



LOVE  
+ OTHER  
LIES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
DONNA ALAM

# **LOVE + OTHER LIES**

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Take me to you, imprison me, for I,  
Except you enthrall me, never shall I be free,  
Not chaste, except you ravish me.  
~ John Donne, Holy Sonnet, XIV

## PROLOGUE

THEY SAY you'll always remember your first love. What they don't tell you is why. It's not for the love you shared, the memories, or the things you learned about yourself. Learned about love. It's the heartache.

I fell in love with my brother's best friend. He warned me not to, but I did it anyway. But that's just the beginning of my story. There's also a middle and an end.

A story of three parts.

Before. Now. And what comes after I'm forced to marry him.

ISLA

*THE MIDDLE – PRESENT*

*The wedding*

“So how do you two know each other?” Kennedy, the bride’s sister, lifts her glass in an attempt to hide her smile. She obviously thinks something is going on between Van and me because she caught us earlier bickering in the gardens like an old married couple. She’s *so* wrong. We’re more like old adversaries than friends.

Old adversaries who sometimes have sex.

“Van is my brother’s best friend,” I answer with a tight smile.

At the same moment, *he* utters his own version in that infuriating drawl of his,

“I’ve been a devotee of this woman since she *begged* me to peel her out of her pants fourteen years ago.” And if that wasn’t mortifying enough, he adds, “Isn’t that right, Peanut?”

“They were stuck,” I reason instantly, resisting the urge to elbow him in the ribs. “The zipper was stuck, and I desperately needed to use the ladies’ room.” That’s why he (annoyingly) calls me Peanut. Pee-nut. That it infuriates me is just a bonus to him. “Also, it was fifteen years ago.” I want to swallow the admission immediately—inhale it, press reverse.

I might as well announce it with a neon light above my head: I STILL THINK ABOUT YOU.

“The passage of time hasn’t dimmed the image of you in those very, *very* tight pants.” His gaze flicks over me in that way of his, my skin prickling as though experiencing the physical brush of it. I also prickle outwardly. Bristle, in fact, unhappy that all these years later, he still has this effect.

“So old friends, then?” Kennedy’s eyes dart between us like she’s watching a match on center court at Wimbledon.

“Pfft, no!” I scoff.

At the very same time, he replies, “The very best kind.” A smile tugs at his lips like his own neon sign. His would probably read: I KNOW WHAT ISLA TASTES LIKE.

He’s infuriating. And infuriatingly handsome. He’s all harsh lines and dramatic angles, softened by that damn mouth of his. I swallow a sigh. He really does have a lovely mouth. His lips are soft and pillowy, and that tongue... all need to be wrapped in duct tape right now. Because his looks are nothing more than a testament to the unfair nature of this world. Because his personality? He’s like the human equivalent of nettle rash. Hot and incredibly annoying. An itch I can’t help but scratch.

“Isla, my God, you are *amazing*.” My cheek is the sudden and happy recipient of a smacking kiss as Holly, my brother’s bride, wraps me in a one-armed hug. *A girl needs a free hand for her champagne*. “How can I ever thank you for today?” she says with such misty-eyed happiness. “It’s been so magical.”

“It was my pleasure.” The tears glistening in her eyes are a precursor to mine. My brother deserves to be happy, and if Holly’s the one to make him so, then I’m glad to have had a hand in their day. Even if he did steal my nanny in the process. Even if he and I both know that love is, at best, unreliable. At its worst, well, it’s hell.

“Honestly,” Holly says, turning to her sister, “Isla makes it all look so easy. Organization, arrangements, and all that stuff. And this dress!” We all stare at the creation I had a hand in designing. She really does look like a modern-day fairy-tale princess. “I’ll never be able to run this castle the way you do,” she says, her earnest gaze rising from the tulle. And that’s



*castle* as in my family's Scottish ancestral home. "The castle, the kids, and running your own business. I'd be a mess, yet you're so cool and composed and so freakin' competent."

I open my mouth to answer but find I'm not sure what to say. It's all smoke and mirrors because my life is a mess. I have two beautiful sons who are learning to adjust to life post-divorce, an ex-husband I'd sometimes like to strangle, a business with a cashflow problem, and a mortgage I can barely afford on a house that's falling down around my ears. I haven't had a haircut in over a year, and I'm avoiding the hors d'oeuvres not because I'm on a diet but because the very lovely gown I'm wearing is a rental and needs to be returned on Monday.

It's all smoke and mirrors. I'm a master at distracting the eye with a competent air and a winning smile. A smile I don't wear for long as Van beats me to an answer.

Not that I have to defend myself against Holland's undeserved praise when Van is around.

"That's Isla. Always in the background doing what's right." My eyes cut to him, finding his inscrutable gaze on me again. *Everything right except where I'm concerned*, it seems to suggest. "She's like a swan gliding through life. No one knows what's going on below the waterline."

I pause, unsure if he's obliquely referring to our relationship... *if you can call it that*. We're not a thing. We just happen to have reconnected recently. Carnally.

But I don't think that's what he's talking about. And he can't know the mess of my life. *Can he?* No, because then he'd know I'm more like a duck than a swan, my legs working like pistons to stay afloat.

"Maybe Holly can return the favor when you two tie the knot," Kennedy suggests mischievously.

I bark out a laugh that sounds like gunfire. "Holland, you didn't mention that your sister was a comedienne."

"Pay her no mind." My new sister-in-law smirks. "She's recently decided arguing is the best kind of foreplay."

“Because it is,” Kennedy replies. But if she’s looking for confirmation from me, she shouldn’t hold her breath. “What can I say? I’m a fan of fire and sparks.”

“That does sound like us.” Van shields the amused twist to his lips behind his glass. “How does the saying go? We get along like a house on fire.”

“Sticking to the fire analogy”—given we are old flames—“a marriage between us would be forged in the fiery pits of hell.”

Van’s expression firms, and a pinprick of panic pokes me between the ribs. For a second, I think he’s about to contradict me, or worse, agree, outing us in front of my new family. While it’s true we aren’t the best of friends, we were—*are*—the most incendiary of lovers. But that’s a secret. Both what happened between us years ago and what began again more recently.

A woman is allowed her divorce rebound, and mine just happens to be him.

I’d told myself it was settling old accounts; the perfect kind of payback for the way things ended between us. Lately, I’ve begun to think the idea was as practical as taking tea with a tiger. Like a tiger, Van is mesmerizing and not even a little civilized. Yet despite the obvious dangers, I still find myself drawn to him.

“I’ll have to bow to your greater experience of the state.” And he does. He actually bows, giving a mocking dip that’s not in the least subservient.

I ignore him and this sudden pinprick of unease. A long time ago, Van hurt me, and while he’ll never get the opportunity to do so again, the way he’s looking at me is strange. Like he’s the one who was wronged.

“Sorry.” Kennedy gives a tight shrug as she slips her hands into the pockets of her bright-blue rockabilly dress. “I guess I read the signals wrong.”

Good one, Van. Full points for making everyone feel awkward. If Holly and Kennedy weren’t here, I’d tell him so. Maybe even thump him as I point out how ungentlemanly he’s

being. But that's what I've come to expect from him. Niko Vanyin is Oxford educated, suave and sophisticated, but don't let the cut of his suit fool you. He's just a little too savage to be called a gentleman. And God help me, I think that's why I've wanted him since the first time I set eyes on him ...

**ISLA***THE BEGINNING - FIFTEEN YEARS BEFORE*

A quarter of a century—I'm practically a third of my way through my life and no closer to making any sense of it. With a murmur of thanks, I place my soaking wet jacket in the care of my brother's new and very unimpressed-looking butler.

"Milady." The man inclines his head, moving to take the coats of the rest of my party as I press my hand to my mouth to mask a hiccup. A burp really, but ladies don't burp, or so I've been told on countless occasions. Not even the ones that have been throwing back champagne since lunchtime. But you only turn a quarter of a century once. Which is just as well, considering how the day has gone.

"Wow! Your brother's place is amazing!" Tamsin's grip tightens on my arm as she takes in the grandeur of the Georgian reception hall.

"It *technically* belongs to Sandy," I say with a slight bristle, "but it's been the family home of the Dalforths for centuries." I wave carelessly at the neoclassical hallway, the pillars, the ridiculously high ceilings, and glittering chandeliers. "Well, the London home."

"God, I always forget you're, like, almost royalty."

We're more like impoverished aristocracy. Asset rich but pocket poor. Although in my case, I'm both asset *and* pocket poor, despite being the first twin expelled from our mother's

womb, thanks to good old-fashioned male primogeniture. I'm not even the heir's spare, given my lack of penis. Not that I would swap places with Sandy for all the tea in China. Or all the champagne in France. I would, however, switch the venue of my birthday party. Though I suppose I already have.

"Do you have clothes here?" Tamsin asks, looking down at my rain-soaked black skinny jeans and blouse.

I shake my head and give in to a frigid shiver. "I haven't lived here for years."

"At least no one can tell you're soaking wet," she adds with a shrug.

"I might get pneumonia, but at least I'll die looking stylish?"

"I bet there's a chaise lounge somewhere with your name on it." I send her a bemused look when she turns theatrical, pressing the back of her hand to her forehead. "You'll look *divine* as you succumb to your bout of ague."

"That makes me feel so much better."

"You'll be fine. I'll bring you an onion poultice."

"I'll stick to aspirin, thanks."

"The old days can't have been all bad, not when depression was treated by medically sanctioned orgasms."

"How do you know that?"

Tamsin smiles back, one of those huge closed-mouth affairs you usually see in school photographs. "I read books."

"I read!"

"Magazines don't count, Izzy."

"I like the fashion sections," I demur. "We can't all recite strange facts and useless information."

"It's not all useless. I told you a boat on the Thames in March wasn't the best idea."

"It wasn't a boat. It was a pleasure craft."

"Was it, though?"

“Okay,” I admit, “it was a terrible idea.” Because the sky had turned pewter, and the heavens had rained down. We’d all gotten wet, but I’d taken the worst soaking when an awning filled with water had tipped over me. I’d jumped at the first trickle and managed to avoid the water gushing over my head but nowhere else. It had sobered me up, unlike the rest of the bunch. “At least it’s warm and dry here,” I say, pushing on a giant-sized door. “Even if the music is terrible.”

I lead Tamsin and my party stragglers (those not sensible enough to have gone home) into the ballroom. It’s much louder in here as drunken revelers shuffle around the intricately tiled floor—the ancient Aubusson carpets rolled back and stored away for the night—to the sounds of a band who may or may not actually be Radiohead.

“Quite an eclectic mix,” Tamsin calls over the sounds of indie rock, observing men in evening suits mixing with those in grungy jeans and Adidas. Half of the women wear cocktail dresses, the others half dressed in garments more *under* than outerwear.

“My brother always throws a good party,” I call back, eyeing the server with a tray of blinis topped with smoked salmon and caviar. Alexander, or Sandy as he’s known in family circles, had suggested we hold a joint party, just like when we were kids. But as I’d pointed out to him, our parents were dead, so finding two people to get drunk and yell at each other might be a little difficult. “He’s got the good champagne out.” I point at a bar set up in the far corner where a cute redhead is twisting the neck of a bottle of Cristal in his meaty hand. It looks like someone has raided the cellars. I wonder if Sandy knows. “I’m just going to see if I can find him.”

“To tell him we’re crashing his birthday party?”

“Something like that,” I reply with a grimace before turning back the way we came.

The vast reception hall is full of stuffed shirts and braying, horsey girls, making me remember why I didn’t want to have a joint party. The monied class is so pretentious. I bet half of

these people don't even know Sandy and are here just to say they hung out with a duke.

Pushing through the crowd, I turn left, then left again. My pointy heels *clip-clop* like the proverbial billy goat as I make my way down to the basement kitchen. Not that I think Sandy will be hanging out with the caterers but because nature calls. Actually, nature seems to be tap-dancing on my bladder while yelling through a megaphone *FIND THE NEAREST CONVENIENCE!* But along with not burping in public, a lady apparently shouldn't announce her bodily urges. I turn the corner, the wooden banister smooth under my hand as I head for the nearest powder room. No one knows it's here, so there won't be anyone...

*"Yes! Yes! Right there. Oh, Jonny! Oh God, I'm coming—"*

And I am *going* as I pivot on my heel.

I've needed to *go* for about forty-five minutes, but after seeing the condition of the bathrooms on the boat, I decided I'd rather explode. It's beginning to look like that might be a distinct possibility.

*Think dry thoughts*, I silently intone as I gingerly hop back up the stairs, taking care not to make my strides any larger than *necessary*. At the top of the flight of stairs, the hall is packed. Oh my God. Get out of my way, people, or this isn't going to end well for any of us.

"Hey, Izzy!" One of Sandy's old university friends calls out to me as I push my way through the throng. "How are you?" *Bursting! Can't you tell by the pained look on my face?* "I haven't seen you in an age," he adds in that ridiculously plummy accent of his.

"Can't stop, Giles," I trill, swinging around the curve of the banister. "I'll come and find you in a bit." *Say, ten years or so*, I think as I hobble up the next flight of stairs. Much to my disappointment, there's a line for the first available bathroom on the next floor, so I move quickly along to what was once our parents' bedroom suite, squeezing my thighs together so hard, I must look like a waddling duck.

Hell, the door is locked!

Pressing my ears to the wood, I hear voices. Well, giggling. Female giggling. For a split second, I consider hammering on the door with my fist. But the bedroom is now Sandy's, and it *is* his birthday. So no need to guess what's going on in there.

On to the next bathroom... which also has several people waiting.

Thighs squeezed together and ankles crossed, I explain my desperation to the girl in the lime-green dress at the front of the line when she tells me she's not sure if the couple inside has a *really* big bag of party favors in there or if they're having tantric sex. Uncrossing my ankles, I make like Usain Bolt for the next floor.

"Excuse me," I mutter, the delivery more, *move bitch*, as I skirt around a couple in a passionate embrace. My bladder feels like a balloon about to burst, my insides squealing like a pig that has discovered it's about to become pork chops.

Third floor, formerly the children's suites, and now unused. I dive for the door that was once my teenage bedroom, twisting the handle with one hand as I pop the button on my super skinny, super shiny, super wet jeans. Sweet relief is...

Nowhere near.

"Oh no!" My plea is impassioned, my disappointment as clear as the fluid that will soon be running between my legs because my zipper is stuck! "No, no, no!" I shove my hand between my legs and do the pee dance, which might as well be the rain dance for all the moves.

*Stop it*, I silently scold.

*You're a grown woman.*

*It's just a case of mind over matter.*

But the thing about needing to pee is, the closer you are to that toilet seat, the more desperate the feeling becomes, even if that toilet seat is beginning to look more like an unreachable throne.



With something like a growl, I kick off my heels as I draw my hand from between my legs. Gritting my teeth and summoning Hulk strength, I pull on the zipper.

“Oh God. I need this!” I pull again. I pull and pull and—

“Fuck. My finger.” Sliding my hand between my legs again, I stare down at YKK branded to the forefinger of my other hand. I give the sore digit a quick suck, then grasping the open sides of my waistband, I try to wrench them apart.

“Open up for me,” I growl, pulling with all my might. If I’m going to have wet knickers on my twenty-fifth birthday, I deserve a better experience than this. “Just give it to *meeee!*” I pull so hard that I lose my balance and careen in the direction of the bathroom door. The only thing preventing me from crashing through it is the fact that it swings open at the very same second.

“What are you—” His words halt as his strong arms band around me, stopping my momentum. It takes me a moment to realize I’m pressed against a hard body. A very *male* hard body. I raise my gaze a little, taking in the breadth of his shoulders and a brilliant white evening shirt that screams *bespoke*.

“Are you all right?” He frowns and somehow smiles at the same time, like I’m a puzzle he’s trying to work out. I don’t immediately answer. I just stare up at him wondering what kind of deity gave birth to this golden-haired man. His features are truly chiseled—he has cheekbones sharp enough to cut cheese—and his blue eyes are oddly cool.

His brow quirks, and I realize I’m staring. Engaging my brain, I mentally replay the previous few moments.

“I suppose that would depend on your definition,” I murmur, wondering why he hasn’t released me or why I haven’t tried to pull away.

“Was there someone in there with you?” Smooth, dark, and rich, his voice reminds me of the most decadent kind of chocolate. I’m not sure his accent is wholly English, a shade of something *other* sliding through his vowels. Gathering me to

his side, he peers exaggeratedly around the open bathroom door. “It sounded like there was a struggle going on.”

“Only with myself.” No longer stunned from my need-to-go state, I glance around the room for something to help me with my dilemma. *Scissors. That’s what I need. Scissors, a little privacy, and a working toilet, preferably in that order.*

“What are you doing up here?”

“Probably the same thing as you.” Avoiding the lines for the bathroom. Lifting my hand in a careless sort of dismissal, I begin to move in the direction of my old desk when the stranger’s fingers slip around my bicep, his large hand drawing me back to him.

“What were you doing in the bathroom?” His gaze darkens as it runs over my face, his thumb sliding my hair from my still-damp brow. “Whatever it was, you seem to have worked up quite a sweat.”

My hair does feel damp, which means the wispy hairs at my hairline have probably curled like tiny question marks. “Yes, well, I was having quite a hard time.”

“I’m beginning to commiserate.” The velvety tone of his words makes everything inside me pull tight. “Perhaps I could help?”

“I don’t see how.” Consternation ripples across my brow. “Don’t you want to...”

“*Desperately.*” His soft breath skims across my cheek as he slides a lock of my hair around his finger, like the temptation of it was just too great. But there’s a particular something in his gaze that makes me think he’s laughing at me.

What did I say? Or what did he overhear?

*Unzip, you useless pair of pants?*

No, that wasn’t it.

*I need this.*

Oh dear.

*And fuck my finger. No! Fuck, my finger.*

*Open for me.*

A smile quirks, his lips ridiculously lush. Yes, *lush*. His mouth really makes no sense in that face. I can't imagine how I thought he looked cold, not with a mouth just begging to be kissed.

"You're sure there's nothing..." His hand slips to my waistband, and I suck in a breath as his thumb skims lightly across my skin. My full bladder begins to pulse, and for a minute, it's actually quite pleasurable. *Which is a conundrum in itself.* "In my experience, two is always better than one."

"I can't get off."

His smile spills like honey, slow and sweet but much more suggestive. "That is a pity."

I shake my head staccato, the continued stroke of his thumb scattering my brain and thickening my tongue. "I mean, I can't get my jeans off."

"Also something I could help you with."

"The fact is," I begin, more flustered than annoyed because a handsome stranger wanting to strip me out of my jeans in this room seems like a teenage fantasy come true. "The fact is, I was in the bathroom for a very specific reason, and every other bathroom in this house was already occupied—" My words halt, breaking off mid complaint as his hand lifts between us and his thumb presses against my bottom lip. Not to silence me, I realize, as he adds a little more pressure, swiping the tip inside.

Liquid heat floods my body as he lifts that digit to his own mouth.

"Champagne."

He was *tasting* me? I return the gesture without thought, rolling my bottom lip inward, savoring the salt of his skin. *The salt of him.*

"That was..." *Hands down, the sexiest thing that's ever happened to me.*

Bewildered, I roll my bottom lip in again. “Does that usually work for you?”

He presses me closer, his words like a kiss blown across my lips. “You tell me.”

I might anticipate his kiss but find myself inhaling a sharp gasp as he sucks on my lower lip instead. Light and heat wash through me, my nipples turning to hardened points beneath my still-damp blouse. As though he can tell, as though he knows this sudden ache, his hand slides under the silk, spanning my ribs.

I’m so turned on, I feel like I might explode. And then I remember why “explode” is a pertinent term as a pulse begins to beat painfully between my legs.

“I need...” My voice is husky, my body confused and wanting.

“Tell me,” he demands, moving me backward toward my childhood bed. “Let me give it to you.”

“Yes—no! You don’t understand.” I press my hand to his chest, my tone a little more forceful. “I have to go,” I whisper as his lips find the tender skin behind my ear.

“Not yet,” he murmurs, his clever mouth delivering a trail of kisses down my neck.

“*Oh.*” I do love neck kisses, and I think I might whimper as his big hands cup my bum, pressing me against him. “*Oh!*” The tone is different this time as a desperate urge almost overwhelms me. “*Oh my God. I’m going to wet myself.*”

He makes a low masculine growl, a sound of approval.

“No—” His teeth scrape over my pulse, and my knees give.

“Yes! *Oh my God, I’m going to pee all over the floor!*”

“I can’t say I’ve ever been into water sports.”

I pull away with a cry, my hands plunging downward in another attempt. “I can’t... get... them... off!” Glancing up, I find him studying me. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to work out if I’m turned on or not.” My gaze dips to his crotch, and my cheeks turn pink. I’m too much of a lady to

contradict him. “Could I perhaps...?”

He doesn't wait for an answer, my stomach—and bladder—flipping as the stranger folds gracefully to the floor.

“I see what the issue is.” Blue eyes stare up at me from a fan of thick, sandy lashes. The visual, a handsome man on his knee in front of me, is a little too much. It's a shame about the circumstances. And my exploding bladder. “Your zipper is stuck.”

“Is it?” I cry, crossing my ankles and squeezing my legs together again. Annoyance flashes through me as more sarcasm falls out of my mouth. “Goodness, how did I not notice?” His chest moves with a deep chuckle, but now is not the time for laughter. Unless you're the playground sadist, I suppose.

“I mean it's broken,” he qualifies. “Mangled. Completely fucked.” It seems I'm not too desperate to notice that hard fricative or how nice his hands feel curled around my hips. *But pressing circumstances*, my mind trills. “Why are your jeans wet?”

“Because of the weather.” My gaze slides to the darkened window, rain hitting it like drumming fingertips. “They're going to be a lot wetter if you don't help me out of them.” I begin to jiggle and bounce when his hands tighten against my hips. I still.

“Just so I don't misunderstand, you're asking me to help you undress?”

“You know, I might just pee on you for prolonging this agony!”

“Don't make promises you might talk me into,” he drawls.

My huff precedes an answer that dies on my tongue as his big hands yank the sides of my jeans apart with a ripping sound. I stumble with the force of the jolt, though he catches me before I fall.

“Oh, thank God!”

“Not sure God had a hand in it,” he says, but I only half hear him as I dash in the direction of the bathroom. The door bangs closed and rattles in the frame, but I don’t even bother to lock it. I don’t even care if I sound like a horse.

“Oh my God,” I whisper. The sheer relief. Why, it’s almost an ecstasy. But even the longest pee in Christendom must come to an end. And when it does, what then?

I flush, wash my hands, and stare down at my ruined jeans. I’ve buttoned the waist, but the zipper and subsequent seam are ruined. It appears my jeans now come with air-conditioning.

“Dammit.” I glance around for a towel or something to wrap around me, but there isn’t even a hand towel. The vanity drawers come up empty but for a couple of old hair ties and a brush. Pulling on my waist-length top, I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I look like a total mess, so I wipe away my smudged mascara and run my fingers through my rain-tangled hair.

But I can’t hide from his hotness forever, so I clasp my hand over my pink underwear and steel myself for the second most awkward conversation ever.

## ISLA

MY HEART PLUMMETS BECAUSE, for a second, I think he's left. But then I spot him, a silhouette framed by the window, my old desk lamp now lit. This is maybe why I don't lead with my thanks, instead asking, "What are you doing lurking up here?"

There's an amused twist to his mouth as he turns, but I'm grateful he doesn't comment. And while he was attractive from close range, he's a whole other level from this perspective. He's at least as tall as Sandy, his broad shoulders tapering to a slender waist, his legs long and muscular, according to the brilliance of his tailor. His shirt is open at the collar, his bow tie lying open on either side, making me think of half-unwrapped gifts.

"I'm not sure I've ever lurked in my life." His voice is rich with suppressed laughter.

"Loitered, then."

"That's supposed to be better?" The amused twist deepens as he slides his hands into the pockets of his pants, revealing a not insubstantial bulk of bicep.

"Skulked?" By contrast, I can't rein in my own smile, especially at the taunting lift of his brow. "Prowled, then." Which is exactly what he's now doing, I realize with a pinprick of delight.

"What are *you* doing up here?" he says, coming to a stop a few steps away from me.

“Would you believe that all the bathrooms were occupied in a house this size?”

“Given the number of assholes Alexander invited this evening, yes.” There’s a hint of chagrin in his expression. I’m not sure if it’s just for show, but it’s odd that he’s used my brother’s given name. Sandy is his family name, Sandy being a Scottish diminutive for Alexander. His friends and acquaintances call him Dalforth, as in *the duke of*, and everyone else refers to him as *his grace*. I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone actually call him Alexander. But it’s good because it means the pair aren’t well acquainted. I’m not about to admit the family connection.

“So my story checks out,” I offer a little flirtatiously, “but yours is still unclear.”

“I came up here to escape the crowds.”

“You’re not much of a party person?”

He shrugs. “I’m not in much of a party mood.”

“Oh dear. Skulking and brooding. You sound like *loads* of fun.”

“Just for that, I’m going to make you stay up here with me.” His words sound vaguely threatening, though they’re contradicted by that amused expression.

Is he enjoying himself or is he laughing at me?

“That won’t be a problem. I’m not going anywhere dressed like this.” I glance down at the gaping fabric, grimace, and tighten my hands over the flash of my pink knickers.

“Pretty underwear, by the way.”

My cheeks immediately begin to sting, but I think that was the point. “That’s not very polite, mentioning my unmentionables.”

“Far be it from me to let you labor under a misapprehension. I’m not polite.” He takes a step closer. It feels vaguely threatening. “I’m not even nice.”

“Contrary to your actions, you mean?” He quirks a brow, inviting me to elaborate. “Helping me out of my jeans?”



“Oh, I’m always available to help a lady out of her clothing.” Another step and he’s suddenly towering over me, and I’m not even short.

I roll my eyes. “I suppose that gets you all the girls,” I taunt, lowering my tone to some approximation of his. “Darling, let me divest you of your underwear.” I don’t know what I was expecting, but it wasn’t his deep burst of laughter. I like it, like that I’m entertaining this hunk of a man, which is why my mouth seems to run away with itself. “I can be your bad boy.”

“*Darling.*” His tone drops, and he reaches out and skims his knuckles down my cheek. “I’m not sure if you noticed, but I’m no boy.” His tone, touch, and meaning feel like a lick of warmth between my legs.

I feel out of my depth. And he definitely feels like trouble.

“Well, you’re behaving like one,” I retort, channeling brave and uninterested as I press my palm to his sternum. Am I stopping him from coming closer or am I stopping myself? “It’s my birthday, so you’ve got to be nice to me.”

“You’re spending your birthday at someone else’s birthday party?” There’s a skeptical note to his tone.

“What’s wrong with that?” Especially as we were once wombmates. “Anyway, I should get back. My friends are waiting for me.”

“Except...” He glances down at my underwear again.

“Hey!” I complain, swinging away, which is when I spot his jacket lying on the bed. “Would you mind?” Snatching it up, I turn my head over my shoulder and aim a tiny flutter of my lashes his way. Men love a little vulnerability.

“That depends. What’s in it for me?”

“What do you mean?” I retort sharply, unimpressed to have stumbled across the one man unresponsive to my womanly wiles.

“It’s a simple concept.” He folds his arms across his chest, highlighting its taut breadth. “The act of giving or taking one thing in return for another. An exchange.”

My hands tighten on the garment as a thrill washes through me. His words—their delivery—is surprisingly sexy.

“I’m familiar with the concept. I just don’t understand why you can’t loan it to me without strings.”

“Where’s the incentive in that?” he purrs.

“How about a little common decency instead?”

“Ah, well, there’s your problem. I’m neither common nor decent.”

He’s certainly not common. As for decent, he’s been pretty decent so far. And a very decent kisser. Except he hasn’t kissed me on the lips. Not exactly. My cheeks aren’t the only part of me that heats as I remember the sensation of my bottom lip between his. I have never had an exchange like this. Never had a man provoke these kinds of responses in me.

Not nice. Not polite. Not common or decent, but definitely intriguing.

“Well, what do you want?”

“What’s on offer?” His eyes positively glitter as they fall over me, that earlier wash of heat turning from a flicker to a blaze.

“Not nearly as much as you’re imagining,” I answer, trying not to look like I’m lying through my teeth.

“There are no limits to my imagination.” His voice has turned husky as I suddenly realize there’s playing and banter, and then there’s feeling like you’re holding a tiger by the tail.

“In that case.” I hold his jacket out. “I don’t want it that much.” Liar, liar, rain-damp pants on fire, but something like self-preservation prompts me.

“Calling my bluff?”

“Just making good choices.” Good girl choices, I think.

He steps forward as though to take the proffered jacket, though presses his hand over it. “What if I wanted only to accompany you downstairs for a drink?”

“Then I’d be suspicious,” I answer, not bothering to hide that suspicion. I lower my arm, his jacket still clasped in my hand.

“What if I admitted I hoped that drink would lead to a kiss?”

Then I’d be flattered beyond belief, but this isn’t what I lead with. “You could’ve kissed me earlier.”

“I was getting to it.” He makes a rolling gesture with his hand. I suppose there isn’t a polite hand gesture for *there were other exploding matters to consider*.

“Well, that boat has sailed.” My hand tightens on the fabric as though it might somehow help my restraint.

“If you’re so sure, why the hesitancy?”

“What?”

“Unless you’re planning on spending an eternity up here alone?”

“Yes,” I deadpan. “Because that is *so* likely to happen.”

“Like our kiss.”

“Exactly, a kiss that’s definitely *not* likely to happen.”

“And you’re sure of that?”

“Sure that I won’t let you kiss me?” I ask in the vein of *as if!*

“Sure that you won’t kiss *me*.”

“I’m becoming more and more sure of it with each passing minute.”

“I’m willing to wager on the opposite.”

“You want me to *bet* that I won’t kiss you? For the use of your jacket?”

“No, darling, that was an exchange. This is a wager. Name your terms.”

“I’m not—”

“Not sure you can restrain yourself?”

“How odd. I do suddenly feel like strangling you.”

“Kinky.” His blue eyes glitter.

“Try murderous.”

He gives a sudden, startling laugh. “I knew there was a reason we gelled. Name your terms.”

“This is ridiculous. I’m not going to kiss you.”

“Then it won’t matter what terms you set.” He slides his hands back into his pockets. “Will it?”

My gaze narrows as a sudden thought hits. From his bespoke shirt to his handmade shoes, he is obviously monied. But the thing about rich people, I’ve observed, is that they don’t like to part with their trappings of wealth. They’re generally a bunch of tight wads and skin flints. So how better to put him off than by threatening to hit him where it hurts. In the wallet. Or better still, via the rich man’s version of a penis extension.

“How did you get here tonight?” My eyes flick over him as though I’m seriously considering it. Considering him. I’ll bet it was in something obnoxious like a Ferrari.

“I drove,” he answers agreeably.

“Was it a nice drive?” Keeping my words careless, I slide away a fallen lock of hair.

“An Aston Martin is always a nice ride,” he replies, his eyes lighting with understanding. He pulls a leather key fob out from his pocket. “It’s yours,” he adds, holding it up so it dangles from the tip of his forefinger, “if you can resist me, that is.”

“You have yourself a bet,” I retort, folding my hands, and his jacket, over my chest. “If I win, I get the car. If you win, you get a kiss.” This is so, *so* juvenile. So ridiculous. And such fun!

“That’s not how a wager works,” he condescends. Urgh. I hate being patronized, especially by men! Strangely, I think he seems to get that by what he offers next. “I just meant those aren’t my terms.” He palms his car keys before sliding it back into his pocket. “The kiss is the event we’re wagering on.”

“Fine.” I suppose. “So what is it you want?”

“Oh, the possibilities.” His tiny smile is taunting and truly devilish.

“Just spit it out and let’s get this over with.”

“I want five minutes alone with you.”

Something inside me starts to pulse, not for his words but more from the way he’s looking at me. Like he’s already won and he’s making plans. I pause, not sure how to respond—let’s do it? I’ll gift you those five minutes gladly? It’s weird what runs through my head when you consider what finally falls out of my mouth.

“Five minutes?” I trill. “How disappointing for you.”

## VAN

“FIVE MINUTES? HOW DISAPPOINTING FOR YOU.”

I’m not sure what I was expecting, but it sure as hell wasn’t that. I open my mouth to speak but can’t find the words. I might, on occasion, choose not to speak, but I’m *never* at a loss for words. “Disappointing?” I eventually manage.

“Obviously.” Her gaze dips to my crotch with an expression that borders on sympathy.

“Just so we’re clear, if I’d wanted to fuck, you’d already be flat on your back. And it would’ve taken longer than five minutes, Peanut.”

“Peanut?” she repeats indignantly, her mouth now a small moue. She has a pretty mouth. Unusually heart-shaped and full. “Well, if you *had* managed to get me on the bed—”

“Which I would’ve. Had I tried.”

“It would’ve quickly turned from a divan into a waterbed.”

“Hence *peenut*, Peanut.” I am enjoying myself much too much.

“That is *really*...” She halts and inhales deeply, and my gaze dips to the distracting rise and fall of her breasts. Jesus, since when have I been unable to concentrate because of a pair of tits? Even incredible tits, deliciously high and firm, but still. “Horrible,” she adds, aggrieved.

“There are worse things to be called.” My smile leaks through my words, pissing her off just a little bit more.

“You should take this back.” She thrusts the jacket my way as she resumes her mask of calm indifference. “Especially if it’s only going to take five minutes,” she can’t help but add.

“Do you want me to prove it to you?”

“Not necessary,” she answers just as snippily. “Given that little insight, I’m surprised you get anyone into bed.”

“Are you really?” I laugh, a loud delighted sound. Fucking her is going to be so much fun.

“And such a charming line in terms of endearment.”

I temper my response to a provocative smile. God, this is the strangest exchange—the strangest girl. The most gorgeous, too. Hair the color of honey and eyes of dark denim. Her skin makes me think of summertime, of peaches and cream, and I just know she’ll be creamy and sweet when I get my mouth on her.

*She’ll be such a feast.*

“What?” Her elegant brows pucker. “What’s that look for?”

“I’m not getting into a pissing contest with you, mainly because you’d win hands, or rather”—I drop my gaze deliberately—“jeans down.”

“You are a—”

“A man with a sudden taste for peanuts,” I mutter, pressing the jacket more solidly into her hands. *A taste for peanuts and arguing as a form of foreplay. “Just take it.” Before I pull your pigtails when what I want to do is fist your hair.*

“I’m not interested in a five-minute thrill,” she says, though we both know she means fuck as she thrusts my jacket back at me.

“Then try your best not to kiss me.”

“I think I’ll manage.” Her stormy gaze narrows. “Fine,” she snaps as though I haven’t just handed her five thousand pounds worth of tailoring so she won’t flash her underwear to half of London. She studies me for a moment as though she’s trying to read my mind, and I notice how she circles her

forefinger over her thumb in a nervous tell. Moments pass before she tips her chin and announces, “Turn around, please.” The latter seems like an antagonistic add on.

“While you slip my jacket on?” She tips her chin imperiously. “Fine,” I mutter, turning away.

“You realize we haven’t exchanged names.” Her statement follows a ruffle of clothing, her next words lightly muffled. “I’m Izzy.”

The heavy *slap* of fabric against the floor shortly follows. Her jeans? Why is she—*stripping*? Whatever the reason, lust licks at my insides.

“Social convention usually dictates an *exchange* of names.”

“Niko.” It takes me a moment to grasp I’ve offered her my actual name, or some semblance of it, distracted by the possibility of her undressing.

“Well, no peeking, Niko.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I drawl, making myself a liar.

“Do you have sisters, by any chance?”

“No.” I frown, not that she sees it. I’m not common, decent, or nice, but it’s true no quick peek will satisfy. *Neither will five minutes.* “Why do you ask?”

“You have the air of an older brother. And by that, I mean annoying.”

“Speaking from experience?”

“Perhaps your parents should’ve enrolled you in some sort of charm school,” she says without answering. But her change of direction is one I’m happy to follow.

“Charm is something I’ve never needed before.” People usually do as I ask as a matter of course. What sounds like a drawer slides open, then closed. *Is she prying, or is she a thief?*

“It’s clear you’re not headed for the diplomatic service,” she mutters. “Ow!”



“What are you—”

“Don’t turn around,” she says quickly. “Not unless you want me to poke your eyes out.” The latter she adds in an undertone.

“The room isn’t that cold.”

“What? How would ...?” I almost hear the penny drop before I hear her *harumph*. “I meant I’d poke them out with this needle,” she mutters. “Like I just stabbed my thumb.”

“What *are* you doing?” Sewing her ripped jeans? Would that even be possible?

“All will be revealed,” she answers distractedly. “I’m nearly done.”

“Do you always carry a sewing kit?”

“Yes, because my jeans have pockets like Mary Poppins’ magical carpet bag.”

“Whose carpet bag?”

“Mary Poppins. You know, the enchanted nanny?” When I don’t respond, she adds, “The Disney film with Julie Andrews? All children know who Mary Poppins is, Niko.” *Not all children*, I don’t answer as my gaze slides to the rain-slicked window. My knowledge of childhood pop culture is a little patchy. “I found the sewing kit in the nightstand.”

“Did Mary Poppins teach you the principles of thievery?”

“It was Enid Blyton. And it was resourcefulness.”

Resourceful. I suppose the word could be used by the kind of person who celebrates their own birthday at the cost of someone else. *At someone else’s party*.

“You can turn around now.”

“Not before time ...” The complaint dies on my lips.

I wasn’t prepared to find her stumbling from the bathroom, all tangled hair and wet jeans, and I wasn’t prepared to find her tasting so irresistibly sweet. I wasn’t prepared for her

feistiness, and I certainly wasn't prepared to see her dressed like this.

Izzy has fucking legs for days. Gone are the wet, torn jeans I'd expected her to wear my jacket over. *Over not instead of. Was she even wearing a bra under her shirt?* She isn't now. My jacket. Fuck, I'm jealous of it. Envious of the lining rubbing against her nipples, the creamy cleavage visible from the deep v of the lapels. Pink nipples, judging by the color in her cheeks. Fucking genius woman is wearing my jacket as a dress. She seems to have snipped off the buttons, which would probably give my tailor a case of the vapors, moving them over so the fit is snug over her curves. The hem of the jacket hits her midthigh and she's rolled the sleeves. All that leg and cleavage with killer spiked heels, she looks good enough to fucking eat.

She also looks like she'd ironically adhered to tonight's dress code.

All she's missing is an actual black tie. *The one I'd like to tie her wrists with.*

"Say something." Her tone has lost its earlier bite as she chews the corner of her lip. And not for effect, judging by the way her forefingers anxiously circle her thumbs, her hands not quite concealed by her thighs.

How on earth can she not know she looks like fucking Aphrodite?

I shake my head as I rein in my fanciful thoughts, then slide my hand into my pockets again. "I think I'm just going to give you these," I say, pulling out my keys.

"Because you admit you're going to lose." Her smile is the epitome of pleasure.

But then her eyes darken as I step closer, ignoring her outstretched hand. I slide the key to my Aston Martin into the top pocket, my knuckles ghosting over the rise of her breast as I pull away. "Darling, I think I already have."

Lost my mind. Lost my purpose. And if I'm not careful, I might just lose myself.

**ISLA**

“SHALL WE?”

Niko, the annoyingly handsome stranger, offers me his elbow at the top of the stairs. It doesn't feel right somehow—not the man. I can attest the man feels more than fine. *I bet he kisses like a man with a vocation.* I suppose I mean his name doesn't feel right. I'm not suggesting he's given me a fake name. It's just Niko makes me think of Greek islands and Mediterranean skies, while the man standing next to me is less blue skies and more iceberg. I don't mean cold, more like he has hidden depths, that he could be dangerous.

I'm being ridiculous.

I give myself a little shake as I accept his courtly escort, sliding my arm through his.

Downstairs, the party is in full swing. Music blares from the ballroom, and though I should probably find Tamsin and my birthday crew, I find I don't want to. It's not just because I'm drawn to him. Our meeting feels almost pivotal. I know that sounds silly, and maybe it's the whole “turning a quarter of a century” thing, but I have the strange sensation of things never being the same.

“So what's next?” Butterflies flutter through my tummy as I turn to face Niko at the base of the grand staircase.

“I promised you a drink,” he replies, plucking a champagne glass from a passing tray.

“Nothing for you?” I press the glass to my lips, trying hard not to stare at him over it. I’m so nervous that I spill a little, catching it between my finger and my bottom lip. When I glance up, his eyes are midnight dark, and an angry-looking crease has formed between his brows. “What is it? Oh, you don’t drink?” I almost apologize because his expression is so fierce.

“I prefer a clear head.”

“How sensible of you.”

“That sounded like an insult.” His expression morphs into mild amusement.

“And you’re smiling?” I say, trying to dampen my own grin.

“Perhaps I’m perverse.”

“No doubt about it.” My grin becomes a chuckle. Bickering with him is such fun.

“I think you might be right because this is where I leave you.”

Blinking, I fix that smile on my face. He can’t mean it, can he? Unless he’s worried he might actually *lose* his car. Anyway, I’d given him back his car keys because keeping them just seemed ridiculous. At least as ridiculous as this conversation. “How am I meant to kiss you if you’re not here? I mean, how am I meant *not* to kiss you if you’re not around?”

“Easily, I would imagine.”

“That seems unfair on you.”

“Or like removing temptation?”

I almost roll my eyes. “What I meant to say was, don’t go too far.” Reaching out, I poke him lightly in the shoulder. “I can’t have you leaving with the keys to my new car.”

Catching my retreating hand, he curls my fingers over his. I assume he’s about to press a courtly kiss to my hand when he flicks my forefinger up and presses his teeth over the tip. I inhale a tiny gasp, my insides beginning to pop and fizz like a dozen tiny bottles of corked champagne.

“I’m looking forward to collecting *my* prize far too much to let you wander off,” his low voice rumbles. “Be a good girl, and don’t kiss anyone else.” He turns, and the crowd swallows him.

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“You know, I’m beginning to think this isn’t your brother’s party,” Tamsin says, pitching her voice louder. We’re in the room adjacent to the ballroom, and while the music isn’t deafening, it’s still pretty annoying. “Or even his place, come to think of it.”

“What?” My attention swings her way. “Why else would we be here?”

She gives a theatrical roll of her eyes, but I’m already looking away. From our position near the fireplace, I have a perfect view of the room and a partial view of the room beyond. You’d imagine a man in a stark white shirt would be easy to spot in a sea of dinner jackets, even without him being a head taller than most of the men here. But I’ve yet to set eyes on Niko. How am I supposed to make a point of *not* kissing him if he’s not here? Even if kissing him is pretty much all I can think about.

God, the silk lining of his jacket sliding against my nipples has turned me into a horny maniac. If he wanted to kiss me or wanted me to kiss him, he wouldn’t have wandered off, would he?

“Are you even listening?”

“Sorry,” I say, tuning back into Tamsin’s conversation. “I thought I saw Sandy for a minute. What were you saying?”

“Just that we’re here because your birthday party was a washout.”

“Thanks for reminding me.” I pull at the lapels on Niko’s jacket, wondering if my nipples are announcing their attention to everyone as some passing idiot’s eyes dip to my cleavage.

“He almost choked on his beer bottle.” Tamsin snorts.

“He should be watching where he’s going,” I answer haughtily. “Instead of staring at my boobs.”

“Hard not to stare,” Dex offers, appearing at Tamsin’s side. “I keep staring at them, and I’m not even into girls.”

“Look,” I say, turning to my friends. “If I’d kept my bra on, it would’ve spoiled the line.” I sweep my hand down the front of the jacket as though in proof. “It would’ve looked like I was wearing a man’s jacket rather than a dress.”

“Which you are,” Tamsin points out.

“But she does have a point.” Dex’s gaze flicks over me again. “She’s selling it.” He languidly lifts his hand, clicking his fingers approvingly. “She’s workin’ it.”

“Making men fall over because of it.” Tamsin’s gaze dips to my boobs. “Or rather because of them. Where’d you get the jacket from anyway?” She reaches out and fingers the fabric of the lapel. “Silk blend. That’s bespoke, or my name’s not Tamsin.”

“I thought your name was Tammy,” Dex taunts around the neck of his beer bottle.

“At least I haven’t got the name of a serial killer, *Dexter*.” We’d recently watched a new TV show of that name and (mostly) mild-mannered Dex had been horrified by association. “That jacket,” Tamsin says like a dog with a bone, “would’ve cost a fortune. Three grand, at least.”

“Trust you to know that,” I mutter, unsurprised. Tamsin is a textile technologist. The three of us had met while studying fashion at St. Martin’s College. Dex is now a junior buyer for Harrods, while I serve coffee and run errands at a local art gallery. But that’s what I get for ditching my degree. “And you’ve moved the buttons on it.”

“They’ll go back,” I protest. “It’s not like I’ve ruined it. A trip to the dry cleaner and it’ll be as good as new.” I glance away again.

“Yes, but whose jacket is it, Izzy? You went away looking like a drowned rat and came back looking like a cat that licked the cream. Or had cream licked from it.”

“Ew! It’s Sandy’s jacket, like I’ve already told you.” It was the best I could come up with at short notice.

“Is that the brother you’ve been trying to summon by staring longingly at the doors?”

“I just don’t want to miss him.” *Where is he, anyway?* Either of them; Niko or my brother. It’s so typical of Sandy not to turn up to his own birthday party.

“More like you’re pining for a lover,” Tamsin taunts, dragging me from my thoughts. “Is Sandy really your brother?”

“You know he is.”

“I know you’ve got a brother, and that his name is Sandy. But I’ve never actually met him. Dex hasn’t met him either, have you?”

“I saw a picture of him in the society pages once,” Dex offers. “He looked broodingly handsome.”

“Bad-tempered, you mean.” Sandy hates appearing in the society rags.

“See.” Tamsin ignores my interjection. “Five years we’ve known each other, and we’ve never met him.”

“Because he’s very busy.” And because I’ve always kept my life and my family at arm’s length of each other for the sake of my sanity.

“Because he’s a duke?”

“If you don’t believe me, check Debrett’s.”

“I know your brother is a duke,” she scoffs. “I just don’t necessarily believe that this is *that* duke’s party.”

“The family coat of arms is above the fireplace!” I say, swinging my arm out in that direction.

“I know this is some aristocrat’s house, Izzy.” She adds an airy wave encompassing the chandelier, the painted ceiling, and the huge portrait of one of my ancestors dressed in a *robe à la Française*. “I just wonder if we’re here to deliver your posh boy squeeze a booty call.”

“We’re here because my birthday bash was a washout.”

“You’re sure it’s not because your secret *bae* lives here? Your super snobby friend with benefits maybe?”

“While the dukedom has long been associated with debauchery,” I answer snippily, “it never extended to incest. As far as I know.”

“Eww!”

“This isn’t a birthday booty call. We’re here because I know Sandy won’t mind us drinking his champagne. And on that note, I’m going to get another glass.”

“I still need to meet him,” Tamsin calls after me. I wave without turning, heading for the bar in the ballroom.

“What can I get for you?” the cute redheaded barman asks, drying his hands on a towel.

“What have you got in the way of whisky?”

Before he can answer, hands come around me and cover my eyes.

“Guess who?” the masculine voice demands.

Clammy hands and an overpowering cologne belong to neither of the men I’d be happy to see. “Giles?” I hazard, underwhelmed.

“You must have seen me coming.” Giles hands lower, his tone a touch petulant.

“I definitely didn’t.” Because if I had, I would’ve walked the other way. Giles and Sandy move in the same circles, though I wouldn’t exactly say they’re friends. More like acquaintances. Old school pals? Which is probably why he thinks it’s okay to be flirty.

The barman clears his throat. “Whisky, you said?”

“Oh, yes. Do you have—”

“Not on your birthday, Izzy. Champagne is what you should be drinking,” Giles declares, turning to the barman.



“I’m so relieved to have a man know what’s good for me,” I murmur. “Goodness knows my gender invalidates everything that comes out of my mouth...”

“What?” Giles glances my way, then decides he must’ve misheard me as his attention moves to the barman again. “Dalforth stashed a few bottles of Krug here earlier, didn’t he?”

“You’ve seen Sandy?” My attention swings Giles’s way, though he spares me only the briefest of glances.

“Not for a while.” His attention shifts to the barman as he appears with a bottle of champagne. “That’s the stuff,” he says, almost snatching it from the barman’s hands. “Glasses, man,” he barks, twisting the neck from the cork.

“Thank you,” I add, sliding the redhead a sympathetic smile as he places two champagne glasses on the makeshift bar top. The faster I accept his felicitations and swallow a mouthful of champagne, the quicker I can leave. Being polite to people who don’t deserve it is such a pain, but I don’t know any other way to be. I really need to learn to channel Tamsin because I’d rather stick pins in my eyeballs than spend more than five minutes with him. “Actually, could you make that four glasses?” Just in case Giles gets the wrong idea. “My friends will be here in a minute.”

“A toast to the birthday girl,” Giles announces, sloshing the vintage into two flutes. He sets the bottle down quite forcefully and only the quick reflexes of the barman prevents it from falling. “Sorry about that, old chap,” Giles blusters, though he pays the barman very little attention as he pushes one of the flutes into my hand. “Happy Birthday, beautiful Izzy.”

“Thanks.” I keep my eyes glued to the rim of my glass as he taps it with his, then pretty much look anywhere else than at him because, urgh! I bring it to my lips as I scan the room. I’ve sensed he’s had a thing for me for a while, but the human race would go extinct if there were just the two of us left because he makes me feel icky. He watches me, and I know that sounds ridiculous because if someone fancies you, of

course they'll watch. But there's something off about him. Even more *off* than being horrible to servers. The bottom line is, he makes me feel uncomfortable. "Where did you say Sandy went again?" I take another sip from my glass as I shoot him a tiny, mechanical smile.

"He was with that blond girl and her friend. I expect he has his hands full."

It's hard to ignore his leer. Urgh. I'm glad I didn't knock on Sandy's bedroom door earlier. Like links on a chain, my thoughts feed from Sandy to Niko, that other elusive male. I thought girls were supposed to play hard to get.

I realize Giles has spoken. "Sorry. I zoned out for a minute." I turn to him, my expression bland. "What was that?"

"I asked if you were having a nice birthday."

"Yes, of course." Reflexively, I take another sip of my drink.

"What are you doing these days? You know, to keep busy."

I fix on a smile, knowing I'm about to sound like a walking cliché. Like so many girls of my background, I work in an art gallery. But unlike those girls, it's not a way to *keep busy* between attending university and finding a rich husband because I actually have rent to pay. I also like to eat from time to time. I also have dreams beyond the wedded state, but if you have the kind of family lineage I have, you want to avoid it, too.

The debauching dukes of Dalforth.

I think my father thought the title was his destiny. Then I suppose he didn't expect my mother to meet him, lover for lover. *Tit for tat*.

Nope. Marriage is not for me. I have other aspirations. I'm pretty good with a needle and thread and want to design clothes for more than just myself. Not that I'd tell Giles any of this.

"I work at a gallery in Mayfair." I keep my answer deliberately vague. As the area has dozens of galleries, there is so much less chance of him just wandering in. "And you?"

“I help my father with the estates,” says the future lord or baron of... I don’t really care. “Getting into the role before he pops off this mortal coil.”

“Of course,” I reply with a nod that feels about a foot long. Exaggerated and slow. I suddenly feel strange, and my hand seems huge as I try to bring it to my temple. Huge and with a strange kaleidoscope tail of dozens of fingers. “Oof.”

“You okay there, Izzy?” When I look up, the concern on Giles’s face seems to have been imprinted on a balloon.

“I ... I think I need some air.” I shove my glass at him, finding that my feet have also grown. They feel huge and uncooperative. “I feel ...” Dizzy? That’s not the word. Unreal? There’s something wrong, yet I don’t feel at all panicked.

“Keep it with you,” he says, ignoring my champagne glass as he slides his hand across my back. “You look thirsty. Take another sip, then we’ll take a walk around the gardens, eh? Some brisk, March air will sort you out.”

“Yes,” I think I reply as I swallow, my tongue thick and woolly. I haven’t had that much to drink, have I?

The entrance hall is a crush, grotesque and gargoyle expressions zoom in and out of my vision like a slow-motion carnival scene. Everything seems amplified—braying voices and deafening music, yet internally, I feel the opposite. I feel numb, and my brain feels sluggish, my every movement taking effort. The only part of me that feels at all animated is my heart as it ricochets from my ribs.

“Let’s get you somewhere quieter.”

“Yes.” At least, that’s what it sounded like in my head. I need space. And a moment. Somewhere to gather myself.

“Good girl.” There’s a note in Giles’s tone that I don’t like as his hand tightens around my waist. He takes the glass from my hand, and then we’re suddenly halfway up the first flight of stairs.

“Is she okay?” I hear a woman inquire.

“She’s had a little too much to drink,” Giles offers in that jolly tone of his. I know he’s not right, but I can’t coordinate my tongue and brain to dispute it. “She lives here. I’m a friend of the family. I’m just taking her to her room.”

I don’t...

“Come on, Izzy. Nearly there.” If we’re going to my old room, maybe that’s good. I just need a moment. “Up the apples and pears,” he cajoles, the cockney rhyming slang sounding odd delivered in such plummy tones. My feet falter as we reach a half landing where the stairs turn back on themselves.

“We can take a little break,” he says, pressing my back to the wall. “Here, take a little sip of this.” He presses the rim of the glass to my lips. “It’ll make things easier.”

“Easier for who?”

I didn’t say that, did I? No, my voice isn’t so deep. Though I know someone whose is. *Niko*. I spot his fair head a little lower on the previous flight of stairs.

“This is nothing you need to worry about,” Giles mutters, lowering the glass. “I have this in hand.”

“I see you do.” His eyes dip to where Giles holds me, and when they lift again, his expression is murderous. “But I am not so familiar with the rhyme.” Suddenly, his accent is anything but English. “Up the apples and pears? I think you are referring to the stairs.”

“What’s it got to do with—”

“And into the garden shed? That’s the next part of the rhyme, yes? Bed?”

“Yes, she’s had too much to drink,” Giles blusters.

“And you thought you’d helpfully put her to bed. You’re going to tell me that’s perfectly acceptable, aren’t you? That there is nothing nefarious here.”

“Nefarious is more your line,” Giles mutters in an undertone, his fingers suddenly gripping my waist as he turns us both.

“Then wouldn’t it be wise to let me take it from here.”

Light footsteps sound on the stairs before Giles mutters something that sounds like, “Fuck off back to Russia.” Then he squeals.

I find myself dropping, falling, though I’m caught before I hit the landing. Careful hands turn me, seating me on the bottom of the next flight of stairs.

“Open your eyes, Izzy.” Fingers stroke my cheek as I struggle to peel my eyelids apart. “Fuck.” I hear his sharp curse as I close them again. “Try to stay awake, darling.” I try because there’s something compelling about him, but they feel weighted down.

“You’ve broken my fucking fingers!” Giles squeals.

“I’ll break more than that. What have you given her?” Niko growls. “She’s smacked the fuck out.” A heavy *clunk* sounds, and I peel my heavy lids open to see Giles’s head being bashed against the wall in time to Niko words. “What the fuck was it?”

“You can’t go around accusing a member of the peerage...”  
No words, just gurgling now.

“Tell me or I’ll put you in a fucking hole.”

That’s all I hear as all the lights go out.

**ISLA**

“OH GOD,” I groan, rolling over in my bed. Wait. *Not* my bed, I realize, as my hand hangs over the side. I roll the other way and curse because it feels like my brain is loose and rattling around inside my cranium. “Oh no,” I add, trying to peel my eyelids apart.

“Oh good. You’re not dead.”

“Debatable.” I push up onto my elbow with a groan, slowly coming to understand a number of things. I’m in my old bedroom. I’m naked under this sheet. My head currently weighs about three hundred pounds. And Tamsin is still not a morning person. “Death might be preferable.” My throat is so hoarse. I sound like an eighty-year-old with a lifelong twenty-a-day habit. My throat is also swollen, I discover with a dry swallow. “Why am I naked?” I twist to peer at the flowery quilt and discover I’m not completely naked as my bum cheeks begin to uncomfortably chew my knickers. These are more the *get-you-into-bed* kind of underwear than the *comfortable-in-bed* kind.

“You’ll note I am not.” Curled in the fireside chair, Tamsin makes a small flourish to indicate last night’s outfit. “I’m going to call these my Florence Nightingale pants from now on.” She sits straight with a wince.

“They’re the pants you had on last night,” I answer dully.

“And you managed not to vomit on them, which is also the answer to your ‘why am I naked’ question.”

“I vomited?” I repeat, appalled. “I didn’t have that much to drink.” Did I? At least, I don’t think I did.

“You don’t remember anything?”

I shake my head, regretting it immediately as I find I need to use my hands to stop the rattling. Tamsin makes a wolf-whistling action with her mouth, but without the actual sound because that’s not part of her skill set.

“It’s nothing you haven’t already seen,” I mutter, picking up the edge of the dropped sheet. We lived together at university, and there might’ve been the occasional mad dash from the shower after forgetting my towel. “God, I feel like I have the flu *and* a hangover. Noticing the glass of water on the nightstand, I gulp half of it down. “The boat,” I say, returning to our earlier conversation thread. “I remember the boat and getting wet.” Which would account for the flu-like feeling, I suppose. “We got here, and I desperately needed to pee.” And then I remember Niko, here in this room. Heat pools in my center as I remember his dare. His playful confidence. I was looking for him and... and what?

“That’s all you remember?” Tamsin’s tone is unexpectedly tentative.

“Giles, I think. I saw him on the stairs,” I add more certainly. “He’s one of my brother’s friends.” Was I with Niko?

“Ah, the elusive brother again.”

“Didn’t we see him?”

She shakes her head. “I’ve yet to make his acquaintance, though I did meet your new friend.”

“Giles?” I ask, my head muddled.

“He is not much of a friend.” Her expression turns grave. “The prick drugged you.”

Her words settle like a stone in my stomach. “No, that can’t be.”

“Terrible hair and a florid complexion? He drugged you, Izzy.”

“I still have my underwear on.” Sickness swills through my insides because, as a first reaction, I think it’s a valid one. It’s not just a knee-jerk reaction, a thoughtless denial, because we all know the tales. The woman who was drugged only to have good friends who realized in time. Worse still, that friend of a friend who wasn’t so lucky, who wakes up semi-clothed and in unfamiliar surroundings with no recollection of what had passed. And now I know that feeling, even though I’ve been lucky enough to have the intervention of friends. Not that it stops me from feeling confused. Frightened. Ill. Which Tamsin seems to understand immediately.

“You’re safe, sweets. Nothing happened because the bastard was caught half-dragging you up the stairs.”

“Did you find me?” My heart aches and swells with gratitude, but she’s already shaking her head. “Dex?”

“No, it was the man with the expensive taste in jackets who is *not* your brother.” The explanation is accompanied by the lift of one taunting brow. With a wrinkled nose, she glances in the direction of the bathroom. “You probably owe him thousands because no dry cleaner will touch his jacket after what you did to it.”

My hand rises to my throat, though not in confirmation of vomiting, more in shock. Niko found me. *He saved me. Saved me twice last night*

“Hence the deep throat thing you’ve got going on.” Her fingers flutter over her own throat. “It might’ve been worse,” she adds brightly. “It might’ve been sore from the rape-y kind of deep throating.”

“Your bedside manner sucks.” I briefly contemplate throwing my pillow at her. Instead, I flop down onto it, suddenly drained. My God. What might’ve happened if Niko hadn’t been near? And how do I tell Sandy that one of his friends drugged me? The armchair creaks, Tamsin’s soft steps sounding on the carpet before the side of the bed dips with her weight. My eyes are still screwed closed as my fingers seek hers. “Don’t give up your day job, Florence.” I tighten my



eyes against the sudden onset of tears, tiredness, fear, and even a touch of shame makes for a horrible case of overwhelm.

“I don’t know how nurses deal with this stuff,” she answers, her voice soft. “Real life, scary stuff.” I hear her swallow thickly, her words turning watery. “You were completely out of it, like a warm corpse with just these brief flashes of reanimation.”

“Frankenstein’s bride?” The words come out on a watery sob as I tighten my eyes, causing a kaleidoscope of colors to burst behind my lids. Someone drugged me. Someone I know wanted to cause me harm, and I don’t know how to process that.

“But your friend was amazing, Izzy. He carried you up here in his arms and had a posh Harley Street doctor in the room within twenty minutes. He didn’t even flinch when you turned into Carrie, though you might’ve been a bit more considerate and vomited on his trousers as well.”

“What?” The room is bright when I open one eye, Tamsin little more than a shadowy outline. *A watery, giggling outline.*

“You vomited on his shirt, and he took it off. Try not to be semi-conscious when he does that next. It’s so worth it.”

“Pervert.” The word comes out warbly. “I was going to say thank you for staying with me, but maybe I can ask him to flash you again as thanks.”

“You gave us such a fright,” she whispers.

“Who else was here?” How many people saw me in such a state?

“Just the two of us after I sent Dex home. There was a *little* too much testosterone in the room before that.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, attempting to push up onto my elbow.

“Your friend Niko is a little intense. He was very upset. Hella angry, really.”

“At Dex?”

She shrugs. “That the doctor wasn’t here fast enough, even though he was pretty quick. At the dick who spiked you. At your brother when I said you’d come here looking for him.”

“Does he know who my brother is?”

“I didn’t mention who he was. I didn’t want to cause any trouble, though I did find his number in your phone, but there was no answer. I left him a voice message, but then I got distracted when Dex started to dry heave in sympathy, and Niko totally lost his shit again.”

“That’s not Dex’s fault that he’s a sympathy vomiter.”

The lift of her eyebrows says what she thinks about Dex’s affliction. “It was total madness in here. The rage-y Niko muttering curses because I couldn’t get ahold of your brother, yelling at Dex for being a drama queen, and...” She pauses. “To be honest, I thought Niko was your brother initially.” I frown at her pensive expression, waiting for her explanation. “He just kind of took over.” That’s usually Tamsin’s job. “And he was kind of imperious.”

“You mean rude?”

“More commanding. It seemed like a duke-ly attitude. Anyway, he was a little too possessive for a brother.” She pauses for a beat, studying me. “So as you can imagine, I have questions about you and your not-so-little friend.” She shoots me a sudden sly glance. “But they can wait. You look wiped out. You should rest now.”

“My mouth tastes like a box full of used cat litter.”

“Don’t tell me. You once mistook it for granola,” she says, getting up from the side of the bed.

“Don’t make me laugh. It hurts my stomach and my head.”

Tamsin crosses the room and grabs her purse from the back of the chair before coming back to thrust a travel-sized mouthwash into my hand. “Spit it in the glass,” she says, passing it to me next. “I’ll rinse it and get you a fresh glass.”

Like a good little patient or a person drained of energy, I do as I’m bid before lowering my head to the pillow again.

“Better?”

“Less yucky, thank you.”

Setting the glass and mouthwash down, Tamsin grabs the half-fallen quilt, settling it over me. “I’m going home to get changed. I’ll grab you some clothes.”

“Good plan.”

“Better than going home in a sheet, anyway.” She begins to stroke the hair from my face. “Want anything else?”

“To come back as a cat in my next life,” I whisper, relaxing into her touch. “That feels so nice.” And like a content feline, I drift off to sleep again.

**ISLA**

THE LIGHT HAS SHIFTED when I next open my eyes, the weak spring sunshine retracting from the room. As I lift my head, I find it no longer weighs as much as a small car, and with a jolt of what can only be described as pleasure, my nurse is no longer Tamsin.

“Sleeping Beauty wakes.” Niko’s silky address strokes like a caress as he lounges from the other side of the room, stretched out in the fireside chair. He links his fingers over the chest of his black T-shirt and crosses his long, jean-clad legs at the ankles. Black boots match his T-shirt, and the scruff on his cheeks lends him a slightly piratical air.

*Being drugged must make me fanciful.*

“Don’t,” I protest with a groan, pushing away how the sight of him makes me feel. Which is inappropriate for a girl who was drugged and almost—

*No. I won’t go there.*

What happened (or what almost happened) doesn’t alter the fact that I’m attracted to him. I was attracted to him before, and I’m attracted to him still, maybe even a little more so after hearing Tamsin sing his praises. But I’m also embarrassed after Tamsin’s description of the other events of the evening. Like vomiting.

“I imagine I look less like Sleeping Beauty and more like a barely awake troll.”

Niko's expression is part world weary, part mild amusement. I push up onto my palm, my other clasp the sheet to my chest, the rose-adorned quilt having slipped from the bed again.

"I expect it's nothing you haven't already seen," I mutter as his eyes follow the movement.

"Honestly? I was too worried to pay close attention. If you'd like to remedy that, feel free."

"Dream on," I retort.

"It's probably the least you can do." His gaze very obviously rakes over me. I try to ignore the thrumming that look ignites.

"A quick flash of my boobs for services rendered?" How does he do that? Simultaneously turn me on and annoy me into acidic responses and heatstroke of the cheeks?

"More like you show me yours after I showed you mine."

"What?" My gaze drops to his crotch.

"When you vomited on my shirt. And you actually clapped your hands like a drunk seal as I stripped it off."

"You're making that up. Tamsin said I was mostly comatose."

"Not at that point," he adds, his expression suddenly grave.

"I should thank you." I can't seem to lift my gaze from where I twist the edge of the sheet. For the first time, I notice the flesh-colored Band-Aid on the back of my hand. *From an IV?*

"Whatever for?"

"For last night. For saving me. I feel so stupid."

"Don't do that." He sits forward suddenly, knees splayed and his elbows propped there. "You did nothing wrong. Men like him are scum. They don't deserve to breathe the same air." This is no throwaway line, judging by the set of his jaw and the truth in his icy gaze. "They don't deserve to breathe at all."

"They should be punished, yes." Because death seems a bit grim. "I should probably call the police." I frown down at the bandage and slide my nail under the edge.

“The doctor took blood,” he explains. “But by the time the results came back, you were already out of the woods. He said the drugs would be out of your system within hours.”

“What did he give me? Was it in my champagne?”

He inclines his head in agreement but doesn't answer anything else.

“Do you know? Tell me, please.”

“It was a cocktail of chemicals, according to the doctor, but not enough to do any real damage. Not the amount you ingested, according to the blood work.”

“Real damage,” I whisper, struck by his word usage. “The real damage wasn't intended to be the drugs, though, was it?” A sudden spike of panic crashes through me. What could've been. What might've been.

“No, you're right, by the bastard's own admission.”

“You've spoken to him?”

“Yes,” he answers, though not before a tiny hesitation.

“I can't believe he'd do that to me.” My thoughts scatter, that earlier spike of panic a sudden wave. “If you hadn't...” I try to swallow, suddenly not able. “If I...” Oh God. Oh God. “I was so stupid.”

I barely register Niko moving before his thigh is flush with mine, his arm bolstering me from behind. “Take a couple of sips,” he says, pressing my glass of water into my hands. It tastes like cool bliss as I throw it back. “Slowly,” he coaxes, and I find that I am.

“Thank you,” I whisper, passing it back. Niko twists from the waist, flooding my senses with the scent of his cologne. It's crisp and fresh, and makes me wonder if I stink myself. I give my shoulder a surreptitious sniff, and well, I don't pass out.

The glass clinks against the wooden nightstand, and he turns back to me. “You must try not to think like that.”

“But I should've known.” My eyes begin to fill with tears. “I've always felt something was not quite right about him. I

should've paid more attention." I purse my lips in punishment as the bottom one begins to quiver.

"This is not your fault." His earnest eyes hold mine. "Monsters rarely show their true selves." I shiver at the chilling tone of his words. "I promise you," he adds as his expression softens, "nothing happened. Nothing *would've* happened to you last night. Not while I was here." I open my mouth to dispute this—because how can he know—when his thumb brushes across my cheekbone. "I wasn't about to let you wander off. Not when you had to try so hard not to kiss me."

"You were watching me," I begin hesitantly.

He pauses and frowns before answering. "Evidently, not well enough."

"I didn't see you," I add quickly when it seems like he'd blame himself. "I was watching, too. You know, in case I bumped into you and kissed you accidentally."

He lifts his hand, but I'm not ready to let him get away. My fingers fasten over his strong wrist, holding him there.

"That was the point, wasn't it? To not kiss you?"

His gaze dips to my mouth. "I don't think that was the point at all."

"You're so confusing," I admit in barely a whisper. His expression morphs into mild surprise. Maybe he's not used to candor. "Were you watching because of our bet or because you wanted to kiss me?"

"You should let go." His eyes say otherwise, and the thump of his pulse under my thumb echoes the one between my legs.

"I don't want to." I bite my bottom lip, suddenly conscious of how close we are and how I probably have terrible breath. But those worries dissolve like sugar on the tongue as he presses his finger there, forcing me to release it. "I should probably brush my teeth." His eyes turn dark, and my breath halts as his head dips.

"You should make me leave," he murmurs as his lips ghost over my ear.

“I don’t want you to.” I’ve never been particularly brave, especially where men are concerned. I rarely make the first move because it feels so alien. So the soft rustle of the sheet falling to my waist is a testament to how much I want him.

His gaze drops and breath leaves his chest in a small *ah*, and he stares at me with such longing, with a look of such sultry intent, that I don’t have a moment to doubt myself. This kind of longing I understand.

“You are so beautiful.” His eyes meet mine as the backs of his knuckles brush the tip of my breast, his wrist still encircled by my fingers. “But, darling, the time isn’t right.” His knuckles close over my nipple, and everything inside me contracts to that tight, aching point.

“It feels good to me.”

“It feels exquisite. But you should let go of my wrist,” he says, reading my intentions, anticipating where I’d been about to press his hand.

“I want you to touch me.” Even as I loosen my grasp on his wrist, my words are needy.

“I know, darling, but not now. Not after last night. The drugs he gave you—”

“Were they Niko-specific? Did you drug me with your jacket?” I trail my fingers between my breasts as I recall the silk lining tantalizing my nipples. “I wanted you before. I want you still.”

“We shouldn’t,” he maintains, studying me with those ice fire eyes.

I feel like a siren as I lower my head to the pillow and rest my hand above my head. “I know you want me, too.”

His hand slides to my hip. He palms it. It seems almost a prevention, a stand against my invitation. The confirmation of his intent is shocking as he says, “I’m not going to fuck you.”

A hard fricative yet such a soft denial. It shouldn’t be a turn-on, but it is.



“I’m not going to let you.” The taunting quirk of his brow aims to contradict. “I’m not that kind of girl.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” he replies, a smile tugging at his lips.

“But I do want to see what you can achieve in five minutes.”

His chuckle can only be construed as dark and dirty. “That sounded distinctly like a dare.”

“And you’re so easily manipulated?”

“When it comes to you, it would seem so.”

“Not true,” I whisper, “or I wouldn’t be forced to do this.” When I tighten my fist in his T-shirt, he allows me to pull him down, the bristles on his cheek a soft caress. “This isn’t gratitude.” My eyes flutter closed, reveling in the feel of his torso over me, daring him to resist as I scrape my teeth over his ear. “I am grateful, but—”

His body vibrates, his breath harsh and hot against my neck. “I’m no one’s hero, darling. I’m not a good man.”

“You saved me.”

“You don’t know me.”

Thank God for his hand sliding from my hip to span my ribs.

“Consider me duly warned.”

Relief rushes over me as his big hand palms my breast, and I hiss out a breath as his lips brush the juncture of my shoulder and neck. “Duly warned but still reckless.” He tastes and teases, sucks at my skin, and as his lips fasten over the hard point of my nipple, I almost levitate from the bed.

“*God, yes!*” The urgent pull of his lips sucks a sweet and urgent pulse from deep inside me. Blood fizzes in my veins, my head filling with impatient thoughts.

*Need him. Now. Skin to skin.*

*I want the squeeze of his hand. The feel of his teeth.*

*I need him inside me, hard and unforgiving. The thrust and press of him claiming me so, so deep.*

His tongue swirls and his teeth scrape as he takes his time, but this frenzy inside me won't be contained.

"Let me—" I reach for his zipper, for his cock, when he plucks my hand away.

"Impatient," he chastises, pressing my hand above my head. Lifting the other, he makes a manacle of his fingers over my wrists. "Good girls wait for an invitation. Good girls say *please*."

I turn instantly hot at his words. The chastisement. My cheeks burn with indignity, the blood in my veins turning molten as a fiery need creeps across my skin. I want to bite him, fight him for making me feel this way, but I want more than anything to be good for him.

*His good girl.*

"Please, Niko," I plead. "Please touch me." Being restrained only heightens these feelings, my internal pleasure points pulsing with need.

"You want me to fuck you, but that's not happening today, darling."

That can't be true. "The look on your face says otherwise."

His free hand drags away the sheet, leaving me naked but for my panties. The cool of the room caresses my skin, and a shiver courses through me as his hand passes down my hip and slides over my thigh. "It's not that I don't want you." His eyes eat me up. Heat me up.

"Just five minutes," I whisper.

"Five minutes is all I trust myself with." His fingers tighten on my thigh. Lifting it, he widens me to him. Cool air hits damp, and I know the pale-pink gossamer fabric can leave little to the imagination.

"You're wet." It's not an accusation, more an expression of praise as his thumb passes over the fabric, making my insides ache. A brush, a touch, a scrape of his nail over my most sensitive place as he begins to play with me, play with my

responses. I whimper and twist, feeling like an overripe peach. One firm touch, and I know I'll burst all over his fingers.

I tilt my hips to increase the contact, wondering if he can feel my pulse through fabric and flesh, if he can feel my needy pull.

"Niko. Touch me. Oh God, please kiss me."

"Don't you want my Aston Martin?" He lowers his head in promise, his tongue sliding across my lips in something so much dirtier than a mere kiss. It's not a tasting or a tease but a statement of our roles. Something intrinsic. How he'll give. How I'll receive.

"Is that what we're calling it now?" Not for the first time, my eyes slide to the bulge in his jeans. I bite my lip to contain my smile as I consider how all signs point to a premium *vehicle*. "Why don't we just call it what it is?"

"And what would that be?"

"All for me." My reply is breath over sandpaper.

"Such a tease, Peanut." He gives a dark-sounding chuckle as his lips coast over mine, feeding me his words and his hot breath as his hand cups me fully. "It's almost like you're trying to force my hand." That low, taunting rasp, his squeezing touch, it makes everything inside sing. "I've half a mind to punish you for it."

Pleasure ricochets through me, lighting me up inside like a pinball machine. His words are a thrill, but something tells me that wasn't an empty promise or words heated by the moment. They're words with substance and consequences, which means he has practical experience. How do I answer?

Do I just say *yes please, some of that*?

"Only half a mind?" I whimper as his fingers pinch my swollen clit.

"New wager." He pulls away, watching my expression as he drags his thumbnail the length of me. "I'll make you come right now. Give you that relief. And you'll have dinner with me."

“That’s not how a wager works,” I whimper, my body chasing his fingers, his touch. He said so himself. “There’s supposed to be something in it for me.”

“Other than coming?” God, I want to lick that expression from his mouth. Ride it, maybe. “Falling apart under my hands? My mouth?”

My insides clench needily, and I arch from the bed. “What if I can’t? If you can’t.” My words are as tremulous as my breath, but still, I persist in this push and pull. “What if I don’t come?”

“That would be a crying shame.”

He looks like he might be about to add something, some proviso or quip, when I grab his shirt for the second time today and pull him down to me. He doesn’t resist this time, his body coming over mine, his broad shoulders blocking out the weak afternoon sun. My hands scrabble against his belt, pulling his shirt from his jeans until my fingers find flesh, lean muscle, and skin. A downy trail of hair and—

“Oh!” Everything contracts as his body arches against mine. “Oh God.” My fingers wrap his bicep where it bulges from under his sleeve.

“A crying shame,” he rasps through gritted teeth. “Spread your legs for me, darling.” He slides his hand under my thigh, impatiently pulling me open.

I cry out as he rocks into me—he feels so big. Everywhere. His shoulders above me, his strong thighs between mine, the feeling of him, so hard and so hot, pressed between my legs. Even his lashes are thick, his studying eyes as blue as the ocean and just as easy to get lost in. And those lips, they’re just begging to be kissed. Only we haven’t, I realize. I slide my hand around the back of his neck, pulling him down to rectify the matter. *To taste him.*

“You have the mouth of a hedonist.”

“Was that a hint?” His whisper is pure taunt. “That I should put it to good use.”

“It would be a shame to waste it.” He makes as though to slide down my body when I tighten my thighs around his back. He can’t want to do that. More to the point, I can’t let him. Not after the night I’ve had. “Kiss me,” I demand, arching from the bed and rocking against him.

“*Fuck.*” His curse is so ragged around the edges, the muscles in his biceps flexing as he drops down to meet me. “I can feel the heat of your cunt. I want to taste it.”

Base words and temptations are the hottest kind of praise. I cry out, straining to get closer as every part of me awakens, from the hairs on my head to this deep pulsing need. “Oh God, Niko. I’m going to—”

“Yes, my sweet, sweet girl, you are.” His low sexual rasp ricochets through me. “Let me do this right next time and take you to dinner.” His hand comes between us, slipping into my underwear, his thumb swiping over my wet clit. “Let me take you home.” He rubs, and I writhe, heated, harsh breaths filling the space between us. Another swipe, a flick, as he slides a little lower, undulating against me. “I’ll taste your sweetness. I’ll fucking devour you.”

Oh God. His words. His touch. The wet sound of my pleasure. Niko grunts as I press my teeth into his chest, the sensation spreading through me and robbing me of sense. I fall, my body clenching through a wave of heat and ecstasy.

My head hits the pillow, and I smile. Dry humping in my teenage bedroom. Who’d have thought it would be so much fun? I stretch out, my muscles tingling in their satisfaction, finding ... the one muscle apparently lacking in satisfaction.

*He’s so hard.* I try not to laugh, though I do wiggle a bit. “Sorry.”

Niko settles himself a little lower with a groan. “You’re really not sorry at all.”

I am too *replete* to be embarrassed.

“Not to be too indelicate, but why didn’t you want to...”

“Fuck you?”

“So indelicate,” I complain with a huff.

“It’s not that I don’t want to.” His brows lower, his face stern. “I just want—”

“Izzy?” Thumping footsteps sound from the hallway as a deep voice calls my name. “Izzy, can you hear me?” The door to the adjoining room opens, then slams closed with a *bang*. “Where the hell are you?”

“Oh, sh-shivers!” I press my palms against Niko’s shoulders. “Hide, quickly!” I hiss, attempting to thrust his large body from mine. “If he finds you here...”

“Who?” Confusion ripples over Niko’s expression as his gaze flies to the door as three sharp knocks rattle against it.

“Are you in here?”

“Wait!” I sort of screech, taking in the sudden wide-eyed expression of the man above me. “Just a minute.” I shove again, and this time, he budes.

His knee hits the floor as he curses, his leg sliding out from under him.

“Get under the bed,” I frantically whisper, ignoring how he looks as though he’s about to laugh. “Please.” My relief is short-lived as he reluctantly drops out of sight because my brother’s voice heralds the door swinging open.

“What the hell, Izzy.”

“Hey! I haven’t got any clothes on,” I yell back.

“What!” Sandy bellows.

If I thought that would help, I’m sorely mistaken as the door rebounds from the doorstep not a second before I grab Niko’s T-shirt and shove it over the side of the bed before grabbing the sheet.

“I’m going to tear that pink fucker limb from limb,” my brother, Sandy, growls, appearing in the room like a Viking berserker. “They said you were okay!”

“I’m fine,” I protest. “I’m only naked because I was sick everywhere.” I pause. “Who said I was okay?”

“Does it matter?” Sandy takes my face in his hands, his eyes falling over my expression as though they might find the opposite of fine. “But you’re well? Not hurt? What did the doctor say?”

“How’d you know there was a doctor here?”

“Izzy,” his deep tone warns.

“*Sandy*,” I intone, imitating his tone.

“I spoke to your friend as soon as I got her message,” he mutters gruffly.

With the sheet clamped under my armpits, I set my hands over his. “Well, as you can see, I’m perfectly fine. Nothing happened.” Nothing I want to speak about, at least, even without having a man stashed under the bed. I’m not even sure why I shoved him there. Except I’m naked. And because I like his face the way it is. Surely one shock a day is enough for any overprotective brother to endure.

Also, my sex life has nothing to do with him.

“I wouldn’t say that’s true.” Sandy’s fair brows furrow deeper. “You were drugged, and I wasn’t here to protect you.”

“That’s not your job. Where were you, by the way?” My nose wrinkles as I lower my hands. “On second thought, I don’t think I want to know. You smell like a brothel.” It’s now afternoon, and he’s still dressed, sort of, in his evening suit, and his cheeks bear a thick stubble. *Does that mean I might smell of sex, too?* Tugging on his hand, I encourage him to sit next to me, hoping I don’t.

“Well, it was no one you know,” he says with a sly smile.

“I’m glad to hear it.” A long time ago, when we were sixteen, to be exact, we swore off dating the other’s friends after he slept with one of my friends and made my life very awkward for a time. We move in different circles now. Odd that he’d bring it up now. “How come you were here last night, anyway? And what are you doing in this old room?” He glances distastefully around the space.

“Long story.” I sigh. “And I am fine.”

“You’re sure?” He sends me the patented Dalforth gimlet glare.

“Yes.” I roll my own eyes for effect.

Pressing his hands to his thighs, he jumps to his feet. “Your friend said someone was with you,” he says, this time glancing around the room as though his will could summon them. *Hopefully not.* “That someone was looking after you.”

“There was, but I asked Tamsin to pop home and grab a change of clothes for me.” We won’t mention the man under the bed who provided a different kind of comfort.

“It was Tamsin I spoke with.”

“There you go, then,” I answer wearily.

“But she made it sound like—oh, fuck it! I’m so sorry. I suppose I’m just feeling a little useless here.”

“It’s fine. I’m fine. Honestly, Sandy.”

“Right.” He stares at me as though gauging veracity. “I’ll just go and shower.” He presses a perfunctory kiss to my head before turning for the door. “Stay right where you are.”

“Urgh!” I pull the sheet over my head as though dead.

“I mean it, Isla,” he mutters fiercely, turning on his heel. “Stay right here. I’ll take you home. No driving and no bloody cabs.”

“I’m not likely to run home in my underwear,” I mutter from under the sheet.

“Good. Because I might need your help digging a Giles-sized hole.”

I yank it down to my chin. “Don’t do anything rash, Sandy.”

“I won’t do anything he doesn’t deserve,” he growls, and then he’s gone.

“He won’t find him.”

I turn to Niko’s voice, finding him climbing back onto the bed. I expect he’s right unless Giles is really, really dense.



“This isn’t what it looks like, by the way,” I say as he perches himself on the edge of the bed. I don’t owe him an explanation, but I also don’t want him to think I regularly have overbearing and possessive men running in and out of my room. As much as Niko annoys me, I’d really like to see him again. That orgasm was—

“What do *you* think it looked like? Because, to me, it looks like you’re the twin sister of my best friend.”

## VAN

“HELLO, NIKO.” The blonde on the doorstep smiles up at me saucily, her hands tightening on the handle of a purse large enough to carry a decapitated head. She’s wearing jeans. Again. Pale blue this time, loafers, and a long cardigan. “Or should I call you Van?” She pulls a wind-whipped strand of honey hair from her pink cheek, her expression expectant.

