

A man with long, light brown hair and a light beard is the central figure. He is shirtless, showcasing extensive tattoos. On his right chest, the words "The Good" are visible. On his left chest, there is a large, detailed tattoo of a dragon or a similar mythical creature. He is wearing a silver chain necklace, a ring on his right hand, and a black and white striped wristband on his left wrist. He is leaning against a dark, possibly metal, structure. The background is dark with some vertical lines, suggesting an industrial or prison-like setting.

EMPIRE
OF SINNERS

Merciless
SINNER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
FAITH SUMMERS

Merciless Sinner

Khardine Gray

Faith Summers

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Untitled

Merciless Sinner

Empire of Sinners Book 2

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Chapter One

Virgo

Monte Carlo is another city in this world that never sleeps.

The streets are always bustling with people and various activities, day and night.

Even at this hour of the morning. It's barely seven, but from what I can see, it could be at the height of noon where everyone is out and about.

I'm sitting at one of the quaint wooden tables in the back of the Noisette Café, watching it all unfold through the floor-to-ceiling glass windows.

People are all around me. Outside and inside the café. All the tables are taken, and it looks like it's going to stay that way for the next few hours. I was lucky to get one to myself, even though I got here when the café opened its doors.

I've been here for a little over an hour, which has seen me down two triple shots of espressos. I have a fresh cup in front of me, and I hope not to order any more, but I will if I have to.

Coffee usually makes people jittery, but it calms my nerves when I'm anxious. Still, even I have a limit.

Anxiety is an emotion I rarely feel, and I loathe it as much as I do fear.

I can count on one hand how many times the feeling has infiltrated my mind in the thirty-one years of my life. I suppose the first few years of life don't really count, though, as I wouldn't remember. I doubt my parents would either. I

was told that the moment I was born, my mother handed me over to the nanny while my father was away with one of his many mistresses.

Such is my life.

For the times I *can* actually remember being anxious, nothing has come close to this moment.

I'm Virgo Antonov. My name in the Bratva—and to those who know to beware of me— is synonymous with ruthless, fearless, heartless, *merciless*.

Yet... I've come across this one situation I can't control despite who I am.

I'm not here to drink coffee or watch people walking around the city.

I'm here for the girl.

My girl.

Olivia O'Ridian.

The woman who has lived in my dreams for the last two and a half years. The woman I refused to accept was dead until I had proof.

It turns out my heart was right—she's not dead. At least I hope not. I haven't seen her in the flesh yet.

My guards told me she would be here today at opening time. This café is supposedly one of the places she works. But either she's late, or she's not coming to work today.

I've seen pictures of her which prove she's alive. Those same pictures had me on my jet from New York to Monte Carlo within the hour of seeing them.

I have no plan, no strategy, no hidden aces up my sleeves.

I'm flying blind, but I needed to see her.

By the same token, I also know what to expect if and when she presents herself, as the other problem I have is that she doesn't remember who she is.

Meaning she won't remember me either.

The headstrong Bratva leader in me refuses to believe that could be true, because I find it hard to accept that you can have the kind of history and relationship we had and forget each other.

But I know it's something I'll have to deal with as a cold, hard truth if it hits me in the face.

I take a sip of my coffee and decide to down the rest. There wasn't much left in the cup anyway.

The chair creaks as I lean against it and allow my eyes to drift to the crystal-blue sea of the French Riviera in the distance. I get lost in the sunlight sparkling against the sea's surface, but my thoughts rumble around my mind like tumbleweed in a tornado.

My patience is wearing thin with every passing second. I keep thinking *what if I don't see her?*

Or if I'm wrong?

What if we're all wrong and the woman in the pictures isn't Olivia, or the identity tests my guards ran are *all* wrong?

Everything proved this woman to be her, but I'm at that place in this haggard journey where my faith is failing and fading.

I've spent every waking moment over the last few years searching everywhere I could for her. It's hard to believe that

this isn't one of the many occasions where I come up with nothing but disappointment and grief in my soul.

Every time that happens to me, I ask myself the same question—do I keep looking?

Do I let her go from my heart and accept that I might never find her?

Do I say goodbye and move on?

As this instance is by far the most promising, I already know my answer to all those questions.

Even if I had no evidence, I'd still be here. Still halfway across the world.

Still looking for her.

I look around at the same time the door to the staff entrance swings opens and out rushes a young blonde woman. On seeing her, I straighten with anticipation, and my heart stills the way it does whenever I come across any woman who looks like her.

This woman has the same white-blonde hair color as Olivia. It's piled on top of her head in a messy bun. She also has the same slim build and petite, willowy frame, but as her head is bowed while she fixes her apron, I can't see her face.

When she walks around the counter to join the other baristas and lifts her head, I find her face and my heart stumbles a beat, then comes to a complete stop as I realize it's her.

It's actually her.

My God.

The air in my lungs dries up the longer I stare at her, and every nerve and cell in my body awakens with this knowledge that I've actually found her.

I'm looking right at her. The girl I thought was lost to me forever.

The thought makes my spirit leap like an engine restarting with new life, and my heart starts racing as if it only started beating again for her.

No other woman has ever produced this sort of reaction in me.

I have always felt like *this* about her.

Dark souls like me aren't supposed to associate with hallowed beings like her, even when they come from the same world.

You should know to look and never touch, but like everything else, I broke the rules. *For her.*

The euphoria of knowing that my Olivia is alive and still with me in the world of the living makes me want to run over to her and take her into my arms, so I hold her in my heart forever.

But I know I can't do that.

The sensible thing is to keep watching and wait for the right time to approach her. So, I do just that and keep watching.

Those bright blue eyes of hers scan the room as she looks at the people around us. She must see me, but her gaze bounces right off me.

That's okay. Although I'm a big guy and hard to miss because of my muscles and tattoos, I'm at the back, and there

must be at least fifty people in here.

Olivia grabs a little notebook, and while I watch her scribbling down her notes, memories of us flow into my mind like a river breaking through a dam.

I remember the first time we met, the first time I knew she had feelings for me, and the first time I kissed her and shouldn't have.

She was always forbidden to me.

First because her brother. Cillian was one of my best friends, and she was his little sister, younger than me by five years. But even when we got older and it would have been okay for me to be with her, she became forbidden to me because of the feud between our families. That never stopped me.

I was the man to take her virginity and the first to hear her cries of ecstasy when her body was filled with the pleasure I gave her.

I was her first and her only. Until I fucked things up and led us to this.

This version of us where we're little more than strangers. Even though I thought I was doing the right thing, living in a world where she might not know who I am is a curse I deserve.

My gaze is intense enough for that sixth sense most people talk about when they sense someone is watching to kick in, but she's so focused on what she's doing that she doesn't notice anything.

Judging from the way she rushed in, my guess is she really was late for work.

Work in a coffee shop.

She must truly have forgotten who she truly is if she thinks she has to work here or worry about being late for work.

Olivia O'Ridian is an Irish mafia princess and the heiress to her father's gold mine. Like mine, her family is one of the richest in this world. Meaning she's worth billions.

The woman I'm observing has no inkling of wealth and doesn't look like a person who's running from the past either. Or trouble.

Maybe she doesn't know that either, or that her parents disappeared the same time she did.

I keep my gaze trained on her as she makes her way to an older couple on the other side of the room. A bright smile fills her beautiful, beautiful face I've missed so damn much it hurts.

She takes their order, then several more from the people at the nearby tables.

When she's finished, she walks back toward the counter to give the waitress behind it the orders and sets off for the section with the condiments and syrups.

She turns to pick something up, but at that moment, our eyes lock and she sees me. *Really* sees me.

Those piercing eyes of hers take me in, and the flawless, pale skin of her cheeks warm to a soft rose color that looks striking against her white-blonde hair and incandescent beauty.

We stare at each other for a few long heartbeats, and I feel she must for sure recognize me. I expect something to click and any moment now, she'll run toward me and throw her arms around me like she used to and kiss me.

I gear myself up to feel her against me again, but she seems to catch herself for staring and instead offers me a kind, shy smile before looking away.

Just as she's about to walk off, she accidentally bumps into the tray with the condiments and little sachets of sugar, salt, and pepper, sending them all to the floor.

She kneels down and starts picking them up, but I see the opening I need to speak to her.

I push to my feet, shoving the anxiety twisting my stomach to the back of beyond. When I think of how far I've come to find my girl, nothing else matters.

She doesn't see me until I crouch and gather up a few of the sugar sachets. When she looks at me, her eyes lock with mine again.

As I stare back at her, hardly believing I found her. I hope being closer might make her recognize me. But it doesn't.

She's looking at me as if she doesn't know me. The gaze of interest is simply the look of desire I receive from most women who are attracted to me.

"Thank you so much," she says, hitting me with that shy smile again as she speaks in that soft, dulcet tone I've always loved. "I'm an utter klutz when I'm rushing around, but I swear I'm not always so clumsy."

When people talk about feeling like their heart sinks, I thought it was utter bullshit, until now. My fucking heart is literally plummeting through the earth and going down, down, down the longer I realize she doesn't know me.

Billy, one of my guards, told me she did the same with him when he approached her days ago. She's known him her whole life, but she didn't recognize him either. She also thought he

was mistaken when he called her Olivia. Apparently, she's going by the name of Alice.

"It's Monday." I oblige her, searching my mind for words when I realize I haven't said anything. "Most people are like that on Mondays, so I don't think you're clumsy."

"You're sweet."

If she truly remembered me, there's no way she would call me that. I'm probably one of the most dangerous men she'll ever meet, but I suppose it's nice to pretend I'm however she sees me.

"Thanks for helping me." Her smile brightens when I hand her the last of the sachets.

"You're welcome."

We stand, and I tower over her five feet and four inches by an entire foot. As she looks up at me, she slides a lock of hair behind her ear.

"Well, I suppose I'll see you around."

"What's your name?" I ask quickly, visibly throwing her off. Although I already know what she's calling herself, asking for her name gives me a foot in the door for when I next see her."

"It's Alice," she replies. She's still smiling, but there's a slight rasp of hesitation in her voice.

"Good to meet you, Alice."

"And you."

I step back, away from her. "See you around, too. *Soon.*"

I allow my gaze to drift over her perfect body, hidden by the uniform she's wearing, before I turn with all the reluctance

in this world and leave.

I grant myself one more look, finding she's still staring at me with curiosity, but I turn away and keep walking through the door.

After being without her for so long, those few moments weren't nearly enough, but since I can't do what I want to do, the mere seconds we spent together will have to be enough for now.

Next time I see her—which will be *soon*—the only mindset I'll have is to take her back home to New York with me.

She might have forgotten who I am, but she's still mine.

Chapter Two

Olivia

Alice...

Every time I give someone that name, I feel like I need to check myself. Although I don't remember my real name, I know Alice is not me.

I chose the name from *Alice in Wonderland* because it seemed fitting to what I was going through.

When I first woke up from whatever trouble I'd narrowly escaped, I didn't know who I was. Neither did any of the people who were caring for me. The only thing they knew was that they needed to keep it that way—a secret.

As I watch the deadly handsome man whom I was just speaking to walk down the road, I actually feel like I would have loved to tell him who I really am.

He was the kind of rough and rugged handsome you see on a hero in an action film, and he had a deep Russian accent that would make any woman swoon.

And like any other woman, I wasn't immune to his striking good looks.

There was also something about him that hooked me.

Something that whispered to the deeper layers of my mind I can no longer access. Maybe I've finally gone crazy. It's strange to feel such a thing for a stranger when we barely spoke. But that was how I felt.

It would have been nice if my brain hadn't turned to mush so I could have asked for his name, too. Maybe not knowing is

better.

Given my situation, and my recent debacle, the last thing I should be doing is fantasizing about mysterious handsome men.

Especially one like him who oozed danger from every pore of his large, muscular, tattooed body.

I'm in enough trouble as it is. The kind that might mean I have to run again if things don't work out for me by the end of the month.

It would be a shame to leave. I've been in Monte Carlo for a little over a year and held down this job for near enough the same time. It's just not enough to pay my extortionate debts.

The only job I could get that could help me is one where I have to sell my soul to the devil. I officially start tonight.

"Hey, Alice, come on, get your head out of the clouds!" Louis yells at me. "The customers need you."

I turn to find his stern face and the disapproving way he shakes his bald head. He's the supervisor here, but he thinks he owns the place.

"Sorry. I'll go take more orders." I nod, but before I move, I look back at the handsome man outside just before he disappears from my sight.

It was nice of him to help me.

Whoever he was.

* * *

The bright flashing lights of Club Montage bounce against the inky night sky in a cascade of colors.

The vibrant sight reminds of films I've seen of hotels on the Las Vegas Strip.

The club is enormous, elegant, and extravagant enough to blend right into the same decadence you'd find in Las Vegas, which makes it perfect for Monte Carlo.

Except Club Montage isn't exactly a hotel.

Sure, it has rooms like the surrounding hotels and resorts where you can stay, and it also has a casino with live burlesque shows.

But beneath all of that, it's really a high-end sex club. A playground for the wealthy billionaires, and the resting place for dignity for girls like me who've reached the end of the line and have no other choice.

My soul feels just as dirty as it did days ago when I made my way up these steps to sign my contract to be one of their Angels—a VIP escort.

Basically a whore. The Angels are the girls who are reserved for high-profile clientele. I got selected because of the color of my hair and the size of my breasts.

At two grand a night, an Angel is expected to do whatever is required of her. That means everything, including sleeping with said high-profile clientele if that's what they require.

I was told that most girls work here because they obviously love the money, but also because they actually love the job. It appeals to their wild side.

Unfortunately for me, I'm just desperate and have reached a new low in my life.

I'm a soon-to-be whore who landed herself in a death trap when she got mixed up with the wrong kind of man who then

got her mixed up with the worst kind of people.

I met Flavio when I first came to Monaco. Even in my amnesiac state, I knew I shouldn't have trusted him. But I was lonely.

Lonely and tired of moving across Europe when I felt trouble was following me.

Things moved fast. Way too fast. Before I knew it, we were living together and taking out loans in each other's names. The loan was to open a water sports shop. Because he was a surfer and we live in a place where people worship the beach, I thought it was a good idea. I also love anything to do with the water.

But there was no business. It was all a sham.

I thought he cared about me, but he was just using me. We were together for a grand total of four months before the asshole left me without a trace, emptied my bank account, and left in debt for seventy grand to a bunch of cartel drug lords who didn't hesitate to beat me black and blue.

When I walk through the staff door, I have the same thoughts I had the other night. That this is one of those times when I'm grateful I don't remember who I am.

I'd like to believe that in my other life, I was better than this.

But just like the other night, my thoughts are chased away with the one warning I was given to never trust anyone who recognizes me from wherever I originally came from.

That's the one solemn truth I'll have to live with for the rest of my life and run as soon as I feel like my life is in danger.

It's laughable. I'm thinking that as if my life's not in danger now.

My debtors have already threatened to sell me or kill me if I don't pay.

That's why I'm here. About to go down another deep, dark rabbit hole.

I walk down the wide hallway and find Madame Noir's office. She owns the club with her husband and is in charge of the girls.

As her door is open, I walk straight in and find her sitting at her desk.

Tonight, she's wearing a bright pink wig and overdone makeup that makes her look like Effie Trinket from the *Hunger Games*.

She looks up from her computer screen and gives me a wide toothy smile. The kind you expect to see on the Grim Reaper just before he collects your soul.

"Wonderful, you're early. We like early here." She taps her coffin-shaped nails on the glossy surface of her desk.

"I didn't want to get caught in traffic." I try to return her smile but can't bring myself to do so.

"Good thinking." She brings her hands together and sighs. "Anyway, I'm glad you're here early. I have good news."

Hope sparks my heart on hearing that. "Good news is always good."

"Definitely. I have a client who wants to book you for the rest of the week. The pay is thirty thousand."

My interest piques as if someone lit a fire underneath it. My God, thirty grand would seriously help me. I've only managed to pay back ten thousand dollars on my debt. Getting that kind of money would get me one step closer to my goal, and I wouldn't have to work here for the two months I signed up for.

Madame Noir chuckles as she looks me over. "From the look on your face I don't think I need to ask if you're interested."

"I'm interested." I can't get the words out quickly enough.

"Great, you start tonight. The client's name is Petr Nasellev. He's an investment banker who is very particular. The position will require you to be with him for the entire week while he's on his yacht."

Sounds like I'll have to call in sick at the coffee shop. "I can do that."

"Good. Well, get yourself glammed up. He'll pick you up from the lounge. Your first order of business is to join him for a poker game. He likes having a beautiful woman on his arm while he's playing. It provides a good distraction for his opponents, so make sure you pick something sexy and revealing from the dressing room."

"Okay," I answer, my voice filled with a confidence and assurance I don't feel. "Thank you for this."

She gives me a curt nod, and I leave with my heart as heavy as my steps. It's great I was picked for this job, but I know I'll have to work for that thirty grand doing only God knows what with Mr. Petr Nasellev.

And what will he be like?

* * *

A pig.

Petr Nasellev is an absolute pig.

Not only has he acted like one, but his unruly, curly hair, fat face, and body make him look like one, too.

From the moment I met him in the lounge, I knew exactly why he had to pay to attract a woman's company. No one in their right mind would be with him in real life.

He says he's in his early sixties, but I think he's more like seventy.

My fake date of birth—estimated by the doctors who took care of me—makes me twenty-six years old, so it's icky to be with a man old enough to be my father.

Or grandfather.

The first thing Petr did when we met was get a good hand full of my breasts. Then he took me to a private booth at the bar where his hands were either on my ass or creeping up my thigh. Both events were right out in the open for everyone to see, which shouldn't have surprised me because that's what people do here.

Not a minute later, he proceeded to tell me about all the ways he planned to fuck me all week. Starting with tonight after the game.

I'd pray for strength, but I'm not sure there's any point in praying anymore, so all I can do is what I'm doing and hope I'll find some way to survive.

The money at the end is what I have to think about to keep myself going.

When Petr finishes drinking his champagne, we head down to the poker table. It's in a private section of the casino.

There are already six men sitting at the table. All reek of money and power. The men look at me then glance at each other, a knowing look brightening their eyes.

I recall what Madame Noir said about the distraction, which seems to be working. Their eyes are all over my incredibly low-cut gold dress which stops at the tops of my thighs.

Petr and I sit next to each other, and his hand goes straight to my thigh again.

"Evening, gentlemen. I'm sure you won't mind me bringing my date," Petr greets them, issuing each man with an uncanny smile.

"Not at all," says the dark-haired man to our left who speaks in a rich French accent. "We're all used to you now."

As he chuckles, the other men join him and the croupier walks up toward the table with a deck of cards.

I know nothing about poker, so like everything else, I don't know what to expect.

"Ready to go?" the croupier asks, holding the cards up. "Looks like all the players are here."

"All except me," a deep Russian voice cuts in.

My head snaps up, and my eyes connect with the azure-blue ones that belong to the deadly handsome Russian man from this morning.

Dressed in a dark blue suit, he looks like he just stepped off the cover of *GQ Magazine*. His attire and presentation are so different to the Levi's and T-shirt guy he was this morning, showing off muscles and tattoos.

My heart flutters at the sight of him, and a rush of heat cascades over my body in the most inappropriate way. But I can't stop it.

Our eyes connect like they did this morning, and just for a moment, I forget where I am.

The scandalous look he gives me when he takes in what I'm wearing makes me blush from the inside out. The sinful look in his eyes strips away my reservations about being careful around handsome mysterious men, and suddenly, I'm embarrassingly wet.

His gaze flicks over me as if he knows, and for a moment, I wonder if he does.

But then I check myself. Because what is he doing here?

How is he *here* at the same time as me? In the same place. At the same game.

This can't be a coincidence.

If there's one thing I know, it's that anything that appears to be a coincidence is usually a warning of something amiss.

In my case, that's always about the danger that sent me running from the past.

Chapter Three

Olivia

“P erfect, now we can start.” The croupier gives the men a stiff smile and starts dealing out the cards. As he does, I notice some of the men look uneasy at the presence of my mysterious Russian friend.

He sits next to the Frenchman who spoke earlier, but his eyes haven't left me.

The sinful look is still there, joined by curiosity.

My nerves spike when his gaze drifts down to my deep cleavage, and the reminder of why I'm here replaces my worries about his coincidental presence with embarrassment.

A man like him is going to know what this club is. He'll also know there's no way I'm here with Petr out of choice, so it's a dead giveaway that I must be an escort.

Feeling more than embarrassed and humiliated, I look away from him, wishing I could jump straight into a black hole.

There was no way I thought I'd run into anyone who knew me from the café, but he doesn't actually know me.

I wouldn't consider the oh-so-brief encounter we had this morning an actual meeting, but the embarrassment remains.

As the men survey the hand of cards they've been dealt, I try to calm my nerves.

“Interesting to see you here, Virgo Antonov,” the Frenchman says in a newscaster voice, referring to my new friend.

Virgo Antonov. That's his name.

At least I know it now.

"Why is that, Francois?" Virgo asks, his voice as cool as melting ice.

They know each other. That's odd, right?

It's difficult to tell when I'm being paranoid from when there's nothing to worry about. The answer is hardly ever the latter when it comes to me and the world around me.

"Just didn't know what business the Bratva had in Monte Carlo."

Bratva—as in the *Russian mafia*.

Jesus. No wonder I sensed that danger vibe when we met. Because he *is* dangerous.

Dangerous, here, *and* we met this morning.

Never mind my embarrassment. There's no way in hell seeing him again here is a coincidence.

Is he linked to the danger that keeps me looking over my shoulder and watching my back?

I've never had a face before.

Is he what my danger looks like?

If so, I never expected that danger to come in the form of a beautifully handsome man who helped me clean up when I spilled the tray of condiments at the café.

A few days ago, I freaked out because there was a guy who thought he recognized me. He called me Olivia, and he looked at me as if he was sure that was who I was. On guard—as always—I told him my name was Alice. He apologized for the mistake, then left me alone. I tried to push the encounter out of

my mind when I didn't see him again. It seemed like it was an honest mistake.

But what if it wasn't?

It's strange that should happen to me mere days ago, and now this. This thing—*whatever it is*—with Virgo Antonov.

My lungs squeeze with the anticipation of this new, very real possibility, and I wonder what on earth I should do if I'm right. It's been almost a year since I felt like I needed to run. With the new level of fucked up my life has fallen into, now really isn't a good time.

"I was wondering the same thing," Petr chimes in, piercing my thoughts. I glance at him as he stares at Virgo head on, then I switch my gaze back to Virgo, noticing he's squaring his shoulders as if he's gearing up for a fight.

"Nothing to wonder." A ruthless smile pulls at his lips.

"Oh, but it is curious. I highly doubt that the lure of tonight's game could tempt a man like you."

"Maybe there are other things here tempting me." Virgo looks at me and winks, sending an unexpected flush of heat straight to my core. The feeling is as potent as if someone had just taken a hot poker out of a fire and shoved it into my stomach.

There's no doubt he's talking about me. He was looking at me when he dropped the comment, and he's still looking at me. Petr notices.

"Do you two know each other?" Petr asks, his brows knitted with disdain.

"No," I answer quickly, the sharpness yet softness of my voice sounding out of place amongst this group of hardcore,

high-powered men.

Virgo responds with a stiff smile, as if to say I don't know him *yet*.

Getting my mind under control, I summon bravery and steel my spine. No matter how much I despise my reasons for being here, I hate the idea of being dead or sold off to someone who might kill me more. So, I have to protect the money I stand to make from Petr.

Virgo looks away from me then at each of the men, staring at them in turn, the strength of his presence displaying his dominance. "How about we just make a start?"

"That sounds like a good idea," Francois agrees with a confident bow of his head.

"Can I get your bets, please," the croupier asks.

The men throw in their chips. A *lot* of chips. Even with my lack of knowledge of this game, I know those chips must be worth a shit ton of money. Millions maybe.

Millions to be won or lost.

Neither of which is my concern. I have bigger worries. Regardless of the timing, if Virgo's presence means I'm in danger, I have to figure out what to do. *Fast*.

The game begins, and the men show their cards. Virgo wins the first hand. Then, much to everyone else's dismay and utter annoyance, he wins the second, third, and fourth hands.

He plays with the skill of a man who could play this game in his sleep, and I'm very aware that his eyes have hardly left me throughout the entire time.

Petr wins the next two rounds and makes a show of slipping his arm around me, staking his claim. Every time he

touches me, I notice a tick in Virgo's jaw and a wildfire blazing in his bright blue eyes, as if he wants to tear the skin off Petr's hands.

I think Petr notices, too, because he touches me even more, making me feel like I've been drafted into a game of mental tug-of-war.

An hour passes, but it feels like it goes by as quickly as if I'd blinked.

Suddenly, Virgo is on a winning streak with a mountain of chips in front of him and a cocky smile twisting his handsome face, but then Petr wins again and again, taking over control. His success replenishes the confidence he had when I first met him.

"Sorry, Virgo Antonov, looks like your luck is dwindling, while mine is through the roof." Petr chuckles low and cunningly.

"I wouldn't say that." Virgo smiles back. "How about we take things up a notch since you feel so lucky?"

"What do you have in mind?"

"Let's raise the stakes by ten million."

Ten million.

The smile drops off Petr's face at the same time my stomach squeezes as if a vice is clamped around it.

I can't imagine playing around with that kind of money just for fun. It seems like Petr and the others can't either.

"Make it lower." Petr demands.

Virgo laughs. "Thought you said your luck was through the roof."

“I did, but I’m not foolish enough to play with a Bratva boss. That kind of money is pocket change to you people.”

Bratva boss? *Great.* Being in the mafia was already bad, but he’s a leader. A filthy rich one from the sounds of it.

“Ten million is nothing to you, either, but if you don’t want to dig that deep into your pockets, why don’t you just give me your girl?”

A heated chill races over my body, and I glare back at Virgo. I want to snap back and tell him to go fuck himself, and that I’m not for sale.

The words are already falling off my lips, but I catch myself when good old embarrassment reminds me that I already sold my soul to the devil.

They all know that. Hence the reason Virgo made the request.

“She’s not for sale.” Petr straightens, glowering at him. The smile and humor are gone now. “As you can see, the girl belongs to me.”

“I beg to differ.” Virgo gives him a mirthless smile. One that exhibits power and authority. “This girl doesn’t belong to anyone but herself. If you took a closer look at her, you’d see how much she loathes sitting next to your disgusting, fucked-up body. We can all see she’s already mentally vomiting her insides at the thought of what she might have to do with you tonight.”

His sharp voice pierces into me, forcing every single word into my mind. As each one lands, they feel like explosions, ripping open every secret part of me, unleashing my true thoughts. It’s worse when he looks at me and that thing from earlier that I felt when we first met returns.

This morning, it felt enchanting, but now it makes me feel more exposed.

“I’m sure she wishes she could do something else to fix whatever trouble sent her here.” Virgo keeps his gaze trained on me, as if he can see straight through to the insides of my soul.

I try to breathe past the seal of trepidation clogging my throat. But I can’t, because...he’s looking at me as if he knows me.

As if he knows me beyond our casual encounter this morning.

God... am I right?

Is he my destruction?

The question in my mind short-circuits my nerves. Because... I think I am right, and the only thing I can think of is getting far, far away from here.

Petr snaps his gaze to me now, more suspicious than ever, and I feel like a mouse trapped in the lion’s den.

Air. I need some air. Or cold water on my face. I need to do anything but stay here.

“Excuse me.” My voice sounds weak as I stand on trembling legs. I’m about to move when Petr grabs my hand.

“Where are you going?” He speaks through gritted teeth.

“I need to go to the bathroom.” I try to sound like Virgo’s words didn’t hit my nerves with a mallet, but I know I fail.

“Don’t stay too long.” Petr releases me, but not without giving me a look of cold, hard warning that echoes his displeasure.

“Sure.” I nod and walk away.

Although I can feel Virgo’s eyes searing into me, I don’t look back.

I head to the ladies’ bathrooms, but I keep walking when I spot the open door to the terrace. I walk out there instead, allowing the cool, sea-breeze-scented night air to wash over me.

Goose bumps prickle my skin and an unhinged sensation crawls through my nerves like a snake.

This is too much for me. If I’m right about what’s going on, then I’ve fallen into a trap I never saw coming. If I make the wrong move, I’ll only get twisted tighter in this web of shit I’ve landed myself in.

I head toward the balcony, rest my hands on the metal rails, and gaze ahead at the city below. I’m on the rooftop of a fifteen-story building, so the people all look like ants walking around in the cascade of multi-color lights.

My heart is heavy, and my thoughts are racing so fast I can’t pick them apart.

I close my eyes, but all I can see is Virgo’s eyes staring at me, engraved in my mind’s eye like an emblem. The way he spoke, and the things he said... it did something to me. Something I can’t quite describe.

My aversion to Petr is obvious, but it’s the other things Virgo said that got to me, cementing the idea that he’s part of my danger.

“What kind of trouble are you in?”

My eyes snap wide at the sound of that deep voice. I was just thinking of the man the voice belongs to.

Slowly, slowly, I turn to face him, completely unsure of what to say.

Virgo moves closer, and my nerves scatter.

I step back when he gets even closer, not wanting to be blocked in so I can't run if I have to.

Run?

Really? Do I really believe I could run away from *him*? He's so big and strong and foreboding, I'm certain he could catch me with the tip of his finger before I could take one step.

"What do you want?" My voice is low and as unsteady as the rest of my body.

"You heard me?" The fire behind his blue gaze intensifies the longer he stares at me.

"That's none of your concern." I steel my spine and level him a hard stare. It's probably a weak attempt at portraying a confidence I don't feel, but I refuse to look weak. I've survived on my own for years. The parents I can't remember died protecting me, so I can't be weak now. "This meeting of ours is no coincidence, is it?"

"No."

His honesty tightens my body with the sensation to flee, but once again, I know I can't run. The only other route of escape is over the balcony. That is not an option.

"Neither was this morning at the café. You were watching me?"

"I was." A ruthless smile tugs at the corners of his full, sensual lips, revealing dimples that highlight his chiseled beauty. If I weren't so terrified at his confirmation, it would

almost be fascinating to watch the balance of darkness and light in him.

“What do you want with me?”

“I’m not going to hurt you.” Something softens in his expression, but I don’t trust it. I can’t.

“*What* do you want with me?” I repeat the question with more force in my tone.

“I’m here to take you home, *Olivia*.”

Olivia.

Oh my God. That was the name the man from the other day called me.

I was right. I was actually right. This is all related.

It’s all part of the same thing.

Shit, I’m so stupid. How could I have had a heads-up days ago and not follow it through?

But how could I have done anything to protect myself when I had Tulio and his cartel friends on my heels about the fucking debt?

My throat tightens and panic seizes my nerves, clouding mind like an overcast of smoke.

“I’m not Olivia.” That’s all I can think to say. Denying who I could be is the only defense I can think of even though it failed me the other day. “My name is Alice.” My voice comes out higher than I expected.

“It’s not Alice. You had an accident, and you can’t remember who you are. Or who I am to you.”

“And who *are* you to me?”

“Everything.”

My eyes widen with shock from the fervor in his words.
“What... do you mean by everything?”

His searching eyes scan my face, then soften. “In the world where you’re from, we belonged to each other.”

My heart beats faster. My lungs squeeze. My skin heats.

We belonged to each other? As in, we were together?

Him and me.

I try to process the thought. This possible fact.

I think back to this morning and how he looked at me. And how he’s looking at me now.

He’s the kind of man who you couldn’t resist even if you wanted to, and I won’t deny my attraction to him. But he’s talking about something deeper. Not just mere attraction.

The thought ignites that crazy something I keep feeling.

The something that gripped me when I first looked at him in the café.

“People at home think you’re dead,” he explains, speaking faster. “But I didn’t want to believe that. That’s why I looked for you everywhere, and I wouldn’t stop. That’s all I’ve done for the last two and a half years.”

His heartfelt words melt my fears, but before it can take full effect, the crude warning I was given about people from home hits me, flashing in my mind like the red and blue lights of a police car.

Don’t trust anyone who knows you from home.

Whatever happened to my parents and me was an inside job.

Someone from *home* wanted us dead. But I didn't die.

I'm sure my enemies know that. They just haven't been able to find me. No one has.

Until now.

As wonderful as it would be to believe this man who is claiming to be my *everything*, I can't trust him.

My travels have taught me enough to know that men like him in the Bratva are just the kind of people who would want me dead. So, I need to protect myself no matter what.

"You need to leave me alone." I nod, trying with everything inside me to stay calm. "I'm not who you think I am." It's better if I keep going with the same excuse.

"Yes, you *are*." His voice is more forceful. "Your name is Olivia O'Ridian. Your family is Irish. You live in New York, where you still have friends and family who love you. You studied art history and antiquities at Harvard. Believe me when I say you do not belong here. This is the last place you should be."

I'm hooked on his words again and the possibility that I really could be this great person he's talking about who went to Harvard.

But hearing I have friends and family who still love me sets off the warning bells in my soul even more. Nothing he says changes the fact that I can't trust anyone. I don't know them, don't remember them, don't want to see them, so it's better I stick to the plan of not entertaining anything he has to say.

"I think you're mistaken, and you need to leave me alone."
I step back again.

“I can’t do that.”

“You need to. I—”

He cuts off my next words by slipping his large hand behind my head and crushing his lips to mine.

The cruel, ravishing contact paralyzes me with a raw dose of desire and shock. I know I should pull away, but I don’t think I could, even if my brain could take back control over my body.

My heart pounds in my chest as his tongue pushes through the seam of my lips and he deepens the kiss, devouring me, overriding any fleeting thought I have to resist with the delicious suction of his lips.

A wild current of pleasure sweeps over my skin, and God, it feels like we should have always been kissing.

The kiss becomes carnal and sinfully hungry, and his warm, firm, demanding lips on mine feel like the only constant in my world of chaos.

I’m stunned at myself when I kiss him back with the same passion. His fingers glide through my hair, forcing my fears from my mind, and all I can think is that I want to feel him everywhere. Inside me, outside me, and all around.

The wicked sensation of need tingles in my chest, tightening my nipples as if he’d touched me there.

At that moment, footsteps crunch against the gravel on the path, and we pull apart. With my lips still on fire, I look to my left at the same time Virgo does to find Petr walking toward us.

There’s no way he didn’t see us kissing.

No way.

The instant he got to the door, he would have seen us long before he stepped onto the gravel path.

As he comes closer, I take note of the wrath on his face. It confirms my thoughts.

Damn it. What the hell am I going to do now?

My mind is still climbing down from that kiss, and I can't think straight.

I don't think I could anyway.

Virgo snaps his gaze back to me. "Don't go with him. No matter how much he paid, I will take care of whatever trouble you are in."

The offer surprises me, but I don't get to answer because Petr marches up to us, completely enraged.

"I thought you were going to the bathroom." He glares at me, then at Virgo.

Like Virgo, it's clear Petr is a man who's used to getting what he wants, but he's also visibly scared of Virgo even though he challenged him at the poker table.

Petr seems sensible enough to know that sort of challenge would only work in a game. Apart from being a Bratva boss, Virgo is almost a foot taller than Petr, and his sheer size in muscle would make two of him.

When Petr looks back at me, I know I have to give him an answer.

"I just needed some air," I say, swallowing hard.

"With *him*?" The fury on his face flows into his words, making each syllable rise like hands balling into tight fists.

I can't think of anything else to say that would work.

“Watch it, Petr Nasellev. Remember in whose presence you stand.” Virgo sounds like he could be the earthly incarnate of the God of War. The tone of his voice is so firm and harsh it’s enough to make Petr go rigid and tense like he might snap in two.

“We’re leaving now.” Petr looks back at me and grabs my arm.

“Remember what I said,” Virgo calls to me.

I look back at him as Petr ushers me away.

Virgo clenches his jaw when Petr yanks me closer.

We turn the corner and head back into the building, out of Virgo’s sight.

I feel like I just walked back into darkness. Confusion rules my mind, and everything feels wrong, including leaving this hotel with this man.

I feel worse when we get into his car and drive away.

Chapter Four

Olivia

By the time we reach Petr's two-story apartment by the beach, I feel like my organs have turned inside out.

We drove here in silence, but I suspected that might have been more for his driver's benefit than because we had nothing to say.

All the way through that arduous drive, I kept thinking I shouldn't do this. But the closer we got to the apartment, the more my chances of getting out of this situation slipped away.

The apartment is set in a beautiful complex that's secluded from everything. As appealing as that is, it means no one can hear you scream if you're pouring out your soul for help.

I sense the shift in the air the moment we step out of the car and Petr places his hand to the small of my back to continue leading me to Hell.

This was a terrible idea. All of it. And I don't know how I'm going to spend the rest of the night with this man.

I was already petrified before, but now I feel worse.

I also have the added worry of Virgo and everything he said to me. And that kiss.

That kiss and his claim to be everything to me.

But what does that matter now? I'm about to enter another dark place in the rabbit hole.

When we walk inside the apartment, a tall, bulky man meets us.

“Boss,” he says with a dip of his head to Petr.

I guess he must be a guard. He spares me a glance, but that’s all.

“I’ll be busy for the rest of the night,” Petr tells him, and he nods.

My stomach churns when I think back to his promises from earlier on how he planned to fuck me.

I feel sick to my core and as trapped as an animal caught in a snare.

“We’re going upstairs.” Petr addresses me in a cool voice that sounds suspiciously too calm.

“Okay.” I press my lips together and my hands into my thighs.

I walk with the sureness of a confident woman as he ushers me up the stairs, but I’m freaking out so much my breath is coming out in short, silent pants.

When we walk inside the bedroom, automatic lights turn on, lighting up a king-sized bed in the center of the room and white presidential-suite-looking furniture.

As I stare at the bed and really think about what I’m doing here, I realize I can’t do this.

If I go through with this, it will mean giving up. *Failing.*

I may be many things, but I’m not weak.

There must be another way to fix my problems. And I don’t mean through Virgo.

I stayed hidden all these years, and even when I thought I might be in danger, I’ve never had an encounter until now.

The sordid events that have happened in my life have taught me that the only person I can rely on is myself. It must *never* be anyone else but me.

I built what could be classed as a home here in Monte Carlo, but the solution to this is to run again. But I need to get out of here first.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost, my dear.” Petr chortles behinds me, running a cold finger across the back of my neck.

He walks around to face me, and I take a step back.

“I changed my mind. I don’t want to go through with this. I’m sorry. I’m sure Madame Noir can refund any money you might have spent for tonight.” I speak with the sureness of a confident woman, but inside I’m freaking out.

Petr simple stares back at me with a blank expression, and I don’t like how unreadable he is. It’s unnerving and unsettling.

“You think that’s how things work?” His tone is low, like before. “Did you decide to change your mind because of your big, bad Russian boyfriend?”

“He’s not my boyfriend.”

“I saw you kissing him. There is no way in fuck you just met him tonight. I know Virgo Antonov. A man like him can have any woman he wants. He would only be interested in you if he decided to claim you. Even if you didn’t know you’d been claimed.”

I take note of his words and the possessive meaning, but my sprit repels them. I don’t want to be claimed or belong to anyone.

I might not trust Virgo or remember him, but he was right when he said I belong to no one but myself.

“Regardless of that, I need to go now.”

“That’s not going to happen, *Alice*.”

My breath hitches. “You can’t keep me here. I’m leaving.”

I’ve barely finished the sentence before he raises his hand and slaps me right across my cheek. The impact is so hard, it sends me straight to the ground. I scream, realizing the danger I’m in.

Petr marches up to me and grabs me by my hair.

“I’m having you tonight, whether you want me or not.” His rough voice comes out like the growl of a feral beast, and I swear the glass in the windows rattles with the same fear I feel.

My entire body trembles with it, shaking from the inside out.

“Please let me go,” I beg, grabbing at his hands to try to get them out of my hair, but he only latches on tighter.

“No, whore, you’re not going anywhere.” He swats my hands away, hurting my fingers. “The only place you’re going is my bed. Take your fucking clothes off. Now!”

Oh my God. He’s going to rape me. He’s going to rape me.

The horrific thought pulls tears out my eyes like water flowing from a busted pipe.

“No, please.” I try again, but I shouldn’t have.

Petr answers by pulling his gun from his back pocket and striking me with it in the side of my head. A blast of pain

explodes through my body, and I scream out so loud it feels like I've used up all my voice forever.

Petr hovers over me like a dark cloud of smoke, my screams of horror lost on him and the four walls surrounding us. I'm sure they're lost on the guard downstairs, too.

Terror steals my ability to speak, so my voice gets lost in the trepidation clogging my throat.

"Take your clothes off, bitch. Don't let me tell you again, or I'll kill you."

Petr releases my hair but keeps the gun trained on me.

Shaking, I stand and start taking off my clothes. As I'm not exactly wearing much, I'm naked within seconds.

"Now get on the bed, on your hands and knees," he growls.

I move, uncaring that his disgusting eyes are all over me, and I do as I'm told.

I get on the bed and look away when he undoes the buttons on his shirt. I don't want to see him taking his clothes off.

He's about to get on the bed when his phone rings.

I expect him to ignore the call, but he doesn't.

He takes it.

I chance looking back at him, noticing the deep frown creasing his already wrinkled face, then I watch him pull his pants back on.

"Where is she?" he asks the person he's speaking to, cradling the phone between his neck and shoulder. "I'm on my way. Make sure that wife of mine stays put."

He has a wife, and look at me here.

Petr hangs up and grabs his shirt, then he looks at me with disgust.

“Stay in the bed. I’ll be right back. If you try to leave or do something stupid like contact your little boyfriend, my guards will kill you.”

I don’t question the warning. I know he’s serious.

Petr marches out of the room and locks the door with a key, locking me in here.

Fear holds me in place for several minutes. I keep expecting him to come back, but he doesn’t.

It’s only after a few more minutes that I lower my body to the sheet and sink into the pillow, still too scared to do anything more.

I can’t even think of trying to escape with the guard downstairs.

Tears flow down my cheeks, staining the pillowcases and turning the fabric cold against my skin.

How could I have gotten myself in such a mess?

God... will Petr let me go when he’s done with me?

Or will he kill me.

I don’t think he’ll want to take the risk of word getting out that he held me at gun point.

After everything I’ve been through, I might die here.

Raped and murdered, then forgotten.

Terror continues pulsing through my mind, ravaging my body. I close my eyes to try and control it, hoping that the darkness I live in will keep me from going insane.

But it doesn't work.

Nothing works.

