



STREET KINGS
BOOK 3

DECEPTIVE
KNIGHT

USA Today Bestselling Author
SIENNA SNOW

DECEPTIVE KNIGHT

SIENNA SNOW



CONTENTS

Street Kings Book 3

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Books By Sienna

About the Author

STREET KINGS BOOK 3



DECEPTIVE KNIGHT

Sienna Snow

Copyright Page

Copyright © 2022 by Sienna Snow

Published by Sienna Snow

All rights reserved.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with. If you are reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then you should return it to the seller and purchase your own copy. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact at contact@siennasnow.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Cover Design: Steamy Designs

Editor: Jennifer Haymore

www.siennasnow.com

ISBN - eBook - 978-1-948756-26-6

ISBN - Print - 978-1-948756-27-3

LONDON, EIGHT MONTHS AGO

Reyhan

“IF YOU GET CAUGHT WITH THIS, YOU’RE ON YOUR OWN,” CORA Hass said in German to her former boss, Rex Busch, as he approached her near a corner shop on the outskirts of Brixton.

I’d followed her for over an hour without her suspecting or noticing. This screamed that the exhaustion from running had finally taken its toll.

Well, fortunately for me, I’d finally captured my prey.

Cora Hass, or should I say Lillian “Lilly” Lennox, would end the day knowing fate had placed her in the path of the very man she should hope she never met again.

Why she’d picked this area of London for the drop-off surprised me. There had to be a reason. No one without backup would dare venture into this neighborhood.

Hell, my team had eyes on me right now.

“I know the drill,” Rex responded, taking the gift box from her and opening the container. *“And how the business works.”*

She adjusted the hat over her ears and studied his appearance, and I couldn’t help but smirk at the disgust on her face. She should have warned him to dress a little more casually for the drop-off.

If they were in Berlin, he could have passed himself off like any other well-to-do man in his late thirties. But in this neighborhood, he stood out like a sore thumb.

Lilly, Lilly, Lilly. You should know better than to work with dumbasses.

Then again, said dumbass probably thought he was the cream of the crop when it came to the spy game.

Fucker had no idea we'd watched him for years and waited.

Or maybe that was her plan—she wanted people to notice him. Make him stand out. Let the locals see he was an intruder in their midst.

She, on the other hand, fit right in. She wore well-used, nondescript clothes, slightly on the dirty side, with her formerly blond hair covered in a large cap. And if I wasn't mistaken, a pair of black or brown contacts. In this area, being recognized was a bad thing.

"I want to make sure you understand that all consequences are on your shoulders."

"Understood." He studied the device wrapped in cotton, nodded, and smiled. *"Amazing how such an inconspicuous thing can cause so much chaos."*

"That's the story of my life."

"Sometimes, a little chaos is just what the doctor ordered."

This man was so full of shit. He hated Lilly on a good day. The sheer fact he was meeting with her today said he was beyond desperate.

And from the flattening of Lilly's lips, she was well aware of it but would go along with the charade until the payment hit her account.

Busch had a knack for underestimating her intelligence. One day, he'd regret it. Then again, he'd left the comfort and security of his office at the BND in Germany to meet with Lilly.

He had no idea how much trouble he'd just landed in by crossing international borders.

God, I couldn't wait to get him into an interrogation room.

The second this drop ended, my team waited to collect the asshole.

"Flattery will get you everywhere." She lifted her wrist and tapped the display on her watch. *"Invoice sent."*

He pulled out his phone and typed something. *"Payment transferred."*

A few seconds later, an alert appeared on her watch screen. She promptly typed in a code and inclined her head. *"Device activated. As always, it's nice doing business with you."*

As she shifted to pass him in the direction of the London Underground, he said, *"I could give you ten times more work if you returned to Berlin."*

"I don't need the work," she responded and then added with a tinge of bitterness, *"Besides, I can never go back. You made sure of this. Did you forget I have a target on my head? Or that you tried to kill me?"*

"What if I said I have the means to clear your record as a way to apologize?"

"The last thing I would do is believe a word you have to say, Rex Busch."

"You need to listen to my full offer."

She cocked her head to the side, giving him a look of such disdain that Busch would have no doubt about her feelings toward him. *"I don't need to do anything."*

"Why did you come today?"

"Because I love to see desperation on a man's face. It soothes the senses. I may need to bottle it."

Busch grabbed her arm in what looked to be a painful hold. *"You're a bitch, Cora Hass."*

“Yes, I am. But you’re the one who contacted me through back channels that could get you in a lot of trouble, handed me money from a fund that shouldn’t exist, and then flew to another country to procure my product. I’m the bitch you thought was disposable and now need in order to keep your illegal world of information trade going.”

Oh, Lilly, you do know how to hit a man in the balls, especially Rex Busch. His weakness was his ego. The last thing he wanted was a reminder that he was as much a criminal as she was.

Actually, even more so.

Was Lilly even aware her former boss was also a sex trafficker? I highly doubted it. Men like him kept those kinds of things hidden away, especially from women like her.

One of the few redeeming qualities of Lilly Lennox was her loathing for those who preyed on the innocent. Her alias went to great lengths to expose anyone involved in the world of trafficking.

First, I’d deal with Busch, then I’d handle Lilly.

Lilly’s crimes were on a different level. A personal level. She’d nearly cost me my life.

But I’d wait a little longer.

“It isn’t as if you aren’t making a huge profit with this deal,” Busch said. *“Rumor has it you freelance for some dangerous individuals when the money dries up.”*

“My money never dries up, especially when there are people like you constantly needing assistance from criminals like me.” She batted her lashes for a second, then glanced down at the hand holding her arm before she lifted a brow. *“I’d let go if I were you. You may need that body part in the future.”*

Lilly gave the appearance of an elegant ballerina with her long legs and lithe frame, but I’d seen her throw men five times her size to the ground without missing a beat.

“I need you back.”

She jerked her arm. *“I was an unnecessary waste of space, and no one cared what happened to me. Isn't that what you said when everything went down? No, wait, you said the agency would believe any story you gave them about me, so my only choice was to do as you told me. Or was it, 'death will be the easiest thing you'll experience from now on'?”*

Now that was something new.

I wouldn't change my plans for either of them, but information was the key to this whole endeavor.

“You made a rookie mistake, and it had consequences. But don't let it dictate your future. We worked well together up until you lost focus.”

I had a feeling I knew what the rookie mistake was.

Me.

“My future is very comfortable, especially now that I'm millions richer.”

“I could put your name in the right ears, and the CIA will learn the location of the woman who seduced and then shot one of their agents. Especially since multiple agencies are still looking for the mousy tech nerd no one realized was a snake.”

And... I was right.

Rage flashed across her face before she schooled it away. That was interesting. Maybe I'd meant more to her than I believed.

“Is that a threat?”

“Even if it was, I doubt you give a shit. Let's say it is a friendly warning.”

“First of all, you don't know my location. Do you actually think I live in this neighborhood? Once we finish here, don't expect to see me again. And second, we need to fix your memory. You are the reason behind all the shit. You targeted said agent because you found it hard to believe someone like him could want anything more than a casual fuck with nerdy me. You thought putting the hit on him would move the CIA's focus from you to me.”

Everything inside me froze. So, Busch had ordered it. Then why the fuck had she walked into his trap?

No matter, she'd still pulled the trigger that had left me bleeding.

"I told you not to get involved with any of the Americans. You lost focus, and I had to get your attention."

"What I did on my private time was none of your business."

"If you'd fucked him and left it at that, I wouldn't have cared. You had to learn a lesson. There are no white picket fences for people like you. Do the job or pay the consequences."

"If I go down, so do you. Don't fuck with me."

"You don't scare me, little girl."

"I should. Remember, I'm the one with the leverage."

"What leverage?"

"Let's say you stole a set of microchips from me and thought I didn't notice. Did things not work out the way you planned when you used the software?" A calculated grin touched her lips, then she tsked and shook her head. *"In addition to fucking up your system, I watched everything you did from that point on. Trafficking, Rex. Really? You know better. That's a big no-no, even for us bad guys."*

So, she knew about his extracurricular activities. This was about to get interesting.

Rex's complexion grew red, and he jerked Lilly toward him, bringing her face to his.

"Who are you?" he asked through gritted teeth.

She smiled, holding his gaze. *"Cora Hass. A woman on the most wanted list for the CIA, Interpol, and the BND because of you. And a legend on the Dark Web. I'm kind of a badass."*

At that moment, a black SUV pulled up to the curb, and a group of men and women stepped out. They wore clothes

similar to the people in the neighborhood but moved like specially trained agents.

Who the fuck were they?

I pulled out my phone and typed in a code to my team, telling them to intercept, if possible.

Within seconds, I received a response saying they couldn't intervene without causing a scene.

She couldn't have fucked up the same operation twice for me.

I clenched my teeth and then exhaled, trying to calm my temper.

Dammit, Cora. *Lilly*. Fuck.

"Time to let me go, Rex. I have a plane to catch and a beach waiting for me."

Lilly nodded to one of the men in the group, and they pulled Busch off her by grasping his neck.

"You set me up. You got me out of Germany for this," Busch accused.

Lilly leaned toward him. *"Just like you set me up. Just like you forced me to shoot an innocent man to save your ass. Never assume when it comes to revenge women aren't as ruthless as men. Many times, we're worse. You've fucked me over in so many ways that even after a thousand lifetimes, I wouldn't forgive you. This is only the tip of the iceberg of what I want to do to you. Good luck with your interrogation. You'll need it."*

With those words, she jogged toward the Tube station and disappeared down the steps. By the time I returned my attention to Rex, the group already had him and were pulling into traffic.

Who the hell was that?

I sent a signal to my team to follow the vehicle carrying Busch and moved from my position. I took a different set of

stairs into the subway and arrived at the landing in time to see Lilly pause as if to catch a breath.

Her lips trembled, and she covered her eyes with her palms.

It must be exhausting to always be on the run, to never feel safe, to know your past was on a constant hunt for you.

She thought she could start fresh somewhere else, pretend her sins were forgotten.

Not happening.

I knew her real name. I knew her history. I knew every fucking thing about her.

I had a plan for her, and she would follow through, whether she liked it or not.

I was her past, her present, and her motherfucking future.

Yeah, I sounded like a bitter asshole. Maybe I was.

With her, I'd thought the hardened street rat from a poverty-stricken neighborhood in New York City had found his soulmate.

Idiot.

After calming herself, she adjusted her posture and moved through the turnstiles and hallways until she reached the correct platform. She stepped onto her train, moved to the back, and took a seat that would allow her a view of everyone around her.

Too bad, I'd been at this game longer and knew how to remain in the shadows. My twelve years to her one-off jobs for the BND made her a novice at best.

But then again, the novice had done a number on me.

I should have known from the beginning she was trouble. She'd had this underlying vulnerability that had drawn me. It was something she hid under layers of a hard, no-nonsense business exterior. Especially her stormy gray eyes that told a haunting story of things seen and done.

All of us in the game found ourselves experiencing things we'd rather forget. Hell, the shit I'd seen on the dirty streets of New York as a kid could have made a grown man vomit.

Pushing down the memories, I studied her.

No one would have guessed she was the art-loving, free-thinking only daughter of Joseph Lennox, a German syndicate boss with a reach very few people could acquire. No one would know she could tell a man she loved him in one breath and shoot him with the next.

Just as the train pulled to a stop and Lilly rose to leave, I received a message saying my team had lost track of the van carrying Busch.

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

This woman could fuck me over without even trying.

Lilly rubbed her hands together to warm her fingers and then stuffed them into her pockets as she exited the Tube and crossed the street.

Staying a good distance behind her, I watched her take a side road into a row of exclusive townhouses. At this point, it was going to get complicated.

Lilly couldn't pick a regular neighborhood in London. Her choice was an affluent street with government-style security in Richmond.

But lucky for me, I had the skills to navigate around situations like these. Fifteen minutes later, I made my way through the skylight of Lilly's bedroom.

Footsteps echoed along the wooden stairs a few seconds before Lilly appeared with a phone to her ear.

"Don't I get a day or two?" Lilly asked the caller as she pulled off her hat, revealing long brown hair, and shrugged off her jacket.

She sighed in resignation. "Fine, I'll meet you at the den. Let me shower. I have to wash the stench of that asshole from my skin."

After hanging up, she threw the cell on her bed and sat on the end. She closed her eyes and wiped her hands down her face, then plucked her contacts out of her eyes and tossed them in a nearby wastebasket. Next, she kicked off her shoes and pulled her shirt over her head.

She stretched as she rose from the bed but stopped at the threshold of the bathroom, shifting her head slightly to the left.

I couldn't help but smile.

That's right, Lilly. You feel it, don't you?

Before I could move out of the shadows of the curtains, Lilly spun around, pulled the gun at her waist, and pointed it at me.

“Hello, love. I guess you weren't expecting a visit from me.”

LILLY

MY PULSE HAMMERED INTO MY EARS AS I STARED INTO THE golden eyes of the man who haunted every one of my thoughts.

All I wanted to do was reach out and touch his gorgeous face.

He was healthy and breathing.

The last time I was this close to him, I'd left him bleeding in an alley.

Oh God, what was he doing here? He couldn't be anywhere near me.

It wasn't safe.

Everything I'd lost, everything I'd sacrificed would be for nothing.

Stay calm, Lilly. Find out what he wants and get him out of here before anyone notices.

“No answer for the man you claimed to love?”

My hands shook on the gun for a split second, and I had no doubt he'd seen the tremor.

“How did you find me?”

He shifted to come toward me, and without hesitation, I positioned my pistol higher and braced my legs apart,

preparing for whatever he planned.

“Stay right there.”

“Why?” He lifted his shirt, revealing his naked waist and the scars left from the bullet wounds.

My gut clenched, and I couldn't help but swallow. I couldn't forget that shooting Rey had saved his life.

He glanced down, noticing where my eyes lingered.

“Does it hurt you to see it? Or do you wish you had finished the job?”

He would never believe me, even if he knew the truth. It had killed a part of my soul to pull the trigger.

He'd been the only bit of happiness I'd had in the three years I'd spent so deep undercover that I'd nearly forgotten my real name. Where I'd had to become the very villain I was fighting against.

That stolen time together meant more to me than he would ever know. And it had cost me. It would keep costing me, especially if Rey stayed here.

Though the enemies that wanted me now weren't the ones I'd gone undercover to defeat, but the ones I'd planned to take down long before this man had entered my life.

Solon. European Solon, to be exact.

The very organization I'd joined as an open-hearted eighteen-year-old thinking they were the good guys, only to discover years too late that greed and corruption had infiltrated nearly every aspect of it.

I pushed down my riot of emotions and ordered, “Answer the damn question. How did you find me?”

“Does it matter? The fact is that I found you.”

“What do you want from me?”

A calculated grin touched his lips, and he cocked his head to the side.

His gaze drifted up and down my body before it settled back on my face. “That’s a loaded question. We can start with answers. Then we’ll move on to penance.”

“Answers to what?”

“Question one, do you know who I am?”

Yeah, I knew who he was but learned the truth after everything had fallen apart, and I’d had to pick up the pieces.

“Shay Decker.” I kept the gun trained on him and responded using his alias instead of his real name.

From the moment I’d met the cocky American CIA agent with amber eyes, I’d known that his name definitely was not Shay Decker. It was in the way he introduced himself that gave it away.

It was my job to read people—I’d trained to do it from the age of eighteen. He was so sure of himself that it rubbed me the wrong way. Sometimes I wondered if he would have even noticed me if I hadn’t told him to his face that he needed to tone down the cocky if he wanted people to believe his cover. But then again, “Shay” had caught me on a night when Rex had pissed me off, and I’d had no filter left in my body.

“I’m not talking about the one the agency gave me.” He glared at me.

I kept quiet.

Discovering his real name hadn’t been easy, but I’d managed it. It took breaking into encrypted CIA records to learn his true identity.

Reyhan King.

I’d not only had an affair with a CIA agent, Rey just happened to be one of the notorious King brothers. A group of men who brokered between the unsavory elements of the world and polite society.

I sure knew how to pick them.

“This is only going to work if you cooperate.”

Instead of answering, I asked my own question. “Are you mad that I know your real name? Or that you discovered my real name isn’t Cora?”

“Did you know about me when we were fucking?”

He made it sound so cold, as if it hadn’t meant anything. Maybe the aftermath had killed whatever he’d felt for me. Whereas, the memories of the love we’d shared were all I’d had to hold me together for the last year.

I kept my face as emotionless as his. “No. I learned later.”

“At least there is that.” He took a step toward me, and I braced for whatever he planned.

I’d watched him train enough times to know unpredictability was his greatest strength in a fight.

“Does it scare you to learn that, in addition to your long list of enemies, you added the Kings to it?”

The Kings were the least of my issues. Their brand of danger was nothing compared to what I’d faced for the last year.

“Does it look like I’m scared? I’m the one with the gun.”

His eyes darkened in the way they’d done right before an attack when we sparred.

My heartbeat accelerated, drumming into my ears.

“You should be scared. I know all of your secrets.”

“What secrets have you discovered of mine besides where I live?”

“How about that you are Joseph Lennox’s errant daughter, Lillian. The one who disappeared a little over six years ago after her boyfriend tried to murder her best friend and nearly destroyed three families in the process.”

He moved toward me, but I held my ground.

“Or that the only contact you’ve had with Papa Joseph and your worried mother and brothers is gifts that appear at their doorsteps on their birthdays and Christmas.”

How the fuck could he know this? I'd worked so hard to keep my distance.

"Is that it?"

"The one big thing I learned about you is that you like to run from your past, pretend nothing happened, that all is forgotten." He stalked toward me until the barrel grazed his shirt. "Fate says otherwise, Lilly. I'm not letting you run anymore."

"You don't believe in fate, remember?"

He clenched his jaw. "Oh, I remember. Maybe I should have listened to that fortune-teller when she gave me that crazy reading about being fated to love two women who were one, in a single lifetime. Then maybe it would have saved me from eating two bullets."

"What do you want?"

"As I said, many things." He braced his hands on the wall, caging my head, and pressed his body against mine, wedging the gun between us. "Maybe I want to use you, or fuck you, or how about kill you?"

"Step back, or I'll shoot you." I shoved the gun into his stomach, but he wouldn't budge.

"Go ahead." He pushed closer to me. "I lived through it once. I can do it again. But we both know if you planned to shoot me, it would have already happened."

I held his gaze. "Just like we know you aren't here to kill me. Kings only kill as a last resort. You draw out your punishments."

"I see you did your research." He ran his thumb over my collarbone, and goosebumps prickled my skin.

"I always do my research."

"Then tell me, what is the punishment for two bullets, a damaged career, and finding out I was fucking a ghost? Wait, we need to add Busch to the list now. He was our target."

The hell he was. He had been my fucking target for three fucking years. If the CIA wanted to look for him, they could be my guest. They'd never find him. Hopefully, Solon had him locked at the base of a volcano somewhere by now.

“You're the one with the grievances. You tell me.”

“I'm a King brother. I work in favors. At a time of my choosing, I will call them in.”

“I owe you multiple favors?” I asked, unable to look away from his hypnotizing golden irises.

“Multiple infractions.”

“And what, exactly, will I be doing?”

He brought his mouth a breath away from mine. “Any fucking thing I tell you to.”

His hand slid to my throat, and I reflexively grabbed it with my left. That's when his focus shifted to the ink circling my ring finger, and my heart clenched.

“Why is that still there?” His fingers tightened on my throat. “Why would you keep a symbol of something that was a fucking lie?”

I couldn't tell him it was the only piece of him I had left, so instead, I said, “What I do with my body is none of your business.”

“That's where you're wrong. I control your future. I know your secrets. You want to keep Cora Hass safe from the world? Then you will do everything I tell you.”

I closed my eyes for a brief moment. “And if I tell you to fuck off?”

“Did you know your father is an associate of ours? We've worked in favors for years. You wouldn't want to ruin that relationship, would you? Haven't you caused them enough problems?”

“You bastard.” I clenched my jaw, barely able to hide the tears burning the backs of my eyes.

I was so fucking exhausted. Couldn't I just catch one damn break?

I shoved his shoulder hard enough to force him back, but just as fast, he had both of my hands pinned above my head and the gun tossed to the ground.

"You won't win this one, Lilly. Remember, I sparred with you. I know how you move."

"You knew Cora. You don't know me." I dropped my head back against the wall as a wave of utter defeat hit me.

"That's right, Cora Hass made a promise of forever. It meant something to me."

Cora Hass was a fucking idiot.

She should have stayed in her lonely little world, kept her focus on the long game, and ignored the arrogant asshole who wouldn't stop asking her out and made her want things she knew she couldn't have.

"So, it's blackmail."

"Call it what you like. But, for the foreseeable future, you are the source for the tech-related equipment I require. You fuck me over, and I'll fuck you over."

"I do this, and all is forgiven."

"Never. It just means you're paying your penance."

I bit my lip, wanting so desperately to tell him to go to hell.

He smiled as if he knew what I was thinking and then used his thumb to pull my lip from my teeth. "Think of the added peace you're going to give Papa Joseph when he learns you've resurfaced under the watchful eye of the King brothers."

"What do you mean, resurfaced?"

"You're moving to New York, Lilly Lennox. How else am I going to keep an eye on you? You have two months to figure out how to get there. Make sure you stay alive in the meantime."

“You want me to hate you. Is that it?”

The words I spoke were a lie. I could never hate him. Might as well add it to the hundreds I’d told him and myself.

He held my gaze. “I don’t really give a shit how you feel.”

Wasn’t that the truth?

“If you hate me so much, then why do you want me in your city?”

“Because I need to make sure you don’t run away. Besides, It’s not as if I’m going to see you day in and day out. New York is a big city. I’m sure you can find ways to occupy your time.”

Something in the energy between us shifted, and every nerve in my body fired to life.

Fuck, this was not the time for this.

The love he’d felt for me had disappeared, but the livewire attraction still burned hot as ever.

“I’m only required to provide tech services. Is this correct?”

His golden irises dilated as his hard cock pressed into my stomach. “Correct.”

My mouth watered, desperate for a taste of him.

I needed to keep my head on straight, but all I wanted was to feel that mouth on mine.

As if reading my thoughts, his breaths grew unsteady, and he licked his lips. Slowly, he released my wrists, trailing his fingers down my arms. One hand gripped my waist as the other continued down the column of my neck, between my breasts, and along the side of my body to my thigh, grasping it in a firm hold before pulling me up against him.

“We can’t do this,” I whispered, clutching his shirt. “It’s wrong. You’re blackmailing me.”

“Just because I plan to keep you on a leash doesn’t mean I don’t want to fuck you. The one place I know you weren’t

lying was when my cock was deep in your cunt.”

His words caused a spasm to shoot through my core.

“Tell me, do you ever think about the way it was between us?” He rubbed his length up and down the seam of my jeans, making me whimper. “Do you remember how intense it was, how raw, how feral?”

I would never forget the hours we’d spent lost in each other. It was something I should never have let happen in the first place.

“Yes,” I murmured and then noticed the discarded gun.

My temper flared, and I shoved him back. “I won’t let you mess with my head. I need to have something left when this is over.”

“Did you ever think about the consequences for me?” he bit out, gripping the nape of his neck. “I would have given you everything I had. I fucking loved you more than anything on earth. And it was all a goddammed lie.”

I swallowed, resisting the urge to defend myself.

I was the enemy. I had lied. And I would continue to lie. I could never tell him the truth. I’d accepted my role as the villain of this story.

“From this moment on, your life belongs to me. Your family’s future belongs to me. I’ll decide when I need you. Don’t even think about running. I’ll find you. I’m glad I know what you are now.”

“What am I?”

“A liar, a murderer, a thief. Should I continue?”

“You are everything I am.”

“But it’s not illegal when I do it.” He smirked, moving toward my stairs. “I’ll see you around, Ms. Lennox. And get rid of the ink before you get to New York—it belongs to a woman who never existed.”

“You could make me hate you.”

“Imagine how I already feel about you.” He disappeared down the stairs.

I released a deep breath and walked to my windows. Rey appeared, crossing the street in the direction of the park at the end of the row of houses.

Tears spilled down my cheeks as I braced my arms against the glass.

A few minutes later, I heard my front door open, followed by footsteps.

A tissue appeared in front of me.

Taking it, I tilted my head to the side. “I despise you for doing this. I know it was you. You gave him my information. How could you? I trusted you. You were one of the only people I trusted.”

One of Solon’s North American directors and a close friend of mine, Devani Patel, leaned against the window next to me.

“I had to get you transferred under my umbrella without it looking as if I stole a prized asset from the European Directors Council.”

Yep, that’s what I was, a fucking asset.

Once upon a time, the Council planned to welcome me into their ranks—until I wouldn’t toe their line.

Now I was property, with skills so specialized, very few people could duplicate them. A piece of equipment they’d deemed useless without inspection but realized later had value and had forced out of hiding by threatening the lives of everyone she loved.

“Van, was this really the way to do it?”

“If it looks like the Kings found you and want their pound of flesh, then the Council won’t question your move to the States.”

“It’s never that simple.”

“It’s not as if they don’t know that Rey is your weakness and that in reverse, the opposite is true. He hates your guts.”

I held in a wince, knowing the truth of her words.

“Just don’t do two things once you get to New York.”

“What’s that?”

“Number one, don’t act too happy about the move, and number two, don’t fuck Rey King in a public place.”

“Fat chance of the latter happening. Are we done?” I asked, turning toward my bathroom. “I don’t have the energy for anything else. I’m emotionally drained.”

“I’m going to make it up to you.”

“Unless I’m spending six months back on a beach doing nothing but sleeping, you can’t make it up to me.”

“As a matter of fact, I’m sending you to a private island in Greece to recover. And I know for a fact, it has an absolutely amazing beach.”

I narrowed my gaze. “What are you up to?”

“What makes you think I’m up to anything?”

“You move us around like chess pieces on this board of yours. You’re the most manipulative bitch I know.”

A calculated smile tugged at her lips. “I always have plans in the works.”

“Meaning?”

“Since Rey wants you in New York, how would you like to return to the art world that you loved so much and become an appraiser again?”

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. “Is that even possible? I haven’t worked in the field in over six years.”

“It is. I have two names I’m sure you’re familiar with from your research. They are in the art world and understand tech jobs. In fact, they’re hackers of sorts and are looking for assistance on projects. Your skills are exactly what they need.

Therefore, we can keep your association with me in a similar capacity to theirs, one-off cyber and art jobs.”

“Just give me the names.” I eyed her suspiciously, knowing I wasn’t going to like what she was about to say.

“Danika Dayal and Jayna King.”

Motherfucker.

I clenched my teeth. “I really hate you sometimes. Can you make my life any more complicated?”

“Of course, but I can wait until you get to New York.”

NEW YORK, PRESENT DAY

Reyhan

“WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT THE CORA HASS SITUATION,” MY eldest brother, Nik, said as he leaned back in his leather armchair.

Nik had decided to call a last-minute King brothers meeting to discuss some important information before we all gathered at the opening of a new exhibit at the gallery owned by my sister-in-law, Danika.

If I’d known our meeting would veer to this shit, I’d have skipped and headed straight to the show. I’d had six fucking months of dealing with the Cora Hass situation.

“Such as?” I picked up my tumbler of scotch, taking a deep swallow of the amber liquid.

Six months ago, I’d come back from an assignment to see a very familiar face staring into some type of machine as she laughed and chatted with Danika and Nik.

What the ever-loving fuck?

How the hell had Danika hired Lilly Lennox right under my nose?

When I’d told her to figure out a way to get to New York, this was the last way I expected it to happen.

I should have remembered Nik's favorite phrase to repeat to all of us, "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned."

"We can keep looking, but the trail is dead. The last trace of her is an encrypted code Dani discovered from a few months back linked to a Rex Busch. She's a ghost. If Dani can't find her, nobody can."

My brother Kir's assessment of Danika's skills wasn't an underestimation.

Danika was the Dark Web hacker known in the underground as the Little Rabbit, something our family went to great lengths to keep the world at large from knowing.

Danika could find information that would boggle the mind. At times, I envied her. I'd trained years to develop the skills that came naturally to her.

The fact Lilly had kept her identity hidden from Danika said she was on par or even better than Danika when it came to the hacker side of life.

"She'll turn up sooner or later. I'm fine with letting it drop for now. She knows that I'm always going to be a thorn in her side."

Oh, she was stuck with me. I'd made sure of it. The woman haunted my every waking thought, so I might as well do the same thing to her. Which reminded me, I had a new project for her.

Yeah, I was an asshole, but then again, I hadn't been one until her.

Who was I kidding? I was always an asshole.

"You're letting it go, just like that?" Nik studied me. "After all the man-hours we've spent to find her. I don't buy it. She fucked you over."

"Literally," Sam, my other brother, added. "How does someone go dark to this level without help?"

She had accomplices. There was no doubt. Someone helped her be in the right place at the right time to meet Jayna, to help her establish a friendship with Jayna while she grieved

for a husband she believed was dead, and to get Jayna to set up a job for her in New York.

Over the last few months, I'd watched every move Lilly had made, but the woman was beyond careful. According to Jayna, they'd met while Lilly was recovering from a bad relationship that forced her to leave her family.

Fucking bullshit.

That happened over six years ago.

I'd let her keep her lie going, as long as she did nothing to hurt the people I loved.

If she so much as made Jayna or Danika cry, it was game over.

Kir's eyes narrowed as he rubbed the scar that ran along the side of his face, a result of a car explosion three years ago caused by his father-in-law. He always touched it when he was thinking something through. Of all my brothers, he was the one who would know if you were hiding anything.

But then again, it was his job. He was the enforcer of our little empire. He found the liars and cheats in our business and made sure they paid up.

Not so long ago, Kir had paid his own penance to his wife for letting her believe he'd died. If he was willing to crawl through hell to make up for his wrongs, he wouldn't expect anything less from someone who'd shot me.

"You know something." Kir leaned forward on the sofa where he sat, holding my gaze. "Spill it."

"Let's say I decided to handle it a different way."

"Do you have her locked away in one of your agency dungeons?" Nik asked.

Sam shook his head and then said, "The last thing the asshole would do is turn her over to the Feds. They'd put her in some facility, she'd cop some plea, and all would be forgiven."

“No, she isn’t locked away. She’s very much free. She’s living her life and knows I’m watching.”

“You’re going to fuck with her head before you go in for the kill.” Nik nodded as if in approval.

“You do realize you’re talking about an actual person, don’t you?” Danika asked as she came out of a hallway and sat on the arm of Nik’s chair. “What if there’s more to the story?”

“What more do we need to know?” Nik countered, taking Danika’s hand, kissing it, and then lacing his fingers with hers. “She wasn’t what she let the world believe. She played everyone around her, and when it was time to bail, she shot Rey and left him to die.”

“Look, I’ve said this before, and I’m going to say this again.” Danika shifted her attention to me. “The spots where she shot you were at points that look fatal but aren’t. It was premeditated. She wouldn’t have missed a killing shot, Rey. There’s more to the story.”

Could Dani suspect Lilly and Cora were the same person and not say it to us? They were pretty tight friends. And they had a working relationship in both aspects of Danika’s businesses—the art and the hacker side.

Lilly had manipulated me into loving her. She could fuck with Dani’s head too.

I narrowed my gaze. “What do you know that I don’t?”

“Nothing more than I’ve shared. I’ve used every back door I could think of to access information. It’s all a dead end. I just keep getting this feeling there’s something we’re missing.”

The elevator opened in the foyer of Nik and Dani’s penthouse, and Lilly stepped out. In an instant, the energy in the room changed, and I couldn’t help but clench my teeth as every nerve in my body reacted.

It was as if she’d sensed we were talking about her, and she had to show up.

Why the hell was I so drawn to her? Why the hell was she so damn beautiful?

Instead of the messy bun she wore most of the time in Danika's gallery while appraising art, tonight, her long brown hair was styled loose. The sleeveless navy gown she wore hugged every damn curve on her lean body, and the slit on the side made her legs look a mile long.

Legs I remembered wrapped around me as I fucked her.

God, despite all the shit she'd done to me, the need for her lay under everything.

Lilly turned, setting her clutch on a side table to reveal her completely exposed back down to the upper swell of her ass with only a few strings of beads lacing across.

What the fuck?

It had to be one of Jayna's fashion choices. No other person I knew picked the most scandalous clothes on the runway to wear to any black-tie event.

Lilly moved into the living room, where we all sat.

Her stormy gray eyes held mine for a second, and if I wasn't mistaken, heated with a familiar lust before she noticed my scowl and glared at me. "What's your problem now?"

"Is that a gown or dental floss?"

"Dental floss—it was all the rage during fashion week. Should I get Jayna to pick something out for you next time?"

"Maybe you should get her to pick out something more age-appropriate."

A crease formed between her brows. "You mean more revealing? I'll only be this young once."

"Okay, children. That's enough," Danika interrupted before I could respond. "Let's go, Lilly. We need to get to the gallery. Let me grab my purse."

Danika rushed down the hallway to her and Nik's bedroom.

Just as Lilly shifted to move past me, I stood and whispered, "Planning to fuck someone in that dress tonight?"

The second I asked the question, a flush crept over her skin. “Why do you care, even if I was? You aren’t part of the equation.”

“I’m part of everything you do. I’m your keeper, remember?”

“When it comes to projects, yes. Otherwise, you have no say.” Fire sparked in her gray eyes as she lifted her chin. “Why don’t you worry about all of the women who run in and out of your bedroom and leave the men in mine to me?”

I faced her and leaned in, ignoring the curious looks from my brothers. “What do you know about my bedroom when you’re not in it?”

God. This charge was the last thing I wanted to feel right now.

“I don’t need to be in it to know the truth. You do have sisters-in-law who share plenty of information on you.”

Sometimes I wished I could muzzle Danika and Jayna. Most of the time, the women I met were contacts or other people from the agency.

“You actually think I slept with them? I don’t fuck every woman I know. Is it so hard to believe they’re my friends?”

“Yes.” Something flashed like pain in her eyes. “Besides, why do you care what a liar, thief, and murderer believes?”

“I ask myself that every fucking day.” I noticed Danika move behind Lilly, ready to drag her away from our conversation.

“Then, while you ponder your life choices, I’ll take your suggestion and put it into action.”

I frowned. “What, exactly, are you putting into action?”

“I plan to fuck someone wearing this tonight.” She gestured to herself, turned, and then stalked to the elevator.

It took all my will not to go after her, drag her into the nearest room, and make it clear no one touched her but me.

Shit. I was losing my mind.

Once the elevator closed with Danika and Lilly inside, Nik said, “Want to tell us what the hell that was about?”

“Nothing new. Lilly and I just don’t see eye to eye.” I walked over to the bar in the far corner of the living room, refilled my drink, and shot it down.

“Whatever you were talking about was more than not seeing eye to eye.” Sam set his arm on the back of the sofa. “Just fuck and put the rest of us out of our misery. It’s like watching two feral cats circle each other.”

“You’re an asshole. Why don’t you worry about your diamond princess and stay out of my business?”

