. “Every time I see you, you have some chick pressed up against you.”

He laughs. “Leave me with my guilty pleasures. Come on, let’s go out back.”

He cocks his head to the side and runs a hand through his dark hair.

We head past the bar into the corridor leading to the VIP room we often meet in with the other guys in our crew.

During your first year at Raventhorn, you’re placed in groups of eight that you stick with until graduation. They are your team you go on missions with and might form the unit you work with beyond graduation.

We meet here because it’s laid back, but also because it’s one of the places on campus that doesn’t have surveillance inside the building. The only other places like that are the student accommodation, Raventhorn Hall, and the buildings the teachers and other staff members use for administrative purposes. There’s surveillance outside those buildings, but not inside.

I understand the respect for privacy and activities others wish to keep secret; it benefits me in times like tonight, but in instances like what happened to Zak, not at all.

It was the non-existence of surveillance that our enemies used against us; and why we haven’t been able to get further than we have.

Before we reach our room, the unmistakable sound of flesh slapping against flesh and the sounds of moans and groans echo into the passageway. Then we enter the room and find the couple responsible.

The guy has the girl pressed up against the wall as he pounds into her hard from behind. She's fully naked, and he's thankfully only shirtless.

The walls of this room and the floor are made of one-way privacy glass. It's another cool feature of the Verge, so that you can see out to the club and the dance floor below, but no one can see inside.

Our clever friend here is using that to his advantage.

The couple stops fucking when they realize they aren't alone and recognize us.

I'm sure they would have expected anyone else to apologize for interrupting and leave immediately, but the guy at least knows we won't do that.

"Get the fuck out. We need this room," I tell them.

"Sure, sorry," the guy says while the girl tries to reach for her clothes.

It takes seconds for them to exit the room.

Thorne and I sit opposite each other on the black leather sofa. He hands me a joint, and we light up.

"What have you got for me?" I ask.

"This." He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a piece of paper.

When he hands it to me, I see there's a password written on it.

"I did it," he says, and for the first time in a long time, I feel hope. "I figured out a way to trick the system. When you put that password in, you can walk through the entire database without anyone knowing you accessed the information."

"How the fuck did you do this?"

"I programmed a virus into the password to copy the ID of the last person to access the clearance we need. Then I backed that up with a cloaking algorithm. That will be how we'll get through undetected. It wouldn't have worked before because we needed our access. As high-tech as it all sounds, I couldn't

get it to work on the initial entry-level clearance into the system.”

This is the reason I needed his help. Thorne is the tech in our duo. He’s studying computer science while I’m doing a business degree. Even though the family business might be in software engineering, I’m not wired that way, but he absolutely is.

“This is more than a breakthrough. It’s a foot in the door. Thank you.”

“Caspian, we have to be careful. You know the Knights have the best people working for them, people who will be better than me and might be able to pick up on what we’re doing. If we’re found out, you know what will happen.”

Death. That is what will happen.

I could imagine my father killing us both. Or maybe he’d spare me because I’m his heir and make me kill Thorne. So, we can’t fuck this up in any way.

“Let’s just hope that doesn’t happen.”

Because so much time has passed since Zak’s death, we have our work cut out for us and a lot to get through.

Our plan is this. Look into anything logged on the system and check it out if it looks suspicious. We already have access to the police and coroner’s reports.

We’ll be going over everything we have to see if anything was missed. The problem we have is that whatever we’re looking for might not even be recorded anywhere, but we’ll have to piece together all we have to lead us to what we can’t see.

I take a drag on my joint, allowing its potency to steady my mind. Thorne does, too.

“At least we have a start.” Thorne blows out a ring of smoke. “You still want to narrow the focus down to the judges?”

I nod.

He presses his lips together and gives me an uncertain look. “Caspian, don’t get mad at me, but I’ve got to ask. What’s fueling your suspicion about the judges?”

“Just a hunch. Let’s go on the basis that Zak was killed because he was a threat. Who would be most concerned with protecting what they have?”

He bites the inside of his lip. “The judges.”

“Exactly. We can’t find anything that makes sense. *No one* can find anything that makes sense. Not even my father. The only people who can make things disappear in that kind of way is a judge.”

He blows out a ragged breath. “Fuck. I see your point.”

“The judges don’t need anything, but you best believe they’d kill to protect what they have.”

With the exception of my father, there are only four judges who got their position through direct lineage to the Elder Knights—Peter, Levka, Cain, and Al. Everyone else was invited or elected. I don’t, however, think I should differentiate based on that, so I want to look at all of them.

Since Thorne still looks uncomfortable, I’m compelled to remind him he doesn’t have to do this.

“It’s not too late to back out,” I say.

“As if I would.”

“You need to know you can, though. I can do this next part by myself. You’ve helped enough.”

“You’ve always had my back, Caspian, even when you shouldn’t have. You know your old man never forgave you for what you did for me in Russia.”

He’s referring to the darkest part of my past. A darkness he should be carrying instead of me. Just like every other time we talk about the past, I shove it to the back of my mind and summon the strength to move past it.

“You don’t have to feel obligated to back me up because of the past.”

“You know I’m not. The same way you know I have your back.”

“All right, let’s do this.”

“Let’s.” He balls his hand to bump his fist with mine.

I’m going to make a start tonight when I get home.

With the serious talk over, Thorne smiles, and it’s like he slips into the mask of his usual carefree self.

“Your old man spoke to you after the ceremony, didn’t he?” he asks, but he looks like he already knows what my father spoke about.

“He did.”

“Was it about Willow and Dorian?”

Fuck does news travel fast. “It was.”

“And?”

“And nothing.” I give him my habitual lackadaisical smirk. “He wants me to stay away from her.”

“And you are going to, right?” He’s smiling but giving me a curious stare at the same time.

I give him a narrowed look. “Why are you asking?”

He straightens. “Because I know you, and I should be the one to warn you not to piss off your old man.”

“Is that what you’re doing? Warning me?” I raise my brows, and he chuckles.

“I—”

He stops talking when his eyes drop to the glass floor. When he bites the inside of his lip, I follow his gaze and spot the little red-haired princess wandering around the sea of swaying bodies looking like the lost lamb she is.

Fuck me. She’s here.

Willow Raventhorn is here, and fuck, is she a sight to behold.

She looks beautiful in her light pink babydoll dress with thin straps running over her shoulders and the fabric flirting with her legs as she makes her way through the crowd. That long red hair is longer than the last time I saw it. Now it's below the small of her back. I remember when I saw it in the hospital, and it was so short. Now, I would never believe she's the same person. Or the same girl I used to play with when we were kids.

Willow Raventhorn grew up to be a goddess with a body made for hardcore fucking.

Jesus, she looks better than the last time I saw her.

"Caspian," Thorne chides.

"What?" I mutter, still looking at her

"You know what. Didn't you just say you're supposed to stay away from her?"

"I'm allowed association for business purposes."

He rolls his eyes. "This is a fucking party. Your father is going to know this isn't business."

"But he's not fucking here. What the old man doesn't know won't hurt him." I chuckle.

"She's engaged."

"Is she? That's not how I heard it, and I know you didn't hear it that way either."

"You know what I mean."

"You know what I mean, too. So, she's not fucking engaged. And you know Dorian is already here somewhere fucking."

"Of course, I know that."

"Right, then, I'll see you later."

"Remember, safe sex."

I leave before he can say anything more and spot my ex-best friend in the crowd again when I walk out onto the balcony.

Of course, I'm not the only guy looking at her.

I spot at least ten of them, but that's what I can see. I know there are more.

I'm crazy for doing whatever it is my dick is leading me to do, but since she walked into my line of sight, it means she entered the Viper's Lair.

I just want a look. A peek.

Maybe a taste. Another taste, just a little one.

That's all, and then I'll switch to business. After all, she'll be working for me after tonight.

I expected to run into her tomorrow at the magazine. I don't think she knows we'll be working together yet because my name isn't listed on the staff register.

I was hoping for the element of surprise. This works, though.

I'd be a fool if I didn't seize this for what it is—the lost little princess wandering into a wild party all by her lonesome.

Who would have thought the Goody Two-Shoes would come to this party of all the parties.

From here, I spot the little silver pouch dangling from her wrist. It should contain the silver coin she'll give to the person she wants to spend the night with.

I wonder if she knows you wouldn't accept that pouch if you didn't want sex.

Or maybe she did.

I watch her walk toward the stairs leading downstairs to the basement, right to the sex dungeon where all the sex is happening.

My, what a shock she'll get.

I wonder if she's still the dirty girl who touches herself at night when she thinks no one is watching.

Did she ever think of me?

Does she still?

I'm about to find out.

CHAPTER
TWENTY

WILLOW

The music follows me as I make my way down the long wide passageway filled with drunk, drugged couples kissing along the side of the walls. The flashing strobe lights on the ceiling illuminate them like they're the main attraction, and the scent of alcohol and sin permeates the air.

It's like a warning that the sex I wasn't overly fond of seeing by myself is close.

So, what would be better, Willow? Watching people have sex with your friends?

Why am I even here at this party?

I'm not a prude in the least, but I knew this was a bad idea right from the instant Eilish mentioned it. I only went along with it because I was focusing on the aspect of this being our first college party.

But there is no 'our.' It's just me who's been here at the Verge for nearly two hours, and I can't find my so-called friends.

I was early, too. I finished signing up for all my classes earlier than expected, so, silly me decided to rush back to my apartment, get ready, and make my way here.

We agreed to meet in the corner by the bar. Lucian said to sit on the sofa in front of the Goo Goo Dolls poster. That's exactly where I was. I thought it was a good meeting spot, too, because I'd be able to see them the moment they approached the bar.

When I first arrived, it was clear I had on way too many clothes—a complete contrast to all the other girls here who were dressed in lingerie. Even if I'd known that part, I would have still chosen the dress I'm wearing. I turned down the mask at reception because I wanted my friends to be able to see me and only accepted the cute little silver bag because I didn't want to look like a loser.

I tried to act cool by heading straight to the bar, which was opposite where Lucian said to meet, and grabbed an orange juice, although I was tempted to see if I could get away with ordering a margarita without them checking my ID. However, the moment the bartender looked at me and offered me a soda, I knew I wouldn't.

I've been waiting all that time, having to fend off one drunk guy after another who didn't just proposition me for sex but group sex, too.

I was worried if I moved, I'd miss my friends, but after the last guy came up, I decided to call it a night.

This is my last sweep of the place just in case my friends are here but elsewhere.

I dial Lucian's number one last time and press the phone to my ear, waiting for the low ring I heard the last fifteen times. Only it doesn't come. This time, I'm taken straight through to his voicemail, but I don't bother leaving a message. I decide not to call Eilish either because I've called her the same amount of times as Lucian.

Either they're here, and I just haven't seen them and got the meeting point way wrong, or they really aren't here.

If they are here, maybe they can't hear the phone ringing because the music is too loud. I have this sinking feeling, though, that I'm right and I've been stood up.

When I check the downstairs, I'll confirm and head back to the house. Then I swear to God I won't be speaking to either of them for at least a month.

I'm so mad.

Weaving through the crowd, I continue down the passageway, which seems to go on forever and ever deeper underground. By the time I reach the end, I realize, to my annoyance, that I must have gone the wrong way or chosen the wrong passage.

I expected to be on the first floor below the level I was on, but I'm sure I'm in the basement.

Shit. This is just great, and now I have a sinking feeling I'm about to venture to the seedier parts of the club. By myself.

Thanks, Lucian and Eilish.

How dare you stand me up at our first college party, on our first day?

That is so evil.

Heat races over my skin when I walk onto the dance floor and see everyone dancing so close they look like they're having an orgy. That heat scorches my brain when I look at the sidelines and see people having sex right there in the open.

My mouth falls open, and my eyes bulge so much I think they're going to pop.

Holy shit, there are open cubicles separated by transparent net curtains, with people having real live sex on sofas. They line the entire left side of the dance floor, and there are all sorts of pairings inside. Couples, threesomes, foursomes, and more. Guys with girls, girls with girls, and guys with guys.

It's like everyone's gone primal wild, succumbing to their animal instincts. I'm not sure if I can call it having sex. Not that I would know the difference on a firsthand basis. I just think *fucking* is the term I'm looking for.

And I'm here, right in the action by *myself*.

I can't even blame my friends anymore. No one told me to come down here. I did this.

Suddenly, the memory of trying to watch porn with my friends years ago enters my mind. The attempt lasted all of two minutes before we decided we just couldn't watch it *together*. Now, look at me in a room full of people who think this is *normal*.

But maybe it is for them, and I'm the odd one out amongst a hall full of hormone-crazed teens and people in their early twenties.

I'm so shocked I can no longer think, and suddenly, the anger I felt over being stood up dissipates. I find myself

staring at the naked couple in front of me having sex on the sofa. It's a guy and a masked girl who's bouncing up and down in his lap.

I can't even remember when I stopped moving and became one with the dance floor and the bodies smashing together. I don't think anything could have prepared me for tonight.

I watch as the guy picks the girl up, and they both crash into the wall, where he fucks her harder.

It's only when he turns to look at me and smiles that my senses snap back, and I move away, walking with my head straight, not looking to the left or right.

Forget looking for Lucian and Eilish. I need to get out of here.

I head toward the passage ahead, believing it must lead back upstairs, only it doesn't.

Where it leads me to is a glass window with the perfect view of a naked girl on a bed with two guys pounding into her at the same time while her wrists are bound above her head.

Her wrists are attached to a rope coming down from the ceiling. She's straddling one guy, riding him, while the other guy hammers into her ass.

Once again, my feet are rooted to the ground, and instead of moving away, curiosity sucks me into the scene, luring me to stare. It's the look on the girl's face that has me so fascinated.

I couldn't imagine being with two men or anyone tying me up, but she makes it look like she's experiencing unimaginable pleasure.

Is she?

The pleasure-filled expression on her face is so rapturous it's infectious.

She couldn't be any older than me, and I almost envy her for the carefree way she looks. Like she doesn't have a care in the world, and all she feels is pleasure.

Is it because she's with two guys, tied up, or both?

I could almost imagine myself bound and at someone's mercy. Tied up or not, I think I'd like my first time to feel like that—an escape into pleasure. I'd want to be touched the way I am in my fantasies, but I'd want to touch my man, too.

“I never figured you for a voyeur, but that is exactly what you are, Printsessa.”

I know the voice even before I turn around. I always know his voice, asleep or awake. In my dreams and in my nightmares. In my fantasies and in reality, where we're supposed to be enemies.

Warmth seeps into my skin through the sheer fabric of my dress when Caspian Ivanov's fingers press against the small of my back like he owns me.

“You look intrigued, and I've been trying to figure out what fascinates you more. Watching, being shared, or tied up.” His deep sexy voice pours over my skin like a stream of liquid fire, and my breath hitches.

I feel like I've been caught again doing something wrong, but he's here, too, and this is our first real meeting in more than a year.

When he rests his free hand on the glass next to me, I realize only then how close I am to the glass wall and to him.

I turn to face him just as he leans in closer, so his face is inches away from mine. The air stills in my lungs as I take in his arresting good looks that have improved even more in the time we haven't seen each other.

Those boyish good looks are still very much there, and the beautiful boy I knew is still alive in his pale olive-green eyes, but the sharp angles and planes of his handsome face make him look more like a man—a man who can now steal my breath away just by looking at me.

“HELLO, OLD FRIEND,” he breathes. “Long time no see.”

“Hi.”

“Are you lost again, little lamb?”

He angles closer, reminding me of the last time we were this close. It wasn't the nanosecond I kissed his forehead at the cemetery on the night of Zak's funeral. It was the kiss on the night of the Reaping.

It was the first and only kiss with the boy who hates me.

Hate.

But when he looks at me the way he is, it's hard to imagine hate because I don't see that in his eyes.

My gaze drops to the angry snake on his neck with the sharp fangs out and ready to pounce. It's a viper, and it suits him. It's exactly what I imagine him to be like.

Caspian is staring at me like he expects an answer, except I can't recall the question. The corners of his lips curl into a wicked grin, and I realize I just made my first mistake. I didn't pay attention.

“I'm going to assume your silence is a yes, so I'll just move back to my former contemplation. You looked like you like what you see. Which part turned you on most?”

My cheeks flush. “I don't know what you mean.”

“I think you do.” His warm breath tickles my nose. “So, do tell. Do you like to be tied up, shared, or are you the watcher?”

“I don't have to tell you anything.”

His smile widens. “You're right, because I know you so well, Willow Raventhorn, that I should be able to guess. So, let me guess. You do like watching people fucking, and the more hardcore, the more intrigued you are because that's how you want to be taken. You'd try sharing. You'd also like being tied up and fucked in every hole of your body.”

He's been bad but never so crass. I'm grateful for the cover of the dim lights so it will hide my skin, which I know must be flashing crimson.

“Am I right, Willow? Is that what you like, to be shared and tied up? I don't share, but I would love to tie you up.”

“You don’t know me. Don’t you have anything better to do than bother me?” I don’t know what the hell I’m saying, but I can’t think. It’s always mixed messages with him, and I can’t see past the sexual haze that clouds my judgment.

“Or maybe you’re still a virgin. The curious virgin princess lost in a fantasy,” he continues, ignoring my question. And he’s right again.

“I’m leaving now,” I grate out, embarrassed by how right he is.

I try to step past him; however, it’s a fruitless attempt because he blocks me in with both hands and the width of his body, pressing me against the glass.

“I’m not done with you yet.” He moves his hand to my jaw and traces a line across my skin. I hate the sinful things that simple touch does to me, and I hate it even more because I know better than to get all weak-kneed for Caspian Ivanov. “Dance with me, Printsessa.”

I know better, but how am I supposed to do better when he says things like that? Things that throw me off-kilter and screw with my mind when I know he’s toying with me. We’re little more than the lion and the mouse.

The air around us suddenly seems thicker, denser, like it’s been sucked away.

“Didn’t you tell me to stay away from you?” I try to sound braver than I feel.

“But you didn’t listen, did you?” He’s talking about the last time we saw each other.

“That was different.”

“So is this. What’s a dance between two friends who haven’t seen each other in a while?”

“We’re not friends.”

He brushes his nose over mine. “No, we aren’t. We’re a little more than that, aren’t we?”

It's not a question. It's a statement of fact that crawls right under my skin and stays there.

"Come with me," he beckons, his gaze riveting to mine with a dark desire which scares and hooks me in equal parts.

The urge to run far away and never look back sweeps over me.

If I were thinking straight, I would do just that—run. But I won't run and look like a coward, or worse, show him I'm afraid of him.

So, when he takes my elbow as if he knows I've already decided I'm going with him, I allow him to lead me to the dance floor.

Ushering me away from my sanity.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

WILLOW

The upbeat club mix fades and transitions into something sensual, calming the crowd. It makes it easier to weave through the bodies pressed together.

I'm grateful when Caspian takes me to the furthest corner of the dance floor, opposite of all the sex. There are so many people around us I can no longer see the cubicles.

There's also more space. Another small mercy, as I would hate to get dragged into the crowd and have people touching me where I don't want to be touched.

Worries of people touching me leave my mind when he slips his arm around my waist and closes the space between us. Because I'm too short to reach his shoulders, I press my hands to the steel walls of his chest, marveling at the feel of his rock-hard abs beneath my fingertips and the steady beat of his heart.

My awareness of his touch heightens when he strokes his thumb along the small of my back, and I gaze up at him at the same time Billie Eilish's dulcet tone fills the room, and she starts singing the first verse of "No Time to Die."

Meeting those eyes of his as we dance traps me in his stare again, and the juxtaposition of emotions clashing within me sends a chaotic shiver through me.

Where we're dancing, the music is just low enough to carry a conversation. It makes me think he brought me here by design, so he can talk to and taunt me at the same time.

He's just staring at me, and I'm doing my best to keep focused, but I'm almost too afraid to breathe, just in case I miss something important this predator might have up his sleeve for me.

"Are you just going to stare at me? Or are you thinking up more shit to say to me?" I decide to break the stare fest.

Fascination lights up his eyes. "I'm not sure yet. I'm still trying to figure out what to do with you."

"How about you just leave me alone."

"That's too easy, and I don't think you want me to do that."

"Oh, I do. I try my best to stay away from assholes and dicks."

"Well, there goes your sex life."

My ears burn. "You know what I mean."

"Of course, I do, but I'm still right. It's not wise to engage in an argument you won't win."

With a wink, he sways with me, and I hate the way we fit together and easily fall into a rhythm as if it were just yesterday that our parents made us dance together.

By my record, the last time we danced together, he would have been twelve, and I was eleven. Mom dressed me in a dress that made me look like a doll, and Caspian wore a tux. That was just a little over a year before everything changed so drastically, and he became my enemy.

My heart shrinks away at the memory and the thought of my mother.

Not wanting him to know I'm thinking about the past, I school my thoughts.

"I heard congratulations is in order," he says, and my stomach squeezes like I might vomit.

He's talking about the wedding. Of course, he would know about that.

I don't want to talk about it with anyone because there is nothing congratulatory about it. He'll know that, too.

"Have you set a date for the big day?" he adds.

"No."

"My dear Printsessa, you don't sound happy at all." Here comes the taunt.

I intensify my glare, deciding I'm not going to allow him to make fun or take pleasure in my situation.

"I'm fine."

"You should be. Dorian would make a great husband for you." The smile inching across his lips is maddening. Like he's happy I'm finally getting what I deserve.

"You bastard. You're taking pleasure in this, aren't you?" Years ago, I would have never spoken to him like that. I always had his words of blame for our parents' deaths stuck in my head. The guilt is permanently stuck there, so I'm numb to the shit he thinks he can throw my way. "It shouldn't surprise me that you think the perfect punishment for me is ending up with an asshole who can't stop thinking with his dick."

"Maybe I do think you deserve to be with a dick who will undoubtedly cheat on you with anything that moves." The smile on his face becomes almost psychotic and then scary when he grits his teeth. "Or maybe I wanted to be the one to break you—heart, body, mind, and soul."

My heart gallops.

Break me.

He's looking at me with that desire again, but desire wouldn't make sense for someone who wants to destroy me.

I gaze into those eyes of his, trying to figure out what he's thinking, but I can't. He could be thinking up all sorts of murderous plots, and I wouldn't know. The only thing I'm getting off him is waves of desire I can't explain, along with that dark, eerie vibe I always feel coming from him. The type that makes me imagine him snapping my neck in my sleep. Except, Caspian Ivanov isn't a coward like that. He'd snap my neck while I was wide awake and looking at him, like I am now.

That mocking smirk stretches across his handsome face, and he lowers his mouth to my ear and brushes his cheek against mine.

"Maybe I wanted to be the one to explore those fantasies of yours. You know the dirty ones I mean."

His words unlock the secret parts of me that used to fantasize about him after that kiss. My heart speeds at the alarming thought of him knowing, and I move away.

Clearly, I'm being ridiculous, though. He can't see inside my head.

Then why is he looking at me as if he can? As if he can see all the forbidden paths my wild imagination carried me to because I wanted more than a kiss that night so long ago. The fact that he was so forbidden to me made it worse, and I couldn't stop myself from imagining all the things I wanted him to do to me.

He leans back in so close I think he might kiss me. "You're thinking of them now, aren't you?"

His confident tone sends a bolt of arousal straight to my pussy, and the urge to run far away and never look back sweeps over me. I'd try, but the same arousal forces my body to betray me, and I feel weak.

"I d-don't know what you're talking about," I stutter.

"I think you do. So, you should. Your soon-to-be husband will never please you the way I can."

I search his eyes, and he does the same to me, looking like he wants to kiss me.

Again, I almost think he will, but he doesn't. Instead, he reaches for my wrist with the scar that will forever be visible and places the kiss there instead. He keeps his gaze trained on me as his lips linger on my skin, then releases me.

"Welcome to Raventhorn, Printsessa." He sets his shoulders back. "I'd tell you to stay away from me, but you won't be able to."

What an asshole. I grit my teeth. "I can stay away from you just fine."

"You'll see what I mean." It sounds like a promise, or like one more thing he's privy to. "You should go home now. You don't belong at this party, Printsessa."

Finally, the spell breaks, and I find my focus again. “You can’t tell me what to do. I can stay here if I want.”

Lifting my chin, I walk away from him, contemplating the possibility of heading back to the bar and staying a little longer just to show him I’m not leaving because he told me to. However, by the time I reach the passageway, my feet keep going—the right way this time—until I’m back at the coatroom collecting my jacket.

Then it’s like I can’t get away quickly enough.

I leave the club and head out into the cold night, pulling my jacket closer.

As the gentle breeze lifts my hair about my face, I shake my head at myself.

I’m so stupid, and why the hell am I so brain dead when I’m around that guy? He was just screwing with me, playing around and messing with my head. I’m the one who fell into the trap.

After all that’s happened and all I’ve pushed myself through to come out strong, Caspian’s taunts should mean nothing.

Forgetting him isn’t the answer. The solution to my problems is the opposite. I need to remember who and what he is now. If I can do that, I just might survive my time here.

But really, he’s the least of my worries. What the hell is my life going to be like in two and a half months when I’m stuck with Dorian?

I foolishly thought I’d be spending the next four years in my beautiful apartment, but that’s not exactly going to happen, is it?

I start thinking of him and how things will change again as I hurry along the path. It’s not until I get to the intersection and stop to check I’m going the right way that I feel eyes on me.

The feeling is so strong I expect to see someone I know when I whirl around, but there’s no one there.

No one at all, or anything else, like maybe a bird. I'm alone, but nerves creep up my spine with an awareness that tells me I didn't just imagine that weird sensation of being watched.

It makes me feel uncomfortable, so I hurry back to my apartment.

Once I'm in my bedroom, I feel safe again. Until I see a white envelope on my bed with my name on it, and my nerves spike.

The door to my room was locked. Who would have come in and left that?

Was it Misha? It would be odd for her to come into my room to leave a note when she could have slipped it under the door. The fact that it's on my bed is the thing that's off.

Tentatively, I walk over to my bed and pick it up. The envelope looks standard. Like the usual kind you'd receive a letter in, so maybe it's just me being paranoid.

I open the envelope, pull out the note inside, and all the blood drains from my body when I see the handwritten message saying:

You shouldn't have come to Raventhorn.

Death will follow you if you stay here.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

WILLOW

Misha struts into the kitchen wearing a pink tank top and matching gym shorts. With her hair in a high messy bun, she reminds me of a laid-back version of Tinkerbell.

She jumps, startled when she sees me huddled in the corner by the breakfast table with a cup of hot water in my hands.

“Holy fucking shit. You scared me half to death.” She brings her hand to her heart, and I straighten. “What are you doing down here at this hour?”

It’s a good question anyone would ask. When I last checked, it was two in the morning. That couldn’t have been more than an hour ago. I should be in bed now or still at the party. But fear sent me out into the open to wait for my friends once again, who might not show up. I messaged them after I got the note, letting them know what had happened to me.

“I couldn’t sleep,” I reply.

“Why is that?”

I drag in a breath and decide to tell her what happened. She should know. “Someone was in my room.”

“Didn’t you lock the door?”

“Yes, but they still went into my room.”

“No one would do that here,” she scuffs, looking down her nose at me. “I’ve been here since I brought you guys back from the tour yesterday. I’ve seen everyone who came and went. No one but you went near your bedroom.”

“They left me a note.”

“What did it say?”

I pull it out from the pocket of my sweatshirt and hold it out for her to take.

She sets her hands on her hips and walks over to me like she's just stepped onto the runway. When she takes it and scans over the writing, she narrows her eyes with scrutiny.

“That’s cryptic as fuck.”

“Yes, of course, it is. I felt safer down here. I was hoping my friends would be here by now.”

She regards me with the same scrutiny she used on the note and looks me up and down.

“You know, I once saw this film about this psycho bitch who did anything to get attention. She even wrote herself threatening notes and got the police involved so the guy she liked would stay with her.”

Oh my God, what the hell? Now I fully believe Misha has her head stuck in the clouds with movies swimming around in her head.

I give her an incredulous glare. “You think I made that shit up and wrote myself that note?”

“It sure sounds like the start of some SWF episode.”

“What is that?”

“Single white female.”

“Misha, isn’t that what you’d call someone who’s trying to take over another person’s life?” I blink several times, wondering how the conversation took this weird turn which makes no sense.

“Yes, but it starts with being crazy.”

What an absolute airhead. “I’m not crazy.”

“Well, I hardly think you’d tell me if you were. Look, I understand your *special* case, so I’m aware you might have these types of episodes after being in a mental home. This really does sound like it could be the start of some psychotic meltdown. Starting college and moving away from home can be difficult, but if you’re finding it hard to cope, there are professionals on campus you can speak to.”

My temper flares and I have to hold my tongue.

This reminds me of when I tried to tell people what happened to Lillian, and no one believed me.

If I lash out at her, she's going to think I'm crazy. Then what will happen? It might be funny to her, but it will ruin everything for me. It's never far from my mind that my godparents still hold my freedom, and soon it will be Dorian. All I'd need is some shit like this to make me look unstable or like I'm not coping to add another year or ten.

At the same time, am I supposed to let this note slide?

"Misha, with every due respect, I'm not crazy, and I don't need anyone to speak to besides campus police. I can't understand why you'd think I'm having some kind of meltdown."

"Because no one was here besides me, which means no one went inside your room."

"That doesn't mean that at all," I argue. "Clearly, someone must have snuck in without you seeing them."

"Excuse me, don't let me remind you who you're speaking to." She gives me a pointed glare.

"You think I'm making shit up."

"You know what? I don't care what you do, but you need to go back to your room now."

"Why?"

"My man is going to be here in five minutes, and we like having the kitchen and living room to ourselves."

"I thought this was a communal area."

"Clearly, you didn't read the house rules, so consider that one strike."

"A strike?" I blow out a ragged breath.

"Yes. Those rules became effective immediately. The rule in question is Rule 5.2: All communal spaces belong to your senior sisters between ten p.m. and seven a.m. That will remain effective as long as I'm president of the Theta Alphas. Monday through Wednesday are my nights, so get the hell up

and sort your shit out elsewhere.” Spitefully, she holds the note up then allows it to float to the floor, showing her lack of care. “Now, get out of my sight before I punish you.”

“*Punish?*”

“Yes, Willow Raventhorn, and like I said earlier, I don’t give a fuck who your daddy was. You’re in my world now, and while you live under my roof, you play by my rules.”

I restrain myself from asking what she’d do to me in case it’s in the rule book, which I only read half of because it was so absurd. The stupid thing read like she’d dedicated her life to memorizing all the rules the Plastics used in *Mean Girls*.

I suppose, though, that’s what your life is like when you’re treated like the pampered princess, and you don’t have to experience the hardship and loss I have.

Without another word, I pick up the note and head back upstairs, taking my steps lightly.

I didn’t want to go back inside that room until I saw my friends because of that creepy sensation of knowing someone was in there.

Once I walk inside, I check everywhere to make sure I’m alone and safe. I don’t put the lock on the door, so my friends can come in when they get here—if *they ever plan to come*—then I head into the bedroom to sit by the desk with my laptop and wait.

I don’t want to go in my bed in case I fall asleep, and this crazy person comes back for me.

Misha can say whatever she wants—someone was here. She probably didn’t see them because she was too busy watching some fucking shit on TV that took her outside of reality.

That note was both a warning and a threat.

Who wrote it? And what does it mean?

I look at it again, and my hands tremble.

You shouldn’t have come to Raventhorn.

Death will follow you if you stay here.

So, what am I supposed to do? Leave?

But wouldn't I leave if I'm in danger?

Death will follow you if you stay here can only mean danger.

Fuck, this is such absolute shit. I don't think I'm ever going to forget the last twenty-four hours of my life.

I gaze through the window, staring at the walkway on the bridge and the still waters of the river until my lids feel heavier than they were.

I decide to rest my head on the desk for a minute, and the next thing I know, someone is shaking my shoulders and calling my name.

"Red, it's me. Come on, babe, wake up." It's Lucian.

My eyes snap wide with a start, and I lift my head, annoyed at myself for falling asleep.

I'm so happy to see him, though, that I throw my arms around him.

Eilish is here, too.

She comes closer when she sees I'm awake.

When Lucian pulls away, the two of them look at me with guilty expressions.

"We're sorry about last night," he says first.

"Super sorry," Eilish adds, giving me a quick hug.

"What happened to you guys? I had the worst night ever, and I even ran into Caspian," I blurt.

"It's my fault. I should have called you both. I sort of met this girl," Lucian says, tugging on the inside of his lip. "I decided not to go to the party. I thought Eilish was going to be with you, so I thought you'd be okay."

“I got to the party really early,” Eilish explains. “I met these guys, and we left.”

Lucian snaps his gaze to her and straightens. “Guys, as in plural, Eilish?”

She glares at him. “Yes, plural.”