Still, I keep my eyes closed, and wait, and wait, and wait.

I wait, and I don't know how in the world I manage to slip into a deep sleep. And right into that dream I always have.

Dream. Nightmare. They feel like one and the same to me when my mind throws me into this dreary wilderness of desolation.

Like *Alice in Wonderland*, I fall down into that deep, dark hole I've grown accustomed to, and I have to feel my way though. I can't see anything ahead of me, but my fingers come in contact with a hard surface that feels like dirt in some places and concrete in others.

I'm so lost, and I have no idea where to go but to keep moving forwards. Tears are streaming down my cheeks and doom has filled my soul.

Suddenly, I feel like I can't breathe.

"*Help me,*" I cry out to the nothingness surrounding me.

That's when I see a glimpse of light and hear voices. One main voice in particular soothes my tired soul.

"*Zayka, I got you. Come to me.*"

I follow the voice until a hand reaches out to me. I take the hand, and I'm free.

Then, just like always, the contact pulls me out of the dream.

I open my eyes, and it takes me a moment to remember where I am and what happened to me. The instant I do, everything freezes inside me.

I'm naked in Petr's room. I fell asleep in his bed, and now I've woken up to the real nightmare.

Is he still out?

Or is he back?

The light around me is dimmer than before, suggesting someone must have come in here. There's also a weird smell about the place. It's coppery and heavy.

I'm lying on my side facing the sliding glass windows, so I roll onto my back, but then I quickly realize there's a sticky wetness on my bare arms and legs.

When I look down at my body, I shriek and nearly jump out of my skin when I notice I'm covered in blood.

I bolt up, only to bump into Petr lying naked next to me, but he's drenched in blood from head to toe.

Bullet holes riddle his body, and his eyes are wide open. Cold and lifeless.

I scream, falling off the bed and pulling the sheet with me as I hit the floor.

Just then, the room door flies open, smashing into the wall.

Men with guns rush in, and I scream louder. But I realize when I see their uniforms that they're no ordinary men.

They're the police.

"Hands up, you're under arrest," the tallest one shouts, pointing his gun at me, and it feels like my world just ended.

Chapter Five

Virgo

I look at the clock on the wall as I enter my hotel suite. My heart shrinks when I see it's just gone one in the morning.

Three hours have now passed since I last saw Olivia and watched her walk away with Petr.

Three fucking hours. Now I'm back here with the bitter taste of failure tearing me up from the inside out.

Allowing Olivia to leave with Petr did not come easy to me.

It felt like the worst thing I could have ever done. If I were my normal self, I would have killed Petr for his insolence and taken Olivia away somewhere I could convince her that I'm not the bad guy.

I decided against doing either of those things because it was my recklessness that sealed my fate in this disaster in the first place.

Sure, whatever was happening with her family would have always happened. But it was my decision to kill recklessly that took me out of the picture, so I wasn't there when Olivia and her family needed me most.

That one reckless mistake created this alternate path where my girl doesn't know me. And doesn't trust me.

I saw it in her eyes as she spoke and during the moments when it seemed like parts of her mind were trying to remember me. But there was a mental block that wanted to keep me out.

A guard to protect herself. I understand it, but I blame myself for its presence.

It was only when I kissed her that her body gave over control to me. I hadn't meant to do that. It just happened, and like an idiot, as her soft, tempting body molded to mine and she kissed me back, I almost believed her memories would return. But I found the same distrust in her eyes after we pulled apart.

Tonight felt like a curse. I had Olivia right there in my sight. I talked to her, touched her, kissed her, and I let her go. *Again.*

Watching her walk away with Petr was like a fucked-up déjà vu moment coming back to bite me in the ass. And just like years ago, I had to stand there and watch her leave me.

The only differences between then and now are that tonight, she was with Petr, and years ago, she fled from me after I broke her heart.

I never got to tell her the real reason I hurt her was to protect my sister from my father's unhinged plans.

My one mistake gave my bastard father ammunition to use against me when he got footage of me killing a man who is important to the people in my world. The man who raped my sister.

Instead of siding with me, my father threatened to use the footage against me if I didn't break up with Olivia. All because of the damn feud between our families.

I don't regret killing that asshole; I just wish I'd done things differently.

Like tonight. But I don't know what I could have done differently *tonight* because I've had to play everything by ear.

The only thing I had on my side was the power of persuasion that comes with being part of the Bratva.

Those powers got me the intel from Madame Noir that Olivia had just been hired/bought by Petr. The same powers got me a seat without question at the invite-only high-stakes poker game. But that's as far as my powers went.

I march over to my laptop on the desk and open my tracking software. The setup I have on here is more sophisticated than the one I was using on my phone.

As my men had a head start on me, I got them to follow Petr, but they lost sight of him. I managed to run his license plates through my systems, and I tracked his car to a bar on the other side of the city.

I went there and found the fucking car, but no sign of Petr or Olivia.

My immediate thought was that he must have had a driver who took them to one of the four houses listed in his name. Or they went somewhere else I don't know about.

The worry of the latter sent me back here to up my game and utilize my hacking skills. I have facial recognition software on my laptop and other tracking systems that I hope can help me.

Outside of that, I hope Olivia doesn't follow through with Petr's plans for her. But the fear in my gut tells me she might not have a choice.

Petr might not have the same powers as me, but he's still a man of power who didn't like it one bit that I showed him up.

I connect my facial recognition software to the tracking pixel and hack into the city's surveillance. If a camera picked

them up, I'll know about it. The only problem is that this could take time.

There's a knock on my door.

That will be Dante, my best friend. On my way here, I got a message from him letting me know he'd just arrived in Monte Carlo. I wasn't expecting him to come here, but I shouldn't be surprised. We always have each other's backs. It was a given that he'd be here for me in my time of need. Although there's nothing much he can do right now, his support gives me strength.

I rush to open the door, and there he is, standing on the other side carrying a duffle bag.

People always mistake us for twins because of the similarity in our appearance. We have the same hair color, eye color, height, and build. We're also the same age and both covered in tattoos.

We grew up like brothers and have known each other since our childhood days spent in Russia.

"Hey." He reaches out a hand to shake mine.

I give him a firm handshake and step aside to let him in.

We walk into the living room and sit on the sofas by my laptop.

"I'm glad you could make it," I tell him.

"Sorry I couldn't get here sooner. I just had to take care of some things so business could run without us for a few days."

"I appreciate that."

Dante and I run a couple of very successful night clubs together. But that's not the only business he's referring to. In

the Bratva world, he's the Pakhan of the Zaitsev Brotherhood, while I'm the Sovientrik—second-in-command to my father in the Kuznetsov Brotherhood. Dante is also the leader of the Creed, which is an alliance of twelve crime lords. In the Creed, I'm his second-in-command.

“No worries. So, what's happening?” Dante asks. “Did you see Olivia tonight?”

My last update to him was about yesterday morning at the café.

“I saw her and spoke to her, but she doesn't remember me at all. Neither does she trust me.” I release a haggard sigh. “And I lost her again, Dante.”

Worry washes over his face. “What happened?”

Quickly, I fill him in on what transpired with Petr.

“I thought I would have been able to keep guys on him and track them, but I haven't.” I grit my teeth. “I shouldn't have let her go with him.”

“I understand your worry, given the circumstances and her reasons for being with Petr. But did she look like she was in danger?”

I bite down hard on my back teeth. “No. If she had, there's no way I would have let her go with him.”

“Exactly, so you did the right thing. It sounds like it was best, too, if she didn't trust you. The worst thing you could have done is chase her.”

“I don't want that motherfucker to touch her.” I straighten. “And if he puts his fucking dick anywhere near her, I *will* kill him.”

“Let's just hope that maybe she listened to you.”

I shake my head. “I don’t think she did, so I’m going to keep trying to track them down.”

Dante leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Alright. I’ll help.”

“Thanks.”

My phone rings in my pocket. I pull it out and answer straightaway when I see it’s Billy calling me.

“Hey, have you found them?” I ask.

“Yeah, and it’s not good, Virgo.” I glance nervously at Dante, who is already looking at me with eagerness in his eyes.

“What happened?”

“Petr is dead.”

The news pushes me to my feet. “What?”

“He was murdered in a beach house he hired out for the night. The police came and took Olivia. They think she did it.”

“Did she?” I can’t imagine that, but what if she was in danger and had to?

“There’s no way. Unless she turned into some femme fatale, it’s definitely highly unlikely. Petr’s body was shot up like a piece of meat with a military gun. The police are keeping her in custody because she was the only person they could hold. The report says she was asleep when it happened, but the police don’t believe her.”

Fuck.

I ball my hand into a tight fist and bring it into my leg.

How the fuck could this situation have gotten worse?

Damn me, I shouldn't have let her go.

I shouldn't have let her go.

My instincts were going bat shit crazy. Why the fuck didn't I listen to them?

On seeing my reaction, Dante stands, and as I look at him, a sudden thought pierces my mind.

A thought.

An idea.

A plan.

A possible way to work this new dire situation to my advantage. My ruthless bastard mind takes over, viewing this turn of events as an opening I could use in more ways than one to get what I want.

To get Olivia.

"What do you want me to do, boss?" Billy sighs into the phone, making the line crackle in my ear.

"Leave it to me. I may have a solution." I continue thinking. "Message me all the details from the police reports, and I'll keep you updated."

"Alright."

I hang up and look back at Dante.

"What's going on?" he asks. "It sounded serious."

"It is. But I think I just found a way to get my girl back."

Chapter Six

Olivia

I rest my head against the cold wall of my jail cell and allow more tears to fall.

Curling my legs to my chest, I make myself small on the flat metal seat riveted to the wall and gaze at the full moon against the inky black sky.

The moon is the only thing I can see through the shoe-box-sized, barred window before me.

I'm trapped again.

Not just trapped within the prison of my mind. Now I'm behind bars with so much more to worry about.

Petr was murdered, and the police think I did it.

No matter how much I pleaded my innocence and stated my case that I couldn't possibly kill someone, let alone a man like Petr, they didn't believe me. *Wouldn't* believe me.

They didn't believe a word I said, then fucking Madame Noir sold me out by refusing to speak to the police and back up my reasons for being with Petr. She told them she didn't know me, so to the police, I look like some hooker who murdered Petr to try and steal his money.

I was told he was shot fifty times. From how he was found, the police think I must have done it while we were in bed together.

I tried to explain that I fell asleep when Peter got a call from someone who was telling him about his wife. I also tried

to tell them that there was a guard in the house, but everything I said was to no avail.

I spoke to the police about an hour ago, then they left me in here to my thoughts. I've cried every tear I could possibly cry, and now I feel numb and hollow inside.

I'm in so much damn trouble, and I don't even know what to make of the situation other than someone clearly set me up.

My first thought was that it had to be the guard. The damn guard who I know nothing about. Not a name or anything.

Everything that happened was too convenient. From the way the police showed up while I was still in bed, to the fact that I heard nothing when the incident occurred. As I'm a very light sleeper, I think I must have been drugged while I was asleep. I can't imagine a man being shot fifty times right next to me and me being oblivious to what was going on.

That guard was in the house when Peter left me. If he didn't kill him, then he would've seen what happened.

So far, there are no details of him being there.

Everything has gotten so much worse than it already was. Things were already bad when I went to Petr's house, but that was just the beginning.

I can imagine everything becoming worse and worse when the police start doing their ID checks on me and discover my passport is fake and everything about me is made up. Then I don't know what the fuck I'll do, and that will just push me deeper into Hell.

But realistically, I was already there that first moment when I opened my eyes and didn't know who I was.

At least back then, I was among people who cared for me.

There was an older man called Kevin. He was the person who saved me when my parents were attacked in England. He was part of the team my father commissioned to get our family to safety.

He didn't even know our names. He was told my father purposely left that out for security purposes. It was just a job to him, but Kevin took compassion on me after my parents were killed. He told me that while we were escaping from an attack, our car crashed.

That's how I lost my memory.

Kevin got me to a hospital, where he stayed with me until I woke up. When he realized I was suffering from amnesia, he helped me further by taking me to a convent in Germany where I could be safe to heal.

During my first week there, I took the name Alice after reading *Alice in Wonderland* in the children's library. I was fascinated by the characters.

With the loss of my memory, I felt like Alice and the world was my Wonderland. Everything was new to me. And everything was either a possible danger or threat. Kevin sorted out my passport and ID with the name Alice Fairchild. That's who I've been for the last couple of years.

Before Kevin and I parted ways, he warned me about the dangers of meeting anyone from home and explained his reasonings based on the attack that killed my parents. He said only someone who knew my father would have known about the house in England. And that we'd be there.

I never saw Kevin again, and he hasn't been in touch. It was understandable because I wasn't his responsibility, and he couldn't help me any more than he already did.

I stayed at the convent for several months until I was asked to leave. They were worried about the possible danger I posed to them and the vulnerable people who relied on them.

I never argued or begged to stay because it got to a stage where they started treating me badly and I began to distrust them. I never doubted the possibility that they could hand me over to my enemies if the need arose to protect themselves.

Left on my own, I bounced from country to country, watching my back continuously. I didn't stay anywhere for too long, and I purposely didn't meet people, because I didn't trust anyone. It wasn't until I got to Monte Carlo that I felt I'd been running for long enough.

I prayed things would be okay, and they kind of were for a while. I even made friends with some of the girls at the café.

But now that life has once again blown up in my face, I feel like I should have known something would happen.

I really don't know what I'm going to do.

I wipe the flow of tears with the heel of my hand and dry my hands on the baggy tunic I was given when I got here.

The police took me in naked with Petr's blood all over me and disgraced me further by marching me into the station just like that for everyone to see.

Now I'm looking at the very real possibility of being imprisoned for murder, and I haven't got a leg to stand on, and no one to turn to.

Footsteps sound on the floor outside the cell.

I look toward the metal rails locking me in, and my body goes as hard as steel when my gaze lands on Virgo walking beside the officer who put me in here.

My heart revs, beating way too fast, so fast it affects my breathing, making my lungs burn.

He's here.

What does this mean?

How did he find out where I was?

The last thing he said to me before I landed myself in more shit was that he'd take care of whatever trouble I was in, but now I'm in so much more trouble.

"Visitor for you," the guard announces in a sarcastic tone, as if I should take every opportunity to see anyone who wants to see me before I'm locked away somewhere I'll never see the light of day again.

He slides the bar open, and Virgo walks in, tall and proud, and foreboding, giving me God of War vibes again.

I straighten and lower my legs so my bare feet are flat against the cold floor, but I'm so drained from this haggard experience I grip on to the edge of the seat.

The guard closes the door, leaving me enclosed with Virgo.

When he looks at me, memories of that kiss we shared reignite the embers still burning my lips.

With a kiss like that, I could imagine where it would lead if we'd been alone in a room somewhere.

It's scary when I think that I might have allowed him to take me without a second thought.

Maybe I really have gone crazy, or I'm more fucked up than I realized.

Didn't I sign a contract to be an escort only days ago?

Virgo steps closer, and I catch the alluring scent of his musky aftershave and his power. That power has a life of its own and fills the space between us and around us with invisible fingers reaching out to every corner and crevice of the room.

He leans against the wall opposite me, and I gaze back at his handsome face with his dark beauty that reminds me so much of a twisted story-book prince.

I keep my gaze fixed on him, watching and assessing him, waiting for him to speak. Because I don't know what to say.

“Did you kill Petr?” he asks, his voice as cold as the cell.

“No.”

“Did he hurt you?” He glances at my face and seems to take in the bruise that formed after Petr hit me.

“Yes.” I blink back tears.

Virgo clenches his jaw, and the fury I witnessed at the club returns. “Did he do anything else to you?”

I shake my head slowly. “He was going to rape me, but someone called him to tell him about his wife.” My voice turns croaky with emotion. “He left. I fell asleep, and when I woke up, he was next to me. Dead. The two of us were covered in blood. The police think I did it. I didn't.”

“The girl I used to know hates guns.” He speaks in a listless voice, as if lulling me into a dream. “She wouldn't even kill a fly, let alone a person in such a violent way. But since you told me I must be mistaken, I guess I don't really know *you*.”

Menace lights up his eyes, and I catch a glimpse of his power. It's dark and demanding. As powerful as night chasing

away daylight and owning the moon and the stars in the sky.

I've only crossed paths with one Bratva boss, and that was just before he killed a man for stealing from him. The man didn't even get to say two words to explain himself before a bullet was wedged between his eyes and blood splattered everywhere.

That happened when I was with Flavio. We went to this underground club to meet up with the bastards I now owe money.

As I look at Virgo, I detect the same ruthlessness. There's no wonder if he would kill exactly like that, or act like the Hell god I've christened him to be.

"I told you not to go with Petr." Virgo inclines his head and gives me the I-told-you-so look to match his words.

"Why are you here?" I lift my chin higher, as if I still have control of this situation. I know I don't, but I want to know his angle.

"That's a good question, given the fact I don't know you. I shouldn't be here, should I? Unless you are indeed my Olivia, *Alice*." He searches my eyes, and something inside me slips. "Are you?"

"Tell me why you're here." My voice shakes, but I keep my breathing steady, hoping to regain control of my body.

"I'm here to make you an offer."

"An offer?" I keep my eyes locked with his. "What kind of offer could you give me?"

"One you'd be foolish to refuse."

"Why is that?"

“Because you are the *only* suspect in Petr’s murder. There was no one in the house but you when the police arrived. You were covered in his blood. Your prints were in his bed. He was all over you. The police are booking you in for murder. You don’t have a hope in hell of fighting this even with a good lawyer.” He almost sounds as if he’s taking pleasure in this. “From the negligible state of your bank account, I don’t think you could afford one.”

I already feared everything he’s laying out before me, but the confirmation of truth ignites my nerves with unquenchable terror.

Virgo can see it written all over my face as clearly as if I’d tattooed it into my skin. He doesn’t need whatever method he’s using to get intel on me to find out how bad my bank account is or where I’ll be, and when.

“I didn’t kill Petr,” I rasp out.

“I believe you.” He nods. “But your testimony is as good as shit because you’re the prime suspect.”

“If I’m a prime suspect, how the hell can *you* help me? What hope do I have?”

“Sweetheart, you’ll come to know that I can do many things and people like the police wouldn’t dare challenge me. If I believe you didn’t kill Petr, *they’ll* believe you. If I say you didn’t kill him, then you didn’t kill him, whether you did or not. I can make this little problem of yours disappear as quickly as smoke after a fire.” His don’t-fuck-with-me attitude ripples off him in powerful waves, mingling with the musky scent of his cologne. “I can do all of that for you, but you have to accept my offer.”

God, the last thing I wanted was to be more trapped than I am.

But how could I be more trapped than being imprisoned from murder?

That would be for *life*.

If I don't accept whatever he's offering me, I'm looking at spending the rest of my living days behind bars knowing I will die there.

That is what my future looks like after the mistakes that led me here.

"What is your offer?" I ask.

"You get to hear it if you drop this Alice bullshit. I know you're Olivia."

I look away, then my gaze drops to the floor.

"I'm not going to hurt you. I was never the bad guy, so you have nothing to fear from me, or the people at home who want you back."

I return my gaze to him, my entire body tense with a cacophony of emotions. Fear, terror, sadness, emptiness.

"It's people at home who wanted me dead in the first place." I speak the words that have lived in my head for so long they've hardly become distinguishable from my thoughts. "It was someone from *home* who was responsible for the attack that killed my parents."

I just confirmed I'm *Olivia*—a name unfamiliar to me—but Virgo's brows snap together and his face fills with rage on hearing my accusations.

"What do you remember?" he demands.

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing at all. But that was the warning I was given by the man who saved me. He was part of the team my father put together to help us, but he didn’t know who we were. Only that my parents were running from danger, and the person they were running from knew them.” I rest my back against the wall again. “According to what happened during the attack that killed my parents, he knew it had to be an inside job, so he told me to run from anyone who recognized me from home.”

Virgo seems to contemplate this, but his expression becomes infused with the same kind of anger you’d see on a psychotic murderer. It’s strange witnessing such emotions on someone you don’t know. Or don’t remember.

“Where is this guy now?”

“I don’t know. He stuck around for a few weeks after I woke up and paid for my medical care.”

“He paid?”

“Yes. I figured my father would have paid him a lot, but he took care of me because I reminded him of his daughter, who’d died years before. I guess that was why he took compassion on me.” Regardless to who I reminded Kevin of, I know I was lucky to have him. He didn’t have to do any of what he did for me because he didn’t know me.

Swallowing hard, I breathe steadily through my burning lungs, deciding to focus on what’s important now. “What’s your offer, Virgo Antonov?”

He returns a hard stare to me. “Your freedom from this mess, along with the repayment of any debts you owe. You get that if you come back to New York with me. And be my wife.”

His words slam into my chest as forcefully as if he'd hit me with a sledgehammer. I gasp then stare back at him, blinking at first, then not as my brain struggles to process his request.

“What?”

“You heard me. Your freedom and the repayment of your debts in exchange for becoming my wife.”

“You want to marry *me*?” My voice comes out rusty, as if I haven't drunk water in centuries.

“Yes.”

“Why would you want to marry me?” I lean forward, my hands coming free of the grip on the seat. “What's in it for you?”

“We will discuss that later, but let's just say our union will be very profitable for both of us. Especially you. You're in no position to make any other demands. Are you?”

“You know I'm not.”

“Then the only answer I want from you is yes.”

“But it's marriage.”

“Yes, it's marriage.”

“I... I don't know you.”

The intense blue of his eyes darkens, reminding me of the evening sky before a storm. Watching that power rippling around him like electricity hits me with a new kind of fear.

“You don't know me now, but you did.” The smile he gives me is wicked and dominating. “Sweetheart, I'm the same guy who bled the cherry from between your legs. The same guy who knows your body inside out, and everything about

you. What you like. What you don't like. I *know* you in every sense of the word.”

My breath catches in my throat, tangling with the roiling heat flowing from him to me. Then my mouth goes dry as I think of everything he's saying to me, and all I can do is stare back at him.

“Come back to New York with me, Olivia, and I can make all your problems disappear.”

At the mention of New York again, my mind is pulled away from the raw arousal coursing through it, and I think of the main problem I'll have if I go *home*.

“I can't go back to New York.” I shake my head. “I can't do it. The moment people know I'm back, they'll try to kill me.”

“You are under my protection now.”

“How can you protect me if you don't know who to protect me from? They could have been with you all this time, and you wouldn't have known.”

“Let me worry about that. I will find the person responsible and annihilate them. New York is your home, and that is where we are going. You can't stay here or run forever. There is nothing left for you here but death, and what kind of future can you have when you're always watching your back?”

I hate to admit it, but he's right.

“I need your answer now.” He sets his shoulders back. The gesture makes him appear taller. “Do you accept my offer or not?”

I swiftly realize there's nothing to think about. I am in a situation where I'm more than cornered and death is the only

way out.

I don't want to die.

“Yes.” My voice sounds like that of a shy child who hasn't spoken in public before.

The smile of a victor inches across Virgo's face. Despite the gravity of my situation, that smile makes me feel like I've been caught in a different sort of trap.

Like he owns me now.

But he does...

I just agreed to become his wife.

Chapter Seven

Virgo

Dante lowers his body to sit across from me.

We're in my study at my home in New York.

We arrived over an hour ago with Olivia. Eden, my caretaker, is showing her around the property while we wait for Olivia's uncle to arrive.

I could have shown her around myself, but I felt she needed a break from me.

Every time I look at her, she looks like she wants to run away.

As much as I'd love to shake the memories of us back into her mind, I know I have to give her time.

Especially with our upcoming marriage.

The idea must seem like a nightmare to her, but to me it's the plan of all plans. And perfect timing to meet my father's demands.

Although he's not going to like my chosen bride one bit.

Right now, my father is the least of my worries because I need to find out who was responsible for killing Olivia's parents. As long as that person lives and breathes among us, they'll be a threat to her, and she'll never feel comfortable being back in New York.

I sit in the armchair opposite Dante and grab a Cohiba from the humidor on the coffee table.

“Are you sure you can trust Seamus?” Dante asks, grabbing a cigar, too.

I nod and light up our cigars. “As far as people go, he’s possibly the only person we can trust. Seamus is a good uncle to Olivia. He held on to the belief that he could find her and her parents nearly as much as I did.” So far, he’s the only person outside of us and my guards who know that I found Olivia, that she has amnesia, and that her parents are dead.

“People can make things look however they want. You know I’ve lived through that type of shit well enough to write the manual about it.”

Dante is talking about what happened to him with his uncle, Igor Levitsky, the former leader of the Creed and his Pakhan. Igor double-crossed him in the worst ways imaginable, all to gain power.

“This is not the same thing. It’s physically impossible for Seamus to have had anything to do with this because he was in a medically-induced coma at the time.”

The man was going through cancer treatment for a brain tumor. He’d been in the hospital for months before the attack. His wife, who has since died, cared for him. If she were alive, I’d excuse her, too. Neither of them had anything to gain from killing Olivia’s parents.

“We still need to be careful.” Dante remains uneasy, but his face softens. “This situation is going to require tact. Especially since we have to bear in mind that we may only be able to catch whoever is responsible once they know Olivia is back.”

“I know.” That’s the part that worries me. I feel like I’ve brought her back into the arms of danger, and like I’m using

her as bait to smoke out her enemies.

My only solace is knowing she has something she never had before. *Me*.

“I hope we can get to the bottom of this as quickly as we can.” I press my lips together in complete displeasure. Everything goes back to what I always suspected.

Like most people, I knew what happened to Olivia and her family had to be an inside job. My problem is that I could never find hard dirt on anybody. As I’m the guy who claims to be able to find anything, that can only mean the evidence I need is not on paper.

There was also someone else I suspected even more than those who are close to Olivia’s family—my father.

He was the only person who hated the O’Ridians enough to want them dead.

But I investigated him enough to be satisfied at the time that it wasn’t him. That didn’t mean I ruled him out completely.

“What about this marriage thing?” Dante searches my eyes.

I know I shocked him entirely with that bomb. He’s happily married, so I know he’s not going to talk me out of it. Definitely not when he knows how I feel about Olivia. But the fact that we’re not the people we used to be is cause for concern in anyone.

“You really pulled an ace on me with that,” he adds. “Where did that come from? And what about your father?”

I rest my head against the soft back of the chair. “Last month, my father finally announced he was moving back to

Russia.” He’ll be gone by Christmas. The plan has been in the works for a while to take care of the branch of company over there and others in Europe. My family’s business is oil mining. My father plans to own every ounce of oil on the planet if he can get his hands on it. He thinks he’ll have more power from his contacts in Russia. “On his departure, he wants me to take over the company here. But to do so, he demanded I get married first.”

Dante leans forward. “Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

I shake my head. “I didn’t want to talk about it.” The moment I say that, understanding forms in his eyes.

He’ll know exactly why such a topic would have been difficult for me to discuss when I spent every waking hour looking for Olivia. He’ll also understand that I wouldn’t have wanted to burden him with my problems when he would have been away living the life he’s always wanted with his wife, Serenity. They’ve only been married for a few months, and I can see it’s the start of something different for him.

My shit with my father is practically never-ending.

That man is the only bastard who knows how to wield control over me. I could easily defy him, but then I’d never get what I want—*the company*. My share of the empire. My birthright.

“He wants me to marry some hotel heiress, but my plans to marry Olivia will change his mind.”

“*How?* Your father hates the O’Ridians.”

“Olivia’s father left her the diamond company.”

His mouth drops. “You’re kidding me.”

“No. It’s hers once she’s married.”

“What about Cillian?”

Cillian is Olivia’s brother. Before the feud, which feels like a hundred years ago, he, Dante, and I were inseparable.

“He got their bank and the brewery in Ireland.”

“Jesus.”

The bank Cillian now owns is one of the private banks used by the criminal underworld. It’s worth even more than the diamond company. The brewery is a bonus and a fortune on its own.

The diamond company was what started the feud. My father helped set the business up, but Callahan O’Ridian, Olivia’s father, put all the money in. When my father insisted on a fifty-percent share—the bastard he is—it created havoc. The whole thing went to court, and it was decided that the company solely belonged to the O’Ridians because of the collateral they put into it. After that, my father essentially sought to destroy them.

“If I marry Olivia, I get that share of the diamond company. To my father, that company is like the girl who got away.”

Dante frowns. “Virgo, you know that’s not going to go down well with the O’Ridians.”

“We’ll see what happens when Seamus gets here and we talk about it. He’s Olivia’s executor. Now that she’s alive, he has to release his responsibilities to her and fulfil the rest of the terms of her father’s will.”

“You really thought this through, didn’t you?”

“Yes.” On the surface I know my plans look like I’m trying to screw with the O’Ridians, but I’m not. “But I’m doing what I have to do to protect what’s mine.” By that, he knows I’m talking about the girl.

“Virgo…” His voice trails off, and a pensive look enters his eyes. “I think you might have to accept this might not work out the way you want. I mean, sure, marry her. But she can’t remember you.”

“That doesn’t mean that she won’t.” Or that she can’t be mine again.

A knock sounds at the door. I guess that to be Seamus.

“Come in,” I call out.

The door opens, and Seamus walks in looking stronger than I’ve seen him in years. It’s because of the news of finding Olivia.

He’s tall and lean with a bald head and pale gray eyes that should seem cold but have the warm glow of a loving father.

He’s in his late sixties. Olivia’s father was younger than him by twelve years and the kind of man who lusted for power like everyone else in the Creed. Seamus is the opposite of him. He’s the least power-hungry man I know.

Callahan held the third seat of control in the Creed. When he went missing and Cillian decided he wanted to go back to Ireland, Seamus had to be begged to take the position, or their entire family would have been excommunicado.

“Hullo,” Seamus greets us in a rich Irish accent, bowing his head to both of us. I stand and shake his outstretched hand; so does Dante.

“I’m glad you could come on such short notice.” I take in the eagerness in his eyes.

“Of course. Where is she, Virgo?”

“She’s just being shown around my house. I wanted to talk to you before you met her.”

“Okay.” He sits, and we do, too. “As you can imagine, I’m eager to see her and take her home.”

I sit straighter and level him a stare. “Actually, she’s going to be staying here with me.”

“What? Why? She’s my niece. In her condition, she needs to be with family.”

“I agree, but that’s the part we need to discuss.”

I’m the only person in my family he speaks to. I’ve spoken to Cillian a few times in the past when he knew I was searching for Olivia, but we were never like we used to be. My father did some despicable things to their family, and Cillian thought I was the same as him.

He also didn’t like the fact that I was seeing his sister behind his back and warned me away from her on several occasions.

My marriage proposal is literally about to start a mafia war between families, and they can challenge me if they want to, but they won’t win.

I start by telling Seamus about what happened in Monte Carlo and verge onto my plans of marriage to Olivia. I last approximately one minute before he’s shaking his head vigorously like one of those dashboard dollies.

“You can’t do this, Virgo. It is wrong. How can you think marrying Olivia is okay when she can’t remember you?” He looks from me to Dante. “And you support this as the leader of the Creed?”

“This is out of my hands and not a matter for the Creed to cast judgment on,” Dante replies, although I can see the whole thing is making him uncomfortable.

“Olivia is in a vulnerable state.”

“Be that as it may, she signed a contract with me.” My words shut him right down, but disappointment shadows his eyes.

“I have admired you for years and viewed you differently from your father. Please do not tell me you used my niece’s incapacitated state to take her inheritance from her.”

I shake my head. “The only interest I have in her inheritance is that it allows me to marry her without the interference of my father. It was always my intention to marry her.” No one has ever heard me speak like this. Not even Dante.

I know what I lost by not having Olivia in my life, and I’m determined to get it back.

“I see. I still don’t approve. It’s obvious you care for her, but this is too much.”

“Forgive my harshness, but this meeting is not to ask for your approval.” I speak in a stern voice that tells him not to fuck with me. “Due to my respect for you, I’m giving you the courtesy of knowing we’re getting married.”

Seamus gives me a firm look, but he knows he’s got nothing to come back with. “There’s nothing I can do to convince you to do otherwise?”

“No. But what we need to talk about is finding out the truth of what happened. There’s a traitor among us.”

His eyes widen then narrow to slants. “A traitor?”

“Yes. Olivia thinks what happened was an inside job.”

“Which means I’m employing all the resources of the Creed to investigate,” Dante adds.

“I appreciate that.” Seamus sighs. “How are we going to go about this?”

“By investigating everyone. And I mean absolutely everyone. For the next few days, we’ll need you to be careful with whom you tell she’s back. Be very selective.”

“I will definitely do that. Will she be safe here?”

“Safer than anywhere else on this earth.”

“And what of this wedding? When will it take place?”

“Next week, if I can get all the paperwork together.”

Once again, his eyes snap wide, and Dante casts a glance at me.

“Next week? That’s just days away. It’s rather soon, don’t you think?”

“The sooner, the better.” Because of my father. But I don’t say that. Dante will know the reason without me having to say it. If Seamus knew, he would argue even more against it. Like everyone else, he doesn’t want problems with my father. I don’t sense there being one after I tell my father about the diamond company, but I always have to be one step ahead of the man just to cover myself. I will never give him the chance to screw with me again.

“Have you contacted Cillian?” Seamus asks, keeping his tone even. I can see he wants to say more about the wedding, but he’s choosing his battles wisely.

“I have, but he’s gone on one of his trips.” Cillian is known for disappearing for months on end without anyone being able to contact him. “I left a message with his assistant to get in touch with me straightaway.”

“Okay. Well, I guess we’ll have to see what happens next.”

“Indeed.” I think everything that does happen next will show the missing pieces of the puzzle.

And maybe it will help Olivia gain her memories back.

I got her back, but I miss the girl I used to know.

She tamed the soulless beast inside me that’s been running wild for the last few years.

Now I need to unleash that beast to protect her.

I will find out who is responsible for what happened to her and her parents.

When I do, not even God will be able to help them.

No one will.

Chapter Eight

Olivia

I'm in the living room of Virgo's manor home sitting with my uncle, Seamus.

We're opposite each other on the wicker chairs near the potted plants. He's been filling me in on my life and telling me about my family and friends by regaling me with memories and stories.

We've spent the last four hours together. Eden prepared a nice lunch for us after she finished giving me the tour of the property, then we came in here to talk privately.

I got the whole family history from Ireland to New York.

He told me about my older brother, Cillian, who lives in Ireland and takes care of the family bank and brewery. Then we got into a deep conversation about my parents where he dropped the bomb that my father was one of the heads of the main clans in the Irish Mafia and our family are worth billions.

Virgo alluded to our net worth when we spoke on the flight back, but I could never conceive he meant that much money.

Or the whole mafia thing that's really unnerved me.

Apparently, my father provided a wonderful life for all of us here in New York. The place of my birth. Seamus explained that's why I don't have an Irish accent like him. He also told me Cillian had a slight accent that became stronger in recent years because he's spent so much time in Ireland.

I've been listening to him and taking in the warmth in his presence and the fondness in which he speaks, but I can't help

the feeling of disconnection wrapping around my soul.

Every time he tells me some memory about myself, I feel like he's talking about somebody else.

I know he's probably doing it with the hope of sparking my memories, but he can also see nothing's happening.

I wish it would, though, but one thing my doctors warn me about was that the damage in my brain could mean I'd never remember anything ever again.

Or my mind is protecting me from remembering because of the traumatic experience I went through.

"There's still a lot more to tell you." Seamus smiles. "But I don't want to overwhelm you with more information. I know I've already given you a lot to digest."

"Yes, we've talked about a lot," I agree. "It's been nice talking to you, though."

Seamus seems nice, too, and like somebody I could trust, but the panic in my soul makes me want to be wary of everyone no matter how genuine they seem.

Now that I'm back in New York, instinct makes me want to keep watching my back because I'm worried something might happen.

"I'd like for you to come to my house whenever you're ready. There are a lot of photo albums there. Your brother didn't want to sell the family home, so he's rented it out. But I kept all of your things and your parents' stuff, too. Most of it is in storage, but I kept the special things at my house."

"Thank you. That means a lot." I don't have to remember my life here to know that's a kind gesture.

“You are more than welcome. I’m so sorry about your parents, and sorry for what happened to you.”

As he says that, I try to assess if he’s really sorry or if his compassion is fake, but I can’t find either.

“It was horrible, but I don’t know what’s worse. Remembering or not.”

“Both. The protective side of me wants to spare you the pain, but I know we can only keep you safe if you remember what happened.”

“I’ve been trying. But there’s a wall in my head, and I can’t see over it.”

Sadness fills his eyes, and he reaches out his hand to take mine. “No matter what happens, make sure you do what’s best for you. Don’t do too much and don’t get upset if nothing comes to you. The important thing is you’re home now.”

I search his eyes, then glance briefly at the door as if I’m looking for someone. “But am I safe?”

Seamus catches my meaning, silently understanding I could only be looking for Virgo.

“You can trust me. And as far as I know, Virgo hasn’t given me any reason to distrust him, but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t follow your gut.”

I appreciate his honesty. It enables me to drop my guard a little. “It’s hard to know for certain what part of my fears is my gut and what part is paranoia.”

“Listen to all of it and make the decision based on what feels right to you.” Seamus nods with conviction, as if backing up his words of wisdom. “Is there anything pressing you want to talk about before I go?”

There are million pressing things, but I suppose there is one main worry.

“The wedding,” I confess, garnering a deep look of sympathy from him. “I don’t know when it’s going to be, but it will be soon. I’ve gone from not knowing where I came from to... being someone’s fiancée.”

“Your worries are completely understandable.”

“Did... Virgo tell you how the idea of this wedding came to be?” I assumed Seamus must know. He seems too cool about the wedding not to know the facts behind it.

He nods, studying the bruises I still have from Petr’s gun and fist. “Virgo told me what I needed to know.”

Embarrassment grips me when I think of the trouble I landed myself in. “Then you know that I owe him.”

“Yes, I understand that, too.” He nods again.

Sure enough, Virgo kept his word. I practically walked out of my jail cell moments after I struck the deal with him. Within the hour, he paid all my debts, and by midday the following day, I was boarding his private jet and heading back to New York. Me and my one suitcase containing the few things I hold special. As nothing else in my dinky apartment was worth taking, I left it all behind.

“The biggest thing about this wedding that worries me is Virgo’s family. Has he spoken to you about them?” There’s a caution in his voice that piques my senses.

“Yes. I’m aware of the situation with them.” And that we apparently saw each other in secret when we were together.

Virgo told me everything about the feud between his family and mine. He told me it began with the diamond

mining company my father left me. With that in mind, he said our marriage would end the feud, but he never really spoke about the actual benefit marrying me would bring him. I don't think it's down to his desire to end the feud or be associated with the billions in assets that will be released to me once we're married. My understanding is that the Antonovs are worth even more than my family's net worth and Virgo has his own empire outside his family's oil company.

He told me about the nightclubs he owns with his friend, Dante. The guy who traveled back with us from Monte Carlo—another person I know and can't remember.

It's only left for me to think that the benefit in this marriage for him is me.

But like everything else, that's a difficult concept for me to wrap my head around.

Seamus drags in a haggard breath. "It's a tricky situation."

"It sounds that way. The last thing I want to do is marry into a family that hates me. Did you know I was seeing Virgo before I went missing?"

He nods slowly. "You told me. I was the only person who knew for a long, long time."

A sense of warmth settles over me at the knowledge that I would trust him in such a way. "How long was long?"

"You were sixteen."

My mouth drops open. "That's almost over ten years ago." Seamus confirmed my date of birth and age, and I'm actually almost twenty-six. My real birthday is two months from now. Virgo is five years older than me, so that means we got together when he was twenty-one.

Was that when I lost my virginity to him? Or did we wait until I was legal?

Given his ruthless nature, I doubt the latter. But what was I like?

“I suspect Amelia would have known before me. She’s your best friend, so I assume she would have known all your secrets well before anyone else.” Seamus smiles.

“I guess so.”

Amelia is the other person Seamus told me about. My best friend. A lifelong friend who was as close to me as a sister. Not remembering people who had so much significance in my life feels odd.

I forgot them as if they never existed.

Seamus taps my hands again and gives it a gentle squeeze when he notices the shift in my mood.

“Take it easy, child. I think that’s enough for today.” Warmth fills his pale eyes. “Take it easy and steady. You’ve been through a lot over the past few days and last few years. We mustn’t overload your mind with too much.”

I nod, agreeing.

He sighs and releases my hand. “I’m going to leave now and give you some rest, but I want you to call me if you need me.”

“I will, and thank you. Thank you for coming by.”

He stands. “Always, my love. I assume your brother will be here as soon as he hears you’re back. Perhaps we could do something as a family then.” A hope-filled smile crinkles his eyes.

I nod, but the idea of meeting another family member makes me even more unsettled, but I still smile back and say, “That would be nice.”

“We’ll organize something the moment he returns. See you in a few days.”

“Alright.”

He lowers his head to plant a kiss on my forehead, then leaves.

I stare at the large wooden double doors long after he’s gone and think about him, and all the things we spoke about.

Chances are Seamus truly is the endearing uncle who’s loved and cared for me since forever. He seemed exactly like that, but my mind drifts to that sphere of fear it has nestled in, and I wonder again if he could be my enemy.

Seamus explained that he was in the hospital at the time of the attack. He’d had various medical procedures going on and was basically out of the picture.

But I don’t know him enough to use that alibi as something that would discount him from wanting my parents and me dead.

He’s my father’s brother. He would certainly make a good Judas.

So would Cillian. Virgo said he was in Ireland, but people can do anything from anywhere in the world.

Who would know more about everything to do with my parents’ plans and whereabouts than them?

I wish I didn’t have these feelings and suspicions, but I’m completely out of my element. Being back in New York also

means I put my trust in someone else besides myself. That places me in a situation I never wanted to be in.

The last time I did that was with Flavio, and he screwed me over.

But that was different to this. Flavio was just an asshole who preyed on my weakness. He didn't know about my past.

Coming back here to this alien home is me facing my demons I'm not ready to face. The whole idea makes me feel volatile and as unstable as thin ice.

Then there's the wedding.

I'm an Irish mafia princess who's about to marry a Bratva boss?

Mafia. During the time I've been away, I've stayed away from anything to do with the mafia. It means danger, all of it, so how can I really be safe here?

I bring a hand to my head as a rush of dizziness hits me.

Slowly, I stand, deciding I might need some fresh air before I pass out.

Seamus was right. I need to take things easy and steady. If I don't, my mind will explode.