Sam had an on-again, off-again thing with socialite, diamond heiress, and my local Solon contact, Devani Patel. She was the first woman ever to make my ice-in-his-veins brother feel something beyond the thrill of closing the next deal.

And what pissed him off more than anything was that Devani ran in the social circle of his biological father, Ashok Shah. The man who’d abandoned Sam’s mother for his ex-wife, Jayna’s mother, and the money that came with marrying her.

“It’s over. She made her choice.” Sam’s voice was void of emotion, which was his standard way of hiding pain.

He’d done this shit since we were dumbass eight-year-olds following Nik and Kir around in our shit neighborhood. He’d learned to mask the hurt rather than let anyone know his weaknesses.

Too bad I’d never picked up the skill. Then maybe I could compartmentalize this rage I felt at Lilly’s betrayal and be done with it. Let her go and get on with my life.

“Well, fuck.”

Sam took a long swig of his drink. “Yeah, so now back to your issues with our resident mob princess. Remember what Arin said—you’re obligated to fulfill the promise your father failed to clear with Lennox. Kings never break their word.”

“I know what I owe Lennox.”

If it wasn't for Joseph Lennox and his connections, my birth father, Christopher Klum, would have died in a territory war that wiped out all of his family. Instead, he'd escaped to the United States on a cargo ship with a new identity and enough money to start a new life.

Their agreement was that once Lennox took over his own territory, my father would return to work for him. Something that never happened because he'd met a computer science student from India named Hema.

When Arin King adopted me, he'd used his resources to find out everything and anything about my background, which included the agreement with Lennox. In our world, obligations from the father are carried over to the son.

In my case, it meant Lennox wanted occasional favors from King resources to further his interests.

His most recent favor was the very reason I'd discovered Cora Hass's true identity. Lennox had sent me a picture and told me to find his daughter and keep her safe.

The damned fate I'd never believed in now said the very woman who'd destroyed my heart and tried to kill me was the one I was obligated to protect.

“Lilly's proven that she's not the pampered socialite we expected.” Sam's bias toward Lilly annoyed the fuck out of me.

No, she was a chameleon who could blend into any world she entered.

“Lennox worries too much about her. She isn't as weak as he believes.”

“He never believed she was weak, and you know it,” Nik stated as if I was an idiot. “Something forced her to disappear, and it sure as hell wasn't the scandal with her ex. If she'd stayed, her father had the power to protect her. Besides, if it wasn't for her, Lennox wouldn't have found half of the assholes who betrayed him.”

Yeah, she helped eviscerate most of them, literally.

Lilly's ex, Kane, had worked with a Russian conglomerate trying to worm their way into Germany, and by hooking up with her, he'd used her to gather information on her father and his allies. After Kane's capture, Lilly had hacked every possible person connected to him and exposed all the illicit activities against her father and his allies, letting her family handle the punishment. Then she'd walked away from the life she'd known without a backward glance.

Staying would have cemented her as a member of her father's organization, not the Lennox princess.

"I'm not her babysitter, Nik. She's a grown fucking woman."

"Whatever made her run in the first place may still be after her. Lennox wants us to watch her back."

"Then give her a personal detail." I glared at Kir.

"We offered. She said no."

"How is that my problem? Have some of our guys shadow her then."

"That didn't work, either. She can slip our best in a matter of minutes, sometimes less."

I could almost see the faces of our guys when they realized they'd lost her.

Kir smirked. "You like to tell her you're her keeper. Now you can actually make good on it."

"Asshole."

"Also, while you're at it"—Sam looked at me—"find out how she hid for years without a trace of her existence. Even Dani couldn't find a thing on her before she came to interview. That's some skills we need to monopolize on. It's impressive as hell."

I wanted to say "*because she was living as another fucking woman*" but kept it inside.

Before I could come back with a smartass response, Nik spoke. “Just like my wife, Lilly is a chameleon. If she doesn’t want to be found, she isn’t going to be found. Frankly, I don’t care what she was doing. We have a job to do for Lennox, and we will do it.”

I felt the order as if it was one given to me from the leader of our old gang when I was fourteen and Nik was sixteen in our shit neighborhood.

“Would it make a difference if I told you that I’m about to start another case?”

“Wait a second. You said you were going to be in New York for a while.” Kir narrowed his gaze. “What happened to the deal you negotiated?”

“That’s the case.”

Nik lifted his tumbler to his lips and then asked, “Since when do you do work stateside? Isn’t that out of jurisdiction?”

The CIA only worked on international cases, leaving domestic situations to the FBI. In this instance, they were more than happy to let us handle it. Technically, the CIA wasn’t involved either, but just providing logistics and manpower through King Holdings connections.

“Let’s say this is a joint operation, and in return, we will clear a debt and earn a favor.”

“Impressive.” Nik lifted a brow.

“Now, does that get me out of watching the princess?”

“Nope.”

LILLY

“ASSHOLE,” I MUTTERED TO MYSELF FOR THE FOURTH TIME IN the last hour.

The drop-off was in less than forty minutes, and the last thing I needed on my mind was Reyhan King. Jerk, with his fucking comments about my damn dress, as if he had any say in anything I wore.

Age-appropriate, my ass.

That saying about a thin line between love and hate must have had him in mind. He was teetering toward hate at the moment.

And the only reason he hadn't fallen over the edge was because I was a perpetual fucking idiot who couldn't let go of the damn past.

I looked back through my magnifying goggles and growled.

Dammit.

My focus was shit, and I had less than twenty minutes to finish the microchip for the drop tonight.

The buyer, Noah Carter, was another of my few trusted inner circles and needed a tailored job for his latest assignment. I'd introduced him to Danika as a friend who'd requested her assistance in tracking disappearing funds

between his many international subsidiaries. All the while, I'd left my personal relationship with Noah vague, something I'd gotten good at doing.

There were parts of my life I'd never be able to share, my role in Solon being a big one.

It was Noah, Devani, and two other Solon agents who'd helped me go dark after I was "disciplined" for my initial failure to capture Rex Busch.

Solon reported to no government entity, allowing them to operate outside the parameters of what many would consider legal or illegal. This freedom to do what they wanted also allowed them to dispose of their agents when they broke their golden rule: Never compromise the end goal—the very thing I'd done when I'd fallen in love with Rey and lost their target, Rex Busch, and any hope of stopping the human trafficking network he worked for.

Solon's headquarters resided in Geneva, Switzerland, but in actuality, the management was divided into distinct ruling bodies by continents.

I fell under the group that ruled Europe known as the European Directors Council, a collective of nine men and women notorious for their ruthless tactics when it came to discipline.

I'd barely managed to escape Rex Busch's plans for me following Rey's shooting when my verdict came in. The European Directors Council never even gave me a chance to plead my case. They'd used words like "demotion" and "retraining time," but it had all meant one thing: dead woman walking.

I'd lost my protected status.

It hadn't mattered that I'd stayed undercover for three fucking years, two years past the original agreement, and given them more information than they would have ever acquired otherwise. Or that I was now considered an insider in the underground hacker market.

I'd failed my mission, and the ruling body had deemed me expendable.

Good thing I'd survived, or the European Directors Council wouldn't have had someone to blackmail into apprehending Rex Busch for them and acquiring all of the valuable information he possessed.

I closed my eyes and sighed, thinking of Rey.

I'd done it all to save him, and he hadn't a clue.

But then again, if it wasn't for me, he never would have been a target.

I guessed dealing with Rey and his antics over the last six months was a small penance to pay for moving over to the North American umbrella under Devani's command.

I could understand his shock when he first saw me working in Jayna's art gallery. Plus, I wouldn't lie to myself and say it hadn't given me a bit of a thrill to piss him off. No matter how much guilt I carried for bringing him into my world, I wasn't a complete pushover.

There was this undercurrent of pulsing energy between us whenever we were near each other—a mix of pain, memories, emotions, and, as always, unquenched lust.

Maybe that's what drew us to push each other's buttons.

Overall, avoidance was our go-to way of interaction. We rarely appeared in the same place at the same time. It was better for everyone all around.

Setting my tweezers down, I inserted the microchip into a slit inside a large men's ring.

Project completed, I removed my goggles and lab coat and then slipped the piece into a hidden pocket in the side of my evening gown.

Now to freshen up.

Stepping into the powder room, I reapplied my makeup and smoothed out my hair. I glanced at my reflection, angling my face left and right.

I finally looked healthy, and the dark circles under my eyes that I'd thought would become permanent had disappeared. I'd even gained back the weight I'd lost after everything had gone to hell. Not having to worry that someone wanted to kill me every time I turned around helped me eat a good meal or two in peace.

Pushing down the memories, I exited the bathroom to find Jayna and Danika leaning against one of the appraisal counters.

"Oh. Hi. I'm almost ready," I said as I walked toward them.

The only way to describe the cousins was striking. Both had flawless golden skin indicative of their Indian heritage, striking hazel eyes that saw way too much and tended to freak me out at times, and the intelligence of barracudas.

There was no doubt they were related with their similarities in features. The only major difference they had was their stark contrast in height. Jayna matched my five-foot-eight-inch height, where Danika barely made it past five-foot-one.

The fact the women were married to two of the King brothers and held their own said something about their strength and will. Added to it, they also had their men wrapped around their little fingers, and that was something no one would ever believe of any King brother.

I couldn't help but envy them at times.

"Well, hello there, sexy. Lab work does wonders for you," Jayna said as she eyed my dress up and down.

"I'm never borrowing any of your dresses again. I don't care if it's hot off the runway or if you've never worn it before. This thing nearly shows my ass." I glanced behind me at the open back of my navy gown that hit just above the upper curve of my butt.

Jayna took fashion to a new level. She pushed boundaries by wearing clothes that were a bit on the provocative side

without actually revealing too much. Well, maybe with the dress she'd picked for me tonight, she'd gone over the limit.

"I say it shows exactly enough. If you have it, flaunt it. Kir already told me he was glad it was you wearing it and not me. You must have made some impression. I'm sorry I missed the big reveal."

I'd definitely made an impression.

Planning to fuck someone in that dress tonight?

Why the hell he cared, I couldn't understand.

Releasing a sigh, I said, "You're lucky I love you, and this dress has hidden pockets. I've never seen a designer gown with pockets."

Danika came up behind me to help with the placement of some crazy beading between my shoulder blades and then asked, "Can we all agree pockets are only things starting with the letter P and ending in S that every woman wants?"

We were quiet for a few seconds and then burst out laughing.

God, I loved these women.

The last time I'd had non-Solon friendships was over six years ago, with my friend Isa. Papa had worked as her father's second all through my childhood. Isa and I had shared everything from our love of art to technology. We'd even started an art appraisal business together.

Around the same time, the shit with my ex, Kane, had happened, and the current European Directors Council had staged a coup and slaughtered their predecessors. Turning what was once a respected branch of Solon into the sham it stood as today.

I regretted having to pull away from everything associated with my life in Germany. Hell, I hadn't just pulled away. I'd completely disappeared, ending contact with anyone and everyone.

But then again, it had kept those I loved most safe. No ties meant no weaknesses.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Jayna set a hand on my arm. “You stopped laughing and looked sad all of a sudden.”

I shook my head, trying to push my thoughts to the far recesses of my mind. “I’m okay.”

“I think you’re working too hard.” Danika studied me. “You haven’t taken a real day off in weeks.”

“I’m fine. I promise. I like to stay busy.”

“I know exactly what you need.” Jayna gave me a calculated smile.

“I’m scared to ask what.”

“It’s not that bad. Why don’t we go to the cage for a few rounds? This way, you can get in some training and burn off some energy. It’s good for the mood.”

The woman had no idea. I trained nearly every day, not at one of Jayna’s many fight clubs, but at an underground facility that very few people even knew existed.

“I think you just want someone to kick your ass.”

“Is that a challenge, Lennox?” Jayna lifted a well-defined brow.

Maybe this would help take my mind off things, at least until the waiting for something to happen ended.

“I believe it is, King.” Shifting my attention to Danika, I asked, “What’s the expected take for the piece?”

“Seven.”

Meaning million.

“That’s a nice profit.”

“And all because of your connections.” Danika smiled.

Yep. Noah never ordered anything low-scale.

Most of his Solon assignments required custom microchips and very specific programming. The latest software request landed in the realm of Danika’s specialty of crypto tracking. So instead of spending more time than necessary working on

the project myself, I'd offered the job to Danika, who'd completed the work within a few hours.

I picked up my phone and placed it in the clutch on a nearby counter. "I won't activate the chip until the account clears."

"You never do." Danika threaded her arm through mine. "Let's go empty some pockets."

A few minutes later, Danika, Jayna, and I made our way down the spiral staircase leading into the center exhibit of the Dayal-King Gallery.

Tonight's show centered around nature. The featured artist loved to showcase all aspects of the natural world and its beauty through mediums ranging from woodworking and glass-blowing to jewelry and painted canvas.

The room was overflowing with people, elegant people. Some were here for the art while others wanted to mix with the Kings. They'd spend their money hoping one of the King brothers would open their calendar for the possibility of considering a favor.

I didn't begrudge anyone who played the game. It was the way of the world I'd grown up in. However, Papa and my brothers worked in favors for access to our family's freight and transportation routes running through most of Germany and into Austria and Switzerland.

"Well damn. He's hot," Danika whispered as she noticed a tall blond man walking toward us.

"Yes, he is. Let me introduce you." I reached out my hand, and in the next moment, a firm palm slid across it and drew me toward him, kissing my cheek.

"Did you miss me, Lil?" Noah said in a polished British accent, making me want to shake my head.

The man was as American as they came. He'd grown up on a ranch outside of Boulder, Colorado before his recruitment into Solon during college. But his cover was a British businessman who was an heir to a steel conglomerate, so his accent had to match.

I had to admit. It was pretty good.

Just like me—unless someone knew my background, they would always assume I was British and not German. Although my accent was the result of boarding school, not hours of Solon training.

“Not for one minute.” I smiled at Noah. “Ladies, this is Christopher Jameson. Don’t believe anything he says about me.”

“That means it’s all true. How do you know our Lilly? She’s tightlipped about everything,” Danika said as she shook Noah’s hand.

“Let’s say Lilly and I tended to get in trouble together once upon a time.” He winked at me, and I nearly rolled my eyes.

Jayna nudged me forward. “Then I hope you get her in trouble here. This one lives like a hermit.”

“Hermit? I’ll do my best to change that.” Noah offered me his arm. “Show me around, Lil. And maybe I can convince you to take a walk on the wild side.”

As we moved into the crowd, I whispered, “Laying it on a bit thick, weren’t you?”

“Are they or are they not supposed to get the wrong impression that, once upon a time, we may or may not have had a torrid affair?”

I sighed. “Fine, whatever. For that, you’re going to have to buy a really expensive piece from the show tonight.”

“I am buying an expensive piece in just a few moments. It’s going to cost me seven mil.”

“That’s not my deal. That’s between you and Dani. My cut is just for the equipment.”

He lifted my hand, giving me a mischievous grin. “A cut worth a good percentage?”

“Good enough,” I hummed.

On most deals, Danika and I had an agreement. A quarter of all profit went to me and she took the rest. Most of the

microchips I developed for her were standard, and custom orders only came in on the rare occasion. Programming was the more complicated part, which I happily left to her.

“Lil, I thought you were going to get rid of this.” Noah rubbed the tattoo on my left hand, peeking out from under my decorative ring. “You are a glutton for punishment.”

Wasn't that the fucking truth?

I resisted the urge to glance over my shoulder to where Rey stood across the room. “It's to remind me to keep my head on straight. And there is no happily ever after for people like us.”

No matter how much I wanted it.

“If only you'd remembered that sooner.”

“Yeah, yeah. You're starting to sound like our disappointed teacher.”

My heart ached every time I thought of my mentor, Camilla Ress. She'd helped to recruit me, taught me everything I knew, groomed me to take her place, and I'd let her down.

First, I couldn't play the game with the European Directors Council and be their lapdogs. Maybe if I had, I'd be up for the next available opening.

And then, I'd shown the Council a weakness by falling in love.

I'd broken the two rules Camilla had drilled into my head: play the game, and never give them a weakness to use against you.

“I'm the one who took the brunt of her anger while you and Van made your way to New York. It's been months, and she still hasn't forgiven me.”

I winced, thinking about how she must have reacted when she learned about my amazing escape from hiding or the method in which I accomplished it.

“Next time you see her, remind our great teacher that I’m a damn American and under North America,” Noah said. “And that I only pretend to be a Brit. I don’t think I can handle any more slams against the wall.”

Cringing, I said, “I owe you one.”

“You owe me more than that.”

“You can add it to my tab.”

“Speaking of your tab, our North American Council Director is requesting your presence for a briefing.”

I swallowed and then released a breath.

“I suppose Van could only keep me inactive for so long. Let’s go over there, finish Dani’s deal, and then let me hear the details.”

I led him to a sculpture in the corner of the room near the windows overlooking the street.

“Oh, darling, were you enjoying your time playing with all the paint?”

I glared at him. “Listen, farm boy. Don’t knock the paint, and I won’t say anything about your pigs, chickens, and cows.”

“I have horses, Lil. There’s a big difference.”

“Sensitive, are we?” I couldn’t help but give him a smirk.

A couple strode by us to study the sculpture, so I waited until they moved to another piece before saying, “Who’s the target?”

“Unclear. Van’s keeping everything very tight to the chest.” He set a hand on my waist, drawing me to him. “Which only means it’s something high-level and classified.”

“I’m surprised that I even qualify for something at that clearance level.” I slid my fingers into my hidden pocket, grabbed the ring, and then rested my palm against Noah’s chest.

A crease formed between Noah's brows. "Want to explain that statement? Your clearance is higher than mine."

"*Was* higher. Demotion, remember?"

"Different continent, different director. Van operates by her own rules."

"After everything that happened, I'm just being realistic. My days as primary are gone. Do you actually see me leading a case again?"

"I do. You don't see your value." Noah covered my fist with his, taking the ring from me before slipping his hand into his pocket. "Why do you think your old directors are so pissed with Van for stealing you?"

"Because they wanted to give me a grand farewell on their terms." I looked up at him, smiled, and then let a tinge of my bitterness show. "Maybe one day, someone will give them back a little of their own medicine. Send the money."

He brushed a hair from my forehead. "Already done."

I noticed Danika walk past me with Nik a few seconds later, and I nodded, confirming the exchange.

"Lil, karma is already set to work her magic. For now, focus on the here and now."

"I'll do my best. When is the meeting?"

He leaned in. "Tomorrow morning at eleven. The address is on the card in your pocket."

"Do you know the team?"

"Some of them. We met earlier today." His bland tone made me think he wasn't too keen on them.

"Should I worry? I'm an outsider here."

"Lil, they'll have your back. I promise. Some of them are rough around the edges and like to bite, but they know their shit."

"Wonderful."

REYHAN

I COULDN'T HELP THE IRRITATION BURNING IN MY BODY AS I watched the bastard with his hands all over Lilly. They looked comfortable together. As if they had a history, intimate history. Or maybe they were together now, and that damn dress was for him.

Fuck.

What the hell was wrong with me?

She wasn't the woman I loved. That woman was an illusion. Someone made very real by an incredible actress.

I shot back my drink, needing another refill of scotch before the smooth alcohol had time to soothe any of my tension away.

The way Lilly kept shifting closer to the fucker, smiling up at him, made me grit my teeth. They were so lost in conversation the world could have disappeared, reminding me too much of the past.

Would it ever stop hurting?

“Going to lie and tell me it's nothing more than not seeing eye to eye?” Sam said as he came up next to me. “That line may fly with Kir and Nik, but it won't work with me.”

I continued to look in Lilly's direction. “It's between us.”

“If that’s how you want to keep it, go right ahead. Just remember, she’s one of us. The way she helped Jayna with Shah proves it. She was the mastermind behind most of it.”

Of course, Lilly had gained Sam’s loyalty. She’d used her cyber skills to help Jayna take over all of her father’s finances to make him dependent on the daughter he’d abused during her entire childhood.

“I know what she did.”

“Well, fuck. You’re in love with her. Never thought it would happen after the Cora Hass shit.”

I clenched my jaw. “Love isn’t what I feel for Lilly Lennox.”

“Let me give you some advice. Don’t make my mistake and hold out for a woman who doesn’t want you back. It fucks you up.”

I glanced over at Sam. He stared at the crowd in front of us, his face void of emotion except for his hazel eyes that bore scars of pain and loss.

Whatever had happened between him and Devani had messed him up on a level I hadn’t realized.

“The last thing I’m doing is holding out for Cora.”

“Then I suggest moving on. Lilly is a flesh-and-blood woman right in front of you. If you wait too long, she’ll find someone else to irritate.”

Ignoring the jab, I asked, “What do you say about a few rounds of poker with the guys as soon as this thing ends?”

“How about you grab some gear and meet me at the warehouse? I haven’t kicked your ass in a while.”

Now that was an idea. I needed to get some of this aggression out, and Sam was the perfect sparring partner for the job.

“You’re on.”

A LITTLE BEFORE ONE IN THE MORNING, I DROVE THROUGH THE streets of my old neighborhood in the direction of the warehouse district. Every time I came into the area, there was a little bit of comfort. Full of memories. Not that I wanted to ever live here again, but it was familiar.

I wasn't born in this area like Nik, Kir, and Sam. The first almost eight years of my life were spent in a nice lower-middle-class neighborhood. If the people who should have taken me in after my parents' deaths had done their duty, I may have never seen this neighborhood. Instead, I'd learned to fight on these streets and had my ass handed to me plenty of times. I'd held my first pistol here and used it to rob stupid tourists.

God. It was a wonder I'd made it to even eleven with the shit I'd gotten into on a daily basis.

Then again, if it wasn't for Nik, none of us brothers would have survived after the foster system failed us following the deaths of our parents. Nik had run our local gang. Even being a kid himself, he'd created a small family for us since our parents weren't there to do it.

My parents.

I could barely remember them—more fragments of memories from a seven-year-old's perspective. One thing I knew for sure was that they loved each other. Hell, my father had betrayed his word to Lennox for my mother.

One memory that always came to mind was the way my father would watch Mama as she worked on her laptop. He seemed fascinated by her as if he was shocked someone like her would be with him.

Sometimes, I wondered what my life would have been like if they hadn't died in the bus crash that had killed them with Nik's and Kir's parents, as well as Sam's mom.

Would I be anything like the man I was today?

I glanced down at the signet ring I wore over the ink on my left hand.

I knew the answer. I owed everything I was today to Arin King.

If it wasn't for Arin, more than likely, Nik, Kir, Sam, and I would either be dead or in jail. Instead of killing us after our failed attempt to rob him, as any man in Arin's position would have done, he'd taken us in and given us lives none of us could ever have imagined as poor street kids.

I scrubbed a hand down my face.

God, I missed the man.

Arin was anything but a traditional father. He was strict, took none of our shit, and often used the threat of death to keep us in line. His lessons were hard, especially the way he'd taught us the ins and outs of his business, but in the end, we expanded his empire to ten times its original size.

He'd seen the potential in each of us and pushed us in those directions. Nik and Kir were always meant to run the business, with Nik as the lead and Kir the power behind it. Sam had this lethal cunning about him that made him the right choice for the public face of King Holdings, so Arin pushed him toward business school.

Which left me.

From the beginning, I was the sneak—the one who gathered the information to use against people so they'd stay in line. I'd done it when I ran with Nik's gang, and Arin taught me how to do it for him. He'd all but sent me to college to become a hacker and hired private tutors to teach me the tricks. My recruitment into the CIA was no coincidence—it was an exchange of favors. Something to keep the Kings off the radar for our assistance when the government needed a discreet approach.

I glanced back at the ring on my hand and flexed my fingers, feeling the burn of what hid under it.

What I wouldn't give just to get some advice from him again, especially when it came to this Lilly situation.

I knew what he'd say. The man never minced words.

Rey, stop being such a brokenhearted pussy and do your job. Business comes first.

If only things were that easy.

Until I'd met Cora Hass, I'd had my fucking emotions on lockdown. It was what made me so good at my job, both in King Holdings and in the CIA.

Hell, Arin had dubbed me the deceptive knight because I applied cold calculation to find out everything I needed on a person, used it against them, and obtained the outcome we wanted.

Now here I was, losing my ever-loving mind over a woman who'd done nothing but lie to me.

Hopefully, a few rounds in the cage with Sam would help me get my head on straight.

I drove my car around to the back lot of the warehouse where we ran our fight club and slowed, seeing more cars than usual for the middle of the week, especially this time of night.

What the hell was going on?

As far as I knew, nothing was on the schedule for tonight.

Parking my car, I picked up my phone and sent Sam a text.

ME: Thought the cage was ours?

A few seconds later, a response came in.

SAM: Things changed.

ME: Asshole.

SAM: Let the round finish, and I'll show you who's the asshole.

ME: You're on.

Opening my door, I grabbed my bag and made my way to the side entrance. The second I pushed the sliding metal door open, I was bombarded by cheering. The crowd wasn't to capacity but thick enough to say it was some type of private match.

Moving into the open-spaced building, I made out the forms of two women in athletic shorts and sports bras bobbing and weaving in the cage.

Kir stood to the side cheering, with Danika, Nik, and Sam gathered next to him.

They still wore their clothes from the gallery show, except the guys had lost their jackets and rolled up their shirtsleeves. Danika jumped up and down, screaming something to the women in the ring.

Now it made sense—Jayna was inside.

She was the only one who drew this kind of crowd at this time of night.

It would have been nice if one of my brothers had let me know between the time I left the gallery and now that she was getting in the cage. Then, I'd have headed straight here instead of taking care of a bit of work.

The last time I'd watched Jayna fight anyone was years ago. She was lethal and had trained with Kir for over a decade. Her opponent had to be better than average—very few people could match Jayna in skills or ability unless they were on the professional circuit.

I shifted closer to the crowd, and just as I neared Kir, Jayna's opponent veered into my line of sight. Instantly, I was transported back in time a year and a half to a place across the ocean.

Fuck me.

In a flash, a tingle shot down my spine and my cock responded, forcing me to grit my teeth.

Sweat coated Lilly's flushed face and skin, her sculpted arms and abs flexed, expecting an attack, and the muscles of her long legs readied in a stance to take the offensive.

I'd watched her train enough to know she planned a roundhouse on Jayna when she least expected it.

Kir glanced in my direction and shook his head. "These women are vicious. No one would believe they were friends

outside the cage. They don't pull any punches.”

“Jay sets these matches up mainly for Lilly,” Danika exclaimed. “Lilly's so nice and controlled all the time. It's fun to see her let the rage out.”

And just as I predicted, Lilly shifted, angled, and landed a roundhouse to Jayna's stomach, sending her to the ground and making Kir wince.

“Jay's going to hurt tomorrow.”

Within seconds, Jayna jumped up and positioned herself to counter Lilly.

The two women traded barbs only meant for their ears and then continued the round, trekking all over the ring until the buzzer went off a few minutes later, signaling the end of the match. Lilly and Jayna hugged and leaned on each other, heavily breathing as they moved to step out of the cage near us.

Just as Lilly emerged through the chain-link ring, her stormy gray eyes locked with mine, telling me she'd known I was here. Lust and need filled her irises and gave me visions of our marathon sex session after I'd watched her spar with her trainers.

She held my gaze for a few more seconds before she released a deep exhale and then turned away, moving through the crowd toward the locker rooms.

Without thinking, I took a step to go after her, but a hand landed on my shoulder.

“Once this place clears out, are you ready for me to kick your ass?”

I glared at Sam, holding in the urge to deck him. “Keep dreaming. I'm not the one who sits behind a desk all day.”

“I'll show you how this desk jockey punches you in the face.”

“I hope you're ready to put your money where your pretty mouth is.”

LILLY

I STEPPED OUT OF THE SHOWER, TRYING TO WRAP MY MIND around the knife's edge I was about to walk.

I'd never played both myself and an alias at the same time. It was either deep undercover or Lilly.

With the briefing set for eleven in the morning, I'd have enough time to get home, catch some sleep, and make it into Chelsea.

I prayed Cora Hass wasn't part of this scenario. I'd retired her.

Though my gut said she'd have to make an appearance sooner or later. She'd pissed off too many people and had a lot of information.

Luckily, she was a liability on a level the agency only wanted to touch as a last resort.

The second Cora and her signature made a slight trace on the Dark Web, every fucking government agency would round up their top people to crawl the net looking for my location. Hell, Dani would jump aboard before them. And she'd find me first.

As far as anyone knew, Cora Hass had disappeared from the face of the planet after seeking her revenge on Rex Busch.

Pushing down the thoughts, I winced, toweeling my body dry.

Damn Jayna and her left hooks. I'd spend tomorrow sore and possibly in pain, but it would be well worth it.

God knew I'd needed the no-holds-barred aggression release.

Though I needed another type of release more. One I hadn't had in nearly—

No. Don't go there, Lilly. That road only leads to trouble.

Yeah, if the reprimand worked, I'd have never gotten involved with Rey in the first place.

I could still see the glint in Rey's golden eyes as he'd watched me. The hunger, the animal lust, as well as the knowledge of what moves I'd make.

It was both arousing and painful, reminding me too much of a time I should never have allowed myself to steal.

I pushed the thoughts back and reached for my gown. What I needed to do was get back to my apartment, take a healthy shot or two of whiskey, and sleep.

It would give me a short oblivion.

Ten minutes later, after towel-drying my hair, I strode toward the doors of the ladies' locker room. Just as I grabbed the handle, the metal swung open, forcing me back, and Rey walked in.

Instantly, the energy I'd felt during the match intensified to an almost combustible level. My skin burned, the throbbing deep in my core intensified, and the need for him grew painful.

If only I'd left my hair damp, I could have made it to my car before he showed up.

The last thing I wanted to do was remember, to ache, to regret. My emotions were all over the place, and I had to get my head on straight before my meeting.

“You're in the wrong locker room.”

“Is Jayna in here?” Rey asked, staring at me with something that had a shiver running down my spine and goosebumps prickling my skin.

“Umm.” My breath grew shallow. “She left with Kir.”

Rey reached behind him, locking the door.

“This is a bad idea,” I whispered, taking a step back. “You hate me, remember?”

Ignoring my question, he moved in my direction and asked, “Didn’t you say you planned to get fucked in that dress?”

“I said that. But—”

God, why did he have to look at me like that?

“Well, I’m going to fuck you in it.”

“This will only complicate things more.”

“Then say no.”

I swallowed and continued to retreat. “You’re blackmailing me to be here.”

“That’s not a no.” He came upon me and gripped my hips, walking me backward until he pressed me against the counter stationed on the far wall of the room. “Tell me you don’t need this as much as I do right now.”

I needed it more than him. He knew very well how he affected me.

He always had.

I ached for his touch, but the consequences were too great. And I was a damned idiot whose body could never resist him.

“I...I don’t want you.”

“Liar.” The corners of his lips curved, and a feral light entered his dark amber gaze. “You don’t want to want me. I know you, Lilly. You’re so desperate to fuck right now that your skin is burning.”

“You knew Cora. You don’t know a damn thing about me.” I tried to push him back. But, instead, he slid a hand up the slit

of my dress, pushed the fabric aside, and gripped my thighs a second before he lifted me onto the edge of the counter.

“I know if I slid my fingers into you right now, you’d come in less than a few minutes.” He positioned himself between my legs and pressed his thick, hard cock along the seam of my slick folds.

The abrasion of the fabric of his pants had me biting my lip to keep a whimper from escaping.

“I know how hot you’d get after I watched you train. I know how we’d fuck for hours until sleep overwhelmed us only to go at it again and again.”

I couldn’t help but grind myself against him, needing the friction I’d craved for so long.

“Why won’t you leave me alone?” Finally, a small semblance of sanity hit me, and I slid one foot to the ground, readying to jump off.

I had to stop this.

Instead, his grip on my thighs tightened, and then he rocked his pelvis along my clit to a rhythm designed to drive me crazy.

“Because I’ve suffered long enough.”

“Don’t give me that bullshit. How have you suffered? I know you moved on after me.”

I couldn’t hide the pain radiating in my heart.

A crease formed between his brows. “Did I?”

“I’m not blind to the women connected to you.”

“What proof do you have? Were you there?”

One of his hands glided up my side, cupped my breast, and then pinched the straining tip through the material of my dress as the other snaked around my waist on its way up my naked back.

“Don’t do this,” I whimpered, knowing I was losing this battle.

“Do what?”

“Make me want things I can’t have, never could have.”

He cupped the nape of my neck, tilting it back as he fisted the damp hair at my nape. “Why can’t you have them?”

“Don’t fuck with my head.” I narrowed my gaze. “I know you don’t love me anymore. It will be better for both of us to stop now than to hurt more later.”

“No.” His mouth closed over mine.

Instead of pushing him back, I gripped his shirt, drawing him closer and meeting his demands with my own, drowning in the intoxicating taste of him as all my common sense evaporated.

God, I loved this man’s mouth.

“Rey,” I moaned as he deepened the kiss, letting me lose myself in the play of his tongue and reminding me of a time when there wasn’t so much pain between us.

“You fucking taste the same,” he murmured as his fingers clenched in my hair.

We ate at each other’s mouths, driving the pulsing ache deep in my core higher and higher. I reveled in the bite of pain against my scalp as his hold tightened, and my nipples strained against the fabric of my dress.

“You haunt me day and night. Every fucking moment,” he murmured, arching my neck and trailing his lips down my throat. “Why can’t I move on?”

Instead of thinking too hard about his words, I broke our kiss long enough to pull his shirt over his head.

It was better to focus on the sex, the desire, the attraction that laced every interaction between us.

His fingers slid under the hem of my dress, kneading the muscles of my thighs in the way only he knew I liked.

I gasped, rocking toward him, and heard a deep, satisfied chuckle. “Always like that edge of pain, don’t you?”

When he reached my hip, he muttered, “You’re naked under here.”

“I thought it was obvious.” I cupped the damp material covering his cock. “Couldn’t you feel me pressed against you?”

“I fucking hate this dress.” He jerked my knees farther apart and pulled me toward him.

“Even when I was yours, you never had a say in what I wore, so don’t think you have any now.”

He lifted his head and stared into my eyes. “You didn’t wear clothes like this back then.”

His fingers slid through my soaked folds until he reached my sopping core, gliding up and down in teasing strokes a few seconds before thrusting in one finger followed by another.

“Oh God,” I gasped, my back bowing and my nails digging into the skin of his shoulders.

I clenched my eyes tight, my pussy clamping around him.

He pumped in and out, using his thumb to circle my clit with each pass. “You’re mine until I set you free. Do you understand?”

The sensations flooding my system were too overwhelming to answer him. I couldn’t think. I shouldn’t need this so desperately.

I writhed in his hold, lost in the way he worked my body. The muscles of my pussy quivered and contracted, and arousal flooded his hand. Everything inside me clenched as I spiraled, lost on the edge of release.

I was so damn close.

“R-R-Rey,” I whimpered, biting my lip.

Just as I was about to go over, he pulled out and gripped my face with his damp hands. “I asked you a question.”