“Either,” I reply belatedly. Idiotically. “Whichever you’d prefer.”

Her appearance is ... unexpected, given the conversation we’d had last weekend after I’d come close to fucking her. *Fucking my best friend’s sister*. The only reason I hadn’t was I’d told myself I was saving myself for the whole meal. But now part of me wishes I hadn’t stopped at a snack, while the other part of me curses my luck for ever being in that room in the first place. Not out of loyalty but pure selfishness. If I hadn’t tasted her skin, felt her heat, and watched her come apart under me, I wouldn’t be salivating at my front door, wondering if one more taste would be worth the price of losing a good friend. Possibly a couple of teeth.

“Nice house.” She tips her head back, glancing up at the neoclassical portico, typical of this area of Kensington.

“Thank you.”

“You’re really not very good at this, are you?” An amused note curls through her words.

“At what, exactly?”

“Polite conversation. Manners. That sort of thing.”

“I feel like we might’ve had this conversation before.” I fold my arms across my chest and lean my shoulder against the doorframe, unable to bite back my own wry amusement. “I’ve little use for pretty manners and general niceties.”

“Hmm. I think you’re just a slow learner.” Her amused gaze darts away as she taps her bottom lip with a lilac-painted fingernail.

“I believe I followed all your cues last time we met. Wouldn’t you say so, *Lady Isla*?”

She almost rolls her eyes at my address. “It’s not like I kept it from you.”

“It’s not like you mentioned it either.”

“Yes. I do find I make the best kind of friends when I go around introducing myself as landed gentry. How was I supposed to know you and Sandy are friends? I’d never even seen you before.”

I straighten, coming back to myself. There are very few people I respect in this world, but Alexander happens to be one of them. Because of that respect, I’ve kept my distance since the weekend. Not that it’s kept her out of my head. All that hair spread across the sheet, nipples as ripe as cherries, and eyes as dark as sin. How can I not think about her, drink from the well of that memory? Imagine what might’ve happened if I hadn’t stopped when I did.

“Are you really going to make me stand here at the door?”

“I haven’t decided.”

“Honestly,” she mutters, yanking the handle of her bag to her shoulder purposely. “Move over,” she adds, sliding between me and the doorframe.

“I don’t think this is a very good idea, *Lady Isla*.” Yet I’m already closing the door behind her.

“Only the people at the bank call me Lady Isla. Everyone else calls me Izzy. Except you.” She allows the corner of her pink lips to curl. “Do you know elephants don’t even like peanuts?”

I throw my head back, my laughter filling the hallway. It wasn't so much the question she'd asked or the peanut reference. It was the way her eyes dropped to a certain part of my anatomy. "Very subtle."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Her smile lingers like an encouragement. She angles her head flirtatiously, a ray of sunlight shining through the stained-glass panel above the front door burnishing her hair in an autumnal blaze. "This isn't —" She glances behind her uncertainly. The colonnades, the high ceilings, the space big enough to host a ball in. "Not the whole house?"

"Is the whole building mine? All five floors?"

"Silly question." She shakes her head as though the thought is ridiculous, painting on a bright smile. "Unless you have a couple of wives and half a dozen children, it would be like living in a mausoleum."

"Three wives and still lots of room to let the kids skateboard in." Her eyes stray to the door on the right. Maybe she roller-skated through her parents' stately home with Alexander and a pet hound following her. And maybe if she opened that door, she'd run screaming from this place, which would be the best thing for her, all things considered.

I avoid telling her I do, in fact, own the whole house after living in the penthouse apartment for the past three years. I'd taken a shine to the area and the building, the guts of which had been carved into flats many years ago. It had taken a year to get everyone out of the building by gentle persuasion and other means, and renovations are now underway to return the building to its former splendor. Meanwhile, the place smells like paint and sawdust, neither of which Isla remarks on.

"Coming?" I turn in the direction of the elevator, moving her away from the reason I'd sent the construction crew home after Alexander's fateful birthday gathering. What's behind door number one? A secret. A problem. Something I'm dealing with.

"I thought you'd never ask," she says, falling into place beside me, all avid gaze and zest for life. It's hard to believe she and

Alexander are twins. He's always so staid and buttoned up, while Isla reminds me of a bird, quick and light and all pretty plumage. I shake away the fanciful thoughts, the wrought-iron cage of the ancient elevator screeching as I pull it open.

"It looks ancient," she says as I gesture her ahead. "I didn't think lifts as a concept were as old as this."

"I think this was installed in the 1890s."

"Antique," she says uncertainly, "if not ancient."

"You're safe with me."

"I know," she says quietly, something I don't deserve shining in her eyes. I close the cage door and the car lurches upward as it begins its slow, rumbling ascent. "I'm surprised you haven't mentioned my parking," she adds in a brighter tone. "Or at least the car."

"The Aston?" As I'd opened the door, I'd noticed it parked on the street in a space reserved for me. "You'll get a ticket. It's permit parking only."

"That's all you've got to say?"

I rub a hand across my jaw as though contemplating when, in reality, what I'm trying hard to do is ignore the lock of hair that, between the front door and the lift, has escaped from the mass piled on top of her head. It's fucking mesmerizing, curling like a temptation to touch. To pull. *Such a tactile pleasure.* "I'd ask if it drives well, but I already know it does." I try not to inhale too deeply because fucking orange blossoms. It's how her hair had smelled, spread across the pillow like a soft cloud.

"Exactly." The word explodes with laughter as she almost throws up her hands in the small space. "Niko." She steps closer, pressing her hand to the center of my chest. "A car is a very grand gesture, but I can't for the life of me work out why it was delivered to my place of work last week."

"How does the saying go?" My eyes lift from her hand, finding her gaze so blue but not guileless. "You won it fair and square."

“Did I?”

“I don’t remember you kissing me.” Somehow, we’ve moved closer, and my hand is cupping her hip. “I know I would’ve remembered.” It would’ve been part of my dreams, my memories, stored in that part of me that still hears her soft cries. Still remembers how delicate her wrists had felt.

“We did a lot more than kiss.” My eyes dip to the temptation of her heart-shaped lips. “I thought you were avoiding me.” Her words are soft. They should be tempting, yet they feel like a deluge of cold water.

“I was.” I step back, and her hand slides down my chest. “I am.”

“Because of Alexander.” Not a question. More of an unhappy statement of fact as the elevator squeaks and judders to a stop. One statement of fact. There are other reasons.

“Come. Let me get you a drink.” I pull on the cage door and help her out, opening the door to the living area of the penthouse apartment.

“It’s lovely,” she says, taking in the neutral colors and the expansive use of glass. Her gaze slides to the terrace and the view of London beyond. Roofs, chimneys, and skeletal treetops, church spires standing like sentinels in the distance.

“I prefer it up here. It’s quieter.”

“And such gorgeous views.” She turns to face me. “I confess, it’s not at all like I’d imagined it would be.”

A tiny bubble of pleasure explodes in my chest. She’s been thinking about where I live, meaning she’s been thinking about me. *Gratifying*, I think with a quiet exhale. And impossible.

“Drink?” I make my way over to the kitchen, and she follows. “Tea? Coffee? Something stronger. It’s nearly five o’clock, after all.” This is such a Western concept. No Russian I know ever asked themselves the time before pouring a vodka.

“Water, please.” I round the island, putting a sea of dark granite between us.

“Ah, yes. I forgot you were driving.”

“Actually, I will have that drink.” As she unravels her scarf, her words are a touch combative. “I did drive here, but I’ll be leaving on foot.”

“Then expect that parking fine. Wine? Something stronger?”

“Wine, please. White, if you have it.”

I pull a decent bottle of Pinot Grigio from the wine cooler under the kitchen island, then grab a couple of glasses from the cabinet. Meanwhile, Isla slides off her cardigan to reveal the kind of blouse that exposes nothing but hints at everything. She slides onto a stool and catches me staring.

“Yes?”

“That’s a pretty blouse.”

Her eyes dip briefly, her expression pleased. “Thank you. I made it. It’s a hobby of mine.”

She certainly knows how to highlight her assets. The hint of cleavage, full and soft. The slope of her shoulder, and I’m staring again. “Just a hobby?” I ask, uncorking the bottle.

“At the minute. I thought you didn’t drink.”

“Would you prefer to drink alone?” Pouring a little into a glass, I slide it her way.

Her expression flickers, a sort of, *fair enough*. “If you don’t want to get to know me because of your friendship with my brother,” she says as she grasps her glass by the long stem, “how do you think I’ll explain why I’m driving around in your car?”

“I’m not sure he ever saw it,” I answer, ignoring her euphemistic delivery. “I’ve only owned it a week or so.”

“You gave me a week-old Aston Martin?”

“I didn’t *give* it to you.” Pulling the other glass closer, I splash a little into the bowl. “You won it in a wager.”

“That’s just silly. Seriously silly.” Her glass *clinks* against the countertop, her arm dropping heavily to the marble. “You realize this is the twenty-first century, don’t you? That my brother isn’t the guardian of my chastity?”

“Isla,” I say with a sigh. “I know that. I also know your happiness is important to him.”

“What if you make me happy?” she counters.

“He’d tell you that effect would only be in my power for a short time.”

“Maybe a short time is all I’m interested in, too.”

That was not the answer I’d expected, but I notice how she circles her thumb with her forefinger anxiously. That she’d find bravery in her want of me is more than flattering. But Alexander knows of my proclivities, just as I know of his. The thought of telling him I’d like to spend time with his sister doesn’t exactly appeal to me. I don’t have a sister, but I can’t imagine it would be very pleasant to glance at her over the lunch table having some idea of what your best friend enjoys doing to her in bed.

“His objection to that would be more about me than you,” I eventually answer.

She lowers her hand to her lap when she notices my glance. “I don’t require his consent.”

“It’s a question of respect.”

“Retain his respect to lose mine, you mean?”

“It’s complicated,” I argue. “Risky.” And not just because of Alexander.

“Niko, I’m not proposing! Did you ever consider Sandy might like you so much he’d be pleased for me to spend time with you?”

“He likes me, yes. He knows me. If I told him what transpired between us last week, I’d lose both his friendship and respect.”

“That you saved me?”

“That we almost fucked. Sisters are off-limits. It’s just the way it is.”

She picks up her glass, trying to mask her flare of annoyance.

“*Kippis*,” I say, raising my own in toast.



“That’s not Russian.” She narrows her gaze.

“It’s Finnish. My mother tongue.”

“Alexander didn’t mention that.”

“Because he doesn’t know.”

“Oh.” Conflicting emotions seem to come to life, then fade on her face. Confusion, surprise. A flicker of pleasure?

“Not many people know,” I add, gesturing with my glass to hers, not exactly certain why I’d mention any of this. Old news is not particularly interesting news.

“Vanyin is a Russian name?”

“Along with Nikolai. Only my mother called me Niko, which is also Finnish.” I’m not sure where the admission came from, to be honest. Perhaps because I want her admiration, and if I can’t earn it while she’s kneeling for me, I’ll gain it in other ways. “I don’t speak Finnish very often.”

“I don’t know any Finnish,” she murmurs.

“Do you know any Russian?” My mouth twists in wry amusement.

“*Na zdarovyе?*” she answers with a tentative look as she lifts her glass. “That’s right, isn’t it?”

“*Boodym zdarovy,*” I reply, correcting a common misconception. “To our health.”

As we each sip from our glasses a silence falls between us. It’s not uncomfortable exactly. More expectant. I can’t keep my eyes from her face. Meanwhile, hers make a very thorough inventory of me following the line of my shoulder, my bicep, sliding down my bared forearm.

“What did you do to your hand?”

“Tennis. I went in for a slide and ended up falling.” Curling my right fist, I glance at my bruised and swollen knuckles, then catch her studying my face. “It looks like I’ve been fighting, doesn’t it?”

“A little.”

It wasn't so much a fight as a punishment. "Hard courts are pretty unforgiving."

"It stings, of course," she says suddenly. It takes me a beat to realize she isn't talking about my hand.

"Alexander," I discern, and she nods.

"Not that I'm not used to it, him being the heir after all. I suppose it makes me feel like the other woman when I find myself suggesting he doesn't need to know."

"Isla." I sigh, despite what she's offering. If only she were someone else's sister. Anyone else's sister. "I don't have a lot of friends, and there are very few people in this world I respect. If we go out, you will tire of me"—of my secrets, of the way I'll want to fuck and control—"and it won't be a question of choosing sides for him."

"You're forgetting something. Sandy is an adult, too. He won't need to choose. You're his friend, and I'm his sister. Separate entities. And it's not like we move in the same circles. There'd be no need for drop-dead glares at twenty paces if, when, it ends."

I shake my head with a sad smile. Of course it would end. What she's looking for, she won't find with me. Stability. Normality. Kids, no doubt. A house in the country.

I swill the glass's contents around the bowl, bringing it to my nose. "At university, I once heard one of our circle of friends ask Alexander how he might get to know you." I glance up to find those eyes watching me intently. *Does the shade change with her mood?* "You were visiting, I think, and at first, mistaken for his latest..."

"Companion?" she offers up cheerfully. "Alexander doesn't do the whole girlfriend thing."

There he and I agree. But if I remember rightly, the idiot's words weren't so euphemistic. He was so enraptured by the sight of Isla from a distance, he'd said he'd be willing to suck Alexander's cock just to get a taste of his latest squeeze.

"After he was made aware of his error, and his apologies very quickly offered, the idiot asked how he might get to know his

grace's sister. Alexander's answer? A firm offer of marriage and the naming of your firstborn son after him. This would be in exchange for not shooting him."

"That sounds like something he'd say to someone he didn't like. He likes you. I know he does."

"Have you asked yourself why we've never met before?" Because I have.

"But he likes you."

"Not enough to introduce me to his sister." Because he knows me too well.

"It's not the first time I've been rejected over my brother." She lifts her glass in an ironic toast. "I was first out of the womb, yet he got the dukedom."

"If it makes you feel any better, I've never imagined your brother in my bed."

Her eyes sparkle, her laughter restrained. "That *would* sting."

*So would being in my bed*, I don't reply. It would sting and hurt, and she'd probably cry a little and beg for a little more. A little more, I'd deliver before kissing away the aches and licking away the stings. She'd look so fucking pretty tied, tears steaking her face, and my cock in her mouth. *Fuck*. I put my glass down, forcing my fingers to uncurl from the bowl, wondering how it's still in one piece.

"Do you have a good dentist?"

"Sorry?" I look up, finding mischief dancing in her eyes.

"All that jaw clenching." She gives in to her smile. "You should probably order a mouthguard before your molars crumble."

"You think?" Or did you notice my jaw because you have a mouth kink? Do you like wearing a gag? Or is a mouthful of fingers your thing, Lady Isla? Maybe you like tender strokes to the cheek and murmured praise while your mouth is full? I remember how her breath had held as I'd bitten the tip of her finger.

“Anyway, I can’t take your brand-new Aston Martin.” Her voice brings me back from my musing and my stiffening cock.

“It’s already done. All that’s left is for you to get used to it.”

“And when Sandy asks me where it came from?” she inquires with a tiny, incredulous laugh.

“I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

“As will he! Probably that I’ve got myself a very rich sugar daddy.”

“A less horrifying prospect than his deviant friend.”

“Deviant?”

That *would* be the one thing she picked up in that statement. “He’d certainly think I’m a deviant. My best friend’s sister.” I shrug, covering the slipup.

“Why do I think you’re hiding things?”

“Because you’re far too astute.” Hiding what would make you blush and cry. Moan and cry out. Hiding what would give you nightmares, as well.

“This is a really lovely place.” Isla’s eyes slip to the terrace and the view beyond the glass before her attention swings back. “What do you do, Niko?”

“Do?”

“I mean, do you work, or are you a trust fund baby?” Her shoulders hunch a little as she makes a triangle with her fingers over the base of her glass. “Sandy said your family is fabulously wealthy oligarchs.” It’s not quite a question, though the inflection is there.

“What would be your second guess?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Russians are only known for vodka, money, and dubious business dealings.”

“You forgot criminals.” She arches a brow and I swear it makes my cock twitch. If only she knew how close she is to the truth. “Some would say all rich people are criminals.”

“What is this, Isla?”

She swallows more wine, momentarily veiling her thoughts with a lowering of her lashes. “My friends call me Izzy,” she eventually answers.

“Is that what we are? Friends.”

“Without the benefits,” she answers, full of faux solemnity. “Sadly.” This is added in almost a whisper before she suddenly sits straight as though regretting the utterance. “Do you want to be my friend?”

What I want is to fuck her until she can’t remember her own name. There’s no way we can be friends. But as she sits in my kitchen, I can do nothing but enjoy her in the ways available to me.

“I won’t make you braid my hair or anything.”

“I was especially looking forward to that part of the friendship.” Braid her hair, tie it back before braiding her body with a crisscrossing of ropes.

She grins. “We’ll work up to it.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“Well, friend,” she says, hopping down from the stool. “I’m dying to have a snoop around your place. You don’t mind, do you?” she adds, grabbing her glass.

“Would it stop you if I said yes?” Would she let me do the same? Let me examine the contents of her nightstand drawer in return?

“Of course,” she calls over her shoulder. “I’m not a monster.”

“That’s what all monsters say,” I murmur, trailing her. My hand cups her elbow as she stops abruptly, my body almost colliding with hers.

“Is this a Rothko?” She turns her gaze from the painting, sucking in a sharp breath as she becomes aware of how close I am. Every inch of my body is suddenly alert, liquid fire coursing through my veins at her proximity.

“That would be some level of tax evasion, wouldn’t it?” Or money laundering, depending on your aim.

“That doesn’t answer my question.” Her voice is as soft as an April shower.

“Why don’t you tell me. Give me your professional opinion.”

“I don’t remember telling you I worked in an art gallery,” she says, turning to face me.

“Didn’t you?” I contemplate telling her this isn’t the only thing I know about her.

“If I had, you’d also know my expertise is in making coffee and photocopying.” Her gaze drops to my lips, and I want so much to pull her against me, let her feel what her nearness does to me. I slide my hands into my pockets instead. “How did the car end up at my place of work?”

“Magic.”

“I know you didn’t deliver it because the receptionist wasn’t all a flutter at the sight of you.”

“Say that again.” I pitch my words as though I hadn’t heard.

“The receptionist usually reports—” Her lips quirk. I suppose my own expression must give the game away.

“Do you think I’m handsome?” I find myself purring, causing her to shake her head in faux disbelief before glancing back at the art.

“It looks like a Rothko, and that one”—she points at the wall behind me—“looks like a Matisse.”

“Do you like what you see?” She glances back at the art, a tiny pinch between her brows. “Because looks can be deceiving,” I caution.

“That’s true.” Stepping back and ignoring my warning, she reaches for the handle of the nearest door. “For instance, this looks like a door to a bedroom, but for all I know, a sex dungeon could lie behind door number one.”

“It *is* actually a bedroom,” I confirm, stepping closer. “*My* bedroom, as a matter of fact.”

“Ah, then it’s a bedroom with a spanking bench,” she answers with a cheeky grin that tells me she’s not quite psychic. “It was a gag gift from your friends. You hang your pants over it in the evening, and that’s the only action it ever gets.” She laughs as though the picture she paints is ridiculous as her hand depresses the handle, and she almost falls into the room.

“Oh.” The soft sound could be in response to the way my hand wraps around her arm to stop her from falling, but I don’t think so.

“Friends share their secrets, don’t they?” My voice is soft, my intentions dark. Intentions that, I remind myself, can lead nowhere.

“I ... yes, I suppose they do.” She presses herself backward against the open door, her gaze landing on items in the room before fluttering away again. The classic yet modern-style four-poster bed, the tactile walls, the velvet accents, and rococo mirrors strategically placed on the walls. I try to see it through her eyes, the sinuous-shaped chaise built for fucking. The low velvet stool next to it. At first glance, the room is sumptuous. A sensory feast. But it’s also a room for feasting in.

How long will it take her to realize?

“That’s an unusual chair.” Her eyes slide to mine briefly, then back. “It looks a little like a birdcage.” A gilded half birdcage. The seat is forest green and plush, the hard metal arms cushioned by the same. Golden handcuffs with velvet restraints to match, hanging from the top. But I’m not really looking at the chair. I’m looking at her. Watching her eyes darken and the way her teeth press briefly to her plush bottom lip. I thought it might be the chaise that would capture her imagination, but this is an interesting insight. *An interesting, useless interest.*

“It’s a chair for little birds.” My words are husky and my fingers aching to touch her. “For good little birds who like to be tied.” Unable to stop myself, I press my mouth into her hair. I curl my hand around her hip briefly, so briefly, as I reach for the door handle at her back. “And, oh, how they do sing.”

Her cheeks flushed and her eyes like midnight, she doesn't immediately notice I'm pulling the door closed. Pulling her body into mine.

"No spanking bench. I'm afraid I'm a traditionalist. I prefer to use my knee." The soft wisps of her hair move with my breath.

"Your knee," she repeats, and it's almost as though I can see her thoughts bouncing like stones down that slippery hill.

"Yes. What do you think?"

"About your knee?"

"The room," I pitch my words lightly, smile, too. "*Friend.*"

"Oh." Her lashes flutter rapidly as she comes back to herself. "It's very nice. Tasteful."

"Do you want to inspect the other rooms? There's a room at the end of the hall where I often strip before getting hot and steamy." My hand retracts belatedly from the handle, and I allow my gaze to roam over her so she doesn't miss the innuendo. *Fuck*. Her nipples are so hard under the thin cotton of her blouse. How is a man supposed to think straight when she's inviting me with those eyes?

"Naked?" Her tongue darts out to moisten her bottom lip.

"And steamy," I almost whisper. There is no way on this earth we're ever going to be friends.

"You have a sauna," she answers, equally soft.

"Yes." My head continues its downward trajectory, pulled in by her dark eyes and her scent. "Why do you smell like orange blossom?" I inhale a deep lungful and give in to the temptation of her hair, curling a lock around my finger.

"There you go again with that pleasure-lover's tongue."

"Oh, darling." Her breath halts as my lips skim her ear. *Want* and *ought* seem like such distant concepts when her scent is filling my nose and her mouth is within kissing distance. An ache expands from the base of my stomach and, all at once, I'm determined to have her at any cost. Tipping forward, I press my cheek to hers and whisper, "This tongue would love



to taste your pleasure.” My hand slides to the back of her neck, and she sucks in a breath as my lips feather over hers.

She breathes my name, soft and hot against my lips. With a low groan, I pull her closer desperate to taste her. Less than an inch separates us, when—

The intercom buzzes. *Like a bell calling time.* I ache and I hate as I halt, drawing back with a reluctance that makes me feel like I’m wading through treacle.

“I’m sorry.” Sorry for my actions and sorry for myself as my hands slide to her shoulders to put her away from me, severing our connection. “It was wrong of me.” Turning swiftly, I head for the intercom.

“Saved by the bell,” Isla whispers, almost to herself.

Saved from me or saved from ourselves.

“*Da?*”

After a brief conversation over the intercom with Sergei, an employee? Associate? A member of ... our family operations, and a doer of distasteful tasks, I turn to find Isla sliding her massive purse over her shoulder.

“I’d better be going,” she says without lifting her eyes to mine. “You’re obviously busy.”

“I’m never too busy for you.”

“But still.” Her gaze drops, and she begins to rummage in her bag. “I’d best be on my way.”

“Not without these.” I grab the keys from where she’d dropped them on the kitchen counter. She allows me to take her hand, and I press the keys into her palm, folding my fingers over hers. “There’s nothing I can do with a car that’s no longer registered in my name. Unless you want me to be accused of stealing it.”

“This is ridiculous.”

“The best kind of wagers often are.” They’re also often the ones with the best kind of payoff.

We make our way to the old elevator and ride it down to the ground floor. At the front door, she pauses, glancing down at the keys in her hand.

“Isla.” Her name sounds halting and wrong on my lips. “I would’ve risked a lot more than a car for a kiss. But your brother has been my friend for a long time.” *Stick to her brother as a reason. No need to complicate matters further.*

“Please, Niko, stop trying to explain. I understand,” she says, dipping her head, her hair shielding her face. “You don’t have to keep repeating yourself. But it’s clear you and I aren’t destined to be friends.” Her head lifts, and the corner of her mouth tilts. “Because we can’t seem to keep our hands to ourselves.”

“I regret nothing.” Except not having her. Stopping when we did.

“Goodbye, Niko.” She tips on her toes, her hand curling around my shoulder as she presses a kiss to my cheek.

“Goodbye, Peanut.” She rolls her eyes and steps out into the cold early evening. She doesn’t look back as she unlocks the car, sliding into the darkened interior.

“She wasn’t here long.”

I close the door and turn to the sound of Sergei’s guttural Russian.

“Long enough.” I choose to answer in English, much to his annoyance. But Russian isn’t my preferred language. Finnish is. It’s not called a mother tongue for no reason.

“Not long enough for the way you like to fuck,” he leers.

“What do you know about my sex life? You been listening at the door again?” He scowls. I smile. “I expect you’ve forgotten which hole it goes into.”

“Stop talking like that, or I might be forced to remind you.”

My laughter fills the cavernous hallway. I take his ears in my hands and press a kiss to his massive head. “You know I love to hear your gulag stories.”

“You have a very strange sense of humor.”

“And you don’t have one,” I retort, patting his cheek as I move past him.

“I know enough about your sex life to know that your uncle is right. It’s time you got married.”

“Ah, so you want to curtail my sex life, just like him.” I shake my head.

“*Ahpeteet prihohdit va vryemya yedy,*” he mutters. *Appetite comes with eating*, so the proverb goes. For Isla Dalforth, I’d happily gorge myself to death

“The jealousy of the older generation.” I shake my head mockingly.

“The lack of respect from the younger. Your uncle likes the duke.”

“Likes the idea of him being in his pocket, you mean.” Marrying his only nephew into the aristocracy would elevate his already overinflated sense of self. He’d get off on ruining her family by tying them to us, embroiling them in our business dealings and death. “But why buy the cow when the milk is going for free?” The analogy isn’t a pleasant one, but it’s a necessary lie. Isla Dalforth would be nothing but an empty husk, drained of her lust for life if she were forced to be tied to me. And that’s what it would come to because he’d see to that. The man can’t help but view people as commodities—pieces to be moved around the chess board of his life. “Let my uncle enjoy his vacation,” I add with a dismissive wave. “Don’t bother him with any of this.”

“You are his only family. He wants what’s best for you.”

“Of course,” I lie. And the best for me, according to him, is to make the best of myself. To join myself to the British elite. Not to fashion myself in his image.

“*Nikolai,*” I can almost hear him say, “*what was the point of paying the fees for Winchester, for Eton, for Oxford University, if you’re not going to make the most of your connections?*”

He'd milk me dry too, if I'd let him. But I tread my own path, I don't dance to his tune, and I show no interest in joining him. To risk doing so would only end my life prematurely, I'm sure. Konstantin likes to see himself as my benevolent uncle, but I do wonder if he'd gut me if he thought I had plans for his empire. Which I don't.

"He is enjoying his holiday!" Sergei gives a deep belly laugh. "Last night, I heard he chopped up some Albanian upstart in one of his clubs."

"Murder on the dance floor," I drawl. Sergei frowns then shrugs. I can only guess he's not a fan of Sophie Ellis-Bexter's music. I can't stop the low rumble of my sigh. "The man has no finesse."

"No, but he does have *la policia* in his pocket."

That stands to reason because why else would he chop someone up with an audience.

"Lady Isla would be useful to you," Sergei adds, falling in behind me. "No one says marriage has to curtail your other activities."

As I grasp the door handle, I turn my head over my shoulder. "You have been listening at keyholes?"

"Your uncle—"

"I know what he wants. He might pay your salary, but he doesn't rule me. Let him stick to ruling—ruining?—the Canary Islands, instead of ruling,"—and ruining—"my life."

"He wants what's best for you, the son of his only brother."

"And I don't want a fucking wife." The rest I swallow down. My uncle's best for me was to be raised by a succession of maids and housekeepers until, at the first opportunity, I was dumped at the gates of the best school's money could buy. I learned to ape and to infiltrate influential circles. To make friends with the sons of princes and prime ministers, dictators and diplomats. Because who knew when those connections would come in useful to Konstantin Vanyin.

And now he'd have me pick a bride for the same reasons. To better his influence. To poison. To invade. To corrupt. The Dalforths deserve better than that.

"You sound like a child," Sergei grumbles.

"Think before you speak, old man," I growl, swinging around and stepping into him. "Who will be left holding the reins when Konstantin is gone?"

Sergei's eyes widen, but he doesn't step back. "*Kolya*," he soothes using my father's nickname for me. "This life was never meant for you. Your uncle respects what your father planned."

"But my father isn't here."

"This life—"

I turn for the door again, my shoulders aching as though the world is balanced there. I won't have him interfering in my life. I won't let him sully Isla. "I need to take care of this *svoloch*," I mutter, pushing the door wide.

"He's not a bastard, and his father is a viscount."

"Baron," I mutter, not that Sergei knows the difference.

"Viscount, baron, or prince, you can't kill him." The older man grips my forearm as I step into the room. "Your uncle wouldn't like it."

"That's a joke. The man who slices up rivals with a smile on his face would take issue with me dealing out the same kind of justice?"

"Think of the mess—the floorboards have just been stripped and you just paid a fortune for that silk wallpaper!"

I laugh, loud and hard. "Ah, Sergei." I slide my arm across his broad shoulders. "Put you in a headscarf and you could be a babushka."

His eyes narrow and he mutters a curse. "The floors are old. Historic. Not a piece of shit dance floor. You want to stain them red, you go ahead, but I tell you, the Pakhan wouldn't like it."

“He’s not here, either.” My arm retracts, and I straighten my cuffs. “And what if I become the next Pakhan? You’d be doing my bidding then.”

“I have always been here for you,” he says, thumping his chest with affront. “Even when you were a snot-nosed kid. Wasn’t it me who brought you here from Finland?”

After my parents’ car crash, he means. My uncle sent him to bring me to London. I couldn’t speak a word of English, and my Russian wasn’t much better. He sent a man with two half ears and a scarred face to collect a grief-stricken seven-year-old. It’s little wonder I ran the other way.

“Didn’t I chase you when you ran?” he says. “Like the devil himself? But what do you mean, if you become Pakhan? Konstantin doesn’t want you involved, and not like this. Your father, he was a different kind of man.”

A decent sort of man.

“My uncle would make me in my father’s image, no?”

“What?”

“Sergei, Relax. Nothing is changing. Don’t tax your brain.”

“And what about him?” He inclines his head in the direction of the whimpers, to the figure beyond the open door.

“I don’t plan on killing him, either.” Or, do I mean I don’t plan on making a habit of it? It’s hard to tell given this sensation in my gut. It feels like silt swirling from the bottom of a riverbed. Granular. Murky. Wrong. It was my intention to frighten him. To make him suffer a modicum of the fear I’d experienced when I’d found him draped in a semi-conscious Isla. To teach him a lesson. But then there was the filth found at his apartment. *Fucking scum.*

As I push the door wide, frightened eyes meet mine over the slash of duct tape. Tied to the chair after a half thorough beating, my *guest* begins to protest under the tape.

“Hello, Giles.”

“He hasn’t stopped quaking since he heard her voice,” Sergei spits, sticking with Russian.

“Were you worried I’d called Isla here to offer her a little retribution of her own?” With a pout, I swipe up a mallet abandoned on the painter’s scaffold. “I thought about it, but she doesn’t seem the avenging type.”

Behind the tape, Giles mutters muffled words, his eyes beseeching.

“What am I going to do with you? I suppose I haven’t decided yet.” Rotating my wrist, I begin to swing the mallet, making him squeak from behind the tape. “I want to kill you, and that’s not hyperbole. My head tells me your loss would make the world a better place.” Eyes wide, Giles shakes his head staccato, his knuckles white over the arms of the chair. “But Sergei makes a good point. He doesn’t want your blood to stain the floorboards.” My attention swings Sergei’s way with a smile, though I make a point of frowning at the chimney breast. “And there are the walls, of course. As you can see, they’ve already started to paint them.”

His shaking head turns to vigorous nodding and a series of muffled pleas.

“Fucking pussy,” Sergei curses in English, switching to Russian as he almost falls over an industrial tub of paint. “Fuck! When are you going to let the damn decorators back in to finish?”

“When we’re done here,” I answer, beginning to rotate my wrist, and the mallet, again. “Obviously, there will be a little mess no matter what route I take.” I pivot on my heel to face him. “Alexander, or his grace, the duke, if you prefer, was planning on digging a hole for your body on Sunday morning. I’ve spoken to him since and you’ll be pleased to hear he’s downgraded his plans to breaking both of your legs.”

Welling tears spill and track down the tape as I lift the mallet over my shoulder before bringing it down hard and fast. Halting an inch above his knee.

“You’ll need a different tool,” Sergei suggests. “A hammer, at least.”

“For the benefit of our guest, English, if you please.”

He does so, his gaze flicking to Giles, adding, “Maybe you just kill him now. This is not a man, this is mouse.” He makes a silly squeaking sound.

I shake my head and pick up the previous conversational thread. “Kill him, don’t kill him,” I reply in Russian, using my hands as though weighing his response.

“For the benefit of the audience only,” Sergei answers with a scowl.

“You’re no fun,” I answer before switching back to English. “What kind of hammer?”

“A better one,” he replies with a grunt. “And something to tie his legs.”

“Tie?” My brows lift as though we were talking about the weather. Thankfully, Sergei seems to finally get the gist of things.

“It is almost impossible to break leg with a mallet. Unless he has twigs for bones.”

Giles’s attention swings from Sergei to me, offering another burst of muffled protests.

“Improbable, not impossible,” I argue. “I could try. If it doesn’t work, we can do it your way.”

“Better you bring some breezeblocks.” Sergei sniffs. “Immobilize knee and ankle to stop joints from giving way. It takes two, maybe two-twenty pounds of force to smash shinbone.”

“Tibia,” I add. “That’s the proper term.”

“What? You a doctor now?”

I tut and shake my head. “I want to cause him pain, not take it away.”

“Stop playing,” Sergei mutters in Russian. “Either do it or let him go.”

“Remind me, who is in charge now?” I answer in the same.



“A heavy hammer.” Brows beetled, Sergei folds his arms across his chest. “One with small surface area.”

“You should listen to this,” I say, turning my attention back to Giles. “The man is giving a masterclass.” Over the tape, Giles’s wide eyes blink.

“You could use hatchet—”

“We’re not trying to chop off his leg,” I retort with a laugh.

“Yet,” Sergei answers with a shrug. “I think he will make too much noise. You don’t want police knocking on front door.”

“I’m not going to shut him up by chopping off his leg, Sergei.”

“Head, then.”

“It’s an avenue.” I shrug, then turn back to my guest. I stretch my tight shoulders, tilting my head to one side, then the other, almost as though limbering up for a morning run. Despite my outward calm, a roiling, boiling rage swims through my veins, the kind that won’t be satiated by anything other than violence. He put his hands on what is mine—what would be mine if I could only allow it. He planned to hurt her, and for that, I feel justified in this. I could kill him. I could do it with a smile on my face.

Dropping down to my haunches, I stare at those fearful, bloodshot eyes. Outside, a car rumbles past, a child squeals in delight, and a dog barks. His shoulders begin to heave with his deep sobs because, here, in this room, the outside might as well be in another galaxy. At least, for him.

“But this is all talk, no?” Sergei asserts, folding his arms across his chest. “Maybe it is the duke I should be giving masterclass to.”

“I said Alexander planned on it.” I stand again and swing the mallet over my head. Behind the tape, Giles screams. “Not that I’d reserve the privilege for him.”

**ISLA**

I'D BEGUN to wonder if Sandy had purposely kept me from meeting Van because my brother knew of his friend's bedroom proclivities. Assuming he is a little kinky, which I think he is, given what I'd seen in his bedroom. Our brief encounter haunted my dreams in the following weeks, pulling me from sleep, my body twisted in the sheets, throbbing and sweaty, every inch of my skin yearning for his touch. But it had to be coincidence that we'd never met before because I'd realized my brother mentioned his name often enough. Maybe I just hadn't been paying attention. By coincidence or fate, over the coming months, we find ourselves in the same space more than once.

"So how long have you two been together?" Niko, sorry, *Van* as I'm supposed to know him, corners my date and I at a dinner Sandy is holding. There'd been a general ripple of surprise as he'd strolled into the room, quickly followed by avaricious looks and fluttering eyelashes from the female contingent. Backslapping and exclamations of delight from the other group. *Niko Vanyin seems to be a popular boy.*

"A few weeks." Alistair clears his throat. "Just a few weeks."

"Not that it's any of your business," I add with a saccharine sweet smile because stuff his avuncular tone. I saw the way his eyes devoured me from across the room. I remember the way he felt over me.

*You're such a sweet, sweet girl.*

Maybe his kink is depriving himself because I know he's attracted to me. I felt the echo of that attraction at his bedroom door when he'd almost kissed me. "After all, you're not my brother." I point around my glass to the fireplace where Sandy is chatting with a girl dressed in the wrong kind of pink for her complexion. "He's over there if you want to bother him." You chose him, in other words, which stings.

"Bother?" Van's brows rise. "I thought you and I were friends."

"We're not as friendly as you'd think." I send Alistair an adoring smile, one that seems to confuse him, judging by the tiny crease between his brows. *Come on, stupid. When a girl smiles at you, you're supposed to smile back.* We aren't together-together. But it's no good pining after a man I can't have. A man who looks at me like he could swallow me whole.

"Aren't we?" Niko answers in that smooth tone of his. "Or maybe we're just not the kind of friends you'd like to be."

"You mean frenemies?" I ask, intentionally misunderstanding him. He means friends with benefits. I can't blame him for bringing it up. I did turn up at his front door and almost throw myself at him. And he almost kissed me. Again. But I can understand his reasons for oh-so gently rebuffing me, even if it's hard to put myself in his shoes because I've never had the kind of friendship he and Sandy have.

Jealous? Moi? Just a teensy bit.

As I understand it, they're about to go into business together. They're buying a crumbling country house to turn it into some ritzy club or hotel. So I can respect his reasons. I can even (begrudgingly) respect the man. But that doesn't mean I have to be nice to him.

Pride cometh before a fall and all that.

But I hate that just the sight of him makes my heart flutter like the wings of a fledgling, balanced on the edge of a nest. Will I fall backward or forward? Will I fly into his arms, or will he let me fall flat?

*Yes, well. We already know the answer.*

“Where did you two meet?” His avuncular tone suddenly grates on me. So this is how he’s playing it? My brother’s best friend, the old codger. Like we aren’t the same age.

“Alistair and I met in the gallery.” I turn my body toward my supposed beau, sliding my arm through his. I also have to clamp my fingers on his forearm when he jolts from surprise. “Didn’t we?” For good measure, I pat his bicep as though besotted.

*Balls.* It’s a wasted exercise, judging by the arctic twist to Niko’s lips.

“Ah, yes,” Alistair belatedly replies. “I’d just moved into a new place, and Izzy was able to help me with the art.”

“Ah, his art.” Only Niko could make that sound dirty. “Why don’t you come and help me with my art?”

*Come up and see my etchings?* I almost laugh, then sigh instead. “I think your wallet is a little plump for my little gallery.”

“I remember you were quite interested in the birdcage.”

My heart thumps loudly, the sensation echoing between my legs as a fractured image from my dreams flickers to life behind my eyes. Gold and velvet. *The chair. His skin.* I blink, realizing I’ve fallen quiet, drawing the attention of both men. One stares at me with confusion, and the other looks like he can read my mind. *And that he likes what he sees.*

“My experience relates only to wall art, not ... installations.” Dammit, I nearly said etchings. I can’t do this with an audience. Hide my attraction to him, play nice knowing he won’t act on this. I turn to Alistair with my glass. “Would you mind topping me up?”

“Of course.” He acquiesces far too quickly for someone who is supposed to be playing the adoring boyfriend.

“Get me a beer while you’re there, would you?” Van’s murmur doesn’t have the air of a request.

“You don’t drink,” I accuse once Alistair is out of earshot.  
“And I’m certain you don’t drink beer.”

“Don’t I?”

I narrow my gaze. “Stop non-answering questions with more questions.”

“Is that proper English?”

“Well, it’s not Finnish. Or Russian.”

Van says something I don’t understand. It could be Russian or Finnish or something else, but I’m reasonably certain it sounded like a curse.

“It’s not that I don’t drink,” he adds tersely. “I just prefer to keep a clear head, but it’s a state I can’t quite manage when you’re around.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That I find you intoxicating.”

My breath freezes, half in, half out, my body seeming to comprehend his meaning before my mind does. I see the cuffs again, a bloom of sensation surging inside. I find myself tilting, leaning toward him as though—

But no. We’re not doing that. Shagging. Knocking boots. Bumping uglies. Fucking each other’s brains out.

“Intoxicating but not worth the risk, apparently.” Why don’t I just make a sad trombone sound!

“That’s not what I said.”

“You said you didn’t want to be that kind of friend.”

“What kind of friend is that?” he asks with an honest-to-goodness smolder. “Maybe you could refresh my memory.”

“You know what I mean.” He steps closer, and I’ve neither the will nor the space to step away, though my heart beats with the cadence of a prey animal. One looking forward to the chase *and* the kill. *So a prey animal that’s kinky.*

“I don’t think I do. You see, I’ve never wanted to fuck your brother.” He doesn’t glance Sandy’s way, not that it matters,

because I can't believe he just said that. Another step and we'll be pressed against each other. Thighs. Stomachs. Chests. Perhaps even lips. Here, in this room with so many people around us, looking on.

I'd dare him to, but for the love of my brother.

"Don't play games, Niko," I whisper. My heart continues to hammer as my tongue darts out to wet my bottom lip. He watches the moment, his lids dropping closed as though to savor the moment, and I find myself thinking how those sandy half-moon lashes look like the sweep of an angel's wing.

"Oh, darling." I physically startle as his eyes flick open, now devil dark. "The games I could play with you."

"Could, but won't," I reply in a bored tone. "Why are you even here?" My voice feels stronger than I feel, braver. "You never accept Sandy's invites to dinner." At least, I've never seen him here.

"Perhaps I didn't know who I was missing." He reaches out, and I think, for a moment, he might be about to touch me when he points at something behind me instead. "Tell me about the figurine, Peanut."

I answer without looking. "I don't know anything about antiques." Even if the house is full of them. I don't even know much about art. I do know lots about pouring wine to ease art purchases. I know about making coffee, photocopying, and listening to the other office girls talk about their ponies and the dates they're trying to turn into husbands.

"Turn around," he coaxes. "Take a look at it. Please, for me."

I turn reluctantly to the Edwardian-era credenza, heavy with silver picture frames, each containing a piece of family history. Images of long-dead family members featured in far-flung places. Ladies in large hats and high-necked gowns with bustles, men with bowler hats and handlebar mustaches. Flapper dresses and tuxedos, striped blazers and cricket whites. More than a century of Dalforths living their privileged lives. But that's not what he's pointing at as his arm

brushes my waist, setting off a million burning, yearning fires across my skin.

“This?” I whisper, tracing my finger over a dark, wooden patina.

“Tell me about it.”

“It’s just a wooden frog from Indonesia.” From Bali. “I bought it for Sandy when I was a teenager.” A smile touches my lips. I’m surprised he kept it.

“Isla.” My name is a whisper that maps my body, teasing every nerve ending in its path. *This* is what he’ll sound like when he comes, I think to myself. His mouth pressed against my hair as he buries himself inside me one last time, breaking apart at my name. *Isla*. “What are you doing with him?” He’s so close, I can almost convince myself that I can feel the heat of him. “He’s not the man for you. You deserve someone a thousand times better.”

“Someone like you, you mean?”

“I’m not nearly good enough for you, Peanut. But then, neither is floppy over there.”

“Floppy?” The word is warbly with laughter though I tamp down a flare of disloyalty. I’m not particularly attached to Alistair, but I did invite him here. “Van, don’t be unkind.”

“What happened to Niko?”

“I’m beginning to wonder about that myself.” Is this a change of heart or a way to torture me?

“Floppy hair, florid features, a flaccid—”

“Stop!” I giggle despite myself.

“Am I right?”

“His hair is a little ... floppy.” I frown down at the frog. I’d thought Alistair was cute, but next to Niko, he now seems all wrong. “It’s not necessarily a bad thing. I think he looks like a young Hugh Grant.”

“Like I said, floppy.”

“Maybe I like floppy things.” I turn, expecting him to step back, but he doesn’t, those glacier-cool eyes intent on mine.

“That isn’t my recollection.”

A thrill courses through my veins at his velvety tone, my insides pulsing emptily in my own remembrance. *He was so hard, and I ached for him.*

No. I halt the thought, racking my brain for some comeback, for some distraction. Or just letting my mouth run away with me.

“I’m a big fan of floppy things. There’s nothing so endearing as Labrador ears.” Why did I have to think about *her* right now?

He crooks his finger beneath my chin, tilting my face up, bringing my gaze level with his. “That doesn’t look like a good memory.”

“It’s fine.” I lift my head away, his cool-blue gaze too much to handle in such close confines. “I was just thinking about the chocolate lab I owned when I was a girl,” I say, fixing on a smile. “Did you have pets?” I add, redirecting the conversation. Some memories are just too much.

“No.”

“Not even a goldfish?”

“I suppose you had one of those lop-eared rabbits, as well.”

“No, just Bess.” Despite my best efforts, I can’t quite stop my smile from slipping.

“Was it a recent loss?” he asks, his tone suddenly soft.

“Goodness, no. She was a gift for my tenth birthday and gone by the time I was twelve.”

“The downside of love,” he says sagely. “I’m told man’s best friend is never around long enough.”

“No, that’s true. Sometimes no matter what you do.” She was the hardest lesson I had to learn, and I still wake some nights in tears. In the darkness, the weight of guilt weighs so heavy on my chest it can feel hard to breathe.



“So you’ve had a love for floppy things since you were a girl.”

“It would seem so.” What even *is* this conversation?

I drop my gaze as I find my hand in his, his thumb sliding across the back of my hand. “I’m sorry. I’ve made you sad.”

“No, it’s not you. *You* frustrate me.” I ignore how his lips quirk briefly. “But memories aren’t always good ones, you know?”

“What can I do?” he asks earnestly.

“Distract me. Tell me something—anything. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“I’m wondering if you think of me when he goes down on you.”

Every thought in my mind disappears, his words pulsing through me so darkly. Velvet and gold flash once more through my head, a yearning slick and sweet, threatening my knees.

“We haven’t—” I halt at the almost triumphant lift to the corner of his lips. I suddenly feel untethered. I don’t have the wooden frog or my glass to distract me, lost instead to his fathomless eyes. How does he do it? Paint such filth into poetry? Who is that confident, so sure of themselves? With little care of being rebuffed. But I suppose I didn’t exactly beat him off with a broom the last time we met. Far too late, I respond with, “That has nothing to do with you.”

“You asked what I was thinking.” There isn’t an ounce of contrition in that tiny shoulder flick.

“You’re not supposed to tell me! You’re supposed to offer something bland. It’s not like I asked if you think of me when you fasten those cuffs to another woman’s wrist.”

“Every time,” he answers immediately. “I think of you every time.” I shouldn’t feel flattered, should I? “Seeing as we’re being utterly un-English and honest, do you think of me when you touch yourself?”

“Stop. You’re being unfair.” I look away. He plays this game too well.

“What’s unfair is how you invade my sleep, *milaya*.”

My brow creases at the unfamiliar word.

“What’s unfair,” he continues, “is how you haunt my dreams, *darling*.”

“You can’t do this. I mean, we could, but you don’t want to. So stop playing with me.” Stepping to the right, I make to move past him, past his tempting eyes and his persuasive words, past the injustice of Sandy knowing him first. My footsteps falter, and I half turn, my gaze dropping to where his fingers curl around my wrist. I expect him to make some quip about how he’d like to play with me because this seems to be how he’s determined to behave when his answer just confuses the hell out of me.

“But what’s more unjust”—his gaze lifts from the manacle of his fingers, rising to my face—“is how you seem content to settle for so much less than you’re worth.”

“You don’t even know Alistair.”

As though summoned at that moment, my gin and tonic arrives in Alistair’s hand.

“Here you go, Izzy.”

Alistair, the date I’d thought was a cute possibility. *Was, as in past tense*. Niko annoys me, but Alistair doesn’t make me want to smack, kiss, and ride his face all at once. He doesn’t thrill and annoy me in equal measure. But the strange thing is, in settling for less than I’m worth, I don’t think Niko necessarily means Alistair.

“Thank you.” I force a smile as I take the glass.

“And for you,” he says, producing a bottle of beer for Niko quite happily. “There was this or the Estrella. I wasn’t sure which you’d prefer.”

“You didn’t have to do that.” My smile turns brittle. I feel off balance by Niko’s behavior, by his words. The way he’s still looking at me, his cool eyes burning with longing. I might be worth more than what he can offer me, but it doesn’t mean I want it any less.

“It’s no problem,” Alistair answers, causing me a pang of embarrassment for him. If Niko wants to play alpha, it doesn’t mean Alistair has to play along. Surely, he’s not so dense that he doesn’t understand he’s become the errand boy.

Niko raises his bottle in an ironic toast. “It’s so lovely to see you again, Isla.”

“Izzy,” I correct him, adding a little grit to my voice. Niko Vanyin provokes so many feelings in me. And not all of them are pleasant.

“Peanut.”

“It’s a silly story.” Glancing Alistair’s way, I roll my eyes as though bored. *Try strangely thrilled.*

“I have to get going.” Niko cups my elbow as he leans in to kiss my cheek. His skin is warm and his cheek smooth as it retreats.

“You’re not staying for dinner?” I hate how disappointed I sound.

“Sadly, no. But I’m sure I’ll see you around.”

By his delivery, I’m not sure if that was a promise or a threat.

“Thanks for humoring him.” I shoot my date a tight smile rather than watch him retreat. *Even if the rear view is almost as delicious.* “Getting him a drink, I mean. I appreciate you not making a big deal out of him being ... well, him.”

“No problem.” Alistair brings his glass to his mouth, pausing for a moment. “When Nikolai Vanyin asks you to get him a drink, you go. To Moscow for Moscow Mules, if that’s what he asks for.”

“You know him?”

He tips his own glass back, then nods. “I know *of* him. I work in the city.” At my blank expression, he adds, “His uncle is as rich as Croesus, Iz.”

“Oh.” He must bank with Coutts, which is where Alistair works.

“The family is said to be worse than the Medicis.”

“What do you know about his family?”

“I’m a banker,” he says to the tune of *well, duh!* “Though I expect if I were a policeman, I might know a little more. I do know the prime minister holidayed on the family yacht, and that if the press got a whiff of it, he’d be out of parliament and out of a job.”

“Are you saying Van’s family are criminals?”

“I wouldn’t dare. I like my limbs where they are and not in a sports bag buried in a field somewhere.”

“You have the worst sense of humor,” I reply haughtily because my brother doesn’t mix with criminals. “Whatever his family are or aren’t, Van is a businessman—a graduate of Oxford University. He recently donated over a hundred thousand pounds to a Hoxton animal charity!” Or at least, I donated it in his name after I’d sold his beautiful Aston Martin. I was sad to see it go, but I couldn’t in good conscience keep it. Besides, every time I climbed in it, all I could think of was him. It even seemed to smell like him. Powerful, expensive, and more than a little thrilling.

“I didn’t know you cared about education, Iz.”

“I don’t. Plenty of idiots attend university.” I might be looking at one right now. “Van can’t be a criminal.” He just can’t be.

“Then maybe Nikolai Vanyin is the exception to the family rule.”

And maybe Alistair the banker really is a wanker. Either way, I find myself going off his company very, very quickly.



## ISLA

“THE PRICES ARE EXTORTIONATE,” I complain, passing Tamsin her drink.

“What?”

“The drinks,” I say a little louder. “I’ll have to sell a kidney when it’s my turn to get in a round.”

“What do you expect on the opening night of London’s new *it* club?” she shouts back. I roll my eyes. I can’t believe I agreed to come. Opening night in the new place to be seen is more Tamsin’s thing than mine. That’s part of the reason I’ve decided to move back to Scotland. I’ve grown tired of partying like I’m still at university. I miss waking to cold mornings and the swirl of mist over the rolling hills. I miss the people and their lack of artifice. Working in an art gallery and pandering to pretentious pricks is wearing on my soul and dating a string of useless, privileged fuckwits is getting old.

So I’m going back. Next month, in fact. Scotland feels like a favorite pair of wool socks, comfortable and safe. The antithesis of this place, I think, glancing around at the velvet-covered walls and neon-feather bouquets in alcoves. I imagine the designers were given the word *opulent* as a creative direction, and whoever wrote the cocktail menu *exorbitant*.

“Give it a little while,” Tamsin adds, her gaze sweeping over the place. “We’ll have men fighting to buy us drinks when the place fills up.”

“I wouldn’t count on it.” My head slowly turns, following the progress of a woman wearing little more than a silky hanky.

As is typical for Soho nightclubs, the place is teeming with women in similar states of underdressed. Slavic supermodel types, legs up to their armpits and boobs sitting under their chin. Like the one who just passed us by. She was trailing a twentysomething city boy, denoted by a sharp suit and a heavy waft of aftershave, his eyes glued to her bum. “Anyway, I prefer to buy my own drinks these days,” I add airily, ignoring the unpleasant ripple of residual ick that runs down my spine. “Being spiked once is enough for one lifetime.”

“Not every man is a creep.” Tamsin brings her glass to her lips. “What happened to him, by the way? Did you end up going to the police?”

I shake my head. “The drugs were out of my system within hours. It happened in a private dwelling so no CCTV, no trace of drugs, no evidence.”

“In other words, he got away with it?” Pulling on my arm, she motions me away from the bar to a low row of seating around the periphery of the room where we don’t need to yell at each other. “Oh, is that a new Stella McCartney dress?” Tamsin catches my hand before I sit, insisting I do a little spin, the hem doing a little flip as she inspects both the fabric and the cut.

“No, I made it,” I admit with a tiny burst of pride.

“You’ve got mad skills.”

“Mad sewing machine skills,” I say with a laugh. Because the rest of my life ...

“You have the technical skills, yes, but you also have an excellent eye.” Turning my wrist, she examines the pearl buttons on my deep cuffs. “This is totally gorg, babe.”

I murmur my thanks as I swish my hand under my bum and thighs to minimize creasing and to stop my legs from gluing themselves to the PU bench. “What were we talking about?”

“I asked you what happened to that lowlife. Did your brother ever catch up with him?”

“No.” Something uncomfortable twists in my gut. “No one has seen him since. He just sort of disappeared.”

“Weird.” Tamsin’s expression scrunches.

“Not as weird as the email he sent me.”

“The man who roofied you, sent you an email? What a fucking liberty! What the hell did he have to say?”

“It was an apology. I mean, it was weird, but it was definitely an apology. It said something like he hadn’t considered how it might disturb me.”

“Disturb you?” she squeaks. I shrug. “*I’m sorry,*” she intones in her approximation of deep and posh, “*so sorry I roofied you with nefarious intentions, old girl! It just hadn’t occurred to me that you might not be into it.* You know what that sounds like?” she adds angrily. “Like he thought you might be perfectly fine about waking with your knickers in your pocket and no recollection of what happened. Like you’d just put it down to having one too many wines and *a jolly good time.*”

“Personally, I think it’s more likely that he didn’t give one single shit about how I’d feel. It’s something I’m trying not to dwell on.”

“Fab outlook.” Glassware *clinks* as she touches her drink to mine. “Fuck him. But—obviously—not really. Unless you can do so with a broom handle.”

I shake my head, unsure how to answer that.

“But you’re okay now?”

“It’s taken some processing, but yeah. I’m fine. I’m just grateful you were there. That I had friends looking out for me.”

We each watch as a server passes by with a tray of bottles, each stuffed with an indoor firework, the golden sparks turning Tamsin’s red hair gold.

“He deserves stringing up,” she mutters, not quite done with the topic. “Like he wouldn’t be frightened out of his wits if it had happened to him, waking and not being able to piece the evening together.”

I frown down at my drink, stirring it with my straw. It still makes me feel ill when I think about what might’ve happened,



but for the grace of God. Well, the vigilance of Van. “The email did say he was going away so I wouldn’t have to worry about seeing him again.”

Tamsin snorts. “More like he was worried someone might catch up with him with something worse than a broomstick.”

Something cold passes over me. A similar thought had occurred to me after reading his email. Not that he was worried it might happen but more like it already had. I’d said as much to Sandy, but it had only set him off on another rant. He swore he hadn’t seen him, and in the same breath swore to do him bodily harm when he finally does. Maybe Giles has gone overseas or is just lying really, really low.

“You do have quite a powerful protector.” Tamsin shoots me a look that’s not hard to interpret.

“Sandy’s not the violent type. The angry type, yes.” Sandy also knows better than to refer to himself as my protector. I’d kick him in his shins if I caught him saying such a thing.

“I was thinking of the delicious blond,” Tamsin says with a sly glance.

I paint on a bland expression but don’t answer, even if my heart beats hard at the mention of Van. How do I like my men? Infuriatingly contrary.

“Don’t play coy with me. You know who I mean. Razor-sharp cheekbones and expensive tailoring. I hope you took his jacket to a decent dry cleaner,” she adds, making me laugh. “Hotter than Satan’s scrotum. Ring any bells?”

*Just once*, I almost answer, *and just from dry humping*. Because self-service orgasms while thinking about him don’t really count.

“He was so angry,” she says, wide-eyed along with her commentary. “Like *so, so* angry.”

“I don’t remember.”

“Yeah, because you were out of it. His concern was sincere. All command and intensity.”

“I can’t think why,” I murmur. “I barely know him.” I just know he smells delicious and that I can’t stop thinking about him. Yet he didn’t even kiss me. Maybe my breath smelled like a dog’s bum after being drugged and vomiting, but when I turned up on his doorstep, I’d made sure it was as fresh as a (minted) daisy! He’d looked so *sexy*, and he’d made me so hot and bothered with his teasing. He was provocative, intentionally so, and he behaved the same way at Sandy’s dinner. Maybe that’s how he gets his kicks. Tormenting women until they burst.

And goodness, did I burst.

*The Oscar for best non-penetrative orgasm goes to:*

Niko Vanyin.

“Didn’t you say he’s a friend of your brother’s?”

I snap back to myself and the moment. *Did I tell her that?* Reluctant to discuss my connection to him, I make a vague gesture. It’s not quite a shrug, not that she pays attention anyway as she squints at something in the distance.

“My God, talk of the devil! Isn’t that him over there?”

“Where?” My head whips around, following the direction of her gaze, but that jolt of excitement pops like a burst balloon as Tamsin presses her hand to her mouth and begins to laugh. Actually, she laughs so hard, her feet come up off the floor. “Very funny,” I mutter, sending her a stinking look.

“So you don’t really know who he is, and you’re not bothered, or even interested, hmm?”

“Get lost,” I mutter, though as I lift my glass to my mouth, I find myself smiling around my straw. “It would just never work between us.”

Tamsin’s eyebrows shoot to the top of her head as she nods knowingly. “I get it. This is a self-imposed moratorium after to-die-for sex.”

I wish. “He’s just off-limits, both to me and for conversational purposes.” She opens her mouth to speak, but I cut her off. “He’s Sandy’s friend, okay?”

“Oh. Right.” She nods as though committing this to memory. “So you’re being a good little sister so as not to become the topic of an awkward conversation over a pint down at the pub.”

“I’m not sure the pair are a pint down the pub types.” I’m also certain Niko doesn’t have an awkward bone in his body. Plus, he doesn’t exactly have that *one of the lads* vibe about him. He’s sort of enigmatic. I add the word to my list of Niko descriptors along with *annoying* and *mercurial*. I don’t really know him, of course, but I have noticed some things about him. He’s kind and thoughtful and pays more attention to me than any man ever has. He’s also confusing. I definitely get mixed signals from him, the kind that have kept me awake at night. Urgh. I don’t want to keep thinking about him.

“Ah, but no one wants to hear you talk about how good your new girlfriend gives head when the new girlfriend is your sister.”

“On the nose, as usual, Tam,” I say, despite her being nowhere near close. Is she even listening? “How about we change the subject now?” Because I’m not protecting my brother, he is.

“Fine.” She rolls her eyes dramatically, before perking up again. “Oh! Tell me about the new baby.”

I press my hand to my chest as it fills with warmth. “She is just *darling*.” My heart literally melts at the mention of my new addition, love pouring from my eyes like cartoon hearts, I’m sure. “Her little face.” I make as though to squish it. “Those dark, soulful eyes, and her great big silky ears!”

“She’s got oversized ears?” Tamsin pulls a face.

“Absolutely not!” I answer in defense of my lovely girl. “They’re gorgeous. She’ll grow into them.”

“That’s what my mother said about me but look who’s still wearing her hair long.”

“You don’t have big ears!”

“I look like a cab with the doors open when I wear my hair in a ponytail.”

“Not true,” I answer with a giggle. *Okay, maybe just a little bit.*

“Who looks after the baby while you’re at work?”

“I’ve been taking her.” I pull a *EEK* face. “The boss is on a buying trip. Which means she’s probably recuperating after plastic surgery, so I have a few weeks.” By then, I hope to have trained her out of peeing on the art installations. I’m pretty sure she’s improved one or two of them.

“I can’t believe you got yourself a puppy.”

“Me either.” I grin because I didn’t. “She was a belated birthday gift to myself.” That’s my cover story, and I’m sticking to it. Because the truth is just a little trickier to unravel.

“Have you decided on a name yet?”

“I was going to call her Aston.”

“Ashton? That’s a boy’s name, isn’t it?”

“So is Martin.”

“What?”

“Nothing.” I give a quick shake of my head.

I’d opened the door to my flat three weeks ago to find a pink box the size of a large dollhouse on the front step. A woman stood next to it, but I didn’t pay her any attention, thanks to the whimpering and the scrabble of paws against cardboard. My heart hammered as I’d crouched down as though the box was a bomb. I knew what I’d find inside, and I was so terrified. I wanted that insistent, wriggling, fluffy thing, but I was so petrified of what it might mean. *The legacy of my childhood Bess*. Love is tricky. Fleeting. It’s hard to be worth it. But then the box had burst open, and this soft, sandy-colored love bug of a Labrador puppy had leaped into my arms. She’d had a pink satin bow around her neck, and I was just done for.

The very nice lady who accompanied her handed me pedigree certificates, pet insurance documents, a card for an account at a local veterinary clinic, vouchers for a doggy daycare place nearby, and the delivery schedule of a year’s supply of

gourmet puppy chow. She'd also delivered an envelope with a handwritten note.

*It was her ears that sold me. I saw them and was instantly inspired by your self-proclaimed fondness for floppy things. I hope she will improve your taste in companions and, yes, I do include myself in that wish. Because, Peanut, I send this wriggling and floppy thing in lieu of the very hard thing you inspire in me near constantly.*

*Yours in affection,*

*N.*

It was hardly the “you must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire you” declaration, a la Mr. Darcy. It still made me as fluttery as reading that passage had during my teenage years.

I still have the note, and I've read it a dozen times.

*Daily.*

A fancy car and a pedigree pooch. He dreams of me. *He wants me.*

The man has a very strange idea of friendship.

“Shall we dance?” I ask as I peel the back of my thighs from the seat like chewing gum.

“You haven't said what you've named her,” Tamsin complains, following me.

“Well, given she's not a boy,” I reply almost at a shout as the music gets louder as we get closer to the dance floor. “I've named her Gertrude.” I throw a grin over my shoulder. “Don't tell me you don't like it because it suits her, and it's already grown on me.”

Tamsin opens her mouth but doesn't answer as a surge of people push her into me.

“Shit,” she mutters, holding out her drink to stop it from spilling. “I wish we’d had the foresight to book a table.”

“I’ve got better things to do with my money than waste it on ridiculously priced booze just because it’s served at the table. I’ve got responsibilities now.”

“Who’s looking after the Labra-baby this evening?”

“Uncle Sandy.” Maybe Uncle Sandy’s butler. They’re probably fighting over her. She’s just so adorable.

“With contacts like your brother, couldn’t you have gotten us into the VIP area?” she complains with an exaggerated pout.

“I think you already know the answer to that.” I mean, I probably could, but I hate mixing with that crowd. I’d rather be on this side of the velvet rope where no one cares who your family are, or what they can do for you.

“Seriously?” she answers, unimpressed.

“The grass isn’t always greener on this side of the fence. It’s not all mega bank books and fancy balls. You know, Princess Diana worked in a kindergarten before she married Prince Charles? And that she used to clean for her sister. *Lady* Diana, the cleaning lady.” I push out a harsh breath because if Sandy ever asked me to clean his house, I’d bloody his nose.

“What’s your point?”

“Being an aristocrat isn’t all that it’s cracked up to be.”

“Yes, but you get to mop up your tears with trust funds full of fifty-pound notes.”

“Only I didn’t get the inheritance.”

“I just find that so ... Urgh! Haven’t the aristocracy heard of the emancipation of women?”

“It is what it is,” I answer, metaphorically kicking away her soap box. I don’t need her demanding a revolution on my behalf. “And I like how it is. I have my freedom. I don’t have to worry about leaking roofs and conservation works, deer culling, or staff. I can do what I please when it pleases me.” In theory, at least.

“Yes, but between us, we have a limited number of kidneys to sell, so let’s find someone with a big wallet to fund our drinks tonight. Unless you’re thinking of stealing someone else’s kidney, of course.”

“Shall I give my friendly local roofie dealer a call?” Obviously, I mean that asshole Giles.

“I suppose you’d better if we’re going down the organ theft route tonight.”

“It’s not a good night until blood is spilled, Tams.”

“Ladies.”

“*Whoa.*” Tamsin’s eyes widen to comedic levels before I whip around in the direction of the deep voice. I look up, then up again. Dark suit. Dark hair. A head the size of a soccer ball. His nose seems the kind of crooked that comes courtesy of a pummeling of fists, but more distracting is the fact that he has one and a half cauliflower ears. Probably less. This seems much more worrying than a full two cauliflower ears because it seems to suggest someone has taken a bite out of each. Dragging my gaze away, I smile brightly, guessing we’ve been accosted by security.

“She was obviously joking,” I say with a staccato titter.

“You’re the one who mentioned spilling blood,” Tamsin unhelpfully offers.

“Bloody Marys,” I say quickly. “We’ve more than enough money to buy our own drinks without committing back street surgery.” Credit cards, anyway.

“Come with me,” the man intones in a heavy Eastern European accent, before adding, “Please,” as an apparent afterthought.

“What did you do?” I accuse, turning to Tamsin. We can’t be getting thrown out for a bit of gallows humor. She did once get us ejected from a pub for slipping a fancy cocktail glass in her purse.

“What could I have done?” she protests. “We’ve only been here an hour.”

*In other words, give her time.*

“Ladies,” the man begins again, “Mr. Vanyin requests your company in VIP area.” An arrhythmic flash of lights from the dance floor washes the man’s face puce, briefly turning him into a gargoyle. It doesn’t stop my insides from somersault pleasantly. I read once that when you’re looking for signs, you see them everywhere. Is this a sign? Or could it be a red flag?

“Mr. who?” Tamsin’s nose scrunches, mainly because she doesn’t have her glasses on, like leaving her specs at home has also turned her slightly deaf.

“Mr. cheekbones and fancy suit,” I say with a sigh. A car, a puppy, and now an invite to the VIP area by proxy.

“Oh, Niko! Your *friend*.”

I snort indelicately. Not even close, Tam. “Where are you going?” I ask as she turns.

“With him?” Confusion flickers across her brow.

Honestly, Ted Bundy could’ve extended the invitation, and she’d be in for free champagne. “You don’t even know Niko.”

“No, but you do. The universe has intervened, sweetie,” she says, making a gesture that would make a fairy godmother proud. “Organ harvesting is unnecessary tonight. Unless you want to find what Niko’s organ may yield, of course.”

Curling my fingers over her forearm, I turn back to the man in the suit. “Please tell Mr. Vanyin that if he wants *the pleasure of our company*, he’ll have to come and get us himself.”

“What?” Tamsin protests as the bouncer opens his mouth, but I’ve already grabbed her hand and am dragging her to the dance floor.

“But... free champagne!” she whines as we reach the steps down to the retro dance floor.

“Drink up!” Without letting go of her, I place my glass on a nearby shelf as I tamp down a wash of giddiness.

*He’s here!* my mind whispers as music pulses through the soles of my feet. *And he wants you.* Or maybe he just wants



me to thank him for Gertie the golden Labrador. And maybe I could thank him—offer him a helping hand for that hard problem he mentioned.

*Or maybe my mouth.*

I give my head a little shake, but neither the nonsense filling it or the smile on it budes.

“I can’t believe you’re making us dance,” Tamsin complains over the music. “We can dance on the opposite side of the rope too, you know.”

“It’s complicated.”

“No, it’s not. It’s free champagne! Unless. Is this one of those reverse psychology moves? Treat him mean, keep him keen?”

“Of course not.” And absolutely.

The crowd swallows us like a whale, the music rising through my body like a wave. I can’t remember the last time I danced in a club, but tonight is suddenly brimming with promise, and I feel so alive and so vital.

“Look out.” Tamsin laughs as her gaze dips comically to her hips, where manly hands are curled. “Roaming hands,” she mouths, moving closer. “What about the face?”

“Not bad,” I call back, taking stock of the man dancing behind her.

A shrug signals her decision. “I’m not giving up on hobnobbing with the elite. Come and find me when it’s time.”

“Fairweather friend,” I call back, taking her face in my hands. A moment later, her new dance partner spins her to face him, and I find myself dancing alone. Only I’m not alone because this crowd, this sea of humanity, we’re all here for the same thing. To let go. To succumb. To give in to the beat.

I dance as though he’s watching me, imagining my hands are his as I trail them over my hips, the back of my fingers coasting the sides of my breasts as I feed my fingertips into my hair. Heat courses my skin, the beat of the music throbbing through my veins. God, I want his hands on me, his mouth on my neck, and the feel of him over me.

“You’re so hot.” From behind, unfamiliar hands envelop my waist, his deep voice at my ear. “Is this okay?”

I nod without speaking, pressing my hands over his for control, my insides seeming to pulse in time with the deep bass. I keep moving, dancing, as though it’s not a stranger behind me but someone I long for. Long to kiss. Long to feel.

The man’s lips brush my neck, and I stifle a moan. But the music is loud, right? He wouldn’t have heard. If he did, he wouldn’t know that sound wasn’t his. He’s just a place card, and his hands are holding onto me for someone else. The thoughts are slightly shocking but also anticipatory. Niko is here. If he wants me, he’ll come for me. *Again*. I’ll slide my hands into his hair, press my mouth to his, and I won’t let him push me away this time.

The song changes seamlessly to something slower, the man behind me rocking my hips from side to side. I close my eyes and imagine his hands are Niko’s. Would he dance with me? Would he slide my hair from my neck to press his lips there? I lose myself in the music and the feel of the man as we dance, my body no longer commanded by the music but by this pounding, internal beat. A beat of need.

“Do you want to get out of here?”

*No. No, I don’t.* My eyes flutter open, but it’s not the stranger’s words that make them do so. It’s an awareness. An anticipation. A sixth sense.

From across the dance floor, Niko’s eyes bore into me, corkscrew sharp, burning with the kind of intensity that makes me a little breathless. I take a step when the hands on my hips tighten with a murmured protest, the words barely registering.

A strobe light passes over the crowd, highlighting Niko’s sharp cheekbones and the determination etched on his face. The crowd parts with barely a ripple, the sharp lines of his suit marking him out as dangerous. *Just as clearly as exotic stripes would.* He moves across the dance floor with the grace and surety of a tiger. God alone knows, Niko Vanyin is my favorite predator. And I want to be devoured by him.

This thing between us is coming to an end, I'm sure. This push and pull, this dance of denial. It ends tonight.

But will his friendship with my brother end along with it?

Selfishly, I push the thought to the back of my head, indulging in only the carnal. Will he use his fingers in the place of those cuffs? Press my wrists above my head to prevent my hands from wandering?

As he comes to a stop in front of me, my insides react like a florist's ribbon drawn across the edge of sharp scissors.

"Take your hands off her." His mouth shapes the words, the music almost too loud to hear them.

"Hey, man—" Those words I hear as I try to step away from the man behind me, the man I haven't once set eyes on, to find his grip almost piercing.

Niko barely tilts his head. Is it a trick of the strobe that makes him look venomous? He's a man of secrets. I know this on some instinctive, animal level. And one of those secrets is this side of him.

The man with murder in his eyes makes my heart gallop as he reaches out and cups my face. He leans in, his cheek almost pressing mine. "Take your hands off her," he says, not shouts, "before I drag you outside and break every bone in your body."

The threat pounds low in my belly for reasons I don't understand.

"She's dancing with me," the man blusters.

"Can't dance with broken feet. Can't hold with mangled hands." Van's tone is ice. His words fire. My partner's fingers retract with stuttered apologies, and I find myself almost pushed into him.

"Peanut." He doesn't smile as he steadies me. "What are you doing?"

"Dancing?" I offer lamely, then realize I haven't really moved since he appeared. "This is a dance floor," I add with a little

unconcerned flick of my shoulder, despite the way his hands still hold my arms.

“You like to dance?” My heart soars as he reaches out and slides a lock of hair from my cheek. I open my mouth to respond, distracted by this tender act of what turns out to be subterfuge. He dips, and suddenly, I find my body balanced over his shoulder.

“Hey!” My legs dangle in the air, and I’m pretty sure by the sudden cool draft, I’m flashing my underwear. “Van!” I brush the mass of fallen hair from my face, grabbing handfuls of the back of his jacket, spoiling the line of his expensive tailoring. “Van, put me down.” Pressing my palms against his back, I push up and wonder why no one seems to want to challenge him. I stop, Tamsin, laughing and waving and generally looking like she’s enjoying the spectacle, though the crowds of dancers swallow the space behind us as soon as we pass.

“Are you listening to me?” I poke his back, more for attention than anything else.

Nothing. He says nothing. Though when he smooths the fabric of my dress over my bottom, securing the hem under his forearm, I feel slightly mollified and less exposed. But still embarrassed. *Embarrassed and turned on.* He starts up the stairs as though I weigh nothing, which really isn’t true. At five foot seven, I am not exactly what you’d call a small woman. I’m more well made. Urgh, there’s a phrase I never thought to hear again, let alone in my own head. It’s what my father had said the year I turned twelve when I’d towered over Alexander. *For about five minutes.*

Thrusting away the recollection, I twist my hair away from my face, staring at the gawking faces, smirks and knowing looks. Are these the same kind of looks I’d received the night I was drugged? No one stopped Giles. *Except the man whose arms I’m in.* At the thought, something pulses low in my belly. Or high, I suppose, depending on your relative perspective. I wouldn’t be surprised if he could feel it, *feel me*, throbbing against him. This shouldn’t be sexy. I shouldn’t be turned on.

But God help me, I am.

“Ow!” Suddenly, the tiny purse I’d been wearing at my hip flips and bounces from the top of my head. It feels like a less-than-divine punishment. Maybe the universe is trying to knock some sense into me. “This is ridiculous.” Both the bag and my mode of transport. “Are you listening to me?” I yell, thumping his back with the side of my fist.

He says nothing, again, though his arm bands tighter across my thighs, his fingers wrapping inward, securing me to him.

“Please, put me down now.” A different tack. A different delivery, this one oh-so reasonable. “I was going to come and see you. Honestly!” Still nothing. I slump back against him. “I may as well be talking to my arse,” I complain as I stare at *his*. With my hand still wrapped in his suit jacket, it’s pretty much in my line of vision. But there are much worse things to stare at. He does have a good set of glutes. I wonder if he does squats. And I wonder how he’d react if I squeezed them? I reach down and ... suddenly don’t feel brazen enough.

“Oof!”

Up the three more stairs. He pauses, and there follows a brief exchange of words with another voice. A claret-colored velvet barrier rope is clipped closed behind us by a man in a suit who ignores me.

“Where are we going?” The music isn’t so loud here. We’re clearly in the VIP area, by the whiff of entitlement permeating the air. People here are far too important to pay more than a passing glance to a man carrying a woman over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. “Van, come on! Where are you taking me?” We’re obviously not heading for the exit.

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

“He speaks!” I splutter.

“Believe me, Peanut, *he* has a lot to say.”

My heart begins to flutter against his back, and I press my hand there, wondering if his is, too. How is he not in the least fatigued?

“I doubt I’ll be able to hear you,” I snipe. “I have too much blood in my head.”

And it seems we're back to non-answers again.

In a flash of pique, I spread my arms across his back and dig my fingers into his sides. Hard. I mean, I dig my fingers *hard*, but he's also hard there. Like a wall of muscle. A belt? It both annoys and impresses me that he doesn't bend. Doesn't make a sound. He could've at least giggled or let out a snort.

Another door is opened. This time we pause, Niko speaking again, not in English this time, but that's all I can gather because my brain feels like it's going to explode from all the blood swishing around in there. Except, I wriggle, and then realize my bum must be staring at this other ... person. This other man. How mortify—

*Ohh.*

Niko's hand strokes down over my left bum cheek in a soft yet masterful caress. This must be why dogs ... No. Stop that! I can't relax against him like a bloody pet! Also, is he seriously having a conversation while *fondling* me? Before I can protest or poke him again, he moves and a door closes behind us this time. I don't dare lift my head to see if the other man is looking, choosing to stare at his shiny shoes this time.

What in the world is going on here? I feel like I've been whipped out of my life into the life of someone else. Since when have I been the kind of woman who inspires jealousy and strong actions from men? The men who've drifted into my life are the kind more likely to present me with a bunch of wilted chrysanthemums and think that gives them license to feel me up in the back of a cab. The truth is, despite my protestations and my complaints to be put down, there's something about being hauled into a man's arms that makes a girl feel all fluttery. *Especially in the knicker department.* I know, I know. My feminist membership card is about to be revoked. But until then, every part of me that's touching Niko is enjoying the hell out of the experience.

*Smack!* In the muffled quiet of a darkened corridor, his large hand connects with my backside, and I yelp. So much for enjoying.

My protest is a strangled yelp and a “What the hell was that for!”

“For a start. For poking me. I still owe you plenty.”

“Owe me plenty what?”

And there he goes with the no-answer thing again.

“Listen here.” I poke him in the back this time. “You do realize we’ve met before. I know you’re not the strong, silent type.”

“Ha. What type, Lady Isla, do you think I am?”

*The kinky type*, my mind supplies, remembering his bedroom. The type that rescues you from rape-y men.

“The annoying type,” I say instead. “The type who should’ve been blessed with a little sister.”

“They’d put me in prison for doing to my fictional little sister what I’m going to do to you.”

Oh. Oh! Hang out the bunting—sound the trumpets!

“Keep going, Peanut, because for every poke you land on me, I’m going to double.”

“To poke me twice?”

“We’re up to two fingers now. Keep going, and it’ll be three. Three fingers I’ll push inside you to make you come.”

“You can’t say things like that.”

“I have big fingers, but you can take three, I think. Four, however, might be a little uncomfortable.”

I have no answer to that and curl my fingers into fists against the notion of poking him again. My bum throbs, but it’s not the only part of me that’s doing so. Or smarting, come to that. These two separate sensations are somehow not entirely incongruent. Or unpleasant ...

Another door, one he opens himself this time. He closes the door behind us, and the thud of the bass instantly dims. As he drops his shoulder and my feet meet the floor, I stagger a little, though his lightning-quick reflexes prevent me from falling.

His fingers on my arm, his ice and fire gaze sears me to the spot. One minute, we're staring at each other, just staring, and the next we're kissing. Not that kissing really covers it. We're more like mauling each other. Hands touching, sliding, grasping, tongues tangle and teeth graze. Our motions, the sounds filling the space are anything but gentle.

"You make me crazy," he rasps, his fingers tangling in my hair, anchoring me in place.

"Kettle." My head falls to the side, giving him more real estate and me more thrills.

"What does that mean?" His mouth begins to explore the skin of my neck, his stubble a delicious scrape.

"Kettle, pot, black," I pant as my heart hammers against my rib cage. I can feel my legs literally shaking, because this is everything. Every word and sly glance. Every look that contradicted what his mouth said. "Niko." I sigh his name, my fingers seeking the feel of him under his jacket. There's too just much fabric. Too much between us.

"So I'm Niko again?" His admonishment feels like the best kind of punishment, a powerful pulse bursting to life as his teeth settle over my pulse. *Yes, yes, yes!* it seems to beat out as my body melts against his.

"Always. You'll always be Niko to me."

His response is to spin me until I'm facing away from him. His arms slide around my waist, pulling me into him. *He's so hard.* The realization pulses heavily through me.

"Oh God, please."

"Yes." His lips skim the shell of my ear. "Just like that. I want to hear you beg me to fuck you."

My heart begins to thunder like the hooves of a runaway horse. I feel the echoes of it everywhere, its cadence shimmering across my skin. His big hands slide down the front of my thighs, toying with the hem of my dress. With a low rumbling sound of satisfaction, his hands glide inward, his body enveloping me from behind like a cloak.



I want this so damn much. And I can't quite believe it's finally here. It stung playing second best to Sandy, and I—

“Wait.” It takes me a fraction of a second to comprehend that was my voice. “Wait, please.”

His hands still, and can't believe I'm stepping away from him.



## VAN

SHE STUMBLES FROM MY ARMS, and while my first instinct is to follow her, I force myself to be still. She takes a step, then another, before whirling around to face me.

“Well.” She blinks, a fluttering of lashes and artlessness. “That was a little unnecessary.” Her words hit the air in a shaking breath, her bravado, no doubt, meant to cover it.

“Really?” I cock a brow, sliding my hands into the pockets of my pants. They’re both casual actions that do little to mask the menace in my reply. “Like your eyes weren’t begging me to kiss you.” Begging for other things. When her eyes are on me, I can’t think straight. Her denim gaze makes no pretense of coyness, though I’m sure she’s unaware of the degree of want burning there. It’s why I had her turn from me at Alexander’s. I didn’t trust myself.

Which is probably why I’d attacked her the minute the door was closed. Giving in to the thing I told myself I wouldn’t under any circumstances.

Any other circumstance but her.

But it wasn’t my plan to—fuck it, I didn’t have any plan. When I saw her tonight, chatting with her abrasive little friend, I told myself I had a handle on things. That we could have a drink together and dance around the attraction between us a little more. I was willing to be the masochist she’s made me. I was even willing to ignore how I’d confessed to dreaming about her, dreamed of fucking her almost nightly. But I’d also dreamed of other things. Of waking to her in my bed. Of

permanency. Of longevity. Foolish, pointless dreams. And not because I risk losing my best friend.

It's been three weeks since I'd seen her, and I have no idea how, in such a short span of time, she's become so vital to me. Having her close seemed like torture, but not being near her has been infinitely worse. So seeing her tonight seemed like the answer to a prayer I hadn't sought. But then Sergei had returned without her.

*"Plenty of other pussy in the sea,"* he'd muttered, mangling the idiom.

But I didn't want other pussy because I wasn't planning on having hers. She isn't mine to own or command, but Jesus Christ, I'd replaced her dead childhood puppy. Didn't I at least deserve a thanks? And I'd take that thanks however she saw fit to issue it. A drink together. A little sparring. Flirting with her might be my own personal form of self-flagellation, but I'd fucking take it.

