



ENDLESSLY RAPHAEL

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Immortal Assassins

Book 4

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Content Warnings

This book features a team of vampire assassins who take out really bad people. There is on page violence including vampires being vampires and bad guys doing bad things.

- Minor homophobic comments from family member
- Mild pain kink

The relationship between MCs is low angst and the book has an HEA.



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Prologue

Madrid, Spain 1772

Cold, damp concrete meets my cheek as I'm tossed unceremoniously into the cell. The guard chuckles at my humiliation and rage boils in the pit of my stomach.

I pull myself upright, the clanking of the shackles around my ankles loud in my ear. All I can do is glare at my captor, one of the king's guards. The copper taste of my own blood lingers on my tongue, a result of the beating I took.

The only things I have to blame for my predicament are myself and my foolish libido. The king's son, the darling prince of Spain, was too alluring to ignore, and I followed him to my demise.

"Get comfortable," the king's guard says to me. "You will be here for a long time."

The metal door slams shut, leaving me in darkness. It smells of mold and body odor, the faint squeak of rats the only sound.

I lean against the wall, contemplating exactly how I plan to get out of here. It's not the first time I've been imprisoned and likely won't be the last. Making a living by taking from others was bound to catch up with me, but I've really made a mess of things this time. I enraged the king.

As day turns to night, my stomach rumbles with hunger, but I curl into myself on the stone floor and pray to nonexistent gods for sleep.

The loud sound of metal sliding on metal as the cell door opens jolts me awake. It takes me a moment to focus on the men in the doorway in the faint light. A man steps in, and even in the dimness, I can feel his gaze on me.

“This one will do nicely,” the man says, his voice deep and accented. Irish maybe? “He looks strong.”

“He’s only been here a few hours,” the guard says.

“Perfect. Name your price.”

Is he *buying* me?

The two men discuss my fate just out of earshot, but I strain to listen anyway. I have no idea what is happening, and I’m no one’s slave, but if I can get out of here, it will give me time to plan my escape to the New World.

A moment later, I’m lifted from the dingy floor and shoved towards the open doorway. Cool air and sunlight floods in from the window behind the guard, the tease of freedom so close I can taste it.

Then I focus on the man who may prove to be my savior. He is... breathtaking. Tall and dressed in extravagant clothing, his light eyes fixed on my face. His hair—wavy and somewhere between brown and blond, with a hint of redness to it—looks soft enough to invite touch, but his face... My god, his face. His jaw is sharp enough to cut glass, and his features are perfectly placed, as if sculpted by the finest artist in Europe. He offers a subtle smile and my body warms immediately in response.

“What is your name?” the man asks.

“Raphael.”

“And your father’s name?”

“I have no father. No family name.”

The man nods, glancing at the guard. “Leave us.”

“He is dangerous, sir,” the guard warns.

“He is chained. I can handle him.”

The guard leaves as the stunning man before me removes his gloves and looks me over. “My name is Yves Orpheus.”

“And what do you want with me, Yves Orpheus?”

Yves chuckles. “I see your bondage has not weakened your bravado.”

I lift my head in defiance. “Nothing weakens me.”

The smile lingers on his face as he studies me. Under his intense gaze, I have to wonder if he can see my faults, my desires, my needs.

“What I want with you, dear Raphael, is simple. You’ll come with me and join my household.”

“I am no man’s slave.”

He only chuckles in response. “Yes, you’ll do just fine, Raphael.”

Yves snaps his fingers and the guard returns promptly, leaving me curious about the man before me. Who is he to command the king’s guards and keep his head?

Yves and the guard discuss something I can’t hear, and I watch as Yves hands the guard a satchel I assume to be filled with coins. The guard swings around and glares at me.

“Fortune shines upon you,” he says, unlocking my shackles.

“I’m free to go?” I ask incredulously.

“Not free, no,” the guard says. “You are the property of Senor Orpheus. If you are found outside of his company without express permission, the king will have you imprisoned once more.”

He practically snarls the words at me while Yves looks on with a passive expression. My pride and self-preservation rise

like bile in my throat, urging me to fight my way out of this mess, but I'm no fool. The palace is thick with guards who won't hesitate to kill me.

I simply nod to avoid venting the defiance on my tongue.

I follow Yves from the bowels of the palace to the glorious outdoors again. The sun is shining and the air is fragrant from nearby gardens. Yves leads me to a carriage. A man steps out and opens the door, smiling at me with a subtle head nod. He is almost as beautiful as Yves, with long black hair tied back in a ribbon that catches the light of the sun, and a gaze that feels like he can see right through me.

"Alessio, this is Raphael."

Alessio's smile grows, and he touches a lock of my hair. "Quite stunning."

"Please do not soil your hands by touching me."

Alessio chuckles. "A little dirt never hurt me." He turns to Yves. "I can't believe you found him so quickly."

"Word travels fast in Madrid," Yves says, gesturing for me to step onto the carriage ledge.

"What is happening here?" I ask.

"We will tell you," Yves says.

Once we're settled in, Yves and Alessio sitting across from me, I wait for an explanation.

"We saw you two nights ago," Yves finally says. "In the square. You appeared to be looking for companionship?"

My heart sinks. "You saw that?"

"Oh yes," Yves answers. "You stand out even amidst the beauty of Spain. I intended to pay your price for a bit of your time, but you were stolen out from under me."

I would much rather have been with him than the spoiled pig of a man I chose. At least it was over quickly, and he paid my price without a quibble.

“We asked around,” Alessio says. “We learned you had been imprisoned, but not why.”

Their expectant expressions make it clear they want to know what I did to end up here.

“I was caught in the prince’s room.”

“The prince?” Yves says with one eyebrow raised. “How did you manage that?”

“He’s been a lover of mine for some time. Normally, we are more discreet, but he invited me to his rooms believing his father would be away. As it turns out, the king delayed his trip and discovered his son’s secret.”

Both men are silent as I continue.

“My lover did nothing to save me. He stood by silently as his guards beat me and his father ordered my imprisonment.”

“Oh, Raphael,” Yves says softly, but instead of pity as I expected, it feels more like an understanding of sorts. “Dealing with aristocrats comes with many perils.”

“And you are not one of them? Buying my freedom and commanding the king’s guards as though you are royalty yourself?”

Yves chuckles, but Alessio looks far more serious. “Yves commands anyone he sees fit, and you should be grateful for your freedom.”

“But am I free? Would you open this carriage and allow me to walk away, or have I just traded one cell for another?”

Alessio scoffs. “You do know how to pick the fierce ones, don’t you?”

Yves chuckles. “It is a gift.” His gaze shifts to me, softening. “Do not worry, Raphael. You are no more a prisoner than I am. However, before you plot your escape from my clutches, you may want to hear what I have to offer you.”

“I’m listening.”

“I will tell you more when we arrive at my home.”

Fortunately, the wait is not long. The carriage stops in front of a lovely flat in the city center. The door opens and two men exit, looking on curiously. One is tall, with olive skin and thick black hair, his features strong and handsome. The other man is softer in appearance, with long blond hair and a sweet face.

“My family,” Yves says, as he steps out of the carriage, holding out his hand for me as though I am a lady of high standing.

Ignoring the hand, I climb down on my own, followed by a chuckling Alessio. Yves leads me to the door, and I enter when the other two men step to the side. I stop in the foyer, overwhelmed by the grandeur around me. While it’s not a palace, it certainly is luxurious. Who is Yves Orpheus?

“I’m Eros,” the blond one says. “You must be hungry. Thirsty?”

“Yes. Both.”

He smiles. “I’ll be right back.”

The others guide me to the sitting room, but I feel ashamed in my dirty and tattered clothing. “I don’t want to sit upon your nice furnishings.”

“I insist that you do,” Yves says, his tone both commanding and kind at the same time.

Reluctantly, I nod and take a seat on the edge of the settee. Yves, Alessio, and the dark-haired man who hasn’t spoken yet sit across from me.

“This is Leander,” Yves says, gesturing to the quiet man on his left. “We are family. Chosen, of course, and we would like to add you to our home.”

My brow crinkles, but before I can ask anything, Eros appears again, carrying a platter of breads, meats, and cheeses along with a tall glass of what appears to be wine. That was remarkably fast.

Ignoring any sort of decorum, I snatch up a roll and several pieces of meat and cheese, desperate to quell the gnawing

hunger in my belly.

“What if I told you, Raphael, that starting today, you could choose a life where you would never be hungry again? Never cold, never dirty, and never forced to sell your body to survive?”

I scoff, chewing a mouthful of bread. “How?”

“By joining my family. I would take care of you and all your needs.”

I nod, finally understanding his motive. “I would be your lover?”

“I would hope so, yes, but it is not a requirement.”

“No? Then what do you get out of it if I decline?”

The four men exchange glances, and as Yves nods, I would swear they communicate without words.

“While I’m sure I would enjoy your presence in my bed,” Yves starts, “I want something far more precious than just your body.”

“I have nothing to offer *except* my body.”

“Ah, but you are wrong about that,” Alessio says.

“So wrong,” Leander adds.

Eros, sitting beside me, plucks a grape from the vine and pops it into his mouth. “We were all saved in our own ways by Yves. Now our lives are decadent, beautiful, and more than your mind can even imagine.”

“I don’t understand. I am a petty thief and a prostitute. What can I give to you?”

“Your blood,” Yves says plainly. His eyes seem to glow as he moves nearer to me so smoothly I’d think he can float. “Your soul, your eternity.”

As I study his face, I notice his long canine teeth past his parted lips. “Wh-what?”

“Raphael,” Yves says, brushing his smooth fingers across my scruffy cheek. “I want you. Not for any reason other than

your beauty and what I sense inside of you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I know your heart,” he says, his hand sliding to my chest as the other men crowd around us.

Yves, this beautiful man in all his elegant clothing, kneels between my legs, undeterred by my filth, as if he can see beyond it.

“You need a family, a home,” Yves continues, “a place to belong. I can give you that.”

How does he know this? “And in return? You want blood? You mean to kill me?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “I would never harm you. What I want, beautiful one, is your life. I can take you away from this struggle and replace it with untold beauty, safety, and love. All you have to do is say yes.”

I glance at the other men, all of them touching me in some way, their eagerness somehow palpable. “I don’t deserve a life like that.”

“No?” Yves asks. “Why not you? What happened to you was not your fault.”

I crinkle my brow. “How do you know that?”

“I asked around, remember? The ladies in the market told me of your mother’s death and your father’s absence. What else could a man in those circumstances do but survive? I do not judge you for choosing to live.”

My throat clogs with emotion I’m not used to feeling. “Everyone judges me. I am not good enough for any family, and my desire for men...” I stop, shaking my head. “I am nothing.”

“Not to me,” Yves says. “Not to us.”

I am a lot of things, but a fool isn’t one of them. “If I say yes, what happens to me next?”

“We will bathe you,” Alessio says.

“And show you to your room,” Leander adds.

“And give you the finest clothes available to us,” Eros tucks on.

“And then you will be brought to me,” Yves says. “And I will transform you.”

A shiver runs down my back as the next question bubbles up. “Into what?”

Yves moves his hand to my throat, not squeezing or in a threatening way, but in a caress. “You will be what I am. What your brothers are.”

I study his face, somehow even more perfect, and my stomach twists when I catch sight of his sharp teeth again. An unbidden storm of desire swells deep within me, stirring my cock to life.

“I think I should be afraid of you,” I admit. “But I’m not.”

Yves smiles. “I am not to be feared. Not by you.” He brushes his thumb over my bottom lip. “Tell me, Raphael, would you like to warm my bed and join my family?”

I nod, even though a small part of me knows this is dangerous. “For how long?”

“Eternity,” Alessio answers. “Like all of us. Give Yves your blood, and he will give you immortality.”

Yves opens his mouth, revealing what can only be described as fangs. His eyes glow, radiant, and a wave of warmth encircles me.

I gasp softly. “You are... No. Those are folklore. Just stories.”

“Are they?” Eros asks, rubbing my back.

“Or does all lore start as truth?” Leander asks.

“What is your answer, Raphael?” Yves asks. “Will you join us?”

“Or will you leave and resume your old life?” Alessio asks.

“The answer is easy, if you ask me,” Eros says.

“Nothing easier,” Leander adds.

As my mind replays the last two decades of hunger, pain, and selling my body for a few coins and a place to sleep, Eros is right. The answer is easy.

“Yes. I will join you.”

Yves smiles, but my guess is he knew I would say yes all along. “Good. We are happy to have you.” He cups my cheek. “By morning, this old life will no longer exist for you. We’re off to the New World in a few days. Does that excite you?”

“Yes.”

Yves leans in and presses a kiss to my lips, in spite of the filth and dried blood covering my face. “If you are this beautiful now, I can only imagine what’s to come.”

“It’s very exciting,” Eros says. “Come. I’ll show you to your bath.”

I take Eros’s hand, glancing back at the others as he leads me to the stairs. I have no idea what I’ve just gotten myself into, but I have a feeling Yves and his brothers are something I thought only existed in stories from poor villagers.

He’s a vampire, and if what he says is true, I will be by morning.

ONE

Raphael

Current Day

“You look bored,” Thorn says as he guzzles a cocktail next to me.

“That’s because I am bored. Maybe we should go to Lair instead.”

“Nope. You need to get laid, and this place has way more options than Lair.”

“I’m not sure I agree with your assessment of what I need.” I roll my eyes even as amusement teases my lips. “Sex is not the cure for every problem.”

“But it’s a damn good treatment.” He bumps my arm with his. “What about that treat over by the bar? The one in the pink mesh.”

With a bored gaze, I check out the cute blond. “Not my type.”

“What is your type, exactly?”

“I’ll know it when I see it. I’m a little pickier than your criteria of breathing and ‘must have dick.’”

Thorn laughs. “I enjoy more than dick on occasion.”

“We know, Thorn.”

He chuckles but I continue to survey the room. Thorn is right about one thing. Sitting around at home watching my brothers and their mates isn’t doing anything good for my

mood. It's been a while since I enjoyed the heat of a mortal body next to mine. Maybe I should put a little more effort into finding someone.

Just then, someone catches my eye near the entrance.

"Well, well, what do we have here?"

Thorn leans towards me, gazing into the crowd. "What? Trouble?"

"I hope so. You don't see the stunning man standing near the door like he owns the place?"

"Ooh, look at that morsel." He shoves me in that direction. "Go get him. He'll be scooped up quickly with this crowd."

"I don't chase, Thorn."

"Well I do. I'm going to get the blond."

I wave my hand goodbye as he ventures off and I focus all my attention on the pretty man up front. As if we're the only two people in the room, he swivels in my direction, his face lighting up like he was intentionally looking for me. Then, with more swagger than should be legal, he saunters in my direction, the crowd parting for him like he's a celebrity.

He's wearing black leather pants and a silver tank top, with a slight build. His deep tan skin has something sparkly on it, catching the shimmering lights of the club as he approaches. His hair is long and wavy, brushing the tops of his shoulders. But it's his eyes that draw me into his web. They're a stunning light brown, like warmed honey swirling in a cup of tea. His features are literal perfection, his lips full and pink, shiny with some kind of gloss. He's lined his eyes with black eyeliner, making the color pop even in the dim light of the club.

When he smiles, I nearly stumble from the brilliance. I'm also quite aware of the glimmer of mischief in his expression. I am very much the prey to his predator. How refreshing.

"Hello, handsome," he says when he reaches me, extending his hand. "I'm Haven."

"Haven." I take his hand in mine, marveling at the softness of his skin. "I'm Raphael."

Haven shimmies closer to me, brushing right up against my body. “Mm, I guess I’m a lucky man tonight.” His hand moves to my neck, and although he’s several inches shorter than me, I am completely enthralled. “Would you be up for an adventure, Raphael?”

“What kind of adventure?”

He leans in, rising on his toes so his lips are close to my ear. “The kind where you rearrange my insides.” As he finishes his tantalizing words, he drags his tongue up my cheek.

Effective. “Lead the way.”

Haven steps back, that gorgeous smile full of smug joy. “Take me somewhere.”

I nod, gripping the back of his neck and studying his face. The way he reacts will tell me everything I need to know about him. All I sense from his steady heartbeat and charming smile is desire. I can handle that.

I take my phone out of my pocket and dial Thorn while leading Haven to the door.

“Yeah?” Thorn answers, panting heavily, the sound of skin slapping skin evident.

“Damn, you move fast.”

He snickers. “I know what I like. What’s up?”

“I’m leaving.”

“Alone?”

“No.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear. See you.”

“Bye.”

Sliding my phone into my pocket, I glance at the man walking confidently with me to a destination unknown to him.

“Do you always trust strangers so easily?” I ask.

Haven shrugs. “I’m a good judge of character. Do you?”

“Not at all, but I’m a good judge of character too.”

“Or just horny.”

I laugh softly, pushing the door open for Haven. The night air is brisk, teasing the onset of winter soon, and I notice his shiver as he moves slightly closer to me. The valet sees me and hurries off to get my car without requiring a single word from me. We’re so prevalent in New Onyx’s nightlife that we’ve become well known and slightly feared—exactly the way we want it.

While we wait, I glance at the stunning man beside me, filled with curiosity. What brought him to the club tonight seeking a hookup? Where does he live? What is his story?

The valet pulls up with my very basic black sedan. Unlike my brothers, I prefer a less audacious experience, choosing to spend my money on experiences over things.

Haven takes in the car with a neutral expression as he slips inside. I consider taking him to my place, but he’s looking for an adventure, and thanks to Thorn, I know just the place.

I take off into the night while Haven plays with my stereo, pausing on a hip-hop station. Just a few miles down the road, I pull off into what used to be a parking lot but is now nothing but weeds and cracked pavement. There’s a streetlamp close enough to provide just a touch of light, and as I cut the engine, Haven grins.

“Perfect,” he purrs.

TWO

Haven

He shoots. He scores.

I can't believe I found this hottie the second I stepped into the club tonight. He looks more than able to meet my needs for the night, and if his car is any indication, he might serve a higher purpose.

I step out of the car, doing a little shimmy to tempt Raphael to join me. Gah, what a perfect name for a man who looks like he was made for romance. Too bad that's not what I'm looking for. I just want my hole wrecked and my mind quieted for a few minutes.

Raphael is quick to join me, grabbing my wrist and pulling me up against his chest. He's much taller than me, thanks be to the gay gods, and with his thick, wavy brown hair, sweet face, and a body that could make a grown man cry, I gotta admit, he's got me under his spell.

"What do you want me to do to you?" he asks, swaying our bodies to music that isn't playing.

"Kiss me?"

With a sexy smirk, he lowers his head, pressing our lips together. The kiss goes from chaste to explosive within seconds, and as he pushes me up against the hood of his car, I shamelessly grind against him, hoping for a preview of what he's packing.

When his hard and supremely thick cock pushes into my thigh, I let out a tiny moan. Damn, I really am good at this. He

looked like sex on a stick, and based on what he's working with, I'm in for a good time. Hopefully he knows how to use it.

Time to find out. I break from the kiss and slide to my knees, unbuckling his jeans and tugging them down. He's wearing tight black bikini-style briefs, so I lean in and drag my tongue over the fabric, inhaling his scent.

His cock twitches against my lips as he slides his hands into my hair, twisting just enough to make me feel it. When I shift my gaze up to his face, he's watching me with hooded eyes and parted lips. Fuck, this man is gorgeous.

I tug his briefs down, unleashing literally the biggest dick I've ever had the pleasure of meeting. I giggle, nearly bouncing on my knees, but the hard ground keeps me from going too wild. Raphael keeps his eyes glued to my face as I flick my tongue out to tease the head of his cock, already sticky with precum.

Oh fuck, he tastes good. Like, unnaturally good. Precum is supposed to be salty, but not his. It's mild and almost sweet. I lap at his slit, in awe. A slight smile pulls at his lips. He knows he's a fucking god among men. Well so am I, my friend.

To prove my point, I stop teasing and go all in, sucking his length down my throat. His eyes go wide and he moans. The sound is gorgeous. Yep, I live for sucking dick. Sometimes it's enough for me to suck someone off and go about my business, but not tonight. I need to be filled, and Raphael has the dick to do it.

After letting me choke on his cock for several minutes, Raphael tugs my hair, pulling my head back. Spit and precum drip down my chin, and he leans down to give me another hard kiss. Without words, he pulls me up and twists me around so my chest is pressed to the hood of his car.

He tugs my too-tight leather pants down with ease and wastes no time burying his face between my legs. Fuck, he gets right to business, doesn't he? Raphael licks and fingers my hole like it's his job, loosening me up for what I'm sure is going to be epic sex. With his free hand, he reaches around

and strokes my aching cock and balls, teasing me to the edge before letting me fall back.

Shamelessly, I grind my ass against his talented tongue, nearly delirious already. I ain't too proud to beg, either, and if he doesn't get that dick inside of me soon, I'm about to go there.

As if he can read my thoughts, he moves up my body, kissing and sucking the flesh along the backs of my thighs and up to my back, rubbing his cock into my crease. My hole clenches and flutters with need, and I honestly can't remember a time when I've wanted to be fucked so badly by someone.

"I don't have condoms," he whispers. "But I can assure you, I'm negative and very safe."

I tense for a second. I've never had sex without a condom, but my testing is on point and I'm on PrEP. I mean, that's kind of the point of it, right?

"But I don't have to penetrate you if that's not what you want," Raphael adds.

I'm gonna die if I don't get that dick. "You promise?"

Raphael nuzzles my neck. "Promise. I would never harm you in that way. Or we can leave and go—"

"No. I trust you. Weirdly, I believe you. I'm negative too, and I'm on PrEP."

"So...? You want to continue?"

"Yes. Please. I need this. You."

"We are two souls with the same needs tonight."

And then he breaches me and I exhale, slumping against the car. Oh fuck yes. He's huge. Not too long, but so damn thick I swear he could split me in two. Wouldn't that be fucking amazing?

I expect him to just go hard like so many casual fucks, interested only in his nut, but Raphael surprises me again, gripping the front of my neck and slowly thrusting until I

loosen up completely and that tight ring of muscles allows him in.

He kisses my neck as he fucks into me, holding on to me tightly, which is a good thing—my legs are shaking so badly I don't think they'd hold me up on their own. Finally, I've reached the place where the sting stops and the pleasure kicks in.

“Fuck me so hard I can't remember my name,” I whisper.

Raphael chuckles, biting my earlobe before tearing into me. He fucks me so hard the car moves back and forth. My sweaty hands slide along the cool metal, looking for purchase, but I'm just a ragdoll in his grasp.

Raphael's movements are pure silk, smooth and methodical. He hits me so deep inside, my request to have my insides rearranged might actually come true. He tags that delicious spot deep inside with each thrust, pushing me closer to the edge, but just as I'm about to fall over, he pulls out.

“Hey,” I complain, but Raphael just laughs and flips me onto my back.

He pushes me higher on the car and lifts my legs, slamming back into me with one deep thrust.

“Oh fuck. Fuck.”

“Good?” he asks. “Or too much?”

“So fucking good.”

His grin suggests he already knew that. I grip his forearms, one on either side of me, wrapping my legs around his waist as he does his best to tear me to pieces and yes, make me forget my name. I'm close to tears as waves of pleasure pulse through my body, and the orgasm I so desperately chase builds deep in my core.

“If you edge me again, I'll cut your balls off,” I threaten.

Raphael throws his head back in laughter but doesn't miss a single thrust. “You feel like paradise,” he whispers as his laughter falls away. “I could fuck you forever.”

“I might let you,” I whisper back, licking my bottom lip. “Fuck, you’re hot.”

His brow crinkles as he increases the speed of his hips slapping into me. I can feel his balls smacking my skin, and as I drag my hands down his broad chest, I let myself imagine doing this with him every night.

“Fuck,” he murmurs through tight lips.

Under the dim light, I would swear his eyes are even lighter, but he closes them just as I’m being drawn in by them. I want to beg him to open them and keep them on me, but words are lost as I finally fall helplessly over the edge, taking my dignity and sanity with it.

I cry out his name as cum shoots from my cock, watching in awe as he scoops it up with his fingers and licks them. Holy fuck.

The orgasm rattles my body, leaving me shaking and on the verge of tears from its power. Raphael’s arms tense, his face tightening as his cock swells impossibly thicker. He’s silent as he releases deep inside me. He falls forward, burying his face in the crook of my neck.

I wrap my arms around his neck, holding him close and inhaling the intoxicating scent of sex, body heat, and something distinctly Raphael. It’s earthy and sensual, like how an autumn night around a bonfire smells.

As we lie together, perched on the hood of his car, our skin cooled by the night air, I decide to ask the question I’ve had bottled up inside me for the last two weeks, hoping to find someone suitable for the task.

“Hey, Raphael?”

“Mm?” he asks, slowly lifting his head to gaze at me.

Damn. His just-fucked face is even better than his normal one. If he says yes, at least I’ll get to look at this face a little longer, and hopefully, get fucked a lot more.

“I have a weird favor to ask.”

“I’m listening.”

“Um... well... I was wondering if...” Now that I’m in this situation, it’s a lot harder than I thought.

“What?” he asks, sweetly brushing my hair from my forehead.

“Okay, um, will you marry me?”

THREE

Raphael

“I’m sorry. What? I think I heard you wrong.”

Haven, beautiful with his flushed cheeks and kiss-plumped lips, flashes that smile that just might be my undoing.

“You heard me correctly. I need a spouse and I need one in the next two weeks.”

“Why?”

He scoffs, sitting more upright and dragging a hand through his unruly curls. “It’s lame, but I have to be married for an inheritance.”

“Tell me more,” I say, tucking my spent cock back into my jeans. I would’ve rather sat here stroking his soft skin and hoping for a second round over this, but I’m intrigued.

“Okay, well my family situation is complicated, to say the least. My grandparents on my dad’s side came to this country and built an amazing company.”

“From where?”

“Egypt. Well, my grandfather was from Egypt. My grandmother was from England, but her parents were Moroccan and Italian. I’m a mixed bag, ethnically speaking.”

“You’re stunning.”

He smiles as if it’s not a compliment he must hear a million times a day.

“Thank you.” He glances down at his half-naked body, making no attempt to cover up. Fine by me. “So anyway, I’m the firstborn grandson. I was super spoiled growing up, and I was the only grandchild until I was ten.”

I nod, leaning on the car hood to show him he has all my attention.

“I was expected to go into the family business, like my uncles and aunts, like my dad. I really wanted to. I did. I tried so hard, but I just wasn’t cut out for it. My grandfather agreed and told me that if I went to university and got the right business training, he’d give me another shot.”

“Okay.”

“So I did. I got my degree, then my masters. By that time, my grandfather’s health was failing. My uncles and my dad took over and basically had no intention of giving up that control to me, even though everyone knew that was what Gedo wanted.”

“Gedo?”

“Oh, grandfather in Arabic.” He sighs. “Anyway, I was pushed out. My dad gave me some money to basically go away, so I did. I just gave up and walked away. Two months ago, my grandfather died.” A tiny crinkle forms across his brow. “He left all of it to me. His entire estate.”

“Oh wow.”

“Yeah. And just to make a point, he had it updated shortly before he died. So no one can even say it was outdated and contest it. But he had stipulations. The first was that I have to consult quarterly with a designated trustee. That’s to ensure I know what I’m doing. The second is that I have to have a primary residence in New Onyx.” He lifts his pretty eyes to me. “And the third is that I have to be married. My grandparents were super old school and traditional. I mean, my parents’ marriage was arranged. I avoided that fate only because my mom intervened. My grandfather thought marriage was a sign of stability and maturity. So I have two

weeks left to make it happen or I get skipped and the estate gets split among my dad and his brothers.”

I nod, taking it all in. “You want this badly enough to marry a stranger?”

Haven shrugs. “It’s a principle thing, you know? And it’s what Gedo wanted. I wasn’t good at running shit when I was twenty-two, but that was a long time ago. I’m almost thirty-five now, and…” His words trail off as his voice hardens. “Honestly, I’m pissed off. I’ve been cast aside by my own family. Left out of events and important celebrations. I barely survive on the pittance they gave me to go away.”

Haven grabs my wrist.

“I can pay you. I’m inheriting a shit-ton of money. Millions. I just need you to play nice, pretend you’re crazy about me, attend a few honestly horrible family gatherings, and stay married on paper for a year. Maybe less.”

“I see.” There’s no possible way I can marry this man. “As much as I’d like to help—”

“A million dollars,” Haven says, his tone desperate. “Please. Don’t make me embarrass myself even more.”

“Why me, Haven? For all you know, I could be a terrible person.”

“Yeah, I don’t care what kind of person you are. We’d have to do a prenup, but I promise I’d make it worth your while.” He slides off the car, tugging his pants up. “This is my shot, Raphael. My chance to make something of myself. I’ve been looking for weeks and I couldn’t even find someone I wanted to bang, much less pretend to be in love with. At least we have chemistry. I can live with that.”

“You don’t understand. I’m not the kind of person you want in your family.”

“I’m my family. That’s it. No one else talks to me. The scandal my grandfather’s will caused is massive. They’ll hate me even more if I pull this off. Maybe you can’t understand. Maybe you have an amazing family, but not all of us do.”

“Haven...” I scratch my scalp while I try to work this out, but I’m left speechless.

“Do you want more money?”

“No. I don’t need money. I wouldn’t accept a dime.”

“A car then? A house? Name your price.”

I step forward, placing my hands on his shoulders. “Haven. I don’t want anything from you. It’s just not something I can do. I’m sorry.”

“Why? It’s not like it’s forever. It’s a business transaction. Please, Raphael. You’re my best chance. I’m running out of time.”

The desperation in his voice tugs at my barely used heart. But the poor soul has no idea what he’s asking me for. How could I keep what I am from him in this situation?

“I need time to think about it.” It’s a weak excuse, but it’s all I’ve got. “Can I have twenty-four hours to consult with my brothers? We don’t make major decisions without discussing them.”

His face lights up. “Really? You’ll think about it? Do you promise you’re not just blowing me off?”

“I promise.”

Haven nods. “Okay. Twenty-four hours is fair. Would you be able to give me a ride back to my place?”

“Of course.”

We tidy ourselves up and return to the car. Haven seems confident again, like he’s positive I’ll say yes, but I don’t see how I could. I’m an assassin and a vampire. I’m safe enough for one night, but I can’t promise any longer than that.

Following his directions, I drive to a section of town close to where we do a lot of our ‘cleaning up’ and I tense up. This beautiful man lives in this area?

“It’s temporary,” Haven says as if he can read my reaction. “I can’t afford much more, but like I said, once I get my inheritance, everything will be different.”

“Are you safe here?”

“Safe enough, yeah.” He smiles, but I’m no fool. I see the concern in his eyes. “Hopefully I can move soon. I can find us a really nice place. If you say yes, I mean.”

Searching his eyes, my thoughts wander, imagining a world where I could keep such beauty all to myself. “You should give me your number.”

Haven nods, lifting my phone from the console. He types his number in and sends himself a text. “Now I have yours too.” He shifts in his seat to face me. “Um, thanks for tonight. I mean, it was amazing. You’re incredible.”

“I feel the same about you.”

“If you have any questions that come up while you’re thinking, don’t hesitate to ask. I can show you the will if you need proof of everything I’ll get.”

“I don’t need that, but thank you.”

After a too-quick kiss on my cheek, he opens the car door, looking back at me before slipping out and hurrying off between two buildings. I should go after him and take him back to my place, but that would likely only complicate things. I need a clear head and the counsel of my brothers.

Maybe doing a good deed for a mortal in need would be nice. Gods know I’m not known for my philanthropy. I’m happy to fuck one, but beyond that, mortals are food or paychecks to me.

Not Haven though. He’s too beautiful and interesting to write off that easily. I suppose I could at least keep my word and give it some serious thought.

Imagining myself as a married man is truly hilarious, but if this life has taught me anything, it’s to expect the unexpected.

FOUR

Haven

I don't think that went too badly. He seems like he might actually be considering it. Of course, he could think I'm a total nut job and never speak to me again, but I got his number, so that's something.

Climbing the rickety metal steps to my apartment, I hold my nose to block out the putrid scent of urine mixed with the ubiquitous skunkiness of weed. Gedo would roll in his grave if he saw the conditions I've been living in, but I wasn't given a choice, now was I?

As I enter the apartment—hovel would be more accurate—I flick the switch, only for the lightbulb to blow out. Great. I skulk over to the hand-me-down couch and plop down, hoping it holds up long enough for me to get this money.