I lifted my lids and stared into heated golden irises that reminded me too much of the man I’d known so long ago. The

one who made me dream, made me believe I was more than an asset.

No, I wouldn't do that to myself. My heart was already broken. No matter how I felt, he'd never love me again.

When it ended, he'd stay here, and I'd move on. It was the way it worked in my world.

"I am not your anything. This is just sex."

For him it was, anyway.

He continued to hold my face and my gaze for a few more seconds, then as if accepting my statement, he released me and set my palms on his hips.

I pushed his jogging pants down with his boxers and freed his thick, hard cock. I fisted him at the base and then pumped up and down, his arousal weeping from the tip and coating my fingers.

He stepped closer, gripping my thigh and waist. "Put me in."

I shifted forward and positioned him at my soaked entrance. In the next second, he thrust to the hilt.

"Fuck," both of us gasped.

It had been so long. The pleasure and the pain of it.

I closed my eyes, reveling in the sensation of him deep inside me. All of my fantasies over the past months had never done it justice. I needed more. God, I needed more.

Instead of pulling out and thrusting back in, Rey fisted my hair in a biting hold and forced me to look at him.

"How many others?"

"What?" I focused on his face and not the throb of his thick cock lodged in my body.

"I asked how many others since me? Did you fuck that blond prick from today? Is he your lover?"

Why was he asking this now?

“You have no right to that number. It’s none of your business.”

“It is, especially when I’m in you raw.”

I stiffened. Oh God. What was I doing?

I was on birth control. It was required as part of my status with the agency, but protection was on me.

Fuck. I knew better.

“I’m not the one with a different person on my arm every week. You should answer the question.”

We stared at each other as if we faced off in a battle, a war of emotions raging.

After a few moments, he released a deep breath and answered, “No one but you.”

“But...” My lips trembled for a second. “I don’t understand.”

“What’s to understand? I’m not the whore you think I am. Now you answer.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat, and then I whispered, “Same.”

His fingers flexed in my hair, and his lips covered mine as he pulled out and thrust back in. There were no more words as we let the need of our bodies take over.

We kissed and fucked, desperate for that connection we’d lost, one I knew would never come back.

I wasn’t sure if anyone could hear what was happening outside of this room, and at the moment, neither of us seemed to care.

The fire building in my veins, in my blood, raged as my core quickened with each slide of his cock, driving me closer and closer to release.

“Come, Lilly. I want to feel you come.” He rolled his hips in that perfect way to send me over.

I gasped, “Oh God, Rey,” and threw my head back as my orgasm washed over me.

My pussy quivered and clenched around his pistoning cock, and ecstasy rocketed through every nerve in my body.

He continued to pump into me, pushing me into another orgasm as he raced for his own.

When he came, he clasped me to him and whispered my name in that way he'd done so long ago when he'd loved me.

REYHAN

I HELD LILLY AGAINST ME, HER HEAD CRADLED IN THE CROOK of my neck as I tried to catch my breath. My cock was nowhere near calm, and the urge to fuck her over and over until I quenched this need for her pushed at the back of my mind.

This woman made me want things I shouldn't, especially not with her. She'd been my world, my everything, and I couldn't wrap my mind around how I could have been so wrong.

"We shouldn't have done this," Lilly whispered, regret lacing her words. "It's only going to make things worse."

I tugged her head back, forcing her to look at me. "How can it get worse? Are you planning to shoot me a second time?"

I regretted the hard edge to my words as soon as they were out.

"I didn't want—" She clenched her teeth and then pushed me back, jumping from the counter. "It can't happen again."

I grabbed her arm, keeping her from running away. "Do you actually think that's even a remote possibility? Fucking is the most honest thing between us."

"You look at me and see Cora. I'm not her." The sadness in her gray eyes wasn't something I expected.

“Was any of it real?”

She swallowed and then asked, “You mean besides the fucking?”

“Yes.”

“It won’t change the outcome. I’m still the villain. I shot you. I disappeared. I’m still the one you forced to be here. I’m still the one who showed up in your world to fuck with your life.” She jerked her arm free and moved to a cabinet full of clean towels, grabbed one, and then wiped the dampness from between her legs.

I quickly dressed, knowing she’d try to escape the first chance she got.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Why does it matter?” She stalked to the door, but I blocked her way.

“Because I need to know I mattered. That it wasn’t just me.”

She closed her eyes, and when she opened them, a tear spilled down her cheek. “It wasn’t just you.”

Her words felt as if she’d shot me all over again. All that time together, all those days laughing, loving, just being together. She’d thrown it all away.

“Then why did you betray me?”

“Because that’s what I do, Rey. It’s my job. I’m a liar, a thief, a murderer.”

“I see.”

She shook her head. “No, you’ll never see. It’s the way it is. I’m sorry.”

“Fuck sorry.” I clenched my fists, wanting so badly to have some semblance of control in this situation.

“This can’t happen again. It’s better for you to move on.”

“That would make it easier on you. Assuage your guilt. As you said, no matter what, you’re the villain.”

“You know nothing of my guilt.” She pushed me. “You know nothing of the depths of what I carry inside.” She pushed me again. “Get out of my way. I want to leave.”

“Tell me. How deep does it run?”

“Please, just let it go. I don’t want to do this. Nothing I say will make a difference.”

“Try me.”

She dropped her head. “You weren’t part of the plan. I knew better, but I still got— It doesn’t matter. Just know I shot you to save you. It was either I do it, or Rex and his men.”

She shoved me out of the way and unlocked the door.

As she grabbed the handle, I asked, “Did you ever love me?”

“Why does it matter? I’m the villain. And there aren’t any stories where the villain lives happily ever after, are there?”

She pulled the door open to find Sam standing there. Concern flashed on his face as he took in her appearance, and then he glanced up at me. Leaning down, he whispered something to Lilly, and she shook her head before she moved out of view.

A second later, Sam stepped into the locker room and locked the door. Irritation was etched all over his face, and I braced for a punch.

He scanned the room, his gaze landing on the beads lying on the ground from Lilly’s gown. If Lilly’s appearance hadn’t given away that we’d fucked, the pieces of Lilly’s dress and the scent of us in the air would have.

“Did you get confused with the signs on the locker rooms?”

“Get lost.” I sat on a bench and dropped my head into my hands.

“Time to cut the bullshit and admit something I figured out a while back.”

Lifting my head, I asked, “And what is that?”

He leaned against the closed door and crossed his arms across his chest. "Lilly is Cora."

Of all the brothers, it would be Sam who'd figure it out first. Then again, maybe they all had and just kept it to themselves. I'd done a piss-poor job of hiding my feelings.

"Would it change your perception of her?"

"No. I know what I need to about her."

"Then I don't have to admit to anything."

"Have you asked her the whole story, or did you just demand answers as if she's in a fucking interrogation?"

"What does it matter? It happened."

"I call bullshit again. In any other situation, you are the most damn logical asshole around. You'd want every detail, every fact, before making a conclusion. You never take anything at face value."

"What's your point?"

"I'm going to say what Arin would tell you."

"And that is?"

"Stop being such a brokenhearted pussy and get your shit together."

"Did you give yourself that advice?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. But the difference between us is that your woman is right in front of you, and the one I want picked someone else."

"She isn't mine."

"Did you or didn't you just fuck in here without giving two shits who heard? By my book, you've staked your claim on her."

"I'm sure this caveman viewpoint went over well with Devani. No wonder she dropped your ass."

Sam clenched his fist. "You think saying shit like that will deflect the discussion from you? Don't forget, we're both master manipulators."

“Fuck off, Sam. I don’t have time for this.”

“Would you rather Nik or Dani corner you? They’ll hear about this sooner or later.”

“What is it you expect me to do? There isn’t some happy ending here.”

“You can stop playing this self-righteous prick. None of us are innocent when it comes to the things we’ve done to get the results we want. Hell, since we lived in the old neighborhood, you knew how to seduce the right chick to get the information we needed for our deals. What pisses you off is that the same shit happened to you.”

“I don’t want to talk about anything to do with work when we’re together. This is the one place I get a break.”

I sighed, hating to admit the truth, and said, “She didn’t get information from me. We had an agreement never to talk about work.”

“Then get over yourself and leave her the fuck alone.”

“Our whole relationship was built on lies, and you expect me to believe anything she tells me?”

“Your whole existence is a lie, Agent Shay Decker. No, wait, you’re about to go on a case, so you’ll have some other asshole’s name. Or maybe today you’re going by one of your hacker names like Tobias Hicks because it’s only Reyhan Akshay King when it’s convenient to you. Are you even a King anymore?”

My temper flared, and I stood, ready to deck him. “What the fuck do you mean by that? I do my damn job.”

“Tell me, when was the last time you went out in public with one of us and didn’t have your guard up? Even tonight, you stood at a distance, and I can guarantee you’ve scoured any record of your presence at the show.”

“It’s not the same thing.”

“Isn’t it? You lie for a living. For us, for your agency, and for any purpose you deem fit. You’re the last person to pass judgment on anyone.” Sam turned, opening the door, then

paused. “I think it’s about time the deceptive knight finally met his fucking match. Or should I say someone better than him?”

AN HOUR AFTER LEAVING SAM AT THE WAREHOUSE, I ARRIVED outside Lilly’s townhouse.

Sam was right. I was as much a liar as Lilly. I’d started our relationship under a different name and resented the fact she wasn’t the woman she presented to the world.

Although she’d known from the beginning I had been using an alias.

This was so fucked up.

I needed answers. I could only hope she’d give me some. She held secrets deeper than anyone I’d ever met. The ones I’d discovered barely scratched the surface.

Parking my car in a lot near her building, I made my way to her apartment.

Before I could ring the bell, the door opened, and Lilly appeared. “What do you want?”

She’d changed into loose lounge pants and a tank top and tied her dark brown hair into a messy bun. Her gray eyes were void of emotion, but the dark circles and the slight red rims shadowing them told me she was upset about something.

More than likely, what had happened between us.

“Were you expecting me?”

“Since some asshole stalked me in London, I’ve upgraded my defenses everywhere. Now, I take precautions to know who breathes the air within fifty feet of my place. So, let me repeat. What do you want?”

“We need to talk.”

She clenched her jaw. “I don’t have the energy for this. Get lost. I have work in the morning.”

She tried to close the door, but I grabbed it.

“What’s the real reason you left your family, Lilly? And how the fuck did you disappear so completely? Cora Hass appeared less than four years ago. Who protected you? Who still protects you? Who was that guy tonight?”

A smile tugged at her lips, one that was far from genuine. “Haven’t you read enough suspense stories to know a good villain never reveals her secrets?”

“Fuck that shit.” I pushed open the door, making her stumble back, and then shut it. “Stop with the villain crap and give me a straight answer.”

“That’s something that will never happen.”

I stalked to her, gripped her waist, and pinned her to the wall. “Why is that?”

“Because I’ve never been honest with you. I’m a liar. Or did you forget?”

“Wrong. The only time you were ever completely honest was when my cock was deep inside you.”

She lifted her chin as she pressed her palms against my chest, ready to push me back. “You think you can fuck the truth out of me?”

Fire filled her gaze, but the change in her breath and the way her nipples pebbled into hard pearls under her tank told me she definitely liked the idea more than she wanted to admit.

This was not what I’d planned when I’d driven over, but now that she put the thought in my head, it sounded like the perfect idea.

“I did get more answers out of you tonight than I have in the last six months.” I stepped closer to her, letting my aroused body rub against hers.

“Rey, you can fuck me all you want.” Her voice went husky with lust, and her fingers curled into my shirt. “But you won’t win this.”

“Are you throwing down a challenge?” I leaned in, setting a hand next to her ear, and then rubbed the stubble on my jaw along the column of her cheek and throat.

She always smelled so fucking good, a mix of her flowery soap and her sweet natural essence.

Goosebumps prickled down her flushed skin, and the barely leashed impulse to fuck her loosened, readying to take over.

She arched her neck, her breaths growing more and more ragged. “Even if I am, as I said, you’ll lose.”

“At least I’ll get to fuck you out of my system.”

She lifted her face, a plea in her stormy eyes. “Is that what you need, a purge? Then will you let me go? Will you let me leave?”

“There’s a lot of things I need.” I fisted her hair, tugging it back. “But I’ll take this for now.”

I covered her mouth with mine, making her gasp before she met the demands of my lips with her own.

Fuck. She was like a drug, intoxicating, addicting, all-consuming.

As much as I wanted to hate her, never see her, I wanted to keep her, bind her to me.

She wrapped her arms around my neck as I slid a palm under the hem of her shirt, over the bare skin of her abdomen, and cupped her full breast, rolling and pinching the puckered tip.

Lilly broke our kiss and threw her head back. “Oh God. Rey. I need more.”

“Then I’ll give you more, and when I’m done, you won’t have a single secret left.”

“You’re good, but you’ll never break me.”

“The last thing I want to do is break you. But I will make you beg.” I held her gaze as I increased the pressure on her nipple, causing her to grit her teeth, and then released my hold

to move my hand down her stomach and into the waistband of her pants to the soaked slit of her pussy. “And we both know I’m very good at making you beg.”

“It’s been a while. Things probably have changed.” She’d barely finished her sentence before she gasped.

“Is that right?” I circled her straining, swollen clit, teasing and driving up her desire. “Let’s find out.”

Her thighs trembled, and her hold on my shoulders tightened as she shifted her hips, needing more of my touch.

“Rey.”

“Is this what you’re searching for?” I slid two fingers deep into the wet heat of her pussy, causing her back to bow as she clenched around me.

A mewled whimper left her lips before she bit the bottom one and closed her eyes.

God, she was so beautiful. There was nothing like watching her lost in arousal and need.

She rode my hand as I plunged in and out of her, all the while massaging her swollen clit with my thumb.

“Please, Rey. I need to come. Stop torturing me. Let me come.”

Shifting my rhythm, I gave her the hard, steady thrusts she craved. Within seconds, she shattered, crying out as the slick muscles inside her pussy clamped down.

She slumped against the wall in a post-orgasmic haze, and I couldn’t help but give her a smug smirk.

“Did you say something about things changing?”

“Shut up.”

Bringing my finger back up her body, I traced her mouth and coated it with the essence of our sex from earlier and her arousal.

“Open.”

Without hesitation, she parted her lips and sucked. When I withdrew, she scraped her teeth along my skin, biting the tip. The rawness of this reminded me of things she'd done in the past, of a time when I thought I'd met my soulmate, the one person meant to be mine. I couldn't help but feel an ache deep in my chest.

She lifted her lids, and we stared at each other, a familiar energy passing between us.

She broke the silence and whispered, "This is lust, nothing more. You're purging me from your system."

"Lust, is it?" I released my grip on her hair and then lifted her by the thighs, allowing her to wrap her legs around my waist as I turned and carried her up the stairs to her bedroom. "Didn't you say those words to me before?"

The first three times I'd taken her to bed, she'd pretended it was nothing more than physical chemistry. By the fourth, there was no denying something deeper churned between us. After that, we were practically living together.

"This time, I mean it. And, I already know the outcome."

I stopped and set her down on her feet when we reached the base of her bed. "What is the outcome, Lilly?"

"Memories of dirty, hot sex."

"Is that it?"

"Yes."

If she meant it, why couldn't she look me in the eyes?

Instead of voicing my thoughts, I said, "So be it."

We reached for each other, pulling and tugging at clothes until we were naked and panting. I pushed her onto the bed and then crawled over her.

She was a fucking goddess, eyes dilated with carnal lust, skin flushed, and a body I couldn't stop wanting, no matter how hard I tried.

She cupped my face, drawing me to her for a kiss before she raked her nails down my neck, chest, and abdomen. She

traced the tattoos on my skin as if trying to memorize them and then moved lower, encircled my raging, weeping erection, and pumped up and down.

Fuck. I threw my head back and clenched my teeth.

Grabbing her wrist, I freed her hold and pinned her arm to the bed.

“If you keep doing that, this won’t last.”

“Are you saying you don’t have the ability to go all night anymore?”

I leaned over her, bringing my face a fraction of an inch from hers. “If I stay here and do everything I want to, there won’t be any hiding that I’m fucking you. Someone is bound to notice, especially Danika. Are you ready to answer her questions? Are you ready for everyone to know you’re mine?”

What was I saying? But then again, I wasn’t sure I could let her go.

Fuck, this woman had me all twisted inside.

“The same can be asked of you. You’re the one with the reputation to protect.” Her leg slid along mine, positioning to hook against my calf.

I’d pissed her off, and she planned to flip me. Maybe it was my words, or perhaps it was the change in my expression from my thoughts.

No matter, she would not get the upper hand.

Before she could make her move, I rolled her to the side and threw my weight onto her back, trapping her underneath me and settling my cock perfectly along the seam of her cleft.

“Now, if this isn’t the perfect position. Lilly Lennox naked and wet, on her stomach and so ready to be fucked.”

“Bastard,” she hissed.

I leaned forward, grazing her earlobe with my teeth. “Are you mad that I figured out your plan or that I countered it?”

“Get off me and go home. I don’t want to fuck anymore.” She ground her ass against my erection, contradicting her words.

“*Tsk, tsk.* Are you lying again?” I shifted my knees, pushing hers apart and making her breath accelerate into short, rapid pants. “Tell me that you don’t want me to thrust into you right now. Tell me that your pussy isn’t dripping for the feel of my cock.”

“Your cock is replaceable.”

“Is it?” I rimmed her entrance, pushing in a fraction before gliding up and down her soaked slit. “Then why haven’t you replaced it?”

I bit the juncture of her neck and shoulder, giving her the pressure she craved. Goosebumps prickled her skin, and a moan escaped her lips.

“Please, Rey. I need.”

“What do you need, Lilly?” Gripping her hips, I pulled her back without giving her the penetration she craved.

She glared at me over her shoulder. “I need you to stop talking and just fuck me. All you Americans do is talk.”

Sliding a hand over her firm stomach, I brought her flush against my chest and then cupped her throat, tipping her face up until she looked at me. With my other hand, I positioned my aching cock to drown deep inside her.

No matter how much I wanted to sink into her, I had to get her response.

“Answer me.”

“Don’t make it more.”

And there it was, the non-answer that said so much.

“It was always more, Lilly. That’s why there were no others for either of us.” I covered her mouth with mine and thrust in to the hilt.

She reached back, fisting my hair, and met the demands of my mouth as the fingers of her other hand threaded with mine

at her thigh.

The slide of her quivering pussy was a heaven I never wanted to leave.

She met the rhythm of my pistoning hips, reminding me of how in sync we'd always been when it came to sex.

“Oh God, Rey.” Lilly gasped and arched, breaking our kiss, her face a play of pleasure and pain as the muscles of her core spasmed and contracted around me.

Wanting to prolong her release, I brought our joined hands to her sensitive clit and stroked the swollen bundle of nerves.

“It's too much,” she cried out a second before her pussy clamped down so hard I couldn't hold back any longer.

I shoved her forward, the desire to come overwhelming every one of my thoughts. She buried her face in the covers of the bed as I set a relentless pace. She gasped and moaned, pushing into each of my thrusts. When my orgasm finally washed over me, it felt as if I saw stars.

LILLY

I STARED AT THE CEILING OF MY LOFT WITH THE SENSATION OF a ten-ton weight pressing down upon my chest, ready to crack it open.

What the hell was I doing? I knew better. I'd known better before, but I'd still taken the leap.

I could say the sex at the warehouse was a lapse in judgment, but this...

Lilly, do you ever learn?

Turning my head, I stared at Rey sleeping next to me.

How many nights had I watched him like this? So relaxed, so unguarded. I wanted to reach out and trace the lines of his beautiful face and lips.

I'd fallen so hard and fast for him. We could talk for hours about nothing and everything. He'd been my anchor, making the last six months of the god-awful assignment bearable. However, as time went on, holding back parts of myself felt wrong on too many levels.

The guilt of it had started to eat away at me.

In the end, Rex took the choice of whether to tell Rey the truth from my hands.

Then again, I'd lived in a fantasy believing we'd have a future together without consequences.

European Solon had three classes of agents: officer, operative, and special task force. Nearly all agents were considered operatives. Those agents could live normal lives outside of Solon, have families, do whatever the hell they wanted—including retire if the job wasn't for them anymore.

But those of us with unique skills in technology and arms development fell in the special task force category. We reduced the organization's need to outsource, and, therefore, the Council believed they owned us. Any belief otherwise resulted in the Council showing us how wrong we were.

People like me never got happy endings. We worked until the job retired us or the European Directors Council did.

Without thinking, I brushed Rey's hair from his forehead and then quickly pulled back, curling my fingers into my palms.

Why had he spent the night? Everyone would know we were sleeping together.

What had changed in his thinking from the start of the gallery show to the moment he'd arrived at my doorstep?

Why couldn't he leave things alone?

He wasn't supposed to be here. He wasn't supposed to want more. He was supposed to keep hating me, even if it broke my heart.

Fuck. I had to get it together.

I had a meeting to attend, a new team to feel out, a new balance to learn between my real life and whatever job Devani gave me.

With one last glance at Rey, I slipped from the bed. I padded into my bathroom and then into my closet, grabbing my clothes, a pair of boots, and a leather jacket before moving to a mirror in the back of the space.

Stepping onto a specific spot on the carpet, I said in German, "*Bruised, not broken.*"

It was a statement I used to describe myself after all the shit I'd survived.

In the next second, a green beam appeared, scanned my face, and the mirrored wall popped open, revealing a room behind it. I stepped inside, letting the wall close behind me.

As the lights turned on, I made my way into my safe room. I'd outfitted a place like this in every city I used as a home base to store my equipment and to give me somewhere to regroup, if necessary.

It was state-of-the-art and secure as hell. The space resembled a compact apartment with a kitchenette, bathroom, and convertible sofa bed. I could live in here for a month, and no one would find me.

Only Devani knew about it, and that was because she'd helped me build it.

Setting my clothes on the sofa in the center of the room, I took a quick shower, dressed, and scarfed down three caffeinated chocolate bars. It was the best alternative to coffee at the moment.

Moving to a set of bookcases, I shifted a few copies of classic Jane Austen novels to reveal an access point for my safe. I punched in the access code and then set my hand on the fingerprint reader.

When the door opened, I reached inside the mental container and selected two of my favorite pistols to tuck into my pants and three blades designed to hide inside my boots without hindering my movement.

I never took chances at any first meeting. When one worked for an organization that supposedly didn't exist, one could never be too careful. Especially knowing the European Directors still hadn't forgiven Devani for smuggling me into the protection the North American Directors Council offered.

After shutting and securing the safe, I stood and then approached the door leading to my closet, setting my hand on it.

Rey. You always wanted something from me I couldn't give you.

With a heavy sigh, I pushed thoughts of Rey aside.

I had to keep my focus.

Ten minutes later, after weaving my way through a series of passageways fitted on the side of my building, I exited out onto my street and jumped into a waiting cab. After a short ride, we stopped near a set of apartments close to a subway station. I never took the same route anywhere unless it was intentional. Ingrained Solon training, I supposed.

After multiple unnecessary train changes, I arrived at the address Noah had given me.

I knocked on a tall metal door. A few seconds later, it opened, and a petite woman in her early fifties, about four inches shorter than me with cropped blond hair and piercing green eyes, appeared.

We stared at each other for a few moments before she asked in a German accent, “Do you have an appointment?”

I reached into my jacket, pulled out a card, and handed it to her.

She studied it and then me, taking her time to inspect me from head to shoes. She pursed her lips and narrowed her gaze, not liking what she saw.

Yep, Lilly Lennox was definitely not up to snuff for this group.

“Fucking idiot,” she muttered and then turned. “Follow me.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. This was not what I expected when Noah said I’d meet my team.

After the door closed behind us and we took a long hallway deep into the building, I whispered, “I’m sorry, Camilla.”

She grabbed me and shoved me against a wall, knocking the wind out of me.

I kept my hands down, accepting she had a right to her anger. I deserved it.

After I'd shot Rey, I was supposed to stay on the small island off the coast of New Zealand as she'd instructed. I was supposed to follow the plan. I was supposed to listen. And as usual, I hadn't.

Rage filled her face, and I braced for a slap, something she'd delivered on more than one occasion.

Instead, she leaned in and gritted out in German, *"You were safe on the island. We lied to the Council for you. We made them believe you were useless. We put our lives on the line to keep you safe."*

"I didn't have a choice."

"Bullshit. You had a choice not to make the deal with the Council to give them Busch. It was a test to see what King truly meant to you. And you fucking failed. You had a choice to let us know. We would have been there to back you up."

"And do what? They think you're one of them. They have Rex and the codes. I did what I had to in order to cancel the hit on Rey. The slate is clean."

"If you believe that, then you're a bigger idiot than I thought. Now lie to me and tell me why you are here."

"I didn't have a choice in that, either."

She pulled me forward and slammed me back again, and then she slapped me on the cheek as if she was trying to wake me from a haze.

"The only reason you are in New York is for King. That man is the reason for every goddamned thing you do."

When I'd gone into hiding following my demotion verdict by the Council for losing Rex and shooting Rey, the only people who'd known Rey's true identity were those who'd protected me. As far as the agency at large believed, my lover was an American operative with the alias Shay Decker, and no amount of digging could reveal any other information about him. Rey had buried the data, and then I'd used other means to encrypt it.

However, when the Kings launched an all-out search for Cora Hass with millions in reward money, the directors became suspicious of what I could have done to piss them off. After some digging, they'd matched some security footage from the building across from my old townhouse to Rey King's face.

"He found me."

"Oh yes, the blackmail. Van and her fucking games."

"It's more than that."

"Idiots, all of you. And on top of everything, I was the last to find out. Do you have any idea what you're doing?"

"I'm doing my job."

"You and your fucking job. I know your job. I taught you everything you know. You were my replacement." Camilla clenched her teeth. *"Your job was to stay on that damn island where we left you. Where you were fucking safe."*

"You know I couldn't stay there."

"Did you think about what would have happened if Busch hadn't gotten desperate and begged for a meeting, or if you'd failed with the capture?"

I stared at her. I'd never thought past getting Rex and having the Council cancel the hit on Rey.

She shook me as if trying to jar some sense into me. *"Your King would have died anyway. And what about you? There was the off chance the Council was so tired of your antics that they would have put a bullet in your head and washed their hands of you. But the reality is, you're too valuable an asset. The Council would have captured you and kept you working until you wanted to die."*

I swallowed, knowing the truth of her words. Assets had no rights beyond what value they provided. There was no doubt in my mind Camilla knew I'd do something drastic if the Council ever captured me.

"Do you ever think about what would happen to us if we lost you? Stupid idiot!" she shouted in my face, forcing me to

focus on her anger again. *“I will not have your death on my soul.”*

My lips trembled for a second, and I whispered, *“I’m sorry.”*

“If you’d listened to me from the beginning, you’d be one of them. We were going to bring them down from the inside. Follow orders, no matter how much you hate doing it, get to the table, and then take them out. That was the damn plan, not to fucking fall in love.”

“Enough,” came a booming voice in a French accent just as a large hand pulled her off me.

I looked up at the angry face of Marcus Abalo, one of my oldest friends in Solon.

“We can’t change the past.” Marcus positioned himself between Camilla and me. “Now we deal with the present. Too many things are in motion to change course.”

Marcus pulled me into a hug, and I buried my face into his chest. It had been so long since anyone who loved me had held me in their arms.

Marcus and I had met during our second week of training when we were barely eighteen years old. Both of us were excited and scared out of our minds at the adventure ahead of us. He’d flown in from Togo, a small country in West Africa, and I’d snuck away from my boarding school.

If only I’d fallen in love with him. Life would have been so much simpler, and I wouldn’t be in this mess. But then again, Marcus was more like my brother, and the thought of anything other than platonic with him was beyond gross.

“Why are you here?”

“You know why. To watch your back,” Marcus answered. “Do you ever do anything easy?”

“Oh look, the gang’s all back together.” Noah walked down a set of stairs. “I take it you met the team member with the edges.”

“Fuck off, Carter.” Camilla shot Noah the bird and then leaned against a wall.

“Fuck off, *Jameson*.” Noah corrected. “I’m a Brit as far as everyone is concerned. Never fall out of character, isn’t that what you taught us, oh, great teacher?”

“Stupid American kicked in the head too many times by his damn horses is what you are.”

“Have you all lost your minds? You can’t be here with me at the same time.” I pushed out of Marcus’s hold. “If anyone links you to me, do you know what will happen?”

The thought of the European Directors Council retaliating against Camilla or Marcus for helping me was something I never wanted to envision. They were both in high-level positions, and the fallout would mean elimination.

“We know what we’re doing.” Marcus smiled.

“Meaning?”

“We know how to stick to a plan and play lapdogs to protect each other’s asses. If only you understood how to fucking do it.” Camilla moved to the set of doors along the far end of the room we were in.

Then it hit me. “You’re here to spy on the lost asset.”

“That is one way to look at it,” Marcus smirked. “I like to think we convinced them it was in their best interest to keep an eye on you.”

“When did you get that kind of pull?”

Noah stepped up next to us. “Marcus has moved up in the ranks now. He has all kinds of pull.”

The last thing I ever expected Marcus to do was to position himself to become a member of the European Directors Council. He hated playing politics and wanted to lead teams in the field.

Then it hit me—our original plan. Get into power to topple power. I was the original one slated to infiltrate the Council, and now Marcus had taken my place.

“You reevaluated your stance on bureaucracy?”

He lifted a brow. “Ms. Lennox, a lot has changed since our last assignment together.”

“I see.”

“No, Lil. You don’t even have a clue. But hopefully soon, you’ll catch up.”

I continued to stare at him.

Camilla cleared her throat and then said in American-accented English, “If we’re finished with our reunion, it’s time for the actual meeting. Make sure to stay in character at all times. Don’t slip for one second. Is that understood, or do I need to reinstruct you on your roles?”

“That won’t be a problem, since I’m more than likely playing myself,” I said, which garnered a glare.

“You don’t know if this assignment entails you to program something, steal a diamond, or fuck someone, so don’t think too far ahead.” With those words, she pushed through the doors and disappeared.

“She’ll come around,” Noah said.

I sighed. “I wouldn’t count on it.”

“She trained us. She’s vested in our survival. Yelling is her way of showing love.” Marcus squeezed my shoulder and then moved to a rack, grabbed a tailored jacket from a hook that clashed with the style of trendy casual wear he normally wore, and shrugged it on.

“You’re serious about joining the upper ranks.”

“Lil, you’re about to see a side of me you’ve never seen. Just remember, everything I do has a reason. Trust me.”

“You sound as cryptic as Van does.”

“That’s because we’re playing chess with the same end goals in mind.”

“And let me guess, I’m one of the pieces on this board.”

“You knew this from the start.”

I wanted to roll my eyes, but the seriousness on his face had a chill going down my spine. “What piece am I playing?”

He walked up to me, cupped my face, and kissed my forehead. “That, Lil, is something you will have to figure out.”

With those words, he took the stairs, leaving Noah and me in the basement room.

“Do you have any idea what he means?” I glanced at Noah.

“It means you need to start rereading the chess playbook.”

He was probably right. I’d spent too much time running and had gotten rusty.

A lump formed in the pit of my stomach, telling me this case was going to cause me nothing but grief.

“I have a bad feeling about this meeting.”

“Whatever happens, I hope you don’t pull the knives I’m positive you’ve got hidden in those boots.”

“It’s good to keep hope alive,” I smirked. “Are all meetings for American operations like this?”

“Never. As with everything, Van has a reason for the shit she does. And the fact that Marcus and Cam, two high-positioned Europeans, are here means something big is about to happen.”

Me and my bad feelings.

“What if this is about Cora?”

“Then you deal like always.”

I nodded. “Let’s go find out what the hell is going on.”

Noah and I made our way to a hallway blocked by security, who let us pass to a bank of elevators. We stepped into a cab and arrived on our designated floor.

As soon as we exited, I noticed the discreetly placed decals on what was supposed to resemble a series of average office suites.

My heart skipped a beat, and a cold chill coursed down my spine.

“This is a CIA building.”

“I noticed that too.”

I paused, feeling all the blood drain from my face. “They aren’t going to hand me over, are they?”

“No, Lil.” He grabbed my upper arm and pulled me forward. “They wouldn’t do that. We’re family.”

A wave of nausea settled in the pit of my stomach, making me glad I’d only eaten the stupid chocolate bars.

“You have to get me out of here.” I looked behind me and calculated the number of steps it would take to make it to the elevator.

“It’s a bit late for that. I’m sure everyone knows we’re here.”

I grimaced.

“You’ll be fine.”

We reached a set of doors with two guards who inclined their heads.

The taller of the two men said, “You can go in.”

As I stepped inside, it felt as if I’d entered an interrogation room but with groups of people dressed in a mixture of suits and street clothes sitting around a table. It was a bit surreal.

Devani sat on one end of the table with Camilla. On the exact opposite side were a group of men and women who carried an aura of arrogance. Without a doubt, they were CIA. Marcus sat in the middle, with two people I remembered Rex Busch pointing out as possible Interpol agents.

Well, okay then.

How the hell Marcus had managed this, I’d never know. Scratch that, I knew. Solon had its way of getting in anywhere. I had posed as BND, so why couldn’t Marcus work his way into Interpol?

Marcus and Devani definitely had their chess games on point, if their cool, *I'm bored* expressions were any indicators.

“Thank you, Agent Jameson, for bringing in Ms. Lennox, or should I call you Cora Hass?” Marcus’s words had every nerve in my body freezing.

I glanced at Devani, who gestured to the seat by her. “I believe using her given name is appropriate.”

I took an empty chair next to Devani, and Noah slid into the one next to Camilla.

I tried to wrap my mind around everything happening in the room as Marcus and Devani made quick introductions. The problem was I couldn’t make heads or tails of any of it.

Why would they blindside me like this?

The lead on the CIA side, Mike Kerr, turned to me. “Ms. Lennox. I’m going to state this clearly. The terms Director Patel negotiated are heavily in your favor, therefore, we expect complete cooperation.”

Before I could respond, Devani spoke. “The term ‘complete’ is subjective. As per our agreement, you must clear all plans with me prior to implementation.”

Her no-argument tone almost had me smiling. Well, I might have if I wasn’t so pissed about all of this.

“Of course, Director.”

Kerr returned his attention to me. “How much do you know about this assignment, Ms. Lennox?”

Devani inclined her head, giving me the go-ahead to speak.

“Absolutely nothing.”

“We require your alias, Cora Hass.”

As if I hadn’t figured this out already. It was the only thing I understood about this whole fucking assignment so far.

“I see.” I held his gaze. “And what exactly is my alias going to do?”

“The folder in front of you has the detailed logistics of the case. Here is the overview. While you worked under Rex Busch, you had considerable contact with Saun Huber. We need your help to apprehend him. He is our prime suspect as the chief financier of a human trafficking ring.”

My stomach dropped.

“By using me as bait.” I glared at him.

During my time working for Rex, hedge fund manager Saun Huber had hired me to program some very illegal software into microchips which he used to help him funnel money for his clients. He loved my work so much that he recommended me to others and helped me gain the reputation I had on the Dark Web.