And then I saw her dancing with that prick. His hands on her. Her smiling over her shoulder, flirting with him. I'd felt fucking unhinged. I hadn't felt that since ... well, since the last time I'd seen her in someone else's arms.

*And look at how that turned out.*

Just the sight of them, the thought he could've tasted what I realized I considered mine. It made me want to obliterate the memory of any other man she'd ever touched. It made me want to fuck her so hard and so well, I'd become her drug of choice. It was a moment of clarity, the blinds falling away, showing me the situation for what it truly is. I wasn't trying *not* to fuck her out of deference to my friend. I was trying not to fall for her. Trying to keep her from the poison of my life. But when that door closed behind us, it was already too late.

I'm willing to ruin my friendship with her brother.

I'm willing to ruin her.

In front of me, Isla smooths her dress down her thighs, pulling at the hem. "Yes, unnecessary. The caveman thing."

"Unsophisticated thoughts produce primitive actions."

“Like spanking me, you mean.”

“Some would say primitive. Others would say fun.”

Her gaze flits away and I watch her examine the manager’s office. The dark wooden paneling and the oversized captain’s desk. A burgundy velvet sofa littered with an array of jewel-colored cushions. It seems quite opulent for the manager of a nightclub, but it’s the little things that prevent the attrition of employees. I value loyalty and repay it well.

“You could’ve just asked me to come with you,” she says, her attention coming back. Her fingers begin to fidget by her side, though she forces them to still.

“But I did ask, Peanut.” I take a step toward her, and she instinctively takes one back. “And you declined my invitation.”

“I—”

“Sent me a message?” Another prowling step, and like a tiger shedding his stripes, I strip off my jacket, tossing it to the sofa without breaking my stride. “I got your message loud and clear. Come get me yourself. Isn’t that what I just did?”

“It was hardly—” I know what she’s going to say before the word falls out of her mouth.

“I think it’s time to try another flavor because *polite* doesn’t seem to be working out for you and me.”

“What happened to what you said before? About being friends?”

My footsteps halt. I drop my head for a beat, stubble rasping against my fingers as I rub my hand over my chin. “You brought this on yourself,” I eventually reply, lifting my gaze but not my head.

“Me?”

“I warned you I wasn’t a nice man.”

“Well, I’m not nice either.” Her gaze darts away and she bites her lip. “Just now, when you kissed me, it occurred to me that my whole life I’ve played second fiddle to Sandy. The son.

The duke. The one who must be obeyed.” The latter I’m sure she means ironically. Her brother has no more authority over her than I have. “This might be my idea of rebelling the status quo, forcing you to choose me and damn the consequences. But that’s wrong, isn’t it?” she whispers, her gaze coming back. “Because I’m not the one who’ll have to bear the cost. I’m not the one who’ll lose a friend.”

“You have no idea what I’d give up for you.” Two quick steps and she’s in my arms. *If you count my hands wrapped around her upper arms.* “No idea what it’s taken to stay away from you.” Does she even see herself?

“But you said it yourself. The risk.”

“I know what I said,” I growl, resisting the urge to shake her. How can she see herself as second best? “I also know what I’ve endured. Dragging you from that slimy fucker on your birthday turned me into an animal. I broke four of his fingers just peeling them from your waist.”

“I don’t—I don’t remember.” Her voice is barely above a whisper, her chest rising and falling with tight little breaths. A ripple of awareness runs through me. She stepped away because she was trying to do the right thing. But she’s turned on. By the violence in my tone, by my jealousy.

“Then to see you out there, with his hands on you?” My hands rise from her arms to shoulders, from her shoulder to her face. “I wanted to more than break his fingers. I wanted to kill him.”

“It wasn’t his fault.”

“Oh, I know. Because it’s you I want to own. To punish.”

I’ve desired before, desired the tangible and the intangible. Possessions and positions, success in its many forms. I’ve wanted women, made it my goal to get them into my bed. Enjoyed them until the fun came to a natural end. But this, this is different. My desire for her is a force flowing through me, making my heart pound and my skin feel alive to the touch. It’s a sensation clawing at my skin, a whisper that promises one taste will satiate. Just once will take away this ache.

But desire is a lie, and obsession is a dangerous path to tread.

“Why don’t we”—her tongue darts out to wet her lips—“work this thing out of our systems?” Her tone is careful, her gaze honest. “Maybe we can do this, then walk away. Pretend it never happened. That way, no one gets hurt.”

“Darling,” I murmur, sliding one hand through my hair. “I don’t just want your body. I want to own your fucking soul.”

She inhales a sharp breath as my hand tightens on the strands at her nape, a shimmer of connection running through us. I tilt my head, pausing my descent as she speaks.

“That’s a little dramatic.” Despite her disparaging tone, her eyes flare midnight dark. “I mean, if I was meant to be controlled, surely I would’ve come with a remote.”

“I’m not usually one for gadgets.” My lips ghost over hers. “But why don’t we table making you come by remote for another time?”

Her laughter is as genuine as it is fragrant, her hot breath whispering over my lips as I hold her. As I tease her, feeding on her frustration as her lips pursue mine.

“We’re really doing this?” She settles her palms against my chest, tightening her fingers in my shirt as though I might change my mind.

My hand still in her hair, I trail my other down her side, my fingers discovering the concealed zipper there. “I think the answer to that is yes.” Her breath is unsteady as I begin to slowly pull. “But that’s not really the question you’re asking,” I whisper, tracing my lips over her neck.

“Isn’t it?”

“I think you’ve been asking yourself how I’m going to make you come.” Her body jolts against me as though my words detonate inside.

“F-Fingers. You said fingers.”

“I’m going to use my mouth.”

“*Niko.*”

Fuck, I love how she almost groans my name as I test my teeth to her thundering pulse. “I’m going to enjoy you like the feast you are until you’re dripping down my face.”

“Oh, goodness.” Her answer slides out on a sigh.

“Yes, lots of goodness.” Pressing my hands over hers, I slide them to the placket of my shirt. “Undo the buttons, Peanut.” Her fingers nimbly set to her task as I slide my lips to the tender space below her ear. A suck. A tiny swipe of the tip of my tongue. “I’m going to use my fingers, my tongue, my teeth.” As the front of her outfit begins to sag, I stretch it to expose her shoulder, pressing my teeth there, relishing the ripple of reaction that runs through her. “Then I’m going to fuck you so hard and so well, I’ll be so deep inside that you won’t know where you end and where I begin.”

“It sounds like you’re going to be very busy.”

I ignore her attempt at bravado as the last of the buttons falls loose.

“Take it the rest of the way off.” She shivers as I kiss her neck, her fingers fumbling with my cuff links. As she slides them into my pants pocket, I find I have to curtail her wandering. “You don’t want to rush things,” I purr.

“Don’t I?”

“Not if you know what’s good for you.”

“And I suppose you think you do.”

In the absence of my reply, Isla slides her hands up my chest, my abs tighten and my balls ache as she pushes the shirt from my shoulders. I return the favor, dragging her dress from her body until it pools at her feet. My appreciation of the sight before me is a low rumble of approval. Her underwear is little more than pale, silky cobwebs, a demicup bra and tiny panties. In the ambient light, her skin seems to glisten, highlights of peaches and cream. By contrast, her eyes are like midnight. *The color of liquid sin.*

“You’re exquisite.” I wrap my hand around her waist to pull her against me when she reaches for my pants. “Ladies first,” I murmur, lifting away her hands.



“Are you shy?” Amusement twinkles in her eyes.

“You already know the answer to that.”

“I shouldn’t be the only one naked.”

“You’re not naked.” My gaze meanders down her body from the rosy peaks of her nipples straining at the lace to the shadow of her femininity. “Yet.”

“Maybe you don’t want to admit to being shy. Maybe that’s why it’s taken so long for you to kiss me,” she says, twirling away.

“And maybe you’re frightened.” I take a step toward her, and her head comes up fast.

“Frightened?” Her breasts rise and fall with tight breaths as she steps backward. “Of you?”

“Frightened you might’ve bitten off more than you can chew.”

“I’m not frightened,” she protests, stepping backward again.

“Then stop trying to get away from me,” I growl, lunging for her. Wrapping my arms around her, I drag her against me.

“I think you’re the one who’s frightened.” Her eyes are so dark as her head rears back. “You never kissed me, not properly. Not on the lips—not until tonight.”

My answer is a low growl as I trace a hot, wet path to her throat, my hands dipping to palm her ass.

“Why didn’t you?”

“I couldn’t trust myself to stop.” To kiss her was to yield. I didn’t want to just kiss her, and I didn’t want a hurried fuck in a small bed, one foot on the floor, listening out for footsteps in the hallway. Not with her. Not then. I could tell together we’d be something special. I wanted to spread her out and take her apart piece by piece, discover all her hidden pleasure points, feast on her moans and her tears. I wanted to lose myself in her in a visceral masterpiece. I wanted her to crave me, to say yes to seeing me again. And it worked because she turned up on my doorstep. But by then, she was a prize I was destined never to have.

And look at us now.

“I think you’re a tease.”

“Do you?” I pull back. If I sound a little delighted, it’s because I am. “I do like to take my time.”

“Glacially slow.” In a flash of pure Isla, she rolls her eyes. The next time she rolls them will be in ecstasy.

“My darling, a wise person once told me hasty men miss so much.”

“You’re the opposite of hasty.” Her voice brims with temptation.

“I’m going to take that as a compliment.”

“It wasn’t meant that way.”

“I’ll ask you how you feel about it in the morning.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I’m going to continue as I started, that I’m going to take my time with you. I will kiss you—again and again. I’ll kiss you until you’re delirious.” Her breath is hot and sweet as I feather my lips over hers, drifting south to press over her heart. “Here,” I whisper, sliding my finger into the half cup of her bra to release her nipple. She whimpers as I envelop the tight peak and moans as I suck, her fingers lifting to knot in my hair. I glance up, savoring her reaction as I flick the shiny bud with the tip of my tongue. “Or here.” I cup my hand between her legs. “Yes, I think I’ll start here.”

“Niko, stop talking.” Her voice is pure compliment as I wrap my arm around her back, steadying her as I flick her bra loose.

“You’re so hot for me already,” I murmur, bending her backward over my arm. *The shapes I’ll bend her in when she’s pliant and sated, her big eyes watching me as I take her again and again.* “Such a good, good girl. What a treasure it is to see you burning for me.”

“Oh God.” Isla jolts against me as I rub my middle finger over her slit. “Who says stuff like that?”

“Aren’t you watching my mouth? Watching the shapes and promises it makes. Let’s put you somewhere you’ll get a better view, hmm?” After briefly considering the sofa, I instead begin to move her backward until we come up against the desk. “Let’s put those kissing conundrums to rest.”

“What?”

“I’m about to press my face between your legs and make out with your cunt.”

“Niko!” she exclaims, all red cheeks and maidenly outrage. But for the way she subtly rubs herself into my hand.

“You’ll be so sweet, dripping down my chin.”

“Oh my God! Who says these kinds of things?”

“And I’ll wear your scent like my favorite cologne.” The muscles in my abs tense with raw need as I hook my finger into her panties and begin to pull, that finger becoming a fist as I drag the gossamer fabric down between her legs.

She is naked, and she is a dream. Like many things in life, I don’t deserve her. But I’ll have her anyway.

“Hop up,” I murmur, pulling the scrap of fabric from her foot. I groan as her body bounces with the movement, her palms slapping against the surface as she catches herself. A sigh whooshes from her lips as I drop to my knees and take her foot in my hand. I kiss her from her inner ankle to the top of her thigh, her flesh quivering as I reach the apex and use my hands to spread her legs wide.

“Oh, darling.” I glide my thumb along her slit, glancing up to watch her face. She mewls as I press my thumb deeper to caress that slick ribbon of flesh. “I knew you’d be pretty,” I whisper, pressing a kiss to the soft skin of her inner thigh. “But you’re perfect.”

A deep rumble of appreciation rises through me as I peel her open with my thumbs as everything inside me pulls tight. Nerve endings scream and muscles ache, my fingers tightening on her thighs against the urge to throw her back, to lose myself inside her without thought. To fuck her for *my* pleasure, not hers.

But I won't. Instead, I press a sweet kiss on her clit. A delicate swirl of my tongue. A press. Her thighs tremble, and she throws back her head, the visual almost too much to bear.

"You taste heavenly. Like manna from the gods." A Bacchanal feast.

"Oh, Niko, please."

"I know, beautiful. You're aching for this." Because I am, too. "That's right, sweet girl, moan for me. Moan and I'll give you the world."

Another lick, then I begin to make out with her pussy, slow and sweet.

"You're *so good*. So good at that." Her words are breathy as she rocks into my face. "Oh, yes. God, that tongue."

Innocence and filth, she drives me fucking wild, my make-out session turning dirtier as I lick her long and lushly, as I suck, flick, and finger fuck her until she's squirming on the desk. The room is filled with the sound of her taut cries and sweet gasps, and the scent and taste of her, fuck, I can't get enough. She is a high coursing through my veins, addictive from the first shot.

"Slippery. Delicious." Her reaction is everything. The way she rides my fingers, my face, her spine a sinuous arch, and her fingers planted tight in my hair. "And all for me."

"Oh my God, Niko. I'm ... I'm ..." She moans, the sound desperate and ragged around the edges.

"Not yet, darling." My voice is hoarse, and my cock feels like a fucking pole. Just a little more. A little deeper. I suck on her pussy until she's writhing beneath me, and her insides are pulsing around my fingers.

"*Please, Niko.*"

"That's it, sweet girl. Beg for it."

"I can't—please, I need to come!"

Her body bows as though struck by a live wire, her cry echoing through the room as I bury myself between her legs,

sucking and swirling, repeating again and again until her legs are trembling, her words almost keening. I feel like I could come myself, a contact high as my hand slips to my cock, squeezing the fat head as my tongue begins to slow. But I don't pull away. I can't. Not as her pussy pulses against me.

"No, Niko. It's too much." She pushes against my head, trying to squirm. "Too sensitive."

"You're so fucking beautiful," I praise, continuing to work her, the strings of her orgasm tied to a series of tiny aftershocks and soft moans. "So, so beautiful," I whisper, kissing my way up her body to take her face in my hands. "Should this be our first kiss?" I whisper, bringing my lips to hers. "A kiss where we shared and enjoyed your sweetness?"

"You are perverse," she whispers, a smile lurking in the corner of her mouth.

"And you're irresistible."

I brush my lips over hers, just once, and she opens to me with a breathy moan. I thought I couldn't get any harder, but as our kiss deepens, as she sucks her taste from my tongue, I fucking do. I am fit to burst as I lift her hands to my belt.

"Loosen it." My whisper is gravel hoarse.

"Yes, please. Let's hurry." Her slim fingers begin to pluck and scrabble, "I need—"

"I'm going to give it to you, sweet girl. You're going to take all of me."

I'm already so fucking wired when Isla traces her fingernails down my chest. A shiver wracks through me from head to fucking toe. I bite back an expletive because, Christ, I need this as I drop my forehead to hers, inhaling a steadying breath.

"Feel what you do to me." Grasping her wrists, I press her hands over my crotch. One hand slides down over my boxers, and she cups my balls. I groan at the added stimulation, her pleased gaze rising to mine.

"I want to see."

"Lift me out, Peanut. Lift out my cock."

My abs tighten in anticipation as her fingers pull at the waistband, a pained rumble stuttering from my chest as her hands slip inside.

“Oh, that’s ...” Her eyes dart to mine, her gaze a touch uncertain.

“All for you.” A smile leaks into my words.

“And thick,” she whispers, wrapping her dainty fingers around my girth, making me pulse hotly in her hand.

“You’re going to take me, darling.” She nods as though it were a question, watching as I run my hand along my shaft, twisting my fist over the head. *Tormenting her, teasing myself.*

“Yes.” She tilts her pelvis and trails a finger between her breasts.

“All of me, as hard as I need.”

“Yes, Niko, please.”

“Tell me you’re on the pill.”

“I ... No, I’m not.” She presses her hand to my chest, panic blooming on her face. “Don’t you have a condom?” I groan and shake my head. “Then we can’t—”

My abs clench, and my balls ache at the thought of this ending here. “Isla.” Her name is a plea as I slide the crown of my cock through her wetness.

“Then we can’t ...” Her words trail off into a shiver. She dips her head, and we both watch as I coat my cock in her pleasure. As I drive myself fucking insane.

“I would rip off my arm rather than hurt you.”

“Are you ...?”

“As clean as a whistle. You have my word. I’ll be careful, darling. Just let me ... *fuck.*” For a moment, I think my knees might give out as she widens her legs in silent assent, tipping her pelvis. “That is ... the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.” The crown of my cock, framed by her sweet, sweet pussy.

“Niko, please.” She flexes, her fingertips brushing down my abs as she reaches for me.

“Like this?” She mewls as I slide inside—the tip, just the tip. My heart pounds so hard that it’s like I can feel it everywhere.

“Don’t tease.” Her fingers slide down from my abs to my cock, finding me slippery with her pleasure.

“Oh, darling, you are *so* wet for me.” She shivers at my low rumble, whimpering as I pull back and circle her clit with my crown. “I love how wet you sound.” Gliding down, I begin a teasing slide and retreat.

“Please, Niko, you’re driving me insane.” Pained words, panting breaths. She looks fit to burst. My ripe, English peach. But she’s not the only one tortured, not the only one aching for this.

“I’m so fucking hard for you. Isla, look.”

She glances down, her head snapping back as I drive my cock into her.

“God, you’re such a good girl,” I rasp, and she cries as I draw back.

“You’re such a fucking tease.” Her thighs quiver, her words wavery with need.

“And you, sweet girl, have a dirty, dirty mouth. I could find something to fill it.”

“One thing at a time,” she answers, curling her hand around my shoulder. “Please, again.”

So I do. With each shallow jab of my hips, I feel like I could embarrass myself.

“You take my cock so beautifully.” Biting her ear, I growl, “You fit like a glove.”

“Oh Lord,” she pants, writhing under me.

“You can do better than that, sweet girl. Tell me what you want.” I find my hand around her throat, and her dark eyes and excited gasp the reaction I couldn’t have anticipated but just fucking revel in.

“I want you.” I feel her swallow, the movement a ripple that cascades from her neck down. “When I wore your jacket, you were all I could think about. I wanted your cock when I woke to you watching me.”

I laugh, actually laugh. “I wanted to give it to you, too. You were so fucking beautiful, begging me with your eyes and your little whimpers.” So open and so vulnerable.

“Oh God.” Her eyelids flutter, and she presses back on her hands as I drive myself hard inside her. “I wanted you in your kitchen.” She gasps. “Out on the wintery terrace.” Her pussy clenches around me. “I wouldn’t have cared if the whole of London.” A moan. “Watched us.”

I plow forward, my head snapping back at her admission, everything inside me taut and tense. Her sounds, her body, the picture she paints for me, it’s such a sensory overload.

“You’re so fucking tight,” I growl, my forearm at her back, my hand slipping under her to change the angle. Her insides squeeze me like a hand in a silk glove as I plow my cock deep inside her. “Watch how you take me.”

“*Oh God!* This is—” She presses her lips to my shoulder, almost as though to stem the flow of words.

“I know.” It’s never felt like this. I don’t need words. Not as her strangled cry joins my hiss. Her entire body hakes as her orgasm hits, her walls milking me like she might drag me in. Every inch of my skin is prickling and hot as I force myself to pull out, and she watches me with dark, glassy eyes pouring with pure encouragement as I work my wet cock in my hand.

I am pure energy, pure power, and shaking from head to toe as I paint her pussy in endless pearly white strands.





## ISLA

### *THE MIDDLE - PRESENT*

#### *The wedding*

That night was the beginning of the end for us.

Poised halfway on the castle's service staircase, my hand grips the utilitarian banister as my mind slips from the memories of that evening. *And what followed.* But the truth is, if I'd known how things would end before he'd carried me over his shoulder into that office, I don't think it would've made any difference. Foolish girl that I was, I thought I knew what heartbreak felt like. I had yet to learn. All I could think about was how I wanted him. I didn't care about the consequences. By nature, consequences were for later. All I wanted was looking back at me with the same expression that I was surely wearing.

I'd never had sex like that. Never felt so commanded yet at the same time so worshiped. My orgasm was like an out-of-body experience, and as he helped me down from the desk, I was sort of surprised to find I still had legs. That I was flesh and blood and bone, not air and ecstasy. He'd slid the sweaty knots of my hair from my face, his eyes dipping to inspect my neck. *Jesus, my neck.* When he'd held me there, my body lit up like a Roman candle. I felt controlled, possessed. Adored. His knowledge of my body has always been one of the things most irresistible about him.

As I stood there, naked and sweaty, recklessness dripping from between my legs, Niko made me feel nothing but beautiful. *Nothing but his.* But then he'd pressed his lips to my head for the longest beat and a ripple of unease had run through me. A light kiss would've been lovely. A long kiss, well, it felt like goodbye.

*"Please don't tell me you're sorry,"* I'd whispered, staring at the dark blond hairs on his chest. Staring, touching, my insides a torrent of tiny aftershocks. I couldn't lift my gaze to his, worried about what I'd see there. Worried about what he might see. It couldn't be over between us. Not yet.

*"I will never be sorry for glimpsing heaven."* Pulling back, he had slipped his fingers through mine. He'd brought his gaze level and kissed my hand. I was relieved to see nothing but sincerity in that alpine gaze of his. Which is why his next words came as such a shock. *"But I will be infinitely sorry if I break your heart."*

It was a clear enough warning, but the foolish girl I was didn't heed a bit of it.

*"Oh, Niko,"* I'd said, resting my chin on our linked hands. *"You'll be even sorrier if I break yours first."*

But, as it turns out, Nikolai Vanyin doesn't have a heart. Unless you count the one I gave him. The one he was very careless with.

"Hello, Peanut."

His voice brings me back to the moment, my hand tightening on the banister. If I didn't know better, I'd wonder if my thoughts had summoned him. *Like the dark lord he is.* I force myself to take the next step, then the next, before looking up.

"Don't call me that."

The effort to prepare myself is wasted, my heart dropping like a weight between my legs at the sight of him. Not now, not when the evening is almost over. Not when I've done so well to avoid him. *Mainly because parties don't run themselves.* But I've resisted more than two glasses of champagne and only spoke with him when others were present. Not that I can

trust him to behave himself in company. Who am I fooling? I've resisted champagne because I don't trust myself to be within a foot of him.

Champagne. Cream cakes. Chocolate. Niko Vanyin.

Why do we want the things we know are no good for us?

"So this is where you've been hiding."

"Hiding?" I reply, channeling smooth, serene, and unruffled, three things he makes me feel the opposite of. "I've been busy." I make my way down the remaining three stairs, my free hand holding the hem of my decorously gathered gown. The last thing I need is to find myself falling at his feet. *Again*. "Temperamental chefs required humoring, children herded like unruly sheep, and a dog's occasional need to pee." I scowl at my slipup and am relieved when he doesn't bite.

"Who needs an assistant when you're on hand?" he answers smoothly, but for the tight pinch between his brows.

"I like to be useful," I retort. "Besides, if I don't do it, who else will?" *Don't pretend you care*, I want to add. The children and dog are my responsibility, and humoring the temperamental, my stock in trade. Just ask my creditors. "Anyway, what are you doing out here in the service corridor?"

"Looking for you."

Trying to get me alone, more like, I can tell. Laser focused, he just gets this look, his intentions settling around him like a cloak. I got the impression I'd upset him earlier by suggesting our marriage would be hellish. Apparently not.

"Well, you've found me, but sorry, Van. I'm not playing tonight." As I reach the bottom, I make as though to breeze past him when he catches me around the waist.

"That's an interesting way to describe what's between us." Taking my hands in his, he slides them behind me, pressing me back against the curved banister. Everything inside me pulls tight, my pleasure points twinkling like fairy lights. Why him? After everything he put me through, why does it have to be him? Maybe I just like being held. Held and my body bent.

Told what to do. And when. Well, in the bedroom. Not that anyone else ever has. He's the only man who seems to know me, and I don't just mean sexually. I sometimes feel like he can see into my head, see the less pleasant side of me. The side that no one else sees.

*Urgh! Not helpful, brain.*

"Nothing is going on between us." Damn. That sounded less needy in my head.

"Because you've been avoiding me," he purrs, as though my body needed further encouragement.

To counteract whatever my nipples might be doing, I scowl. It's a genuine reaction because I suddenly can't decide if it's idiotic or ironic that this man is both my divorce rebound and the reason I married Tom in the first place.

Probably idiotic.

"Van, please. I'm busy. I have the boys with me this weekend." I glance up the stairs behind me as though they might traipse down at any moment. They won't, fortunately. They're not on this side of the house. I'm not sure where they are. I only know that Hugh, my almost ten-year-old, has led Archie, his eight-year-old brother, and three other children off in a hunt for the headless gray lady, one of Kilblair Castle's resident ghosts.

"Didn't you bring their nanny?"

"I think you'll find she's a bit busy. You might've seen her in the ballroom. She's the one on my brother's arm. In the white dress?" I add far too sweetly.

If I'm an idiot, my brother is a cliché because he married my nanny. *Sort of*. A better woman he couldn't have picked, even if it took him a couple of tries to get there. Speaking of first loves, I glance up into cool alpine glacier eyes. No. I'm not thinking about second times because that way madness lies.

"Holland has been duchess for a few months now," he says, like I need reminding. I don't. I've been here most days since Christmas, helping her settle into her role as doyen of this monstrosity. I was hoping it might free me up to concentrate

on my business. It hasn't yet, but she'll get the hang of it. "Haven't you hired anyone else?"

"Obviously not," I complain, tugging on his hold. I could barely afford her in the first place. I just sort of borrowed her and supplemented her pay. "Let go of me, Van. I haven't got time for this."

I ignore the twinge of melancholy when he does. I'm just tired, I tell myself. Tired of keeping up the pretense that everything is as it should be. My once shit of a husband is late with his alimony payment, my car is overdue its annual service, the driveway to the mortgage pit I call a home has more potholes than gravel, and thanks to said shit of an ex's habit of shirking his responsibilities, I'll probably have to put next term's school fees on my credit card. In short, I'm broke.

I really shouldn't complain. I know poor is a relative term, and I'm so thankful that I'm not living in my car, but that silver spoon I was born with is very much tarnished these days. My once stylish updo is more an up-don't, and this Valentino rental is more than a smidge too tight. I just want to go back to my room and kick off these party shoes that are older than my firstborn child.

"Come and have a drink with me, Isla."

"Why?" I hate how I notice that he's overdue a haircut as I curl my fingers against the urge to brush it back from his forehead.

"No need to look so suspicious," he soothes. "Do you need a reason to have a drink with an old friend?"

"You and I don't drink together."

"We could do a lot of things together, if you just let yourself."

I press my hand to his chest as he steps closer, my chuckle sounding like a clapped-out lawnmower. "Just stop right there. Those things you're thinking? We aren't doing them." Not tonight. Not anymore. I just haven't gathered the strength to break it to him. Or admit it fully to myself.

"What things would they be?" he almost purrs, lifting my hand to slide it to his shoulder. The hunger in his eyes is answered

by the empty ache between my legs.

I hate myself for being a pushover.

“I told you, just a drink,” he whispers, sliding his lips across my neck.

“I can’t. I have the boys to think about.” I’m not beyond using them as an excuse to protect my eternally foolish heart. I told myself it wouldn’t happen this time, that I’d be the one who called time on this thing between us. So why am I bending as he presses me against the curve of the banister? Why do I sigh and grip his shoulders as he slips his thigh between my legs?

“Just a drink,” he purrs. “A conversation.”

“With us, it never ends in just conversation.”

“I want us to get to know each other better, outside of the bedroom.”

“Why?”

If he senses my body stiffen, it doesn’t stop his hand from drifting from my waist, the flesh of his palm coasting up the side of my breast.

“Because we could be good together. If only you’d allow yourself to take the chance.”

My heart kicks at his tempting words. We *were* good together once. We never gave our relationship a title, and we kept it secret from the ones who love us best, but things were good—we were good. We laughed together. We talked. I thought I was getting to know him. I was not.

“Darling.” He presses his words into my neck. “I can’t think straight when you’re near, and I can’t function when you’re not.”

“Van, please.” Please more. Please stop. *Please never stop.* But this is how he makes me feel—like I don’t know if I’m on my head or my heels. “That’s just sex,” I whisper. That’s all this is. That’s all it can ever be.

“We’re so good at that,” he purrs as he puts his lips and tongue to such deliciously nefarious use. My head rolls to the side, an

easy accomplice to his kisses. “Spend the night with me.” And there it is, the real reason, heat pooling between my legs at the press of his hard cock. “Or a lifetime.”

The longing in his tone snaps me back to myself like the *ping* of strong knicker elastic. My body stiffens, everything inside me stilling. Everything but my heart, which is currently thundering like the hooves of a derby winner.

“Are you drunk?” My palms push at his shoulder.

“You know I’m not.” His chest moves back, but nothing else. My heart continues to hammer, as does the pulse between my legs. “Unless you count drunk on you.”

Talk of promises and lifetimes is like crack cocaine to my underfed heart. But I won’t be teased. Not like this.

“You’re talking nonsense. Lifetimes, Van? That’s just”—*hurtful, tempting, unfair*—“ridiculous,” I settle on.

“Is it?” He seems to frown and smile at the same time, like I’m a puzzle he’s trying to solve. Like he isn’t the confusing one. Like he’s unaware of our history. Ignorant of what he does to me.

Even after he hurt me, if he’d as much as flicked an eyebrow, I would’ve dropped everything and run to him. Right up until I stepped onto the aisle on my wedding day. But there were no more moments for me and him. *Until my divorce.*

“How can it be nonsense when I mean it? When I dream of you constantly.”

“You dream of me because I’m available again,” I say, my tone cool. Because, to give him his due, he kept his distance while I was married. He behaved with propriety. *Or ambivalence.*

“I never stopped dreaming about you.” The light in the stairwell renders him half in shadow, making him look suddenly severe. “I never stopped wanting you, even when you belonged to another man.”

“Whose fault was that?” The comment escapes without thought, just malicious intent, echoing in the hallway. “Mine,



of course. You warned me not to fall in love with you. It's a mistake I have no intention of making again."

"I wasn't worthy of your heart."

"And you think you are now?"

"I could be if you take that chance. I dare you, Isla." He steps closer again. "Take that chance."

"I no longer make wagers that are bad for me." My tone is bitter, and this time, when I press my palms against his chest, he moves. My gown swishes against his pants, the sound of my hammering heels muffled by the industrial carpet as I hurry. He doesn't follow, and I'm glad about that. At least, I'm trying to be glad about it.

For some reason, Van has recently become a bigger part of my brother's life. Invitations that were once gracefully turned down are now accepted. Lately, I can't turn around without someone mentioning something he said or did. Or worse, turning around and setting eyes on him.

Back in the ballroom, I do a lap, stopping now and again to exchange small talk. And to surreptitiously look for my sons under the table linens. By the way they're behaving lately, anything is possible. I compliment the color of a politician's wife's god-awful dress and make sure a long-distance uncle has his whisky topped up.

"Isla, my girl! Such a lovely, lovely name. Your father named you after Islay, of course."

I smile tightly and nod. It's more likely he couldn't spell Lagavulin. My father liked whisky as fish like water. He named Alexander after himself and me after the island where his favorite tippie is distilled. If that doesn't tell you about his parenting style, nothing else will. Not that my mother was much better. Never mind. At least they provided me with a wonderful parenting barometer. I only need to ask myself, "what would they do?" and then I do the opposite.

"It's a pity your parents weren't here to see you both settled," he adds, staring morosely into his glass.

“I suppose I could get someone to drag them up from the mausoleum.”

“What?” Uncle Gerome blinks back at me. He looks like a wrinkled toddler.

“I said I’m sure Alexander would be happy to see ’em.” I smile widely, imagining just that. I’m sure they’d love the attention, dead or not. They’d probably insist on dragging their ghostly lovers along, of course.

Leaving the old codger, I dodge a couple of invitations to dance. And I do so with a smile on my face and resignation in my heart. No more dances for me. No more men. I need to concentrate on my family and my business, in that order.

“What are ye doin’ out here?”

On the way down to the basement kitchens, I turn to the sound of Chrissy’s voice. Some people refer to Chrissy as the housekeeper, when the reality is she’s the backbone of the castle. The person who knows where everything is, from the good linens to where the bodies are buried. And considering the castle is hundreds of years old, I don’t mean that figuratively.

“I was looking for the boys.” She seeks them here. She seeks them there. She seeks them every-bloody-where. In a castle this size, the game could go on for hours. “You haven’t seen them about, have you?”

“Aye. They’re watching something called *The Goonies* in the Great Hall.”

“How did that come about?”

“Holly, I mean her grace, said—”

“If Holly wants to be called Holly rather than Holland, her grace, the Duchess of Dalforth, who are we to go against her wishes?” Though I’ve begun to call her Holland rather than Holly just because Sandy does. It’s a bit more dignified. Like a hat she wears that doesn’t really suit her. God, I love her.

“But his grace—”

“Is far too clever a man to go against his wife’s wishes. Happy wife, happy life,” I add with a small shrug.

“Ah, well,” she answers with an amused twist to her lips, “*his grace’s* wife, her grace, dragged the old projector from the castle’s education center. Then she put up a tent with dozens of pillows and some sleepin’ bags. She told the wee ones that they could have their own party because a wedding was bound to get boring after a while and that *The Goonies* is a cult classic that every cool kid needs to watch at least twice. Then she asked Mari to keep an eye on them.”

I smile to myself. And here I thought she’d spent the day being pampered. Holland really is a gem. She’ll be a wonderful mother, and I wouldn’t be at all surprised to find that happening sooner rather than later. At least, I hope so. Babies are so delicious. Especially when you can hand them back after a cuddle.

“She even suggested young Archie bring his football and set up the goal at the far end of the hall.”

Oof. Holly is kind and sweet and all kinds of wonderful. But I’m not sure she fully understands the gravity of her new situation. Not marriage to my brother—she’s a natural at that. I meant as guardian of Kilblair Castle. The current keeper of all its history. But she’ll get there.

Meanwhile...

“That doesn’t sound like the best of plans. One wrong kick and we’ll be trying to fit those suits of armor back for weeks.” Like a bag of mismatched Legos.

“You know this from experience, I ken.” Chrissy smirks.

“Sadly, so do I.” Alexander and I were spanked with a slipper by our father for knocking one over years and years ago.

“Well, you’ll be pleased to hear they’ve only got the sponge ball up there. Can’t imagine that’d do too much damage. Oh, I meant to say, Billy over at the farm says he’s got some sheepskins that’ll be ready soon.”

“Oh, that’s great.” My company, House of Dalforth, or HoD as my brother likes to call it, sells mostly local products via e-

commerce. I might not use my title very often, but I'm not so silly as not to cash in on the Dalforth name. Sandy likes to tease me by saying I mostly sell twinsets, tweed, and sheepskin slippers for middle-aged matrons, and he's right. But I also have a small clothing line that I'm very proud of. Mostly because I designed it. *Va-va-voom*, I think with a smile. Bombshell dresses with nipped-in waists to create a classic hourglass shape. Tartan jackets with fishtail backs, that kind that scream out for a riding crop and a jaunty hat with pheasant feathers. I sell those too. The hats, I mean. HoD has only recently broken even. I don't even make a salary out of it yet. "I'll give him a call," I say, mentally calculating when I'll fit it into tomorrow.

"Meanwhile, stop frettin' about those boys. They're better behaved than you and Sandy ever were."

I smile at her slip. She usually insists on using formalities.

"All the same," I reply, "I think I should check."

"God only gives you what you can handle," she calls after me. "Remember that!"

"Apparently, God thinks I might be Wonder Woman," I mutter, gathering my skirts over my arm. And off I set, navigating the myriad of halls, rooms, and corridors off-limits to the public in this rambling, ramshackle castle I still think of as home.

Along the ancient, flagged hall, I walk past the ladies' parlors, several sitting rooms, and the main library, all still roped off for public viewing and the looming tourist season. Through the arch flanked by medieval pikestaffs and suits of armor, I pass the main reception hall and the Victorian busts of long-dead Romans, then climb up one side of the grand staircase before I cut through the state room and out into the hallway, and almost stumble over my firstborn, Hugh.

"There you are." The relief I feel at finding him is short-lived as, his back pressed to the wall, my son doesn't immediately lift his head from his knees. "I've been looking all over for you. Where's your brother?" I've barely gotten the words out when I realize he's trying not to let me see his tears as he hurriedly wipes them on the backs of his hands.

“He’s still watching cartoons with the others.” Still not looking at me, he sets down his *only for emergencies* cell phone that he hadn’t answered when I’d called.

“Have you fallen out?” Crouching beside him, I sweep his hair out of his eyes. “Had an argument?”

“No.” Along with his denial, he shakes his head.

“There must be a reason you’re sitting out here all on your own.”

Hugh glances down at his phone. “Dad just called,” he mutters without lifting his head.

“Ah.” There’s a time when all children realize their parents are fallible. That they don’t have all the answers. That they’re human and have faults. Despite my best efforts, Hugh is finding this out sooner than most. I’d wanted a different experience for my boys than my own childhood, but I see the echo of it in so many ways. The divorce has been particularly hard on Hugh. But it’s difficult for me to police his father’s behavior when I no longer have daily access to him. “What happened?” I ask softly.

“He’s not coming to get us next weekend.” Again. He means he’s not coming again. His timing is the worst.

“Oh, Hugh. I’m sorry.” The bastard. I’ll ring his skinny neck when I see him next. “There will be other birthdays. Lots of them.” And probably lots of my time spent whisper-hissing down the phone line *you promised, you dick head*.

“He’s taking Carly to Paris.” The words leave his mouth like little bullets. “He said Carly booked it, that he’d told her what dates not to book but that she must’ve gotten muddled up.”

“Oh. Well.” That absolute cow. “Perhaps she forgot it was your birthday?”

“So?” Hugh’s head swings my way, his expression suddenly uncannily like my brother, who can hold a grudge like it’s nobody’s business. “He’s known her weeks. He’s known me almost ten years!”

“I know, sweetheart.” Scooping my rented dress under my bottom, I lower myself next to him. “But your father—”

“Has his brains between his legs.”

“Hugh!” I aim for chastisement over agreement, even if he is right. “Wherever did you hear that?”

“I overheard Chrissy saying it. She didn’t know I was there, so you can’t blame her.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Again, because she’s not wrong. “Even if it isn’t a nice thing to say.” Though I will be saying much worse things to him over the phone tomorrow. It’s probably just as well he’s in London or else I might pop around to his place with a shotgun. Hurt my babies at your peril...

“But Chrissy’s right. He only thinks about getting his leg over.”

“Getting his leg over—” I almost add *what* but catch myself. Better to feign confusion.

“You know, Mum, s.e.x.”

“What do you know about... that?”

“I know it’s something grownups do and that it’s where babies come from.” Oh. My God. How? Since when? Who’s been corrupting my baby boy? “Don’t look so shocked. I *am* nearly ten, and we do live out in the country,” he adds in a reasonable tone.

“But...” he used to think the sheep, horses and cows were fond of piggyback rides. Can I rewind the clock to that point?

“Do you think he’ll have a baby with Carly?” A thread of concern weaves its way through his question.

I actually laugh. I can’t help it. But there’s no way I’m adding vasectomy to Hugh’s knowledge bank.

“It’s not funny, Mummy. He can’t even look after the children he has.”

“You’re telling me! I mean, maybe I shouldn’t say so, but I agree with you. It’s wrong he’s not going to be here for your

birthday, and I will be discussing it with him.” At volume rather than at length. “But no, your father won’t be having any more children.” Hugh is right, he can’t seem to afford the time or expenditure for the two he already has.

“I hate her,” he says suddenly, his blue eyes narrowing. “Don’t you?”

“Carly? No, sweetheart, I don’t.” My issue is with your father.

“You will when I tell you what she called me when she came to my rugby match last week. You’ll hate her so much you’ll probably want to pull her stupid hair. You said she had stupid hair, right?”

“I think I said it was an improbable shade,” I hedge because I’m pretty sure I said I doubted her collar and cuffs matched—red is such a difficult color to replicate in a salon chair—although Chrissy was scandalized as she thought I said *muff*. To which Holly added helpfully that girls her age rarely go in for hair “down there.” God, I hope Hugh didn’t hear any of that conversation. “But no, I don’t hate her.” Yet. “What did she call you?”

“An ingrate,” he answers with the hauteur of his uncle, the duke. *Bloody Sandy*.

“Ah, well.” I straighten my back against the wall. “I think you might’ve misheard.” Because it’s not the kind of word a person would use in a text. Or a social media post.

“No, I didn’t,” Hugh insists, shaking his head, his gaze earnest. “She really did call me that. She’s so mean.”

What she is, I imagine, is childish, given she’s probably only a dozen or so years older than Hugh herself. Perhaps even a little jealous of sharing her time with them.

“Well.” I paste on a bright smile. “Never let it be said your father does nothing for those less fortunate. He’s certainly improving Carly’s vocabulary.”

“How is that supposed to help me?” Hugh complains.

“It reminds you to be kinder to people, for a start.”

As a chuckle sounds from the other end of the dark hall, my son's head swings to me.

"Who was that?"

"Not the gray lady. Or headless Harry." I know the owner of that chuckle is a haunting particular to me.

Niko—Van—steps out of the gloom, his arm hooked negligently over a bright blue foam ball that is pressed to his hip.

"Uncle Van!" Hugh jumps to his feet, shoving his cell phone into his pocket, his face wreathed in a broad smile.

Since when has he been Uncle Van? I didn't realize the pair had even been introduced.

"Hello, Hugh. Sorry if I startled you. I'm sorry to say I got lost looking for my room."

"You're leaving the party already?" I scramble up from the floor, hating myself for the tiny audible touch of disappointment in my tone. Yes, I stormed away. Flounced, even. But that doesn't mean I want him to leave—I don't want to be the cause of his leaving. *Nothing to do with him being excellent eye candy.*

"I didn't think I'd be missed." A sad-looking smile briefly touches his mouth before his attention shifts. "This must be yours," he adds, pressing the foam soccer ball into Hugh's hands.

"Oh, yes! Thank you. Wilder kicked it out here by accident, but he was too frightened to get it because Archie told him about the castle ghosts," my boy recounts quite happily. "But then my phone rang, and I forgot about it." And with those words, his expression closes again.

"That was another reason I was going back to my room."

"Because of the ghosts? You're not frightened, are you?"

"No." The corner of Van's mouth twitches.

"Chrissy says the dead can't hurt you. Only the living can."

"Chrissy sounds very wise."



“But on the other hand, like Cameron”—the gardener—“says, ghosts can make you shit yourself.”

Pressing my hand to my forehead, I groan. Literally groan.

“Swearing doesn’t count when you’re repeating someone else,” Hugh adds, reminding me of a conversation we’d recently had. But that was something different—that was me trying to get to the truth of something, not—“Besides, he got a clip around the ear for saying it.”

“Maybe I should do the same to you.”

“You wouldn’t,” he offers quite happily. “Violence isn’t the answer, you always say.”

“Sometimes it’s the question,” Van offers obliquely.

“What?” Hugh’s expression scrunches.

“If you’ll excuse me, I have a phone call to make.”

“Mobile phones are portable, you know. The hint is in the name. *Mobile*.”

“Yes, thank you.” He smiles at Hugh’s attempt at humor. “I left it in my room on purpose. I’m not sure whether the mobile phone is the best or the worst of inventions.”

“They’re good for playing games,” Hugh answers, beginning to bounce the ball on his knee in a game of keepie-upsies. *Check me out; a mother in the know*. He bounces it once, twice, three times. “But the worst for horrible calls.” Four, five, then the ball hits the corner of his childishly bony knee and heads straight for Van.

“Oh—”

Before I can add anything else, Van dips and lithely catches the ball on the back of his neck. He balances it there for a moment before he moves, the ball then bouncing off the top of his head. Once, twice—*this move is called a header, I’ve learned*—before he repositions it, dropping it to the top of his foot. He begins to bounce it from one foot to the other, all without taking his eyes off me.

I roll my eyes, unimpressed. We're not in school; the dinner jacket and the scruff on his cheek are a bit of a giveaway. On the other hand, the way my heart trips... Is there anything this man isn't good at? And suddenly, I'm annoyed again.

"Disappointing calls are the worst," Van agrees, continuing to bounce the ball between his feet. "But cell phones have their uses. Say, for instance, you want to order some signed jerseys."

Hugh gasps with delight, his astonished gaze swinging my way. Until Van does this fancy thing where he kicks the ball over his head, catching it on his heel behind him to send it spinning once more to my son.

"Can you really do that?" Hugh returns to the knee-bouncing thing.

"I can, and I have. One for you, Archie, and Wilder. Signed by Arsenal's number one striker."

"Wow! Did you know Uncle Van owns a stake in Arsenal Football Club?"

"Until a couple of minutes ago, I didn't even know you had an Uncle Van," I murmur.

"Silly you." My son pokes his tongue out of the side of his mouth, concentrating on the ball rebounding from his knee. "Uncle Van is Uncle Sandy's best friend."

"Yes, I know that, darling." No rolling eyes this time, just the tiny quirk of one brow.

"It's an hon—" More poking tongue and increased concentration. "An honorary title. Uncle Sandy said so."

My brow arches a little more.

"Not quite the same as honorable."

"No, it wouldn't be with you," I answer in response to his wry tone.

"More honorable than my father," Hugh interjects. "I bet he forgets to get me a birthday present."

“Hugh!” We don’t wash our dirty laundry in public, child. And he does have a gift for you. I made sure of it by buying it myself!

Catching the ball in both hands, my son clasps it to his stomach. “Well, what would you call a man who goes to Paris with his stupid girlfriend on his eldest son’s birthday?”

“That’s not very respectful,” I utter in a warning tone.

“That’s what I’m saying.” My son slides me a look as though I’m taking his father’s side. Divorce is a minefield to navigate, and while I don’t have very many nice things to say about my former husband, I try to keep that to myself.

“Don’t twist my words.” For goodness’ sake, the boy has barely reached double digits, and he’s already running circles around me. I’m not looking forward to those looming teenage years.

“He’s supposed to be taking me out to celebrate.”

“Well, you’ll just have to make do with me,” I mutter, pushing myself up to stand. Van holds out his hand, but I wave it away, the independent woman that I am.

“You’re no one’s second choice,” he offers smoothly. “I’m sure Hugh agrees.”

“We were just going to do man things,” my son mutters sullenly. “I’m going to be ten, you know.”

“Unless you’re talking about peeing standing up, there’s nothing I can’t do that your father can.”

Hugh actually guffaws, though he presses his hand to his mouth to smother it.

“What are you laughing at? What can your father do that I can’t?”

“It’s not what you can’t do,” the little *sh-darling* says. “It’s just that you’d probably rather not.”

“Try me,” I demand. Was that the suggestion of a longing sigh I just heard from Van, or was it my imagination?

“He was taking me to a football match. The last time you went to a football match, you wore earplugs, and the time before that, you complained about the rain, and you told off the man behind us for swearing.”

“There was no need for that kind of language,” I answer primly.

“He only said ‘the referee’s a wanker.’”

“Enough, Hugh.”

“But the referee was a w-was the worst,” he says, catching himself. “The songs and the rude words are part of the atmosphere,” he adds as though talking to someone who just doesn’t get it. Which I don’t.

“If that’s what you want to do on your birthday, then a football match it is.” I nod decisively and catch our spectator smiling at me.

“Thank you, Mummy.” Hugh’s thin shoulders sag. “We’ll do something else. I’m sure it’ll be fine.” *It just won’t be the same*, his expression says.

Despite his earlier cheek and this very clear snub, my heart breaks a little for him. This isn’t the first time Tom has let him down, and I’m sorry to think that it won’t be the last. I want to cry at what’s in store for my babies because I’m not going to be able to make this experience better, no matter how hard I try.

“Might I make a suggestion?” Van’s voice cuts through the sudden quiet.

“As long as it’s not a Laddiemouth match,” Hugh replies morosely, referring to a team from a local soccer league.

“How about an Arsenal game?”

“Really?” Hugh’s head lifts, his eyes lighting up like flying saucers. His expression is such a picture, like he almost can’t trust his ears.

“There’s a home game next Saturday.”

“But isn’t Arsenal in London?” As in, not in Scotland, but almost at the other end of the United Kingdom. “Darling, we can’t travel to London for a football game. Perhaps during the school holidays.” I doubt my car would make it, and the train

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“You’re quite welcome to come, but I thought I might take care of the arrangements,” he adds smoothly. For my ears only, he adds, “I’ll even source the spittoon.”

I clap a hand to my mouth to hide my snort. All the manly things? But then I remember why I stormed off earlier.

“Thank you, Van, but we couldn’t.” Could I trust him with my children? My first instinct is that I could, but given the circumstances, I shouldn’t. “We couldn’t possibly impose.”

“Alexander will come, of course.” His attention dips to my son, and he tempers his smile as he adds, “Your uncle, Archie, and your cousin too, if you like?”

“I do like,” Hugh supplies with a rapid nod. “I like that idea a whole lot! Uncle Sandy hates football, but he can’t hate Arsenal. And Wilder is half-American, and they play the wrong kind of football there.”

“So a birthday trip and an educational visit.” Van nods as though intuiting where Hugh was going with this.

“Can I bring my best friend, too?”

“Hugh!”

“There’s room in the jet for a couple more,” Van replies anyway.

“But not for you,” my son adds ungraciously. “Sorry, Mum, but this is a boys’ trip. Flying to London!” he adds, punching the air.

“Perhaps we can arrange for you to meet a couple of the players afterward?”

“Really?” Hugh looks like he’s about to explode from pure pleasure. How am I going to get out of this?

“Van, please.” My words fall on deaf ears as the pair plan out the delights of the day that sounds like the highlight of my soccer-loving son’s young life. With each suggestion, the chances of me stopping this freight train of childish delight diminishes. But how can I deny Hugh? And why is my discomfort matched by warmth as I watch Van indulge in my son’s pleasure?

Indulge or share?

“I’m going to go and tell Archie and Wilder the news.” My boy spins on his heel, pivoting back again. “Thank you, Uncle Van.” He suddenly throws his arms around Van’s waist. “You’re the best honorary uncle ever.” Over my son’s head, I can’t tell if Van is disarmed or alarmed. A fair measure of both, I’d say.

Hugh dashes off.

“I’ll be along shortly,” I call after him. “It’s nearly bedtime.”

He doesn’t turn, though he gives me the thumbs-up sign, and suddenly, we’re alone in the darkened hallway.

“Were you really going back to your room?” My voice breaks the silence, breaks the way we just stand looking at one and other.

He doesn’t immediately answer, sliding one hand into the pocket of his pants as he scrubs the other down his face. His exhale sounds like a low rumbling growl.

“Yes,” he suddenly snaps. “Is that the answer you want? I was hoping to stop myself from following you around like a lost fucking puppy. But I got lost in this labyrinth.” He throws out a hand behind him.

“That’s what happens when an eleventh-century fortress becomes a thirteenth-century castle, and the subsequent inhabitants just keep adding wing after wing. “Come on.” I link my hand through his, disarmed by his sudden frustration. “I’ll show you the way, but please don’t feel like you have to stay there on my account.”

He falls into step with me. “You’re fond of lost puppies.”

I can feel his eyes on the top of my head. *Only the pretty ones*, I almost say. “Only the ones that don’t try to hump my legs.”

He laughs, and I take the opportunity to give in to my own little sigh. Pretty Van. Pretty annoying Van. But I’d forgotten how he can also be kind.

“Speaking of puppies, I still have her, you know? The Labrador. She’s an old girl now but still lovely.”

“Did she ever grow into her ears?” The warmth in his tone makes my heart sigh.

“Yes.” I nod but don’t glance his way. “Thank you,” I add, tightening my hand on his arm. We slow to a stop, turning to look at each other. “For Hugh. You didn’t need to, and I wouldn’t like to think—” I’m not sure how I’m going to finish this, so it’s perhaps just as well to find his finger pressed to my lips.

“I know what it is to be disappointed by a father figure. There is no ulterior motive.” His brow reflects his thoughts, or maybe he just reads mine as I remember how he hurt me in such different circumstances. “I can be trusted. I’m not the person I was.”

“Which of us is?” I answer, refusing to become embroiled. “So,” I add, changing the subject. “Who gets to tell Sandy about your day out?”

“I’ll leave that to you.” A smile curls through his words. “Bad news is always better delivered with a little sweetness.”

“You’re too kind.” Sandy really hates football, but that’s not why my laughter sounds forced. The way he’s looking at me? No other man has ever looked at me this way. Never made me feel like the center of the universe. Even if it was only for a little while. He reaches out, his finger twirling away a wisp of my hair from my temple.

“Such hair,” he whispers. His hand retracts, his thumb deliberately caressing my cheek. I catch it between my own, lest it wander anywhere else. Or that’s what I tell myself.

“How come you didn’t have children? Didn’t you want to settle down?”

“I was never the settling down type.” His deep voice brims with regret. “And I ruined the chance I had with the one woman who could make me happy.”

“Don’t.” I whisper this into the back of his hand, then step away from him. “Again, thank you for Hugh, but you really don’t have to.”

“Can I want to?”

“Yes, but not for the wrong reasons.”

He tips his head. “Message received.”

“If you’ll excuse me.” I half turn. “I have to get back to the boys. Cajole them into bed.”

He sighs. “Oh, to be a boy.”

“Take the first left at the end of the hallway.” I won’t be drawn. I can’t allow it. Not outwardly, at least. Internally is another pulsing thing altogether. “Down a half flight of stairs, your room is on the right.” Literally the farthest room away from mine. *Intentionally.*

“Then I’ll wish you... good night.”

“Night, Van.” I turn fully. “See you at breakfast.”

“I can’t wait. I already feel quite ravenous.”

I don’t turn back despite feeling the weight of his want and his eyes. It won’t be the gray lady who haunts me tonight. It’ll be the lure of him.





## VAN

“THIS FEELS LIKE DÉJÀ VU.” My words are deliberately lazy as I push up onto my elbow. The mattress gives a little and the sheet pools low across my hips.

“Don’t spoil things, Niko.” Her back to me, Isla’s answer is soft and sounds unconcerned, but the way she clutches the dress to the flare of her hips contradicts. Just like last night when she turned up at my door, her mouth full of denials, her eyes full of want. But what’s important is she came, as I knew she would. What we have is like the tide of time. Impossible to resist.

I sigh. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think this was a habit of yours. Skulking out of a man’s bed in the dead of night. Each time, stealing away with a little more of his heart.”

The brief pause betrays the careful selection of her words as she ignores the easy bait. That I lack a heart.

“How do you know it isn’t?” Her voice is as carefully careless as my own as she continues the sinuous slide of silk over skin. “I might be breaking hearts everywhere.”

I tip my gaze to the shadowed ceiling. I feel old. This game we play is getting old. Pretending we weren’t meant for each other, perhaps even more suited the second time around. Why else would she be here tonight? *Because she wanted to fuck*, echoes an insidious voice in my head. Whatever brought her here, I rejoice for it. I can fuck her, fuck her well, if that’s what it takes to steal back her heart. I might not have been her first, but I swear to God I’ll be her best and her last in all things.

“No, my darling. I know you better than you think. I’m the only vice you hide from the world.”

I know a thousand things about her. Because I’ve watched and I’ve waited, I’ve denied myself and I’ve hoped. When I said I wasn’t the man I once was, I meant it. I’ve done things I wasn’t destined for, all so I could have her. I’ve lied and schemed, biding my time, even when my desire threatened to overtake me. I’ve spent too long thinking about her, too long suppressing my need. But no more. She will be mine. Wholly. Absolutely. No more stolen moments. No more secrecy. I will have her in my life and on my arm for all to see.

“I don’t skulk,” she says, turning to me with the hauteur of a queen. “And strictly speaking, this isn’t your bed.”

“Strictly speaking, there isn’t always a bed.” I stretch out, relishing the way her eyes watch the movement of the sheets. “Last time, it was a terrace.” I can almost see those snatched moments play out across her face. “Music, laughter, and conversation drifting out from the open doors, wrapping us in our own little world. The scrape of stone under my fingertips. Your skin cool against my lips, and the absolute heat of you pulsing around my cock.”

“Stop,” she whispers without conviction, whirling away.

“You kept your face from me then, too.” Like I’m a dirty secret she’s trying to ignore. “I remember feeling jealous of the stars as they watched you come.” Isla reaching her peak is a picture of sheer beauty.

She’s discomposed for less than a heartbeat, her mouth twitching yet not curling in profile. “They were probably blushing at the filth you whispered. You have such a dirty mouth.”

“My filth is all for you.”

“I find that hard to believe.” Her tone is a touch harder, but she’d hate for me to notice.

“Is that why you leave?”

“Perhaps it isn’t a habit.” She slides a foot into her shoe, pausing not to deliver an answer to my question but to a

previous one. “I might leave because I’m done with you. It would be an appropriate kind of payback, wouldn’t it?”

“Fifteen years is a long time, Isla. I hoped you’d forgiven me.” Hoped you’d give me a chance to make it up to you. Give me a chance, darling. Don’t force me to make you.

Another pause but this time, no answer, though her head shakes from side to side as though she’s the long-suffering subject of my humor. But there is no levity, and the suffering has been mine. *Deservedly so, she would say.* While she married and created a family, I kept my distance. While she grew and flourished, I was the invisible shadow by her side. But no more.

“I’m not sure I’ve ever forgiven you. But I have moved on.”

Allowing the hint of a smile to rise, I run my hand over the bed linens, each a contradiction. Her eyes glitter, but she doesn’t give in to that flash of anger. *Ever the diplomat, my love.*

“Moved on?” I repeat with a quirk of my brow. “Then what was tonight?”

“An aberration on my part.”

“And the balcony?”

“Too much champagne.”

“What about London last year?” She’d arranged her brother’s birthday, despite it being her birthday as well. I was probably the only one at the table happy he didn’t turn up because it was the first time I’d been in Isla’s company in more than a decade. She was just as lovely as ever, and just as concerned for everyone’s enjoyment over her own. When it became clear Alexander wasn’t coming, his guests began to dwindle, and we were left staring at each other over a candlelit table. I couldn’t help myself. And it seems she couldn’t either. It was like the world stopped the clock for the night, and everything was right. She was mine. Until the morning when I’d found my bed empty. She’d made it clear she had no intention of coming back to me.

“That was a weak moment,” she murmurs. She’d caught her husband in a compromising position, she’d said. When I hadn’t heard from her after that night, I’d worried she’d taken him back. That spending the night with me had been her retaliation; tit for tat. I should’ve known better because Isla does everything the right way. *Except falling for me at a time I couldn’t have her.*

“Look,” she adds, tamping down her frustration, “you’re reading too much into this. It’s almost tradition that the best man sleeps with one of the wedding party. Why not you?” She throws out her arms, unconcerned. “Better the devil you know.”

“Or better the devil that knows how to ride you. To hold you. To bend you in the shapes you so like, to make you come again and again.”

“Do you have to be so crass?” Her brows pinch, and she sends me a look like a school mistress. But it’s a hard look to pull off when her cheeks are pink from my whiskers, and her hastily donned dress reveals a sucking bite to her breast.

“Modesty is a little hypocritical,” I chide, idly plucking at the sheet. “When we’ve both enjoyed my mouth on your cunt.”

“You enjoy annoying me, don’t you?”

“Not as much as I enjoy fucking you. Is it still crass when it’s the truth? Your speech was right, you know. The best man is always a woman.” Her brother chose well in both bride and best *man*. I hope to be as happy in my choice as he is someday. My choice. My heart. I’m looking at her.

She smooths her dress over her thighs, pointedly ignoring my gaze. “Van, the point I’m trying to make is that this can’t keep happening.”

I don’t point out that she knocked on *my* door. “Ah. I’m back to being Van again.”

“Yes. No more Niko. No more Niko for me.”

A fist tightens around my intestines, though I force myself not to react. I must’ve overstepped last night by involving myself in her family life. Doesn’t she understand I want it all? I want

her mornings and her evenings and her every minute in between.

Angling my gaze her way, I force a smile. “I take it you’ve found someone else to fulfil your needs.” I don’t believe this for one minute.

“Yes, didn’t you hear? The newly divorced are insatiable.”

My gaze narrows as it falls over her. A crown of golden hair and eyes of steel. She probably chose her gown to complement the unusual color of her eyes, not that any other man would notice, given the way it clings to her torso like a second skin. She has the posture of a queen. Her body makes me want to drop to my knees like her most faithful subject.

“Insatiable, yes.” I am as insatiable for her as she is for me. Despite what she’d have me believe. We aren’t old flames who occasionally spark. We’re old flames who have smoldered for years. Old flames who eternally burn.

We were meant to be. We *will* be.

“I didn’t come to your room for this, not tonight.” The strap of her dress slips from her shoulder as though to contradict her words. “I came to say next week is a bad idea. This football game, we shouldn’t blur the lines—I don’t want my children to be hurt.”

“I will take care of their hearts, but you must take care of mine.”

“I don’t understand...” A hint of bewilderment flickers to life in her expression, replaced by something darker as I pull back the sheet and rise naked from the bed.

“You understand better than you allow yourself to.” I pin her with my gaze. A pulse begins to thrum in her throat.

“Van, please understand that this—”

“Means nothing?” Yet her eyes offer me everything as I settle my hand on her shoulder. “We’re just fucking?” Nothing that feels this intense could ever be described as casual. I brush my thumb over the wing of her collarbone, and her eyes flutter closed. She may veil her thoughts from me, but I won’t be

ignored as I lower my head and press my lips to her chaotic pulse. Her soft gasp isn't offered as resistance as I hook my hands under her thighs and lift her onto the dresser at her back. "Tell me, Isla, how many other men do you fuck casually?"

"That's none of your business." Her hand sears my skin as though she might push me away but hasn't the will. We are like opposing poles, helpless to resist.

"Is that what you truly think?" My lips tantalize the delicate shell of her ear as I ignore the tension in my stomach and the insinuation that it is a lie.

"I'm not—I don't ask you who you're sleeping with."

"Fucking, *milaya*." She inhales sharply as I rasp the words against her skin. "We aren't sleeping together because you chose to creep out in the dead of night."

"I don't creep." She shivers as I trace the edge of her ear with my tongue. Gasps as my teeth gently test her lobe.

"The question you won't allow yourself to ask, the only woman I'm fucking is you, my queen."

"Van, please don't."

Her protest isn't against the way my hand slides up her calf or how I press myself between her thighs. Not as her fingers knot and curl in my hair.

"I am your servant." Sliding her dress out of the way, I swipe my fingers between her legs. She's still so gloriously warm, so wet with our pleasure. "You rule over my heart."

"No talk of hearts," she whispers, her body undulating in a silent plea. Not heartfelt. Libidinous.

"Yes, hearts." I press her fingers over mine, over the tattoo she sees but refuses to ask me about. Hands under her thighs, I drag her closer and the dresser screeches in protest. "You own my heart and every time you leave, you tear it from between my ribs."

"Van, the noise—"

“I don’t give a fuck.” I press my cock to her heat, her fingers tightening as I thrust inside. “Because my love is selfish. I cannot breathe without you.”

“No.” She gasps and turns her head even as her insides seize around me, milking and pulsing and threatening to take my knees out from under me.

“Don’t look away.” My voice is rough as I grasp her chin. “You’re mine. I want to see that in your eyes when you look at me.”

“Stop.” She arches against me, her body denying her words.

“This will never stop.” I press my promise to her skin. She was once my secret darling and I let her get away. It won’t happen a second time.

By any means, foul or fair, this woman will be mine.





## ISLA

*YOU'RE MINE, milaya. I won't let you get away again.*

A door slams somewhere, pulling me forcibly from my trance and causing me to spill the coffee from my cup.

“Dammit.” Setting the cup on the kitchen table, I use the sleeve of my sweater to scrub the stain spreading across the moleskin cover of the old sketchbook I’d uncovered this week.

I shouldn’t have gone to him last night. I should’ve known, but Hugh could barely function for the excitement of his sudden upcoming trip. I hadn’t the heart to deny him such a treat, but I thought I should make it clear to Van that this would be the first and last time. I appreciate his sentiments—we can all relate to being let down by our parents—but I can’t help thinking his sentiment is just a ruse. I often get the sense that, while the rest of us are playing checkers, Van plays chess. With the calculation of a grand master, unfortunately.

I scrub a little harder at the stain, hating that I’m thinking about him again. Hating that I’d gone to his room. I was there on official parenting business, and he’d made some comment, *did I want to have this conversation out in the hall for others to see?* So I’d stepped over the threshold, but not because of his goading. I stepped in because I can’t help myself. I haven’t heeded the lesson. He didn’t *let* me go fifteen years ago. There is no dignity in being discarded.

But there is still a terrible thrill in knowing he still wants me.

*Spend the night with me. A lifetime.*

*Be mine, darling. Let me do it properly this time.*

He might even think he believes it and it was thrilling to hear, but I'm not the girl I once was. I know love, like people, brings nothing but disillusionment. I won't risk my heart again, and I won't disrupt my children's lives for anything.

"Bugger," I mutter, scrubbing at the coffee stain a little harder. "Just go away!"

"And good morning to you, too," my brother, Sandy, says, appearing in the doorway. He doesn't remark on what I'm doing in his kitchen. Considering I spend almost as much time here as I do in my own home, it's not surprising.

"What do you look like?" I ask, my scowl immediately displaced by a giggle.

"What?" he asks, glancing down at his bare feet, completely missing the state of his badly buttoned shirt. Sandy is conventionally handsome and always well pulled together. It's a rare sight to see him less than pristine, so to see him in wrinkled jeans and a shirt that looks like a three-year-old child buttoned it is very strange. And very entertaining. And just the distraction I need.

"What's that saying? You look like you've been ridden hard and put away wet?"

"What a charming visual," he mutters, making his way into the kitchen.

"You do know this isn't your *actual* honeymoon week." Despite last night's shindig, he and Holly married on Christmas Eve three months ago. It was a small family affair because they couldn't wait. Last night was just an excuse for a party and an opportunity to show off his new bride. Ah, to be in love. To allow yourself to be—

No, that's not for me.

"I just happened to have had a late night," he murmurs, a smile touching his lips.

"Not good for a man of your advanced years."

“Watch it,” he mutters, ignoring the very expensive Italian coffee machine in favor of filling the electric kettle from the tap. “You’re calling yourself old, *twinnny*.” A flick of the switch and the kettle begins its quiet task.

I chuckle at the sight. It seems Holly has domesticated the lofty duke. I knew he could use the coffee machine without someone to work it for him, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen him use anything else in this kitchen. Except for a corkscrew.

“I feel old,” I answer, stretching my arms over my head as I try to get the kink out of my right shoulder. I’d say I slept awkwardly on it, but I didn’t really do a lot of sleeping.

“Well, I feel wonderful.”

And then I remember why my shoulder, in particular, hurts. I was filling the potholes in my driveway yesterday at six o’clock in the morning, dressed in my pajamas and coat. I had a shovel in my left hand and a heavy bucket of gravel in my right, all because I was forced to take my ten-year-old Range Rover into the local repair shop during the week. It had needed a wheel alignment, thanks to hitting a pothole or ten.

“What are you thinking about?” Sandy asks as he pulls out a mug.

“Potholes.”

“What?”

“Nothing.” I wave away my answer. If I tell him what I’ve been up to, he’ll insist on sending someone to fix it, and potholes are the least of my issues. I have a leaking roof, a temperamental boiler, rotting window frames, and a suspected case of subsidence I’m currently battling my insurance company over. The crumbling pile sometimes feels like a reflection of my life. At first glance, it all looks fine. But take a second look and the cracks are more than apparent.

Sandy bangs another cupboard door closed, making me jump.

“What are you looking for?”

“Honey for Holland’s cup of tea.”

“You’re taking her a cuppa in bed? How sweet.”

I wonder if Van would be that kind of hus—

Why is my mindset intent on torturing itself today? Because Niko Vanyin is as tempting as the devil himself. Last night, after I'd gone to his room, I'd tried to creep out, tried not to look at him lounging in the bed. His bare torso is a study in deliciousness with lines and ridges of muscles like a man half his age. He's so wonderfully put together. Long, graceful limbs and broad shoulders. That gorgeously solid chest dusted with sandy hair, and home to the tattoo, a swirl of Cyrillic script, I'm dying to ask about but won't allow myself to. A washboard stomach and the dip between his belly and thighs, a trail my lips love to follow. And there I go again, thinking about him. Tempting, yes. I tried not to look, but he'd caught me doing it anyway. The way his gaze wandered down my body, it was like I was naked, not him.

No man has ever made me feel like he does, and not just physically. He has a way of looking at me like he can see into my head. He listens intently when I speak. And those eyes, they make me feel so wanted. But to give in would be purely selfish. I have the boys to think about first and foremost. Involving him in our lives is not a chance I'm willing to take. My sons and my heart require distance and protection.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Sandy mutters, banging another cupboard closed and making me snap back to myself. "Where does McCain keep the stuff?"

"The honey? In the downstairs kitchen, I imagine." We're currently in the much smaller kitchen in the family apartments.

"I'm not going all the way down there," he mutters, making me laugh again.

"The thought was sweet, I suppose."

"Sweet, yes. I'll take her a chocolate biscuit instead," he says, pulling out a patterned tin.

"I see you know where those are kept. I suppose you have one with your cup of cocoa—"

"I am not old."

“—cocoa and a chocolate biscuit, dressed in your jim-jams and slippers by nine in the evening.”

My brother is as vital as a man half his age, but I’ve been teasing him since we learned to talk. It’s my life’s work, though I’m happy to say I’ve recently handed over the reins to Holly because she’s very good at it. They’re an unlikely pairing but they make marriage and partnership look so easy.

“Surely, a man of my station reaches for his smoking jacket and pipe in the evenings, forgoing cocoa for a brandy nightcap.”

“Before long, you’ll be reaching for a walking frame.” Brows raised, I cast my eyes over him so he can’t miss my meaning. “But that’s what you get for marrying a woman nearly half your age.”

“Not quite half my age,” he replies, giving my ponytail a quick tug.

“Ouch!” I strike out to slap him when he steps out of reach.

“And that’s not the kind of thing a sister should remark on.” I huff out a protest but give in as he swipes my coffee from my hand. “Though it’s exactly the kind of thing Griffin would,” he adds, referencing our half brother. He’s not the only half sibling we have, thanks to our father’s prolific affairs, but he was the only one invited to Sandy’s wedding.

“He won’t surface until this afternoon.” I frown, remembering Griffin’s weaving gait at the end of the ball, one hand clutching the hip of his date, and the other a bottle of champagne.

“He has dreadful taste in women,” Sandy says, contemplating the dreary weather as the rain almost vertically lashes against the window. Neither of us voices that Holly was the exception to this rule. Thankfully, she had eyes for no one but Sandy. “Speaking of appearances—”

“The boys?” I cut in. “Chrissy has taken them over to Home Farm to see the lambs.” And pick up my sheepskins.

“Nice, but no. I was about to say Van won’t be here for breakfast.”

“Oh?” A tiny knife twists in my stomach. Despite my best efforts, there’s a slight waver in my reply. “Well, one less for Dougal to cater for.” God, I’m a masochist because I mean it.

“He took a car to the airport this morning. Needed back in London, apparently.”

“Idle hands are the devil’s workshop,” I find myself murmuring. I’m not sure how I can be both relieved and disappointed that he’s not here.

Sandy narrows his eyes over the rim of my cup. “It sounds like you know him better than I thought.”

I don’t answer his subtle goad, blinking innocently back at him instead.

“Something tells me his hands weren’t at all idle last night,” he mutters.

“I hope you’re not expecting me to comment.”

He doesn’t know. He couldn’t know. I couldn’t have put Van any farther away from the family quarters. Not without housing him in the damp, medieval-era rooms, which would’ve raised questions. But I suppose there is the argument that I’d put him so far away for some other purpose than moving him out of temptation’s way. Subliminally, I mean.

I watch as Sandy’s blue gaze dips, but before the coffee thief can bring the cup to his lips, he realizes it’s almost empty. And likely cold. “Isla, you know I’m not one to interfere—”

I bark out a laugh. “The great and powerful duke of Dalforth not interfere? Since when?” I’m not complaining. Sandy has always felt his duty strongly. He’s supported me, and in turn, I’ve done what I could for him, helping with the running of the castle from the gift shop to hosting dinners. I’m still helping now, though mainly because it’s a lot for Holland to take on.

“I’ve never interfered in your life, not if I could ever help it. You’re old enough and wise enough to make your own decisions, but you don’t know Van well. He is my best friend,

and I think very highly of him, but sometimes I'm not even sure I know him. Yes, he's smooth and charming and I dare say he has his attractions—"

"Sounds like how someone might describe you, brother dearest." Crossing my legs, I fold my arms across my chest. "Someone like Holland, say."

"But he isn't the man for you, Iz."

I was aware of it fifteen years ago, and it didn't stop me from offering him my heart on a platter. *Which he treated like dog meat.* But I'm not some wide-eyed romantic in need of excitement. So why are we still treading those same old worn boards?

"I'm aware," I answer eventually.

"Good. I'm pleased to hear it."

"Although he is very attractive," I murmur, glancing down to flick the pages of my sketchbook. Why exactly does Sandy think Van is a bad choice? "And divorce is hard." I sigh. "It can be lonely." Lies! Tom was rarely around. I don't miss his presence at all.

The cup clatters against the countertop, my brother's jaw flexing in frustration. "Then find someone else. Van is dangerous."

*That's probably part of his appeal,* I almost say. Instead, my reply reeks of innocence. "What makes you say that?" Come on, Sandy, be specific. I know Van is dangerous to my heart, and I know he can be violent in his expression and in his desires, but something tells me he's not just trying to frighten me off. "If he's your friend, then you must respect him. And as far as being a potential love interest, Van is solvent and respectful. As far as I can tell, I'd be—"

"Asking for trouble involving yourself with him."

I laugh an unhappy sound. Don't I know it. I know it now, and I knew it back then. I suppose the more things change, the more they stay the same.



“There are things about him that I can’t tell you, not without breaking his confidence.”

“Which would make you a terrible friend.” God, these two and their moral code and their friendship. I love and detest them both for it.

“I’d rather be a terrible friend than a terrible brother and I would tell you, if I thought they might frighten you off. But with you, I can never tell.”

“I’m not sure that’s very complimentary.”

“You are a paragon.” He quirks a brow. “Except when you’re not. You might fool everyone else, but I know how well you hide your stubborn streak.”

“Having a short temper is no one’s definition of wild.” I begin to rub my finger against the coffee stain on my sketchbook as a way of keeping my thoughts from him.

“You’ve always been your own person,” he says unhappily. “But please, just take my word for it. Van isn’t a man to be taken lightly.”

“Maybe I’m not looking for a man,” I retort, glancing up. “Don’t look at me like that. You know that’s not what I mean. Maybe I’m not looking for a man *long term*,” I add heavily, hoping to make him squirm.

“That’s perfectly understandable,” he returns, surprising me. “But you never wanted to be part of this life, you always said the aristocracy was nothing but outdated misogyny. Well, Russia may have done away with the tsars, but they’re no more enlightened, as far as I can tell.”

“I think the serfs would have something else to say about that.”

“What if I told you Van is his own kind of tsar, ruling over his own serfs.”

“Put not your trust in kings and princes,” I find myself murmuring. It’s not like Sandy to be so vague, and I’m not in the mood for playing guessing games.

“Izzy, I’m being serious. Are you listening?”

“Yes, I’m listening to the kettle boiling. If you’re not careful, your wife will send out a search party for her tea.”

“Fine.” He takes the hint, turning to the kettle. “Just be careful. And please don’t misconstrue his offer to take the boys to watch Arsenal play next week.” Sandy spins, brandishing a spoon my way. “How did that come about, by the way?”

“So you’ve heard?”

“Heard? I’ve been roped into it.”

“I know what you’re thinking,” I begin, feeling awkward. It’s one thing to tease Sandy, another to tease myself by dreaming. But it would only be dreaming, and I’m not about to let my sons become used to Van’s presence. They need stability, not another unreliable man in their life. “It was lovely of him to offer, but I’m sure I can do something to talk Hugh out of his excitement.” Sandy snorts. “I’ll find something else he wants to do next Saturday.”

“You won’t unless you can get Ronaldo to pop in to watch him blow out his birthday candles.”

“Who?”

“A famous soccer player, I understand. And no, I don’t know him. So come on, tell me why I’m flying to London next week with my nephews?”

“And Roman,” I say, referring to Kennedy’s husband.

“No, Roman is flying to Sydney on Wednesday. He has family business to take care of.”

“Oh, well, maybe just be thankful Hugh’s best friend couldn’t make it, too.”

He throws up his hands. “Why not? The more, the merrier, right?”

“You’ll be singing a different tune after you’ve spent an afternoon with them.”

“I’ve spent lots of afternoons with my nephews,” he scoffs.

“Trips to the cinema and the zoo, not hyped up on private jets.”

“Stop avoiding the subject. Spit it out—how is this even happening?”

“Blame Tom,” I grumble, propelling myself from the chair. “I could ring his rotten neck. He was supposed to have the boys for Hugh’s birthday, but he’s taking his latest teenage girlfriend to Paris instead.” She’s not a teenager, but the disparity in their ages pisses me off. Pulling the dishwasher door open, I drop my tea plate to the rack when what I really want to do is throw it at the wall. My lanky shit of an ex can annoy me until the cows come home, but disappointing his sons makes me want to remove his testicles. I know what it feels like to be ignored by a parent, to be made to feel like you’re never enough. This won’t happen to my little men. Ever.

“He’s such a bastard,” Sandy growls. “He can’t pay the school fees but—”

“Please tell me he hasn’t.” I don’t know whether to scream or cry. “Tell me he hasn’t asked you to pay them again.” Turning, I lean back against the sink and fold my arms to hide how blood boils in my veins.

“I don’t mind helping,” Sandy begins.

“No. Absolutely not.” My hand cuts through the air with finality. “They are his children. He can take some responsibility for them. He’s already behind with the child support payments. That man,” I grate out, pointing my finger in the air, “that man...” screwed the nanny, left me with a mortgage the size of a third world country’s national debt, and now a nasty phone call from the school’s accounting department.

“That man isn’t much of a man,” Sandy ends as he curls his hands around my shoulders and gives them a comforting squeeze. “You’re well shot of him.” His hands slide away. “But I still don’t see how Van became involved.”

“Hugh was upset, and Van was passing. He said he knew how it felt to be disappointed by a parent. That he wanted to help.”

“He belongs to a different world, Izzy.”

“I know that. He’s taking my son to a Premier League soccer match in his private jet.” Not to the local cinema in an aging Range Rover, which is best I can come up with as an alternative.

“Van isn’t the type to take Gertie for her morning walk,” he says, speaking about the dog he doesn’t know Niko gifted me so long ago. “He won’t mow the lawn or pick up Hugh and Archie from school—”

“So just like their father, you mean?”

“He isn’t domesticated.”

I begin to laugh. “Van is like *The Tiger Who Came to Tea*?” Consternation ripples across my brother’s face. “Don’t you remember? We had a copy of the book when we were children.”

Sandy turns back to mangling Holland’s tea with a harrumph. “Fine, don’t listen to me.”

“I am listening,” I reply, stepping closer to press my palm on his back. “I promise you have nothing to worry about.” *Because I wouldn’t dream of burdening you with any of this.* “You can’t take her that,” I say, pointing at what looks like a cup of tar. “You could probably stand the spoon up in it.”

“I’m not much of a tea drinker.”

“Hence the very fancy Italian coffee machine,” I mutter, sliding next to him. “Out of the way.” I bump him with my hip. “I know how she takes it.”

“I know how my wife takes it,” he protests slightly petulantly.

“Oh, I’m sure you do,” I retort with a saucy sideways glance at him and his disheveled appearance. “How she gives it, too.”

“Tea, Izzy,” he replies witheringly, but I don’t mention the slightly pink tinge to his cheeks. He’d probably blame the heat from the kettle or me for driving up his blood pressure. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him blush. “I’m quite capable of making Holland a cup of tea.”

“Yes, of course you are. A really bad one. You want to keep her, right?”

“Hilarious,” he drawls.

“Happy wife, happy life. Shuffle over and I’ll make her happy this morning.”

“I think I’ve already accomplished that.”

And now it’s my turn to blush. “Well, now you can do so with tea,” I say, not quite able to look up at him. Grasping the cup of dark liquid, I throw the contents down the sink. Sandy and I have always looked out for each other but making his wife tea is not the same as him shelling out thousands of pounds for his nephews’ educations. But I’ll manage. I always do. And while I might be looking at an increase in my credit card balance, it’s a small price to pay in exchange for living a life without a terrible husband.

*My love is selfish. I cannot breathe without you.*

I don’t think Tom ever said such a thing to me during our whole marriage. It’s not an original quote, and I’d known those weren’t Niko’s words. The strange thing is Keats might’ve written those words from my heart because Niko makes me selfish. Going to his room last night was pure selfishness; allowing him to lift me to the dresser was pure self-interest. I wasn’t going to stop him, no matter what the sensible little angel on my shoulder said. I didn’t care about the noise we made, either. Because when I’m with Van, I worry about nothing at all. But that doesn’t make him an ideal candidate for a life partner, not that I’m looking for any kind of candidate. I have my boys, and I have my business, and that’s enough.

Van broke my heart, and while he made me no promises, it took a long time to get over him. Which is why I now see that making him my divorce rebound was a mistake, not the clever sort of payback I’d convinced myself it would be.

I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t partly about sex—at least in the beginning—but a cheating husband can bring a woman down low. What better pick-me-up than sex with a man who made me feel like a goddess? He hadn’t lost his touch, so it’d happened again. And again. It’s almost like I can’t help myself. But it wasn’t just the way he made me feel because

life is rarely that simple. I found I still resented him for what happened between us, and I wanted to goad him, get under his skin, make him want me like I'd wanted him. But it has to end because he's just a passing phase—a tiny slice of indulgence I'd grabbed for myself.

The kettle boils, beginning to whistle. I make Holland's tea, setting the mug on the kitchen table.

"Hey, that's private," I complain when I find Sandy flicking through my sketchbook.

"I forgot you used to draw," he replies, twisting his torso to stop me from grabbing it. "You wanted to be a fashion designer, didn't you?"

"Childish dreams." I pitch my voice light despite the way my fingers itch to snatch it back.

"It's not a dream is it's happening," he says, closing the sketchbook.

I make a derisive noise in return.

"You sell your own designs, ergo, you are a fashion designer," he says, handing my sketchbook back.

This time, the noise I make is noncommittal. The truth is, the small line of clothing I'd designed for the House of Dalforth isn't selling. At all. And being the practical sort, I know that childish dreams, like phases of selfishness, eventually have to end.



## VAN

“HOW WAS LAST NIGHT?” I ask as the call connects.

“No trouble, as expected,” Sergei, my right-hand man, answers in Russian. “Where are you?”

“Just leaving the jet.”

“I thought you were in Scotland until tomorrow?”

“I discovered I’m allergic to heather.”

Sergei laughs as I nod to the driver and slide into the back seat, locking out the gray London morning, the smell of leather, luxury, and money enveloping me. “More like you’ve fucked Heather and are now bored with her.”