What I didn't confess to Raphael was just how dismal my situation is. I didn't tell him the emotional abuse I've suffered at the hands of my greedy family for years since Gedo retired. I was forced to put on a brave face and lie to him while he still lived. If not, the small stipend I was getting would have stopped altogether.

All because my father and uncles felt jilted by a father who preferred his grandson over his children. Like that was my fault somehow. My aunts accepted their roles in the family, outdated as they may be, but the men are dicks. My father is more than hoping I can't pull this off, and if that happens, I'll never see a dime again.

My only hope to get out of poverty is a stranger with pretty eyes and a huge dick. I'm not above stalking him if I have to. I've been hitting every major and some not so major social spots in the city, looking for anyone at least mildly interesting who could hold a conversation. I even considered a woman, but I couldn't do that to someone there's no chance of me being attracted to. Besides, my family would never believe I fell for a woman. Not once in my life have I even looked twice at a beautiful woman. My queerness was obvious early on. At least I can be thankful that despite our culture, the family never rejected me for that. They had plenty of other options to pick from.

I reach into my pocket and pull out the few bucks I still have. I should have batted my eyelashes to get dinner out of the sex god tonight, but I guess it's another night of instant ramen. One day I'm going to rise above all this. I'll quit my shitty restaurant job and show my family I'm capable of running the empire Gedo built on his own back.

That's the plan. All I have to do is convince Raphael to say, "I do."

FIVE

Raphael

When I arrive back at home, I'm surprised to find Yves sitting in the common area with Viper, Viv, and Hale. They seem to be watching a movie. Have I accidentally crossed into a parallel universe?

"What is happening here?" I ask as all four turn to look at me.

"Watching a movie," Viv answers.

"Why?"

She tilts her head and Yves chuckles.

"Forgive his confusion," Yves says. "I'm fairly certain this is the first known sighting of me in front of a television."

"Yeah," I say. "What brought this about?"

"I coerced him," Hale answers. "We're bingeing vampire movies. Ironic, yes?"

"Uh, why?"

"I wanted to know what mortals believe about us," Hale explains.

My gaze shoots to Viper, who grins at me in response. "Cat's out of the bag. It has been for a while actually."

"You know?"

Viper nods, glancing at Vivienne. "Cute that you guys tried to protect me, but I've got this cool gift that lets me pick up on

a lot of things left unsaid and unseen. It only took me a couple of weeks to figure it out.”

Yves smiles affectionately at the woman. “We should have known.”

Nodding, I smile. “At least you’re good with it.”

“I think it’s badass,” Viper says.

“It certainly has its perks,” Hale says.

“Do you have a minute, Yves?”

He nods, standing from his spot on the sofa. “My office?”

“Yeah.”

I follow Yves to his unit and into his office. Before we sit, he walks to his credenza and pours each of us a glass of blood-tinged wine. I accept my glass and take a seat across from his desk.

“I have an unusual dilemma.”

“I’m listening,” Yves says, leaning back in his chair. He’s dressed casually in a black t-shirt and linen pants. It’s rare but nice to see.

“I met someone interesting tonight. His name is Haven. He’s...” My thoughts drift back to his stunning face and the way he came apart in my embrace. “He’s beautiful and passionate.” I clear my throat. “But it was only meant to be a hookup.”

“Go on.”

“At the end of our... interlude, he propositioned me. He’s in need of a spouse, and quickly. It’s for an inheritance. I’m weighing the pros and cons of helping him.”

Yves raises a single eyebrow. “You *want* to marry a mortal?”

“Not particularly, but he assures me it’s temporary. It’s a ruse.”

“You don’t know him, Raphael.”

“No, but he doesn’t know me either. Maybe I could consider it a good deed.”

Yves sits forward, a soft smile on his lips. “What is your real motivation, Raph? You can tell me. Good deed aside, there has to be something else.”

I nod, taking a moment to sip my drink. “Perhaps...” I direct my gaze to my maker and savior. “I guess I remember what it was like to be discarded by those who were supposed to love and protect me. Maybe I feel an affinity with him.”

“It sounds as if you’ve already made your decision.”

“Well, no. Part of me wants to help, but it’s risky.”

“All interactions with mortals are.” He swirls his drink in his glass. “But as we’ve seen, there are times when the risk is worth it.”

“Yeah. I guess.”

“What are you most afraid of?”

“Losing control and hurting him. Exposing us.”

Yves nods. “Valid concerns, but I trust you to use your best judgment in your interactions with him and his with us.”

“You do? That’s not like you.”

He chuckles. “Let’s just say watching three of my brothers fall in love and find their very mortal mates has softened some of my paranoia. I trust you all with my life, so I should extend that trust to your personal lives. While it’s unconventional to say the least, if you feel that marrying Haven is a good choice, I’ll support you.”

His response stuns me. I think on some level I expected him to talk me out of it, and maybe I even wanted him to, but now I can’t deny the very real excitement coursing through me at the idea of seeing Haven again.

“You say he’s beautiful?” Yves asks.

“Very. We’re compatible in one area, at least.”

“Many marriages were created from less.”

I laugh. “True. I just never saw myself marrying for any reason, least of all a fake one.”

“My honest opinion of the situation is that you’ve suppressed your desire for love for too long. Haven feels like a lifeline. Just keep your expectations in check. If this is truly just for show, guard your heart. Even jaded vampires are capable of falling hard.”

“Good advice.”

He leans across the desk, placing his hand over mine. “But also be open to the possibility that it could grow into more. As we’ve seen, stranger things have happened.”

Nodding, I flip my hand to hold his and give it a gentle squeeze. “True. How are you? Hale seems to be fitting in.”

“He is. I’ve got him set up to start working at Lair soon. He’s not interested in joining Veil Protection, and we could always use more support at the club.”

“Is there...” I’m careful with my next question. Yves isn’t known for encouraging prying into his personal life.

He chuckles, clearly already picking up on my thoughts. “Interest in Hale? No. No more than as a friend.”

“It isn’t fair, you know? Fate should have chosen you first.”

His eyes soften. “Fate is on her own timeline. I accept that.”

I stand and walk around his desk, where I open my arms to him. While we long ago stopped sleeping in each other’s beds, I know that Yves still craves an intimate touch from time to time. Syn was always the one to give it, but now he’s with his mate, their touches have gone extinct.

Yves wraps his arms around my waist, pressing his cheek to my belly. It’s far from sexual, but more intimate than merely platonic. It’s centuries of shared history and affection. If fate is listening, I pray she graces this generous man with a mate of his own. If anyone deserves love, it’s him.

“Thank you,” he whispers after a moment. He squeezes my hand as we separate. “Let me know if we can do anything to help you with Haven.”

“I appreciate that. I think the further I keep him from this life, the better.”

“You’ll figure it out.”

After I leave Yves and say goodnight to the others, I head to my apartment. Everything has changed. I can’t just swing by Eros’s place and bug him now that he has a mate. Syn and Midnight are always tucked away in their own units with their mates. Thorn is out doing Thorn things. Without a job, I have nothing to do, and watching vampire movies doesn’t appeal.

Maybe agreeing to Haven’s plan isn’t the worst idea. It would give me a distraction in between jobs. Besides, what’s a year in the face of eternity? Worst case scenario, we hate each other when it’s over but he still gets his inheritance. And I definitely wouldn’t mind spending a few more nights tangled around his body.

As insane as it is, I think I’m going to do it. I’m going to marry Haven.

Haven

It's been twenty-four hours with no call from Raphael. Ugh. Back to the drawing board, I guess. While I put the finishing touches on my face—a bit of gloss and eyeliner—I do my best to push back the disappointment. I guess I was really hoping I could stop creeping through every nightclub in the city looking for a suitable partner. Not to mention Raphael is hot. And that dick. Damn.

Maybe I should switch gears and go somewhere nerdy guys hang out. I've always been into brains. The fuckboi route isn't producing any results.

With a pink jumpsuit on, black leather ankle boots, and my face as good as it's gonna get, I grab my phone and keys for another night out. Just as I'm heading down the stairs, my phone rings, and for a second I'm hopeful it's Raphael. It's not.

“Hi, Auntie,” I answer. “What's up?”

“Haven. How are you, my boy?”

“Holding up. Is everything okay?”

“Mostly, yes.”

“But?”

“We had a family meeting yesterday. Your father is preparing papers in the event that you don't meet the terms of the inheritance. Are you making progress with that?”

I roll my eyes. “Yes,” I lie, “I’ll make it.” One way or another.

“Good. That’s what baba would want. I’m rooting for you.”

“Thanks, Auntie. I gotta go.”

“Be safe.”

“I will.”

I end the call feeling even heavier than I did a few minutes ago. No time for that though. I’m on a mission. I shake off the black cloud and lift my chin with the confidence of a man who intends to get exactly what he wants.

My rideshare shows up and I slide onto the back seat. The man driving is probably about sixty, but at this point, if he were single, I’d marry him.

He confirms the address, and as he plugs it into his GPS, I see the gleaming gold band on his left ring finger. Married. Figures.

I sit back with thoughts of how my life ended up like this swirling in my head. Raised a spoiled rich kid, now living in tenements and desperate for marriage. I never thought I’d be close to begging someone to take me, but here we are.

I’ve always had pretty good luck with romance. Well, with sex. I’ve never really pursued romance. Like, why would I when the world has so many opportunities in it. Still, there was a part of me that wondered if I’d ever fall for someone.

Maybe I shouldn’t give up so quickly on Raphael. I glance out the window, watching the passing cars and buildings as we head out of my shitty neighborhood. Then someone catches my eye. I’ve only met him once, but I’d recognize that face anywhere.

“Stop the car, please.”

My driver pulls over, twisting to look at me. “Something wrong?”

“No. I saw a friend. I’m gonna get out here.”

“In this neighborhood?”

“Dude, did you see where I lived? I can handle it.”

I slip from the car, hurrying down the sidewalk in the direction I'm positive I saw Raphael and another man. My outfit definitely gets a few strange looks, but if living on my own has taught me anything, it's that you should never show fear. Act like you own the place and people will steer clear. If that doesn't work, I can always pull out my knife.

I turn a corner and spot them at the end of the alley. Between them on the ground is a black mass that looks a lot like a body. I freeze, squinting, but when I blink, the thing on the ground is gone and Raphael is turned in my direction.

“Haven?”

How did he... I step out from behind the dumpster. “Uh, yeah. Hi.”

“Hi. What are you doing here?”

“I was, um... meeting a friend.”

He saunters closer to me, a sexy smirk on his lips. “Is that so? Did you find them?”

“No.” I blow out a breath. “Okay, um, I was passing by and I thought I saw you.”

“You did.” His eyes roam from my face to my feet and back up again. “You are as beautiful as I remember.”

“Thanks.” I straighten my shoulders. “So I'm guessing the answer is no?”

“Why do you say that?”

“You didn't call.”

Raphael steps closer, his hand landing softly on my cheek. “I had to work first. I planned to call tonight.”

“To let me down?”

He tilts my chin up. It's so nice to find someone taller than me. Not by a lot, but enough.

“To tell you I made a decision. I want to help you, Haven.”

My brain goes off-line for a second. “What?”

“Yes,” he says, his smile growing. “I’ll marry you.”

“Oh fuck. Really? You mean it?”

“I do.”

I throw my arms around his neck and literally jump into his arms. He laughs, catching me easily. “Thank you.”

“I’m happy to help.”

As I slide out of his arms, I fall straight to my knees and work on his belt.

“What are you doing, Haven?”

“Sucking your soul through your dick. Least I can do.”

He grabs me by the elbow and lifts me up. “Not here. You deserve better.” He glances over his shoulder at the man lingering near the end of the alley. “Let me tell my brother what’s going on, then we can go to your place.”

I scrunch my nose. “Oh no. We can’t go there. What about your place?”

Raphael’s brow crinkles. “I would prefer not to. I have a lot of nosy brothers. What’s wrong with your place?”

I bite my bottom lip to avoid answering, but Raphael gently tugs my lip from my teeth.

“Talk to me, Haven.”

“Um, okay. I live, like, four blocks from here. That way.” I point behind us. “It’s not good enough for you. It’s not even good enough for me, but it’s all I can afford with my restaurant job and my stipend.”

Something that looks a lot like anger flashes across his features before he blinks it away. “Show me.”

Cringing, I grip his shirt. “Do I have to?”

“Yes. I want to know things about you. If we’re going to convince your family, I need information. I want to see what conditions they’ve caused for you.”

I nod, understanding his reasoning. “Okay, but can we do yours tonight and mine tomorrow? I don’t care about nosy family.”

He nods, but he doesn’t look happy about it. “I’ll be right back.”

“I can’t meet your brother?”

Raphael tenses but then nods again. “Of course. Come.”

He offers his hand and I take it, following him to the end of the alley where a very tall, very muscular, and very intimidating man is standing. His black hair flows over his shoulders, and he looks at me with a completely blank expression.

“This is Syn,” Raphael says. “Syn, this is Haven.”

Syn offers his hand, but his expression doesn’t change much. Does he already hate me?

“Nice to meet you, Haven.”

Raphael leans close to Syn, whispering something I can’t hear. Syn raises an eyebrow as he focuses his gaze on me and nods. Then he’s off, disappearing into the night without another word.

“Talkative fellow, huh?”

Raphael chuckles as we begin walking. “We’re all a little on the quiet side except for Thorn.”

“How many brothers do you have?”

“Five. Well, I think six now.”

“You think six?”

“We just added on.” Then he pauses. “Oh. We are chosen family.”

“Ah, okay. That’s cool. What about your folks and stuff?”

“Dead.”

His answer is so blunt it startles me. “Real broken up over that, huh?”

He glances at me. “It was a long time ago.” We stop in front of a much nicer car than the one he had last night. “Here we are.”

“Holy shit,” I whisper, dragging my hand over the hood of the red car. “A Bugatti Centodieci? I’ve only seen this at car shows.”

“It’s Syn’s. He prefers flashy cars.”

“It’s gorgeous.” I slip into the passenger seat, running my hands over the supple leather. “Amazing.”

Raphael only smiles as he starts the engine, the rumble of it purring beneath me. “You like it, huh?”

I turn in my seat to face him. “Would he kill us if we fucked in here?”

He raises an eyebrow in amusement. “I’m not sure it’s large enough for that, but Syn would likely destroy whole city blocks with rage if we so much as sneezed in here.”

I laugh. “That’s fair. This is nice.”

“Hold on.”

Raphael tears off into the night, and I lean back to enjoy the smooth ride. We attract a lot of attention driving through this shitty neighborhood in a car worth more than most of the real estate here. For the first time in a long time I feel like my old self again. Oh how the mighty have fallen.

We exit the neighborhood and Raphael merges onto the freeway, glancing at me.

“Why are you so dressed up?” he asks.

“Husband hunting,” I answer honestly. “I figured you were gonna say no, so I was heading out for the night to see if I could find someone even half as interesting.”

He nods, but I notice how his jaw ticks.

I touch his arm with a grin on my face. “Does that make you jealous?”

Raphael scoffs. “Hardly. I’m not a jealous man.”

“Well I am. Possessive too. But I guess we should have rules since this whole thing isn’t real.”

“Like what?”

I shrug. “Um, I don’t know. Do you still want to see other people?”

His brow creases again but he doesn’t respond.

“I guess it’s not fair of me to expect you to put your life on hold for me,” I continue. “I would just ask you to be discreet in case my family follows me or something. I wouldn’t put it past them.”

“I have no intention of seeing other people. What happened between us last night isn’t something I do a lot.”

“Aww, are you saying I was just too good to pass up?”

That makes Raphael smile. “You must be aware of your charm and the way you carry yourself. I don’t think anyone you set your sights on has a chance.”

“Nope.” I lean across the seat and lick his cheek. “And I’m more than open to a repeat.”

His eyes heat as he focuses on me, probably for longer than he should. “Good. So am I.”

He returns his attention to the road and within minutes we’re in one of the city’s best areas. I laugh to myself. Here I thought his modest car meant he could use some cash, but if this is where he lives, I’m the only broke person in this car.

Raphael drives down into a parking garage, swinging the car into a spot. I notice several high-end cars, a motorcycle, an SUV, and then the sedan he drove last night. He leads me to an elevator, and I shake my head.

“You live in this building?”

“I do. We own it, actually. It has a few other residents in it, but we occupy one floor of individual units. We’re very close knit.”

I nod, watching the elevator numbers rise. When the door dings and slides open, we exit and enter another room that is

more like a wing. The walls are lined with closed doors, but in the middle is what looks like a big entertainment room with lots of furniture, bookshelves, window seats, and a massive TV. It's full of people too, who all stop talking once they notice us.

Raphael grips my shoulder as we approach. I'm pretty sure he didn't intend to introduce me to everyone yet, but I guess it would be rude not to. The man I met earlier, Syn, is sitting in an armchair with another man on his lap, stroking Syn's hair. I wonder how he beat us here if we had his car.

Two other men, one with long blond hair and the other with short, curly hair, sit with their legs tangled together. There are two women sitting at a small round table with a puzzle between them. A door opens behind us and two more men step out, both of them stopping when they see us. The taller one raises an eyebrow as he focuses on Raphael.

"Uh, hi, everyone," Raphael says. "This is Haven." He looks at me. "This is my family. We can get names another time." Then he grabs my wrist and leads me down the hall.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

"Yes. I just didn't plan to have everyone around. I didn't want to overwhelm you or explain."

"They looked at me like I was an alien."

He chuckles as he opens a door to an apartment. "They aren't used to seeing me bring someone here. I never have."

"Really? I feel special." I press against him once we're inside. "I'll be the first man in your bed?"

"You will," he says, his eyes heating. "And now we have time to truly explore."

"We do." I loop my arms around his neck. "Why don't you show me this bed and make it hard for me to walk tomorrow."

Raphael grins. "I can do that."

SEVEN

Raphael

I walk Haven backward to my bedroom, indulging in the taste of his flesh with kisses. He clings to me, rubbing against my body, and the desire coursing through us both is enough to erase the awkward interaction with my family moments ago.

When we reach the bedroom, I lift Haven off his feet and toss him on the bed, stalking towards him as I peel off my shirt. He props himself up on his elbows, gazing at me with pretty eyes and a predatory smirk on his lips. It's nice to be hunted once in a while.

"I thought my luck ran out a while ago," Haven says, licking his lips. "But I think it kicked back in. Finding you *had* to be good luck."

After I kick off my jeans, I pull off his boots and climb onto the bed, hovering over his body. "However it happened, let's just be grateful for it."

Haven nods, his eyes heating as he watches me drag the zipper of his jumpsuit down. The more skin I expose, the harder my cock grows. Something about this man intoxicates me. I drag my nose from his neck to his stomach, moaning softly as he tangles his fingers in my hair. My mouth waters and my gums throb with need. I close my eyes to calm myself. Haven draws my beast to the surface.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

Smiling, I shake my head and open my eyes, focusing on him. "Nothing. Just pacing myself. You turn me on like no one

else has.”

He grins, twisting a lock of my hair around his finger. “You don’t have to flatter me. I’m a sure thing. I’ll even marry you.”

“I don’t say things I don’t mean, Haven. Maybe our marriage won’t be authentic, but I assure you, my desire for you is.” I rub my aching cock against his leg to make my point.

Haven moans, nodding at me. “Okay, you convinced me. Can I suck you now?”

“Fuck yeah.”

Haven squeezes out from under me and then pushes me onto my back. He’s nothing but spectacular as he licks his lips and settles between my legs, peeling the jumpsuit the rest of the way off. When he wraps his hand around my erection, a whole-body shiver moves through me as if his touch is electric. Something about this man is so different from my usual hookups.

With a big grin on his face, he licks a stripe up my shaft before swallowing my entire length down his throat. My eyes go wide. What a feat.

“Like, zero gag reflex,” Haven says as he releases me, stroking me in his hand. “Fuck, your dick is addictive.”

He returns to his sucking and licking, stroking me, and occasionally massaging my balls. The man knows what he’s doing. I want to close my eyes and sink into the feeling, but I literally can’t take my eyes off of him.

So many times it felt like the men I’ve been with were just doing it as part of the sex act, but Haven, he enjoys sucking cock. At least, he enjoys mine.

While he works me over, he rubs his chest up and down on my legs, so I reach down and squeeze his nipples, drawing a long moan of pleasure from his lips.

“More,” he mumbles around my cock.

I tweak them some more, and as he pushes me too close to the edge, I manage to shove him back and focus on worshipping his body. I indulge myself in his scent, rubbing any part of me I can on him like an animal in a heat rut, but I don't care how shameless I am. He's too delicious for anything less.

With his nipple in my mouth, I gently nibble it, gazing up at him as he bites his bottom lip. I move my hand down his torso to his cock, reaching into pink lacy panties and rubbing my thumb over his sticky slit.

"Fuuuuuck," Haven whispers. "How are you so good at this?"

I snicker, but return my attention to his body, almost overcome by how much I want to consume him. I want all of him surrounding me at all times. I could keep him here, locked in my urban palace and away from anyone who would ever mistreat him. All to myself, endlessly indulging in his flesh, his cum, and gods, someday his blood. Would he let me have a little taste?

He hisses and I realize I grazed his skin with my fangs. Before I can even apologize, his face lights up. "Ooh, a biter. I'm down."

"What?"

"You like to bite? Go ahead. I can handle it."

Chuckling, I shake my head and force myself away from his chest. "Not the way I bite, my beautiful lover."

Haven raises an eyebrow. "Really? What? Are you, like, into blood play or something?"

"Or something."

Haven grips my arm and pulls himself up, hooking a hand behind my neck. "Do it. Bite me. Do whatever you want to me, Raphael. I like experiencing new things, and I definitely like it rough."

His offer is beyond tempting, but he has no idea what he's asking me for. I lift his hand and kiss his palm. "I want to be

inside you again.”

“Yeah. I want that too.” He leans in and nips my bottom lip. “I can bite too, handsome.”

“Are you always so reckless, Haven? You hardly know me, yet you tempt me to do things to you far beyond the norm.”

“I’m not afraid of you,” he says, dragging his hand down my chest. “Just the opposite, actually. I don’t know what it is, but you calm me inside.” He chuckles. “Weird, right?”

“A little, yeah.”

He shrugs, wiggling around to get his panties off. “You’re not gonna kill me, right? I highly doubt you’re a serial killer who offers to marry strangers as a favor, not to mention all the people on the other side of the door.”

Little does he know...

“I would never harm you. Not intentionally.”

Haven’s eyes sparkle with danger as he climbs onto my lap. “But accidentally?” he practically purrs as he brushes our lips together. “I could use a little excitement in my life.”

“Haven...”

“What do you like to bite? My chest? My ass? Not my dick, I hope. That probably hurts.” Reaching between us, he guides my cock into the crease of his ass. “Mm, you’re so sticky already. I love it. You must save a ton of money on lube.”

“You talk a lot, Haven.”

“I know.” He grins as he slowly rocks back and forth, teasing us both. “I talk a lot of shit, but I can back it up. I’m yours to do whatever you want with, Raphael.” He enunciates my name by syllable. “I want this night to be one of those you can’t believe happened the next day. I’ve waited a long time to meet someone who matches my... adventurous nature. Is it you?” He dots the tip of my nose with his fingertip. “I think it is.”

Wrapping my arm around his waist, I pull him close until our chests press together. Haven's breath hitches as I tease his hole with my fingers. His eyelids droop and his lips part, but he nods.

"Yes," he whispers. "Fuck me silly. Make me forget everything and everyone before you."

Lining the head of my cock up with his rim, I push inside. Haven shouts, and I close my eyes as I sink into his tight, warm body.

"All the gods, Haven. Your body is a miracle."

"Fuck, you're so thick," he murmurs, even as he starts rocking. "I love it. I want to be so sore tomorrow. I want to walk so funny that I'm embarrassed by it."

Opening my eyes, I grin. "Aren't you sore from last night?"

"Yeah." He smirks. "I love it."

"You're a bit of a masochist, huh?"

"Only in the bedroom. I'm a princess out of it."

I chuckle at that, then wrap my hand around the front of his neck and squeeze just barely. His eyes go wide before he relaxes into my touch, nodding with a pleading look in his eyes.

"You want me to hurt you, Haven?"

"Yes. Leave marks. I want to look in the mirror tomorrow and see what you did to me."

"You're sure?"

He tilts his head, dragging his nails across my shoulders, hard enough for me to notice. "Do I sound unsure?"

"No, but I've never been purposely rough before."

"I've never let anyone have free rein either. It's new for both of us. I can't explain why, but I want this with you. I think you can give me what I really crave."

I grip both his wrists in one hand and bring them around his back. He smiles, satisfied that his speech worked, and it did. I let myself go, giving in to my own restrained desires. I've always had to be so careful with mortals, and I still do as far as biting goes, but this man is capable of handling me at my fullest. At least I hope he is.

I toss him back on the bed and lift his legs before pushing inside him again. "Keep your arms above your head," I command. "If you move them, I stop."

He nods, biting into that bottom lip of his again.

"And stop biting your lip. Only I can bite you. Understood?"

"Oh, fuck yeah."

Finally, after so much talking, I let loose, gripping the front of his neck and pounding into his body. His hole clenches around me, drawing me in and holding me there. I spit between us to ease the friction for him, but for me, it's fucking paradise. It's the Elysium Fields of sex.

"Fuck, Raph," Haven murmurs as he bounces beneath me. "More, more, more."

"More what?"

"Pain," he whimpers. "Good pain."

I pull out and flip him easily onto his stomach. He puts his cheek to the bed and his ass up in offering, and I happily slide right back inside his accepting body. Haven claws at the bedding, but I grab his wrists again, holding his arms tightly behind him as I work off centuries of pent-up desire.

Haven's unlocked a part of me I was only vaguely aware of. Of course I've had urges to be rough before—I'm a vampire, for fuck's sake—but I held back so as not to harm them or reveal what I am. As long as I can keep my beast under control, Haven will accept anything I throw at him. How incredible.

"Fuck," he cries out, pumping his hips and fucking himself on my cock.

I pull out abruptly, ignoring his whiny pleas, and bury my face between his legs, licking and sucking his hole, his balls, his cock. Then I sink my teeth into his fleshy ass. Haven cries out, but hisses, “Yes,” as I lick the wound closed again. There’s not enough blood in this location to sate my bloodlust, but the simple act of biting him was almost good enough. Almost.

“More,” Haven whimpers.

So I lean forward and bite into the fleshy part of his shoulder, continuing my assault on his hole. Warm, coppery liquid coats my tongue this time, but instead of providing any satiety, it’s just the opposite. My beast pushes to the surface, my fangs growing even longer and my skin tingling with the need for another taste.

I pull out again, shoving Haven onto his back and sucking his cock into my mouth, desperate to taste all of him. He buries his fingers in my hair, fucking my throat and dotting my tongue with precum.

“More,” he demands again.

I pop off his cock and bite right into his thigh, exhaling as a flood of warm blood fills my mouth.

“Jesus,” Haven shouts as he throws his head back. “Fuck, you’re a sex god. Bite me everywhere. Hurts so good.”

I squeeze my eyes shut as I force myself off his thigh and up to his belly, where I suck hard enough to get a hint of metallic blood through his skin. As I rise to my knees, I gaze down at him, the vein in his neck pulsing with a hypnotic beat, drawing me to it.

Almost in a trance, I fall forward and suck on the vein, refusing to bite even though it’s painful not to. With my hand hooked under his knee, I enter him and ride the wave of pleasure his body provides.

Haven claws at my shoulders, lifting his head to bite into my pec, then latching onto my nipple and sucking so hard I can feel it in my balls. Oh, this man. He can give as good as he gets.

Reaching between us, he strokes his cock, but I smack his hand away and take over. His pleasure is mine. His cum, his sweat, his fucking blood.

“Arms up,” I demand, licking his lingering blood from my lips.

He immediately obeys, and both of us fall silent as I give him everything I’ve got, pummeling his hole with my cock until finally, mercifully, Haven screams my name and warm cum shoots from his cock.

I fall over the edge right behind him, nearly delirious from everything we experienced. As my body twitches and my cock pulses inside his tight hole, I pull him against me and lie on my side, keeping my eyes closed until I’m positive I won’t reveal what I truly am.

After a few minutes to come back to earth, Haven laughs, brushing his hair off his forehead. “Jesus, fuck. You’re an animal.”

“You bring something out in me.”

He grins, brushing a sweet kiss to my lips. “Tell me you’ll marry me again and that I’ll get to have more of this with you.”

“I will marry you, Haven. And yes, you will share my bed.”

“Until?”

My brow creases. “I don’t know the answer to that. Do you?”

“No.” He draws a circle with his finger on my chest. “I wonder if you can fall in love with someone’s dick.”

His comment draws a surprised laugh from my lips. “I’m glad I can please you. I get the impression not everyone can.”

“You got that right.” He scrunches his nose as his eyes shift to my shoulder. “I scratched you.”

“I’ll be okay.” In a matter of minutes, actually. “Do you need water or anything?”

“Nah, I’m good. I just want to lie here, boneless and dripping with cum.” He smiles, releasing a contented sigh. “You did exactly as I hoped. Thank you.”

Leaning in, I kiss him softly. “Get some sleep.”

His breathing slows and I know he’s drifted off quickly. I’ll clean us both up in a few minutes, but right now, I’m truly stunned by what happened between us. I’m pretty sure I’ve never had chemistry with someone like I do with Haven.

I don’t know what it means, but I do know I plan to keep him in my bed as long as possible.

EIGHT

Haven

Waking up in this soft, luxurious bed feels like a dream, but as I stretch and soreness registers across my body, I know I'm awake. I grin as I stir in the blankets. Raphael did exactly as asked.

I open my eyes to an empty room, but at some point, he got up and cleaned me off. As much as I enjoy being covered in cum, it's no fun when it dries, so I'm grateful. He's a thoughtful guy.

Managing to pull myself up and crawl out of bed, I find the bathroom and take care of my morning needs. There's even a brand-new toothbrush waiting on the counter for me. I look over my shoulder with narrowed eyes. Maybe Raphael was lying about not having a lot of men here. Why else would he just have a spare toothbrush?

Eh. Who am I to even question it? He's doing me a massive favor.

After tending to my morning needs, I venture out of the bedroom and down the hall. His apartment isn't anywhere near as modern as the exterior would suggest. Instead, it feels like I stepped into some lavish palace from the past. Honestly, it looks like the stuff I saw in Paris when we went on a family trip there years ago. Okay, the guy likes antiques.

I gasp as he appears right in front of me without making a sound.

He smiles. “Sorry to startle you. Would you like coffee or tea? Food?”

“I’d love some coffee please. I won’t eat for a few hours, but don’t let me stop you.”

Raphael gets an interesting look on his face before he turns around and heads back to the kitchen. I follow him, filled with curiosity about the man. The kitchen is nice—sparse and clean, like he doesn’t use it much. I lean on the island and watch him pour a mug of steaming coffee for me.

“Cream or sugar?”

“Both, please.”

“I’m glad I got some from Bowie. I don’t drink it.”

“But you have a machine?”

He nods, taking a small cup of creamer from the fridge. “I told the designer to outfit it as she saw fit.”

I stir the drink after he hands it to me. “You like antiques, I guess?”

“I do. I grew up in a similar environment.”

“Cool.” I take a sip and smile as the hot liquid nearly scorches my throat. Perfect. “So, out of curiosity, you said you didn’t bring men here, but you had an extra toothbrush for me.” Ooh, did that sound catty? I think it might’ve.

“I found it in the guest bathroom. Is it acceptable for you?”

Feeling a little sheepish, I nod. “Yeah. So, um, when do you think we can do it? The marriage and stuff?”

“I’m available most of the time. I’ll let you decide.” He lifts a glass of liquid to his lips, and as he drinks, I notice how thick and red it is.

“You’re drinking wine in the morning?”

“It’s not wine. It’s a... special drink.”

“Can I taste it?”

“No.” He almost pulls back in horror. “You wouldn’t like it.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do.” He slams it back and hurries to rinse the glass in the sink. “I have unusual dietary needs. It’s like a…”

“Like a supplement?”

“Yes.” Raphael smiles. “A supplement.”

I don’t a hundred percent buy his answer, but I nod and smile anyway. “Cool. So, I thought maybe we should talk and get to know a few things about each other so we have our story straight when you meet my family.”

“Good idea.” He steps closer to me, his eyes heating as he does. “I think our chemistry is convincing, yes?”

“Yeah, but they might accuse you of marrying me for money.”