“What the hell? You went home with both of them?”

“Sorry, *Dad*, you don’t need the deets. Did I ask you about your random hookup? And yes, this is your fault. You thought the two of us were going to be okay at a party like that?” She places her hands on her hips. “Lucian, I only agreed to go to that party because you were going to be there. No way would I have gone off if I’d known you’d be spending your night banging your latest catch.”

“At least I wasn’t having a threesome.”

“Guys, please,” I cut in before they start arguing. “I don’t care about that part anymore. This is what’s worrying me.”

I retrieve the note and show it to them. Lucian takes it, and Eilish moves closer to look at it, too.

“Where did you find it?” Lucian asks.

“It was on my bed.”

“Did you get a chance to speak to Misha or anyone else?” Eilish asks.

“Just Misha. She said no one came in here, and she thought I wrote the note to get attention.”

“God, what a bitch. Forget her.”

“I can’t because what if she really believes that? I’m going to sound crazy. All I need is for her to start talking to the wrong people. I can kiss my freedom goodbye.”

“Calm down,” Lucian says. “Don’t start worrying over things like that if you don’t need to. Let’s think of this logically. What if this is a joke? We’re the freshmen, and yesterday was the first day of college. Ten guys I know already had all sorts of shit happen to them from sophomores

and juniors pulling pranks. This could be your prank, and just maybe, Misha knew who did it but is keeping quiet.”

“That wouldn’t surprise me,” Eilish agrees. “Maybe she did it.”

“Exactly.”

I doubt that. Misha might be a bitch, but I don’t think scaring me would be that enjoyable for her.

“What if she didn’t?”

“Let’s consider these things.” Lucian raises his palms. “Why would you be in danger here? Think about it. If anything, you’re in the safest place you could be. The hub of the Knights and so many of us in one place. Besides, you’re Willow Raventhorn.”

Although I still have that uneasy feeling, I think he might be right.

“So, you think it could just be a prank?”

Lucian nods, and Eilish does, too.

“I don’t think it’s something crazy to worry about, but I’m going to do the responsible thing and report it to campus police. If you’re worried about Misha, I can give Viktor’s name, and he’ll keep it quiet if I ask him to. Of course, within reason.”

I release the breath burning my lungs as several weights lift off my shoulders.

“Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me.”

“Of course, Lucian. It means a lot that you care.”

“Red, you know I have your back. I’ll bring you cupcakes at lunch later at the magazine.”

I smile at the mention of the magazine. I’m there today for the whole day, and I can’t wait to get started.

“That would be awesome.”

Lucian brushes the side of my cheek, and out the corner of my eye, I notice a weird look flash over Eilish's face. It happened so quickly I couldn't quite see what it was, but it almost looked envious. I hope it wasn't.

Her smile comes quickly when I look at her. "In happier news, there's another party tonight. It's at Erebus House. How about we try to redo last night? I could meet you at the magazine when you're done."

"And I'll pick the two of you up from here, take you both to dinner, then we'll make our way to the party together."

I sigh and think about it. After last night, I'd sworn off parties, but I guess I could try this redo and maybe stay for an hour.

Eilish wraps her arms around me for our usual hug. "Say yes, please say yes. I feel terrible about last night."

"Yes. That sounds like fun, and it would be great to have dinner with you guys."

"*Yay*. Lucian found this cool Japanese place near campus."

"You'll love it, babe," he says to her. "They have those cool drawings on the wall you like."

"I love it already."

He smiles back at her, but concern returns to his eyes when he refocuses on me.

"What was Caspian like?"

I shake my head. "Worse than before. It was not good running into him."

"Just stay away from him."

I nod. "That's the plan." Even though Caspian thinks otherwise.

"How about we grab breakfast?" Eilish suggests.

"That would be perfect. I can be ready in half an hour."

"That's cool."

I quickly shower and get dressed, deciding not to allow yesterday to infiltrate my plans for today.

The note must have been a prank. Someone just wanting to scare the shit out of me on my first day. Well, it worked.

We grab breakfast, and things seem okay, like they're back on track. Or as on track as they can be.

There are things happening in my life that I can't change. I haven't accepted them, but I've accepted I have no control over them.

By the same token, I don't want to dwell on them and miss out on the reasons I wanted to study here.

Irina Ivanov might have been having an affair with my father, but I'll never forget how she made me fall in love with writing.

So, one hour later, when I make my way into the magazine building, it's with a warmth in my heart.

There's a black and white portrait of her by the door in the reception area. Seeing it brings back memories I had of her when I was little.

The receptionist greets me, and as she leads me to my supervisor's office, I tell myself things will be okay if I focus on the good.

But when I walk into a large office, my heart sinks right into the chasm of hell when my eyes glue to the man standing by the floor-to-ceiling glass windows. He's got his back to us, but I don't need to see his face to know who he is.

The viper tattooed on his neck seems brighter in this light, and when the beautiful devil turns to face us, I think the same of his face, too.

Caspian smiles at the receptionist, then at me. "Thanks, Belinda. I'll take care of my intern from here."

His intern.

What the actual hell is this now?

Belinda leaves us, and I narrow my eyes at Caspian the moment the door clicks shut.

This is what he meant about not being able to stay away from him.

“Hello, Printsessa.”

“What’s going on? I didn’t realize you work here.”

“Now you do. Looks like you and I are just getting started.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE

CASPIAN

I wish I could take a picture of the put-out expression on Willow's beautiful face and frame it.

Women line up to be with me, fall at my feet and worship me, but this one looks like she wouldn't touch me with a barge pole if her life depended on it.

I shouldn't want her to. She just got good at what I told her to do—staying away and forgetting me.

Common sense should tell me to go with the flow and not open Pandora's box by following temptation and tasting the forbidden fruit my father has forbidden me to take. But the same thing that happens to me every time I'm around her is happening to me now. My fucking dick is hard, and I can't bleed her from my mind.

Straightening, I steady my thoughts and step away from the wall to get a better look at my little intern, all dressed up in a classy blouse and a skirt that hugs her hips.

"You might have said something last night about working here," she states.

"Yes, I might have if I wanted to." I lower to sit on the edge of my desk and motion for her to sit in the chair before me.

She does but holds her bag close, like she's protecting what's inside.

"Why wouldn't you have wanted to?"

"Let's just say I'm a bastard that way, and I wanted to surprise you. Surprised?"

"OH, yes, I am. Is this how you plan to destroy me?" She scrunches up her little nose, and her bright blue eyes bore into me. "Because if it is, I'm not doing it."

Clever girl. It's a good idea, but what prevents me from doing anything to screw with her work in that way is knowing my mother wouldn't approve. That doesn't, however, stop me from screwing with her in other ways.

"Relax. Even if I wanted to, the old creeds prevent me from stopping you in your pursuit of success," I decide to say. That's another reason, too, and what my father meant when he said he couldn't stop her from doing the internship. The same rules apply to me. "That doesn't mean I'm going to make things easy on you or that it will be easy for you because you're Willow Raventhorn. This is my mother's legacy. That's why I'm here, so you'll have to follow the rules and expectations like everyone else."

"And what are those expectations?"

I like this side of her. Although it's unbecoming of her, it's fiery and sexy. "Basically, do as you're told, please me, and we're good."

"Please you?" She raises a sharp brow. "What does that mean?"

"I'll let you know when the time comes, Printsessa."

Of course, she doesn't like that answer. I can't blame her. My answer is vague as fuck and only adds to her ever-growing list of things she can't figure out about me.

I reach across the desk for a printout of the essay she wrote to support her application for the position.

In order to eliminate any bias, we have an agreement with the journalism school at Harvard to assess and mark those applications. I was told it was graded the highest. From the moment I saw the title, I understood why.

The task was to write about a notable person in history whom you admired. She chose Mark Twain, not for his notable accomplishments but for his losses. That was what she wrote about. I intended to read it, but that first line hooked me, and I couldn't stop until I got to the end.

"Recognize this?"

I hold up the paper so she can see it. As she studies it, her pretty face softens, becoming prettier if that's possible. Her eyes grow more open, the color returns to her cheeks, and the tension in her heart-shaped face decreases.

I don't think I've ever seen anybody display such an extensive range of emotions in less than a minute.

Anger. Fear. Annoyance. Hope. Awe.

They were all there on her face, and I understood them all.

She doesn't trust me, and she shouldn't. There's nothing trustworthy about me because I don't even trust myself to do the right thing when it comes to her—which is to leave her alone and stop screwing with her.

In that minute it took for her to relax, I knew how much this position here mattered to her—more than anything. Maybe more than her entire studies at Raventhorn because I know she hopes to work for the magazine after college.

In that minute, she thought she was threatened and possibly the one thing that might keep her sane while married to Dorian. What she doesn't know is it's going to be taken away from her anyway the moment she says *I do*.

I almost feel sad for her. I give nothing credit because few things impress me, but this essay she wrote impressed the fuck out of me.

She writes the way my mother did—with her heart.

“What made you write about Mark Twain like this? Why would his losses make you admire him?”

Her eyes widen slightly with a sheen of purpose. “You read my essay?”

“Yes. Gonna answer my question?”

“Sure. His losses impressed me because that was when he had to be the strongest. People most often pay attention to you when you show them your success. But they don't see what you have to go through to get it. They don't see the times when you fall so far you don't know how you're going to pick yourself up.” She takes a quick breath and pauses for a beat.

“He lost the love of his life and three of his four children, and each time he lost something, he had to pick himself up and try to start again. I admire him because of those parts. To me, that’s success and things you admire people for. That’s why I wrote the way I did.”

And that’s the same reason she got graded the highest. Harvard doesn’t give away those types of marks easily, and I’m sure if she weren’t who she is, they’d want her for themselves.

“Who taught you to write like this?”

The sheen of awe fades from her eyes and is replaced by raw hurt. She glances away from me for a moment, then looks back at me with the previous tension-filled expression.

“Your mother.”

There isn’t a day that goes by when I don’t think of my mother and Willow’s secret. Sometimes I flit between emotions, hating her for not being loyal to me, then hating her for being too loyal to my mother. As the years went by, I realized Willow wasn’t just keeping that secret because her father asked her to. She also kept it because she practically idolized my mother and would have done anything she asked her to do.

“Well, it will be a while before you’ll be writing anything.” I change the subject and set the essay back down on my desk.

“How long will it be before I get to write?”

“A long time, and your final project will be the deciding factor. You’ll be training for the next two weeks and learning about the magazine. Then you’ll be shadowing one of the senior editors for about a month. Your project will be due by then, from which I’ll decide if I like what you write.”

“What happens if you don’t like it?” The annoyance returns to her face now.

“Then your apprenticeship here will be over.” I stand.

“That’s it?” She presses her lips together at the same time her fingers knit in a tangle of nerves.

“Yes. I’m afraid so. The university magazine is just as important as the public one. So, your position here is to be treated like a job with a trial period. Like a job, I expect you to be here on time for the days you’re scheduled to be here.” That’s all-day Tuesdays and Wednesdays from ten until six to work with my schedule. “You’re welcome to use the building whenever you like for your project. Let’s take the tour, and then I’ll get you set up on the system. Today is just the usual work procedure training and risk assessments.”

She stands, too, but I don’t miss the tremor in her hands. She studies me for a few seconds, probably trying to figure me out again and failing.

She’ll never be able to do it. No one will because that’s how I want to be. A mystery and a wonder, so no one truly knows me. Not even her, the only person whom I allowed to get close.

What’s bothering her is, she doesn’t know what to make of this confusing push and pull between us. What’s worse is the line between our position as enemies keeps dwindling every time desire infiltrates.

I lead the way out of the office, and she follows.

I show her around and take every chance I get to check out her ass in that skirt when she walks ahead of me. When she catches me looking, I make no attempt to look away, and nothing called shame or guilt fills me either. I look, and I imagine grabbing a handful of the lush cheeks or spanking them until the soft flesh turns raw red.

It’s the perfect ass for spanking and fucking.

Would she let me do that?

I’m such a sicko.

She wouldn’t let me go near her, much less touch her ass, or fuck it.

Last night, I teased her about being a virgin. I wasn’t sure if I was right in my assumption or not.

The thought of any other man having her heats my blood. The fucked-up thing about that is, even though I know I have no right to feel this way, I choose to.

I'm missing a link, so I don't have that instinct or gauge to stop me from doing or thinking about whatever the hell I want. Be it fucking, killing, or obsessing like I am now.

If she's not a virgin, who did she give herself to?

I get her settled in the bank of four desks outside my office and give her the first desk, so I can see her.

She's one of twenty interns this year. Eight are upstairs with me and the rest downstairs near the other staff members.

When I leave her, I resume the only other thing I obsess about—finding my brother's killer.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR

CASPIAN

I started looking through the Knights' database last night when I left the club. I stayed up most of the night searching through the judges' files. I haven't found anything out of the ordinary yet, but I didn't think I would so soon.

In fact, with the amount of effort I know my father has already put into investigating Zak's death, what I'm looking for might not become visible to me for a while. If at all. It's the latter that worries me.

I'm currently looking at Oleg—the quiet, subservient one. People say silent rivers run deep, though. I call him a yes-man because he's always up my father's ass and worships the ground he walks on as if everything he says is the Lord's gospel.

He was always like that, though, right from when Timofey was the Pakhan. I used to look at Oleg and wonder how the fuck he got his position. Until I saw him fight alongside my father to rescue me when I was taken in Russia.

The man fought like a demon from hell even when he pushed my father out of the way and took the bullet that was meant for him.

He is the Obshchak now in the Bratva—the man responsible for taking care of all the money that comes into the Brotherhood of Knights and the Komarovski. As such, he works at the bank. A man like that is one you can trust.

So, why am I looking into him?

Because like the others, that's exactly the kind of person to stab you in the back when you aren't looking or kill your son because he's seen you do some shit you shouldn't have.

The annoying thing is that everything about Oleg on the database is basic. He has a daughter called Marissa, who's a junior here, and two sons, Ilya and Liev.

Liev is the eldest and married with a child. He's worked at the bank alongside Oleg for the last five years. Ilya, however, is a senior here and as quiet and weird as his father.

Aside from the family stuff, all there is is Oleg's work history. Basically, nothing to see, so I make some notes on the spreadsheet I created to detail my findings.

Movement outside the floor-to-ceiling glass wall catches my eye, and I'm drawn to watching Willow again.

The wall is similar to the one at the club, so she can't see me watching, but she glances over her shoulder as if she can feel me.

I stare at the plump flesh of her breasts as she leans onto her elbows and jots something down on her notepad.

Against the little white blouse she's wearing, the curve of her breasts is quite distinct, as is the slight hint of her hard nipples.

It's not cold in the building, or even outside. In fact, the humidity outside resembles a similar heat to what we get in the height of summer. So, I can only assume she might be aroused, and that's not because I can't stop thinking with my dick.

It's practically lunchtime. Should I be the good boss and take her to lunch on her first day?

That would be considered working by my father's standards, right?

I don't even wait for the answer to form properly in my mind. I lock my computer screen and get up.

When I open my door, I'm just in time to see Lucian approaching Willow's desk, so I stop, deciding to observe their interaction.

"There's my girl," Lucian beams, and Willow all but skips into his awaiting arms.

My girl?

Is she?

Was it him she gave herself to? I know people say men and women can be friends, and sure, I agree to some extent. Not for them, though. They've always been too close for my liking, and I hated it. I hate it now nearly as much as not knowing if they're together.

They look like they are, except if that's the case, Lucian has to know she's as forbidden to him as she is to me.

I used to worry she would be promised to him because they're the same age. Literally, they're about two weeks apart. As if they're not annoying enough as it is.

"Red, I thought I'd take my favorite girl to lunch instead of bringing cupcakes," Lucian says.

Red. How fucking original to call her that because she has red hair. Yet Willow blushes like she thinks the name and the offer to go to lunch are the cutest thing ever.

"Oh my God, I would love that."

"I thought you might. I also found a cake shop you'd love on Main. We could go there first. Dessert first, food next."

That better not be some fucking code for fucking. I'd have her for dessert, too, and the main.

Fuck, listen to me. This girl is making me crazy.

"Yay." Willow does a little hop that makes her hair bounce.

"How long do you have?"

"An hour."

"That's plenty of time. We can—" His voice cuts off like it's been short-circuited when he notices me standing by my office door.

The warmth in his eyes that was there seconds ago instantly turns frigid, and he squares his shoulders like he's getting ready to fight.

It makes me smile, and I still give him credit for the way he charged me in the school halls that day when I threatened his *mommy*.

Fucking mama's boy.

And he still is. He won't say fuck or shit to me because he can't. One glance at the Sigma symbol tattooed on my wrist, and he knows he fucking can't. The punishment for defiance in such a way from a Pledge—which is what he is—is death, and he doesn't want to die by my hand or have the threat of what might happen to his precious mother if my father decides to punish his stepfather in other ways.

So, Lucian won't challenge me. Not yet anyway. My old friend is just biding his time. I'm waiting for something, though, when he passes through his initiation.

He's a man after my own heart. If you ever have to focus on survival, do so, then focus on ending the one who failed to kill you.

That is one of the creeds of the Knights, so I'm waiting for him, and I'll be ready when he's ready to strike. I expect nothing less from him because if anyone threatened my mother, they'd be dead.

"I'll explain at lunch," Willow says, tugging on his arm. The gesture breaks our stare-off.

Even though rage is brewing on his face, he looks away from me and slips a protective arm around her.

Looking at him holding her makes me want to rip that arm of his to shreds.

The two leave, and I watch with anticipation. Lucian holds Willow like she's his, and that pisses me off because I don't want her to be.

I eat in my office and try to focus on what I'm doing, but nothing of the sort happens until Willow returns from lunch and knocks on my door.

I lift my head and give her a hard stare, which she can't see.

"It's open," I call out.

She comes in with a tentative expression on her face and hesitation in her steps.

“I’ve done all the workplace procedures modules. Can I get clearance to move on to the training?”

Working together is so weird, but I like that she has to ask me for shit when she probably hates the idea of talking to me.

“Of course. Enjoy lunch?” I give her an icy stare.

“Yes. It was great.”

“Was lunch all you had with your *friend* Lucian?”

She gives me a narrowed look. “Yes, why are you asking me that?”

“Because, Printsessa, it looks like I’m not the only friend who wants to fuck you.”

The blood drains from her face, and her mouth drops. It’s almost fucking comical. I nearly laugh when she tries to talk and fails miserably.

My words have the desired effect. Those nipples harden right up and, unbeknownst to her, look like little peaks pressing against her blouse.

Her face is nearly the same color as her hair, but it’s her eyes that get me the most.

I still know her the same as I always have, so I know what she’s focusing on is the confession that I want to fuck her. The knowledge doesn’t make me any less crazy about Lucian, but something that fucking hooks me because she’s also giving herself away— she wants to fuck me, too.

Like the psycho I am, I smile.

“Like the lost little lamb you are, you didn’t know that, did you?”

“You’re a sick, crazy asshole.”

“Well, yes, but we both already knew that, didn’t we? Ot etogo ya tebe men’she ne nravlyus’, Malyshka.” I tell her in Russian that it doesn’t make her like me any less. I also call her baby girl. That’s new. I’ve never called her that before, but I can see it turns her on. The blue of her eyes darkens to that of the afternoon sky—Prussian blue. I almost want to paint it. I

press the button on my computer to unlock the access she wants and widen my smile. “You have access. Let me know if you need anything else.”

She leaves and avoids me for the rest of the day.

I know I should leave well enough alone, but I never could. I always find a way to fuck myself over again and again when it comes to Willow Raventhorn.

She and her friends go to the party at Erebus House, and I watch her for the whole night.

Like an animal, I follow my instincts and turn down a blowjob and a night with Brooke to follow Willow when she leaves with Eilish a little after midnight.

My crazy, sicko pursuit leads me to the bridge outside Willow’s apartment at Myrrdin House. Right in the shadows of the alcove, it’s the perfect spot for the stalker I’m fast becoming, and with my hood up, I’m dressed for the part, too.

I don’t think it matters much that I had a little break from watching her. The act I’m performing right now is continuing what I started when I was sixteen. Three years later, and I’m still screwed.

It’s nearly one in the morning, and she’s changing her clothes. Just like when she lived with Elaine and Adrian in New York, she follows the same routine—shower, tend to her hair, then change into something sexy.

She has a bigger vibrator now, though, and as she touches herself, she goes wild. I do, too.

There are no guards here patrolling to catch me spying, and I’m hidden like I’m going on a stealth mission. So, I take out my cock and fist myself as she continues to pleasure herself.

I jerk off worse than I did when I was sixteen, and I even think I come when she does.

My fucking head is spinning, and like I’m hooked on some fucking drug, I want more. But I want to touch her, and I want to know if she’s thinking of me, too.

I want to know if it's me who fills those dirty fantasies of hers.

The need for the answer sends me back the next night and the night after. I watch her do the same things, and I finish the night like an asshole with his dick in his hands.

By day, I follow her and take what I can get as time permits. By nightfall, I lose my mind.

When a week passes and I realize I've been stuck on repeat for the last seven nights, I realize I'm not just in trouble.

I want her. I still want her, and now I'm obsessed.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE

WILLOW

“Good news,” Lucian says as he walks through the door.

Eilish stops working on my eye makeup, and we both focus on him.

He’s smiling, which is always a good sign.

“What’s happened?” I ask.

He drops down on Eilish’s bed and leans forward. “Viktor called to let me know the investigation is complete. He got his men to check out everything they could, and they couldn’t find anything. No one was near the house who shouldn’t have been there, and no sign of foul play. So, we both think it’s safe to say the whole note thing was some hazing prank.”

Eilish releases a long sigh, and I relax my shoulders.

A prank. It was just a prank. At least I hope so. I haven’t forgotten the weird sensation of being watched. That’s continued over the week I’ve been here, but I won’t mention that.

Both my friends look happy that this mystery has resolved itself, and I know Lucian went through a lot of trouble to ask his stepdad to do a full-on investigation.

Which means I need to drop it now and lay it to rest. It was a prank, and now I can move on to the real shit on my mind my friends don’t need to be part of.

Things like Caspian and his weird behavior.

He hasn’t spoken to me much since that first day at the magazine when he practically told me he wanted to fuck me. I still haven’t managed to get over the shock of working with him, and I’m still praying he won’t sabotage my work and give me the boot.

But what throws me for a loop every time is him and the things he says to me. If there was any doubt before of what he

wanted to do to me, it was clarified within those few seconds, and I know he was serious—that's the problem.

That's why I haven't been able to get his crass words out of my head. And it turns out they were just as effective as that ill-fated kiss we shared, which explains my dirty nightly habit I reacquainted myself with nights ago.

I thought I was over those fantasies and over sinking so low as to please myself with my vibrator by conjuring images of Caspian Ivanov claiming me in every way a woman wants to be claimed. In my fantasies, he's not the way he is now. I created an alternate version of him that's based on what I thought he would be.

"All just a prank," Lucian reiterates, cutting into my thoughts and probably mistaking my silence for worry.

"Thank you," I say, forcing my mind to focus. I don't think Lucian would like me to have any thoughts of Caspian at all. The same can be said for Eilish. Caspian threatened them multiple times and made life shit for them. Every time I think about him, I feel like a dirty traitor. "Please thank Viktor for me."

"I will. I guess it's good to be able to call on him in times like these."

"Good for me, too." And good to see him bonding with Viktor in whatever way it happens. It's at the very least, good he thought to contact him.

"We can go to the party now and have a good time," Eilish states, waving her makeup brush around.

We're getting ready to head out to our second party—my third. Last week's party was so much fun that I agreed to go to this one at Lapetus House. That's where Lucian lives.

When I'm at these events, it takes my mind off shit for a few hours. I may look like I'm happy and as carefree as the other freshmen, but I'm not. I also managed to get a joint at the last party. To be honest, I'll admit I'm going there for that.

I've never bought drugs for myself because I don't think I should go down that path. I fear it might be one I might not

come back from, and I can't allow myself to fall down such a hole. So, having a taste of one that's offered to me every now and again is enough. It also means I can refuse it.

"Yes, absolutely," I agree.

"That's what I like to hear," Lucian says with a bright smile. "I'm going to whip you girls up one of my famous cocktails."

"Then I'm all in."

"Oh, me too. I haven't had alcohol in a few days." Eilish laughs.

"I'll let you girls finish getting ready." Lucian gets up and gives Eilish a once-over. "Looking good, babe. I might have to get my guns out if anyone tries anything with you."

Eilish smiles at him. "Remember our discussion about violence never solving anything."

Lucian looks at me and gives me an incredulous glare. "She wants me to sing *Kumbaya* when I get angry."

I start to laugh.

"See, it's funny, Eilish."

"I just don't want you to get in trouble. You nearly got in a fight with that guy at the diner."

"I didn't like the way he was looking at you."

"You confuse me."

"Whatever. Next time, I'll let the hillbillies take you." He pats my head before sauntering back through the door and leaving us.

"Keep still while I finish your makeup," Eilish says.

I do, but I glance at her reflection in the mirror and notice she's blushing.

God knows I try to mind my own business, but when it comes to my friends, whom I desperately want to see together, it's hard. Maybe it's because I can see what they can't, and I'd

hate to think I could have done something to push them toward each other yet never did.

“So, that sounds like something weird happened? And there was a hillbilly?”

She giggles. “You know Lucian. He’s always getting worked up when some guy looks at me *the wrong way*. This guy—the said hillbilly—was old enough to be my grandfather. Lucian said he was staring at my ass.”

“Maybe he was.” I laugh.

“He’s always the first to see someone staring at my ass.”

I bring my hands together. “Well, maybe there’s a reason for that.”

She stops applying the liquid liner to my eyeliner and looks down at me.

“What do you mean?”

I try to broach the subject subtly. “Maybe he’s protective of you because he might like you.”

There’s no mistake in the blush that flushes down her neck now, but she shakes her head.

“I don’t think so. Not me.”

“Why not you?”

“I don’t think I’m his type. Besides, I don’t think his parents would like that.”

“Why do you say that?” I lift my head to look at her a bit better.

“I think they’d want someone a little more thoroughbred for their son. I’m neither Italian nor Russian and a ... a little broken in all the ways that can’t be fixed.”

I reach out and take her hand. “Don’t say that.”

She smiles, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. “It’s true, Willow. You know it. I think they’d want someone more like you.”

I frown, hoping she doesn’t really believe that. “That’s not true at all.”

“I think it is. In fact, I think if things had gone how they were supposed to, your father would have probably picked him for you.”

“Or Caspian.” I only say his name to throw her off the train of thought she’s on because she’s looking at me like she thinks I might have some interest in Lucian. I don’t because we’ve always just been friends.

“Or Caspian.” She chuckles. “It doesn’t matter now, I suppose.”

“No. But what about you? How do you feel about Lucian?”

“That doesn’t matter either. Let me finish your makeup. I love the way this smoky eye shadow pops against your skin tone.”

The swift subject change translates to: I don’t want to talk about this anymore.

So, I don’t push the subject. There are many things I don’t want to talk about either, and since my friends are always respectful, I allow her to work her magic by focusing on doing my makeup.

It’s not long before we’re ready, and I love what she did. I look like I’m ready for some photoshoot.

The three of us head out to Lapetus House, and I hope for a good evening. I don’t want to stay out too late because I want to go into the magazine early tomorrow to get some work done. I also don’t want to stay out too late because I’m trying to avoid running into Dorian. I’ve successfully managed to do so since I’ve been here.

There were three instances when he contacted me about meeting up for dinner, and I managed to find excuses each time. I was either in class, at work, or off campus.

The latter was spent meeting with Adrian and Elaine to buy a car. They came to Boston for the day last Thursday to check on me and spend time together. Adrian bought me a beautiful yellow Porsche. I had planned to buy a car, but he insisted.

We also talked about money because Adrian set up a separate account at the bank and gave me full control over it. He put enough money in there, so I don't have to ask for anything.

The one thing that's been clear over the years of my godparents taking care of me is their willingness to give me what I want and spoil me. They've never held back or given anyone cause to think they were. This was one of those times, which also tied in nicely with the rest of my plans.

The other day, I thought of how I could put at least part of Lucian's freedom advise in motion to look into what I can on Lillian.

My project at the magazine is on Sylvia Plath. Since she lived in Boston and there are some notable monuments and various other things that are dedicated to her, I'll be going off campus for most of my research. While I'm out, I plan to visit the public library and use the computers there.

At the library, I'll have some privacy and be beyond the watchful eye of the Knights or anyone affiliated with the Bratva. It will give me the freedom to look around and see what I can find.

That's my plan so far. I managed to register at the library on Friday. Next week, I'm going to be spending more time there.

The moment we turn the corner, the music coming from Lapetus House grabs us, then we see the craziness when we get a little closer.

"Welcome to my humble abode, ladies," Lucian beams.

While we've met him outside the house, we haven't been inside yet. So, this should be interesting.

We pass people dancing and drinking beer out on the lawn and head inside to more dancing and beer drinking.

Through the sliding doors, I can see naked guys and girls jumping into the pool, howling as they land with a massive splash, and couples passing drugs by kissing each other and inhaling the smoke.

They must be trying that new drug I heard about at the last party.

Lucian leads us to the living room, where five hulking guys stand around the table pouring beer down their throats while three topless girls dance on the table.

The party last week was an eye opener to how many people love taking their clothes off, but nothing can shock me more than the party at the club designed by the Dark Odyssey.

“Cocktail first!” Lucian shouts over the music that just got louder. “Right this way.”

We all laugh as he makes a show of linking arms with the two of us. He takes us into the kitchen, which is thankfully clear, then we head to the pantry.

Lucian unlinks his arms from ours to take down some tumblers from the cupboard and hand them to Eilish.

“Willow, if you grab the crate of guava from the back, we’ll be ready to go,” he tells me, pointing to the door behind me.

“Sure thing.”

I open the door and get the shock of my life when my eyes land on Dorian, shirtless and pounding hard into a naked Misha from behind.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX

WILLOW

I'm so shocked I freeze to the spot, and I can't move.

I've felt nothing but disgust for this asshole right from the moment I was told I was going to marry him, so that pang of pain inside me isn't my heart breaking because I'm hurt by what I'm seeing.

I'm hurt because this is a glimpse into what my life will be like. This is the man I'm supposed to marry.

"What the motherfucking hell?" Lucian says from behind me.

Dorian stares at us, and the asshole doesn't look shocked, guilty, ashamed, or anything. He pounds harder into Misha, who smiles at me while he sneers.

"Can't you see I'm busy? Fuck off," he grunts.

And I do fuck off.

I walk away. Lucian grabs my arm, and Eilish moves to my side, taking my other arm.

"I'm gonna go home," I tell them.

"Let me go back with you," Eilish offers.

"Me too. We can order in or watch movies," Lucian suggests, looking me over with worry.

"No, I want you guys to stay. I'd feel worse if you left. You've been talking about this party since last week."

Eilish's favorite band, The Whisperers, are going to be playing here in an hour. She's loved them forever.

"It's fine," Eilish replies. "You know we'd rather make sure you're okay."

"That's why you should stay. When else are you going to have The Whisperers at a house party? Lucian, tell her I'll be okay." I nod, looking at them both.

“Okay. I’ll call you in a little while.”

I nod again and continue my retreat. I don’t look back because I can feel the tears coming, and I don’t want to be tempted to cry here.

Too late. One escapes, and another follows. They start blurring my vision, and

I make the mistake of glancing down as I turn the corner.

That’s when I crash into someone who feels like a wall and would have gone flying backward if they hadn’t caught me.

Embarrassed, I look up and meet the olive-green eyes of my nemesis.

Of course, the universe had to go one step further and put the icing on the cake to make things so much worse than they already are.

I’m crying, and he’s holding me, watching the tears run down my cheeks.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t paying attention,” I apologize anyway.

He releases me, and I wipe away the tears quickly. “What happened to you?”

“Nothing,” I answer quickly, remembering with perfect clarity what he said to me about Dorian at the club.

He agreed I deserved to be with a dick who would undoubtedly cheat on me with anything that moves. He said those words, so I can just imagine how he would mock me if he knew what happened.

“People don’t cry for nothing. Prints—”

“Not tonight, Caspian, please. Not tonight. My heart can’t take it.” It can’t. My heart is full, and I can’t take any more from anyone, least of all him. It always hurts more when the pain comes from him.

Fresh tears tip over the rims of my eyes, and I’m grateful when he lets me go.

I run back to my apartment, fall onto my bed, and cry.

Everything pours out of me like an overflowing river of sorrow.

Hours pass, and I continue to cry not just for tonight but everything. I've been trying so damn hard to hold it together for so long.

I try to look okay and be okay and sound okay. But I'm not.

I'm at college trying to go through the motions of what I've been told my future will be, but I'm not okay, and I hate everything.

Anyone who looks at me can tell I'm not fine.

