

DARK VOW

A DARK NEW ADULT ROMANCE



BB HAMEL

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TRIGGER WARNING

This book contains graphic descriptions of sexual content, explicit violence, and past trauma. These scenes were written to create a more vivid, in-depth experience, but may be triggering for some readers.

Read at your own risk.

DEAR ROBYN

When I think about you, it hurts.

I like the pain.

Sometimes, I picture you bent over my bed with my pillow between your teeth while I spank your ass raw. Do you want that? Does it scare you how much the idea excites you?

It wouldn't be all agony. There'd be pleasure. More pleasure than you've ever tasted in your life.

Do you deserve better? Do you crave more? I can give it to you.

I've been watching you, Robyn. My best friend's little cousin. Shy, smart, beautiful.

Jarrold warned me to keep my distance, and for a long time, I listened. I care about him more than the others do. They don't realize how deep the darkness can go.

I've kept to myself. I've watched you blossom and bloom.

Now I want to ruin you.

There's no in-between, not in my world. With me, it's all, or it's nothing.

With you, it's everything.

Here's what I mean:

I need a wife, and you're the only woman I'd ever dream of marrying.
The stakes are high, too high for me to worry about what you want.
I've known you long enough to realize you'll never make the first move.
Jarrod might kill me for these letters.
I'm not sure I care.

Do you dream at night? Do you close your eyes and feel my lips on your throat?

I'm coming for you. I can't wait.

Love,

C

ROBYN

Ever since I was a little girl, winter was my favorite season. Skeletal trees. Ice on the windowpanes. The feeling of peeling off layers only to take a steamy hot shower. Something about the world going gray, dying off, disappearing. I had a morbid sense of beauty.

A crisp winter wind blew down off the treetops, and Cora pulled her jacket tighter. The fuzzy fake fur hood billowed like long grass, and she moved up close against my side. “Oh my god, I hate how cold it gets around here.”

“Aren’t you used to it by now?” I nudged her with my shoulder, grinning. I liked the cold. I liked the biting wind on my cheeks.

“I thought I was, at least until I started living with Jarrod.” Cora made a face. She’d been shackled up with my cousin for the last year. Their trailer was small and cozy, but not exactly warm. “Our place is like a big leaky tent. I swear, I can feel the freezing wind blow across our bed at night.”

“You probably can. When was the last time he did any work on that place?”

“He’s been trying to get things sorted recently, but you know how it is. Football season sucked up all his time. I swear, I felt like he was deployed overseas or something.” She rolled her eyes, grinning. “I’m happy it’s over.”

“I’m happy you’re happy.”

We wandered through the gaggles of other students, trudging over piles of snow. Winter break had seen a few inches drop a few days after Christmas.

It had been the most horrible holiday season of my life. My mother spent it in a depressed funk while my father spent it in prison. He'd wanted everyone to visit, but I'd refused. It was hard to go sit around a dingy visiting area surrounded by strangers just to spend time with a murderer.

Only Mom had made the trip, although I didn't know why. She couldn't possibly have thought Dad was worth the effort, not after having watched him abuse me and Jarrod for years and years.

Her slavish devotion to him made my skin boil. I spent more time with Cora and Jarrod than I did with her, which only made me feel even more guilty. She'd lost her husband, and the whole town was gossiping about how she was still married to an incarcerated killer. Her life was total hell, and she needed my support now more than ever.

I couldn't find it in my heart to give it to her, not when she kept speaking to that bastard.

"It's good to be back on campus at least," I said quietly as we made our way toward the lecture halls.

Blackwoods College was a dream. It was an oasis south of Philadelphia, the ideal of the northern liberal arts college complete with ivy-covered brick buildings, Gothic architecture, several haunted house stories, insanely competitive student societies, and long, meandering paths through pristine, manicured lawns, trees, and shrubs. There was at least one hidden fountain, which the students lovingly called "the toking fountain" on account of the perpetual haze of weed smoke and the ever-present hemp ponchos and hacky sacks and drum circles. I stayed away from the toking fountain.

But when I was at Blackwoods, I could forget about my life for a while. I didn't think about my mom sitting in front of the TV crying late into the night, or zoned-out and half-conscious and high on whatever pills her doctors prescribed, or the memories of my father beating me and Jarrod senseless. I didn't have to look at the scars, or think about hiding the bruises, or do anything but go to class, hang out with Cora, and try to be happy.

"Have you seen him yet?" Cora looked at me sideways, a sparkle in her eye.

I knew who she meant. The one person I wished didn't exist.

“Not yet.”

I didn't want to say his name. I was afraid it might summon him, like Voldemort but much hotter. Though, to be honest, I had a thing for the snake-face version in the movies. Something about that weird nose and the way he held his wand sent tingles down into my nether region. I chose not to look too closely at that.

“You're going to, though, right? I mean, that was an insane offer. Do you think he was serious?”

“Jarrod said he probably was.”

“Yeah, but Jarrod doesn't know everything.” Cora sighed and clung to my arm. “He does know a lot, though, especially about human anatomy.”

“Okay, gross, he's my cousin. That's definitely over the line.”

She laughed and pushed me away. I sighed, scooped snow, and pelted it at her. She squealed, threw some back, and as I packed the perfect ball, ready to bean it right into her face, I saw him.

He stood at the end of the walk, off to one side, leaning up against a light pole. His arms were crossed over his chest. He wore a black jacket and slim jeans, and his eyes burned into mine, even at a distance. The snowball fell from my fingers.

He was gorgeous. It always struck me how perfect he seemed. Calvin Solar could be covered in mud and blood and still look like a chiseled Greek god. His arms, his lips, the way his cheekbones accentuated his eyes. Even his hair was thick with a slight wave, tossed carelessly back and perfectly messy.

As I gaped at my stalker, I got slammed with a chunk of ice right in the stomach.

I groaned, doubled over. Cora cursed and grabbed my arm. “I didn't realize it was so hard! Oh my god, are you okay?”

I nodded, trying to smile. I looked up, but he was gone, like he'd never been there at all.

I couldn't forget those eyes, that stare. Like he wanted to undo me.

Which he did. He'd said as much in the letters.

"Seriously, I am so sorry," Cora said. She helped me up and brushed off my jacket. "I got a little carried away. I guess I'm excited to be back too."

I looped my hand through her arm. "It's fine, but you owe me a coffee now."

"That's a deal."

We headed to our respective classes. She had an elective on popular culture, some filler class that she hoped would be as easy as it was boring, and I had a course on modern American fiction. As I listened to the professor talk about the syllabus, I stared out the window and couldn't shake the feeling that someone was staring back.

Calvin couldn't be everywhere. He was rich, well-connected, and part of the most popular group of guys on campus, but he wasn't omniscient and couldn't be everywhere. If I was careful, I could avoid him.

Maybe forever.

His offer from last semester kept nagging at the back of my mind. I'd find myself drifting off, staring at the TV, and suddenly I'd start thinking about him. About the way he looked at me, the curve of his lips, and the sound of his voice when he'd said he wanted to marry me.

The deal was simple. Calvin needed a wife, and he had the power to make sure my father never left prison.

We could help each other. I wanted my father to rot behind bars forever—but his sentence carried a maximum of twenty years, and my dad wasn't in such bad shape. He could get out one day.

I would do anything to make sure that didn't happen.

Except, apparently, give myself to Calvin Solar.

I left class and trudged out onto the sidewalk. My boots crunched over sprinkled salt granules as I headed toward the student center. I needed coffee and Cora planned on meeting me after her next class. I figured I'd do some reading and kill an hour, then we'd head back to her place for the night.

But as I approached the building, I slowed and looked over my shoulder. The small hairs on my neck stood on end, like some primitive part of my brain was firing off neurons like crazy. I sensed something, someone watching me, eyes on my body, a sense I hadn't known I had. It was eerie and uncomfortable, and I picked up my pace.

It was like he hid behind every corner.

I almost screamed when he stepped out into my path and matched my pace like a car slipping into traffic.

"You scared the shit out of me," I hissed at him.

Calvin Solar barely looked down at me. He stared ahead like he was sizing up the world and he didn't like what he saw. I hated that arrogance, like he knew he was better than everyone around him and he wasn't afraid to show it.

His family was rich, but so were a lot of families. Blackwoods was an elite school, and most of the students had some sort of connection: financial, political, cultural, whatever. There were sons of senators and daughters of pop stars mingling with the children of tech billionaires, and there I was, boring little Robyn.

Calvin never should've noticed me. I blamed Jarrod—my cousin was a part of the Four Horsemen, the elite group of attractive and popular football stars that basically ran campus. All social events flowed through them like water, and they had the power to completely ruin someone if they chose to—which they did with shocking regularity.

But for some reason, Calvin wanted me. I couldn't understand why, even after the dozens and dozens of letters that he'd sent over the last six months. I wished I understood, but despite the unwanted glimpse into the deepest, darkest, most fucked-up and sensual recesses of his mind, I still didn't know him, not one bit.

The letters were filthy, but they didn't reveal anything. Like he was too guarded and careful to let his real motives slip.

I didn't trust him, and I sure as hell didn't want to marry him.

"Have you been thinking about my offer?"

“We haven’t spoken in a week and that’s the first thing you say to me, like your stupid deal is the only problem I have to deal with?”

He glanced over with a slight frown. “I doubt you’ve got much more important things going on.”

“Oh, god, you’re such an asshole.” I picked up my pace, but he easily matched me. “You really think everyone hangs on your every word, don’t you?”

“I think I offered to make you my wife, and I meant it. I know you, Robyn. You’ve been obsessing.”

The way he said that last word, obsessing, made my skin crawl, half with horror and half with excitement.

Because yes, of course he was right. I was obsessed. I hated myself for it, but how could I not be?

Calvin Solar wanted to marry me and get me pregnant.

That would change my life.

I didn’t know if that was a good thing or not.

He grabbed my arm and stopped walking. His grip was tight and on the edge of painful. Several girls standing nearby stared as Calvin leaned closer. For a second, I thought they might be coming over to help—but no, they whispered to each other and looked like they were jealous, like they wished Calvin would manhandle them and invade their personal space.

This whole place was insane.

“Get off me, Calvin.” I stared into his perfect blue eyes, and he stared right back.

A little smile formed on his lips.

“Give me your answer. Will you marry me? I’ll give you whatever you want, Robyn. But I think we both know what you need.”

“I don’t need you, if that’s the implication.”

“Your father. Did you know men would kill for a few thousand dollars in the commissary? It’s all about having the right connections.”

His words sent a cheap thrill into my guts.

My father, shivved to death in prison.

I didn’t hate the idea. The bastard deserved it and worse.

But the price was too high.

The price was everything.

All of me.

“I don’t care what you can do.”

“Is that a no?”

“I don’t know what it is.” I should’ve turned him down, flat out. And yet I couldn’t speak the words.

He moved closer, hand tightening. “I’m going to Europe for a business trip. I want you to come with me.”

I would’ve laughed if his fingers weren’t biting into my flesh. “I’m not going anywhere with you. You’re hurting me.”

His grip didn’t lessen. “I’m leaving for Riga on Friday and returning on Monday. You’ll have to miss those classes, but I think you can afford it.”

“Riga? What business?” I shook my head, glaring.

“Riga is in Latvia. You’ve heard of it?”

“Don’t be a condescending prick.”

Another ghostly smile. “We’re leaving Friday afternoon. I’ll pick you up.”

“I’m not going.”

He sighed. “Don’t make this difficult.”

“Calvin. Listen to me.” I wrenched my arm away and took a step back, desperate to put some space between us. When he was that close, I found it

hard to think. “I’m not going to Europe with you. I’m certainly not leaving this Friday. And I’m not marrying you.”

“Is that your final answer?” His eyes burned with something I couldn’t identify. Rage? Passion? Desire? All of the above, and more.

“I’m not going to Europe with you,” I said, my voice softer. “Just leave me alone, okay? Stop writing me letters.”

“So you’ve been reading them.”

“Of course I have. But that doesn’t mean—”

“Then you understand.” He came closer. I backed into a bench and almost sat down. “I’m going to have you, Robyn. It can be now, or it can be later, but I’m persistent and I know what I want. You don’t need to make this difficult.”

Anger flared then. He didn’t know a damn thing about me. Just because he was friends with my cousin didn’t mean he had a right to me. He couldn’t claim me, steal me, take me.

I had control here.

“Go to hell. Stop sending me letters. Stop following me around. I’m not playing your stupid, twisted game.” I shoved past him, heart racing wildly.

He let me go. He could’ve grabbed my wrist and pinned me there on the ground and had his way with me in front of the whole campus, and I doubted anyone would’ve stopped him.

But he let me leave and didn’t say a word. I felt his gaze on my back until I disappeared into the student center. When I looked back through the windows, he was gone.

I got a coffee and found a quiet table alone in a corner. My heart wouldn’t calm down. I could barely breathe and my hands were shaking.

Calvin Solar wanted to take me to Latvia for the weekend.

For some business deal.

I squeezed my eyes shut. I didn't know much about his family's business, but I did know they sold arms. Weapons, guns, bombs. That sort of thing. A business trip to a small Eastern European country meant a few million dollars' worth of guns would change hands, and Calvin wanted to drag me along to the deal.

It was insane. This whole nightmare was unhinged.

But I hadn't said no. I'd turned down the weekend trip—but I'd never said I wouldn't marry him.

Why didn't I just say it?

I rubbed both my eyes and tried not to cry.

ROBYN

For the rest of the week, I obsessed about going to Europe with Calvin.

Cora said I should do it. She figured I might decide whether I wanted to take him up on his offer or not.

That seemed insane to me. I mean, there were easier ways than letting him whisk me away to Europe.

When Thursday rolled around, I decided I needed help. Calvin wanted an answer, and he'd get one whether I liked it or not. That much had become clear since all this started—he wasn't the sort of man that coddled indecision.

Jarrold and Cora's trailer was a short drive off campus. I picked up Cora after her classes were finished and we headed over together. Cora chatted about her professors the whole way, and I tried my best to listen. Calvin had left me gutted and confused, and I found it hard to care about homework and reading and midterms and all that other normal stuff.

Which drove me crazy. The normal stuff was all I had anymore. The rest of my life was so completely broken and abnormal. I craved mundane things, like taking notes and meeting a friend for lunch.

I parked behind Jarrod's truck. Cora hopped out, oblivious to my indecision. She hurried inside, and I followed behind. Their living room was cramped, with two small couches and a TV. The kitchen was next, also tight but surprisingly well stocked. Beyond that was the bedroom and the bathroom. When I slept here, which was a few times per week, they made up the couch.

It wasn't comfortable, but then neither was going home.

Cora ran into the back to see Jarrod. He had morning classes, then spent the afternoon doing repairs. I took off my boots and got some water boiling in their electric kettle. Cora came out a minute later and kissed my cheek, then held out her hand. "I need your keys."

"What for?"

"Dinner. I'm hitting up the store."

I handed them over. "Want some money?"

"Nah, we're good." She grinned and headed to the door. "Jarrod's just getting changed." She left after giving me a lingering look.

I sat on the couch and stretched out my legs.

Jarrod had moved in with my family when I was young. His parents had been killed in an accident, and my parents took him in. I didn't think Jarrod had understood what he was getting into at the time—he'd probably seen the manicured lawn and nice house and figured everything was good inside those walls.

He had been very wrong.

My father had started hitting him that first week. I think there had been some anger and resentment going back decades. Not necessarily directed at Jarrod, but at Jarrod's parents. They were both addicts and had borrowed money from my dad over and over again without ever paying it back, and Dad must've been pretty angry that he'd never see a dime of it.

So he'd taken it out on little Jarrod.

I could still see poor Jarrod on the first night after Dad hit him. He had sat in his room, knees pulled up to his chest, face streaked with tears, lip puffy. Dad had normally been better about hiding the bruises, but he'd gotten mad, and Jarrod hadn't known to keep his mouth shut.

I wished I'd comforted him back then, but there had been nothing to say.

Over the years, Jarrod had gotten the worst of it. Sometimes, he'd stepped in and redirected Dad's anger away from me and onto him. I'd always loved him for that, even if he was a total bastard to me in public. Jarrod had been a complicated animal, both protective and aggressive, and I hadn't known which version of him I'd get at any time.

Now, though, he'd softened. He was still angry, but he didn't look at the world like it was out to get him anymore. Cora helped tame the darkness. He didn't lust after pain as much these days.

Jarrold came out from the back room, rubbing his wet hair with a towel. He grunted at me, which was his way of saying hello, and poured two mugs of tea. He gave me one and sat on the couch to my left, his big body sprawling out. We sat in a short silence as he looked down at his phone and I fidgeted.

"I saw Calvin today," I said finally, unable to hold it in.

"Yeah, I did too," he said, not looking up. "And Des and Addler."

"I mean, he came to talk to me."

Jarrold put down his phone. "And?"

I rubbed my face. I hadn't told him about the offer yet. Indecision churned in my gut, but I knew I couldn't hold it back. Cora knew, and I'd made her swear not to tell Jarrod, but it wasn't fair to keep him in the dark.

"He made me an offer a week ago."

He went very still. "What sort of offer?"

"He wants to marry me. And in exchange, he'll make sure that Dad never leaves prison."

Jarrold's jaw tightened. He gripped his mug in both hands like he wanted to crush it. I bet he could, if he tried.

"You're not going to do it." A statement, not a question.

"Of course not. I mean, he can't be serious, right? We're twenty years old. We haven't even graduated yet."

Jarrold's face twitched. "It's Calvin. If he said it, he meant it."

“Marry me, though? He barely knows me. In all the years he’s been coming around, I’ve spoken to him like ten times.”

“Doesn’t seem to matter to him.”

“What do I do?”

“Tell him no.”

“And if that doesn’t work?”

Jarrood grunted and shook his head. “I don’t know what you want from me here.”

“I want you to say you’ll keep your best friend from forcing your cousin into marriage.”

“If that’s what you want.”

I glared at him. “I don’t feel reassured.”

He went quiet for a moment, then said, “What if you did it?”

“Jarrod!”

“You want your dad to stay in prison, right? Marrying Calvin wouldn’t be so bad.”

“I don’t love him. I don’t even like him.”

“Good. Then don’t do it. But imagine if you did.”

I stood up, pissed off that he was even entertaining this. I paced away, head reeling, then turned back to him, hands on my hips. “What do you know about Calvin’s business?”

He seemed uncertain. “Not a lot. They deal weapons. Defense contractors. Lots of money in that shit.”

“Is it all legal?”

“Probably. Mostly. He doesn’t talk about it much.”

“But you know something.”

He waved a hand in the air. “He’s going to take over one day. He says he doesn’t like it, but that’s the way things are.”

“That’s what he needs me for.” I looked down at my hands. My fingers tugged at the hem of my sweatshirt. “He needs a wife and a kid before his dad will name him the heir to the company.”

“Huh,” Jarrod said, leaning back and crossing his legs. “I guess that makes sense. Ensures some longevity. And he does have brothers.”

“Calvin has brothers?”

“Two younger ones. He doesn’t talk much about them, either.”

“Does he talk about anything?”

Jarrod laughed and ran a hand through his hair. “What do you want from me? You’ve met Calvin. You know what he’s like.”

I did know. Quiet, calm, intense. Totally self-assured, like he could never make a mistake and knew it. I envied that kind of confidence.

“You’re his best friend. I need to know what I’m getting myself into.”

He sighed and met my gaze with a steady smirk. As much as I hated him sometimes, Jarrod had saved my life more than once. When we’d gotten older and Jarrod had gotten bigger and able to fight Dad off, he’d always make sure to redirect Dad’s anger away from me and onto him—since he’d known Dad wouldn’t try to hit him, not once Jarrod turned sixteen and hit a growth spurt and put on like six inches and fifty pounds of muscle.

“I think you’re getting yourself into a serious relationship. That’s what I think.”

“God, you’re useless.” I sipped my tea and cursed. It was still hot. The water burned my tongue. I put it down on the counter and wanted to scream. “I need to get some air.”

“Go ahead. Door’s right there.”

“Why are you being such a dick?”

“Because I don’t think this is as serious as you’re pretending it is.”

“Calvin wants to marry me. He’s scary as hell. You know that.”

“Tell him you don’t want it and he’ll stop.” Jarrod shrugged and picked up his phone again, done with this conversation. “I’ll talk to him for you if you want, but I don’t think it’ll help. Might just make it worse.”

“Jarrod, don’t.”

“Then handle it. Tell the guy no and move on.”

I groaned and grabbed my jacket from the couch. I left the trailer and let the door slam behind me. It was petty, but I knew it’d drive him crazy.

Outside, the wind was crisp. I paced back and forth, annoyed Cora had my car. I couldn’t leave until she came back, and I didn’t want to be around Jarrod right now.

I’d expected him to be more—something. Protective? Helpful? Anything but that. He’d acted like this was no big deal, like men made marriage deals with women all the time. Calvin wasn’t someone I wanted to mess with, and the idea of telling him no stuck like a knife in my throat.

Would he hurt me if I said no?

I cursed and started walking away from the trailer. I needed to clear my head. Stupid Jarrod had me freaking out again. I’d wanted him to help, but instead he’d acted like this was no big deal, and that only pissed me off even more.

He’d done a lot over the years. He’d protected me from Dad again and again, and I owed him so much for that. He had been the one who’d gotten Dad thrown into jail and out of my life forever—and I was so grateful.

But there was a dark side to him. Like he couldn’t be bothered about other people. Only Cora was different. He looked at her like she was the shining jewel in his life.

Like Calvin looked at me.

I heard a sound. It was several footsteps from a set of overgrown bushes in the yard next to Jarrod’s small gravel driveway. I turned, frowning, expecting a stray cat or a neighborhood kid—

Instead, Calvin strode toward me.

It took a few seconds for his presence to compute. I'd never seen him in the trailer park before, but there he was, glorious Calvin, looking like a shining god, a smile on his lips as he raised a white rag.

“What are you doing?”

“You should've said yes.” He leapt forward, grabbing me by the back of the head. I gasped in shock—

And that was when he shoved the rag against my mouth.

I breathed in something acrid and harsh. I struggled, but my limbs felt numb and heavy and my head swam. Light flashed at the edges of my vision, then it began to tunnel, a thick black spreading quickly.

Calvin's arms wrapped around my body before I fell.

“Sorry, love,” he whispered. “But you should've made this easy.”

Then the black finished, and I was gone.

DEAR ROBYN

Sometimes I can't control myself.

There's a gun range on my father's estate. He took me out there when I was five years old and taught me how to shoot. He stood behind me and corrected my aim and made me fire, over and over and over, until my legs were tired. When I cried because I was hungry, he kicked me in the thigh and told me to keep going until he was satisfied.

I hated shooting. I still hate shooting. But my father said weapons are a part of my blood. They are my future.

Can you imagine?

Killing and death and blood. I was born into all that.

He wanted to make me hard.

I think he took something from me.

Can you give that back? Can you help me find it again?

Whatever humanity I've lost.

I was thinking about you today at football practice. I dropped my shoulder and slammed it into this freshman's chest. I think I broke his rib. It felt like heaven when he was on the ground, gasping for air.

I thought of what it would taste like to pin you down in the middle of the field and lick your soaking wet cunt.

That boy's pain, it meant nothing to me.

But your pleasure? That means everything.

I dream about you, Robyn. Your breasts pressed together and shaking as I thrust deep into your pussy. Your clit swollen and pink and soaking wet as it grinds against my tongue. Your lips parted and wide open and moaning.

I want to pin your arms above your head and fuck you until you scream my name.

I like it when you struggle. When you fight back. When you make it hard.

My cock's stiff right now, thinking about you screaming my name and digging your fingernails into my skin so hard they leave deep red welts.

Robyn, Robyn, Robyn.

Will you marry me?

I think you will.

I know something's going on with Cora and Jarrod.

They did something terrible.

Would you forgive me if I did something just as bad?

I don't think you would.

Not unless I made you.

Love,

C

ROBYN

I woke in a haze.

It was hard to think at first. Like my head was all sludge. I groaned, rolled to the side. I was slumped over in a chair. A big, comfortable chair.

Something vibrated. The whole room vibrated and hummed.

I touched armrests. Felt a seatbelt.

I blinked at bright lights and looked out the window.

Clouds everywhere. Fluffy and thick. Floating in the air.

I screamed.

Calvin's hands were on me then. "It's okay," he said quietly into my ear. "It's okay, Robyn. You're safe."

"Get off me." I struggled, but the seatbelt kept me pinned down.

I was on an airplane. A private plane. Small and comfortable—lavish even. Calvin sat in the seat next to mine, and an attractive young woman sat up toward the front near the cockpit, frowning back at me as I fought.

She didn't stand or make a move to help.

Why wasn't she trying to help me?

"If you can't calm down, I'll sedate you again."

I stared at him in terror. My heart raced wildly.

The blackness.

“You drugged me.”

“I did.” He tilted his head. He looked alien and beautiful and serene. “You gave me no other choice.”

“I told you no. You could’ve respected that.”

“I didn’t.”

“Let go of me.” I shoved his hands away and looked at the hostess. “Excuse me? Excuse me, can you please help?”

She stood, walked over—

And pulled a curtain shut, cutting her off from our conversation.

I gaped, stunned.

Calvin laughed. “My people are extremely well paid. How do you think you ended up here like this? You think a normal flight would allow an unconscious girl on board? My family owns this plane, that girl, and the pilots. You’re completely safe, but you’re in my world now.”

“You need to rethink the meaning of the word safe, you psycho.” I leaned back and squeezed my eyes shut. I still felt heavy and weak. I couldn’t fight him even if I wanted to.

I couldn’t fight him even if I was at full strength.

The realization hit me in the gut. He had me now and I was at his mercy. Calvin, terrifying, gorgeous Calvin, the author of the letters that both excited and tormented me. I hung on every word, obsessed over each and every line, and felt an overwhelming sense of revulsion. I hated myself for loving the attention and hated him for lavishing me with his obsession.

He lapsed into silence. I hated the way he watched me, like every move I made brought him so much joy. I was his favorite movie, playing on repeat, just for him.

The bastard. I was like a toy.

I stared out the window and tried to think.

We were flying to Riga. It was dark out, which meant—it was still Thursday? It couldn't have been more than a few hours later.

There had to be a way out of this.

“I took your phone,” Calvin said conversationally. “I packed you some things. I hope they fit, but we’ll see. Might be better if they don’t.” He seemed extremely pleased. “I know this isn’t ideal. I mean, I don’t exactly want to have to drug and drag my future wife around all the time, but—”

“I’m not your future wife,” I snapped, anger getting the best of me.

I was trapped on a plane with this man. He was dangerous, and he’d already proved that he was willing to drug me to get his way.

He might be willing to do even worse things if I provoked him too much.

I took steadying breaths. I had to keep calm. I had to think.

“I know this is a lot,” he said quietly, with just a hint of contrition. I almost believed him. “I wanted to do this the right way. Invite you like a gentleman. Give you every opportunity to come along on your own. But you refused, and now here we are.”

“A gentleman doesn’t drug people.”

He sighed and spread his hands. “Gentleman was the wrong word. I’m far from a gentleman.” He leaned closer, showing teeth. “Is that what you want? Someone nice? You won’t get that with me, Robyn.”

“I won’t get anything with you.”

He lingered, so close. His lips were parted, and I almost wanted to jerk my head forward and bite down hard. I could rip him to shreds, make him bleed—but that wouldn’t help at all.

It’d only make things worse.

He pulled back and stood. “Do you want anything? Something to drink?”

“Bathroom.”

He gestured. “Right there. Go ahead.”

I hesitated. I sensed a trap. But I was already stuck on this plane with nowhere to run.

Which he was intensely aware of.

I stood and slipped into the aisle. His body was close. Hulking and powerful.

I hurried to the bathroom, slipped inside, and locked the door.

It was the nicest airplane bathroom I’d ever seen. It was more like a real hotel bathroom with gold-plated appliances and stone countertops. Everything gleamed with a perfect polish.

I stared at myself in the mirror.

I looked like hell. Bags under my eyes, hair a frizzy mess. I was haggard and exhausted.

I wanted to scream.

There was nowhere to go. I tried to pry a panel off the wall, but it didn’t budge. Some crazy part of my brain thought I could sneak into the belly of the plane and survive in there somehow, then slip away after landing—

But where would I go? How could I get home with no phone and no wallet?

I sat down and put my face in my hands.

Jarrold. Cora. They’d wonder. Someone back home would start asking questions. I couldn’t just disappear for a weekend without raising some eyebrows.

My mother would notice. She’d call someone.

There had to be a way. Maybe they were looking for me already.

I stood and splashed water on my face. I felt woozy and disoriented. I leaned forward, trying to clear my head before I stepped back out into the cabin.

The flight attendant was bent over Calvin. She placed a drink in his hand and flashed him a seductive smile. She was pretty, wore a white button-down blouse with the top two buttons open, showing plenty of her ample breasts, and Calvin didn't even glance at her. He grunted at the drink as she retreated back to her seat, frowning at me like she'd never seen another human before in her life.

I stood next to Calvin.

He sipped his drink and looked up.

"I thought you got lost for a second," he said.

"I was trying to come up with a way to escape."

"And?" He arched an eyebrow, smiling.

"Hard to do at forty thousand feet."

"Might as well sit and enjoy the ride."

I crossed my arms. "People are going to look for me."

"No, they aren't. I already told Jarrod where you'll be, and your mother's not in a state of mind to pay attention to much of anything these days. You're all mine."

I ground my teeth. "I have class on Monday."

"I emailed your professors. Anything else?"

"You're insane."

"We've covered this already, Robyn." He sighed, looking exasperated.
"You're coming to Riga with me. This is happening. Why keep fighting?"

I leaned down, staring into his attractive, smoldering eyes.

"Because you need to learn that you don't own me."

He looked delighted as I pulled away, stormed to the seat across the aisle, and sat down. He laughed as I buckled myself in, pulled my knees to my chest, and stared out the window, making a show of turning my back to him.

The bastard. He thought this was a game.

I'd show him it wasn't.

He was right. I didn't have much of a choice anymore—this was happening.

But that didn't mean I had to make his life easy.

If I was being dragged into hell, I'd go down kicking and screaming.

CALVIN

Robyn's rage took my breath away.

Her anger was addictive. It was powerful and sultry, like a fine red wine or an aged cigar.

Pungent and delicious.

I reveled in her fury. I needed her pink and screaming before this weekend was over, and I had a good feeling I'd get what I wanted.

The letters were only a tease. Just the beginning.

But I could tell they had her rattled.

Oh, Robyn, my lovely, my love. She despised me. I couldn't blame her. But she'd change her mind, sooner or later.

And she'd become my wife.

The plane touched down at Riga International. My people were already there: Matthias, my right-hand man within my family's organization, and several bodyguards and mercenary soldiers vetted and hired for this occasion. They were hard men, used to fighting for the local oligarchs and warlords, and would serve me well.

So long as I paid them.

Robyn followed in silence as we were whisked away to a line of private cars and ushered into the back of a comfortable black sedan. It was around one in the morning and the airport was dead. Matthias sat up front with the driver, his dark eyes and black, messy hair turned forward, a serious look on his face.

Matthias was always so serious. I'd known him since we were boys—his father worked for my father, and we'd been raised like cousins. He was clever and sharp and ruthless, which were all the qualities I looked for in a good employee. I loved him like a brother, but we both understood our roles.

“Is everything ready?” I asked him. Robyn stared out the window as the cars pulled out.

Matthias nodded. “You have a meeting in five hours.”

I looked at Robyn. “Will you be okay for a few hours on your own?”

“I'll survive.” She didn't glance over.

She was going to be difficult. I didn't want there to be any problems between us, but I couldn't force her to enjoy herself.

Still, I'd spoil her, whether she wanted it or not.

“We need to take Robyn to the rooms first, then we'll go to the meeting.”

Matthias inclined his head. “That'll be fine. But just so you know, the contact changed.”

That wasn't good. I'd been dealing with a man from the war ministry for months, a gentleman called Lukas Brnovich. He was a respected and connected member of the ruling government's cabinet, and when he'd said he'd make a deal, I'd trusted his word.

Getting passed on to someone else was not a good sign, but it might not be a death sentence for the deal.

“Who are we speaking with now?”

“I'm not entirely sure.” Matthias seemed uncomfortable. “We received word from Brnovich's office that he was sending an officer in his stead. I don't

know the man's name."

"Try to find out. I don't like entering a meeting blind."

"I'll see what I can do."

The ride lapsed into silence. I wasn't happy about this turn. This deal was extremely important, not just to my family, but to me personally.

I'd set this up. I'd negotiated the terms and put all the pieces into place. My family had been trying to get into Eastern Europe for a long time, and selling to the Latvian government was the perfect starting point. They were European and progressive enough that nobody back home would cry foul about past war crimes and such, but they were respected in the region. With a good word from their ministers, I could have Solar weapons in the hands of every petty dictator from Germany to China.

We pulled up to the Grand Palace Hotel, a sweeping amalgamation of modern architecture with classical details. All of Riga was a mixture of the ancient and the new, like most of Europe. They clung to their past while hurtling into the future, and I liked the contrasts between glass skyscrapers and the three-story, brick-fronted residential buildings with colorful facades and Gothic peaks.

We hustled inside. Matthias had already arranged the rooms and led the way up to a set of lavish suites. Robyn glared around like she might light the couches on fire. My men placed our bags in the bedroom then arranged themselves out in the hallway. Matthias went to his own room, adjacent to ours.

"We should get some sleep. Tomorrow won't be easy."

She glared at me. "Sleep here? With you?"

"That's the idea."

"I get the bed." She stalked toward the bedroom.

I caught her wrist and held her tight. "Don't make this difficult for me."

"Let go of me." She glared death. I loved it.

“Are you sure you want to sleep alone? A bed’s always better with company.”

“I’m sure. Let go.”

I released her. She disappeared and slammed the door.

I let her have some privacy. She needed time to adjust, and there wasn’t anywhere for her to go, not on the top floor of this building. She was trapped and safe, just the way I wanted.

I poured some whiskey, drank it down, and tried to get some restless sleep. I dozed in and out, my mind working through the details of what was going to happen, until the sun began to rise through the windows. I drifted into the bedroom and got changed while Robyn tossed and turned under the covers, finally sitting up and staring at me.

“Will you be okay without me?” I asked, straightening my tie in the mirror.

Robyn frowned and looked startled. She wiped sleep from her eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“My men will make sure you’re safe. I have business.”

“You dragged me out here only to ditch me in some hotel?”

“It’s a very nice hotel. Get room service.”

“You bastard. I don’t want room service. I want to go home.” She looked perfect in that bed with messy hair and a sleepy glare.

“You’re so lovely when you want to strangle me.”

“Don’t be a sick freak.”

“I know this is frustrating, but I can’t bring you. I’ll be back as soon as I can and then we’ll spend time together.”

“I don’t want to spend time with you.” She threw her hands up in frustration. “I want to go home.”

I shifted closer, staring into her eyes. “You’re not going anywhere. Wait for me here. Don’t make a mess. My men have orders to keep you happy.” I put

emphasis on the word happy. She'd come to her own conclusions. In reality, the men were under strict orders not to touch her, only to make sure she couldn't leave and was completely safe.

She scowled but pulled the sheets up tighter against her chin.

I left her like that. She'd behave, for now at least. I met Matthias out in the hallway, and he gave me a flat look as we rode the elevator down together.

"Slept well?"

"Not at all." I leaned my head against the mirrored wall. "Robyn's not happy."

"Did you think she would be?"

"I hoped."

He snorted. "You're usually more realistic than that."

I ignored him. We reached the ground floor, went outside, and climbed into a car. The driver pulled out.

"How much do you trust those men?" I asked quietly, staring at the hotel as it disappeared around the corner.

"They won't touch her. You have my word."

I grunted in response.

Leaving Robyn with hired thugs wasn't an ideal plan, but I needed Matthias for this meeting. The guards would follow orders and wouldn't touch her—not if they wanted to get paid, and paid extremely well for such a boring job.

I forced myself to pay attention as we drove into a quieter, more residential section of the city. The streets were narrow and packed with people and cars. It was the Old World again, a place built for carts and pedestrians, not for cars. Back then, a man could be born and die and never leave a ten-block radius.

Things changed, but they also stayed the same. Humans evolved, but still wanted to kill each other.

That was where my family stepped in.

Death had been cheaper back then, but easier now. My family's company had weapons that could level entire city blocks, bombs that could rip a man's skin from his bones, guns that could tear holes in steel and shred a chest to nothing. All that for anyone willing to pay.

Some men would have moral issues with dealing in slaughter.

I had none of those.

My father had made sure of it from a very young age.

The driver parked outside of a quiet cafe. I stared at the crumbling facade and windswept street. This wasn't the kind of place where I was used to meeting government officials, but I tried to keep my displeasure to myself as I stepped out onto the sidewalk. Matthias joined me and frowned at his phone.

"This is the right place." He looked up at me, dark eyes narrowed. "Should we leave?"

I held up a hand. "This is too important. Let's find out why we're being snubbed."

He grunted. I could tell he didn't like it, but he wouldn't argue.

My soldiers took up positions around the cafe. I walked forward and went inside with Matthias on my heels. The interior was quiet and dark, with a counter straight ahead and several small tables. It was early and the streets outside were still. Plants were lined along the windowsills, and it smelled like almonds and chocolate. It was clean and nice, if cramped and old.

I spotted the man I was there to meet right away. He sat with his back to the wall and wore a simple and plain gray suit and a navy tie. His hair was buzzed short, and his pale, pallid skin had a sheen of sweat. He stood nervously as I approached, smiling like a bureaucrat, and shook my hand.

"Mr. Solar, I am so sorry to make you come here, and to make so many changes last moment," he said in accented but passable English. Most people in Latvia spoke Latvian, though there was a large Russian contingent.

"And you are?"

“My name is Emils Jansons. I am the prime secretary of Minister Brnovich. He sent me here in his stead.” He gestured awkwardly at the table. “Please, take a seat, yes?”

“Very well.” I gestured for Matthias, who took the chair next to mine. Several of my guards lingered nearby, watching the single old woman that stood back near the kitchen warily.

I sat across from Emils and folded my hands on the table.

Emils shifted and stared at the table. “Well, ah, I know this is not what you expected, and the minister does apologize, but we are very busy as you must know, and—”

“Emils, please don’t waste my time any further. Why are we meeting in a rundown cafe in the middle of nowhere?” I stared at the man, trying to keep my face neutral. He grimaced and rubbed his palms together.

“Well, there has been a... problem. Not a big problem, but a problem.”

“Tell me.”

He glanced at Matthias then at me, almost pleading. “Certain members of the parliament are unhappy about our deal. Not the terms, but any deal at all. They believe Latvia is a peaceful country with no need for weapons.”

“Idealists.”

“Yes, yes, Minister Brnovich agrees,” he said, enthusiastic. “However, they make problems. They are very loud, yes? And so Minister Brnovich, he wishes very much to make deal, but he cannot be involved any longer.”