Raphael shrugs. “We’ll do the prenup as you suggested. I can also show proof of my financial status if necessary.”

Taking another sip of coffee, I study his handsome face. So rugged and somehow pretty at the same time. “What do you do for work?”

His expression looks like he tasted something terrible as he quickly turns away from me and walks purposefully to the living room. Um, oh-kay.

I follow him, wondering how that question could cause his weird reaction. “Raphael?”

He’s standing in front of the windows, his arms crossed over his chest, but after a few awkward seconds, he turns to face me.

“I can’t tell you, but rest assured, there’s no way your family would find out either, even if they did extensive research on me.”

I nod, my teeth grazing my bottom lip until I remember his comment last night and release it. “Why? Are you in witness protection? Undercover CIA ops? The Mafia?”

A smile tugs at his lips but he holds it back. “No. What I do is very sensitive involving security.”

“Okay. I’ll go with the CIA angle. Classified. They’ll like that you work for the government.”

Raphael snorts a laugh. “Fine.”

I plop down on the couch, screwing up my face when I realize it’s not at all comfortable. “Is it dangerous?”

“Yes, and please don’t spill coffee on that. It’s from Henry the VIII.”

I whistle, dragging my hand over the textured fabric. “It must be worth a fortune.”

“Indeed.”

“I grew up with expensive shit. I’ll be cool.”

He nods, sitting across from me in a maroon velvet chair. He’s wearing gray sweatpants and nothing else—thank you, gay gods—and crosses one leg over the other, creating a strange mix of formality and casualness.

“What should I know about you, Haven?”

“Probably not a lot more than you already know. I’m a little spoiled but pretty humble after losing my dad’s financial support. Once I get the money, I plan to take over the business and demote every single family member who treated me like shit.”

Raphael smiles. “Ah. Revenge runs in your veins.”

“I didn’t deserve how they’ve treated me, and my gedo knew it. That’s why he favored me in the will. Can I tell you something I haven’t admitted out loud?”

“Of course.”

“I never wanted to run the company. I mean, maybe when I was really young and everyone told me that was my future. I wanted to make Gedo happy, but it’s not what I really wanted to do. Now, it’s just because...” I blow out a breath. “Just to make a point.”

“What do you really want to do?”

I shrug, even though the unspoken answer makes my heart beat faster.

“You can tell me anything, Haven. I won’t judge you.”

“Fashion.” Just saying the word brings a smile to my face. “I design a lot of the stuff I wear.”

“Did your parents know?”

I shake my head. “Nah. I knew it wouldn’t be cool. For a hobby, maybe, but never as a profession. So, like a lot of things about me, I just pushed it to the side.”

“The way I see it, you have an opportunity now.”

“With our marriage, yeah. Until now, I’ve been too busy surviving. I have to go to work tonight. This little dive pizza place, but the manager is nice. He’s Middle Eastern and wanted to help me even though I had no experience.” My eyes well with tears. “I don’t think I’m too good for honest labor, you know? It’s just...” I don’t finish the sentence. How can I without sounding exactly like I think I’m too good for it?

“You’re sad because you’re in this position and you shouldn’t be,” Raphael says. “I understand. Trust me. I’m well acquainted with unfair situations. My life now is wonderful, but before Yves found me, it was far from that.”

I perk up. “Really? So you actually do understand?”

“More than you know. Come over here.”

I set my mug on the coffee table and cross the room to where he sits. Raphael pats his lap, and as I laugh, I climb up. His arms settle around my waist. “I’ll support you however I can. Whatever you want to do. Run a company, design clothes, lie around on the couch so others can simply enjoy your beauty. Whatever you want, Haven.”

“Why?”

“Good question. Maybe I see a part of myself in you. Yves swooped in and changed my life in ways I can never repay him for. If I can do one nice thing to help someone else, maybe that’s the whole reason I’m here.”

I brush my fingers across his cheek. “So you’re my Yves?”

An emotion flickers in his eyes, but he blinks it away before I can name it. “Something like that.”

An hour later, after Raphael left to go talk to his brothers, I hold my phone in my hand, both dreading and reveling in the call I need to make. It’s now or never though. I press the call button next to the trustee’s name and tap my foot on the floor until he answers.

“Amir Hassan,” he answers.

“Hi, Mr. Hassan. This is Haven Samir.”

“Hello, Mr. Samir. What can I help you with?”

“I wanted to inform you of my upcoming marriage. I believe it means I’ll meet the stipulations of my grandfather’s will. What information do you need from me?”

“Oh, wonderful. Let me get the paperwork. One moment.”

I’m put on hold, and as classical music plays in my ear, I imagine my father’s face when he hears the news. He’s going to shit ten bricks.

“I’m back,” Amir says. “Okay, well, I’ll need a verified copy of the marriage certificate and to establish a schedule for the business update meetings.”

“Is that it?”

“Yes. When is the wedding?”

“This week.”

“Now, Mr. Samir, as your grandfather’s trusted adviser, I have to ask if you’re marrying a stranger or some other situation that will only end in disaster.”

“No,” I lie. “We’ve been seeing each other but we had a talk and decided we’re ready.”

“I see. What’s her name? I’ll note it in the file.”

“*His* name is Raphael.”

“Ah. My apologies. Raphael...?”

I shake my head. Dammit. I don't even know his last name. I search the room for any sign, then notice a small gold plaque on the wall by the fireplace with 'House of Orpheus' engraved in it.

“Orpheus. Raphael Orpheus.”

“Very well. Once you provide the certificate, I can start the paperwork to put the company's assets in your name.”

“Great. I'll be needing a prenup too. Can you help with that?”

“I can. Very wise, sir.”

“Just in case.” I exhale with relief. “Will you notify my family?”

“If that's your decision.”

I turn it over in my mind for a second. “I'll handle it. Thank you, Mr. Hassan.”

After I end the call, I fall back on the sofa and kick my legs in joy. I can't believe I'm really gonna pull this off, and with a guy who seems pretty decent. Maybe... maybe we could even like each other. Wouldn't it be wild if this actually turned into something real?

I mean, unlikely. Raphael seems like a guy who enjoys his independence, and me? What do I know about functional relationships? It's probably best to bury any hope for more and just enjoy a regular dick down until one or both of us gets tired of it.

As long as I get to one up the family that did me wrong, it's good enough for me.

NINE

Raphael

“Raphael has news to share with us,” Yves says, after covering a bit of business.

“Does it have anything to do with the pretty twink you brought here last night?” Thorn asks.

“You weren’t even here.”

“News travels fast,” he says, wiggling his eyebrows at me.

“Anyway.” I shift in my seat, preparing myself for the reaction I’m about to receive. “I’m getting married to a mortal.”

Eros’s jaw drops as he just stares at me. Midnight’s head jerks back. Syn narrows his eyes, like he’s trying to figure out who I am. Thorn cackles, practically falling back in his chair. Tru and Bowie are the only polite ones who simply smile at me while Justice looks slightly scandalized.

“What the fuck, Raph?” Thorn asks, slapping his knee. “It’s not April. Are there other days for jokes?”

“It’s not a joke.” I look to Yves for help, but even he is fighting laughter. “I have a good reason.”

“Please share it with us,” Syn says. “Because I’m astounded.”

“He needs a spouse,” I mutter, scratching the back of my head. “For an inheritance. We met at a club and we have some chemistry.”

Thorn is still chuckling. “Yes, we heard your *chemistry*.”

I roll my eyes. “I would have preferred to go to his place as I normally do, but he wasn’t comfortable with it.” I shift my gaze to Yves. “I didn’t intend to bring him here. I’m doing my best to buffer him from us.”

“Why?” Bowie asks. “Do we embarrass you or something?”

“Of course not. He doesn’t know what we are, obviously, and I think we’d all prefer to keep it that way.”

“How are you gonna do that?” Tru asks. “You’re gonna marry a guy and somehow keep him from finding out that we’re a bunch of murderous vampires?”

“That’s the plan, yes.”

“Good luck with that,” Thorn says. “I bet there’s at least three guys in the room who could tell you the benefits of telling the mortals we bed.”

“Raphael is wise to be cautious,” Yves says, finally adding a touch of reason to this conversation. “We don’t know Haven.”

“Cool name,” Tru says.

“What’s his backstory?” Justice asks.

“Rich family that disowned him over a family business. He stands to inherit it all through his grandfather’s will, but he has to be married first. Traditional family.”

“And he can marry a dude?” Bowie asks.

“Apparently. I agreed simply because...” I shrug. “I guess I just wanted to do a good deed.”

“That must be some good ass,” Thorn mutters, drawing me to my feet.

In a flash, I grip the collar of his t-shirt and growl as my beast rises to the surface. Thorn stares back at me with wide eyes, his face a mask of confused surprise.

My own reaction startles me, and I back down quickly, stumbling back to my chair. All of us fall silent, processing what just happened. Finally, Thorn speaks.

“Sorry, brother. I’ll be more respectful of your fiancé.”

I have nothing to say, so I just cross my arms and settle into my seat.

“I think that’s all for now,” Yves says. “You have your assignments for this week.”

The meeting ends, but as I walk back to my unit, Eros catches up with me. “Hey,” he says, grabbing my arm.

“Hey.”

“Not to be clingy, but I’m used to you telling me stuff.”

Smiling, I put my hand on his shoulder. “It happened quickly. Besides, things are different now. You have a mate.”

“But I’m still here for you.”

“I know. I’m good. It’s not like it’s real love. It’s a transaction.”

“But he’s in your bed. That has to mean something.”

I glance over my shoulder to ensure Haven is still tucked safely inside my apartment. “The first night was a wild hookup on the roof of the car. The second time was here last night. We’re very compatible in that area. I guess I just wanted more of him.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And with me agreeing to marry him, it felt appropriate to spend a little time together and learn about each other.”

“Okay.”

“What, Eros?”

“It’s just so unlike you. Are you sure this...” His words trail off as he shakes his head. “Nothing. You know what you’re doing.”

“You know you can say what you want to me.”

“Yeah.” Eros glances over his shoulder. “It’s just your reaction to Thorn, and agreeing to something so major. Are you feeling like it might be time to find a love of your own?”

I scoff. “Eros, my dear friend. This isn’t love or anything like it. It’s incredible sex and a favor for someone who really needs one. It doesn’t affect my life at all. When the time is up, we’ll do the paperwork and go our separate ways. My stance on love and mates is the same as it’s always been. Not for me.”

“But that’s so wrong. You know what Yves says.”

“Yves’s view of the world is colored by his fantastical ideas. Not all of us are searching for a soul mate. I’m happy for you and the others, but for me, I’m fine.”

“None of us were looking either, Raph. I’ll remind you of that.”

“What are you saying?”

“Maybe just keep your heart open. There has to be a reason you’re drawn to help Haven. More than just a good deed.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll keep my heart open, but Haven feels the same. The last thing he wants is a serious relationship. Why do you think he went out looking for some stranger to marry?”

Eros nods, searching my eyes. “Fair enough. Are we invited to the wedding?”

I laugh at that. “I have no idea what we’re doing but I’ll keep you all posted.”

“You better.”

“I should get back to Haven.”

“Okay.”

I watch Eros walk away for a second before calling out to him. “Eros?”

He twists around. “Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

He smiles, winking at me.

As I walk back to my unit, his words replay in my mind. My reaction to Thorn was a little out of character. Okay, a lot. But maybe I was just being protective of someone who doesn't deserve crass talk about him. That must be it.

At this point, I refuse to think it might be anything else.

TEN

Haven

When Raphael returns, he seems tense. I automatically brace myself for him to tell me he's changed his mind. Maybe his family talked him out of helping me? There's no way I'm giving up easily though, so I hope he's ready for that.

"Hey," he says, approaching me.

"Hi. Everything okay?"

"Yep. You good?"

I nod. "I made a couple of calls. We can just go to the courthouse and do it JOP style."

"JOP?"

"Justice of the peace. Have a judge marry us. All we need is ID and to pay for the marriage license."

"Fine. Would you like to have anything..." He waves his hand. "I don't know. Celebratory?"

"Oh. I don't think that's necess—" The theme song to *Psycho* pierces the air and I glare at my phone. Fuck. It's my father. I try to ignore it but seconds later it rings again.

"Who is that?"

"Father," I grumble, staring at the screen. "I told the lawyer I would notify people, but I'm guessing that didn't happen."

"I can answer it."

Blowing out a breath, I shake my head. “I need to handle this anyway.” I straighten my shoulders and press the answer button. “Hello.”

“Haven,” my father says, his tone cool. “I understand you have an update.”

I roll my eyes. “I told the attorney I would update the family later.”

“Yes, well let’s just say he was encouraged to give me an update now. You’re getting married?”

His incredulous tone sends waves of rage through me. “You’re shocked? Didn’t think anyone would sign on to be with me?”

“You aren’t exactly known for your long relationships.”

“Yeah, well when it’s right, it’s right. What do you want to know?”

“I want to be there. I want to witness this *union*.”

“No thanks. It’s supposed to be a happy day.”

“Listen, Haven. No one believes this marriage is legitimate.”

“I’m under no obligation to prove it to you or anyone else. Grandfather’s will states I have to be married, and married I’ll be. Quite frankly, once it’s done, it’s none of your damn business.”

“You will not talk to me like some undisciplined street rat.”

Raphael’s brow furrows as he sits closer to me.

“I’ll talk to you however I want to. If I remember right, in our last conversation you said I was no son of yours. So why should I be respectful? You’re just pissed because I’m about to get everything you wanted, and if you think I’ll show you an ounce of kindness, you’re fucking wrong.”

“Haven, you listen to me—”

“No. You listen to me for a change. You underestimated me, but that’s on you. You’ll find out firsthand how wrong you’ve been about me. I’m going to ruin your life, the way you ruined mine.”

“If you think I’ll go down without a fight, you’re mistaken.”

“Don’t care. It’s all legal. You can fight me and cry about it all you want, but this is one thing you can’t take away from me.” My body vibrates with a mixture of disbelief that I’m standing up to him and absolute terror for the same reason. “We’re done now.”

“I will ruin you, Haven.”

“You already did that, *Father*.”

I end the call and slump back against the sofa. Raphael holds my hand in his.

“Are you okay?”

Closing my eyes, I shake my head. “I’m not really sure. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised he was so evil about it, but it still sucks.”

“Of course it does. A family betrayal is one of the worst things that can happen to a person. What can I do to help?”

I huff a laugh. Is he this nice for real? “I’d say agreeing to marry me is above and beyond.” I glance down at our entwined hands. “I’m afraid he’s gonna find a loophole. Or do something to prevent me from getting my inheritance.”

Raphael studies my face for a moment. “Haven... I could help.”

“How?”

“My family... we offer protection services.”

“Protection? Like bodyguards?”

“Uh, sure, you could call us that.” He clears his throat, and I get the sense that I’m not getting the full story. “I don’t want to tell you all of it. The less you know, the better.”

“It’s illegal, isn’t it?”

“Classified. As you said.”

“Right. I don’t care what it is, Raphael. I don’t care if you’re in the Mafia or a drug dealer or—”

“We are not in the Mafia.” He practically spits the words. “And we definitely don’t deal drugs.”

“I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“You didn’t. I just want to make sure you understand. What we do is...” He shrugs. “We’re not bad guys, but we’re not the good guys either. The world isn’t that simple.”

“No, it’s not. You obviously don’t want to tell me, and that’s fine. I’m not gonna push. I don’t think I need physical protection anyway.”

Raphael nods. “Just as well I’m here now. You don’t have to do this alone.”

“You’re a sweet guy, and I appreciate it, but I am alone. I don’t expect anything from you except enough togetherness to make this look legit. After that, you’re off the hook.”

A deep crease forms in his brow, but he simply nods.

“I think he’s gonna try to find us though. Maybe even object to it or something. Are there any out-of-the-way courthouses other than the big one downtown?”

“I can look into that,” Raphael says. “For now, I think we should go to your place and get a few of your things to bring back here.”

“Bring back here?”

“Wouldn’t it make sense if we’re a couple? You don’t want me at your place, so when we’re together, we’ll have to come here.”

“Oh. Right. I didn’t really expect that.”

Raphael brushes his fingers under my chin. “I would like to spend more time with you.”

“Same.”

“Good. What should we do now?”

Taking this beautiful man to the shittiest part of town isn't something I want to do, but he's right. And hell, if I'm honest, I'd much rather be here. “I guess we can go to my place and just get it over with.”

“It can't be that bad.”

“Trust me. It can.”

ELEVEN

Raphael

As we head to Haven's place, I can feel the tension and nerves pouring off him. I wish he understood that his circumstances mean nothing to me, but maybe he'll figure it out once he sees it for himself.

He keeps hedging as he gives me directions, and I want to send a wave of compulsion over him to calm him down. I'm not used to this hesitant and embarrassed side of the normally confident man. Granted, I don't know him well, but I know his confidence is genuine. At least, it usually is.

"Well, here it is," he says, gesturing to a run-down brick building. "Home sweet home. I know you're jealous."

"Hey." I put my hand on his thigh. "I don't judge you."

He nods, but his eyes are hard. "It's just bullshit, you know?"

"Yep, and it's almost over. Eyes on the prize, Haven."

"Right." He blows out a breath. "You can wait here, and I'll bring my stuff down."

I chuckle. "That's not gonna happen."

I pull into a parking space and shut the car off. I chose my modest car today, which based on the area we're in, was a smart move. It's still the nicest vehicle in the lot.

"Hope it's here when we come out," Haven says, walking slowly as though he thinks if he dawdles enough I'll change my mind.

I put my hand on his lower back to make sure he knows I'm here. He blows out a breath that sounds a lot like resignation and gestures for me to follow him. We trudge up some concrete stairs dangerously close to reaching their functional limit, and stop in a hallway that smells so rancid, it actually turns my stomach, and I can take a lot.

The unfairness of it all grips me. I've always hated seeing the way some mortals live in chaos. Yves tells me to detach from it, but even though it was hundreds of years ago, I've never forgotten my own plight before he swooped in and saved me.

Haven unlocks the door and enters, his head down. Inside is a small apartment, pretty clean with minimal possessions visible. In the corner of what should be a dining room is a small folding table with a sewing machine on it and material strewn everywhere.

"Sorry it's a mess. I wasn't expecting company."

"It's not a mess, Haven."

"Whatever. You have closets bigger than this."

"And? I'm older than you. Our lives are different."

"How old are you? You don't look a lot older."

Chuckling, I glance around. "Older than I look."

Haven shrugs and walks down a hallway to what I presume is his bedroom. I enter behind him, pausing in the doorway. Oh, this won't do for a man as charming and magnetic as Haven. I watch as he opens a closet packed with clothes and shoes.

"At least I got to bring my clothes with me," he says, pulling things off the rail.

"They kicked you out completely?"

"Oh yeah. Well, my father did. My mother was sad, but she's powerless. I didn't really want to stay anyway. I just didn't know things were so expensive, you know?"

"Yes."

“The stipend I get is insulting compared to the cost of living and I think he did that on purpose.” Haven twists around, clutching a sweater in his fist. “I’m going to make them pay for this.”

I nod, wishing I had words to comfort him, but what could I even say?

“Thank you,” he whispers, returning to his task. “You’re literally saving my life.”

“I’m glad to help, Haven.”

“Now you see why I didn’t want to kill the vibe last night by coming here.”

I walk over to the closet and help him pull some clothes down. “You said you have to work tonight?”

“Yeah. I get off around eleven, but I can come back here.”

“I’ll pick you up.”

“Are you sure? It’ll be late.”

“It’s fine. I have to work tonight too, so I’ll be in the area.”

“You work down here?”

“I work all over.”

He studies my face, and just when I think he’s going to ask something, he presses a kiss to my lips instead. Then he turns back to the closet, humming a song as he pulls clothes down.

“I know I shouldn’t get used to this. You, I mean. I’ll be rich again soon. Then I can get out of here for good. I’m gonna get a swanky condo like yours.”

He’s right. We shouldn’t get used to this. All the myths and fairytales, even my own brothers finding love, haven’t convinced me that it’s meant for everyone. If Yves doesn’t have a mate yet, what right do I have to even hope it could happen? Better to live with my guard up and zero expectations than to be disappointed later.

Haven knows what he wants from his life, and I don’t plan to be in his way. We’ll ride this out for as long as it’s fun then

go our separate ways. I hope we can remain friends when it's all over. If the past is any indication of the future, our attraction will fizzle out soon enough.

A few hours later, after dropping off Haven's things in my apartment, I pull up in front of the pizza place where he works. A normally vibrant creature, he's toned way down in black pants and a white shirt, with a black apron around his waist.

I want to whisk him away from this, but the last thing I want to do is offend him. He's not looking for a handout. He turns to me and forces a smile onto his face.

"Thanks for everything. I'll see you later?"

"You will."

Haven pauses with his hand on the door handle. "It's kind of wild how life works out sometimes, isn't it? The night we met, I was about to head to this other club I heard about, but something drew me to the one you were in. It's like I subconsciously knew I'd find the right guy for this madness."

My brow creases. "Really?"

He nods. "Yep. You seem surprised."

"Um, kind of. Thorn coerced me to go to that club. It's not my normal hangout."

"Hmm. Maybe it was fate." He leans in to kiss my cheek. "See you later, Raphael."

"Bye, Haven."

I watch him leave in a bit of a daze. *Maybe it was fate.* His words linger long after he's gone, but eventually I shake them off and get to where I'm supposed to meet Midnight. It's our night to work together, and I need my head in the game for this target.

We know nothing about him except that he's volatile and therefore dangerous. Yves suggested two of us handle him

because he's often with several people.

I drive to an alley where I leave my car, scenting my brother nearby. I spot him sitting on the edge of a rooftop and scale the building to join him. Cold wind whips past me, blowing my jacket around me. Midnight glances in my direction with a bored expression.

"Surprised you didn't bring Tru." I sit next to him and nudge his arm with mine.

"He's with Vivienne and Viper, watching them make glamour potions."

"That's interesting. Why?"

"Viv says anyone can learn but I don't think that's true. She'd just teach us if it were."

"Hmm, maybe not. Maybe she likes hanging out with us."

Midnight chuckles at that. "Maybe. I think she adds a little something to it to make it work as well as it does."

"Likely. No sign of our target yet?"

"Nope, but he should be by here at some point. He has some girls that work on the corner of Seventh and Maxwell."

"He's a pimp?"

Midnight shrugs. "He must be, but he obviously did something wrong if he's got a hit out on him."

"True."

Dangling my feet over the edge, I gaze up and down the alley. We aren't too far from where Haven works.

"Where is your fiancé?" Midnight asks with a smirk on his lips.

"He works." I turn to my friend. "Since you have a mate now..." I pause, uncertain.

"Yes?"

"I don't know. Haven said something that got me thinking."

“Yeah? What did he say?”

“The night we met, we were both at the same club and it was out of our ordinary routines. He decided at the last minute to go there, and I let Thorn talk me into it. He said, ‘maybe it was fate.’ Do you believe it could be that simple? That we were just drawn to the same place?”

Midnight shrugs. “You gotta meet somehow. Why wouldn’t it be simple? Maybe Haven isn’t involved in some big situation that needs our help. Do you think he could be your mate?”

“How would I even know? Does it feel different?”

“Yes. It’s a visceral connection. It’s difficult to be apart. You think about them all the time, and the physical part is more intense, I’d say.”

“Really good sex?”

“Better than good. It’s the best, and it’s deeper than what you’ve known before.”

“Even when it shouldn’t be?”

“What do you mean?” Midnight asks.

“Like, you barely know someone, but the connection is strong.”

He nods. “Exactly like that. I noticed an almost rabid desire to protect Tru and keep him close.”

I nod, shifting my gaze past Midnight for a second. “Being unable to think about anything else when he’s not with you?”

“Yep.”

“Were you ever worried that maybe you were projecting onto Tru because of what happened with Syn and Bowie?”

“Yeah.” He chuckles. “But then it just became too obvious that it wasn’t that.” He grips my shoulder. “My advice is to let it happen. There’s nothing you have to do. If he’s your mate, it will become clear soon enough, and if he’s not, then you can still enjoy him.”

I nod. “Good advice.”

We both turn our heads sharply to the left as three men enter the alleyway, boisterous and walking clumsily.

“There he is,” Midnight says, narrowing his eyes.

“Yep. The asshole du jour.”

Midnight snorts a laugh. “Who do you want?”

“I’ll take his friends.”

“Let’s do this.”

We both stand and leap from the building, landing almost silently behind the three men, but casting a shadow that gets their attention. The target spins around, a gun already in his hand. Clearly drunk, he sways as he tries to make out our faces in the dim lighting.

“Who the fuck are you?” he growls, stumbling toward us.

Before he reaches me, I can smell cheap beer and body odor wafting off him. He’s a very tall and muscular man, with a shock of white-blond hair and tattoos covering almost all his visible skin, even parts of his face. He’s dressed in a white tank and baggy jeans.

Midnight steps forward just slightly. “We need to talk to you, Mike Janoslawsky.”

He snarls in response. “I don’t gotta talk to no one.” He waves the gun at us. “I don’t got no business with you.”

“But we have business with you,” Midnight calmly replies.

The two guys standing next to Mike move in. One of them pulls a gun and fires it right at me, but I grab the bullet in midair, growling as I toss it to the ground.

“What the fuck,” the guy says, starting to move backward away from me.

I twist my neck, no longer holding back my beast, and let the monster within me rise to the surface. In a flash, I’ve got both men by the necks and slammed against the wall. Midnight swoops in and grabs Mike.

As I tear open the first man's throat, the other screams, kicking and clawing me to break free, but it's useless. He hits me in the head with his gun while I'm feeding on his friend, but all that does is piss me off, so I slam him against the wall so hard that he gasps for air and clutches his throat.

I release the first man and pull the other one closer, sinking my teeth into his throat and gorging myself on his blood while he whimpers and claws at my hand. Slowly, the life drains from his body, and I drop him on top of his lifeless friend.

When I turn to look at Midnight, he's straddling his victim, his face buried in the crook of Mike's neck. I lean against the brick wall, waiting for him to finish, but immediately my thoughts shift back to Haven. What would he think of me if he knew what I truly was? Would he fear me? Run away?

We'll be married and he'll be living at my place. Is my secret something I can keep safe from him when we'll be so close together? Do I even want to?

Midnight lifts the victim's decapitated body from the ground and carries it toward the dumpster. After we take our pictures for evidence, we toss all three bodies in the dumpster and Midnight torches them with the very cool fire potion Viv cooked up. By morning there won't even be any bones or teeth left to identify the bodies. Viv was careful to tell us the fire had to be contained in metal, or it would just keep burning.

Midnight hands me a wet wipe and I laugh before cleaning my face off.

"I never remember to carry these with me," I lament.

"I prefer it over the glamour potion. Just because no one can see the blood doesn't mean I can't feel it."

"Ha, good point. I don't mind it really. It makes me feel alive."

"Want to grab a drink? The target tasted terrible. How were yours?"

"Fine, I guess. I didn't feed much."

He lifts an eyebrow. "Didn't feed? Why not?"

“Not hungry.”

He studies my face for a second before chuckling. “Dude. It’s Haven. It has to be.”

“Pssh. It’s not. I’m just not hungry.”

“When’s the last time you fed?”

“I had some this morning.”

“You know it’s not the same as it is from a fresh donor.”

I rack my brain trying to remember, then it comes to me. “Um, well, Haven let me bite him last night. Not feed though. Just a little taste.”

“Uh-huh, and now you’re not hungry. Coincidence? Unlikely.”

“Whatever, dude.”

Midnight grabs my shoulder as we walk back to our cars. “Whatever,” he mocks. “Just don’t say I didn’t tell you so when you figure it out.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Once we say goodnight, I decide that since I have nothing but time on my hands until Haven gets off work, I’ll go hover around the restaurant and make sure he stays safe. This is not the nicest neighborhood in New Onyx. May the gods help the person foolish enough to harm Haven.

The thought sends a shiver down my spine. Okay, so I’m feeling a little protective of him. It’s just because I like him, and I hate seeing good people suffer. That’s all. It doesn’t mean anything.

At least that’s what I’m telling myself for now.

TWELVE

Haven

I hate it when the restaurant is slow. Time crawls, and now that I know my money problems are close to being solved, it's that much harder to focus on half-drunk customers and wiping down already clean tables.

I just want to see Raphael again.

When it's finally closing time, I have the restaurant nearly clean except for the floors, which I make quick work of. Once that's done, I head back to the office where the owner is.

"Hey, Omar."

He looks up from counting money and gives me a nod with a smile. "All done?"

"Yep. Floors are drying." I blow out a breath. "So, um, you know about my inheritance."

"Yes." He sets the stack of cash down and gives me his full attention.

"Well, I'm getting married. Next week, actually."

His eyes go wide. "Yes? That's good news."

"Really good news, except it means I have to give notice here."

Omar waves his hand in the air. "It's okay. I knew it wouldn't be for long. Unfortunately, business is down, so I can manage with Erika and Sean."

Leaning on the doorframe, I nod. “It makes no sense. The food is good here.”

“Thank you. I think maybe I need to refresh the space a little. Update it.”

“Nah, that can’t be it. No offense, but this isn’t exactly the swankiest part of town. Something changed.”

“If you figure out what it is, let me know. I’m a little worried.”

“Sorry, Omar. You deserve success. You’re a good man.”

He smiles with a half shrug. “There are lots of good men in the world living in hard times. It happens. Go home, Haven. Enjoy your night.”

“You too.”

I remove my apron, balling it up in my hands. Omar struggling bothers me a lot. He’s a good man. He helps the neighborhood a lot and his food is good. Maybe once I get my inheritance, I can help. Would he allow me to make an investment?

Pushing open the back door, I’m hit with the slightly rotten smell from the dumpsters and the stench of old urine. I walk down the dark alleyway to the front, finding Raphael sitting on the hood of his car, already waiting for me.

“Hey.”

He smiles brightly. “All done?”

“Yep.” I wait as Raphael slides off the car and opens the passenger door for me before popping in on the other side.

I’m glad he brought his simple car. I’d hate to stink up the sports car.

“Ugh, I cannot wait to shower.” I twist my neck back and forth. “What a night.”

“Busy?” Raphael asks.

“Not at all.” I lean my head back. “It’s bugging me.”

“What is?” he asks, pulling onto the street.

“Omar, the owner, he’s a good guy and the pizza is really good, but business is dropping. Like, a lot. I can’t figure out why though. It’s been a neighborhood hangout for years. What changed?”

“Hmm. That is interesting.”

“Yeah. I don’t want him to fail, you know? He gave me a job when I really needed one. I just think he’s too proud to accept money.”

“Maybe we can figure something out. I spend a lot of time in this area. I’ll pay attention.”

“Thanks.” I turn my head to study his profile as he drives. “God, you’re hot.”

Raphael chuckles. “So are you.”

“I’ll feel hotter when I get back into normal clothes. Are you hungry?”

He turns his head and gazes at me, and the look on his face more than answers my question.

“I meant for food, you horndog.”

“*I’m* the horndog?” He laughs, squeezing my thigh.

“Maybe we’re equal.”

“I think we are. I’m not hungry, but if you are, we can go somewhere.”

“I’m starving. Sometimes I’ll grab leftover pizza slices from the restaurant, but we didn’t have any tonight.”

“What would you like?”

“Any pasta places open this late? I could use a pile of spaghetti.”

“I know a place.”

Raphael drives off toward his neighborhood, and I lean back in the seat.

“Where do your parents live?” he asks.

“West Side,” I answer. “In a gaudy quasi-mansion.” I drag my fingers through my unruly hair. “Except for the abject poverty, part of me is happy I don’t live there anymore. I always felt watched. It was like living in a fishbowl.”

“So what will you buy after you receive your inheritance?”

“Hmm. Excellent question. I’d like a place like yours. Modern and sleek, but also posh. If I followed the normal family trend, I would buy a house way too big for me just as a status symbol.”

“You don’t strike me as one to follow the herd.”

“Ooh, what a compliment,” I say. Raphael chuckles. “You’re right though. I definitely dance to my own beat. Kind of how I ended up here, I think.”

“I’m sure it’ll all work out.”

“Obviously. I found you.”

He glances at me with such a sexy expression on his face that my stomach flutters. I cannot believe I get to sleep next to this man.

“Have you ever been in love?” I ask after a moment.

“No,” he answers quickly. “I’ve been infatuated before, but love? It remains out of my reach.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’ve been dodging it?”

Raphael chuckles again. “Fair. In recent years, I’ve done my best to avoid it.”