All you have to do is look at the fucking scar on my wrist to see my mind isn't fucking right. And yes, that time when I cut myself, it wasn't just to feel. It was to stop feeling forever.

That night, it hit me that Lillian was dead, and I'd failed. I'd lost everything I loved, and there was no hope, so I didn't know what the point was in living.

I'm embarrassed to say that I still don't, but what keeps me going is the memory of my sister telling me she loved me right before she pushed me over that cliff—saving me.

Back at the mental hospital, when that girl reminded me of the significance of that memory, her words worked because my heart always remembered Lillian. Those words unlocked my thirst for life.

But look at me.

This was the future I fought so hard to come back to, and now sacrifices have been made for me; it's hard to think of dying.

I fall asleep crying and wake early to a host of messages from my friends.

It's morning now, and I feel bad for not messaging back last night. I quickly fire off a message to both Eilish and Lucian, letting them know I'm okay, then I get ready to head out.

It's really early. I'm supposed to be at work in two hours, but I need the distraction of doing something.

Besides, I don't want to be around and run into Misha. It occurred to me that maybe she did write the note or get one of her minions to do it. Dorian obviously isn't the guy I've seen her with here, but maybe he's the new conquest. They're both just as disgusting as each other.

Unlike the smart clothes I usually wear, I opt for dressing casually in a pair of jeans and a baggy jumper, and I tie my hair in a ponytail. In my Converse All Stars and rucksack, I look like a typical college student when I walk into the quiet building of *Real Magazine*.

On the walk over here, I grabbed a large cup of coffee to go and started sipping on it. The caffeine is just starting to kick in.

Today, I have more training, but this extra time will allow me to do some typing. It's not the first time I'm doing a project on Sylvia Plath. She's one of my favorites. I've read every single poem she wrote, and I read *The Bell Jar* at least ten times. Five of which were while I was locked away from the world in the mental hospital. I could probably write about Sylvia Plath with my eyes shut, so I hope to finish my project early.

That way, I can use all the time I'm off campus looking into Lillian. Thinking of her last night encouraged me.

I start typing once I finish my coffee, not even bothering to look through my notes. The title of my project is *The Beauty in Their Work*.

Like my entry essay, I'm supposed to pick a notable literary writer, research their works, and give my opinion on how they changed the literary world.

I type for an hour, and when I hear footsteps, I stop. I lift my head, expecting to see one of the other interns who came in early yesterday, or even Caspian, but the person coming in is neither of them.

It's my husband-to-be.

Jesus, what is he doing here? And he has the audacity to look mad.

His nostrils flare when he walks up to me, and he slams his fist down on my desk so hard the computer screen jerks like it's going to tip forward.

"Figured I'd find you at work," he growls.

"What the hell do you want?"

"Don't you fucking talk to me like that."

I get up quickly when he grasps for me. His hand was coming straight for my neck.

I'm not safe, though. He moves forward, blocks me into the wall, and still goes for my neck.

"You listen to me, you little bitch. Don't you ever interrupt me like that again."

"Let go of me, you fucking asshole." I try to break free, but he's too strong. All I do is piss him off, and he squeezes my neck harder.

"It's time I taught you some respect and give you a rude awakening. You are a means to an end. Money and a route to power. That's all your sister was and what you are, too."

My God, he's squeezing so tightly I see stars.

"Let me... go." I choke

"This marriage we have is shit, and all you will be is a fuck toy. I will fuck whomever I want to fuck, and when I do, you fucking stay out of the way. Piss me off again, and I'll teach you a lesson you'll never forget. You hear me?"

"I heard you," comes a voice that commands attention.

It's the voice in my nightmares and my dreams, but I've never heard him sound so authoritative before.

Caspian stands across from us, glaring at Dorian, who releases me on noticing him.

I cough when the air flows back into my lungs, but I'm so weak my legs give out, and I have to press against the wall to

hold myself up.

“Mind your own business, Ivanov,” Dorian warns. “This doesn’t concern you.”

“I work here, you don’t, so yes, it does concern me. Now, get the fuck out.”

“I’m not done speaking with my wife-to-be, yet,” Dorian smirks, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

“Yes, you are. She’s on my time now. So, like I said, get the fuck out.”

“You think you’re better than me because daddy dearest runs the show.”

Caspian answers him, but he’s talking in a language I don’t understand and one I’ve never heard him speak before. I recognize a word—*andlát*—and I remember hearing my father say that a long time ago. I just can’t remember what it means, although I don’t think I was ever told.

The language is old Norse, the language of the Knights, and whatever Caspian said to Dorian has him gritting his teeth and walking away, leaving.

I don’t take my eyes off him until he disappears around the corner, and then I hear the door close.

Caspian walks up to me, and I don’t know what to say. I’m very aware of what could have happened if he hadn’t shown up. At the same time, I couldn’t be more embarrassed. He heard everything Dorian said.

Does he really think I deserve to be treated that way and spoken to like I’m nothing?

“Are you okay?” he asks.

“Yes.” I stare back at him, expecting him to gloat or make some comment I won’t like, but he doesn’t.

“Did he hurt you?” The question surprises me.

“I’m okay now. Thank you ... for asking him to leave, and whatever else you said to him. What did you say?”

“If you didn’t understand it, then I can’t tell you.”

“Oh.”

It’s the first time I’ve come across something secret to do with the Knights that I didn’t know and wanted to know.

“Take the day off.”

“No, I’m fine to work,” I insist, shaking my head. “I’m just shaken, that’s all.”

He touches my cheek, and heat seeps into my skin. Something enters his eyes that grips me, beckoning me to stare.

“Tomorrow is another day, Printsessa. Get some rest and come back tomorrow.” His hand drops to his side, but there’s a flicker of something unreadable in his eyes that’s gone before it has the chance to take fruition. “Okay?”

“Okay.” I look away from him and gather my things, hoping this won’t be something he’ll hold against me.

“See you later.” Something wicked flashes in his eyes, and his words sound like a promise of something more secret, but it stirs arousal deep in my belly.

It’s an odd reaction to have after what just happened. Maybe it’s tiredness and the shock of everything, so I can’t be thinking straight.

“Later,” I reply and move on shaky legs.

When I leave, I glance over my shoulder and find he’s still watching me, and that predatory presence I usually associate with him spikes my nerves.

It makes me look away and walk faster.

Caspian Ivanov might have just done the nicest thing he’s done for me in years, but it doesn’t change anything, and it won’t change what Dorian said to me.

I can’t believe my father ever picked someone like that for Lillian to marry, and now *I* have to marry him.

There's something off about all of it. Something's been off with the world since the day my parents died.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN

CASPIAN

I t's not often I have to pull rank on anybody or speak in the secret language to emphasize my authority. But I had to earlier with Dorian.

I also threatened to kill him if he didn't leave.

There are only a few people in this world who still speak Old Norse, most of them are Knights because we learn to speak it from birth. We kept it alive through the ages the same way we send messages using the Elder Futhark Runes.

If Willow had understood what I said to that motherfucker, it's then she'd know without a doubt just how crazy and messed up I am.

Also, if she hadn't been there, things would have gotten more violent than they did. I also didn't want to wreck the place.

Usually, I never have to threaten people like that because most are afraid of me for two reasons. The first is, of course, who my father is. Common sense will tell you not to fuck with the Pakhan's son.

The second is me, and by the same token, common sense should tell you not to fuck with me because I'm the Pakhan's son, but it doesn't tend to work on those like Dorian who've been Knights longer than I have and have seen more field time. That's why he thought he could challenge me.

I wasn't going to allow him to do that or get away with what he did to Willow.

The rank I pulled to get rid of his ass was by way of inheritance. I'm fully aware of how much I must be hated because I can do that. The mere fact that if my father dies, I jump straight to being Pakhan and leader of the Knights is serious collateral and not something I take lightly.

It does come in handy for instances like this morning.

And now.

I'm in training, and the motherfucker is here. Dorian clocked on to me the moment I walked into the training hall with Thorne, and he hasn't stopped looking my way since. That was at least five minutes ago. Sitting next to him is his lackey, Yenson.

Three times a week, we train in our units.

Yuri Zelkova, the senior Brigadier, is responsible for the enforcers in the Komarovski. We train with him like we're going out to fight the next world war. He's already here taking notes in the far corner with Masuku, his second-in-command. Yuri has been to two wars and served as a Spetsnaz—Russian special forces—for ten years.

He's a man who doesn't deal with shit and expects nothing but our best when we're here.

The only hater I usually have to contend with is Lucian, who's on the bars doing pullups. Today, I have him and Dorian.

Wonderful. They can both make my day by attacking me at the same time.

Pricks.

“Why the hell is Dorian looking at you like that?” Thorne asks, leaning close to whisper when we sit on the bleachers.

“Don't ask.”

“I'm asking. He looks like he wants to kill you. Has he been trading joints with Lucian?”

“No.”

“Then what happened?”

In regard to Willow, I still don't know what exactly happened, but I figured she saw Dorian's true colors last night and maybe caught him fucking around. I put two and two together from what I heard him say to her and from her distress last night when we ran into each other.

In regard to me, what happened between them opened the door of permission.

I smile at my cousin, who's staring at me with icy blue curious eyes.

"I emasculated him all six ways to Sunday in front of his wife-to-be." His wife-to-be, who I'm planning on visiting later just like I promised.

Like an addict trying to recover, I felt good that I skipped last night's stalking. However, I almost felt I cheated myself in some way because, judging from the mood she left the party in, she probably wouldn't be pleasuring herself when she got home.

To my credit, I'd planned to stay at that party all night. I don't plan to do anything of the sort tonight. I saw the way she looked at me earlier, and I'm still obsessed with knowing she thinks of me in the height of her pleasure-filled states.

"All right, men, look alive. Let's fall in line with the usual sparring. One hour, then change it up," Yuri says, slapping his large hands together.

Thorne and I usually spar together because we're skilled in similar fighting styles. Ninjutsu, Wing Chun, fencing, and kickboxing are our main styles, so we move over to the section we normally practice in.

"Caspian Ivanov. How about you spar with me instead?" calls a gravelly voice from behind me.

It's fucking Dorian, and I knew this was coming.

He can challenge me here on the training ground. This is the only place a Knight of equal standing can challenge another and not be punished for defiance. It's simply because he can claim it's in the interest of training. This is not that, though.

The smile on my face when I turn to look at him must really throw him because he narrows his eyes at me.

Everyone is looking at us. They would, because to most, this hasn't happened before. It's only the freshmen who wouldn't know. There are forty of us in here, ten of which are freshmen. The others know this duel for what it is.

We're not going to exactly call what we're about to do a duel, though, because one of us would have to definitely kill the other.

I just want to give Dorian the beating of his motherfucking life.

I spread my palms out and lift my shoulders, smiling widely at him.

“Think you can take me, Dorian?”

“Without a doubt.”

“Trying to get back at me for this morning?” I laugh and walk closer to him.

He smiles, too. “Well, it does look like I have something you want. Easy pussy. I'll tell you what, I'll be sure to pass little Willow Raventhorn to you once I and my boys have had her a few times.”

I see red. That's all I see. A curtain of fire blazing amongst the darkness that always consumes me. I see it, then I rush him, my balled fist connecting with his jaw for a bone-crushing sound.

The impact knocks him straight to the ground, but he's up in seconds as if it never happened. The only evidence being the blood dripping from his nose.

Like wild, rampant beasts, we clash together, then we're wrestling on the ground, throwing punches designed to kill. We roll on the floor with him on top of me, then me on top of him, strength matching strength. Not skill, though.

I have him figured out within a minute. To know how to defeat someone like him, you have to fight him, take a few hits, and learn them, which is what I just did. His main flaw is that he leaves himself wide open when he's angry.

People always talk about using emotion, but that's not how my father taught me to fight. Ivanovs do not fight with emotion. We push all emotions aside, be it rage or love, and it's the act of doing so that hones in on raw, brute strength. The way an animal would fight based on instinct.

That is what I do. I get off the ground and yank him up, too. His face is already messed up, and the blood dripping from the side of my mouth suggests I am, too.

The fucker smiles and tries to kick me, but I whip out my leg into a roundhouse kick that blocks him and sends him back to the floor.

“You fucking dog,” Dorian taunts, getting back up. “Look at you, so obviously jealous of the woman who was promised to me.”

“She wasn’t fucking promised to you.” And I can’t begin to imagine why Timofey promised Lillian to him. Dorian was always a motherfucker, right from when we were kids.

“Correction. The other psycho sister. I inherited the one who was more messed up. But don’t worry, I’ll make sure I break her until she cracks again and there’s nothing left. Nothing left of your sweet Willow. Then that will be the end of her.”

End of her?

What the fuck does he mean?

I’m a fool. I know exactly what he means. He’s talking about death. That’s the only thing he could mean by saying shit like that. It’s no mere threat.

We’re not ordinary people, and we aren’t honorable either. We aren’t the kind of knights who save damsels in distress. We were set up to infiltrate and destroy. That’s what he’ll do to Willow.

It’s what I promised to do to her.

But there is a difference between this asshole and me.

I actually don’t want to destroy her.

The realization floods emotion within me, and I piss on every Ivanov when I truly unleash and turn lethal.

I guess the reason we don’t fight with emotion is so we can think straight. I’m not thinking right now when I headbutt

Dorian and throw my body into his, knocking him back to the ground so hard I hear a rib snap.

I'm little more than an animal when I throw a series of furious punches into his face and chest, roaring like a lion from hell.

I'm not human when I pull a knife from my sheath when I see he's barely moving. All I see is him doing some shit to Willow that will take her away from me forever, and I can't allow that.

In that moment, I care like I used to. I'm that guy again, the one who thought the little girl who ran through the meadow with her striking red hair and bright blue eyes belonged to him.

With both hands, I grab the handle, readying to bring it down into his heart.

That was how I killed the last guy who fought with me. Except he was a rapist and that was on a mission that earned me my pass to initiation.

This would be a different type of killing.

The only thing that stops it from happening is the loud roar of Yuri's voice calling my name, and Thorne at my side with his hands on mine.

The fucking knife is inches away from Dorian's heart, mere inches, and the fucker's eyes are wide with the panic of death brimming within them.

"Don't do it, Caspian," Thorne says. "Don't fucking do it. Things will not bode well for you if you do. Don't do it."

I look at my cousin, my hands now shaking, and I make a conscious decision to listen to him.

My grip loosens on the knife, and Thorne lets me go. I then return my gaze to Dorian. Panic still swims in his eyes, along with fear. Good. It seems he underestimated me.

I lean forward and swipe my thumb over his cheek to collect some blood, and like the savage my ancestor, Gael,

was, I smear the blood over my left cheek and smile down at him.

“Hanokr þú dey,” I mutter in his face, telling him in Old Norse that I’ll kill him if he hurts Willow. “If I were you, I’d stay the fuck away from Willow until the day of your arrangement.”

I won’t call it a wedding because it’s fucking not. With that said, I stand. I’m surprised when I meet Lucian’s dazed expression. Like everyone else, he’s shocked I just lost my shit and nearly killed a man, but with the exception of Thorne, I don’t have history with everyone else. So, he’s shocked I just lost my shit and nearly killed a man for Willow and threatened the same man’s life if he hurt her.

Yuri grabs my arms and shoves me around to face him.

“Go and take a fucking walk and cool off,” he orders in a thick Russian accent. “Don’t come back until tomorrow.”

As always, I give him the respect I always do and dip my head for a curt nod.

I leave and head back to my apartment, where I hole myself up in my room.



I’M SUPPOSED to have an economics lecture at seven, my only class for the day, but I skip it. I spend the whole day going through the database, but I might as well have done nothing because I’m not focusing.

Lack of focus isn’t going to help me get anywhere, and it won’t give me answers for Zack either.

At ten, I grab a beer from the fridge and smoke a joint. It gives me the calm to answer Thorne’s messages, then I get dressed to fulfil my promise to the princess of *later*.

I shouldn’t be going anywhere. What happened today with Dorian clearly showed this woman has flipped my mind upside down, and I can’t seem to snap it back into focus.

She's only been back in my life for less than two weeks, and I'm already doing shit I can't explain.

I smoke a normal cigarette on the walk over to Myrrdin House because I've smoked far too many joints in the past week for my liking.

When I make my way to the back of her house, I see the light in her bedroom is on.

I'm later than usual, but at least I still get to catch her awake.

As I make my way to the bridge, I ask myself how many more times I am going to do this. This is so juvenile and fucked up. When I was sixteen, it was understandable. At the age I am now, I shouldn't be doing this. Only old perverts do shit like this once they reach a certain age.

I'm nineteen. Can't I seriously get this fucking girl out of my head and get laid somewhere else?

I turn the corner to walk up the bridge but stop dead in my tracks when I spot a tall muscular hooded figure in the center of the bridge. It's a guy. He's standing by the edge of rail where I normally position myself.

At first, annoyance fills me when I think this guy, who's probably out for a late-night stroll, has ruined my guilty pleasure. However, my mind changes quickly when it becomes evident the longer I watch him that he's not out for a stroll, and he's standing near the section I use for a reason.

He's watching her—Willow.

He's watching her.

The realization moves me closer to the shadows so I can watch a little longer to confirm my thoughts and figure out who he could be.

Is it Dorian?

No. He wouldn't be that stupid, and I don't think he would stalk. This guy is also taller than Dorian and has a little more muscle. Serious muscle. So, he has to be one of the more experienced students or seniors. Or staff?

Nothing surprises me, and Willow is beautiful. Why wouldn't a member of staff find her attractive?

The guy is watching her almost the way I do, but there's something more sinister in the air between us that tells me he's not here to see her take her clothes off.

I can just see Willow from here. She's walking around in her room, oblivious to the two of us.

Deciding I've seen enough, I move closer, ready to jump him. I don't want to fall down the thirty-foot drop in the river, though, if we go over the side. I want to keep him on the bridge and find out what the fuck he thinks he's doing.

I become visible the moment I step onto the stairs and the creak in the wood warns the motherfucker of my approach.

He snaps his gaze to me and runs, an immediate sign of guilt.

I chase him, but he already had the advantage of a massive head start, so by the time I reach the top of the bridge, he's already across and disappearing into the woods. That doesn't stop me. I continue bounding forward right into the woods, and I don't stop until I'm in the thicket of trees not knowing where else to go.

An idea crosses my mind as I search for the bastard.

I call Thorne, who answers straightaway.

"Thorne, pull up the cameras at Myrrdin. I need to know what you can see around the woodland area."

"What's going on?"

"Just do it, fast."

I hear him shuffling around, then tapping at a keyboard.

"I just see the woods, that's it."

"Go back to the bridge and rewind by thirty seconds." I continue looking around while he does that, mindful that I've lost the guy who's long gone.

"There's just the empty bridge. There's no one on there."

I narrow my eyes. “Go back by a minute.” Maybe my timing was off from when I ran off the bridge and entered the woods.

“Nothing.”

I was on that bridge a minute ago, no more than that, and so was the guy.

“Try two minutes.”

I wait for him to check and answer. “Nothing. Caspian, what the hell’s going on?”

Good question. “I was just on the bridge. Are you sure you have the right cameras?”

“Of course, I’m sure. What are you doing there anyway?”

Another idea forms in my head of what might be going on, and it’s not a good one.

“Thorne, look at the cameras in the woods now. You should be able to see me. I’m not that far from the bridge.”

He checks, and I hear him sigh. “I can’t see you. The woods are completely clear.”

Fuck. I know what’s happening here, and it’s not good. Someone’s tampered with the cameras. That guy, whoever he was.

“Caspian, if I can’t see you, and you’re where you say you are, the cameras could be messed up.”

“I don’t think they’re just messed up. Look, I gotta go. I’ll check in later.”

“All right.”

We hang up, and I make my way back to the bridge to the place I was supposed to be, to the girl I was supposed to be watching.

She’s at least a hundred feet away from me, and I need my binoculars to see what she’s doing up close.

I know she wouldn’t have the curtains open like that if she had an inkling that anyone would be up here watching her the

way I do. Even if she could see someone on the bridge, the usual person wouldn't expect them to be equipped to see you up close.

So, when she takes her clothes off and falls into her bed and starts touching herself in the faint night light, she thinks she's safe and stuck in a fantasy.

I still want to know if she's thinking about me, but now that I know someone else was watching her, I want to know who it was. And I want to know why.

Being watched like that means she's in danger, which explains why I don't leave this time when she falls asleep, and how I find myself sneaking into the house to find her room.

When I get there, the first thing I notice is the room smells just like her.

Like roses and fresh meadow, and like the warm summer day Shakespeare obsessed about in his poem.

I stare at Willow Raventhorn in the bed with the silky cream sheet drawn up to her tiny waist and those gorgeous breasts practically on show in that loose-fitting nightie.

That's all she seems to be wearing as I can just make out the slight hint of her rose-dipped nipples which look paler in the sliver of moonlight shining down on her.

That crimson hair is spread out over her shoulders, and she looks so vulnerable and helpless in her sleep.

Because she is. She has that look when she's awake, too. Like she's barely hanging on and might blow away in the wind.

There's a small bruise on her neck. That would have been where Dorian grabbed her.

That motherfucker. I should have at least cut off his hand for doing that.

Positioning myself in the window on the bay, I watch over the girl I love to hate, and hate to love.

It's ironic—I'm the viper watching over the lamb.

It's also fucked up, but here I am.

What a shock she'll get when she wakes and sees me.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-EIGHT

WILLOW

I shuffle against the images filling my mind. I know it's a dream, or rather a nightmare, but I'm so weak I can't pull away from the clutches of vivid memory.

The images all come at me at once, no longer in sequence but a mash-up of events, some out of order, some exactly as they happened.

I see Lilian holding my hand as we run through the woods and the men chasing us. Those two men. They bound forward through the woods after us, and we fall into the ditch. She sprains her ankle, but we keep going. The trees come at us as we run for our lives with no hope.

"I love you," she says, and I see the moonlight flashing down on her face and the necklace she wore, the one just like mine.

Then I'm falling. When I land in the water this time, I'm pulled back up to the top of the cliff and I see those men standing over her.

One man pulls out a gun and shoots her twice in her head.

Blood splatters everywhere and she screams.

That scream I never heard in real life makes me jump out of my sleep, and I bolt up breathing heavily with my hands over my mouth.

Oh God.

It's just a dream. It was just a dream. I never saw them kill her, and I never heard her scream.

I always wonder if she did, or if the first bullet killed her instantly and she never made a sound.

How foolish was I to think that she could have survived? I was so hellbent on trying to get whoever would listen to me to find her. Even when they stuck me in that hospital, I screamed for her, for help, but she was already dead.

Two gun shots was what I heard. Maybe one would have given me that crazy hope she made it out alive. But two? No.

“What were you dreaming about?” comes a voice from the shadows.

I snap my head around to see a shirtless Caspian leaning against the window, which is open. He’s smoking and watching me.

My jaw drops, and a wave of terror surges through me. Grabbing the sheets, I pull them closer to my chest to cover the flimsiest nightie I own, which I wore because it’s so hot.

“What the hell are you doing in my room?” I choke out.

He puffs away on his cigarette, not flinching, unmoving, just staring like the badass he is.

I’m mad as hell, but I get angrier at myself when my eyes run over those hard muscles I conjured up when I touched him last week. They’re on display before me, and what I see rivals any fantasy and everything I imagined. He looks like someone sculpted him to perfection and quite unlike most nineteen-year-olds.

His powerful shoulders, biceps, and pecs are ripped with the kind of muscle you’d find on the cover of a *Men’s Health* magazine. Ridges and valleys line the length of his wide torso, tapering down to a defined V. Inked to that perfection are his tattoos.

His left is covered with snakes and Russian designs I recognize from some of the men who used to work for my father, and his right side only has the symbol for Sigma and the rune for defense.

The most prevalent is the massive snake on the left side of his neck, which runs down the length of his arm.

“Like what you see, Malyshka?” He smirks.

His cockiness and that name—Malyshka—he called me last week snaps my brain back into focus and I recall the question I threw at him.

“What are you doing in my room, Caspian? How did you even get inside my apartment?”

And how long has he been here?

A quick glance outside tells me the sun is almost up. I’m sure I’ve been asleep for hours and clearly dead to the world if I never heard him come in.

He continues smoking with that unfaltering granite gaze, which drops to my breasts then climbs back up slowly to meet my eyes.

A grin full of mischief and oozing sex appeal curves his lips, and the same emotion fills his eyes.

“Didn’t I tell you I’d see you later?” he asks so casually anyone would think we’re talking about food.

“I thought you meant later at the office, at work. Not my room.”

“Hmmm, I can see how that would be confusing.” He puts the cigarette out using one of the little side plates I bought at the market as an ashtray.

“What is the matter with you? You’re crazy if you think this is okay.”

“Printsessa, you keep calling me crazy like it’s the first time you’re figuring that out and we keep coming back to the same conclusion that this is not new news to anybody.”

He steps into the light, and I see the bruise on his cheek and more dark patches around his eye.

“What happened to your face? Were you in a fight?”

Is that why he’s here? He looks like he’s been fighting.

“Long story about a girl.”

I press down hard on my back teeth. The last thing I need after the horrible dream I just had is to hear about him and some girl.

“Then why don’t you go and bother her?”

“I am,” he replies with a sexy grin, shutting me down.

My nerves tense immediately, and a knot forms in my stomach. What is he talking about? He wouldn't get into a fight over me. Or would he?

I recall what happened with Dorian with perfect clarity. Did something happen between them?

“What happened?”

“Nothing interesting. That's all you need to know.”

He closes the window, and when he moves closer, my awareness of him being in my room returns.

“I don't think you should be here, Caspian.” I take a shallow breath. “This is my bedroom.”

“No shit.”

“Well, it means you can't be in here.”

“Okay, I have one question. If you answer it, and I like the answer, I'll leave.”

“What kind of question could you have for me at this hour of the day?” And why wouldn't he like the answer?

The pulsing knot in my stomach tightens when he comes right up to me and rests his hands on the bed either side of me.

I inhale him, and the scent of sandalwood, musk, desire, and sex is too much. It's too much for me to handle, and the forest of butterflies in my stomach go off in a frenzy of madness.

The playful smile dancing on his sensuous lips is a tell he knows what he's doing to me.

He moves one more inch closer, and my breath hitches.

“My question is this, and I want the fucking truth, who do you think of when you touch yourself at night?”

For several heartbeats I hold my breath, shocked and trapped by the question.

In the confines of his granite gaze, I'm backed into the same corner he put me in back at the club when I worried he could see inside my mind.

It wasn't that at all. He spoke like he knew what I do, and it's the same thing happening now. Except, what do I say? I rummage my mind for some answer to give him and come up with nothing. What the actual hell am I supposed to say to him?

"You're sick," I grate out. "How can you ask me that?"

Leaning onto his left arm, he flutters his fingers across my cheek, then traces a line down to where I have the sheet pressed to my chest.

An inch to the left, and he'd be touching my breast.

"Is it Lucian? Is he whom you're thinking of as you pleasure yourself?"

"Leave me alone, Caspian."

"I told you, I want an answer, then I'll go. So, tell me, is it him? Does he make you ache? Does he make you hot in all the right places? Or wet? I told you I wasn't the only friend who wants to fuck you."

As if I need the refresher.

"Tell me, Malyshka, who do you want? Who is it? Is it him?" He grips my throat, and my breath quickens.

My pulse beats erratically at the threatening timbre in his husky voice.

"No... it's not him."

A tense silence squeezes into the space between us as he stares back at me. Then a menacing, maddening grin forms on his face.

"Is it me? Do you think of me?"

I breathe in shallow and quick breaths, but it doesn't stop my heart from thumping madly as if I've been running a marathon.

His fingers splay around my neck, but he doesn't grip like he did before. His touch becomes a caress, and my eagerness to escape fades.

Instead, my body betrays me, and I want him to touch me.

“Answer the question, Willow. Is it me?”

My torturous body forces my senses away because it knows what will happen if I tell the truth, and I’m so eager to find out that I allow myself to drift into the fantasy.

“Yes.” My voice drifts into a hushed whisper, as if straying into a dream.

The moment I confirm what he wanted me to say, his eyes glow with a savage fire that’s arousing and frightening. It comes alive with desire and scorches me from the inside out.

No one has ever looked at me like that before. As if I am everything and like he can see past the shattered remains of my heart and see the person I used to be.

My own desire for him awakens, and I don’t want to fight it.

Smoothing his hand back up to my cheek, he continues into my hair and guides me to his lips.

I go willingly, the same way I did years ago, but this is different because I already know what he tastes like.

Now I get to savor the taste and allow insanity to claim me, if only for a few moments.

He cups my face with both hands and deepens the kiss, pushing his tongue into my mouth so it can stroke mine.

I release the sheet and run my hands over his chest and up to grip his shoulders.

Soon, the kiss turns hungry and it’s clear this is nothing like the kiss we shared before. The cruel ravishment of his mouth consumes me, and as his hot tongue sweeps over mine, ecstasy demands that I give him more and take more. So, I do. I suck on his tongue, savoring the taste of him and that I’m kissing him again.

But then he ends the kiss before I’m ready to stop. The break allows a sliver of my senses to return, but not quickly enough to stop him from ripping the sheet from my body.

I shriek when he pulls me closer to the edge of the bed and shoves my nightie up my thighs.

“What are you doing?” I gasp, trying to stop his wandering hands from moving further up. I have no panties on. I don’t usually sleep with any.

Mischief lights up his eyes. “Fucking around and doing what grown-up Willow and Caspian would have always been doing. Now, spread your legs and let me taste your sweet cunt. I’ll give you something to fantasize about.”

I’m so stunned I can barely breathe. I want to say something, but no words come.

My entire body falls under his spell when he pushes my nightie right up my hips, exposing my bare pussy.

He looks satisfied I’m not wearing any panties, and by what he sees.

“You’re wet.” He runs a finger over my slit, touching me where no one has ever touched me before. His touch makes my body quake with longing and need. It’s so intense I almost beg him to touch me again.

I manage a quick breath. That’s all, barely a sip of air before he buries his face right between my thighs and thrusts his tongue into my pussy.

And... Oh. My. God.

All the blood in my body rushes to my head then back down to my pussy, where he’s eating me out.

My muscles tense as I’m held in the claws of pleasure, and my body bows to him, to his touch, and his will.

Whatever resistance I had floats away into the ether and all I feel is the pleasure he gives me.

I run my hands over his shoulders, holding him there while he feasts on me like I’m a rare delicacy, and he continues to give me what I need.

When he licks over my clit and swirls his tongue around the hard nub, a loud moan rips from my throat and I grab my

breasts the way I do when I'm in the height of pleasure.

He lifts his head and takes my hand away from my breasts. "No, no, no, Printsessa. That's my job. Take this off and show me what you look like." He tugs on my nightie.

My scalp tightens at the same time my nipples do. Somewhere in the back of my mind I know this is a bad idea, but I don't want to stop. I don't want to stop and go back to the horrible reality I'm only able to escape in my dreams and fantasies.

So, like an obedient servant, I do as I'm told and lift my nightie over my head.

He watches me curiously with his bright-colored eyes, which become brighter when my breasts bobble and sway toward him.

My nipples are so tight they ache with arousal just from his poignant stare.

This is it. I'm naked. He's the first guy to kiss me and the first to see me naked.

The *what the hell am I doing* moment will hit any second now. Until it does, I'm doing this, whatever it is.

His fingers flutter over my breasts, and I suck in a gulp of air.

Catching my right nipple between his thumb and forefinger, he massages the diamond-hard peak while he lowers his head to take my left nipple into his mouth and thrust his free fingers back into my pussy.

A mindless moan falls from my lips while he explores me with his tongue, and his fingers pump in and out of my pussy hard and fast.

That's when I feel the first tug of pleasure jerking on my groin. As if he knows what's happening inside me, he intensifies everything, alternating his suckle from one breast to the other and pumping harder into my pussy.

The rough, possessive way he touches and consumes me shatters my soul, and I come. My bones tingle as fire ravages

through every secret part of me.

Pleasure ripples all over my body, driving me insane. It rockets through me, and I want this moment to last forever.

I throw my head back and scream, holding on to him.

He lowers himself back to the ground, parts my legs wider, and drinks the arousal that flows out of me.

He doesn't stop until he licks me clean, and I'm left gasping for air.

When he's done, he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and stands, showing off the impressive bulge of his cock pressing against the front of his pants.

My cheeks flush, and a blush races across my body when I think of what we just did and how he practically consumed me. The sudden awareness makes me reach for the sheet to pull it back over myself to cover up.

He doesn't say anything, so I'm not sure what to think. The last time we were anything close to intimate, he told me to stay away from him or he'd destroy me. I'm not sure if I could handle being told that today. Or what I'd do if he decided he was going to do some dumb shit like fire me from the magazine.