I make my way into the adjacent room, which is hall filled with beautiful paintings on the walls. Most of the house is like this, but this room appears to be set up to display nothing but art.

Expensive art that probably costs more than a fortune.

I make my way through the hall, glancing at each piece. I saw them earlier when Eden, Virgo's custodian, showed me

around, but they're all the kind of masterpieces that you're tempted to stare at forever.

All things aside, the house is impressive. It's a manor in the suburbs with eight bedrooms, two living rooms, extensive grounds with a pool, and an 18th century French Provençal style that would be more suited to an older person than Virgo. He who seems like he'd be more at home in a penthouse, a bachelor pad in the city. I guess it shows how much I don't know him, and looks aren't always what they seem.

When I step out onto the wide balcony, I walk up to the stone wall. It overlooks the lake that runs right through to the woods.

Eden—who I apparently know quite well—told me how I used to love talking walks on the grounds of the property, and she'd often join me.

I saw the angst in her face as she spoke to me. It looked like it was hard for her to accept that I couldn't remember her, or any of the beautiful memories she shared.

I felt bad, but it also made me aware of how much time I must have spent here with Virgo.

Everything has been strange to me. Strange being in a home I've been in before and can't remember, strange talking to people who know my face but I can't remember theirs.

It's been even harder with Virgo.

He's allowed me my space while we've been sorting things out and traveling back here, but whenever I look at him, I see the same look he gave me just before he kissed me. It's the same look he gave me before he graciously schooled me on just how well he knew me. Knew me in every sense of the word.

I wonder how I felt about him. Was I in love with him?

I think I was. It sounds like I was.

But I'm not that girl anymore. I feel like I don't fit the skin I'm wearing, or the place I'm in, or the man I'm supposed to be marrying.

I don't know how any of this is going to work for me. I hardly trust my own shadow.

And there's one thing I haven't mentioned to anyone, mainly because I'm ashamed to look like a coward. Virgo and Seamus both want to get the truth and find who was responsible for killing my family, but I just want to protect myself.

The one thing that was certain from all that's happened is that my family was trying to escape trouble.

Speaking with Seamus about who my father was made me worry even more. If my father was so powerful, why would he run?

Why would an Irish mafia boss run from trouble?

Then he got caught and killed.

I carry the secrets of that time locked away in my head. If it was indeed an inside job, that person isn't going to want me to remember anything. And even if I don't remember, they still won't want me around.

So, what does that mean for me in the grand scheme of things?

The only thing I know for certain right now is that I don't want to live my life in danger. Even if this problem is resolved, I don't want to be part of the mafia life.

The door behind me opens, and I turn to see him walking through it as if he just manifested from my mind.

He's wearing business-like clothes today, but full black. A black button-down shirt and black slacks. They darken his presence even more.

As he comes closer, I gear myself up for another round with him.

Chapter Nine

Olivia

This is the first I'm seeing him since we arrived at the house earlier. It's almost five in the afternoon now.

He walks right up to me, his gaze fixed on mine.

When he stops before me, my nerves tingle because he's too close. A kiss away.

"I'm heading out to the club now," he states. "I have to take care of a few things that might take a while, so I won't be back until quite late. I just wanted to check in on you before I leave."

"I'm okay."

"How did it go with Seamus?" He searches my eyes.

"Fine. He seems okay. He told me a few things about my family. And friends."

"Where you okay talking about them?"

"I have to be, don't I? In a few days, I'm sure I'll be meeting those same family and friends."

"We're being careful with who knows about your return."

That gives me a small comfort. "I guess that's something. It's just going to be difficult when *everyone* knows. I could be talking to the person who wanted me dead and wouldn't know."

His face hardens. "You're safe here."

"Until I'm not."

His gaze deepens. "I will make sure you are safe."

“That’s not something you can promise me.” No one can when they don’t know who they’re supposed to be keeping me safe from. Even if they did, they might not be able to.

“Maybe not, but my word is pretty damn close. I brought you back here, so there’s no way I’m going to let danger get to you while I’m still breathing.”

It sounds like a vow, and I believe him, but I stand by my belief that nothing can be certain, especially in uncertainty.

“I believe you’ll try.”

“That’s all I need right now. For you to believe I’ll try.”

I breathe in the cool air to steady my mind when that dizzy feeling hits me again. As this is the kind of conversation that will keep going around in circles, I decide it’s best to change the subject. If we continue, he’ll only keep assuring me, and I’ll keep doubting.

“What happens next?”

“We prepare for the wedding. I’ve managed to get everything ready for next Saturday.”

My blood freezes. Next Saturday is only nine days away.

“Really? *Next Saturday?*” My words come out in a rush. “That’s soon. Why is it so soon?”

“It’s better that way.”

“Why is it better?”

“It just is.” The finality in his tone tells me not to press him any further. There’s no point anyway. It’s not like it can change anything. “The wedding will be next Saturday. In the meantime, you will see a psychiatrist who will take care of you. Your first appointment is next week.”

“I don’t know if I’m ready to see a psychiatrist yet.” I don’t disagree that I need to see one, but I’m not ready yet. The last time I saw one, I was left with this dark feeling in my soul. The doctor said it was probably because I saw death. The only death I can think of that would make me feel that way must be my parents’.

I don’t know if I could handle the memory of that just yet, or ever. If I wasn’t ready two and a half years ago, I can’t say when I’ll be.

“You *need* to see one.”

“Must you have so much control over my life?”

“This is what we’re doing.” His voice holds the authority and command of the mafia boss he is.

“What if I don’t want to do it?”

“Then I will make you do it, sweetheart.” He dips closer and picks up a lock of my hair, making me flinch when I think he might kiss me again. “Our contract binds you in more ways than one to me. If I say you’re going to see the psychiatrist, then that’s what you’ll be doing.”

“This is not freedom.”

“But you’re not behind bars either for killing a man.”

I simply glare back again. Once again feeling like I don’t have a leg to stand on.

He cuts me a sharp smile and allows my hair to float back down to my chest, but then he traces a finger along my jaw, igniting the arousal I’ve been staving away. The emotion couldn’t have chosen a worse time to visit me.

Virgo stares down at me for a few beats until the seriousness returns to his face, chasing the smile away. “The

sooner you remember, the safer you'll be.”

The statement is logical and sensible, and fuck, I *know* he's right again.

He's absolutely right. But can't he see I'm scared?

Strike that. Scared is when you don't want to turn the lights off at night because you don't want to sleep in the dark. What I am is terrified. My darkness lives inside my mind like a monstrous demon ripping my soul apart.

He takes a step back, breaking free from my personal space, and I can breathe properly again.

“I'm leaving now. Eden will be available for whatever you need, but if you need me to come back, call me.”

He backs away, still looking at me with those observing eyes.

He turns, and I think of one more thing I need to ask him about. One more unsettling thing.

“Virgo,” I call out his name.

He stops and turns back to me. A lock of his dark blond hair drifts over one eye, making him look more dangerous.

“What is it?”

“The bedroom my things were taken to. Is that mine? Or yours?” The room smelled like him, and the décor of dark colors and black wooden furniture suited him. I wanted to ask Eden the question the moment she guided me in there, but I decided against it. I saved the question for now.

That merciless smile returns to Virgo's handsome face, and I already know the answer before he gives it. “It's ours. *Still* ours.”

“I want my own room.”

“No.”

“I—”

“I said no.”

“I’m not sleeping with you, if that is what you think I’m here for.” I grit my teeth and ball my hands into fists at my sides.

He stalks back to me, coming close again, as if he’s about to fuse his body with mine. “Why don’t we see about that.”

“There is nothing to see.”

He chuckles, laughing at me, moving closer. I step back, and he follows.

“You’re going to be my wife.”

“Just on paper.”

“You will be my wife in every way.” He comes closer, and I move again.

He follows me with that possessive smile on his face and walks me back until I’m up against the wall.

Planting his hands on either side of me, he locks me in and lowers his head until we’re sharing the same breathing space.

“Marriage doesn’t make me yours. Neither does a contract.” I try to keep my meager strength flowing, but it’s dwindling.

“If I fucked you against this wall right now, you’d be mine.” His eyes radiate with the idea while my traitorous body betrays me when my mind serves up an image of him taking me hard against the wall.

The crude, lewd image conjures moisture between my thighs and turns my nipples to shards of glass.

“You’d be nothing but a monster if you did that.” My voice is breathy, as if I’m fighting for air.

“Newsflash, sweetheart. I’m already a monster. A ruthless motherfucker who knows nothing but savagery, so fucking you against a wall is nothing new to me. Or you.”

Fire races over my skin, like flames flicking over gasoline. My mouth goes dry, and my brain stills but snaps back into focus when he inches closer to my lips.

I turn my face away, but he catches it, guiding me back to face him.

“I’m not that girl anymore,” I stutter.

“But you never stopped being her, *Olivia*.”

That name still sounds misplaced on me. “I did.”

“No, not for me. Whether you remember me or not, you still want me.”

“I don’t.”

I’ve barely uttered the word when he presses into me, pinning my body right against the wall so I can’t move.

I gasp when he rolls up my skirt and his fingers slip under the lace of my panties, straight into my pussy.

He did it so fast I barely registered that he’d moved until his fingers were inside me. Now that they are, and completely immersed in my wet folds, I’m stunned to my core.

“Liar. You’re wet for me,” he says in a playful voice and smirks as I grow wetter. “I pray to God your first memory is

how much you love riding my cock. Or how much you love it when I do this.”

His fingers flutter over my sex and back to my folds so he can push his fingers into my passage, then he strokes from inside to outside in a practiced manner, showing me we’ve done this before.

Done this before, and yes... I like it. But I mustn’t.

I manage to press my hands against his chest, but his damn fingers inside me feel so good I can’t think straight enough to form words. Or fight to move away.

What the hell is wrong with me?

My memory loss shouldn’t affect my common sense or my ability to know right from wrong, but this guy has been the exception to everything from the moment he stepped into my world.

Exception or not, I have to try and get away from him.

“Sto...p,” I stutter, on the edge of a mindless moan.

With a wicked smile, he starts a steady pump into my passage. “Stop me.”

Although he moves back a little to give me an opening to stop him, the devil he is sets me up for to fail when he rubs over the hard nub of my clit and starts stroking me. Like with everything else, he knew I wouldn’t be able to resist him.

“You are such... an ass...hole.”

“Yeah, that’s what you love about me.”

The next second sees his lips on mine, kissing me with the same possession he used in Monte Carlo.

This kiss is just as paralyzing, cruel, and almost punishing. It's like he wants to punish me for not remembering him and however many kisses we must have shared like this.

His lips on mine while he finger-fucks my pussy push me to the edge of insanity. And like the woman starved to be touched, I melt into the granite muscles of his chest, yielding to his possession.

My body absorbs it like a sponge, relishing in his masculine strength while my mind goes wild wondering what his cock would feel like inside me.

As if he really can read my mind, he presses his cock into my belly, making me feel how big and hard he is for me. The combination of feeling his hardness along with his savage pumps into my pussy makes me come.

There wasn't even a buildup before the orgasm took me, but that's probably because I haven't had one in so long my body was starving for it.

For him.

I moan my release into his mouth, my body shaking and shuddering with each wave of pleasure. Virgo continues kissing me, taking it all in. It's only once I calm and climb down from the high he took me to that he stops, but he keeps me pinned against the wall.

There, reality snaps my mind from the sexual haze that surrounds me, and my awareness floods back in with the horror that I just came all over his fingers.

He pulls his fingers out of me, now coated with my glistening juices, and shocks me by licking them off. One by one.

My breathing is as ragged as the state of my mind. I watch him and process the way he just clamed me. As I do, a new worry surfaces in my heart. One that makes me realize I can't stay here.

I don't feel safe, but more than anything, I can't allow myself to fall for someone as dangerous as Virgo Antonov.

Chapter Ten

Virgo

I lick her sweet nectar off my fingers once more, making a show of savoring every last drop as if I haven't eaten in centuries.

My sinful mind relishes the way her face morphs from pleased to horrified, just as much as I love the taste of her.

It's the sight of her wanting me and not wanting to want me. It's a fight she won't win.

We've both been down that road before, and all roads lead us back here. Even when she can't remember who I am.

This new Olivia wants me just the same, but I'd like to think that the moments when she yields to me is the old Olivia trying to break through.

That might not be true, but it's a bittersweet lie I'll allow myself to believe for whatever strength it gives me to hope she'll come back to me.

I release her, and the loss of contact with her decadent body makes me feel like part of me is missing.

"I will see you later, unless you want me to stay so we can finish this in bed," I taunt her with a smile.

She's already bright red, and her skin is glowing from the pleasure I just gave her, but I can still pick apart the blush that flushes across her cheeks.

"You can go now." She tries to imbue her voice with confidence, but her eyes give her away, revealing every emotion locked away inside her body.

Fear rules them all. Fear for her life. And fear of me.

I don't need to be told she's afraid of me because I'm dangerous, but I know she's also afraid of what she feels for me.

I step away and give her one last leisurely look, allowing my eyes to drift over her body. From the top of her head and down to her ripe, heaving breasts with her nipples visible and poking against the thin fabric of her top. I look at her ruffled skirt already wishing I could be back inside her pussy. Then I leave her.

I leave before I lose my mind and switch to beast mode where I would most assuredly fuck her senseless against the wall. The fact that I know she'd let me fuels the idea. But I push it away.

Not because I don't want to.

If I do that now, we'll continue dancing with attraction.

I want more than that. You can't have the real deal with a girl like Olivia O'Ridian and settle for attraction.

Getting her back will require a slow but sure strategy. Tactics that will make her come around to me the way she did before.

Patience may not be my best quality or a virtue linked to me, but at least I already have my foot through the door. Or rather, if I'm being technical, my hand in her pussy and the taste of her arousal in my mouth.

It's a small win I'll take.

I'll give her a free pass until I decide to claim her the way I want to, which means I'll stay in one of my guest rooms for the moment.

But she doesn't need to know that. Especially if I change my mind.

I wanted her in my bed so she could get used to it.

It was obviously for me, too.

No other woman has slept in that bed but her.

From my research and sorting out her debts, I know she was with some asshole called Flavio—said asshole who will be getting a visit from me when I find him.

That relationship only ended about eight months ago, so it's still relatively fresh, and I'm sure she must still have him in her head because of the way he screwed her over.

Me, on the other hand... well, I'm a whole other story.

Months after Olivia first went missing, people started giving up and telling me she must be dead. Then those who knew I'd been with her began telling me to move on. I didn't.

Not until a year had passed and I started giving up and believing what everyone else did.

I turned to drinks, drugs, and the fast women who frequented my clubs. Especially the sex club. It was easier there.

Then one day, Billy received note of a sighting of Olivia in France. The picture he got was fussy, so I couldn't really make out her face, but the description he gave was so close I started believing again. That was also when I took the first steps to reconnect with Cillian, who was also looking for his family.

Of course, I didn't find her then, but with my hopes awakened, I started a new search. That was over a year ago, so I haven't been with a woman since.

Having the only woman I've ever wanted in my home is a dream I never thought I'd have again in this lifetime. So, if I need more patience, then that's what I'll get.

Right now, I need to stop thinking with my dick and pull my head from out of the clouds. Because I have one hell of a task ahead of me to find out who was responsible for what happened to Olivia and her parents.

It's understandable that Olivia is freaking out about her safety. I can't blame her for that.

But by my life or death, I will protect her, and I won't stop trying to find the truth as well as the traitor until she's safe.

Everything is just going to be harder than hard. Even for a guy like me who's considered a world-class hacker with my double honors degree from MIT in computer sciences and software engineering. I finished that degree for fun because I knew I was always going to work in the oil business, but my skills in the criminal underground are a gold mine on their own.

The person I'm looking for has had two and a half years to hide. Their trail ran cold even before we knew something was wrong.

It took two days after the shit went down before we all knew something had happened. And for me to find out that Olivia never got on her flight to England.

It was Dante's father who unearthed the disaster that had taken place.

He'd gone to visit Callahan and found all the house staff and guards dead with bullet holes everywhere. Because men like Callahan have a shit ton of enemies, all angles had to be considered—inside job or outside. Apart from my suspicions

about my father, it was more believable that someone on the outside did it. But the general consensus was that the family had been taken captive.

The O'Ridian case has been investigated by the Creed and police alike to no avail. But with a traitor among us, there was no way we would have ever found anything.

My guess is we're not just looking for *one* person. There's at least two people or a group of them. And I also believe they have ties to people outside the Creed.

Someone wanted Olivia's family dead. Her parents in particular.

That person waited until Cillian left for Ireland and Olivia was supposed to be in England for her internship at the British Museum.

She was only there by accident because of me.

The day before, I broke her heart with lies, and I nearly got her killed.

That's why I have to fix this and give Olivia her life back.

* * *

It's just past eight in the morning.

I'm at Antonov Resources, walking down the corridor leading to my father's office. I'm about to enact phase two of my sketchy plan and give my father the news of my marriage.

I expect all hell to break loose, but that's nothing new.

I didn't get to see Olivia before I left this morning, and I didn't see her last night either. It was too late by the time I returned home. She was asleep.

Asleep in my bed.

It was a sight to carry with me. The way I have the last memories I had of her before the incident.

I continue on the path and turn by the floor-to-ceiling glass windows. There I find Brandy, my father's secretary, standing in reception. I acknowledge her with a curt nod; she does the same. Then I continue to my father's office.

As the door is open, I walk straight inside. He's sitting behind his desk on a call while looking through some paperwork. He looks at me when I walk in and motions for me to sit with a cock of his head.

I close the door first and watch him take note of that. We only ever close the door when we have something important or serious to discuss.

I make my way over to the chair he pointed to, but he keeps his curious gaze fixed on me.

Although he knows I wanted to see him today, he doesn't know what I needed to discuss.

"All right, Paul, I'll get back to you later. My son's just arrived," Father says into the phone before he hangs up.

His curious stare morphs into that I-own-you look I hate, and he places his hands on the desk before him to steeple his fingers.

"Morning, son," he greets me, with emphasis on the word *son* as if he thinks I could forget. "I have good news."

"What kind of *good* news do you have, Father?" I humor him. He knows I'm not interested in his fucking news, good or bad.

“I’ve just arranged all your dates with Vanessa. She’s looking forward to meeting you, which is a good sign.”

Vanessa Sarkova is the hotel heiress he wants me to marry. He’s interested in the union because her father just expanded their empire to the Caribbean. It’s going to be worth billions by the end of next year.

I give my father a crude smile and lazily incline my head. “You can cancel those dates.”

His smile drops like a plate landing on the floor and shattering. Venom replaces the spark of arrogance that lit up his eyes, and he glares at me as if he wants me dead.

“What the fuck do you mean by cancel it? We spoke about this only a week ago. You knew that you would have to get married to take over the company, and you agreed. We even signed a contract.”

“Yes, we did. But things have changed since.”

“What sort of things? Are you going to tell me that you no longer want the company?”

“I found my own bride.”

“Who?” His gaze hardens to stone.

“Olivia O’Ridian.”

My father is already pale-skinned, but I swear his skin turns at least ten times lighter at the mention of Olivia’s name.

“How? She’s dead.”

“No, Father. She’s very much alive and in my home, in my care. I found her. She’s been living in Monte Carlo. But she’s lost her memory.”

He takes a moment to process this information, then his lips apart and he straightens.

“What about her parents?”

“They’re dead.” My voice holds the weight of the sadness I feel, but I know my father won’t care. “Olivia survived the attack on her home and has been surviving in hiding ever since for the last two and a half years. I’m going to marry her.”

At my declaration, the shock he previously displayed dissolves and he assumes his role of high-handed dictator. I expected this.

My father hated the O’Ridians even when he was friends with them, so any other emotion would shock me.

“You are not going to marry an O’Ridian.”

“Olivia is the heir to the diamond mine,” I cut him off before he can continue barking his orders at me. That key piece of intel stops him in his tracks.

“What?”

“The same diamond mine you guys fell out over. She is the heir to it. If I marry her, I get fifty percent ownership. The very thing you wanted and have wanted all these long years.”

He takes me in with a new light in his eyes, the kind of look he uses when he sees an opportunity.

He might not like that the mine will be mine, but he’s the kind of ruthless person who doesn’t care how he gets something as long as he gets it and has it in his possession. He will see the mine as belonging to the Antonov family. I’m already playing with fire, so I won’t set off any more flames by letting him know I’ll be giving that fifty percent share to Olivia once the processing period is over.

“I see,” he says after a prolonged silence. “Well, that changes everything now, doesn’t it?”

“We’re getting married next Saturday. I’ve put in all the paperwork already. All we need to do is say ‘I do.’”

He leans forward. “Is there no other way to get the diamond mine without marrying the girl?”

“This is the way I choose, and you have no authority to influence me one way or another. The contract we agreed to stated I’d get the company after marriage. I never agreed to you choosing my bride.” That part was implied, but I found a crack in the terms and slipped right in.

I stand, signaling I’ve finished talking to him. “I’m leading an investigation to see what happened to her parents. The Creed are going to help. You better hope we don’t find anything that links you to their disappearance and deaths.”

“I’ve already told you this before; I did nothing.”

“And I still don’t believe you, Father. I still don’t believe you.” I cut him a hard glare and with that walk out, leaving him to stew in the bomb I just dropped on him.

I finally have my father exactly where I want him. And as of now, there is nothing he can do to come back with to get me. That doesn’t mean he won’t try.

I make my way to my office on the other side of the building.

Before I reach it, I realize the door is open, something unusual for me as my doors are always locked. All the cleaners usually come in early at around five or six o’clock because I start as early as seven sometimes.

When I get closer, I realize that there's someone sitting inside.

I walk in and realize the someone is one of the last people I'd like to see.

Amelia Fairchild. Olivia's best friend. I haven't seen her since Olivia disappeared, but there was a time when our families were close and she was part of my life

Amelia turns the moment she hears my footsteps and stands. Her bright green eyes find mine, and she pushes her long black hair over her shoulder.

"Hi, Virgo," she says, "I'm so sorry to impose. Your secretary said it would be okay for me to sit in here and wait."

It's not okay, but my secretary wasn't to know that.

I wish I could look more welcoming, but this is the same girl who tried to seduce me when she got the chance. Olivia saw us. It was the day before she went missing. That incident set off a chain reaction that led us here.

We all grew up together. And at one point in time, Amelia was promised to marry me, but then her father went bankrupt and lost everything. My father decided that marriage to her would no longer be viable, so he called off the arrangement. This happened long before we were even able to get married, but because Amelia grew up thinking she was going to marry me, she always had this attachment toward me. When I started seeing Olivia, I knew she didn't like it. I thought she'd moved past it after years had gone by, but that night showed she never did.

"Why are you here?" I ask after an awkward silence has nested between us.

My guess is she was one of the first people Seamus told about Olivia's return, but I wish she didn't come here. Seamus saw Amelia as the distraught friend who has grieved for the last two and half years. The two were as close as sisters. Only a select few knew what she did.

"Seamus told me you found Olivia," she stutters, holding back tears. "He called me last night. I could hardly believe it. I needed to see you today. I couldn't let another moment pass before speaking with you. You really found her?"

"I did," I reply, and tears slide down her cheeks.

She brings her hands up to her heart and holds her chest as if she's physically hurt.

Amelia might not exactly be one of my favorite people, but I know she grieved.

Her grief and guilt were worse because of the attempted seduction.

Of course, what Olivia saw wasn't what she thought was happening, at least not on my part. What she saw was Amelia naked and pressed up against me, but she never saw me throw her out of my room.

My guilt lies where Olivia confronted me, where I allowed her to believe what she wanted because of the threat placed on me by my father. I never got to set the situation right.

Amelia told me Olivia messaged her wanting to see her after she spoke to me. She told her that she saw her with me. That was the last message Olivia sent anybody before she disappeared.

"Seamus said Olivia has lost her memory. Does she really not remember anything? Or any of us?" she asks.

“She doesn’t remember anything. Or anyone.”

“Virgo, I need to see her.” She steps closer. “Despite the past and what I did, I need to see her. Thinking she died has ripped me apart every single day. If nothing else, she needs to know how sorry I am and that I should never have betrayed her. Please, I have to see her.”

I take in the way her eyes plead with me. I don’t give many people chances or any at all, but I feel on this occasion, I should for Olivia’s sake. Having a friend might help her remember certain things about her life. Even if the friend hurt her. The two were as close as sisters, and despite what Amelia did, if anyone is able to reach the part of Olivia that used to be mine, it’s her.

I also don’t know if Olivia would have been able to forgive Amelia, but it’s not for me to rob her of that chance when I’m seeking redemption, too.

I plan to come clean when the time is right, but only after she gets used to me again. It may be fair to give Amelia the same opportunity, and especially if it helps Olivia.

That’s all I care about.

“Okay,” I nod. “You can see her.”

“Thank you so much.”

“It’s important that you don’t stress her out. And I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell anyone else that she’s been found until I give you the go-ahead.”

“Of course. I promise.”

“We’re also getting married next Saturday,” I declare, and her eyes widen.

“Married? Oh, wow.”

“You may attend if she wants you there.”

Amelia nods slowly, seeming genuine. “I’m glad things worked out for you both.”

That is yet to be determined, but I don’t tell her that. “Come by the house tomorrow. I’ll message with a time.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it. Speak to you then.”

She leaves, and I think about the rocky journey that lies ahead of me.

There’s a lot at work, but at least I got Olivia back.

Chapter Eleven

Olivia

Good. The house is finally quiet. It's just past one in the morning, so I assume most of the staff are asleep.

I walk outside the bedroom and close the door behind me. Keeping my steps light, I make my way across the landing. The automatic light snaps on, but as they're on a time-sensitive program, they aren't as bright as they were earlier.

I've been contemplating the idea of escaping since the thought infiltrated my mind.

I know it's risky as fuck to even think about it, and if I get caught, Virgo might not be so forgiving just because I've stepped in the shoes of *his Olivia*.

Escaping would also break every term in that contract I agreed to with Virgo, but I can't stay here. It was nice to meet Seamus and hear all the things he had to tell me about my brother and family, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized that I needed to take back control over my life. None of these people can help me, and I don't want to be part of their world of danger.

In this mafia life.

Not that I was entirely safe in Monte Carlo, but I wasn't married to the mob. I took care of myself and decided what I did and didn't do. My one bad mistake of getting involved with Flavio was my bump in the road. I won't make such a mistake again, and I definitely won't hang around here and wait for something bad to happen to me.

Or worse, allow Virgo to make me crazy. I can't come this far in life only to lose myself to a man who will end up hurting me eventually, whether he intends to or not.

After my little encounter with him, I went for a walk in the garden. There I saw a path leading into the woods where the cameras stop. You can reach that same path from outside the basement.

When you're on the run like I've been, you always look for ways of staying hidden, and ways to escape when you need to.

I'm going to check it out now, but... if I get my chance to leave, I'm going to take it.

I've come to learn that you have to strike while you can because you may not get another chance, but that's where the bulk of the risk comes in because I have no plan.

And I'm not prepared.

All I'm wearing is a pair of jeans and a hooded sweatshirt. Inside my sweatshirt is my phone and my purse containing my bank card. I have close to a thousand dollars in my bank account from my last paycheck. It's not a lot, but that should see me through for a few weeks, and I might be able to get passage to South America or somewhere far.

I haven't thought that far ahead yet. If I do get a chance to leave, then all I want to do is get as far away from here as possible and don't get caught.

Carefully and quietly, I make my way down the steps. When I get downstairs, I look around, checking to make sure no one is around.

I also make myself look like I've just come downstairs to go for a walk around the house. There are cameras in here, and

I'm sure the guards on surveillance will be watching.

Outside of Virgo's personal guards who escorted us back from Monte Carlo, ten guards work on the grounds at all times. Two by the gates, two in the surveillance room, two outside the doors, and four who patrol the grounds.

It was Eden who told me that information on our tour. It was clear she was trying to assure me that I was safe, but she wasn't to know that I'd file the information away for my escape attempt.

I walk down the hallway and keep going toward the kitchen. The entrance to the basement is in there. When I reach it, I check to make sure again no one is watching before I slip right through the door. I take the wooden steps down and quicken my pace when I pass the darker corners.

The door I need is just ahead of me.

I walk faster but slow down when I hear a shuffling sound. The sound grows louder, and I stop to look around.

When I find nothing, I decide it must be some kind of creature, like a squirrel or even a rat. The grounds of this property are huge with the woodlands and the lake; that would attract all sorts of animals.

I continue to the door and try to open it, but it's unsurprisingly locked.

Pulling a hairpin from my hair, I shape it so I can fit it into the lock. This is the one useful skill Flavio taught me when he was *borrowing* cash from his cousin. He broke into his apartment and took it from under the bed. It wasn't until Flavio fell off the face of the planet that I found out he didn't even know the man who lived there.

I shuffle the pin inside the lock until I hear it click. The door opens, but I hear the shuffling sound again, and it turns into solid footsteps.

Before I know it, a light snaps on, brightening the area and showing me Virgo walking out of the shadows like the Grim Reaper.

At first my mind freezes, then I try to think of some lie I can tell him, but in the same thought I realize the lie won't work. It's obvious what I'm doing. The hair pin is still in the lock, and as his gaze flicks from the lock to me, I can see that he knows I was trying to escape.

“Going somewhere?” he asks with a mocking smirk that makes my nerves shiver.

The smirk turns into a full-blown devilish smile, and my senses kick into overdrive when I contemplate what he might do to me now that he's caught me. This was a bad plan.

Now the only thing I can think of doing is...

Run!

I yank the door open and run outside down the path.

He comes after me, the sound of his heavy footsteps making my heart gallop like it's going to leap out of my chest.

I push all the strength I can muster to run faster, but shit, I'm not fast enough.

Virgo's arms secure around me, lifting me into the air as if I'm weightless. He literally picks me up while I'm running so that my legs are still moving against the air.

“What the hell are you trying to do?” he growls, flipping me around and hoisting me over his shoulder caveman style. “Did you seriously think you could escape? I knew what you

were up to from the moment you left the room.” The taunting in his voice makes me feel completely foolish.

Completely and utterly foolish. Then angry.

The bastard would have only seen me leave the bedroom if he were watching me through his cameras. That means he must have access to them on his phone or something like that.

“Let me go, you asshole.” I thrash against his grip, trying to break free. I know it’s useless, but my pride is hurt. It wants to keep believing I can fight this giant of a man and gain my freedom. Or maybe I just need to know I tried.

“It seems you’ve forgotten our contract.” He marches back up the stairs with me while I continue to pound my fist on his back. “Maybe prison life would have been better for you. Perhaps I should send you straight back there.”

His threat makes me stop moving and sever the faux bravado I had pumping through my veins.

“You wouldn’t do that, would you?” I feel even more foolish for having to ask the question.

“When last I checked, we had a legally binding agreement, and you just broke it. I’m within my right to do whatever I want.” He scowls. “Where were you going, Olivia?”

Olivia. There’s that name again. The name I can’t get used to in a life that doesn’t belong to me.

It belongs to *her*, and I almost hate it. All of it.

We’ve made it into the kitchen.

I expect him to continue to the bedroom, but we turn left instead, and he walks down a dark corridor I haven’t been in before. I don’t even remember seeing it on my tour. Granted,

the house is huge, and I've barely been here for two days. I haven't completely gotten my bearings yet.

Virgo switches on the light, and my heart stops its rapid beat when my gaze lands on a set of chains hanging from the wall.

The only other items in the room are a metal table and chair that looks awfully similar to what you'd find in an interrogation room at the police station. Having spent hours in one days ago, I'm well versed in the setup.

"What are you going to do to me?" I yell.

I get my answer quickly when he carries me over to the wall with the chains, turns me around in some Rambo-style grip, and secures the chains around my wrists above my head.

Like yesterday, when he had me up against the wall, he did it so fast, I was attached before I knew I was. Now I'm hanging from the wall with my feet barely touching the floor.

"You bastard. You're crazy. You can't tie me up in here!" I shout against the cold chains rattling around my wrists.

Virgo stands back and simply stares at me. When a few long moments of silence pass, panic starts setting in. I stop moving against the chains and hold his stare.

"Say something!" I shout.

"Strike two." His voice is flat and emotionless, his face as unreadable as the plain walls around us.

"Strike two? I didn't do anything wrong before."

He steps closer and catches my face. "Your first mistake was planning to escape. That means you were looking for your first chance to screw me over when I could have left your ass in jail to rot. Your next mistake was running. If you fuck with

me again, I *will* send you back to Monte Carlo, hand-delivered to the police.”

“Please don’t do that.” I can’t imagine him going through all the trouble to find me only to send me to prison for something I didn’t do, but he might.

He inches toward my ear, his hot breath caressing my skin. “Why shouldn’t I?”

“I’m sorry.”

Briefly, he presses his forehead to mine. “No, you’re not. You’re only sorry you got caught. If you’d gotten free, you would have headed for the hills and never looked back.”

He’s right, so when he steps back, I don’t try to deny it.

“You can’t run from the Bratva, Olivia,” he adds. “And you can’t run from me. Now that I’ve found you, there’s nowhere you can go that you can hide from me.”

His warning sends a chill rushing to every nerve ending in my body.

“Can’t you just let me go? This life isn’t for me. I don’t want to be part of it.”

He gives me a cynical smile and reaches into his pocket to pull out a small velvet box. A ring box.

My insides knot as I realize what that must be.

He opens the box, revealing a beautiful engagement ring. The diamond glistens against the light, along with the delicate platinum band it’s set in.

My mouth drops. I’ve only ever seen such decadence on the rich and fabulous who frequented Monte Carlo flashing their wealth and fame from head to toe.

Virgo reaches for my hand slips the ring onto my finger, smiling brighter as it fits like a second skin.

“You are mine,” he informs me. “*Mine.*”

“I don’t want to be.”

My words sound cruel to my own ears, and they create a psychotic look in his eyes that terrifies me.

Seeming to regain some sense of his humanity, he moves back and simply looks me over.

“You can stay in here for tonight’s punishment. I’ll figure out what to do with you in the morning for the *rest* of your punishment.”

“I said I was sorry.”

“And I told *you* before not to lie to me. Let’s see if you’re feeling more loyal in the morning,” he grates out in a harsh voice.

“You fucking asshole,” I lash out, rattling the chains again. “You can’t leave me in here all night.”

“Watch me.”

Virgo turns and walks away, straight through the door, leaving me to my thoughts and his engagement ring on my finger.

The door slams shut, the light switches off, and the next sound I hear is the key in the lock.

The weight of my worries sinks me deeper into the darkness, and this time when my tears threaten to fall, I let them.

God.

Everything is complete shit, and I don't know what the fuck I'm doing anymore.

I feel like I took a left turn somewhere along the road of life and can't find my way back to fix it.

I can't find *any* way back, and I don't even know what *back* looks like for me.

I'm freaking out and making crazy mistakes. On top of that, I'm stuck with a man who wants to keep me and claim me as his.

I hate to think of Petr now, but I recall what he said about Virgo. That he would only be interested in me if he decided to claim me. Even if I didn't know I'd been claimed.

I got confirmation of that just now.

I hang my head and cry until I fall asleep and into the dream that always welcomes me when my mind allows me to dream.

I become Alice again, making my way through a deep, dark hole.

The darkness is so black and thick I fear it will swallow me whole.

I'm lost, but it makes me feel like my soul is, too. I keep moving forwards, then that suffocating feeling assaults me.

"Help me!" I cry out to the darkness.

At the sound of my voice, that light pierces through the darkness, and then come the voices. That one main voice that always soothes me, although I can never make out who is speaking to me. It could be a man or woman. I don't know.

"I got you. Come to me."

I follow the voice until a hand reaches out to me in the light. I take it, preparing myself to be freed, but then faces flashes before me. At first it looks like one, then it's two, then it's too many to pick them a part.

"Olivia, run!" a voice calls out.

"Mom." My lips move, and I try to say something more, but the sounds of gunfire make me snap open my eyes and out of the nightmare.

There is light around me—daylight.

Virgo steps away from the wall in the corner, alerting me to his presence.

It's morning. Time to face more of the consequences and repercussions of last night.

My insides tighten with the anticipation of what my complete fuck-up of an escape attempt will mean for me now.

Now that I see Virgo, I realize with certainty how foolish I was. And that I can't win this. Not the way I think.

True desperation mixed with fear will make you do anything, but I can't simply run from this situation.

"Morning, Zayka." He greets me with a name that grates on my nerves.

I don't answer because I don't know what he has in store for me yet. As much as I want to get back on his good side, I don't want to be pleasant if he plans to torture me.

"You were dreaming," he adds, searching my eyes. *"You called for your mother."*

"Did I?" I speak now, narrowing my eyes.

"Yes."

That's never happened before, and I've also never seen faces in that dream. When it first started happening, I told my doctors, and they hoped it was my memories pushing through, but as time went on, nothing more happened.

"Were you dreaming about the attack?"

"I don't know. I heard gunfire, and someone told me to run."

"Did you see anything?"

"Not really. But it came after a recurring dream I sometimes have where I'm searching through darkness."

Worry darkens his features, and he considers what I'm saying for a moment before reaching for the chains to undo the latches from my wrists.

As my hands come free, all the blood rushes down through my arms, making them sting. I rub my hands together and down my arms to alleviate the pressure.

"Do you need to see the doctor?"

I shake my head. "No, I'll wait until next week."

"Are you sure?" His voice deepens.

"Yes." I draw in a little breath.

"Should I take that to mean you've decided to be loyal again and you'll be *here* next week?" His tone takes on that sarcastic, menacing edge from last night.

"Yes." I speak firmly, trying to shake off my worries about my actions and the consequences to follow.

"Then it looks like we're back in business." He straightens. "Get showered and changed, and have some breakfast. You have a visitor coming to see you in two hours."

“Is it my brother?”

“No, I’m still trying to reach him. It’s Amelia.”

My spirits lift a little on hearing that. That’s a good sign. Maybe a best friend is what I need right now.

“She’s coming to see me?”

“Yes. She’s very eager to see you. You two have been friends since birth.” He lifts his chin higher. “I’ll be away after lunch. We’ll talk about last night when I get back later.”

Sin lurks in his eyes, and I realize he was only just getting started with me last night.

“I know I shouldn’t have tried to escape.”

“At least you know that now.”

“You chained me up in this room like an animal. Can’t you just let it go? I *am* sorry. I wasn’t intentionally trying to break our contract.”

He leans forward, and I steel my spine.

“The road to Hell is paved with people who never intended to do what they did, but they’re there. So, in my books, you owe me more than you did before, and I’ll be collecting as I see fit *later*.” The corners of his lips lift into a half-smile that makes me think of how he owned my body the other day with just his fingers.

What will he collect from me later?

“Go. Get ready.” Although he changes the subject, the seriousness in his eyes prevails, telling me he still believes I’m only sorry about last night because I got caught.

He’s not wrong. I know I can’t bullshit him. Or myself.

But I also can’t help how I feel.

Chapter Twelve

Olivia

As I approach the door to the sunroom, I see her.

Amelia.

I recognize her from a picture Seamus showed me. She's sitting on the large wicker sofa facing the windows, so she can't see me just yet.

Her attention is on the finches flying around the red roses in the garden. I can see why she's fascinated with them. It's their color. The birds are almost as red as the roses. The only thing to set them apart is the smidge of black feathers lining their wings.

The sun shimmers on Amelia's black hair, casting a glow over her, and I wonder what this meeting is going to be like.

When I reach the door, she turns toward me, and her large green eyes widen.

They're the same emerald as the skater dress she's wearing.

With her lips parted in shock, she rises to her feet, standing slightly taller than me.

Her skin is pale, but I swear it gets paler, turning to alabaster as she takes me in. She literally looks like how a person would if they'd seen a ghost.

Emotion seems to overwhelm her the closer I get, and when I stop before her, a tear tracks down her cheek.

"Olivia." She said my name as if she's trying it out. Since I've been doing that since I got here, I know how it feels. "My

God, you're really here."

I nod, and strangely, this feels okay.

More tears come, and she reaches out to touch my face. From the gentleness in her touch, I can tell we must have been exactly as Seamus described. Like sisters.

When she pulls me in for a hug, I believe it.

Several people have hugged me over the last few days, but this hug has a warmth to it that feels safe and soothing.

It's exactly the kind of hug that only a best friend can give.

"Oh, Olivia. I can't believe it's really you. You have no idea how happy I am to see you." She pulls back so she can look at me again, but now she's smiling with the deepest joy.

"It's good to see you, too. But um... I'm so sorry. I can't remember anything."

"Seamus told me." Her breath hitches. "He said you don't remember anyone, but I was really hoping you'd remember me."

Slowly and regretfully, I shake my head. "I'm sorry. I don't."

She brings a trembling hand to her mouth, pressing her palm into her skin, then she wipes away more tears.

"That's okay. It's okay. We have you back. It doesn't matter how you came back to us. You're here." Her gaze floats down to my hand, and she gasps when she sees my ring. "Holy crap, look at your ring. It's stunning. I'm so happy for you."

She hugs me again.

"Thank you," I tell her, but guilt pulls on my insides for wishing I could be anywhere but here.

* * *

It's nearly lunchtime.

We're sitting on the grass under the willow tree by the lake, still talking.

We spent the entire morning talking. She's been with me nearly the same amount of time as Seamus the other day, but being with Amelia has been completely different.

She's filled me in with a different category of memories.

Memories from school, work, and life.

Apparently, the only time we haven't been together per se was during college. While I went to Harvard, she went to study journalism at Raventhorn University, a college most of the heirs in the Bratva attend.

However, as Raventhorn is a stone's throw away from Harvard and they share a section of the campus, I still saw her pretty much every day. We even got an apartment together for the last semester of college. That was the extent of our separation.

Everything she's said to me has been utterly fascinating. The most fascinating thing being my choice of career.

I wanted to be an antiquities specialist and work in a museum. *Me.*

The same girl who was nervous to work in a coffee shop because she didn't think she had the right skills and *brains*. I don't know how I could have ever thought that about myself. Even if I didn't know about my other life of academic achievements, most people are okay working in such places. But that was probably my anxiety getting the better of me.

“I can’t believe I did so much. And went to Harvard.” I smile, sitting forward.

“Yes. Harvard was just one of many colleges that accepted you.” She nods with vigor.

“I can’t imagine myself as an academic person. Not like that anyway.”

“You are. And the most academic of them all,” she replies in a hearty voice. “I’m the one who lagged behind because I was off partying with all the boys. Especially in college. And *now*.”

A saucy look enters her eyes, and she giggles.