“Why?”

“Why?” he repeats, keeping his gaze straight ahead. “I’d say because I didn’t want anything less than forever, and no one I met inspired that feeling in me. There was always something too big between us to overcome. I want it to be epic or not at all.”

“Ooh, now this is interesting. You’re happy alone?”

“I’m not alone. I’m surrounded by people who care about me. They would give their lives for me. As far as carnal

desires go, those are easy enough to quench.”

“I like the way you talk. Sometimes you sound so old school. Like, who says carnal desires?”

“I do.”

“Yeah, it’s cool. You’re unique, Raphael.”

“You have no idea.”

“Guess I’ll find out.”

He only smiles in response. As we leave behind the shitty area and head into the much nicer one, the ball of tension in the pit of my stomach unravels. I didn’t expect to meet someone better off than me, but what a treat. Just being able to sleep without the constant sound of gunshots, screams, and distant sirens is amazing, even though it’s only been one night so far.

Raphael stops at the light that leads onto the freeway. As we wait for it to change, there’s a scuffle of some kind on the side of the road. Raphael notices too, lowering his window to see more clearly.

It appears to be a man and a woman in some kind of argument. The man has the woman’s arm in his hand, shaking her while she yells at him. But then he hauls off and punches her dead in the face.

“Oh shit,” I murmur.

Raphael slams the car into park and is on his way over there before I’ve even processed the scene. Without hesitation, he puts himself between the two people, shoving his finger into the man’s chest. The man pulls a knife from his back pocket, and I gasp as my stomach clenches, but it turns out I don’t have anything to worry about.

Raphael grabs the man’s hand and squeezes it until the knife clanks to the ground. The man sinks to his knees, clearly in pain. Based on the man’s wails, I’m pretty sure Raphael just broke his hand.

I watch, completely transfixed, as Raphael helps the woman to her feet and tends to the bruise on her cheek. He

points in the direction of the car, but she shakes her head before taking off in the opposite direction. Then he kneels, speaking to the man again. I can't hear him from here, but his expression is intense and the man nods rapidly.

A shiver of excitement mixed with apprehension moves down my spine. Raphael is a total badass. He marches back to the car, his long jacket flapping behind him, and slides into the driver's seat, then takes off just before the yellow light turns red.

"Sorry about that," Raphael says. "I had to deal with it. I don't tolerate abuse."

"Don't apologize. That was awesome. Did you break his hand?"

"Yes."

He still looks pissed, but me? I'm fucking turned on. I reach across the seat and rub his thigh.

"You're a total badass and you saved her."

"For tonight," he says, his tone and expression softening as he glances at me. "She'll likely go back to him, but hopefully he'll remember my lesson."

I slide my hand down his chest to his crotch. "Mmm, new turn-on unlocked."

"I'm sorry?"

"Sexy, dangerous man with a savior complex. I like it."

Raphael scoffs a laugh. "I don't have a savior complex." He fixes his gaze on me. "But I am dangerous."

"Should I be scared of you?" I drag my nose along his cheek. "Are you the big bad wolf coming to blow my house down?"

A tiny crease appears in his brow, but he shakes his head. "I have no cause to harm you."

"So you have to be provoked?"

"Yeah."

“I knew there was a beast underneath your pretty surface. The way you let go in bed was a big hint. Tonight was another clue. How violent can you get, Raphael?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Plausible deniability. Smart since we’re getting married. I can never testify against you.”

He snorts, shaking his head. “You are unique yourself, Haven.”

“But you like me?”

He glances at me again, a sexy smirk on his lips. “I like you a lot.”

THIRTEEN

Raphael

Is it wrong of me to hunt down Haven's father and shake some sense into him? Probably. I could compel him to be kind and accepting, but that's only a temporary solution. I hate that money and power have destroyed this family.

These are the thoughts running through my mind while I watch Haven scarf down a huge bowl of pasta. I sip my glass of wine, listening as he talks about all his plans between bites.

"The first order of business will be the board of directors, of course," Haven says, wiping his mouth with a napkin. "I'll need to find replacements because my family is seventy-five percent of it."

"Will that be difficult for you?"

He shrugs, taking a long drink of wine. "No clue. Guess I'll find out." He grins. "This food is amazing. How do you not eat it?"

"It's enough for me to see you enjoy it."

"Hmm. Well I hope your sex drive is stronger than your appetite." He winks, drawing laughter from me. "You're gorgeous all the time, but when you laugh? Damn, Rapha. Can I call you Rapha?"

"Whatever you like."

"You're so interesting too. Like, right now, super chill, but thirty minutes ago you went apeshit on a dude. Badass."

I smile and continue to sip my wine. He has no idea just how easily triggered I can be. Hopefully, he won't ever witness it. As long as I keep it contained to my work, we should be fine.

"What was your childhood like?" Haven asks, finally leaning back in his seat to take a pasta shoveling break.

"Uh... childhood." By the gods, can I even remember? "It was a long time ago. I only have vague memories."

He tilts his head. "Come on, Rapha. You're not that old. Is it sensitive? I'm prying, aren't I?"

"No, you're not." I focus for a moment, conjuring my mother's face. "My mother died when I was young, and my father, well, he couldn't handle it. He tried to sell me, but I ran away before that could happen."

Haven stares at me wide-eyed. "Sell you?"

Damn. That isn't a modern thing. "Very archaic, I know. It wasn't in America."

"Oh, gotcha. Yeah, I know all about archaic shit. Some of the stuff in my family is based on traditions from hundreds of years ago."

I nod, relieved that he understands on some level without me explaining more than I can.

"Sounds shitty," Haven continues. "So you really do understand a family betrayal."

"I do. But then Yves came into my life. He taught me the true meaning of family. It isn't always from birth. Sometimes we create our own families. I know that Yves and all my brothers would lay down their lives for me if necessary. Well, three of them would choose their mates over me now, but that's expected."

"Huh?"

"What?"

"Mates? That's a weird way to say boyfriend."

“Right. Uh...” Thinking quickly, I come up with an explanation. “We use that word to mean more than a boyfriend. A life partner, if you will.”

“Oh.” Haven smiles. “Cool.”

He’s so easily accepting of my lame explanations that I take a moment to thank the gods of old.

“I’m full,” Haven announces. “I’m ready for dessert.”

“I thought you were full.”

With a grin on his face, he says, “You’re dessert.”

FOURTEEN

Haven

Not gonna lie. Rapha is quirky as hell, but for some reason I really dig it. It's like some old soul got trapped in a super-hot young dude, and I'm here for it. He's interesting and deep. Getting to know him is fun.

We take the elevator back to his apartment, and my mouth is practically watering for another taste of this man. When the doors slide open, it's eerily quiet, which makes sense given the time. There are only two men on the couch, wrapped around each other, watching a movie.

The older man with long blond hair sits up and focuses on us, then nods at Raphael and settles back in with his man.

“Who's that?”

“Eros and Justice. Justice was part of a cult before we met him. They spend a lot of time helping him catch up on world events and pop culture he missed out on.”

“Wow.” I glance over my shoulder at them as we pass. “That must be so strange for him.”

“Yes, but he's a quick and eager learner. And resilient. Not many people could adapt so easily to everything thrown in that man's path.”

“You like him?”

“Yes. He's good for Eros and he fits our group well. When you're with one of us, you're with all of us.”

“That’s how my family is too. I mean, when you’re not the black sheep like I am.”

“I’m sorry, Haven.”

“It’s cool.”

I hover behind Rapha as he opens his door and steps to the side to let me pass.

“No reason to lock the doors, I guess.”

“No,” Rapha says. “It’s safe here.”

“Can anyone get up to this floor?”

“The entry downstairs is controlled beyond the elevators, and quite frankly, even if someone were able to outsmart the security and get up here, well, may the gods have mercy on their soul.”

I grin at him as I kick off my shoes in the entry. “What gods?”

Rapha smiles. “Any of them.”

“Well, whatever god made you knew what he or she was doing.” I step forward and rub against him, sliding my hand down his chest. “I want you to make me pray, but first, I need a shower.”

“Right this way.”

I follow Rapha through his apartment to the bedroom, tugging my shirt over my head as we walk. In the bathroom, he starts the shower for me. He’s set out my toiletries on the counter already. Dang, I cannot wait until I can live in a place like this full time. No more hovels for me.

“Could I interest you in joining me?” I waggle my eyebrows at a fully dressed Raphael. “You could wash my back and I could choke on your dick.”

He guffaws, shaking his head. “How could I say no to that?”

“You can’t.”

I shake my ass at him before stepping into the doorless, all-marble shower. Jets of water shoot out from numerous spouts and a rainfall showerhead above me feels like summer rain. It's luxury with a capital L.

A minute later, Rapha joins me, pressing against me as if this shower isn't as big as some bedrooms in this city. His hands move up my chest as he nuzzles my neck. I lean my head back against his shoulder, smiling as my body tingles from his touch.

"Your skin is soft as silk," he whispers, nipping my earlobe. "I can't keep my hands off you."

"Don't. I like the way you touch me."

He slides his hands down to my thighs, avoiding my quickly swelling cock as he strokes everything he can reach.

"You touch me like I mean something. Like I'm precious."

"You are."

I start to object but hold back the urge. I don't want to kill this moment. A guy I'm fucking wants to be nice to me. Who the fuck am I to stop him?

Rapha's cock pushes against my ass, making me clench my hole with need. It's still sore, and logically, I should probably take a break, but fuck logic. I want to be torn in two.

"Mmm," Rapha murmurs, grazing my neck with sharp teeth. "Your natural scent is amazing."

"Yeah?" I press his hands to my waist, swaying our bodies together. "What do I smell like?"

"Like the forest. Like rich soil, thick moss, and autumn trees. Like you sprang directly from the earth." He kisses the back of my neck. "And like the richest wine. Silky, with notes of cherry and chocolate and even a hint of tobacco. I want to bury myself in your body and imprint your scent on my skin so I'm never without it."

For once, I'm left speechless. "Rapha..."

"You deserve only the finest in life, Haven."

“You don’t even know me. Maybe I’m an asshole.”

He chuckles, twisting me around to face him. “Maybe I am too.”

“Nah. Definitely not.” Draping my arms around his neck, I search his eyes. “I think you’re a big softie underneath the badass exterior. You saved a woman tonight. What other good deeds have you done?”

“Not many.”

“Add rescuing me to the list.” I grin. “And finally fucking me the way I’ve craved for so long.”

The heated look on his face, the way his tongue darts out to wet his lips and the water beads on his handsome face cause my stomach to flutter.

I slide to my knees. “Enough talking.”

I gaze up at the handsome man looking down at me. Steamy water flows around us, dripping from his wavy hair. He looks like some kind of Adonis who should be the star of his own calendar.

His heavy cock bounces between us, and my mouth literally waters. I open up, sticking my tongue out in offering, and Rapha understands my request. He moves closer, rubbing the tip of his dick on my tongue, leaving a trail of sticky precum. I don’t know what this man’s diet consists of, but whatever it is, it makes him taste delicious.

Placing my hands on his thighs, I close my mouth around his thick shaft, doing my best to get it as far down my throat as possible. The way his eyelids flutter draws a smile to my lips as I slide my hands around to his ass, shoving his cock deeper down my throat.

“Fuck, Haven,” he whispers, his fingers tangling in my hair. He tugs and I nod to encourage him.

“More,” I mumble.

“You like to feel pain?” Rapha asks. “Beauty like yours should be pampered. Revered.”

“Bruises,” I say, popping off his cock. “Marks. That’s beauty to me.”

Rapha chuckles. “You fascinate me.” His face turns dark as his eyes heat to the point I think we might explode. “I will mark you, beautiful Haven. I will leave bites in my wake.”

“Yes,” I whimper. “Please, Rapha.”

“Stand up.”

I scramble to my feet, pressing against him. What is it about this man that makes me want to lay myself out before him like prey? It’s like all my self-preservation disappears. He can ruin me if he wants to. I shouldn’t feel safe with him, but somehow I do.

He takes the bottle of bodywash from the shelf and pours some into his hands, rubbing them together to work up a lather before dragging them down my back. When he reaches my hole, his slick fingers massaging the tender flesh, and I flinch.

“You’re too sore for sex.”

“No. I like how it feels. I haven’t felt so alive in a long time.”

“I don’t want to hurt you. Not really.”

“I’m not hurting.”

He smiles, but I notice the crease in his brow. “I have an idea. I think you’ll love it.”

“As long as we both nut, I’m sure I will.”

He shakes his head, pushing me under the stream of water to get the soap off and then shutting the shower off. After he helps me step out and we both dry off with a towel, I stand before him with anticipation. I want to be fucked, sore ass be damned.

Rapha scoops me off my feet and carries me to the bedroom, where he tosses me on the bed. I literally bounce on the soft mattress and luxurious bedding. I wonder if this is how it feels to be royalty. Maybe an Egyptian prince back in the day.

Rapha climbs onto the bed, straddling me. “I want you to trust me. This is all about pleasure.”

“I do trust you. Weird, right?”

“A little, but I trust you too.”

“Sweet. Are you gonna tie me up?”

“No. Close your eyes and focus on my voice.”

“Ooh, okay.”

All I can feel right now is his closeness and where our bodies connect. I want to feel a lot more though, so I hope whatever he’s planning involves me being impaled with that dick of his.

His hands move to my chest, and then my body is flooded with warmth, the way it feels to stand under the sun in the summer. I immediately relax, all the tension in my shoulders releasing as I sink into the bedding.

The next sensation is warm, sticky liquid dripping down my body, like lube, but a little silkier and thicker. More like syrup, actually. I’m so curious, but I keep my eyes closed in spite of it.

Rapha scoots back slightly so that our cocks are aligned, the sticky liquid between us providing perfect friction as he slowly slides back and forth. Then he’s lying completely on top of me.

“Don’t move. Just experience,” he whispers.

I nod, desperate to open my eyes and see his stunning face, but I’m an obedient boy when I want something badly enough, and right now, I don’t want to do anything that might make him stop this exceptional torture.

“My gods, you are stunning, Haven.”

I exhale deeply, soaking up his praise. It’s been so long since I’ve even felt seen, much less admired. Rapha makes me feel like the most beautiful man on the planet.

He rubs his nose against the column of my neck, the friction between us increasing. Okay, this is getting good.

Maybe he's relaxing me so I can take his cock more easily. I lie beneath him, boneless, but I want to touch him.

"Can I touch you, Rapha?"

He clicks his teeth. "Just feel."

I nod, giving in to whatever this is. Waves of heat roll through me, like I'm lying in a warm wave pool, and my entire body tingles pleasantly. I can feel every part of me where Rapha's body touches mine, as if he's electricity and I'm the outlet. It's intense, but in the best way.

Slowly, the world around us drifts away, and I'm floating in clouds with sunlight warming my body. I can't hear anything but Rapha's breath and his sweet words of praise and desire. Incredibly, sweet tension crawls through me, building between my legs. How the fuck is he doing this?

"Gods, I want to taste you," Rapha says. "I want all of you, Haven. Do you know how beautiful you are when you come?"

I shake my head, unable to find words to describe what's happening inside of me. It's new, foreign, but welcome. The more I feel it, the more I want it.

"Can I bite you?" Rapha asks. "Please?"

I nod, trying to open my eyes, but it's like they're glued shut. I try to lift my arms to hold him close, but yeah, it's not happening. I'm part of the bed now, and weirdly, I'm okay with that. Maybe he made me a sex slave and I can never leave this bed. Why does that sound amazing?

The next sensation is a sharp sting of pain that's over quickly, like when I got my nose pierced. It's replaced with a sense of peace and desire overload. Completely untouched, my cock jerks, spilling cum and taking my breath away.

Out of the blue, tears flood behind my eyelids, seeping out and down the sides of my face. The orgasm is intense and deep, like it came from an undiscovered part of me, and I lie boneless as wave after wave racks my body.

My nipples tingle and my hole clenches as I experience what can only be described as a full-body orgasm. Rapha

keeps his face buried in the crook of my neck, holding me to him as I ride it out completely. After what feels like hours, it all slowly subsides, incredibly leaving me jonesing for more.

“Holy fuck,” I finally mutter once my mouth works again and peeling my eyes open.

“Yes,” Rapha whispers. “Fuck.”

“What... Rapha? What was that?”

He lifts his head, gazing down at me with eyes so bright they seem to glow. I gasp in surprise. He looks so beautiful. Perfect.

“What’s happening right now?”

He blinks and his features return to normal in a flash. Did I imagine it? Am I so sex drunk I’m seeing things that aren’t real?

“You are so perfect, Haven.”

Feeling off balance, I nod, reaching up to brush his hair away from his face. I study his eyes, only seeing the pretty light brown color gazing back at me.

“That was incredible. I’ve never experienced anything like that.”

“It’s tantra. A form of energy exchange.”

“Whoa. I just...” My words trail off as my eyelids grow heavy. “So sleepy. You drained me.”

“Not yet.”

“Wha...?”

“Sleep now, my beauty. I’ll be here when you wake.”

Nodding, I try to focus on his face, but he’s blurry. “I hope this lasts,” I whisper. “I hope we can do this forever.”

He brushes his fingers across my cheek, smiling. It’s the last thing I see as sleep drags me under.

FIFTEEN

Raphael

For far too long, I watch Haven sleep, unable to tear my eyes from his face. The taste of his blood still coats my tongue. The scent of our sex continues to seduce me. Nothing about what happened between us was normal. The whole incident has my mind swirling with thoughts and desires long buried.

I decide to test my theory, jumping to my feet and walking out to the common area. I find Eros and Justice still sitting on the sofa. Eros glances up at me, his brow creasing.

“Mighty Hades, what happened to you?”

“One sec,” I mumble, making my way to the bar. I pour myself a shot glass of my favorite blend and throw it back. It’s bitter as it goes down, turning my stomach immediately. “Fuck.”

“Raph?” Eros asks.

I turn around, rubbing my forehead. “Something’s wrong with me.”

“What do you mean?” Justice asks. “You can’t be sick, right?”

“No, not sick.” I plop down on my favorite window seat. Both men give me a minute to speak. “It’s Haven. My reaction to him is not normal. He...” I close my eyes for a moment as memories of earlier taunt my beast back to the surface. “He allows me to taste him.”

“He knows you’re a vampire?” Justice asks.

“No, but he doesn’t even question it. He just accepts it. He accepts everything I tell him, no matter how odd.”

“Why is this a problem then?” Eros asks.

“Because I can’t control it. I can’t merely have sex with him without needing to taste his essence. I can’t stop thinking about him. His scent drives me mad. Is he a sorcerer?”

Eros chuckles, shaking his head. “Oh, Raph.”

“What?”

“He’s your fated mate. Obviously.”

I scoff. “Oh really? I just happened to bump into my mate in a nightclub?”

“Eros found me in the woods,” Justice says.

“Tru was rescued from a gang,” Eros says.

“And Bowie witnessed Syn murdering someone,” Justice continues. “Meeting in a club is pretty normal, all things considered.”

“Haven is not my mate.”

“How can you be so sure?” Eros asks.

“I don’t know. It’s just... how could it be?”

Eros shrugs. “How could it not? If he’s not your mate, then Thorn is a virgin.”

Justice cackles but then stifles his laughter. “Sorry.”

“Why don’t you want to believe it?” Eros asks. “You have proof they exist now. Why couldn’t it be your turn?”

“What if...” The words trail off as my true fear clenches my chest. “Fuck.”

“What?” Eros asks.

“Do you want me to leave?” Justice asks. “So you can talk openly.”

“No,” I answer. “I’m not sure I want to say the words out loud to anyone.”

“Raph, please,” Eros says. “You can tell us. Maybe we can help.”

I nod, sitting in silence for a few more seconds to summon the courage to speak it. “I think I’m afraid to believe it. If I open myself up to it, then I can be hurt.”

“Aww,” Justice says.

“Haven doesn’t want a true commitment. He wants to get his inheritance and rebuild his life.”

“Yeah, that’s what we all want until we figure out what’s right in front of us,” Justice says. “All I wanted was to get to the safehouse and learn how to be a normal guy. I got this instead and I definitely wouldn’t trade it. Give Haven a little credit.”

“Do I just tell him? How can I know for sure?”

Eros stands and walks over to me, leaning on the back of the armchair across from me. “Listen to your heart. Push your fear back and let your instincts tell you the truth. If it’s real, you’ll know it. As far as telling him, you just have to decide when the time is right. Trust yourself. You’ll know.”

I nod, but I’m unconvinced.

“I have a question,” Justice says. “If he told you he changed his mind right now and he just wanted to go on with his life, what would your reaction be? Would you let him go? No big deal? After all, you could find someone else.”

His question, while innocent on the surface, triggers the feral part of me. My jaw tightens and my fangs threaten to drop at the very idea of letting him walk out of here.

“And if he found someone else?” Justice continues. “Someone he’d rather marry? Would that be okay as long as he was happy?”

“He’s mine,” I growl, the answer seemingly coming from some deep, undiscovered part of me.

Justice grins knowingly. “Thought so.”

Eros chuckles. “Mystery solved.”

Rubbing my knuckles against my sternum, I'm literally stunned. Given that my reaction to most men, even the ones who have been good in bed, is indifference, this discovery has me shaken.

"Go back to your home," Eros says, softly. "Be with Haven. You'll figure it out."

I get to my feet in a daze. "Thank you both."

"And don't worry," Eros continues. "We won't tell the others. It's your decision to share when you're ready."

I nod. As I walk back to my apartment, a glimmer of hope I haven't allowed myself to feel in ages blooms in my chest. Haven could very well be the man I've waited a lifetime for.

Could it really be my turn for fate's grace?

SIXTEEN

Haven

When I finally peel my eyes open in the morning, I stretch and snuggle in the bedding. As soon as I get the money, I'm buying whatever brand of mattress this is, because it's legit the best sleep I've ever had.

I roll to my side and just like he promised, Rapha is lying beside me. He's awake and gazing at me with a serene smile on his lips. "Good morning, my beauty."

Reaching out, I tickle the soft skin of his chin. I wonder how he avoids stubble. "Morning. Did you sleep well?"

"Well enough. You?"

"Like the dead." My stomach rumbles loud enough that Rapha raises an eyebrow. "Guess I'm hungry."

"Let's get you fed. What would you like? I can order in while you freshen up."

"French toast? Bonus if it's stuffed with berries."

"You got it."

I flip the blankets back and slide out of bed, but as I twist around, Rapha is still there, watching me. "What?"

"Just admiring you."

Putting my hands on my hips, I tilt my head. "You know, you weren't supposed to be cool and romantic and interesting. Let's not even talk about the sex god part. I'm gonna try real hard not to get attached to you."

“Why? Would that be so terrible?”

“Given my track record, yeah.”

Rapha nods, but his serene smile slips. “I can relate.”

Sauntering over to him, I study his face. “Don’t tell me that underneath it all, you’re a hopeless romantic too.”

“No. I’m a jaded one.”

“Same.” Draping my arms around his neck, I sigh as he slides his hands down my sides and rests them on my hips. “I guess it wouldn’t be bad, but it would scare me a little. You know, if I’m being honest. I don’t want to get hurt.”

“No one does, Haven.”

“Right, but some people only focus on the good parts. I guess my family trampled on my heart so much I worry that one wrong step from a lover would break me.”

Rapha gazes up at me with an expression that makes my heart flutter. “I would never want to hurt you.”

“I feel a ‘but’ coming.”

“No.” He smacks my bare ass. “Go, before I drag you back to bed.”

“Ooh no, not that.”

Rapha laughs, and damn. The way his eyes crinkle at the sides, his full lips parting to show off his brilliant smile, the warm sound tumbling from his lips... The man is stunning.

I lean in and steal a quick kiss before turning around and strutting to the bathroom, swishing my hips in an exaggerated way that draws more sweet laughter from the normally serious man. A guy could get addicted to making him happy if that’s the result.

By the time I resurface, I hear female voices coming from the living room. I dig out a pair of jogging pants and a t-shirt, then go out to see what’s going on. I find Rapha sitting at a dining room table that’s far too big for two people. Two women sit across from him, one with fiery-red hair and the other with raven-black. Both women stop speaking abruptly

when they see me, the redhead smiling big. Pretty sure they were the two working on the puzzle before.

Rapha turns his head and smiles too. “Come, Haven.”

I walk over, sitting in the chair beside Rapha. He has a plate of raspberry-stuffed French toast, coffee, and orange juice set out for me. Yum! But I don’t want to be rude.

“Hello,” I say to the women.

“Hi,” the redhead says. “I’m Vivienne. I work with the guys.”

“I’m Viper,” the other woman says. “I do too.”

“Nice to meet you both. Haven.”

“Adorable,” Vivienne says. “Your name and you yourself.”

“Thanks.”

“Eat,” Rapha says, rubbing my back.

I dig into my breakfast, so thankful for this gorgeous meal. Raphael really is my savior.

“My sisters here got wind that we’re planning on a quickie wedding,” Rapha explains.

I nod, still scarfing carbs.

“Unacceptable,” Vivienne says with a sweet smile on her lips. “We need to have a little reception, at least.”

After wiping my mouth with a napkin, I take a gulp of coffee. “Whatever Rapha wants.”

“No,” he says. “It’s what *we* want.” He holds my gaze and for just a second, I forget that this is supposed to be fake.

Time to put my defenses back up before I go and do something stupid like fall in love. Neither of us are up for that. “Seriously. I mean, if we want to make it seem legit in case my family shows up then we can do something.”

Both women frown as they exchange glances.

“What? You didn’t know it’s not real?”

“We knew,” Viper says. “We just think it’s kind of sad. It’s the first marriage for both of you, regardless of the circumstances. It should still be special. Someday you can look back on it and have good feelings about it.”

Her comments put more than one chink in my armor. “Yeah. Okay. That sounds nice. I mean, if you want that too, Rapha.”

“It does sound nice,” Rapha says.

“We’ll take care of everything,” Vivienne says, her face lighting up again. “We just need to know when.”

I shrug, setting down my coffee mug. “I figured we’d just swing into the courthouse sometime this week and get it done.”

Viper opens up a black notebook, dragging her pen down the page. “How about Wednesday? That gives us a few days to pull some stuff together.”

“Where do you plan to host this event?” Rapha asks, grinning as he draws circles on my back with his fingertips.

“Here,” Vivienne says.

“Or Lair. If we can get the vam—” Viper stops abruptly, smiling weirdly. “If the space is available.”

Um, okay. “What is Lair?” I ask.

“A nightclub,” Rapha answers. “We don’t own it, per se, but we have some influence there. Wednesdays do tend to be a slow night.”

“Right,” Viper says. “I’ll ask Hale and Tiago.”

“Perfect,” Rapha says. “If that’s all...”

Vivienne snorts a laugh, tossing her hair off her shoulder. “So polite. Come on, Viper. We have a party to plan.”

The two women leave, chatting happily. Once they’re gone, I finish off the French toast and guzzle the orange juice.

“So good. Where did you get it?”

“A restaurant not far from here.”

“That was quick.”

“I went to pick it up.”

“Thank you.” I pat my belly. “I’m good until dinner.”

Rapha smiles as his eyes roam my face. “I like making you happy.”

I nod, suddenly shy. “New subject. Does every stunningly gorgeous person in New Onyx belong to your family?”

Rapha chuckles. “I’m not sure.”

“I mean, you’re like a work of art. Those two women were gorgeous. Your brothers are fire. Is it something in the water in this building? ’Cause if so, pour me a glass.”

“You don’t need any help in that department.”

“Hmm, we do look pretty good together, don’t we? We match.”

“Match?”

“Yeah. Haven’t you ever seen couples who don’t match? One is lightyears hotter than the other one? Not that love should be based on looks, but I always wonder how they even met. Birds of a feather, and all.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Similar people hang out together, so how does someone wicked hot meet someone average or less?”

“I’ve never given it any thought.”

“Hmm. Maybe I’m shallow.”

“I don’t think so. You’re just an observer. I am too, in many ways, but not so much on an external level.”

“That’s not how I got you to rail me that first night?”

He snorts a laugh. “Your face captured my attention, yes, but your energy really drew me in. Your confidence is a turn-on.”

I lean in and brush our noses together. “I’m glad I caught your eye.”

“So am I.”

After breakfast, the two of us sit on the couch. I lean into Rapha, just enjoying the closeness. I can't remember the last time I cuddled with someone. Damn, it's nice.

“Do you think we should dress up?” I ask with my hand under Rapha's shirt. Dragging my fingers through the hair on his chest, I peer up. “Is that too much?”

“We should.” He puts his hand on my chest, over my heart. “Is that excitement or worry making your heart beat so loudly?”

“You can hear my heartbeat?”

He nods. “I have very sensitive hearing. Scent. Taste. Sight.”

“That's kind of cool.” I blow out a breath. “It's excitement. I promise. Maybe a little worry about my family showing up, but they'd literally have to stalk the courthouses to figure out where we are.”

“You know, we could just invite them.”

I pull my head back. “Eww. No way. Why would I do that?”

“It shows you're not hiding anything. As unpleasant as it will likely be, at least it'll be done. They'll have their proof, and then we can go celebrate with our friends. Besides, you won't be facing them alone.”

I wonder if he can hear how my heart just fluttered in my chest, like I chugged an energy drink—jittery, but not unpleasant. “I don't want to, but I think you're right.”

He drags his fingers through my hair. “Sometimes in life we have to do hard, unpleasant things, but once it's done, we find it was worth the discomfort.”

“Yeah, yeah. Maturity sucks sometimes.”

Raphael chuckles. “It does.”

SEVENTEEN

Raphael

Watching Haven pace my living room while he talks to his mother requires a great deal of restraint on my part. His whole being is engulfed in stress, worry, and even shame. I hate that his family can draw these emotions out in him, but gods, can I relate. It may have been centuries ago, but the pain of losing my family never truly fades.

I can hear the woman's voice, a mixture of happiness and worry as she speaks to Haven. I detect love flowing from her even through the phone line, but there's hesitation too. Likely the father's influence.

Haven ends the call a few seconds later and turns to me, clutching the phone. "My mother will arrange it." He bites his bottom lip, letting his teeth drag sharply over it. "She's insisting we come to dinner tomorrow." He furrows his brow, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "It's tradition. It would be pretty sus if I don't do it."

"Sus?"

"Suspect. Suspicious. Weird. I hate to make you go through it though. Actually, I hate to make myself go through it."

"Come."

He nods, dropping his shoulders as he walks over to me.

"Remember what the end goal is, Haven. When it's all said and done, you'll have what you want. These are just necessary

obstacles to overcome. Besides..." I press a kiss to his cheek. "I'm not afraid of your father or anyone else."

"That's because you're a total badass. It's me that's going to crumble. He has that effect on me."

"Not while I'm around." I lift his chin. "No one will harm you, physically or otherwise, while I'm around. If you want a doting, protective future husband, that's what you're getting. If not, well, sorry to disappoint."

A smile finally breaks through his sadness. "Gah, you really are the coolest. I don't even care if you're a serial killer or a mob hitman. You're nice to me, so that's all that matters."

I search his eyes, wondering how he would react if he actually knew what I was. He seems to handle the unusual parts of me with ease, but learning that I'm an immortal creature may be a bridge too far.

Delicately touching my cheek, he asks, "Can I ask you something weird?"

"Yes."

"Two things really. You've bitten me during sex, but I don't have any marks from it. Also, it felt pretty deep at the time, and I was wondering if you actually drew blood, and if you did, is that, like, your kink? You like drinking human blood?"

I don't say a word, simply because I don't know how to respond. He's more aware than I thought. I figured the haze of desire made the details less noticeable, but I was wrong.

"I don't care, you know," Haven continues. "If it's your kink, I mean. I like the biting. It's hot. You could do more." He drags his hand down my chest. "I like the rough stuff."

I nod, clearing my throat as my gums throb. The invitation to bite stirs my beast to the surface. My cock swells quickly and my fingers tingle.

"Be careful with me, Haven. I can be far rougher than you'd think."

He only grins in reply, rubbing his ass on my growing erection as he sits on my lap. I moan and his eyes heat as he bites his bottom lip.

“I’m not scared of you, Rapha.” He drags his tongue along my cheek. “I’d love to see what happens if you let loose entirely.”

“No, I don’t think you would.”

“You wouldn’t hurt me. Not for real.”

“I could lose control.” I close my eyes to block him out, but it doesn’t work at all. His scent is all around me. “By the gods, Haven. You are dangerous.”