In silence, I watch him walk over to my nightstand, but shock slams into my heart when he retrieves the little velvet bag with my vibrator and gives me a crude smile.

"You won't be needing this thing anymore," he states to my absolute horror. Then, from the back of his pants, he pulls out a business card and holds it up. "My number. Call me instead when you need me to come over and take care of your needs. See you later."

With an easy wink, he puts the card in the drawer and slaps the side of my leg that's still visible.

I'm hot with fury. It's eating me alive, but the words I need to say don't come.

Caspian grabs his shirt from the chair in the corner and leaves just as the room brightens with the sun's rays.

I must lie there for a full minute with my mouth open and my head feeling like it might fall off before I'm able to move.

With the calm renewed after the departure of chaos, my mind settles, and I process what just happened and what it all means.

He's been watching me.

Caspian has been watching me.

I look through the window to the only possible place he could have seen me from, and I want to scream.

The bridge. It must be the bridge, unless he can fly. But I'm so far away from the fucking bridge, I wouldn't have thought anyone could see inside my room.

Sure, I suppose that would work for someone normal. Someone who wouldn't go up there equipped to spy on others. He would have had some camera to zoom in or a pair of binoculars, which made it all the better for the Viper to see with.

Oh my God, what an asshole, and look how I behaved with him. I practically begged him to touch me.

What the fuck else is he doing? I've felt the presence of someone following me. Was it him?

Ugh. I've had enough, and I'm so sick of being a joke to everyone, or the punching bag.

I get myself ready, and instead of going to the stupid sorority breakfast meeting that's *mandatory* to attend every Thursday morning, I leave.

If Misha says anything to me later, I'll be the daddy's girl she is and tell Adrian what happened with Dorian and that I'm *distraught*. I might not be able to fight off Dorian or change things with him, but when it comes to anybody else, I'm going to fight.

And I'm starting with Caspian.

Nobody has terrorized me more than him, and I can't allow myself to fall deeper into the hole I dig for myself when I'm

around him.

It needs to end right here.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE

CASPIAN

I recognize her footsteps, so I know it's Willow even before she enters the foyer.

It's too early for her to be here, just like yesterday. But from the look on her face when she sees me, I know she's mad at me.

I gave myself away in every way possible, slipping up intentionally and unintentionally at the same time.

I sip on my cup of coffee and raise my brows when she stops ahead of me.

I can taste the strong Arabica beans with a hint of vanilla I asked the barista to add to my brew, but underneath that flavor is the taste of my ex-best friend.

That sweet taste of her pussy and the juices that flowed from her as she came undone in my arms.

"Good morning again." I dip my head and smirk.

"You asshole. There's nothing good about this morning, Caspian."

And I'm not having this conversation here. There's no one up here, but the sound carries downstairs

I turn and make my way into my office, where, of course, I knew she would follow.

She closes the door behind her, and I set the coffee down on the table.

"How long have you been watching me?" She looks hurt. I understand it, but since I'm not sorry, I won't say I am. If given the chance, I would do it all again, but maybe I'd visit her room sooner for two reasons.

The first being I want her, and the second is, I don't know if she's in danger.

She's all worked up the way she is but has no idea that someone else, someone more threatening than me, got to the position of stalker before me.

"I don't think you want the answer to that, Malyshka."

"Stop calling me that."

"Why? Because it suits you?" I smirk. I can't even remember how it was I came to be calling her that, but it stuck like she'd graduated from being my Printsessa to being my baby girl.

"How does it suit me? What the hell is the matter with you? Don't you know what privacy is? How dare you spy on me. Have you been following me around, too?"

Following her?

So, she thinks someone's following her?

That means the guy might have been around longer than last night.

"I don't have time for that. You think someone's following you?" I quirk a brow.

"Was it you?"

"I just gave you an answer, and I never repeat myself." I'm going to look into it. I need to because something weird is going on. My gut is telling me something is up. I can't imagine what, but I'll find out.

In the meantime, I have her right where I want her, and she looks good in that short skirt. I never got to see her ass. Maybe she'll show it to me now.

"Why are you looking at me like that? I'm mad as hell at you, and you aren't giving me a straight answer."

"Come here."

"What?"

"Come here."

She doesn't move, so I move toward her, and she gasps when I pick her up and carry her over to my desk.

“You crazy asshole, what are you doing to me?”

I set her on top of the desk and block her in like I did earlier when she was on her bed.

“Do you want me to show you or tell you?”

“Tell me, so I can run away.”

I laugh. “You aren’t going to run away from the Viper, little lamb, and just for the record, I’m thinking of fucking you on my desk.”

I wanted to see her flush and her shocked reaction. I got both, but I was also being serious.

“I can’t figure you out,” she says with an exasperated sigh.

“You’re not supposed to be able to.” I brush my nose over hers, then my lips.

She warms to me within seconds, and when she opens her mouth again to protest, I place a finger on her sweet soft lips and shake my head.

With a smile, I cup her face, and she moves toward me when I chase her lips for a kiss.

Every time I kiss her, it feels like coming home, or what I imagine coming home would feel like when people describe home.

I only had that feeling when my mother was alive, and even then, things were tense.

Kissing the girl who’s forbidden to me shouldn’t feel so fucking good, but it does, and the sensation of her lips on mine sizzles through every part of me.

Her dainty hands press against my shirt, and I run my hands down to her breasts. Fuck, how many years have I wanted to feel her up and feel those huge swells beneath my fingertips?

She’s mad as hell and letting me touch her, and I know we shouldn’t be doing this here.

We're at fucking work, for God's sake, and people are starting to come into the office. I can see one person walking in, and I thank fuck for the one-way privacy wall.

Instead of doing the sensible thing and stopping, I do the other sensible thing and pick her up so I can carry her into the cupboard where I keep the stationary.

No one needs me for anything, so I plan to pick up where we left off earlier.

I shove her up against the wall and kiss the side of her neck, kissing over the bruise that's still there.

"Caspian, what are we doing?" she mutters.

I smirk. "Grown-up Caspian and Willow are fucking around again."

Fucking.

I want to fuck her. That's what I want, but I'm also a jealous motherfucker who wants to own her and possess her.

I take hold of her face and lift her chin so she can look at me, so I can ask the question that's always been on my mind.

"What is Lucian to you?"

The rise and fall of her chest increase. "My friend."

"A friend like me? Because if that's the case, he can't have you." I don't know what the hell I'm saying. It's like some part of me thinks I can have her.

Her brows snap together, and she tries to get out of my grasp, but I hold her down like a little mouse trapped under my paws.

"Let me go."

"Stop requesting things you don't want, Printsessa. If you really wanted me to let you go, you wouldn't be in here with me."

"Why are you asking me about Lucian?"

"I told you. I'm not the only friend you have who wants to fuck you."

“You aren’t my friend.”

Last time she said that, I felt nothing. This time, there’s a pang of hurt I didn’t expect. At least no matter what happens, Lucian still gets to be something to her.

I tighten my grip on her pale neck and watch her pulse quicken.

“Did he get there before me?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did you give yourself to him? Was he your first?”

“No.”

“Then who was it? Who touched you? I want the names of every single man who touched you, kissed you, or even *looked* at you like they wanted to have sex with you.”

A pained look enters her eyes, and she shakes her head.

“It was just you.”

Me?

Just me? What, three years ago?

That’s not possible. Look at her. I’ve never seen anything more perfect than her, and I’ve seen men looking at her.

“You’re a virgin?” Saying it now sounds incredulous.

She nods slowly, and her cheeks stain with the color rose.

“And I was the only person you’ve ever kissed?”

“Yes.”

I don’t care what anyone says or who she’s promised to. That makes her mine.

She takes a quick breath, and trepidation rushes over her face.

I bring her back to my lips. The thrill of having her lush body pressed up against me hardens my cock, and I decide I’m going to take her right here up against this wall.

Her hands grip my shirt, and I catch her left and bring it down to my dick, clasp her fingers around my length through my pants.

She gasps into my mouth, and I nibble on her bottom lip.

“Feel how hard I am for you, Willow Raventhorn.” I squeeze her hand tighter around my dick and guide her to rub up and down. “Are you on the pill?”

“Yes.”

Perfect, fucking perfect. I press my mouth to the shell of her ear and push my erection into her flat belly.

“Let me fuck you against this wall. Say yes to me, Printsessa.” I lift her leg and slide my fingers over the lace of her panties, and right over to her pussy lips. “Say yes to me, Willow. Let me fuck you.”

She arches her back when I rub her nipples and push down her top so her left nipple can poke out.

“Yes, fuck me.”

Fucking hell. Hearing her say that makes me almost blow my load in my pants.

I undo my belt buckle and kiss her again, my dick aching to be inside her. I get lost in the kiss, but then I hear my name being called.

“Caspian, are you in there?” my father calls out from inside my office.

And he’s the only person who can pull me back to reality and away from Willow’s lips,

As I pull out of the kiss, I get ripped back to my senses and remember the direct order he gave me to stay away from Willow Raventhorn.

She looks as scared of him as everyone else is, and I just dragged her into shit.

I place my finger over her mouth and then to her heart, which is beating so fast in her chest I fear it might burst.

“Stay here. Stay right here,” I tell her.

“Okay.”

I smooth out my pants and run a hand through my hair. The sound of my father’s voice already lessened the blood flow to my dick so I’m not pitching a tent.

Pulling in a deep breath, I leave Willow and walk out into my office. He’s not out there but in the open plan section with the banks of desks.

When he sees me, he frowns and walks back inside my office.

“I was just in there. Where were you?” he asks.

“I was out back on the ladder. I called back out, but you didn’t answer. How come you’re here?”

He glares at me as if I just insulted him. “Are you fucking kidding me? I heard what happened yesterday.”

Yuri is not the kind of man to run to my father with shit, but on this occasion, I wish he hadn’t said anything. It’s understandable, though, on account of the fact that Dorian almost died at my hand.

“Explain yourself,” Father demands.

Oh fuck. What the hell am I supposed to say?

“Dorian challenged me, and I put him in his place. I shouldn’t have to explain myself for that. I did what any Ivanov would do in that situation, and I would do it again.”

“Yuri said the fight was over Willow Raventhorn? Is that true?”

“It depends on how you heard it, Father.”

“Caspian, I already warned you away from that girl. Don’t let me have to do it again. You took the oath. You live by the oath and die by it, too. Do not defy me.” He eyes me dangerously.

I’m never the liar, but I’m not a fool either, or a bitch.

“Of course not. But if a man challenges me to a death match, regardless of the reason, he’s dead.”

“Be that as it may, if you defy me, you’re dead to me, too.”

I believe him.

“See you later for dinner,” he adds, tapping my shoulder.

My father never ceases to amaze me. He can feed you with one hand and kill you with the other.

“See you later.”

He leaves me, and when he turns the corner and I can’t see him anymore, I head back into the cupboard to look for Willow.

Except she’s gone.

Clever girl. She left through the back door. It leads to the fire escape. At least one of us is thinking.

I should leave well enough alone, but it feels like the coward’s way out.

I won’t be a coward to a woman who feels like mine.

CHAPTER
THIRTY

WILLOW

I HAD TO GO OFF CAMPUS.

I needed to in order to clear my head so I could think a little better. Just for some clarity.

Travelling around Boston for the day seemed to be my medicine. Although I hadn't initially planned a day trip to escape Caspian and Aleksander Ivanov.

I don't know how I got myself into this mess. I didn't even do anything. Okay, yes, I was in the complete wrong for everything I did with Caspian and telling him to fuck me just illustrated the depth of how much I'd lost my mind.

Other than that, I didn't do anything to instigate this shift in our non-existent relationship.

But I think I can at the very least explain myself.

I always felt this way about him, and the years since our parents died have been about me not trying to feel, and it's still about me not trying to feel. My body is telling me to go left, while I'm constantly trying to fight it to go right.

Then there's him. I still can't figure him out. There's always been this dark edge to him that I knew would snap one day, but I never thought it would ever be directed at me.

No matter what craziness has fallen over us in the last twenty-four hours, I have to remember that because there's more to Caspian Ivanov that can destroy me. I got the rude awakening when I heard his father's voice. It sent terror through me. Absolute terror.

I heard what he said. Everything.

I know Caspian got into a fight over me with Dorian and I know Caspian's father warned him away from me. His threat sounded serious. He mentioned death and I know not to take such things lightly. Especially when it comes from the Pakhan

That's why I left.

It's awful to know that someone could hate you for your mere existence. He referred to me as that girl with such distaste the intensity could have strangled me if such a thing were possible.

But I guess I can't act like I'm completely innocent, or rather the victim. I will always remember that I wronged Aleksander Ivanov too when I kept my father's secret.

But I can't act like I'm completely innocent.

To him, I knew a secret about his wife, and while his wife and my father are dead and gone, I'm the one left to blame. It's like I was part of their sins just for knowing what they were doing. Guilty by association and therefore the one who made him look like a fool. That's why he will always hate me.

And why I mustn't get close to Caspian.

Caspian likes to think he can defy his father in these clever ways, but he would sell his soul to the devil to please that man.

When clarity returned, I made use of the time by going to the library like I'd originally planned to do.

I downloaded some articles about my sister's disappearance and created a scrapbook.

I got over a hundred articles I want to organize into a file. When I do that, I'll go over each one and maybe make contact with some of the people who wrote the articles. I still have nothing to go on, but it's a start that makes me feel like I'm doing something.

When I return to campus, it's not that late. I could catch up with my friends. However, I choose not to.

I strictly want to be by myself for a while. So, I head to the library to go over the reading for my classes this week and to add some more content to my magazine project.

I find the most abandoned section, put my headphones on so I can listen to Black Lab while I work, and tuck into reading a journal on Sylvia Plath.

It's all about her relationship with Ted Hughes.

Like my love for the classics, it was my mother who first introduced me to Sylvia Plath. She read her poems to me, and I loved 'Mad Girl's Love Song.'

When I first fell in love with Sylvia's work, I was also drawn to her relationship with Ted. I've always been a hopeless romantic, so to me, their meeting sounded like a fairytale. Except Mom left out all the darker parts of their relationship and allowed me to be the dreamer. I was fascinated by them because they were two writers who'd fallen in love. I couldn't imagine anything better, until I got older and read about all the parts Mom never told me.

I'm not sure where I'm going with my reading yet or how I'll insert it into my project, but at least I'm doing something.

A little tap on my shoulder pulls me away from my music and reading.

I lift my head to see Nina and Ilya standing beside me. They're Oleg's children; both are older than me and nicer than most people I've met since starting at Raventhorn. Nina works here in the library and was extra helpful on my first day when I had to get my books. It was her who gave me the journals when I arrived earlier, and we got talking about poetry when I told her my project was on Sylvia Plath.

She's in the same year as Caspian and majoring in English Literature and Classical Studies, so of course we hit it off right from the word go.

She raises her dark brows and tilts her head to the side as she lifts another journal and smiles.

I take my headphones off and return the smile.

"Found this," she bubbles. "It's an awesome research paper on Sylvia's love letters to Ted. I thought you'd love it. It was written a few years back by a grad student who now works for *Time Magazine*."

"Oh, my goodness, thanks so much." I take the document when she hands it to me.

“Don’t stay too late.”

“Says the pot calling the kettle black,” Ilya cuts in with a roll of his eyes. He raises his arm with his Knight tattoos and shakes his head. He’s taller than Caspian, which makes him the tallest person I know. He’s a junior here and as wide as a wrestler, with a full beard which makes him look a little older than his twenty-one years. “I swear you’d have no life if I didn’t pick you up in the evenings.”

Nina smirks. “That’s not true. My books are my life. Don’t judge me because you don’t understand me.” She giggles and returns her gaze to me. “Don’t mind my brother.”

I smile at them both. “It’s nice to have someone to look out for you.”

“I suppose so.”

“But seriously, don’t stay out too late,” Ilya says. “You need to take it easy in these first few months, or you’ll burn out. Save the late nights for the end of the year when you need to put the work in.”

He nods, and I dip my head with appreciation.

“Thanks. I’m going to take it easy after I finish this project. It’s for my internship at *Real Magazine*.”

“Wow, that’s cool. Well, good luck. Come on, sis, the restaurant’s calling us.”

“See you around. Just leave the stuff I gave you on the desk, and I’ll put them back in the morning,” Nina says.

“Sure thing.”

The two leave, and I go back to listening to my music.

I manage to scan through the first few pages of the research paper before my headphones are pulled off my head.

At first, I think it’s Nina again, but when I turn, I meet Caspian’s riveting gaze, which takes me with fascination.

I’m so thrown to see him here I don’t know what to say. Definitely not when two of my last words to him several hours

ago were *fuck me*. I never say such a thing to anyone, let alone him.

Now he's here looking as attractive as sin, and that constricted feeling in my lungs warns me about an oncoming panic attack. Except, I know I'm not having one. That's just the effect he has on me.

He doesn't say anything. He puts my heads on and wrinkles his nose within seconds of listening to my music.

"What's this whoo-hoo shit?" he asks.

"It's not whoo-hoo shit." Whatever that means. I'm guessing he doesn't like it. "They're Black Lab."

"Who?"

"*Black Lab*."

"Never heard of them." He shakes his head and plants himself in the seat next to me.

"A little like R.E.M."

"No wonder I don't know who they are."

"What's wrong with R.E.M, Caspian? Everyone loves them."

"Nah, not me." He takes out a cigarette, tucks it behind his ear, and rests his elbows on the table. "Printsessa, did I tell you, you could have the day off? And what part of *stay here* don't you understand?"

My cheeks flush, and I switch off the music on my iPod.

He looks at the paperwork on the desk, and his frown deepens.

"And what the fuck is all this depressing shit?"

I frown right back at him. "What is the matter with you? I love Sylvia Plath."

He picks up the research paper Nina left me and shakes his head. "Enough to read 'The Tragedy of her relationship with Ted?'" That's the title of the research paper.

"It's for my project."

“You know it didn’t end well, right? I preferred your Mark Twain fixation. Now, there was a man who was in love with his wife. He and his Livy. He called her the most perfect character he ever met.”

I widen my eyes, unashamedly surprised. It’s weird listening to him talk with such depth when he’s so rough on the outside.

“You know their stories?”

“Let’s just say someone’s mother might have given me a copy of *Tom Sawyer* and that’s what got me hooked on classical literature and other things.”

Mom.

My mother.

My heart squeezes, and I’m tempted to walk down memory lane, but I keep my strength and wits about me.

He reaches out and touches my hair, curling the ends around his finger.

“Come home with me,” he says, leaning in with a wicked smile on his face.

The low timbre of his voice sends a flush of heat to my groin and moisture instantly beads between my thighs.

“No. You know I can’t.”

“Why not? You said this this morning.”

“I heard what your father said, and I know what you did to Dorian.”

His smile widens, but it looks psychotic.

“So, what?”

My lips part. “That’s kind of a big deal, don’t you think? You took the oath.” Which I’m sure was to his father, too, or he wouldn’t have mentioned it to Caspian earlier.

“I took an oath to be a Knight, and that is what I am. My old man doesn’t make my rules.”

It seems like he's forgotten who his father is. "But he does."

"No one has to find out. Besides, we're working together. This can be *working*."

He tries to touch my breast, but I swat his hands away.

"You're crazy."

"Fuck, yeah. Come home with me."

"No, I'm not getting in trouble with your father, who already hates my guts. And I'm not getting you in trouble either."

He grits his teeth. Then, in one swoop, he grabs me and sets me on the desk. I'm about to protest when he captures my lips and kisses me.

He just kisses me right here on the desk. If anyone were to walk past, they'd see us.

God help me, I remember everything I said I wasn't going to do with him. I remember, but strength doesn't come to make me stop.

He tastes so good, and I don't want to stop kissing him. I don't want to ever stop. His hands move to my breasts, and he squeezes then starts kneading. I try to lock my thighs when a pang of arousal pulses through my pussy, but he keeps them apart.

Pulling away, he touches my face and lifts my chin so I can stare into his eyes.

"I still want to fuck you, and I think you want me to."

I do, but I shouldn't. It would be a bad idea for all sorts of reasons.

"I can't."

"Why the fuck not?"

"Caspian, what the hell are we doing?" I have to know because this is beyond crazy.

He nuzzles his face into my neck and sneakily sucks on my nipple through the fabric of my top.

“Grown-up Caspian and Willow strike again.”

“Wouldn’t they have more common sense?”

“No.” He brushes his nose along mine, then seriousness returns to his face. “Don’t fucking tell me you’re thinking of Dorian.”

“No, of course not.” Although I should be in some respect, but no way am I doing anything of the sort whether I’m with Caspian or not.

“Lucian.” His eyes blaze. I don’t know what his obsession is with thinking Lucian and I are anything but friends, but I don’t make the mistake of making him crazier.

“No, I keep telling you Lucian is my friend.”

“Why, then?”

I gaze at him, and I don’t have to think of the answer. It’s right there in my head. There are several answers in my head, the most prominent being that I don’t think I’d ever want to stop. But I can’t tell him that and bare that part of my soul to him. And that in mind, the other reason is that I haven’t forgotten our ugly past, which means I can’t trust him with something as delicate as my heart.

“I can’t now.”

He lifts my chin higher. Mischief glitters in his eyes.

“Okay, I have one hour before I have to meet my father. Come home with me and suck my dick.”

My mouth falls open, and I try to pull away from him.

He tightens his grip and keeps me there with that mocking smirk dancing on his lips.

“I’m not giving you a blow job, and I’m not sleeping with you.”

“Well, I’m not taking no for an answer. You get to choose one or the other.”

“I’m not sleeping with you.”

“So, then you’re sucking my dick.”

I swallow hard past the lump in my throat and the raw desire tearing my insides apart.

I shouldn’t do this or anything, but I’m finding it hard to say the word *no* to him.

“If I do, will you leave me alone?”

He chuckles. “For tonight, yes. Let’s go, then I’ll hand deliver you back to your place. Come on.”

Oh my God, what am I doing?

When he lets me go and I slide off the desk, I know I can no longer claim innocence in this.

I’m guilty because I keep allowing him to lead me astray.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-ONE

WILLOW

We reach Erebus House, and I'm surprised to see Caspian has practically half the house to himself. When we enter, we do it through the back, which has a separate door, so no one sees me going in with him.

There was a party here last week, and I never came anywhere near this side.

It's one of the bigger houses, and I'm guessing being the Pakhan's son has its perks.

He grabs my ass when we walk inside his bedroom, which I'm drawn to admire because of the paintings on the walls.

But he doesn't give me a chance to look around. He lifts my skirt, and when he starts kissing my ass cheeks and nibbling on the flesh, I can't believe this is happening between us.

"Get on the bed on your hands and knees and show me your pussy," he taunts in my ear, slipping one strong arm around my waist.

"I'm not sleeping with you."

"Can't blame a guy for trying." He inhales my hair, and my senses spin out of control. "I want your clothes off."

"Why?"

"I just do. I swear I won't try to fuck you. I just want you naked while I watch you suck my dick."

The huskiness of his voice makes me hungry with desire, and I think of my fantasies. We're almost like the way we are there, except this is real and I feel like a puppet attached to strings. It feels like someone else is controlling me, like someone else is driving me forward while I'm just in the passenger seat along for the ride.

I move out of his arms, and he looks me over, drinking me in.

“Take your clothes off for me.” His words pour over me like warm honey, and it’s that last part that has me hooked.

For me.

He wants me to take my clothes off for him. Suddenly, I conjure all those beautiful girls I used to see him with at school and I remember how jealous I was even though he treated me like shit.

I was jealous despite the treatment, and I always wondered what it would be like to be with him. To be one of those girls on his arm I knew he was sleeping with.

It was worse after he kissed me.

I undo the buttons on my top and pull it over my head, then I push my skirt down my legs and step out of my shoes at the same time.

My hands start shaking when I take off my bra because his eyes are glued to me, and by the time I roll my panties down my legs, I’m a mess. All my awareness has returned, and once again, Caspian Ivanov has me naked. This time in his lair.

The insane sexual haze that sent me here was clearly more potent than any drug because I’m here, and like this, I’m at his mercy.

“Fuck, you’re perfect,” he husks.

Convulsive waves of pleasure streak through me when he slips his arm back around my waist and pulls me close so he can take my breast into his mouth.

Every fiber of my being lights up with wild energy when he moves from one breast to the other, sucking and tasting me.

I hold on to his shoulders and allow him to feast on my breasts. I almost come when he pushes one thick finger into my pussy and strokes my clit.

“You’re wet, Malyshka. Clearly, you want me, but it’s fine, I’ll leave you wanting me more. Time to suck my dick.”

He takes one step back and undoes his belt.

I stare at his pants, eager to see what his cock looks like. When he shoves his pants down, his massive cock springs free and my jaw goes slack. I have to swallow hard again to stop myself from drooling. It's long and thick with a bulbous head and a clear bead of pre-cum forming on the tip.

I try to act nonchalant and cool, so I don't look like such a baby. Of course, I know sex stuff because Lucian is obsessed with sex and Eilish has told me enough for me to write a biography on her conquests. But that knowledge isn't enough for the real-life experiences, big or small.

It was bad enough confirming my virginal status to Caspian earlier. I'm sure I must have looked like I spent my earlier years pining over him—which I did—so I don't want to look immature now. But I fail. I'm staring at his cock *way* too much.

He smiles with satisfaction and caresses my face.

“Is this the first time you've seen a cock, Malyshka?”

I stare back, hesitant to answer, but when his eyes bore into me, I nod. “Yes.”

“Lucky me. Get on your knees and pleasure me.”

Pulling in a breath, I lower to my knees and position myself before him.

He runs his hand over my head, stroking the top as he gazes down at me.

I wrap my hand around his erection and hope I can do this properly. His cock hardens, filling my fingers, and suddenly, I'm anxious to taste him.

Lowering my head, I do exactly that when I lick the pre-cum off the head of his cock and swallow it.

It tastes salty and masculine, and strong. But mostly, it makes me want more.

He's rock-hard when I take him into my mouth, but he seems to get harder again once he's inside my mouth.

His fingers knit through my hair, guiding me to suck, so I do, taking him deeper into my mouth and down my throat.

My head moves up and down his shaft, and I try to swirl my tongue over his length as I suck him.

“Fucking hell,” he growls and fists a handful of my hair.

With that, he starts pumping into my mouth the way I think he would if we were having sex.

His thrusts come harder and deeper, until he’s fucking my face. I have the urge to gag when he goes too deep, but I take the impact of him, continuing my wild suckle.

I’m more than wet even though he’s only got his fingers in my hair, and soon the two of us are groaning and moaning like we’re locked in the throes of passion.

I glance up at his face as I continue gliding my tongue over his shaft, and the look on his face is one I wish I could capture forever.

It’s filled with pleasure that I’m giving him, and he’s staring down at me as if I’m the most perfect woman he’s ever seen.

His shaft jerks, and he grips my hair tighter, then hot cum sprays into my mouth, covering my tongue so I can get the full taste of him. It hits the back of my throat and some drips down the side of my mouth.

“Swallow it,” he commands, and I obey. I swallow, and his liquid heat flows down my throat, warming me up from the inside out. “Good girl, swallow the whole thing.”

When I’m done, he pulls out of my mouth, and again I wonder what’s next.

But not for long because his lips come crashing down on mine and the urge to mount him hits me like a ton of bricks. All of a sudden, I can’t remember why I’m not supposed to be with him.

He backs me into the wall and kisses me harder, like he wants to consume me.

Then he just stops and steps a back.

“See, man of my word,” he rasps out. “Like a Knight. Ty mozhesh’ doveryat’ mne.” He tells me I can trust him in Russian.

“Mogu ya?” I ask if I can.

“Pú mega.” That’s Old Norse, and I don’t know what he said.

“What did you say?”

“Let’s just say I said yes. Get dressed. I’ll take you back home like I promised.”

I get dressed, and we walk back to Myrrdin House in almost silence.

When we arrive, I don’t expect him to actually come inside, but he does.

“There you are,” Misha barks at me from the living room.

I stop in my tracks, as does Caspian by the door. Misha hasn’t seen Caspian yet, so she rushes at me like a little pit bull dressed in pink.

I don’t think I could possibly get the image of her and Dorian out of my head, but at least it makes me feel less bad for being with Caspian.

“Why did you miss the meeting this morning?” she shouts on top of her lungs. “I already told you I don’t give a shit who you are, Willow Raventhorn. When we have meeting, you better show up. I will punish you for this. Consider that strike three. How dare –”

Caspian clears his throat, and when Misha turns to the left and sees his stern face, the blood drains from hers and her eyes snap wide.

“Not that I have to explain myself, but Willow was working with me,” he informs her.

I’m almost surprised by how scared she is of him because all I’ve seen of her since we met is this nasty piece of work that’s a force to be reckoned with.

But I remember how even the people who thought they could be bullies were terrified of Caspian in high school.

“Oh, that’s totally fine.”

Caspian gives her that psychotic smile, and she looks like she’s going to shit her pants.

“You sounded real mad, though, Misha. So, I do hope there’s no problem, because you don’t want a problem with me, believe me.” He moves closer.

“No, there’s no problem at all. I’ll leave you to it.”

She practically flees. It would almost be comical if my nerves weren’t all over the place.

We head to my room, but he stops at the door.

“See you later,” he says, dipping his head.

“Does that mean you’ll be watching me again through my window?”

His lips curl. “No, because now I know what you taste like, and I know you know what I taste like, too.”

He winks, retrieves his cigarette from his ear, and leaves.

I watch him go, and even when I can’t see him anymore, I continue to stare at the empty trail he left behind.

I blow out a ragged breath when minutes pass and I’m still standing there.

When my gaze lands on Eilish’s door, I wish I could knock and tell her what happened, but I can’t. Caspian coming up here just now was a risk.

My friends won’t understand what’s going on with me.

I can’t understand it.

Caspian said I could trust him.

Can I?

Could this be him letting go of the past? If so, what does it mean for me when I’m supposed to be getting married in a few months?

CHAPTER
THIRTY-TWO

CASPIAN

“Are you gonna tell me what happened, or am I going to have to drag it out of you?” Thorne asks when we walk back into my apartment. “I’d also love to know why I’ve been asked to set up full surveillance around Myrrdin House.”

I invited him back for a drink after that miserable dinner with my father I really wished I’d skipped.

Every fucking week, we go to the same classy restaurant to eat food I hate and I know he hates, too. My father only eats it and takes us there because it’s supposedly of his caliber. That’s where Timofey Raventhorn used to wine and dine with the pompous pricks who used to lick his ass

My father started going there after he became Pakhan, except we didn’t go every week. It was a monthly thing until Zak started at Raventhorn.

I throw myself down on my bed and imagine the beauty that graced these walls hours ago.

I lost my head again, and I’m clearly not thinking straight if I can act so jovial about the promises I make to live the oath.

I stare at Thorne, who is looking at me with anticipation. He knows I’m on the brink of trouble.

“Grab a beer and sit. I’ll tell you everything.”

He does, and I fill him in on what’s been happening with me over the last forty-eight hours.

“I don’t know if I can say I’m surprised. You’ve been jonesing for this girl forever.”

“I’m not just fucking jonesing. I’m gonna get myself killed.”

“Well, I’m glad at least you’re thinking of that part. I didn’t want to say.”

I straighten. “Thorne, what right does my old man have to kill me if I’m with someone he doesn’t approve of?”

“Your old man is alpha and omega, and fuck... Caspian, are you with her? I don’t think you can just be with her given the history you two have.”

I know that. “I didn’t mean it like that.” And I haven’t forgotten either.

What’s happened is, obsession has clouded my judgment and erred my thought process.

“I just meant it’s wrong.”

“You need to stop seeing her, Caspian. She’s getting married.”

“Yeah. I know.” And it pisses me off she’s going to belong to that motherfucking dog.

I saw Dorian limping today across the quad like the dog he is. Then I heard he was going off campus to spend the next few days with his parents. That means I really fucked him up and he probably needed the downtime.

“I don’t care about the marriage to Dorian, but I care about the consequences. You should, too. And what, are you going to keep seeing her after the wedding?”

“Don’t worry, cousin, I’ll keep my dick in my pants.” Even as I say that, I know I won’t. I knew I wouldn’t, and not even the hatred I felt for her in the past could stop my obsession. I want her. Maybe once I have her, it will be enough and I can finally leave well enough alone. “I just want to make sure she’s safe first.” That was one reason I walked her back to her place.

“Make sure that’s all it is. The problem with us as Knights is we already have to live outside the norm, but it will always be worse for us because we’re Ivanovs and answer to your father before anything else. I don’t mean to be the one to rain on your parade, but I’m mindful of that, always.”

I nod, agreeing. “I know.”

“It is weird, though, about that guy you saw.”

“I would have brushed it off as someone watching her, but the fact he screwed with the cameras so he couldn’t get picked

up suggests something else.”

“It does. I wonder what.”