I didn’t like this. I glanced at Matthias, who stared darkly at Emils.

“Does this mean you’ll be my point of contract from now on?”

“Oh, no, no,” Emils said, shaking his head, waving his hands. “Not me. It cannot be me. I am the minister’s prime secretary.”

I clenched my jaw, trying not to kill this simpering asshole. “Then who?”

“Certain associates of Minister Brnovich’s. Fine, upstanding men. You will deal with them from now on. They will be the mouth of the minister, and any

deal you make with them, you will make with him. Will this suffice?”

I leaned back and stared. “So you’re telling me I’m supposed to set up a multi-million-dollar deal with men I don’t know and haven’t met, and you won’t even tell me their names?”

Emils looked like he might cry. “Yes.”

I shoved my chair back and stood. “You’ve wasted my time. Tell Minister Brnovich—”

“Wait,” Emils said, throwing out his hands. Matthias twitched, and I guessed he was reaching toward his gun. I touched his shoulder to steady him. “I have documents, yes? Official documents, and down payment, as discussed.” He reached under the table and lifted up a dossier. It was thick with paperwork, but sitting on top was a check, made out for the proper amount: ten million American dollars.

I pushed it over to Matthias, who studied it closely. “Looks real.”

“This is only part,” I pointed out. “We discussed more.”

“More will come. We need to see weapons, make sure everything is good—”

“The Solar Company has impeccable standards, Mr. Jansons.”

“But I am not dealing with the Solar Company, am I?” He smiled placatingly, and I wanted to strangle the life from him.

I stared at the simpering bastard for several long, tense moments, but I turned my back on the table. “Matthias will finish this discussion and ensure everything is in order. Tell Minister Brnovich that while this isn’t official Solar business, it still carries the Solar name. He should be more careful.” I walked away, leaving Matthias to handle cleanup.

I got into one of the cars, and it began the drive back to the hotel. I stared out the window at Riga, at the people going about their lives in a foreign place I’d never visited before, while back at the airport several cargo jets filled with bombs, small arms, missiles, and ammunition were being unloaded into a private hangar that I’d bought just for this occasion.

And my family had no clue it was happening.

I'd suspected there would be problems. Nothing was easy when dealing with governments, especially small European countries that had never purchased weapons before. I'd known that I'd have to cajole, bribe, and fight my way into this money.

But I'd hoped the problems wouldn't start the moment we landed.

I closed my eyes. At least Robyn waited for me back at the hotel. She didn't want to be here—but that was a minor detail.

The pressure of this deal hung on my shoulders like live electric wires. If I screwed this up, my brothers were waiting to pounce and cut my throat. They'd steal away my inheritance and make sure I never took over the Solar Company, regardless of whether Robyn married me or not.

Though it would help if she did.

My father wasn't keen on me taking control. I hadn't shown an aptitude for or an interest in selling murder, which I didn't think was a bad thing. He didn't agree.

If I wanted to control my family's power, then I had to prove myself.

This deal was the first step.

The next step was marrying Robyn and getting her pregnant.

Then my father wouldn't be able to complain. Not with a wife, and a child, and a big deal under my belt.

And if it all fell through? At least I'd have Robyn.

Above all, she was the true prize.

She was worth killing for. Worth dying for.

And if necessary, I'd do both before this was all over.

The car stopped, and I headed up to the penthouse suite. The hotel was lush and beautiful, and I hoped Robyn would enjoy her time trapped inside.

A guard standing near the front door let me in, but he didn't meet my gaze.

That was my first clue.

The second was the sitting room. The couches were flipped. The cushions ripped. Fear sparked in my chest.

My soldiers stood around, avoiding my gaze.

“What the hell happened?” I snapped.

The mercenary with the scar stepped forward. He looked sheepish. “The girl, sir.”

“The girl?” I looked around. “Someone tell me what happened here.”

“The girl lost her mind. We couldn’t stop her. We were told not to touch her unless her life was in danger, but her life wasn’t in danger, and—”

“What. The fuck. Happened?” I snarled the words.

The man gestured toward the bedroom.

Robyn stood in the hallway, leaning against the wall, grinning at me. She wore a long, slinky dress, tight against her curves and cut low. She looked stunning, ravishing, incredible. I took a step closer, pulse quickening.

“You’re home already,” she said. “I hoped I’d have more time to surprise you.”

Then I understood.

And began to laugh.

Her face slowly fell. She pouted, arms crossed. God, what a woman. “You did this to piss me off.”

“I did it because you don’t get to cage me.”

“You ruined a hotel room for spite? What a silly, absurd thing to do.” I grinned and all the soldiers seemed to relax. I could only imagine what they were thinking.

She stormed toward me, rage incarnate. “I am not silly and I am not absurd.” She jabbed two fingers into my chest. What a woman. “You think you’re so

clever? You think you're so strong? You drag me to this place and expect me to behave? But guess what? I'm not following orders. I won't be a good little girl, Calvin, you asshole."

I grabbed her wrist. "I don't want a good girl. I want a very, very bad one." My eyes moved down her throat toward her breasts. "Why are you wearing that?"

"It's the only halfway decent thing you packed." She pulled her hand away and stepped back. "Don't look at me like that."

"I want to see what else is in that suitcase if this is what you picked."

"I bet you'd like that." She almost snarled at me. God, I was hard, my blood pulsing in my veins. "But I want you to understand something. You're not coming near me. You're not touching me. Forget about whatever sick fantasies you have in your head. It's not happening."

"Oh, Robyn. You have no clue what I want."

"You want a nice, obedient wife for your stupid rich boy games. I'm here to say it's not happening."

I stalked forward. She moved away, stumbled on her dress, nearly fell. I caught her, steadied her. I held her there and wanted to keep going, to push her against the wall, to rip her clothes away and revel in her body. I'd feast on her skin, lick and suck her nipples, make her scream as I fucked her.

But I stopped myself. It wasn't the time. Not yet.

"Understand something. This isn't a game. My life is on the line. I need you, Robyn, and you will give me what I want, sooner or later. Make it easy on everyone and give in now." I grinned, moved in, and kissed her neck. "Or make it hard. That might be more fun."

She shoved me away, wrenched herself free, and ran.

I watched her go. She slammed her door and disappeared.

I smiled, then looked back at the guards.

“Clean this shit up or get someone to do it.” I pointed at their scarred leader.
“You stay outside of her room. Make sure she doesn’t do something stupid.”

The guy saluted awkwardly and walked down the hall. He took up his post, back straight.

I poured myself a drink, sat down, and kicked my feet up.

The Latvian government was going to make this deal as difficult as possible.

But Robyn was going to make this weekend so sweet, I didn’t think it mattered.

ROBYN

I spent an anxious few hours in my room. I went through the suitcases again but found nothing less revealing than what I had on already. It was like he'd packed for a porno shoot and not for a weekend abroad.

The bastard. He'd done it on purpose.

I'd hoped trashing the room would piss him off or at least knock him off balance. Instead, he'd seemed delighted.

In fact, he'd seemed to love it when I was angry.

I had to get it together. He wasn't going to back down, not with me raging at him all the time.

I needed to be calm and collected.

When he knocked on my door later that afternoon, I sat up straight and told him to come in. He stepped inside, eyes blazing. "We have a meeting."

"We do?" I kept my face as neutral as I could.

"I need you to come since I clearly can't trust you to behave here." He frowned at me, slightly confused. I hadn't risen to the bait like he wanted. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing." I stood and gestured. "Shall we?"

He frowned as I walked past him. Matthias stood near the doorway, glowering. He was a couple of years younger but clearly knew Calvin very well. I followed them into the hall and into the cars waiting outside.

Calvin didn't speak as we headed to our destination. I kept a serene smile on my face and tried to pretend like I was on a sightseeing tour. I stared out the window at the foreign buildings, at the shops and the restaurants, at the people milling about. I could almost pretend like I was back home, despite the strange language everywhere. The driver took us to a crowded section of the city in a downtown area surrounded by big buildings interspersed with crumbling old bars and nightclubs. The driver parked, and Calvin got out, surrounded by his men.

"This way," Matthias said, glaring all around. We made our way through the crowds, past drunk young people laughing and chatting. It was all noise, the language blurring together into nothing more than sound. I could imagine how these people felt—the joy of going out and drinking too much, of laughing and dancing and having fun with your friends—and I envied them. I felt like I'd grown ten years in the span of a day.

Matthias entered a seedy bar with Calvin on his heels. The door was wooden with blue paint peeling in thick flakes. The windows were barred and covered in newspaper clippings. The sign out front was worn almost to nothing, and it said something I could never hope to pronounce or understand.

I went inside, followed by Calvin's men.

The interior was dim and smoky. It smelled like beer and puke. Calvin glared all around before heading toward a back door. He was ushered inside by a smiling man with bad teeth. In the back, several men sat around a table, smoking cigarettes and drinking small glasses of clear alcohol. They wore suits, slim and dark, and smiled big as Calvin approached with Matthias. I lingered near the door with the bad-teeth man, and he leered at me. I crossed my arms over my chest and took a step away.

Calvin's men spread out and looked uncomfortable.

"Mr. Solar, so happy you come," the leader of the group said, spreading out his arms, then putting out a hand.

Calvin shook it. “You must be Makarov. Jansons said I’d be meeting with you.”

“Yes, yes, Makarov. This is my associate, Yuri, and my other associate, Ilyin. Sit down, yes? You want drink?”

“Please.” Calvin sat. Matthias stood at his shoulder. The men hesitated, looking at each other, but they took their seats again.

The room was thick with anxiety and uncertainty. I could barely stand it. I drifted to the side to try to get a better look at the men sitting across from Calvin.

They were well-groomed, middle-aged, but looked rough. Hard eyes, callused hands. If these were the representatives of the Latvian government, I wondered what the rest of their elected officials looked like.

“Minister Brnovich says you speak with his voice. Is that true?” Calvin was quiet and intense. I didn’t like it.

“Yes, of course, of course,” Makarov said. “Me and Brnovich, we very close. We go back far.” He grinned and poured a glass for Calvin, who accepted it. “Let us drink to him.”

The men touched glasses and threw back the shot. Calvin frowned slightly and leaned forward.

“I was told you wish to inspect the shipment. I have a hangar at Riga International where—”

“Yes, yes, inspections,” Makarov said, interrupting Calvin. “We want inspections soon, yes? But first, we talk price. Brnovich says price too high, must come down.”

Calvin went very still. Matthias looked like he might start killing people at any second. I wanted to scream.

This wasn’t right. Something was extremely wrong here. These men weren’t government officials, and if they knew the defense minister, it wasn’t through approved channels. Calvin had been passed off, and I suspected he was dealing with Latvia’s underworld, with men that drifted between legal and

illegal, black and white.

Gray men. Neither good nor bad. Neither official nor unofficial. The kind of men every government employed to some extent. They got things done. Did dirty work, wet work, tasks nobody else wanted or could handle.

Now Calvin was supposed to negotiate a multi-million-dollar deal with monsters.

I didn't know why I cared. Some part of me wanted him to fail.

But this was dangerous, and I wasn't sure who I should be scared for, Calvin or these bastards.

"The price is firm," Calvin said slowly and carefully. "Brnovich agreed to it weeks ago, and I will not change it."

"Yes, yes, but situation changes, yes?" Makarov kept on smiling, but it was empty and malicious. "You have guns here now. They're ready, yes? So you come down on price and we take them from you."

"No, I don't think so."

"Well, then, I suppose we have issue, yes?"

One of Makarov's associates looked over at me. I felt his eyes move down my body. He grinned, baring a set of yellow teeth, and grunted something in another language. Makarov laughed, and Calvin's fingers dug into the table.

"What did your friend just say?" Calvin asked and his tone was like ice.

"Nothing, nothing, bad joke. Yuri keep mouth shut from now on."

Calvin's jaw tightened. "Yuri can speak for himself."

Yuri looked at Makarov and spoke in that same guttural language. Makarov waved him off. "Is fine, is fine, is all good. He only made bad joke about your girl there, but Yuri is animal, very dumb man. You can ignore him."

Yuri showed his teeth again. "Said she looks expensive. You can afford to come down in price."

Calvin lunged forward. He reached across the table and grabbed Yuri by his stringy, long hair. He pulled hard, yanking Yuri's face forward, and his nose smashed into the table with a sickening crunch. Calvin's growl was feral as he slammed his elbow into the back of Yuri's neck, and something popped as Yuri went very still.

Makarov stared in utter shock before he shoved his chair back and stumbled to his feet. Makarov's men grabbed their guns, but Matthias and Calvin's guards were already shouting for them not to move. Weapons were brandished, and the room was one second from turning into a slaughterhouse.

Calvin stepped in front of me. He didn't look back, but he placed his body between mine and the Russian gangsters on the other side of the room.

Yuri didn't move. His body slumped to the side. He breathed slowly, and his eyes were open, but it was like his limbs had stopped working.

"What is wrong with you?" Makarov shouted, hand on the gun behind his back. "This is how you do business? You insane fuck? He make one joke and you kill him?"

"He's not dead," Calvin said. "Here's what's going to happen. We're walking out of this room. If you try to stop us, we will kill you. There will be a lot of blood, and most of it will be yours. But if you're smart, you can return to your bosses and tell them what I did here."

"They'll rip out your tongue. Are you crazy? You psycho American fuck. I'll cut off your balls."

"If you move, I will kill you." Calvin nodded at Matthias, who pulled open the door and held it.

Calvin grabbed my arm and pushed me away. I stumbled but let him take me out of the room. Calvin's men came next, with Matthias last.

Nobody fired a shot.

Calvin hurried outside. He tugged me along and I stumbled to keep up. His men moved swiftly, fanning out, making sure we were safe before getting into the cars and driving away.

Matthias sat up front and stared ahead with a stony expression. Calvin glared out the window like he wanted to rip the glass to shreds.

I sat there breathing hard.

We'd almost died back there. All because that gangster made some stupid joke about me being a hooker that Calvin didn't like.

He could've gotten everyone filled with bullets for his stupid pride.

I was flushed and angry.

I didn't want him to do stupid crap like that. I would've let the insult go—it was petty and dumb and meant less than nothing coming from a man like that.

But Calvin couldn't do it. He'd rather risk all our lives.

“Was it worth it?” Matthias asked, breaking the heavy silence.

I wanted to know the same thing.

Calvin grunted in response. “Yes, it was.”

“You're being reckless.”

“I will not tolerate—”

“Reckless,” Matthias said again, emphasizing the word. He looked back, glanced at me, then stared at Calvin. “I understand how you feel about the girl—”

“You understand nothing,” Calvin said, returning the anger tenfold. “Know your place, Matthias. Don't overstep.”

Matthias stared at Calvin for a long few seconds. There was hurt in his eyes.

He turned and stopped speaking.

Calvin looked exhausted. He rubbed at his face and sat unmoving for the rest of the trip back to the hotel. When we arrived, he stepped out and grabbed Matthias's wrist.

“Double the guard. And I'm sorry.”

Matthias nodded. “I’ll make it happen.”

Calvin let him go. The man walked off, barking orders at the soldiers.

I joined Calvin on the sidewalk. I didn’t know what to say, and he lingered there, glaring after Matthias as the guards went to park the vehicles.

“You almost got everyone killed.” I should’ve watched my mouth, but I couldn’t help it. “Matthias was right to give you shit.”

“I know that.”

“Then why? Why be so stupid and risk everything?”

He turned on me and grabbed my arms. I stepped back, but he held me close, staring into my eyes with a white-hot fire that made my stomach lurch with fear and excitement. I struggled, but he was a monster with a steel grip.

“Because nobody insults you. Nobody looks down on you. Not anymore.”

“Calvin—”

“You can tell me that it’s stupid. Shortsighted. You can say you don’t want it. I don’t give a damn.”

“You’re right. You’re being stupid.”

“And you’re mine, Robyn. If they don’t respect you, then they don’t respect me. I will not tolerate that. Not for anything.”

I shook my head slowly. “I don’t want this.”

“I don’t care.” He released me. “Go to your room.” He snapped his fingers at a guard, summoning him over. The man looked apologetic as he steered me inside.

I glanced back at Calvin as I went through the automatic doors, and his face was twisted with rage. He looked like a maniac, like he wanted to tear through the city and rip down the houses brick by brick. His eyes were wide and his hands wrapped into fists, and I could imagine him killing, killing, killing—and taking me with him down into the darkest depths of his private hell.

He'd do it, if I let him. He'd drag me through filth and muck and say he loved me all the while.

I was terrified that I'd let him.

I turned away and let the guard take me upstairs. I didn't argue. I'd seen enough violence today, and my hands still shook with adrenaline and fear.

CALVIN

I turned the lock pick set, and the door clicked open. Matthias moved past me, pushing open the back door of the modest row home in a quiet but upscale Riga neighborhood not far from the government district.

My men followed, silent as wraiths. We were ghosts, spirits, demons in the night. The kitchen was clean and neat and organized. Children's drawings covered the refrigerator. The living room was filled with toys and magazines but comfortable and cozy. My soldiers checked each room, silently motioning all clear.

We headed upstairs. Matthias held the soldiers back as I pushed open the door that led into the master bedroom.

I took a moment to let my eyes adjust. A machine played white noise over the sounds of two people softly snoring. I walked past a mirror, pictures hung on the walls, photographs of young people smiling into the camera, at a wedding, at a party, on a hike, then stood beside Emils Jansons's bedside.

I knelt down and put my hand over his mouth.

He startled awake, stared, then struggled. He woke his wife, who sucked in a sharp surprised breath and rolled to the side to flip on the light.

It blinded poor Emils. He blinked rapidly.

The wife said something in Latvian. Fear dripped from her tongue. Emils gaped at me, and I removed my hand from his mouth. He said something

back in Latvian, and although she relaxed slightly, fear still oozed from her pores.

I could almost smell it.

“Your wife is pretty,” I said softly, head tilted to the side. “It’d be a shame if something bad happened to her.” I’d let him fill in the blanks. I wouldn’t touch the woman or allow her to be mistreated by my men.

But I would kill her. Quickly, efficiently. A mercy in disguise.

“No need for threats. You’re in my house.” Emils sounded angry. So the little bureaucrat had a spine after all. “What do you want?”

I pointed at the wife. “Go into the bathroom. Sit on the toilet seat. Do not make noise.”

She glanced at Emils, who nodded. She got out of bed and drifted into the attached room. Matthias stepped in with her and shut the door.

Emils stared at the space his wife had vacated a moment earlier.

“I met with your friends,” I said, speaking low and slow. “The Russian men. They weren’t very nice.”

“Brnovich has all sorts of associates. I assume it didn’t go well.” He turned his gaze to me. He was sweating. Poor bastard.

“No, it did not. What’s going on here, Emils? Why would Brnovich send me to deal with Russian gangsters?”

“They’re not—”

I punched him in the mouth.

He recoiled, groaning. I didn’t hit him hard, only enough to make my point. He glared at me, dabbing at his lip, which was already swelling.

“Try again.”

“I don’t know why.”

I believed him, but that didn’t help. “Is Brnovich serious about this deal?”

“As far as I know, yes, he is.”

“Call him. Right now. Set up a meeting for the morning.”

“Please, Mr. Solar, I cannot just—”

I hit him again. Harder this time. His head lolled and he groaned.

“Call him.”

He reached for his cell phone on the nightstand and did as instructed. He stared blankly at the far wall until someone picked up at the other end.

His conversation was short and clipped. He spoke Latvian, which was frustrating. I knew some Russian, but Latvian was different enough that I couldn't entirely follow what he was saying.

Emils covered the phone. “He says you can go meet him at his estate. He has land outside of the city.”

“Address, please.”

He pulled a piece of paper and a pen from the top drawer and wrote it down in a quick, precise hand. He shoved the scrap over.

I folded it and placed it in my pocket.

He uncovered the phone and spoke briefly before hanging up.

“You're expected. Please go straight there. Brnovich will be waiting. It's a several-hour drive.”

“I'd apologize for this, but you understand now, don't you?”

“Understand what, Mr. Solar?” He tilted his chin up in my direction.

I grabbed his arm and wrenched him forward. He sucked in a shocked breath as I took his palm in my hands, tucking his forearm into my armpit for leverage, then twisted his joint with all my strength.

His wrist snapped like a twig.

He screamed in pain. I shoved him away as he curled around his injury. I heard sounds, noises from other rooms. My men said soothing words in the

hallway.

Matthias came out of the bathroom. The wife was crying.

“Finished?” he asked.

“Finished.” I left Emils groaning on his bed. In the hallway, three young children, ranging from ten to four, stood gawping at my soldiers. I winked at them and pressed a finger to my lips. “Not a word, children.” I gestured and my men followed.

We left through the front. No need for stealth now.

In the car, Robyn’s eyes met mine. She looked miserable and exhausted. “I heard screaming.”

“Emils wasn’t happy with our conversation.” I buckled my seatbelt and handed Matthias the address. “We’re going for a drive, but we’ll stop back at the hotel first.”

“This place is four hours away,” Matthias said.

“Then we’ll leave at two and get there around six. He’s expecting us sooner.”

Matthias nodded, understanding. Robyn stared at me, bewildered.

“Who’s expecting us?”

“Brnovich. We’re going for a vacation in the countryside.” I smiled at her sadly and inched closer. “I’m afraid it won’t be much fun, but I can do my best to amuse you.”

“No, thanks. I can amuse myself.”

“I’m sure you can,” I said softly, touching her cheek as the car pulled out. “But I have to warn you, this might be dangerous.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised.”

“I’ll keep you safe. You know that.”

“I know you’ll attack a man for looking at me the wrong way. I can’t say I’m very safe with you around.”

I smiled and reached my hand around to wrap my fingers through her hair. She tried to pull away, but I grabbed tight, leaning across the seat to stare into her eyes. “We’re not at Blackwoods right now, love. This is the real world.”

“Nothing’s real with you.” She shoved her hands against my chest. I liked the warmth in her fingers, despite the anger radiating from her. “Let me go.”

I held her a moment longer, then released.

She pulled away, glaring, and crossed her arms over her chest.

I retreated into myself then. Let her have some space for now.

I had planning to do and a defense minister to beat senseless.

DEAR ROBYN

I was born to kill.

Born to sell weapons of death. Born to revel in the misery of others.

To prosper from the misfortunes of those in the way of my family's weapons.

Merchant of blood and gore.

My father never let me forget it. One night, when I was ten, he dragged me from my bed and made me break down and rebuild an old Kalashnikov he kept in the kitchen. I did it again and again, blindfolded, until he was satisfied. It took hours. When I was done, he beat me with a thin wooden switch for keeping him from his bed for so long, then sent me off to shower and do my chores.

That was my father at his softest.

I picture myself as a parent. I imagine my children. Would I treat them like that? Would I be so desperate to make them hard? To make them killers?

No, I don't want my children to suffer my fate.

What then?

Will you soften me? Turn me into a better man? Make me the father I always wanted?

I think about getting you pregnant. I picture your legs spread wide as I plunge myself inside. I dream about your moans. I spend hours imagining your orgasms.

The way your legs shake. The way your mouth opens.

I've never seen it and yet I feel as though I've experienced it a thousand times.

I want to taste it a thousand more.

Will you let me tease you until you're soaking?

Force you to crawl on your hands and knees to take my cock in your mouth?

I won't make you beg too much.

Unless that's what you want.

I'll spank your ass and pull your hair and hold you down so there's no escape.

I'll fuck you rough or fuck you slow. I'll make you scream and make you moan.

I'll keep you as my own.

My little toy. My doll. My love.

Will you be all mine?

Yes, darling, you will.

Love,

C

ROBYN

I slept through most of the drive.
Calvin was silent. Brooding. Angry.

So more or less himself.

His assistant Matthias sat up front and stared out the window. When I woke with the dawn, he still hadn't moved, and hadn't passed out at all.

Calvin's head was leaned up against the window, his lips pursed together, like even in sleep the world managed to disappoint him.

"Does he always do things like this?" I asked softly.

Matthias looked at me in the rearview mirror. "If you mean does he always do extremely dangerous and borderline insane thing, then no. He doesn't. I wouldn't remain with him if he did."

I smiled slightly. "How come I've never seen you around campus?"

"His world at school and his world in business are two separate things."

"Do you know him well?"

"Very well. Do you?"

I considered that. "Not at all. Although I feel like I do at the same time. It's strange."

“That’s Calvin.”

“He wrote me letters. Lots and lots of letters. Some of them had stories about his life growing up.” I hesitated, glanced at the sleeping bear next to me. I spoke softly. “Were they true?”

“I don’t know what he said.”

“Was his father an abusive piece of shit?”

“Yes, he was. I’m surprised he told you about that. He doesn’t talk about it much.”

“Were you around for it?”

He nodded and his eyes went glassy. “We grew up together. His father was a difficult man. High standards. Treated Calvin the worst though, since Calvin was the heir.”

“What’s their relationship like now?”

“Strained, at best. But you should ask him.” Matthias looked away as Calvin stirred.

I went quiet. Calvin woke, frowned at me, then smiled slightly, like he wasn’t sure if I’d still be there and he was happy to find I hadn’t disappeared. He turned to look out the window, squinting, then looked at the time.

“We’re close,” he said as if he’d been awake the whole time.

We finished the drive in silence and pulled down a long, meandering private road near a massive blue lake. Brnovich’s house was an absurdly palatial estate with crisp white columns and half a dozen expensive cars parked out front. A single man came down from the front steps wearing a black suit and looking haggard. He had gray hair and a trim little black mustache, clearly dyed an unnatural shade.

“Welcome, welcome, we were expecting you sooner,” the man said, looking around fretfully.

“We drove as fast as we could,” Calvin said, stepping forward. “Where’s Brnovich?”

“Inside, inside. He didn’t sleep at all last night, the poor man.” Brnovich’s servant spoke perfect English. I was tempted to scream my head off and beg him to help me get away.

Which would only end in disaster, of course.

“Take me to him.” Calvin strode to the house and his men followed. Matthias gave me a tight smile, and I smiled back.

I wondered if I could be friends with him.

But no, of course not. Any man willing to stand by Calvin’s side wasn’t the kind of person I wanted to bring into my life.

“He’s very tired, very tired, perhaps it would be best for everyone to rest before you speak?” The mustached man danced ahead of Calvin.

“No. Take me now.” Calvin didn’t pause as he stormed up the steps and into the house.

The entry hall was grand. The floors were marble and a staircase led up to the second floor. A chandelier hung and glittered with a thousand diamonds and crystals. Pillars were carved with scenes out of myth: foxes chasing hunter, men with the bodies of deer, women wearing nothing but clouds and rivers.

Calvin glared all around until the mustached man finally gestured for him to follow. More staff appeared, and Matthias said he’d see to the guards.

Calvin grabbed my hand and pulled me along. I couldn’t do much more than stumble after as the mustached man took us down a short hall, through a door, and into a small dining room.

Brnovich sat at the far end. He was heavysset with a thick beard and small, beady eyes. His skin was ruddy and marked with red splotches, and his hair was thinning but combed over to cover his gleaming skull. He wore silk pajamas, the jacket half open to reveal a hairy chest, and he stood when we entered.

If he was embarrassed to be caught in only his pajamas, he didn’t show it.

“Mr. Solar,” he said, beaming, and laughed a hearty, loud guffaw. “Welcome to my summer home. Please, come sit. Shall I send Ivan to bring you food?”

“Please,” Calvin said, looking at the mustached man. Ivan, apparently. “Coffee for me and Robyn.” He took a seat near Brnovich, and I sat down reluctantly.

Brnovich grinned at Calvin then studied me. I wasn’t sure what he thought, but he looked away as if he’d learned all he needed to know, and wasn’t impressed.

“I received word that your meeting with my associate Makarov did not go as planned. I am truly sad to hear about this, but I promise you, Mr. Solar, we will resolve this issue and move forward with our deal.” He grinned jovially but Calvin only stared impassively.

Ivan returned with coffee and a plate of eggs, fruit, cheese, breakfast meats, and small fried pancakes I didn’t quite recognize. I was hungry, so I picked at the food while Calvin sipped his coffee.

“I’m still trying to understand why you would send me to meet with a man like Makarov,” Calvin said, keeping his tone neutral and level. “Russian gangsters don’t seem like the kind of individuals to be a part of an official government negotiation.”

Brnovich waved that away. “You must understand, things are difficult, yes? My government does not want to purchase your weapons, not officially at least. So we must do things under the table, so you Americans say. We do it this way to avoid scrutiny. Gives me freedom to make good deal.” He showed his teeth one more time.

“Your man wanted to negotiate my price down.”

Brnovich stopped smiling. “He was not authorized to do so.”

“I’m here because I do not like being jerked around, Minister Brnovich. I flew to Riga, I brought my shipment, and I am prepared to fulfill my end of the bargain. If you do not wish to pay me, and you no longer want my merchandise, then please, say so, and I will leave.”

Brnovich studied Calvin. My heart raced and I wanted to be anywhere but at this table. Calvin’s hand moved to my leg and squeezed my thigh as if he could hear my thoughts and wanted to steady me. I bit down on a strawberry and tried not to let the sweet taste mingle with the feeling of his strong palm

on my leg, so high up and close to the gap between my legs.

“Do not leave, Mr. Solar. Please, finish your meal, go to your rooms, and get some rest. In a few hours, we will sign the papers, finish negotiating the details, and all will be okay. Can we do that?”

Calvin nodded sharply. “We can.”

“Good!” Brnovich pounded the table and stood. “Then I will bid you a good morning and a good evening. I will get some beauty rest. Ivan will show you to your rooms, then send for you this afternoon.” Brnovich left, bustling away, his breakfast left half eaten on the table.

Calvin stared after him with weary eyes as Ivan appeared from nowhere and began nervously fussing again.

We were swept out of the room and up the stairs. Ivan showed us to a room on the second floor, near the staircase. It was large, with a sitting area and a fireplace, logs already crackling behind the grate. The bed was large and lavish, and I turned to ask Ivan where I’d be staying when he shut the door in my face.

Calvin paced to the window and looked out at the lawn. I stared at the door before slowly turning.

They put us in a room together.

Of course they did.

Calvin turned to me, suppressing a smile. “What’s wrong?”

“You’re sleeping on the floor.”

“No, I’m not.” He came toward me.

“I’ll scream.”

“Half the people in here don’t speak English. What do you think you’re going to do?”

“I’ll run.”

“Please run. I’d enjoy the exercise.”

I sighed and groaned. “This is sick. What are we even doing out here?”

“I was wondering the same thing,” he said softly, glancing back toward the windows. “Did you notice how quickly Brnovich apologized? And how desperate he was to get out of that room?”

“He didn’t want to make any promises, that’s for sure.”

“Something’s not right.” Calvin paced in front of the fire.

“What are we going to do? We can always leave. Go back to Blackwoods.” I missed Jarrod and Cora. I missed my mom, even if I hated her, too.

“We’ll stay. There’s still a chance this will work out. And if it doesn’t—” He paused and looked up at me, and I took a step back. I saw depths in those eyes I never imagined were possible. So much rage, so much promise. “I’ll gut the fucking wretch and leave his body in his precious little lake.” He walked to the bed and climbed on top. “Now come on, wife. Come join me. It’s comfortable.”

I wanted nothing more than to climb into bed and pass out. I was desperate for sleep after the night before.

But I’d rather cut off my own tongue than stay in the same bed at him. I moved toward the couch along the far wall, but he was up and at me before I could reach it.

I yelped when he grabbed me. I pounded on his back when he threw me over his shoulder.

And I groaned when he threw me onto the bed.

“Asshole,” I said, kicking, as he climbed up beside me. I caught him in the shoulder and nearly smashed my heel into his mouth.

He caught my ankles, threw my legs aside, and pinned me down on the comforter.

“Are you done?” he asked, face inches from mine.

I struggled, breathing hard. “I don’t want to be in this bed with you.”

“Stop being a child. I’m not trying to fuck you.”

“You’re always trying.”

He laughed then kissed my neck. I groaned with anger and something else, something more primal. I couldn’t help myself. He wedged a knee between my legs, right up against my warm, soaking spot, and I was stupid and tempted to rub myself along it.

“Not yet, love. But I will, and when I do, you’ll know it.” He held me tighter, steady, his eyes locked on mine.

Then he kissed me.

I was too surprised to fight. I opened my mouth and let his tongue lap against my own. He tasted like sunrise and gunpowder, acrid and gorgeous, just like him. I bit his lip and he bit me back, and I found myself returning his kiss with a shocking passion I hadn’t realized was deep inside my core. I rolled my hips and groaned as he kept me there, at his mercy, under his control.

All at once, he stopped, and I was left breathless.

“Get some sleep.” He climbed under the covers and rolled onto his side.

I gaped. Not sure what just happened.

But I did as he commanded. I was too overwhelmed to do anything else.

It was hot beneath the sheets as I curled into a ball and squeezed my eyes shut.

He kissed me. He took me and he kissed me.

And I kissed him back.

For all the hate I felt, for all the anger, I still gave in to him.

Just like he said I would.

God, I was pathetic. Weak and pathetic.

But his hands were strong and his mouth was soft and I yielded, god, I gave myself over, and when he came looking for more, ready to pry me apart and lick me and fuck me and fill me, I was terrified I’d break all over again, and slide down into his abyss, and love it.

CALVIN

Matthias came a few hours later. The house was quiet. Staff crept along the corridors like mice. Ivan was nowhere in sight.

We kept our voices down. Robyn slept, curled under the sheets like a cat, her hair spread out on the pillow. She was angelic and heavenly. Her taste lingered in my mouth. I wish I hadn't stopped.

"The men are spread out over the grounds," Matthias said, face pulled into a worried frown. "I don't like this."

"Get them all together. Double and triple them up in rooms if you have to, but get them all close."

"The staff are watching like hawks."

"Let them. They won't try to stop it, and if they do, we'll leave." I hesitated and moved closer, whispering. "Did all of our luggage arrive safely?"

He nodded, understanding what I meant. "All of it."

"Good." I patted his shoulder. "Go round up the men and pull them together. Make sure they have their suitcases prepared." I didn't go into detail. I assumed there were listening devices all over the house, and if there weren't, Brnovich was a moron.

But a man like him didn't reach the heights of government without a bit of cleverness.

Matthias left and shut the door quietly behind him.

Robyn stirred. She sat up on an elbow and I watched her like the sun rising. She was glorious, cheeks flushed from sleeping in front of the hot fire and next to my body. I was worn and haggard, but she was like my opposite. Where I was ruined, she was whole.

I wanted to drag her down and feast on every inch of her body. I wanted to hear her scream with pleasure.

And only a hint of fear.

“Good morning.” I opened my suitcase and began to change.

She gaped at me. I didn’t care if she saw my naked body. I had nothing to hide.

She looked away. I smirked to myself.

“You could at least go into the bathroom if you’re going to do that.” She sounded breathless.

She liked what she saw.

“I could, but you wouldn’t get a show that way.”

“God, you’re impossible.”

“Get up. I need you to change.” I finished putting on my suit then went through her bags. I picked out a simple dress, one that would accentuate her hips and breasts, and draped it on the end of the bed. “Put this on.”

She glared at me then at the dress. “It’s like three in the afternoon. I’m not putting that on.”

“I don’t care what time it is. I want Brnovich staring at your tits.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Put on the dress.”

“Go to hell.”

I walked to her side of the bed. “I will drag you out and make you wear it. Do you want that? Believe me, love, I’ll enjoy stripping you down.”

She clenched her jaw. I wondered if she’d fight. I hoped she would.

But she threw the sheets back, got to her feet, and stormed into the bathroom instead.

I let her stew a bit. Truth was, I hated the idea of parading her beautiful body around in front of a scumbag like Brnovich, but we were in the lion’s den. I needed every advantage I could get.

I only hoped that I wouldn’t rip out the bastard’s eyeballs if he looked at Robyn’s chest for too long.

She took a shower and came out not long later, fresh and still damp. I sat near the window and watched as she picked up the dress, studiously ignoring me. I expected her to go into the bathroom like she said I should—

Instead, she dropped her towel.

I gaped, too shocked to do anything but stare.

Her legs were long and lean. Her ass was tight and gorgeous. Her nipples were pink and stiff, her breasts round and firm, her stomach flat, her shoulders small, her hips wide, her arms, her hands, her lips, fuck—

I was overwhelmed, losing my mind. I’d never lost control so quickly or so intensely before. I couldn’t think, could barely breathe. Her body was like a lighthouse, but instead of keeping me from dashing to bits on the rocks, it beckoned me closer and closer.

She pulled the dress on nice and slow, giving me a goddamn show.

When she was finished, she pulled her hair aside. “Zip me.”

Her voice snapped me out of the trance. My cock was so hard it must’ve been filled with half the blood in my body. I stood and walked over as if in a dream. I floated, glided. My vision was blurry. My hands were shaking.

When the hell did my hands ever shake?

I pulled the zipper up. I let my fingers linger on her neck. She looked at me, blushing.

“You wanted me to watch. Why?” My voice was husky and raw. My throat felt tight, constricted. I wanted to bite the soft skin at the base of her neck, where her shoulder arched up toward her lips.

“Because when I’m out there with your little defense minister, I want you to picture my body beneath this dress. You won’t last ten minutes letting him look at me then.”

My mouth fell open and I laughed. I couldn’t help myself. So bold and clever. She glared and stalked to the other side of the room.

The girl was crazy. But god, she was right.

I was a jealous monster, and now that I’d seen what was beneath her clothes—the perfection, the immaculate skin—I couldn’t let a pig like Brnovich catch a single glimpse of her.

She was using my own obsession against me.

I loved it.

“Get changed,” I said finally, giving in.

She tried to stifle her smile. She knew she won this round as she approached me, head tilted. “Are you sure?”

I stalked forward and grabbed her wrist. She gasped in shock as I shoved her back against the wall next to the bathroom. Her lips opened, her face twisted into a snarl of pain and outrage. I held her tight and breathed in the sweet smell of her rage and her body. She was a flower and I wanted to rip her from the earth and make her all mine.

“Get changed before I rip that fucking dress off your body and take your soaking wet cunt right here and now.” I snarled at her, barely able to restrain myself.

She didn’t move. Her anger turned to fear. My lips were inches from hers.

“Will that make you feel big and strong? You’re twice my size. You could do whatever you wanted with me.”

I held on tighter. I’d leave a damn mark. I wanted her to remember this moment. “You’re damn right I am,” I whispered and brushed my lips against hers. She stood still, either out of terror or excitement, I didn’t know, and I didn’t care. There wasn’t much of a difference between the two. “Keep testing me, Robyn. Push the limits of my patience. Find out what I’m capable of doing to you.”

“Let me go.”

I held on a moment longer before releasing her wrists. She slipped away, rubbing her skin and glaring at me. I stepped in her direction.

She let out a little yelp, grabbed her bag, and ran into the bathroom. She slammed and locked the door.

I wasn’t going to survive this girl.