The problem with him had been his interest in me outside of professional. He kept asking me out, going as far as offering me jewels, vacations, and even a marriage proposal behind Rex’s back. I’d become an obsession of his. An obsession that had grown to the point that made me think he’d have me kidnapped if given the opportunity. Given the human trafficking aspect of this case, my gut feelings were probably correct.

After I’d gone underground, he’d made it a mission to lure me out of hiding, offering me ungodly amounts of money and promises of protection if I contacted him.

Now it looked as if Van was using Saun’s fixation on me to clear my record, and these fuckers were going to exploit the same thing to the max.

“Precisely, Ms. Lennox,” Marcus interjected. “I’m sure you’re aware, Huber is fixated on finding you. You have a way of making the sanest men go to great lengths to seek you out.”

“And how am I supposed to apprehend him for you?”

“You will work with one of our counterparts to network and meet members of Huber’s inner circle, laying the foundation for Huber to seek you out. Once Huber makes contact, we will advise you on the next steps based on discussion with Director Patel.”

“Where is the location for this case?”

“New York City, and the cover is yourself. Meaning you, as Lillian Josephine Lennox, will reveal yourself as Cora Hass during the course of this case. Thus, enticing Saun Huber to seek you out.” Kerr held my gaze as if he expected me to refuse.

Why would he use my full name?

“Is my role concerning my father?”

The corner of the man’s lips turned up slightly. “Your connection to him was a factor in the negotiations with Director Patel. It does solidify your assimilation into your counterpart’s circle.”

“What role am I supposed to play, exactly, in this counterpart’s circle?”

“Nothing more than what you were in Germany before your disappearance. A mob princess,” Marcus said in a condescending way meant to piss me off. “As well as your counterpart’s girlfriend, lover, or whatever label you would like to put on it.”

This was all I needed to complicate my life even more. How was I going to explain this to Rey?

He wanted things from me I could never give him, and all I could do was hurt him over and over again.

I had no doubt that if I glanced in Camilla’s direction, her eyes would shout, “This is what you get for leaving that damn island!”

Keeping my face as calm as possible, I asked in a tone that matched Marcus’s disparaging one, “Why would you require the services of a wanted criminal for a multi-agency case? Aren’t you afraid I’ll double-cross you, especially since escaping with Huber benefits me?”

“We have people watching, and they would know.” Marcus lifted a brow. “Your deal is contingent on your cooperation, Ms. Lennox. You can’t hide from us.”

“Are you sure about that? I’m very good at what I do. You only know where I am because I let you see me.”

Devani cleared her throat next to me and then set the pad of her foot over mine and pressed down in a warning to shut up.

Yeah, yeah. I got the message. This wasn’t our Marcus.

“Lilly. This is what Agents Kerr and Abalo are failing to relay. They need you to draw Saun Huber onto US soil. Once he is here, we will take care of the rest.” Devani gestured to herself, Noah, and Camilla.

Okay then.

They wanted Solon to do the dirty work.

Neither the CIA nor Interpol could technically conduct an operation on American soil without a big political mess.

And since Solon had no allegiance to any country and ran by a loose set of moral rules, we were called in for cases that required a hands-off-but-thanks-for-the-assistance touch.

“Do this for us, Ms. Lennox, and”—Kerr paused as if whatever he was about to say was going to leave a bad taste in his mouth—“the agencies will owe you and Director Patel a debt in return.”

I bit the inside of my cheek, holding in a smile.

Well, okay then. It always helped to have both the CIA and Interpol owe you one.

“Who is my counterpart, and when do we meet?”

Kerr glanced at his watch. “I expect him any minute.”

“I suggest you take a look at the detailed logistics while you wait. It will give you all the information your heart desires.” Marcus really had the dickhead Interpol agent persona down pat. “Plus, he already knows your alias.” He paused and then continued. “Intimately.”

Oh, fuck me. This couldn’t be happening.

I clenched my jaw as all the blood drained from my face and anger pulsed in my head.

Turning, I glared at Devani and muttered under my breath, “You are a manipulative fucking bitch, Devani Patel.”

REYHAN

A LITTLE BEFORE ONE IN THE AFTERNOON, I ARRIVED AT AN old renovated brownstone that now housed a collection of CIA offices for joint operations between various US-based and international agencies.

Irritation had pulsed deep in my veins since waking up in Lilly's bed alone, and I had to get it together before this meeting.

She'd disappeared again. Without a word, a note, anything.

Maybe I was the one more vested in us from the beginning, and that's why I couldn't let go. She sure as fuck could walk out without a backward glance.

And to think I was going to pass on this assignment after falling asleep with Lilly wrapped in my arms.

Fuck that shit.

I'd do as she'd told me to do over and over.

I'd move on.

Once I finished this meet-and-greet, I'd go to the gallery and tell her she was free. She could do whatever the fuck she wanted. If she wanted to disappear, then she could be my guest.

Adjusting my tie, I took a deep breath and prepared to play my role. And what a fucking role it was.

Sam said I never was Reyhan King.

Well, for this assignment, that's who I was. No better way to end my agency career than by being me. No messy cleanup. No waiting out a transition period. I'd get to move right back into my life.

Sam had no idea I'd already planned to leave after the shooting. It wasn't just the fact my reputation had taken a hit, but if anything had happened, I'd have died under a different name without my brothers around. No matter how much shit we gave each other, we'd gone through hell and back, first surviving on the streets and then in the ruthless business Arin had passed to us.

Maybe once I took over some of Sam's responsibilities, he'd chill the fuck out a little. It wasn't as if he was the only one who knew how to put a fucking real estate or equity deal together.

My driver and security, Marty, came around to my door, and I stepped out into the street.

Moving into the building, I passed through security and then onto the elevators until I reached a conference room.

Two agents I'd worked on other cases with in the past waited for me.

One of them scanned me up and down and lifted a brow. "You clean up well, Mr. King."

"Thank you, Turner. What am I walking into?"

"Abalo is waiting inside with his team. The last of Patel's team arrived fifteen minutes ago. Everyone is feeling each other out. You know, the usual."

"Do they know the objective?"

"I believe they are going over the preliminaries now. They brought in the hacker. The rumor is she has some type of reputation in certain circles."

I thought of Lilly and Danika. I was familiar with hackers who were women with reputations.

“Is she a local?”

Turner shook his head. “British, from what I could gather. So was the agent with her.”

“Anything else I should know?”

“Your hacker almost had a panic attack as soon as she realized she was in one of our facilities. I chalked it up to the illegal shit they do. Maybe the deal they struck with her didn’t calm her nerves. I propose slipping her something for anxiety.”

Dear God, please don’t give me a partner who can’t cut it in the field. I needed someone who’d shoot to kill, not someone who wanted me to hold their head over a toilet after seeing a gun.

No, Devani wouldn’t do that to me. We’d worked together too many times for her to saddle me with anyone who cracked under pressure.

“Let’s hope she can handle the stress.” I opened the door and stepped inside.

All conversation ceased, and an undercurrent of tension filled the room.

Kerr and my team sat on the side of the meeting space.

Marcus Abalo, one of the Interpol leads out of the unit in Paris, sat at the table in the center. There was a look of boredom on his face, an expression he seemed to favor every time I’d encountered him. The guy annoyed the shit out of me half the time, and the other half, he was funny as hell. You never knew what you’d get from him.

I scanned the rest of the table and focused on a stern-faced blond woman who seemed to hate me on sight if the glare she was shooting me was any indication.

I had to remember to stay away from her.

Then everything inside me froze.

Lilly.

There, next to Devani. My gaze landed on her. Her stormy gray eyes watched me with a touch of apprehension and fear

as if she hadn't anticipated me, either.

"Welcome, Agent King," Kerr greeted me and then introduced everyone in the room.

I barely heard anything. My attention remained solely fixed on Lilly.

"And lastly, Lilly Lennox. She has agreed to partner with you and to use her alias, Cora Hass, to assist us in the capture of Saun Huber."

I clenched my teeth as a war of emotions and memories flooded my mind.

Cora represented everything that had destroyed us.

The lies, the pain, the deceit.

Neither of us said anything. We only stared at each other.

This was why she'd left me to wake up alone.

The hacker with the reputation, who'd cut a deal giving immunity for all crimes said hacker may or may not have committed and would commit in the line of duty.

If I wasn't so pissed, I'd be in awe of Devani Patel's sheer balls when it came to maneuvering and tactics. She'd given Cora Hass a get-out-of-jail-free card.

Suddenly, I noticed the redness on Lilly's cheek, and my temper flared for another reason.

Who the fuck had slapped her?

"King, is something wrong?" Marcus Abalo asked, snapping me out of my thoughts.

"No, everything is fine." I continued to hold Lilly's gaze.

There was a slight tremble to her lips before a blank mask washed over her face, giving her an utterly emotionless appearance.

"Is it going to be a problem working with someone you know on a personal basis?" Abalo asked with a hint of amusement in his voice. "Especially someone who tried to kill you."

The room grew quiet.

“I’m sure you’re well aware that she works for my sister-in-law. We’ve spent the last six months around each other without her attempting to shoot me again. I think I can handle it.” I moved to a seat near my team.

“You’ll have to do more than handle it. You are required to perform in an intimate capacity. It will only work if you’re convincing,” Marcus countered. “Is it possible for you to rekindle past affection, considering your history?”

“I’m sure they can figure it out,” Devani interjected. “Neither of them are unfamiliar with the many facets of sex.”

Sex was the only thing we had right. Everything else teetered in the realm of train wrecks and car explosions.

Soon, Lilly, we’ll have our talk, and I’ll finally get every one of my fucking answers, whether you want to give them to me or not.

Ignoring Devani’s comment, Marcus asked, “Ms. Lennox, will this be a problem for you? I’m sure Mr. King isn’t your biggest fan. Can you handle the role of an intimate relationship with him?”

Lilly glanced at me, the undercurrent of everything from the night still humming between us, and then glared at Marcus. “As Director Patel stated, King and I will figure it out.”

Oh, we would figure it out. That was for sure.

“Now that’s settled. Let’s start with details of our first event.” Devani flipped open her folder, and we spent the rest of the afternoon going over the detailed logistics of the case.

I ARRIVED AT THE DAYAL-KING GALLERY A LITTLE AFTER eight in the evening, knowing three things. Danika and Nik were on a date, the gallery closed at four on Saturdays, and the only person who worked after hours was Lilly.

The briefing between the CIA, Interpol, and Solon teams had been anything but brief, lasting nearly six hours. By the end of it, I wanted to pull my hair out.

The Solon team, specifically, liked details on a level I'd never encountered. They asked questions as if they had a collective mind. Then, with Lilly in the mix and her alternative viewpoints and suggestions, there was no aspect of the setup that she hadn't considered.

Maybe it was her BND training, but she thought like a seasoned agent. The only thing that seemed to agitate her was the idea of revealing to anyone Lilly and Cora were the same person.

I could understand her hesitation. She'd worked so hard to separate the two. Now, her deal made that impossible.

Cupping the back of my head, I inhaled a deep, steady breath. I'd made a promise to her father to protect her. If at all possible, I'd help her keep her identities separate.

Who was I kidding? This had nothing to do with her father.

All through the meeting, I'd gotten glimpses of the vulnerable woman who, once upon a time, I'd have walked through hell for without anyone having to ask.

Cora Hass had done a number on both of us. I'd gotten shot and lived to tell the tale. She'd gone on the run, hoping to survive to see the next day.

Once I parked my car, I walked up to the side entrance leading into the receiving area of the building, punched in the access code, and cleared the next four levels of Danika's many security protocols. I had to hand it to her, she took no chances with her building. It seemed as if it was a hacker thing since Lilly had rigged her place the same way.

As I made my way up the service stairs, I expected Lilly was well aware of my presence in the building. If I wanted to hide my arrival, I would have taken a different route.

Once I reached the third level, I took a hallway leading to the appraisal room. Just as I reached the area, the frosted glass

enclosing the space cleared, revealing Lilly holding a small controller and leaning against one of the high tables inside.

She'd changed out of her street clothes into black and green athletic leggings and a fitted top that showed off every fucking curve on her body. Back was the messy bun she favored on top of her head, giving me a vision of tousling it up some more.

Her face was void of makeup, making her look years younger than twenty-eight. The redness on her cheek was less pronounced but still visible.

Whoever touched her, I planned to punch in the face.

As my fingers closed around the door handle, she stood, setting the black device on the table to her side.

I waited until the door closed behind me to say anything, just held her wary gray gaze.

“So, you cut a deal?”

“Devani is the mastermind behind it.”

Of course, she was. The woman's hands were in everything.

“How do you know her?”

“Chris. He introduced us.”

I hated that fucker.

“Before you ask, we met during university.”

“Were you ever lovers?”

Her lips curved up slightly. “We've slept together, but we've never been lovers.”

What the hell did that mean?

“Has he seen you naked?”

She bit her lip. “Not in the carnal sense that you have.”

“So, the simple answer is that you two are close college friends.”

“Something like that.”

“How did he go the Solon route and you the appraiser-hacker route?”

“Considering my ties to Solon, I did take that route too.”

“Can I assume you did something big to get Devani to negotiate the kind of deal she did?”

The humor left her gray eyes. “It’s more about what I am.”

“What are you?”

“A high-value asset.” The tinge of bitterness in the tone made me believe this was at least one thing true in the many answers she’d given me.

“How much of what you just told me is a fabrication, and how much is the complete truth?”

“That’s something you’ll have to figure out.”

“What would you do to keep a lie going?”

“It depends on what was at stake.”

“What is the ultimate stake for you, Lilly?”

She swallowed. “People I love.”

“Who do you love, Lilly?”

She gripped the counter behind her, dropping her head for a moment, and then answered. “The ones I hurt and leave behind.”

“You left me behind. Hell, you shot me to keep me from following you to that ship. Can I assume you loved me?” I slowly moved toward her.

“Why does it matter, Rey? It doesn’t change the outcome.”

“Let’s talk about outcomes, then. No one seems to know the answer to this, except that you disappeared. What happened after you shot me?”

“Rex locked me in a cargo hold and tried to kill me. He thought letting Cora take the fall for his dealing with all of his buyers for art, drugs, software, and human cargo was the easiest way to clear suspicion from his name.”

Now Lilly's rage when she captured him in London made sense. She'd wanted him to pay for what he'd put her through.

"How did you escape?"

"I train. He doesn't." She shrugged, but something on her face said it was more than that.

I wanted to press her to tell me what exactly had happened to her, but she'd close off more than she already was.

"Why did you come out of hiding? Was getting back at Rex that important to you?"

"He deserved to pay for what he did."

"True. But others had plans in the works to make that happen. You had to know this. Why did you come back? You could have provided your services on the black market and never surfaced again."

"Living on a remote island isn't as relaxing as I expected. I like the excitement of a city." Her lips curved at the sides, but the humor never reached her eyes.

The chasm of information she held back grated on my senses. What wasn't she saying? Who was she protecting?

"Is that the real reason?"

"Yes."

"Liar." I stopped a few feet from her.

"And I'm a thief and a murderer too. We established this a while ago."

"I'm all of the same things."

"But as you said, it isn't illegal when you do it."

"As of today, it isn't for you, either."

"That's only true for the duration of this case. Once it's over, my immunity for new acts disappears."

"Are you already making plans for after this case?"

"Yes. I'm leaving," Lilly whispered.

"What about us?"

“There is no us.”

She knew her statement was a lie as much as I did.

“Is that what you believe or what you’re trying to make yourself believe?”

“It’s the truth. There is no point in pretending otherwise.”

“If that’s how you want to play it. My answer to your leaving is no.”

Lilly narrowed her gaze. “What do you mean by no? I’m clear from all agencies. I’m free. You can’t bind me to your stupid blackmail.”

“Oh, that’s where you’re wrong.”

Step.

“You’re still bound for shooting me.”

Step.

“You’re still bound for continuing to lie to me.”

Step.

“You’re still bound for breaking my heart.”

“I don’t remember our agreement having those exact terms.”

When I was right upon her, I trapped her by setting my hands on either side of her and then leaning forward until our faces were an inch apart.

“I believe you misunderstand the meaning of blackmail. There is no concept of agreement.” I fanned my lips over hers and watched her eyes dilate into pools of dark gray. “And when it comes to terms, they are all mine.”

“Rey, we can’t pick up where we left off. Too much has happened.”

“There is no picking up for us. We’re in the real world now. No more illusion. When we fuck, it’s Lilly and Rey. Cora is a fictional character you play, nothing more.” I couldn’t help but smile as a thought came to mind. “You know something?”

This is the first time I'm ever going to fuck one of my partners."

"What makes you think you're going to fuck me?"

"Oh, we're going to fuck." I threaded my fingers into her hair as her palm came to settle on my chest. "So often that there will be no doubt in anyone's mind whether we're together."

Her breaths grew erratic, and her fingers flexed on my shirt as if she wasn't sure whether she'd push me away or bring me closer. "We aren't together."

"For the duration of the assignment, we most definitely are. And after, we'll see if you can renegotiate terms." I leaned down, covering her lips with mine.

Just as I deepened the kiss, the ding of the appraisal lab elevator chimed, causing Lilly and me to freeze.

A second later, Nik and Danika stepped out.

"Hey, Lilly, are you hungry? We brought fo—" Danika stopped mid-step with a look first of shock and then of amusement.

Nik, on the other hand, just shook his head and glanced down at Danika. "Told you it was true."

I knew better, but I asked anyway. "What's true?"

"That you and Lilly had a Jayna and Kir-style discussion last night in the ladies' locker room to resolve your differences."

Lilly dropped her head against my shoulder, trying to hide her face.

Jayna and Kir were notorious for having sex in the craziest places and not caring who knew about it.

"You're such an asshole."

"Hey, you're the one who asked."

LILLY

I SMILED AS I STEPPED INTO MY APARTMENT TWO HOURS AFTER Danika and Nik's impromptu arrival at the gallery. After clearing my security and toeing off my sneakers near the shoe stand, I strode straight to my kitchen to grab a fork for the cake she had specially packaged for me.

Danika knew my love for all things desserts, so I wasn't going to complain. And since Rey had stayed behind with Nik and Danika, I wouldn't have to share when I opened the box.

I could still see the death glare Rey had shot Nik when he'd reminded Rey that it was his night to represent the Kings at The Library, the underground poker club the brothers owned.

In all honesty, I was relieved Rey hadn't come home with me. The ride back to the townhouse had given me time to think, to process.

Hell, I was still processing.

I'd gone from fighting with Rey whenever we were around each other and letting him believe the worst in me to sleeping with him and partnering with him on a case where I'd be the very person who'd destroyed my relationship with him. All within the course of less than twenty-four hours.

If this was fate trying to tell me something, I wished she'd start clearing things up because my heart was too battered to

take any more of her shit.

On the long flight from London to New York months ago, I'd finally accepted that I'd never have the life Solon had promised me when I'd joined. Not unless the current European Directors Council vacated their roles by the same means by which they'd come into power.

Seeing Marcus and Camilla here emphasized it even more. No matter what they implied, I was no dummy and had been in the game long enough to know there was way more to their presence on the case than to watch a lost asset.

Until I could corner Marcus and Camilla and demand all the details, I had no choice but to stay the course. Plus, I wouldn't lie to myself and say it didn't give me a sense of comfort knowing the people I completely trusted were watching my back.

Marcus, Camilla, Noah, and I had started off as teachers, students, friends, and partners, then became a makeshift family. Later, Devani joined our motley crew of misfits during a case in West Africa and somehow completed our unconventional circle.

Over the last ten years or so, we'd gone to insane lengths to keep each other safe and alive. My situation from last year was the latest in a long list of unbelievable circumstances we tended to get ourselves into.

The only other people who'd always had my back were my parents and brothers. They'd burn down a city for me.

Like literally.

Leaving them was one of the hardest decisions I'd ever made, but I'd rather have them think the worst of me than suffer the consequences of my career.

Glancing at my watch, I made a mental note to send Mama a birthday gift.

At times like these, I missed her the most. Mama had this way about putting everything into perspective, even when the world went to shit.

I sighed. Maybe the cake would get me out of this funk.

Yep. That's what I needed.

Cake.

And then a long shower.

I opened a drawer, grabbed a fork, pulled out the cooler-type dessert container from the bag, and placed it on the counter.

Damn, this hadn't looked so big in the bag. Danika must have gotten me the whole cake and not just a slice.

Who was I to complain?

As I pried open the lid, a whiff of cold, smoky air came out. Once the fog cleared out, my heart lurched.

Oh, Danika.

My eyes welled up as I picked up the envelope sitting on top of the wrapped cake.

It had my name in Mama's handwriting.

This was the first time in over six years she'd known my location and had a way to contact me.

Breaking the family wax seal, I slid out and opened the card.

I could barely make it past the first paragraph before my tears started flowing uncontrollably, and I knew it was finally time to admit I'd broken our family by leaving, even if I'd been trying to protect them.

CLOSING MY EYES, I DROPPED MY HEAD AGAINST THE STONE wall of my shower as the scalding spray from the jets pummeled my skin. It eased some of the tension in my muscles but still left my mind an exhausted mess.

The unexpected gift from Mama had literally been the icing on the cake of an emotionally draining day that seemed

as if it would never end.

Mama's letter was beautiful and painful.

She'd filled it with stories of her, Papa, and my brothers, their wives, and children. Not once was there any mention of my coming back to Berlin. However, I'd read the undercurrent of her message.

I could always go home.

By the end of the seven-page letter, I'd decided that once this assignment ended, I'd find a way to go to Berlin, face my family, confront demons, and make them understand the reasons behind my choices.

I could almost see the scowl on Papa's face once he learned that the boarding school he'd sent me to, believing it would keep me safe from our family's life in Berlin, was the place where Solon had recruited me. He'd probably threaten to tear the place to the ground to save another father from heartache.

Sometimes I wondered what would have happened if I'd told them what I'd gotten into from the very beginning.

Long before the coup that changed Solon, when I loved my job, when it was an adventure, when I felt I was going to make a difference in a fucked-up world.

I had no doubt Papa and my brothers would have had a few choice words about my decisions, but they'd have kept my secret. Hell, they'd probably have begged to help me with assignments, knowing them.

There was no point in thinking about what-ifs.

The organization I loved no longer existed, not in Europe anyway. Overnight, I'd gone from a valued agent on the rise to an asset to use until deemed disposable.

No one should have to sever close ties to their loved ones in order to protect them. But nearly everyone at my level had made that same decision. And those who chose to believe the new Council would follow the ways of the old one when every indication said otherwise had suffered the loss of spouses,

parents, children, and lovers after they'd disappointed their new Council.

I'd managed to avoid the same mistake for years, keeping a level head and my focus sharp, and then I'd met an insufferable ass who wouldn't take no for an answer.

As I tilted my head back to let the water cascade over my hair, I felt Rey's familiar presence in the bathroom. Of course, he'd show up when my thoughts drifted to him.

Pushing the wet strands from my face, I glanced over my shoulder and asked, "Who gave you the access codes, Devani or Danika?"

"I may not have your skills, but I'm not completely useless." He opened the door's outer glass enclosure and stepped inside. "I do know my way around a tight B&E job."

"What about The Library? Aren't you on duty?"

"Sam decided he needed a distraction and relieved me."

He stepped into the spray of the jets and set his hands on my waist. The instant he touched me, I wanted to lean against him, let him wrap his arms around me, allow him to give me a little comfort.

Instead, I dropped my head forward and closed my eyes again.

"Rey, you shouldn't have come. I can't go through any more right now." Just saying those words brought a wave of exhaustion and tears to my eyes.

His palms glided over my stomach as he pressed his naked front to my back. "What's wrong?"

"Are you asking that after the day we've had?"

"This is more than earlier."

"Leave it alone." A hiccup escaped my lips, betraying the depth of my turmoil, and a tear spilled down my cheek.

"You're crying. You hide your pain with that annoying mask of yours, but you don't cry."

“You think you know me, but you don’t. You know the illusion I gave you. Now go away.”

“Oh no you don’t.” He turned me and then caged me with his arms. “You said at the gym that it wasn’t just me. That means I do know you. What happened after you left the gallery?”

My temper flared, and I gritted out, “Let. It. Go. And get out of my apartment.”

“No.”

“What do you mean no? I said I wanted to be alone. Go away.”

He leaned his face down until we were nose to nose. “No.”

“Fuck you with your damn *nos*.” I shoved him back, but he grabbed my wrists, holding them against his chest.

“What happened?”

“You want to know what happened?” I shouted as the tears I tried so hard to hide from him flowed down my cheeks. “My mother sent Danika a fucking cake with a letter for me. That’s what happened. It was the dessert Danika brought me.”

Rey’s face softened. “Lilly.”

“Mama told me that Papa learned to golf. He hated golf. That my baby brother will have a baby soon. That my family is living their lives.” I closed my eyes for a brief second. “And you know what? I’m not part of any of it. It’s my own damn fault. I chose this. I left them. I did this to myself.”

I tried to jerk my arm, struggling with Rey’s grip to get free. I needed space. He couldn’t see me like this. I had to get it together.

“Lilly, breathe.” He pulled me into him, wrapping me in a tight hug. “Let it out. I’ve got you.”

He kissed the top of my head, and that was all it took for the dam to break. I pressed my face into his wet chest and sobbed while the shower poured down on us.

When my tears finally dried up, Rey leaned me back against the shower wall. A bone-tiredness had seeped in on a level I'd never experienced. Not even when I'd spent months on the run to keep anyone from finding me after leaving the safe house.

I pushed the soaked hair from my face and watched Rey lather a loofah with some of my favorite soap.

He hadn't spoken a single word while I cried, just held me and stroked up and down my back with his fingers, giving me the comfort I craved so much.

Don't do this to me, Rey. Don't make me wish for things I can't have again.

Before I thought too long on it, Rey came back to stand in front of me.

"How big is your hot water tank? It should be empty by now."

"There is an on-demand water system in the building for each townhouse. Less energy wasted than to heat up water in a tank and have it cooling and heating constantly."

"Makes sense, unless someone takes a thirty-minute shower, then water and heat use are to the max." He smiled down at me and then twirled his finger in a gesture to turn.

I shifted, facing the shower wall and bracing my palms on the tile.

Rey gathered my hair onto one shoulder, kissed the other, and lathered my back in soft, gentle strokes. His movements were hypnotic and relaxing.

"Turn back around."

I followed his direction, settling my spine against the travertine.

He knelt at my feet, beads of water dripping down his face and sculpted body. He had this utter masculine perfection about him. Maybe not perfection—that was too pretty a word. He was a handsome man, there was no doubt, but it was more

than that. From the moment we'd met, I'd known the suit he'd worn hid something dangerous, raw, forbidden.

It drew a woman to put her better judgment to the side and take what he offered.

Hell, that's exactly what I'd done. But instead of just taking it, I'd jumped into the deep end with him.

By the time he'd soaped the front of my body and stood, my skin tingled, and the ache in my heart had dulled, being replaced by a physical one only he seemed to bring out in me.

He wasn't immune to the shift in energy between us. His cock hardened, pressing against my belly, and I licked my lips as we stared into each other's eyes.

Instead of kissing me, he reached for the knobs of the jets and said, "Let's get you in bed."

I set a hand on his wrist. "I don't want to go to bed."

"You're in no condition for anything but sleep."

I stepped against him, trapping his hard, pulsing erection between our bodies.

"I know how much I can handle. Besides, you said you planned to fuck me often. There is no time like the present," I whispered through desperate, needy pants.

He gripped my hips, and his pupils dilated, making his eyes turn black with golden rings around them.

I grazed my fingers over his arms, letting my nails score his beautiful tanned skin, heated from the shower and arousal, until I twined my arms around his neck.

"Lilly." The rasp of my name sent a shiver down my spine.

"Please."

He closed his eyes for a brief second, and then when he opened them, dark lust stared back at me. "We do this my way. Got it?"

Licking my lips, I nodded.

He cupped the back of my head, tilting it up, and brushed his mouth against mine in slow, soft caresses.

He teased, seduced, never deepening the kiss. He trailed down my jaw and along the curve of my neck behind my ear, making me gasp and hunger for more.

“You were always so sensitive here.” His tongue darted out to brush the spot, sending goosebumps all over my skin.

He continued lower, down my throat, to the valley between my breasts. Cupping the mounds, he laved, nipped, and teased each nipple, driving my desire higher and higher.

“Stop teasing me.” I combed my fingers through his wet hair and whimpered as the ache deep in my core intensified.

His lips curved, and I almost had the urge to shove him away, but that would have only tortured me.

He sank onto his knees again, gripped my thighs in that firm, possessive way only he’d ever discovered turned me on, and pressed me back against the warm, wet tile.

“Spread your legs.”

A spasm shot through my pussy at the command in his words.

I braced my feet apart and immediately felt the slide of water and the heat of his mouth between my folds.

“Rey,” I moaned as my fingers flexed in his strands.

His tongue darted out, gliding up and down the seam of my pussy lips, then circling my clit in leisurely caresses before finally pushing into my core.

“Oooh God.” My back bowed as sensations coursed through me.

His mouth worked my sex, building my arousal higher and higher. He stroked, tasted, and teased. I could barely gasp in shallow breaths. Just when I thought I’d go mad from the need to come, he thrust two fingers through the swollen muscles of my soaked core, shooting me into oblivion.

Everything inside me quivered and then contracted.

I cried out, pushing one hand back against the shower wall, and the other gripped thick, soaked strands of his hair.

My legs wobbled, and I felt him brace me with his shoulders as he continued to command my body with his deliciously wicked mouth and fingers.

Slowly, as I came down, he rose to his feet, his eyes desire-glazed and almost black with the barest hint of gold.

His mouth covered mine, pressing his front to mine. The heady taste of me on his lips drove up my arousal again. He filled my senses in a way no other man dared.

He lifted my legs around his waist, positioned himself, and in the next second, thrust his hard, thick cock deep into my slick pussy.

I held on to his shoulders, losing myself in the heady sensation of him pistoning in and out of me.

“Lilly,” he murmured against my lips. “You’re mine.”

My heart clenched at these words.

If only it was possible. I couldn’t belong to him. I couldn’t even belong to myself.

“Do you hear me?”

The command in his question had me opening my eyes, and I said, “This is enough for now.”

He pulled back, staring at me as if my response was a challenge. “We’ll see.”

His pace increased, growing more demanding and forceful. My pussy responded, quivering and flooding with desire. The pulsing deep in my core grew more intense, and then my core clamped down as I tumbled into another orgasm, plunging Rey into his own.

REYHAN

“LILLY, ARE YOU IN POSITION?” I HEARD THE PRICK JAMESON say in my earpiece as I waited for the signal to exit my car and officially start the initial event for the joint agencies’ assignment.

“Yes. I’ve set the first one in place. I really don’t see what I’m doing here. Any idiot can do this. I thought I was here to make contacts with people for the case.”

I would have laughed at her annoyance if I wasn’t so irritated with her myself.

She truly was the most exasperating woman I’d ever encountered. After a night where I’d believed we’d broken down barrier after barrier, she’d fucking left me.

Again.

At least, this time, I’d had a note.

REY,

Thank you for last night. I can’t let this be anything other than casual.

I won’t lead you on. It’s only going to hurt more when I leave.

Lilly

THAT HAD BEEN FIVE DAYS AGO.

I still couldn't figure out how she'd snuck out of the place.

I slept light. Maybe once I'd buy that she could manage to leave without detection, but twice? No way.

I would have heard the door open. Her bedroom was a fucking loft, for Christ's sake.

I'd searched her apartment for a hidden exit of any kind. Knowing Devani, I wouldn't put it past her to have secret passages constructed in all of her buildings.

If it wasn't for some pressing King Holdings business across the country that I had to handle, I'd have cornered Lilly by now.

She was so used to running that it was her go-to method of handling things. She wanted roots so badly, but the thought of having any connection with anyone scared the shit out of her.

No point in worrying about it now.

After tonight, all of New York society would know we were together, whether she liked it or not. And, sure as hell, Lennox would find out. More than likely, he already knew.

I wasn't stupid enough to believe he'd leave the safety of his daughter entirely in my hands. Now that Lennox was aware of her location, he'd station his people throughout New York to keep an "eye" on all things associated with Lilly.

There was no doubt she frustrated the hell out of the tail Papa Lennox posted on her too.

It made me wonder what Lennox thought of who she was now. The tough-as-nails woman who held everything in until she broke was nothing like the Lillian Lennox from the reports.

Before the incident nearly seven years ago, Joseph Lennox's baby girl had been a carefree, hippyish woman who enjoyed life to the fullest, dressed in stylish, loose clothing, and laughed at everything. She was the light of her father's eye

and had a way of making people find joy in every situation. She was also known for having no fear and a willingness to face any challenge head-on.

Which was why it had surprised everyone that she'd run from the scandal with her ex and his family.

One day, I'd learn the truth.

My gut said, once I got to the bottom of this, it would solve many of the issues in my relationship with her.

"We already went over this, Lennox." The matched irritation in Abalo's response had me smiling. "While you're waiting to step into your arm candy role, you can make yourself useful. You agreed to the parameters of the assignment for your freedom."

"Asshole," she muttered.

"I heard that."

"I meant for you to hear it."

I couldn't figure out if he disliked Lilly because of the deal Devani made on her behalf or if something personal had happened between them.

On a positive note, at least I wasn't on the receiving end of her wrath. And even if I was, we could fuck the energy off later.

Though if Abalo ever touched her, I'd break his face.

"You're on, King." Jameson's voice sounded into my earpiece. "Your old friend is in the exhibit hall to the right when you enter. Lilly is across from it."

Once my car pulled up, I stepped out into the cold late-October air. I made my way up the stairs into the museum, nodded to the security, and then approached a waiting attendant.

A glimmer of recognition hit her eyes as she remembered me from the old neighborhood.

"Mr. King." She waved me forward without taking my invitation.

After my security screening through a metal detector, I strolled into the room Jameson directed me to enter. There, in a corner, was my target.

Craig Felix.

I wouldn't call him a friend as much as an acquaintance. We'd known of each other in the old neighborhood.

Looking at us now, no one would believe we'd worn dirty clothes and run with gangs to survive when we should have been sitting in classrooms and learning algebra.

We'd shed the aura of poverty and learned a new game that had allowed us the ability to slide into the world of the affluent. He'd married his way into the life by seducing the eldest daughter of a French hedge fund manager. Whereas I'd had the good luck of trying to rob Arin and then gaining the influence of his stern hand.

I learned early the risks to take and when to call before the stakes crossed a line from which we couldn't come back. Craig, on the other hand, couldn't see past the profit.

And it was well known the pool of money available on the black-market sale of human cargo was endless. Even if he wasn't involved in the physical transportation of people, he provided the means to allow it to happen.

Now I'd let him lead me to the head of his organization of financiers, Saun Huber.

Though, the thought of using Lilly to facilitate it left an uneasiness in the pit of my stomach. I'd spent enough time researching Huber. His obsession with Cora Hass went beyond someone with interest only in her technical skills. He'd put her on some unhealthy pedestal that made it dangerous.