He draws my eyes open when he flicks his tongue across my lips. “Me? A big strong man like you can handle me. I *want* you to handle me.”

“Haven...” I moan.

“You know what I love? Every time I move I can feel where you were. Inside of me, all over my skin, everywhere I touch. Do you know how fucking hot that is?”

I nod, holding his gaze. Unable to speak without revealing my fangs, I grab the back of his neck and pull him forward for a kiss. Haven shifts so he’s straddling me completely and rubs himself on my cock.

“Dangerous,” I whisper against his lips.

“I’m just a sweet, docile little sex kitten.”

I snort a laugh before devouring his mouth in an explosive kiss. Haven moans, clawing at my shoulders as he gives as good as he gets. Our cocks brush together and even through clothes, it’s amazing.

Eros and Justice’s words flow back through my mind. I could very well be kissing my mate, and while so much of me wants to blurt it out and tell him everything, throw myself at his feet and ask for his love, I refrain. If he really is my mate, all will be revealed in time.

I flip him onto his back and lay him on the sofa, kissing my way down his body. As I tug his pants down, he watches me, looking more like a hungry tiger than a sweet kitten. I inhale deeply, his musky, sweet natural scent tickling my nose and delighting the beast within me.

No longer able to hold myself back, I devour his cock, swallowing him completely. Haven gasps, pumping his hips in response. With my hand on his belly, I hold him down easily, keeping him in place. He's a squirmy one.

Little droplets of his precum dot my tongue, teasing my vampire to show himself. I close my eyes so I can focus and keep my teeth from hurting him.

"Oh god, Rapha," Haven moans, tangling his fingers in my hair. "So good. So, so, good."

I tickle his balls with my nose pressed all the way to his pubic bone. He trims his hair but it's still there, soft against my lips.

He bucks wildly beneath me, fucking my throat with as much leeway as I'll give him. I love how enthusiastic he is. I adore giving him pleasure. It could become an addiction.

"Fuck," he moans. "Fuck, fuck. Oh god. Raph... Gonna come. Fuck."

I pop off him, drawing a loud groan of complaint from him, but I shut him up quickly enough by moving down and dragging my tongue over his delicious hole.

"Oh fuuuuck," he whimpers. "All the sinners and saints."

I snicker, indulging in his unique taste and tender skin. I might be able to live between his supple thighs. I slide a finger inside him before moving back to his cock to continue gorging on his flesh.

My gums throb with the need to bite, to flood my senses with his essence, but in the light of the day, I hold back. The next time I bite can only happen if he truly knows what he's dealing with. It's the right thing to do, no matter how difficult it is.

“Gonna come,” he cries. “Don’t you dare stop.”

I swallow around his cock and that seems to do the trick. His back arches off the couch, his hand still tangled in my hair and pulling hard enough to harm a mortal. Hot, thick cum floods my mouth and I sink into him, drinking down every drop. It’s not blood, but it’s almost as good.

He flinches moments later, so I let him slip from my mouth and lay my head on his belly. All I can hear is Haven—his breathing, his heart beating wildly, his blood rushing through his veins.

We lie silently for several minutes, just basking in the afterglow until Haven massages my scalp where he tugged. The gesture is beyond sweet.

“What about you?”

“Your pleasure is mine, Haven. I’m more than satisfied.”

“Are you even real, Rapha? Do men like you actually exist?”

“I exist.”

Haven chuckles. “I think the matrix glitched and dropped me into a new dimension where men are perfect and endlessly romantic, can fuck like gods, and still be cool to hang out with. In the real world, you only get one.”

“One what?”

“One good trait. If a guy can fuck, then he’s either an asshole or a total dud personality wise. If he’s romantic and swoony, then he can’t fuck. If he’s fun to hang out with, there’s no chemistry. You only get one.”

“I suppose I could say the same. You have me captivated, Haven. I can’t deny my attraction to you in more ways than physical.”

He smiles as his cheeks bloom pink. “Maybe...” He shakes his head, brushing hair away from his forehead. “I should shut up.”

“No. Don’t hold back with me. Ever.”

His smile fades, but he nods. “I was gonna say maybe we both got lucky. I said earlier that maybe it was fate, but I don’t really believe in fate. At least, I didn’t. Pretty hard when life is butt fucking you left and right without lube.”

“Yeah.”

“But then Gedo comes through with the will and I meet you and you’re just... so incredible. I kinda want to believe that meeting you was meant to be somehow. Maybe I don’t have to worry about falling in love or fucking things up. If it’s meant to be, it’ll work out. That’s what people say, right?”

“Right.”

“I have this secret,” Haven continues. “I’ve never told anyone. Not a single soul alive.”

I remain quiet, waiting for more.

“I’m not gonna tell you yet, but I *want* to want to. If that makes sense. I want to feel so safe with you that I can say it out loud and know that you won’t run away.”

I put my hand over his heart and nod.

“And it’s not that I don’t think that now, but the part of me where that secret lives doesn’t. If I ever tell you...” He pauses and his eyes well with tears.

“Oh, Haven.”

“I’m okay.” He wipes his eyes. “I just want you to know, if I tell you it means you have all of me. My therapist told me that’s how I would know it was the best love. I wouldn’t be afraid of it anymore.”

I lift his hand to my lips and kiss his palm. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to. I know it’s heavy. I guess as much as I talk about not wanting love, it’s deeper than that. Everybody wants love, I think. They just don’t want to be destroyed by it. I’m barely put together as it is.”

I move up his body and gaze down at his beauty. He blinks, releasing the tears that flooded his eyes. All the gods,

he is stunning, even in his sadness. I could make it go away right now. I could compel his memory to erase the hurt he holds, but it's wrong to use my power that way.

“Are you scared too, Rapha? Is that why you say you don't want love? Because you're scared of it like I am?” He smiles as he sniffs. “You can pretend it's true so I don't feel so lame right now.”

“Hey, your feelings are not lame. Not ever. That's the first thing you need to know.”

He nods, but I see in his eyes that he doesn't believe me.

“And yes, maybe it is fear that makes me keep my heart to myself. I haven't explored it too deeply for a very long time, but your presence in my life is slowly changing that.”

“Okay.” Haven smiles, wiping away the remnants of his tears. “Now we know. If I tell you my secret, then it means I'm surrendering to you.”

“Then it's only fair to reciprocate. I have a secret too, Haven.”

His face lights up. “Really? Okay, so is that our sign? If we share our secrets then it means...”

“It means we choose each other. It means it's real.”

A genuine smile graces his pretty mouth. “Deal.”

EIGHTEEN

Haven

On a list of things I'd rather cut off my foot than do, dinner with my father is at the top. My churning stomach doesn't help. The only reason I'm able to get through this is the handsome man turning onto the street where I grew up.

He drove one of his brother's fancy cars—a Bugatti, for fuck's sake. If that doesn't impress my father, I don't know what will.

As the gate to the house opens slowly, another wave of nausea hits me. "Fuck."

"It's going to be fine, Haven. We can get through this."

Blowing out a breath, I squeeze my eyes shut. "I hate this, Rapha. I hate feeling so powerless and weak around him. It's like being a child all over again."

He slows the car, reaching to pull my hand into his. "You have the upper hand. Don't forget that you're the one with the power now. If he's a smart man, he'll recognize that."

"He's smart, but he's a stubborn ass. It's a family trait."

"Then use it." He kisses my cheek before driving onto the circular driveway. "Be stubborn. Hold your ground. You are no longer beholden to him for anything."

I nod, shaking my shoulders out to release some stress. "You're right." I flip the visor down to study my reflection. Eyeliner still in place, lips still glossy. "He hates when I wear makeup, so of course I did a full face."

“And you are stunning. Did you make that outfit too?”

“Yes.” I glance down at my white suit with hot-pink pinstripes and sky-high heels. “I feel good.”

“You look good, but most importantly, you’re in charge. This is nothing but a show for them. You have nothing to prove, not really. Not to them.”

“Right.”

“By Wednesday night, you’ll be a married man, and I’ll stay as long as you need me.”

I turn and focus on Rapha’s gorgeous face. His gaze is serene but somehow intense at the same time, and the longer I look, the calmer I feel. Damn, this man is good for me.

“I’m ready.”

He smiles. “Good. Let’s go in.”

Once I’m out of the car, I straighten my suit and walk around to meet Rapha. He offers his hand before kissing my temple. A sense of overwhelming confidence I didn’t feel before spreads through me, so I hold my head high as we approach the front door.

I ring the bell, which is weird, but then, I haven’t been here since I was asked to leave. The door opens and my mother is there, looking glamorous and beautiful as always with her black hair flowing over her shoulders, a pretty pink dress on, and the loving green eyes I still see in my dreams.

“Haven.” She opens her arms and I step into them, soaking in the warmth only a mother’s hug can provide. When I step back, she keeps her hands on my shoulders, taking me in. “You look wonderful. Happy.”

“I am happy. This is Raphael.”

Her eyes shift to the man beside me, who bows his head slightly before taking her hand and kissing the back of it. “Pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Samir.”

My mother actually looks flustered as her smile grows. “Well, hello. What a charming gentleman. Come in.” He has

my mother in the palm of his hand, at least.

Raphael touches my lower back to guide me in. Once we're past the foyer, Raphael takes my hand in his again, which steadies me even more. I got this.

In the dining room, everyone stops talking and turns their attention to us. My aunts, uncles, and a couple of cousins are here, and at the head of the massive wood table is my father. He doesn't even bother to stand.

"Everyone," my mother says. "Please welcome Raphael to our home."

He's met with a barrage of greetings, names, and relationships to me as we take the two empty seats at the end of the table. Raphael keeps his hand firmly wrapped around mine.

"What are you drinking, Raphael?" my uncle Ali asks.

"Wine if you have it. Water if you don't."

"Wine it is," Ali says, lifting a carafe and filling both our glasses.

Then everyone settles down, creating an awkward silence. Without words, my father commands the room.

"How did you meet?" he asks, eyes narrowed.

"At a nightclub," Raphael answers easily, smiling at my cousin Julia as she passes him a plate of appetizers. He puts an assortment on his plate, then gazes up at my father, waiting for more questions.

"Figures," my father says.

"Yes, it does," Rapha answers without missing a beat. "That's where a lot of young people meet. Even in a room filled with hundreds of people, there was no ignoring Haven. We were drawn to each other like magnets."

"Mm. Was that before or after you learned of his inheritance?"

Rolling my eyes, I huff, about to say something, but Rapha pats my thigh under the table.

“How would I have known that upon first sight, Mr. Samir?”

“Maybe you figured it out quickly enough and decided to stick around.”

Rapha sips his wine, then smiles in such a condescending way I can actually see my father shrink. Fucking amazing.

“I don’t think this is the right setting for me to tell you all the ways Haven enraptured me, nor do I think it’s required. You’re allowed to form your own opinion.” He smiles at me. “Besides, I don’t need Haven’s money. I have plenty of my own.”

My family is literally speechless as they all turn to my father to see his reaction.

After he composes himself, he spits out, “I am still his father. In my country a man should ask the father for his child’s hand.”

“Your country is America,” I say with a huff. “Besides, pretty sure you told me I was ‘no son of yours’ when you threw me out.”

“Don’t you dare get smart with me, Haven.”

His harsh tone would ordinarily put me right back into that small place I’ve been in too many times, but this time nothing happens. So I jut my chin just a bit.

“Raphael is right. We don’t have to prove anything to you. In fact, our presence here is for my mother. I wanted to see her.” I turn to Rapha. “He doesn’t have to ask anyone for my hand. He asked me.” Then I shift my gaze back to my father, narrowing my eyes. “And quite frankly, it would be an insult to ask you for something that doesn’t belong to you.”

My father’s face turns red and my mother puts her palms flat on the table, bracing for the explosion about to erupt.

“If you think I will just sit back and let you take what I built, you are very sorely mistaken.” He stands, throwing his napkin down. “This is a farce and I know it. I’ll prove it.”

I stand too, drawing shocked expressions from my family. “You’re wasting your time, *Salman*,” I say, using his name. My uncle gasps. “There’s nothing in the will that prevents me from claiming my inheritance other than a legal, binding marriage. So do what you like. Follow us around, I don’t care. You’ll have plenty of free time once I assume control of the company.”

I barely recognize my own voice as the words tumble from my lips.

“You are out of line,” my father bellows, nearly shaking the windows. “You don’t even know how to run the company. You’ll destroy everything.”

“Oh dear,” my mother says, clearly unsure of how to intervene.

A part of me wants to back down, but Raphael’s hand on my back steadies me. “You never give me credit for anything, and that’s where you fucked up.”

“Oh!” My mother is so flustered I wonder if she might faint.

“Language,” Ali yells and I turn my anger on him.

“I am a grown man and I can use whatever language I damn well want to. None of you have a right to tell me anything about behavior or decorum or tradition. If you thought I would roll over and let you run me the way you have for most of my life, you’re the ones who are mistaken.”

“Our attorneys are working on finding a loophole,” my father says. “We will contest it.”

“Knock yourself out. You can’t. Gedo made sure of it.” I cross my arms, feeling courage flood me. “In fact, maybe I’ll sell the company. I bet your competitors would love our client list.”

My cousins and aunts simply get up from the table and leave the room, taking my mother with them. Now it’s just me, standing off with my uncle Ali, my uncle Joe who rarely speaks, and my father, whose face is so red he looks like a lobster.

Raphael stands up beside me, not speaking, but his presence is enough.

“We’ll take you to court and block everything you do,” Ali says. “You won’t get approval from the board.”

That’s when I smile. “Not the current board. You’re right about that.”

My father, realizing what I mean, pulls his head back. “No. No, Haven. It would be a mistake to remove us. We have history and understand everything.”

“I can hire consultants. I can hire advisers. I can headhunt your competitors. I’m not as clueless as you thought. You treated me like I was disposable. Now you’re about to experience karma, and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“Do you really think we’re going to let you take all this away from us?” my father asks, his tone so cold I actually shiver. “Because you don’t know me at all if you think that.”

“The problem here is that I do know you. All I’ve done in the time since you put me out is study you. I know everything about you. But you don’t know anything about me. You don’t know how far I’m willing to go to do to you what you did to me.” My voice is starting to shake, so I pause, glancing at Raphael for strength. It works.

“You took everything away from me without a second glance. I was nothing to you, and in the process, you became a villain to me. I’m the hero of this story, Salman. When it’s all said and done, you’ll be sorry for what you did to me. You destroyed this family over money and power. Just remember that. You may not claim me as your son, but your blood runs in my veins, and if you think I’m not capable of being ruthless, you’re in for a surprise.”

“Get out of my house,” he seethes.

“Happily. Didn’t want to be here anyway.” I wrap my hand around Raphael’s. “Don’t come to the wedding. I’ll have you escorted out if you do. I’ll provide the necessary documents to the estate trustee to claim my inheritance. Then get ready, *Daddy*.”

He flinches at the word I haven't uttered since I was a child.

Raphael glares, pausing before we leave. "Let me be clear. Haven's safety and well-being are extremely important to me, and I will do what's necessary to protect him."

"Is that a threat?" Ali asks, his tone incredulous.

"Not if you don't plan to harm him." He flashes his teeth in the most menacing smile I've ever seen, and yeah, my dick twitches. Oof.

We leave the dining room and enter the living room where the rest of the family sit on couches in stony silence. Raphael approaches my mother.

"Mrs. Samir, I do regret that we couldn't stay for dinner. It smells lovely and I appreciate being invited into your home."

She nods, gripping his hands. "I'm sorry for my husband. He's so hardheaded when it comes to Haven. He'll come around."

I scoff at that. "No, he won't. I'm sorry, Mom. I miss you, and I wish we could see each other more, but I know it's easier for you if you stay away."

She frowns and her eyes well with tears. "This is so difficult."

Raphael puts his hand on her shoulder, and as she gazes up at him, she nods, as if she heard words he didn't say.

"I can have a plate made for you," she says quietly. "To take with you."

"We'll get food," I say before kissing her cheek. "See ya."

I take Raphael's hand and lead him from the house. As soon as he opens the passenger door for me, my knees buckle and he catches me.

"I've got you," he whispers.

"I know. I just can't believe how much he hates me."

“He doesn’t.” Rapha helps me into my seat and buckles the belt for me. I blink back the tears as I wait for him to join me.

Once he does, he starts the car and we leave. After we’re back on the main road, Raphael rubs my thigh. “I’m able to deeply sense people’s emotions,” he says. “Beyond their words and actions.”

“Like a psychic or something?”

“Different from that. We can call it an extra sense.”

“Okay.”

“Your father’s actions are mired in fear and insecurity, but not hate.”

“Insecurity? About what?”

“You.” He glances at me. “My guess would be he’s well aware of your potential, and maybe even knew your grandfather would go this route with his will. He’s terrified of losing it because he has nothing else. He’s made it his identity.”

I cross my arms over my chest to block the emotion trying to get through. “So what? He’s still a jerk.”

“He is. He doesn’t deserve you at all, but I wanted you to know, he doesn’t hate you.”

“Does it matter? If he treats me like he hates me, how is it different?”

“Because there’s hope.”

“Hope for what?”

“A change. Maybe it’ll never happen, but maybe he’ll wake up and see what he’s done. That’s his journey, but please, guard against letting hate take over *your* heart.”

“I want to hate him, Rapha. I want to hate him so much.”

“But you can’t.” He lifts my hand and kisses the back of it. “That’s why he doesn’t deserve you.”

“It’s also why I’m hurt. At least if I could hate him, I’d be indifferent.”

“Nope. Hate is an emotion too, and an all-consuming one. Just like fear, it takes over if you let it.”

“Yeah. I see your point.” I stare out the window for a second. “Ruining his life probably won’t make me happy, will it?”

“Probably not.”

“I’m still going to. He deserves it.”

“I won’t talk you out of it. That’s not my role in your life. I’ll back you up whatever you decide.”

I huff a laugh, wiping away the stray tear that escapes from my eye. “Maybe you’re my karma. Did I suffer enough that I finally got something good?”

“Maybe you’re mine too, Haven.”

NINETEEN

Raphael

Hours later, after ensuring Haven is fed and sleeping, I exit my apartment on a mission. In the common area, I find the person I was looking for.

“Thorn.”

He turns his head to me, the phone in his hand playing a video of people jumping off very high buildings. “Have we ever tested how high we can jump from without injury?”

“I’m sure Yves would know.”

Thorn nods, a crease in his brow. “Hmm. I’m into it.” He closes his browser. “What’s up?”

“I need your help.”

His face lights up. “Do I get to murder someone?”

“No. In fact, it’s important you don’t cause any harm.”

He pulls his head back. “Then why the fuck are you asking me?”

“Because I can’t do it, the others are tied up with their mates, and you’re appropriately terrifying for the task.”

“Oooh. I get to scare the fuck out of someone?”

“Yes.”

“Sweet. That’s almost as good. Who’s my target?”

“Haven’s father.”

Thorn raises an eyebrow. “What’s the plan?”

“I just need to put the fear of Hades in him. Or whatever god he believes in. I met him earlier and there’s a rift in the family driven by him.”

I sit next to Thorn, checking over my shoulder to make sure Haven is still out of earshot.

“He’s acting out of fear, and I got the strong sense that he could go too far. He could harm Haven to get his way.”

Thorn narrows his eyes. “And we don’t want to kill him for this? Strike first?”

“No. He doesn’t *want* to hurt Haven, but in his desperation, he could. In fact, he loves his son, but...” I shake my head as earlier impressions revisit me. “You know how far panic can drive a man.”

“Yeah. This is about his inheritance?”

“It is. It’s not going to be easy.” I put my hand on his leg. “I don’t want to be in a position where I have to harm one to save the other. I’m not sure Haven could forgive me.”

“I get it. Make sure Daddio understands the consequences for fucking with us.”

“Yes, but using compulsion, of course. I don’t want to act like we’re Mafia.”

“No horse heads in the bed, got it.”

“What?”

Thorn rolls his eyes. “Dude. *Godfather?*”

“Right. No horse heads.”

“Now?” He’s practically vibrating. “I’m bored. I could use a little fun.”

“Yes, now. I’ll go with you.”

The two of us head out and Thorn drives to the location I send him to.

“I had a bad feeling about one of his uncles. He was very quiet during the confrontation we had. Too quiet.”

“Yeah? You think he’s trouble?”

“He could be. His energy was very even, but dark. The father was loud and defensive. The other uncle spoke up, but the third, he just sat there taking in the scene as if he didn’t really care.”

“So are we visiting the right person?”

“This is a good start. I’ll find out more from Haven.”

“Cool.”

In record time, we make it to the swanky suburban neighborhood where Haven’s parents live. It’s late enough that I suspect his mother will be asleep, but we have to be prepared for anything given we don’t know their habits.

“This is one of those times turning into mist would be super helpful.”

“You and your mortal lore fixation.”

Thorn chuckles. “What? It’s funny shit. Remember that village in Romania where they hung garlic around all the entrances? Come on, even Yves thought that was hilarious.”

I fight back a chuckle. “Okay, yeah, it’s funny.”

We scale the large wrought iron gate easily, nearly undetectable to any cameras except as quickly shifting shadows. The house is mostly dark, except for a lone light on the lower level.

“Let’s try that room.”

Thorn nods as we creep through the elaborate landscaped gardens. We peer in the window but it’s just a hallway. I point to the back of the house, so we move that way, finding the man we want in what appears to be a study sitting in an armchair. He’s surrounded by papers and seems to be searching for something. Possibly the loophole he threatened Haven with earlier?

“That’s him,” I whisper. “I’ll stay here. Just remember not to actually hurt him, Thorn.”

“I got it, but you owe me a tour after this.”

“Fair. Go.”

Thorn lifts the window easily, breaking the lock on the ledge. Salman is so caught up in his work, he hasn't noticed yet. That is, until Thorn slips inside.

Salman glances up briefly, then a second time, gasping and scooting back in his chair. "Who are you?"

"Just a messenger."

I grin, crouched by the window. Thorn is truly spectacular when he's in work mode.

"What do you want?" Salman asks. "Money? Jewelry? Just don't hurt us, please."

Thorn shakes his head, his heavy boots clomping across the marble floor. He leans on the desk, closing the distance between himself and Haven's father.

"I'm not here to harm you. I'm here to tell you something."

Salman nods, clutching the papers he's holding to his chest.

Thorn stands, rising to his full height, and Salman watches with true terror in his eyes. My brother likes to toy with his targets, and in this case, that's likely to help the outcome.

Thorn walks around the desk and comes to a stop behind Salman, placing his hands on the top of the man's chair. "How much do you enjoy breathing?" Thorn asks.

I can see Salman shake from where I'm sitting.

"A lot."

"I thought so." Thorn swings the man's chair around so that he's facing him. As Thorn kneels, the sound of Salman's rapidly beating heart is slightly concerning. Thankfully, Thorn seems to pick up on this as he says, "Calm down. I just want you to listen."

Salman blows out a breath, nodding, and his heartbeat slows a bit.

"Good," Thorn says. "Consider me the ghost of Christmas future, or whatever bullshit holiday you celebrate with

family.”

“We-we’re not religious.”

“Then pretend, ’kay?”

Salman nods. “Okay.”

“Wouldn’t you rather have a united family again? One where there is love and harmony?”

Salman looks unsure. “Well, yes, but—”

“No,” Thorn interrupts. “No buts. Search your heart. What do you really want?”

Haven’s father scrunches his brow, as if resisting the answer inside himself. Thorn is patient but has his intimidating gaze fixed on Salman’s face. The only person better than Yves at compelling people is Thorn.

Salman places his hand on his chest, squeezing his eyes. “I have no choice.”

“There are always choices,” Thorn says.

“No. My brother...” He snaps his mouth shut, but appears to struggle to stay quiet.

Damn, Thorn is good.

“What about your brother?” Salman tries to look away, but Thorn grips his chin. “Tell me.”

“I’m afraid of what he’ll do if we lose the company to Haven.”

“Which brother?” Thorn asks, glancing at me through the open window.

“Joe,” he answers, clearly struggling against Thorn’s compulsion.

Exactly as I thought.

“I see,” Thorn says. “Let me give you a new choice, Salman.”

Haven’s father looks absolutely terrified at this point.

“See, Haven is protected now. So you have a choice about whose side you’re gonna pick. Your brother’s or your own son’s.”

“But...” Salman flinches as if being hit by something invisible. “I’ll be ruined.”

“And yet it’s okay to ruin your son?” Thorn asks.

“He... has... oth-er... talents.”

I tilt my head at that. Unable to sit back any longer, I climb through the window and join the party. When Salman sees me, he only looks mildly surprised. He struggles against his unseen restraints. Thorn is so powerful, a person can actually *feel* his influence like a physical bond.

“What other talents?” I ask.

“Shouldn’t you know?” Salman spits. “If you’re so in love with him.”

“I know what I know. I want to know what *you* know.”

He scoffs. “His designs,” he says, his voice now weak and hoarse. “What are you doing to me?”

Thorn grins with his arms crossed over his chest.

“I guess you should have considered what you had to lose when you turned your back on him,” I say softly, leaning in close. “You could have run the company together. Now you’ve forced his hand.”

Anger pours off the man as he fights to put his defenses back in place. “You don’t know me.”

“I know more than you think, Salman. I know everything about you.” I search his eyes. “I even know why you’re afraid of your brother.”

Salman pulls his head back, but that’s fear in his eyes, not defiance. His scent reeks of terror, sour and distorted from the man I met earlier.

“Listen, Salman, you deal with your brother how you see fit, but when it comes to Haven, you have to get through us.”

“And let’s just say, we’re not exactly easy to deal with,” Thorn says.

“Let’s wrap this up,” I say to Thorn, who nods.

“We’re going to leave now, and in the morning this will feel like nothing but a dream. You won’t remember our visit or the specific things we said, but you will remember that it’s in your best interest to make sure nothing happens to Haven. No harm, no blocking the will. If you do, I’ll visit again, and I won’t be so nice the next time. Are we clear, Salman?” Thorn says.

His eyes glaze over as he listens and nods. “What are you?”

“I told you. I’m a ghost. Sleep now.” Thorn drags his hand over Salman’s face, who falls instantly asleep.

Thorn lays his head down gently on the desk and the two of us slip out the window and back into the night. When we’re back in the car, my thoughts spin. I’m even more agitated than I was.

“He’s not a bad person,” Thorn says. “A shit father, yes, but he loves Haven.”

“I know. Which means my instinct about the other brother was right.”

“Yep. Is that our next stop?”

“I don’t know where he lives. Besides, I’m curious about what he’s got on Salman.”

“Me too. Can I drain him? He’s just an uncle.”

“No, Thorn, you cannot drain him. Not yet, anyway. We need to find out more.”

Thorn makes a face, sticking his tongue out. “Ugh, you’re a killjoy.”

I pat his shoulder. “Come on. I’m sure there’s some trash that needs taking out somewhere.”

“Right on. That’s what I’m talking about.”

As the car tears off into the night, I pat his shoulder. “Thanks for helping. I needed your compulsion skills.”

“I’m glad I can be useful sometimes.”

“Sometimes,” I repeat, scoffing. “We wouldn’t be who we are without you.”

“You’d be a lot more boring, for sure,” he says, chuckling.

“Hades forbid.”

“Seriously though,” Thorn continues. “I felt his fear and it was real and visceral. The uncle is trouble.”

“Yeah. I’ll keep Haven safe until I can figure out what Uncle Joe is up to.”

“I know you will.”

“I just hope I don’t have to kill someone in his family. Talk about awkward holidays.”

Thorn snorts a laugh. “Fuck yes. Raphael the brooding artist just told a joke.”

Smiling, I shift my gaze out the window. Let’s just hope his father is the good man I believe him to be underneath whatever this bullshit brother stuff is. I don’t want to take him out, but I absolutely will if that’s what it takes to keep Haven safe and happy.

I can no longer ignore the tight, tugging feeling in my chest that I’m sure I haven’t felt before. The urge to protect Haven at all costs clogs my throat and seizes my thoughts. Closing my eyes for a second, I let the emotions swirl through me, and as they settle, the truth I’ve tried to deny or explain away is as clear as the daytime sky is blue.

There’s no doubt in my mind. Haven is my fated mate.

TWENTY

Haven

“You look so handsome.”

I turn to see Vivienne smiling behind me. She and Viper, Rapha’s sisters, have been helping me this morning. His family is a strange mix of people who don’t look a damn thing like each other, but if love is tangible, it can be felt all through this house and in everyone I interact with. I know they’re a chosen family, and what a cool concept. Imagine being with family because they want to be there, not just because they’re stuck with you.

Viper is fussing over a flower for my hair. I told her it wasn’t necessary, but she heard from Syn that Raphael’s favorite flower is a magnolia, so she made one from silk for me. The gesture tugs at the part of me that I’ve pushed down for years. Real love seems so out of reach I decided long ago to settle for hot sex and Mr. Right-For-Now. So why am I wishing this wedding was real and Raphael was Mr. Forever?

“Are you okay?” Vivienne asks.

“Mostly. I’m a little nervous that my family is gonna mess things up.”

“Don’t worry.” She puts her hands on my shoulders, squeezing gently. “No one can get past the Orpheus boys unless they want them to.”

“Right.” I slide my hands down my lapels. “Whose last name is Orpheus? I mean, the original one I guess.”

“Yves. Are you taking Raphael’s last name?”

“Uh, shoot. We didn’t even talk about it. Maybe because this isn’t legit, I should just stick with my name.”

Vivienne holds my gaze through the mirror’s reflection. “Are you religious, Haven?”

“Not at all.”

“So you wouldn’t be opposed to me and Viper doing a little energy work for you?”

I turn to face her. “What’s that?”

“It’ll help you relax and enjoy the moment.” She smiles. “All we really have is now. We create the future and the past is just a memory. We’d like to help.”

Viper nods happily. “We’d love to.”

“Sure. Why not?”

“Good. Come sit.”

I walk over to sit on the bench in the hotel room where we’re having a little party afterward. Apparently, Syn knows someone who runs it and pulled off a reception for us. Since this may be my only wedding, I guess I’ll try to enjoy it.

Viper and Vivienne, wearing matching blood red dresses that show off plenty of cleavage, kneel before me. One glamorous, one goth, they hold your attention, that’s for sure.

“Close your eyes,” Viper says.

I do as I’m told, waiting for whatever they have planned. The next sensation is warmth spreading through my chest, especially where my heart is. Like a box being unlocked or a present revealed, my heart opens, filling my body with pleasant tingling.

“What—”

“Shh,” Vivienne says, blowing a warm breath on my face. “Just feel.”

Everything around me blurs and drifts away and all that’s left is Raphael. I see him in my mind as if he’s standing right in front of me. He doesn’t speak, but he doesn’t have to.

Everything he's thinking and feeling seeps into me, my soul soaking it up like a sponge. I'm left breathless and floating on a cloud. Somehow, I believe that Rapha is in my life for a reason. An important one.

Is he the one?

A cool breeze clears away the haze, leaving me relaxed and happy. "That was incredible."

Both women smile but don't offer an explanation.

"No? Not telling me what that was?"

"Energy work," Viper says. "Just like Viv said."

"Energy work. Cool."

Viper giggles. "Come on. Raph is waiting for you."

"Right." I stand, straightening my shoulders, then allow the women to lead me to the exit.

Just across the street is the courthouse where the formalities will take place. I'm expecting the estate trustee to be there, but no one else in my family. I wish my mom could be here. Oh well. For now, I'll just pretend that Rapha's family is mine.

"Did you invite any friends?" Viper asks while we wait for the light to change to cross the street.

"Um, no. I don't really have any. Not anymore." I glance at the women with a fake smile, then drop it. "When my father disowned me, a lot of my so-called friends ditched me. I wasn't on their level anymore without money and status. Guess I found out why they really hung out with me."

"Ugh, I hate shallow people," Viv says, looping her arm through mine. "You won't find that around here with us. We're an odd bunch but an authentic one."

"I can tell. I just hope it's not temporary. I mean, all of this is just..." The words fall away. Something inside me won't let me say them. Maybe if I don't put them out there, it won't happen, and I can stay.

Viv and Viper just smile like they know something I don't. The light changes and we cross. The closer we get, the calmer I feel. Like even if my dad and uncles show up to ruin it, Rapha won't let them. I believe that.

Viper opens the courthouse door and after passing through the metal detectors, we walk down the hall where I see Rapha and his brothers standing in a half circle. Yves sees me and taps Rapha's shoulder, who has his back to me.