I laugh, too, and it feels so good. “Partying is not a bad thing.”

“No. At least it sounds like you haven’t forgotten how to have fun.”

Fun. I wish I could agree with her, but I can’t. I actually don’t know what fun feels like.

“Did I go crazy at parties?”

She laughs harder, making me think I did until she shakes her head.

“Nope, you weren’t the crazy type at all. You’d be the responsible person at every party and the girl who would never have one too many or hook up with anyone. But you liked parties enough. They were breaks for you.”

“Oh, good.” It’s nice to hear that I wasn’t just a bookworm.

Amelia grabs a handful of the peanut M&M’s Eden brought out for us to eat and shoves the whole thing into her

mouth. “Sorry, I have a massive sweet tooth, and these are my favorites.”

“I like those, too.”

“Oh my God, that reminds me. I get to tell you that joke we’ve had going for years, but it will be like the first time you’ve heard it.”

I’m already laughing. “What joke?”

“About Spencer Wainwright.” She straightens. “We went to high school with him, and we ran into him on a girls’ trip to Florida.”

A girls’ trip to Florida sounds great. “What happened?”

“Back in high school, he wanted to set up his own chocolate business that would rival and M&M.” Her face becomes animated, making me laugh even more. “He swore he was going to do it. Everyone believed him because he was one of those assholes who thought they own the world.”

“Did he do it?”

“No.” She tries to suppress a bout of laughter. “We ran into him on the beach selling honey roasted chicken feet.”

On hearing that, laughter pours out of me like air. “What? Honey roasted chicken feet? Whoever heard of such a thing?”

“Him, only him. He gave up on the chocolate dream and found a new calling. I didn’t know what was funnier, him with his chicken feet stall or you feeling so sorry for him you bought some.”

I laugh even more. “I didn’t. No way.”

“You did.”

“Oh my God.”

The two of us continue laughing so hard we're in tears. I've never laughed this much before, and I can just imagine how we must have laughed when it happened.

"You just have a heart of gold," Amelia says, her words barely forming over the laughter that takes her. "It's a good quality, but damn, honey roasted chicken feet?"

"That is so crazy."

"It definitely is."

Our laughter subsides, but then I feel eyes on me. Intense eyes burning into me with desire, power, possession. Only one person looks at me like that.

I look to my left and spot Virgo standing on the third floor balcony watching me. Watching us—Amelia and me.

She notices him, too, and instantly schools herself as a look of caution enters her eyes.

That look stays there until he walks away.

I know why I'm wary of him, especially after last night, and the anticipation of what he's cooking up for me later, but did she react that way because everyone else is like that with him, or is it something else?

We spoke about the wedding earlier and a few other things about Virgo, but nothing too intense for me. I didn't tell her the reason for the wedding or my reservations. I think she can assume quite rightly, though, that our marriage is based on business. Even if Virgo and I have a past.

She looks back at me and draws in a breath.

"You're cautious around him." I decide to cut to the chase.

"Everyone is like that with him." She chuckles.

“I noticed, but you seemed extra wary.”

“No. It’s just been a while since I’ve seen him, and things are different with him being one of the leaders in the Bratva. He’s no longer the boy I used to know.”

She explained that her family are in the same brotherhood Virgo leads with his father. Her father is one of the head brigadiers—part of the working unit in the Bratva.

“But at least he’s not like his father.” Disdain ripples through her voice at the mention of Virgo’s father. Seamus was like that, too.

“I take it his father isn’t very nice?”

“His father is an asshole. Like literally, so please don’t be offended if he *offends* you. Virgo’s mother isn’t that much different either. But his sister, Piper, is an absolute angel. She was friends with us, and we went to school with her. But her parents became controlling after the feud. She lives in Russia now with her husband, but I’m sure she’ll fly back for the wedding.”

“Wow, I guess it will be nice to see his sister, but his parents sound like work.”

“Don’t waste your time with them. My family had to fall in line, but we all hated the feud and the way Virgo’s father treated yours.”

The moment she says that, I wonder if Virgo’s father could have been involved in my parents’ death. He sounds like an enemy who would do that.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she surmises. “We all thought it. That he had something to do with your family’s disappearance, and it was investigated by Virgo himself. He

must have found enough evidence to excuse his father, but he believed it more than anyone. And so did Cillian.”

“Is that why they don’t speak?” That was something else Seamus told me.

“No, that happened long before because of the feud. Virgo’s father sought to destroy your family after they fell out. Cillian believed Virgo supported his father’s actions.”

“Did he?”

“It might have seemed that way because there was nothing he could do to stop him. But that was understandable. Andreas Antonov is not a man to be trifled with. There’s very little you can do when you’re his eighteen-year-old son and you have to do as you’re told. But Cillian kind of blew things out of proportion. It was sad because he, Virgo, and Dante were the best of friends. As close as you and I.”

“That sounds awful.”

“It was, and of course, Cillian went ape shit when he found out Virgo was seeing you and that you two had been together for years when he found out.”

“How did he find out?” It’s best I know things like these. I’m guessing when Cillian comes back, he’s not going to be overly fond of the idea of me marrying Virgo.

Amelia bites the inside of her lip. “He caught you in bed with him when he went to visit you at college.”

My eyes snap wide. “Oh God, really?”

She nods. “Sorry, sweetie.”

“There’s so much to take in.”

“I know. It’s a lot to come back to. We’re already living it, so we’re used to it. But remember, this is all in the past. You still have a future to look forward to, so please try not to let anything get to you.”

I smirk. “Virgo gets to me.” I pause for a beat to think before continuing. “I don’t know how to take him. It’s difficult not remembering him when I know we had this deep relationship.”

“That’s understandable. If it’s any consolation, the one constant with Virgo Antonov is that he’s always been in love with you. Even when he tried not to be.”

Her words soften something inside me. “Really?”

She nods and gives me a gentle smile. “Absolutely. You might not remember him but know that you trust him with your life. He wouldn’t let you go even when everyone told him you were dead. I think he would have spent the rest of forever searching. I don’t believe he would have ever stopped.”

“It sounds like he loved me.”

“He still does. This house here,”—she motions around with her hands—“he got it months before you disappeared. He traded in his apartment in the city for this. You didn’t share this with me, but I think you two might have been talking about marriage, so I wasn’t really surprised when he told me you guys are getting married.”

It’s funny how I already imagined Virgo to be the apartment-in-the-city kind of guy. He was.

Amelia’s words feel like truth, not just her opinion, but I feel bad again because of my fears.

Fears of being with a guy like Virgo, fears of the accident that stole my memories and my parents, and fears of this life.

Everything Amelia said is beautiful. Who wouldn't want to be loved like that?

But there's nothing anyone can tell me to eradicate those deep-rooted fears from my mind. Especially since I'm not exactly wrong.

Everything is still dangerous. The man and his world.

I still want to escape it. The whole escape thing is merely pushed to the back of my mind for the time being because I know I have to choose my battles wisely.

That means I'm going through with what I promised Virgo. The marriage and living here in New York. Being his wife.

That's the plan for the moment.

"We'll be married next week." I sigh. "It's soon. A lot is going to happen next week."

"And I'll be there to help you." A spark of excitement brightens her eyes.

"Will you?"

"Of course, I will. We have over two years to catch up on, so I will be here whenever you need me." She nods with conviction. "Also, I know you're going to do the whole walk down memory lane thing with Seamus when Cillian gets back. But I'd love to take you around to all our special places and help plan the wedding."

I'm already nodding before she can finish speaking.

"I'd really love that. I really would."

"Then that's what we'll do."

I smile back at her. “It feels like we just met, but I hope you’ll be my maid of honor.”

She laughs. “Of course. I would have been so offended if you didn’t ask.” She takes my hand and gives it gentle squeeze of reassurance. “You’re going to be okay, Olivia. You’re going to be okay.”

She sounds like she really believes that. I wish I could, too.

“I hope so.”

Chapter Thirteen

Olivia

Amelia left at nightfall.

We had a really good day. The best I've had in...

Well, as long as I can remember.

I thought I had what could pass for good days when I was with Flavio, but those soon turned sour, and I was on my own again.

Today was good and left a positive effect on me given the circumstances.

Now I'm sitting on the bed in the bedroom, flicking through an art history book I found in Virgo's library.

It was Eden's idea to read it after dinner when she thought I looked bored.

I knew she was gently trying to rekindle my interest in my previous fascinations, and it worked.

Worked like magic to suck me in.

The book has a collection of Medieval and Renaissance art that I was already interested in. In my travels, I was fortunate enough to visit Rome. While there, I went to the Vatican and saw all the glorious paintings inside the Sistine Chapel.

Many of those are in here, along with other paintings and artwork from an array of countries I would love to see in real life.

I've been reading for the last two hours, and I've definitely been thoroughly intrigued. I don't feel anything close to a

Harvard graduate who had an internship at the British Museum, but the spark of interest I must have felt to pursue a career in this field is there inside me.

I felt it with every page I turned, and I wondered what it must have been like for me to accomplish so much.

Reading has also provided a much-needed distraction.

A distraction from Virgo.

It's late again. Not as late as the time when I attempted my escape last night, but still late.

It's *later*. The time Virgo promised to catch up with me.

I've been listening out for him and waiting.

Waiting and wondering what tonight might bring. I know he wasn't bluffing when he told me he was going to collect.

I've also been wondering what we could have been like as a couple since he's the complete opposite of me. Other than attraction, I don't know what I'd have in common with him, or what we'd even talk about.

Maybe... we didn't talk much.

The thought instantly brings heat to my cheeks, and I allow my mind to explore the idea.

If we were seeing each other in secret, then maybe all we did was spend time in bed.

But Amelia said she thought we were talking about marriage. If we were, then there must have been more to us than sex.

There must have been something that clicked between us to create chemistry.

I wouldn't know what that thing is if it slapped me in the face because he's so closed off. Like a wall. Or a gate.

The handle on the door turns, making me jump out of my thoughts.

That could only be him. Eden is the only person who's come up here to get me for one thing or another, and she always knocks. Even if she's just left the room.

The door opens, and sure enough, it's him.

At the sight of him, I straighten, and my hands go limp while holding the book due to his menacing presence which changes the atmosphere.

Suddenly, everything feels small, including me, with that *Alice in Wonderland* effect again. This is the first time I've seen him in here. But I know he must have come in when I was asleep. This is his room, after all.

Virgo's eyes are glued to me as he walks in, shrugging out of his biker jacket. Once it's off, he tosses it back onto the hooks on the door.

"Hi." His deep baritone is lower.

"Hey."

"Good day with Amelia?"

"Yeah." I push the book aside. "It was good to reconnect with her."

"Sounded like you two had a good time."

"We did."

His lips quiver into a smile, but it doesn't quite make it. I've realized that he has three types of smiles—the passable pleasant smile like the one he nearly gave me, the sarcastic,

mocking smirk, and the one he uses to put the fear of God in you.

He doesn't seem capable of smiling just because he's happy, or the way a normal person would when they're trying to be sociable.

“She said she'd be around next week and go to the doctors with me, if that's okay.”

“Of course, it is.” His gaze flicks down to the book, and something warm sparks in his eyes. “Interesting book?”

“Yes. I was actually surprised to find a book like this in your library. Eden gave it to me.”

“Because it's yours.”

My breath recoils in my lungs, stalling then stopping. I look from the book to him, and a hollowness steals the euphoria I felt moments ago when I was fascinated by what I thought I was seeing for the first time. Except I wasn't.

The book is mine.

It makes sense, but it makes me feel disturbed again in the most irrational way because it was hers—the other Olivia's. The Harvard graduate who everyone loved, including this beautiful tattooed Bratva man.

“You kept it?”

“Yes, amongst others.”

“Do you know where I bought it?” I watch him as he starts undoing the buttons on his shirt.

A lump rises in my throat when the soft cotton of his shirt opens, and I catch sight of his tanned chest, revealing more tattoos and muscles.

“You were on a trip with me to Florence.”

“We went to Florence?” A flicker of unabashed interest ignites in me.

“For your eighteenth birthday.”

“That sounds nice.”

“It was.”

“What did we do?”

“When we weren’t sightseeing, I spent every moment inside you. It was where I first had you.”

A rush of warmth covers my heart as I get the answer to the question I had days ago.

He waited. Waited for me to turn eighteen before we were together.

Virgo seems to read my mind but continues observing me.

“Oh.” I break our stare by glancing at the book.

When I look at him again, he takes off his shirt, and I get a good look of his masterpiece body.

Muscles upon muscles line his abs in chiseled peaks and planes as if he were sculpted from stone. I’ve never seen so many muscles on a man in real life.

Each one is mesmerizing on its own, but then there are his tattoos.

A bald eagle takes up most of the space on his chest, along with dark red roses wrapping around Japanese characters. They complement the Samurai inked on his arms.

But what stands out the most are his Bratva symbols. The stars splashed over his shoulder that mark him as a leader

along with an assortment of other leadership markings.

I'm sure I would have known all this before, but I looked them up after my first encounter with that Bratva boss. He had similar tattoos with the addition of prison ones that showed how many times he'd been locked away and how many people he'd killed.

I guess I should be grateful Virgo doesn't have those, but that doesn't make him any less scary.

He moves closer and takes the book from me. "I'm sleeping in here tonight."

I could have guessed that. "What does that mean?"

"It means it's time to collect what you owe."

I release the breath I'm holding and give him a measured stare. I knew this was coming, so I had time to prepare. But I'm still on edge and kicking myself for last night.

Part of me also wonders if he'd really send me back to Monte Carlo to be imprisoned. So far, the only benefit to our arrangement is getting his old girlfriend back. What if he loses interest when he sees I'm not anything close to her?

Listen to me... I've split myself away from the person I was as if we're two different people, but in my world, it feels like we are.

"What do you want from me?" My voice comes out in a soft hush.

Virgo sets the book down on the nightstand but keeps his gaze fixed on me, trapping me beneath his stare.

"I want to fuck you," he answers without thought or hesitation, as if the question was as simple as being asked his name. "But I'm sure you already knew that."

“Are you going to?” Every cell in my body is heightened with expectancy and trepidation.

The feeling is odd and conflicting because I know I shouldn't want him.

But I do, and that part of me that wants him doesn't want to be treated like the escort I signed up to be mere days ago. Not for punishment, or blind pleasure.

“Not tonight,” he answers, but I know he has something more planned for me. “Tonight, we *play*.”

“Play? What exactly do you mean?”

A sly smile crosses his face, and his eyes darken with raw desire. “You can start by sucking my cock, then we'll take it from there. That's what we'll do tonight and every night in the run up to the wedding.”

Arousal surges through me, flowing through my body with the blood in my veins, but I push it away, trying to hold on to some shred of sanity.

“What the hell is wrong with you? Can't you just be normal?”

“Sorry, Zayka, I don't do *normal*. Apparently, I'm psychotic and deranged. A whole other level of fucked up.”

“I'm not a whore.”

“No, you're not. Whores don't get the pleasure of having me like this.” Here comes the fear-of-God smile. “They wouldn't be in my room, in my bed, or in my head. But at least they'd know not to double-cross me if I freed them from certain imprisonment and shelled out seventy grand to save them from cartel pricks who wanted them dead.”

Hearing him rehash what he did for me makes me feel guilty again.

“I told you I was sorry.”

“And I didn’t accept your apology. I told you what I want, now do it.” He inclines his head and gives me a mocking smirk.

Shit. I bite down so hard on my back teeth I fear my jaw will snap. I should have known he’d come up with shit like this to punish me.

But... a sneaky part of my mind is questioning my anger.

Am I angry at him? Or am I angry at myself for getting aroused at the idea of being so intimate with him?

I realized from the moment I met him that a destructive part of me is curious to touch the darkness so I can see what it feels like. Maybe that’s how I ended up with this guy in my previous life.

“I’m waiting.”

“Okay,” I mumble.

“Good girl.” He steps back to allow me to get off the bed.

I shift to my knees, but he stops me.

“Strip first. I want everything off.”

I stifle a groan and pull off my nightshirt, the main piece of clothing I’m wearing. All I have on underneath is my panties, so the instant the shirt comes off, I’m basically naked with my bare breasts on show.

A lean, hungry look enters Virgo’s eyes when he sees them, and witnessing him looking at me that way makes my body react in those traitorous ways I wish I could control.

He reaches out and cups both my breasts, then runs his fingers over my tight nipples, which grow harder with each stroke of his rough fingertips.

“You’re fucking perfect.” A dark smile slides across his face, and he pulls me closer. “Fucking perfect and mine.”

He closes the space between us with a kiss that takes me back to where we were days ago when he last kissed me. Then confliction rules my mind.

I don’t know what it is with this man, but he melts my resolve with one touch, and his kisses make him irresistible to me. It’s like a I lose my mind in a different way, and I can’t remember the reasons I’m not supposed to want him.

This is all supposed to be part of my punishment, yet I crave his lips on mine, and his touch.

His tongue captures mine, and he sucks hard on it. I feel the tug deep in my core, and I press my body into his. But just as I immerse myself in the lure of wanting more, he pulls away.

“Greedy,” he mumbles with that taunting vibe.

“I—”

“Shhh.” He presses a finger to my lips and traces the outline. “No more talking. Let’s put your mouth to better use. Now get on your knees.”

Pressing my lips together, I lower to my knees and watch him staring down at me with that God of War vibe again.

Without taking his eyes off me, he unzips his pants and pushes them, along with his boxers, down his hips.

My gaze goes right to his thick, massive, very hard cock. Pre-cum beads at the tip of the head like a pearl. More seeps

out when he flexes his hand around his length and pumps.

My stomach tightens at the size as I wonder how I'm going to fit all of that into my mouth, let alone inside me when the time comes.

The image has my thighs clenching.

Virgo cups the back of my head then slides his fingers through my hair to direct me to his perfectly erect cock.

“Open your mouth and suck me.”

I obey. The moment I open my mouth, he plunges inside, giving me the raw potent taste of him.

He groans when I start sucking. The sound tells me he likes what I'm doing and arouses me at the same time.

He pushes deeper into my mouth, feeding me more, then he secures a tighter grip and starts deep-throating me.

He's pounding now and holding my head to make sure I don't move away.

I gag several times, but I relax my jaw, keep going allowing him to fuck my face.

His grunts of pleasure deepen, sounding like they're coming from deep inside his soul.

Hearing him makes me feel like it's me who has control and power over him.

That curious part of me makes me want to outdo the old Olivia.

He pounds into my mouth relentlessly, and I allow him to hurt me and dominate me so I can own his pleasure.

Tears sting my eyes, then stream down my cheeks, but his pleasure turns me on.

“Fucking hell,” he groans low and guttural, then mutters a string of words in Russian I don’t understand.

Other than calling me Zayka, he hasn’t said anything else in Russian around me. Not even to the staff or Dante when he’s been around.

Hearing him utter the language now while he’s in the height of pleasure is so sexy. I want to hear more.

I get my wish when he comes and hot cum pours down my throat. The words tumble from his lips, sounding like a mixture of curses and endearments. I might not understand him, but I like it.

My haze of control snaps when he pulls out of my mouth and picks me up from the floor, then places me on the bed.

“What are you doing?” I moan.

He gets on the bed and hovers over me, sweat glistening on his muscular body.

“It’s my turn to taste you now. *Properly.*” A different smile lights up his face, looking like a deadly cocktail of sin and delight.

He runs a thick finger over the flat plane of my stomach then lowers his mouth to lick the places he just touched.

He licks from my belly up to the deep valley of my cleavage, then finds his way to my left nipple and takes it into his mouth.

His mouth on me with his tongue swirling around the tight peaks of my nipples weakens me, and for a moment, I give in, allowing the pleasure rising within me to take over. My breath comes out in a rasp, and I arch into his mouth, loving it when he alternates his suckle from one breast to the other.

Then he kisses his way down, down, until his hand cups my sex and his fingers slide over the smooth mound of my pussy.

I gasp when he slides one into my passage and starts pushing in and out.

“Spread your beautiful legs for me, Olivia.”

My body obeys his command, then he grips my thighs with his large hands and brings my pussy to his opened mouth.

His hot, wet tongue pushes up into my passage and licks me, tastes me. He lifts his head to look at me, then he returns to my swollen clit and takes the hard nub into his mouth.

He sucks hard, and that does it.

I’m lost.

Lost to myself and lost within his touch.

The moans that pour out of my mouth make a liar out of whatever reasoning told me this man was bad for me.

I’ve never felt better in my life.

Virgo pulls me closer to his mouth and devours me, eating me out as if he wants to take everything from me.

The orgasm that rises from my core is vicious, and I know any second now, I’m going to come.

He knows it, too. He can hear it in the rising pleasure riding on every moan. He can feel it crawling through my body as I arch into him.

“Your greedy little pussy tastes so good, Olivia,” he grunts, pushing his tongue even deeper.

“Virgo!” I cry out. Then I come. And fuck, I come so hard I scream, letting myself go.

My body bucks and thrashes as I come on his face, in his mouth, and he drinks me up, lapping up my arousal as it pours out of me.

He doesn't stop until my body stills and the chaos within me fades, but he continues to hold me.

Pulling away, he places a kiss on my parted thighs and moves back to hover over my body with his hands on either side.

He brings his face to mine, breaths away from my lips.

The sinful smile returns as he looks at me, and I know why.

It's because he can see that I want more, that I want him inside me.

“You will remember me,” he states like a promise. “I'll make you remember me. Then you'll give yourself to me.”

I gaze back at him as truth sinks into me, making me realize that I don't need to remember him to do that.

He just had me. And he still does. So, when he lowers his head to kiss me again, I kiss him back and allow myself to stop being Alice.

And I become Olivia.

Chapter Fourteen

Virgo

I lace my fingers through the silky strands of Olivia's hair as she slides her hot little mouth over my cock.

I tilt my head back and absorb the pleasure she gives me, then I look down at her on her knees before me. Naked and perfect and mine.

She looks like a goddess with that lustrous mane of hair cascading down her back and her perception on show.

This is night two of us like this.

Night two of us in this bedroom that was always ours.

I have to go to the club in a few minutes, so I'm having my fill now.

Dante should be bringing over some paperwork to help our investigation, so I might be away for most of the night.

The wedding is only a handful of days away now. Everything is on track to run smoothly, but I know I have to watch my back so I can watch hers and keep her safe.

Our eyes lock as her head bobs up and down my length.

"Harder," I tell her, and like the good girl she is, she obeys.

I tighten my grip on her head, loving her mouth on me, and I think of what she would have done if she'd escaped the other night.

The plan was a mess. She knows it and that she acted on a stupid impulse.

Olivia also knows my warning still rules. She wouldn't have been able to run from me, but I know not to be so self-assured that I don't factor in the possibility that she could.

She could run because she still wants to.

Even though a part of her comes alive during these sinful moments, I know if I opened the door, she'd run straight through and never look back.

I don't know which terrifies me more—knowing she would leave if she could or the fact that she'd leave and never care to look back because in her world, I don't exist. In her world, I'm a big bad mafia boss and I represent danger. The very thing she's running from.

The other night, she said she didn't want to be part of this life, which means she didn't want to be in my world, or want me.

But I meant what I said, too—she's mine.

She *is* still mine. As long as she is, I won't stop fighting or trying to get her to love me again.

That's why I haven't fucked her yet.

I've wanted to badly, to the point where I ache to be inside her, but this way, I give her just enough to keep wanting more and more.

I've taken us right back to the beginning to what we used to do when we began. This is how we used to fool around and *play*.

I'd sneak into her room at her parents' house, or I'd take her away in my car and park in the woods or some back alley.

I truly corrupted her, and I have no fucking regrets.

She was fifteen when I first kissed her. I know I had no business being with her, so it was understandable that Cillian was pissed as fuck when he found out about us.

But at least he found out when she was in college. I don't think anyone ever confirmed how many years before I started seeing her.

If he knew, I doubt he would have given me a pass, or a fucking pat on the back if I told him I didn't take her virginity until she was eighteen.

For a start, he wouldn't believe me. Nobody would. I hardly believe it myself. I only know I did it because I did it.

I waited out of respect, but I waited because I loved her.

I still do.

Every time we're together like this, that look in her eyes grows and grows.

She sucks harder, and my balls tighten, then I lose control and pound into her mouth, allowing my release to erupt from me.

She takes me in deeper and swallows. While she does, I play with her breasts, tweaking her rosy nipples so they darken at my touch.

I pull out of her mouth, and she licks her lips.

I look deep into her beautiful eyes, but she looks away from me. I know she's catching on to what I'm doing and doesn't want me to see her wanting more. Wanting me.

I want her, too, so fucking badly.

I don't know how I'm going to keep up with this plan of mine.

She stands and turns to head to the bathroom, but I catch her arm and pull her back to my chest. I'm naked, too, so she can feel my cock pressed against her ass, getting hard again.

"Tomorrow morning." I press my nose to her hair. "We'll make up for tonight tomorrow morning before you head out with Amelia. Unless you ask me stay, and we can make up for it now."

"We have nothing to make up."

I run my fingers down to her stomach, and she flinches. "I haven't touched you yet."

"I don't need to be touched."

She's lying.

Olivia pulls out of my grasp, but I catch her again, just to prove the point that I'm right. I know she wants me.

She tries to swat my hands away, but I lift her onto the bed, knocking off the little dress she had on earlier.

I lay her on her back and pin her down, then plunge my fingers into her soaking wet pussy.

"Liar," I taunt. "When are you going to stop lying to me?"

"Leave me alone."

I laugh. "No. Fuck, no."

"Didn't you say you were going to the club?"

"It can wait." Fuck it. I need to be late tonight.

She's in mid-protest when I part her legs and bury my face between her thighs.

At first, she tries to resist, but I feel the moment the pleasure stops her from fighting and paralyzes her to my will.

Instead of protesting, she moans into every lick of my tongue on her swollen clit, then I almost celebrate when her hands smooth over my shoulders and she grips me as I feast on her.

“Is this what you want?” I whisper over her smooth mound. “Tell me.”

“Yes...ss.”

“Do you want more, Zayka?”

“Yes, give me more.”

“What do you want me to do to you?” I stroke her clit, wanting to hear her finally give in to me.

“Lick me.”

Fuck. I nearly blow my load just hearing her say that.

“With fucking pleasure.” I return to licking her pussy and also find her succulent breasts, pleasuring her there, too, while I work her pussy with my mouth.

It doesn't take long before she comes and her delicious juices flow into my mouth.

My fucking cock is hard again with a stiffness that can only be satisfied inside her, but I regain control by resting on her, inhaling her.

I lift my head and meet her troubled eyes already looking at me.

I rest my head next to her stomach. If I do anything else, she'll take her hand away from my shoulder, and I don't want her to.

We stare at each other in listless silence, then slowly, she runs her fingers over my chest, tracing the eagle tattoo.

“Did you have this done when we were together? I mean before.” Her voice is feather-soft and careful.

“Yes. I got them done when I was sixteen.”

the shower of stars tattooed over my arm like a sash.

“No. I got it a few months after. I got moved up when the previous Sovientrik died.”

“Is that how you got to the Creed, too? I hardly even know what that is. Amelia was talking about it today.”

“I’m in the Creed because of my father. If something happens to him, I’m next in line to take over.” I haven’t spoken to her about those parts of my life on purpose. The same way I haven’t spoken to her about Amelia.

I don’t want to just yet with everything so fragile. Amelia has also been good for her. Olivia has loosened up a lot since Amelia’s first visit. She’s been coming by every day since.

“The Creed sounds dangerous.” Her words come out on the edge of a breath. “All of it sounds dangerous.”

I lift my head and gaze at her. “I won’t lie to you and tell you it’s not.”

“Then don’t you think it’s better not to provoke danger? It’s a lot of trouble to go through just for me.” She stares back at me with sad eyes.

I take her hand now and bring it to my lips to kiss over her knuckles. “When you remember me, you’ll know that threat of danger would not stop me from keeping you safe.”

“*When* I remember?”

“Yes, *when*.”

A little smile tugs at the corners of her lips. It’s a small breakthrough in the wall she’s built to keep me out, but it’s quickly chased away by the seriousness that returns to her face.

“What’s happening with the investigation, Virgo? You haven’t said anything.”

“Because I don’t want you to worry about it. I have the best people working on it. The only thing I want you to do is focus on you and getting your memories back.”

“But I—”

“No.” I know there’s a fine line between being protective and overprotective, but I don’t need to make her worry even more by telling her everything is exactly the same as it was days ago.

We’re only just getting everything up and running, but I’ve been going over all the details I had before.

“Get some rest.”

I get off the bed and pull on my clothes. She watches me, then pulls the sheet over her breasts to cover herself.

“Will you keep me updated?” she asks as I’m about to walk through the door. “It’s really hard not knowing anything. I hate being kept in the dark.”

“Yes. I will.”

“Thank you.”

I grab my jacket and leave, hoping that maybe I can fix things sooner rather than later. The issue of her memory is

difficult enough without the knowledge that someone out there wanted my girl dead.

* * *

“That’s everything,” Dante says, setting another stack of foolscap folders on the table.

“That’s all the stuff from the police reports and the evidence that was taken from the O’Ridians’ home after the incident.”

He sits opposite me.

We’re in our office at Club X. We decided to have a joint office here and at our other clubs so we could bounce ideas off each other.

Tonight is one of those nights when I’m glad for our little setup, but most of all, I’m grateful for his help.

He’s the most trustworthy person I know, so I’m able to tell him anything.

“How are things at the house? You look like shit.”

“Because everything is shit.”

“I hate to break it to you, but this is going to take time.”

I sigh with frustration. “I know.”

Dante looks at the folders and raise his brows. “Where do we even start?”

“I think we should work with anything dated right after the incident,” I suggest.

Somewhere along the line, we missed something. It could be some small thing that could give us a lead to the bigger

picture. My problem here is that I've gone through these reports before and found nothing. I felt I left no stone unturned, but maybe going through them again with a different mindset will change things.

The first time I studied them, I considered the possibility of an inside job, but hearing Olivia say it gives me more direction. I'll be looking at people who were closer to the family with new eyes.

"How about we start with the police reports, then work through the documents from the Creed," Dante suggests.

"That sounds good."

"I also want us to put together a plan for everyone else before the Creed meeting."

"I'm sure we can do that."

At that meeting, everyone will be informed that Olivia is back. Thankfully, we've managed to keep that information contained until we set up our investigation on everyone in the Creed.

In our world, when you suspect everyone, you do what you need to do first, then ask questions later. That way, your enemies don't get a head start.

We have eyes on everyone in the Creed, and all the people who were friends, family, and enemies of the O'Ridians.

I suspect that once the word is completely out of Olivia's return, something might happen. Or nothing.

It all depends on what Olivia saw before she lost her memory. If she saw something or someone she shouldn't have, we have to be prepared for that person to strike.

“Let’s work on this for the next three hours then check in on the club. Then pull in another few hours,” Dante says.

“What about me?” says a voice from the door in a deep Irish accent. “What should I do, old friends?”

We both turn to find Cillian O’Ridian standing at the door, his eyes fixed on us.

He’s as tall as us and just as muscular. The only thing separating him from us is his lack of tattoos.

He straightens, looking from Dante to me. But that look of dark menace lurking in his eyes is only for me.

“Cillian.” Dante smiles, piercing the fog of tension that has filled the room with Cillian’s presence. “You’re back.”

“I came as soon as I heard Olivia had been found.”

Dante gets up and shakes Cillian’s hand. He then looks back at me. “How about I leave you guys to talk? You need to.” Dante nods.

“Yes, I agree. We have lots of things to talk about,” Cillian replies.

“That works for me.” I keep my voice just as measured as he does his.

Dante leaves us, and Cillian walks in. I stand so we’re on equal footing, but I wonder what he’s going to say to me. He looks mad as fuck obviously, about the wedding, but relief over his sister being found seems to have provided some balance.

“You found her,” he states in the same voice.

“I did.”

He glances down for a moment, and his guard drops, so I can read the gratitude in his eyes. It's still there when he looks at me.

“Thank you. I can't thank you enough for not giving up when most of us did. Me included.”

“You don't have to thank me,” I reply.

“Yes, I do.” His tone is stiff, revealing the layer of irritation lurking in his voice.

The last time I saw him was more than a year ago, after that sighting in Germany. We messaged one or two times after that. That was it. Nothing more.

“Obviously, I spoke to Seamus.” The irritation becomes more prevalent now. “He told me about the marriage, Virgo. What the hell are you thinking? Don't get me wrong, I'm over the moon you found my sister, but what the hell is this?”

I stare back at him. I expected this conversation. In fact, I expected his fist in my face.

I expected a fight, like the one that followed when he found out I was seeing his sister. But this is better, so we can talk man to man.

“How could you take advantage of her in this situation?” He bares his teeth.

“You know I'm not taking advantage of her,” I snap, cutting him off before he can finish. “Seamus would've told you what I plan to do with the diamond mine.”

“And you expect me to believe that? You are going to just give her your share when the time comes?” He eyes me with caution. “The moment your old man gets his hands on that precious diamond mine, nothing of that sort will happen.”

“My old man isn’t getting his hands on shit,” I assure him.

“Does *he* know that?”

“He doesn’t, but that’s the only way I could marry your sister.”

Cillian laughs offkey, sounding unhinged. “Virgo, we’ve been through this before. I told you to let her live her life. I don’t want to be enemies with you anymore, but if you do this, you will make an enemy out of me.”

“Then we’ll have to agree to be enemies, because I’m not letting her go.”

He looks at me as if I just slapped him in the face. “This isn’t going to work out the way you want,”

“Why not? Because you say so? Because you won’t give me a chance, or you stopped giving me chances and put me down as being like my old man? Times have changed. *Everything* has changed. He doesn’t rule me anymore. Now it’s time to finally get what I want, which is her. For the last two and a half years, you’ve known that I’ve been looking for your sister. That should mean something to you.”

Finally, it looks as if I touched something he can’t argue with, because he knows I’m right.

“I can’t just stand by and watch this.”

“Then don’t stand by. How about you help me instead? Help me find out what happened to your family. That’s something I’m not going to let go. All this here,”—I point to the documents on the desk—“these are all the details that were taken after the incident occurred. If we all work together, we might come up with a solution much faster and make sure Olivia can live her life free of the threat she faced.”

Tension fills his face as he sets his shoulders back. I expect him to argue again because that's what he's like, but he surprises me with a slow nod.

“Okay. Let's work together. I already planned to stick around to resolve this before going back to Ireland. I agree that working together will be for her benefit.”

I mentally sigh with relief.

“Let's do this, then. I hope you'll join us at the Creed meeting.”

“I will. I'd also like to see my sister tomorrow,” he says.

“That's not a problem.”

Thank fuck I got him on board.

I would have hated to be at war with him, too. Having everyone on board will help me make my girl safer sooner.

I just hope we can make that possible before whoever we're up against has a chance to strike.

Chapter Fifteen

Olivia

“**T**his doctor comes highly recommended. He’s good at his stuff and knows how to work with patients who’ve suffered from amnesia at any stage,” Virgo explains. Although he sounds confident, I can tell from the shift in his usual presence that he’s nervous.

“He sounds good,” I agree, but only because I feel like I have to. Nothing sounds good to me right now.

We’ve been sitting in the waiting room at the doctor’s office for about ten minutes.

Hospitals and any kind of clinical environment make me uncomfortable enough, let alone being here to remember the thing that will hurt me more. I don’t know what to expect from today, but in my mind, I conjured up being under a hypnotic spell where all my memories flood back and I end up having some kind of psychotic meltdown. That is one of my biggest fears.

“You need to tell the doctor everything you remember. Don’t leave anything out,” Virgo continues. When he starts launching into a whole conversation about how helpful therapy is, I zone out.

I don’t often zone out when he speaks because I always feel like I need to be ready for whatever mood he’s in. Like last night. There was one moment when he seemed like he would tell me anything I wanted to know, but he shut me down when I asked about the investigation.

Virgo seems to drift from one extreme to another. It's like I'm caught in a game with him, which can get exhausting.

After the appointment, I'm going shopping with Amelia, then I'm headed to Seamus' house to visit him and Cillian. There, I'll spend the rest of the day. As nervous as I am to see Cillian, the break from Virgo is most welcomed.

He continues talking, and my mind drifts further. I recall the last hospital I stayed in. That was when I woke up after the incident. That feeling of not knowing anything is one of the worst possible feelings I could ever have experienced. Every day after that, I feared reliving that same experience.

My mind was a blank slate of nothingness. What was worse was looking at my face and not knowing who I was, where I came from, my name, just nothing.

The doctors and nurses who looked after me were supportive, but that terror I experienced is one I'll never be able to shake from my mind.

The next clinical professional I saw was at the convent. We had various therapy sessions until the money Kevin paid ran out, along with my welcome.

The convent wasn't willing to continue my treatment, and I couldn't expect them to.

My mind returns to the present when the secretary approaches us with a warm smile that crinkles the corners of her eyes.

"Dr. Belmont is ready to see you now," she says.

Virgo and I stand, and she guides us to Dr. Belmont's office at the end of the corridor.

We walk through an open frosted glass door and find him sitting behind a desk. He's a tall, well-built man with short dark hair and a kind face. I always study people's faces more than usual—their eyes, their mouths, their expressions. It helps me to assess how a person might interact with me. "Hi." He stands, extending his hand to shake Virgo's, then mine. "I'm Dr. Belmont."

"Thank you for seeing us," Virgo replies.

"That's no problem at all."

Dr. Belmont looks at me as if he's already assessing me, probably because I barely moved my lips to say hello.

He then switches his gaze back to Virgo. "As good as it is to see you here, Mr. Antonov, I prefer to see the patient for our initial consultation by themselves unless they specifically request the company of a friend or family member."

"No." Virgo is shaking his head before he can finish. "I will stay here. It's better if I'm here to help fill in the blanks where necessary and give guidance on various things. I'd also like to know what you discuss."

"I understand that," Dr. Belmont says, "but this first consultation is one where we get to know each other on a one-on-one basis."

"That doesn't mean I don't need to be here."

I touch Virgo's arm, tugging on the sleeve of his shirt. "Virgo, 'll be okay," I assure him.

He gives me a look of displeasure, and his brows snap together. "You need me here," he insists.

"It will be okay to leave me by myself, if that's what the doctor wants us to do." Honestly, I would prefer to see the

doctor without him.

“You can just sit outside the room.” Dr. Belmont points through the door. “Literally outside the room. I’ll call you in if I need you or if *she* needs you. Can we do that?”

Virgo’s shoulders tense. “Yeah. Sure. Okay.” He looks back at me, worry filling his face, but he leaves the room and closes the door behind him.

With him gone, I turn back to face. Dr. Belmont, who is already looking at me. “I’m sorry. He can be really intense sometimes.”

“No need to apologize. I’ve come across Virgo Antonov before.” He dips his head, and I wonder if he might be someone else I know but don’t remember.

“Do I know you?” I check. “I really don’t remember anything or anyone.”

He gives me look of sympathy and shakes his head. “That’s okay. And you don’t know me. I’m just a doctor who is used to traveling in the same circles Virgo does.”

That means the mafia, I realize.

“How about you sit, and we get started?” He motions to the chair in front of him.

“Sure.”

We both sit.

“I’ll start by introducing myself properly. I’m actually from LA.” He nods. “But I have this office here in New York. Virgo has asked for me to stay for as long as necessary to help you. My appointments tend to be held at this office, but I can come to your home if that’s where you feel most comfortable.”

“Oh, that sounds good.” I return his smile. “Virgo tells me you’re the best and that you came highly recommended.”

“That’s good to hear, but I’m only the best if I can help you. I got your reports from the hospital you were in when you first woke up.”

I wasn’t aware that Virgo had gotten those, but it’s no surprise he did.

“Why don’t you tell me what’s happened to you?” Dr. Belmont nods. “Notes can be one-sided sometimes. Hearing you talk and recount your side of the story will help me to get to know you better and come to grips with what you remember. Just tell me everything.”

“Everything?” I clarify.

“You can tell me everything you feel is relevant to you. Whether it’s related to the incident or not. Or if you think it’s relevant to your life since the incident.”

“Will you be reporting back to Virgo?” I assume he will be.

“Everything you tell me can stay here in this room. I will only share what you give me permission to share. That part is entirely up to you.”

On hearing that, I feel a bit more at ease. “That’s good to know. I’m okay with you sharing details about my condition, but there are some personal things I prefer he didn’t know.” Which are all the things to do with him.

Dr. Belmont nods his understanding. “That is absolutely fine.”

“Thank you.”

“Whenever you’re ready, we can start, and if it’s okay, I’d like to record our sessions.”

“Yes, that’s fine.”

“Great.” He takes out his notebook and a tape recorder from his drawer. “Ready when you are.”

I think for a moment and decide to start at the very beginning of my memories, which was that horrible experience of waking up. I tell him about that, then everything else that happened after, my life for the last two and a half years, including the horrendous experience with Flavio and the cartel. I tell him about the debt, my decision to sign up to be an escort, and I finish with Virgo.

I’m surprised by what I share because a lot of that are probably things I shouldn’t really speak about. But I guess I feel more comfortable talking to him because I know what I say can stay here.

Once I finish, he explains the therapies he wants to use with me.

We spend well over an hour talking, and at the end, I feel lighter inside. I realize I probably needed the session more than I thought.

“I think it’s best we arrange an appointment for a week after your wedding,” he suggests.” But I’d like to schedule a phone appointment next week just to check in.”

“That sounds great.”

“I’d like you to get a journal to document all your memories, your dreams, and emotions. It sounds to me like those dreams you keep having, especially the recurring one, is your mind trying to open up. We need to pay attention to that.”

A chill runs down my spine on hearing that. “Dr. Belmont, I feel like...” I pause for a moment and steady my mind. “I feel like I witnessed something really horrible, and I’m scared to think of what that something might be. I think it’s going to break me when I remember it. *If* I ever remember it.”

“Try not to worry about that.” The sympathy returns to his expression. “Many cases like yours involve horrific incidents where the mind blocks remembering what will essentially destroy you. But we will only go as fast or slow as your mind will allow. We won’t push too hard, and we won’t fall back. Try to remember that you have support around you; you’re not alone anymore. That’s really important. This is not something that you have to deal with by yourself.”

Hearing that helps, so I nod. “Thank you.”

“Do you have any more questions for me?”

“No.” I shake my head.

Talking to him definitely helped to relieve some of the tension that has lived inside my soul, and I feel a little stronger to attempt to get my memories back.

But I still feel like I’m walking on thin ice.