He wanted her not just as a woman, a lover, but someone to collect, a prize. As if he was procuring art.

I picked up a champagne flute from a passing waiter and slowly strolled toward Craig, pausing to study a painting or two on the way.

“King. It’s been a long time.” I turned to my left to find Craig standing next to me with two women by his side.

One of them I recognized as his wife, Julia, and the other I assumed was the best friend the reports said rarely left her side.

“How are you, Felix? It’s good to see you.” We shook hands.

“Let me introduce you. This is my wife, Julia, and a good friend of ours, Olivia Hanson. This is Reyhan King. We grew up in the same neighborhood.”

Both gave their greetings, and we exchanged pleasantries. Within a few seconds, I pegged Olivia as a predator trying to size me up on whether I was a potential mark. Outside of recognizing my name, I noticed her attempt a subtle scan of my clothes, cufflinks, and watch. I’d dealt with plenty of people like this over the years.

In my line of work, I’d let women like this catch me on purpose for my own use.

Then a thought crossed my mind that had me holding in the urge to clench my teeth and frown.

Had Lilly ever done the same thing?

Even if she had, I had no place to judge. Just as Sam said, I’d done shit like that as a teen.

If only she wasn’t wrapped in so many secrets. I was still clueless as ever on why she’d worked for Rex Busch in the first place. With her skills, she could have done anything.

Hell, if she wanted to join the Dark Web hacker circuit, she could have gone Danika’s route and offered her services on a one-off basis.

“I didn’t know you enjoyed events like this.” Craig brought my attention back to him.

“I attend events when there is something interesting to see.” I scanned the room, looking for Lilly.

My lips curved as I found her examining a painting. Trust her to find a unique art piece to inspect in the middle of an assignment.

I could almost hear Abalo giving her shit later in the evening for losing focus. She'd more than likely inform him that women were gifted with the ability to multitask and to fuck off.

"Who is that?" Julia asked. "I'm not sure if I've seen her at an event before."

Lilly was absolutely breathtaking. The barely-there dress she'd worn to Danika's event had brought out the caveman in me. However, this one gave her a regal aura. This gown covered every inch of her long, athletic body in a deep purple hue, hugging every curve. The only hint of skin showed through her sheer long sleeves. Her hair was set in some artful design meant to sit on one shoulder. And in her ears and on her neck sat jewels—from the look of them, expensive jewels.

Diamonds. But with secrets.

The stones on her necklace carried her near-transparent microchip underneath.

Damn, she was a fucking goddess.

I sipped my drink, continuing to watch her. Her perusal slid to another part of the showroom. An elderly couple came close to her, and the wife started an animated discussion with Lilly.

"She does look familiar. Do you think she is the new curator?" Olivia asked me, noticing my attention on Lilly.

"No, she isn't. She's an appraiser at a gallery in SoHo."

Olivia set a hand on my forearm in a gesture of familiarity that was way too forward for a first meeting.

"So, you know her?"

"I do." Shifting back, I slipped Olivia's palm from my suit sleeve.

At that moment, Lilly's gaze caught mine, and she lifted a brow with a hint of amusement lighting her eyes.

Then her stormy irises heated as she scanned me from top to bottom, and she licked her lips.

In a flash, my body responded, and I had a vision of her mouth wrapped around my cock.

Fuck.

This was not the place for that.

"Does she have a name?" There was a hint of annoyance in Olivia's tone that had me shifting my attention back to the group.

"Lillian Lennox."

Something between surprise and delight flashed on Craig's face, and then he glanced at Olivia for a split second before he focused on me again.

"As in Joseph Lennox's missing daughter?"

"She was never missing," I responded in a tone that sounded casual but conveyed a message for him to tread carefully.

Craig, of all people, should understand there were things never to mention in polite society, specifically anyone linked to the syndicate in any country.

Picking up on the hint, Julia asked, "Perhaps you can introduce us? I'd love to meet someone who knows the art world better. Appraisers are always up to date on all the technology, something I find absolutely fascinating."

"I'm sure my lady would enjoy that, but perhaps another time. I'm already late meeting her, and we have dinner plans after this."

"Lilly Lennox is your lady?" Olivia narrowed her gaze, catching the words I'd slipped in.

"Yes. Lilly is mine," I stated, letting it hang.

Olivia glanced at Craig again, some sort of silent communication going back and forth between them before returning her focus to me.

This whole thing had shifted from step one in the case to step I-wasn't-sure.

Yes, we were to leave the seed of the Lennox connection, but there was an undercurrent of something I couldn't put my finger on. It was more than obvious all three of them were familiar with Lilly, not just Joseph Lennox and his connection to my brothers and me.

Could they know or suspect Lilly was Cora?

Something in the pit of my stomach said yes. But *how* was the question.

I shifted to move around them. "If you'll excuse me."

"King. Some of the old gang is meeting at the Dove tonight. Why don't you join us?" Craig offered me a card with the club's name and an emblem of a silver dove above it. "Bring your lady. We would love to meet her."

My first instinct wanted to keep Lilly as far away from this as possible. If I said anything like that to her, she'd probably throat-punch me.

"We'll see if our plans can accommodate it."

"You do that."

Moving around Craig, I headed into the room where Lilly waited.

I'd barely passed the threshold when I heard, "Your lady, am I?"

"I believe we established that." I stepped to my left and joined Lilly in a small alcove, taking hold of her hips and drawing her to me.

She slid her palms over my shoulders and leaned forward. Her pupils dilated, and a slight flush crept up her skin, revealing the way I affected her.

"For the assignment."

“We discussed terms already, or did you forget?”

“Rey—”

I cut her off. “Unless you want everyone to hear the rest of this, I suggest you stop right there.”

“Don’t stop on our account,” Abalo jumped in. “I’d like to know this side agreement you have going. Lennox, I think we need to have a chat.”

Lilly cringed and then glared at me.

She pulled out the small disk in her earring, and I removed the one hidden in the hairline near my ear.

She tried to step out of my hold, but I wouldn’t let her budge. “You piss me off, King.”

“Probably. But I do something else more, Lennox.”

“And what is that?”

I leaned into her ear and whispered, “I scare you.”

“What makes you think I’m scared of you?”

I picked up her left hand and shifted the three fused decorative rings she had on her middle three fingers to reveal the ink she’d never removed.

“Because of this. I make you feel things. I make you want things. That’s why you left that damn note.”

Jameson passed by us, grazing his hair over his ear in a gesture to get the communication device back up.

She bit her lip and closed her eyes for a fraction of a second before she pled, “Don’t make it more. Please.”

I shifted us back into view of the rest of the room and offered her my arm. “You’ll have to accept, sooner or later, that all we’ve ever had was more.”

“Eventually, you’ll have to accept I’m no good for you.”

“No.”

“Yes, you will.”

“No.”

Both of us slipped our devices back into place.

She growled. “If you don’t stop with the fucking *nos*, I’m not responsible for what I’ll do.”

“It looks like we didn’t miss much. The lovebirds are contemplating homicide,” I heard Abalo comment.

Then Lilly muttered, “I’m contemplating stabbing him. He’s having way too much fun at my expense.”

LILLY

I STARED AT MY REFLECTION IN THE GIANT MIRROR INSIDE
Rey's enormous bathroom.

It felt strange, almost surreal, being in here.

Hell, the moment I'd stepped into his penthouse, a sense of uncertainty had settled in my stomach. As if sharing space with Rey again was setting myself up for disaster, for an even bigger heartache than I already knew was coming.

My life revolved around pretenses, and this assignment wouldn't stop blurring the lines.

And it was all Devani's fault.

Bitch.

Less than five minutes after Rey and I had walked out of the museum and climbed into his car, Devani had informed me that I'd moved into Rey's penthouse. Immediately.

What the ever-loving fuck?

Pushing down my irritation, I washed my face and reapplied my makeup, something appropriate for the Dove Club.

And what a club it was.

Of all the places that Craig Felix could have invited us to, it was a kink club.

I wondered if Rey's investigation on me had revealed that the open-to-new-experiences, free-thinking, almost-twenty-two-year-old Lilly Lennox of nearly seven years ago had visited fetish clubs in Berlin with her friends. It was at one of those places I'd met my ex, Kane.

It still pissed me off—how stupid I was with the fucker. God, I was so naive. The signs were everywhere that something wasn't quite right with him, but I'd ignored them, thinking his family was connected to mine, so he was safe. One of the big ones should have been that he never wanted me to come to the club, especially with my friends who were members, and seemed annoyed whenever I showed up. Later, I'd learned the club was where he met up with his Russian contacts.

At least I had small satisfaction in knowing that after I'd financially crippled Kane's family, Papa and his allies had wielded their forms of justice on them and the other families who'd betrayed him.

Yeah, I sounded bloodthirsty, but the world I grew up in required it. Then again, Solon was no sweet peacemaker organization, and I had the scars to prove it.

I sighed, thinking of the cake still in my refrigerator. If it wasn't for the current European Directors Council, I wouldn't have taken such drastic steps to separate myself from my family or destroy my reputation in the art world.

Eventually, I'd have no choice but to leave Rey behind too.

He may never understand it or forgive me, but it was better for him in the long run.

Devani was powerful, but I couldn't trust the European Directors Council to stay away from me. I was property to them. And sooner or later, they'd pull the same shit they'd done to get me out of hiding—they'd force me to return to Europe and come back under their umbrella.

The more I was around Rey, the more vulnerable I made both of us. I should have kept this thing between us to just sex.

Who was I kidding? Rey was right. It was always more. Nothing was ever just sex with us. Being anywhere near him made me feel too much, want too much.

My phone beeped, snapping me out of my thoughts.

Glancing at the screen, I read the message.

CAMILLA: Go in twenty. Your clothes are on his bed.

I could only imagine Camilla's response when she'd learned the change in plans. Something most likely filled with a string of expletives and reasons why my ass should have stayed on the damn island.

She'd barely spoken more than a few private words to me since she'd attempted to scramble my brain in the basement of the CIA building.

I had no doubt that the woman loved me, especially after the shit she'd pulled to keep me safe. I viewed her as an angry auntie who smacked me, taught me life skills, and would kill anyone who looked at me wrong.

Though it felt awkward to have her around without the comfort of her normal personality, I'd never experienced her undercover, and the American accent creeped me the hell out.

What hurt the most was seeing the disappointment on her face every time she caught sight of me. She'd trained me to be strong, think ahead, never lose focus, and always have a plan. The plan was to either replace her or jump higher one day, and now neither was possible.

I moved into Rey's enormous bedroom. The space was big enough to fit most of my apartment. Then again, he had an entire floor in the King Holdings building.

If you've got the space, why not use it?

Windows made up two walls of the room, giving it an even bigger feel. Fabric upholstered seating in shades of light gray and blue sat in strategic places so as to not obstruct the view of New York City from the giant bed in the center of the room.

Stopping at the foot of the bed, I shook my head as I inspected the club outfit.

If Rey hated my dress from Danika's gallery show, he was going to love this ensemble.

Yeah, right.

After slipping on the corset, skirt, and heels, I returned to the bathroom, scanned my outfit from head to heels, and adjusted everything into its rightful place, specifically the hem of the skirt, which seemed to want my ass to half hang out.

With one last glance in the mirror, I strode into the living room.

I came to an abrupt halt when Rey's gold eyes landed on me and heated with an intensity that had my heartbeat accelerating and arousal pooling between my legs.

He stood, coming toward me, completely ignoring the fact Camilla and Noah sat on the sofa.

"Lilly."

"Yes."

He leaned in and whispered, "I plan to fuck you in this later."

"Okay." My breaths hitched as my core clenched. "I thought you'd want me to change."

"Before, you weren't mine, and it pissed me off."

I shifted closer to him, letting his jaw brush mine. "Now you believe I'm yours?"

"There's no believe, I know." His lips curved up. "Plus, I recall you informing me I have no say in what you wear."

Seeing him like this took me back to a time when we were two different people, completely lost in each other.

"Kiss me, Lilly. I know you want to."

Licking my lips, I tilted my face up to his.

"If you're done fucking around, we have an appointment to get to," Camilla grumbled, breaking the spell.

"She did that on purpose." Rey held my gaze.

I smiled. “Yes, she did.”

That was when I heard Camilla order, “Get a coat, Lilly. Your ass is hanging out. And remember while you’re sightseeing tonight that you’re there to work.”

Rey shook his head as we separated and moved behind Camilla as she headed toward the elevator.

“I thought Arin was a hard-ass,” Rey said to Camilla. “Good thing you’re not a trainer, Ressa. You’d scare the shit out of some poor Solon newbie. Though, I’m sure you’d keep them in line.”

The elevator opened, and I noticed a smirk appear on Camilla’s lips.

AN HOUR LATER, REY AND I ARRIVED AT A PLAIN, BRICK-faced building. A tiny dove painted on one plaque at the very bottom near the door was the only indication anything was inside.

We stepped out into the cool night air, sending a shiver down my spine.

“Are you ready?” Rey tucked my coat around my shoulders and then ran a thumb over my lower lip.

“Places like this don’t scare me.”

His lips curved. “Good to know.”

Rey tucked my arm into the crook of his and led me toward the entrance of the club. After a security check, a tall woman dressed in a simple long-sleeved dress with a green belt greeted us. She instructed us on the rules and expectations of the club and then had us go through some standard check-in procedures.

Next, she gave us bracelets indicating our guest status before an attendant led us inside the club’s main building.

We climbed a set of stairs to a second level that opened up into a bar area with strategically placed seating to give views into the central part of the club where the performances took place.

Men and women congregated in groups, chatting, drinking, and eating. What distinguished those in this room from any other high-end bar was not only the attire of the patrons, which ranged from high-fashion dresses to complete nudity, but the complete acceptance of everyone's sexual preferences. No one batted an eye if a Dominant had her or his submissive sitting at their feet or walking behind them on a leash. Anything was fair game, as long as it was consensual.

"Your party is in the private viewing area through this curtain." The attendant held the dark gray drapes back.

Everyone's attention shifted to us the moment Rey and I stepped into the room.

It was as if we were on display.

Giving them the same perusal, I took them all in.

This space was different than the rest of the club, with ample comfortable seating and a stylish living room setup meant to give an intimate feel for the guests.

The people in the room ranged in age from early twenties to late sixties, many of whom I'd seen at the museum.

"Glad you could make it, King," Craig said to Rey, but his gaze focused on me. "And you brought your lady. Lilly, if I'm not mistaken."

"Yes, my Lilly." Rey set his hand on my lower back.

I glanced up at Rey and noticed his eyes narrow slightly and a thick layer of tension pass between Craig and him.

Fuck.

I'd picked up on the tension at the museum and wondered about the odd interaction I'd overheard through my earpiece.

Whatever this shit was, it revolved around me. What Rey needed to do was keep his cool and figure out the details. We

had enough on our plates.

“Come join us,” a tall brunette I knew was Craig’s wife, Julia, said, indicating a place on the sectional near her and her friend, Olivia.

I almost sighed in relief, threaded my fingers with Rey’s, and led him to the place next to Olivia.

Conversation in the room resumed, but the undercurrent of something unsaid remained between Craig and Rey.

“I know this sounds like an odd question, but was your hair ever a different color?” Olivia asked.

Rey’s hand on my thigh stiffened, having heard the question.

Well, okay then. At least now I knew the reason for the pissing contest between Rey and Craig.

I shook my head. “Dark brown is all I’ve ever had. In the summer, it gets lighter golden streaks from the sun, but that’s it. Why do you ask?”

“You look very similar to a picture I saw recently. The only differences are the hair and eyes. Yours are very distinctive.”

What picture?

As far as I could remember, I’d never taken pictures with anyone or allowed it. Plus, I was vigilant to search all camera and video feeds for images of me.

Hell, I’d designed programs with the sole purpose of scouring the Net for this.

“Yes, they’re light gray like my mother’s. No mistaking them anywhere.”

“And you have no sisters?”

“No. Four brothers. Three older, one younger. But I’m sure you already know this.”

Before Olivia could ask another question, a server arrived to take everyone’s order, shifting the attention away from me.

These types of questions were the last things I expected for tonight.

Rey draped his arm around my shoulder, and I leaned against him, whispering, “They either know or suspect.”

His fingers ran up and down my shoulders as he scanned the room. “Looks that way. Until it’s confirmed, I don’t want you alone with any of them.”

“It doesn’t work that way. I have a job to do.”

“Yes, to establish yourself as my woman in my world.”

“I have the bargain to hold up.”

“Yes, you do, to me.”

“You can’t keep me here, Rey. I don’t belong to you.”

He took my left hand in his, rubbing his thumb over the edge of the tattoo peeking out from the ring on my finger. A tingle shot over my skin, bringing with it a tinge of arousal and a deep longing.

“This says otherwise.”

A lump formed in my throat.

Why wouldn’t he let this go?

What he offered wasn’t something I could reach for. The one time I’d let myself believe it was possible, I’d nearly destroyed his life.

Just as I opened my mouth to respond to him, Olivia drew our attention to her by asking, “How long have you two been together?”

“Long enough to warrant a permanent future. Wouldn’t you agree, Lilly?”

Instead of answering, I stood. “If you’ll excuse me a moment. I need to find the ladies’ room.”

Rey narrowed his gaze but kept his mouth shut and released my hand. For a split second, I expected him to follow behind me, but he remained seated as I stepped through the

curtains from the private seating area onto the main floor of the club.

As the drapes shut, blocking out the crowd in the lounge, I took a deep breath and let the hypnotic aesthetic of the Dove engulf me.

There was a rich blend of light and dark colors, both soothing and shocking to the senses. It created an illusion that time no longer existed.

Taking a long hall lined with sculptures and framed paintings, I couldn't help but admire the seamless way the artistic decor blended with the music and vibe of the lounge.

This place was stunning.

The owner of this establishment had to have paid a pretty penny to design this club.

I paused as I passed a canvas of a Monet that looked too real to be a replica.

A chill shot down my spine.

Turning to face the piece, I took in the details, from the brush strokes to signature and the lines on the edges.

This was no fucking replica. I'd bet my life on it.

Well, shit.

The last time I was anywhere near this painting was over three years ago when I'd handed it to Saun Huber as part of the deal he'd made with Rex Busch.

I should have suspected this was Saun's place from the second I'd set my eyes on the authentic sculptures and artwork throughout the club.

Saun's obsession with art was legendary, especially rare, hard-to-find pieces.

I scanned the other frames on the wall, seeing more from Rex's procured stock and the evidence of my past projects.

With a calm and casual lift of my fingers, I scratched along my neck and touched my earring to release a few trackers.

Then, I scanned the area for all the cameras and guards before making my way around to browse all the paintings, placing the pin-sized microchips at various spots on the frames.

Just as I returned to the Monet, Olivia came up next to me.

“It’s a beautiful piece.” Her smile was bright, but it never reached her eyes, telling me it was practiced and an act.

“Yes, it is. I’m surprised to find it and so many other rare pieces hanging in a club and not in a secure location.”

This woman wasn’t the money-hungry social climber she pretended to be, and I’d seen it, even at the gallery. There was too much intelligence behind her eyes. It was her way of sizing up people and finding out weaknesses.

She wanted people to underestimate her. That was her game.

The dossier Rey’s team had put together gave details on Craig’s family and friends. Olivia’s connection to Julia went back over ten years to when they were in high school together. Her family worked in finance like Julia’s father, but her background seemed too airtight for my liking.

If given a choice, I’d have conducted my own research. Now, combined with the things I’d noticed at the museum, and a few minutes ago, I had no doubt everything about Olivia was bogus. I’d used plenty of covers and could spot them. Hell, I’d figured out Rey’s pretty fast, and he’d trained for years in the art of deception.

“This area is more secure than you will ever know. My cousin Saun owns this club and would never let anything happen to his precious art.” She gestured to the security positioned along the corridor.

Cousin? That wasn’t right. After three years of working with him and compiling data, I knew Saun’s details inside and out. He had two younger brothers and seven first cousins, only one of them female. She was an artist named Victoria, who lived in Boston.

Saun doted on his baby cousin, who he thought of as a sister, and I distinctly remembered his insistence that I would

have to meet her one day and let her paint me.

I studied Oliva's face and saw the faint similarities between Saun and her. They had the same eyes and cheeks.

Realizing I was staring, I said, "It does make sense to share his collection with the world and let others appreciate it instead of having it locked away in a vault."

"That sounds like something he would say." Olivia set a shoulder against an empty space on the wall. "I think you two would get along. Two art lovers and all. I should introduce you."

My heartbeat accelerated.

"Is he here tonight?"

"No." She shook her head. "He's away on business. Something to do with lost shipments out of Argentina."

I almost sighed in relief but made a mental note about the shipment part.

"Perhaps in the future, we will meet."

"I'm certain of it. There's another piece I think you might find fascinating. Let me show you."

She led me to a section roped off for club employees and down a long hallway. Then she stopped in front of a large portrait.

"What do you think?"

I focused on a painting, and a wave of nausea lurched through my stomach.

Oh, dear God. It was me.

Not me, but Cora. Well, the green-eyed, blond-haired image she'd shown to all of Rex Busch's clients.

I leaned against a wall, gazing out a window at one of my drop points with Saun Huber and Rex.

If someone studied the picture, it would seem as if the woman in the image waited for her lover to arrive. When in

fact, I had been scared out of my mind with worry that Rey had seen me on his way back from an appointment.

It was also the day I'd realized I'd fucked up by starting anything with him.

“Now you understand why I asked those questions.”

“I do. We have many similarities.”

She reached over and touched my tattoo and then the same spot on the painting. “We know it's more than similarities, even if King doesn't.”

“Rey knows more than you believe.”

“Perhaps, but Saun has spent an incredible amount of time and money looking for you, Cora.”

I gave no outward reaction to her use of the name.

“Do you deny you're her?”

Instead of answering her question, I asked one of my own, “And what does he want from her?”

A smile touched her lips. “The same thing King wants. To claim her as his. She made an impression on Saun, which is hard to do.”

Olivia opened her clutch, pulled out a card, and handed it to me.

“This is an address in the Hamptons. It's Saun's private estate. He will arrive in the States in three weeks. Have dinner with him on his yacht, hear his offer, and then decide.”

Olivia's gaze went over my shoulder, and I knew Rey stood behind me.

“I can see King's appeal, but I can guarantee Saun is the better investment. He can give you a life you could never imagine. You're lucky. Women like us rarely have options.”

“What do you mean women like us?”

“Ones who were born into families of only men. They make the rules based on their dealings. Though, you wouldn't understand the restrictions I deal with, would you?”

I thought of Papa and my brothers. They weren't the typical men from the syndicate world. Outside of sending me to a boarding school to protect me, I'd had no limitations on anything in my life. I could learn what I wanted, go where I wanted as long as I had my detail with me, and enjoy life.

"I suppose you're right. I am lucky."

"Then I suggest you make the wiser choice. Saun can give you a life you never imagined."

Olivia moved past me and strolled down the hall, leaving me with Rey.

"Do I want to know what that was about?"

"They know I'm Cora."

REYHAN

LILLY STARED AT THE MONET, HER SPINE STIFF. “DID YOU hear what I said? We need to call a meeting now.”

“I did. This was the plan. To get close to Craig and gain access to Huber. Your charms just seem to have accelerated the plan.”

“Are you listening? She told me I’m supposed to choose between you and Saun.”

I walked up, setting my hands on her hips. “Then I guess I better do a damn good job of convincing you to pick me.”

She whirled around and glared. “You’re not taking this seriously.”

“Oh, I’m taking it very seriously. Keeping you has become my life’s mission.”

“Let’s go so that we can have a rational conversation.”

She shifted to move, but I stayed her by gripping her waist. “It can wait.”

“No, it can’t.” She glared up at me. “Rey, there are things you don’t understand about this case, and I have to request permission to tell you.”

I had no doubt her deal with Devani had parameters that restricted her from saying many things that could make my relationship with her easier.

Cupping her cheek, I rubbed my thumb over her lower lip. “We’re turning it off for the rest of the night. From this moment until the morning, it’s just us.”

“Rey—”

“A meeting isn’t going to make any difference right now. It’s near midnight. It’s okay to turn it off. They don’t own you.”

She glanced down as if she believed the exact opposite.

Releasing a sigh, she said, “Okay. For the night. Then we have to talk.”

“In the morning.”

Taking her hand, I led her into the heart of the club. In the center sat a series of performance rooms. Glass viewing walls separated the audience from the individuals, couples, and groups conducting scenes for their preferred kinks.

We strolled from room to room until Lilly paused at a room where a Dominant worked two whips over his submissive’s body.

A slow flush crept over Lilly’s skin, and she inhaled little pants of air as she lost herself in observing the couple.

The woman drew me in like a moth to a flame.

I stepped up behind her and slid an arm around her waist. Her hand gripped my forearm, and the heat of her body seeped into mine.

Goosebumps prickled her skin, and I had no doubt her pussy had grown slick with desire and her nipples were hard, stiff peaks.

Leaning down, I grazed the stubble on my jaw along her neck. “Do you miss being part of this world?”

“I was never part of this world,” she responded, pushing her ass back against my straining cock.

When Lennox had ordered me to find his daughter and had given me Lilly’s picture, I’d made it my mission to learn everything I could about her. Discovering her extracurricular

proclivities in the world of kink clubs had both fascinated and infuriated me. It added to another layer of secrets she'd hidden from me.

“Liar.” I nipped her shoulder with my teeth. “I know all about the things innocent Lilly Lennox did behind her parents’ and brothers’ backs.”

“Then you would know I observed, nothing more.”

I trailed my palm up the short hem of her skirt, over her hips, and then under the gusset of her underwear to the slick slit of her pussy lips. “You’re wet, Lilly.”

“Sex is arousing.” She swallowed, as if to ease the dryness in her parched throat.

“I think it’s more than that.” I slipped a finger between her folds and circled her clit. “We were together for months. Why didn’t you mention you were into kink?”

“I’m not.” Her answer came out raspy. “I observe. There is a difference.”

“Is there? Kinks come in all forms.”

She closed her eyes, bit her lip, and dropped her head back against my shoulder.

Seeing her like this, completely lost in her desire, was one of the most incredible sights ever.

The only things that would make it better were if we were back in my apartment, alone, and she wasn’t holding in her moans as I worked her clit and the spasms shot through her pussy.

Fuck it. I had to hear her.

I pushed two fingers inside her.

“Rey,” she gasped, making me smile.

“You like to watch others,” I crooned as I pumped in and out. “I find this side of you fascinating. We’re going to explore it further in the future.”

Her nails dug into my arm as a spasm shot through her core, and another whimper escaped her mouth.

“Watch them. They’re a beautiful pair. Enjoy their passion while I make you come.”

She opened her eyes, focusing on the couple as I drove her arousal higher and higher.

Lilly’s pants grew faster as she watched the woman who only a few minutes ago arched into each strike of her partner’s whip, now lay over a bench while her Dom fucked her from behind.

Lilly’s pussy clamped down on my pistoning fingers, and I held her against me as her legs grew weak and wave after wave of ecstasy washed over her.

“That’s it. I’ve got you. Ride it out.” I continued the steady rhythm of my hand until I’d wrung every last drop of her orgasm out of her and all she could do was lean against me like a rag doll.

The sight of Lilly’s pleasure had me near ready to come in my pants. She was a fucking goddess.

Pulling free of her body, I brought my wet fingers to her mouth. “Open.”

She smiled and pivoted in my arms. Then, holding my gaze, she lifted onto tiptoes and sucked my fingers, making sure to scrape her teeth along the fingertips before kissing me.

As her feet settled back on the ground, the same pulse of energy we’d felt in the foyer of her apartment shot to life.

This was us from before, when we were in love.

Who the fuck was I kidding? It had never stopped, no matter how much I’d wanted it to stop.

I stared into her beautiful gray eyes. “Tell me again that it’s not more.”

A storm of sadness washed over her face, and she swallowed as if there was a lump in her throat.

“Let this be enough.”

“Is it enough for you?”

“It doesn’t matter if it’s enough or not. This is all I can give you. Making promises will only lead to more pain.”

“I won’t accept that. I see it on your face. It never stopped for you, either.”

She closed her eyes, exhaled, and then said, “Please don’t make me break your heart again.”

“What about your heart, Lilly?”

“My heart will remain in the same state it’s been in since I shot you.” She pulled out of my hold and walked away from me.

FIVE MINUTES LATER, LILLY AND I EXITED THE CLUB, NEITHER of us saying anything. Our last words to each other lay heavy between us.

Right before we slipped inside the limousine, Lilly stopped in front of Ress, who was dressed as one of my personal security, and said, “We need to have a chat with the team.”

A mix of anger and authority that I had never heard from her before laced her words. The fact she’d directed them at a battle-ax like Ress surprised me.

“What would you like to discuss, Ms. Lennox?”

“They are fucking with this case.”

Who the hell were “they”?

Ress kept her usually stoic expression. “Did you expect otherwise? Just because you are under another umbrella doesn’t mean the old one doesn’t remember you.”

“Is that the real reason you’re here, to remind me they haven’t forgotten me? As if that was even possible.”

“We told you our objective from the beginning. To watch you. To keep you alive. To make sure your ass is covered,

even when you don't listen worth shit.”

“Then, at the end of this, am I free?”

“What do you think?”

“I should have guessed. How stupid of me.” Her shoulders sagged. “What do I need to do?”

“Finish the case, and then we'll discuss it.”

She clenched her fists by her sides. “You're going to make me wait until the job is done for a meeting, after knowing what's at stake?”

“You agreed to the terms when you signed up. Now live with it.”

Lilly wiped at her cheeks. “I hate all of you.”

“I feel the same damn way sometimes.”

Moving past Ressa, Lilly stepped into the open door of the car and disappeared.

I approached Ressa and asked, “What the hell is going on?”

Her attention shifted to me. “This is internal agency business. We negotiated Lennox's terms. She has to abide by them.”

“If you forced her to work for you, then it's no better than blackmail.”

Ressa's gaze narrowed. “You would know, wouldn't you, seeing as that is how you brought her to the United States.”

I ignored the dig. “Helping Lilly doesn't mean she is the property of Solon. She deserves her freedom.”

“You don't know anything about her situation. So, I suggest staying out of it.”

“She means something to me. I will watch out for her.”

“Is that right? If you're not careful, it's your neck that will be on the line.”

“Is that a threat?”

“I don’t need threats. The people I work for only make promises and then follow through.”

“Tell me, Ressa, why do you hate me so much? Did I wrong you in a past life? Or is it that I exist?”

“No, King. I don’t hate you. In fact, you remind me too much of someone I knew a long time ago.”

“And where is that someone now?”

“Dead.” Something like pain flashed in her eyes before she masked it.

Her response left me speechless for a moment. “What’s your issue with me?”

“You make her weak. You make her unfocused. You make her priorities shift. She is the type of person who can’t afford those things because that means she makes mistakes. And mistakes have dire consequences.”

“Is she in danger?”

Ressa lifted a brow. “When is Lilly Lennox not in danger? She is a mob princess, after all.”

“What I wouldn’t give to get a straight answer. Does Solon make you take a class or something on how to evade questions?” I gripped the back of my neck.

“As a matter of fact, they do.” She smiled, transforming her face from the stern, constantly pissed-off woman I’d gotten used to, to someone more approachable. “I’m the one who created the curriculum.”

LILLY

“ARE YOU TIRED?” REY ASKED, RIGHT AS THE LIMOUSINE arrived in the underground parking for the King Holdings building that housed his penthouse.

I stared at him from across the bench seat for a few moments and then said, “A little, but I don’t think I can sleep.”

“Want to see where I came from?”

“I’ve been to your old neighborhood, remember?”

“No, do you want to see where I came from, before the bus crash, before foster care, before Arin?”

I nodded. “Show me.”

We stepped out of the car and then moved toward the area where Rey parked his vehicles.

“Wait, shouldn’t we change? Not sure this outfit is appropriate.” I gestured to my club attire.

The last thing I wanted to do was attract unwanted attention.

His lips curved. “Don’t worry. No one will see you but me.”

Frowning, I shot him a skeptical glare.

“I promise. It’s not what you expect.”

Deciding to take him at his word, I moved to the passenger side of his Mercedes and slid inside. That was when I noticed Rey's security getting ready to tail us.

“How long did it take you to get used to them again?”

“There's nothing to get used to. I've had them since Arin took us. They know I can slip them if I want, and I've agreed only to do it for purposes of a case.”

“Is it that simple?”

“Yes, as you well know.” He glanced to the side with a cocky grin. “Maybe you could give our guys an easier time from now on?”

It looked as if they were all on to me.

I smirked. “Between the King and Lennox men, it's almost a full-time job trying not to trip over people. Perhaps, if you could agree to have only one team shadow me, I'd consider it.”

“You know that's a lie.”

“Of course, it's a lie. I'm a liar, after all.”

We were quiet for a few moments, then he said, “I'm sorry for calling you all of those names.”

Liar, thief, murderer, villain.

I waited for him to add more, some qualifiers, something else, but nothing came.

I closed my eyes for a brief second and then said, “I *am* all of those things.”

“And so am I. As are your father, your brothers, and my brothers.”

“It doesn't absolve me from my choices, Rey. Because of me, you ended up in a pool of blood.”

“No, because of you, I'm still alive. I know he had a hit on me.”

Without thinking, I faced him and asked, “How would you know that?”

No one fucking knew but me, Rex, and the other members of our team.

“Because you weren’t the only one running an operation on Busch in London the day I cornered you in your apartment. I overheard your conversation.”

I tried to remember all that I’d said to Rex. “Then you weren’t fucking with me when you said I took Rex from you.”

“No, losing Busch cost me.”

Not as much as it cost me. “What did he do to get on your radar?”

“The President of the BND brought my team in to find the mole in the Frankfurt office selling case information on the black market. It took us over six months, but we’d narrowed it down to Busch around the time of our breakup.” He air-quoted the “breakup” part.

“What gave him away?”

“It was the fact Busch, a director in the cyber intelligence department of the BND, warned me away from dating a mid-grade analyst who didn’t even report to him.”

“He did what?”

“If it was just you, I may have connected the dots sooner. He didn’t want anyone in your department associating with agents from other organizations. He even refused help from Interpol on an art theft case that, later, he closed with no leads.”

I shook my head and pressed my fingers to my head. “And you never once suspected anything about me?”

“No. But I know why.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. Why?”

“Because you were never really Cora with me. It was always Lilly when we were together. That’s who I fell in love with.”

My heart clenched, and I swallowed the lump in my throat.

“Don’t, Rey.” I turned to the window.

“Why are you so afraid to let your walls down? It’s not just with me. You do it with everyone. You hold yourself back like you’re waiting for something bad to happen.”

“Because that’s inevitable. No matter how much I may want it, there is no happy ending for me.” I glanced at him. “I can’t give you what you want. I never could.”

“I’m going to prove to you that you’re wrong.”

“You don’t give up, do you?”

“It’s not my style.”

“Stubborn.”