When he turns around, my jaw drops. His long hair is tied back and he's wearing a gorgeous slate-blue suit. It looks like it was made for his body. Oh wow. I get to call this man my husband. At least for a while.

Then he steps to the side and my mother appears. My eyes well with tears. I'm too shocked to move until Viv and Viper give me a tiny nudge.

"Mom."

She smiles, reaching up to touch my cheek. "The trustee wouldn't give up the location, and it was hard to find a number for Raphael, but I did it. I hope I'm invited."

"Of course." I wrap my arms around her. "Thank you."

She kisses my cheek. "Everything will be okay, my son. I couldn't miss your big day."

I hug her again, mouthing, "Thank you," to Raphael. The smile on his face could melt an iceberg in the Arctic.

A few minutes later, the estate trustee joins us, looking slightly surprised by the large group and my mother's presence. Pretty authentic, I'd say.

The large wooden doors to the left open, and a man in a black robe steps out with a clipboard. "Orpheus party?"

"That's us," Yves says.

When I release my mother, Raphael offers his hand and I take it, leading me inside the courtroom. The judge stands between us as everyone else gathers behind. All his brothers are dressed in red suits that match Viv and Viper, and yeah, I'm floored. How did he pull this off so quickly?

Rapha takes my hand in his and we repeat the generic words the judge recites. I don't know what Rapha is thinking right now, but I'm putting all I've got into these words, hoping that maybe, just this once, the universe will hook me up and let me keep this sliver of happiness I've finally got in my clutches.

There's no way he's not a good person. Agreeing to this was enough proof, but he doesn't even need money. He's doing it just to help me out.

"Do you have rings to exchange?" the judge asks.

My mouth drops. "We forgot rings."

Rapha laughs. "I guess we were too caught up. We'll get some later."

I nod. "Yeah, okay."

The judge nods, continuing until he makes it official. "I pronounce you married. You may seal your union with a kiss."

Raphael's eyes soften as he leans in and presses a chaste kiss to my lips, whispering, "There'll be more later."

Giggling, I nod. "We're married."

"We are."

We simply hold each other's gaze until Thorn breaks it up. "Enough googly eyes. Let's go party."

As a group, we flow out of the courthouse and back across the street to the ballroom we have reserved. We opted to discard all the traditions like first dances and stuff and just have fun. And that's what we do.

There are other people here now. Almost all of them are men except for a few women who hang around Viv and Viper. Rapha and I sit in a corner, sipping champagne and watching everyone. His brothers keep my mother entertained, dancing with her until she makes a polite departure.

"How do you feel, my beauty?" Rapha asks, lifting my hand to kiss it. "You pulled it off."

“Not quite yet. Tomorrow I’ll go get everything signed with the trustee. Then the hard part starts.”

“Remember, you’re not alone. Yves is always available for advice.”

“Not you?”

He chuckles. “I don’t concern myself with business dealings. I just do my job.”

“Which is?”

His smile fades. “CIA Operative.”

“Right. You don’t think you should tell me now that we’re married?”

“Nope.” He kisses my nose. “I’d rather you keep your current image of me.”

“Oooh, intriguing response.” Scooting a little closer, I run my hand down his chest. “Maybe I could tease it out of you.”

“You think so?”

“Or I could bribe you to tell me.”

“Bribe me with what?”

I tap my chin like I’m thinking. “You seem to like biting me.”

His expression immediately heats. “You’re playing a dangerous game.”

“But I’m not afraid of you, Rapha. I like your edge.”

He presses his hand to my neck, squeezing just enough to make my eyelids flutter. “You are quickly becoming my weakness.”

“That’s the last word I would use to describe you.”

“What would you use instead?”

“Addictive.” I grip his wrist, holding his hand where it is. “Mysterious. Sexy as fuck.”

He tears his gaze away abruptly, clearing his throat. “This is not the place.”

“Then take me somewhere.”

“You want to go to our room already?”

“No. Somewhere else. Somewhere naughty.” I reach between his legs and rub the erection I knew would be there. “Gah, you make me want to do wild things. How do you make me feel so free and yet so safe?”

“Because you’re both with me.” Rapha claims my mouth in a searing kiss that tingles all the way to my toes.

My cock swells, straining against the tight material of my slacks. “Rapha. Please.”

He bites into my bottom lip, drawing blood and a needy moan from me. “Fuck, you taste like paradise.”

“You like my blood?”

“It’s so much more than that, my beauty.”

“Yeah? You need it?”

When he focuses on me, my breath catches in my throat. There’s something in his eyes I can’t name. Is it hunger? Desire? Danger? I don’t know, but whatever it is, I want more of it.

“Take me away from here, Rapha. Take what you need from me.”

He blinks, washing away whatever that was on his face. “No. It’s not right. It’s too dangerous, and I should know better.”

“Are you afraid to hurt me?”

His jaw tightens as he nods. “Yes.”

I nod, sliding my hand over his heart. I can barely feel it beating, which doesn’t match the desperation in his voice.

“You’re free and safe with me too, Rapha. Don’t you know that?”

He searches my eyes like he’s looking for truth. I don’t know what he sees, but he stands, pulling me to my feet by my wrist before leading me out of the room. Where we’re going is

anyone's guess, but I don't really care. I'm along for whatever ride he wants to go on.

Rapha presses the elevator buttons, and when they open, he pushes the button for the roof. Oh fuck yeah. As soon as the doors close, he presses me against the wall, devouring my mouth as hard cock meets hard cock. We grind together for the few seconds it takes to get to the roof, and I'm already swooning when the doors open again.

"You trust me?" Raphael asks as he leads me to the edge of the building.

"A hundred percent," I answer easily. "Do you trust me?"

He pauses, turning to face me. "Yes."

Smiling, I press against him. "Good. I'm yours to take."

TWENTY-ONE

Raphael

I'm well aware of the dangerous game I'm playing, but right now my desire to give Haven an amazing experience overrides my better judgment. He deserves joy.

I lead him to the edge of the building, standing behind him as we gaze out at the city below us.

“What do you see, Haven?”

“Lights.”

“No. Look deeper.” I place my hands on his shoulders, massaging gently as I send my emotions to him. Even without looking at him, he should be able to feel them if we're as connected as I think we are.

He gasps softly. “Rapha...”

“What do you see, my beauty?”

Shaking his head softly, he leans back against me. “It's like a movie, and we're the stars.” He gasps louder this time. “Actual stars. How is this happening?”

“Just experience it.” I kiss his neck, inhaling his scent. “Your presence moves me, Haven.”

“Flowers,” he whispers. “It's raining flower petals.”

“What color are they?”

“They're...” He pauses, smiling big. “The color of my eyes.”

“Exactly. They smell like you, too. Everything I see is you.”

“Rapha...”

“Close your eyes.”

He nods, doing as I asked. Reaching in front of him, I unbutton his jacket and slide it off his shoulders. Slowly, I remove all his clothes, wrapping him in warmth to protect him from the chilly breeze. He’s shivering, but I sense that it’s excitement causing it, not the temperature or fear. He doesn’t speak at all, truly trusting me.

As I reveal his nude body, my beast pushes forward and a sense of rightness and belonging I’ve never experienced before spreads through me. Yes. Without a doubt, Haven is it. The mate I didn’t believe existed. I have to find a way to tell him.

“You are so beautiful, Haven. Inside and out.”

He inhales deeply and blows it out. “So are you.”

I peel out of my own clothes, tossing them to the ground to join his, my mind swirling with all the things I want to do with him now that I know. I rub my nose up and down the column of his elegant neck before wrapping my arms around his waist.

Haven moans, pressing his ass against my cock. Desire rushes through me like a river heading for a busted dam, and I have to twist my neck back and forth to calm myself before I take him to be my eternal beloved.

He lifts his arms, wrapping them around my neck, and we sway together. “How come I’m not cold?”

“Because I’m here,” I whisper. “You’ll never go without. All your needs and wants will be fulfilled by me.”

“Raph... why? I don’t understand.”

“You do. Search your heart.” I kiss his neck before pushing my way inside his tight body. It’s not real, but the sensations are.

Haven moans, sinking into me as I support his weight. “How...?”

“Shh, my darling. *Feel*. That’s all you have to do. The more you feel, the better it gets.”

He responds by grinding his supple ass against my erection. My gums throb in response, releasing my fangs. A voice deep inside tempts me to bite him, drain him, keep him.

“My Haven,” I whisper, lifting us off the ground. I’ve nearly shocked myself. I was never able to lift myself up so seamlessly but perhaps my emotion for Haven is the fuel I needed to accomplish it.

Haven gasps as a smile spreads across his lips. “Oh my god.”

“You’re safe.”

“I know.”

“Keep your eyes closed though.”

“I will. Rapha...”

I bury my nose in his sweet-smelling hair, our bodies rubbing together. Waves of pleasure surround us, swirling around us, as we rise high above the city below. In my mind, we’re wrapped in silk and cashmere, making love. Haven offers his neck, inviting me to claim his soul for my own.

My body responds with elation, tingling with light as if the stars themselves are falling around us. The release I feel is beyond satisfying and will be enough to get me by until the real event. I know it’ll happen. Haven is the one.

“Raph,” Haven whimpers. “Oh god.”

He shakes in my embrace, his body simulating the orgasm I wanted him to feel. Unable to resist, I nip his flesh. Just a scratch, a tiny one to soothe my beast. I can taste him on my tongue—his blood, his cum, his scent. If I could get drunk, I imagine it would feel exactly like this.

Haven twists suddenly in my arms, wrapping himself around me, and I bring us down safely. As my feet touch the

roof, I grab our clothes, wrapping them around him as best I can while I support his weight with my other arm. I carry my destiny, my fate, to our room, moving so quickly it would be impossible to detect us. Haven keeps his face buried in the crook of my neck, but as we enter our room, warm moisture trickles down my shoulder.

“Are you okay?” I ask, setting him down, but he refuses to let go, so I settle in a chair with him still on my lap.

He shakes in my arms, softly sobbing, and drawing tears to my own eyes. His emotions are loud for me, telling me everything I need to know. He’s content and he feels safe. I couldn’t be happier to give this moment to him.

After several minutes, he lifts his head, gazing at me with glossy eyes and a shy smile. “You’re not real, are you? It’s not possible that someone like you really exists. Please, Rapha, please tell me you’re real.”

I cup his cheek. “Oh, my darling. I’m real. Can’t you feel me? Don’t you see me with your own beautiful eyes?”

“None of this was supposed to feel like this. We’re supposed to be fuck buddies and have like a business deal but...” He pauses, searching my eyes. “You’re making me fall in love with you.”

“There is no greater gift than your love.”

“I’m not alone, right? You’re feeling things too?”

“Absolutely. More than I can express.” I grip the back of his neck. “My Haven. My beauty. This isn’t fake. Not for me.”

Fresh tears flood his eyes. “I never thought...” He shakes his head. “Everything’s been so shitty for so long. How did I find you? I’m not that lucky.”

“It wasn’t luck, Haven.” The words dance on my tongue, tempting me to confess. I want so desperately to tell him what we are to each other, but I hold back. It’s not the right time. Not yet. “Can you keep trusting me?”

He nods, touching my cheeks with his fingers as he holds my gaze. “Yes.”

“Good. I think you have to start believing that you’ve earned some happiness. It’s your karma, remember?”

He laughs, nodding. “Right. We did it, Rapha. We pulled it off. All I have to do now is sign the papers.”

“Yep.” I brush the lingering tears from his cheeks. “And you’re still not alone. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Thank you.”

“How do you feel? Are you tired? Do you want a drink? Food?”

“I’m good. I want to cuddle, and then I want you to tear me apart again.”

“I can handle that.”

Watching Haven sign the papers to officially take ownership of his family business fills me with pride I wasn’t expecting. His hand shakes, but his outer appearance is nothing but confident. He’s taking his rightful spot.

The estate trustee smiles, shaking his hand. “Congratulations, sir. I’ll have a courier deliver the paperwork to the board of directors today.”

“Then all hell breaks loose,” Haven says, glancing at me.

The trustee nods. “Yes, well, it is what your grandfather wanted. One last bit of business before you go.” He opens a manila folder. “The requested prenuptial agreement.”

“Oh, I don’t think we need that anymore,” Haven says. “Raphael is wealthy in his own right.”

Mr. Hassan looks rightfully dubious as his eyes flit to me. “Sir, if I may—”

“I have no problem signing it, darling.” I kiss Haven’s temple. “Anything to keep your family at bay. Mr. Hassan?”

The trustee seems pleased, sliding the folder toward me. “The details include—”

I wave my hand to stop him. “I assume it states that all assets currently belonging to Haven remain regardless of our relationship outcome.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Fine.” I scrawl my signature on the paper. “As Haven said, it’s not his money I want. Just his heart.”

Haven beams as his cheeks bloom pink. Happiness looks beautiful on him. I lean in, ready to taste his lips again, but Mr. Hassan clears his throat.

“Right. We’re not alone.”

Haven giggles, wrapping his hand around mine. “Come on, lover boy. Let’s get some food. I’m starving.”

“Lead the way.”

An hour later, after watching Haven scarf down a cheeseburger and fries, we stroll hand in hand through one of the better parts of downtown New Onyx.

“What do you do for fun besides me?” Haven asks, swinging our hands.

I chuckle. “I used to draw a lot. Sketches.”

“Really? That’s so cool. I guess with a name like Raphael, it’s kind of in your DNA.”

I nod. “I suppose so. I haven’t created anything of note in a while. I miss it. It was my outlet.”

“Well, you could sketch me.” He twists around so he’s walking backward facing me. “Paint me like one of your French girls, Rapha.”

I raise an eyebrow. “What?”

He stops walking, propping his hands on his hips. “Come on. Don’t tell me you haven’t seen the cheesy epic, *Titanic*?”

“I’m afraid I haven’t.”

He mock gasps, clutching the gold necklace around his neck. “Well, we’ll fix that tonight. Seriously though, you could draw me. Maybe I’ll inspire you.”

Wrapping my arm around his waist, I pull him into me, pressing a kiss to his lips once he’s close enough. “I believe you’re onto something.”

His eyes heat as he wiggles his eyebrows. “Take me home and I’ll get onto that dick.”

I laugh out loud. “I adore your energy, Haven. You are a delight.”

“And you’re breathtaking when you laugh.” With his hand on my cheek, he smiles. “I’m really happy.”

“So am I.”

TWENTY-TWO

Haven

When we arrive back home, it's quiet. "Where is everyone?"

"Working, probably. Speaking of..." He pauses as he opens the door to his unit for me. "I'll have to get back into the rotation this week."

I nod. "I understand. What are your hours?"

"I typically work at night. Late at night though, so you'll be asleep."

"Okay." I want to ask again, but I bite my lip. He'll tell me when he's ready. "How about a nap where we don't sleep at all?"

Rapha smiles. "Sounds good."

Before we can make it to the bedroom, my phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out and frown. "Shit. Seems too soon for them to get the paperwork."

"It's your father?"

"Yep." I ignore it until it stops, but a second later he calls again.

"You better answer it. Just remember, he can't do anything to you."

"Right." I blow out a breath. "I can handle this. I have to."

Rapha nods, leaning against the wall.

"Hello?"

“Haven. It’s your father.”

“I’m aware. What can I help you with?”

“I need to speak to you and it’s urgent. Can we meet somewhere?”

I scrunch my face. “Why would I meet with you?”

I hear his deep exhale. “Listen to me, Haven. This is very difficult for me to say, but it must be done.”

“This feels like a trap. There’s nothing legally you can do to me.”

“I know. I already spoke to Hassan. This isn’t about what I want. It’s about...” The tension in his voice is unusual. He’s not angry, but something is going on. “I really don’t want to do this over the phone.”

I look at Raphael for help.

“Meet with him,” Rapha says.

“Okay. We can meet, but my husband is joining me.”

“Fine. There’s a coffee shop across from our building. Uh, your building.”

“I’d rather meet somewhere else.”

“Name the spot.”

“Café Rosa. What time?”

“Is an hour enough time? This is important.”

“We’ll be there.”

I end the call and slump against the wall. “That was weird. All the hostility is gone, but he’s clearly worried about something.”

“Best to hear him out.” Rapha kisses my forehead. “And I’ll be there with you for support.”

“Yeah. That helps. I guess it’s time for me to grow up.”

“You’re already perfectly grown, Haven. Based on what I’ve seen, you’re more than capable of dealing with your family.”

“Thanks.” Reaching out, I drag my finger down his chest. “I’d rather get railed by you all day.”

Rapha chuckles. “We have endless hours for that.”

“Hmm. Endlessly railed by Raphael. I like it.”

Still smiling, he grabs my wrist and pulls me into him, immediately nuzzling my neck. “Trust me, darling, I’m just as eager for more of you.”

Leaning back against the wall, I close my eyes as Rapha dots my skin with kisses and gentle nips. I tangle my fingers in his hair. Everything about him is so decadent, from the silky feel of his hair to his soft lips. I should pinch myself, but fuck that. If this is a dream, I never want to wake up.

“We should go,” he whispers. “Café Rosa is forty minutes from here.”

“Ugh. Fine. You’ll make it up to me later? Technically, we should be on a honeymoon.”

Rapha pulls back, lifting his head to gaze into my eyes. His expression is... My breath catches in my throat. I can’t quite explain it, but I sure as hell can *feel* it. Without words, I sense the promise in his eyes. A promise of more, of a future. Could he fall in love with me too? Do I even have that kind of luck to catch a man like Raphael and keep him? Damn, I hope so.

He leans in and kisses me softly before squeezing my ass hard enough to pull a needy moan from my lips. “Business first. Pleasure later.”

Blowing out a breath, I nod. “Yeah. Let’s do this.”

Raphael turns onto the street where the adorable local coffee shop is. I love it because it’s queer owned and the coffee is strong enough to show up on a drug test.

My stomach churned with nerves the whole ride over, but as Rapha parks, I shake it off. Gedo always told me that no

matter how you feel inside, you project confidence. In business, weakness will fail you.

Once we exit the car, Rapha offers me his hand and leads me inside the shop. My father is already sitting at a table with a manila folder in front of him. He looks as nervous as I feel inside, which sets off a new concern. I've never seen him look nervous. Something is wrong. Rapha must sense something too because he rubs my back to comfort me.

My father looks up as we get closer and stands, nodding politely at Raphael, though his expression is slightly confused.

"Thanks for meeting so quickly," he says, gesturing to the chairs. "Do you want to get a drink?"

"Uh, yeah."

"I'll order," Rapha says.

"You choose for me," I say. "Everything is good."

He nods. "Mr. Samir?"

"Oh. Uh, the black cardamom tea, please."

Rapha kisses my temple then walks to the front counter. The café is busy, with nearly every table filled, and the buzz of conversation soothes some of the awkwardness between us.

"What is this about?" I ask.

His brow creases. "I was hoping it wasn't true, but I've had some suspicions that someone inside the company was up to something malicious."

I pull my head back. "How malicious?"

Rapha is back, setting down a tray with our drinks. He slides a drink in front of me, and the scent of rich coffee, cinnamon, and apples wafts up.

"Our profits have taken a sudden downward turn," my father says, glancing at Raphael. "We were told that two of our larger customers decreased their purchase orders, which triggered me to investigate. These customers have had standing orders for over a decade. Changing now makes no sense."

“Uh-huh,” I murmur, sipping my drink. “Who told you that?”

His face turns red as he slides the manila folder toward me. “Your uncle Joe.”

I literally feel Raphael tense beside me.

“Uncle Joe?”

“CFO of the company.” He clears his throat. “I did some digging, and the customers’ purchase orders haven’t changed at all. They were clearly altered on the documents, which you can see in the folder, but in the system, the orders were the same.”

I flip the folder open and glance at the documents. A sinking feeling takes hold as I flip through the orders. “Is he... Oh god. Is he embezzling?”

“I wanted to believe it wasn’t him. I thought maybe he’d been fooled by whoever was really behind this, but...” My father shifts his gaze to Raphael, as if he doesn’t want to say whatever it is, but after exhaling, he continues. “Since your grandfather’s death, he’s been acting very strange. I suspect this has been going on for some time, but he’s increased his efforts. He’s become very closed off with sharing information, and somewhat aggressive.”

“Aggressive in what way?” Rapha asks.

“He threatened me late last night. He said I’d better find a way to prevent Haven from assuming ownership or ‘I would be very sorry.’ Those are his words.”

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“Haven, I’m here for two reasons. I think Joe is attempting to either make the company unstable, or he’s plundering out profits for his own gain. The second reason is...” He pauses, shaking his head with a pained expression on his face. “I’m worried that he’s not above violence to protect his own interests.”

I gasp. Talk about words I never expected to hear. “What?”

“Violence against Haven?” Rapha asks.

My father nods. “Yes. Ali isn’t convinced, but he does agree that Joe is different now. Something’s changed. I admit none of us are happy about the ownership change, myself included, but outside of legal recourse, I would never break the law or harm you. I don’t know what’s happened to him that he would go this far.”

I’m too stunned to speak.

“I’ve dishonored my father,” he continues. “I’ve dishonored my children and my wife. I let pride and perhaps greed taint my values, but I will not stand by and allow him to destroy our father’s legacy. I will not passively accept my son being threatened.”

“You really think he would hurt me?” I ask, finally finding my voice again.

“I don’t know, Haven, but a desperate man cannot be trusted.”

I turn to Raphael, who is staring at my father, blinking slowly, his jaw twitching. He looks like he could explode into a violent rage at any minute, and hot damn, what a turn-on to feel so protected. No one has ever had my back, but I know without a doubt that Rapha does.

“What should I do?”

“I’ll handle it,” Rapha answers darkly. “Haven is safe with me.”

My father visibly shivers as his eyelids flutter. “Clearbrook,” he says, reciting the suburb name unprompted. He clears his throat. “Uh, there’s a gated community there called Oak Lanes. Joe lives there.”

I tilt my head, watching the strange interaction. My father sways slightly, his eyes locked on Raphael’s.

“You and your wife should come stay with us until this is over,” Raphael says softly. “We have guest apartments.”

“I don’t think—”

“It wasn’t a request. If he’s willing to harm Haven, wouldn’t he go for Haven’s weak spot? His mother.”

My mouth drops open. “Oh shit.”

My father’s face goes pale. “Yes. You’re right.”

“This is what I do, Mr. Samir. You need to follow my advice until the threat is eliminated.”

“You won’t kill my uncle, will you?” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them.

Raphael doesn’t tear his gaze from my father as he gently squeezes my hand. “You need to trust me. I’ll do what’s right.”

My father’s eyes close, like he fell instantly asleep. Raphael gently turns my chin so that I’m facing him. “I will do my best to ensure no one is harmed, but you must understand, if it’s your life or anyone else’s, I will save you.”

Warmth spreads through me, his words like a blanket. “I’m scared.”

“No reason to be, my darling. I’m here now. Just rely on me.”

Nodding, I cup his face and kiss him hard, ignoring the busy café around me. “Later, you can tell me exactly what the fuck you’re doing to my father right now.”

He only grins, returning his gaze to my father. He suddenly opens his eyes, shaking his head and looking around for a second like he’s not sure where he is.

“What was I saying?” he asks.

“I was talking,” Raphael says. “Just telling you that the guest apartment will be ready for you and Mrs. Samir. I advise coming tonight.”

My father nods. “Yes, of course.”

Feeling my courage return, I sit up a little straighter. “Thank you for informing me of the problem. While I appreciate it and am willing to work with you to deal with the situation, I want to be clear that it doesn’t instantly make things right between us. I don’t forgive you for what you’ve done to me.”

A crease appears in his brow as his face tenses for a moment, but he nods. “I have not asked for your forgiveness, so I don’t expect it.”

“Good.”

“That said, I would advise to keep us on the board, at least until this problem is resolved. I think it’s the best way to uncover what’s happening.”

“I’ll take it into consideration.”

Rapha and I watch as my father leaves the café, and as soon as he’s gone, I slump in my chair.

“Fuck.”

“It’s okay, Haven.”

“It’s not.” I shake my head. “I’m wondering if this is really worth it? The business has already torn my family apart. Now my safety is in danger. Over money.”

Rapha nods, rubbing my back. “Money and power are powerful forces. Every war that’s ever been fought has been over one or the other or both. I understand it’s upsetting.”

“What do I do? If I don’t take over, I have nothing. But if I do... at what cost?”

“First of all, you don’t have nothing. You have me and my family.”

“It’s not...” I squeeze my eyes closed. “We’re not married because of love and commitment. I don’t know if I can count on us yet. We’ve known each other, like, a week. Yeah, it’s been awesome and we have some good things going, but it’s all new. My track record hasn’t shown that longevity is my strength.”

Raphael turns in his chair to face me, gripping my hands in his. “Valid concerns, but I can promise you I’m not going anywhere.”

My heart flutters in my chest with hope, but the doubt is still there. “How can you promise me that?”

His expression turns very serious as he glances away. “I have something to tell you, something that changes everything, but this isn’t the right place.”

“Dude, you’re gonna leave me hanging like this?”

A shy smile pulls at his lips. “I promise it’s worth it.”

I huff. “It better be. You know, you’re lucky you’re so hot and I’m literally addicted to you. I can be very bratty when I don’t get my way.”

“Mm, I’m interested in your bratty side. I bet I could tame you.”

“And just like that...” I shake my head. “Alright, Romeo. Take me somewhere to tell me this game-changing news.”

TWENTY-THREE

Raphael

“We need to stop at Yves’s place and update him about your parents coming.”

Haven nods, staring straight ahead as I pull into my parking spot in the garage. His energy is a heady mix of unsettled nerves and pulsing desire. He’s addicted to me? Then we’re two addicts feening for each other.

“Is he gonna be mad?”

“Mad? No. Why would he be?”

Haven shrugs. “I don’t know. You have to tell him, so I figured he might have a reaction.”

“He just needs to know someone new will be among us.” And the sooner that’s dealt with, the sooner I can tell Haven what we are to each other. Here’s hoping he’s as joyful about the news as I am and that it calms some of his worries about the future.

“I’d like you to wait for me in the apartment,” I say, entering the elevator. “I need to talk a little business with Yves too.”

“Okay,” he says without arguing.

“Thank you.”

“Sure. I’m curious, but I figure you’ll tell me when you’re ready.”

“I will.” I kiss his temple. “One thing at a time.”

Upstairs, I lead Haven to my unit, kissing his forehead before turning to go see Yves. I enter his home and I'm immediately hit with a tense, almost confused energy permeating the room. The disturbed air draws me to his office quickly, where I find him hunched over his desk, flipping through a stack of papers.

"Yves?"

He startles, which is very odd behavior for a man who often expects your presence before it arrives.

"Raphael." He sits back in his seat, blinking away the chaos on his face. "Something's wrong?"

"With you, yes. What's going on?"

Yves shakes his head. "No, actually, I'm fine. I was digging through some old papers that brought back memories."

I nod, studying his face, but he's back to his usual guarded self. "Okay. Nothing you want to talk about?"

His stoic expression slips again. "It's likely nothing, but I had a very unusual feeling earlier. I felt..." He pauses, so I take the opportunity to settle into the seat in front of his desk. "I was on the roof looking out over the city and then the air shifted. I felt this... energy. An energy specific to someone I knew a very long time ago. Before I met any of you."

"Someone you loved?"

Yves nods. "Oh yes. I loved him, but we were not meant to be. Not for lack of trying, but it seemed that something was always preventing us from being together."

"What happened to him?"

"We were turned together and lived with our maker for a time, but we went separate ways. I heard he met a gruesome fate in Paris. I was on my way there to see him again when the news reached me. Burned while he slept, his entire coven destroyed by local villagers. By the time I arrived, there was nothing but ashes and debris, and in the ruins I found a ring I had given him."

“Yves, brother. Why didn’t you tell us about this tragedy?”

“What difference would it have made? He was lost, and I was left to build a life that didn’t include him.”

“That’s when you found Syn?”

“Decades later.” He turns his head to stare off into the distance for a moment before shifting his melancholy gaze back to me. “I swear I felt him again, but it’s impossible.”

“How do you know for sure? What if he didn’t die?”

Yves shakes his head. “No. He did. If he’d survived, he would have found me again. That, I’m sure of. There’s no way all these centuries later, he wouldn’t have found me. It must have been a lost memory looking for a home.”

I reach across his desk with my palm up in offering, and he takes my hand, smiling, but the heartbreak still pours off of him.

“What was his name?”

“Tadhg.” The word is reverent on his lips.

My heart hurts for my maker and brother. I pray fate will show kindness to the man who has given so much to me.

Yves pulls his hand free. “You came for a reason?”

“Yes. Haven’s parents are coming to stay for safety. It turns out one family member is potentially willing to harm him rather than let him take his rightful inheritance.”

Yves’s face hardens. “Do you have plans to eliminate the threat?”

“Yes, but Haven’s mother is at risk, and I can’t allow anything to happen to her.”

“What can we do to help?”

“Nothing yet. I just wanted to make you aware.”

“I’ll tell the others.”

“Thanks.” I glance around his office for a moment. “Haven is my fated mate, Yves.”

Yves nods as a slight smile pulls at his lips. “I know. I sensed his connection to you as soon as we met. I’m very happy for you, Raphael. It’s wonderful to feel your soul so calm and light.”

“Yet I’m racked with guilt.”

“Guilt. Over what?”

“It isn’t fair. Especially after what you shared. Why should we be given mates before you?”

“My dear brother, fate works on her own timeline. We mustn’t question or doubt it. Perhaps...” He pauses, nodding as if agreeing with his own thoughts. “Perhaps part of my gift is watching this beautiful family I created blossom and grow. Pride fills my chest. Joy that I had a part in yours. My situation doesn’t take away from yours. I trust in divine timing.”

I nod, but it still feels so wrong. “Maybe fate is saving the best for last.”

Yves chuckles. “I’m fairly certain Thorn hopes to be last, or skipped entirely.”

I laugh too. “He’s the resistant one.”

“Yes, which I imagine is rather tempting for fate.”

“I’ll be in the front row watching that man fall.”

“I’ll be right beside you.” Yves’s smile fades. “Be with your mate, Raphael. Give him your all, and don’t waste your energy worrying about me. I’ve made it this far. I’ll be fine.”

“I know you will.”

“And let us know if you need assistance.”

“Of course. I’m going out to work tonight.”

Yves nods, effectively ending the conversation. As I leave his office, I find Viv and Viper working at the desk near the entry. Viper is typing on the computer, pointing at something on the screen and talking, but Viv isn’t paying attention to that. Her eyes are trained on the pretty woman next to her, and if she were a cartoon character, she’d have hearts for eyes. I hope love is in the air for the two of them at some point.

I enter my apartment to find Haven in my living room, dancing around to music playing on his phone. He hasn't noticed me yet, which gives me time to simply enjoy him. He shimmies in circles, swaying his hips with his head tilted back and his eyes closed, completely lost in the rhythm.

From where I stand, I can feel the heavy beat of his heart in my own chest, the sadness and worry pushed back slightly by the lightness of the music. This is the moment I want to capture. The brief moment when the weight of the world is easier to carry, when he remembers who he is at his core, when he can still be young and carefree. I hope I can always give him a refuge from the world.

The song changes and he opens his eyes, startling when he notices me. His cheeks turn a lovely pink that has me moving toward him.

“How long were you watching me?”

“Just a minute or so, but it was lovely. You looked happy.”

Haven smiles, playing with the edge of my t-shirt. “I am, mostly. I mean, I'm worried too, but every time I start to get worked up, I close my eyes and remind myself that you exist.”

“I want to be that for you, always. A safe place.”

Searching my eyes, he steps closer until our chests are pressed together. “Thank you. Like, for everything, you know?”

“I know. Let's sit. It's time I told you a few things.”

“Oh goody. Is this the part where you tell me how you hypnotized my father?”

Is it? Am I ready to reveal to him what I am? I owe him something at this point, but maybe I should start with the easy to digest bits—my profession and what we are to each other. The immortal creature of the night reveal can wait a little longer.

Once I'm seated, Haven settles onto my lap, his scent heightened by his increased body heat from dancing. My

insides stir and my gums throb with need. I have to close my eyes to keep my beast at bay a little longer.

Haven drags his hand through my hair. “I feel the same way when we’re close.”

I open my eyes. “What way is that?”

“Like I want to eat you.” His hand moves to the back of my neck where he drags his nails across my skin. “I would devour you if I could, to keep you with me always. That’s how you feel too, right?”

I nod, astounded that our desires align so perfectly. “Yes. You make me insane with need.”