Chapter Sixteen

Olivia

“Let’s take a break here and watch the ducks,” Amelia suggests, pointing to the park bench opposite the pond.

“Sure.”

We sit next to each other, setting our shopping bags by our feet.

We just spent a few hours walking around the mall, and she showed me around the city. Virgo’s guards are with us, but I’ve been thankful that they didn’t follow us around like shadows and left us to ourselves.

They’re across from us now, so if anything were to happen, they’d be over here in a flash.

“That was a really good shopping session.” Amelia beams

“It was,” I agree.

“How are you feeling?” Amelia asks.

I think of how to answer her question. I’ve had fun today with her, and this morning’s appointment with Dr. Belmont went well, but I’m still conflicted.

With the wedding only a breath away and Virgo’s nightly punishments that don’t exactly feel like punishment, it’s no wonder I’m so torn.

I’ve never met anybody who could produce such strong emotions in me in such a short space of time. It’s been barely over a week since he’s been in my life, and he’s already turned it upside down and had me thinking all sorts of different things that I shouldn’t. And then there’s the closeness, this closeness

between us that keeps increasing day by day when he insists on this ritual of play. I know he's trying to get to me, trying to break me, break my resolve, and it's working.

"I'm not sure," I reply, deciding to be honest.

"Are you nervous about seeing Cillian?"

"Yes and no. I'm looking forward to seeing him. It's the investigation I'm worried about."

"Have you spoken to Virgo?"

"He won't tell me anything. He wants me to focus on getting my memories back."

"Maybe he's right." She grits her teeth and gives me a careful look. "I wouldn't really want you worrying about the investigation when you have so much else to worry about."

"I get it, but I want to know I'm safe. Everything is unnerving. In Monte Carlo, I didn't need to be accompanied by guards everywhere I went."

"I understand. I think you should try talking to him about it again. He's not going to want you worrying about anything unnecessarily."

I wish I could agree with her. She clearly must not know Virgo as well as she thinks she does.

A man who doesn't want me to worry unnecessarily wouldn't have chained me to a wall or thought of punishing my mouth with his cock.

"Maybe," I decide to say because it's best, and she smiles.

She glances at her watch and looks back at me. "We have a little over an hour before you have to leave for Seamus. How about we sit here for another ten minutes then head over to the

museum? They have a Byzantium exhibition I'd love to book. It's in two days' time. You used to live for anything like that."

I laugh at that. "Really?" I'm pretty sure I couldn't even say the word *Byzantium*.

"Yes. You seriously did."

"I don't know if I want to go there yet. I feel like I need to study first. I don't want to look silly amongst a group of people who know their stuff."

Amelia starts laughing. "It's not going to be like that. It's just an exhibition. We should do it."

"Okay. Let's go. I guess I can rely on you to push me out of my comfort zone."

"You sure can. And don't worry about feeling uncomfortable. You're still Olivia O'Ridian."

I stare back at her and simply nod, but I can't agree.

Because I'm not that girl anymore.

* * *

I arrive at Seamus' house an hour after dropping Amelia off at her place. I'm sitting in the back of the Bugatti, gazing at the beautiful country-style home ahead of me. It has a European flair that I saw common to most of the homes in Germany and Italy.

The driveway is similar to Virgo's house with its endless length, but there's something homier about Seamus' house that I can feel from all the way out here.

We stop on the driveway and get out. One guard stays in the car while the other escorts me up to the front door. This

guard's name is Kirill. He doesn't talk much, but he seems friendly. When he speaks, it's more in Russian, so I get the impression that he doesn't speak English often.

We ring the doorbell, and not even a full minute passes before Seamus opens the door. He's dressed differently to how he was the other day.

Both times he wore a suit. Now he's wearing a sweater and cream slacks. He looks like he's going to play golf.

"Olivia," he beams heartily, and pulls me in for a hug.

"Hi, Uncle," I say. I called him that the other day, and I swore he looked like he almost cried. He has the same look now as he pulls away and stares at me.

"I'll be out here if you need me," Kirill says, backing away.

"Thanks, Kirill." Seamus dips his head, and I smile at both of them.

"Come in." Seamus ushers me inside and closes the door. "Cillian is just on a call. He'll be with us any moment."

"Oh, good. I can't wait to see him," I reply, although I'm nervous as hell.

"How are you today?"

"I'm okay. Just a little antsy."

"Try not to be."

"I was just..." Footsteps cut into my words. I look to my left, then I find him—Cillian.

Since I've been back in New York, I've only seen pictures of my brother, but seeing him in real life produces a different effect in me. He stops at the door, standing as tall as Virgo and

as proud as him, too. Something inside me warms at the sight of him, something I can't explain.

He stares back at me with parted lips, and I step away from Seamus to move toward him. The same warmth lures me closer, and suddenly, I find myself rushing forward at the same time he does.

He pulls me into his arms and holds me close.

It's strange. Even though I can't remember him, he feels like family to me. When we pull apart, he cups my face and I gaze into his eyes that look like my own. Staring at someone who shares some similarity with me offers a comfort that feels like home.

"Olivia." He says my name, and it's the first time that anyone has said it when I felt like I could be Olivia. "It's really you." He touches my face.

"Yes," I reply, and he hugs me again.

Seamus walks up to us, looking us over in awe, and nods. "I feel blessed for this moment," he says. "To have the two of you together again. Come on, let's go eat."

Seamus ushers us into the dining room, where a feast that looks fit for Thanksgiving or Christmas awaits. An assortment of food is spread out on the table, and the maids keep bringing more.

We dive into eating while we talk like nothing ever happened and like we do this all the time.

Once we're finished, Seamus leaves me to speak with Cillian.

We go out into the garden and sit by the Koi carp pond. Night is approaching, so the sky has that dusty color and the

solar panel lights have just started to come on.

We sit next to each other, and Killian looks me over, studying me again as if he's trying to work out if I'm real or not.

"So, how are you really?" he asks as if seeing straight through me. "You used to be able to tell me how you truly felt. I can see you're doing your best to put your best face forward."

"I guess I'm still transparent, then," I reply.

"It's just brother's intuition." He nods. "To look at you, I would never think you don't remember us, but I'm glad that you've allowed us to help you."

A stab of guilt tugs on my insides because that's not entirely true. If Virgo hadn't stopped me from escaping, God knows where I'd be now. Probably far away in South America.

"It's been difficult," I tell him.

"I'm sorry for what you had to go through and that I wasn't there. I can't tell anyone how bad I felt. That's why I moved back to Ireland. I couldn't stand to be here knowing what happened to you and our parents. I blame myself a lot."

"It wasn't your fault."

"Maybe so, but I should have been there that night when you were attacked."

"I think that was by design, don't you think?"

"Yeah. Someone knew I wasn't going to be there. I guess when you get your memories back, we'll know."

"You sound like Virgo." I drop his name because I want to test the water. "He thinks I'm going to get my memories back,

too.”

“Please don’t say that I sound like him.” He looks heavenward, then back at me. “But I guess he’s as hopeful as I am. How are you doing with him?”

“I’m not so sure. Do you know what happened to me in Monte Carlo?”

“Yes. It was the only way I would allow the marriage.”

Embarrassment stabs at my insides, but I keep my thoughts focused. “I made foolish mistakes, and I can’t take them back. I was in trouble, and he helped me. If not for him, then I don’t know what would have happened to me.”

“So, you’re okay with following through with this marriage? It’s in a few days, Olivia.”

“I have to be.”

“It only needs to be for a year. I don’t know if he’s told you that part, so I’m telling you. I want to make sure that you have all the information you need before you go into this.”

I wasn’t aware of the length of time, but knowing helps me put things in perspective.

“We’re doing our best to work together.” Cillian bites the inside of his lip. “Now that you’re home, our only priority is finding out what happened. We all agree that this threat needs to be dealt with so you can get back the life you once had.”

“What if I don’t remember and I decide to go down a different path? A different life outside the mafia?”

He reaches out and takes my hand. “That’s something we’ll have to respect, whatever you choose, and I will make sure you get to live whatever life you want. No matter what Virgo wants. Okay?”

“Okay.” I nod, but I know Virgo won’t let me go.

Chapter Seventeen

Virgo

I 'm at the Creed meeting, sitting in my usual chair next to my father. Dante is to my right. The men have just started filing into the room to start tonight's meeting.

Tonight is the night they find out that Olivia is back.

Apart from the people I've ruled out, I feel like I can't tell friend from foe. The men all arrive within the next minute, and all are seated, including Cillian. It's strange seeing him here amongst the group. He's sitting next to Seamus. Years ago, he was next to his father, just like I am.

It's sad how times have changed. I look around at the twelve crime lords and their subordinates who make up the Creed.

There are four Pakhan's from the Bratva including Dante, two dons from the Italian mafia, and two clans each from the Camorra, Irish mafia, and Yakuza.

Each group has taken the blood oath to live by a set of laws and principles which have bound them as allies for the last fifty years.

They're all powerful men who have agreed to share power and wealth.

But the problem is that any one of them can turn on you at any given time.

The oath we took assumes loyalty, but at the end of the day, we're all a bunch of criminals who are in it for themselves.

That's why I have to stay focused, but it's difficult when I'm so worried about Olivia.

After I spoke to Dr. Belmont yesterday, he told me there were parts of their meeting he didn't have permission to share with me. Of course, I wasn't happy about that, which was the reason why I wanted to be in the room in the first place. Then I realized I was being overprotective and overreacting again, and I needed to respect Olivia's privacy if I ever wanted her to trust me.

I can only imagine that those parts he withheld are about me, about me and her and our strange relationship, or rather our non-existent one where I'm forcing her to remember me.

Even I know what I'm doing to her isn't right, but I can't stop myself from trying to get my girl back. Dante stands, and everyone goes quiet. The silence in the room drapes over us like a blanket.

"Welcome to tonight's meeting," Dante starts. "Tonight is a special meeting where I have news to share. It's possibly the first of many, where we'll all have to put our heads together to come up with a solution to a problem that's arisen, or rather an old problem that we must resolve."

He looks at each man in turn, assuming the role of the leader. When he's like this, he's so different to the guy I'm used to when we we're just hanging out as friends. I'm glad he's leading us. I know he'll only have my best interest at heart, and I know he will do everything possible to get to the bottom of the situation.

"We will all remember the sad disappearance of the O'Ridian family, of Callahan and his wife and their daughter, Olivia. News has been brought to light about the situation, and I'm pleased to report that we have found Olivia." The moment

he says that, the room erupts in a series of whispers, coming from all except the people who already know, like my father, Seamus, and Cillian.

“You found Olivia?” asks Carlos, the head of one of the Camorra clans. He was friends with Callahan. I pay attention to him when Dante nods. I’m checking for signs of guilt but can’t find any.

But these are trained men, all of them. If spotting guilt were as easy as looking at their faces, many secrets would be spilled tonight.

“She has been found. Unfortunately, she also confirmed that her parents are dead. They were killed in an attack in Germany. I’d like to employ all the resources of the Creed as a group to finding out what happened to them. The mystery remains unsolved and our enemies at large. I think we can all agree that if this enemy was able to murder one of our own and hide for the last two and a half years, this is something we must take seriously and resolve as a priority.”

Mostly everyone nods. “Well, you have the resources of our clans,” Carlos states, looking at Malachi, the other clan leader, who is also nodding.

“We are all in this together,” Dante continues, making a point of looking at my father.

All the men agree except my father. I can see him looking straight ahead through the window as if he doesn’t have a care in the world. His posture is stiffer than the dead.

Cillian is watching him, too. As he’s at the end of the table, we can see each other quite clearly. We exchange knowing glances, and I’m sure I know what he’s thinking.

He still suspects my father. Even without evidence, he suspects he had something to do with it. And my father isn't exactly acting innocent.

"I'd like for us to discuss this tonight. We've launched a full-on investigation," Dante continues. "We're going over everything we did in the past and gathering new information. We must leave no stone unturned. We're also going to be investigating people we didn't previously speak to before, so please don't be offended if you are asked questions." Dante nods.

It's good to see the men agree.

We spend the rest of the night discussing the plans. Time wears on, and I try to keep my mind focused on the present, but I keep thinking about Olivia. I probably won't see her tonight because I'll get back too late, which might be good news for her. The other night, she seemed to warm up to me, but that has changed since. At the same time, attraction still reigns during the moments when we're together. We get married in three days. In three days, she'll be my wife. Maybe she's become withdrawn because she knows playing around won't suffice from the moment I put my ring on her finger. She's right. I'll want more.

The meeting ends, and I'm just about to leave when my father grabs my elbow.

"A word, please," he says, staring at me with his hawk eyes.

"Sure."

While the men gather for drinks in the lounge, we go downstairs into one of the halls for some privacy. I expected some kind of discussion from him or something by now, so

this is no surprise to me. He closes the door, and we walk into the hall. I follow him as he walks ahead, and we stop in the middle of the room between two walls, one with a large painting of angels and demons and the other showing a depiction of Judas' betrayal to Jesus. Both seem fitting for us.

“What do you want to talk to me about, Father?” I ask.

Father squares his shoulders. “Your marriage,” he replies.

“What about it? Decided you're not attending the wedding?”

Father smiles, revealing perfect white teeth. “Oh, I will be there just the way you want me to be. I'm very aware that you want me to be present, to witness you marrying my enemy's daughter, so you'll feel like the man who defeated me, but it's the reverse for me. To me, my son achieved something I could not. My will is still done by whatever means.”

My insides twist. Of course, he would see it like that. His glass is always full, and all his clouds are covered in silver and gold. “You think you own everyone, don't you?”

“I don't, but I know how to keep you in line. I worked hard to build our empire, and I won't see it fall for foolishness.”

“What the hell do you want to talk to me about?” I press. I'm not going to get into this with him tonight. It will only end up with me feeling more unhinged.

“I want you to divorce the girl when the year is up,” he declares, revealing he's looked into everything to do with the diamond mine and my marriage to Olivia, just like I thought he would.

“No.” I keep my voice firm. “I'm not doing that.”

“You only need to stay married to her for a year. Then I want you to get rid of her. I still want you to marry the hotel heiress. Imagine us with both assets and opportunities in our hands.” He extends an arm to either side. “The gold mine and a hotel chain. Can’t you see the benefits of having such?”

“So, you want me to take her inheritance?” I clarify.

“Of course.” He smiles and rests his hands back at his sides. “You are a blind fool, Virgo,” he sneers. “Blind to love. This problem of yours has come back to haunt you, when all I wanted was for you to be rid of it. Remember, I still have you by the neck.”

Rage courses through my blood. “Don’t you dare threaten me.” I ball my hands into fists. “Don’t you dare. This is your fault. If you were any kind of father, you wouldn’t have done what you did to me. You blackmailed me into this position, and it had a knock-on effect for Olivia. If you didn’t force me to break up with her, we wouldn’t be standing here. She would’ve been mine long ago.”

“I beg to differ,” he counters.

“You would, wouldn’t you? I protected Piper when you wanted to do nothing to the man who destroyed her. Then you punished me after, and you still want to punish me even more. No more of it, Father.”

“Olivia is just easy pussy.” Before he can say another word against her, I grab him by his neck.

“Shut the fuck up. Don’t you ever speak about her like that again.”

“Just stating the obvious,” he dares me.

“Don’t let me kill you.” I eye him seriously, showing him I am not joking. “I kept my end of your demand. I’m getting

married. You know no one else but me can run the company the way you want it. So, back the fuck off.”

I release him, shoving him hard, so he stumbles. I’ve never grabbed him like that before. I’d never think to, but it was necessary.

“I’m not happy with this, Virgo.” His voice is low.

“Deal with it,” I grate out.

“Oh, believe me, I will.” He turns and walks away. I watch him leave through the door, slam it shut. I know he meant every word he said and he’s a threat on his own. But I know to be ready for him, too. I’m about to leave as well, but then I feel eyes on me, and I look up and find Cillian standing on the upper balcony, leaning against a pole, smoking a cigar. He saw us and probably heard everything, and he’s not making any attempt to show that he wasn’t eavesdropping. I know he was, but there was nothing I said to my father that showed my support for his plans the way Cillian believed all these years. He backs away, moves into the shadows, and I leave, too. Tonight feels like the start of a war, a war I’ve always been fighting. It’s just time for others to join me.

Chapter Eighteen

Virgo

Tiredness will not be my enemy tonight.

Although I've only had a few hours' sleep, I must keep going.

Today, I was at work at the oil company from before the sun came up. Now, I'm at Club X.

I've spent the last few hours at my desk going over the rest of the police reports. I have a few more files to look through before I leave tonight. The files I'm studying contain the CSI notes from the crime scene at the O'Ridian house. I'm reading the detailed notes about what they recorded from the bodies and the CCTV. Earlier, I watched the footage they listed as high profile. Those were the recordings the cameras picked up just before the attack and after.

The before footage shows Callahan and his wife in the kitchen.

Olivia came in at one point to get a cup of coffee, then she left. When I saw her like that, it pulled on my heart. She was herself back then with nothing wrong with her and all her memories in her mind. At the time of the recording, it was exactly two hours before I broke her heart. That's the only footage I have of her and her parents. The CCTV was tampered with and did not record the places they were in the house, or it was wiped. The only other footage is the attack, which shows the guards being shot by masked men. Again, there's nothing more. Nothing that shows the men getting inside the house or out. Like with all the other files and reports, I've seen these before, but I'm going through them

again. Outside of Olivia's mind, I keep thinking that the secret I seek lies in the evidence that was collected after the attack at the scene of the crime. So far, I haven't found anything, but I'm going to keep looking.

A knock sounds on my open door, and I lift my head to find Cillian. He gives me a crooked smile and dips his head.

"Hey," he says, "I have a possible lead. Also thought it'd be good to talk to you." Any kind of lead is good in my book.

"What did you find?" I ask.

Cillian walks in and pulls up the chair in front of me. "I've managed to track down Kevin and a man called Freddy, another possible member of the team who helped my father. I'll have to go to England. I'm planning to leave the day of the wedding. I don't really know what I'll find, if anything, but it's easier if I'm there."

"Well, hopefully, it will lead us somewhere."

"Hopefully." He cracks his knuckles. "The difficulty is finding out what the guys knew. Like Olivia said, my father kept information to a minimum. Some people he worked with didn't even know who he was."

"I get it." I nod, understanding. "We do similar things. It's just difficult in times like these."

"Exactly," Cillian agrees.

It's strange, the two of us sitting here. We haven't done that since high school.

"Well, that sounds promising."

"God, I hope so. We need something more than what we have. How are things on your end?"

“The same,” I reply.

He looks at the computer. “I guess I feel more assured knowing you’re checking things out. Not many people have your skills.”

I can’t remember the last time Cillian O’Ridian paid me a compliment.

“Is that what you wanted to talk about? I know it’s not.”

“No, there’s more.”

“What else could there be? I thought you heard everything last night. Looked like you chose a good spot to listen in.” I’ve never been one to beat around the bush. I always launch in when I have questions. I think people appreciate me for it. Cillian seems to because he smiles, and then he reaches across my desk to take a cigar. He lights up as if it’s his office, and I allow him. His openness is a sign the dust might be settling in the feud between us.

“It was interesting to see you stand up to your old man like that.” He nods. “It’s about damn time.”

“You know I couldn’t before. Especially that last time.”

Cillian is the first person I told about what my father did and the blackmail to do with my sister. The next person to know was Dante.

Anyone who knows me would realize that was odd because I tell Dante everything. I never told him, though, until I had to, probably for his safety, but mostly because of my guilt. He simply believed I lived up my father’s ass and did everything he told me to do all for the sake of power. I didn’t, but I suppose I allowed him to believe what he wanted to believe, too.

With Cillian, it was different. I told him because I wanted to explain my part and the reason for his sister being there on the day her parents were attacked.

“It’s still about time,” Cillian insists. “There’s stuff you haven’t told Olivia. She still doesn’t seem to know why she was at my parents’ house at the time of the attack. I take it you didn’t tell her what happened between you and Amelia, or what you did, so I didn’t.”

“I’m going to, but now’s not the right time.”

“I couldn’t agree more, but…” He raises a finger. “It’s not the kind of thing I think she should remember on her own. You never can tell what that might do to her.”

“I know. I feel a coward every time I think about it, but I need her to trust me first, so she understands.”

“I think she’ll understand your part, but I worry about her friendship with Amelia.”

“Me too, but she seems good for her. She’s comfortable with Amelia in ways she isn’t with anyone else.”

“I just want to make sure she’s happy.”

“I’ll take care of her, Cillian.”

“I know you will, but there is too much darkness and bad blood in the past between our families. I never wanted her to be part of that. At the same time, I accepted long ago that I would never force her to marry somebody she didn’t want to be with. But now you have.”

“That’s the way you see it,” I say, although I know he’s right.

“It is what it is, Virgo. I get that you saved her in Monte Carlo, and I understand that you wouldn’t have wanted to

marry somebody your father picked for you, but I stand by my word that this is too much for Olivia. In ways, she might seem like the same person, but she isn't. She spoke to me the other day and expressed the possibility of a life outside of our ways. I'm open to it if that is what she wants. I think you should be open to that, too. From what she said, I could tell quite clearly that she wants out."

"If she remembered who she was, she wouldn't want out," I point out. "I owe it to her to keep trying."

"No, Virgo," he protests. "If you love her like you say you do, then you owe it to her to do what's best for her." He stands and leans over to put out his cigar. "If you are best for her, then let her choose you. Let it be her choice. See you later."

I don't answer. I allow him to walk out, and I think about his words.

Let her choose me. That's exactly the thing I'm worried about. Because I know she won't.

* * *

I get home three hours later. Olivia would've gone to sleep long ago. She's lying in bed on her side with her hair sprawled out around her. It looks beautiful against the moonlight, just like her. She looks like a dream or fantasy. I can't count the times I imagined her like this in my bed over the last few years.

Now Cillian's words come back to haunt me the moment I sit next to her.

Maybe I could let her go if I didn't know she has something stopping her from remembering the life she once

lived, the life where she was in love with her career and in love with me.

I wouldn't force her to love me if I knew she didn't or hadn't before.

I pick up a lock of hair and allow the end to curl around my thumb.

I have to believe that I am best for her. Not even the universe could be this cruel to let me find her in a one-in-a-million chance, only to let her go. But if the universe wants to fight me, then I'll fight it, too. I'm the kind of guy who will destroy the world just to have her.

I know no other way.

Chapter Nineteen

Olivia

It's finally here.

My wedding day.

I'm in the bridal suite at Oheka Castle, one of the wedding destinations people dream about.

While Amelia does the finishing touches to my makeup, I stare at myself in the full-length mirror taking in my gorgeous wedding dress.

It's absolutely beautiful. The design has an elegant strapless bodice speckled with sparkling diamonds and a flowing skirt.

Amelia has given me smoky eyes which accentuate the long beach waves the stylist placed my hair in.

As I stare at myself, I have that feeling again, and I can't believe I'm a bride, or that this is really happening.

Within the next hour, I will become Olivia Antonov. I was just getting used to being Olivia O'Ridian. I was her for all of ten days.

Now my name is changing again.

This is a day most women dream of, but I still have that disconnected feeling where I don't feel like I belong.

And now I'll have a husband.

A guy I used to be insanely in love with, but now I can't remember him. The last few nights with him have only served to drive me crazy.

I'm sure tonight will be the night when that changes and we change, too.

"All done." Amelia announces with delight, pulling me from my sordid thoughts.

I give her a grateful smile and look at myself again when she steps away to give me a better view. "Thank you. I love it."

"Thanks for allowing me to do your makeup."

"It was fun, and it feels like a good luck charm."

She laughs. "You definitely don't need luck. But what you do need is these."

She walks over to the dressing table and picks up the bouquet of white Calla lilies.

"Thank you." I take them from her when she hands them to me.

"You are so welcome. I know you're nervous, but I'm so happy to be part of this day. When we were little, we used to always play dress-up and pretend we were at each other's weddings. Now we're doing it for real." Her smile spreads right to her eyes.

"I wish I could remember."

"I have hope you will, but if you don't, we have today. And I know you'll be okay." She sounds so sure. I decide to borrow some of her enthusiasm. "I'm so happy for you."

There's a knock at the door before I can answer. Eden walks in.

She's usually in her maid's uniform, but today she's dressed in a beige suit that compliments her curvy figure. Her gray hair is rolled into a neat chignon and a chip hat placed in the center with blue peacock feathers adorning the center.

"Wow, you look absolutely stunning, dear," she beams in a melodious voice while looking me over with fascination.

"Thanks to you guys." It was Eden who picked this dress for me.

"Your mother would have loved to see you like this." Eden brings her hands to her cheeks and moves closer to give me a little hug.

"She would," Amelia agrees. "I'm sure she's smiling down at you right now feeling proud."

"I couldn't agree more," Eden concedes.

Hearing them speak so fondly about my mother when I can't even remember her makes me feel sad. According to everything Seamus and Cillian told me, I know they're right.

"Well, they're ready for you." Eden composes herself. "Your groom awaits. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Then let's go."

The three of us walk through the door. Eden leads us to a massive hall with stained glass windows, and I see Seamus waiting for me. He's walking me down the aisle. I don't have a massive wedding party. Only Amelia and Eden.

There are friends from high school who are in attendance, but I haven't bonded with them the way I have with Amelia.

Seamus smiles and greets me with a hug. On his face is a proud father look.

“Look at you. You look breathtaking.” He looks me over with that good-natured warmth.

“Thank you.”

“I’m so glad I get to do this.”

“Me too.”

He links his arm with mine, and moments later, the two oakwood doors to the hall open before us and the violinists start playing the Wedding March.

The moment we walk in, my eyes find Virgo standing at the head of the room with Dante on his left and the priest on his right.

My heart flutters at the sight of him standing there looking so handsome in his suit and staring at me as if I’m the most important thing in his world.

My mind fazes out as I realize I am. But I still feel like an imposter wearing someone else’s skin and like I stole this man from the woman he remembers me to be.

I switch my gaze from him and look at my side of the family. I find Cillian first, sitting ahead in the front row along with a few other relatives I recognize from pictures Seamus showed me. But when we reach the middle of the hall, I feel a different set of eyes on me. Intense eyes of hatred.

They’re coming from Virgo’s side of the family on our left.

I’m not surprised when I look there and find his father staring at me with all the revulsion in the world. He’s looking at me as if I’m his enemy, and if he could, he wouldn’t just kill me; he’d grind my bones to powder and allow the wind to

carry it out to sea. The dark blonde woman next to him is Virgo's mother. She gives me the same evil look. Piper is next to her. She's smiling at me, but I can tell she's uncomfortable.

Seamus tugs on my arm, a silent notion to stay focused.

I look away from them and back to Virgo just before we reach him and Seamus hands me over to him.

Virgo takes my hand, and the next moments feel like time freezes and I'm watching everything as if I'm having an out-of-body experience.

Before I know it, we're taking our vows. The rings are exchanged, then the priest pronounces us husband and wife.

"You may now kiss the bride," he declares.

Virgo lowers his head to kiss me. When his lips touch mine, I'm taken away to that place where all I feel is him.

* * *

The moment night falls, Virgo comes to find me.

He cuts in, slipping his arm around my waist while I'm talking to five of my friends from high school. Amelia was helping us reconnect.

"Time to go home, *wife*," Virgo whispers into my ear.

At the mention of that word—wife—and in that low sensual tenor that makes his Russian accent deeper and sexier, my nerves tingle. But not with anxiety. It's with the same desire that's been building all week.

I notice Amelia watching us, so I smile back at her and the other girls.

"See you all later. Thank you for coming," I tell them.

“Go, have fun with your husband.” Amelia giggles.

Virgo barely waits for the rest of them to reply before he whisks me away keeping his arm around my waist.

About an hour ago, I noticed him watching me while he was talking with Dante and few business associates. The look in his eyes held the promise of soon.

I’ve had this part of the evening in my mind all day knowing we’d probably stay as long as we had to, then leave.

Honestly, I thought we would have left well before now, and I hoped we would.

Not because I’m eager to jump into bed with Virgo, but it was overwhelming to be around so many people who knew me when I don’t remember them.

Most of our family also left earlier.

Like his parents. They were the first to leave. No surprise there. They left as soon as the ceremony ended.

Cillian left after the ceremony, too, but he explained he had to head to England as a matter of urgency to check something out in regard to the investigation. He didn’t give me any more details than that, but of course I worried.

Seamus left an hour ago, along with Piper. I got to reconnect with her a little and meet her husband. Her presence softened the harsh vibe of tension that came with her parents and other members of the Antonov family.

Now we’ve reached this point of the evening, in what feels like a dark, twisted fairytale, about to cross another line. One Virgo is so eager to jump over, he’s walking at the speed of light.

When we reach the wide stone steps, I almost trip. It's my heels. Normally, I'm wear pumps or mules.

Virgo steadies me.

"We don't have to be in such a hurry." I glance at him.

"Yes, we do." With a sly grin, he surprises me by scooping me up and carrying me. "Things change tonight, *wife*. No more playing."

Hearing him call me wife again sends a bolt of heat straight to my core. He amplifies the feeling when he kisses the side of my neck, making my traitorous body crave more.

"You're not going to resist me tonight, or act like you don't enjoy me."

"What if I don't?" I challenge.

"We both know that's a lie." A devilish smile lights up his handsome face that has that God of War vibe again in the moonlight.

We continue to the car and get in, then we're off on the journey home.

Tonight, we're in a Maybach. The other day, it was a Bugatti when we went to see Dr. Belmont. I haven't seen the full range of Virgo's cars yet, but I'm aware he owns several luxury and fast cars. Eden told me it's something he's into.

But this is only the second time Virgo has driven me anywhere. I'm always with his drivers or guards, or both.

We reach home in record time, barely taking half an hour for a journey that should have been roughly an hour.

The moment we get inside the house, the predatory look of seduction returns to my husband's face.

My husband.

That's the first time I've thought of him as such, even though he's been calling me wife.

We moved so fast since Monte Carlo. The short space of time that has passed is almost unbelievable, yet so much has happened it feels like a century.

"Upstairs, *now*." Virgo nuzzles his face into the crook of my neck and guides me up to the bedroom he christened ours.

We walk in, and he turns me to face him.

He takes a step back to observe me, and I wonder what he sees and craves. Me? Or the other Olivia?

When he calls me his wife, is he thinking of me, the broken woman standing before him?

Or her?

Has the fantasy of having his girlfriend back blinded his mind so much that he's blind to what's in front of him?

Can't he see that although I may wear her face, look like her, and sound like her, I don't measure up?

There's no comparison between her and me. I'm like the angel who flew too close to the sun and got burned so badly, there's nothing left of my wings.

Yet... the look the beautiful Russian god is giving me would make me almost believe he thinks I'm everything. The most important thing in his world.

He comes back to me, closing the space between us, and cups my face.

"I've waited for so long for this day," he mutters.

“But I’m different.” My voice is a little higher than a whisper, revealing the angst I feel stirring inside me.

Virgo shakes his head. “No. Not at all.”

He moves in to give me a hungry kiss, igniting my senses with fire.

He pulls me closer, and I feel his cock, thick, heavy, and hard between us.

Feeling him and tasting his desire for me switches off my worries and awakens the desire I’ve been trying so hard to control, so I kiss him back with the same intensity, and it’s clear, oh so clear, that I want him, too. I can’t even try to resist or hide it.

Lord knows I’ve tried not to want him. I even tried to escape him, but every time, I fail and think I would have always failed, because the part of me that wants him won’t allow me to win. Now I can think of nothing but what he’ll feel like inside me.

He unzips my dress and shoves it down my body, almost tearing it off. It has a built-in bra, so all I have on underneath are my panties and my heels.

Leaving my lips, he kisses his way down my neck, then my chest, until he reaches my breasts and pauses to suck my nipples.

I grip his wide, powerful shoulders as the sweet pleasure makes my head spin and I nearly fall over.

Moans of pleasure pour from my lips as wildfire courses through me, stirring forbidden need in my pussy.

He sucks my breasts until they’re both aching, then he stops to take off his clothes, too, allowing his massive,

perfectly erect cock to jut free and hang between his legs.

A wicked smile lights up his face, and he picks me up to carry me over to the bed.

My back connects with the silk of the sheets, and he lowers his face to my pussy to kiss my sex through the lace of my panties.

“The heels stay on for round one.” His voice is a rough rumble of sexual need.

“Round one?” I breathe past the thick arousal in my throat.

“Round one, Zayka.” He rolls my panties down my legs and lowers his mouth to lick my pussy. “I plan to fuck you all night. We have a lot of time to make up for.”

He runs his hands over my body and returns to my pussy so he can eat me out.

Convulsive waves wrack my body with every stroke of his tongue, and I arch into the bed, feeling the rise of a vicious orgasm.

“Oh my God!” I cry out.

“Oh, we’re just getting started, wife.” Virgo smiles down at me, fascinated by watching me unravel and come undone in his arms.

He returns to his wild suckle on my pussy, tasting and teasing my clit with his tongue.

Then I come. I come with a desperate moan, digging my heels into the bed.

“Next time, you come on my cock.”

I don’t get to talk. I don’t think I could.

The next second sees him plunging his thick, hard cock deep inside my body as I'm still coming.

My body is so ready for him that he slides right into me, buried to the hilt so he's balls deep.

And God... it feels so good. I can tell it feels good for him, too, because of the intensity of the pleasure on his face.

I've never seen him look like that.

"Fuck," he grates out and starts pumping into me. Moments later, I'm adrift in a sea of pleasure, caught between desire and the way he claims my body with his merciless pounds.

My body bows to the unforgiving sensation that consumes every inch of me, setting me on fire.

His powerful thrusts wrack my body, fracturing me from reality, and I want to stay here in this place he's taken me where I know no other feeling but the raw ecstasy flowing through my blood.

"Wrap your legs around me, Zayka," he groans. "I want to feel your heels digging into my back."

I do as he says, then he speeds up, taking me from having sex to fucking.

Hard-core fucking that pulls orgasm after orgasm from deep inside my soul while cries of pleasure fall from my lips.

"Virgo!" I scream when I come again.

His response is to continue his relentless pounding, fucking me angrily as if he's enraged with the universe for the years we've spent apart and he's laughing in the face of all the gods who kept us apart.

A moment of delirium clouds my mind, and I feel like I'm going to black out from the power of the pleasure pulsing through me.

But then his cock hardens against my walls, and he comes. His release of hot virile cum floods my passage, causing I come again, too.

My body tingles like a thousand bees are humming beneath my skin. The feeling subsides when his pumps slow and he stops.

He pulls out and lowers his forehead to press against mine.

We stay like that a few moments, staring deep into each other's eyes, our bodies dripping with sweat.

Until he kisses me again and a different type of hunger invades us. One where we can't get enough of each other.

I know it, and he knows it, too.

No words are spoken between us.

Not one. We both allow our bodies to do the talking.

And soon, my husband is inside me again.

Chapter Twenty

Virgo

Wedding present for you, boss. Aiden Romanov just picked up Flavio in L.A. for stealing from his wife. I contacted Aiden and told him what Flavio did to Olivia. He wants to know what you want to do with him.

I smile at the text message that's just come through from Billy and lean against the kitchen wall, contemplating the best recourse.

Aiden Romanov is a longtime associate of mine and one of our allies in the Bratva. He's the Pakhan of the Voirik Brotherhood and into the club scene like me.

Funnily enough, his wife is also called Olivia.

Even though Flavio stole from Aiden's wife, it is customary among us to check in with the first person your prisoner wronged to see if he wants to dole out the mode of punishment.

But as Aiden is as ruthless and fucked up as me, I can think of no better way to punish Flavio than allowing Aiden to deal with him.

I text back:

Tell Aiden to do whatever he sees fit, but make sure Flavio knows Alice sends her love.

I hate using that name—Alice—but I do on this occasion because that's the name Flavio will know Olivia by. And the

motherfucker will surely get what's coming to him because I practically signed his fucking death certificate.

I want to fly out to L.A. and kill his ass myself for what he did to Olivia, but death is too good for some people. Sometimes, it's better to punish with torture.

That's exactly what Aiden will do to him until he begs for death.

Noted, boss.

I set my phone on the countertop.

At least I have a small win. It's a drop in the ocean in comparison to what I have ahead of me. And also another reason I'm not hopping on my jet to kill Flavio.

There are more important things to focus on here.

Like my wife.

My wife.

My wife, who I devoured all night with such a fierce intensity my fucking dick is raw. Not to mention that my back is fucked, too, from having her heels embedded in my skin.

Pain was pleasure and pleasure pain, then insanity came and stole us.

I married the girl of my dreams.

But I know we don't have the fairytale ending she dreamed of.

The ending I allowed myself to dream of, too.

I knew long ago that there was no one else for me but her, but when our families fell out, the dream slipped away from me, and I knew I had to fight to keep it alive.

Then fate struck in the worst way and took her away from me.

But she didn't die.

I still have part of the dream. I just have to fight for the rest of it.

That's why I've thought of taking her away for the next two days. Two days at a beach house in the Hamptons. It's four in the morning, but I just booked it.

We leave later today. I got up after Olivia fell asleep and did some work so I wouldn't fall behind.

The idea is as spontaneous as everything else I've done, and the timing might suck, but I don't want her to look back at our wedding and think of the sad parts.

It's not the honeymoon I saw in my dreams, but it's something for the moment. The Hamptons is just two hours away from us. If I'm needed back here, I can be here.

I plan to make it up to her with a real honeymoon the first chance we get. I just wouldn't feel comfortable going anywhere else, or too far, during this time.

And not while my mind is so preoccupied. You can't have fun when you have danger hanging over your head.

The slight pad of footsteps cuts into my thoughts. They're careful and quiet but there.

It's not Eden. There's no way she would be up at this hour for anything.

Moments later, my wife enters the kitchen, and my dick goes instantly hard, wanting her all over again.

She doesn't see me straightaway because I have the light dimmed down so it almost looks like it's off.

I'm also in the corner.

I watch her and wonder if she's going to head to the basement again and try to escape me, mere hours after we got married.

She's not dressed like she is. A flimsy nightshirt covers her body. But that might just be a prop for her plan.

I never know what her state of mind is. The moments when I get close are when I'm tasting her. Earlier, when I was inside her, I felt her, but she never allows me into her mind.

I'm sure she knows by now that she wouldn't have succeeded that escape attempt. The woods she hoped to run into are also guarded and have cameras, but that's not information I share with anyone. Not even Eden. That's for her safety, too.

When Olivia walks over to the cupboard and takes out the tin of crackers, I almost sigh with relief.

But when I push away from the wall, I startle her, and she drops the tin and the crackers smash all over the floor.

I turn up the light, brightening the room, and stare back at her clutching her heart.

"Sorry," I say, the word feeling strange on my tongue because I rarely say it in that capacity.

"You scared me half to death," she gasps.

I move toward her, crouch down, and pick up the tin.

"Going on a walkabout again?" I push to my feet, towering her. She's so tiny next to me, and with her hair scooped up in a

ponytail, she looks teenage young.

“I was hungry.”

“I guess I wore you out.” I give her a wicked grin. “Sit. I’ll get you some more crackers.”

She seems hesitant at first but then nods. “Thanks.”

While she makes her way to the breakfast table and sits, I grab her crackers and the cheeseboard. Years ago, she used to snack on stuff like this.

I set it before her, and she smiles back at me.

She starts cutting slices of the cheese while I clear up the split crackers on the floor.

I feel her gaze on me, though.

“How come you’re up so early?” she asks in a soft voice, still filled with sleep and an undertone of pleasure.

I dispose of the crackers in the bin and walk over to the counter opposite her.

“Business.”

“What kind of business?”

I smile at the challenge in her tone and lean against the countertop.

She looks me over, her eyes scanning the tattoos on my bare chest. All I’m wearing is a pair of joggers. I was going to head out for a walk, but now that she’s here, I have better ideas.

“Punishing your ex for his heinous crimes.”

She stills, her eyes pop wide, and her mouth drops. We’ve never spoken about Flavio outside her jail cell, and when we

did, she was uncomfortable talking about him.

“You found him?”

“I did.”

“I didn’t know you were looking.”

“Of course, I was.”

She bites the inside of her lip. “What are you going to do with him?”

I’m glad she asks the question like that. Like she knows I’ll rain hell on him.

“I have a friend taking care of him. Let’s just say no one will ever have to worry about him again.”

Panic flickers in her eyes, and a pang of envy stabs into me. Flavio had her while she was in this state. She was able to open herself to a relationship with him.

If I’d found her while she was still with him, I would have still found a way to take her.

“Don’t tell me you feel sorry for him?”

“No. Just sorry I met him.”

“Are you sure? You must have loved him at one point or another.” She knows exactly what I’m trying to ask her without asking—*did you love him?*

“No. I didn’t love him.”

“Good, because I won’t share you with anyone, *wife*. Not even your mind, so you can forget him now.” I grin back at her with seduction. “Understand?”

“Yes.”

I close the distance between, surprising her by lifting her onto the tabletop, then surprise her again by picking up a cracker and holding it near her mouth so she can eat it.

“You’re going to feed me?”

“Yes. It gives me an excuse to touch you in some way. Now open your mouth.”

She bites back a smile and opens her mouth. I put the cracker in and press a finger to her lips, caressing the delicate outline for a few brief moments before she chews.

“Good?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“I’m taking you away for two days.”

A spark of excitement forms in her eyes. “Away? Like a honeymoon?”

“A mini one.”

“I didn’t think we were going anywhere.”

“We need to. I think the break will do you some good. We’ll be away until Tuesday.”

“Where are we going?”

“A beach house in the Hamptons. It will do for now.” I press my lips to hers lightly and briefly.

“Is anyone else coming with us?”

“No. Just you and me. But it’s just you and me now.” I tug on her nightshirt, deciding I’ve waited long enough. I need her again. “I could fuck you on this table, and no one would dare interrupt us.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” I brush my nose along hers and bend to suck her hard nipples through the fabric of her shirt. “Why don’t you give me a proper taste?”

I return to her left breast and suck on it until the shirt is wet. The soft arch of her back tells me she’s mine again.

“Don’t keep me waiting,” I taunt.

She pulls off the nightshirt, revealing her nakedness. She’s just as bare as I left her in the bed.

I smile and continue my suckle of her breasts, loving the hardness of her nipples against my tongue.

Like earlier, I kiss my way down to her pussy, then spread her legs so I can feast on her all over again.

I run my fingers over her soaking pussy, loving how wet she is for me.