Ten minutes later, she came out again, wearing a pair of tight jeans and a loose sweater. I didn’t recall packing that, but then I didn’t look too closely. I wished I’d only brought lingerie and underwear and forced her to lounge around my rooms like a beautiful bird.

But I didn’t want a useless wife. I didn’t need a trophy. I wanted Robyn, clever and angry and passionate Robyn. I wanted her willing, happy, excited. I wanted her filled with anger and pain and pleasure. I wanted all of her, and not a bit less.

Brnovich waited out on a tiled veranda. Mosaics were set in the floor at intervals, and he dined on poached eggs and salty fish while reading a Russian newspaper. He smiled as we approached, Robyn on my heels. His eyes flipped to her for only a brief moment before looking back to me. If she’d worn that dress, he would’ve let his gaze linger—and I might’ve ripped out his eyes.

“You’re an early riser,” Brnovich said.

“I like to start the day as soon as I can.” I lingered, refusing to sit down. I liked having the position of power. “Did you rest well?”

“Yes, yes, I always do. I’m like a baby that way.” He grinned wickedly. “Though I don’t know why they use that phrase, sleeping like a baby? I have two children, a little girl and a little boy, though they are not so little now, yes? They never slept for those first few months, always fussing, screaming, crying. We hired so many nannies to keep track of those savages.”

“They’re hard to get down, but once they’re out, aren’t they perfect?” Robyn asked before I could speak.

Brnovich gave her a curious look. “That is true.” Then he grinned. “Because they can’t scream when they’re unconscious.” He laughed at his own joke.

Robyn gave me a mild look and I forced myself to smile.

“I was hoping we could finalize our paperwork this morning. It’s a long trip back to Riga.”

Brnovich waved and pushed his chair back. Two house servants appeared to take away the plates. “Come, I always take a walk after I break my fast. It aids with the digestion.” He laughed again. Jovial old Brnovich. He was in a good mood today.

I didn’t like it.

He led the way down a path between the hedges. The land around his manor house was kept in pristine shape. The grass was cut and the hedges were trimmed, and any stray plant or weed was ripped from the soil. We walked through the most manicured stretch of land I’d ever seen. Past the rolling hills, the nameless lake lay like a jewel in the early sunlight.

I wished Matthias was present. He had most of the deal locked away in his genius little skull. But too late for that now. If I asked to wait for him, I’d look weak.

At least I had Robyn, trailing along behind me.

“I love coming here.” Brnovich breathed deep. “I own most of the land around the lake and I keep it all wild. Do you like to hunt?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Shame, shame. Hunting is the manliest thing you can do. Kill animals for food. It’s primal. Nothing relaxes me like traipsing around the woods with a gun, yes?”

“We need to discuss shipment inspections, ammunition boxes, and a payment schedule. I assume state funds will be appropriated.”

“No need to worry about any of that,” he said dismissively. “While we are here, we must go see the fountain.” He looked at Robyn, a slight sparkle in his eyes. “Or perhaps I take you down to the lake for a swim. You have a bathing suit? One can be provided, if you do not.”

I tensed and stared at Brnovich. He leered at Robyn openly, not trying to hide his interest. Even though she was covered head to toe, he still looked at her like she was revealing herself to him, like she was an offering, a ripe plum. I wanted to smash his skull against the dirt until it cracked open like a melon.

She was a peach. Her juice would run down my chin. I’d lap her up until she screamed.

And no other man would touch her.

“She isn’t interested,” I said with more venom in my voice than I’d intended.

Brnovich looked confused. “Not interested? It would be fun. Believe me, I have plenty of outfits we can put the girl in. That is why you brought her, yes?”

“No,” I said and stopped walking. I felt Robyn’s tension radiate off her. I hated myself for thinking that I’d use her as a distraction to get the upper hand against this slovenly creature.

She was right. I would’ve ripped his skull to pieces if she’d come out of that house in that dress and let his unworthy gaze linger in her breasts.

I was a fool. A stupid, stupid fool, and I was lucky she showed me just how misguided I’d been.

“No?” Brnovich tilted his head. I was on the verge of violence. I was about to do something reckless and stupid.

“She is here because I trust her opinion.” I stepped closer to the fat old general. “She is mine and don’t you forget that.”

He seemed utterly taken aback. I bet he’d never encountered a woman he wasn’t allowed to partake of, at least not for a long time. His compatriots, sycophants, admirers, and underlings must’ve all indulged his whims and desires, all because the bastard was in a position of power.

But I wouldn’t. I didn’t care if it destroyed this deal.

Robyn knew me better than I knew myself.

“I understand,” Brnovich said, gathering himself, and his face grew serious. “You wish to talk business? Then we’ll talk business, but only when I have my trusted advisors available.”

“You’re the one that makes decisions.”

“That’s right, and you must not forget it.” He stared at me, his hands clenching into fists.

The threat of something deadly lingered in the charged atmosphere. I couldn’t help but smile. I wanted him to come at me. Let the old shit find out what it felt like to be beaten into a pulp by a man better and stronger than him.

Robyn spoke up. “I wouldn’t mind swimming.”

I stepped back in surprise. Brnovich stared at her in bafflement. She smiled sweetly at me then at Brnovich.

“You wouldn’t?” I was skeptical, to put it mildly. I couldn’t imagine her ever wanting to wear a bikini supplied by this cretin for his amusement.

“It’s a nice lake. I wouldn’t mind going out on the boat, if the minister has one.”

Brnovich perked up. His hands unclenched. “Boat? I have boat. I have many boats. I can show you, if you wish. Boathouse is not far.”

“I would be absolutely delighted.” Robyn stepped past me and took the minister’s arm. “How big are the boats?”

“All sizes, dear.” He patted her hand, beaming with pride. “I will show you the biggest. She is a beauty, you will see. If you wish, we can take her out, and you can dive from the second balcony into the water. Very deep and beautiful, out in the middle of the lake.”

“You impress me with the boats, and I’ll be happy to impress you with my diving.”

Brnovich roared laughter and walked along with Robyn, and I trailed after, doing breathing exercises to keep from murdering the old shit.

We spent the next hour looking at his boats. He had big ones, small ones, fast ones, slow ones, and by the time he finished blathering on about each, explaining what their crude names meant in too much detail, I was exhausted, hungry, craving caffeine, and on the verge of nuking this entire estate just to be done with this awful visit.

Robyn was in good spirits. She bounced back to the house with Brnovich on her tail. He was clearly smitten with her, and followed her like a puppy dog.

“Eat, eat,” Brnovich said when we arrived back on the veranda. “You break your fast, drink your coffee, and relax. My dear, we will go on the lake later, later, perhaps even tomorrow. Please, I have work, but please enjoy.” Brnovich begged himself off and disappeared inside.

I watched him go. Robyn stood very close.

“That’s how it’s done, asshole,” she muttered.

I grunted. “I’ll note that we didn’t get any work finished.”

She hesitated, frowning. “You’re right.”

“Never spoke about the deal once. When I tried, he deflected.”

“Then went on and on about his boats. How the hell does anyone care so much about boats?”

I turned to her and touched her hand. “You did good back there.”

She glared at me and pulled her hand away. “I didn’t do it for you. I just wanted to make sure you didn’t murder our host. I figured that might get in

the away of me returning back to Blackwoods.”

I snorted but grabbed her hand and held it tightly. I didn't let her go when she tried to pull away. “I would've killed him if he kept looking at you like meat.”

“Aren't you glad I changed then?”

“Yes, I am. I can be a stupid man sometimes.”

She stopped trying to wrestle her hand away. “Admitting you have a problem is the first step.”

“You aren't going in that lake with him.”

“No, I'm not, but I can if I want to.” She yanked herself free and sat down at the table. “And you can't do a damn thing to stop me.”

I stared at her and laughed.

There was a lot I could do. Lock her in the room. Tie her to the bed. Strip her down and fuck her senseless. Brnovich wouldn't mind if I ravished Robyn into submission. In fact, he likely expected it.

She was in the nesting ground of sharks, and she was drenched in blood, a lovely little meal. And she had no clue.

“I'll find the staff and get something to eat. You can relax.”

“Planned on it.” She grinned and leaned back.

I stepped inside, unable to suppress a smile.

ROBYN

I was flushed and angry but kept it together. I managed that disgusting man for Calvin, even though he looked like he was about to murder the old bastard. I figured pretending to care about boats was better than escaping the country to avoid a murder charge and possibly sparking an international incident, assuming we could get away at all.

The way Calvin looked at me in those moments right before I took charge and defused the situation was like lightning on my spine. He was filled with lust and rage and need, an incredible, electric combination that was both humiliating and exciting. I hated myself for liking it; I couldn't stop myself from needing him. He was worming his way into my thoughts and I didn't know what I could do to make it stop.

As the day wore on, Calvin became more and more agitated. Matthias moved Calvin's soldiers closer together, consolidating them along the same hallway we were staying in. If the staff noticed or cared, nobody said a word.

Calvin paced around the room. He stalked the hallways. He berated a scared-looking cleaning boy as the guy tried to vacuum the carpets downstairs. Calvin looked like a monster possessed by infernal, insatiable appetites.

I couldn't blame the young kid for being scared shitless. Calvin was terrifying, like a barbarian run amok. He stormed and raged, but did it all internally, silently brooding on his ever-present anger. I was afraid he'd rip the house to shreds.

I was afraid he'd rip himself to pieces.

Or worse, take me. Press me down on the cold bed. Strip off my clothes. Take away what meager dignity I had left—and ruin me, ruin me right. Kiss me, lick me, spread my legs roughly, pin my hands down, hold my wrists, slide his thick cock between my legs and make me scream.

I was afraid of it, but the thought only heightened my latent greed. I wanted more and more, wanted to see how far he'd go, feeling how much pleasure he could give me, if only I'd open myself and let him pillage and destroy.

That was Calvin. He left bodies in his wake. He was a nightmare incarnate. He was hunger and ardor and frenzy. He was the pulse-shattering feeling in the middle of a wild panic, or the scream on the edge of an orgasm, or the brainless tip into black oblivion. He scared the hell out of me.

So yeah, of course he frightened the shit out of the staff.

“Something's wrong here.” He stood in the middle of our room after having already stormed through the entire house searching for Brnovich, only to be told, over and over, that the minister was busy, and could we please be patient?

“The only thing wrong is your lack of patience.” I sat with my legs crossed, trying to fake my way into relaxation.

“He keeps deflecting. You saw it when we first got here, and again earlier today. Why do you think that is?”

“He's a government official. Isn't making you wait part of the game?”

“No, he wasn't like that before.” Calvin stopped and stared down at his hands. “We negotiated everything, Robyn. Down to the smallest detail. Everything was set. When we came here, I was under the impression that all I had to do was follow through with the plans.”

“Things change. You're selling him weapons, not toilet paper.”

He gave me a flat look. “To a man like Brnovich, it might as well be. He doesn't give a shit about what these guns will be used for, so long as he can use them to his personal advantage.”

“So what are you saying then? He wants to back out?”

“I can’t decide.” He gripped one of the bed’s corner posts. “I don’t know why he’d go through the trouble of setting up this whole thing only to walk at the last possible moment. He wouldn’t want to insult my family like that. Unless...” Calvin began to pace again, hands clasped behind his back.

Silence followed, broken only by the sound of his feet on the floor. He stared ahead of him like he forgot all about me.

“Unless what?” I prompted finally, unable to take the cliffhanger.

“He might know that I’m not here on behalf of my family.”

I let that sink in. “Your family doesn’t realize you’re selling millions of dollars’ worth of weapons to a Baltic state? Are you doing this illegally? Are we going to some sort of international jail for arms dealers?”

He waved a hand in the air. “The Solar company is massive. We’re a multinational conglomerate with more subsidiaries than you could possibly imagine. It’s not difficult to run this deal below the awareness of my father and my brothers.” He gave me a flat look. “And there are no jails for arms dealers. They tend to end up rich or dead.”

“Why didn’t you tell your family about this?”

He stopped pacing and faced me. “Because if I’m going to take over for my father when he passes, I need to prove myself.”

“I thought that’s what you needed me for.”

“You’re one step in the process.” He walked closer, hands tensing and relaxing, like he was imagining his fingers wrapped in my hair. “I was raised in my family’s corporation. I lived and breathed the business from a young age, and I’ve never known anything else. But I’ve had other interests in the last few years.” He let that linger, staring at me ravenously.

“Like football? And school?”

“Among other things, yes. My father believes I’ve grown lazy and soft. He would prefer it if I stayed home and did nothing but work, while I’ve always felt that I need experience outside of the boardroom if I’m going to be an

effective leader.” He sat down next to me and kicked his feet up on the coffee table. “This deal is my way of showing him that I’ve come into my own.”

I watched him carefully. Calvin never struck me as the kind of person that cared what other people thought of him, but when he spoke of his father, it was with a strange earnestness, like he truly cared that his father saw him as an equal and a peer. That struck me as strange, but it made him more human.

Ever since we first met, I thought he was like an alien. Distant, unknowable. Like normal emotions didn’t matter.

There was lust, there was rage. There was need. But things beyond that? I couldn’t imagine him feeling anything.

He had depths I never guessed at before.

“What happens if he still doesn’t think you’re ready?” I asked carefully. “Even if this works out and the deal goes down, what then?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I have contingency plans. Some involve violence.”

“You wouldn’t kill your own dad.”

“You don’t know my father.” He laughed bitterly.

“You sound like you care about him though, or at least what he thinks.”

Calvin touched his chin for a moment, considering. “I hate my father,” he said, speaking slowly. “But I respect him for what he’s built. He inherited the Solar company, but he made it into something truly incredible. He pursued his goals with an admirable single-minded determination, and he was ruthless in everything. He was also an awful parent.”

I studied his face. I remembered the letters—he mentioned some of the terrible things he went through as a child. Awful, abusive, manipulative things, the sort of twisted games that would permanently scar any child. It explained so much about him, but I found it difficult to reconcile.

“Do you want to be like him?”

He let out a soft snort and glanced down at me. His lips pulled into a smile. “I don’t need a psychoanalysis session right now.”

“I’m only trying to get to know you.”

He shifted, leaning closer. “Then know this. I hate my father, but I inherited some of the things that made him great.”

“Like what?” I leaned away, very aware of his proximity, of the motions of his chest as he breathed, of the smell of his skin and shampoo.

“I’m single-minded. I’m strong. I’m ruthless. I take what I want and I don’t apologize for it. I let the weak whine and complain. I simply change the world to fit my vision.”

“That’s not working so well right now, is it?”

He grinned viciously as he reached out and grabbed my hair. I yelped and he pulled me closer, dragging me against his body. I struggled, squirmed, but his hands were like iron. He shoved me down face-first over his legs, my face against the cushion of his couch, as he brought a hand down and slammed it against my ass.

I gasped in shock. For one intense, amazing moment, a bolt of pleasure lanced down my spine. He did it again, and I felt myself tingling and wet.

Then the realization of what was happening locked into place and overrode my baser needs.

He was spanking me.

I freaked. I struggled. I slammed my elbows in his gut and ripped my head away. I rolled onto the floor then scrambled to my feet, eyes wide and staring, and he was laughing, laughing, but his eyes suggested he didn’t think this was funny, and the bulge straining against his pants certainly wasn’t a joke.

That fucking monster spanked me.

“Don’t get too close, my love,” he said, standing, not bothering to hide his erection, the sick freak. “You don’t want to find out what’s underneath my handsome smiles.”

“You piece of shit. You can’t treat me like that.”

“Tell me you didn’t like it.” He advanced and I scrambled away.

I didn’t want to lie, but I also didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of knowing just how badly that turned me on. There was no pain—he hadn’t hit me hard enough. There was only the distinct sensation of his hand on my ass and being at his utter mercy.

There was a feeling of being controlled. Of submitting to a higher power.

Of giving myself to a beast and letting it devour me whole.

If my pants were off—if he could’ve touched bare skin, or better, spread my ass wide and slipped his fingers between my legs to that soaking wet mound and teased me and fucked me to god, oh, god—

I slammed back against the bathroom door. Why was the door closed? I grabbed at the handle and wrenched it open, hoping I could escape inside.

He shoved the door shut and pinned me.

“Tell me you don’t want me to rip you to shreds,” he whispered, his voice painfully seductive. His words were honey, dripping from his tongue. I wanted to taste them, to lick him and let him lick me back, to spread myself and give in to the dark pleasure I knew he wanted to give.

Only I didn’t know if I could come back from something like that.

“I want to go home. I want to survive this nightmare.”

“It’s not a nightmare, love. It’s something so much better. It’s a wet dream, but it’s reality.” His fingers laced through my hair and gripped hard. I pushed against his chest, but the fucker was a brick wall. I struggled and that only made him grin more. His lips came within inches of mine.

I snapped like an angry dog. I barely missed taking a chunk from his mouth. He laughed and pulled my hair hard enough to hurt. I gasped in shock as his other hand gripped my ass—

And he kissed me.

I groaned into that kiss. It was savage and incredible. He spread my lips apart and his tongue slipped into my mouth, moving along my tongue, my teeth. I growled in rage and pleasure, like a purr in my throat, and his other hand tightened on my ass. He pulled me close and I felt his hard cock against my soft pussy, right between my legs, and I moaned in outrage and pleasure as he kissed me, and I kissed him back, mindless and insane.

I'd let him do whatever he wanted.

Right now, if he stripped me bare, I'd let him.

Oh, I'd fight. I'd even try to hurt him.

But when he fucked me, I'd submit, I'd moan, I'd beg his name, and I'd come, god, I'd come along his thick shaft, again and again.

He'd leave me a shuddering mess in a pool of sweat on the bed.

I wanted it so badly. I pressed myself against him, grinding my hips along the length of his massive cock. He was a monster, a sick freak, and I wanted him to ravish me, to defile me, to destroy. I wanted to sink down into his darkness and luxuriate in whatever sickness he'd drive into my life.

I wanted him.

I hated myself for it. I hated him, too.

Our lips parted. I gasped for breath. His eyes were filled with rage and his hands tightened on my body.

"Tell me you want it," he whispered, pulling my hair hard. "Tell me you want me to fuck you."

"Fuck yourself, asshole."

He pinned me harder to the wall. "Say the words, Robyn. Tell me you want it and I'll make you feel better than you've ever dreamed."

I glared back defiantly. I'd let him have me—but I wouldn't invite him.

If he wanted to fuck me, he'd have to come and take me.

The terrible moment hung in the air. The space sizzled. I hung suspended between two possible outcomes: he'd force the issue and rip my clothes off and fuck me like an animal, or he'd back down and leave me wishing I'd only said the stupid words.

I tilted my chin up. I parted my lips, licked my tongue along my teeth. I was inviting him. I was seducing him.

Come on, you bastard. Come on and fuck me. Come and take me. Make it hurt. Make me scream.

Outside, shouts cut through the moment.

Calvin's hand loosened. He looked toward the door, face hardening.

I wanted to reach out. I wanted to pull him back. He was so close to giving me what I really wanted, even if I couldn't admit it out loud. We were inches away—

More shouting. Angry shouts. Then a bang ripped the air, and Calvin released me.

"Grab your bag," he barked, running to the door, and I was left shaking, trembling, and terrified, as another gunshot screamed deadly fire.

ROBYN

Calvin grabbed our things. He threw me a backpack as Matthias burst into the room.

“They’re coming for you,” he said, panic in his eyes.

Calvin took a gun from the nightstand, checked the magazine, and cocked back the slide. “Are the men ready?”

“They’re holding the end of the hallway.”

“Escape route?”

“We’re working on it.”

Calvin nodded and gestured at me. “Make sure she’s safe.” He started toward the door. More gunshots burst out in the hallways and there was shouting, most of it indistinct, but some of it was in the local language.

“Wait,” I said before Calvin could leave. “What the hell is going on?”

Matthias moved to my side as I stepped toward Calvin, my hand outstretched like I could do anything in this situation.

I was powerless and weak. Calvin looked deadly calm, and that scared me most of all.

“Brnovich,” Calvin said, as if that explained everything.

I wanted to demand more, but he was already moving into the hall. More gunfire erupted. I waited for a scream, but there was nothing.

Mattias took my arm. “Crazy fucking bastard,” he muttered, glaring at the door, breathing hard. He looked down at me like he’d never seen me before. “Are you ready?”

“Ready for what? I don’t even know what’s happening.”

“Our host is trying to kill us and we’re about to run out into a hallway littered with bullets.”

“Fuck,” I said as he pulled me to the door. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

“That’s about my feelings,” Mattias said. “When I say run, you run. Go right and straight ahead. Understand?”

“Wait, hold on.” I struggled against his grip. “Is Calvin okay?”

Sweat dripped down Matthias’s forehead. “You should be more worried about yourself. If anyone can survive this, it’s him. Now, are you ready?”

“Definitely not.”

“Run.”

He yanked me into the hallway. More shouts followed, then gunfire. I felt something hot zip over my shoulder, inches from my ear, like a bug moving at supersonic speed. More gunfire answered, more screaming. I staggered, slipped on something wet—red paint?—then started running again. Matthias dragged me as we staggered toward a door at the far end.

Calvin was there. He walked toward me, gun held out. He fired shots off, aiming at someone over my shoulder. I flinched, but he looked like an avenging angel, like a god from myth come down from Mount Olympus to mete out justice. His lips curled in a sneer as he fired, fired, fired, and Matthias dragged me past Calvin and into an open stairwell.

I stumbled and almost fell, but strong hands caught my hips.

“You’re okay.” Calvin pulled me against him. “You’re not hurt.”

I stared at him and wanted to scream.

More men spilled into the stairway. Men in body armor and carrying big guns. Some of them were injured, but most were okay.

One crouched next to Matthias. “Sir, we’re holding them.”

“Take your team forward and clear the way. We’re going out the back and to the vehicles.”

“Sir.” The soldier gestured and took several more men with him. They barreled forward while we waited.

Calvin glared over his shoulder. More shouts, more gunshots, then a few more soldiers trickled into the stairwell. Matthias waited before making a signal, and Calvin took my arm and dragged me down the steps with him, following after the first group of soldiers.

At the bottom of the steps, two staff members stepped out from a doorway. One held a mop, the other held a bucket. They dropped their cleaning implements and threw their hands in the air. Calvin nearly blew their skulls to pieces, but left them with a growl.

“Fucking trap,” he said as he pushed down a hall and into the kitchens. The soldiers were ahead, checking a back door. More gunshots, but they were distant. “This whole thing was a trap.”

“Why would Brnovich want to do that?”

“I don’t know.” Then he shook his head. “Unless he’s working with my brothers.”

“Your brothers?”

“The Solar family doesn’t get along.” He dragged me to the door and shoved the commanding soldier. “Clear the way. Move it.”

The soldier didn’t look happy, but he obeyed. They kicked outside and burst into the sunshine. Gunfire erupted and two went down, but Calvin shoved me onto a back porch and came out firing.

My ears screamed and rang from all the commotion. More soldiers followed. We were on a small gravel lot on the side of the mansion clearly meant for deliveries and staff. Men with guns were set up nearby behind improvised

barricades made from garden furniture.

Fortunately, the pathetic cover didn't do much to protect from Calvin's men. They fired high-powered rifles that blew holes in wood and bodies alike, sending the attackers scattering.

Calvin looked grim as more of his men joined the group. He gestured for them to push forward, past the barricade, and up a steep driveway. Matthias was there, barking orders, as the soldiers spread out.

The parking garage was attached to the side of the driveway. The soldiers angled for it, firing at men that were perched on the porch to the left. Calvin sprinted ahead, dragging me along, until we reached the side of the garage. He kicked in the door and shot a man in the face, sending blood and brains splattering against the garage door. More bullets hit the wall next to him but he shoved me back and out of the way as he dropped to one knee and returned fire.

The fight was over in seconds. Calvin's men stormed in and overwhelmed the guards stationed to watch the SUVs. Soldiers piled inside as the garage doors were opened, and Calvin shoved me into the back of one, making sure I was safe before shouting at his men to form up and get prepared to run.

More men appeared outside of the garage. They fired on the cars, and Calvin's men fired back. I was thrown sideways as Calvin leapt into the side next to me and Matthias got behind the wheel. We jolted forward, ran a man over, slammed into three more, before breaking clear of the attackers. The windshield was cracked and peppered with bullet holes, but it held.

Calvin looked grim as we drove away. One of the SUVs was trapped by the attacking men and the soldiers inside were yanked out. I saw them execute one, his body falling limp in a pool of blood, before they were lost to sight.

I sat back, my heart racing, my ears ringing, and tried to make sense of what happened.

I estimated half of Calvin's men died back there. We nearly died more than once. Brnovich double-crossed him, and it would've worked if Calvin hadn't been smart enough to keep his forces all in one place and heavily armed. As it stood, Calvin's forces in the country were severely depleted, and he had the

freaking defense minister out for his head.

Nobody spoke as we drove back to Riga.

One second, I was worrying about Calvin's hands on my body, and the next I was terrified I might die.

It happened so fast, so sudden.

And he'd reacted like it was nothing.

That was his true strength. His true power. He flowed with events and dominated them.

I looked across the back seat and felt like I saw him for the first time. He brooded, glaring out the window. I could practically hear his brain thinking.

"We don't return to the planes." Calvin's voice was raspy. "We go to the safe house."

Matthias glared at him in the rearview mirror. "That's insane. We have to leave the country now, before—"

"I have one stop to make tonight. I can salvage this."

Matthias groaned. "Brnovich is the defense minister. He has resources, connections. If we wait even a few hours, we'll be stuck in this hellhole of a country, and they'll find us."

"It won't matter." Calvin leaned forward, staring at his assistant. "You trust me, don't you?"

"I think you'll do anything to win."

"Then trust that I'll win."

Matthias sighed. I wondered how many times they'd had a conversation like this one before. I bet hundreds, thousands.

"One night. In the morning, we're leaving."

"That's all I need." Calvin sat back, arms crossed.

“What will you do?” I asked, afraid of my own voice. I sounded surprisingly steady, even though I felt like I might crumble and break.

“Brnovich wants to kill us. He wants to double-cross me. There has to be a reason for that, and I’m going to find it.”

I wanted to press more, but he lapsed into silence, and I knew there was nothing left to say.

I gazed out the window, at the pretty landscape, at the receding lake, and wondered if I’d ever see home again.

CALVIN

Money buys most things.
Flesh. Power. Life. Comfort.

Happiness.

It's a pretty lie we tell ourselves, that money doesn't matter. That we can have a healthy, perfect life without it.

In a world built on labor and value, money makes everything happen. It can buy anything, for the right price.

I snuck over a black wrought-iron fence. Matthias slipped in after me, followed by three of his best soldiers. Our force was decimated, and morale was low, but I hoped this would change things.

If it didn't, I had some serious doubts about our ability to escape the country. The plane was under surveillance, and my men were already making alternative escape routes, but they'd be tricky.

The back yard was nicely trimmed. Grass mowed, hedges cut. It was small, but luxurious for an old city like Riga. Patio furniture was pressed to the side on a concrete slab. It looked expensive and comfortable.

I reached the back door and looked up at a camera.

Hello there.

I smiled and began to pick the lock. It didn't take long. I learned how to do it when I was ten. My father made me sit and practice until I could open a door in two minutes or less with my eyes closed.

Matthias followed me into a small laundry room. Baskets with spare socks, detergent, dryer sheets, and Tide pods were stacked on wooden shelves above the white full-sized appliances. I went to the door, listened, then stepped into a hallway.

My men followed, silent like ghosts.

I reached a living room. Spacious, comfortable. Couches, tables, chairs, built to be used. I imagined men and women eating, drinking, laughing. It was a nice place. Warm and inviting.

I'd burn it to the ground if this didn't work.

The staircase jutted straight to the next floor. I didn't wait, despite Matthias waving me off. He wanted one of the men to go first. To hell with that.

I was pissed off and I wanted someone to try to kill me.

That'd give me the excuse I needed.

Nothing happened at the top of the stairs, much to my dismay. I tried the door at the end of the wall and it opened into a spacious, comfortable master bedroom.

Two bodies snored.

It felt all too familiar. Poor Emils and his wife. I smiled at the memory.

The light snapped on and I froze.

The Prime Minister of Latvia sat up in bed with a pistol held in his hand. He stared at me with hard, cold eyes. He was a handsome man in his fifties with a mustache and dark hair. His wife rolled over, glaring at me. She was pretty, around the prime minister's age. So her snores were fake.

Clever bastards.

"Speak before I kill you." His English was good.

I gestured at my men to stand down. “Prime Minister. My name is Calvin Solar.”

“I know who you are. Defense Minister Brnovich warned me of you.”

“Then you know he tried to kill me earlier.”

The prime minister laughed. “He did not use those words.”

I stepped forward into the room. The prime minister raised the gun. I had no doubt he’d use it.

“I came to your country to sell your defense minister some guns. There’s a plane and a hangar at Riga International. It’s filled with my family’s weapons. Go there and check. I can wait here.”

The prime minister stared. His wife pulled the blanket up to her neck and didn’t move.

“This must be some joke. Brnovich, buying guns? This was not authorized.”

“He suggested it was. I have paperwork. I have communications and documents. I can prove everything.”

“Then why would he say you attacked him?”

“Because his attempt on my life failed. Prime Minister, I came to your country to sell guns. I don’t want to get involved in whatever petty political game that’s being played.”

The prime minister’s weapon lowered—slightly.

That was a good sign.

“You have the weapons here?”

“Edgars,” his wife said in surprise and anger.

The prime minister cut her off with a glare.

I smiled to myself.

“Yes, it’s all here. The papers are drawn. The deal is negotiated. I’ll admit, it’s a good price, Prime Minister.”

He stared at me. Measuring, weighing. He was a clever man and likely knew his defense minister was a snake. I didn't know if he realized how far the bastard had turned, however.

His wife suddenly moved. She threw off her covers and got out of bed. I caught a flash of skin. She wore a pale blue nightgown. She said something in Latvian while glaring at me, and I could tell it wasn't very nice. The prime minister suppressed a smile as she stormed into the bathroom and slammed the door.

Just like Emils, but so much different.

"Forgive her. She doesn't like to be interrupted in the middle of the night by foreign men with guns."

"Understandable. Your security is shit."

"They're not. I knew you were coming. They're watching right. I told them to allow you in here."

I glanced over my shoulder. Matthias only shrugged.

"Why would you do that?"

"Because Defense Minister Brnovich has been lying to me about purchasing weapons for years. The funds go out, disappear, but no guns come back. He lines his pockets and gets fat and rich. I believe he is working with a Russian-backed syndicate to steal as much government money as he can."

"I've seen the boats. And I'm aware of the Russians."

He rolled his eyes. "I hate the damn boats. All he talks about."

"Prime Minister, this is a misunderstanding. I can prove that I mean you no harm. In fact, I want to help your government."

He placed the gun down on the nightstand and pursed his lips. "How much weaponry are we talking? I want details, as many as you can provide. And I am already sending men to check your plane and your hangar to ascertain the truth of this."

“Very good, Prime Minister. I think we can make a deal.” I grinned at him and glanced back at Matthias.

He rolled his eyes, as if everything always worked out for me in the end.

It didn't. Not always.

But I couldn't deny that luck was on my side tonight.

The prime minister stepped out of bed. He wore pajamas, dark gray with blue stripes. He was in decent shape for a man his age. He strode over and shook my hand.

“Come. Let us have tea and work this out. Perhaps Brnovich can join us.”

“I'm not sure that would be a good idea. All due respect, I think I'd kill him.”

The prime minister laughed and led me back into the hall. I followed him downstairs and into the kitchen, where several of his guards were waiting.

He made tea for everyone, and we sat and talked.

DEAR ROBYN

I know what you see when you look at me.

Rich. Handsome. Given everything. Every advantage in the world.

My life's been a struggle. Since the day I opened my eyes for the first time, I've been fighting to survive.

I know that sounds strange.

My fight was never for comfort, or food, or luxury. I was given all of that and more. Privilege and honor and duty.

My fight was for strength.

My father instilled a killer instinct in me and my brothers from a young age. He pitted us against each other in fights, in contests, in competitions. We grew up trying to kill each other, sometimes literally. I have scars from my brothers.

I have wounds that will never heal.

When I was ten, my brother shot me in the face with a BB gun. I still have the scar above my eye. I bled so much it still shocks me to think about it. A sea of red. When I was twelve, my father made my brothers and I fight with sticks until only one of us was left standing. I won that competition, but things were never the same after.

We struggled. God knows I've struggled.

I don't love my brothers. Does that make me a monster? You already thought I was. What's one more sin?

When I was thirteen, my youngest brother, Raymond, broke my wrist with a baseball bat. When I was fourteen, my middle brother, Noah, pushed me down a flight of stairs.

On and on. Injuries and betrayals.

I don't love them because I know that if I did, they'd use my love against me.

They'd do to me exactly what I'd do to them.

All because my father taught us that was what a man was supposed to do.

I still have nightmares about the pain.

Does this make me weak?

Then I'm weak.

But I promise you, my life was not easy, and it never will be.

Not while my brothers are alive.

I hope you never meet them.

Love,

C

ROBYN

The Blackwoods campus felt like heaven. I lounged on a bench with Cora and kicked my legs out.

“So you’re telling me you nearly sparked an international incident? In freaking Latvia?” She leaned forward, staring at me with an open mouth. “Jarrod’s gonna freak when I tell him.”

“Please don’t. Calvin would murder me. And I think I mean that literally. I’m pretty sure he killed people out there.”

Cora’s laugh was disbelieving, and I couldn’t blame her.

I still hadn’t processed what happened in Latvia yet.

After the attack in Brnovich’s lake house, I spent a night in a quiet, cold, anonymous rowhome, curled in a comfortable bed. Calvin and Matthias were nowhere to be found, and the soldiers assigned to keep me safe wouldn’t tell me where they went.

My ears rang. My body ached. I yearned for Calvin’s arms. I despised myself for that, too.

He returned in the morning with good news: The prime minister would take over the contract, and we were selling his weapons after all.

He never fully explained. The next day was a whirlwind of official signings and inspections, and we were hustled back onto our plane before sundown. The Latvians were happy to get their guns, but they didn’t want Calvin to

linger long.

He opened champagne to celebrate, but he barely spoke during the entire flight home. When we landed, he drove me home, dropped me off, and disappeared back to wherever he lived.

I still couldn't believe it'd been real. I saw things I never dreamed I would. So much blood, so much death. Pain and wrecked human bodies. When I closed my eyes, I could taste the smell of gunpowder in the air and the metallic tang of blood.

It made me sick. And still the feeling of Calvin's lips against mine lingered, and that incredible hunger rumbled in my core.

"So what are you going to do? Does he still want to marry you?"

"I think so. I don't really know. We haven't spoken since he dropped me off."

"God, he's so weird."

"I know. You should've seen it, Cora. He walked around like the guns were nothing. He did things I didn't think were possible. He was a nightmare."

"You sound like you enjoyed your trip."

I glared at her, but she was right. I heard the note of worship in my tone.

Another reason for my ever-present self-loathing.

I stood up and shook my head.

"I never want to go to Latvia again. Lovely country though."

She laughed and joined me. We walked through the central quad and split at the far side. She had class and I wanted to kill an hour in the library.

I breathed deep the crisp smell of Blackwoods and tried not to think about Calvin. It was impossible, of course—he was in me, everywhere. Not just because of what happened, but also because of his letters, his touch, his eyes, his hands.

The near-death experience only heightened everything and intensified it.

I followed a quiet, shady sidewalk bordering the science building. The library was tucked back in a copse of trees. Ivy grew up its sides in twisting scales. I smiled to myself and didn't notice the man step out from bushes to my left until he was right next to me.

"Excuse me," he grunted, and slammed into me like a linebacker.

I went sprawling. I hit the ground hard and gasped. My shoulder ached and I shoved myself up on my hands, glaring death at me. "What the fuck is your ___"

I stopped and stared.

He loomed over me, grinning. His mouth was so familiar, and that nose. He looked regal, like a prince.

Like Calvin, but not quite.

"You must be the girl." He sneered. I knew that sneer. It was so frighteningly familiar.

"Who the hell are you?" But I knew already.

"My name's Noah. You know my brother, Calvin." He leaned down to stare into my eyes. "I'm here to kill you."

I scrambled away.

Calvin's brother.

He had two, both younger. Noah was the first, and Raymond was the second. I didn't know much about them, except that their relationship was complicated, to say the least.

And Calvin suspected them of having set him up overseas.

I didn't know what to say, so I didn't try to speak. When he stepped closer, I lashed out, kicked him as hard as I could in the shin, then scrambled to my feet and ran.

I made it three steps before he grabbed my backpack and yanked me back.

I hit the pavement. The back of my head smashed down and I saw stars. I gasped, groaned, tried to struggle, but was too lightheaded and dizzy to do much. He hauled me aside, dragged me off the path, and into the bushes. He pushed me against the wall and pinned me there, one hand on my throat.

His lips pulled back in a vicious grin.

“Calvin talked about you. He says you’re going to be his wife. Is that true? Are you going to marry my big brother?”

“Fuck you,” I said through gritted teeth. I could barely breathe. His grip tightened and I gagged. I wanted to spit in his face, but I thought he might kill me.

Hell, he might do it anyway.

“I’ll take that as a yes. Any woman that would marry my older brother must be messed up in the head. Are you messed up, Robyn? If not, I can fix that.”

I struggled. “Let me go, you psycho.”

“You went with him to Latvia.” His face tensed. “What happened?”

“You tell me.”

He snorted. “All I know is my agents failed to follow through with the kill, and now here you are, still breathing and happy.”

My heart fluttered and pulsed. I wasn’t happy, that was for sure. I was terrified.

What did he mean, the kill? Was I the target all along?

I didn’t know what to do. If I struggled, his hand might smash my windpipe and kill me. If I did nothing, he might strangle me to death anyway. I was trying to suck in air and it was getting harder and harder, and my head hurt, and my shoulder ached.

I hated that I was a part of this. I never asked for it. I told Calvin to leave me alone repeatedly. And yet I was sucked into his family drama, and the consequences were life and death with these people.

“I don’t know anything,” I croaked desperately.

“What does Calvin want from you? Does he really plan on marrying you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you pregnant? Did he knock you up already? Tell me or I’ll cut your womb open and find out myself.”

“No,” I said, trying to shove his hand away, and failing. He wasn’t as big as Calvin, but he was strong.

“I believe you. You’re a pretty girl. I can’t imagine you’d willingly spread your legs for a demented creature like my brother.” Noah showed his teeth again. “Did Calvin’s deal go through in Latvia?”

I decided lying was silly. He’d find out either way. “Yes, it did.”

“How?”

“He went directly to the prime minister.”

“Brnovich fucked up then.” Noah snarled. “You should be dead. You know that? You should be buried.”

He released me. I fell to my knees, gasping. I saw stars at the edge of my vision as Noah paced in front of me, his hands behind his back. He looked unhinged and psychotic. Fear pulsed in my core, fear mixed with anger.