What the hell does he want with Willow?

Thorne has the cameras set up outside Willow’s house. He did it today, and no one noticed because he sent in a guy pretending to be the gardener.

I was tempted to have cameras in her apartment, but I decided not to overstep boundaries any more than I have.

I guess if there’s anything to see, I’ll see it.



I’M SMOKING a joint on the lawn the next morning when my gaze lands on Lucian Sokolov walking up my path.

I already can’t stand this fucker for his relationship with Willow, so my temper switches out of control at just the sight of him.

The fact that he’s on this side of the house suggests he could only be here to see me. I own this entire side of the house. The only people who use these paths are the ones I invite. And he’s not invited.

I stand, put out my joint on the lawn, then square off, ready to fight because I think I might already know why he’s here.

“Did you get lost, Sokolov?” I bark.

Most guys would shy away. This guy has some balls, though, because he keeps coming and doesn’t stop until he gets right up to me.

He’s a fraction shorter than me, probably half a foot because I’m six four.

We are equally matched, though, and because we train in the same unit, I know his skill.

“What’s going on with you and Willow?” he asks, ignoring my question.

“What’s it to you?”

“Answer me.”

I look him up and down like he’s lost his mind for taking that tone with me.

“Who the fuck do you think you’re talking to?”

“You. I’m talking to you, and I’m serious as fuck. And before you even think of it, don’t you dare threaten my mother ever again. Do it, and I will kill you and suffer any consequence I must.”

He bares his teeth like a feral animal, and while I respect him for standing up to me for being the asshole I am, I smile as if I don’t care for his threats.

“Listen to you all grown up and putting big brother in his place.”

“Fuck you, Caspian. You aren’t my brother, not in the Knights or otherwise. But I’m not here to argue with you. I’m here to warn you to leave Willow alone.”

I step right into his personal space and slam my chest into his.

“What the fuck did you just say to me?”

“You fucking heard me. I knew something was up when you nearly killed Dorian, then I saw you walking away from her apartment last night, and it made sense. You act like you don’t care about her, but you do, or Dorian wouldn’t have nearly lost his life.”

His words reach under my skin and calm me somewhat.

“Why the warning, Sokolov?”

“Because you know you can’t be with her, and if you hurt her, it will be worse than from anybody else. I never knew why she choose to fixate on an animal like you, but you can’t help who you feel for.”

“Worried she might like me more than you?” I decide to be an asshole.

“She does. And you know it’s not like that between me and her.” He backs away, eyeing me dangerously.

I keep staring at him as he walks back down the path and turns the corner. His words ring through my mind, and I feel like I’m at a fork in the road where I have to choose to go left or right. But I don’t know which path leads to what I want.

My phone rings in my back pocket, cutting my thoughts, stalling my decision.

I answer when I see it’s Thorne.

“Hey, are you around? I need you to take a look at something,” he says. “I think I found something on the database we might need to look into.”

“Yeah, I can be with you in two minutes.” I’m already rushing to him.

I hang up and make my way to the other side of the house to his apartment.

I find him in his living room standing by his computer on the desk.

“What did you find?”

“Something that wasn’t mentioned or looked into. Look at this.” He brings up Peter’s file on the computer screen. There are a set of phone numbers listed in a row. “I just thought I’d try something different when I was looking at Zak’s phone records the police logged. I cross-referenced the phone numbers on the log and did a search through the database. This number came up under Peter’s file, but also Dorian’s.” He switches the screen to Dorian and shows me the same number that ends with five triple seven.”

Blood pounds in my temples. “One of them called Zak?”

“I think it was Dorian. The number was listed for Peter from two years prior to it being transferred to Dorian.” Apprehension darkens his eyes. “Caspian, I looked at the coroner’s report at the estimated time of Zak’s death. According to the log, the last call Zak took an hour before he died came from that number.”

An icy knot twists around my heart. “One hour?”

He nods. “There’s also no record of the police talking to Dorian to follow up on that. I don’t think anybody has. Everybody else who came in contact with Zak was questioned. Even Peter has a statement on file. Nothing for Dorian, though.”

“Well, I’m going to talk to him the first chance I get.”

“Be careful, Caspian.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“Chances are Peter was spoken to because the number was listed as his. No one seemed to notice that it belonged to Dorian at the time, not his father. In which case Peter would have known who used the phone to call Zak.”

Yes, Peter would have most fucking assuredly known that.

It seems that we might have found our first lead, because that’s suspicious as fuck.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-THREE

WILLOW

As Professor Lanksky smiles and straightens, signaling the end of the class, all the girls in the front row straighten, too, and give him their undivided attention.

Because Professor Lanksky looks like he could be the next James Bond and has the muscles and an English accent to match, the front of his classes are always heavily female populated.

Eilish and I are in Psych 101, the only class we have together

“Any questions?” he asks. “I imagine you must have plenty.”

All the hands go up in unison, and Eilish and I giggle in the back with the guys who are pissed off. All those questions mean we’ll have to stay back longer until Professor Lanksky’s adoring fans get their answers and can listen to his accent a little longer.

Admittedly, it is nice to hear and proves some distraction to my Caspian Ivanov-riddled mind.

It’s Monday, and I spent all of Friday and the weekend without seeing him. I see him tomorrow, though, and I’ve been worried because I don’t know what to do. I’m mindful that the clock is ticking. This is the start of our third week at Raventhorn.

The time has just flown by, and it feels like so much has happened. At least the little encounter Caspian had with Misha deterred her from making my life hell. She’s barely spoken to me.

Eventually, the questions get answered, and Eilish and I leave when the class is over.

I’m going into the city for the day. This was my only class today, so I want to use the time wisely.

I spent most of the weekend working on my project for the magazine, and I'm glad I'm nearly finished. I'm still using it as an excuse, though.

"What are you up to now?" Eilish asks when we step outside. "I thought it would be cool to hang out for the day, maybe sleep over at mine, and watch some chick flicks. I was going to see if Lucian wanted to join us later for dinner and a movie. Of course, one that's not a chick flick." She laughs.

"I wish I could say yes, but I have that project I'm finishing up. I need to go to the library to check out some stuff. I think I might be gone all day."

"Oh, that's fine. As long as that's what you're doing." She gives me a saucy look.

"What's that look for?"

"You've been acting weird. Weird like maybe you've been seeing someone. A man." She giggles.

"I'm not," I say quickly.

"Then why are you blushing like you are? Oh my God, you little minx, are you seeing someone?"

Oh God. I shouldn't lie. Telling her I'm not seeing someone isn't a lie, but it still feels one because I've been romantically involved with Caspian.

If I told her that, though, I'm sure it would be the end of us. I'll never forget how she cried when he called her Lucian's pill-popping girlfriend and practically called her a slut.

"No, I'm not seeing anyone."

"Alright, I guess you'll tell me about the man who has you blushing when you're ready. Ugh, don't look now, but the Viper just clocked on to us." She gazes over my shoulder, and I follow what she's looking at to see Caspian and Thorne walking across the quad like a pair of Greek gods.

Everyone is in their little cliques like they were in high school. There's hardly that much difference. The popular people sit at one table, the nerds at another, the jocks,

cheerleaders, above-board geniuses, and the ones who are little crazy and always on drugs.

But then there are people like Caspian and Thorne Ivanov, who are in a class all their own.

And Eilish is right. Caspian is looking at us, or rather at me, and he makes no attempt to look away either.

“Did you hear he killed a Viper with his bare hands and ate it in front of everyone?” Eilish mutters.

“Is that even true?”

“I think it is. It was some Bratva thing. So gross, but of course, we know dear old Caspian had to show he was the man of all men. They call him the Viper. But I think they did so long before he ate one. It’s because of how he kills.”

It’s funny I called him that the other day when I didn’t even know it was his nickname.

It’s hard to think of him as a killer, but every now and again, I remember who we all are.

Bratva. Knights. Same difference, just as dangerous. I’ve often wondered what it must be like to be normal. Not attached.

I was the daughter of the Pakhan once. Dad would have had to be a killer, too.

Caspian doesn’t look away from me until he passes by. I look back at Eilish, and she raises his brows.

“I hope he hasn’t been too awful to work with.”

“No. he hasn’t.”

“Well, I hope it stays that way. I can’t imagine anything worse.”

And I can’t get him out of my head.



ONCE I GET into the city, I find the library and spend the rest of the day highlighting things that stand out to me from the articles.

I already made my scrapbook and placed all the newspaper clippings in it.

At first, it looked like I might never figure out where to start, but when I got going, I knew what to do.

The thing I keep seeing in most of the articles is details about where Lillian was spotted before she disappeared.

I'm making a list of the places based on the memory of what she said as she ushered me out of that cabin. She said we were in danger and needed to get out.

She would have gone somewhere to find out that information. I'm hoping to get some clues on where that could have been.

If I'm going to do this properly, I'll have to go back to the campsite at some point soon.

At minutes to eleven, I pack my things up. It's way past time to have left and head back home. I get carried away.

I have one article to photocopy before I can leave.

I do so, but when I get back to my things and see a white envelope on my handbag, a surge of panic rushes over me.

The envelope looks just like the one from the other week.

But that was on campus and supposed to be a prank.

Gingerly, I pick it up and open it. Sheer fright clogs my throat when I look at the note inside, which says:

Remember I warned you. Death awaits if you stay at Raventhorn.

My eyes flick up, and I push aside the cloying fear threatening to send me over the edge as I look around the room.

I'm one of the last people here, but someone left this for me.

Grabbing my things quickly, I walk around the section and head out to the foyer to see if I could find anyone else who looks like they just left the area where I was.

The photocopy machine wasn't that far away, and I wasn't gone from the desk long either.

The person who left the note must be around, and fuck, I don't think this is a prank anymore.

It makes no sense to me. I'm in the city, and no one is supposed to know I'm here. Unless I was followed.

That's been happening, too—someone following me.

I've been here for hours, though. Has the person been watching me the whole time?

Nothing makes sense, and if I'm to go by the warning in the note like I thought I should when I got the first one, it means I'm danger.

I need to get out of here and get back home.

Instead of looking around for this elusive note-dropping person, I head to my car, get in, and drive.

My hands are shaking so much that I can barely keep control of the wheel, and to make matters worse, it starts raining.

Damn it, I shouldn't have stayed out so late.

I'm scared. I'm actually scared, and my heart is racing, my lungs constricting.

A panic attack isn't far off.

"30, 29, 28, 27, 26..." I continue the rest of numbers in my head but stop at ten when I turn the corner onto the Memorial Bridge and notice a truck with blacked-out windows and no license plates behind me.

There's no one else on the road, and I can't see the driver.

I hate to be paranoid, but the first thing I wonder is if they're following me.

Are they?

When I cross the bridge, I decide to check, so I make a turn, and they follow. I make another turn down another road, and they do the same.

Shit! I am being followed.

I step on the gas and drive faster. They do too.

Shallow breaths leave my lips, and the knot of fear in my soul turns into a noose around my neck tightening with every breath I take.

Jesus, why is this happening to me?

The car screeches down the road when I flip the car onto the next street. I'm near the train tracks now and so far away from where I need to be. I head for the next bridge, but the truck catches up to me and branches out on the road so it's next to me.

I look through the window to try and see if I can get a glimpse of the driver, but I see no one, just the blacked-out windows.

They drive closer, too close, and bump right into me. No one can tell me this is prank.

My car slams into the bumper rails, and I scream.

The truck comes at me again, but this time, I slam down the breaks and they speed ahead of me.

Thinking quickly, I reverse, flip the car into a U-turn, and breeze down the road like someone dosed up my car with napalm.

The truck returns, but I head for the train tracks.

There's a train approaching now.

Pushing past a hundred, I sail over the tracks. The train comes, and I manage to lose the truck.

I drive with my head straight and my heart galloping in my chest.

Thirty minutes later, I reach Raventhorn and burst into tears.

The first person I think of calling is Caspian, but I push that thought aside quickly. Calling him would be encouraging something I shouldn't. So I call Lucian, who answers straightaway.

I'm crying so much I can't even talk properly, so I'm grateful he meets me at the apartment and is there the moment I arrive.

"Red, what happened to you?" he asks, panicked.

"Someone tried to kill me."

That's what happened, so I think I need to take that note very seriously.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-FOUR

WILLOW

Raised voices wake me the next morning.

It takes me a moment to remember what happened last night. Only a moment.

The memory has me sitting up in my bed and gripping the edge of the sheets.

I cried myself to sleep from the panic that overwhelmed me.

Thankfully, Lucian stayed over, so I wasn't alone.

I can hear him now out in the living room, and the other person talking to him must be Eilish.

Slipping off the bed, I drag on my dressing gown and go out to see them.

Eilish sees me first, and the look of distaste on her face is not what I expect after what I went through.

Lucian is shirtless with just his boxers on. When she looks from me to him and pain enters her eyes, I know she's not happy he's here dressed like that.

"What's going on, guys?" I ask. "Why are you arguing?"

"It's okay," Lucian says with a little smile as he looks at Eilish. "I'm gonna get us all some coffee and those little cakes you like, babe."

"I don't want any cake. Don't buy me anything."

"Babe—"

"Don't. Just do whatever it is you're doing for her."

The stiffness in her voice is unmistakable. She's pissed off.

Pissed off at me.

Lucian pulls on his sweatshirt and drags on a pair of pants. He looks at both of us then leaves.

Eilish glares at me the moment the door closes.

“So, he stayed over the whole night?” she asks.

“Did Lucian tell you what happened to me?”

“Yes, I heard.”

“Then why are you talking to me like that? Like I did something wrong. Eilish, someone tried to kill me.”

“I think maybe *you* think that.”

Oh my God.

“They rammed into my car while I was driving. There was no mistake in what they were trying to do. They were trying to run me off the road.” I march over to the kitchen island and pick up the note, holding it out so she can see it. “I got another note, and I don’t think it’s a prank.”

“I think it is. Willow, Viktor checked everything out. He’s not some nobody who gets things wrong. So, I’m sorry, I do think it’s a prank, the same prank.”

“And they followed me into the city?”

“Yes, that’s exactly right. What is so weird about that? It’s not like we’re that far away. So, yes, I think it’s a prank, but you’re so paranoid that everything has to be a fucking disaster. I did this with you already, and I can’t do it again and watch you end up in a mental home.” She starts shaking, and tears run down her cheeks. “Do you know how hard that was? You were gone for two years, and for at least a year of that time, you really were fucked up.”

My heart hurts. It aches in the hollow of my soul, and I feel awful for what I must have put her through.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s happening again, and I have my own shit. I really needed you guys last night.” She wipes away tears. “Yesterday was the day.”

“What day, Eilish?”

“When I lost my family. It was the anniversary of their deaths. I don’t talk about it because I can’t.” She’s never told me that before. “I didn’t want to be alone, so I asked you over

to watch TV, and I understood that you had your project. I asked Lucian over, and he had a thing, too, a thing he dropped straightaway when you needed him.”

“Oh God, Eilish, I’m sorry.”

She shakes her head at me. “Everything is about you, and I’m so sick of living in the shadows. You know how I feel about him, or you wouldn’t have asked me about it the other week. Do you know how I feel when I watch him always choosing you over me? Like I don’t matter.”

“Eilish—”

“Don’t.”

She walks out and slams the door, leaving me feeling numb.

I sink down to the floor and press my back against the wall. That’s how Lucian finds me when he returns with coffee and cake.

He sets them down on the coffee table and moves to me on the floor.

“What happened, Red? Where’s Eilish?”

Tears tip over my lids. “She’s mad at me.”

When he bites the inside of his lip, I realize he must know, and I remember the argument I heard before I got out of bed.

“She’s mad at me, too. I didn’t know about her family. But she can’t be mad at us for something we didn’t know.”

I blow out a ragged breath. “That’s not the only reason she was mad at me.”

“What else was there?”

“She was mad at me for needing you, and the fact that you’re here. I don’t think she liked you spending the night.”

“Why the hell would she be mad at that?”

I gaze at him, contemplating if I should tell him, and I decide to because I don’t have the strength to pretend anymore.

“Lucian, don’t sit there and tell me you don’t know how she feels about you.”

Realization dawns on his face.

“Don’t do it, because I know you know,” I add. “Don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then why haven’t you ever done anything about it?”

“Because she keeps shutting me out.”

“You’re my friend. My very best friend. I called you because—”

“You don’t have to explain anything to me,” he cuts in. “You’re my very best friend, too, and I will always be there for you.”

He sits next to me, and I rest my head on his shoulder.

“Red, I checked out your car. You said the person crashed into you. Well, I definitely think they wanted you to have an accident.”

I grip his shoulder. “They were. I don’t know how I managed to get away.”

I don’t. Pure adrenaline and my will to survive must have taken over. One little mistake, and God knows what could have happened.

“I have Viktor looking into it. I will be, too.”

“But Eilish—”

“No. I’m going to look into this. If it’s a prank, it’s gone too far. Eilish needs to cool off. I’ll check on her later and make sure she’s okay, then I’ll bring her back somehow.”

I’ll check on her, too, although I don’t think she’ll want to see me. She was right. Everything is always about me. I never meant for it to be that way.

“Thank you for not thinking I’m crazy.”

“You’re not.”



I WASN'T FEELING like going into work, but I went because I don't want to look like I'm not taking things seriously.

I geared myself up to see Caspian. Except he wasn't there all day. I spent the day shadowing one of the editors who is currently teaching me how to use the mainframe database.

The day resembled something akin to what a normal day would feel like if I didn't know Caspian.

Of course, I spent the day jumping at the slightest sound and looking over my shoulder.

I tried to concentrate, but it was difficult. Lucian met me for lunch, so that was nice, and I could see he was doing his best to console me. Without Eilish, though, it felt weird and like I was continuing to do something I shouldn't be doing.

When the day ends, my first thought is to go and see her, so I do.

I knock on her door, and I must be standing there for ten minutes before I knock again and she answers.

She would have seen me though the little peephole, and I can imagine she was probably hoping I would go away. I will, but I want to apologize to her first and find out how I can fix us.

She looks terrible, and I can tell from her eyes she's been taking something—some drug. A lot of it. I've only ever seen her look like that a handful of times.

I hoped that meant she was aware of the dangers of hardcore drugs and wouldn't dabble in them too often. Seeing her now, I wish I'd said something or tried harder to find out what happened to her.

"I'm sorry," I begin. "I don't want you to think everything is about me."

"But it is," she fills in.

“No.” I shake my head. “Eilish, I’m sorry about last night, and I’m sorry I haven’t been there for you. You have to believe I would never do anything to hurt you.”

“I know, and I know you’re sorry, and I know I’m acting like a bitch, but I can’t help it. That’s why I think I need a break.”

“A break?” My heart shrinks. “As in you don’t want to see me?”

“I think I need to do this, Willow. A lot happened to me I can’t talk about and I can’t forget.”

“Why can’t you tell me what happened?”

“I can’t go back there. Talking about it makes me remember, and I don’t want to. Every time something happens to you, I have to find strength for you, and it takes everything inside me. It’s been hard being here in Boston. Home. So, I’m sorry I can’t be more compassionate, but I just can’t deal with whatever is going on with you right now.” A tear rolls down her cheek. “I hope you can understand that.”

I nod, but inside, the sadness and failure of being a terrible friend wrap around my heart.

She steps back and closes the door, shutting me out, just like Lucian described, but I feel worse because I caused this. No matter what happened to me, I caused it. It makes me wish I’d just skipped going to the city and hung out with her instead. If I had, last night wouldn’t have happened.

I head to the loneliness of my room, where I find myself crying to take the edge off. I almost make use of that number in my drawer on the nightstand and call Caspian, but I think better of it. The days apart are good. It means I can be a stranger when I next see him and cut the cycle of craziness.

The logic is there and strong, but it falters the next day when I go to work and he’s not there again. Today is my half day, so I don’t know if he comes in after I leave for my classes or if he isn’t in at all like yesterday.

Not wanting a repeat of last night’s silence, I head to the library to study, and for the first time in forever, I don’t bother

to put my music on. I just read *The History of Journalism* until the words scramble together and my head starts to dip.

It's time to go home, take a shower, and sleep.

If I force myself to stay here, it's going to be counterproductive.

With that reasoning, I reach for my tote bag to pack up my things. When I open the bag wider to put my folder inside, my heart lurches when I see a white envelope tucked in the pocket along the seam.

Jesus, what the hell?

When did that get there? I had my bag with me all day. I didn't leave it anywhere for anyone to have put anything inside it without me knowing.

I scan through my movements from yesterday and come up blank, too. The only time I couldn't see my bag was maybe when it was on the floor while I was in the lecture hall, but that was it.

This is making me crazy.

And... I have to read the note. I have to read what this one says.

Lifting the note out of my bag, I tear open the envelope. And just like the other night when terror raced through me, my stomach caves, shattering like thin ice.

This time it's worse, though, because the notes says:

Lilian died for the sins of your father.

Stay at Raventhorn, and you'll end up just like her.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-FIVE

WILLOW

A suffocating sensation of anguish tightens my throat, and it feels drier than the Sahara.

Fear makes me want to retreat inside my body and scream all at the same time. My eyes are glued to the note as I read it word for word over and over again, trying to process what it's saying to me.

Lilian died for the sins of your father.

Stay at Raventhorn, and you'll end up just like her.

MY GOD, my God. What is this truly saying to me?

Lillian.

Dad?

I grip the paper and look around. I can see Nina downstairs at the checkout desk tapping away on her computer. There's no one else around, but even if there were, what was I going to do?

Call for help?

And for what?

Those who need help died long ago, and I feel like I died right alongside them.

Who's writing these notes to me?

Who?

And what do they know about my sister and my father?

The note acknowledges that Lillian died. But for my father's sins?

My mind is forced back to the events of that horrible night, and I remember Lillian saying we were in danger.

Is that what this note means?

Wait a minute.

I need to pause and think. I'm getting ahead of myself, and my mind is racing to all sorts of possibilities which might not make sense. My mind is also clinging to anything that will give me answers.

I take several deep breaths and try to think past the chaos surrounding my mind.

If I had some idea on who this person is, then maybe I could figure everything else out.

But I can't think.

I feel like I've lost some element of my mind and I might actually go insane. As if the strength I've built over the years has been destroyed.

Destroyed.

That's exactly what I feel like, and when I think of the only person who's ever wanted to destroy me, Caspian comes to the forefront of my mind.

I will destroy you.

He said those unforgettable words to me. Weeks ago, when I first arrived at Raventhorn, he practically said he wished he had the chance to break me before Dorian could.

What if this is that?

A way to break me. A way to destroy me.

Would he do this to me?

Why wouldn't he?

I've never met a more complicated being than Caspian Ivanov. The boy with the ability to charm you and the man with the ability to rip your heart from your body and crush it before you.

He's dark and vindictive enough to do this to me. He's spiteful enough to make me think he wants me, then screw with me in the same breath.

Caspian Ivanov is cruel enough to want me dead.

Everyone thinks Lillian ran away, but he has ways of getting information about people. He could have found out my original story and used it in this note to screw with me knowing it would leave a mark on my soul.

My hand flies up to my mouth, and I hold in tears.

But then, like a crazy person, I rush downstairs, slam down the journals on the counter by Nina, and run out of the library.

She calls after me, but I don't stop.

I keep going and find myself at Caspian's door—the private entrance—and I know I'm not thinking straight.

Like some terrible omen, the rain starts falling the way it did the other night. It soaks me as I knock on the door and ring bell at the same time. I don't care that I'm acting like I've lost my fucking mind. Maybe I finally have, but it's time to have the conversation I've been waiting to have with him for years.

The door flies open, and he stands there dressed in full black looking like the Grim Reaper. Thorne is behind him.

“Go, I'll check in with you later,” Caspian says to Thorne, who nods and glances at me before he disappears around the corner.

Caspian turns his attention back to me and takes in my disheveled demeanor.

“What's going on, Willow?”

“You tell me.”

My tears mingle with the rain as I reach for the note in my bag and throw it at him. It falls to the ground. He picks it up and looks at it.

Of course, he's looking at it like it's the first time he's seen it. But the more I look at him, the more I think it's him.

Only he could hurt me this way.

“You bastard. It's you, isn't it?” I shake my head at him.

“What the fuck is this? What are you asking me?” His eyes blaze.

“It’s you who’s been sending me notes, you who’s been following me.” The tears come harder, and my voice breaks. “You sent someone to try and kill me. Or maybe it was you.”

“Willow—”

He reaches for me, but I swat his hands away.

“Don’t touch me, don’t ever touch me. I hate you for this, Caspian Ivanov, and I curse the day I met you. What was the plan? To make me feel for you so you could make me crazy, then kill me? That sounds like something you would do. You knew it would be easy because you know how I’ve always felt about you.”

“Willow.”

He moves in close, stepping outside to join me in the rain. When he tries to reach for me again, I lift my hand and slap him right across his face. I slap him so hard blood pools at the corner of his lip. He wipes it away and glares at me ferociously, but I don’t care. I have more to say.

“You stay away from me. Stay away. You did this to me because you can’t forgive me for what I did. You still blame me for your mother’s death and wish me dead for the secret I kept. I have news for you.”

“What?” His nostrils flare. “What news do you have for me?”

“You’re just as bad as me. If your father asked you to keep a secret, you’d do it in a heartbeat. You’d do anything to please that man. You’d do it, and you wouldn’t care who you hurt. So, fuck you. My sister died protecting me. I’m not going to allow you to kill me.”

The words fly out of my mouth so fast I can’t stop them. They leave my lips, and I realize I’ve said too much and to the wrong person.

Caspian’s eyes widen, and he blinks rapidly. As his lips part, my heart and mind race and I’m not sure what to do.

“What did you just say about Lillian?”

I back away and try to run, but he grabs me in one swift move, hoisting me into the air kicking and screaming as he tosses me over his shoulder like I'm weightless.

My previous bravado was nothing. Of course, it was. Obviously, he allowed me to strike him, and this is payback.

I pound against his back, which feels like ramming my fist into a steel wall.

He closes the door and carries me in my defiance up the stairs. We go into his bedroom, where I was only last week on my knees giving him a blow job.

Now I'm back again, and I don't know what the hell he plans to do to me.

When he sets me down, I try to bolt out the door, but he pulls me back. He shoves me up against the wall, barricading me in with the force of his body and pinning my hands above my head.

"Fucking stop it," he growls.

"You tried to kill me."

"I didn't, and I didn't write any fucking notes."

"Then who did? The only person I know who hates me enough to want me dead is you. You hate me, Caspian, you—"

He steals my words away by smothering my lips with a kiss that sets my mouth on fire. My tumultuous emotions swirl and the world skids to a stop as currents of pleasure I shouldn't feel spiral through me.

Forcing his tongue into my mouth, he makes a point of stroking mine, as if he's trying to soothe me from the inside out. It works. The tenderness in his strokes coaxes me to succumb to him and melt my soft curves into his hard, wet body.

He releases my hands and trails a sensual path to my neck so he can touch my face.

Holding me, he moves back a few inches so he can gaze into my eyes.

“I don’t hate you. I fucking want you, and no matter what I do, I can’t stop,” he breathes. His words seep into my mind. In the turbulence, they’re the only thing that manages to calm me. “You’re wrong about what I do to please my father. Every time I look at you, I break my fucking vows for you.”

His fingers dig into my cheek. It’s painful, but I want to feel it, because it’s him touching me.

“Me?” I whisper.

“I want you, and I think you want me too, don’t you? Tell me the truth.” His voice takes on a hard demanding edge that stops me from lying.

“Yes.”

“Then don’t resist me.” He devours my mouth in a strong, dominating kiss, wrapping my body with his once more.

Sheer possession claims my mind when he presses his hard erection into my belly. My ability to resist slips from my grasp, and I allow his tongue to mate with mine, feral and raw.

At that moment, my resolve shatters, and I know I’m going to let him take me.

The sexual chemistry igniting between us explodes, and in one fluid motion, he rips open my blouse.

Buttons fly and bounce over the concrete floor. The air chills the exposed swells of my breasts. Then his hands are on them, squeezing, kneading, and tweaking my nipples between his thumbs and forefingers. He then moves down to my pussy and cups my sex.

He breaks away from my lips again, this time with a wicked smirk lifting the corners of his sensual lips.

Moving my panties aside, he feels my wetness and slips one finger inside me, then another. Thrusting in and out, he sends me completely over the edge, making my soul tremble.

“I love your body, Malyshka. I love the way you feel in my hands.” Another finger moves the wetness from my pussy to the tight rosette of my asshole.

At the contact, undiluted, primal need devours me, and I arch my back into the thrilling sensation. I want to answer with words, but only a soft moan leaves my lips.

“You’re so tight.” He flicks the hard nub of my clit. “And so fucking wet for me, Malyshka. I think it’s time I own this tight little cunt. This is happening tonight, Willow. I’m going to fuck you against the wall.”

My brain screams something that sounds like a reminder of all the reasons I shouldn’t be with him, but my head nods.

My confirmation intensifies the madness, and he returns to my lips. In between kissing me and touching me, he manages to remove his shirt, my bra, my panties and shove his pants and boxers down his hips, freeing his cock.

Lifting my leg, he hooks it around his waist, pressing me into the wall. Then he grabs his cock and guides himself to my entrance.

My body tenses when I realize this is it. I’m about to give myself to him.

He’s going to take my virginity, and everything will be different after this.

Caspian takes hold of my face at the same time the fat head of his cock plunges into my passage, stealing my thoughts.

“Look at me. Focus only on me.” He thrusts deeper, and it hurts so much I grip his arms. “I’ll make you feel good soon, I promise.”

“You... promise?” I moan.

“I do.” He moves in and out a few times, stretching my passage to take him. “I’ve dreamed of this a million times. Let me show you how I feel. Let me show you what it feels like to be with me.”

One hard thrust forces a bolt of pain through my body, but I’m so enthralled by his words I hardly feel it.

What I do feel weakens me with pleasure, leaving me dizzy with delight, but he holds me up as he continues

thrusting, each stroke going deeper and deeper, grinding against my clit.

Once my body adjusts, Caspian drives into me harder and faster. Then even faster with an animalistic need that sends my body into overdrive. He never breaks our riveting gaze while he holds me there in the pinnacle of pleasure.

“You feel so good. Your tight little pussy is greedy for my cock,” he groans.

My body hums in response to his dirty mouth and his touch.

Overwhelmed by his hunger for me, I let go, and the tug of my orgasm grips me with such a ferocity it scares me.

The sound of our bodies smashing together fills my being, and I savor the scent of us invading the air.

I’ve never done anything that’s felt this good. It feels so good I lose myself in him.

He fucks me at a furious speed, hard and mercilessly against the wall, and all I can do to stop myself from falling off the face of reality is dig my fingers into his shoulders and hold on.

“You’re so beautiful,” Caspian whispers into my ear, my mind spinning as he continues to consume me. “So fucking beautiful.”

Our gazes tangle, and when I see warmth lighting up within his emerald eyes, I feel like I’m finally home. As if he’s rescued me from being lost in the wilderness with no hope of return.

That’s when I come and fall over the precipice of sanity into madness.

His pace increases again, then I feel his cock pulse and am flooded with the warmth of his hot cum as he speaks in Russian, telling me how beautiful and perfect I am.

His pumps slow down to a stop, but he doesn’t let me go. He surprises me by kissing me again, but this kiss feels different to any other we’ve shared.

It's beautiful and tender, passionate and full of what I've always dreamed about.

I feel it everywhere. In my heart, my mind, and my soul. He then presses his forehead to mine and holds me close to his heart.

"You are mine. I can't allow anyone else to have you," he speaks in a low determined voice.

I lift my head slightly to look at him because I'm not sure he knows what he's saying.

"Mine. My girl. My Willow."

He moves back to my lips, stealing my senses, and I lose myself all over again because he feels like mine, too.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-SIX

CASPIAN

I stare at the girl asleep in my bed—woman. She's not the girl anymore.

I CHANGED HER. I took her virginity and made a woman out of her.

It's practically morning. She fell asleep hours ago after I had her for the fourth time.

I want her again, but I won't be a bastard and wake her up when I know she's exhausted.

All I want to do is spend forever in this room. My room smells like sex and us. Her sweetness and my strength. The cocktail is intoxicating, and I don't think I've ever smelled anything better in my life.

I don't know what the fuck kind of trouble I'm getting myself into by opening this can of worms from the cupboard in hell.

All I know is, I don't want out of this, and I don't want out of her.

What happened between us was a long time coming, and I meant what I said about not wanting anyone else to have her. I just don't know how the fuck I'm going to get around that one.

The things that were said last night, however, highlight there's much more to worry about than what I previously thought.

The note she got was a fucking worry, and so was everything she said.

What stuck in my head most of all was what she said about Lillian. She said *my sister died protecting me*.

It's the first I'm hearing that. Everyone was told how Adrian and Elaine took the girls camping and Lillian ran away.