Her sweet nectar covers my fingers as I pump in and out of her passage, producing moans of delight from her gorgeous mouth.

She’s a beautiful sight to behold, sitting on top of the table with her full, round breasts bouncing with every thrust of my tongue into her pussy.

The ache in my cock signals my need for her and that I might blow my load from just looking at her if I’m not careful.

Since I want her to come on my dick again, I stand and shove my pants down my legs.

Olivia’s eyes go straight to my already erect cock, and I grin back at her.

“Ready again?”

“Yes,” she moans.

“Good girl.”

I grab her thighs and bury myself deep inside her again, molding her soft body around the granite hardness of mine.
Owning her.

Owning her the way I did before.

Every thrust into her makes me hungry for more and more and more, as if I’ve been injected with insanity.

I fuck her into the table, relentlessly, never holding back. And neither does she.

She moves into me, too, showing me she wants me, and eventually, I pick her up so she can wrap her legs around me. Then I move us over to the wall so I can fuck her against it.

“YA budu vseгда tebya khotet,” I mutter in Russian into her ear.

“Tell me what you said,” she moans, her voice overflowing with sexual hunger as she tightens her grip around my neck.

“I will always want you.”

She stares back at me while I move inside her, and we move toward each other at the same time for a kiss.

I feel her again. The real her.

The real her who wants me just as badly as this version of her that doesn’t remember me.

It turns out that never mattered.

It didn’t matter to me either.

I take her back to bed.

* * *

The soft buzz of my phone pulls me from a deep sleep. I open my eyes and see it's morning, bright morning. I can't even remember falling asleep.

I reach for the phone on the nightstand. When I see it's Dante, I realize it must be important.

It's just past nine. He wouldn't normally call me at this hour on a Sunday morning, and I don't think he would call me the day after my wedding if he didn't have news.

I pull on my pants, glance at Olivia, who's still asleep, then make my way outside the room onto the landing to take the call.

I answer when I'm a few paces away from the room.

"Hey, Dante."

"Sorry to disturb you today of all days," he begins, "but I have news I thought you'd like to hear."

"What's happened?"

"Your facial recognition system pulled up a meeting between Evan St. John and Artemis Bane. The meeting occurred the day before the O'Ridian's disappearance. The recording was of them in an underground boxing facility in Boston."

My interest piques through the roof. Evan St. John was Callahan O'Ridian's right-hand man, and Artemis Bain is a known enemy to the O'Ridians. He usually works with black market dealers across Europe.

He had a run-in with Callahan some time ago when they fell out over a business deal.

He's the last person who should be meeting with Evan.

Evan, the same Evan who provided so much information to me when the O'Ridians disappeared. But it makes sense now if he was trying to cover himself.

"Jesus, Dante," I sigh. "This definitely sounds like we got something."

"I think so. Evan is currently on a business trip in Florida. He won't be back until early next week. We could bring him in for questioning, but I think it might be wise to wait until he gets back, just so we don't give him a heads-up so he can run or alert anybody else. In the meantime, we can watch him, but it's up to you."

I nod, although he can't see me. "Yes. Let's definitely do that. We can pick him up from the airport the minute he lands."

"Sure thing. That's it from me. I'll let you know if anything else happens, so you can focus your wife. I got things covered here." There's a smile in his voice. I told him about the mini trip, and he thought it was a good idea.

"Thanks. Speak to you later."

We hang up, and I rest my hands on the banister. This news of Evan sounds like light at the end of the tunnel.

Hopefully, that light will lead us to what we seek.

Chapter Twenty-One

Olivia

We left the house half an hour ago to set off on our journey to the beach house in the Hamptons.

As we drove on the open road, I watched the scenery change from the busy New York traffic to the scenic countryside. I've been lost in my thoughts about Virgo and me.

My thoughts about us have even overshadowed getting my memories back and the investigation about my family.

Just like I knew it would, last night changed me in all the ways I predicted, and I know the closer we get to our destination for this little trip of ours, the deeper I'll feel for him.

We're going to be away for two and a half days.

It will be two and a half days and two nights of nothing but us. Seeing him all the time will be quite unlike the last twelve days, when I only saw him at different points in the day.

"Relax," Virgo says, glancing away from the road to look at me. "I don't want your head to explode."

"I was just thinking." I give him a little smile.

"About what?"

"About what it will be like to have a break from everything." I'm not used to taking breaks. I haven't been on anything called a vacation in the last two and a half years. It's just been go, go, go. I might've taken days here and there in different cities I stayed in to sightsee, but I wouldn't call that vacation.

“Tell me what’s on your mind.”

I stare at him for a moment and sift through the million things living in my head about us.

“Is this beach house somewhere we’ve been before?” It might seem weird, but talking about past places I’ve been to is one of the things that kind of bother me. I understand why everyone does it, but more often than not, it makes me feel bad that I just can’t remember.

“No,” he replies. “I wanted to create new memories with you.” His answer surprises me.

“Really?”

“Yes. The past was great, and we visited some amazing places, but this is me moving forward with you.”

A look of longing enters his eyes before he returns his focus to the road.

I don’t look away from him, though part of me wants to ask if he’s sure he wants to move forward with this version of me. But I keep the words from spilling out of my mind.

“Doesn’t it bother you that I’m different?” I ask instead, but I almost sound like I’m repeating the same thing from last night.

“Just because you can’t remember your life doesn’t make you different. Not remembering doesn’t change the past.”

“But doesn’t the past shape your future?” I saw a quote like that written somewhere, and I strongly believe it. I believe that you go through things in your past, learn from them, and they define you.

“Your past is in you, Olivia.” Virgo sounds as if those words are the truest thing he’s ever spoken. “It’s a part of you.

Nothing can change that. Not even forgetting.”

“The Olivia you knew did so much. I can’t do any of that stuff as she did. Like Harvard. God, that feels like such a dream. I remember when I was working at the coffee house in Monte Carlo, I was so happy to just have a stable job. I can’t imagine doing anything academic that required the level of skill people tell me I used to have, and I definitely can’t imagine being that smart.” I feel like I’m opening up, probably in ways that I haven’t with Amelia.

“You’re the same Olivia.” He nods. “I think the fact that you managed to hide and keep yourself safe for two and a half years is a big deal you shouldn’t ignore, especially with somebody like me looking for you.”

“I suppose so.” I see what he means.

“And I see you,” he states.

“What do you mean?”

“I can still see you. When I look at you, I see the same person inside. She’s just been through different, difficult things. She grew up and became even more amazing than anyone ever thought. That’s the girl I looked for and found.” His words warm my heart in a way I can’t describe other than to say that he’s really looking at me. Not thinking of me as my old self.

“That means a lot.” I give him a soft smile of appreciation.

“It’s the truth, Zayka.” He looks away and focuses on the road again.

My thoughts go back to us and this new path I’m on where I have a husband.

We arrive at the beach house an hour later, and it's beautiful. I get out of the car, and my eyes are glued to the beautiful crystal-blue sea ahead of us. I love the sea in Monte Carlo, but this is different. This has an idyllic feel to it that makes you want to immerse yourself in the water.

"You like it?" Virgo asks.

"I do. It looks great." I switch my gaze to the beach house, which is a two-story modern-looking house with a porch. The paths around it all lead down to the sandy beach, where the waves breathe in and out against the shore.

Virgo walks around to me. "Let's grab something to eat. Then we'll go out on the sea and do some swimming." He points to a sailboat, and I gasp.

"I don't mind going out on the boat, but I don't swim."

"Is that because you don't want to or *think* you can't?"

I chuckle. "I'm not sure. I don't think I can, so I haven't tried."

"Don't worry. I'll teach you. *Again.*"

"Again?" I widen my eyes. "You taught me to swim before?"

"Yes. You were convinced that goblins live in the water. You'd only ever get in with me."

"Goblins?" I laugh.

"You were seven, but that's how I ended up teaching you to swim, and you're very good at it. You used to be on the swim team in high school."

"My God, another thing I didn't know about myself."

“And there’s so much more. Come on, let’s go.” He extends his hand to me.

I stare down at it and study at the wedding band around his finger, the same as mine.

I give him my hand. As he covers it with his, warmth sinks into me, and I feel like I’d follow him wherever he wanted me to go.

* * *

Being out on the water with Virgo is like nothing else.

After we had a big feast prepared by Janice, a gourmet chef Virgo hired, we headed out in the sailboat. Now we’re in the middle of the sea and so far away from land that I can’t see the beach house. All around me is blue. I’ve got my arms secured around his neck while we drift with the waves.

Virgo has taught me a few things, and now I can float, but I don’t trust myself to let go of him or move too far away from him.

“Just keep steady.” He smiles.

“I’m scared I’m going to sink.” I chuckle, holding tighter.

“You won’t sink.” He laughs. “I won’t let you.”

“How do people even do this? It feels like something else entirely.”

“Because it is.” He smirks. “But you’ll get it. It’s just a matter of allowing your body to adapt to the water and then trusting that you won’t sink or get eaten by water goblins.”

I laugh, really laugh at that dig on my childhood horror.

He smiles, too. “Come on, let’s dive down. You’ll love it.”

“Dive down?” I shriek. “Oh, no, no, no. I don’t think we should do that. This is enough.” A huge wave splashes against me, and I secure myself closer to him.

“How about you just trust me? We used to swim like this all the time.”

“We did?”

“Yes, we did.” He holds my gaze. “So, trust me.”

I take note of the way he says *trust me*. It holds significance because weeks ago, I didn’t. I wasn’t anything close to trusting him or anyone.

Right now, I would say he’s the only person I trust outside of Seamus, Cillian, and Amelia.

But the trust I have for him is a little more than that. He’s my husband.

“Ready?” He stares back at me.

“Okay.”

His eyes brighten. “Keep your arms around my neck. I’m going to flip you onto my back. You mustn’t let go, but if you do, I still got you.”

“Shouldn’t we have goggles or something for this?” I look around.

“No, you’ll be fine. You just need to blink when you get in the water. It’ll feel uncomfortable at first, but then your eyes will adjust.”

“Virgo, if I go blind, I’ll blame you,” I joke.

He rolls his eyes at me. “You won’t go blind. You ready?”

“No. Of course, I’m not ready, but yeah, I guess I am.” I laugh.

He shuffles me around so that I'm on his back, then he makes sure that my arms are secured around him.

“Okay, we're going to go now. Get ready to hold your breath.”

“Alright.” I wince.

“Now!” he shouts.

I take a huge gulp of air and close my eyes, screwing them shut as he dives down deep into the water.

The whoosh of waves hits my face, but there's something soothing about it. And familiar.

As that feeling of familiarity hits me, I open my eyes and blink a few times. It's as uncomfortable as he said it would be, but that passes in a few seconds, and I can see.

Virgo swims deeper, until we're amongst a school of silvery-looking fish. Seeing them fluttering by amongst the seagrass makes me feel like I'm in Atlantis or one of those magical sea worlds you hear about.

He swims toward them, and they scatter like mice.

We stay down there for a minute, before he propels us back up to the surface.

When we break through, I take a gulp of air and tighten my grip around his neck.

“You okay?” he asks.

“Yes, that was great. I saw the fish.”

“Want to go again?”

“Yes.” I sound more excited this time.

“Ready?” he announces and down we go again.

This time, we stay a little bit longer, and I realize that my lungs were made for this. His words from before about the past being part of me feel true, as my body feels as if it did this before and doing it again is effortless.

On the third go, we stay even longer, and I even let go of his neck, managing to swim down amongst the fish. Soon, I don't need to hold on to him for as long.

We spend the rest of the time frolicking in the water as if we don't have a care in the world besides ourselves.

Just before it gets darker, we dive down once more, and when we come back up, Virgo pulls me toward him and suddenly, we both start laughing.

Nothing was funny. Neither of us said anything. The laughter comes from the joy of hanging out together.

When it subsides, he cups my face, guiding me to his lips for a tender kiss.

It's a kiss too soft and gentle for us, gentle for him, but I like this side of him.

When he pulls away from my lips, he strokes the side of my hip and brushes his nose against mine.

"I think it's time we get back to the house." His warm breath expels the cold from my skin. "I want you again."

I want to tell him I want him again, too, but instead, I kiss him.

* * *

Virgo crushes his lips to mine the moment we step off the boat.

With my legs wrapped around him, he carries me into the house and straight to bed, where he buries his hard cock inside me.

My body welcomes him as if it missed him, and pleasure courses through me in radiant possessive waves.

“Virgo...” I moan, losing myself in him again, and allowing his presence to saturate my senses.

“That’s right, wife. Say my name and know you belong to me. Always.”

Always.

The promise sounds no different to the vows we took when we became husband and wife.

I tried so hard to keep my emotions under control when it came to him, but that thing inside me kept pushing me toward him. Pushing me here.

It’s the same something that sparked in my soul when I first saw him sitting in the cafe watching me. It’s bloomed into this entity that has taken over my mind and body, making me crave what he gives me so much I know there’s no turning back.

I’m different from just days ago when I saw Cillian and I mentioned the possibility of wanting out of this mafia life.

Which meant leaving Virgo.

Now I can’t deny I’ve allowed him past the guarded walls I placed around my heart and mind. And I’m falling for him.

I’m falling for the guy who stole me from my life and declared me his.

The thought sinks into my mind, and suddenly, I drift, and the image of Virgo's face flashes through my mind. I see him smiling in bright sunshine. He's kissing me while we're in bed. The sound of our laughter fills my ears, and I feel myself placing kisses on his shoulders. He says something, but I can't hear.

The image of us fades to blackness, and then I'm staring at him.

Him here with me now.

Him looking at me with worried eyes.

"Olivia, are you okay?" he asks.

I freeze as my mind tries to process what I just saw. As it's pitch black outside and what I saw happened during the day, I know what I saw wasn't us now.

And his shoulder...

I stare at it, at the stars inked on his shoulder, and realize there weren't there in my head.

So, what I saw could only mean one thing.

"Olivia." He touches my face. "What happened?"

"I think... I just had a memory." My words come out in a hushed stutter. "A memory of you. Of us."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Virgo

I observe Olivia as I place several slices of steak on the skillet.

She's sitting on one of the high stools around the counter, watching me.

I'm watching her, too, wondering if maybe she'll remember everything about me.

Nothing has happened since last night, but there's no way in hell that I can complain.

She remembered something.

Something about me.

This is the first time in my life where I've had to hold on to a belief that I couldn't see my way around. It was raw faith that had me wishing and hoping against hope. Now that I'm starting to see the fruits of that belief coming into being, it feels like a balm to my wounded soul. I just have to keep believing.

We spoke to Dr. Belmont earlier, and he suggested an appointment on our return, but he seemed hopeful that we're on the right track.

I flip the steak in the skillet, and Olivia laughs heartily. It's a good sound. She seems less anxious since the memory.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" She narrows her eyes at me and tries to calm her laughter.

"Yes," I say with insistence. "I cook all the time."

She still looks at me as if she doesn't believe me.

Earlier, when I told her I was cooking, she laughed as if I was joking and quickly schooled herself when she realized I wasn't.

"I won't think any less of you if you call Janice back to make us dinner." She continues to giggle.

"No, we won't be calling her back. I already told her I wanted to make dinner." I might've hired Janice for her gourmet skills, but I specifically wanted to make dinner tonight in the hope to stir more of Olivia's memories. The idea came from one of the tips Dr. Belmont listed. He suggested doing things she loved because the smallest thing could spark a memory. Olivia always loved my cooking.

"This is Japanese-style steak." I flip the steak again in the teriyaki sauce.

"I've never had beef like that before." She wrinkles her nose when she looks at the sauce.

"This is one of your favorite meals."

At first, she looks surprised, then realization forms on her face as she figures out what I'm doing.

"This is one of your favorite meals that *I* cook," I clarify.

"Then I'm sure I'll love it." She gives me a little smile.

"I'm sure you will. How are you feeling?"

"The same as five minutes ago when you asked me." She grins.

"Just checking on you." She's right, though. I'm doing that overprotective, obsessive thing again.

"My mind feels looser," she mutters in a cautious voice.

I pause to look at her. “Looser?”

“Yes. Like something came free since the memory. But it’s like the start of a headache that doesn’t come. That tight tension isn’t there anymore, so that must be something good, right?”

“I think so.”

“I’m just nervous.”

“Don’t be. I’m here,” I assure her.

“I know.”

When Dr. Belmont spoke to me privately, he expressed that maybe the memory came because she’d opened up to me. His advice was to be there for her as much as possible, so I will.

When we get home, I’m taking time off from the club. I’ll still go to Antonovs, but only for a few hours a day.

“Here and cooking for me.” Her former chirpiness returns.

“Yes, and you’re about to find out that there are other things I can do with my hands.” I said that to make her blush, and it works like a charm.

As the steak is thin, it cooks within a few minutes, so I slice off a bit of the end, stab a fork into it, and hold it out for her to taste.

“Come here.” I allow the fork to dangle between my fingers.

She looks at me with hesitation. “You want me to taste it?”

“Yes, just taste it.”

She swallows hard, closes her eyes for a moment as if she’s praying, then leans toward the fork. She opens her mouth

and bites the steak.

Seconds later, her face is filled with pleasure. I love seeing pleasure on her face, in whatever capacity it gets there.

“Oh my gosh. This tastes really, really good.”

“See?”

“It’s amazing. Where did you learn to cook like this?”

I probably should have known she would ask that question when she tasted the food. I hope my answer won’t make her sad.

“Your mother taught me,” I reply, and instantly, the sadness I hoped wouldn’t come fills her eyes.

“My mother?”

“Yes. When I was younger, my parents lived in both Russia and New York. They did so until I was in my teens. When I was here, I was mainly at your house. Your parents would teach me all kinds of stuff like cooking.”

“That sounds nice.” Her voice is low and reflective. “I wish I could remember them.”

“Your parents were some of the best people I knew. They were so good, they extended their love to me. I’m sure you can see that my parents aren’t exactly the model type.”

“I noticed.” She brings her hands together nervously. “They didn’t really say much at the wedding.”

She’s putting it lightly, because my parents didn’t say anything. They were already getting up to leave before we were declared husband and wife.

I was glad my sister stayed, but apart from my aunts and uncles who complimented Olivia on her dress and beauty, that

was the extent of my family's interaction with us.

“What are you like with them? You don't seem to be close with your father.”

“No, I'm not. I have a strange relationship with both my parents. I think it's because neither of them were cut out to be parents. They think of their kids as assets to be used to gain more power. That's what it was like in their homes. My grandparents were like that before they died. My father is very controlling. My mother does what he tells her to do, as long as she can have access to his money. We never had a home like yours.”

“That's sad.” She sets her fingers on the counter. “What happened between our families, Virgo? You told me about this bond they seem to have. Then it just got broken. Was it really about the diamond mine?”

I've thought about this a lot over the years. Every time, I come to the same conclusion.

“I think it was always about the diamond mine,” I reply. “I think your father got it, and my father wanted in. My mother just played along, playing the part of friend, but I'm not sure I believe either of them can be friends with anyone without an ulterior motive.”

“I don't think they're happy we're together.”

“That doesn't matter.”

“It would just be nice if there weren't such bad blood between us.”

I can see the whole issue has been bothering her, just like before. Some things never change.

“Neither of us can worry about that. That bad blood is something that neither of us can control. My father will always be the way he is, and my mother has no desire to change.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Yes.” I don’t bother to tell her that I know it. “Come on, let’s eat. This is all ready now.”

“Thank you for cooking.” She smiles.

“Anytime, Zayka.”

I serve the food, and in next to no time, we finish everything.

When it gets dark, Olivia suggests watching a film and picks out one of the *Saw* movies for us to watch.

Ten minutes into the film, my phone rings. When I look at the home screen and see it’s Cillian, I decide to take the call.

“I’ll be back in a second,” I tell Olivia.

“Sure,” she answers but glances at the phone, knowing it must be an important call.

I go outside onto the porch, where I can talk in privacy.

“Hey, what’s going on?” I say.

“I have bad news,” Cillian says.

“What happened?”

“I found Kevin and the other guy. They’re dead, Virgo. Killed yesterday. I got to England only two days ago. Now they’re dead. Both of them were shot in the head, execution style, and it looked like they were bound and gagged.”

“Fuck.”

“I know. This suggests we’re being watched. *I* was being watched. And if I was being watched, it means you are, too.”

I knew to expect this, but hearing it so plainly hits me in the gut. I look around as if checking for someone, but of course there’s no one to find. “

“You still there, Virgo?” Cillian checks.

“Yeah. What are you going to do now?”

“I’m heading back to the States tomorrow. Let’s regroup when I get back.”

“Okay.”

He hangs up, and a stab of fear twists my insides. I hate the unknown. I can handle it when it’s just me, but I don’t just have myself to worry about anymore.

I have a wife who needs me.

I walk back into the house, and she looks over at me. “What happened?”

How do I tell her that the man who rescued her is now dead because we stirred the hornet’s nest? It would crush her.

“Nothing to worry about at the moment.” Fuck, I loathe lying to her, but I can’t tell her yet.

There’s never a good time to tell her these things, but I can’t break her like that tonight when she’s had a breakthrough with getting her memories back.

Dr. Belmont cautioned against stress or putting too much pressure on her, which I already knew, but hearing him say it felt a hundred times worse. He said her mind could go into lockdown mode again.

“Is Cillian okay?” She looks me over.

“He is. Don’t worry. Let’s just watch the movie.”

I sit next to her and slip my arm around her, pulling her toward me.

We watch the movie, but my mind isn’t here. I’m thinking about the past, which hasn’t left us.

Olivia’s return has reopened secrets people want to keep hidden.

Whatever was happening then is still happening now.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Olivia

Something happened. Something bad.

I know it.

I've been feeling like this since Virgo got that call. He was different after, tenser.

The movie just finished.

Although our eyes have been glued to the screen, I know he's been thinking about whatever is happening back at home, and I've been thinking about him.

Virgo stands, and I look at him.

"We should head to bed." He sighs, looking uneasy. "We have an early start tomorrow before we head home."

"Okay."

"I'm going to clean up the kitchen. You can get ready ahead of me."

I was about to agree again, but I stop myself.

"Something bad happened, didn't it, Virgo?" My voice reflects the impatience I feel. "I wish you would tell me. I don't want to be kept in the dark. I've lived there for the last two and a half years."

Hesitation mixes with sympathy as he stares back at me. I can read conflict swirling in his eyes.

For a moment, he looks like he might tell me what's going on, but then his face hardens, and he becomes the mafia boss again.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” he assures me.

“But I can see there is. Virgo, you’ve told me nothing about what’s going on.”

“Look, we need to think about what Dr. Belmont said. No stress, remember?”

“Not knowing is stressing me out.”

“I know, but that stress will never be as much as knowing every single detail. There’s nothing to tell you right now that’s going to be helpful. Please just trust me.”

This is awful, but I have to acknowledge that he might be right.

“Okay.”

He moves closer and plants a kiss on my forehead. “I promise I will update you as soon as we have something solid. Just give me time.”

“Alright. You know it’s going to come to a point where you’re going to have to tell me something.”

“I know, but that’s not tonight. Let’s get to bed.”

We do, but I don’t sleep.

Neither does he.

After we make love, we lie next to each other for hours.

My back is pressed against his chest, and he holds me until he thinks I’m sleeping.

He then gets up and walks over to the window to light up a cigar. There he smokes for a while. I’ve never seen him smoke like that before. He’s done it occasionally when I’ve been around, but never for this long. I also sense he can tell I’m not asleep.

It's a while before he comes back to bed. He lies next to me, slipping his arm around me, pulling me within the safety of his chest.

I roll into his arms, showing I'm awake, but I rest my head on his chest and listen to the slow, steady rhythm of his heart. The sound lulls me to sleep and right into that dream where the darkness lives.

Suddenly, I'm in that hole again, that hole of nothingness. Everything is so dark. I can't even see my hands. I feel my way through dirt and hard surfaces, but it feels like someone is following me. I move faster, faster, hoping the voice will come and save me. Footsteps behind me now, and I start running. I run as fast as I can, stumbling and falling. I don't know how I get up with my legs shaking so much, but I do. I run faster, and then I see the hand and hear the voice.

"Come to me," it says, but this is the first time I can hear that the voice belongs to a boy. I run faster, the footsteps galloping behind me now like a crowd of horses. The hand I'm looking for reaches down, and I see the light.

"Come to me, Zayka."

Within the light, a face appears, and I notice straight away that it's Virgo, but he doesn't look like he looks now. He doesn't sound as he does now either. His voice is that of a boy's.

"Olivia!" he calls out. "Come to me. Take my hand." I take his hand, and as I'm pulled up out of the dream, I land straight in Virgo's arms, but this Virgo is right in front of me, not in my head and not a boy. He's back to being a man again.

Looking panicked, he switches on the light, and I see I'm not in that hole anymore. I'm next to him in the bed.

“Olivia, are you okay?”

I stare back at him, then realize that my body is completely covered in a cold sweat.

“Olivia,” he says my name again,

“It was you. You helped me,” I stutter.

“What are you talking about?”

“In my dream.”

“What did you dream?”

I pause for a moment as I think of the dream. It was different again. It’s different every time I have it now. It’s no longer the same run-through scenario where I’m crawling through this hole.

“Sweetie, tell me what happened. What did you dream?”

“Normally, it’s a dream that I’m surrounded by darkness, like I’m in a hole. I’m trying to feel my way out. There’s nothing but darkness until someone calls me into the light. A hand reaches down. I can never usually tell who’s calling me, but I can hear the words, and I can see the hand, but I never see who it belongs to until just now when I saw you, Virgo, but you couldn’t have been more than twelve.”

His face pales. “Olivia, that wasn’t a dream.” He shakes his head.

“What?”

“That really happened. When you were nine, you used to look around rabbit holes in the woods we used to play in. That’s why I called you Zayka. You fell through an old tunnel that had caved in, and you were trapped for a few days. No

one could find you. It was Cillian, your dad, and me who found you, but I pulled you out of the hole.”

I bring a hand to my heart. “Oh my God, that really happened?”

“Yes. Olivia... you’re remembering.” He touches my face lovingly, and I press my cheek into his palm.

“I am.”

“You’re remembering me.” He smiles with warmth.

“Yes. I’ve been dreaming that dream for so long.” Maybe it’s because that was the first time I felt so lost. I actually fell into a hole. Just like Alice. “You saved me.”

“I did.”

“You were in my head all this time.” I nod.

“Never left, Zayka. I never left.” He pulls me close into a hug, and I think of what all of this could mean.

I’m remembering, and the dream was my mind trying to access my memories.

But... what about the other things?

The other things I saw in that dream that have recently popped up?

Did those really happen, too?

Like the sound of gunfire, my mother telling me to run, the fractured faces.

God... what else did I see?

* * *

I’ve just finished seeing Dr. Belmont.

Due to the nature of how my memories are returning, he suggested a few sessions of hypnotherapy.

I can't believe I had two memories over the last few days.

Two of them, and I have to acknowledge that being around Virgo is helping me in more ways than I imagined.

It was like I had to find him to complete the rest of a puzzle, and I've done a complete turnaround.

I'm still scared of what I'll remember, but now I'm also curious.

I'm on my way to meet with Amelia for lunch at the little Italian bistro she pointed out the other day. As it's walking distance from Dr. Belmont's office, I walked.

Amelia has been away with her company for the last few days, so we didn't really get to speak much. I messaged about seeing the doctor, but I haven't told her about my memories yet.

I wanted to speak to her face-to-face to tell her.

When I go inside, I find her sitting across the room in one of the furthest booths. She's right near a wall with a fish tank that has a group of multicolored fish swim by her head, but she's got her focus on the menu she's reading like a newspaper. Today, she looks more studious with her hair piled up in a messy bun on top of her head and a dress suit that makes her look like she's ready for work.

I make my way across to her, but she doesn't see me until I'm actually at the table.

"Oh, my goodness. I'm so sorry. I was so focused on picking the right food, I didn't see you walk up." She giggles.

“That’s okay.” I give her a quick hug before sitting in the chair in front of her.

“How did the appointment go?”

“Really good, but a lot has happened.”

“What?”

“Well, it looks like I’m starting to get my memories back.”

“Oh my God. That’s fantastic.” She sounds excited, but I sense an undertone of hesitation in her voice. “What did you remember?” She searches my eyes.

“Just an incident from when I was nine. Virgo pulled me out of a hole.”

She gasps “You remembered that?”

“Were you there, too?”

“No, but I heard about it. I was away with my family for the summer. Oh, Olivia, did you remember anything else?”

“Just seeing Virgo’s face. Him kissing me.”

“Aww. I’m so happy. This is good news. I was hoping that being away from all the stress would spark something.”

“It sure did.”

“What happens now?”

“Just more sessions with Dr. Belmont. I’m also going to increase my visits to twice a week until things change.”

She nods. “Well, that sounds promising. It really does.”

“I hope so. I guess the next thing is trying to remember what happened to my parents.”

She reaches across the table and takes my hands. “Don’t worry. Like Dr. Belmont said the other day, you have support

now. You just have to remember that.”

“Yeah, and thank you.”

“That’s what friends are for.”

“It’s funny that both my memories include Virgo.”

She smiles at that. “Seems like he was your missing piece,” she offers.

“It seems so. Maybe I might be able to fix myself and become Olivia again.”

Although her wine glass is empty, she lifts it a toast. “Here’s to finding yourself.”

“Yes.” I just hope I’m ready for whatever comes next.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Virgo

Cillian walks into the meeting room with a large folder tucked under his arm and closes the door. Dante and I were waiting for him.

“Sorry I’m late, guys. I got stuck in traffic,” he apologizes and shrugs out of his jacket.

“No worries,” I reply. “Take a seat.”

He comes over and sits opposite me, setting his folder down with the others we have on the table. We decided on meeting here at Club X again.

This is one of the rooms we use for our high-profile clients. There are no cameras in here and no way for anyone to listen in.

“Has Olivia remembered anything else?” Cillian asks. I shake my head. “No, only what I told you about me.”

As I say that, I tamp down the warmth that comes from knowing she’s really starting to remember me.

It was emotional to watch her realize that I’d been a part of her mind this whole time.

While Dr. Belmont believes the spurt of memories means she might get more breakthroughs with clearer images, I know we’re not out of the woods yet.

“I’ll visit her tomorrow,” Cillian says. “Just to see how she is.”

“Of course,” I tell him.

“It seems that once again, we’re in a time when we need to watch our backs closer.”

I know what he means by the darkness in his voice. He knows our lives are dangerous.

The same way those men were killed, we could be next.

“I’ve doubled up on security.” Dante looks at both of us. “I know you guys have, too, but I’ve gotten more men to support us. They’ll be watching everyone more closely.”

“That will help.” I nod my thanks.

“I can’t pinpoint what happened in England.” Cillian shakes his head. “I hardly spoke to anyone because I didn’t want to alert people that I was looking for the guys. I can only assume that my presence there must have set off a chain reaction. Whoever was watching me knew I could only have been there to find them. What doesn’t make sense is, why now? Kevin especially would’ve always been a threat.”

I nod, agreeing, but I can’t make heads or tails of it either. “Something must have happened in between that time.”

“Maybe something from here,” Dante suggests. “But it’s going to be difficult to pinpoint what that something is.”

“I agree. That’s why I left some of my men in England,” Cillian continues. “The murders have sparked a new trail that maybe we can follow.”

“We’ve been looking at all correspondence between everyone we’re investigating,” I tell him. Dante and I started looking the moment we got the news. Even though I was in the Hamptons, it didn’t stop me from working. It also didn’t stop me from trying to keep Olivia occupied so she wouldn’t worry.

I feel like an asshole for not telling her about Kevin, but it would be the worst thing to happen now if she locked down again.

I know she'd blame herself for his death.

He was safe until we found her.

"The only thing we might have is whatever comes of interrogating Evan tomorrow," Dante points out.

"I want to be the one who questions him." I straighten.

Cillian shakes his head. "I think it should be me, don't you? He was my father's PA after all. That man worked with my father for years. If he double-crossed him, I want to deal with him."

"I get that, but it was Evan who took me for a fool every time he provided information that threw me off trail."

"We'll all be seeing him," Dante cuts in. "You can both ask your questions. I've arranged for him to be collected the moment he steps off the plane. We can take him straight to the Creed headquarters and deal with him there. Then I'd like for him to be imprisoned in the Bratva compound until the matter is resolved. Of course, that depends on what he tells us or not. The only other alternative is waiting to see what happens with Olivia."

"She's going to be working with the doctors twice a week," I explain. "But I don't want to push her too hard. As badly as I want her to remember everything, I don't want to mess up the progress we've made. That's why I've kept certain things from her."

"I agree," Cillian says. "She needs to remember in her own time. I'd say she's our last option if all else fails."

It's good to hear him agree with me, but I almost feel biased. As badly as I want her to remember, there are things that I'd rather she didn't. Like my encounter with Amelia and what I did after.

"How about we look through the information we've received over the last few days?" Dante suggests and glances at the folder Cillian brought. "Looks like you have more to add."

"These are the police reports from England. They contain notes from the people they questioned. I looked at them already, but I figured we could check it out together."

"Sounds like a plan."

We start going through the files and brainstorm ideas until there's a knock at the door.

I purposely said I didn't want to be disturbed in this meeting, but I trust my staff to use their judgment when they need me.

"Come in," I call out.

The door opens, and Jan, one of the bouncers, pokes his head in.

"Sorry to disturb you guys, but there's a girl asking to see you, Virgo. Her name is Amelia. I know you didn't want to be disturbed, but she said it was important she speaks to you. I have her waiting in the VIP lounge."

My brows knit the moment I hear Amelia's name, and this important request she's talking about can only mean one thing.

She met with Olivia earlier for lunch, and I know the two were messaging before we left the Hamptons. Olivia would've told her she was starting to remember things.

It's obvious that Amelia is worried Olivia will remember the incident that would've heralded the end of their friendship.

Normally, I would've told Jan to send whoever it is away, but I decide to see her.

"I'll go talk to her quickly." I stand and look back at the guys. "This shouldn't take too long," I tell them.

I'm sure they know why Amelia is here, too. I leave the meeting room and make my way to the VIP lounge. There, I find Amelia standing by the floor-to-ceiling glass wall that captures a perfect view of the city.

Even in her heels, she looks small against the wall and the view. This woman has always made me feel uncomfortable, even way back when my parents wanted me to marry her.

Olivia knew about the arrangement years before, but I wonder how she would react now, as it would be new information to her. Back then, she hated the idea, and I'm sure she was happy when the whole arrangement fell through.

It happened when she and Amelia were fourteen. Of course, at that time, I'd seen the way both of them looked at me. But it was always Olivia for me.

I also knew she had feelings for me well before she started to look at me like that. Even with the arrangement, Olivia would've never had anything to worry about when it came to Amelia and me.

I never had any feelings for Amelia. Not one ounce.

But I know she wished I did.

The day she tried to seduce me was one I knew would happen. It was only a matter of time.

She turns to face me with worry etched into her features.

“I’m intruding again,” she states, with a slight lift of her shoulders.

“It’s okay. What’s going on?” I ask, even though I’m ninety percent sure I’m right about her reasons for coming by. The situation with her hasn’t been far from my mind, so it must be riding hers like the devil.

“Olivia told me about her memories. I’m happy she’s starting to remember, but I’m worried. Worried about what she’ll remember about me and you.”

Bingo. Of course, I was right. “As much as I hate that, too, that’s not something either of us can stop.”

“And you’re okay with that?” She narrows her eyes.

“Of course not.”

“I want to tell her,” she says quickly, shocking me. “I don’t want her to remember on her own. I want to tell her before she does. It’s not you who’s going to look like the bad guy. It’s me, because I am. You didn’t do anything with me, but I tried to break you guys up. I want to come clean before she remembers me like that. I’m different now, and I’m so happy to have her back in my life, I don’t want to fuck things up again.”

A new level of respect for her settles over me. I would’ve never guessed that she would suggest such a thing. I’d be more inclined to think she’d want to bury those memories and hope Olivia never remembers them. I understand her reasons for wanting to tell her, but it was still my fault that Olivia was with her family that day.

“I will talk to her,” I say. “I always planned to tell her anyway because I need to, but I don’t think I should do it now.”

“Why not?” Amelia prods. “Don’t you think the sooner we do it, the better, before it’s too late?”

“I’m an advocate for sooner rather than later, but she’s just started trusting me and remembering me. I don’t want to fracture that. The doctor said if she’s stressed, she might shut down.”

“Oh God.” Amelia places her hand on her heart and pants. “I don’t want that to happen either.”

“No. Besides that, everything is still too fresh. It’s barely been two weeks since she’s been back in our lives. I’ve uprooted her from her life in Monte Carlo, brought her back to this place where she ran from, and forced her to marry me. It’s a lot for anyone to deal with.”

As soon as I lay it out like that, Amelia nods, then brings her hands together. She stares at me for a moment, then her lips part.

“I just feel bad every time I’m with her. I keep thinking she’s going to remember what I did and hate me. I’m always on edge when we go out or when I come by the house. But I’m not going to put her at risk like that. Even if she does hate me.”

“I’m sure she won’t hate you.” Olivia doesn’t have a hateful bone in her body, but this might be different. “I think if I speak to her first, it might soften the blow.”

“I just want to let her know how sorry I am. That’s it. Even if she chooses to never speak to me again, it’s important she knows that.” She nods.

“I’ll let you know you when I decide to tell her,” I offer.

“Thank you. I know you don’t owe me anything, so I appreciate you considering me.”

“That’s okay.”

“Can I just ask how the investigation is going? Olivia told me that something might have happened while you guys were away. Is she safe?”

“We’re doing our best to make sure she is.” I would never share anything more than that.

“Thank you. I’ll leave you to get back to your evening. Good night.”

“Good night.” She gives me a curt nod, then leaves.

I watch her go, and I think about how she must feel. What she did was bad, but I can assure anybody she can’t feel any worse than me.

* * *

Dante, Cillian, and I walk into the interrogation room like demons from hell.

Our eyes are on Evan sitting on the metal chair in the center of the room.

He’s a thin, lanky guy with thick, rimmed glasses and a balding head. He looks fragile on any given day, but at the sight of us, he looks like he might wither away in the wind.

Dante closes the door, and as it shuts, the echo reverberates inside the room.

“Guys.” Evan tries to smile, but it doesn’t quite come. “I’m a little confused about why I’m here.” Dante looks at me, a sign I can take the lead, so I do.

“Don’t worry about that. We’re about to enlighten you.”

I switch on the flat screen TV on the wall in front of us, and it goes straight to the recording of Evan meeting with Artemis Bane. The moment Evan sees himself on the screen, his skin goes pale.

The recording plays for two minutes, and he looks as if he dies a little more with every second that passes. “Why don’t you explain that?” Cillian points to the screen. “You know that man screwed my father out of business all six ways to Sunday. Why the hell were you meeting with him?”

“It’s not what you think,” Evan argues.

“Isn’t it?” I cut him off. “Because it looks like you were conspiring with a known enemy the day before the O’Ridians were attacked.”

“No, I swear it. I had nothing to do with that.”

I don’t have time for this. I burn a short circuit as it is, and I don’t have patience for people who lie to me. I pull my gun from my back pocket and rush forward.

Evan attempts to get up and protect himself, but I slam him down as if he’s little more than a cockroach. He yelps, then screams when I grab his face and shove the gun into his mouth. Instantly, tears pour out of his eyes, and he pisses himself.

Pathetic.

Weak men like him make me sick.

“Evan, I’m going to give you a chance, one more chance, one chance to tell me what that meeting was about. If you blow it, I will kill you right here. Do you understand me?” I speak sharply and succinctly so he knows I’m serious. He nods vigorously against my grip. “Good. Now talk, and make sure every word you say is stuff I want to hear.”

He nods again. I remove my gun and release my grip on him.

“Your father,” he splutters.

I give him a narrowed stare. “My father, what?”

“He set up the meeting between me and Artemis Bane. He hired me to steal information from Callahan.”

My blood heats with this information. I checked out my father thoroughly, but this should come as no surprise. My father is like a devil, always ahead in everything and outsmarting the best of the best.

“Was it him, Evan? Did he order the attack on the O’Ridian home?”

“The plan was to kill Callahan,” Evan replies. “As he and his wife are dead, I can only assume your father must have been successful.”

My eyes lift to meet Cillian’s and Dante’s. The hollow in my heart grows.

My father was responsible. I was wrong about him. He was the villain all along.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Virgo

My father, my enemy.

As I stare down at Evan and process the confession he just gave, something snaps inside me.

I look from him to Dante and Cillian, who are both staring at me, watching me unravel before their eyes. A moment of blankness passes, then I see nothing but red streaks of lightning crackling before my eyes.

Thunder roils in my soul, awakening the beast inside me who wants to tear my skin off my body and wreak havoc until blood pours from the sky.

My father is my enemy.

It was him all along. He arranged the attack on the O'Ridians.

He killed Callahan and Sheena.

My father is the reason Olivia was gone from my life all these years.

With the loss of her memory, she didn't know where to turn.

She was alone in the world with all kinds of danger lurking around every corner. Like what happened to her in Monte Carlo. I don't want to think what would have happened if I wasn't there. When you go to prison in those types of countries, especially with a fake ID, you're screwed.

This is exactly the kind of thing my father wanted. Destruction.

The O'Ridians' destruction.

He can't get away with what he's done.

He must die for this, and I will give him death.

With my gun in my hand, I whirl around and head for the door. But before I can reach it, a heavy hand pulls me backward.

"Virgo, no!" Dante shouts.

"Fucking let go of me." I shove his hand off my shoulder, but he grabs me again.

This time, Cillian joins him, taking my other side.

"Virgo, stop it," Cillian barks, then the two of them are pushing me into the wall.

"He needs to die for this!" I shout. "My father needs to die for this!"

"We need evidence," Dante barks, pushing me back into the wall when I shove him away from me.

"Screw the fucking evidence. We've heard enough. It was him. He's guilty. They're dead, aren't they?"

I make a move to go again, but Cillian and Dante come at me stronger. They were holding back before.

I know I sound like I've lost my mind, but this is within reason. Suddenly, the door opens, and Dante's men come in. On seeing the struggle, they don't think twice about joining in to hold me down.

It takes all five of them to wrestle me to the ground, but I'm still fighting to break free, with my gun in my hand.

"Virgo, calm the fuck down." Cillian elbows me.

I can't believe he of all the people is trying to talk me out of killing my father. The only person who hates him more than me is Cillian.