What the hell did Calvin drag me into?

“What do you want from me?”

“I want you to stay away from my brother.” He stopped and stared. “Do you understand? Stay away from Calvin. If you don’t, I will find you, and I will kill you.” He stooped down. I could smell his rancid breath. “You know I’m not lying.”

I met his gaze, but I trembled. I was weak and fighting for enough oxygen to stay conscious. “I know.”

“Good. Ending your miserable life would’ve been easier on foreign soil, but don’t think it’s impossible here.” He straightened and took a step away as if I was an infectious disease. “Stay away from the Solar family. Don’t marry my brother. Don’t speak with my father. Stay away, do you hear me? Stay

away.” He glared for a moment longer, then stalked off, leaving me there to gag and choke as I tried to catch my breath.

I spit over and over into the dirt. Students passed by as I got myself together. They didn’t notice me hidden in the bushes back away from the sidewalk, and I didn’t cry out.

I didn’t want to see anyone. Not yet.

It took a few minutes to find my equilibrium again. My heart was racing and my head was pounding but at least I could think. I squeezed my eyes shut and pulled my knees to my chest. For now, I was safe.

If Noah wanted to kill me, he would’ve done it already.

Calvin pulling me along to Latvia was bad. Getting me embroiled in that nightmare was horrible. But this was too much.

I thought Blackwoods was safe, but I was wrong.

Everywhere was tainted. Home was filled with terribly memories of my abusive father, and my poor, wretched mother still lingered around like a ghoul, caught between life and death. Cora’s trailer with Jarrod was warm and cozy, but it wasn’t mine. I was welcome, but I couldn’t stay there. I couldn’t find solace there.

Blackwoods was my last refuge. The library with its big, vast windows and its quiet, dark interior rooms, and the lecture halls and their ancient wooden seating. Blackwoods and the trimmed hedges, the manicured grass, the sidewalks twisting and winding like something from a story. I felt good here. I felt safe and productive.

Blackwoods was tainted now.

All thanks to Calvin.

That bastard.

Heat rose to my cheeks. I struggled to my feet and gingerly touched my throat where Noah had squeezed. It was tender and raw.

I wanted to punch Calvin in the dick until he exploded.

I pulled my backpack on and stepped out into the path. Nobody was around, and I wasn't ready to face anyone yet. I hurried away from the library to the edge of campus, and began the long walk home. I texted Cora to let her know that I wouldn't be meeting her later on after all. Something had come up.

And something had.

It was time to fight for my life.

CALVIN

My house wasn't home.

I didn't have a home. I had places where I lived—my family manor, the ocean residence, the apartment in Manhattan, the row home in Paris—but nowhere was entirely my own.

Everything came from my family. Everything stemmed from my father.

I didn't want to check in with them. By now, they'd know about the deal. I couldn't keep it secret for long, not with the sheer amount of cash that would've flowed into our coffers. My brothers would hear about it, and my father would be informed by his sycophants and ass-kissers.

For years I kept out of family politics. I let my brothers suck up to Father. I let them play their games, stabbing each other in the back, fighting with father's trusted advisors, jockeying for positions of power by his side.

I stayed aloof. I kept to myself. I did the bare minimum to let Father know that I cared about the family, but I didn't engage in the cutthroat fighting that characterized life in the Solar family.

My brothers did enough of that for me.

But this Latvian deal was a warning shot, and they'd hear it, loud and clear.

I was coming for them.

No more sitting idly by.

I leaned back on my couch. Smoke from a joint curled into the air. I took a small hit and released the acrid weed into the air, watching it plume and curl in the sunlight as it slanted through my windows. This was my space, but it wasn't all my own.

Smoking took the edge off. It helped tame my demons. It quieted my anger, made it easier to think.

And I needed to think now more than ever.

Matthias was back home near the manor preparing my next move. He'd see to the fallout as best he could and he'd give me a heads-up if there were any problems. So far, it'd been quiet.

I didn't like quiet.

A pounding at my door pulled my attention from my problems. I sat up, frowning. Not many people knew where I lived. Jarrod, Des, and Addler, but nobody else. I stood and went to the blinds, peeking out.

Robyn stood on my porch, glaring at my front door like she might explode it into splinters.

I smiled, stubbed out the joint. I pushed it aside. She'd smell it, but I didn't care.

I opened the door and smiled. "Hello, my darling. I was wondering when you'd—"

She slapped me across the face with enough force to turn my chin.

I stepped back in surprise. My skin tingled as I touched it with my fingertips. Her hands were balled into fists and her jaw was clenched hard.

Her throat was covered in bruises.

The slap was forgotten. I stepped toward her. "Who did that to you?"

She tried to hit me again. I caught her wrist and yanked her violently inside. I slammed the door behind me and growled as I approached. She backed off toward the couch, face determined and angry, and she tried to hit me again, and again.

I stopped her, wrestled her down, and pinned her to the cushions.

“Who did it?” I said as she struggled.

“Let go of me, you fucking prick. You deserve so much worse than one stupid slap, do you hear me? You’re going to get me killed, you selfish asshole.”

“Who?” I said, leaning down to stare into her eyes. “Tell me who did that to you.”

I knew those bruises. I’d seen them before. Felt them on my body. Those were from human hands. They were what happened when a big man tried to choke the life out of a smaller one. Burst capillaries, subcutaneous bleeding. I imagined how she’d felt: vision dimming, head pounding, pain lancing all along her core, and the panic, the sheer panic of not being able to breathe.

Rage flowed like water along my skin.

Whoever did that to her would die.

Whoever made her feel that way would have to pay.

“I’m tired of your sadistic games,” she said, still trying to get free. If I weren’t so angry and ready to murder, I’d find it unreasonably arousing. The way she twisted and writhed beneath me. How easily I could crush her. “I don’t want anything to do with you ever again. Do you hear me?”

I got right in her face. I stared into her eyes.

“Who. Touched. You?”

She sneered. “I bet you can guess. Go ahead. I’ll give you three tries.”

I didn’t want to play this game. I bit her bottom lip and she gasped, arching her back. I shoved a knee between her legs, pressing it against her warm spot, and as she moved forward, she ground against it. Another gasp, this time half in surprise and half in pleasure. I kept my leg there as she tried to get away and my cock began to stiffen.

“I’m not playing. Tell me.”

“This whole thing’s a game to you, Calvin. All you think about is what you want and what you need. You don’t give a damn about me. I’m just some pretty little toy, isn’t that right?”

“You’re a beautiful toy, Robyn. But I care about you more than you know.”

“Then leave me the hell alone.”

I moved my leg, grinding against her pussy. “You don’t want that.”

“You don’t know what I want.” But her lips fell open.

I held her down as her hips began to move.

Fuck, she was grinding her cunt along my leg.

“I’ve been watching you for a long time. Studying you. Learning you. I know you better than anyone.”

“You think I’m a piece of candy to carry around in your pocket.” She moved slow in long arcs of her hips, mouth open, panting softly.

I wanted to rip her clothes off. I wanted the taste of her flesh on my lips as I fucked her into submission.

But I had to know who did this first.

“You’re so wrong about that. You’re one of the few people I know that understands me.”

Her lips tightened, but her hips moved faster. “I don’t understand a damn thing about you. What kind of person drags someone along against their will and throws them into danger? You talk about loving me, but so far you’ve only made my life hell.”

“Is this hell?” I whispered into her ear as I kissed her neck.

She moaned. Tried to move away.

I kept her pinned, and her hips went faster, grinding along my thigh.

“Yes, this is hell,” she said, groaning, glaring so much hate and desire into my eyes that it was all I could do to stop from ripping her shirt open, licking

her nipples, making her scream. “Wanting you is hell, because I know what it gets me.”

“Pleasure? Pain?”

“Dead in a ditch somewhere. I’m disposable. I’m flesh. I’m nothing.”

I held her harder and jammed my knee against her cunt. Not enough to hurt, but enough to make her listen. She gasped, mouth open.

“You are not disposable,” I said as her hips began working furiously, her eyes rolling back. “You’ve been through so much, Robyn, just like me. You’ve lived through hell and survived. You’re strong, and smart, and beautiful. But you’re so fucked up, and that’s what I love about you the most.”

“Asshole,” she gasped.

I kissed her as she came. I tasted her orgasm on her lips. She moaned into my mouth as her hips slid up and down my leg. She shuddered and gasped, and I bit her lip, kissed her deep, drank her pleasure in dizzying swirls. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes unfocused when I pulled away.

“Who hurt you?”

She blinked several times, coming back to herself. “Your brother, Noah.”

I released her as if she’d burned me with lightning. I backed off, standing. My cock strained against my jeans. I was aroused and angry and dizzy with both. I paced back and forth as she sat up, adjusting herself, watching me warily.

“When? How?”

“On campus. He must’ve followed me around until I was alone.” She looked down at her hands, at her wrists. I left red marks on her pale skin. “It happened this morning.”

“That fuck.” I slammed my fist into the wall. Pictures rattled, a painting fell. I stood heaving, trying to draw enough air to keep me from losing consciousness.

Noah. That piece of shit.

He must know about the Latvian deal after all. But how did he know about Robyn, and why would he target her?

“I’m going to kill him.” The words came out soft.

But I meant them.

My brothers played their games. They hurt each other and targeted anyone they thought might gain them some advantage. I knew they were vipers and heartless monsters, but I had no clue how quickly they’d come for me once I stepped into their world. It was barely a day.

I should’ve protected her.

Only I didn’t realize that she’d be the one they’d come for. I assumed it would be me.

I wouldn’t make that mistake again.

Noah would have to die for this. I looked back at Robyn and her fingers gingerly touched the bruises on her throat. She looked away, face flushed, all of her anger wiped away by the orgasm.

I approached her slowly. I made her look up at me.

“I won’t let him hurt you again.”

“You could leave me alone.” She spoke in a soft monotone. “I don’t want to be a part of this, Calvin.”

I bent over and kissed her lips. “Liar.”

She jerked away. “Leave me alone. I didn’t ask for this, okay?” She got to her feet, arms wrapped around her core.

I felt like a hungry wolf. I wanted to throw her onto the floor and ravage her. I was feral and filled with so much rage that I didn’t know what to do with myself.

I paced and paced, mind spinning.

I’d have to hit Noah back. Raymond would be next, and if Noah targeted Robyn, I had to assume my youngest brother would as well. She’d need

protection, guards. I'd make it happen. Around the clock.

I'd be there, watching. And when I couldn't, ten armed men would.

My brothers wouldn't get close.

"You're not hearing me." She stood near the door. "I don't want to play anymore, okay? I want out."

"There's no out." I stopped moving, tried to still myself. I couldn't make a rash, stupid decision because I was emotional. "You're in this now. My brothers tasted blood and they won't stop until you're out of the way."

"Then release me. Tell them we're over. I don't want to die because you're so obsessed with marrying me."

I stalked toward her. She shrank back. I stopped a foot away, trying to keep control. "They won't touch you again."

"Just leave me alone, okay? This was... I don't know what this was. A mistake, I guess. Just leave me alone."

I let her leave. She closed the door and hurried down the steps. I watched her get into a car and drive off before I called Matthias.

"Send security," I said. "Noah found Robyn."

Matthias sighed. "That was fast."

"Raymond won't be far behind. I need men on her twenty-four-seven."

"Understood."

"And Matthias?" I paused, closing my eyes. "I'm going to kill them. Is fratricide a mortal sin?"

"I'm sure it is. But it's one of the oldest sins in the book."

"Then so be it. Noah's going to die for this."

"Better hope your father doesn't learn it's you."

I let out a breath. "That's the least of my concerns. Get security on Robyn immediately."

“Will do.”

I hung up, waited a few minutes, and grabbed the gun from my bedroom. I shoved it into my waistband, and I followed Robyn back to her house.

The car was parked out front. She was inside. I slumped down and pulled a hat low over my face. I crossed my arms and got comfortable.

Until security arrived, I wouldn't let her out of my sight.

The taste of her lips and the sound of her moans as she came played through my mind as I waited, plotted, and planned.

ROBYN

My body was like a bell. Once rang, it wouldn't stop vibrating.

I stayed in my room with the door locked after getting home from Calvin's place. I regretted making Jarrod give me the address. I huddled under the blankets, eyes closed. My mother was downstairs, a zombie in front of the TV.

I slept and dreamed about rubbing my pussy over Calvin's gorgeous lips.

God, what was wrong with me?

I woke early, showered, and dressed. Downstairs, the TV was still on. Like my mother hadn't made it to bed.

She probably hadn't.

She was a mess. A shell. I should've hated her, but I pitied her instead.

I knew what it was like to be in thrall to a monster.

Calvin drove me wild. I planned on killing him when I went over there. I wanted to hit him, over and over. That first slap was sweet justice, but it did nothing to quell the intense furor in my body.

But the orgasm?

That was perfection.

I didn't mean for it to happen, but when he jammed his leg between mine, I couldn't stop it. I knew what he wanted. I saw it in his eyes, in his lips. I went slow, slow, and, god, it felt so fucking good to have him hold me down like that, completely as his mercy. I'd never come so hard before in my life, like oceans and oceans of pleasure opened up inside of me and I drifted down into the depths, lost and adrift, and I never wanted to return to the world.

After, I was clear. The anger was gone.

I still hated him.

But I was aware of something more.

Desire. Want. Incredible need.

Lust. Disgusting lust.

I wanted him to take me. Rip off my clothes, bite my shoulders, squeeze my ass, tease my breasts, fuck me rough and wild. I wanted him to make me submit.

Hold me down and ravage me with that thick cock until I screamed his name and lost myself again.

It was sick. I loved it.

I went downstairs, hungry for breakfast for the first time in a while.

I smelled smoke. I panicked until I found Mom sitting at the kitchen table. She held a long white cigarette in her hand. In the other was a letter, written in a tight hand with official-looking paper.

"Hey," I said, lingering near the coffee machine.

She blinked and looked at me. Ash fell from the tip of her cigarette.

"Oh. You're up."

"You're smoking." I gestured at it.

She frowned like she'd forgotten then took a drag. "I smoked before I married your father. Did you know that? It's a disgusting habit and I've missed it all these years. Now I figure, why not? What else is there to lose?"

I poured myself a mug of coffee and studied her. “Are you okay?” I asked, meaning, *are you any worse than normal?* because of course she wasn’t okay.

“Fine.”

“What are you reading?”

She focused on the letter again. “Oh, this. I found it taped to the door when I went out for a pack of smokes. Silliest thing, really. It was addressed to you. I hope you don’t mind, dear.” She shrugged and held it out.

My heart sank as I took it.

The top was Solar family letterhead. The paper was thick and cream-colored. I skimmed the words and went to the signature.

Raymond.

I groaned and let the letter wash over me.

* * *

Dear Robyn,

By now I suppose you’ve met my brother, Noah. He’s quite the brute. Please don’t judge the whole family by his actions.

I’m writing this letter because I want to start out civil. I hope we can resolve this problem without resorting to drastic measures.

Like my brother.

So, Robyn. I’m writing to make one simple request: Do not speak to my brother Calvin ever again. Leave him alone. Have no more dealings with the Solar family.

Simple enough, yes?

If you manage to do that, there will be no problems.

But if you can't, then I will hire three men to find your father in prison. Two of them will hold him down while the third cuts him open with a rusty shiv. My men will unwind your father's guts like rope and strangle him with them, nice and slow. He'll suffer, I promise.

I won't stop there. Your mother will be next. I'll hire four men for her, but I won't go into details about what they'll do.

Suffice to say, it won't be nice.

So please, do yourself and your family a favor, and stay away from Calvin.

Sincerely yours,

Raymond Solar

* * *

I lowered the page.

Mom's face was ashen. I saw it then. I'd gotten so used to her floating around like a ghost that I almost missed it.

The fear. The pain.

Those fucking bastards.

I crumpled the paper up. "Mom, I'm sorry you read that."

"Is Calvin your new boyfriend?"

"No, he's not."

"This Raymond seems to think so. Does Calvin make you happy?"

"No, Mom. He doesn't."

"Darling, boys are temporary. Always remember it. They're never what you think they are." She took a long drag. Her hands were shaking. She stood and drifted into the living room, still smoking, and turned on the TV.

I stared after her, mind whirling.

Strangling me was bad enough. Hunting me down like a dog and nearly killing me in the last safe place in the world was awful.

But this was so much worse.

My mother. My poor mother. She'd been through enough.

She didn't need to read that.

Fury rolled along my spine. My teeth ground together and I stomped on the fucking letter.

I wanted to hurt them.

Not Calvin. I wanted him hurt too—but not like I wanted to tear Noah and Raymond to shreds with my fingernails. Calvin was a bastard, but some stupid part of me wanted him, and believed that he cared.

Raymond and Noah were the enemy.

My mother wasn't innocent. She stood by while my father hurt me, over and over, for years. She enabled him by keeping silent. She ignored the beatings, the pain. She let it all happen.

I hated her for that.

But she was still my mother, and she was suffering.

She didn't need to suffer more.

Maybe that made me weak. A stronger person would've wanted her to hurt for allowing her husband to hit her child and her nephew.

I wasn't that person.

I saw her waste her life on a man that ruined her. I couldn't imagine how it felt to know she'd given herself to the wrong person, and watched him twist her life into a shell, into a nightmare. I pitied her, and I hated her. I felt it all.

But nobody would torture her. Nobody had that right—except for me and Jarrod.

I stormed upstairs. Coffee sloshed over the mug and fell onto the carpet. I cursed but didn't stop. Let it soak. I didn't give a shit.

I found my phone and called him.

Calvin answered on the first ring. "I was wondering when you'd reach out to apologize."

That knocked me off balance. "Apologize? For what?"

"Slapping me."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Or maybe thank me. For getting you off."

"You were nothing more than a convenient object. Don't flatter yourself."

"What can I do for you, love?" There was humor in his voice.

I took a deep breath and released it. "I want to hurt them."

A short silence. "Who?"

"Your brothers. I want to hurt them. What can I do?"

Another silence. Longer this time.

"What happened?"

I told him from the beginning. "She read the whole thing," I said, pacing around my room.

Pacing like he did when he was agitated.

"That asshole," he said with a long sigh. "I shouldn't be surprised. Raymond thinks he has tact, but the man's an ogre."

"What can I do?" I spoke the words like bullets. "Can we kill them? I want to kill them, Calvin. I've never felt like this before."

"Try to calm down."

"You calm down. You're not the one dealing with a broken mother and a fucked-up, abusive father and all the scars that comes with. I'm still living in

the house where my father used to hit me, can you imagine? And now my mother's smoking again, which is disgusting."

"Robyn."

I clenched my jaw to stop the torrent of words. I could go on and on, about how I felt like I was losing my best friend and my cousin as they fell in love, and how selfish that made me, and how much I hated myself, how worthless, how horrible my entire existence had become, and Calvin, this killer, this demon, he was one of the few good things, even if he was a double-edged sword, a poisoned flower. I wanted to tell him all that and more, but I was too pathetic, and too angry.

"We can hurt them," he said, his voice cool, like velvet, like water on a hot day. "We can hurt them very badly. I told you I'd kill Noah for what he did."

I touched my neck. "And Raymond?"

"He'll suffer too."

"How?"

"Come home."

I stopped pacing. "I'm already home."

"No, love. Come home with me. Come meet my father."

That stopped me dead.

Meet his father.

The patriarch of the Solar family. The one man both Noah and Raymond desperately wanted me to stay away from.

That would hurt them, all right.

That would make them angry.

"Keep my mother safe."

"I will."

"Promise me, Calvin."

“I already have men stationed around your house. I’m not sure how Raymond slipped through, but he wouldn’t have gotten inside.”

I rubbed my face. Of course he had soldiers watching me. I shouldn’t have expected anything less. A man like Calvin would never give me an ounce of freedom, not if he could help it.

That wasn’t fair. He knew I was in danger and sent men to protect me. They did a shitty job—Raymond still managed to post a letter. But at least he’d done something.

That was more than I could say about most people in my life.

Jarrold was the only other human to ever step up. Over the years, he’d taken more beating on my behalf than I deserved. I still didn’t know why, but I’d be paying that debt forever.

Calvin was like Jarrold in that regard. He went out of his way to try to keep me safe—while simultaneously dragging me down into the depths.

“When do we leave?”

His voice, when it came, was delighted.

“Soon. Pack a bag. I’ll pick you up in an hour.”

I hung up the phone and sat on the edge of my bed.

The Solar family home. I’d meet his father, his mother. I’d see where he grew up.

The place that shaped him.

I didn’t know how I felt. Scared, excited.

Angry.

So damn angry.

At everything. At my circumstances, at my life, at myself.

But I wasn’t going to roll over and let the world happen to me.

I’d do something about it.

Noah and Raymond wanted to fuck with me? Then I'd fuck with them back.

I grabbed an empty suitcase from my closet and began to pack.

At least this time I'd have my own clothes.

DEAR ROBYN

Picture cliffs. Steep, rocky. Gray stone. Beneath then, roiling ocean, slamming over and over against their base, grinding away, breaking it, shaping it over millennia.

I'm the cliff, and my father was the ocean.

He broke me and left behind something in his image.

Most people have happy memories from their childhood, or at least they have a place they can look back at and smile.

The Solar Manor was like a nightmare.

A waking dream. A living horror.

It was opulent. My father treated it like a museum. The staff had orders to keep me and my brothers from touching almost everything. It was antiseptic, too clean. There was nothing comforting in the marble floors and ornamental furniture.

I was surrounded with money and power, and it was the worst way to live as a child.

I'll show it to you one day. I think you'll understand why there's something missing inside of me.

Something warm and comforting.

I don't know warmth.

Only the cold. Freezing, bitter. Never-ending.

I was raised by a string of nannies. Strangers. They never lasted long. My parents were distant entities that intruded onto my existence. They only ever brought pain.

There was grass. Rolling hills. Trees. The forest was the closest I ever came to feeling free and happy. I'd hike along the trails and follow the streams and listen to the birds.

And more often than not, my brothers would ambush me far from the house where nobody could hear me scream.

Nothing was safe. Can you imagine? Growing up without safety?

I wasn't even given the illusion.

I'll take you there. I can't wait for you to see it.

Love,

C

ROBYN

Calvin was on edge during the flight to Maine.

I hadn't expected his family's mansion to be out in the northern wildness, at the furthest reaches of the country. I figured the Midwest, or out in California, somewhere central, somewhere close to power.

"Wherever the Solar family goes, everything else follows," he explained as the plane began to land at a small private airport. "My father likes his privacy."

I couldn't imagine anything more private. Everything for miles was trees. Forests, oceans and oceans of forests. The air was crisp, nearly freezing. Matthias met us with a fleet of Range Rovers. He seemed jubilant as he shook Calvin's hand.

"It's been a while," he said.

Calvin scowled. "Not long enough. Let's get this over with."

We piled into the back of a car and led down a long, winding road. It was a twenty-minute drive down a tree-packed street, no more than a path, until the manor appeared like a wraith in the mist.

It sat on top of a steep hill. A black fence surrounded the inner yard and Calvin's driver had to get out and open the gate. The building itself was austere from the outside, with marble columns and understated carvings along the roof. There were windows, so many windows, furnished and

covered by deep bolts of cloth. It looked as though sunlight never went inside. It was huge, and stretched back further than I could see. An army could live in a place like this, or an entire prison population.

The doors were big and wooden, and a woman stood on the front porch. She was old, in her seventies at least, with frizzy white hair and an apron. She wiped her hands and stepped forward as Calvin climbed out and went to meet her.

“His last nanny,” Matthias said quietly as we followed. “Martha. Closest he ever got to a mother.”

Calvin embraced the old woman gingerly. She smiled, said something. He only nodded and turned to beckon me over.

“This is Robyn, my fiancée.”

I let the word drift over my skin like mist and forced a smile on my lips. “Nice to meet you.” I’d have to talk to him later about calling me that, but I wouldn’t make a scene.

Yet, at least.

“You as well, dear. I’m glad someone made this one settle. He’s been wild for much too long, you know. In my day, he’d be married and have a litter of children already.”

“I’m not so sure about the litter part of that.”

She cackled and turned. “Come, come, let’s get inside before you get a chill.”

I glanced at Calvin, searching for some clue as to how I should feel about all this—but his face was guarded and closed.

We followed Martha into the manor.

I’d seen mansions online. I’d watched *MTV Cribs* and see a few of the monstrosities lingering around my neighborhood. I lived in a nice place, and although it wasn’t exactly the nicest thing in the world, it was definitely better than most.

The Solar family estate blew me away.

It was like stepping into a museum, except that did it a disservice. Everything was pristine, orderly, perfect. Marble floors, sweeping staircases, wooden detailing around the ceiling, everything hand-carved by master craftsmen. I stood in the entryway and gawped at a chandelier that must've cost more than my father would ever make in his entire life.

"Who is on the grounds, Martha?" Calvin asked as she led us toward the stairs. Two young men in black shirts and black pants appeared seemingly out of the wall and took my bag. The other tried to grab Calvin's, but he was already moving away like he'd expected it. The shamed house servant disappeared back into the shadows while mine hustled up the steps and hurried around a corner.

"Your mother, of course," Martha said, going slow. Calvin stayed at her elbow. He didn't touch her or offer to help, but he was lingering like he expected to catch her if she fell. It was surprising to see him so affectionate and protective of another human. I didn't think he was capable of complex emotions like that.

"And Father?"

"He's here somewhere. Your brothers are not, which I suppose you're happy about."

"Can't complain," Calvin said.

Martha sighed. "I always said you boys were pitted against each other far too often. Always fighting each other. Always trying to get ahead." She let out a breath. "You're grown men now."

"Raymond's in high school."

She waved that off. "Your father made sure you all grew up fast. You'd think you'd all want to work together, but no. It's kill or be killed in this house."

I felt a shiver run down my spine. Kill or be killed in this house.

"You know how Father can be," Calvin said as we reached the top and Martha led us down a series of winding hallways, each one more lavishly furnished than the last, until she stopped outside of a single doorway. It was left ajar, presumably by the servant with my bags, and Martha went in.

It was a large suite. The sitting area was nautical themed with lots of leather and brass, and a small fire crackled in the fireplace. The bedroom had a single king, and my bag sat at the foot. Calvin threw his bag on top and faced Martha.

The old woman lingered in the doorway. “I hope you’ll be okay here. I thought you’d like the privacy.”

“This is perfect. Far from the action.” Calvin glanced at me, and I said nothing.

We were sharing a room again.

Great.

I couldn’t speak up, because I was his fiancée—apparently. But inwardly, I boiled, and glared out the window to keep Martha from noticing my discomfort.

“Your mother wants to see you both when you’re settled. I suggest you get it over with. She hasn’t had time to have too much wine yet.” Martha sighed and shuffled off, shutting the door behind her.

I whirled on Calvin and planned on giving him a metric ton of shit, but the look on his face stopped me. He stared at the place where Martha had been a moment earlier with a look torn between pain, nostalgia, wistfulness, and anger.

“Are you okay?”

He looked over and composed himself. “I’m fine. We’d better go speak with my mother.”

“Where’s Matthias staying? Is he sleeping on the couch?”

Calvin’s smile was tight, but didn’t reach his eyes. “He’s nearby.” He gave me a measuring look. “I think you should change.”

“Excuse me?”

“My mother. She’s exacting.”

“I’m dressed perfectly fine to meet your mom.”

He shrugged as if it was my funeral and went to the door.

“Hold on,” I snapped, making him pause. “We’re not going to discuss the fact that I’m your fiancée now?”

“Don’t pretend like you’re surprised. You knew the deal.”

“I was thinking more girlfriend.”

“And I was thinking wife. We met in the middle. Now, are you ready?” He left, sweeping out into the hallway without waiting for an answer.

The answer would’ve been no. But I didn’t have much choice.

I caught up with him before he turned the corner. Otherwise, I would’ve gotten lost. “How many rooms are there?”

“Too many. Half of them are empty.”

“Seriously?”

“The staff dusts and cleans constantly, but it’ll always smell a little musty. Can’t help it. Too many rugs, too much space. Not enough people living.”

“Is this the room you grew up in?”

“No, my childhood bedroom is closer to my parents. Martha placed us in there for privacy, since it’s at the far end of the manor.”

“This place is a maze.”

“When I was very young, I loved exploring. I’d get lost and discover some new room I’d never noticed before. My great-grandfather was an amateur architect and he spent most of his life adding new wings, new rooms, new twists and turns.”

“It’s incredible, really.”

“It’s lonely. The excitement quickly wore off and now I see this place for what it is.”

“And what’s that?”

“Empty.”

He reached a short staircase that led to a third floor. The hallway had a single door at the end. He approached and knocked, waiting until a voice called out from inside.

My stomach clenched as he entered. I hesitated, wondering if maybe I should've taken him up on his advice to get changed. I wore tight jeans, black sneakers, and a button-down with the top two buttons undone, showing just a hint of my chest. It was a totally appropriate outfit for most occasions—except for meeting with the matriarch of a powerful family.

Too late now. I followed him into a large and airy sitting room and my breath caught in my throat.

The windows were huge. They were ten feet tall, at least, and covered with pale gossamer curtains. They seemed to glow from the afternoon sunlight and swirled and blew gently in an unseen current. The floor was wood and covered with multiple thick, heavy rugs, and books were piled all over, on antique end tables, on couches, on shelves, inside birdcages. There were half-burned candles, and pens, so many pens, most of them spilling ink.

His mother sat at the far side at a small desk. Her hair was pinned up, graying tastefully, though it must've been blonde once, like Calvin. She wore a simple, tasteful sweater with pearls at her throat and in her ears, and a pair of dark slacks. She held a book in one hand and a glass of white wine in the other, and the look she gave Calvin was far from welcoming.

He lifted his chin under her gaze. I withered, overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of her presence and the strangeness of the room.

“So you've come home,” she said, putting her book down as she took a long sip from her glass.

“It's nice to see you too, Mother.”

“How is Blackwoods? Are you learning or just busy getting brain disease from that football game?”

“Brain disease, mostly.” He looked around. “You need to let the staff come in here.”

She waved him off. “It’s clean, just scattered. Does your father know you’re here?”

“By now he does.”

“And your brothers?”

“They’re not home, allegedly.”

“Interesting. I’ve heard rumors that you’ve been busy on behalf of the business. Is it true?”

“Yes, it’s true. I sold guns to Latvia.”

“Lovely. I suppose that’s why you’re here. Noah’s going to try to murder you.”

“He will, yes.”

“I suppose you’ll try to murder him first.” She sighed and rubbed her face. “I do wish you boys would get along.”

“No, you don’t.”

She quirked a smile then her eyes fell on me like she was noticing for the first time that a strange girl stood in her doorway.

I didn’t move. I felt like a bug pinned for dissection. That must’ve been what deer felt like when they froze in front of a big rig truck. I wanted to turn and run away, but I was afraid that if I moved, I’d knock over a stack of books and the whole place would come tumbling down around me.

“You brought a girl.” His mother’s mouth sneered.

“Mother, this is Robyn. Robyn, meet my mother, Diana Solar.”

Diana Solar stood. She was a small woman, petite, pretty. She held herself like a giant.

“Lovely to meet you,” I managed.

She stared at me for several long seconds before she glanced at Calvin. “Why is she dressed like a common street whore?”

Calvin sighed and I repressed a gag.

“She’s wearing normal human clothes, Mother. I’m aware that you don’t get out much and wouldn’t know.”

“Don’t give me that, Calvin. She looks like you picked her up on the side of the road.”

“Mother.”

“You’ve been with some shockingly low-quality women before. I shouldn’t be surprised. Do you remember Theresa?”

“Her father was a Nobel laureate. Her great-grandmother invented sugarless gum.”

“Trash. Garbage. And that girl, what’s her name? Nancy?”

“Parents were both world-renowned doctors.”

“What a pill, that girl.” Diana rolled her eyes. “And now this one. So what’s its name again?”

“Robyn,” Calvin said, getting visibly angry. “And she’s my fiancée.”

That made his mother pause. She looked at him, frowned, looked at me, and frowned even more.

I wish I had gotten changed.

“You’re joking,” she said.

“I’m not. Robyn is my fiancée. That’s why we’re here, to tell father. I suppose you’d better get used to the idea of having a common street whore around more often.”

His mother burst out laughing. She shook her head and tried to stifle her mirth with another long drink, draining the glass, but she continued cracking up. Calvin’s face was red, but probably not redder than mine.

That asshole didn’t need to call me that.

He turned his back on his mother and went to my side. “We should go,” he said quietly as his mother sat back down and fished a bottle of wine from the floor. She refilled her glass to the brim.

“Are you sure?” I watched her drain half of it down as her laughter died away. “She’s your mother.”

“She’s an angry, bitter old drunk.” He looked over his shoulder, eyes flashing. “She wouldn’t know quality if it slapped her across the face.”

“Don’t give me that, darling,” his mother said. “You just paraded your previous girlfriends around, bandied about their accomplishments like they matter, and yet you’re marrying—this?”

“Her name is Robyn.”

“I don’t care if her name is Sparrow. She’s worthless. She’s beneath the Solar name. Really, darling, if you want a wife, I know plenty of eligible girls. Princesses, duchesses, women of caliber.”

Calvin gripped my hand. He held it so tight I thought he might break a bone. “That’s enough.”

“You’re going to reproduce with her, aren’t you? I suppose that’s all she’s good for, bearing children. A regular old bitch, isn’t she? Prepared to breed and breed your babies? Oh, your father will love this.”

“Enough,” Calvin said, storming over. His mother flinched back as he ripped the drink from her hand and smashed it against the wall. Glass and wine scattered all over, and she shrank back from him in shock, her mouth hanging open.

He stood over her, breathing hard, and I was afraid he’d strike her.

Instead, he bent over, picked up the wine bottle, and tucked it under his arm.

“You’ve had enough. From now on, your drinking will be monitored.”

“How dare you,” she snapped, leaning forward, face like a snake. “You ungrateful—”

“I am going to own this family soon,” Calvin snarled, matching her fury. “And when I do, I will bury you, Mother. There is a lot I can do that will make your life miserable. From now on, your drinking will be controlled and monitored, and if you don’t like it, I’ll make sure you live out the rest of your pathetic, lonely, worthless existence in some far-flung corner of the world, even more alone than you already are.”

He turned and stormed toward me. I gaped at him, then at his mother, as he brushed past me into the hall.

“Nice meeting you,” I said and hurried after him.

He didn’t stop until he was halfway across the house. When he finally did, he turned on me, eyes hot fire.

“She never should’ve said that to you,” he said.

I backed away, afraid. “I know.”

“She wasn’t always like this. There was some of that elitist bullshit, but it’s only gotten worse over the years as she drinks herself into oblivion. Did you know that my mother had a doctorate in English from Oxford? She’s written books, won awards. Then she married my father, and all that ended.”

“I had no clue.”

He backed me against the wall and crushed me there with his hands against my hips.

“She was smart. She had a life. Then she married into this hell and look at her. Surrounded by reminders of what she could’ve been while drowning herself and looking down on everyone else. It’s horrible. It’s what I’m afraid I’ll be.”

“You won’t.”

“Why?” It was half question, half plea.

“Because you’re not like her.”

He let that sink in. I thought he might hit me, or kiss me, or drop to his knees, rip off my clothes, and lick me until I screamed. Instead, he pulled back and

took several deep, calming breaths.

“I shouldn’t have lost control back there,” he said, speaking to the floor as if he couldn’t meet my gaze. “I won’t let it happen again.”

“Calvin.”

He looked over. “I promise.”

I shook my head and sighed. “This is hard for you. I didn’t realize how hard.”

“It’s not your problem.”

“No, it isn’t, but I want to hurt your brothers for hurting my mother, and I need you at the top of your game if we’re going to do it.” I stepped forward and slipped my hand into his. “So suck it up and get it together.”

His grin was vicious and beautiful. “Yes, ma’am. I like when you talk to me that way.”

“Asshole. Don’t be a fucking baby.”

He growled and pushed me back against the wall. “Call me a lazy piece of shit.”

I turned my chin away. “You’re an idiot.”

He kissed my neck. “You can do better.”

“You’re a conceited, manipulative, monstrous piece of garbage, and I want to see you tear your family to shreds for me.”

“I will,” he whispered, and kissed me.

I threw myself into that kiss. All my anger, all my desire. It raged through me like fire, burning, burning, burning. Threatening to overwhelm my senses. Nothing mattered but Calvin.

When we broke apart, it was like coming up from beneath a sheet of ice.

He squeezed my hand.

“Come on. Let’s get settled. We still have to meet my father.”

He turned and left.

I hurried to follow. No sense in getting lost in this hell.

ROBYN

I showered and changed. I let Calvin pick out my outfit, halfway expecting it to be something absurdly revealing, but was pleased to find a respectable and conservative ensemble of calf-length skirt and blouse. I dressed in the bedroom, and out in the living area I could hear him pacing around like a caged lion.

I tried to imagine what it must feel like for him to be home. I guessed it was like what I felt every time I saw my mother rotting in front of the television, drinking herself to death and waiting for her abusive husband to come home from prison—except magnified. This place was beautiful at first, but after that show with his mother, I could start to see the cracks forming all around.

The beauty was fleeting and meaningless. The expensive paintings, rugs, the details, it was all there to exude a sense of power. And yet since we'd been here, I'd only seen Martha, Matthias, Calvin's mother, and random staff members.

Nobody else experienced this place. It was like a garden in the middle of a locked fortress.

Never seen, never enjoyed.

I stepped out of the bedroom and spread my hands. "How do I look?"

He paused long enough to look at me with pure hunger in his eyes. "Beautiful."

I blushed and wondered why. “Better than a common street whore?”

“I never should’ve said that.” He came closer.

I held up my hands. “I know you weren’t directing that at me.”

“Even still. My mother has that effect on me.”

“I think most mothers do.”

“Does yours?”

I nodded and drifted toward the window. A skeletal forest stretched out into the distance, punctuated by several cell towers and some taller buildings in the distance.

“You know about my father. But my mother was just as bad.”

“She hit you?”

“No, but she didn’t try to stop it.”

He let out a long breath. “I can see how that would hurt.”

“It’s not the same as what my father did. I don’t hate her like I hate him, but I’m more...” I trailed off, searching for the word.

“Disappointed.”

I turned and nodded. “Disappointed,” I repeated, testing the word. It felt right. “She was supposed to be better. She’s my mother, after all.”

“She let you down.”

“Exactly. I don’t hate her. Sometimes I do, but mostly I don’t. I feel bad for her right now. She’s going through something very few people experience, and I don’t think she was prepared.”

“My mother was similar, though she played a more active role. My father loved his lessons, and though my mother was always softer, she did nothing to stop him. Sometimes she helped.” He shrugged as if the past was the past and it didn’t matter anymore.

But the past always mattered, whether or not we wanted it to.

“How do we forgive someone for sins like that? She didn’t do anything to me directly, but she didn’t move to stop it, either.”

“Was she afraid?”

“I don’t know.”