“You know me so well.” On a surface level, at least. He doesn’t know Isla was at the castle, and I don’t feel like telling him. It’s fair to say Sergei isn’t her biggest fan, given what passed following our breakup. He’s usually sensible enough not to admit it in earshot but does suffer the occasional slip.

One of the benefits of being in my position is possessing the ability to do what I want when I want. *Ordinarily*. But that’s not why driving away from Kilblair Castle this morning felt so fucking galling. Last night, I got to *do* who I wanted—namely, Isla Dalforth, though *want* doesn’t cover the depth of feeling I have for her. With anyone else, last night would’ve been enough. I’d be content to see the castle grow smaller in the rearview mirror, happy for the distance between us. Between our bodies. Between the act of fucking. But I crave other intimacies with Isla. *I always have*. I want to sit by her side at



breakfast, not stare at her over the table as some distant guest to her brother's wedding.

I don't want to be her secret fuck or the man who hurt her so many years ago.

Fuck, I just want her. I want the good and the bad. Her ire and her anger, I want her submission and the truth of the love I know she has locked away in her heart. I know she thinks I don't deserve it, but I want to. I will.

Besides, when has being undeserving ever stopped me?

*Except before.* But that, I did for her.

Would I ever get to tell her the truth of it? Would I admit that every moment between then and now I'd been waiting for the time she'd leave her marriage—a marriage my actions were responsible for? A union that was my cross to bear from afar.

It's a cross I'm still carrying. A weight I still bear.

But she will be mine. There is no other way.

I close my eyes and see her golden hair draping down her elegant back as she glances over her shoulder. Her mouth curls in a tiny, satisfied smile, her eyes full of secrets.

"For sure you want me to set up a meeting with that asshole Fedorov?" Sergei's gruff voice brings me back to myself.

"Yes. Friday."

"I can't take care of it for you?"

"No, I need to see him face-to-face." And in private.

Sergei clucks like an old woman. "It is not like you to get your hands dirty."

"Is there something you're not telling me, Sergei?"

"I do not understand."

"Getting my hands dirty. Don't tell me he makes you give him a hand job."

"What!" he explodes angrily, making me feel lighter than I did a moment ago. "I like pussy. I am no f—"

“Ah, ah. We don’t deal in slurs.”

“You and your jokes,” he mutters. “Not so funny if one day you find bullet in back of your head.”

“That’s not going to happen. Everyone likes me.” More important than liking me, the people in this organization respect and fear me. They fear my reach, my connections. My wealth. They fear inciting my wrath. “And better the devil you know than the one who would replace me.” Cut off the snake’s head, and it would grow five more in its place. Chaos. Disorder. Volatility. No one wants that. Under me, everyone knows their place. They know what’s expected of them and they know what to expect if they step out of line.

The organization run much smoother under me. Perhaps my uncle would even agree, not that he’ll ever say so.

“What snake? Everything is big joke to you,” Sergei grumbles.

“Yes,” I agree, scrubbing my hand down my face. I must be desperate for a fucking laugh to spend time annoying this old bastard. “Just set up the meeting. And try not to excite yourself. At your age, it can’t be good for your blood pressure.”

I hang up and stare at the passing scenery, but all I can see is Isla watching me from across the room last night. Look but don’t touch, her eyes seemed to say. Touch but don’t tell. You can hold, her gaze promised, but you’ll never possess.

In the window, my reflection comes into focus as my phone buzzes with a text. Hope springs as I reach into my jacket pocket. A hope that doesn’t last as I glance down and note the number. Somehow, I’ve memorized her phone number despite her not ever contacting me. *Or I her.*

**I miss you,** reads the text. **It’s been a while.**

I stare at the accompanying image with cold indifference. Tits. Skin. Red lingerie. A cascade of dark hair. But no face, rightly so. Not that revenge porn has ever been a hobby of mine.

*It’s been a while.*

I delete the text without a second thought.

It could be from any number of women; names and faces I no longer recall because I haven't fucked anyone but Isla since Alexander's fateful birthday. Isla's birthday too, of course. How odd that we reconnected on the same date. Reconnected, not rekindled as I'd hoped. I'd been so certain I could make her understand. I've longed to explain, longed for her forgiveness, for her absolution, but every snatched moment, every stolen half night together seems to push her farther away.

Oh, she wants me. She wants me so badly she can't help herself, but she doesn't want to talk—really talk. She wants nothing from me but the way I fuck.

And because I can't help myself, I give her exactly what she wants.

*Because I am a fool in love.*

I glance down at the phone in my lax hand, my expression twisting as I consider sending her a modern-day love note. The same kind of "I miss you" message as I'd just received. How would she react to a screenful of cock, hard and straining in my hand? Would she be incensed? Inflamed? Would it prompt her to call me, even just to shout?

Fuck. I scrub a hand across my jaw at such ridiculousness. Lady Isla Dalforth would not deign to answer a cock shot. She probably wouldn't answer a sonnet from me.

"Straight home, sir?"

I glance up at my driver's voice. Home to think more about this spell she's cast on me? Home to dissect the night and wonder how I might entice her to give me a chance.

"No. To Thornbeck," I answer almost automatically.

The mirror reflects the man's surprise, though he's quick to conceal it. No one dares to outwardly question me. No one but that old bastard Sergei. Saturday nights are the busiest of the week at the lifestyle club I no longer use but always have use for. Like any place of fun—bar, nightclub, den of debauchery—the morning after the night before is always a little grim. The same goes for Thornbeck Hall when Sunday mornings

reek of sex and sweat, booze and lube. But I don't want to be alone with my thoughts, so I'll go to the club to work instead.

My phone buzzes a second time, this time without the same spring of hope.

**Fedorov meeting confirmed**, comes Sergei's advice. **He's shitting his pants because he does not have money together. Was bleating like fat hairy sheep about some fucking golf club.**

**That's not my problem**, I reply. There's little use in pointing out sheep are woolly not hairy.

**You know about this stupid game? I want to know what is best type of club.**

He means a club to *club*, not to play. Though, in a way, he will be playing. Making a point, I suppose. Sergei is not so subtle.

**You need a driver.**

**Why? I have car and license? And new spectacles for nighttime driving.**

I sigh and shake my head. **The club you want is called a driver. A titanium one would be best.**

**Spasibo. Thanks.**

To use a modern business model, I am the CEO of a criminal organization. Which would make Fedorov one of my heads of department. As such, he is accountable for a number of business-related concerns. Workforce training, development, and management, of course. He has logistics to manage, product placement to control, and productivity to maintain. There are sales to drive and debts to manage because profit is all. And that's why the man is shitting himself. He owes me money, and I'm not a patient man.

Except when it comes to Isla. *Fifteen years and counting.*

A fucking golf club. Does he think I'm—

The hairs on the back of my neck stand straight like pins, my thoughts beginning to slide and move around like pieces on a chess board.

“Change of plans,” I grate out over the roar in my chest. My hand curls around the back of the driver’s seat as I lurch forward. “Not Thornbeck. Home.”

I notice the tremor in my hand as I lean back and turn over my phone.

**Change the meeting**, I quickly type out, sending the missive to Sergei before I’ve finished, the plan unspooling like a reel of film in my head. **Tell Fedorov I want him at the house in one hour.**

**I won’t have golf club**, Sergei replies.

**I’ll bring you a better gift from Scotland next time. Want a mace or a spike?**

We first met on her and Alexander’s birthday.

We rekindled that flame again on the same day another year.

On the first day of her brother’s new marriage, I’ve decided to take another path.

By any foul means, not fair, this woman will be mine.



## VAN

### *THE BEGINNING – FIFTEEN YEARS AGO*

“Excuse me for a moment.” Dropping my napkin to the table, I push my chair back and stride out of the private dining room, following the now familiar swish of blond hair. “Isla.” Madness makes me reach for her before I even say her name, and she swings around, her blue eyes wide. “Sorry. I thought you heard me.”

“Van!” I’m enveloped in the scent of orange blossoms as her arms fold around me with a squeeze. She seems relieved, and I’m sure I felt her heart beating against my chest. I frightened her. No, *he* frightened her. He won’t do so again. “Where did you spring from?” she asks, pulling back, her smile wide and genuine.

“Back there.” I flick a careless gesture to the latticework screen of a private dining suite. No doubt, my uncle and his cronies are squinting through it right now. At the thought, I straighten, ostensibly to fasten the button of my suit jacket. In reality, I hope to shield her from their view. *Nosy bastards are worse than old women.*

“Oh, very posh,” she says, craning to see over my shoulder.

“It’s more like sitting in purdah with a load of old crusty suits.” Crazy suits who’d slit a man’s throat for just one wrong look.

Call me hopeful, but she seems to relax at the news of my company. “A business dinner in T’zuma,” she teases, lightly touching my chest. “Poor Niko. I feel for you.”

I wish she would. Right here in the passageway. A man can dream.

“I don’t feel poor right now.” I let my eyes roam over her so she can’t mistake my intentions. She’s so fucking delectable, her black dress clinging to her every curve. Curves I’m familiar with. Curves I want to taste. And those shoes, so high and pointed and very fucking dangerous. “You look gorgeous. Is this one of your designs?”

“No, not this one.” She looks pleased I remember. If only she knew.

“So, how are you? What are you doing here?”

“Oh. I—” *Have a hankering for overpriced Japanese* is what I hope she’d say. I surmise it won’t be that by virtue of her pause and the way she nervously slides her hair behind her ear. “I’m actually meeting someone.”

“Anyone I know?” I answer easily, over the pinch in my chest. With all my might, I will her to reply with the name of some female friend. As she shakes her head in answer, my mouth spins on. “How’s floppy?”

“I wouldn’t know,” she answers far too breezily. She hesitates before adding, “Alistair dumped me.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I lie, “but I was talking about the puppy.”

“Oh God. I’m sorry!” Pressing her hand over her mouth, she laughs. “How stupid of me.”

“No, it’s not you. I just assumed.”

“Assumed?” Her smile is a jaunty, quirking thing.

“That he wasn’t an idiot.”

Isla cants her head as her cheeks turn pink. “Idiotic and floppy,” she murmurs almost to her toes. “And now living in



Geneva,” she adds as her gaze rises again. “I seem to have the worst taste in men.”

My lips twitch. “I wouldn’t say that.”

“No, I suppose you wouldn’t.”

“I also don’t remember any complaints... just cries,” I add softly, remembering how she’d thrown her head back as my fingers thrust inside her.

“We agreed it was a one-off. We were supposed to work it out of our systems.”

“It hasn’t gone anywhere,” I reply, tapping a forefinger to my temple. If anything, that night just made matters worse. That night, after I’d helped her down from the desk and handed over her discarded clothes, we’d left the club hand in hand, heading for my place by some silent agreement.

In the car, I couldn’t keep my hands off her and though she’d tried to stay quiet, she just couldn’t manage it. One night we’d said, but I’d known it wouldn’t be enough, even as I’d pushed her into the rickety old elevator and dropped to my knees. Her fingers clung to the scrolled ironwork door as I’d gone down on her, her cries carrying through the house.

Yes, it’s all there in my head. But it’s not enough.

“I suppose my taste isn’t all bad.” Her denim-blue eyes shine in the corridor’s lights. “Because there was this one man who recently gave me the eternal gift of love.” She grins, no doubt thinking she has me worried. “Don’t look so concerned. That time I was talking about the puppy.”

“Do I look concerned?”

“I think you look like you might be about to make a dash for it.”

“Shows what you know,” I reply, stepping closer. My gaze lingers on her, sliding from her head to toes and every place in between. “You know me better than a man who hurries.”

“Yes.” Her gaze dips. “But that was before. The night we agreed was an act of fate.”

“We could call this the same. You and me in the same building again.” Without my permission, my arm lifts, my knuckles sliding down her cheek as my intentions fall between us like a line drawn with indelible ink.

“Except we agreed,” she answers softly. “Plus, I’m here to meet someone.”

“Well, there is that, I suppose.” My hand drops between us like a stone. I slide into my pocket against the desire to pull her to me.

“And he’s here.” Her gaze flits nervously over my shoulder, and she hazards a small wave.

“Is this one floppy?” I kind of groan. Fuck, I hope so.

“Stop that,” she warns, though she’s smiling. “Also, you’re really bad at social cues.”

“I am?” I shift my weight to my right leg. Sort of, *huh*.

“Yes, that was your cue to leave. Go!”

“Not a chance, Peanut. You just said yourself you have terrible taste in men.”

“Van,” she groans, pressing her hand to her head. “Well... behave yourself,” she mutters through a ventriloquist’s smile.

“I’m not even sure I know what that looks like.”

He’s tall, I see as I turn. At least as tall as me. Dark-haired and broad through the shoulders and moves like the world owes him an appreciative glance. Worst of all, there’s not a floppy hair in sight. *Fuck*.

“Van, this is Jack.”

“Hey.” The prick greets me with a jerk of his chin, though he does the right thing when I hold out my hand.

“Jack is a professional rugby player.” She says this as though this might recommend him somehow. Isla practically vibrates with nervousness as she adds, “Jack, this is Van. My brother’s best friend.”

Tightening my fingers over his, I give a shit-eating grin. *Hello, Jack. I'm her brother's best friend and the man who ruined her pussy for all other men.*

He gets it. I even see the moment the penny drops. His dark eyes harden, his fingers tightening on mine.

“Babe, they won’t hold our table.” His gaze flicks over her head.

Ah, you’ll have to try harder than that, Jackie boy, to get rid of me. “Won’t they?” I give a pointed glance back at the latticed wall, once more becoming conscious of the eyes watching there.

“Van is terribly fancy,” Isla blusters. “He’s private dining all the way, but you’re right, we should take our table before they give it to someone else.”

“If that happens, you can always join me.” Or one of you can.

“Thanks, Van, but I don’t think—”

“I can recommend the robata grill.” I lean in quite suddenly, making Isla’s eyes widen the moment before I press my lips to her cheek.

“I’ll tell Sandy you said hello,” she squeaks as I pull back, though we both know that’s not why she said it. It’s a reminder to me. A move to pacify Jack. I know she won’t breathe a word of this to Alexander at all.

“It was lovely to see you again, Peanut.”

She narrows her eyes, but I’ve already turned because I don’t want to see her walk away. “Take care of her,” I warn with a nod at him. *Or you might find yourself wearing a concrete overcoat.*

Back at the table, my uncle and his cronies watch as I top up my sake cup.

“A friend?” The smile hovering on my uncle’s thick lips tells me he already knows.

“My friend’s sister. You’ve met Alexander, I think.”

“Alexander, Duke of Dalforth,” he says, pronouncing his name the Russian way. *Aleksandr*; the rest of his title all hard d’s. “A good friend to have. Important.”

I nod, even if I don’t agree. Not by his approximation. Alexander is a good friend to me, but there my expectation ends. Neither of us is interested in the kinds of things that would be useful to my uncle. Manipulation, political and otherwise.

“I did recall he had a sister,” he says with such a casual air I know what he’s thinking. Perhaps it was a mistake to give her the car. Or perhaps the mistake was leaving someone else to transfer the paperwork.

“Twin,” Sergei grunts from the end of the table, shoveling sashimi into his large head. *Stupid fucker.*

“Twin sister.” My uncle nods, holding a thoughtful finger to his lips. “And you’re acquainted with her, I seem to remember.” There is so much suggestion in his voice that the table breaks out in chuckles. They halt at my quelling glance. “You have nothing to say, Kolya?”

“Did you see my lips move?” Someone has been telling tales. *Baboushka* Sergei, no doubt.

My uncle claps his hand on my shoulder. “No.” He waggles an admonishing finger. “The deeper the sorrow, the less tongue it has,” he says, reciting an old Russian proverb.

“Maybe that’s what his issue is,” some joker offers up, making a vulgar motion with the *v* of his fingers and his tongue. “Maybe you should leave her to me.”

“Dima, you old bastard, it’s been so long, I doubt you remember under which arm a woman’s pussy is.”

The table breaks out into laughter as Dima’s neighbor slaps the back of his bald head. But I wait. Wait for it. And it isn’t long before my uncle turns.

“Aleksandr’s sister is very beautiful.” He grins as I send him a withering look. “So secretive, my Kolya.”

“Do I ask you who you’re fucking?”

“Ask!” His meaty hand slaps my back. “I’d offer you them!”

“Thanks, but I don’t need your cast-offs. And I’m not interested in Aleksandr’s sister.”

“She would make a good wife.”

With an impassive glance, I bring my sake cup to my lips.

“Don’t look at me like that.” Maybe not so impassive, then.

“A wife can be a valuable asset. A helpmeet. Someone to raise your children, when the time comes. She need not curtail your proclivities.”

“And what proclivities are those?”

“I don’t profess to know,” he blusters as his gaze flicks down the table to Sergei. “But I hear things.” Then he grins.

“I’m twenty-six. I’m not looking for a wife.”

*I warned her not to fall in love with me, and she laughed, like I was fooling myself.*

“Look at it like this.” He pauses, making a show of considering his next words. “Sometimes you have to do in the short term what is better for the long term. A family such as hers. Kolya, think of the circles that will open up to you.”

“I’m going into business with her brother. That will be enough.”

“Yes, yes. A gentleman’s club for those with very particular tastes. I begin to wonder what they taught you at these fancy schools. Too much corporal punishment, eh?”

“You’re welcome to come for a lesson. Thornbeck caters for all tastes.”

“I am a simple man,” he answers. “I like plain pussy. Blow jobs.” Hands open, he shrugs. “Canes and whips are not my thing.”

But we both know that’s not true because I’ve seen the relish he has for causing others pain. He’s a little old these days to resort to fists, but I’ve seen the damage he can cause when wielding a knife. Which gives me an idea. I reach for the earthenware *tokkuri* and top up his sake cup as my other hand

feeds into the pocket of his jacket, which hangs on the back of the chair. Slipping out his trusty switchblade, I slide it into my own pocket.

More drinks are had as dishes of yellow tail, octopus, and tiger prawns are passed around the table. Talk turns to business, the conversation switching exclusively to Russian. I'm not expected to offer an opinion. As my uncle likes to remind me, my father intended for me to be something other than a criminal. And so I listen. I learn. Then I excuse myself from the table, making my way into the main part of the restaurant.

I see the back of Isla's golden head, her hands wildly gesticulating as she tells a story. With a dark glower, her companion spots me, so I return his earlier acknowledgment with a jerk of my chin.

I can feel his eyes following as I make my way to the restrooms.

Leaning against the pristine vanity, I wait.

Alistair—floppy—was an easy fix. It's amazing what a private banking group will do when you threaten to withdraw the entirety of your funds. Off to Geneva for him.

It's ridiculous, I know, the lengths I'll go to. If I can't have her, no one else can?

It makes me sound like a fucking psycho when I'm as sane as the next (insanely jealous) man. But in all seriousness, if I can't have her, and clearly, I can't because that old bastard out there will just spoil everything, I'm not letting anyone else defile her. Not until I work out how I can safely have her in my life. Because there has to be a way, I think, pinching the bridge of my nose.

The door swings open, and before he can utter a word, I'm on him. I drive a hard left to his stomach, and a right to the kidneys, leaving him without breath to speak. I thrust my forearm across his neck, flattening him against the hand dryer, his eyes flying wide as I flick open the switchblade.

"Nice of you to join me, Jack." I rest the flat of the blade against his cheek. "Are you a bit of a Jack-the-lad, I wonder?"

He flattens his head against the wall and almost shakes his head, thinking better of the motion. “N-No. I’m not. I really like her.”

“Wrong answer,” I grate out, pressing the point of the blade under his eye. “Isla deserves better than your big man swagger, your liberal dousing of *Creed* cologne”—I wrinkle my nose at the scent—“and stupid skinny trousers. She deserves better than you.”

She also deserves to be a fully functioning human, not some sexless deity who no one can touch. I’m working on how I can reach that point of acceptance. Meanwhile...

“So what are we going to do about it?”

“Whatever you say, man.” His hands rise slowly, his fingers outspread. Big fucking hands that might’ve touched her. I overcome the mad notion to pin one of them to the wall with the blade. “I’ll do whatever you want.”

“Right answer,” I breathe, the sake-drenched gust coasting his cheek. This is why I don’t drink. It brings out the devil in me. “So this is what you’re going to do. You’re going to go back and finish your delicious dinner. You’re going to pay her a couple of compliments and make her feel good. Then you’re going to kiss her on the cheek, like you would your grandmother, and put her safely into a cab—a black cab. None of this unlicensed minicab shit.”

“R-Right. I can do that. I can definitely do that.”

“Then you’ll call her in a day or two and tell her you want to be friends. You’ll be the long-distance type. Can you guess why?”

“B-Because I’m moving away?”

“Clever boy.” With a flick of my wrist, I slash the sleeve of his shirt. “Fold that up,” I grunt, pulling back. “If I see you with her again, I’ll cut off your balls and make you swallow them.”

And that, my friend, isn’t an empty threat.





## ISLA

### *THE MIDDLE - PRESENT*

“There you are, you dirty little horticulturist.”

I laugh, turning from the colorful blooms bordering the lawn at the sound of Holland’s voice. After a long week of work, school runs, and general running around, I’m back at Kilblair Castle for Hugh’s birthday celebrations, which began this morning with a drive to the local airport. We were directed to the private terminal where I handed over one deliriously happy ten-year-old, his there-just-for-the-snacks younger brother, and their new cousin, Wilder, to my brother. Deliriously happy he was *not*. Not even at the sight of Van’s gleaming private jet.

“Dirty hor—” I press my fingers to my mouth and feign shock. “For a moment, I thought you were going to say something else.”

“I am shocked you would assume such a thing!” Continuing with the ridiculousness, Holland affects a Southern sort of bless-your-heart drawl. But Holland is from Oregon, not the deep South. Folding her arms, my sister-in-law comes to stand next to me. “Especially when I’ve been keeping your dirty secret from your fretting brother. For months... months!”

“If you’re talking about Van”—which she is, given she caught me creeping out of his room at a party last year—“Sandy already tried to warn me off this week. Not that he needed to.”

“Exactly. You’re old enough to make your own mistakes.”

“That’s one way to describe him,” I murmur under my breath.

“At least he’s a pretty mistake.” She wiggles her eyebrows ridiculously. “So last night? I guess you were just making *real* sure?”

“Are you suggesting I made the same mistake twice?”

“Something tells me he’s a repeat offense,” she replies, not bothering to hide her smirk.

“No comment.”

“It’s only really a mistake if you don’t enjoy it. If it helps, you can think of it as increasing your data sample size.”

“Size?” I quirk a brow, unable to stop myself.

“Yeah, in case you find yourself in the same situation again.” She pauses. “Which you totally wouldn’t if size was an issue.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I answer, picking invisible lint from my shirt.

“Okay. Just confirm it and we’ll move on.”

“Confirm what?”

“The sample size.” Holland snorts, then slaps her hand over her mouth. “That sounded like I was asking for specifics—girth and length and stuff.” She holds out her hands, like the fisherman describing the one that got away. “Which I’m totally not.” With a grimace, she slides her hands behind her back.

God, I love Holland. She’s like a breath of fresh air around this place.

“Again, no comment.”

“I just want to know you’re having a good time. God only knows how Alexander hasn’t noticed what’s going on between you two.” She fans her face. “Talk about sparks.”

“He rubs me the wrong way,” I mutter, ignoring the mention of my brother.

“Or maybe the right way, judging by... okay, I’m gonna shut up now.”

“The pansies are out early,” I say with a bland smile.

“They’re pretty. So we don’t usually get pansies in March?”

“It’s a little early, but the weather has been mild.”

“If you say so,” she says, wrapping her cardigan tighter around her. “Can’t say I’m much of a gardener.”

“Not a dirty little horticulturist, then?”

“Only when I can get away with it. I know nothing about flowers except they look prettiest in the ground and not in a vase.”

“I wholeheartedly agree.”

“Anyway, I came out to issue you an invitation. Kennedy is making margaritas, and I wondered if we might be able to tempt you.”

“I’d love to, but I’ve got to drive home when the boys get back.”

“Why don’t you stay the night? By the time they’re back, and we’ve sung ‘Happy Birthday,’ then stuffed our faces with cake, it’ll be late. Stay—swing by the house on the way to school in the morning for their books and stuff.”

It wouldn’t be the first time. I love being here with Sandy and Holland, though I take care not to outstay my welcome. They are newlyweds, after all.

“Aren’t you sick of the sight of me?”

“Totally.” Rolling her eyes, she links her arm through mine. “I just can’t get any peace in this tiny, overcrowded hovel.” We turn back to the castle as she makes an expansive gesture to the enormous façade. “This *is* your home,” she adds, giving my arm a squeeze. “It always will be. You could move in with a troupe of clowns, and I would have nothing to say.”

“Well, that’s just ridiculous, your grace. Clowns are creepy.”

“So is owning your own dungeon, *Lady Isla*. Come on, stay,” she says, pressing her head to my bicep.

What's waiting back home is an empty house, once the boys have gone to bed, and probably some work on my website. Solitary. Boring. "Well, if you're sure."

"Yay! We're gonna get a little drunk and share all kinds of girly secrets."

"Is it too late to change my mind?" Holland laughs. "But I have to pop to the village store first."

"Why?" Her arms slide from mine as we come to a stop. "They have like, seven things on the shelves."

"And one of those things are birthday candles." Dougal, Sandy's chef, made Hugh's cake this year, but there aren't any birthday candles anywhere. "I meant to get them earlier but forgot," I say, patting the back pocket of my jeans, checking for my car keys before remembering they're in my bag by the front door.

"Can't have birthday cake without candles," she agrees with a shrug. "Can't use candelabra candles, either." We make our way up the steps and through the open French doors. "Want me to come with?" she offers.

"It's fine." I give a quick shake of my head.

"I'll tell Kennedy to hold on."

"No, you go ahead. I won't be long." I turn in the direction of the entrance hall.

"Hurry back," she calls, heading the opposite way. "We might start without you, but you'll have to catch up. We'll probably be on the terrace," she adds, spinning around to walk backward. "I'm lighting the fire and taking out furry blankets."

"I hope you don't mean the tiger skins."

"Eww! I almost died when Alexander told me they were real. Those mangy old things are full of holes."

"The word you're looking for is antique, my love."

"Mangy," she retorts making me chuckle all the way to the front door.

Despite Holland's plans for furry blankets, the weather is positively balmy for a Scottish spring. And by that, I mean it's cardigan weather, not coat weather. Although watch this space because nothing is guaranteed in Scotland, least of all the weather.

The wheels of my elderly Range Rover crackle over the gravel as I turn right out of the West Gate, which no longer *has* a gate but still an imposing gray stone portico. A car is parked on the other side of the quiet country road I pull onto, but I don't think much about it as, in my rearview mirror, the castle gleams in the sunlight, the Scottish flag lying limp above the ramparts. *Very unseasonable weather we're having.* Even the rugged hills seem green and inviting instead of their usual misty gray.

The village consists of a corner store, a café, a pizzeria, two pubs, and a chip shop. I pull up outside of the store, the pungent smell of fish and chips floating down the street.

I'm pleasantly surprised to find, not only birthday candles, but number-shaped silver sparklers on a rotary stand filled with celebration items. I pick up and pay for a number one and a zero, then make my way back to the car when my phone rings.

**NON-CUSTODIAL PARENT** lights up on the screen. This is how Tom, my ex, is listed in my phone at the moment. But it's likely to change. It often does after I've had to speak to him. Sometimes, he becomes *Tom the Tool* or *Tom the Tossplot*. Sometimes he's just *Sperm Donor*. When I'm really cross, he becomes *That Fucker*. I only do it when the boys aren't around. I try to keep my feelings about their father to myself.

Anyway, I think about not answering it, but the temptation is too great.

"How's Paris?" It's a better opening than *I hope the Eiffel Tower falls on you.*

"What? Oh, I didn't end up going," Tom answers in those overly modulated tones of his. Fake, fake, fake. He grew up on the rough side of Glasgow, which I don't judge him for. What I *do* judge him for is the fact that he hid this from me. At least, I judge him now. I (foolishly) forgave him at the time.

“Oh, what a shame,” I add a little too gleefully. “I suppose Carly couldn’t get day release from the juvenile detention unit.”

“She’s not—”

“I don’t give a damn what she is or isn’t, what I do care about is that today is our son’s birthday, and you broke your promise to him.”

“You’re not still going on about that, are you?” he retorts, his tone terse. “I said I was sorry. She got the dates mixed up.”

“But you’re not in Paris. Didn’t it occur to you that Hugh might want to spend his birthday with you anyway? Even as your second choice?”

“He wouldn’t give up an Arsenal match. How’d you swing that, anyway?”

“Sandy arranged it,” I hedge, not wanting to tell Tom anything. The man is a weasel. It’s just a pity it took me a while to figure that out.

“Makes sense. I saw on the news that his friend was there. The Russian?” I offer nothing, leading Tom to try again. “They were speculating if he might be gearing up to buy a controlling stake in the club. What’s his name again?”

“I’m sure you know what his name is.”

“Van.” His lips twist as though the one syllable is distasteful. Tom doesn’t know about our history, but I sometimes wonder if he suspects. “I suppose it’s the Russian’s private jet they flew down in, too.”

“What do you want, Tom?”

“I need to talk to you.” Before I can tell him to get lost, he adds, “I can call in to Kilblair, if you like.”

“I don’t like.” Clicking the remote on my car, I pull open the door and throw my purse inside. “And I’m almost certain Sandy said the next time you step onto the grounds, he’d shoot you. Probably just in the leg.” I shrug. “But you can’t have everything.”

“But he’s not there, is he? He’s at Arsenal.”

How does he know that? “I have things to do today.” And no desire to help him ever again. Ruining our son’s birthday was the final straw.

“Izzy, please. I need your help.”

“Ha!” My shoulders roll in with the strength of that sound. “Look, I already know you’ve asked Sandy to help with the school fees. We don’t need to meet to discuss how useless you are.”

“It’s not about the school fees, for God’s sake. I’m in trouble!”

“And that’s supposed to interest me how?” I ask coolly.

“I don’t know. Maybe because you don’t want to buy the boys new suits for my funeral?” There’s a note of desperation in his voice that I don’t derive any joy from.

“What are you talking about?”

“Izzy, please. If you’re at Kilblair—”

“I’m in the village.”

“Meet me at the café? I’m begging you.”

Tom’s a weasel, but I’ve never heard him beg. Dragging my purse from the passenger seat, I slam the driver’s door. “This better be important,” I mutter, swearing to myself that I’ll run him over if it’s not.

“Thank you.” His answer sounds like a flood of relief. “I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

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The village café is slightly twee, yet not quite a greasy spoon kind of place. Cream-colored café style nets hang at the windows, the furniture is mostly turned spindle Windsor-style kitchen chairs and small tables covered in plastic floral tablecloths. I’m told it does a roaring trade during the tourist season, but today, it’s quiet with only a couple of old dears gossiping over a teapot at a table in the back. I consider

ordering one coffee but decide not to be petty and order Tom one, too. I take them over to the window and glance down at my watch. If he isn't here in five more minutes, I'm leaving, imminent funeral or not.

When Tom wasn't cheating, he wasn't a terrible husband. But he wasn't the best either. We mostly got along. I think I confused his need for my attention for love, but it wasn't until we married and had been living under the same roof for a while that I realized he only ever wanted my attention when we weren't together. Under the same roof, it's like I might as well have not been there at all. So it wasn't a marriage of passion or deep abiding love, but we cared for each other. Or maybe I cared, and he just did his own thing. It's a question I no longer ask myself.

I rushed into marriage, and I have Van to thank for that. I knew I wasn't *in* love with Tom, but I liked him enough to believe I could learn to love him. He was good to me, kind at a time I needed it. But it didn't last much beyond our wedding day. I came to understand why Sandy had said I was making a mistake. He'd called Tom a social climber (probably *the* most complimentary thing my brother had to say about him), and I'd accused Sandy of being a snob. At the time, the most important thing to me was that if I wasn't madly in love with Tom, he couldn't break my heart. But that didn't mean he didn't hurt me. And Sandy was right, Tom is a social climber. Marrying the sister of a duke must've felt like winning the lottery to him at first. He hated that I was never interested in that side of life. My title. Balls and country houses. I think he'd viewed me as his access ticket to the one percent club. But aristocrats aren't always wealthy, and I never moved in monied circles in the first place. By the time I'd caught him in our bed with our very young, very Spanish nanny, I suppose it was almost a relief.

The old fashion bell above the door chimes. Speak of the non-custodial parent and he shall appear? The figure I know to be Tom lollops in, and I say *figure*, because I can't actually see his face for the oversized aviator sunglasses he's wearing... along with a fedora and a scarf. He'd become a bit of a fashion



victim since he's turned forty a couple of years ago (sad-trendy, I'd coined it), but I've never seen him look so... odd.

"Izzy." His hand on the back of my chair, he bends to kiss my cheek, thinking better of it as I turn my face disgustedly. "Well, er, thanks for coming."

"You didn't leave me a great deal of choice." With his begging. "What's with the...?" I gesture to my own face.

"What?"

"The sunglasses and hat ensemble. Are you traveling incognito?" My laughter is met with a stony silence. "Suit yourself," I say, wrapping my hands around my bucket-sized cappuccino.

"You may laugh," he retorts.

"I think I just did." Peeling my forearms away from the plastic tablecloth, I lift my cup and take a sip. Not bad but not as nice as the coffee from Sandy's machine. I expect that's the beans he has sent from a small batch roaster in Edinburgh that make it superior. "You'll draw more attention dressed like that than you'll avoid, assuming that's what you're trying to do," I add.

"Go ahead, be flippant," he says, slipping off the hat and sunglasses. "I'm in danger." As he unravels the scarf, I notice the dark blue smudges beneath his eyes. "In danger of losing my life."

"Right." I sigh. "I suppose you'd better tell me what's going on." I don't recall him having such a flair for the dramatic before.

"It's the stuff over on Harris. I'm up shit creek."

"This isn't news, Tom." A few years ago, he'd invested in a golf club development on the Hebridean island of Harris—sank all the money he could get his hands on into it. There was to be apartments and a club house, but not before a distillery was opened, along with a marina and God knows what else. It was to be the jewel of the highlands—Scottish holidays for the gray nomad elite. But he was already in deep financial trouble months before I found him balls deep in Camila. He tried to get Sandy involved on several occasions, but unlike me, my

brother was far too astute to get involved with Tom. “This has been going on for ages now.”

“I know, but I borrowed some money after the thing threatened to collapse the second time, and now the bastards want it back.”

“You’re just going to have to bite the bullet and declare bankruptcy.” My mouth tightens as I sit back in the chair and fold my arms. I’d thought once or twice it might come to this while we were married.

“Bite the bullet,” he repeats, dropping his head to his hands and flashing me his balding head. “Apt,” he says, looking up again. “I might get one to each of my kneecaps. Or maybe my head.”

“What are you talking about?” My cup chinks as I set it back on the saucer, and I watch as he moves his untouched coffee aside.

“Bad guys, Iz.” His voice lowered, Tom presses his forearms to the table, leaning in. “I borrowed a shitload of money from some bad guys, and I don’t have it to pay back.”

“Oh, Tom.” My hand lifts. I think I want to slap him with it. I lower it instead.

“Why would you do such a thing? Who are you involved with?”

“To stop me from losing everything,” he cries. “And it doesn’t matter who. I just need your help.”

“How much?”

“I need a hundred grand by Wednesday.”

“A hundred thousand—I don’t have that sort of money! I’m sorry, Tom, but even if I did, I wouldn’t give it to you.”

“What about the house? Can you borrow on it?” he asks, ignoring my barb.

“By Wednesday? No, Tom. And the house has subsidence—you know that. I can’t do anything until the insurance company has investigated and come to some conclusion on the

claim.” If I hadn’t, I think I would’ve sold it by now. “And quite frankly, I wouldn’t risk making the boys homeless so you can hang on to your *get rich not very quick* scheme.”

“How about to keep their father’s head attached? Would you do it then?”

“I don’t know. I’d have to think about it.”

“Izzy,” he says on a pained groan, slumping back in his chair. “I know I hurt you, but you loved me once.” I pull a face. “Think of the boys.”

“I am thinking of them. I’m thinking of keeping a roof over their heads. Of keeping one parent in the land of the living.” I know I sound heartless, but he’s just being dramatic. I don’t doubt he’s in some sort of trouble, but I also wouldn’t put it past him to try to scam me out of money while he’s at it.

“What about Sandy? You could persuade him to help me.”

I try hard not to snicker. I really do. “If someone is going to kill you,” I say, reaching for a sachet of sweetener, “Sandy might offer to dig the hole.”

Tom’s hand shoots out, his fingers gripping my wrist. “I’m not kidding. They really are going to kill me.” I hear his frantic tone and see the fear in his eyes. Is he serious? “I thought they were real investors, but it turns out, they’re glorified loan sharks. Organized crime, Iz—they’re fucking criminals! They had guns. They took me to a warehouse.” His gaze turns inward, his expression one I’ve never seen before. “I was so frightened, I nearly pissed myself. You’ve got to help me, Isla.” He dips his head. I think he’s actually crying.

“Go to the police.” Despite what he’s put me through, I find myself turning my wrist, grasping his fingers in mine.

“You want me to die quicker?” His head comes up, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. “Do you have money in the business? Cash flow?”

“You know I haven’t turned a profit yet.” Online retail can take years to build up a database of loyal buyers. Not to mention, I’m not catering to your average shopper. My buyers

have to be courted delicately and persuaded by more than high quality.

“Can *you* borrow from Sandy?”

“You want me to ask him for money?” But I’m not really asking, more reminding him of how we both know I won’t.

“You could lie to him, tell him you need the money for a new roof or something.”

“Not happening.”

“Then maybe you can persuade him to invest—”

“He already said he won’t.”

Tom presses his elbow to the table and the knuckle of his thumb to his teeth. “I’m sorry, babe.”

“I’m sorry, too.” Sorry he’s in this state. Sorry I can’t think of a way to help him, other than the police. “What are you going to do?”

“The only thing I can do.”

“Which is?”

“Appeal to your better nature.”

“Me? I’ve told you, I don’t have—”

“They said—they said they’d take a meeting with you. As part payment.”

“What?” His words send icy-cold fingertips skittering down my spine. “No.” I snatch back my hand. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Please, Izzy. They’ve promised not to hurt you.”

“They’re going to kill you but be nice to me? Really, Tom. These are trustworthy criminals, are they?” My cappuccino turns to coffee cottage cheese in my stomach as I grab my bag from the next chair to me, thrusting my hand inside for my car keys.

“They’re hardly going to hurt the sister of a peer of the realm.”

“Nope.” Swallowing down a gurgle of panic, I almost jump from the chair, making the legs screech against the linoleum

flooring. “You must think me the biggest fool alive. I’m not meeting with criminals. I’m not a human to be trafficked.”

“It’s not instead of me. They just want to talk to you.”

“Oh... piss off,” I hiss, ignoring the snippy looks of the oldies at the other table.

“They’ll kill me if you don’t!”

“Well, that’s a risk I find I’m willing to take.” I grasp my cup and take it back to the counter, sending Annie, the proprietor, a quick smile. I might want to get away from this situation as quickly as possible, but I’m also aware of how the villagers talk.

*Came in for a coffee, so she did. Too high and mighty to clear her cup away when herself was done.*

“Himself” is the duke. “Herself” would be me, though really should be Holland now.

Although, judging by Tom’s bleating as he follows me out, an unreturned cup is probably not what the gossip will be about.

“Izzy!”

I dash across the quiet high street, pointing the key fob at the car as I bite back my retort. The car *bleeps* as it unlocks, but I can’t open the door as Tom’s palm lands on it.

“I didn’t tell them about you, but they knew. I said you wouldn’t help, that we were divorced, but then they brought up the boys.”

“What?” The blood in my veins turns to ice water, my head turning like an automaton. My voice, when I find it, sounds much stronger than I feel. “Brought the boys up *how*? What exactly did they say,” I yell when he pauses. He seems to be choosing his words.

“They knew their names. Where they go to school. They suggested, no”—he rakes a hand through his hair—“more like implied it would be a shame if anything happened to them.”

Fear, like an icy-cold hand clamps over my entrails as it forms an unrelenting fist. It sounds like some clichéd made-for-TV

show. Or I might think so if it wasn't my children I was suddenly terrified for.

"It's just a meeting," Tom adds hurriedly. "In London. Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" I feel so very, very sick.

"I'll take the boys to school, if you want."

I blink heavily and get a hold of myself. "How magnanimous of you."

"Don't be like that. I really did try to keep you out of this."

"Not bloody hard enough." I purse my lips after the unhelpful utterance. Tom is only ever interested in Tom. It's just a shame I found that out too late. He loves our boys, but mostly as an extension of himself. The man has an inflated ego, a sense of grandeur that's very much undeserved. He'd never run into a burning house to save me—not even when we were married and he professed to love me. I know only two men in the world who would drop everything for me. One is my brother, who I'm trying to learn not to lean on. The other is Van. The man who proved he can't be trusted with my heart. Tom would never gift me an Aston Martin. He's never once offered me his jacket when I was cold.

"They said somewhere public. You get to choose."

"Oh, wonderful!" I hear the words—in my voice, too. But none of this feels real as my mind spins with a million other things. What it might mean if I don't go. And I don't mean for Tom, who wasn't even at the bottom of my list of people I care for before and is now at the top of my list of people who I don't give a flying fuck for.

"Maybe they just want to sort out some sort of payment plan," he hedges.

"For me, you mean? Some way I can pay off your debts?" I shut the thought down, though I think he must see the horror on my face.

"Not like that," he says plaintively. He moves back from the door and slices a hand through his hair.

“You’ve forgotten your disguise,” I mutter, adjusting the straps of my purse on my shoulder. “If they hurt me, Tom, you know Sandy will—”

“No, Iz. They won’t.” He reaches for my hand. Fear allows him to take it. “I just meant they know you were the brains behind my business, and I was just the charm.”

I yank my hand back. If I wasn’t so terrified, I might roll my eyes. Or poke him in his. I used to think he was charming. And harmless. We were no great love story, and I thought that would somehow protect me. Clearly, I lack the imagination for his treachery.

“That you sorted the finances,” he adds, “and did the accounts.”

“They don’t want to meet me because I’m a whiz with a spreadsheet.”

“No, really. I think that’s why they want to talk to you.”

“You know what I think? That you’re full of shit.”

That he’s a toad. A weasel—a rat!

He’s left me no choice.

So it looks like I’ll be taking a meeting with criminals.

And I will never forgive him for that.





## ISLA

“WE WERE ABOUT to send a search party out for you,” Holland calls as I make my way out onto the terrace.

The sun is much lower now, and the drive back from the village had been unnerving for more than just that. The hills loomed ominous and the trees places to hide behind. Even the car that had been abandoned beyond the castle gate had been a potential source of harm. It wasn't until I'd reached the castle courtyard that I'd felt safe. And now, seeing this girly pair huddled under fleece blankets, can I force myself to breathe again.

“Who were you thinking to send?” I force a little brightness into my words.

“Gertie, of course,” she says, watching as my faithful Labrador shuffles out behind me. Where I go, she follows. Unless there's someone in the kitchen, because then she turns into a fair-weather friend. “Hey, Gertie girl.” With an eager wag of her tail, my (in)constant companion ignores me in favor of following the whiff of the charcuterie board and a pat from Holland.

“Sorry, work stuff.” I offer the vague explanation, dropping onto the opposite end of the Lutyens bench that Holland's sitting on. Kennedy has the hood of her light jacket pulled up, and Holland has on a pair of striped socks, her sparkly designer sneakers abandoned to the flagstones. The women may look similar, but stylistically, they're worlds apart. Kennedy is more retro styling while Holland prefers all things

girly. “I got a call when I was coming out of the corner store, so I took my laptop to the café to sort it out.” My innards suddenly cramp, though not from my lies. Don’t think about it. Not now. Shove it in the cupboard of anxieties to deal with later.

“I don’t blame you,” Holland predictably complains. “The Wi-Fi out here is literally the worst.”

Worse than being forced into a meeting with potential criminals? No. But I’d picked my excuse well—my sister-in-law is regularly driven daft by the phone and internet service at the castle. I’d been gone longer than candle buying and my conversation with Tom. “I also decided to take you up on your invitation, so I drove home to get the boys’ school uniforms.” I’d also pulled together an outfit for tomorrow for my meeting with a couple of members of the criminal fraternity. God help me, I need that drink.

“Yay!” Holland claps her hands like a delighted baby. “Margarita time! You’re only one or two behind.”

“Try four,” Kennedy interjects. “And you don’t get to complain about connect-ability when you have all this.” She waves her glass in the direction of the grand and ancient house behind us and the extensive gardens in front.

“I convene with nature on the regular,” Holland complains. “But sometimes a girl would like to speak to her nephew and her sister, and it’s not fun when you kinda have to hang out of the window trying to get a signal. Out of windows, up on the ramparts. I even once thought about climbing the flagpole.”

“Flagpole?” Kennedy replies with a laugh.

“You saying I can’t work a pole?” Holland demands. “I’ll have you know, I could give the girls over at the Fuzzy Clam a run for their dollar-stuffed G-strings.”

“There is *not* an establishment called the Fuzzy Clam,” I interrupt. Not even in the back woods of Oregon.

Holland bursts into a fit of giggles, leaving Kennedy to explain. “It’s what Jenner, my barista back home, calls the local strip joint.”

“Its actual name isn’t much better,” Holland adds as Kennedy lifts an antique Clarice Cliff jug from the table to fill an empty margarita glass.

“It’s called The Pink Oyster.” She passes the glass over the table.

“How charming,” I pull a face as I accept it and take a seat on the bench next to Holland, who throws the end of her fleece blanket over my lap. “I’m not sure which name is worse.”

“Debatable.” Holland gives a shrug before lifting her glass. “Bottoms up.”

“Cheers.” Throwing a mouthful back, I repress a lime-induced shiver.

“The Wi-Fi around here is definitely enough to drive anyone to drink,” Holland says, examining her glass.

“You could ask Alexander to install one of those mast things for your birthday,” Kennedy jokingly suggests.

“A phone mast or a pole?”

“I guess whichever tickles your pickle,” her sister answers with a snort.

“I know which would tickle his pickle,” Holland mutters. “You can do that?” Her head swings my way. “I mean, he has a lot of land.”

“I’m sure Sandy would do whatever he could to please you, your grace.” Curling my feet up on the bench, I take another sip and smile as Holland scrunches her nose. She loves her title about as much as I love mine.

My mind jumps from this to my date with destiny. Criminal destiny.

*What can they want from me?*

“There’s no harm in asking,” Kennedy says, heaping a blue, crumbling cheese to a cracker.

I startle before realizing she’s not reading my mind.

“Sure. Tell him I want a pole for my birthday.” Holland’s mouth quirks. “You girls know exactly what he’ll wrap for me.”

“Do you want to make my ears bleed?” I protest, though I’m happy to be distracted. “We are not talking about my brother’s anatomy.”

“Will your ears bleed if I tell you that I caught Gertie happily munching on a pair of Holland’s panties while you’ve been gone?” Kennedy’s brows ride high on her forehead as Holland groans.

“From the laundry?” I hazard hopefully.

“Yes!” Holland shouts. “Let’s go with that.”

“I caught Miss Gertie trotting out of one of the exhibit rooms. The ladies’ parlor, I think. The one with the beautiful blue silk wallpaper? Holland told me the name in French, but I forgot.”

“*Toile de Jouy*,” I supply. “I think the paper is Victorian, though it looks like it’s straight out of Versailles. Dior used the pattern heavily in their spring collection this year.”

“Hear that, Holland ho-bag?” Kennedy taunts. “Have a little respect for history and keep your damn panties on! I feel like it’s only a matter of time before the two of them get caught in a compromising position. We’re flying back to Oregon next week, and with the castle due to open for the tourist season soon, I’m counting on you to tell me when it happens,” she says, turning to me.

“Our elderly tourists would probably love a peep show. Their hearts however...”

“Better up the insurance cover!” Kennedy laughs.

*At least I’ve left the boys well provided for with my life insurance.* The thought pops unbidden into my head.

“Stop picking on me!” Holland ducks under the fleece blanket with a giggle. “Hey, are you okay?”

“What?” I turn to her and realize she’s staring at me. “Sorry.” I shake my head as though shaking off flies rather than worrying thoughts. “I was just wondering how the boys are

getting along,” I hedge, painting on a smile, resolving to make a better effort to push tomorrow to the back of my mind. Kennedy and Wilder are only in Scotland for another few days, and I won’t spoil their sister’s afternoon.

Gertie cons us individually out of more cheese, and as more drinks are poured, the conversation continues to ping-pong all over the place. I begin to relax and find myself laughing more than I have in weeks. I’ve always been quite adept at compartmentalizing, but the anesthetic effects of tequila certainly help. But that’s not to say I’m not shocked when the sisters decided to turn their attention to the topic of my love life.

“Come on, Isla. There must be someone you’re interested in,” Holland insists, a particular light glinting in her eye. *Like a love supervillain.* Holland has her suspicions about Niko, given our paths crossed very early one morning last year at a house party. We were both undertaking our own walk of shame; mine from Niko’s bed and hers from my brother’s. At the time, she was employed as my nanny.

“There isn’t.” I shrug, uninterested, ignoring the bait and her comic expression.

“Someone!” she adds dramatically.

“Sorry. I like my life as it is.” Well, bits of it. *Please, God, let tomorrow go okay, and I won’t ever complain again.* “I have no plans to complicate any of it.” *Further,* I silently tag on.

“Complications can be fun,” Kennedy suggests. “Even when you tell yourself you’re not interested.

“I don’t have time for a man in my life. Not with the business, the boys, and the house. Speaking of the boys, they’ve been gone ages, haven’t they?”

“I got a text from Alexander an hour ago,” Holland says quickly. “Stop trying to change the subject.”

“I’m not. I’m just saying that I’m not interested. Besides, I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“Methinks the lady knows exactly where to start. And who to start with.”

Yes, by not touching that.

“Who?” Kennedy demands.

“There really isn’t anyone,” I insist.

“No cute, single dads at the boys school?” Kennedy pops another cheese topped cracker into her mouth.

Leaning forward, I snag a grape from the platter. “I’m not sure. How do I spot them? Dark bags under their eyes? A harried expression?”

“Okay, fine. So no single dads.”

I have enough baggage of my own.

“You could join a couple of singles nights,” she suggests.

“In rural Scotland?” I scrunch my nose. “Those would be some slim pickings, indeed.”

“Alexander can’t be the only duke hereabouts,” Kennedy persists.

I grimace.

“Dukes are thin on the ground,” Holland says. “Chrissy said there are a couple of earls and a whole heap of barons, not that Isla’s interested.” She slides me a look. “She has very particular tastes.”

“I think you’ll find I have no taste. Not taste for involvement or complications.”

“What about joining a dating site?” Kennedy suggests as though I haven’t spoken. “It would increase the size of the dating pool.”

“Sadly, the dating pool has pee in it,” I say, draining my third margarita far too easily.

“Some people like that kind of thing,” replies Kennedy.

“Peeing in pools?” My expression scrunches.

“Oh, here she goes.” Holland waves her glass over her head.

“There’s no stopping her now.”

“Stopping what?” My attention flicks between the two of them.

“The topic of kink,” Kennedy answers with a gleam as she produces her phone from the depths of the blanket.

“I’m gonna need more alcohol.” Holland tips back her head, her eyes on the darkening sky.

“Drama student.” Kennedy rolls her eyes. “Anyway, pool peeing is not on *Cosmo’s* list.”

“Oh, it’s a *Cosmopolitan* magazine article, is it?” I sometimes forget Holland and Kennedy are in their twenties. I also sometimes (conveniently) forget I’m not.

Her eyes glued to her phone, Kennedy scrolls through goodness knows what. “Wanting to pee on people or wanting people to pee on you, that one’s here.”

“The list isn’t alphabetical, then? Water sports would be toward the end.”

“Lady Isla!” Holland admonishes, pinging straight like a jack-in-the-box. “I am shocked!”

“I can’t think why. I’ve been around a long time. In fact, I’m practically ancient.”

“Please,” Holland scoffs. “You’re a total babe.”

“Thank you for saying so.”

“A knowledgeable babe.”

“Academic knowledge,” I hedge, trying hard not to think of Niko and the things he’s introduced me to. “You see, we have these things we have in Scotland. Square boxes with moving pictures. I’m not sure if you’re familiar, but they can make a person a bit of a voyeur.”

“That’s here in the ‘A to Z of Kink,’ too.” Kennedy brandishes her phone. “V is for voyeurism. Someone who gains sexual pleasure by watching others *get it on*,” she adds as she does a little punching dance.

“That’s not my cup of tea at all. I think I’d feel a little left out.”

“Wouldn’t it be just like watching porn?” Holland asks.

“Inasmuch as you’re not physically involved yet you still get off?”

“You crack me up,” she says with a cackle and a slap to my knee.

“I’m not into being a masochist, thank you very much.” This I offer primly as I remove her hand, making both women laugh.

“I don’t know,” Holland singsongs. “A little light spanking can be fun.”

“I is for impact play,” Kennedy adds before I can complain.

“Can I get a testify!” Holland calls, suddenly embodying a Southern Baptist minister.

“I really don’t want to know what you and my brother get up to in the privacy of your own rooms.”

“Or the public rooms,” Kennedy adds heavily.

“You’ll give our elderly visitors a heart attack.”

“Tell that to your brother,” Holland replies, pink with giggles.

“You tell him. Develop a dominant streak. Tell him you’ll spank his bottom if he doesn’t stop.” Holland’s giggles turn to a gurgle. “How many drinks are you ahead?”

“Not enough to think that might work. Besides, I like a man who knows what he’s doing in the bedroom. A man who’s a little bossy.”

“Growly,” her sister agrees. “But he’s got to know *what* to say to give a girl those feels.”

“And what letter in the kink alphabet is that?” I find myself asking. These two are as drunk as skunks!

“A is for aural” Kennedy says, glancing back at her phone. “But the list begins with *A* as in *age play*.” At this her gaze turns to her sister who begins to merrily convulse.

“Who’s playing?” my twenty-four-year-old sister-in-law says, batting away tears. “An older man can be the bomb.”

“You’re suggesting I should seek a senior citizen?”



“Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it,” Holland answers with a laugh. A laugh that deepens as the sonorous tones of my brother carry across the terrace.

“Tried what, my sweet?”

“Uh-oh,” she whispers. “Daddy’s home!”

I groan and I laugh, burying my head in my hands, part amused, part mortified.

“Such an enlightening conversation,” my brother whispers, pressing a kiss to his wife’s head. “Not that I was eavesdropping much.”

“You big ole liar pants,” Holland purrs.

“Care to accompany me upstairs to help me get out of them?”

“Cake and birthday songs first,” she answers, sliding her hands around his neck.

It’s sweet yet sort of sad, watching a pair so obviously in love. Sad perhaps because it leaves me feeling lacking somehow. But not for long as my boys come scampering across the terrace.

“My gorgeous men have returned,” I call as Hugh and Archie throw their arms around me. Over their heads, I watch as Wilder snuggles next to his mother on the opposite bench. He’s such a sweet boy and so much quieter than my rabble rousers. “How was the match?” I ask, staring into their gorgeously grubby faces. Tears teeter suddenly on my lids, something like relief flooding my nervous system. It’s like the whole afternoon has been one, long, held breath and now I’m only just recognizing that deprivation. It’s not about missing them or worrying about how they’ve been because I know they’ll always be safe with my brother. *If it comes to that.* I squeeze the pair tighter to me. “Did you have all the fun?”

Both boys begin to speak at once, words tumbling out of their mouths. *Best day ever! Cake and cola! Private jets are the best.* The words come thick and fast, tumbling over their tongues and each other.

“Arsenal won, and the striker gave me his shirt,” Hugh exclaims, waving a slightly sweaty-smelling blue-and-white shirt under my nose.

“Amazing!”

“Look, Mummy. He wrote my name on it, too! Just don’t wash it ever, okay?”

“We’ll get a glass case to keep it in.” To hide the smell if nothing else.

“He wished me happy birthday and ruffled my hair like he liked me!”

“Who wouldn’t like you?” With another squeeze, I turn to my younger son. “How about you, Archie. Did you have fun?”

“I had snacks on the plane,” he replies quite happily, pulling (presumably) pilfered packets of nuts from his pockets. “The lady in the uniform said I could take some home for later,” he adds when he catches me staring. “Private jets are much better than big airplanes. You don’t have to wait for the toilet, and the chairs are like sofas, so you can lie on them if you want.”

“Excellent.”

“Can we buy one?”

“Probably not just yet.” Or ever.

“I had a burger and chips and lots of cake!” Archie reports, unperturbed. My baby has been eating his feelings since the divorce. “I didn’t even get a tummy ache.”

“I’m pleased to hear it. I hope you remembered to say thank you to Mr. Vanyin.”

“Who?” Archie asks, his face scrunching adorably.

“She means Uncle Van,” Hugh utters in a superior tone. The pair turn their heads over the back of the bench and shout, “Thank you, Uncle Van!”

Oh God. Just how long has he been standing there?



## ISLA

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?” I murmur as we make our way inside for what’s turning out to be Hugh’s second birthday cake of the day. The children run ahead, followed by the other adults, Gertie lolloping behind as though knowing they’ll reach the kitchen first. We bring up the rear. A close rear. “Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that,” I add, wanting to kick myself for being ungracious. “It’s just...” I sneak a look at him in profile. Something about those dark jeans and midnight shirt make him look lethal, the bristles on his face drawing unnecessary attention to his lips. “You’re growing a beard?” Immediately regretting the words, I swing my attention to my family as they dip under an ancient stone arch before turning a corner and disappearing out of sight.

“Do you like it?”

I sniff, hoping to convey my indifference. “It’s your face.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

“You would.”

“Because you like my face.”

“I like not to have to set eyes on your face, but lately, that seems impossible.”

“You don’t mean that, *milaya*.”

“Don’t I?”

“I think I’ve made myself clear,” he murmurs, his tone turning serious. “I want to be with you.”

“So you’re hanging around so much to remind me of that?”

He pulls on my wrist, and I swing around to face him. “I will do what it takes. Or you can just tell me what I have to do to make you believe me.”

“I don’t...”

“Just think of the possibilities.” He lifts my hand to cradle my cheek, and I can’t help it. I’m thinking of it—immediately and exquisitely so. How the bristles would tickle my cheek. The brush of it would tantalize the skin of my inner thighs. Maybe this is my way of ignoring the intent he’d sought to soften. Or maybe Niko Vanyin just makes me hot. Either way, I take care to make sure my response doesn’t reflect those thoughts.

“If that’s why you’re here, you’ve wasted your journey.” But if he’s going back to London, then maybe—

“It’s never a wasted journey if there’s the smallest chance you might ride the face that you like so much.”

“Van!” My response is part chastisement, part gasp, and all internal pulsing. “You can’t say things like that. Not here.”

“Fine. I’d journey to the ends of the earth just to set my eyes on you.”

I swallow, unable to answer. He has as much talent for sweetness as for filth.

“I’m only sorry we interrupted you ladies out on the terrace. I would’ve liked to have heard the rest of the alphabet.”

A weight sinks between my legs. By contrast, my voice sounds like I’ve been huffing helium. “What?”

“I would’ve liked to have heard your alphabet.”

“I don’t have one,” I return with asperity. Turning away, I set off at a brisk pace. In only a step or two, he’s next to me. *The tiger keeping pace with the hare.*

“Don’t you?” he purrs, amused.

“No.” I make the mistake of glancing his way, and the look he sends me is part taunt, part incitement. “I’m not made that way.”

“Is that what you tell yourself?”

“I don’t need to tell myself anything because I know.”

“We all have our preferences, kinky or not. My darling Peanut, your alphabet most certainly begins with aural. With an *A* or an *O* because you’re a big fan of both.”

“Really, Van,” I huff.

His feet scuff against the flagstones as he pivots and steps in front of me. His large hands fold over my shoulders, forcing me to stop. “Then *B* for bondage, the light form, of course. And also for breath play.” He inhales deeply, almost as though he can sense how instantly wet I am. At his low-spoken words, the suggestion in them, memories are brought to life like a flickering flame. One hand drifts, the backs of his fingers stroking down my neck. “When you swallow beneath my hand, a ripple of excitement works its way through your body from the neck down.” His touch causes those exact sensations in me.

“You make me sound like a deviant.” I swallow, my denial not nearly as strong as it should be.

“Impact play,” he murmurs next, ignoring me. “We both know how you like to be manhandled.” One hand on my shoulder, the other folds around my hip as he backs me into the stone wall.

“Niko, please. Not here.”

“Then where, *milaya*? I’m tired of these snatched moments when no one is looking. I want to be with you, want you on my arm for the whole world to see.”

“I can’t. I have the—”

“The boys,” he finishes for me. “I understand. You know I’m a patient man. I can wait. We can do this properly. Get them used to the idea of us together, along with everyone else.”

“Van, there *is* no us. There can’t ever be an us.”

“Why?” he demands, stepping so close that his face is made of nothing but shadow and the angry icebergs of his eyes. “Give me one good reason.”

“Because I can’t go through it again. I just can’t.” I turn my head, my gaze following the direction of my family, unease swirling in my stomach. I want to be there, up ahead, in the bosom of my family, not here having this conversation. I can’t be with Niko, not right now, here in the hallway, not when I long for him to push me up against the wall, to make me think of nothing but what he’ll take and what I’ll give. Make me ignore the precariously spinning plates above my head. But I also can’t be with him in any real sense. We aren’t made for real relationships. For the humdrum and lack of drama, school drop-off, dog walks, man flu, period pain, and complaining about hair in the shower drain.

Yet it would be so easy to drop my head to his shoulder when now more than ever I just want to sink into him. To unburden my troubles, let my fear and my worries be absorbed by him. But that would be wrong. This is my life and my mess.

“Are you staying the night?” I ask, turning back to face him while trying very hard to keep my tone even.

“Will you come to me, steal away with a little more of my heart?”

“It’s such a good thing you have such a big heart, isn’t it?” I retort, hating the sad glance he sends me in return.

“I won’t be visiting,” I say before I change my mind, though the temptation to lose myself in him is great. “This has been good,” I add hesitantly, laying my palm against his chest. “You’ve made me feel good, Niko, and for that, I’m grateful.” My gaze flicks away at the almost scornful flick of his brow. “It was what I needed, but I won’t be visiting your room tonight. Or anymore.” His expression resets to that urbane look he wears so well. No taunting twist of the lips. No hardened glance of displeasure. “I’d like us to remain friends.”

His large hand covers mine. “You don’t need friends like me, Isla.”

“I do,” I answer quickly. “I also need to be in London tomorrow. I’d booked the early morning commuter flight, but —”

“Of course. My flight is scheduled to leave at seven.”

“I can hitch a ride?”

“I’d gift you the jet if I thought it would help persuade you to give us a chance.”

I shake my head. We had our chance years ago. What happened more recently was just an ego boost, or so I tell myself. But the man never misses an opportunity. He cups my face and, leaning in, presses his cheek to mine.

“I would give you the world if only you’d let me.” Pressed as close as we are, I can’t see his expression, but it doesn’t stop me from hearing the longing in his voice.

“You’re a good man, Niko, despite what you say. But I can’t be with you. I can’t be with anyone.”

“In time—”

I shake my head. “You will always bring out the most selfish version of me. You make me greedy. And I have to think of my family right now, not myself.”

“All right.” His fingers slip around mine, giving them a reassuring squeeze. “For now.”

“Mummy!” We spring apart at the sound of Archie’s distant voice. “Hurry up, I’m hungry for cake!”





## VAN

### *THE BEGINNING – FIFTEEN YEARS AGO*

“Isla?” I’m leaving one of the smaller exhibition spaces when a familiar blond ponytail bounces past me. Shock and delight blooms deep in my gut before a secondary wave of something less pleasant hits me. I’m not sure if it’s this or if scaring her last time makes me hesitant to reach for her.

Fuck knows I’ve tried to stay away from her, but it seems the devil is intent on putting her in front of me anyway.

“Van!” The object of my borderline obsession turns and throws her arms around me in a friendly sort of hug. “How are you?”

“Better for seeing you.” Better for having her pressed up against me, no matter how briefly.

She pulls back, a delicate pink spreading across her cheeks as a couple of women pass, their sharp eyes and lopsided smiles distinctly unfriendly.

“What are you doing here?”

“Working,” she says as I bite back a retort of *you don’t work here* when she steps back to let a wave of people pass, and I notice her outfit. Her black pencil skirt and a diaphanous blouse tucked in at the waist. As the punters pass and she steps closer, I notice its printed with tiny stars and that the fabric is almost transparent. She’s wearing a dark camisole under it,

and her outfit is completed by heels. Shiny black fuck-me heels. Her whole outfit makes my dick twitch.

“I thought you worked in Mayfair.” I clear my throat, my voice sounding husky, but I’m glad when she doesn’t ask how I know. Not that I’d admit to the extent of my knowledge. It’s not stalking. I don’t follow her around, noting her every move. But I know where she works, where she lives, and where she hangs out because I wanted to be sure our paths wouldn’t cross after the fuckup in T’zuma. It was a mistake to speak to her in front of my uncle. When he has an idea, the bastard is like a dog gnawing away at a bone.

“That’s right, but this is my little gallery’s big brother,” she says, her eyes flitting around toward the main exhibition space, where she’d seemed to be heading. “And it’s all hands on deck for tonight’s exhibition.” She pulls an unenthusiastic face. “Sabine, the owner, is hoping to cash in on next week’s Sotheby’s sale. Did you hear they have one of Modigliani’s nudes for auction?”

“Oh really?”

She nods. “It’s expected to go for somewhere around three hundred million.” *Four*, I almost respond. That’s what my Konstantin is banking on. “Can you imagine?” she adds all wide-eyed delight.

“How have you been? How’s Theo?”

Her expression twists again. “Well, *that* didn’t go anywhere. But he did.”

“Not Geneva again?”

“I don’t know where he went.” She shrugs. “To the graveyard of boyfriends past.”

“Another one bites the dust?”

“Don’t be mean,” she says miserably, though not sincerely.

“Do you own a creepy doll collection by any chance?”

“What?” The word gurgles with a laugh as she presses her fingers to her mouth.

“In your bedroom, I mean.” I give a little shudder. “All those blank staring eyes can be a bit off-putting.”

“Sounds like you know that from experience.”

“A gentleman never tells.”

Isla folds her arms. “You’re no gentleman.”

“Didn’t I make sure you came first?”

Eyes wide, she swings her head left then right. “Not in here!”

“Of course I didn’t make you come in here.” I pause. “But I can if you’d like.”

She huffs and shakes her head, her cheeks so pink.

“What about cats?”

“Cats? What are you talking about?”

“I’m just trying to help you understand why you can’t hang onto a man. Cats are needy creatures.”

“And all attention needs to be on you?” The frilly collar of her blouse flutters as she folds her arms across her chest.

“Peanut, you know that’s not true.”

She turns a delicious pink at my suggestive tone. “No cats,” she blusters, “What I have is an adorably large Labrador with floppy ears and a problem with flatulence.”

“Maybe that’s your problem.”

“Gertie?” She presses her hand to her chest, faux aggrieved.

“Maybe she’s the source of your relationship woes.”

“That’s not true because I can’t even get a man to come back for coffee.”

“I’m grateful you didn’t put that in air quotes.”

“Lest I offend your delicate sensibilities?”

God, I love making her laugh. “More like it’d make me jealous. You’ve never invited me to your flat.”

“Because we agreed you couldn’t say things like that.”

“Not even if they’re true?”

“Especially if,” she says with a tiny shake of her head. “Oh, bugger.” Tilting her head, she mutters the rest of her words. “My boss is coming, and she doesn’t look happy.” Her gaze turns pleading. “Pretend to be a potential buyer.”

“What’s in it for me?”

“W-What?” Her eyes are as wide as saucers now, and they skim over my shoulder again.

“Invite me back to your place,” I demand, surprising us both.

Her gaze reflects her confusion, and she shakes her head.

“Invite me, Peanut. And promise you’ll wear those shoes when I fuck you.”

“Isla.” A haughty female voice makes her name sound like a complaint. “Did you find the box of programs?”

“I...” Her gaze flicks to me, and I watch as she makes her decision. “No. Sorry, Sabine. I was just helping Mr. Vanyin with his questions.”

The woman comes to a stop between us. Tall, attractive, and red-haired, her eyes widen a touch as she recognizes my name.

“Mr. Vanyin. How wonderful to finally meet you. I’m Sabine Le Blanc. We’ve spoken on the phone.”

I give a clipped nod but don’t offer my hand.

“If you’d permit it,” she begins, “I would love the opportunity to show you the—”

“Thank you, but Isla has been most helpful. If you’ll have the time,” I add as I half pivot away, “I believe I saw a Bracquemond in one of the other rooms.”

“Yes, we have—”

“Mr. Vanyin,” the woman says condescendingly. “Isla is just an assistant. She has no expertise or even knowledge of Marie Bracquemond.”

“I require her eye and her opinion, not to repeat facts she has learned rote. And I don’t have a great deal of time.”

“But of course,” the woman demurs, gesturing Isla ahead.

“I think I’ve made you an enemy,” I mutter as we walk away.

“Don’t worry about it.” As we turn a corner, Isla’s shoulders visibly sag. “She already hates me.”

“I’m sorry, Peanut.” In the hallway between spaces, I touch her shoulder briefly, feeling like a bastard for putting her in an uncomfortable position.

“It’s fine.” She turns to face me with a deep sigh.

“Should we view the painting?”

“No need. She won’t interfere if there’s a chance of a sale. And something tells me she knows you have deep pockets. Besides, I won’t be here much longer.”

“New job on the horizon?”

“Eventually.” She glances away distractedly. “I’m moving back to Scotland.”

*I said I’d be sorry if I broke her heart, but it looks like she’ll break mine first.*



## ISLA

“WHERE?” Niko shakes his head as though he’d misheard.

“Scotland,” I repeat. “I’m going home.”

I’m not sure what I was expecting as his hand glides past my hip. A twist of the handle and the door behind me opens, and he backs me inside.

“Niko!” I protest, laughing. The door closes behind him, and the room is plunged into darkness. I’m suddenly not laughing anymore.

“Say that again.” His voice sounds deeper for some reason, but I’m not afraid as he reaches for my hand.

“Why are we in the photocopying room?” My eyes adjust to the dim light as my heart batters against my ribs like a tiny bird trying to escape a cage.

“Obviously, I have a hankering for making multiple images of your ass,” his cool voice replies. “All the more now you’re moving to Scotland. But I meant the other. My name. Say it again.”

“If you heard, why are you asking me to repeat myself?” Pulling my hand from his, I grasp the thin ties of my blouse and pull on them, just for something to do.

“Please.” It’s not a word that seems well used by him. “Say it.”

“Niko,” I whisper, and he exhales a soft breath. “What are we doing in here?”

“Why are you moving back to Scotland?”



“I’ve had enough of living in London.” My shoulders lift and fall in a tight motion, and I swipe my fingers along the top of a row of boxes. “I’m tired of the rat race, the games men play, and I want to go home.”

“Peanut, I’m hurt,” he asserts, not sounding even a little bit wounded.

“Sorry. Obviously, I didn’t mean to lump you in with the rest of your useless brethren.” I roll my eyes, though I doubt he can see. “At least you’ve been straight with me.”

Still holding my hand, he rubs the other down his face. “So you’re returning to a drafty castle in the wilds of Scotland to heal your bruised heart.”

“I didn’t realize I lived in a gothic novel.” I pull my hand away. “Look, it’s fine. I want to go home. I’m not running off with my tail between my legs.”

“What about me?” Now he sounds wounded, which is just ridiculous. He folds his arms across his broad chest, and I have the oddest notion of telling him to lose the jacket. *And the shirt.*

“We had our moment. We agreed it couldn’t be anything...” Did we agree, or did I just go along with him? Because standing here in the dark doesn’t dampen my want of him—just the opposite. I find myself wondering if the naked need in his expression is reflected on my face.

“I’ll miss you.” One step brings him closer. Another will bring his thigh flush with mine. *Please.*

“We’ll probably see each other more then. I know you’ll visit Sandy up there.” The words are jagged. I don’t mean them to be. “We can all be friends.”

“But when you’re here, in the city, I know you’re watching the same clouds in the sky.”

“I didn’t know you could be poetic.”

“Sidestepping the same smack head.” He smiles a little, his voice still soft. “Avoiding being run over by the same black cab.”

“You’ve been holding out on me.”

“Darling, so, *so* much.” My breath halts when he reaches out and winds a lock of hair around his forefinger.

“Niko.” My voice shakes a touch on his name. “Please answer me. What are we doing here in the photocopying room?” Standing in the dark, aching to be touched.

“Because I want to look at you without anyone watching.” His hand moves to my shoulder, his fingers a soft trail down my arm. “Because I can’t wait any longer to kiss you. I don’t want to wait until I take you home.”

“I didn’t say I’d come home with you.”

“Isla,” he chides softly. “You’re better than that.” His fingers link with mine, and the next minute, I stumble into him, chest to chest. “What time do you get off?”

“You don’t want to do this.”

His hand curls around my hip as he whispers, “We could make it now.”

“What?” My brain connects the dots the minute the word is in the air between us.

“You could get off now.”

“Van, really.” With a weird laugh in the place of *yes, please*, I press my hand to his chest when he lifts it, pressing a kiss to my palm.

“Yes, really.” His eyes glitter in the dim light as he slides my middle finger into his mouth, the lick of his tongue resonating between my legs, flooding my mind with images of how he’d looked on his knees in the nightclub. His fingers inside me, his tongue pressing my clit. We said it’d never happen again—we agreed it was for the best.

“What would that achieve?”

“If you have to ask, perhaps I didn’t do it properly last time.”

“Stop.” I sort of giggle. “Stop fishing for compliments.”

“This is the compliment I want to pay you.” His hand rests over mine, sliding it southward. “Touch me, Isla. See what you’ve done to me.”

My pulse is a wild thing as I close my hand over the feel of him. “You’re so hard.” I bite my lip, my eyes lifting to his. “That sounded so porny, didn’t it?”

“We are in the right place for it.” He means the photocopier behind us.

I hadn’t imagined when I’d arrived at work this evening that it would turn out like this. That I’d see Niko again. That I’d *feel* Niko again. God, I’ve missed him. When we’d bumped into each other in the restaurant, I’d been almost embarrassed to admit I was on a date. Tamsin had set me up with Jack complaining that I’d lost my sense of fun, like it had slipped down the back of the sofa. And in the worst case of timing, there he was. The man I could look at but had agreed not to touch.

“Someone could come,” I whisper, my gaze not lifting from where I palm him.

His reply is a low rumble as he pitches forward, his mouth moving down my neck. “Not from a little over-the-pants action.”

“You know what I mean. Someone could come in. Someone could see.”

All at once, his hands seem to be everywhere as he palms my backside, lifting me against him. Pressing, rubbing, growling, he ignites such a need in me as he backs me into the wall. I try to hook my leg around him, but my skirt is too tight. It doesn’t matter because he rewards my enthusiasm anyway by cupping my breast in big hand. My body bows as his thumb skims across my nipple in a shiver inducing caress.

“Someone *should* come.” His lips touch my ear, his voice dark and soft before he makes a hot, wet trail down my neck. “That someone should be you.”

My whimper sounds like an agreement. He makes quick work of the tiny buttons of my blouse, sliding the fabric from my

shoulder, taking the stretchy camisole with it. One shoulder, then the other, down my arms until it pools at my waist.

“I dream of sliding my cock here.” He presses his teeth to the curve of my breast, his finger sliding down my cleavage. “Seeing your skin covered in pearly strings.” Everything inside me contracts at the picture he paints. “I’d rub myself there until I became hard again when I slide my cock into your mouth.”

“I think... I think I’d like that.” There probably isn’t much in my imagination I wouldn’t let him do. *And like.*

He laughs a low, carnal sound. “Beautiful, filthy girl.”

His body is an elegant arc as he bends to suck my nipple into his mouth. When he blows lightly over the damp peak, my moan reverberates around the room. I slide my hands into his hair when he gives a reproving click of his teeth and tongue. Taking my wrists, he presses them against the wall.

“No cage. No cuffs,” he whispers, pressing them above my head with a squeeze, an unspoken order. *Don’t move.* “Be a good girl.”

His mouth brushes mine, once, twice, my body pulsing, blood turning molten in my veins. Being touched in the dark, my pleasure commanded, just heightens everything for me. It makes me feel like I might burst from the slightest touch. But Niko’s next touch is not so gentle as he drags my tight skirt up my legs, higher and higher until it meets my blouse, bunched around my waist.

“Pretty,” he whispers, his gaze trained between my legs. My pussy *aches* as he presses his finger to the top of my underwear. Down it trails, over the gossamer fabric, skirting past the place I pulse for him, sliding over the tops of my lacy holdup stockings. “I wonder...” His words tail off as he traces an absent circle against my bare thigh.

“Yes?”

His eyes lift to mine, cool blue shining with intensity the second before his full hand cups me. “I wonder how wet you

are.” I moan as he grips me, my sounds amplified when his thumb slides down my slit.

“Niko, please,” I whimper as he presses and pets over the thin lace of my underwear.

“I like it when you beg.”

I’m all soft want and aching gasps. His touch is so deft, but I need more. *And he knows it.*

“Tell me, darling. What can I do for you?”

“I need you. Touch me, please.”

His eyes never leave my face as he hooks my underwear to the side, pushing his thumb between my folds. I gasp, but my relief is short-lived as he lifts it to paint a wet trail across my lips. He kisses me then, plundering my mouth. My hands pressed by my head, my body arches from the wall as he thrusts two fingers inside me. This is no tentative swipe or gentle press, his fingers driving inside me again and again.

“You look so beautiful riding my hand.”

Pleasure spirals through me as he thrusts his tongue into my mouth. Pinned by him at both ends, he owns my body, owns my pleasure, forcing it from me in pulsing waves. I’m so lost to the moment, wound so tight, I don’t immediately realize his fingers aren’t inside me when he drops to his heels, pulling my underwear with him.

“Show me,” he demands. He tap the inside of my right thigh in further instruction. Heat and mortification washes through me. It feels so wrong as I step wider. The kind of wrong I crave with him.

His low groan dissolves any conflict I feel, my whole body shaking with need as he slips both thumbs inside me, exposing me to his view.

“You’re *so* wet, my darling.” The compliment sounds as though dragged over gravel, his eyes fixed on where I’m spread. *Like he can’t get enough of me.* “But we can do better, can’t we?”

“Niko,” I whimper, canting my hips.

“Be a good girl. Use your words.” His breath coasts over my clit before he presses a light kiss there, whispering how pretty my pussy pulses for him.

“You’re the worst,” I whisper, swallowing down a much worse insult.

“Yes.” His attention lifts, his gaze glittering in the dim light. “And I’m going to ruin you.”

One swipe of his tongue against my clit and my body bows from the wall. *A slow circle. A light flick.* He groans the words to the very center of me.

I writhe and moan as Niko licks and sucks, using his lips, his teeth, and his tongue to absolutely devour me.

“You’re so fucking soft, so sweet. I want to eat you up.”

“*Oh God!*” I cry out, “*Yes.*”

“Until only sighs and bones remain.”

As he makes good on his words, I drop my hands from the wall, wrapping my fingers in his luxurious hair, I absolutely use his face to get myself off. But that’s not really true, not at his tongue works me, not as his fingers thrust—two then three, spreading me wide.

I don’t mean to come, but I can’t fight this sweet, urgent agony. My fingers tighten, the world behind my eyelids turning white, my body filled with heat and light and electricity.

*Oh God.*

I sag back against the cold wall, and shiver at the last tender brush of Nikos’s tongue. I glance down as he begins to pull my skirt back in place. I suppose I should be shocked. Embarrassed. Something. But I don’t seem to reach that place.

“Stay with me,” he whispers, sliding his hands around me. As he tips his head back, his lips and chin shine in the dim light.

“We said we couldn’t.” *You said you wouldn’t.* Despite my denials, the temptation is so great.

“You’re leaving.” His arms tighten. “Leaving me.”

I never had you I want to complain, until he says,

“Peanut, leave me with a parting gift. Spend the weekend with me.”

Silly girl, I do.





## VAN

### *THE MIDDLE - PRESENT*

She didn't come to me during the night. For the first time, she'd stayed true to her word. As Hugh's birthday candles were lit, it was hard not to notice her agitation and her fidgeting fingers. As congratulations were cheered, she'd looked pained and chewed her inside lip. But she'd rallied, pasting on a smile as she'd hugged her sons and fussed around others. She even dared to look my way once or twice, in a friendly sort of way.

Meanwhile, I'd watched her as though I might see what was going on in her head. Watched as though I could crawl into her chest to wrap myself around her heart.

It's a rare moment for me to see Isla in her family element. I liked it. *No, I fucking loved it.* I like to watch her at the best of times, but these moments are new. It's rare for me to be around children. I'd found myself pleasantly surprised to have enjoyed the day I'd spent with her sons. Nurture had obviously trumped nature because the pair seem to bear no resemblance to their father.

Both boys are fiercely loyal to each other, much like the relationship between their mother and uncle. You don't need to have siblings to understand the rarity. Hugh, the birthday boy, overflowed with joy the whole day. It was impossible not to delight in his happiness. The younger, Archie, while not as enthralled by his surroundings or by soccer, never once

expressed anything but encouragement in his brother's birthday outing. I found both boys to be open natured, kind, and bold. It was hard not to see their mother in them.

After cake and champagne and toasting, Isla disappeared, ostensibly to supervise the boy's bedtimes. She didn't surface again.

At five this morning, she'd arrived in the main hall, her abundant hair pulled into a neat chignon, she's appeared at the top of the grand staircase in dark red heeled pumps and a wrap dress. Feminine but formidable, her outfit said: look but don't touch.

Was the message for me?

We'd barely spoken on the drive to the airport and now time is running out, because the flight a short one—just ninety minutes. A period she seems content to keep her face from me as the plane's engines drone.

"Where did you say your meeting was?" The sun, so much brighter above the clouds, shades her hair a honeyed gold. She's wearing more makeup than usual, but the light betrays the dark shadows she's tried hard to conceal.

"Thank you." Isla smiles up at Melanie, the flight's purser, as she accepts a glass of orange juice. "I didn't," she then answers without even glancing my way.

"We'll be landing in London City Airport. My car will be waiting. Where would you like me to drop you?"

"Oh." She angles her head my way, seeming to decide something. Is it to be subterfuge or an outright lie, I wonder? "That would be wonderful, thank you. Where are you heading this morning?"

"Home first. Want to come?"

"No thank you," she answers primly in response to my innuendo filled drawl. Childish, but some habits are hard to curb. "If it's not too much problem, you could drop me off somewhere on the way."

"Tell me where you're going, and I'll take you straight there."

“No need.” Her gaze dips to the orange juice momentarily. “I wouldn’t like to inconvenience you. The traffic—”

“It’s Sunday. The traffic won’t be so bad.”

She pauses but can do nothing but acquiesce. “All right, then. The Cadogan, please.” I’m certain she just plucked the name of the hotel out of her head. It’s not where she’s going. I’m as sure of that as anything as I watch her attention return to the window and the clouds.

“Are you in town for the night?”