Cillian should be right with me, gun in hand, ready to go and blow my father's brains out.

"You should be at my side. Right at my side!" I shout.

"You motherfucker. Olivia needs you." He throws a punch in my face, stunning me. But I don't feel the impact of the punch as much as the hit from his words.

"Olivia needs you, you asshole. You just married my sister, and now you want to do something like this to leave her. Olivia *needs* you!" He's shouting in my face now. "With no fucking evidence, if you kill your father now, a man who is a second seat in the Creed and Pakhan of your Brotherhood, the Bratva will be forced to kill you. Or at the very least lock you away for the rest of your life."

My body goes still on hearing his words, and my gaze switches from him to Dante, who has gone silent.

But his face says it all. Dante is the leader of the Creed and the Pakhan of his Brotherhood, which have such a close alliance with mine. They may as well be the same entity. It would be him who would have to kill me.

He would be expected to do so, to fulfil his leadership. And if he didn't, they would kill him and his wife. That is the law of the Creed.

I vowed to protect Olivia.

My wife.

If I'm not here, or dead, I break my promise.

With that reasoning, I drop my gun.

* * *

I make it home in one piece with my mind intact, just barely.

Today is the first in a long time that I've come home in the middle of the day. And on a weekday.

I walk down the corridor. When I turn the corner, Eden sees me and gapes as she takes in the massive shiner over my eye and the black and blue bruises starting to form on the left side of my face. This is actually tame in comparison to what she's used to. At least I'm not covered in blood and guts, and I haven't been shot.

"What happened to you?" She rushes up to me and sets down the basket of clothes she was carrying.

I sigh and think for a moment on what to tell her. "I had a little scrape with the guys," I decide to say.

She frowns. "You call this a scrape?"

"I'm fine, trust me." I insist, but it's a lie. I'm far from fine. In fact, I might not be fine ever again.

"Go into the living room. I'll grab an ice pack," she urges.

"Okay."

Eden saunters away, going back the way she came, while I make my way into the living room to wait for her.

Eden takes care of me the way a mother would. Since she practically raised me, I guess in a way, she could be classed as my mother.

She's worked for my parents since before I was born, but after twenty-five years of service, they fired her.

That came when she had to have a day off because her daughter went into labor, and she had to deliver the baby. My parents didn't think that was a good enough reason for a day off. Such is the despicable nature of the people I call mother and father. I hired Eden on the spot when I learned what happened.

At the time, I lived at my apartment and didn't really need a maid. But I took her in anyway and at the same salary she earned when she worked for my parents. When we moved here, I doubled it so she could be in charge of the rest of the house staff and the household along with my affairs.

She also puts up with my dangerous lifestyle.

Eden has seen a lot in her time, and it's not over yet.

Things can only get uglier with this news of my father.

She walks in with the ice pack and some of that homeopathic cream she's been using on me since she turned to natural remedies. Although it helps with bruising, I mainly humor her to make her feel better,

I sit and take the ice pack from her, place it on my eye, and allow her to put the cream on my face.

"Are you going to elaborate on what this scrape was about?" she asks, intensifying her stare.

"No," I reply in a tone that suggests she mustn't press me for more information. I don't tell her things she doesn't need to know, but this might be one occasion where the news I have supersedes all else.

And once again, this news about my father is also one I mustn't share with Olivia yet.

I'm so sick of keeping secrets from her, but as Cillian quite rightly pointed out, Olivia might not react too well, knowing that she just married a man whose father might have killed her parents.

That *might*, in my mind, is only there out of protocol.

Innocent until proven guilty. But I don't believe for one minute that my father is innocent. Especially since I've always suspected him.

"There, all done," Eden announces.

"Thanks. Where's Olivia?"

"She's in the sunroom reading. Amelia is coming to pick her up to go shopping in a little while." Eden smiles. "Olivia seems to be adjusting very well, and I think it's nice having Amelia around."

"Yeah," I agree. But of course I'm thinking about that other secret I have to keep.

"We went to the museum this morning and spent the entire morning there. It was nice watching Olivia observing everything." She chuckles. "It was all so fascinating to watch her fall in love again with things she already loved. Like you," she points out.

Her words soothe me, and I dip my head.

"I'm not there yet, Eden," I say, feeling the need to tell her that I still have more work to do. I know Olivia is attracted to me, and she's starting to remember me, but she's not in love with me the way she used to be. The way I am with her.

"Give her time, Virgo. Just give her the time she needs. I'm almost certain she'll come back to you the way she was

before, if not better.” She gives me a pat on my shoulder and leaves.

I wait for a few minutes to allow the ice pack to work.

Then I set it down in the little bowl she carried it in and make my way to the sunroom to find Olivia.

She’s curled up on the large wicker sofa, reading a post-romantic art history book. When she lifts her head and finds me walking in, she has the same reaction as Eden. Except she looks more worried.

It’s understandable, because it’s the first time she’s seen me looking like this.

“My god, what happened to you?” She gets up and rushes toward me.

“Don’t worry.” I grin. “I was sort of sparring with Dante and the guys.” Better to put it like that and make it sound like we were just messing around. I also leave out Cillian’s name. If I mention him, she’ll probably guess that I was in a real fight.

“You look hurt, though,” she observes, studying my face.

“I’m not.”

I give her another smile and shrug out of my jacket, setting it on the arm of the sofa.

“Can I do anything for you?”

My smile widens. “This.” I sit and slip an arm around her tiny waist and pull her into my lap, then I pull her in for a kiss.

Her lips on mine are the only thing calming me.

I keep hearing Cillian’s words in my head, telling me *Olivia needs you.*

Olivia touches my cheek and runs her delicate fingers over my beard. “You seem troubled,” she says in a soft reflective voice.

“I’m always like this.” I nod.

She continues touching my face, looking over my bruises. As she does, I wonder how the hell I’m going to tell her all the things I’m keeping from her. The news of my father is certainly one that could tear us apart.

What if it did? What would I do then?

I shove the thought out of my mind, not allowing it to take residence. It’s better not to worry about things I can’t control, or something that hasn’t happened yet, especially when there is enough to worry about. I glance at the book she was reading. It’s not one I’ve seen before, so I assume it’s new.

“You got a new book,” I say, turning her attention back to the book.

“Yes, Eden and I went to the museum this morning. It’s to go with the exhibition they’re having on the post-romantic era. It’s very fascinating. I’m going to go back next week to possibly book myself on a more in-depth tour. There’s also an art historian there who’s going to be running a tour at Harvard. I was thinking of going.”

I don’t think anything could make me smile the way I am right now but this. She sounds exactly the way she did years ago, when she was herself.

“You’re giving me that look again.” She giggles.

“Because you sound like you.”

“That’s good. I’m feeling more comfortable reading these books now. They almost feel like coming home.”

I hold her tighter. “You are home. Do me a favor and book yourself on that tour. And definitely do the Harvard thing. You’ll absolutely love it.”

She nods gratefully. “Thank you. I think I will.”

She stares at me for a moment, then leans in to give me a kiss on my cheek. But she lingers there, as if absorbing the memory of my skin, what it feels like. “Thank you, Virgo,” she whispers, her warm breath caressing my cheek. The way her fingers did.

“There’s nothing to thank me for, Zayka.”

She shakes her head. “There is. I’m still afraid, and this is all new to me, but it feels like me. That’s thanks to you.”

It means a lot to hear her say that. Eden comes in at that moment, smiling when she sees us sitting together like this.

“Amelia just arrived,” she announces,

“Thank you.” Olivia glances at me.

“Go. Go have fun with your friend.”

She slips off my lap and looks back at me just before she walks through the door.

When she leaves, the hollow returns to my heart.

I can’t lose her.

I mustn’t.

I’ll do whatever it takes to keep her.

But first, I have to establish my father’s guilt.

* * *

I spent virtually all of yesterday and last night in my office looking through my father's files.

I've found nothing I hadn't seen before, and anything new I came across wasn't relevant to anything. I've gone through everything, going back years, including his secret files that are all encoded and encrypted, but I've found nothing.

This is the part where I'd declare a person cleared of suspicion. But on this occasion, I know I have to keep going, because there must be something.

I was even thinking I might find something in relation to him hiring Evan to steal information from the O'Ridians.

As there was nothing, I guessed my father must have met with Evan face to face to discuss their plans.

I'm at my wit's end, and I feel that helplessness again that I loathe.

A guy like me with all my skills isn't supposed to be helpless.

But here I am.

It's now late again, and another day has passed.

I have a few more files to investigate. Once I'm done, I have nothing else, and I'll be at another dead end.

Footsteps sound outside my office door. They're too heavy to belong to Eden or Olivia.

As the door is open, I see Cillian before he reaches it.

I'm surprised he's here, especially after yesterday.

"Hey," I say first.

"Hello, old friend. Eden said you were up here.

“Yeah, working. Olivia’s with Seamus. I thought you might be there, too.”

“No, I’m actually here to see you.”

His answer surprises me even more. “Really?”

He’s had time to think about the revelations from yesterday. Knowing him, with his stubbornness, he could think that I’ve changed my mind and decided to support my father.

“Yes, really.” He nods. “I came to see if you were still keeping your wits about you and yourself under control.”

“As you can see, I’m here. Are you sure that’s why you came?”

He grins, knowing exactly what I must be thinking. “Yes, I think my father would have tanned your hide for losing your shit like that yesterday.”

I observe him and note he’s talking the way he used to years ago.

“Why didn’t you lose your cool? You had every reason to.” The question might sound foolish, because I know the same rules and sanctions apply to him. But he’s a man like me. He would’ve screwed the rules to get his vengeance.

“My sister.” He nods. “So, my reason is the same as yours. Olivia needs you, but she needs me, too. Seamus is our uncle, but with our parents gone, we’re all we have as immediate family. If I kill your father, being in the Irish mob and all, the Creed wouldn’t think twice about killing me. You know what kind of men they are. They’d probably kill her, too.”

I press my lips together. Not commenting, because he’s right.

I've acted irrational, volatile, and reckless because I'm desperate.

Cillian pulls up the chair and sits in front of me. "You and I don't just have ourselves to worry about anymore, Virgo. Especially if you plan to keep my sister in your life for more than a year."

"You know I do."

"Then you need to be wise. I will say, though, that you regained my trust and my respect."

I sit straighter. "Did I?"

"Of course. There was a time when I thought you would have sided with your father."

"You were wrong."

"I know that now, but I was angry in the past. I was angry because I was powerless. I knew you were, too, but I hoped you could contain your father. When that didn't happen, it pushed me to rage. Watching you ready to seek revenge for my family set me straight."

"You know I'd do it." I eye him seriously.

"I know. I know you would. In the same breath, watching you switch your focus at the mention of my sister's name showed me how much you care about her. So, I guess I'm here as a friend checking up on you."

It means a lot to hear him say that. We've come a long, long way with years of animosity and heads clashing against heads.

"Thank you."

He gives me a curt nod. “Virgo.” He says my name with reflection. “As bad as things seem, we now have a lead. A lead we didn’t have before.”

“Yes, we do”.

We have a lead.

I just wish it weren’t my father.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Olivia

When I get back from the museum, Eden tells me Virgo is still in his office.

He's been in there all night, and he was there when I left this morning.

I know something is happening again and he's working around the clock, burning himself out.

I make my way to his office to check on him.

The door is open, so I can see him looking through some documents.

When I get there, he sees me and straightens.

He looks exhausted.

"Virgo, don't you think you should take a break?" I say as I walk in.

"Hey. I'll be done in a few hours."

"Hours? But you've been working all night and day."

"Miss me so soon?" He smirks, giving me his boyish charm and cockiness I always fall for.

"Yeah, maybe."

I walk up to him, and he pulls me into his lap.

"Virgo, you're making me worry. I know there are things you aren't telling me. I also know you're being careful with me."

"I just want to protect you."

“I know.”

“What can I do for you, though?”

A mischievous smile lights up his face. He stands, and I slip off his lap.

He marches over to close the door then back to me, catching my face. Then he kisses me.

He presses me up against the wall and nibbles on my neck.

Just then, the phone on his desk beeps.

“Fuck,” he mutters. “Give me a second.”

The phone is set up like he’s at work, so he switches it to speaker phone.

“Yes,” he says.

“Virgo, your father is asking for you,” comes an older woman’s voice on the line. “He says you haven’t been in for days. He wants to speak to you.”

Virgo sneers, looking more enraged than usual when the subject of his father is mentioned. It’s a good thing the woman can’t see him. She might run.

“Carmen, tell my father that I’m busy fucking my wife. I’ll speak to him when I’m done, whenever that might be.”

My jaw drops, nearly smashing on the floor.

Before the woman—Carmen—can answer, Virgo switches off the line and yanks the phone plug out of the socket.

He turns back to face me with sin in his eyes.

“Virgo—”

“Just kiss me.”

His lips come crashing down on mine, and I kiss him back, feeling his desperate need for me.

It's the same as mine.

The kiss turns hungry, and he strips off my clothes.

He guides me to his desk, where he bends me over so I can see the hazy reflection of us in the window.

We look erotic and scandalous.

He spreads my legs, pushes his pants down, and takes out his cock.

I haven't had him inside me for a little over a day, so my body is greedy for him.

When he enters me, filling me up, my body comes alive with the delicious sensation of him.

"Fuck, Olivia. How do you always feel so good. Jesus." He starts moving inside me, and God, he's right, but for me it's him.

This position is always good.

He pounds into me, and my breasts bounce with every thrust.

My hair falls out of my bun and covers my face, obstructing my view of our reflection.

It' doesn't matter. I can see us in my mind, and I feel us.

Virgo pounds into me fearlessly, and I come.

He waits for me to calm before he pulls out and flips me around to face him. He picks me up, and I wrap my legs around him so we can finish this way.

“I always want to see your face.” He plants kisses over my lips.

“Yours too.” That’s the first time I’ve said anything like that. It’s another line crossed for me.

It brings a smile to his face, and he pounds into me, groaning out his release.

He holds me there for a few moments, where we share the rapid sound of our beating hearts.

“Ty menya utomish’,” he says.

I’m about to ask him what that means when his words rattle through my mind and a flash of memory comes to me.

I see us, and I know we’re in Florence, even though I haven’t been told. There’s a bed. On it is a birthday card that says ‘Happy twenty-second birthday to my girl.’

I see Virgo’s face, and he bows to kiss me and says, “Ty menya utomish’.”

The image of us fades, but I realize I know what those words mean.

“You’re going to wear me out,” I say.

Virgo inches away from me, his lips parted.

Carefully, he pulls out of me and sets me down, then he tucks himself back into his pants and takes hold of my shoulders.

“What did you just say, Olivia?”

“Ty menya utomish’. It means ‘you’re going to wear me out,’” I reply. “You told me that in Florence. I remember us in Florence for my birthday.”

He touches my face.

“You remember that?”

“Yes.”

* * *

“Morning,” Dr. Belmont greets me with a heartfelt smile.

“Good morning. Thank you so much for seeing me at such short notice,” I reply.

“You know that’s not a problem. Take a seat.” I sit in the chair before him and bring my hands together nervously. We were supposed to have a consultation tomorrow, then Saturday. But after last night, I couldn’t wait to speak to him.

“So, you had another memory. That’s really great news.” He smiles wider. “Why don’t you tell me all about it?”

“Sure.” I nod.

I pull in a deep breath, take my mind back to last night, then recount the distinct memory of Virgo and me in Florence.

“It stopped when he kisses me, then speaks those Russian words,” I conclude, but I can still feel the emotion behind what I remembered.

“That was your twenty-second birthday. That was the year when everything happened,” he points out.

“Yes, it was.”

His face clouds, and an overcast settles over my heart.

It’s good I remember all these beautiful memories, but I can only think of what will come next.

“That’s very significant, Olivia. This is the first time you’ve had a memory of an important event in the lead up to

the incident.

“It is.” I nod, agreeing. “The incident happened ten months later. Maybe that’s what I’ll remember next.”

“Not necessarily,” he surmises. “You have ten months of life events in between. The one thing in common with all these memories is Virgo.”

I smile. “Yeah, I noticed that, too.”

“Maybe you can think of him as your anchor.”

“That sounds nice.” And it suits him.

Dr. Belmont thinks for a moment, then sighs. “Let’s do some hypnosis today and see where that takes us.”

“Okay.”

“Come on, let’s go over here.”

I follow him to the chaise lounge, where I lie down and position myself, so my body is relaxed.

He sits in the chair beside me and takes out a pocket watch. When we first started these sessions, I imagined him with a pendulum like in the movies. Or one of those strange pieces of equipment that you see in horror flicks.

“We won’t use any music today,” he says. “All I want for you to do is to listen to the sound of my voice, and let the memory flow, okay?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s start.” He straightens. “Close your eyes and take ten deep breaths. Inhale and exhale slowly. Do that three times. Go as slow as you can until you feel air light.

I close my eyes and do as he says. By the time I reach my second set of breaths, I feel like all the negative energy from

my mind is being expelled with every exhale I take.

“Good.” He speaks in a softer voice. “Now I want you to imagine yourself surrounded by a ball of light. A bright, bright ball of light that surrounds everything you can see. Can you see it?”

I think of sunshine and insert myself into the light.

“I’m there,” I tell him.

“It’s very important that you know that this light is a safe space. Nothing bad can happen to you while you’re there. Nothing at all. Do you understand me?”

“Yes.”

“In this ball of light, you are completely safe, so I want you to repeat the memory you just told me, but I want you to put yourself there.” His voice soothes me, and I take myself to the memory as if it’s a real place. “Look at everything around you, and take in all the sights, smells, feels, everything. Now tell me what you see.”

I repeat the memory. By the time I get to the end, where Virgo kisses me, I expect something different to happen, but nothing does.

I wait for a while to see if anything changes, but still, nothing happens.

“That’s all I see,” I say with disappointment.

“Stay right there, Olivia. Stay right there and wait in that safe space. Holding on to that last memory where Virgo kisses you. While you wait and think of that kiss, I want you to also think of what makes you happy.”

The first thing that comes to my mind as he says that is Virgo. And I think how ironic that is. Weeks ago, I wanted to

run from him. Back then, he was darkness and danger to my light. I didn't trust him. Now I do. I've changed so much since I let him in, and it feels hard to imagine my world without him.

A crackle of white light speckles before me, and I feel like I've fallen asleep. Except faces flash before me, then my mind drifts. The faces all jumble together, moving quickly until they're not.

I'm able to pick them apart. I see Cillian first. But his hair is different. It's much shorter in a military crew cut. He's laughing at something I said. We're standing in a garden.

Next to us is Seamus, sitting in a wheelchair. He's bald. Behind him is his wife, Aunt George-Anne.

Mom and Dad walk out to us and say something, but I can't hear the words.

But I know them. I know all of them. I don't have that fog over my mind, and I don't just recognize them from pictures. I know them as my family.

Cillian, Seamus, George-Anne. Mom and Dad. We head into the house my parents just emerged from, but as we go inside, they all disappear from my view as if they were never there.

I search for them, looking around the house as it fades from my view.

"Zayka." Virgo's voice helps me find my way. Then suddenly, everything changes, and we're in his house.

He looks different, too. His smiles come easier than they do now when he sees me. And something inside me pulls me to him. And I'm so happy to see him that I skip into his arms.

He picks me up and kisses me. And I hug him as if I haven't seen him in a hundred years.

"You like the house?" he asks, kissing me.

"I love it," I answer, hearing myself speak.

"I finished the library. Come and have a look." He sets me down and ushers me to the library. I smile when I see the beautiful wooden shelves.

There aren't any books on them, but it's still gorgeous.

A mischievous smile lights up Virgo's face, and he takes me to the shelf by the right side of the wall. When I look at it, I realize I was mistaken. There is one book on the shelf. It's mine. My art history book we bought in Florence when I was eighteen. I walk over to it and pick it up.

"My book." I smile back at him.

"I wanted something here that belonged to you. I bought this house for us, so I thought the best first thing could be a book. That book in particular. And here's to having many more here. Along with you, as soon as possible."

His words pull on my heart. "Oh, Virgo, thank you so much. But what are we going to do about our families?"

"It doesn't matter." He nods. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

He pulls me in for another kiss. And presses his forehead to mine.

"I'm going to marry you someday, Olivia," he promises. And just then, he disappears into the light.

White light surrounds me again. And I blink slowly, trying to find him.

I look around and blink again, until my eyes open and Dr. Belmont comes into focus. I sit up, startled on seeing him.

“Steady. You’re okay, Olivia,” he assures me, resting his hand on my arm.

My lips part to ask him what happened, but then I remember. And as I look at him, the strangest thing happens to me. It feels like a missing puzzle piece has been fitted into my mind.

Knowledge settles over me, fusing with my brain and body, and I feel... healed.

“Are you okay?” Dr. Belmont searches my eyes.

“Yes, I think so.”

“What did you see?”

“My family and Virgo.”

Virgo. He bought the house for us. I remember.

I actually remember.

My God, I remember.

He said he was going to marry me someday, and he did.

“Do you want to tell me what you saw?” Dr. Belmont asks.

I’m about to tell him, but then I feel like the memory should be shared with Virgo again. “Um... Dr. Belmont, would it be okay if I call you later? I think I need to see my husband,” I tell him in a hurried voice.

“Of course. Let’s do better than a phone call. How about we keep that appointment tomorrow?”

“That would be great. Thank you so much.”

“You’re very welcome. We’ll do this again tomorrow and see if we can pick up where you left off, okay?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“See you then.”

I practically flee from the office, and I get Kirill to drop me at Antonovs. I thought I might have to ask for directions to Virgo’s office, but then I realized I know the way.

I actually remember the way. When I reach Virgo’s office, the door is open and he’s talking to his secretary, the same one he had years ago. I recognize her. God, I actually know her face. Both of them look at me, and she smiles.

“Hi, Mrs. Antonov. Good to see you.”

“You too... Maria.” I say her name as if I’m trying it out.

At the sound of her name on my lips, Virgo stills and stares back at me, shock registering on his features. Maria clearly doesn’t know that I lost my memory. Or she’d have the same shocked look as Virgo.

“See you both later,” she says, and leaves us. When she walks through the door, Virgo looks back at me and moves from around his desk, approaching me.

“You remember Maria, Olivia?” he asks, and I nod. “What else do you remember?”

My heart warms with several memories that come to me.

It feels like some kind of miracle has happened. I don’t remember everything because I can still feel blocks in my mind, but there are parts of him that I remember.

“You hate grape soda. And pickles,” I start.

He narrows his eyes, steps closer.

“You like traveling and swimming, and sailing through a storm,” I continue.

He smiles wider and stops in front of me. “You can’t stand it when my dad calls you laddie, or when Cillian wins a bet.”

He cups my face and stares at me with awe.

“Your favorite color is green. Not green like the grass. It’s sea green. The type of sea green you find in the Mediterranean.”

“Olivia.” He strokes my face.

“You like weekends and Wednesdays. But most of all, you love me.”

“I do love you, Olivia,” he replies, with the deepest conviction in the world.

“And I love you, too. I remember you, Virgo. I remember you. Thank you so much for finding me and believing I was alive.”

I couldn’t be more shocked when a tear tracks down his cheek. I didn’t think such a thing was possible.

He pulls me into his chest for a hug. And holds me close to his heart.

Where I wish I could stay forever, loving him.

* * *

We’re back at Dr. Belmont’s office. Virgo is here with me this time. I felt this would be one of those times when I would need him here with me.

I told Dr. Belmont all that I remembered yesterday.

Throughout the course of the night, I had more memories return to me. Just little things like where I lived when I was younger, trips to Ireland, and things from high school. I still can't remember Amelia or any of my other friends. Or Harvard and my academic achievements.

That's okay. It's baby steps. I'm further than I was weeks ago and more than I thought I would be. I'm so different from the girl I was in Monte Carlo that I can't believe all the things that have happened to me.

"How are you feeling after yesterday?" Dr. Belmont asks.

"Positive."

"That's good." He glances at Virgo. "You had a good breakthrough yesterday. Today, we're gonna do the same sort of thing and see where your mind takes you. I think with Virgo here, you might feel safer to explore those hidden memories."

Virgo takes my hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. "I'll be right here next to you," he assures me.

"Okay, I can do it."

"Great. When you close your eyes and the memory comes back to you, I want you to try and tell me everything you see. Yesterday, I allowed you to explore the memory, but it's important today that you tell me what you saw."

"Alright."

"Ready?"

"Yes."

We move toward the chaise lounge, and just like yesterday, Dr. Belmont sits in front of me.

Virgo pulls up a chair to sit next to him. “Can I hold her hand?” he asks Dr. Belmont.

“Of course.”

Virgo takes my hand, then Dr. Belmont guides me through the same breathing techniques and visualization of the ball of light.

“Describe the memories from yesterday,” Dr. Belmont instructs.

I do, feeling good as I speak. When I reach the end of the memory, where I’m at Virgo’s house in the library, Dr. Belmont instructs me to wait and stay there.

“Yesterday, I got you to think of something that makes you happy,” he says in that smooth voice. “Today, I want you to think of your parents and let whatever flows to your mind come. It could just be images of them. From pictures or the memory you’ve had yesterday. Anything. But I want you to put them both in your mind. Your mother and your father.”

“Okay,” I mumble.

I insert images of my parents into my mind’s eye. And allow them to float around as if carried by the wind. I see Mom, with her long flowing blonde hair, like mine, and her kind blue eyes. I see Dad, with his shaggy dark curls and large brown eyes. I grew up to look exactly like my mother, and Cillian like Dad. But without the curls. He also got Mom’s eyes.

At the thought of Mom’s eyes, I focus on them, and I see them before me as if she’s right here.

“What can you see, Olivia?” Dr. Belmont asks, cutting into my thoughts.

“My mother. I’m looking at her eyes”.

“Keep focusing on her eyes. Where exactly is she?”

I focus on her eyes until my mind fills in the rest of the space with my father’s office.

I remember it.

Mom is looking at me. Then she paces around the office.

When she turns to face me, blood is covering her chest. In her hands is a bandage. Her face is flooded by panic and terror.

“You guys need to get out of here,” Dad calls out. He’s covered in blood from head to toe and limping.

“Olivia?” I can hear Dr. Belmont’s voice, but I can’t answer him.

I’m staring at my father, covered in blood, and it’s like I’m back there in that drifted state again, and I’ve inserted myself into the memory.

“Dad, no,” I hear myself say, but he ignores me.

Dad staggers over to Mom, more blood flowing from his stomach.

He takes hold of her arm and hands her something. It’s a memory stick.

“You need to get yourself and Olivia out of here. Get yourself to safety, and hide this,” he tells her. “The men will take you to England. Hide there for as long as possible.”

“Callahan, you have to come with us,” Mom cries.

“I’ll stay and hold them off. Go, Sheena,” he urges, then limps toward me to plant a kiss on my forehead. “I love you, dear girl. I’m so sorry.”

He doesn't get to say anything else. A bullet pierces his neck, and blood splatters all over me. Then another in his head. The impact is so strong it blows off the side of his face.

I scream, then the sound of gunfire surrounds us.

“Olivia, run!” Mom calls out to me.

A flicker of faces jumble in my mind and suddenly we're in England. Mom is putting the memory stick in a safe in a facility by the river.

“We're going to be okay,” she assures me. But the scenery shifts again and it's night. She's running for her life and then she's on fire.

The screams pour out of me as I watch her ablaze and Kevin grabs me.

He throws me over his shoulder and runs with me. He shoves me in a car and we drive.

More gun fire comes then the car crashes and blackness slams into my mind.

That ball of light shatters around me. Fragments splinter everywhere, and I'm screaming and screaming and screaming.

I jump right out of the terror and into Virgo's arms.

He's holding me but I feel like I want to run out of my skin.

The memory has racked my brain so hard that my nose bleeds.

And I continue screaming.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Virgo

Dr. Belmont offers me a look of sympathy. I know he feels the same guilt I do. He's just arrived at my house. It's been three days since Olivia remembered the attack and her parents' death. We go into my office and sit opposite each other.

"How is she?" Dr. Belmont asks.

I shake my head. "Not good. I know everything was set up the proper way, but I feel like I pushed her too hard. Maybe we shouldn't have gone back into her mind so soon."

"For that, I am to blame." He inclines his head and presses his lips together. "But what we did wasn't too soon. From the first time Olivia started getting her memories back, I suspected they would start coming back faster. She started remembering sequences of events that happened in the run-up to the attack. They all seemed to be very specific events that meant something to her, like her birthday in Florence and you getting the house for her. I felt it was better for her to be in a contained environment rather than on the road somewhere where she would be weakened if she had that memory of the attack on her own or just with you where you might not have known what to do."

"I guess so." I have to agree.

Olivia was so hysterical. She had to be injected with medication to calm her. Was only way we could get her to stop screaming. I'll never forget the way she looked with blood pouring from her nose.

I've never seen anyone break down like that and I didn't want it to happen to her. It was only the day before yesterday that she was able to talk about what she saw and as she told me one horrific detail after another, I realized exactly why it took her so long to remember what happened.

We were fearing that she'd go into lockdown mode, but she was already there. She'd been in lockdown mode for the last two and a half years. Maybe that dream of hers where she's searching through the darkness was her mind telling her that she had to find me to get help.

It was only through me and the closeness of our relationship that everything else was unlocked.

"What now?" I ask, thinking about the other things I need to factor. "She can't have another session like that."

"No. We're going to take things back to basics again."

"Okay. It's clear that memory stick is what the enemy was after." We've decided to leave it where it is for the moment.

"Yes. I would definitely say so."

"Our problem now is that although we know what happened and *why* it happened, we still don't know who did it." I've also found nothing on my father.

"I suggest you continue keeping information to a minimum."

I'm already nodding before he finishes that sentence. If I knew nothing else, I knew that. "I'm going to speak to Olivia about that." The only other person I know she would tell is Amelia and it's better if no one knows.

"Good. I'll keep you updated."

"Thank you."

“I’ll be on standby, but I’ll set up an appointment for next week. We can have it here.”

“Thanks, and thank you for the work you’ve done.”

He dips his head. “You’re welcome. But we’re still a work in progress until it’s over.”

I couldn’t agree more.

He stands, gives me a final nod, then leaves. I remain seated in my chair and think about all of it. There are so many moving parts to this mystery that I don’t know which to focus on first. At least we have a few things cleared up and a few more revelations. Like the fact that Callahan died in his home.

When Olivia first came back, I thought that both her parents died in Europe, but it was just her and her mother who went there. And the enemy caught up with them. I’ve been trying to figure out how that happened, but the only thing that makes sense is that after they were attacked in their home, the enemy might have been able to get the information from Callahan somehow, like maybe on his phone. Olivia said that they were to leave with the men. If her father had arranged for men to meet them, it makes sense that he would’ve told them where to go. So that traitor got the intel from New York and followed them to Europe. But they could have only gotten that information from Callahan, because it’s nowhere else.

Not even Cillian was able to pinpoint where exactly they might have gone in Europe.

I have him working on this as much as possible because I know right now Olivia needs me. I can’t neglect that.

The weekend comes and she seems brighter. As in she’s crying less. As far as I know, she hasn’t been in touch with anyone. I’ve been messaging Amelia when she messages me

to find out how Olivia is doing. The only thing I've made Amelia aware of is that Olivia remembered details of the attack that upset her. I assured her that as soon as she was feeling better, she'd be in touch.

In the evening, I decide to make Olivia that teriyaki steak. Eden already cooked lunch, but I wanted to cook dinner again for her.

We haven't really spoken much about anything else, and all she's done at night is curl up next to me, cocooning herself into my chest as if she wants me to protect her.

Olivia walks into the kitchen and sees me cooking. She gives me a little smile, which is a good sign.

"Hi," she says, looking at the steak in the skillet.

"Hey."

"Cooking for me again?" She asks in an appreciative tone.

"I thought I'd make you dinner." I smile but my heart sinks at the sight of her frail body. "How are you feeling?"

"Awful," she replies and sits on the stool near me.

I reach over to touch her cheek and she rests her head against my hand.

"I'm here," I tell her. "I'm here for whatever you need. I wish I could tell you it will get better, but I can't."

She straightens and nods. "I know. How can you tell me such a thing when I watched my parents die? No wonder I didn't want to remember. The whole thing explains why I was so terrified."

"I know."

“I’m trying so hard to remember who did killed them, but I can’t.”

“Maybe that’s another block in your mind,” I suggest. “But give it time. Please don’t try to stress yourself out by pushing too hard. You’ve experienced a big blow.”

She nods agreeing. “Okay. I’ll try to take things slowly. And, I guess I should also message Amelia back at some point, or call her. It’s just difficult to talk to anyone.”

“I’ve been taking care of that. She understands.”

“Thank you.”

“Whenever you speak to Amelia, I think it’s important that you don’t give her any specifics or details about the memory,” I caution. “The information about the memory stick could be dangerous. The less people who know, the better. Especially because you know where it is. We need to keep that information between us for the moment.”

“Okay. I won’t mention it.”

The only other people who know are Cillian, Dante, and Seamus.

“The last thing I want to do is put my friend in danger.” She sulks.

“I think she’ll be okay if we’re careful.” I tap her hand.

“Can we eat this together and watch a movie like we did at the beach house?” A small smile brightens her face.

“Absolutely.”

We spend the rest of the evening watching films and I take care of her until she goes to sleep. Then I make my way to my office. I want to touch base with the guys.

I switch my computer on. Then the phone rings. It's my cell phone. I pull it out of my pocket and see it's Borya, my father's advisor. He rarely ever calls me for anything. Of course, I've been ignoring my father, so I'm tempted to ignore this call. But I answer.

"Hi Borya," I say.

"Virgo, I have bad news." He speaks in a hurried voice.

"What's happened?"

"Your father has been shot."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Virgo

“**Y**our father is stable,” the surgeon says. “But there are some complications you need to know about.”

I clench my jaw and stare back at him, deepening my gaze.

“What are they?” I’m not sure which emotion I’d use to describe my voice. It sounds somewhere in between shocked and numb. Both come from a place where I’ve always believed that my father is untouchable.

“The first is, he’ll be with us for a while. The bullet to his chest was only two millimeters away from his heart. He’s lucky to be alive. But the bullet to his back severed his spinal cord, meaning he’s going to be paralyzed for the rest of his life.”

The numbness inside me increases, expanding to my core.

I can’t imagine my father paralyzed and not being able to move around the way he always does, or fly from country to country, commanding his empire.

“When can I see him?” I ask.

They’ve been in surgery for six hours, so I’m not sure how he’ll be for visitors.

“You can see him now,” the surgeon replies. “But just bear in mind, he’ll be in a coma for some time. I can’t say when he’ll wake up, or even if he will. That is a situation.”

I nod. My father was found unconscious in his office at home, shot twice. It was Borya who found him.

Apart from the guards, he was alone at home, as my mother is away on a spa retreat in Switzerland. She's been notified of what's happened to him, and is on her way back.

"Thank you," I tell the surgeon.

"I'll keep you updated along the way. If you head to the nurse's office, they'll show you to your father's room."

I give him a curt nod, and make my way to the nurses, who then take me to see my father.

It was only the other day that I saw him.

As usual, he stood tall, proud, and strong.

The man I'm looking at now looks like a shadow of the one I know. He's attached to so many wires and tubes and machines that I can't tell which is doing what. He's only sixty, but the man in the bed looks like he could be a hundred years old.

I don't know what this incident means in the grand scheme of things.

I don't know if it means that I was initially right about him, and he didn't have anything to do with the O'Ridian murders.

Or if this is an isolated incident that has nothing to do with them, and everything to do with how despicable my father is.

Conveniently, the surveillance didn't pick anybody up, or anything out of the ordinary. The guards also saw nothing. Those parts aren't actually a surprise because my father has secret passages into the house. It does however tell me that the person who used them, which it looks like they did, is someone he knew very, very well.

My father has a separate surveillance system in his office, but only he knows where it is and the codes to get in. With him down like this, we're not going to get any of that information any time soon. Someone opens the door. I turn to see Borya standing there.

His face is hard, and the light shines down on his gray hair, turning it silver.

Borya has known my father since they were boys. If I wasn't around, he would be my father's second in command. But the position of advisor he holds is no different than a consigliere in the Italian mafia. That means he's almost more important than me.

"A word, please, Virgo," he says,

I go to him. We go outside and head down the corridor to the little alcove where we can talk in private. Borya looks uneasy and shaken, and I still feel shocked and numb.

"We still can't locate the surveillance in your father's office," he begins, "But we found evidence that the secret passage was definitely used. A burner code was put in to gain access."

Fuck, I was right. Burner codes are untraceable and would have only been issued by my father.

We're definitely not going to have any kind of clues on who did this.

"Do you have any ideas who this person might be?" I ask.

Borya shakes his head. "I wouldn't know where to begin."

The irony in this situation is that this person could've been me. I know the secret passages like no other. I also know how to use a burner code, and I hate my father. Only the other day,

I was ready to kill him. Everyone knows the tension that has lived between us for years and years and years.

It's only a matter of time before people start suspecting me.

"It wasn't me," I declare. Just to get it off my chest.

"I know," Borya replies. "I already checked you out. Nevertheless, you wouldn't kill him like this. You wouldn't leave him alive to tell the tale. You would have given him a bullet straight to the head to make sure he would never make it back, and if you thought he might, he would have gotten another bullet to finish him off."

The harsh answer is the truth. So I say nothing, because he's right on all counts.

"In other news..." He pauses and clears his throat, as if to mark the change in the subject. "As your father's condition is dire, we need to enact the emergency procedures. For both the Brotherhood and the company. Both require a leader."

My breath stills with this news.

The emergency protocol provides that if my father can no longer fulfill his duties, I must take over with immediate effect. As in, take over everything.

We have a sixty-day rule, which means he'll have sixty days to get well, and get back into action. And we both know that's not gonna happen.

"I become the leader." I say those words as if I'm checking, but actually, I'm talking to myself.

Borja nods. "The sixty day rule kicks in from today, Virgo. Let's face it, your father is going to be paralyzed for the rest of his life. If he pulls through, he'll need extensive treatment for

months. He's not gonna be able to come back to the Brotherhood. Or the company ever again. That responsibility now falls on you."

"I see."

"I'll be speaking with the lawyers in the morning. Along with the Bratva officiates."

My father loved power so much it came before his family. He hardly wanted to part with a company here in New York. If he could have managed to run everything himself, he would have. Now he can't do any of it.

And I will.

"Alright." I sigh. "Thank you for taking care of that."

"We will await your instructions, Pakhan." He places emphasis on that word—*Pakhan*.

It sounds strange to my ears to hear it in reference to me, but I nod, because that is who I am now—the new leader.

He's about to leave, but I stop him.

"Yes," he says.

"I want you to be my second in command. I want you to take over with immediate effect and carry out the duties."

A spark of interest invades his eyes, something that tells me he's always wanted that position. I know he has.

"My thanks, Pakhan." He bows and continues down the corridor.

I look away from him and gaze through the window. It's every man's dream in the Bratva to have more power and get to the top.

I just made it and secured my birthright. But to me, it neither feels good nor bad. Perhaps it's because this occurrence marks another change in my life with Olivia. It's also come to the point in our journey where I can no longer keep secrets from her. I'm going to have to tell her everything.

Absolutely everything.

* * *

Olivia is the first to greet me when I get back home.

I've already spoken to Eden, she called while I was at the hospital. And I was able to explain my father's progress.

When I left to go to the hospital Olivia was still asleep.

As it's just gone seven in the morning, I assume she must have just woken up.

"Oh Virgo, I'm so sorry," she offers, concern brimming in her eyes. "Eden, told me what happened. How's your father doing?"

Bless her heart for her compassion. The kind soul she is has allowed her to push aside my father's horrible nature to check how he is.

"He's not good," I answer and quickly fill her in on my father's condition.

I then verge on to the details about my new position in the Bratva and the company. The moment I tell her of my new position, she goes rigid.

She already looks frail, but this news seems to hit her hard.

"Does this mean you'll be traveling a lot?" She brings her hands together.

“No.” I brush her cheek. “And I’m not going to be away from you. I’ll arrange everything so that I’m not.”

She looks visibly relieved to hear that. And the color returns to her cheeks.

But I won’t rejoice just yet because I’m about to wear her down further with everything else I have to tell her.

“I really appreciate you for doing that. I need... you.”

“I know. You are my first priority.”

“Thank you.”

Pulling in a deep breath, I prepare myself to delve into deeper secrets.

“Olivia? There’s more stuff I have to talk to you about. Stuff to do with the past, the investigation, and us.

She searches my eyes and studies my face.

“That sounds serious.” She rasps.

“It is, but it’s time I tell you what’s going on and what went on in the past.”

Again, she stills. “Okay, tell me.”

“Let’s go and sit in the living room.”

I slip an arm around her. And usher her into the living room where we sit.

She searches my face again, probably trying to pre-empt what I’m going to tell her. She won’t be able to do that.

“Before I begin, it’s important you know that I’ve only kept these things from you because I didn’t want to hinder your progress.” I explain. “I also needed you to trust me.”

“You’re worrying me, Virgo. Just tell me what’s going on. I’ve been eager for weeks.”

“Alright. The first thing is about my father. Up until today, we suspected him of having something to do with your parents murder.”

“I thought you said you already checked that out and he was cleared.”

“I did, but new information came to light the other week. It confirmed that my father was planning to kill yours.”

She gasps. “My God. So it could have been him?”

“As of this moment, I can’t confirm one way or the other. I don’t believe the shooting excuses him, but it certainly adds to the mystery, and we’re going to be investigating.”

Her hands tremble, and she sinks into the sofa.

There’s more. Much more, I declare. Feeling like an asshole for doling out more shit to worry about.

“Tell me.” Her voice is weak.

“Kevin is dead,” I say and she looks worse than before.

But what’s even worse is the guilt that comes into her eyes.

“Dead? When? When did this happen?”

“Weeks ago. It happened when we were at the beach house. Cillian went to see him and another guy who worked for your father. But someone got to them first.”

She brings a hand up to her cheeks and stands. “This is because of me.

Because I came back here.”

I stand too and put my arm around her. “Please don’t think that. This is all about whatever happened in the past. You mustn’t blame yourself.”

“But I do. He was safe until I was found. Clearly.”

“He was never safe.” I shake my head. Because it’s a hard truth I have to let her know. “Just like you never were. It’s only a matter of time for these things to catch up with us. That’s why you can’t blame yourself.”

I guide her back to sit. It’s better if she’s sitting for everything else I have to share.

“God, what else is there? You said there was much, much more.”