“You should ask her.”

I laughed at the idea. “She’s a zombie. She barely speaks to me.”

“Try anyway. Have you ever tried to talk to her about your father?”

“No, I haven’t. Not really.”

“Then try it. Your mother might not be too far gone.”

“And yours is?”

“Maybe when she sobers up, we can discuss all the ways she failed me as a mother. For now, I’m writing her off.” He moved toward the door, checking his watch. “We should go.”

“Where to?”

“My father’s study. Dinner’s served in an hour and I want to speak with him before that.”

I didn’t argue. His family seemed to move by unseen forces, following a set schedule that made no sense. But then again, other people’s routines rarely did.

We followed the quiet, creaking hallways on a circuitous route past statues that were likely worth more than my entire college education. Staff lurked in the silent, dark corners, and I wondered how many people this place employed—all to service five people at most. It was a travesty, such a waste, and yet at least these people had jobs.

His father’s study was toward the front of the house close to the entryway. “He likes to be near the action,” Calvin said bitterly. “As if there’s any action here.”

“Do they get visitors?”

“Sometimes,” he said. “Out-of-country guests stay here. When I was younger, they used to have more gatherings, parties for their rich and famous friends, but those stopped a while back.”

“Why? What happened?”

He hesitated near a pair of French doors and dropped his voice low, shifting closer. “My father threw himself into work. My mother lost herself in drinking. I think their misery finally caught up with them.”

“You make it sound like living here was always terrible. Was there any happiness when you were a kid?”

“No,” he said, his eyes never leaving mine, before he turned and tugged open the doors.

His father’s study was spacious, larger than our suite, larger than his mother’s room. Books lined the walls in neat, orderly rows, and a fire roared in a nearby tile fireplace. Couches, chairs, and desks were neatly arranged, and nothing was out of place. It was so different from his mother’s lair.

Calvin stepped into the room, but didn’t go further than the very first rug. He stood with his back straight, staring ahead. I joined him, slouching by comparison, and looked around.

A man sat behind a desk at the far end. He was in his sixties, with neatly clipped white hair and a dour and serious face. I saw the resemblance, though Calvin had his mother’s eyes and hair, while his father had a darker complexion and rougher edges to him. The man stood, and he seemed to tower over the massive oak desk.

“I heard you came home,” he said. His voice carried across the room.

“I have business here.”

That was strange. Business. I didn’t think of what we were doing as business—but in Calvin’s world, everything was business.

“Come sit.”

At the invitation, Calvin moved deeper into the cavernous room. I followed, my eyes lingering on a painting of a lion ripping the arm from a man while

people in Roman clothing screamed and cheered in the background. I shuddered, wondering if I was the animal, or the poor bastard getting ripped to shreds.

Better not to think about it.

Calvin sat in a large green chair. I sat in the chair adjacent to him and tried not to look like I was trembling. His father stared at both of us like he smelled poisonous gas and wanted to open a window.

“Father, this is Robyn.” Calvin’s voice was clipped. The anger he showed toward his mother was gone, replaced by civil formality. “She’s my fiancée.”

His father looked at me with undisguised interest. There was no disgust, which was a step up. I tried not to squirm.

“Fiancée,” he repeated.

“That’s right. It happened fast.”

Extremely fast. I kept my mouth shut.

“Her father?”

“In prison for murder.”

“Mother?”

“Housewife.”

He nodded to himself. “Why her then?”

I was taken aback. I expected derision or scorn. I hated the way Calvin trotted out my family’s sordid recent history like it was an answer on the SATs. I grimaced as Calvin shifted toward me and took my hand in his, fingers lacing with mine.

“She’s intelligent and resilient. She’ll make for a good addition to our family.”

What a glowing endorsement. He might as well have said I was good breeding stock, like his mother.

“I see.” His father sat back, studying me. “Do you know what it means to marry my son?”

I opened my mouth to answer then shut it again. Frankly, I had no clue. I vaguely understood that the Solar family was rich and powerful and really, really creepy, but beyond that, I didn’t know what being Calvin’s wife would be like.

And I didn’t want to know. All of this was fake, only to get back at his brothers, but the further it went, the more intense it became, and I was beginning to wonder if I was in over my head.

“I think so,” I said in a small voice. I cleared my throat and tried to summon some courage. “I know how important family is to him.”

His father snorted. “Yes, that’s an interesting way of putting it.” His eyes slid back to Calvin. “I’ve been asking you to marry for years now. I understand you’re young, you want to enjoy life, but you don’t have that luxury.”

“I’m aware.” Calvin sat rod-straight.

“And now you bring a girl home and say you’re engaged. She’s not connected, she’s not important, but you know I don’t care about that.”

I blinked in surprise. “You don’t?” The words came out before I could stop myself.

His father gave me a flat look. “I suppose you met his mother already.”

Calvin squeezed my hand. I kept my mouth shut. “We saw her, yes,” Calvin said.

“And how drunk was she?”

“Drunk enough to call Robyn a common street whore within two minutes of seeing her.”

His father snorted. “I can’t say I’m shocked. I’ll tell you something, Robyn. My wife was not always like this, but bitterness can change a person.”

“Oh,” I managed to say.

His father shuffled some papers on his desk. I didn't know what to think. I expected this man to be terrifying—and while he was certainly intense and intimidating, he wasn't the complete nightmare I thought he'd be.

Instead, he seemed almost kind and understanding.

I was missing something.

Calvin described his father in letters. Every single time, he painted a picture of a maniac. The kind of psychotic, self-absorbed creature that tortured those he loved in the name of making them stronger. Calvin wrote about a challenging childhood, about abuse and pain and anger.

But this man didn't resemble the nightmare I'd constructed in my head.

"My wife was kind once. I suspect Calvin doesn't remember that." If Calvin remembered or not, he didn't move to say so. His father continued. "But life changes a person. I've worked hard to establish this family, to raise up the Solar name, and to drag the company into the twenty-first century. Without hard work, sweat, and blood, none of this would be possible. Calvin's mother thinks breeding is enough. I think breeding is only part of the equation."

I caught a sharp undertone. Calvin's father leaned forward, staring at his son.

"Breeding only matters if you're willing to work," Calvin said softly as if he were reciting scripture. "Nobody is born the best. Winners are made."

"That's right, son. It warms my heart to hear my own words parroted back."

"It's hard not to, considering you've been drilling it into my skull since I was a baby."

"Lucky for you." His father watched him carefully. "Are you serious about marrying this girl?"

"Yes," Calvin said without hesitation, and that was the first time it sounded as though he weren't lying or holding back.

His father nodded. "Good. You know I'm pleased to hear it."

"But I have conditions."

I sat up straight. I didn't know about this. I assumed he was coming here to show his father that he was willing to play along—but having conditions of his own was interesting.

“Go ahead.” His father tilted his head like he was watching a curiosity unfold in front of him.

“I want Noah and Raymond stripped of their shares. I want Noah's trust cut in half, and I want him written out of the will. I want Raymond to forfeit his stock options in the company if he's going to retain the Solar name. I want Noah thrown out of the family.” Calvin leaned forward, shivering with rage. “I want them destroyed.”

Calvin's father leaned back. I expected him to seem outraged, but instead he only smiled and nodded slowly, as if he'd wanted this all along.

“I see you're finally embracing the competitive spirit.”

“They took things too far. It's time to stop being kind.”

“I always said you were weak, Calvin. You were too willing to give second chances.”

“I'm finished with chances.”

“Very well.” His father tilted his head. His gaze was predatory, like a hawk circling a field, searching for a mouse to kill. He smiled, his lips pulled back to show too-white, too-straight teeth. It was disconcerting, like a spirit drifting from the mist.

“You know I'm the best man to run the Solar company. The Latvian deal proves it, even with the odds stacked against me.”

“Your brothers did go to great lengths to try to stop you.”

“You knew?” Calvin didn't sound surprised, but I felt a deep sense of shock on his behalf.

“You think I don't know everything that goes on in my company? I knew what you planned and I knew your brothers were going to counter it. I'm pleased you managed to work around them.”

Calvin took two breaths to compose himself, though his expression barely changed. I sensed the anger in the air like electricity, and I could taste it on my tongue. His father looked positively exalted, like he was bathing in Calvin's rage and enjoying it far too much.

I began to see the beast beneath the surface. He seemed so mild-mannered at first, but as the conversation wore on it became clear that this man had no conscience and no desire to help others. All he cared about was domination, control, and victory at all costs—even if it meant hurting or killing his sons in the process.

This was the logical endpoint of a kill-or-be-killed mindset. This was might makes right incarnate. This was a warlord, a broken mess, a demon from Hell.

The worst part was he wore a normal human's face. But beneath all that was blackness.

That was Calvin's future. I saw it plainly. I couldn't turn away once it became clear. Calvin sped toward his father like a freight train, morphing into a twisted version of himself, and one day he'd wake up and find that the man he once thought he'd become was only a distant memory, replaced with sorrow, and longing, and anger, and death instead.

It broke my heart.

“When I'm married to Robyn, I want you to make a formal announcement. I won't wait for heirs.”

“You know I want children.”

“We'll make them. But I won't wait.”

“You're making a lot of demands, Calvin.”

“And you don't have much of a choice but to grant them.”

The two men stared at each other. Nobody moved. I could scream.

His father laughed.

“All right then. I’ll grant all your wishes, but you’ll give me one thing in return.”

“You want more?” Calvin didn’t move though.

“You’ll marry Robyn here. You’ll marry her tomorrow.”

My mouth dropped open.

Calvin went still. He didn’t look at me, but I could tell he wanted to. I stared between them and so many thoughts flashed through my mind, a jumble of emotions—Calvin kissing me, Calvin pushing me down, gunshots, pain, screams, Noah’s hand wrapped around my throat, Calvin’s thigh between my legs—and I didn’t know what to do. I breathed fast to try to keep myself from losing it, but that only made it worse.

“I’ll arrange everything,” his father continued. “I’ll bring in a priest. I’ll act as your witness. I’ll arrange the paperwork. You don’t have to worry about wait periods or anything like that. I will make it all go away if you agree to marry this girl tomorrow morning.”

Calvin turned from his father and looked at me. “What do you say, Robyn?”

I opened my mouth and nothing came out.

What could I say?

If I said no, this would be over. Any chance of getting back at his brothers would evaporate. I’d go home to my sad, empty house with my sad, empty mother and I’d live my sad, empty life. Noah and Raymond would get away with hurting me, and worse, with hurting my mother.

But if I said yes, I’d be Calvin’s wife in the morning.

For real. Not fake, not for revenge.

But real, his actual wife.

It didn’t have to be forever. Even marriage wasn’t ironclad. I could divorce him—I could run away—I could do so many things—

And I knew that if I said the words and kissed him, then I’d be giving myself away, and nothing I tried would bring me back again.

It scared me more than anything.

But his father's eyes ripped into my chest. Calvin's expression was blank, but intent. I clenched my jaw, steeled myself, and nodded once.

"Yes, I will."

"Good," his father said, clapping his hands loud enough to make me jump. Calvin didn't look away. "I'll make the calls. You two should prepare yourselves."

"Are you sure?" Calvin asked softly. "I know you wanted a real wedding."

"This is fine." I didn't know why my voice was so quiet. Like I was whispering.

"She's practically beaming," his father said, sounding happy. "She's glowing with excitement, and why not? She's marrying into the Solar family. What a lucky girl." He laughed again, head thrown back, and stood. "I have work to do, so go make eyes at each other somewhere else, you crazy kids."

Calvin stood, never looking away. He took my hand and pulled me from the room, and didn't stop until we reached the safety of our suite. He shut the door, locked it, and faced me as I walked to the windows and looked outside.

I could run away. Jump out, scale the wall, hit the grass, and keep on going. I could lose myself in the wilderness. Live with the wolves and the bears. Become a hermit in a cave. I didn't have to marry him.

"You don't have to marry me," he said.

The perfect words.

"Yes, I do. It won't be forever. It won't really matter." I didn't look at him. I stared at the trees. "If I do this, you'll make sure your brothers suffer. And you'll do the thing you first promised."

"Kill your father." His whisper was so close. I didn't hear him approach. I shivered and closed my eyes as he touched my arms and squeezed my shoulders.

"Kill him. Make sure he never leaves that prison. I want him to suffer, too."

“I’ll do it for you, love.” He kissed my neck. I almost moaned. Almost.

Then he was gone. I looked back, but the room was empty. I hadn’t heard him leave. I felt dizzy, drunk with confusion, and I collapsed onto a chair, curling up into myself.

I was getting married in the morning.

And I didn’t even have a dress.

ROBYN

I lasted an hour before I had to leave. Calvin never returned, and the room felt too hot, too oppressive. I stepped into the hallway, looking around wildly.

Matthias stood next to the door, looking at his phone. He glanced up, frowning.

“Took you long enough.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Watching over you.”

“Making sure I don’t run?”

He slipped his phone away. “Is that what you’re doing now?”

I turned and began down the hall. I had no clue where I was going. Matthias fell into step behind me, like a shadow. I stopped, looked back, glared, and walked again.

“What do you want from me?” I refused to turn around again.

“I want to use you for my own gain.”

I stopped and grimaced. “You’re not supposed to admit that, you know.”

“What’s it matter? You’re using Calvin, he’s using you. We’re all using each other.”

“Is that how relationships work in this place?”

“You don’t have a relationship with Calvin, or with me.”

I stopped and whirled around. “I don’t want one.”

He smiled, shrugged. “That settles that. I want to use you. Why do you care if I say it out loud?”

“I want to know what you get out of all this.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “I suppose I get power.”

“You suppose. How do you even know Calvin, anyway?”

“I’m the gardener’s son.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“I’m not. I met Calvin when I was a little boy. We grew up together.”

“Is your father still around?”

“He’s outside right now trimming the rosebushes. Do you want to go meet him?”

I shook my head. “I’ve met enough fathers for one day.” I turned and started walking again, looking for a staircase down. I wanted to get out of this building and get some fresh air.

“What did you think of Calvin’s father?”

“He’s an asshole.”

Matthias laughed. “That’s about right.”

“I don’t get why you’d want to hang around this place and work for Calvin.”

“Don’t you? Look around. I’m the gardener’s son. Do you think I’d ever be in a place like this otherwise?”

“Doesn’t seem so great to me.” I swatted at a fake plant and jabbed a finger into a vase that was probably worth a fortune. “All this crap and nobody to look at it.”

“Ah, true, but Calvin rarely ever comes here.”

“Do you live at Blackwoods?”

“No, he keeps me away from there. He prefers his little friend group. The Four Horsemen. He hates that name.”

“I can’t blame him. It’s a dumb name.”

“I like the others, you know. Jarrod. Des. Especially Addler. He’s a good one.”

“I’m glad you approve.”

I found stairs and took them down. Matthias didn’t let up.

“I wish he’d let them into his life more. Wouldn’t this be so much better with them around?”

I reached the bottom and glared at him. “Will you leave me alone?”

“I can’t do that. I’m just making conversation.”

“Go make it somewhere else. I’m going for a walk outside.”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

“Yeah, well, I bet you wouldn’t marry Calvin, either.”

He chuckled and shook his head. “I wouldn’t be so sure.” His eyes sparkled.

I turned away, walking again. I didn’t need to engage with him right now. He was messing with me, trying to distract me from my goal. I didn’t know why he wanted me to stay indoors, and I didn’t care. All I wanted was the wind on my face and the grass beneath my feet, even if it was cold out.

I found a side passage, and at the far end was a door with a heavy handle. I pulled, then yanked, and it creaked open. Exterior air buffeted my face as I stepped into the slanted late-afternoon sunlight. I was somewhere in the bushes on the side of the house, and Matthias followed me out, but stopped short on the threshold.

I went toward the woods at the far side of the lawn.

“Be careful,” he called out.

“You’re not going to follow me?”

“I’m under strict orders to stay indoors. Besides, you’re a big girl. You can make your own stupid mistakes.”

“You’re going to go tell Calvin what I’m doing, aren’t you?”

“I’d guess you have ten minutes before he comes looking.” Matthias waved and disappeared back indoors.

I glared at the closing door, but refused to turn back. That bastard. I had a short window of peace, quiet, and silence, and I was going to take it.

I marched to the woods. Trees creaked. Leaves rustled. Birds chirruped. I could scream at it all. I could burn it to the ground.

All my life I’d been hurt. Over and over, hurt by my father, hurt by my mother.

Hurt by those two bastards, Raymond and Noah.

Now I have a chance to hurt them back.

And all I have to do is marry Calvin.

The man that wants to hurt me most of all.

But his hurt comes with strings, and all those strings are complicated.

Pleasure and pain. Even at my lowest, I can still feel good.

Calvin’s like that. He drags me down, down, down, and then he brings me higher than I ever thought possible.

I stepped over a downed tree and scrambled into a small clearing. The canopy thinned above, letting more light filter down. Leaves fluttered across the ground. The bare, skeletal branches reached up to the clear sky.

I heard a crunch. Then a crack. I hesitated, not looking back, not yet.

I knew it’d be him.

“Matthias said I had more time. I guess he found you right away.”

The footsteps got closer. I expected his voice and his touch at any moment.

Instead, I heard something else.

“I think you’re mistaking me for someone else.”

I jumped, turned. That wasn’t Calvin. It wasn’t Calvin at all.

I both recognized and didn’t recognize the man staring at me. He was tall, bigger than Noah, with broad shoulders and an easy smile. His hair was longer, pulled back in a tight bun, and a scraggly beard covered his face. He looked like his father, but softer, with touches of his mother.

“You’re Raymond.”

He nodded. He was ten paces away, hands shoved in a big, black jacket. “What are you doing out here?”

“I needed some air.” I looked around. I could run, but he’d catch me. He knew these woods, and besides, he was bigger, faster. I might be able to escape if I climbed a tree, or if I hit him with a log, or if I got insanely lucky —

But none of that would happen.

No, I was trapped.

“Lucky for me.” He took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. “I saw you and Matthias talking. Then you ran off, and I thought, maybe I could share. You want one?”

I shook my head. “Bad habit.”

He shrugged, lit a cigarette, took a drag. “Nasty. I totally agree. My father hates it. This is my one rebellion.”

“You’ll show him. Shave a few decades off your life.”

He laughed and blew out a thick plume. “You wouldn’t understand. I’d cut myself to the bone if it meant hurting my father.”

“I thought you and Noah worshiped him.”

“Worship, despise, all of the above.” Raymond shrugged, flicked ash onto the ground. “I take it you didn’t listen to my warning, and you definitely ignored my brother’s.”

My hand drifted to my throat, to the bruises still healing. “Calvin convinced me.”

“Did he? Doesn’t sound like him.”

“We’re getting married.”

His smile dropped. “Really.” Flat tone. Affect dead.

I sensed danger. He took another drag.

“Tomorrow. That’s what we spoke to your father about. Can’t get rid of me now. I’m family.”

“Oh, sweetie. Family doesn’t matter to the Solars, haven’t you figured that out yet?” He sucked on the cigarette and walked toward me.

I backed away. “Calvin’s coming. You can’t hurt me.”

“I can and I will.” He lunged. I tried to dodge, but he was fast and his arms were long. His free hand caught my wrist and yanked me off balance. I stumbled, dropped to my knees.

He jammed the lit cigarette onto the back of my hand.

I screamed in pain. It was shockingly intense, the cherry sizzling on my skin. Raymond’s lips pulled back, showing teeth as he held my hand while I writhed, sobbing in pain, trying to get it away. He only yanked the cigarette back once the burning had mostly stopped.

The welt was round and bright and smelled like burned hair.

He released me then kicked my stomach. I groaned, fell over. I clutched my burned hand and cradled it against my chest.

“God, you’re pathetic. My father burned me for the first time when I was six. I didn’t cry half as much as you are.” He yanked a sleeve up and showed me

an arm covered in scars. “Knives, lighters. Oh, this one’s from a glass he broke. My father was so creative when we were kids. Really made things fun.” He chuckled as I tried to slither away.

He stomped his boot down on my ankle. I screamed again as the pain hit me.

“Father was brutal to me and Noah. He kicked, punched, cut, burned. But for some reason, Calvin was spared all that. Most of it, anyway. He got his beatings, some worse than what we were given, but Father never marked him like we were marked. I always wondered about that.”

“You’re all sick.”

“That’s right, sweetie. Fucked up. Broken. Did you think you could come here and still go home? God, what a fucking idiot.” He lit another cigarette and kicked me in the stomach. “I think I’ll put this out in your eye. Really mess you up. I doubt Calvin will marry you then. All scarred and gross. Your depth perception will be ruined, toast. You’ll miss his cock every time you try to suck him off.” He laughed, manic and sick, as he knelt down and grabbed my hair. I struggled, slapping at his face, trying to dig my fingernails into his cheeks but he punched me hard in the mouth and the world swam.

“Stupid girl,” he said, and the bright cherry glowed in front of my face, coming closer, closer, getting huge, getting so big, and I felt it burning my eyelashes, burning the skin, and I started to scream in fear and pain until something big and blurred slammed into Raymond, knocking him away.

I fell back gasping. I groaned in pain but got to my knees, staring as Calvin rained blows down on his brother, hitting him hard, slamming fists into flesh. Raymond laughed at first, but his laughter turned to moans, until his face was smashed pulp and blood covered Calvin’s fists.

Calvin stood, breathing hard. Raymond wasn’t dead, but he needed a hospital. His nose was snapped, his cheeks sunken, his eyes a bruised and bloated mess. Calvin loomed over him.

“Don’t,” I croaked.

He paused and looked back. “Don’t what?”

“Kill him. Don’t kill him.”

His jaw worked. “Why? After what he did?”

“Noah will use it against you. You can’t murder your brother. You just can’t. We’ll hurt him more, but you can’t murder him.”

Calvin grimaced and glared at Raymond’s prostrate, unmoving form. I knew he wanted to do it. He’d keep beating his brother to death if I hadn’t spoken up. That was what their lives had amounted to, fighting and killing each other in the forest.

They were born to this. Three of them grew up but only one would survive.

Calvin released a guttural howl of rage then turned from his brother and came to me. He stooped down and lifted me into his arms. I clung to his neck and leaned against his chest as he carried me from the woods, legs moving like pistons.

Matthias met us at the back door. I was brought into the room, and a man appeared, one I’d never seen before. “Dr. Nero,” he said, smiling kindly. “I’ll take care of you.”

He looked me over, spoke to Calvin, then gave me pills. “For the pain.”

I swallowed them and watched Calvin as my eyelids fluttered. I was so tired. Exhausted really. What a long day. “I think I’ll nap.”

I closed my eyes and saw the bright red glow getting closer and closer and closer.

DEAR ROBYN

Imagine growing up in a house where you're valued.

Where life is about something more than fighting, survival, victory.

Imagine feeling love. Warmth.

You can't, can you?

Oh, Robyn, my sweet.

There are nights where I close my eyes and think about you. I picture all the things I want to do together. Children, houses, cars, first jobs, first anniversaries. All the normal things normal people do.

We're not normal, are we?

I can give you other things. I can show you pleasure. Peel your panties off while you bend over and show me your dripping wet cunt. Spread you wide and lick you top to bottom, savoring every delightful inch.

I can do more. Pin you to the floor. Fuck you while you scream. Make you beg, yes, beg. Part your lips and pant my name. Come so hard you forget to hold back.

Release, love. Release. I can give you that.

I can give you blinding pleasure. I can wake you up with my tongue between your legs, or my cock bottoming out deep inside your warm, slick pussy. I

want to watch you shower, get clean, and I want to make you filthy afterward.

I think that's the only thing keeping me sane anymore. My desire for you. My need.

Hunger.

Because without that, without dreams of you to ground me, what would be left? All I know is struggle and pain and anger.

Addler and Des, they don't know. Jarrod has some idea. But even he wouldn't understand.

Only you, Robyn, my sweet.

Come to me, baby girl. Let me give you all I've imagined and more. Distract me from the hate. From the hurt.

Make my life mean something.

I'll devote myself to you.

My goddess.

If only you'll get down on your knees and swear you'll be mine, all of you.

Forever.

Love,

C

ROBYN

I woke up on my wedding day with a blinding headache.

I groaned, rolled over. It was early. The sun was just rising. The sky was pink through the gossamer curtains.

The bedroom was empty. Only me and the big bed.

Where was Calvin?

I sat up and felt dizzy. The day before came back in drips. Raymond's leer. The pain from the cigarette.

My hand was wrapped in a bandage.

I got out of bed and stumbled into the bathroom.

God, I was a mess. Bruises on my neck. Bruises on my face. I looked like I'd gotten hit by a truck.

I started the shower, undressed, and got in. I let the steam fill up the bathroom, so hot it nearly scalded my skin. I wanted to be red, pink. I wanted to boil.

I heard the door open. Someone came in.

"Tell me it's you this time." My heart raced.

"It's me." Calvin's voice.

I calmed, but marginally. “I’m in the shower.”

“I know.” His voice was closer. Right outside the door. I wiped my hand at eye-level and looked out.

He was naked.

I took a step back. The shower was big, the glass frosted just enough to blur his cut body. The steam covered over the window I’d made, and he disappeared.

“I’ll leave if you want me to.”

I opened my mouth to answer. I shut it again. I waited, the water running. I counted to twenty in my head before he opened the door and came inside.

Calvin.

Tall, beautiful Calvin. Blue eyes like ice. Blond hair pushed back and wavy. Full lips parted, mouth curved into a grimace, like he was holding himself back from something.

His arms were cut and muscular. His shoulders were broad and enormous. His chest, his abs, that long, luscious V down to his half-hard cock, long and thick, shockingly big. I stared, my mouth open, and looked back into his eyes.

Neither of us spoke. He stepped closer. Reached up and touched my face so gently I barely felt it.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered.

“You didn’t do this.”

“I left you alone. I was trying to set up the wedding, make sure my father didn’t fuck it up—”

“You left Matthias.”

“He shouldn’t have let you walk off alone.”

“He went to get you.”

“I know. We spoke about that.” He moved closer. Inches away. His cock stiffening. He couldn’t help himself. The thought sent shivers down my spine. I was dripping, excited. His eyes were on my face, but they roamed, yes, they roamed to my lips, my breasts. My nipples were hard. Water rolled off my skin.

I must’ve looked like hell, and he still wanted me.

“It’s bad luck to see your bride on the wedding day.”

“I don’t believe in luck.”

“What do you believe in?”

He touched my lips. “These.” His fingers trailed down my chin, my throat. “Your skin.” He touched my breasts, my nipples. Pleasure tingled along every inch of my spine. “Your body. Your beautiful, perfect breasts.” He kept going, going. Fingers down my stomach, to my belly button. “Your voice. Your laugh. The way you smile and crinkle up your nose at a bad joke. The way you tug at your hair when you’re anxious. The way you roll your eyes.” His fingers reached my pussy, god, yes, and he stopped there, inches from my swollen and aching clit. “I believe in you, Robyn. I always have.”

“I don’t understand why.”

“Does it matter anymore?”

“No,” I said, and he kissed me.

He crushed me back against the wall of the shower. I opened my legs enough and his fingers did the rest, spreading my pussy as he rolled his fingers along my clit. I gasped into his mouth and moaned as he plunged inside then back out, teasing, teasing, bringing pleasure, yes, but also pain as he bit my lower lip and pressed me harder against the tiles. He held me there, tight and rough, fingers working, working, and I reached out, stupid and greedy, and stroked his cock.

He was long and thick. Rock hard the instant I touched him. He licked my nipples, bit them hard, squeezed my breasts with his free hand. He was rough, needy. He palmed my ass, spanked it. I stroked him faster, losing my mind as he fucked me with his fingers, until a growl escaped his throat and he turned

me around, shoving me against the wall, my hands behind my back, his cock against my ass, against the open, soaking entrance to my pussy.

“I’ll leave, if you ask,” he whispered.

“We should save this for the wedding night.”

“I can’t wait.” His hands tightened as he pinned me. It hurt and it felt good, both sensations mingling, confusing and too intense. “I want this, Robyn. I need to feel you now, before I make you mine. Before we choose to make this forever.”

“It’s not forever,” I whispered.

He bit my shoulder, grabbed my hair. “You know it is.”

And he plunged himself deep between my legs.

I gasped, screamed with pleasure and pain. He filled me, stretched me past anything I thought possible. He fucked me with a savage intensity that had my knees shaking. He growled in my ear, all man, all monster, all beast. He slapped my ass hard, harder, leaving handprints, leaving bruises. More marks on my body. He fucked me and squeezed my throat, careful not to touch the spots left by his brother. He pulled my hair and put his fingers in my mouth and I sucked them, then bit them, and let him savage me, again and again, until an orgasm welled its way up my core, rolling along my fingers, making my knees shake.

“You don’t understand what you do to me,” he whispered, fucking me faster, deeper. “I want to consume you, love. I want to make you all mine. On your knees, sucking my cock. I want to command you, to dominate you. Will you give me everything?”

“Yes,” I moaned. “All of me.”

He pulled my hair harder. “Pleasure and pain. All of it.”

“Everything.”

“I want your cunt wrapped around my thick cock. I want to watch you dress in the mornings. I want to stare at your pink nipples, your full breasts. I want you bend over, screaming, struggling, fighting as I fuck you. I want you to

slap me in the face then take your punishment as I wrench your arms back and plunge inside. I want to savage you. I want to ravage you.”

“Oh, god, Calvin,” I moaned as the orgasm ripped through me. I came hard as he whispered in my ear, sending bolts of intense ecstasy to every inch of my body, my head like a lightning burst, like a thunder clap. I saw spots, bright lights, and nearly blacked out. He supported me and kept going, fucking my tight pussy, unrelenting, like a force of nature. He took me over and over, sending earth-shattering explosions all through my skin, and when I didn’t think I could stand any more pleasure, he came deep between my legs.

I moaned his name as he growled mine. I turned when he was done and he held me in the water, letting the steam rise in billows. He kissed me softly and brushed my hair back.

Then, to my utter and total surprise, he began to wash my body.

Wordless. Gentle. Loving. He cleaned me like he worshiped me. Every inch, from my toes to my hair. He lavished me with attention, whispering soft words of praise for my skin, my curve, my figure, everything. When he was done, I felt pampered, dizzy with comfort. He turned off the water, wrapped me in warm, fluffy towels, and deposited me in bed.

He lingered, kissing my lips.

“We’re getting married later,” he whispered. “You have to get ready.”

“Will it be bad?”

“No, love. It won’t.”

“Then I’m looking forward to it.”

He laughed, kissed me again. “I doubt that very much.”

He left quietly. I stayed in bed, wrapped in blankets and towels, for a long time.

CALVIN

My father sat next to my mother on white folding chairs beneath a crisp white tent. He wore black, and she wore gray, and neither of them smiled.

Behind them, my brothers glared like they'd rather slice my throat open than watch me get married.

Raymond in particular. He was held together with gauze and morphine. Noah had to keep jabbing him in the side to keep him from nodding off. The pair looked like hell, and it still wasn't enough.

They hurt her. That meant I'd revisit all that pain on them tenfold.

We were out in the garden behind the manor. The smell of flowers was thick in the air. The wind was cold, though the staff set up heaters. The trees hung with long, naked branches, casting shadows across the partially frozen grass. It was an odd time of year for an outdoor wedding.

The priest looked uncomfortable. I'd never seen him before, and I guessed my father bribed him to show up, say a few words, and give this farce a semblance of respectability, though I didn't know why he bothered. The only people watching were my parents, my brothers, several staff members, a few guards, and Matthias. There was no need for all this, but my father insisted.

He was old school that way. My preference was to sign a piece of paper and take Robyn as my prize, but if this was what he wanted, then this was what we'd do.

It was for him, after all.

All this theater was for his benefit.

I adjusted myself and half turned to Matthias. He stood next to me at the altar as my best man. Robyn had nobody on her side. I felt bad about that—I was sure she'd like to have Cora there, and a part of me wished I could've invited Jarrod and Des and Addler, but those two worlds had to be kept separate.

"She's late," I said, frowning at my assistant.

"She's on her way. I checked in."

"What's taking her so long? I don't know how long my mother can keep herself from drinking. It's been five minutes already."

"I'd worry more about Raymond nodding off and never waking up again."

"If only I could be so lucky."

The priest looked scandalized and I winked at him.

At the far end of the tent, the flaps pushed back. Martha stepped inside, positively beaming. She looked around and clapped her hands. Everyone looked back as she gestured, and Robyn stepped through.

The "Wedding March" played over loudspeakers, but I barely heard it. I stared, my mouth hanging open, as Robyn walked toward me. She glowed, floated, shone. She wore all white, a slip of a dress that clung to her body and shimmered in the weak winter light. She had diamonds in her hair and a heavy fur shawl around her shoulders. Her lips were red and her eyes were a bright, startling green. She always looked beautiful, but in this moment, coming toward me with that angry smile on her lips in that damn wedding dress, she looked transcendent.

My father must've seen it too. His eyebrows knitted down, his lips tugged into a frown.

Martha escorted Robyn to her position, kissed my future wife's cheek, grinned at me, and took a seat behind my brothers. Everyone sat as the priest raised his hands for silence.

“You look incredible,” I whispered as the priest began to do his thing.

“Thanks. You can thank Martha for that.”

“I will.”

The priest glared daggers and cleared his throat. “If you don’t mind?”

I waved a hand in the air. “Skip the bullshit, father. We’re here for a pronouncement and a kiss.”

The priest looked scandalized and turned to my father, but my old man only nodded once. “Listen to the boy.”

“Sacrilege,” the priest said, shaking his head, but he flipped ahead and cleared his throat. “Now, we exchange rings. Calvin, will you place yours on Robyn’s finger and repeat after me?”

I said my vows. I stared in her eyes as I did it, the simple silver band perched on the tip of her ring finger. She stared back, lips parted, and I meant every word I said, until death do we part. I slid it down and it fit.

She did the same thing, but with much less enthusiasm.

That finished, I moved closer to her.

“By the power vested in me by the State of Maine, I pronounce you two man and wife. You may—”

I didn’t wait for him to finish. I took Robyn in my arms and kissed her deep and hard, like it was the first time we’d ever touched lips. She returned it with a breathless and surprising hunger.

Nobody clapped. When I broke away, my mother was leaving with my brothers. The priest said something about his check and swept out of the tent. Martha wiped tears away and scooted after him.

My father stood and approached. I held Robyn’s hand tightly in my own.

“You did it,” he said, eyeing me, and looked at my bride. “I expected you to run.”

“Then you don’t know me very well.”

“I suppose you’ll fix that.” My father almost smiled. He turned to me. “Now that this is finished, you’re going to want a position in the company.”

“And a seat on the board.”

“We’ll discuss that.”

“No, we won’t. A seat on the board, and my brothers disinherited.”

He shook his head. “We’ll discuss that.” He turned and walked away.

I let him go. Not worth arguing.

“Congratulations,” Matthias said, and followed my father.

Leaving me alone with Robyn beneath the altar, standing in front of a few lonely chairs in a deep, beautiful tent.

“I guess there won’t be a reception,” she said.

“Not unless you want to dance right here.”

“No music. What a pity.” She adjusted her dress and spread out her hands. “How do I look?”

“Incredible.”

She blushed and stared at her shoes. “This isn’t how I expected my wedding to go.”

“No? You didn’t want to get married in front of an unwilling priest while everyone in the crowd imagined your bloody and horrible death?”

“Not everyone. Martha was happy.”

I laughed and steered her down the aisle. “That’s true. She was the only one.”

“Not your father? Not Matthias?”

“Things are complicated with my father, and I’m not sure Matthias cares either way. It won’t change his life much.”

“You have a weird relationship with him.”

“That’s definitely true.” I led her out of the tent and toward the house. “I

want to show you something, if you're up for it."

"If this is some pretext to get me in bed, forget it. We're not having the traditional wedding night."

"I don't need a pretext for that. This is about something else."

She shrugged and took my arm. "Lead away then."

I took her into the house, past several gossiping staff members, and down a series of hallways. This place was so familiar and so foreign, so strangely a part of my life, but always so remote. When I was a child, I explored this house obsessively, learned every corner, every inch, because there wasn't much else to do. But I was always held at a distance, told never to touch anything, and punished severely if I made a mess.

"When I was twelve, I broke a Rembrandt right here." I stopped in a hallway and pointed. "It used to be there. I was dribbling a soccer ball and decided to kick it against the wall."

"That's the danger of living in a museum, right?"

I smiled and unbuttoned the top button of my shirt. She watched carefully as I pulled my shirt aside and pointed at a scar. It was a small knot of puckered pink skin beneath my collar bone. "My father stabbed me with a pen."

Her eyebrows shot up. "A pen?"

"It was what he had on hand. It could've been worse. He could've been shoveling."

"God, Calvin. That's so horrible."

"I have scars all over like this one." I closed my shirt again. "Marks on my body and the corresponding places in this hellhole of a home where they happened. Tears on my back, knots on my thighs. My father liked to punish me creatively, and used our space liberally in doing so."

"He'd drag you around just to beat you?"

"Essentially, yes. He wanted me to know that everything I had, I had because of him. Nothing was mine. Nothing was earned. He wanted to make me

strong. I think it worked, but it had some unintended consequences.”

“Like what?”

“Like how I enjoy hurting, and to hurt.” I touched her cheek and she flinched away. “Come on. There’s one spot you should see.” I walked on, twisting into memory, into the nightmare of my childhood. I passed corridors and rooms, statues and paintings.

I refused to stop. If I paused in this place, I’d let memory overwhelm me. I couldn’t get dragged back down, not right now. Not on my wedding day.

I hated the Solar family. I hated Solar Manor. If Robyn understood the depths of my loathing for my own family, she’d understandably wonder why I’d ever want to be a part of this people, why I’d ever give up so much to become the head of the household.

But that would be shortsighted.

I reached the end of a corridor and turned the knob on an old, oak door. It opened on rusty hinges, screeching the whole time. A thick layer of dust sat on its trim.

Cold air hit me as I stepped out into a small courtyard, shaded by peaked roofs, surrounded by bare walls.

Robyn followed hesitantly. My feet crunched over dead grass. I followed an old path made from flagstones toward a single bench. All around, flowerbeds were barren, filled with weeds, overgrown and gone back to the wild. In the summer, this place would overflow, and the staff would cut it all back once or twice a year.

Otherwise, it would remain empty.

I sat on the stone bench. It was old, older than this place. Perhaps ancient, I didn’t know. Robyn lingered, looking around.

“What is this?”

“It’s the only spot I could ever be alone.” I smiled and looked up at the sky. “Nobody ever comes here. I don’t know why it still exists. My great-grandfather must’ve had it installed when he was still alive, but after he

passed, it fell into disuse. I found it when I was a kid and never mentioned it to my parents, and I'm not even sure they realize its here."

"Someone mows this grass." She looked around, touching her lips. "Though not often."

"In the summer, I'd run around the tall grass and play games. My brothers didn't know about it, so I'd have it all to myself. You can't imagine how happy I'd feel in this place, imagining wars and dramas and epic duels. I was the king of this place."