“No.” Her attention is fleeting. “I’ve booked a late afternoon flight back.” She crosses her legs, her wrap dress parting and offering more thigh than she realizes.

“Time to do a little shopping after your meeting?”

She shrugs, neither a yes nor a no.

“Why didn’t you come back downstairs last night?”

“I was tired,” she retorts as though ending that line of conversation.

“Nothing to do with avoiding the continuation of *our* conversation?”

“There was nothing else to talk about.”

“We could be so good together, Isla.”

“That’s not going to happen, Van.”

“Ah.” I shake my head. She uses my name like a knife.

“I don’t deny I have feelings for you,” she says, sliding her dress over her thighs. “I dare say I’ll have them for the rest of my life.”

“Why can’t you let me make you happy?”

She shakes her head. “I tried that once. I ended up feeling... the opposite.”

“I wish I could turn back the clock, but I can’t. What I can do is make it up to you, if you’ll let me.”

“What’s done is done. I fell in love with you when you told me not to. But love makes fools of us in the end.”

“Always?”

“The only love that matters is the kind that makes a person selfless. Love is family, and nothing else.”

I don’t argue with her, because how typically Isla. I can’t deny she’s right. To her love is service. It’s sacrifice. She doesn’t know how I’d suffered for her. What I’d sacrificed in her name—in the promise that she would be mine when the right time came.

“Love is doing the right thing,” she adds quietly.

And there we disagree. The right thing isn’t always the answer. Being moral and upright won’t always get you what you need. And what I need is her. On her knees in front of me. On my arm. In my bed. I need her as part of my life, now and forever. Mine irrevocably, safe from harm.

“Always the good girl.” My quiet taunt brings me her flashing gaze, but no glance of hurt. Another for her alphabet. P for praise. She does so love to be good. Almost as much as she loves to deny me.



## ISLA

### *THE BEGINNING – FIFTEEN YEARS AGO*

“Fallen in love with me yet?”

“Of course,” Niko murmurs without lifting his head from his laptop. “My heart grieves when you’re not here.”

“Liar,” I retort, pressing a kiss to his head. Throwing my purse and my lunch tote to the sofa, I bend to slip my shoes from my work-tired feet.

“Hard day at the office, dear?”

“Boring. Want to go out tonight?”

Through the darkened window, I watch his fingers still over the keyboard as my mouth runs on. “I noticed there’s a cute new Italian place opened on the corner. We could walk there and—”

“I’m not in the mood for pasta,” he answers before I can finish.

“Okay.” I keep my answer even despite a swell of frustration, dropping to sit on the arm of the sofa. “How about a few cocktails at The Ned?”

“It’s been a hell of a week.” He glances over his shoulder, sending me a tired smile. “I’d rather stay home.”

Home.

Home isn't Scotland, where I'd intended to go before that fateful weekend. And it's not the huge house Niko owns in Kensington. It's not even the flat I still pay my share of rent and bills, though I've been there only twice in two months to collect mail and a few clothes. Since the evening Niko made me come so hard in the photocopying room I saw stars, since I promised him the weekend, I've slept here, in his bed, every night.

I'm not living with him, because that would suggest some form of permanence. No promises have been made. I'm still moving to Scotland, I lie when he wants me to, I just haven't made it as far as the train station yet.

So home right now is a penthouse apartment overlooking the Parliament building and the River Thames. The apartment is gorgeous and very private and is situated in the kind of building you'll never accidentally meet a neighbor, never mind hear one.

I'd thought the whole cloak-and-dagger thing was a way of protecting Sandy. The pair's business is up and running, so he tells me. Sleeping with his business partner's sister might make things messy. That's what I'd initially reasoned. Looking back now, I know I've been fooling myself.

I glance up and find Niko studying me through the dark window, his expression full of longing. When his gaze drops to his keyboard, I ask myself for the thousandth time if I'm deluding myself. If he wanted me, he need only turn and crook his finger and I'd throw myself at him. If he wanted me, truly wanted me, he'd find a way of breaking the news to my brother.

"Was Sergei his usual effusive self on the drive home?" He doesn't lift his head, continuing to hammer away on his laptop.

"So so chatty," I lie. "I had to ask him to be quiet." Another new development. I get a lift to and from work every day, whether I want it or not. I mostly don't. "Sergei loathes me," I add with a shoulder sagging sigh.

"Sergei loathes everyone. It's how he shows his respect."

“He must respect the hell out of me,” I mutter.

“How about Korean for dinner.”

“Yeah, whatever,” I reply, pulling the hair tie from my ponytail. Dinner together. Alone. Again. Yet somehow, we become more like strangers with each passing minute.

I’m going to give my notice at work next week.

I want to say the words. Break the news. Tell him. But can’t quite manage.

*Because I don’t want to go.*

I want to be here. I want the Niko I only see in sideways glances these days. The man who strokes my hair when he thinks I’m sleeping, who whispers his pained feelings in languages I can’t understand. The man who holds me so tight when we make love, yet feels so very far away

*I’ll be sorry if I break your heart, he’d said.*

*You’ll be even sorrier if I break yours first.*

There are no winners in this game. I know he’s fallen for me, and I know that he hates that he has. But where he once looked at me with fondness, he now watches me with the kind of intensity that makes me wonder if he’s worried I might vanish.

He won’t make love to me in the light anymore, not without blindfolding me or turning me on my stomach. But when the night comes, and he whispers my name in the dark, I can only turn to him. Give myself over. Listen for the sound of his anguish over the cries of my pleasure. And wonder what’s going to happen.

Pushing my weary body up from the sofa arm, I stretch my hands over my head. “I meant to say, expect a call from Sabine next week. Another Bracquemond is coming in.”

“Will you fuck me in the photocopying room again?” The smirk in his voice turns my blood cold.

“Why not,” I find myself muttering, “it’s dark enough in there for you.”



“What did you say?” My insides flutter as he slowly turns, fixing me with a look of such intensity.

“I’m going to take a shower.” I take a step in that direction when his words freeze me in place.

“It isn’t about you, Isla. You understand that, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t.”

“I don’t want to share you. I want you too much.” He shakes his head. It’s neither an explanation nor an apology. Not even if I squint. His possession is too intense—too much taking of me without the giving of him in return.

“Whatever. It doesn’t change the fact that it’s the only way you’ll fuck me these days. And this place is beginning to feel like a prison.”

I half turn but halt as he stands, a flicker of something heating my veins as he begins to loosen the buttons of his shirt.

“What are you doing?”

“The shower. I thought you might like a little company.” He stalks toward me, pulling the cotton loose from his pants. Stripping it off, he drops it to the floor as he comes to a stop in front of me. “Have you fallen out of love with me yet?” There’s a vulnerability to his voice as his thumb skims my cheek. “You know I’m no good for you.”

I press my hands to his waistband, sliding his belt from the buckle. “Got to fall in love before you fall out,” I retort, whispering the lie of my life.

I’m not slave to these four walls, I silently acknowledge as I take his thick cock in my hand. I’m a slave to him. A little Russian doll, every moment we share together stored within my thin wooden walls.



## ISLA

### *THE MIDDLE - PRESENT*

I take a deep breath as Van's chauffer driven BMW pulls out into the morning traffic. *One ordeal down, another more frightening one to follow.* I can't believe I thought it would be a good idea to travel with Van today. In such close confines, enveloped by such buttery, leather luxury, the opportunity to join the mile high club was just a whispered suggestion away. It took every ounce of my concentration not to fidget because he's the one person who'd notice my state of nervousness.

I almost suggested it. Well, I *thought* about suggesting it, which isn't quite the same, because he was watching me like he could see into my head. For a moment, it had seemed like a suitable distraction. Something I could own before disappearing into the abyss.

*Ridiculous notion.*

*Ridiculous woman.*

Not that the silent admonishment stops me shivering as I pull the sides of my coat closer and turn in the opposite direction of The Cadogan Hotel. I am meeting members of the criminal underworld in a hotel, just not this one. Turning the corner, I'm blasted by an almost arctic wind as I step up to the curb and hail a London black cab.

"The Ritz, please," I direct the cabby, clicking the seat belt into place.

I suppose if I'm going to be sold into slavery, at least my last breakfast will be in style.

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It's fine. I'm fine. I'm not sitting in some Docklands warehouse waiting to be shoved into a shipping container to God knows where. Instead, I'm soaking in the rosy ambience of one of the most opulent restaurants in the world. While I can't physically stomach the thought of a final meal, this would be the place I'd dine pre-gallows.

My grandmother used to bring me here as a child for our London outings. She'd be decked in pearls and diamonds, the legacy that was mine but somehow never came to me, and I'd be dressed like Mary from *The Secret Garden*, gussied up in a velvet frock, my socks pearly white and my Mary Janes polished and shiny. I didn't care that I looked like I'd just fallen out of the Victorian era. I would've worn a clown outfit to get a grown-up to pay attention to me.

But here I sit again, all dressed up, pretending to be someone I'm not, sipping Darjeeling from dainty cup as I turn a freshly baked croissant into pile of flaky crumbs.

*Lord, please help me through this*, I silently plead, tipping my gaze heavenward, as though He might be looking down at me from beyond the frescoed ceiling. But I didn't just choose this place out of fondness for the décor or for the sake of history. It's more the fact that I can't imagine anyone daring to speak above a murmur in this hallowed hall, never mind drag me kicking and screaming from here.

I glance around the restaurant that is a monument to fine dining and all that's proper. Conversations carrying on around me at a volume scarcely above a hum, the white gloved staff are unobtrusively sure footed amongst a sea of crisp linens, fine bone China, and shining silverware. My gaze snags on a man seated at the table opposite as he absently adjusts his tie. They might turn up in trackpants and running shoes, covered

in tattoos, and draped in heavy gold chains, unaware of the dress code where gentlemen must wear a jacket and a tie.

They'd be turned away! And I'd live to fight another day!

Not that it would make the problem go away. But why do today what you can put off until you move home from the outer regions of Papua New Guinea at the ripe old age of ninety-three? *I wonder what the schooling is like in Micronesia.*

"Lady Isla." I almost jump three feet at the sound of a deep voice. In some other less strange realm, I might've thought he were Niko. *English undercut with the hint of something other.* But I'm not so lucky as a man around my age takes my hand, almost bowing over it. Dark haired and elegantly dressed, he's on the quiet side of good looking and dressed like a banker or perhaps a CEO of some company.

*Perhaps he is. CEO of a criminal concern.*

"Forgive my tardiness." He pauses, waiting, I realize, for an invitation to sit.

No, go away—

"Please." I gesture to the seat opposite, noting the breadth of his shoulders in the Edwardian mirror behind him. His suit is well made but off the rack. Hugo Boss or Armani, but not bespoke. But the thing on his wrist is less timepiece and more statement piece. *A gold Patek Phillippe.*

"Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today."

"I didn't realize I had a choice." My response sounds sharper than I'd intended. "I'd like to think my ex-husband has told you I have no money. That I have nothing to do with his business, or—"

The man holds up his hands. "I'm aware." His eyes crease in the outer corners, dark eyes shining pleasantly but lingering too long, like a handshake where the other person won't let go.

"Then I'm not sure why we're here, Mr. ..."

Go on, fill in the blanks for me.

"Aslanov. But, please, call me Anatoli."

“I’m not sure why we’re here, Mr. Aslanov.”

“Just Anatoli.” He smiles as though I’m adorable, rather than annoyed, and the server arrives to take his order.

“Your brother,” he begins as the server departs.

“No. I won’t involve him in whatever this is.”

“For the right reason, I think a man such as he would want to know. Want to be involved.”

“Involved in what exactly?” I place my hands on the table, clasping them together in front of me. “What is it you want?”

“This is... a business meeting, brought about because your husband—”

“*Ex*-husband,” I correct, drawing a definitive line between me and that weasel. Where once the line was perforated, now it’s severed.

“Your ex-husband owes me a great deal of money, which has placed you in an unenviable situation.”

“Which I really don’t understand at all. What makes you think I’m interested in his troubles? That, even if I had the means, I’d be willing to pay his debts?”

“Because you are like the good Samaritan. You will do what you can to help who you can.” A smile catches in the corner of his mouth, but it’s chased away a second later. “Because you will do what you must to protect your family.”

My heart does a painful jig in my chest, but I force myself to paint on a bland smile. “That sounded like a threat, Mr. Aslanov.”

I physically start, when he answers.

“Then we understand each other.”

This is a needle scratch on a vinyl record, a sign that we’re not playing nice, if we ever were. I don’t know what to say, my tongue suddenly thick in my mouth. My heart is galloping like the hooves of a runaway horse, which is apt, because it takes every ounce of my resolve to stay seated in my chair.

Coffee arrives, an espresso for him and a latte I didn't ask for is placed in front of me. I resolve not to touch it, not trusting anything right now. Besides, it wouldn't stay in my stomach, anyway.

"You drink lattes." His eyes meet mine over the top of his tiny cup.

"Not this morning I don't," I murmur, trying hard to hide my fear.

"Then I will, as they say, cut to the chase. You don't want your ex-husband to die, and quite frankly, neither do I. A dead person can never repay a debt. Instead, his family must."

"I'm not his family."

"You bore him sons. They are your family. Your shared family. You don't want to see them grieving, do you?"

"Of course not, but—"

"Then you have a choice."

I huff out an unhappy laugh. "If I had a choice, I think I'd find myself anywhere but here, Mr. Aslanov."

He makes a gesture; open handed, a sort of *what can I do*.

"Then let's discuss these choices."

"I have certain... business interests that I require some assistance at a governmental level."

"I don't know anything about government."

"But your brother sits in the House of Lords. He has contacts."

"We're not discussing my brother," I answer, my spine stiffening. "He's far too upstanding to involve himself in anything untoward."

"Your brother is not as upstanding as you think, Lady Isla."

"I don't know what you mean by that," I bristle. "And I don't want to know."

He makes a sound; a click of teeth and tongue as though I'm a child who requires gentle chastisement. "A peer of the realm

with powerful friends? The truth is, he is beyond my touch, but you could persuade him.”

“No,” I answer brusquely. “What are these other choices?”

“This is my preferred choice.”

“But not mine.”

“Then you are about to become very disappointed, I think.”

The server materializes like a genie from a bottle, and my companion is served his breakfast. Yellow, fluffy scrambled egg with Scottish smoked salmon, topped with black pepper and truffle shavings. The smell of it makes me feel ill, but there’s more to bear as a dainty rack of toast is set on the table, along with a silver cake stand containing several levels of continental breakfast. Cheeses, salami, ham. And to follow, a basket of miniature pastries.

Worse than the smell is the thought of who’s paying for all of this.

The black tailed server tops up my water glass and retreats.

“You’re not eating?”

My face contorts in some semblance of a smile. “No, thank you. Blackmail always spoils my appetite.”

A fork balanced in one hand, he waggles the forefinger of his other as though I’d just told a terrible joke. The tines of the fork disappear into his mouth. He chews, swallows, then dabs the corners of his mouth with his napkin. All while staring at me. “I think you’ll involve your brother.”

“And I know I won’t.”

“One way or another,” he murmurs as though I haven’t spoken. Setting his silverware down, he leans to his left. “But we can discuss other avenues. Your business, for instance.”

I become as still as a piece of statuary. “It produces barely enough profit to cover my mortgage. I hold very little stock, and—”

“There are other ways to monetize online businesses.”



“Criminal ways, you mean?” I could almost bite off the end of my tongue. What else would he be talking about! “It’s a small concern. I have only three parttime employees and—”

“We could increase your orders one hundredfold. Increase your orders, increase your success. This would in turn lead to you requiring more raw materials.”

“My raw materials are sourced locally. Highland wool and sheepskin—”

“You would need to outsource. Buy sheepskin from China, for instance.”

“I don’t understand. There are more sheep than people in Scotland.”

“You would receive shipments of Chinese wool to help with the influx of orders.”

Then the penny drops like a lead weight. “Along with other imports, I assume you mean.”

“One arm of my business deals with imports.” He adjusts the cuff of his shirt, his words matter-of-fact.

“Drugs?”

“Sometimes drugs, sometimes people. Sometimes other things.”

Oh, my God. He’s serious.

“Another of my businesses deals in exports.”

“You want to take over my business to help you import—”

“No, the business will be yours. In your name.”

“Therefore, the risk would be mine?”

“You assume there would be a risk. You assume this is what I would do. But I think this is too distasteful for you.”

“Just a bit.” I blink heavily. Meanwhile, he barely does so.

“A lady of your reputation, your standing. I understand.”

“If not my brother, if not importing illegal items, what else is there?” What am I bargaining with here?

“My friend... Michael,” he says, seemingly picking the name out of the air. “Mikheil, he buys a tweed jacket from you. The price is a little higher than was advertised last season but that’s inflation,” he adds with a theatrical shrug. “He pays for the jacket and recommends it to his friends, who all buy the same. They all pay by credit card, your website host receives their fee, the online payment platform, their cut also. Then you receive the balance into your bank account. You send the jackets, or not—”

That noise. I think it was my jaw hitting the table.

“You’re talking about money laundering,” I whisper, horrified.

“And you are not just a pretty face!” He jabs the air like I’m a child who just recited a clever ditty, then picks up his fork again.

“But surely, my *very* small business won’t be enough. If the business grows too fast, it’ll draw the attention of the authorities.”

“You might be the face of any number of businesses, their bank accounts wreathed in a web of protection. Bank accounts owned by shell companies registered offshore. Mysterious trusts you co own with persons living elsewhere.”

“So I’d be a front? Isn’t that what it’s called? A patsy?”

His fork drops to his plate and he bursts into the kind of laughter that’s far too much for this restaurant. “He did not tell me you were so amusing.”

“Tom?” I ask, horrified a measure more. To think I’ve been discussed, offered up like some fatted calf. I will kill him. I will literally murder the man! I’ll run the bastard over with my stupidly old Range Rover!

“He did not tell me you were beautiful, either.”

“I—” Bloody hell. The way he’s looking at me is unpleasant. I don’t like it. I don’t like it at all.

“So.” He picks up his fork and sets to his smoked salmon and eggs again. “You will open other businesses on my behalf. Lady Isla, upstanding business owner, doer of charitable

works, member of the aristocracy. You will be beyond reproach.”

“You’d be in the minority to think so. In days gone by, people might’ve respected those who were seen as their elders or betters, but those days are long gone.” Good riddance too, I say.

He gives an unconcerned flick of his shoulder and reaches for his cup. “The National Crime Agency is woefully underfunded and very wary of litigation. Especially when it would involve someone of your background. So this will work in your favor.”

“How sure can you be of that?” Desperation leaks from my reply. “I’d think it would put a target on my back.”

“Who would they be more resistant to investigate, me or you?”

“My title won’t protect me,” I add quickly. “I know it won’t. But I suppose you don’t care about that.”

“It would be a shame to expose one as lovely as you to the criminal elements.”

“Like you, you mean.”

“Like a prison cellmate. Ah, I can see I have upset you. Don’t worry, *my lady*. This will never happen. The NCA would not think twice but a dozen times before investigating the sister of the Duke of Dalforth.”

“So that’s it.” I slump backward in my chair, my mind filled with a million things. “That’s what I have to do to keep my family safe?”

“And your ex-husband alive.”

I shake my head. Him I’ll kill myself. “For how long? How much money, or however these arrangements work.”

“Indefinitely.”

“No, that can’t be right. That would be like some version of indentured servitude. I get to live forever under the threat of violence or criminal investigation, meanwhile, Tom gets off scot-free?”

He folds his arms before bringing a finger to his lips, tapping it pensively. “No, he forfeits the land, the project.”

“I don’t care what happens to him.” My words are urgent, my tone beseeching. “This is not fair. I won’t do this for him.”

“You are right. This will not do.” A tentative relief floods my system. At least, until I notice the expression he’s wearing. “There are other ways,” he begins carefully. “Ways we might find mutually beneficial.”

“I’m not sure I understand.” My brain doesn’t. My skin, however, feels like it might peel away from my skeleton and slither away because he’s back to looking at me *that* way. Anatoli Aslanov is far from repulsive. He’s well dressed and not bad looking. Intelligent and mostly polite. He’s also frightening and what he’s suggesting makes him repulsive—makes him about as appealing as a bout of dysentery and tetanus at the same time.

“You’re being coy,” he remonstrates playfully.

“No, excuse me, but I think perhaps I’m being a little dense because you can’t be suggesting what I think you’re suggesting,” I say as my heart gives a manic flutter. “I don’t even know you. I don’t—” A horrible thought hits and my mouth runs away with itself. “Is this where I get trafficked? Forced into some backstreet brothel, touted as posh—?”

Laughter leaves his eyes like a light going out. “I don’t like to be made fun of.”

“W-Who’s laughing?” I stutter. My stomach twists, my hands on my lap along with it. “He is my ex-husband. I owe him nothing. I have no love for him and very little respect. In fact, I have no respect for him at all.” Not after this. “You must have exes? Mr. Aslanov, you know how these things work.” I’m not doing this—I’m not! I’ll beg, borrow, and steal if I have to. Tom will have to leave, start afresh in some other country. Somewhere cheap and hot, with mosquitos the size of —

“My exes cause me no problems,” he answers darkly.

“A b-business arrangement is one thing,” I stutter, “but another kind of arrangement is beyond my realms of comprehension.”

“I know you understand,” he says, reaching across the table to pat my hand.

“But... but I might be terrible in bed!”

“I don’t think so.” His eyes are acquisitive as they rake over me. As I make to pull away my hand, his fingers fasten around my wrist. “You can open your legs. Your mouth. It’s enough.”

“No, it’s too much,” I say, stiff jawed with repulsion.

“I think you’ll find you have little choice.” With his free hand, he reaches for the newspaper and, without unfolding it, he places it over the gold rimmed tea plate in front of me. “You will do what needs to be done to protect your family.”

“How many times do I have to say this?” I glance down at the headline. For a split second, it doesn’t compute as my brain works to protect itself. “Tom is not my family.”

Even as I protest, my brain is trying to protect me from this new reality.

This has nothing to do with Tom. Not anymore. But one thing is clear. My life will never be the same again.



## ISLA

“HELLO, HOLLAND?” I hold my phone so hard my fingers ache. This is my fourth attempt at making this call, all the ones before ending in tears. Inhaling, I pull the phone from my mouth as I blow out a long, slow breath.

“Hey, Isla! That was fast. You need picking up from the airport already?”

“Oh. No. Not yet.” Maybe not ever.

*Steady now. Don't cry. Keep it together.*

Today has been a day of revelations. You might say I've learned a few things. Like how I can withstand more terror than I ever thought was previously possible. That the staff at The Ritz don't bat an eyelid as you sprint through the space with panicked eyes and jagged breaths. Also, Darjeeling tastes much more bitter coming up than it does going down.

“Hey, you still there?”

“Yes—yes, I'm here. And no, I don't need a lift yet. I'm still in London.” Still in The Ritz, though no longer in the restaurant. My potential pimp-cum-boyfriend-cum- whatever the hell he was offering me has left. At least, according to the intel of the next person to wander into the lady's bathroom. I actually asked a matron in a pink suit to go and check, after describing to her where he was seated and what he looked like. The poor old dear thought he was an abusive boyfriend and asked me if I wanted to borrow her phone to call the police. I almost said yes. But the newspaper burning in my purse says I don't really have that option.

“My flight isn’t due back until six,” I add, hiking my purse higher on my shoulder as though the headline weighs a ton. Flights aren’t exactly hourly from London to the Highlands, but I hope I’ll be able to get a seat on a later flight, probably one stuffed full of business types, travelling home to escape the heathen city of London. I can’t wait to escape myself—I want to go home immediately. Hug my boys tight and never let them out of my sight ever again. But I don’t have that luxury. I can’t take this trouble home.

“How did your meeting go?” Holland’s question brings me back to the moment again.

“It went,” I sort of warble, fighting the inevitable flow of tears. It went badly. Tits up. It went... fucking awful.

“Well, don’t worry. I’ll hold down the fort. In fact, I promised the boys ice cream after school.”

“Is it sunny up there?” I can’t even remember what the weather was like this morning. It all seems so long ago.

“If it had to be sunny to eat ice cream in Scotland, the dairy industry would go bust.”

“Point taken. Is Sandy there, by any chance?” The newly grown fist around my heart squeezes as I say his name.

*Oh, Sandy. What have you done?*

I could go to him. Ask him to tell me the truth—hear it from his own mouth. And maybe he’d admit it. Maybe he’d tell me it’s true. Because I wouldn’t need him to tell me why. We’ve always done what we could to help the other, to protect each other. But never in a million years would I have thought him capable of this. So I could ask him, but then what? It wouldn’t help this situation. It would only make it worse because he’d do something rash again, all in the name of protecting those he loves.

Holland. Me. Archie and Hugh. And the Dalforth name, of course.

I won’t let that happen. This is my turn to defend him.

“Isla? You still there? Man, the signal in this place is the pits!”



“Sorry.” I snap back to myself. “I think it’s the signal here. But what did you just say?”

“You just missed Sandy. He’s gone off to do something lord of the manor-ish. I forget what, but he has his phone if you want to talk to him.”

“Actually, I was wondering if you could do me a favor?”

“Sure,” she replies as I knew she would. “Shoot.”

“Is there any chance you could get Van’s phone number for me?”

“Don’t you have it already?” She doesn’t bother to hide her surprise.

“No.” I shake my head, not for her benefit but possibly because I know I shouldn’t involve him. Not after my declaration this morning. Not after everything I’d promised myself. But also, as Chrissy’s mother was fond of saying, *he who sups with the devil should be sure take a long spoon*. Not that Van is the devil. Not exactly. He’s not my favorite person in the world. *My favorite fuck, yes*. He’s secretive. Dangerous, probably. And I don’t just mean to my heart. And I think that’s why I need his help. I can’t see another way out of this and I have nowhere to turn, so what’s one more U-turn for the tally? One more moment I can’t help myself?

“Isla? Hell, the signal has gone again,” Holland mutters.

“Hey. Hello. I’m still here. And no, I don’t have his number, sort of intentionally.” I exhale another wobbling breath.

“Right.” She draws out the word, her amusement ringing clear. “I get it. But it’s not like removing *that* temptation has helped, if you know what I’m sayin’.”

“No,” I agree quietly. Number or not, the temptation rarely abates.

“For what it’s worth, you can’t fight fate. Not that you need my permission or anything.”

“But I do sort of need his number.”

“Mission accepted. I’ll go find *m’lord*,” she adds, sounding a little like the butler from *Downton Abbey*.

“Holly?” I say as her footsteps begin to echo against the stone floor. “Do you think you might be able to get Van’s number without telling him? Sandy, I mean.”

“Oh, right!” Her answer sounds like a slap to her own head. “Your brother doesn’t need to hear about your quest for a little afternoon *de-light*.”

“Exactly.” Better that’s what she thinks this is for. And why wouldn’t she think that?

“The only question is, how do I get my darling husband to hand over his phone?”

“The butler will have it. But if you could somehow ask him not to mention it to his boss?”

“Leave it to me. That man doesn’t know how to take me at the best of times. I’ll just embarrass it out of him.”

“Fab. Excellent. But if you could, please hurry.”

“Okay,” she says, laughing, not doubt surmising I want to maximize my afternoon hours of *de-light*. She promises she won’t be long, and we hang up. When my phone buzzes a moment later, I wonder how she’s managed so quickly. The screen lights as I touch it and the fist around my heart squeezes so tight, the muscle ends up in my throat as a video of Archie and Hugh fills the screen. They’re in the castle’s courtyard, dressed in their school uniforms, school ties straight and shirttails tucked away. Holland is hustling them into Sandy’s pristine Range Rover as though they’re late. I almost smile—Archie would make a saint late for his own canonization—before I realize Holland didn’t shoot this. Not when she’s in it. Maybe Sandy did? Yes, that could be—

My phone buzzes again. Another video clip. It might seem like overkill if I was in the mood for being flippant. But I’m not. Not as I watch Holland stroll through one of the country lanes behind the castle, dressed hunter green wellies and a waxed jacket. She even has a Sandy’s tweed cap on. Gertie plods alongside her providing companionship but absolutely no

protection at all. Somehow, this clip is the scarier. The boys had the protection of the car, the protection of Holland. But here, Holland is alone. She might be hit by a car, or bundled into the back of one, and we'd know nothing about what happened to her.

A sob of terror catches against the back of my throat.

Their message is clear, the threat not at all implied. We have access to your family in more ways than one, and there's nothing you can do about it.

Another buzz, this one a text. And suddenly, I have a timeline, and the sword of Damocles is hanging over my head.

**You have 48 hours to answer, Lady Isla.**

---

“Niko?” I try to keep the warble out of my tone, just as I had with Holland, but maybe Niko knows me better. Maybe he even knows me better than anyone.

“Isla, what is it?” His tone, his immediate concern, causes my tears to well. “Are you all right? Is it the children?”

“I'm fine. The boys, too.” For now. “Niko, I need to see you.”

“Tell me where you are.”

“No, I ... I can come to you.”

“Isla, are you sure you all right?”

“Yes, I'm fine.” Or at least I'm hanging on, hoping I will be.

“I just need—” You. I don't know why you, but I feel it in my bones that no one else will do.

“Come now.”

“Where?”

“The same place as before. You remember it?”

“Yes.” Because how could I ever forget?

---

I tumble from a cab that stops almost at his front door, but for an expensive and sleek looking sports car that is *not* an Aston Martin. Van opens the imposing front door before I have a chance to ring the bell, his hands wrapping around my bicep as though he fears for my ability to stay on my feet.

The hallway darkens a little as he closes the door behind him. The place looks exactly as I remember it, the bones of the place, at least. How many times have I replayed standing here? The elevator ride up to his lair.

“This way.” Niko turns to an oversized door to the left.

“I didn’t think you’d still be living here.” Th words sort of fall out of my mouth. I know it sounds silly given my family background of castles and vast and draughty country homes, but these days, no one chooses to live in a palace. My brother views his property portfolio as a piece of history he was born to protect, but the truth is, the properties and grounds are like great millstones hanging from his neck. Why would one man choose to live in a house this size? Who has the money? *Royalty, obviously. The Chinese uber wealthy and Russian oligarchs.* “All this space just for you?” I hate myself a little for asking.

“Sadly,” he answers as he opens the door, gesturing me inside, “I never found one woman to marry, never mind a tribe, so no hoards of children on skateboards.”

“You don’t know what you’re missing.” This fear inside me is replaced for just a moment by a rosy, warm hue. He still remembers our conversation from all those years ago. My mind hops to Archie and Hugh and how they’ve been known to play soccer and pitch tents in the great hall.

“What you’ve never had, you cannot miss.”

“Do you really think that’s true?” I find myself asking, because I find myself missing him despite what I tell myself. Missing his body and what he does to me. I’ve even missed the idea of what we might’ve been sometimes. Then I think of

my boys, and I remember life is as it should be. Though not today, of course. I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't feel so wretched. So absolutely terrified.

"I tell myself so sometimes." His answer sounds bittersweet.

He gestures me into a room outfitted as an office. Despite the age of the house, the décor is light and modern. White shutters shield the room from the world outside, and a widescreen television hangs above the original fireplace. His desk is huge and sleek and for some inexplicable reason, just looking at it makes me blush. *History, I suppose.* I don't think he notices as he leads me to a stylish leather sofa opposite the fireplace.

"Sit down. Do you want some coffee? Something stronger?"

"No, thank you." Sliding my hand under my thigh, I take my seat.

"Tell me what's wrong. What I can do to help."

"I don't know where to start," I murmur, thankful I no longer have to rely on my legs to hold me up.

"Your hands are so cold," he says, chaffing them between his own. "Where's your coat?"

"I—I must've left it." I remembered my bag, the newspaper, and I remembered to run. "It's still at The Ritz."

"Not The Cadogan?" There's a playful curl to his words.

"I know, cloak and dagger. I just didn't want anyone to know." I take back my hands, folding them in my lap. "And now I wish you had been there because I know I wouldn't be feeling like this." My hands shake as I lift them to my head. "He wouldn't have said the things he said if you'd been there." *Or if Sandy had been there*, my mind supplies as an afterthought. And at that, I give into this overwhelming fear by bursting into tears.

"Isla." Van's tone is so soft as I allow him to pull me closer. His shirt is soft and his chest so solid. "Hush, darling. Don't cry, everything is going to be fine."

In the comfort of his arms, I could almost believe so.



## VAN

ISLA CRIES AS SHE SPEAKS. Then she cries a little more, the words spilling haltingly, the tip of her regal nose turning red. She talks of her ex and his tale of fucking woe. I swear, he'll be lucky if he lasts a week after making her cry like this.

"He sold you out."

"Tom?" She raises her eyes to me, her lashes thick with tears. "But he—"

"He has problems he can't solve, so he served them a prettier proposition." I brush away tears from her cheek with my thumb. "Prettier in more ways than one," I add, reluctantly pulling my hand away.

"That is... entirely likely," she adds, almost curling into herself. "Entirely like him." She takes a deep, halting breath and looks like she might be about to burst into tears again.

"No." I hook my forefinger under her chin, angling her gaze my way. "He's not worth it."

"I know that," she protests, "I'm not crying for him. I just find it hard to understand how he could be so selfish."

Humans are, by and large, selfish creatures, and I include myself. But I don't go with that. "No more tears. Tell me everything."

"He's in debt—to criminals. Millions, I suspect."

"He came to me last year looking for investment into a leisure complex and a distillery on one of the islands." The casual

drift of my hand suggests that the details don't matter. But, as they say, the devil is always in the details. Look hard enough, and you'll find him there, working away.

"I didn't think you knew each other." A ripple of unease flickers in her gaze.

"We'd never met before, but he was looking for money and knew me as a friend of Alexander. A wealthy friend, I suppose."

She ducks her head. "I never told him about you. About us. I never told anyone."

"Not even your friend Tamsin?"

She raises her eyes, her smile small but spontaneous. "She still mentions you occasionally."

"You're still in touch?"

Isla nods. "Mostly by phone. She lives in London. She's married now and has a couple of children. She's married to another woman, actually." The corner of her mouth quirks mischievously. "Life is, apparently, much simpler without men."

"We have our uses, I'm sure."

"She'd tell you that's where batteries come in." I chuckle—her pert expression, her wet eyes. At least until she lowers them again. "Why couldn't I have been interested in women?"

"I'm eternally grateful you're not."

"Sandy would've told you Tom is a bad investment," she says, reverting to the previous topic. "You didn't give him money, did you?"

"What do you think?"

"That you probably exercised much more sense than I had concerning him."

I pull back a touch, my smile rueful. "I'm not sure my reasons were at all sensible. I just wanted to meet the eyes of the man you once belonged to."



“Our relationship was never like that,” she answers quietly.

“How was it?” The question feels a little like juggling with knives, but I can’t help myself.

“Safe. Or so I thought for a while.”

Safe from me. Safe from heartache. If only she knew the truth.

“It was so hard to stay away from you,” I begin, laying out this truth. “I know I hurt you. That I didn’t deserve you, but my God,” I add, taking her face in my hands, “I’ve missed you.”

“Don’t Niko.” Her hands cover mine, sliding them away. Unsure what to do with them if not holding her, I drop my elbows to my knees.

“I purposely kept my distance, year after year. I knew to see you with him would’ve felt like a knife. Here.” I tap my fingers over my heart. “I liked to tell myself I wouldn’t be the only one hurt.”

“You can’t say things like that.”

“I’m not supposed to speak the truth? You’re not married now.”

“You were right to stay away, to stay out of my life.”

“I couldn’t stand to see you happy without me and I didn’t want to hurt you any more than I already had.” Any more than I’d had to. “I’m so sorry, Isla. But I was curious. I wondered who this man was, the man you chose after me. Alexander warned me I should expect a call, that Tom had mentioned my name.

“No doubt after trying to borrow money from him.”

“I invited him to London. I wasn’t about to pass up the chance to feed my curiosity.”

I found she’d settled so cheaply, but she never did understand her own worth.

“But we were already separated,” she says, her brow furrowing.

“I know.” I shrug lightly, as though the motion is the answer to an unspoken question. “Curiosity is curiosity.” I’m relieved when she doesn’t press me because I was not impressed. “This meeting today.” My turn to redirect the conversation. “What was his name, the person you met with? Did he say?”

“He was Russian,” she says carefully.

“Is that what brought you here? Because he was Russian?”

She shakes her head. “I had nowhere else to go. No one else to turn to.”

“Not to your brother?” Again, she shakes her head, this time keeping her gaze from me. “*Milaya*, he’s not here, whoever he is. He can’t hurt you.”

“I feel terrible for involving you, but—”

“You did the right thing.” Cutting off her reply, I take her hands in mine.

“He said his name was Anatoli Aslanov and he was ... was not a nice man.”

It’s not only the name that takes me by surprise, that makes my hands tighten on hers. “What does that mean, exactly? Did this man threaten you?” Blood halts in my veins. Halts. Thins. Freezes. I can see Aslanov’s face, laughing with his crew. I can also see how it will look next time I see him when he will not be so happy.

“Have you heard of him?” she asks. “You look worried.”

Try irate, my darling. “Did he touch you?”

“What?” She pulls her hands back to her lap.

“Did he touch you?” My gaze roams over her as though I could discern the answer before she gives it.

“No. It was bad enough the way he looked at me,” she adds, cuffing her left wrist with the fingers of her right hand.

*There. He touched her there.*

“The way he looked at you,” I repeat, keeping my tone even, keeping the roar of my anger to myself. “What do you mean?”

“It’s hard to explain,” she says, again avoiding my gaze.

Something settles in my stomach hard and sharp, like a shard of glass, but the sensation has nothing on the pain I’ll inflict on him. For touching what already feels like mine, I’ll tear off his fingers one by one.

“Let me understand this.” A pulse thunders in my temple as blood blazes through my veins. “You went to meet with a Russian criminal after your ex-husband told you his life was in danger?”

“Yes, but I didn’t go for him.” Her answer is as sharp as her gaze.

“It seems a lot of trouble to go to for someone you don’t love. You were married for a long time. It would be entirely normal to still have feelings for him.” The words feel like thorns in my throat, despite my even tone.

“I never—” She stops, her dark blue eyes flashing angrily. “The only reason I married him—” Again, she stops herself. But I will have the truth, even if just for my own ego. “For your information, the only torch I have for Tom is the one I’d singe him with.” Her back now ramrod straight, she runs her fingers under her eyes and delicately wipes the back of her hand under her nose, her next words delivered staccato and a matter of fact. “He told me they had photos of our children. Said they were in danger. That’s why I went. And now I see that he was telling the truth because they sent photographs of Holland and the boys to me—photos from this morning.”

“So you went by yourself to meet a maniac.” I stand by my description, as out of the two of us, I know the man. “Without telling *anyone*.” My heart begins to pump, blood rushing through my veins, throbbing at my temples. “I can’t believe you’d be so reckless.” I press my hands to her face. “That you’d put yourself to such risk.” Images begin to flash in my head, the kind that would make me scorch the earth for her.

“I wasn’t exactly left a choice,” she utters as she tries to twist away. She probably thinks she’s right. So stubborn and so fucking independent.

“You had choices. You could’ve turned to your brother. You could’ve come to me before meeting him. Why would you think you had to do this on your own?”

“I am not a child in need of protection,” she retorts hotly. “I do have to do this on my own, every bloody day. Those are my children to protect, and I will do what I must to protect them.”

“*I will protect you. I will protect your sons.*”

“You’ll forgive me for saying so,” she utters not meaning a word of it, “but you don’t exactly have the best record when it comes to trust.”

Air rushes from my chest, the words much angrier, much louder than I’d anticipated. “Promise me, Isla. You will never put yourself in that situation again.”

“Niko, stop!” She pulls away, pushes at my hands. “I won’t promise. I did what—”

“You did what might’ve cost your life—your liberty. You could’ve been drugged and dragged off fuck knows where, never to be seen again. Used, abused, kept smacked out and until an army of men had paid to use every one of your holes.”

She gasps. Shocked? Offended? I’ve never spoken to her like this, but I’ll do whatever it takes. Her life is in transition and she no doubt thinks of it as tough, but there is filth and heartache in this world that I swear will never touch her. *Filth that should never have touched her*, I silently amend. “Anatoli Aslanov deals in fear and flesh.”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you—he wants my fear and my flesh. He expects me to work for him, to launder money. To risk my company and my life to protect my family. But he also wants me.” This she adds in tear-filled hush.

“That’s not going to happen. Ever.”

“But what can we do? He’s given me forty-eight hours to... to... Oh God.”

Color leeches from her face, even as the “we” in this scenario warms me. “We aren’t going to do anything. You’re going to leave it to me.”

“What can you do? I don’t want to put you at risk, too.”

“Has Alexander never mentioned my family?”

She takes a moment to choose her words carefully. “He intimidated some things. He has suggested I shouldn’t get involved with you. And I’d heard rumours, of course. About your uncle.”

“My uncle was a very important man in the community. A wealthy man. A dangerous man.”

“Can’t he help us?”

I give a quick shake of my head. “He’s retired.”

“Who’s in charge now? Can we go to him?”

Don’t ask questions you’re not ready to hear the answers to, darling, I think as I give a half shrug.

“Who can help us, Niko?”

I press my lips to her head along with my promise. “Let me deal with this.”

“But it’s so much worse than you can imagine.” Her fingers grip mine for a beat before she reaches down to where she’d dropped her purse. Fumbling with the strap, she pulls it to her knee. “You have to promise me you won’t speak to anyone about this.”

“You can tell me anything,” I reply, wondering where this is going.

“Promise me, Niko. This must stay between us.”

I press my finger to my pounding temple because her eyes, so shiny and wet, hold so much fear. If he hurt her, I will—

Realizing she’s waiting for my reply, I nod once, unable to find a calm response.

“This.” With bloodless fingers, she drops a folded copy of one of this morning’s broadsheets to my lap. The headline reads

something about the current government's taxation policy, which can't be it. My fingers still as I flip over the heavily creased newspaper to find a familiar face staring back at me. A face that wasn't smiling the last time I'd seen it.

"This is ..." I don't want to say his name, not out of superstition, but more like I refuse to poison the space between us.

"Giles." She swallows. "Niko." Her hand reaches out, her fingers tighten over mine. "He told me Sandy killed him."



## VAN

“SANDY?” Relief. Fuck, relief *is* sweet. So sweet I almost laugh. But for her pained expression, I might. Where the hell did Aslanov get this idea from?

Isla nods, pushing her hair behind her ears, this morning’s chic business chignon now falling around her face.

“Why?” Fuck if I can even guess.

“Because of what Giles did to me. What he almost did. Don’t you remember how angry Sandy was the day after his birthday party?”

“Yes, but as far as I was aware, he never set eyes on the man again.”

“He’s hardly going to admit to murder, Niko.”

“I think he might’ve admitted it to me.” He would’ve needed help with the cleanup, at least. But, as it was, I’d gotten to the weasel first. I dragged him out of his flat for Alexander. After all, it was his right to punish him, not mine.

But, the best laid plans...

“He said he was going to break his legs. I heard him say it back then. Repeatedly!”

“Most of London heard him. Wasn’t that why he was never seen again? Because he was scared of the repercussions?”

“This.” Her eyes dip to the image of that bastard’s face. “This is why he never turned up again. Because he’s dead. Murdered.”



“And buried under the concrete of some car park somewhere.” I scan the headlines, genuinely curious where he’d been found. And how. An underground water leak meant part of the carpark was dug up recently. *Bad luck*. “You really think Sandy did this?” I flip the newspaper over and slide it onto the coffee table. “That he buried him in a supermarket carpark, a Tesco’s in Ealing.” I imagine that’s what makes it newsworthy. The son of a peer in a supermarket.

I wonder if his parents are alive or if they’re turning in their graves. Not even a Waitrose carpark. The shame of it!

“I don’t want to think it, but all I can think is why else would that man have threatened me with it?”

*Bad luck*, I think to myself. Bad luck for Aslanov that he can join the dots but sees an elephant where others see a snake. Bad luck for him when I get my hands on him.

“I can’t let them go to the police with this.”

“I very much doubt that’ll happen.” My critical tone causes Isla to lift her head. “I would imagine the Metropolitan Police don’t have much faith in the word of criminals.”

“But it might trigger an investigation, and whether Sandy did this or not, Leonie’s death will come up. Leonie, his first wife, remember?”

“Yes, I remember.” I remember while wondering how much Isla knows about that rancid kettle of fish? Maybe she’s looking at me, wondering the same.

“Remember the media furor when she went missing. I mean, Sandy wasn’t even in the same country, yet people still pointed fingers. I can’t put him through that kind of scrutiny again.”

“He didn’t do anything to Leonie.”

“I know that.” She turns her watery eyes on me again. “But I’m not so sure about Giles.”

“Isla.” She allows me to wrap her in my arms and I pull her to my chest. Not that I’m worried she’ll see something in my expression, because what I feel at this moment is sheer relief.

“*Chimu byt’, tavoh ni mihnovat.*”

“What does that mean?” she whispers into my shirt.

“You can’t avoid what is meant to happen.” Why would I want to, even if this isn’t exactly going to plan?

“Because I don’t want to see my brother in a prison jumpsuit,” she says hotly. “You never struck me as fatalistic before.”

“It must be the Russian in me speaking.” *Avos*, or the concept of hope or maybe, what will be will be, has never been a philosophy I ascribe to. Life is unpredictable but we must make our own luck—a man makes his own fate and takes what he must. This situation I’ve just been handed? What do the English call it? A gift horse? It’s not one I’ll take lightly or ignore.

“What am I going to do?” Isla’s tears dampen the front of my shirt but I console myself I’m not the cause of them. Not entirely.

“I’m thinking.” Thinking of this gift horse I’m about to run with. I’m thinking of how long it’ll take me to convince her that this is the right path. By fair means or foul, I’d promised myself. I just hadn’t expected fate to work in my favor. “You should stay here the night.”

“Niko.”

I laugh at the way she draws out my name, but at least I’m still Niko. “You think I have nefarious designs on your body?”

“Nefarious isn’t necessarily the word I’d use.” A humorous lilt softens her words. “But I have to get back to the children, more so than ever.”

“But you don’t want to take this trouble back with you.”

In my arms, she gives in to a shiver. “Do you really think he’d follow me?” Her fingers flex restlessly on my chest.

“They, Isla. This isn’t a one-man organization we’re dealing with.” Though the snake only has one head. “I need a little time to make this go away.”

“How? You’re not—” she pushes up to sit. “You’re not going to pay off Thomas’s debts, are you?”

Was the lilt in her voice hope or incredulity? “No. Even if I wanted to, that wouldn’t work right now.”

“You think it’s too late?”

“Something like that. I have to go out for a little while.” Fear flashes in her denim gaze. “You’ll be safe here, I promise. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“But—”

“Stay, and when it’s time, I’ll take you back to Kilblair myself. I can call Alexander for you.”

“No!” she almost yells. “I mean, please don’t.”

I stifle a sigh. “You don’t want him to know you’re here.” Even now. Even after this.

“It’s not that. Not *just* that. Besides, Holland knows. I just...” Tears turn her eyes into pools again. “I got your number from her.”

“I gave it to you months ago.”

“I deleted it,” she replies sheepishly. “I’m just not ready to talk to Sandy about this.”

“Because you want to protect him.”

“I need to protect them all.”

“And you will. We will, but you have to give them a reason for not coming home.”

“I’ll call Holland—I’ll say that business has held me up. I am sort of being held up.” She laughs unhappily. “She won’t tell Sandy, not if I tell her I want to ...”

“Break the news that you spent the night with me?”

“Plausible deniability,” she adds haltingly.

My darling, we’ll have much more to ask him to forgive you for before this day is through.

“I’ll call and ask if she can keep the boys tonight. I’ll stay.”

“I think that’s for the best. Come,” I murmur, sitting forward.

“Let’s get something hot into you.”

The tension suddenly returns to her body, though her response is flippant. “And here I thought a crisis might make you behave yourself.”

“Darling, if there’s ever a time I’m not trying to get you into bed, something will be very, very wrong. But for now, let me introduce you to the other woman in my life. Her name is Julia.”

Is it cruel to tease? Probably. But her expression, as well as a boost for the ego, is a sign that she doesn’t dislike me quite as much as she might like.



## ISLA

I WATCH the woman move about the kitchen with a sureness born of familiarity. Julia is the housekeeper, though she looks unlike any housekeeper I've ever seen. Petite, dark haired, and pretty, she can be barely thirty. Meanwhile, I must look like an old crone, I decide, tugging at my wild hair again.

"Is there anything I can get for you, Lady Isla?" The smile she turns on me is unruffled and serene.

"No, thank you," I answer, wrapping my hand around my coffee cup.

With a nod, she leaves me alone in the kitchen, slipping out of the door as quiet as a mouse. Van mentioned she lives on the premises, and I find myself wondering if the pair ever sleep together. And by that, I mean, if they fuck. It's not a word I use often, not even to myself, but it's the term I choose now. I feel green eyed and slightly sour, even though I sensed nothing between them but a friendly kind of ease.

I can't ever imagine Van being celibate. Not that it has anything to do with me—nothing to do with me at all. But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't relieved to find myself all alone in the cavernous room.

Not alone but protected, according to Van, because there's a security detail on-site

What am I going to do? Not stay here, if I can help it. Van and I are like oil and water, and by that, I mean it's only a matter of time before one of us ends up lying on top of the other. But

for now, I wait. And literally twiddle my thumbs, and bite the occasional cuticle, as I glance around the space.

*Make yourself at home*, he'd said.

What would I do if this were my home? I'd probably be making snacks for the boys and listening to the commentary about their day. Turning my wrist, I glance down and confirm the time. They'll be home now, probably thundering through the kitchen in the hunt for food. Geordie, Sandy's chef will have made them something far superior to what I'd usually pull out of the fridge. *Ham and cheese sandwiches or fruit and crackers*. He'll probably have made them their favorite; sausage rolls, the pork delicately seasoned with herbs, rolled in buttery, flaky pastry. Most likely, there'll be freshly squeezed orange juice and some kind of sweet treat to follow afterward, despite my usual protests of it being too close to dinnertime.

I miss my boys so much.

Pulling out my phone, I decide to call. I just need to hear their voices, need to hear they're okay. I've barely pushed *connect* when I hear Holland's breathy, "Hello."

"Is everything okay?" Has she been running? Running away? The worst kind of imaginings begin to flit through my head.

"Fine," she says, her voice just as breathy. "Everything's fine."

Breath leaves me in a gust. "Great. So is this a bad time?" Newlyweds, I think, almost rolling my eyes.

"No, it's fine. In fact, your timing is perfect in helping me ward off your overly amorous brother." My overly amorous brother whose deep laughter I hear in the background.

"*Right*. I think I'll just take this opportunity to remind you again that girl talk is fine, but not when it involves the topic of my brother."

"I was just kissing her hello," comes Sandy's rumbling tones. "Positively chaste kisses, at that."

"I doubt you can spell chaste, never mind embody it. I'd been on the school run," she adds with a chuckle. "I've been gone thirty minutes, not for the thirty years' war."

“Or as our ancestors like to all it, the good old days.” I inject my reply with forced humor.

“Hey! Keep your hands to yourself.” Holland laughs and then squeals before a door slams. “Sorry about that. Again. What is it about men feeling you up while your hands are busy?”

“I’ve no idea.” Because Tom was never—

I cut off that thought. Tom is dead to me. At least, he’s going to wish he is.

“Taking a phone call, rinsing dishes” Holland continues, oblivious to my dark thoughts, “tying my shoelaces! You name it, your brother loves to creep up on me all handsy.” She does not sound like she’s complaining. Not seriously. “But that’s not what you called to hear.”

“Exactly. As far as my mind is concerned, my brother’s hands only clasp in prayer.”

“Speaking of clasping, how’d your meeting go?” she asks saucily.

“The meeting went well. Good.” If today is some hellish version of opposite day.

“Obviously, I’m interested in *that* meeting, but I was talking about Van.”

“Oh, ha-ha! Yes, the clasping reference.” Keep up, would you. “... haven’t seen him yet,” I decide on.

“Oh. Okay. But the other meeting, did they love your designs?” she asks, rolling with this.

“Yes.” The designs. They had them. Designs on my business. Designs on my body. “You could say they liked them.” And that I did not.

“Isla, are you okay? You sound a little odd.”

“Actually, that’s what I called about,” I find myself answering as I grasp another sudden thought. “I had smoked salmon this morning and, well, I’ve done very little but vomit all afternoon.”



“Oh, bummer,” replies the Duchess of Dalforth, making me smile. “Where are you?”

“The meeting was at a hotel, so I booked myself into it,” I add, keeping the details vague. “I don’t think I’ll be in any state to make my flight.”

“Oh, shame. So you won’t get to see—”

“Nothing but the inside of a hotel toilet bowl.”

“Ew.”

“I feel so ill.” Ill for lying to her. For playing on her sympathy.

“Well, you know you don’t worry about the kids. They’re fine here with us. You just take care of yourself.”

“Thank you.” I trust Sandy with their lives, and that’s still the case whatever has happened. And though Holly has been in our lives only a short while, I know I can say the same for her. “I don’t know what I’d do without you both.”

“Not a thing you have to worry about,” she says with a laugh. “You just take care of yourself.”

“How are the boys? How was the school run?”

“Fine, on both counts.”

“Nothing to report?” As in, did you notice anyone taking creepy videos of you all?

“Nothing new, at least. Just the usual complaints about school suckage and from me, the line of traffic to get through those fancy school gates. The boys argued over the radio, as usual, and we ended up listening to something that, I swear, sounded like an inflatable donkey falling down a flight of stairs.”

“I can’t even picture, I mean, imagine what that sounds like.”

“Count yourself lucky. My ears are still hurting. Oh, here comes your progeny,” she adds. “Archie, come talk to your mom.”

Muffled noises follow as I cast my eyes around the kitchen, which is a chef’s dream. Fancy appliances, a fridge you could hang a carcass of venison in and still have space enough to

feed an army of teenagers. The countertops are a stylish gray granite, the cabinetry white and sleekly modern. There's a door to a huge, glass fronted indoor wine cellar, temperature controlled by the looks of things. I glance around imagining this would be where the original Edwardian kitchen was situated, yet this room is bright and airy thanks to the removal of the back wall in favor of glass. Stackable doors, I suppose, allowing a view over the garden, bringing the outside in.

"Mummy!" calls my littlest man. "Geordie made us bao buns for our snack, and they were very, very yummy."

"Oh!" No sausage rolls? Good for Geordie getting the boys to eat something out of the ordinary. "They sounds very fancy."

"Bao buns are Vietmanees sausage rolls. They have the same stuff in the middle as sausage rolls."

"Vietnamese," I repeat gently. "And I think you mean pork."

"And salad, but not like that boring stuff you make us eat."

"Boring?" I repeat with a laugh. "That's it, iceberg lettuce for you for the next ten years." I swear, if Archie was a dog, he'd be a beagle. Food obsessed. Ask him what kind of day he's had at school and settle in to listen to a ten-minute monologue on what was available for lunch in the school cafeteria.

"Hugh wants to talk to you."

"Wait, Archie. I just wanted to say I won't be home tonight."

"Okay," he answers, completely unfazed.

"Is that okay?"

"Yes, very. Geordie is making pumpkin gnocchi for dinner."

"That sounds yum. I'll call before bed, okay?"

"Okay." His giggling and Gertie's bark follows before Hugh's voice sounds.

"Hello. School was fine. The drive home was fine. I don't have any homework and I'll remember to brush my teeth before bed. I'll see you tomorrow. Bye."

"Hugh, don't ..."

“Too late,” Holland says.

“...Rush off. I feel so loved,” I add brightly despite experiencing a poke of sadness.

“Tweens are the new teens,” she answers sagely.

“I can’t wait for the actual teen years.”

“Yeah, right,” she says through a laugh. “Well, I’m off to bribe them into doing their homework, then I think we’re gonna watch a movie.”

“Sounds like fun.” My heart aches to be there.

We say goodbyes and as the call disconnects, I drop my head to my arms and exhale a loud sigh. The conversation already feels like a blur, but the main takeaway is they’re all okay. Secluded in a medieval fortress castle with mace, swords, and pikes decorating the walls, and actual rifles in the gun room.

They’re okay.

I’m okay.

And Van is... doing whatever he can to help, and I’m sure he’ll be okay, too.

A distraction. I need a distraction. And something to eat, I realize, as my stomach begins to rumble. I haven’t eaten since breakfast—though reducing a croissant to crumbs probably doesn’t really add to my calorie count. Julia offered to make me something, but I was wound too tight (and too suspicious, even if I have no right) to take her up on her offer. But hearing that all is well at home seems to have reinstated my appetite.

Rounding the island, I pull open the fridge. No hanging venison, thankfully, but someone shops in Harrod’s food hall, I see.

“And someone is a cheese fiend,” I whisper, tickled by the insight. Beaufort d’Alpage, Brie de Meaux, Stinking Bishop, Tomme de Chèvre and Crottin de Chavignol. “Oh, yum.” Slow-baked Dottato figs. I pull out the figs and the goat’s cheese, glancing twice at the open bottle of Pinot standing next to the organic milk. What the hell. I whip it out as well, and before long, my carb loving heart has found a loaf of walnut

bread. *Slotted away in one of the cabinets; nothing so common as a bread bin to sully these marble surfaces.* Next, I find a glass and a plate, and before long, I'm smoothing creamy dairy onto an earthy, nutty slice of heaven.

"Mmm." My eyes almost roll to the back of my head at the flavor explosion because Niko isn't the only cheese fiend, though I limit myself to the occasional cheese blow out or I'd end up the size of a house. I wonder what Niko does to keep in trim given he likes cheese, too.

*Maybe he keeps trim with Julia.*

*So what if he does. It has nothing to do with me who he sleeps with.*

*Except he occasionally sleeps with me.*

My God, shut up brain!

I take a sip from my wine. Then a swig. I'm not going to turn myself in knots over him.

I swipe my knife through the *chèvre* again, and tearing off a little more bread, spread the yummy goodness across it and top it off with a little sticky fig. Glorious, a cheese and wine party for one.

"Bastard," I mutter around the mouthful, because that's what Tom used to call my solo feasting. "Absolute twat." I spear a fig. If it wasn't for that lactose intolerant arse, I wouldn't be in this predicament. I'm not going to think about it. I'll save my anger, store it up for next time I see him when I'll tell him from now on, I'm Tom intolerant. It's a shame I can't murder the father of my children. But I could maim him, maybe.

After eating my fill, I clear away the evidence before topping up my glass. A little Dutch courage to keep me company as I 'make myself at home.' Also known as snooping. When he'd made the invitation, I wonder if he meant I should leave the empty cardboard toilet roll containers on the vanity or smear a little toothpaste where it ought not to be. That's what men do, how they make themselves feel at home, isn't it? Before selling you out to Russian criminals, of course.

Van's house is *huge*. And that's saying something, considering I grew up in a castle. It must've been carved up into multiple apartments when I'd last visited. I wonder what prompted him to want to own the whole house, and extend it, by the looks of things as I turn left out of the kitchen and down an enclosed staircase that I can't imagine would've been part of the original design. The house has to be Grade I listed historically for preservation, and while it's retained all of the charm and architectural aesthetic of the regency period, it's been thoroughly brought up to date. It's not creaky and draughty like Sandy's London place, instead warm and sumptuous, even though I'm heading to the subterranean level.

To where the bodies are buried...

Or maybe not. The basement is all for play. And not the kind of play I'd usually associate with Niko. There's a home cinema with lights like a runway running along the floor, plus a state-of-the-art home gym. But the majority of the floorspace is taken up by an honest to goodness swimming pool that's at least twelve meters long—the entire area housed in Carrara marble! How he'd gotten planning permission for a whole extra floor in such a historic property boggles my mind.

Back upstairs, I find myself wandering through the myriad of rooms and past the ancient looking lift that I once rode in. I open a door to an elegant drawing room, complete with original fireplace and crown moldings. One wall is mirrored, reflecting the gray early evening. I trail my fingers over the soft velvet nap of the armchairs and find myself plumping the sumptuous damask cushions. A smoky glass coffee table stands in the middle of the seating arrangement, a pot with a white orchid placed in the center. It looks like the kind of room meant to impress. And also remind visitors not to get too comfortable.

The next room houses a huge billiard table and cocktail bar, its cabinetry covered in a slate-colored suede to match the table's bespoke baize. Next is a dining room large enough to seat a couple of football teams, then a sitting room with a modular sofa big enough to hold an orgy on—and all this on one floor.

I pause in the hallway and look back at the lift. Would I go up to the penthouse suite? And would I go because I'm curious about the artwork or the décor but because of the gilded chair. Would it still be there, I find myself wondering? Would the touch of the cuffs still feel as soft as a caress?

I'm curious.

I shouldn't be.

But I am.

*Surely, he wouldn't still have it, would he?*

Frozen with indecision, *want* versus *ought*, I'm still staring at the brass cage of the elevator when the front door opens. I spin around as the sounds of a late afternoon in London seep in. *Cars passing. A wind whistling.* Van looks up, his smile all relief, and I return it as tension flows out of me.

He's here, he's okay. But he's not alone.

The man behind him is even larger than Van. A head taller and wider at the shoulders. *Thicker at the waist.* He looks sort of familiar, or maybe the familiarity is media created because, with his build and scarred face, the man looks like a minder.

The ear! I remember him now. Van murmurs something and the man slips almost silently into an adjacent door, barely acknowledging me.

"I see you found the cellar." Niko's alpine lake gaze skates over me as though in inventory.

"I found the fridge," I correct as he takes the glass from my hand, pressing the rim to his lips. Something inside me heats, cooling again as he lowers it briefly before taking a swallow.

"You found Julia's cooking wine."

"Oh." I stare at his lips. Then the liquid. "It's not bad," I say with a shrug. I'm more in the mood to chug than taste.

"Did you eat?" he asks, handing me back my glass.

"A little, but Van." I wrap my fingers around his retracting wrist, curling my fingers over his. "What happened?" His knuckles are grazed and bloody, and tiny specks of blood

dapple his white shirt. He makes to pull away when I press my free hand to his face. “Tell me, please.”

“Nothing that you need to worry yourself over.”

“Are you hurt?” Now it’s my turn for the inventory as I pat my hands over him, expecting him to complain.

“I’m fine,” he says softly, stilling my roving fingers.

“Tell me what happened, Niko. Your hands—”

“It was a difference of opinion. Nothing else. Nothing for you to worry yourself over.” He lifts my fingers to his lips. “Thank you for your concern.” His words are smoky and his eyes hot. The situation in danger of reverting to how we know best to deal with feelings.

I slip my hands from his, folding my would-be questing fingers under my arms. “Did you find out anything? Anything that might help.”

“Yes.” The word sounds resigned as he slides a hand across his golden bristles. “Let’s go upstairs and I’ll tell you.” He turns, though pauses when I don’t immediately follow.

“Do we... need to go upstairs?”

“You think the sight of a bed will drive me to ravish you?”

“No,” I reply hesitantly. He turns wordlessly, not bothering to hide his smile. I make for the stairs, startling when he turns again.

“Since when have you and I ever needed a bed?”

“Hilarious,” I mutter, trudging up the stairs behind him like an unimpressed teen. An unimpressed teen with very fluttery, gratified insides. Is it possible to get drunk on the sight of a smile? I’m not sure, but the sight of it warms my insides like a good whisky would.

“It’s just for expediency. I need to pack.”

“You’re going on a trip?” My heart beats twice, hard against my ribs. He’s leaving? *Leaving me?* Have I put him in harm’s way? The blood. His knuckles.

“Something like that,” he replies, continuing up the stairs.

A chill skitters down my spine. I’m on my own. What happened to *I’ll take care of you*? He owes me nothing, I remind myself.

We reach the landing, and Niko opens the first door on the left and gestures me ahead of him. The room is huge, lavishly decorated and deeply masculine. The walls are covered in a deep gray paneling and the bed, which is big enough for an Ottoman pasha, is heaped in bronze-colored linens. A dark colored sofa sits in front of a fireplace, a huge flatscreen TV hanging above it. Between the back of the sofa and the end of the bed, there’s still enough floorspace to hold a swing dance.

“Grab me a couple of shirts, would you?” He appears with a monogrammed weekend bag in one hand and a toiletry bag in the other.

“In there?” I point at the door he’s just come through, and he nods. Oh, wow! I know people who would kill for this kind of closet space. People like Tamsin.

The cabinetry is dark and sleek, matching the bedroom walls. The hanging spaces are open to reveal row upon row of jackets moving from darker to lighter hues. On the opposite wall, shirts are given the same treatment. Goodness, even his jeans!

“Find them?” he calls from the other room.

“I’m working on it.” I step up to the built-in drawers, pulling open the top one.

Watches. Omega. Cartier. Audemars Piguet. Patek Phillippe. It’s like a mini-Harrods! Closing the drawer, I pull open the next one. Blinking heavily, my hand has barely lifted from the handle when I sense Niko next to me.

“There aren’t any shirts in there,” he murmurs, sliding the drawer closed as though it had contained socks and not a handgun.

A gun. There’s a gun. A gun in that there drawer.

“Why?” I twist to face him. There are guns at the castle. I can even handle one. Not that I ever do, not after—I shut the



thought down, clamp it closed, marking it *Do Not Enter*. But Niko's gun isn't the kind you'd easily get a license for.

"Don't ask questions when you're unprepared for the answers. Come here." He pulls my reluctant form into him, pressing a kiss to my head. "It's in the drawer, isn't it? I rarely carry the thing."

"But a gun, Niko." Here, in the city.

"Alexander tells me you're a crack shot."

"Not like that," I retort, part incredulity, part shock. "Sandy has guns for grouse and deer hunting, but the only shooting I do is the clay pigeon type." And only when I force myself to join his guests. For the good of the castle. For the good of the bottom line.

Handguns are for criminals, aren't they? Suddenly, my brother's words come floating back to me. *Van is his own kind of Tsar ruling over his own kind of serfs.*

As he maneuvers around me, sliding open a different drawer, I take the opportunity to look at him. Niko isn't a criminal. He can't be. He's far too urbane. *Jaded? Sophisticated.*

*What about Anatoli Aslanov? Wasn't he a poor facsimile of this man?*

No. Niko can't be a criminal. I'd know. And Sandy wouldn't knowingly go into business with a villain.

Another drawer, a rattle of hangers, and I come back to myself.

"Hand me that bag, would you?" Niko brushes past me making his way back into the bedroom. Grabbing the leather toiletries bag, I follow him out as he drops T-shirts and shorts into the leather bag before dropping a pair of loafers haphazardly to the top.

"Move over," I mutter, pulling the shoes out. "Didn't anyone ever teach you how to pack a bag?"

"Julia usually does it for me."

“Does she?” I reply snippily, the words escaping without thought. I feel... resentful. Jealous? *No*. Whatever this is, my actions are jerky and erratic as I pull out his belongings.

“Julia is an employee.” His hand on my shoulder, he turns me from the bed. “She’s my housekeeper, and nothing else.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t have to, *milaya*. Your actions are loud enough”

“You can sleep with who you want,” I retort, ignoring the provocative curl of his mouth.

“If only that were true.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Because the person I want to sleep with is you.” With that, he pulls me to him, his chest expanding with a sigh full of longing. I shouldn’t feel mollified, but I do. And also a little territorial as I wrap my arm around his waist. “Come, let’s get this finished.” He pulls away with a slow reluctance.

“Oh, yes.” I forgot. He’s going away. “You were going to tell me about it, what happened this afternoon, I mean. Did you find out anything?”

“Yes.” Glancing at the open bag on the bed, he slides his hand through his hair. “That’s why we’re packing.”

“Oh.” My eyes widen, a pinprick of fear poking my chest. His bloody knuckles. He’s in trouble? “You have to go away.”

“For a little while.”

“Is it bad?”

“That all depends on your perspective.”

“I’ll go back to Scotland.” I drop heavily onto the edge of the mattress. “Don’t worry about me.”

“No.” He lowers himself next to me and takes my hand. “You misunderstand. I’m not going away. We are.”

“What?” I try to pull away when his hold tightens. “No, Niko. I’m not running away.”

“Who said anything about running?”

“It’s not like we’d be going off on holiday.”

He inclines his head as though considering. “No, not a holiday,” he agrees. “Strictly speaking, we’ll be on honeymoon.”

*Wait, what?*



## VAN

HER OPEN-MOUTHED SHOCK doesn't exactly elicit joy inside me. Isla is my person though, given the option, I'm sure she'd deny it. Seeing her happy makes me happy, being responsible for her happiness increases my pleasure tenfold. Confusion, sadness, mistrust, these are the emotions her expression cycles through next, and though I hide it well, it causes me pain to be responsible for such things. I told myself I'd tear off my arm before I'd be responsible for her unhappiness again, yet here we are.

She inhales audibly, her spine lengthening. "I'm sorry." She gives her head an almost infinitesimal shake. "But can you say that again? I think I must've misheard."

"You didn't."

"This feels so odd. You know when you've been swimming under water and then you break through to the surface?" It's not a question she's asking, so I stay quiet even as her eyes seek mine again. "Everything feels water muffled and not quite real."

"I spoke to your brother."

"What?" Her tone is much sharper. But what's interesting is that her reaction to involving Alexander seems stronger than her aversion to marrying me.

"I had to tell him what happened."

She springs up from the bed like a prize fighter ready for action. "You spoke to him after I explicitly asked you not to?"

“In a word,” I answer, standing slowly, “yes.” Her gaze narrows as it tracks my unhurried motion, the unconcerned flick of my shoulder, and the way I slide my hands into my pockets. I play the part of arrogant overlord well. Of course, I am the arrogant overlord, but never with her. “I did what I felt I ought to. In the interests of expediency.”

“What about in the interests of me? I asked you not to—there was no need to worry him unnecessarily.”

“You think this is about me?” I ask, because her point is ridiculous.

“I don’t know what this is about,” she says, throwing up her hands. “All I know is I must be bloody hearing things.” Her chest heaves as she tries to control her anger, though she eventually settles on sliding me a dirty look. “This might well be about you. Sandy said there was a side to you I don’t know about. Is there, Niko? Have you hidden things from me?”

“I never want to hurt you.”

“That’s not an answer, that’s a sidestep.”

“I’ve done what I must to protect you.”

“But I’ve never sought your protection,” she retorts vehemently.

“It was me you came to today. My phone you called. My doorstep you turned up on.”

“I’m regretting it now!”

“Regardless, you have my protection.”

Isla stalks to the window, gazing down at the street below.

“And this is your form of protection? Marriage?”

“So you did hear me.”

“What exactly did you tell Sandy?”

“I told him what you told me. The real reason you’re in London, who you’d met with. I left the murder accusations out. I have to say, Isla, Alexander had the same response. He found it hard to believe you’d be so foolish.”

“God,” she groans, pressing her palms to her temples. “This isn’t the fourteenth century. I get to make my own decisions. It *is* allowed.”

“Who’s saying otherwise?”

“You are! Because don’t for one minute think I’d believe my brother is in on this madcap marriage scheme.”

“That’s true. How could I tell your brother the only way I can protect you is by making you my wife?”

“We’re you imagining he’d take the news well afterward?” she snipes.

“I was hoping you would see sense, if nothing else. Whether Alexander knows before or not won’t alter the fact that we must get married.”

“Stop saying that!”

“Stop speaking the truth? Why? Because it doesn’t suit you? Or perhaps you’d prefer to follow Aslanov’s plans?”

“This can’t be happening,” she mutters to herself, her fingers moving restlessly by her sides.

“Saying so doesn’t make it true. And whether it pleases or enrages Alexander, he did agree that it was reckless of you to agree to meet Aslanov by yourself. And by reckless, I mean stupid.”

Before my eyes, Isla becomes the human form of a pufferfish, her indignation making her shoulders rise, her outrage taking on a deadly edge. “How dare you.”

“Oh, I dare,” I answer, stepping into her. Her eyes widen as I cast off the façade of a reasonable man, gripping her chin between my fingers. “Because I am far from reasonable when it comes to protecting what’s mine.” Her eyes widen, her breath fragrant on my face. “Yes, *milaya*. You can keep denying it, but it doesn’t make it any less true. You put yourself in this position, and this is how we fix it. You’re mine from this point onward, so deal with it.”

She twists viciously away. “I didn’t ask for this.”

“Asking would suggest some rationality,” I grate out. “Some thought for self-preservation. But Lady Isla doesn’t deign to bother the mortal folk. She just strides through her life thinking the shit of it will never touch her.”

“You know nothing,” she yells. “My life is not a bed of roses—it never has been!”

“Better no bed of petals than a bed of thorns.” I expect her to turn my words into an accusation, but nothing comes. An uncomfortable silence falls between us, one I have neither the time nor the will for. Unclamping my molars, I begin again in a more reasonable tone. “Isla, if anything had happened to you —”

“Your fear doesn’t give you the right to treat me like a chattel.” Arms crossed, she swings away from me.

“Blame me all you like but you put yourself in this situation. Don’t you have a thought for your own safety? The risk you put yourself to? Alexander was aghast, I can tell you.”

She swings around with a growl, her face red, her eyes glistening. “Oh, piss off, Van! And don’t try to tell me Sandy will ever be okay with your proposal. Oh, sorry.” She ducks, feigning girlish embarrassment. “You didn’t actually propose, did you? You just decided for me!”

“You have a choice. You deal with me, or your deal with Aslanov. And whomever he passes you off to when he grows bored.”

“Bored?”

“Bored fucking you.” As if that were even possible.

“You are...”

“Oh, I am everything you’re thinking and a hundred times worse. But better the devil you know. Better the devil who knows how to look after you.” Better the devil desperate to hold you.

“If you’re waiting for me to agree that this is the best idea in the history of ideas, don’t hold your breath. Oh, actually, *do!*”



“I’d like to keep breathing, thanks. You don’t wish me dead.”  
*Yet*, I add silently.

“I don’t want to get married. I didn’t even want to marry Tom!”

“Why did you?”

“That has nothing to do with you,” she retorts loftily, her chin raised along with her lie. “I can’t marry you—I don’t even like you!” She throws her arms out in front, part petition, part disgust.

“We both know that’s not entirely true.” My gaze rakes over her from the crown of her head to the tips of her red pumps. “There are parts of me you like. There’s always a bright side.”

“What’s that?” She looks like she could bite off her tongue for asking.

“Marry me, marry my cock. Think of the unlimited access.”

I chuckle at her lack of amusement, prompting her to turn away again. “I could go to the police.”

“The Russian mafia tend not to have much respect for His Majesty’s constabulary.”

“The mafia?” She swings back to face me.

“Mafia. Vory. Bratva. Whatever you’d like to call them. You had a breakfast meeting with a member of the Russian mob. Did he enjoy the eggs?”

“I didn’t... how do you know what he ate?”

“Because I had an afternoon meeting with the same bastard,” I growl, pointing at my battered knuckles. The bastard has a face like an iron girder. His wrists, thankfully, weren’t so troublesome. “That’s how I know he had fucking eggs, and that’s how I know where he fucking touched you. And that’s how I know the only way to save your reckless but delectable ass is by tying it to me permanently.”

“Are you a member of the Russian mafia?” she asks, aghast.

Out of all of the avenues that statement might’ve taken her, this is the one question I’d dreaded.

“No, Isla. I’m someone much worse.” I’m the *Avtoritet*, the authority behind the outfit.

“What does that mean?” she asks hesitantly. “Are you a criminal?”

“Wealth and crime go hand in hand.”

“Well. I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean.”

“It means you’re getting on a plane with me in two hours and flying far away, whether you like it or not.”

“I like it not!” she yells and actually stamps her foot. “I can’t go with you, I have my sons, my family. My business!”

“They’ll still be here when we return. Better yet, they’ll all be safe from harm.”

“You’re bonkers!” she says, throwing up her hands. “Stark raving mad! You have to be. I can’t—” Her panicked gaze falls over my body without once rising to my face. “I just can’t. And you can’t make me.”

“Who said anything about making you?”

“You aren’t?” Her tone drips with suspicion, her eyes briefly meeting mine.

“I’ll take you back to Scotland, if that’s what you want, but I won’t be able to protect you from what happens afterward. As Alexander’s sister, you’re fair game as far as Aslanov is concerned. Your family, too. As my wife, however...” I leave the implication hanging in the air.

“Why Van? Why would that man leave me alone as your wife?”

“Fear. Respect. Tradition. Any and all of those.”

“Why can’t you just tell him to leave me alone?”

“Because his claim precedes mine. If you’d come to me first, perhaps.” I shrug, leaving another suggestion in the air. “But you didn’t and that door is closed now. It’s how things are done.”

“You can’t tell him now? Tell him to leave me alone.”

“Yes, when my claim supersedes his.”

“When I become your wife,” she adds faintly. “But Alexander will protect me.” Her words stronger, she tips her chin, but she can’t hide the fear lurking in her eyes.

“I know he will, to the death. But you don’t want to be responsible for that.”

“Stop it.” Her hands ball into fists down by her sides.

“But he can only protect you some of the time, and when he’s protecting you, who’s protecting his wife? And what of the boys? He can’t be everywhere at once.”

“Stop it, Niko. Don’t do this.”

“Don’t speak the truth? Don’t remind you of the violence you were threatened with?” Violence repaid to Fedorov and owe to Aslanov. “Don’t you remember the nerve agent poisonings that happened in this country not so long ago?”

“Of course. It was all over the news—that man was a former Russian spy.”

“You watch the news. What happens to people who deal with so-called Russian businessmen but end up dying in mysterious circumstances?”

“Russian businessmen like you, you mean?”

“You’re learning,” I reply with a rictus grin. I fully believe I’ll meet justice someday. Until then, I’m looking at the one reason I live this life. My love, my heart’s desire and I will have her. “But have you seen one person brought to justice on *the news*? No, because those murderers are ghosts.”

“I don’t believe in ghosts,” she retorts imperiously.

“You’d believe if you were to find Alexander pushed to his death from rampart to railings.”

“Don’t say things like that.”

“Don’t tell the truth?” Blood thunders through my veins as I slide my hands through my hair to stop myself from shaking her. Doesn’t she understand? I might’ve fucking lost her!

“Don’t try to frighten me because it’s not working.”

“I wish I could say the same because you fucking terrify me.” I don’t know which is worse. The strength of my feeling and need or the risks she’d put herself to. I turn away from her lovely, obstinate face and, pressing my palms to the windowsill, drop my gaze to the street.

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“If he’d hurt you...” I glance up, my anger and desperation are reflected back at me. My eyes shutter closed, blocking it all out. I would flay him alive. Make his men and his family watch. “Alexander could and would, protect you.” I turn again. “But ask yourself, Isla, at what cost?”

“We’ll manage somehow. Sandy can hire protection—I know he can.”

“But who will protect him, *milaya*? Who will shield him when the newspaper wolves turn up at his door? When the police come knocking, who will protect him?”

There is some truth in all that I’ve said. Anatoli Aslanov might’ve done any of those things... with anyone else but her. Because any of those things would’ve brought the world tumbling down on him. He will pay. For touching her. For fucking up my plans. There is truth in all that I’ve said this evening. Some truth but not all. But this is the one lie that does not sit well with me. But it is necessary because my lovely, obstinate Isla will risk herself, but she will not risk her brother.

“Tell me,” I prompt softly. “Who will protect him?”

“I don’t know,” she replies, her eyes sliding from mine.

And there. There I have her. She won’t do it for herself, but she’ll do it for her family. There is no loyalty better than that. There are better reasons, of course. I hope one day to be worthy of them. She loved me once. She can learn to love me again.



## ISLA

“THIS IS GOING TO BE A DISASTER.” I keep my eyes on the window though the sky beyond the tiny square is a black nothingness.

“Disasters are often unavoidable.” At Niko’s soft answer, I slide him a disgusted look. One his eyes meet without an ounce of offense. “They can also bring out the best in people.”

“Don’t hold your breath.” My mutter is loud enough to be heard over the rumble of the plane’s engine as I fold my arms, determined not to offer him an ounce of encouragement. I want my boys. I want to hug them tight and never let them out of my sight. I hate—*hate* that I’m here right now. But what choice do I have? None that I can think of. Turning my wrist, I glance down at my watch. I have less than forty-eight hours to come up with an alternative plan.

Marry Niko. Marry *him*?

I don’t want to marry anyone, let alone someone I don’t really know. I thought I knew him, but I realize I’ll never get to the bottom of him. Wealth and crime go hand in hand. That’s hardly news to me. But the source of it is... *him*?

My gaze slides Niko’s way, heat exploding in the pit of my stomach when I find him watching me. I snap my attention in the opposite direction, hating that I can’t seem to help myself. How can he sit there so calmly after upending my life? Well, he’ll rue the day he ever thought making me his wife was a good idea.

I mean, who even is it a good idea for? Me, obviously. I feel myself frown. And my family, to keep them safe. But what about him? Why would he offer to marry me?

*My love is selfish. I cannot breathe without you.*

His words float into my memory. He'd said it the night of Sandy and Holland's wedding, but that was jealousy talking. Words in the heat of the moment. Sweet utterances during sex.

He can't love me. He doesn't even know me. Not anymore. And I know he thinks he wants more, but marriage isn't more—it's all! He must have better prospects than a divorced mother on the cusp of middle age. I don't consider myself there quite yet because I plan on living until at least one hundred and twenty. Sixty is the new forty.

He wants me, yes. But why would he marry me? Out of respect for my brother? Because he likes me on some level? I mean, we're having sex already, which seems to happen whenever we're within a few meters of each other.

Except for today. Which isn't over yet, I suppose.

But I'm too annoyed to feel amorous. Too *urgh!* If he comes near me, he'd better be ready for a solid knee between his legs.

If not for love, if not for sex, then could this truly be an act of goodness? He told me a long time ago that he isn't a good man. But even bad men are capable of good, aren't they?

I'm just too angry to process. I'm literally crawling out of my own skin with irritation. I can't believe I'm in this situation—that there's nothing I can do about it. And how bloody dare he and Sandy agree that I behaved recklessly! How could they possibly understand? Mere men will never understand motherhood—what drives us. The lengths we will go to protect those we love.

And those lengths include marrying the last man I ever thought I would.

I swallow a pitiful growl, and closing my eyes, I begin to breathe deeply.

*In through the nose, slowly out through the mouth.*

I once did yoga a for a few months a little while back, but I found I was unable to turn off my brain. But this stuck with me. A little self-soothing. Or something else to concentrate on when I feel like smashing things.

In. *Outttt*. In. *Outttt*.

*Oh, Sandy. What have you done?*

Maybe going to London to meet God knows who was a little rash, but at least I didn't murder someone! *Yet*. I've never had a hit list before. And now I have. A hit list of one.

*Tom.*

I'm going to rattle what few brain cells he has when this is all over.

*When this is all over and I'm Niko's wife.*

My annoyance begins to build again, my mind going round and round in circles. Why would he want to marry me? A woman with bags under my eyes, a semi-permanent harried expression, and a mummy pooch that no amount of Pilates will shift?

*Those flaws didn't stop you sleeping with him, the devil on my shoulder whispers. It didn't stop him, either.*

But that was different, wasn't it? It was payback. It was me choosing him! But why has he chosen me? Chosen to tie himself to me when he can date supermodel types with high breasts and flawless skin?