“I can admit to this fault.” Rey picked up my hand, twining his fingers with mine, and then set them on the console separating us.

I dropped my head back against the seat and then gazed out the window again, both of us growing silent.

Fifteen minutes later, we were pulling into a well-kept, middle-class neighborhood of row houses lit up by the streetlights and the occasional passing car, including ours. Flowerboxes lined a multitude of short fences, and in nearly every driveway sat a vehicle or two.

We turned into a driveway of a two-story brick house sandwiched between four others on each side. Everything about it showed that someone took great care to keep it maintained.

Rey parked, turned to me, and then said, “This is where I spent the first seven and a half years of my life.”

“I don’t understand. If your parents lived here, how did they end up on the bus that killed them? And how did you end up living in the neighborhood with Nik, Kir, and Sam?”

“All of it was honestly bad timing, or luck, or fucking fate. Whatever anyone wants to call it. My dad was a shift manager at the same factory where Nik’s and Kir’s dads worked. So they sometimes met up for breakfast before going to work.

“That morning, the wives decided to join them, and the ladies invited Sam’s mom.” Rey closed his eyes for a brief moment, as a wave of sadness washed over his face. “The crazy part is, my mom didn’t even work in the factory. She was going to catch the train to her software company after breakfast.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Arin. He had an investigation done after we moved in with him. He hired private investigators to check out all of our backgrounds. That’s how he learned about Kir’s family in Puerto Rico and Miami and Sam’s connection to Ashok Shah.”

“I’m so sorry.”

He sighed. “So am I. But then again, I wouldn’t have the life I do now. Plus, I remember you telling me fate makes plans for us, whether we want them or not.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in fate.”

“I changed my mind after a fortune-teller told me I was fated to love two women who were one.” He unlocked the car. “Come on, let me show you the house.”

We made our way to the front door, and I noticed a small Om symbol painted under the doorbell. It was the Hindu symbol of luck, representing the union of the mind, body, and spirit.

“Who owned this house after the accident?”

He waited until we were inside to answer. “It went to a distant uncle on my mother’s side with all of my parents’ assets.” His response was emotionless, but I understood the resentment underneath.

“They took the money but not you?”

“Money is acceptable. A mixed-race child isn’t. My mother’s family disowned her for marrying my father. They felt she turned her back on their culture, so they turned their back on me.”

“How do you have the house now?”

“Arin took it for me. He wasn’t conventional as a father, but the man would walk through hell and fight every one of our demons for us.”

I thought of Papa and the lengths he’d go to for his children. I knew, without a doubt, that he’d wage war on the world for us. I could only imagine how Arin must have reacted when he’d found out Rey’s family had rejected him but taken the money that came with him.

“Papa is like that.”

“Yeah, he is. Maybe, one day, you can trust him with your secrets. I promise, one of the first things he’ll say to you will be *come home*.”

Pushing down the wave of longing Rey’s words brought forward, I made my way into a small front room.

“Let me give you a tour.”

Over the next few minutes, we strolled through the compact house with all its nooks and crannies. We ended up in an upstairs room overlooking a tiny backyard. This was one of the few rooms with furniture, holding a bookcase, sofa, and lamp.

“Let me guess—this was your room.” I pointed to a height chart drawn on the side of a closet door.

“Correct.”

“Why did you want to bring me here, Rey?”

“To show you the reason I keep pushing you to drop your walls.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Give me your left hand.”

I placed my palm over his, and his fingers closed over mine. His heat seeped into my skin as it had in the car, and that familiar longing to seek his comfort pulled at me.

Slowly, he worked the fused rings from my middle and ring finger off, stuffing the silver into his pocket, and then set

my hand next to a pattern etched in the window overlooking the backyard of the house.

It was a stylized mandala, designed in the shape of a hummingbird—the same pattern as my tattoo, including the Sanskrit words meaning *eternally mine*.

“My mother had this same design on her finger. This is why it hurt so much when I thought it was a lie. But it wasn’t, was it, Lilly?”

“Rey, I already told you it was real. It still doesn’t change the past.”

“But it doesn’t mean we can’t make different choices for the future. Let me show you something else.”

Rey lifted his hand and tugged off the signet ring that I never saw him without.

He placed his palm over mine. On his ring finger were the exact Sanskrit words inked on my skin.

My heart clenched.

“I went so many times to have it removed, but I just couldn’t do it. There had to be a reason, don’t you think?”

“Don’t make me love you again.” I dropped my forehead against the window.

He curled his fingers over mine. “Did it ever stop, Lilly? Because it sure as hell didn’t for me.”

Why would fate show me everything I wanted, knowing she was planning to take it away?

“Don’t fight for me, Rey. I’m a bad bet.”

“Haven’t you realized Kings always gamble and win big on longshot odds?”

“And when you decide it’s time to fold, will you let me go?”

“There is no letting you go.” He rubbed his thumb over my ring finger. “I marked you as mine.”

Could I risk this? Could I take what he offered? Could I hope the Directors Council would be happy with fucking with me from afar? I turned my head to look at him over my shoulder. “There are parts of me I’ll never share with you. I can’t. It’s just not in the cards.”

“Then I’ll just have to take what I can get until I can convince you otherwise.”

We stared at each other for a few moments, neither of us saying anything.

Breaking the silence, he said, “I mean it. I won’t give up on you.”

“You seriously are relentless.” I sighed.

“Good thing I am. Otherwise, we’d never have gotten together in the first place.”

Turning in his arms, I faced him. “I broke down because I needed to get laid.”

“Are you saying I dickmatized you into falling for me?”

“Something like that.”

He moved forward, heat filling his golden eyes. “Want me to dickmatize you again? I did warn you that I had plans to fuck you in this outfit.”

His words sent a spasm deep into my core.

“Here?” I glanced around. “In your childhood bedroom?”

“Yes, here. If I’d grown up here, I’d have fantasized about someone just like you as a teenager. Gorgeous, long-legged, and curves in all the right places.”

He glided a hand along my stocking-clad thigh, tracking the lace edge, then moved higher until he reached under my short skirt, grabbed hold of the front of my underwear, and ripped it from my body.

“Rey,” I gasped as arousal pooled between my legs. “What if someone sees us?”

“No one lives in the house behind here.”

“How would you know that?”

He gave me a cocky smirk and lifted a brow. “I know everything that goes on in this neighborhood.”

“Of course, you do.” Setting my palms on his shoulders, I walked him backward until his calves hit the couch and forced him to sit.

Just as I set one knee on the sofa cushion to straddle him, he gripped my thighs and pulled me flush against his steely erection.

“Oh God.” The abrasion of his pants along my naked clit sent a shockwave of sensation throughout my body, and I couldn’t help but bite my lip.

My nipples beaded, and my breasts strained in the confines of my corseted top.

He shifted my hair on my shoulder and cupped my neck and throat, tilting it up, and brought me forward to run his teeth along the delicate skin along my jugular. “I fucking can’t get enough of you.”

“Rey,” I moaned as a shiver shot down my spine and arousal flooded my core.

Gripping his upper arms, I covered his mouth with mine, needing to taste him, savor him. He took over the kiss, fisting my hair and licking into my mouth.

My body burned for this man, and I couldn’t get enough. He made me ache and need like no one else before him.

I pulled away, gasping for air, my heartbeat drumming into my ears. Rey’s eyes had nearly lost all the gold, his chest heaving like mine.

Holding his gaze, I rose onto my knees and set my palm against the open vee of his shirt collar. Slowly, I slid my hand between us and glided down his stomach and over the hard ridge of his thick cock.

He remained quiet, watching me, waiting, letting lust radiate off him in waves.

I reached for his belt, working it and his pants open, freeing his heavy length into my hold. I pumped him up and down, never moving my eyes from his.

My arousal was a damp presence between my folds, and the throbbing deep in my core grew to an almost unbearable level.

“Lilly, put me in,” Rey ordered as his fingers flexed on my thighs, but he left them in place.

I leaned forward and angled the crown of his thick cock at the entrance of my swollen, soaked pussy.

“Oh God,” I moaned, sliding down onto his glorious length, loving the way my muscles clenched around him.

“Fuck, Lilly. You feel so good.”

I set a steady rhythm, moving up and down, reveling in the delicious pleasure of his body. Plus, the fact we were both still fully clothed except where we were joined heightened my arousal.

As my core quickened, my volcanic need spurred me on, urging me to ride him harder and harder.

Sweat beaded Rey’s forehead, and his erratic breathing told me his restraint was teetering on the edge.

A spasm of pure ecstasy shot through me, forcing a gasp from my lips, making me realize Rey was drawing slow circles around my clit.

“It’s time for you to come, Lilly.”

A wicked gleam entered his eyes, and he shifted, pushing my thighs wide enough to expose my naked pussy completely to his gaze and give him the leverage he needed to take over.

“Fucking gorgeous.”

He continued to stroke my clitoral nub as he gripped one of my hips and pistoned up into me.

All it took was a few hard thrusts against the spot only he’d ever found inside me, and I shattered. My pussy clamped around his driving cock as euphoria engulfed my mind.

“R...Rey.”

“That’s it,” he crooned as he yanked my hips down to meet his upward thrusts.

My body jerked with each wave of pleasure. He pulled me to him, fusing our mouths together.

He continued to fuck me, harder now, pushing me into a second orgasm before he grew thicker inside me and came with a guttural cry and my name on his lips.

REYHAN

A LITTLE OVER TWO WEEKS AFTER TAKING LILLY TO MY parents' house, I made my way into the storeroom of the Dayal-King Gallery with a handful of tools, ready for an emergency exhibit change.

I wasn't really sure what had happened, except it had to do with a new temperamental featured artist and unacceptable layouts. All the King brothers were expected onsite to assist with the floor change.

As an added bonus, Lilly promised me a sexual favor or two if I stopped everything I was doing and came over to help her.

Needless to say, I immediately stopped a fucking meeting with some of my agency contacts and drove over here.

The last sixteen days or so had become a mixture of acceptance and resignation on my part. At times, it felt as if Lilly's walls were so thick that even a nuclear explosion might not tear them down, and at other times, it seemed as if I was with the woman I'd fallen in love with long ago. She'd talk to me, laugh, just enjoy life. But those times were rare and only if we were alone.

I knew how she felt about me, even if she refused to verbalize it. I saw it in her eyes, especially when she wasn't aware that I was watching. Something had happened to make

her so scared to love, to give any part of herself. It was as if letting anyone see she cared was a death sentence.

If only I could get her to see it was possible for her to have the happy ending she kept insisting wasn't meant for her. All she had to do was reach for it and stop planning to leave.

And it pissed me off to no end that she still expected to leave. She wasn't saying it, but I knew.

Whatever led her to work for Rex Busch and his enterprise no longer mattered. Hell, the shit Nik, Kir, Sam, and I pulled as kids could have landed us in jail or outright killed more times than not. On top of everything, the whole foundation of King Holdings lay on the world of brokering favors. Illegal as fuck by most standards.

What I feared most was that she'd leave before I had the chance to wear her barriers down enough for her to trust me.

Just as I made my way into the main area of the gallery, I heard voices and stopped.

Why was Lilly on the floor?

Rarely, if ever, would she work the gallery. Instead, she stayed in the background, running the appraisal aspect of the business.

Lilly's name had garnered a stigma in the art world after the drama of her past in Berlin, and most buyers wouldn't work with her.

Plus, Danika's full-time staff ran the showroom.

Wait, it was past three. The gallery closed early today.

Staying in the shadows, I moved closer and immediately felt a surge of protectiveness wash over me.

Whoever this fucker was, the last thing Lilly wanted was him anywhere near her.

Her posture was ramrod straight, and the way she gripped the counter made me think she was ready to bolt at any second. This wasn't her normal personality.

“You shouldn’t be here. This isn’t a safe place for you. You have to know this.”

“It is comforting to know you worry about me.” The man turned, revealing a tanned complexion and deep blue eyes. I pegged him to be somewhere in his late thirties, possibly early forties. It was obvious he took care of himself. He had a similar build to me, except for our heights. I was a good two to three inches taller.

“Why are you here, Saun?” Lilly’s gaze lifted in the direction where I hid, and she tapped her phone.

Of course, she’d figured out I was here.

Message heard loud and clear, Lilly.

I pulled out my cell and typed in an alert to our team.

It looked like Saun Huber had decided to put a damper on our exhibit-change plans for the evening.

I couldn’t fault him for wanting to meet Lilly Lennox sooner rather than later.

We should have anticipated this. I should have expected it.

Waiting three weeks to meet was an eternity, especially if Huber knew that the woman he’d spent an ungodly amount of time and money looking for was with another man.

“I hoped to catch you alone and see where you worked all at the same time.” Saun set an elbow on a glass display housing a set of rare crafted masks.

“Your boss showed me some of the pieces in here earlier today. They’re beautiful. Many of the selections on display are extraordinary. Though they are a bit modern for my taste.”

“Yes, I know you like the classics.”

As in stolen, priceless art. Asshole. I’d already arranged with my colleagues at the FBI to confiscate the paintings from the Dove as soon as Saun was in custody.

“Can I assume you don’t carry those here?”

“Nothing like that would ever cross the threshold of this gallery.”

“So, the Kings are honest criminals then?”

“Something like that.”

No, Danika would stab someone in the throat for even suggesting the idea of using her gallery for stolen art of any kind. Art was her passion.

“I find it fascinating that you were an appraiser all this time, and I only just discovered this tidbit of information.”

“Who told you about me?”

Saun swept a lock of Lilly’s hair from her forehead, stroking his fingers slowly over her skin before tucking the strands behind her ear.

The fact he touched her as if he was her lover gave me visions of punching him in the face. She was mine, and he damn well knew it.

“I have my ways.”

“That information wasn’t available anywhere. I made sure of it.”

“You know better than to make assumptions like that. Some groups thrive on collecting data and using it. Others are willing to sell it for the right price.”

“You’re absolutely right.” A crease formed between her brows before she smoothed it away. “When Olivia, or should I say *Vi*, approached me, I drew that very conclusion.”

Oh, she had, and it probably had something to do with her interesting conversation with Ressa.

“I told her to approach you using her real name, but she insisted on that stupid alias. She says she doesn’t want people to treat her differently based on our family’s reputation.”

“I can understand that circumstance. Our familial connections can have stigmas.”

“Yes, you would understand. She did say you two had a lot in common.”

“Perhaps we’ll see each other again.”

A calculated smile appeared on his face that had my back going up. “I’m positive it will happen. In fact, we can attend her upcoming wedding together.”

“That’s another perhaps. Let’s have a first date, and then we will see about the rest.”

“Fair enough. I want to ask you something.”

Lilly tilted her head. “Go ahead.”

“Why didn’t you respond to my messages on the market? I would have helped you. After all the times we worked together, you had to know that you could trust me if you were ever in trouble.”

“Trust is hard for me.”

“And you trusted King enough to come out of hiding for him?” Huber’s jaw clenched, but his body remained relaxed.

“Yes.” Her gaze lifted again for a split second. “We have history. He knows me.”

Her words felt like a punch in the gut. Maybe I *had* chipped away at her walls.

“Through your father, I assume.”

“My father and I don’t have a relationship—not for a long time, anyway.”

“Ahh, yes. I heard about the scandal.”

Lilly shifted her stance and looked toward the window of the gallery.

“It wasn’t your fault what your ex’s family did to you.”

Lilly turned back to him, narrowing her gaze. “What do you know about it?”

“I researched you after I learned your real name. The Mancheskis and their allies used your disappearance as an admission of guilt in framing them. You shouldn’t have left.”

He leaned forward, setting his hand over Lilly's. "You did right by your father. You were ruthless and to the point. In fact, you are the exact type of woman any man would want by his side."

She's with me, asshole.

"What is it you truly want from me, Saun? This is a lot of work to charm a woman into being by your side. Why am I so valuable to you?"

"Don't be so suspicious." Saun threaded his fingers with Lilly's and then brought them up to his lips, kissing her knuckles. "Did I or did I not show my interest in you from the first moment we met?"

"I'll concede, you did."

"Then it's obvious my desire is genuine. The rest of your questions I'll answer over dinner tonight."

"You do know that I am with someone. In fact, I live with him."

The last part of Lilly's statement had his jaw tightening, and rage flashed across his face before he masked it.

"I'm well aware of your relationship with King. I want to show you the kind of life you can have when you aren't looking over your shoulder."

Lilly's life would be nothing but looking over her shoulder with Huber in the mix.

Fucker.

"According to Vi, our date isn't for another five days."

"Are you opposed to moving it up?"

"I'm working tonight. I have an exhibit to prepare for a new artist."

"Give me tonight. Let me give you an evening you won't ever forget."

"You're very confident in yourself."

He smiled. “That is because I know my value and the value of the prize I’m looking at, even if she doesn’t know it.”

Oh, Jesus, this guy was full of shit.

“Will you answer my questions if I say yes to dinner?”

“Of course.”

“Then I accept your invitation on a few conditions.”

He waited for her to continue.

“First, we will stay on US soil. I have work in the morning.” She smiled at him. “I know how you like to fly your dates to far-off places.”

He grinned. “That’s acceptable. What else?”

“I will not spend the night with you, and I’ll go home to Rey.”

Huber’s face grew angry. “Does he have that much control over you?”

“It’s the exact opposite,” Lilly responded with a calm, almost placating tone. “Rey can’t control me. So I’m trying to make it clear to you that you can’t control me either.”

His lips curved at the corners. “I see. This is the bossy stubbornness Busch warned me about.”

All of a sudden, something like panic appeared on Lilly’s face before she masked it and asked, “Why would you have talked to Rex about me outside of my work?”

“I was trying to get tips from him to win your heart.”

The lie in his words was so blatant that even a toddler would have recognized it.

After a few seconds, Lilly asked, “Can you accept my conditions?”

“For now, I’ll accept.” Saun nodded. “Are you ready to start your date then, Ms. Lennox?”

“Give me twenty minutes to let Danika know I’m leaving and close up. Where should I meet you?”

“My car is at the corner.” He pointed to a limousine parked near the side of the gallery.

“I will see you in a few minutes.”

With one last glance, Huber moved to the front doors of the showroom and left.

Lilly waited for Saun to step into his car before she shifted from her spot. Then she walked to the gallery entrance, touched a keypad, tinted the windows, closed the automatic shutters, and locked the gallery.

Once the security monitors beeped, giving the signal the building was armed, she turned, shoulders sagging, and whispered, “Rey.”

I moved out into the showroom.

“What the fuck am I going to do? He’s—” She paused for a second and then started again. “I said the condition about the US soil just for the case, but—” She pressed her fingers to her eyes and then looked up at me. “I can’t be alone with him. If he gets me anywhere out of American borders, I’m not coming back.”

“Why? What haven’t you told me, Lilly?”

Her face was pale, and the desolate look in her gray eyes had me going straight to her and pulling her into my arms.

She buried her face in my chest.

“Remember when I told you Rex tried to kill me?”

“I take it you left some things out.”

“After I shot you, Rex was supposed to drop me at the nearest port for another job. En route, I overheard him negotiating the final details of a sale.” She paused, swallowing. “The sale was for me. The exact words he’d used on the phone to the buyer were, *you’ll have to train the bossy stubbornness out of her*. The same things Saun Huber said to me just now. It can’t be a coincidence, considering what this case revolves around.”

“How did you escape?”

“I told you the truth about that part. Rex’s ego was always his downfall. He assumed his size gave him the advantage, so I let him think he knocked me out when he punched me and put me in the cargo hold. Then, when he came to check on me, I jumped him and stole the speedboat attached to the ship.”

She made it sound so easy, but there was no doubt, especially from her reaction now, she’d been scared beyond anything she’d ever wanted to reveal.

A memory of something she said in London from all those months ago surfaced. I could still hear the bitterness, the pain, the rage in Lilly’s voice when she’d captured Busch.

“You’ve fucked me over in so many ways that even after a thousand lifetimes, I wouldn’t forgive you. This is only the tip of the iceberg of what I want to do to you.”

“Why didn’t you tell me he did this to you?”

“What difference would it have made? I escaped. Certain choices in my life brought me to that spot. And until this moment, I had no idea who the buyer was.”

“We need to get Van and Abalo on the line. I’ll handle Kerr. You can’t get in the car with him.”

She released a sigh and then stepped out of my hold, shaking her head as she paced. “Camilla was right. I agreed to the terms when I signed up. I made a commitment, and I have to follow through.”

“Like hell you do. Just a few seconds ago, you were shaking at the thought of being alone with Huber.”

She stopped moving, and that emotionless mask that drove me insane locked over her face. “It was a moment of weakness that will not happen again. The second I lose focus, predators worse than Saun will pounce. Hell, they’re already circling. It seems like I always get sucked into your vortex and miss the warnings.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I told you I was a bad bet, Rey. And shit keeps proving me right over and over again.”

Oh no, she wasn't going to do this. I was not going to let her run. We'd come too far for this.

"That's bullshit, and you know it."

"No, it's not. I deceive people for a living. I lie. Now everything seems to be catching up to me."

"You can trust me with your secrets. I will do everything to keep you safe."

"Don't you see? Trusting me to keep you safe is the issue."

"Why?"

"Because the only way I can keep someone safe is if I'm not in their life."

Well, here was my opening. "You're still planning to leave, aren't you?"

The starkness in her gray gaze told me the truth before her words could. "I never changed my mind."

"I know you love me. I see it in your eyes. I fucking saw it even when I wanted to hate you. So if you love me, why are you looking to run?"

"It's because I love you that I can't stay."

"You make no damn sense." Clenching my jaw, I closed my eyes.

Why couldn't I get through to her?

"I warned you that I'd break your heart again."

"That's a total copout, and you know it. What are you hiding from? Just tell me the fucking truth about what's going on with you."

"I can't tell you the truth. You have no idea how much I want to." She paced. "Then you would understand."

"Why won't you let me love you?" I couldn't hide my frustration.

"I want you to love me. That's the problem. You make me weak, Rey."

I felt as if we were going in circles. She loved me. She'd just admitted it, and she saw no future for us.

“How the fuck do you expect me to accept this?”

“God, how do I get you to understand?” She covered her face with her hands and then lifted her gaze and whispered, “Cam’s going to kill me.”

“Just say it.”

“Six years ago, I’d resigned myself to the fact that there was a specific course for my life. No love, no family, just work.

“Then you showed up and wouldn’t take no for an answer. Falling for you made me lose focus, made me dream, made me want things. Rex saw it. And in the end, others, more dangerous than him, did too.”

“Who?”

She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. All you need to know is that I would have stayed in hiding if I hadn’t revealed this one piece of leverage to use against me.”

Me.

I stared at her, a war of emotions battling inside me.

“Rey, I’m sorry I did this to you. The biggest mistake I ever made was accepting that date. If I hadn’t, it would have saved us so much pain in the long run.”

That was when the teams from Solon, Interpol, and the FBI entered the gallery wearing all black and each carrying a duffle bag.

The grim looks on Ress’s and Abalo’s faces told me they’d heard Lilly’s words.

I moved toward Lilly, but Ress stepped between us. “There’s no time for this. She has enough on her shoulders.”

LILLY

LESS THAN FIVE MINUTES AFTER THE TEAM WALKED IN ON MY painful discussion with Rey, I exited the gallery's side door, secured it, and made my way down the street in the direction of the waiting limo.

My heart ached, knowing the end was coming in more ways than one.

The European Directors Council was getting ready to strike. I felt it in my gut. I was fooling myself into believing they were playing games to get back at me for moving under Devani's umbrella.

Leaking—or the better term, *bartering*—my information to Saun before I could do it myself through the case, was their way of telling me they were coming for me. Even if Saun managed to get me off US soil, they'd acquire me from him by any means necessary.

I was a commodity to them, a multimillion-dollar one who could build the equipment they currently outsourced. The Council wasn't just going to let me ride off into the sunset with a human trafficker.

Guilt settled deep in my gut. Rey deserved so much better than me. As I'd told him, I should never have accepted that first date, no matter how much he'd flirted.

It was breaking something in me every day. This constantly holding back, constantly fighting this battle to keep a wall between us, constantly expecting the other shoe to drop.

Now I understood what Camilla meant by love making you weak, making you lose focus. In this job, we couldn't afford either.

Maybe, if I'd joined a different division on a different continent, I would've had options. Without another coup, nothing would change in the European Division of Solon. And for that to happen, too many things would have to play out. The problem was that I wasn't a piece on the board for that battle anymore.

As the driver exited the car, Marcus's voice came into the communicator attached to my earring. "You got this, Lil. Knock heads. See you on the other side."

I almost smiled.

That was the exact thing I needed to hear to get out of my head. The words he said on every assignment we worked together right before going silent.

I released a deep breath, centered myself, and stepped into the limo, taking the hand Saun offered me.

"Thank you for waiting."

"The best things are worth waiting for," Saun said with a smile.

He reached for a bottle of rare vintage champagne, popped the cork, and poured two glasses.

Knowing he might have laced the glass or the drink, I took the offered flute and pretended to sip the bubbly liquid before I studied him over the rim of the crystal.

He hadn't aged at all since the last time I'd seen him in Germany. He looked to be in his mid-thirties but was, in fact, ten years older. He had dark blond hair, deep blue eyes, and a face many women would go to great lengths to admire.

He wasn't like Rex, who acted as if he stayed in shape but rarely—if ever—saw the inside of the gym or any training

facility. Instead, Saun loved sports, especially ones involving water. He'd mentioned them many times and had invited me to join him on various trips he'd planned.

"Where are you taking me?"

"It's a surprise, but I promise you'll enjoy it." He watched me and then shook his head. "Why are you so worried? Have I given you a reason for concern?"

Because you purchased me from an asshole and bought information about me on the black market.

Pushing away those thoughts, I focused on my role.

Act the part, Lilly. Let him seduce you. Let him charm you. Let him think he won you away from Rey.

"I'm curious about everything. From the moment you met me, I've made it obvious that I like information. Isn't that why you hired me in the first place?"

"All right then, I'm taking you to a museum for dinner."

Letting my lips curve up, I shifted closer to him.
"Impressive."

"Just wait until you see where we're going for dessert."

"Now you have me very intrigued."

"Lilly Lennox, by the time this night is over, you won't even remember who Reyhan King is."

A chill shot down my spine, but I kept the smile on my face.

THREE HOURS LATER, SAUN AND I SETTLED BACK INTO HIS limo after an extravagant meal in what turned out not to be an actual museum but the giant private gallery of a well-known art collector who'd allowed Saun to host our dinner there.

If I'd been with anyone but Saun, I would have thought it a romantic gesture worthy of a romance novel. We'd had a

Michelin Star chef serve us a ten-course meal and then strolled the rows of rare art, antiquities, and sculptures.

I kept up my part, smiling, laughing, and giving Saun the attention he clearly wanted.

Each minute that passed felt like I was on the tail end of a countdown to a bomb detonation. Anxiety bubbled in the pit of my stomach.

“Ready for dessert?”

“I’m not sure I can eat anything else.”

“By the time we get to our destination, I’m positive you’ll have regained your appetite.”

Out of the window, I noticed we neared a pier with a multitude of large yachts docked along its side.

Motherfucker. I’d made it clear I wanted to stay on American soil.

“I’m not dressed for water sports.”

“No water sports today.” He laughed. “However, there is always tomorrow.”

Swallowing to ease the dryness in my throat, I mentally skimmed through the various ways to avoid getting on that damn ship. Ninety-nine percent of them would require assistance from outside sources.

Fuck.

Saun couldn’t actually believe I’d trust him to return me to Rey after he got me in international waters.

This was the perfect way to procure something he’d purchased without a fight.

My heart pounded in my ears, and a wave of panic hit.

Fuck, this wasn’t me. I had to get it together. I’d lived through situations ten times tighter than this.

Tamping down the terror, I thought back to my training and remembered my team.

I could count on them. They'd find a way to keep the ship in the harbor. And if they couldn't, I knew sure as hell Rey would.

“Ready for dessert under the stars?”

“Not so fast. You agreed to stay on US soil. I have work in the morning.”

Saun's relaxed smile shifted to a frown. “I will return you in time for work.”

“That wasn't our agreement. I made it very clear. I go home to Rey.”

“What will it take to convince you that a minute in King's bed isn't worth leaving me?”

I wanted to respond with *not all the money in the world*, but instead said, “I need to know you see me as a partner, not property or a possession that you purchased.”

He held my gaze for a moment and then nodded. “Good thing I'm looking for a partner and not a possession.”

I would have believed he was charming as hell if it wasn't for the part that he'd purchased me from my former boss and was a human trafficker.

“Then, as a partner, I would assume you would respect my decisions.”

“How about a compromise?”

“I'm listening.”

“We will stay in the harbor to have dessert. Thus, holding to the US part, and you will have time to return to your keeper.”

Shit. There was no way of getting out of that one.

“I can agree to this.”

“Then come see my yacht.”

The doors of the limo opened, and Saun stepped out and then offered me his hand.

I slid my palm across his, and I smiled up at him before joining him outside and tucking my arm in his.

We made our way to a stunning ship that was somewhere along the lines of a one-hundred-and-fifty-foot mega-yacht.

“What do you think?” His pride in his ship was evident.

I also knew the money for it had come from a multitude of nefarious means, among them, the sale of human beings.

“It’s beautiful.”

“This is the life I can give you, Lilly.”

“Why me?”

“Because with you by my side, as my bride, we can expand on the operation Busch started. Do you think I didn’t notice you were the brains behind everything?”

“How would you know this?”

“Let’s say, within six months of you joining Busch’s team, we had acquired more art, more financing, and more connections than the four years previously working with him put together. Why do you think Busch acted as if he owned you?”

“Because he was an asshole,” I muttered, which garnered a laugh.

“Yes, he was. Is that why you handed him over to the Brits? It was payback for the way he treated you?”

“What makes you think I had anything to do with Rex’s capture?” I gave him a coy glance and then shifted my gaze to the yacht.

“Let’s say a little bird told me.”

“I’m not saying I was involved in anything. However, would you blame a woman for exacting her revenge on a man who tried to kill her after she discovered he’d sold her to someone?” I felt the weight of him watching me.

“Is that why you ran? He tried to kill you?”

“One of the reasons.”

“In my opinion, you let Busch off too easily. I would have handled things differently.”

“I’m positive that he isn’t very comfortable.” I smirked and then threw in, “Wherever he is.”

“So, the rumors are wrong. He isn’t with British intelligence. You gave him to someone else.”

“I haven’t admitted to doing anything to Rex.”

“This is why we are perfect for each other. Let’s get out of the cold and enjoy the rest of our evening.” He led us toward the gangway leading onto the yacht where two men in uniform waited.

A second before we reached the bridge, I heard Camilla say into my ear, “Drop your purse.”

Allowing my clutch to slip from my fingers, I quickly grabbed for it and ducked down.

Saun followed my movement. “Let me help you.”

In the next second, men and women wearing FBI vests surrounded us, and I found myself pushed to the ground with my hands pinned to my back.

“Cora Hass, you are under arrest for murder, art theft, racketeering—”

Subtle, guys. Very subtle.

It always amazed me how the backend coordinated shit like this.

“Don’t say anything,” Saun shouted.

I turned my head to see him struggling against the hold three agents had on him.

His gaze connected with mine. “Keep your mouth shut. Do you hear me? I’ll get someone to help us.”

“I don’t understand,” I said, playing into my part. “Did you set me up?”

“I wouldn’t do that to you,” Saun protested as agents hauled him up.

“I don’t believe you.”

I allowed Saun to see tears filling my eyes before someone dragged him in the direction of a waiting car.

Dropping my forehead to the wood planks of the dock, I steadied my breathing and waited for whoever was holding me down to get off me.

Damn, this fucker was heavy.

Instead, the pressure stayed, and the press of the cuffs on my wrists intensified.

“You can get off me now, or I’ll make you.”

“I have a message from your directors,” the man said in an Italian accent.

My blood grew cold, and I stilled. “Go ahead.”

“It’s time for the lost asset to return home. You have six weeks to close shop. Your days of freelancing for the highest bidder are over. All funds procured to date are yours to keep.”

“As if the Council plans to let me spend any of my money. If I ever step foot in Europe, they’ll have me locked in a building and work me to death.”

He ignored my words and continued, “No more jobs unless approved, and you start development on case-specific assignments in three weeks. This is your reminder that you permanently belong to the European Council, no matter what you or Director Patel believe. Deviate from the plan, and you accept the consequences.”

“I’d rather you just eliminate me. Isn’t that the alternative once demotion fails?”

“That’s not my objective. I’m here as a messenger.”

“Just know you’ll be in this same situation one day. You’re part of the task force, like me. I know your voice.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Now answer this question.”

“What?” I gritted out.

“Have I delivered the message?”

“Yes, asshole.”

“Good. Time for a different warning.” His grip loosened.

“Just say it.”

“They’re inside both of King’s organizations. They’re listening. They’re watching. The Council knows you and King are more than just casual lovers. If you want to keep King alive, this time follow the fucking plan.”

My lip quivered.

“Tell Abalo and Ressa it’s arranged,” the man said.

In the next second, the cuffs on my hands disappeared, and he moved off my back.

There was no point in looking for him. He’d vanish from view within the next minute or so.

Slowly, I pushed to my feet, staggering for a second.

I should have expected the Council to place people inside King Holdings. Solon was fucking everywhere anyway.

Turning, I searched the area and found Camilla and Devani standing in front of the open doors of a black van. To their right were Marcus and Noah.

I moved toward them and stopped in front of Devani.

“Did you get a messenger?” she asked.

I clenched my teeth. “Obviously.”

“What did he say?”

“They want their asset back.”

“Anything else?”

“He said it’s arranged.”

She nodded and then glanced at Marcus, who inclined his head.

“You should have told me.” Everything inside me boiled with so much hurt and anger.

Devani returned her focus to me and said, “You weren’t ready.”

“It wasn’t your call.”

“Actually”—she lifted a brow—“it was. I have the highest rank out of everyone here.”

Pushing down the urge to hit Devani, I moved to Marcus.

I held his dark brown gaze. “Tell me, Marcus, what’s arranged? I know this is all you.”

He released a sigh, closing his eyes for a second. “Lil.”

“Don’t you *Lil* me.” I shoved his chest.

“You knew from the moment you got here with Van this was coming.”

I shoved him harder. “You could have just done it from the beginning, and I would never have come here.”

“We had our reasons.” Devani spoke this time.

“Why did all of you set this shit up?”

I kept shoving Marcus, needing someone to hurt as much as I hurt. “Why did you make him love me again?”

Just as I pulled my arm back to push him once more, Marcus grabbed my wrist and pulled me to his chest, wrapping his arms around me in a tight hug.

“Why are you making me break his heart?”

REYHAN

I STOOD ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE VAN, FEELING AS IF MY world had collapsed.

“Why did you make him love me again? Why are you making me break his heart?”

Finally, everything made sense.

All the evading, all the pushing me away, her desperate need to run.

At first, I couldn't understand what was happening when that fucker jumped on Lilly's back after the FBI raid ended. I'd been too far away in the CIA observation area, and I couldn't understand why the Solon assholes weren't helping her.