"It's the only happy memory you have from home, isn't it?" She sat down and put a hand on my leg.

"I wanted you to see it before we went back to Blackwood."

"Thank you."

I took her hand and dropped to a knee in front of her. She pulled back, but I didn't release her palm. I touched her skin then ran a finger around the ring.

"I want you to understand something." I spoke low, like the memories infusing this place might hear. The child version of myself wouldn't understand this, wouldn't understand any of it. He was broken and angry and alone, but still so naive. He didn't know how bad it could get. "When I said those words, I meant them. I will do anything for you, Robyn."

"Calvin—"

"Anything." I squeezed her hand hard. "I know you despise me. You hate what I am and what I've done. I can't pretend that I'm a good man or that your life won't have pain. It will hurt, love. It always does. That's being alive. But I swear, so long as you're my wife, I will give you anything you want, and make every day better."

She let out a long breath and gently pulled her hand away. I stayed there, unmoving. I didn't need her to accept, and didn't expect her to. This was a solemn oath, and not something that needed her approval.

I didn't care if she wanted me or not. I didn't care if she hated me.

Robyn was mine, and so long as we remained married, I'd devote myself to her.

Whether she wanted it or not.

"This is a business arrangement." She spoke softly, as if she were afraid of the magic of this place. I couldn't blame her. It was beautiful. I could feel it in my bones. "You and me? We're not real. I know it feels real, but it's not."

"Real doesn't matter. Fake doesn't matter."

"It matters to me. We're still in college. I'm not ready—" She choked on her words and stopped, looking at her lap. "I'm not ready for any of this. You're too much."

"You're enough."

"Stop it." She stared at me, anger in her eyes. I smiled back, loving every second of this. "I know we had sex. I shouldn't have done it. I can't help myself sometimes, but that doesn't mean I want to be your wife forever. I'm doing this to get revenge against your brothers and to make sure my father never walks free again. Once those goals are accomplished, we're finished. Do you understand?" She touched my cheek. "Tell me you understand."

I pulled her hand away. "I understand."

"Good." She gave me a tentative smile. "Thank you for bringing me. I really do like it. I'm sorry your life here was so awful."

"It wasn't your fault."

"But I won't change my mind. You have to know that."

I nodded. She seemed to take that as acceptance and turned away. She walked to the house and the door, and I watched her go, hips swaying slightly in that dress, every inch of my body on fire.

My Robyn, my love.

She believed this would be the end. We'd marry, achieve our goals, and separate.

But I'd never let her go.

She was mine now. And sooner or later, she'd realize it, and love it. I already saw the seeds, planted a long time ago.

Soon it would sprout, and she would open her lips, her legs, her body to me, and I'd fill her to the brim.

ROBYN

Cora grabbed my hand and yanked it into her face. “What the fucking fuck is that thing on your hand?”

I tried not to laugh as she stared at the wedding band. “It’s nothing, Cor. Just a ring.”

“That is not just a ring. That’s a silver ring on your wedding finger. That’s like a marriage ring. What did you and Calvin do this weekend?”

“Cora.”

She released me and put her hands on her hips. “Talk.”

I spun the ring around. It still felt strange. I hadn’t gotten used to its weight yet, and I kept playing with it, over and over, thinking of him every time I touched it. The metal felt cold against my skin, like his personality shrunk down onto my finger.

After I left him in the garden, I went back to the room and changed out of the wedding dress. I made him get us on the first flight back to Blackwoods so that I’d have plenty of time to decompress and get ready for class on Monday. He was strangely quiet on the way, and didn’t complain once when I refused to sit next to him, and wouldn’t so much as look in his direction.

That might’ve been a bit much. It wasn’t fair to him to act like he dragged me by my hair into his cave and forced me into a marriage. I could’ve at least been civil.

But the way he looked at me down on his knees, and the feeling of his cock between my legs, and the dull, intense throb in my chest every time I thought about being his wife made me keep my mouth shut and put up as many walls as I could.

This wouldn't become real. I wouldn't let myself go down that path.

Not after meeting his mother. That woman was a bitter shell of a human, and I was terrified I'd turn into the same thing if I joined the Solar clan in earnest. I didn't want to waste away, rotting in a far-off corner of their compound while Calvin ran the business with an iron fist.

I wanted a life after living in fear for so long.

He promised me anything. He said he'd make my life better. It would hurt, I knew it would hurt, and he said as much.

But I couldn't put my future in his hands.

This was for revenge.

Against my father and against his brothers.

Nothing more.

I walked along a curving path through the central quad. People scurried out of our way, and I couldn't help but notice the looks we were getting.

Cora dealt with that all the time. She was dating the most popular boy at school. It was only natural that the underclassmen and jealous girls (and jealous boys) would give her dirty looks and talk shit openly.

I wasn't used to getting some of those same looks though.

"It's not what you think, first of all. So please don't overreact."

"I'm about to overreact if you don't tell me why you're wearing a ring all of a sudden."

"We got married."

"You got fucking married?" She screamed the words so loud that several groups openly gawped in our direction.

“Would you stop it?” I hissed and tugged at her backpack to try to get her to stop dancing up and down. “People are staring. They’re going to talk!”

“They’re already talking, you idiot. Everyone knows you’ve been spending time with Calvin Solar, but holy shit, nobody realizes just how much time you plan on giving to him.”

“Stop it.”

“You married him. I haven’t even married Jarrod yet!”

I paused, frowning at her. “Yet?”

“Oh, don’t give me that. I love your stupid cousin and you know I’m going to be his wife. He’ll knock me up and we’ll have fifty cute babies.”

“Who’s gonna raise those?”

“Fifty highly qualified German nannies. Very ugly, very matronly German nannies.”

“Lovely.”

“How could you do this, Robyn? I thought you hated Calvin.”

“Hate’s a strong word.”

“Clearly. You married him.” She stepped closer, her face composing itself as she grabbed onto my arm. “Are you okay?”

I smiled and touched her back. “I’m okay. Really. He just needs a wife to win some position with his company. We’re doing it to fool his dad.”

“Right, the classic fake marriage to fool your parents into giving you a promotion at work gag. It always works out in romance novels.”

“Really?”

“No, you idiot. They always end up barefoot and pregnant.”

I walked faster. “I’m not getting pregnant.”

“Not with that attitude.”

“Cora.”

“Robyn, for real. You do realize how serious this is, right? You’re getting involved with his family, and his family are freaks.”

“What do you know about them?”

“Just that they’re rich and mysterious. You know how rich people are. They’re deranged.”

I grinned. “You have no clue.” I told her about my first meeting with Calvin’s mom, but chose not to mention my run-ins with his brothers. She’d only get Jarrod involved, and I didn’t want that.

“See? You see? Absolutely deranged. They’re insane! Your whole plan is insane. Why are you doing this, anyway? What’s he offering you?”

I stared straight ahead. “Nothing.”

“Liar.”

“Money.”

“Double liar. You don’t care about money.”

“It’s a lot of money.”

She hesitated. “How much?”

“So much I never have to worry about working again.”

“Now I know you’re lying.” She nudged me with her hip and got in my face. “Tell me what he promised.”

“It’s about my dad.” I couldn’t meet her eyes. I kept walking faster, hoping she’d let it drop.

Of course she didn’t.

“He can’t do anything for him, you know. And besides, just because he’s innocent of murder, doesn’t mean he should be free. Your dad’s an abusive fuck. He belongs in prison.”

“I know. I agree with you.”

That surprised her. “Really?”

“Really. If this works out, nothing good is going to happen to my father.”

She went quiet and we walked in silence. I stared at the ground, not able to meet the eyes I felt staring. I hated that falling into Calvin’s orbit meant becoming popular.

I’d lived in Jarrod’s shadow for a long time. He’d always been cool. People flocked to him because he was big and strong and outgoing and good-looking. Girls swooned, guys wanted to be close. He had a natural magnetism, and when he went to Blackwoods, it was perfectly natural that he’d excel on the football team and fall in with the three other hottest, most popular guys on campus.

I didn’t mind. I kind of liked it. I was just his quiet, shy cousin, and he got to do whatever he wanted. I stayed out of his way and it worked out. Nobody bothered me, and I bothered nobody.

Except now that spotlight was shifting. I was getting sucked into that world, and I didn’t know how to handle it. I saw the way it messed with people, made them shift their priorities, get addicted to the attention and the popularity. I didn’t want to end up like that, craving more praise, more affirmation. I didn’t want to become beholden to Calvin for my fix.

This would pass. It had to pass.

“Are you at least being safe?” Cora’s voice was quiet and small. “Not just with sex, but with yourself. You’ve been through a lot.”

“I’m trying to be.”

“Just promise you won’t let yourself get hurt. Calvin cares about you, maybe a little too much, but his ideas about how to express himself are pretty warped.”

“You’re not kidding.”

“Just take care, is all I’m saying. You deserve something good in your life, not more misery.”

“Thanks, Cora. I’ll try.”

She shrugged and leaned against my shoulder. “How’s your mom doing?”

“She’s holding up.” She was a shell when I got home. She hadn’t noticed that I’d left, and didn’t see the ring on my finger.

“Good.” We reached one of the big stone buildings with its white facade and gothic style windows. “I should go to class. I’ll see you later?”

“See you then. Text me.”

“Always do.” She waved and walked off.

I watched her go. I had a class after this block and drifted toward the library. I thought of Noah’s hands around my throat, and jumped when I heard someone call out my name.

I turned, and Calvin strode toward me with Addler and Des.

I looked around and felt like a rabbit caught in a snare.

“Where are you headed?” Calvin asked as he approached.

I felt more people staring. God, I hated this.

“Hi, Calvin. Hey guys.”

“What’s up?” Des said, flashing me that boyish smile. Addler waved and scratched his head as he looked at his phone.

“I want to talk.” Calvin stared me down like stone in his shoe.

“I was headed for the library.”

“I’ll walk you.”

“I can walk myself.”

“Remember what happened last time?”

“I don’t need you to follow me around, Calvin.” I felt myself getting heated. Couldn’t he leave me alone for ten seconds?

“Lovers’ quarrel already,” Des said with a big, dramatic sigh. “I guess the marriage won’t last.”

“What was your wager? Two months?” Addler raised his eyebrows.

“Two weeks, bro.”

“Oh, that’s right. I had two months. I believe in these crazy kids, you know?”

Calvin ignored them. “Let’s go.”

But I wasn’t ready to go. I stared at him, my mouth hanging open. “You told them?”

“They’re my friends.”

“I can’t believe you told them. How could you?”

He stepped closer. “Did you tell Cora?”

“That’s different.”

He smiled savagely. “How?”

I tried to answer, but Des interrupted. “Damn, girl, he’s got you there. Sick logic, bruh.”

“Shut up, Des.” Calvin touched my elbow. “If we’re going to do this, we need to do it for real.”

I clenched my jaw and sucked in a breath. I let it out nice and slow as Des leered at me and Addler looked almost apologetic.

Calvin was right. If we were going to follow through, we couldn’t keep it a secret. Sooner or later, everyone would hear. It didn’t make sense to try to hide it.

Still, some stupid part of me had hoped I could keep this contained.

“Fine. You can walk me to the library. But you’re not going inside.”

“I have practice soon.” He looked back at his friends. “You two go ahead. I’ll meet you there.”

“Enjoy your time together, you crazy kids,” Des said, hands over his heart. “God, I just love love. Don’t you love love, Addler?”

“Come on, you asshole.” Addler yanked on Des’s backpack, dragging him away.

I ground my teeth and marched in the direction of the library. Calvin matched my pace, hands shoved in his pockets. More people stared, and more rumors would spread. Soon, the whole college would know about my relationship with Calvin, and then what?

What the hell was I going to do?

I hadn’t thought out the repercussions of marrying one of the Four Horsemen.

“I know you’re struggling,” Calvin said. “I hoped that I could help with that.” We reached the front steps of the library and I turned to face him.

“How? Maybe a divorce would do the trick.”

He reached into his pocket and took out a ring box. “I was thinking the opposite.”

I felt myself flush as I tried to push it back at him. “No, god, no. What’s in there? Please don’t tell me there’s another ring inside.”

“There’s a ring inside.”

“Calvin.”

“Robyn, darling. I love when you say my name.”

“Asshole.” I was bright red. I wanted to run. “Can you stop it?”

“Take the box. Open it.”

I cursed, but took it. This wasn’t going to get any easier and I might as well give in and get it over with. I held the box on my right palm and opened it with my left.

The ring inside glittered like the sun and my breath disappeared from my lungs.

It was an engagement ring. White gold to match my silver band. The diamond was huge, oval cut, and shone like lightning. Smaller diamonds circled it and covered the whole band. The main rock was enormous, the sort

of thing Instagram influencers wore for clout.

“This is insane,” I managed.

“Wear it.”

“Absolutely not. I can’t hide with this thing on my finger!”

“I don’t want you to hide.” He grabbed my wrist hard and wouldn’t let it go. I tried to pull the box away, but he snatched that, removed the ring, and shoved it down onto my finger before I could scream.

It fit like a dream.

He released me once it was on. I spun it around and could’ve easily yanked it off. There was a drain nearby, and part of me wanted to throw it down and never see the thing again.

But another part liked the way it looked.

What was wrong with me?

I was worried that people would talk. Terrified that the campus would know about my marriage to Calvin.

Now, the whole world would see. Even in my mom’s drugged-out state, she couldn’t miss this monstrosity.

“It suits you,” he said simply, putting the empty box back into his pocket. “You look beautiful.”

“Shut up.” I stared at my hand. “I didn’t want this.”

“And yet you’re still wearing it.” He turned and started to walk away.

“When do we make the next move?”

He paused. “Soon. For now, enjoy being a college kid.”

“I want to kill them, Calvin.” I felt heat in my cheeks. I wasn’t sure why, if it was the anger, or the excitement at wearing this gaudy ring.

“I know you do. And we will. Just have patience.”

He left me standing there, staring at my hand like a moron.

I was Calvin's wife. And now I had Calvin's ring.

Everyone would know.

And the shimmering, swirling feeling in my chest should've been a bad thing, but it wasn't.

ROBYN

I could've taken it off.

It would've been easy. Slip it down and shove it in my pocket. Nobody had to see that insane monstrosity.

But I didn't.

I left the ring on. I kept telling myself it didn't matter. The ring was meaningless. We'd already gone through the wedding itself and were legally together. The ring was just another symbol of his power over me.

I could've taken it off.

I still didn't.

The day wore on. I got looks. Lots and lots of looks and several blatant stares and one guy, this daffy, douchey kid in jogger sweats with big eyes and a stupid smile on his face, actually stopped me outside of class and asked if it was real.

"It's as real as your chlamydia infection," I said, which was uncalled for, but it ended the conversation as his friends burst out laughing.

I liked wearing the ring. It felt stupid and gaudy and outrageous and a million other things, but I liked it. Cora met me at the car and chatted about her classes and her professors, and didn't even notice until I pulled into the parking spot out front of her trailer and killed the engine.

“Holy fuck balls, what the hell is that thing!?” She stared, mouth agape.

I waggled it in the air, trying not to smile. “This old thing?”

She snatched my hand and stared, gasping in shock. “Robyn!”

“I know, it’s absurd.”

“It’s the size of a freaking dinosaur egg. You could start Jurassic Park with this thing.”

“I hope there isn’t fossilized DNA locked away.” I frowned. It was possible. Calvin could make a lot of things happen.

“I guess you’re serious about this then.” She released me and I pulled it back, feeling defensive for the first time. Even that jerk earlier hadn’t made me feel like I needed to explain myself.

“It’s part of the deal.”

“I get that you need to play the part, but does he really get to claim you like that?”

I looked down at my lap. She was right. I’d been thinking the same thing.

Did Calvin really get to mark his territory like this?

“It’s supposed to be real.”

“Come on, Robyn. He could’ve given you a normal engagement ring, but instead he plastered Mt. Rushmore onto your hand just to make sure everyone on campus knows that you’re claimed.”

“I am not claimed.” I glared at her, feeling heat in my cheeks.

She looked back softly and sighed. “I know you’re not, but try explaining that to him.”

I ground my teeth. I hated justifying myself to Cora, especially when I agreed with her, and yet I didn’t want to take off the ring. I liked wearing it. I liked the way it looked and the way it felt and yes, yes, okay, I liked what it symbolized.

I was sick, but still. I liked it.

“This is my decision, okay? He didn’t force me into this.”

“I’m worried it’s going too far. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“What makes you think I’ll be the one who gets hurt?”

“It’s Calvin. I’m pretty sure he’s incapable of feeling.”

I shook my head hard. “You don’t know him.”

“Seriously? I know him better than you do.”

“No, you don’t, not if you think there’s nothing going on inside. Calvin’s been through a lot. He suffered way more than you’d think.”

“Rich boy Calvin? Are we talking about the same guy here?”

“Just stop it, okay? I know how you feel about him and I don’t even disagree. It’s just that he’s a lot more than some quiet, unfeeling rich psychopath or whatever you think. His family fucked him up more than you’d think.”

She was quiet as she studied me. I felt hot, stifled. I wanted to get the hell out of this car, but first I needed her to leave.

“I never thought I’d see the day when you’d defend him.”

“Yeah, well, neither did I, but here we are. Can you just go? I have a lot of studying to do.”

She didn’t look angry. I hated myself for that. She opened her mouth to say something, but shook her head and pushed open the door. A blast of cold air flooded inside.

“I love you, okay?” she said, leaning in. “I’m just looking out for you. That’s all.”

“I know. But please trust me.”

She shut the door and went inside.

I drove back home, cursing the whole way. That didn’t go the way I’d hoped. I wanted to laugh about the ring, to make fun of it. I wanted to tell her how

stupid it made me feel, and maybe admit that I liked it, a little bit anyway. Girls I thought would always ignore me were suddenly staring with blatant, crazy envy in their eyes, and I know that's such a stupid and shallow thing to care about, but I'd never been popular, never been cool, never been anything more than Jarrod's quiet little cousin, and now suddenly all their eyes were on me.

It was intoxicating. It was dangerous.

It was all because of Calvin.

I saw my future with him in those interactions. He could bring me a life I'd never dreamed of before. Fame, fortune, excitement. It was all possible, if only I could give myself to him.

And yet I couldn't bring myself to do it.

I parked out front. There was another car in the driveway, one I'd never seen before. A Bentley, big and black and nice, with shiny chrome wheels and a Maine license plate.

What the heck was a car like that doing at my house?

My heart rate doubled as I hurried inside. Maine, a Bentley, it could only mean one thing, and my mother was in danger. I pushed open the door and strode toward the kitchen.

"Mom! Where are you? Is everything—"

I stopped when the table came into view.

The good china was out. Tea was served in tiny cups on tiny saucers. Mom was sitting up straight, her hair in a tasteful bun, her clothes straightened and clean. Her eyes looked focused for the first time in weeks.

And sitting across from her was Calvin's mother.

I didn't know what to do. I felt trapped and terrified. This was so much worse than I'd imagined. I could face down Noah or Raymond. I could let them beat me to a pulp if it meant defending my mother.

But Calvin's mom?

“Hello, honey,” Mom said, smiling at me like she was a human again and not the pilled-out zombie. “Mrs. Solar came to visit.”

“Hello, dear,” Calvin’s mom said, drawling a bit with a lazy smile. She winked, and I was instantly transported back to her room and its studious mess and her cutting barbs and condescension. I felt like a child, but this was my house, and she was on my turf now. Back at the mansion, she was like a Titan. But here? She was just another rich lady in the suburbs.

“Hello, Mrs. Solar. Nice to see you again.”

“Call me Diana, dear.”

I said nothing.

“Diana was nice enough to come by and talk about your visit,” Mom said, and she seemed chipper. I didn’t know how to feel about that. “I’m told it was quite... eventful.” Her eyes strayed to the ring on my finger.

I flinched. I planned on explaining everything to her—eventually. I hoped she’d be too engrossed in her grief to notice anything was happening.

“Right. Very eventful.” I sounded so lame. I hated myself for having nothing clever to say, but Calvin’s mom made me feel like a fool.

“Do you mind ever so much if I speak with your daughter alone?” Diana Solar sounded like a princess. I hated it.

“Go right ahead. Do you want more tea?” Mom stood, readying herself to make her guest comfortable.

“Please, no. If you wouldn’t mind?” It was perfectly polite, and an utter dismissal.

Mom accepted it with a smile, walked over, squeezed my hand, and disappeared upstairs like Calvin’s mother owned this place.

I lingered, staring down at the woman.

“What are you doing here?”

“Please, sit. We have to discuss some things.”

“I don’t think so. I should call Calvin.”

“That’s a bad idea.” Her eyes sharpened on mine. “Sit down, you gold-digging little brat.”

I reared back. The sudden insults were unexpected. Her polite veneer dropped long enough to show her fangs, and they were long, sharp, and dripping with venom.

I sat down, poured myself some tea, and stared her down.

“I’ll ask again. What are you doing here?”

Calvin’s mom studied me. She watched me carefully, lips pursed, weighing her words.

“Do you know what it means to run the Solar family?”

I considered my answer. “Yes, I do.”

She continued as if I hadn’t responded, which drove me insane. “It means Calvin will be in control of a multi-nation conglomerate that employs thousands of people. Real human lives are in the balance, and it will be up to Calvin to ensure the company takes care of them all. You’ve met my son. Do you think he’s the kind of man that will put the good of the company over his own wants and needs?”

I covered my discomfort by drinking from my tea. She was right—I hadn’t considered that angle. Whoever ran the Solar company would have a lot of responsibility riding on their shoulders, and Calvin truly didn’t seem like the type of person to put the well-being of others before his own.

And yet what were the alternatives? His insane brothers? Both of them tried to hurt me, and one nearly succeeded in strangling me out on my own college campus. It was hard to believe either of them would be better suited to the task, even if Calvin wasn’t exactly the most empathetic human in the world.

“I think he’s your best option,” I said, putting my tea down. “And to be honest, I don’t give a damn about the Solar family.”

“You should,” she said. “I’ve worked very hard to maneuver Calvin and his brothers into this position, and I won’t allow you to undo all my hard work.”

My mouth fell open. “You did what?”

“You think anything happens by chance in a family like the Solars?” She leaned back, looking smug. “Calvin’s father is too busy working most of the time to notice what happens in his house. It’s been easy to make sure my favored candidate ended up on top, at least until you came around.”

“Your favored candidate? You’re talking about your own children like they’re prospective employees.”

“That’s because they are.” Her face hardened. “You think this is easy? I love my boys, including Calvin, but he’s not suited for this. Noah would be the better leader, and I was going to get my way until you showed up.”

I couldn’t help myself. I leaned back and laughed. This was too much.

She’d been scheming behind the scenes the whole time. I wondered if Calvin knew, and guessed he probably had some idea. He might not have realized the extent, but he must’ve known his mother had a hand in everything happening.

“Did you know that Noah gave me these bruises?” I showed her the marks on my throat. She didn’t react. “Your other son would’ve killed me if it weren’t for Calvin.”

“I saw what Calvin did to him.”

“You think they’d be any better? Your precious boys are all psychopaths, no thanks to your upbringing.”

Her eyes hardened. “You don’t know a thing about what it’s like to be our family.”

“You’re right, I don’t. But I do know that Calvin’s a decent man, even if he’s flawed and broken and dealing with a childhood of trauma. You think you can come to my house, speak to my mother and still get your way, but I have no interest in giving you what you want, Diana. So I’d appreciate it if you’d stand and leave. I have to show my mother my engagement ring.” I held it up for Calvin’s mom to see.

She stared, looking extremely unhappy. “I’m going to make you an offer,” she said. “I will pay for your school. I will give you five million dollars. I will give you whatever you want, so long as you divorce Calvin and walk away from this game.”

I sucked on my teeth. “I can’t be bought.”

“Oh, but you can. I don’t know what Calvin offered, but I’ll match it, and I’ll double whatever he’s paying. You don’t need to go through this hell with him to get what you want. If you’re doing this for money, or for favors, or something else, I will pay you, and I will give you what you need. Forget about Calvin. Stay away from our family.”

It was tempting. I had to admit, it was very tempting. I looked at the ring on my finger and thought about accepting.

It would make my life easier. She could have my father killed—I didn’t doubt she could do it and would if it meant getting Calvin out of the way peacefully—and she’d give me more money than I had any hope of making on my own. She could change my life and make things so much easier.

And all I had to do was betray Calvin.

Calvin, my stalker, that psycho, that bastard. Calvin, the man who had kidnapped me and flew me halfway across the world for his own amusement. Calvin the monster, the beast.

Calvin, my husband.

Stab him in the back, and this could all be over.

Or I stay. Keep going with my deal. Remain married to the only person in this world I could say with certainty was obsessed with me. I could let him consume me, let him bury me in his misery, his darkness. His brothers would try to hurt me, and his mother would do everything in her power to destroy me.

I could make things easy, or I could make them hard.

“I asked you to leave, and I’ll ask you again. Please get out of here.”

Her jaw worked. “You’re making a mistake.”

“Yeah, maybe, but it’s my mistake to make.”

She pushed the chair back and stood. She held herself so prim and proper, like a queen on parade, and I hated her for it. I followed her to the door, if only to make sure she really left.

She paused on the porch and looked back, all of her dignity and self-importance wrapped around her like a cloak.

“If you change your mind, come talk to me. I’m always listening.”

“If you hadn’t been such a judgmental bitch the first time we met, this conversation might’ve gone differently. Too bad you messed that up.”

I slammed the door in her face before she could reply and locked it.

I leaned against the frame, breathing hard. My hands were shaking. My knees felt weak.

Mom stood at the top of the stairs, staring down.

“Are you okay?” She walked slowly, leaning on the banister. Some of the shine was gone. I guessed she took another pill.

“I’m fine.”

“You got married.”

“Yeah, I did. For business reasons.”

“Business,” she echoed. I was losing her again. “What kind of business?”

“The kind I should stay far away from. But at least he’s rich, right?”

She smiled and drifted toward the living room. “Who was that woman here? She seemed nice. Very put together. What was her name again?”

“Diana,” I said and let her go. I leaned my head back and closed my eyes. “Her name was Diana.”

I heard the TV turn on and I tried to keep the tears from spilling down my cheeks. I choked and dug my fingers into my thighs as the tears dripped along my cheeks and onto my shirt.

Those bastards. I hated them so much. Noah, Raymond, Diana—even Calvin’s father. I hated them, and I wished they’d never come into my life at all.

But I hated myself even more.

Hated myself for being so weak. My mother needed someone strong right now, and I was letting her down by getting involved with Calvin all for my own petty revenge.

They’d keep coming. They’d hurt me, and they’d hurt my mother, and they wouldn’t stop until Calvin was destroyed or I was dead and couldn’t help him anymore.

There was no happy ending for me.

I’d break, no matter what.

My fist thumped against the door. It didn’t matter. Mom wouldn’t notice.

If I was better, if I cared about her more than I cared about myself, I’d accept Diana’s offer. I’d take the money, make her kill my father in prison, and move away somewhere else. I could give my mom a better life. I could help her recover from this horrible, deep depression she’d dropped down into.

We could start over.

But the thought of leaving Calvin hurt too much. It broke me, ripped me to pieces. I couldn’t do that to him, not when he was the one that actually cared while all the others were doing this for their own stupid reason. Calvin cared about me, he loved me, he was deeply, darkly, horribly obsessed with me, and what seemed like a nightmare at first was quickly becoming a daydream, and soon it’d be a reality.

I wanted that future more than anything.

I was sick and stupid. I should’ve run away.

I wouldn’t turn my back on Calvin.

Not yet.

ROBYN

I got my shit together, cleaned up the tea set, put it all away, and got back into the car. My mom would be fine alone for a while. I spun the engagement ring around before starting the engine and driving to Calvin's place.

We had to talk. He needed to know about what his mother said, and I wanted to tell him in person. I wanted to see his face, to feel his hands, to taste his lips—

God, what was wrong with me?

I should've just called.

It would've been easier. But I pulled up to his small, secluded cottage, parked, and stared at the door. His car was tucked to the side in front of a small detached garage. I knew he was home.

I could still turn around.

I killed the engine and got out. I knocked three times and he answered a moment later. He wore a pair of tight gray pants and a black t-shirt that clung to his body. His hair was damp from a shower and his eyes scowled at me, deeply and disturbingly. He was handsome, beautiful really. I stepped inside and the door shut behind me like the lid to a coffin.

"My dad called." He didn't say hello and didn't ask why I was there. He stalked into the living room, pacing.

I knew that pacing. He was agitated and upset about something.

“What happened?” I stood next to the couch watching him like a lion tamer wondering if the new beast would turn and claw me to death.

“He’s asking too much. I knew this would happen. When I started this, I knew—and now he’s doing it.”

“Calvin, what’s going on?”

He stopped and looked at me, and the pain in his expression broke my heart.

“He wants me to drop out of school and start work immediately.”

I blinked rapidly. “He wants you to do what?”

“Not senior year. No football. No friends, no class, nothing. He wants me to work, Robyn.” He began to pace again.

“Why? You’re so close.” This didn’t make any sense. He had two more semesters, and then he was done. The experience he’d gain in the classroom have to be worth waiting two more semesters. “You’ll have a degree.”

I said it like something so mundane could matter to a family like the Solars. Degree or not, he’d rule over that company like a tiny lord.

“My life is here. You’re here. Jarrod, Des, and Addler are here. The last three years at Blackwoods has been the best of my life. Without this place—” He stopped and shook his head. “I don’t know what I’d be. Lost. Less human. More like my brothers.”

I could only imagine how much worse he could be. “So why not tell him no?”

“I can’t do that. Things are too tenuous right now.” His fists clenched. He stared at me like I was dinner.

I liked it. A shiver ran down my spine.

“Your mother visited.” The words spilled out and I wished I could pull them back inside, but it was too late.

He started and stared. “She visited? Your house?”

“She offered to pay me off. She wants Noah to win.”

He laughed and sat down in a chair. He leaned forward and pulled at his hair, and as I moved closer, he held up a hand. “I’m fine.”

“I’m sorry. I should’ve waited to tell you, but I thought you needed to know. She offered to match your price and would throw some money on top.”

He looked up and his expression was deeply sad. “Why didn’t you take it? That’d be a lot easier than staying married to me.”

“I’m not going to betray you. Besides, your mom’s a bitch and your brothers are dickheads.”

He grinned, but there wasn’t much behind it. “Very true.”

I walked to him and knelt down. I put my hands on his knees, trying to comfort him, but I felt a jolt in my stomach, deep and intense. His eyes locked on mine.

“This is how it happens,” he said, his voice so soft, liquid silk. “I get involved with them. I try to give them what they want, but they ask for more and more and more until they have everything. That’s what it means to be a Solar. You sacrifice yourself to the family until there’s nothing left.”

“Calvin.” I didn’t know what to say. I couldn’t imagine the pain he felt or the pressure. “I’m not going to leave you. No matter what happens.”

“Even if I drop out?”

“You won’t.”

“But I might have to. And I’ll do it if it means taking control. I’m broken already, Robyn. There’s nothing left in me to save.”

I moved up and kissed him. I pushed myself against his chest and felt his lips on mine, hungry and passionate, and I let his tongue invade my mouth, his hand in my hair, his growl on his lips. I couldn’t help myself. I couldn’t stop it.

I wouldn’t let him talk like that.

This wasn't Calvin. The man I knew was confident. He could destroy worlds and break men over his knee like they were children. He walked into a room and dominated it with his presence, his willpower, and his charm. I wanted that Calvin. I needed that Calvin.

I wouldn't let him drift too deep.

I ran my hands along his thighs. My heart raced as I moved closer and closer to his thick cock. I felt his shaft through his sweats and stroked him slowly, rubbing his long, thick length as he stiffened, harder and harder, and I moaned into his mouth, letting myself get lost in the moment.

He pulled me away from the chair and tugged me down on top of him on the couch. I straddled his hips, arching my back as his erection pressed against my pussy. A gasp played on my lips, soft and intense. He growled back like he wanted nothing more than to rip off my clothes.

He tightened his grip in my hair. "Will you leave me if I drop out?"

"No," I said as he pulled my shirt off. He kissed my neck, my chest, my collarbone, as he unhooked my bra.

My breasts spilled out. His eyes were molten fire. He licked my nipples, already stiffened with excitement. His tongue rolled around them as he pulled my hair harder, tighter, his other hand digging into my back. The pain contrasted with the pleasure of his mouth on my breasts and I moaned, unable to stop myself.

I came here thinking I'd tell him about his mother and go home, but nothing was easy with Calvin, and everything hurt.

So why did I love it? Why did I still have on his ring?

He moved down to unbutton my jeans. I rolled my hips, grinding myself against his cock, panting. I tugged at his shirt and he took it off, showing his incredible physique, his cut chest, his muscular abs, and that long, lean V that led down to his stiff cock. He let out a roar and rolled me to the side, pinning me down to the couch with his weight and mass.

He could crush me, destroy me. Instead, he stripped off my jeans, ripped down my panties, and buried his mouth on my dripping wet cunt.

I gasped and arched my back. Pleasure rocketed along my spine. He slid his fingers inside—god, I was wet, how did I get so wet?—and he fucked me with them as he licked my clit in precious, incredible circles. He was a master with that tongue, and those fingers, and I pulled his hair hard enough to make him grunt with pain, but that only made him go faster.

“I want to taste it,” he said, half a moan and half an order. “I want to lick you up while you scream my name. Come for me, Robyn. Come on my lips and tongue and fingers. You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, and I want to taste you, all of you.”

I bit my lip hard enough to bleed as he kept going, faster, faster, licking, sucking, fucking, making these delicious, incredible, sensual noises, his words echoing in my ears, and he was right, he was always right, I couldn’t help myself with him, when he came near, I lost my mind and all my nerve and there was only Calvin.

I put his ring in my mouth. The diamond was cold and the metal was tangy and sharp. I sucked it as I came, and I moaned his name, the orgasm exploding from my spine, I moaned his name over and over again, and he didn’t stop, that bastard, that monster. I came, and he stood, slowly pulling his pants off until he stood stroking his thick cock, his monstrous shaft.

I gaped at him, breathing hard. I was aware of every heartbeat. Sweat rolled down between my breasts and my pussy glowed like lightning.

“Come here.” He stared at me with thunder in his eyes.

I sat up. He took my hair, tilted my chin up. He kissed me and parted my lips. I guided his cock into my mouth—slowly at first. I licked him, tasted his precum, took him further into my throat. He groaned with utter delight. I looked up and met his eyes and knew he was in love—so deeply, stupidly in love that he’d do anything for me. I sucked him faster, sloppy, dumb, infatuated and captivated, stroking him with both hands, before he pulled me back and kissed me. His tongue explored, controlled, engrossed me. He gasped as he ripped me up to my feet then made me kneel on the couch.

He shoved me against the back, my hands gripping the cushion as his hands grabbed my hips. I felt his cock brush against my pussy—oh, fuck, he wasn’t going to fit—but he teased me first, grabbing my hair, slapping my ass.

I was pulsing for him. I was dripping. “Calvin,” I moaned.

He pressed himself inside, sliding deeper and deeper into bliss and oblivion until he filled me to the brim and I thought I might scream.

“God, yes,” he whispered. “You are what I always dreamed of. Every inch of your soaking wet cunt, little love. You’re incredible, Robyn. Your tight ass, your long legs, your lips. Your mouth was made to suck my cock and to whisper my name as you come. I want to keep you in my bed, wet and ready. I want to fuck you into submission. I want to make you come, make you scream. I want to make you hurt and feel so good, all at the same time. I want you to lose your mind, Robyn.”

He fucked me then, fucked me like I never imagined I could be fucked. He was rough, unyielding. He grabbed my hair and made me say his name as his cock pummeled me, taking me from behind. He was a savage. He was a blunt instrument. He was crude and barbaric, and it felt good, oh, so good. I was sin and lust. I was greed and the pleasure and the pain made me feral with want.

“Fuck me, Calvin,” I panted. “Fuck me harder. Make me scream. Make me come. God, your hands feel so good. Slap me harder.”

He spanked me, again and again, his cock taking me deep, slick and wild. We were both sweating, moaning. I panted with want and gasped as he turned me around, pinning my back on the couch, my hands above my head. I was dominated and broken, and he fucked me, licked my breasts, bit my lips, grabbed my hips so hard there’d be bruises, and I was lost, lost, lost in him, in his thick cock, in his wild eyes and hands.

I came with his name on my tongue, again and again. He roared his delight and filled me to the brim, coming like a lion. I gasped and arched my back and wanted more, more, more, and we were dizzy together, floating and swirling in orgasm, until I finally touched down, lying in his arms.

Sweat cooled on my skin. His breath came slow and rumbling. “How did we get here?” I asked, blinking away the last vestiges of the orgasm.

“I believe you came over to tell me something about my mother. I decided to fuck you instead.”

“I’m pretty sure I initiated this time.”

“Did you?”

“Kissed you first.”

“That’s right,” he purred, grinned. “So you did.”

I blushed deeply. “Don’t be a dick.”

“I’d never dream of it. But you’re right. And did I see you sucking on your engagement ring while my cock was buried between your legs?”

“If you’re going to be disgusting, I’m going to leave.”

“I don’t find it disgusting,” he said, kissing my shoulder. “There’s nothing more perfect.”

“Shut up,” I said, smiling, and pressed my face against his chest. His arms were like blankets, soft and comforting. “Are you really going to drop out of Blackwoods?”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t want you to. I’m sure Des and Addler and Jarrod don’t either.”

“I’m not sure I have a choice.”

“There’s always a choice. There has to be another way.”

“I should’ve waited until senior year.” He let out a long breath. “But I was afraid you’d get away.”

I left my head, frowning. “What do you mean?”

“I couldn’t wait any longer.” He looked across the room, still lost in the haze, a smile on his lips. “I needed to have you.”

“I thought this was about winning your company.”

“It’s about that. But it’s always been about you.”

I opened my mouth and shut it again. I slowly peeled my body from his, one arm coming up to cover my breasts the best I could and mostly failing. His

eyes strayed from my lips to the nipple I couldn't quite hide.

"You're telling me that this whole thing was a ploy to get me to marry you?"

"Don't misunderstand. I do need a wife and children to win this company. But wives and kids are cheap. You're priceless."

I didn't know what to say. The idea that he was willing to throw away so much for me both excited and repulsed me.

That was Calvin. He was terrible and beautiful, and I was never sure which I'd feel more.

"I should go." I grabbed my bra and searched for my panties, and was about to give up when he dangled them on one finger. I tried to snatch them away, but he pulled them back. "Please, Calvin."

He shook his head. "A memento."

"Don't be gross."

"I'm not." He balled my panties up and held them tight. "Now I want to watch you get dressed and run out of here like I didn't just give you the best sex of your life."

I glared, but he was right. I hated when he was right.

When I was decent, sans underwear, I stood near the door, studying him. He was still naked, my panties dangling from a finger. He twirled them around and around, a smile on his lips, his cock half-hard already.