*Maybe he still will. Maybe this will be marriage in name only.*

The thought is red hot and painful, like a poker to the nape of my neck. Why on earth am I jealous? It's ridiculous. I inhale deeply, determined to get a grip on this. It's fine. Absolutely fine. Because what's good for the goose—

But I wouldn't. And it's not like Tom and I had that kind of marriage and it didn't stop him from dipping his wick indiscriminately. He was no kind of husband. Most of the time, I might as well have been on my own.

But what kind of husband would Niko be?



He'd be the kind of husband who does as he pleases. The kind of husband who always thinks he always knows best. Bloody hell, am I really going to go through this all over again!

Then, over my hot, angry thoughts, cold washes over me. Is he offering to be a husband in name only? Is that what he's offering? Protection of his name in a marriage that's just for show. The prospect shouldn't leave me frozen but with a sense of jubilation. *Why isn't it?* I can't even begin to unpick my reaction, so instead, I concentrate on the things I feel vindicated in, because how the hell was I supposed to know I was dealing with the Russian mafia? This is real life, not a made-for-TV show. How was I supposed to know they might take an interest in me personally! The way that man's dark eyes had roamed over me...

A shiver wracks my body at just the thought. But then something snags in the corner of my eye, and as I look up, Niko moves from the seat opposite to set a soft blanket over my knees.

"You're shivering." The supple leather barely murmurs as he sits back again. He lifts a manila folder from the empty chair next to him, placing it on his knee.

"Thanks," I answer, not wanting to admit the direction of my thoughts, to put a voice to my fears. To admit that he and Sandy might have a point. His gaze dips, and I realize I'm rubbing the cuticles of my thumbs. I bury my fingers under the soft cashmere. It's just one more thing to be annoyed about. *Annoyed he's noticed. Annoyed I can't seem to curtail the childish habit.*

"What did you mean when you said you didn't mean to marry Tom?" His voice is quiet, almost like he was reluctant to voice the question at all.

"I didn't realize you had an interest in ancient history." Refusing to lift my gaze, I'm intent on rearranging the blanket to hide my reddening fingers.

"I'm interested in all kinds of things pertaining to you." His hand moves restlessly over the thin cardboard.

“Except my marriage doesn’t.”

“Your former marriage,” he corrects. “Come on, Isla.”

I refrain from telling him where to stick his winning smile and carefree words. Mainly because he would. Stick them right *there*.

“This isn’t like you, Isla. You’re pragmatic, not dramatic.”

“Or maybe you don’t know me as well as you’d like to think.”

“I know you’re an expert at making the most of any situation. I know that you choose not to wallow in self-pity, even at times when it could be warranted.”

I glance up sharply. “You’ll have to excuse me but I’m not quite sure how to act. I’ve never been kidnapped before.”

“That’s unfair.”

“Blackmailed?” I offer with a blithe flick of my hand. My flippancy is over the top because the more I think about it, the less shocking the idea of marrying him becomes. And that scares me.

“You think this is blackmail?” he asks in the vein of *do you think it’s going to rain?*

“Given the choice between the devil and the deep blue sea, you mean?” I answer saccharine sweet.

“Which am I? Which is Alexander, which is Anatoli? You have choices.”

“Do I?”

“We all have choices,” he answers darkly.

“Why, Niko? Why would you choose to marry me?”

The way he watches me, the weight of his attention; it feels like soft, caressing fingertips. “I want you. I’ve always wanted you. And this is the only way I can think to protect you.”

“And my brother.”

“I’m not marrying your brother.”

“So it is chivalry.” I almost roll my eyes, not sure why I’m laboring this point, except I suddenly don’t want his eyes anywhere else than on me. I know it’s wrong, but I can’t help it any more than a flower can help seeking the sun. “Isn’t that what every woman wants to hear,” I add scathingly. “That she needs a man to save her.”

“Is the idea so bad? To need someone.”

I roll my eyes. “The stuff of hearts and flowers.”

“You’re not a hearts and flowers kind of woman.”

“How would you know?” I retort, unimpressed that he’s right.

“Because I pay attention.” His gaze holds mine, daring me to look away. Daring me to contradict what I know to be true. “You told me a long time ago that flowers should be left in gardens.”

“Did you buy me flowers?” I didn’t mean to voice to the question.

“Not that you ever saw them.” It’s like he can’t dial back his amusement as his fingers relax on the folder, his other hand settling on the arm of the leather chair.

Why are my cheeks heated? “Chivalry aside, that’s not much of an answer.”

“There are always the tax benefits.”

“But I thought you said—”

“Is it criminal to be wealthy? I have businesses,” he chides. “I pay taxes. I’m not a complete degenerate.”

“I expect you must have a very clever accountant.”

“Everyone who works for me is clever. Well, almost everyone,” he adds. “I think you know my clever lawyer.”

He’s talking about Griffin, my half brother. Sandy said he was working for Niko’s uncle, but if he’s retired, maybe he works for him now. His fingers twitch on the folder again. I wonder what its significance is.

“A marriage is a union. Emotional. Spiritual. Physical.”

A pleasurable shiver rolls through me, one I know to be wrong. *Traitorous neurological pathways*. “We’re to have a marriage in that sense?” I actually suffer heart palpitations as I wait for his answer.

He throws an incendiary glance my way, his words dark and velvety. “I want it all.”

“But Sandy—”

“I respect your brother, but it’s you I want. I want to be so deep inside you I can feel your heartbeat.”

I swallow thickly, trying so hard to ignore his words. *What of love?* I want to ask, but I won’t allow myself as I turn to the window again.

*Where are we going?*

We’ve been in the air about forty-five minutes and for forty of them, I’ve been fighting the urge to ask. There hadn’t been an opportunity to find out at the private airport before takeoff. All I do know is I wasn’t asked for my passport, and I wasn’t about to remind him I’m not in the habit of carrying it with me. Assuming his plans include immediate marriage.

My stomach knots as I glance down at my watch, mentally calculating how many hours I have left. Forty-eight hours to respond to the Russian mafia. Or marry Niko.

*Can’t get married in forty-eight hours anywhere in the UK*, I think to myself. Which, as far as thoughts go, is a safer bet than letting myself imagine what’s about to happen. *Because then I might have to admit the prospect thrills me on some level*. But as I don’t have my passport, I don’t know how he thinks we’ll be marrying.

Noting my smile reflected in the dark window, I conceal it behind my hand. It’s safe to say I’m feeling quite smug all of a sudden. A little gleeful, even. I mean, what is he going to do? Smuggle me into a foreign country? Except, isn’t that exactly what a mafia type would do? And he did say he was someone worse than the mafia?

So maybe he’ll try that.

And maybe I'll kick up a stink wherever we land.

And be shoved into some foreign prison.

"Not long until we land."

I swing around to face him, perturbed my face might be so transparent. "Where will we be landing?"

"It would be a shame to spoil the surprise."

"Right." I might just over-enunciate the *t* the tiniest bit as I flounce away from him. It's quite a feat, flouncing while seated. As is ignoring his quiet chuckle. So I don't, pivoting to face him. "If you keep me from my sons—"

"Only a monster would keep a mother from her children." This time, Niko is the one to break the connection, his gaze sliding away. It's then I notice the plane has begun its descent. It isn't long before it lands smoothly, despite the wet and windy conditions. In the dark, I can't make out any landmarks. We could be in Ireland or ... somewhere else. My geography isn't great, to be honest, but there's something strangely familiar about the landscape. Narrowing my eyes, I peer through the darkness wondering if it's the hills in the distance that make it seem so. But then I notice my reflection squinting back at me.

"We're only touching down," Van says as the plane taxis to where it must. "We'll be back in the air very soon."

"Why?"

Niko's forefinger taps the manila folder before he moves it to the chair next to him. "Come, I'll show you." He unclips his seat belt and stands. "You won't need your purse," he adds, turning for the exit. I swear I then hear him mutter, "Let's go and find out if this worked."

I emerge into the dark, damp night, the wind whipping strands of my hair across my eyes and into my mouth. The light from the cabin casts an arc in front where the fine misting of rain glistens like tiny diamonds peppering the air. A gust of wind plasters my dress to my legs, making me shiver. A moment later, I find myself half turning as Niko settles his jacket on my shoulders. Something passes between us as our eyes meet. This is how it all started, with a jacket, all those years ago. My

fingers tightening on the lapels as nostalgia lingers in the air between, but then—

“Is that—” My head whips back to the night as my brain belatedly registers a childish squeak, then the rain-hazy figures on the tarmac. It’s Archie and Hugh and Holland, her smart new jaguar parked behind them. We’re not at a private airport but a small private airfield, local to Kilblair Castle, the rustic hanger standing in the distance.

“You arranged for my boys to be here?”

He nods, and the smile he wears is one I don’t think I’ve ever seen on him. Quietly pleased. Sort of modest. I shouldn’t think so but I like it on him. “I arranged for them to come with us.”

By contrast, my smile is a mile wide, relief flooding my body. As certain as I’d felt leaving them with Sandy and Holland, having them in my arms seems like everything right now. I don’t wait for Niko’s reply as I dash down the steps.

Only a monster would separate a mother from her children. Niko Vanyin is a lot of things—a lot of annoying things—but he isn’t a monster.

“Mummy!” the boys call in unison, Hugh waving madly as Archie tries to skip ahead, stopped only by Holland placing her hand on his shoulder. She bends and says something to him, but moments later, I’m there on the tarmac in front of them, my arms wrapped tightly around my babies.

“Hello, my lovely men. Fancy seeing you here!” My words are overly exuberant to detract from the imminent flood of tears. “How was school?”

“Rubbish,” Hugh offers, wiping my kiss from his cheek. “And we already had this conversation.” Before he can point out we agreed no kisses in public, Archie cuts in.

“We had apple cake for dessert at lunch.”

“Yum!” I press a matching smacking kiss to Archie’s cheek then run my hand through Hugh’s thick hair. Oh, what the hell! I press another stealthy smacker to the side of his face and laugh at his annoyed expression.

“*Mum*,” he complains, scrubbing the spot with the sleeve of his sweatshirt this time.

“Oh, you’re in trouble, mister.”

I meet Holland’s expression before it’s slips over my shoulder because those words weren’t for Hugh.

“Your grace.” I turn in time to see Niko incline his head. “It’s easier to ask for forgiveness than permission. Or so they tell me.” No longer bashful, he’s wearing an expression that’s more him. Cool, confident, and unbothered by the stuff that troubles us mere mortals.

“Where is Sandy?” I ask, swinging back to Holland. Something in her expression causes me to gather the boys closer.

“He’s on his way to London.” But then her countenance lightens, her lips settling into something that looks like begrudging amusement. “I’ve got to hand it to you. You timed it perfectly.”

“Thanks for being my accomplice.”

“Oh, no!” she says with a stuttering laugh. “You’re not pinning this on me.” She looks about to add something more when she turns to the boys instead. “Can you two get your mom’s bag from the back seat?”

“We brought your laptop,” Archie says. “And your diary. And we packed our swimsuits.”

“Come on, Arch.” Hugh throws his arm around his brother’s shoulder. “They want us to leave so they can say things they don’t want us to hear.”

“Be thankful,” Holland retorts. “I could’ve stuffed cotton in your ears. Now, scoot. And don’t forget your jacket.”

“He won’t need it where we’re going.”

“Well, that remains to be seen.” Holland suddenly sends Niko a cool look. “They’re not going anywhere yet.”

“Hang on a minute.” I half turn, not quite able to take my eyes from my sons yet needing to know what I’m missing. “What’s

this about? What's going on, Niko?"

Holland's dark brows climb at my use of his name. "I wish I could tell you," she replies with a grin. "I can't quite work it out, except the part where you two are getting married."

"You told!" I explode, sending my *betrothed* a look of loathing. My attention swings back to my sister-in-law. "Do the boys know?" Holland shakes her head and I quickly direct my venom to the man standing behind me. "I can't believe you'd do such a thing."

"I told Alexander," he answers equably.

"And Alexander told me," Holland adds with a grin. "From the road, so to speak." She sends Van a pointed look. "Man, is he pissed."

"Wait? Sandy went to London? Why? To stop me?" Confused, or indignant; honestly, I'm not sure what that was. I'm annoyed Niko told him and annoyed that Sandy would go haring off to... to stop me? Like I don't know my own mind. Like I can't make my own decisions. Not that it's exactly my decision, but he doesn't know that.

Bloody men!

"He was already on his way there," Holland says. "I told him you weren't flying back tonight because you were ill and then Van called. Next thing I know, he tells me not to leave the house, that security is being stepped up, then he goes haring off. Meanwhile, you haven't been answering your phone. He was worried about you," she adds with a touch of censure.

"But I haven't had any calls." I shake my head. My phone is in my bag on the plane. I'm not about to get back on the thing to get it—I might miss something. "I don't understand." Or maybe, on some level, I really do. "When exactly did you call my brother?" My attention flicks to Niko.

"Before I came back to the house this afternoon."

"Before we discussed *this*?" I hiss.

"Before I proposed. Before you said yes." I suppose his demeanor is supposed to be endearing. Sort of, *aw*, *shucks*,



*look at me. Aren't I hopelessly in love?*

Liar.

“You told him before you proposed?” Holland sounds delighted. “I guess *someone* is a little confident.”

“I knew I'd wear her down in the end.”

Holland snickers, but I don't have the bandwidth. I suppose I should be thankful she doesn't know the real reason we're getting married. Sandy, on the other hand, had obviously rushed off for that reason. And increased security at the castle.

“But Sandy asked you to stay home,” I find myself saying.

“I guess I'm not the only one who likes their man a little bossy. And a little sweet.” Her gaze flicks over Niko's jacket pointedly.

“Does he know everything?” I ask Niko in a low tone.

Niko nods.

“Guys, no need to talk in code.” Holland laughs. She really has no idea. “I have to tell you, Alexander is not happy at the wild goose chase you sent him on. The air turned blue when I called to tell him you were on your way to Scotland.”

Niko wanted him out of the way—he wanted to be sure I couldn't speak to him.

I pivot slowly. “You devious...”

“Hey, the kids are heading back,” Holland interjects. “So does someone want to tell me if I'm an accomplice or a getaway driver?”



## VAN

AVOIDING Alexander was a precaution against interference. I didn't tell him the whole story—or the whole story as Isla knows it—but I told him enough. I needed him sufficiently spooked enough not to be in Scotland when we arrived for Isla's belongings, her passport, and her boys. Once I was sure he was already on the way to London, I called and told him I was eloping with his sister, then had the signal to Isla's phone blocked.

It's not the way I usually treat my friends but needs must. We can iron out the issues later after I've won Isla's love. While not a religious man, I find myself sending *please, God*, heavenward.

“What am I supposed to tell them?” Isla's fierce whisper brings me back from my thoughts. Her gaze slides from mine, narrowing on the pair as though they might be feigning sleep. If they are, Hugh is an excellent fake snorer and Archie mustn't mind people thinking he sucks his thumb.

Arranging to bring the boys had been another strategic move for the most part. I knew Isla would be much happier to have them with her. I'd also thought she'd be less likely to fight the idea of us for a nine-hour flight with an audience. When the audience included the two most important people in her world, there was a every chance she might even bring herself to be nice to me. What I hadn't bargained on was both boys falling asleep within an hour of take off, leaving us back where we started.

“Tell them they’re about to spend a week by the pool instead of the classroom.” And I’ll tell you how to win friends and influence children. I wanted them here for her, for our wedding. I fully intend on asking them for their blessing, not that she needs to know that right now. If I’m lucky, having them at the ceremony might help legitimize the union in Isla’s eyes. “I’m sure you’ll hear no complaints.”

“Don’t get cute with me.”

“I can’t help it.” I stretch out my legs and settle my hands in my lap. “I think it might be in my DNA.”

“The cunning kind of cute.” She harrumphs, jerking back in her chair.

“You’re right, of course. You’re the one that’s just too adorable for words.”

“Yes, I feel adorable,” she replies, throwing sharp daggers my way. “Van, seriously, what am I supposed to tell my children about us?”

I stifle a sigh at her use of my name. “I’m sure you’ll think of something,” I reply, stiff jawed.

“Stop being so bloody obtuse.” God, that mixture of desire and malevolence in her gaze is such a fucking turn on. If only she knew the power she wields over me.

“Tell them I’m mad about you. That I can’t live without you.”

“Be serious.”

I *am* being serious. More serious about anything than I’ve ever been. But this isn’t time to make a clean breast of it. She wouldn’t accept my overtures in the bedroom, refusing to discuss the possibility of a future together at every turn. This is what she left me with. It’s a path from which I won’t turn.

“Tell them I’ll do everything in my power to make you happy.” Forever, I silently add, because that’s how long I’m keeping you.

“I can’t believe we’re doing this.” Tipping forward, she presses her face into her hands. “I can’t believe you’re making

me do this,” she quietly explodes, her head coming up sharp again.

“I prefer the first version. You do have freewill.” Or the illusion of it.

Her answer is a growl.

“If you want to blame anyone, it should be your ex. He sold you out. He brought you to the attention of a very dangerous man. I’m just doing what I can to protect you.” Truth and lies, given the dangerous man is me.

“And out of the frying pan into the fire I go!”

I bite back my smile. How close you come! “To jump is your choice, *milaya*.”

“My savior,” she snipes.

“I’m not your jailer.” Just your manipulator. The man who’d take advantage of any situation to show you how good we could be together.

“I don’t pretend to understand any of it.”

Yet, my darling. You don’t understand *yet*. Which is probably just as well.

“Can I get you anything, Mr. Vanyin?” The purser appears, turning her smile my companion’s way. “Lady Isla, could I bring you another orange juice?”

“No, thank you, Melanie. And thank you for being so sweet with the boys earlier.” The consummate diplomat she is, Isla immediately masks her tension. Both women’s gazes slide to the sleeping children.

“It was my pleasure,” my employee returns with a warm smile.

“Please pass on my thanks to the captain. I’m sure my sons will be talking about their trip to the cockpit for months to come. It was a dream come true for them both.”

“How do you do that?” I find myself asking as Melanie makes her way back to the bulkhead. “Make everyone smile.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, you do. I know you do.” When she doesn’t answer, I add, “You make everyone feel seen. Important.”

“Everyone is important.”

“Even me?”

“Once upon a time, you were all I ever thought about.” She turns her head, signaling the end of the conversation.

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“Uncle Van, do you own this whole island?” Without waiting for an answer, Archie sticks his head out of the window of the moving Jeep. His hair blows in the breeze, the brilliant sunlight giving it the appearance of a million fiery pins.

“Archie, stop that right now.” Isla pulls at his arm. “That all I need for you to lose your head.”

“It’s not going to blow off,” he says, then giggles. “Blow off, Mummy get it?”

“No, darling. I don’t get it, and by your giggles, I’m not sure I want to get it, either.”

“He means fart,” his older brother drawls. “That’s what blow off means. Archie, if another car or a truck comes the other way, and you’re hanging out the window like Gertie, you’ll never eat Geordie’s shortbread again. Because you’ll be dead.”

“Yes I will. I’ll just have to hold my head under my arm like this.”

In the mirror, I watch Archie mime feeding shortbread to his decapitated head, held against his hip.

“Speaking of heads,” his brother replies, “tell Mum what Ms Maddison said to Holly at the end of school yesterday.” The kid glances at his mother, a tiny pinch showing between his brows. “It was just yesterday we were at school, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.” She smiles, pushing his overly long hair from his face.

“What time is it in Scotland now?”

“I’ve no idea. But get back to Ms Maddison, please.” Her eyes catch mine in the mirror. “Archie’s teacher is...”

“Horrible,” Archie retorts. “She doesn’t like me at all.”

“Then she must have very bad taste,” I offer with a smile.

“Exactly,” she agrees before remembering who she’s speaking to, swapping her open expression for a haughty one. “What happened?” she coaxes her son.

“She got her knickers in a knot over nothing.” Folding his arms, Archie harrumphs. “Uncle Van? Your friend has fat rolls on the back of his head like a bulldog.”

“Archie! That isn’t a very nice thing to say. You know better than to hurt people’s feelings.”

“I was just telling the truth.”

“Of course you were,” I interject. “Besides, Sergei doesn’t have any feelings, do you?” I defy anyone not to smile in the face of Sergei’s scowl.

“I have feelings,” he mutters in heavily accented English. He rolls his shoulders as though discomfited by the admission. “But my neck is not like bulldog. Is like bull.”

Archie giggles, then tries to change the subject when his mother presses him again, but the story eventually comes out.

“So let me get this right,” Isla begins. She looks genuinely frazzled, which is still preferable to how she’d looked on my doorstep yesterday afternoon. *As long as I have breath in my body, she won’t ever be scared again.* Her hair seems to have taken on a life of its own in the humidity and her dress looks like she’s slept in it. I had suggested she take something more comfortable from her suitcase to wear during the flight, but she’s just glanced at me like I’d suggested she give me a lap dance. “Yesterday, you—”

“He took a skull into school,” his older brother supplies.

Eight-year-old Archie gives a definite nod. “I put it in a shoebox and put the box in my schoolbag.”

“An animal skull?” she asks warily.

“No. A people one. It had the jaw and everything.” Pressing his palms together, he makes a snapping alligator of them.

Isla glances at Hugh who grins a little manically. “He’s being serious?”

As I understand it from a comment Sandy made in passing, Archie’s reaction to his parents’ divorce has been to begin telling tall tales. Hugh, meanwhile, has taken to sullen moods and fighting in school.

“Where on earth did you get it, Archie?” Isla’s head swings to her younger son, then to the older. “He hasn’t been in the pet cemetery, has he?” As I recall, the castle has a Victorian pet cemetery.

“It was a people head,” Archie replies, clearly in his element. “I found it in a box in the attic with hundreds and hundreds of other bones.”

“What on earth were you doing in the attic?” Isla asks as, at the same time, Sergei repeats in Russian, “Hundreds of bones?”

“Not what you’re thinking,” I murmur, refocusing on Isla and her sons sitting on the back seat. *If he’d been in the mausoleum, possibly.*

“I was looking for treasure,” Archie replies with a shrug that’s quickly followed by a jaw-cracking yawn. “Holly said I could. She came with me to make sure I didn’t fall through the ceiling.”

“Oh, well. I’m pleased you weren’t up there alone. But those bones, they used to hang in a doctor’s surgery.”

“In the olden days?” Archie asks. Head tilted to the early morning sun, his eyes fluttering closed as he yawns again.

“Yes. I’m not sure how your grandfather came to have them,” she ponders. “Picked them up at an auction, maybe. But they were definitely his.”

“That’s what I told the class.” Eyes still closed, Archie’s smile seems more sly than slumberous.



“That’s not *exactly* what he said,” Hugh interjects with a snicker.

“Yes, I did!” Archie suddenly jerks straight. “I told them, ‘This is my grandfather’s skull. I found it in a box in the attic along with the rest of his bones.’ And then one of the girls started to cry because girls are really silly.”

Sergei nods his agreement at the same time as his mother chastises Archie.

“Just girls, Mummy. Not grown-up ladies. And Clarissa Fraser is the silliest.” He harrumphs. “My friend Paolo wasn’t scared, and he asked to hold it, but the teacher snatched it from my hands before I could pass it over. When she put it on the shelf, someone asked if he’d been murdered. Then someone else asked if I’d seen his ghost.”

“Oh, Lord.” Isla presses a hand to her forehead.

“I told them he died because he liked *whisky and wicked wimmen* too much,” he says, imitating a Scots accent perfectly. “And I know that because I heard Chrissy say so.”

My eyes meet Isla’s in the mirror, hers dancing with mirth. “Well, it certainly sounds like you told a good tale. But what did Miss Maddison want with Holland?”

“She told her, in a very mean voice, that bones aren’t allowed on the school premises. Then she asked what Holly was going to do about it. Holly just ruffled my hair and told me I was a budding lesbian.”

“Thespian, darling.”

Hugh snickers.

“Miss Maddison said I ought to be told off not encouraged. Then she asked where I’d gotten such a thing, and Holly told her the best joke.”

“Did she?” Isla returns in a reedy tone.

“She said, ‘Who knows?’” Archie throws up his arms. “She said she’d have to investigate because we have a dungeon, our own graveyard, and a mausoleum, so really, it could’ve come from anywhere. Miss Maddison went a bit red, and her mouth

fell open like this.” Archie pulls a face that’s all eyes and tonsils. “Then she said, ‘well, I never!’ and Holland said if she didn’t believe it, she should check it and that for twelve pounds fifty, she could visit the castle to find out for herself.”



## ISLA

“WHAT’S THAT?”

“Oh. I, err...” I stare at the cream silk rippling between my fingertips. I’ve never seen it before. It’s certainly not mine because it’s not the kind of nightdress you wear for sleeping in. *But something that was intended for the dark of night.* “I think Auntie Holland must’ve put some of her things in my case by mistake,” I say, shoving it back into my suitcase. I notice the Agent Provocateur nightdress still has the eye-bulging price tags attached, so I pull the silk out of my case because something of that value deserves better treatment. Folding the silk more gently, I consider how kind it was of Holland to pack it. And how the reality of the situation is very different.

“This is a nice room,” Archie decrees, jumping up onto the bed. “This bed isn’t as big as Uncle Van’s but it’s just as comfortable.” He glances around the sage green walls, the rustic wooden furniture, running his fingers over the carved wooden headboard fashioned to look like a huge leaf.

Set on a hill with a backdrop of a stark volcanic outcrop, Van’s property is beautiful. A modern take on the local architecture, it’s sleek and expansive with wide verandas and plantation style shutters, muted tones and cool marble floors. The room I’ve been housed in (alone) would rival that of any five-star hotel, the bathroom, in fact, is bigger than my bedroom back home. Overlooking a lagoon style pool and gardens that are a tropical paradise of lush green palm trees and vibrant tropical flowers, the view stretches over the tops of the palm trees to a

golden beach and the Caribbean Sea beyond. More like a boutique hotel than a home. It's a tropical paradise. If I owned it, I don't think I'd ever leave.

As I turn back from the view, Archie's words begin to sink in. "What were you doing in Uncle Van's room?"

"I went to have a look. He did say to make ourselves at home."

"I'm not sure he meant in the goldilocks sense," I reply, watching as he drops his head to the mattress and spreads out his arms.

"I wanted to see if Hugh was right because he said you and Uncle Van might be sleeping in the same bed, like Daddy and Carly."

"Oh." A strangeness twists through my stomach at the thought.

"And Angel before Carly, and Candy before Angel, and—"

"Thank you, Archie, but there's no need to list all of your father's girlfriends."

He gives a shrug. "Can't remember all of their names anyway. That's a little sofa, isn't it?" He points at the linen two-seater which faces the end of the bed.

"Tiny," I agree, "but, as you can see, Uncle Van and I have separate rooms." Which had come as a relief. *Mostly*. It feels like a stay of execution, not that sleeping with Niko has ever been anything but enjoyable.

"I know. I already told Hugh."

"My sons. The arbitrators of my virtue," I mutter.

"What?" Archie lifts his head.

"Nothing."

"You always tell me not to do that. Say nothing when I said something." I send him *the look* when he flops back on the bed and begins to move his hands across the bedlinens like a snowless snow angel. "Mummy, we like Uncle Van. Me and Hugh talked about it, and we wouldn't mind if he *was* your boyfriend."

“I’m too old for boyfriends.”

“But Daddy is older, and he’s had *loads* of girlfriends.” The human starfish on the bed lifts his head again. “And you’re not old. You’re not losing your hair.”

“Thank heaven for small mercies,” I say with a laugh.

“Daddy got really cross when I said the hair on the top of his head had started to disappear.”

“Oh dear.” Not. I hope it all falls out and he has to carry it around in a basket.

“He was bending down to fasten his shoelaces and I patted the bald spot on the top of his head. I didn’t even say *tut, tut baldy nut* and he yelled at me,” Archie says, aggrieved. “Anyway, if you wanted to make Uncle Van your boyfriend, Hugh and me, we’d be all right with that.”

I turn from my suitcase. “And I suppose that would be nothing at all to do with holidays on private islands in the Caribbean while you should be at school, trips in private jets, or meeting the players at Arsenal Football Club.”

“Hugh says those are just nincidentals perks. We like him because he’s Uncle Sandy’s best friend and because he makes you smile, though you don’t seem to like him to see when you do. Hugh says that’s what girls do.”

“Does he now?”

“Yes. He says his friend told him that girls say to treat boys mean to make them like you. Or something like that.”

“Treat them mean to keep them keen,” I mutter.

“That’s it.”

“That’s not it at all. At least, that’s not what I’m doing to him.”

“Really?” Archie sounds unconvinced. “Because it seems to be working. When you’re not looking at Uncle Van, he watches you like Gertie does.”

“Like I have a biscuit in my pocket?” Like she’d lick me to death for it. What a way to go, though. Niko, not Gertie, I mentally amend.

“I don’t think Uncle Van would like dog biscuits. They don’t taste like people biscuits.”

“I don’t want to know how you know that.”

With a grin, Archie flops back and the sun-angel making resumes. “Gertie looks at you like you’re her favorite person in the whole wide world. And that’s how Uncle Van looks at you.”

Be still my foolish little heart.

“Knock knock.” The deep words are accompanied by two raps on the doorframe. “Am I interrupting?” Niko appears before us in pale shorts and a dark T-shirt. His legs are long and tanned and—

I pull my gaze away. I really don’t need this right now. Did he hear any of that? Talk of boyfriends and my son’s pimping me out for the perks. I chance a look his way and though his gaze darts between me and the boy on my bed, his expression is bland. In other words, it’s impossible to tell what he heard.

“Archie was just complimenting his accommodations,” I say, hustling my brain onward before it spirals away.

“I told Mummy that your bed is big enough for an army to sleep in.”

“Do you think so?” There’s more than a note of amusement in his reply.

“It’s *far* too big for one person, Uncle Van. You must roll about in it feeling very lonely.”

“Thank you, Archie.” My sons, the would-be merchants of my virtue. “Why don’t you go and see what your brother is up to?”

“He’s having some alone time.” Archie sighs.

“I—” No. Not that. It was probably just an excuse to get rid of his brother for a little while.

“Hugh says when you reach double digits, you need time for self-care. I think that means putting on clean clothes and under arm deodorant.”

My gaze meets Van's, and both of us struggle not to laugh.

"Why don't you go and get changed," Van suggests, his gaze sliding Archie's way. "I'll give you all a tour of the place."

"No, I don't—" think that's a good idea. Is that what I want to say? I feel so conflicted. I know why I'm here. I'm not supposed to be having a good time. I'm not supposed to be making it easy for him.

"It would be best," Niko adds. "Between the villa and the beach, there's some very dense bushland. Better to be safe, no?"

"Yes, okay. But can we do it later?"

"Yes, because I'm starved!" Archie announces, rising from the bed like a corpse reanimated.

"Why don't you go into the kitchen and ask Mary to make you a snack?"

"I can do that?" he asks, lighting up.

"Of course."

"Whenever I like?"

"I think you should ask your mother before you ask the housekeeper," he answers, somehow picking up on my anxiety.

"Right, but I can go now?" he says as his legs slide from the bed. "Because you already said so." Archie's attention flicks between Niko and me. "He did, Mummy."

"Yes, darling. That's fine."

"And then can you take us to the pool, Uncle Van?"

"I'm sure Uncle Van has lots of things he needs—"

"Of course. Go get your swim shorts and your brother."

"Yay!" Archie does an excited little skip. "Best day ever!"

I want to be cross. I want to say 'I see what you're doing' but I can't quite manage it. The boys get so little attention from their father, and I know they feel that lack. When we were together, I was able to counteract it. What they didn't get from



him, I'd try to make it up with my love. But now we're no longer together, I can't be there to fill that void. When they spend the odd weekend with him, he might take them to the cinema, but more often than not, they just watch TV while he does 'business things.' But it's not about where they go or what they do, it's the fact that he seems to have so little interest in them. I know they feel it, my lovely, kind, perceptive little men.

Niko isn't their father, and marriage or not, that'll never change. But these moments in the sun; Arsenal Football Club, birthday cake, and so on, I can't deny them.

"Are you coming with us?" From his position in the doorway, Niko watches me.

"To the pool?" I glance back at my suitcase. "I suppose that depends on whether Holland has packed my swimsuit. Honestly, I'm not even sure if I own one," I add distractedly.

I turn, Niko's voice suddenly much closer. "Agent Provocateur?"

I glance down, realizing what I have in my hands. "It's not—" what you think it is? Not meant for you? "Holland packed it."

"For your wedding night." He's looking at me like he's a starving man and I'm a hearty meal.

"That doesn't mean she approves."

"While we don't need her approval," he says, slipping the nightgown from my hand, "I think she might secretly be Team Van."

"Because she's confusing you with my brother," I retort, ignoring the curl to his words. "He adores her, and why wouldn't he? She's not a middle-aged harridan with a couple of kids."

"Keep going, *milaya*." He presses his hands to my shoulders and the silk drops like a theater curtain. "Who knows," he adds, his words becoming a little rough around the edges, "you might actually find something to turn me off."

I don't answer. I can't. Because when he touches me, heat spreads across my skin like wildfire.

"But don't count on it," he whispers, his hands cradling my cheeks. "I do it again, I won't pretend there's nothing between us. Tiptoe around to protect other's feelings. For the sake of your safety, for the sake of my sanity, like it or not, you will marry me."

"I don't like it," I whisper.

He presses his lips to my head as he whispers, "Stop lying to yourself."



## ISLA

“HOLLAND,” I whine, “why would you do this to me?”

I stare at myself in the mirror, angry and sweaty, and wanting to crawl out of my skin. The boys have gone ahead with ‘Uncle Van’ having decided they were far too excited for sunshine and adventure to wait for me. Which is just as well as after seeing what Holland has packed for me, I might not leave my room until it’s time to go home.

“So much skin on show.” I pinch the flesh at my hip then readjust the tie of my bikini bottoms. Yes, *string*. “There was a perfectly acceptable one-piece in the drawer,” I mutter. “Why couldn’t you have packed that?” Instead, she’d packed the bright red string bikini I’d bought after Tom had moved out and moved onto women half my age. She also included a brand new one-piece suit I’ve ever seen before, but it’s cut so high at the bottom and so low cut at the top, it’s actually more indecent that the tiny red triangles I’m (barely) wearing.

Giving up on my reflection, I move back to my case with the vague hope that I might’ve missed something, when a shrill squeal I’d recognize anywhere makes me rush to the balcony. I look down, my fingers tight on the railing as fear floods out of me, because there, in the shallow end of the pool, Archie and Hugh stand knee deep, laughing and flicking water at each other.

“Mummy!” My littlest man pushes the brim of his floppy hat from his eyes as he spots me. “We went through a jungle to get to the beach, and I saw parrots!”

“Hurry up and come down,” Hugh complains loudly, shielding his eyes from the sun. “Uncle Van says we can’t swim until you’re here.”

“Put your hat on the right way,” Archie complains, pointing at the way his brother is wearing his cap back to front. “Then you won’t be all squinty.”

“That’s very responsible of Uncle Van,” I call back, interrupting the brewing argument. “Where is Uncle Van, anyway?” The boy’s answers are drowned out as my eyes snag on the blond Adonis standing on the far side of the pool under the shade of a palm tree. He’s shirtless, unmoving, and staring up at me like a starving man staring at a hearty meal. And the worst of it is, I suspect I’m looking at him with the same kind of hunger.

“Mummy, come on!” Hugh shouts.

“Yes, all right.” Tearing my gaze from all that tanned and taut torso, and those burning eyes, I jerk from the railing. As an afterthought, I move back again. “Have you both got sunscreen on?”

“Yes, hurry up!” they shout back.

I leave the balcony, unable to resist my reflection one more unhappy time. I suck in my stomach, examine the stretchmarks on my thighs.

“Bugger it,” I decide. “Marry me, marry this body.” Grabbing an oversized cotton sarong, I fold it around me and tie the edges halter neck style around my neck and make my way to the stairs.

My bare feet are almost silent as I make my way down the staircase and through the house. French doors lead out to a shaded terrace, the air warm and sticky on my skin. I begin to wonder what happened to the shouting and splashing when I step out onto the sun warm terracotta tiles. But then I see them through the dense foliage of some potted palms. Their backs to me, my little men sit quietly either side of Van. Archie’s hair looks like he was recently electrocuted, while my suddenly

too-cool-for-school ten-year-old still has his baseball cap on back to front.

“Is that why you’ve brought us here?”

At the sound of Hugh’s serious tone, my heart sinks, my footsteps slowing to a stop as I wonder what prompted this. He wouldn’t—I know it. Niko wouldn’t be so cruel as to frighten my children with the events of yesterday.

“No, of course not.” Niko’s body shifts until he’s looking into the face of my son. “Of course not,” he answers gently. “This was meant to be an opportunity for us to get to know each other better. I didn’t think you’d mind missing school,” he adds lightly.

“I don’t mind!” Archie interjects, bouncing in his seat. “I don’t mind if you want to be Mummy’s boyfriend, either.”

“I think I’m a little too old to be anyone’s boyfriend.”

“That’s what she said,” Archie chirps. “But Daddy has girlfriends and he’s going bald.”

I press my hand to my mouth to suppress a chuckle.

“What has hair got to do with it?” Hugh leans around Niko to glare at his brother.

“Just that Uncle Van’s still got all his hair so he can’t be that old. But even if you were bald,” he adds earnestly, turning to Niko, “I’d still like you. You make Mummy happy.”

“It’s very kind of you to say so, Archie.”

“I like to see her smile,” my youngest adds. “Not that fake smile she wears sometimes.” A sudden finger pokes at my heart. My lovely, slightly strange, perceptive little boy.

“Does she wear a fake smile often?”

Archie nods. “She wears it when she’s worrying.” Hugh makes a noise of disgust, causing Archie to lean around again. “She does, and you know it, Hugh. Like last week at breakfast when she made us pancakes instead of porridge just because we caught her in coming in from the driveway wearing her coat over her pajamas. She put on that smile,” he adds, turning to

Niko now, “and made us pancakes so we wouldn’t ask what she’d been up to.”

“And what had she been up to, do you think?”

“She’d been filling the holes in driveway with a bucket of gravel. She thinks we don’t notice the holes make her sad, but we do.”

Pressing my hand to my mouth I swallow over the lump in my throat. Potholes don’t make me sad. The futility of the exercise does. The fact that I can’t afford to get it fixed. My lovely, slightly strange, perceptive, big-mouthed child. I’m going to need a better fake smile. I begin to move again, keen to stop further revelations.

“But getting back to your question,” Hugh says, “have you asked her to marry you?”

My feet halt and my blood freezes, and that poking finger digs into my heart a little deeper.

“I wanted to speak to you both about it,” Niko says, artfully dodging the question.

“So that is why you brought us here?” Hugh rebukes.

“Are you asking if the trip was a bribe?”

“Well, if it’s not, you could always try,” Hugh offers with a cheeky chuckle.

“You’ll go far in life.” Niko’s tone is wry as he reaches to ruffle Hugh’s hair.

“I don’t want to go far. I just want to play for Arsenal.” He pauses. “You could always buy the club.”

“For your permission?” Niko replies, sounding amused.

“It wouldn’t hurt,” the mercenary replies with a shrug.

“I’m sure I don’t need to. If you want to play for Arsenal, I’ve no doubt you could. Set your mind to it, put in the hard work.”

“That’s what Mummy tells him,” Archie butts in. “She says nothing worth having comes easy.”

“Your mother is a very wise lady.”

“And very pretty,” my littlest white knight says.

“She is the prettiest,” Niko agrees. “But that’s not why I want to marry her.”

Hugh clears his throat and presses his right fist to his thigh.

“Then why do you?”

“Because I love her. I have loved your mother for a long time.”

“Really?” Archie asks. “But she was married for ages.”

“I loved her before she was married.”

My heart does a traitorous pitter-pat, though I try hard to ignore it. I can’t put any stock in his words. He’s just trying to smooth things over, make things easier for the boys.

“Why didn’t you tell her?”

“It’s a very long story.”

“I’ve got time,” Hugh answers in a serious tone.

“Let’s just say young men make foolish decisions, which is something you’ll find out for yourselves. I wasn’t kind to her,” he adds quietly. “I didn’t deserve her.”

“What’s different now?”

“Have you ever experienced regret, Hugh?”

“Well, yes,” my son offers awkwardly.

“He once lied to Mum and—”

“Shut up, Archie!” Hugh retorts.

“It’s okay,” Niko soothes, “we’re human. We all make mistakes. In fact, it’s nice to know I’m not alone.”

“You mean you lied to her, too?”

A prickle of warning runs over my skin, but curiosity wins out, my body straining closer to hear. Lied to me about what?

“It was a very long time ago, but I still regret it.”

“Me, too.” Hugh shoulders slump.



“Your mother deserves so much better,” Niko adds so softly, I almost miss it.

“She deserves everything,” Hugh agrees, “Because she does everything for everyone—she’s always trying to make other people happy.”

“When she smiles, it feels like being in the sunshine.” At Archie’s interjection, my vision becomes a little tear hazy.

“What a wonderful way to put it.” Niko turns, resting his hand on Archie’s shoulder.

“Will you lie to her again?” my youngest asks.

“I will try my very best not to,” Niko answers, deftly sidestepping the question.

“Mum says trying your best is all anyone can ever ask of you.” Cursed by my own words, I almost don’t hear Hugh mutter, “Dad didn’t try his best for her.”

“Not with anyone, really,” Archie pipes up. “I’m not allowed to play at Tiberius’s house anymore because he said something mean to his mummy. My feet are hot. Can I go and put them in the pool again, Uncle Van?”

“If you put on your hat on promise to stay in the shallow end,” he answers.

Off Archie trots, and just when I think this is my opportunity to arrive, Hugh’s next words are like a lance to my heart.

“Dad didn’t say something mean. He kissed Tiberius’s mum. I know because I caught them.” As he stares up at Niko, his bottom lip begins to wobble, though my little man does his best to stop it. “He made me promise not to tell her.”

My poor boy. I thought it was the divorce and his father’s lack of interest that had been taking its toll. But making him keep secrets is the lowest of the low. I’ll twist off Tom’s testicles for putting my child in this position, making him keep a secret from me.

My love. Well, there’s one thing for certain. Hugh understands honor more than my shit of an ex ever will. I didn’t know—I suspected when Tiberius’s mother stopped looking me in the

eye when I dropped the boys to school, but they were only suspicions.

“Hugh.” Niko turns and rests both hands on my son’s shoulders. “I hope you know you’ve done nothing wrong. You mustn’t feel bad about this.”

“Can’t help it,” he mutters with an uncomfortable looking shrug. “Tiberius is such a stupid name.”

“It’s never okay for a grown-up to ask a child to keep a secret, especially one that makes them feel uncomfortable.”

“I know.” Hugh drops his head. “But if I’d told Mum then she would feel bad, too. And it wasn’t her fault,” he adds quickly, his head coming up sharp. “He wasn’t supposed to kiss anyone else. He was only supposed to kiss her!”

“You’re a good son to think of your mother’s feelings, but it isn’t right that you were put in that position.”

“He was worse to her. He made her cry so much, but now she just wears that fake smile all of the time.”

Hugh falls quiet, breaking my heart for him a little more. Tom isn’t the best father, but he loves his boys in his own way. *An inadequate way*, my mind whispers full of regret. I never thought when I married him, thought about having children, of course, but I was sure he wouldn’t be the same kind of father as my own, but in his own fucked up way, he is. Neglect and deceit are just as harmful as mind games. Lost to my own regrets and introspection, I almost miss Hugh’s reply.

“What is a stepdad supposed to do?”

“*Not* buy you Arsenal Football Club,” Niko answers without missing a beat.

“It was worth a try,” the cheeky monkey admits with a grin.

“The problem with buying the club is that later, you’d begin to worry why I bought it. Then you’d begin to wonder about my intentions and my trustworthiness, and I don’t want that. I want you to like me not for what I can do for you but because of the respect I hope we’ll have for each other one day.”

Before I'd hidden behind this palm, I could've been offered a hundred guesses as to what I might hear, and I still wouldn't have come close. And it feels disconcerting. Who taught this man about feelings?

Hugh nods and offers a happy, "Okay."

"You're sure about that?" Niko sounds bemused.

"Yep. I mean, I'd be really happy if you bought Arsenal, but understand the reasons you won't," Hugh replies sounding years older than his age. "I'm okay about it as long as you're kind to Mum. She should have someone to look her after for a change."

"You've noticed that," Niko says quietly. "How she puts everyone before herself."

I find myself frowning. Archie as he calls from the pool and Niko turns to him with a wave. I'm not some martyr. I just look after the people I love.

"He lies," Hugh suddenly says. "My dad lied to her, and he lies to us all of the time."

"There are all kinds of lies," Niko replies, seeming to tread carefully. "Sometimes we lie to those we love to protect them."

"I know there are lots of kinds of lies, Uncle Van. I'm not a baby. There are white lies people tell not to hurt someone's feelings, and then there are the lies you tell when you're embarrassed, like the time I walked in on Mum waxing her—"

"There you all are!" I positively burst from the potted palm. "What are you two up to?" I ask, all exuberance and jolly hockey sticks.

"We were waiting for you," Hugh protests. "What *have* you been doing?"

Niko's smirk makes my cheeks pink. *I wasn't waxing anything*, I think, hoping my withering glance says as much.

And it was a couple of stray hairs in my nose Hugh had walked in on me waxing. The area Niko is probably smirking about no longer requires a waxing regime as I'd gone down

the laser route some time ago. Mainly because I'd once waxed my own nether regions with so much wax, I'd had to lie in a hot bath to remove my underwear. It was either that or commit to wearing the same pair of knickers for the rest of my life. But those aren't the kinds of things you discuss with your *fiancé*. After the wedding, however...

He's in for such a shock, I decide.

"Mummy, can we swim now?" Archie calls. "We've been waiting *ages*."

"We were about to send out a search party." Niko angles his gaze my way, the heat shining there deepening my degrees.

"Were you?" The way he's looking at me makes my stomach flip. I turn to my son as he begins to pull off his T-shirt. "Did you put sunscreen on?"

"Yep. And I've got my rash vest," he says, pulling an aqua blue top from the bench. He slips it over his head, then one arm, before grabbing his brother's matching one and stepping in the direction of the pool. "Here you go, Arch!"

"It's all wet now," Archie complains.

"Don't be an idiot," he replies, shoving his other arm in. "You're in the pool already." He pivots and gives a little hop and a skip. As a mother of boys with ten years' experience, I read what he's about to do. I make to move, my mouth already open, but that's as far as I get before he catapults himself into the water with a bellowed, "Cannonball!"

My heart jumps to my throat, further strangling my reply, but then Hugh's head breaks the through water's surface again.

"Come on Arch!" he yells. Meanwhile, I think I've just aged ten years.

"Hugh!" I yell, my emotions a ball of anger and relief. "You're know you supposed find out how deep a pool is before hurling yourself in." Shielding my eyes with my hand, I watch as Hugh plunges back under the water like a seal, pretending not to hear. "The little—"

“It’s my fault.” I almost startle as I find Niko at my side. He’s wearing his sunglasses now, but I still sense the sweep of his gaze. “We talked about pool safety when we got back from the beach.”

“You’re not going to be one of those stepfathers, are you?” I return hotly, swinging around to face him. My heart still hammering at Hugh’s recklessness, not to mention I still feel wrong footed about the conversation I’d overheard. But not so much that I don’t note the way his brows retract at that one pertinent word.

“What kind of stepfather is that?” He doesn’t bother to hide his amusement.

“The kind who tries to win favor by playing friend,” I snipe, folding my arms across my chest.

“So you don’t think I should buy Arsenal Football Club?” Niko returns, challenging my ridiculousness. “*Milaya*, you know me better than that.”

“Do I? I thought I knew you once.”

“Peanut,” he suddenly growls. “I can’t wait to see what you’re hiding under this.” His gaze flits over my body, everywhere it touches, it burns, and he steps suddenly closer, his hands curling around my hips. At the contact, my insides bloom, my body reacts with such treachery as his thumbs make a slow sweep of my hips over the thin cotton sarong. He’s so close I can smell the base notes of his cologne, oud wood, rich and heady. I find I have to resist the urge to melt against him because a shirtless Niko is a sight to behold, and a low growling Niko is a temptation like nothing else. But temptation is base and carnal and wholly selfish, and the attraction I’m fighting right now has other flavors. Listening in to his conversation with Hugh and Archie has muddied my thoughts, has complicated things. He spoke with sense and compassion and he handled Hugh’s worries with such delicate diplomacy. Niko Vanyin might not be husband material but it’s a crying shame he isn’t a father.

“Red and,”—his eyes dip, his finger and thumb begin to pull on one string—“brief.”

Was a word ever enunciated so wickedly?

“You’ll have to keep imagining,” I retort with supreme effort as I press my hand to the center of his chest. I make as though to push him away when his hands tighten on my hips, “because I have no intention of taking it—”

That’s as far as I get, unless you count the very undignified squeal I make the moment before I hit the water.



## VAN

THE CHILDREN'S delighted cheers sound through my waterlogged ears. I hadn't pushed Isla into the pool, I'd launched both of us in.

"You!" She breaks the water's surface, swiping her hair from her face. Using the flat of her hand, she sends a wave of water my way. "Horrible, rotten—" But she can't stop the tilt of her lips. Isla isn't the precious type and add in her sons whooping approvals and I know she won't stay cross very long.

"You know me better than to issue a dare, darling." Ducking under the surface, I slick back my hair.

"I did no such thing!" she splutters.

"You said you had no intention of taking *it*."

"Off!" she splutters, pink cheeked and gorgeous. "I have no intention of taking off my sarong."

"Ah, my mistake," I reply through a smile. "Anyway, a dunking might be preferable to the alternative." We're both treading water, her reluctant smile an echo of my unrepentant one. "I was very close to kissing you."

"You wouldn't." Her eyes flick to the other end of the pool where the boys have stopped hollering.

"Didn't you hear? I have their permission."

"You're not kissing me in front of my children, Van."

"You shouldn't have said that," I say, moving closer.



“What are you going to do? Make me wet twice?”

“Is that a dare?”

I laugh loudly when she splutters, “I didn’t mean—”

God, I love her disconcerted expression and, as she blinks, sunlight glistening from waterdrops balanced on her spiked lashes force a memory to the forefront of my brain. The bathroom was bathed in sunlight and my fingers wrinkled as I’d held out my hand to help her from the bath. The floor was covered with water and bubbles that had poured over the side from when she’d ridden me. One foot on the floor, the other in the bath, she slipped, her body crashing against mine. Hardened nipples and bathroom cool skin flush from thigh to chest. It had been moments since I’d had her and I wanted her again. But it was more than that. I wanted her heart—needed her bone deep. I think that was the moment I knew we were meant for forever. And it feels like it happened yesterday, not years ago. I still feel the same now. It’s as though loving her altered my DNA somehow.

“What are you doing?”

Her pale sarong blooms under the water like a pale flower as I reach for the back of her neck.

“Helping you out of excess clothing.” Pulling her closer, I undo the knot one-handed when she presses her hand over mine. “You know that’s all I’m good for.”

“Niko, don’t—”

“Own your beauty, Isla.” *Red for warning. Red for life and death. Red for love.* A vine of need twirls through my insides as I soak in her lushness. The freckle on her collarbone, the hard pucker of her nipples begging for the warmth of my tongue. “God knows, it owns me.”

Any answer she might be about to make is drowned out as I find Archie limpet-like on my back.

“You dunked my mummy!” he squeals, pressing his small hands to my head. “Now we have to dunk you.”

“Oh no!”

“My saviors,” Isla exclaims with a laugh.

“Defend the mother ship!” Hugh’s yell is a strangled war cry.

“Mother ship?” she splutters. “That’s not exactly flattering.”

But neither boys listens, intent on joining in the fun. Or drowning me.

“Death to the pirate!” Archie presses his hand to my head. Taking a breath, I slide under the water, making him giggle as I surface, adding a little flailing motion, playing along.

“Maybe not death.” Isla laughs as, with a long, elegant stroke, she makes for the side of the pool.

“The pirate’s escaping.” Hugh gives a childish war cry, splashing sounding from behind me. So I turn and hurl both delightedly squealing boys deeper into the pool. I’m at her back before she can climb out. Using my body, I cage her against the side of the pool bringing my lips to the glistening shell of her ear.

“I’m glad to hear you don’t want me dead.”

“Not yet.” Her face in profile, the tip of her tongue unconsciously swipes water from the bow of her lip. Need streaks instantly through me, my hand snaking around her body. She rocks suddenly against me, her breast in my hand, so full and lush.

“Not until I make you wet again.”

Isla swallows a gasp as I slide the triangle of her bikini top sideways, exposing the curve of her breast then her hard nipple to the air. My mouth waters. I want to turn her and suck the perfect peak into my mouth. She’d slide her legs around my waist, and I lift her to the stone tiles and press my body over hers.

“The boys,” she whispers, her voice tight with want. She shivers as I slide my thumb across her nipple, then pull the red triangle back into place.

“I just can’t help myself.” Pressing my lips to the side of hers, I steal the briefest of kisses. “But you know what they say. To err is human.” The water swirls around us as I turn to the

sounds of Archie and Hugh. I launch myself in their direction with a yell. “And to pirate is *arrrrr!*”

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## ISLA

*Own your beauty for it owns me.*

Climbing out of the pool to Archie’s squeals of, “Mummy’s bum is squishy” and Hugh’s cackle of delight at my “mega wedgie,” does not do my confidence a great deal of good. Or maybe it’s theirs is just the perspective I need because the way Niko looks at me makes me feel like a queen. *A desperately horny queen.*

I take care not to put myself in his orbit for the rest of the morning, but I feel his eyes following me anyway. Who am I kidding? My eyes devour him just the same. I feel like I’m being seduced and not just in the way he looks at me. It’s also in the way he is around my sons. He had such boundless energy in the pool, launching them into the air, letting them win swim races again and again. He shows endless patience for their incessant questions, playing down his wealth at Hugh’s childishly invasive questions and Archie’s more whimsical addresses.

In just one morning Hugh asked:

*How much money do you have in the bank?*

*How many houses do you own?*

Meanwhile, Archie’s enquiries had sounded more like:

*If you were a pirate ship, what would your name be?*

*Would you rather have a pirate peg leg or a hook for a hand?*

How is this man not a father already?

“Really, boys. That’s enough. Leave the poor man alone.”

“But he’s not poor, Mum,” Hugh answers cheekily. “Uncle Sandy says he’s minted.”

“I’m sure Uncle Sandy would never say such a thing.”

“He might think it,” Niko answers, not helping things. We’re sitting on the terrace, plates of fresh bread and grilled chicken, salad and fruits lying between us. When his gaze meets mine over the table, everything inside me pulls tight.

“Can you eat these?” Archie picks up a tiny pink flower from one of the salad plates, twirling it between his thumb and forefinger.

“I imagine so,” I reply. Why else would it be in the salad?  
“Elbows off the table please.”

“You absolutely can.” Niko plucks it from Archie’s fingers, popping it into his mouth. “They taste a little like cloves.”

“I’d prefer it if they tasted like cake.”

“That’s all you think about,” Hugh mutters without lifting his gaze from his handheld videogame console.

“I don’t remember you asking if you could have screen time,” I say, reaching for my glass of water. There’s wine on the table too, but I feel like I need to stay alert.

“But we’re on holiday,” Hugh complains, glancing up.

“But at the table?”

With a huff, he places the thing on the tabletop. “Can we go back to the pool?”

“In a little while. Let your lunch digest first.”

Hugh folds his arms with another huff and for good measure, begins to slam his heel off the leg of the wicker chair repeatedly.

“Hugh,” I warn.

“What?” The preteen snipes.

“Stop kicking the chair.”

“I’m not kicking it. I’m hitting it.”

“Whatever you’re doing, stop doing it,” I murmur setting my glass down. My eyes meet Niko’s accidentally. In other circumstances, I might be embarrassed but not right now. *This*

*is what you're saddling yourself with*, my gaze seeks to say. Children aren't always a bundle of love, light, and joy. Some days being a parent consists of repeating the same five phrases, refereeing petty arguments, avoiding childhood communicable diseases, and being told you have a big bum.

My look his way? Take a good look at your immediate future.

His return gaze? I find this all very amusing.

But I don't even know if he wants to be a parent or if this is all for show. And even if it is for show, points at Niko for having concern for my children's feelings. Bugger it all, I feel so confused. I have to marry him but I shouldn't want to—the idea of being his seems to become more reasonable with each passing minute. I want to know what kind of marriage this will be when I really ought to be railing against it.

And he—he should be running away, shouldn't he? Not looking at me like he has a lifetime of plans for my body.

"I have a magic trick," Archie announces happily.

I expect Hugh to groan but he doesn't. Instead, he grabs a piece of mango from the fruit platter. "For my next trick, I'm going to make this piece of mango disappear." He pops it into his mouth and mumbles, "Taa-daa!" around it.

Van gives an enigmatic smile which I quickly ignore.

His gaze: I'm going to make that bikini and sarong disappear.

"Did you bring your magic tricks?" I ask my youngest hoping the answer is no. Another parenting gripe is the lack of choice in being a captive audience.

"No, this is my very own trick and I need everyone to help me."

"Come on then," Hugh says in an unexpected burst of brotherliness.

"Yes, Archie, what can we do?" Niko unfolds himself from the chair sinuously.

"I need you to blow this up for me, Uncle Van," he says, passing him over a new red balloon. "But not yet. I'll say

when.”

“And me. What do I have to do?” Hugh’s compliant tone tweaks my parental suspicions, but not for long as Archie hands us both a blue colored balloon. “You two can blow these up. But not yet. I get to say when.”

“Why does my balloon have a string?” I ask, pulling on the brown twine wrapped loosely around the blowing-up end.

“No! Don’t do that,” Arch says, slapping his hand to his back pocket, where the string seems to originate.

“Okay.” I hold up my hands.

“Right, so first part of the trick is to stretch your balloons,” the maestro instructs as he does just that, twanging his balloon between his fingers. “Ow,” he mutters as it snaps back. “I meant to do that. Anyway, now you’ve got to bring it to your mouth and give it a good, hard blow.”

“Said the vicar to the actress,” I find myself murmuring.

“What actress?” Archie’s expression scrunches.

“Nothing. Ignore me.”

“Pay attention, Mummy. This part is very important.”

“Sorry. So give it a good stretch.” My gaze glides to Niko’s.

“Then give it a good blow.”

“Stretch then blow,” the man repeats, all velvety. “Sounds like a solid plan.”

I find myself snickering, but not for long as the Great Arch-  
inie has more instructions.

“Okay, one, two, three and... blow.” And we all do as we’re told, each of us with varying speeds and success.

“Right, what now?” I ask, pinching the end of my balloon.

“Everyone hold them up for Mummy to read.” Archie’s pronouncement seems to vibrate with excitement.

I twist mine around. It has the word ‘me’ written in black Sharpie by Hugh, I’d guess.

“These are the magic words, Mum,” Hugh says with a grin.  
“They’re very important. Start with me.”

“Marry,” I read as the other balloons pop up around the table.  
“Me. You.” I look at my own balloon. “Will.”

“Archie, you doofus. You made Mum sound like Yoda.”

“Marry me you will,” I repeat to myself.

“Whoops!” my littlest man announces. “I got the balloons mixed up.” He quickly swaps them around before instructing,  
“Try again, start here.”

“You will marry me,” I read a little more slowly. It shouldn’t be funny but it is.

“It sounds like Mum’s forcing him now,” Hugh mutters. Archie looks back at his brother suddenly crestfallen.

“It’s not what I meant.” The words fall quickly, his movements turning jerky and his gaze frantic. “I’m sorry, Uncle Van. You let me plan the surprise and I got it all wrong.” Tears teeter on his lids and turns as though ready to flee. At least until Niko wraps a strong arm around him.

“Nothing is wrong, Archie. I think it’s worked out perfectly. Instead of putting your mum on the spot, she can decide if she’d like to ask me.” He glances my way and I literally have nothing to say. My head is void of words though my chest is clogged with emotion. He didn’t have to plan to bring the boys. He didn’t have to make it believable for them, yet he’d done all that and more. And now to see him comforting my sensitive baby is too much to overcome.

“But it isn’t a question,” Archie worries.

“She doesn’t have to ask me. She already knows I want to marry her.”

“What if she doesn’t want to ask you?” Archie whispers, now shielding his mouth with his hand.

“We’ll go to plan B.” They both glance Hugh’s way who gives the kind of smile that would be at home on a Bond villain.

“I dread to think,” I murmur. My heart hammers in the brief silence as I stare down unseeing at the balloon in my hand. What should I do? What *could* I do, because beyond all this, beyond the idyllic setting and the pains Niko has gone to, I’m still in trouble? In trouble in more ways than one, if I’m honest with myself. Yes, I’m at risk of losing my liberty to a bunch of criminal thugs, but I’m also at risk of losing my heart to a man I promised myself I’d never love again. A man who, for whatever reason and for however long, wants me. A man whose quiet words and thoughtfulness have opened my heart once again.

“Uncle Van.” I swallow and lower my gaze at the teasing quirk of his right brow. “Van.” My stomach flutters nervously and my heart does a little jig. “Niko,” I amend softly.

“Don’t forget the balloons,” Archie prompts. We all hold them up and I point at each in turn.

“Will. You. Marry. Me.”

The man smiles sweetly then answers, “Of course I will.”

“Don’t forget the string.”

At Hugh’s happy words, I glance down and wrap it around my finger. Then I pull.

“Oh my goodness!”





## VAN

“I WAS GOING to ask if you’d prefer something else, perhaps a new ring.”

Isla turns her head at the sound of my voice, my lips landing on my cheek rather than her hairline. Her heels are on the seat of the chair, her knees are under her chin, and one cheek bears the tiniest pillow crease. She’d been staring at her outstretched hand before I’d spoken, gazing at her ring. The ring that yesterday had been in an aged Cartier box, tied at the end of Archie’s string. She seems embarrassed at being caught admiring it.

“No.” She lowers her feet to the floor, her half-tamed bun wobbling precariously as she shakes her head. Her answer feels like cool relief. There was a chance she’d pitch the ring back at me. Though perhaps not *this* one.

“It’s hot early today.” I push damp strands of hair from my face. A poor substitute for touching hers.

“Do you always run in the mornings?”

“It’s a good way to start the day.”

“So is meditation.”

“Is that how you like to start your day?” *These days*, I almost add though manage to bite back my surprise. It’s been some years since we last spent a whole night together. But we have a lifetime of that to look forward to. I know we do.

Isla snorts.

“I suppose some people meditate sitting on pillows and listening to tinkling bells. My meditation is the steady pound of my feet hitting the road as I go over my plans for the day.”

Her response is a cynical twist of her lips. “I’d prefer the pillows.”

As I lower myself into the chair next to hers, I can’t help but note how her eyes travel my outstretched legs. Higher and higher they slide, right to where my running shorts bunch at my crotch.

“I agree. There are more fun ways to exercise.” My cock pulses when, pink cheeked, she glances away. There’s something bittersweet about her reaction to me. Look, but don’t linger. Want but don’t admit. But that’s half the problem, isn’t it? She won’t allow herself to be truthful. Not much longer now. My ring on her finger, she’ll be spread out and bared beneath me. *Mine unequivocally.*

“You don’t believe me?” I ask for no other reason than the joy it brings when she looks at me. Joy that she looks. Joy that she can’t help herself.

“I know nothing about meditation, but I start my day with a strong, black coffee. Courtesy of Sandy’s Italian machine, if I can help it. And I make it a policy only to run if being chased.”

“You might regret telling me that.” A grin leaks through my words while she bites back the beginnings of hers.

“By something scary,” she qualifies.

“You don’t think I can be scary?” I ask, pitching my voice low.

“I—” Her eyes dart away, her denials flustered. “I don’t know why you’d want to.”

“Can’t you?” My eyes skate over her as she shakes her head. “For the pleasure of seeing you run. For the pleasure of catching you.” For having my wicked way with you, I think but don’t add.

“I’d prefer it if you didn’t try to find out.” She sniffs and turns her head, but it’s hard to be dignified when you’ve already

been spotted curled in a chair like a street urchin. “We’re not children.”

“No, when I pull your pigtails, it’s with a darker intention.”

“Stop.” Her whisper is contradicted by the way she shifts in her seat. She’s not uncomfortable. She’s turned on.

“Wear the red bikini again.”

“Van.”

“Without the sarong.” The sight of her in it yesterday... Fuck, sit her on a rocky outcrop and those curves would be the siren of many a wrecked a yacht. She’s no less delectable this morning in old-fashioned cotton pajamas; dark blue with white piping and tiny buttons. “Pretty pajamas, Peanut. Those tiny buttons are just begging to be undone.”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

“Then maybe you should be nice to me.”

“Nice how?” Ice fills her tone, one brow arching like a question mark.

“Tell me you like your ring.”

Tension drops from her shoulders, and she holds out her hand to examine it again. “Like it?” She gives a tiny disbelieving shake of her head. “I can’t even begin to tell you how utterly shocked I was. How perfect it is.” She’s talking about the ring, perhaps the proposal, probably not the circumstances. Not that it matters as her words hit me viscerally. “Better than perfect. More than I could ever have imagined.”

Her quiet pleasure feeds mine as she continues to stare at it. The twin diamonds on the fourth finger of her left hand glint in the sunshine, the facets of the old European cut shining as only brilliants can.

“It’s just as I remember it. Only the hand is different, void of wrinkles and age.” Her smile is bittersweet, and her eyes are full of memories. “How did you even know?” When she eventually lifts her head, her eyes glisten with unshed tears.

“That the ring was destined for your finger? You told me how you were supposed to inherit your grandmother’s jewels and how sad it made you that you hadn’t.”

“You remember?”

I tap my finger against my temple. “There’s very little I don’t remember.” The nights we spent together. The conversations we had. Things she said in passing that she’ll never remember yet I treasure.

“But you couldn’t have known this was hers.”

“It was an auction. The name Dalforth was mentioned and there aren’t many of those around.”

“Auctioned?” Her eyes fall briefly to the ring again, but for me, she is the only sight worth staring at. “But the provenance? It was stolen, almost from my grandmother’s deathbed.”

“This wasn’t auctioned at Christies.” My reply is heavy with of meaning.

“Oh. I suppose not. I suppose criminals have their own channels.”

The jibe is well aimed but it doesn’t land, my smile almost cutting into my cheek at the irony. I have it on good authority that the ring and other items were stolen to order. That it was an inside job, as they say. Alexander suspected their father claimed on the insurance as well as making money from his share of the deal. The fact that Isla wasn’t offered at least the insurance pay out, given the jewels were part of her inheritance, says exactly what kind of father the duke was.

“I suppose it will come in handy having a criminal in the family.”

“Alexander might think so.” I wonder how long this will last. Her insistence on denying she wants me, that the idea of marrying me is abhorrent when we both know this is nothing but a lie she tells herself.

“It’s as well Granny didn’t recover from the stroke to hear the news because she would’ve been devastated.”

“Imagine how happy she’d be to see you wearing her ring now.” I steal myself for another jibe. *Not married to you she wouldn’t.*

“Yes.” She absently readjusts the diamonds. “It was her mother’s engagement ring. *Toi et moi* styling.”

“You and me,” I murmur.

“Such a romantic sentiment for two people thrust together for anything but love.”

This time, I feel the blow. Or maybe not, as she speaks again. “I think they were cousins, my great grandmother and grandfather. Their marriage was a consolidation, an attempt to protect land and money.” As though refusing to dwell on the topic or draw any parallels, she turns bodily to face me. “Thank you for what you did yesterday. Involving the boys in...” She flounders, struggling for the right words.

“Isla, you don’t have to thank me. I *want* to make you happy. I’ll do all I can to make both boys happy, too.” And if that means a little subterfuge, I can live with that. “I want them to be involved,” I find myself adding. “I want to be part of their lives, too.”

She falls quiet, perhaps digesting my words.

“I was wondering what we’ll tell Sandy and Holland, given they think you’ve already proposed.”

“We’ll tell them the truth.” I casually cross my right ankle over my left knee. “That we wanted the boys to feel involved.” We both want those things even if we weren’t aligned in the planning.

“They’ll guess, you know. Sandy and Holland. They’ll see this for what it is.”

“And what is that, *milaya*?”

“This is hardly a marriage made in heaven.”

“Marriages made in heaven leave lovers with their heads in the clouds.” Nico Vanyin... Poet. Businessman. Criminal. Will I ever get to the bottom of him?

“And where are our heads, Niko?”

“Where they should be. On survival and on each other.”

Her expression clouds and, for the first time since I cobbled this plan together, I begin to realize she might never love me like she once did. Meanwhile, I’d fallen in love fifteen years ago and never bothered to fall back out again.

She’s all I ever wanted. The focus of my whole life.

My hands ball at my sides as I’m washed by a sudden sense of futility. I force it away, force my hands to relax, to curl around the low arms of the chair. I haven’t come this far to give up. Nothing has changed except that my love might have to be enough for both of us.





## ISLA

WE'D SPENT the morning by the pool again, the boys more than happy to dip in and out until their hearts were content. And Niko seemed happy to do their bidding.

*Flip me higher, Uncle Van!*

*I bet you can't swim to the other end of the pool without taking a breath.*

*Let's have a race!*

In between, we'd played cards on the terrace, drank lemonade and nibbled on delicious saltfish fritters and fried plantain. It's so strange—it all feels so natural. Like this has been our lives for years. It's a slippery slope, I try to remind myself.

After lunch, Niko comes back down to the terrace, no longer in low-slung swimming shorts but dressed for work. Slim fitting dark pants and a brilliant white shirt that's going to require sunglasses to look at in the sunshine.

“You're looking very dapper.”

“Do I?” His eyes dip briefly as though surprised but the motion is really just to hide the twitch of his lips. He knows. Of course he does. There's not a thing that gets past that man. “I thought we could go to dinner on the mainland this evening. What do you think, boys?”

Is it any wonder my will is softening when he's so lovely with my little men? And that's what he knows. It's not even as if I can say he's doing it on purpose because his behavior is wholly genuine.

“Do we have to dress up?” Hugh scrunches his face, unimpressed.

“It will require clothes.”

Both boys are currently shirtless, as they have been since we arrived on the island. Despite my best efforts, they’re also a little pink.

“Smart but casual,” he amends, unconsciously swiping a hand down the flat plains of his stomach, though there’s nothing casual about the way he looks at me.

“Aw, but I want to live in boardshorts,” Archie interjects, making me smile over my lemonade glass. “They’re great. They have pockets with this on a string.” He pulls out the plastic tool attached to the pocket. “Though it’s pretty hard to brush your hair with it.”

“That’s for cleaning wax off your surfboard,” Hugh answer in a superior air.

“Huh.” Archie stares at it for a beat. “Strange. But the best thing about wearing boardshorts every day I’d never have to wear underwear again. Because it’s already built in.”

“You’d always be freezing.” Hugh huffs. “We live in Scotland, remember?”

I drop my hands to my lap, the lemonade turning to cement in my stomach. Will we still live in Scotland after this? I have some many questions. So many *whats* and *ifs* but taking them to Niko would feel like making some concession. Almost as though I’d be admitting to myself that this marriage is what I want. But what I don’t want is to move to London. Apart from uprooting the boys at a time they’re only just settling post-divorce, I just don’t want to live there. I love rural Scotland. I love the peace, the greenery, and my heather-covered rolling hills. I love being close to my brother and Holland. London is fun for short breaks but living there fulltime would be—

Stop, I censure silently, already noticing how I’ve begun to worry my cuticles.

“Hmm.” I tune back in as Archie drops his chin to his fist, adopting his thinking face. “Mummy’s a fashion designer!” he

adds almost immediately. “She can design me some long pants with underpants inside them. Thermal ones to keep my bahookie warm!”

“Mummy’s a fashion designer, is she?” Niko snatches onto this snippet like a miser grabbing pennies abandoned in the street.

“No, not really.” I give my head a little shake.

“You’ve designed some dresses and things to sell on your website,” my little champion insists. “Holland said they were very sophis—sophisticated.”

“That’s lovely of Holland to say so, even if they’re not quite to her taste. In fact, I’m not sure they’re to anyone’s taste by the rate they’re selling. It was a nice feeling while it lasted but I’m clearly not Scotland’s answer to Yves St Laurent.”

“Who’s she?” Archie asks.

“The cat’s mother,” Hugh snaps impatiently, turning to Van. “Can we go to dinner in the helicopter?”

“Sorry, Hugh.” Niko’s mouth quirks. “So far, I only have the helipad.”

“That’s like carrying around a motorcycle helmet while you’re riding the bus,” Hugh mutters, his tone full of censure.

“Or walking around with an Aston Martin key ring without actually owning the car.”

Niko sends me a hot look. “I used to own an Aston Martin, I seem to recall. I lost it in a wager.”

“It’s bad to gamble,” Archie asserts. “The house always wins.”

A little snippet picked up from his father, no doubt.

“Owning an Aston Martin is not nearly as cool as owning a helicopter,” Hugh grumbles.

“My goodness me. Next, you’ll be complaining your diamond shoes are too tight!” I have a feeling Niko might become the basis of this child’s schoolyard bragging rights if I’m not careful.

“I wouldn’t wear diamond shoes.” Hugh slumps back in his chair.

“I would,” Archie puts in excitedly. “I bet they’d make rainbows while I walk. If I had diamond shoes,” he adds, “I’d wear them to dinner. With my boardshorts.”

“No boardshorts.” The phrase ‘brooks no argument’ is obviously one my children haven’t heard.

“But they have pockets! And no need for underwear.”

“If Archie gets diamond shoes, I’m going to walk three paces behind him.”

“Good. Because you do nothing but complain, anyway.”

I press my fingers to my temples. My boys get along so well. At least until they don’t.

“Well, all you do is say stupid stuff.”

“Mummy, Hugh called me stupid!”

“No—”

“It sounds like no one wants to come with me when I go helicopter shopping.” Niko pitches his voice over the cacophony of complaints and noise.

“Oh, I do!” Hugh answers, practically vibrating in his seat.

“Me, too,” chirps Archie. “I’ll wear my diamond shoes.”

“You don’t have diamond shoes,” Hugh snipes.

“I will if Uncle Van buys me some.”

“Quiet!” I send Niko a look, sort of, see what you’ve done?

“No one is getting diamond shoes. But we are going to a nice dinner this evening, thank you Uncle Van.”

“Thank you, Uncle Van,” both boys intone tunelessly.

“A dinner that will require showers and combed hair,”—I send Archie a serious look—“by a real comb, and nice clothes. A shirt with buttons.” My gaze glides seriously between the two. Archie looks pleased until I amend, “And underwear.”

My littlest man pouts.

“Yes, fine,” Hugh grouses, though turns immediately back to Niko. “Just do yourself a favor. Don’t take Mum helicopter shopping. It’ll be a disaster.”

“Hey!”

“It’s true,” Archie says, backing up his brother. “She’ll definitely make you buy something too big for your helipad.”

“That’s not nice!” I protest.

“She’ll say that you’ll grow into it.” Hugh slides me a pitying glance.

“That’s mean!” I retort through a bout of aggrieved laughter.

“I’m not sure helicopters do any growing.” Niko doesn’t bother to hide his own amusement, his gaze dancing between the three of us.

“Maybe not, but you should see the size of my school blazer.”

“Those things are expensive,” I splutter defensively.

“Well, so are helicopters,” insists my eldest son. “So if you want to do the right thing, you should take me and Archie.”

“And my diamond shoes. Hello Sergei.” Archie suddenly waves. “Want to come helicopter shopping with us?”

“Maybe.” His expression barely flickers as he rattles something off in, what I assume is, Russian.

“That’s bad manners.” My youngest sends the taciturn man a reproachful glance.

“Archie,” I censure. I like my ears whole, not chewed off.

“Well, it is. You always say so. Same as it’s bad manners to whisper.

“Sergei feels more comfortable speaking Russian,” Niko reasons. “That’s why he prefers to speak to me in Russian.”

“Can you understand him?” Archie asks.

Hugh makes a critical sound as Niko answers, “Of course.”

“So you can speak Russian and English?” my littlest man asks next.

“And Finnish. And French, plus a little German and Spanish.”

“Wow.” Archie pushes the sound out on an awed breath. “Your head must be full of so many different thoughts. Is it confusing?”

“No.” Niko’s charmed gaze slides my way. “Perhaps only sometimes.”

“Oh.” Archie’s mouth twists in consideration. “I thought it would be like a lot of different voices in your head.”

“Just one voice. In a few languages.”

“What language do you dream in?”

“English. Unless I’m dreaming about my mother, and then I dream in Finnish.”

“Archie, Uncle Van has somewhere to be.”

“One more thing. Please?” From thinker to pleading, Archie does his best begging cherub impersonation.

“One,” I warn.

“Uncle Van, will you say something Finnish before you go.”

It feels like his heart is in his eyes as Niko looks at me. “*Rakastan sua.*”

“What does that mean?” Archie asks.

“It’s a secret.” Niko turns from my son, holds out his hand. “Walk me out?”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s a secret.” Niko turns to me and holds out his hand. “Walk me out?”

“Yes. Of course.” I push my chair back. “I won’t be a minute, boys. Please stay away from the pool.”

We leave through the open patio doors to a chorus of complaints. *We’re not babies, you know!*

“I sometimes think they were easier as babies.”

“Oh?” Our gazes connect and I almost say he could find out for himself if he married someone else, but the words seem

stuck in my throat.

“Well, you get to put them into baby prison occasionally.”

His reaction is part disbelief, part *what the fuck*, but it only lasts half a second.

“Baby prison. The crib, I mean. Bars and stuff. Anyway,” I add brightly as my cheeks begin to burn, “are you off anywhere nice this afternoon?”

“I have a couple of meetings. Some paperwork to finalize.”

I make a chiding *tsk*. “Working on holiday, Mr. Vanyin.”

“This I don’t mind,” he answers with an enigmatic looking smile. “I probably won’t be back in time to pick you up this evening, in which case Sergei will drive you and the boys and I’ll meet you there.”

The boys. The words, his carefulness, tugs on my heartstrings.

“Thank you, Niko. For making this easy for them. For involving them.”

He shrugs off my words. We’ve reached the front doors by this point and his hand is still wrapped around mine as he turns to face me. Something about the moment pulls at fragments of my memory. Was there another time we stood like this, dust motes dancing over our joined hands? The warmth in his eyes echoed by that in my chest.

“I didn’t know you still designed clothes.”

His eyes seem more blue sky than cool water right now, though it could be I’m trying to deflect. Trying to ignore the jolt of pleasure at Niko’s knowledge of that secret part of me. Still, I give a diffident gesture as I answer.

“It’s more like a hobby I can’t afford at this stage.”

“I could—”

I’m shaking my head. “No.”

“Peanut, always the helper.” He reaches out, the back of his knuckles coasting down the side of my face. “Never the helped.”

I roll my eyes, a familiar sense of discomfort washing over me. “I thought that was your role this time. Niko to the rescue, wasn’t it?”

“It’s not a selfless gesture, darling. There is something in it for me.”

“That I’m not sure I’ll ever understand,” I answer, lowering my eyes as to shield my pleasure.

“Do you still make your own clothes?”

At this, I lift my head. “On occasion.” When I have the time and the energy.

“Do you have something with you that you might wear tonight?”

“I suppose,” I reply, mentally scanning the contents of my suitcase. Not that my clothes are in my suitcase, but hanging in the walk-in closet, carefully pressed by his almost invisible housekeeper.

“Then I look forward to seeing you in an original creation.” He lifts my hand as though to kiss it, pausing only at my answer.

“I didn’t say I was going to wear it.”

“For me.” His voice was made for seduction, the rasp in it a little hard. Commanding.

“We’ll see.”

I’m not quite sure how it happens, but we’re suddenly pressed together. Thighs, hips, stomachs, his big hand flattened low on my back.

“For me.” His velvety words are like a play of fingertips between my legs. I can’t look at him. *Because I feel him everywhere.* Heat pools, sensation blooms. He hasn’t touched me since he’d comforted me in his London house, and I only now realize I’ve been aching for this. I watch as my hand slides up his arm, following the line of his bicep, my chest rising and falling with tight, aching breaths. “You know you love to please me.” The pressure of his hand increases, feeding this need inside me. He knows what he’s doing—can see how



my nipples have turned to hard points under the thin cotton of my sundress.

“We’re not talking about this.” Who I become when the bedroom door closes. When I reach that point where I can’t pretend anymore.

“I have something we can talk about instead.” I expect explicit and incredibly smutty, my body tightening in anticipation of it, even. “Your forty-eight hours are almost up.” My thoughts scatter, my body still pulsing. I push against him, fighting this moment, this conversation. “Crunch time, darling.” His hand lifts to cradle my face. “Are you ready to marry me?”

“Why, Niko. You really must stop making sham proposals.”

He smiles despite the ice in my tone, as he holds me there, his eyes full of secrets and his body all restrained power. I give in. Sag. Make a point of how futile this is.

“Yes, fine. I’m ready to marry you because I can’t see another way out of this,” I add at last.

All for show and only half of the truth because feelings change whether you intend them to or not, and *acceptable* is a line that moves so subtly you don’t see the change until it’s already done.



## ISLA

THE JEEP TRUNDLES over the unpaved road as we zip along a well-worn path through, what seems like, a jungle. Hugh stares out of the side window as Archie, placed between us, chatters happily about the layers of the rainforest canopy, but I'm only half listening. This is at least my third lesson on the composition of a rainforest, the first being when Hugh studied the topic a couple of years ago, the second when Archie did the same last year. I'm almost certain we still have the painted cereal box diorama. Anyway, my mind is on other things. Like this marriage. And what offense I seem to have caused the man at the wheel of the Jeep. *Sergei. He of the football shaped head.*

"Mummy, I think Hugh feels car sick."

"No I don't," he protests, turning from the window.

"Well, you're very quiet," Archie replies.

"I was just thinking, that's all."

"You're sure?" Leaning across Archie, I press the back of my hand to his head realizing that Archie is right. He's barely said a word since we left the house.

"Mum, I'm fine," he insists, though submits to the parental illness litmus test.

"We are here," Sergei mutters abruptly, the engine of the Jeep ceasing just as fast. He heaves his bulk out of the car and, in an unexpected show of deference, pulls open my door, holding out his hand to help me out.

“Thank you,” I demur, turning to Archie. “Out you hop.”

“Mum?” I turn from finger combing Archie’s hair to find Hugh’s arms outstretched, holding a circlet of flowers.

“Wherever did you get these from?” I ask delightedly as I make to take it from his hand. But as he shakes his head, the sense of the situation seems to dawn. It’s not a bunch of flowers, it’s a headpiece.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” Hugh says, the words falling quickly. “We like Uncle Van, but if you’re not sure, we could just drive home—he said we could.”

I press my hand to my face and laugh. I might also fight a few tears. My gorgeous, thoughtful little man, taking on the role of the anxious bride’s father.

“Have you been worrying about this?” He shakes his head, so I dip so he’s able to place the coronet of cream-colored blooms on my head. I’d worn my hair down and put on the dress that Niko has asked me to. Pale gold, long, and flowing, it’s the perfect summer evening dress. Strangely enough, it also lends itself to a beach wedding, and that’s what we’re here for, after all. “Not even a little bit in the car?”

“I was thinking about my speech,” he says with such proud solemnity that a tear slips down my face. But no time to dwell as Archie taps me on the back.

“Look what Sergei just gave me!” he says, thrusting a posy of flowers excitedly into my hands. “Are you getting married?”