“Yes.” Now my voice sounds far away. “The next thing is to do with the past, and it’s the reason you were home that day of the attack.”

She narrows her eyes. “What do you mean? I thought I would have been there anyway.”

“No, you were supposed to be in England. You’d gotten your placement at the British Museum, and that day was the day you were supposed to leave.”

“So why didn’t I leave?”

“Because of me. Because of something I did to upset you.”

She stills for a moment, and stares back at me. “What did you do?”

“I have to give you some context first. My father was furious when he found out we were seeing each other. He always sought to break us up. Every time I saw him, all he demanded was our breakup. I fought him hard, until the day I got caught in a trap.”

“What happened?” She mutters.

“My sister told me she was raped, so I killed the man who did it, but my father got a recording of me killing the guy. He threatened to expose me. I could have lived with that part, but that’s not all he did. He also threatened to arrange for my sister to marry one of his associates. A man I knew would have been her destruction. My sister was already engaged to the man she loved. For my crime, I would have been killed. And I wouldn’t have been able to stop my father from handing her over to a man who would have probably sold her or eventually ended up killing her.

Olivia gasps. “Oh my god, Virgo.”

“The ultimatum was to break up with you. If I did that, he’d destroy the evidence on me. That happened days before you were supposed to leave. Then you came to see me. I didn’t know you were there, but what you saw was Amelia trying to seduce me.”

I always wondered how I was going to tell her that part as there are two competing stories here, Amelia’s and mine.

Shock fuses with Olivia’s face, melting into her beautiful features. First the blood drains from her cheeks, then it returns with a vengeance, and her entire face goes red.

“Amelia?” She shakes her head with disbelief. “Amelia was trying to seduce you? You mean Amelia, my best friend?”

“Yes,” I reply.

“Maybe she wasn’t. Maybe you were mistaken. I can’t imagine that—”

“She was naked.” I cut her off before she can say any more. “She was naked and she kissed me.”

A few seconds of silence pass by as if the fabric of reality is allowing itself to work that information into the threads of time and into her mind. A tremor ripples across her lips and travels down her body.

“I saw that happening,” she mumbles. “Between you and her?”

“Yes.”

“Were you with her?” A tear runs down her cheek.

“ No, you didn’t see me turn her down. I would never cheat on you, but the worst thing I did after was allow you to believe I did. Because of my father’s ultimatum, I told you I did it. I said we’d grown apart, and that I was interested in Amelia. I broke up with you, and you were devastated. That was the day I lost my soul.” I pause for beat. “I assumed you were too distraught to leave for England because after the attack I found out that you rearranged your flight for the following week. I never got to tell you the truth, and I’ve been looking for you since.”

She bows her head and allows her tears to fall.

I let her cry for a few moments, then I sit beside her and rest my hand on her back.

“Please forgive me, Olivia. I’m so, so sorry.”

Slowly, she lifts her head and places her hand at her heart.

“I hate what you did. I hate that you could have hurt me like that. But I can’t blame you. I can’t. You were trying to protect your sister. I understand that. It hurts, but I understand.”

An ounce of redemption fills my soul. But it doesn’t expel the guilt that’s still there.

“If not for me, you wouldn’t have been at home,” I point out.

She looks away, and stares ahead, to the window. “It’s not something we can change. I was home, and I saw what happened, and I experienced. It too. The only thing I can take from this is that I was with my parents in their final moments. Maybe that’s better than not knowing.” She looks back at me. “Amelia, on the other hand...” Her voice trails off.

“She wants forgiveness, Olivia.” I offer, although I know it’s not for me to do so.

“You think I should forgive her for what she did?” Her face contorts with disgust.

“That’s something for you to decide now that you know the truth. She wanted to tell you what happened herself. I insisted that I would tell you when the time was right. Today was that time.” It’s fair, that she know those parts.

She seems to consider my words then she bows our head again.

We say nothing more and allow the silence to take over.

The secrets are out now.

Everything is out in the open.

Now we have to decide what to do with them.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Olivia

Numbness fills me as I walk across the path leading to the park.

This is where I'm meeting Amelia for the talk we should have had years ago.

When Virgo told me the truth, he contacted Amelia to let her know I knew.

It's taken me five days since to message her and get to this point.

My mind was still reeling from the memory of what happened to my parents, but hearing what my best friend did pushed me into a deeper hole of despair.

When I saw Dr. Belmont yesterday, he gave me the strength to do this.

That's why I'm here. My sessions with him have almost become a necessity. I still can't remember the people responsible for the attack on my parents, but I know that will come.

Since Virgo told me about his father, I keep imagining his father in my father's office shooting him. I imagine his horrible face giving us all that same look he gave me at the wedding. As if I were nothing and he despised me.

If it turns out to be him, I wouldn't be surprised. But right now, we still don't know anything because he's in a coma.

And I'm still where I am because I can't remember anything more. Little moments and memories have come back

to me like puzzle pieces sitting themselves in place. I would even go as far as saying that I feel like my old self again when I'm around Cillian, Seamus, and Virgo, but there's an awareness about me that knows I'm still not right.

This news about Amelia has shoved me further into that category of not being right. Everything feels wrong. Because we're not the friends I thought we were.

When I get to the Rose Garden, I spot Amelia sitting by the duck pond. We've been coming here after our shopping trips to talk and hang out.

All those times, I didn't know her secret on whatever attraction she held for Virgo. He'd explained further about their initial marriage contract, but it doesn't explain what she did, because that would have been years before.

I stopped for a moment to steady my mind. I'm really not ready for this.

Learning what Amelia did has hurt me deeply. But I feel like this is the kind of thing that will fester in my soul if I don't address it.

That was the reason I came today. And I'm interested in hearing what she has to say. Part of me wants to know why she would do that to me.

But I'm really not ready for this confrontation. Summoning all the strength I can, I continue walking. She sees me before I reach, and stands. Worry has riddled her features, making her look gaunt.

I haven't seen her in well over a week. But the last time I saw her, she didn't look like this.

I stop before her and her eyes become glassy as if she might cry. I hope she doesn't, because I don't know if I could

offer the sympathy I should, as a person who is supposed to be her best friend.

“Thank you for coming,” she says first.

“I guess I made it.”

“Do you want to sit?”

I answer by sitting, but I keep my gaze trained on her. She sits too, and stares at me with expectancy.

“I don’t know what to say to you,” I speak slowly.

The more I look at her, the more I wonder how she could have done what she did to me.

“I don’t expect you to say anything. It’s me who should talk. And the only thing I truly, truly want to say to you is that I’m sorry. Olivia, I’m truly, deeply, so sorry for what I did.”

I can see that she’s being genuine, but that does nothing to ease the hurt nestled in my heart.

“Why did you do it? I don’t get it. I don’t get it at all.” I smirk without humor. “Why would you do something like that to me knowing how I felt about Virgo? You know we were talking about marriage. And you did that?” The venom in my voice is evident. As evident as the sun in the sky.

“I know.” She looks down in shame. “I can’t take that back. But I’ll explain. I’m guessing Virgo told you about the marriage contract we had when we were kids.”

“He did.” I straighten. I didn’t like hearing about that, but I assumed I must have known at some point.

“Way back when, my father and his were close. The marriage contract was arranged because my father’s business was booming. Virgo’s father thought the business match would

be beneficial to our families. Then my father lost his business, and Virgo's father severed the arrangement between them. When I tried to seduce Virgo, my father was in trouble again. He was on the verge of bankruptcy, and we were about to lose everything. I freaked out. I went to Virgo, and I thought..." She pauses for a minute, then pulls in a breath. "I thought if I could seduce him to marry me, I'd fix everything for my family."

Because we'd then have the money we needed. So you thought you'd screw me over. I understand what she's saying, but I also understand that she shoved me to the back of beyond for her own selfishness.

"I wasn't thinking, Olivia. I panicked, and I did the only thing I thought I could do. You will never know how sorry I am. On the day of the attack, you messaged me to let me know you knew what happened. I never got to see you to apologize. All these weeks, I feared you'd remember and hate me. I wanted to show you that I could be a friend to you when you needed me most. That's why I've been around so much." She dabs the tears that finally come.

Seeing her this way softens my heart. She *has* been there for me. I trusted her with my innermost feelings about Virgo and my worries. I even trusted her with the information about where I was all these years and what happened to me in Monte Carlo.

If I was being truly honest, I'd have to accept that she has been trying to show that she's a friend, but I'm still hurt.

"I'm not going to ask you to forgive me." She speaks in a low, calm voice. "But I am going to ask for a chance. You don't have to answer me today. Take some time to think about it. And if you think you could find it in your heart to just give

me a chance, maybe we could still meet on Friday for the museum exhibition.”

Friday would give me a few days to think. Surely I can do that.

“Okay,” I agree. “I’ll think about it.”

She sighs and relief floods her face. “Thank you so much. It means everything to me. It really does. And I am truly, truly sorry, Olivia.”

“Yeah, I hear you.”

“How are you otherwise?” She regains her former compassionate composure. “We haven’t spoken since you remembered what happened to your parents.”

I shake my head. “I’m not good. I remembered everything that happened, except who did it. It was horrific. Absolutely horrific. She purses her lips together.”

“I’m sorry. I think I’ll get closure when I remember the person who is responsible for taking them from me.”

“It sounds like you’re getting close,” she offers. “At least you’ve remembered the worst parts. And maybe you don’t have to be afraid anymore.”

Those words sound wise, so I nod, but I decide that this is enough.

I can’t stay here and listen to her offer me these words of wisdom and compassion when I feel this angst in my soul for what she did.

“I have get back.” I push to my feet just as she was about to say something else.

“Okay, I hope I see you again.”

The hope in her voice pinches my soul.

“We’ll see.” I nod, then leave.

I’ll have to wait for Friday to see how I feel.

Right now, I don’t have the strength for anything.

* * *

“How did it go?” Virgo asks, coming over to me. He just got back home.

I sit up against the headboard and stare at him, wondering exactly what I’m supposed to say to answer that question.

I got back from seeing Amelia about six hours ago. It’s night now and I still feel the same torment in my soul.

“It didn’t go well,” I tell him.

A shadow of worry washes over his face as he comes closer and shrugs out of his jacket.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I don’t know.”

As he looks me over, I know he still feels guilty for his part. But I understand what happened with him. He couldn’t control fate and wasn’t to know what was going to happen to me and my parents.

Amelia, on the other hand, set out to be duplicitous. I understand that she’s sorry now, but what about then?

She never seemed to factor in how devastated I would have been if Virgo had chosen her.

Virgo sits on the edge of the bed.

“She wants me to give her a chance,” I explain. “But I don’t know if I can and I don’t think I should be thinking about this when there’s more important things to worry about.”

“This is important too,” he points out. “It’s important to you. Or you wouldn’t be worrying about it.”

My shoulders slump. “This just feels like one more thing I don’t need to worry about.”

“I know what you mean.” He leans forward and plants a kiss on my forehead.

“She’s asked if I could give her until Friday. We’re supposed to go to an exhibition at the museum.”

“Then you have till Friday to decide. Until then, I need my wife.” The way he says that suggests he’s had a long, rough day.

He’s been here for me, but I know he’s been working around the clock at other times, to get down to the bottom of what’s going on.

I need him too, badly, so when he pulls me onto his lap, I go and straddle him. Within moments, we’re naked, and he’s inside me, and I’m riding him. This is our escape, my escape from reality. We keep going through the night, taking breaks here and there, but always finding each other.

Eventually, I drift off to sleep in one of our breaks.

My body melts into a dream, and I see myself walking into a hallway I recognize as my parents’ house.

When I get to the end of the hallway, I see Amelia. She turns at the sound of my footsteps, looking surprised to find me there. But then a smile of pure, raw sin spreads across her face, and she looks evil.

“You don’t deserve him, Olivia. You never did. Virgo was always mine. You’re just a confused bitch.” She rushes forward, and I jump out of the dream, and into bright daylight.

I’m by myself, in the bed, and the quietness of the ensuite bathroom suggests I’m alone.

I swallow hard, and dab at the sweat trickling down the side of my face.

Then I recall the dream I just had, and the horrible feeling twisting and squeezing my stomach. That was just a dream, right?

Not a memory?

I didn’t see Amelia after she tried to seduce Virgo, so it couldn’t have been a memory.

It wouldn’t make sense if it was a memory. Not with what she said to me.

When I saw her in the park, all she wanted was my forgiveness, so that had to be a dream.

I go through the rest of the day feeling uneasy with this hollow inside me that gnaws away at my insides.

The feeling stays with me.

Friday rolls on and things are still the same. But it’s now time to come to a decision on whether or not I’m going to give my best friend a chance.

I have an hour before I have to see her.

I’m hesitant and still not ready. The hurt is still raw. But I realize, it’s not going to go away overnight.

This is not the kind of thing that you just forget. It’s going to take time, just like with everything else.

Eden makes me a quick snack, and I take out a photo album Seamus brought around a few weeks ago.

I looked through it then, but I go to the sunroom to look through it again.

It contains pictures of Amelia and I.

I open it, and it starts with us as babies. Literal babies. Who are Nine months old. She has a pink bonnet, and I have a yellow one. I flick through to more pictures of us as children, then as teenagers, and then adults. We were all so close, us together, and our parents.

The feud ripped us all apart. She asked me for a chance. How can I not give her one?

We share such a rich history together. Deciding to push my feelings aside, I gear myself up to go and give her the chance she asked for.

The look on her face when she sees me walking across the road toward the museum is a sort a person would want to frame.

I smile back at her, hoping we can move past this.

But something inside me tells me, I can't.

Chapter Thirty

Virgo

We found the recording unit in my father's office.

It's a small victory, but now we have to open it.

It was carefully hidden in the case with his Bible, of all the books, and I had to search through over two thousand books, documents, and various other things to find it.

The entire office is practically decimated and looks like a bomb dropped in the middle of it.

It seemed like the only course of action after he was shot was to look for the recording unit in here.

The plan was to hack into it and see if we could get the recording from the day he was shot.

I found it about an hour ago. Now I'm joined by Dante and Cillian, who've been trying to help me gain access to the device.

The unit is one of those tricky ones, with a self-destruct mechanism, so you get ten times to try and put the password in, and if it doesn't work, the unit will destroy itself.

Only my father would think of such a thing. Yes, it's a good idea, but not for times like these.

The worst thing is, I've already input the password wrong five times.

"Maybe we should take a break," Dante suggests.

"That might be a good idea," Cillian agrees. "We can regroup and come back later. We don't want to waste the next

lot of tries.”

“No, I say looking over the unit. I have to keep trying. If this last attempt doesn’t gain access, then we’ll take a break.”

I’ve modified a hacking device I often use to access encrypted files on computers. I’m hoping my modifications will make it work here.

I’ve gone off the basis of trying to see if I can access the previous occasions when the password was used.

If this thing belonged to anybody but my father, I know I would have definitely been in by now. But it’s clear from the fact that I *can’t* get in, that he was trying to keep his affairs hidden from someone like me.

Or maybe it was actually me.

“I hope this works, Virgo.’ Dante chimes in. “This will be attempt number six.”

“I know.” I nod. “I’m holding out on hope here.”

I secure the device to the key panel on the unit. It latches on like a leech. I then press the button, and it lights up. If this works, the locking system will release.

We wait a minute, then another, and another.

We look at each other, and I gaze up heavenward, because this looks like another failed attempt. I sigh, and I’m about to take off the device when we all hear the distinct click of the lock coming free. My whole body sighs with relief.

“Thank God,” I rasp. I was starting to believe I’d lost my touch in the tech world.

I glance at Dante and Cillian, who both nod at me with relief.

“We just need to watch the recording now.”

“Hopefully we’ll get some answers,” Cillian says.

I open the unit and take out the microchip. Then I walk over to the computer, switch it on, and slide the microchip in the side.

Dante and Cillian join me as I bring up the menu, detailing the dates that were all recorded on the device. I’m shocked to see that my father has recordings going back as far as eight years.

I select the date he was shot on another menu that comes up.

These lists the times for each hour. As Borya said, he’d seen my father up until eight o’clock, I look from that time. Nothing happens in the first hour or for the next two hours. Then my father comes into the office. He sits in his chair and takes a call. He waits like he’s expecting someone.

Five minutes later, the door in the wall, by the bookcase, which leads to the secret passage, slides open and I gear myself up to see who will come through.

I expect a man, someone from the Bratva, or one of the other associates my father deals with. But who I see stuns me to my core.

It’s Amelia. Actually, Amelia.

Her father works for mine, but there’s no reason for her to be meeting with my father alone in his office.

The three of us look at each other, completely confused.

“Is that seriously who I think it is?” Dante asks.

“Yes,” I reply, but my voice sounds as if it’s far, far away.

What the fuck would Amelia be doing in my father's office?

The dark feeling in my gut tells me I already know the answer.

Father smiles when he sees her and looks her up and down like she's a piece of meat.

"I have no need for you tonight," he says in a taunting voice. "I thought I already fucked you hard enough the other night. Is your pussy greedy for more?"

A stone drops in a pit of my stomach and keeps going down, plummeting through the earth.

My father was having an affair with Amelia. *Seriously?*

"I'm not here for that," she replies.

"What a shame. I was ready to bend you over my desk. Why are you here then?"

She walks up to the desk and stops in front of him.

"It seems you've been snooping around my father's business," she replies in a voice that sounds more confident than I've ever heard her. Something tells me that this is the real her.

My father seems surprised by her answer, and the shadow of worry touches his face. I've never really seen him look worried before, so this is a first for me.

"I don't know what you mean," Father says, trying to play down his emotions.

"Oh, I think you do." Amelia laughs. "I have evidence that shows you've been checking into a friend in common, *Lance Polinsky*."

I know that name. Like Artemis Bane, Lance is another black market dealer, but no one actually knows what he looks like. He's referred to as a ghost in the underground. He only allows you to know him if he needs you.

"Your father has friends he shouldn't know," Father says in a stiff voice. "Friends I suspect murdered the O'Ridians."

I glance at Cillian who's jaw is tense.

Amelia looks thrown by the accusation. "What did you find?" She challenges.

"Enough to ruin you people. My son suspects me and I didn't do it. I planned to, but your father beat me to it, didn't he?"

The truth spills from my father's lips and Amelia, stands there with a stiff smile on her face. I can't believe what I'm hearing, but it's actually happening.

"I think you know too much," Amelia replies.

My father reaches down and I know what he's reaching for. He keeps a gun in the desk. But he's not quick enough to retrieve it.

Amelia pulls a gun from her purse first and shoots him.

The bullet lodges in the chest and as he turns, she shoots him in the back.

Both shots aren't heard. The gun has a silencer. Father falls to the ground. Hardly making a sound.

Amelia looks around. And goes to the computer. She takes a little device from her purse and downloads something. Then she goes back the way she came. *Gone.*

She's gone from the screen, but the shock from what I just saw and learned slams into my chest like a truck falling off a highway.

Amelia.

This was all her. Fury makes me stand, and I stare at Cillian and Dante.

"I'm calling the men to bring her and her father in," Dante balks, then something hits me, and I glance at the time.

It's just gone midday. Amelia is with Olivia. They're at the museum.

Everything was a lie. And I don't think for one moment that Amelia wanted any sort of chance with Olivia.

So that meeting today...

It's a trap!

Chapter Thirty-One

Olivia

The first part of the exhibition ends. We have twenty minutes before the second session begins. The exhibition is about the life in Pompeii before the volcano destroyed the land.

It's the type of exhibition that is filled with all sorts of fascinating information and things I love learning about. But through the whole time I've been here, I've been uncomfortable with Amelia.

I've done my best to push aside my angst, but every time I look at her it returns to me.

"Hey." She smiles. "Do you want to run to the bathroom to freshen up? Then maybe we can grab a hot chocolate from the cafe before the next session."

There's a hopeful look in her eyes. Not hopeful that I will say yes to the suggestion, but hopeful that the tension between us can pass.

All I can say toward that is that I'm trying. I'm doing my utmost best,

but it's just one of those things that's going to be hard.

I think she has to accept it, and so do I. But in the spirit of trying, I nod.

"Sure," I say. "I could do with brushing my hair. I flick the ends of my hair."

I have my hair down today. As I didn't fully know if I was going to see her, I allowed it to air dry when I came out of the

shower this morning.

“Mine too.” Amelia inclines her head so the ends of her ponytail brushes over her shoulder.

“Let’s go to the ground floor bathroom,” she suggests.

We go down there. It’s one of the bathrooms we prefer because it has a bigger section of full length mirrors. I find my usual spot and take out my brush to run it through my hair. Amelia joins me, fixing her hair too. When she’s done, she turns to look at me, giving me a pensive stare.

“Are you okay, Olivia?” She checks. I look at her, wishing she wouldn’t ask me such a thing, when she most likely knows the answer is no.

“I’m not too bad,” I decide to say.

“Thank you so much for coming out today. I really thought you wouldn’t make it. I was actually preparing for it.”

I pull in a deep breath. “I’m willing to give our friendship a shot. I felt that even though I don’t remember you and the past we shared, we’ve been in each other’s lives for far too long to throw it away.”

The hope in her eyes blooms into positivity. “It means a lot you thought about that, especially when you have more important things to worry about regarding your parents.”

“Virgo pointed out that you’re important to me too.”

“You’re important to me too. I just wish I could do more for you.” She touches her cheek. “I wish I could’ve done more for your family as well. When I think of how they were killed over a memory stick, it cuts my soul.”

I start to nod. Then I realize something.

Something that crashes into my mind. I never told Amelia about the memory stick. So how would she know about it?

“What?” She asks.

“How did you know about the memory stick?” My voice trembles.

She blinks and narrows her eyes. “You told me,” she replies, sounding as if the answer is simple.

I shake my head. “No, I didn’t tell you.”

“Then maybe Virgo told me. Someone did.”

Again I shake my head, because I know Virgo wouldn’t have done that.

“Virgo told me not to tell you anything. Neither of us wanted to put you in danger, so how could you have known? I can’t imagine anybody telling you.”

Her lips part. And she pauses in thought for a moment, then surprises me with a little laugh.

“You know what? I guess I slipped up.” She throws her hands up in the air, as if she’s just remembered something. “So, whoops!” She giggles, and it’s like I’m talking to someone else.

“What do you mean?”

She steps forward, coming to close the distance between us, and brushes her hand over my arm. Something stings me and I pull back.

“What was that?” I gasp.

“Calm down, Olivia. You’re always such a drama queen. And a very confused bitch.”

Oh God. That was what she called me in my dream. Now that I hear her calling me the same thing in real life, I know that was definitely not a dream.

It was a memory.

“What’s going on?” The mixture of emotions rushing through me clash throughout my body.

She sighs. “It was *me*, Olivia. I guess you could call me the traitor you’re all so worked up about. It’s me. Me and my father.”

All the air leaves my lungs and my heart just stops. The blood in my veins, stills and my brain slows as it tries to process the words she just said.

“You,” I breathe.

“Yes. But you weren’t supposed to be there. That was an unfortunate mistake. But the fact that you’ve been found turns out to work in my favor.

You remember where the memory stick is.”

I step back. The room spins. In my dizzy haze, my mind finds her face. And in that instant, I remember her.

I remember her on the day of the attack. The memory of her face and her presence there feels like someone injected her into my mind. She was there, but worse. It was her who smashed the window to my father’s office and then she shot him. First in his neck, then in his head. It was her. The scene flashes before me, the blanks filling in and I remember my mother calling me to run as masked men stormed in. We got out through the fire escape.

I try to push through to remember more, but darkness speckles my vision, and I feel like I’m falling and fading away.

Amelia comes forward, and I try to step back, but I fall to the floor. There's a smile on her face.

“It turns out I did see you. Olivia. We spoke, after all, and I stand by my word, as I did back then. You don't deserve Virgo. He should've been mine.”

I black out.

* * *

I stir, opening my eyes slowly to find myself in a cold, dank, dimly lit room. Water is dripping in the background from what sounds like a broken pipe, and there is a musty smell about the room. I try to move, but my hands are bound behind me, and I realize I'm tied up.

Tied to the metal pipe behind me. It takes me a few seconds before the horrid memory of Amelia comes to my mind and I feel like I might throw up and never stop.

Minutes pass that feel like hours and memories flow.

Pieces begin to fit in that didn't before and I put together the picture of what happened in the past and what is happening now.

I remember what Amelia did then and what she's doing to me now.

I remember seeing her with Virgo.

And I remember that hallway encounter. What I saw in my dream was exactly what happened.

She'd come inside my parents' house and ran into me. I'd messaged her earlier to let her know. I knew what happened between her and Virgo and I wanted to talk. But I didn't

expect to see her at the house. At that time, I hadn't decided yet if I was going to fly out to England.

She was surprised to see me because she thought I had. When masked men stormed the place and started speaking to her, telling her things and asking orders, I realized it was her that let them in.

I ran to alert my parents, but my father was prepared for them. He knew why they were there. It was while we were trying to get away to his office for safety that he was shot twice. He got shot and he was still thinking of protecting mom and me. He handed my mother the memory stick. That was the first time I'd seen it and I knew nothing of what was on it. I still don't. I just knew it was important.

After he gave it to my mother and kissed me, Amelia smashed through the window and shot him.

That's what happened.

Mom and I got out through the fire escape and into the tunnels. That was how we broke free.

There we met up with the men my father had arranged for us to meet. They took us to England.

We weren't even there a few days

before trouble found us again.

And that was where I lost my memories.

The door in front of me creaks and screeches open. Then Amelia comes in,

her heels clicking against the stone floor. She closes the door behind her and smiles at me.

"Good. You're awake," she says.

“You evil bitch. Let me go,” I shout.

“I’m afraid that’s not going to happen. I need to know where you put that memory stick first. I know you remember where it is, right?”

“Let me go.”

“You heard what I said. No. That stick is worth ten million to me and my father.

I guess I should thank your father for the job opening.”

“What the hell do you mean by that?”

“Your father stole information from Lance Polinsky. The man he was working with when a business deal fell through. Then your father tried to blackmail him. Men like that will obliterate you if you cross them.” Her laughter echoes around the room.

“My father was commissioned to get the memory stick back. What I told you the other day about our financial situation was true. So, of course we did it for the money, him and I. He knew it’d be easy for me to get close to your family and get inside the house without question. I could get past the guards, and I could’ve gone to your house any time of day I wanted, because I was your best friend.”

“All those years of friendship meant nothing to you, I spit. There comes a time in life when you have to choose.” Her voice rises with pride. As if she’s so pleased of herself for making the right choice. “So I did it for ten million, but it all went wrong.” Her voice dips on those last words. “But I’m going to fix it, and you’re going to tell me where the stick is.”

“You’re crazy,” I cry.

She laughs. “Honey, you only just realized that now. But if you were me, you’d be crazy too. Try coming from a life where you had it all, and you never had to worry about anything. Then all of a sudden you have nothing and you’re watching your parents struggle to climb back on the ladder they used to be on. Then your best friend keeps getting more and more and more. Including the man you were supposed to marry. The same guy who was supposed to fix all our financial worries. Marrying into the Antonovs was a dream to me. I knew I would have been useful to my family through my marriage to such a wealthy prestigious family in the Bratva. But then there was him—Virgo.”

My stomach squeezes. “You were always in love with Virgo, weren’t you?”

She places her hand to her heart. “Yes, and the whole seduction thing? Wasn’t for the money. It was real. I felt with you heading to England, I’d step in. Maybe he’d see me and change his mind. Then he’d defy his father the same way he defied him for you.” She grits her teeth. “Virgo always supported your dreams. But he didn’t want you to go to England. He planned to marry you. But this placement of yours meant you’d be away for two years. He would’ve done anything for you though, including wait forever if he had to. But I was right here. I thought I just had to make him see that.”

“I can’t believe this is you talking, Amelia. Is it really you?”

“You better believe it because it’s real. This is the real me, and how I’ve always felt. I was sick of being your shadow. When Seamus told me you’d been found, I saw the opportunity to be the grieving best friend seeking redemption.

I acted like that anyway after you disappeared, so I slipped back into the role. As you told me what happened to you, I fed that information to our boss. So when Cillian went looking for his people in England, we were already there, siphoning what he knew.” She does that little laugh thing again, now it sounds psychotic. “We hoped your friend would know where your mother had hidden the memory stick, but he knew nothing. That’s why he died.”

That pang of guilt strikes me again. She’s the reason Kevin died. Because I told her about him. I gave her a name.

And specific locations. I might not have been able to find him myself, but people like her, and whoever she’s working for, would have found him with ease.

“With that plan out the window, I knew we’d have to wait for you to remember what happened. Although you didn’t tell me what you remembered about the attack, I figured it out. I figured out that if you remembered how your parents died, you might have remembered your mother getting the memory stick. You all but confirmed it with our talk about it.”

“You are truly evil.” If I could, I’d rip the skin off her face.

“Evil is a matter of perception. I was looking out for my family. People have to do what they have to do. This is what I did. I chose.”

“What did you do with my father’s body?” The thought comes to my mind. “After we hacked his phone to see where you and your mother were heading we hacked him up too into little itty bitty pieces and disposed of him in acid.”

My body instantly wrenches, doubling in on itself. I hope you rot in hell for this, Amelia. I hope you do.”

She puts a finger to her temple, pretends to think. “I most probably will, but at least I’ll be rich. Because you *will* tell me where that stick is. We know your mother hid it in England and that’s where we’re heading. You have until we reach to tell me or I’ll be really angry and I might start chopping you to pieces until you die.”

A shiver runs through me.

“Tick tock.” She wiggles her fingers.

The door opens again and her father comes in. Like her, I can see the evil in him. It’s like the two of them have just taken off their masks and I can see what lies beneath.

“Amelia, we have to get everything ready to go.” He switches his gaze from her to me, then back to her again.

“On my way, father. Maybe our guests will be in a better mood when I get back.” She smirks at me, then they both leave.

As the door slams shut, everything inside me crumbles. I’m locked up again. And this time, I know I most assuredly will die.

Virgo doesn’t even know I’m in danger. He thinks I’m making peace with my friend. But that same friend is planning to kill me. I have to do something. Anything. Right now, my knowledge is my leverage. The moment I tell them where the memory stick is,

They’ll kill me. The only choice, here, is to die fast or slow.

I’ve come too far for that to happen to me. Frantically, I glance around the room. My gaze lands on my little purse across from me in the corner.

I'm sure Amelia would have taken out my phone, but inside is a tracker Virgo placed on my lipstick.

If I could get to it, I could activate it. He'd know I'm in trouble. But how do I get to it if I'm tied up over here?

I stare across the room at the bag, assessing the distance. My gaze flicks down to my body, and I wonder if I could stretch myself out far enough toward it. Before the idea even processes in my mind, I'm trying.

I stretch my legs out, but I'm not close enough.

I move against the rope and realize if I lower my upper body, I might be able to get to it.

I do so And my God, it works. It actually works. My feet brush against the purse, and I loop my foot through the handle, tugging it toward me.

I manage to flick the bag over, and my makeup falls out.

I catch sight of the lipstick rolling by, and stop it with my other foot. Just as I thought, Amelia had taken my phone, but she would never have guessed that a tracker would be in my lipstick case. With all my strength, I land my foot down on the center. I have to do it twice, hurting myself, before the little red light beeps on the side.

My soul rejoices as I see it beeping. Then I kick the lipstick and the bag across the room, just in case Amelia gets back and sees it.

It's not in the same place as it was before. But I pray, I pray Virgo finds me.

I pray he finds me, again.

* * *

It's an hour before Amelia comes back.

Just like before, the door creaks open.

"Ready to go," she says in a hearty voice, as if she's about to break out into a song.

She comes over to me, and a guard follows, standing next to us.

"Ready to talk yet?" She asks. "One more chance before we leave."

"No," I snap.

"Are you seriously going to do this?"

"Yes, I am. I'm not going to tell you anything."

She grimaces, then out of nowhere, she strikes me across my face with the back of her hand.

Just then, hurried footsteps come down the stairs outside and her father rushes in.

"We have to get out of here now," he shouts. "Virgo and Dante are here. There's at least ten cars pulling into the facility with all the security team from both Brotherhoods."

Oh God. they came. It worked. They're here for me.

"What?" Amelia gasps. "How the fuck did they know we were here?"

"I don't know." Her father pants out of breath.

Amelia snaps her gaze to me, then she sees my bag isn't where she left it. She doesn't see the lipstick though, and I don't think she would figure it out. But I can tell from the

enraged look on her face she knows there must have been some kind of tracker in there.

“You. You did this.” She points at me.

“I hope he kills you,” I growl.

She slaps me again.

“Untie her,” she orders the guard.

The guard undoes my ropes, hoists me to stand, then I’m being carted off through the door.

The four of us make it down the hallway, and I look at my surroundings. Wherever I was, it was at the bottom, basement sort of facility, in a house, or a building of sorts.

When we go outside, stepping into sunlight, I realize we were in a building, and where we just emerged from must have been some dungeon.

I can see the car is coming, as I’m being ushered over to a black sedan.

I see Virgo’s car, and him inside.

He spots me too, and turns toward the direction we’re in. But he’s too far away, and we have a head start.

We pile into the Sedan. Amelia’s father gets in the driver seat while she gets in next to him. I’m in the back with the guard.

We drive off as gunshots fire everywhere and tear out the facility, going through a pair of opened gates. Then we’re on the road driving way too fast for a winding road without barriers.

Virgo and a few of the cars follow us at the same speed.

Shots are fired. One catches the wheel, another goes through the glass and into the security guard's head who is sitting next to me. He falls on me and I try to shove him off, but I can't. He's too heavy.

"Go faster," Amelia cries to her father.

"I'm going as fast as I can. I—"

Before he can finish the next word, a bullet lodges in his head, and he slumps against the steering wheel. Amelia screams.

The car swerves from left to right and I scream too seeing what's going to happen.

We're going to crash.

I brace myself, strapping the seatbelt on me, just before we go over the side of the road.

Our screams are all I can hear as we go down into a deep ditch.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Virgo

I watch in horror as the car Olivia is in goes over the side of the road, landing into the ditch.

I screech to a stop and jump out of my car, praying with everything in me, she's okay. My men were aiming for the wheels of the car to soften the blow, but all crashes are bad, no matter how big or small. Regardless, I pray she's okay. I get to the side of the road. And see, her car is wedged between the rocks and a tree. Olivia is stuck inside the back, but she's moving. There's a nasty gnash on her forehead, but she's okay.

I ease myself down and manage to get to the car, but I also smell gasoline.

"Olivia," I shout, yanking at the door.

I pull it free and reach in to take her out.

She secures herself to me, crying against my chest and shaking.

"Oh God, Virgo? You're here."

"I'm here" I assure her.

I can see Amelia is in the front of the car. But just then, the engine smokes.

"We have to get out of here, now." I shout.

Olivia looks back at Amelia just as she started to move.

I know what Olivia is thinking. But we probably only have a few seconds to make our own escape.

So I think no more. Only to make my choice. I hoist her over my shoulder and rush back up to the top of the road.

Just then, the car explodes.

Another explosion ripples through the air and I know, there's no way Amelia survived that.

Olivia knows it too.

She stares back at the rising fire and smoke then curls into me and cries.

The tears that fall come from deep within her .

She cries for everything that's happened, but I also know she's crying for the loss of her friend.

I feel sad too.

Only for her.

Olivia.

* * *

A week later, we secure the memory chip. And I find out what's on there.

It contains the names of hundreds of men, along with evidence of dirty dealings with all sorts of people, from government officials to certain groups in the mafia.

I can see why the information was highly sought out. The type of details in here is enough to either put certain people away for the rest of their lives, or kill them. I figured that Callahan took it as leverage. But it backfired on him in the worst way. I'm sitting in my office at home, just going over it.

I'm not looking for anything in particular. I'm just curious to see who's on there. There are many names on it I recognized.

With the mystery wrapped up, I don't need to investigate anything anymore. All I need to do is think of living.

Life has taken me in a direction I never thought. I have my girl at my side, and the Empire.

My father woke up days after the truth was revealed. He was made aware of a situation. He hasn't really spoken to me. I know to him it must feel like he lost and I won, but I never wanted that.

All I wanted to do was live my life the way I wanted.

Cillian approaches my open door with a smile.

"Hey there," he beams.

"Hello, old friend." I borrow his usual words.

He smirks. "I just saw Olivia. She looks like she's doing okay.

"Yeah, she's doing better."

Cillian comes in. "I'm heading back to Ireland now."

I knew he would leave when this was over, but I've been contemplating something I wanted to run past him, so I give him a long hard stare.

"Why don't you stay?" I say.

He laughs again. "I don't know about that, old friend. I have a life in Ireland."

"But you have a legacy here. Your family and I were once allies. I want us to be that again."

He considers the idea, and sighs. “I’ll tell you what, Virgo. I’ll think about it. I’ll really think about it. But I like that idea. How about right now, we just go back to being close friends?” He puts out his hand for me to shake, and I shake his.

“Close friends.” I give him firm nod, then I retrieve the memory stick and hand it to him. “I guess that’s yours now.”

“What are you gonna do now?” I am curious. The mystery is wrapped up. But there’s loose ends that need to be tied up with this knowledge of Lance Polinsky.

“You know damn well what I’m gonna do with it, now that I know Lance Polinsky wanted my parents dead. Sure, we got the killers, but not the guy who put the hit on my parents.”

“I figured you would say that. So, I’m here, if you need me.”

“Thank you. See you around, Virgo.”

“See you.” I dip my head, and he leaves.

With that done, I turn off my computer and go downstairs to find my wife. She’s sitting in the sun room reading a book, and she does look better. Everything that happened took its toll on her. But there’s a lightness about her that feels like she’s healing.

Healing and getting over the fresh loss of a friend. She hasn’t said much about Amelia. But I know it can’t be easy to be betrayed in such a way.

She lifts her head and looks at me, offering a gentle smile. I walk over to her and kiss her.

“I was thinking we should go to dinner,” I suggest. That makes her smile brighter.

“That sounds like a date. Are you asking me out?”

“I guess I am, wife.”

“Then it’s a yes from me always.”

I take her hand and lead her away, grateful to have her in my life. Every day with her is treasure to me.

Priceless moments of happiness.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Olivia

2 months later

I walk across the lush green grass of the cemetery pathway leading to Amelia's grave.

I know I shouldn't be here.

No one expects me to be here. Not the living. Not the dead. But I've been meaning to come by well before now.

Two months have passed and Amelia was buried long ago. But I wanted to come and see her one last time. Not for the reasons you'd visit a friend's grave. This is for me. For closure.

I notice that someone has come by and left white roses. Amelia's favorite. I have one too. One single white rose.

I lay it down on the gravestone and stare at it along with her name, her date of birth and date of death. Everything blends in swirling letters of gold against shiny marble.

I keep thinking it didn't have to end like this.

Our lives could have been different. What happened happened and she betrayed me. There was a time in our lives when we were best friends.

I remember it all now. Everything.

Although I still see Dr. Belmont, I have a handle on that part of my life, so I can remember the past and the way Amelia and I were.

When people say we were sisters. We really were.

But today, I'm here to bury those good memories. Because that's not the person who she became.

I've found that trying to remember her in any good way brings out the darkness, and it's hurtful to me.

So today, I'm putting everything behind me.

"I hope you find peace, Amelia," I say. "I hope you find peace. Through everything that happened. You were my friend. You might not have seen me in such a light, but that is how I saw you until the end.

I bow my head, look at the grave one last time, and I turn and walk away closing the door on the past forever.

Virgo is standing by the car waiting for me. I told him I wanted to see Amelia by myself. When I reach him, he takes my hand and kisses my knuckles.

"Do you feel better?" He gives me a reassuring smile.

"No." I shake my head. "But I feel free. I guess that will have to do, right?"

He nods. "Freedom can take you anywhere, and allow you to be healed by time and love."

I appreciate his words. "Love took me back to you."

"It did. I love you, Olivia."

"I love you too, Virgo."

Epilogue

Olivia

3 months later

Virgo and I swim in the beautiful Mediterranean Sea. We're in Florence again for my birthday. This year, we're able to keep up with the tradition.

We're also celebrating my new job as an assistant curator at the Museum in New York. I start in two weeks' time.

I was actually able to secure that placement again at the British Museum, but I remembered what Amelia said with regards to how Virgo felt about me leaving.

So when I got the job in New York, I couldn't have been more thrilled. It was also a better job, with more prospect of moving up a ladder a little quicker.

We've been in Florence for a week, just frolicking in the sun and sea.

Now we're swimming beneath the sea, amongst the fish and watery beauty. We've been out all day again, enjoying each other and having fun.

Real fun. Virgo swims around me and runs his fingers over my body, then he grabs my waist and breaks through the surface with me.

We laugh and fall into a passionate kiss. It's getting dark now, but everything around us is still so beautiful.

"I want you again, Olivia Antonov," he husks. "I think it's time we go inside."

"I think you're right." I agree.

We kiss again and get back on the boat. As soon as we're back at the hotel, we're crashing against the wall in a sea of kisses. Then he's inside me, and I'm with him, where I always belonged.

With him I never feel lost anymore.

Virgo

I'm in the garden, watching my wife take laps in the pool. I'm expecting a visitor, but while I wait, I admire the view of my girl.

I watch her swimming like a mermaid, falling back into her old self as if nothing ever happened. I chuckle to myself when I remember, months ago, when she thought she couldn't swim. Right now, there's hardly any difference between her and the water.

Footsteps echo on the terrace path. I look up and see Cillian, making his way toward me.

"Hello, old friend," he beams. "Watching my sister again?"

"I am." I smirk. "So let's hear it." I lift my chin toward him. He's supposed to be visiting, but today's the day. He said he'd tell me what he decided about coming to live in the States.

He sits, takes one of my cigars and lights up, then allows it to dangle between his fingers before he nods and says, “It’s a yes from me.”

“Fantastic.” I grin back at him. “Because I have news.”

“What sort of news?”

“I manage to track down Lance Polinsky.”

Cillian’s eyes widen. He’s been looking for him since we found his name.

“You found him?”

“Not exactly. I just know where to look. He’s in New York. He’s been seen in New York twice. I think he has business here.”

Cillian smiles again. “Well, it looks like I’m going to be hunting again.”

“No, old friend. We are,” I correct him, and he nods, putting out a hand to shake mine.

“Let’s do it.”

* * *

Thanks so much for reading, I hope you enjoyed Virgo and Olivia’s story.

Cillian’s story is next in Fearless Sinner. Coming soon...xxx