I could stay. He'd fuck me again—he'd wreck me over and over and over.

But I had to get away if I wanted to retain some of my sanity.

"Be careful," I said. "And think seriously about school. It's only one more year."

"I'll think about it. You be careful too."

I looked out his window and toward my car. "Do you still have men watching me?"

“I do.”

“Did you know your mother visited already?”

“I did. Although I didn’t know what she said.”

I snorted and sighed. “Can’t get anything past you.”

“My eyes and ears are everywhere.” He stretched and sighed. “If you change your mind, I’d love to have you sleep over.”

“Good night, Calvin.”

DEAR ROBYN

My life has been one long sacrifice.

Does that sound dramatic? Maybe it is.

When I was ten, my father took the door from my room. He caned me across the back until the welts broke and bled. He took away my blankets and pillows. I shivered all night.

He did that to punish me for speaking out of turn during dinner.

I could list a thousand more stories. Heartbreak and rage. But none of it matters.

My life has been sacrifice. I've given everything to my family and to the company. I've broken myself, again and again, against the wall that is my father. I've become a different person, all for them.

You are the first thing I will not give up.

I can hear their words already. I can taste their scorn. It's bitter poison on my tongue.

Do not listen to them, Robyn.

You're the only good thing in my life.

I don't care that you hate me right now. You think I'm a stalker. You think I'm insane.

The crazy boy that won't leave you alone.

But hear me: I don't care. I won't give you up, not for anything.

I'll let them try to kill me. They can take away my dignity, my money, my rightful place as heir.

They will not take you.

That's a promise on my life. Do you see that mark at the bottom of the page?

My thumb, dipped in my blood.

Who else would bleed for you?

I'll do so much more.

I hope you've been reading carefully.

This is the last letter I'll write.

Tomorrow, I'm coming to take you away.

Don't be afraid.

I promise, it'll only hurt if you want it to.

Love,

C

ROBYN

“Oh my god, it’s blinding me.”

Des threw his hands up and staggered back. Addler laughed and even Jarrod grinned. My cousin stood with Cora, his arm draped casually across her shoulders. I still had trouble seeing them together.

“Cut it out,” I said, covering the ring. “You’re being a dick.”

“It really is enormous,” Addler said. “Even by Calvin’s standards.”

“That thing’s enormous by any standards, dude,” Des said, stroking his chin. “I think our boy really does have the hots for you.”

“No shit, idiot,” Addler said. “They’re married.”

“Say, Robyn. When do you plan on having his babies? I assume you’ll drop out and take care of the household.”

“Fuck off, Des.”

Des barked a laugh.

“Guys, leave her alone,” Cora said. I shot her a grateful look. “It’s not her fault she got wifed-up by a billionaire.”

I sighed as the others laughed at my bright red cheeks.

I hated the teasing, but it felt kind of good. For a long time, I was the target of my cousin’s seething rage. In public, he tortured me, pushed me around, and

mocked me relentlessly. It was savage, and sometimes I broke down in tears. If he weren't taking care of me back home and preventing my father from beating me senseless most nights, I'd hate his filthy, black heart.

Now though, their barbs were friendly. It was the banter of friends, and I'd never experienced it from Des and Addler before. They'd looked at me with pity in their eyes at best, and ignored me the rest of the time while Jarrod treated me like his personal punching bag, but now they were welcoming me into the group.

I liked the idea of having friends. Even if my friends were popular, rich assholes that ruled Blackwoods.

It still felt good.

"So this thing between you two, it's real?" Jarrod eyed me as Des and Addler walked off, pushing each other and still laughing at my expense.

I shrugged, avoiding his gaze. "You know Calvin."

"I thought I did." Jarrod's voice hardened. "He didn't ask me about this."

"Was he supposed to? You're not my father, last time I checked."

"No, but I'm practically your brother. He should've said something."

"Oh, god, stop it," Cora said, shoving Jarrod gently. "You don't own her. She can do whatever she wants, and Calvin's well within his rights to do whatever he wants, too."

"Still should've asked." He looked away, glaring into the distance. "I would've told him to fuck off and leave you alone."

I let out an exasperated breath. "I don't know how to take that. Are you trying to be nice or are you being your usual dickish self?"

"I think what he's trying to say is congratulations, and he hopes you're happy. Right, Jarrod?" Cora elbowed him in the side.

He grunted and gave me a forced, fake smile. "What she said."

I rolled my eyes. "You two are the worst."

“We’re just concerned, okay?” Cora glanced up at her boyfriend. “I think you’re in over your head.”

“A business arrangement,” Jarrod said. “He wants to turn marriage into a business arrangement.”

“I don’t think either of you have a leg to stand on here, and I don’t want to talk about it anymore.” The good-natured teasing had turned dark, and my smile faded. “And you weren’t supposed to tell anyone the truth about this whole thing.”

Cora had the good sense to look sheepish. “I couldn’t keep it from him.”

“He’s exactly who I wanted you to keep it from.” I stopped walking and threw up my hands. “Why does everyone think they know better?”

“Because I know Calvin, and he’s not good for you.”

“Then you don’t know him at all. Calvin’s complicated, but he’s not some insane, evil monster.” I didn’t know why I felt compelled to defend him. Maybe it was to justify my choices.

But deep down, I knew it wasn’t that.

I’d learned a lot about Calvin. I’d seen past his walls and burrowed down into the darkest parts of his life. The letters gave me a glimpse into the childhood that shaped him, and my time as his fake fiancée and current wife showed me the man he wanted to become. Calvin was pulled in all directions, between his own wants and desires, and the needs and wants of his father, his mother, his brothers, and everyone else around him.

Expectations could shape, but they could also destroy. It was a weight that could crush, and while Calvin managed to hold on beneath the utter mountainous onslaught of the world’s assumptions about what he’d become, I saw the cracks that threatened to topple everything. Still he held on, and I grudgingly admired him for it.

“I just want what’s best for you.” Jarrod stared at me with those hard eyes.

Cora patted his chest. “That’s enough, okay?”

His jaw flexed, and he looked like he wanted to argue, but he backed down. That was rare from a man like Jarrod. I'd have to ask Cora how she did it, but I probably wouldn't like the answer.

"I'm safe, okay? I'm taken care of. Don't worry about me."

Jarrod grunted. "We should get to class. Come on, Cor."

She gave me a smile. "See you later?"

I nodded and waved, and they walked off. I watched them go, a strange, longing pit in my stomach.

I wanted the laughter and teasing back. I wanted the simple joy of walking with a group of friends. Ample time, nothing to do, and miles and miles of potential stretching out into the day. But that short argument with Jarrod made everything else feel forced.

Nobody thought my relationship with Calvin was a good idea.

Not even me.

So why throw myself into hell for this man?

All for revenge? All to kill to father and to see Noah and Raymond punished?

I could get that from his mother.

Something else held me in his spell. I touched my lips, thinking of his kiss, his hands on my hips, his cock buried between my legs. A shiver ran down my spine.

He had his barbs in deep and I didn't think I'd ever pull them out.

The day slipped past. I went to class. Des and Addler found me and made more jokes. Cora was quiet on the ride home.

"I'm sorry about Jarrod earlier," she said before getting out. "You really are okay, right?"

"I'm dealing. I promise."

“Yeah, all right.” She frowned at me, then looked down at her hands. “You know about what happened with me and Jarrod, right? The deal we made?”

I knew. They’d told me. We never spoke of it, but it was always there.

“I remember.”

“I don’t regret it. We did something terrible. I still think about that night and see his face—” She stopped and took a deep breath. She never spoke the name of the man she murdered with Jarrod’s help. “It changed me. Broke something, but healed something, too. And I guess I want to say that sometimes things are hard, and wrong, and fucked up, but maybe you need wrong and hard and fucked up to survive. If that’s what you’re going through with Calvin, then don’t stop.”

I smiled and bit my lip to keep the tremble from my voice. “You’re a good friend.”

“Just speaking the truth. And anyway, Calvin’s not so bad. You could have a worse husband.”

“Thanks, I think.”

“Be careful, and don’t get caught.” She grinned at me, though I saw the haunted silence behind her gaze. She hopped out and went into the trailer.

I thought about her words on the way home. Was my situation the same? Was I looking for something in this relationship with Calvin? I thought it was straightforward—nothing more than a business deal. He’d kill my father and I’d help him get control of the Solar family.

It’d become more than that. The ring, the sex. His lips and voice and tongue. It suffused me with a warmth I dreamed about, but never thought would be mine.

It was that warmth I craved.

The feeling of adoration. Calvin’s obsession was like a blanket. I wanted him to wrap me in worship and make me feel like a goddess.

It was similar to the feeling I got when Addler and Des joked around. But that was a weak version. Friendship, acceptance.

Calvin made all that pale in comparison to the heat of his attention.

I wanted him and needed it. I craved so much more.

And I knew Calvin would give me as much as I wanted, if only I'd stop resisting and admit—

I slowed as I pulled up toward my house. Two men sat in a car parked across the street. I recognized them instantly. They were soldiers from the Solar family, men that worked for Matthias. I'd last seen them in Latvia.

They nodded and smoked cigarettes as I pulled into the driveway.

So I was being protected still. I didn't know if that should comfort me or not.

I went inside. My mother was wrapped in blankets sipping tea in front of the television. "I'm home," I called out, dropped my stuff near the table, and started on dinner.

Mom drifted into the kitchen. I looked up, surprised. She held her mug in both hands and smiled as she sat down.

"Don't think I hadn't noticed that ring." She nodded at my finger.

I held it up. "Hard to miss."

"It's serious with this guy then?"

"We got married."

"Oh." She sipped her tea. "That's nice."

The old Mom would've yelled at me, or had some pithy comment, or done something. But my new Mom only sat and watched me with lidded eyes and a glazed smile.

"You met his mom. Remember? Diana?"

"Yes, of course. Very nice woman. Very proper."

"That's the sort of family he's from."

"Rich. Country club people." She laughed gently and put the mug down. "I thought I married up."

“Really?” My mom didn’t talk about Dad very often and I listened intently. “Where did you meet?”

“Through a mutual friend. Your father was so handsome back then. I’m sure you can’t imagine, but it’s true. Everyone wanted him, and he wanted me. I couldn’t say no.”

I understood how that felt. “What happened?”

“The usual. We went out on some dates. He proposed to me after three weeks.”

I gaped, mouth open. “Three weeks? I never knew that.”

“We don’t talk about it much. Back then it was romantic, but now? People think we’re crazy.”

I thought she was crazy, but I couldn’t judge. I’d done worse, much worse.

“Do you ever look back and regret it?”

She shook her head. Her eyes sharpened somewhat. “No, never. There were bad years. Lots of bad years. But it gave me you.”

I felt tears pull at my throat and had to look down at my feet. “I love you, Mom. Even though I’m still really mad at you.”

“I know, sweetie. I’m really mad at myself. I don’t think you’ll ever forgive me, and that’s okay. If I ever pull myself together, it’ll be for you.”

My hands balled into fists. Where was this mother when my father was beating me senseless? Where was this woman when I needed her the most?

She was nowhere, but she was here now, at least some part of her.

“I’m trying, okay? I’m working on it. I think that’s the best I can do right now.”

She smiled and nodded. “I know. I guess I should say congratulations, but I’m not sure I want to.”

“Why not?”

“I heard what that woman said to you. How much money she offered.” Mom got to her feet as I stood there locked in horror. She’d been listening? She heard? What could she think? “Forget about the boy, sweetie. Take the cash. Boys bring nothing but trouble. Money always loves you.” She smiled and drifted back into the living room.

I stood there like an anvil fell on my skull.

CALVIN

The football off-season was a time of rest and relaxation for everyone but the players.

Des leaned back on the bench as Addler changed into clean pants. Jarrod leaned against the lockers, stretching.

“You’d think we’d get a break, but no,” Des said, sighing as he stared at the ceiling. “Coach wants to murder us. I swear, he wants us to die.”

“He wants us to be better,” Jarrod said. “Maybe you should try harder.”

Des shot him a glare. “I’m trying as hard as anyone. I’m aware of my limitations.”

“I’m not,” Addler said. “I’m going pro or I’m doing nothing.”

“You’re going to work for your dad’s hedge fund and make a stupid amount of money,” Jarrod said.

“Right, after I play in the NFL.”

Des laughed. They continued to joke with each other as they changed. I sat there, staring at my hands. I couldn’t bring myself to stand.

“You okay?” Jarrod sat down next to me. He was a big guy, but I was too. I liked to surround myself with big people—it was the only way I could feel somewhat normal.

“I’m fine. Tired. Thinking.”

“About Robyn?”

I tried a smile, but it felt wrong. I let it drop. “Among other things.”

Des and Addler drifted toward the door. Addler paused and looked back. “You two coming?”

“I still have to get changed. Go on without me.”

Addler shrugged. “We’re headed to DelRio’s for some pizza if you want to meet us there.”

I waved and they left. Jarrod remained, watching me.

“What did you get my cousin involved with?”

I looked at the floor. I’d been waiting for this conversation. I’d also been dreading it.

“We made a deal.”

“What kind of deal?”

“You already know. Don’t pretend otherwise.”

He grunted. “All right, I know. Can you really do it? Kill her dad?”

“I can make it happen, yes.”

“Then do it.”

I looked up and smiled. “Sometimes I forget he abused you too.”

“Don’t make jokes. I got that bastard locked up, but prison’s not enough.”

“Nothing’s enough for you, Jarrod.”

“Cora’s enough.” I accepted that in silence. He weighed his next words. “Robyn’s a good person. She’s one of the few decent humans I’ve ever met. I don’t want you to twist her, Calvin.”

My hands curled into fists. I leaned closer. It took all my willpower not to pummel him to death here and now. I wasn’t sure I’d win that fight, but he’d

deserve the beating.

“Robyn is her own person. She makes her own decisions. She’s not some idealized construct that exists to be your shining beacon of purity.”

She wasn’t pure. Not in the slightest. My Robyn was filthy, so filthy, and I loved her for it, stains and mess and all.

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Isn’t it? Just because you’re broken, and Cora’s a mess, and I’m as fucked up as they come, that doesn’t mean Robyn needs to be perfect.”

His jaw worked and he stood. “I’m only saying don’t hurt her.”

“And I’m saying I won’t.”

“Good.” Jarrod hesitated and turned to the door. “You can’t push us away forever. Addler and Des are worried.”

“I didn’t think they noticed anything was wrong.”

“They’re not stupid. They just think acting like things are normal might make things normal again.” He grabbed his bag. “When does this all end?”

“Soon,” I said, my voice soft. “Don’t worry.”

“Good.” He looked back, shook his head, and left.

I was alone again.

Good.

I leaned my head against the locker.

My muscles ached. My heart was close to bursting. I wanted Robyn here, and I wished she’d run away and stab me in the back. Taking my mother’s offer was her best option. I didn’t know why she’d tell me about it.

But she did, and now I had a choice.

I could drop out of school. Give up any hint of a normal life. Forgo my last football season, my final two semesters, and throw myself into the role I thought I wanted.

Or I could hold on to this, to all this.

Glorious, perfect Blackwoods. Flawed and fucked-up Blackwoods.

The only place on this planet where I could pretend to be a regular person.

For a while at least.

I was supposed to want this. It was the whole reason I pulled Robyn into my world.

So why, now that I was faced with getting what I wanted, did I hesitate to take what was mine?

I heard a sound. Someone coming down the aisle. I stood and pulled a shirt over my head. "You forget something?"

I figured it was Jarrod or Des or Addler, coming to grab a lost phone or bag.

Instead, Raymond and Noah stared at me.

Both of them grinned.

"Hello, brother," Raymond said. His face was healing.

Noah smirked. "You're all alone."

"How did you two get in here?" Not that it mattered, but I was delaying.

"People are funny," Noah said. "They'll do almost anything for money. But I've never seen the appeal."

"That's because you have so much of it." I glanced over my shoulder. I could run, but I wouldn't get far. "Did you know Mom tried to bribe Robyn into leaving me?"

"I thought she would." Noah advanced. Raymond stayed close. "Mom's always wanted me to win. I think it's because of our special bond."

"She breastfed you until you were ten."

Noah rolled his eyes. "Good one."

"What about you, Raymond? Aren't you pissed Mom passed you up?"

“I’ll get mine,” Raymond said. “And you will too.” His grin was vicious. He was missing a tooth.

I made my move.

There was no escape. Running wouldn’t work. I might get away, but they’d only come again. Always together, always in a pair. I could take them one against one, but both at once? I didn’t have a chance.

So I threw myself at them like a monster.

It took Noah by surprise. He figured I’d try to get away. He didn’t think I’d rush him, screaming my head off. I clocked him once in the chin, sent him reeling back as I followed with a knee to his gut. I was about to smash my elbow into his neck and break his spine when Raymond slammed a fist into my nose.

I stumbled away. Raymond came on, punching, hitting. I tried to block his blows, tried to strike back, but I lost the momentum. Noah joined him, and together, my brothers pummeled me.

I kicked someone in the ankle. I punched a mouth, a stomach. I tried to break fingers, wrists. Eventually, my head was slammed against the lockers, and stars burst into my vision.

I fought. I grew up fighting. My father taught me never to back down no matter what, even if the odds were stacked. We’d done this a thousand times as kids, tried to beat the shit out of each other, all for the amusement of our old man.

Except this time, nobody held back. The stakes were too high, and my brothers were too angry.

Blows rained down. My world became pain, even as I viciously tried to fight back.

I fell to a knee. I took an elbow to the mouth. I spit blood, got kicked in the ribs. I crumpled, placing a hand to keep me from collapsing onto the cold tile floor.

“You never were smart enough, Calvin. If you were, you would’ve run.” Noah gloated. That bastard. I hated him, hated both of them, but I hated my father and my mother most of all for turning us into this.

Into nothing more than beasts. Mindless and violent.

A shout of anger and surprise drew my head up. My skull spun and pounded, and I blinked twice before the image of Jarrod came into view.

He roared like a lion and charged.

Noah barely had time to try and fight back. Jarrod was a demon. Nobody could take him in a fight. He loved pain too much, and reveled in breaking people. I could match him at best, but I could never win.

Noah and Raymond were hurt from taking me down, and Jarrod destroyed them like they were children. He beat Noah so savagely that I thought my brother might die, until Raymond forced Jarrod back, and dragged Noah away. They reached the aisle, and Noah staggered to his feet. Raymond helped him limp away as Jarrod watched, breathing hard.

I struggled to my feet. Jarrod looked back. He didn’t try to help and I was thankful for that.

“You good?”

I smiled. It must’ve been an ugly, bloody sight. “I’m good.”

He nodded. “Come on. You need some pizza.”

I laughed. Fuck, it hurt, but I laughed anyway. He grinned back.

I leaned some weight on his shoulder and we left the locker room together.

ROBYN

Calvin looked like he'd been hit by a bus. I dropped to my knees in front of him and hugged myself against his chest. He wheezed and grunted.

"Easy," Jarrod said. "He might have a broken rib."

I pulled back, touching Calvin tentatively.

He smiled and ran a thumb down my cheek. "Ignore him. I'm fine. Come here." He pulled me against him and hugged me tight.

I noticed his pained breath but he didn't pull away.

A wash of confused and conflicting emotions rolled through me. Calvin was nearly killed—Jarrod said if he hadn't shown up when he did, Noah and Raymond were going to beat him to death. My mother's words still lingered in my skull, but she was wrong, she had to be wrong. I couldn't imagine her ever feeling this way for a man, much less for my father.

"You don't need to worry," Calvin said, peeling me back. He wiped a tear from my cheek. I hadn't realized I was crying and blushed. Jarrod was watching, and I didn't want him to know the depth of how I felt. I didn't want anyone to know.

Not Calvin. Not myself.

"They're not going to stop, are they?"

"Not until I'm beyond their reach."

I chewed on my cheek. “What does that mean?”

“I think you know.” He looked so sad, his shoulders slumped. My proud, beautiful Calvin was reduced to this.

I kissed him. I didn’t know what else to do. I tasted blood and didn’t care. He kissed me back softly, slowly. I held myself there and pressed my forehead against his.

“You can’t. You’ll hate yourself if you do.”

“It’s only a year of college. What does it matter? I’ll survive.”

“Calvin, please. Don’t go.”

“You don’t have to come with me.” He touched my cheek. “You can stay here. I’ll explain to my father. He’ll understand.”

“That’s not what I mean.” I squeezed my eyes shut. I concentrated on his breathing.

I didn’t want him to leave me. That was the truth. I needed him here. Things were starting to feel good for the first time in my life, and he was a central part of that. I wanted to be in his group, wanted to be in his world, and wanted him, yes, I wanted him.

I needed all of this, and more.

He made me feel like a normal, complete person for the first time in my life, and I didn’t want to give that up.

Worse, I knew he didn’t, either.

This was his home. Blackwoods was more than a school. It was the one place in the entire world where he could be himself. No walls, no barriers. It was difficult and he struggled, but I knew he relished that discomfort. It made him a better man.

I didn’t want to lose that. We had precious little time left as it was.

One more year.

“I don’t think there’s another way.” He sounded so heavy. “I can drop out and take my position in the company. I’ll be given more and more responsibilities, and in a few years, my father will retire, or he’ll die. Either way, I’ll take over, and my brothers won’t be able to do a damn thing to stop it.”

“And us? What about us?”

“You’ll finish school. Then you can do whatever you wish.”

“What about our fake marriage? And children? And everything?”

“Oh, Robyn, love. I’ll find a way to let you live. I promise.”

I blinked away more tears and kissed him again. We held that for a long time, and when I pulled back, he smiled at me. The room was empty. Jarrod must’ve left at some point and I hadn’t heard.

“I don’t want you to go. Isn’t that sick? When all this started, I didn’t want you around. Now I can’t imagine you gone.”

“I knew I’d win you over.”

I batted at his chest gently, making sure not to hurt him. “Why did you do this to me?”

“Because I love you. That’s why. You know I do.”

I felt the words fill me with a strange, warm glow, and I basked in him for several long moments.

Calvin loved me. I knew he did. He’d all but said as much before. His letters, his deeds, his touch, his kiss. I knew, I knew, but hearing him say it so plainly, with no hesitation, no reservation—

It was too much.

I stood and stepped back. He watched me carefully, still smiling. Bruises covered his face. I could only imagine what his chest looked like.

His muscular, perfect chest. Marred and painful.

“I need to go home, but I don’t want to leave you alone.”

“I’ll be fine. Matthias is coming and a doctor’s on the way.”

“What about Jarrod?”

“He’ll look after me.”

I nodded and glanced toward the door. “When are you going?”

“Soon. I doubt I’ll finish the semester.”

I grimaced. I hoped I’d have a few more weeks, at least.

“Right. I understand.”

“Robyn—”

“It’s okay.” I walked to the door. There was so much more to say and I shouldn’t run away from him right now, not when he said what I wanted him to say. I wished I could express all the emotions that swirled through my body, wished I could make him see how his touch drove me to insanity, how his voice brought me back down from the heavens and grounded me again, and how I needed him here more than I ever thought possible.

But he made his choice, and if he was going to leave me, I couldn’t make this any harder.

So I left. It hurt, and it broke me, but I left. There was nothing else for it.

I got into the car and cried.

I hated this. Hated his family. Hated his brothers. And above all, I despised his father for forcing Calvin into this no-win situation.

They were all sick and twisted and there was no escape.

Not for Calvin. And now, not for me.

I drove home. I wouldn’t let myself cry. It was dark, and the car that was parked out front of my house was quiet.

I slowed and leaned out to wave at the guys.

Blood was slicked and splattered all over the windshield.

I stifled a scream. My hands flew to my mouth.

Both of the guards were dead. Shot in the skull. One looked like he'd tried to fight back or to escape. His body was slumped to the side, halfway toward getting the door open.

I stared at their corpses, not moving, until one word flitted into my skull.

Mom.

I parked and jumped out. I should've called Jarrod or Calvin or Cora or the police. Whoever killed the guards might've been waiting for me.

Hell, I knew who did it.

Noah and Raymond. I didn't need to guess.

I didn't hesitate. Mom was inside and she needed help. I barreled in through the front door, breathing hard, freaking out. "Mom!"

I ran into the living room.

The TV was on. Her blankets were in a pile on the floor. A glass of white wine with two ice cubes in it stood alone on the coffee table.

She was gone.

I searched everywhere. The kitchen, her room. There was no sign of a struggle, no blood, no bodies.

She was simply gone.

I went back into the kitchen, trembling. I paced, freaking out. I could barely keep myself together.

It took me way too long to notice the note stuck to the refrigerator with a Margaritaville magnet my dad brought home as a joke a few years back after a business trip.

I tugged down the paper.

The handwriting was immaculate. It was neat and lovely, looping, feminine.

Dear Robyn,

I have your mother. I'm sure you've realized that by now.

Don't mourn the dead men out front. They weren't kind.

If you want your dear mother returned, please accept the very kind and generous offer I made you. Renounce your relationship with my son and divorce him. Toss that gaudy ring down the drain. Turn your back on our world.

In exchange, your mother will live, and your father will die.

Fitting, yes?

Darling, I wish this could be easier, but I cannot leave this to chance.

Please do what's best.

Sincerely, Diana

PS, I do so dislike violence, but my sons are not so averse. You have a day to decide.

CALVIN

My mother insisted on meeting on the Blackwoods campus. “I went there too, you know. Best years of my life.” She crooned at me over the phone with too much glee in her voice.

I sat in the second row in the central Blackwoods Cathedral, an enormous Catholic church at the edge of a manmade lake called Student’s Folly after all the dead kids that drowned out there after drinking too much. The ceiling was high and voices bounced off the stone walls and floor, amplifying every whisper, every prayer.

The place was empty except for me and Robyn.

She sat rigid beside me. Her back was straight and her chin was tilted up toward the altar. I didn’t know what was going through her mind. The stained-glass images of Jesus and his apostles stared down on our sinning bodies and I wondered if this had been a mistake—but the cathedral was the only place on campus where I didn’t think my mother would try to have me killed.

“We don’t have to do this, you know,” I said as quietly as I could.

Robyn shook her head, a slight turning of her chin. “It’s the best option. You said so yourself.”

“We could try—”

“No,” she said, eyes hardening. “I have to face her.”

I slipped my hand into hers. She held onto my fingers tightly, and I could feel her anxiety despite the calm and centered exterior. She was trembling, and I knew her frustration was a mixture of fear and anticipation.

Fear for her mother, and fear of mine.

This hadn't been my first option. Originally, I wanted Matthias to track down where my mother was staying, break into her hotel room, and cut her throat. But Matthias had talked me out of that, and suggested I try something that didn't come naturally: diplomacy.

"My mother wants to end this as much as we do," I said, shifting closer, my thigh touching Robyn's. She was warm and soft, everything I wanted, but could never be. I was much too broken for that. "She isn't stupid. She knows hurting your mom will only escalate things further."

"Noah and Raymond aren't quite so restrained."

"They are with her. Noah's her favorite for a reason, and Raymond does whatever they want, because he's a mindless idiot."

"They nearly killed you. Jarrod said if he hadn't stopped them—"

"It doesn't matter. They want me dead, not your mom."

She turned her face to mine. She had tears in her eyes and her lip quivered. "What if they hurt my mom? For fun? Or revenge?"

"They won't." I squeezed her hand hard. "And if they do, I'll kill them both myself."

She nodded. I reached up and wiped her tears and she smiled. She composed herself as the sound of the doors opening echoed into the room.

My mother's heels clacked as she came down the aisle. When she reached our pew, she crossed herself and curtsied to the altar before slipping in beside me.

She looked good. Well rested, put together. She wore a light black jacket and a cream-colored sweater over a pair of designer pants and heels. A big, black bag hung from her shoulder. I wondered if she had a gun in there, but it was more likely she came packing books than heat.

“Is this what it takes to get you in a church, Calvin? All I have to do is kidnap your wife’s mother?”

I grimaced and felt Robyn stiffen, but I touched her thigh to calm her. “Is she safe?”

Mother laughed lightly. “I’m not a killer.”

“No, you’re not, but my brothers are.”

“She’s safe. Having a very nice time, actually. That poor woman needed a vacation.”

Robyn leaned forward. “She’s not at some fucking spa, you rotting piece of ___”

I held up a hand to silence her, and she bit down hard on her cheek.

Mother only smiled impassively. “Do you know why there wasn’t a struggle? It’s because I invited her to come stay with me. I didn’t have to force her anywhere. In fact, as far as she knows, she’s having a lovely time lounging around a five-star hotel and getting sober from all those wretched pills. When you get her back, she’ll be none the wiser, and in better shape than when you lost her.” Mom’s smile widened, and I hated her in that moment.

She thought she could manipulate her way into anything. Kidnap a woman, lie and bribe and cheat and steal, so long as it got what she wanted.

That was the world I was brought up in, and it was the world I rejected.

“Are you ready to negotiate?” I met my mother’s gaze and struggled to keep my rage from showing. I’d never been good at that.

“I’m here. I’m listening.”

“I want to end this. No more fighting. No more hurting innocent people. Taking Robyn’s mother was too far. She’s not a part of this.”

“Robyn made her a part of this when she refused to back down. I warned you, dear.”

“You’re a disgusting person. Do you know what my mother’s been through?” Robyn’s back was rod straight. I thought she might lash out and rip my

mom's eyes from her skull. And I might let it happen.

"You know I don't care. I find your whole family history an utter bore. Now, I want to tour campus, and I'm not happy about having this discussion in a house of worship, so I'd like to end things as soon as we can."

I grunted in response. I had a plan, but I hadn't told Robyn what I wanted to offer. I knew she wouldn't like it, and I'd tried to get her to stay home, but she insisted on coming.

I took a breath to steel myself.

"I'm offering to step away from the family."

The words sang out over the chapel and mother's eyebrows skyrocketed.

Robyn grabbed my arm. "Calvin," she hissed. "What are you talking about? You can't do that."

"I'll walk, Mother. I'll tell Father I'm giving up my inheritance. I'll pass it all up and leave the family."

Robyn's didn't move. Mother didn't react. Both of them stared at me like I was insane.

"All to get your wife's mother back? You'll back down that easily?" Mother didn't believe it. I couldn't blame her.

"I have some stipulations first."

Her face composed itself. "I thought you might."

"First, neither Noah nor Raymond will take my place."

She laughed. "Out of the question. There's nobody else, dear."

"Neither of them will take over the company. I will not step away and allow them to take control. If I don't win, they don't either."

Robyn's fingers squeezed into my arm. I ignored her and kept my eyes on my mother. It was like staring down an angry gorilla—if I turned my head, it would show weakness.

“A Pyrrhic victory,” Mother said quietly, head tilted, lips pursed. “You lose, but so do your brothers.”

“Winning and losing are relative terms.” I leaned forward. “They will not inherit.”

“Then who? You can’t possibly think this is a realistic option. Without you and your brothers—”

“Matthias will take my position as the lead heir.”

Mother reared back as if struck.

Robyn let out a strangled sound of surprise.

I let the idea linger in the air.

I’d thought about this a lot. Nobody knew the Solar business like Matthias did—not even my father. Matthias had grown up with me at the Solar mansion, though he hadn’t been a part of the family. He knew all our secrets and had eaten at our table since we were little kids. My mother and father treated him like a cousin and a trusted employee.

It made perfect sense. Matthias was a much better fit for leadership than any of us. I was too angry and impulsive and uninterested in the work, and my brothers were both bloodthirsty, power-hungry fools. Matthias was clever and hard working. He’d take the Solar company to the next level.

Only I had to convince my parents first.

“That’s outrageous. He’s not family.” Mother sounded truly offended. I couldn’t blame her.

“He’s practically family. He grew up with me, minus all that fucked-up training.”

“That training made you smarter and faster. It made you stronger. It’s why you and your brothers can lead.”

“It’s why we’re all deeply broken, Mother. It’s why Noah’s too twisted and Raymond’s too packed with hate. It’s why I’m always so damn angry. That training ruined us, but it didn’t ruin Matthias. He was given enough to thrive,

but not so much that it stamped out his potential, like it did with the rest of us.”

Mother’s mouth worked soundlessly until she shook her head. “Out of the question.”

“Did you think about this?” Robyn asked, leaning against my shoulder. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.” I touched her hand. “Matthias can be adopted. I’m sure you can work that out. Bring him into the Solar family and make it official. His children will be Solar children, and if he has none, then my children can inherit.”

“Insane,” Mother murmured, but with less force.

“It’s the only option. If we don’t do this, then I will end up killing Raymond and Noah. You know it’s true, Mother. I’ll kill them and take over the family, and I’ll run the whole operation into the fucking ground. Your boys will be ruined, and the family will be nothing. I promise it’ll happen.”

She didn’t speak. She only watched me, studying, trying to decide if what I said was true.

And it was. I meant every word. If she didn’t agree to this deal, then I’d murder my brothers and stain my soul black. I’d run the company into the ground. My father would spin in his grave, and I’d dance and laugh on the ashes of the Solar fortune.

I’d make it happen. And she knew it.

“I barely know Matthias.”

“That’s because you’ve always been too busy for people you consider lesser. But you’ll like him. Matthias is the perfect person for this job.”

“Your father will never do it.”

“He will if you convince him to. I know you can make it happen.”

She stared for another few seconds before standing. “Is that all? You walk, Noah and Raymond are set aside, and Matthias takes over?”

“That’s all. Those are my terms. If you accept, return Robyn’s mother and we’ll end this.”

Mother nodded. Her face gave me nothing, but it didn’t have to.

The fact that she wasn’t calling me a stupid, worthless, moronic piece of trash was all the information I needed.

“I’ll consider your offer.”

“You have three hours. After that, I won’t hold back.”

She glared, but raised her chin and walked off. Her heels clattered, and my mother disappeared back through the door. I watched her go with sadness in my heart—I wished that things could’ve been different. I wished my mother loved me the way a mother should—but that woman was cursed by the Solar family, and she’d never feel anything more than a wicked lust for control and domination.

It was all the Solars ever brought into the world. Death and misery.

“You’ve lost your fucking mind, Calvin.”

I turned in surprise. Robyn stood up, looking like she might punch me in the face. I smiled, almost welcoming it. I wanted to be punished right now. I was a failure and a bastard. Robyn could make me hurt.

Her hands clenched, but she didn’t move. Her trembling turned into outright tremors.

“Please sit down. You need to take some breaths.”

“I don’t want to calm down. What’s the matter with you? We went through hell for this, and now you’re about to give it all up?”

“I know it’s hard to understand—”

“You’re psychotic. You know that, right? Was all this some elaborate ploy to get me to marry you? I’ll divorce you, I swear I will. If you walk away from your family, I won’t stay married to you.”

I sighed and nodded. “I expected that.”

She threw up her hands. “So what the hell are you thinking?”

“It’s the only way.” I patted the pew. “Please, Robyn. Listen to me.”

She sank down, but only onto the edge of the seat. “Talk fast.”

“It’s never going to end. Even if we get your mother back, my brothers will keep coming until I kill them or they kill me. There’s no middle ground here. Either I find a third option, or there will be more blood, until my family is ripped to shreds. There’s no winning, not really.”

She softened slightly. She didn’t move closer, but she didn’t leave. “So where does this leave me then?”

“I’ll follow through on my promise. Your father will die. Beyond that—” I shrugged. “I have no hold over you anymore.”

“And your brothers? Is this punishment enough?”

“They’re going to be stripped of their future and watch a commoner take their place. Every day will be torture.”

“Won’t they try to kill Matthias?”

“Probably, but I’d like to see them try.”

She sighed and leaned her head forward. She closed her eyes and stood before opening them.

“I understand why you’re doing this, but I can’t say I support it.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.”

“We could still win this. You could win this.”

“By killing my brothers?”

“They’re bastards.”

“Yes, they are, but they’re still my brothers. How much worse do you want me to be? How much more can I stand before I lose all of my humanity?”

She chewed on her lip and shook her head. “I don’t know. I’m sorry it came to this.”

“I am too.”

She walked to the end of the pew and hesitated. I couldn't read her expression. There was longing, there was anger—but also disappointment.

I hadn't realized she was so thirsty for blood, but maybe I should have.

Well, it didn't matter now. I made my choice. I'd walk away, my brothers would be punished, and Matthias would ascend to the top of the Solar family.

My father would accept it. Not right away, but eventually. Matthias would prove himself.

The Solar family would continue.

It would change, but it wouldn't end.

That was more than it deserved. If I'd kept down this path, there'd be nothing left.

I watched Robyn walk away. She'd get her mother back. Her father would die. And her life would go on.

As for me? Well, I didn't know what else mattered.

The door shut behind Robyn, and she was gone.

ROBYN

Mom was home by five that night.

“Oh, honey, you should’ve seen that hotel. It was enormous. The kind of place your father used to take me when we first got married. Diana was such a wonderful host, so gracious and kind.” Mother stood in the kitchen, smiling at me. She put a kettle on for tea.

I expected her to pour a big glass of wine, but she didn’t.

Her eyes were clearer than I remembered. She was looking at me and seeing me, really seeing me. I sat down, startled.

Diana hadn’t lied. Mom really was doing better. “What happened there? You seem more yourself.”

“Diana took away the pills.” Mom laughed lightly. “I think they were holding me back.”

“Sounds like you got lucky.”

Mom shrugged and leaned against the counter, arms crossed over her chest. She had no clue that she’d been in so much danger. If something had gone differently, my mother might be dead right now.

Instead, she was off the pills and smiling like she’d been given a second chance.

I wanted to scream in rage and pain.

Calvin shouldn't have made this deal. He was giving up too much for me. His entire life, his whole future, gone to get my mother back, a woman I hated and loved at the same time. I didn't understand why I was worth any of this.

He could win. It would take blood—but he could do it. There had to be a way.

Instead, he walked. He turned and walked and now I was left here reeling, trying to pick up the pieces.

I didn't know where this left us. He hadn't said anything about our marriage, and I'd thrown it in his face, threatening him like a child. I hated myself for doing that. It was an ugly, awful thing.

But I couldn't stand the idea of him giving up for me.

"You look stressed, sweetie." Mom hovered then sat down across from me. "Want to talk about it?"

"Just stupid boy stuff."

She laughed. "It's always boy stuff."

I looked down at my hands. I didn't want to tell her about how I felt. She'd already made it clear that she thought I should walk away from Calvin, and there was a part of me that agreed. Calvin was trouble. He was a nightmare. He was pleasure and pain and everything good and bad all wrapped up in one classically gorgeous beast.

And I wanted him. God, yes, I wanted him. I didn't want this to be over.

That was what hurt that most. I didn't want this to end.

It was selfish and dumb, but I felt it.

"You know I'm still mad at you." The tears came then. They choked me, but I forced them back.

Mom's face fell. "I know you are."

"I'm so mad at you." I glared at her, jaw tightening. I shouldn't do this. Not right now. It wouldn't change anything. "You let him hurt me."

“I know.”