You aren't supposed to be able to just run away when you're linked to the Knights, so I always wondered how she did it.

Hearing she died made more sense. But if that's what really happened, then somewhere along the line, someone's lying, and I don't think it's Willow. One of the first things we're taught in training is to be able to spot when someone is lying and when they are telling the truth.

I saw truth in her eyes, and by the same token, I saw the moment she realized she said something she shouldn't have. Something secret.

I reach for a cigarette, crack the window open, and light up.

Will she tell me if I asked her what happened?

I want to know.

It's funny how secrets from the past have cropped up, like a beast rearing its ugly head. The last two days have been shit, as I had Dorian checked out and found nothing useful. He's back on campus tomorrow. Rest assured I will be seeing him, but I wanted something more concrete to use to interrogate him.

But now there's this.

Resting my head against the rigid wall of the window bay, I smoke and watch the princess in my bed.

I have done everything my father told me not to do, and I've pissed on tradition with a woman who's promised to another man.

The dark rebel in me makes me believe I can have anything I want in this world, but in the back of my mind I've always known there was one thing I couldn't have.

Her.

And that was before she was forbidden to me. I don't know if she would have ever been promised to me. It would have made sense because we were inseparable when we were kids. But I think her father would have given her to Lucian.

Whatever would have happened, the future would have seen me stuck here just like this, plotting all the ways I could steal her.

Now that she's clearly in danger, I want to steal her for more than my selfishness. I want to pack a bag, put her in my car, and drive the fuck out of here, away from here.

I can't do that, though, without knowing what the danger is and leaving so many loose ends behind. That would be foolish and reckless even for me.

My cock stirs when she shuffles, rolling onto her back so the moonlight can caress her skin in its silver glow. When the sheet slips down her waist, exposing her breasts and tight pink nipples, I wonder what the fuck it is I'm doing sitting here watching.

In those fantasies I've had of her, I take her a million ways and own every part of her body. We do everything that would land us in a confessional for years, and we don't stop. I own her pussy over and over again, eating it out until I milk every last drop of arousal from her body. I suck her tits until they're sore. She rides my face with her sweet pussy positioned at my mouth so I can drink her. I own that ass and every hole in her body, and she owns my dick, too.

I've fucked many beautiful girls, but none like her. No one can hold a candle to her, and none have been sexier. Every inch of her body is a fantasy. From her crown of luscious crimson hair to the tips of her toes. Those pert nipples, ripe with need, send my hand straight to my aching cock. I stroke my length only to calm myself because I plan to have her again.

Putting out my cigarette, I decide to be the bastard I am and have her even if she is tired. I'm a greedy motherfucker at the best of times, but when it comes to her body, I become a voracious glutton.

There are serious things to talk about when the sun comes up. Before it does, we're still here in the fantasy, and I want to live out one more with her. One last time before I make her tell me her secrets.

Pushing my boxers down my legs, I make my way over to her with my cock bouncing between my legs as I harden up all over again.

I climb onto the bed, and when my weight dips the mattress, her eyes flutter and she rolls onto her side. Leaning down, I take her left nipple into my mouth and suck it, swirling my tongue around the hard peak until it pebbles.

Warm fingers flutter into my hair, lacing through the strands, and when I lift my head to pause my suckle, I meet eyes the shade of the sky on that warm summer's day.

I should have fucking known this chick had messed with me from the moment she had me thinking of Shakespeare and shit.

Locked in her gaze, I see her desire for me, and I recall the countless times I imagined her looking at me just like this.

“I wanted to suck your tits. You can't see tits like this and not suck them.” My words have the desired effect, and her eyes become round and open. That was nowhere near as crass as what I've said to her or what I plan to say, but I'm shocking her in every way possible. “Was that okay, Malyshka?”

“Yes.”

“Roll back onto your back.”

When she does, I switch on the lamp so I can see her properly.

I'm so amazed by how much I can't get enough of her—looking at her body and being inside her. Even after knowing what it's like to fuck her, I can still say that.

Willow retains that lure which makes me want more even when I think I've had my fill. I was a fool to ever think one time with her would fix me. I never knew once wouldn't be enough.

I suck her other breast, giving it the same attention I did the other. I've learned her body well by now and know she likes me doing this. It makes her pussy as wet as I need it to be so I can fuck her the way I like to fuck.

I know she'll be sore from earlier, and raw from me taking the cherry between her legs.

I feast on her, loving her breasts with my mouth and those moans of pleasure chorusing through my ears in a symphony that awakens the secret parts of my soul.

I stop sucking when she arches her back into the sheets and grips my shoulders as she comes, moving her hips against me.

Sliding down to her pussy, I feel how soaked she is and smile up at her.

“Perfect, fucking perfect.” I slide my tongue between her pussy lips and lick the full length of her slit to the rosette of her asshole, which I plan to take someday soon. “You taste fucking amazing.”

She opens her mouth, but I steal her words when I return to her pussy and circle my tongue around her clit a few times. Moaning, she writhes in my arms while I savor her flavor and the pleasure-filled look on her face.

“Caspian,” she moans with desperate need, and her hips buck.

I pause again to look at her. “Yes, Malyshka.”

I know I keep calling her either Printsessa or Malyshka, but she's both. My baby girl and my princess.

“Do you want me inside you?” I taunt, knowing the answer, but this is part of the fantasy.

“Yes.”

With my fingers, I plunge into her wet pussy and press hard on her clit.

“Then beg me. Beg me to fuck you,” I answer like the wicked devil I am. She's in the Viper's Lair now, and I want to break her down to play by all my rules.

“Fuck me,” she cries.

“With pleasure, Malyshka. Get on your hands and knees, ass up.”

She does as she's told, and I take my own sweet time to commit the way she looks kneeling on all fours to memory.

My hungry eyes roam over her body, following every curve, then I position myself behind her. Grabbing her hips, I take my cock and line my dick up with her slick opening. I then thrust in deep, ramming myself to the hilt.

The cry that tears from her lips fuels my movements, and I go faster, pounding into her over and over. She feels different now because she fits me perfectly, so when she stretches to take me, I fuck the way I like to. Hardcore and raw.

My body shivers from being inside her and owning her body all over again, and my balls tighten. The sensation hits me like a tumbling wave, and my entire body clenches. Mindless ecstasy makes me drive into her like a madman, and I hammer into her so hard she screams.

Fuck. She feels too good. How the fuck can she feel even better than before, or unlike anything I've ever experienced?

I fight my release, trying to force myself to slow the fuck down, but I can't. I move faster, pound faster, own her faster. When I come, it's with desperation, like my body needed the sweet release, and I explode into her tight passage. Her walls tighten around my cock, wrapping my length like a hot silk glove.

I growl, and she cries out, the two of us lost and uncaring about how loud we are, or who hears us.

My nerves buzz with the wild energy, like I've been injected with a dose of adrenaline. I fight the awareness that returns to me as much as I wish I could fight the brightness outside as the sun peeks through the sky.

When I pull out of her, she sinks to the bed, and I take a moment to hold her as we watch the sunrise.

Pressing my nose to her hair, I inhale her and commit the scent of her to my memory, too.

It's time to talk.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-SEVEN

CASPIAN

She watches me while I slide off the bed, and her gaze never leaves my body. I'd allow myself to believe she was checking me out if I didn't take note of the fear lurking in her eyes.

She's still afraid of me, and she should be. But she's also afraid of us.

She should fear that, too, because I do, and I'm not afraid of anything.

The moment you allow emotion in, that's the day you entertain weakness, and my father already thinks I'm weak.

I head to my ensuite, clean off, then head to my walk-in closet to pull on a pair of boxers and joggers. I then grab a towel and warm it under the hot tap for her.

When I return to her, I don't bother to hand it to her so she can clean herself. I reach for her and do it as if she's mine. I notice the blood stains mixed with my cum the same way it did when I took her virginity. There isn't as much blood, but it's there, which means I was too rough.

I meet her nervous gaze and grit my teeth.

"I hurt you," I say.

"I'm okay."

"Are you sure?"

She nods and gives me a weak smile.

I want to joke around and tell her I'll kiss her pussy better, but it's time to get serious. Which means I should get her some clothes.

"I should go back to Myrrdin, Caspian." Another faint smile paints her lips, and she reaches for the sheet and covers herself. "I was hoping to get some work done at the magazine so I don't piss off my supervisor any more than I have. There was that unscheduled day off I had I need to make up for."

I get one of my sweatshirts with the Raventhorn crest on it and give it to her to put on. As she drags it on, I wonder how I'm going to broach the subjects I need to.

"I have it on good authority that he's not pissed off," I reply, deciding to keep the easy-going conversation until I see the right moment to change things up. "He hasn't seen you at work for the last two days because he had unscheduled days off, too."

She gazes deeply into my eyes. "Where were you?"

"Business. I had business to tend to." It's like we're destined to keep secrets from each other. "But I should have let you know. I do have your number, after all."

"When did you get my number? The staff directory?" Her cheeks color.

"The moment you got that phone."

"I've had the same number for the last three years."

"Exactly, Malyshka."

"When did I become your baby girl?"

"You were always that." I set the towel on the ground and gaze back at her. "We need to talk, Willow."

"We're talking now."

"Not about the things we're supposed to. Not about the things we need to. You said stuff last night I can't just ignore. But mostly, I want to know what happened to Lilian."

Her lips tremble, and she brings her hands to closer to her heart.

"You know what happened. She ran away. She ran away when we went camping, and it screwed with me. That's what happened." She nods with conviction, as if she really expects me to believe her words.

It pisses me off, but I calm myself because I don't want to give her more reason to hide her secrets from me.

“Don’t lie to me, Willow. Don’t lie to me like you did before.”

“When did I lie to you?”

Time to talk about the past, too. “The moment you decided you were going to keep your father’s secret to yourself. You lied by omission. Every time you saw me and I wondered where my mother was and you even suspected she could have been with your father, you lied when you didn’t tell me.”

I give her a narrowed look and wonder when I’ll feel like I can forgive her. If I can have all these experiences with her I’ve never had before and I still feel that hatred inside me that won’t go away, I know it’s not going to be any time soon.

I also know in the same way she’s right by what she said last night about my father. I would keep his secrets. I just don’t know if I would keep them if they involved her.

She was a little girl at the time when she kept the secret that ripped us apart, but I was a little boy, too. Even then, I know I would have still chosen her.

Her gaze drops to her lap, and she stares at the silky sheets.

Watching her start to crumble, I touch her face and lift her chin so she can look at me.

“What happened to Lillian, Printsessa?”

She shakes her head, and the fear that fills her eyes tells me there’s something more she’s scared of that isn’t me.

“I can’t tell you.” Her voice is barely above a whisper but there, and the hair on the back of my neck rises from the acknowledgement that what happened to her sister is not what the world believes.

“Why not?” I use the same hushed tone she used.

“I can’t, Caspian. I can’t.”

“Willow, I think the time for silence is over. You said your sister died trying to protect you, and someone tried to kill you, then there’s this note about her dying for your father’s sins.” And the guy watching her. I wasn’t going to tell her about him

because I didn't want to scare her, but I need to tell her. "There was someone watching your room last week."

The blood syphons from her face, leaving her a ghostly shade. "What?"

"The night I was in your room. That's why I was there. I saw someone watching you, and when I checked it out, he'd done something to the cameras so they wouldn't pick him up."

She grabs her heart and starts breathing hard. "Oh my God. That would be why no one knew who snuck into my room to leave the first note."

My blood heats. "How many fucking notes have you gotten?"

"Three."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Lucian checked out the first one, and he was doing the same for the second. I got the second the other night when I went into the city."

"Lucian?"

"Caspian, please. I can't deal with whatever craziness you think is happening between me and Lucian."

"But you can tell that motherfucker your secrets and not me. He gets to play knight in shining armor while I'm here scratching my ass." I calm down. I drag in a breath and give her a hard stare.

"You didn't tell me about the guy."

"Because I didn't want to frighten the hell out of you. What else happened?"

"Nothing."

"Right, well, I have eyes on your apartment. Chances are he's not going to go back there, which is probably why you got the notes elsewhere. Assuming it's him leaving the notes, which it might not be if you're being warned."

We gaze at each other.

“I don’t know what to think. You think there are two people?”

“Well, I don’t know why someone would try to kill you in one breath and warn you in the next. That suggests two people. Maybe your note person knows your enemy’s plans. And they know stuff about the past.” I hold her gaze. “Willow, I need to know what happened to Lilian. I want you to trust me. I want you to trust me the way you should have done in the past.”

She shakes her head and brings her hands up to her cheeks, pressing her fingers into her skin.

“I can’t. I can’t talk about that.”

Her face takes on an expression I recall seeing twice in my life, both were when secrets were at work. It looks like I might have to share a secret or two with her to get answers. I care enough about her to do so.

I reach for her hands and take them into mine.

“I think you need to talk to me, trust me. The last time I saw you look so helpless, your hair was shorter, much shorter, and you had a bandage around your wrist.” I lift her wrist with the scar, and as I kiss it, realization forms on her pretty face.

She knows the only way I could have seen her hair short and a bandage on her wrist was when she was in the mental institution.

“You came to see me?” Tears well within her eyes and course down her cheeks. The spark in the depths of her blue gaze tangles with pain and tries to push forward. For that instant, she looks like the girl I used to know. The one from the meadow.

“Yes, I did.”

More tears come, and I feel like the devil I was so hellbent on becoming and wonder if she’d actually seen me during that time, would it have made a difference? My heart tells me it might have. Or maybe it would.

“Why didn’t they tell me?”

“Because I asked them not to. I wanted to be a ghost. That day, I remembered the last time I saw you that way, and I promised myself I’d never do anything to make you that sad.”

“When was that?”

“After I came back from Russia. When I was eight. I was gone for ten months, and everyone would have told you that I was visiting my grandparents, except I wasn’t. I think you knew. You could see through the lie.”

Her eyes cloud, and I know she remembers. She was seven years old, but she remembers.

“I could, but everyone kept telling me you’d be home soon. What happened to you?”

“My father’s enemies took me believing I was Thorne, and I made them believe I was so I could save my cousin.”

Her mouth falls open, and her grip tightens on my wrist.

“What?”

“We swapped, or rather I did.” And that’s why my father thinks I’m weak and why he uses Thorne against me.

I hate to admit this, but there is some element of truth to his accusations of weakness. I’m a devil with a heart. My heart is my chink and the only thing that could cut me down like grass.

“The things they did to are things I still can’t speak about,” I add. “The way they killed Thorne’s parents and his sister is something I’ll never forget.” Even now I see those demons in my mind, and everything is still a nightmare.

People say it takes one to know one, and the only person I know who carries the flame of darkness the way I do is Eilish. It was that flame I saw in her when we first met her and why I ironically encouraged everyone else to befriend her.

Maybe that’s also why I choose to be the asshole when it came to her, because she brought out the devil in me, but that’s a fucking story for another day.

“Caspian,” she grates out on another bout of tears. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

“You were never supposed to know, and those are secrets my family never shared because of who they had to kill to get me back. I can’t tell you any more than that because I’ve buried it in my mind. But if I can trust you with those things, I think you can trust me, too.”

She stares back at me for a few beats, and I hope I’ve reached her.

When she releases me and places her arms around me, I think I might have.

Willow presses her lips to my ear, and her hot breath tickles my skin.

“My life is not my own,” she mutters in a whisper as if she’s scared someone might hear her. “When I tell you my secret, I’ll be trusting you with the only thing that could destroy me.”

She pulls back a little so we’re facing each other.

“If you feel anything for me, then you have to trust me. Can you?”

“Yes.”

“Lilian didn’t run away, did she?”

“No, she didn’t.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-EIGHT

WILLOW

I drag in a weary breath and focus on the solace I find in Caspian's steady gaze.

It felt good just to confirm Lillian didn't run away and not be looked at like I'm crazy. He's looking at me like he wants to listen, and in those deep green eyes, I see the familiarity of the person I trusted more than anything until I shattered our relationship.

I can't believe he came to see me during the darkest time of my life. Knowing he did makes me think that one day he could forgive me. I want that more than anything, and maybe this is the start.

Trusting him with the thing that could destroy me.

"Talk to me, Willow," he mutters, giving my hand a comforting squeeze.

"Okay... I'm just getting my mind ready. It's a difficult subject."

"Take your time, but I want to know everything."

I nod. The last time I told this story, I sat in the doctor's office at the mental institution. Doctor Taylor was behind his desk with my medical notes, and Elaine and Adrian were sitting next to me.

It was a checkup day and one of the last they had with me together. Soon after that, it was just me, and I think it was because of how it affected Elaine.

That last time we all sat in the doctor's office was terrible, and it was the first time I truly acted like I was insane.

I recounted what happened to Lillian the same as I had been for the month prior to that, and when I saw the look of disbelief and pity on the doctor's face, I just lost it.

I called him a fucking cunt who didn't care that my sister was dead. Then I ripped a massive chunk of my hair out of my skull, threw it at him, and started screaming. They gave me

Valium and something that made me sleep. I remember being asleep for a long, long time, and it felt like years had passed, except it was days.

The moment I opened my eyes, the screaming started again when I thought of someone killing my sister. I couldn't save her, not the way she saved me.

I pull in another breath, and as I exhale, I start talking while Caspian listens.

He listens, and he still doesn't look at me like I'm crazy. The attention he gives me almost makes me feel like crying. My poor soul has yearned for such attention for so long it aches that I'm getting it.

I tell him everything, absolutely everything, and when I'm done, I can't believe I shared the story and the ease I spoke with.

"I'm sorry, Willow. I'm so sorry," he says, rubbing over the back of my hand.

"Thank you."

"Who else knows this?"

"Outside of Adrian and Elaine and I suppose the staff at St. Claire's, only Lucian and Eilish. But they all believe I changed my mind and believed Lillian ran away." I swallow past the lump in my throat. "Caspian, if anyone heard me talking like this, I'd go right back into that hospital and Dorian would own me and my father's company for life."

I told him about my guardianship, too, so he knows the position I'm in and how everything will transfer to Dorian when I marry him.

So... now he knows how to destroy me because if any of that happens, it will be the end of me.

"I'm sure no one would complain if that happens. In fact, I'm pretty sure he'd want that. Owning Dynamic Corp would be a big deal. I didn't know the company was mine. Did you know?"

He nods. “Yes. I knew. I don’t know much, but I know your father was adamant that his daughters would have something for themselves and that was why he made my father the original executer of the company.”

My lips part, and I pull in a sharp breath. “He did that?”

“Yes. Alongside Borgia. Borgia was only a second because of his legal background, but he got bumped up to first when the partnership was severed.”

And there’s something more that doesn’t make sense.

“I don’t know anything about that time, and I have no idea why the partnership was severed. It’s not something I would have ever done to your father. Even now.”

I’m not stupid. For what little I know about the company, I could only imagine that being in a partnership with a giant like Aleksander Ivanov Tech could only be a massive advantage.

“As powerful as my father is, I don’t think he even knows what happened either. It just did, and we assumed maybe it was to do with your father’s relationship with my mother. We figured your father must have wanted us out. It looked that way, and it’s not something we can worry about now.”

It’s not, so I shouldn’t dwell on it. We stare at each other for a few moments, and he leans forward and kisses me.

“No one’s going to hear this from me. I promise you.”

“You promise?”

“I swear it. What did you hope to find at the library in the city?”

“Anything. It was the only place I could go where I knew I could check things out without being seen. I haven’t found anything yet. I probably won’t either. I was just trying. She’d try if it were me. She wouldn’t just give up.”

I know he understands that because of Zak. I’m sure I’m not supposed to know the details of his brother’s death, but I know Zak was murdered.

“No, she wouldn’t. That’s why I’m going to help you.”

Warmth fills every inch of my body like a balm to my tired, drained soul.

“You will?”

“Yes, and I won’t say anything about why I’m doing it. Nothing that will make people think you believe anything other than what they already know. It’s suspicious as fuck that this note has come about. I think it’s part of the same thing.”

“What if it is? Caspian, she said we were in danger, and then nothing happened.”

“Maybe because her being out of the picture eliminated the danger. Maybe she found out something she shouldn’t have.”

I release the breath burning my lungs and blink several times.

Could that really be what happened?

“I wonder what that could be.”

“Maybe we’ll find out.” He presses his lips together.

“Thank you so much for listening to me and wanting to help me.” Especially when he doesn’t need to.

“That’s okay. Thank you for trusting me.” He gives me a small smile, and within that smile I see the same flicker of interest that fueled them as he took me. I can’t help but think of all we did together last night.

I’m not a virgin anymore. I feel different, and so do my mind and body.

My mind knows things it didn’t before, and my body aches in ways it can only feel when you’ve had actual sex.

I’m only now thinking about it because we’ve been talking about the past and the secrets that weighed so heavily on not just me but him, too.

I know him, so I know it must have been hard for him to tell me about Russia, and he would never say he found it difficult to talk about something unless it was serious. He’s the strongest person I know, but I also know he abhors anything that resembles weakness.

God knows what he must have gone through to say that to me, and what he saw happen to Throne's family. I was told they died in an accident, but of course the people we relied on in the past all lied.

"How about we take the rest of the day off, Willow? Spend it with me."

Nothing sounds better than that. It feels like we've healed parts of the broken pieces that used to be the people we were, so I nod, agreeing.



THREE AND HALF hours later sees us walking through the meadow we used to play in when we were kids.

Last time we were here together was after his mother's funeral and we became enemies.

I'm not exactly sure what we are now, but as we walk through the tall grass toward the tree we christened the Wishing Tree when we were five and six, he's holding my hand.

We used to meet under this tree nearly every day. The tree and the surrounding lake and woods were our playground.

His family home is about ten minutes to our left, and the house that used to be mine is five minutes to our right. Lucian's is slightly further, but he used to ride on his bike to meet us.

When we were all practically babies, our mothers would meet up in the day to read while they sat on a picnic blanket, and we'd go off and play some adventurous game Caspian would make up.

It was over by the little park down the hill where we first met Eilish, weeks before school began.

It's hard to believe the storms of life carried us down some dark, dangerous roads.

When we get to the tree, Caspian sets me on the old stump next to it as if I still need help to climb up. It was a flourishing oak tree but got damaged in a hurricane, so it had to be cut down for safety.

I was so little when the owners of the land first chopped it down, my legs hung over the side.

I chuckle and shake my head at him. “Caspian, I’m not three feet tall anymore.”

“Old habits die hard.” He smirks.

“It seems so.” I’m surprised I can smile when so much has happened over the last few days—my near accident, Eilish, the notes, telling Caspian my secrets, and being so terrified I thought I was going to die from fright. “So, are you going to tell me how come we drove all the way here? I was thinking we would go for coffee.”

He gathers up some stones like he used to and sets them next to me. I’m guessing to throw them in the lake later.

“No, coffee sounds like a date. Are you asking me out?”

My cheeks burn, and I feel hot in other places when he places a light kiss on my lips.

“No, I was just thinking we wouldn’t go so far. We’re in New York, Caspian, and we live in Boston now.”

“Yeah. I didn’t know where else to take you. This is the only place where I’m myself.”

“What do you mean?”

Another kiss brushes over my lips.

“I still paint.”

I smile at that. “Do you?” He was so talented. He used to draw and paint the most amazing things. The colors were so vivid. Then he stopped. He stopped after he came back from Russia. I guess I know why now.

“I do.”

“I thought you stopped.”

“No, I just didn’t show anybody except my mom. This place is the only place left in my mind where the sky is still blue, your hair is still a vibrant red, and your eyes still love me.”

Love him?

I’d be lying to myself if I didn’t admit that I always did, but admitting it now scares me because I know I can’t have him. But when he moves back to my lips, I hold him there for a longer kiss and refuse to return to reality just yet.

I want to stay in this fantasy for just a little longer, just until the glass of bliss shatters around us and pulls me away from him.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-NINE

CASPIAN

I managed to get her to stay with me again tonight.

Not by asking. If I'd asked Willow outright to stay at my place, I know she would have made a big deal out of it.

Instead, I seduced her back into my bed. It wasn't hard after we played out a few of my fantasies under that tree in the meadow. And when I had her riding my cock in my car after we got back to Boston later in the night.

I parked in an alley, where I took her relentlessly and dirtied up that good girl so bad she never thought to say no to me when I lured her back to my place.

The only thing that annoyed me was her messaging Lucian a few times and then a phone call to him that nearly made me lose my shit when she muttered back *love you* after I heard him say it.

I'm walking a thin line my temper doesn't help already, but when it comes to him, he makes me lose it in seconds. I didn't want her to tell him she was with me, but at the same time, I wanted him to know.

Now that it's late and she's asleep in my bed again, it's time to work. I made my own call, too, to Thorne, asking for a favor. Another one.

It's barely eleven, so I'm making my way across the landing to his apartment to tell him what that favor is.

Thorne has the second biggest apartment in the house. My father had two apartments converted to make his. Mine was already as big as it was because of who I am. This is the first time in decades that relatives of the Pakhan would have taken up three apartments. I have Zak's old apartment.

Throne is in his room sitting shirtless by his computer, and Lilly Bradshaw is sitting on his bed putting her shirt back on. Like the other girl from weeks before, she has purple hair, and

I notice her name starts with L, too. I can't remember if the girl at the club was called Lilly or Laila.

She smiles at me before she leaves, and Thorne glues his eyes to her ass.

He laughs when he sees my face.

"Girls with purple hair with names beginning with L?" I ask, pulling up a chair and narrowing my eyes. He laughs and nods.

"I have to make life interesting when I'm bored. It turns out I love looking at purple hair when I'm getting my dick wet."

"But Lilly didn't have purple hair a few weeks ago. Wasn't it blonde?"

"I'm Thorne Ivanov. She dyed it for me." He chuckles low and cruel.

When people see this side of him, it's easy to fool them into thinking he's jovial like this all the time, but he's not. He's as ruthless as I am.

That ruthlessness returns to his face in seconds when the air between us shifts.

"Right, so I have to tell you I'm afraid to ask about this favor of yours," he states. "It feels like it's something more to do with Willow Raventhorn and something more to piss off your father."

"Maybe because it is."

"Jesus Christ, Caspian. What does this chick have over you to make you crazy?"

"Thorne, I need you on this. I wouldn't ask if I could do this myself."

"Do what? And you know I'm in. I had this dream the other night of us dying together. So, I accept shit might happen to kill us both."

"Thank you, cousin, and I pray we don't die."

“Okay, spill it. What am I doing for this girl of yours?”

I straighten. “I need you to look into Timofey Raventhorn’s files at Dynamic Tech.” His mouth drops. “I also need you to check out the police reports from when Lillian went missing.”

“Caspian, have you lost your mind? Why the fuck are we looking into that for?”

I pull the note Willow received from my pocket and hand it to him. This is the only thing I’ll share with him.

It’s pushing boundaries on my promise to Willow, and she doesn’t know I’m talking to Thorne about this, but I realized I couldn’t ask for his help without giving him some context to work with.

His eyes scan over the words of the note several times before he looks at me. “What the fuck is this?”

“She’s in danger, Thorne. What we thought before with that guy is right. You and I both know there are no such things as coincidences. So, this can’t be. The note says Lillian died for her father’s sins. I want to know what her father’s sins are and what happened to Lillian.”

That’s enough. I don’t need to tell him anything else.

Thorne nods. “Okay. I’ll do it. Be careful, Caspian, you’re getting yourself a little too involved with this girl, and she’s not yours.”

I dip my head and press my lips together. “I know.”

Standing, I set my shoulders back, and the shadow of reality hits me. The clock’s ticking. Willow will be nineteen in a month and a half, and she’ll belong to that motherfucker Dorian

How will I feel then?



I TAKE the steps up to Dorian's apartment, and when I reach his door, I knock hard. I appreciate it might take him some time to hobble to the door, but I don't care. I knock like I'm death coming to butcher his ass.

It's been days since I wanted to speak to him, and he's had the morning to settle in after his break from campus.

It's lunchtime. The only reason I haven't been by sooner is because I took care of Willow first. Before we parted, I came clean and asked her to come back to my place when she finished her classes. Thankfully, she agreed.

I knock on the door again, and one of Dorian's lackeys walks out of the apartment next door. When he sees me, he keeps his head straight and keeps walking by. The fool is afraid of me. I can't remember the idiot's name. I just know him by sight. Clearly, he knows what I'm capable of.

Smiling, I pound on the door once more.

"I'm coming. Fucking wait," Dorian answers from the other side of the door.

When he opens it and his gaze lands on me, he looks like he's going to shit himself. I'm guessing the fool didn't look through the peephole first before pulling the door open.

Maybe he thought it was his mommy coming over with a pot of soup. Judging by how stupid he is, he's probably never used the thing because he hasn't had to check to see who might be coming to kill his ass.

Until me.

"Dorian, good to see you back."

I walk into his apartment without him inviting me, and he closes the door.

He looks like a weak version of his former self, and the evidence of the punches I delivered to his face is still there in shades of blackest black and inky blue.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he seethes.

"I need to talk to you."

“About what?”

He hobbles in and sits on the sofa. I think it’s because he can’t stand for too long, but he’s playing it cool.

“My brother.”

He tips his head to the side and regards me with curiosity. This is where I have to be careful and not say too much.

I’m not mentioning the phone call because Thorne and I haven’t been able to establish what exactly happened. But whatever happened, we know Peter had a hand in it. We’re just not sure how. I want to talk to Peter, but I’m going to leave it for last. The worst thing about not having full details is speaking to people who might and giving them the heads-up that you’re investigating them.

“What about your brother?”

“I came across something, and it looked like you were one of the last people to speak to him. I just wanted to find out what was said and if you remember anything strange. There were no records of him speaking to you.”

“Because I wasn’t around. I was in Chicago. The last time I saw Zak was the week before he died.”

I stare back at him trying to see if he’s lying because there’s something off with the tone of his explanation.

“What were you doing in Chicago?”

“Went to see a girl.” He smirks then sneers at me. “That all? Want to know what kind of condom I used to fuck her?”

I narrow my eyes at him, continuing my observation because I think he’s lying.

“Dorian, you keep that shit to yourself.” I walk over to him and crouch down to his level so he can look me right in my eyes. “If I find out you’re lying and you had something to do with my brother’s death, you’re dead, your father is dead, and your mother is dead.”

The smile recedes from his face, and that tells me something.

“Looks like I have nothing to worry about then, right? Because I’m telling the truth. I’m pretty sure my girl could vouch for me. I gave her a real good time.”

I don’t answer because that doesn’t sound like a good enough alibi to me, or maybe it is, and I don’t want it to be. If he’s telling the truth, it means his father called Zak.

One of them is hiding something, and I trust neither the father nor then son. I will find out what part they played, though. Mark my words.

I stand and let myself out of his apartment before the urge takes me to beat his ass again. This time if I did, it wouldn’t just be for Zak, it would be for my jealousy over his upcoming nuptials to my girl.

My girl.

Fuck, am I ever in a mess, and I know Thorne isn’t just warning me away from Willow because of my father. He’s doing it for me, too. He can see what’s happening to me, how I’m changing, and that what I feel for her is growing at a pace I can’t control.

My phone rings in my back pocket when I get down the stairs. It’s Thorne.

“What’s up?” I ask eagerly, thinking he’s found something.

“I have good and bad news.”

“Good news first.”

“I started with Lillian, and there wasn’t a whole lot to go on because the police logged her as a missing person because of the assumption she ran away. So, I made contact with the old sheriff who first investigated the case. He’s retired now but still does freelance work for the police. He’s agreed to meet with you when he’s back in town tomorrow.”

“Thanks for doing that.” Although I want to keep things under wraps, it’s definitely going to be better to speak to someone. “What’s the bad news?”

“I tried hacking into Dynamic Tech, but I can’t. Timofey has some serious firewalls up, and they rival anything I’ve

ever seen.”

That’s fucking saying something considering we were able to get into the Knights’ database.

“You seriously can’t hack it?”

“No, but I have an idea.”

“What?”

“There’s only one guy I know who can hack a motherfucking encryption like this.”

“Who is he?”

“Lucian Sokolov.”

Damnit to fuck.

Right... well, I guess he’s my next stop.

CHAPTER
FORTY

CASPIAN

I find Lucian in the quad among a circle of admiring fans. There are six girls who've gathered to watch him. He's shirtless and only wearing a pair of sweats. He looks like he was working out or playing football with the other guys out on the field.

He flexes his muscles for the girls and points to the definition in each of his biceps, naming each muscle group as if he's giving a lecture in the human anatomy. I used to do shit like that in my freshman year, but I swear to God I wasn't so vain.

There's one girl watching him from the top of the bleachers who he either can't see or is ignoring. Or he can see her, and the show is really for her.

Eilish is staring just as much as the other adoring fans, but she doesn't look so impressed, which means there must be trouble in paradise.