Then I realized the guy holding her down wasn't actually hurting Lilly. In fact, Lilly was allowing him to keep her there, and they were having a conversation.

Whatever he'd said, at one point, it had her face paling.

That was when all the clues clicked into place.

She was fucking Solon.

Not just any Solon, but Europe.

How the hell hadn't I figured it out?

Her fear of connections, her relationship with Jameson, her interaction with Ressa, and the banter with Abalo.

That fucker was both Interpol and Solon. How that made sense, I'd never understood.

Now here I was, hearing Lilly breaking down. Why would people who seemed to love her set her up?

As if hearing my thoughts, Lilly asked, "Is this what family does? How can you love me and do this?"

I shifted around the front of the large vehicle.

"The kind of family we are does. We had to give you a chance to end it with love, not hate," Abalo whispered into her hair as he held her in his arms.

Seeing him with his arms around Lilly after the way he constantly hassled her about something or another made me want to jerk her away from him.

But I wasn't sure how to process what he'd said to her. They'd brought us back together just to rip us apart again.

Yeah, I wouldn't hate her anymore, but how was that better than knowing what we had was real, and she'd walked away?

"What about Noah and Cam? Were they in on this, or was it just you and Van?"

Who the fuck was Noah? That had to be Jameson.

"They brought me in after it was too late to stop it," Ressa said in a German-accented voice. "That idiot over there is Van's, so I'm sure he helped her put the information on King's phone."

Was anyone who they said they were?

I glanced toward Noah, formerly known as Jameson, who lifted his hands. "We lie for the greater good."

"I'm the greater good?" Lilly jerked out of Marcus's hold, lifting her face into the cold night air.

"Yes," Devani answered. "You were dying, Lil. Exhausted, losing weight, making mistakes left and right. Your guilt was

eating at you every day. Never in a million years would you have ever let the Directors Council trick you into coming out of hiding if you were thinking straight. You would have contacted one of us first before making any move.”

“They were going to kill him. They had someone on his damn team ready to pull the trigger the minute the word went out.”

I hadn't had a chance to process everything she'd said at the gallery, with all the chaos of the case.

She'd all but said someone put a hit on me. Now I knew it was Solon. And they'd done it through people I'd trusted, agents who I'd believed would always have my back.

How many cases had I worked where some asshole could have posed as CIA and been Solon?

“I was on the fucking inside.” Abalo clenched his fist at his side. “I convinced them you shot him to discard a useless lover. The Kings going after you added to my lie. When they sent out that message, it was a test. A test you failed.”

Lilly glanced at Ressa. “Oh God. This is what you meant when you said I failed the test. I didn't truly get it until now. I'm so sorry. I fucked up.”

Lilly dropped her head and covered her face with her hands.

Marcus walked up to Lilly, pulling her fingers from her eyes. “You should have contacted me first. That's what you would have done any other time. I would have told you what was happening. You went completely dark. You stopped communicating with everyone. How were we going to help you when we had no fucking idea where you were? You don't do that to family.”

“When did I become a pawn? I used to be so damn strong that no one saw me coming.”

“You aren't a pawn. You just forgot your role in the game.” Noah moved closer to me, pulling out a chess piece from his pocket.

The rook.

Here was another fucking clue that I'd ignored.

Lilly's love of chess. And Solon was notorious for using chess strategies during training.

I even remembered a story Lilly once told me about giving a friend a rook to remind him of her after graduation. They'd had a running joke about the popular kids like the knight and bishop taking all the glory and then crying when the rook kicked their ass because they forgot it was the second most powerful piece on the board.

It looked as if Noah was the friend.

"Here." Noah offered Lilly the castle-shaped black piece. "I think you need this back."

She took it from him, rolled the carved object between her fingers, and then lifted her gaze to Abalo.

"Are the structural repairs still in progress?"

Structural repairs?

Then it hit me.

A coup of the European Directors Council.

They had to be out of their minds to plan something like that. It would take more than just a few rogue members of European Solon to orchestrate something as massive as a council takeover.

"Yes." He gave her the smirk that seemed to annoy her. "The one who outlined it thought of every scenario. Well, except one. Not having you."

She lifted her chin and then stated, in a tone I hadn't expected, "When you activate, the two at the top are mine. No one gets to put them down but me."

"Then you need to accept what we have ready for you," Devani stated.

Lilly nodded and then asked, "How will it happen?"

"You'll know when you know," Marcus answered.

Lilly remained quiet for a few seconds, then shifted to step into the van.

As her head ducked into the cab, she stated, “I don’t care what any of you say. I can’t leave without him knowing all of it. I already told him some of it. No more half-truths, no more lies. I just don’t have it in me.”

“I don’t think that’s an issue.” Devani glanced over her shoulder at me. “I think he’s gotten most of it.”

Lilly froze and then slowly turned to face me.

“This is what we mean by mistakes, Lil,” Ressa said, with a softer, motherlike tone and none of the pissed-off attitude I’d gotten used to from her. “You should have known he was there, sensed it. This is how you can get yourself killed.”

“Point understood.” Lilly’s lips trembled as we stared at each other.

All the secrets and deception were gone.

“Reyhan King.” Devani broke the silence. “Let me formally introduce you to Senior Special Task Force Agent Lillian Josephine Lennox.”

Instead of recognizing anything Devani said, I moved past her and stopped when I was right in front of Lilly.

“Now, I know.”

She nodded. “Now, you know.”

“How long were you undercover when we met?”

“Two years, five months, and sixteen days.”

No wonder I’d believed she was exactly the mid-grade BND data analyst she portrayed. Anyone who lived that long undercover fell so deep into the role, it became almost an ingrained part of their personality.

“You said I wasn’t part of the plan. There had to be a consequence for having an affair with me, for shooting me, and definitely for letting Busch go. I know how your council works. They have a reputation for their discipline. What was it?”

“Demotion.”

I felt something clench in my heart.

The European Directors Council had all but thrown her to anyone who wanted to use her as target practice. She wouldn't have had access to any of the tools or the agents needed to survive.

She'd had no choice but to go into hiding.

“You came back to protect me, and now you're going to leave for the same reason.”

“Something like that.”

“And there's no coming back?”

She shook her head.

“I don't accept that. I'll find a way.”

“Rey—”

“Finish this conversation in private,” Devani cut in and gestured to a group approaching us.

It was the CIA and Interpol teams.

“Time to debrief.”

A LITTLE BEFORE ONE IN THE MORNING, IN THE WAKE OF A long, exhausting debriefing covering everything from the people we encountered to the food we ate during the course of the case, I released a sigh of relief.

I was fucking done. No more CIA.

That left two major problems in my life. Solon and Lilly leaving.

Right now, the Solon team sans Devani was taking Lilly and me back to the King Holdings building. And no one seemed in the mood to say anything to one another.

I guessed the endless hours of talking had tapped all of us out.

Plus, the emotional roller coaster that I'd just ridden without a safety belt had left me torn to shreds.

Wading through Lilly's conversation with the Solon team was like working a jigsaw puzzle with a million pieces facing downwards. The one thing I understood completely was that at one point, Lilly had been one of the leaders of their group. Then the Busch case had happened, or maybe it was meeting me and all the shit that had ensued.

It still pissed me off to think the people who cared about her believed she was weak. She was fucking anything but weak.

I'd seen seasoned agents with twenty years on the job lose their minds with less stress than Lilly had faced.

Hell, the fact she'd gone on the damn date with Huber, knowing he'd bought her from a fucking human trafficker, made her stronger than over half the people I knew.

I would not lose Lilly to this plan of theirs. There was a way around it. I just had to get my ducks in a row.

I closed my eyes, cleared my mind, and tried to imagine how Arin would work this.

All of a sudden, I remembered something he'd said a few months before his heart attack.

If you're stuck, figure it out together. Why do you think I come to the four of you? I sure as hell can't do it on my own.

Pulling out my phone, I sent a message in the King group chat.

Me: Emergency meeting. My office. Eleven AM.

Nik: Regarding?

Me: Life or death.

Sam: That sounds cryptic.

Me: No shit.

Kir: We'll be there.

Sam: Want to make it earlier?

Nik: You sure you can handle earlier? Rumor says you're occupied.

Sam: Asshole. Set a time, and I'll be there.

Me: Okay, let's move it up to nine.

All three of them agreed, and I set my phone back in my jacket pocket.

LILLY

I EXPELLED AN EXHAUSTED SIGH AS REY AND I WALKED INTO the elevator that would take us directly to his penthouse.

The second the cab doors closed would be our first moment alone since the argument in the Dayal-King Gallery. It felt as if we'd lived through a lifetime between then and now instead of just hours.

My world had completely shifted. Rey knew my secrets, including my failures.

I had no doubt he had more questions. And I wanted to give him the answers he craved. He deserved them.

Hell, I wanted to give him the ending he craved.

But there would be no happily ever after for us.

I'd known it from the start. The European Council would never let me go. Not until their directors were out of power.

As the lift ascended, his golden eyes locked with mine, and a surge of anxiety shot into every nerve in my body. I waited and prepared for whatever he'd say.

“How long do I have left with you?”

I wasn't expecting this question.

No demands to know about Solon. No pushing for more information on the past. No wondering if I was still lying.

He just accepted the inevitable.

I'd leave. Nothing he could do would keep me here now.

A wave of soul-deep sadness and pain wrapped itself around my heart.

If only things were different. But there was no point in dwelling on something like that.

Releasing a deep breath, I stared at his gorgeous face and told him the truth. "I don't know."

"What happened with that agent who had you on the ground?"

"He delivered a series of messages."

"As in from the European Directors Council?"

I closed my eyes for a second. "Exactly."

Just as the elevator opened into his foyer and we stepped out into the penthouse, he said, "They're using me to force your return to Europe."

I set my coat on the edge of a nearby sofa and turned to face him. "You already know this."

He gripped the back of his neck as he came toward me, stopping when I was within reach.

"All of this. Us." He gestured between us. "So we could say goodbye?"

"Looks that way." I swallowed the lump in my throat and peered up at him.

"That's some sadistic bullshit." He clenched his fists at his sides as if he wanted to reach for me but resisted.

I glanced away, trying not to let the weight of everything bear down on me but failing. I'd spent so much time resisting him that revealing how much I needed him felt like I was exposing the most vulnerable parts of me.

"No matter what they did, my decisions got me into this position in the first place."

I'd joined Solon. I'd run away from my family. I'd had an affair with Rey even when I'd known better. I'd come out of hiding. Now, being who I was, I had put Rey in danger again.

I accepted my part in this. And I'd learn to survive with this gut-wrenching cut in my soul because of it.

“Outside of joining Solon, every one of your decisions was based on protecting people you love.”

Tears burned my throat and filled my eyes.

“What does it matter? I can't stay here.”

Rey tilted my face up with a finger under my chin. Then he used his thumb to wipe the wetness running down my cheek.

“Answer this then. Do you still feel the same way about me now as you did back then?”

“Yes.”

He sucked in a breath as if relieved by my response. “What happens between now and when you leave?”

“You tell me.”

“No.” He shook his head. “This is all you. I don't have any idea how to navigate this.”

Hell, if I knew how to navigate anything. All I could do was take this tiny bit of time with him.

“I can't make promises. I can't give you the future you want. But for now, I can give you all of me.”

He took a step away from me, a crease forming between his brows. “Then one day you'll just disappear?”

I wanted to say *pretty much*. I'd helped other agents in similar situations. We'd staged everything from car bombs and house fires to straight-up shootings.

“Maybe. I won't know until the plan activates.”

“What kind of existence is that, Lilly? Don't you want something solid, something stable, something that doesn't force you to run all the time?”

“There is no point in wanting something I can’t have. The last time I did that, I had to shoot someone.”

He paced, not saying anything, and then came to an abrupt halt, focusing back on me. “I won’t stop looking for you. I found you once. I can do it again.”

“No, you won’t, not this time.” I sighed. “Besides, you only found me in London because of Devani.”

“What are they planning to do?”

“That’s the thing. I don’t even know the plan.”

“You accept this?”

“Yes. This way, it looks authentic.”

“You don’t think I can protect myself? I fucking have a damn empire behind me.”

“If our people are in the CIA and Interpol, don’t you think they’d make their way into King Holdings without any of you having a clue? You wouldn’t know if they were your security or your accountant. That’s something else that the agent told me. They’ve been watching us from the beginning.”

He paced back and forth, then moved to the bar, but instead of pouring a drink, he braced his arms on the edge.

He glanced at me. “How do you expect me to accept this?”

“You don’t have a choice.”

Something passed through his golden eyes, and I thought for a second he would argue, but instead, he asked, “Do you mean it?”

“Mean what?”

“That I have all of you until you leave. No more resisting. No more pushing me away.”

We stared, holding each other’s gazes, intense, full of emotions. Then, before I realized I’d moved, his shirt was in my hand, and I’d pulled him to me, fusing our mouths together.

Rey fisted my hair in a tight hold and deepened the kiss, sliding his tongue along mine and causing a flood of arousal to course through every nerve in my system.

This kiss wasn't like anything we'd shared before. There were no more secrets, no more lies between us. Nothing separated us but the inevitability we had no control over.

He cupped my ass, and I slid my arms around his neck, pressing my body to his, feeling every hard inch of him, his thick cock a solid presence against my aching clit.

"Rey," I murmured.

This was what we needed after everything that had happened tonight. We tasted, savored, ate at each other.

I wanted him, craved him, ached for him.

I'd barely registered Rey walking me backward until my spine hit the cold window, and I gasped.

The shock disappeared within seconds, replaced by a moan the moment Rey's teeth grazed along the juncture where my neck met my shoulder.

When he bit down, giving me that edge of pain I loved without hurting me, goosebumps broke out over my skin, and my nipples pebbled to stiff peaks.

Rey kneaded my waist as he braced a palm against the glass by my head and trailed his lips down my throat.

"Fuck, Lilly. I can't get enough of you."

I had to touch him. I needed to feel him.

Before he could register what I was about to do, I reversed our positions, pinning him against the window.

Surprise flashed on his face for a split second before a wicked grin appeared, causing a spasm deep in my core.

"You've waited to do that, haven't you?"

"Well, I had to prove you didn't know all my moves." I returned his smile and then added, "Plus, there is a thrill in knowing I can pin a man more than twice my size to a wall."

He leaned back and lifted a brow. “Now that you have me here, what do you have planned?”

A shiver shot down my spine. Sex between us was always a game of power, a push and pull, something we both got off on. But on the rare occasion when one of us relented, it seemed to add to our connection.

“I guess you’ll just have to see,” I said, shifting away from him.

Reaching behind me, I unzipped my skirt and let it slide to the floor. Next, I untied the knot holding the top of my blouse closed and slowly exposed the lace bra underneath.

Rey’s eyes heated, turning into rings of gold, and his breaths grew shallow. His cock lay long and thick along the seam of his pants, making me lick my lips and giving me all kinds of ideas.

Once I stood before him in only my thigh-highs and thong, a low hum of energy pulsed between Rey and me.

This was something we hadn’t shared in so long—the raw, feral desire.

Holding his gaze, I moved back toward him. Lifting onto tiptoes, I nipped his stubble-covered jaw and then rubbed my cheek against him, loving the feel of the abrasion against my skin.

“Are you marking me like a cat?”

“Possibly.”

Untucking his shirt from his pants, I unfastened the buttons and pushed the expensive cotton off his shoulders.

God, this man’s body was the stuff of dreams.

I traced the tattoos covering his beautiful tan skin from his neck and along his arms.

His muscles flexed and bunched as I scratched my nails up his sculpted abs and then back down.

He let out a slight hiss and warned, “Lilly.”

“Shush. I’m in charge. For months, all you’ve done is boss me around. Now it’s my turn.”

I clasped his belt buckle, pulling the leather through the loop.

“Remember, there’s payback.”

“I wouldn’t doubt it.” I slid my hand into his now open pants, cupping his straining, thick cock before squeezing the length up and down. “You’re never one to leave things one-sided.”

Releasing my grip on him, I sank to my knees, looked up, and then gave him a smirk that conveyed exactly my next move.

“Fuck.” He expelled an unsteady breath. “You have no idea how much I want you.”

A sharp pain hit my heart for a brief second, knowing times like these would be short-lived, but I shoved the thought to the far recesses of my mind.

Pushing his pants down, I reached inside his boxers and freed his hard, velvety erection.

A drop of precum beaded the tip, making me salivate for a taste. Then, leaning forward, I took the pearl onto my tongue.

I lifted my gaze to his. Pure carnal lust stared back at me, and a shiver shot down my spine.

“Put me in your mouth, Lilly.”

“Always so bossy,” I said, a second before engulfing the broad crown of his cock between my lips.

A low, guttural moan escaped from deep within Rey’s throat, and he threw his head back against the glass.

I took him in, gradually at first, and then deeper and deeper, my palm following the path of my lips over his cock. I set a pace meant to keep him on edge and drive him crazy.

His fingers threaded into my hair and fisted in an almost too-painful hold. “You’re a fucking tease.”

I hummed as I bobbed up and down, caressing the heavy vein on the underside of his cock with my tongue. His arousal drove mine higher and higher, my skin burning with need.

An almost painful throb intensified in my core, and I squeezed my thighs together as I tried to resist the urge to slide my hand between my legs.

As if sensing my thoughts, Rey jerked my head back and tugged me off him. "That's mine."

He pulled me up, reversing our positions.

He ripped my underwear from my hips with one hard jerk and then lifted my legs around his waist.

In the next second, he positioned himself and slammed into me.

"Rey," I cried out, my back bowing against the window and my nails digging into the muscles of his shoulders.

Instantly, my pussy spasmed and clenched around him, flooding his cock with my arousal.

"God, Lilly. I love feeling you like this."

"Like what?" I gasped between his thrusts.

"Open. No holding back."

Instead of lingering on the emotions I saw whirling in his eyes, I cupped his head and drew his lips to mine.

In the next few moments, we were lost again in the needs of our bodies. Rey shifted us once more to the floor, sandwiching me between him and the dark hardwood, and started a relentless pace, fucking me hard and fast as he made me mindless with the need to come.

When my orgasm finally washed over me, I clamped down on him so hard it pushed him into his own release.

"Fuck, Lilly." He dropped his head into the crook of my neck.

I clutched at his shoulders, gasping for breath and looking up at the ceiling of the living room.

“Do you realize we rarely make it to a bed?”

He lifted his head, giving me his sexy-as-hell smile.
“Making love on a bed is overrated.”

I SQUARED MY SHOULDERS AND BRACED FOR THE UNEXPECTED as I made my way into the Dayal-King Gallery a little before four in the morning. Nerves burned in my gut. However, I was positive this was the right choice.

Fuck, I had no other choice. Well, none that gave me a chance at a life with Rey.

I'd lain awake for over an hour, watching Rey sleep and feeling my heart breaking.

I understood everyone's intentions in bringing Rey and me back together, but I knew neither of us would be able to move on.

The Directors Council had pushed all of us into a corner, and somehow, we'd all trained ourselves to believe disappearing was the way to escape them. But there had to be another way.

I couldn't go into hiding without trying something. I couldn't go into hiding without taking at least one more shot at finishing my role in the plan I'd started long before I'd ever gotten on the Busch case or met Rey.

Yes, I wasn't going to follow the original plan, and yes, Camilla and Marcus were probably going to kick my ass, but I couldn't just accept a life in exile.

Though, this time, I wouldn't be stupid. Trying to do everything myself left me exhausted.

And as Camilla and Marcus had told me, I kept making mistakes.

Well, now I was going to ask for help from one of the most intelligent people I'd ever encountered.

Would she hate me was the million-dollar question.

I'd sent the message through an encrypted server with a signature completely distinctive to my hacker profile. Only someone with skills at my level or better could decode the message.

As I entered the appraisal lab, the lights turned on.

Danika sat at my desk, dressed in a pair of pajamas, holding a mug of coffee the size of a football.

"So, I finally get to meet the Cora Hass side of Lilly Lennox. It took you long enough." Danika lifted a well-defined brow and took a deep gulp from her cup. "Want to tell me why Cora is requesting a meeting with the Little Rabbit?"

How the fuck had she figured it out? And why hadn't she said anything?

"How long have you known?"

"I could ask you the same question."

I smiled. "For a few years. I'm very good at tracing digital signatures."

"And you didn't reveal it to anyone?"

"Let's say I know the need to keep secrets, especially as a woman in this industry." I held her gaze. "When did you know about me?"

"Since the day Rey came back into town after you started working here. With the intensity in the way you watched each other, there was no hiding the two of you had a past."

I still remembered that day. The shock that covered Rey's gorgeous face and then the flash of lust before it morphed into anger.

"Plus," Danika continued, "later in the day, I happened to overhear the conversation when he had you pinned against the wall of the lab."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

“Because whatever happened, it had nothing to do with the fact you didn’t love him. I saw the pain on your face when he accused you of being a villain.

“You were letting him believe the worst in you for a reason. I know what it’s like to play a role for a purpose. I wasn’t going to punish you for the same thing.”

I suspected she was thinking of her uncle and Jayna and Sam’s father, Ashok Shah. She’d pretended to be his puppet for years to keep an eye on him and his plans against the people she loved.

“Does Nik know?”

“I don’t keep secrets from my husband.” She gave a sheepish smile. “Well, not in situations like this.”

“And he kept it from Rey?”

“Well, Rey was keeping things from him, so Nik thought it was the least he deserved.”

“Where do we go from here?”

“Depends on what you need from me.”

“I want to hire you.”

“I got that from the open price tag with the request to meet. What’s the job?”

“Leverage worthy of serious blackmail.”

“I see. What type of targets?”

“Platinum level. They’re the type who would hire you to implement their security. That is if you ever lowered your standards to work for people like them.”

Danika remained quiet, studying me for a few moments, and then asked, “And your Solon network can’t help you?”

I gave no reaction to her knowing this information about me. Just like I’d figured out she was the Little Rabbit, somewhere along the way, I must have left clues. And I hadn’t been as careful as I used to be.

“Oh, I’m sure they will mobilize when the time is right. They’ve already put too much on the line, and it’s better to keep them on a need-to-know status. At least, until we have set things in motion.”

Like after it was too late for them to do anything except to follow along with my plan.

“Let me guess. It’s someone within Solon.”

“Two someones.” I handed her a paper with the names.

One was a well-known Italian fashion designer, and the other was the head of a British music label.

Her eyes connected with mine.

“Why does this not surprise me?”

“We come in all shapes and sizes.”

“Can I assume by going after these two, we’re taking on Europe?”

I nodded. “It took them less than seven years to destroy the reputation of an organization that was the model for others.”

“What’s your end goal?”

A chance with Rey.

I kept those thoughts to myself and said, “Before I leave, I have to take one more shot at cutting the head off the snake that’s taken so much from me and others like me.”

“We’re limited on what we can do from our end. You’re going to need backup, more than those in Solon you trust. We’re already putting them in the middle of a war between their own people. Let me call in some King resources to help.”

I shook my head, knowing there was only one person I could contact that no one would suspect of helping me. He’d drop everything to stand by my side.

“No Kings. The Council has people watching them. I can’t risk it. But I do have someone we can call, and he will mobilize more than an army within minutes.”

“Take a seat, Lilly Lennox.” Danika opened a backpack she had hanging on the side of a chair and pulled out a laptop.

Danika started typing something. Suddenly, bars came down on all the windows, and a warning appeared on all the security monitors stating the building was in lockdown mode.

“Impressive.”

Danika pursed her lips. “Don’t act like you don’t have something like this in your place. I bet you built some state-of-the-art war room in the basement.”

I shrugged. “Good point.”

Rising from her chair, Danika picked up her bag and computer and moved to the elevator. “Meet me upstairs in my old apartment. Since you know my secret, I might as well show you the heart of the Little Rabbit’s operation.”

“First, let me make the call to arrange our backup team.”

Danika nodded and stepped into the waiting cab.

Once the doors closed, I pulled out my encrypted cellphone and called a number I hadn’t used in too many years to count.

“*Hello,*” a deep, annoyed voice said in German. “*Who the hell is this? How do you have this number?*”

“*Papa.*” I swallowed down my churning emotions. “*It’s Lillian.*”

“*Schatzi!*”

“*I need your help.*”

REYHAN

I STARED AT THE NEW YORK SKYLINE FROM MY OFFICE A little after nine in the morning, wondering what the hell Lilly was doing at the moment.

We'd spent hours lost in each other. There was desperation with each touch, a lingering knowledge the end was coming, but somehow, I'd woken alone once again.

How the hell had she snuck out of my penthouse without me knowing? Even my men hadn't seen her leave the building.

She was probably with some of those Solon fuckers who were going to take her from me.

As if I couldn't read between the lines of what Lilly had said last night.

They planned to stage her death.

And keeping her in the dark about when it would happen would make it look believable.

I closed my eyes, still seeing the devastation on Lilly's face as Abalo and Ress had spoken to her. The relationship she had with them was as deep as I had with my brothers.

They'd hurt her by bringing us back together, with the plan to tear us apart again. But now that I'd had a chance to wrap my mind around it, I could understand their motivation.

They wanted both of us to have closure.

What neither of them realized was that there was no closure for either of us. Lilly was it for me. And I had no doubt it was the same for her. She'd put too much on the line for it not to be.

Hopefully, the risk I planned to take would work.

I shook my head, thinking about how badly Abalo had played me.

Fucker.

I'd worked with him on and off for two years without a damn clue he'd known my history with Lilly.

I should have known there was more to the tension between him and Lilly than his dislike of the deal to clear her record.

It was a fucking act.

Why hadn't I gone with my gut and remembered never to take anything Devani said at face value? She was Solon to the core, and mind games were her forte.

Though there was no doubt about Devani's loyalty, it wouldn't matter that Abalo, Ress, and Lilly weren't under the North American umbrella. She'd go to bat for them. Hell, by bringing Lilly to New York, she'd put the ire of the whole European Directors Council on her head.

All of them had protected Lilly with their lives in this whole mess with the European Council.

The Kings and Joseph Lennox owed each of them a debt.

Fuck. There was another mess I'd have to deal with at some point.

Lennox.

What was I going to tell him if she disappeared again?

Hopefully, Abalo and Ress were open to changing their plans for Lilly after I posed my counteroffer to them, and talking to Lennox would become a moot point.

Before anything could even move forward, I had to convince my asshole brothers to back it.

I pressed a closed fist to the cold window and gritted my teeth. “Fuck.”

“It’s that kind of morning, is it?” Nik asked as he walked in with a cup of coffee. “Guess this meeting is an emergency, after all.”

“Where’s Kir and Sam?”

“On their way. They don’t live in the building as we do.”

“Technically, I’m the only one who lives in the building. You live on the top level of an art gallery.”

“Well, last night we stayed here. My penthouse. I can do what the hell I want with it.” Nik took a seat on one of the recliners near the window, leaned back, and gave me his get-on-with-it look. “Now that we got my living arrangements out of the way, what’s going on?”

“We’re going to call in some favors,” I stated as a fact, not a request.

“I see.” Nik nodded. “Before we get to that, I’m going to ask you this once, and I want a straight answer.”

I already knew what this was about.

“Fine.”

“Are you with her because you remember Cora or because she’s Lilly?”

“Did you figure it out before or after you walked in on us in the lab?”

“Before.”

“When?”

“The day you supposedly met Lilly Lennox for the first time in Danika’s gallery. The looks on both of your faces said more than enough.” Nik leaned forward. “Plus, did you think I didn’t notice the fucking ink you like to hide under Arin’s

ring? I can read Sanskrit. Those same words are worked into Lilly's tattoo."

Without thinking, I twisted the platinum ring. "Cora wasn't real. I'm with Lilly."

"Here's another question. When did you learn Lilly was Cora?"

"The same fucking day Lennox sent a picture of her and ordered me to find and protect his missing daughter."

"That explains why you were such a fucking asshole for months afterward," Sam said as he strolled in with a bag of food and an insulated mug. "You could have told us who she was. We wouldn't have wasted so much money and time looking for her."

I narrowed my gaze. "Fuck off, money man."

"Apparently, getting laid on the regular hasn't improved your disposition."

"I see I didn't miss much." Kir shook his head as he walked in with his own cup of coffee, closed the door behind him, and grabbed a spot on the couch next to Sam.

"Now that we're all here, explain what favors you want called in." Nik relaxed into his seat.

"First, I need to secure this room." I moved over to a panel and typed in a code.

A second later, the locks engaged, and all electronic access to the room stopped.

"This has to be serious if he's going all spy-level on us." Sam opened his bag and pulled out a sandwich.

I returned to the sitting area and took my chair. "We need to find out who runs Solon Europe. Specifically, the members of the Directors Council. I don't care about the regional directors. Ideally, I want anything and everything about the two assholes who chair the council."

A crease formed between Kir's brows. "Are you out of your fucking mind? They keep that shit a secret for a reason."

That's like declaring war if they get any wind of it."

From the moment I'd thought of this idea, I'd known Kir would fight it. He'd worked with Solon for years on a consultant basis in exchange for future favors. Many agents considered him one of them for all the shit he'd done for them.

"Would it change your mind if I told you they put a hit on me? And have people planted in our organization awaiting an order to pull the trigger?"

"Bullshit," Kir protested, pulling out his phone and then tossing it on the coffee table, remembering nothing worked inside the room at the moment. "I monitor all threats to us. I have every one of your aliases covered, and Danika does her thing crawling the web."

"How the fuck would you know if they ordered one of their own to do it? Their agents hide in plain sight. Sam's socialite is a prime example. Would anyone believe a diamond heiress is part of Solon or a member of the North American Directors Council?"

"First of all, Devani isn't mine." Sam's voice grew cold. "Second, what did you do to piss them off?"

"It isn't something he did. It's something someone else did with him." Nik studied me and then turned his attention to Kir. "Kir, correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't you mention there is a group of European agents who don't follow the normal practices of other Solon agents, like having regular lives, marriages, and families? That, in fact, they sever all ties to everyone outside of the organization."

"The special task force. They are individuals with honed skills, anything from strategic planning to technology and weapons development. They're actually called assets, not agents. It's fucked-up as hell."

"In other words," Sam interjected, "Europe doesn't like to outsource anything, and to ensure this, they keep their special assets tied to them in any way they can."

"Exactly. This is the reason I avoid contracts with Solon Europe. The directors are corrupt as fuck, and you can't trust

them.” Kir ran a hand over his face and stood, moving to the window. “Lilly is their classic MO. Affluent, genius-level intelligence, and a boarding school attendee.”

“Now the pieces fall together,” Nik stated. “She left her family to protect them, not because of the shit with her ex.”

“And the European Directors Council used me to bring her out of hiding,” I added. “They wanted their asset back, but Devani stole her away to America.”

Now they were using me again, to take her back.

“Did you ever find out where she went or how she disappeared without a trace?”

“The one thing I’ve learned is that she can talk in riddles and avoid a straight answer at all costs.”

“I know this firsthand,” Sam muttered, no doubt referring to Devani.

“And are you CIA assholes any different?” Kir held my gaze.

“Maybe not, but she’s mine, and I’ll be damned if I’ll lose her to them again.”

“It’s like that, is it?”

“Yes,” I answered Kir without hesitation.

“If we’re doing this”—Kir’s voice took on a let’s-get-to-business tone—“you give us everything and don’t leave a fucking thing out. I need every detail you know.”

Before I could open my mouth, Nik said, “You can start with how you blackmailed her into coming here.”

“In his defense, I have a good suspicion someone manipulated him into doing it.” Sam smirked.

I shook my head and then scrubbed a palm over my face. “You don’t even know the half of it. We are all part of the Great Solon Plot.”

“Once we have everything set, you can pay your penance by calling your future father-in-law and filling him in on the

details of the trouble you couldn't keep this daughter from getting into," Kir ordered.

"If I can keep her from disappearing, I'll do any-fucking-thing as penance," I stated.

Nik leaned back in his chair. "Start talking."

Hearing the command, I proceeded to detail everything from my relationship with Lilly in Germany to the case here in New York City and everything I'd learned last night.

By the time I finished, I felt gutted.

"I don't know whether to be impressed or scared shitless at their level of coordination to get you two together." Sam's awe of the effort was pretty much equivalent to mine.

"What do you want to do with the information about the Council?" Nik asked.

"I want to give them a taste of their own medicine."

"As in leverage or elimination?" Kir watched me, knowing I'd want to do the latter if that was an option.

"That all depends on whether they cooperate with our demands."

Kir set his coffee on the table in front of him and rubbed his scar. "Wouldn't your superiors look down on this type of behavior?"

"I don't give two shits what they think. I'm done. My final case ended last night." I shifted my attention to Sam. "Besides, some asshole informed me I don't think I'm a King anymore. Might as well come back and show him I can still do things Arin's way."

At that moment, a knock came at the door. And I could only shake my head. Just like Lilly, they'd managed to circumvent our security to enter our building. And this proved Solon agents trained to get into anywhere.

"What the fuck?" Kir jumped up, pulling the gun he always had on him.

“Didn’t I say Solon can get in anywhere?” I moved to the door. “However, these two were invited. Though, Kir, I think you need to up your game with security in this building.”

Punching in the access code on the panel released the seal on the room and then opened the door.

“King, you wanted to chat?” Marcus Abalo stood there with Camilla Ress, both of them with smug smiles on their faces.

“Welcome, Agents Abalo and Ress. Thanks for joining us.” I gestured for them to enter, and once they passed me, I secured the room again.

“Talking to either of us isn’t going to change the plans.” Abalo scanned the faces of my brothers, taking in everything about them.

Ress ignored everyone, headed to the window, and leaned back on it as if this was her office. I had to hand it to her. She had a way of owning a room for a woman who barely made five-foot-five-inches.

“She straight-up gives the Solon vibe. You, on the other hand, I’m not sure. Interpol or Solon?” Sam asked Abalo. “You were at dinner with Director Patel the other night.”

“Ahh. The on-again-off-again love interest.” Abalo’s lips curved. “To answer your question, all of the above.”

I could almost hear Sam grind his teeth.

“Have a seat,” Nik directed. “Rey, want to fill us in why you invited them here?”

“You’ll understand in a moment.” I turned my attention to Abalo. “I heard you say that you wanted to purge the European Directors Council. How would you like our help?”

Abalo studied me. There was no doubt the man was intelligent. He couldn’t have gotten into Interpol at the level he was without being on top of his game.

“And what favor would I owe the Kings in return for this generous assistance?”

“The very thing you said you wouldn’t do when you walked in the room. Call off the order on Lilly.”

“We can’t do that since that leaves you vulnerable, which in turn leaves Lilly vulnerable.” Ress glared at me.

“All of this is because of me. It’s time I protected her instead of the other way around.”

“You love her?” Abalo held my gaze in the way I’d expect a parent or brother to size me up.

“Yes.”

“You think you have the power to take down one of the most powerful groups in Europe?”

“There is no *think* about it. We may not flex our power, but our network has a far and deep reach. Combining it with what I’m sure you already have in place will provide you all that you’ll need to return the organization to its original structure.”