“I hate you for what you did. I hate you for doing nothing.”

“I hate myself too, sweetie.” She didn’t meet my eye. “I’m so sorry. I know it doesn’t change anything.”

“No, Mom, it doesn’t change anything at all. I still got hit all those years. I still have the scars.”

She let out a soft breath. A tear rolled down her cheek. I was so used to my mother crying at this point that it barely registered. She’d shed so many tears for my father—but so few for me.

“I was scared. I know that’s a bad excuse. I’m a terrible person. How could I let my own baby girl get hurt like that? By her own father? I thought—I was so afraid. I’ll never forgive myself for what happened, and I don’t expect you to forgive me either, but I hope we can have a normal relationship again one day.”

“Mom, I’m so mad at you.” The tears rolled down my cheeks. Today was a fucking awful day. “And I love you. I hate that Dad did all this to us, but he’s never coming back. He’s never, ever coming home, do you hear me?”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do.” I reached out and took her hands. “You have to move on. I’m not ready to forgive you, but I’m willing to try. I love you, but you have to let go of Dad. He can’t hurt us anymore. He never will again.”

She cried in earnest then. I cried too, unable to help myself. Years and years of abuse, self-hatred, and horrors spilled out between us, and we let all the tears fall that should’ve fallen a thousand times over. Our house was a nightmare and a tomb for so long, but it was over, it was finally over.

When we regained ourselves, I hugged her. I hadn’t lied when I said I wasn’t ready to forgive her, but I was getting there.

I wanted my mom back so badly.

Mom wiped her tears as the kettle screamed. She poured two mugs of chamomile. “I guess I shouldn’t ask about the boy troubles. They seem small

at this point.”

“You can ask if you want. You are my mom, after all.”

She suppressed a smile. “Calvin Solar, right? He’s the one that gave you the ring.” She put the mugs down and sat again. “I remember I said something to you about him. Something I shouldn’t have.”

“That all boys are awful and not worth it.”

She let out a long sigh and blew on her tea. “I might’ve been out of line.”

“I can understand where it came from.”

“The truth is, honey, I got unlucky and married a monster, but most people don’t go through that. If you like him, you should be with him.”

“Really?” I laughed and turned my mug in little circles. “I didn’t expect you to say that.”

“I mean it. I was wrong to say you shouldn’t be with him if it makes you happy.”

I touched the ring. I still hadn’t taken it off. “We got in an argument and I’m pretty sure I was wrong.”

She smiled. “That stinks. What are you going to do about it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Go talk to him. Work it out.”

I hesitated, but glanced toward the door. “You’ll be okay?”

“Sweetie, I’m better than I have been in a long time. Go ahead. Talk to him. I’ll be here when you get home.”

I stood. She was right. I was a dick to Calvin earlier and I wanted to make up for it. I hated that I left things that way, and he deserved more.

An apology, an explanation. Something more than my callousness.

I drove to his cottage. I didn’t know if he’d be home, but I didn’t want to call first. This was something I had to do in person.

His car was out front. The lights were on. I parked and went to the door. I knocked and waited, stomach churning.

What did I want?

I didn't know the answer until he opened up and smiled.

That. Right there. Calvin's grin, his face, his lips, his hands. I wanted him, needed him. I was angry earlier because I felt as though he was tossing me aside. He was ending our arrangement, and it broke my heart.

But it didn't have to be that way.

I opened my mouth to speak—

Then looked over his shoulder.

Boxes were all over the floor. His things were stacked inside. The walls were barren.

I looked back at him, going pale. "Calvin?" I asked. "You're packing?"

I took a step back, because of course he was leaving, of course.

CALVIN

Her face went ashen white and I thought she might turn to bolt.

I grabbed her before she could run. I pulled her wrist and dragged her inside, slamming the door shut. She struggled, but weakly, like she didn't really want to but felt like she had to put up some fight.

I loved this woman more than life itself.

I pushed her against the wall. "Take a breath and listen."

"I knew you'd run away. That's your whole thing, isn't it? Suck me in, give me a ring, marry me, sleep with me, make me feel things—"

"Robyn." My voice was sharp enough to make her stop. She chewed on her lip. "I'm not going anywhere."

Her eyes strayed to the boxes. "But you're packing."

"I'm not leaving Blackwoods. Why the hell would I do that, when I just sacrificed my future so that I could stay?"

I felt her relax. My words found their mark, and I released my grip. She rubbed her wrist, looking at me tentatively, uncertain.

"So why are you packing?"

"I need a new start. I'm going to stay with Des and Addler for a few days until I find a new place."

“But this cottage is perfect.”

“It’s everything I used to be.” I walked over to the boxes and kicked one. “Remote. Quiet. Dark. I want to be a part of the action this last year.”

“You’re moving onto campus?” She laughed as if that were insane.

And fair enough, it was. I could waltz into student housing like some second son of a hedge fund manager. I had a reputation to uphold.

“No, not on campus, but right next to it. I’m sick of secluding myself from the world. I don’t have to do that anymore.”

Which was true. For so long, I lived with one foot in this world and the other in my family’s business. I couldn’t commit myself to being happy at Blackwoods because I knew it could all go away at any moment. My father could rip me from here and shove me into the Solar company.

Not anymore. It wasn’t official yet, but it would be soon. My mother accepted my offer, and now she’d work her magic breaking the news to my brothers and to my father. There’d be a fight. There might even be blood.

But it was over.

She drifted closer. “I overreacted. Again. I’m sort of a mess right now.”

“I can’t blame you. We’ve been through a few fucked-up days.” I watched her carefully, my heart beating a wild hole in my chest. “I’m happy you came.”

“I wanted to apologize. I shouldn’t have said what I said back there in the church. I was just so mad, and so confused, and Calvin, you don’t have to give everything up for me—”

“Stop, Robyn, please.” I held up a hand and went to her. I put my hands on her hips and steered her back, pinning her to a bare wall again.

I loved the feeling of her hipbones on my palms. She was warm and soft and luxurious. She was sensual and kind and everything I wanted, but was never able to have.

She gasped when I kissed her but melted into my embrace. She moaned as my hands roamed her body and my tongue invaded her mouth. I held nothing back. I was tired of holding back. I wanted more, wanted better. I didn't want to be the monster that ran the Solar empire. I could be anything at all now. The options were endless.

And yet all I wanted was to be Robyn's husband.

She was breathless when I broke off the kiss.

"I love you," I said, touching her lower lip with my thumb. "I'm giving up my place with my family so that I can finish college with you. Maybe you don't want to stay my wife. I can't force you to. But I won't leave."

She began to blink. Tears welled up in her eyes. "Calvin."

"Oh, shit. What did I say? Don't cry." I tried to wipe them away.

She kissed me gently. "I love you."

It was my turn to stare.

For so long, I'd dreamed of hearing those words leave her perfect lips. I'd imagined it, over and over.

This was better than even my most perfect vision.

"I love you too."

"I don't know when it happened, but I fell for you. I don't want a divorce. I don't want any of that stupid stuff. I want to be with you. I want you to stay."

"Then I'll stay. I'm not going anywhere."

"Your family's really going to let you go?"

"They didn't have much of a choice."

"And Matthias?"

I shrugged, kissed her neck. "Fuck them. Not my problem."

She swatted at my arm. "You'll have to help him, you know. You got him into this."

I sighed and nodded. “I know. Can we just pretend we’re regular college students for one night?”

She grinned. “What do regular college students do?”

“They fuck all night. Or until you collapse in exhaustion, covered in sweat and cum. Either way.”

She slapped my arm, but grinned wider. “You’re disgusting. Tell me more.”

I laughed and dragged her to the bedroom.

Thankfully, I hadn’t begun to break it down yet.

“When I get my new place, I want you to move in,” I said as I undressed her, pulling off her shirt.

She yanked off mine. “I will, but not yet. I need to make sure my mom’s okay first.”

“Then you’re all mine.” I kissed her neck, her chest, her collarbone.

She looked into my eyes. “I’m all yours.”

I shoved her back onto the bed and followed.

ROBYN

Several Months Later

I lounged back on the towel and stretched my legs out far. Campus was beautiful when it was empty, and I loved lying in the middle of the quad with nothing to do but feel the sun on my body. I watched fluffy clouds drift over deep blue sky and wondered when it would all disappear.

Nothing good ever lasted. I learned that the hard way, again and again.

At least, until I married Calvin.

For some reason, that was lasting, and it showed no signs of slowing down. My heart was heavy and full, and my days were lighter—because of him.

Calvin reached over and touched my thigh. “You okay?”

I looked at him over my sunglasses. “I’m good. Just thinking.”

“Yeah? About what?” He watched me like I was his favorite movie and he couldn’t take his eyes from the screen. It was always like that—an intense, deep devotion.

“How happy I’ve been. And I hadn’t even realized.”

“That’s what happiness should be. So all pervasive that you’re steeped in it.”

“Never experienced this before in my life.”

“No, I haven’t either.” He leaned over and kissed my neck. “I wonder why.”

“Probably because our parents were psychopaths that tortured us?”

“Probably.” He kissed me again. “You almost ready to go?”

“I guess so. I wish we could stay longer.”

“I do too, but I’d like to get back soon.”

“Why the big rush?”

“I plan on using your body for my pleasure this evening, and I’d like to preview the night’s feasting before we go eat.”

“Do I get a say in that?”

“No, you do not.”

“Sounds good.”

He laughed. He looked happy and lighter than he had when everything started. His skin was sun-touched and golden, and his hair was a brighter shade of wheat. He sat up on an elbow, wearing short sleeves and designer jeans.

My prince. My husband. My rings glittered in the sunlight.

I reluctantly stood and rolled up my blanket. He rolled up his and we walked together, holding hands, along the empty, winding pathways.

Blackwoods was so beautiful. I didn’t appreciate it before. I was too busy being afraid and angry and scarred to look around at my little paradise. The architecture, the landscaping. It was heaven tucked away in a small Pennsylvania town.

I didn’t deserve it, but I’d enjoy it anyway.

He draped his arm over my shoulder and hugged me close. “How are you holding up?”

“You don’t have to keep asking.” We reached the end of the path and walked beneath a large iron archway. “I’m fine. It’s what I wanted.”

“Still, your dad’s dead. That’s got to be hard.”

“It’s not. Honestly, it’s really not. I’m happy he’s gone.” I leaned my head against his shoulder as we paused at the corner, waiting to cross.

Earlier that morning, I got a call from my mother. My father had been found in his cell, dead from stab wounds. Nobody knew how it happened. His cell had been locked. No guards saw anyone enter or exit. The security cameras had been disabled for twenty minutes—the exact amount of time it took for Dad to die.

Calvin made it happen. He promised he would, and he made good on his word.

I didn’t ask for details. I didn’t want to know how he’d found a contact in prison, or how he’d bribed the guards, or how much money exchanged hands. I didn’t want to know how many awful people were now moderately richer because of him.

All I cared about was that my father now rotted in Hell where he belonged.

My mother took it better than I expected. She sounded sad, a little numb, but not shattered. If this had happened sooner, it might’ve destroyed her. But she was stronger now. She might’ve felt some relief, though she tried to hide it.

She wouldn’t backslide into that mindless mess.

Especially not now that she had friends from her yoga studio and she met a guy online.

It was weird, my mom dating, but it was better than her moping around the house feeling miserable.

We headed across the street and into the building at the corner. I lived with Calvin in a massive three-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment with a balcony that overlooked campus. He hadn’t been kidding when he said he wanted to live right where the action was. The most popular student bar in the area was two doors down, and we could hear voices and music until late at night.

I loved it. I loved being in the middle of everything with him, even if we heard couples fighting at three in the morning. Not that it mattered. We were never asleep.

He kept me up late, using my body like he couldn't get enough.

I took a shower while he made a phone call on the balcony. The warm water felt good and when I got out, I stood in front of the mirror and wiped the steam off with my towel. A stranger looked back, a pretty young girl with a smile on her face, a girl that didn't have bags under her eyes, that didn't look angry and sallow and afraid. There were the familiar scars, and they'd never fade—scars never did. But they didn't define me anymore.

I was better. I was growing. And I had Calvin to thank for that.

Things weren't perfect. He was dark and moody, but I weathered his anger like a storm, guiding him back to equilibrium. He treated me like I was his guiding star, and I was the only person in the world that could talk him down and make him see the light.

I pulled on clothes and found him sitting in the living room with a glass in his hand. He frowned at the wall, staring into space, slowing twirling the tumbler in his hand.

I hesitated. He only drank when he got bad news. "Are you okay?" I asked.

He looked back at me and smiled. "I'm great. How was your shower?"

"It was fine." I drifted over and sat next to him. "Who was that on the phone?"

"Matthias."

"How are things going?"

"He's good. He wanted some advice."

"Yeah? And?"

He grinned at me and took a sip. "My father's going to name him heir. They signed the adoption papers today."

I gasped. My hands flew to my mouth. "Calvin!"

“I know. It’s crazy. I didn’t think this plan would work, but here we are.”

“That’s wonderful. How does Matthias feel? Is he excited?”

“I think he’s wary, but starting to be a bit more optimistic.”

“He’s going to do great.”

“I know that.” He leaned closer and kissed my lips softly.

“Better than your asshole brothers. Where are they, anyway?”

“Noah’s in Greece. I think he’s working on some tech startup here. Raymond’s bumming around California, spending his trust fund. They’ll both be out of cash in the next few years, and I can’t wait to tell them to fuck off when they come begging.”

I laughed and leaned my head against his shoulder. His brothers took it hard when they were cast out of the family in favor of Matthias and hadn’t quite recovered yet. I had a feeling they never would.

At least I hoped so, the bastards.

His mother still enjoyed her position as the matriarch of the Solar family. I wished she’d get thrown out too, but at least Matthias would be there to counter her moves. He had no love for Diana Solar, and he’d do everything in his power to make sure her life wasn’t perfect.

“Are you going to tell Cora and Jarrod?”

He shook his head. “Not yet. I want it all to be over first.”

“I understand. I’m happy though. I’ll have to call Matthias and congratulate him.”

He pulled me tighter and hugged me against his side. His arms were warm, strong and comforting.

“We should get going if we’re going to make it on time.”

I kissed his chin. “We could always stand them up, you know.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

“I mean it. We can celebrate here, alone.”

“I know what you mean by celebrate. Are you sure, baby?”

“I’m sure.” I hesitated and bit his lip. “On second thought, I’ll text Cora and let her know at least. We’ll see them tomorrow.”

“Better hurry, because I’m not going to wait very long.”

I laughed and jumped up from the couch, dancing out of his reach. He grinned, sipped his whiskey, and leaned his head back.

I knew Matthias taking over the family was a huge burden lifted from his shoulders. He always seemed happier and lighter.

We had one more year of Blackwoods. Things weren’t perfect and they weren’t settled, but it was going to work out. I had my Calvin, my husband, my future. And I couldn’t wait.

I sent a quick text to Cora.

Robyn: Something came up. We’ll see you two tomorrow.

Cora: Ugh, god, newlyweds are the worst!! Get a room!!!

Robyn: We have a room. We’re using it right now.

Cora: GROSS. Love u.

I tossed my phone aside and sat at the edge of the bed. “Calvin?”

He appeared in the doorway. “Yes, my dear?”

“Come over here and fuck me like it’s the first time.”

“Gladly.”

EPILOGUE: DES

When people look at me, they see fun-loving, easygoing, loveable asshole Des.

I'm a clown. I make crowds smile. I like attention, and I'm not ashamed of it.

Nobody knows why I'm at Blackwoods.

They figure it's the normal stuff. Good education. Bright future. My family's connected—though how, nobody's sure. There are rumors. I've heard them all. Apparently, I'm the scion of an elite Saudi prince, cousin of the Rothschilds family, and something about aliens.

The truth is worse. Much worse.

My friends don't see past my mask. Jarrod and Calvin are too busy with their own fucked-up darkness to notice much around them, and Addler wants to believe the best in people. He doesn't want to see the truth.

Not that I can blame him. It's nicer to think your closest friend in the world is just a decent, normal, all-American douchebag jerk.

Campus was quiet the first day of my senior year. I strolled along the pathways alone, admiring the buildings, the gaggles of hot freshmen girls—okay, some of my reputation was true, fair enough—and the long fields of manicured grass. I loved Blackwoods, loved it like a real home. It was the closest I've ever been to being happy.

I gave in to that happiness. I let myself be normal. For three years, I was one of the Four Horsemen. I ruled the school and took what I wanted, when I wanted it.

Life didn't get better, and I wasn't ready to give that all up.

But the time had come.

I waited outside of the Warren Life Sciences building. I lingered near a bench, leaning against a cold black light pole. I watched strangers come and go, nodded at a few shouted greetings, grinned at a girl I fucked three nights earlier and winked as she hustled past blushing wildly, until I saw my target.

She was small, blonde, pretty. Beautiful, really. She walked with a straight back and a raised chin like she was ready to own the world. She dressed conservatively and piled her hair on the top of her head in a messy bun like she couldn't be bothered to style herself.

I drifted in her wake, keeping my distance.

I'd seen her a thousand times over the last three years, but I always kept my distance. I didn't want her to know who I was. I didn't want her to realize what my family name meant.

Pretty little Ashleigh. Ash, to all her friends.

She walked fast, hips swaying. I felt half hard, watching her ass. I shouldn't have been this excited, but for some reason I couldn't help myself.

She was everything.

My future. My past. She was the reason I came to Blackwoods and the reason I was going to throw away my senior year.

For revenge.

Ash reached a group of her friends and I hung back. Any one of them might call out and drag me over. They were members of a student society, one of the powerful but secretive groups that operated in the shadows at Blackwoods. I'd been to their parties, fucked their friends, did their drugs.

All to keep within striking distance of Ash.

She looked over her shoulder, like she knew I was watching. I didn't look away. In the past, I would have.

This time, I had nothing to hide.

I smiled. She looked confused, brushed a stray piece of hair behind an ear, and smiled back. Her friends laughed and someone whispered something that made her blush.

“Oh, Ash,” I said quietly to myself. “I can't wait to kill you.”

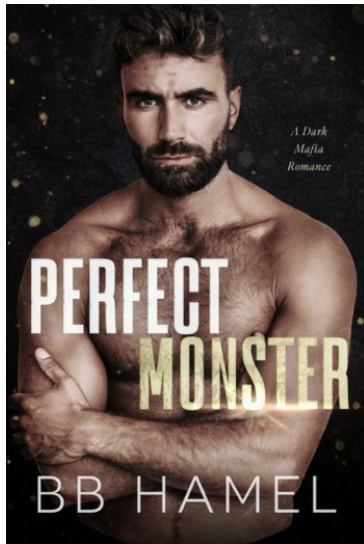
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PREVIEW: PERFECT MONSTER



Chapter One: Cora

The red stain spread across his crisp white shirt in a wide bloom. I took a step back from the very large and very angry-looking man as he wiped at his chest and groaned. The wine glass lay shattered into pieces at his feet, sparkling like little diamonds.

That shirt probably cost more than three months of my rent, and the suit looked custom. The pinstripes matched up perfectly at the shoulders, each little detail fastidiously tailored and finished.

“You idiot girl,” he said, still trying to wipe the wine off with his palms, like that would work.

He was a wine-soaked gorilla.

I was tempted to suggest club soda. Or maybe I should just run.

Instead, I kept my mouth shut and kept still.

His date, a pretty brunette with striking lips, thick dark hair and eyebrows, and enough jewelry to make the queen blush, rubbed his arm and gave me an apologetic smile.

“It’ll be okay, baby. Just a little stain.”

The man shoved her away.

“Do you have any idea how much this cost, you stupid little bitch?” His eyes bugged out, and he stared at me like he was about to rip off my head and drink my blood like a demented Viking.

Which he might’ve, all things considered.

It was a very weird party.

Winter in Sea Isle, New Jersey, didn’t exactly get a ton of tourists, but when Jack, the manager at the Stone Harbor Club, called me up and said some big gathering was going down and offered me a catering job for the night, I had to say yes. Money was always tough to come by in the cold, lonely months.

Though, in retrospect, maybe staying home would’ve been a better idea.

The room was packed with men in expensive clothes and skinny girls draped on their arms like cotton candy. They mingled over drinks, laughing softly to each other, the room’s air was thick with danger and discontent.

I knew men like them. I had distinct childhood memories of men smoking cigars and talking at each other too loudly over poker games and football on TV, the room crackling with a sense of unease and latent violence. It’d been a long time since I’d last let myself get anywhere near men like these, but the rent was due and I liked eating, so I kept my head down and tried to power through.

The ballroom was set up like a wedding, with a dance floor and lots of round tables, but there was no music, and the gathered men seemed more like they’d rather blow lines of coke off a stripper’s ass and maybe kill someone than do the Electric Slide.

Couldn’t blame them. I hated the Electric Slide.

I had no clue what the occasion was supposed to be except that it celebrated a man named Roman and some new business venture he’d started, which sounded great, good for Roman. I wished him the best.

Only I really didn't want this very large, very angry-looking Italian man to murder me in front of fifty people.

And based on their bored stares, I was pretty sure nobody would come to my rescue.

"I am so, so sorry," I said, finding my voice at last. The guy's date glared at him and crossed her thin arms over her curvy chest, saying nothing. I wasn't getting any more help there, clearly.

"Sorry's not good enough," he said, voice dropping into a dangerous snarl. He'd be handsome, if it weren't for the death glare.

In my defense, it was an accident. He'd been arguing with that girl about something when I walked past with a glass of red on a tray for one of the guests, and he turned abruptly and slammed into me.

Obviously, that didn't matter now, but still, I was a decent waitress.

I'd only ever spilled drinks on, like, two other customers. Three, max.

"Sir, I'll get you some club soda, and maybe—"

"Club fucking soda? For wine on a two-thousand-dollar shirt? What the fuck is wrong with you?"

I really shouldn't have mentioned club soda. I'd known it was a mistake and would only piss him off more. I just couldn't help myself.

I held up my hands, pleading now. I didn't want this to turn into a whole thing. I couldn't afford to lose my job, especially not in the winter when I was barely making ends meet to begin with, and the idea of burning two grand for some rich guy's shirt made me want to scream bloody murder into my pillow.

"I'll make it right, sir, whatever you need."

A dangerous gleam flashed in his eye. "Anything I want, pretty bitch?"

I stepped back from him, heart suddenly racing. The way he ran his tongue over his lower lip was both lascivious and threatening, and I wasn't a fan of where this was going.

“I meant, financially. I can pay to have it dry cleaned—”

He reached for me, faster than I could follow. My tray clattered to the floor, and the other men didn't even react, like they were used to seeing waitresses get assaulted.

“Is there a problem here?”

A voice behind me. I was about to hyperventilate from the stress and the worry that maybe, just maybe, this creep would sexually assault me in front of all these people.

Yeah, it felt like that kind of party.

My asshole assailant looked up, and his face instantly switched from rage-induced mania into something more like a very angry child caught sneaking into a forbidden room.

“Roman,” he said, gripping my wrist harder. “This woman ruined—”

“Let go of her, Manzi.”

Manzi, his face very red, released me instantly. I rubbed the aching bone and looked back at the looming figure behind me, then sucked in a surprised breath.

Dark hair, light skin, handsome, cut jaw, and eyes the pale blue of arctic ice. His expression was tightly controlled fury, though I got the strange, distinct sense that he could lose himself at any moment. He was muscular and athletic, and he wore an expensive, sleek suit—not quite as flashy as Manzi's, but perfectly fitted to his exquisite body.

His eyes drew me in and made me want to get lost. I'd never seen eyes like those on a person before. They looked like a wolf leading its pack. His dark hair was pushed back in a deceptively messy, almost perfectly imperfect style that accentuated his high cheekbones and sculpted brow. His full, pale pink lips frowned and twitched slightly as he stared down Manzi like a bull about to wreck an alley filled with clowns wearing bright red capes.

Roman was gorgeous. I'd seen plenty of handsome men in my life, but Roman was on an entirely different level, like his mouth and eyes and cheeks

and hands were built to attract and to please.

Like he was used to giving orders, and to being obeyed. He held himself like a prince, like a king.

He was a honeypot, a poison flower, a Venus flytrap, something beautiful and dangerous all at once.

Terror flitted through my gut as I turned back to Manzi.

He looked down at the floor. “There’s no problem, Roman.”

“There better not be, not at my party. Not when we’re celebrating a business venture that your father worked very hard to put together.”

“Of course, Roman. I didn’t mean anything. It’s only, this shirt—”

“I’ll write you a check.” Roman’s tone was a snarl and a whip.

Manzi flinched. “That won’t be necessary.”

“I insist. Or are you simply looking for any excuse to terrorize this girl?” He finally looked at me—

And his head tilted to the side like he saw something interesting for the first time.

His eyes roamed down along the full length of my body in very explicit judgment, and I felt weighed and measured. Coming from most men, that look would be rude at best, but somehow it felt natural from Roman, like he was used to taking the temperature of a person.

I hoped he didn’t realize that I was burning up.

I stared back. I couldn’t help myself. His gaze commanded respect and attention, and I was instantly drawn toward him, like I was a space rock on a crash course for the moon. I knew instinctively that he was a hunter, that he was a predator with sharp teeth and a strong jaw and a hunger that I couldn’t begin to sate, but my curiosity only intensified under the pressure of his presence.

He was alluring and terrifying.

“No, Roman. I apologize for making a scene.”

“Good. Go now. Don’t bother the girl again.”

Manzi turned and strode away. He grabbed his date’s arm and dragged her with him. She let out a string of curses in Spanish, none of which Manzi seemed to understand, let alone care about, but I was pretty sure they were extremely intense.

At least, I thought so, based on my Spanish 101.

Nobody stopped him as he pushed open the door and the pair disappeared outside.

The remaining men went back to drinking and talking in a low murmur.

“I apologize for my young, reckless friend.” Roman continued to look at me with those incredible eyes, and I felt like a patient on an operating table.

He could take me apart and I think I’d let him.

What the hell was wrong with me?

“It’s okay. It was just an accident.”

“Even still. Did he hurt you?”

“No. I’m fine, really.”

He nodded once. “If he bothers you again, come find me.”

And with that, he walked away and joined the nearest group of men. They greeted him with smiles, though they all seem reserved, respectful—even a little afraid.

I couldn’t blame them.

“Holy crap,” I whispered to myself as I picked up my tray. I returned it to the back, found a broom, and quickly cleaned up the glass shards.

They glittered in the overhead light. I kept glancing over at Roman, the center of attention.

Who the hell was that guy? He'd defused the very angry, very scary Manzi without breaking a sweat, and I got the feeling that Manzi wasn't used to being deferential.

Heck, none of the men in this place struck me as the simpering type. And yet Roman controlled the room like a general in front of his latest cadets.

I hurried into the back again and leaned up against the wall by the employees' bathroom, hands shaking. I wasn't sure if I was freaking out from Manzi manhandling me, or if I was trembling from the intensity of Roman's attention.

"What the hell happened out there?" I turned as Winter stormed over looking outraged. She was a few inches taller with dark auburn hair and the kind of curves that made most women jealous. Including me. And I knew for a fact that her idea of working out was walking to Wawa to buy three Snickers bars and a cheese-filled pretzel.

Whereas I went for a five-mile run most mornings just to stay in shape. And to quiet the little voice in my skull that kept wanting to go over the same old mistakes from my past, again and again and again.

Mostly to stay in shape, though.

"Did that fucking guy grab you? Jack just told me—"

"It's okay, seriously," I said quickly, holding up my hands to try to keep her from exploding. "One of the other guests helped me out."

Winter let out a sharp huff and slammed herself against the wall next to me. "That motherfucker. Did you see the way he was talking to that girl he had with him? If I were her, I'd stab him in the eye with a fork."

"I totally believe it. I sort of have the feeling she's tried that, though. You should've heard what she said to him in Spanish as they left."

"Yeah? Good, I hope she makes him feel like a real piece of shit." Winter's expression softened. She was a few years older and lived in the apartment unit below mine. We rented from this nice old lady named June who was happy to lose out on a little extra cash in the summer to have a couple of full-time, dependable tenants. "You're too passive sometimes, you know."

“Hey, don’t make me feel bad. I wasn’t the one being a dick.”

She smoothed her hair over her shoulder. “Fair enough. I just want to see you stick up for yourself, you know?”

I forced a smile. “You do the sticking up for both of us.”

“Damn right I do. Any guy talks to my girl like that, I knee him in the balls. No questions asked.”

“Pretty sure that’s not true, but I appreciate the sentiment.”

She gave me a stern look. “You ever need a pair of nuts kicked, you find me. I love you, girl.”

“Love you too.”

She patted my wrist. “Jack says take your time and come back out when you’re ready. I’m gonna go scope out the room and make sure that asshole’s definitely gone.” She pushed off the wall and hesitated. “You sure you’re okay? You look a little flushed.”

I stared down at my feet, thinking about Roman’s ice-blue eyes and the way his lips curled as his gaze traveled down my body—it was strange, like he was both appraising me and unable to look away.

“I’m fine. Really.”

“All right. Take your time. I’ll be back in a bit.” She waved and marched back off toward the banquet hall.

I leaned my head against the wall and took a few more calming breaths, trying to remember that meditation exercise I’d learned on YouTube. The guy with the very soothing British accent called it a body scan or something like that. I started at the very top of my head and imagined the focus of my attention slowly moving down, from the tip of my skull to the points of my toes, pausing to focus on each muscle, each inch of skin.

By the end of it, I almost felt better.

Except then the image of Roman’s hands following that exact same pattern, touching all of me, from my lips down to my breasts down to the soaking wet

heat between my legs sent me into another stupid dizzy tailspin and I decided I had to get some fresh air.

I grabbed my jacket from the break room, headed through the kitchen, waved to Chef José, then shoved out the back. The Stone Harbor Club was a little private events space right on the edge of the bay, and the seaweed stench rolled up from beneath the wooden pier that surrounded the building. I walked over toward the railing overlooking the water and stared out at the gently lapping tide, the marsh grasses waving in the wind. I pulled my jacket tighter for warmth and let out big plumes of white breath, trying not to think about that man again, about that Roman.

It was like he wiped away the darkness of the moment with Manzi. For one second, I felt utter fear, the sort of chest-constricting terror I hadn't experienced in a very long time. I was sure Manzi would do something horrible if given the chance, and I couldn't tell if a room full of men would stop him.

At least until Roman had appeared. Then it was all about that beastly specimen.

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to banish the thoughts. I couldn't get some stupid, girly crush on a guest, especially not when I'd been working so hard at keeping to myself. I'd moved to Sea Isle three years ago, after the incident, and ever since then, I hadn't done much dating or really much of anything at all.

I touched my belly where the scar tore me in half, hip to hip.

Winter said I was antisocial and wallowed too much. I said she was right, but I didn't tell her why. Before the incident, I was an outgoing girl—I had lots of friends, liked big parties, always had a big smile on my face.

The world was great. Sunshine and flowers. Rainbows, ponies, unicorns, and all that crap.

But afterward, things changed.

“Get the fuck off me, pendejo. Vete a la verga, stupid asshole.” It was the Latina girl again, and she sounded pissed. Her voice echoed off the pier and the club walls, and I caught her shadow projected along the wooden slats.

Another voice, this one male. It was Manzi, but I couldn't make out the words. He sounded angry, though, and I drifted toward them, heart racing.

What would he do to that poor girl, out here alone? Should I run inside and get Roman?

The girl let out a violent, pained gasp, like she'd been hit. I walked closer, one hand on my scar, the other at my throat like I needed to keep myself from screaming. I peered around the corner and saw them, backlit by streetlights beyond the parking lot.

The girl was down on her knees in front of a hulking shape. She stared up with a sneer and dabbed at her mouth with the back of her hand, then spit blood onto the wood.

Manzi stood over her, breathing hard.

"I told you not to embarrass me and this is what you do."

"Fuck your mother, you weak little man. I told you the truth because you needed to know."

He slapped her across the face. She gasped and clutched at her cheek but didn't cry out.

I didn't understand why she wouldn't scream.

"You should've kept it to yourself then, you dumb bitch." He pulled a gun from his waistband and aimed it at her face.

The girl went very, very still.

The rage drained from her face and her eyes went wide. Her lips dropped open—*god, she was really pretty*—and she put her hands up in the air.

"Okay, Manzi, let's be careful, okay? I know I shouldn't have slept with him. It was a very stupid mistake. I agree. You can slap me around. I deserve it. We both know that. But why bring out a gun? Why would you want to kill me?"

"You keep doing this, Dia. We keep playing this little fucking game, and you don't seem to get it. Now maybe you'll learn." He sounded on the verge of

losing his mind, his rage barely controlled. I didn't know what to do, and as he stepped forward and pressed the gun against Dia's head, I couldn't move, couldn't lift my limbs, couldn't open my jaw.

My lips were stuck to my teeth.

My tongue was heavy and swollen.

My mouth was bone dry like chalk on a gravestone, and a buzzing pulse ran through my legs, an ice-cold sheen of fear that kept me frozen in place.

Just like that night, all over again. My fingers dug into the scar on my belly. The slash of pain. All that blood.

"Nobody has to know, baby," Dia said softly, and her hands reached out like she wanted to pull him against her. "Come on, Manzi. You know how this goes. You fuck around, I fuck around, but I still love you, mi cielo. I always come back to you, mi rey, my king."

"Why the fuck do you have to be like this, huh? Why the fuck do you always have to be like this?"

"Manzi, please—"

He pulled the trigger.

Her head jerked back and exploded outward in a cloud of red mist and skull shards and brain matter. She slumped down in a tangle of limbs, more blood pooling all around her gorgeous body, and I kept thinking, *oh my god, oh my god, she was so pretty*, my mind like a VCR on loop, like a rope thrown over a cliff. I took a single step forward, staring at Dia's body as Manzi cursed and waved the gun around and stood over her grabbing at his hair like even he was shocked that he'd shot her—

I didn't know what made him turn.

Maybe he felt me there, maybe he heard something.

But Manzi looked over his shoulder, and for one throat-clenching moment, his eyes stuck to mine like daggers, and there was fear in his expression, definitely fear, but that quickly turned to anger as he leveled the gun right at my chest.

My legs were broken. My fingers pressed so hard against the scar it hurt.

I finally found the scream that was stuck in my throat.

Manzi cursed and lowered the pistol. His eyes leapt to the door, and he took one step away from me before shoving the gun into his belt. He turned and ran off into the night, leaving Dia alone on the wooden pier, her blood dripping down into the bay below, mingling with the ocean tides and the saltwater, feeding the fishes and little creatures that feasted on life, her pretty hair drenched in the sticky red mess, her beautiful face absolutely ruined, and I was still screaming.

I must've been screaming the whole time until a hand pressed down over my mouth.

“What the hell happened?”

His voice. It barely cut through my total panic. His fingers were rough against my lips, and I forced myself to stop, took gasping breaths, blinked away the fear-induced tears that rolled down my cheeks, and looked back.

Roman stood just behind me, his chest like a prison and an escape.

I pushed his arm away and tried to get my looping brain under control.

“Manzi,” I said, breathless. “He shot her.”

Roman stared down at me, those ice-cold eyes calculating.

Weighing, measuring, judging.

“Did anyone else see?”

I shook my head. “We need to call the police.”

“Come on.” He grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the parking lot.

Toward Dia.

“No,” I said, resisting. “I don't want to go near her. Please, we have to call the police.”

But Roman's grip was iron and he didn't stop. I struggled, but that only made him turn back and stare into my eyes.

"If you don't follow me right now, I can't promise you'll survive tonight. Do you understand me? Do you have any clue what you just witnessed?"

"Who are you? Why are you doing this?"

A smile quirked at the corner of his handsome mouth. "I'm nobody. Now hurry."

He pulled me again, and this time, I followed.

I didn't know why, but I let him tug me along. We skirted around Dia's body—so much blood, all of it ruining that gorgeous dress, *why the hell do I care about her dress, she's dead*—and out into the parking lot.

Roman took out a phone and dialed a number. "Bring the car around. I'll meet you out front. Hurry." He shoved it back into his pocket as he dragged me toward the street.

"Wait, hold on." My heart was racing, but my mind started to work again. I felt dizzy, like I might be sick, but at least I could think straight. "We're calling the police, right? That was a murder back there."

"You just witnessed the start of a war, you unlucky girl. There are men back in that building who will gladly throw you into the bay to make sure what happened just now never leaves this place. If you stay, they'll make sure it happens."

I tugged back against him. "What are you talking about? Are you crazy?"

He let out a frustrated growl. We were a few feet from the sidewalk and the streetlights, and for some reason, I didn't want to go any farther with this man.

This terrifying monster. The sort of beautiful nightmare that was supposed to stay hidden beneath my bed or locked behind the closet of my childhood.

"Do you know who those men were back there? Do you remember the skinny guy with dark hair, looks like a schoolteacher? That's Giatno Liberto, don of the Liberto Mafia. You just watched his son murder the daughter of a Ramos

Cartel lieutenant. Can you begin to understand what that means?”

I opened my mouth to say something, but there were no words.

The worst part was, I did have some idea.

I had a shockingly good idea, in fact.

A black SUV screamed around the corner and pulled to a stop at the curb. The window rolled down and a young, handsome man with an intense jaw and a deep frown leaned toward us.

“You okay, Roman?”

“I’m fine.” Roman didn’t look back at the car, only stared at me with those killer eyes. He spoke softly, but with some urgency. “If you stay here, Giatno will make sure you can’t tell anyone your story. He’ll want to avoid a war with the Ramos Cartel at any cost. Do you understand how complicated everything’s going to be now?”

“Who the hell are you?” I drowned in that gaze. Roman was an avalanche, coming to bury me. I wanted to turn around and find Winter and tell her what had happened—she’d know what to do, she’d have some smart comeback. Hell, maybe she’d even kick these guys in the crotch for me.

But the mafia. I knew a little bit about the mafia.

My father, those men in my past.

The scar across my belly.

I knew what those monsters were capable of, and Roman didn’t seem like the type to lie to me.

“I told you, I’m nobody. Get in that car right now or you’re going to end up like poor Dia.”

I blinked at him, then stared at the SUV. “I don’t do cars.” Another round of panic threatened to overwhelm me.

I hadn’t been in a car in three years.

“What are you talking about?”

“I ride my bike. I don’t do cars. Please, I can ride my bike and meet you—”

He let out another annoyed breath, then bent forward and lifted me up over his shoulder. I let out a shout and tried to hit him in the back, but it was like pounding against a brick wall. He opened the door and shoved me inside like luggage, then climbed in.

I scrambled for the door, but the driver locked it.

“Please let me out,” I said, hyperventilating. “Please, please, please, please let me out. I don’t do cars. I don’t ride in cars.”

Roman only stared at me with a frown. “Drive, Erick.”

“Where to, boss?”

“My house in Avalon.”

The car pulled out, and I sank down in the seat, breathing so hard I thought I might rip a hole in my throat, barely keeping the overwhelming animal fear at bay.

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