Haven searches my eyes, and as he does, his own soften. “I wish you could see yourself right now. You’re so gorgeous, Rapha. Like a piece of art that came to life. Your eyes are like stars glowing in the night sky. I don’t know how you manage to look how you do, but maybe you’re not really from here.”

“From here?”

“Earth. Maybe you’re an alien who lives in the stars and just visits Earth when you feel like it. There’s no way you’re just a regular man like the rest of us.”

“There’s a reason you feel the way you do about me.”

His eyes go wide. “*Are* you an alien?”

I chuckle, shaking my head. “No. I was born to human parents on planet Earth.”

Haven giggles, twisting his fingers in my hair. “Okay. Then what’s the reason?”

I clear my throat as the words tickle my throat. “I never thought...”

“What?” He brushes his forehead against mine before pulling back enough to meet my eyes. “Tell me, Rapha.”

“Haven, my beauty, you’re my fated mate.”

TWENTY-FOUR

Haven

I can tell from his reaction that this is a very meaningful moment for him, but I'm confused as fuck.

“What does that mean?”

“Right. You wouldn't be familiar. What it means is that you and I are destined to love each other. Our souls are literally connected.”

“So... we're like soulmates? That's sweet.”

“No.” Rapha shakes his head. “It's not as simple as that. It's not...” His words trail off as his brow creases. “Shit.”

“Okay, what is it if it's not soulmates?”

Rapha hangs his head for a second or two, but when he looks up again, I gasp at the expression on his face. Warmth invades my body, and I find myself swaying into his grasp. He brushes his fingers across my cheek. His lips are moving, but his voice is faraway, like he's in a tunnel. I can't hear him with my ears, but somehow it's like my heart can. I open my mouth to speak, but words don't come. He leans in and kisses me softly several times, his lips carving a path from my mouth to my collarbone, then I'm up off the couch. Moments later, I float to the bed, resting gently in the lush bedding.

Rapha climbs in next to me, his hand sliding under my shirt and rubbing circles on my chest and belly. I've never felt so relaxed in my life. The sound of a distant buzzing reaches me.

“I’m sorry, my beauty. I’ll explain more later. I have to go to work,” I hear him say. “I want you to stay here in bed and rest. I’ll make sure your parents get here safely. When you wake up, you’ll know in your heart that everything is just fine.”

Reaching up, I touch his cheek. “So handsome. My mate...” The words come from some unknown part of me, but the rightness of them brings tears to my eyes. “Rapha?”

“Shh,” he whispers. “I am your mate, my darling. I will love you until the end of time. You will never be alone again.” He lifts my hand to his lips, kissing it as I watch him in a dreamlike haze. “I have waited endlessly for you, and now you’re here. When the time is right, I will reveal everything you need to know. You are safe here. Always.”

“Okay, handsome. I’m tired now.”

“Sleep.”

“Yes, sleep,” I repeat as my eyelids close, seemingly dragged down by weights. “Everything is perfect. Raphael... is... perfect. Love... Raph...”

I blink awake slowly, feeling groggy and disoriented. It’s dark outside, and I have no idea what time it is. I sit up slowly, trying to get my bearings, but I don’t even remember how I got in bed. My chest tugs strangely, as if some part of me is missing, and I rub the place over my heart. Where’s Rapha?

I climb out of bed and head to the bathroom to splash water on my face and snap out of whatever deep sleep hit me. Then I remember my parents should be here by now. I’ll have to call to figure out which unit they’re in.

My ringing phone pulls my attention back to the bedroom, and I hurry over to grab it, drying my face with a hand towel. I don’t recognize the number but answer it anyway.

“Hello?”

“If you want to know what your husband really is, I suggest you come down to Park and Eighteenth.”

“Who is this?” The man’s voice is unfamiliar to me. “Hello?”

I pull the phone away from my ear. The call was disconnected. Park and Eighteenth? That’s one of the rumored Mafia areas. Why would Rapha be down there if he’s not in the Mafia like he said? Or maybe he really is CIA and is doing an undercover sting? That would explain why he’s so secretive about his work. Oh! Maybe that’s how he knew how to do that mind control shit he did on my father.

A part of me knows I definitely should not leave the safety of this apartment to go see what Rapha is doing. I trust him, even though we barely know each other. No, I’ll wait here and tell him about the call when he gets home.

With my mind made up, I go back to the bathroom to brush my teeth, but before I get there my phone buzzes with a text. I rush back to grab it. It’s a number I don’t recognize again, but I smile when I see the words.

Rapha: Borrowing a phone. Mine’s dead. Just checking in. What are you doing?

Me: Just waiting for my handsome man to come home.

Rapha: Want to meet up?

Me: Yes! Are my parents here?

Rapha: Soon. I’m downtown near Park Street. Do you know the area?

My instincts tingle. Something doesn’t feel right. It’s exactly where the person who called told me Rapha was.

Me: I got a call earlier. A man said you were at Park and Eighteenth. I think you’re being followed.

Rapha: I handled it. Come down and I’ll explain.

Me: Okay. I’ll grab a car.

Rapha: See you soon.

His ending feels a little cold, but he's on someone else's phone, so maybe he's just keeping it chill. I hurry and finish finger styling my hair, then throw on my shoes as I use an app to schedule a ride.

I guess tonight's the night he wants to show me what he does for work. I just wish I could shake the strange feeling of foreboding gripping my bones.

TWENTY-FIVE

Raphael

Walking through the alley with Thorn, Eros, and Midnight, a strange feeling hangs in the air. When I left Haven earlier, I was confused, my mind chaotic. I hadn't thought it through. How would I explain fated mates to him without revealing my vampire nature? A stupid move on my part that forced me to compel him.

Now I'm out working to blow off some steam, but I was interrupted by a frantic text from one of our trusted contacts. We were told there was a group of gang members shooting up restaurants and clubs downtown, but we're here now and everything is eerily quiet.

Midnight tries the contact again, but he's not answering. "I don't feel good about this," he says, sliding his phone back into his coat pocket.

"Something is off," Thorn confirms. "I can feel it down my spine."

"I'll call Yves again," Eros says.

We stop walking and simply let our senses explore the area. I lean against a brick building and text Haven to check in. It's possible he's still asleep, and as long as he's at my place, I know he's safe, but I'd still like to hear his voice. I need to touch base with his father too and make sure the parents make it to our building unscathed.

The sudden shift in the air hits me like walking into a brick wall, and I lift my head sharply, my gaze focused on Eros.

“What’s wrong?” I demand.

“Yves said he thinks we’re walking into a trap,” Eros says. “He made some calls after we left, and Terrence has been in California visiting family for over a week.”

“Fuck. How would someone get my number plus pretend to be Terrence?” Then the pieces start to slot together, and I immediately tear off towards home, instinctively knowing that Haven is in danger, but I’m stopped by my ringing phone. My panic settles when I see my love’s name on the screen. “Haven.”

He doesn’t speak, but I hear heavy breathing and feet shuffling.

“Where’s your phone?” a man’s voice comes over the line, thick with an unfamiliar accent.

“I don’t have it.” That’s Haven.

My blood crawls when I realize someone has Haven. I focus on the call as my brothers gather around me.

“Fucking liar,” the man spits. “Everyone has a phone.”

“I forgot it at home.” Haven’s voice is strong and brave, like he’s not afraid, but he must be. “Just let me go, okay? This was an accident.”

The man scoffs. “An accident? No one shows up here by accident. Who sent you?”

Where are you? The question radiates off me and I pray to Hades it reaches Haven.

“Just don’t hurt me, okay,” Haven says. “Because if you do, my husband is gonna find you and tear you limb from limb.”

“Is that so?” the man says, chuckling darkly. “I ain’t afraid of no one. So why don’t you just tell me who sent you here, and maybe I’ll let you live.”

I turn to Eros, my jaw tight. “Someone has Haven, and it’s not his uncle. He doesn’t know who it is.”

“We’ll find him, brother,” Eros says, squeezing my shoulder. “Focus on your connection.”

Closing my eyes, I shift my attention to the tight ball in my chest, pulsating with energy. Slowly, as it coils through me, I sense Haven. His bond reacts with joy, bouncing along our connection, but it’s still hazy.

My brothers put their hands on my chest, all of us intently focusing on Haven. Then, finally, an image forms in my mind, and the sense of my mate strengthens. I open my eyes.

“The Onyx,” I whisper. “The old nightclub over on Park and Eighteenth. He’s there.”

“Let’s go, then,” Thorn says.

We take off using our heightened speed, and as we travel, Midnight’s phone rings while I keep my ear trained on the call with Haven. All I can hear are muffled noises and voices, and if he’s with who I think he might be with, time is running out.

Midnight’s hand on my shoulder brings me to an abrupt stop. “Yves said Haven’s father showed up. He got a call from his brother saying that he plans to remove the quote ‘problem’ tonight, and if he gets in his way, he’ll be part of the removal.”

“Fuck! There’s no way whoever has Haven is someone he knows. What the fuck is going on?”

“Come on,” Eros urges. “We need to get there and find out.”

Rage takes over, spreading through me like cancer, and with my beast fully taking over, I channel all of it to rescue my mate. I didn’t wait centuries to find him only to lose him to some asshole. Not happening.

I’m on my way.

Gods, I hope he knows.

TWENTY-SIX

Haven

I definitely fucked up.

I should have listened to the warning bells as I got closer to the area. Part of me knew something was wrong, but I wanted to see Rapha badly enough that I ignored it. Now I'm tied to a column with my mouth gagged as two scary looking dudes talk quietly in front of me.

Behind them is a table stacked with guns, cash, and packages of a white substance I can only assume is whatever the hot drug of the moment is. So yeah, I walked in on some Mafia guys, and I'm in trouble.

All I can do now is hope that Raphael picked up on what was happening. My quick thinking to dial his number and slide the phone behind some boxes is the only chance I have to survive this. There's been a strange tightness in my chest since I heard his voice, and an even stranger calmness given the seriousness of my situation. It's like some part of me just knows he's on his way. I don't know how it's possible, but I can *feel* him.

"What do we do with this asshole?" the larger of the two men asks the other.

"I don't give a fuck, Frankie. Shoot him, slash him, fuck him, whatever. Just make sure he doesn't talk to no one. If this deal goes sideways, The Admiral will fuck us up."

The Admiral. Fuck. The most notorious mobster in America. I thought he was all about the Chicago area though.

What's he doing in New Onyx?

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Frankie says, glancing at me. “He is kind of pretty.” He licks his lips in a way that turns my stomach.

“I was joking about fucking him, dude. We don't have time for shit like that.”

“Ah, come on, Ice Pick. It'd take me like five minutes. You could get some too.”

“I fuck chicks, man.” His comment doesn't stop him from eyeing me like a sex toy.

“Ass is ass,” Frankie says. “We got ten minutes. We get off, we slash his throat, and whoever sent him here learns a lesson.”

“Yeah, okay.” Ice Pick is already unzipping his jeans.

I break out in a cold sweat as fear grips my stomach, choosing to close my eyes. I may be helpless, but I won't watch them do this to me. If I die tonight, I want the last face I see to be Raphael's, even if it's just in my mind.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Raphael

Haven's scent strengthens the closer we get, drawing me with the frenzied need to protect my mate. When we turn the corner and see the dilapidated old bar, I spot a man on the side standing on boxes and peering into the window.

Eros is on him before I can get there, dropping him on the ground before me. It's Joe.

"You motherfucker!" I pounce and slash his cheek with my long nails. "Where is Haven?"

"Inside," he says, his voice shaking with fear. "I didn't mean for it to go this far."

Clutching him around the neck, I lift him off the ground. "No? Then what was the threat made to his father?"

Joe coughs as he chokes in my grip. "I thought..." He squeezes his eyes closed for a second. "I thought if he came down here and got beat up, he'd back off." He coughs again. "I paid—" He can't get his words out so I loosen my hold just enough.

"Talk."

"I paid some kids, but Haven... he went inside." Joe grimaces. "There's some mob guys inside."

I toss Joe to the ground. "I'll deal with you later," I growl as I stomp towards the building's door. Eros and Thorn are beside me while Midnight keeps Joe under his watchful eye.

I kick the door off its hinges, navigating the musty, dark space to the only dim light on near the back. I tear that door from its frame too, entering the room just as some huge dude is touching my mate's face. I hiss loud enough to rattle the windows before descending on the man, easily dragging him away from Haven.

I let my beast take over at that point, or rather, I give in to what is already happening, shredding the man's neck open with one swipe. Then I'm on top of him, tearing at his flesh with my fangs and soaking in his pained screams as he begs me to let him live.

I don't know how much time passes until my beast is satiated and the man beneath me is nothing but a bloody ruin, but when the haze lifts, I turn to Haven and the realization of what he just witnessed sinks in. But instead of fear, I see awe and lust coloring his features.

“Holy fuck, Rapha. What are you?”

I glance around the space. Thorn is packing up the cash while Midnight and Eros destroy the guns and drugs. The other man lies lifeless on the floor between them, a pool of blood surrounding his body.

Without a viable excuse and too relieved that Haven is safe to come up with a plausible explanation or to compel it away, I simply nod. He had to know at some point.

“Haven, my beauty. I'm a vampire.”

I don't know what kind of reaction I expected, but it isn't the one I get. Haven's mouth spreads into a brilliant smile.

“A vampire? No way. A vampire,” he repeats in a breathy voice. He gazes off for a second then nods. “That's how you influenced my father. That's why...” He pauses as his face lights up. “That's what you meant earlier that we aren't just soulmates.”

I nod, pulling myself up from the floor. I'm covered in the man's blood, and now that Haven knows, the vampire in me won't subside. He doesn't seem to fear me as I slowly walk toward him though.

“You’re not in the Mafia or CIA ops.” He chuckles. “A vampire.”

“There’s a lot to discuss, but first, we need to get you out of here.”

“Okay.”

He studies my face as I untie him. Once his hands are free, he reaches out and brushes his fingers across my bloody cheek, wiping them on his own shirt.

“I knew you would come. I felt it.”

Haven lifts the hem of his t-shirt and wipes the blood from my mouth. My eyelids flutter from his unspoken acceptance. I turn my face to kiss his wrist as he cleans me up.

“I knew you weren’t a regular man,” he whispers.

“No.” I grip his hand. “Haven, Joe is outside.”

His brow creases. “Joe? My uncle Joe?”

I nod. “Yes. He sent you here to have you beat up.”

“What? I got a text from you.”

“No. It was him. Somehow he texted me too, from someone in my contact list. Led me across town from here. He planned all of this.”

His eyes widen with betrayal and shock. “He wanted me to die?”

“He says he didn’t mean for it to go that far. Do you want to see him?”

“Fuck yeah, I want to see him.”

Haven pushes past me. Midnight made sure Joe wasn’t going anywhere and has the man locked in a dumpster when we get outside. Haven marches over to where we can hear the man’s muffled screams and waits for me to pull the lock off. When I lift the lid, Joe stands, gasping for fresh air. The scent of rotten food and urine wafts from the container. Haven scrunches his nose, stepping back. Midnight lifts Joe out easily and sets him down.

“Seriously, Joe? How could you?” Haven asks, his arms folded across his chest. “Are you so fucking desperate you would have your own family harmed?”

Joe doesn’t speak until I shove his shoulder hard enough to slam him into the dumpster. “Fucking talk or I’ll make you.”

Joe flinches but nods. “I didn’t think you’d go inside,” he mumbles.

“What’s that?” I ask, kicking his shin.

Joe yelps, glaring at me. “I hacked Raphael’s phone and spoofed some numbers. I paid some kids to beat you up,” he admits. “But that’s it. I didn’t want you killed.”

“You think that’s better?” Haven asks. “You’re a loser, Joe. I can’t believe you would destroy so much. For what? Money? A business? Did you think I would just walk away with my tail between my legs?”

“Yes.”

Haven scoffs. “You obviously don’t know me.” He walks closer to his uncle. “All I would have to do right now is say the word and Raphael would end your life. Do you understand how powerful I am?” I gesture to Raphael. “You see this blood on his clothes?”

Joe visibly trembles but his eyes harden. “You should kill me. I have no honor left.”

“That’s obvious,” Haven says. “But death is too kind for you. You deserve to face the consequences of what you’ve done. You’ll stand before your family and admit it.”

“I will not,” he says, his tone full of defiance.

“Yeah, you will,” I say. “You’ll do whatever Haven wants you to do. I’ll make sure of it.”

“You don’t have proof I did anything,” Joe says.

Haven chuckles. “I don’t need proof. I have the company. For once, I have my father’s ear. I have everything I need to make sure you pay for what you’ve done, and I have some pretty impressive backup.”

Eros appears next to me. “We should go, Raph. There’s about to be a huge fire.”

“Excellent.”

Thorn comes screeching around the corner in a black SUV. He lowers the driver’s side window, a maniacal smile on his face. “Get in, losers.”

“Where did you get the vehicle?” Midnight asks.

“Borrowed it,” Thorn answers, winking.

Haven watches as Eros shoves Joe toward the car.

“Put him in the back,” Thorn yells. “He stinks.”

Once we’re on the road, Haven squeezes my thigh. “You have a lot of explaining to do, mister.”

“I know.”

“But...” He sighs. “I still trust you.”

Thank the gods. I lift his hand to my mouth and kiss his palm. “I’ll tell you everything.”

“I know.” He glances over his shoulder. “I think I’m still reeling from finding out my uncle was trying to hurt me. My father warned us, but this is unreal.”

I rub his back to comfort him. “Your family does not deserve you.”

He laughs softly, but it has a bitter edge to it. “I’ve tried a million times to figure out how all of this happened. I just don’t get how families turn on each other over money or... I don’t even know. Is it money? Power? It’s not like the family business is some kind of global conglomerate. We aren’t curing cancer.”

“What does the company do?”

“We partner with small business owners in other countries to help them build trade relationships with larger compatible companies in the US. The idea is to improve the global economy and to expand trade partnerships.”

“That sounds amazing.”

“It is. Gedo was passionate about giving back, and he was loyal to the country that had helped him build a better life for his family. I’m anxious to find out where the company stands now.” He squeezes my hand. “But first, I have to deal with jerkface back there.”

I kiss his cheek. “Tell me again how you ended up out here.”

“I got a weird call from a guy who told me I should come out to this area. I ignored it but then I got a text that seemed like it was from you. I should’ve gone with my instinct, but I didn’t. When I got here it was quiet and I was scared, so I went inside the club. I called your name and ran into those bad dudes. By then it was too late to run.”

Rage stirs my beast again at the mere thought of what could have happened had we been any later. “They didn’t harm you?”

“No. You got there in time.” He threads our fingers together. “I don’t know if it matters to you and your brothers, but I heard them talk about The Admiral.”

Thorn twists around to face us even though he’s the driver. “The Admiral? The fuck is he doing in New Onyx?”

“That’s what I wondered,” Haven says. “I don’t know shit about the Mafia, but he’s in the news so much I know about him. Isn’t he a Chicago dude?”

“That was my understanding,” I mutter. “We don’t bother with them much. As long as they stay out of our business, we stay out of theirs.”

“But it is interesting,” Eros muses. “They could be up to something we should know about.”

“Definitely,” I agree. “I’ll let Yves know.”

Wrapping my arm around Haven, I let my mind wander to the moment I reveal all. He handled finding out what I am shockingly well, but then again, I have to assume he hasn’t really processed it yet, given the situation.

First up though, is what to do with his uncle.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Haven

My husband is a vampire.

I practically giggle at the thought. In no way does that sentence even make sense, but unless this is all an elaborate dream, there's no other way to explain what I saw when he burst into that room. I watched with my own eyes as he ripped into Frankie's neck with his teeth like some kind of feral animal. He killed him right in front of me, and as he looked at me with the man's blood all over his face, I know I should have been repulsed, but instead I felt so damn protected.

Now he's the Rapha I'm used to—warm and comforting, very much a regular, if extremely attractive, looking man. Gone are the sharp, talon-like nails, the gleaming white fangs and glowing eyes. I have so many questions to ask once we're alone again.

Thorn drives like a lunatic through the streets of New Onyx and we arrive back at Rapha's home way before we should. Once we're all out of the car, Thorn announces he's returning the car and tears off into the night again.

“He's interesting,” I murmur.

Eros chuckles. “You have no idea.”

Midnight has my uncle by the collar, shoving him as he walks. All I can do is glare at the man who until now I thought was the most compliant. He never spoke up, never challenged me. He just sat quietly, letting my father and Ali do all the talking.

In the elevator, I'm tempted to punch him in the face, and maybe I will before the night is over. I could've been killed tonight. The doors open and Yves is standing there with my parents. My mother's eyes are red like she's been crying.

I step out and straight into her arms. She holds me tight, kissing the side of my head.

"My son. Are you hurt?"

"No, Mom. I'm fine."

When I step back, the fire in my father's expression as he glares at Joe makes my breath hitch. He's obviously holding himself back. I've never seen him look so enraged.

"What smells so bad?" Syn asks, standing behind Yves with his man, Bowie.

"That's my traitorous uncle," I answer. "Who is about to tell us what the actual fuck."

"Yeah, okay," Syn says. "But the stench is too much. I'll go get a change of clothes."

"Vampires smell everything intensely," Raphael whispers in my ear. "What's overwhelming for mortals is intolerable to us."

I turn to face him as his unspoken words settle in my brain. That means Syn is a vampire. That means all of them probably are. Cool.

Syn returns lightning fast, tossing a shirt and sweatpants at Joe. He looks at all of us, then sighs with resignation when he realizes he's not getting any privacy. My mother, bless her, looks away while Joe changes.

An intercom buzzes and Yves nods. "Your uncle Ali was invited over."

"Oh good. He needs to hear this too."

Raphael pulls a small vial from his pocket and drinks it down.

"What is that?" I ask.

“Hides the blood,” he whispers.

“I can still see it.”

“Because you know. No one else can.”

After Joe is changed, Midnight nudges him to walk to the area in the center where there are lots of couches and chairs. The brothers must hang out here a lot. When Ali comes up, he has Amir Hassan, the estate trustee, with him. Ooh, good call.

Ali’s eyes flicker to me, then my father, then finally reflect surprise when he sees the condition Joe is in. Dirty, wearing clothes too big for him, and guarded by two of Rapha’s brothers, he’s far from the commanding presence he usually is.

“Right,” Yves says. “Let’s get on with this, shall we?”

“We shall,” I say, walking over to stand in front of Joe. “Why don’t you tell the class what you’ve been up to, *dear uncle*.”

Joe glares, his jaw tight. Doesn’t look like he plans to speak up.

“Don’t make us encourage you,” I add. “You’re pretty outnumbered right now.”

“What did you do, Joe?” my father asks. “Is it true you tried to hurt my son?”

“He almost got me killed. I was seconds away from a very brutal end.”

My mother’s gasp breaks my heart, but I don’t look at her. I’ll fall apart if I do.

“You tricked me,” I continue. “You sent me to a Mafia drug house. You asshole. Do you know what they were gonna do to me?” My voice finally cracks with the stress and fear I was holding in. “They were going to rape me, Joe. Then they were gonna cut my throat and leave me there to die. Is that what you wanted?”

“Oh god,” my mother wails before she lunges forward and attacks Joe, scratching his face as she pummels him.

My father grabs her, holding her close as she sobs. My eyes well with tears, but Rapha is right there supporting me.

“Look what you did,” I say to him. “Are you happy now?”

“That wasn’t supposed to happen,” he finally says. His voice is hard though. “I was just trying to scare you into walking away.”

“Yeah, I heard about that. Scare me by having me beaten up. So much better.”

He lifts his head, glaring at me with pure hatred. “You spoiled little brat,” he spits. “You don’t lift a finger but you get everything on a silver platter because your grandfather had a soft spot for you. I’ll never understand what he saw in you, but I had no intention of letting you take this away from me. You don’t deserve it.”

“I don’t deserve it? At least I can look in a mirror at night and know that I still have my honor. What do you have?”

“If I may,” Mr. Hassan says softly. “I finished reviewing the last two quarters of financial reports.” He hands identical sheets of paper to me, my father, and Ali.

I notice how pale Joe turns as he watches. When I look down at the paper, my stomach plummets to the floor. Fuck.

“What is it?” Rapha asks.

“Only several million dollars directed to an offshore account belonging to a company that doesn’t exist on any government’s books.” I look up at my uncle. “You piece of shit.”

He attempts to rise from his chair, but Midnight and Eros hold him down by the shoulders.

“Joe?” Ali says, still looking at the printout. “Did you steal from us?”

He doesn’t say a word until Raphael kicks his shin. “Please don’t make us force you to talk. You won’t enjoy it.”

Joe, still seething, lifts his head, focusing on my father. “You are so weak, Salman. You were just going to accept it all.”

Thirty years we've dedicated to our father's vision, all so he can just give it away to your son. Not mine, not Ali's. Your... *flighty* son."

I know all too well that flighty is code for gay. Anger rises like bile in my throat, but Rapha has his arms around me, holding me in place, so I lean into his presence for balance.

"I am the oldest," my father says. "It is tradition."

"We are still alive," Joe spits. "What does Haven know? He failed once. Are we supposed to sit back and let him destroy everything we built?"

"It's what father wanted, Joe. You know I wasn't happy about it either."

"But you wouldn't do anything," he yells. "So I did. I took enough to make sure I could survive, and yes, I intended to make a point. It's not my fault he stupidly walked into that building."

"Yes it is, you asshole. I wouldn't have been there if it hadn't been for you."

"I would rather die than watch you take my livelihood from me," Joe mutters.

"Maybe we can arrange that," I retort. I rub my forehead. "Amir, Father, Ali, can we speak?"

The four of us step into the massive foyer while Raphael stays with my mother.

"What would you like to have done to him?" I ask. "I have my opinions."

"Which are?" my father asks.

"Pressing charges would bring unflattering attention to the business and possibly worry our clients and partners, plus I can't prove what he did to me tonight unless he confesses."

Both men nod while Amir just listens.

"I was thinking maybe he has to return the money he took and, I don't know, pay us some kind of restitution. Of course,

he's out of any business dealings, but I'm open to hearing other ideas."

"As a family member," Amir says, "he's entitled to lifetime profit sharing as established by your grandfather. You could adjust that benefit."

I nod. "But that hurts his family too."

"We could set up a trust for his children and ensure he doesn't have access on any level," Amir suggests.

"Hmm. I like that."

"I propose a lifetime ban from using the family name, any client relationships, or business ideas," Ali says. "That will handicap him greatly."

I nod. "Good. Anything else?"

"He needs to pay for what he did to you tonight," my father says. "Pay with more than money."

"I don't know how we'd accomplish that without involving the authorities." I turn my head to see Rapha handing my mother a cup of tea. My heart swells in my chest at his gentleness with her. Only I know what's hiding under his surface. Why is that so damn hot?

"I have an idea," my father says, his tone somber. "He'll hate it."

Ali's expression lifts too. "Oh. If it's what I'm thinking, that's genius."

"What?" I ask.

"We'll exile him to our father's village for a year," my father says. "We went there as children and every time, he couldn't wait to get back to America. We still have some extended family there."

Ali grins. "Devious and perfect. Let's go tell him."

"Does that work for you, Haven?" my father asks, and the gesture is so foreign, my throat clogs.

"Yes, that's fine."

“Good. You tell him. We’ll back you up. Amir, can you help Haven organize the necessary paperwork to make these adjustments?”

“Of course.”

We walk back to where my uncle is slumped in a chair between Rapha’s intimidating as hell brothers.

“We’ve made our decision,” I announce. “Your profit-sharing percentage will be redirected to a trust for your children. You will repay what you’ve stolen, and we’re implementing a ban on the use of the family name, ideas, and all related business dealings.”

Joe’s mouth drops.

“Additionally,” I continue, “in lieu of involving the authorities over your actions tonight, we’re sending you to Egypt for a year.”

His face turns red with anger.

“Your family will be provided for in your absence.”

“You... you can’t do that,” he says, his voice shaking.

“Yes, actually we can.”

“And if I were you, Joe,” Rapha says, “I’d take Haven’s deal. You don’t want to know what I would like to do to you for the danger you put him in tonight.”

I don’t know what Joe sees looking at Rapha, but pure terror settles over his features and he nods. “Okay. Okay, yes, I accept this.”

When I look at Rapha, he smiles and winks at me.

The elevator doors open and Thorn comes strutting out. He glances around at everyone as he approaches me and Rapha.

“What’s going on?”

“Just tying things up with Joe,” Rapha says.

“Are we draining him?” Thorn asks, his face lit up.

My father, Ali, and Amir blanche, and I have to hold back laughter.

“No, unfortunately,” I answer. “We’re banning him from the company and the country for a year.”

“Boring. Hey, I found the guys Joe paid to rough up your mate. Let’s just say they won’t be fucking anyone up for a while.”

“Thanks, Thorn,” I say.

“You got it.”

My uncle and father talk with Amir while Joe sits pouting in the chair.

I lean into Rapha as he puts his arm around me. “What a wild night.”

He kisses the top of my head. “I’m proud of how you handled yourself.”

“Would you have killed him for me if I asked?”

“Without hesitation.”

I turn and gaze into his eyes. “After we get him out of here, we should fuck.”

Rapha grins. “I thought we had more talking to do.”

“Oh, we’ll do that too, but after you split me in two. Let me get my fam taken care of and then it’s you and me.”

He lightly touches my cheek. “You’re not afraid of me?”

“Far from it, handsome.”

TWENTY-NINE

Raphael

Finally alone!

The night has pushed me to the limits of my control, and I'm desperate to lose myself in Haven's body and scent.

As soon as the door is closed behind us, he grins, pulling the shirt he's wearing over his head and tossing it to the floor. "First, I need a shower. Being held captive in a dirty nightclub doesn't look good on me."

"Wrong. You still look good enough to eat."

Haven tilts his head, still grinning. "Could you eat me up, vampire?"

"You have no idea."

"Hmm," he murmurs, rubbing against me. "Show me."

"Oh, I will." I sweep him off his feet and he giggles as I carry him to the bathroom.

I set him down on the vanity so I can start the shower. When I turn around, he's gazing at me with heated eyes.

"I'm so curious," he says softly. "I want to know everything about you."

"I'll tell you everything." I tug my shirt off. Just gazing at him stirs my soul, my vampire pushing to the surface for another taste. "You still smell sweet."

"That's good." He slides off the counter and unbuttons his jeans. "I can't believe this is my life now."

“You deserve the world, my beauty. I can give it to you.”

“I already have everything I want.” He unzips my jeans. “Almost everything. All that’s missing is some of this dick.”

I laugh, wrapping my arms around him and kissing his neck. Inhaling his scent, I walk us into the shower, indulging in the softness of his flesh and the thrum of his vein under my lips.

“Now I know why you like to bite,” Haven murmurs, dragging his fingers through my hair. “You really were drinking my blood.”

“Tasting,” I whisper. “Only tasting.”

He slides his hands down my body, tilting his head back to kiss my chin. “But you want more?”

I nod, searching his eyes before twisting us so he’s under the stream of water. His closeness combined with his tempting words draws my beast closer to the surface. Now that I know he is truly my mate, holding back from making him mine for all eternity is proving difficult.

Instead, I focus my energy on washing his body. “I want to erase what happened tonight. You must have been so afraid.”

Haven shakes his head. “Not as much as you’d think. I knew you were coming. I was just scared they would...” He blows out a breath. “You know, touch me before you got there.”

“I’m so sorry this happened to you. You don’t deserve what Joe tried to do.”

Haven slides his arms around my neck. “I don’t want to talk about Joe or any of this anymore tonight. I want to pretend we’re on a honeymoon, just the two of us.”

“Yeah? Where would we go?”

“Somewhere warm, where we could be naked all the time.”

“We could go somewhere cold too. We could spend all of our time in front of the fireplace, very naked. In fact, as pretty

as you look in clothes, I prefer you naked.”

“Sweet talker. I think...” He tilts his head again as a slow smile spreads across his lovely mouth. “I think I like your idea. Take me away for a while, Rapha.”

“Anything you want.”

“Can you get time off work?”

I chuckle at that. “I’m sure I can.”

“Good.”

He sinks to his knees, but I lift him right back up. “No. I want to be in bed. I want to savor you.”

His expression softens. “Me too.”

After rinsing the soap from his body, I shut the water off and wrap him in a fluffy towel. With my arms around him, I walk us to the bed, my cock swelling against his ass even with the towel between us. My gums throb, so I simply give in, releasing my will to hold them in.

When he drops the towel and climbs on the bed, he gasps. “Oh, Rapha.”

“What?”