The fact Nik, Kir, and Sam remained quiet conveyed their complete support of my position.

Ress moved to stand along Abalo’s side. “You’d put your empire behind a war to protect her?”

“In a heartbeat.” I’d do anything for Lilly.

“How would you even know who to trust to wage this war? The directors have people inside this very building who would turn on you given the order to do so.”

“What you don’t understand is that we grew up on the streets, and that was our life every day until Arin took us on.

“We will weed them out, but in case we can’t, we’re sure you can. Especially the trainer over there. I’m sure a few of them have come through her classes once upon a time.” I looked in Ress’s direction.

“You believe I’d have interest in helping you?”

“You’d do anything for Lilly. She’s like a daughter to you. You treat her like Arin treated us—hard as hell, but you’d take a bullet for her.”

Ress nodded. “Just because I didn’t give birth to them doesn’t mean they aren’t mine.”

“That’s one thing we understand firsthand,” Nik said. “All four of us had parents, but Arin was our father through and through.”

“Are we in agreement?” I asked.

Marcus nodded. “The time may come sooner than you expect.”

“Then it’s settled.”

“Not even close.” The grin on Ress’s face made me nervous. “There is one major problem to face before any of this can go forward.”

I held her calculating stare. “What is that?”

Abalo released an exhausted sigh. “Lilly has already taken your plan and gone one step further. She’s managed to lure the co-chairs of the Council onto US soil. In fact, they will be here by the end of the day.”

A roar sounded in my ears. What the fuck was she doing?

“How do you know any of this?”

“Two reasons.”

“And they are?”

“First, the councilors contacted us to make arrangements for their arrival, including security,” Abalo paused and glanced at Ress, who inclined her head, and then continued. “They wanted to surprise Lilly with their presence.”

“Why would they contact you?”

“Because as the Director of Recruitment and Training, Cam isn’t on the Directors Council but reports directly to one of the co-chairs of the Council,” Abalo said. “And I’m next in line to join the Council, meaning as soon as the co-chairs deem a director is no longer operating at prime capacity, I will replace them. I am what one would call protégé to the co-chairs.”

“Isn’t that convenient?” Nik mused.

Abalo held Nik’s gaze. “Tell me a better way to position oneself to assassinate the leaders without being at the same table?”

“Point well made,” Nik conceded.

Bringing everyone’s attention back to the topic, Kir asked, “Why would Lilly want them here?”

My thoughts went to the conversation I’d overheard between Lilly and the Solon crew: *“When you activate, the two at the top are mine. No one gets to put them down but me.”*

My heart ached, knowing the answer.

“She’s using herself as bait so she can take them out.”

“Correct. She isn’t one to go into exile quietly,” Abalo said with a grim nod. “Which connects to the second reason. After it was too late to deviate from her plan, she sent options on ways we could coordinate with her strategy.”

“When, exactly, was this?”

“About five minutes before you requested this meeting,” Ressa answered.

That explained why it had been so easy to get a response from them.

“Who’s helping her?” Kir asked. “To garner this type of reaction in a matter of hours requires coordination on a large scale.”

Ressa shook her head and sighed. “While you boys slept, Lilly used her considerable pull to activate an army very few people have access to with one phone call. And she supplied said army with very detailed information she collected with a fellow Dark Web hacker to blackmail the European Directors Council.”

Nik and I stared at each other before he asked, “And who is the hacker?”

“This data wasn’t relayed to us. Lilly protects her sources.”

Nik muttered something as he stood, pulling out his phone, and then glared at me when he saw a blank screen. “Want to unlock this fucking room?”

“Not until we have things settled.” Instead of talking to Abalo, I focused on Ress.

This whole meeting with them was a classic Solon runaround. They could have just told us this information from the beginning without the fucking song and dance.

“Cut the bullshit. You had a plan when you got here. I see it in your eyes. What is it that you want me to do?”

“We want to use you as leverage.”

LILLY

“YOU CAN STILL CALL THIS OFF,” I HEARD DANIKA SAY INTO my earpiece as I made my way to the restaurant where I was supposed to meet a representative of the Council.

I’d spent the day locked in the gallery with Danika going over every contingency possible to keep her and the Kings safe.

“It’s a bit late for second thoughts, Dani. The train left the station a long time ago. I know what’s waiting for me inside.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

I’d received an encoded message agreeing to a meeting with a Council representative less than an hour after Papa’s men delivered packages to the actual homes of the European Directors Council members instead of the ones listed in public databases. Each of our information gifts contained details ranging from personal bank records, to their children’s health information, to their last vacations and the names of the people they may or may not be cheating on their spouses with.

What I hadn’t expected was for my brothers to get involved in the operation. Or for them to make the decision to take all of the Council members’ families into custody as additional leverage.

It seemed as if my inability to stick to a plan was hereditary.

I wasn't worried that anything would happen to the families. It wasn't how my brothers operated. More than likely, they'd end up scared but unharmed in the long run. However, the spouses were going to learn a lot about their significant others.

Maybe I should feel remorse or something within that realm for putting anyone's family through an inkling of fear, but honestly, I couldn't muster a single ounce of guilt in this situation.

Maybe the years I'd spent under the oppressive thumbs of the co-chairs had destroyed parts of my moral compass. If so, I couldn't give a damn.

"Dani, we already planned for the ambush. Marcus and Cam are going to have people in place. And Van has eyes on the outside."

"While I get to sit here in my building monitoring everyone from miles away."

"This isn't your fight. I won't have you in the crossfire. Plus, Nik needs you."

"Doesn't Rey need you?" Danika asked.

Now here was where I truly felt something. The guilt of leaving Rey in the dark ate at me. He'd sent a text around noon saying he was going out of town on King Holdings business and wouldn't return until evening. Depending on the results of this "meeting," I may or may not see him again.

"What you don't understand is that I don't even have a chance at anything long-term with Rey unless this works."

"Then let's hope you clear this board."

"Oh, was that a chess reference?" I asked.

"Being around Devani all of these years was bound to rub off on me."

"I'm here." Tugging my earpiece out of my ear, I leaned down and stuffed it into the hidden pocket in my boot.

The second I entered the building, someone would check me for devices. I may have lost my honed edge, but I wasn't an idiot. Trusting anyone to actually keep their word was like believing a feral black bear was something to cuddle up next to in the forest.

I approached a small eatery on the corner of an intersection of various types of businesses and shops. With the meeting being well past rush hour, the crowds had thinned from the daily bustle of the area.

Before I could grab the door handle, it was pushed open, and a tall, slender man appeared and tilted his head in a gesture to enter.

Next, a woman who was about my height dressed in jeans and a leather jacket with dark brown eyes and rich ebony skin approached me.

She studied me from head to toes, taking in everything about me, from my clothes to my thigh-high boots.

As she stepped in front of me, she kept her face void of any expression, pulled out a device the size of a small pillbox from her pocket, showed it to me, and then scanned my body, purposefully avoiding certain areas of my boots.

Okay then. Good to know at least I had one person on my side here.

As she stood, she held my gaze and said, "You aren't what I expected."

"What did you expect?"

"Someone a lot taller. And maybe a bit scarier, especially for all the chaos you've caused."

Hell, what could she have expected? I was five-foot-eight, not petite by any standard.

She turned around and started in the direction that she'd arrived.

Just as she passed the threshold of the passageway leading into the restaurant's dining area, she paused and tilted her chin. "Follow me."

I fell in behind her, and we made our way into the restaurant. The whole place was packed, from the bar to all of the tables. And not a single one of them was there for the food.

Yeah, this was a fucking ambush.

Well, as far as it seemed.

Throughout the room, I noticed faces that would never risk gathering in one place together at any time before. People who were part of the network Camilla had started long before my recruitment into Solon.

I could buy that some of them mobilized to be here within the short window I'd given Marcus and Camilla, but this many?

What the hell was going on?

“Here we are. Director Abalo requested you join him at his table. He will be here shortly.”

I stopped and frowned. “What do you mean by Director Abalo? When was he promoted?”

“Director Abalo has replaced the previous Council Director of Security Infrastructure.”

“Your early-morning package deliveries and cargo acquisitions today identified a weakness in the Council,” Marcus said as he approached from my side with Camilla and two people who I wished I could beat to within an inch of their lives. “The co-chairs deemed my experience was more suited for the position of security.”

“Isn't that convenient?” I muttered.

“One never turns down an opportunity.”

I held the gazes of Sofia Barker-Caster and Lorenzo Castello, not caring that, at this moment, they hated me as much as I hated them. “Hello, Directors. Please take it personally when I say it isn't nice to see you. Also, doesn't it suck to have your own methods played on you?”

Sofia stepped toward me, making me ready to counter a punch, but Lorenzo lifted a hand. “Let's see if we can handle

this in a civilized manner, shall we?”

I shifted my attention away from Sofia and asked, “Is that possible? Given the circumstance.”

“We can always try.” Lorenzo glared and then gestured to Marcus.

“Let’s sit and discuss this situation.”

I waited until everyone shifted into spots along an arrangement of sofas with a coffee table in the center before taking a seat.

I hated to have my back to the room, but Marcus and Camilla were on either side of me, so I could live with it.

“I want my children back.” Sophia’s face showed the anger of an enraged mother.

I wanted to have sympathy, but the shit she’d put countless other people and me through made it impossible to give her a grain of compassion.

“I want my freedom. I want you to forget I ever existed. I want you to forget anyone with the name King exists.”

Lorenzo smirked. “Is that all? Do you understand how much money we put into training you?”

“You put nothing into me. If anyone owned me, it was the previous council. They sanctioned my recruitment. They funded and oversaw my training. I’m their asset. Eliminating them doesn’t mean ownership transfers to you.”

When Camilla and the deceased co-chair, Silas Walsh, had recruited me, I’d had so many naive dreams about my life and changing the world. Then, these two fuckers, Lorenzo and Sophia, came into the picture, and I went from an agent to a damn asset with no choices or a future outside of the one they dictated.

“That’s exactly what it means.” Lorenzo leaned back in his chair.

“Then I guess your children and spouses now belong to me. Isn’t there some saying here in the US that goes

possession is nine-tenths of the law?"

"Don't act morally superior when you're holding our families hostage to teach us a lesson."

"Your children are probably eating ice cream and watching cartoons. Something I can guarantee wouldn't have been the case if you'd ever used my brother's children against me.

"Oh, one more thing about my moral superiority. You should know, your significant others have learned in great detail about your extramarital activities. I hear divorce settlements for record executives can range in the tens of millions."

Sophia's face was a play of rage. "You won't walk out of here alive. Who do you think the people in this room are loyal to?"

"I'd say maybe thirty-three percent would fall on your side, but the other sixty-seven would land heavily in my favor."

"Are you willing to risk it? Abalo knows you and your contacts. He will find our families. Your leverage is gone. All I need is one bullet, and you're done."

"The same is true for the both of you." I glanced at Marcus and then back at Sophia. "Let me ask you a question. When was the last time I worked with Director Abalo? Or, let me put it another way, when was the last time I had any contact with him that wasn't in a formal capacity?"

Both Lorenzo and Sophia remained quiet, so I continued.

"People change in five years. Director Abalo knew me, but does he actually know me? Are you willing to risk your families on the remote possibility he remembers my behaviors correctly?"

"Does anything scare you?" Lorenzo asked.

"What do I need to fear when I'm the one holding the cards?"

He leaned forward. "Are you sure about that?"

“Absolutely.”

“What about King?”

“What about him? I fuck him.”

“So King is nothing but someone you fuck?” Sophia’s voice had an edge of something that had goosebumps prickling my skin and fear settling in my gut.

“Exactly.”

“Good to know.” Lorenzo gestured to someone. “Then you won’t have a problem proving it. Let us show you something.”

We moved toward a set of double doors that I assumed led to the kitchen.

A minute later, two agents brought in an unconscious man with a cloth bag over his head. I recognized the shoes and the shirt, clothing I’d seen in Rey’s closet.

A wave of dizziness hit me as my stomach clenched in a painful vise grip, and bile rose into my throat.

“Are you so sure it is nothing more than casual?” Sophia asked in the patronizing way that had me itching to pull a knife and stab her. “Your reaction tells me he is very important to you. Love has always been your weakness, Lennox. Pathetic.”

That was when I noticed the two men who’d brought Rey in, Jace and Art. Both of them were trusted King Holdings security team members.

They turned their attention to me, and I let them see my disdain. If I made it out of here, their days were numbered.

“What did you do to him?” I asked Jace.

“Nothing but a mild sedative.”

“Now, Lennox, you see the tables have turned. What is his life worth to you?” Sophia asked me, knowing damn well the answer.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I tried to control the rage building in my mind.

“For his life, you will return our families,” Lorenzo ordered.

“Your word means nothing to me. All of you are liars.”

“Then we are at an impasse.” He gestured to Jace, and he pulled out his gun, pointing it at Rey’s head.

“If anything happens to him, you lose your leverage over me. Are you sure you want to risk it? Especially since I still have what is precious to you, to both of you.”

“You take a child from us. We take a child from you.” Sophia stepped between me and my view of Rey. “You may not have a relationship with your family, but we know your nieces and nephews are precious to you. We can take them one at a time.”

“The same can be said for you. Excluding Marcus, there are eight council directors with spouses and two to three children each. Oh wait, we already have them. Don’t think just because I left my family that I didn’t acquire a taste for their methods of handling things.”

“You never learn, do you, Lilly Lennox? As with everything, a demonstration is the only way to make an impact.” Sophia shifted, pulled a gun from her waist, aimed in Rey’s direction, and pulled the trigger.

“Nooo.” I lunged toward Rey, but a hand grabbed me, hurling me back.

“Lil, stay focused. Just stay focused. Don’t look anywhere but in front of you.” Marcus was at my back, his weapon pointed over my shoulder and aimed at the directors. “Lil, are you with me?”

My mind whirled as nearly everyone in the room drew their guns and held them at each other.

“Are you sure you want to go this route, Abalo?” Lorenzo held his gun at Marcus.

“I chose my route years ago.”

As Camilla moved to my side with her weapon drawn, Sophia asked, “Is this a coup, Ressa?”

“Why don’t you tell me? Aren’t you the one who orchestrated one seven years ago?”

“I can’t believe you’re still holding a grudge about Silas.”

“He was my husband. Did you expect otherwise?”

A slight tremor shook Camilla’s hand, and I made the mistake of glancing at her. Never in all the years that I’d known her had I seen that type of pain and fury on her face.

Then the words she’d spoken registered.

Oh God, Director Walsh was her husband, and Sophia and Lorenzo had killed him during the coup.

“You’re lucky you kept your position. You could have had the same fate. Silas made you weak, just as King makes Lennox weak. Aren’t you supposed to teach them not to make the same mistake you did? Agents and assets have two distinct paths.”

Now everything about Camilla made sense.

Why she was so hard on me. Why my relationship with Rey scared her so much.

She’d loved someone as I loved Rey.

And the Council had taken him from her.

She’d kept it from us for the same reason I pushed Rey away. Not to feel vulnerable.

If we didn’t end this, they’d take away more people from other agents.

Through my peripheral vision, I caught a glimpse of Rey’s shoes as he lay on the ground, and instantly, tears burned the backs of my eyes, and rage like nothing I felt before settled in the pit of my stomach.

After all this, I’d still lost Rey.

As if sensing my thoughts, Marcus whispered, “Lil, focus. Rey’s still alive.”

He couldn’t know that. Sophia had an incredible aim. She never missed a kill shot.

Before I realized I was moving, I pulled two pistols from the insides of my thigh-high boots, aimed, shot the two directors in the head, and continued to unload as many rounds as I could, not caring what happened to me.

“Oh shit, Lil!” Marcus shouted.

“I want them dead. Don’t you dare stop me.”

I pivoted, searching for the fuckers who’d brought Rey in. Just as I found them, someone slammed me against the ground, causing the back of my head to collide with the hard concrete.

“You always give us so much trouble. Stay the fuck down, Lillian,” some guy ordered in German before lifting off me.

I gasped, trying to push through the pain radiating through my mind and all over my body.

Damn, how much did that guy weigh? And did he say, Lillian? No one called me that here. And was he speaking German?

Fuck, my head hurt. I gasped in a few tiny breaths, but the pain was too much. God. Why couldn’t I get my heartbeat under control? I should be able to get it under control.

Rolling to my side, I tried to gain my bearings. Shouts and gunshots echoed all around me, and debris lay all over the place.

I had to find Rey. I couldn’t leave him here.

Blinking my eyes a few times to clear the haze, I scanned the area. My lips quivered as I spotted Rey motionless in the middle of overturned tables and chairs and complete chaos.

Slowly, I pushed to my feet. Ignoring the wave of dizziness, I staggered for a moment and then ran toward Rey. Sliding to my knees as I reached Rey, I gathered him into my arms.

I untied and then tugged free the cloth covering his face.

“Lilly,” he murmured, his golden eyes half-open.

Oh God. He was alive.

Overwhelming relief washed over me, then panic as I took in all the blood covering both of us.

I had to get him to help.

“Rey. I’m so sorry. I’ll get you out of here. I promise.”

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not.” I looked around.

Who was I going to call for help?

My heartbeat pounded into my ears, and my breaths became erratic. I couldn’t leave him here.

Tears filled my eyes.

“Baby, listen. It was a setup.”

“What setup?” I asked, not caring as I watched the bloodstains dampening our clothes get bigger. “I’m so sorry, Rey. There’s so much blood.”

“What blood? Fuck.” Rey shifted, and I grabbed hold of him, trying to keep him still.

“Don’t move. I need to put pressure on your wound.” I pulled at his shirt, not understanding what I was seeing. “You have a vest on.”

I blinked a few times to clear the cloudiness growing in my eyes. “But all the blood.”

“It’s you.”

“Oh.” I sagged against him, gripping his shirt as a wave of utter exhaustion washed over me, and the sudden pain filling in my chest made it nearly unbearable to breathe.

“Over here,” Rey called to someone.

“Dammit, Lil.” Marcus came into view. “Those fucking boots.”

“Abalo, you were supposed to keep her safe.”

“The blame’s on you for getting shot.”

Hearing Marcus’s words, my fingers flexed on Rey’s shirt. “You have to get help. Please.”

“Lilly, vest, remember? You’re the one in trouble.”

I shook my head and pressed a palm to the floor in an attempt to sit up, but agony like nothing I’d ever felt radiated into my chest, forcing me to collapse.

“*Schatzi*, you are still as stubborn as ever. You have to let us tend to you.”

Papa? What was he doing here?

I couldn’t understand what was happening.

“Lilly, look at me.” Rey stared down at me.

His lips moved, but I couldn’t hear his words. Why was he talking so low?

Would someone please move the asshole pushing on my chest?

Fuck, why couldn’t I talk? God, I was so tired. Maybe if I closed my eyes for a few seconds, it would help. Yeah, just a few seconds...

REYHAN

“TELL ME, KING. SHOULD I THANK YOU OR KILL YOU?”

Loosening the grip on my hair, I lifted my head and took in the utterly exhausted face of Joseph Lennox as he entered Lilly’s hospital room, holding two insulated cups.

Less than an hour before, Lilly had come out of surgical recovery, and she had yet to wake up.

“Your daughter tends to have a visceral reaction when the latter happens.”

“I noticed.” He handed me a cup of coffee. “Drink this. You look like the walking dead.”

I drank down the hot liquid, letting the heat seep into my body. There was something about Lennox’s calm presence that was both comforting and disconcerting.

He had a quiet authority about him that said not to fuck with him, reminding me of Nik. Even in the midst of seeing what had happened to his baby girl, he hadn’t shown an ounce of fear. He’d gotten his men to coordinate with Abalo and Ress, and within minutes, they’d had the area secure.

My respect for him had grown tenfold in those moments. Whereas, I’d nearly lost my mind when Lilly had gone into shock after losing too much blood. Thankfully, the paramedics had arrived within seconds of her slipping into unconsciousness.

“This isn’t how I intended for you to see her again.” I looked down at Lilly’s sleeping face.

“No, it’s not ideal, but then again...” He sighed. “She always jumps headfirst into everything. I thought sending her to boarding school would calm her down.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s where they recruited her.”

“I should bulldoze that place to the ground and save another father some grief,” Lennox muttered as he moved to Lilly and ran a hand over her forehead.

“Your help was invaluable today.”

“I’d burn down the world for my children. You’ll understand that one day when you have some of your own.”

I glanced at Lilly and then back at him.

The fact Lilly had reached out to him only meant she’d planned to launch a full-scale assault on the Council from the moment she’d left our bed.

Thankfully, her gamble had worked.

Currently, five of the nine previous European Directors Council members had been eliminated, three were in custody, and one was at large. Lilly had set in motion a chain reaction with other networks of agents activating to coordinate similar actions.

Though, as far as we knew, Lilly and one of Lennox’s lieutenants were the only ones who’d sustained life-threatening injuries.

With the fall of the European Directors Council, Marcus Abalo and eight others who represented both the special task force and standard agents stepped immediately into the roles of the Council. On the other hand, Camilla decided to remain in her position, preferring to deal with recruits rather than bureaucracy.

“I hope you know that your man gave her a concussion when he knocked her to the ground.”

“He protected her as a child. That makes him her man.”
Lennox shrugged his shoulders. “Talli forgets his size. He took two bullets intended for her, so he paid his penance.”

The giant was next door recovering from his own surgery.

“Do you think he’d consider a relocation under the King umbrella?”

“You can ask, but he’ll only ever work for a Lennox.”

“What if he’s assigned to a former Lennox?”

“You planning to keep my Lillian here?”

“Yes.”

“Have you asked her?”

“I don’t have to. She loves me.”

“Do you love her?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t care. You ask her first.”

“I’m not asking.”

He narrowed his blue gaze at me. “You don’t tell a father that you’re keeping his daughter without asking her.”

“I’m not just keeping her. I’m marrying her.”

“King, my daughter is in that bed because you didn’t protect her. What makes you think you can force her into marriage?”

“I don’t need to force her. It’s a given.”

“Want to explain this?” The irritation on his face was almost comical, and I would have informed him of that if he wasn’t who he was.

“I know about your side arrangement with my father. I know why you kept stringing me along all these years.”

Lennox’s lips curved at the corner. “When did you find the contract? It had to be recent. Otherwise, you’d have mentioned it long ago.”

“Not quite a month ago when I had work done in my parents’ old house. It was in a lockbox hidden under the floorboards of their bedroom.”

“Do you believe a piece of paper can tie my Lillian to you?”

“No. Fate did.”

“You sound like my wife. She says things like that all the time.”

“What would we call this, if not fate? Two children of allies met under different names, under false pretenses. Fell in love. Broke up. Dealt with some crazy shit meant to keep them apart and still ended up together. All the while, their fathers had intended for them to be together the whole time.”

“I can see your point.” Lennox sat in a chair near Lilly’s bed. “Your debt from your father is clear on one condition.”

“What is that?”

“Bring her home to see her Mama and brothers.”

“Those were my intentions from the beginning.”

BERLIN, THREE MONTHS LATER

Lilly

MAKE SURE YOU COME ALONE, THE MESSAGE ON MY PHONE instructed. As if I needed anyone to tell me this. I'd spent over a decade in this game. I understood the drill.

Assholes.

Stepping into the icy morning air outside of my hotel near the Spree River, I tightened my coat and pulled my hat closer around my ears. I walked down a few blocks and then grabbed the waiting taxi. After a twenty-minute drive, I arrived outside a white-painted brick house.

The car pulled into a long driveway leading toward a two-story palatial estate home. Guards stood strategically at various points along the roof, monitoring all aspects of the property.

The driver pulled into an oversized garage, unlocked my door, and waited for me to exit before he reversed and closed me inside.

I made my way to a set of steel doors, which slid open as I approached.

Glancing up at the two cameras positioned at the corners of the threshold, I shook my head and then strolled inside.

A large empty tray sat on a table, telling me to follow protocol and leave personal items outside. I stripped out of my outerwear, placed it on the tray, and set my handbag in a slot on a lone shelf.

“Okay. I’m ready,” I called to whoever was watching the monitors.

When nothing happened, I growled and asked, “Are you guys for real?”

“Disarm,” an electronic voice ordered.

Sighing, I tugged up my shirt, revealing the belt holding my sidearm. After depositing my pistol in the weapons bin, I lifted my pant leg and removed all my knives.

As soon as I finished, a door opened, revealing a dark hallway. I rolled my eyes and moved into the space. If they were trying to make this like a horror movie, it was sorely lacking. I’d been in scarier situations as a child.

“This is so stupid.”

When the door slammed behind me, leaving me in pitch black, I stopped, folded my arms across my body, and began to tap my foot.

“Marcus, I swear. I’m going to kick your ass if you don’t cut this crap. You’re like a toddler who’s hit his head too many times.”

The lights came on, revealing Noah, Devani, Cam, and Marcus. They all sat around a table.

“When did you start taking on Cam’s traits? She’s the only one allowed to have the title of grumpy.” Noah smiled at me.

Camilla glared at Noah. “I cannot wait until you go back to your cows in America.”

“Horses, Cam. They’re horses.”

I looked over at Marcus, who shook his head and smiled at me. “Calling it quits, Lil?”

“I wouldn’t say quits. More like changing professions. Freelancing. For the right price.”

“Of all the places, you pick New York.” The disgust in Camilla’s voice made me want to laugh. “In the summer, it stinks there. So why not Bora Bora or somewhere in California if you have to be in America?”

“You know why.”

Camilla’s face softened, and she nodded. “I know why. Does he know where you are?”

“I’m sure he will soon enough.”

Rey and I had agreed if I ever left—or, in his words, snuck out—I would inform him of my whereabouts. It still annoyed the hell out of him that I could maneuver around him without him ever knowing, but he wasn’t as skilled or sneaky as I was.

All of a sudden, I felt sadness wash over me. “I guess this is goodbye.”

“No, Lil, it’s not goodbye. We will see each other, but not in the same way. More like the family we say we are.”

The thought of not being part of this core group, not working with them, not planning things with them, not living life with them felt like I was losing a significant portion of my identity.

But then again, I was gaining something more: Rey and the future we’d have together.

“What now?” I asked.

“We strip you of all your clearance and all access.” Devani leaned back in her chair. “After that, you are considered officially retired.”

I thought of the life ahead of me, knowing there were no more barriers in the way.

“Well then. Let’s get to it.”

TWO HOURS LATER, I EXITED THE WHITE BRICK BUILDING feeling a sense of both melancholy and elation. Finally, I’d

closed over a decade's worth of history, both incredible and painful.

Now I had one more thing to do today. But this step I wouldn't take alone.

As I made my way down the driveway, a familiar tingle sizzled along the column of my spine, and I paused. A second later, Rey stepped out of the shadows along the side of the building and lifted a brow.

God, being around this man made me want so much. And finally, I could reach for it.

"One day, I will catch you sneaking out."

"It's good to have goals." I grinned at him. "You do realize this is a secure area. The only reason the patrol didn't shoot you is that you're mine."

I gestured to the guards walking the roof of the house.

"I took my chances. But you do know I can track you through your phone?"

"Yes. And I left you a note."

Rey came toward me and set his hand on my hip. "Are you good?"

I nodded. "I was done a long time ago. Now, it's official."

"Then let's go do one more thing."

"I thought we were going this afternoon."

"Will it make a difference if we go now or later?"

A shiver ran down my spine. "I suppose not."

The thought of seeing Mama, seeing my brothers and their families, was almost too overwhelming. And then there was Isa.

Isa would be there.

My ride-or-die from childhood, who I'd let down and for some reason had forgiven me the second I'd reached out to her. I guessed it helped that she understood the world of Solon

from having worked on appraisal projects for them before the coup.

I could do this. *I could do this.*

“Look at me, Lilly.”

I lifted my gaze to meet his.

Rey tucked a stray hair back under the brim of my hat and then kissed my forehead. “You’re going to be fine. I promise.”

“How did I go from pushing you away nonstop to needing you to ground me?”

He gave me a wicked grin. “I dickmatized you.”

“You’re ridiculous.” I started laughing, knowing he’d said that to shift my focus. “Let’s go.”

It took thirty minutes to arrive in my parents’ neighborhood. Driving down the roads where I’d grown up felt almost surreal. Everything looked nearly the same, from the rows of houses to the corner shops.

Papa owned all the houses on his street, with his lieutenants living in various ones around him.

Rey parked in front of my childhood home and then turned to me. “Ready?”

“I think so.”

He stepped out of the car and came around to my side, opening my door and then reaching for my hand.

A group of men came out of the shadows of the rowhouses along the street. They inclined their heads to acknowledge our presence—many of them familiar. I returned their gesture and noticed a few of them smile.

“See. You’re still one of them.” Rey brought my gloved fingers to his lips, kissing my knuckles.

I glanced at the front door of the house. “What if they can’t forgive me?”

“You know it’s not true. Your father already told you this.”

He was right. Papa had flown across an ocean to fight with me, and my brothers had waged war in Europe for me.

Some of the tension eased from my shoulders. It was going to be okay.

Rey wrapped an arm around my waist, and we turned toward the house. "Let's take you home."

"No, this isn't my home."

Surprised by my words, Rey frowned as he looked down at me. "It will always be your home. This is where you grew up."

"Maybe some parts of it." I cupped his face and rose up on my tiptoes. "But my real home is wherever you are. I made so many mistakes when it came to us, and somehow, we still got a second chance. I go where you go."

Raw love and emotion burned in his eyes. "You're my home too, Lilly. Fate made it, so there was no one else for either of us."

A smile touched my lips. "Can I consider you an official believer in fate now?"

"Absolutely. Fate hides in plain sight and then jumps out and surprises you with her plans."

"We women are deceptive that way."

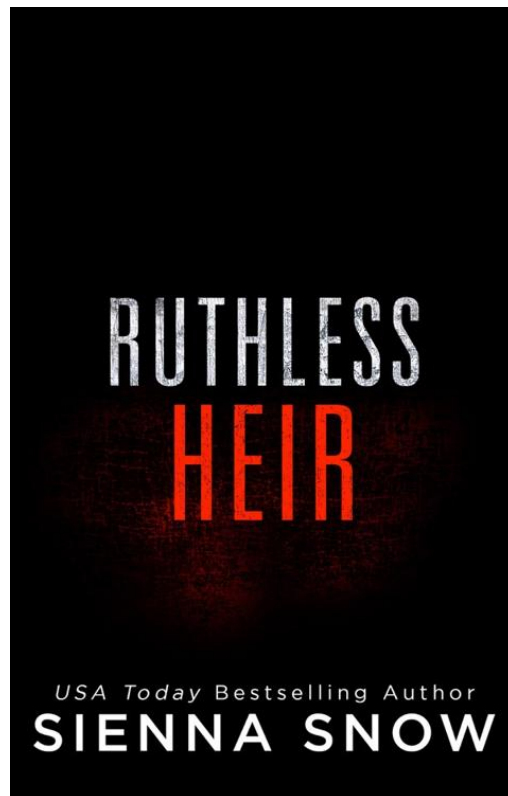
"Most definitely."

Pre-order the next book in the series - [Ruthless Heir](#)

Or

Start a New Series while you wait - [Master of Sin](#)

Pre-Order Book 4 in the Street Kings Series - Ruthless Heir



www.books2read.com/ruthlessheir

I'm the player, the gambler, the one without a heart or soul.
There isn't a risk I won't take and a challenge I won't meet.
Then she came into my world, melting the ice in my veins and
showing me a life a man like me never deserved.

But it was all a lie.

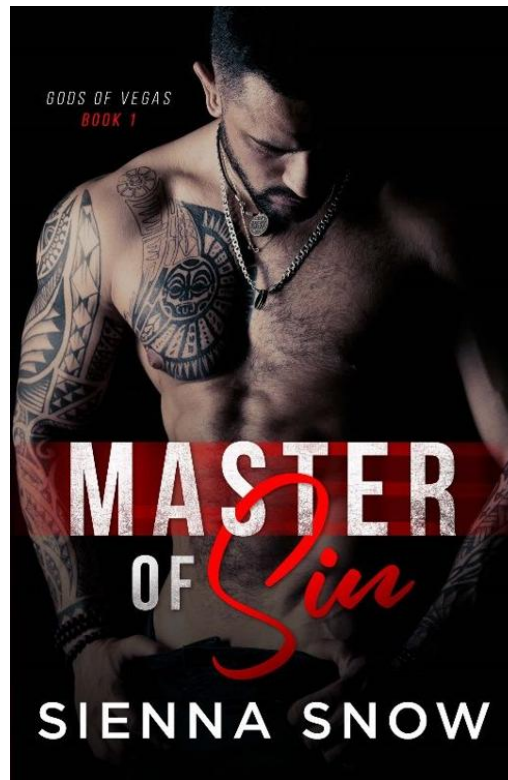
She chose a safer, easier path, not realizing it was riddled with
chains.

Now she's trapped, needing escape, and I'm the only one who
can set her free.

I'm not the hero from the storybooks, but the devil betrayed
from birth.

With the cards stacked in my favor, I will use any means
necessary to take my empire and my queen...even if it means
burning it all to ash.

Read the first book in the Gods of Vegas Series:



www.books2read.com/masterofsin

It was always him...

The one I shouldn't want, shouldn't crave, the one who could destroy my carefully built life.

Hagen Lykaios was the essence of sin, indulgence, and danger - everything I knew to avoid.

All it took was one unexpected touch, and he consumed me, left me begging, needy, and hungry for more.

He said if I entered his world he would corrupt me, own me, and change all that I had ever known...and you know what? *I went anyway.*

BOOKS BY SIENNA

Rules of Engagement

Rule Breaker

Rule Master

Rule Changer

Politics of Love

Celebrity

Senator

Commander

Gods of Vegas

Master of Sin

Master of Games

Master of Revenge

Master of Secrets

Master of Control

Master of Fortune (April 2022)

Sweetest Sin

Intrigued By Love

Street Kings

Dangerous King

Vicious Prince

Deceptive Knight

Ruthless Heir (Feb 2023)

Collections

Reckless Rome (A Cocky Hero Club Novel).

Take Me To Bed (Limited Run Anthology - 2019)

Meet Me Under The Mistletoe (Limited Run Anthology - 2021)

Darkly Ever After (An Organized Crime Anthology). (May 2022)

Dirty Arrangement (A Blurred Lines Collective) - (Oct - 2022)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Inspired by her years working in corporate America, Sienna loves to serve up stories woven around confident and successful women who know what they want and how to get it, both in – and out – of the bedroom.

Her heroines are fresh, well-educated, and often find love and romance through atypical circumstances. Sienna treats her readers to enticing slices of hot romance infused with empowerment and indulgent satisfaction.

Sienna loves the life of travel and adventure. She plans to visit even the farthest corners of the world and delight in experiencing the variety of cultures along the way. When she isn't writing or traveling, Sienna is working on her "happily ever after" with her husband and children.

Sign up for her newsletter for notification of releases, book sales, events and so much more.

<http://www.siennasnow.com/newsletter>

contact@siennasnow.com

[Goodreads](#)

[Facebook](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Instagram](#)