“So it would seem.” What is it I feel as my eldest son offers me his elbow? Choked. Muddled. Sort of relieved that it’s here. That I won’t have to stress or fight fate anymore. I just have to... submit.

A not unpleasant shiver runs through me, but I don’t dwell on it as Archie reaches for my hand. We both end up giggling when we realize I don’t have a spare one.

“I should’ve been an octopus.”

“An octopus wouldn’t look as pretty as you in your dress.”

“Thank you, kind sir.” I dip a tiny curtsy and hold out my bouquet so we can both hold the flower stems.

“Ready?” I nod, unable to speak as Hugh nods his head and we’re on our way again. “This is the way Uncle Niko brought us to the beach,” he says as we emerge from the canopy of green to a scene that might’ve been stolen from the heavens. The sky is a wash of color—watermelon pink, hues of apricot and gold. It’s so beautiful that I find myself stopping just to take in the view. And that’s before I notice our venue.

“The beach didn’t look like this before,” Archie says. “It’s pretty, isn’t it?”

“Very.” My whisper is a touch awe filled. Was this Niko’s workday? Did he plan—oversee—this paradise? A wooden pergola has been set almost at the water’s edge, its roof heavy with tropical flowers and green, trailing foliage, its fine, pale drapes billow in the warm breeze. Lanterns make our aisle, our carpet a thick layer of petals. Four wooden chairs make our pews, two chairs placed either side of the aisle.

People mill around, carrying trays of drinks and food, skirting scattered lanterns and a low sofa setting. There’s a small dais with a lone guitarist quietly plucking away on a classical guitar. So much to see. So much to wonder about, until my eyes snag on Niko. He stands on the shoreline, gazing over the vast ocean, one stark lonely figure against such a backdrop of majesty. I choose not to dwell on the thought. How could I pity him when the world seems to bend to him?

“Shall we leave our shoes here?” I don’t have to ask the boys twice. And I don’t have to worry about any awkwardness when the boys go haring off after Niko.

What can I do, but follow?

“This is all very lovely,” I say as I reach the shoreline. He’s wearing that expression again. Quietly pleased. “Archie, try not to get wet,” I half laugh, turning away. Lovely. Satisfied by a tiny word of praise. I must be getting fanciful in my old age. “But there was no need to keep it secret.”

“He didn’t keep it secret from me,” Hugh pipes up, reminding me to be careful with my words.

“I wanted it to be a surprise.” Those words feel like a lick to the inside wall of my stomach. Lord help me, because then he rest his palm at the small of my back. “Good surprise or bad surprise?” His gaze narrows almost infinitesimally, daring me to tell the truth.

“Good,” I say softly. “It’s so, so pretty.” And I’m touched that he would go to the trouble because, surely, this wasn’t for appearance sakes.

“But not nearly as pretty as you. You look beautiful, Isla.” His gaze smolders as it slides over me, heating my skin. He leans toward me, and I him, his features becoming indistinct, until...

“Not now, not now!” We spring apart as Archie inserts himself between us. “You’re supposed to save the kissing for the end.”

What? We almost kissed. In front of the boys. A first that should’ve felt odd, not normal. Not inevitable.

*Submit*, my mind whispers. Wasn’t that what I decided?

For today.

“Are you keeping your shoes on?” Archie demands. Four pairs of eyes drop to Niko’s shiny black Oxfords. *Probably handmade*. “We’re not wearing ours,” he says, wiggling his toes in the sand.

“I don’t want to be the odd one out,” Niko answers, lifting one foot and pulling off the shoe off by the heel. Both Archie and Hugh laugh as he pitches it over their heads, the other shoe to follow.

“You won’t be able to do that when we go home,” my littlest man says. “Or you’ll make Mummy cross. But you could get a laundry basket like mine. It’s made like a basketball hoop and hangs on the back of my bedroom door.”

“That sounds...”

Too much like real life creeping in. I inhale, preparing to change the topic when Archie beats me to it.

“Will Uncle Van sleep in your bed, Mummy? Or will he sleep in the spare bedroom, like Daddy did?”

*Dear Lord! From the mouths of babes comes too much trouble sometimes.*

“I might want to steal your room.” Niko doesn’t bother to hide his pleasure at *that* little insight as he ruffles his hand through Archie’s hair. “You were right about the shoes.”

“I know. Socks and sand are yukky. Are we going to eat soon?” he adds, his eyes riveted to a passing tray of food. “My tummy’s getting quite hungry.” As though to support his point, he gives it a little rub.

“Soon,” Niko replies. “I just need to borrow your mummy for a minute.”

Archie shrugs, unfussed as Niko takes my hand.

“Am I to be relegated to the spare bedroom?” he asks once we’re out of earshot.

“We haven’t even talked about any of this,” I begin, nervously. “About what happens when we get back, or anything.”

“Let’s start with tonight.” His footsteps slow and he turns to face me, still holding my hand. He gives it a reassuring squeeze. “Our wedding night,” he adds softly.

“Do we have to have a wedding night? It’s not set in stone or anything, is it?”

“So you can have it annulled you mean?”

“Who’d know? It would just be your word against mine.”

“Well,” he says, ruffling a hand through his hair. “I wasn’t expecting a declaration of undying love, but I’d hoped you wouldn’t be so keen to get rid of me.”

“That’s not it at all.” My gaze slides sideways to avoid the intensity in his. “I’m grateful for everything you’ve done.”

“I don’t want your gratitude,” he says, his voice suddenly husky. “I want to be invited into your bed.” His finger at my chin, he turns me to face him, his words a dark, sweet assault. “I want to be invited into your body.”

I want the same but for different reasons.

“What’s it to be?” A smile catches at the corner of his mouth.

“Is it the spare bedroom for me?”

“You have your own bedroom.” I feel my brows pinch.

“Where?”

“It’s on the third floor,” I reply without thought.

“Ah, so you do know where I sleep.”

“Of course. Archie, told me.”

“I’ve been waiting for you to come yourself.”

This feels like a tiny explosion of delight. I dip my gaze to hide what that knowledge does to me.

“No.” He tips my chin again. “You can’t look at me without blushing. There won’t be any spare bedroom for me, will there, darling?”

“I haven’t decided.”

He chuckles again. My eyes widen, sanding kicking up and tickling my feet as he pulls me to him. “You can lie to yourself.” A tremor runs through me as his warm lips brush the space below my ear. “But you can’t lie to me.”

As he pulls away, his smile somehow looks mildly pornographic.

“This isn’t a real marriage, Niko.”

“Isn’t it?” His brow arches, matching his words. My nerves begin to rattle like keys in a pocket. Is this it? Is this my answer to what our marriage will be? The answer to what a real marriage looks like to him. Me in his bed as and when he wants me. We’ve been in that place before—fifteen years ago, as I recall. And it didn’t work then. I suppose I wasn’t expecting for better and worse, in sickness and in health—the whole shebang—but I also wasn’t expecting this.

“You can’t tie me to you with a gold band—”

He dips, pressing his mouth to mine and my heart stops. Not because he cuts off my denials with his mouth, but because,



for the briefest moment, I see a flash of truth in his expression. I see hurt and anger and pain. But that's as far as my insight goes as he moves into this kiss, moves into me. My brain is a wash of confusion, my mouth one part of this hot tangle of lips and questing tongues. Of rough breaths and half moans. Our bodies flush, he lifts the hair from the nape of my neck, and my brain switches off. His fingers curl, holding me as my hand slides up his chest and curls over his shoulder. The moment is fervent but brief, and as he takes a step back, his eyes are all pupil and I no longer have a thought in my head. He opens his mouth to say something, seeming to change his mind when his expression firms as he reaches for me again.

“Can't I? Make your excuses if it'll make you feel better, *milaya*. But this is until death do we part. This is *my* solemn vow.”

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I feel naked as I stand under the pergola, reviewing the legal paperwork. The boys didn't seem to pay attention to that hot and heavy moment, but I can't say the same for the small army of people here to help facilitate this union.

*A real marriage.*

*His solemn vow.*

*Marriage until death.*

My hand shakes as I take the pen the magistrate proffers, my handwriting like a spider scrawl as I begin to fill my portion of the paperwork. Apparently, strings had been pulled for Niko—no surprises there—as we were supposed to visit the equivalent of the town hall yesterday.

But I didn't know I was getting married yesterday. I mean, I knew. Just not when. *Bugger, I've made a mistake already.*

“Oops!” I send the magistrate a wobbling smile.

“You're doing fine.” He meets my smile with his broader one. “When nerves make you vomit over the paperwork, then we'll have a problem.”

I take a deep breath and plow on. I've had a lifetime of pretending everything is well, I can do it again. The key is to keep half an ear on the conversation. Smile and nod when you think it's appropriate. And it works quite well. Mostly.

"I'm sorry. Did you say you were from Peckham?"

"I did, my lady," the man answers jollily. His black hair is graying at the temples and his shirt is pulled taut around his wide girth. "I was a magistrate in my previous life. I live on the mainland now. It's the island semi-retiree life for me."

"How wonderful."

"I think so. Marrying folks in love is much less stressful than sentencing criminals."

My smile fixed, I try to ignore the tiny voice in my head that suggests I should ask him how he feels about conducting the marriage of a self-confessed criminal.

"Mummy, shall we?" Hugh offers me his hand this time as the officiant takes his place at the flowered pergola, a leather folio in hand. Niko, serious faced, stands to the right of him. With flowers in my hair and my boys by my side, we step barefoot across the petals as "Bach's Prelude in D" layers over the endless soft swish of the tide.

I wanted Niko long ago. This moment, or variation of, could be something plucked from my secret reveries. And that's what this feels like. Just a dream.

A soft breeze disrupts Niko's thick hair, his face wearing that impenetrable mask he wears so well. I'd said: "I do," and so did he, which for all intents and purposes means we're married. We hold hands as we wait for the denouement—the final words—from the man in the too-tight Aloha shirt.

And then they come.

"Niko, you may kiss your bride."

Shock holds me motionless as his hand cradles my cheek, his lips a sweet slide over mine. People clap. A childish cheer goes up, and all of a sudden we're laughing. He takes my hand and turns to our audience. Sergei and Mary, the almost

invisible housekeeper, who are also our two legal witnesses. Hugh and Archie, their arms slung around each other. The pair smiling so wide, their faces are mostly teeth.

“You did it!” Archie yells. “Now let’s eat cake!”



## ISLA

AS NERVOUS AS a bride on her wedding night.

I'm nervous, of course I am. I'm nervous as we return to the house. Nervous as I oversee the boys getting ready for bed. The rhythms are the same as every night, teeth to brush, showers. No need for a bedtime story given the late hour, not that it stops Archie's diversionary tactics.

"Uncle Van said you can get married again in the kirk when we get back," he begins as I pause by the bedroom door. "If you want to, he said, so Uncle Sandy and Holland can be there. Chrissy says you have to get married in a kirk"—a church—"to be married in the eyes of God."

"You don't think God was watching us this evening? I thought he must've had a hand in the day looking at the glorious sunset." A flash of memory flits through my mind: Niko sitting on the sand, his arm hooked over the seat of a low, cream chaise. Behind him, the sky dark, but no less majestic in its velvety blanket. His eyes on my face, he lifts a glass of champagne to his mouth as though to hide the smile building there. The smile seemed to say *you're mine and I have plans for you later*.

We'd eaten grilled lobster and drank champagne, and when the sun set, the boys requested the guitarist play everything from Bach to Beyonce, and we'd all danced under a sky strung with nature's fairy lights. But Niko didn't mention anything about getting married in a church in Scotland, though the

conversation has clearly been had. I'm not sure I'll ever get to the bottom of this man.

"Or you can just have a party, if you want." Archie's hopeful voice brings me back to my hand wrapped around the handle of the door. He adds, "Personally, I think you should just have a party."

"That's just because you want to eat more cake," Hugh says from the bed on the other side of the room.

"True," Archie admits, "I love cake. And this cake was delicious. What was your favorite tier, Hugh? Was it the lavender and lemonade, the orange and poppyseed, or the big cake on the bottom with chocolate hazelnut?"

"Silly question," Hugh grumbles.

"Mine was the chocolate, too." Apparently, the flavors were chosen by the boys. "But I love Uncle Sandy and Holland more than I love cake, and I think they would like to see you in a pretty dress," Archie continues. "Maybe you could do the same as them. Their wedding was also like Christmas."

"That's because it *was* Christmas." Hugh folds his hands behind his head and stares up at the ceiling as though appealing to the heavens for strength to deal with his brother's incessant talking.

"I don't think I need another wedding." I glance at both boys, their (mostly) happy faces, their hair flaxen and their golden skin, thanks to this escape to the sun. "I don't think there could be another day as lovely as this." It strikes me as an odd thing to say, considering I almost had to be manhandled onto the jet, but a break from real life is what we all seemed to need. It's strange how things have changed in a few days.

"What was your favorite part of the day?" asks Archie just as I remember I was about to close the door.

"That there was just us. Me and my boys." All three of them, God help me. "Good night, my lovelies."

"Night, night," they return in chorus.

“Sweet dreams,” Archie whispers as I pull the door almost closed. But will I sleep?

The house seems silent like it’s holding its breath as I walk the hallway to my own room. Grains of sand rub the skin between my toes and dapple my arms like glitter. The French doors are open in my room, the sound of cicadas and frog song drifting up from the gardens. A cool evening breeze ruffles my hair as I pick up my brush and pause, no longer able to ignore the way my stomach somersaults as I stare, unseeing in the mirror as my mind slips back an hour.

“*We don’t need to...*” I’d whispered, not able to raise my eyes to him, instead watching the boys as they’d collected shells from the beach. I’d wondered why I’d persisted. Niko had already made it clear this was to be a marriage in all senses, and that both worried and thrilled me. But why was I poking the bear again?

“*We don’t need to...?*” Amusement curled through his words.

“*You know.*” I’d turned my head without thinking, his burning gaze searing my heart, the heat sliding down my torso and pooling between my legs.

“*You think we don’t need to consummate our marriage?*” Only Niko could make something so sober sound so smutty.

“*Who would know?*” I forced myself not to look at him as he’d answered.

“*I would, milaya.*”

“*This is wrong, Van. You know it is. Blurring the lines.*”

“*Or drawing them in the sand. You’re mine now, Isla. And we will have this night.*”

And that’s why I’m nervous. As nervous as a (wanton) bride, nervous as I step from the shower and tense as I pull out the hair dryer. And annoyed with myself as I thrust it away again as I decide to let the air dry it. The towel tucked tight around me, I pull open the drawer and run my fingers over the silk of Holland’s nightgown as I try to decide if I should wear it.

It’s beautiful, but not exactly subtle, I consider.

So delicate. *Like my will.* Cut on the bias, the cream silk swishes around my ankles in such a tantalizing sway. The bodice is formed from lace that clings to my curves and leaves very little to the imagination from breast to navel.

Cream silk, not white, is my flag of surrender.

Pulling open a dresser drawer, I slip my hairbrush inside and jolt as a crack of thunder rattles the open French doors. I cross the room with the intention of closing them, pausing to inhale the ozone filling the air. Lightning flashes above the clouds, the sky flashing with blues and pinks fleetingly.

*Maybe it's a sign,* I think, still clinging to the open door. Maybe this outfit is too much. I glance back across the room, the door open to the hallway.

Does it look too desperate? Too eager? *Come inside, let's copulate.*

I give my head a quick shake, dislodging the ridiculous thoughts. I'm a mother of small children, first and foremost. The door to my room is always open.

I'm also a bride on her wedding night, nervous what the night might reveal.

Thunder rumbles in the distance, the sky continuing to flash above the clouds. I shiver, securing the doors but leaving them open, savoring my body's reaction to the sudden cooling breeze. Silk molds to my thighs, my nipples hard as pebbles in breasts that feel full and heavy. And, of course, I'm touching my own breast as Niko arrives at my bedroom door. My breath goes short at the sight of him.

His shoulder propped against the doorframe, the light from the hallway seeming to cast him in gold. He wears nothing but an enigmatic smile and a pair of low-slung lounge pants that seem to be held up by prayer alone. His hair is damp, and his cheeks shaved smooth, and he comes bearing champagne gifts.

"May I come in?"

His gaze slides over me hotly, but it's his question that makes me blush.



*For better or for worse, this is happening.*

Who am I kidding? There is no worse sex when it comes to this man.

But marriage? I realize I haven't answered, almost coming back to myself with a jolt.

"Of course." My voice sounds wooden, my body language jerky. Come into the parlor said the spider to the fly, only it's the spider that's closing the bedroom door.

"It looks like the weather took a turn for the worse," he says, glancing at the night sky as he sets the glasses down. "Did I say something funny?" he asks, a smile playing on his lips.

"Say? No. Do?" I make an open-palmed gesture. "It's just this. You. Me. Since when have we discussed the weather?"

"It's a big night," he murmurs in reply. "Lots of pressure."

"Is there?" From the other side of the room, I lean back against a dark wood chest of drawers, ignoring the loveseat. Even just glancing at it makes me flush, which is just ridiculous given there's a great big bed between us.

"You only get one wedding night." He begins to tear the foil from the bottle, and I wonder if he's waiting for me to contradict him. So I do, opting for the milder reply of the two.

"Unless you're Sandy and Holland."

"Do you think they were nervous both times?" The cage falls loose, and he begins to twist the bottle from the cork.

"You're not nervous." He certainly looks calmer than I feel by a mile.

"No?"

"I don't know." I give an uncomfortable gesture. "I suppose I just assumed." Because this isn't our first rodeo. Together, we're explosive. Niko mastered my pleasure from our very first night. He fucks me like it's his vocation. Makes my body feel like its communing with the divine.

"This night, *milaya*, is the beginning." He doesn't look at me as he speaks, instead half filling both glasses. "One night

before all others,” he asserts, cutting a confident path across the room to pass one of the flutes into my hand. “To us.”

My mouth fills with the taste of crisp, cool bubbles that do nothing to ease this overwhelming nervousness. The proximity of his golden skin and how utterly comfortable he is in it. The gnawing sense that, no matter how long this marriage lasts, I’ll never get to know the whole of him.

“You’re so beautiful.” I duck my head at his compliment. “You always were, but age—”

“Watch it.” I feel my expression twist.

“You’re like a fine wine, Isla. Fine, full bodied, and the kind of delight I’d happily drown myself in.”

“Well, that’s better,” I demur. His compliments light me up inside. Something internal urges me to move closer, to press myself to him.

“And that nightdress.” He shakes his head slowly, almost as though he thinks his eyes are deceiving him. And maybe they are. Agent Provocateur is fabulously expensive for a reason.

“I didn’t pack it.” Heat seeps into my cheeks at my denial because I was the one who chose to wear it. Thankfully, it’s something we both pretend to ignore.

“Something borrowed,” he replies mildly, referring to the wedding tradition. “But it’s not the ribbon around a bouquet that makes it beautiful, darling.”

“There’s about a ribbon’s worth of silk in this.” My eyes dip to the gown, my blush deepening when I notice how my hard nipples are visible through the lace. *If I can see them, so can he.*

Something dark and delicious pulls at my insides.

“I must remember to thank your sister-in-law for such a wonderful wedding gift.” He pins me with his dark gaze, and I fight the urge to squirm. My skin feels alive, my insides pulsating with a pent-up kind of energy. *An energy in need of a release.*

There's a tremor in my hand as I lift my glass to my lips. "I'm not sure Sandy will appreciate you using his wife's name and the words *thanks* and *Agent Provocateur* in the same breath."

"His wife is safe from my attentions."

"I'm sure he'll be glad to hear it."

"And you?" When I don't answer, he speaks again. "There are no other women for me." He leans closer, his thumb brushing the tiny, untamed curls from my face. "It's your body I want to conquer. Your soul I want to enslave." His ominous words dance across my pleasure centers. "No other men for you," he adds, his lips a whisper over mine.

"That sounds like monogamy." My heart pounds in the rhythm of those four syllables.

"As it should."

He takes my hands, and I find myself lowering into the corner of the loveseat. Niko sits next to me. Half turned in my direction, he rests his knee on the cushion, his hand draping the back of the couch. He uses his other knee as somewhere to balance his glass, and I pretend that's what I'm looking at and not how those soft lounge pants leave very little to the imagination.

A sudden breeze makes me shiver, ruffling Niko's hair.

"What day is it?" I find myself suddenly thinking of Scotland. "I've barely looked at my phone since we got here," I add, feeling foolish. "I seem to have lost track of the days."

"Island life." He lifts one shoulder in an indolent shrug. "It's like its own magic."

He lifts his glass to his lips, and my gaze glides over the tanned cap of his shoulder before following the curve of his bicep. He has such strong arms, and there was a time in my life when I used to feel nothing but safe when he held me. *But isn't that what he's doing now? Keeping me and my loved ones out of harm's way.*

"What was that?"

“It’s Wednesday.” It’s obvious by his tone that this isn’t the first time he’d answered me. “I asked if you had pressing plans?”

“No, I was just wondering where the time had gone, and something silly flitted into my head.”

“What was it?”

“It’s silly.” I shake my head, wishing I’d kept the thought to myself.

“*Peanut.*” He drags the stupid name out. I shouldn’t find it endearing, but I do.

“You know, I hate that you call me that.”

“Why do you think I do it?”

“Because you’re perverse.” But we’re both smiling.

“Only with you. Tell me,” he coaxes in that midnight voice of his as his fingers begin to idly toy with the strap of my nightgown. “You know I’ll get it out of you eventually.”

The delicious hint of warning in his tone reminds me it won’t be the only thing he’ll get out of me this evening.

“It’s just a silly rhyme from when I was a young girl.”

“I love tales of young Isla.”

“I’ve never told you any.” I don’t think.

“Didn’t you?” Knowing lurks in the corner of his mouth. “I wonder how I know that it once took you and Alexander three hours to put a suit of armor back together?”

“What?” The word is half amused, half indignant.

“I know about the staircase and the tray—”

“That was Sandy, not me.” I laugh. “I was far too sensible to race down the staircase on a silver tea tray.”

“But not *too* sensible,” he persists.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say, shielding my response with my champagne glass.

“So you didn’t race him to the bottom on the banister?”

“It was much safer than a tea tray! My brother has a big mouth,” I add in a grumble.

“If it makes you feel any better, I don’t think he’ll be in a sharing mood again.” His expression turns inward and my heart gives a little pinch for him.

“He’ll come around,” I say, impulsively reaching for his hand. I realize, as I do, what a turnaround this is. “I’m old enough to make my own decisions. And I did decide,” I add, biting off the rest of my admission. *I decided it was you long ago. Even if you forced my hand this time*, I think, as I slide my hair behind my ear. With a tiny burst of pleasure, I realize he follows the motion. “Wednesday,” I murmur. “A favorable day to get married.”

“Is it?” He sounds amused, and I sound like I’m talking nonsense. And I am as I reach inside me for more of the stuff. Anything other than telling the truth because this truth will not set me free. It’ll shackle me to him instead, and I’m not sure I’m ready for that.

“As the saying goes, you should marry on a Monday for wealth—”

“I am quite rich.”

“And Tuesday for health,” I add, ignoring this. Mainly because, “Wednesday is the best day of all.” His expression lightens, though I hurry on. “Thursday for losses, Friday for crosses, and a Saturday marriage brings no luck at all.”

“Wednesday is the best day to get married?” He quirks a teasing brow.

“Well, I can confirm by experience that Saturday weddings are the worst.”

As he presses a sudden finger to my lips, the sweetest percussion begins inside. “Wednesday is my new favorite day.”

I taste the salt of his finger as it retracts, my gaze snagging on the long line of his throat as he tips back his head, draining his glass. When he leans across me to deposit it on the chest of drawers, I find the broad expanse of his chest is just a whisper

away. I am suddenly fascinated, and before I know it, my hand is moving of its own accord, lifting to caress his flat, copper-colored nipple. The sharp intake of his breath seems so loud in the room, the tremor that runs through him a delight to behold.

He whispers my name, the sound low and throaty, as he twists his body, encouraging the contact as though I might have other plans. My fingers trace his ribs, sliding down that delectable trail of downy hair.

“Yes, touch me.” I relish the rumble in his chest as I lean closer, and my tongue darts out to taste him. He hisses a curse as I use my teeth, my hand sliding down to the drawstring waist of his pants. I pull on the knot, then hook my thumb into the soft cotton to drag the fabric lower. Heat and need rushes through my veins. The curve of his firm backside, the delicious dip of his hips, I want to press my teeth there. Trace my lips to feel him shiver. I want it all, and I want it now.

I shift in my seat and so does he, taking my glass and placing it with his before he brings his knees to the seat cushions either side of my thighs. My mouth waters as the fine fabric of his pants reveals the proud outline of his thick cock. I’ve always loved the sight of Niko in an evening suit, and the man can fill a pair of jeans like he was born to do so. But I might’ve just found my favorite version of him as he stares down at me like some angry Norse god.

My hand seems to lift by its own volition, my fingers trailing the swirl of Cyrillic script tattooed to his chest. “Tell me what it says,” I whisper softly.

“Inquisitive darling?”

“As long as it isn’t an ode to another woman.” My heart does a painful little jitterbug at the knowing in his smile. A smile that doesn’t last as I press my nail into his skin. “It isn’t, is it?”

“Are there other women but you?” There’s a darkness in his expression as he takes my fingers, trailing them over the script. “With love, one can live even without happiness.”

“Have you... are you unhappy?”

“Ask me if I love, Isla. Ask me *who* I love.” I close my ears to his demands, afraid of the answers.

“Where are the words from?”

“My heart. My life. Also Dostoevsky,” he adds as his hand slips from mine. I scrape my nail down the length of his torso, not willing to examine that. “Isla,” he growls. “Be careful.”

“Maybe I don’t want to.” Desire thickens my voice as I reach his waistband.

“I planned on going easy.” His chest rises and falls as his breath is dragged in and forced out through his nose. His hands grip the back of the sofa, his arms bracketing my head. Muscles flex and veins bulge like I needed the added stimulation.

“Why? Why spoil the habit of a lifetime.”

“You’re not a habit, my darling. You’re an obsession. And now you’re my wife.”

His husky statement sounds better than it should. “Much good it will do you,” he says, dipping down to take my mouth. His kiss is thorough but brief, at my instigation, because a wife is surely entitled to stroke her hand down her husband’s body, drawing his lounge pants the rest of the way down.

“Much good it will do *you*,” I whisper, brushing my palm against his silken crown.

Niko groans, pushing himself against my hand. “Goodness is overrated.”

“I want to see you,” I whisper, pulling on his tongue as we kiss, wet and messy. “Show me.”

With a muttered curse, he pulls his mouth away and rises to his knees, caging me in with his strong arms. I lick the vein in his forearm, press my teeth over it as I run my hand down the ladder of his abdominals, savoring the shiver that wracks his body.

“They broke the mold when they made you,” I tell him as I reach the root of his thick cock, scissoring my fingers over him.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.” His voice is harder and his breath sharper as my fingers make a lazy perusal of his sleek length. His cock twitches in my hand, thick and heavy as I press my tongue to his crown.

“The world take only one of you.” Exchanging my tongue for my lips, I slide myself over him.

“The world can go to hell,” he groans. “I only need you to take me, *milaya*.”

He’s all ache and gravel as I work my mouth down. “That’s it, darling, take me all the way in.”

My hand at his base, I lick him like there’s nothing in my life but this. As I flick my tongue along the thick underside vein and the deep ridge of his crown, his harsh breaths and his guttural words are what I live for.

“You take me so beautifully,” he groans, sliding his hand to the back of my head. “I’ve dreamed of this moment.” His body shakes as I slide my lips down his hard length with a moan. “Darling, show me how much you can take.”

My God, his commentary. It turns me on. Drives me on. I want him wild and uncontrolled as I tighten my lips and take him deeper—deeper than ever before.

“That feels so good.” He releases a harsh, masculine breath, his jaw taut and his expression pained as I moan my desire around him. “You look so beautiful sucking my cock.” His lewd whispers tighten every part of me, his avid gaze glued to the glistening thick slide of him between my lips. His fingers, light at the nape of my neck, draw the opposite effect as he tenderly gathers my hair, making me feel cherished. With a grunt, he gives an experimental flex of his hips. He’s so thick that my throat constricts around him, my body unprepared.

“Relax, darling,” he coaxes, his fingers a light brush at my jaw. “You can do it.” Shock and unease mingle with his tender words and touches. “Do it for me.”

Oh God, I want to. I want to be the source of his pleasure, want to own him just as I want to be owned by him as, with a hum, I relax, opening my throat to the feel of him.



“Fuck, yes,” he hisses, “that’s it.” His hands in my hair, he guides me, my fist and mouth working him as he tests my limits and whispers such filth. “Show me how love my cock. Yes, show much you can take.” His hips work harder, his breath suddenly labored. I think to myself, this is it. *This is the moment I make him lose it.* I cast my eyes up the length of his beautiful body, willing him to use me, to take his pleasure, to give it over to me.

Niko half retreats, his cool eyes made entirely of hunger. For a split second, I’m sure I know what’s about to happen, and my heart hammers triumphantly in my throat. His dark thoughts veiled under the sweep of his lashes, he drags his cock from my mouth.

“Slide down the straps.” His cock glistens against his palm, but it could almost be that we don’t speak the same language. Until he tugs one strap, pulling it from my shoulder, and the words finally sink in.

“You’re so fucking perfect.” I slide the other silk strap down and Niko pulls the lace to my waist and takes my breasts into his hands. There’s something about being half undressed that’s infinitely dirtier than being completely naked as his large hand cups my breast. “You make me want to defile every inch of you.” I shiver as his thumbs brush over the hard pebble of my nipples, arching from the sofa, silently willing him to use his mouth.

“Yes.” I lick my lips. “Do it.”

“I want to own you all. From your soft heart to the velvet of your cunt.” The words and sentiments pulse hotly through me, my body jolting as the sensation reverberates through me. “I want to come in your sweet mouth, and spill over your hand. I want to slide my cock between the cleft of your ass and make you moan.”

“Niko, please.” I see it all. I want it all.

“I want to fuck these,” he rasps, pressing my breasts high, before dipping once more to lick them with the flat of his tongue. “I want to do it all and I don’t know where to start.”

“We have time,” I whisper, earning me his blazing blue, calculating gaze.

“Yes, because you’re mine now Isla. You understand I’m never letting you go.”

“Niko,” I moan, undulating under him.

“Tell me you hear me,” he demands. “Tell me you’re mine.”

“That works both ways,” I counter, desperately trying to pull him closer.

“Yes, it does.” His pleased words whisper across my mouth, my body jolting as he swipes the pads of his thumbs across my nipples again.

“Do you think you can still come like this?” he asks suddenly as he presses his cock to my nipple. A pearly white bead glistens at the tip, stretching between us and making me moan. The way his eyes burn make me feel as though my most private thoughts are exposed. No man has ever been like this with me, no man has ever made me crave such wickedness. But it’s too embarrassing to admit that, but for his attentions, my breasts have long been neglected in all forms. Or that they’re more sensitive now than they ever were.

“I asked you a question,” he says, rubbing his smooth crown against me as he kneads, squeezes, skims.

“Y-yes. I think so.”

“Let’s see, shall we?”

Then I’m suddenly on my back, stretched out across the sofa. Fire rushes through my veins as he takes my nipple into his mouth, swirling his tongue over the tight peak. Tongue. Sucking. Turning my mind and my will to mush.

He looks so serious as he taps two fingers to my lips in an instruction. I open, forcing back a moan as he slides them inside, in then out, he works them with a steady kind of pressure.

“Suck, darling,” he coaxes, and I do. I suck and lap, I fellate his fingers as I had his cock. He stares down me with such possession and I soak that look in, whimpering as his fingers

leave a wet trail over my chin. His fingers ghost down over my chest and between my heavy, sensitive breasts, my pleasure spiking when he scissors them over my nipple. My God, wet fingers. They're like a secret weapon, sliding and petting, making me throb with pleasure.

"Good?" His expression is pure carnality as he blows a cooling breath over each of my glistening nipples.

Distant thunder rumbles in the background as I nod, his attentions stealing my breath and my words. Warm, rubbing fingers, cool breath, and wet mouth, unspool me like a reel of cotton. As Niko licks and sucks, my body bows and twists with pleasure and I cry out, sliding my hands into his hair as though to stop myself from falling, the pleasure heady as between my legs pulses, aching and empty.

Niko grasps my ankle, as though suddenly reading my thoughts. He slides it wider before his fingers make a soft path up my leg. Finding me soaking, his fingers slide inside with such ease and such depth, I arch from the bed with a cry.

"Oh, Niko." I throb literally everywhere.

"That's it, darling, milk my fingers." His mouth, his fingers, and his sweet, filthy urgings push me over the edge. I cry and I twist, my reactions pure and unguarded—I come so hard, his mouth at my breast and his fingers wedged deep inside me.

Soft licks and touches, Niko gentles me, kissing his way up my body as reality edges its way back in. I turn my head, embarrassed at my body's betrayal when I find his fingers at my chin.

"Don't look away from me. You're mine and I want to see that in your eyes every time your eyes meet mine."

"I've often thought your mouth doesn't make sense," I whisper, pressing my forefinger to his full bottom lip. "I now realize it's you. Nothing about you makes sense."

His gaze travels over me with such possessiveness, I find I have nothing to add. Not even when his hands slip under me and he stands, pulling me with him. Pulling against him.

“Niko!” I complain, finding myself flush against his chest, his arm bracketing my thighs as she he carries me over to the bed. “We’re not twenty-five anymore—put me down!” These days I only have to look at a heavy box to feel my back creak, yet he carries me with such ease.

“You make me feel like I’m twenty-five,” he asserts as he lowers me reverently to the center of the bed, pulling the slippery silk gown from my body like a magician pulling on a novelty tablecloth. “What a sight you are.” His possessive gaze passing over me feels like an electric current. “What a treasure.”

I swallow, my mouth suddenly dry. *Take. Steal. Plunder.* The suggestions bounce through my head, the mattress barely dipping as his knee lands next to my leg. I almost sigh in relief as his hand hooks under my knee, spreading me wider. But my sigh morphs into a sob as my Niko suddenly produces the bottle of champagne, the cool liquid cascading me. His grip on me tightens as I try to close my legs, his eyes never leaving mine as he splashes champagne between my legs.

The bottle *clunks* against the floor, discarded, as Niko practically dives between my legs, his tongue hot where a moment before I was chilled. I twist my fingers in the bed linens, every one of my muscles tense and shivery as his tongue follows every trailing tributary. My breasts, my ribs, his tongue swirls over my navel and over my hips, my breath halting as Niko reaches between my legs.

Through the open door, a clap of thunder carries loudly, a crash of lightning filling the room the moment before the lights in the room cut out. We both freeze, but I’m not sure if the darkness is a blessing or a curse because the sight of him there between my spread legs was almost too much. *A blond devil ready to devour me.*

“The boys.” His voice is husky, his breath a cool press against my heated ribbon of flesh.

“They’d sleep through an apocalypse.” My words keen as his tongue flicks my clit, the sound drawing out as he presses his tongue between my legs.

“*Good.*”

My heels dig into the mattress—I’m almost certain I’m levitating—as Niko’s thumbs spread me open, his mouth beginning to work me like he needs my pussy to breathe. There is no slow build up, no gentleness. He offers me no mercy and I wouldn’t want it anyway as he thrusts and licks, eats and feasts, his growls and his demands forcing my pleasure to the surface the moment before it bursts through me.

“Niko, please!” I tighten my hand in his hair as I let go and a shower of golden, molten heat and light explodes through me.

“Yes,” he growls against my heated flesh. “Come for me, darling. Come all over my face.”

Ah, oh, God, I do, as his mouth continues to work me. I try to close my legs—the sensation is just too much, when he just holds my thighs wide, pressing slow, thorough kisses to my pussy, dragging my orgasm out, twisting it into something otherworldly.

I am a ball of electric aftershocks, panting and throbbing when I become sentient again, and aware of Niko’s kissing his way up my body. Damp and sticky, his body is hot where it touches mine.

“You make me feel like a king when you beg me like that. So many times I’ve come with my cock in my hand to the memory of you.” I have no answer as the blunt thickness of him nudges my inner thigh and his body rises over mine. A blaze of stark white flashes through the room making him look like some silver, mythical deity. the weight of his gaze pressing the air from my lungs. Breath pounds in his chest, his nostrils flaring with each inhale. There’s something dark in his expression, so much so I find myself scrambling backward across the mattress, instinct overcoming rationality.

“No, *milaya.*” His hands grasp my ankles, pulling me back and under him. “There is no escape. I will have you in all ways.” His hand cradles my throat, sliding down over my collarbone. A moan catches in my throat as his smooth head nudges where I’m still so wet.

“Yes.” His affirmation is soft and low as his hand makes a whispering slide up my ribs. He takes my hands in his, one then the other, pressing them to the side of my head. Like a choreographed dance, my legs rise and wrap around him, and I hear the sharp intake of his breath as he slides forward, fully possessing me.

“Yes,” he growls again as my flesh yields. “You feel...” His eyes glisten in the darkness, his fingers tightening on mine as he grinds against me. “You feel like mine.”

I whimper my affirmation as he pulls back, delivering a demanding, almost bruising kiss. With a snap of his hips, he drives forward again, filling me so completely, so deliciously, as he comes into me and over me again and again. I shift, lifting my hips as our bodies silently communicate. I will take and he will give. But as his teeth press to the curve of my shoulder with a rasping groan, I know he is mine as much as I am his.

Pulling me back, he moves onto his knees, pulling my thighs over his. I moan loudly as his thumb slides over my swollen clit.

“Look at us darling, moving as one.” His words, his touch, his avid expression makes everything inside me contract. It feels so good.

He pulls me up against him, seating me fully on his cock, changing the angle instantly. Wrapped in his arms, I begin to undulate against him when his grip tightens, urging me to move harder, faster.

“That’s it, darling girl. Ride me.”

And I do. One, two, three, I slam myself against him when his hand twists in my hair, my body bowing as he thrusts up into me. The sensation is too much, the friction, the sheer size of him pounding into me. I can barely breathe as my body tightens around him in pulsing, silvery bursts. I choke back a cry, my whole body trembling as pleasure rips through me. My whole body stiffens, pinned between two points, as the moment hits. The peak—such bliss, overlaid by his hoarse whispers of encouragement against my lips.

“Fuck, yes. Like that. That’s so good—fuck. *Oh fuck.*”

Everything in the world disappears. I give in. I give up. I fall apart. I’d surely float away if I weren’t grounded by the feel of his hands on my hips. Niko rasps my name, bucking up into me, the expression on his face pained as he follows me.





## ISLA

I AM DEEPLY FLAWED.

So deeply flawed as I watch Niko press his palms to the tiles, lifting himself effortlessly from the pool—a deeply flawed pervert as my insides clench at this blatant display of pure masculinity. I’d woken a little while ago alone, dragged from sleep by familiar squeals and splashes and yells, the phantom of his words echoing in my head.

*With love one can live even without happiness.*

*Ask me if I love.*

*Ask me who I love.*

I’d be a fool to dare to believe him. *Wouldn’t I?* A fool to think he’d loved me in all the time between then and now.

Pushing the thoughts to the back of my head, I’d found my robe draped along the end of the bed, guessing Niko must’ve placed it there. I mean, I hoped he had and not one of the children. Because Mummy doesn’t usually sleep naked, sprawled across the bed. I’d slipped it on and made my way out onto the balcony to find the three men in my life splashing in the pool. Not wanting to miss out on the fun, I’d quickly showered and slipped my bikini on to find breakfast of fruit and pastries about to be served on the terrace.

I really could get used to this life.

“Uncle Van, come back!” Archie calls from the water. “I want another race!”

“Soon,” Niko promises with a wave. “You’ve worn me out.”

“Because you are an old man!” Archie bounces in the shallows with each yelled word, and I laugh.

The world is blocked out by the sun-warmed bulk of him as he grips the armrests of my sunbed, showering me in droplets of water as he presses a kiss to my head.

“Need a break, old man?”

“Need a spanking?” Pulling back, he takes a seat on the sunbed next to mine, his body turned my way.

“No, thank you.” My stomach flutters, though I muster a little dignity in my response when he rakes a hand through his hair, slicking the damp strands back. Muscles pop and flex in his arms and chest, the flutter’s tempo and depth increasing.

I am so very deeply flawed.

*Ask me if I love. Ask me who I love.* His words seem to repeat on a loop in my head.

“I think you deserve one for flaunting yourself in that tiny bikini.” His gaze glitters over me, tightening my nipples. “I see the way you’re arching your back.”

“I am not.” Heat washes more than just my cheeks.

“Twisting in your seat. Does the pressure help that needy ache?”

“Van!” I sound scandalized, but what I am is inexplicably throbbing.

“Your know what would help with that?”

“Stop it,” I whisper, my tone more like *go on*.

“My tongue.”

“You are the worst.”

“You’re looking a little pink. Perhaps I should help you with your sunscreen.”

“Stay where you are,” I retort, sending him a quelling glance. “My children do not need corrupting.”

“*Milaya*, come over here.” With a provocative glance, he moves back on the sunbed, sliding his thighs over the sides.

“No.”

“Please.” He pats the space between his legs. “Come a closer.”

“Said the spider to the fly,” I mutter almost under my breath.

“That’s a good analogy because I do want to eat you.” I open my mouth to tell him off—probably—when he begins to chuckle. “Don’t look so scandalized. I’m not going to, not in front of the children. I’m not a complete degenerate.”

“You’re sure you don’t just hide that side of you beneath a well-tailored suit?”

“I’m not wearing a suit now. Look.”

I don’t *mean* to look, but I do, the sight only increasing this tide of want building inside me. “And you have the audacity to complain about my bikini.”

“That wasn’t a complaint, but you can examine the cut of my shorts better from over here.”

“Niko, they’re so tight, I could see more than just the fabric’s *cut* from the other side of the pool!”

His smile signals a change of tack. “Come over here, my darling wife. We have serious matters to discuss.”

“Such as?”

“How much I want you.”

“Hmph. Very serious.” Yet I find myself sliding my legs to stand. My gaze slides to the pool, to where Hugh is dragging Archie around on a large inflatable crocodile.

“Look, Mummy!” he calls, noticing me. “I’m calling him Snappy!”

“Lovely, darling. Where did that come from?” I ask, turning back to Van.

“A toy shop.” His answer isn’t terse, but it is short as his gaze coasts over me like I’m a sandwich in front of a starving man. “Come.” His hands cradle my hips, turning me to face him as I

draw closer. Catching my balance on his shoulder, I step over the bed, seating myself to face him.

I muffle a shriek when he hooks his hands under my knees, pulling me closer, laying my thighs over his. "That's better."

"But not very dignified. And the boys..." I send a worried glance over my shoulder.

"You look after me, and I'll look after them."

"And who'll look after me in this scenario?"

"I think you already know the answer to that," he whispers as his finger feathers down my chest. "But I think we need a code word."

"For?"

"To protect their innocence. Perhaps we should instigate a policy that, when the bedroom door is closed, they'll only burst in if there's an emergency." He slides his hands up my thighs, light and shade dapples his body in sharp spikes, thanks to the way the sun falls through the fronds of a nearby date palm. "Because I'd only just made it to the door this morning before the pair burst in."

"I hope you had clothes on," I say with a girlish sounding giggle.

"I had my hands and nothing else." Hands that tighten on my thighs causing a bloom of sensation to burst through me. "And *you* had the sheet wrapped around your ankles and nothing else."

"Oh dear." Pressing my fingers to my mouth does not effectually muffle my amusement.

"They didn't see. Well." Amusement flickers across his brow. "They didn't see *you*. And Archie's compliment was the highlight of my morning. At least until you'd peeled off your sarong," he adds, his gaze turning hot.

"He didn't..."

"Didn't what?" Smug. His expression looks smug.

“My child didn’t say whatever it is you’re about to say.” I hope. *Nice penis, Uncle Niko?* The mind boggles.

“He just mentioned that his father doesn’t need to use both hands.”

“You get compliments, yet I get told I have a big bottom.”

“You have a delicious—”

“Anyway, it’s far too big for this tiny bikini. I feel like I’m spilling out of it.”

“That’s exactly why your body was made for this bikini.”

“I don’t need to be flattered, Niko. I know what I see.”

“That’s just it. You don’t. You’re like your brother in that regard. Too stubborn to see what’s sitting at the end of your nose.” I don’t think we’re talking about my bikini now.

“Ask me, Isla. I dare you to.”

His sigh is short and sharp. “I’m going to buy Holland the biggest bouquet for seeing all that you refuse to.”

“She—” The rest goes unsaid as he hooks his finger into the fabric of my bikini top, sliding the triangle to expose my nipple. “Niko.” His name was meant as a warning, yet it sounds like an encouragement.

“Relax. No one can see.” My gaze lifts to the terrace and he’s right. We’re shielded from view of the house, and the boys can only see my back. All is well, as long as I keep my bikini on. *All is deliciously well because I’m deeply flawed.* “I want to see you in the sunlight, your body stretched out before me.”

Deeply flawed and turned on. “When the children go back to school.”

“Are you offering to take me romping through the heather?”

“I was thinking more along the lines of keeping the curtains open.”

He smiles before his eyes seem to blaze. “I can’t stop thinking about last night.”

My stomach tightens greedily in anticipation.

“I knew it would be good. I’ve dreamed of it often enough.” Pleasure pulses through me at his admission. Not that he’d dreamed of sex, but of our wedding night. “But my imaginings never came close.”

“I always thought you had a very fertile imagination.” My voice sounds calm despite snapshots of the evening filtering through my brain. His hand on my breast. The hard length of him pressed between my legs. His strong, tanned throat as he’d thrown his head back. *The sound of him as he came.* The feeling that moves through me feels like electricity, my body rocking forward, chasing the sensation.

“Fertile or furtive?” he murmurs. I swallow a moan as he captures my nipple between his knuckles. “Hmm?”

“A little of both.” The words sound strained, my body aching for more.

“But you’ve always liked that about me, haven’t you?” I bite back a whimper as his knuckles skate down my body. “No one has ever fucked you the way that I do.”

“Such a dirty mouth.”

“This dirty mouth makes you come like no other. Say it, *milaya.*”

“It’s true.”

“And now I’m it for you. From now on, no one else gets to fuck you.” His statement is as fierce as his sudden grip against my thighs. “If someone as much as looks in your direction, I’ll blind them. If someone insults you, I will pull out their fucking tongue.” His dark words cause a wash of goose bumps along my arms. “You’re mine now. Anything you want, anything you need, you’ll get it from me.”

“I don’t—”

“It’s time someone looked after you.” His voice turns soft, his fingers exposing my other breast now. “That someone is me. Better get used to it.”

“This wasn’t supposed to be—”

“Now who’d be being furtive? Lying to themselves? I see you, Isla. I know you better than you think. I know what you want and what you need. You just have to let me in. Let me in, darling,” he whispers fervently, his eyes not leaving mine as they slip under the fabric of my bikini bottom. I whimper as he breaches me, his fingers finding me already wet. “You just have to let me. You just have to be.”

My spine goes rigid. This feels so wrong—I being to turn my head.

“No.” Two fingers at my cheek, and two inside me, he holds me there. “No need to worry. I’ll take care.”

His eyes quicksilver and cool, blue glass as I lift my hips, bearing down on his fingers. I bite my lip to stop from crying out, a deep, secret part of me awakening. There is such pleasure in being vulnerable, in allowing him to set me free. And all the while, he croons such things.

*He is mine and I am his.*

*How we were made for each other.*

“Ask me who I love,” he demands.

I shake my head because, “I don’t need to.”

My body tightens around his fingers, I press my arm to my mouth to stifle my cries. I am boneless, liquid, as he watches me. I am deeply flawed, and I am his. His to love.

Moments, maybe hours later, I watch as he readjusts the red fabric and, as easy as sliding into a pool on a hot day, I turn on the sun bed, curling against his broad chest. If it catches him off guard, he doesn’t say so, his arms coming around me as though fifteen years haven’t passed.

“They love this place,” I whisper, watching my boys floating now like starfish in the pool. Starfish that giggle and occasionally splash.

“I have a pool.” He pauses, then rushes on, “We can build them a pool in Scotland. The house has land?”

“A little.” Half turning, I glance briefly up at him. “And a summer that’s about five minutes long.”

“So we’ll build an indoor pool. Or buy a house with a pool, whichever—”

“Or we could just come here again.”

“Yes.” He slides his lips across my hairline. “We could. Anytime they like.”

“They should be getting back to school.”

“Yes. Reality has to intrude sometimes.”

As though invited by our discussion, the real world steals back in when Sergei’s voice calls from the terrace.

“Kolya, there is telephone for you.”

Behind me, Niko expels a breath. I sit forward, and he slips out from behind me.

“What’s Kolya?” I whisper, sliding my fingers around his wrist before he can leave.

“It’s short for Nikolai,” he explains without emotion.

“I thought Niko was?”

“No one calls me Niko but you.” He brings my hand to his lips, then presses it to his cheek. “I have only ever been your Niko.” He doesn’t wait for an answer, straightening, the palm trees above covering him in lacy shadows. “Oh.” He turns, glancing over his shoulder. “This morning, Hugh was using your phone. He said he needed to check his school email for homework.”

“A likely story.”

“That was my immediate thought. I hope I did right in taking it from him.”

I nod. “Thank you.”

“It’s under the towel.” He gestures to the table on the other side of the sunbed. “Just a suggestion, but you might like to think about returning some of those calls.” The corner of his mouth quirks. “You might also need to explain to Hugh what Stockholm syndrome is?”

“Sandy,” I fume.



“I’m not sure how many of his uncle’s texts he read,” he says, rubbing a finger to his brow.

“How many did you read?”

“Only that one,” he says with a deep chuckle. “It was already open.”

I harrumph, not at all mollified or sure I believe him, come to that, when his face is suddenly level with mine.

“I’m a lot of things, and not all of them good. But ask me for the truth, and I’ll tell you.”

*Ask me who I love.*

“Kolya.” This time, Sergei sounds slightly exasperated.

Niko mutters something in a language I don’t understand, but a tone I do. A brief press of his lips against mine, and then he’s gone.

Well, I have six texts from my brother. Less than I’d imagined, but each is increasingly terse in tone. The last is my favorite.

**Just come home. All of you. We bloody well miss you.**

*Oh, Sandy. You great big softy.*

I flick through Holland’s missive, my cheeks positively burning as she’d listed the reasons she’d packed what she did and hints to the fun she hopes we’re having.

I sincerely hope neither Hugh nor Niko read any of these.

“Mummy, where did Van go?” Hugh calls. I note he’s dropped ‘uncle’ which is probably for the best now that their relationship has officially change. Officially and fundamentally. He’s so good with them both and, whatever else happens, that has warmed my heart.

“He’ll be back in a little while,” I call back.

Both boys are voluble in their complaints when my phone suddenly buzzes in my hand. I have no intention of answering it, not yet, using it instead to point at my eldest son.

“I have a bone to pick with you about this.” In reply, Hugh dips under the waterline.

“You little...oh!” I fumble and accidentally hit the wrong button.

“I hope I’m not interrupting anything,” a familiar purr curls down the line.

“Tamsin? This isn’t your number,” I say, bringing the phone to my ear.

“New phone, who dis?” she drawls. “You’re more original than that, Isla. Come on.”

“Am I supposed to know what that means?”

“You will. Give Hugh a couple of years. I’m using Toby’s phone.” Toby, Tamsin’s eldest, is thirteen. “I thought you might be screening my calls.”

“I’m screening everyone’s calls today,” I hedge. Today? More like all week.

“So how’s life treating you?” she says, far too airily.

“Oh, you know,” I reply in the same tone. “There isn’t much to report since we spoke last.”

“Oh? That’s a surprise. It must be a misprint, I suppose,” she says sounding thoroughly unconvinced. “Or a prank.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Haven’t you seen it?” smug. That was definitely smug. “Let me read it to you. ‘Mr. N Vanyin to Lady Isla Dalforth,’” she intones. “That’s the heading, by the way.” My stomach flips. What the hell is this? “‘Nikolai Vanyin and Lady Isla Dalforth were married on Wednesday on the island of St Lucia, the ceremony was conducted by—” I am unprepared for Tamsin’s (uncharacteristic) squeal. “You sly bish! You married him! All these years later and you married the blond hottie from way back when!”

“Er, yes. I suppose I have.”

“Have you two always had a thing, or was this some kind of post-divorce hookup on steroids? Tell me all the things!” she

demands, practically yelling down the phone. “Because, clearly, you haven’t been keeping me fully abreast of your life.”

“Since when have you been a fan of other people’s lives?” I ask, suddenly realizing that it’s one thing to feel like I’m coming to terms with my change in situation (and finding I might actually quite like it) but another to announce it to the world.

“Since I was there at its inception. Stop stalling and tell me! It all sounds so romantic.”

Is it romantic to be forced into marriage? Some might think so. *Some people like me.* It’s not like he tied me up. *Yet.* It’s also not like I used to complain when he did.

“Well, we got married on Wednesday—”

“I already know that bit. Is that the boys I can hear in the background?”

“Yes. They appear to be drowning each other in the pool.”

“You took them on honeymoon? That’s great. I liked him before but he’s already going up in my estimation.”

“Maybe I insisted on taking them.”

“Izzy, you’re a single mother of two boys. You and I both know you would leave them to God and good neighbors if it means a few days of peace. You don’t have to admit it. I know.”

“I’d leave them with my brother, but—”

“Exactly what I said. The boys are there on your new husband’s instigation. So tell me about the ring. Give me the c’s. Cut, color, clarity, carat, cock.”

“Not sure that last one is one the diamond chart.”

“You know I like to keep my hand in.”

Pressing my hand to my head, I moan.

“Oh, come on. That was funny. I haven’t been completely broken of *the D* yet.”

“I’m sure Gabby just loves to hear that,” I say, invoking her wife’s name.

“As a matter of fact, she does. It makes for some spicy bedroom—”

“Niko gave me my grandmother’s engagement ring,” I blurt. “It’s a family heirloom that was stolen and he found it.”

“Oh, wow. You know, that’s so romantic.”

“Yes, I suppose it is.” If you don’t concentrate on how it went missing in the first place and if you don’t consider how Niko came to find it. It’s not like he wandered into Cartier.

“You don’t sound convinced.”

“I am, it’s just. It’s all happened so fast.”

“I wouldn’t say fifteen years is fast.”

“This time around,” I add, frustrated. “Everything has been so wonderful, but I feel like I haven’t had time to think.”

“Okay, lets break this down,” she says, slipping into her faux-therapist mode. “It’s not like you just met. There’s a history between you.”

*Not a very pleasant one*, I think to myself. We’d kept what happened between us, though I’d almost told her after things fell apart. But, in the end, I just tucked my tail between my legs and moved back to Scotland.

“I bet this thing has been simmering between you for years.”

“No, I was completely faithful to Tom.”

“I wasn’t suggesting anything. I’m just making the point that it’s not like you’ve married someone you only just met.”

“But that’s just it. I don’t really know him. I’m not sure I can trust him.”

“Isla, love, you don’t trust anyone.”

“What?”

“And it’s not all that surprising.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I trust!”

“I suppose to an extent. You trust your brother, but I’d bet my retirement fund you don’t tell him everything. Meanwhile, you make yourself useful to everyone around you, often to your own detriment.”

“No,” I scoff. “That’s not true. I like to help.”

“You don’t *like*, to help, Iz. It’s a compulsion.”

“Is it?”

“We all have our wounds, babe, but as far as my therapist loving little heart is concerned it’s not surprising you are the way you are. If you ever find yourself on a therapist’s couch, you’ll probably discover your father shooting your dog when you were a kid was the start of it.”

Ice washes over me, from my head to my toes. I don’t really hear anything else, not as my mind moves back in time to that moment...

It was raining and I was in the boot room with Sandy. We were supposed to clean it as punishment for arguing at the breakfast table. Bess started to whine at the back door, so I thought she might need to go. I hadn’t bothered with her lead—oddly for a Labrador, she wasn’t very keen on water, including wet weather—when she’d taken off across the courtyard. I’d run after her. She didn’t like the rain and there was supposed to be a storm coming. I got so wet so fast, my hair plastered to my head and my T-shirt stuck to my chest. I’d spied her slipping through the broken gatehouse door. I’d dashed in after her, following her familiar barks and higher yips to find her playing with my mother’s best friend’s Yorkshire terrier. But my heart had sunk to my boots. Clothes hitched, flashes of skin, heavy grunts and higher pitched sighs, I’d also found my father. And Aunt Annabelle, my mother’s best friend. I backed out of the room. My twelve-year-old eyes not able to comprehend what I was seeing but knowing anyway. I ran home, mute. Bess was the least of my worries at that point.

Sandy wanted to know what was wrong, but I couldn’t find the words to explain what I’d seen. It hadn’t even occurred to me to worry about hiding it from my mother. But it turned out I never would, because within twenty minutes of my letting her

out the door, I'd heard a rifle shot ring out. And I knew. I ran out to the courtyard to find Bess on the sandstone. She was still, a ruby red puddle bloomed under her, and she was still warm as I'd dropped to the ground and sunk my fingers into her fur. I'd sobbed, my immature heart breaking as I'd looked up at my father for an explanation.

*"That's what happens to when you don't do as you should,"* he'd said in that detached tone of his. Then he'd stuck the butt of the gun under his arm and turned away, but not before adding. *"Make yourself useful, girl. Go and find the gardener. Tell him to plant a shrub over this."*

I'm frozen. Frozen in the horror of the memory. I can still feel her soft fur under my fingers, the lifeless cloud of her gaze that still haunts me sometimes. My throat feels thick, choked by guilt and grief and the metallic tang of her blood. I'd had to find the gardener—I'd had to leave her there and it just felt like another moment of my treachery.

*Bad things happen when you're not a good.*

Is this the mantra I'd lived my life by? I hadn't watched Bess and she'd been torn from me in the cruelest way. Then Niko. He wasn't supposed to be mine, perhaps that's why things ended as painfully as they did.

And this time? Did I have a choice? Would it have made a difference?

Poor Bess. I would hope she's getting her own back by biting the bastard's backside daily in heaven, but I imagine doggy heaven is on a much higher plain than the human one. If my father is hanging out with the angels at all.

"...childhood trauma." Tamsin's voice pierces my memories as the sound of my childish sobs seems to echo her voice.

*"I hate him."*

And I did. But as far as my new husband is concerned, I fear my feelings are the opposite.

Can you love without trust?

Perhaps you can when the person you don't trust is yourself.



## VAN

“ISLA.” Curling my fingers around the duvet, I pull it from under her nose. “Why is this house so fucking cold?”

“The boiler,” she mutters. Pulling on the duvet, my darling wife mutters something about the hell of jet lag. Despite how cold the house is, under the covers, Isla is as naked as the day she was born, despite having gone to bed with a fluffy pajama and socks ensemble. “Like its owner, it’s temperamental in the morning.”

“So I see.”

None of us were ready to leave our bubble of St. Lucian sunshine bliss, but the longer we stayed, the harder our transition into reality. We’d flown back yesterday, straight into a local private airfield and arrived at a cold, damp house where I’d had no doubt which room I’d be sleeping in. *Hers. Now and forever.* Something else I’m quite sure of is a new heating system will be installed within days. While it’s always delightful to peel Isla out of her clothing, I’d prefer not to climb into bed with her dressed for the arctic.

“Time to get up,” I announce, whipping the bedding from her body. *Time to face the music. Time to make the monkeys dance.*

“Hey!” She growls, swinging her legs out of bed, but then she spots the cup on the nightstand, and her face brightens. “You brought me coffee?”

“I’m not sure you deserve it.”



“I’m not sure I want it if you’re going to be like that.”

“I think you always want it.” My eyes slide hungrily over her nakedness. “You just don’t like to admit it to yourself.”

She scowls and, spotting her robe at the foot of her bed, lunges for it. But my reflexes are quicker.

“Ah-ah!” I swing it away as she makes a grab for it a second time and, with a flourish, hold it out for her like a diligent lady’s maid.

“Thank you,” she mutters haughtily, stabbing her right arm into the sleeve.

“You can thank me when your new robe arrives.”

“What’s wrong with this one?” Her head swings around, and she glares at me over her shoulder.

“What’s right with it?” I imagine it was once fluffy, but now it’s threadbare and shabby. But that’s besides the point. “As your husband,” I add as she slides in her other arm, “I want you to have the best of everything.”

She begins to laugh. Unhappily. “For me or for you? Marriage isn’t all silks and satins and sex on tap.”

“Are you suggesting the honeymoon is over? I’m disappointed \_\_\_”

“You’d better get used to it,” she snipes. “Or else, file for a divorce.”

As I slide the robe up her arms, she jerks as though to pull away from me. Until I curl my fingers over her shoulder. Her skin is so silky, the bone almost delicate. “Try again, darling,” I whisper, bringing my lips to her ear. “I know this was a rude awakening, but till death do us part. Remember that?”

She reaches for the belt, her breath hitching as I pull her hands to her sides. I’d only meant for her to take a pause, to get her to understand that this morning’s reality hadn’t only been a shock to her. When I woke in her bed, knowing *he’d* slept in it and they’d fucked in it did not make for a good start to the morning. Then I’d noticed the mug Archie had been drinking from.

*World's Okay-ist Dad.*

The echo of that fucker is everywhere.

Isla is mine. Now, always, and forever. And while nothing will ever change that, I still feel like a dog with the urge to piss and leave my mark everywhere.

So I'd only held her to make her pause, but the hitch in her breath changes all of that. It twists my mind and my plans as I tug the robe back down her arms and yank the belt from the loops.

"Till death." Pulling her wrists to the middle of her back, I bind them with the cheap material. "Till our bones turn to dust," I growl, drawing her body against me.

"The boys," she whispers, then twists her head to the side, gifting me with a glimpse of her profile. Her fair lashes flutter, her cheeks flushed pink.

"They're already at school."

"How?"

"They were awake at six." Her body jerks as I grip the binding, testing it. "Hugh said he had football practice, and Archie wanted to see his friends."

"But breakfast..." My free hand coasts over her soft stomach, then higher, her nipple stiff against my palm.

"You really don't think much of me."

"No, I just—"

"Confused me with someone else?"

"No." She tries to turn, not that I'll let her. I don't like this house. I don't like his lingering presence. I don't like that he snatched her from under my nose fifteen years ago when I had fucking plans. "I know you're not..."

"Not what, milaya?"

"You're not him," she whispers.

"That's right, Isla. I wouldn't leave you living in a house with more flaws than charm and a car that's a hazard to you and

your sons.” Need thrums in my veins—a need to make her understand.

“The heating works. It just needs—”

“Fuck the heating,” I growl into the soft skin of her neck. “And fuck you dressing for bed like you’re setting out on an arctic expedition. Go ahead, wear a dozen layers if you like because the only thing you’ll wake wearing is my scent.”

“Yes.” Her soft answer causes me to still, snapshots of a million images flashing through my head. Isla laughing in the sunshine. Crying out under me. Smiling. Kissing. Loving. Being mine. Loving me. “Niko,” she whispers, her denim eyes pleading.

“I’m burning this fucking monstrosity,” I rasp, tugging on the binding again.

Her laughter is as soft as spring sunshine. “But it’s just—”

“Ugly.” I slide her hair from her neck, her knees giving a little as I press my teeth there. “You deserve better, so much better, and it’s my job to give it to you.”

“And you’re going to give it to me?” she purrs, her voice full of suggestion as she pushes her backside against me.

“Oh, so now you want to tease?”

“You know you love—” Her voice halts, the air around us suddenly shimmering with awkwardness.

“Yes, that’s right, my darling. I love your pleading eyes and how your pussy owns me.” Nudging her to the bed, I use the binding to press her gently to the mattress. “I love when you get on your knees for me.”

The bed dips as I settle myself behind her, sliding my hand over the elegant slope of her shoulder. Her skin is golden in the light, the white marks of that fucking bikini haunting me as I squeeze and knead the flesh of her ass. She whimpers, so open and vulnerable stretched out beneath me that the sight short-circuits my wiring. Words rise from my heart and spill from my mouth.

“*Rakastan sua.*” She shivers as I press the rolling sounds of the words against her neck. “Above all else, I love you.”

“Niko.” My name on her lips sounds pained.

“I know you love me.” My belt buckle *chinks*, and her breathing speeds up at the soft susurrus of my zipper. “You want me. You love me. I feel it in your touch. I see it in the way you watch me.” Pressing my crown to her entrance, I circle and tease, the head of my cock glistening with her wetness. My heart thunders in my chest as I try to shut off a wash of feelings and this urge to own her. This desperation to make her feel the strength of my love.

She is so fucking perfect as she stretches like a cat, her hips tilting in invitation. So fucking stubborn as she turns her face to the mattress.

“I have always loved you,” I rasp, sliding my hand to cradle her throat. I press forward, her body yielding to mine, her heart opening as she cries out.

“Oh God, Niko!” Her body trembles around my cock, and she swallows back a sob. “I didn’t want to love you.” My jaw clenches as I slide forward, covering her body like a cloak. “I almost broke last time.”

“Never again,” I whisper fervently, brushing the hair from her face. I mutter a string of unintelligible promises to her—to God—pressing my lips to her hairline, her lips, her cheeks. “I will guard your heart.” My heart feels like a thing with fucking wings.

“I don’t speak Russian. Or Finnish,” she whispers wetly.

“*Ya tyebya abazhAyu,*” I whisper. “I adore you.” I switch from Russian to Finnish. “*Rakastan sinua aina.* I’ve loved you always.” I begin to move inside her, slow and deep, my heart thundering against her as it threatens to break free from my ribs. “Love me, darling. Trust me with your heart.”

“So deep.”

“*Yes.*” The room is cool, yet our skins are slick, her body shaking as I push into her again and again. This feels like more than sex. More than a promise or a communion.

“You love me,” I grunt, my hips beginning to flex as I start to fuck her like I’m angry with her.

“Oh God!” she cries. “Yes!”

“And I love you. You believe it,” I demand.

“Yes. *Yes.*”

“Good, because I’m about to fuck you like I hate you.” Words die as I press her knees wider, the angle changing, my sense of control slipping as I hold her down and begin to thrust in earnest. Her spine arches, her frantic cries ringing through the room as she takes all I have to give. She gasps and calls my name, the rhythmic tightening of her pussy milking me for all I’m worth.

I screw my eyes tight, riding the wave with her, gritting my jaw against this pleasure thrumming through my veins.

“Again,” I grunt, tugging her upward by the bindings. My arm comes around her, and I roughly grasp her breast, my other hand diving between her legs. “Come for me again, Isla.” Grinding against her, I slide my fingers over her clit, making her buck against me, her cries tremulous. “Your pleasure is so sweet against my fingertips. Can you hear it?”

“No, Niko. Too much,” she complains with a carnal moan.

“For me, darling. One more time.” She nods. Biting her lip, she begins to hum, fucking hum, opening herself to me as my fingers work over her in tight, wet circles. It doesn’t take long, her body jolting as though struck by a live electricity line. My knees threaten to give out as her body pulsates tightly around my cock.

“Yes, that’s it. Give me one more, my love.”

“Love,” Isla pants, “I love. *You.*”

My vision begins to blur as my orgasm barrels down my spine. I love. She loves. She is mine. With a strangled grunt, I pitch forward, twisting to the side, and pull my whole world with me.

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“Am I supposed to punch you or shake your hand?”

“Do what you must,” I answer, closing the car door behind me with a solid *thunk*. Alexander’s large gray mastiffs sniff around my knees until their master brings them to heel with a shrill whistle. “That’s a good trick. You should teach it to me.”

“It won’t do you any good with my sister”—I glance sharply at him— “my *sister’s* dog.” He sends me a withering look. “Fucking hothead,” he mutters, making a vague gesture behind me to where an overweight Labrador is sniffing around the front wheel. “Gertrude,” he adds by way of explanation or introduction.

“We’ve already met.” Dropping to my heels, I hold out my hand for her to sniff, which she does. “I’ve come to take you home, Gertie.”

“And where is home?”

I straighten and try not to smile at Alexander looking down his nose at me.

“I’d save it for the butler if I were you.”

“Fuck off,” he enunciates before adding, “I suppose you’d better come inside.”

The hallway is dim, the worn flagstones echoing beneath my feet as I follow Alexander down into the bowels of the house. A right, then a left, and we’re in a warm, light-filled library with aged tomes stacked from floor to ceiling along three walls.

“I feel like I’ve been sent to the headmaster’s office.” I pitch my voice lightly as it looks as though Alexander might be about to put the large antique desk between us.

He really does want to punch me. To be fair, I’d punch me if I were in his place.

“That sounds like a guilty conscience talking.” Dropping to the corner of the desk, he folds his arms across his chest.

“You know me better than that.”

“Because you don’t have a conscience. Your moral compass swings like a drunk pendulum.”

“Or points straight to hell, depending on who you ask.”

“Enough, Van. Tell me what the fuck is going on.”

“I told you. I’ve come to take Gertie home.”

“Home now, is it?” One brow arches like a question mark. “And where might that be? Kensington? Thornbeck? Saint fucking Petersburg!”

“Wherever Isla is. That’s my home now.”

He glares at me, unconvinced, before his gaze dips to the floor. “We’ve been friends for a long time.” His eyes rise slowly, his expression one I’ve never seen before. “I thought I knew you as well as anyone. I thought I could trust you, but that stunt you pulled last week, frightening the fuck out of me, then sending me on a wild goose chase to London? Was any of that even true?”

“That Isla was involved with the Russian mafia?” *More than you’d care to know*, I think but don’t say. “It happened. You can thank her ex-husband.”

“I will,” he grates out. “When I find where he’s hiding.”

“Not if I find him first.”

He masters a cold-looking smile as he asserts, “I thought you were the Russian mafia?” A shot in the dark.

“Obviously, I’m not all of it,” I answer as I saunter across the room.

He nods as though appreciating that snippet of candor. “And your mysterious uncle?”

“He lives in Switzerland.” *Barely.*

“So my sister gets entangled with the mafia. Threatened?” His gaze is mildly questioning.

“That’s what she said. When she came to me.” Score one for Van as I come to a stop next to an oxblood chesterfield sofa.

Not that he invites me to sit.

“Then she marries you, becoming further embroiled.”

“Embroiled isn’t how I’d put it.”

“You whisk my only sister off to Saint Lucia to get married on short notice.”

“You saw the announcement.”

“How are the two related? She’s at risk, then she’s married.”

“She came to me, and I said I’d help. I asked her to marry me, and she said yes.”

“Just like that!” Unfolding his arms, he snaps his fingers. “No buildup. No courtship. No declarations of love.”

I shrug, holding out my hands as though I don’t quite understand.

“I love my sister very much.”

“I know.”

“How, Van? How could you possibly know? You don’t have a sister or, as far as I can tell, anyone you care about.”

The barb is well aimed, and it pierces when it lands. I get it. I’m a shit friend. But I’ll be a better brother-in-law because he’s wrong. I might not have a sister, but I have someone I’d lay my life down for.

“I care about Isla. I care about her more than you will ever know.”

“Do you?”

“What do you want me to say, Alexander? That I betrayed our friendship years ago? It’s true. I fucked her, and I didn’t tell you.” Alexander springs from the desk and lunges for me. We scuffle, my heel catching on a hole in the worn rug, Alexander’s forward momentum smashing me against a bookcase.

“Shut your fucking mouth,” he growls as leather-bound books, musty with age, rain down from the shelves as he crashes my shoulders against the shelves again and again.



“I fucked her, Alexander, and made her promise she wouldn’t tell.”

My former friend presses his forearm against my windpipe. And what’s more, I let him. I let him, and I grin.

“All these fucking years.” He follows up his words with a gut punch that I fully deserve. “All these years you were fucking her! Playing with her!”

“I don’t even regret it,” I taunt, feeling like I deserve his ire because how could I ever explain all I risked, all I did, to protect her?

“Bastard!” His head rears back, and I appear to have enough self-preservation to keep him from headbutting my nose.

“Motherfucker!” My cheekbone, however, is another story. “Did you hear that crack?”

“I think that was my forehead,” he mutters, rubbing the back of his hand across his brow. He pulls back a little, seemingly shocked that it had come to this, that things had moved so quick.

“I don’t regret any of it,” I say, my chest heaving as adrenaline twists through my nervous system. “I love her. I’ve always loved her. I just couldn’t have her.”

“Sounds like you have,” he says, his face contorted with disgust. “Sounds like you’ve had her again and again, and you didn’t have the fucking decency to—”

I begin to snort great bellyfuls of wheezing, painful laughter. Thanks to my battered cheek.

“What’s so funny?” he growls, looking like he’s thinking about threading his fingers around my lapels for a second round.

“You, the great Duke of Dalforth, worrying over his sister’s virtue.”

“This is not about my past.”

“No, it’s about hers, and if she could hear you now, she wouldn’t send for your white horse. She’d knee you in the

fucking balls.”

“Yes, well. You’re not telling me she knows about this conversation.”

“Of course she doesn’t,” I reply, sliding down the bookcase until my ass hits the floor. Otherwise, we’d be laughing our asses off about how she thinks he murdered Giles. She won’t be laughing when she finds out he didn’t, I suppose.

“I don’t know what to believe anymore,” he mutters, dropping to a nearby cedar chest.

“It happened—we didn’t mean it to.” Stretching one leg straight, I rest my hand on my bent knee, my eyes on the peeling frescoed ceiling. “I kept it from you because I knew I couldn’t keep her, and I couldn’t lose you. We kept it from everyone because I couldn’t protect her. Not then.”

“You’ve manipulated her,” he says, seeing through my bullshit.

“I saw an opportunity, and I grabbed it with both fucking hands.”

“So you lied to her?” Leaning forward, he presses his elbows to his knees. “You don’t lie to the people you love.”

“Yes, you do. You do it to protect them. Tell me, does Holland know about Thornbeck? Does she know about your past?”

“That has nothing to do with this,” he growls.

“Because the means justifies the end. Now I can protect Isla. I can take care of her.”

“Good luck with that.” He snorts. “Isla doesn’t like to be coddled. She’s not a pet. She won’t be kept.”

“She deserves to be treated like a queen, and that’s what I’ll do.” If I need to tie her to the bed to do so, I will. “She will be loved. And she has love. Love for me.”

“And we had friendship once,” he replies pointedly.

“Yes. But now we’re family.”



## ISLA

“I HEAR CONGRATULATIONS ARE IN ORDER.”

“Oh. Yes.” I blink, staring at Griffin, my half brother. “What are you doing here?” On my front doorstep, suited and booted, he’s dressed for a day in chambers, minus the wig and gown. He does have an official looking leather folio with him, though.

“I realize this is unusual,” he answers gruffly, shifting his weight from one leg to the other. “Awkward, even.”

And then I realize I’m the one being awkward. “No, not at all. Come in.” Pulling the door wider, I gesture him inside. “You’re welcome to visit anytime.” Even if you’ve never visited before and rarely venture from London to the wilds of Scotland.

“How are the kids?” he asks, stepping past me.

“Fine. They’re at school.”

“Right. I guess I should leave some pocket money for them.”

“Should you?” I answer, amused, as I close the door behind him.

“Apparently so.”

“According to Hugh?” I hazard.

“He might’ve mentioned I’ve been lax in my duties as uncle at the wedding.”

“He doesn’t miss a trick,” I murmur, gesturing for Griffin to follow me down the hall.

“A barrister in the making? To follow in his uncle’s footsteps.”

Griffin shrugs. “There are worse careers.”

“You mean like being a duke?”

“Yes.” He smiles tightly, then mutters, “Let’s go with that.”

Odd. “Can I get you a tea or a coffee?” I ask, pointing at the electric kettle on the bureau now that we’re in the dining room. “I’m afraid I can’t offer you much more than that.”

“No, I’m fine,” he answers, holding up a hand. “This isn’t strictly a social visit.” From the kitchen, an unearthly *clang* sounds. I step back, suddenly worried this bulk of man might end up on my knee like a frightened cat. “What the hell was that?”

“The carpenter.” I give a wan smile. “He is why the contents of my kitchen are in here,” I add, glancing at the absolute mess contained in this room. I really should take the opportunity to go through it all. Throw away the aging dried herbs and spices, some of which probably predate Archie’s birth. “Shall we sit?” I say, pulling out a heavy dining room chair as Griffin does the same.

There’s a saying that’s been floating through my head since we got back: a new broom sweeps clean. But I’m not exactly sure this is what prompted Niko’s thinking when the engineers arrived to install a new heating system last week. Or even when I came home from the school run to find a crew replacing the potholed driveway and building surveyors examining the place. Or even when a truck turned up with pallet upon pallet of gray Scottish slate for the roof.

And then a new bed turned up—one big enough to hold an orgy in.

“*A new broom sweeps clean?*” I’d said, tapping the bouncy new mattress.

Niko’s arms had slid around my waist, toppling us to the bed. “*But an old one knows the corners.*”

The corners. The bells. The buttons to touch to make it melt.

“Isla?”

“Sorry. I was just thinking.” The words fall from my mouth. Thinking about something you don’t need to know about. “We’re having a new kitchen installed,” I add as an electric drill whirs. The new/old broom struck again after I’d made some vague comment about how Julia must find the kitchen in his London house a delight to be in. Next thing I know, a London kitchen designer and his crew are crawling all over the place.

Is it a case of wanting to obliterate Tom’s presence? I’m not sure. But it is like having a very active fairy godmother. One you need to watch your words around.

“Is Van about?” Griffin’s glances behind him as though expecting Niko to appear like the earl of hell himself. The devil in a well-cut suit to some, a man with a magic wand to me. *And, boy, is it magic.* “Did I say something funny?”

“No.” Pressing my fingers to my mouth, I give a tiny shake of my head. “It’s just Niko went to London this morning. He won’t be back until tomorrow. Van, I mean,” I add, finding Griffin’s expression blank. “You should’ve called. I could’ve saved you the journey out here.”

“No, it’s always great to see you,” his mouth says. His posture, however, says this is uncomfortable. “Actually, I’ve come to see you. At Van’s request.”

“Oh?” Pulling the side of my cardigan closer, I ask, “Aren’t you a criminal barrister?” I pull a face. “I know Archie is a little light-fingered where chocolate and treats are concerned, but I think he’ll grow out of it.”

“He wanted me to go over this with you,” he says, opening the leather folio to reveal a manila folder. I know manila folders are common things, but I can’t help feeling that I’ve seen this one before. In Niko’s lap on the plane, say.

“No.” Linking my fingers together, I press my wrists to the table.

“No what?”

“I don’t want whatever that is,” I add happily. “Money, property, whatever.”

“Maybe it’s a life insurance policy?” Griff’s mouth quirks in an echo of my brother’s smile. Weird. Griffin is dark where Sandy is fair, and as far as personalities go, they’re miles apart.

“I don’t think Van needs to take out a policy on my life to cash in on a later date, do you?”

Griffin laughs, then shakes his head. “He’s got more money than Croesus.”

“I think he might actually like me.”

“Oh, sure. There is that. If you’d allow me to show you this folder, you might find out exactly how much he likes you.”

“No thanks.” I don’t need to know. We’re getting along fine as we are—more than fine. I’m sort of surprised to find I like him. I loved him before. It was a heady, sweeping kind of love. The selfish, unthinking kind. A young love. But, as I’m a woman now, I *like* him. But like is such an inadequate word. I don’t like him like a pair of shoes or a nice dress. My feelings are muddied and hard to pin down. I feel grateful to him, not for saving me because he’s no white knight on a charging steed. It’s more about the gratitude I feel for all that he’s done to make this easy for my sons. He didn’t have to—he didn’t have to do anything, but he did. I’m also relieved at how well the three of them seem to get along, which has been more important than him easing the transition for them. You can pretend to like a child. You can pretend to listen when you’re really not paying any attention. You can smile and nod and think you’re doing a good job at fooling them, but they know. Kids are intuitive like that, and this is how I know he isn’t just pretending. For my sake. For me.

So I like him. I’m grateful to him. I see his kindness and his care. I see how he looks at me. And I think he sees the way I look at him. Because, my God, I fancy the pants off him. He makes me feel hot and greedy and like I’m twenty-five again. Which has brought me full circle because, at that age, I couldn’t get enough of him. At this age, I couldn’t help but fall

in love with him for a second time. Like first, then love. And the sex? Well, that's just an excellent bonus.

"Isla, I've come all this way. At least have a look at it."

"What for?" I laugh, feeling a little giddy. "I don't need anything from him." It's nice to be taken care of. A little strange being on the opposite side of the fence, but fighting it would be like fighting the tide.

"Don't make me go back having failed at my job."

"Why did he ask you to do this? You're a criminal barrister."

"Maybe because the amount of money he wants to give you could be seen by some as criminal." He grins. "You know all this is just for you—no strings attached. It's just like a massive \_\_\_"

"Hug," I say, sure he won't understand. Niko wants me to feel secure and not dependent on him.

"He keeps his cards pretty close to his chest." Griffin's expression seems to say: hello, surprise wife!

"He must've asked because you're family." Griff's posture stiffens, uncomfortable with the label. "You do quite a lot of work for him, don't you? As a criminal barrister."

"I have several law degrees. I just happen to be an expert in making crime pay."

"For you or for him?"

"That would be telling." He grins. "Not to mention grounds for being struck off. Ask your husband," he adds when I don't reply, tapping his forefinger against the folder. "But not before you have a look at this. Please?"

"It's a lot, isn't it?" I ask, but Griffin just sort of shrugs. "Want to give me a hint?"

"Some property. Some shares. Details of a couple of bank accounts, in your name, of course. Shares in a couple of racehorses, I think, not that you need to hold on to them, but they're sound investments. As you can imagine, Van has the best wealth management team around. Oh, and there's this."



Slipping his hand into his jacket, he pulls out a black credit card and slides it across the table. “The bill goes straight to the accountant, and there’s a half a million limit.”

“Dear me,” I trill. “How am I supposed to buy a super yacht with a piddly half a mil?” Five hundred thousand pounds. What kind of credit score does the man have?

“You could always dip into your offshore bank account,” Griffin says, sliding the folder over next. I stare at the thing like it’s a ticking time bomb. Like a bomb, I want to run away from it. *Oh, bugger it.* I flip it open and scan page after page of information. Bank accounts in my name. Deeds of ownership the same. Stocks, bonds, and stuff I don’t even understand.

The fine hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, and my skin begins to tingle. I close my eyes, and all I can see are bursting number stars in the darkness. Am I having a mini panic attack?

“Are you okay over there?” Chair legs scrape against the floor, and my eyes spring open.

“I think I feel a little sick. This is all legitimate. The money, it’s not...”

“Ill-gotten gains?” He snorts, amused.

“I thought you were here to help.”

“Isla, Van is the cleverest fucker I’ve ever known. And none of this can be linked to any kind of organized crime, that I can guarantee.”

“Organized?” A heavy stone plummets to the base of my stomach.

“You know.” His shoulder lifts and falls, but it’s clear that’s all he has to say on the subject. “Well, it looks like my job here is done.”

“That’s it? You’re not going help me understand what to do with all of this?” I flick the edge of the folder, still unsure what to think.

“You don’t want to take financial advice from me. Far better you speak to the head honcho.”

“Hmm?” My gaze rises from the folder.

“Sandy is bound to be much better at this sort of stuff.”