“Your teeth. You look so... stunning.”

“I’m not holding back.”

“Please don’t.”

I join him on the bed, settling between his legs. “Still not afraid of me, right?”

“No,” he answers, shaking his head. “You wouldn’t hurt me. If you wanted to, you would have done it by now.”

“I would never harm you. The only pain you’ll ever receive from me is only the kind you seek.”

Haven moans softly, bucking his hips just a bit. “You turn me on so much. More than anyone ever has.”

“Because we’re connected on a level you’ve never experienced. Nor have I.” I press a kiss to his belly. “My

darling Haven..." I whisper, nuzzling his belly button. "You undo me."

He cards his fingers through my hair. "Back at ya. Show me your teeth."

I part my lips to reveal them fully. Haven's breath catches and his cock hardens even more beneath me.

"I've never shown myself to a mortal."

"A mortal," he repeats, smiling. "So immortality is real?"

"It is."

"Mm. Come up here and kiss me."

Gliding up his body, I moan as our cocks bump together. Mine is dripping with sticky precum, ready for more of his body. I attack his mouth, kissing him as deeply as I can, and he melts into me, wrapping his arms and legs around me to pull me closer.

I slide my hand down his side, over his hip, and between his legs to find his delectable hole. Haven arches his back when I touch him there, moaning softly into our kiss.

"Yesss. Please, Rapha. I need you inside me."

My intention to go slow and take my time with him vanishes with his needy pleas, and instead I line my cock up against his rim, rubbing back and forth to soften him before I push my way inside.

The noise Haven makes as I enter him is my new favorite sound. His body accepts me easily, as if we're separate puzzle pieces meant to be slotted together. I guess we are in some ways. Fate has given me a gift beyond my wildest dreams.

Haven digs his nails into my shoulders, holding my gaze with his lips parted. His brow creased, he nods his encouragement. A thousand images of our future together flash through my mind, sending shivers down my spine.

"I have waited so long..." I whisper before burying my face in the curve of his neck.

We move together in perfect rhythm, his supple body taking every single thrust easily. I slide my arms under him, lifting him up to sit on my lap. He smiles, kissing my nose as he rides my dick.

“You’re fucking perfect, Rapha. I’m never letting you go.”

“Convenient, since I feel the same.”

Haven falls silent as he rocks himself up and down. Gripping his shoulders, I hold him in place and thrust, bucking my hips hard and rough, knowing he can handle it. He goes limp, allowing me to support his weight as he moans, “Yessss,” over and over with his head thrown back and his eyes closed.

“All the gods, you feel amazing.”

“How do I taste?” He opens his eyes slightly. “Bite me.”

I don’t hesitate, pulling him upright and sinking my teeth into his neck. Warm, sweet blood floods my mouth, and my heart reacts, beating out of time until it syncs perfectly with his.

“Oh god,” Haven whimpers. “Yes. It feels so good. Drink, my vampire,” he says, twisting his hand in my hair to hold me to his neck.

I’m vaguely aware of how much I’m consuming, knowing I need to use restraint, but how the fuck do I pull away from such sweet elixir?

“Raph...” He claws at my back. “Oh fuck. I’m gonna come.”

His body tenses and he cries out my name as his cock pulses between us and warm cum gushes out. I pop off his neck and toss him backward, lifting his legs and slamming into him, reaching my climax mere seconds later.

I collapse on top of him, drowning in sensory overload—his blood on my tongue, cum on my skin, heated scent wafting around me. He is everything and everywhere.

He strokes my hair as his body gently shakes and I realize with some alarm that he’s crying.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, lifting my head.

Haven shakes his head, wiping his cheeks. “Nothing. Everything is so perfect, it brought tears to my eyes.” He cups my chin. “I can’t believe you’re real and you’re with me. I didn’t even know I could feel so happy.”

I turn my face to kiss his wrist. “Let’s get you cleaned up. I have so much to tell you.”

Haven nods, smiling sweetly. “Yeah, okay. It’s time to talk.”

THIRTY

Haven

Still glowing from the hole wrecking I just endured, I roll onto my side, smiling at Rapha as he wipes me down with a warm washcloth. He's so gentle with me one minute, then railing me within an inch of my life the next. His lips are tinged red from my blood, and the realization of that sends a pleasant shiver through me.

He tosses the washcloth into the bathroom and climbs back in bed with me, also lying on his side as he gazes at me.

"Sometimes I would think your eyes were glowing or you looked too perfect, like a statue come to life, but I wasn't imagining it, was I?"

"No. When the vampire appears, it changes me."

"Okay, so how does it appear? Is it something inside of you? Separate?"

"It's not separate, no. Eros explains it best. I am always a vampire. It is my truest essence, but with time, I've learned to let the man surface and keep my true self hidden away. It's how we're able to blend in with society around us."

I nod, trying to deal with the questions crowding my head. "Your job? Is vampire a profession?"

Rapha chuckles. "Not exactly, no. As time went on and society became more industrialized, more civilized in some ways, we needed an outlet. We require blood to thrive, so Yves created Veil Protection Services over forty years ago."

“And what does Veil Protection Services do?”

“We’re assassins.”

I’m sure my face just went blank. “No shit. You kill people?”

“Necessary killing, yes. We’re hired by clients who need obstacles removed for various reasons.”

“Whoa. That’s why you said you work in the area where the pizza shop is.”

“We’re usually in the worst parts of town, but we’ve definitely visited a mansion or two in our day.”

“Have you killed anyone famous?”

“Yes.”

“And it doesn’t bother you?”

“No.” Rapha shakes his head. “We’re not like mortals anymore. Right and wrong in our world is completely different. We live by our own code of ethics.”

“Like not killing my uncle?”

“Oh, I would’ve killed him if you’d said yes. I would have delighted in his death. That wasn’t about ethics. That was about you.”

My stomach flutters. This conversation should not be hot, but tell that to my dick. “What are some examples of things you wouldn’t do?”

“We try very hard not to harm the innocent. We typically won’t take a job that includes children or women or anyone whose absence would be too high profile.”

“Like the president?”

“Exactly. Any world leader, most politicians.”

“Too bad. I can think of a few we’d be better off without.”

He grins. “Me too.”

I brush my fingers across his cheek. “What does it do for you? When you kill?”

“It’s an outlet and a source of food. We can feed and the beast inside us craves violence. We are apex predators and the human race is our prey.”

There’s that damn tingle again. “Do you ever get scared?”

Raphael grins. “No. I have nothing to fear.”

“But... Okay, I saw a movie once where daylight killed vampires, but you’ve been outside in the daytime. You don’t sleep in a coffin. What else is wrong?”

“Almost everything. My brothers and I descend from the original vampire, making us elite and much harder to kill. A stake through the heart won’t do it. We can heal from that, whereas other vampires cannot.”

“Garlic? Crucifixes?”

“No effect. The only thing that can kill me is decapitation.”

I shudder at the thought. Now for the big question. “How did you become a vampire? You weren’t born that way, right?”

“No. That’s where Hollywood mostly gets it right.” He rubs his thumb across my bottom lip. “I was born in 1695 in a village near Madrid.”

I open my mouth to speak, but I’m stunned speechless.

“My mother died when I was only three. My father, bereft from his loss, drank away his days and nights and then stopped coming home altogether. I was alone, begging for food from the other villagers. At fourteen, a man approached me in the market and offered me a warm bed and food. All he wanted in return was my body. I had nothing else to give him, so I said yes.”

My eyes well with tears as he tells his story. Rapha has a faraway look in his eyes, as if he’s reliving it all in his mind.

“Gustavo took me in. I shared a room with three boys and two girls my age, and we worked the markets of Madrid. I had to give him most of my money, but I had a safe place to sleep.”

“Were you happy?”

“No. No, but I didn’t expect to be. I was just surviving. Gustavo often sampled his own goods, and if I close my eyes, I can still smell him. He turned my stomach, always smelling of stale wine and pork mixed with sweat. I only refused once. He beat me so badly I couldn’t work for days.”

“Oh, Rapha.”

“When I was twenty, Gustavo died of a heart attack. I went out on my own looking for respectable work. I was willing to do anything, but no one would have me. I was tainted.” He shrugs one shoulder. “So back to turning tricks for me. I was handsome and sought after, which allowed me to make a decent living. I could pay for my own room. It was shabby and it smelled, but it was mine alone.”

“I can’t imagine.”

“It was a very different world than the one we have now, but in some ways so similar. The poor and disadvantaged are not welcomed by those with more.”

“True.”

“My life changed one day when the prince and his entourage came to town,” Rapha continues. “I caught his eye and he summoned me to the palace. He bathed me and gave me fresh clothing. I became his lover.”

“The prince of Spain?”

“Yes. The poor closeted prince with a pretty wife and a desperate need to be dominated. We snuck around for months. He would even lower himself to visit me in my room.”

“Did you love him?”

Rapha scoffs. “No. I found him unpleasant and sad, but he paid me well for my discretion. He bought me gifts of food and clothing, perfume, and finer sheets. In return, I slapped his face and fucked him brutally.”

I swallow hard. “I know that was, like, three hundred years ago, but fuck that guy.”

Rapha brushes his fingers across my cheek. “You’re jealous of a long-dead prince? My darling, if you had existed, I would have never touched another.”

“Okay, that’s fair. Did you stay with the prince forever?”

“No. He invited me to the palace while the king and queen were off to Portugal. Except they didn’t leave as planned. His father walked in on us.”

“Oh no. What happened?”

Raphael tears his gaze away. “He ordered his guards to beat me. The prince stood by and stoically watched. His father told him he would release me if his son wanted to take his place and admit he was an abomination. The prince remained quiet.”

“Yeah, like I said, fuck that guy.”

Raphael shifts his gaze back to my face. “I was imprisoned that day, bruised and broken. I knew I would never be released. I would die there and I hadn’t turned thirty yet.”

“Fuck,” I whisper, stroking his arm.

“And then Yves appeared.” His tone changes, lifting with relief and happiness. “Like a dark angel, he secured my release and took me to his home where I met Eros, Syn, and Midnight.”

“What about Thorn?”

“We hadn’t found him yet.” He smiles. “Yves offered me a life I couldn’t have imagined existed, but there was something so compelling about him. Not to mention he had rescued me.”

“How did he find you there?”

“He saw me in the market a few days before and asked around until he learned my fate. He had the money and prominence to get what he wanted.”

“So then he said ‘wanna be a vampire?’ How did that go?”

“It was a bit like that, but more seductive. Yves was looking for his mate. Anyone he felt a connection to, he would invite to join his family.”

“Oh. He wanted you romantically?”

“Yes. Now remember, this was a long time ago.”

“You were Yves’s lover.” The words are bitter on my tongue. “I don’t like that. Do you guys still fuck?”

“No, darling, we don’t, and we haven’t since sometime in the 1700s.”

“Really?”

“Really. Once Yves knows you’re not his fated mate, he resumes his search, and we move from lover to brother.”

“Isn’t that weird? You’ve all fucked Yves?”

“It’s not weird. It was so long ago, it’s hard to conjure a memory of it. None of us look at each other that way anymore. Any lust was replaced with a bond that is indescribable. Even the term brother is insufficient. There is no bond like that of a vampire.”

I nod, mesmerized by his words. “Did you sleep with the others?”

“Yes. I want to be honest with you. Vampires tend to be polyamorous until we find our mate.”

“So you would never look at another guy, right?”

Rapha grips both my hands in his. “No one else exists, my beautiful Haven.”

“I believe you. How can you be sure we’re mates?”

“It’s a deep knowing. I can feel it in my bones, in my soul. The moment your blood coated my tongue, I knew this connection was like no other.” He puts his hand on my chest over my heart. “When we were apart, did you feel me? You said you knew I was coming. You felt it, right?”

“In my chest? Like a string pulling?”

He nods, smiling. “Exactly. That was our bond. Our souls are drawn to each other. They knew what we were before we did. It was no accident that we met. I was always meant for you, Haven, and you for me.”

“You’ve been alone all this time. It makes me sad.”

“I don’t remember it. All the lonely nights and pining moments were worth it to get to you. Three of my brothers have found their mates, and I was too afraid to hope it could happen for me too, but then you came. You erased the fear.”

“But...” I blink back tears. “I’m going to get old and die someday. I don’t want to leave you alone again. That’s not fair.”

“That doesn’t have to happen, Haven.”

I pull my head back slightly. “What do you mean?”

“You could join me on my eternal walk. I could make you a vampire.”

My eyes go wide. “You can turn people into vampires?”

“Yes.”

I sit up, shoving his arm. “Seriously? You kept this from me all this time?”

Raphael sits up too, but he looks confused. “All this time? We’ve known each other for a week.”

“Yeah, but you knew we were mates, like, two days ago. You could’ve made me a vampire and then I could’ve kicked Joe’s ass.”

Now he looks amused. “My apologies.”

“Oh, sure. Laugh.”

“Darling, it’s a big decision. I had planned to tell you before things went sideways with your uncle. It’s not something to take lightly.”

I cross my arms. “Dude. You can go outside, eat regular food, sleep in a bed, and fuck bad guys up. What’s hard about that?”

“Haven, darling, you have to drink blood to survive.”

“You seem to enjoy it.”

“I do, but it’s a big change.”

“I get it, but I’d live forever? With you?”

“Yes,” his voice is soft now. “With me.”

“And I’d never get old or sick?”

“Never.”

“Could I do that hypnosis thing you did to my dad?”

He chuckles. “In time, yes.”

“What else?”

“Eternity is a long time. You can’t even imagine how long.”

“But I’d be with you and your family.”

“Your family will die, and you’ll still be you.”

“That would happen anyway. You’re supposed to live long enough to see your parents die.”

“Well yes, but—”

“Seriously, Rapha. Blood drinking aside, how badass is being a vampire? No fear, no pain, no sickness. I’d never have to worry about being lonely again because I’d have you. I’d never have to worry about money or eating or where to live because of my inheritance. I’d get to spend my life with you and it gets to be even longer than I thought. There could never be enough time.” I grip his hands. “I want to be yours forever. Please, Rapha. Please make me a vampire.”

THIRTY-ONE

Haven

Raphael closes his eyes. A wave of heat washes over me, like I'm standing in front of an oven.

“Whoa. What was that?”

Raphael doesn't move or react to my question. He's so still it's like he's turned into a statue.

“Rapha?” He opens his eyes slowly, drawing a gasp from my lips. “Holy shit.”

“Haven,” he whispers, his voice tight.

I touch his shoulder. “What's happening? Are you okay?”

He nods, gripping my hand. “I am. I just...” He shakes his head. “I never thought this could happen for me, and it's more overwhelming than I anticipated. The urge to turn you was so intense I was startled and afraid to be too rough.” He smiles slightly. “I'm better now.”

“Oh wow. You really want this, don't you?”

“There are no words to express it.” He cups my face. “My life has been long and intensely lonely, but you're here now.”

“I am. I'm never leaving. You don't have to be lonely anymore either.”

Rapha's glowing eyes soften. “I want you to know what to expect.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll start by biting you.” His voice drops low as he speaks. “I’ll drain you completely.”

A shiver moves along my spine, and all I can do is nod.

“You will die, Haven. Your mortal body will succumb to the lack of blood, but I’ll replace it with mine.”

For some reason only a therapist can unpack, my dick immediately swells. “Damn. Your blood will be in my body?”

He nods, a sexy smile on his lips. “That’s how you turn. I will be your maker, our destinies forever united by our blood and our bond.”

“Fuck, that’s so hot.”

“You’re not afraid?”

I shake my head. “No. I want this. It’s literally the coolest thing I’ve ever heard of.”

“You are unique, Haven. I will never stop thanking fate for bringing us together. You’ve given me a new reason for my existence.” He lifts my arm and kisses my wrist. “You have no idea how honored I am that you want to join me.”

“My sweet man. I deserve this and so do you. We waited a long time and went through a lot of shit to get here. Now do what you have to do so we can start the rest of our lives.”

Raphael parts his lips, and I watch in awe as his fangs descend right before my eyes. Pretty soon I’ll have teeth that do that too. I wonder if I’ll look as smoking hot as Rapha does. I bite my lip, desperate to climb on him and fuck myself silly, but I manage to sit still as he leans forward to first kiss my lips, then my neck.

I gasp as his teeth sink into my flesh, the sharp sting of pain vibrating through me. Gripping his shoulders for stability, I close my eyes, focusing on the outcome instead of the pain. The other times he bit me were during sex and felt very different from this.

The more he drinks though, the more relaxed I become. He sucks forcefully, like he’s giving me a hickey, his hands rubbing my chest in front and supporting my back from

behind. I can hear the blood leaving my body as my surroundings blur. The blood loss is taking hold.

I tangle my hand in his hair, whispering, “My vampire,” as Rapha drinks me in. My eyelids grow heavy, and it’s getting hard to hold myself up, so I relax and Rapha lays me down. My breath slows, along with my heartbeat. I never thought about what dying felt like, but it’s softer and gentler than I would have imagined. It’s easy.

Turns out I spoke too soon as pain shoots through my chest, making my stomach clench and tears form in my eyes. “Oh god.”

“Shh,” Rapha says. “I’m here. You’ll be okay.”

The cramping is severe, and nausea churns my stomach. My muscles tighten, and I struggle to hold on to coherent thought. “Rapha.”

He hovers over me, his face the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. He holds his bleeding wrist over my mouth, and as the first few drops of blood land on my tongue, something shifts inside.

I grip his wrist, latching on and taking long gulps. The more I drink, the better it feels. The pain subsides but the desperation doesn’t. It’s like I can’t get enough.

Rapha smiles over me, his eyes glowing and hazy as he watches me drink. “Take all you want, my darling. You can’t harm me.”

I keep drinking, awed by how my strength returns, greater than before. The first change is how clear everything is. I can see dust in the air, for fuck’s sake. A jumbled mixture of sounds hits my ears—people talking, music, moans, even wind. Holy fuck.

“Your senses are heightened now,” Rapha says, clearly knowing exactly what I’m experiencing. “I can hear your thoughts. Feel your emotions. We are so connected now, my darling Haven.”

I pop off his wrist, finally satisfied. My body tingles and feels fuzzy. “It’s like when your hand or foot falls asleep and

starts to wake up again.” I pull my head back slightly. “Whoa. My voice is so deep.”

He nods. “I vaguely remember it all.”

I gaze around the room, more aware of my surroundings than I’ve ever been. Raphael’s scent, earthy and sweet, is a blanket over me. My cock twitches, heavy and hard. “It’s a lot.”

“It is.”

I’m about to ask another question, but my gums begin to throb and I rub my cheeks, flinching at the sensation of my teeth growing long. “Holy fuck.”

“All the gods, Haven,” Rapha whispers, gazing at my face. “Somehow you are even more beautiful. I am staggered.”

I blink several times as my vision shifts. I never had trouble before, but it’s like, I don’t know, wearing 3-D glasses or something. Everything is so vibrant and crisp it doesn’t seem real. My fingers throb and I look down in awe as my nails grow into long, sharp talons.

“I could fuck someone up with these.”

Rapha chuckles. “Yes. You will learn how to manage your strength and your more feral tendencies.” He rubs my chest in soothing circles. “Your appetite for blood and sex is in overdrive at first, but it helps to have an outlet.”

“That’s why you’re assassins.”

“Yes. It’s how we protect the innocent. You will want to kill when you are hungry, but I am here to feed you.”

“Fuck, that sounds so hot.”

“I will fuck you as long and as much as you want.”

My cock throbs from his words. “Unf.”

“As insatiable as you are, I am your match. I will never tire, never deny you what you want and need. You are my entire world.”

I feel my eyes tingle like tears are building, but nothing happens. A million other questions float through my mind, but all the strength I felt just minutes ago is fleeing.

“You’ll be tired at first,” Rapha explains. “You’ll sleep for hours, but when you wake, you’ll be renewed. Reborn. Immortal.”

Reaching up, I touch his cheek. “I have to tell you something.”

“I’m listening.”

“You told me your secret.”

“You can tell me later.”

“No.” I shake my head even as my eyelids threaten to close. “Now.”

“Okay.”

“It’s really bad.”

Rapha grips my hand. “I’m here.” He rubs my belly. I have to get the words out.

“I should’ve told you before... before you promised...”

“It doesn’t matter, Haven. I’m yours no matter what.”

Nodding, I focus on his face. “After I was pushed out by my father... I did something bad. I was desperate. I... I let some people do stuff to me. You know, for money.”

“Do stuff?” His voice hardens. “What do you mean?”

“There were these guys. They were always in my neighborhood. One night they cornered me, and I thought it was gonna be forced, you know.” I can’t look at him. “But then they said if I went to a party, I could make some money. So I went. It was so bad, Rapha. So bad. I don’t think everyone there was old enough, you know?”

His body tenses beside me.

“Oh god. You’re ashamed of me.”

“No.” He grips my chin, turning my face to his. “No, Haven. I’m angry you and others were taken advantage of. Do

you know who did it?”

I nod. “Yeah, but he’s dead.”

“He’s dead?”

“That’s the rumor. His name was Malik Dane.”

I can see the stress visibly release from Rapha’s face. “Yes, he’s dead. His whole crew is dead.”

“You know for sure?”

“We killed them.”

I smile, patting his chest. “You were my hero even before I knew you.”

He kisses my forehead. “You should sleep.”

“I have so much shame,” I whisper. “If my family knew...”

“No. Listen to me, Haven.” My eyes snap open at his commanding tone. “You should feel no shame for doing what you had to do to survive. It’s your father who should feel ashamed for putting you in that situation. It doesn’t change anything for me. I told you, a vampire’s morals are very different from mortals’. You are still the most precious, beloved joy of my life. There isn’t anything you could do or have done that would change that.”

“You mean it?”

“Haven, my darling, you are my mate. You were made for me and I for you. All of our faults and mistakes are washed away by our love. You are perfect.”

“You don’t think I’m tainted?”

“You are new again, my beauty. Perfect as you were and as you are now. My only wish is for you to believe it.”

He kisses me softly and another wave of warmth washes over me, releasing the sadness and shame I carried with me. All the tension in my body melts away, and I relax into his arms.

“Thank you.”

“Rest, darling.”

“I love you, Raphael. I’ll tell you again when I wake up. I’ll tell you every day, endlessly, until you’re tired of hearing it.”

“I will never get tired of that.”

THIRTY-TWO

Raphael

While Haven sleeps, I rise to do something I've thought about almost since the moment I saw his face. Quietly, I pull a new sketchpad down from my closet shelf, then position myself in a chair by the bed.

I study his sleeping form, then allow my fingers to move on their own as I attempt to do justice to a man so beautiful he leaves me breathless at times. I try to capture the perfect slope of his nose, the sweet curve of his cheek, the sensual pout to his mouth, adding the beauty mark near his left eye.

His vampire is present, adding new features to his already wondrous face. The sharp tips of his fangs press into his plump bottom lip. His skin, already flawless, is now so smooth it rivals the finest silk. His hair falls in shiny black curls around his face.

Ah, but his neck. Elegant in its curvature, my earlier marks just barely present as his body heals them away. All the gods, Haven is stunning. And he is mine.

I spend the next several hours working on my sketch, laboring over every detail, from each long eyelash to the tiny mole on his earlobe. When I've done the best my skills can manage, I set it down and climb back into bed with him, nuzzling my nose into his hair. His scent is even stronger now, like the magnolias I so love. What a wondrous thing it is to love the one person meant to hold my heart in his delicate hands.

“So loud,” Haven whispers, bumping his ass against my growing erection.

“What is?” I whisper back.

“Everything.” He twists in my arms and focuses on me, a sweet, relaxed smile on his lips. “Hey, gorgeous.”

“Hey, beautiful.”

“Guess what?”

“What?”

“We’re married.” He pokes my chest. “Know what else?”

“What?”

“I’m a fucking vampire.”

Chuckling, I nod. “You are indeed.”

“And I’m your mate.” His eyes turn shiny as they begin to glow. “I feel amazing. Like I slept for a hundred years.”

“Your transformation is complete.”

“Can I fly now?”

“Not fly like a bird, but you’ll be able to launch yourself off the ground. It takes practice though. Perhaps in time you can even levitate like I did.”

“Cool. What else? Can I turn into a bat?”

“No.” I rub his chin with my thumb. “We always stay in this form.”

“Hmm. But I’m really strong, huh?”

“Incredibly. And fast.”

His smile fades and he looks lost in thought. “I told you my secret.”

“You did. Remember what you said before, that if we each shared our secrets we’d know it was real.”

“Yeah. I remember. Yours were cool though.”

He shouldn’t feel any shame anymore. I compelled it away. “How do you feel?”

He shrugs. “Fine. It is what it is. Like you said, I was just surviving. At least no one ever hurt me.” His smile is back. “Is it true my body is new again?”

“Yes.”

“So that means no man has ever touched me but you.”

“That’s true, and no man ever will again.”

“I love that.” He drags his hand down my chest. “I can’t see myself, but I feel beautiful. I can see it in your eyes.”

“You are stunning, but then you always were.”

“It’s different now though. You’ve made me something else. Something better.”

“You made me new again too. In many ways.”

Haven releases a contented sigh. “I love you, Raphael. Thank you for everything.”

“I love you too, my darling.”

His stomach growls loudly and he laughs. “Dang. I guess I’m hungry.”

“Let’s get you fed. Would you like to try neck feeding?”

He visibly shivers. “Ooh dang, that sounds amazing. Yes, please.”

I tilt my head back. “Listen for the sound of my blood. It’s louder in mortals, so you have to focus. Just listen.”

He nods, leaning a bit closer, but then he gasps. “Rapha.” I turn to see him grab my sketchpad. “Oh my god. It’s... Is this what I look like to you?”

I nod. “Yes. Do you like it?”

His brow creases as he stares at it, almost touching, but not quite as he traces the details with delicate fingers. “You are so talented. I... I’m speechless.”

“You are that beautiful, Haven.”

He reaches up and touches the tips of his fangs. “Wow. It’s humbling to know how you see me.”

“How the world sees you. All I did was document it.”

“And this is how I’ll look forever?”

“Forever.”

He puts the sketchpad down, smiling at me. “I feel like crying, but no tears come.”

“It would take a lot for that to happen. We feel the same emotions we always did, but our bodies react differently.”

“Except lust, because I want to climb you like the Eiffel Tower.”

Laughing softly, I pull him onto my lap. “I adore you.”

“Good, because you’re stuck with me now.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Epilogue

HAVEN

Six months later

I enter the apartment after another long day at work. It's only been six months, but I'd swear they've been the longest of my life. Raphael is exactly where I knew I'd find him, set up where our dining room used to be in what is now his art studio. Since we came back from our week-long fuck fest, a.k.a. honeymoon, in Greece he's been churning out art.

He drops his paintbrush and is on me in a flash, scooping me off my feet and carrying me to the couch. "You look tired, my love. Vampires aren't supposed to get tired."

I chuckle as Rapha works on removing my shoes while I balance on his lap. "My love?"

"Yes?"

"You must know what I'm feeling. You always know."

He flashes an innocent smile.

"You're waiting for me to say it, aren't you?"

"I've been waiting for you to work it out on your own."

I nod, leaning into his shoulder as he undoes my tie and massages my shoulders. My eyes catch the gleaming diamond encrusted band on my ring finger. It's been a wild year.

Since taking over my grandfather's company I've learned so much about business, but the biggest lesson has been that

this isn't how I want to spend my life. It's time I stopped letting pride keep me somewhere I don't belong.

"I have a proposal. I've been thinking about it for a few weeks."

Rapha nods, still smiling like he doesn't already know what I'm going to say.

"I'd like to offer my father and Ali their former positions."

"Do you think they'll take them?"

"Yes. You know that our relationship has improved, but they have the knowledge. And more importantly, they have the desire. I wasn't meant to be caged in an office ten hours a day."

Rapha kisses my temple. "You know I support you."

"I know. It just feels like such a letdown after everything I went through to get it."

"Don't look at it that way. It was that conflict that led us to each other. Your grandfather was looking out for you."

My heart flutters in my chest. I'm glad the butterflies this man gives me didn't go away. "So romantic." Reaching up, I rub the back of his neck. "I want to make pretty, badass clothes. Stuff vampires would like."

Rapha's face lights up. "I love that idea."

"We could have a boutique with your art and my clothes."

"If it would make you happy, I'll make it happen."

"Thank you." I brush my fingers across his cheek. "I want to be with you more too. I don't feel good when we're apart for too long. I want slow mornings and steamy nights. I want to spend so much time with you we make other people sick."

Rapha responds by kissing me. It quickly turns heated, and we grind together on the couch. That is until the sounds of his brothers' voices bleed through our walls.

"What's going on out there?" I ask.

“No idea,” Rapha replies, more than annoyed, but we’re both off the couch and heading out to the common area where all the vampires and their mates are gathered around Thorn.

“Is something wrong?” I ask.

Eros turns to us with a smile on his face. “Nope. Thorn is having an existential crisis so we’re taking him out.”

“Another one?” Rapha asks. “It’s been at least fifty years since the last. I thought he was over it.”

“I don’t want a stupid mate anyway,” Thorn yells, sloppily trying to push past his brothers.

Something tells me he could get away if he really wanted to.

“Is he... drunk?” I ask.

“He fed from a bunch of people at a rave,” Syn says, his tone disapproving.

“What does that do?” I ask.

“It’s the highest a vampire can get,” Justice explains. “It takes a lot for us to feel a buzz. Thorn spends a lot of time pushing the limits.”

Yves’s door opens and he steps out wearing jeans and a black sweater. It’s the first time I’ve seen him look so casual. “Whoever is coming, let’s go.”

“You’re going out with us?” Bowie asks, clearly shocked.

“Thorn needs his brothers.” He walks over to Thorn, gently lifting his chin. I watch as the two share some kind of exchange and Thorn presses his forehead to Yves’s shoulder. Yves holds him for a moment before kissing the top of his head.

“I am shook,” I whisper.

“It’s hard to see,” Rapha replies. “Thorn is so strong. Something got under his skin.”

Syn turns to us. “A rare sight indeed.”

“Nothing a few hours of brotherly love won’t fix,” Midnight says. “We’ve neglected him. All of us found our mates and nothing is the same as it was.”

“Oh shit. I feel bad.”

“No,” Syn says. “It’s our fault. Thorn has always needed the togetherness we created here. We lost sight of our brothers Thorn and Yves.”

Thorn steps away from Yves, a dopey smile filling his face. “Ah, come on, guys. I’m fine. It’s already wearing off.”

“A night out will do us some good,” Yves says. “All of us. It’s been nothing but work for too long. Zeus knows I’m guilty of being a homebody.”

Thorn’s face lights up. “Well, okay, if everyone wants to go out. We can’t miss an opportunity to socialize with our maker.”

“We’ll be right behind you,” Rapha says. “We just need to get changed.”

“We’ll wait downstairs,” Yves says.

“I called Viv and Viper,” Tru says. “They’re coming too.”

Thorn looks like a kid who just got a bike for Christmas. As we change clothes, I take a moment to just appreciate this strange little family I was lucky enough to be given. They rally around their brother in need without hesitation.

“Is Thorn gonna be okay?”

“Yes. He’s always needed people, and I’d guess he’s feeling our absence.”

“Does he want a mate too?”

“No.” Rapha chuckles. “That much is clear. He’s too much of a free spirit. Not even Yves could tame him.” As we exit the apartment, Rapha squeezes my shoulder. “Get ready. A night out with Thorn will be one you’ll never forget.”

“At least we don’t need much sleep.”

He smiles. “Nope. Hey, maybe I’ll even show you how to hunt to feed. No killing required.”

“I could go for a fresh meal instead of waiting for you to deliver one. Does that mean I’m a big vampire now?”

Rapha laughs. “Sure, babe.”

We join the others, and now Thorn is smiling and talking about the clubs he likes downtown. Tru, Bowie, and Justice gather around me. We’re like our own little club of vampire mates.

Sometimes I really can’t believe this is my life, but I wouldn’t trade it for all the money in the world. Lucky for me, Raphael would never let me go anyway. Immortal life is pretty badass.

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About the Author

Mia is a USA Today Bestselling author of queer paranormal and contemporary romance. She's obsessed with vampires, mermaids, and tattoos, all of which make regular appearances in her books. She's fluent in sarcasm, addicted to caffeine, and easily amused by memes. She may or may not be a witch.

Her books are low to mid-angst, high heat, and celebrate the many ways people of all types can fall in love- even the paranormal kind. After all, love is love.



Also by Mia Monroe

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