I see her just fine, so I'm guessing he couldn't have missed her.

I stop paces away from him and listen to his shit.

"The lateral portion of my deltoids runs straight into my triceps brachii," Lucian explains with pride. "On Italians, it's bigger."

"Why?" the girl with the pixie cut asks.

I can't believe she actually believes shit like that, but they all look like they believe him.

"We're just made that way."

"What about Russians?" I cut in, and he looks at me, frowning. "I'm Russian, and I swear to God mine's bigger than yours, and so is my dick."

"Fuck you, what the fuck do you want?"

I look at the girls who've only just seen me, and they straighten right up.

"Leave us," I order with a firm wave of my hand.

They leave quickly, and Lucian gives me a murderous glare.

"Ivanov, you better have a good reason for coming to see me."

"Don't let me have to remind you that I am your superior."

"You don't, but I'm on my own time now, so I don't have to answer to you."

I don't know which rule gave him that idea, but I'm about to give him a reminder.

The moment I start speaking in Old Norse and tell him he's to watch himself because I need him for a job, he pipes down.

"What do you want?" he asks in a more respectful tone.

It grieves me to ask him for anything, let alone anything to do with Willow, but I need to, and I should know what he's been doing about the notes.

"I need your help."

"*You* need my help?"

"Yes. It's to do with Willow. She's in danger. We need to talk."

"Let me grab my shirt."



TWENTY MINUTES LATER, we gather with Thorne in his apartment.

Lucian sits behind Thorne's computer, tapping away at the keyboard.

I spent some time filling him in on what we've been doing, and he told me about the other notes Willow received.

His stepfather, Viktor, has been investigating the incident in the city and trying to get footage of the person who tried to run Willow off the road. So far, he hasn't found anything, but that doesn't surprise me. This person has managed to give us the slip successfully every time.

If it's the same guy, we at least know he's one of us.

I'm always impressed when Thorne does some high-tech computer shit, but I have to admit Lucian impresses the hell out of me, and it seems he does the same to Thorne.

With ease, he gets through the firewall at Dynamic Tech and starts tapping away like it's a walk in the park.

"How the hell did you do that?" Thorne asks.

"I'm not telling you shit. Things like this make me valuable," Lucian scuffs.

"Well, you could at least share how I can get back inside."

"As long as you use this computer, you won't have a problem. You're ghosting, and the system accepts you as part of the shared network."

"Clever," I say, and he cuts me a glance.

"I'm doing it for Willow."

As if I didn't know.

"What am I looking for?" he asks.

"I don't know. If we start with Timofey's private files, maybe we can find something on there."

"I'm going to check what he was doing the week he died."

He goes into the files, and his hands still on the keyboard.

"What's going on?" Thorne asks.

"Someone accessed his files nearly two years ago from here. I have the IP address of the computer. Let me see who it belonged to."

He taps away for a few seconds, and when he finds the owner of the computer who last accessed Timofey Raventhorn's files, we all see the name on the screen.

Zak Ivanov.

My heart slams at the sight of his name, and the blood pounding through my veins feels like it might explode in my body.

My brother was the last person to access these files, and the date he did so was two days before he died.

My breath hitches, and my mind tries to process what I'm seeing and what it means.

Fuck. What the fuck reason would Zak have to go digging in Timofey Raventhorn's files?

The one constant I've had over the last few days is this feeling that there are no coincidences. This can't be one either.

Lucian and Thorne stare back at me. It's Lucian I'm paying attention to, though, because the tension that was previously on his face has loosened and there's empathy in his eyes.

"Do you know why Zak would have been looking here?" he asks.

"No, I haven't got a clue, and he did it two days before he died."

The phone call Zak got from that number that either came from Peter or Dorian... could it have been about that?

I have no idea, but this is a connection I never expected. Something I should probably tell my father about. Except, what does it mean?

He hardly wants to hear Timofey's name mentioned. If I go to him with this without finding something more concrete, he's going to stop me in my tracks. Of course, doing so would also stop me from finding out what's going on with Willow.

"Zak wouldn't have been looking through these files for no reason," Thorne states.

"No, he wouldn't," Lucian agrees. "Maybe he was looking for the same things we are. Timofey's sins."

And I wonder if he died for those sins, too. Like Lillian?

Jesus, am I getting ahead of myself?

Maybe I'm not if he was looking through these files and turned up dead two days later—murdered.

“Are you free today to help us look through this?”

“Of course. I'm going to see if I can find out what he might have accessed. Something might have made him look here, though, and that might not be on file.”

Like everything else. Shit. What does this all mean?

Zak, what were you looking for?

What did you see?

“Let's just have a look.”



WE SPEND the day looking and find nothing. Not a damn thing, and I don't know what to think because the trail's gone cold.

I don't know what the connection is besides what we assumed earlier about Zak looking into Timofey's files.

Lucian promises to help and keep looking on his end, so does Thorne, so now I have to leave it with them.

The only good thing that happened was making an appointment to speak to the old sheriff about Lillian in two days' time.

When I walk into my apartment, the scent of basil and tomato sauce envelopes me.

I head to the kitchen to find Willow making pasta.

She gives me a weak smile when she sees me, but God, is it a good sight to see her, and I wonder if this is how coming home to her would feel like.

“Hi. I thought I'd cook,” she says, waving her hand over the simmering pot on the stove. “I hope that was okay. I thought you might be hungry.”

“Of course. Come here.”

She pads over looking dainty and petite in a baggy jumper and a pair of shorts. Her hair is piled up on top of her head in a messy bun, and with minimal makeup, she looks younger.

We kiss, and I savor the taste of her. I wish I could just take her to bed and we could fall into a fantasy like we have been, but I know she's eager to hear if I found anything out today.

I break away from the kiss reluctantly and brush over her cheek.

"Printsessa, I have a meeting set up for Sunday with the old sheriff who was investigating Lillian's case."

Her face brightens. "Oh my gosh, really?"

"Yes, and you don't have to worry. Whomever I speak to will just think I'm looking into things for myself. I won't mention you."

"Thank you so much."

"You're welcome. I'm also looking into your father's files to see if I can get any info from them. I haven't found anything useful yet." I don't tell her about Zak because I don't want to talk about it anymore for the day. "I'll keep looking."

"I can't thank you enough."

"Printsessa, I want you to stay here with me until it's safe."

She gives me a look of appreciation, but I can tell something more is wrong.

"I don't want to impose on you. It's not right."

"I'm telling you to stay."

"Caspian, there was a girl here earlier, and I think she was, um..." Her voice trails off, and I know exactly what she's going to say and who it was that came to see me. It was Becky. "I don't think it's a good idea for me to hang around here."

"She was just someone..." The version of myself I was weeks ago would have told her Becky was a fuck buddy. Now I can't say shit, and I don't have to because she's not stupid. She knows.

“You don’t have to explain yourself to me. You have a life, and realistically, I have to get serious. Adrian called me earlier. The date for the wedding has been set.”

The wedding to a guy she shouldn’t be with.

“When is it?” As if it matters.

“Tenth of December. I marry Dorian on the tenth of December. And as bad as he is, I don’t want to feel like I’m cheating or something.”

“You aren’t together.”

“No, but we will be. And I’m not my father.”

“I know you aren’t.”

“I just think it’s best if I distance myself.”

Greed pulses through me, clouding my mind. It stops me from acting rationally. All I see when I look at her is my need for her, and selfishness takes over.

Her lips part to continue talking, but I kiss her and kiss away the words.

I move with her until she’s up against the wall and I pin her against it, her arms up like the night I first took her.

“I’m not letting you go,” I grate out, and panic sweeps over her face.

“You have to.”

“I don’t have to do shit. You’re my girl, and I told you no one else is having you. You’re mine.”

“Caspian, you sound crazy. You know what will happen.”

“I don’t fucking care. You. Are. Mine.” I release her wrists and throw a punch into the wall beside her.

I’ve never felt more suppressed in my life. In that moment I realize I feel that way because I’ve never wanted anything more in my life than her.

She belongs to me, so she belongs with me. I don’t want to be told otherwise.

She reaches up to touch my cheek and the gentleness in her caress makes me want her more.

I move to her lips and she comes to me too for a cruel devouring kiss neither of us can resist. It's hungry and greedy, selfish and all consuming.

We tear at each other's clothes until we're both naked. I lift her so she can wrap her legs around my waist then I plunge into her warm, welcoming body that feels like it was made for me.

I fuck her against the wall like I did that first time, but like I've lost my damn mind.

Then that's exactly what happens. I lose myself in her over and over again inside her all night and right through the early hours of the morning.

We fall asleep eventually drunk on each other, then as soon as we open our eyes we take each other again relentlessly.

Time slips away from me along with my awareness of my surroundings. All I hear, feel, see, taste and smell is her in my bed which we've barely left.

I have her there now, moaning as I fuck her into the mattress and the sound of our bodies slapping together fill the room.

Somewhere beyond the wild sexual haze that's consumed me I hear footsteps. They sound like they're on the steps leading up to my bedroom, then they get closer and closer.

I'm so busy pounding into Willow as she lays beneath me though that I can't stop. I don't want to.

It's her that squirms beneath me, her hands suddenly reaching for the pillow to cover herself.

"Caspian stop," she hisses, looking terrified as she stares at the bedroom door.

Someone clears their throat and I already know who it is before I look, so I'm at least prepared to see my father before I turn my head.

His face is red with fury, his hands are balled into tight fists at his sides and his nostrils flared like he's ready to breathe out infernal fire.

Fuck.

He caught us.

He's caught me.

What the hell am I supposed to do now.

"I will see you downstairs," he grates out and turns to walk away.

This isn't just the case of embarrassment at being caught by your father while you were having sex.

It's the case of me breaking my vows and my loyalty to him.

CHAPTER
FORTY-ONE

CASPIAN

“Oh my God,” Willow mutters, moving off the bed with the pillow in an attempt to cover herself.

She scrambles around looking for her clothes, but they’re downstairs. She’s not going to find anything of hers up here.

I rush into the wardrobe, pull on some pants then get her one of my larger sweatshirts which should be big enough to cover her to her thighs.

When I go back out she has the sheet wrapped around her body and she still has that terrified look on her face.

“I’m sorry,” I say because it’s all I can think of. Somewhere along the line this is my fault. “I never expected him to turn up. He never does this or comes by on weekends.”

I know I locked the doors but my father has a key to the apartment. My fault is I was so obsessed with having her I lost track of everything.

“I shouldn’t have been here,” she stutters.

“Fuck that. Put this on and wait for me.”

“Wait? Are you fucking crazy. That’s your father, not some ... person. You aren’t supposed to be with me.”

“Willow, I’m a man now. He can’t fucking tell me who I’m supposed to be with.” Yes he can and he did and I know I’m not making any sense because I can’t think straight.

“I have to go. Don’t keep him waiting.” She takes the sweatshirt from me and pulls it on.

I stare at her for a few moments knowing no matter what I say this is the end.

I reach for her but she backs away.

“Don’t. Don’t make it worse. Go to him.”

She practically flees from me. Moments later I hear the door close on the other entrance into the apartment.

Holding my breath I make my way downstairs where my father is waiting in the living room.

He's standing by the mantle with his finger pressed to a paperweight he gave me last Christmas.

He picks it up and launches it into the wall. It smashes on impact then he rushes at me and lands a fist straight in my face. I stand there and take it because I'm in the wrong, and I wouldn't fight him unless I have to. There's too much rage inside me and I always fear if it came to it and we did fight I wouldn't be able to hold back. Or maybe he wouldn't either and we'd kill each other.

He taught me to fight to kill. Right now he looks mad enough to kill me.

When he steps back I take note of the tattoos on the underside of his wrist and remember he's my beginning and end.

"You motherfucking piece of shit!" he bellows throwing another punch in my face making me spitting blood on impact. "I gave you one order—stay away from Willow Raventhorn—but you couldn't could you?"

"I'm sorry," I answer.

"Sorry, really boy. That's what you say to me your father and your leader?"

"What else am I supposed to say?" I shout back and hold up my hands. "What the fuck else do you want me to say? You knew how I felt about her. You always knew and that's why you issued the order in the first place."

"Her fucking father ruined every bit of trust I ever had in him. He took my wife. My wife!" He shouts like a feral animal and rushes up to me again. This time we go crashing into the wall. "I would have preferred to let me girl go, than for her to die. It's his fucking fault she's dead and I can't fix that. Your little girlfriend knew what was happening long before I did and she said nothing. I looked after that girl like my own and she spat on me when she decided to keep that secret. I don't

fucking care how old she was. She was old enough to know right from wrong.”

What he’s saying is everything I’ve already thought so I can’t say a Goddamn thing.

“If I was anybody else and laws of the Bratva and the Knights dictated anything other than it did, Timofey Raventhorn would have ruined me. How dare you fuck that little slut?”

That’s it, I see red. The same way I did when I fought with Dorian. My fist lies up in an upper cut and connects with his jaw. It does nothing though because of the angle I came at and he’s still holding me. All he got was a shake.

“She’s not a slut, she’s mine.” I balk.

He retaliates with another punch which leaves me dizzy. Before I can hit him again, he reaches for his gun and holds it under my chin.

My guns are upstairs, but would I hold a gun to him?

My father?

Have I lost my mind to obsession over Willow Raventhorn enough to hold a gun to my old man? And what would I do? Pull the trigger and kill him?

It’s different if he holds a gun to me. He’s allowed to because he’s the leader. If I did it, instant death would be the punishment.

But the punishment is not what I’m concerned with. In the seconds that pass by I wonder if I could really lose my mind and kill him, not caring he’s my father.

My flesh and blood.

The man I remember raining Armageddon when he found me in Russia. He’s the same man, but instead of holding a gun to the enemies who took his little boy and tortured him, he’s holding that gun at me.

“Stand down,” he grits out through bared teeth, pressing the cold steel barrel into my skin. “Stand the fuck down.”

I meet his eyes and take in the disappointment within them. Now I remember his words about never being able to fill Zak's shoes.

Zak would never disobey him, but I'd do it in a heartbeat.

He lowers the gun and steps away from me.

"I am ashamed of you," he seethes. "Blood flow thicker than all the waters on this earth and binds it. It binds you to the vows we take but you have no regard for things we hold sacred and no love for me if you could think to strike me for calling that girl a slut. She is whatever the fuck I say she is. I am ashamed to call you my son. Her father wanted to destroy me, but that meant nothing to you because you are a traitor to me. You are to stay away from that girl. I will deal with you later."

With that cold callous look in his eyes he walks away and I stare after him until he's gone and there's nothing left to see.

I spoke boldly when I told Willow I'm a man. Right now I feel like nothing.

I don't know what to do and I'm torn between loyalties.

It hasn't escaped me that my father didn't kill me just now. He left me to live, but dealing with me later could mean anything—strip me of being a Knight, kick me out of the Bratva, banish me from having anything to do with this school or the life I know, take away my legacy. Or kill me. There are worse things than death though and my father is the kind of vindictive bastard to think of all those things. He's just like me, or rather, I'm just like him.

He'll dole out the worse kind of punishment to teach me a lesson for defying him and it won't matter that I'm his heir.

He probably left to think about how he wishes to deal with me.

The real question is what am I going to do about it?

What am I going to do about Willow? She's in danger and counting on me to look into what happened to Lillian. I have that appointment with the sheriff later today.

I'm in trouble and once again I've been told to stay away from her, but everything inside me forbids me from backing down.

My heart tells me I have to keep that appointment, and I have to keep my promise to her too. I have to keep her safe.

Who knows what will happen to me tomorrow, so I can't sit here like some coward and do as I'm told. I have to strike now while I can, before my wings are clipped and I'm left powerless.

With that plan in mind I move and head to the only person I might be able to trust to help me.



LUCIAN ANSWERS his door on the second knock.

He doesn't have that pissed off look he normally has whenever we see each other. Wariness is in his eyes though.

"Hi, can I come in?" I say. I even sound different.

"Sure." He steps aside so he I can go into his apartment and when he closes the door he regards me with curiosity. "I haven't found anything important but there's a trail so I can see all the files Zak accessed. Has something more happened?"

"Yes."

Panic fills his face. "Is Willow okay?"

The question and his concern should irritate me but I'm in no position to have some pissing match I was never entitled to have.

"She's fine. I need a favor. Another one."

"What?"

"I need you to take care of Willow for me. Something's happened between my father and I and I might not be around. If that happens I need you to take care of her."

He stares back at me long and hard then looks me up and down in the same manner. I can tell he knows I defied his warning too and I didn't stay away from Willow.

"That's not something you have to ask me. I've been taking care of her for years, stopping monsters like you for taking advantage of her and hurting her more than she's already been hurt." Rage fills his eyes. "You're involved with her aren't you?"

"Yes." I want to say I was but I don't want to acknowledge anything that sounds like the end of whatever I had with Willow.

"You motherfucker."

"Sokolov, now's not the time to argue with me. I have one thing I have to do for her today and then I don't know what more I'll be able to do. I need to know you'll look after her and keep looking into those files."

"Yes, of course I will. But I got to ask, why are you asking me something so obvious?"

"You're the only person I trust to take care of her the way I would."

That calms him down. "You trust me?"

"You love her." I rip me apart to say that word to him. "Don't you?"

"Yes," he replies and the tear in my heart rips even more. "But not in the way you do. Like you always did."

I should feel relieved but I don't.

How can I when he knew I loved Willow before I did?

Ashamed I dip my head and when I look back at him he bites down hard on his back teeth.

"Look after her for me." I take one step to go then turn back to him. "Lucian, I'm sorry I threatened your mom. I think I was just jealous you still had yours and I didn't have mine."

His eyes widen but he doesn't say anything.

I leave before he can think of a response.

It's eight o'clock now. My meeting with the sheriff is at six-thirty. My original plan was to leave after lunch because it's a six hour journey to Bluff Island, but I think it's wise to head out to now.

Instead of taking my car I jump on my motorcycle and leave campus hoping this journey will be worth whatever sacrifice I'm about to make, especially if Lucian is right.

What if Lillian and Zak both die because of something Timofey Raventhorn did?

CHAPTER
FORTY-TWO

WILLOW

I OPEN THE DOOR AND LUCIAN WALKS IN CARRYING A BAG FROM MY FAVORITE PASTRY SHOP. I CAN ALREADY SMELL THE BLUEBERRY MUFFINS AND THE AROMA MAKES MY MOUTH WATER.

I t's the slightly peeved look on Lucian's face however that staves off my hunger and keeps me in check.

He's always bring me stuff but this feels like it's for a reason and I know him well enough to know when something isn't right.

"Hi," I croak. My skin is still on fire from hours ago.

I can't believe Aleksander Ivanov caught me in bed with his son. Me of all the people. the least little girl to do anything like that.

"Hi."

When he walks in, I close the door then follow him into the living room where he sets the bag on the coffee table and rolls up the sleeves to his t-shirt.

"You have coffee yet?"

"No, I haven't eaten anything. I just got back from..." My voice trails off and he gives me a look of scrutiny.

"Sit and wait," he says in a commanding voice I've never heard before. It's the sort of voice I would expect him to use when he's amongst his peers in training. It reminds me of how much we've all grown up.

I go over to the sofa and sit while he makes me coffee.

When he returns with it and hands it to me I take a few sips. Right now I feel like I need something stronger than coffee to face the day.

He lowers in the chair opposite me and rests his hands on his knees as he leans forward.

The only recent thing I've done that I haven't told him is get involved with Caspian. I think he knows.

"Do you have something you want to tell me, Red? Something about a guy we both know?"

I'm right.

"Yes." I set the cup down and stare back at him.

"Then do it, tell me."

I release a labored sigh. "I got involved with Caspian Ivanov."

"Did you sleep with him?"

"Yes."

"Were you careful?"

"Lucian." I narrow my eyes at him.

"No, don't fucking look at me like that. Answer the question, were you careful?"

"I'm on the pill," I answer feeling so awkward to have this conversation with him.

"That's not good enough."

"He said he was clean."

"Jesus Christ."

"Stop it, I don't want to talk about this."

"FUCK. Someone who cares about you has to talk to you about these things. Who else are you going to talk to if you don't have me? You think because I'm a guy it's going to stop me? Or because Eilish is all caught up in her feelings for me and acting weird with you that it's going to stop me from caring about you? Fuck no."

I've never seen him look more serious.

“Furthermore, Eilish isn’t here and judging from her carefree attitude about men I doubt she’d have this type of talk with you. That aside, she’s hardly speaking to you as it is so I’m not she’d speak to you ever again if she ever found out you were seeing our bully behind our backs.”

I glance down at the table, thinking how right he is.

“I’m sorry.”

“What parts are you sorry for?”

“I shouldn’t have gotten involved with him.”

“Willow,” he says my name in a much calmer voice.

I return my gaze to his and will my tears away.

“You can’t be sorry for getting involved with Caspian because it was a long time coming.” His brows furrow. “I was just waiting for it to happen. What I’m mad about is that you didn’t come to me. I’m mad you kept it from me and I had to find out from him.”

That gives me pause. “From him?” Oh God, Caspian wouldn’t speak to Lucian about us unless something bad happened between him and his father. “What did he say to you?”

“He came to my place looking like he’d been beaten up by the hulk and he asked me to take care of you.”

I sit forward then stand when I feel like a hand is strangling me from the inside.

“I have to go see him.”

“He’s gone. I don’t know where to but Thorne said he saw him leave on his motorcycle a little over an hour ago.”

He’s gone to Bluff Island, for me.

“What happened this morning Red? He said something happened between him and his father but I think it’s a little more than that for him to have asked me to look after you. It seemed like he thought he might not be around to do it himself. Tell me what happened.”

The time for secrets is over. I mustn't lie now. I shouldn't to him.

“His father caught us together. Weeks ago, I heard his father forbidding him to see me. He told him to stay away but Caspian didn't listen and neither did I.”

He releases a slow sigh and brings his hands together so his fingers lock.

“Fuck. I figured it might be something like that.”

I sink back to the chair. Under normal circumstances I'm sure all I'd be up against is a disappointed parent, but this isn't the case here.

“What's going to happen to him, Lucian?”

“Don't worry about him. Do where he might have gone?”

I know and the time of secrets might be over but I'm scared to tell anyone else about Lillian. Or in his case, let him know that I don't think she ran away.

I don't want to lie anymore and since I can't tell the truth I think of the only thing I can do.

“I know where he went. He went somewhere for me, but I can't tell you about it right now.”

He frowns. “Why not?”

“It's important I keep quiet about it. can you trust me to promise to tell you another time? Soon?” I hold his gaze. I can see he's reluctant to agree but he does.

He nods and keeps his gaze trained on me. “That soon better be soon. Red, I'm going to ask you to come and stay with me. Even if it's for a few nights. Viktor's going to be talking to Adrian and Elaine today about what happened to you so they might call you and they won't be happy if you're by yourself here. If we tell them you're staying with me at least they'll know you're safe. It's also going to be easier for me to look out for you if you're at my place. Can we do that?”

“Okay.”

“Great. Did you have anything planned for the day?”

“I have to go to the library later to finish off my English paper.” Homework has been the least of my worries over the last few days, but I don’t want to fall behind. “ I also wanted to go into town to buy Eilish a present.” I picked up my car yesterday from the body shop.

“Is the trip to town necessary, Red?”

“Yes. I’m sure she’ll hate me even more when she finds out I’m staying with you.”

“She doesn’t hate you, and we can’t worry about that now.” he stands. “eat then we’ll pack what you need and head over to mine. To be on the safe side I’ll take you to town then you can see her and go to the library after.”

“Okay.” I just wish I knew what was going to happen to Caspian.

CHAPTER
FORTY-THREE

CASPIAN

SHERIFF TANNER IS A TALL BURLY MAN THAT REMINDS ME A LITTLE OF THE DEPICTIONS I'VE SEEN OF PAUL BUNYAN. ALTHOUGH HE RETIRED FIVE YEARS AGO, EVERYONE IN THE STATION INCLUDING THE CURRENT SHERIFF CALLED THE SHERIFF. THEY DID IT WITH THE RESPECT TOO THAT YOU'D RESPECT FOR SOMEONE THEY'D REVERED AFTER YEARS OF SERVICE.

As I walk into his office he stands to shake my hand and I don't miss the way his gaze drops to the tattoos on my wrist and flicks up to the one on my neck.

I'm sure from my name he knows who I am or he wouldn't have agreed to see me. He seems to be knowledgeable in the meanings of the symbols on my wrist too.

"Boston's a long way from here, son," he states in a rich Tennessee accent, motioning for me to sit in the chair before his desk.

I do and he sits too.

"It was important I saw you face to face." Without the risk of having my calls recorded.

"That's okay, I understand completely." He looks me up and down. "It's been awhile since the breeze blew the Bratva or whatever it is you people are down these parts."

"Don't worry I just have some questions."

"About an unsolved case that never sat well with me. We spoke briefly on the phone, Mr. Ivanov. Now that we're face to face my question is why now? Did that girl turn up? Or something else?"

His tone already tells me he's skeptical about what we all believe about Lillian.

"There have been a few incidents that have encouraged us to go back to the past and look into what might have happened to Lillian Raventhorn."

"And what do you think happened to her?" He eyes me curiously.

"We think she ran away. Don't you?"

He regards me for a moment then lifts his chin. "What are these incidents?" he asks stepping around my question.

"They're regarding her sister."

"Willow," he mutters with a sigh. "What happened?"

"Someone's been leaving her threatening notes warning her to leave college. The last was about her sister's death."

His brows raise. "Her sister's death? Now sounds like someone out there is messing around with emotions, or they know what really happened to Lillian Raventhorn."

"Yes it does."

"I don't think you would have driven for six hours to see me if you believed what you were told, so I'm assuming it's okay to speak freely."

"You're right, so please do."

"Okay, here's what happened from my end. My deputy found Willow washed up on the bank of the river. He took her to the hospital and called me because she had cuts and scratches all over her face, arms and legs. We assumed she got them from the woods. Either running in the woods, or being chased. We have cliff divers around that area, but you wouldn't catch a young girl jumping off a cliff. Not saying she didn't or couldn't. We assumed she fell into the river or jumped, both not by choice."

He pauses for a moment and I recall what Willow told me.

"I was the first person to take her statement," he continues. "Everything she explained was conclusive to what she looked

like so I believed her. When it came time to investigate and we couldn't find evidence of what she was saying about her sister everything paused much to our dismay and to her godparents."

"What were they like?" I'm curious. I've always been curious.

"Elaine was hysterical and Adrian was always trying to console her. He searched everywhere with us and was right by our sides the whole time. They acted like those girls belonged to them. With nothing left to go on, there was nothing else anyone could do. Nothing legal I suppose."

"You sound like you believe there was something more."

"I guess the whole thing never sat well with me. I never believed Lillian ran away so I continued to investigate until I couldn't. I appreciate the story is Willow went through a lot because of her parent's death so she made up the story of her sister's death to help her cope, but in my gut I believed her. It saddened me she ended up in a mental home for standing by her word."

"So what do you think happened?" he must have some opinion.

"I think someone targeted the family," he replies. Instantly I wonder if maybe they were targeted for Timofey's sins whatever those were. "It could have been someone they knew, or someone else. I understand Willow's father was a powerful man. Maybe someone wanted something from him. I've been an police officer for fifty years and in my time I've seen things like this where people disappear. Criminals can make things look however they want it to look. I think you and I both know if those said criminals came from the Bratva, they could make people believe whatever they wanted them to believe, or keep something secret."

Secrets. There are a lot of those and they keep falling out of the closet.

This feels like another one, or a continuation of the same lies.

“You think someone might have killed her to keep something secret?”

“Mr. Ivanov, what I don’t believe is a young girl of a merely fifteen years old managing to escape the Bratva and your secret society.” His eyes rivet to mine. “She would have to be some kind a wonder and more, to be able to do that. So I’m surprised by anyone who still believes that. Someone somewhere is lying, and it wasn’t Willow. But how does one prove what they have no evidence of.”

I nod agreeing. “We can’t.”

He flicks his palms over. “I would take those notes very seriously if I were you. To my knowledge only a handful of people are supposed to know Willow believed her sister was shot. She said her sister believed they were in danger and that’s why she tried to get her away. I don’t think she stopped being in danger. What I don’t know is why now after so long. So perhaps something changed along the way, or something recent has happened.”

I think about it and I have no answers. “The only thing that’s changed is we started college.” The notes all warn her away from Raventhorn.

“Maybe it’s that, maybe it’s not. I don’t know. I wish I had more for you, but sadly I don’t.”

“Thank you for your time.” I might not have gotten much in the way of answers from him but he raised my suspicions. “I would appreciate if you told no one about this conversation with me.”

“You have my word, this conversation never happened until you say it did. I have nothing to hide, but I suppose you do.”

“It will keep her safe,” I state.

“She needs that.”

She does and I’ll try to be her white knight for as long as I can.

It’s time to head back and face my father.

CHAPTER 44

WILLOW

Eilish steps out of the salon and stops in her tracks when she sees me.

I was sitting on the wooden bench nearby waiting for her to come out.

Lucian found out she's be here so I came by to wait with the gift I have for her.

It's a little china doll similar to what she had when we first met, except the face isn't broken.

I saw it in the window of a little boutique in city the other day but the shop was closed. Although dolls like this creep me out as much as clowns I thought of her immediately.

I stand and make my way over to her. When her eyes zero in on the doll in my hands I notice the stir of emotion in her bright blue eyes.

I thank my lucky stars that she's at least not walking in the opposite direction, or trying to avoid me like I'm poison.

When I get up to her I stop, hold the doll up and little, feeling a little silly. We're eighteen now, too old for these things.

It was just that this was the first thing we bonded over in the past. At school a boy smashed her doll to pieces and threw it in the fish pond. When I next saw her I gave her one of mine. At ten years old, we were probably too old for dolls then too. Mine were more for show because my grandmother collected them, but Eilish was attached to hers.

It was when I gave her my doll that she first told me her name. that was the first day she spoke to anybody.

“I saw her in the shop in town. Of course I thought of you and the little doll you had when we were kids.” I hope the doll out to her and my heart warms when she takes it. “You weren’t speaking to me then either, I was hoping you’d give me the same chance you gave me that day to be your friend.”

Her eyes fill with tears. “I’m sorry I’ve been selfish,” she mutters.

“You haven’t been selfish.”

“I have.”

“We’re each going through our own problems but sometimes it’s good to make sure we take care of each other. I don’t feel like I took care of you, or somewhere along the line I wasn’t able to. I wasn’t capable, but you never stopped taking care of me. I don’t want to lose you. I can’t. You’re my best friend.”

“You haven’t lost me. I just ... I was going through a lot and I flipped out.”

“I understand.”

She lifts the dolls and smiles even though a tear runs down her cheek.

“My dolls name was Audrey, like Audrey Hepburn. She was given to me because I loved her movies and I used to watch them with my grandmother.”

As she speaks it feels we just met.

“I love Audrey Hepburn too.”

“I know. I observed that, but I couldn’t talk about it because it reminded me of my grandmother. She...” more tears stream down her cheeks and I reach out to take her hand. “She died that night too. She was killed. I had a ...mother and two sisters. I was the youngest.”

She dips her head and when she lifts it again I know she won’t say anymore. that’s the most she’s ever said and it

makes me wonder why her family died and how she survived. She didn't say anything about her father.

"I'm sorry for what happened to them." I give her hands a gentle squeeze.

"Thank you. there's more, but I can't talk about it. That might be enough except that I don't like being back in Boston, Willow. But I don't want my past to weigh me down. I want to be at this college and I want to move on but there are things holding me back that I can't face right now. maybe never."

"How about we do it together when you're ready?"

"I'd like that. What's happening with you? Are you safe?"

"Don't worry about me. I'll be okay. How about we talk tomorrow properly?"

"Okay, that would be nice. Gina is meeting me for dinner. She said she could tell something was wrong with me. I couldn't accuse of trying too hard be my mom when I don't need one. I figured, anyone who's willing to drive for three hours just to check on me and make I sure I eat is a mother to me whether we share the same blood or not."

I nod. "Yeah, she is." I squeeze her hand again and release her. "Go, have fun, your hair looks nice."

She looks like she just had a trim.

"Thanks, so does yours."

She gives me a quick hug, then we part.

I watch her until she goes up the steps to the parking lot and I make my way to the library. In my heart I pray she'll still be my friend when she finds out about Caspian and me. Like Lucian said though, that's the least of my worries.

I've been worried sick about Caspian all day. It's late now going on seven.

I called him earlier and sent a few messages but there was no answer. I guessed though that if he was on his motorcycle he wouldn't answer. I didn't even know he rode one, but it didn't surprise me. I just wish I could hear from him and I

wish none of this ever happened. Which I suppose means I wish I hadn't gotten involved.

Except I don't wish that. The thing I wish for is that things could be different.