My heart gives a little pang at the mention of his name. I’ve seen him since we got back, but I haven’t been around nearly as much. I’ve blamed the business and the boys’ schedules, but the truth is, guilt keeps me from him. Guilt at what he did in the name of protecting me. I feel like we both have blood on our hands and no way to get rid of it. No way to discuss it. I can’t tell him what I know, or how I know, and that kills me a little. But he wouldn’t understand. He’d hold it against Van, and I don’t want him to. Whatever the impetus or the driving force behind our marriage, I don’t regret it. I’ve said as much to my brother, and we seem to have reached a place where we ignore the fact that I married his best friend under less-than-perfect circumstances. Or maybe that should be his former best friend, given the way Niko had looked when he’d returned from picking up Gertie. His cheek wasn’t swollen because he’d had a difference of opinion with a door, no matter how strongly he insisted. The man doesn’t have a clumsy bone in his body.

“Oh, and the contact details for a wealth manager are also in the file. Or you could find your own.”

“I didn’t even know it was a thing,” I murmur, standing from my own chair now. “I’ve never had wealth before.”

Griffin looks at me askance. And I begin to chuckle.

“Did you think I had hidden millions somewhere? That I like driving a battered Range Rover? That I found the oil leak charming?”

“He left you with money, though, right?”

He who shall not be named, also known as our father. “The only thing he left me with is an overwhelming need to please other people. Everything went to Sandy, but if you ask me, he still got the rotten end of the deal.”

“He got the title.”

“You wouldn’t want that.”

“They wouldn’t give it to a bastard, anyway,” he says with a sharp laugh. “Nah, I wouldn’t want it. I suppose I just assumed you would’ve been taken care of.”

“No.” I glance down at the folder. “At least, not until now.”

“What a fucked-up family,” he mutters.

“Yes, but we’re working on it.”

He looks at me for a beat, then nods. Giving in to the label, maybe. “Well, if you ever murder anyone, I’m the man to call.”

“To bury the body or to take care of my defense?”

“Both of those are in the remit of my talents.”

“I’m sure you have many other attributes.”

“None that you want to know about,” he returns as we make our way through the house to the front door.

“Thanks for coming.” He looks surprised to find my hand on his arm. More surprised still as I pull him in for a hug. “Van did right in asking you.”

But am I doing right in accepting such generosity?

I suppose time will tell.

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**We have a problem**, reads the text from the House of Dalforth’s logistics manager. Who also happens to be my operations manager, my inventories manager, and even sometimes a customer service rep.

**It’s not a bad problem to have, exactly**, she follows up with.

“Then why are you calling it a problem?” I mutter, picking up my phone. It barely rings before Jinny answers. “What’s up?” My heart beats through a series of palpitations, which is my go-to response when there’s a problem with my business baby.

“Have you seen the figures for today?”

“No.” I don’t check them every day. It’s a little too disheartening.

“You should,” she insists, sounding buzzed. *Happy?* This is not a state I’m familiar with for Jinny. “Really. Fire up your laptop now.”

“Do you want me to call you back?”

“No! I want to hear your reaction.”

“You’re frightening me,” I mutter, logging on to the website’s order interface. “It’s ah-what?”

“Aye, that’s what I thought. I even looked on the backend, but it’s correct. We’ve sold out of the Katia dress in the black, the green, and the blue. We’ve got no sizes left. Not one!”

Pleasure begins to pop inside me like miniature bottles of fizz. The sleek and sexy Katia dress is one of my designs. Oh, I am feeling the love!

“What are we going to do about resupply?”

“Um, I’ll get in contact with the factory. Can you make a post on the website? Maybe something about how we limit our orders because we believe in sustainability and not oversupply. You know, fast fashion ending up in the landfill,” I run on, circling my hand in the air as I try to process my thoughts. We don’t stock a huge inventory because I didn’t have the money to buy more stock. I suppose I do now. I also suppose this company could become a cute hobby. I also know it won’t.

“Yeah, I’ll do that. I wonder what’s behind the massive spike.”

“Isn’t it obvious? It’s a gorgeous dress, designed by a very talented woman,” I say with a teary laugh. I just can’t make sense of this, other than it’s obviously amazing. “Whatever the cause, I’m going to have a celebratory slice of cake with my coffee right after I do a little happy dance.”

“Living it large,” Jinny says with a chuckle. “You’ll be dancing to the soundtrack of home renovations, by the sounds of it.” The drill in the kitchen has fired up again.

“The music is all in my head,” I answer as we end our call.

I do actually dance a happy jig. I've always wanted to be a fashion designer, and I have been, I suppose. I've designed things and felt great about making my own clothes on my trusty old Singer sewing machine. I've toured factories where the clothing I've designed has been made. I've held dresses and blouses and jackets in my hand and marveled at how I've had a hand in the process. But this feels different. This feels like acknowledgment.

My phone buzzes. Another text from Jinny.

**Got it! HoD IG page was tagged by the model Viktoria Kvitko. She was pap'd wearing the dress at The Ivy last night. Then The Daily Mail ran the photo this morning, listing HoD as the place where Viktoria's look could be picked up.**

**Fab, I type out. Maybe we should send her some flowers.**

**Or her stylist,** Jinny replies.

Except we haven't had any inquiries from stylists lately. *Or ever.*

**Great detective work,** I add. **A pat on the back coming your way.**

And an internet stalk in my future. As Hugh would say, my Spidey senses are tingling.

Viktoria Kvitko is, in a word, gorgeous. Dark hair, almond-shaped eyes, and a figure like Jessica Rabbit. *The perfect shape for a HoD dress.* At age twenty-eight, she's not a catwalk model but, rather, Instagram famous. An influencer with hundreds of thousands of followers and a beautifully curated feed. She recently dated a boy band member and now gets stalked by the paparazzi. Scrolling through her account makes me feel old and frumpy. Honestly, I don't get what being famous for being famous' sake is. She's gorgeous, and I understand women want to be her and men want to—

No. I shake my head. *No!*

There are no images of a beautiful Viktoria draped around my husband on her feed. I press my hand to my head. Can you

hear yourself? Your husband!

This isn't happening. Jealousy isn't a good look on anyone. Not that it stops me from moving from Instagram to the internet.

*Viktoria Kvitko and Nikolai Vanyin*, I type in the search bar, then hit the search function, move onto images. And there are lots of images, but none of them together.

Good. Next, I type:

*Viktoria Kvitko and mystery man*.

And I scroll. What am I searching for? Proof of them together? This is silly. Why would she wear my dress, in that case?

They could be friends. Friends who used to fuck.

*Friends who still do*, whispers a vicious little voice in my head.

"Oh, sod it," I mutter, reaching for my phone again. I dial Niko's number.

"Well, this is an unexpected surprise." The warmth in his tone floods my body with oxytocin, taking the edge off this neurosis. There are voices in the background, their conversations indistinct. "One moment," he murmurs, then mutters something in Russian, I suppose. A door closes and the background noise shuts off like a tap. "How are you, Peanut?"

"I'm good." My smile leaks through my words, then I remember why I'm making this call. "Good but confused."

Niko laughs, a soft, carefree sound. "Anything I can help you with?"

"Do you know Viktoria Kvitko?"

"Who?"

"Viktoria Kvitko, the model. Do you know her?"

"I know of her?" Reticent. That tone was a little cagey, right?

"Why do you ask?"

“Because she wore one of my dresses, and the website has sold out.”

“That’s fabulous, darling.”

“What I’m asking is, did you have anything to do with it?” His pause feels like a tiny row of dots, the ellipsis in a text message. In other words, I’m waiting for the blanks to be filled in.

“You want to know—”

“If Viktoria Kvitko is a new girlfriend or an old one.” Ack! I could bite off my tongue.

“I’ve never even met the woman.” His voice is silky with self-satisfaction.

“You didn’t have anything to do with this?”

“With your website selling out? No. If it sold out, that’s because of your talent. Your skill.”

“It sold out because she wore it,” I persist.

“Because of your design, because you know how to make women feel beautiful.”

“Stop buttering me up.”

“Now, there’s an image.”

“Niko, if you had anything to do with this, just tell me.”

“I haven’t, and I’m pleased it has. We’re having a very different conversation than the one I’d imagined we’d be having.”

“About butter?”

“About money,” he replies with a chuckle.

“Don’t you worry. We still have that to discuss,” I retort, sort of, *how dare you make me a wealthy woman!*

Excuse me while I allow my diamond shoes to chafe a little.

“I look forward to it. Tonight?”

“I hope your jet is stocked with lots of snacks because we still don’t have a kitchen.” My outward reply is prickly while

inside I feel sort of rosy, especially when he laughs. Home.  
My husband is coming home to me.





## ISLA

### *THE BEGINNING OF THE END*

Life goes on, and it's good. The boys settle back into their daily routine, Niko's presence slotting into their lives like he's always been a part of it. The house continues its transformation from millstone to stylish home, and somehow still feels like an allegory of my life. I feel like I'm also undergoing a huge shift. Where before, everything felt weighty and stagnant, I now feel light. Not that this change has come easily—it's taken thought and effort. Acceptance, I suppose. I've never been looked after before. But money and the trappings of wealth could've easily felt like a cage, until I realized that it's just an aside. The real wealth comes from being the center of someone's thoughts, the person they love most in the world. But I suppose, in a way, I do feel caged, but it's the fun kind of cage. Soft velvet cushions and supple leather handcuffs.

And while his wealth has provided me with a sense of security that I've never felt before, it's the little things I delight in. The texts. The phone calls to check in. How I start my day with coffee in bed and a hot man between my legs. At least, when Niko is home. Because we don't live in each other's pockets. He still has an empire to run, and I have my responsibilities in Scotland. We spend our days apart, sometimes nights, but when we come together, nothing else matters but us. Niko spends as much time in Scotland as he can, and sometimes the boys and I fly to London for the weekend. They say they love

the London house almost as much as they love their uncle's castle, but I think it's mainly the lure of Arsenal for Hugh. And for Archie, probably his access to Uber Eats.

"Come on, Gertie, move your fat bum." Hefting a grocery bag over her curious nose, I press the front door closed with my foot. Or at least I try to.

"It's me. It's just me," says a familiar voice from the other side.

"Tom." I wondered when he'd resurface. He hadn't once arranged to see the boys since that afternoon in Kilblair village—my skin tightens and bristles whenever I think of our last interaction. He'd called them a few times and made his excuses over a series of phone calls. Weirdly, the boys hadn't seemed at all troubled at that. The passage of time doesn't mean much to Archie at his age, and Hugh seems to have lowered his expectations since his birthday. "I suppose you'd better come in." That we'd better get this over with. I turn for the kitchen, hefting the heavy bag over my arm, knowing from experience I can expect no help from Tom.

"This place looks different." His gaze flits around the light and airy kitchen, his voice more begrudging than impressed as I maneuver my way around Gertie's lumbering form to set the bag down next to my new butler's sink.

"I assume that was a compliment." The new kitchen gleams, not quite white but a shade called "tansy," according to Henrick, the designer. The marble countertops reflect the sunlight spilling in from the garden, a wall of glass doors now in the place of the old window. As I begin to pull bread and milk out from the bag, Tom slides off his Barbour jacket and dumps it on the new island. He pulls out one of the wicker stools as though this kitchen, this life, is still his.

"It looks like things are going well for you." Tom presses his elbows to the marble and rakes his hand through the front of his hair. I bite the corner of my mouth when I remember Archie's rhyme. Tom's hair does seem thinner than last time we met, but I'm not surprised, given the way he's pulling at it.

“No thanks to you,” I mutter, pulling a jar of peanut butter from the bag.

“What? No caviar? Don’t tell me your new husband likes peanut butter on his blinis. How subversive.”

His tone chafes like a shoe rubbing at the heel. “Is that your strange version of congratulations?”

The feet of the stool screech against the floor as he abruptly stands. “I can’t believe you fucking married him!”

“And I can’t believe you fucked the nanny in our bed,” I retort, my grip tightening on the glass jar as I’m filled with the insane urge to throw it at his head. “Oh, wait. I do believe it because I walked in on you.”

He rolls his eyes like a balding teenager, sort of, *oh, that old chestnut again*. I don’t know why I said it. I really don’t care anymore.

“I can’t even think what you’re doing here, Tom.” I put the jar down and press my hip against the countertop, shoving my hands into the pockets of my cardigan. “You should come back when the boys are here. You haven’t seen them in weeks.”

“I haven’t seen them because I’ve had shit to sort out, and how am I supposed to call when *he’s* here?”

“Do you think I have enjoyed your parade of young girls that have traipsed in and out of our children’s lives? If you don’t like the man I married, that’s not my problem.” I turn back to the bag, my movements jerky as I return to my task. *Celery, coriander, radicchio, and vine ripened tomatoes*.

“Actually, it is kind of your problem.” I startle as his hand curls around my shoulder, tugging me to face him.

“Get off,” I mutter, forcing his hand away.

“Because you married the man who got me into this shit in the first place.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” How typically Tom. But I suppose it’s easier to blame others for your mistakes than examine your own shortcomings. “I do know the last

conversation we had resulted in me being exposed to a Russian criminal. The delightful Mr. Aslanov.” Invoking his name sends a beetle skittering down my spine. Sweeping the vegetables up, I brush past him.

“Worse than Aslanov is his boss? And you just married him.”

My denial hits the air in a thorny laugh. I tug forcibly on the fridge door. “Have you been surfing the dark web, befriending conspiracy theorists?”

“I went to him for money, Iz. I went to London at his invitation, to his fancy office in Mayfair.”

“I know. You went after I had nothing left to give. After Sandy wouldn’t give. I also happen to know Niko didn’t give you money.”

“Niko, is it?” He slides his hands under his arms, almost tipping forward on his toes. “He was very civil. But you’re right, he didn’t invest, but he passed me on to someone else who did. Someone in the *organization*.”

“Naturally, that means a crime syndicate,” I scoff. Niko is no Boy Scout, but a Russian mobster? A crime boss? No.

“Well, he didn’t refer me to someone at Citibank, did he?”

Something sharp and heavy settles in my stomach.

“The good people at Citibank wouldn’t have dragged me to some warehouse and threatened to cut off my balls if I couldn’t come up with a payment, plus thirty percent interest.”

“Just because they’re Russian, just because Niko is Russian —”

“That’s just it. I’m not reaching. I know I’m not. And I’ve thought long and hard about this. About how, in the past, you’d change the topic of conversation whenever Sandy brought Van’s name up. And how come if he’s Sandy’s best friend, I never met him? Not even once?”

“You haven’t met all Sandy’s friends.”

“In over a decade of watching you play queen of the castle while Sandy fleeced movie moguls and do-gooders in the

quest to repair some moth-eaten tapestry or bit of roof? The place was always teeming with his friends and their hangers-on. He might've afforded a new roof if he hadn't spent years feeding them and pouring drinks down their necks."

"Jealousy is so unbecoming," I say in my grandmother's voice.

"But the one person I didn't meet," he says, talking over me, "was Nikolai Vanyin. He wasn't at the castle once. Unless he was there when we weren't." A pause. "Which was, when? *Never.*"

"You're grasping at straws." Opening a cupboard, I grab a glass. "Always looking to blame someone else." At the sink, I keep my gaze on the glass as it fills with water.

"You had a thing, you and him. Before we were married. I see that now."

"So what if we had?" Water sloshes over the edge as I turn off the tap and swing around to face him. "If I'd asked you who you'd slept with before me, we might never have made it to the altar."

"Strange how you never mentioned it. Never mentioned him. It must've been a bad breakup. Heartache and mess."

"Unlike our separation," I answer witheringly.

"I bet it was you who ended things, wasn't it?"

I laugh, but he just carries on.

"I asked you to help me"—I send him *such* a look—"for you to take that meeting, and the next thing I know, those Russian fuckers are shaking my hand and extending my credit."

"You should be thanking me, then, shouldn't you?" He should be on his knees, not quizzing me.

"You didn't marry him for me, babe. But don't try to tell me those things aren't connected."

He's right, and he's wrong, and this watery sensation in my stomach feels like truths about to reveal themselves. I agreed to marry Niko because I could see no way out, because he said

it was the only way to protect my family. That's the truth but not the whole truth because by the time I picked up those flowers and walked across the cooling sand, I wanted him. I wanted him more than anything.

But if he's behind this—behind the start of this—what then?

“I want you to leave.” I slam the glass down and grab Tom's jacket from the island, thrusting it at him. I can't listen to this. Tom has connected dots that aren't in a straight line. Niko didn't murder Giles.

“I'm going, but I have one more thing to say. When those goons took me to that warehouse to threaten me, you weren't my first hope. I went to him—to Van—your new husband. I told him the horrible things they'd said they'd do to you, to his best friend's sister. And do you know what he said? That he couldn't help. He couldn't help me, but then he helped his fucking self. And you let him!”

“Get out.”

“You married the man who set me up.”

I married a man who is an expert at manipulation.

---

I feel ill, and I hate how much of what Tom said seems plausible. But why? How can you profess to love someone, to show someone love, yet have such origins? I can't think. I can barely breathe. As far as I can tell, there is only one thing left to do, and that's hear those answers from the source.

My ribs ache as I carry myself from room to room, as I pull out my laptop and reserve a seat on a flight later this afternoon, but not before I make a call. I consider speaking to Sandy first to ask him if he murdered Giles, but I think I'm afraid to hear the answer. What if he did, and I involved him in this needlessly? I call my second lifeline. I call his wife.

“You're sure it's okay? It is Friday,” I remind her in a forced, bright tone. “Sandy might have made plans.”

“Sandy’s plans probably include falling asleep with a glass of whisky in his hand, and all before the clock strikes nine,” Holland replies with a laugh.

“Do I need to have a word with him?” I ask before realizing I need to get to the bottom of my own marriage before I go interfering in theirs.

“No,” she says with a laugh. “It’s just been a long week. We’ve had film scouts here for the past few days, traipsing over every brae and glen.”

“That doesn’t sound like fun, especially given the rain this week.”

“You got that right,” she agrees. “I gave up following them, but you know Sandy.”

“He’s a good host.” A good brother. The thought feels like a bruise being poked by a finger.

“He’d say it was less about being a host and more about being a good steward of the land. But seriously, you know we’d love to have the boys over for the weekend. You newlyweds deserve a little time *alone*,” she adds saucily.

“I... thank you,” I settle on.

“I’ll get them from school, swing by and pick up Gertie, then head to the pizza place on the way home. And while I’m stuffing my face with all that cheesy carb-y goodness, I’ll think of you sitting in some fancy London restaurant, staring down at your oversized plate with a tablespoon-sized lamb noisette, a sliver of carrot, and two of those tiny new potatoes.”

“You’re so kind.”

“Am not, or else I’d save you a slice.”

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The flight to London is short and uneventful, though I can’t say the same for the cab ride in from Heathrow. Rush *hour* is an understatement as rain lashes England’s capital city, making



it cold, wet, and miserable. Not that I pay the weather much attention, my thoughts like an old hair tie full of tangled strands.

As the cab pulls to a stop at the front door, I realize I don't have a key. The lights are on, though. I barely reach the portico before the door swings open, Sergei's bulk obstructing the light spilling from the hallway.

"Kolya is not home," he states, like the Russian version of the Black Knight from Monty Python. *You shall not pass.*

"Will he be home soon? I need to see him."

He shakes his head and mutters, "*Nyet.*"

"So you just want me to stand out here in the rain?" I'm so not in the mood to deal with anyone else's bullshit. I have enough of my own. "Because I'm sure he'd love to find out I've had to book into a hotel."

"Pakhan will not love to find you here at all."

"Thank you for your opinion, but I don't seem to remember marrying you, so if you wouldn't mind *getting out of my way,*" I grate out, "that'd be fabulous."

And he does. With an unhappy grunt.

"Any idea when he'll be back?" I ask as I turn, but Sergei is already disappearing through the office door. I'm not used to people disliking me for no good reason, and I'm not usually one for confrontation, but I seem to have reached my daily limit for bullshit when I find myself pushing on the door. "What is your problem?" I'm not yelling. Or maybe I am. "What did I ever do to make you dislike me?"

Sergei whirls around with more speed than a man of his bulk should possess. "You are no good for Kolya," he mutters. "You bring him too much pain."

"What are you talking about? He's happy with me! I love him."

"Happy now, but for how long, when before—"

"Before, we were just children."

“His life, he molded for you while he mourned for you. He changed his destiny.”

*With love, one can live even without happiness.* His tattoo, is this what Sergei is talking about?

“That makes no sense,” I retort. “What happened between us was over in a matter of weeks. How would that have changed him? Changed the course of his life?”

*It changed mine.* The echoing thought feels like a cold wind around my neck. I married Tom, and look at how that ended.

“He ended things between us,” I return, adamant. “He broke *my* heart. I didn’t break his, so stop looking at me like I’m something you’ve stepped in.”

“You see only what you want to see. Only your own problems,” he mutters, turning his back on me.

I leave the doorway feeling shivery with shock and aching with confusion. I find myself wandering into the kitchen.

“Lady Isla.” Julia’s greeting is warm, her expression faltering at what she sees in my expression. “Come and sit down.” Her jacket buttons are half fastened as she pulls out a chair at the kitchen table. I cross the room but don’t sit.

“Do you have any idea where Niko is? Mr. Vanyin, I mean?” Her expression turns wary, and she gives a slow shake of her head.

“I don’t. But let me get you a glass of water. You look pale.”

“I don’t need water.” I clamp my hand on her forearm before she can move. “Please, Julia. I’ve had some bad news. Van isn’t answering his phone, and Sergei has just confirmed my suspicions that he hates me.”

“Sergei is like an old woman.” She frowns, her gaze briefly darting to the door behind me. “But I can’t help you. I wish I could. I just know he left late this afternoon.”

Releasing her arm, I press my hand to my mouth. “You’re sure there wasn’t something he said that you might’ve overheard? Instructions to the driver? Anything?”

“I don’t want to lose my job,” she whispers, suddenly looking afraid.

“I won’t tell anyone. I just have to know.” My heart beats, *bump, bump, bump* as time seems to pass as though stuck in glue. Julia’s tongue darts out to wet her lips, her gaze sliding again to the open doorway.

“I don’t know what it is or where it is,” she says quickly, quietly. “I just know the place as Thornbeck.”

My hand grips the back of the chair as my legs turn to jelly, my heart plummeting to my shoes.



## ISLA

“YOU KNOW, when I said I could help you with murder, I didn’t mean my own.”

Staring out of the car window, I watch the dark landscape as it rushes by. Fields. Houses. A fancy-looking pub. An evening in Surrey is not what I was looking for.

“No one’s getting murdered tonight.” I see myself in the window then with dark-painted lips and a cascade of light hair. It’s my face, my hair, my shoulders. Yet I feel entirely unlike myself.

“Are you sure you know your husband?”

Feeling the weight of Griffin’s regard, I turn. “I thought I did.” Or that I was coming to understand him.

“He’s going to fucking kill me,” he mutters under his breath.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“This isn’t a game, Isla. You married a very dangerous man.”

“Perhaps you should’ve led with that when you dropped off that folder.”

“I thought you knew what you’d gotten yourself into. Sandy’s known him forever.”

“Does anyone really know him?” When Griffin doesn’t answer, I add, “If it makes you feel any better, you can just take me to the door.”

“Yeah, why not. I’ll just let Sandy kill me instead. Murder’s murder, right? Van’s bare hands or Sandy’s shotgun. One method is as good as another,” he adds mutinously.

“Why would Sandy kill you?” The silk of my dress slides against my thighs as I turn in the seat to face him. This dress is a prototype of something I was considering stocking on the website for Christmas. I’d ultimately decided against it because the amount of silk would’ve made the retail price ridiculous, plus the design is a little too risqué for the average buyer. The color of bronzed milk chocolate, the top is cut low across the bust, slightly corseted in style, and held up by the thinnest spaghetti straps. Nipped in at the waist, it flares and falls to the ankle but flashes a lot of leg, thanks to the two hidden splits that run to the top of my thigh. It’d been hanging in Niko’s huge walk-in closet, waiting for the right occasion. I guess this is it.

“He’ll kill me because of *where* you’ve asked me to take you.” Griffin’s hands tighten on the leather steering wheel, his brows tightening.

“I know where we’re going. I’ve been here before.”

His head turns so fast, I’m surprised he doesn’t get whiplash. “No.” His eyes return to the road. “I don’t think so.”

“A country house in the middle of nowhere? Leather chairs in dark corners, claret-colored sofas, and lush parlor palms. Cabaret nights—”

“That could be any one of a number of hotels you’re describing.”

“Oh, I’m not finished,” I say sharply. “Cabaret nights with very particular tastes. Guests in evening suits and cocktail dresses.” My eyes flick down Griffin’s black jacket as I pluck at the silk skirt of my dress. “Domino masks that hide faces, gossamer lingerie that exposes skin. Rubber.” My tone changes. The words now blunt and ugly. “Heavy-duty bondage wear. Beds not meant for sleep, built to hold a dozen bodies.”

“Okay, so you have been there.” He sighs. “Even if I wish you hadn’t told me.”

“A lifestyle club where clothing is optional,” I add, turning back to the side window. “I’ve only been once.” I twist back again. “I didn’t stay long, if it makes you feel any better.”

“Maybe you could write that down and sign it as proof because Sandy isn’t going to believe it from me.”

“Why do you keep bringing Sandy up?”

“Apart from the fact he’ll kill me for bringing you here, you mean?”

“I’m a grown woman. I can do as I please. Also, he doesn’t necessarily know where *here* is or what it is.”

“Sorry to burst your bubble, Isla, but Thornbeck Hall was where I first met him. Before either of us knew we were related,” he adds. “He was part owner of the club.”

The knowledge feels like a punch to the solar plexus. My brother. My wombmate. The person I thought I knew best in the world has so many secrets. He owned a sex club? I can’t even imagine him *in* a sex club. Oh God. I’m going to need therapy after this. Sandy is so upright and proper, I can’t—no. I will literally drive myself insane with the bullshit of today.

The tires hiss against the road, thanks to the earlier rain, as a sadness settles over me. Are all the men in my life liars? Feckless? Faithless? My father and Tom, yes. But now Sandy and Niko?

“How do...” No. Again. Don’t ask what you’re not prepared to hear.

“What?” His eyes meet mine warily. “How do I what?”

“Do you come here often?” I roll my eyes. “You know what I mean.”

“I used to. Not so much these days.”

“How does it work? Is there a membership or something?”

“Yeah. It’s ultra-exclusive. Van must make a fortune on the membership fees alone.”

For the second time today, I feel like the rug has been whipped out from under my feet. My brother owned it, past tense. My

husband owns it now. Why would he hold on to a place that has such bad memories? The hush, the dark interior, the closer we get, the deeper I become entrenched in the memories. The deeper I feel this hurt.

A tight left at a discreet signpost, and the tire sound changes as the car moves over the gravel.

“We won’t use valet parking,” Griffin says as he drives around the side of the house.

“You don’t have to come in with me.”

The engine purrs as the car pulls into a parking spot, the headlights frightening a squirrel as it scampers up the trunk of an oak tree.

“You’re not going in by yourself.”

“You can’t solve this for me.”

“I don’t even know what *this* is. The last time I saw you, you were literally glowing with happiness.” Palm flat, he holds out his hand. “Tell me what I can do.”

“Nothing. There’s nothing you can do. I just recently learned my husband owns a sex club.” Among other things.

“Oh fuck. I thought you knew. I thought that was why—”

“You thought I was going to get my freak on?”

“Isla.” He groans my name as though in pain. “No, I thought you’d just found out, and you wanted to rip him a new asshole or something?”

“Tempting, but that’s not why I’m here.”

“Then what are we doing here?”

“I have to speak to my husband,” I answer simply, reaching for the door handle.

“Just wait.” Griff’s hand lands on my bare shoulder. “Don’t jump to conclusions, okay? I’ve never seen him in there.”

I pull a face, but I suppose I do seem that naïve—I am that naïve.



Griff drops his head and takes a deep breath as though the weight of the world is balanced on his shoulder. “I have never seen him in here, Isla. The man doesn’t fuck women—or men—in that place,” he says, pointing a finger at the Georgian villa lit gold by ground lights.

“Maybe he’s shy. Maybe he likes to conduct his affairs in private?”

“Or maybe and, trust me on this as someone who knows from experience, he uses this place as a source of knowledge. It’s power, and it’s leverage.” Not quite comprehending, my head cants to the side. “The people in there? Judges, politicians, senior policemen, minor royalty. They’re all in his pocket.”

“Barristers, too?”

He grins. “I would’ve worked for him without the incentive.”

Griff says *incentive*; others would say blackmail. “Why does he need to? Who is he?”

“That’s not a question I can answer.”

But it’s something I have to find out for myself.

My heels sink into the gravel as we make our way to the front door.

“Take my arm,” Griff instructs. “You’ll look like my guest.”

Sure enough, we’re waved through by a heavy security presence before Griffin has even pulled out his phone, which is deposited into a tiny velvet bag and then a locker.

“They didn’t ask for your phone,” he murmurs, our footsteps echoing across a black-and-white tiled floor. I instinctively clasp my tiny clutch purse under my arm, knowing what that means.

Niko knows I’m here.

We turn a corner, faced now by a wide balcony, stairs at each end curve down toward each other like two halves of a heart. People mill around, dressed as I remember from last time, some sexy, others downright ridiculous. *Leather pony masks, leather rabbit ears, and horsehair tails sprouting from—*

“His office is upstairs.”

“I know.” I swallow. I remember that, too. A long hallway, the carpet thick and almost silent underfoot. The watery, frightened sense of unease swilling through my stomach is also familiar, but there was excitement last time, too. I’d received a written invitation. A dark glossy card embossed with golden calligraphy swirl. It was an invitation to Niko’s birthday party.

An invitation to ruin.

I take a deep breath. I want to run away—flight, not fight—but that was the route I chose last time. Now I need to see this through.

“Come on, I’ll walk you up.”

“No.” Sliding my hand from the crook of Griff’s arm, I shake my head. “This is as far as you need to go.”

“Do you know where you’re going?” His brows pull down, but he’s clearly conflicted. I can’t blame him for preferring not to be around when I meet Van.

“Not really.” Tipping up on my toes, I press a kiss to his cheek. “Thank you. For everything.”

“I’ll go to the bar and wait for you there.”

“There’s a bar?” I’d missed that last time.

“People get thirsty,” he says with a grin.

“I appreciate it, but there’s really no need.” He sends me a look, and relief floods my system. “Okay, I would really appreciate that. But don’t wait all night. I mean...” my cheeks sting, my words and my thoughts suddenly tangled. “I just mean...”

“I get it.” His hand rests on my shoulder as he brings his gaze level with mine. “But next time, just let me bury the bodies, though, yeah?”

I laugh a little hysterically, given how close to the truth he might be. I feel his concerned gaze following me all the way up one half of the grand staircase.

“Hey gorgeous, you want some company?” As I reach the top of the stairs, a hand reaches out, fingers trailing my bare shoulder. I barely glance at the owner or the man she’s wrapped around.

“No, thank you,” I answer, carrying on along the hallway. The wallpaper has changed. How strange is it that I notice? Rooms spill off to the left and right. The doors have been repainted matte black. Some of them are closed, and some stand open. Some rooms are dark, and others are filled with light and very obvious noises carry from their interiors. Fewer people are upstairs, but those who are, are bolder in their looks. I ignore their invitations, and their suggestions. They’re ghosts I can’t hear as I draw deeper and deeper into the house.

And then I reach it. The door. The end of the line. My heart thunders, my hand almost bloodless as it curls around the brass doorknob. I close my eyes as it twists, and I push the door open...

Van on another chesterfield sofa, like the ones I’d spotted on the way in.

His arms are spread along the back, and his head is tilted heavenward.

His foot moves on the bloodred Persian carpet, his denim-clad legs spreading wider...to accommodate the woman on her knees between them. To allow me to better see her. Her hair is a dark sheet over a naked back that is narrow though swells to wider hips. She turns as the door creaks, her red-painted lips curled expectantly.

“*Come in, darling,*” he’d purred, his hand lifting languidly, his fingers curling. “*Come and meet the birthday gift I want you to share with me.*”

And that was that.

I swallow bile as the door opens noiselessly this time. He wore his hair different then, the stubble on his cheeks less pronounced, the creases around his eyes less distinct. When I open my eyes, the images disappear. The sharp ache in my chest does not.

The sofa is gone, and in its place are four sleek chairs and a glass coffee table. Even the rug is different, though the paneled walls are the same, the huge antique desk and the captain's chair with the faded cushion. Same as the original fireplace with a vaguely familiar painting hanging above it. *A Matisse?* The original shutters are folded back from the windows, and it's there Niko sits. Half perched on a cast iron radiator, the dark night frames him, the Anglepoise desk lamp highlighting the bold strokes of his features.

"Hello, darling." The old window rattles as he sets a demitasse cup down on the sill, lifting his gaze to me. He's always been somewhat inscrutable, but now I see that was only the tip of the iceberg.

I close the door behind me, placing my tiny clutch on the console table before stepping farther into the room. "You don't seem surprised to see me."

"Were you hoping to catch me unawares?" He nods to a bank of monitors on the wall to my right. My gaze flicks away at what I see there. Something tells me he knew I was coming before I'd even climbed into Griffin's car. "Or were you expecting to find an excuse to run away again?"

It's hard, but I ignore his take on what happened fifteen years ago. I ran, yes. I didn't need nor want an excuse. I loved him, though I never admitted it. The fact that he didn't follow told me all I needed to know.

I moved back to Scotland immediately, and the rest, as they say, is history.

History that isn't going to repeat itself today.

"I'm not dressed for running," I answer, taking a turn around the room on unsteady legs. I refuse to let him see how nervous I am and take care to move in a way that shows my dress to its best advantage. "But I did come for answers." No matter how painful.

My heart beats erratically as he crosses the room. Wrapping his hand around my upper arm, he slides his thumb under the

shoulder strap of my dress. “It looks like you came to be fucked.”

“Do you like it?” Heat blooms low in my belly, our bodies pressed from knee to hip.

“I’d like to tear you out of it.” His voice is low and hoarse, his eyes not so unfathomable now, desire burning there like two bright flames.

“Maybe you’ll get that chance. Or maybe I’ll go downstairs and find some other man to kneel between my legs instead.”

His eyes close, his expression pained. It lasts less than a second. “Time to pay the piper?”

“Time to tell the truth for a change.”

“Truth is relative, *milaya*.” He slides his hand through my hair, the strands falling from his fingers in shimmering waves.

“It’s what I want to hear.” What I need to hear.

“The truth is rarely satisfying. You won’t tie up all our mysteries in a neat little package.”

“Don’t try to pacify me.”

“I wouldn’t dare. But the truth won’t set you free, darling. Not from me.”

It takes supreme effort to pull away, but I force myself to. Being close to him just muddies my heart and my mind. It makes me feel like I’ll always want to be tied to him. But that can’t be right.

“Tell me, Niko, why did I end up taking tea at the Ritz with a member of a Russian crime syndicate?” My question sounds casual as I stroll to the other side of the room as though my stomach isn’t roiling and my brain isn’t more cortisol than gray matter. “Was it your doing, or was it truly Tom’s?”

He slides his hands into his pockets as he pivots to face me, his answer pointed. Succinct. “That was your doing, darling.”

My laughter ricochets around the room like sharp shards of glass. “I don’t remember making that appointment.”

“I’ve made you happy, haven’t I?” He takes a step, and I hold up my hand like a stop sign. “All I ever wanted was for you to be happy. Safe.”

“And tied to you, at whatever cost.”

A smile pulls at his lips, but he doesn’t give in. “Well, yes.”

“These last weeks, I’ve been happier than I’ve ever been, but the means don’t justify the end when they include lies and manipulation.”

“I tried to persuade you to give us a chance, remember? I’d pursued you for months—got on my knees and begged.”

“Was I asleep when this happened?” I ask, leaning back against the wall. I don’t want to sit—sitting feels like giving in—but I’m not sure how much longer my body will hold me upright.

“You were either begging for more or invoking the name of God. I tried, Isla. I tried to get you to see, but you refused me at every turn. Had there been a choice, I would’ve done this another way. A better way, if you’d allowed it. I would’ve taken you on dates, trips to the theater, weekends away. I would’ve won you fairly. Properly. Remind you why you fell in love with me while I watched you fall all over again. But you wouldn’t meet me halfway. You fought me at every step, refused my every attempt, except when it came to fucking.” So much venom in that word. “Oh, you were happy to fuck me,” he adds scathingly, “as long as no one found out. I was tired of being your dirty little secret. I wanted more. You left me no choice.”

“So it’s my fault?” I ask with an unhappy laugh. “I did this to myself? I tied Tom to criminals and—”

“That greedy fucker did that all himself!”

“You passed him on to someone who works for you. *You* did that.”

“That was just business, no scheming involved. But rest assured, had it occurred to me, I would’ve used him to get to you in a heartbeat.”

“But you did.”

“Not then,” he utters, his expression stark. “I thought I still had a chance with you, fair means, not foul. I thought you’d come around. I didn’t plan for him to default. He did that and left you open to manipulation.”

“You used my fear to get what you wanted.”

“No, I used your need to do what’s right, always to the detriment of yourself.”

“And Sandy?” I’m almost too afraid to ask.

He rolls his shoulders as though attempting to loosen tight muscles. “That,” he eventually says, “I regret.”

“So you do have a conscience. A heart.”

“I gave you my heart!” he roars.

I shake my head, refusing to hear this. “You made my brother a part of your manipulation plan?”

“You give me too much credit.” His sudden smile seems almost weaponized. “It was the mistake of an idiot. I just... ran with it.”

“You made me think my brother was a murderer,” I accuse, my voice low and full of passion. “You made me think—”

“Did you think any less of him? Even after what that *svoloch*’ did to you.”

“I got an email from him,” I answer instead. “From Giles. Right before he seemed to disappear. His family said he’d gone to South America.”

“He certainly went south.” He makes a careless gesture. My body seems to know what’s coming, but my head refuses to process it.

“His father died not knowing what happened to him, Niko. The people who loved him spent years wondering, just as I’d spent years wondering. Why would he run off when he heard Sandy was going to break his legs? Ridiculous, no, running off because of an empty threat?”

“The threat was real enough.”

His gaze burns with something strange yet not unfamiliar. Something I once saw on my brother’s face.

“No.”

“The day after it happened, I asked Alexander what he was going to do about it because it was clear something was to happen. He told me he was going to break the man’s legs. He was quite specific when I asked for the details. Did he plan on breaking one leg or two? What did he plan to use?”

“What a strange conversation that must’ve been.” The words burble out on a laugh that doesn’t sound like it belongs to me. “What did Sandy decide on, hypothetically speaking?”

Niko settles his blue gaze on me as a snake begins to coil itself around my innards. I feel suddenly flushed yet cold, and the longer it takes him to speak, the stronger this urge is to press my hands to my ears. To open the door and run.

“Whatever you thought, Isla, you read the news. His body was found. He’s dead.”

“Yes, I know.” I swallow back a sob that isn’t for Giles.

“Ask me.” Though his expression has barely changed, he seems infinitely graver somehow, the muscles in his upper arms tautening under the fine cotton of his shirt.

“I don’t want to,” I whisper.

“I thought you came for the truth. Tonight,” he says, throwing out his arms, “I am an open book. Ask me *my* truth, milaya. I dare you to.”

“I’m not your confessor,” I answer, swinging away I suddenly wish I was anywhere but here.

“But you’ll listen anyway.” Because then his fingers are curling around my upper arm. I didn’t even hear him move over the hammering of my heart. “Because I did it for you.”

The animal inside me seems to recognize his meaning, even if my brain refuses to make sense of them.

“I punished him.”



“You—you broke his legs.”

“Perhaps I wouldn’t have if his email had been sincere.”

“You saw it?”

“Let’s just say he wrote it with supervision. The idiot didn’t realize it might’ve been his ticket to redemption. But he couldn’t even do that properly.” I pull against his hold on my arm when his grip tightens, and he pulls me closer. “It’s not easy to break a man’s legs with only a hammer, not that I blame Alexander for his lack of experience in his choice of tools. It would’ve been much easier if he’d said a wrist or an arm. Infinitely easier if he’d said he’d shoot him.”

“Let me go, Niko.”

“No, apology or not, it wouldn’t have saved him because when I dragged him out of his house, do you know what he was watching? Porn. The homemade kind. He’d been drugging women for years—women at university. Schoolgirls, drinking underage in Oxford pubs. You could’ve been a part of his collection. It might’ve been your face on the screen, your unconscious body he violated again and again.”

“So you killed him?” I whisper.

“It wouldn’t be the last time I killed in your name.”



## VAN

SHE LOOKS TRULY HORRIFIED but not afraid as I cradle her face in my hands.

“No, Niko. Please don’t say that. You didn’t kill him for me. That’s not true.”

“Straight to the heart.” My thumbs stroke her pale cheekbones. “You’re right, of course. I killed him because he touched what wasn’t his.”

“I’m not a possession. I don’t belong to you.”

My smile feels sad as I shake my head. “You can’t deny it, Isla. For fifteen years, I have loved you, and now you love me back. I am yours, and you are mine.”

“Are you insane?” Her wide eyes are pleading. She just doesn’t get it yet. “Don’t you remember what happened in this room? How was that love? How could you bring me here and expect that of me?”

“It gave what I expected, what I planned. You did what I needed you to do. I had to get you out of London. I needed you safe. What I didn’t expect was for you to marry someone else.” Her face still in my hands, I press my lips to her head as though I could impart the rest of my tale this way. “You didn’t mourn for very long, did you, darling?”

“You killed us,” she whispers. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“Nothing,” I whisper, pulling back. “At least while I tell you the rest.”

Her mouth works silently as though she can't make sense of her own thoughts. I take her hand, moving us past the chairs and the fireplace, past the lies I'd painted for her that night, lies that forced her away. At my desk, I slide my forearm across the top and watch as laptop, papers, and pens go tumbling to the floor. I don't give a fuck.

"Niko, please."

Ignoring her protests, I put my hands on her waist, lifting her to the edge and grabbing her hands as I drop to my chair. My legs bracket hers, the silk sliding from one thigh then the other, exposing the tanned length of her legs.

"I wanted you from the moment I set eyes on you," I begin. "Wet-haired and desperately wiggling, your breath puffs of cold air in that bedroom. Then I found out who you were, and I knew it could never be."

"Yes, I know." Her voice is terse. "Because of my brother."

"Fuck your brother. I sacrificed more than friends to be with you. To love you. But I couldn't have you, not without putting you in danger."

"What danger? Danger how?"

*This was always going to be a problem*, I think with a sigh. Isla is as good as she is golden in the lambent light. Her lashes painted dark, her denim eyes so piercing, it's like they can see through me. But I know that's not true, or else she would've realized long ago that I loved her. And she would've run anyway because she would've also seen my darkness.

"My uncle, he raised me after my parents were killed in a car crash. Konstantin Vanyin was the most powerful Russian in Europe. Wealthier than Croesus, more wicked than Caligula."

"Was? But everyone speaks of your uncle as still being an important man."

"He is a... figurehead."

"You're contradicting yourself," she says warily. I tighten my grip on her hands.

“He sent me to the best schools, and from there, I went to Oxford. The official line was he was honoring my father’s wishes. You see, crime is a family business, stretching back to Soviet-era Moscow. But my father bucked the trend. He fell in love with a Finnish girl and moved there, turning his back on what he knew. He taught at a university because he thought it would be a place of no use to his family. There was very little profitable corruption to be had in my father’s line of work. But then my parents died, and I was sent for. It was Sergei who actually came for me.”

She pulls a face. It makes me chuckle, my soft breath brushing her skin causing some outsized effect. A wash of goose bumps dapples her arms, her nipples hardening beneath the silk. It defies belief that I could be talking of Sergei and also getting hard. *Maybe I’ll tell him. Maybe he’ll have a fit.*

“He looked like a gargoyle come to life to my young eyes.” I clear my throat, ridding it of its huskiness.

“He looked like a troll this evening,” she muses. “We had words.” Her gaze flicks to me and away again. “A difference of opinion,” she adds, brushing off the altercation.

“I know.” I tilt my head, hiding a tiny smile. There isn’t much I don’t find out. Not these days. “But he’s been good to me. Protected me, even when he didn’t agree with my plans.”

“Was your uncle unkind to you?”

I can see myself, white-blond hair and knees like knots in my pale, skinny legs. Sergei driving me to school. Calling me during the term, insisting I speak in Russian to him.

I shake my head. “Konstantin was manipulative. The line he sold was that he was providing me with the best education money could buy—the best experiences. That it was all for my benefit, and in honor of his brother, but those were lies. I was told to ingratiate myself with those boys at boarding school. Learn their ways, mimic them. Cultivate friendships so they could turn to me when life’s troubles hit. I was to turn to my uncle so he could—”

“Blackmail them.”

“It’s no worse than what I do.” I glance at the bank of monitors, but her eyes don’t follow. “I just go about it a different way because, the truth is, I couldn’t make people like me. I didn’t have a talent for bullshit.”

“You never were one for social niceties,” she whispers, “but I liked you anyway.”

*She loved me anyway.*

“I was neither common nor decent,” I murmur in an echo of another time. Her smile turns bittersweet. “When school vacations came around, I was often left there as punishment for not being invited to my schoolmate’s country homes or on their ski trips. Don’t look so sad, *milaya*. At least I wasn’t forced to spend the time with him.” I laugh.

“I know that feeling.” Her expression falters, perhaps lost in her own memories.

“Konstantin insisted this was my responsibility. What I owed him. One time when I was perhaps fifteen, I found cocaine in my cases when I returned to school for the new year.”

“How to win friends and influence?”

“Getting them addicted was just a bonus.”

“Oh, my goodness.” A mother’s pity emanates from her eyes and her heart. I wonder how long it will last.

“Then I met Alexander.”

“And he latched onto the idea of him,” she assumes.

“I was older. I could tell him to fuck off in four languages, and I did. Frequently. But then I met you.” I can’t hold her gaze, so instead, I rub my thumb over her grandmother’s ring and the simple gold band, my gaze transfixed. I’m not the man she thought I was, but there is no other place, no other man. Not now. “Konstantin was the reason I couldn’t have you. Not publicly. To involve you in my life was to put you at risk.”

“But I have no influence,” she begins haltingly. “How could I possibly have been of interest to him?”

“You had a duke for a brother. That was enough. I’m sure he thought he’d get to him through you. Facilitate his acceptance into the circles I failed to get him into. He imagined he’d have access to the country’s decision-makers. Politicians, perhaps influence in the House of Lords. He’d curry favor. Manipulate, blackmail. For a soviet, tying his name to blue blood certainly excited him. But gaining influence was his ultimate goal.”

“He wanted me for you?”

“He wanted control. But I maintained there was no connection between us. You were nothing to me as far as he was concerned.”

“That’s why we never went out together, why you moved house. Not because of Sandy.”

“I couldn’t resist you. I told myself you were moving to Scotland, so what difference would one weekend make?”

“But I never left.”

“I tried to hide you. Tried to tell myself you would move back to Scotland, but that just made things worse. I was crazy for you, and I couldn’t show it. Things got very strained between us. You and me, me and him. I had to get you away. Make you go to Scotland, make it so you would stay. It was a risk because you loved me.” I glance up at her, but she angles her gaze away, refusing to look at me. “You didn’t have to say it. I just knew. I didn’t fuck her,” I add with such urgency. *My love, it is constant.* “I didn’t want to hurt you, but I had to make sure you would leave, so I set the whole thing up. I knew the news would get back to him, you running crying from the building. I’m so sorry. Seeing you like that tore out my fucking heart, but I’m not sorry for what I did. I won’t apologize for protecting you.”

“How can you be sorry for that but not sorry for Giles?”

“He deserved it. You didn’t. It really is as simple as that.”

“Murder is never simple.”

“Not when it involves family.”

Her lips pinch, her face turning pale. “Oh, Niko, no.”

“You went to Scotland, I had no firm plans after that, not immediately. I thought things might calm down. That Konstantin would find something else to obsess about. But he didn’t. He decided if I wouldn’t marry you, then he’d get someone else to. It was Alexander, you see. A twenty-five-year-old duke with no one to guide him through life. Ripe for the picking,” I add with an unhappy laugh. “The least tractable man in the country.”

“Yes, you’re quite a pair.”

“Konstantin told me he’d decided his second-in-command would move to Scotland. He was also blond and good looking, so he’d do. He didn’t care that the man already had a fiancée. A baby son. He’d be your Russian rebound. He said it with a laugh that turned my blood cold. That bastard had no sense of loyalty. I couldn’t let it happen.”

“What did you do?”

“I couldn’t kill him outright, not without becoming a target myself. But it was you or him. And I will always choose you. So I hit him,” I say, my voice flat. “I fractured his skull and made it look like he’d fallen. It was a risk, but one that paid off. Despite a subdural hematoma, he survived but in a vegetative state. I cut off the snake’s head. It needed another one quick.”

“And that’s you?” She sounds horrified.

“It had to be me. You were my one hope, my darling. I knew I’d get you back.” My shoulders tighten. I roll them back. It doesn’t help the tautening of my skin. Every muscle screams, from my jaw to my legs. “Only, you didn’t wait,” I whisper, loosening my fingers to stretch them wide over her thighs. I want to tighten them. Squeeze. Give her a small taste of my pain. “Did you?” If my words sound like an accusation, it’s because they are. “You married the first idiot to come along.”

“Niko, no,” she whispers as I slide my hands higher up her thighs. Her skin is so soft, scented by orange blossoms.

“You don’t want these hands to touch you? These hands that have sacrificed so much to protect you.”



She shakes her golden head, but she doesn't stop me.

“Your husband's hands.”



## ISLA

I CAN'T THINK. Whatever I was expecting to hear tonight, not even in my wildest imaginings, my darkest nightmares, could I have concocted even half of this.

For my whole life, I've thought I was alone. Oh, I had Sandy and the boys, but I looked after them, not the other way around. I've been living a lie, but how could I have known that Niko has always stood between me and harm?

And foolish, impetuous, and desperate to be loved, I married another man.

Silly little Isla.

"You ask me how I'd never become a father. The answer," he says as he stands, "is because I was waiting for you."

*Oh, Niko.*

My heart is full. Regret and love are a painful combination.

"It's always been you." His hand feeds into my hair, twisting at the nape as his mouth dips to mine. But he doesn't kiss me, not because he's waiting for permission because I'm sure it's there, shining in my wet eyes. The move has to be mine. A move that's a declaration, a promise, more than it is a kiss.

Closing the space between us takes courage. Or recklessness. But that's what I do, pressing my lips to his. His grip tightens, creating a whisper of space between us.

"There's no going back, Isla. You're a fool if you ever thought there was."

My heart hammers in my throat as I strain closer again. His thighs knock my knees wider, stepping into the newly created space. His body comes over mine, pressing me down, down, my bones liquefying as I melt out across the wood.

Melt. Bleed. My arms reach for him, scrabbling against his shoulders as he seals his mouth over mine. He steals my breaths, swallows my gasps. He devours me.

“No one will ever know you like this.” The grit in his tone feels like punishment, the nip of his teeth against my lips sweet relief. His gaze burns down as he links our fingers, pressing them down to my sides, pinning me to the desk as the thick length of his cock demands entrance with each grunting press.

I sigh his name and buck against him, desperate for his touch.

Then his mouth is on mine again, his tongue a declaration: I’m inside you. You’re taking me.

My hips surge against him, and he makes a low carnal sound of appreciation, undulating against me.

“You’re so fucking lovely. You’re like a flower in my hand. I don’t know if I want to curl my fingers to protect you or crush you to smell your scent.”

Pinned beneath him, I thrash and jerk, desperate to touch him—to be touched by him

“Be still.” I groan as his teeth scrape the lobe of my ear. “Don’t move, milaya.”

He pulls back, my brain exiting stage left, taking my sense along with it because I don’t even flinch at the sudden flick of movement in front of me or how the light glints from the sharp blade. I gasp as his hands span my collarbone, sliding down to the low neckline of my dress. A swift tug and my breasts are exposed, his warm breath spilling over my nipples.

“This is not a dress I ever want to see you in again.”

Down, down, down his hand travels, sliding between my breasts and over the soft slope of my stomach where he pulls at the silk tight.

“But it’s a dress I’ll never forget.”

The knife flicks up, then down, a ripping sound filling the air as he slices my dress from the waist down. He fans the silk over my hips, his finger hooking the elastic of my underwear. I hold my breath at the cold press of steel—once, twice—he slices away my tiny undies from the hip. The knife flips in the air before he stabs it hard into the corner of the desk, where it quivers.

His mouth descends on my nipple like a starving man. His lips fasten, and he sucks as though to chasten, my back bowing from the wood with a moan. His attention feels dark and wild, calling to something in my bones as I wrap my hands in his hair, tightening my fingers on the thick strands.

His groan is my reward, the nip of his teeth my mark of excellence. I repay him in kind, drawing the pointed heel of my shoe up his leg, pressing it into the firm globe of his buttock, causing him to hiss.

“You’re not the only one who can wield a pointy thing,” I rasp, my stomach tightening at his dark and sinful chuckle.

“How about something blunt and thick.” His hand slips between my legs, parting my flesh and finding me wet. With a groan, he thrusts two fingers inside me, the sensation rude, rough, and sublime.

“Oh God!” His finger work is fast, his possession hot as his mouth lowers to mine again. His tongue and fingers work in tandem, licking and flicking, sucking and stroking, driving my pleasure higher and higher until I begin to crest, panting, whimpering—what are those noises coming out of my mouth?

“Oh God. Oh, Niko. Yes, yes! Harder, please.”

“The lady gets what she needs,” he grunts. My back sticks to the wood as he yanks me down to the edge, but I can’t care as I lift my head and watch as he loosens his fly. So rude and ruddy his hand, he presses the thick head of his cock to my folds, sliding back and forth, the blunt weight of him parting me. Making me twist under him, pure animal now.

His breath held, he drives himself inside with a snap of his hips. Pressing, grinding, his expression dark, it seems like he's trying to climb inside me.

My heart feels like a flock of panicked birds beneath my ribs. I cry out, my arms beginning to flail, the heels of my palms catching him in his chest. This is too much—what we're—fucking after such revelations. After he killed for me. His possession of me is too much, the things he has done in the name of our love.

“No.” His hands catch mine, pinning them wide. “I won't apologize,” he grunts, my body tightening as he drives himself inside me again. “I'm not sorry.” A thrust. My body bows. “I'd do it again.” His cock is so deep inside. “You would do it for me. You would kill to protect your family.”

“I can't—I can't—” I can't take it.

“Yes, you can. You will burn. You will burn out. But like a phoenix, you will rise again with me.”

“*Yes!*”

Yes to all of it, to protecting those we love, to being turned inside out by long, hard strokes. Yes to his tongue in my mouth and the way he reaches the parts inside me no one else has. Yes to how he holds my heart. To how I'll always be safe with him.



## ISLA

I WAKE to rain pitter-pattering against the windowpane, naked and in Niko's bed in Kensington. *Our bed. Our home. Our life together.*

I feel like I've had my life turned upside down and shaken vigorously. But even though everything has now settled, it doesn't feel the same as it did before. Strangely, it still feels right. I don't know how. It just does.

I'm married to a dangerous man, but that was clear before last night's revelations. I'm married to a man who sacrificed his very existence for me. That's what Sergei meant when he said Niko has changed his destiny for me.

*With love, one can live even without happiness.*

And he did. He loved me, and what he got in return was years of living someone else's life. Years filled with unhappiness.

The sheets rustle as I turn onto my side, watching the rain snake its way down the glass. A new day, a new beginning, the rain washing it all away? If only it were that simple.

Who knows. Maybe it is. If I'm his happiness, he won't ever live without me.

Throwing back the covers, I decide it's time to embrace this new life of mine.

I shower, tie up my hair, then slip on jeans, a white shirt, and a pair of soft loafers before checking in with Holland that all is well.



**All good?** She doesn't reply immediately, but that's normal.

"Damn." I forgot Hugh has a soccer match this morning. I hope he forgot too, or else Holland will have been dragged out of bed at some ungodly hour to stand in a patch of damp grass this morning. Or maybe Sandy.

My stomach rumbles as my feet trip lightly down the stairs. I need carbs and coffee and more time with my husband to discuss the implications of this life on my children. They will be protected, of that I'm sure, but I don't—

Voices. Raised voices in the office. Rapid-fire Russian.

I can go to the kitchen and stick my head in the sand, but I've already decided against that way of dealing with things.

The door silently glides open, though Niko doesn't miss it.

"Darling." His cool eyes meet mine, but I see the anger burning in them as he raises his hand to gesture me forward. "Come in."

"I don't want to—" My words halt, and my stomach drops. There, on the other side of the room, is the man I met at The Ritz. *Anatoli Aslanov*. His eyes meet mine and quickly dart away, his words not so much spilling as overflowing.

"In English," Niko instructs.

"I didn't know. I'm sorry, Pakhan. I was given instructions, and I carried them out. That's my job."

"You weren't told to terrorize." Niko's gaze glides to the man standing next to him. His arm is in a sling, and I'd say by the traces of bruising around his eyes and some swelling, he's recently had his nose broken. "Unless you told him to."

"No, Pakhan," the man with the sling insists, tipping his gaze southward. "Again, my sincerest apologies. It will not happen again. I apologize most humbly to your wife, also."

"You will not address my wife," Niko barks. His eyes warm as they land on me. "Close the door, darling."

Four pairs of eyes watch me. Niko. Sergei. Aslanov. The man with the injured face. I feel like I'm on the edge of a yawning

precipice. Do I jump or do I back away?

I jump, crossing the room to where Niko stands.

His hand snakes around my hip, pulling me closer to him.

“This is Federov.” He gestures to the man in the sling. “He is who you were supposed to meet at The Ritz. He is”—Niko pauses—“a senior manager, a head of department, in our organization.” *Euphemistic much?* “He is also the man who, unauthorized, delegated his assignment to the scum who touched you.”

“He didn’t—”

Reaching across me, Niko threads his fingers around my left wrist. “No?” His gaze dares me to defend the man.

My eyes dart across the room to Aslanov’s pale face. It looks like the answer has already been shaken out of him.

I turn my head, keeping my voice low. “It doesn’t matter now. What’s done is done.”

Niko’s hand cups my cheek. “It’s not done until I say so.” His lush lips brush my forehead. “Because, you see, Anatoli’s crimes extend far beyond touching you. He has a taste for the flesh. Don’t you?” His head lifts. “For fear and filth. This is not the first time we’ve had this conversation, is it?”

“Pakhan, please.” He holds out his hands, palms up.

The animal in me knows what’s coming as Niko straightens and begins to pull away.

“No.” I grab his shirtsleeve. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Don’t I?” His face is so beautiful, and his tone so benevolent. “You think this is jealousy?”

“I don’t know what this is. I only know you’re better than this.”

“Jealousy is a toxic trait, my darling. It’s wanting something you don’t have. Being territorial is protecting what you *do* have.” He nods, and Federov backs away, Sergei lunging for Aslanov, who begins to fight and flail.

“No, Niko.” I grab his wrist this time, but fear seems to have hollowed out my bones. “You don’t have to do this.”

“No.” He takes my hand in his. “You’re wrong. This is who I am.”

“But he’s not a threat to me,” I say frantically, sweat beginning to bead on my brow. Am I worried about Aslanov, Niko’s soul, or seeing something I can’t unsee? “You’re not a murderer,” I plead.

He smiles and lifts my hand to his mouth, pressing a kiss to my knuckles. “Everyone is a murderer, darling. You just haven’t found your person yet.”

I swing away, my whole body shaking, but not before I see the gun tucked at his back. I dive for the door handle, feeling like I might be sick. My hand curls around the door handle, my shoes slipping against the polished floor as I struggle to get out.

My phone buzzes in my back pocket.

A crack rings out, and all I can think is that made-for-TV gun noises aren’t realistic, and silencers aren’t so silent.

My hand shakes as I pull my phone out. I expect it to be Holland, and I’m about to silence the call when Hugh’s name flashes on the screen.

The sickness in my stomach intensifies. I don’t know how, but I know something is wrong.

“Mummy?” My heart stops. Hugh never calls me Mummy anymore.

“Yes, darling, I’m here.”

“I need you to come home,” my son continues, his voice vibrating with unshed tears.

I swallow over my heart where it’s lodged in my throat. “What is it? Is Holland there?”

There’s a catch in his voice. “You can’t speak to her. She’s sleeping,” he says on a choked sob.

“I’ll be there as—”

“Hurry, please. And Mummy? Dad says you’re not to bring Van.”

“What?”

“He says *or else*.”

---

I rub at the red stain on my finger, only making the smudge of lipstick worse.

“The private terminal, did you say, love?” The cabbie’s voice carries through the acrylic screen. The back of his gray hair stands in a spikey whorl as though he’d recently just dragged himself from a nap.

“Yes, please.”

“You don’t have much luggage with you,” he adds cheerfully. Turning his head, his gaze dips to the tiny satin clutch on my lap.

“No, I know. I have a family emergency.” Swallowing, I press my thumbnail into the palm of my hand, willing myself not to cry.

“Well, let’s see if we can’t get you there any quicker.”

His expression firms, and the black cab swings down a side street, causing my clutch to almost slide from my lap. My phone starts to buzz. I silence Niko’s call. So much for him paying attention to the message I’d left him. It was hardly subtle.

*I need time to think*, I’d scrawled in red lipstick across the huge hallway mirror. *Please don’t follow me*.

I’d grabbed my clutch from the hallway table and slipped unseen out the back door. I’d run in the direction of the South Kensington Tube station, blindly, stupidly, trying to make my way to Heathrow airport. I’d even booked a flight—before I remembered my new credit card slotted away in my clutch. It’s amazing how fast you can get a private jet in the air when you double the booking price.

I try Holland's number again, but it connects immediately with her voicemail. Meanwhile, Sandy's phone just rings out. I chew the inside of my lip as I give myself another talking-to. Tom must've gone to watch Hugh play soccer. Holland probably saw no harm in letting them go home with their father, and Sandy is most likely out with the ghillie, chasing deer and romping through the fucking heather. Only, I know this can't be true—apart from Sandy, because that's likely where he is. Holland wouldn't do anything without calling me first, and I can't remember the last time Tom went to one of Hugh's matches. I consider calling Griffin to come with me, but I already feel bad about last night.

I also briefly consider calling the police, but what would I say? I have a funny feeling about things?

No, I can do this on my own. This is Tom we're talking about. I could take his lanky arse, no problem. Besides, the man is a weasel.

The cabbie gets me to London City Airport in record time. The wheels are up, and we're airborne long before my Heathrow flight would've boarded. I have a car booked at the other end. While it's probably the quickest route I could've ever taken, it still feels like a dozen years as the car drives along the newly resurfaced driveway.

I'm out of the door before the driver can help me from the car, my loafers kicking up gravel in my haste.

"Archie! Hugh!" My voice echoes, the entryway ominously dark as I close the door behind me. Before I take a step, Tom steps out from the living room.

"Lock the door."

I turn and knock down the latch.

"And the deadlock."

I glance warily over my shoulder as I do. "What's this about, Tom?"

"What it's always about, Iz."

“Not that bloody island again,” I mutter, swinging around to face him.

He reaches out, and I find myself letting him lift my purse out of my hands. “Your phone?”

“It’s in there,” I answer automatically. “Where are the boys? Why aren’t they with Sandy and Holland?”

“Why aren’t they with you, is what I want to know.”

“Don’t you dare,” I mutter vehemently, holding up my finger. Okay, pointing it at him. “Don’t you dare question my parenting when you can’t even be bothered to call to speak to them.”

“I’m busy fucking working.”

“That’s a poor excuse.” Does he think I lie about eating bonbons all day?

“You don’t know what I go through just trying to stay afloat,” he answers as though hurt by my accusation.

“No, I wouldn’t know what that feels like,” I snipe. “Hugh? Archie? Come on, we’re going out.” Out where, I don’t know. My car is still at the airport.

“But that’s not something *her ladyship* has to worry about anymore, is it? Not with all the new money you’ve got in your purse.” He throws said purse in the living room, then growls, “Get in the fucking kitchen.” And for the first time since I’ve known him, Tom grabs me roughly. His fingers clasp my arm tightly, and he pulls me from the door, hurling me in front of him. “Move!”

“Ow, Tom!” I begin to turn when he plants his palm between my shoulders and pushes me hard. “What’s gotten into you?”

“I’m a man on the edge,” he yells. “On the fucking edge!”

The bright and airy kitchen is tidy, just as I left it. But for the sight of my sons sitting stock-still at the island. Hugh’s face is grubby and smudged with mud, and he’s still wearing his football jersey. Archie’s shoulders are hunched and he’s as white as a sheet. Both boys look like they’ve been crying.

“It’s okay.” I slide my arms around their thin shoulders, pulling them close. Their arms thread around me, fingers clinging to my shirt. “I’m here.”

“Daddy’s so mean,” Archie whispers in my ear. But what Hugh says, I don’t think I heard right. *Holland is in the laundry room?*

“Right, boys. Like I told you in the car, now that your mother’s here, we can sort this out.”

“Sort what out? Why have they been crying?”

“Probably because they don’t get smacked enough,” he announces, making both boys flinch. “Your mother’s new husband has stolen my life from me.”

Is he jealous? It takes me a moment to process this because my first instinct is to believe his family is his life. But then I remember we’re talking about Tom.

“This is about money, not your life. The problems with that bloody island predate Van ever coming into our lives.”

“A good wife would’ve tried to get me out of it.”

“We’re divorced! And I did what you asked. You put this family at risk, so I went and met that bloody thug!” Who is now probably very bloody. Also, probably very dead.

“Ye’d fall in a bucket of shite and climb out smellin’ of roses!” Tom’s accent slips as his voice rises. “But what could I expect from marrying a *hoor*, born with a silver spoon hangin’ out of her mouth!”

I tighten my grip on my sons, feeling them tremble. I’ve never seen Tom like this. He’s self-centered and petulant. His problems are never of his own making and always the fault of someone else. But this is different. Is he having some kind of mental health crisis?

“Tom, please, calm down.” I try a different tone, a different tack. “You’re frightening the boys. You don’t want them to see you like this, do you?”

“Aye, you worry about them and their sniveling tears. You’d like to see me dead and out of the way. That’s what’s going on

here!”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” I turn from the boys to grab the roll of paper towels for Archie’s bubbling nose. Ridiculous is the right word for how Tom’s behaving, but now wasn’t the right time to point it out as I find myself yanked back by the hair.

“Ow!”

He drags me across the kitchen, hurling me against the fridge. Twisting viciously on the strands, he forces my face into the stainless steel.

“You never understood me,” he growls as Archie begins to sob behind me. “It isn’t fair that you should come out of this with so fucking much.”

“Tom, please.” My knees turn watery, his grip on my hair so tight that my eyes water. “You’re hurting me.” I instinctively reach back to ease the pain in my head when he smashes my face into the fridge. The pain in my cheek is nothing to the pain caused by the cries of my children.

“Mummy!” Archie shouts.

Then Hugh is by Tom’s side, pummeling him with his fists. “Get off her!” he screams, his voice high-pitched and terrified. “Leave her alone. You already killed Holland!”

“No!” I shout as Tom raises his hand, lashing out and sweeping Hugh across the kitchen. There’s a bang, then my boy’s piercing cry, but I can’t turn my head because he won’t let me move.

“Hugh, darling. It’s all right. Everything is going to be all right.” *Please let everything be all right.* “Archie, please don’t cry.”

“He killed Holland,” my baby wails. “And now he’s killed Hugh.”

“No, I’m okay,” my eldest says. “I j-just bumped my head.”

“H-H-Hugh’s head is bleeding!” Archie howls.

“Archie, go and get the folder on the dining room table,” Tom demands, “and be fucking quick about it.”



“Go on, darling. Get the file for him.”

Tom’s ragged breaths are harsh in my ear, his chest heaving as though he’s run a minute mile. Yet I feel cold and deathly calm.

“Is Holland really dead?” I whisper.

“You think I give a shit? The pair of you have it so fucking easy.”

Breath and sadness sag from me. “Tom, no. Sandy will tear you limb from limb.”

“He’s got to catch me first,” he says, dragging me over to the island by the hair. I catch a glimpse of Hugh as I’m swung around, my stomach swooping at the flash of red across his outstretched palm. “You stay where you are,” Tom growls, flipping open the familiar manila folder. “You shoulda had this in a safe.”

His self-satisfaction sickens me.

“We don’t have a safe.” I never needed one with him because we never had any money.

“Got yourself a pretty little nest egg here and a husband worth billions.”

“A husband who will hurt you down when he sees what you’ve done today.”

“Aye, but I’ll be long gone. Archie, gimme that laptop,” he demands.

“Pass it over, darling.” I encourage him with a smile that probably isn’t very reassuring. It doesn’t help that the saliva has dried up in my mouth, making my lips uncooperative.

“Sign in to the account,” Tom mutters.

“I can’t even see the keyboard,” I complain as he holds my head at an awkward angle.

“You’ll manage. This one.” Grabbing the paperwork for the first account, he presses my head lower. “Transfer the money into this account.” He thrusts a small square of paper under my nose, the numbers scrawled in his hand.

I haven't even signed into these accounts yet—not once. There might be a daily transfer limit or some kind of security. My stomach somersaults as I send a silent prayer that there isn't.

I sign in, pass the security details despite my shaking hands, and transfer a whole lot of numbers into Tom's offshore bank account.

The second isn't so easy.

"Attempt two of three," I read from the screen.

"Fuck! *Fuck!*" Tom whacks the back of my head with the palm of his hand.

"I can call them." Anything to get him out of this house.

"No. No phones," he grates out. "Archie, go get your shoes. Jacket, too."

"What? Where are you taking him?"

"I don't want to," my boy whimpers.

"Do as you're fucking told!" he yells, part man, part petulant adolescent as he actually stomps his feet.

"You can't take him." The fear building inside me spreads across my skin in a rush of prickling heat.

Tom's expression twists as he glances down at me. "Aye? What are you gonna do about it, then?"

"I won't let you take him."

"He's half mine, and you'll get him back once I have my money. Maybe," he adds with a cruel grin. "I have their passports. I was gonna take them both—hit you where it hurts—but I think I'll just take Arch."

"No!" my littlest man wails. "I didn't do anything!"

"Shoes!" Tom barks again. "And don't think about running away, or I'll hurt your mother," he adds as an afterthought.

"Tom, this isn't you," I whisper. "You don't need to do this."

He sniffs, wiping under his nose with the back of his hand. "It's what I've been driven to," he mutters, staring at the door as though willing Archie's return. "I want that money, or

you'll never see him again. I fucking mean it, Iz. You took my life. My way of making something of it."

"No, I—"

"Shut the fuck up!"

Something snaps inside me. I hear the crack—the fissure—it feels almost violent. I glance up at him, wondering if he'd heard it, too. Something inside me seems to take over. My head comes down, and everything begins to slow.

I catch Hugh's eye.

My hand lifts.

My mouth opens, mouthing just one word. "*Run!*"

My elbow descends, the blow landing between the *V* of Tom's legs.

His body bows, his breath coasting my face. The stool moves from under me. Tom grabbing my hair as I pull away, not even feeling the pain. I fall forward, my fingers scrabble, the knife block in sight. He pulls me back but not before my fingers fasten tight around one of the handles.

I scream. I twist. I swing as he yanks, the knife disappearing into his flesh like one of those joke knives—plastic with a spring. His expression is one of shock, like he can't believe I just did that to him. If he yells, I don't hear it. I seem to have gone deaf as I watch red bloom across his shirt like the time-lapse recording of a flower opening.

A voice echoes in my head. It sounds ponderous, not afraid. *Everyone is a murderer.* Horror registers on Tom's face as I pull back my arm to stab him again. Because my person? I've just found him.

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## EPILOGUE

### NIKO

“TIBERIUS IS COMING to my birthday party!” Archie’s voice echoes sonorously from the ancient flagstone hallways of Kilblair Castle long before he appears in the room. “Here’s his R.S.P.P,” he calls, appearing in the room, his arms spread wide like the arms of a plane. Without stopping, he drops a sheet of blue paper onto the sofa before disappearing into the garden through the open French doors.

“Don’t even think about it,” Holland says without looking up from her phone, which she happens to be resting on her very round and very pregnant stomach.

“Tiberius was a great military strategist and an emperor of Rome.” Alexander looks up from his laptop on the other side of the room. “The name has a certain ring to it, don’t you think?”

“We are *not* calling our son Tiberius.”

“You could call him Tibby for short.” Hugh snickers, dropping his schoolbag to the floor. Hanging over the back of the sofa, he grins manically at his aunt. “Actually, Tibby sounds like a perfect—”

“Cat’s name,” Isla says, bringing up the rear. She’s dressed for her new office, wearing one of her own creations. She says it pays to advertise, but those assets enhanced by the dress’s design? They are mine. Her expression brightens instantly as she spots me. “You’re here!”

“As promised.” I stand from the armchair, wrapping her in my arms. “I couldn’t stay away,” I whisper, my body relaxing at the press of hers.

“You’ve only been gone a day.”

“It was half a day too long.” I can’t stand to be away from her. If only my business could be run by Zoom calls.

She hooks her finger around my belt. “I’m not complaining.”

“Urgh! Mushy love stuff,” Hugh mutters. “I’m going to the kitchen to see if Dougal has made more bao buns.”

“Oh, bring me one back, honey.” Holland’s eyes widen like a possum.

“One. Or twelve,” Alexander murmurs under his breath.

“Hey, I’m eating for three over here!”

“Of course you are, but I’m sure most people wouldn’t notice you’re expecting twins. You barely even have a bump showing.”

Holland laughs as she rubs her very obvious, multiple-baby-dwelling stomach. “Sweet talking will get you nowhere. Actually, it might get you *somewhere* because I was just reading an article with a few suggestions to get this show on the road.”

“What show?” her husband asks, not picking up on the insinuation in her tone.

“This one,” she replies, pointing finger guns to her rotund stomach. “We might be able to get things moving by... you know.”

“I’m not sure I do.” His gaze lifts to his sister, the castle’s resident child expert, given she’s the one with the experience.

“How you made those babies,” Isla says with an amused shake of her head. “That act can, in some cases, help speed up labor.”

“Oh,” Alexander says, perking up immediately.

Isla's soft gaze drifts to Holland's round stomach. Keen to distract her obvious train of thought, I pull her back against me, dropping into the nearest armchair.

"You guys are so sweet," Holland says with a smile. Hooking her arm over the back of the sofa, she turns her attention to her husband. "Remember when you used to like me to sit on your knee?"

"I still like it. We just need to have a crane nearby." He laughs and ducks as a throw pillow sails past his head.

"I can't wait to meet my new niece and nephew," Isla says with a bright smile.

"I can't believe we're having twins," Alexander murmurs, though I know the prospect secretly makes him feel as proud as a dog with two dicks. It's also terrifying him, naturally.

"We can always put one up for sale on Facebook Marketplace," Holland suggests. "I choose the one called Tiberius. With a name like that, we'll have to price him cheap."

I tighten my arms around Isla in part comfort, part reminder. The topic of babies is a little like a scab that she keeps picking when it needs time to heal. Too much, too fast, I've cautioned. The dark trauma of that bright and sunny afternoon is enough to make anyone's body go into shock. Even without the court case that followed, without what happened the same morning in London, and the revelations of the night before.

I drop my head to her shoulder. My wife. My life. She's a fucking lioness.

I'd arrived just in time to take the knife out of her hand, having left for Scotland the moment I'd spotted her scrawled message across the mirror. A short flight and a hair raising drive to the castle, imagining that would be the one place she'd feel safe after what I'd forced her to confront. I was cursing myself, my every muscle tense, regretting every moment while knowing in my heart she needed to see it. She needed to know who I'd forced myself to become.

Then my phone rang. It was the bank querying the transfer sum. A change of direction and just a few minutes lost before I spotted Archie and Hugh racing along the hedgerow to the street, intent on flagging down a passing car.

She didn't need help. She learned that lesson the hard way, the way I had learned it.

We do what we must to protect those we love.

I'd like to say I finished the job for her, finished him off for her. I would've cut his throat as easily as blinking. As with Anatoli, who'd touched my wife, who'd been trafficking vulnerable women into prostitution, cancer needs cutting out.

Tom is a cancer. A leech. But I had to think of the bigger picture. As terrified as the boys were by the experience, he was still their father. How could they grow to love me knowing I'd murdered him? Murder also weighs on the soul. I didn't want that for Isla.

So I'd taken her in my arms, then the emergency services.

Tom is currently serving a lengthy prison sentence for attempted kidnapping, grievous bodily harm, and a list of other offenses. He deserves every day he'll spend behind bars after luring Holland and the boys away at the end of the football match, knocking her out, tying her up, and generally terrorizing two women and two children.

And they say I'm a bad man...

After a police investigation, Isla faced no charges.

It pays to have friends in high places. And people in high places who owe you.

I don't count Sandy in that group. By default, Sandy and I are now part of the same family. He says he's learned to live with that fact, but I know he's pleased to see Isla and the boys happy. Looked after. Loved.

"Well, we're not calling either of these children Tiberius," Holland says.

*We're still having this conversation?*



“We’re going to have to call them something, darling,” Alexander replies, absolutely winding her up. “We can’t carry on calling them Thing One and Thing Two, no matter how cute you think it is.”

“How much longer do you have to decide,” I ask, resting my arms around my wife.

“Four weeks.” Isla answers for her sister-in-law. “But twins often arrive early.” Her words are wistful, but I’m sure I’m the only one who notices. Holland and Alexander are too wrapped up in their own joy to see Isla’s quiet sorrow.

*“It’s too early,”* I’d cautioned her the last time we’d had this discussion. *“You put yourself under far too much pressure.”*

*“Time is running out,”* she’d replied with a teary laugh. *“I’m not getting any younger. If it doesn’t happen soon, it might never—”*

*“So be it.”* I’d taken her in my arms, brushing away the trickle of tears. *“I have everything I need right here. I have you. I have Archie and Hugh. To ask for more would be greedy.”*

But I know she also wants a child for herself.

Sliding Isla’s hair from her face, I curl it around her ear. When she’s near, I can’t help but touch her. When she’s not, my body seems to ache for her. “Where do you suppose Archie has gone?”

“The long way around to the kitchen. After-school snack,” she says with a tiny shrug. He’ll have to work fast; Sergei is probably there. He complains about the accents up here, but he secretly loves it. He’s become partial to Dougal’s cooking. And is probably helping himself to the cooking sherry.

“Want to take a walk around the gardens?”

Isla gives a coy flutter of her lashes. “Because you want to take advantage of—”

“The beautiful day, of course.”

Holland snorts.

Pulling Isla more solidly into the cradle of my lap, I whisper. “What do you think?” I gently bite her ear.

She shivers and, with a soft laugh, slides from my knee.

“Where are those two going?” Alexander asks as we step out onto the terrace, hand in hand.

“To look at the flowers,” Holland answers in a bright tone. Then I’m sure she adds, “Dirty little horticulturists.”

Isla’s dress flits around her bare knees as our feet trip lightly down the old stone step like a couple of teenagers finding themselves home alone for a few hours.

“Wait for me.” She giggles, following me as I cut across the lawn.

“Come here.” My voice sounds husky as I slip my hand around her waist, pulling her behind one of the huge old cedar trees dotting the lawn. Her laughter is bright and carefree as I press her against the wide, gnarled trunk.

“Oh, no. What are you going to do to me?” Her eyes glitter, full of daring.

“That all depends on what you want.”

“I want it all.”

“Then how about we start here.”

There are no more words as our mouths fuse. Her lips are soft and warm and her breath sweet. It’s an unhurried kiss, a thorough kiss, a kiss that encompasses love, desire, and happiness, all without the need for words.

This woman is everything to me.

But as with all kisses, there’s a tipping point. Pull away or deepen. All in or quit. And today, it’s lady’s choice.

“That was a kiss and a half,” she whispers, pulling back and swiping her thumb across my bottom lip.

“Let’s round it up,” I reply, lowering my head again. “No one wants half kisses.”

“Not so fast.” She presses her hand to the center of my chest, holding me there. “I had an interesting conversation today.”

“Oh?”

“With Viktoria Kvitko.”

“Who?” My brow furrows.

“Instagram model? The woman who sent my Katia dress viral a while ago?”

“Oh, her.” I smile. I know what’s coming. I promised Isla I wouldn’t tell her everything, but that if she asked, I’d always tell her the truth. I meant it, too. But the dress was a small act of subterfuge. Isla has the talent. All she needed was a little nudge to expand her confidence.

Bottom line, I wanted her to feel good.

I’m pleasantly surprised as Isla’s hand slips around my neck, pulling my mouth down to hers. *Better than an argument any day.* “Thank you,” she whispers. “She told me you own the PR firm that represents her.”

“Do I?”

“Don’t play coy.” She nips at my lip, her free hand sliding between us and brushing my cock. “It doesn’t suit you.”

“You didn’t need my help. You just needed a little luck.” She has the talent. She just needed a little exposure. And speaking of exposure... “Hello,” I purr as her fingers make quick work of my zipper, her intent becoming very, very clear. “Here?”

“*Here.*” Her eyes turn the color of midnight, her fingers folding around my hard length as I work wet kisses along her neck. “Yes, I like that,” she whispers, her voice husky with desire.

My hand reaches for her shoulder, intent on turning her around. Bark can be harsh on the skin. Don’t ask me how we know.

“No, this way,” she demands, pulling my cock free. Sliding the hem of her dress higher, she slides her instep along my leg. “I want to look at you.”

“You’re very bossy this afternoon.” My voice is raspy with delight. I fit my cock to her heat, and we both hold our breaths as I push inside her.

“You love it.”

“I love *you*.” My declaration is rough as I punctuate my words with quick thrusts. “You were made for me.” I’m lost to the feel of her and the sound of her soft moans as I lift her other leg around my waist, balancing her ass in my hands.

“Was I worth waiting for?”

“I’d wait an eternity just to see you smile.”

This is hard and fast, and as her orgasm begins to flutter around me, my own begins to spiral.

“I like Tiberius,” she whispers hoarsely into my neck, crying out at my next thrust.

“I... want to... *fuck!*” I grind against her, my brain cells like marbles rolling around in my head.

Her hands tighten on her as she crests, crying out her love as I drive myself inside her again and again. Ecstasy barrels down my spine, white-hot and intense, as I blow my load and my mind.

White noise. Weak knees. It takes a moment for my coordination to return as I press her against the tree trunk, not yet ready to let her go.

*Not now. Not ever.*

Tiberius. What a fucking ridiculous...

But my heart stills, my head quietening as I pull back to look at her. Something’s different about her—*that smile?*—I’m not sure what it is.

“Are we getting another dog?” I ask? “I know the boys are keen, but—”

She shakes her head, happy tears beginning to spill. “Gertie wouldn’t like that.”

“Then—”

“Do you think the boys would settle for a baby instead?”

“A baby?” I hold her tight against me. My emotions are like an explosion of happiness. I dance—I fucking jump! “We’re going to have a baby!”

“Niko, please,” my darling says, sliding her fingers through my hair. “There are tourists on the bridge. Do you want to be prosecuted for indecent exposure?”

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today bestseller Donna is a writer of love stories with heart, humour, and heat. When not bashing away at her keyboard, she can often be found hiding from her responsibilities with a book in her hand and a mop of a dog at her feet.

Get to hear all the news by joining her newsletter or come say hello in her private reader group, Donna's Lambs.

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