When I get to the library Nina is there with Ilya and Oleg, her father and. She looks like she's packing up to go.

It's the first time I'm seeing them all together and the first I'm seeing Oleg since my meeting. He said nothing in that meeting and every time I've seen him he's been quiet.

He gives me a warm smile when he looks at me.

"Okay, you're officially worse than me," Nina says and we both laugh. "woman it's Sunday."

"You're here," I point out.

"I'm about to leave and you're just arriving."

"Leave her, her mother was the same," Oleg replies, speaking with a slight hint of a Russian accent. "Being astute is not a bad thing."

"Thank you, that's a high compliment."

"It should be your mother was a scholar."

"Alright I take it back," Nina replies and points to the carriage with the journals. "I trust you enough to come back here and borrow what you need. Just make sure you put it back neatly or the Gruffalo will have a fit if she sees anything out of place."

She calls her boss the Gruffalo because of her temperament, and looks. I saw her the other day and had to agree.

"*Nina*," Oleg chides while Ilya laughs.

"Yes, Father." Nina schools her face but rolls her eyes.

"I'll see you guys later. Have a good night."

"You too," Oleg replies while Ilya and Nina smile at me.

I find my usual spot in the abandoned section not that it matters. I'm the only one here on a Sunday evening.

I study for two hours and then leave to go to Lucian's apartment.

The last time I came to Iapetus House was that horrible night I caught Dorian having sex with Misha in the pantry. I haven't been back since.

Lucian brought my things over earlier when we got back from town. I have no idea what it's going to be like staying with him, but I'm grateful he cares enough to want to take care of me.

When I get to his door its ajar which is weird for him because he's always telling me off for not locking my doors properly.

He has a fit if I even leave my cupboard door open.

I walk in and something feels weird about the place.

It's too quiet, as if he's not around, and he was supposed to be here.

I can't imagine him leaving his apartment door unlocked.

"Lucian, where are you?" I call out. "I'm back."

I walk into the living room and stop short, icy tendrils of shock robbing me of breath and rooting me to the floor, when my gaze lands on Dorian on the floor by the window in a pool of blood.

His eyes are wide open, his lips blue, his skin pale, and there's a bullet wound in the middle of his head.

It takes me a moment for my brain to process what I'm seeing and I scream when I realize he's dead.

Cold terror grips me, but my body curls in on itself when I look to my left and find Lucian lying face down in a pool of his own blood,

"No!" I race over to him and tears pour from my eyes when I see two bullet holes in his back. "Lucian!"

I get down to the floor and check him for a pulse but I can't feel any.

He can't die. He can't be dead.

Not him.

Not him. No, God, Please.

Reaching for my phone I call 911.

CHAPTER 45

WILLOW

I feel like I'm walking around in some kind of daze where nothing feels real.

I feel wrong and so does everything else. As if I went through the wrong door and ended up in someone else's life.

That would be the only thing to explain how Lucian ended up being shot and has been in surgery for the last six hours.

The only thing I keep holding on to is that when the paramedics came they were able to resuscitate him. He didn't wake up though.

I've been sitting in the hospital waiting room since. Adrian and Elaine joined me an hour ago, right after Lucian's mother and Viktor arrived. Lucian's mother hasn't stopped crying. I'm just a fraction better than her.

I tried to call Eilish but her phone was off so I sent her a message. The only other person I messaged was Caspian.

I've had to be strong when I feel like fading away. things keep happening and all I'm left with is more questions, and guilt.

Why did it happen?

Dorian is dead and Lucian in a coma have life saving surgery.

What was Dorian doing in Lucian's apartment?

They don't talk at all. Dorian doesn't even live there. there was no reason for him to be anywhere near Lucian.

Clearly someone wanted both of them dead.

Who?

Why?

This can't be unrelated to what's happening to me. The connection between Lucian and Dorian is me.

Elaine gives my hand a gentle squeeze and puts an arm around me.

"He's strong sweetie," she mutters. "He's strong."

I'm crying so much I can barely see her but I manage a nod.

"Willow," Eilish's voice has me turning away from Elaine.

Eilish rushes into the room with both her parents behind her and I fly into her arms. We both break down holding each other.

"Has there been any news?" Eilish asks when we pull apart.

"No he's still in surgery."

"Oh my God." She covers her mouth and cries harder.

Gina comes closer and puts an arm around Eilish. Al does the same.

At that moment I catch sight of Caspian walking down the corridor and I run to him.

Adrenaline pulses through me pushing me forward right into his arms.

He speeds up when he sees me and scoops me into his arms when we meet.

I'm sure to everyone else looking on we look weird, but I don't care.

He's the only person who can comfort me right now.

I feel awful for thinking that when there are so many here, but he's the only person I want to hold me and tell me things will be okay.

He keeps me close to his heart for a few moments of respite I savor then we moves away and cups my face.

Caspian's about to say something when his name is called by a tall, muscular man behind us.

He's a police officer. Two more officers come up, both showing their guns.

"Caspian Ivanov?" the first officer says.

"Yes," Caspian says.

"You're under arrest for suspicion of the murder of Dorian Belkov and the attempted murder of Lucian Sokolov."

The sob in my throat is impaled by shock.

"I didn't do this," Caspian says.

"You have the right to remain silent."

"I have a fucking right to tell you the truth."

"He didn't do anything," I find my voice.

"I didn't."

"Mr. Ivanov, we can do this the hard way if you like," the officer says. "It's going to be easier for you when dealing with your father if you don't do it that way."

Dread fills me at the mention of his father. I see the same dread on Caspian's face.

"He didn't do anything," I speak up.

"Willow stop." Caspian silences me and holds out his wrists for the officers to place the handcuffs on. "Go on take me to my father."

I watch everything play out the same way the others do. Except I feel like I'm floating around again in an alternate universe and I'm forced to watch and wait.

The lump in my throat thickens and the constriction around my lungs cascades down to my feet in same gamut of doom.

The swirl of chaos tells me only disaster can follow next.

CHAPTER 46

CASPIAN

The cops kept the handcuffs around my wrists. So I look like the fucking criminal they suspect me to be and what I know I must seem like.

I quite literally have my back against the wall of the small jail cell at the police station.

While I've been waiting for my father to grace me with his presence, I've been staring at the murky gray ceiling, running through the events of my life like a prisoner on death row.

When something like this happens to a Knight it's my father who's called, not your lawyer, or whoever you want to represent you. And you don't get your one phone call either.

Mine wouldn't have been him. I'd call Thorne.

My father is the last person on earth I would ask for help and after the fight we had I might as well write myself off.

Yes, I have an alibi for where I was but the moment I say anything my promise to Willow will be broken. I've been in this cell for the last hour thinking of everything I could use to excuse my guilt. Everything that would keep that promise safe.

I was told what happened to Lucian and Dorian and I'm sure the same fucking questions on my mind are on everyone else's. Except I suspect I have a little more context to guide my suspicions on why Dorian was in Lucian's apartment.

I've never seen them speaking together. So the only conclusion I can form is this: Lucian was looking into

Timofey's files, maybe Dorian found out about that and was trying to stop him or find out what he knew.

I don't fucking know what happened but I have a feeling it has something to do with those files.

But why is he dead? Who killed him and tried to kill Lucian?

They couldn't have tried to kill each other because no guns were found at the crime scene. The cops at least told me that.

I feel like I'm stuck trying to put the pieces of a puzzle together and just when I think something fits I find out it doesn't. Or it does in some ways but not others.

I guess it doesn't matter now because I look guilty and I'm here because I'm the only person anyone knows who wanted Dorian dead.

The penalty if I'm found guilty is death and I won't be tried in a court of law. I will be executed by the Knights under the old methods of punishment.

So either they'll hang me or chop my head off with Raventhorn's sword.

I'm not afraid of death, but that doesn't mean I want to die.

Not when I just started living.

Every time Willow Raventhorn kissed me I felt alive. It didn't matter what she did to me in the past, when her lips touched mine something inside me healed and I wasn't broken.

Footsteps echo on the concrete floor outside my cell and I know from the sound who they belong to. Unlike yesterday morning, I'm aware now.

My father's stony face appears through the bars of the cells and the guard accompanying him opens the door for him to come inside.

My judge, jury, and executioner waltzes in and I gear myself up for a repeat of our fight. Unlike yesterday when he

looked a little more on the casual side, he's wearing a dress shirt and black slacks now.

Father pulls out the metal chair by the hole you're supposed to shit and piss in and sits before me with a poison-tipped glare on his face.

Fury is entrenched in his eyes along with something that looks like regret. It throws me off because I would have thought he'd find my situation more pleasing because he now has a reason to kill me.

I failed to show him I could fill my brother's shoes and I've given him cause to end my wretched existence.

"I didn't do anything," I say first. I want to stake my claim to innocence before he has the chance to throw guilt my way. "I didn't kill Dorian and I didn't hurt Lucian."

"Security has you listed as leaving campus at eight fifteen yesterday morning. Where did you go?"

Time to get creative. "After our fight, I needed air."

"Air?" His nostrils flare.

"Yes."

"You were getting *air* for the whole day?"

"I was out riding around on my bike." I keep my tone and stare level, but inside my head's a mess. I can't think of anything to say to him that will make more sense and keep my visit to Sheriff Tanner secret.

"Where exactly did you go to get this air, Caspian?" His eyes bore into me. "Dorian's time of death was around nine-thirty last night. If you left campus in the early hours of the morning that's plenty of time to get back and kill him."

"There's no record of me going back on campus," I point out.

"Don't bullshit me." His brows shoot up. "You and I both know there are ways to get on campus without it being recorded. There are secret passages we all use as Knights. So

if you're not fucking guilty you need to tell me where the fuck you were."

"I'm not guilty."

He growls and straightens up. "Caspian, the other week a room full of fucking people watched you batter Dorian Belkov into the ground and nearly kill him. You would have ran your blade through his heart. The same fucking group of people heard you threaten to kill him. Now he's dead."

"But I didn't kill him," I grate out.

"When I asked you about the incident, you yourself said to me you'd do the same thing again if he challenged you. Now he's *dead*."

"Father, I did not kill him."

His mouth pinches, tightening at the corners, then he bears his teeth. "There's a witness who can place you outside Dorian's apartment on Saturday. He said you looked like you were there for trouble. And now Dorian is *dead*."

"You know I always look like that. I did not kill him."

"You have a long standing hateful relationship with Lucian Sokolov. He's out of surgery now, but he's in a coma. If he dies that's on your head too."

"I didn't do anything."

A scathing glare fueled with uncaged turbulence washes over his face and suddenly he's on his feet. One hard growl rips from his chest as he goes for my throat. In one swift movement, he hoists me up then rams me into the wall.

I try to get him off me but with my wrists bound I can't do shit. If he were someone else, and the situation was different I would kick the shit out of him but I tamp down my rage and try to continue to play it safe.

"They'll want me to kill you!" he shouts in my face and that tempestuous look in his eyes intensifies. The blood drains from his skin as it ripples with anger. "The Knights will want me to *kill* my son, *my* little boy. And as my punishment for

what you seem to have done I would have to do it to make an example out of you.”

As I take in his words and observe the distress in his demeanor, it occurs to me with a glaring start that he doesn't want me dead.

He doesn't want to kill me.

Like yesterday I see the man he was when he rescued me when I was a child, and the way he looked when he retrieved my frail broken body from the bottom of that well where those devils starved me for days after they'd battered me. In Russia I went through things no eight year old should have and I remember through the darkness in my mind I suddenly felt the hope I hung on to when I was taken. When I pretended to be Thorne, in my heart I knew my father would never stop looking for me.

I never knew in the years to follow he'd destroy that belief I had in him, and that love. I witness traces of that man now and again I'm torn on what to do.

“Under the laws of the Knights you know death is the penalty for killing another without cause. I might have pardoned you for defying me with *that girl* and found some other way to deal with you, but death is the answer if you're guilty for Dorian's death. Unless you have a better alibi than getting air.”

If I tell him where I was, it's not going to be hard to figure out why I went there.

From that he'll know, even with the notes Willow is getting, that she still believes her sister was shot at Bluff Island. That last note only said Lillian died for the sins of her father. It left it open to assume she could have died at any point over the last six years, and anywhere.

Visiting Bluff Island is more specific and I would only have gone there if I was sent or directed there.

I can't betray Willow like that. Not when she trusted me with the thing that would destroy her.

I think of my girl running through the meadow with her beautiful hair and bright blue eyes staring back at me.

It wasn't just obsession I felt all these years. It was love and I remember her like that because she was free. That's how she looks when she's happy and free.

If people know she lied about what she believed happened to Lillian she will never have her freedom. My father won't hesitate to lock her back in the mental institution to get her out of Raventhorn, the magazine, and our lives. Then he'll find some way to take everything.

"Do you have a better alibi?" he grates out.

"I went out for fresh air," I state, feeling my stomach tighten with bile as his face hardens once more and he becomes the devil again.

"So you choose death, son?"

"Father I didn't kill anybody."

The muscles twitch under his eyes making his gaze more flinty. "Okay, Caspian, maybe it's time for a harder truth. Because Dorian is dead, the marriage pact is severed, leaving Willow Raventhorn's future in my hands. *Mine*. As her Pakhan it is left to me to sort out what happens with the Raventhorn fortune, Dynamic Corp, and of course her. As it stands now, she needs to be married."

When he ambushes me with a mirthless grin, goosebumps prickle my flesh, erupting at the back of my neck then crawling down my shoulders and arms.

"What are you going to do to her?"

"Marry her," he answers and my heart smashes into my chest. "I'm going to marry her, and believe me when I fuck her it will be nothing like what I saw you doing to her. Every time I fuck her I'll destroy her a little bit more for what she took from me. That scar on her wrist will be the beginning. When I'm done with that little bitch she'll slit her own throat, or beg me to do it. I will destroy her, and if she's still alive when I'm done, I'll make her my whore and sell her body."

Fuck! Fucking fuck.

All the words jumble in my mind and I feel like I'm up against the infernal flames of hell. I assumed he'd find someone else for Willow to marry, but I never thought he would do it.

Him.

My father won't hesitate to make good on his word. Every single word he just said, he'll do.

I know him.

"You bastard." My eyes slam into his, shooting him a fierce look. "How could you do that to me!"

"Pathetic. You are so fucking pathetic."

"You can't marry my girl," I bellow, my voice shaking in a way I've never heard.

"Then find a better fucking alibi, Caspian. Find one, and I will allow *you* to marry her." His pupils dilate. Within them I see a deadly combination of desperation to keep me alive and the dark vengeance he always expresses when we talk about Willow.

"Caspian, I can see in your eyes you have something better to tell me than you were out for air. So give me a better fucking alibi. If you don't, you will die and I *will* take Willow Raventhorn for my wife."

She'll die if I die.

My monster of a father will exact vengeance on her for my mother's death and what her father did to us.

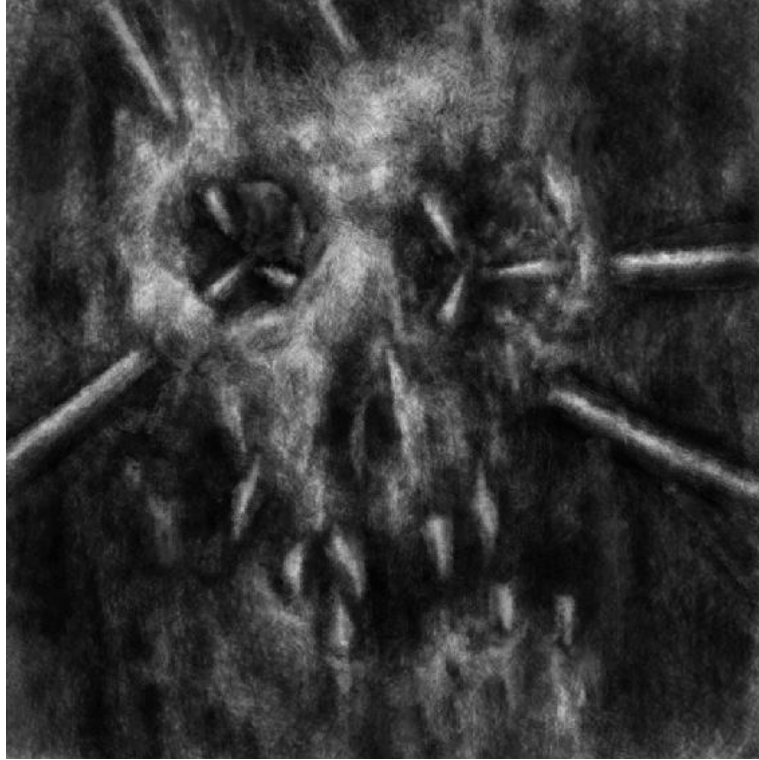
I can't let that happen to her, better she belongs to the monster she knows than the beast who will rip her to shreds and crush her into powder.

"What's it going to be, boy?" he demands.

Betrayal ravages my heart, leaving it desolate in the lonely cavity of my ribs.

“I’ll tell you where I went, but I need to make a phone call.”

I have to call Sheriff Tanner and use the evidence of my meeting with him to destroy the girl I love.



CHAPTER 47

WILLOW

I t's Tuesday afternoon.

I'm sitting in the waiting room in Raventhorn Hall dressed in a black robe that looks like something Maid Marianne would wear. Elaine is next to me dressed in the same type of robes. This is what the women in the Knights wear to ceremonial halls.

We're waiting to be called into the meeting room. Adrian is already inside. I'm not sure who else will be joining us.

I've been with Elaine and Adrian since I left the hospital yesterday. They booked a hotel room near campus. We were summoned here last night by Caspian's father.

I've never been here before and I never expected I would. Only the married women attend certain ceremonies with their husbands, and those like me attend in exceptional circumstances. Like the meeting that will be taking place in ten minutes.

Because of Dorian's death, and the way he died, the reason we're here is to discuss the future of the Raventhorn fortune and my inheritance. When a Knight dies and he was about to get married, a new promise must be made. It's conducted by the senior Knight and sealed in his blood.

I understand this has to happen but I don't want to talk about my future or my inheritance right now when Lucian is still in a coma and I haven't seen Caspian since the day before last.

I certainly don't want to talk about any of those things with Caspian's father when the last time he saw me was in bed with his son pounding into me.

I don't know what is happening with Caspian and no one has said anything to me. I know they still think he killed Dorian and shot Lucian.

I would have thought the same if I hadn't gotten to know him over the last few weeks, and if I didn't know where he was yesterday.

I don't know if he told them where he went and it still wasn't enough to save him because he never told me what time he was seeing Sheriff Tanner.

I don't know what time he got back to Boston. It was just around seven-thirty in the morning when his father walked in on us.

I worried about what people would think in regards to me if they knew Caspian went to Bluff Island but I pushed those worries aside.

He promised me he wouldn't share my secrets and I trust him. Besides, being at Bluff Island doesn't mean he has to tell anyone *why* he was there. All he has to do is show that he wasn't anywhere near Dorian or Lucian—if he can. Maybe he has a receipt or something from a coffeeshop. I pray he has something, anything.

I couldn't live with myself if he died. I might not know all the secret ways of the Knights but I know what can garner you the death penalty.

Elaine covers my hand with hers and taps my wrist.

"Breathe," she mutters.

I look at her and nod. "I'm trying."

"How about we go see Lucian after this? I think Eilish and her parents are going to be there later."

"Yes I'd like that."

No one said anything to me about the way I greeted Caspian. It was obvious we weren't enemies anymore. I caught Eilish looking at me with understanding and compassion when he was taken away. Then when we got to see Lucian after his surgery she held my hand.

I want to believe she doesn't hate me for being with Caspian, but I don't know.

"Elaine, I'm nervous about being here. Have they given you any details?"

She looks away from me and stares ahead.

I tried to ask earlier at the hotel but Adrian was there. She always gets cautious to tell me certain things when he's around. That's perfectly understandable because I know she sometimes tells me things she shouldn't.

She swivels her gaze back to me with sadness in her eyes, and strokes my hair the way she did when I was little. "I know things but I can't tell you, my love."

I guessed they were going to choose another husband for me because that would make sense. I didn't ask about that, however, because I've been afraid. It's strange how I wished for nothing more than to get out of that marriage pact with Dorian. I never imagined it would happen like this.

Who are they going to give me to now?

"Is it bad?" I manage in a choke voice.

She attempts a smile but fails. "Just wait and see..." Her voice trails off and she releases my hand as a tear runs down her cheek. She's usually a pillar of strength, so seeing her like this throws me. "Shit I'm sorry. It's just that it's not the first time I've wanted to put you in my car and drive the fuck away from all of this shit. Broken promises, rules and regulations, restrictions. I just wanted a normal life for you."

She dabs at her eyes when the doors open and gathers her composure.

A man comes out dressed in the traditional Knight's tunic and walks up to us. I've never seen him before but because I

see some resemblance to Misha I guess this her father.

Instantly, I realize this meeting is going to be much different to the first one I had at Dynamic Tech.

“We’re ready for you,” he says.

“Thank you,” Elaine replies, helping me to stand.

She gives me a reassuring nod but I’m stuck on the words she spoke moments ago. I’ve never seen her react like that before, but maybe it’s because everything that’s happened has made her crack.

If she did open the doors to her car I’d jump right in and drive away with her.

We follow Misha’s father into the hall he came out of. As we enter through the doors my breath is stolen away by the beauty of the place. The woodwork and intricate design along the walls remind me of where the elves lived in the Lord of The Rings, somewhere like Rivendell.

The moment of is gone however when we go through another set of wooden doors into the meeting room and my gaze lands on all the Knights dressed in their traditional wear sitting around a long black table.

My eyes lock with Caspian’s father standing at the head dressed like the black knight from hell. Behind him is another statue of Raventhorn, but this one is holding his actual sword spread across both hands.

I’m so engrossed with looking at Caspian’s father that I don’t see Caspian in the seat to him until moments later.

For an instant my heart swells when I look into his green gaze. In his Knights’ tunic he looks so different, so handsome, and foreboding.

The expression on his face is just as ominous and tells me I shouldn’t rejoice to see him yet.

“Please sit,” Aleks Ivanov says in that demeaning voice I remember from the other morning when he told Caspian he’d see him downstairs.

Elaine and I are ushered to two seats beside Adrian.

I fold my hands in my lap when I sit, but when Elaine does, Adrian puts out his hand to take hers into his. I don't know this but I get the feeling that was some requisite he had to do, even though I've seen them holding hands many times.

Across from Adrian is Peter, who looks a mess with grief over for his son riddled in his expression. He doesn't look at me at all.

“Welcome to the hall of Knights. We are gathered here today to discuss important things that pertain to your future,” Aleks begins like he's about to deliver a sermon. I suppose that might be a good way to describe what he's about to do. “Before I go on, I must acknowledge my sadness in knowing that Dorian Belkov has been murdered, and Lucian Sokolov, in a critical condition in hospital.”

My gaze flits across to Viktor, Lucian's stepfather, who acknowledges me with a brief glance. The agony in his eyes makes me worry even more about Lucian.

“Rest assured the person responsible will be dealt with and I will kill them and anyone else who assisted myself. You have my word as your leader that their blood will be spilled with my blade,” Aleks continues. “With that said I must also acknowledge that hard evidence has been brought to light which clears my son of all suspicion in relation to these incidents.”

On hearing that I stare at Caspian expecting his face to look less tense but it doesn't. He looks worse.

How could he look worse if there's hard evidence to excuse his guilt?

“Now that those matters have been raised and clarified before this council, we need to discuss business.” Aleks straightens. “With regards to the matter of the Raventhorn legacy, Willow Raventhorn must now be promised to another. As your leader, I have selected my son.”

My flesh comes alive with heat. It starts at the top of my head then races the length of my body.

I'm marrying Caspian?

Wait, his father would never want that. What's happening here?

“Willow will marry my son two weeks from today. I have chosen to conduct this union as soon as possible to get formalities out of the way. This is so we can get on with our lives that have been practically on hold since Timofey Raventhorn's death. With that aside there is another matter to discuss.”

Aleks pauses and glances from Caspian to me. At that moment I know that doom I felt yesterday is about to take fruition.

“In the evidence used to excuse my son's guilt from the incidents that took place on Sunday, a rather disturbing matter also presented itself in relation to Willow. We are aware that she was committed to St. Claire's Mental Institution following the disappearance of her sister. We are also aware that she appeared to be better and she was released with the hope of resuming a normal life. But that is not the case. It appears she lied about her mental state.”

“Oh my God,” I whisper.

I know what's happening. I know what's going on here.

He knows the truth. the worse person to know my secret knows the truth and only one person could have told him.

I look away from his callous eyes to Caspian. He's looking at me now with that expressionless stare I always saw after his mother's death.

He told his father my secret. What will happen now?

“This matter is being discussed because she is heir to a legacy that binds all of us and I take matters of personal freedom very seriously.” As he continues to talk my mind wants to check out because I don't want to hear what he has in store for me. “In the same breath, it is my job to ensure every member of our society, especially the only heir to Raventhorn, is taken care of with utmost care. As such and with immediate effect I will now hold legal guardianship over Willow

Raventhorn, until such time I see fit to make arrangements to release her.”

I shoot up out of my chair and shake my head furiously. “No, no, you can’t do that to me!” I cry.

“Yes I can. It is for your benefit.”

“*Benefit?* What benefit?” My God, before the extension of the guardianship was only a year. Now this sounds indefinite. Knowing him it will be.

“My dear, you are not well and not fit to take care of yourself, let alone all the assets your father left you. I will make sure you are cared for.”

I glance around the room wondering if anyone else can see his insincerity, but no one would dare defy him.

No one at all.

Definitely not his son.

“This isn’t right.”

“Everything I’m saying is right. It is clear that if you lied to get yourself out of the mental institution, you are not as stable as we thought. So when you turn nineteen and your inheritance is released and the ownership to Dynamic Corp transferred, I will manage the running of all those things. I will also make sure your psychiatric health is revised so if we need to put you back in hospital, you’ll get the care you need.”

What a bastard. This is my punishment. My penance.

This is his revenge for my secret.

“Fuck you,” I shout, not caring who or what he is. “You fucking asshole, your punishing me for something that wasn’t my fault. I will not go back to that place.”

I glare back at his amused, unfazed face then I run.

I rush out of the room and out to the hall.

Before I reach the door leading outside, strong arms secure around my middle and hoist me into the air.

“Willow,” Caspian says crushing his mouth to my ear.

I knew it was him even before he spoke. I always know when it's him.

"Let go of me. You broke my trust."

"I had to."

"I hate you. I fucking hate you."

He grasp loosens and I slip from the clutches of his arms. Whirling around I face him, meeting the hard gaze he gives me.

"You said you would destroy me and you did. Like a fool I served you my secret on a platter."

"Willow, he was going to kill me and marry you."

My eyes widen and my heart races.

"My father was going to marry you and do you know what would have happened if he had."

I'd die. I know I would.

"I couldn't let him do that to you. My only alibi was the meeting with the sheriff. They had me on camera at the police station at Bluff Island. The moment I told my father where I was he figured it out."

"And you filled in the blanks," I admonish.

"It wasn't like that. I swear to you. This way I at least get to make sure you're safe."

"Really? You think I'm safe. Your father owns me. I will be in a cage from now on."

"You're mine, I will not let him hurt you." He reaches for me but I slap his hands away.

"Get away from me. I'm not yours. I never was."

"Like fuck, you're mine." He grabs my arm hard, wrenching me toward him but I slap him across his face.

"I don't want to be with you." I scream.

The world dims around the edges and my heart aches. My trust is shattered and so is my life.

I don't care what the reasoning is. Truth is truth and whether I like it or not, I'm a prisoner now to the Ivanovs.

Caspian bares his teeth and releases my arm.

"Then go, run. But guess what? I will always find you, Malyshka."

I turn and run, ignoring the fear in my heart telling me he's going to make good on his word and when he does, we're not going to be the couple we were days ago.

We'll be enemies again, but worse.

CHAPTER 48

WILLOW

I went back to my apartment and got rid of that stupid cape.

I changed out of the dress I wore underneath and put on some normal clothes. Then I packed a bag with some clothes, grabbed some cash from the little piggy bank on the dresser and head out to my car.

I need to get away for a while. I won't go far because I want to be able to see Lucian, but I need to get away from this place and everyone.

Maybe I'll stay at one of the hotels near the hospital.

I jump in my car and drive into the city. I haven't been out since that dreadful night.

It will be dark in a few hours so I need to come up with a plan fast. To do so I need to be a little calmer. When I park by the river, I go to the Starbucks at the end of the road. It's the furthest in town and where I always go because it's less busy than the one's closer to the library.

I get the biggest mocha they can make and sit in the back booth where no one can see me.

Sipping on my drink, I try to tamp down the urge to cry and scream so I can think about what I'm going to do, and what will happen to me.

Elaine knew what was about to happen, that's why she didn't tell me. That was why she said what she said. Now I wish more than anything I could escape.

I can't though. I wouldn't get far.

Apparently, after Lillian *disappeared* security was tightened and we all might as well had trackers placed in our bodies. That's how I know I wouldn't get far.

I'm also sure Aleks Ivanov has eyes everywhere.

He was going to marry me. Jesus. What a mess.

I gulp down the rest drink even though it burns my throat.

What am I really going to do?

The question hits the walls of my brain and the tears I've been holding back run down my cheeks.

They come hard and fast and that's where I stay for what feels like hours with my head down, crying.

Night falls and the Barista comes over to me with a tentative expression on his face.

Reaching for a napkin to dry my tears, I right myself when he reaches me and offer a little smile. I must look so pathetic sitting here crying.

He crouches down and places his hands on the table.

"Hi, Miss Raventhorn," he says and the moment I hear my name, which he shouldn't know, I know he was sent to find me, and who sent him.

I'm being watched.

"Yes," I reply stiffly, glancing over his arms. They're bare with no tattoos, but I guess that doesn't stop him from working with the Knights.

"I'm sorry. I've been told to tell you, you need to go back to campus now."

"God." This is such shit. I bite down hard on my back teeth. "Anything else?" my voice drips with sarcasm.

"Mr. Ivanov said he'll catch up with you later at your apartment, but you need to go now."

"Which Mr. Ivanov gave the order?"

"Caspian Ivanov."

Shit. He found me just like he said he would.

“And if I don’t go?”

“Miss Raventhorn I think you should follow your orders. I’ve seen this sort of thing happen before and it’s not pretty. Please just go.”

This guy is just doing whatever job he’s been told to do. It’s not fair to get mad at him.

I grab my bag and leave. As I get in my car and drive back to campus I feel like I’m on autopilot, simply going through the motions like a puppet attached to strings.

This is what my life will be like from now on—following Caspian’s orders and being owned by his father.

When I get to my apartment a shiver rushes over me when a strange sensation pricks at my nerves.

Nothing looks out of the ordinary when I walk through the door and lock it. It’s just a feeling I have. As if something is wrong.

I switch on the light in the living room and when I see a tall masked man step out of the kitchen I scream now knowing what’s wrong. I’m not alone.

I try to go back to the door but he chases me. Screaming, I run to the sliding door leading out to the terrace. It’s the only place I can see to escape.

I yank the bolt open and jump out into the night with the guy behind, bounding toward me. This is the second time in my life that I’ve been chased with the threat of danger hanging over my head.

Pushing forward with everything I have in me I run to the bridge. It’s so dark I can barely see ahead. The lamppost at the other end of the bridge and the moon are my only lights.

When the footsteps quiet behind me I look back to see where my assailant is and that’s when I crash into a hard chest. Arms grab me and I look up into the masked face of another man with a hood.

My God, there was two of them.

My throat works but the constriction in my lungs is so tight my screams are swallowed.

I take a quick breath of terror and he stabs me in my neck with something sharp. It's not a knife, but whatever it is makes my mind spin at a rapid pace then everything turns to darkness.

Then I feel like I'm falling.

CHAPTER 49

CASPIAN

I gaze up at Willow's apartment and toss the cigarette.

I know we're going to argue and it will be bad but I have to make her see why I did what I did. It was because I did what I had to do.

She's right though. My father owns her. Not me.

That motherfucker held on to her rights because of the company. That's why.

He saw a opening to take what was once taken from him and he seized it.

I'll never forget the maddening smile that lit of his face as I told my tale and betrayed Willow with every word that left my mouth.

I reach the side of her apartment and glance at the bridge where I see the vague outline of two people. One is a hooded figure. The other is a woman.

I stop my stride to watch them for a few seconds but when she goes limp in his arms like a ragdoll instinct moves me.

I start running when the figure steps into the moonlight and I catch a flash of red hair on the woman's head.

Oh my God, it's Willow!

I torpedo down the path at a burst of speed as blood pounds through my veins.

Everything inside me shatters and what's left of my soul dies when the hooded figure releases Willow and throws her

over the side of the bridge.

Then she's falling.

TO BE CONTINUED...

